



A GENDER-FLIPPED LITTLE MERMAID

HUNTING SIRENS

LEGENDS OF NEVERLAND BOOK TWO

MARY MECHAM

ADVANCE NOTE ABOUT DEAFNESS



You may notice that in this book, the majority of the dialogue is written in italics, not in quotation marks. This is because Treva is profoundly Deaf and uses sign language to communicate. Any character signing will use italics, and any spoken words will be in quotation marks.

Additionally, I wanted to note that Deaf is capitalized. This is intentional and is not a grammatical error. Often, the word Deaf will be capitalized to indicate that an individual is fully immersed in the Deaf community (fluent in sign language, associate with other Deaf individuals on a regular basis, etc). A small d in deaf is understood to mean that the individual, who could fall anywhere on the spectrum of hearing loss, is *not* fully integrated into the Deaf community.

It is noteworthy that Treva, the main character, is not a reflection of all individuals in the Deaf community. Just as personality, attitude, and life experiences differ between individuals who are hearing, diversity will be found in any

group, including the Deaf community. Treva simply represents one person's experience.

I am also aware that the grammar in sign language varies greatly from English grammar, but just as we would use whichever grammar structure the listener is familiar with, I have any signed language written using English grammar. So while the correct ASL grammar for a sentence like "I'm going to the store" is signed *Store I go*, to eliminate confusion for the readers, I elected to use English grammar.

Similarly, sign language is NOT a universal language. Each country's signed language will differ from others, just as there are variations in spoken languages. In this book, however, the siren and human sign languages are mostly the same. It is briefly addressed in the book as to the reason they would be so similar.

While I personally am not Deaf, I did have this book screened by several individuals who are in the Deaf community to ensure accuracy in its reflection, and I would like to especially thank Shandy, Patricia, Brayden, Brielle, Gwen, and Gabrielle for helping me to understand more about Deaf culture and to portray Treva's Deafness in an accurate and respectful manner.



CHAPTER 1



The stone wall in front of my anvil was illuminated with a burning orange glow as the door to my workroom opened and the dusk's warm sunshine spilled in. I glanced over my shoulder, shaking back the few loose strands of wavy brown hair that had fallen loose from my braid while remaining careful not to disturb the red-hot iron I had been pounding. Da's silhouette ducked under the low doorway, followed closely by two ship captains—Orville and Milo. My younger brother, Gage, brought up the rear.

Orville's mouth moved, and Gage interpreted to sign language, even though I was able to read Orville's lips. *How are you today, young lady?*

I raised my eyebrows at Gage and looked pointedly down at the scalding metal resting on the anvil to show I had my hands full and couldn't sign an answer. As I did so, a bead of sweat dripped off my forehead and sizzled on the hot iron, bubbling briefly before it evaporated in a wisp of white steam. Gage grinned cheekily at me before he

answered Orville, telling him that I was busy and to make it quick.

Orville did not make it quick. It took ages for him to finally get to the point. I could never understand why hearing people insisted on spending so much time with exchanging pleasantries before they actually said what they intended to.

I quickly lost track of reading his lips, but the intensity of his body language and gestures conveyed his obvious distress. Orville's forehead shared the same worry wrinkles I had seen in Milo's and Da's faces upon their entry. The same lines could be seen on every adult in Haven Harbor as we all struggled with hunger. The exceptionally scorching summer had caused our crops to fail, and without being able to fish or open the trading routes due to the blasted sirens, our people were starving even more than in previous years.

Gage's hands flashed rapidly, signing, *The sirens took another man last night. He was trying to set crab traps along the eastern shore. If the sirens aren't dealt with soon, the town is going to starve. Your father thought you could be of use.*

I glanced up at Da, who remained stony-faced. Being the commander of his sister's vast navy had hardened him into a stoic and unreadable man. Or perhaps, I speculated, his demanding and calloused personality was what had driven him to pursue a military career rather than the soft life of a prince at the palace.

Curse the sirens. They had become increasingly bold in the last year. It used to be that only those who set sail were at risk of being lured by the sirens, but now, even those who attempted to fish from the shore or set crab traps were in danger.

What could I do for you? I'm not a soldier or a sailor, I signed back, then wrenched off my heavy leather gloves, slapping them down onto a nearby barrel. I had abandoned the sharp iron harpoon I had been tempering and was struggling to keep my own temper in check. The metal would have to be completely reworked because of the extended interruption.

Gage interpreted my signs to the men, and while he did so, Da walked over to the wall of weapons I built, running his hand almost reverently along the rows of tridents and steel-tipped crossbow bolts. I straightened as I watched Da perusing my work.

He pivoted when he reached the end of the wall and gestured to a large crossbow I had mounted on hooks. *Can you make one of these and install it on a ship?*

What he had in mind instantly snapped into place. A slow grin spread across my face as I crossed my tightly muscled arms. *When would you need it?*



The cruel beauty of weapon design never failed to leave me in awe. In the following week, I had a constant stream of new ideas and inventions that sailors could use to fight back against the sirens that had plagued our seaside city for years. All sailors had to be trained in basic archery, but the flight of the arrows was always impeded when it broke the surface of the water, and the second the sirens began their singing, all training was wiped from the sailors' minds as

they cast themselves over the bulwarks to their watery graves below.

I fashioned large, weighted nets braided with fishhooks and shards of glass to ensnare any pods of sirens unfortunate enough to cross their path. It certainly had shredded my fingers enough when I created it, but it was perfect for attacking a cluster of the water demons before their heads broke the surface and started their spellbinding music.

Iron shackles hung in intervals on the ship. The intention of the chains was that, as sailors saw the approaching sirens, they were to shackle themselves to the ship so that no matter what their enchanted minds told them, they wouldn't be able to drown even if they tried and lacked the presence of mind to unlock themselves while the sirens sang. Many ships had been lost at sea, drifting abandoned and unoccupied for who knew how long after all of the occupants plunged overboard. I had also nailed a small box onto the ship's mast that was filled with small wads of malleable wax to stuff into their ears.

Sailors had attempted to use cotton earplugs in years past, but without any measurable success. The wax was intended to mold to fit their ear and block out enough sound to dampen the effects of the sirens' songs so the sailors could shackle themselves to the ship until the danger had passed.

Above all else, my pride and joy lay in the massive crossbow mounted on the bow of the ship, just above the figurehead. It was an enormous contraption, modified to fit the frigates in the navy, all equipped with heavy bolts longer than my arm and all specially designed for their projectiles to break into multiple sharpened spears after firing. I lovingly dubbed the horrific machine the Lacerator, and every time I fired it, the tremors that shot through the

wood and vibrated up my arm exhilarated me in a way that nothing else could. Whenever I trialed it, I saw people nearby clap their hands to their ears, and I would stifle a scoff. Hearing people and their constant jumpiness.

The difficulty in maneuvering the giant weapon posed a problem that took me serious deliberation to resolve. Because of its weight and size, it couldn't be carried, nor could I have it statically mounted into the framework of the ship, as it would only be able to shoot in one direction. I fretted for several days about how to solve the issue and finally developed a rotating circular base placed near the fore of the warship, with a tilting pedestal to mount the Lacerator. That way, it could swivel from side to side and tilt up and down as shots were fired. Its size meant that it required a dedicated man to pull back the levers that locked the bolts into place before it could be released. When it fired, the force of the forward thrust splintered each bolt into a dozen thin steel-tipped spears, each sharp enough to puncture any siren's flimsy shark hide armor.

I was mainly ignored by the sailors on board while I worked, which was the way I preferred it. It was difficult enough to equip ships with major weapons and calculate angles and trajectories without people coming over and trying to painstakingly fingerspell their names, thinking they were being in any way helpful. Gage had to constantly remind me not to roll my eyes at everyone, and I snapped back that they deserved it for bothering me while I was working, no matter how often he insisted that they were merely trying to be polite.

Politeness would have meant letting me focus on my task at hand. I counted myself fortunate that I didn't have to listen to all the superficial chatter that all hearing people engaged in—the nonstop small talk that simply served as a

vehicle for acknowledging one's existence, rather than actually getting to know someone on a deeper level. I had seen this phenomenon for years—one person would pass another on the street while they exchanged some meaningless conversation like, "Hi there, how are you?" "Fine, and you?" "Fine." Then they would continue on their way without another thought. The waste of time and energy made no sense to me.

Gage lounged about while I worked, chatting with any passersby and explaining my task to them so I didn't have to. It seemed that anytime I glanced over at him, his mouth was moving. Secretly, I was grateful for his presence. He was completely useless as a blacksmith or weapons designer, but he was a natural conversationalist and had a charming, charismatic personality, much more like our mother and so unlike myself and our father. With Gage around, I was never forced to engage in trivial conversations.

It was with pride that I led Da, several naval officers, and several ship captains on a tour a week later of the ships I had outfitted, explaining in depth each weapon's intended function and how to operate them. Even Crown Prince Korth, my tall, broad-shouldered cousin, was in attendance. Gage interpreted for me, and I was pleased that the majority of people continued to watch me sign, even though they had little understanding, rather than shifting their focus to Gage as he spoke. The times when I showed off my creations were the only times I wanted attention from crowds. It was as though I valued each invention as highly as a mother did her child, and I shifted to doting on the many positive attributes that each of my creations possessed. At the end of my demonstration, the crowd applauded. Some brought their hands together repeatedly,

and I felt the air reverberate with the vibrations of their clapping. Others waved their hands in the air to show visual applause.

I allowed a rare smile to pass over my lips as I bowed. Da's striking figure stood out prominently from the crowd, adorned in medals earned from past battles. Just like me, he almost never smiled, but I could see the pride in his face as he inclined his head to me slightly.

Korth took over after I finished with my bit, prattling on and on about the implications that this had for our trade routes and foreign relations, and how this would be the pivotal moment in the decade-long war against the sirens. Gage interpreted for me, signing Korth's words so animatedly that several people turned to watch him rather than look at Korth, which amused Gage and which Korth disregarded. Despite the fact that we had practically been raised side by side at the palace, Korth had never learned to sign well.

Korth looked every inch the crown prince that he was. He had a chiseled physique, was exceptionally tall, as everyone in our family was, and had an air of complete masculinity that made him the center of girls' attentions... at least anytime Gage wasn't around. Gage and Korth looked very similar, but Gage was so much friendlier than Korth that it was impossible not to like him, even for someone as grouchy as I.

Besides, Korth was supposedly betrothed to some foreign princess on a different island nation, but because of the increasing siren issue in the last ten years, they had never met. I had to hand it to Korth, though. No matter how much the girls in Haven Harbor flirted with him, he never once reciprocated, insisting each time that he was already engaged. I admired his loyalty to a woman he had never

met and only corresponded with through a handful of childhood letters, which had also stopped when no ships were able to get through the pods of sirens lurking beyond the barrier reef.

While rule-abiding Korth remained aloof and slightly distant from the people, Gage was always quick with a joke and knew more tall tales than anyone I had ever met. He claimed that he had a story based on any word, so children in town would often run up to him and shout something like, “Tell us a story about a...gnat!” and Gage would immediately do so, pantomiming the entire tale with such vivid detail that even I would get sucked into his storytelling.

I leaned casually against the ship’s railing as Korth dragged out his long-winded speech. My gaze constantly fell on the Lacerator, and I silently admired the simplicity of the weapon that had such devastating capabilities. In my peripheral vision, I spotted a siren’s rippling outline just below the surface of the water, darting across the fjord and heading out to the open ocean but not stopping to lift its head and sing. I frowned after it. The sirens were becoming far too bold as of late. It was time for them to learn a lesson or two, and the Lacerator would serve to humble them quickly.

Gage continued to sign on Korth’s behalf, and I refocused on the speech. “For more than a decade, we have been held captive by the fear of what awaited us in the depths of the sea, but no more. Today ushers in a new era for Haven Harbor, for starting today, we will no longer be at the mercy of the sirens that haunt our borders.”

Korth placed his hand on the Lacerator and continued, “Tomorrow, the sirenfolk will learn what we’re capable of, and that we are *not* helpless victims. We are strong, and we will emerge victorious. For Haven Harbor!”

The audience applauded, and I allowed a thin smile to cross my lips as I waved my hands in the air. We had been preyed on for too long. Revenge was long overdue, and I was determined to be an integral part of the retaliation. If only I had known then how my involvement would alter the course of my life.

CHAPTER 2



Dusk had fallen before Ma came to find me for supper. I was always notoriously late for our evening meal, and today was no different. The time I had spent presenting the weapon upgrades to the naval officers detracted from my valuable time in my blacksmith shop, and I had several more bolts for the Lacerator that I needed to work on before I could call it a day. The timing of the metal tempering was fine-tuned, so I couldn't delay.

It was the cool night air blowing into the shop, swirling over my arms, that alerted me to her presence. The breeze was a welcome change from the red-hot metal I was working, and I briefly raised my hand to acknowledge the new arrival's presence without looking up.

The visitor placed a light hand on my shoulder, and I knew immediately it was my mother—dainty, gentle, and patient in everything she did. She moved into my line of sight and signed, *Supper is ready. Are you coming tonight?*

I shook my head. I couldn't leave yet, not with the metal unfinished. Besides, I knew that supper would be the same

as always—stewed taro root with rice. If we were lucky, we would each have a single boiled egg as well.

I'll wait until you're ready so we can eat as a family. Are you planning to go to that tavern with Sterling again tonight?

I nodded, then plunged the scalding metal into a barrel of water. Steam billowed up, filling the air with the comforting smell of raw iron. Mother wrinkled her nose.

That smells.

Smells wonderful, you mean?

Ma didn't answer but looked long and hard at me as I withdrew the metal rod and examined it closely before taking it over to the grinding stone. As I began to work the pedal, Ma asked, *Is anything going on with you and Sterling?*

It was only extreme respect for my mother that held me back from rolling my eyes. She asked every few weeks if Sterling and I were interested in each other, and no matter how many times I insisted that we were just friends, she would continually ask again. Right before I set the metal to the rough stone, I simply signed, *No*.

She pursed her lips. *I really don't like you going to that tavern. It's no place for a lady.*

Of course she wouldn't want me to go there. My petite, blonde mother was exactly the type of person who would give The Squid's Head a wide berth. She was a highly respected member of high society and far too ladylike to associate with rowdy crowds in cheap pubs.

Although I was female and had the knowledge of how to act at prissy tea parties, I didn't consider myself a lady. Why couldn't I simply refer to myself as the most talented blacksmith in all of Haven Harbor? I should be judged based on my accomplishments, not my gender.

Da taught me how to defend myself, and I've never had any trouble.

Because all men are intimidated by you.

I smirked. *Good.*

Treva, Ma reprimanded.

I raised my eyebrows. *I don't try to intimidate people. They are simply easily intimidated. Remind me again why I should apologize for someone else's insecurity?*

Ma sighed, a motion that always made her shoulders noticeably rise and fall, and I knew she was exasperated with me.

One would never know you're a girl, the way you behave.

I wear skirts just like I promised you I would. I glanced pointedly at the fabric bunched around my thighs that was always pinned up so I had full range of motion.

Ma glared at the pants that protruded from under my wrinkled skirt, and I turned my face to hide my grin, then flipped the bolt to shave off impurities from the other side of the metal and sharpen the tip.

Ma waited patiently for me as I finished with the grinding stone, though she did hold her hands up to her ears as I pumped the treadle and held the metal to the rough stone. Sparks flew from the bolt in a fiery dance that never lost its appeal for me, and all too quickly, my work was done for the day.

Finished, I informed my mother as I went to the wash basin to begin scrubbing the black smears from my hands, digging under my nails to remove every trace of soot.

You'd best get all that off, or you can sit outside to eat. Only those with clean hands can sit at my table.

I grinned, dried my hands, and locked up my shop before following Ma down the street to our house. She walked just as a lady of her station should, with small, refined steps in feminine shoes that were highly fashionable and wildly uncomfortable. I, on the other hand, strode

confidently with paces that were more than double the length of my mother's, my feet shod in a pair of my father's heavy military boots.

Our modest home was nestled just beyond the businesses that lined the main road not far from my blacksmith shop. Our family was wealthy in comparison to other families in our city, but not outlandishly so. Often people assumed that because Da was the queen's brother, he would live at the castle.

The truth was, Da had no interest in pursuing the royal way of life. He liked staying close to the docks and drilling his troops on their eternal quest to vanquish the sirens.

Ma gave me a stern glare as I crossed the threshold, and I meekly removed my boots, still caked in stale, fishy-smelling mud from my time on the ships that day, before stepping onto her pristinely clean floor. Gage and Da were already at the dining room table and were deep in conversation. They looked up as Ma and I entered. Gage flashed his charming smile that always made girls fall all over themselves, and Da inclined his head solemnly, as if at a funeral.

Late again, as always, Gage quipped. The food will be cold, thanks to you.

I rolled my eyes. Leave it to an obnoxious younger brother to complain about everything. I sat down in my chair, and Ma held out her hands toward Da and Gage to say grace. We all joined hands and everyone else closed their eyes. Gage squeezed mine harder than he needed to, and I returned the pressure with an additional measure. He opened his mouth in a silent scream and opened his eyes to throw me a dirty look, and I cocked an eyebrow at him.

Ma and Da hadn't noticed. Da plowed on with the

prayer. I had the words memorized, so didn't bother to read Da's lips.

The prayer ended and everyone unclasped hands. Gage was right; the food was cold. It might have been better hot, but not by much. The rations each family was allowed each day were limited. Until the siren problem was dealt with, fishing in the open ocean and trading with other islands was impossible.

"I saw Osten's girls today." Ma always signed and spoke at the same time, and smiled as though we were enjoying a feast rather than the mushy taro root and boiled egg, as always. "They were dancing in a competition this afternoon."

She went on to detail their achievements, but my eyes glazed over and Ma's signs blurred together. Osten was my father's younger brother, who led the nation's army. He and his wife had four children—Lyla, Lily, Lara, and Lucas. The girls were triplets and were already accomplished dancers, even at just twelve years old. I didn't know them very well as I never had much patience for children. I supposed I should make more of an effort now that they didn't spend every moment smudging their sticky hands on other peoples' belongings and trailing after me like lost puppies.

Da listened quietly while he ate, occasionally nodding to show he was still paying attention. He never spoke until his supper was finished, but Gage did, enthusiastically asking questions and carrying the conversation in spite of my and Da's stony silence.

I tuned back into the conversation momentarily. Ma, bless her, was still signing for my benefit, even though I had clearly not been paying attention and her cold food was barely touched.

All those girls will be beauties when they are older. It won't

be long before they start getting noticed. With their blonde hair and dancer legs, boys will be falling all over themselves.

My focus dwindled again. I knew Ma cared about her nieces deeply to the point where they were almost as close to her as real daughters. They were everything she hoped I would be—dainty, blonde, thin, and with enormous blue eyes that could soften the hardest heart. I quickly finished my dinner and asked to be excused.

Ma's shoulders slumped ever so slightly. *Don't you want to stay and talk to us?*

Da spotted her disappointment and fixed me with a firm stare. "Sit down." It was always easy to lip read what Da said. If it had been anyone else speaking that way to me, I would have walked away in spite. But knowing it was the military efficiency with which Da communicated with everyone, and considering how much respect I had for him, I slowly lowered myself back into my seat.

Da's gaze never wavered. "You did well today, Treva. I wanted you to know I am proud of you." Those few words meant more to me than any others, and I fought to maintain my neutral expression.

My mother clapped her hands together and asked for more details, which were supplied in healthy amounts by Gage. It wasn't until nearly an hour later that Ma was finally satisfied by the description of the day's events and let us go our separate ways. Da, as always, went to bed early. Ma had a ladies' sewing circle she attended, Gage was usually off entertaining some girl or another, and I would slink off to the shady pub. The sorry excuse for ale that the tavern owners sold was pathetic and watery, but it did at least rid my mouth of the taro flavor that was all too familiar to everyone in Haven Harbor.

CHAPTER 3



A toast, signed Sterling, to your great accomplishments.
May sirens the world over fear your name.

I grinned and raised my mug in victory. We drained our ale simultaneously, both racing to see who would finish first. Sterling won, though narrowly.

Are you sure you aren't a sailor? You drink like one!

Sterling signaled the tavern keeper for refills. *Says the girl who can outdrink most any sailor or soldier.*

I smirked. *Maybe they should be less of ninnies about holding their alcohol then, if a girl can best them. This is weak, anyway.*

A barmaid took our mugs over to the keg in the corner, and I drummed my fingers idly on the wooden table. The lit candles illuminated Sterling's face in a ghostly light. He had a handsome face, smooth and clean, just like the other bookkeepers he worked with. His pale skin and blond hair were a stark contrast to my tanned complexion and dark brown hair, and we were nearly identical in height. It wasn't that Sterling was short by any means; I was just an unusually tall girl, something I had always been proud of.

My height and strength proved invaluable in my line of work, and I loved when men seemed intimidated by my height and confidence, which only bolstered my somewhat inflated self-assurance.

My mind drifted to which ships I would prioritize arming next. Korth paid generously for my time. Though we were cousins, he would never take advantage of our family relationship to pay me less than my workmanship was worth. Because of the higher prices, all my other projects had been pushed back months so I could focus on outfitting the fleet.

Sterling's hands jumped into motion and I was pulled from my thoughts. *Do you think they will catch sirens?*

With my weapons on board? Absolutely! The sea will bleed red tomorrow.

Sterling's pale face grew slightly green. *You have a gruesome sadistic streak. You know that, right?*

I pretended to blush and fanned myself dramatically. *You flatter me.*

Out of the corner of my eye, I spotted a couple of older women giggling and looking in our direction. I felt the vibrations in my chest from the pub's raucous laughter and music from the jongleur, so these women likely believed that they couldn't be overheard. I watched their lips move.

"Aren't those two adorable? I am surprised they aren't married already. They are so cute together!"

"Oh, I know. There aren't many Deaf people in Haven Harbor, but those two found each other." The woman pressed a hand to her heart. "So romantic."

I stifled a snigger and relayed to Sterling what they were saying about us. He grinned mischievously, then nodded at two people sitting at a nearby table, both of whom had crossed their arms and were glaring away from

each other. The air was thick with icy tension around them.

Sterling pulled his face into an exaggerated dreamy look. *I think those two should get married. Want to know why?*

Why?

They are both hearing! Isn't it romantic? They're perfect for each other!

I let out an unheard laugh, feeling the air in my lungs compress as it was forced out of my chest. It was so typical of everyone to assume Sterling and I were madly in love since we both signed and spent time together. Coupled with the fact that few people could understand what we were saying to each other, it led all the townsfolk to assume we were in some sort of relationship and doing the equivalent of whispering sweet nothings to each other when we signed. This didn't bother me too much outside of being annoyed at people for making assumptions. It served to ward off any young men who otherwise may have expressed interest in me, but as Sterling so frequently pointed out, my standoffish attitude did that already.

Sterling was the one I felt sorry for. He had harbored a crush on a sweet girl at his bookkeeping office for months but felt too shy to say anything and worried that she would think he was already taken. No one ever believed that Sterling and I were only friends. Because we were both Deaf and Sterling was one of the few men taller than I was, everyone assumed we would end up together.

As we wiled away the evening drinking, people would occasionally approach us and introduce themselves, finger-spelling their names and asking to practice signing with us. Sterling was far more receptive to them than I was. He would smile and urge them to continue learning, practicing for a few minutes before they went along their way. His

thought was that we should encourage anyone who wanted to learn sign to broaden our circle of friends, and being the eternal optimist that he was, he was very welcoming to their efforts.

I, on the other hand, had a different, more pessimistic outlook. Hearing people who learned sign language often sought out validation from the few Deaf individuals they knew, expecting praise from both the hearing and Deaf communities for their mediocre efforts at slaughtering my native language, and I had no intention of giving it. It often felt like they viewed me as a pity project and were learning sign language out of the goodness of their hearts.

When they merely gave me the afterthought courtesy of including me only when it was convenient so they could boost their already inflated egos, I was more than happy to shut them out. If they wouldn't make an active effort to include me in their lives, I had no reason at all to include them in mine. I didn't want to be someone's extra-credit, feel-good project, and I was perfectly content with my life as it was—I had a job that I enjoyed, friends and family who supported me...I had no need for superficial friends who only knew how to fingerspell *cat*.

Over Sterling's head, I saw Korth enter the pub. I stared. The crown prince never deigned to come to shady taverns like this; what was he doing here? I rapped my knuckles on the table to attract Sterling's attention and jerked my head toward my older cousin. Just as Sterling looked around, Korth caught my eye and made a beeline for me. As usual, the customers parted the moment they saw him coming. I saw that everyone had stopped talking, too engrossed in Korth's approach.

Uninvited, he pulled up a stool, whipped out his handkerchief to brush the seat free of the crumbs scattered from

the last occupant, and sat down. I appraised him with interest. Korth never came to me unless he wanted something. He seemed more cheerful than I had ever seen him before but still maintained his air of dignity and station.

Choppily, Korth signed, *How are you?*

Good, I answered, eyebrows raised. He knew a few simple signs, but nothing else, and I knew what was coming.

After a brief pause, Korth began to slowly and meticulously fingerspell *I-L-I-K-E-D-W-H-A-T-Y-O-U-M-A-D-E*, but I held up a hand to forestall him halfway through and shoved the slate and writing stylus I always carried at him.

He seemed relieved and quickly wrote,

*I liked the weapons
you made*

I wiped the slate clean of his obnoxiously perfect handwriting and scrawled back,

What do you want?

He smiled, flashing his white teeth in a way that would make most girls swoon.

*To have a drink
with my cousin*

His charm was wasted on me. I raised an eyebrow suspiciously then shoved a mug across to him and raised my own, challenging his honesty. Korth took the offered ale

and sniffed it. He wrinkled his nose and gingerly took the smallest sip I had ever seen. He would've looked more at home sitting down at a little girl's tea party rather than surrounded by brawny men at a seedy tavern like this one. Sterling raised his hand to cover his smile, his eyes crinkling up as he did so. I drained my own mug in a matter of seconds, then slammed the empty container down.

Korth considered me, then smiled ruefully and shook his head as he admitted defeat. He took up the slate again and wrote,

I need your help

The truth comes out, I signed to Sterling, then wiped the slate clear.

What sort of help?

He didn't answer right away. He swirled his foaming tankard around several times without taking another drink before responding.

*Come with us on the
hunt tomorrow.*

I cocked an eyebrow after I was done reading. It wasn't that the offer wasn't tempting. To the contrary, I was very eager to know that my inventions avenged some of the deaths our town had suffered over the years. But like I had already told Da, I wasn't a soldier or sailor; I was a weapons

designer. My part in this story ended once the weapons were handed off to the military. I picked at one of my nails, which had grown long enough to be inconvenient at work lately, and deliberated.

Korth made to hand the slate back to me, but Sterling snatched it out of my hands.

She'll do it.

You can't make decisions for me, you big lummo!

Sterling smirked. *Like you don't want to see payoff for your hard work. Besides, I want to watch too. I'm inviting myself.*

I glowered, but I knew he was right. I wanted to see my creations in action. I nodded my consent.

READY TO READ MORE?



Find out what happens when Treva goes to see her creations in action (here's a hint: being Deaf becomes a HUGE advantage, and the hearing sailors don't share that advantage). You can find this book on Amazon and Kindle Unlimited.

