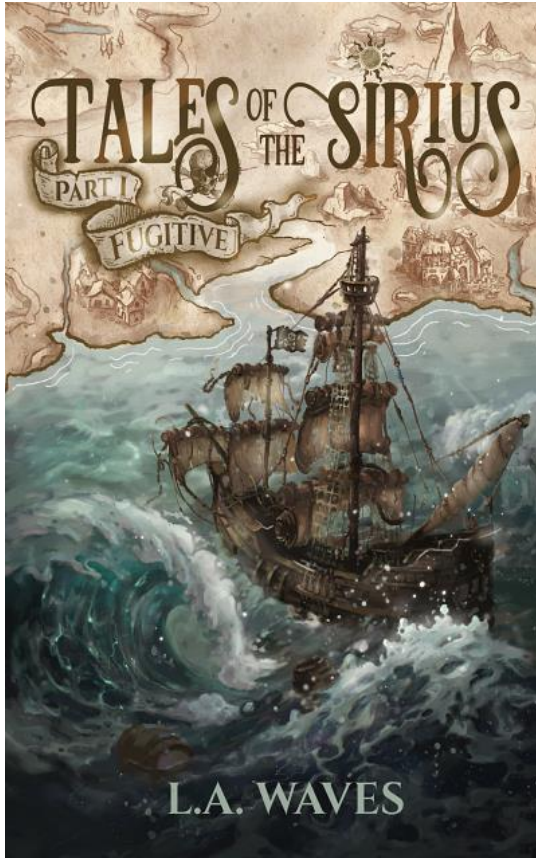




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Tales of the Sirius: Part I - Fugitive

By L. A. Waves

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TALES OF THE SIRIUS

The background of the entire cover is a sepia-toned map. It features various landmasses, some with small buildings or structures. A large, multi-masted steamship is depicted sailing through turbulent, dark green and blue waves. The ship has a complex rigging system and a prominent smokestack. The overall style is reminiscent of a vintage nautical adventure story.

PART I

FUGITIVE

L.A. WAVES

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Print ISBN: 978-1-961266-24-7

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2026

First Edition

Cover art, interior map, and chapter illustrations by Kayla M. Martell – @kmmartellart



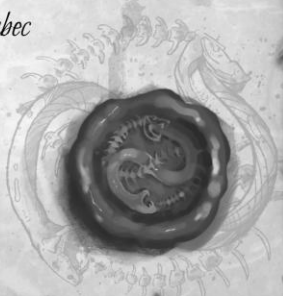
SIRIUS LOG BOOK



January 20, 1893

The endless search continues for the two slippery items that obsessive reprobate is after. One more clue, one more destination—Thalassa. I received a surprising missive from a most unexpected sender which could prove crucial to finally making headway. Onwards and upwards. Time is of the essence in this chase. I can't let him win this one. I could never forgive myself.

*Sirius Ship Captain,
Morgan "Whitelock" Brabec*





Chapter 1

ADRIFT

Captain Whitelock had a hard time finding a spot for his latest trophy. The walls of his quarters were much too crowded with random trinkets: ancient coins, stolen decorations, ornamental blades, fine charcoal drawings, and above all, lots of dainty colorful seashells. He never outgrew his habit of collecting them. Neither did the previous tenant of that cabin, apparently.

He finally found an unclaimed space next to his baroque four-poster bed and carefully affixed his newest acquisition at eye level. It was an oval-shaped mirror encased in a sinuous matte golden frame. *De Forêt*, a plaque on its base said. Whitelock grabbed a letter opener from the pigeonhole of his pink ivory desk and gouged the engraving. Then, he caught his own reflection.

Mottled three-week stubble, messy hair crammed under an oversized tricorne, dark brown eyes hidden under wildly bushy

eyebrows which, from the looks of it, could turn into one cumbrous unibrow at any moment. He really needed a trim.

Eh, no one to impress on the ship at the moment, he thought with a placid shrug.

As he turned around to leave, he stumbled against the marble chess table set beneath the stern lights, dimly illuminated by the moonlight. The impact made the pieces rattle, followed by the slow, stately topple of the white king. Muttering a curse, Whitelock hurried to set it back up. He had no trouble remembering its position—the original layout of those locked chessmen was firmly engraved in his mind. An illustrious army of white clearly dominating over a dwindling horde of black. And yet...

Whitelock clicked his tongue, inevitably drawn to the eternally unsolved puzzle. *Damn you, Morgan.*

A soft knock on his door interrupted his musings. “Captain,” a gritty voice rang outside.

Whitelock opened the door to find his boatswain, wrinkled apron stained with dark splotches and sweat dripping from his headdress. “What is it, Bonnet?”

“The spare table has been set on deck,” Boatswain Bonnet informed. “Dinner menu is shellfish and seared tuna steaks from the last catch. Luke and Stumpy are bringin’ up a rum barrel as well.”

Whitelock observed him wheeze, out of breath. For a second, his mind went back to the moment when he finally convinced

that cunning, slippery runt to join his crew after much urging and cajolery. Back then, Bonnet was barely a twig, as willowy and lissome as a tumbler. Looking at him now, his solid build effectively hiding any hint of what used to be a visible ribcage, Whitelock figured the runt's decision back then had been the right one. But he always wondered if Bonnet thought the same.

"Well, sink *me*," Captain Whitelock gestured dramatically. "Am I missing the party?"

"Yer certainly missin' the prep work," the boatswain pointed dryly. "Cargo block is still jammed, so we gotta carry everythin' up by hand."

"Ah, the vicissitudes of life at sea," Whitelock sighed, donning his mantle. "I reckon someone has to bite the bullet and do the tasting, too. Fret not. As your Captain, it shall be my honor to shoulder such toil."

With a sardonic groan, Bonnet stepped back to let him pass. Whitelock happily strutted out to the deck and nearly plowed into his deckhand Luke and his gunner Stumpy, who were lugging a heavy cask up the stairs of the companionway—the former vowing to quaff the entire barrel before midnight, the latter rolling his good eye in response. Whitelock held the door open for them, quietly entertained by their rapport. For two people who spent so much time together, they could not be more different: Deckhand Luke was young, tall, lanky, fair-skinned and eager. Gunner Alain—or *Stumpy*, as he was commonly known for obvious reasons—was short, stocky, black, and flinty. Lacking an arm and an eye. And possibly older than Whitelock, although he could never be sure.

With a tip of his hat, Whitelock joined the rest of his crew by the main mast. They were admiring the fruitful harvest of their latest plunder. Gold ingots, jewels, weapons, sacks of food and other assorted valuables were haphazardly scattered around the waist deck like children's toys in a wayward nursery, glinting gently under the wobbling light of several oil lamps that hung from the ratlines. It was a truly inspiring sight.

The spare table rested beyond, laden with a tantalizing seafood banquet just as gorgeous-looking, and definitely better-smelling. Whitelock snapped a leg from a steaming king crab and gave it a slurp, humming in delight. *A king for a king*, he chuckled to himself. He devoured the tender meat and licked his fingers clean.

He briefly scanned the deck, seeking the person with the most expensive garments among all crewmates on deck—his navigator and ever-reliable First Mate, Johan. He found him leaning against the bulwark, testing the quality of a gold nugget with his teeth.

“What did I say, Johan?” Whitelock approached him affably. “Wasn’t that place a real motherlode?”

Save for the occasional silver hair in his impeccably maintained dark mane, Whitelock could swear Johan had a way to cheat time itself; he appeared exactly as he did when he first presented himself for hire. Same outrageously lavish coats, same goatee trimmed to perfection on a carefully concealed cleft chin. Same evasive almond-shaped eyes.

Johan observed his soft teeth marks on the nugget. “Twenty-four carat, not bad,” he assessed as a matter of response.

Whitelock noticed his rowdy lookout Cyrus snatching a jewel-encrusted goblet from the treasure pile and using it to pour himself a drink. “I can’t *believe* rich people. Who leaves a whole villa vacant, loaded to the brim with gold, for the whole winter season?”

Onboard medic and bonesetter Loïc dropped a heavy sack of white powder he was weighing on his brawny dark arms and tutted in displeasure. “Cyrus, that cup was covered in dust and rat droppings before you took it. The coating is probably leaching into the wine, too. It’s extremely unsafe to drink.”

But Cyrus had already downed it, not listening. “How *dumb* can people be?”

Loïc sighed. “Excellent question.”

Whitelock chortled. Those two never failed to entertain. Which was hilarious, because not only was the medic ten years older than the lookout—they were also decades apart in terms of character. Loïc was wise, mindful, and forthright, while Cyrus was immature, entitled, and impulsive. Yet, somehow, they clicked. As a comedic duo, if nothing else.

Whitelock picked a golden goblet festooned with turquoise beads from the pile for himself. “In the Marquis’ defense, the location of his summer house was supposed to be confidential,” he shrugged innocently.

Deckhand Luke hurried to pour a generous amount of wine in his goblet. "How did you find the location of the Marquis de Forêt's summer house, then, Captain?"

"Kid, *please*," Whitelock drawled smugly, smacking his lips after a good swig. "I *am* the Pirate King of the Five Seas. I have access to all sorts of useful intel."

"Intel my arse," Boatswain Bonnet scoffed as he sorted several bags of variegated beans. "Ya bedded the Marquis' wife, didn't ya."

Whitelock winced. "We struggled to find a proper place to meet in secret, and she mentioned her husband's vacation home...Unattended, easy to access, up for grabs..."

"You're still talking about the *house*, aren't you?" First Mate Johan checked, examining a wide-rimmed fur felt hat with a critical eye.

"Don't be so crass, Johan," Captain Whitelock chided. "You know women are treated with respect in this crew."

"Oh sure," the First Mate sneered, trying the hat on. It was too big. "When the Marquis' wife arrives at the meeting point expecting a steamy rendezvous, but instead finds her husband's summer villa despoiled and vandalized, she'll be feeling the respect in *spades*."

"There goes my hope for a second date," Whitelock grimaced. "Now, my men! What say you, we enjoy this mouth-watering supper before it gets cold, then leave our lovely cabin girl to

take inventory of this handsome haul? Unless she'd rather savor a sweet dessert, instead. In my *quarters*, that is."

Cabin Girl Liz perked up at the mention of her title, her freckled face brimming with enthusiasm. "Aye aye, Captain! Inventory taking, it is."

"Your loss, dear," Whitelock winked, making her giggle. He always loved it when she flashed those adorable protruding front teeth. Whitelock never wasted a chance to try his charms on her, because *that's* who he was and *that's* what he did, of course. But the truth was, he found her much too endearing to hold any real licentious thoughts for her.

"Avast, me hearties!" Captain Whitelock toasted. "Let us celebrate this most successful caper with a bountiful feast! To the booty!"

And they all cheered in response as they took their seats around the table.



"How goes the tallying, dear?" Whitelock asked, sprawled on his seat and severely drunk on stolen brandy.

Cabin Girl Liz scrunched her thin eyebrows as she counted the piles of coins, bills, and bullion she had stacked on the table for easy allocation. "So far I counted four hundred and forty-eight quid in coins, fifteen thousand in bills, and twenty-nine gold bars, at a value of...Uh..."

“Two thousand a piece,” Johan completed from his seat at the other side of the table.

Liz pointed to the rest of the treasure, meticulously lined up by the starboard gunwale. “That, plus all the liquor barrels, food, drugs, jewels, clothing items and other random goods you brought over. I mean...Fans? A bear rug? *Chamber pots?*”

Deckhand Luke protested. “Hey, have you never had an emergency in the middle of the night? Those can become very valuable when you sleep in the cargo hold.”

“Please tell me ya haven’t been usin’ the water jugs up till now,” Boatswain Bonnet sulked.

Luke conveniently ignored that and joined Gunner Stumpy by a hazardous mound of gunpowder and loose cartridges. Without warning, the one-armed gunner fetched a thin stick and ignited it, making everyone cower with a gasp. No explosion ensued, however; the stick simply burned down slowly, releasing a festive rain of sparkly golden specks that sputtered, wavered and died before they touched the floor. Stumpy scowled in disappointment.

“Oh come on, Al,” Luke grabbed the sparkler and shook it around playfully, fleeting bright lines following his every movement. “So we didn’t find an arsenal of deadly explosives. Next time we’ll hit the jackpot! For now, let’s enjoy the fireworks, right?”

Stumpy shot him a deadpan glare. Luke went on to trace an obscene depiction of male anatomy in the night sky with the burning sparkler, but Stumpy licked his thumb and put the

firework out with a shrilling hiss before the deckhand could finish his aerial masterpiece. With a listless shrug, Luke scanned the rest of the swag. “So what else is in here? Any blades to appraise? Huh?” He frowned, pointing at a heap of brass horns, flutes and other assorted instruments. “Are those actual *musical* instruments?”

“Oh aye!” Captain Whitelock beamed. “The good Marquis must be quite the longhair—had a whole arrangement in his living room. I’ve always wanted to have music onboard, like that jester Redplume does, so...here we go. Can any of you play a lick?”

The crewmates exchanged bewildered glances, shaking their heads.

“Avast!” Whitelock pouted. “Not even you, Johan? You had a swell education when you were young, didn’t you? Surely that included musical training?”

First Mate Johan huffed coldly. “I don’t see how that’s relevant.”

“Come on, get your hands on that guitar,” Whitelock insisted. “Knock us dead.”

“Tempting,” Johan hissed. “But unless you have a piano among that pile of trash, you’re out of luck, Captain.”

“Oh, but there was!” Whitelock recalled. “Wasn’t there? A grand one? Cyrus, I left you in charge of lowering it to ground level with that pulley from the balcony, didn’t I?”

The flaxen-haired lookout squirmed on his seat, next to the medic. “Yeah...Thing is... It ended up fallin’ on the head of the guard posted at the entrance below. By *complete* accident, of course.”

“There was a guard?” Medic Loïc wondered, surprised.

“Not fer long,” Lookout Cyrus whispered back.

“Cyrus,” Whitelock said, turning serious. “Did you disregard our code *again*?”

“Hey, it wasn’t me!” Cyrus raised his hands. “It was *gravitas*!”

Loïc rubbed his eyes with a tired sigh. “The word is *gravity*.”

“You, mister,” Captain Whitelock pointed at Cyrus with a stern finger, “just forfeited your share of the spoils.” Cyrus got ready to protest heatedly, but Loïc elbowed him in the ribs to keep quiet. Whitelock went to the stack of instruments and browsed the brass section. “And the rest of you, I’m sorely disappointed. Next time I find a prospective mate who knows how to play an instrument, they’ll be taking your place.”

“But Captain,” Deckhand Luke uttered. “Do *you* know how to play...?”

His words were interrupted by Whitelock’s attempt at playing a cornet. A jarring sound, similar to an elephant drawing its last agonizing breath, made everyone gnash their teeth.

“I guess that’s a *no*,” Luke whispered to Stumpy, who tapped his bulbous nose with his good hand.

Whitelock unstuck the cornet from his lips, a shimmering string of saliva stubbornly clinging to its mouthpiece, then tossed it over his shoulder nonchalantly. The instrument landed inside the rum barrel, still half-full. The crew groaned.

“At any rate,” Whitelock cleared his throat, “this amount of booty should keep us comfortable for a while. Good thing, too, because I received a lead for a most exceptional treasure, but the search is bound to be a long and costly one.” He raised his goblet. “Rejoice, my men! This prey shall garner us pay to sink a galleon!”

As the crew cheered, Cabin Girl Liz cleared her throat. “Um, may I say something?”

“What is it, dear?” Captain Whitelock smiled. “Finally time to announce you’re done with that gormless piano wrecker of yours and ready to relocate to my quarters?”

“Excuse me?” Lookout Cyrus raged.

“Uh, no,” Liz snickered. “I didn’t mean to interrupt, but, um...On a day like today, three years ago, I fell in with this crazy crew.”

There was general awe around the table. Gunner Stumpy lit another sparkler.

“Liz, is today the anniversary of your accidental boarding?” Deckhand Luke gasped.

Cyrus gaped. “Anniv-what?”

Liz grinned fondly. “Back then, it felt like the most terrifying of misfortunes, but... I know now it was fate that brought me here. And while I wouldn’t mind some more closet space sometimes, or a bit of fresh water for my poor brittle hair, or a fellow female shipmate to talk to...”

“Not to mention a partner who gave a *damn* about yer anniversary,” Boatswain Bonnet pointed dryly. Cyrus reddened.

“Regardless of all that, I would not change this life for the world,” Cabin Girl Liz concluded, and raised her glass. “Bottoms up.”

“Aye aye!” everyone joined.

“Aw, Liz!” Luke pounced on her like a drunken flea. “Please never leave us. I don’t want to do the swabbing on my own ever again, it’s a nightmare! Look, you want a female shipmate? I’ll be it. Lend me one of your dresses.”

Liz chortled as the deckhand plucked the pink circlet from her head and tried it on his windblown mousy hair.

“Hey, hey!” Cyrus snapped. “Hands off her! And if I see ya wearin’ one of her dresses, I will *rip* it to *shreds* it while it’s still on ya, ya hear me?”

“Nice, mate,” Luke retorted groggily, rosy circlet hopelessly stuck in his tangled locks. “Can’t believe you managed to woo her. Guess that’s where the last of your smarts went.”

“What?” lookout Cyrus shouted in outrage. “I have plenty of smarts to crack yer skull open, ya skinny mutt.”

“That’s the only way you’ll ever see a brain working,” Deckhand Luke guffawed.

“How *dare* ya disrespect yer senior?” Cyrus lunged at Luke unsteadily with his dagger.

Luke dodged his attacks easily, his slim body easily squeezing through narrow gaps and disappearing from sight with the sleight of a gecko, while Cyrus charged at every barrel or crate that could be used as a hiding place with the finesse of a rhinoceros. Finally, Cyrus managed to corner Luke against the port bulwark. The deckhand bent over it, shaken with giggles. As he caught his breath, his gaze locked on some distant point in the dark waters. “What is that?”

“Ya think I’m gonna fall fer that?” Cyrus grumbled, rearing to strike again. But the only answer he received was a gasp that made the whole crew sober up instantly.

“What is it, Luke?” Captain Whitelock asked, approaching the deckhand. “Did you see anything suspicious out there?”

“It’s a pinnacle,” Luke said, pointing. “Looks unmanned. It’s too dark to see what’s in it, but there is definitely some lump.”

Whitelock straightened automatically. “Bonnet, Loïc, bear down upon it and report back. Keep your eyes peeled for traps. Bring back anything of value. ‘Tis a sweet yield that comes to us without price or risk, after all, ain’t it?”

“Aye aye.”



Captain Whitelock observed his boatswain and medic row the longboat synergically toward the drifting boat, the flames of an oil lamp dancing lively between them to facilitate orientation and signal their location to the main crew at all times. The mysterious pinnacle slowly floated further and further away, carried by the stern wake coming off the *Sirius*' transom. In a matter of minutes, it would be lost forever in the darkness of the night. Luckily, Loïc and Bonnet were exceptionally fast rowers.

“It’s a person,” Medic Loïc shouted once they reached the boat.
“A woman.”

Whitelock salivated in eagerness, back at the ship. “Sweet yield indeed! Ask her if she can play an instrument!”

“No can do,” boatswain Bonnet’s voice came from the distance. “She’s dead.”

Blast it, Whitelock clicked his tongue. *And here I was hoping.*

Lookout Cyrus scoffed behind Whitelock. “Good riddance, then. We don’t need no woman on the ship.”

“Um, hello?” Cabin Girl Liz poked at Cyrus’ shoulder, vexed.

Cyrus grimaced. “Oh, come on, Liz, ya know I don’t see ya as a woman.”

Liz gaped, then walked off in an angry huff. “Rude!”

Cyrus followed, whimpering. “Don’t get mad, ya know that’s not what I meant...!”

Captain Whitelock sighed, vexed. “Could we leave the marital caterwauling for later? Bonnet!” he shouted to the longboat. “Is there nothing there we can salvage?”

The boatswain responded, “Nothing in the boat. But the pinnace is in decent shape. Bit of a do up should sort it.”

“Bring it over, then,” Whitelock commanded. “Toss the body.”

“Aye.” Medic Loïc stepped into the pinnace to follow orders while the longboat returned, Bonnet at the oars. Deckhand Luke and Gunner Stumpy were rolling down the Jacob’s ladder when Loïc’s bass voice echoed in the distance. “She’s not dead.”

There was a confused silence.

“But I couldn’t feel her breathin’,” Bonnet spoke bewilderedly, half-way up the ladder.

“She’s very weak,” Loïc explained as he reached the ladder with the pinnace, the dark lump of the motionless woman on his lap. “She needs urgent care.”

“Luke, Stumpy, cast the hoisting falls,” Whitelock commanded. “Let’s haul her up with the boat.”

As the deckhand and the gunner operated the creaky davit-mounted winches to lift the pinnace to the deck, Whitelock

suddenly felt the euphoric compulsion to smooth his rumpled tresses. *I may have someone to impress on the ship, after all.*

But the moment medic Loïc lifted the body from the small boat and into the light of the hanging lamps, all hints of lust vanished from the Captain's mind.

The woman was unconscious, small, and looked as if she hadn't eaten properly in months. Her skin was the color of brown clay, mapped with the crimson of severe sunburns. Her face was round despite the frightening hollowness of her cheeks. Her eyes were curiously slanted, crowned by thick lashes that curled like the caudal fin of a blacktail. Her hair was dark, abundant, yet cut short in grisly, uneven slashes, reminiscent of a mass of dead kelp.

But none of those features stood out as prominently as the injuries and lacerations that bespattered her beaten, emaciated body.

An unpleasant memory of another young woman coming home, her feeble figure covered in bruises and her eyes dazed and swollen, flashed in Whitelock's head. Suddenly, he wasn't in the mood to party anymore.

"Loïc, take her to the sick bay at once," he ordered sternly. "The rest, take all of this loot to the hold. No more revelry tonight, gentlemen."

The news was received with mixed reactions, but Captain Whitelock brushed it all off and retired to his quarters, turquoise-encrusted goblet still in his hand. He stood by the stern windows, contemplating the fine hook of the crescent

moon disappearing behind a lone roving cloud. As he distractedly took the goblet to his lips, the bitter tang of metal in the aged wine made him wince. Frustrated, he unlocked the secret cabinet under his desk and grabbed one of his very few, very treasured bottles of Ósaian whiskey.

He uncorked it with his teeth and drank distressedly from the bottle.

Damn you, Morgan.



Where am I?

Am I...alive?

Rhein could not open her eyes. Her body did not respond, and she could hardly think through a debilitating fog that clouded her every faculty. But a faint humming kept prickling at her ears as she slowly recovered consciousness. Human voices. One thin, lilting and feminine, like a sleigh bell. “Is she getting any better?”

The other one, male, velvety and deeply bass, with the soothing quality of molten butter and a subtle trace of a Temenian accent. “She’s on her way to recovery.”

“But...it’s been a week already,” the female voice said, sounding rueful.

“She is not dehydrated anymore, and the sunburns and hematomata are healing,” the male voice said. “It looked like

touch-and-go for a while, but she's stable now. Considering her condition, actually, she's lucky she was unconscious this whole time."

"But what could have happened to her to end up like this?" the female voice asked.

"It's pointless to speculate," the male voice answered. "What's important is that she's responding to the treatment. She will wake up eventually."

As if hit by a magic spell, Rhein's body shook with a surge of energy. A torrent of light blinded her as she opened her eyelids, and she needed a moment to adjust as the world around her gradually took shape. She was on a canvas bed. In a small, oddly triangular-shaped room. Cramped, aseptic—a spartan desk, cabinets crammed with bottles and jars in various states of use, and shelves bursting with books of contrasting heights and widths. And two strange circular windows on the facing walls, through which she could only see blue—clear, endless, and empty.

Rhein frowned in confusion, failing to make sense of any of that. She turned to her side and was startled by a massive dark figure sitting on a stool by her bed. A man, seemingly, only with the build of a mountain and the shoulder span of a barn door. He was wearing a bright white coat, which contrasted strikingly with his onyx black skin, and a pair of elegant pince-nez spectacles, which contrasted heavily with the intimidating cluster of hoops and studs that glittered on both of his ears.

“Ahoy there, miss,” the dark giant greeted her in his sonorous voice, peering at her over the rim of his spectacles.

Rhein gave a jolt and recoiled, but her back hit the wall. Cornered and overwhelmed by feral panic, she felt her lungs closing, and her vision blurred.

“Calm down, you are safe,” the giant gestured, removing his spectacles with grave deliberation. “Everything is alright.”

Rhein instinctively shielded her head with her hands. “Don’t hurt me.”

There was a long silence. Rhein eventually lowered her arms, trembling, only to be met by the giant’s grim, unyielding stare. He rose from his seat and stepped back. That’s when a second person materialized behind him and took over. A pale, freckled girl with long chestnut-colored hair crudely held up with a tatty length of rope and a large keychain hanging from her sash. Petite, awkward, barely of age judging by her meek disposition. Nonthreatening.

“Um, hello,” the girl tried gently, her tone sweet and crisp like that of a tin whistle. “Please don’t be afraid. This person here, he may look a bit scary, but...”

“Hey!” the giant protested.

The girl smiled apologetically at him. “Sorry, Loïc, but...you’re enormous. I would be scared, too.”

The giant glanced down at his overinflated pectorals. They bulged out through his white smock like inverted soup bowls,

making his tucked spectacles poke out dangerously from his breast pocket. "I may have been overdoing it a bit with the pushups."

"I've had to mend your coat *four* times because you keep ripping it!" the girl moaned.

"Yeah," the giant winced. "My neck chain snapped the other day, too."

Rhein observed the odd pair bicker in perplexity. "Um...who are you?"

Startled by her intervention, the giant and the girl turned back to her. "Sorry about that," the girl grinned. "My name is Liz. This here is Loïc, and he is a medic. He's been taking care of you. You are in good hands, I promise."

Rhein gazed blankly at the dark giant. "A...medic? Where am I?"

"You were unconscious on a drifting boat," Loïc informed her. "We rescued you."

Rhein felt hazy and unmoored. Her eyes went around the room again, trying to take in more details. There was an unlit stove under one of the windows, and a washing station by the back wall, with a pile of bowls neatly nested in the basin and a rack of hanging towels next to it. A small table rested near the head of the cot where Rhein lay. It was littered with medical armamentarium: a stethoscope, bandages, a mercury-in-glass thermometer, rubber gloves and a terrifying set of surgical

instruments Rhein could not identify. Everything looked sharp, functional, and disconcertingly clean.

Dumbfounded, Rhein peeked through the windows again. And again, she could see nothing but the blue sky. Until she propped herself up and her perspective changed. That's when she noticed something else, just as blue and just as infinite, resting under the sky.

Water.

"Are we on a...ship?" Rhein choked.

Loïc sighed. "Miss, you've been in a coma for a week. You are overwhelmed, weak, and confused. Let's go step by step and I'll tell you more about your situation as you get better. First and foremost, let's get some food into you."

She seemed ready to protest, but Liz held her hand to calm her. "Please, do as he says. We only want to help you, uh...What is your name?"

Her large amber eyes were pleading. Rhein found herself unable to shake her off. "Rhein," she answered reluctantly.

Liz beamed in delighted surprise. "Rain, as in rainfall? What a beautiful name!"

"No, Rhein with an *H* and an *E*."

"Ah, I see," Liz hummed. "That sounds kind of exotic. Where are you from, Rhein?"

Rhein's incipient sense of ease vanished at once. "Why do you want to know?"

Liz faltered. "We would just like to know where it would be most convenient to drop you ashore. Surely you must be eager to go back home, wherever that is, aren't you?"

Rhein's heart pounded in her ears as panic gripped her again. Loïc and Liz exchanged worried glances.

"Miss Rhein, listen to me," Loïc said, his soothing but stern voice boring its way into Rhein's head through the relentless hammering. "You need to calm down. Your body is too weak for an anxiety attack. Breathe. In and out."

"I'm sorry," Rhein wheezed. "I can't deal with this right now."

"Let's take it slow," Loïc tipped. "Liz, go ask Bonnet for some porridge."

"Aye," the petite girl said, rushing off.

As soon as Rhein was left alone with the swarthy medic, her shoulders cramped painfully with the accumulated tension. The medic eyed her probingly. "Your body seems to be in shock," he observed. "You may develop back spasms with such stress. A good rub should do the trick. Remove your shirt, please."

"What? Get off me!" She cowered automatically, her hand going to her navel. "Have you...Did you *touch* me while I was...?"

Loïc pursed his lips, his patience evidently running out. “As Liz mentioned, I am a *medic*. Of course I checked on you while you were out, and I massaged your muscles to prevent atrophy. Now, a little collaboration, please?”

Rhein gulped, disturbed. “Look, I’m fine. I appreciate the attentions, but I can take care of myself.”

“You are a stubborn one, huh?” Loïc said, reaching out to grab her hand.

Rhein raised her arms again on pure reflex. “Don’t touch me!”

Loïc’s hand froze at her outburst. Slowly, he retreated, peeved. “Fine, I won’t touch you. You think you can walk?”

Rhein took a moment to regain her composure. Keeping a leery eye on the medic, she tentatively placed her feet on the floor and tried getting up. She crumbled down like a dry sandcastle with a helpless yelp.

“It’ll take a little time,” the medic smiled. “But with some food and a little work on that attitude, you’ll be back on your feet in no time.”

She didn’t return the smile. “You still haven’t answered me. Who are you?”

“Again with this? I am Loïc, and I am a med...”

“Don’t give me that. I mean this ship—this *situation*. What is this, one of those Medical Campaign ships? I thought those only roamed the Northern Quadrant.”

Loïc arched his eyebrows. “You know about those?”

“Answer me!” Rhein insisted.

“No,” Loïc responded reservedly. “This is not a Medical Campaign ship. Although I may have unconsciously copied their style in my sick bay. I did work in one of those for three years, after all.”

Rhein furrowed her brows, lost. “So...what, you joined another medical ship here in the South after that? Why else would you pick up a random injured person and nurse her back to health?”

“Well,” Loïc scratched his head. “I *did* sign up to board another ship after leaving the Medical Campaigns, yes. Although *medical* would not be the word I’d choose to describe it. Um...how to say this...”

Suspicion burned in Rhein’s narrowed eyes. “Out with it.”

The medic sighed. “Alright, here we go. This...is the *Sirius* pirate ship.”

Rhein’s expression didn’t change immediately. “Pirate ship?”

“Yes.”

“*This* is a pirate ship. *You* are a pirate.”

“Correct.”

Her gaze glazed over as the message dawned on her. *I need to get out of here.*

Loïc snapped his large fingers to bring her back. “Miss Rhein? You okay?”

Her hand silently crept toward the surgical set, searching for anything sharp enough to cut her way out of that bizarre predicament. Sizing up the enormous medic, she figured her best shot was to aim for his eyes, banking on the element of surprise. She subtly snagged a pair of scissors and kept them gripped behind her back, awaiting her chance.

Liz reappeared at the door just then, plate of steaming oatmeal on a tray. “Oh, Rhein, it’s so great to have another woman on board. Life here is fun, but the crewmates have no clue what it’s like to be a girl. Bunch of oblivious dummies, all of them.”

“I take offense to that,” Loïc grumbled.

Liz chuckled and shooed him. “Time for some girl talk. A little privacy, please?”

To Rhein’s horror, the medic gave a weary eye-roll as he stepped aside to let the girl take his place on the stool. He wagged a finger at Rhein on his way out. “I will be back for a checkup later. Use this time to rethink that attitude.” And he left both women alone.

Liz gabbed animatedly as she plopped the food tray on Rhein’s lap, utterly oblivious to her discomfort. “So Rhein, I take it this is your first time on a pirate ship? Because let me tell you—I wish I’d had a fellow female to tell me the most important rule to keep in mind back when I first joined.”

Rhein twitched, feeling the sharp edge of the scissors sinking in the skin of her palm. “To sleep with a knife under your pillow?”

Liz chuckled. “Never make the mistake of laundering your undergarments in a load of *colors*. You may end up wearing a Jolly Roger under your skirt while your bloomers are hoisted to terrorize merchant ships into submission.”

Rhein froze, expecting anything but that. Liz watched her expectantly, obviously hoping for a giggle, or at least a nervous grin. But Rhein could only gawk, aghast.

I can't do this.

She opened her concealed fist and the scissors fell on the floor. The dry clang of metal on the wooden floorboards was painfully obvious, and Rhein could see the girl's amber eyes widening as she registered what had happened, her guileless smile freezing for an instant. But she quickly recovered her composure. She *pretended* not to notice.

“You better hurry with that porridge or it will get cold,” Liz urged, standing up. “I'll leave you to eat in peace. I'm sure my mindless banter is the last thing you need right now.”

“N-no,” Rhein blurted, surprising herself. “Please stay. I...don't mind the conversation.”

She saw the girl's eyebrows twitching, a flicker of emotion in her dilated pupils. She took a seat again, clearing her throat. “If that's what you want.”

And she kept prattling on about life on a ship, gesturing and laughing for the two of them. Rhein only half-listened as she slowly ate the plate of porridge.

It didn't taste like much. But the warmth brought tears to her eyes.



Onboard medic Loïc left the sick bay that evening with a smile on his face after performing a thorough and consented physical on his reluctant patient. He knew he could rely on Liz to turn a difficult patient into a cooperative one. Rhein was, after all, not Liz’s first successful case. Nor by any means the most dramatic one.

“Hey!” the angry voice of Lookout Cyrus blared from the common room. “Ya comin’ here to check on me before I die, or what?!”

Loïc sighed. *Speaking of the devil.*

Ruing the day he ever suggested using the common room as a temporary infirmary, the medic took a deep breath to muster his patience and pressed on to attend the lookout’s persistent summons.

Loïc liked the common room. Located at the ample stern of the berthing deck, it was one of the few cabins on the ship with enough clearance that he didn't need to worry about bumping into the furniture. It was a spacious hall devoid of unnecessary clutter or decorations, equipped only with a long rectangular table which the crew used for communal meals and gatherings, nailed to the floor to prevent it from tipping during rough seas. Ten stackable chairs rested around it; nine of them neatly fit under the table in carefully equidistant arrangement. The tenth chair disrupted the harmonious structure, dragged back and much too close to the left-hand corner, like a disoriented soldier breaking rank.

Cyrus sat on the misplaced chair, one foot up on the table, blood oozing from an ugly gash on his blackened sole. Next to it were a few strips of clean gauze cut and ready, and a bowl of milky water. Liz anxiously dipped and wringed an old towel in the bowl, then used it to wipe the puddle of crimson forming around the lookout's heel.

"About damn time," Cyrus grumbled.

"So now that you cannot barge in the sick bay at all hours of the day to whine about whatever ailment you *think* you may suffer, you've taken residence in here?" Loïc asked tersely. "Don't you have any scouting to do?"

Cyrus rolled his eyes in aggravation. "I stepped on a shard of glass on the deck while training. From one of the mugs we broke last night during the drinkin' contest. Apparently, *someone* skipped on their mornin' swabbin'."

He shot a reproachful glance at Liz, who reddened. "I'm really sorry, Cyr, I know I've been remiss with my daily chores lately..."

"Stop it, Liz," Loïc interrupted her with a curt gesture. "I will not tolerate you enabling his tantrum."

Cyrus raged. "*Tantrum?* I've been bleedin' out here fer an *hour!* All because of that damn stowaway, who's become the one exclusive tenant of the sick bay. I probably have *cangrene* by now!"

Loïc kneaded his throbbing temple. He pointed a stern finger at the incensed lookout. "First of all, the word would be *gangrene*. And if you were to develop it, it would be *your* fault for training barefoot. And for wearing the same filthy socks for weeks."

Cyrus was taken aback. Liz cleared her throat with a telling wince.

Loïc fired on. "Secondly, if the deck needs a swabbing and no one is free to do it, there is no law against picking up a mop and doing it yourself. Liz is busy helping me with important medical duties at the moment."

Hearing this, Cyrus flared up again. "So to ya, carin' fer some dyin' drifter is more *important* than tendin' to yer own crew?!"

"And thirdly," Loïc cut him off, his booming voice drowning Cyrus', "if you have a problem with the current setup, I suggest you take it up with the Captain. He and I set very clear conditions upon my ingress in the *Sirius*, including my

prerogative to care for any sick or injured person that we may encounter during our voyages.”

Cyrus blanked out. “P-prerog-what?”

“Now,” Loïc sentenced, taking a mysterious white jar from his medical bag. “I suggest you brace yourself. I’m about to disinfect and sew your foot. It’s going to hurt.”

And without further ado, he scooped a dollop of paste from the jar and smeared it on the gash. Cyrus hollered in agony. “What the hell?! It *burns!*”

“That’s kind of the idea,” Loïc asserted dispassionately, dipping his suturing needle and thread in the paste. He pinned down the hurt foot with one hand and mercilessly jabbed the needle with the other, just as he would if he were mending canvas. Cyrus blared such profanities, Liz covered her ears in fright.



The suturing took no more than five minutes, but to Lookout Cyrus, it felt like five lifetimes.

When it was finally over, a faint Cyrus observed through a fog of tears as Loïc whispered something in Liz’s ear, prompting her to leave the room in a hurry. The medic then proceeded to bandage Cyrus’ foot. “No training and no scaling the rigging for four days,” he instructed curtly. “Keep that foot up as much as possible. And for heaven’s sakes, get rid of those socks, unless you wish to end up with a peg leg.”

Cyrus heaved a grumbling sob. “Yer enjoyin’ this, aren’t ya, ya sadistic pill.”

Loïc shrugged wryly. “Perhaps we should give sepsis a chance. See who grants you kinder treatment.”

Cyrus blanked. “Sepsis who?”

Cabin Girl Liz returned at that point hauling a long, heavy-looking sack, which she passed to the medic. She then approached Cyrus cautiously. “Do you, uh, need help to walk to bed?”

“No, he does not,” Loïc responded, extracting a wooden sword from the sack.

“The hell am I supposed to do with a practice waster?” Cyrus grumbled. “Ya just told me no trainin’ fer two days.”

“I said *four* days,” Loïc remarked. “And this is not for practice.”

The medic assisted Cyrus to stand up on his good foot, then stepped back and flung the wooden sword at him. As Cyrus caught it, the weight immediately threw him off balance. He instinctively leant on the heavy stick to regain his footing.

“It’s a crutch,” Loïc concluded, leaving the room.

Cyrus and Liz stared blankly at the door, then exchanged baffled glances.

“Um, I-I’ll go and, uh, get on with my chores,” Liz hurried to leave before Cyrus had time to digest the situation.

Cyrus was grateful for it. Because as soon as reality hit, he hurled the practice sword against the wall in outrage, set off to leave, and fell flat on his face the second his bandaged foot touched the floor.

And so, with a bloody nose, a bruised pride and a desperately needed crutch, he limped out of the common room in snuffles.



On his way to his quarters, Cyrus heard Captain Whitelock's baritone voice coming from the gundeck. Based on the lack of verbal response, Cyrus guessed he was talking to Gunner Stumpy. The lookout reckoned that was a good opportunity to speak with the Captain in private. He had been meaning to do so for a while, but he never found a good time. Or so he kept telling himself.

Eyeing the ladder stairs that led up to the gundeck, Cyrus cursed to himself. Hopping them up on one leg was not an option—the swell was particularly relentless that morning. With a groan, he sat on the steps and climbed them up slowly on his backside, feeling like a lame shrimp trying to conquer the Lopican Barrier Reefs. He prayed no one caught him in such a humiliating position.

No one did. But to Cyrus' exasperation, when he finally made it into the long, low-ceilinged deck fringed by rolling cannons and littered with crates of gunpowder and brass monkeys, the Captain was no longer there. When asked, Gunner Stumpy pointed up with his calloused finger, indicating that Whitelock

had gone through the stern hatch on the ceiling that opened directly into the chart room above.

Cyrus bit his lip hard, looking up at the collapsible ladder folded against the hatch cover. There was no way he could climb that rickety thing on one foot. He had no choice but to continue climbing the regular stairs with his buttocks, all the way to the open deck. And this time, he was found out—and laughed at—by Luke and Bonnet.

Once he was finally out, Cyrus found the Captain talking to First Mate Johan at the quarterdeck, by the wheel. Johan was ranting. “I don’t see why we don’t drop the stowaway off in Rocío or Long Shore. Lost time on our course to Thalassa would be negligible, and it’d be one less burden onboard. I thought you were in a *hurry* to get there.”

“How many times must I say it?” Captain Whitelock retorted tiredly “As long as she’s in the sick bay, that’s Loïc’s territory. Once she’s out, we’ll decide what to do with her.”

Always panderin’ to the doc, Cyrus thought, annoyed. Then, he eyed his bandaged foot and remembered Loïc’s quip about that sepsis person. He reconsidered. *Better the devil ya know*.

“Capt’n,” Cyrus panted, resting on his crutch pitifully.

Whitelock and Johan turned to him, surprised. “The hell happened to you?” the snobbish First Mate snapped. “Don’t tell me you stepped on a rat trap. *Again*.”

“The trapped feet-to-rat ratio we get from these dratted contraptions is concerning,” Captain Whitelock mused. “Is there something wrong with them, you think, Johan?”

“No,” Johan sneered. “Rats just happen to know better than to step on them. Can’t say the same about *some* people around here.”

Cyrus swallowed an expletive. “Can I talk to ya in private, Capt’n?”

Whitelock gingerly stepped down from the quarterdeck to approach Cyrus. “By my troth, if you’re here to give me grief about the stowaway too, I’m dunking you two in one barrel.”

Johan huffed as he turned the wheel. “Try steering this hulk by yourself, then.”

“Hey!” Captain Whitelock turned to point at the First Mate warningly. “Insult this lame clodhopper all you want, but I won’t tolerate a cross word against my ship!”

Johan rolled his eyes. Cyrus gritted his teeth as he poked on Whitelock’s shoulder pad with ill-controlled force. “I ain’t here to discuss the stowaway, Capt’n.”

Whitelock squinted at him, wary. “What is it, then?”

Cyrus beckoned at him to get closer and checked that they were out of earshot from everybody else. “The loot from the Marquis’ villa. I need my share.”

“You’re still on this?” Whitelock admonished. “I already said it’s not gonna happen. You broke the code, Cyrus.”

“Ya know it ain’t fer me!” Cyrus tried to reason, his voice hushed. “It’s been a while since the last time I sent anythin’ worth a damn. Ya know what will happen if this doesn’t change. Don’t ya think maybe ya should be a bit more flexible here, Capt’n?”

“What I think is that you should quit this charade and come clean, Cyrus,” Whitelock preached. “I’m not changing my mind. Next time, use your head before crossing the line, and you’ll get your share.”

Cyrus grunted in exasperation, but the argument was over. Captain Whitelock went back to the quarterdeck to discuss the course with Johan. They both disappeared inside the chart room after locking the wheel in position, leaving the lookout behind.

Alone and enraged, Cyrus dragged his backside down to his quarters, feeling like the waste expelled by the climbing shrimp in some stagnant pocket of fetid seawater in the reefs.

His cabin was empty, of course. *Someone* was much too busy minding that unwanted stranger at the sick bay to grant him the company he sorely needed at that point.



“Rhein.”

Rhein jolted awake, panting. Her eyes darted around the room frantically, trying to make sense of her surroundings. Shelves. Stethoscope. Stove. Portholes. Liz.

She was *still* in the sick bay.

“Are you okay?” Liz asked, concerned. “I just came in and found you grinding your teeth, drenched in sweat. Were you having a nightmare?”

Rhein remembered the medic’s advice. *Breathe in, breathe out.* “Something like that.”

“I’m sorry.” Liz handed Rhein a cup of tea, which she gulped down thirstily. “Better?”

“Yes, thank you,” Rhein uttered. She set the cup aside, sat up, and placed her feet on the floor. She stood up carefully.

“You’re recovering your strength,” Liz observed. “You even gained some weight.”

“Small wonder,” Rhein muttered. “I’ve done nothing but eat and sleep for days, now. Is Loïc ever going to let me out of this room?”

Liz cast a surreptitious gaze at the keychain jiggling against her hip. “I’m sorry, I can’t speak for him. But we’ll ask him when he comes, okay?”

Rhein sighed. As much as she wanted to, she could not get mad at that girl. Her gentleness was like an overwhelming bearhug. It was a most unexpected, yet crushingly disarming, kind of attack.

“So...” Liz dithered. “Do you remember how you ended up drifting in the ocean?”

But then, such questions brought Rhein back to reality. Surely that girl was there for a reason. To lull her into a false sense of security. And to squeeze information out of her.

“No,” Rhein answered. “Everything is a blur before I got here.”

Liz bit her lip. “I see. I’m sorry.”

Rhein sneered. “You’ve apologized for no reason three times in the last minute alone. Are you on some sort of dare?”

Liz gasped. “I’m sorry, was that a joke at my expense?”

Rhein rolled her eyes. “Four, now.”

“Did I miss the fun?” Loïc entered the sick bay at that moment, his towering frame hitting the hanging lamp as he squeezed in through the door.

“Loïc!” Liz squealed. “I think Rhein is starting to warm up to me!”

“Oh, come on,” Rhein scoffed.

“Now you are flustered,” Liz laughed.

“How can I not be?” Rhein flailed in bafflement. “What is a sweet girl like you doing in a ship full of vile pirates?”

“Vile...?” Liz blurted, blank.

“I demand some respect,” Loïc protested. “I *am* part of this crew as well, remember?”

Rhein struggled to find the words. “More weight to my argument, then! What are you two doing in a pirate ship? A well-read, capable medic, and an innocent, cheerful girl...”

“Pirates or not, we are people, and people get sick,” Loïc replied, amused. “As for your *innocent, cheerful girl*, she is an accomplished cabin girl and also happens to be the woman of one of the best swordsmen on the ship.”

“She is?” Rhein uttered, stumped. Liz blushed furiously. “So then, where is this famed swordsman? Where is the crew? Why haven’t I seen anyone other than you two in all this time?”

Liz shot the medic an uncomfortable glance. Rhein caught it. “What is it?” she insisted. “Why am I locked up in here? Am I a prisoner? If so, *why* would you waste such prime health care on a lowly hostage? Are you *grooming* me for something?”

Loïc moaned in vexation. “Here we go, harping on the same string again. Tell me, how does bringing a person in critical condition aboard just to let her die make sense to you?”

Rhein scrubbed at her eyes. “You’re right. The fallacy here lies at the root of it all. Why on Earth did you bother *taking me in* in the first place?”

Liz and Loïc exchanged nonplused looks.

“She talks smart,” Liz pointed.

Loïc rubbed his lean square jaw. “We could *use* smart around here.”

“There!” Rhein claimed, vindicated. “You want to *use* me for something! I knew it! If it is ransom you are keeping me for, let me tell you, you’re making a big mistake.”

“Um, we don’t know who you are, or where you come from,” Liz pointed. “Who would we ask for the money?”

Rhein was out of words for a moment. “Well, good!” she blustered, indignant. “Because I’d sooner *die* than breathe a word of my background.”

“Ah, darn it,” Loïc clicked his tongue in displeasure. “And here we were putting so much effort into keeping you alive. Oh well. Liz, want to do the honors? I have a rusty scalpel here which would do the job nicely.”

Rhein paled. Until she saw Liz’s blithe expression as she replied. “You may have gone a bit too dark on that joke, Loïc.”

The medic snorted a laugh. “We may be pirates, Rhein, but we are not in the habit of letting people die gratuitously. And as a medic, I’m morally obligated to do everything in my power to restore anyone’s health—be that friend, foe, crewmate, or stowaway.”

“Really?” Rhein retorted. “Is it also your moral obligation to keep patients confined?”

Loïc sighed. “We’re keeping you in here for your own protection, Rhein. But if you feel strong enough to face the rest of the crew, I won’t stop you.”

A cold pit formed in Rhein’s in her stomach. “Wait, what?”

Liz interjected. “She was wondering when you’d let her out of here. She must be craving fresh air.”

“W-wait a minute,” Rhein stuttered. “What do you mean, *you’re keeping me here for my own protection?*”

But the medic ignored her. “Nothing more to discuss, then. My job here is done—the patient’s condition is no longer critical, and it’s against ship policy to keep the sick bay occupied unless there is a medical emergency. So...”

Loïc grabbed her hand, whisking her out of the sick bay and up a treacherously steep, shadowy set of stairs, leaving her no time to process the sudden movement. The air smelled damp, the space felt unnervingly tight, and the floor shrieked underfoot. Rhein tried to feel her way by touch in the darkness until she almost crashed against a double door at the very end of the stairs.

“*On y va,*” Loïc grinned, and opened the doors to an explosion of wind and blinding white light.



Sun. Bright, blazing, blessed sun. Rhein felt its warmth swathe the bare skin of her shoulders like a radiant veil, while the soft breeze caressed her face and rustled her short hair. And for the first time in a very long time, she got the indescribable sensation of being free to spread her wings and fly away.

But as her pupils gradually adjusted to the light, the feeling vanished. She was standing on the ample deck of a massive three-masted ship, surrounded by bewildered, rough men that

leered at her in a way that made her feel like a prime cut of meat sold at auction.

“What the...?” A young, lanky boy circled her like a hungry vulture, his eyes bulging with interest. “Are you the woman that was drifting, like, two weeks ago?”

A one-eyed portly black man followed the boy stolidly. One of his arms was cut in half, but the stump was covered with a strange device that kept shooting out a small flame at regular intervals. The horrific convenience of the setup sent chills down Rhein’s spine.

Loïc intervened, squeezing Rhein’s shoulder encouragingly. “Yes, she is. Her name is Rhein. Rhein, these are Luke, our deckhand, and Stumpy, our gunner.”

“Oh, wow,” Luke whistled, nudging the gunner. “She gave us a good scare. We were half drunk that day, but seeing her looking like a corpse really did it for us. Right, Al?”

Stumpy shrugged in response, lighting up a pipe and blowing a cloud of smoke in Rhein’s face. Rhein coughed, tearing up. It was the foulest thing she had ever smelled.

“Stumpy, keep that noxious dross away from our guests,” a booming voice commanded. A huge man crowned by tricorne hat perched atop a mane of tangled, long hair and draped in a dark velour mantle with extravagant shoulder pieces approached Rhein, boasting the broad smile and mannerisms of a hyena marking his territory. “Rest assured, Miss Rhein. Here, in the *Sirius*, women are treated with respect. Captain Whitelock, at your service.”

Rhein choked. “C-Captain Whitelock? As in...the Pirate King of the Five Seas?”

“My, my! My fame precedes me,” the Captain guffawed. “Aw, behold the fair maiden, gawking at me like I’m a beast about to eat her. Fret not, miss—I don’t bite. *Hard*,” he drawled, openly enjoying her spooked reaction.

“I hope ya’ve been enjoyin’ the attentions my Liz gave ya in the sick bay,” snarled a smug-looking blond shipmate endowed with a shockingly angelic visage, marred only by a curious scar on his left cheek. He was leaning against the main mast, looking at Rhein with the eyes of someone who had found a cockroach under their bed and couldn’t wait to stomp on it. “Cuz that’s over, now. She’s with *me*, ya hear?”

“Cyr, that’s *rude*!” Liz’s head popped behind the mast, blushing in embarrassment.

Loïc groaned and spoke in Rhein’s ear. “This is Cyrus, our lookout. And, believe it or not, Liz’s partner.”

Rhein needed a moment to follow, unable to grasp the incongruence between the lookout’s enchanting appearance and his uncouth demeanor. “Wait, *you* are this famous swordsman Liz is involved with?”

Cyrus straightened on reflex and winced the moment his right foot touched the floor. “She told ya about me?”

A solitary cloaked figure fishing at the forecastle sneered. “She probably needed a shoulder to cry on, on account of the sad show ya’ve been puttin’ on lately.”

Loïc whispered in Rhein's ear. "Bonnet, boatswain and cook."

"Shut it, Bonnet, ya frigid shoe!" Cyrus countered angrily. "Ya better catch somethin' decent with that crummy rod. Last soup ya served tasted like balls!"

"That was the bowl for the washin' up," Bonnet responded while reeling in a small wiggling fish, his countenance as wooden as the bucket he tossed the catch in. "And ya gobbled it all. Along with the last of the soap we had."

A lavishly dressed man with almond-shaped eyes and a neat goatee intervened from the wheel. "Are you serious? So he was the reason why I could not wash the stains off my best coat before berthing in Vivali?!"

Loïc clued Rhein in. "Johan, navigator and First Mate."

"Yes, *that's* why ya couldn't launder yer bloody weasel," Bonnet dissed, casting his rod again from the foredeck. "Nor could we properly wash the dishes. Nor the bogs. Nor our soddin' faces, Johan."

The wind made the plume of Johan's elegant slouch hat dance wildly as he huffed with contempt. "My coat was worth ten times any of that."

Liz interjected with a laconic sigh. "So was the one you got from that Vivalian boutique the minute you stepped off the ship."

Observing the bickering crew, Rhein was out of words. "So *this...is the Sirius pirate crew?*" she asked Loïc.

The medic seemed surprised at the question. “Correct.”

Rhein studied the crewmates again one by one. Captain Whitelock winked seductively at her from the quarterdeck while First Mate Johan scowled to get his attention back to the map they were discussing; Boatswain Bonnet kept hauling fish after fish, completely ignoring her presence; Cabin Girl Liz scolded a fuming Lookout Cyrus for his loutish manners; Gunner Stumpy kept hurling lit firecrackers overboard while Deckhand Luke stole tobacco leaves from his chatelaine and chewed them furtively.

She finally turned back to Loïc. “This is the oddest pirate crew I’ve seen in my life.”

Loïc smiled.

“Welcome to the *Sirius*.”

About The Author

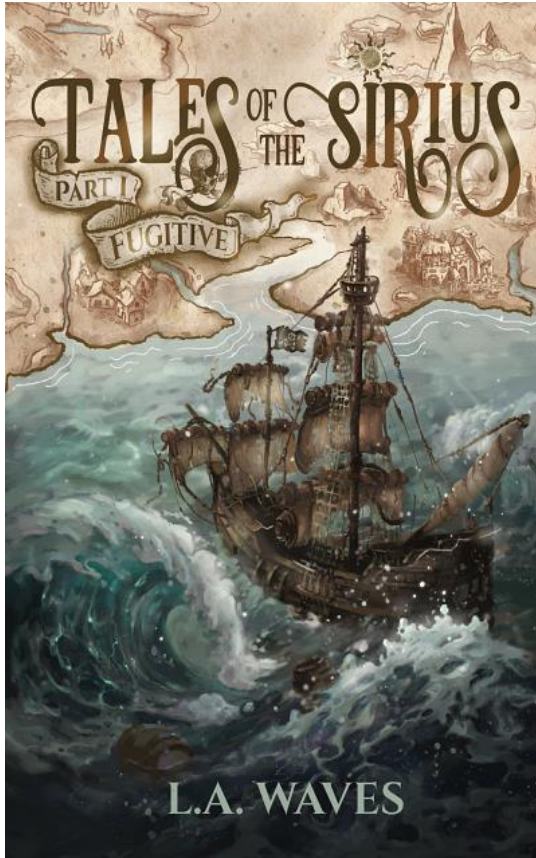
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