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THE
BALLAD
of
JACQUOTTE
DELAHAYE

a novel

BRIONY CAMERON

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THE BALLAD
of
JACQUOTTE DELAHAYE



A Novel

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ATRIA BOOKS

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1655



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*In loving memory of my father, Carl Cameron, who instilled in me my
love of storytelling.*

*And dedicated to Lewis Morgan. For everything that you are. For
everything that you have given to me. This is for you.*

PROLOGUE

Hôpital, Saint-Domingue, January 1656

JACQUOTTE DELAHAYE was alone. The prison cell was small and dark, and the smell of brine and piss hung heavy in the humid air. It was monsoon season and rain flooded the streets. The prison was close to the sea, so close that it taunted her. Salt water dripped from the cracks in the wall and pooled at her feet, stinging her open wounds. The gash on her leg had gone green and, had she been able, she would have cut it off for fear of mortification. The jagged edges had turned black, and the exposed skin was slick with thick yellow pus. Though she could move it, the feeling had been lost there days ago.

She had no need to worry about sickness any longer. In a way, she was lucky to die a swift death. A death to be remembered. And she wanted to be remembered. For tales of her great deeds to reach the far corners of the earth, for harrowing sea shanties to be sung in her honor, and for green cabin boys to whisper at night, terrified that her ghost haunted them. Now she would live on forever, in infamy.

Jacquotte had expected the French to do away with her quickly. King Louis detested pirates and had taken to decimating all those who threatened his vast lands. She had expected her head on a spike within an hour of setting foot onshore. It would have been wise to kill her sooner, so there was no chance of a great escape back to her beloved *Dayana's Revenge*. But they had taken their time, and Jacquotte had spent weeks lying on the soiled straw of her cell, forced to shit in a bucket and eat rancid scraps. No one had come to rescue her. She was completely alone, all but for the rats.

Weak light streamed through the single barred window of her cell. Dawn. The bells began to toll. This morning was not the customary clangor, one chime for each hour of the day; instead, the bells pealed and trilled. At her home in Yáquimo they only played the bells so jubilantly for the weddings of Spanish admirals. But these bells were for a much grimmer affair: her execution.

Footsteps echoed down the corridor. Her heart leapt into her throat. She wished she could do something, fight, scream, cry, but when the guard opened the heavy metal door of the cell and clamped irons down on her wrists and ankles, there was no fight left in her. Not since Tortuga. Her capture had left her sore and weak. She was glad her crew could not see her now; Captain Delahaye, scourge of the Caribbean Sea, shackled by a Frenchman.

The guard led her from the cell. The prison was a labyrinthine mess; long corridors with cramped cells stacked on top of each other, filled with prisoners, their skin tarred with blood and dirt.

The men gaped as she was marched past. They had seen the proclamations bearing King Louis's seal. Captain Jacquotte Delahaye. The mulatto who killed the Governor of Yáquimo. The woman pirate captain. The red-haired menace. They knew of her, and they knew of the five-hundred-livre reward for her capture. She was infamous, a living legend. To them, she was a sign of hope, of freedom. But soon she would be nothing more than a corpse dangling from a rope.

The guard shoved her outside. The rain hit like a wave, hot and sharp. The sun was hidden behind the clouds. Jacquotte would not get to see the light of day before it was over. The air washed over her, salty on her tongue. At least she was close to the sea, set out across the horizon like a washerwoman's finest sheet. A knot formed in her stomach. A pang to return to the water. To her ship. Her home.

A chorus of angry voices broke through her reverie. She looked out across the courtyard where a crowd had gathered. There were sailors amongst them, officers of the French Royal Navy, but there were also regular townfolk, who booed and jeered as she was ushered toward the gallows. They had come to watch her die. Had they heard stories of how she had clawed and scraped her way to her captaincy? Of her fearsome crew, three hundred strong? Or had they

simply come to watch a woman hang? It was a rare enough occasion to warrant such a large crowd.

The executions were already underway. The crowd was in a frenzy. They shoved at each other and the guards, fists pumping in the air, their bloodlust still unsated despite the two bodies that already hung from the gallows.

She held her head up high. She would face her death with dignity. Captain Delahaye would stand tall, shake her hair from her face, and smile as the noose was tied around her neck. That would show them she wasn't afraid. But when she went to shake out her beautiful soft red curls, she found they were grimy and knotted, matted to her head and choked with lice. They'd taken away her gold teeth, and her brown skin was filthy; grime clung to her like a hard shell, and what was left of her clothes hung about her in tatters. Jacquotte looked like a beggar, not a woman to be feared or adored.

The gallows loomed over the courtyard, a huge wooden structure affixed with three nooses, three stools, and three hanging pits. After she was hung, they would gibbet her. The iron cage awaited, and once she danced the hempen jig, they would put her on display. A warning to all pirates that they too would be carrion for the crows one day.

Lightning flashed above, and rain whipped her face. With all her remaining composure, Jacquotte ascended the stairs to the gallows. Her knees were weak as the guard dragged her up onto the stool. She rocked back and forth, trying to keep still. She looked down. Beneath her the floor of the pit was stained with excrement from when those before her had loosed their bowels in fear.

A young man, face scarred by the pox, stood beside the gallows. He was dressed in the finest red and blue French livery.

"Before us stands a woman condemned," he said, his voice booming across the courtyard. "Jacquotte Delahaye, notorious pirate captain of *Dayana's Revenge*. Delahaye has been found guilty of treason against our beloved king, His Most Christian Majesty, the King of France, Louis Dieudonné de Bourbon XIV."

As the boy spoke, a murmur rose amongst the crowd. Jacquotte looked at them, unable to stand the sight of the pit any longer. Far fewer of them were French than she expected, and the crowd was even larger than she had first

thought. Most seemed to be mulattoes like her, and there were maroons and freed slaves amongst them. Many of the French were not fond of their freedom and tensions had been strong between them for as long as Jacquotte could remember.

“The punishment for her crimes most heinous has been decreed thusly,” the crier said. The crowd’s voices had grown so loud that he had to shout to be heard. “Delahaye shall be hanged from the neck until dead.”

The noose was placed over her head. It was thick and heavy and scratched at her skin.

The crowd bellowed. The guards called for silence over the hammering rain, but it was for nought. They moved forward as one, pressing so close to the gallows that the guards had to restrain them. Jacquotte could no longer hear the boy as he decried her various treasons. The crowd shouted and yelled, shoving the guards, and some even threw refuse. Did they want her dead so badly?

The guard put his foot on the stool. Her legs quivered. The pit taunted her.

A crash. A man in the crowd struck a guard over the head. Everything descended into chaos. The crowd threw themselves at the guards. For what reason she could not tell. Rage? Joy?

Jacquotte’s heart pounded. She could have sworn she saw a face she recognized. Long dark hair. Honeyed brown skin. Was it her? Or was Jacquotte merely imagining the face she yearned for more than anything? The face she most wanted to be her last sight on this earth.

A man pulled himself up onto the gallows. In his hand was a machete. He charged the guard beside her and, with one swift motion, cut a notch from his head. While the two men became locked in battle, she strained to get another look at the crowd. She tried searching for the familiar face, but the crowd was unrelenting. Each person blurred into the next. As the mob surged toward her, the guard fell backward into the hanging pit, and knocked the stool out from beneath her.

The noose tightened around Jacquotte’s neck.

Her legs went out from under her.

She fell.

PART ONE



The Shipwright

CHAPTER ONE

Yáquimo, Santo Domingo, October 1655

JACQUOTTE WALKED the length of the ship with purpose. The storm had hit *El Triunfo Dorado* hard. The galleon was a beautiful piece of work, but it was no match for the unrelenting nature of monsoon season. Despite the crew's best efforts, it had struck a reef just off the coast of Santo Domingo, prow-first, piercing the hull. Somehow, most of their crew had managed to make it to shore. Of the eight ships to leave Cartagena on their voyage to the outer reaches of the Spanish Empire, only the *Dorado* had survived the storms, not to mention the pirates. The chaos they had wrought upon the fleet was harrowing to hear, but she found herself rapt by every grisly detail.

Occasionally, she scribbled in her journal with her sheepskin-wrapped lead pencil, much to the annoyance of the crew. It seemed they wanted nothing more than to have their ship fixed and be on their way back to Spain after their failed mission. They didn't tell Jacquotte why they had planned to come to Santo Domingo, but she assumed it had something to do with the plantations scattered across the island. They would never discuss such a thing with someone like her.

There was a lot of work to be done. The bowsprit had snapped in two, with one half lodged into the deck. The steps of the companionway had been completely destroyed. The bow was practically shattered along the port side. The scuppers were clogged with dung, dead crabs, and fish, and there were major scratches and structural damage to the hull. But it could be salvaged.

Across the Yáquimo shore, deep blue water lapped against white sand and pink stone. Beside the *Dorado*, five ships were moored at the jetty: a small sloop,

two barques flying the French flag, a ketch, and Jacquotte's favorite, Richelieu's caravel, *Sérendipité*.

Moored alongside the Governor's grand fleet, it was clear the *Dorado* had been built by a master craftsman. The quarter galleries at the stern were built expertly, surrounding the raised, angled quarterdeck. The beakhead platform was still intact, and there were decorations carved into its rails. They were damaged, flowers and birds, perhaps chickens, but the figurehead beneath was unharmed. Carved from a deep, solid wood, it showed two women holding hands, the wind in their hair, looking onward.

Jacquotte had worked on many ships in her time as a shipwright; she had trained and apprenticed for nine years, since she was just eleven years old, and had spent the last year running the business after her mentor Richelieu's passing, but she had never worked on anything of this caliber. Every decision that had been made, every board and nail placed, had been done with an exact purpose. The design was leagues ahead of anything she had ever seen before. It was no wonder the *Dorado* had survived after all it had been through. It was a marvel.

Though she was a shipwright, aside from the occasional fishing vessel, she had never built a ship from scratch herself. She had never had the coin or the time, though her fingers always itched to put her skills to the test. It was what she had been trained for, but all she was able to do in Yáquimo was maintenance. Up at dawn and home at dusk, Jacquotte labored over broken and damaged ships. Repairing hulls, carving new boards and masts, rigging the ropes and sails until her limbs ached and her fingers bled.

The surviving crew eyed Jacquotte suspiciously. They were tired and injured. Half had been sent to the local doctor for their ailments and the rest were remanded to the ship.

Jacquotte had done her best to look the part of the shipwright. She wore the same loose white shirt that Richelieu had worn every day she had apprenticed under him, long britches, and boots. She'd even tied back her hair. Red hair was bad luck on a ship, but then, so were women. Richelieu always said that since she was both, she canceled out her own bad luck. It was a pity not all sailors felt the same way.

The crew used what little strength they had left to follow her about the deck with their eyes, watching her every move.

The only man who didn't look at her as though she'd been sent from the devil himself was a huge man, a head taller than the others, with a wide chest and thick strong arms. His skin was so dark that it was practically black, and his face was marked with white scars. On the back of his neck was a pink slave's brand. He couldn't have been much older than Jacquotte, who had recently turned twenty.

When she had finished her inspection, Jacquotte made her way back to the purser and the bosun. She laid out the work that needed to be done, and the cost.

"*How much?*" the purser asked. "That is outrageous."

He had a peculiar accent, for a Spaniard. The crew all had that same, lilting tone to their voices. Had she the mind to, she might have tried out her Portuguese, but as it stood, she had neither the time nor the patience. Jacquotte forced a smile. "I can assure you, the work is worth the price," she said. "It'll take perhaps a month to fix the damages."

"No, that's too long," the bosun interjected. "We must leave within the fortnight, else the weather will turn and we'll be stuck through till winter in this godforsaken hellhole."

"It's not just the repairs, sir. We must also send out for materials," she said. "Unless you wish for your boat to be patched with palm trees and coconut shells?"

The bosun glared. "That would not do."

"I have a team of four men and myself," she told them. "We do good work and stay long hours, until nightfall, and sometimes longer if we're properly compensated. You won't find anyone as good on this side of Santo Domingo."

The men traded knowing glances. She knew their ploy, and she wouldn't be so easily tricked. She had met many a man like them in her time as a shipwright, and she would meet a hundred more before her life was done. The purser wanted to gouge her on the price, as any money handler worth his salt would. And the bosun wanted that extra money to hire new crewmen, to make up for

those they'd lost at sea. Sailors, like their gear, were replaceable in the eyes of those in command.

"We won't pay," the purser said firmly. "Where is Monsieur Richelieu? I was told this was his business. Let us speak with him at once or we shall take our leave. We do not do business with women."

"Certainly not *mulatto* women," the bosun spat.

Her mentor's name was a stab to the gut. She did not dignify them with a response. Instead, she steeled herself and looked around. The *Dorado* was in bad shape and the remainder of the crew were battered and broken, worn down by their years at sea, the barrage of storms, and their encounters with pirates. They were scrawny, close to starving, and she could tell by sight that they had eaten the calfskin off the ropes for food. They were weak and desperate.

"Judging by the condition of your ship, you aren't going anywhere," Jacquotte said with another, much more genuine smile. "As I am sure you know, the best shipwrights are on the other side of Hispaniola, and you won't make it that far. The next town over with a decent shipwright, one who, for the price you want, could patch up your sails with ratty cloth and nail rotten wood to the front of your ship, would be in Marigot. That's at least fifteen miles on a good day. Please, raise your tattered sails on your frayed ropes, turn your broken prow seaward, and head east with your punctured hull. Perhaps if I leap into the water and swim, I shall pass by in time to see you drown."

The men looked taken aback, then red-faced with fury. They knew they had been beaten. By a woman. By a mulatto. They had no choice but to pay her. Richelieu used to tell her that sailors were often made unkind, not by the harsh conditions in which they chose to live, but by their own foolishness. They traveled to unknown waters with inadequate rutters to guide them, and without extreme care and precision, the nautical guidebook was useless. Most were unprepared, with lax barrelmen in their crow's nests, and crashed into reefs and cliffs along unfamiliar shorelines. But even the cruelest, most sea-hardened man could be beaten with the right amount of wit and certainty.

Finally, the purser sighed. "How many reals?"



As dusk fell, Jacquotte walked home with a spring in her step. The repair wasn't going to make her rich, but it was a fortune compared to her recent pitiful undertakings. She would have her brother help with the arithmetic, she'd never had much of a head for numbers, but even after sending out for materials, Jacquotte and her crew would each receive a hefty sum.

In just a few short years she would have enough to travel to Fort de Rocher, heart of the once-great pirate haven of Tortuga, an island just off Hispaniola's northernmost coast. An impenetrable coastal town founded by Jean La Vasseur, boasting a legendary fort so formidable that no army had been able to invade. Until Juan Felipe had outsmarted them.

The Governor of Yáquimo himself had been the one to orchestrate the attack. Jacquotte had keenly listened to his tales as a child, sitting cross-legged on the hard wooden floorboards of the Governor's manor. Wide-eyed and breathless, she had mapped his strategies in her mind: cutting off the means of escape, sending a ship filled with explosives in to break the first line of defense, tearing down parts of the impenetrable fortress.

Now, from what she could glean from the idle chatter of those passing through, Tortuga was full of sailors and fishermen, as well as buccaneers and pirates. The island was left to its own devices after the execution of La Vasseur, and surrounded by sea on all sides, the greatest shipwrights in the Caribbean had flocked there to provide them with worthy vessels. They came from all over the world, bringing with them unrivaled expertise and the finest materials. They were treated like kings, gods amongst men, and were paid handsomely for their efforts. Fort de Rocher might only have been a small town there, but its history was legendary, and it held a special place in Jacquotte's heart.

That was where she wanted to be, amongst the masters of her craft. To learn and grow and be celebrated. To make a name for herself. She had been saving her money for years, ever since Richelieu began paying her for her work, waiting until she finally had enough to set off with her younger brother, Marceau, who had been apprenticing with a doctor and could find work anywhere. She kept her earnings at home in a cloth sack, hidden in a hole in the wall behind the bureau. Her father would never intentionally steal from her, but he could be unpredictable when he drank.

The Delahaye home was away from the business of town, off a dirt road along the hill leading to the mountain where the Governor and Spanish nobles lived. It was the only house in the lower town with four rooms: her father's chambers, his study, Jacquotte and Marceau's chambers, and a kitchen. It was larger than most other homes in the lower town, but compared to the stone houses on the mountain it did not look so grand. A crude wooden fence marked off the territory Arnolde had claimed, and within was her mother's frangipani tree. Its narrow trunk, wide-arching branches, and thick, dark leaves provided little shade for the house, but the scent of its blooming white flowers was overpowering, sweet and lush. The smell reminded her of her mother. It was one of the only memories she had of Dayana, sitting beneath the shade of the tree as her mother's nimble fingers twisted her hair into braids.

The house was quiet when she arrived. Her brother and father must have still been at work. Within, the house was decorated with the items Arnolde had salvaged from his life in France, relics of an exiled lord. There were fine books and tomes; gold, silver, and bronze trinkets and jewels; and fine clothes on display. But alongside them were the trappings of an ordinary life, the life his pittance of a salary from the Governor afforded him. Ancient pots and pans, an uneven chair salvaged from the tavern, hand-stuffed straw mattresses and threadbare sheets. Arnolde always said it was an honor just to be chosen to work for the Governor, but she could earn far more than him in a month if the weather and the sailing conditions were poor.

Jacquotte entered Arnolde's study. She had spent countless hours there as a child, learning diction and elocution, French and Latin, arithmetic, and her letters. She would practice her script until her cramping fingers were black with ink while Arnolde supervised, so that when he took her with him to the manor in the morning, the noblemen would praise him on the excellent work he had done educating an island girl.

Jacquotte left a portion of her earnings on her father's desk, when she noticed a letter, startlingly white, still tucked carefully inside its envelope. She turned it over to admire the penmanship, formed of long, languid strokes of a quill. The ink danced across the page, elegant curls printed onto thick parchment by a deft

and confident hand. It was written in French. *PRIVATE AND CONFIDENTIAL.*

Jacquotte hesitated. It alarmed her to see her father's native tongue written in a hand other than his own. She supposed she oughtn't be surprised at her father conversing with another Frenchman. He had never been coy about his life before coming to Yáquimo with Richelieu. Before his exile all those years ago, Arnolde Delahaye had been a lesser nobleman from Lyon. He'd had a family before them. A wife. Three children.

She opened the letter.

Dear Monsieur A. Delahaye,

Despite our initial aversion, we find ourselves most impressed with your initiative. The Governor of Yáquimo clearly considers you a great asset. Not just a scribe, but an adviser. Notwithstanding your unfortunate history with the Duke of Savoy, we can see why he would be reluctant to let you go.

Although this proposition did give us pause, your confidence in your ability to achieve such a feat made quite the impression on all of us.

While I am sure you are aware your plan is not the only course of action we are considering, we find your demands agreeable. After much discussion, we are pleased to say we have decided in your favor.

Should you agree to our terms as previously set out, your requests shall be met regarding your exile, and we will send word to your family in France once your obligations are fulfilled.

We eagerly await your response.

Mon. L M

Jacquotte stared at the page, ears ringing. The words ran through her mind. It had been years since she'd heard Arnolde speak of his family in France. What had her father promised to this man?

Anger rose within her. Was he planning to leave them? Arnolde had been away from France for over twenty years. Yáquimo was his home. She and Marceau had been there for him for all those years. They would do anything for him.

When Jacquotte and Marceau were old enough to understand, Arnolde told them of his treason. How he had befriended the Duke of Savoy and been led astray. He'd sided against France in the dispute for Mantua and was exiled to Saint-Domingue for crimes against the Crown, forced to leave behind his family and fortune.

Jacquotte's childhood was filled with nights where Arnolde would stumble home from the tavern, so drunk he could hardly see. He'd collapse onto his straw mattress, ranting to himself. He wished he could return to his real home, that it was unfair he had lost everything he'd ever loved, and that now he was stuck here and wanted nothing more than to die. Jacquotte and Marceau would pretend they couldn't hear him until he cried himself to sleep.

His family in France never had to lie awake at night, worried Arnolde wouldn't make it home, that they would receive news that he had drowned, or owed the wrong man a gambling debt he couldn't pay off. They never had to search high and low through the town when Arnolde went missing, only to find him unconscious beneath a palm tree, badly burned by the sun. They didn't have to wash his clothes after a particularly hard night of drinking, so hard that his clothes were drenched in sweat and caked in vomit. They didn't have to do any of that. Because they weren't here with him. Jacquotte was.

The study door opened, and Jacquotte whirled to see her father. Arnolde looked older and more tired as of late. The auburn hair that they once had in common was turning gray. His formerly pale skin was leathery and worn from years in the sun, his face worried with lines like a peasant and fingers stained with ink.

He glanced at the letter in her hand. Neither of them said anything. The air between them was hot and humid, as though it were summer, clawing at

Jacquotte's skin and wresting the breath from her.

"I would ask that you refrain from going through my personal effects, Jacquotte," he said at last.

"What does it mean?" Her hands shook, the letter quivering in her grasp. "What are you doing with the French?"

Arnolde set down his things. "I taught you to read French as well as you do Spanish," he said. "If you are too dull to understand then that is by no fault of mine."

She winced. She didn't want to ignite his temper, but she had to know. What did it all mean? What was he planning? Would he really leave Jacquotte and Marceau behind, or would he take them with him?

She scolded herself for the thought. They were two mulatto bastards. He would leave them without a second thought, she knew. She wondered if it would have been different if her mother were still alive. The way he spoke of her, how in love they'd been, besotted with one another, that she was his true love, not his French wife. She had heard the stories he told of Dayana, a free black woman who completed him. She was everything he was not, and more. Beautiful and demure. Would he have left their mother too?

Arnolde walked the short length of the room and stood before her expectantly. She realized she had crumpled the letter. A feeling of deep shame welled up inside her. Arnolde was made for a life in France. He was born to have servants wait on him with expensive food and the wines he craved when he was drunk on rum. He should have been visiting the opera house and the theater in fine clothes that he didn't have to mend himself.

She passed him the letter.

Arnolde smiled. Once again, she found herself thankful for his forgiving nature. Many of the mulattoes in Yáquimo were treated far worse. They had scars on their backs and legs from their punishments, or they were married away so young. Some even died in childbirth before they turned fifteen.

Her father hadn't beaten her since she was young, a rebellious child who needed to be set straight. Now that she was earning, he would never marry her away. Because of him she didn't have to be a wife. Not the fishmonger's wife or

the brewer's wife or the tanner's wife. She could be a shipwright. She could have a man's job; earn a man's wage. She wasn't subservient to a husband.

Deep down, she knew that her father allowed her to be a shipwright not from the goodness of his own heart, but because there were consequences to her marrying. He would have to pay her dowry, and he would lose her income. The price of her freedom was a portion of her earnings that Arnolde took for "upkeep." It was a small price to pay.

Arnolde placed the letter back inside his bureau and closed the lid. "It is my business and mine alone. That shall be the end of it."

Jacquotte nodded once, standing straight. "Yes, Father."

She knew better than to argue. She knew her place. She would get nothing more from him.

She watched as he picked up her earnings off the desk without a word, then left the room. She only let herself relax once he was out of sight, feeling the tension seep from her body. There was no doubt in her mind that he was headed to the tavern.

She tugged at his bureau drawers, but all were locked. One question lingered in her mind: What was her father hiding?

CHAPTER TWO

THE NEXT morning, Jacquotte made her way to the boatyard at sunrise. She loved looking out across Yáquimo and the bay, white-capped waves lapping against the pale sand along the edge of the town. The line of ships along the jetty looked uniform, the French flag flying from the barques. Crowded along the shore were the houses of the common folk, wooden with thatched roofs, many leaning lazily, lopsided and close to collapse. Most were mulattoes and freed slaves, but amongst them were also poor whites, laborers mostly, some from the lowest ranks of the Governor's men, servants and lesser sailors who hadn't earned a place on the mountain, strikers, cabin boys, and powder monkeys. Those deemed so low that they had to live amongst the blacks. But even the lowest white man was more important than the most high-born black or mulatto. They would always be seen as above them.

Jacquotte had a good view of the mountain as well, where the Governor and his soldiers lived on the hill just below the mountain, looking down on the rest of the town. The Governor's manor, which peeked out over the top of a grand stone wall, looked more like a fortress than a home. She thought of her father, who worked there every day. How could he have dismissed her so outrightly? She had wanted to press him further, but he hadn't returned home last night.

Jacquotte was exhausted. She had spent the better part of the night making lists of equipment and sketching plans, impatient to start work on the *Dorado*. The bosun and purser were willing to pay good coin to hasten work and have the *Dorado* seaworthy as soon as possible, which meant early rising, long hours, and late nights.

The town was waking around her. The church bells began to ring. People walking the streets flocked toward the sound like they were called to it.

Her mind flashed to Richelieu. She often thought of her mentor, a captain exiled from France with her father, the man who had captained their escape

from French Saint-Domingue and piloted them to freedom in Spanish Santo Domingo, but she didn't allow herself to wallow. It had been little over a year since he had died, and his loss still lingered, weighing heavy on her heart.

Since taking over following his passing, Jacquotte had fired all of Richelieu's men. They were terrible workers, rude and constantly late. The women of the town were afraid of them, and though she hated to admit it, so was she. Jacquotte may have been larger than most women, taller, sturdier, with a strong body toned by years of hard work, but they would always outnumber her.

So, she'd hired all new workers. Her oldest friend, Francisco, had been looking for work, and the other men she knew from around town. They had all grown up together. They turned up on time and did everything she said, and she was pleasantly surprised when none of them threatened or spat at her when she gave her orders. They were mulattoes too and didn't look down on her the way the white men did. They didn't see her as beneath them. She was in charge, and they treated her as such.

By the time she reached the boatyard, her crew was already waiting for her: Miguel, Alberto, Roberto, and Francisco. They had all been promised a handsome reward by the purser of the *Dorado* if they finished in three weeks instead of four.

"The bosun is a madman," Roberto grumbled. "The *Dorado* is a wreck. There is no way we have her seaworthy in three weeks."

The other three men nodded in agreement. About a hundred yards from the *Dorado* the surviving crew were pulling out all their possessions, furniture, silver, and anything else they could salvage. Some sorted through the mess, stacking everything into haphazard piles.

"Are we certain they didn't hit the reef deliberately?" Francisco said. "I cannot imagine being so poor of a pilot. I'd die of the shame."

"I heard he *did* die," Alberto said.

"Serves him right."

"*Francisco*," Miguel hissed. "Do not be so cruel."

Jacquotte glanced at Alberto. "My father didn't return home last night."

Alberto looked concerned. "Is he missing again?"

"He is," she said. "Was he at the Laundry, by any chance?"

He shook his head. "I will ask Mama to keep an eye out for him."

"Thank you."

Alberto was an orphaned brothel babe, raised by Blanca and the washerwoman at the Laundry that lay on the unofficial border between Spanish Yáquimo and the French settlement. It was also the local brothel. Alberto was kind and gentle, despite his grand size. In addition to working for Jacquotte, he protected the women at the Laundry from the drunk and angry men who frequented their rooms.

Jacquotte and the four men followed the path from the boatyard toward the harbor. There was no sign of the limping purser, but the bosun marched up to them as they made their way toward the *Dorado*.

"Señorita Delahaye," he said, falling into step beside them. "I am so glad you're here."

"You are?" she asked skeptically.

"Your crew has been eagerly anticipated. We have waited for you all morning."

It was not yet five o'clock. "I'm sorry to hear that," she lied. She stopped and turned to her men. "Meet me on the ship."

They did as they were told, but Francisco watched over his shoulder nervously as they went.

"Do you have any more men under your employ?" he asked, watching the four men climb the gangplank. "I fear you will not be finished in time."

"Unfortunately, no. It is just the five of us."

"I see."

The bosun turned to where his crew salvaged their items from the ship. Working alongside them was the ship's slave, who carried around anything the crew pointed at without a word of objection.

"Marc!" the bosun called. Some of the crewmen looked over but none of them moved. "Come here! Come here, goddamn you! You filthy slave! *Marc!*"

One of the men gave Marc a rough shove. He looked up and saw the bosun, red-faced and furious. Marc put down a one-legged chair and walked leisurely over to him.

The bosun turned to Jacquotte with a heavy sigh. "He's an imbecile," he said as the man came to stand beside them. "We picked him up in Holland and those damned Dutchmen swore he'd been properly trained. Conned us out of a great deal of coin, and for what? A big lummoX who doesn't understand a word we say."

Jacquotte said nothing. The bosun scowled accusingly at the slave, who stood a respectful distance away from them. His eyes were trained on the horizon, watching the waves wash against the beach. It was as though he hadn't a care in the world.

"He's thoroughly useless. But strong," the bosun went on. "If you point, he can understand you. Have him assist you and your men with the repairs."

The bosun stalked away, muttering under his breath. Jacquotte waited until he was far enough away before turning to Marc. Hesitantly, she pointed to the *Dorado*. Without a word, Marc strode toward the ship. Jacquotte almost had to run to catch up. Her crew eyed them wordlessly.

Francisco was the first to break the silence. "Who is this strapping man?"

"This is Marc," Jacquotte said. Upon hearing his name, the man's eyes flickered over to her, but he made no move or sound. "The bosun gave us use of him but says he won't understand us."

"For God's sake. What use will he be if he can't understand us?" Roberto mused.

"Do not use the name of the Lord as a curse," Miguel hissed, his hand shooting to the rosary at his hip. Miguel attended church every Sunday morning, and, when he found the time, he also attended evening services during the week. Both his white father and his black mother were Catholics, and he was a true believer, perhaps the truest believer Jacquotte knew. If he wasn't a mulatto, he would have joined the seminary years ago.

"The bosun said to point," Jacquotte told them.

Alberto pointed to the warped boards on the other side of the deck. Marc walked over and stood there patiently.

"I don't like that," Alberto said, lowering his arm. His eyes filled with guilt.

"Marc?" Francisco called. "Can you come here?"

Marc walked over to stand beside them, waiting.

“Can you understand us?” Jacquotte asked. The man eyed the crew of the *Dorado*, who were busy sorting through their possessions. He nodded once, shallowly, but they saw it. “Great. Can you talk to us?” Marc shook his head. “All right, that’s fine. We can work with that.”

“Is he mute?” Francisco asked.

“No, he just doesn’t want *them* finding out he can understand,” Roberto said, jerking a thumb in the direction of the *Dorado*’s crew. “You know how white men are with their slaves. Doesn’t matter how hard they beat them as long as they can work in the end. It’s like on the plantations. The slaves can speak, but when they do, their masters beat them half to death for talking instead of working.”

Alberto nodded. “I heard they think blacks don’t feel pain, so it’s all right to beat us. Best to stay silent, if those are the ones in charge of you.”

They looked at one another solemnly in agreement.

“We won’t hurt you,” Jacquotte promised, though Marc never met her gaze. She turned back to her crew. “All right, Alberto, you can work on the companionway stairs. Roberto and Miguel, the port side of the hull needs work. And... Francisco, how long will it take you to carve repairs for the taffrails?”

Francisco appraised them quickly with his eyes. “A day. Perhaps two. But I haven’t the right wood for it,” he said. “We sent out for materials a few weeks ago, after working on those two English barques. The wood you like for the decks has arrived from the Valley, but nothing else, and we’ve not seen a merchant ship in weeks.”

Jacquotte thought about it for a moment. “All right. You and I will go to Frenchtown tomorrow.”

“We will?”

“Yes. Clean the scuppers in the meantime,” she decided. “Fix what you can and then start with the warped boards of the deck.”

“Can do,” he said with one of his charming grins, the kind that made the Spanish women swoon.

Jacquotte rolled her eyes and turned to Marc. “There’s loose damaged wood about the ship. Can you collect it and take it to the beach? We may need it later.” Marc nodded. “Thank you.”

They set to work. The sun beat down on her back as she knelt on the hard deck, prying up the warped and splintered boards and replacing them one by one. When the bells finally rang for a half to noon, she stood and wiped the sweat from her brow. She heard shouting on the dock. As she clambered down the gangway, Marc was close to the ever-growing pile of damaged wood, listening to the bosun, whose voice was raised and agitated.

“What’s the matter?” she asked when she reached them.

“The stupid slave can’t keep his pile straight!” the bosun snarled.

Jacquotte looked at the wood. It was in no worse state than any of the crew’s piles of broken furniture and scraps of cloth.

“I need him back on the ship,” Jacquotte said, noting the rising tensions.

The bosun’s hand darted to the whip looped through his belt. He brought it up and lashed out furiously, aimlessly. The whip slashed Marc across the chest, sending him stumbling. On the backlash it caught Jacquotte. She barely had time to raise her hands to protect her eyes. The whip’s tails caught her across the wrist mostly, but one sliced into her cheek.

The bosun gasped. “Señorita Delahaye! I—”

Jacquotte ripped the whip from his grasp. The bosun flinched as if she was going to hit him back. And there was a glorious moment of temptation. She couldn’t imagine how many times he’d struck Marc with that same whip.

“Jacquotte!”

She heard a commotion behind her and turned to see her crew charging toward them. The four men were incensed. They stood behind her, breath ragged with fury, rage-blind and ready to fight on her command. She looked back at the bosun, hunched over, his small hands raised to protect his face. Instead, she snapped the whip’s wooden handle over her knee and threw the pieces as far as she could. The leather tails soared, spinning wildly, before dropping into the sea with a splash.

The bosun glared at her. “Señorita Delahaye,” he said, his tongue dripping with malice, “that was my property. And you had no right to steal it from my hands and—”

“You are lucky I did not choose to relieve you of those hands,” she snapped. Her heart beat so fast it felt as though it were trying to break free from her chest.

The welts on her wrist and face burned and blood trickled down her cheek. “I threw your whip away for your own protection, señor. Turn to violence once more and we shall be forced to do the same.”

The bosun looked startled by her words, but he saw the look in her eyes and knew she meant every word she had said. She would beat him without hesitation, with her own large, calloused fists if need be, regardless of the *Dorado*’s fifty-man-strong crew.

He nodded once, curtly, and stormed away.

“Are you all right?” Alberto asked once the bosun was out of earshot. “You’re bleeding.”

Jacquotte wiped the blood away with the back of her hand, but more spilled in its place, dripping onto her shirt.

“I’m fine,” she said.

As her crew continued to grumble angrily, a flash of movement caught her eye. A boy no older than sixteen was running toward her on the dock. She recognized him as the Governor’s messenger boy. He would often come to their house late at night with letters for her father, calls back to the manor, or messages for him to translate by morning.

Upon reaching her, he handed Jacquotte a letter.

“It’s urgent,” he said.

She opened it, expecting to see her father’s hand, the long, languid cursive, an apology for not returning home, but she didn’t recognize the writing. It was scrawled and cramped, barely legible, but she understood what it said.

“The Governor wishes to see me immediately?” she asked, flustered. “Why?”

“I don’t know,” the boy said, his voice lowered. “But he says you are not to discuss your visit with anyone.”

“Anyone meaning—”

“Your father, ma’am.”

A chill ran down her back. Jacquotte nodded once and handed the letter back into the boy’s expectant hand. The Governor wanted no proof of their meeting. He gave her a curt bow and marched away, following the dirt path that would lead him back to the mountain.

It had been ten years since she had last seen the Governor. Ten years since she had last been permitted to set foot inside his sprawling manor. Whatever the reason, Jacquotte knew it wasn't good.

CHAPTER THREE

THE CLIMB was grueling.

The Governor's men lived far above the rest of Yáquimo, on the path and hills leading toward the mountains. Nerves prickled her skin. Jacquotte had not walked this path since she was ten years old.

Every day for almost five years, Jacquotte would climb up to the Spanish settlement with Arnolde. It started because Dayana was sick. She remembered very little of her mother, but her pregnancy with Marceau had been tumultuous, and she had struggled to feed and care for Jacquotte. So, Arnolde took her to the manor to let the cooks and scullery maids look after her. But he soon learned there were other benefits to bringing Jacquotte along.

The other men of the manor gawked at her, a mulatto who could read and write, speak French and Spanish, and read Latin. She spoke more eloquently than their children who were older than her, her letters and her handwriting were exceptional, and she was bright too. They thought him a genius for his ability to train her. And then, just weeks after Dayana passed, she found an unlikely friend: the Governor's nephew and heir presumptive, Florián Gonzaga. They were the same age and grew close over those five years, until, one day, as she dressed and readied a wriggling young Marceau to travel with Arnolde, her father told her they were no longer permitted entry to the manor, and that they would have to stay home. It was not a question, and she was not given an explanation. There was no chance to plead or beg or apologize for whatever she had done. Arnolde left and that was the end of her time on the mountain, and her friendship with Florián. She had not been allowed back since. Until now.

She could see most of Yáquimo from this height, sprawled out along the shore before spilling across the land in all directions. To the south were the sugarcane plantations. Bright green stalks blanketed the horizon as far as the eye could see, and amongst them the slaves worked, toiling away in the hot sun.

Farther afield was the French settlement. It looked much like the rest of Yáquimo, only their houses were sturdier, newer; they hadn't been there long enough to be battered by the monsoons yet. Every day the French constructed more buildings and set up more stalls, expanding their territory, and every day the unofficial border between the Spanish and French towns became less defined.

The presence of the French had long been a problem for the Spanish nobles of Yáquimo. The tenuous peace they held with France in these lands, and beyond, was holding on by a thread, and no one wanted to be the one to sever it. The Spanish left the French alone in hopes that the settlement would fester and fail. But it had flourished, like a weed in the cracks of parched ground, clawing toward the sun.

Not only that, there had been rumors about spies in Frenchtown ever since it began construction. She had given the hearsay no merit. She had always believed it came from the Spanish, sowing the seeds of distrust amongst the townspeople. But the words of the French letter to her father echoed in her mind. Something was amiss, a plot unfolding, and there was little doubt in her mind now of Arnolde's involvement.

Jacquotte mounted the crest of the hill where the land flattened. All around her were grand Spanish houses, painted bright, lively hues of blues and yellows. Women strolled along the path, tending flowers that blossomed on their balconies, chatting in huddled groups, whispering behind gloved hands and folding fans. They were dressed as colorfully as their homes in exquisite gowns with exaggerated waists, blooming white sleeves, and low, round necklines that somehow both covered and accentuated their breasts. Glittering necklaces graced their bare throats, and they wore scarves on their heads to protect their fair skin.

Jacquotte felt a sudden wave of something she didn't often feel. Self-consciousness. She could never look like these women. She didn't often think about her appearance in anything but a factual manner. She knew what she looked like, but it was rarely important. She wasn't beautiful, not like the Spanish women. Her father always told her she was too dark to be a Spaniard's wife. They liked their women white, and if they chose a mulatto, she had to be pale as cream.

The air was heavy with perfume, a mix of rose water and lilac. And oranges. It was enough to make Jacquotte look twice; that smell, tangy and sparkling, yet so crisp. It caught her off guard, bringing her right back to some months ago.

There had been a Spanish victory, a successful battle against the English in the ongoing war for Jamaica that they would soon lose, and a great celebration followed. The Spaniards commemorated the win on their hill, but the lower town housed the real celebration.

Jacquotte had seen her before. A beautiful woman in a yellow dress, who smelled inescapably of oranges. Every time there was a celebration she saw her, drinking and dancing, but she had never had the courage to approach her. But that night, the woman had asked Jacquotte to dance, and her stomach had leapt into her throat. They danced until the sun went down and the musicians were too drunk to play anymore.

Jacquotte and the woman wandered around town, keeping away from the warm glow of the torchlight, their hands lingering together, their fingers interlocked. Jacquotte's heart pounded so loud in her ears she could hardly hear the woman speak. She led her down to the harbor. No one went to the harbor at night. The locals, though they lived by the sea, feared it; the sea was a beast that man would never tame.

They sat with their feet in the water. The waves washed over them, as they looked out at the moon. Jacquotte told her the names of the stars and constellations and she listened eagerly, until they ran out of known stars and started naming new ones themselves. It had grown so dark, Jacquotte could hardly see the birthmark on the woman's face anymore, shaped like a crescent moon beneath her right eye. She could only smell her perfume. Oranges.

They had grown closer, their voices quieting, until their lips finally met. Jacquotte's body felt like it was aflame. They touched tentatively at first, nervous, unsure, before gaining confidence, hands grasping at one another in the darkness until they were lying in the sand, limbs tangled together. The shadow of the church loomed over them, but Jacquotte found herself unconcerned with her soul as their hands and tongues explored each other.

The next morning, Jacquotte had woken to find the woman gone. Ever since, Jacquotte longed for another Spanish victory, if only for the celebration where

she might find her again. She hadn't seen the woman since that night, but Jacquotte thought of her often.

Finally, she reached the Governor's manor, which stood in all its glory, looming over the Spanish town and all of Yáquimo. She thought it would look smaller now that she was grown, but it was no less imposing than when she was a child.

As she approached the gates the guards standing watch readied themselves, hands darting to the rapiers at their sides. They were dressed in the yellow and red livery of the Spanish army.

"Name," one of them demanded as she came to stand before them.

"Jacquotte Delahaye. I have been called for by the Governor."

It dawned on her she had never been to the manor unaccompanied. She had always followed Arnolde, at first carrying his satchel filled with his papers and quills and inks, and, later, a squalling Marceau.

Thankfully, they recognized her name. There was a hideous screeching as the gates opened for her.

At the center of the courtyard was a tall fountain, trickling the clearest water she had ever seen. She remembered as a child, when the heat was unbearable and her skin was sticky, she would plunge her head under the waterfalls and drink, letting the water soak her through until someone shooed her away.

On the opposite side, a set of long stone steps led up to the manor itself, where a house girl waited. She was young, perhaps seventeen, and very pretty. On her head was a white coif that barely contained her unruly black curls. She was a mulatto, pale enough to pass for white but for her hair and her wide, flat nose.

"Señorita Delahaye," she said with a deep curtsy. "I have been given the honor of escorting you to the Governor."

"Thank you."

The girl allowed her no time to reminisce about her surroundings. She turned on her heel and marched up the stone steps. Jacquotte followed reluctantly. All she wanted was to rest, to put her feet up and wipe the sweat from her brow, perhaps drink from the fountain again. She could still taste its cool bite.

The house girl led her through endless winding corridors, but even still, Jacquotte could have walked these halls blindfolded. It was as though its map was seared into her mind. They stopped outside a door Jacquotte recognized as the Governor's study. She straightened her shirt and ran a hand through her hair, trying in vain to make herself presentable. The girl cleared her throat and when Jacquotte looked over there was a rag in her hand.

"You're bleeding," she said quietly.

Jacquotte nodded her thanks and dabbed at her cheek. It stung like hellfire.

"The Governor will be with you shortly," she said, opening the door. "Please, make yourself comfortable."



Jacquotte fidgeted in her seat.

She had been waiting for the Governor for almost an hour, according to the grandfather clock in the corner of the room. She tried to be patient, but thoughts whirled through her mind. What did he want with her?

The room was exquisite. The walls in the lower town were plain, wood or stone, but here they were papered a striking red, decorated with birds and flowers along the borders. Bookshelves were filled with leather-bound tomes and there was a dark wood desk with three chairs. Their arms were shaped like lions. Solid gold.

Above the hearth was a grand portrait of Juan Felipe Gonzaga de Aragón, the Governor of Yáquimo. He had been granted his governorship following his impressive assault on Fort de Rocher. Jacquotte had heard the tale a hundred times, marveled over it, over the man himself and his military prowess. In the painting, he sat tall and proud atop a white warhorse, long brown hair tumbling down beneath a cocked hat bearing white plumage. He was impressive and regal, and his clothes looked as though they'd been stitched with gold dust.

The painting seemed as though it belonged to another world. She supposed that was fitting with the Governor himself. The man might have been a military marvel, but from what she heard from Arnolde, he was not so adept at the running of a town.

The last time she had seen the Governor's study, she and Florián had been listening to her father and his uncle argue, something about the Governor's spending and him needing to find a wealthy bride. Florián and Jacquotte had just returned from their swordfighting lessons, and Florián was still sore about his loss. The boys his age weren't permitted to play with him or speak back to him, and they treated him as though he were made of glass. Jacquotte had no such compunction and challenged him in every way.

They had elbowed each other to get closer to the study door, and Florián got her in the stomach, hard. She had kicked his legs out from under him and he'd taken her down with him, and the two had wrestled until her father had stormed out and taken Jacquotte by the ear. When she had received her punishment, a firm crack of Arnolde's belt and a day of cleaning pots and pans, Florián had stayed beside her, chattering away. Though they did not speak of what happened, his eyes conveyed everything she had needed: his apology and his unwavering friendship.

The Governor opened the door.

Jacquotte stood so quickly she almost overturned her chair. She dipped into the lowest curtsy she could manage in her tight britches.

"Jacquotte," he said, embracing her. "It has been too long."

It had been ten years, but he seemed so much older. He was squat and soft from years of being waited on. His long brown curls were tinged with gray.

Following him was a younger man. It took her a moment to recognize Florián. She smiled impulsively. It had been a decade since they had last seen each other. He was now a man dressed in uniform and looked every bit the heir to Yáquimo. At his hip was a rapier and he held a feathered hat in one hand.

"It is wonderful to see you, Jacquotte," Florián said.

She remembered him as a boy exactly. All the time they had played together with sticks and wooden swords, running about the courtyard screaming and play-fighting. Looking at him now, she did not see that same wide-eyed boy who followed at her heels as she made a nuisance of herself. Now his responsibilities had aged him into the man he was always destined to become.

The Governor crossed the room to sit behind his desk, and she took the seat opposite. Florián leaned against one of the bookshelves, as though its contents

were not worth a fortune.

“It’s an honor to be in your presence again, sir.” Her hands shook in her lap. She couldn’t remember the last time she had been so nervous.

He nodded once. His hands, large and white, rested on the golden lions’ heads of his chair.

“I was sorry to hear of the passing of Monsieur Richelieu,” he said. “Your father told me he was a good man. He shall be missed.”

Jacquotte felt a pang in her gut. She saw his face, could hear his voice, bright and booming. She took a breath.

“His death was a great loss to us all,” she said at last. “*Requiescat in pace.*”

“Your Latin is impeccable,” the Governor said, a smile playing on his lips. “You always were a talented linguist. How many languages do you speak now?”

The question threw her. “Spanish, French, English, and Latin,” she said. “I know some other languages, too, like Greek and Dutch, but I’m not fluent.”

Arnolde had only been responsible for teaching her the languages he felt were important. His mother tongue, Latin, and English, but it was Richelieu who had taught her the others. Smatterings of languages he had picked up at sea. He had used her as his translator when foreign ships came into harbor. She picked up on words and phrases quickly, understood how to barter and haggle, but she was not proficient.

“Perhaps they will come in time.” The Governor opened his desk drawer and produced a folded piece of paper. “I was hoping, Jacquotte, that you might be of assistance to me. Take a look at this. Tell me what you think.”

He passed her the paper. Though his demeanor was calm, there was something in his eyes that she immediately distrusted. She had seen that look in a man’s eye a hundred times over. He was trying to con her.

She didn’t open the paper. “May I ask what this is?”

“It’s part of a letter,” the Governor told her, “which requires translation, but my interpreters cannot agree on its meaning.”

“My father, your scribe, taught me everything I know,” she said coolly, but she could feel the sweat on the back of her neck. “Has he looked at it for you?”

The Governor’s smile was unwavering. “Many have, but we have not reached a conclusion,” he said. “We thought you might be able to help.”

“I am no expert in written languages.”

The Governor leaned back in his chair and exchanged a meaningful glance with his nephew.

“Your father brags of you relentlessly,” Florián said, stepping forward. “I cannot imagine such skill has left you now that you have become a laborer.”

She was caught off guard. He knew of her life, of her work. Had he been following her progress in the lower town?

“I am a shipwright,” Jacquotte corrected.

Florián smiled. He was not the boy he once was. Nervous. Shy. Always looking to Jacquotte when they found themselves in trouble. Calling for mercy when she beat him at wrestling or swordplay. He was handsome and strong, tall with a careless, effortless charm to him that few could easily accomplish.

“A shipwright,” he said. “A woman of business. And we deal not in dissimilar ways. We both rely on loyal individuals, who deserve to be fairly compensated for their work and assistance.” His gaze flicked to the cut on her cheek. “Trouble at the boatyard?”

Jacquotte said nothing. She looked between both men. Florián’s lazy smile never left his lips.

“We would, of course, be indebted to you,” Florián said, sliding the paper toward her. “A favor for a favor.”

This came as a surprise. A favor from the Governor could mean countless things. Money. Stability. Perhaps passage to Fort de Rocher. It could change her life. And all she had to do was read a letter?

The Governor reached across the table and put his hand on hers. It was sweaty and smelled of sickly sweet powder. He hadn’t paid her much mind as a child, only when he’d wanted to boast of his wartime achievements, and now she felt uncomfortable under his heavy gaze.

“Take a look.”

Jacquotte unfolded the paper. She didn’t have to read what it said. She recognized the handwriting immediately as her father’s. He had a bold hand, firm but languid, so unlike any other in Yáquimo. The writing was in French, but infused with Latin. It took all her strength to keep her hands from trembling.

“I am afraid I cannot read it.”

“Pardon?” The smile left the Governor’s face. “I thought you understood French?”

“I can speak it, but Father never thought it important for me to learn to read it,” she lied. She forced herself to look away, feigning embarrassment. “I can read a few words, but not enough to translate this letter.”

Anger flashed across his face. “Are you certain you cannot read it?”

“Yes.” Their eyes met. She could feel the resentment emanating from him. “I am sorry to disappoint you, sir.”

The Governor snatched the letter from her, tearing it at the corner. He stood suddenly, looming over her, and his hands shook, knuckles white. For a moment she thought he might strike her.

Florián darted over to the Governor’s side and put a hand on his shoulder. He drew him away and whispered something inaudible into his ear. The Governor relaxed and cast his eyes at Jacquotte.

“You may go, Señorita Delahaye,” the Governor said. “Florián will escort you out.”

Jacquotte stood quickly and forced herself to curtsy. “As you wish, sir. Thank you for the honor of this meeting.”

“If you happen to change your mind, you know where to find me.”

Her chest was so tight that she could hardly breathe. What had just happened?

Florián walked ahead of her and held the door open with a bow. There were two guards at the door where they hadn’t been before, but Florián ignored them as he walked beside Jacquotte.

She was more confused than she had been before. Her father was in trouble. Did they think her involved? She looked behind her at the armed guards, engaged in discussion. She had always dreamed of being invited back to the manor, of being accepted with open arms, recognized for her achievements, missed by her friend. Now she wanted nothing to do with this place, these people, and their schemes. She wanted to go home.

As they turned a corner, Florián grabbed her by the wrist and pulled her into an alcove. It was hidden behind a grand tapestry of a gory battle. She went to

protest, but he held a single finger against his lips. The two guards marched past.

For the longest moment Jacquotte stood completely still. She looked up at Florián. Their bodies were flush against each other, so close that she could feel his breath on her face.

“Do you remember this spot?”

Jacquotte looked at him, still startled. “What?”

“We used to play here,” he reminded her. “I was the Governor, and you my loyal lieutenant.”

It took a moment, but she did remember. They were always finding hiding spots together, places where no one would see them. They had spent hours behind this tapestry, talking days away, planning their lives ahead of them. The places they would sail, the lands they would conquer together.

How childish it all felt to her now.

“What do you want from me?” she demanded, but her voice was no louder than a whisper.

“I know you, Jacquotte,” he said at last. “I know you can read that letter.”

Jacquotte’s breath caught in her throat. For a moment, she was certain he had been sent to dispose of her, quickly and silently.

“We wouldn’t want anyone finding out you lied to the Governor, now, would we?”

As if summoned, she heard the guards’ footsteps approaching.

Florián held her tight against his chest, a small smile on his lips. A silent instruction not to make a sound. Her heart hammered so hard she thought she might faint. They were so close she knew he could feel it, as she could feel the steady thrum of his. It would have been impossible not to.

“But, as we’re old friends, I’ll tell my uncle you truly are as clueless as you pretend to be. That is, if you do one thing for me.”

“What?”

“Meet me tomorrow evening,” he said. “Like I said, I know you, Jacquotte. More than you might think. And we have much to discuss.”

CHAPTER FOUR

Is THIS the wisest plan, Jacquotte?” Francisco muttered. His hands were stuck deep into his pockets, and he kicked up stones as he walked. “The second those Frenchmen see us the price will rise threefold, just you wait.”

“What else would you suggest?” Jacquotte asked, mildly irritated.

She had too much on her mind to be concerned with Francisco’s fretting. He was right, but time was not on their side. They had made good progress on their first day, despite Jacquotte’s excursion to the Governor’s manor, but they would not have the ship seaworthy without supplies. They needed to get in, get what they needed, and get out. Then she could find her father. She didn’t know what she would do about Florián.

“We could go to Marigot instead?” he offered. “I bet they have supplies there.”

“And how do you propose we get to Marigot?”

They’d been bickering all the way from the *Dorado*. A merchant ship hadn’t passed through Yáquimo in weeks. Every day their supplies dwindled, and they couldn’t sit around in the hopes that one would miraculously pass through. If they waited much longer, they could lose the money they’d been promised.

Jacquotte had not entered the French settlement since the construction began a year ago. The settlers were known for their hostility toward anyone who wasn’t like them. No one went there unless it was the only option.

“We could borrow a horse,” Francisco said.

“Do you know anyone with a horse?” she asked.

“The men on the mountain.”

“And you are so well acquainted with these men all of a sudden?”

Francisco grinned. “No, but I sure do know their wives.”

Jacquotte couldn’t help but laugh with him. He was her oldest friend, and arrogant beyond belief. She’d seen the way women looked at him, even she had

once looked at him that way, and it was more than just a passing glance at a handsome man. She marveled at his audacity. But she also worried for him sometimes. There were different rules for mulattoes. If he were ever caught with a married woman, he would be shot where he stood. It wasn't thought of as cowardly to kill a mulatto unarmed; they weren't seen as "real" men.

Her laughter died in her throat as they reached the Laundry, the invisible border to the French settlement. Jacquotte could feel the same presence there was in the Spanish town. A haughty air. An unwelcoming aura.

"Everyone's staring at us," Francisco said, uncharacteristically nervous. His dark eyes darted around wildly, assessing any possible threat, and his hand stayed close to his hip, where Jacquotte knew he kept a pistol tucked into his waistband.

"They aren't," she said, but she knew he was right.

The French watched Jacquotte and Francisco with a mixture of amusement and disgust. They talked brazenly, assuming they could not understand them.

"They look like beggars."

"More like thieves."

"What are they doing here?"

"You know, I think that one might be a woman!"

"Look at the fluff on his chin. Can't he grow a proper beard?"

"I've heard mulattoes can't. Inferior blood."

Francisco caught her scowl. "What're they saying?"

"Nothing," she said quickly. "Nothing that matters."

Jacquotte turned. She could have sworn she heard a faint cry above the rabble.

"Arnolde!"

She stopped in her stride, turning to see where the shout had come from. There were too many people around. She spun around, searching for the source.

"Jesus," Francisco muttered. "What is it, Jacquotte?"

Her mind flashed to the letter. Could he be here? Would he be so reckless? Her gut twisted into knots.

"Arnolde!" she heard again, closer this time.

"Jacquotte? Are you all right?"

She exhaled as a man walked past her in answer to his name, and the source of the cries became clear.

“Yes, yes, I’m here,” a man said casually. A man who was not her father, a man who was not anyone to her. A man she would never have noticed if he hadn’t the same name as her father. She scolded herself for her fright. This was not her business. And it was certainly not her mess. She had work to do.

“I’m fine.”

They pressed through the town hastily, not wanting to spend any more time there than they had to. Jacquotte felt irritated by the crowds, by those who seemed deliberately in her path.

Finally, they reached the far side of the settlement, where an open market was set up. There were wooden stalls and wheelbarrows filled with goods: silks from China and Tuscany, tobacco, fresh loaves of bread, meat and fish, coffee and sugar, and the wines the French made specifically to eat with meals. Vendors hawked their wares aggressively, trying to compete to be the loudest and gain the most attention.

Jacquotte pointed at the stall they needed. “That one.”

She led the way. Francisco followed close behind her as she weaved in and out of the stalls. They stopped at a booth that was little more than a wooden plank balanced on two mismatching barrels. There were coils of ropes, crates of leather thongs, mallets, saws and hawsing irons, great barrels of tar, square and triangular sails, and, much to Jacquotte’s relief, a binnacle.

“I’ll handle this,” she told Francisco. She turned to the merchant with a forced smile and slipped easily into French. “Good afternoon, monsieur.”

The merchant’s face broke out into an instinctive grin, until his eyes fell on Jacquotte.

“Afternoon,” the merchant said.

“We need supplies,” she said. “I’ll take five coils of rope, ten leather thongs, one barrel of tar, a set of sails, square and rectangular, as much of this oak as you have, the pine, too, and the binnacle.”

The merchant made no move to retrieve what she requested. “Do you have coin to pay?”

“Plenty.” She stood taller, suddenly conscious of her posture. Her father always called her on it. “In reals, not livre.”

“There is a charge for paying in reals,” he said, his smile twisting into a sneer. “Double.”

She stiffened. “That is outrageous!”

Francisco looked at her. “What’s he saying?” he asked.

“He wants to charge us for paying in reals,” she said in Spanish. The merchant huffed, unable to understand them.

“He does know we’re in Spanish territory, does he not?” Francisco demanded. “Tell this sniveling whoreson that he will take our coin at no greater charge, or I shall be forced to beat him about the head until he’s purple!”

“I’m not going to threaten him,” Jacquotte said, though the idea was appealing. “We’re in the middle of the French settlement. They won’t think twice about killing two mulattoes.”

Francisco gripped the handle of his pistol. “Then tell him I’m going to find his wife and fuck her, no matter how ugly she is.”

“If he has a wife she’s probably still in France,” she said, trying to hide her amusement. She hated to encourage his antics. “There are no Frenchwomen here.”

“Then tell him I’m going to charter a ship, sail to France, and *then* fuck his wife! Tell him, Jacquotte! The man must be informed that he’ll soon be made a cuckold. He’ll need time to prepare for the stink of shame that will soon follow him around.”

She couldn’t help the laugh that escaped her. The merchant glared.

“What are you saying?” he demanded, looking between the two of them accusingly. “You must pay me what I ask or leave. Now! Make your decision, you filthy bitch.”

Jacquotte squared up to him. “We’re leaving. We’ll take our business elsewhere.”

The merchant smirked, proud that he had finally caught her attention. “What? You think you’re better than the other mulatto whores because you speak French? I can see you are just as lowborn and worthless as the rest of them.”

She held his gaze. She wanted to turn on her heel, but her feet wouldn't move. She had done nothing to this man except offer him her custom and her hard-earned coin. And yet he would treat her this way? It wasn't fair. It wasn't fair that he was holding what little power he had over her. She could not help the fury rising in her at this familiar feeling. Arnolde preparing to leave them behind. Florián trying to trick her into playing his political games.

She clenched her fists together until the knuckles cracked. She was better than this. Better than the way they all treated her. She had her own business. She was smart, industrious, loyal. But they all treated her like a powerless child, one they could intimidate and malign. Who they could treat as less-than.

“Get out of here before I call the soldiers on you. You revolting mulatto cunt. You disgust me. Why, I should—”

Jacquotte threw herself at him. In one swift motion she cleared his shoddy stall and her body slammed into his. Leather thongs and nails went flying as they crashed to the ground, clawing at each other. His hand smashed into her face and she bit him so hard that when he tore away, some of his flesh stuck to her teeth.

She swung her fist, blind with rage, and landed a punch that broke his nose. Blood burst out of his nostrils and sprayed her face. She gagged and tried to wipe away the blood, but the merchant grabbed her by the hair and slammed her face onto the ground. Her head rang like the bells of the chapels were between her ears.

Francisco appeared above them, blocking out the sun. His heavy boot came down so hard on the merchant's chest that there was an audible crack. She managed to roll on top of him and punched him square in the face. And then again. He no longer had the strength to raise his arms to fend her off. She should stop, but his round, bloodstained face somehow looked like all the men who had ever held something over her, and her body moved on its own. The purser. The bosun. The Governor. Florián. Arnolde. *Arnolde*.

She stopped then, as her father's facade wiped across the merchant's face. Through the blood pounding in her ears, she could hear a voice.

“Jacquotte! Stop! You're going to kill him!”

She looked up, dazed. Francisco stood beside her, his hands held up in surrender. Surrounding them were soldiers in the red and blue livery of the French army, rapiers and muskets in their hands, all pointed toward her.

Jacquotte forced herself to stand, the world spinning before her eyes. She spat. Blood pooled in the dirt at her feet. The merchant didn't get up.

CHAPTER FIVE

THIS IS not quite the meeting I had in mind.”

Jacquotte’s vision was blurred. She lay on the cold, hard floor of the prison cell.

“You can imagine my surprise when I received my letters from the French settlement, detailing all the detained Yáquimo citizens, and saw your name amongst them.”

She looked up blearily. Florián Gonzaga stood effortlessly. He looked almost ordinary. His clothes were simple, and he had no rapier or feathered hat as he had before.

She could still hear him talking, vaguely. He droned on, but his words blended until all that was left was a faint mumbling. It was almost pleasant, like the sound of the brush when Marceau did her hair. Soothing.

He brought a chair over and rested his feet up against the metal bars. There was a large white pebble stuck between the grooves of his left boot. It took all the strength left in her not to reach out and pluck it.

“Jacquotte?” Her eyes wandered from his boots up to his face. A handsome face. An annoyed face. “Have you heard a word I said?”

She looked up at him and considered lying. But she didn’t have the strength to feign respect.

“Honestly? No.”

He sighed and rubbed at his temples. “I know you are aware of this already, but you cannot get into brawls with merchants. *Especialy* here.”

“I do know.” She felt like she was being scolded by her father, and she didn’t care for it.

“You beat that merchant nearly half to death,” Florián told her. “The doctor said it will take months for him to recover. His face will never be the same.”

“I didn’t mean to. It just... happened.”

She should have just left, found another merchant. Never in her life had she reacted like that. She'd wanted to, so many times she had wanted to, but she had never allowed herself for fear of the consequences.

She looked around. The prison was pathetic. It was a large, converted house and it seemed she was the only person on the floor. Her heart leapt in her chest.

"Where is Francisco?"

She and Francisco had been separated, but she had no idea how much time had passed. She lurched from the floor to look down the corridor. Francisco had assaulted that man, too, but only to protect her. This was her mistake. He shouldn't be here.

"Who?"

She glared at Florián. What was he even doing here? She felt the same urge to reach out and grab him, but she stopped herself. Her arms ached deep in their core.

Florián reached through the bars and pulled her chin up, forcing her to look at him. "Tell me who."

"One of my crew. He was arrested with me."

He went to the door. "Name?"

She looked at him, confused. "What?"

"What is his full Christian name?"

"Santos. Francisco Santos."

He leaned through the door and Jacquotte could hear him calling for the guard. Jacquotte watched, bewildered. What power did Florián have in the French prison? And why would he help her? Her head throbbed. Perhaps because they had been close, once, so long ago, some part of her felt hope as she watched him wait patiently by the door. Outside appeared one of the soldiers she had seen guarding the Governor's manor. Florián said something inaudible to him, but as he walked back toward Jacquotte he kept talking.

"... You're not to leave the settlement until you have Francisco Santos in your custody. He's to be released without consequence." The guard gave a small bow and closed the door. Florián turned back to Jacquotte. "There, that shall be dealt with imminently."

"You can order that?"

He sat back down, a serious look on his face. “You can trust me, Jacquotte,” he promised. “I only have your best interests at heart.”

In that moment, all the hope she had felt left her. She knew he was lying. She recognized the insincerity in his face and in the tone of his voice. The same voice he had used as a boy to blame Jacquotte when their childish war games grew too excitable, and they broke a prized vase of the Governor’s. The last time that had happened her father had smacked the backs of her legs until she couldn’t sit for a week.

She shifted back, away from him, as he leaned forward.

“I can just as easily arrange your release.”

“Why would you?” she asked, trying to keep her voice calm but firm.

He pulled two folded sheets of paper from his trouser pocket. The first was new, clean and white, while the other was ancient, worn and brown and practically turning to dust. He held them both in front of her.

“You recognize this, I assume?” he asked, pointing to the white paper. “This is the letter the Governor asked you to translate.”

She gave a small nod but said nothing.

“We both know you understand written French perfectly,” he said. “I remember you trying to teach me. So, I’ll ask once again. Would you be so kind as to translate it? And I will be sure to arrange your immediate discharge.”

“Surely, there are others who speak French?” she jabbed. “There are many educated men in the Governor’s cohort. Why must I be the one to translate it?”

“What my uncle said was true. No one can agree on its meaning. They could just be poor translators, or they could be deliberately mistranslating according to their own agendas.”

“And how do you know I won’t do the same?”

“Because you are no fool,” he said. “I know you recognize the hand as your father’s. You want to protect him, but you owe the man no loyalty.”

She looked at him then, enraged. “He is my father. He has fed, clothed, housed, and raised me since the day I was born. I owe him my life.”

“You owe him far less than that.”

Jacquotte winced. “I would rather rot in this ramshackle cell than help you.”

He moved the other piece of paper closer toward her, the old tattered brown one. She didn't take it.

"Your loyalty is admirable, but perhaps somewhat unfounded."

"What is this?"

"Not something I wanted to have to divulge," he told her. "It is a receipt. For a purchase your father made some twenty years ago."

She knew not to trust him, but she couldn't help herself. Her curiosity won out and she picked up the piece of paper.

It was so old and frail it was tough to the touch; the ink was so dry it had cracked in places. She held it carefully at the edges so as not to damage it and squinted to read the faded words.

17th November 1633

Receipt of collection for Five Hundred Reals for the purchase of one Negro slave by the name of Dayana aged approximately nineteen years old, this day sold to Arnolde L. Delahaye. The right and title for said slave I hereby warrant and defend against the claims of all persons whatsoever, and likewise find her sound and healthy.

She dropped the paper like it had burned her.

Her whole body shook uncontrollably. Her ears rang as though she had been struck in the head. Around her, the world moved painfully slowly. It was as though she could no longer move or see or think or breathe.

"This is a forgery." Even as she said it, she heard the hesitancy in her own voice. It had to be a fake. A lie. It *had* to.

Her father had always told Jacquotte he had fallen in love with their mother the moment he arrived in Yáquimo. She was a free woman who had loved him back.

"You know your father's hand better than anyone," Florián said. "Could anyone replicate it with such ease?"

Her mind raced. There had to be another explanation.

“I don’t believe it,” Jacquotte said, swallowing thickly. “My father has never owned any slaves.”

“He did. But only one,” Florián told her.

Jacquotte looked at the receipt again. It was indisputably his signature. No one in Yáquimo had such expert penmanship, not even the Governor himself.

There had to be an explanation, but she couldn’t think. Arnolde was good to her, and to Marceau. He might be a cruel drunk, he often said things that stung her to her core, but he was a good father. He let them have their freedom. In exchange for payment, he let Jacquotte have a job, a man’s job, the kind of work most men would be ashamed to see their daughter do. But if the receipt was real, Arnolde legally owned Jacquotte and her brother.

“I can see why you would be hesitant, Jacquotte,” Florián said softly. “Your father has done right by you and your brother. He treats you well, that much even I know. But this is the truth. Many wealthy men own slaves and think nothing of it. Perhaps your father truly did love your mother. But that doesn’t change the circumstances or the facts.”

Jacquotte felt sick. The receipt was heavy in her hands. Her skin was clammy with sweat. She thought she might retch. It felt as though her body was turning against her.

“Why are you telling me this?”

“Because you deserve to know. You deserve to know the man you’re protecting.”

Her vision was blurry. She realized she had been crying and she wiped the tears away angrily. She couldn’t cry. Not here.

“I have to go,” she said suddenly, standing as close to Florián’s face as the bars would allow. Hating herself for needing his help. “Please, get me out of here.”

“Jacquotte, I would be happy to secure your release,” Florián said. “But you must translate your father’s letter.”

She wanted to scream. She hadn’t asked for this. He had done this to her. She wondered if she could hold him to the bars, reach her arms around his neck. But there were guards on the other side of the door. She needed to get out.

Jacquotte sat on the floor and picked up the letter that her father had written. Her eyes darted to Florián as she unfolded the crisp, white paper. It was in that

strange cipher, French imbued with Latin. She could see why there had been such trouble translating it. But she was better than them. She was better than Arnolde. And his code only took a matter of minutes for her to unravel.

“It’s a letter of acceptance,” she told him. “A previously agreed-upon arrangement. Arnolde is to go to the French settlement and meet someone there to—”

“Who?”

She blinked up at him. “I don’t know.”

He looked annoyed but signaled for her to go on.

“They will discuss details in person,” she went on. “Arnolde will meet with the men this afternoon and report all to them tonight. They...” She hesitated. It was exactly as she thought. “In exchange for his help, they are planning to nullify his exile... and permit him to return to France.”

Jacquotte’s stomach churned.

“Very well,” he said. A satisfied look on his face. She hated it. She hated him. How could he smile, when all she had ever known was unraveling? “I will call the guards to let you out. You won’t tell anyone about this meeting.”

Won’t. She said nothing. She wouldn’t agree to his demand. But he didn’t notice, or care. Florián took the letter from her hands and turned his back on her.

He was not the boy she had once known. He was not the friend she had once picked flowers with and confided all her secrets in. Now he was cold, calculating, a man who would use whatever means necessary to get what he wanted.

She sat, unsure of what to do as bile rose high in her throat and her chest constricted so tightly that she could hardly breathe. Her head was spinning.

He glanced back at her then, crumpled on the floor. “Thank you so much for your cooperation, Jacquotte.”

CHAPTER SIX

AS SOON as she was out of sight of the converted shack of a prison, Jacquotte leaned her head against a tree and heaved and heaved until there was nothing left in her stomach. The bile burned her throat and made her eyes water.

She was in a daze. It was as though she was being dragged down by the weight of the world but somehow also floating a foot off the ground. The Frenchmen made snide comments about her as she passed, noting the filth and stench covering her clothes, but she could hardly hear them for the ringing in her ears.

Instead of making her way home, she found herself traveling through the Valley. By the time she regained control of her body, she realized that she was on the outskirts of the plantations. She normally avoided the working fields; all the free blacks and mulattoes did. There was something too painful and cruel about passing by and acting as though nothing was happening to people who looked just like them. People who had the misfortune of their birth and the whims of the white man to blame for their laboring in the fields. It was a fate that could have befallen any of them, and they didn't like to be reminded of it.

But today, Jacquotte found herself unable to look away.

Despite the setting sun, it was still unbearably hot. The slaves toiled away regardless. They had no choice. They harvested sugarcane by hand, pulling up the bright green stalks and shoving them into cloth sacks. They were covered in sweat and dirt; their clothes were old, tattered, and filthy; and many of them were bloody, especially their hands, and some bled through the backs of their rough-spun shirts, the legacy of a recent whipping.

Some of them saw her watching and stopped working. One of the whip-crackers noticed that his slaves were falling behind. He was a large white man, his skin red and worn from the sun. He followed their eyes until he caught sight of Jacquotte.

“Oi!” he called out.

He stormed toward her, whip in hand. Her face still stung from where a whip that looked just like his had caught her. She wondered if it would leave a scar, like those covering the men and women she looked on. But she had gotten off easy. She didn't suffer as they did. She couldn't imagine enduring a true whipping and having to stay silent or risk a worse punishment.

"Get out of here, mulatto!" the whip-cracker ordered. "Or I'll put you to work with the rest of them!"

Jacquotte hesitated. She wanted to do something, to take the whip away from him just as she had done with the bosun's. But there was a look on the man's face that made her believe he truly would put her to work if given half the chance. She was powerless. Her chest felt painfully tight.

As the whip-cracker got closer, she forced herself to leave. Some of the slaves watched her go. It was impossible not to see the similarities in their faces. Some shared her nose, her brother's large eyes, Alberto's broad hands, Roberto's soft curls, the faces of those who lived in town with her, and even the fractured image of her mother that she held dear in her heart. They could be her family. Aunts and uncles, cousins, maybe even siblings. She didn't know. She would never know.

She had been used. The Governor and Florián had used her for information about her father and she had fallen for it.

Jacquotte forced herself to walk away. Color slowly started to seep back into her eyes, but as she passed from the Spanish settlement to the lower town, the world turned from beautiful and vibrant with overpoweringly pleasant smells and colorful flowers to dirty, hot, and sticky, with tall weeds and barren trees and the smell of sweat hanging in the air. The home she had known all her life felt drab and ugly in a way she had never known before. She had dreamed of bigger things for as long as she could remember, but now her world looked so small and insignificant that the idea seemed impossible.

A group of young boys ran past her, chasing each other and laughing wildly. She wondered how many of them had parents in love. How many had black and mulatto mothers who were bought as property or raped by white men? Her stomach leapt into her throat at the thought of it. And what of her father?

She felt a swell in her chest and took a deep breath. She would find her father and he would explain everything to her. He would not avoid her questions. She had to know the truth.



The sun was beginning to set, bathing all of Yáquimo in a deep red light that made it look like the whole town was bleeding.

She knew where she'd find Arnolde at this time. He would have finished work by now and would already be at the local tavern, squandering away what little money he had on drink. It was the reason Jacquotte had been hiding her money away in the wall, so he wouldn't spend it in a moment of weakness. But he was always weak, she realized. He always had been.

Jacquotte stormed through the town. Everyone moved out of her way. They saw the look in her eyes and gave her a wide berth.

The tavern was already full within, and she found her father easily. He was in the corner with three other white men who worked in the Governor's manor but weren't important enough to earn a house on the mountain. By the state of him, it looked like her father had been there by far the longest.

At the next table was the purser. When he saw Jacquotte he said something to the men who sat with him, most of whom she recognized from the *Dorado*, and they got up and hurried out. She met her father's eye across the tavern and forgot all about the purser.

Arnolde smiled at her drunkenly. He was red-faced and squinting.

"Jacquotte!" Arnolde lifted his cup to greet her. "Men, this is my daughter."

The others looked her over as she came to stand beside them. The table stank of ale, rum, brandy, wine. The two younger men appraised her, trying to gauge her age and eligibility, but they only sneered at her.

"She's filthy, Arnolde," one said. "Is this how you keep your house?"

Her father squinted harder. He looked taken aback, and then disgusted. "Jacquotte! Why do you look like a beggar?"

She had to quell the urge to smack his drink from his hands. The only thing that stopped her was knowing a poor tavern girl would have to clean the floor. Instead, she balled her hands into fists at her sides to stop herself from shaking.

“I spent the night in prison,” she said, barely able to speak with her teeth clenched so tightly. “Did you even notice I was gone?”

Her father shrugged and took a large swig of his drink. Rum. It smelled sickly. “I am so busy, Jacquotte. You cannot expect me to notice every little thing that goes on. I am very important.”

The two younger men snickered into their drinks. She took a deep breath to calm herself, but all it did was fuel her rage. “Father, I need to speak with you. Now, please.”

“Later, Jacquotte,” Arnolde said. There was a thinly veiled tinge of anger in his voice. That only annoyed her more. Why was *he* angry? “We can speak when I get home.”

“No,” she said firmly. She had to do this now. “We must speak *at once*.”

His companion laughed. “Go on, Arnolde. Your girl is calling you.”

Arnolde scowled and slammed his cup down so hard the whole table shook. He stormed outside and Jacquotte followed close behind. His drinking friends watched as they went, laughing. The look in Arnolde’s eye was uneasy. She buried the fear that began to rise at the thought of his anger. He could not avoid her. Not this time.

As soon as they were outside, her father rounded on her. He looked crazed, his skin bright red, his graying auburn hair unkempt, and his eyes were wide. He looked like a beast from a story to scare children into behaving.

“How *dare* you embarrass me like that, Jacquotte!” he yelled. He was so loud he could be heard over the commotion of the tavern. “You know never to speak to me like that! I raised you better than this!”

“This is important. It’s about my mother,” Jacquotte said, barely able to keep her voice steady. She folded her arms tightly across her chest to stop herself from launching her whole body at him like she wanted to. “You need to listen to me.”

“What?” He squinted at her, bewildered. “I need not do anything. Especially listen to you, you ungrateful wretch! You are lucky I do not take you home and teach you a lesson with my belt.”

Images of the whip-cracker and the bosun flashed before her eyes. Neither of them looked like her father, besides the color of their skin, but there was a sudden similarity in all of them, in the look in their eyes, one she had not truly

recognized until now. Memories flooded her mind of her childhood. Memories she had buried deep within.

She saw Arnolde looming over her, belt in hand, swaying on his feet.

It was not her first beating at his hands, and it was not her last. Arnolde had not hit them for years, ever since she had become strong enough to challenge him, to pose a threat if he tried. Since then, it was only his barbs and his insults that hurt her. But she still remembered what he always told her.

“It’s for your own good.”

That if he didn’t beat them, they would become monsters, and that they would be just as bad as the rest of them. Only now did she know what he meant. *The rest of them.*

“You—”

“Jacquotte! *Jacquotte!*”

Marceau stumbled toward them. He barreled into Jacquotte and pulled her into a hug, almost knocking her to the ground with his cane. He hugged her so tight that it felt like he was trying to rearrange her bones, to make her small enough that he could carry her around forever and keep her safe.

“Oh, Jacquotte! Where have you been? I’ve been looking everywhere for you!”

Her younger brother looked exhausted. His face was covered in snot and tears, and it was clear from the dark marks under his eyes that he hadn’t slept all night. She wrapped her arms around him, letting herself melt into his sweaty warmth, even though their father was watching, disapproval on his face at their open display of affection. Marceau had noticed that she was gone. He had cared that something might have happened to her.

She hugged him back as if she was trying to hug out all of the anger and sadness inside her, but somehow it only became deeper and more profound. She wasn’t just angry for herself anymore.

“You should go home, Marceau,” she said quietly. “I need to speak with Father. Alone.”

“Why?” he asked. “What happened to you? Are you all right?”

“I will be.”

“What is that supposed to mean?” Arnolde demanded. “Both of you should go immediately. Leave me be, you ungrateful children.”

Jacquotte rounded on him, unable to stop herself any longer. “I spoke with Florián.”

“Why on earth would you... Jacquotte, if you have interfered in my business, I swear I will—”

“Stop!” she shouted. “Just stop.”

She didn’t care about his letters. His plans. She didn’t care about any of it anymore.

“He told me about our mother.”

There was a silence that could have filled an age as Arnolde looked her up and down. His eyes passed over Marceau, but he saw the confusion on his face and knew it was only Jacquotte he had to answer to.

“Let us not do this now, Jacquotte,” Arnolde said in French.

His speech was still slurred, and his face was still red, but it was clear that her accusation had sobered him.

“No. I want to know here and now,” she said in Spanish, refusing to hide from Marceau what she had to say in their father’s mother tongue. “Was our mother your slave?”

Her brother inhaled sharply beside her and clutched her arm. Arnolde was quiet for a long moment before he finally opened his mouth. “I...” His words faltered. “It is... Jacquotte, it is more complicated than that.”

She had not been prepared for the feeling that hit her, like a punch to the gut. She had expected him to deny it fervently, to promise he could never have done such a thing, to reprimand her for her lies, to remind her of the tales of his and Dayana’s love from their childhood. But he hadn’t. He couldn’t.

Beside her, Marceau let out a small noise, somewhere between a gasp and a groan of pain. She felt an ache in her heart. She’d wanted to speak with Marceau privately, to explain. But now she had to do it here, in the street, where everyone could hear.

“Tell me.”

Arnolde was quiet again as he tried to find his words. “I... Jacquotte, I was a nobleman before I came here. I had slaves and servants aplenty in France. Why

should I not be afforded the same comforts here? I am not a savage. I am a lord. So, *yes*. Not that it is your concern, Dayana was my... property. As is the law of the land.” He stood taller, prouder, though he wobbled on his drunken legs.

His words crashed into her like a wave, filling her chest with something she had never felt before. Despair spread through her lungs and clawed at her insides. All she wanted was to tear him apart until there was nothing left of him but scraps and shreds that flew away on the wind.

“None of our concern?” Her voice was shaking, and her breath was caught in her throat. “You told us you loved her. That she was a free woman. You lied.”

Arnolde belched loudly. The smell was vile. “It wasn’t a lie. Not all of it. I did love her. Everything I did for her, everything I did for you, I did because of love.”

She stayed quiet. She did not understand what he was saying. But she waited. She knew he hated the silence.

“We all do things for love,” Arnolde said.

“What do you mean by that?” Marceau asked.

Arnolde hesitated. “It means nothing, my boy.” But the look on his face told her all she needed to know. He was hiding something again.

Jacquotte tried to make herself remember the woman that time had forced her to forget. There was little she recalled in the days surrounding Dayana’s death, only that she was sick and Arnolde would not let her see her. And then, one night, the screams began. Heartrending sounds, guttural cries and moans. She had heard them before from the other women about town. The cries of labor. Jacquotte was to be a sister, but she found no joy in it, only terror.

It went on for hours, but the longer they continued, the weaker they became. It had been raining heavily that season, but despite this, Jacquotte went outside and sat with her back against the growing frangipani tree her mother had planted, toes wriggling in the wet mud, tearing up fragrant white flowers to distract herself.

She was not sure how long she waited, getting soaked to the bone, until a second cry joined the first. A birth wail. The exuberant lungs of a newborn, shortly followed by Arnolde’s rejoicing. “*I have a son! I have a son!*” But beneath his joy and young Marceau’s screams, she could no longer hear her mother’s sobs. She couldn’t hear anything at all.

Jacquotte swallowed back bile. She didn't want to ask the question, to speak the words into existence, to make it real. But she had to. She had to know. "How did our mother die?"

In the silence that followed, she imagined a thousand possibilities. A thousand other scenarios. But she knew what he was telling them. She knew what he had done.

"Jacquotte, you are an adult now. You know how sick Dayana was after Marceau," he spat. "Dayana... She couldn't do *anything*. Couldn't walk. Couldn't move. Couldn't cook. Couldn't clean. Couldn't look after either of you. I... *saved* her from the pain."

Jacquotte's ears were ringing.

She looked over to Marceau, unable to hear any more of Arnolde's words. The world blurred before her as tears streamed from her eyes. Marceau screamed. She felt stuck. Frozen in place.

Marceau was standing between Jacquotte and their father. She didn't know when he had moved, but he was shielding her with his body. One hand clutched his cane tightly, and the other balled up into a fist at his side. She had never seen him like this before and she didn't know what to do. Her words failed her.

"You cannot save anyone by killing them," she heard her brother shout, staring up at their father. "That does not make you a good man. It makes you a *murderer*."

Arnolde stood taller, glowering at him. As if Marceau had said something unspeakable.

"A man is allowed to do whatever he pleases with his own property!" he yelled, his face red. "It is his legal right as a man! I won't have a mulatto tell me I should be denied my birthright or—"

"You are a *monster*," her brother said. He wiped the tears off his face with the back of his arm. "Leave us alone. Forever."

People were starting to gather, stopping as they passed by to see what was happening. Some had even come out of the tavern to watch the scene as it unfolded. They were whispering and she was certain she heard talk of the guards. She took Marceau by the shoulders.

"We need to leave," she said.

“No. You shan’t leave,” Arnolde hissed. His eyes darted around to the crowd forming around them. Jacquotte saw his cheeks redden with embarrassment. “I am your father! I *own*—”

“You own *nothing*,” Jacquotte said and spat on him. “You hold no power over us. You are not better than us. You are nothing but a spoiled man granted every opportunity in life, only to squander it by your own greed and selfishness.” She took a deep, rattling breath. “You will not come near us again.”

She took Marceau’s hand in her own and led him away.

CHAPTER SEVEN

JACQUOTTE HAD dreamed of the woman in the yellow dress again. Sweet dreams, as they always were, but darker than normal. As they danced, Jacquotte ran a thumb over the woman's birthmark, but instead of laughing sweetly, as she had once done, the woman asked about Arnolde. Demanded to know how Jacquotte could have been so naive. So foolish. How she could have let her own mother die by his hands.

She awoke drenched in sweat.

The room was unbearably hot. A thin white sheet graced the window, but the sun tore through it as though it wasn't there at all.

In the week she and Marceau had been staying at the Laundry, she was still not used to waking there. The wooden building on the border of the French town did its washing by day, and by night while the clothes and sheets hung out to dry, it transformed into a brothel. Each night the sounds that filled her room were unlike anything she'd ever heard before, especially all at once, and so loudly. Thankfully, Marceau was a sound sleeper and fell asleep shortly after he put his head to the pillow each night. He was still deep asleep now, even as light streamed into the room.

Jacquotte was not so lucky. Every night she crawled into her bed, her thoughts consumed her, disquieting even her sweetest dreams. Thoughts she kept trying to push from her mind, but she knew would always be there.

She and her brother had not been home since that night. They could not bear to. For years they had lived alongside that man, cooking for him, cleaning for him, taking care of him when he was sick or hungover, searching for him when he drunkenly went wandering, giving him countless chances when he took more than his fair share of their wages. And for what? For the man who owned their mother, murdered her, who owned them both.

There had been a part of Jacquotte that had worried he would come after them. That he would bring soldiers and claim his rightful property. It was a part of what kept her up at night, tossing and turning, waiting for him to bang on the doors of the Laundry with soldiers at his heel and take them away. She was prepared to fight, prepared to die if it meant Marceau could go free, but Arnolde had not come. He had not sent anyone in his stead. She had not seen nor heard from him in a week. It was unusual for him to go missing for this long, but he was not her problem anymore. It was not her job to care for him. It never should have been.

Alberto was in the room next to theirs and promised to keep an eye on them. He was in and out of his room all night, keeping the peace, breaking up fights and kicking out any men who acted inappropriately. She could hear him yell through the walls. He sounded truly terrifying when he wanted to.

Jacquotte could not recall how they had ended up at the Laundry that first night. All she could remember was Alberto ushering them through the back door before Blanca took over. She insisted on giving Jacquotte a bath. She couldn't remember when she'd last had a chance to wash. She could feel her hair beginning to knot at the back of her head. If she didn't get to it soon, she'd have to cut it off. But maybe that wouldn't be such a bad thing. It reminded her of... *him*.

She started dressing for the day. Her clothes were supplemented with outfits left behind by clients of the Laundry, ill-fitting britches and shirts, but she took them willingly. She was eager to be back on the *Dorado*, to be back at work. She had not missed a day despite all that had happened, and she would not start now. They were making great progress with the galleon, far better than she could have predicted. Perhaps her rage propelled her onward, or perhaps her crew were less inclined to laugh and chat with the somber mood she brought with her.

Outside, she heard footsteps and a knock on the room next door.

“Good morning, my love.”

She recognized Blanca's voice immediately. She was older than most of the women at the Laundry, and her voice had a sharp, piercing quality that could be heard above almost anything else.

“Good morning, Mama,” she heard Alberto reply.

“How are they doing?”

“Better than when they first arrived,” Alberto said. “Marceau went back to work yesterday, and Jacquotte never stopped. I might go with Marceau to collect their things from Arnolde’s home. He might need the support after... everything that happened.”

There was a creaking that Jacquotte could only assume was Blanca sitting down on the bed. “I never trusted that man,” she said. “There was always something about him. He acted like he was too good for us. Never helped out around town. Goes to church up on that high mountain like a rich important white man, but really, he was just a regular townsman, like all the others.”

“Did you know her? Jacquotte’s mother.”

“Not well. No one knew her well,” Blanca said with a sigh. “She was a sweet young girl. She seemed... small. Scared. Hardly spoke to any of us. I think we thought maybe she shared her white man’s opinions. Thought she was too good for us. But no. *Now* we know why she was like that.”

“Why did Arnolde lie?” Alberto asked. “The white folks have slaves. It’s what they do. Why would he pretend she wasn’t his slave?”

“White men on the mountain have slaves,” Blanca said. She sounded angry, like she was about to spit. “But you ever see a white man down here with a slave? No. They don’t do that here. *We* are the slaves; brothers and sisters, parents, *children* of slaves. You keep a slave down here and you wake up with a knife in your back. You don’t keep slaves with your free blacks, son, unless you’re looking to start something.”

Jacquotte felt like a fool. How could she have believed her father’s lies? It had all been there, right in front of her. Arnolde had never acted like her father. Richelieu had. He had been much more than a mentor to her. He had been the one to take Jacquotte out to sea for the very first time. It was not long after her mother died. He had stood tall beside her, without speaking a word, the two of them looking out at the endlessness before them. She felt a pang in her gut again, and not for the first time that week had she cursed that it was Richelieu who had died and Arnolde who had lived.

Loud footsteps sounded outside and the door to Alberto’s room burst open.

“Mama, Alberto,” a girl said, her breathing ragged. “There’s men outside. They’re here for the Delahayes.”

“Who are they?” Alberto asked in that same frightening, authoritative tone.

“Spanish men, in the Governor’s uniforms.”

Blanca sighed deeply. “Come, Alberto. Let’s get rid of them.”

Jacquotte was already on her feet. She threw the door open. Blanca, Alberto, and the young girl stood staring at her.

“Jacquotte, stay here. We’ll deal with this,” Blanca said as she tried to usher her back to her room.

“No. I’ll speak with them,” Jacquotte said in the firmest voice she could muster, though she felt it crack as she was speaking.

“Someone has to stay with Marceau,” she said, making herself stand taller. Through the open door she could see her brother had not yet stirred. “They can have me, but Marceau must stay safe.”

Blanca looked her over once more. The woman was short and fat, still beautiful in her older age. She had rich, dark skin, and her hair was cropped short and worn in an array of little twists that sat around her head like a halo.

“Delia,” Blanca said. The girl who had come to warn them was no older than ten. She must have been one of the brothel babes, born there and bound to work there one day. “Stay with the boy, get help if anyone tries to take him. Jacquotte, come with us.”

Alberto looked like he wanted to protest, but Blanca rolled up her sleeves and marched toward the front door, and he fell silently into step behind his mother. Jacquotte followed. Her head felt light, and her stomach was tight.

At the door, two women were trying to keep the guards from entering but immediately stepped aside as Blanca barreled toward them.

“Are you the madam here?” one of the men demanded. “We are looking for...” His eyes settled on Jacquotte. “Ah, Señorita Delahaye.”

Jacquotte made herself stand taller upon being recognized. She didn’t want to look like a simpering coward, hiding behind a madam.

“What do you want with me?” Jacquotte asked, trying to sound calm and authoritative, but she was weak.

“Where is your brother?”

Jacquotte wasn't sure which of the three men had asked her that.

"He's not here," she said quickly. "Now tell me what you want."

The men looked between them, before one reached behind his back. Jacquotte's hand shot to her hip, where a knife was sheathed. Blanca had given it to her on their first night at the Laundry, saying it wasn't safe for a woman to be unarmed. Jacquotte had not been without it since.

None of the men seemed to notice as one man produced a single sheet of paper, folded into a neat square.

"*Señorita Delahaye and the Young Señor Delahaye,*" the man said, reading aloud from the paper, "*this is a formal invitation from his Lordship, Juan Felipe Gonzaga de Aragón, Governor of Yáquimo, to the banquet he holds at the Manor this Saturday eve.*"

"A banquet?" she asked skeptically.

"Yes." The man nodded. "It is in honor of the arrest of the traitor Arnolde Delahaye."

It felt as though Jacquotte had been immersed in freezing water. Her father had been arrested. Part of her felt panicked. She had been the one to do this. She had translated the letter. She might as well have signed his death warrant. But then she remembered who he was and what he had done, to Jacquotte, to her brother, to their mother. And even though she knew he would never be tried for the crimes against her mother, at least he would be for this.

"When is the banquet?"



Over the following days word of the arrest spread like wildfire. Soon all of Yáquimo was bubbling with excitement. Whenever the Spanish town had a celebration, the lower town shortly followed. Already, they had put up torches lining the town square. Barrels and buckets and anything people could find were rolled out to make seats. As she walked through the town, she passed the tavern. The doors were open wide and within they were preparing huge batches of food in large pans, skillets, and troughs. The smell made her stomach growl. She could already pick out certain dishes: chicken and walnut stew, rice and beans, orange fried pork, and her favorite, crunchy fried goat.

As Jacquotte continued through the town, heads turned. The townsfolk looked at her in awe, like she was beautiful. Despite herself, she *felt* beautiful. She had never cared for clothes and jewels or looking pretty, but the way the town looked at her now had her considering it. She felt powerful. She liked that.

Blanca and the girls at the Laundry had done all the work. One girl was similar in size to Jacquotte, and a regular had bought her a Spanish dress. It was a vibrant green and suited Jacquotte's complexion perfectly. Blanca had brushed the tangles out of her hair, then twisted and pinned it until it fell in delicate ringlets. She touched her bright auburn curls and watched as they fell, bouncing beautifully in the looking glass.

Marceau had returned home in Arnolde's absence. He wanted to sort through their father's effects to find anything of worth to keep or sell so that they could begin their lives anew. Jacquotte couldn't bring herself to spend any time there.

She felt sick as she approached the door. She didn't want to see the home where she had once happily lived with her father. With her mother. She took a deep breath and forced herself to step inside.

There were papers everywhere. All of their father's belongings had been separated into piles varying in height and stability. She saw the books Arnolde had used to teach them to read. His maps of the world. His famed tomes that people came from all over to see. All piled haphazardly on the ground. She looked away, unable to stomach the sight any longer.

Marceau stood preening himself in Arnolde's looking glass. He had grown out of his finest clothes years ago, so Marceau wore a green patterned vest that Arnolde had managed to sneak out of France during his exile, a clean linen shirt, and a pair of Arnolde's nicer trousers that he'd patched up. He almost looked genteel.

There was a pensive look on his face that would have made him appear older were it not for the out-turned lower lip that betrayed his fifteen years. Five years Jacquotte's younger, he had a round face, large eyes, and black skin. He did not share their father's striking red hair, as Jacquotte did. But there was something about the way he stood, his slight, delicate frame and soft black curls, that reminded Jacquotte of their mother. He took after her in that way, she

supposed, with a quiet elegance, and if it were not for the tap of his cane as he walked, she might have believed she was seeing an apparition.

“You look good,” Jacquotte said with a smile.

Marceau turned to her with a smile of his own. “So do you.”

“Are you ready?”

“As I’ll ever be.”

They made their way up the mountain filled with nervous excitement. Neither of them knew what to expect, or what was expected of them. Were they to give speeches? What was the order of events? Would they be sat together? But all questions faded as soon as they reached the top of the hill.

The Spanish town was a clamoring, hollering mess of bodies, all pressed into a tight throng, crowded around the grand walls of the Governor’s manor. There were far more people than Jacquotte had even known lived in the Spanish town, all dressed in their finest. The guards at the gates held them at bay, shouting orders and refusing entry to almost all who tried to enter. They were armed with muskets and wicked-looking rapiers. Everyone wanted an invitation to the Governor’s banquet, it seemed.

Panic flooded her body. Would they be able to get through? She wanted to turn back and simply enjoy the festivities in the lower town. Perhaps she would find the woman in the yellow dress again, ask her to dance, maybe even learn her name. But Marceau wrapped his hand around hers and pushed his way to the front of the crowd.

He stood tall with a proud smile on his face as they broke free of the throng. She found herself copying his stance.

“Marceau and Jacquotte Delahaye,” her brother announced.

Without a moment of hesitation, the head guard stepped to one side and gave a small bow. “Right this way.”

As soon as they passed through, the guard took up his place in the center again, refusing entry. A chorus of complaints and shouts rose from the crowd of angry Spaniards. A rush of excitement coursed through her. She was permitted entrance to an exclusive banquet while most Spanish gentry were not. She was more important than them. More favored. More powerful. She relished the feeling.

Marceau's eyes widened and his jaw dropped as they entered the courtyard. She had forgotten he had only been five years old when they were no longer welcomed into the Governor's manor. He marveled at the courtyard, almost spinning around to make sure he didn't miss a thing. Flower petals were scattered across the stone tiles and minstrels played a soft tune, backed by the tinkling of the fountain. Servants with drinks flitted around, offering glasses to those who passed through the gates.

Waiting for them at the base of the steps was a pretty house girl dressed in a red and white uniform, ready to lead them into the manor.

Within, the candles made everything as bright as if it were noon and not night. In the glaring light she noticed the girl's hands. She kept them clasped behind her back, where Jacquotte could see the burns on her palms. She knew what they were. Some of the girls in the Laundry had similar burns from cashew oil. They used it to lighten their skin. Jacquotte tried not to stare, but she found she couldn't look away.

Jacquotte was not light-skinned. She was light enough that it was clear one of her parents was white, but no one could mistake her for a white girl. Marceau was darker still. There had always been a hierarchy: the lighter you were, the prettier you were, the better you were. The closer you were to white, the better you were treated. It had always been that way. So darker mulattoes would burn their skin to lighten it and wrap up their thick hair if it didn't fall in loose curls. There was a whole manner of other, horrible things they did to make themselves appear whiter. Just so they could be treated with some humanity.

The house girl led them down several winding corridors. The farther they went, the louder the sounds of revelry. Soon enough she could smell dozens of sickly sweet perfumes. They came to a set of large double doors with a servant on either side, who both gave small bows and opened the doors. Jacquotte and Marceau stepped into the grand hall.

Jacquotte felt that same, strange insecurity that had flooded her the last time she was here. She was dressed as a Spanish woman, from her hair to her beautiful green dress with the low neckline. But the Spanish women weren't dressed like that now. Instead of the beautiful, bright colors she had seen in the town before, now they all wore dresses in black, burgundy, deep red, and forest green. All

somber colors. Her lively green dress was out of place. The women were laden with jewels: on their clothes, around their necks and wrists, in their ears. Some even had jewels on their hats and in their hair. One single woman probably carried the entire wealth of the lower town on her body as if it were nothing.

The other guests examined them as they stood in the threshold. Though imperceptible to anyone but Jacquotte, even the trio of musicians stopped their playing for a moment to stare. The doors closed behind them. The house girl, and any sense of familiarity, were gone.

Jacquotte turned to her brother. He hadn't noticed the piercing stares, or if he had, he did not care. The widest smile lit up his face. She couldn't help but smile too. Whatever world Marceau was in, she wanted to be by his side. They made their way across the room and Jacquotte held her head high. She met the eye of every person who looked their way, giving a polite nod to anyone who stared too long, forcing the women to hide behind their fans and the men to turn hastily, as if something important had just come up.

As they made their way across the room, an impeccably dressed man came to stand before them, barring their way.

"Are you the Delahayes?" he asked abruptly.

Jacquotte and her brother looked at one another. They both nodded, choosing not to speak, unsure of how the man would react. But a wide smile spread across his face, and he reached out a hand to Marceau.

"It is an honor to meet the man who foiled that treacherous Arnolde!" he said, his voice booming across the room. Jacquotte said nothing. It did not surprise her that her brother was framed as the hero over her. She was a woman, after all. "I am Héctor Cervantes, delighted to meet you. Now come, boy! You must meet my comrades. We are some of the Governor's closest companions."

The man clapped a hand on Marceau's back and steered him across the room. Marceau turned and gave her a worried look, but she forced a smile. It would be good for him to make advantageous connections like this. He was a doctor's apprentice now, but with companions like these he could very well have a stone house on the mountain, a job in the manor, and even a Spanish wife in just a few short years. The thought made her feel hollow. Empty. She watched him go until she couldn't see him for the crowd and could no longer hear the tap of his cane.

She turned away, intending to stand in the corner closest to the musicians, but was immediately accosted by a group of young Spanish women.

“Are you Jacquotte Delahaye?”

“Was it your father who was imprisoned last week?”

“What a *terrible* shock that must have been!”

“Oh, you poor thing!”

“He’s left you with only a day dress and no evening dresses?”

“What a terrible father he must be!”

Jacquotte forced herself to nod politely as the gaggle of women hounded her with questions. She gave the vaguest answers she could. She could see they looked on her with pity, but also, she noticed, a hint of jealousy. She and Marceau were the guests of honor. The Governor had personally invited them. These women clearly did not receive such a privilege.

The more they talked, the more she realized that they all seemed to play secondary parts in the lives of their husbands. Some part of her thanked Arnolde for not subjecting her to such a life. A loveless marriage to a man old enough to be her father, multiple children at such a young age, living a life in which you were only as good as your most beautiful dress and your most expensive jewels.

She continued her aimless chatter with the girls, trying to give as little away about her own life as she could, dodging their hands as they shot out to snatch at her hair, demanding to know how she had managed to get her “mulatto curls” to do such a thing. She smiled and nodded as she listened to their incessant complaints about their husbands and queries about her brother’s eligibility for their friends and sisters.

On the other side of the great hall, a second pair of double doors opened and a small boy, no older than ten, loudly cleared his throat. An immediate silence fell over the room.

“Introducing, Captain Florián Gonzaga,” the boy said with a little flourish of his hands.

Florián stepped into the room and Jacquotte felt her stomach drop. He clapped men on the back as he sauntered about, bowed, and grinned at swooning women. And then he came to a stop before Jacquotte. He smiled that

same lazy smile. She stood, frozen as he took her hand and grazed it against his lips, letting it linger there, his eyes sharp on her face.

She saw red. Was he so cruel as to goad her now, before all his guests? As she looked into his eyes, all she could see was the receipt for her mother. The greed in his face as she decoded her father's letter. The way he walked away without a second glance. Hatred consumed her.

Finally, he moved on, leaving her alone. The young boy waited for the room to quiet again, before announcing, "His Lordship, Juan Felipe Gonzaga de Aragón, Governor of Yáquimo, and his wife, Teresa."

As the Governor stepped into the room, polite applause broke out. Jacquotte clapped along with them. The Governor was dressed in splendid burgundy, his beard waxed to a point and his mustache curled. On his arm was his wife. Teresa.

Jacquotte's heart stopped. The woman was dressed all in black, and her curly hair was pinned in a beautiful mass atop her head, dripping ringlets so long that they framed her face and brushed past her shoulders. She was tall and fat, her skin a perfect honeyed brown, her hair a deep chestnut. But it wasn't her beauty that captivated Jacquotte. It was the birthmark shaped like a crescent moon beneath her right eye.

From across the room, their eyes met. She could see the shock on her face that must have mirrored her own.

Jacquotte and the Governor's wife had met before, only a few short months earlier.

Images of the woman flooded her mind. Her naked body, slick with sweat, writhing beneath her, crying out at her every touch, yearning and desperate, her yellow dress long forgotten in the sand. The smell of oranges.

Her head swam and the room spun.

Jacquotte had slept with the Governor's wife.

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE GUESTS were herded into the dining hall almost imperceptibly. Jacquotte and Marceau were shown to the seats of honor close to the Governor. Florián sat at his right hand and Teresa at his left. But Jacquotte couldn't think about her. Not now.

Instead, she stared directly ahead. In the center of the table were four charming sculptures made entirely from sugar; they looked like bouquets of flowers. She tried to admire them, but all she could think about was how that sugar was farmed.

Servants flitted around, refilling cups and carrying huge platters of food. There was stuffed peacock and swan, great haunches of venison, a variety of roasted fish, conger eel. It was a continuous stream of delicacies that Jacquotte had never heard of before.

None of the meats were fried, or cooked in orange or lime juice, or smelled of anything other than meat. Some were dripping in fat or burned black in places and the look of the eel made her nauseous. She took enough to seem polite.

As she tried to saw through a particularly tough cut, she felt a pair of eyes hot on her face. Slowly, she looked up.

Teresa stared at her with a fierce intensity. When their eyes met, Jacquotte saw the other woman tilt her head slightly to the side. She followed her gaze to a door at the side of the room. Teresa whispered something in the Governor's ear, and then left the table. No one seemed to notice except Jacquotte. She watched as she walked. At the door, she turned back and gave Jacquotte another nod. The door closed behind her.

Jacquotte's pulse raced. She didn't know what to do. She looked down the table. It was so long it almost filled the entire room, but she was surprised to see that several people had already left their seats. They would not notice her absence.

She turned to Marceau. "I'm just going to step out for some air."

He hardly looked away from the conversation he was having with Héctor Cervantes. She got up and crossed the room. Her legs were shaking, and she was certain people would stare, but she didn't dare look back. She passed through the door and closed it firmly behind her.

Outside, the house girl with the burned palms waited for her. She beckoned and Jacquotte trailed wordlessly behind, following her down corridors and up a flight of stairs until they came to a door. The girl knocked twice and stepped aside. Jacquotte took a deep breath and entered.

The room was beautiful. Burnt-orange walls, dark wood furniture, and to one side there was a large, canopied bed draped in yellow. But she hardly had time to take in her surroundings as her eyes settled on Teresa. She stood in the middle of the room, her mouth set in a firm line.

She looked different from the last time Jacquotte saw her. Back then, she had appeared just like anyone else. More beautiful, certainly, but normal. Common. Now her social standing was undeniable, from the exquisite black Spanish gown she wore, adorned with seed pearls, to the beautiful room they were standing in. It must have been her bedroom. There was no mistaking that this woman was the Governor's wife.

They stood watching each other silently. Jacquotte's heart hammered so hard in her chest she felt it might burst. The air was hot and clammy and bristled with the same fierce energy that came before a thunderstorm. Finally, she could take it no longer.

"What's going on?" she demanded. "What do you want? Why do—"

"Jacquotte, let me explain."

Her words died on her lips. Teresa's voice. She had almost forgotten her voice. It was angelic, strong and soft with a lyrical tone. It almost sounded like she was singing. She had a strong accent that Jacquotte couldn't place. She heard that voice in her sweetest dreams.

She forced herself to stand upright, though her knees were buckling. "Then explain."

"Firstly, I was so sorry to hear the news of your father. It must be an incredibly—"

“Yes, thank you,” Jacquotte cut her off. “I am not here to discuss that matter right now.” One of her tenderest memories, a time when she had felt alive and whole, unbidden and free, was now sullied with lies. Anger rose within her. “Do you know the danger you could have put me in? What were you doing there that night? Visiting the lower town amongst the peasants. Does your husband know?”

“No! *No!*” Teresa said quickly. She crossed the room until she was so close that Jacquotte could have reached out and touched her. “My husband doesn’t know. He can *never* know, Jacquotte. You must promise me that you will never tell him.”

She was taken aback by the sheer force of her pleas. “Of course, I would never tell him,” she said. “Or I would surely be hanged.”

“Thank you,” Teresa said meekly. She visibly relaxed.

For some reason Jacquotte felt hurt that this woman would think her capable of such malice, even at the cost of her own life. It stung her pride.

“Just, please, tell me what happened,” Jacquotte said.

“Sometimes this place can be so... so *stifling*,” Teresa said. Jacquotte couldn’t imagine that was true of a manor so large, but she said nothing. “I am Juan Felipe’s third wife. I am treated as though I was made from glass. My only purpose is to bear him sons. Every day that I fail is a grain of sand in the hourglass that drags me toward the same fate as the women before me. There are servants and guards at every turn. I can only visit the Spanish town with a small army of ladies’ maids and musketeers. But the Spanish town isn’t real. Everyone is forewarned of my arrival. They put on their finest clothes, and I am invited to sit with the wives and it’s all so dull, so forced. But I hear the sounds of the lower town and smell the foods and see the people and you all look so... *alive*. So sometimes my maids will sneak me out of the manor, and I go and be amongst the people. The real people.”

A sick knot began to twist in Jacquotte’s stomach. “You pretend to be like us because you’re *bored*?” she snapped. “Are we entertainment for you? Free blacks and mulattoes living their lives unchained is such a spectacle. Is that it?”

“Oh, Jacquotte, no.” Every time Teresa said her name it felt like a knife to the gut. She said it like it was a delicacy she wanted to devour. Full of hunger and

longing. But this time there was a look of genuine sadness on her face. “It’s nothing like that.”

“Then what is it?”

“I hail from Peru,” Teresa said, seemingly searching for her words. “I was the fifth child of eight. My father was a notable kuraka of royal descent who pledged his loyalty to Spain in order to keep his wealth and power. Since I was not a son, nor the eldest daughter, my parents let me run free. I was able to do as I wished with no orders or rules. I spent my days by the river with the other children, playing in the water, drawing on the ground, swapping dresses with the other girls and coming home, much to my mother’s dismay, in a peasant’s dress because I preferred the color. I was my happiest back in Peru.”

Jacquotte watched her carefully, measuring what she said, but there was no hint of a lie in her words. The look in her eye was wistful, and sad.

“By the time I was thirteen, I had men vying for my hand,” Teresa continued. “My dowry was substantial. An emissary from Yáquimo arrived when I was sixteen, and my father made a deal with them. I was shipped away to marry a man I had never met. I felt more alone than ever. So, when I have the chance, I sneak away. The festivities in the lower town remind me of my home and my childhood. I can almost feel happy again there.”

Her lip was quivering, and she looked ready to burst into tears. She seemed so happy in her memory that Jacquotte couldn’t help but feel her hostility and anger melt away. She wanted to be outraged, incensed that this woman might well have cost her her life, that she had lied to her, but she didn’t feel that way. She looked back at the door warily.

“When you visit the lower town...” Jacquotte stopped. But she had to ask. “Do you always do as we did... with strange women?”

Teresa looked aghast. “Never!” She stepped closer to Jacquotte, taking her wrist gently in her hand. Jacquotte’s skin burned where they touched. She could feel her breath hot on her face. “I have never done anything like that before. I think of it often, trying to understand what came over me, and now that you are here... I...”

Jacquotte couldn’t stop herself. She felt drawn to Teresa, as if by some invisible force. They were so close now that their bodies were pressed together.

The seed pearls decorating Teresa's front dug into Jacquotte's skin almost painfully. Her whole body was on fire.

"I think about you all the time," Jacquotte found herself saying, her voice barely above a whisper.

There was a long pause and she wondered if Teresa might pull away. But instead, a slow smile spread across her lips. "You do?"

Jacquotte could feel the heat from Teresa's body. She could see the beads of sweat on her throat. The gentle strands of hair that fell from her perfect curls. The brown hue of her lips. The swell of her breasts. She could almost taste the sweet oranges.

She reached up and cupped Teresa's face in her hand. Instead of flinching, she leaned into her touch, nuzzling against the coarse roughness of her calloused skin, and laid the gentlest kiss there.

She knew she shouldn't. Not in the Governor's house. Not when dozens of guests dined just downstairs, and they could be discovered at any moment. But she couldn't stop. She felt like she would die if she did.

Jacquotte pushed herself onto her tiptoes and captured Teresa's lips in a kiss. Teresa froze for a moment, before she closed her eyes and kissed her back.

There was an urgency in their kiss like no other. Teresa's lips were soft and warm and tasted of sweet wine. Jacquotte could think of nothing but the other woman as she got lost in her mouth. Her whole body was weak, and her heart raced, but the feel of Teresa's skin against hers, the soft fabric of her dress, the hard press of her seed pearls and the soft tangle of her hair as she ran her fingers through it were enough to undo her.

Teresa's thick arms wrapped around her waist, pulling her closer, forcing her to arch her back until every inch of them was pressed together. It felt as though they had been made to be molded together like this forever. She could feel how much she wanted her in the urgency of her kiss, in the grasping clutch of her fingers, in the flick of her tongue. She wanted nothing more than to clamber into Teresa's canopied bed and have her then and there. They might never get another chance like this again.

Teresa's hand, soft and almost silken, ran down her chest. It ran down the length of her corset, fingers tracing the boning, until it reached her hip. Her

stomach flipped as she slid her skirt higher and higher, playing with the fabric, before her fingers closed firmly around her bare thigh. She leaned into the touch, aching, wanting, begging. Teresa's hand was so dangerously close that she could have screamed.

There came a sharp rap on the door and Jacquotte leapt away as if she had been burned. Teresa stayed absolutely still. Then came a second knock, and a third, in a strange pattern.

"It's just my maid," she said. "The next course is to be served soon."

The door opened and Teresa's house girl entered the room and closed it behind her. She smiled faintly.

"Oh... I..." Jacquotte's head was spinning. Her skin was hot, and she ached deep within her to close the door and lock the two of them away forever.

Teresa smiled and drew Jacquotte closer. She kissed her gently on the forehead. Jacquotte jumped away, but the house girl was looking dutifully at the floor. If she saw anything, she did not care, or had been told not to. The thought both thrilled and terrified Jacquotte.

"We can talk later," she insisted. "We must get back or we'll be missed."

They made their way to the dining hall together, but Jacquotte entered alone. She sat beside Marceau without anyone seeming to notice or care that she had been gone.

"Your hair is a mess at the back," Marceau whispered.

Jacquotte fluffed and patted the hair quickly. Her brother quirked an eyebrow at her questioningly. She kept her mouth shut but could not keep the smile off her lips.

After a moment, Teresa entered the room. Her heart was full to bursting. Upon seeing his wife, the Governor stood.

"Ah, Teresa, there you are!" he said loudly, his voice booming across the room. "Come, come, my dear."

Jacquotte watched as Teresa went to stand beside the Governor. She was far too beautiful for him. He took her hand in his and the two stood at the head of the table. Everyone stopped what they were doing, eating, drinking, talking, and a hush fell upon the room.

"Honored guests," the Governor said, "I have an announcement."

Teresa looked terrified. Jacquotte looked at her, but she wouldn't meet her eye. What was happening? Teresa was growing paler by the moment.

“It is my delight to announce that my beloved wife Teresa is with child!”

A resounding cheer rose throughout the room. The women clapped politely, and the men hammered their fists and cups on the table exuberantly, praising the Governor and complimenting his virility. They congratulated him loudly, promising to pray for a son and heir apparent.

Jacquotte felt sick. Teresa still wouldn't meet her eye.

The only person who shared a similar look on his face was Florián, but she didn't have time to think about him as she clapped politely and forced a smile.

CHAPTER NINE

THE MAN she danced with was drenched in perfume, but still the ripe stench of sweat rose from his body. He had been talking at her for the last few minutes, and by now Jacquotte was relieved her response was not a requisite. He was the fourth man she'd been made to dance with that evening, and the fourth to inquire about her eligibility. It seemed she now had the Governor's favor, which brought with it the favor of many unmarried Spanish men. Guards lined the walls of the room, making a quick, unnoticed escape all but impossible.

"... I've always imagined I'd have five children. Two boys of course to inherit the..."

She could hardly stand it. The dancing, however, was a welcome distraction. Teresa had been trying to get her attention ever since the announcement.

She didn't want to avoid her, but her heart couldn't take it. They could so easily have been caught in her bedroom, or someone might have noticed their absence from the table, or the state of their hair and dresses. Jacquotte was foolish to have kissed her again, knowing who she was this time, and in the Governor's own home, no less. She was reckless and thoughtless and by God all she wanted was to do it again. But Teresa had far more to lose now. She was pregnant.

"... a new heir to Yáquimo!" her dance partner said gleefully, seemingly reading her thoughts. She was pregnant with the heir to Yáquimo. Jacquotte wouldn't risk her life that way. What more was there to talk about? So, she avoided her instead.

Jacquotte's stomach lurched as her dance partner spun them around the dance floor. His hand clawed at the small of her back, holding her so close that she could see every wispy hair on his chin.

"... Of course, it puts Florián in a rather unfortunate position, what with him being the current heir..."

She ignored his blathering. She didn't want to give even the briefest of thoughts for Florián. It was perhaps the only good news of the Governor's announcement, that he had lost something now too. She looked around, trying to focus her eyes, and she met Teresa's gaze across the hall. She looked sad. It took all her strength not to rip herself from the man's arms and run across the room to hold her. Someone should have.

The Governor stood on the other side of the room, entertaining a group of men that included her brother, and no one was paying attention to Teresa. There was a small group of women surrounding her, but they all spoke amongst themselves, as if simply being in her presence was enough. She remembered what Teresa had said about how lonely she was, how no one really knew her. She could see it now.

She turned away, unable to look at her any longer and do nothing, when a man caught her eye. He was dressed as one of the Governor's guards, in red and yellow, but he wasn't one of them. Unless he had changed professions overnight, the bosun of the *Dorado* had no right to don that uniform. He walked across the room briskly, nervously.

Jacquotte pulled away from her dance partner. "I have to go."

The man started to protest, but she ignored him as she cut through the dancers and followed the trail of the bosun. What was he doing here? It didn't make any sense.

She twisted and elbowed her way through the crowd, ducking beneath the intertwined arms of a couple who twirled onto the dance floor in a romantic embrace. A pair of polished black boots stood before her, blocking her path. She looked up, ready to curse out yet another one of her newfound suitors, to see that it was Florián. Marceau was at his side, looking confused.

"Jacquotte. I have been waiting for you. It seems you've been rather occupied," the man said with a smirk. "I must speak with you and your brother."

Jacquotte peered around him, to the door the bosun had slipped through. "I really think—"

Florián took Jacquotte by the waist and steered them both away. She looked at her brother as they were ushered out of the room and down the halls. He only

shrugged. They were headed toward the Governor's study, she realized, but there were guards around every corner. They made her nervous. She presumed they were there to protect the Governor's guests now that the festivities in the lower town would be reaching their peak. It could get wild, and the Governor's manor held the richest people in Yáquimo. Still, something about all those men with rapiers at their hips and muskets strapped to their backs troubled her.

When they entered the Governor's study she was taken aback. Two guards stood in one corner of the room, hands on their weapons, and kneeling on the floor between them was a man, his head bowed.

It took Jacquotte an age to realize that the man was her father. Arnolde looked small and thin. His face was gaunt and bruised, his nose broken and bloody, and his lips were swollen and purple. His hair was filthy, and his clothes were little more than a cloth sack.

"What's going on?" Jacquotte demanded. "What is he doing here?"

Florián closed the door behind them and offered them seats. Jacquotte and her brother sat, speechless, as Florián sat behind the Governor's desk. There were papers in neat piles next to ink pots and quills. He sat down and pushed two of the stacks across the desk. "I need you both to sign these."

"What?" Jacquotte and Marceau looked at each other then.

"Why?" Marceau asked, echoing the question racing through her own mind.

Florián sighed. "To attest to the crimes that your father has committed."

"Treason?" Jacquotte asked.

"Yes."

From the corner, Arnolde moaned, "I didn't do it."

Florián ignored him. "Jacquotte, you translated the letter, so you must sign these documents. Marceau, these are for you."

Jacquotte picked up the pile of papers and began to look them over.

"There's no need for that," Florián said quickly. "You can sign on the final page."

Something was off. Quickly, she scanned through the papers. Her stomach twisted into knots.

"I can't sign this," she said, putting them down firmly on the table, hard enough to knock Marceau, who was reaching for a quill. "This statement is filled

with lies.”

Marceau snatched his hand back. Jacquotte watched Florián carefully. Arnolde whimpered quietly in the corner.

“I am not quite sure what you mean,” Florián said, his voice calm and measured despite the look in his eyes. The hairs on the back of her neck stood on end.

“These documents are blatantly false,” Jacquotte said, trying to keep her voice steady, but it was already beginning to shake. “I never witnessed any secret meetings between my father and prominent members of the Governor’s cabinet. Nor was I privy to any plans to overthrow the Governor. The letter I translated said nothing of note, and certainly nothing treasonous. If he had grand schemes and plans, I did not know of them. This is a complete work of fiction.”

Whatever game Florián was playing, it was a dangerous one. These were bold accusations to make. He had named several high-ranking members of the Governor’s cabinet, including some of his most trusted advisers.

It was clear to her now that Arnolde would do anything to return to France. But these were obvious lies, and she would not sign her name to them.

“Jacquotte,” Florián said slowly, reaching around the desk to delicately place his hand on her knee. She frowned, taken aback. “We followed your father to the meeting, just as the letter stated. We caught him in the act, and he confessed he was planning an insurrection.”

“I never made it to the meeting. I was arrested!” Arnolde cried from the corner. “This letter is the extent of my participation, Florián, I swear. I have told you everything I—”

The guard smacked her father with the back of his hand. Jacquotte winced, despite herself.

“I assure you, it all makes sense, Jacquotte. There is no conspiracy here.” He paused, removing his hand. “Unless... Perhaps you know more about this than you have admitted?”

“What?”

“It seems implausible to me that you could live under the same roof as your father and not know what he was planning,” Florián said slowly. “And you were

the only one who could accurately decode the letter. Perhaps you had some part in Arnolde's treachery?"

Jacquotte looked at him then. His eyes were defiant, daring. The threat was clear: sign the documents or else be charged with treason alongside her father. She took a deep breath and forced herself to meet his look with one of her own. She would not be a pawn in this man's games again.

"Do you have the authority to do this?" she asked. She kept her voice steady, the same voice she employed with captains and sailors who tried to underpay her. Deep. Stern. Authoritative. She had seen the look on Florián's face at the Governor's announcement. "It seems we need someone of actual importance here for a meeting like this. I think—"

Florián slammed his hands down on the table. An inkwell tipped over and ink spilled across the desk and onto the floor. Nobody moved. Even Arnolde stopped sobbing. Florián stood slowly, his hands balled into fists.

"I am the heir to Yáquimo," he said through gritted teeth.

She had hit a nerve. "Not for long," she said. "What do you make of the joyous announcement of Teresa's pregnancy? Like all of us, I am sure you will be praying for a boy. A true heir for the Governor."

She was goading him. But she could see by the look in his eyes that the idea terrified him.

"I am the Governor's heir!" he yelled, spittle flying from his lips. "Boy or not, I will be the next Governor of Yáquimo! As soon as that old man dies, I will rule! Not Teresa's *spawn*! It is my *birthright*!"

Everyone stayed entirely still. Florián was red in the face. Even the guards looked tense. Jacquotte's heart beat hard in her chest. She had not expected such an outburst. He leaned closer, his lips curled into a snarl.

"You—"

The door to the room burst open and the Governor strode in laughing, Teresa on his arm, escorted by two guards. He clearly had not heard the commotion from his nephew.

"Florián!" he called out. He was plainly drunk, swaying on his feet and trying to make out the scene before him. "My boy, what is the meaning of this?"

Jacquotte recognized the guard to the Governor's right. Their eyes met. The bosun.

"Watch out!" she shouted.

Before the words had crossed her lips the bosun drew the rapier from his hip, grabbed the Governor, and held the blade to his neck. The other guard put a firm arm around Teresa's throat.

"Do not move!" the bosun snarled at Jacquotte. "Or I will kill him!"

From behind the desk, Florián sighed deeply. "This is not how I wanted this to go."

Jacquotte turned just in time to see him pull a pistol from inside his jerkin.

"Florián?" The Governor stood incredibly still, his voice no louder than a whisper. The steel of the rapier had broken the skin of his neck, and blood trickled down his throat and stained his white shirt.

The grandfather clock in the corner of the room stirred, its cogs whirring noisily. Florián pointed the pistol and pulled the trigger just as it began to chime.

Midnight.

CHAPTER TEN

EVERYTHING WAS still.

The gunshot rang deafeningly in Jacquotte's ears.

Teresa let out a single, piercing scream.

The room smelled of smoke and blood. Jacquotte watched in horror as Arnolde swayed on his knees, choking and spluttering. Blood dribbled from between his lips. There was a hole in his sack garment and thick, dark blood bloomed across the material. When the grandfather clock gave the final strike of midnight, Arnolde keeled over backward, his knees bent beneath him.

Her father was dead.

Her head felt light. All the courses she had eaten that night began to rise in her stomach.

Arnolde was dead.

She wanted to scream, to cry out, to throw herself down onto the floor beside him and pull his lifeless body into her lap. To hold him one final time. She hated herself for that. He was a monster. But he was still their father. She stared at the ground as a growing pool of his blood spread toward her.

Behind the desk, Florián lowered the smoking pistol. Jacquotte looked around. Marceau's lips were set in a wordless scream. Teresa clutched her stomach. The Governor's face was wrought in anger.

"What did you do?" he yelled, as though he could not feel the cool press of the blade at his throat. "He was to be tried within the week! The King will have our heads for this!"

"The King of Spain, perhaps," Florián said with a shrug. "But the King of France is far more lenient these days."

His words hung heavy in the air. *The King of France*. No one dared say a word as he reloaded his pistol slowly, without a care in the world. He emptied a

small cloth pouch of powder and dropped a shot into the wide-barrel. The room was deathly silent. Her father's blood pooled at her feet.

"What do you mean?" the Governor asked. But the anger had gone from his words; now there was only confusion. "The traitor, he was—"

"Arnolde was the wrong choice for France."

The Governor barely moved from the bosun's grip. He just stood there, blood trickling from the nick at his neck, mouth gaping like a dead fish. It was hard to separate him from the tales of her childhood. *This* was the man who defeated the impenetrable Fort de Rocher? He looked pathetic, scared.

"Florián," he managed to say, his hoarse voice no louder than a whisper. "I... *you* are the traitor?"

Florián sat down. "I have long told you of my ambitions, Uncle," Florián said. "Time and again, I have urged you to set your sights higher. But over the years, you have lost all pride and sense of aspiration."

He was still holding the pistol. Nobody moved.

"The Spanish are too idle for Hispaniola," he went on. "You've been losing land to the French for years with almost no resistance. This island is almost entirely French now. Even your most prized accomplishment, Fort de Rocher, is falling deeper and deeper into disarray. And no one cares. No one tries to stop it. And you, Uncle," he said, waving the pistol in his direction. "You are happy to sit on this small piece of land, never to advance, never to search for more. There are lands across the West Indies, across the *world*, with money and status and power to go with them. But you are content to be the Governor of a town of wood and dirt."

Florián's words drummed into her ears, echoing around her head. Jacquotte lifted her foot. Blood clung to her boot, dripping down slowly, almost like sap. Her father's blood. She couldn't stop herself any longer. She turned away and retched. The vomit splattered across the floor and sprayed toward Teresa, the Governor, and their guards. The bosun leapt away from the mess.

"Don't!" Florián shouted, but it was too late.

Jacquotte saw her chance. She charged at the bosun. The Governor stumbled away, knocking the second guard back. She barreled into the man, shoulder first,

and he slipped in her vomit and fell to the ground, the rapier flying from his hand. She snatched it and turned the bosun's blade back on him.

"Let us go," she ordered. The sword was heavy and the metal cool to the touch. She had not wielded a sword in some years but her lessons were still ingrained in her mind. Everything about it felt right. It was like an extension of her own arm. She looked at Florián over her shoulder. "I will not hesitate to kill him."

It was as if the room itself held its breath. Teresa huddled by a bookshelf, hand over her stomach. Marceau was half-crouched by the desk. The bosun lay on the floor before her, and the Governor and the second guard faced off. Only Florián seemed at all calm and in control.

He shrugged. "Do it."

Before Jacquotte had time to decide, she saw his grip adjust on the pistol. These men would kill her in a heartbeat. She held the sword's hilt firmly in both hands and turned the blade downward. She plunged the sword into the bosun's gut. She had not expected it to go in so quickly, so easily, but his flesh was soft and within a moment the blade was buried deep within him. He let out a low groan. Blood spilled from the corner of his mouth.

Her hands were still wrapped around the hilt.

Jacquotte had killed a man.

Florián's eyes widened, and his jaw hung slack. "I..." He cleared his throat, regaining his composure. "I underestimated you, Jacquotte. That shall not happen again." He pointed with the pistol from Jacquotte to the floor. "Drop the sword."

"No!" she heard her brother scream.

Marceau dropped his cane as he threw himself across the desk and slammed his weight into Florián and the pistol fired. She flinched but the pain never came. The second guard collapsed, blood blossoming from a wound in his leg.

Florián threw his pistol aside and pulled the rapier from his hip. Marceau was defenseless beside him. Jacquotte let out a roar so feral that she sounded half-beast. She tore her sword from the bosun's gut and launched herself across the room.

She wasn't fast enough. The dress was almost impossible to move in with the skirts tangling her legs. She was useless like this.

Florián punched Marceau hard across the jaw, sending him clattering into the lion-headed gold chairs. He pointed his sword at her brother's chest.

Jacquotte vaulted over the desk, lifted her rapier high above her head, and brought it down in a smooth arc. Florián turned with the swift ease of a military man and batted her sword away with his own. She reeled from the reverberations running painfully down the length of her arms. Confusion masked his features as he took in Jacquotte in her beautiful green dress, a sword raised to meet his own, while his uncle cowered in the corner.

"Stop this, Jacquotte," he said. "Drop the sword. You ca—"

"Never!" she said, straining under his might. When did he get so much stronger than her?

She kicked a heavy chair at him. It knocked him back enough to unlock their swords, but reflexively he kicked it back. It slammed into her shins and knocked her off her feet.

She hit the ground hard. Her teeth snapped together, and she felt blood spill from the back of her head. The chair was on top of her, its weight pinning her left leg, and the world was upside down. Behind her, she could see Teresa standing over the Governor. When had he fallen? There was a wound on his side. The shot must have caught him. He was pale and sweaty. The second guard was covered in more blood than she had thought possible. It spurting violently from the wound on his upper thigh. His eyes were glassy. Dead. She couldn't see Marceau. There were three bodies strewn across the room, and if she didn't move quickly, theirs would soon join them.

She rolled to her feet and tried to snatch up her sword just as Florián towered over her. He flicked his sword almost carelessly, batting it out of her grip and sending it sliding across the blood-covered floorboards toward Marceau's feet.

Florián smirked, closing the gap between them. "You know, Jacquotte, I—"

He never got to finish. He yelped and toppled headfirst onto the floor. Marceau stood above him, panting. There was a deep gash on Marceau's forearm. He offered Jacquotte a hand up and passed her back the blade.

"Are you all right?"

Before she could answer, she saw the shadow coming behind them. She turned and raised her sword just in time to catch a rapier that would have cleaved Marceau's skull. Florián stood over her.

"Stop being foolish, Jacquotte," he said, his mouth set in a snarl. He pressed down with his sword, harder and harder. Her arms shook under the weight. She felt something cold on her cheek and realized that the edge of his blade rested on her skin, slowly cutting into her. "You only have to sign the papers. You will be compensated. You can have anything you desire."

"Jacquotte!"

She leapt backward. Florián's blade sliced her cheek as Marceau kicked him hard in the gut. Jacquotte saw her chance. She kicked out, hard, hitting him in his weak ankle, just as she had done dozens of times as a child. He overbalanced, tipping backward. Jacquotte and Marceau shared a look and threw themselves at him. The sword was lost from his hands and all he could do to protect himself was cover his face with his arms. Together, they forced him back and shoved him as hard as they could.

The window shattered with a deafening crack. Florián fell with a scream. They looked out hesitantly. He lay there on the ground, groaning, shattered glass surrounding him. It wasn't a high enough fall to kill him, but it gave them time.

"We have to go," Jacquotte said. She turned to where the Governor leaned heavily against the wall, clutching his side. "Can you walk?"

"I'll help him," Teresa said, her voice shaking. Her hands and her clothes were covered in blood, but she was unharmed.

The Governor struggled to stand to his full height. She knew they should leave him. He would only slow them down. But he must have seen the look in her eye.

"Help me and I will make you rich beyond your wildest dreams."

Jacquotte nodded once. "Let's go."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

SCREAMS ECHOED through the manor's corridors and everywhere they turned Spanish soldiers fought against Florián's men. The latter were winning. They'd had the element of surprise. Spanish bodies littered the halls and they practically tripped over them as they tried to make their escape.

It had not taken Jacquotte long to put it together. Florián had led the coup with the French in exchange for governorship. The *Dorado*, the single ship that remained of a flotilla of eight, had been sent to aid the takeover. She did not know if they were Spaniards, Frenchmen, or mercenaries, but they were getting the job done. Florián had been planning this all along, ever since he first discovered Teresa was pregnant. *He* was the other option the French letter spoke of. And her father, lying dead in the study, must have discovered Florián's plan and offered them a better deal. He was cheaper; all he wanted was to return to France. Florián was ambitious; he wanted the world.

They slipped down back passages and lesser-used walkways to avoid the melee, but the fight was everywhere. They had to turn around several times and find a different route as the violence broke out of the rooms and into the corridors.

Marceau supported the Governor with an arm around the waist while Teresa walked alongside Jacquotte. Teresa struggled to breathe through sobs. Jacquotte wanted nothing more than to pick her up and carry her to safety, to take her away from the fighting and leave her husband behind, but she couldn't do that. She had to look after them both.

They turned a corner and Marceau screamed. Jacquotte leapt out in front of him just in time to catch the blade of one of Florián's men as it slashed down in a cruel arc. As their swords pressed together, recognition flitted across his face as he took in her skin and hair. He was from the *Dorado*.

She didn't give him a chance to raise the alarm. Her muscles tensed as he lunged at her, and she sprang away so quickly that he stumbled. She swung out with her sword, and it struck the flesh between his neck and shoulder. He staggered and dropped to his knees, and she took her sword in both hands and brought it down as hard as she could. It sank deep into the flesh of his neck and when she finally managed to tug it free, his body hit the ground with a dull thud. When she looked up, Teresa, Marceau, and the Governor were already moving on. She followed, trying to catch her breath.

Teresa peered ahead of them and cried out, barely able to cover the sound with her hand. Jacquotte, her body aching, dragged herself to catch up to her, sword outstretched. But there was no soldier waiting for them. Two bodies lay in their path. Jacquotte recognized the woman as Teresa's house girl. It was only by the burns on her hands; she couldn't have recognized her by her face.

They kept walking. Teresa took the lead, more determined than before.

Finally, they came to a bright yellow corridor. It was a dead end. On the far wall was a grand tapestry depicting the battle of Fort de Rocher that was beginning to look increasingly like what was happening in the manor. Embroidered figures lay in heaps, blood streaming out of them, while Juan Felipe paraded victoriously on a crudely stitched horse. How far the mighty had fallen.

"Have we gone the wrong way?" Jacquotte asked, looking around disorientated.

They could be found at any moment. Florián would have pulled himself up off the ground by now and sent his men after them.

"The stables."

Jacquotte followed Teresa's gaze to the men on horseback on the tapestry.

The Governor wheezed painfully behind her. He was white as a sheet, his hair and mustache drenched in sweat, and he was bleeding heavily through his shirt. Marceau struggled to keep him standing.

"The stables are too far. We'll never make it."

In one swift motion Teresa pushed the tapestry aside. Behind it was a single wooden board, which she shifted out of the way. There was a hole in the wall, just tall and wide enough for a person to fit through. With a start, Jacquotte

realized this must have been how Teresa got into the lower town without anyone noticing.

Without waiting for the Governor to react, Teresa ducked through the gap, careful of her stomach, and squeezed out onto the other side. Jacquotte followed close behind.

Outside was like something from her nightmares. The stables were within view, and so was the rest of the Spanish town. The beautiful, colorful homes she had once admired were aflame. She could see the shapes of people running and fleeing through the fire and darkness, their screams and cries carried in the wind.

Jacquotte felt sick as she looked over the destruction, at the madness Florián's schemes had wrought. This had been his plan all along. Not only to oust the Governor and his closest advisers, but to take over all of Yáquimo for the King of France.

Marceau and the Governor made it through the hole, and they set off for the stables, faster than before. The grounds were practically unguarded. It seemed the majority of soldiers were in the Spanish town, terrorizing the people. The only well-guarded area was the gates, manned by a dozen musket-wielding guards.

They found the Governor's fair-haired messenger boy on his belly in the dirt outside the stables. Three shot wounds decorated his back. They stepped over him, growing numb to the devastation, and slipped into the stables unseen.

A single lantern hung from a high pole. The horses were frightened. They whinnied and snorted and stomped their feet, rearing at the sight of intruders and the sounds of the battle that came with them.

"We can't go back out there," the Governor moaned as Marceau set him down on the ground. "They'll shoot us on sight."

"We have nowhere else to go," Marceau said. "They'll find us here eventually."

"We need to get to the lower town," Jacquotte said. She took her sword to her skirts, stripping fabric until she could move freely.

"And then what?" the Governor said, and Jacquotte realized he was crying. He tried to hide it, but she could hear it in his voice. "We've no way of escaping. We've nowhere to go."

“So, you want to give in?” She couldn’t keep the disgust from her voice. To think that not so long ago she had feared this man and the power he wielded. Now she could see how pathetic he was. She pitied Teresa and their unborn child.

Marceau was agitated and nervous. He kept checking the crack in the stable door to see if anyone was coming. They had to get out.

“I have an idea,” Jacquotte said suddenly. They all turned to her. She began readying the horses. It was foolish but it was all she could think of. Her brother and Teresa followed her without question.

“Marceau, will you take Teresa?”

He nodded and began helping her up onto the saddle. Jacquotte reached for the Governor to do the same.

“What do you think you’re doing?” He glared, resisting her.

Jacquotte saved her breath, and with all the strength she could muster, hoisted him up. “Trying to save your life.”

Once he was steady, she moved through the stables and unhooked the gates of each horse. “Ready?”

They burst through the stable doors with an army of two dozen horses at their heels.

The Governor clung to Jacquotte for dear life as she pressed their horse on and on, her heels digging into its sides. Jacquotte looked over her shoulder. Marceau and Teresa were not far behind. They drove the horses toward the gates, but they needn’t have bothered; the creatures knew there was freedom beyond them, and there was nothing they could have done to stop them. Nor could the dozen armed guards.

At the sight of the horses stampeding their way, the guards at the gate bolted in every direction. They leapt and threw themselves out of the way. Two were not fast enough to move and she heard the terrible crunch and crack, and then silence all but for the beating of hooves.

They broke through the gates without any resistance. Her hands gripped the reins so tightly that the leather burned her skin.

“They’re getting away!”

Florián. She would have recognized his voice anywhere. She turned in her saddle and saw him standing by the fountain in the courtyard. His beautiful black clothes were torn and there were deep gashes in his face from the glass, but he was standing to attention, and he was pointing directly at them. The soldiers who had fled the gate stood in a line surrounding him, their muskets cocked.

“We need the redhead alive,” she heard Florián shout above the thundering hooves. “I want the others dead.”

“Look out!” she shouted desperately.

Shots exploded all around them. They hit the gate, the dirt, the air, and then she heard the piteous cry of a horse as it was struck and collapsed, screeching as it was left behind by its brethren. Teresa screamed and clung tighter to Marceau. But the shots had missed. She heard the men reloading and running after them, but they were already out. She couldn’t help the bubble of laughter that escaped her lips.

“Fire!”

A shot rang past Jacquotte’s head. It caught her horse through the ear. Her horse reared. Jacquotte held tight to the reins, barely keeping herself in the saddle. The skin of her palms tore painfully. Horses raced past her. She could hardly hear a thing. Somewhere in the distance she heard Marceau call out her name. Teresa screamed. She felt the Governor’s grip on her waist loosen. She turned just in time to see him fall to the ground.

She rounded her horse clumsily, her palms stinging, and reached down. She had to get him back onto the saddle. They had to get away. He reached out to her, blood and dirt staining his pale fingers, and gripped tightly. But before she could pull him up, she heard the terrible explosion of shots firing.

Musket balls ripped into the Governor’s back, one after another. His hand loosened in hers and dropped. His head hit the ground.

Jacquotte couldn’t move. She couldn’t breathe. Her body didn’t know what to do. The musketeers were moving toward them. Florián’s eyes were trained on her.

A hand grabbed her reins. She could only stare back in horror as Marceau led her horse away, hooves thundering on the stone path. As she looked back,

Florián stood triumphantly over the body of his uncle, a terrible smirk on his lips.

CHAPTER TWELVE

YÁQUIMO WAS burning. Flames nestled on the lower town like a blazing crown, coring the wooden houses with fire.

They'd left the horses at the foot of the mountain and sent them in the opposite direction, hoping Florián's men would follow the trail. They hid in the brush to the south of the town. Above, the pallid moon cast sickly light on the scene before them. Soldiers dragged people screaming from their homes, rounding them up near the tavern, killing anyone who put up a fight.

They watched in horrified silence until Jacquotte could stand it no longer. Her house was nearby, and they made a run for it. Jacquotte kept her eyes up, refusing to look at the dead, lifeless faces of her friends and neighbors, those she had grown up alongside, lying in the dirt. Who was amongst them she didn't dare think about.

They made it into the house without being spotted. Teresa immediately sank to the floor. There were still piles of Arnolde's possessions scattered around and she rested her head against a stack of books, her hands clutching her stomach. Jacquotte wondered, briefly, if the baby would survive this. A thought that only mattered if they could survive this. Tears streamed down Teresa's face as she sobbed quietly, choking back the sound with a hand stained red with her husband's blood.

Jacquotte walked over to the bedroom. Through the cracks in the wood, she could see figures moving outside. As quietly as she could she eased the bureau away from the wall. There was a stack of his letters on the bureau's lid. She wondered what more she would discover if she read them, but she stopped herself. She didn't need Arnolde's letters. He was dead and there was no use spying on a dead man. None of it mattered now.

She pulled her cloth sack from the hole in the wall. All her coins were there. She grabbed an old pair of britches and boots and tugged them on under the

remnants of her dress. She began to loop her cloth sack through her belt when she heard a sound from the other room.

She ran inside. A soldier stood in the threshold, rapier in hand. With a roar Jacquotte lunged into the room, slashing wildly. Her sword caught the soldier's wrist and he leapt away. He kicked out, his boot slamming into Jacquotte's stomach, and she stumbled back as he raised his sword. He froze suddenly, standing still in the doorway, a look of shock and terror on his face. A line of blood dribbled from his lips and Jacquotte looked down to see the tip of a blade piercing his chest. The sword withdrew and he collapsed to the floor, dead.

A quiet sob bubbled from her throat. Francisco stood in the threshold. His face was battered and bruised, blood soaked the front of his shirt, and he had a wicked gash along the line of his chin. But he was alive. Crowded behind him were Roberto, Miguel, and Alberto, all in similar states of dishevelment, carrying pilfered weapons.

"Jacquotte!" he cried out and rushed into the room.

He wrapped his arms around her, and she fell into the embrace. He was warm, sweaty, and smelled foul, but he felt like home. He was safe and alive. They all were. She had not allowed herself to think of them, but she realized now that she had assumed they would be dead. Florián's men were killing all those who proved a problem, and if she knew one thing about her friends, it was that they would always make themselves a problem.

Alberto ushered everyone through the door, closed it behind him, and blocked it with his large back.

"Fucking Frenchmen everywhere," Roberto said, wiping the sweat from his brow with the back of his hand. "What is the Governor doing?"

"It isn't the Governor," Jacquotte said. "It's Florián. He sided with the French king. It's a coup."

The room was silent for a long moment, all but for Teresa's quiet cries and the prayer Miguel whispered to himself.

"Fuck," Francisco said finally.

"Mama's secured the Laundry," Alberto told her. "They've kept the fires out for now but soon enough they're going to have to leave."

“We should go,” Jacquotte decided quickly. “We can get Blanca and the girls and leave together.”

Outside, the fires were burning down, but the air was so hot Jacquotte could feel the sweat slick on her skin. Smoke clung to her hair and clouded her nostrils, choking her. She could hear screams, but they were farther away now. The Laundry was on the other side of town. It would be impossible to get there without running into Florián’s men. But they kept going, Jacquotte at the head and Alberto at the rear. They moved in formation as one, keeping low to the ground.

Jacquotte stopped suddenly and Roberto bumped into her. He cursed loudly and inventively as only the son of a fisherman could.

“What are you doing?” Miguel hissed from somewhere behind her. “Don’t stop!”

“Look.”

They followed her finger. They had come to the jetty. The ships rocked gently on the waves. The water was pink and writhing in the pale light and the wind was brisk, snatching the smoke from the air and taking it far away. It was perfect conditions for sailing.

“The *Dorado*?” Francisco said. “She’s not ready.”

“She’s seaworthy,” Jacquotte insisted. “She won’t take on too much water. She has sails and a sturdy hull, a binnacle, and strong ropes. Everything we could want.”

“How in God’s pimply ass are we going to get away on that thing?” Roberto asked far too loudly. “It’s huge. They’ll see us. And... look! There’s people on it!”

Jacquotte peered through the gloom. Roberto was right. She could see five crewmen on deck. She paused for a moment, squinting through the darkness. One man stood a head above the others. Marc.

“It’s our only chance,” Jacquotte said. “If we can secure it, Marceau and I can ready it to sail. By then, the four of you will have safely secured all the women at the Laundry and will bring them back here.”

“And what about... um... *her*,” Miguel said, nodding his head toward Teresa.

Teresa sniffed, wiping at her tears. “I am pregnant.”

“Congratulations,” Francisco said jovially.

“She’s with us,” Jacquotte said, ignoring him. “We won’t need her anyway. Marc is on the ship.”

“And you think he will help us?” Alberto asked.

“I’d stake my life on it,” she said in all seriousness. “So, are you with me?”

The men looked at each other for a moment. They nodded. Relief flooded her body. She should have known better than to think she had to ask.



The waves lapped at her booted feet, cool and briny. The crewmen on the *Dorado* talked loudly, laughing at the distant cries of the townspeople, oblivious to the seven people crowded around the ship’s hull.

Jacquotte gave the signal.

Roberto let out a feral roar and barreled headlong onto the ship. Jacquotte followed, Alberto, Miguel, and Francisco close behind her. The crewmen leapt to their feet, drawing their weapons, but the first man couldn’t get to his sword fast enough. Roberto dealt him a heavy kick to the chest that knocked him to the deck. Jacquotte pressed the tip of her sword to his throat. He lay on his back, looking up in confusion.

She turned slowly, making sure to look directly at Marc, the other crewman, and lingered purposely on the purser, who leaned back heavily on a sea chair. His eyes were murderous and there was a whip on his lap.

“I’ll give you one chance,” Jacquotte said. “Surrender this ship or die.”

A thrill ran up her spine at the silence that fell over the ship. There was something exhilarating about commanding their attention.

“Why would we surrender?” the purser asked, but she caught the way his left leg twitched, his missing foot begging him to run, his mind knowing that he couldn’t.

“You’re outnumbered,” Jacquotte said.

“We are hardly outnumbered,” the man snorted. “There’s five of you and four of us.”

“Four of you,” she said, “perhaps three. You cannot fight, that much is plain to see, and Marc is not one of you.”

Upon hearing his name, the large man looked over at them curiously. He was standing behind the purser with his thick arms folded across his chest.

“Marc will do as I say,” the purser snarled. He took up his whip and lashed it hard against the ship’s boards. It cracked like thunder. “Marc! Stop her! Stop them!” He punctuated each order with a crack of the whip.

Marc did not move. The purser turned in his chair to glare up at the man. “Marc!” he yelled, cracking the whip again. “*Now!*”

When Marc remained still, the purser cracked the whip once more, this time close to Marc’s bare feet. He finally moved, and the purser smirked. Marc lifted the man out of his chair. The purser hadn’t a chance to scream before Marc slammed his back onto the taffrail. A sickening crack tore through the night as he went limp and Marc let him slip off the side of the galleon and into the water.

The man beneath Jacquotte grabbed her by the leg, trying to use the chaos to escape, but Jacquotte pressed her sword down hard and drew it away, slitting his throat. He choked and spluttered but went still.

The final two crewmen fought for their lives against Francisco and Alberto. One tried to evade them, but Miguel blocked his way. Roberto kicked his legs out from under him and dealt a final blow, and Francisco had no trouble dispatching his own.

When she finally caught her breath, Jacquotte turned to the man who had helped them. “Thank you, Marc.”

“Mbala,” he said. His voice was deep and smooth, his accent strong like some of the freed slaves she had met before; thick like the tongues of their homeland. “My name is Mbala.”

She nodded once. “Thank you, Mbala.”

Marceau and Teresa climbed the gangplank. He struggled without his cane, and she supported him by the arm and led him over to the purser’s sea chair. Jacquotte couldn’t afford her friends a similar respite.

“Marceau, Mbala, you stay with me to ready the ship,” she said. “Alberto, you lead the crew to the Laundry. Get your mama and the girls and bring them back here. Anyone you find along the way can come with us. As quickly as possible. We have to get out of here.”

They started work immediately. The ship was seaworthy, but just barely. Jacquotte was grateful they had worked so hard and fast, but was not convinced of how far the *Dorado* could take them. They just needed to get away from Hispaniola.

The sound of the fight was dying down, or perhaps Jacquotte was just beginning to tune it out. The sea writhed and the waves lashed against the ship, and she listened to the wind. They would have no problem getting out to sea with a wind like this.

They worked quietly, moving low; they didn't want to draw attention to themselves. Teresa kept watch, but no one came. Slowly, women from the Laundry and those who had sheltered there made their way to the ship in small groups. Some were injured, nursing deep wounds and broken bones, while others carried their children and what few possessions they could in their arms.

Finally, she saw her friends. They were running toward the jetty, pursued by three of Florián's men. She could see that Francisco and Alberto had lost their weapons and Roberto was limping badly. They weren't going to make it.

Jacquotte grabbed her rapier and leapt over the taffrail. She landed hard in the sand, water lapping at her ankles, and ran.

Roberto tripped in the sand. He stumbled and fell hard. Her heart was in her throat. She was too far away. Florián's men were gaining on him. Jacquotte hurried. Her feet sank into the sand with every step.

A soldier raised his rapier in the air. It caught the light of the fire.

"No!" she screamed.

Roberto looked up, brown eyes glassy. The sword sank into his back.

Alberto let out a feral roar and threw his whole body at the soldier. The two fell to the ground, locked in battle.

Jacquotte lunged into the fray as Francisco head-butted the second soldier, breaking his nose and sending him reeling. She struck at the last man, hitting him in the chest with her elbow. He stumbled back, giving her enough space to swing her sword and cut a long line across his chest. He howled in pain, clutching the wound, and she advanced. She wouldn't give him the chance to get away. He pulled a pistol from his belt.

Francisco was still fighting against the man beside her. Alberto struggled in the dirt, beating the soldier about the head with his huge hands. No one had seen the pistol.

She stepped back slowly. If she lunged, would he have a chance to shoot? But the pistol never fired. The soldier's face contorted painfully as the pistol fell from his grasp. He dropped to the ground. The sand around him bled. Miguel stood behind him, a bloodied rapier in hand. He looked pale standing there, hands quivering.

Francisco dealt a terrible blow to the soldier he fought, and the man tumbled to the ground just as Alberto brought his great fists down one final time on the head of the soldier with a horrifying crack. The man stopped moving.

They stood there for a long moment, panting.

"Miguel, you saved my life," Jacquotte managed to say through her ragged breath.

"May God forgive me," he said. He looked like he was about to cry. He had never hurt anyone before.

"God will forgive you," Francisco said, a grin on his face. "You are his favorite, after all."

"Where's Roberto?"

Jacquotte pointed. She couldn't bring herself to look at him. Her friend, lying dead and glassy-eyed in the sand. She wanted to scream. To shout. To do *something*. But there was nothing left to be done. Roberto lay still, blood pooling beneath him. He was dead.

A strangled cry broke from Miguel's lips.

A group of Frenchmen descended the hill in the distance. They had to leave now, or they'd never escape. She reached out and took Miguel's hand in hers. He was shaking so badly she almost lost her grip. No one looked back. No one could bear to look back.

As they walked up the gangplank, all eyes were on her. She looked about the ship. At the women huddled together and Marceau at the helm. They had secured the ship for sea. They were ready.

"Where are we headed, Captain?" Francisco asked.

Jacquotte looked out to sea. The salt spray flecked her skin. She took in a deep breath.

“Fort de Rocher,” she said.

PART TWO



The Pirate

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

JACQUOTTE STOOD at the helm of the *Dorado*, looking out to sea. It was early afternoon and if she did not find safe harbor soon, then everyone on the ship would die.

She took a deep breath, letting the air fill her lungs. It had been just hours since they had fled Yáquimo. Her home. She could still feel the heat of the flames on her skin. Hear the ring of the gunshot that killed Arnolde. See the flash of the blade that took Roberto's life. Dread pressed like a hand tight about her throat and she pushed the thoughts away. She had to stay focused.

Seven hours after escaping Yáquimo, storm clouds darkened the morning sky, and the rains began. It wasn't long before the *Dorado* started to take on water.

This was the longest she had been out to sea and the farthest she had been from home. When she was Richelieu's apprentice, he had tacked up maps around his caravel so that she could learn. Though her father had taught her to read and write with words, Richelieu had taught her to read the seas and write her course. A far more valuable education, by his reckoning. The Caribbean Sea was their focus, but her seafaring education had been extensive. She'd found herself fascinated by Europe, where wars were waged between nations fighting for control of islands like her home.

It had always been a dream of hers to explore the seas, but it was not at all as she had expected. Richelieu had been right. Reading maps, charting courses, planning a rutter. None of it captured the feeling of being out at sea. It was a whole other world. Vast. Endless. Exhilarating and terrifying all at once. Or it had been, until they began to take on water.

Now the water was almost up to their ankles.

Dark clouds swelled heavy with rain overhead, drenching them to the bone, and the warm air was sharp with the tang of salt water. If her rutters were correct, they could reach Tiburon within two hours. Despite the rain, the sea

was fair, and the wind was strong, but this could change at a moment's notice during the rainy season. A monsoon could sweep through, devastating everything in its path.

She scanned the horizon for a stretch of land without dangerous rocks, jagged reefs, or seabeds tall enough to scuttle them, when her eyes caught a shape moving toward them. She squinted, exhausted, before she saw the fluttering of white flags. It was a ship. Her heart soared.

“Francisco!” she called. Her friend craned his neck to look up from where he was patching a hole in the deck. “We must hail that ship. Fly something to get their attention. And have the girls bail water from belowdecks. We need to stay afloat long enough to get noticed.”

“Aye!”

Soon a string of colorful sheets flapped in the wind above them, and everyone worked on the double to stop them from sinking. Buckets and anything that could carry water were rushed below to the women while her crew manned the sails, Teresa and Mbala amongst them. The two had not only insisted on helping, but they had not left her crew since they had set off.

As the ship drew closer, Jacquotte inspected it. It was a large brigantine, a gaudy thing. The outer hull had been painted with wonky stripes of yellow, red, and green and was covered with a thick tar lacquer. On one side, she counted eight cannon.

She froze. A sixteen-cannon vessel. She searched the ship for the jackstaff flying its colors. She prayed it was Spanish or English. She did not know the depths of Florián's schemes, but she would not take a chance encounter when they were outgunned and outmanned.

The flag flying from the jackstaff was not a French one. Her elation was only temporary. The brigantine's flag was black, decorated with two skeletons, one red and one white. The red skeleton was maimed, pierced with arrows, swords, and axes; it was missing a chunk from its skull and there was a rope tied around its neck.

It was a pirate ship.

It was too late. The smaller vessel drew close to port and before Jacquotte could even call a warning, they were being boarded. Grappling hooks were tossed

over the rails and a dozen armed men clambered over the side of the ship. The women fled to the safety of the companionway stairs, but Jacquotte's crew were on the deck. They had nowhere to hide. The pirates encircled them, closing off their escape.

Her heart stopped. Her friends were unarmed. Fresh memories of Yáquimo burned through her mind. *Roberto*. She had been too slow to save him. She would not be too slow again.

Jacquotte launched herself from the quarterdeck with the greatest roar she could muster, falling into the seawater reaching up to her ankles. She drew her sword from her hip as she reached her friends, her eyes darting between the men surrounding them.

"Get off my ship," Jacquotte ordered. Her heart thundered in her chest, her breathing was ragged, and she was so tired she could hardly hold her sword level. "We do not want trouble."

The men ignored her, holding their ground. Over their shoulder, she could see more of them affixing a gangplank between the ships. It was only moments before two men crossed onto their ship, and the pirates parted for them.

Jacquotte's breath left her. The first man was enormous. A brute. His weathered white skin was littered with scars and burns and there was a large X carved onto the top of his bald head. Twin axes were strapped at his hips.

Beside him, the other man almost looked plain. He was stocky and strong, with a true sailor's body, though his mane of thick black hair and wild beard made him seem larger. In one hand he carried a cutlass and around his neck hung a brace of pistols in vibrant silk sashes. He was dressed as she knew English pirates to dress, in knee-length boots and dark clothing. Jacquotte instinctively knew him to be the captain.

"What do we have here, Lennox?" the captain said in English. "Is this a ship of maroons?"

The larger man, Lennox, shook his head. "They don't look like maroons. Too many women."

Keeping her eyes focused on the captain, Jacquotte lowered her weapon, but kept it firm in her grasp. She took a step toward the men. Lennox's hand shot to one of his axes, but the captain didn't move.

“Please, let us leave,” she said to them in English, the accent heavy on her tongue. She felt suddenly self-conscious. She hadn’t had to use her English in some time; it was not her strongest language, and it took her longer to translate. She did not want to appear weak. Not now. “There is nothing of worth on this ship.”

The captain watched her for a time, appraising her with a look that made her skin crawl. “A red-haired mulatto,” he mused. “What’re ye doing out in these waters, Red?”

“Our ship is damaged,” she told him. “We are looking for refuge at the nearest port.”

He looked amused. “Yet you have nothing of worth on board. How d’ya expect to pay for your safe passage?”

“There is a sea chest by the helm,” she told him, her breathing shaky. She felt sick. “Inside you’ll find a sack filled with coin.”

The captain whistled and shouted a command in Spanish and Jacquotte watched as her sea chest was raided, and her hard-earned coin was handed over to the man who held their lives in the palm of his hand. He tutted, shaking his head. “This won’t nearly be enough for all of you,” he said, his voice mocking. “How do you intend to pay for the rest?”

Her heart thundered in her chest. She had nothing else to give. None of them did. He noticed the look on her face and stepped toward her. Jacquotte took a step back.

“Do you know who I am, Red?” the captain asked. She shook her head. “They call me Blackhand.”

There were many pirates operating out of the Caribbean Sea. Jacquotte heard their names and tales from those who had her repair their ships. She had heard of their close encounters and narrow escapes, and of the ships in their fleets that were not so lucky. And she had heard of the notorious Captain Blackhand. Her mouth went dry.

She’d met crews who had been misfortunate enough to cross paths with Blackhand. He pirated their ships, stripped them of their cargo and valuables, and always took a member of their crew. They would never see him again. But she had heard of what he did to those unfortunate souls.

Her mind reeled. She could not let him get his hands on her crew or the women from the Laundry. She could not live with herself if they were subjected to such a fate. She cast her eyes over his brigantine. She took in the evident damage of a recent skirmish.

“Your ship is in need of repairs, Captain Blackhand,” she said in Spanish, gripping her sword tight to keep her hand from shaking. If she was to sell herself, she would do it in her common tongue. “I’d say you were in a cannon fight recently. There are charred holes on your port side, loose boards, and you’ve a damaged mast.”

He quirked an eyebrow, but also changed to Spanish, much to her relief. “Your point, Red?”

“I am a shipwright,” she told him. She saw interest light up in his eyes. “I can fix your ship and make it better than it was before in exchange for safe passage.”

He cast his eye about the *Dorado*. “You must be a piss-poor shipwright.”

“This was a vessel most shipwrights would have taken apart for scraps,” she told him, trying to keep calm, but her pride was bruised. “The repairs should have taken a month. In just over two weeks I made her seaworthy. Were it not for our haste and this weather, she would not be in this condition.”

He considered her words, eyes locked with hers.

“I am in need of a bosun,” he said at last. “You’ll join my crew as an indenture. A swabbie. Earn your safety and your keep. The hours are long, and the work is hard, but you’ll live.”

She had been free. For a few glorious hours, she had been free. Free from Arnolde. Free from Florián. The Spanish. The French. She had a ship, her coin, and she was bound for Tortuga as she had always dreamed. But now it was as though iron manacles clamped down about her wrists and ankles.

“But I... I’m not a pirate,” she managed to stammer.

Blackhand only laughed. “Look at your stance,” he said, gesturing to the way she held her sword, her knees slightly bent, her feet a shoulder’s width apart. “I think you can hold your own.” He cast his eyes over the others, and in English he said, “But what will we do with your friends, eh, Red? My men could make use of your women, but your men?”

The threat hung in the air between them. She almost retched. “*No*,” she said, so forcefully that she sounded possessed. She squared up to the captain until their faces were inches apart. “This is *my* crew. They are trained shipwrights.”

He cast his eyes over her friends. “What about the woman and the cripple?”

“My name is Marceau,” her brother said, standing taller, gripping his makeshift cane. “I am a doctor.”

That caught his attention. “A doctor?” he mused. “But you’re just a boy.”

“I have been an assistant for years,” her brother said coolly. “I am as good a doctor as you’ll find.”

He considered for a moment before nodding. “And the woman?”

Teresa looked about, confused. Jacquotte cleared her throat. “We hail from Santo Domingo,” she said. “Only my brother and I also speak English.”

He considered for a moment. “Any other languages?”

“Yes, sir,” she said. “French and Latin. I have a basic grasp of others, too, but I am not fluent.”

He nodded and turned back to Teresa. In Spanish he said, “What use do you have, girl? What skills do you bring, besides what’s between your legs?”

Teresa looked pale. Her mass of curls was plastered to her skin. She was shaking. Jacquotte forced an encouraging smile and Teresa stood taller. “I am an educated woman,” she said. “I read and write better than most, and my arithmetic rivals any man you’ll meet. I’ve spent years running a grand household on meager coin.”

Blackhand nodded slowly. “My last purser tried to cheat me of my treasure. If you’re more honest than him, you won’t meet the same fate.”

“My crew are all adept sailors,” Jacquotte added. Her pulse raced, but she could see him growing softer, could see that his most recent skirmish must have taken out more men than he had accounted for.

“Francisco Santos. I’m a skilled rigger,” Francisco said, catching her eye and seeing the plan she was laying out. “I’m quick, agile.”

Alberto nodded. “As am I,” he said. “I’m tall, too, strong, and faster than I look.”

Blackhand looked to Mbala. “And you?”

The man stood taller. “I have been trained as a gunner.” Jacquotte noticed the bite to his voice, and the way his hand shot up to the back of his neck, where his brand colored his skin pink.

Blackhand nodded and turned to Miguel. “And y—what’re ye doing, lad?”

Miguel had his hand wrapped around his rosary, whispering heavenward. “Praying.”

The captain paused for a moment, and then laughed, gold teeth glinting in the light. “A worthy barrelman.”

Relief washed over her. They were safe. Almost. “Your crew won’t have the women,” she told him, drawing his attention back to her. “Your men aren’t to touch them.”

“Is that so?”

“They’re working women,” she explained. “They ran a successful laundry and brothel. Set them up in your local port and take a profit of their earnings, then whenever you return, you’ll have even more coin to spend.”

His eyes widened briefly, and she swelled with pride. He was impressed.

“We have a deal.”

He reached out his hand. She looked down. In her hand was her sword. The last vestige of her freedom. Shaking his hand would mean defeat. But it would also mean safety, food, work, and that none of her friends would die.

With a pang in her gut, she dropped her sword, watching it sink into the ankle-deep water, and took the captain’s hand.

Blackhand’s grip was firm. There was a finality in his thick fingers. He pulled her closer and clapped her on the back. “Welcome aboard *The Marauder*, Red.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

JUST AS Blackhand had warned, life aboard *The Marauder* was not easy. The hours were long, and the work was hard. There were no mentors or tutors. She had to learn as she went. But, despite her initial hesitation, Jacquotte found that she settled into the life quickly. It was as though she had been built for a life at sea. It had been little over a week and already she had acclimated to the hours, to the deck pitching and shifting beneath her feet, and to the work. She found it was not so different from being a shipwright.

True to his word, Blackhand had taken them to his home port. Port Royal. He set up Blanca and the girls in a new Laundry, and none of them had been touched during their journey under threat of death. They were his girls now, and the crew knew to stay away. When the weather cleared two days later, Alberto had said a tearful goodbye to his mama, sisters, and aunts, and they set off on their first voyage under Blackhand's command.

It was early morning, and the ship was beginning to wake. She looked about as men moved around her. Her friends weren't amongst them yet, but the ship teemed with life. It was an easy time of day, before there was much work for the crew. Many were still belowdecks, sleeping, dicing, while those on deck maintained the ship. Swabbies scrubbed the deck with hard-bristled brushes and brooms. Riggers climbed the ropes and kept the sails secure. Men hung over the rails, scraping barnacles from the hull above the sea line.

The crew began to stir from belowdecks, climbing up the companionway stairs to start their days.

"Mornin'."

"Do you know who coiled the ropes last night? They're a shambles!"

"Anyone seen Eden? Filthy bilge rat owes me from last night."

"I told you not to dice with him. He's not good for the coin."

"Old Man Hobbes's leg is acting up. Can Marceau fashion a splint?"

“The mainmast has splinters on the port side. Do you think it could be mites?”

Jacquotte answered questions as they came to her. She knew all the answers. It had taken her only a matter of days to master the state of the ship. But the inner workings, the relationships between the crew, she was still learning, watching.

The Marauder could hold a crew of a hundred and twenty-five men, but at present, they only had eighty. Life on the ship was like living in a small village. The crew ate, slept, and worked as one. They were like cogs inside a clock, all essential for the running of the ship.

Though it might have been large, the brigantine was an ugly vessel, built for function and speed. No true craftsmanship had gone into its design. Not like the *Dorado*. She exhaled at the thought of the ship she had just started to feel a part of, even as it had failed them. It was long gone now. Despite Jacquotte’s pleas, Blackhand had found no use in the galleon in its poor condition and had quickly sold it on.

“Red!”

Jacquotte flinched at the sound of the name. *Her* name. Short. Sharp. A bark. An order. When they joined Blackhand’s crew, she had known she had to change her name. She was already too recognizable. She couldn’t be Jacquotte anymore. She had wanted to find a name that suited her, long and languid, pleasant on her tongue like her true name. But Blackhand’s pet name for her had stuck, and now she was Red. She hated it.

She followed the sound of the voice, crossing the deck to the mainmast, where the quartermaster, Lennox, stood. “Yes, sir?”

“Your orders were to repair the damage to the binnacle. That was two days ago.”

“I already told the captain, I can’t repair it myself,” she said. “When we next stop in Port Royal, I can fetch a compasssmith, but before then—”

Lennox rounded on her. He was so large that his body blocked out the sun, casting her in shadow. “Don’t make excuses, swabbie,” he said, punctuating the last word by jabbing a thick finger at her chest. “*You* call yourself a shipwright.”

“I *am* a shipwright,” Jacquotte protested. She felt anger stir deep within her. “A position most are paid well for,” she muttered under her breath.

Lennox let out a short, sharp laugh. “You’re lucky we pay you indentures at all. Quit your griping, before I tell the captain of your insubordination.”

Jacquotte seethed but knew there was nothing she could do. He was right. They would all be dead had Blackhand not accepted them aboard. They would never have made it to Tortuga, to Fort de Rocher, and she was not certain they would even have made it to Tiburon. But the indenture was a steeper price than she had anticipated. Jacquotte and her companions were indentured to Blackhand and paid a swabbie’s pittance. It would take years to earn their way out, but it was the price to be paid for their lives.

“Yes, sir. My apologies.” She hesitated. “I’ll find my carpenter and see if he can be of any help.”

Lennox snorted. “Sancho Bustillo is as much help as a donkey with a hammer.” But still, he dismissed her with a wave.

Jacquotte turned quickly and hurried down the steps belowdecks. She did not search for Sancho, but instead ducked into the surgeon’s quarters.

The windows were shuttered, and the room was dark. There was a worktable in the center, and to the side she found her brother asleep on a cot. Marceau looked younger lying there, beneath a thin sheet, and she had to resist the urge to tuck him in, as she had done for most of his life. He had been given his own quarters, his own room on the bustling ship, and she was glad of it. While the crew were mostly decent men, that was not always the case, and there had been brawls and fights she was glad her brother was not witness to.

His eyes opened blearily as she closed the door. “Ja... Red,” he said, correcting himself quickly. “Are you all right?”

She nodded, shifting his feet to sit on the cot beside him. “How’re the men treating you?”

“Better than they were,” he said, stifling a yawn. “They still see me as a child, but a child who can be of use. Fixing their wounds, easing their pains.”

Jacquotte nodded slowly, her eyes fixated on his worktable. “And how is she?”

He followed her gaze to the sleeping figure on the table. “She will recover,” he said slowly. “She did not require much assistance, but she must rest. Having a

miss can be tough on the body and the spirit.”

Teresa was asleep. She lay on her side, facing them, eyes shut and lips parted slightly. Jacquotte watched her body rise and fall with her breathing. She looked so peaceful, despite the loss of the baby. Despite the terror that had raced through Jacquotte as she collected Teresa, bleeding, in her arms and rushed her to the surgeon’s quarters in the middle of the night. Even now the thought of it snatched her breath away. Not only for Teresa, but for the memories it brought back of her mother, of the night Marceau was born. Memories she had done her best to forget.

Marceau patted Jacquotte’s knee, drawing her attention back to him. “I think you should talk,” he said, finding his cane and rising stiffly. “She’ll be glad for the company.”

Jacquotte was not certain that she was the kind of company Teresa would want right now, but she did not protest as her brother left the room. A thousand thoughts raced through her mind. Apologies. Sympathies. But she couldn’t find a way to articulate them. Everything she came up with fell short.

Jacquotte and Teresa had not spoken of their time together at the Governor’s banquet. In Teresa’s room. The moment they had shared. The kiss. And almost more than that. There hadn’t been time. The journey to Port Royal was fraught, the few days they were permitted on land they were both put to work, and since returning there had been so much to do, and their friends were always around, that they had not been given a moment alone. In the rare quiet of the night, Jacquotte would wonder, now that they had left behind Yáquimo and their lives, if something could happen between them. Something more. But she would quickly shake such thoughts from her mind. And there was the small niggling voice in her head, which told her she was not worthy of her love.

She recognized the voice as her father’s. At times it felt like it was all that was left of him; the comments she had blocked out all her life. Reasoned away. Excused out of misguided loyalty. She could still hear him scoffing at the thought of her finding a husband. His words lingered.

It’s a good thing you know your way around a ship. You’d be no use to any man otherwise.

“You seem lost in thought.”

Jacquotte startled. Teresa was watching her from the worktable. There were dark circles beneath her eyes and her brow was covered in sweat, but there was a small smile on her lips.

“Teresa,” Jacquotte said. She tried to find the words to convey how she felt, but they were all useless now. “I am so sorry.”

Teresa shifted, sitting upright, wrapping herself tight in her blanket. Even now, sick, unable to bathe, and no longer dressed in the finery of a Governor’s wife, she looked beautiful.

“To be honest, I expected this sooner or later,” she said. Her voice was rough, as though she had not had much sleep. “In truth, I only learned I was with child recently. I do not think the idea had settled on me yet. It did not feel... real. Though, I suppose, it never has for me.” She hesitated, picking at hairs on her blouse. “I did not... I never wanted to be a mother.”

That caught Jacquotte off guard. “You didn’t?”

Teresa gnawed at her lip. “I was barely sixteen when Juan Felipe got me with child the first time,” she told her. Her eyes caught Jacquotte’s, and then all her words came rushing out at once. “I was so sick I couldn’t bear it. And then one of the house girls, Beatriz, told me of this plant that could ease my sickness. Women drank it and it could stop it all. So, I drank it, and I was ill for a small time, but then I was no longer with child, and I grew stronger. And then he got me with child again. So, I drank it again. And it went on and on for years.”

Jacquotte said nothing, but she reached out a comforting hand. Teresa hesitated but took it, gripping it tightly. “Then I overheard his council talking,” she continued, taking a shaking breath. “They said I was just like Juan Felipe’s last two wives. Useless. That he would be rid of me soon too.”

Jacquotte thought back to the Governor’s wives. She had not met his first, who had died before Jacquotte was born, but she had seen his second. She was always bedridden, always heavy with child, always crying.

“His first wife could not stay with child, and his second could not deliver a living child. He had them... dealt with,” Teresa said. She looked pale, frightened, as though she was back in that moment. “The council laughed that this was my last year, that Juan Felipe was growing impatient. So, I stopped taking the drink Beatriz gave me. Even still, I could never stay with child long.”

Teresa looked at her then, and there was something in her eyes Jacquotte did not recognize. Worry? Guilt?

“Beatriz told me what his last wife did,” she said. “She bedded a local man with similar coloring. The babe did not live for more than a day, but it gave her more time.”

Jacquotte considered her words, playing them over in her mind, until she realized what she was confessing. “You slept with another man to get with child?”

Teresa nodded shallowly. “A few men. It did not take the first time.”

“But how—” Jacquotte cut herself off. Her heart felt heavy. “During the festivities in the lower town.”

She felt like she had been slapped.

She had asked Teresa if she had shared what they had with another woman before, and she had said no. *Never*. But Jacquotte had not asked the right question. *Any woman*. She had not thought to ask of men. Teresa had not told her. It felt as though everything they shared was a lie. The warmth Jacquotte felt when she looked at her cooled, the lightness in her heart and soul grew heavy. Had any of it been real? Did she even care for Jacquotte? Or had she been placating her so that she did not tell the Governor of her deception?

“Ship ahoy!”

The cry rang out above them and Jacquotte jumped to her feet. She did not know what she had been about to say. Whether she had been about to accuse Teresa or confess something deeper. But it would have to wait.

“I have to go.”

“Jacquotte,” Teresa said. She was still holding her hand. “Wait—”

Jacquotte snatched her hand away and bolted out of the room, rushing onto the deck.

Miguel sat high within the confines of the crow’s nest. He leaned over the edge and yelled, “Ship ahoy!” again, making sure he was heard. He had told Jacquotte that he did not enjoy life in the crow’s nest. It made him sick and nervous. But Blackhand liked God-fearing men in his crow’s nest. He counted on their honesty, their vigilance, and their predilection for guilt.

The crew crowded around the rails to get a better look.

There it was, on the horizon. She could just make out the blurred shape of Havana in the distance and, before it, a grand merchant ship, flying the blue and yellow colors of the French flag. It sent a wave of dread through Jacquotte. This was the second ship they had come across. The first, Jacquotte and her friends had not been permitted to board. They had been too green. But Blackhand had said they would be ready by the second. Fighting, she could do. Looting, she could stomach. But the dread that filled her at the sight of the French flag was like no other.

The brig was primed with a row of cannon, but no ships trailed behind to guard whatever cargo it hauled. It was the perfect mark.

Lennox stood on the quarterdeck, giant hands cupped around his mouth. “To your stations!” he said, his voice booming out across the deck.

The crew leapt into action. Some scaled the rigging, eager to let loose the sails. Others rushed belowdecks to prime the cannon. From inside her waistband, Jacquotte pulled out a hat and began stuffing her hair inside. She would not risk recognition, not during her first boarding.

A movement caught her eye. The subtle twitch of the thick curtains of the captain’s quarters. Blackhand was there. Watching them.

She shuddered, turning away from his watchful gaze, and took a deep breath. She was as ready as she would ever be to call herself a pirate.



The merchant ship rocked back and forth, quaking beneath Jacquotte’s boots. The tumultuous sea and the raging battle nearly knocked her down, but she kept her balance. Her grip on her cutlass never faltered, though the hilt was slick with blood and sweat. Seawater swamped the deck and flooded her boots, her head pounded, and there was blood on her face.

Smoke clouded her eyes, the remnants of the cannon fire that had torn apart the French ship’s port side only moments ago. It spread across the deck, coating everything in an endless fog, clawing at her throat and lungs. Jacquotte could just make out the writhing bodies of people fighting as the smoke billowed around them, swallowing them up and spitting them out.

She had practiced swordsmanship with her friends since setting sail with Blackhand. Grip, stance, attacks and parries, everything she had learned in her lessons as a child. But she knew now what real battle was like, and it was an entirely different beast. She thought back to her fight with Florián, how much stronger he had been than her, how much better with a blade. Like him, these Frenchmen were all military men, bigger and stronger than her. The thought filled her with fury and rage and something else. Whatever instinct she had summoned to get them to safety from Yáquimo had not left her since that moment. She felt its power. Its calling.

She slashed at a French sailor who stumbled blindly into her path. He leapt away, but not fast enough; her blade cut a line down his back. He screamed and rounded on her, sword raised. She prepared to parry.

A cannonball exploded and the Frenchman was thrown overboard. He hadn't even had a chance to scream.

The French fought back harder than expected. They had chased the vessel for half a league before it was forced to engage. Broadsides turned, they'd exchanged heavy cannon fire until they were close enough to board.

Out of the smoke, a Frenchman lunged at her, cutlass raised.

Jacquotte took a deep breath. She had to time it right. As he leapt forward, she brought her fist down onto his sword hand. He overbalanced and pitched forward. She grabbed his sword by the hilt, pulled it over her head, and twisted until he was bent double, and she heard something snap. He fell to the deck, and she brought his own sword down onto his neck.

Alberto barreled through the smoke. He crashed into a sailor and hurled him onto the deck, flattening him. The man stayed down as Alberto ran off in search of a fairer fight.

They were winning. Her first-ever boarding and they were winning. Blood thrummed in her veins. Excitement raced through her. She had never felt a thrill like this. Never felt so strong and in command. So *powerful*. She liked the terror in the Frenchmen's eyes as they saw her charge toward them, how they fought with her like she was not only an equal, but a threat.

A strong gust of wind cleared the smoke for just a moment. French bodies littered the deck, and she was thankful to see none of her friends amongst them.

Then the smog blew back, and the deck disappeared again.

A blade glanced her side. She howled and whirled around, sword slashing out wildly, but she hit only air as the Frenchman leapt back. He pressed forward, relentless. She saw the blood weeping from his side and his left arm, broken and dangling uselessly. This was the kind of man the other pirates had warned her about, the kind they hated to fight: one who had nothing left to live for.

He raised his sword high above his head and Jacquotte lifted hers just in time to stop it taking a notch out of her collarbone. Her arms quivered, both hands on the hilt, as the Frenchman pressed down with all his might.

She kicked out and her boot connected with his chest, hard. He stumbled backward, snarled, and lurched for her again. He stopped short, slack-jawed, shuddered, and collapsed. Black smoke trailed from a hole in his back.

Francisco stood behind him, a pistol in his hand and a grin on his bloodstained face.

“That’s twice now I’ve saved you,” he said with a laugh. “Perhaps you should try a little harder and return the favor?”

He shucked his pistol into a brace at his hip and drew his sword. They moved into the familiar formation of their training sessions, standing back-to-back, moving as one in a circle, slashing out at the few remaining sailors who dared attack them.

“It’s not a competition. I had him,” she said, trying to catch her breath as she parried a blow from a particularly brutish Frenchman. “You just can’t stay away, can you?”

A roar ripped through the ship. They turned just in time to see a sailor fall mere feet away from them, a blade pointed in their direction. Mbala stood behind, a bloody short-handled axe in hand.

“Watch yourselves,” he said with a thunderous laugh.

She had begun to see a change in him since they fled Yáquimo. Where before she had hardly known the sound of his voice, now he talked with them all, unafraid of the consequences. Each night since the beginning of their voyage, they gathered around him belowdecks and listened as he told stories from his homeland. Some were true, the boy who lived in his village who took down a wild boar alone, the woman who birthed a completely white babe. Some were

folktales, stories of demons with the face of both a man and a hyena, how the first men on earth came from a cave in a hole in the ground, and countless stories of a wily hare and its many foes. And she saw him growing closer to them all. He was eager to learn swordsmanship and craft from Jacquotte, he questioned Miguel unceasingly about his religion, comforted Teresa, dined with Alberto, and stayed up long into the night speaking in hushed voices with Francisco. He was good to them all. She couldn't imagine life without him.

"Enough!"

The fighting died down. The smoke drifted away. Jacquotte watched as the gangplank was lowered between the two ships. She could finally see *The Marauder* again. Captain Blackhand crossed the gangplank. A different feeling fell upon them. No more was there the heat of battle. It was almost cold. The air was stagnant, the smell of death amongst them. They had won, and now it was time for their captain to make his demands.

He stood before the captain of the merchant ship. The French captain dropped his sword and raised his hands in surrender.

"I ask for quarter, good sir," the Frenchman said, his voice quivering like a scolded child's. "Take what you want, just please, spare my crew and I."

Blackhand observed him quietly for a long moment and then looked around the deck. *"Red!"*

All eyes turned to Jacquotte. She crossed the deck to stand beside him. "Yes, Captain?"

"Translate for me," he said. A cruel smirk twisted his lips. "Tell this man of the price he must pay for his life."

This was what Jacquotte had dreaded. Since he had learned of her gift for languages, he had made use of her skills. First to sell the *Dorado* in Port Royal, and then after the crew captured their first ship of the voyage. She took a deep breath and turned to the Frenchman before her. "Our captain demands a bounty," she told him in French.

"He can have anything he wants from the ship," the man answered quickly. If he was surprised to see a woman, he did not show it. "As much as he wants. He can take anything he'd like from my private collection. I have a sword presented to me by the King of France himself."

Jacquotte shook her head. Blackhand would have taken the sword anyway. “He wants something else as well,” she said, barely able to muster the words. “He wants one of your men.”

“My... my men?” the man stammered. “Why?”

“Does it matter?” she asked. “It’s one man’s life for the lives of all your crew. Get everyone together and he will decide.”

The French captain was unconvinced. “I shan’t. He can take our goods. But my men must live.”

“What is his answer?” Blackhand demanded.

Out of the corner of her eye she could see Francisco. He was close to her, his hand still on his sword. He could not understand what was being said, but he could hear the defiance in the Frenchman’s voice, as could Blackhand.

“He agrees,” Jacquotte promised in English. She turned back to the Frenchman. “Either you do as he asks, or he’ll pick you. I promise, you do *not* want that.”

The Frenchman looked around to where Blackhand glowered. He nodded once, sharply. “To me, men!”

His crew dragged themselves to him. There were fewer than twenty of them left, standing in a ragged, bleeding huddle.

Blackhand looked over them once. He put his fingers to his mouth and whistled sharply. Most of the men looked about, confused, but the man who stood closest to the French captain made a terrible mistake. He flinched.

Blackhand smirked. “Lennox.”

Before anyone could react, Lennox reached out and grabbed the sailor. The man screamed as he was swung over Lennox’s shoulder, but he was too weak to stop him.

The French captain looked on in shock. “No! Not him! He’s my navigator!”

Lennox ignored him and walked the screaming Frenchman onto *The Marauder*. They disappeared down the steps of the companionway. The door slammed shut and they couldn’t hear his screams any longer.

“Men, get to work!” Blackhand ordered with a grin. The crew cheered and set about sacking the ship. “Santos, Red,” he said. “Watch these men. If they try to escape, kill them.”

Jacquotte and Francisco looked at each other. They were both thinking the same thing. It felt like a test of loyalty, to look on those they had just broken and feel no mercy.

The crew had already begun unloading the hold and some were returning with sacks and barrels in their arms. The sailors had no doubt heard tales of the notorious Blackhand, but the navigator had no idea what he was in for.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

THE SOUNDS of torture drifted across *The Marauder*, a haunting echo of the fate that had befallen the captured Frenchman. This was the second man this had happened to in her short time upon the brigantine. The other crew seemed to tune it out, but she was not sure she would ever get used to the sounds.

Now that she had seen Blackhand's treatment of his captives, she counted her blessings every night that they had become his crew, not his enemies.

She winced as Marceau slathered the slash on her side with an unguent of his own creation. The smell was foul and made her eyes water. Her skin burned where it touched, but that meant it was working. The rest of the crew in need of treatment lined up out the door for the stuff. She swelled with pride. They were beginning to give him the respect he deserved.

"Does it hurt terribly?"

Teresa knelt beside her, soft hands checking Jacquotte for scrapes and wounds. Her long brown hair fell below her waist in two thick plaits, and she wore britches beneath her skirts. She looked in better health than when Jacquotte had last seen her, but she still felt stung by her. By the casual way in which she announced that she had lied to Jacquotte, that there had been others besides her. But still, she could not stop her heart warming at the sight of her.

"They're just scratches," Jacquotte promised.

She took Teresa's hands in her own to keep her from fussing. Jacquotte let her, despite herself, but her eyes wandered about the crowded ship.

After Blackhand's crew took them in, Jacquotte and Teresa had shared a hammock. She was no longer certain why. Only that they had been exhausted and fallen into the hammock together. In the middle of the night, one of the crewmen, who they would later know as Henry Birch, grabbed Teresa and tried to drag her back to his own bunk. Jacquotte had no weapons, so she'd fought him off with her bare hands. Thankfully, her friends had been nearby; otherwise

she wouldn't have been able to save Teresa. The memory made her sick. She kept a knife in her boot from then on.

When she complained to Lennox, the quartermaster merely shrugged and told them it was their own fault for not being "claimed," for not having men to protect them. That was how Jacquotte had found herself sleeping with Francisco, and Teresa with Mbala. Bedding them was part of the facade that they "belonged" to the men. For Jacquotte, bedding Francisco was something she had done drunkenly in their youth, so it did not affect her greatly. He was kind and gentle, and tried to make a jest of it. But hearing Teresa and Mbala at night did something to her. The two had been growing closer. They were the newest to the group, and she always saw them talking or whispering, always close to one another. It filled her with envy.

"Like I'd believe you," Teresa said, gently slapping Jacquotte's hands away. "Marceau, how is she?"

"Just a flesh wound," her brother said cheerily. He finished tying the bandage about her waist. "She'll be fine."

"I told you," Jacquotte said, pulling herself to her feet and rolling down her sleeves. "Thank you, Marceau."

"I need to get back to the storeroom. The captain has me doing inventory," Teresa said as they left the surgeon's quarters. "We should reach Port Royal in two days, and I need to stretch our supplies."

Teresa smiled, gave her hand a squeeze, and left for the storeroom. Jacquotte watched her leave, before heading up the stairs.

The deck was alive with movement. Men ran about, grabbing weapons and rope and whatever else they could find.

"Ship ahoy!" Miguel cried from the crow's nest, a wide-brimmed hat planted firmly on his head.

She peered out at the horizon. There was a ship, its sails billowing and white. They'd lost fifteen men to the fight against the merchant ship just that morning and were down to seventy crewmen. *The Marauder* had taken on damage. They weren't ready to fight again. They needed to go back to port, buy supplies, fix the ship, and let the men rest. But none of that mattered to Blackhand.

"It's English!" Miguel called, lowering his spyglass.

As if summoned by the commotion, Blackhand appeared from the companionway. Lennox was at his side. The crew seemed anxious. There was something about the snarl that curled his lips, the way his eyes narrowed and his brow furrowed so deeply, that made him look like a madman.

“Strike the colors!” Blackhand called.

She heard his cry echoed like a chorus across the ship. The flag was lowered. Blackhand was a former English privateer. Despite turning to piracy, he was still loyal to the Crown.

Blackhand visibly relaxed. His knuckles went from white back to their usual weathered pink. “Get back to work! You lazy sacks of shit! I wouldn’t take the time to scrape you off my boots!”

He turned, about to head back down to his quarters, when a voice broke through the silence.

“We should take the vessel.”

Jacquotte, and the rest of the crew, looked at Sancho Bustillo, the ship’s carpenter, in shocked silence. No one spoke out against Blackhand. No one went against his orders. But Sancho stood tall and proud.

“What did you say, Bustillo?”

Jacquotte couldn’t breathe. What was Sancho doing? He was indentured too. He had no say, no vote. He was nothing to Blackhand. Yet he took a bold step toward their captain.

“We should take the ship,” he said again, louder this time. “Every day we pass English vessels and do nothing. We hardly make enough to get by. We put our lives in danger every day for you. And for what? The pittance you dole out when we happen upon a vessel that isn’t English?” Sancho took another step toward Blackhand. Nobody moved. He was right. The crew knew he was right. But he shouldn’t have said it. “It’s foolish not to take a ship just because of the flag it flies under. It reeks of cowardice.”

The silence felt endless. The crew held their breath. They all knew Blackhand would never take an English vessel. He was a pirate, yes, but first and foremost he was an Englishman.

Lennox reacted before anyone even knew what was happening. The enormous man launched himself at Sancho. Lennox struck him so hard a

terrible crack reverberated across the deck. Some part of Sancho had been broken by a single punch.

“Stop!” They all turned to Blackhand. He rolled up his sleeves. Beneath, his forearms were muscular, pale, and marred by white scars. A sailor’s arms. “This worthless whelp has a problem taking orders from me? We’ll settle this honorably.” Blackhand walked across the deck toward him. It was as though he was enjoying himself. “I call a brawl.”

The word washed over the crew and echoed through their ranks. *A brawl.*

Sancho was on his feet, though his left arm was visibly broken. He raised his good arm, fist clenched. “I accept.”

All around her, the crew crowded together to form a tight circle, enclosing Sancho and Blackhand within. It was clear from their faces that most did not want to see Sancho punished for what he’d said. Almost every non-Englishman on the crew agreed with him. But they had to respect the brawl. The chant went up.

“Brawl! Brawl! Brawl! Brawl!”

Jacquotte found herself tucked tight between two large men toward the back of the circle. She was thankful to see one was Mbala. She could hardly see through the mess of people, but in the gaps between the bodies she could just make out the fight.

As Blackhand circled him like a stalking cat, Sancho punched him once, then twice. Blood spilled from the captain’s face. Sancho tried to kick him, but Blackhand was quicker, uninjured, and furious. He grabbed Sancho by his bare foot, yanked until his back hit the deck, and tucked the leg firmly under his arm. He brought his elbow down hard onto his knee, again and again until the bone broke and all that could be heard was the cheering of the crew and Sancho’s howling screams.

Blackhand dropped him to the deck and stamped on his chest. Twice. Sancho vomited, much to the enjoyment of the crew, who whooped and hollered. It was as though they had forgotten Sancho was their crewman, their friend, and that he was being punished for something they all believed.

One of the men in front of her moved and her view was obscured. An awful whining cry came from the brawl circle. Jacquotte ducked and twisted, trying to

see what was happening, but a large hand came down on her shoulder. Mbala shook his head and mouthed “don’t look.”

Another gut-wrenching cry. The crew got quieter. Whatever had happened, whatever Blackhand was doing, he had gone so far that it had knocked the bloodlust from the crew in one swift motion.

Sancho let out a scream that didn’t sound human. The crew was silent. No more cheering and clapping. No more chants.

Suddenly the circle opened up. She could see the center again. There was blood everywhere. Why was there so much blood? She could see Blackhand walking across the deck, dragging Sancho behind him by the leg like a sack. With a grunt he heaved Sancho’s body over the taffrail. Jacquotte peered over, a morbid curiosity overtaking her. She watched as his body hit the sea. It sank quickly. Blood bloomed in the dark waters, leaving a deep red plume.

Blackhand turned, making sure to look everyone in the eye. His face was smeared with blood.

“What’re you all standing around for?” Blackhand demanded, spittle flying from his lips. “Get back to work!”

Everyone leapt into action, running about the deck, trying desperately to find something to do, something to occupy their time so that their captain’s ire didn’t fall on them next. Jacquotte stood, stunned. Unable to move. Unable to do anything. Mbala took her by the arm and steered her toward the prow of the ship with him.

“Red!”

She stopped. Mbala stopped beside her. Blackhand beckoned.

“Clean up this mess.”

Jacquotte let out a sigh of relief.

“Yes, Captain.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

BLACKHAND HAD the swabbies clean the ship the day before they were set to return to Port Royal. He claimed he saw it as a fresh start for the crew before their weeklong port stay. Jacquotte saw it for what it really was: a way for him to further humiliate those indentured before they were allowed the respite of shore leave. They swabbed the decks in nothing but their britches, pulling shit and rotten fish from the scuppers by hand, while those still on board walked around them like they were furniture.

Jacquotte had not been called on to clean that day. Instead, she assessed the damage *The Marauder* had sustained in Havana. They had taken three ships during their ten days at sea. She wandered around trying to take as much time as possible without seeming suspicious. Lennox stood on deck, overseeing the swabbies. Though there was no whip in his hand, he had the demeanor of a whip-cracker.

When she had taken note of the damage she could find, she made her way belowdecks.

Two of the gunners, Matos and Villar, were clearly on a rampage. They made more mess for the swabbies, throwing scraps to the floor and knocking over pails full of filthy water. She stopped when they began flouncing around with the English flag. Villar wrapped it around his person as though it were a garment.

They jeered at her.

“Something to say, swabbie?” Villar snapped.

“Don’t pretend you hold allegiances,” Matos said. “Look at you.”

“What even are you? Spanish? English? French? Or just the mulatto bastard of a black whore?” Villar laughed.

Jacquotte bit her tongue. She had no authority here, she was just a swabbie, and they were two of Blackhand’s longest-serving crewmen. She walked past, ignoring them.

As she reached the captain's quarters, Jacquotte took a deep breath to calm her nerves before knocking.

"Enter."

English. Blackhand preferred to speak English. He enjoyed the power English gave him over her, the split second it took her to translate what he said and formulate a response, her thick accent when speaking a language that didn't sit right on her tongue.

She pushed open the door. The room would have been filled with light and sea air had Blackhand not hung heavy curtains over the two tall windows. He believed fresh air killed sailors.

The room was dark but for two lanterns spluttering behind filthy glass. He had a large bed, beautifully decorated with silks and furs and pillows stuffed with goose feathers. There was a grand desk to one side and several shelves and cabinets; all were bolted to the walls, and the doors were locked.

There were treasures all around the room. Blackhand's personal items, stolen and bought alike: a chalice fitted with rubies and emeralds, a golden hookah, a Chinese harp, and an array of stolen ceremonial weapons. But these were not his only treasures.

Scattered around the room were the prizes he took from his captives. *Trophies*, he called them. They were placed in seats of honor, shown off for all to see. Bones, mostly, pulled from the bodies of his victims. They came from arms and legs, there were fingers and toes, and he kept a jar filled with rotting teeth beside his bed. The eyeless holes of a skull upon a plinth bored into her.

Wrapped in a white cloth on his desk was a lump. It was still weeping blood. Blackhand caught her looking and smirked.

"It's his hand," he told her, relishing the shudder that ran down her spine.

Somehow when he spoke English his words sounded crueler, his voice more gravelly and more sinister.

Blackhand took a step toward her, closing the space between them. He stood so near she could smell the rum on his breath. Because of Arnolde she was so used to the smell that it didn't usually bother her, but on Blackhand it curled her toes.

The floorboards were stained red. There were bits of severed flesh and fractured bone scattered around, and the ropes he'd used to restrain the captured Frenchman were almost black.

"Report," Blackhand ordered.

Jacquotte stood taller, despite herself. The man was a tyrant, but she couldn't deny the authority he commanded. "There's minimal damage to the hull inflicted from the broadsides," she told him, checking her notes. "There are a few splintered boards. Nothing critical. It'll take a day of work, no more, if we have the resources. And I'll need a new carpenter."

"Why?"

"You... Sancho Bustillo was my carpenter," she said, catching herself before she accused him.

A slow smile spread across his lips. "A shame, truly," he said with a chuckle. "You can have your pick of the swabbies."

"Thank you," Jacquotte forced out. She hated the way his eyes bored into her. "Do you need something else?"

Blackhand looked around at his handiwork. His gray eyes almost glazed over at the sight of it, like it stirred him. "Yes. Clean this place up."

She gave a short nod and turned to leave the room. She needed to fetch her mop and bucket. But Blackhand stuck out his arm and blocked the doorway. He reached out and took her hair in his other hand. She froze. He pulled her hair free of its tie, watching as it fell around her in a red wave. He took a handful of it and twirled it around his fingers, until he found what he was looking for.

When Blackhand recovered them from the *Dorado*, his demands were high. Their ship, the crew, her savings, she understood. All this she should have expected from a pirate. But what she did not understand was his final condition. He had taken a cut of her hair.

She didn't know what he had done with her lock, or why he'd wanted it. But every part of her knew not to ask; whatever the answer, she would rather not know.

She stood entirely still as he rubbed her hair between his thumb and forefinger. It was small, only a finger's width, right at the nape of her neck,

where it could only be seen when the rest of her hair was pulled aside. Already it was growing out, with a blunt end, soft and fresh and new.

“Lennox tells me you’re still bedding Francisco Santos,” he said, his hand still firmly in her hair. She nodded shallowly, eager for the conversation to be finished. He let go of her hair. When it touched her skin, it was sticky. “He’s a good man. Hard worker.”

Jacquotte knew what he meant by that. Blackhand was a lot of things, but he liked to think of himself as a man of honor, and it would not be honorable to rape the woman of a man he respected. She knew it was Francisco, and Francisco alone, that kept her safe.

“He is,” Jacquotte said finally, a lump in her throat.

“Well, if you ever tire of him—”

“I won’t,” she said firmly.

Blackhand only smirked. “If you do, you know—”

A yell came from outside. The square of light visible from the crack in the heavy curtains briefly turned from white to blue and red before passing. Blackhand stormed from the captain’s quarters and up the stairs onto the deck, Jacquotte hot on his heels. On deck, Teresa, Matos, and Villar ran about, snatching hopelessly at the air until the English flag was out of reach and fluttering out to sea.

“What is the meaning of this?” Blackhand demanded.

Teresa, Matos, and Villar stood motionless. They looked like rats, playing dead to avoid the talons of a hawk. The deck was silent. Blackhand stormed toward them. Teresa cringed away.

“We’ll replace it, Captain, first thing at Port Royal, I swear,” Teresa said.

“You reckless wench!” he said, his voice rising with his temper. “Do you have no respect!”

There was no doubt in Jacquotte’s mind that Teresa was not responsible for this. Villar was silent, but he shot Jacquotte a warning look.

Teresa was shaking. “I didn’t... Captain, I’m sorry, but—”

“But *what*, Teresa,” he snapped. He charged closer to her, and Teresa stumbled backward into Matos. “Did I not make clear what would happen if you fucked with me? Do you want to end up like my last purser, girl?”

Teresa looked to Matos and Villar, imploring them with her eyes, but the men ignored her. Jacquotte had not seen such fear in her face before.

“I’m sorry, Captain!” Teresa said, her voice no louder than a whisper. “Please, I—”

“I won’t hear your excuses again. You—”

“It was me!”

All eyes were on Jacquotte. Matos, Villar, and Teresa looked at her, confused. She could not read Blackhand’s face.

“What?”

“I was stowing the flag,” she said quickly. “I thought I had tied it down, but I wanted to report to you and... well, I was rushing. I’m sorry, Captain. I will fix it, I promise.”

Blackhand stood for a long moment. Silence hung in the air between them. Teresa looked at her like she was mad. She felt a little mad herself. But she had seen the fear in Teresa’s eyes, seen the way she cowered and flinched. No matter her feelings or her bruised pride, Jacquotte would not allow Teresa to be punished, especially when she was not to blame.

Without a word, Blackhand came to stand before her. Her fingers itched at her sides.

She cleared her throat. “I—”

His hand lashed out, fast as a whip, and cracked across the side of her face. Her skin stung, her jaw ached, and blood trickled from her nose. She looked up through the water gathering in her eyes.

“Be sure that comes out of your wages.”

“Of course, Captain.”

His rough hand grabbed her by the chin and he turned her face back and forth, inspecting the damage he had done. He had that same look in his eyes as when he surveyed his blood-soaked quarters.

“Good,” he said. “Now get to work. I want my quarters spotless before we reach Port Royal.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

THE CREW reached port in the early hours. They docked just beyond the harbor and brought their plunder to shore in longboats; Blackhand refused to pay docking fees. Blackhand already had buyers lined up for the silks and tobacco, and all that wasn't gold would find buyers soon enough. It had taken hours to bring everything to shore and by the time they were finished the sun was high in the sky, beating down on their necks.

Jacquotte was still high from the thrill of battle. They had taken another ship outside of Jamaican waters and fire thrummed in her veins. She felt it wearing off now as she adjusted her tricorne, tucking in the last strands of hair. She couldn't risk being recognized. Jamaica might not have been French territory, but their reach was wide. By now, everyone had heard the fate that had befallen Yáquimo, or at least the events as written by Florián. She overheard the story in the harbor as she unloaded barrels and crates of pilfered goods.

He had been granted governorship in the name of King Louis XIV of France and they had renamed Yáquimo, her home, Jacmel. She despised it. In the days following the coup, a dozen ships had arrived, swarming with Frenchmen who promptly took up in the vacant houses belonging to the murdered Spaniards. And she heard whispers of the reward for her capture.

Jacquotte had replayed every moment from that night in the Governor's study a thousand times over. Though she was disgusted by Florián's measures, she could not help but remember what he had said that night of his ambitions, his aspirations, and his plans. She often wondered what hers would be, if she ever had the chance to be so reckless with her desires.

Her eyes trailed across to a stone arch off the coast where two men hung by their necks, corpses slowly stripped of their flesh by birds. Jacquotte shuddered.

Across the harbor, fishing boats bobbed in the calm waters, small longboats with shirtless oarsmen toiling away in the midday heat. Some ships were heading

out, the telltale tune of a shanty caught on the wind as their sails filled with air. Already she longed to set sail again, into the relative safety the sea afforded her.

By rights, Port Royal was an English settlement, but it felt far from it. The English didn't have enough forces to protect the small stretch of land, so they allowed pirates to stay there without fear of repercussions for their maritime activities in exchange for protecting their interests. Other than the forces in the forts and those scattered about town, Jacquotte rarely saw an Englishman who hadn't turned to piracy. It was a pirates' town, not an English one. Which meant the French could dock there too.

The crew of *The Marauder* lined up eagerly to visit Teresa as the purser handed out their shares. Jacquotte waited patiently until she was the last crewman standing, fingers itching when it was finally her turn.

"Sorry," Teresa mumbled, as she placed three misshapen coins into her hand.

Jacquotte could not tell if the apology was for her lack of shares, or for the bruise purpling beneath her eye. She forced a tight-lipped smile. "Thanks."

Keeping her head down, the two found their friends. They'd already begun to split up. Miguel muttered something about church and hurried off into the crowded streets, Marceau had found a surgery that had agreed to put him up with room and board for his services while they were ashore, while Alberto left for the Laundry to see his family, and ensure Blackhand received his shares.

"Mbala and I are going to find a gambling den," Francisco said, stretching his long limbs. "Perhaps we can turn these shares into enough coin to buy our own ship. Teresa, Jacquotte, will you join us?"

Teresa sighed. She was looking at her worn shoes, kicking up the dirt. "No, thank you. I'm going to head to the Dog's Tail Inn."

"Be safe, wife," Mbala said. Teresa nodded and turned to walk away.

"Wife?" Francisco asked.

Mbala shrugged. "She's as good as a wife to me."

"Does that make you my wife, Jacquotte?" Francisco asked, draping an arm around her shoulders.

Jacquotte playfully shoved him away. "I am no man's wife."

"So how about it, Jacquotte?" Mbala asked. He wrapped an arm about Francisco. "You could be good luck for us, with hair like yours."

Jacquotte looked around. She felt she would be anything but good luck here. She pushed her hair farther into her hat to make sure it was hidden. Ahead she could see Teresa disappearing farther away into the crowd. “No thanks. I’ll find you later.”

She turned and ran after her, shoving through the throng of people in her way. “Teresa, wait!”

She stopped and turned. People knocked into her as they passed. In many ways, Port Royal was like a river, beating against any obstruction until it was worn smooth: streets, buildings, even people. Jacquotte took her by the arm and led her into the shade of a palm tree.

Jacquotte hesitated before she spoke. Teresa’s eyes were filled with tears. “Are you still unwell, Teresa?” she asked.

“I am fine. Tired, but fine,” she said, but she wouldn’t look at her. “Are you accompanying me to the inn?”

“Not until you tell me what’s wrong.”

Teresa sighed. “I do not want to be here, in Port Royal,” she said, her voice tinged with sadness. “This place... it reminds me of everything I have lost. Not just what I lost here... but my home in Peru, my life in Yáquimo. Seeing the lives of the people here... It is too much.”

Jacquotte’s gut twisted. She felt Teresa’s sorrow deep within her. Suddenly it mattered more than any fear she had of being on land. All she wanted was to be a comfort to her.

“Let’s not go back to the inn just yet,” she said. “Allow me to take you into town.”

Teresa hesitated. “I do not know...”

“If you do not like it, I will escort you to the inn without question,” she promised. “Just let me show you something other than that musty old room.”

A smile warmed Teresa’s face. “All right.”

Jacquotte took her by the hand and led her into the throng. They walked through the muddy, crowded streets together, squeezing between groups of travelers and newcomers, off to make their fortunes, merchants and sailors hauling their cargo to and from the docks. Ahead of them lay the colorful town.

Dozens of houses and shops crowded together, practically built on top of each other, fighting for space.

They reached the market. It was swarming with people. All around were shops, stalls, stands, and huts. Some vendors carried their wares in sacks, or on the backs of mules, and some had set up blankets on the ground and atop wooden crates. And the food. Hearty stews of goat, chicken, fish, and pig served with flatbread, saltfish, and ackee, bright soups colored orange and red and yellow, great hollowed gourds filled with spiced vegetables. Fruit served by the pound: tamarind, breadfruit, shaddock, and mango. And the treats. Rum cake. Candied orange peel. Sugary pastries and breads so sweet that the taste stayed on your tongue for hours after you finished them.

This was the real Port Royal. Colorful and loud, alive with a thousand sights and smells. Where night and day the revelry never ended. A town of hope and possibility; even Jacquotte could feel it.

They walked through the busy market, passing vendors hawking their wares. Teresa's brown eyes were wide with delight.

"Prayer beads! Jade beads! Wooden beads! Beads for all occasions!"

"Cure all! Ointment that'll cure your boils! Your sores! Your broken bones! Cure all that ails ya!"

They stopped at a stall cooking fish. The smell drew them there. An ancient woman, devoid of teeth and balding beneath her headscarf, was expertly turning fish on a closed metal griddle with her fingers. There were all sorts of fish: lobster, crab, fat slices of snapper and flying fish and cod, butterfish, and herring and others that Jacquotte didn't recognize.

They didn't have a lot of money, but Teresa haggled with the old woman until she returned with five large river shrimp, cooked to a perfect crispy pink, covered in salt and spice. They crunched when she bit down on them, a hard, crispy shell and soft, buttery insides. They wolfed them down wordlessly.

They walked around the market with newfound abandon. She soon learned that Teresa was a master haggler. She marched up to vendors and argued them down on prices, bartered, stamped her feet and threw her hands up in the air. Sometimes she even shouted and called the quality of their goods into question

until they walked away with their arms laden with useless frivolities that they had no need for.

By the time they returned to Teresa's room at the Dog's Tail, their arms and feet were aching, and their sides were sore from laughing.

"That was wonderful. Port Royal is so..." Teresa struggled to find the words as she dumped her armfuls of goods onto her bed. There was a broad grin on her face. Jacquotte couldn't remember the last time she'd seen her smile like that. Or if she'd *ever* seen her smile like that. "So full of life. It reminds me of Peru. Vibrant. Free."

"I still can't believe we found a Peruvian merchant," Jacquotte said. She threw down her hat, relishing the feeling of her hair cascading down her shoulders.

"I can't believe how bad my Runasimi has gotten!" Teresa laughed. Jacquotte put her pile down on the bed beside Teresa's.

Teresa rooted around, dropping fabric and silk, a pair of delicate slippers, onto the floor until she produced a pair of earrings. Beautiful gold hoops with green jewels like teardrops dripping from the ends. She raised them up to Jacquotte's ear, pushing the hair away from her neck with a smile.

"The color is stunning on you," she said, her voice softer now. "They certainly aren't emeralds like that shady woman claimed, but they're pretty enough."

Where her skin touched Jacquotte's it felt like fire. "Do you miss your old life? When you were young?"

"In Peru?" Teresa shrugged and put the earrings away. "I always felt free there. Before I became... well, a woman I never thought I would have to be. Married off for an alliance, for riches. It is a fate that awaits many women, but one I never thought would be mine."

Jacquotte almost regretted her question. Teresa looked so solemn. She cocked a grin. "You would have made an excellent merchant."

She laughed. "I agree."

Teresa went back to rifling through their purchases. They'd hardly spent any of their shares, but she'd somehow managed to trade, barter, and haggle with almost nothing until the bed was covered with trinkets and even a basket filled

with sweet breads. Jacquotte realized she'd been staring and turned, as Teresa tugged at one of her long braids.

"I... thank you, for today," Teresa said. "I admit that I have been... less than happy with my situation of late. You've made everything feel... less stifling. I could see myself being happy here. You've shown me that."

Jacquotte's heart leapt in her chest. Teresa stood close to her, fingers still playing with her long braid. She looked nervous. Bashful, almost.

"Jacquotte?" Teresa moved closer and took her hand. It was soft and smooth in every way that Jacquotte's was rough and calloused. Teresa held it against her chest, and through the fabric of her blouse she could feel the gentle thrum of her heartbeat, strong and steady. "Are you quite all right?"

She could smell her. Sweat and sweet orange. Jacquotte swallowed thickly. "I'm..." She struggled to get the words out, her throat was so tight.

Things had changed. Neither was the woman she had been just two weeks ago. They had both lost so much. And Jacquotte still cared for Teresa, truly and with her whole heart, but there was something stopping her. A niggling in the back of her mind. A cage locked around her heart. She was not certain she could trust Teresa after her lie. But as Jacquotte looked up at her, she felt the longing that came with seeing her smile. They were standing so close.

Slowly, Jacquotte lifted her other hand to cup Teresa's cheek. Teresa's breath caught in her throat, but she did not move away as Jacquotte gently traced her thumb along the crescent moon beneath her eye.

"Jacquotte?" Her voice was quiet now, but her breath tickled Jacquotte's face.

"Teresa..." Their hands were still clasped between them, and Teresa's grip strengthened. It took all of Jacquotte's power not to pull her close, to run her fingers through her thick curls, to stand on her toes and draw her into a kiss.

Teresa leaned in closer, straining to hear. "Yes?" Her words tickled Jacquotte's ear and sent a chill down her spine.

"Teresa, I—"

The door burst open.

Two figures stumbled inside as the door slammed against the wall.

Jacquotte leaped forward and her hand snatched at the air above her right hip. She didn't have her sword. But her knife was in her boot.

To their alarm, the intruders paid them no mind. They weren't there to rob them, but were locked in a passionate embrace. They didn't even notice the two women, flushed and flustered, as the intruders tore at each other's clothes, lips locked together.

The woman's fine blue dress was hiked up around her hips as she tried desperately to be rid of it. The man had his back toward them as he fumbled with his trousers. He kept catching his hands on the string of beads at his hip. A rosary.

Miguel.

She would have laughed were the situation not so absurd. She had been about to make a fool of herself with Teresa. Miguel had stopped her. She looked over to Teresa, but she was in a similar state of shock as they watched the pair slam the door closed, eager for privacy they would not find.

The small woman turned, ready to clamber onto the bed, and came face-to-face with Jacquotte and Teresa. She screamed. Miguel leapt forward, moving to protect her with his body, braver than Jacquotte had ever seen him before. When he took them in, he froze.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded.

"What are *we* doing here?" Jacquotte asked incredulously. "This is Teresa's room! What are *you* doing here?"

The woman stood taller. "Miguel, do you know these women?"

Jacquotte could see the hesitation on Miguel's face. "I do. They're friends. They won't hurt you, I promise."

The woman didn't move.

"I'm Red," Jacquotte said quickly. "This is Teresa. And you are..."

"Anne," Miguel introduced her. "She's... from my church."

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Anne," Jacquotte said with a smile.

"A pleasure," Teresa agreed.

Anne looked flustered, nervous. She wasn't the sort of woman Jacquotte would expect to find in an establishment like this, a seedy tavern filled with pirates, freebooters, and thieves. Anne looked between the three of them.

Jacquotte could see the distress written plain across her face. She went to respond to Jacquotte, but clearly thought better of it. Then she turned to Miguel.

“Don’t follow me,” she whispered, and stormed out of the room, skirts fluttering behind her.

“Anne, wait!” Miguel shouted. The door slammed hard. They stood there for a long moment in silence, before they all rounded on each other.

“What are you doing back here so soon?” Miguel demanded.

“This is my room!” Teresa protested.

Miguel chewed on his bottom lip. He sighed. “I’m sorry. You’re right. I don’t mean to be... I’m not angry, I’m just... Promise me you won’t tell a soul what you saw.”

They both looked at him, confused. “Why?”

Miguel took a deep breath. He wouldn’t look either of them in the eye. “Because Anne is *married*.”

Jacquotte’s mouth dropped open.

“Miguel! You scoundrel!” Teresa shrieked. The man who lectured them endlessly on the Bible and God’s word, who preached the benefits of chastity, was not only sleeping with a woman out of wedlock, but a woman who was *married*.

Miguel smiled nervously. “We didn’t have anywhere else to go! We couldn’t very well visit her house and Alberto is already in our room with his sisters.”

“I don’t think her husband would approve,” Jacquotte said.

“Might be awfully strange if he did,” Teresa agreed with a smirk.

Miguel looked like he wanted to burst into flames.

“I wouldn’t have thought church was a romantic place,” Teresa mused.

“It’s not,” he said. “We just... we talked. I felt... lost. I...” His lips tightened. “You all seem to have adjusted to this life so quickly. But I’ve struggled. I didn’t know how I could live with myself... how I could ever call myself a... a *pirate*.”

“What?”

His words struck Jacquotte. They had not talked of it before, but she had been surprised at how easily she had taken to life aboard *The Marauder*. She told herself it was not so different from back home. She was a shipwright, just as she

had always been. That was her role, her responsibility. It was her calling in a way. But she knew things were different. Everything was. She had boarded ships, looted, and killed. It felt foolish now, but she had still considered herself a shipwright. But as much as she enjoyed repairing the brigantine, she had come to crave the action in a way she had not communicated to anyone. Her boots heavy on the gangplank, the weight of a pistol in her hand, the feeling of her sword cutting through flesh and bone. It made her strong. It made her powerful.

Miguel laughed, bringing her back from her reverie. "I thought becoming a pirate meant I was straying from God," he explained. "Piracy isn't the godliest of professions. So, I prayed. I looked for a sign that I was still who I have always tried to be. That I was still able to be good."

"And you found it?" Teresa asked.

"I believe so. In her," he said with a smile. "Anne's husband... he's not a good man. I stopped her from making an irreversible decision. *That* was my sign. Our work cannot corrupt me, when someone as pure and good as Anne can love me."

"I know what we're becoming," Jacquotte said softly. She looked out the window. Even now, the sea called to her. "I suppose I just hadn't said it aloud."

Miguel sighed. "I'm not ashamed of who we are. I think I did believe that it would make us bad people, but now I know it's just a part of who we are."

Jacquotte smiled at her friend. "You know, you might be the most kindhearted adulterous pirate I've ever met."

He laughed and pushed her gently. "Oh hush, you."

After a moment, she cocked a grin at him. "So, can I tell the others?"



The common area of the Dog's Tail was packed to bursting. There were townsfolk, natives to Port Royal, amongst sailors, merchants, dockworkers, and pirates. Inns like these had fishermen and hawkers swapping stories with noblemen and priests. There were more soldiers than she would have liked, but the red and white livery of the English brought her some comfort. Jacquotte sat alone at the only empty table.

It was early evening, and everyone was already in their cups. In the corner, a woman with a fiddle and a man with a penny whistle had struck up a tune, and two of *The Marauder's* riggers, Simón and Vicente, drunkenly sang along to a bawdy song that Jacquotte didn't recognize.

She was early and glad her friends were yet to join her. It had been two days since everything with Miguel, and all she had been able to think about was Teresa. She could still smell her. Could still hear her name on her tongue. Could still feel the soft skin of her cheek. Had she imagined it? The look in her eye? The gentle thrum of her heart? Had she misunderstood the way she said her name, softly, questioningly, as if daring her to come closer? They hadn't spoken once Miguel left; it was as though neither of them wanted to break some unspoken spell.

Someone sat down opposite her, holding two tankards of ale. Jacquotte looked up, prepared to tell whatever misbegotten drunk that she wasn't interested only to see Alberto.

"Afternoon," he said. He pointed to her hat. "Almost didn't recognize you."

"Alberto!" She beamed. Finally, someone to distract her from her own thoughts. "Everything all right?"

"This is for you," he said, sliding one of the ales across the table.

"I heard what happened with Blackhand," he said, taking a long swig of his ale. He set the tankard down hard, knuckles gripped tight around it. "He should never have laid hands on you. I should have—*someone* should have stopped him."

Jacquotte nodded. She regarded him carefully, mapping out the anger on his face, lining his brow, narrowing his eyes, thinning his lips. When she had stayed with him at the Laundry, she had heard how protective he was, had seen the way he cared for his sisters and aunts, and what happened to the men who laid hands on women.

Jacquotte rested a hand gently on his. "It's all right," she told him. "Better me than Teresa." He nodded, face softening, but she could still see the tension in his jaw. She offered up a smile. "How are Blanca and the girls?"

"Good. Very good," he told her, his face brightening as it did whenever he spoke of family. "Business is booming. Mama is already talking of expansion.

Blackhand has made a small fortune from his cut.”

“And they are happy and well?”

“Most of them prefer life here. It is bigger so there are more choices, and more men. Though I worry for their safety while I am away.”

“They have Blanca,” Jacquotte reminded him. “You know she won’t allow anyone to hurt them.”

“I suppose.” He shrugged, before his eyes grazed over her purpling cheek. “He has been visiting them, you know. The captain.”

Jacquotte bristled. “Has he been...”

He nodded. “Dorotea is the object of his affections. He has visited her each night we have been here.” He saw the concern in her eyes. “She is fine. Unharmed. She said he talks, mostly.”

That caught her attention. “Really? About what?”

“Anything. Everything. He’s rum drunk and can hardly move. Just lies in her bed and speaks for hours on end.” He leaned in conspiringly. “She told me something. About the hair.”

Jacquotte’s hand rubbed at the nape of her neck, finding where the new curl was growing out. “She did?”

He nodded. “I know why he took a cut of only your hair, and none of ours,” he said. “Dorotea says he told her he cuts a lock of hair from indentures who take important positions on his ship. Navigator, armorer, bosun, and the like.”

“What for?” Jacquotte asked, her voice barely above a whisper. “What does he do with them?”

“She didn’t say. But I think it’s a reminder that he owns us,” Alberto said. “He has a physical part of us that he will keep forever. As for what he does with them...” He shrugged. “I don’t know.”

The idea crawled into her mind, sharp claws gripping tight about her heart. Did Blackhand own her now? She was his indenture, but had she placed herself back into confinement? Was he another Arnolde?

The thought of her father rose bile in her throat. She hated him. She hated what he was. The man who owned them. The man who killed their mother. But more so than that, she felt something else creep in. Some small, strange part of her missed him. He was a terrible man and what he had done was unforgivable.

But he was her father. He had been there her whole life. And then Florián had shot him dead at her feet. He hadn't allowed her to grieve the loss of what she thought they had. Hadn't allowed her to outgrow him, or to punish him herself for his sins. He was dead and she would never get the chance to let him know how much she despised him.

And now, because of Arnolde, because of Florián, because of what both men had tried to do, she had indentured herself, her brother, and their friends to a madman. A madman who had taken a lock of her hair.

Jacquotte shuddered. "Vile," she sneered. "I wish—"

A rough hand grabbed Jacquotte by the wrist and another went into her hat, yanking her by the hair until she toppled off the bench and onto the wooden floor. White spots danced before her eyes. Her hat was gone.

"I know you," a deep voice growled in French.

Her blood was ice in her veins.

Jacquotte twisted in his grip, trying to free herself. But he was stronger than her. He dragged her through the crowded tavern. Jacquotte's body slid helplessly across the filthy floor, blood trickling into her eyes from the strength of his grip in her hair.

A cold rush of air hit her as the door was kicked open, and then she was thrown outside into the thick mud. The Frenchman loomed above her, her ripped hair stuck to his hand with her blood. She scrambled, trying to get to the knife in her boot, but his foot came down hard and heavy on her back. Once to wind her, another to pin her in place.

"Look what I have found," the Frenchman said, laughing.

A second man walked into her line of sight. "Is that the mulatto from the wanted notices?" he asked in awe. "Look at her hair! It *is* her. What is the reward?"

"Two hundred pieces of eight."

"We'll be rich! We'll—"

The door to the Dog's Tail burst open.

"Unhand her!" Alberto demanded.

He didn't see the second Frenchman until it was too late. He smashed his fist into his face, and Alberto stumbled backward. The Frenchman grabbed him by

the throat and gripped tight, pressing a knife to the soft skin there. “Who is this one?”

Jacquotte tried to crawl forward, to use the distraction to grab the knife in her boot, but the man stamped down harder onto her back. “There is no bounty on his head,” he said. He drew a pistol from his hip and pointed it at Alberto’s chest. “Kill him, quickly. Don’t want him running his mouth about our friend, do we?”

Jacquotte’s heart pounded. She had to get out from underneath him. She twisted and shifted beneath him, trying to throw him off balance.

Jacquotte heard the familiar click of a pistol to her left.

She twisted sharply, pushing through the pain, and ripped her body out from under his weight. The Frenchman moved to seize her; his thick, eager hands gripped her leg hard. His pistol fired into the mud. And then came the loud, unmistakable boom of a blunderbuss, heavy enough to rattle her bones.

The Frenchman fell into the mud beside her. Smoke rose from the hole where his face had been, the edges charred black. Jacquotte was splattered with his blood.

His companion faltered, loosening his grip on her friend. Alberto ducked down, snatched the other man’s knife, and before the Frenchman knew what was happening, shoved it into the soft meat under his chin. He spluttered, sagged onto the knife, and fell.

Jacquotte and Alberto looked at each other, breathing ragged, before turning to see Lennox standing beside them.

“I... thank you, Lennox.”

“What happened?” he asked, looking at the scene.

Alberto forced a grin. “You know what brutes men are when they drink,” he said, lying quickly. “I got into a disagreement and Red here gave me a helping hand.”

Jacquotte nodded, still a little dazed. “I wasn’t as great a help as I’d hoped,” she said. “Thank you, again, Lennox. We appreciate it.”

“A crew sticks together,” the quartermaster said with a shrug. He paused, eyeing the bruise on Jacquotte’s cheek. “I apologize for Matos and Villar,” he

said slowly. “They should have spoken up. I have had words with them, and they won’t be doing that again.”

He turned, walking into the tavern, as two serving boys rushed out to see the commotion. They looked from Jacquotte and Alberto to the bodies, and began to clean up the mess they had left behind without a word.

“Are you hurt?” Alberto asked, leading her away from the scene.

Jacquotte shook her head, still dazed. “I... no, I’m fine,” she said, swallowing thickly. “Thank you, Alberto.”

They reached the table where they had been before. Their cups were undisturbed, their seats untouched. No one paid them any heed. It was as though nothing had happened at all. And yet Jacquotte felt she were somewhere else entirely.

Alberto passed Jacquotte her hat. He was quiet for a moment, before he cleared his throat. “I don’t speak French, but I know some from the Laundry. What’s this about a reward?”

Jacquotte’s hands were shaking, and she stopped trying to stuff her hair up beneath her hat. “I think Florián has put a bounty on my head.”

Alberto considered this for a moment. “We should tell—”

“No!” Jacquotte said. “I... please don’t tell the others.”

“Why?”

She was still trembling, but she hid her hands in her lap. “I am fine,” she lied. “There is no need to tell the others. They will only worry. This is our port stay. We should be enjoying ourselves. There is no need to worry them about something so trivial.”

Alberto did not seem convinced. “If you are certain...”

“I am,” she promised. The last thing she wanted was for this to get back to the others. She grabbed her tankard and took a large swig. “Now, let us drink. Next round is on me.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

JACQUOTTE LOOKED up at the governor's manor of Port Royal. It was less grand than the manor in Yáquimo but still it towered over the town, allowing Jacquotte to get the lay of the land.

She headed west, her feet taking her along a newly beaten path of her own design, until she came to a noticeboard. The announcements were mostly from businesses looking for cheap labor from poor drunks and freebooters. But amongst them were wanted signs. Thieves. Deserters. Murderers. Enemies of the powers that be. This was how she had been recognized at the inn.

For three days, she had taken up a regular route around Port Royal, following the trail of the town's noticeboards. She would not admit to it, but she had not felt right since that day. Any sort of stillness came as an affliction. She couldn't sit. Couldn't sleep. Her mind was plagued with the memory of being caught unawares and helpless. Every time she sat in a tavern, she felt a chill down her spine. Hands in her hair. She couldn't be caught alone and unarmed again; there was no guarantee Alberto or Lennox or anyone would be there to save her.

She chided herself. Arnolde would have laughed had he been able to see her, called her a weak little girl, and he would have been right.

She had planned to cut off her hair. It was too recognizable, even beneath her hat. She had never cared much for her appearance, but as much as her hair reminded her of Arnolde, connected her to him, her hair was something uniquely hers. She didn't want to lose that.

She looked upon the large wooden board. She knew what to look for now. All the warrants described her the same way.

**Muscular mulatto woman. Dark-skinned. Long red hair. Dresses like
a man.**

Reward: 200 pieces of eight. Wanted alive for the crimes of treason, theft, and the murder of the Governor of Yáquimo.



Alive. Always alive. Most warrants such as these did not care if the quarry was brought in dead. They were a problem to be solved, a nuisance to be eradicated. But Florián wanted her alive. Whatever punishment he had for her, she knew it would be harrowing. Why else demand that she be taken in alive?

She found one notice that seemed to have a poorly drawn depiction of her face. She stared at the etching; her long hair loose, her shoulders broad, before ripping it from its pin. The warrant described her as an escaped slave, the property of the new governor of Jacmel. The lies twisted knots in her gut. Florián did not own her, nor would he ever.

She felt her chest tighten, her palms sweat. She had taken down the picture. What was the matter with her? She turned to leave, when a hand caught her shoulder.

White dread pounded through her veins, icy and sharp.

She threw herself backward and was already reaching for the knife in her boot when she recognized her assailant.

“Jacquotte? What’s wrong?”

Her eyes were bleary. Her head was spinning. Something took a hold of her. An all-consuming, unquenchable panic. She couldn’t breathe.

“Teresa?”

She came into focus. Her soft hands were on her neck, her face, searching for signs of injury.

Her heartbeat was slowing in her chest and her breath finally returned to her, ragged and gasping, but at least she could exhale again.

“Come with me.” Teresa ushered Jacquotte down an alleyway. She followed numbly, focusing on putting one foot in front of another.

Her face was lined with worry. “Jacquotte, are you all right? What happened?”

“Nothing,” she mumbled. “I... you startled me.”

“If I’d spoken a moment later you would have gutted me,” Teresa said. She put her hands on Jacquotte’s shoulders and turned her back and forth. When she could still find no sign of injury, she looked at her again. “Tell me what’s wrong. You look unwell. Your eyes... have you been sleeping?”

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I don’t know what happened. I—”

“*Jacquotte*,” Teresa cut her off. “Stop apologizing. What’s going on?”

There was no energy left in her. Her bones were heavy, and she was tired.

She looked at Teresa and hesitated. Would she think her weak? She sighed and took a deep breath, running her hand over her face. She had to come out with it. “I’m afraid, Teresa.”

“What?”

“The other day I was at the inn. This *man*...” She had to take another deep breath to steady her voice. “He grabbed me. I only had the knife in my boot. He had a pistol, and if it weren’t for Alberto and Lennox...”

“Jac—”

“I’m all right,” she said, quickly cutting her off. “But... I was *terrified*. I needed to be saved and I can’t stand the feeling that I can’t take care of myself. I’m afraid, all right? I’m afraid that if I let my guard down, someone will find me again and there will be no one around to save me. Just like... Just like...” She stopped herself.

There was a long moment of silence. She looked up at Teresa, nervous to see the look of chagrin on her face.

Teresa pulled her into a fierce hug. “I’m so sorry,” she said quietly. She was warm and soft against her body, and rubbed soothing circles into her back. “I’m sorry, *Jacquotte*. I wish I had known. I wish you had told us. I would have stayed with you, you know that.”

She tried to move away. “I’m not... I don’t want to be a burden.”

Teresa wouldn’t let her pull away. She held her firm and scowled down at her. “You are *not* a burden. You are our friend. We want you to feel safe.”

Friend. Was that still all Teresa saw her as? It was just days ago that *Jacquotte* had almost confessed to a feeling far greater. Had almost drawn the woman to her and sought out the soft press of her lips.

She shook the thoughts from her mind. Teresa was right, even if her words stung Jacquotte's pride. She was not a burden to her friends, and hearing it aloud lifted a weight off her that she hadn't known she was carrying. She could feel tears rising in her eyes, but she cut them back with a smile.

"You don't need to be able to do everything yourself. We can all help each other. Always know you can come to me if you need anything."

Jacquotte didn't know if that was true, but she wanted to believe it. "Thank you, Teresa." She paused. "I don't really know what I need."

Teresa looked her over, searching. "Jacquotte... What if..." She hesitated.

"Yes?"

"What if we left? We could abandon our indentures. Live inland. Make clear of Port Royal. We could go anywhere. Start our lives again."

Her words struck Jacquotte in a way she hadn't expected. She was not surprised by the first place that came to her mind: Fort de Rocher. But Tortuga was the last place she could escape from Blackhand. Never mind Florián. She looked to Teresa, searching her face. Did she truly think Jacquotte wanted to leave? Or was it an invitation? An offer for them to run away together? "I... Is that what you want?"

"I don't know. I just know I want you to feel safe, Jacquotte."

She took in Teresa's words. It wasn't as if she hadn't thought of running again. Of the freedom it could bring them all. But to live a life away from the seas, it wasn't a life Jacquotte could imagine.

She took a breath. She felt steady. "You know, in a strange way, *The Marauder* is where I feel most safe," she said, surprised at the sureness of her response. "Florián has made me fear the ground beneath my feet. I cannot have another man make me fear the sea." She looked Teresa in the eye. "Even in servitude, I feel at home on the water. The sailing, the fighting, the camaraderie... With a ship beneath my feet. It just feels... right."

"Even if it means putting yourself in danger?"

"I think I *like* the danger," Jacquotte said. "What happened at the inn was different. I was caught unawares. But out at sea? Alongside a crew, a cutlass in my hand? I almost feel... *invincible*, Teresa."

“I’ve never heard you talk like this before,” Teresa said quietly. But there was a smile on her face. That same, warm smile that drew Jacquotte to her like some invisible force.

“I suppose I hadn’t thought about it, until Miguel brought it up,” she conceded. She smiled conspiringly. “Can I tell you something? Even now, I keep thinking of the *Dorado*. I’d have liked the chance to fix her properly. It’s what I spent my life training to do. We never got the chance to sail her right. Richelieu would have loved the *Dorado*.”

Teresa cocked her head. “Richelieu?”

“My mentor,” Jacquotte said. “I’m sure I told you of him.”

“Never,” Teresa said.

Jacquotte considered. Every time she thought of him she grew sad, so she had pushed away all thoughts of him, good and bad. “He was the closest I ever had to a father. A *real* father,” she said at last. “He cared for me when Arnolde was too drunk or irate after my mother died, and he taught me my trade when I was eleven. I am who I am today because of him. He got sick very quickly and there was nothing the doctor could do... he died little over a year ago now. Left me his business.”

Teresa’s smile was soft. “I am sure he would have been so proud of you.”

“I hope so,” Jacquotte said. She laughed. “Though he would have called me a rotted fool for giving up the *Dorado*. Would have encouraged us to fix her up and run her ourselves.”

Teresa laughed gently. “Now that sounds like you.”

“We were similar in that way, I suppose. But can you imagine it? Our own ship. Our own money,” Jacquotte said, reveling in voicing the idea aloud. “A loyal crew, banding together through true allegiance; not because of fear, or because they are indentured.”

“It is quite a thought.” Teresa smiled. “I love to hear you like this. So full of life. You remind me of Mbala when he tells me stories of his childhood late at night when I have trouble sleeping.”

Jacquotte smiled, but beneath it a wound bloomed in her heart. She had almost forgotten it was Mbala who warmed her bed at night, not Jacquotte.

Together, they gathered themselves and left the alleyway. Despite her aching heart, Jacquotte felt lighter.

“Do you have grand plans for when our indentures are paid off?” Teresa asked.

The idea was far off; their indentures racked up daily. Everything they did cost them, but still, Jacquotte had dreamed. “We build our own ship,” she said. “We travel to Tortuga, to Fort de Rocher, as we had intended. We start a business. We live our lives. We can build ships, sail the high seas. Be far greater pirates than Blackhand ever was.”

Teresa beamed as they turned toward the harbor. “In this vision of yours, who would be our captain?”

“Who do you think?” Jacquotte grinned.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

THE CREW was crowded onto the deck of *The Marauder*. It had taken so long to gather everyone from their drunken stupors and merrymaking that the sun was beginning to set on the horizon, a crimson smear in the endless blue sky.

The deck was packed. Blackhand had hired fifty new crewmen in their weeklong port stay. Swabbies, mostly, and lots of them. New men indentured to their captain. More men she could not trust.

Jacquotte and her friends found a space together by the mainmast. She hadn't told anyone about the Frenchman and Alberto would not give away her secrets. She trusted him. But as her eyes swept over Teresa, she was not sure she could say the same. Jacquotte did not want her friends to worry. She could look after herself. But even now she could still feel his hands in her hair, and the quiet thrum of panic beat in her veins.

Blackhand stood on the quarterdeck, looking down. Lennox was at his side.

The chatter was loud and excitable. Everyone was debating where they would go next, if they'd go as far as the China Sea in search of silks and jewels, or stay locally and hunt down merchant ships.

All that ended when the captain raised his hand. An uneasy hush fell upon the ship.

"Men," Blackhand began, his words booming across the deck, though he had not raised his voice, "today, I bring to you a proposition. We have the opportunity to do something truly... *spectacular*," he continued, speaking slowly, letting his words hang in the air. The crew were rapt, as they often were when their captain spoke to them in anything but barked orders and curses. Quiet, respectful murmurs rose up from the crew, though none so loud as to draw the ire of their captain. "There has been a decree by Peter II, King of Portugal. He has issued that all jewels be restricted only to persons of quality and, as such, has recalled all the gold and jewelry in their colonies back to

Portugal.” He grinned. “They will be carried from their colonies back to their homeland by the Portuguese carracks.”

The crew stayed silent, captivated by him. They’d all heard tales of the Portuguese treasure ships. Enormous carracks hauling tobacco, cotton, sugarcane, wine, oil, spices, the finest cloths and goods, jewels and gold. It turned her stomach to think of the true cost of such riches. All those who had been forced into labor, who’d had their freedom stripped away from them.

“I have happened upon a Portuguese rutter, detailing the exact route the recalled gold will be taking through Brazil before arriving at the carrack.”

The light was dying around them, and the ship’s lanterns glowed fiercely, casting everyone in long, waving shadows that flickered with the flames.

“I propose we find the carriages on their route through Rio de Janeiro, and we take the haul for ourselves. All of Brazil’s gold and jewels.”

The anticipation was palpable as the crew awaited their captain’s grand scheme.

A grin spread across Blackhand’s thin lips. “We will find the carriages transporting the jewels on the outskirts of the town, before they are joined by the retinue of soldiers aboard the carrack back to Portugal. The risk would be far less than to take on a treasure ship.”

Mutterings started to rise. An attack on land? From what Jacquotte could hear, they had never attempted such a feat before. Questions began to be whispered. The captain raised his voice above it all.

“We would become legends. Songs will be sung of *The Marauder* and her crew, who braved Portuguese waters in monsoon season to return home with one of the greatest treasure hauls ever recorded.”

Murmurs rose once again, louder this time.

“That’s a reckless plan,” Vicente whispered.

“Especially during monsoon season,” another replied.

“Without cannon?”

“Or means of immediate withdrawal?”

“He’s trying to get us killed,” she heard Simón mutter.

“But he has hired new crewmen,” Matos argued.

“A hundred and twenty-five men aren’t enough to take on a retinue of Portuguese soldiers,” hissed Mani, a boy of only fourteen, and even he thought this was brash and foolish.

Hearing the restless mutterings, Blackhand narrowed his eyes. Everyone snapped their mouths shut.

“I hear your concerns,” he said. “It is no simple task. But I have been planning this heist meticulously since the decree was made. I estimate the treasure will be worth two hundred thousand pieces of eight. *At least*. There will be gold and silver, rubies, diamonds, ivory, sapphires, pearls, and much more.”

There was a long moment of silence as everyone contemplated the information. The risk was great, but the reward might outweigh it. The treasure would be immense.

Though she was without a vote, Jacquotte remained dubious. It felt like a shell of a plan. If anything went awry, it would be a death sentence for them all. They would not be equipped to face off against the Portuguese if Blackhand’s stolen rutter was wrong. She could see the same thought written across the faces of her friends, and some of the swabbies and indentured around her. They weren’t convinced.

As if sensing the uncertainty of his crew, Blackhand stamped his foot hard, calling for attention. “The shares will be divided equally,” he said pointedly, and his eyes met Jacquotte’s across the deck. “And all those indentured... You shall have your indenture halved.”

A cheer rose up from somewhere in the crowd. It flowed like a wave, washing over them in pumped fists and hoarse roars, applause and feral growls. Jacquotte could not believe what she had heard. Soon everyone was cheering and stamping their feet, praising Blackhand. Jacquotte herself felt a rush of joy and excitement tear through her. *My indenture halved*. Every day, her debt grew larger. Everything she did was charged. But with her indenture halved, she would be that much closer to freedom. That much closer to truly *living*.

A satisfied smirk painted Blackhand’s lips. Even Lennox was smiling. They knew they had won them over.

“So,” he called above the hollering and whooping of the crowd, “hands up! Aye to the voyage?”

Within an instant, almost every hand around her shot into the air. Even those who could not vote raised their arms in support. Jacquotte realized the number of indentured men on the ship outweighed those who were free. Men jumped around like giddy children, laughing and cursing, grabbing each other, spinning and jostling those around them. There was no need to count the nays, for there were none.

“The ayes have it then!” Blackhand cheered. “We set sail in a week’s time. To Brazil!”

“To Brazil!” the crew roared back.



The festivities still lingered on deck. The crew liked to make merry when they set off on a new voyage, it seemed. They drank and dined and sang. Jacquotte could even hear the distant thud of a drunken jig.

It was late now, and darkness seeped into the ship. The clammy heat of the rainy season slicking their clothes to their skin. They’d had to string up more hammocks to accommodate the new crewmen. With extra men on hand, the captain had named a second barrelman, Emilio, and Miguel no longer had to sleep in the crow’s nest at night.

Jacquotte and her friends huddled in their hammocks, sharing scraps of orange peel Teresa had pilfered from the cookroom.

“Miguel! You sly dog!” Mbala said, barking out a laugh.

Miguel pressed his lips together tightly and looked down at his legs where they swung.

Francisco shook his head in wonder. “Miguel, you mean to tell us you’re plowing another man’s wife!”

Jacquotte clamped her hand over his mouth. “Hush!” she hissed. “Do you want the whole ship to hear you?”

Miguel snorted. “Don’t be so vulgar, Francisco.”

“Have you gone quite mad?” Mbala asked.

“Love knows no bounds,” Marceau said wistfully.

“I thought the bonds of matrimony were sacred?” Alberto muttered.

“Do you ever do it in his home?” Francisco asked.

“Why would we do that? We could get caught,” Miguel said.

“The thrill of it.” Francisco grinned.

“It’s not about that,” Miguel insisted.

“You’d better hope your God watches over you, my friend,” Mbala said, nudging Miguel with his foot, “or you’re a dead man.”

Suddenly a grin broke out on Miguel’s face. Everyone looked at him, confused, and then he burst out laughing. That set off Mbala. Soon enough they were all in stitches, barely able to contain themselves. Jacquotte’s sides ached as she tried to keep the laughter quiet. They had needed this.

“Of all of us, you’re the last person I’d have expected this from,” Alberto said.

“Who *would* you have expected it from?” Miguel asked.

“Francisco,” they all said at almost the same time. That brought on another bout of laughter.

“How did it even start?” Marceau asked.

“Is she beautiful?” Mbala asked.

“Is she truly wild?” said Alberto.

“Does she make you pray afterward?” asked Francisco.

“I told you, it isn’t about all that,” Miguel insisted, though no one was convinced. “It’s more than just *physical*.”

“But how *is* the physical?” Francisco asked.

Miguel gnawed at his lip, but Jacquotte could see the look of pure joy in his eyes. “Well, if you must know—”

He was cut off by sudden cries from the deck.

“Ship ahoy! *Ship ahoy!*”

Everyone scrambled to their feet, pulling on their clothes and gathering their weapons. Mbala leapt over them. He was on night gunner duty. Already, calls of a merchant ship made their way down to them. Some praised this voyage as lucky, destined for good fortune.

“To be continued, my friend!” yelled Francisco.

Marceau ran off to shutter himself in the surgeon’s quarters as the rest of them dashed up the stairs.

Jacquotte was still tugging on her boots. The hold was empty, but for her and Teresa, who hadn’t moved. She started toward the stairs, and then turned back

to Teresa.

“Aren’t you going to the cookroom?” she asked.

Teresa hesitated. “I just wanted to see that you’re all right, after last week,” she said.

Jacquotte took a breath. *The Marauder* quaked beneath her boots, rocking back and forth on the tumultuous sea. “I’m fine. I promise. Thank you for listening to me. It helped.” She took Teresa’s hand in her own. “Come. I’ll take you now.”

The cookroom was long and thin and cramped. Stacks of crates and barrels lined the walls, sacks filled with limes and oranges hanging from the rafters, and pots and pans and cutlery hung from hooks.

“Jacquotte, I—” A loud *boom* sounded, rocking the whole ship as they let loose their first cannon. There was a flash of light. Teresa screamed.

“Don’t worry,” Jacquotte said. She took Teresa’s shoulders and held her firm. “We’re fine.”

Teresa took a shaky breath. “God, it’s terrifying. I can’t imagine how it is out there.”

Jacquotte hadn’t thought about what happened when they were fighting. She suddenly felt selfish. It never occurred to her that being locked away, not knowing if those she cared about were all right, would be terrifying for Teresa.

She hesitated. She was needed on deck, but there were so many new crewmen, she didn’t think anyone would notice her absence.

“Teresa, the other day you talked of running away... Is that what you wish for?”

Teresa was quiet for a moment. “I... I’m not certain,” she said at last. “All my life, all I have ever wanted is to find community and a purpose. Here, I have a purpose. I am the purser. But, beyond that, I don’t feel as though I am needed here. If I were to leave, another purser would be found easily. I want to feel needed.”

“You *are* needed,” Jacquotte insisted.

“I suppose,” she said. “But with the way Blackhand runs his crew, I don’t always feel that sense of community, of belonging. With you and the others, I do. But I wish—”

A cannonball struck the side of *The Marauder*. Jacquotte stumbled and Teresa cried out, but she caught her before she could fall. She lifted Teresa up and braced her against the wall. She held her there, pinning her to the structure, until the reverberations died down.

She looked up. Teresa was flushed, her breathing ragged, hair spilling from her plaits.

“Are you hurt?” Jacquotte asked.

“No, no. I’m... I’m all right.” Teresa found a small smile then. “You don’t... you don’t have to, um, hold me any longer.”

Jacquotte didn’t move. They were so close that she could feel the thrum of Teresa’s heart and the heat rising from her skin. The ship was still shaking. “Are you sure?”

She could see something in Teresa’s eyes. Hesitation. A pause. “I... I’m not sure.”

Jacquotte’s stomach leapt. She felt that thrill again. That spark between them that flipped her stomach and knocked the breath from her lungs. But then it came again. That darkness that hovered over her whenever she felt herself soften under Teresa’s touch. Jacquotte pulled away.

“What is it?” Teresa asked. There was hurt in her voice that knotted her stomach. “Have I done something?”

Jacquotte hesitated. She felt foolish even thinking about it, but saying it was almost unthinkable. But she had to unburden herself. Had to let her know how she truly felt. “You lied to me,” she said. Her voice was shaking. “In Yáquimo, in your chambers, I asked you if there had been anyone else and you said I was the only one.”

Teresa looked aghast. “Jacquotte, you *were* th—”

“I was *not*,” she snapped, and immediately felt foolish as Teresa pulled away from her. She took a breath. “There were men. You told me there were men. You needed a child.”

Recognition registered on Teresa’s face, and a flush rose in her cheeks. “I did need a man,” she said quietly. Then her words rushed out of her. “I could not get with child. That much is true. But there was never anyone like you. I did not lie about that, Jacquotte. Those men, they merely gave me what I needed. I used

them. I did not... With you, you *gave* me something that I had not known I needed until then. You made me feel whole. Worthy. You did not know who I was, my status or title, you did not see my need for a child as a chance to get something you wanted. What you gave to me, Jacquotte, was priceless. You gave me hope. Hope that one day I could find love. That I could *be* loved.” She took a step toward Jacquotte then, until they were so close, she could feel her breath hot on her face. “I did not lie, Jacquotte. Because there was never another like you. And I don’t think there ever will be again.”

“And what of Mbala?” Jacquotte asked, though the force was gone from her words.

“He is my *friend*, as Francisco is yours. Nothing more.”

Her heart hammered in her chest. The words washed over her. She had been so uncertain. She hadn’t known whether she could trust Teresa, or her feelings for her. The way her pace quickened, and her world brightened whenever she was around. But now, things felt different.

Slowly, Jacquotte leaned in. Slow enough that Teresa could stop her. But she didn’t. Jacquotte pushed up onto her toes, closing the distance between them, and kissed her gently. So soft it was almost a whisper. Teresa went stiff. Jacquotte cursed and pulled away.

“I’m...” Jacquotte said. She shouldn’t have done that. “I’m so sorry. I should have—”

“*Jacquotte.*”

Teresa’s hand on her cheek cut her short. She was looking at her, her brown eyes burning in the dim light. “You have nothing to apologize for.”

Jacquotte looked at her. “I...” She paused, chewing on her lip. “I can’t pretend anymore. I can’t act as though I don’t... *care* for you. I’ve cared for you since the first time I saw you in that yellow dress on the beach. I don’t expect anything, but I need you to know how I feel. It’s eating me up inside. You’re all that I think about, Teresa. You’re all that I want.”

Teresa gave her that look again. That same look. Her stomach pitched. “Jacquotte...”

“Tell me to go.”

Teresa said nothing. Jacquotte felt herself drawn back to her, as though pulled by some invisible tether. She took a step toward her.

“Teresa. Tell me to go,” she said, quieter this time. They were so close that Teresa’s breath tickled her face. “Tell me, and I’ll leave right now. You’ll not hear another word of my feelings for you. About how I care for you. About how I lie awake at night and all I can think about is your lips. The soft touch of your hands.” Teresa’s breath caught in her throat. She took another step closer. Their bodies were flush now. “Tell me to go, Teresa.”

The silence stretched on for longer than any punishment Jacquotte had ever endured. Teresa’s hand was still on her cheek, and her thumb traced the line of the welt Blackhand had left. “Don’t go.”

Teresa ducked down and captured her lips. It was gentle, hesitant. She had to stop herself from reaching up and dragging her down toward her, selfish, greedy, but she stayed still as Teresa kissed her lips, her cheeks, and leaned down to kiss and nip at the curve of her throat. The light graze of her teeth left molten fire across her skin. Finally, when she thought she could take it no more, Teresa’s lips met hers again.

This time, there was nothing tentative or soft about the kiss. There was a hunger in her, a hard edge, a restless urgency that sent chills down her spine. Jacquotte kissed her back, meeting the heat of Teresa’s tongue with her own. She felt the soft warmth of her skin as Teresa guided her hands to her waist, where her blouse had ridden up, revealing the barest glimpse of skin.

Teresa took her face in both hands and kissed her like she was taking her last breath.

When they finally pulled away, breathing ragged, Jacquotte’s head was spinning. The room was getting dark. Distantly, they could hear the boom of cannon fire and the sounds of battle. She didn’t care. To them, there was no sound but for lips on skin, the mingling of their breath, and the soft rustle as they undressed each other.

CHAPTER TWENTY

HEAD UP. Feet shoulders' width apart. No, not that far. You'll fall."

Teresa laughed, shuffling around the storeroom until she stood in some semblance of a fighting stance. "How about this?"

Jacquotte regarded her. "Better."

They were ten days into their journey to Brazil, almost halfway there, but the crew was getting restless. It rained unceasingly and the weather had put Blackhand in a foul mood. He handed out punishments liberally. Jacquotte had spent hours detangling ropes. Emilio had been left in the crow's nest for a day without food or water. Teresa had been confined to the cookroom to peel potatoes all night. They had all suffered his wrath. And it only got worse the closer they came to Brazil.

"Hands up," Jacquotte said, and Teresa did as instructed. "Now try to block."

Teresa managed to block her first jab, but not the second. Jacquotte swung wide, knocking her shoulder instead of her face or neck.

"That hurt," Teresa complained.

"It is supposed to hurt," Jacquotte reminded her. "You were the one who wanted to learn, remember?"

Teresa grinned, circling her, fists raised. "Yes, but I can think of so many better ways we could be spending our time."

Jacquotte flushed and Teresa leapt forward, throwing a punch that didn't do any damage. She laughed. "You can't distract me."

"Whyever not?" Teresa asked, almost innocently. "It appears to be working."

"It's not."

It was.

They were saving *The Marauder's* resources for Brazil, so they were not to take any more ships, leaving the crew with little to do besides maintain the

brigantine and steer clear of their captain, who had taken to drinking the hours away. Everyone found ways to entertain themselves. Some of the gunners had a pool going to see how many bottles of rum the crew went through before they reached Brazil. The stakes on the dicing had become so competitive that some were betting their gold teeth. Some of the riggers had begun to write shanties and songs together. And Jacquotte would sneak away whenever she was sure she would not be missed and seek out Teresa.

Their meetings thus far had been fleeting and frenzied. Mouths and hands searching beneath clothes they did not have time to discard. Half-coiled, ready to spring away from each other at a moment's notice. Privacy was limited on the ship, but they made every moment, every kiss, every touch, count.

Sparring had not been what she had in mind when she found the purser in the storeroom that morning, her intentions had not been so pure, but Teresa had insisted. Jacquotte could not begrudge her that. Soon enough Teresa would be locked away on the ship while they took on the Portuguese on land, outside their normal territory. She would not know how the battle went or which of her friends survived until they returned. *If* they returned.

Teresa took advantage of her distraction and pulled her close. Jacquotte looked up, startled, as her arms wrapped around her waist, unsure if she should expect to be thrown or kissed.

Teresa was always touching her, hands always somewhere on her body, even when there were people around. She was naturally affectionate with everyone, so no one else noticed, but it drove Jacquotte wild. A playful swat on the arm. A hand that lingered on the small of her back as she passed by. Soft fingers dancing on the back of her neck. She was beginning to crave it.

Heavy footsteps sounded outside. They sprang apart, both leaping into fighting stances as the door opened.

Alberto looked between the two of them, flushed and flustered, breathing more ragged than it should have been, and arched a thick eyebrow. "What are you two up to?"

"Jacquotte's teaching me to spar," Teresa answered quickly.

She nodded. "And keeping out of Blackhand's way."

It was the truth, but Jacquotte felt like they were lying. If he had not opened the door when he did, she did not know how much longer before the inescapable pull drew her back into Teresa's warm embrace.

Alberto nodded. "He is in a foul mood today. Though, when is he not?" He stretched, bones cracking loudly. "Mind if I join you? Francisco and Mbala are off somewhere together again and I feel all this time at sea will make me lose my edge before we reach Brazil."

"Of course." Jacquotte stepped aside, letting him into the room. "You can spar with Teresa while I teach her the proper stance."

"I know the proper stance."

"Your footing tells me otherwise."

Teresa swatted at her playfully, but her fingers lingered, and her eyes glittered. She skipped across the storeroom to stand opposite Alberto, copying his positioning and stance.

"Come then," Teresa said eagerly. "Teach us to fight like real military men."



Despite the poor weather, *The Marauder* made good time to Brazil.

Rio de Janeiro lay before them, outlined against the setting sun and the glorious hills. Great mounds of earth jutted from the ground, white-gray rock peeking through an abundance of green. Lights sprang up about the town. Lanterns spluttering behind glass in a feeble attempt to stave off the growing darkness. They appeared one by one, like so many fireflies blinking into existence. The light spread across the city, a glowing blanket, all the way to the dense green squares of the plantations at the far reaches of the town.

There was little time to marvel at Rio de Janeiro as *The Marauder* heaved into port. The dock was difficult to navigate, narrow and cramped with ships. The rain beat their skin raw as they battened down what they could against the weather. Alberto and Simón jumped from the ship to the dock to secure their ropes to the capstans, before clambering back again.

"All right, men," Blackhand called above the pounding rain. The crew gathered around him in silence. "You have your orders. Once we've secured the

ship it's small groups only. We're early. The coaches will arrive in two days. Until then, no fighting. Lay low. If you—”

The captain stopped suddenly. The rim of his hat was filling fast with rain, but he didn't seem to care. Jacquotte followed his gaze. On the dock, coming steadily toward them, was a lantern. It bobbed through the relentless stream of sailors, off to taverns and brothels after a hard day's work.

A pair of boots stopped at the edge of the jetty. They were attached to a short, hairy man. His clothes were soaked through, and the plume of his hat drooped. “Good evening, senhores,” he called over the rain in lilting Portuguese.

“Hello,” Blackhand managed, forcing a tight-lipped smile.

Before she knew what she was doing, Jacquotte hurried over to act as translator. Portuguese was close enough to Spanish that Blackhand could understand, but having a woman aboard, and a mulatto no less, would make them appear less threatening.

“Good evening, señor,” Jacquotte said as brightly as she could, a smile lighting up her face. “How can we help you?”

“I'm the harbormaster. Do you have papers?”

Jacquotte was suddenly alert. She leveled her breathing, trying to keep up her smile. “We're merchants, señor.” The lie came easily. “We've no papers yet. We offloaded our last haul in Venezuela, and we were on our way to Africa when the weather became too brutal. We didn't want to get caught in a storm.”

“That's wise.” The man nodded solemnly. “I can feel this one in my bones.”

Jacquotte smiled. He shuffled around at the edge of the dock. “I just need to take a look aboard and then I shall be on my way.”

“*What?*” Blackhand snapped.

Jacquotte and Lennox shared a look. “Why?” Lennox asked.

“It is routine,” the harbormaster said. “There are many who try to hide weapons or unaccounted-for slaves and the like in these parts, you understand.”

“But of course,” Jacquotte said as she moved aside to allow the harbormaster aboard. “I shall show you around.” Blackhand and Lennox scowled at her but stayed silent. “It's quite a large ship.”

“This is nothing,” said the harbormaster as he awkwardly hopped onto the ship. “There's a carrack here presently, just the other side of the docks.”

“That *is* impressive,” Jacquotte said, feigning enthusiasm.

Lennox had had the good sense to stow their weapons before their arrival at port. Even Blackhand had stashed the brace of pistols he usually kept around his neck. They just had to keep him from where the cannons were stowed. Sixteen of them. There would be no explaining that away on a simple merchant vessel.

The harbormaster searched around belowdecks idly, asking the occasional question, but nothing Jacquotte or Lennox couldn't find an answer for. Blackhand skulked behind, saying nothing.

The harbormaster looked aft. *The captain's quarters*. Jacquotte's heart leapt into her mouth. They hadn't thought about Blackhand's quarters. No one was supposed to come onto the ship. If that door opened, there'd be no hiding the horrors within.

Lennox seemed to share the same thought. He darted forward, barring the way to the door.

“I need to look inside,” the harbormaster told him, perturbed.

“You cannot enter the captain's quarters,” Lennox said.

The harbormaster looked up, unmoved. “You *shall* let me in, senhor, or I will be forced to fetch the guards.”

Jacquotte tried to think. She could see Lennox was drawing a blank.

A movement caught her eye. Blackhand drew the pistol he'd concealed within his coat. The crew around them collectively stopped breathing. He lifted it until it was level with the back of the harbormaster's head.

She had to do something. If he killed the harbormaster, it would be over for them before they'd even begun.

“You don't want to look in there,” Jacquotte said loudly, taking a step forward, blocking Blackhand's shot. She couldn't be certain he wouldn't kill her just to get to the harbormaster, but she had to try. “I'm sure it's not unlike any woman's chambers you've seen before.”

The harbormaster looked at her, confused. Blackhand's pistol wavered. “I thought this was the captain's quarters?”

“It is,” Jacquotte said. She smiled and stood taller. “I am the captain.”

“*You?*”

“Of course,” Jacquotte said, forcing a laugh. “My father owns our trading company. Why else would I be showing you around my ship?” She moved around him to stand beside the door. Lennox moved away uncertainly. She rested her hand on the handle. “I am sure you understand my crew wanting to preserve my modesty. They think it ungentlemanly to look through a woman’s possessions. But I can show you, if you’d like. I’m sure it’s nothing you haven’t seen before.”

“I...” The harbormaster was slowly turning red. “No. *No*. That won’t be... um... necessary. Thank you.”

Jacquotte let go of the door handle. She’d held it so tight there were deep grooves in her palm. Blackhand hid his pistol behind his back.

“That is very kind of you...”

“Domingo,” he said, flustered.

“Domingo.” Nerves subsiding, she draped an arm around his shoulders and began steering him toward the companionway.

“If you don’t mind my asking, Domingo, where are you going to be tonight?”

Domingo’s skin was bright red. He’d completely forgotten about the lower decks. “Perhaps the Black Eel.”

“The Black Eel?” Jacquotte mused aloud as if memorizing it. They stepped out into the pouring rain. The crew still hadn’t moved. “I hope to see you there tonight, then.”

Domingo looked pleased as she ushered him off *The Marauder* and onto the jetty. “I shall see you, Senhorita...”

“Bustillo,” she replied, thinking of poor Sancho.

Domingo winked as he tipped his hat, before trotting away triumphantly. They waited as his lantern blended into the mess of the town. Once he was out of sight, Jacquotte turned to look at the crew. A quiet cheer rose amongst their ranks, whispers of congratulations and hands clapped her on the back as a show of thanks.

But the captain fixed Jacquotte with a long, hard stare.

“Right, men,” Blackhand said loudly. “Let’s get to work. What’re you standing around for?”

Jacquotte didn't know what she had expected. Congratulations? Or at least some acknowledgment of her quick thinking. But Blackhand turned his back on her and walked away.

Lennox looked between the two of them. He gave her a nod and clapped a hand on her shoulder. "You did good, Red."

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

THE SUN spilled through the cracks in the ceiling and the slots in the shutters. It was like water, filling the room with a dull orange haze. Jacquotte mapped the patterns it laid out on the stained wooden floorboards, like tiny constellations, telling her that this was exactly where she was supposed to be.

Teresa rolled onto her back, unfurling herself from where she had been draped idly over Jacquotte. They were naked, trying to cool down from the humidity that came with monsoon season, and the heat of their passion. With or without clothes, dressed as the Governor's wife, a peasant in a yellow dress, or the purser on a pirate ship, Teresa, Jacquotte was certain, was the most beautiful woman she had ever seen, and perhaps who had ever lived. Her copper skin, still slick with sweat, practically glowed, and her curly hair, loose from its braids, framed every curve of her soft body like a dark halo.

Jacquotte caught her staring and laughed. Everything about Teresa made her the kind of woman men went to war for.

"Won't you ever tire of staring at me?"

Jacquotte considered for a moment. "I don't think I will," she said with a grin. "Would you ask the same of someone gazing upon a painting or sculpture?"

"I am not a work of art."

"I beg to differ."

Jacquotte pulled her closer and kissed her. She was warm and soft and her mass of hair tickled Jacquotte's body as they pressed together. She wanted to stay in this moment forever.

She groaned as Teresa pushed her away gently. "You're going to be late," she said with a deep sigh. Jacquotte was due to meet Francisco.

Teresa shuffled to the edge of the bed, searching for her discarded clothes, but stopped. "Will you tell him about us?"

“I would shout it to the heavens if only I knew they’d hear it,” she said with a laugh. “But I’d settle for telling our loved ones. If you would permit me, that is?”

“I think I’d like that.”

Jacquotte beamed. She crossed the bed and kissed her, clambering into Teresa’s lap. Warmth spread through her body, prickling her fingers and curling her toes. She wrapped her legs around Teresa’s waist, drinking in the heat that came with the press of their skin against each other.

Teresa’s hand cradled her face. “Go on,” she muttered into her mouth. She pushed her away playfully and got to her feet, leaving Jacquotte alone on the bed. Jacquotte protested but Teresa threw a pile of her clothes at her. “If Francisco finds us like this, we’ll never hear the end of it.”



“Blow.”

Jacquotte scrunched up her nose in disgust at the dice in Francisco’s outstretched hand. “I won’t.”

“It’s good luck!”

The gambling hall was small, cramped. It leaned almost drunkenly, wind and rain blowing through the holes in the boards until it was almost as miserable inside as it was outside.

Jacquotte felt like a new woman. There wasn’t a single Frenchman in Rio de Janeiro. She was free from disguise, and paid no mind to those in her surroundings. It was the first day on land that she hadn’t given a single thought to Florián. But despite this newfound freedom, her thoughts were occupied with tomorrow. The carriages would be traveling through the outskirts of the town, and it would be her first skirmish on land since she had fled Yáquimo just under two months ago.

“You need more than luck to help you now.”

“Come now. I need a seven to win.”

The men around the table grumbled impatiently. Jacquotte didn’t understand the rules exactly, but Francisco had put everything on his last hand, doubled down.

Reluctantly, Jacquotte blew on the dice. Francisco beamed. He always liked to get his way. The dice tumbled across the table. The first stopped in the middle. A five. The other rolled so far across the table that it almost fell off. Everyone craned their necks to see.

A two.

Francisco leapt up, roaring in celebration. The men shouted, smashing their fists against the table in frustration. He grabbed Jacquotte and lifted her up. She laughed as he struggled to whirl them around.

They left the gambling hall with so much coin the bookmaker had to put it into two small cloth sacks. It was raining and the humidity pressed in on them. They walked down the street drunkenly, arms linked, trying to hide the cloth sacks filled to bursting inside their coats.

“I feel incredible!” Francisco shouted. “I feel like a king... no. I feel like a *god!*”

“You wouldn’t have been half as convincing without me,” Jacquotte said, shoving him playfully.

“Oh please,” he snorted. “I’ve cheated enough dice games without your help.”

“But *I* sold it,” Jacquotte said. “My utter lack of faith in you was so convincing no one called you out on the dice.”

Francisco grinned. “They weren’t even the same colors. How did they not notice?”

“It was a shambles of an establishment,” Jacquotte said with a laugh.

“Should we try another gambling den?” Francisco asked. His eyes were wild as he wrapped an arm around her shoulders.

“Let’s not spoil your good fortune,” she said. “Perhaps we can meet up with the others?”

“Don’t be so dull. The night is young!”

“The night is old and dying,” Jacquotte groaned. “We should head back to the room. We’ll need our rest for tomorrow.”

“No, no! Not yet! Rest is for the old and the wretched,” he pleaded.

“Well, what do you have in mind?”

“Perhaps a brothel?”

Jacquotte laughed. “Do I not satisfy you enough?” she asked, nudging him playfully in the ribs. “I certainly don’t hear you complaining.”

“Of course you do,” he said, suddenly serious.

“How kind.” She grinned.

But he didn’t smile back. “Can I ask you something?” Jacquotte nodded. He looked nervous. “Have you ever been in love?”

She examined him carefully, looking for any hint of a joke, but there was none. “I... I am not certain. Why?” She grinned. “Has someone in Port Royal caught your eye?”

He rubbed at the back of his neck. “Perhaps,” he said. “But I cannot tell if they feel the same way. They’re so friendly with everyone, it is hard to tell. And then, of course, there is you.”

“Me?”

He nodded. “There has been some question of our relationship aboard *The Marauder*.”

Jacquotte felt herself flush. “It doesn’t mean anything. We both know that. Just tell them how you feel.” She drew him closer, pinching at his cheeks playfully. “And who couldn’t love this face, eh?”

He laughed and swatted her away, but his face was serious. “Do you hate it?”

“Hate what?”

“Having to bed me.”

She looked at him closely then, trying to see if he was smirking or about to tell some crude joke, but he was serious. “Why would I hate it?”

He wouldn’t look at her. He ran a hand through his tangled curls. “Because you’re forced into it. It makes me feel like a monster.”

“Francisco, you are not a monster. You’re my friend and I *trust* you,” she asserted. She took his face in her hands and forced him to look at her. “In fact...” She looked around. “I need to tell you something.”

“What?”

She took Francisco by the hand and led him down a back alley between two brothels. She walked until they were hidden in the darkness.

“You’re making me nervous,” Francisco said. He looked about. “Are you going to gut me?”

She took a deep breath. “Do you remember the last celebration we had upon the beach in Yáquimo?”

“The one where your father almost drowned?”

“No, the one after that,” she said. “I met someone there. I told you about her.”

“The woman in the yellow dress,” he said, remembering. “What of her?”

“Well, what I didn’t tell you was... I met her again.”

His eyebrows shot up. “When? Who is she?”

He looked so excited, but Jacquotte’s stomach roiled with nerves. “It was Teresa.”

“*Teresa?!?*”

“I met her at the Governor’s banquet,” she told him. “She called me into her chambers, and we talked and we... well, we kissed and we almost... but then we were called back, and *everything* happened... and then we were on *The Marauder*, and I thought she had lied to me, but I felt such a closeness to her.” She turned to pace as she carried on, suddenly breathless. “We’ve been spending more time together. I took her to the market in Port Royal and we nearly... but then in burst Miguel, but then... when we set sail on this voyage—”

“Are you *sleeping* with Teresa?” Francisco asked incredulously.

Jacquotte nodded. Her breath was caught in her throat. She hadn’t thought this would affect her, but she couldn’t meet his eye. He was her friend, but he had also always been more than that. She hadn’t considered how this might change them.

When she finally looked up, he was grinning down at her.

“Took you two long enough.” He took her face in his hands, leaned forward, and kissed her lightly on the forehead. “I want nothing but happiness for the two of you.”

A smile tugged at the corners of her lips. She could feel tears welling up in her eyes. “I love you, Francisco. You mean the world to me.”

“I love you, too,” he said, looping his arm through hers. “Now, you must spare no details. I want nary a mole nor a birthmark untold.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

JACQUOTTE FELT as though she was still asleep. Her head pounded and her eyes strained in the gloomy darkness.

The scouts had returned in the early hours. It was time. Jacquotte had just crawled back into bed when Alberto barged in with the news. She hadn't even a moment to kiss Teresa goodbye before she was ushered out onto the streets of Rio de Janeiro.

The pirates traveled inconspicuously in small groups as they headed toward the outskirts of town. The farther they walked the emptier the streets became, until all she could hear were the sounds of boots pounding the dirt. Even Francisco was unusually quiet.

Miguel was with them. Normally, he would remain on the ship, but Blackhand had decided to keep Emilio there, as he was less experienced. Miguel wasn't a killer. He was hardly a pirate. Though no one said a word, they made a silent pact to protect him.

The far reaches of the town were all but deserted. Jacquotte looked up as they walked through an enormous arch that felt almost deep enough to be a tunnel. The solidity of its construction felt untrustworthy. It seemed to signal the beginning of the end of town. The buildings beyond it were dilapidated, falling to pieces.

Alberto nudged her gently. "Look," he said, pointing. Jacquotte followed his finger to the rooftops. They were cast in darkness, but a slight movement alerted her to the presence of the crew. As she peered up, she could see a huddle of their musketeers, lying flat on their stomachs, muskets loaded.

The site of the ambush had been mapped strategically. The confiscated gold and jewels would be passing down this road, following along to the docks, where the carrack awaited to carry them to Portugal. It was the only road wide enough to accommodate the carriages. There would be no alternative route.

The crew gathered in a raggedy circle. Jacquotte and her friends were amongst the last to join. Their captain was in fine spirits. His eyes were wide and there was a smile on his face, so unusual that it took her aback.

“Once the first carriage passes this house,” he gestured to a building marked with a black coal smudge, “we move. They’ve three carriages, but only forty men, as I suspected. Once we’ve secured the carriages, we shall meet back aboard *The Marauder* before the storm settles in.”

They all separated within the abandoned buildings. Jacquotte hunkered down behind a shuttered window. She had only just begun to get comfortable when she heard the trill of a bird, the sound unnatural. Too sharp and practiced. She knew what it meant. The carriages were approaching.

Jacquotte peered through the cracked slats. From her vantage she could see the first set of horses passing by. The contingent walked idly as their great wooden vessels rolled through the empty street. There was another sharp whistle as the first carriage passed the coal smudge. A shot fired from above. Then another. And another.

“We’re under attack!”

The Portuguese scattered, cowering from the shots that rang from above them.

“This is it,” Birch whispered. He practically vibrated with excitement. She edged away from him.

They drew their weapons, shifting impatiently. Jacquotte drew her cutlass, fingers wrapped tight around the hilt. Finally, a harsh shout broke through the gunfire.

“To me!” Blackhand hollered.

Birch pushed open the shutters and charged through the window. The others followed, rushing into the melee, and Jacquotte with them. Shots rained down from above, pistols and muskets firing, weaving trails of gray smoke in the air. Jacquotte didn’t have the chance to choke as she barreled into the first soldier she could find. The force knocked him off his feet and she dispatched him quickly. She easily batted away the sword of another soldier and was going in for the kill when a scream broke through the skirmish. She would have recognized it anywhere. *Miguel*.

Jacquotte lunged forward and fainted right, driving her sword into the soldier's hip. She shoved it forward when he screamed, then pulled it out and leapt away, searching for Miguel.

Dead soldiers littered the street. She spotted Miguel, cowering against the second carriage. He was bleeding from his arm and limping. Beside him, another soldier raised his pistol.

Jacquotte ran. She grabbed Miguel, knocking them both to the ground as a shot shattered the wood of the carriage where they had just been standing. Alberto was nearby, axe in hand, covering Francisco against a slew of soldiers.

Lennox called out and she looked up to see the musketeers on the roof reloading. She followed the man's thick finger to a group of surviving soldiers who had banded together in a tight circle, hacking and slashing at all those who attempted to break their ranks. The pirates around them fell backward against their feral attacks. Lennox shouted again and a dozen muskets blared. The soldiers fell where they stood. There could be no survivors, no witnesses, no one to warn of their victory.

Jacquotte helped Miguel to his feet. He was shaken but he would survive.

She looked around. The battle was over. They had won. And her friends were still standing. Mbala and Francisco were together, and Alberto helped the musketeers down from the roofs as the crew gathered around Blackhand.

Their captain opened the first carriage and raised his arms with two fistfuls of jewels. "The treasure is ours!" he shouted. Gold and silver, studded with fat rubies and sapphires, dripped between his fingers. Each carriage was filled to bursting, crates and boxes filled with plunder. An excited cheer rose up around him.

"Stow the bodies and let us be on our way. Jamaica beckons."

The stronger crewmen began to collect bodies to hide within the abandoned houses. Jacquotte looked around at their fallen companions; they would be left behind.

Blackhand was already in the driver's seat of the first carriage. Matos and Villar were inside, rifling through the gold like children playing in sand. Others were peering in to marvel at the treasure. Jacquotte couldn't help but look too. Even in the dimming light, the contents shimmered like nothing she had ever

seen before. The riches were beyond her wildest dreams. A knot twisted within her. Were she and her friends not indentured, their shares would be great. Instead, she and all the other indentures would be granted their usual pittance. To halve their indentures had seemed like the deal of a lifetime, but now she knew they had been cheated.

Alberto cocked his head at her. "Are you all right?" he asked. "You seem a—"

A sharp crack broke through the night. Jacquotte looked up, expecting to see lightning. Thunder was not uncommon during monsoon season, but the day had been clear and blue. She turned to look at a crewman, who swayed on his feet, a hole the size of a fist in his chest. He crumpled to the ground. Another crack sounded, and three more men fell. Shouts broke out as everyone came to the same realization.

They were under attack.

Jacquotte pressed herself against the side of the carriage out of range, looking for the enemy. Portuguese soldiers rounded the corner. At first she guessed sixty, but then more poured in from behind the front line. They were vastly outnumbered. At the front, a row of musketeers knelt in the dirt, some reloading, others firing in tight formation. But then she noticed something. Amongst the navy and white of the Portuguese uniforms were flashes of bright color. Red and white.

"The English!" someone shouted behind her. "Captain! The English are he —"

A musket shot silenced the man as two horsemen charged. Soldiers, Portuguese and English, followed.

The first thundered toward them. He ran down two of their men, crushing them beneath his mare's hooves. The horse pivoted until he was headed right toward her. Jacquotte pushed Miguel behind her, grabbed the pistol from his side, and fired. She aimed for his horse, striking the creature in the chest. It gave a piteous cry as it tumbled to the ground. The soldier fell with it, locked in the saddle, and she watched as his neck snapped beneath the beast's great weight, crushing three Portuguese soldiers.

Bodies were dropping wherever she looked. Bodies of their men. Swords sliced flesh. Hooves crushed bone. Shots tore through chests. All were pirates,

piling up around her.

There was a crack behind her, and she froze. She would recognize the sound anywhere. *A whip.*

Jacquotte spun around, sword raised, but there was no leather strap hurtling toward her. Only a deep wooden groaning. The first carriage was moving. The cracking continued and its horses whickered as they began to pick up speed, dragging the carriage laden with untold riches through the dirt and over the corpses of *The Marauder's* crew. A man sat in the driver's seat, looking around wildly. It took her too long to recognize the man as Blackhand, and longer still to realize what he was doing.

He was fleeing.

He was stealing the carriage.

He was leaving them all behind.

"Captain!" she shouted, fury boiling within her. But if he heard her, he did not stop. The whip kept cracking as the carriage careened around the corner, out of sight.

With their captain gone, the leaderless crew stood around. As the soldiers let free another slew of shots, all hell broke loose. Those left behind scattered.

Jacquotte searched for Miguel. There were bodies all around her, but she couldn't make out his small form amongst them.

"Miguel!" she screamed. No one turned. No one looked. "*Miguel!*"

She saw the glint of a blade arching toward her and just managed to leap out of the way. The tip clipped her cheek and her skin burned as blood trickled down. She turned, howling, and drove her sword into the belly of the soldier who had accosted her.

"*Mig—*"

She was lifted from the ground. The air knocked out of her as a shoulder met her stomach. She screamed and kicked and was about to stab her sword into the exposed neck of her assailant when she saw the pink brand there. Mbala. He barreled through a line of soldiers with her over his shoulder, kicking and slashing with his hatchet until they broke free of the throng. He hurried down an alleyway, behind the ruins of a long-fallen house.

The remnants of the crew were there. Thirty or so men, huddled, bleeding, cowering.

They were trapped. They were alone. They were all going to die.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

SHOTS RICOCHETED off the walls as the soldiers bore down on the pirates who had not escaped behind the ruined house. Jacquotte's mind raced. Any man out there would soon be dead, and it would not be long before the soldiers came looking for those hiding. Everyone seemed to have realized the same. They had never lost so many men. Some whispered nervously amongst themselves, some talked of trying to outrun them, but they had never faced down so many guns. The soldiers blocked their only way out. Even if, by some miracle, they broke through their ranks, there was no way they would make it to the docks.

Lennox was loading his musket. Alberto tried to rip it from his hands.

"Are you a madman?" he hissed.

"Better a madman than a coward," Lennox snapped.

"But the English!" Miguel cried and Lennox stopped where he stood. For once, unsure.

Jacquotte looked around. They were all scared. She had never seen them in such a state before. Though she had not known them all for that great a time, she knew them to be brave and strong. Now they were hesitant, weak, without their leader.

She tried to focus. She thought of Marceau and Teresa on *The Marauder* and thanked God they were not with them. But how long did they have before soldiers descended upon them? The walls around her rumbled. With every shot, a scattering of stones and chunks of wood fell around them. The house was rotting. They weren't safe here. None of the buildings were safe. She wasn't certain they wouldn't collapse if someone coughed too loudly.

She pushed the wall beside her with the slightest pressure. She could see the structure giving beneath her touch, charted the weakness of it with her eyes. She stopped, eyes wandering toward the edge of town, and drew her palm back before the building could collapse.

A plan began to form in her mind. She didn't have time to think it through. She forced herself to her feet.

"I have an idea." No one heard her. "I have an idea," she said again, louder this time. Their voices quieted until everyone looked her way. She cleared her throat, hoping to ease her nerves. Her hands shook fiercely. She held them behind her back. "The enemy outnumber us, that much is true, but we have taken on greater threats than the Portuguese—"

"And the English," someone cut across.

There was dissent in their mutterings.

"The captain's orders're never to fight the English."

"They'll kill us all."

"Blackhand would never."

Jacquotte couldn't believe it. Would they follow Blackhand so blindly to their deaths? Even in his absence?

"Blackhand is not here," Jacquotte said loudly. "We are here. And we cannot let the captain's allegiances decide our own. We all hail from somewhere. Whether English, French, Spanish, Portuguese." She could see something in their faces. Attention. Recognition. "But they do not care for us. If they did, we would not be here today. I am certain this was not the work that any of us intended nor trained for. While many of us did not plan to be pirates, we have become them. And because of that we have each other. Together we are strong. We are resilient. Together we are brave!"

The quiet, nervous muttering had turned to grumblings of agreement. She saw the familiar determination return to their eyes. Could it even be belief? She kept going.

"We may not have a captain, but that does not make us weak," she said. "We have to beat them. Not just for ourselves, but because if we don't, they will find *The Marauder*. Those men we left behind, our friends, our *family*, they are counting on us."

There was silence.

"But how?"

"We're outnumbered, Red."

"I have an idea," she said again, and this time, everyone was listening.



Jacquotte tightened her grip on the knife. It felt lighter than she had expected, unsubstantial in the face of what she was about to do. Her sword was at her hip.

Francisco touched her shoulder gently. "Are you certain about this?"

She nodded. "I am," she said. "As long as you have my back?"

There was a musket in his hands. He nodded, his mouth a tight line. "Always."

She turned to the remaining crew. "Ready?"

The crew murmured and nodded agreements. "Aye, Red."

"Good."

The soldiers had gone quiet. They were finished with their quarry, with those who had not been able to escape. She could hear them reloading. She peered around the wall. The murdered crew were strewn in all directions.

Jacquotte gave one final look at the crew, huddled together but determined. Francisco nodded to her from behind the wall. She crept out into the street, moving with her head down, keeping low. She could see the soldiers laughing. One plunged his sword deep into the belly of a gunner who had been twitching in the dirt.

Two carriages remained. She threw herself behind the closest one, pressing herself flat against its back. She waited, holding her breath for Francisco's signal. No one had seen her. Not yet. She could hear the quiet chatter of soldiers nearby, eight, she guessed, who guarded the remaining carriages.

She caught Francisco's signal, a fluttering whistle, and crept around the far side of the carriage. Ahead, the other carriage had stopped at an angle, blocking her from view of the soldiers. She stayed low, ducking down to a crawl when she reached the window.

Though the soldiers didn't notice her, the horses did. They tossed their heads back and forth, stamping lightly. She would only have a moment before they descended on her. Jacquotte heaved herself up into the driver's seat of the carriage. She grabbed the thick leather reins and pulled them down, snapping them once, sharply. The horses were at work at once. They huffed and snorted, and the carriage juddered into motion, picking up speed.

There was a shout behind her.

“The carriage!”

“After it!”

Jacquotte yanked the reins hard and the carriage swung around. They took off away from the town. The heavy tread of dozens of boots thundered after her. She looked around the body of the carriage. The crew were sprinting out behind the soldiers in the opposite direction, unseen.

Some of the soldiers mounted their horses. They would be faster without the heavy load of the carriage that hers strained against. She willed the horses to gallop faster and gave the reins another crack. The carriage wasn't designed to move at such a speed, and it jolted with every rock and hole in the ruined road. She could see the walls that lined the streets, marking the edge of town. The arch in the walls was just wide enough for the carriage to pass through. Out across the horizon, she could see the plantations, great fields of green and white, the true edges of Rio de Janeiro.

She pulled as hard as she could to turn the horses on their heels. They shrieked at the force, but they were moving. She could see the fury of the soldiers' faces as they thundered toward her, and she them.

She waited until the last second before she tied the reins to the hook as tight as she could. She checked they were held firm, snapping them a final time before she braced herself and rolled from the carriage.

The ground came up to hit her hard and she rolled to a sudden stop. It felt as though every bone within her was rattling. The horses kept running, tossing their heads and stamping the ground, dragging the carriage behind them. There was nowhere else for them to go as they headed straight toward the soldiers. Jacquotte didn't wait to watch. She squeezed her eyes shut tight and ran as fast as her legs would carry her. She heard the soldiers collide with the carriage in an almighty crash. She didn't know how many had fallen but she didn't dare look back as she passed the walls leading back into the streets. She moved her legs like never before, toward the town. She could hear the remaining soldiers gathering themselves to follow her. They were angry.

She could see the arch towering in the distance. She had to be faster.

“Red!” She heard the call way ahead of her, but any other words were lost. Had she given the crew enough time?

Jacquotte groaned but forced herself to keep running. Footsteps pounded behind her. Her breath was caught in her throat, her stomach in knots. She was getting closer. She could see that some of the crew had moved beyond the arch, their bodies tight against the walls, their axes and hammers strewn about, and ropes held tight.

The arch was ready to crumble. There was a shout behind her in Portuguese. They were close. “I have her!”

She had to get to the other side.

A lithe Portuguese man was gaining on her. Fast. He reached out, his hand almost snatching the back of her shirt. She could hear his labored breathing. He was too close.

A shot cracked close to her head. The gaining soldier stumbled and fell. From behind the walls, Francisco’s eyes were trained dutifully on her. As she approached the arch, the crew pulled on the ropes and the walls shook. She ran underneath. The light momentarily dimmed.

A hand snagged the back of her shirt and Jacquotte threw herself forward.

There was a great, splitting crack. The arch came tumbling down. Rocks and dirt, crushing stone. They crashed and fell, piling high. Jacquotte felt herself being pulled away, out of danger, as she coughed up orange dust. Through the red and white haze of the collapse, she could see a pale, bloody hand still reaching for her. It didn’t move.

The pirates coughed and choked, breathing ragged, skin slick with sweat. Jacquotte inhaled deeply and whistled, long and loud. The sound was soon taken up by the crew, and she was hauled to her feet as the pirates began to split up. They ran, bolting down the street toward the town.

With Alberto supporting her weight, the two of them lagged behind the rest of the crew. They cut diagonally down a back alley, boots pounding against the compact earth until she was sure the soldiers had not yet broken free of the fallen arch, and no one had followed them.

She found herself with a small group. Her friends had kept pace with her, as had Vicente, Mani, Lennox, and Old Man Hobbes. She pressed herself against

the wall to catch her breath.

“Did everyone make it out?” she asked.

“Everyone,” Alberto said.

“Thanks to you,” Lennox said gruffly. “You saved us.”

Jacquotte grimaced. “We have to keep moving.”

She led the group through the back alleys toward the docks. They would keep out of sight, along with the other small groups that had split up in the streets.

They made good time crossing the city, but it would not be long before the soldiers followed.

Alberto stopped them suddenly. “Look.”

They had reached the end of the hidden back alleys, and now there was only the main street between them and the docks. Even at this late hour it was far busier than she would have liked. From this vantage, Jacquotte could see two groups of crewmen were making their way toward the ship.

“We need to give them a moment,” she decided. “We can’t all move at once.”

“We can’t stay still,” Vicente said. He was looking around wildly. “We have to keep going.”

“There’s another alley across the street,” Alberto said.

They hurried. The rain and constant passage of people had churned up the mud so much that it sucked down her boots and she had to drag them to keep them on as she walked. As she did so, her boot kicked something up and it skittered in front of them.

Jacquotte plucked the gold broach from the dirt.

“Who would drop something like that?” Mani whispered.

“Someone in a hurry,” Francisco muttered, picking up another.

When Jacquotte rubbed the broach, a ruby the size of her thumbnail appeared; they all looked at each other.

“They’re from the carriages,” she said. Jacquotte was beginning to think she’d gone mad, when she heard shuffling. “Who is there?”

Three men peered around the corner, deciding it was safe to come out. Villar, Matos, and Blackhand himself. His hat was missing, and he was covered in dirt and bruises.

Fury swelled within her at the sight of him. Their captain. The man who had left them all to die. “What are you doing?”

Matos scuffed the dirt with his boot. “We thought we could stay out of sight —”

“What happened to the carriage?” Mani asked.

Blackhand scowled at him. “It’s gone,” he snapped.

“The gold?” Lennox asked.

“Gone,” Villar muttered.

Jacquotte watched them closely. They’d run off with a carriage, left their crew, their friends, to die or be captured, and here they were, with nothing to show for it. But she couldn’t think about that now.

“Come with us,” she said. Her friends looked at her with shock, but she ignored them. “The ship is in the docks. The soldiers are distracted. We can make it. Everyone else should be there by now. They’re waiting for us.”

Matos and Villar looked relieved, but Blackhand was furious. He rounded on Jacquotte, coming so close that their faces were practically touching.

“Who are you to give *me* orders, Red?” he demanded, jabbing a finger at her chest. “You don’t give orders to my crew and certainly not to me. You are *my* indenture.”

Lennox intervened. “Captain, everything is already in place.”

Blackhand scowled at him. He looked like he might attack them all, just as he had Sancho Bustillo.

Instead, he said nothing. He started walking.

Jacquotte’s only care was that they made it to the ship. She let Blackhand stumble ahead as they left the cover of the alley and made it onto the main street. *The Marauder* was just across the harbor. From here, Jacquotte could see the crew at work. They would be ready to leave, and this would all be over soon.

“How many survived?” she heard Villar ask Vicente.

“Not enough,” the rigger said, tight-lipped.

“Oi, talk to me,” Villar insisted. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw the large man grab him. “Swabbie, you will listen to me when I talk. *Look at me.*”

Vicente pushed him away. “Don’t touch me,” he snapped.

As Jacquotte turned, a flash of light tore through the darkness. A terrible *boom* rattled her bones. Dirt and sand blew into the air. Villar wobbled on his feet. His head was gone. His skin was blackened and burned. He fell to the ground. Dead.

Another boom sounded.

She looked around frantically. *The Marauder* was still anchored ahead of them, but between them and the ship lay a contingent of soldiers in the Portuguese livery.

Another flash. Another boom.

Jacquotte was thrown off her feet.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

JACQUOTTE'S EARS rang. White spots danced behind her eyelids. There was blood on her tongue and dirt in her eyes.

The world came into focus around her slowly. Gunfire. Shouting. The smell of soot and blood. She was behind a stack of crates. One was leaking wine that dripped onto her face. She wiped her eyes and looked around.

At her feet was Villar's head. Glassy eyes staring blankly. She scrambled backward, away from the corpse, and stumbled onto a leg. It was Matos, dead from a musket ball.

Jacquotte couldn't stop herself. She retched.

Alberto was beside her, using his body to cover hers. Old Man Hobbes and Vicente covered beside her. Lennox and Blackhand fired pistols in tandem, one of them ducking back for cover to reload while the other shot.

Francisco was standing, shooting at the Portuguese without cover. A wave of musket balls slammed into the crates and one broke through a barrel an inch from Jacquotte's head. She grabbed Francisco and pulled him down.

"There's only seven," Jacquotte panted. "We can take them."

Another spray of gunfire came, breaking through the cracks in the crates and barrels.

Blackhand shook his head. "There's too many, Red. We can't—"

"It's now or never," Jacquotte said, cutting him off. "What do we have to work with?"

Between seven of them they had a sword, two knives, and a musket with a single shot. It would have to do. Blackhand remained stonily silent. They waited until the gunfire ceased and the frantic sounds of reloading began. Jacquotte nodded, stood, and charged. The others followed.

She rushed at a soldier on his knees, reloading his musket. She kicked him, boot crunching his nose, and stuck her cutlass into his gut. Blackhand stabbed

his knife into the throat of the soldier beside her. Vicente threw himself at a man and wrestled the pistol from him, shooting him in the face.

Alberto and Lennox charged. Two of the soldiers turned their weapons to them. One shot Alberto square in the shoulder. He grunted but didn't stop. They collided with the soldiers.

Jacquotte turned and raised her cutlass just in time to catch the blade of a soldier behind her. She fainted, drawing him closer, and when he followed, she plunged her knife into his exposed armpit and drew down sharply. He collapsed. She grabbed his sword and threw it to Mani, who used it to dispatch the last standing soldier.

The Portuguese lay dead around them.

The eight pirates bolted to the harbor. The wooden slats of the jetty pounded under their feet. *The Marauder* was close enough that Jacquotte could see its gaudy stripes.

She stopped dead in her tracks.

Portuguese soldiers lined the jetty, surrounding the brigantine. There were barrels all around. Oil barrels. One man held a flaming torch. They were going to set fire to the ship.

The soldiers had their backs to them.

"Francisco..."

"On it."

He lowered himself to one knee and aimed the musket. He had a single shot left.

The shot rang out. The Portuguese turned. The musket ball hit the chest of the soldier holding the flaming torch. He fell, crashing into the barrels. Within seconds, the oil crates were ablaze. A great wall of fire rose up, blazing high into the sky. Two of the soldiers caught fire. Only one was quick enough to jump into the water.

Jacquotte could see Miguel in the crow's nest of *The Marauder*, looking glass glinting in the firelight. He was waving frantically. She looked to the others. "Can you swim?"

They all nodded except for Mani. But they had no other choice. She waved to Miguel, a signal to leave, and heard his faint call to the helmsman over the

roaring flames on the dock.

The Marauder's sails unfurled.

“What are they doing?” Blackhand demanded.

The soldiers charged.

“We swim for the ship,” Jacquotte said, raising her cutlass, “else they can fire it, and we’ll all be dead.”

The soldiers were closing in.

“Into the water!” Jacquotte urged. The fire was rising higher, too strong for them to pass through it. She pointed north. “There! Go! Go!”

The Marauder's sails were full of air as it pulled farther away from the harbor. They ran for the water. Blackhand and Francisco were first to dive, with Lennox and Vicente close behind. Alberto was at the edge of the jetty.

Jacquotte was close when a shot rang out. Pain seared through her ankle. She stumbled and fell. Her cutlass was lost. *The Marauder* was getting away.

Alberto ran back from the edge of the jetty, flinching as shots studded the wooden slats of the jetty where he had stood. He offered her a hand and hauled her to her feet. Together they ran for the edge of the jetty, where Old Man Hobbes and Mani stood. She could hear Mani crying, desperately pleading with Hobbes to jump into the water, but the old man’s knees were buckling.

Jacquotte leapt into the water.

It was so black she couldn’t see. Old Man Hobbes and Mani jumped on top of her and sent her spinning. She swam upward until she broke free of the surface and gasped for breath. Hobbes struggled beneath her, and she reached down to pull him up before pushing on.

The Marauder was fifty feet away, and the gap was widening. Jacquotte swam as fast as she could. Her whole body ached. Her ankle throbbed. She focused on her breathing, arms cutting through the water. Soon enough, her palms slapped against the gaudy belly of the ship.

She could have sobbed as she grabbed the rope tossed overboard and scrambled onto the deck like a fresh-caught fish. She forced herself to her feet and looked back to the harbor. Mani and Old Man Hobbes came up just behind her, choking up water.

She searched the water desperately for Alberto. And then she saw him. He was still on the jetty. The Portuguese had surrounded him. He hadn't jumped.

"Alberto!" Jacquotte screamed. Her voice was hoarse, stinging with seawater. "Alberto! Jump! Please! You can make it!"

Alberto looked back. Blood blossomed from the shot wound in his shoulder. There was something in his eyes that she hardly recognized in the man. And she knew. He had stayed deliberately. Her eyes scanned the jetty and caught sight of a schooner flying the Portuguese flag only two ships away from where they had anchored *The Marauder*. It was fully rigged, and its sails were unfurled. It was prepared to launch, but all the men were on the jetty, surrounding Alberto.

Her heart plummeted into her gut.

He was saving them.

"Alberto!" she screamed. "*Alberto!*"

He didn't listen. She watched as he threw his huge fists in every direction. Her gentle giant. He grabbed men by the necks and smashed their heads together. He threw his body around. He was a beast of a man. His skin was red with the blood of the soldiers, a grisly war paint.

As their ship caught a gust of wind and took off, out to sea, Jacquotte heard a gunshot. And another. And another. She saw Alberto stumble, rocking on his feet, and then fall. He was mobbed by the soldiers. And then she could see nothing but the black of the sea and the darkness of the night.

He was gone.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

JACQUOTTE WAS soaked through, and she could hardly see through the torrent of rain. The wind chilled her to the bone. Blackhand had ordered her to stay on deck until he said otherwise. She wasn't permitted inside, no matter the rain or the cold. It had been nearly two weeks.

Every day, the captain took care to berate her whenever he had the chance. His words beat at her ears, each bark corresponding with the pounding in her skull. His screaming and shouting were unceasing, until he was red in the face and his voice had gone hoarse. She had become numb to his words. To his blows. Screaming at her relentlessly for giving orders to his crew. Giving orders to *him*. He didn't care what she had done to save them. She had embarrassed him, and for that she was to be punished. After a while, the crew, who had been ordered to watch Jacquotte's public admonishment the first day, filtered away. He hadn't even noticed, and it took him hours until he finally grew weary, taking deep swigs of his bottle.

Jacquotte welcomed the punishment. The aching in her bones. The numbness in her limbs. She deserved it. She had done everything she could, but it hadn't been enough. So many had died. And twenty men had been left behind, those who had fled before Jacquotte's plan came to fruition. And she could not bear to think of her friend. *Alberto*.

His name sent knives through her. He was gone. He had sacrificed himself to protect her. What would she tell Blanca? The girls? She crumpled each time she asked herself. She could not speak to her friends. She did not move when Teresa came to check on her. She had failed. Again, she had failed. First Roberto and now Alberto.

They should have been nearing the West Indies by now, but the weather had turned. The wind and rain pushed them farther east and their supplies were

depleting so rapidly that Teresa had been rationing scraps to feed the entire crew. The water tasted dirty and briny.

After a week, a sickness set in. It hung upon the ship like a shroud, picking the crew off one by one. They'd lost at least a man a day, and more were falling ill. Marceau had done his best to cordon off the ailing, but he couldn't work miracles.

Everyone on deck looked half-dead, barely able to stand in the rain that kept pouring. The sails were trimmed, and the wheel was lashed in place. No one could trust themselves to do a job so vital without aid. If they did not make land soon, they would all be dead of either sickness or starvation.

Jacquotte was so absorbed in thought that she didn't notice Lennox until he was standing beside her. He looked gaunt, skin pulled tight over his skull, but he was still standing.

"You can go below, Red."

She regarded him warily. "Does the captain wish to see me?"

"No. But you need to rest." Jacquotte searched for any hint of falsehood but found none. "The captain's passed out," Lennox assured her. He looked angry, but not with her. "Go below. Rest. I'll keep watch."

Her whole body ached to get off her feet, to sleep, to be warm. "Why would you—?"

"You saved us," Lennox said. "You shouldn't be punished for that."

She nodded her thanks. Inside, the ship had been split down the middle, marked by a line of rags. The left side for the healthy, the right for the ailing.

She heaved her weary bones to the surgeon's quarters. Her ankle was throbbing painfully. It had taken Marceau hours to pull out the fragments from the musket ball. It hit her bone and fractured into pieces. Blood and yellow pus seeped through the bandage still.

Marceau wasn't alone. He sat at his table, playing cards with Teresa and Vicente.

"Red." Teresa smiled.

The purser gave up her seat on an overturned barrel and Jacquotte sat gratefully. Teresa's hands lingered on her shoulders. Warmth began to seep back into her body painfully.

“How is your ankle?” Marceau asked, putting down his cards. He lifted her booted foot into his lap and peeled the bandage away. He winced. “It doesn’t look good.”

“The rain’s in the wound,” Vicente said. “Rots you from the inside.”

“No, it doesn’t,” Marceau said, “but it has stopped it from healing properly.”

Jacquotte looked away as Marceau tended to the wound.

“I don’t see how Blackhand can keep you in the rain,” Vicente said.

Jacquotte shrugged.

“You saved his life!” Teresa argued.

“I would have left him,” Vicente said.

“He’s still our captain,” Jacquotte said, though she found a small smile.

“And he’d be dead too if it weren’t for you,” Marceau said. He gave her ankle a squeeze to warn her before he lathered some foul-smelling salve onto the wound.

“So many died because of me.”

They looked at her, confused.

“Who?” Teresa asked.

“Matos. Villar. And...” She still could not bear to name the person whose loss truly mattered to her, but Marceau knew. “The twenty men we left behind.”

“Nonsense,” Teresa snorted.

“You did everything you could.” Vicente cocked a grin. “Besides, Birch was one of those left behind. That must make you sleep easier. I know I do.”

“Men died, but if it wasn’t for you, we would all be dead. Captives on our way to the noose. Or worse. You saved us. Blackhand left us for dead,” Marceau said firmly.

“But—”

“*He’s* the one to blame,” Teresa said. “*He* almost got us all killed.”

“He might still have his way,” Vicente muttered. “There’s no food. No clean water. Half the crew is sick. We’re sailing aimlessly, there’s no landfall in sight, and he’s locked in his quarters.”

He was right. Their escape would be for nothing unless someone did something. Jacquotte braced herself as Marceau tied a clean rag around her ankle, and forced herself to stand.

“Where are you going?”

“I’m going to talk to the captain.”

“You shouldn’t,” Marceau said quickly. “You’re supposed to be on deck.”

Jacquotte shrugged. “Someone has to speak to him.”

Marceau grabbed her wrist as she tried to leave. “Be careful,” he warned.

Vicente stood suddenly and extended his hand. Jacquotte took it hesitantly, and the rigger clapped her on the back. “All the crew... we really appreciate what you did.”

She left the surgeon’s quarters, expecting her stomach to twist in knots. But she was resigned.

Dread pooled in her stomach as she looked at the door to the captain’s quarters. Jacquotte steeled herself and knocked. No answer. She knocked again, louder this time, and entered.

The room had been torn apart, she assumed in search of food. Even the cupboards he kept under lock and key were unlatched, their doors cracked open slightly.

Blackhand was sprawled across his bed, passed out with a bottle in hand. Jacquotte slammed the door, but he didn’t stir.

“Captain,” she said. He didn’t move. She stamped loudly. “*Captain.*”

Blackhand startled. He looked around, wide-eyed and confused, brandishing his bottle. His eyes landed on Jacquotte.

“What’re you doing here, Red?” he demanded in English, his words slurred.

“Captain, the men are... is there a plan for landfall soon?” she asked. “The crew are sick. We’ve run out of food and clean water. We won’t last much longer.”

Blackhand grunted and sat up, propping himself against the wall. “There’s a plan.”

“Oh?”

“We find the Hispaniola coastline and follow it west. Safer than braving these open waters.”

Fear prickled through her. “Hispaniola?” He grunted again. “Is that wise, Captain? The French are no friends to pirates.”

“Nor is anyone.”

She knew what awaited them in Hispaniola, what awaited *her*. Florián. The bounty on her head. Despite his drunken state, he was right. Following the Hispaniola coastline was the best way to get the crew back to Jamaica. She had to put their lives ahead of her own.

“Should I tell the navigator?” she asked.

He looked at her, bleary-eyed.

“The navigator,” she repeated. “The wheel is lashed. We aren’t headed for Hispaniola.”

“We’ll get to Hispaniola when we get there.”

“We can’t get there if we aren’t headed that way,” she said, trying to keep the anger from her voice. “And we can’t get there if the crew are dead.”

She left before he could argue, slamming the door behind her. She cursed him silently. She had wasted enough time questioning her own instincts.

She headed to the deck to correct their course.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

THE MARAUDER struggled on the roiling waters, beaten down by the rain. They had expected monsoons to find them, but not so soon. They weren't prepared.

The navigator had died in the night. His body had been propped up on the helm for an hour before anyone noticed. Jacquotte's fingers itched against the splintered wood. She had taken it upon herself to sail in his place; she knew these seas better than anyone. It was her home.

Since Jacquotte had corrected their course, things had been quiet. They hadn't seen another ship for at least a week. Wind and rain were bad enough, but the vast emptiness surrounding them made them feel ill at ease. The sea was a living thing; it should not have been deserted.

She didn't trust anyone else to sail in these conditions, but in fact she was glad to be navigating. Her mind was tied to their course.

She sailed with the Hispaniola coastline adjacent to starboard. The weather was so poor that if they ventured farther afield, they could be taken by the monsoon. If they sailed any closer, they could catch a reef or run aground. The mist was thick, but less dense around the sandy beaches in the distance. She watched them, a siren's song begging her to turn the helm and take them ashore. Her heart ached. It all looked like Yáquimo.

Blackhand was at the prow of the ship. Lennox had finally roused him. With half the crew sick or dead, they needed as many men on deck as possible, but he had been no great help. He argued with anyone and everyone over the slightest of things and when he was around, he only made more work for them.

"How long now?" Lennox asked. He had to shout over wind and rain.

The sickness had gotten to the quartermaster too. He was gaunt and dripping with sweat, but he refused to stay below, convinced the fresh sea air would heal him.

“Depends,” Jacquotte called back. “We could be out of French waters by the end of the day if all is well, but...” She looked up at the sky. It was dark and gray, clouds dropped rain like shards of glass, and she couldn’t see the stars to guide her. “It’s hard to be sure. Could be days. We can’t rush with mist this thick.”

“Could we move farther from the coast?” Lennox offered. “Fewer reefs.”

“And no line of sight,” Jacquotte said. “We could get turned—”

Something flashed through the mist. At first she thought it was a crack of lightning. But then came a splintering crash along the port bow. There was a hole in the gunwales. Cannon fire. She could not see where the shot had come from through the fog.

“All hands on deck!” she heard Blackhand call from the prow. He ran toward the quarterdeck. “We’re under attack! All hands!”

She searched the rain-splintered view. Jolts breaking her line of sight. And then she saw it. Through the mist a hulking galley appeared, lined with twenty-five cannon, all primed and pointed their way. It flew the French flag.

Jacquotte thought she was hallucinating. Could Florián be aboard such a ship? Exhaustion, hunger, and thirst concocted a mirage before her eyes. It could not have been anything else. It would have been foolish for the French to attack in the height of a monsoon, where the sea was so unstable it could take both ships down. But then everyone on the deck started moving. The ship was real.

“Evasive maneuvers!” Blackhand screeched from behind her. His face was pale.

Jacquotte grabbed the helm and turned hard to starboard. Lennox came behind her and offered a hand, but he was so weak it was no help. *The Marauder* cut hard just as the galley sliced through the water where they had been, almost clipping them.

Jacquotte’s blood was ice in her veins. Each drop of rain burned her skin.

The French had found them.

Fear gripped her, immobilizing her body. But then another flash of light, another crash, and their port took another hit. She had no time to be afraid.

“To your stations!” she shouted.

Men ran about the deck, struggling against the onslaught of rain. Jacquotte held the helm steady. The galley was bearing down on them. She couldn’t cut

starboard for fear of hitting a reef, but cutting port would mean sailing farther out to sea, and losing sight of the coastline.

The galley was large. It could cut them in two at the right angle, and it had superior manpower and cannons, but *The Marauder* was by far the faster ship.

“You have to turn!” Blackhand ordered. He clutched at the rail. “They’re going to hit us! *Turn!*”

Jacquotte paid him no mind. She would follow her instincts. Richelieu had taught her everything she needed to know to outrun a chasing ship, and to make it out of a storm unscathed. But not at the same time. She had to concentrate. The galley was barely a hundred feet away and gaining, its prow set for collision.

“Red!” Blackhand snarled. “Turn!”

The wind and rain tore at her. But the cold air and biting rain kept her head clear and focused. She held their course. She didn’t waver.

Seventy feet.

Fifty feet.

“Red!”

Forty feet.

Thirty feet.

She cut the helm hard to port. *The Marauder* lurched as its sails caught the wind. The crew was sent reeling. Jacquotte was thrown from the helm and smashed her head against the soaked deck. Blackhand toppled over and Lennox rushed to help him to his feet. The galley sailed past, and she could hear the distant sounds of Frenchmen cursing.

“Cannons!” she ordered, forcing herself to her feet. Her head was spinning, and her legs were shaking. “Starboard cannons!”

The deck pitched and rolled, the water reaching up to the top of her boots, but she pushed through. She threw herself back at the helm as the brigantine threatened to spin, caught in a strong wind.

She could no longer see the coastline, swallowed by the mist, but she didn’t need it now. She knew these waters like they were a part of her.

The Marauder cut through a wave, soaring out of the water before crashing back down. The galley sliced through it like it was nothing. The helm spun out of control, steering them closer to the galley. Jacquotte braced her shoulder

against the wheel to stop it. If they took cannon fire at such a close range, they would be done for. She had to get them away.

“Cannons!” she shouted again, her voice hoarse.

The cannons wouldn't all be primed yet, but it didn't matter. She didn't need many. Four cannons fired. Only one hit the galley. But it was enough. The force of the cannon fire ripped the wheel from her hands, and she let it spin, turning *The Marauder* harder to port than she could have done herself. When they had turned far enough, she grabbed the helm and held their course. The wind was stronger here, the sails filled above her, and the masts creaked as the craggy headlands disappeared. They were headed for the open sea and the galley was falling behind, caught in the froth of their wake.

Her relief was only brief. Ahead through the mist were two schooners. They were anchored at the mouth of the open sea, between the starboard coastline and the craggy spines to port. They were fifty feet apart, broadsides pointed at *The Marauder*. They stood no chance against that sort of firepower. There was no way to get away. Nowhere to turn.

“Guns!” Jacquotte shouted. She turned to Lennox. “Arm everyone. Barricade the prow, crates, barrels, whatever we have. Make a protective wall and station men to keep it—”

“*You!* Shut your filthy godforsaken mouth!” Blackhand shouted, squaring up close to her face. “This is *my* crew! You can't just—”

He almost tripped as Lennox ran past him down the quarterdeck steps, wading through the water swamping the deck. Lennox found Mbala and they handed out muskets and pistols. Lennox rolled barrels and crates and others joined him, pushing them against the prow. It wouldn't be a tall or strong wall, but it might be enough.

Blackhand looked at her. There was sheer hatred on his face. She feared he might attack her for disobeying him or throw her overboard. Instead, he turned his back.

“This is *my* ship,” he seethed. “I would sooner see it burn than take orders from *you*.”

She watched in disbelief as their captain stormed away, down the steps of the companionway, back to his quarters. *The coward*. Her blood boiled, but she was

not surprised. He had fled when the English found them in Brazil, so it only made sense that he would run again now. He wasn't fit to be their captain.

The sea was narrowing around them. They had nowhere to go but onward, toward the two schooners blocking their way. Most of the crew was armed now, and they ducked behind the crate wall Lennox had erected. Seven men pressed against it, trying to stop it from sliding across the deck. Jacquotte braced against the helm, holding their course. It felt as though her arms were being pulled from her body.

Despite the gale, the galley was creeping closer on their starboard bow. She waited until it was just close enough and drew her cutlass, hacking at the rope of the spanker. The sail flapped uselessly in the storm, and *The Marauder* began to slow. The galley caught up until they were neck and neck. Just as she wanted.

“Port cannons! Guns!”

As they started to fire, the heavy *boom* of the cannons rocked the ship. She heard cries and saw Frenchmen fall into the churning waters between the ships. Then a spark caught, and the galley was set alight. Their mainmast went up in flames. The fire traveled up the wood, strong despite the pouring rain, and Jacquotte watched gleefully as the sails finally caught.

The galley was in chaos. More men dropped and some slipped and fell. The sailors panicked. They had failed to see how close they were to the ambushing schooners.

Jacquotte stiffened, wadding up her shirt and biting down hard. She let go of the wheel. It spun uncontrollably, spinning the ship, and she jammed her arm between the spurs. *The Marauder* heeled, trying to keep its course. There was a sickening crack as her shoulder was forced out of place. Pain coursed down her left side and the world turned black around the edges. But she held strong as the brigantine fell back, into the galley's wake.

The sailors on the schooners were shouting warnings; she could hear them over the chaos. They were unable to fire at *The Marauder* without hitting the galley. The sailors scrambled to unfurl their sails, to raise the anchor, to do *anything* to get out of the way. But they were too late.

The galley collided with the port schooner with an immense *crash*.

Jacquotte braced. *One last time*, she promised herself, as she let loose the helm, let it spin, and shoved her arm back between the spurs. There was another hideous crack, and she felt the scream on her lips, though she couldn't hear it. She had no feeling in her fingers anymore.

The schooner exploded.

Boards, shrouds, sails, men. Nothing was safe in the wake of the galley. Red fire and black soot shot up into the air, raining splinters and blood down onto *The Marauder* as they followed in the galley's wake, through the barricade.

"Starboard cannons!" she ordered.

The cannons fired. All eight hit their mark, carving out a great chunk of the starboard schooner's broadside, before they were able to fire on them first.

All around them, men were dying. The starboard schooner was sinking. The port schooner was no more. And the galley was aflame and taking on water fast. The storm showed no mercy. It was almost as if it reveled in tearing the ships apart and dragging them beneath the frothing waves to the black depths.

The Marauder sailed through the carnage as the sea opened up around them. They were out of the headlands and into the open waters. She didn't allow herself time to celebrate.

"Mbala! Lennox!"

The men bounded up the steps, standing to attention.

"Have the swabbies bail the water," she ordered. "It's weighing us down. We need—"

"*Wave!*" She heard Emilio scream from the crow's nest. "*Wave! Dead ahead!*"

She turned, eyes trailing upward. At first she could see nothing but the blackness of the sky. A chill ran up her spine. She wasn't looking at the sky. It was a great wave, so wide and so tall that it blotted out the light, casting them all in darkness. It rose taller than *The Marauder*, taller than its mainmast, and somehow still grew until she could see nothing but the wave.

She couldn't speak. Couldn't move. All she could do was watch helplessly as the wave fell, crashing into *The Marauder*.

Jacquotte was swallowed whole.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

JACQUOTTE GASPED for air.

Water filled her lungs. She was swept across the deck, spinning helplessly in the throes of the wave.

Her back crashed into something hard and firm. A wall. She tried to move, but she was pinned against it as the onslaught of the wave continued. It pressed her there so forcefully that she couldn't move. She could hardly keep her mouth closed. She tried to wait it out, but the wave would not relent.

As the breath left her body, she remembered something Richelieu had taught her. Standing on the deck of his caravel, *Sérendipité*, she could not have been older than ten. She had told him she was terrified of drowning, and he had offered her a piece of advice. He always said if you were overly occupied with saving yourself, you would flounder. But if you thought of something else, distracted yourself, you could make it to the surface.

Jacquotte tried this now. She searched her mind for something, anything, to distract her as the wave pounded against her, beating her head against the wall. She thought of warmth, of love, of the sun.

And that was when she saw her.

Her mother.

She was so small, so young, Jacquotte realized, as her eyes took in a face she could hardly recall. Her belly was swollen with a child, and she labored as she plucked an array of brightly colored flowers and passed them to Jacquotte. She remembered the day well. It was the day Marceau was born. The day her mother died.

She wanted to reach out and touch her. To feel her soft skin once more. To feel her fingers in her hair as she brushed and plaited it before bed. To hear her whisper words in a tongue she didn't understand and would never know as she sang her to sleep.

Jacquotte was ripped from her own mind, collapsing onto the deck as the wave finally passed. She choked, coughing up so much seawater that she worried she might never breathe again. And then she saw the chaos of the deck.

Lennox had been thrown from the helm, and he lay in a heap on the companionway stairs. She heard the screams of men who had been carried overboard through the pouring rain and crashes of thunder. She could see some of them, flailing in the roiling black waves before they were pulled under. They didn't come back up.

Jacquotte plotted the course of *The Marauder* with her eyes. They were still too close to the headlands and the ship was being pulled toward an outcrop of reefs and crags. They reared out of the frothing water, the gray teeth of a rabid hound.

She forced herself up the quarterdeck stairs and against the helm. She could hardly feel her left arm, and her ankle burned, seawater stinging her wound. Mbala was at the helm. Somehow he had managed to hold on. She took over, gripping the wheel by its spokes as the ship's bell rang.

"Stations!" Mbala called, voice booming over the chaos. "If you can walk, you can help!"

The crew wearily righted themselves and moved to their positions. Some of the sick crewmen dragged themselves from belowdecks and took up positions. Francisco, Teresa, and Miguel were amongst them. They looked half-dead. Blackhand was still nowhere to be seen.

Her left arm was useless. Shoulder slack, fingers numb. With all the strength she could muster, Jacquotte used her right arm to turn the wheel hard to starboard.

The Marauder groaned but complied, juddering as it turned slowly but surely, fighting against the gale and the waves. The halyards strained and one snapped. Jacquotte cursed and followed the path of the rope with her eyes to the mainsail. Another snapped and the mainsail came loose, flapping uselessly in the wind.

"Lifelines!" Jacquotte ordered. "Francisco! Teresa! Get everyone on their lifelines!"

She wasn't sure they could hear her, but then they lashed themselves to the mainmast and started passing out the lines. Lennox dragged himself from the companionway, limping.

"Lennox!" she shouted. "The mainsail!"

He nodded, grabbing Vicente and Old Man Hobbes, and together they scaled the rigging. Lennox struggled to heave his large body up the ropes, but he was steady and sure-footed. She watched as they disappeared into the mist and darkness, the wind battering them from all directions.

The mainsail was still untethered, but the mist parted just enough for Jacquotte to catch a glimpse of Lennox grabbing the canvas. For now she could rely only on the other sails, which groaned under newfound pressure.

"Rocks ahead!" Emilio called from the crow's nest.

Jacquotte turned hard to starboard. *The Marauder* careened, but it wasn't fast enough without the mainsail. The ship trembled as jagged rocks caught the side of the hull, tearing at the wood. But the mainsail unfurled, properly rigged once again. It filled with air and the ship lurched forward.

She spied a break in the reef and aimed for it. The sea was roiling, and the wind was angry, but once they made it through the rocks, they would be away from the worst of it.

Mbala was directing the swabbies, buckets in hand, to bail the water over the sides. But they were no match for the onslaught of water.

Huge waves crashed against the rocks around them as Jacquotte heaved the ship to starboard, straight into an oncoming wave. It had come out of nowhere and hit their starboard side so hard *The Marauder* was sent into a tailspin. Jacquotte held on to the helm for dear life. Everyone braced themselves, but there was nothing the riggers could do. She heard their curses and screams as they fell from the ropes, some onto the deck, and others into the water.

Old Man Hobbes and Vicente both slipped on the rigging. Lennox leaned against the ropes and grabbed at them. His thick hand caught Vicente by the back of the shirt, but he didn't reach Old Man Hobbes in time, and he plummeted into the frothing sea.

Jacquotte's arm gave out, her fingers completely numb. The wheel spun. She slid across the quarterdeck and smashed into the rail. *The Marauder* pitched

nauseatingly, and the crew stumbled and fell.

There was a terrible screeching. The spanker groaned, sail still hanging loose where she had cut its ropes, and the wood snapped. Its canvas caught the wind and the mast smashed into her. She was sent flying backward, and then there was no more deck beneath her.

A hand grabbed her by her outstretched arm. Her legs dangled in the air and her head bumped against the hull of the ship. She looked up.

Marceau.

She hadn't seen him come on deck. He shouldn't have been there. It was too dangerous. He was too important.

He struggled to keep hold of her. The pain coursing through her was otherworldly. Her arm was loose in its socket, straining at the weight of her. The water was so high that it washed at the bottoms of her boots. If he didn't stop, he would fall with her.

"Marceau, you have to let go!" she shouted.

"I won't!" her brother said, straining. "Just hold on!"

The water snatched her left boot. Biting cold pierced her skin. She took a deep breath and screwed her eyes shut. She had to save him. She had to let go. She twisted away from him, trying to break free of his grip. And then she was rising. Hands grabbed under her arms, her neck, her hair. She opened her eyes.

Teresa. Miguel. Francisco. Mbala.

Her friends hauled her up, back onto the deck. Her head was reeling. Pain coursed through her. She couldn't feel her arm. Her vision was turning black at the edges.

Everything around her moved so fast that she was left behind. Miguel was at the helm. Francisco rushed to the fallen crew. Mbala was tearing off the fallen mast. Teresa sat behind her, wrapping her arms tightly around Jacquotte while Marceau took her shoulder and violently shoved it back into place. The feeling came back in so sharp a burst that she retched, a terrible sob breaking from her lips. But the shock woke her.

She stumbled to her feet. Marceau tried to stop her, but she brushed him away. She almost slipped on the slick deck, the rain hammering into her skull.

Along the horizon, she could see the waters were calmer. Through the mist, the vague shape of the coastline started to appear. The waves had propelled them forward, faster than they could ever have gone alone. They had almost reached Jamaica.

They had made it out.

A cheer rose up from the crew as their eyes met the land. It took her a long moment to hear what they were chanting.

“Red! Red! Red! Red!”

They were cheering for *her*.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

JACQUOTTE, CAN you hear me? *Jacquotte...*”

Her name. Her *real* name. She had been Red for so long that it sounded foreign to her ears. Resentment welled up inside her, but it was knocked back by hideous pain lancing through her left arm. She forced her eyes open.

Marceau looked down at her, relieved. “How are you feeling?”

Jacquotte looked around. She was on the table in the surgeon’s quarters. Marceau was examining her left arm, and her right hand was held by Teresa. Dark rings burrowed deep beneath her eyes. Mbala, Francisco, and Miguel crowded around the table.

“How long have I been out?”

“Just a few hours,” Teresa said, giving her hand a gentle squeeze. “We’re not yet back in Jamaica.”

“Feels like I’ve been asleep for days.”

Francisco cocked a grin. “You look like it too.” Mbala elbowed him gently and Francisco cleared his throat. “We were all worried about you.”

Her head was still spinning. “The captain—”

“Hasn’t left his quarters,” Miguel said, with more malice than she had thought him capable of.

Blackhand’s actions were indefensible. He called himself their captain, their leader. But he would lead them nowhere, only to death. He had fled their sides in Brazil. He had abandoned them against the French. He had locked himself away through the storm. Now he was hiding from his own crew.

“He’s a coward,” she said. “Every man left on this ship has proven himself a thousand times braver than him. Blackhand owes his life to every one of us.”

Francisco grumbled his agreement. “Precisely. He owes us his life. So why are we the ones indentured to him?”

Something welled in Jacquotte's chest. A fury so deep and profound she almost couldn't place it.

"What gives him the right..." she said quietly. When her friends looked at her, she sat up. "I won't call that man a captain anymore. We have given our lives for him. He is nothing but a slaver with a ship. Why should he decide our fates?"

The others sat with this for a moment. They knew she was right.

"He preys on desperation, on those who haven't the choice to refuse him," Jacquotte went on, her anger rising. "What does he give us in return? Half the crew is dead because of him."

They all nodded.

"He owns us," she went on. "Just like the masters on plantations back home." She looked at her friend. "Just like the men who kept Mbala captive. Just like Arnolde." She paused. "No man should own another, regardless of his position, or situation, or the color of his skin. We are not animals. We deserve to be free."

Marceau eyed her. "What are you getting at?"

"We need to fight for what we deserve."

She hadn't realized what she was going to say, but once the words left her lips, she knew it was true. "He has to be stopped."

She looked at her friends. They all nodded slowly, gnawing their lips and fidgeting, wrapping their minds around the idea.

"What should we do?" Teresa asked.

"We wait for him to fall asleep. Slit his throat," said Francisco.

"We throw him overboard," Mbala suggested.

"No," Jacquotte said. "It has to be done right. The crew needs to see we are more than just murderers. We are more than he is." She took a deep breath. "I have to challenge him."

"You can barely move your arm, Jacquotte," Marceau said. "You've been run ragged for days. You're in no state to fight."

She couldn't feel her arm so much as she could feel the pain of it. Her ankle had been given time to heal, but it was still seeping. But she knew it had to be done.

“I could do it,” Mbala suggested. “He is strong, but I am larger by half. He would struggle to tear me apart.”

“No. It has to be me.”

Her friends burst out with questions in protest, but Jacquotte cut them off.

“I want to be captain.”

There was a silence. It was not a desire she had shared, nor one she had put thorough thought into before. But she knew it to be true. She wanted his captaincy. She deserved it. She had led the crew through hell and back already. She had done her duty when Blackhand had failed them. Then, she had had no choice but to step up for their survival. But now it was her choice. It had come so naturally to her. She had been their leader, and all had followed her.

She had spent all her life preparing for this moment. For this chance. Richelieu had taught her to sail, how to maintain a ship and chart a course. Arnolde had taught her reading, writing, arithmetic, and languages. Florián had trained alongside her with the sword. Running her business had taught her to lead, and how to deal with men like Blackhand. She was ready for this. Ready to be captain.

When she looked at her friends, smiles warmed their faces. Their words came at her in a rush.

“There’s no one I’d rather follow into battle.”

“You’re a born leader.”

“You’ll make an excellent captain.”

“I’ve never met anyone who knows a ship like you.”

“You’re already our captain, Jacquotte.”

She forced herself to her feet, their praise lifting her spirits and filling her with strength.

“If I don’t make it—”

“Don’t say that,” Teresa said quickly.

Jacquotte looked at her seriously. “If I lose the fight... kill him. For the good of the crew.”

The others reached out, pulling her close, until they were all holding each other. When they finally pulled apart, Jacquotte’s eyes were filled with tears.

She knew what she had to do.

She just hoped she was strong enough to do it.



Jacquotte found Blackhand sprawled across his bed, a bottle of rum in his hand. He looked at her dismissively. “Not now, Red.”

She looked over her shoulder at her friends, who were barring anyone from disturbing them. They hadn’t needed to. The crew were on deck, trying to get *The Marauder* the last few miles to Jamaica. None wanted the company of their captain. Those who were not close to death were in poor spirits. They were less than half a crew, and everyone had lost someone dear. Their fight had gone out.

Jacquotte would change that.

“I insist,” she said. “We need to talk.”

“Are you quite mad, girl?” Blackhand said, laughing. He forced himself to his feet, stumbling, and tried to push past her. When she wouldn’t move, his face contorted into a drunken scowl. “Get out of my sight. The lot of you.”

“No,” Mbala said from behind her. “Listen to her.”

Blackhand looked between them and stepped back, taking another heavy swig from his bottle.

“You must stand down as captain immediately,” she said, “and call for a vote to appoint your successor.”

His laugh was cruel and barking, spittle spraying her face. “Why would I do such a thing?”

“Because the crew sees you for what you are,” she said firmly. “A coward.”

He lashed out. The back of his hand cracked across her jaw. Her eyes watered.

“Don’t you *dare* say that to me,” he hissed. “I am your captain, and you...” His eyes scanned her crew. “You are nothing. You shall treat me with respect.”

“Why should we respect you?” Jacquotte said. “You don’t care for this crew. You don’t see these people as anything other than your property and—”

“You *are* my property!” he shouted, waving his bottle around. “You are indentured to me. I *own* you, girl.”

She forced herself to stay calm. “You don’t own me,” she said. “You don’t own any of us.” She took a step closer to him. “You should be ashamed to call yourself a captain. You are nothing but a man who preys on the vulnerable,

relying on terror in the hope no one will notice your inadequacy. If it weren't for me, you would be dead. If not in a grave in Brazil, or in the hands of a Frenchman, then at the bottom of the ocean."

He threw his bottle to the ground, and it shattered at her feet. Her friends moved closer behind her, reminding him of their presence.

"You *cur*. How *dare* you—" He stopped and studied her face. Finally, an amused smirk twisted his lips. "Wait. *You* want to take my place?" He laughed. "*You*? A captain? Some bastard mulatto girl? The men would not hear of it!"

A flush heated her cheeks. "The men have already followed me," she said. "I mapped our escape in Brazil. I saved us from the French ambush. I navigated us out of the storm. All while you ran or hid or cowered." She looked him in the eye. "I would be a far greater captain than you could ever be."

His hands balled into fists at his sides. He wanted nothing more than to beat her until her face caved in. She could see it in his eyes. There was no backing down now.

"I ask for your resignation, Captain," she said slowly. "We all do."

His lip was curled into a snarl, knuckles white, and then something passed over his face. His hands shook as fury washed over him in waves. She took a step back, but she was too late. He lurched forward and grabbed her by the hair, knotting his hand into the roots. She tore at his fingers, but he was strong. Her scalp was bleeding. Francisco and Mbala were beside her, trying to tear the man away. But she was too weak. Blackhand slammed Jacquotte into the row of cupboards lining the wall.

The doors were still unlocked, and when he yanked her away to smash her into them again, the doors fell open. Everyone in the room stopped what they were doing as they took in the sight.

Within the cupboards were what, at first, appeared to be specimens. Jacquotte had seen the like at the Governor's manor. For a time, he had collected butterflies. Each was pinned behind glass, marked and labeled. Here the specimens were tied with twine, pinned, and labeled. But it was not butterflies on display.

It was hair.

Locks of hair filled the cupboard, labeled and preserved behind glass. Her eyes darted around. She found her own quickly, a long lock of curling red hair. And then she found Birch's. And Sancho's. Her gut twisted. Even in death, Blackhand owned him. There were many other names she did not recognize. Whoever those men had been, they were dead and gone now, and all that remained for them to be remembered by was a lock of their hair, held hostage by their captain as his prize.

Marceau was the first to break out of the stupor. He pushed himself forward, bringing a knife to Blackhand's throat.

"Unhand my sister!" Marceau ordered.

It took Blackhand a long moment to realize there was a blade pressing into his flesh. The moment he did, his face turned dark and angry.

"*You*," he snarled. He let go of Jacquotte and she fell to the ground. Her head was pounding as Miguel helped her to her feet. Blackhand rounded on her brother. "I took pity on you. The cripple. I took pity on *all* of you. And *this* is how you repay me? How dare you!"

Blackhand moved toward him, so close that the tip of the knife broke the skin at his throat. Jacquotte moved toward her brother, but Blackhand snatched the knife from Marceau and before anyone could stop him, he slashed out, cutting her brother across the torso. Marceau fell back, cane lost from his hand and a long line opening up on his chest.

Teresa and Miguel tried to move Marceau while Francisco and Mbala fought for control of Blackhand's arms.

"Stop!" Jacquotte shouted. "Stop this now!"

He wouldn't listen. He fought against them like a wild beast, snarling and scratching and spitting. Jacquotte grabbed a candlestick from the table and swung it, smashing into the cupboards. The glass display shattered. She kept swinging, shards of glass and hair filling the air like a grotesque rainfall.

"No!" Blackhand snarled.

Jacquotte dropped the candlestick, her breathing heavy, loose strands of long-dead hair itching her skin. "Your fight is with me!"

Blackhand stopped struggling. He regarded her for a moment. "Yes. It is." Francisco and Mbala loosened their grips. As soon as they did, Blackhand pulled

his arms away and snatched a pistol from the brace around his neck. He pointed it at her. "You should have left well enough alone, Red."

He fired.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

PAIN LANCED through her left arm and a piercing whine rang in her ears. Jacquotte stumbled and fell. A small chunk of her flesh had been taken off, but he hadn't hit bone.

There was a commotion on deck as the crew came down to see what had happened.

"What's going on?" Lennox demanded.

"The captain shot Red," Teresa said, helping Jacquotte to her feet.

"She's *my* indenture," Blackhand snarled. "I will dispose of her as I please."

Jacquotte was grateful to hear the shouts rise through the ranks of the crew behind her. She stood shakily and spat at his feet.

"I challenge you," she said, "to a brawl for the captaincy."

A whisper moved through the crowd as the crew relayed her statement to one another.

There was mockery in the captain's eyes. "You can hardly stand," he sneered.

"What?" she asked, ignoring the pounding in her ears and the blood pouring from her wound. "Are you afraid you'll lose?"

Blackhand tore himself away from Mbala. "Fine," he said. He shoved everyone out of his way and climbed the companionway stairs to the center of the deck. The remainder of the crew shuffled into a circle round him. Jacquotte followed numbly, moving through the crew to meet him in the center of the circle.

Blackhand stamped hard enough to shake the boards. "Brawl!"

The chant began.

"Brawl! Brawl! Brawl! Brawl!"

With everyone around them, she could no longer see her friends. They were lost in the crowd of faces, all chanting and stamping.

Jacquotte took the measure of the man opposite her. It was clear he had the upper hand. But she didn't have to be stronger than him. She just had to be faster.

A voice boomed above the rabble. "*Fight!*"

Blackhand launched himself at Jacquotte. He barreled toward her, shoulder first, aiming to knock her off her feet like a charging bull. She waited until the last possible moment and leapt out of his way.

She edged closer and threw a punch that he easily batted away. She barely had time to dodge out of his reach when he threw his own fist at her. She ducked, using his outstretched arm against him, and jabbed into his unprotected armpit.

Blackhand stood back. "Who are you to challenge me?" he demanded. "A fugitive? A mulatto? Perhaps you are an escaped slave. Should I return you to your masters, girl?"

She saw red. She brought her knee into his stomach, as hard as she could, but he was unaffected. She moved, circling him, trying to keep out of his long reach.

The crew made so much noise that her head pounded painfully. They pressed closer in their excitement, tightening the brawl circle until there was hardly any room to avoid Blackhand's punches.

"I don't want to kill you."

Blackhand laughed. "But *I* want to kill *you*."

He lashed back so quickly she didn't have time to dodge. He punched her throat so hard that she choked. She fell, gasping for air, unable to breathe. Blackhand brought his knee into her cheek. She struggled to get away, but he had her by the hair. She screamed as he dragged her across the deck.

There were roars from the crew. They parted as Blackhand dragged her along behind him. Her head was on fire. She could feel clumps of her hair being ripped from her skull. Blood trickled into her eyes. She clawed at his hands, to no avail.

Blackhand's lips stayed locked in a venomous snarl. He stopped suddenly. He was practically drooling as he brought his foot down onto her left arm. She heard the bone crack before she felt it. Pain like fire raced through her bones. She lost all the breath from her lungs. She could hear a single scream above the roaring crowd.

Teresa.

She had to get up. If she didn't, he would kill her. He would rip her apart just like he had Sancho Bustillo. He would take her life and he would own her forever. He would own her memory. Her legacy.

Jacquotte pulled her knees to her chest and with all the strength she could muster, she kicked with both feet hard into Blackhand's groin. As he fell backward into the crew, she rolled to her feet and barreled after him. He was doubled over, clutching himself and gasping for air like a beached fish. Her arm was broken, useless, but her legs had always been strong.

She kicked the inside of his knee and his leg buckled. She kicked him again, this time on the other side. His legs twisted and he collapsed, landing on his hobbled knees. He tried to stand, pushing himself up on his hands, but Jacquotte stamped on his fingers and smashed her knee into his face, breaking his nose.

Jacquotte turned to the crew. They looked at her, holding their breath.

"This man says he is our captain," she shouted, as loud as she could. "But he is nothing more than our tormentor. We live every day in fear of his wrath, and we pay for his ineptitude. He doesn't deserve to call himself our captain. But I am giving him the chance to walk free." She turned to him. "Step down. Leave us be. Nobody has to die."

The crowd was silent, and then she could hear their murmurs of agreement rise, louder and louder, until they were deafening. Blackhand looked around at the angry faces of his crew, eyes wide and, for the first time, terrified.

"Lennox!" he called, desperate.

The quartermaster was close at hand. Everyone turned to look at him. Jacquotte looked at him. She was prepared for him to launch himself across the deck. But instead, he shook his head. Relief washed over her.

Jacquotte turned to Blackhand. "Stand down," she said again. "If you leave now you will come to no harm by us."

She reached out as a gesture of honor. He looked at her outstretched hand, hesitation written across his face. But his expression cracked.

He batted her hand away and launched himself at her from the ground. Jacquotte stumbled backward and fell, hitting the deck hard. She had no time to roll out of the way. Blackhand was on top of her, his knees straddling her waist.

He clasped his hands together and brought them down as one onto her chest. Her ribs almost cracked under the force of it. Desperate, she tried to stop him as his fists rose again, and he grabbed her left hand. He twisted so fiercely that she felt the bones in her fingers snap. She tried to draw herself away, but he was relentless. Blood trickled down her outstretched arm and onto her face.

The world grayed around her as he lifted his fists again, blocking out the sun. She didn't want to die like this. She *couldn't* die like this.

She lifted her hips and wrapped her legs around his waist, twisting sharply, turning them both onto their sides with force. Blackhand smacked his head on the deck. She tried to scramble away, but he grabbed her by the ankle, fingers digging into her open wound, as he dragged her toward him.

She waited, feigning a weak struggle to draw him in. When he was close enough, she snaked her other leg around his neck. With all her strength she squeezed her legs together, drawing him up until his head was lodged between her thighs. She kept him pinned there.

“I don't want to kill you.”

His arms flailed about, trying to grab her. She clutched one arm between her forearms and wrenched it up, holding it to her body, and pulled. He gasped beneath her as something in his spine cracked.

“You *won't* kill me!” he snarled, though it sounded more like a gasp. He twisted uselessly in her grip. “You're just some mulatto. A mongrel. A *disgrace*.”

She pulled his arm again, harder this time. She arched her back off the ground, never loosening the grip she had with her thighs.

He was turning purple.

“You don't have it in you,” he wheezed. “You don't have the strength. Everyone knows it. They can see it in you. You are *nothing*.”

But he was wrong.

“I am strong,” she said. There was blood in her eyes, and she could hardly see. “Stronger than you could ever be. I am strong because I care for others. I am strong because I am loved. I am strong because I would rather *die* than be anything like you.”

She knew it was going to hurt. She braced herself.

With all her strength, she twisted her upper torso sharply to the right, taking his arm with her. She could feel him panic. He knew what she was going to do.

“Red—”

“My name,” she said slowly, “is Jacquotte Delahaye.”

There was a pause as her name sank in. She watched him realize the bounty he could have collected on her head.

“I will *never* call you that,” he choked.

“You’ll never have to.”

She twisted her lower torso abruptly to the left. His head was trapped between her thighs. It snapped sharply.

There was a horrible, sickening crack that ran the length of her body. But it wasn’t from her. It was Blackhand. Her muscles strained and pulled and her bones ground painfully together, but she didn’t relent. She stayed, keeping herself stiff, until Blackhand’s body ceased its twitching, and slumped down.

She waited, her breathing ragged. She had to be sure. When she finally released him, he collapsed onto the deck. His eyes, wide and bulging, stared up at the sky, unseeing.

He was dead.

Jacquotte struggled to her feet.

She looked around. The crew was silent. They stared at her, faces blurred as *The Marauder* rolled and pitched on the choppy sea.

Finally, she heard a cry break out.

“He’s dead!”

“We’re free!”

A cheer erupted from their ranks. The sound hit her like a wall. Her ears pounded, her head throbbed. She could hardly keep herself standing. She couldn’t move her arm. Her ribs were damaged. Her ankle weeping. Her head bleeding. But she was alive.

The crew surrounded her, clapping her on the back and holding her close. There were praises, congratulations, affirmations that they knew she would win. Then Lennox stood before her. A hush fell upon the crowd.

He put a thick, scarred hand on her shoulder. “Thank you, Captain.”

Her breath caught in her throat.

It was all she could do to keep standing as the word was taken up by the rest of the crew, forming a rhythmic chant.

“Captain! Captain! Captain Delahaye!”

A hand grasped for hers and she shied away from the painful touch, but it was soft and warm. And then there was another hand on her shoulder. An arm around her waist. Her friends stood around her. There were tears on their faces, looks of pride. They had thought she was going to die. *She* had thought she was going to die.

Mbala lifted her high onto his shoulder. She looked down at the crew. At *her* crew. A hush fell over them.

“I know... life hasn’t been easy under Blackhand,” she said. The crew watched her expectantly and her voice echoed across the silent deck. “But I promise things will be different now. *The Marauder* is in bad shape, but we are not. You are some of the bravest people I have ever met, and it would be my honor to lead you... to lead *us*, to be one of the greatest and most feared crews the Caribbean Sea has ever known. I will be your captain, if you will have me.”

There was no hesitation. A great roar rose up from the crew. Their fists pumped the air, and they cheered her name. Her body felt lighter, like she was floating, and the only thing grounding her was Mbala’s firm hand on her back.

She was their captain now.

This was *her* crew.

She looked out at the horizon. They were close to Jamaica. Out across the water, a French merchant ship struggled on the roiling waters.

“Francisco,” she called from Mbala’s shoulder.

He turned to her expectantly. “Yes, Captain?”

A thrill ran up her aching spine. “Can *The Marauder* still sail?”

“Aye, Captain,” he said, a grin on his face as he followed her gaze. “Poorly, but she’ll get the job done.”

Jacquotte patted Mbala on the shoulder and he gently lowered her to the ground. “Then to your stations, lads!” she ordered, stepping over Blackhand’s body. “We’ve a merchant ship to take!”

“You know we’ve hardly any weapons,” Teresa told her.

Jacquotte grinned and wrapped an arm around her waist. “Then that should make it a fair fight.”

PART THREE



The Captain

CHAPTER THIRTY

THE MARAUDER skimmed across the black water. The winds had been against them on their return from Brazil, but they had finally turned, as if welcoming them back to Jamaica. Monsoon season was coming to an end and Jacquotte would not miss it. Still, there was a dampness and humidity that clung to the air.

The crew were in high spirits, despite all they had been through. The ship they had taken yesterday had led them on a chase, drawing them farther away from land, but it had been worth it. Without the gold and jewels from Brazil, they would have been dirt poor, with no money for shares, to repair the ship, or eat. And the merchant ship had carried a grand haul, enough to pay them all handsomely.

Still, they were all anxious to be back on land. With fewer than fifty men remaining, manning the brigantine was proving a struggle. But they worked relentlessly and did not complain. Jacquotte was proud to call them her crew. While Jacquotte was eager to disembark after so long at sea, she did not share the crew's enthusiasm to return to Port Royal. They had little choice, but the thought made her sick to her stomach.

Had she really felt protected under Blackhand? She wasn't so sure. The memory of that lone Frenchman, his fingers twisting into the roots of her hair, still filled her with unbridled dread. But she was captain now. She would not be a coward.

"Land ho!"

The crew leapt into action as Port Royal came into view, spilling across the horizon. They had made good time. She hadn't expected to return until the early hours, but the sun was only just beginning to set.

Jacquotte clapped her new helmsman on the shoulder. "Excellent work, Miguel."

He beamed up at her. "Thank you, Jacquotte."

After seeing how well Miguel had handled the helm in the wake of the storm, it had only felt right to offer him the position of navigator. He jumped at the chance, studiously poring over maps and following the rutters. Soon after, other members of the crew had come to her, asking for new roles. She gave every man the role he wanted without question, and she had freed all those indentured to Blackhand. They would all receive equal shares. And, though they were in bad shape, she had never seen a crew in finer spirits.

“Look out, Captain!”

Jacquotte lurched to the side. The spanker came crashing down. It shattered the boards, harpooning them where she had just been standing. She waited, half-crouched and alert, pain coursing through her ankle at the sudden movement. She'd paid special attention to the spanker after it had fallen during the storm, but she had neither the materials nor the strength to truly fix it well. It seemed it was in need of repair again. Everything was.

The Marauder was a shambles.

Jacquotte had never been more thankful for her time as a shipwright. She took on every leak, break, and tear as they came. But she could not repair such extensive damage while they were still at sea.

“Jacquotte?” Teresa was beside her, worry lining her face as she eyed Jacquotte and the fallen spanker. “Are you all right?”

“I am.”

She stood, ignoring the pain, and let herself be enveloped by Teresa's large, soft frame. Teresa smiled as she pulled away, fingers lingering on her shoulders. “Marceau wishes to see you before we drop anchor.”

“Thank you.” Jacquotte slipped her arm through Teresa's and together they made their way belowdecks. “Anything to report?”

“We sprang a small leak a few miles back, but Francisco and Lennox plugged it with a tampion and covered it in tar. There are some warped boards in the cabins, and we've had problems with the spanker... but I suppose you already know that. Mani and Simón are headed up the rigging now to fix it.”

Marceau was alone in the surgeon's quarters, as he often was when they were close to port. There were no dire battle wounds to tend, so his days were filled with mixing salves and ointments. She could make out a bandage across his chest

beneath his shirt, though he tried to hide it. The wound Blackhand had dealt him was superficial, Marceau said, but it had bled a lot.

He smiled when he saw them and patted the seat beside him. "Come in."

Jacquotte sat, apprehension filling her chest.

"We're almost at Port Royal," she told him.

"Miguel has made good time," he noted.

"Indeed."

He took her left arm in his hands. Jacquotte almost shied away to hide the hiss of pain that escaped her, though she needn't have; Marceau would never judge her. But the pain she felt filled her with shame. She had just become captain, she had few men left, her ship was falling apart, and her body had betrayed her. She couldn't be seen as weak, but she felt it.

Marceau turned her left arm over. It was entirely covered in bandages. Her brother unwrapped them gently, but pain still coursed through her in waves. Her arm was a mess. The skin was raw, her shoulder was bruised black, and there was a chunk of flesh missing where Blackhand had shot her. Marceau hadn't been able to save two of her fingers; they'd begun to rot and turn black. He'd chopped them off at the middle knuckle. The skin was still tender and pink where he'd cauterized them, but they were healing cleanly.

"Teresa," Jacquotte called, trying to distract herself. "Will you be able to find your man when we arrive in Port Royal?"

"He is not a hard merchant to find," Teresa said. "He's a braggart. When Blackhand and I first met with him he told us all about his exploits and connections." She grinned. "He should be easy enough to handle, though. Men like him always are. Leave me with him long enough and he'll hand over the plans for the *Triunfo Dorado* for nought."

Though Jacquotte had done her best with what she had, they were in dire need of a new ship. And she didn't want just any ship. She wanted something great, and she wanted a vessel she knew, one that she had built up from a husk with her own two hands. The *Dorado* had saved her in Yáquimo and led her to find her true purpose. Her captaincy. She had to have it.

She had her suspicions of who its current owner was, and that made her all the more eager to reclaim it for herself.

Marceau clicked his tongue and Jacquotte's heart skipped in her chest.

"How does it look?"

He said nothing as he unbound her splints. She gritted her teeth and turned so Teresa wouldn't see the tears welling in her eyes. He attempted to straighten a finger and she cursed. The pain was unbearable, but she didn't want to lose any more of her fingers, so she kept quiet.

"The cauterization has gone well," he said at last. "But those bones will take longer to heal than I had first thought. A few months, at least."

Almost every pirate she knew was maimed: missing limbs and fingers, hideous scars, and mouths filled with shattered teeth and gold replacements. It was to be expected. But her worry was fighting. Though her ankle was already healing, it was unreliable, and with just one arm, her fighting was unbalanced. She didn't want to find herself as a target when boarding.

Teresa reached out and squeezed her other hand, catching her attention. "Can I raise a concern, Jacquotte?"

She nodded, not trusting herself to look at Teresa. "You may."

"Obtaining the *Dorado* is a brilliant plan, but I'm concerned we don't have enough crew to effectively man it," she explained. "It's a galleon, and we hardly have fifty men."

"You're right," Jacquotte admitted. "We'll have the men spread the word when we arrive at port and put up notices. There's always men looking for work in Port Royal."

Jacquotte's heart bled for her crew. They had been to hell and back again together, and she would not deny them a worthy vessel.

"I'll handle it, Teresa," she promised.



The Laundry was small and unassuming in the vast streets of Port Royal, packed tight into the rows of buildings in the district. Were it not for the sign painted by a familiar hand, she might have missed it. Alberto's lettering was crude, and already the paint was beginning to fade.

Francisco and Miguel had offered to go with her, but Jacquotte knew this was something she had to do alone. She was the captain now, and she could not

be a coward.

Jacquotte stepped into the Laundry and found Blanca immediately, sitting in an upholstered chair close to the fire. She looked tired wrapped in her shawl, eyes threatening to close for the night. In her lap was the well-worn hammer Alberto had always used to chase men from the brothel.

As if sensing her presence, Blanca's eyes snapped open. A tired smile warmed her face. "You're back," she said, heaving herself up. She crossed the room, aging hands fussing over cuts, scrapes, and bruises. "You were gone for so long. Had me worried."

Jacquotte cleared her throat. "Blanca..."

"Your poor arm!" she fretted, touching the damaged skin tenderly, careful not to catch it with the mallet. "Would you like some stew? Alberto's favorite."

Jacquotte stiffened. Her breath quaked and she pulled herself from Blanca's arms. Already tears were welling in her eyes. She couldn't do this. She wasn't ready.

Blanca looked at her, reading her face like only a woman who had raised dozens of children could. "Jacquotte," she said slowly, looking past her to the closed door of the Laundry. "Where is Alberto?"

Jacquotte shook her head. "Blanca..." It felt like there was something stuck in her throat. She rubbed at her face, tears pouring down her cheeks. "I'm sorry... I'm so sorry. I couldn't... he didn't..."

No other words would form in her mouth. Her mind was blank. All she could see was Alberto's last moments on the jetty, surrounded by soldiers.

The mallet fell from Blanca's hands and crashed into the floorboards. Blanca gasped for air, and then she collapsed. The scream that burst from her lips was not human, was not a sound a human should have been able to produce, nor should ever have heard. It was the scream of a mother who had lost her child.

Jacquotte knelt beside her. She didn't know what to do. Didn't know what could be done. Tentatively, she placed a hand on Blanca's back, trying to soothe the sobs racking her body. The woman's fingers clawed at the floorboards, splinters digging into the paler skin of her palms, drawing fresh pinpricks of blood.

Blanca wrapped her arms around Jacquotte, so tight that pain lanced through her left arm. She didn't care. Nothing mattered now, as Blanca held her tight and stroked her hair.

Jacquotte lost herself. She let out everything that had been buried inside her and let herself grieve her friend, the man who had saved them all.

The two women held each other, sobbing on the floor until there were no tears left, until they were so exhausted that all they could do was sit and breathe and stare into nothingness.

Finally, Blanca loosened her grip. "Tell me what happened."

Jacquotte's throat was constricted as she recounted the events of Rio de Janeiro, of Blackhand's failed plans for the Portuguese treasure, and of Alberto's final moments. Tears streamed down Blanca's face as she listened, but she did not interrupt.

"I am so sorry," Jacquotte said when she was done. Her voice wobbled like a child's. "It should have been me. If I had only noticed—"

Blanca took her firmly by the chin and forced her to look into her eyes. They were small and puffy, tears still shining, but they were fierce as ever. "Don't," she said. "What happened to my son was not your fault. It was Blackhand's. *He* did this to my boy." In a quieter voice, she said, "Alberto, he loves... *loved* you all. You were his closest friends. He would have followed you to the edges of the earth and back again. It was not your fault. Understand?"

Jacquotte nodded, sickness in her stomach settling and the guilt subsiding, if only in part.

"Did Blackhand make it out of Brazil?" Blanca asked suddenly, her gaze burning.

"He did." Jacquotte squeezed her hand. "But he did not make it back to Jamaica. I killed him off the coast of Port Royal."

Blanca's eyes searched her face. When she saw she was telling the truth, it was like a weight lifted off her shoulders. "Tell me, Jacquotte. Did he die painfully?"

"Like a rat."

"Good." Blanca tightened her shawl. "What will happen to the Laundry now? What shares will the new captain be taking?"

A small smile crept onto her lips. "She won't be taking any."

“*She?*” Blanca’s eyes widened. “Do you mean—”

“I am the captain,” she said. The words still sent a thrill through her. “The Laundry is yours and yours alone. You’re free.”

Blanca pulled her back into a fierce hug, squeezing until Jacquotte had to pull away for fear that her bad arm might permanently be out of use. Blanca took her face in both hands and leaned their foreheads together. “Thank you, Jacquotte,” she whispered.

Jacquotte nodded. Tears rose in her eyes again. “I’m sorry, Blanca.”

“I know, child. I know.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

JACQUOTTE'S HAIR was wild. Untamed. It had been so long since it had been free from the confines of her hat that she was not used to the touch of it on her skin. The clawing heat only made it all the larger.

In the three days since their return to Port Royal, there had been no hands reaching out to grab her, no men trying to drag her back to Hispaniola for a reward. The terror was still real within her, but she knew she was not alone now. A crew of fifty men awaited her command, and her friends were always by her side. And so she wore her hair with pride.

Marceau passed her the final nail, and she hammered it into place, stepping back to admire her handiwork. In English, Spanish, and French, she had written a sign calling for men to join her crew. They had been to all the noticeboards in town; this was the last one.

Marceau took a step back, leaning heavily on his cane. This last voyage had been hard on his bones, and he had been abed ever since they had returned. "Is it crooked?"

"Does it matter?"

He shrugged. "It might to someone with a more discerning eye."

"We're looking for pirates, not noblemen," Jacquotte said, rolling her eyes.

Marceau laughed. "And that's why you're the pirate and I'm the doctor."

She swatted at him playfully and linked her arm through his free one as they set off toward the market. "I could have been a doctor, too, if I'd wanted."

"You haven't the hands for it." They both winced at the remark. Jacquotte flexed her left hand instinctively, but it wouldn't move. One finger spasmed painfully, and she gave up. He forced a smile. "Sorry."

"Don't be," she said. She raised her hand wrapped in bandages, missing fingers, and bound with splints. "Even before this, I was never the most precise. You're right."

“You get used to it, you know.” She looked at her brother, and he tapped his cane on the ground. “When things change, you adapt. You have to. And after a while, it just becomes who you are.”

Marceau’s pains had begun when he was young, and they had only gotten worse until walking became too difficult. Richelieu had taken notice, where Arnolde felt only shame, and carved him a cane, and it was like new life had bloomed inside him.

“Is that a good thing or a bad thing?”

“Neither,” he said. “It’s just different. The trick is to learn to work *with* the change, rather than around it. If you spend all your time trying to ignore it or avoid it, you’ll never get anything done.”

She hesitated, looking down at him. “I can’t do anything with it anymore,” she said. “Can’t move it right, can’t hold a gun or a knife or anything.”

“Did you fight with it before?”

She thought about it for a moment. “Not really,” she said. “Only when I needed to.”

“Then learn to use something else when you need to,” he said. “Those legs of yours are strong, aren’t they?”

She grinned. “Strong enough to kill a man.”

“Exactly. Learn to use your legs before you go for your other hand,” he said. “Besides, most people won’t be expecting that. It’ll give you an edge and... ah, look!”

Marceau hurried, dragging her along behind him to a stall selling a thick spicy goat stew. Jacquotte’s stomach growled at the smell. She hailed the vendor.

“Morning,” she said. “Two of the stew, please.”

The vendor had an array of coconut shell bowls, but he did not move toward them. “Are you Captain Delahaye?”

Jacquotte felt pride swell in her chest. She had been recognized, not just by her appearance, but by her true name, and as a captain. “I am.”

Some of the other vendors nearby stopped what they were doing to look over at them. It took only a moment for her to realize that their stares were not those of curiosity or admiration, but of mistrust and apprehension.

The vendor folded his arms. “Sorry. No stew for you.”

Marceau looked at him, confused. "Why? We have the coin."

He pointed a thin finger at Jacquotte. "She's wanted by the French."

Icy dread clawed at her throat. Jacquotte forced herself to stand tall. They were not French. They were mere merchants, and they would not turn her in. "As are many pirates and freebooters in this town."

He shook his head. "Can't help you."

"You cannot be serious," Marceau said. He looked around and pointed out a man. "That's Captain Williams. He's wanted by the *English*. Would you have a problem serving him?"

The vendor shrugged. "Captain Williams is a good man."

Jacquotte felt the anger rise inside her. "Did you have a problem serving Captain Blackhand?"

"Blackhand was decent," he said.

"He was a coward!" Jacquotte said sternly.

One of the other vendors snorted. "He was honest," he said. "You can trust a man like that."

"And you can't trust someone like me?" she asked. The vendors nodded.

The goat stew vendor cleared his throat. "There's notices for your arrest all over town," he said at last. "The Governor of Jacmel himself wants you. *Alive*."

One of the other vendors nodded.

"What god-awful things must you have done to make a governor want you alive?"

"I did *nothing*," Jacquotte sputtered.

"I heard you murdered the last governor."

"And burned down the town."

"Killed innocents."

The vendors looked at her with a mixture of apprehension and a sick glee, like they were enjoying shunning her, deriding her, slandering her.

"The Governor is lying," she said, though her voice sounded weak.

The goat stew vendor snorted. "You are not so special that a man of his status would lie," he said. He looked to the other vendors. "This is why I always say, don't trust mulattoes. All they do is lie."

Whatever feelings of sadness had been inside her dissipated. Her anger took over, multiplying tenfold. Her blood boiled in her veins. She steeled herself, fixing them with her hardest stare. If they thought her a monster, then a monster she would be.

“Speak to me like that again,” she said coolly, “and I’ll have you covered in molasses and buried up to your neck in an ant nest.”

Her face was a mask of calm. She watched them carefully as they registered her words.

The goat stew merchant squared up to her. “That sounds like a threat.”

She shrugged. “Consider it a promise,” she said. She pointed out toward the harbor where the jetty teemed with movement. “I’ve fifty men at my disposal, and more joining my cause every day. It would be no trouble to have each of you followed. To find out where you live and what you hold dear, and to take it from you. Your homes, your possessions, your wives and children.” Her gaze was fierce now, burrowing into them. “And when you’ve nothing left, when you’re just husks of men and you come crawling to me on your hands and knees, only then will I end your suffering, and your pathetic little lives.”

There was silence. The vendors looked on her, aghast, jaws slack, terror lining their faces.

“W-we didn’t mean offense, Captain Delahaye,” the goat stew vendor stammered. “Please, accept our deepest apologies.”

The other men murmured their agreements, not meeting her gaze.

Jacquotte regarded them down her nose, before allowing a smile to crack her lips. She reached out with her good hand and the goat stew vendor flinched, but instead of hitting him, she simply patted his cheek. “You lot are lucky I like it when men beg.” She stepped back, linking her arm through Marceau’s. “Be sure not to cross me again. You know what will happen if you do.”

She turned and left, taking her brother with her. She tried to walk slowly, evenly, but all she wished to do was escape. Her whole body was shaking, teeth grinding, sweat beading on her brow.

Finally, when they were out of sight, Marceau stopped them. “Are you all right?”

She shook her head, gnawing on her bottom lip. “No. I... they just made me so *angry*,” she said. “How *dare* they accuse me of such things?”

“I’m so sorry, Jacquotte,” he said. “You know they’re just rumors. But they should not have said it.”

“*We* know that,” she said. “But they felt they had the right to say them to my face. They took pleasure in accusing me of being a monster. But... perhaps I should not have risen to it.”

“They deserved a scare,” he said. “Maybe they’ll think twice before doing it to someone else?”

“They won’t,” she said, sighing. “They’re just like Blackhand.”

“Afraid?”

“Entitled,” she said. “People like them can’t handle change. They see people like us get something and assume it means something bad for them, or that they will be losing out, even when that’s not the case.”

Her brother pulled her into a hug. She allowed herself to linger in it, basking in his warmth. “Don’t let their prejudices rule your life,” he warned her. “And don’t be afraid to ask for help. You might be the captain now, but you are still my sister. I am here for you. And so are Teresa and your friends. You can trust us. You do not have to do everything alone.”

Jacquotte’s stomach roiled at the statement.

She had thought that with Blackhand gone, she could finally make things better. For herself, for her friends, for the crew. But it felt like the world was against her. It wasn’t just the vendor. She saw pity in the merchants’ eyes when she bought materials to repair *The Marauder*, and the sideways glances from the carpenter she had hired now that she couldn’t repair the masts herself with just one hand. How could she explain that to her friends? To Marceau? To Teresa? How could she trust them to understand the failure she felt deep within herself?

She had wanted her return to Port Royal to be victorious. For people to look at her in awe and fear, as they did the male captains. But they didn’t. All they saw was a wanted woman. A spectacle to gossip about and mock. Or a broken woman in need of pity.

That would change. She would have them know her for what she was, if it was the last thing she did.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

AFTER THE day she'd had, the dilapidated wreck of *The Marauder* was almost enough to break her. Already, the coin from the merchant ship they had taken was running low, while the costs for repairs only got steeper. And in the three days since their return to port, almost no new men had joined their crew. Perhaps they'd heard of the bounty on her head, or they had seen the state of the brigantine, or they refused to sail under a woman captain. But, whatever the reason, they did not come. And if they did not find more crew soon, they would not be able to man the *Dorado*, and all her hard work and planning would be for nought.

When she stepped into the second mate's quarters, she found Teresa with her back to the door and a rapier in her hand. Her feet were shoulders' width apart as she practiced dodging and slashing. A weedy flame spluttered in her lantern, casting irregular shadows across the walls as she moved. Jacquotte watched her as her skirts swirled in a wide circle, her sword gripped tight in her hand as she turned toward her.

"Oh! you're back," Teresa said as Jacquotte heaved herself down onto the cot.

"It suits you to have a sword in your hands," Jacquotte said, eyeing her.

Teresa grinned. "I quite agree."

"How did it go with the merchant?"

"Good. I got the papers at a third of the cost, and as I was leaving, I convinced two men to join us."

Jacquotte quirked an eyebrow. "Really?"

"They're with Lennox now, getting settled in."

Jacquotte repressed a sigh. "Looks like you've had more luck than me."

"What do you mean?"

She shook her head. She didn't wish to talk about it. "Where are the plans for the *Dorado*?"

“They’re in the captain’s quarters, for safekeeping. And we have much more than just the plans,” Teresa said excitedly. “We have trade routes, the captain’s journal, maps, and...” She placed the rapier down. “There’s also some correspondence between the current captain and my dear nephew, the Governor of Jacmel.”

Jacquotte had the sudden urge to race to the captain’s quarters. Or what remained of it. Jacquotte had done what she could to salvage it, thrown out Blackhand’s “prizes,” sold his treasures, and cleaned and cleaned, but nothing could wash away the memories of what had happened there. Nor the dark stains on the floorboards. *The Marauder* was not such a grand ship, and with Lennox in the quartermaster’s room, Marceau in the surgeon’s quarters, and Francisco and Mbala sharing the first mate’s room for lack of space, Jacquotte had spent the first week of her captaincy quartered in the second mate’s cabin. But the urge to sit in that room haunted by memories and scour the papers was great.

Florián.

It had taken all her strength to set foot in Port Royal again. She had been gripped by invisible strings, pulling her back, trying to drag her down deep beneath the water. The wretched vendors had proven her fears to be true. She was not welcome in Port Royal. It would not be long before more people knew her name, knew of Florián’s lies. There was no telling how many more would come to drag her back to Hispaniola, to whatever twisted punishment awaited her at Florián’s hand.

He had taken away her home in Yáquimo, she had become indentured to Blackhand because of him, and he had turned Port Royal, her second chance, into a place she feared. All that had befallen her was because of Florián. But she could not live in fear any longer. Not now that she was captain.

When cleaning out his quarters, Jacquotte had searched Blackhand’s effects. She suspected his best chance to profit from the damaged *Dorado* would have been to sell it back to its owners. It did not take long for Jacquotte to trace the ledgers and the sales back to Yáquimo. To the new Governor, specifically.

Soon she would know where to find the ship. There was a chance, if only small, that Florián would be on board. She had to have the *Dorado* to save her crew, but she would relish the chance to have the man’s head too.

Teresa sat on the cot beside her. “I saw the plans for the *Dorado*,” Teresa said. “I don’t remember it being so large.”

“It’s a grand ship, and it’ll have room enough for all our men and more,” Jacquotte told her.

“I like the sound of that,” Teresa said. “Imagine what it will be like to sail on such a vessel. Your legacy as captain will be solidified.”

A knot twisted in her gut, but she forced a smile. “Yes.”

Teresa looked her over. “What’s the matter?”

“Nothing.”

“What are you thinking?”

Jacquotte sighed. “Marceau and I had an altercation with some vendors at the market today.”

Teresa’s eyes narrowed. “Who?”

“It’s fine,” she said. “I dealt with them. It’s just... I thought being captain would bring me respect. But these Englishmen... all they see are Florián’s lies. It’s like they see my captaincy as a mistake, because I am a woman, because I am black. I don’t want to be remembered as some mulatto woman who lucked into a captaincy.”

“No one who matters will remember you like that,” Teresa promised. “You *earned* your captaincy. You should be proud. And you will be remembered for your deeds. You’ve only just begun, Jacquotte. Your legacy, how you will be remembered, that will all come with time.”

Jacquotte let out a breath. “Thank you,” she said. “I needed to hear that.”

“I know.”

Teresa leaned in, capturing her lips in a kiss. It was light and sweet, and she was soft and warm. Her hands danced across Jacquotte’s neck and jaw, spreading fire wherever they touched. There was an ease to her touch, a quiet familiarity, that Jacquotte loved just as much as their nights of furious passion.

Jacquotte pulled Teresa on top of her, leaning back until they were lying down. She kissed her, drinking in her heat, good hand pressed to the small of her back, fingers splayed over the curve of her spine to keep their bodies close.

Teresa smiled as she pulled away, fingers lingering on the buttons of her shirt. “Come now, Captain Delahaye,” she said. “You’ve work to do, plans to

concoct.”

Jacquotte pulled her closer. “I’ve more important things to do right now.” She rolled them over until she lay on top of Teresa, drawing her into another kiss. Teresa laughed gently into her mouth and went back to unbuttoning her shirt.



The Dog’s Tail was thick with the smell of meat, ale, and vomit. Serving girls and boys drifted around, expertly weaving through the mess of tables and bodies. Somewhere in the crowd she could hear Lennox’s bawdy laugh.

Jacquotte’s crew might have been small, but they were rowdy. Her head pounded with every shout and cheer. They were to set sail to intercept the *Dorado* in two days and, unlike Blackhand, Jacquotte refused to let them intoxicate themselves the night before the voyage; with so few men at her disposal, she could not weather any mistakes at sea. She knew what drink did to men. Had seen what it had done to Arnolde, to Blackhand. She decided her crew would always celebrate early.

She had hoped their merrymaking would draw in more men to join them. She looked around, trying to catch the eye of any who might approach her. Aside from the two who had joined that morning, only five more men had come from the notices, none of whom had set foot on a ship before. She had hired them all.

She tried to set her bitterness aside. The Dog’s Tail was more packed than ever. She could hardly see the stained floorboards for all those dancing. Mani stood on an overturned crate, singing a shanty. Those around joined him, drumming a beat on the tables, clapping, the girls from the Laundry singing along.

But Jacquotte did not feel like singing. Her head was spinning. She felt sick. She tried to focus on Teresa as she regaled their friends.

“You mean to say we met *years* ago?” Francisco asked.

“I wouldn’t say ‘met,’” Teresa said. “I saw you, stark naked, clambering out Señora Meléndez’s window in the middle of the afternoon.”

“Why were you naked?” Miguel asked, aghast.

“I’m sure you know better than most,” Mbala laughed, nudging him with his elbow.

A wave of nausea hit her. This was not the kind of sickness that came from overindulging. This was the same kind that had taken over her body in the days following her attack by the Frenchman. She had not been at the Dog’s Tail since, but the crew had wanted to celebrate, and she was not one to deny them.

She had thought she could handle sitting in the tavern, surrounded by her crew and her friends. Sweat prickled her skin. She could feel the fingers in her hair, twisting and pulling. Still smell him, drunk and snatching at her. It was as though it was happening again and again.

“I need some air,” she mumbled to no one in particular. She stumbled over an outstretched leg and suddenly Mbala was beside her, keeping her steady.

“I will come with you, Jacquotte,” he said.

She felt too unwell to argue. She let him guide her through the labyrinth of legs and bodies out into the night air. The sound muffled when the door closed, and the breeze chilled her skin pleasantly. Her head still pounded, but out of the tavern she felt instantly more at peace.

They were alone but for a single drunk, snoring loudly enough for three men.

“Is this better?” Mbala asked.

She nodded, trying to breathe. “It is.”

Above them, the sky was a deep blue, scattered with white stars. The moon shone bright, its cold light contrasting with the orange of the candles and torches around them.

“How are you faring?” Jacquotte asked to distract herself. “Are you ready for our journey for the *Dorado*?”

“I am... conflicted,” he admitted.

She looked up at him, confused. “Why?”

“Though I was not there for long, the *Dorado* was my prison, for a time.”

Her stomach lurched. “Oh, Mbala... I...”

In her desperation for the vessel, Jacquotte had not thought of what it would mean to Mbala. Blinded by dreams of infamy and the pettiness to take back what she felt was hers, she had forgotten Mbala’s past. His years of slavery under a name that was not his own.

“I’m sorry,” she said. She reached out and took his hand, squeezing it firmly. “We will take it and sell it on. It shall fetch a good price, I’m certain. We can find another ship to call our own. It does not have to be the *Dorado*.”

She could find another ship. She would still have a chance of finding Florián one day.

“But it does,” he said, smiling at her. “I know you have designs on it. And it will be a good ship. Prestigious. Worthy of your captaincy.”

She gnawed at her lip. “I realize that I’ve never asked you about that time. What you went through on that ship.”

“It was no worse than the others,” he said with a shrug. “I was there for a matter of months. They collected me from another vessel. I do not know where. They were not kind men, but they were not so cruel as some of the others. I preferred it there, in a way, but I would have preferred my freedom.”

She nodded. “I can only imagine.”

“Francisco told me your mother was a slave.”

That caught her off guard. “She was,” she said. Her head was spinning. “I didn’t know. Not until... just before we fled Yáquimo.”

“Do you remember her?”

“A little,” she said. Thinking back on those days, when her mother was alive, everything was hazy, as if obscured by a thick fog. “I remember how small she was. Young, now that I think on it. She was only nineteen when my father... when he *bought* her. I remember her laugh and her soft skin and the way she brushed my hair. But... I cannot remember her voice.” She thought of the whisper she had heard during the storm on *The Marauder*. “I do not care to admit it, but I rarely allow myself to think of her. I am sure my memories are weakened as a consequence.”

Mbala squeezed her hand. “We are the same in that way. I do not remember much of my mother either. She died when I was young, and the memories can be painful.” He looked down at her, and there was a deep sorrow in his eyes. He sniffed and forced a smile. “You may not allow yourself to think of her, but your actions speak to your feelings. Your fight for freedom is a fight for her,” he said. Jacquotte did not know what to say. “But enough of sadness, eh? We look

forward. We will take the *Dorado*. I have no doubt that you will cleanse it of its wretched past.”

Jacquotte smiled and moved to pull him into a hug when the door to the tavern burst open. There was a cry, and then a woman was thrown to the ground. She tumbled, rolling through the dirt, followed by a small man.

Jacquotte looked on, confused, as he stalked across the courtyard and swung out his leg. He kicked the woman hard in the stomach. Her sob broke through Jacquotte’s pounding head, and Mbala’s grip tightened around her fingers. They shared a look and moved toward them.

The man shouted, pointing accusingly at the woman as he kicked her again. She wailed and tried to crawl away from him, clawing her way through the dirt. The man looked up just in time to see Jacquotte throw a fist. His head snapped back and he staggered away, blood trickling from his nose. He spat a tooth into the dirt. Her fist was throbbing and her head spun. Mbala was crouching down to check on the woman.

“Are you all right?” Jacquotte asked.

The woman shook her head. She was perhaps in her forties, rail thin with a round, tearstained face covered in yellow splotches of faded bruises. She was filthy, uncared for.

“What do you think you’re doing?” the man demanded.

Jacquotte rounded on him. “What do you think *you’re* doing?”

“She’s my wife,” he said incredulously. “This isn’t your business.”

Faces gathered in the windows of the taverns and inns around them, and people crowded in the now-open doorways, watching. Anything was entertainment at three in the morning.

“This is how you treat your wife?”

The man considered her words for a long moment, before laughing wildly. His bloody spittle sprayed her face. “I shall treat her however I please. She’s *my wife*. My property.”

That word hit her like a fist. She looked at him and saw him for who he truly was. Blind fury overcame her. “You do not *own* her.”

He sneered. “Yes. I do.”

Mbala stood suddenly, towering over them all. The man swallowed thickly and took a step back.

“Leave now,” the man said, though his words caught on his tongue. He turned his sights on Jacquotte. “Leave before I show you by rights how a woman should be treated.”

Jacquotte cocked her head at him. “I’m sorry,” she said amiably. “I would never wish to impede upon your rights as a man.”

He looked at her warily. “Know your place, girl.” He tried to move around her, but she shadowed his steps. “Move! I am taking my wife home.”

He pushed her left shoulder. Pain lanced through her body, but she held strong. She slammed her forehead into his, sending him stumbling backward.

“I can’t let you do that, of course,” she said, taking another step closer to him. She drove her knee into his groin, and he doubled over. “You see, I do know my place.” The man looked up at her now, the authority gone from his eyes.

His eyes watered from the pain. “You can’t do—”

Jacquotte brought her knee up to his face, cracking his nose. “Don’t tell me what to do.”

He toppled over backward. He was done, but she wasn’t finished with him. She kicked him in the side, hard. She heard his ribs crack. But she kicked him once more, for good measure. He retched into the dirt.

People had come out of the taverns. There were dozens gathered around, all eyes on Jacquotte. She knew what they expected of her; she was Blackhand’s successor. He would never allow an opponent to live. And part of her wanted to send a message, to pull out a knife and carve into his flesh, to let all men know she was to be feared. But she couldn’t, not because she didn’t want to, but because she vowed never to be like that loathsome man.

Jacquotte turned and offered the woman a hand. She looked up at her with wide eyes, before taking it, and she helped her to her feet. “Are you all right?”

She worried the woman would cower from her, but there was a smile on her bruised lips. “By God, yes,” she said. “I only wish I’d had the strength to do that myself. Thank you, Captain Delahaye.”

And then she knew. She felt a fool that she hadn’t thought of it before. All this time, Jacquotte had been looking for men, but that wasn’t what she needed.

There were more than enough men on her crew, on every crew. What she needed was women. Women like her and like Teresa. Hard workers with bad lots in life, tired of living at the mercy of men's whims.

The man groaned at her feet. Jacquotte had to stop herself from kicking him again.

"Your wife is coming with me," she said. She saw people around her straining to hear, so she cleared her throat. "Your wife is coming with me," she said again, louder this time, making sure all understood. "She'll be safe on my ship. She won't come to any harm. And if you *ever* come after her, I'll gut you like the pig you are."

Murmurs rumbled through the crowd. Many were women, serving girls, washerwomen, wives and daughters. She wasn't sure if it was the pounding in her head or her pride, but she swore some of them looked at her longingly.

"All are welcome on my ship, *The Marauder*," she announced loudly. "Any woman who wants to live for herself, to be away from the men who determine her fate, can join the crew of Captain Jacquotte Delahaye."

She let the words hang for a long moment, before wrapping her good arm around the woman. "Come on," she said, gentler this time. "My brother is a doctor. He'll see to your wounds."

They turned and began to walk away, slowly.

"What is your name?" Mbala asked.

"Elizabeth."

"Welcome to the crew, Elizabeth," Jacquotte said.

Elizabeth looked up at her. Jacquotte could see the faint outline of a black eye forming. "Will I fight?" she asked.

"Not if you don't want to."

Elizabeth's brow set in a determined line. "I want to."

Jacquotte grinned. "Then we'll teach you."

The crowd parted for them. She could hear the quiet murmur of voices, but she blocked them out, focusing on her steps and keeping Elizabeth steady.

"Jacquotte," Mbala said quietly. "*Look.*"

Jacquotte looked over her shoulder. Behind them, women were separating themselves from the crowd. In small groups, by themselves, some carrying babes

on their hips. She heard protests from some men around them, but none moved to stop them. They fell into step with the three of them, trailing behind like a flock of birds in the sky.

Pride swelled in her heart.

They would have a crew for the *Dorado* after all.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

THE STRONG sea wind made a tangle of her flaming hair. *The Marauder* rocked violently on the gentle waves of the Port Royal harbor, as if just as eager for its final voyage as its captain. Even the rats had abandoned the brigantine. She had watched them from the prow of the ship as they leapt overboard, their sodden black bodies struggling away through the deep blue waters.

The smell of the sea air was enough to bring a smile to her lips. She scanned the ocean, quarter by quarter, planning their route in her mind, the feel of the wind, gauging how the weather might fare. It was overcast, the air heavy with rain that had yet to fall.

Ahead, uninterrupted for leagues, was the sea. It called to her. Some unexplainable part of her wanted to set sail and keep sailing until she came upon a land of fertile soil and a bountiful harvest and stay there forever. But she couldn't. Too many relied on her.

Where the sun peeked through the clouds, the dim light shone on the horizon. That was what called to her. The unknown. The endless possibilities. The freedom. Not the depth. The fathomlessness of the sea was something that rightfully frightened her, and should any good sailor. The deep brought another kind of freedom. But soon she would have the kind she craved. The freedom that could be found only aboard the *Dorado*.

Women had flocked to Jacquotte all through the night and well into the following day. Word of her deeds outside the Dog's Tail had spread all over town and soon after, women had come running. Her crew had grown from barely fifty to over a hundred in just two days. As large as Blackhand's crew had ever been.

Most were wives fleeing their husbands. Some were girls on the verge of unfavorable marriages. There were unwed mothers, widows, shopgirls and serving girls, washerwomen, and whores. Even girls from the Laundry had joined

them. Jacquotte was delighted to see the women she had grown up alongside on her deck, training with her crew. Though they were eager and willing, none were prepared for what was to come.

She heard footsteps pounding the wooden boards of the jetty. Panting. “Captain!” a voice cried. “*Captain!*”

Jacquotte watched as a woman raced toward *The Marauder*. Her exquisite blue dress was hiked up and she ran like a madwoman. She recognized the dress. She recognized the *woman*. Anne. It had been so long since she had last seen her, flustered as she was when she and Miguel had burst in on Jacquotte and Teresa, that she almost didn’t recognize her. Anne threw herself up the gangplank, breathing ragged, as Jacquotte came to meet her.

“Anne,” she said. “Are you all right?”

She nodded, sweat beading her brow as she tried to catch her breath. “Captain. I heard of what you’ve done for the women of this town,” she said. Her mouth was set in a determined line. “Please, let me be one of them.”

Jacquotte took a moment to assess the woman. She was small and round, with beautiful brown skin, combed and greased curls that were beginning to escape their confines, and a dress so dear it could have fed a dozen men.

“You would be a pirate?”

“I would be free,” Anne said. Jacquotte could just make out the hint of a bruise purpling the underside of her chin. “And if a free life is a life of piracy, then I would gladly take it. I want to make my own choices.”

“It is dangerous work,” Jacquotte warned her. “This is not the life you have been living in Port Royal.”

“Good,” Anne said coolly, though her tone was clipped. “I would give anything to get away from a life like that.”

“Anne? *Anne!*”

Miguel ran toward them. Jacquotte barely had the chance to move out of the way as he swept the woman up into his arms.

“What are you doing here?”

“I heard what Jacquotte had done—”

“—I was coming to get you—”

“—I wanted to be with you and—”

Soon enough the two were lost in each other's embrace. Jacquotte averted her gaze. Teresa came close and snaked an arm about her waist, drawing her away.

"Anne is joining the crew," she said.

Teresa laughed. "I can see that," she said. She pointed with a thumb over to the companionway. "They were planning to get her."

Jacquotte followed her thumb to where Mbala and Francisco stood, arms wrapped around each other laughing, holding an absurd number of weapons.

"What's all that for?"

Teresa shrugged. "In case there was any trouble."

Jacquotte peered back over her shoulder, to where Miguel and Anne whispered sweet nothings to one another, pressing gentle kisses to each other's skin, and holding each other so close that they were practically one. "There's no need to worry about that now."

"No. There's not."



The clangor of sword against sword filled the deck. *The Marauder* was full of life. For the first time since Jacquotte had become captain, the brigantine thrummed with movement. She hadn't realized how silent it had been before, how empty. Now it was hard to get even a moment of peace. She loved it.

The women had found their footing amongst her crew quickly. Lennox taught the larger women how to brawl. Two farm girls, Henrietta and Alice, were his favorites. The bravest trained in the crow's nest. The riggers taught the sure-footed to scale the ropes. Mbala had some belowdecks at the cannons. Francisco trained Elizabeth and the older, less agile women how to shoot. Marceau had two former midwives in the surgeon's quarters, where they traded knowledge. And those with child were in the cookroom. Everyone had found their place. Every job was accounted for, and all were eager to learn. It was better than she could ever have planned.

She watched as Miguel taught Anne to read the maps and chart courses. The pair were inseparable.

"We're close," Anne told her. "According to these rutters, the *Dorado* will be taking this passage."

The look of pride on Miguel's face brought a smile to Jacquotte's own lips.

Their ship began to slow in preparation for the ambush and the crew readied themselves for battle. Jacquotte had the men lead and held those back who weren't ready to fight. She sent some belowdecks, some to man the cannons and others to stay safe in the hold.

As Mbala passed out weapons, a pit twisted in her stomach. Though the new crew had been training since they arrived, she was uncertain if they would be ready. They had spent two days ashore preparing for their voyage, and three seeking out the *Dorado*, but she had seen the way each and every one of them took to the work and their training, their striving for greatness, and their teamwork. And, should their skills not strike fear into the hearts of their opponents, then the size of their crew would.

Jacquotte found Francisco by the mainmast. "How are they looking?"

"Elizabeth is an excellent shot," he told her. "She's even taught me a few things. I would say we should keep her on board, take out the French from a distance, but she's eager for battle."

Jacquotte could imagine. "Can we have someone keep an eye on her?"

He laughed. "She does not need it. I promise you that."

She made a note to watch her all the same, just to be sure.

Francisco went back to training and Jacquotte looked out across the port bow. The white sand beach of a nearby uninhabited island was close at hand, covered in a dense copse of trees. Its curves jutted out, as did the island on their port side. The French would be hard-pressed to outmaneuver them. It would be impossible for Florián to slip through her fingers if he was, as she hoped, aboard the ship.

"You look very serious, Captain."

Teresa stood beside her. Her skin was slick with sweat and there was a sword in her hand.

Jacquotte smiled. "How is your training going?"

"My stance is improving," she said, "though Lennox thinks I'm too eager and leave myself open to attack."

"You will get better with time."

“I’ll be sure of that,” Teresa said, grinning. She tugged Jacquotte into a kiss, pulling away only when a chorus of whistles and cheers broke out around them. “How long until we cross paths with the *Dorado*?”

“It should be within the day,” Jacquotte said. “The sooner the better.”

“Do you think Florián might be aboard?” Teresa asked, voicing the same question that had been running through her mind since they set sail.

“I hope so.”

She had voraciously consumed the plans and schedules for the *Dorado*. But even more so the letter from Florián to its captain. She must have read it a dozen times.

It appeared he had not been lying to his uncle that fateful night in Yáquimo. He wanted to take the world piece by piece. But of all the islands in the Caribbean Sea, Jacquotte was loath to read of the place he most desired: Fort de Rocher. It made her skin crawl and boiled her blood. What business did he have in Fort de Rocher?

How wrong she had been, all those years, to admire Juan Felipe for his triumph. Fort de Rocher had been such a figment of her childhood imagination of what was possible. Now it was in ruin. It was undermanned and unimportant in the eyes of the Spanish. They would fall easily to an assault by sea, Florián’s letter argued. She thought of Florián taking the island for himself, how he would command the place that all their childhood dreams rested on. The place she had been saving to move to all her life. Where she had intended to flee as he snatched away her home in Yáquimo. The thought drove her mad. He could go wherever he pleased, do whatever he wished, and she could not. Because of him.

“You hope to see Florián?” Teresa asked, pulling her away from the rage welling inside her. “Whatever for?”

She considered the words. “I want to see him suffer,” she said. “I want to see him pay for all he has done. I want him to rue the day we became friends.”

That caught Teresa’s interest. “You were *friends* with Florián?”

“Did I never tell you?” Jacquotte asked. She tried to think back, but any conversation about Florián had been mired in fury and grief. She sighed. “I met him at the manor when I was young, about five. We were friends for years, until I was no longer allowed to return.”

“*You* were his playmate?” Teresa asked. Jacquotte nodded. “I had known he had a friend before I came to the manor, he spoke of her sometimes, but I never knew it was you.”

“What did he say about me?” She was not certain she wanted to know the answer.

“Many things,” she said. “Mostly he bragged of the fun you had together. Whenever I asked my husband for a friend of my own, Florián would boast that he had been allowed one.” She paused. “It was strange to have a nephew, someone my husband treated as his son, who was my own age. Everything between us was a competition.”

“That is because Florián views the world as a competition,” Jacquotte noted bitterly. “If he cannot win it or own it he has no interest.”

“I cannot imagine the two of you as friends,” Teresa said. “Though, there are some similarities.”

Jacquotte felt as though she had been slapped. “What do you mean?”

“Only that you both value your convictions highly,” Teresa said. “And your ambitions. Once you have your mind set on something, you follow through, no matter what anyone else says. No matter the consequences.”

Jacquotte considered her words, but they festered within her painfully. “We are not the same,” she said at last. “That man is a monster.”

Teresa pulled her closer. “I know.”

Jacquotte quieted, gnawing on her lower lip. “He wasn’t always like that, you know.”

“Really?”

“He was always spoiled,” Jacquotte said, “but he used to be... *fun*.” She hated the feeling the memories brought to her, the lightness they had once brought now shrouded in darkness and death. “I was always eager to spend time with him. I looked forward to the hours we would train and play together, the plans we made for our futures together. He was my closest friend and confidant. Now he is just another man who would rather watch the world burn than not claim it as his own.”

Teresa placed a gentle kiss to her forehead. “You are nothing alike,” she promised her.

“I know,” Jacquotte said. “I am better than him.”

It was over an hour before the cry came from the crow’s nest. “Ship ho! Ship ho!” Emilio called out.

The crew strained to see. Jacquotte could just make out the silhouette of a ship. She would have known that galleon anywhere. The timbers, the line of the masts, the peculiar cut of the forecastle.

The *Triunfo Dorado*.

“Action stations!” Jacquotte shouted over the excited chatter that had taken hold of *The Marauder*. “To your stations, now! We’ve a ship to board!”



Jacquotte loomed over the French captain.

The crew of the *Dorado* had surrendered in what felt like minutes. Her crew had suffered no fatalities. The captain was on his knees before her. They had not found Florián aboard. Anger and disappointment clouded her focus.

“I ask for quarter, good si—” The captain caught himself short. With a sneer, he corrected himself. “Good *lady*.”

She regarded him for a moment, letting the silence hang in the air. “What is your cargo?”

When he looked up at her, wide-eyed, she knew something was wrong. She saw the flash of his eyes, the firm set of his jaw, and the sweat on his brow. He was hiding something.

“Is there anyone else aboard this ship?” she asked, her question filled with hope she could not hide. Perhaps Florián was cowering belowdecks.

“We are not a merchant ship, if that is what you mean,” he said. Around them, French sailors shifted nervously. She cut him a scowl and he continued. “But I have treasures of a personal nature that might be of interest to you, gold and jewels and the like. Gifted to me by th—”

“Mbala. Francisco,” she called, turning away from him. Her friends were dutifully at her side. “This man is lying. Search belowdecks.”

The captain looked up at her, startled. “I’m not! I—” But Francisco and Mbala had already turned and were weaving their way through the remaining Frenchmen. “Stop! *Don’t!*”

He tried to stand, but Lennox shoved him to his knees.

Jacquotte watched him closely, eyes scanning the sweat on his brow, the fear in his eyes, and something else that she could not quite place. “What are you trying to hide?” she asked. “It’s best to tell me now. I will not be fooled.”

“Nothing,” he said quickly. “I promise you. *Nothing*. Just—”

She sighed and looked over to her friends. “Go ahead!”

Mbala kicked open the companionway door and the two men disappeared down the steps. There was so much sweat on the Frenchman’s skin that it drenched the high white neck of his collar.

“What do you think?” she heard Lennox mutter to Vicente.

“Gunpowder, I’d wager. Wouldn’t want something like that getting into our hands.”

The rest of her crew began muttering their guesses.

“Pieces of eight.”

“Gold. Rubies!”

“It’ll be sugarcane. Or coffee.”

“What of silks from the China Sea?”

Jacquotte cocked an eyebrow at the captain. “Any of them right?” she asked with a smirk. “Should I place a wager myself?”

“Please, si—*my lady*,” he said, his voice strained. “Call them out of the hold and—”

A wordless roar ripped through the belly of the ship. The deck went silent. The sound of boots thundered toward them. Before Jacquotte could react, Mbala was beside them. He hauled the French captain up by the collar of his shirt until his boots were kicking in the air.

“What have you done?” Mbala demanded, his voice booming.

The Frenchman struggled, trying to no avail to get out of his grip. “I... I was given orders t—”

Mbala threw him across the deck, sending him sprawling, a mess of limbs. He tried to scramble away, but Mbala was on him, kicking him in the gut. He raised his foot again.

“Mbala!” Jacquotte shouted, rushing to his side.

Her friend stopped. Had she spoken a moment later, the captain's brains would have decorated the bottom of his boot. The French sailors looked ready to bolt, to leap over the side of the galley to take their chances swimming.

"Leave him," she ordered.

Mbala turned to her with a fury she had never seen before. "This man is—"

A terrible retching sounded from the companionway. All eyes turned to Francisco. He was hunched over, spilling the contents of his stomach across the deck. He was paler than she'd ever seen him before, shaking.

"Jacquotte," he managed to say when he could breathe again. Chunks of vomit smeared his lips. "Below. There are hundreds."

"Hundreds of what, Francisco?"

He crossed the deck to vomit overboard. She had to get everything under control, and fast, before anything went awry. The women had never boarded before, but her men knew that this was messy, disorganized. She would look weak if it didn't end soon.

She passed her friend as he retched again and walked down into the belly of the ship. There were no lanterns, only darkness. The galleon should have been carrying cocoa, coffee, perhaps cotton or sugarcane that Jacquotte and her crew could sell for a good price.

The smell hit her like a wave. It smelled like a farm or an abattoir, of blood and shit and flesh. It was so rancid that it stung her eyes and her throat constricted.

There had been work done to the *Dorado* since she had last seen it. It was not the broad, open hold she had rebuilt just months ago. Now there was a single narrow walkway down the center.

She walked down the aisle, measuring the distance with her feet so she wouldn't trip. On either side tall panes of wood had been erected in long rows. Distantly, she could hear rustling, a shifting, as if something was moving.

She stopped at the end of the aisle and peered through the darkness. She could just make out the portholes to the aft, letting in some light. Her eyes began to adjust to the darkness, and she inspected the wall before her more closely. It was tall, almost reaching the ceiling, and about the width of Jacquotte's arm-span. There were what appeared to be shelves all the way down.

And then the darkness moved. Shifted.

Two eyes opened wide directly before her face.

Jacquotte cursed and leapt backward. All around the darkness began to move. White eyes opened, blinking into existence. There were dozens of them. Everywhere she looked she saw the darkness turn to flesh and eyes open, blinking at her. Then she heard them. They spoke in many languages, some she understood, others she didn't. They called out, moaning, whispering, crying, their voices hoarse and rasping.

People. They were people.

A hand reached for her. Ropes bound a pair of frail wrists together, and the fingers curled around her left arm. She could hardly feel the pain over her heartbeat hammering in her chest.

In heavily accented French, a voice whispered, "*Please.*"

Other hands reached to her from all sides. Clawing. Groping. Desperate. Wrists bloodied from tightly bound ropes. Fingers missing. Dark skin scarred and burned. Bile rose in her throat and tears streamed down her face. She inhaled deeply, letting the foul stench enter her, consume her, fill her with the fury she needed.

"I will be back," she promised, though her voice was barely above a whisper.

Jacquotte climbed the stairs, letting the wind dry her tears and clear her mind. Everyone looked at her expectantly. She crossed the deck slowly, deliberately, letting the fresh sea air calm the frantic beating of her heart. She stopped before the captain and the man quivered. Had she not been so overcome, she might have enjoyed it.

"Whose doing is this?" she asked the captain. "On whose orders did my ship become a slaver?"

Quiet murmurs rose up from her crew. She ignored them.

"Y... *Your* ship?" he asked, confused. "We bought this galleon in Port Royal. It was anchored in Jacmel befo—"

"*Yáquimo*," she snapped, her fury rising. "I know where this ship came from. It was *I* who rebuilt it. It was *I* who sailed it to Port Royal."

"We bought it legally," he protested. "When we took it to Jac... *Yáquimo*, we were given orders by the Governor himself to transport his cargo to the

plantations in Tortuga.”

Jacquotte’s ears pricked up. “Continue.”

He nodded quickly. “He will pay you handsomely for our safe return. And for the return of his ship. He is a very generous man.”

She laughed. Loudly, icy and cold. She let the sound linger, dripping over him, and relished as he flinched with each harsh bark. “I have met your so-called Governor,” she said. “He is a traitor. You should be ashamed to follow such a man. Trading in slaves is a lowly business. He is no more human than they are. He has no right to their lives.”

The captain balked as if she were speaking in jest. “It is no more illegal or unjust to own slaves than it is to own a cow.”

She slapped him, hard, across the face. “It is *barbarous!*” Jacquotte snapped.

She turned to her crew. The men watched, nervous of her temper. The women looked afraid. She tried to calm herself. She was not Blackhand. She would not torture this man, though she relished the thought that she could.

“My crew,” she said, addressing them all. “We came here today in search of our vessel. But we leave here with much more than that.” They watched her in silence. “Lennox, Mbala. Go below and free everyone. Cut their bindings. Send the sick or wounded to Marceau and the midwives.”

Lennox cocked his head. “Captain?”

Jacquotte stood taller. “They’re coming with us to Port Royal.” She turned to the French captain, a sneer curling her lip. “As for these dogs... search them. Take whatever valuables you can find, then load them into the longboats.”

The captain looked at her incredulously. A red welt was forming on his face in the shape of her palm. “You can’t mean to maroon us?” he demanded. “I asked for quarter!”

“And I did not grant it,” she said. She turned to her crew. “Let’s get to work. The *Dorado* is ours. We’re taking her home.”

“You cannot!” the French captain whined. “This is our ship!”

“Not anymore.”

Her crew split off, finding their duties aboard the new, larger vessel. The French sailors were searched and loaded into the longboats, and their space was gradually replaced on deck by the former slaves. They blinked in the sunlight,

wrists and ankles red and raw, hunched over, most wearing nothing more than sacks and scraps of cloth. She watched with growing pride as her crew did what they could to comfort them. They brought them blankets and sheets, food and water. The women immediately took up collecting the children, doting on them, holding them close as they cried.

Mbala came to stand beside her. He bowed his head. "I am sorry," he said at last. "For my outburst. I—"

"Don't," she said. "By God, if you hadn't, I would have. How many are there?"

He shook his head. "I don't know. At least a hundred. Maybe more."

She felt sick, breathless. "Have as many moved to *The Marauder* as we can. Let's prepare both ships to set sail. I want us back in Port Royal as soon as possible."

He hesitated. "What will we do with them all?"

"We offer them work with us," she told him. "Just as we did with the women. If they want to leave, we will do what we can for them. Send them to Blanca. Find them work around town. Whatever we can."

"Aye, Captain."

The last Frenchmen were being loaded into the remaining longboat. Elizabeth had kept the captain back as instructed. Jacquotte strode over, pleased to see the man quiver. She took him by the collar and shoved him over the side of the ship. He toppled in headfirst, crushing the legs of his crew, and the boat swayed on its ropes.

"I have a message for your Governor," she called down. "Tell Florián that Captain Jacquotte Delahaye sends her regards."

Before he could respond, she kicked the winch holding their ropes. It rattled and came undone, and the longboat dropped. The Frenchmen screamed like children as their boat crashed into the choppy sea below.

Jacquotte watched as the longboat bobbed on the deep blue waters, washed away by the frothing sea. Her message would make its way to Florián. She was sure of it.

She moved out of sight of her crew and vomited into the ocean.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

SLEEP HAD not come easy to Jacquotte. Every time she closed her eyes, she saw the darkness roil and move, eyes opening around her, mouths open in cries that begged her for help.

There had been children in the belly of the ship. It was abhorrent enough for any to be packed into a slaver and sent out to sea, but to put children there was something else entirely. And it had been Florián's doing. Fury coursed through her in place of sleep. Thoughts of her mother played in her mind as she drifted in and out of consciousness. Had she been on such a ship? How old would she have been? The answer did not matter. For as long as men like Florián existed, people like Jacquotte would never be free.

Her indignation had kept her from enjoying what should have been a momentous occasion. She finally had the *Dorado*. The captain's quarters were twice the size of *The Marauder's*, if not larger. Overlooking the deck was a set of large square windows. There were bookshelves filled with works she had never seen or heard of before, histories of European wars, stories and children's tales, and hoards of the French captain's journals. There was a desk stocked with paper and ink, a dresser filled with fine clothes, a metal tub, and a rack filled with rolled-up maps. The bed was built into an alcove, nestled between two bookshelves, with a mattress stuffed with feathers so soft Jacquotte had melted into it.

She looked down at Teresa. She was fast asleep, snoring softly. Her brow was normally furrowed in sleep, but tonight she looked at peace.

They would arrive in Port Royal in three days. Jacquotte knew she should try to get some rest, they would have much work to do when they returned, but she couldn't keep her mind from Florián.

She had found journals, those the French captain had scrawled in, as well as correspondence between Florián and some French officials. She had read

through them tirelessly, picking up any mention of Florián's plans.

He had wanted to lead a charge in an effort to rebuild the fallen fortress of Fort de Rocher. But she was surprised by what she discovered: the French did not comply. They did not agree with what they deemed his childish whimsy. Fort de Rocher was in shambles, a feat unworthy of their capabilities, according to the King.

Florián was incensed. But the former captain of the *Dorado* believed the endeavor a waste of time, too, and he wrote about it ceaselessly. He thought it would have been a reckless misuse of resources. He felt strongly that the ruins of the former buccaneer town would never last. The rest of Tortuga was filled with pirates, freebooters, and privateers, and they would have had no end of trouble. But that was where the slaves were headed. Though denied military support, Florián had been permitted to send slaves to the island to work on new plantations. To embark on exploiting the fertile lands Florián had been so sure the island would have. That was why Florián had not been aboard the ship. He had not wanted to travel with the slaves.

She had to bury the rage that boiled inside her. She could not reconcile the man with who he had been to her as a child. Her closest companion and confidant. But perhaps he had always been this way, and she had been too young to see it. She thought of how enraged he became when she was better than him at something. How violent he had become during their sparring sessions when he grew taller and stronger than her. How he snatched his things away from her when she became attached. His actions now reminded her of that. He had snatched Yáquimo from her and because of his notices he was taking Port Royal from her. How dare he try to take Fort de Rocher as well? She could comfort herself with the fact that he was failing. And soon, he would learn she had taken his ship.

Jacquotte's thoughts were interrupted by an idea for the *Dorado*, and she wanted to get it onto paper before it was lost to sleep. She had found a beautiful journal amongst the French captain's effects. Bound in deep brown leather, its pages were thick and heavy, untouched. It was now filled with sketches of the *Dorado*, plans for how to repair the ship, and how to make it her own, now that

it was finally hers. She crossed the room to the dresser, which was filled with all manner of frivolities no one would need at sea.

She pulled out a deep emerald-green robe, threaded with orange and gold. Jacquotte admired the color against herself. She slipped the robe over her nightdress, careful of her left arm, and stepped into her boots.

Outside, it was dark but for a few lanterns, and the brisk air bit at her exposed skin. Some of the crew were on deck, those assigned to night duty, but she chose to avoid them. She needed time to be alone, to work and think for herself.

She stopped at the foremast. *The Marauder* was behind them, sailing in the *Dorado's* wake. Some part of her would miss it, but she would not miss the memories.

She pulled out her journal, leaned against the rail, and began sketching. Her drawings were clumsy and messy now that she couldn't use her left hand for guidance, but she kept working. There was much to be done; the last shipwright had been an oaf, with no talent or care for the craft. He had made the galleon seaworthy and put in the harrowing bunks, but everything else had been shoddy work. Masts were crooked, the rigging was erroneously set up, and boards were mismatched and uneven. And that was just on deck. She still had to fix the damage caused below by the bunks.

It was as she sketched the gun ports that she felt the knife at her neck.

Cold metal pressed against the curve of her throat. The blade was small, blunt, most likely filched from the cookroom.

She could have disarmed her assailant with ease; they were reaching on their toes to hold the knife to her, overbalanced. There was a knife in the pocket of Jacquotte's nightdress. But she chose not to reach for it.

"Is something the matter?" she asked. "If you're hungry, the cookroom is filled with fresh rolls. We have spare clothes and drink and cots aplenty. There are much better things to do at night than hold a knife to a stranger."

"Not a stranger," came the reply. It was a woman, young, speaking with a heavy French accent. "The captain."

"Indeed," Jacquotte agreed slowly. "And who might you be?"

There was a pause, then, "Samada."

“A pleasure to meet you, Samada.” Jacquotte tried to look over her shoulder, but the knife pressed tighter. If it were any sharper, it would have drawn blood. “You can call me Jacquotte.”

The woman said nothing.

“Can I ask what you want?” Jacquotte said. “If it’s your freedom you are after, you already have that.”

Samada snorted. “Freedom? That is a lie. You mean to work us in the fields. Maybe if we are lucky, we work in your homes. I will not be a slave again.”

“Hey! *Hey!* What are you doing?”

There was a commotion across the deck. She could not tell who had spoken, but she heard boots rushing toward them. She saw a glimpse behind her before Samada’s knife tightened.

“Stop!” Jacquotte ordered. Her crew did as they were told. “I’m in no danger. Leave us.”

More of the crew were gathering now, alerted by the disturbance. Samada was shaking behind her. This time, Jacquotte did turn. Samada lashed out with the blade, but Jacquotte batted it away, twisted her wrist once, and snatched it from her hand.

They faced each other. Though it was dark, she could see Samada was small and thin, bones jutting out awkwardly, and her thick black hair was worn loose, matted in places and cropped in others. She was no more than a girl. Perhaps thirteen or fourteen.

Samada took Jacquotte in too. Her height, her build, her red hair, her skin. She looked confused, and then Jacquotte offered her the knife. She could see her crew, eyes on Samada. Samada’s hand hesitated beside the blade.

“It’s no trick,” Jacquotte promised. “Keep it, if it makes you feel safe. You won’t need it. I won’t do you any harm, and nor will my crew.”

Samada took the blade slowly, though she didn’t raise it to Jacquotte again. “Do you truly mean to free us? *All* of us.”

“I do,” Jacquotte said. “You can leave if you wish, but you can also stay and join us. We may be pirates, but we have honor. You would not be a slave again. This ship is grand; there is room enough for all of you.”

Samada spat on the deck. “This ship is a prison.”

“Not for long.” Jacquotte turned her journal to the girl. “See? I’m going to fix it. No more bunks below. No more transporting slaves. It will be a home. And here,” she said, flipping to another page, “we have private rooms, for those who need them. There are enough that I want to fill some with books, when we find them, so the crew can read.”

Samada looked at her hesitantly. “I cannot read.”

“We can teach you. If you want,” she said. “Everyone here knows something that another does not. We can all help each other. I was a shipwright, before I became a pirate. I built ships, like this one. And look there,” she said, pointing to the group that had formed around them. “That’s Mary. She was the wife of a brewer. Now she’s brewing ale for us, so that we never go thirsty. And that is Sarah, daughter of a carpenter. And up there, in the crow’s nest, that’s Emilio; he was once a fisherman. He’s been designing nets so that we can fish at sea.” Samada’s eyes followed her finger, taking in each member of the crew in turn. Jacquotte looked back at her finally. “Not everyone needs to know everything. But we can all help each other. What can you do?”

Samada looked taken aback by the question. “I can weave.”

“We don’t have a weaver here,” Jacquotte said with a smile. “And what would you like to learn?”

Samada thought on this for a long moment, before looking up at Jacquotte with wide, determined eyes. “Everything.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

THE WEIGHT of the mallet felt right in her hand. The heft of it. Its solid, powerful swings. The sound as it hit the nail. Jacquotte had missed shipwrighting more than she had ever thought possible. There was a safety in the familiarity of it that filled her heart.

Jacquotte wiped the sweat from her brow. The sound of work filled the deck. All around her, the crew were hard at work, transforming the *Dorado* to her design. She had turned her pirate crew into a cadre of shipwrights in two weeks, and she could see the slaver transforming into a ship worthy of the legacy she wanted to leave behind.

But what good was her legacy if she could not enjoy it while she lived? Nothing had changed with the vendors in Port Royal. If anything, they treated her with more scorn and hesitation than before. She was not sure if word had spread about her altercation with the vendor, or if more of the notices had appeared while she was away, but whatever the reason, she could not get what she wanted. What she deserved. Respect.

“We’ll need more nails soon,” Jacquotte noted. “Can you add that to Teresa’s list?”

Samada nodded and scrawled very carefully into her journal. She let Jacquotte inspect it. The lettering was crude and childish, but legible. The girl was a very fast learner, and had taken to lessons in reading and writing with fierce resolve.

“Very good,” Jacquotte said, smiling.

Samada beamed. The girl had been close to her side since they met. She might have been young, but she was determined, and she had the ear of the former slaves. Far more of them had joined Jacquotte than she had expected. After her conversation with Samada, they seemed to have realized she could be trusted. While some had gone to Blanca, to find work or transport out of Jamaica, most

had stayed. She had begun to learn their names and their stories, and the horrors they had endured. Addae the blacksmith. Ayotunde, who had turned a blade on his master, his own father. And Ojo, who had been owned by the same men as Mbala in Denmark. As she cast her eye across the galleon she could see them on deck, as much a part of her crew as anyone else. They now numbered over three hundred strong.

A pit formed in her stomach. The sheer weight of responsibility frightened her. But she pushed it aside. There was no turning back. No shirking her obligations. This was what she had wanted. She was their captain, and she would do everything in her power to better their lives and keep them safe, starting with the *Dorado*.

“Captain.”

Jacquotte looked up, squinting in the sunlight. Francisco stood above her, dark curls framed in the late afternoon glow. She heaved herself to her feet. “Is something amiss?”

“Far from it.” There was a mischievous grin on his face. “Take a walk with me.”

She quirked an eyebrow at him. “Where?”

“You’ll see.” She considered him for a moment, looking back at the crew. He saw the hesitation on her face and wrapped an arm around her shoulders, steering her along with him. “Everything here will be fine.”

She wanted to protest, but conceded. Once Francisco had his mind set to something, it was impossible to put him off course. “Look after things while I’m away,” she told Samada. “I’m trusting you.”

The girl stood straight and nodded her head seriously. “Aye, Captain.”

Jacquotte let Francisco lead her down the gangplank and off the ship. But she felt an unease about leaving her ship, even for a moment. She wanted to work. She *needed* to work.

“When was the last time you had a break?” he asked, seeing the look in her eyes.

She tried to remember. “Before we left for the *Dorado*.”

“That was three weeks ago.”

She counted back in her mind. “Oh.”

“You need to rest, Jacquotte,” he told her pointedly. “You’re running yourself ragged.”

He was right. She was exhausted; she was taking on far more than was expected of the captain. When she wasn’t working on the ship, she wanted to be present for the crew. Anne would have an idea to improve the helm or Lennox would need her approval on guns. Weapons wouldn’t be sharp enough, so she would act as cutler. When more wanted to join their ranks, she’d go back to her sketches to rearrange the intended layout. On top of everything else she was doing, there had been the constant threat of the men whose wives and daughters had joined her crew. They prowled the docks, often looking to start a fight. She hadn’t a moment to rest.

“I suppose you’re right,” she said, looking around. “Where are you taking me?”

Francisco only grinned. They walked toward the tradesmen’s district, through the area populated with brothels. Every step she took away from the ship felt like it was tightening the knots in her stomach. She wanted to get back, to work, to keep her mind busy.

Ever since they’d secured the *Dorado*, things hadn’t felt right. She had yearned to take it as her own, obsessed over the plans, and then they had taken the ship with ease. There had been so few men to stand against them. She had wanted a great battle, a great victory, something that others would remember when they talked of how her legacy began. She couldn’t shake the thought that the time she had to build her legacy would be short, and she was desperate to have something to her name. Something that would grant her the respect she deserved.

She pushed the thoughts from her mind and tried to focus on her surroundings. There were many brothels, the Laundry amongst them. She could see Blanca on the stoop of the building, a babe on her hip. She looked older, her gray hair turning white, her skin worried with lines. But she smiled and waved as they passed by. Jacquotte waved back, but there was a pit in her stomach.

“Do you ever think about them?” she asked. “Alberto and Roberto?”

Francisco stopped in his tracks. He looked at her, brow furrowed. “Every day.”

“I miss them,” she admitted. “I can’t help but think—”

“Don’t,” Francisco said, cutting her off. “I know what you’re going to say. And it’s not your fault.”

“They died protecting *me*.”

She was taken aback by Francisco’s laugh. “I love you, Jacquotte, but you cannot think so highly of yourself,” he said. “They died protecting *all of us*. Roberto died trying to get us out of Yáquimo. And without Alberto we wouldn’t have made it out of Brazil. It was not only for you, Jacquotte. It was for all of us.”

She worried her lip with her teeth. “But I could have done something. I could have—”

“There is no use dwelling on their deaths, on things we cannot change,” Francisco said. “We must think of their lives, the legacy they’ve left behind.”

For the second time that day she knew he was right. Her friends would never have wanted to be remembered for their deaths. She leaned her head on Francisco’s shoulder as they walked.

“You know, he was the first boy I ever kissed,” she said, bringing to mind a memory long since forgotten.

“Who?”

“Roberto.”

He looked at her, scandalized. “How did that happen?”

“I was thirteen and fox-drunk at a celebration in town,” she told him. “Juana Ferro loudly told everyone that my skin was too dark to ever find a good husband. I was furious. I’d seen her fawning over Roberto all night, so I marched right up to him and kissed him on the mouth in front of everyone. We had never spoken before, but for some reason he didn’t push me away. Juana stormed off and cried to her friends about it for the rest of the night.”

“How did he take it?”

“He told me I did it wrong,” she admitted, feeling a flush rise in her cheeks. “So he kissed me properly until my toes curled in my boots. I took quite the fancy to him after that, for longer than I’d care to admit.”

They were running out of streets in the tradesmen’s district, and she was still none the wiser about their destination.

“You know,” he said slowly, looking over at her, “Alberto was my first man.”

“He was? When?”

“Years ago, now,” he said with a wave of the hand. “He told me that he wanted to know what it was like, and given I was almost as pretty as a girl, I’d be the next-best thing.”

“You *are* very pretty.”

“I know,” he said with a grin. “So we did.”

“How was it?”

“I couldn’t walk straight for a week afterward.”

They fell into each other laughing. People moved around them, cursing. There were tears in her eyes, but she couldn’t tell if they were from the laughter or the memories. She had been trying so hard not to think of her friends, of what she had lost, that she had forgotten what a great joy they had been when they were alive. She didn’t want to forget. She *never* wanted to forget them, or how they made her feel.

“Ah, we’re here!”

Francisco led her into a tavern. The man behind the counter smiled when he saw them.

“Señor Santos,” he said, standing quickly. “Please, just a moment.”

He scurried away through the archway and into the storeroom.

Jacquotte eyed Francisco suspiciously. “What’re you up to?”

But he just shook his head. The barkeep returned a moment later carrying two pints of ale.

“Thank you, good sir.”

Jacquotte took the tankard, confused. “We’re drinking?”

“We’re drinking to you, Captain Delahaye,” he said. “With all the excitement, I haven’t had a moment to toast you.”

Jacquotte smiled. “Oh?”

“As someone who has known you your whole life, I have earned the right to be enormously proud.”

She swatted at him with a grin. “Why did we have to come all the way here? We’re so far away from everything.”

“Because they serve the best ales in all of Port Royal. And... I needed to get you away from the ship.”

“Why?”

“Must you know everything, Jacquotte?”

She rolled her eyes and let the moment take her. She drank with her friend.

“Have you had a chance to look at the cabins yet?” she asked him instead, choosing not to rise to questioning him. “We’ve room enough that you and Mbala don’t need to share anymore. You can have your pick.”

“That won’t be necessary.”

“It won’t?” she asked, confused. “You’re my first mate. It’s expected.”

“I know, but we won’t be needing separate cabins.”

She considered his words, rolling them over in her mind. “Oh... *oh*.” She looked at him then, realization dawning. “Does that mean that you two are—”

“Together. Yes,” he said. A wide grin lit up his face. “Have been for some time now.”

She could have slapped herself. “How did I not notice?”

“You’ve been a little busy,” he said, laughing.

Now that he said it, the pieces fell into place. Mbala and Francisco dicing together at all hours. How they always shared a room at the Dog’s Tail, had taken up in one together on *The Marauder*, despite its small size. How she never saw either of them with women, though Francisco had been quite the ravisher in Yáquimo and Mbala was strikingly handsome and charming. How Francisco had cringed when he heard Mbala and Teresa bedding all those months ago. She had thought it was out of sympathy for her. She had been wrong.

“*He* was the one you asked me about in Brazil!”

“He was. Your advice worked, by the way. I told him how I felt that very night. He was more than reciprocating.”

“I am so happy for you, Francisco,” Jacquotte said. She laughed. “God, do you think Miguel will think us all filthy sinners?”

“Miguel thinks *everyone* is a filthy sinner,” he said. “But he’s hardly one to talk now, is he?”

She wrapped an arm around him, leaning into his warmth. “I’m glad for you, Francisco.”

When they left the tavern, Francisco walked with a spring in his step. They walked by way of the taverns and jaunty music floated out to greet them. They were headed back to the docks. She tried to think of what he could possibly be doing, but she knew he would not tell her.

When they reached the jetty, the crew were still hard at work on the *Dorado*. Nothing disastrous had happened in her absence. As Lennox saw them approach, he smiled to Francisco and made his way onto the ship.

Jacquotte looked between the two men. “What are you up to, Santos?” Before Francisco had the chance to answer, she saw their friends hurrying toward them. Marceau, Miguel, Teresa, and Mbala. She looked at them, confused. “What is it?”

Teresa wrapped her arms around Jacquotte’s waist excitedly, squeezing her. “Look.”

Jacquotte followed her finger toward the aft of the ship. The French flag no longer flew from the jackstaff. She could see Lennox there now, working the ropes. Black fabric fluttered from the pole, and they watched in silence as he raised it until it stretched out in the wind, a long black sheet.

Two figures stood on the flag, holding hands. *Dancing*. A white skeleton wielding a dagger and, opposite, Jacquotte recognized herself. A woman, skin threaded brown, holding a cutlass and wearing the loose white shirt and trousers that had become her uniform. A tricorne was atop her head and beneath it flowed hair of bright, flaming crimson. Between them was a flaming heart.

Her colors.

In all the excitement, becoming captain, bolstering her crew, rebuilding the *Dorado*, she had not had the time to create her own flag. She had been flying beneath Blackhand’s mutilated skeleton for weeks. But there it was atop the *Dorado*. Atop her vessel.

Francisco patted her on the shoulder. “So, what will you christen her, Captain?”

She looked at the ship again. It couldn’t stay as the *Triunfo Dorado*; it had too much of a dark past. No. It had to be something they would feel proud to call their home. She looked at her crew. Old and new and newer, they had all come together under her guidance. *Because* of her guidance.

She wondered what Arnolde would have said if he could see her now. It would boil his blood to see her crew of women, mulattoes and freed slaves alike, working together as equals.

She smiled, looking up at the figurehead that had drawn her to the ship so long ago. Two women holding hands. Wild joy radiating from their faces. She knew what she would call her ship.

“Dayana’s Revenge.”

She let the name hang in the air, her mother’s name sitting proudly on her tongue.

Marceau took her hand in his. There were tears in his eyes. “It’s perfect.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

THE MAIDEN voyage of *Dayana's Revenge* was a great success. They had taken three ships, with a haul so grand they would have enough coin to celebrate for weeks.

For the first time, she wished to spend her shares. There was a vendor in the market that sold that sweetbread Teresa loved, and she was in need of some new boots. Now she could afford to have some made specifically for her. But even with the money, she could not buy what she wanted.

In the days leading up to her maiden voyage, more and more vendors had been refusing to serve, to take her coin. She hoped that now that she had much more coin to spend, things would be better. What good were riches if she was not able to spend them?

Two of the new riggers, Ojo and Ayotunde, lashed the ship to the capstans and *Dayana's Revenge* weighed anchor in the harbor.

It was the perfect vessel. Jacquotte could not believe how quickly her crew had come together, old and new, to transform it. Beautiful, sleek, and deep brown, it was the swiftest galleon she had come across in all her years. Fast enough to outpace a merchant vessel, it was powerful, but not bulky.

As she turned to disembark, an odd feeling ran through her. Usually, there would be workers all around the port, laborers hauling crates and barrels, girls from the brothels lined up, their ankles and cleavage on display. The taverns and inns along the waterfront would have their doors and shutters thrown wide open to let the smell of whatever stew they were cooking entice those fresh off the boat. Now the docks of Port Royal were deserted, but for a large group of men three dozen strong.

Something was awry. The men stood in a huddle along the waterfront, close to where *Dayana's Revenge* had docked. Many were armed. She saw knives and

cutlasses, rapiers, pistols and muskets. Others had clearly grabbed whatever they could find. Hammers, saws, pitchforks.

“Lennox!” she called.

The quartermaster was at her side at once. “Yes, Captain?” She nodded her head toward the crowd.

He grew pale. “What do they want?”

“I don’t know,” she said. Many of the crew were still belowdecks as the bell had not been rung, but those who were on deck peered at the crowd over the rails, whispering to each other. “Place the gangplank. I’ll speak with them.”

“Is that wise?”

“We’ll soon find out.”

Jacquotte strode down the gangplank to meet the men. She chose not to bring anyone with her. If things went wrong, they would have time to prepare.

“Good afternoon, gentlemen,” she said, beaming. “Can I help you with something? Are you looking to join my crew?”

One of the men stepped forward. There was a cutlass in his hand. “Are you the captain?”

“I am,” she said, forcing the smile to stay on her face.

“Stand down,” the Englishman said with authority. He was wearing the uniform of an English soldier. Several of the men in the crowd were. “We’ve come for our women.”

Some part of her had expected a retaliation. A man here or there who came and demanded his wife back. Some of the women had reported this problem to Jacquotte. The men who skulked around the docks had become more brazen. But she hadn’t anticipated this.

“No,” she said firmly, loud enough for them all to hear. “You will not be taking anyone. These women are no longer any of your concern. They are being cared for and treated well, and that is all that matters.”

The Englishman bristled and spat at her feet. “We are not asking, bitch,” he said. “Move.”

“No.”

His cutlass stabbed forward. Jacquotte lurched out of the way. Her pistol was in her hand, and she pointed it right between his eyes. “I wouldn’t do that if I

were you,” she said. “If, by some miracle, you make it past me and onto my ship, then you’ll have to face three hundred pirates before you so much as think of taking these women. Are you a gambling man? Because I do not like those odds.”

The man flushed deep red. His sword quivered at his side. The others around him shifted nervously. She saw their eyes travel to the rails of *Dayana’s Revenge*. More of her crew were gathered there now, vastly outnumbering the men before her.

“Do you know who I am?”

Jacquotte regarded him for a long moment. “I cannot say that I do,” she mused. “Care to enlighten me?”

“I am Sir—”

“Sir Henry Darnley,” a voice said from behind her. “He’s the Governor of Port Royal’s right-hand man. He is my husband.”

Anne was beside her. Her mouth was set in a firm line, and there was a dagger in her hand. She looked the very picture of a pirate.

Jacquotte took a step away from Darnley but kept her pistol level.

“Anne,” Darnley sniffed. He looked upon his wife with a contempt that boiled Jacquotte’s blood. “If you want no bloodshed, you will come with me.”

Some of the pirates had begun to walk down the gangplank to join them. Lennox, Ojo, Ayotunde, Elizabeth, Miguel, Samada.

“I don’t belong to you,” Anne said. She stood taller. “*None* of these women belong to any of you. Go home. You aren’t welcome here.”

“You heard the woman,” Jacquotte said, waving her pistol. “Leave.”

Darnley looked her over. It appeared as though he might concede, and then he lunged. Jacquotte was too slow. He dodged her, his sword aiming for Anne’s throat. Miguel was there at once, his blade meeting Darnley’s own. His hands trembled under the strain, but he kicked out, knocking the Englishman back.

“She’s *pregnant*, you monster,” he snarled. “Get away from her.”

Darnley’s head snapped up. Jacquotte’s did as well. She’d had no idea.

“Then she must return home,” Darnley insisted. “That is *my* child.”

“Perhaps. Perhaps not,” Anne said. She moved to stand beside Miguel.

Darnley had turned a shade of deep red and he was shaking uncontrollably.

“Then you will spend the rest of your days in prison for adultery,” he seethed, teeth clenched.

Jacquotte’s pistol was still level with the Englishman’s head, but Miguel blocked her path. “You won’t be taking her anywhere,” he said, a deep anger in his voice.

Darnley sneered. “That child could be *mine*.”

“And I will love it like my own, regardless,” he said. His voice was raised and quaking, but he held his cutlass firm. “I am a man of God, sir, but if you move a single hand to harm either of them, I will not hesitate to kill you where you stand.”

Despite the silence in the air, and the threat of violence hanging between them, Jacquotte’s heart swelled. She had never been prouder of Miguel.

“You and your men are leaving,” Jacquotte said, drawing their attention to her. “I don’t want to have to explain to the Governor how his right-hand was killed by pirates because he couldn’t contain his jealousy.”

Darnley scowled at her. He looked from her pistol to Miguel and Anne, to the pirates on the dock, to those lining *Dayana’s Revenge*. He took a step back. “Don’t think we won’t be back. The Governor knows you are wanted by the French.” He sneered at her. “The Governor will hear of the slaves you stole, and it shall not be long before a second warrant is out for your arrest. You’ll make a fine addition to the corpses hanging from the crag.”

“You would not live to see the day,” Jacquotte said. “I’d make sure of it.”

There was a moment of silence. But slowly, Darnley and his men trailed off. Her heart hammered in her chest as the last of them disappeared down the streets. She stood there, watching, waiting.

She embraced Anne and Miguel, before climbing up the gangplank. Emotions washed over her in waves. Anger, mostly, but there was something beneath it. Fear. She looked at her crew. How was she to protect three hundred people? All of them were wanted in some way. How was she to keep the Governor’s men, the angry husbands and fathers, the French and anyone else who didn’t care for them, from picking them off one by one?

Samada was at her side as soon as she set foot on deck.

“I need you to find all the spare men’s clothes we have. Buy extra if you have to. Use my shares to do it,” she told the girl. “Give them to the women to wear when they go to town. Make sure they go out in groups, and that they are armed at all times.”

“Yes, Captain.”

She took another deep breath. She looked back at Port Royal, its empty docks. The taverners who peered from shuttered windows, awaiting a fight.

Rage bubbled inside her. The vendors wouldn’t take her money, the Englishmen wanted them dead, and the townsfolk looked on while they were harassed and attacked. But with that rage came a realization. They would never be safe in Port Royal. Men would always be lying in wait. There would soon be further warrants out for her arrest. The maroons were only now just free, but they were treated like criminals for their freedom. She had once thought that Port Royal would be her home, a place for promise, but now she knew that wasn’t the case.

They had to leave Port Royal, and find a new place to call home. Only one place came to her mind.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

THE DESK was littered with scraps of paper and broken quills. Maps were scattered around, crushed beneath journals and dog-eared books. Pages had been torn out and tacked to the walls of the captain's quarters. Everything was covered in a messy scrawl that did not look like it belonged to Jacquotte. It was not her normal, seasoned hand, the one that proved she had been educated by a French nobleman. This was jagged and hurried, near indecipherable. It looked as though it had been plucked from the mind of a madman.

Jacquotte's eyes burned. She had spent hours scrutinizing their options. She wanted to make the right decision and to take into account all prospects. But could it be possible? Could Fort de Rocher be the place where they could all be safe? Most towns despised pirates. Cuba had been a candidate, but the strong Spanish presence there made it difficult. There were pirates in the Americas, but those lands did not care for women, and blacks and mulattoes there weren't free. Nowhere else felt right.

There was one thought that she kept pushing from her mind, for she did not wish to muddy her convictions, but still it lurked. Taking Fort de Rocher as their home would also mean taking away from Florián what he most desired.

A gentle knock came from the door.

"No," Jacquotte snapped. "I'm busy."

There was a moment of hesitation, then another knock, a feather against the door. "Jacquotte. It's me."

Jacquotte paused, before sighing. "Come in, Teresa."

There was a worried smile on her face when she entered, carrying a steaming bowl. Teresa looked from Jacquotte to the mess surrounding her. "I brought you some stew," she said, putting it on the desk. "Goat. Your favorite."

Jacquotte gave a thin smile. "Thank you."

"How are you feeling?"

“I’m fine,” she insisted, though she didn’t sound convincing. “I am still exploring our best course of action.”

Teresa peered at the maps. Jacquotte had scrawled across almost every port in the West Indies with the reasons why they could not go there. *Hates blacks. Hates women. No pirates. Poor trade routes.* “It looks bleak.”

Jacquotte nodded. “Aye.”

“It would be simpler to build our own town, at this rate,” Teresa sighed. Jacquotte watched as Teresa scanned the maps on the wall, attempting to decipher her scrawl. “What about this one?” Teresa asked. Jacquotte followed her finger. “It says ‘potential.’”

Jacquotte nodded. “Tortuga,” she said. “The island is almost entirely inhabited by pirates.”

“Would that be a possibility?”

“Perhaps,” she said with a shrug. “But we’d have to abide by their codes and conventions.”

“Is that such a problem?”

“Not truly,” Jacquotte admitted. “Whichever town we join will have a code of their own, and we’d have to pay a modest retainer to live there more permanently.”

“Oh.” Teresa sounded as deflated as she felt. “That sounds no different from Port Royal.”

Jacquotte nodded. It did. Tortuga was a safe haven for pirates, certainly, but they would just be putting themselves in the same position they were in now, only with new masters. Their lives and livelihoods would be in the hands of others yet again.

Teresa wrapped an arm around Jacquotte and kissed her softly. “What of this harbor?” She pointed again to Tortuga, but to the square of map Jacquotte had been staring at for hours. She had circled it until the pen nib ripped through the paper.

Jacquotte swallowed. “Fort de Rocher.”

“Really? The site of Juan Felipe’s victory?”

“The very one.” Jacquotte couldn’t keep the excitement out of her voice as she spoke. “It seems it has been left to fester, lying dormant ever since the

invasion. Only a meager Spanish presence remains according to... my information,” she said, choosing her words carefully.

“I remember the stories, the Governor’s intentions for the town to be built, his dreams for the fort’s future. But he never acted on it. All that work, just to let it fall to nothing. I suppose that’s all they were... Stories and dreams, never to come to anything.”

“They might yet, if we set our sights on it.”

“What more is there to explore? We could build this town for ourselves, a fresh start... a new haven, a community...”

“We would still have to take it from the Spanish,” Jacquotte noted. “We would endure another battle on land.”

“Then I shall leave you to your musing,” Teresa said with a smile. “For there is no one I trust more to choose our battles.”

She slipped out the door, leaving Jacquotte alone with her thoughts.

It was as though a cog fell into place. Her instincts had not failed her yet. Did Juan Felipe, did Blackhand, did Florián sit about questioning their convictions? She hardly thought so. She had to trust herself.

Though Teresa had been exaggerating, she was right. It *would* be simpler to build their own town. Why should they go in search of a new home only to live by the rules of others? Why shouldn’t they have the opportunity to make their own rules? Forge their own destinies. Building their own town would be a great deal of work, but Fort de Rocher was the perfect town. It was once the strongest hold on Tortuga, the hub of the pirate haven. And now it had fallen into obscurity. Leaving the current occupants vulnerable.

But the soil was fertile. Its port had good access to weathered trade routes from Hispaniola, Cuba, Jamaica, and the Americas. The town could be fortified, and protected by the pirate towns all across the island. It could be molded into her image. The perfect town. It could be exactly what they needed.

She scoured her desk for the letters from Florián to the French.

Jacquotte found the one she was looking for immediately. It was weathered and worn from the hours she had spent reading it. It was Florián’s latest call for support. He had failed to convince those he needed to, and it was clear the French would provide him no resources or soldiers. Within, it detailed

everything she could possibly need. Florián's accounting of Fort de Rocher, the measly number of soldiers stationed there, how many civilians, the arsenal at their command. He described points of ingress, the poor state the town had been in since Juan Felipe had abandoned it, and the lack of Spanish governance and oversight.

A slow smile spread across her lips. It wouldn't be Florián who would restore Fort de Rocher. It would be Jacquotte.

She crossed the room and flung open the door.

"Samada!" she called.

The girl stumbled out of her room, bleary-eyed but awake. "Captain?"

"Gather my mates."



Her mates were gathered around the table. Exhausted, mildly annoyed, but present. She had laid out her plans to them in full, not stopping to allow questions until the end, barely taking the time to breathe. The ideas flooded out of her. She was hardly able to contain her excitement. When she was finished, they looked around at each other, sharing slightly concerned looks.

Jacquotte was ready for their questions.

"Won't the Spanish come for us if we take it from them?" Miguel asked.

"The Spanish do not value Fort de Rocher. They have not cared for the island since before Juan Felipe was killed. If they do not care for it now, they will not care to spend their vital resources reclaiming it," Jacquotte said, parroting Florián's letter to the French.

Jacquotte took a moment. She had chosen not to tell her companions about how she came to know this information. Nor had she told them of Florián's desire for Fort de Rocher. They would not need to know of the additional victory it would be to conquer the town Florián so desperately longed for, not until they had taken it for themselves.

"It's a failing town," Jacquotte went on. "The inhabitants are predominantly civilians. Mostly workers and builders, with a middling armed presence to stave off the pirates in the surrounding towns. If the information I have is correct, then it is just waiting to be taken."

A quiet murmur rose up amongst the group, but she could see the excitement on their faces.

“Our very own town?” Francisco asked. “No soldiers, no codes to follow?”

“Exactly,” Jacquotte said. The more she thought about it, the more she realized the plan could work. “We take this town from the Spanish and claim it as our own. Give it new life. It was once the heart of an island of pirates. It can become that again. A home for people like us, the abused and mistreated and forgotten, where we can all be equal, where none have to fear. We can work to rebuild the town, to make it the first port of call for all pirates, not Port Royal.”

Mbala nodded solemnly. “We could reforge the ties with the other pirate towns,” he noted. “Unite the island as one.”

Teresa beamed. “It would be perfect,” she said. “A home where we can all be safe.”

Jacquotte nodded. “Yes,” she said. “So, what do you think?”

It took only a moment for them all to agree. A smile lit up her face.

Elizabeth looked over the maps on the table. “But how do you plan we take an impenetrable town?”

Jacquotte had been waiting for someone to ask. “By surprise,” she said. She shuffled through the papers until she found what she was looking for. “Here. This is the route of a ship that sails between Hispaniola and Fort de Rocher every other week. We catch it away from the island and use it to sneak into the town.”

“Disguised?” Francisco asked.

“Exactly,” Jacquotte said. “The fortress is on a plateau above the town. We wait until nightfall and send in two small parties. According to these letters they are so undermanned that no one guards it by night. Of the five connected towers in the wall surrounding the fortress, only three remain. And one path leads to La Vasseur’s reduit, his keep, at the top. We set it ablaze.”

“Brilliant,” Lennox said. “A classic strategy. Keep the Spaniards from retreating into the safety of the fortress.”

Jacquotte nodded. “And it would act as a signal.”

“For what?” Mbala asked.

“The assault on the town,” she said. Her body vibrated with excitement. “Three groups, converging from all sides. East, west, and from the confines of the stolen ship. We cut the Spaniards off from all angles. And they’ll have nowhere to barricade themselves for safety, driving them out of the town.”

She could see the excitement brighten everyone’s faces. They pored over the maps and plans before them, discussing who would best lead and serve each group.

Jacquotte cleared her throat. “We should tell the crew at once.”

Mbala cocked his head. “Are we not calling a vote?”

Jacquotte looked at them, confused. “Why would we need to call for a vote?”

“Because we always call a vote,” Miguel reminded her.

The others shared a look, murmuring amongst themselves. She felt Teresa’s eyes on her, but Jacquotte refused to meet her gaze.

“We have no other options,” Jacquotte said. She was eager to get to work, to start preparations, to leave Port Royal once and for all. “We all agree that Fort de Rocher is the ideal place for us to make our home. A vote would be a waste of everyone’s time. The longer we take to deliberate, the higher the chance that the English grow brazen once more and attack us. I am the captain, you are my mates, and we have come to an agreement. There is no need for a vote.”

“Agreed,” Lennox said. “Let us inform the crew.”

Jacquotte beamed. Soon she would have everything she ever wanted. A safe haven for her crew. A home to call her own.

And one place that would never belong to Florián Gonzaga.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

THE CREW had been celebrating since they set sail. The sun was just beginning to set, and it would be only a few short hours until it rose again. Jacquotte had orchestrated their leave from Jamaica swiftly. But they would return for their loved ones soon. Four days until they reached Fort de Rocher. Until it was finally hers.

She had not wanted to deprive the crew of celebration. Around the deck they'd brought barrels and crates and anything they could find for seating, and she'd spent a small fortune on food and drink. Those who could play had become their musicians for the night. She wanted to give them something to remember as they embarked on the journey for their new home.

She still felt that spark inside her. She had found her people a home. They would all get what they deserved. Jacquotte and her people would finally have a place all their own, where they made the rules, where they could be free. And Florián would get nothing.

Miguel and Anne danced past her. They had been dancing for hours, lost in each other's arms, and she wondered if they'd ever tire of it. By the looks in their eyes, she guessed not.

Mbala and Francisco were nearby, teaching Elizabeth, Samada, and Ojo one of the complicated card games the English so enjoyed. The two were sprawled across a blanket. Mbala sat with his legs outstretched, and Francisco lounged between them, leaning his back on his chest for support. They looked like a painting, draped around each other in an embrace so casually intimate that she almost felt she should look away. There was something so freeing about seeing them like that, two of her closest friends in love. It made her nervous.

It was dawning on her that though she had dreamed of going to Fort de Rocher all her life, she really knew nothing about it. Would it truly be the

perfect place for her crew, or simply retribution? She was not sure she knew anymore.

“Jacquotte.”

Teresa stood above her. She had put on a new dress for the occasion, one they'd found in the captain's quarters, amongst the finery. It reminded Jacquotte of the dress she'd worn the night they first met. It was slightly too small for her, accentuating her soft, round figure.

Jacquotte heaved herself to her feet, reached up, and kissed her. “By God, but you're beautiful,” she said.

Teresa laughed. “Perhaps I should dress like this more often.”

“The dress is not what makes you beautiful.”

Teresa took her hand, intertwining their fingers. “Come. I want to show you something.”

Jacquotte let herself be led. They weaved through the crew. They were dancing and eating and kissing and she could feel the joy emanating from them all. It swelled her chest with pride. They would never have felt this way under Blackhand. They would never have been *allowed* to feel this way.

Teresa led her away from the throng, to the prow of the ship, far enough that they could no longer make out the features of the person nearest to them, and the music became echoes out to sea.

“Why have you brought me here?” Jacquotte asked, pulling Teresa close. She had to speak loudly over the winds. “Do you intend to ravish your captain?”

Teresa laughed. Jacquotte loved the way she laughed. Loud and brash and full of life. It was one of her favorite things about her. Teresa turned her around to face the sea ahead of them. Jacquotte tried to turn back toward her, but Teresa held her firm.

Jacquotte cocked an eyebrow. “What are we doing?”

“We're taking a moment to be with the sea.”

“Why?”

“Because a long time ago, you told me that you liked to be with the sea to clear your mind,” Teresa said. She paused. “Although, come to think of it, I've never seen you do it. Perhaps it was just your attempt to lead me away from the festivities so you could have your way with me.”

“It was both,” Jacquotte said, laughing.

Teresa was right. She couldn't remember the last time she had been alone with the sea. It was a trick Richelieu had taught her. To look to the water, to let the spray against your skin cleanse your mind. But the sea hadn't been a source of peace for her lately. It had taken so much from her. She had lost Roberto and Alberto so close to its waters. And now, a part of her looked upon it with distrust.

She took a deep breath, closed her eyes, and let the sea spray caress her skin. The air filled her lungs, fresh and cool and strong with salt. She let her mind be at peace, to think of nothing but the waves lapping against her ship. She let everything be calm and still and peaceful. But in the back of her mind, there was still a niggling that she could not shake. She was lying to her crew, to her friends, to Teresa. It would all be worth it soon enough, when Fort de Rocher was finally theirs, but the guilt welled up inside her and she could not contain it.

“Isn't that better?” Teresa asked at last.

Jacquotte opened her eyes. “It is,” she lied, faking a smile. “Thank you, Teresa.”

Teresa moved closer and wrapped her arms around Jacquotte's waist. She leaned into the touch, letting the larger woman sway them back and forth, almost like a dance.

“I just want you to be at peace,” she told her. “You've been so serious. Always working on something. You're running yourself ragged, and I don't want you to be unfocused in Tortuga. I don't want anything to happen to you.”

First Francisco and now Teresa. She felt like her friends were conspiring against her. While she knew they were right, she had taken on responsibilities when she became captain. She had chosen this job, and the crew were relying on her. She wouldn't let them down. She couldn't.

“When we go to Tortuga, I want to join you in battle.”

Jacquotte was so startled she almost fell out of Teresa's arms.

“No,” she said firmly. She pulled her closer, cradling her face with her good hand. “Teresa, you are too important for me to lose.”

“But I want to be there, by your side. Keeping you safe. I don't want anything to happen to you,” Teresa said. Her breathing was shaky and Jacquotte realized

she was holding back tears. “If I’m with you, then I can help.”

Jacquotte leaned in and kissed her cheek. “I need you to stay on the ship,” she said. “You must look after everyone who can’t fight. They need someone there to protect them, to calm them while we’re away. I wouldn’t trust anyone with that but you. I need you to stay on the ship. Promise me you will?”

After a long moment, Teresa nodded. She hesitated. “I... I love you, Jacquotte.”

Her heart stopped in her chest.

It was not a word they had spoken between them in the two months since they had confessed their affections for one another in the cookroom of *The Marauder. Love*. But it was something Jacquotte had felt with her entire being for longer than she had been willing to admit. She had felt it that night when they slept together in the cookroom. She had felt it when she showed Teresa the market and watched her come to life. She had felt it when they had kissed in the Governor’s manor. And some part of her had felt it that first night they’d met. But one thing she was certain of was that she loved Teresa, with all her heart.

Jacquotte pulled Teresa to her, slowly, gently. She pushed herself up onto her toes and wrapped her arms around her neck, pressing herself into the soft curves of her body, her fingers in her hair, her lips to the crescent moon birthmark. When their lips came together, their kiss was anything but gentle. There was a heat in the way Teresa kissed her, a desperation, a hunger.

Jacquotte was dizzy when they finally broke apart for breath, her lips bruised. She looked at Teresa, hair messy from her fingers, skin flushed from their kisses.

“I love you, Teresa,” Jacquotte said. “I love you.”

They kissed until Jacquotte took her by the hand and led her back into their quarters. They lay together, hands exploring skin, lips nipping and kissing, and loved each other like the night they first met. Their bodies, slick with sweat, limbs intertwined, the whole world forgotten around them.

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

THERE SHE is, Captain.”

Their target sailed toward them, oblivious of the danger it was in.

Tortuga was just north of Port-de-Paix, and the farther they sailed, the more Spanish vessels they passed. With Jacquotte’s new colors replaced with a Spanish flag, none were aware that *Dayana’s Revenge* was an impostor, and so they had faced no resistance.

The wind was strong, and they had made good time. But as they sailed farther north, she felt that same pang in her gut that she had the last time they’d sailed so close to Hispaniola. Compared to the built-up town of Port Royal, the coastal villages of her homeland were rugged and bare; all white sand, thick copses of trees, wooden shacks, and farmland, green as far as the eye could see. A longing rose within her, alongside memories of Yáquimo that she had long since buried.

“To your stations, people!” Lennox hollered, voice booming across the ship. “Move! Move! Move!”

The crew began to prepare. Some moved belowdecks, to be away from the fighting, while others passed around weapons and clambered into the rigging or moved to man the cannons.

“Jacquotte.”

Teresa climbed the quarterdeck stairs.

“Is something the m—”

Teresa pulled her into a kiss. Fierce and deep, holding Jacquotte’s face pressed between her soft hands. Francisco and Samada and some of the others were nearby, and they whistled and clapped and laughed.

“Promise me you’re coming back,” Teresa said. Jacquotte tried to answer her with another kiss, but Teresa wouldn’t let her. “Promise me.”

“I would never leave you.”

“Be serious,” she pouted.

“I am,” Jacquotte said. “I would walk to hell and back again to be with you.”

Teresa smiled and pulled her into another kiss. “Good.”

The ship’s bell rang. The sound reverberated through Jacquotte’s boots and up to her teeth. She scowled at Simón, who at least had the decency to shoot her an apologetic look.

She pulled Teresa close again. “One last kiss? For good luck.”

“You’re spoiled, Captain Delahaye.”

But she kissed her anyway, sweetly, longingly.

“I’m coming back for you,” she promised. “You won’t be rid of me that easily.”

“I should hope not.”

“I love you, Teresa.”

“I love you, Jacquotte.”

She watched as Teresa hurried belowdecks, her heart hammering in her chest. Francisco wrapped an arm around her shoulders and pulled her close.

“I thought we might lose you again to the captain’s quarters,” he said with a laugh.

“Don’t test me, Santos, or you just might.” She laughed too and pushed Francisco away. “Now move. You’re with the boarders.”

“Yes, Captain.”

Dayana’s Revenge closed the distance between them and the Spanish brigantine. The first boarders advanced.

Jacquotte’s hand itched at her cutlass. She liked to be in the fray. She loved the thrill of the grappling hook catching the rail, of clambering up the side of an enemy ship and barreling in, sword raised. She didn’t want to wait on *Dayana’s Revenge*, overseeing the musketeers, but her left arm and ankle made it impossible for her to be a part of the first wave of boarders.

Elizabeth led the musketeers. She ordered them into formation.

“Prepare for boarding!” Lennox hollered.

Dayana’s Revenge closed in. Lennox and Ayotunde hauled the gangplank into position. It took all of her will not to run up and vault over the board as it was being placed. Her impatience crawled over her skin like a swarm of ants.

When the gangplank was in position, Jacquotte led the charge, her crew close at hand. Their pounding footsteps bounced the gangplank and she struggled to keep her footing.

A Spanish sailor stood at the end of the plank. He kicked and the board shuddered. Jacquotte hastened toward him, but he kicked again, almost sending them tumbling into the waters below. She regained her footing and charged. She slammed into him with her shoulder, knocking him to the deck, and gutted him. Her shoulder throbbed with the pain, but the thrill was enough to distract her.

There were few Spaniards aboard the brigantine. Her papers had told her they would number about thirty, and they had been right. In the wake of the first boarders, fewer than two dozen remained. They were not practiced fighters. This would be over soon enough.

Jacquotte narrowly avoided the heel of a boot that would have knocked her off the ship. A group had gathered around the gangplank, trying to stop more pirates from boarding. She lashed out at her assailant, cutting him across the neck. He stumbled backward and Mbala rushed toward him. He grabbed the man by the head and smashed it into the head of another man.

A short, burly Spaniard lunged at her, but this time she wasn't fast enough. His foot crushed her ankle, and she howled in pain, pinned to the deck. She slashed his legs and he leapt away. He froze suddenly, and turned just in time for Jacquotte to see the smoking hole in his head.

A grimy hand reached out to her. Jacquotte looked up to see Elizabeth standing above her. The older woman was covered in blood and grinning wildly.

"Captain," she said as she helped Jacquotte to her feet.

"Thank you," she managed, though there was little breath in her lungs. She cursed to herself. Her ankle had been healing well. She didn't want to think about how long it would take now.

The sound of swords clashing drew her mind back to the deck. Her crew had overwhelmed the ship. There were few Spaniards left. Had she wanted, they could have taken out the entire Spanish crew, left nothing but for corpses to feed the sharks. But they were not worth even the time to kill.

Jacquotte pulled out her pistol and fired it once into the air. "Who's in charge here?" she demanded loudly. When no one moved, she exchanged the pistol for

another and raised it in the direction of a group of Spaniards. The sailors looked at her, ceasing their battle against the pirates. "I said, who is in charge here? Bring him to me and we will end this bloodshed. *Now.*"

All at once, the Spanish dropped their weapons. Rapiers and hatchets and pistols clattered to the deck atop the bodies of their fallen companions. They whispered amongst themselves, searching for their captain.

The man finally shuffled through their ranks. His hat was askew and his face smeared with blood, but she could tell by his many decorative tassels that he was their leader.

"We surrender" were the first words from his mouth. Jacquotte smiled at the ease of it all. The captain must have mistaken the look, because he continued. "We are close to our destination, Fort de Rocher in Tortuga. Our benefactor will give you anything you want in exchange for our safe return."

"You already have everything we need," Jacquotte told him.

He looked at her, confused. "What do you mean?"

"Your uniforms."

He looked aghast. "You want our *uniforms*?"

"Corpses' too." She took a step back and leveled the pistol with his head. "Now strip, gentlemen, before I lose my patience."

CHAPTER FORTY

YOU'RE LATE."

There was a hush across the deck as the harbormaster scowled at them.

Fort de Rocher was before them. The beach gave way to dirt streets and lines of stone and wood houses. She could see a small market to the east, a grand manor she presumed belonged to the Governor, and, presiding over all, the fort. She could not quite believe it lay before her. It was on the plateau above the town, and a path wended through the hillside up to it. Jacquotte had memorized the plans of the town. She could have walked the streets blindfolded and backward and still found her way to the fort's three separate entrances.

The harbormaster tapped his foot impatiently. Jacquotte peered over her shoulder, careful not to draw attention to herself as she pretended to swab the deck. She kept her head low, hiding her dark skin and the bloody gash that ran through her coat.

"Apologies," Elizabeth said, her voice deep and low.

The harbormaster scrutinized Elizabeth. "You are not the usual captain."

"He fell ill with sweating sickness."

Hidden beneath Jacquotte's ill-fitting blue coat was a small arsenal: her cutlass, pistols, and knives. She shuffled closer to them, back still turned.

"Very well," he said at length. "The storeroom is this way."

Elizabeth followed him off the ship. There was only one other ship in the harbor besides their commandeered brigantine. A sloop flying no flags, but loaded to the brim with barrels. The Spanish were stocking up, it seemed, though on what, she was uncertain. Once they were out of sight, Jacquotte and the others hurried belowdecks. Within, the ship was packed with pirates.

"Wait for the signal," Jacquotte warned the group they were leaving behind. "If there's any trouble, ring the ship's bell and shoot into the air. We'll come back for you."

Mbala nodded. “We won’t let you down, Captain.”

The uniformed pirates left the ship carrying barrels and crates filled with straw. As they streamed out of the ship and toward the storeroom, Lennox and Ojo took the others in the longboats on the starboard side of the ship. She glanced over her shoulder in time to see the longboats slip silently away into the gloom of the night.

As the last barrels entered the storeroom, the harbormaster looked at them skeptically. “They don’t seem heavy enough,” he muttered. “I swear, if that Hernandez has shorted me again—”

He opened the crate closest to him. Before the lid had hit the ground, Jacquotte had her pistol in hand, aimed at his head. He looked from the crate to the pistol in disbelief.

“What is the meaning of this?” he demanded. He looked to Elizabeth. “Sir, what are you—”

Elizabeth smashed the butt of her musket into his head. He fell to the ground in a heap. When he cried out, Jacquotte hurried across the room and pressed the barrel of her pistol to his head. “Make one more sound and it will be your last.”

Jacquotte could not believe how seamlessly her plan was unfolding. Lying to her friends would all have been worth it soon. One day, she would tell them of how she had come to know of the town’s vulnerabilities, and of Florián’s desires for it. Perhaps someday they would even laugh about it. But the hardest part was still to come. They waited in the storeroom in silence until night had well and truly fallen. Under cover of darkness, twelve of them crept outside and began their journey to the town.

She had been dreaming of this moment since she was a child, the day she would finally see the infamous fort the town was named for. She could still remember the way the Governor spoke of it, grand, beautiful, impenetrable. A bulwark against any great force by sea or land. To see it for herself was like nothing she could ever have dreamed of.

Great walls of harsh white-gray stone towered over the town from a plateau thirty feet high. She counted the gun ports along the wall as they ran. Twenty-four of them overlooking the harbor. And, while two of the towers and walls

were still being repaired, it was still an imposing sight. Once she was in charge, she would restore it to its former glory.

There were no guards posted along the path up to the plateau, and they arrived at the fort without incident. Jacquotte was thankful. The fewer innocents who died, the better. She and Francisco split their group into two teams of five, one following him and the other with her. Francisco and his band slunk away into the night, leaving Jacquotte with Elizabeth, Samada, Vicente, Simón, and Addae.

The door to the southwestern watchtower was unlocked, and together they slipped through. There were no guards in sight. It was only a short distance from the southern watchtower to the high tower at the top of the fort, their destination. La Vasseur's réduit.

They advanced, clinging to the shadows, and followed the stairs leading upward. They were about to continue, when Jacquotte saw something. A shadow flickering. She crept forward, hand reaching for her cutlass. She heard mumbled words. There was a door on each side of the corridor ahead. Both were closed, but light streamed out of the cracks in their frames. She let out a sigh of relief and beckoned her crew on.

They were so close. The stairs to the high watchtower were just around the corner.

They hurried past the doors, shuffling as silently as possible. Samada and Addae were the first across. Then Elizabeth and Simón. Vicente dashed after them. Too quickly.

She watched in horror as his foot caught an uneven stone tile. His pistol flew from his hand and when it hit the ground, it fired. The sound echoed off the walls, so loud that it beat a rhythm into her ears.

The door to the left-hand room slammed open.

“What do you think you’re doing?” a soldier demanded. “You’re away from your post.”

Jacquotte's breath caught in her throat.

“Well? I’m wai—wait a moment... you’re not... *Guards!*”

Three soldiers burst out of the room behind him. She barely had time to draw her cutlass before they were upon them. She slashed up, knocking away a

sword that raced down toward her, and leapt away. Vicente was not so lucky. The second soldier's blade came down hard and fast and lopped his hand off.

Jacquotte lowered her sword and brought it up sharply, slicing the soldier's groin. He cried out and fell, and she lunged at the second guard. His sword was missing, but he grabbed her sword hand and pulled her close, too close for her to slash at him. She smashed her face into his. She heard his nose crunch and break and she stumbled away, head pounding.

The second door opened. Five guards charged out toward them.

The soldiers moved into formation, trapping the pirates in a tight circle. Samada and Addae were nearby, fighting back to back, hacking and slashing at those who dared come close. Simón was on the floor, almost lost beneath the tread of Spanish boots. Jacquotte turned her bad shoulder to the soldiers and charged. Each body felt like a mallet to her bones, but she steeled herself until she broke through their ranks.

Away from the throng, she could see Elizabeth grappling with a soldier. He had a rapier pressed close to her face, but she held it back with her bare hands, pushing with a strength Jacquotte had not known she possessed. Blood spilled down her hands and arms and dripped onto her face.

Jacquotte drew her pistol. Bodies moved so much it took her a moment to line up the shot, but then she had him in her sights. She fired and the man tumbled to the ground. Elizabeth was free. No other soldiers had broken ranks, so she turned back to the fray.

One of the men lurched forward, grabbed her sword hand, and punched her hard in the jaw. Jacquotte stumbled backward, but he didn't relent, and the fist came again and again. She braced herself for a fourth punch that would never come. Instead, a musket ball burst through his chest and he slumped backward, keeling over.

She looked around for her savior. *Francisco*. He slung the musket onto his back and pulled out his cutlass just in time to slit the throat of a Spaniard who had turned a rapier to him.

With the other pirates at their side, the tide turned. Soon enough, the Spanish soldiers lay dead in heaps at their feet.

Jacquotte looked amongst the dead. Vicente and Simón were gone. And she could see from those with Francisco that Jane was missing. It could have been worse, but the knowledge brought her no solace. Three people who had trusted her with their lives were now dead. She steeled herself against the rising guilt. When they took Fort de Rocher, there would be less death.

“What are you doing here?” she asked Francisco when she finally caught her breath.

“A thank-you would be nice.” He spat out a tooth with a grimace. “We heard the fight... Teresa would gut me if I let you die.”

“Thank you,” she said, finding a small smile. She looked at the crew. “Let’s go. The tower is close.”

Jacquotte and Francisco took the lead, weapons raised. The high watchtower was empty. Together she and the remaining pirates tore down the wooden shutters from the windows. Sewn into the linings of their stolen Spanish uniforms were rags soaked in Blackhand’s old stores of rum.

Francisco pulled out the flint and tinder. The rags caught on the second spark. The fire grew quickly, spreading across the shutters and growing until it licked the wooden panels of the roof. It swelled until they were forced to run from the tower as black smoke began to clog their lungs.

They grinned as they turned down the stairs, congratulating one another and clapping each other on the back.

“Jacquotte, look.”

She moved to the thin arrow-slit window on the stairs and peered out. She could see the brigantine docked in the harbor. Torches lit up the ship and pirates streamed from the vessel and were charging into the town. They were a hundred strong. She could hear the faint rumble of their battle cries as they clashed with the Spanish soldiers stationed at the docks. To the east and west, torches flickered, headed toward the town. Lennox and Ojo would be leading another fifty pirates each into Fort de Rocher.

Francisco wrapped an arm around her shoulders. There was an excited grin on his face. “Are you ready to take Fort de Rocher, Captain?”

Jacquotte met his smile with one of her own. “I’m ready to take our home.”

Together they turned and charged back down the tower stairs. Her crew were at their heels, ready to meet the waves of pirates invading the town from all angles. It would all be theirs soon enough.

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

A BELL TOLLED in the night.

Thick smoke billowed from the fire blazing atop the tower, blanketing Fort de Rocher. Through it, Jacquotte could just see the clock tower in the Governor's manor. She could hear a faint cry above the frantic ringing.

"Pirates! Pirates!"

Distantly, she heard a musket shot and a dull thud, and the tolling stopped. But it was too late. Cries and shouts came up from the houses. It washed in waves over the town as the Spanish opened their doors and windows to see Fort de Rocher swarming with pirates and their fort ablaze. Citizens ran from their homes and out into the streets. Some turned and fled, while others engaged with the pirates they came across, taking up whatever arms they could find.

At the shore, Mbala and his group were locked in battle with the soldiers who had been guarding the seafront that night. She could just hear Lennox and his pirates to the west and Ojo's to the east, converging on the town.

"Leave the citizens," Jacquotte warned her group. "Kill only the soldiers and anyone who turns a weapon on us."

They ran, headed toward Mbala and the crew at the shore. But they were on opposite sides of the town. The fort was built onto a plateau, and they followed its winding path down until they reached the town. People screamed and babes cried as they fled, and men struggled to dress and find their weapons.

As soon as they reached the town, they clashed with a group of Spaniards, disheveled and disoriented. There were far more soldiers than there should have been. Jacquotte and her crew drew their weapons, and Francisco moved to her left, choosing to protect her weaker side. She was grateful; she wouldn't have been strong or fast enough to stop any incoming blows. They dispatched the soldiers easily and kept running, their pace slowing only slightly when their boots met the sand.

Jacquotte launched herself at the first soldier she saw. A strong flick of the wrist and he went down quickly. With the aid of her group, the soldiers who had been backing Mbala and his pirates out into the water were dwindling fast. Some had even begun to retreat. But then she heard something. A harsh metal screeching. Wheels.

She spun around, searching the town, and saw the doors to a large wooden building opening. She had assumed it was a barn, but now she could see it was not. It was a barracks. She cursed. There hadn't been a barracks in the plans. Fort de Rocher was supposed to be undermanned, with few weapons or resources.

It was then that she realized: the information had been wrong. Florián had lied to the French. How could she have been so reckless? How could she believe the words of a liar? She didn't have time to think.

From within, four men emerged, heaving a great black metal contraption. It took her longer than it should have to recognize it as a cannon.

"To the ship!" Jacquotte ordered, shouting as loud as she could. "They have a cannon!"

The others stopped around her, confused, until their eyes landed on the Spaniards wheeling the weapon. They turned and scrambled through the wet sand, wading into the water until it was up to their knees, and clambered into the protection of the ship. It wouldn't stop a cannonball from ripping through them, but it would create distance between the ball and their flesh, and hide them from plain sight.

Jacquotte struggled through the water, ushering pirates in front of her. She watched as they disappeared belowdecks. Four men turned the cannon and began to load it. Her heart was hammering in her chest. She looked around. She wouldn't have time to make it onto the ship, not with half the group still struggling through the water. But she was their captain. She wouldn't leave them behind.

She braced herself as the cannon was loaded. Mbala was still in the water. He was heavy, and struggling to pull himself and an injured Elizabeth through the choppy waters. The cannon swung around, primed and ready. Jacquotte flinched, readying herself, but its barrel pointed away from them. Jacquotte followed its eye, over to the sloop sitting at the jetty beside them.

It had been there when they had docked. She had thought nothing of it at the time. It flew no flags, had no crew. All it contained were barrels and kegs. Whatever its contents were hadn't seemed worthy of note. She had at first thought it was food or ammunition, but they couldn't have been foolish enough to leave such precious cargo unattended. No. Whatever was aboard the sloop had been left there intentionally.

Her heart dropped.

She remembered this ploy. The Governor of Yáquimo had used it to break through the first line of defense against Jean La Vasseur when the town was a pirate haven. The crates weren't filled with goods or perishables. It wasn't trade of any sort. It was a line of defense against an island brimming with pirates. And they were directly in its path.

Jacquotte opened her mouth to shout, to warn her crew, but the sound of the cannon blaring drowned her out. There was a second of blissful peace, and then the world was alight, and the force of the explosion threw her backward.

The world was black. Cold. Wet. Smoke and seawater filled her lungs. There were arms around her, dragging her out of the water. She tried to take a breath, but there was only water yet again. Finally, she could breathe, but all the air brought up was seawater, and she retched onto the sand.

Everything was bleary around her, but it came into focus slowly.

The sea was on fire.

The charred skeletons of the sloop and the brigantine floated in the distance. Flames fought against the choppy black water and thick smoke billowed in the air. There were bodies all around her, dotting the waters, collapsed in the sand. Her crew.

“Captain? *Captain!*”

Lennox was beside her. He was soaked through and breathing raggedly. He had been with the men to the west. When had he reached them? She could hear something distantly. Metal on metal. The clang of swords and the crack of guns. The battle was still waging around her.

She sat up. Her head was spinning, and Lennox put a steadying arm around her.

“What happened?” she asked, her voice hoarse.

“Those bastards blew up the ship,” Lennox said. There were burns all down one side of his body. His face was red-raw and puckered and his clothes were singed. His right eye was sealed shut. “I saw you in the water. I thought... you were facedown. I didn’t know if you...”

“You saved me.” It wasn’t a question, but he nodded anyway. “Thank you.”

There was a swath of pirates around them, blocking the soldiers from reaching them. She could see Francisco and Mbala amongst them. She thought of Marceau and Teresa. She was glad they were far enough away not to see.

Bodies bobbed in the water, and more still were scattered across the sand. Those who had made it through the explosion alive were fighting against the Spanish. Some were still pulling themselves from the water.

What had she done?

This was all her fault. She should have been better prepared. She should have known not to trust Florián’s information. She should have known he had been lying to convince the French to take Fort de Rocher from the Spanish. Perhaps she had been blinded by her hatred. Her need for justice.

She looked around. The cannon had been toppled by Lennox’s crew and its men lay butchered around it. The explosion had left them enraged. Across from them a mass of soldiers had flooded out of the barracks toward them.

She steeled herself. *No*. She was not to blame for this. They would not have been in need of a new home had Florián not chased her from Yáquimo in his pursuit of power. If he had not so doggedly hunted her in Port Royal. Her crew were dead because of *him*. She would find him and make him pay if it was the last thing she did.

One of the soldiers, their leader, she presumed, shouted orders to his men. They were low on numbers. She couldn’t hear him, but she saw those around him level their muskets and take aim.

“Run!” Jacquotte shouted.

She ducked and rolled left. Some of the crew followed her, but Francisco and the others were closer to the barracks and could not get away fast enough. The musketeers fired. Shots tore through two of her newest crew, Henrietta and Alice. They crumpled to the ground.

Francisco lurched forward, cutting down the first Spaniard, but as he turned to catch the next, his cutlass was met with another, and they locked swords. Jacquotte rolled to her feet to join him, running her sword through the stomach of the first soldier she encountered. Addae and Samada followed, Mbala and Lennox barreled into the fray, and Ayotunde brought up his gun. They had them.

Jacquotte looked around, checking to see who still lived. Alice was dead. She'd bled out, face crumpled and defeated, her body curled up beside Henrietta.

They didn't have a moment to recover before more soldiers were running toward them. Their numbers sent white-hot panic spiking through her. Soldiers. There must have been another barracks. Another detail Florián had omitted from his letters.

She picked out their leader easily. He was a tall, bearded man, much larger than the rest. He was uniformed, and yellow tassels dangled from his shoulders. They locked eyes across the fray, raised their swords, and charged at each other. Their swords met and he knocked hers away with ease. He was stronger than her. She raised her sword again just in time to catch his blade sweeping downward. Its tip nicked her ear. She held her sword up as best she could, but it was pressing closer and closer to her neck. Another soldier saw her unprotected back and lunged at her, but Samada appeared, driving her daggers into his stomach, sending him tumbling to the ground.

Their leader stumbled backward over a corpse, and Jacquotte pressed forward. A pistol raised close to her head and she only just had time to duck before slicing the throat of her assailant and slashing at their leader again. He was still upright, still standing, and she hadn't so much as cut him yet.

Distantly, she could see the other pirates converging. Ojo and his group were hacking and slashing from the east. They had made slower progress than Lennox. There was a watchtower on that side of the town, and they were held up by soldiers.

Beside her, a man raised his blade to Samada's back. The girl couldn't see him, since she was engaged in battle with another. Jacquotte dodged away from

a glancing blow the leader had in store for her, rammed into the soldier, and gutted him from stomach to throat, kicking his body into the dirt.

Pain, cold and sharp, lanced through her side. She stumbled away, a blade pulling out of her back. Blood, hot and thick, trickled down her torso. She clamped her bad hand over the wound, trying to stay the bleeding. Lennox was knocked back by a blow and he stumbled and fell, knocking Jacquotte off her feet. Her sword was lost from her hands, buried beneath the boots of those around her as they scrambled against the soldiers.

The Spanish leader stood above Jacquotte. There was murder in his eyes and his sword was coated in her blood. She wrapped her legs around his ankles and twisted hard. He teetered on his feet and crashed down into the mud beside her. She scrambled for the knife at her belt, but it was gone too. There was one left in her boot but as she reached for it, he grabbed her, dragging her back down into the churning earth. She kicked out and heard the scream of pain as bones crunched and broke beneath her heavy boots.

She rolled forward, grabbing the knife from her boot, and dashed away, trying to put distance between the two of them and hoping that he would be crushed beneath the fray. She ran toward Francisco, sticking her knife into the throat of a Spaniard as she went. She was slick with mud and blood. Pirates and soldiers clashed on all sides of her, but through the chorus of shouting and the clangor of sword on sword, she heard the click of the pistol.

The shot struck her. The noise of battle faded to a distant hum. Pain speared her flesh. She was vaguely aware that there was now a hole in her shoulder. The shot had clipped her shoulder. It was not stuck inside her and had not struck bone. Some part of her found time to be thankful that she would not have to endure Marceau and his tweezers again. But then a pair of strong hands dragged her down, into the dirt. She didn't have the strength to fight him, and her knife was gone.

Then the Spanish leader was on top of her. He was filthy, covered in mud and blood. He must have pulled himself across the ground to find her again. His eyes were bloodshot and wild, and his hands closed around her throat. Blood poured from the wound in her shoulder, her head was spinning, and his hands cradled her throat, almost like a lover. But then they clamped down, crushing her airway.

She clawed at his hands, nails digging into his skin, but it was like he didn't feel it at all. The splints were coming undone on her left hand and her bones were grinding together, but he wouldn't move. He was a man possessed. His teeth were bared, and spittle flew from his lips with the force of his efforts, spraying her face.

Desperately, she tried to move her legs, to maneuver herself so that she could knee or kick him, but he had them crushed beneath his weight. There was nothing she could do.

The edges of her vision were fading to black.

She couldn't hold up her hands anymore, and they fell to her sides.

Distantly, she heard a scream. Some of the pressure was gone from her throat. She tried to drag in a breath, but it was still too difficult. She blinked, her vision hazy. The man's mouth was open in a howl. His arm hung limply at his side. A chunk of flesh was missing and blood poured out of the wound. His right hand was still firmly locked around her throat.

"Get away!" she heard a voice say out of sight.

Then there was another scream, and the man was no longer on top of her. He lurched to his feet to fight off an attacker she couldn't see. Jacquotte gasped for air. She was met with smoke and dirt and blood and she choked and retched.

There was a flash of silver, the swing of an axe. His head toppled to the ground at her feet.

Jacquotte's savior dropped the weapon and stumbled toward her, reaching out a hand to pull her to her feet. The hand was made up of shredded flesh and makeshift, blood-soaked bandages. The cuts were so fresh that they were still bleeding.

"Are you hurt?" Elizabeth asked.

"I'll manage," Jacquotte rasped. Her voice was ragged and tight and she barely recognized it as her own. "You?"

Elizabeth nodded. "Should we fall back? You need to see a doctor."

Around them the battle still raged furiously. The streets were littered with the dead, just as many pirates as Spaniards. But there were so few soldiers remaining that it would only be a matter of time before they had won. There were more

Spaniards farther out, but as Ayotunde brought down his blade, the last of their assailants lay dead in a heap.

The crew looked at her expectantly.

“They’re on their last legs,” Jacquotte said, aware that they all were too. Her voice was croaking and foreign. She pointed east, to where Ojo and his pirates were making slow progress toward them.

Jacquotte gritted her teeth and collected up her cutlass. The feeling was coming back to her body in waves, her strength and her pain. She pushed through and raised the sword. “Come now. Let’s finish them!”

The crew roared and cheered and raised their weapons alongside hers, and together, they charged.

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

THEY WOULD win. Jacquotte knew that now. But so many had died she had lost count. She refused to look at the ground, to the faces of her fallen crew, who stared up blankly, accusingly. She should have protected them. She should never have brought them to Tortuga. To this death trap.

“What should we do, Captain?” Francisco asked.

Fire still raged over the town, coating all in thick black smoke. The Spanish had taken up to the east, creating a blockade, separating Jacquotte from Ojo and his group, while the pirates had taken up to the west, reconvening with the others.

Blood ran into Jacquotte’s eyes and her body ached. Her shoulder throbbed irrepressibly. Her ankle burned. Never before in her life had she wanted to stop fighting to this degree. If she never picked up a blade again, it would be too soon.

“Lennox,” she called. The quartermaster was at her side instantly. “What do you think?”

“We need only one last push,” he said. “But our numbers have dwindled. They weren’t supposed to have this many men.”

“I know,” Jacquotte said, fury bubbling inside her. “I think—”

“What is that?” Mbala asked, pointing past her.

Jacquotte turned.

Dayana’s Revenge blocked the harbor, but just beyond it she could make out a shape in the darkness, moving toward them. Before she knew what she was doing, Jacquotte reloaded her pistol and ran toward the docks. She didn’t have to look back to know that her friends were behind her. She heard Lennox shout, telling them that Elizabeth was in charge and to stay ready, before he joined them too.

She peered out from behind the cover of a house.

Her heart sank.

A brigantine approached. Had the Spanish sent for reinforcements? How had they traveled so fast? Jacquotte squinted through the darkness.

Panic seized her. The flag.

It was not the Spanish. It was the French.

“Jacquotte, what’s happening?” Francisco whispered.

She dismissed him wordlessly, eyes focused solely on the brigantine.

Could Florián really be here? The French had denied him countless times. How could he have assembled an army?

Jacquotte could hardly breathe. Her crew could not withstand another fight. Not with soldiers fresh for battle. Not in their condition. She cursed her naiveté. Of course Florián would never give in. And now she had done his work for him, cut down the Spaniards at the expense of her own crew.

She could make out a strong crew aboard the brigantine; she guessed perhaps a hundred, maybe more. She thought of her own crew’s numbers now. Dread threatened to swallow her whole. She could not afford to let it drown her now.

She saw something approaching. Slipping past *Dayana’s Revenge* on the still waters, sailing swiftly toward the docks, was a longboat.

“Lennox, can you reach Ojo?”

He nodded. “On what orders?”

“Fall back. Get them out of sight.”

“Aye, Captain.” And with that he charged into the blackness.

The longboat halted in the docks. Jacquotte crept forward, keeping low, her friends close behind her. The Spanish soldiers still locked in battle with her crew took one look at the brigantine in the harbor, turned on their heels, and fled. Jacquotte and her crew had been battling for hours, but the sight of Florián and his men had them running scared like children. But this fight was far from over.

There was a commotion from the docks. The pirates who had been fighting the Spanish on the beaches, now without quarry, had turned their attention to the longboat.

By the time Jacquotte reached the jetty she had to barge through an angry crowd of her crew to get through. Only one person stood at the center of the boat, dressed in a coat too large for his small frame. He was just a boy. He stood on shaking legs, hands raised in surrender.

“Who are you?” Jacquotte demanded in French. “What do you want?”

“I have a message,” he squeaked out. “From Governor Gonzaga. He wants to parley.”



They took the boy out to *Dayana's Revenge* in silence. Jacquotte's heart hammered in her chest, and she spent most of her time on the choppy water seething, her anger so consuming that it drowned out the pain of her wounds.

Florián was in Fort de Rocher.

As soon as they were on the ship, Jacquotte stormed to her quarters, ignoring the questions from the crew they left behind. Francisco stepped away to find Marceau and send him to Fort de Rocher to treat the wounded. Lennox, having returned from Ojo's group without issue, was carrying the French messenger boy.

Teresa was in their room.

“What's going on?” she said, rushing to greet her. Jacquotte could hardly look at her, for the rage boiling inside. “Are you hurt?”

“Florián is here,” Jacquotte told her. Teresa looked at her, aghast, as Jacquotte continued, “He is here in Fort de Rocher.”

“What? How? Jacquotte...”

Francisco and Mbala entered, trailing Miguel, Samada, and Anne. Lennox stepped into the room and placed the boy in a chair. He was shaking all over and wouldn't look anyone in the eye as Lennox stood behind, towering over him.

Jacquotte looked at the boy. “What does Florián want?”

The boy was silent.

Her friends whispered amongst themselves. Jacquotte forced herself to keep calm. She knew the crew in Fort de Rocher needed her brother and his healing hands, but she wished he could have been there. She welcomed his counsel.

Her friends were in an uproar.

“What do they want?”

“If they have come for a fight then we shall give them one!”

“This is our town now!”

“Why would we meet with that monster?”

“This could be an opportunity,” Teresa said calmly. The others listened. “Maybe there’s something in Fort de Rocher he wants? We could offer to return it and gouge him for the privilege.”

“Or we could kill him,” Lennox suggested. “Bring a hidden weapon and make him pay for what he’s done.”

“But why is he here?”

Jacquotte knew she needed to choose her words carefully. She knew exactly why Florián was here. In part, it was why she was here too. She listened to her crew deliberate around her. She could not count how many of their crew had died. At least seventy, she guessed. All because of Florián. Because he was a liar and he would always be a liar. She had only one recourse.

Teresa nudged her gently. “Let’s send the boy back,” she said. “The French can see we have taken Fort de Rocher, and we will not let them take it from us.”

“Florián will never give in,” Jacquotte said. She hated that about him. Hated how similar they were in that respect. “I will go to him.”

Her friends looked at her like she was mad.

“It’s clearly a trap, Jacquotte,” Miguel said.

“I know,” she said. “But what if I could kill him before he tried to kill me?”

Her mind was racing with possibilities. She had wanted to kill Florián since her last night in Yáquimo. Now he was here. And this would never be her home as long as he thought he could take it from her. She had to do it. She had to make him suffer for all that he had taken from her and those she loved.

“He’s too smart,” Mbala said. “Whatever he is planning, we will not be prepared.”

“She doesn’t need to be prepared,” Lennox said. “She just needs to be faster than him. And stronger.”

“She’s in no fit state!” Francisco said, exasperated. “She’s been cut and stabbed and shot! Her left arm is useless. It’s madness. She’s not faster or stronger than an old man!”

Elizabeth stood forward. “She killed Blackhand in a state no better. She can kill this scrawny Frenchman without question.”

Teresa took Jacquotte by the shoulders and turned her so she would look into her eyes. “Tell me you aren’t considering this.”

“Of course I am,” Jacquotte said. She pulled away. “This place will never be ours while he desires it. He said as much himself.”

There was silence. Her friends looked at her, confused.

“What do you mean?” Miguel asked.

“How could you have known why Florián is here?” Francisco asked.

Teresa looked at her then. “The letter,” she said, her voice no louder than a whisper. “There was a letter amongst the French captain’s effects. From Florián. I didn’t read it but...” She crossed the room and took Jacquotte’s hands in her own. “Did you know he would be here?”

Jacquotte sighed. “I knew he wanted Fort de Rocher for himself,” she said.

There was an uproar.

“You knew and you did not tell us?”

“I—”

“You chose Florián’s town deliberately?”

“This is *not* his town!” Jacquotte shouted.

“How could you keep this from us?”

“It does not matter,” Jacquotte snapped. “We needed a town, I found a town. Fort de Rocher is perfect for us. We all know it. Florián cannot take whatever land he pleases for the rest of his life. And now that he is here... it means I can finally get what is owed.”

“And what is that?” Miguel asked.

“I need to kill him.”

She felt it deep in her core. Her thoughts had been haunted by Florián, if he would ever find her, if he would come to take away what was hers. But she was better than this. Better than *him*.

She was glad she had finally spoken it aloud, that she could finally voice the feeling that had been welling in the pit of her stomach ever since they’d been forced to flee Yáquimo. “For everything he’s done to me, to us. For the crew that we lost. For Yáquimo. For *everything*. Taking his town, killing him, it’s what is right. Surely you can see that?”

“Jacquotte,” Teresa said, her eyes flashing. “He’s been trying to kill you since Yáquimo. If you parley with him, he is going to try again.”

“But he won’t succeed,” Jacquotte insisted. “We have him on the back foot. He was not expecting us to be here.”

“Was he not?” Francisco asked. His hands were balled up into tight fists, brow furrowed, lips pressed into a thin line. She couldn’t recall a time she had ever seen him so furious. “Your information said this town was practically all civilians. That the presence of soldiers was minimal. That there were little to no defenses in place.”

“That’s because—”

“But that’s not what we found, is it?” Francisco said, shouting over her. “What we found is a town well defended. Hundreds of soldiers, fully armed and ready to protect this town with their lives. Cannons and explosive ships.”

“There was no way I could have known,” Jacquotte seethed. “Florián must have lied to try to convince the French this would be an easy defeat. I do not understand how he has convinced them now, but—”

“Then you are a fool, Jacquotte!” Francisco argued. “You know he will never stop! How could you think this would be any different? If Florián had not arrived today, you knew he would have come another. You put us all in danger for your own chance at revenge!”

His words stung. For all her life, Francisco had never snapped at her, never spoken to her like this.

“That is why I have to kill him,” she said.

Teresa took her good hand in her own and squeezed it. “Jacquotte,” she said softly. “You need to listen to us.”

“Killing Florián is not worth your life,” Mbala said.

Miguel nodded. “He would never call on you without a plan.”

“It does not matter,” Jacquotte snapped. She could feel her anger bubbling over. “All of this will end with his death.”

Her friends were supposed to believe in her, but she could see now from the looks on their faces that they underestimated her and her abilities. But they were wrong. She wasn’t weak. She wasn’t foolish. It was all Florián. *He* was the reason they had lost so many lives.

“We should get Marceau,” Francisco said, gentler this time. “He’ll make you see sense.”

“I *am* seeing sense,” she said. She could feel the frustration rising inside her. “Florián needs to die. How can none of you see that?” She turned to Lennox and Elizabeth. “What do you have to say?”

Lennox shrugged. “I say we hear him out,” he said. “Perhaps he’ll try to buy us out of Fort de Rocher? Perhaps there is an agreement we can come to. It’s a gamble, but I’d take the risk.”

Elizabeth nodded. “I say we kill the bastard.”

“It’s a trap!” Miguel argued.

“He will not honor the terms of the parley,” Mbala said.

Teresa squeezed her hand again. “Don’t do this,” she said. “You know he’s trying to kill you.”

“I know that!” she shouted. She snatched her hand away. “And he can try. But I will be the one to kill him first if it’s the last thing I do!”

They looked at her in disbelief, and she looked at them the same way. How could they not see that she was right? If she didn’t kill him now, then he would never stop coming after her. Even if they could rally against the French now, he knew where they would be found. He could send ship after ship, army after army. How many more needed to die because they were too cowardly to do what had to be done?

Teresa took Jacquotte’s face in her hands and drew her nearer. “The crew needs you, Jacquotte. *I* need you.” She was shaking, tears welling in her eyes. “If you truly love me, you won’t do this.”

Her breath caught in her throat and sharp knives of guilt ran her through. More than anything, she wanted to please Teresa, to be good to her, to give her whatever she wanted. But she couldn’t. Not this time.

“Teresa,” she said, gritting her teeth. She would not let guilt take her away from what had to be done. “If you truly loved me, you’d know that I have to.”

Teresa stepped away as if she had been slapped. Her face was full of hurt and anger. “If you go, we won’t go with you.”

Her friends moved to stand beside Teresa. Jacquotte’s gut twisted into knots. They had never turned their backs on her before; no matter what she had done, they were always by her side. They looked at her now like she was mad.

They did not understand. They had all seen firsthand what Florián was capable of. The coup in Yáquimo. How he had burned their town to the ground and slaughtered innocent people all because of a baby that never drew breath. The lies he had spread about her and how they had haunted her life in Port Royal. How those very lies had made her subservient to Blackhand. How she had lived every day in fear that someone would capture her and take her to him. Of what he would do when he had her.

Florián deserved to die. And she would be the one to kill him, whether they were by her side or not.

“Lennox,” she said. She turned her back on her friends. On Teresa. “Ready a longboat. We’re going to kill the Governor of Jacmel.”

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

IT'S GOOD to see you again, Jacquotte.”

Florián's words crawled over her skin, his familiar tone sending daggers through her gut.

“A pity I can't say the same, Florián.”

He looked much the same as she remembered. His long, dark hair was tied neatly behind his head, and he had kept his fashionable mustache, but now he wore French livery. Somehow, the garish colors suited him. There was a long scar beneath his eye, and she wondered if she had been the one to give it to him. She hoped so.

They had chosen an uninhabited stretch of land east of Fort de Rocher as their meeting place. They stood beside a tall hill that cut sharply to a cliff. The shore was at least forty feet below. Sharp rocks speared upward, and were flatter and smoother farther out, where they had been worn down by the sea.

Jacquotte and Lennox met Florián and his second. A man not in uniform. He looked strange beside Florián, who wore full military garb. Around them the thick grass turned into a copse of dense trees, walling them in with darkness. Florián had chosen the location because he wanted to keep her from anyone who might come to her aid, but he needn't have bothered. They were alone.

They had agreed to three guards each: one with them for the parley, and two in the surrounding area, in case anything went awry. Then they had checked each other for weapons. She had not found anything hidden on his person, but she knew this was because he had a good hiding place, just as she had. There was no way he would attend a parley unarmed. When she had finished her arbitrary search she let him examine her. His hands were soft, as though he had never worked a day in his life. He searched her diligently, from her boots upward, almost idle in his thoroughness. She could hardly keep her fury from boiling over at the sight of him, let alone the lingering feeling of his hands on her body.

When he was finally finished, she made sure to put distance between them. She would ruin everything if she stayed too close. She would kill him before she got her answers. They did not take their eyes off one another. Jacquotte burned from within. It made her sick to think that she had once called him a friend.

“How did you do it?” she couldn’t help but ask.

“What might that be, Jacquotte?”

“I know the French denied you. I know they had no faith in your vision. So how? How are you here?”

“Oh, Jacquotte,” he said, smiling lazily. “You know I have many means. There are more mercenaries out there than the simple men of the *Dorado*. Everyone has their price.”

She forced a laugh. “Not everyone.”

“Perhaps.” He shrugged. “How different it might have been had you signed those papers. You would not have had to disappear as you did.”

She couldn’t maintain her false smile any longer. “Why not let me disappear, Florián? Why post all those notices for my arrest?”

“I was trying to find you,” he said with a shrug. “You vanished from Yáquimo. I was certain I’d hear tales of the mad redheaded mulatto spilling secrets about the insurrection, but I never did. I never knew where you went. Not until I heard stories of the woman pirate who mutinied against the infamous Captain Blackhand.” He looked almost impressed. “I thought, that cannot be Jacquotte. You were always too morally superior to turn to a life of crime.”

“Hard not to when you turned me into a criminal.”

Florián chuckled. “It has worked out for you, though, hasn’t it? Piracy looks good on you, Jacquotte,” he said. His eyes grazed over her in a way that made her want to claw them out of his head. “You seem to have almost taken Fort de Rocher in its entirety. I owe you my greatest thanks, once again, for your assistance. We make fortunate allies, do we not?”

She seethed. She could not hold her tongue any longer. “This is *my* town,” she snapped. “I took it for *my* crew. You have no business being here, now or ever. Was Yáquimo not enough for you?”

“Jacquotte, you know of my ambitions. Fort de Rocher has always held a place in my future plans.”

She glared at him. “Not anymore.”

“Jacquotte,” he said softly, “I did not call you here to be given demands. I am giving you a chance. A great chance.”

“A chance? You must be more deluded than I thought if you believe you have given me anything. What right do you have to this land that I do not?” Jacquotte demanded. She could feel her anger rising. She crossed her right arm over her left, slipping her hand into her splints, where she had hidden a thin blade. If she pulled it out at the right time, she could lunge and slit his throat, while Lennox took care of his second. His other guards were too far away to stop her, and hers would no doubt intervene.

“Is your goal in life to take everything away from me?” she said.

He looked confused. “Whatever do you mean?”

He was playing the fool now. She would not have it. “Have you not taken enough, Florián? My home in Yáquimo. My safety in Port Royal. What will it take for you to stop hounding me?”

“Jacquotte, I did not come to Fort de Rocher to take anything from you,” he said, his voice suddenly solemn. “No. I came to Fort de Rocher to take it *for* you. For *us*.”

She looked at him then, confused, finger poised on the tip of her blade. “What are you saying?”

“We always imagined taking Fort de Rocher as children. I would act as my uncle and you my loyal lieutenant,” he said, smiling wistfully. Jacquotte fought against the memories, the same ones she knew he was remembering at that moment. The two of them together, laughing, playing. “Those are my fondest memories, you know. When we would spend all our time together, in the manor. But some did not approve of our friendship. Of our fondness for one another. When you were banished from the manor, I was forbidden from seeing you again.”

Jacquotte had not known there was any other reason she was no longer allowed to accompany her father to the Governor’s manor. She thought it was her father’s decision.

“They banished me from the manor because we were friends?” Jacquotte found herself asking. She didn’t want to be swept up in his stories, she had come for revenge, but she couldn’t help her curiosity.

Florián regarded her for a moment. There was a strange look on his face, one she could not read. “It is irrelevant now,” he said at last. “Because now I have you. Now things have changed.”

“Florián, what are you talking about?” Jacquotte demanded. “What is it that you want from me?”

“I want *this!*” he shouted back. He extended an arm out toward the smoldering mass of land that was Fort de Rocher. “All of this. A land to call my own. And with you beside me, everything will be as it was meant to be.”

Her heart stopped in her chest. She looked at Florián, the wild look in his eyes, the flush in his cheeks. “You don’t... you *can’t* mean that.”

“But I do,” he insisted. He took a step toward her, and she took a step back. He ran a hand through his hair, exasperated. “They never wanted us to be together, Jacquotte. My uncle never cared for your breeding. But that never mattered to me. I know you. You can fight as well as any man, and you are smart too. The languages you can speak would benefit my international relations greatly. You are the only woman worthy of me, Jacquotte. I don’t care that you aren’t of noble birth. I can tolerate that you are a mulatto. I—”

“Florián, *stop*,” Jacquotte said. Her heart was racing. “You don’t know what you’re saying.”

“But I do,” he pressed. She saw the hot flush creep across his cheeks. She was reminded suddenly of when he was just a boy, how serious he would get. It was that same look he had now, face screwed up, hands clenched into tight fists. “I won’t stop, Jacquotte. I won’t. Because we are not children anymore. This is not a game and here, I make the rules. Here, you can be mine.”

Jacquotte stared at him in disbelief. The absurdity of what he was saying stunned her. It was a long moment before the feeling came back to her, slowly but surely, and with it came a wave of nausea.

After everything he had done to her, to those she loved, to her home in Yáquimo, to her life in Port Royal and now in Fort de Rocher, he thought she would be his. All because he saw her as something that should be his, his

property, something that he felt had been taken away from him. He had no notion of what he had done to her. What he had taken.

It was then that she realized that she did not just hate Florián. Florián was the living embodiment of everything she had come to hate about the world, the way she and those she cared for were treated and used and abused by those who felt they were better.

Because of some childhood crush, he had decided that she would be his. He never asked her if it was something she wanted, never tried to learn if his feelings were reciprocated. Because it didn't matter. He believed himself better than the rest of them, because they had made it so that nothing else could be true. The white men who enslaved her people, who belittled any who did not have access to the education and finery that they did, looked with disdain at those without wealth, all while hoarding it for themselves.

She hated Florián with every inch of her being.

Jacquotte held tight to the blade in her splint.

"No," she said at last. Florián looked at her, confused. She said it louder. "*No*. I do not want to live here with you. Fort de Rocher is not yours to possess, just as I never have been, and never will be. I would rather die than be another one of your possessions." She took a step toward him, and he flinched, taking a step back. "Nothing you say or do will make me give up my chance of finally finding a home for my people, after you have taken away everything else from us."

An indignant flush rose in Florián's cheeks. "Be reasonable, Jacquotte."

"I *am* being reasonable," she told him. "This parley is over. Either remove your men from the town, or they will die. The choice is yours."

She looked around for her two guards. She couldn't see the pirates through the gloom. "Norris?" she called. There came no reply. She took a shaking breath. "Anna-Maria?"

She heard something in the trees. A rustle and a distinct thud. She whirled around, trying to find the source of the noise. Footsteps sounded and she felt relief well up inside her, but the figures that emerged from the gloom were not her guards. They were the mercenaries. And there were far more than they had agreed upon.

Jacquotte heard the click of the trigger. Her body turned cold.

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

FLORIÁN'S PISTOL was level with her head. His face was deep red, his body shaking all over. She had seen him angry before in Yáquimo, but never anything like this. He looked like a madman.

The pirates she had brought as guards were dead. That much she knew. Only Jacquotte and Lennox remained.

"I was always good to you," he carried on. "*I* was the reason you were always permitted into the manor. *I* stopped Arnolde from being dismissed countless times, allowing you to live above your station." He was getting himself worked up now. "You always wanted to come here with me. I know that. We talked about it endlessly. You and I, here, together."

"Florián—"

"We *cared* for each other, Jacquotte. I know that," he pressed.

The pistol did not waver. "Florián," she tried again, her voice lower this time. "We were children."

"This is what you always wanted," he insisted. "We both know this. And I have finally offered it to you. To be mine is far more than someone like you could ever have wished for, but I have done it out of the goodness of my own heart. Because I know that you care for me, Jacquotte. Why else would you come to Fort de Rocher, to this parley, but to see me again?"

To kill him.

"To find an end to the bloodshed," she said instead.

"No," he said. "It is because you know that you belong with me. You were always meant to be mine. You *love* me, Jacquotte."

She looked him in the eyes then, searching for something, anything that would tell her that he was mocking her, but there was nothing. He was serious. He truly believed all that he was saying.

"I am in love with Teresa."

Florián was silent as he took in the information. He stood, staring at her from behind the barrel of the pistol, wide-eyed and bemused at first, but then a rage like none other washed over him. In an instant, it was gone. “Is that so?”

“Yes,” she said, staring down the barrel of the pistol. “I never loved you. I will never belong to you.”

He nodded slowly. “You will regret that, Jacquotte.” He turned to Lennox. Worry lined his burned face. “Who is this?”

Lennox looked between them. “Jack Lennox,” he said slowly. “Quartermaster of *Dayana’s Revenge*.”

Florián smirked. “It’s nothing personal, Jack.”

He pressed his pistol against Lennox’s head. For a split second, there was fear in his eyes where she had never seen it before. He met Jacquotte’s gaze as he opened his mouth. He never got to say a word. Florián pulled the trigger.

The scream that tore from Jacquotte’s lips was barely human. Lennox collapsed, slumping to the ground. There was a hole in his head and his blood painted Jacquotte’s skin.

She should have killed Florián the moment she saw him. His corpse would have been at the bottom of the sea, stripped of its meat by the fish. And Lennox wouldn’t be dead at her feet.

Florián turned to her, a smirk tugging at the corners of his lips. “Now, Jacquotte,” he said. “Perhaps you might reconsider.”

She could hardly contain the rage boiling inside her. She spat at his feet, and the gob of spittle landed on his muddy boot. “Fuck you.”

He inspected her for a long moment. “We shall see if you change your mind,” he said at last. “It is several days’ journey to Hôpital. A lot can change in that time. Locked away in a dark, cramped cell in the belly of my ship. You’ll *beg* me to reconsider my generous offer. And perhaps I will. If you repent.”

“*Never.*”

He shrugged. “Then I suppose I will have to see you hanged.”

“You won’t live to see me hanged.”

“Perhaps we can t—”

Jacquotte threw herself at Florián. His soldiers were just too far away. They reached for her, snatching at her hair, but she barreled into Florián. He tripped

and fell and she scrambled on top of him. He tried to push her away, but she clung to him, and they rolled around in the dirt, fingers clawing at each other's faces. His nail caught her eyelid and tore at it. Blood poured into her eye.

"Get her off me!" Florián screamed.

The soldiers pointed their guns. Jacquotte rolled so that Florián was on top of her. They wouldn't be able to shoot her now. But she overestimated. They were closer to the cliff than she had thought. They teetered at the edge.

"Help him!" one of the Frenchmen yelled. "He's going to fall!"

Jacquotte could see over the cliff's edge to the tall, pointed rocks below. There was no going back now. There was no way to escape the French, to escape the noose. She had left her friends behind. She had abandoned her crew. If she didn't let go, they would fall to their deaths. And if she did, the French would hang her and Florián would win. It did not matter what happened to her now. Her fate was sealed.

If she was going to die, she would do it on her own terms.

Jacquotte wrapped her arms and legs tighter around Florián, ignoring the pain searing through her. His face was close to hers and she saw the panic in his eyes. She grinned and tipped them over the edge.

They fell.

Florián's body smashed into the cliff wall below, sending them flying away from the impending sharp rocks. They hit the smooth, flat rocks, breaking apart.

The impact knocked the breath from her lungs. She felt her bones crack and shift. She couldn't breathe as she skittered across the rocks and rolled into the sand. There was blood on her face. She didn't know where it had come from. She didn't know how she had survived.

Something shifted beside her. She only just had time to roll out of the way as Florián lashed out with a dagger. It missed her gut but carved a long line down her leg. She kicked his hand, bones crunching beneath her boots, and the knife was lost to the sea. He growled in frustration. He was covered in blood and sand and his front teeth were missing. He looked like a madman.

She lunged at him and punched him hard in the face. The force of it snapped his head back and she punched again and again. She could hear his bones cracking, and she could feel her own knuckles swelling, but she didn't stop.

In the distance, she could hear Florián's men running down the path of the cliff toward them. She didn't have much time.

She drew the knife from her splint and stabbed blindly, but as she did, a rock smashed into the side of her head. She scrambled away. Her ear was ringing loudly and hot blood poured down her neck. Florián lunged at her, and she only just had time to raise her hand to deflect the blow. Instead, something cold pierced her left hand.

The sun was beating down, and she had to squint to see the tip of her knife poking through her flesh. He had driven the dagger through her palm. He twisted it sharply, cruelly, and she screamed, rolling away from him. The knife was still embedded in her hand, and she pulled it out with a cry. Blood spurted from the wound. She could see bone. A hole the size of a coin cut through her. She felt faint.

Florián scrambled away but she chased after him on her hands and knees, more animal than woman. She clambered on top of him, punching away the hands he threw up weakly to ward her off.

He looked up at her, bloody, eyes wide with fear. The knife was in her hands and the soldiers were getting closer.

"Jacquotte," Florián managed, his voice hoarse. "Please—"

She brought the knife down, plunging it into the soft, vulnerable flesh of his eye. Florián screamed beneath her. She would not hear another wretched word from his lips. He struggled and kicked, fingers clawing uselessly at her hand as she pressed down, using all her weight to force the blade until she felt it touch the back of his skull. His scream died in his throat. His breath hitched. His mouth hung open. And then his hands fell.

Jacquotte sat, breathing ragged, blood flowing from her wounds and bones grinding and broken. She had done it. She had killed him.

Relief filled her body. Euphoria. He was gone. Never again would he hound her. Never again would he take anything from her or the people she loved.

He is gone.

But that feeling faded fast. The warmth that spread through her, the light inside, dimmed. It was as though she had dunked her head into the sea. Cold and empty. She had killed him. But nothing had changed. Not truly.

She felt hollow.

“Drop the blade!”

The men poured onto the beach and surrounded her.

“Get away from him.”

She left the knife buried in Florián’s skull and rolled off his body, too tired to get to her feet. She waited for the shot that would end her life, that would bring her peace, but instead, she found irons clamp around her wrists.

She looked up. “What are you—”

The butt of a musket smacked her in the face, and the world faded to black around her.

CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

HER FACE still stung from the slap and the twine scratched against her skin.

Jacquotte knelt on the ground before the smith as he measured her head. Every measurement he took, of her arms and legs and torso, he would scratch down into a journal.

She was chained, hands and feet, so that she could not attempt an escape. She had tried three times already, and had been punished each time. Usually, it meant no food or water and a thorough beating. The last time, when she had taken the metal bowl they gave her for meals and used it to cave in a guard's skull, they had branded her. The pain had been so intense that she had passed out, and she had received two days without food for her troubles.

That was how it had been since she had arrived in the French prison. In truth, she could hardly remember the journey from Tortuga to Hôpital. She had been in and out of consciousness for most of the short voyage. The mercenaries might have lost their commander, but they would not forgo their reward. They had not given her the dignity of shackling her and tying her to the mast, or shutting her in a cabin. They had stuffed her into a cage fit for a dog and locked her away in the hold. She hadn't been able to see the sun or the sea or feel the cool breeze on her skin. There was only darkness and metal and the smell of her own piss.

It hadn't mattered. She couldn't bring herself to care. She felt hollow inside. She had killed Florián, but she had lost everything. Her friends, her crew. Teresa. And for what? The death of one sad, pathetic man. It hadn't changed anything. So she had wallowed in her cage, in the darkness, alone.

Once they were in Hôpital and the men were paid their dues, the French clamped irons onto her wrists and ankles and paraded her through the streets. More than once, she had been unable to walk, and so they had dragged her. People lined the streets to watch, like she was some prize goat on display. The

French jeered and threw rotten food, but the mulattoes and blacks just looked at her with pity. She wondered if they knew who she was. If any of them knew, or if she was just some mulatto bitch to be made an example of. That feeling was worse than the noose that awaited her.

They'd stripped her down when they finally took her to the prison. They took everything from her. Her clothes and boots, the green earrings Teresa had bought her that day at the market; they'd even ripped the ring of gold teeth from her mouth. They put her in prison rags and locked her away. And then they'd left her to rot.

She had expected them to hang her quickly, but she soon learned that the time locked in the dingy cell was a part of her punishment. They wanted to keep her there, languishing, contemplating her fate. She had tried to count the days by scratching marks into the walls, but her fingernails split and broke and bled, and by the eleventh day she gave up.

She'd tried to proposition the guard measuring her. He had a set of keys on him, and she had been certain that if she got his clothes off, she could get them. But he didn't take kindly to that, and a hard slap around the face was all she needed to know not to do it again. They had all been warned about her. She wouldn't be able to escape now.

When he was gone and the shackles were removed, she stretched out. The cell was so small that she couldn't lie flat. She propped herself against the wall where water trickled through the cracks. She let it flow over her hair and face. Cold and briny, it was the closest she had come to bathing in weeks.

The feeling began to come back to her left leg, but not to her right. The cut Florián had given her had opened up into a wide gash and the wound was festering. Every day the wound grew deeper and wider until, through the thick yellow pus and greening flesh, she could see the edges blackening with mortification. It stank of decay. If Marceau was with her, he would have cut it off without question. She'd seen him do it to others for far less. But he wasn't with her now. None of them were.

Days passed her by in a blur. She was fed once a day, albeit irregularly. It was her only way to mark the passage of time. Most often it was scraps, and it was never enough to give her any strength, to put any of the meat back onto her. She

was so thin that she could feel her bones in places she'd never felt them before. It disgusted her.

There were other prisoners sharing small cells close to hers. She'd seen them when she first entered. They talked at length, arguing and gossiping, and she'd listened through her cell door for any news of her crew. She'd heard none.

Her gut ached to think of her crew and her friends and Teresa. She would die without ever saying goodbye to them. Without apologizing for not listening to them. She'd left them to seek out revenge and glory and landed herself in prison, set to be hanged. Now they would never know how sorry she was.

She thought of her brother. Would Marceau ever find love? Would he have children? She wondered if he would leave her crew, travel elsewhere, and become a doctor to the people, and not to pirates. If he would think of her with fondness or as his reckless sister who chose revenge over love.

Miguel would pray for her, no doubt, but ultimately forget about her as he began his new life with Anne and the children they would have. Francisco and Mbala would have no need of her. Perhaps one of them would become captain now that she was gone. They would both be well suited to it, and it was their right, as her mates, to lead, now that she and Lennox were dead. Perhaps they would lead together?

And Teresa...

No. She couldn't bring herself to think of Teresa. Tears welled in her eyes, and it felt like a hole had been punched through her chest. She couldn't bear to think of Teresa. Of how she had abandoned her. Of how she had failed her. No doubt Teresa hated her for what she had done. She would take it all back in a heartbeat if it meant she could see her again, just one last time.

She should have listened to them all. But she hadn't. She'd been prideful and petty and full of wrath that had been building inside her all her life. She had told herself that Florián deserved to die for everything he had done, but her problems had started long before him. With Arnolde and the men who had enslaved her mother and sold her like an animal. Her problem was not just Florián. It was the world. It was herself. It was everything all at once.

Weak light leaked through the single barred window of her cell. It was small and rectangular and almost touched the ceiling, so that she could not see out.

The light danced along her skin, gray and blotchy under its rays. She was admiring it, letting it warm her already sweaty skin, when the bells began to toll.

Fear gripped her, chilling her to the core. The bells played gloriously, a song she did not know. They tolled on and on, each note hammering a nail into her heart. And as the bells pealed, she heard footsteps. The heavy tread of boots that could only mean a French guard.

Jacquotte tried to will herself to stand. To give herself a fighting chance. She didn't have to die on the gallows for the entertainment of the masses. If she went at him hard enough, the guard might stab her, or put a shot between her eyes. She could go quickly. But she could not make her legs move.

The door to her cell slammed open. A Frenchman leered down at her. "Delahaye," he said. "It's time."

CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

IT WAS raining.

The guard led Jacquotte through the courtyard and her bare feet sank into the churning mud. She could see the prison she had been held in, harsh and gray, and all around a tall wooden fence surrounded them, cutting the courtyard off from the rest of Hôpital. The gate was open, allowing the residents of the town to stream in. There were soldiers on either side, some on horseback, but past them she could just make out the line of the sea across the horizon, the swell of blue that stretched to places her mind could not fathom, and to her home.

Darkly, she couldn't help but notice the beauty of Hôpital around her. Looking around, she realized how much it reminded her of Yáquimo.

A commotion turned her attention from the horizon. The crowd that had gathered to see her hang jeered and shouted. The sound hammered into her head. There was singing, too, and she searched for the sound. A group of brown-robed monks stood beside the gates, no doubt singing to absolve the sins of the damned. It would never work. The crowd grew louder the farther she walked. She could not tell if they were jeering at her, or the men who already hung from the gallows.

Only one more noose left. It was meant for her. They had left her until last; a spectacle befitting her crimes. She forced herself to stand tall, ignoring the pain in her bones. If they wanted to see her cry, to beg for her life, they would not. She would not be the woman pirate captain who screamed and pissed herself with fear. She would be proud and they would hate her for it all the more. But when she tried to shake out her hair, she found her curls knotted, matted to her head. The plump white bodies of lice crawled in and out of the tufts. Her hair. It had always been her shining glory, the thing that made her stand out, that made people take notice of her. Now it was ruined. Her clothes were rags, her skin was

blotchy and flea-bitten, and they had stolen her gold teeth. She would go to her death as a woman she herself would not recognize.

She told herself to breathe. She would face her death with as much dignity as she could. She had to grit her teeth to drag her leg up the gallows steps. The guard there grabbed her by her shackles and dragged her up onto the stool. She rocked back and forth, trying to keep herself from falling prematurely.

A French boy introduced her to the crowd. But his voice faded below the thrum of the voices. They spoke louder, murmurs rising to shouts. Her head pounded.

“Delahaye shall be hanged from the neck until dead.”

The guard placed the noose over her head. She ignored the young Frenchman as he decried her treasons, having to take deep gaping breaths as the list went on and on. But she could hardly hear him over the bellowing of the crowd.

They pressed forward, yelling and jeering, and the guards had to restrain them. She felt a knot in her stomach. Why did they want her dead so badly? They had only to wait until the boy finished speaking and it would all be over. She wanted to find peace in her last moments, but they made it impossible. Behind her, the guard put his boot on her stool. It was almost time.

A man broke free of the crowd and struck a soldier across the head. Everything descended into chaos. Jacquotte watched as the crowd threw themselves at the guards.

A man pulled himself onto the gallows. He was wielding a machete. He charged, lunging at the guard beside her, and sliced a notch from his head. She realized they hadn't come to kill her. They'd come to kill the French. The guard fought back, but it was no use. Another strike sent the guard tumbling down. He fell into the hanging pit, knocking the stool out from beneath her.

The noose went taut around her neck.

Her legs went out from under her.

Jacquotte fell.

A burly pair of arms caught her from below. They wrapped around her waist, warm and sweaty, lifting her up so that the noose couldn't strangle the life from her. She gasped for breath, coughs raking her body.

She was alive.

“The noose, Captain,” a familiar voice called from beneath her. “Remove the noose.”

Mbala. Her friends had come for her.

She clawed at the noose, blood pounding in her ears, until it came free. Her neck was bloody and bruised from the fall, but she would live. Mbala placed her on the ground beside the dead French guard’s body.

“Can she walk?”

Another French guard in red and blue. The man did not speak in French, but Spanish. Beneath his wide hat, she could see his dark skin and his pretty brown curls.

Tears welled up in her eyes.

“You came for me,” she managed through her tears.

Francisco pulled her into a hug, fierce and warm, and Mbala wrapped his arms around them both.

“Of course we did.”

“Where did you get that uniform?” she asked when he pulled back.

He grinned. “You don’t want to know.” From his hip, he pulled out a rapier. “Can you use this?”

She nodded.

“Good. Let’s move.”

Together, they ducked out from beneath the gallows. The strain caused Jacquotte’s leg to start bleeding, but she ignored it. Outside, everything was in chaos. Frenchmen and townspeople were fighting, and many lay dead already, sinking into the churning mud. The rain hammered down, making it hard to see, but she could just make out the gate on the other side of the courtyard.

“She’s escaped!” she heard a Frenchman yell. “Delahaye has escaped!”

“Come on!” Mbala yelled.

He ran ahead of her, barreling into two Frenchmen and knocking them off their feet. It was all she could manage to drag her leg behind her, but Francisco stayed beside her. Together they slashed out at any French soldiers who got in their way.

A hand grabbed her, twisting her left arm. She screamed, pain splintering through her bones. She lashed out, catching him across the stomach, but it

didn't draw blood.

"I have her!" he yelled, trying to be heard above the clamor of the crowd. "I have the pir—"

A pistol shot through the back of the head silenced him. But when the French soldier fell, there was another Frenchman behind him, atop an enormous brown horse.

Jacquotte lurched away, raising her weapon.

"Jacquotte, stop!" a thickly accented voice snapped. "You can barely walk!"

Jacquotte stared up. The horse reared, whinnying at the commotion around them. Jacquotte would have recognized those brown tresses anywhere, and the crescent-moon shaped birthmark.

"Teresa!"

A delicate hand reached out to her. "Quickly."

Jacquotte reached, but suddenly Mbala's strong arms were wrapped around her, lifting her up into the saddle in front of Teresa. The larger woman wrapped her arms around her waist and turned the horse around. Her mind was reeling.

"Watch our backs," Teresa ordered.

Francisco grinned and saluted. "Yes, ma'am."

"We can't leave them behind!" Jacquotte argued.

But no one listened to her. The horse lurched into motion. The crowd parted for them, their faces blurred. No one wanted to be caught beneath the hooves of such a beast.

"They're headed for the gates!"

Jacquotte watched in horror as the guards around the tall wooden gates moved to push them closed. They were heavy, weighted down by the iron bands at their center, but even as they barreled toward them, the horse's hooves pounding through the mud, it was clear that they weren't going to make it. They would all be locked behind the gates, and then Jacquotte wouldn't be the only one to die; her friends would too.

The monks scattered, desperately trying to get away from the fighting, but one moved away from the group. He ran over to one of two guards pushing the gates closed and pulled him down to whisper something in his ear. When he pulled away, deep red stained the front of the guard's uniform, and he tumbled

to the ground. The second guard rushed over to aid his fallen companion. He turned to the monk, questioning him, but Jacquotte watched as he pulled a pistol from under his robes and pulled the trigger. His aim was poor, and he only clipped the soldier in the shoulder. The soldier leapt to his feet and lunged, punching the monk in the face and knocking him to the dirt.

His hood fell back. *Miguel*.

“Francisco!” Jacquotte screamed.

She looked around wildly, trying to find the man, but he had already noticed. A musket was in his hands and a moment later a shot rang past Jacquotte’s head. It caught the soldier in the chest and he was thrown backward, off his feet.

Their horse leapt over the bodies of the fallen French guards, out of the gates to freedom. People streamed out of the gates behind them, screaming and running for their lives. Over Teresa’s shoulder she could just make out Mbala collecting Miguel into his arms, Francisco beside them.

Teresa dug her heels into the horse’s sides and they sped away from the chaos of the prison. Away from the cell Jacquotte had been left to rot in. Away from the hanging pits and the dead pirates and the death sentence that awaited her. She was safe, at last, in Teresa’s arms.

Jacquotte allowed the blackness she had fought off for so long to creep into her vision.

CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN

IT WAS dark when she woke. A dull gray haze hung over the room and dim light leaked through the windows.

As the room came into focus around her, she realized she was not on a ship. There was no gentle rock and sway of the sea beneath her, and the room was bright yellow.

Her body was warm in the bed, beneath the weight of the covers. But her head felt unusually cold. She reached up, noting, dimly, that she had lost another finger, but when she went to touch her hair, she realized it was gone.

She searched the room. On a vanity was a looking glass, and when she tilted her head just so, she could see herself. A bubble rose in her throat, a sound somewhere between a laugh and a sob. She did not see herself in the glass. She saw a beggar. Her dark skin was littered with bites and cuts, blotchy, but clean. Her long red tresses were shorn to the quick. Only an inch remained, standing in stiff curls. An ugly scar worked around the bare flesh of her neck, turning the skin from brown to violent pink. When she twisted her neck, she could just make out the raw skin of the brand that marked her as a pirate.

A thought occurred to her that turned her blood to ice in her veins. She drew back the heavy covers.

Her right leg was gone beneath the knee. Bloody bandages covered the stump. If there was pain, she did not feel it. She didn't feel anything. Not the newly missing finger, nor the scar around her neck, nor any of the new marks along her body. Not the missing leg. All she felt was a deep ache welling in her gut, and something else, something she had not expected to feel. *Joy*.

Jacquotte Delahaye was alive.

She had beaten the French. She had defied death. She had lost limbs along the way, but that was nothing compared to her life. Richelieu had always told her, a

man could live a damned good life abed, or without the use of his legs, and he'd known many who had done such a thing. What was one leg, for her life?

The door opened. She could hear a conversation distantly. Marceau walked into the room carrying a pail. A candle bobbed behind him, illuminating his way.

“Jacquotte!”

Her brother dropped the bucket and his cane. Water spilled across the stone floor, but he didn't seem to care as he rushed across the room. He leapt onto the bed and pulled her into a warm embrace. She melted into it, holding him so tightly that pain began to return to her left arm. But she didn't care. She didn't want to let him go. She wouldn't.

“Jacquotte,” he said. There were tears in his eyes when he looked at her. “You're awake. I'm... I'm sorry. About everything. I couldn't... I tried to save your leg but—”

“Marceau,” she said, cutting him off, “you saved my life.”

She wiped tears from her eyes and he smiled and ran a hand through her short hair. “And I'm sorry for this, too,” he said. “I wanted to keep it, but it was... disgusting.” He forced himself to stand and collected the pail. “I need to get more water to clean your wounds. I'll get the others.” He looked toward the light in the doorway. “You two can... you can speak, while I get them.”

He left the room. Jacquotte squinted. The light bobbed closer and a figure entered the room. Teresa stood in the doorway, holding a candle. She was in her nightclothes and looked like she hadn't slept, but she was still as beautiful as the first day they'd met. They stared at each other. The silence was heavy. It was eating her up inside.

“Teresa—”

“Jacquotte—”

They stopped as they tried to speak at the same time. Teresa put the candle onto the vanity. She came to sit down at the foot of the bed.

“How are you feeling?”

Jacquotte managed a small laugh. “I have been better.”

“I should think so.”

Teresa sat awkwardly, hands clasped in her lap. Jacquotte reached out. Her thumb and remaining finger were splinted, but she rested them on Teresa's hand. When she looked up, there were tears spilling down her face.

"Teresa..." She couldn't find the words. Everything she thought of sounded insincere. It wasn't enough. It would never be enough. "I can't... I shouldn't have—"

"No, please, Jacquotte," Teresa sniffed. Her fingers wound gently around Jacquotte's thumb. "I shouldn't have let you go. You could have died. I should have tried harder to stop you. I just thought—"

"Nothing would have stopped me," Jacquotte said. "You did nothing wrong. I was foolish and petty. I should have listened to you."

She tried to sit up, but her body was too weak. Teresa shuffled closer to her and helped her into a sitting position.

"Jacquotte—"

"No," she said. With her good hand she cradled Teresa's face, brushing away her tears with her thumb. "Please. I will spend the rest of my life doing whatever it takes to make up for what I have done. I should never have left you. And worst of all, I put you in danger. Please. Forgive me. I love you."

There was a hesitation on Teresa's face, but it soon melted into a smile. She leaned forward and kissed Jacquotte.

"I love you," Teresa whispered against her lips. "I always will—"

The door burst open.

"Jacquotte!"

"You're alive!"

"You look *dreadful!*"

Her friends bounded into the room. They stumbled over one another to sit on the bed around her. Francisco kicked off his boots and clambered beneath the sheets to sit beside her, while Miguel and Mbala crowded around the foot of the bed. Marceau, sensibly, took the plush vanity stool.

"How are you feeling?" her brother asked.

Her senses were just coming back to her, including pain.

"I'm alive," she muttered. "That is enough for me."

“Well, you certainly *look* like a pirate now,” Francisco mused. He ran a hand through her short curls. His fingers hesitated over the brand at the back of her neck. “You always were too pretty to be a pirate. Now you look fearsome.”

“That makes little sense,” Mbala objected.

“Of course it does,” Francisco snorted. “Look at her. No hair and no teeth, she’s *covered* in scars. No fingers, no leg—”

“I think that’s quite enough,” Teresa muttered.

Miguel rolled his eyes.

There was such an inherent ease to being back around her friends; she had missed the feeling sorely. Her time alone in the French prison had been agonizing, not just for the pain and lack of food, but for the loneliness. She had thought of them day and night, and now she was finally back beside them.

“I...” She hesitated. They all looked at her expectantly. “I am sorry,” she said at last. “I should have listened to you, to *all* of you. All I cared about was besting Florián. Killing him. I didn’t care about anything else...” She took a deep breath. She was distantly aware that tears were streaming down her face. She didn’t care. “I will never forgive myself for what I’ve done. But I will spend every day of my life trying to earn back your trust, to be worthy of your friendship again. One day.”

Silence stretched across the room. She couldn’t bring herself to look at them, so she stared at her remaining fingers.

“Of course we forgive you, Jacquotte,” Marceau said at last.

“You are our friend,” Mbala added.

Miguel cleared his throat. They turned to him. “We forgive you,” he said, “but you dare do anything like this again, ignore what we say, go against our warnings for the sake of petty vengeance... We will not stand for it again.”

They all nodded, mumbling and looking at each other with solemn faces. Jacquotte took a deep breath.

“I promise. It will never happen again.”

And she meant it. There was a lightness within her now. It filled and warmed her up. She did not need vengeance so badly that she could lose those that she loved the most.

“The crew,” she said suddenly. She tried to move but pain splintered through her. “Fort de Rocher... is everything—”

“Once the mercenaries left with you, that was it,” Teresa told her. “With Florián dead, there was no one left to fight for. The mercenaries did not care about Fort de Rocher, nor the French. Only Florián.”

“The Spanish have not returned to claim the land since we took it,” Mbala said. “We held strong here. We’ve seen nothing. No ships, no longboats, no messengers.”

“Everyone is settling well,” Marceau promised.

Jacquotte took a deep breath. They were safe. The Spanish would not come back to take this land. They hadn’t the resources, nor the forces to try to oust them. Not after what Jacquotte’s crew had put them through during the invasion.

“Good.”

“But...” Francisco hesitated.

“Go on.”

“It’s been over a month since you left,” he told her. “The crew are getting restless. They want to hear from you.”

A month. She steeled herself against the pain and the emotions welling inside her. There would be time to mourn, for the time she had lost, for her broken body, and for her crew.

“What do they need from me?” she asked.

“They want to know what they should do,” Mbala told her. “Should we stay in Fort de Rocher? Should we fortify? Should we be pirating? They’re waiting for your answer, Captain.”

Jacquotte considered his words. She knew exactly what they should do. A slow smile tugged at the corners of her lips.

“We build.”

EPILOGUE

Three years later

JACQUOTTE FUMBLED with the halyard, struggling to tie the knot. The sun was already beginning to set, dancing across the still waves of the sea.

She was going to be late.

Jacquotte took a moment to wipe the sweat from her brow, looking out across the unfinished deck. Her latest ship would be her finest work yet. A heavy-bellied brigantine, with speed on its side and a reddish tinge to the paint. It would sit perfectly beside the flotilla she had been building. Jacquotte admired them across the harbor. Her beautiful *Dayana's Revenge*, and the other, newer vessels. Each was built with a different purpose in mind. Speed, stealth, firepower. And each was named after someone she had loved and lost. *Richelieu*. *Roberto*. *Alberto*.

The name for this latest ship had come to her earlier than most, while she was still sketching and planning, and she had let its namesake guide her craft.

Lennox would be proud to have a ship as glorious as this named after him.

The thought sent a bittersweet pang through her gut. To distract herself, she picked up the halyard and tried to tie the knot again, tugging and heaving, leaning back with all her weight, but still, it would not budge.

A gentle hand came down atop hers. Soft and golden, though not quite as soft as it had once been. "Let me."

Teresa pressed a soft kiss to her temple and Jacquotte stepped aside to let her work the knot. Her hands were proficient from years of assisting Jacquotte in her endeavors, and she tied a knot as well as any sailor.

Jacquotte admired her, as she always did. She had seen the woman dress many different ways in their years together. Wild as a peasant on a beach. Stifled as the Governor's wife. In rags as a ship's purser. Uncomfortable in the captain's quarters wearing pilfered dresses too small for her. But these days she was able to dress as she liked. She wore beautiful dresses perfectly tailored to the soft, round contours of her body, in all manner of bright colors, dripping in wooden beads and trinkets that Jacquotte had picked up for her in her pirating. She looked free.

When the knot was finished, Teresa took a step back. "What do you think?"

Jacquotte appraised her work. "Expertly done," she said, pulling Teresa into a kiss. "I could use a strong, capable woman like you at my side. Care to take up a hammer and join me?"

Teresa laughed. "Sorry, Captain, I'm otherwise occupied," she said. "And so are you. Are you finished here?"

Jacquotte looked around. The brigantine was far from finished. The sails had yet to be raised, the rigging was incomplete, the taffrail was in pieces, the boards of the companionway stairs were loose, there was no glass in the captain's quarters windows, the crow's nest hadn't been assembled. Every time she looked there was something else to build or fix or finalize.

"For now," she said at last.

Teresa smiled at her dotingly. "Ever the perfectionist." She linked her arm through Jacquotte's. "Come. You're already late."

Jacquotte let herself be led off the deck and down the gangplank, into the shipyard. Teresa always took extra care to help her on stairs and sloped surfaces. Jacquotte was used to her pegleg now, she had been for years, but it had been Teresa who helped her learn to use the appendage, who had walked with her, guided her, picked her up when she fell.

Beside the shipyard, the jetty was so full that some ships had been forced to anchor in the harbor and their crews had to scull inland on longboats. The town was more vibrant and bustling than any other she had ever seen. The pirates and buccaneers of Tortuga worked alongside the crew she had first brought to the island all those years ago. There were dockworkers and laborers from all over the West Indies, fond of the good pay and equal society they had created. Merchants

from all over, near and far, who had come to trade in the booming market district Teresa had established.

They hadn't long been in the town before all of Tortuga turned to them as their leaders, and less time still before the rest of the Caribbean did the same, wanting to work with her, wanting to join her crew, to move to her town. Jacquotte welcomed them all with open arms. They were all her people, as much as she was theirs.

“G'mornin', Captain!”

Jacquotte beamed, welcoming and greeting all those she passed.

“Your paint is amazing, Armando. Wonderful color. I will be buying more from you, my friend.”

“The market could use another jeweler. Speak with Teresa tomorrow about getting your goods appraised.”

“Marisol, send your daughter to the shipyard next week. I'll have Emilio teach her the ropes.”

“I need that figurehead soon. The brigantine will be done in two weeks' time, if I have anything to say about it.”

Jacquotte knew every face, every family, every life and want and need. She responded to every greeting and answered every question that was asked of her. This was her town. These were her people.

The festivities were already well underway by the time they reached the beach. The whole town had come to celebrate, and even those from farther afield. Captains from Port Royal and Havana and the Americas, the Brethren of the Coast, lifelong friends Jacquotte had made over the years. It was as though everyone Jacquotte had ever known was there. With them, they brought food and drink and so many gifts that the long wooden tables laid out along the sand were overflowing.

The gifts were meant for Jacquotte, but she never accepted them. She had no use for gold hairpins, embroidered vests, bronze chalices and fine shoes, decorative swords, books, instruments. She left them for the citizens.

She always made sure there was also an entire table filled with gifts for the children of the town. Jacquotte paid carpenters and toymakers and tailors to fill the table with presents. Already the pile was dwindling as children rummaged

around to pull out trinkets and toys and clothes. There was a vast array of tiny wooden boats, and the children ran down to the river to watch them race around its curves.

The celebration, the gifts, they were all a part of Jacquotte's thanks to the town, for they had already given her so much. Because on this day, three years ago, Jacquotte had been rescued from the clutches of the French.

Jacquotte and Teresa found their friends sitting around a roasting pit. Francisco and Mbala were holding court, regaling the others with a tale of their recent excursion to Cuba. Miguel and Anne sat together, their two older daughters looking up at the men's dramatic reenactment with wide brown eyes, another babe in Miguel's arms, and Anne resting a hand on the swell of her stomach. Marceau was on a chair they had brought out for him, wincing at the gory details, no doubt reliving the time he'd spent repairing the two men after their daring feat that had left them both with enough scars and stories to last a lifetime.

Francisco was the first to see her. "Captain!" he said, beaming. "Trust you to be late to your own celebration."

Jacquotte smiled. "I've been working on the brigantine," she told them. "I would say that my masterpiece is more important than timeliness."

"Ah, modesty," Marceau said, standing to pull her into a hug. "It never did suit you."

Jacquotte laughed, letting herself be enveloped in the warm, familiar embrace. Marceau had filled out these last few years, and he had grown taller. He wore his hair similar to her own, in a network of intricate braids and locs, and he now had a full beard and a deep, rumbling voice. Her brother was taller than her now, but he looked down at her with the same kind eyes of the boy she had raised. He was still her little brother.

"How fares the ship?" Miguel asked.

"It's beautiful," Teresa said. "It'll be done soon enough. Then she'll just have to find a captain."

"Elizabeth has more than earned it," Mbala mused.

"Then she'll take Samada as her mate," Anne said. "Every time you build a ship you lose a strong ally."

Jacquotte shook her head. "They're not lost," she said. "They're still a part of my crew, but they deserve the chance to flourish on their own. The chance to grow. We all do."

Francisco thrust a cup into her good hand, filled with sweet-smelling wine, and raised his own. "To Jacquotte," he said. They all raised their cups. "The greatest captain in the Caribbean."

Jacquotte grinned. "And to you, my friends," she said. "To your daring rescue. To your strength. And to your forgiveness. May I spend every day I walk this earth proving to you that I am deserving of it."

They smashed their cups together with a cheer, and began their own private celebration. They reveled and danced, sang bawdy songs, and ate more than their fair share of goat and pork and whatever food was passed around, and they shared tales from their various adventures. Though they saw each other most every day, living in the same row of homes close to the Governor's manor, they talked for hours, for so long that the girls fell asleep, and Anne had to leave to put them to bed.

Only Jacquotte, Francisco, and Mbala sailed these days, but Miguel had plenty of stories to tell from his seat in the former Governor's manor. They had turned it into their town hall, where he, Anne, and others elected by the town presided over important matters. They heard every case, every squabble and petty grievance, and came to fair and just solutions. There was little infighting in town, and no dispute they couldn't solve. Teresa told stories of the travelers she met at the market, from far-off lands and ones she had once called home, of the treasures she bought and traded, and the cultures she eagerly learned about. Marceau told stories of the strange and new medical practices and remedies he'd been learning and testing, that left them all feeling sick to their stomachs.

It was only when the moon reached its peak in the sky that Jacquotte slipped away. No one tried to stop her. They all knew where she was going. She walked through the town, still wide awake with the spirit of celebration, to the cemetery in the far reaches of the town, already too full with the graves of those they had lost.

There was a candle on each and every grave and, like every year before, she lit them all. As she did so, passing her own lit candle over the next to share its flame,

she whispered a word of thanks to everyone for their sacrifice. At some of the graves she left gifts. A favored axe. Spiced rum. Blanca's famed goat stew.

She stayed with the graves, telling her friends of their lives and adventures.

She was so focused on the dead that she almost didn't hear the footsteps coming toward her.

Her friends stood at the edge of the graveyard.

"What are you doing here?" she asked.

Marceau smiled softly. "You shouldn't be alone," he said. "Not tonight."

"Come with us," Teresa urged, holding out her hand.

Jacquotte stood, dusting herself off, and took Teresa's hand.

Together, Jacquotte and her friends, her *family*, walked through the town. Through its winding streets and back alleys, past its usually bustling market, now shut up tight for the night. Past the homes of all her friends and crew. They chatted aimlessly as they walked, following the path up toward the fort for which the town had once been named.

It had taken the whole town, a great deal of money and time and effort, but it was restored to its former glory. A fort so impressive, so powerful, that in all their years, there had never once been a successful invasion. No one had even dared approach their shores. They knew the might that awaited them. They knew Jacquotte awaited them.

They passed the guards on duty and climbed the stairs to the very top of the tower, to their war room. The walls were covered with every map they could get their hands on. Every sea, stream, and coast was accounted for. And in the center of the room was a large table, where Jacquotte, the captains of her flotilla, and their mates gathered to discuss their plans before bringing them before their crews. Not a single vote was missed, not ever again.

Her friends sat down around the table, still chattering to each other, smiling and laughing and happy.

"Where do you plan to head next?" Miguel asked, appraising the maps around them. "Another escapade to Cuba?"

Francisco groaned. "Please, no," he said. "I fear I'll never quite recover from Havana."

"I thought you heralded it as your great adventure?" Mbala said.

“Only that I survived.”

“It’s a wonder either of you is still able to walk after last time,” Marceau said. “I say no Cuba. I cannot keep repairing the two of you when you throw yourselves needlessly into danger.”

“Needlessly?” Francisco said, feigning shock. “It was absolutely necessary!”

“I would not call throwing yourself off a roof ‘necessary.’” Mbala grinned, placing a kiss on the other man’s brow. “I would like for you to remain in one piece.”

As their friends argued, Teresa smiled and held her close. “You had better not be gone so long next time,” she said. “I miss you when you’re gone, and you must stay safe. Or else.”

Jacquotte laughed gently. “Are you threatening me, Teresa Delahaye?”

“Offering my services, actually,” Teresa said. She took Jacquotte’s hands in her own. “I’d like to come with you, if you’d have me. Wherever it is that you go.”

“It could be a long voyage,” Jacquotte said.

“As long as I get to be by your side.”

“And it’ll be dangerous.”

Teresa grinned, leaning in close. “And I will protect you.”

Jacquotte pulled her close, pressing their lips together, running her hands through Teresa’s thick hair until her friends laughed and jeered and they pulled away, short-breathed and flushed.

“So, where will we go, Captain?” Teresa asked her at last.

Jacquotte gazed out the window. The bright fires on the beach lit up the night sky, and she watched her people dance and sing and enjoy themselves. Free and happy and safe. She looked out at the town, thriving with the fruits of her labor, from the love of all those who believed in her and had helped to make her dreams come true. A real pirate haven, far surpassing the likes of any that had come before it.

She knew for certain now what she had not known then. She was not alone, and she never would be. She had never been able to find a home. Not in Yáquimo, nor Port Royal. But she had made her own. A home where they would all be safe, a place where they could be free, where no human was property,

where they could love and be loved. And it was everything she had ever dreamed of.

She turned to her friends with a smile. “We can go wherever we wish,” she said. “To the Americas. To the China Sea. To hunt for hidden islands and lost treasures. We can go anywhere. As long as we return.”

Finally, she had found her purpose. And any adventure she went on she knew would lead her right back to where she belonged. Her home.

The Freebooter Republic.

Author's Note

I have always been fascinated by little-known historical figures, especially forgotten women and people of color. There is so much you can learn about the world from the people history chooses to ignore and, in some instances, erases almost entirely. While the plausibility of Jacquotte Delahaye as a legitimate historical figure has been debated, with some believing her to be entirely fictitious, and others believing her to have been pieced together from folklore and legends of the time, what cannot be disregarded is how truly fascinating the information we have on her actually is.

As opposed to other notorious female pirates and buccaneers, such as Anne Bonny, Mary Read, or Gráinne Ní Mháille, the information about Jacquotte is minimal. What we do know about her life is that she was born to a French father and Haitian mother in what is now modern Haiti. Her mother died giving birth to her brother, who might have had a disability, and Jacquotte became a pirate following the murder of her father. According to stories, she was said to have faked her own death and taken on a male alias, later becoming known as “Back from the Dead Red,” in part because of her red hair. She was the captain of hundreds of pirates who took over Tortuga in 1656, hailing it a freebooter republic, and later died defending it.

Part of what intrigued me so much about Jacquotte’s story is *how* she became a pirate captain. How did her father’s death lead her on such a journey? How did she find a crew so large and so willing to follow her? And why, if her achievements were so great, had no one told her story?

Admittedly, I felt a certain kinship with Jacquotte. Regardless of whether she truly existed, the achievements she was attributed with accomplishing altered the course of piracy leading into the Golden Age of Piracy. These accomplishments came from somewhere, from *someone*, likely another forgotten woman of color

from this era. It is so often that women of color are overlooked in history, or their achievements are attributed to others, and in *Jacquotte* I saw someone who deserved to be remembered. She was someone people didn't know, but should.

The Ballad of Jacquotte Delahaye is an amalgamation of the questions I asked myself, and an urge to explore what could have led an ordinary woman of color from seventeenth century colonial Haiti to such an extraordinary life. I wanted to shed light on a very dark period of history that is so often whitewashed, sanitized, and glamorized. It is an interpretation of what I believe her life *could* have been, though, for the sake of good storytelling, I have taken some liberties. It is a work of historical *fiction*, after all, and therefore, I have left much to my imagination, and some historical instances have been amended or adjusted to fit this narrative.

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About the Author



Briony Cameron is a queer disabled writer based in Cardiff, Wales. Her father was of Jamaican, Panamanian, and Cuban heritage and her mother is of English and Welsh heritage. She has been writing since she could pick up a pencil, first emulating the comic books her dad raised her on before moving on to novels. In 2020 her short story “The Nantes Affair” was longlisted for the Crime Writers’ Association’s Short Story Competition, and her debut novel, *The Ballad of Jacquotte Delahaye*, was longlisted that same year for the Penguin WriteNow Competition, and in 2021 it was shortlisted for the Lucy Cavendish Prize. Alongside writing, she is an avid knitter, and she loves to play video games and spend time with her dog, Keanu. Follow her on Twitter [@_BrionyCameron](https://twitter.com/_BrionyCameron).

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