

RIDEN'S  
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THE SHIP WE'RE APPROACHING is utterly unremarkable.

I expected more from a vessel in the pirate king's fleet, but perhaps that is the point. No one expects a princess to be aboard a ship so small and nondescript.

"We're almost upon her," I say to my brother and captain, Draxen. "This outrageous plan of yours just might work."

"My plan is brilliant. We're soon to be very rich men."

"After we kidnap the princess. And convince her to tell us where the pirate king's keep is. And then infiltrate his holding. And then rob him blind. And escape without anyone catching us. What could go wrong?"

Draxen smacks me in the arm. "It was better than any of your ideas."

“I don’t recall having any ideas surrounding the pirate king.”

Draxen places his hands at his belt. “No, your idea was to use our dear dead father’s money to whore and gamble instead of hiring more crew and making something of ourselves.”

“Not whoring,” I correct him. I don’t pay for companionship. I much prefer the challenge of earning it.

Draxen peers in earnest at the ship almost within our reach. I flick the captain’s hat on his head. It flies to the ground.

“Dammit, Riden. I need to play the fierce captain now. None of that!”

That’s what I’m worried about. Draxen doesn’t so much as “play” the fierce captain as he “becomes” him. There is a darkness in Draxen that reminds me of our father. And when pushed too far, it rises to the surface.

I’ve had his back every day since we started the mutiny and overthrew the previous crew of the *Night Farer* nearly six months ago. I nearly died several times before that day, but Draxen saved me from my father’s fists, from starvation aboard a ship with a heartless crew, from giving up on life entirely.

Which is why I will keep the darkness at bay—whatever it takes. Draxen saved me, so I will always be there to save him from himself. Draxen can have his grand plans, but I will keep him grounded.

I don’t see how too much trouble could arise from having one girl aboard our ship, but I am prepared to step in, nonetheless.

I’ve heard conflicting accounts about the princess. In one,

she's a brutal pirate known to be as bloodthirsty as her father. In another, she's been terrorized by her father's cruelty her whole life and is no more than a victim, born to the wrong man.

I can't fault her for that. I was, too.

The crew is tense in the last minute of our approach. Weapons angle at the ready, gazes pin to the ship whose name I can now read, the *Gull*.

Not a terribly threatening name for a pirate ship. Must all be part of the plan to conceal the famed daughter of the pirate king, Alosa Kalligan.

There's a beat of silence before our ship lines up with the *Gull*. One moment of calm before the storm erupts.

Our cannons blast holes into the other ship, and the lads board her using grappling hooks. I watch from the sidelines as the initial contact takes place. The pirate king's men are ready for Draxen's. Pistols fire and swords meet each other in battle.

As soon as the gangplank is secured between the ships, I make my own journey over onto the enemy's ship, sword already raised.

I have to wade through blurs of fighting men before I find a lone enemy pirate. He's probably twice my age with a scrap of cloth sweeping his hair out of his eyes, and blackened teeth. I pull back my arm, readying to strike and expecting him to do the same.

He turns tail, runs to the other end of the ship, and flings himself over the railing.

All right, then.

I approach another enemy pirate who looks to be hanging back from the fight. I raise my sword, and he drops his weapon.

Drops it.

He flings his hands up into the air. "I surrender."

I kick his cutlass over the side of the ship before scanning through those actually fighting. They're not especially skilled swordsman. One by one, I watch Draxen's men disarm them and force them to their knees.

*This is the crew the king of pirates chose to guard his daughter?* Could our intel have been wrong? Is Alosa not on board? Surely only the bravest and best of fighters would be selected to ensure safe passage for the princess of pirates.

And why do they keep throwing nervous glances toward the hatch leading belowdecks?

"Lay down your arms!" A shout goes up from their side, a rather feminine-sounding one. The king's men instantly drop their weapons and go to their knees. My eyes land on the one who spoke.

A petite form. Brown hair separated into two braids. A pretty lass, but not the king's daughter.

There's more than one female on this ship?

Another girl, a raven-haired lass with a murderous look in her eyes, is also on her knees with her hands held up in the air. Every muscle in her body is as tense as a bow string, as though something is taking her great effort. Not fighting back, perhaps?

And a third girl, also with dark hair, has her head turned toward Eridale, who has his pistol pointed her. She gives

him such a condescending look, you'd think their roles were reversed.

I call out to the nearest pirate to me, Kearan. It's a wonder he's sober enough for today's battle.

"Check belowdecks. Make sure no one's hiding."

While he's busy with that, I shout, "Line them up!" to the rest of the men.

Liomen and Brennol herd the enemy's crew into a line effortlessly. No one refuses my instructions or tries to fight back. They're still staring toward that trapdoor.

I follow their line of sight to see Kearan removing weapons from a cabin boy who must have been hiding below. He forces the lad to his knees. That should be everyone, so I do another look over for a redheaded lass. Instead, my eyes lock for just a moment with the pretty brunette from earlier, and I give her a wink.

That's when Draxen makes his appearance.

He keeps his head down at first to draw out the moment, build anticipation. He's confessed to me his hopes of drumming up a reputation even more fearsome than our father's.

And if that's what he wants, then I will help him get it.

"Captain, all the men on the ship are before you," I say to him.

"Good, Riden. But let's hope they're not *all* men."

"I've spotted three lasses so far, but none of them have red hair."

Draxen nods. "Listen up!" he shouts to our captives. "You have all heard the stories of Jeskor the Headbreaker. I am his

son, Draxen. And you will find that my reputation will grow to be far worse.”

I have to fight a smile after he finishes. I saw him practicing the words in the mirror earlier today, but I’d never admit it to him. I’ll let him keep his pride.

I wait for him to continue on to the threatening bits, but he’s interrupted by laughter. Rich feminine laughter that comes from what I’d assumed to be a cabin boy.

“Kearan,” Draxen says, nodding to him.

Kearan cracks the butt of his sword against the girl’s head.

I can’t help but cringe. Maybe Kearan didn’t notice the feminine laugh. He can’t have known he just struck a girl. She’s probably bleeding under the hat. I take a step forward, but I needn’t have bothered.

In just two moves, she renders Kearan flat on his back and has her weapons in hand. She moved so quickly, I barely managed to catch it.

But when she points her pistol right at Draxen, I snap out of the daze. My right hand goes for my own weapon.

“Get off the ship and take your men with you,” she says. If before I thought her simply another female member of the crew, I’m now certain this must be Alosa. That command was given by someone used to being in charge.

Kearan tries to find his feet from behind her, but Alosa slams an elbow into him, and he falls backward once more.

“Leave now,” she says, right after cocking back her gun.

I size up her hand, carefully noting where her fingers wrap around the handle, and fire my own pistol. Just as I planned,

her gun flies out of reach without harming her. I return my gun to its holster and smile at the perfect shot.

Her eyes find me then, but her sailor's hat has most of her face shadowed. I can see the outlines of her nose, mouth, and eyes, but little more. What color are those eyes that must be rimmed with fury?

She draws her sword and dares to take a step in my direction. "You could have taken my hand."

I don't need to respond. This is Draxen's plan. He will want to control the situation, but she seems to think that was a lucky shot. I would hate for her to be mistaken.

"Only if I'd wanted to," I say.

Two of our men grab her, wresting her sword away from her.

"I think you talk far too much for a mere cabin boy whose voice hasn't yet dropped," Draxen says. "Remove the hat."

That brown cap comes off, and fire spills down.

And I drink in Alosa Kalligan, daughter of the pirate king.

Her hair isn't a dark red, like the auburn seen on a lot of girls from the island of Anerdisa. It's also not the less common red-orange.

No, Alosa has hair the color of living flame. It curves over her shoulders, framing a face with high cheekbones, a narrow nose, and eyes so blue they could threaten the ocean.

Though I live a life on the sea, we make port often. And though I've seen many women, bedded many women, there's no doubt in my mind—

Alosa Kalligan is the most beautiful thing I have ever seen. She's almost otherworldly, she's so striking.



I have to give credit to Draxen for not even faltering after seeing her face. “Princess Alosa. There you are. You’re a bit younger than I expected.”

She’s a lot of things I wasn’t expecting. I stare at the hideous, loose outfit she’s wearing and try to figure out exactly what she’s hiding underneath it.

Is her figure rail thin or curvy under those layers?

“I was worried we’d have to tear apart the ship before we found you,” Draxen continues. “You will be coming with us now.”

“I think you’ll learn quickly, Captain, that I don’t like being told what to do,” she says.

That has my head looking up from where it shouldn’t be looking and watching her face, waiting for her to try something.

This time it takes longer because she’s held by two men, but the result is the same. She frees herself, and I grab a second pistol from inside my jacket and level it at her. Then I feel my lips turn up in a smile. Definitely curvy. You can’t fight off two men without ample muscles and weight behind those punches.

“I have terms, Captain,” she says.

“Terms?” Draxen repeats incredulously.

“We will negotiate the terms of my surrender. First I will have your word that my crew will be freed and unharmed.”

Beautiful, a talented swordswoman, and she’s *feisty*. Alosa was definitely trained by her father. She is no helpless captive to a cruel father. She’s a pirate in her own right.

And she's made Draxen angry. He goes for one of his pistols, points it at one of the enemy pirates in line, and shoots.

Dammit.

"Do not test me," Draxen says to her. "You will get on my ship. Now."

As if it magically appeared there, Alosa has her sword in a flash, and she uses it to cut Gastol's throat.

For a moment, I'm stunned, unable to do anything as the scene continues to play out. Draxen kills another enemy pirate with a new pistol, and Alosa responds by shoving her cutlass into Moll's heart. He hits the deck with a *thud* that finally pulls me to my senses.

"Stop!" I shout.

Draxen changes when he's killing. He closes off. Drifts away from me.

Turns into our father.

And Alosa is unknowingly egging him on.

I step toward her with my pistol outstretched, so she knows I mean business.

"If you wanted me dead, you would have already killed me," she says, completely nonplussed by the sight of my gun. "Since you want me alive, you *will* comply with my terms."

And, calling my bluff, she kicks Kearan in the side and forces him to his knees. One hand in his hair, the other tightly gripped around the sword pressed to his neck, she watches me, waiting.

*Call my bluff, that look seems to say. I have no problem doing what you cannot.*

I look over at Draxen and realize he's not going to back down. He steps up to the girl I winked at earlier, preparing to fire.

"For one who asked for the safety of her crew, you sure are being callous when I kill them off one by one," he says.

"But for every man I lose, you shall lose one as well," she answers. "If you intend to kill them all after I'm on board, then it doesn't really matter if I lose a few while bargaining for the safety of the rest. You intend to take me captive, Captain. If you wish me to board your ship willingly, then you would be wise to listen to my offer. Or shall we see just how many of your men I can kill as you try to force me over?"

Oh, she's good.

If Draxen weren't taken over by the darkness, I'm sure he'd see reason. But right now he's lost himself, so I have to intervene. I hurry over to my brother and put my mouth to his ear.

"Remember the plan, Draxen. We just need her on board. So what if we let the rest of the crew go free? We have what we want."

"She cannot treat me this way," he whispers back. "I need to make an example."

"You're allowing her to kill your men. If we want to avoid a mutiny, you need to put their safety first. This can't continue. Don't worry. I'll get the information out of her that we need, but first let's focus on getting her on the *Night Farer*."

His lips push together in a fine line, and I try to keep my face straight as I wait to see his decision.

"State your terms, *princess*," he says. "And be quick about it."

I sigh in relief. He's come back. I don't know what I will do if a day ever comes when I can't bring him back to himself.

"The crew is to be unharmed and released," she says. "I will come aboard your ship without resisting. Also, you will bring my accessories over."

"Your accessories?"

"Yes, my wardrobe and personal belongings."

Draxen turns to me. "She wants her clothes."

"I am a princess, and I will be treated as such."

I can practically feel the heat of his desire to shoot her from here, so I say, "What do we care, Captain, if she wants to get herself all fixed up for us every day? I for one won't complain."

But my thoughts are less on seeing what she looks like in something more form fitting than they are on getting her away from Draxen. They've only just met, and she brings out a bad side in him.

"Very well," he says. "Will that be all, *Your Highness*?"

"Yes."

"Then get your pampered arse over to the ship. You men, get her belongings to the ship. As for the princess's crew, get the lot of you to the rowboats. I will be sinking this ship. It's a two-and-a-half-day sail to the nearest port if you row quickly. And I suggest you do before you die of thirst. Once you reach the shore, you will take my note of ransom to the pirate king and inform him that I have his daughter."

I should oversee things as our crew begins searching the ship for valuables and forcing the rest of the enemy into the rowboats.

But I keep an eye on Draxen and Alosa. I can't overhear their conversation from here, but by the disgusted look on her face, it must not be good.

I need to intercede again, but before I reach them, he backhands her right across the cheek.

I can't move for a moment, as that single action repeats again and again across my vision. I've *never* seen him strike a girl.

And for the first time since we were children, it makes me want to hit *him*.

When Draxen tells me to "Get to work on her," I grasp her firmly by the upper arm and haul her away as quickly as possible, else *I* might do something I shouldn't to my brother.

Draxen has too much invested in this excursion. He won't allow anything to screw this up. I must do my best to ensure nothing ruins his plans. It's the only way to save him.

That means I can't even entertain the notion of sizing up Alosa to find the right angle to get her into bed.

She is my enemy. She is dangerous for Draxen but essential to his plans. I'm to get the pirate king's keep location from her, among other things. She's under the impression we intend to hold her for ransom, but it's so much more than that.

We're going to dethrone the king and take all of his treasure for ourselves.

And if I want to keep my brother from becoming our deceased father, I need to make sure this plan works.

Alosa is a means to an end. Nothing more. She may have gotten under Draxen's skin, but I will not let her do the same to me.