Forged in grief, sharpened by purpose.



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First edition

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Prologue

Consilia 2, Elo 9623 A.R. - Tekara'maku, Jade Destiny Sect

"Another."

The female Olari'i¹ pushed an empty shot glass, partially made of bone, across the bartop. Her voice, raspy and weak, carried a profound hollowness—one all too familiar to those who had parlayed with grief. Hunched over the counter, her disheveled clothes only further betrayed her woeful state.

"You shouldn't be drinking this much, Cali."

The white-scaled Avargan¹ bartender spoke as he slowly poured a violet-blue liquid from a thin-necked bottle into the glass. Inked across his forearm was a tattoo of a white kauhoe². A nametag, "Alren, Owner of the Dirty Kauhoe Bar & Grille" written in Zanyarin³, was neatly pinned to the right side of his uniform.

Alren set the bottle of Halitian alcohol back onto a shelf behind him, among other liquor bottles of various sizes and colors.

 $^{^{\}rm 1}$ One of the 6 main humanoid species who settled on Kylia

 $^{^{2}}$ A species of ara'atan, an animal native to Kylia

 $^{^{\}rm 3}$ The written language of Kylia

"And yet you keep pouring."

A grayish-blue hand picked up the glass, drawing it up toward the owner's face. Despite her pallid expression, the woman's visage held an alluring, enigmatic charm. Her sharp, angular features were framed by long, flowing black-green ombre hair cascading in loose waves around her face, partially concealed beneath a ragged pirate's hat. Two piercing emerald eyes, marked by black streaks of nari'icore that fell from her lower eyelids like tears, stared solemnly at the glass. Dangling from her neck was a small, unassuming dagger.

After a moment of silence, Calista Steelheart took a long, slow breath and downed the shot.

Alren watched her as he wiped down his station. It was difficult to see his former crewmate like this, albeit unsurprising. Less than two months prior, Daryn Daggerhand—Calista's fiancé and one of Alren's dearest friends—had been killed while pursuing a sorceress by the name of Yvanna the Puppeteer off the northeastern coast of the Jade Destiny Sect.

The Puppeteer was known for her profound command of Consilium⁴, which she used to warp and twist the minds of her foes before obliterating them. Calista had warned Daryn of the dangers, but the bounty on her head was too enticing to ignore. Had she tried harder to stop him then, maybe she wouldn't be mourning him now...

⁴ The Paragon of Empathy, one of the 7 classifications of the mystical genki energy source found on Kylia, represented by the color purple and manifests in abilities related to the mind

PROLOGUE

News of Daryn's death didn't reach Tekara'maku for several days after his departure, at first nothing more than speculative chatter. But as days turned to weeks and weeks to months, gradually the truth seemed more and more apparent. When a small raiding group brought back a half-decomposed body of one of Daryn's crew they had found washed up on the northern shores of the continent, the last embers of hope in Calista's heart dissipated for good.

At first, Calista had insisted she was fine, seemingly weathering the loss with the same steel resolve that had made her infamous on the seas. But as time wore on, the weight of his absence settled upon her. And eventually, her facade collapsed.

Alren had done what he could to help her, but he was grieving too. And unlike her, he couldn't afford to close up his shop. As a result, Calista had spent more and more time at the Dirty Kauhoe, drowning herself in his liquor when she needed someone to talk to. Misery loved company, after all.

He didn't mind her presence—he welcomed it even..most of the time—but her constant indulgence in his wares was rapidly depleting his reserves. More than that, he worried she would remain like this indefinitely if no one pulled her out of it.

Alren shook his head. "You know these shots aren't free, Cali. And you still owe me for last week's tab."

"Yeah, yeah, I know."

"And the week before that. And the week before that. And—"

"I get it, Alren." Calista tapped her glass. "One trip is all I need to square things. With you and everyone else. I promise."

Alren frowned. "You're in no shape to sail, let alone go back to raiding."

He poured another shot but covered the glass with his hand.

"Don't you think it's time you gave up piracy? Maybe picked up something a bit more—legal? I know you've probably never considered it, but now might be the right time for a fresh start. New environment, new experiences. Get your mind off things. Make some honest money."

"Just give me the shot, Alren." She swiped at the glass, but he was quicker.

"Booze won't bring Daryn back, Cali. And no matter how many times you say it, it wasn't your fault he died going after that witch. You telling him about the bounty had nothing to do with what happened after. And don't beat yourself up about that 'not trying hard enough to stop him' crap. It was his choice. His consequences." Alren met her gaze. "Sooner or later, you're going to have to accept that. And sooner or later, you're going to have to stop blaming yourself and move on."

Calista exhaled sharply in response.

Alren lifted his hand off the glass. "And for both our sakes, the sooner the better."

Calista picked up the glass, staring at her own reflection in the translucent liquid. She hesitated, then threw back the shot, setting the empty glass gently on the counter.

PROLOGUE

A long silence stretched between them. The chime by the entrance jingled faintly, swaying with the salted coastal breeze.

At last, Calista looked up at her old friend, reading the concern in his beady Avargan eyes. She dropped her gaze back to her glass. "I… I miss him, Alren." Her voice quivered.

Alren nodded, taking the glass and placing it in the empty sink behind the counter. "I do too, Cali. But those of us he left behind have to find a way to keep going. You know as well as I do that Daryn wouldn't want to see you stuck like this."

Calista sat in silence, letting the words sink in. Eventually, she looked up again. Alren gave her his best attempt at a reassuring, toothy grin.

"I really hate it when you're right."

"Must hate me a lot, then." Alren wiped the glass and set it on a rack.

For the first time in weeks, the faintest hint of a smile cracked through Calista's dark blue lips. "But I can't give up being a pirate. It's the only part of me I've got left. That, and I owe it to the crew. I'm sure they're thrilled to have been jobless for the last month."

"Fair enough." Alren crossed over to the register, punched in a few numbers, then returned. "But speaking of which, your tab's now up to a total of 17,212 yin. Not gonna ask for anything now, but from this point on, no more drinks 'til you've paid off at least a third."

"Seriously?"

He shrugged. "Hey, I gotta make a living here too y'know. I even gave

you the friends and family discount."

"Yeah, yeah, whatever." She stood up, trudging toward the exit. Grabbing a coat and cap from the rack, she pushes out the double swinging doors, "You're my least favorite friend!"

"I'm your only friend!"

Chapter 1: The Weight of Loss

Interrita 1, Daeva 9623 A.R. - Zokirian Ocean

Most crews would be rowdy after a victory. Calista's was not.

The Shadow of the Deep loomed over the wreckage of the Djinn⁵ convoy, its dark metal hull almost blending in against the deepening twilight. The top half of the Corsairs' flagship rested above the water's surface like a dormant predator—the rest of its dark, glistening hull submerged, its hooked boarding fins retracted.

From its spine, pale green lights pulsed in slow sequence, their rhythm matching the steady hum of its internal systems. Near the bow, the ship's reinforced canopy gleamed faintly in the moonlight, marred by old scoring and the dried remnants of salt and bolcharge⁶.

 $^{^{\}rm 5}$ Hired porters and navigators who are part of the Olmorani guild system

⁶ A type of weapon that fires a high-energy laser bolt

Pirates in oil-slick coats clambered over debris, prying open salt-soaked chests and finding little worth the ammo they'd spent. Low voices carried across the waves—gripes about thin pickings, mutters that the old days died with Captain Daggerhand. A few glanced at Calista on the rail, then looked away just as quickly, as if afraid she might read the doubt in their eyes.

At Calista's shoulder stood Eshmeel Amo, the ship's bo'sun and oldest hand left from the Oduun's founding crew. A one-handed, red-skinned saagas⁷, his tentacled beard was bound with copper rings, each of which marked a successful raid. His left eye was clouded white, a souvenir from some forgotten boarding action. He chewed a strip of dried seaweedle and watched the loot operation with a grunt that bordered on disillusioned amusement.

"Nothing but a bunch of rubbish." One of the pirates, a broadshouldered woman named Jorrik, scoffed as she kicked open a crate. "Linen? Dried fruit? Where are the damn mojans? The jewels? The weapons?"

"Ain't even a cask of proper rum," an older pirate by the name of Calren grumbled.

The wind carried their disappointment across the deck, mixing with the lapping waves and the creak of the ship's rigging. They had risked their lives for this? The Djinn vessels they preyed upon usually carried fine silks, spices, trinkets or troves of currency bound for the Kingdom of Eternals. But tonight, as had been the case for a time now, all they had seized was meager trade stock—barely enough to cover the cost of

⁷ One of the 6 main humanoid species who settled on Kylia

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the bolor⁸ and sakad⁹ they'd spent taking the convoy.

Calista sighed, fingers brushing against the dagger at her throat. Daryn's dagger. The cool metal rested against her collarbone, a constant, aching reminder of what she had lost.

"Crew's restless," he said, his voice like an anchor dragging gravel. "Keep coming up empty and they'll start thinking the sea's cursed. Or their captain is."

Calista kept her gaze forward, refusing to let the comment sting. "What about you, Eshmeel? You think I'm in over my head too? I'm not fit to be captain? That I made a mistake trying to lead everyone alone?"

"Never said that." He folded his arms. "But they remember when Daryn was standing here with you, splitting sails with that mad grin. You were a pair o' blades for the crew. Now they've only got one, and it ain't the same."

Calista closed her eyes, letting the cool sea breeze blow across her face as she exhaled a heavy-hearted breath.

"One way or another, you've got to show them that the one's still enough." Eshmeel gave Calista a reassuring pat with his one good hand. "For what it's worth, I believe you'll turn things around."

The sound of booted footsteps approaching.

"Captain."

⁸ Energy crystals used to power various tech, from large ship engines to personal weaponry

⁹ A type of metal found on Kylia, primarily used as ammo

Calista turned at the voice. Irene Goldfeather, her quartermaster, stepped onto the helm with her usual brisk stride, her coat stained with a splash of blood that wasn't hers. Her golden eyes, sharp as a falcon's, swept across the restless crew before settling on Calista.

"I need to speak with you." Irene said the words plainly, but there was a hesitation behind her voice—like she was bracing for something worse.

Calista, distracted, replied half-sarcastically, "What is it? The crew planning a mutiny?"

Irene looked to Eshmeel, who nodded and went off to help the others. Once he was out of earshot, she leaned closer and spoke, "One of the crew found a note. I managed to get a hold of it before anyone else saw. You might want to check it out."

She pulled out a crumpled piece of parchment and handed it to Calista. Written in Zanyarin were the words: "Corsairs, 20 kidas¹⁰ West of Miru Island. Use a decoy. - eYe"

Calista's brow furrowed as she read. "You think someone's tipping off the Djinn? One of ours?" She asked, pocketing the note, her voice a mix of frustration and regret.

"Don't know for sure. Gonna have to start digging around to see if I can find any other leads." Irene replied, still doing her best to keep her voice low. "But the bigger question is why? If it is one of our own, they're spoiling things just as much for themselves as everyone else."

¹⁰ Standard unit of measurement for distance on Kylia

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"Maybe they cut a deal with the Djinn?"

"The Djinn wouldn't trust anyone outside the Olmorani. But I don't think you're wrong in assuming there's another hand at play..." Her voice trailed off.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing. I just—I have a theory about who it might be. One you're not going to like, especially if it's true." Irene gestures for Calista to pull out the note again. "See how the signature is written? With the capital Y? What if it's—"

"—Yvanna?" Calista could feel the weight of the crew's worries, their frustration simmering beneath the surface. There was a good chance Irene was right. Things had started going wrong ever since Daryn went after the Puppeteer. Even with her back on the water, fighting to return to the way things were, and despite her best attempts to stave off emotions and doubt that kept creeping up, it all still felt...off.

The easy victories weren't so easy anymore. The loot never quite as plentiful. The crew still fought, still drank—but the bond they had once shared felt frayed, as if the very heart of the Corsairs had been ripped away the night Daryn was lost.

"And what if it is her behind all of this? What are we supposed to do? Daryn already tried and failed and now we're living with the consequences. We don't know what she's capable of or what she did to him and the rest. What if I'm not strong enough—"

"Do you remember the night we met?" Irene asked suddenly, "How you

swooped in to beat up those enforcers who were trying to take me away? You gave me a place to stay, clothes, food, friends, a family—everything really. Ever since I lost my parents, I'd never had a place to call home. Until you came along."

Irene's voice softened as she recalled their meeting. But as Calista turned to listen, she noticed something flicker across Irene's face—something like shame. It passed quickly, buried beneath a practiced calm.

"Back then, in my eyes, you were this unwavering hero without fear, who wouldn't hesitate to do anything she set her mind to. Nothing could stop you. It was like you had the inextinguishable fire burning inside your chest. It was contagious. It made every single one of us just as passionate and just as excited to sail by your side." Irene said, looking out across the horizon, "But now, it feels like that fire's turned to embers. And that any day it very well might go out entirely."

Calista tensed. She should have expected it. Irene knew her too well, knew the way grief settled into her bones like a slow, creeping tide. How it wore away at her conscience like waves eroding the cliffside.

Irene continued, "You can't just keep sailing away from reality."

A moment of silence between the pair as waves softly lapped up against the ship.

"How did you get over it? How did you move on?"

"Pardon?"

"You said that before we met, you'd lost your parents. What was it like

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after they were gone? How did you find a way to keep going?"

"Oh. That." Irene scratched her head, her golden eyes refused to meet Calista's gaze, "To be honest I don't remember exactly. It's been so long now, I've pushed it away to the point I've almost forgotten it all entirely."

There had always been something guarded in Irene, a corner of herself walled off. Calista had once chalked it up to trauma—but lately, it had started to feel like something more.

Calista stiffened. "I've tried pushing it out. Forgetting. But I can't. The way I see it there's only one way I'll be able to move on. Especially now if Yvanna is the one behind all of this."

"Vengeance?" Irene asks, half-jokingly.

"Not vengeance. Justice." Calista replied.

The quartermaster turned to face her captain. "Not everyone on the crew will be on board with this decision, you know. But I'd be damned if I let you run off and face her alone."

"I'm sure I can convince Eshmeel to tag along. He always loves a good fight."

"Then we better start preparing."

"Keep it a secret for now. Once we're ready, I'll inform the crew."

"As you wish. Captain."

Calista knew what she was risking. Going after the witch who killed her fiance. What it meant if she failed, both for herself and for her crew. But it had to be done. It had to be her.

Those thoughts sat heavy in her chest as she stepped away, retreating to her cabin.

Calista shut the door behind her, the noise of the deck muffled instantly. Inside, the air smelled of salt, parchment, and candle wax. A map of the Zokirian Ocean lay spread across her desk, the edges curling from use. Her fingers traced the inked lines, finding the familiar islands—the Frigid Reefs, the Crescent Shoals, the trade routes winding toward the Kingdom of Eternals.

And then, at the northernmost edge of the map, Yvanna's lair. Carved out of the bones of a long-dead primordial, the dreaded Vorrak's Maw.

She let out a slow breath, leaning over the table, her arms braced against the wood. This was the way. She didn't know why, but she was sure of it. Calista reached up, fingers brushing against the dagger hanging from her neck. Daryn's last gift to her.

The memory came unbidden.

Two years ago.

"Hold out your hand."

Calista arched a brow but obeyed. The sea breeze tousled her hair as

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Daryn placed something in her palm—a dagger, small but wickedly sharp, its handle worn smooth from use.

"Bit small for me," she mused, turning it over. "But I suppose I could still stab a man in the eye with it."

Daryn chuckled. "It's not for fighting, love."

She looked up at him. "Then what's it for?"

His smirk softened into something quieter, something real. "For remembering."

Calista frowned. "Remembering what?"

He stepped closer, tucking a stray lock of hair behind her ear. "That no matter how far you sail, no matter how lost you feel—you'll always have something to hold onto."

She scoffed, trying to ignore the warmth creeping into her chest. "Didn't know you were the sentimental type."

Daryn grinned. "Aye, well. Maybe I've finally got something worth being sentimental about."

She kissed him before he could say anything else.

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Calista opened her eyes, the memory dissolving like mist in the morning sun.

She curled her fingers around the dagger, her knuckles white. She had never told him—not properly—that she loved him. That she would have given up the sea for him, if he had asked. That she never wanted to be Captain Steelheart without him at her side. And now, she never would.

Her grip tightened.

That damned sorceress had taken that from her. Her love, her life. And now, it was time Yvanna the Puppeteer paid for her sins.

The dagger was warm against her skin, as if Daryn's hand still lingered on it.

The next morning, Calista stepped onto the deck as the first light of dawn broke over the horizon. The crew was already stirring, moving about with the easy rhythm of a ship at sea. Some glanced at her warily, waiting to see which course she would chart next.

Irene stood near the helm, hands on her hips, watching her.

Calista exhaled, letting the salt air fill her lungs. Then she straightened, rolling her shoulders back, and spoke, "I know you lot are displeased to say the least, about the recent results of our endeavors. I believe I have a solution to that problem. It is one that some of you will not be pleased to hear, but at this point I believe it is not simply the best, but the only way for the Corsairs to return to who we were."

Murmurs amongst the crew. Anticipation arose on what she would say next.

"I intend to claim the bounty on Yvanna the Puppeteer." Calista spoke with as much confidence and determination as she could muster. "To

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avenge all of our fallen brothers and sisters whom she has taken from us. We will sail for Vorrak's Maw, where we will find and kill that vile witch once and for all."

A beat of silence as the Corsairs processed the news.

Calista clenched her jaw. She expected many would oppose. She couldn't blame them. Instead of cutting their losses and seeking another prize, she was dragging them toward the devil who claimed the life of the man she loved and countless others. To the rest of the Corsairs, it probably sounded like folly, lunacy, or suicide.

But the Corsairs weren't ordinary pirates. And Yvanna wasn't an ordinary target. What Calista failed to realize in the moment, was that each and every one of her crew had someone they knew aboard Daryn's ship. Someone too that they had lost to the Puppeteer. And each one had just as much of a reason to follow their captain to avenge them.

One by one, the crew of the Shadow of the Deep raised their hands in support. One by one they stood, shoulder-to-shoulder looking up at their Captain. "Kill the witch!" They began to chant. "Kill the witch!" The voices grew louder. "Kill the witch!" The entire crew in unison shouted as Calista Steelheart stood taller before them.

A proud and grateful smile crept its way across Calista's face as she spoke, "Eshmeel, set sail for Vorrak's Maw."

"Aye aye, Captain."

Chapter 2: Into the Maw

The Zokirian Ocean stretched endlessly in all directions, an unbroken expanse of rolling black waves beneath a sky painted in bruised hues of dusk. Just below the surface, the Shadow of the Deep cut through the water like a torpedo, full-speed ahead as it barreled toward Vorrak's Maw.

It wouldn't be long before the ship reached its destination. As the Shadow of the Deep surfaced, the great mass that was Vorrak's Maw loomed before them, a jagged cluster of black bones and rock, rising from the sea, the last remnants of some great, ancient behemoth. Mist clung to the cliffs, curling over the sharp rocks in ghostly tendrils, and the waters near the shore churned violently despite the relative calm of the open sea.

Calista stood on the bridge, one hand gripping the railing as she stared ahead. The weight of the journey pressed against her ribs, heavy as an anchor. The crew had grown quieter as they neared their destination—no more chatter, no more laughing. Even the ship itself seemed to have

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gone silent.

Because they could all feel it.

A wrongness in the air, in the water, in the bones of the island itself.

Irene approached, her coat snapping in the salt-tinged breeze. "We'll need to disembark soon," she said, voice low. "The waters past that ridge are too dangerous for the ship."

Calista nodded, eyes fixed on the swirling mist beyond the shore. "We'll take the Carcharus pods in."

"We only have enough pods to fit a dozen men."

"It'll have to do. You and I will take one. Eshmeel can decide who else will fill the others. The rest of the crew will have to wait and guard the ship."

Irene didn't respond right away. Instead, she studied Calista carefully, like she was weighing something unseen. Then she nodded. "I'll inform the crew." She turned to leave but hesitated. "There's a good chance Daryn's—."

Calista exhaled sharply. "—I know."

Irene's gaze lingered for a moment longer before she walked away.

Eshmeel leaned against the railing beside her, arms crossed. "In all my years as a Corsair, I don't think I've ever met someone so readily willing to face death." He shook his head and chuckled, "I can't tell if that makes

you the bravest person I know or the most reckless. And I served under Captain Oduun¹¹."

Calista watched the waves, the way they crashed against the jagged shore before retreating back out to sea. The soft white foam that bubbled, then dissipated with the tide. "Most desperate might be a better fit."

The crew loaded one-by-one into the jetpods, continuing to move in silence, their usual banter and laughter absent. Even the most hardened among them seemed uneasy.

Calista climbed into hers first, gripping the controls as the pod powered on. Irene took a seat behind her, quiet, unreadable.

The path to shore was no less treacherous than what waited inside. Razor-sharp rock formations and bone fragments lurked just beneath the surface, invisible to the untrained eye. Calista and her crew approached cautiously, slowly, weaving between obstacles. The closer they came, the heavier the air seemed, thick with something Calista couldn't name. The mist curled around them, like a hand tightening its grip.

As the island's jagged silhouette rose from the mist, Calista felt Irene tense beside her. It was subtle—a shift in stance, a breath caught too long—but unmistakable.

After what felt like forever, the small fleet of Carcharus scraped up against sand along the shoreline.

¹¹ The late founder of the Oduun Corsairs and Calista's mentor

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They had arrived.

Calista stepped onto the blackened shore, drawing her flintlock revolver. The sand beneath her boots was damp, clinging to the leather as she stepped further onto shore. The Shadow of the Deep was barely visible beyond the mist, its dark silhouette swallowed by the thick, unnatural fog. The only sounds were the distant crash of waves against jagged rock and the occasional grunt as the rest of the crew pulled the Carcharus fully onto shore.

"Captain," Irene said, her voice quieter than usual. "Are you sure this is the path forward?"

Calista turned, puzzled. "Why ask now? Is something bothering you?" Irene hesitated. "I just—nevermind."

"It's too late to turn back. Not when we're this close."

The cliffs loomed before them, foreboding and ominous. A single narrow path wound upward, carved into the rock by time and tide. Further inland, the cavernous heart of the Maw waited.

Irene, having seemingly steeled herself, moved up beside her, eyes unreadable in the dim light. "We should move fast then. I don't like how quiet it is."

Calista turned to the crew, all ten of them that had come ashore, their usual bravado absent. Some shifted uneasily, hands resting on cutlasses and pistols, as if expecting something to lunge from the shadows at any moment.

"We stick together," Calista said firmly. "We move fast, we move smart,

and we don't let this place get to us."

Murmurs of agreement. They started forward.

The climb was treacherous. The stone beneath their boots was slick with sea spray, the mist growing thicker with every step. The higher they climbed, the quieter the world became, like the Maw itself was swallowing the very sound from the air.

The entrance to the caves towered over Calista's crew. Inside, the darkness yawned wide, the mist seeping into its depths like tendrils of an unseen beast.

The crew hesitated.

Calista did not.

She took the first step inside, the damp air clinging to her skin. A moment later, Irene followed. Eshmeel after her. Then, one by one, the rest.

Inside, the cave walls gleamed with strange, dark mineral veins, pulsing faintly with an eerie purple light. The tunnels turned and curved in unnatural angles, as if the island itself had been shaped by forces beyond understanding. The deeper they went, the colder it became, and the whisper of distant voices—or was it the wind?—echoed faintly through the stone.

Then the ground shifted beneath them.

Without warning, the cavern trembled, a low, shuddering groan rose

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from deep within the Maw. A trap. The floor gave way in places, stone crumbling into unseen darkness.

"MOVE!" Calista shouted, reaching out as the crew scattered.

A section of rock collapsed, cutting off a majority of the group. Eshmeel and the rest of the crew were on one side, stumbling back onto more stable ground behind them; Calista and Irene on the other, the collapsing stone forcing them deeper into the tunnels.

"Captain!" Eshmeel's voice echoed through the shifting cavern.

"We're fine!" Calista called back, coughing against the dust. "Find another way through. We'll meet up ahead!"

Eshmeel hesitated. "Are you sure? We can try to break—"

"Find another way! It's too dangerous here!"

Another tremor shook the cave, and Eshmeel had no choice. With one last frustrated glance, he turned and led the others back the way they came in search of another passage.

Calista looked to Irene. It was just the two of them now.

Calista dusted off her coat, exhaling. "That felt deliberate."

Irene shook her head, "Probably because it was."

Even now Calista knew Yvanna was watching. Waiting. She took a deep breath and pushed forward into the darkness.

The path continued to twist like the innards of whatever primordial had laid to rest here—narrowing, coiling back upon themselves, and stretching far beyond what should have been possible. The air was choked with the scent of damp stone and something foul: a magic that hummed through the walls, whispering dark secrets Calista couldn't quite make out.

Even Irene seemed to be unnerved by the sounds.

She walked a step behind Calista, eerily silent. Not out of fear, but because she was listening—feeling. Calista had noticed the shift in her since they had stepped into Yvanna's domain. The quartermaster's usual sharpness had faded ever so slightly, replaced instead by a quiet, palpable tension.

After what felt like an eternity of tense, silent strides, the pair arrived at a set of stone doors that towered above them, engraved with imagery of servants praying to a goddess. Towering pillars of jagged stone loomed over the entrance, casting long, sinister shadows in the dim light.

This was it.

Calista nodded to Irene and pushed the doors open. With a low rumble that reverbated through the ground, the walls, and the ceiling, the stone slabs parted ways for the pair of pirates.

The grand chamber was a vast, hollowed-out cavern of stone, its jagged walls slick with an eerie, violet luminescence that pulsed like the slow, dying heartbeat of something ancient. Towering pillars of twisted bone rose from the floor, framing a dais draped in tattered, rune-etched silk.

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And there, at the heart of the cavernous hall, standing onstage beneath the curtains, stood the one they sought—the witch who had cursed Calista and the Oduun Corsairs, who had torn her happiness from her grasp and left nothing but grief, misery, and sorrow in its place.

Waiting for them, bathed in the sinister glow of her own wicked power, was Yvanna the Puppeteer.

Chapter 3: To Kill A Witch

The sorceress did not look at all surprised to see them. She waited at the heart of a swirling mass of violet magic, draped in layers of flowing, spectral silk that shifted between deep crimson and abyssal black, as if woven from the twilight between life and death.

Her skin, the color of grave dust, shimmered like candlelight through parchment, marred with intricate, pulsating runes that glowed faintly with Consilium genki. Long, silver-white hair framed a face both alluring and terrifying. Her gaze was a mirror into a starless sky—endless, cold, and hungry, with fingers unnaturally long and jointed like a marionette's, twitched with invisible strings that glimmered faintly in the dim chamber light.

Yvanna's eyes—dark, deep, knowing—met Calista's, and her lips curled into a slow, languid smile.

"Steelheart," she purred. "I was beginning to think you'd never make it."

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Calista leveled her sakad¹² flintlock, aiming for Yvanna's head. "You're done hiding behind curses and cowards, Yvanna. This ends tonight."

Yvanna exhaled a soft, amused chuckle as she descended the steps of the dais with serpentine grace. The shadows around her moved like they obeyed her thoughts. "You speak of endings, my dear, as if you understand the weight of them. But every ending is just another kind of beginning. You should know that, considering the one you now carry across your heart."

Calista's jaw tightened. She tracked Yvanna's movement with her gun. "You don't deserve to speak of him."

The Puppeteer cackles, "Oh I think you'll find I very much do. But he's with us, isn't he? And in more ways than one. In the way your hand trembles. In the desperation behind your bravado. Daryn Daggerhand—always so bold. Always so tragically—mortal."

Calista fired a shot. The shrapnel carved a clean path through mist and shadow, but Yvanna wasn't there. Only a faint shimmer remained, like a ripple in air.

"Temper, temper," the witch said, now reclining lazily back on the edge of her throne as if this were a social visit. "You brought a gun to a magic fight. Perhaps you're more naive than I thought." Tilting her head, looking past Calista, she smiled, slow and deliberate. "Then again, I always knew you were too naive for your own good."

¹² A type of metal that is fired out from weapons at high speeds with high armor penetration capabilities

Calista narrowed her eyes. "What is that supposed to mean?"

"Oh, I'm sure you've already noticed," she murmured, "That whisper in your bones, the pull in your blood. That insatiable desire for revenge that led you to me..."

Calista tensed. A chill crept up her spine, subtle at first, but grew with every heartbeat. She took a slow step forward, her boots echoing against the stone, and in her periphery, Irene did the same. Perfectly in sync.

Yvanna broke out into laughter, cackling and sneering at Calista. "It was never my doing, child. My plan, yes. But I was not the one who saw it to fruition." Yvanna spoke as she stared directly at Irene.

In that moment, a sharp, nauseating sense of dread seemed to burst from Calista's chest. She turned, "Irene—" But suddenly she realized Irene was no longer beside her. Instead, adorned in the same crimson-black robes, she now stood beside Yvanna. "—What have you done to her?"

Yvanna's smirk widened. "Don't you see? She's always been mine." She replied, placing an arm around Irene's shoulder. "Powerless to save her parents from the brigands who murdered them, she came to me for help. I took her under my wing, trained her, taught her, showed her what it was like to wield true power. And in turn she swore herself to me. To do my bidding as my apprentice."

"Irene, is this true?"

Her question was met with silence. The face of one she thought a sister, suddenly no more familiar than a stranger.

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"Then Daryn—"

"—Indeed, Steelheart. Irene was the one who led Daggerhand to me. Who convinced him to seek me out. And the one who convinced you to follow in his footsteps. All in service of my greater goals."

Calista shakes her head, her body trembling as she refuses to accept Yvanna's words, "Irene..."

Irene stared down at Calista, a mix of pity, sadness, and fear in her eyes and on her face, "I'm sorry Captain." She clenched her fist.

"Tempo Dismantle."

Tendrils of dark purple Consilium genki exploded around Calista, paralyzing her in place.

Yvanna cackled, "How fitting. A pirate betrayed by her own. Treachery at its finest, wouldn't you say?"

"It's—not too late. You don't have to listen to her, Irene." Calista strained to talk through the paralysis, "You owe her nothing for what she's made you do. It's not your fault!"

"Silence you cur!" Yvanna flicked her wrist as her dokan glowed purple. "Akuma no Kao," she whispered, but the words rang like a firecracker in Calista's ears as the world around her shattered.

The sorceress's jumon crashed into Calista like a tsunami—dark, suffocating, an all-consuming force that burrowed into her mind. A cacophony of voices filled her skull, all whispering the same command,

over and over, drowning out everything else.

Kneel.

Her body seized. Her vision blurred. She felt herself sinking, her knees hitting cold stone, her fingers trembling against the hilt of her flintlock.

No. This couldn't be how it ended.

She fought against Yvanna's jumon, but it was like trying to hold back the tide.

Yvanna stepped forward, her voice now smooth as silk. "You are strong, Captain. But not strong enough." She turned toward Irene, smiling wickedly. "Finish it."

Calista strained against the paralysis, her teeth clenched, vision swimming. "Irene... you don't have to do this."

A twitch. A tremble in Irene's fingers.

"This is what I was made for," she said quietly. "I swore to serve her. I owed her my life."

Calista's voice was barely more than breath. "Then what about your new life? What about the crew? What about me?"

A heartbeat of silence. A crack in the mask.

Irene's hand faltered.

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And for the first time, Calista saw it—the war behind her eyes. The guilt, the pain, the fear she had buried so deep.

Yvanna's grin faded. "Finish it Irene! Kill her!"

Irene stepped closer, her cutlass shimmering in the dim light, the purple Consilium genki still coiling around her arms.

Calista's heart pounded against her ribs, she could feel her consciousness slipping as the pain became nigh unbearable. Was this it? Was this truly how her story ended?

Irene stood above her, staring down at her Captain with unreadable eyes.

"Irene-"

"Do it!"

Irene didn't move. Her breath hitched. Her gaze faltered, falling—not to Calista, but to her own hand.

Then, barely above a whisper: "I don't want to hurt you."

Calista's throat tightened. "Then don't."

A long pause. A war waged behind Irene's eyes—love and fear, guilt and duty tearing each other to shreds.

And then—she stepped back.

She turned, slowly, placing herself between Yvanna and Calista.

"No."

"You dare defy me, child?" Yvanna's expression changed—not with fear, but something far more dangerous. Disappointment. Recognition. A predator sensing the moment its prey chooses to bite.

Yvanna's eyes narrowed. "I gave you purpose."

"You chained me."

"So be free," Yvanna hissed. Her hands rose in a graceful arc, and the runes across her body ignited like wildfire. A word formed on her tongue—a jumon Calista didn't recognize, but felt in her bones like a blade being drawn across her spine.

Irene saw it too. Saw the twitch of fingers, the coalescing of power at Yvanna's throat. There was no time to think, no time to hesitate.

Just breath.

Just instinct.

Irene moved.

"Akuma no Kao."

"AAUGH!"

Calista gasped for air as the immense pain and pressure suddenly dissipated. The weight lifted from her mind in an instant, like

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storm clouds scattering before the wind. She looked up to see her quartermaster standing over her, turned toward the sorceress. Irene's body began to shake as she concentrated the full force of the jumon through her sword into a now writhing Yvanna.

Yvanna screeched out, "You ungrateful wretch! I was trying to save us all. You could've been more than a pirate. We would've been gods!"

The quartermaster trembled as she struggled to maintain concentration. Her breath, sharp and uneven. The purple Consilium genki spiraled around her in violent arcs that snapped and crackled against her skin.

Calista could see it now—the weight of the choice she was making. The remnants of the pact she had made with Yvanna, the power the sorceress had given her, clashing with something deeper, something truer...

Irene's jaw clenched. "I can't hold her down for much longer! If you're gonna do something Captain, do it now!"

Calista snapped back to reality. Understanding the situation, she saw her opening and raised her flintlock.

BANG!

Yvanna snarled, raging fury twisting her features as she raised a hand—too slow.

Steel met flesh as the sakad shrapnel pierced her side.

The sorceress screamed out in agony, genki convulsing wildly around her as she tried to break free from Irene's mental onslaught. The

chamber trembled as the walls writhed, recoiling from their mistress's pain. Yvanna staggered backward, blood—dark and thick—dripping from her wound.

"You—" she choked, rage and disbelief filling her expression as she looked at Irene. She screamed out, "How dare you betray your savior! You would be nothing, nobody, dead without me!"

Irene's eyes burned with a newfound fire, fierce and unyielding. The Consilium genki around her began to calm and stabilize, shifting in hue from a darker violet to a lighter magenta. "I've made enough mistakes in life paying whatever debt you made me believe I owed you. It's high time I did something I should've done a long time ago."

With an ear-piercing cry, Yvanna raised her hands in one last desperate attempt—

Irene didn't let her finish.

She drove her cutlass straight through the sorceress's chest.

Yvanna gasped, her body arching as the blade ran her through. For a moment, the world seemed to hold its breath.

Then it exploded.

A shockwave of raw energy burst from Yvanna's body, sending Calista and Irene staggering back as the sorceress crumpled to the floor. The shadows shrieked, twisting violently before collapsing into nothing. The air fell still.

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Was it over?

Calista's breath came in ragged gasps. She looked down at Yvanna's motionless form, then at Irene.

The quartermaster met her gaze, the exhaustion evident on her face. Then, quietly, she said, "Took you long enough to break free."

Calista let out a breathless, half-shaken laugh. "You're one to talk."

Silence settled between them. A moment of understanding, of shared survival, forgiveness, and gratitude.

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Chapter 4: The Burden of Choice

The duo's gaze drifted toward the altar at the far end of the chamber. A sickening aura that seemed to emanate from whatever rested there. And Calista had the sinking feeling that their troubles weren't over yet.

Yvanna the Puppeteer lay motionless, her lifeless eyes reflecting the eerie purple glow of her own magic. A pool of dark ichor—too thick to be just blood—seeped from her form, as if something unnatural still clung to her.

But Calista had no time for the corpse. Her hands shook as she sheathed her gun, stepping toward the altar. The air still crackled with remnants of genki, the sickly-sweet scent of burned incense mixing with the acrid sting of sorcery. Dim blue fire flickered in sconces along the walls, unnatural and cold, their light barely reaching the towering bookshelves that lined the chamber.

Behind her, Irene Goldfeather exhaled a slow, steady breath. The quartermaster stood at Calista's back, her knuckles white around the

hilt of her cutlass. She had been silent since striking the final blow against Yvanna—since severing whatever hold the sorceress had on her. The weight of betrayal, of the past that had chained her to this place, still lingered in her eyes.

Calista glanced at her. "You feel it too, don't you?"

Irene nodded.

The altar was carved from obsidian-colored bone, its surface engraved with runes that pulsed faintly in the dim light. The edges were slick—wet, almost—as if something still lived in the stone itself.

"Captain?"

Gold and jewels had been scattered around its base, an offering to whatever foul power Yvanna had once served. But Calista barely spared the riches a glance. Her gaze was fixed on what lay atop the altar.

A body.

No, not a body.

"Daryn!"

Her breath caught in her throat.

He was there—his form preserved as if caught between life and death. His skin was pale, almost waxen, his chest unmoving. A shroud of genki clung to him, a dark green hue that seemed to pulse like a heartbeat.

For a moment, Calista could only stare, tears forming in her eyes.

Gathering herself, she closed the distance in two strides, reaching out—but the moment her fingers brushed his arm, her body went numb. A needle-like iciness that reverbated through her whole nervous system.

She staggered back.

Irene was beside her in an instant. "What is it?"

Calista clenched her jaw, fists curling. She inspected Daryn's body and the genki around it..

"It seems like some sort of Profectus jumon."

Irene inhaled sharply. "But how? Who's casting it? Surely not Daryn..."

Calista's mind raced, "No. He wasn't a Seraph. But whatever this is, it's keeping him alive. Protecting him, but just barely."

Irene's expression darkened. "Can we stop it?" She paused considering the gravity of the situation, "Should we?"

Calista swallowed, the weight of the truth pressing down on her even more so. "I don't know."

Silence hung between them.

Then, ever so faintly—

Daryn's fingers twitched.

It was barely a movement, almost imperceptible. But it was enough.

Calista's breath hitched.

"Daryn?"

The chamber trembled, shadows shifting as a wave of uneasiness rolled across Calista and Irene. The two shared a look. Something still wasn't right.

Calista gripped her cutlass tighter, scanning the chamber. Yvanna was already dead. So what was it?

Then came the sound—a sharp, brittle crack, slicing through the cavern like ice snapping underfoot. It was sickening. Final.

Calista spun toward the source.

Yvanna's corpse twitched.

A sickly green light bloomed from the hole in her breast, bathing the witch's broken body in its glow. Her limbs twitched violently, folding and unfolding like a puppet with frayed strings. Her spine arched. Bones realigned with audible snaps. And then—

A gasp. Rasping. Wet.

She breathed.

"That's not possible," Irene whispered, eyes wide, hands rising on instinct.

Calista raised her pistol without hesitation.

Bang. The shot slammed into Yvanna's side. Her body slumped. Still.

But only for a moment.

Another breath.

The light pulsed brighter.

Calista's stomach twisted. "What? How is she doing this?"

Yvanna stirred again, slowly turning her head. Blood trailed from her lips. Her smile was faint, but full of mockery.

"You cannot kill me," she rasped, voice like torn parchment. "Try all you like. My soul is not yours to claim."

"Enough with your tricks. You've already lost."

"On the contrary, things are only just beginning."

Bang, Another pulse.

Yvanna wasn't truly recovering—she was returning. Not through healing, but through something far older. Something anchored.

Calista glanced around, the flickering light warping the runes underfoot.

How long until she rose fully? Another minute? Seconds?

They couldn't keep doing this. Shooting. Waiting. Watching her crawl back from the brink again and again.

There had to be a reason. A tether. A source.

Calista's eyes narrowed.

There had to be a way to end it—for good.

"I don't know if I can beat her a second time if she returns to full strength." The glow around Irene's dokan flickered. "We need to figure out what to do and fast. Should we take Daryn back to the ship?"

At that moment, a chilling realization hit Calista.

Her gaze snapped back to Daryn's motionless form atop the altar.

The Profectus jumon.

It was somehow tethering them—Yvanna and Daryn, their fates twisted together like knotted rope.

But Yvanna couldn't be the one casting it. Her Paragon was Consilium, the same as Irene's.

Unless...

Irene exhaled sharply, stepping closer to the altar. "There's something inside him," she muttered, her voice edged with growing horror.

Calista hesitated, then reached forward.

This time, she ignored the frigid numbness, pushing through the painful resistance as her hands roamed over Daryn's chest, searching.

And then she felt it.

A hard, unnatural mass beneath his sternum.

She pressed her fingers to it.

A heartbeat.

Not his.

Something else.

"Irene—help me," Calista gritted out.

Together, they worked, peeling back Daryn's torn shirt, revealing the truth inside.

There, embedded just beneath his ribs, was a black, crystalline heart.

It pulsed with slow, eerie light—deep blackened-green veins twisting like living tendrils beneath his skin.

"A Jigari relic," Irene uttered instinctively. "Of course."

Calista had heard of them in hushed sailor's tales. Ancient artifacts from a forgotten age, ones that held powers unnatural, impossible—the only way a Seraph could cast a jumon outside of their own Paragon.

Yvanna laughed weakly from the ground, watching them with amusement despite her broken body. "Do you understand now?"

Irene stared, her expression darkening. "The jigari—it's tying their life force together. Daryn's life is feeding hers. Preventing her from dying so long as he lives."

A sick feeling settled in Calista's stomach. "Which means...?"

Irene swallowed, glancing down at Daryn, then back at Yvanna, who still clung stubbornly to life.

"You think this was about vengeance?" she rasped, half-rebuilt and wreathed in a crawling darkness. "You think I did this to hurt you?"

She turned her gaze on Calista—sharp, endless.

"I have walked this world as a wretch, a castoff, a tool for men who feared what they could not control. I watched them worship gods who never listened; that so-called Council of Seven be damned. They abandoned us. So I found a new path. I became the vessel. I bound power to flesh. I carved the divine into bone and blood."

She raised her arms, trembling but exalted.

"I don't want to rule. I want to transcend. Mortals die. Gods remain. And I—" her voice cracked into a whisper, reverent, mad—"I am almost there."

Calista stepped forward slowly, fury simmering behind her eyes.

"You turned people into puppets."

"I freed them from weakness!" Yvanna snapped. "Gave them purpose. I honor them in the only way that matters—by making them eternal."

Calista's fist tightened. "You never gave them a choice."

Yvanna's laughter was soft this time. "Seems like you have one now. Save your lover and allow me to walk free, or be the one to kill him with your own two hands."

Daryn's body, both living and lifeless, lay strung up before her, the black heart continuing to pulse in rhythm inside his chest. Irene, beside her, too weak to defend herself any longer. And the Puppeteer, slowly sapping what little life was left of Daryn from the steps below. In that moment, Calista felt as though the chamber had dropped into the abyss itself.

After months of waiting, pining, this desperate endeavor, she had finally found him. And he was alive—barely, but alive all the same.

Only now, if she wanted to end this...

If she wanted Yvanna gone for good...

She had to end him too.

Calista's fingers hovered over the relic, her breath uneven.

Could she do it?

Could she drive her blade into his heart, knowing that this was the price for vengeance?

Her throat tightened.

Irene shifted beside her, but she said nothing. No encouragement. No empty reassurances.

This was a choice only Calista could make.

Chapter 5: The Dagger and the Heart

Calista stood over Daryn, her cutlass trembling in her grip. The blade, sharp enough to cut down a dozen men without hesitation, felt impossibly heavy now.

Her fiance lay before her, his body frail from months of suffering, caught between life and death. The jigari—the sickly black-green, pulsing, crystal heart—beat in his chest like a mockery of the real one he once had, tethering his existence to Yvanna's cursed magic. His breath came in weak, uneven gasps. Every shallow rise and fall of his chest was a reminder that this wasn't truly living.

But Calista couldn't end it.

Not yet.

Not when every part of her still wanted to believe there was another way.

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Irene kept her eyes on the Puppeteer, hands at the read in case the sorceress tried something.

But Yvanna was barely holding herself together, her own breathing raggedy as well. "Calista," she rasped, her voice laced with spite. "If you do this—if you strike him down—you'll never forgive yourself."

Calista clenched her jaw.

She already hadn't forgiven herself.

For failing him. For being too late. For every step of this journey that had been fueled not by hope, but by vengeance.

Daryn stirred.

It was barely noticeable, but his fingers twitched again. His eyelids fluttered, the faintest hint of consciousness returning. And then—

He looked at her.

His eyes, dulled by pain, still carried something familiar. A quiet knowing. The same look he used to give her before they plunged into battle, before they leapt into the unknown together. A look that, even now, told her he wasn't afraid.

Then, slowly, his hand moved.

Not to stop her.

Not to fight.

His finger pointed to Calista. No, to her chest—to the dagger that hung from her neck—his dagger. The one she had carried all this time, worn like a burden, like a promise unfulfilled.

A lump rose in her throat.

He was telling her it was okay.

That it was time to let go.

Her grip on the cutlass tightened. Her whole body screamed against it, but she knew—this was what he needed. What he wanted.

Yvanna saw the change in her expression. Panic flickered across her face.

"No! You wouldn't dare—"

Calista raised the blade.

Yvanna desperately lunged from the ground toward her. "He doesn't have to die! You don't have to—"

The cutlass came down.

A single, clean stroke.

The relic cracked. A terrible sound split the air, like the shattering of glass and bone entwined. Daryn's body seized as black veins raced across his skin. The jigari fought back, resisting even in its final moments.

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Yvanna screamed.

Her body convulsed, the remaining genki within her seemingly exploding outwards. She reached toward Calista, hatred and desperation twisted in her face.

"You-"

Then, with a final, agonized wail, she disintegrated into nothingness.

The silence that followed was absolute.

Calista fell to her knees, her breath coming in sporadic, uneven bursts. Cutlass in one hand, dagger in the other. Both slick with sweat, her knuckles white around the handles.

Daryn exhaled softly. A breath so faint it was barely there.

Calista dropped her sword and caught his hand in hers. Held it.

Daryn looked up at her, at the woman he promised the world, at her tear-stricken, emerald eyes. Taking it all in one last time.

"You're just as beautiful as the day I left," he managed weakly, a pained smile etching its way across his mouth. "Don't forget, I'll always be with you."

Calista pressed the palm of his hand against her cheek, Daryn's fingers wiping away her tears.

"I love you."

"I love you too."

Daryn's eyes closed for the last time as his body finally succumbed to death's long overdue embrace.

A deep ache settled in Calista's chest as she placed his hand on his chest. But for the first time in forever, it wasn't the weight of guilt. It was something gentler, something lighter—grief, but without the chains that had bound her for so long. This one, she knew would pass in time.

Irene placed a steadying hand on her shoulder. "Calista..."

Calista brushed his forehead with her fingers. He looked peaceful. Freed. And as much as it hurt, she knew she had done the right thing.

Her eyes lifted to a chamber beyond the altar—a passageway now partially revealed, as if the battle had shaken it loose. A subtle draft of air whispered from within.

She didn't know what compelled her forward, but she moved without hesitation. The hidden room was nothing like Yvanna's eerie lair—it was grand, untouched, glittering with wealth.

Treasure.

More than she had ever seen. Gold, gemstones, enchanted weapons, fine silks and masterwork artifacts—a lifetime's worth of plunder, hoarded away.

Irene scoffed behind her, "That witch was hoarding this all along?" She shook her head.

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Calista huffed a small, weary laugh. "Guess you picked the right side after all."

Then, from the chamber behind them—a noise.

Shouting. Footsteps. The sound of boots against stone.

Calista and Irene snapped toward the sound, blades drawn.

"Captain!"

The crew had finally found their way in.

The pair stood waiting as the Corsairs stormed inside, weapons drawn, their expressions hard—expecting a fight. But instead of a battle, they found their captain standing amidst swathes of bountiful treasure, alive and waiting for them.

For a moment, there was silence.

Eshmeel spoke first. "Captain?" His voice was rough, uncertain. "You're... alive?"

Calista smirked, exhaustion and relief warring in her expression. "Takes more than a bloody mage to keep me down."

Eshmeel let out a disbelieving laugh, his eyes scanning the chamber. "So it's over? Yvanna's dead?"

Irene stepped beside Calista, arms crossed. "Aye."

"Then this loot be ours for the taking?"
"Aye."

The moment it clicked in their heads, the crew cheered, their excitement breaking through the tension. Laughter and eager shouts filled the chamber as the pirates laid eyes on the riches before them.

Gold clinked, voices rose in excitement, and for the first time in what felt like an eternity—a small bit of that weight in Calista's chest began to lift.

She took a slow breath, fingers brushing the dagger still hanging around her neck. She had carried her grief like an anchor for so long. But here, now, in this moment—after the waves she'd endured, she finally felt it start to unmoor.

Irene nudged her gently. "You sure you're alright?"

Calista looked out at her crew—her family—alive, victorious, and celebrating together. A smile, small but real, touched her lips.

"No," she admitted. "But I think I will be."

Irene nodded, a solemn expression still covering her face, "I'm sorry about Daryn. About betraying you. About everything. If I'd only realized sooner what I was doing I might've—

"—I forgive you."

"What? How can you say that so easily?"

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"Well you did save my life."
"I know, but—"
"The past is behind us. I'm ready to move on and I bet you are too."
Irene exhaled and stuck out her hand. "We're even then?"
Calista smiled and took it. "Sisters don't keep score."

6

Epilogue

In the wee hours of the morning after the raid on Vorrak's Maw, Calista sat alone inside the captain's quarters.

Calista Steelheart. That name had once been her shield, her armor against the world. It had been the name of a girl who refused to break, who carved her place among the Corsairs with blade and fury.

But now? Now, she was something else.

She had been bound by grief, by the weight of his memory, by the past she couldn't change. But Daryn had freed her. In the end, he had shown her the way forward; forged the path for her to find herself again.

His words echoed in her mind as she touched the dagger around her neck, "No matter how far you sail, no matter how lost you feel—you'll always have something to hold onto."

Daggerheart. She carved the name with Daryn's blade into the wood of

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her table. The name felt right—like steel tempered in fire. Like a scar that would never fade. Like a vow carved into the marrow of her bones.

Calista gave a small, knowing smile. In this way, Daryn's memory lived on—not as an anchor, but as the wind in her sails, pushing her forward, onward, and upward.

With one final glance at the dagger resting over her heart, she turned toward the horizon.

It was time to set sail.