

CHAPTER ONE

ESCAPE

A HAND REACHED THROUGH the thick morning fog as it rolled over the dock, hiding the port town from the sea. Blood-stained mail covered its owner, who bobbed his head and grasped for a short wooden post for support. Grog and vomit still stained his stubble from the night before. Gaelenn studied the figure from the water, wrenching his head a little to the side to get a better look.

Lucky, he thought, that anybody'd be here at dawn. Strange, but lucky. There might still be a chance to warn them. A guard?

He tried to shout to get the man's attention but his screams were drowned by the waves and the ropes between his teeth. All he could do was catch a few stray rays of sunlight in his shimmering, odd eye. But today the sun hid behind dark clouds. Gaelenn sighed and relaxed the muscles that buckled against his restraints. Tied to the bowsprit of the ship approaching the shore ahead, he cursed to himself.

How did I get myself into this?

The man on the dock craned his neck toward the sea, paused tentatively, and inched toward the warning bell hanging nearby.

He sees me! He sees my eye! Gaelenn blinked to draw more attention.

The guard stumbled sideways, rubbing his disbelieving eyes, and searched for the bell with his free hand. Before he found it, the boat carrying Gaelenn—and two dozen pirates—pierced the fog and eased onto the beach's soft sand in total silence.

The warning bell still a yard to his left, the man above gargled and coughed, frantic, attempting to warn the town. But just as he cleared his throat, an arrow from the boat pierced the middle of his neck and he fell to his knees, gasping. Another arrow hit his chest and the last thing his eyes fixed on before he dropped flat and drove the arrow the rest of the way through his back was the sparkling green in Gaelenn's eye.

The pirates, clad in sun-worn linen, jumped from the boat's deck to the sand and knelt around the hull, their hands tracing its knotted, rotting wood. Once it had been a modest ship, fast and nimble, made for a small crew to take it from point to point along the coast. Now, it was a husk of a boat, battered and beaten. Running out of life, much like these once-plentiful port towns that fell, one by one, day after day.

The captain looked behind and winked at his first mate, a half-toothed, leathery-skinned woman in sparse braids, and she grinned back at him with menace and hunger on her lips. His eyes glistened, eager—this town, at least, was not deserted. Maybe the last. He looked above at Gaelenn, the odd-eyed vagabond who tried to steal their dinghy during the night, as he hung topless from taut ropes. Salt and streaks of dried blood from lashings the night before painted white-and-crimson stripes across his down-turned body.

"Hm? Whassat? Nothin' to say?" the pirate captain whispered. His breath reeked of fish and decay. "Be a good lad and take care of the boat. Jus' be a few hours. We'll be back to collect you."

He put his weight into a slap on Gaelenn's gut and smiled toothlessly at his crew. The crusty skin on his face rippled with his soundless laugh into a hundred sun-worn creases.

Gaelenn winced and jerked, but the rope easily resisted his formidable strength. His voice, leaking out in a muffled, wheezy hiss, had no chance of alerting the townsfolk of the incoming raid.

Damnit. I can't move an inch. Can't even scream.

The day before he had tried to send warning and failed. Paying his way from port to port on whatever boat was sailing, as he had done for seven long years, he had counted his lucky stars to find this one.

How could I have known they were pirates? He thought, grinding his teeth into the ropes. *And how could I have known they'd be coming here, of all places?*

Hours after he bought his ticket with the last of his earthly possessions, he overheard the planning of the raid and the town's name: *Key Rock*. His heart had dropped to his stomach. Key Rock was his home until he came of age and left his mother and his old life behind on his fruitless quest. Now, years later, back again—though in a bitter twist of fate, a silent bystander in what was sure to be a bloody reunion. He cursed to himself again and his eyes bulged, their whites a hateful shade of red.

The captain nodded to his crew and leered at Gaelenn once more, looking into both his green eye and his gray, unsure of which to use. Desperation and fear hid in the depths of his gaze, his own way of life and the lives of his crew nearing their end. Gaelenn knew it and almost pitied him, and the pirate noticed, cleared his throat quietly, and puffed out his chest.

“No funny business or we’ll gut the entire town, yeah? Including yer mum. But if I do see ’er I’ll make sure to give ’er a kiss from ya.” He puckered his cracked, filthy lips.

Gaelenn glared back, his pity forgotten. Perfect knot-work prevented his slightest movement, so he used his strange eyes and clenched jaw to express his welling desire to kick the pirate leader’s rotting jaw with everything he could.

If you touch her I will kill you.

The pirate withered under Gaelenn’s stare and muttered under his breath.

“Shoulda drowned this one when we caught ’im.” His upper lip exposed the blackness of his mouth where teeth once were, and he shook his head, returning his focus to the beach.

He’s right—I should have been killed in the night. Gaelenn replayed yesterday’s events briefly in his mind, his brow twitching, looking for alternate paths and better choices. *No, I shouldn’t have been caught at all. If only I’d rowed faster. Started earlier.*

Caught cutting away the small rowboat he intended to take ashore during the night while the corsairs waited for the fog of dawn, he bought his life with the promise of ransom: all the treasure he owned and a one-of-a-kind, priceless diamond in return for sparing his mother and himself. Unfortunately, his mother owned no treasure and would rather die than lose her husband’s stone pendant, her last connection to the man Gaelenn had scoured the known world to find. But Gaelenn had no intention of going through with any trade; as soon as he could secure their lives, they would both disappear.

Hopelessness invaded his mind as he reviewed his plan. His burning, raw skin reminded him of his odds, and he sighed.

If I pull this off, it’ll be a miracle.

On a silent signal from the captain, the pirates inched low over the sand toward the town. Gaelenn battled against the ropes to get a better view, his neck convulsing and bulging with the strain. He managed to turn his head slightly, but the grinding of his skull against the wooden bowsprit forced a low, painful grunt from his throat. The assailants, focused on the task ahead of them, paid no notice, and Gaelenn’s eyes followed them up the beach to the town. All the air in his lungs left his body in one great heave.

The corsairs were too late; somebody had beaten them to the raid.

Crumbling walls, battered doors, rising smoke—nothing out of the ordinary from a pirate’s eyes, maybe. Not Gaelenn’s, who had spent his

childhood running through its alleyways. He drew a deep breath through his nose, and sure enough, the air carried nothing of the bread in bakers' ovens or the aroma of fish soup—only the vague reek of blood, flame, and death.

Gaelenn's eyelids flashed open. *This could be my opportunity, if I can—wait. Mother.*

He turned toward the dock involuntarily, ignoring the pain in his head. The dock where he had last seen her seven years ago, weeping, begging him not to leave. That his father would come back someday. That he did not have to go find him.

Father...why did you leave us? Gaelenn allowed his mind to drift further. *Why?*

He ground his nails into the rope around his palms.

No...I don't care why anymore. It doesn't matter. There's no excuse. No forgiving how you abandoned us. And now, Mother might not survive this day.

Gaelenn's jaw muscles convulsed and a tiny thread of rope snapped between his teeth. *She might be dead already.*

"The beach!" came a shrill voice, breaking his thoughts. A dozen more shouts followed along with alarm bells, all calling attention to the pirates slithering across the sand toward the town.

Arrows burst through the air in sudden volleys, striking both sand and body with dull thuds. Voices and screams littered the air. Above, the pirates' returning darts chipped at the town's stone walls and buried themselves into wooden beams and chinks in armor, drawing more screams and more soldiers. A brief silence took hold of the beach for a frightening moment before giving way to the clashing of swords and cries of battle.

Gaelenn squirmed helplessly against the knots, desperate now, forcing his skull against the bowsprit with violence. Blood trickled from the back of his head, following the strands of his messy, dark brown hair and falling to the sand below. Everything was a blur of pain, both in his head and in

his heart—until one particular dark blur under the dock caught his eye and stopped him cold.

The sewers!

His father's warning should danger ever threaten: "*If anything were to happen, not that it would, of course, you go down to the sewers and find the deepest place there. Hide.*"

He had droned it into Gaelenn's head, long ago, over and over—almost as if he had predicted this very moment. "*If I don't find you, your mother will. You'll be safe there. You can get home.*"

With a painful whistle, an errant arrow slammed into the hull of the ship just below Gaelenn, drawing a gasp from between the ropes in his mouth. A foot higher and it would have split his head in half. He peered down, mystified.

Not an arrow for boars. This is for piercing armor. Not something a guard of the town watch would be using in these parts. What is going on up there?

Neither his ears nor his eyes answered him. Chaos reigned. A trail of blood and bodies stretched from the beach and disappeared into the town.

There must have been an entire army here when we arrived. Is this the one that's been leveling all these towns...?

The few pirates who were still alive scattered into the streets between the houses above, still searching for loot, catching stray blows from chasing soldiers. They were finished. Gaelenn's brow knotted.

And so am I. And Key Rock. If I'd only stayed instead, I could have been here to stop this. To fight.

Instead he had roamed the known world and witnessed its ruin for seven years. Staying would not have changed his hometown's fate—or his own, he knew.

Maybe I was meant to die right here, right now, no matter what I did. Destined to die.

The smell of flint and oil hit his nostrils and shocked his eyes wide open. The air above the beach filled in a single instant with the sound and scent of powder and flame, and a gruff voice barked.

“They’re going back to the boat—don’t let them escape! Light it up!”

A rain of fiery arrows slammed into the ship and the pirates sprinting back to it. Gaelenn squeezed his shoulders together to make a smaller target but the wake from several darts kissed the open skin of his face and arms. Smoke dominated the air. A brief pause as the archers reloaded preceded a second torrent and another wave of fear. The air itself seemed to die for a second as he held his breath and forced his eyes shut, waiting for the next volley. Sure enough, missiles drummed into the wood, sending vibrations up and down his spine. He closed his eyes tight, knowing that the next arrow could be the last for him.

A quick thud just above his head knocked the beam and severed a cord, whipping it out into the smoky haze—and out of Gaelenn’s mouth. He sputtered and gnawed at the freshly loosened rope, free now to move his head from side to side, until he conquered it and spit it to the ground. He gasped, glad of the taste of air, full of smoke as it was.

“Not much consolation to get my voice back *now*,” Gaelenn mused to himself. He followed it with a cough, swallowing dryly between breaths. “Going down with the ship on land. I’d have made a terrible pirate.”

His lips curled up into a black smile, and his head fell, crowned in smoke. But the smoke might be his salvation. Slowly, it gave birth to fire, and Gaelenn followed its path as it trailed over the deck and into the ship. Snake-like hisses escaped from between the loosening boards of the hull and Gaelenn took a deep breath and held it. The danger finally dawned on him.

BOOM

The hull exploded from the sides, rocketing wood and metal into the sand and water. Kegs of powder, stored for raids, caught fire and ruptured

one-by-one while the tattered sails fell in ashes and the deck smoldered. The renewed heat lashed out at Gaelenn's boots, his ears ringing, but he still hung in one piece, just as trapped as before. The bowsprit held.

"No fighting the inevitable."

He spat, steeling his jaw and closing his eyes tight, preparing for death. The next explosion might be the one to end him. The fire's scent drew closer and closer. But instead of an explosion, a subtle crackle tickled his ears. A rope broke and flew away from his chest, cracking the air with a quick snap.

Gaelenn squirmed. "The bowsprit's on fire!"

Threads continued to burst and snap, and he jerked his limbs to force the ropes free where the fire was too slow to finish them off. Flames crawled down the sides of the horizontal wooden pole, their heat sizzling away his pouring sweat. With a single, great shout, Gaelenn broke the last of the bonds on his torso just as the fire wrapped around to the bottom of the bowsprit. He swung under it, caught by the ropes around his boots, his face thrust right into the fire bursting from the hull.

A scream slipped from his throat. He covered his face with his left hand, pulling desperately at the remaining rope at his feet with his right. The fire had trapped him. Although the thick leather of his boots protected his skin for the moment, in seconds they would burst into flames, too.

Just below him, the glint of the arrow that had nearly ended Gaelenn's life minutes earlier caught his eye. He swooped backwards, stretched his body as far as he could, and swung toward the arrow with all the momentum he could gather. His burning hands yanked it out and in a single, panicked stroke, he stabbed at the rope that trapped his feet.

A second later, he landed in the sand, dazed, his neck and back bearing the brunt of his fall. Fear left him, seeping away into the sand with his sweat and blood.

The grimace of pain faded from his face and the lines above his eyes hardened into determination.

Mother.

The sewers.