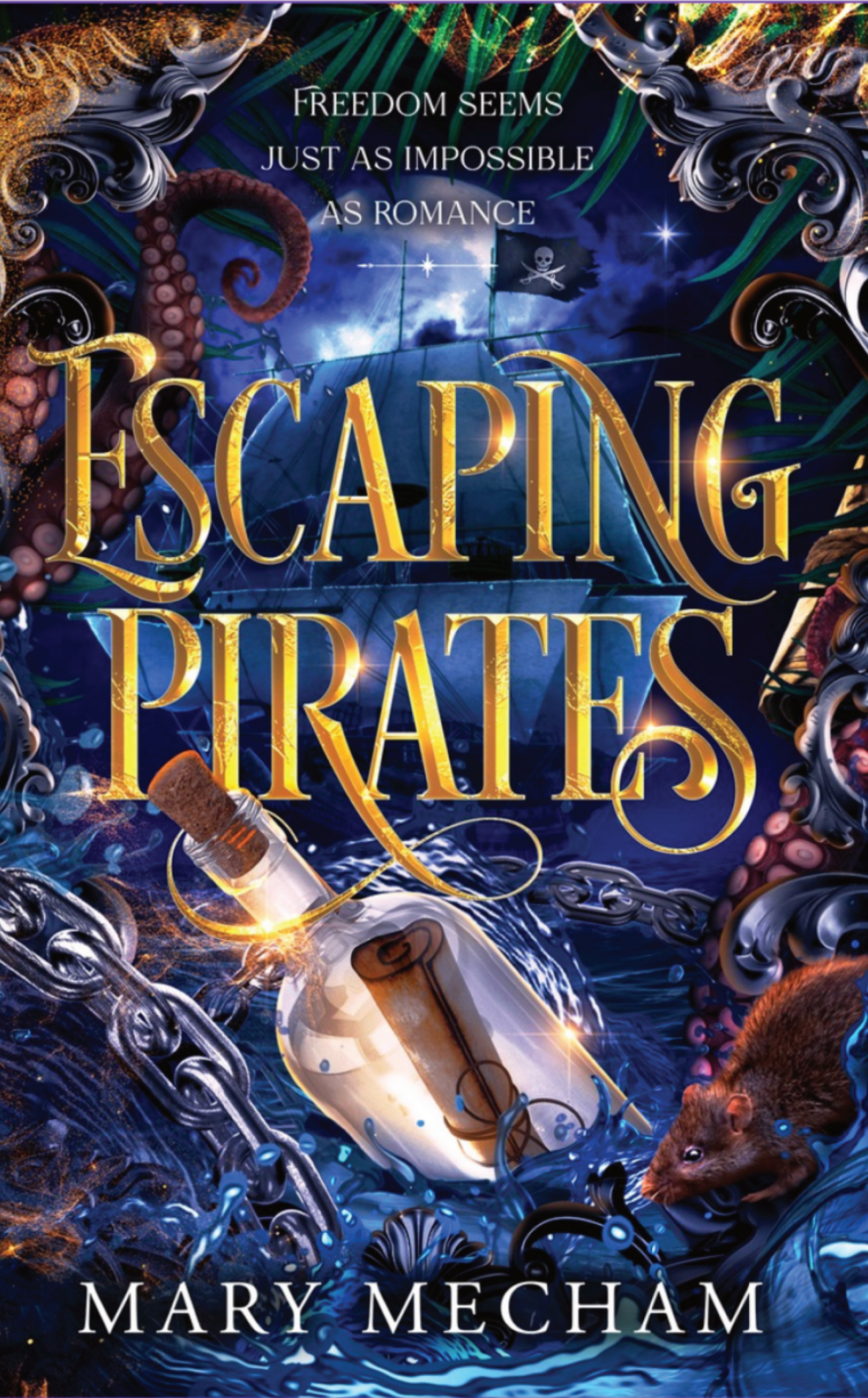




FREEDOM SEEMS
JUST AS IMPOSSIBLE
AS ROMANCE

ESCAPING PIRATES

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CHAPTER 1



Billowing black sails loomed ever larger and darkened our view as the sleek pirate ship bore down on our merchant vessel, which I suddenly realized was woefully outmatched. Our transport was crafted with the purpose of carrying as much merchandise as possible, not outrunning a pirate ship designed for speed and stealth. The enemy crew's bearded faces were coming into focus as they brandished their cutlasses and maces, shouting in ferocious war cries that chilled my blood. Sailors on our deck rushed about in a panic, their faces just as white as their tunics. Clanking from the din of weapons being handed out couldn't drown out the wild yelling from the ship, which was near enough that I could see individual pirates and the ship's name, the *Kraken's Revenge*, painted in bold on the side.

"Mistress, get below deck, and quickly!" The shrill screech from my lady-in-waiting broke through my stupor and jarred me from the slight paralysis I felt overtaking my body. I stumbled away from the bulwark and climbed down the hatch, following Enid as she frantically tugged at my



skirts to urge me on. The trapdoor slammed closed over our heads as the crew prepared for battle.

"We're going to die," Enid gasped when I finally landed beside her. She shook violently from head to toe, and her ragged, terrified breath came in short, wheezing bursts.

"We're going to be fine," I said staunchly, as if commanding it to be so by the force of my words. I looked around for a hiding place. "Get to the hold."

An almighty *crash* jarred the ship so hard that my knees buckled, and I landed painfully on the wooden planks. Enid fell beside me with a squeak of terror.

"What was that?" Her eyes were wide and her chin quivered.

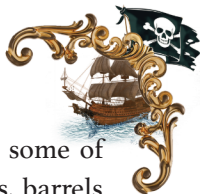
"The pirates are boarding." I could hear their footsteps above my head, along with the clanging of sword against sword, and though terror clutched its icy fingers around my heart, I managed to clamber to my feet and think rationally. I had to, for Enid's sake. "We have to get to the hold. There are empty barrels we could hide in."

Enid's icy fingers scrabbled to clutch my outstretched hand. Using the crew's hammocks as a guide, we wended our way through the maze of ropes, wooden beams, and crates of wares my father was exporting from Haven Harbor. The seas had only opened a few years before, after the Siren Treaty had been signed. We had assumed that the waterways were safe without the threat of sirens calling us to our watery graves, but in our eagerness to take to the seas again, we had forgotten that humans often pose just as great a threat as any monster from the deep. Greed was a motivator that reared its head at a moment's notice; why had we not anticipated pirates? Of course they would crop up at the earliest opportunity. Why hadn't we paid for an escort vessel?





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The hold was packed tight with luxury wares, some of Father's best. Fine silks and textiles, crates of spices, barrels of wine, and a wide variety of finely crafted ceramics were neatly padded and stacked so they wouldn't roll or break when we hit rough seas.

"In here." I pressed Enid's plump form between bolts of fabric. "Stay quiet."

"I'm scared," she whimpered.

"Pirates don't kill women," I told her, wishing my lie sounded more believable. Pirates honored no code of ethics. "We'll be safe."

Enid burrowed into the fine linen and pressed her hands over her ears, tears cascading down her cheeks.

I delved deeper into the labyrinth of goods, trying to block out the stomach-churning sound of men crying out and the thud of bodies hitting the deck above. Who was winning? The captain we'd hired had boasted of his men's skill in battle. Had that been just talk so he would get the transportation fees, or had he been truthful when describing the talent aboard his vessel? I could only hope that he had been honest and wasn't about to pay for his lies with the lives of everyone aboard.



I crouched behind a tall tower of boxes packed with an assortment of women's clothing—ballgowns, shoes and slippers, decorated hats with veils, and many more treasures. If our crew didn't emerge victorious, those articles of clothing would never be worn. I focused on my breathing, trying to force my emotions to stay in check. When Father deemed me fit to handle the negotiations for this voyage, I'd been so proud. I had imagined myself returning home victorious, having secured the best prices for everything in our hold and bringing back a dozen new trade deals, all of which would be most advantageous for our shipping company.





What a fool I'd been.

My legs grew numb as I squatted for what felt like an age. Whatever battle was taking place was a long, drawn-out one. Desperate for a measure of time, I slowly counted the knotholes in all the weathered planks I could see—the ones that formed the ship's massive hull, those that had been used to pack up the merchandise, and even the ones on the ceiling and floor. After doing so four times, the scuffling overhead stopped.

I dared not even breathe as I listened for the low rumble of voices that could only mean one thing. The battle was over, but who had won? I didn't know the ship's crew well enough to recognize their voices through the deck separating us.

Footsteps thudded on the stairs that led down to the cargo hold.

Enid must have moved, because the crash of several bolts of fabric tumbling to the floor sent my adrenaline spiking higher than ever. The footsteps stopped, then there was a low, throaty chuckle.

"I think someone is playing a hiding game down here. I do love games." It wasn't our captain's voice.

Fear seized my stomach. *No!* I screamed inside my head. *Don't find Enid! Don't find either of us!*

"Who's afraid to show their face? Come out, come out, let's start the chase," the unfamiliar voice sang. The children's rhyme I'd recited hundreds of times in my youth sounded all wrong coming from his mouth.

A few seconds later, Enid shrieked. A crate smashed to the floor, and the man laughed.

"There, there, now," the pirate crooned. "Why the struggle? You look all hot and bothered. Fancy a swim?"

"No!" she squealed. "Let me go!"





He laughed again, and this time, other men joined in. There had to be at least a dozen. I closed my eyes. Every one of my muscles was rigid in shock. If I emerged to try to help Enid, it would only lead to my own capture. What could one young woman, untrained in any form of combat, do against a motley crew of hardened pirates?

“Hear that, lads?” the man shouted, raising his voice. “She wants us to let her go! Who votes we let her go right over the side of this here ship?”

A sickening cheer went up that drowned out Enid’s pleas for mercy. I couldn’t stand idly by. I had to do *something* to help her! Enid was more than my lady-in-waiting; she was my friend. Ought I try to bargain for her life? Would they listen, or would I receive the same treatment? Then again, the pirates had already taken the ship and all the cargo. There was nothing more I could offer them.

New voices, high, feminine ones, cut through the men’s low tones.

“Oh, Daddy, if you’re going to get rid of her, do it somewhere else. I can’t concentrate with her crying.”

“Yes, Blossom and I want to examine our new treasures. Scoot along, Gavvet, I want to see those silks behind you.”

My mind spun. What were two simpering women doing with this calloused crew? One had called a pirate *Daddy*. What misguided man brought his daughters along on a cutthroat voyage on the high seas?

“You heard my girls! Take this wench up and toss her overboard with the rest.”

“No, no!” Enid screamed. “Mistresses, please, I beg of you.”

“Ew! Don’t touch me, you tramp. Daddy, take her away. She’s mussing my dress.”

My hand flew up to cover my mouth as I heard Enid get





dragged away. Splashes of large objects hitting the water's surface soon followed, accompanied by drawn out screams. I closed my eyes, bile rising at the back of my throat. How could I just hide here while Enid was being thrown overboard? I disgusted myself.

My hands grew just as cold as Enid's had been. Was this my body's way of telling me that my own death was approaching as well?

A light snap shifted my focus away from the repulsive noises coming from outside the ship.

"Sugar, we should've had Daddy keep that girl."

"Why would you want an ugly hag like her around?"

An impatient huff came from the other sister. "*Because* then we wouldn't have to style each other's hair. We would have someone do it for us."

"Ooooh," squealed the second sister in a voice so obnoxious that it annoyed me even as I feared for my life. "She could organize our clothes and bring us anything we wanted so we wouldn't have to!"

"Precisely. He could probably still fish her out and they only just threw everyone else over. Daddy!"

They both alternately began calling, "Daddy! Daddy!" until a man thumped down the stairs again.

"Yes, my sweets?"

"That woman you just took. Was she already thrown overboard?"

"Yes, darling."

"Well, see if you can get her back. Sugar and I want our own handmaiden. It would be such fun, and she could serve us so your crew don't have to fetch our things."

"Hmm," the man said. "I can go check if you really want—"

"Oh, yes, Daddy!"





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I heard them jumping up and down with excitement and felt revolted. They only cared about Enid's life if it gave them a servant to boss around. They hadn't cared a pittance before, not even when she had begged to have her life spared.

I'd been focusing so much of my energy on eavesdropping on the conversation that I hadn't heard footsteps creeping up on my hiding place until it was too late. A man with a wild, black, unkempt beard poked his head around the crates. When he spotted me crouching in a tiny ball, his face split into a wide, yellow-toothed grin.

"Well, lookie what we have here."



