To The Skies



Amy Sanderson

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The Flight of the Lady Firene: Book 0.5

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CHAPTER ONE

We'd been on the run for three weeks when my brother decided to steal the horses. It wasn't a bad idea, in theory, as we thought the men pursuing us had finally found our trail, meaning stealth and secrecy were no longer an option – except Daryus had a habit of taking things too far. These particular horses, after all, came with a few accessories.

"*What* are we going to do with the cart?" I demanded. I had to struggle not to put my hands on my hips; three weeks wasn't long enough to get used to trousers after a lifetime in skirts, and that sort of flounce really needed a gown to work.

Daryus wasn't looking at me, anyway, being engaged in tying the carter to a tree by the side of the road. It had been disgracefully easy to outwit him – me playing the damsel in distress, and Daryus sneaking up behind with a sword – but we no longer had time for a conscience.

"It's a disguise, isn't it. Throw them off our scent," Daryus said, coming back to the cart. "We'll just be a brother and sister–"

"We *are* brother and sister – that's exactly what they're looking for."

"–travelling south with our cargo of... What did we capture, anyway?"

I unlaced the ropes over the back of the cart, flinging up a corner of tarpaulin to reveal boxes upon boxes of– "Smallclothes," I said, my voice flat, lest I give way to hysteria. "You've hijacked a cart of women's smallclothes."

"*We've* hijacked a cart of smallclothes." Daryus was peering curiously into one of the boxes. "Not bad for a first attempt. Look at all that lace..."

I yanked the tarpaulin back again, showering Daryus with the water it had been holding. It'd been raining for most of the three weeks we'd been on the run, and we were both tired, irritable and footsore. I'd had my doubts about stealing the cart, or even the horses attached to it, but when I climbed up onto the seat and finally sat down, suddenly it didn't seem so ridiculous.

Daryus jumped up beside me and picked up the reins. There are certain things a noble upbringing teaches you, and thankfully for us, that included how to handle a horse – and, in Daryus' case, a sword. He gave a jaunty wave to the carter, who was glaring at us over a mouthful of sacking, and then we were off.

It was a rather steady escape, I have to admit. A pair of draught horses pulling a cart full of

anything, smallclothes or otherwise, don't exactly make good time. Still, it was marginally faster than walking, and Daryus was right: our pursuers were searching for a man and a woman on foot, long-haired and in noble dress, or at least something less disreputable than what we currently wore. We'd already ditched our old clothes and both hacked off our hair (about which Daryus was more distraught than I was), and the cart put the feather in the cap of our disguise.

"We'll stable the horses and cart in the next town," Daryus said, as a curve in the road left the carter behind. "I tried to explain we were only borrowing it, but I don't think he was listening."

I was all for ditching the cart there and then, but I supposed I should give Daryus a chance to display a few scruples for once. We would have bought horses outright weeks ago, except it was closing on harvest time, and in these backwater villages no-one had been willing to sell. It didn't help that we hadn't a single proper coin to our name, and that the jewels I was carrying – although worth a king's ransom – were both useless to country dwellers and largely assumed to be paste.

We rumbled on in silence for a time, but as the day wore on, I found myself dozing in the hard wooden seat; three weeks of looking over our shoulders had taken their toll. In the end, we must have slept, letting our 'borrowed' horses plod on at their own pace – because when I woke, the forest had given way to scrubby farmland, and I could hear hoof-beats.

I blinked and looked around, at a vista lit by starlight. Hills rose to our right, a black range silhouetted against an indigo sky, and I thought the road turned to run alongside them. Our horses had ground to a halt, to do nothing more than chew the grass pushing up through the middle of the road, and flick their tails against the traces in annoyance. Beside me, Daryus was snoring.

I shook him awake. "Do you hear that?"

Daryus gave a grunt of annoyance, then fell silent as he woke fully. We could both hear it now, the rhythmic clop of hooves behind us, and the jingle of tack. It could have been any travellers or merchants, except I had the feeling no-one but our pursuers would be riding in the dark.

"We need to get off the road," I murmured. Our disguise was one thing, but an ordinary merchant wouldn't be rumbling along in the dark, either; to really play our roles, we should have found an inn by now, or at least set a camp beside the road. I wondered at the likelihood of the latter – were there wolves out here? – but there was no time to consider it. Any moment now, we'd be found.

I dived out of my seat, grabbing the bridle of the nearest horse and turning its head towards the fields. It went, reluctantly, and we were soon jouncing through what was no doubt someone's prize crop of barley.

We might have got away unscathed, if it hadn't been for the shack.

It was little more than a woodshed, and it loomed out of the darkness like a great black boulder – I might have walked straight into it, except the horse I was leading snorted and shied away. Daryus started yanking on the reins to turn the beasts, but this time the horses had had enough, and they simply ambled to a halt. And maybe, if the gods had smiled on us, that would have been the end of it, except Daryus swore in frustration, and that was when we realised the shack was occupied.

There was a bang from inside, and then a brilliant chink of light as the door cracked open. I winced and threw up an arm, unable to make out anything save a lumpy silhouette.

"Who's there?" a voice demanded, male and rough, with a south coast accent that it took me a moment to decipher. "Show yourselves!"

He'd see us much better if he closed the door and stepped away from the light, of course, but I wasn't about to suggest that, and a moment later the door opened fully, flooding us all in lamplight. The farmer, as I took the newcomer to be, squinted at us suspiciously.

"What you doing out here? I ain't got nothing worth stealing, I'll tell you now."

I was about to retort that we weren't thieves when Daryus found his voice. "Evening, good sir," he said, jumping down from the cart. "We're sorry to disturb you, but we're simple travellers, and we seem to have strayed from the road. Maybe you could see your way to providing us with directions?"

Daryus might have concealed his noble's accent well enough, but the sound of hooves approaching in the distance didn't help matters, and the farmer looked even more dubious; "Bollocks," he said loudly, stepping back into the doorway. "You're thieves, plain and simple."

"We're not," I said hurriedly, wishing I could replace my own accent with something more ordinary; so far, in three weeks, I hadn't had much luck. "But we are in trouble, and we need somewhere to hide for a few hours. Please, we can pay you handsomely–"

That, apparently, was enough to persuade the farmer we really *were* thieves, because the next thing I knew, he was yelling over our heads, shouting for guards, police officers, friendly passing highwaymen and anyone else who might be in the vicinity. I flinched at the volume of his shouts, then quickly ducked away and swung back onto the cart.

"We need to get out of here," I said to Daryus, and the urgency in my voice was enough for him to agree without question. He jumped up beside me and began turning the horses, which thankfully this time obeyed.

Obeyed too late, though. We'd barely got back into the fields, the farmer's exhortations still ringing in our ears, when I heard fresh hoof-beats mere yards away. After three weeks and hundreds of miles of pursuit, we were about to be caught.

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It soon became clear Daryus and I had slept far longer than we'd realised, because by the time we made it out of the fields and back onto the road, there was the grey glimmer of first light in the sky. Simply hiding amongst the grass and hoping our pursuers passed us by wouldn't work in broad daylight – we were going to have to try a different tactic.

And it looked like we weren't going to have much choice about said tactic, either. We'd just rolled the cart back onto the road when a cadre of horsemen cantered round the last bend. We'd caught distant glimpses of them before, in their uniforms of grey and sapphire blue, but this was the first time they'd got so close. Now, I could finally get a good look at them, and it wasn't reassuring; all were our father's men, and if I could recognise them so easily, they'd recognise us in return.

There was no more time for debate. We'd never be able to bluff our way past them, not with our poor disguises, and in the blank farmlands there was nowhere to hide. Daryus turned the horses as quickly as he was able and snapped the reins, forcing them into a trot. The cart bounced behind us, kicking up clouds of dust, but it wasn't enough to hide our pursuers from us, or us from them. I crouched on the seat, peering back at them: six in number, and their horses looked far fresher than our own.

"Hold on," Daryus shouted, as the cart swerved sideways. I grabbed the back of the seat just before we plunged down into a hollow, the whole cart bucking beneath us; the road swerved again, and abruptly the dawn light was cut off.

I hadn't noticed it before, but the road turned into a veritable canyon along the base of the hills. Plunged into gloom, we were suddenly surrounded by the echoing rattle of loose stones and horse hooves, loud as gunshots. I dropped back into my seat, gaping at the ravine snaking away before us. Our horses had clearly picked an unused way whilst we slept – surely the carter with his smallclothes hadn't been intending to use this road, when there was barely room for the cart. Indeed, there was no sign of wheel tracks ahead, and as we turned a corner, the cart scraped against rock, bouncing off first one side of the ravine, then the other.

There was an explosion of noise as the men entered the canyon behind us. Shouts went up, urging us to slow down, but Daryus ignored them. In fact, he started to laugh. "They can't pass us," he shouted, over the rattle of the cart. "We might go for miles like this and they'll never catch us!"

Or the canyon might open out at any moment, and they'd simply circle us and cut us off.

For now, though, my brother was right. The horsemen closed on us within half a minute, but stayed just beyond our trailing dust cloud, with no opportunity to get past. One advanced a little, and I could hear him calling out. I recognised him as Stephen, one of the men from our family stables, a man I'd known for years. Right now, though, familiarity mattered less to me than freedom.

"Lady du Bois!" First, my married name, which made me grind my teeth; then, a moment later, "Felicity, please!"

I was on my feet before I knew it, screaming into the wind. "My name is *not* Felicity!" I might even have reached for Daryus' sword and started waving it in annoyance, except at that moment the cart lurched again and I almost fell, only steered back into my seat by Daryus' grip on my arm.

We jerked along for several minutes, the heavy horses making a valiant effort at running across the uneven ground. And it needed to be a run, or at least an approximation of one: if we slowed, not only would the lessened dust make it possible for the horsemen to catch up, but I felt certain they'd attempt to leap out of their saddles and onto the cart.

"Oh shiiii–" The first thing I knew about the rockfall was Daryus' shout, cut off as the cart slammed into the canyon wall. We veered wildly sideways, the cart rocking to avoid the tumbled pile of rocks littering the road. It was a little thing, a heap of pebbles more than anything, but it was enough to launch the cart into the air as we passed and then slam it back down again with bone-jarring force. It was a wonder the whole thing didn't shatter into splinters. Instead, we lost our cargo.

I watched it go as though the world had slowed inside my head. First, one of the crates fell, crashing open on the road. More followed, some hitting the ground and others, already damaged in the cart, breaking open in mid-air, spilling their contents like the blown seeds of a dandelion. Suddenly, the canyon was full of lacy underthings, billowing around on the wind, settling in drifts like fresh snow – and obscuring both the footing and the sight of our pursuers.

It was too much to ask that any of them would get a faceful of satin and lace, but the cascade of clothing certainly slowed them, spooking the horses and making footing on the already treacherous ground uncertain. I gave a yelp of laughter and grabbed Daryus' arm, only to realise he was staring fixedly ahead in sheer horror.

A moment later, I saw it too: the canyon ahead narrowed to a width barely capable of taking a single horse. The cart would either jam in the gap, fixing us fast, or it would explode behind us like our load of smallclothes – leaving us nothing to sit on.

Nothing except the horses, anyway. "Come on!" I urged Daryus, standing up unsteadily and edging to the front of the cart. "We have to jump!"

The horses barely slowed when Daryus released the reins, caught up in a world in which flight had become the only option. I jumped without a second thought, and for a moment the horse seemed to be sliding out from under me–

I landed awkwardly, one leg just crooked over the horse's back, but its paraphernalia of harness gave me plenty to grab onto. The horse snorted and tossed its head, but I kicked my heels into its ribs to keep it running. Only seconds passed before Daryus made the jump onto the other horse; I already had a knife in my hand, ready to cut the harness and leave the cart in our wake.

"Together," Daryus yelled, and I nodded. The wind was in my eyes, dust clogging my face, but I applied my knife to the traces holding the cart's shaft in place. The first gave quickly, making the

whole cart jerk, followed by a horrible moment when I thought Daryus had cut his side free whilst mine remained attached.

The final strap came loose a heartbeat later, just as the road narrowed. Our horses squeezed through, one after the other. Behind us, the cart crashed into the wall of the canyon, before rolling to a halt in the gap as though it had been made to fill it.

The horses slowed as Daryus cut the last traces between them, and this time we let them. Shouts of outrage echoed down the canyon as Stephen and his men were forced to pull up; even had they climbed over the offending cart, which through solid engineering had stayed mercifully intact, there was no way to get their own horses past. We were on one side and they on the other – and ahead, nothing but the road to freedom.

CHAPTER TWO

We arrived in the town of Est'halin at noon. It was a pretty little place, pale sandstone buildings around courtyard gardens, tucked beside a white-sanded bay and a glorious azure sea. It was, strictly speaking, still under the jurisdiction of our home city of Requies, but we were now far enough south that we hoped that would have little meaning.

Until we saw the posters, that was. The first was pasted to the wall of a tavern. We looked quite different in it, long-haired and bejewelled and certainly not smeared in the dust of the road, but put the pair of us together and stand us next to the poster, and our disguise wouldn't hold.

"Bloody hell." Daryus slipped from his weary horse to tear the poster down and study it more carefully. "He's offering two thousand silver as a reward for information."

It wasn't quite 'dead or alive', but I still couldn't believe it had come to this. I'd thought it would be my husband, Thomas, who'd send men after us, who'd stop at nothing to bring back his wayward wife. Instead, it was our father.

"Bollocks," Daryus swore again, throwing the poster into the gutter and reaching to help me down from my horse. "How did they send these out so quickly?"

I squeezed Daryus' hand by way of reply. We'd been on the road for three weeks, trying not to draw attention to ourselves, but father could have sent the posters to every town in the region via airship within days of our leaving Requies. We could only hope they'd been here long enough for them to blend into the background, and the reward to go forgotten.

"No-one will recognise us," I said, trying to sound like I meant it. "Father must have been clutching at straws."

Or he'd sent the posters to every port town along the coast as a last ditch attempt to head us off if Stephen failed, but that possibility encompassed more forward planning than I liked to consider.

We found a stable behind an inn for the horses. I paid their upkeep for a month in advance, using the coin we'd found on the cart, and in the hope their owner would eventually find them here; whilst I knew it was unlikely, at least the possibility made me feel better. The common room inside was gloomy and nearly empty; I made sure to sit in a darkened corner whilst Daryus went to the bar. Best not to stand next to each other as though posing for that poster, even if, in my current grubby, trousered state, I did look more like a twelve-year-old boy than a noble's wife.

For just a moment, I allowed myself to relax, head on the back of the bench and eyes half closed. Trouble was, when I closed my eyes, I invariably found myself thinking about home – and about Thomas.

We'd been married as part of a business deal between his family and mine. For long months, through the engagement, I'd had childish fantasies of true love and a happy life together. Thomas had been handsome, dashing, and he came attached to the sort of family name our wealthy but upstart clan could only dream of. After the wedding, though – and a wedding night on which Thomas had arrived in the bedroom too drunk to even undress – things had rapidly gone downhill. My father had always been indulgent when it came to me learning and thinking for myself; Thomas didn't want to know. He was never violent, thankfully, but he was controlling, domineering, and my life was restricted from the moment I woke to the last dinner guest leaving every evening. All my fantasies had blown away into dust.

Until, one fateful evening, I'd whispered a dream to my brother, of running away and starting a new life – and to my surprise and everlasting gratitude, he'd agreed.

"Fleet?" Daryus. His voice made me jump. The name he called me by had developed from my childhood nickname of 'Flea', and it had taken my brother less time to adjust to it than it had me. He sat down, pushing an ale across the scarred table. I sipped at it tentatively, glad for anything to wet my parched throat. If I could have taken a bath in it, at that moment I would have.

"Did he say anything?" I asked, with an infinitesimal nod to the man behind the bar.

"Nothing. Told him we'd been robbed by bandits. He was very sympathetic." Daryus, having spent a few too many nights in the seedier dives around Requies, also had the ability to roughen his accent at the drop of a hat, a skill I was eager to learn. I wanted, quite simply, to lose every single facet of my past life, consign it to history – everything but my brother, of course.

We were still sitting there, feeling a little calmer for the first time in weeks, when the tavern door opened and three men wandered in. They were road-dusty and battered, and my first instinct was to flee; a second glance, though, told me they weren't in uniform, and likely had no interest in us.

No interest, that is, until they took a table close to ours. They struck up a game of dice, and though I could see Daryus itching to join in, for once he knew better. Two of the men ignored us utterly, consumed by their game and their drinks, but the third... The third was facing us, and I couldn't help noticing his interest.

"Newcomers, eh?" he remarked at a pause in the game, over his fellows' heads.

I kept my mouth shut, but Daryus looked over his shoulder and replied, "Just come in from Quent."

It was a reasonable story: Quent was Requies' more industrial and commercial sister city, which would both explain Daryus' northern accent and provide a reason for us to be travelling. Our interlocutor nodded in satisfaction and returned to his game.

We'd just drained our drinks and were preparing to leave when the third man spoke up again. "You know, you two look really familiar. Ever worked down by the docks?"

"Not here," Daryus replied casually, getting to his feet. "Pulled a few shifts in Quent, though, unloading airships and that."

This time, the man didn't look convinced – maybe he heard something in my brother's voice, or maybe Daryus was just too scrawny to have worked as a stevedore. Either way, when Daryus gave the man a friendly nod and left the table, I was all too happy to follow.

We ambled out into the street, quickening our pace when we turned the corner. "We can't stay here," I hissed. "Those posters are everywhere. Someone's going to recognise us."

"They won't," Daryus said, his usual laid-back self. "We'll think of something. Maybe we could buy some hats?"

I didn't think hats were going to cut it, and my suspicions were confirmed when I glanced back and saw the three men from the inn only two streets away. They were trying to look disinterested, but it didn't take a professional to know they were following us.

Daryus grabbed my hand. "Let's get out of here."

We walked as quickly as we could without attracting attention, ducking through a series of narrow alleys and courtyards to arrive on the sun-bleached terrace outside a restaurant. The whole place was too open, too public – we needed to get off the street.

There was a row of shops beyond the restaurant, and then a series of solid stone warehouses. I pulled Daryus in that direction, hoping we could lose our tail in the maze of buildings. We were, at the very least, out of the sun; perhaps we could hide in the shadows and let them go past.

No such luck. I heard voices behind us, no longer stealthy now they'd got us on the run, followed by the hollow pounding of footsteps. I darted one way, Daryus the other, only for him to turn back as I discovered an unlocked door.

We ducked inside, blinking against the gloom – only to realise it wasn't so dark after all. There were lamps lit inside, roughly spaced atop a series of crates and barrels that formed a low ring. And inside the ring, a group of men and women already turning to study us, every single one of them armed.

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There was a moment of stunned silence as we all stared at one another. No-one had yet reached for a weapon, but I had the feeling some were on the verge of it, and the way several of them had their mouths open gave me the impression they were already fired up from the middle of an argument. Little details came to me in the gloom – a pierced ear here, a tattooed hand there, even a flamboyant coat in vibrant crimson – until I realised who we'd stumbled into the middle of. Pirates.

Outside, the voices of our pursuers rose and then fell again, retreating into the distance. It was a boy who broke the silence inside the warehouse, a scrawny child with a shaved head as though he'd been treated for lice. "Here, look, it's those twins. The ones on the posters."

Daryus and I weren't twins, but it seemed best not to point that out. There were murmurs of agreement all round the circle as the pirates peered at us; one even raised a lamp closer. "So it is," he said, nodding in satisfaction.

"Well, now." The third voice was a woman's, sultry and controlled. It took me a moment to place her: not the petite easterner, with a braid of glossy dark hair, who well looked like she would have suited that voice. Instead, it came from a short, fat, grandmotherly woman with curly grey hair, and skin so sun-tanned and weather-seamed she could have been any one of a dozen nationalities. "What are we going to do with you?"

The quiet was curious, rather than strained; the pirates seemed distracted, but they also knew they had the upper hand. Perhaps it was that atmosphere of bemusement that made me say, in a moment's sheer inspiration, "So this is where you've been hiding. How's anyone supposed to become a pirate if they can't find a crew?"

This time, the silence was genuinely flabbergasted, a feeling I thought Daryus shared. If I'm honest, I was a little stunned myself. It had never once occurred to me that a life of piracy might be a good escape from Requies, but faced with this particular group of individuals, I could see no other way to stop them slitting our throats – or turning us over to our father.

Someone cleared their throat, and then the grey-haired woman said, in a flat voice, "You want to

be pirates."

"Of course," I replied, as though it was the most natural thing in the world; the more I thought about it, the more it *was*, given our situation. "What else are a pair of disgraced nobles to do when they're fleeing for their lives?"

Our lives weren't actually in danger, of course, but I must have been convincing, because this time there were murmurs of appreciation and one or two encouraging noises. Grandmother stared at us a moment more, before grinning widely; I tried to ignore how that grin looked like a wolf preparing to devour its prey. "And what would you know about ships?"

"Absolutely nothing," Daryus said, getting into the spirit of things, "but we're here to learn."

"Who's going to want them?" asked another voice dismissively; this one was rough and tobacco-blurred, and turned out to belong to the younger eastern woman. "They're too soft to be deckhands."

"You could have that one as your lover, Maeve," someone called from the back of the crowd, to a ripple of laughter. "And if you don't want 'im, I'll have 'im!"

"Tempting, but I'm spoken for," said the grandmother – who I took to be Maeve – though with a wicked grin at Daryus that said she might change her mind. Daryus, who'd never developed a usual nobleman's snobbishness about looks and breeding, and who tended to love all women who loved him (which was most of them), simply returned the grin. If he saw anything unnerving in this pack of pirates, he didn't show it.

"I'm guessing they've got more than a pretty face between them, though," Maeve went on. "What would a disgraced noble be without a stash of hard coin? More than two thousand silvers worth, I'd guess – might be there's enough to share between a new crew."

That wasn't exactly what we'd planned to do with my jewels – I suppose I'd imagined a little house somewhere, and enough left over to hire a scullery maid – but Maeve was right that the cost of my jewels far outweighed the reward father was offering. Besides, right now, the life of a pirate was looking increasingly attractive. What better way to escape Thomas and my father than to take to a life of criminality? My taste for adventure had long been stifled by my upbringing, but I could feel it flexing its tendrils now.

"Let's just kill them and take it," someone growled.

"I'm not carrying anything, of course," I said loudly, as though to suggest otherwise was ludicrous – which it was, yet I was in fact carrying every last silver pin and gemstone of my jewellery sewn into various parts of my clothing, and had been for weeks, because there'd been nowhere to stash it that we could be certain of returning to.

"You're not completely stupid, then," Maeve said, though she was eyeing my tattered clothing, and I had the feeling she was hunting for any tell-tale bulges that might disclose the location of my valuables.

The eastern woman, meanwhile, was one of the few who didn't look the slightest bit impressed, and stood with her arms folded. "What are you going to do with them, Maeve? You can't want them on your ship."

"Give it a rest, Tass," Maeve replied dismissively, with a wave of her hand. "We've got bigger problems than these two."

"What sort of problems?" Daryus asked, and when Maeve flashed him a look, offered one of his most disarming smiles.

After a moment, Maeve shrugged. "If you want to be one of us, you might as well be pitched in the deep end. Being a pirate ain't all sunshine and fat hauls, you know. Sometimes there's war."

"War?" I echoed. "You mean with the authorities?"

Maeve snorted. "Those morons? The port masters don't care what we do, as long as they get their fat purse at the end of every month. No, girl, with other pirates."

There was a moment of silence as Daryus and I digested this, and the rest of the assembly seemed lost in their own sombre thoughts. A pirate war. Suddenly, allying ourselves with this bunch of misfits didn't seem such a good idea.

"Can I ask who you're fighting against?" Daryus asked.

No-one got a chance to answer, at least not in the conventional sense, because at that moment the warehouse door burst open with a bang, and in the gust of wind that rushed in, all the candles went out.

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There was a chorus of shouts, some nervous and some indignant, as the door banged closed again. This was followed by a great scuffling and scraping as matches and flints were struck, kindling half a dozen lanterns back to life within a few heartbeats. When their flames finally settled, I realised someone had entered and now stood outside the ring of barrels, just beyond the light.

My first instinct was to flee, because either Stephen's men or our more recent pursuers from the tavern had surely caught up to us – except by the muttering around me, the newcomer was here for the pirates. A moment later, she stepped forward, and my breath caught. The woman who'd arrived wasn't striking because of her dark skin, her locked hair, or even her height, well above my own and perhaps even taller than Daryus. No, it was the look in her eyes that caught my attention, an intense, focused stare that might have verged on maddened if it wasn't so piercingly intelligent.

As one, the pirates bristled, weapons leaving sheathes and shoulders squaring for a fight – and yet no-one took a single step forward. I had the feeling they were all rather scared.

It was Maeve who took control. She strode forward, and though she was a good two heads shorter than the newcomer, she didn't so much as flinch. "What are *you* doing here?"

The stranger paused a moment, until we all seemed to be holding our breath in anticipation, and then she smiled. It was, quite frankly, terrifying. "I heard there was a gathering today. Somehow, my invitation never reached me."

"What a surprise," someone called from the back of the crowd, only to fall quickly silent as the woman's eyes flicked in their direction.

"You weren't invited," Maeve said stubbornly, but in the face of this newcomer, her grandmotherly gravitas seemed childish and weak. "Caria Maharin, you've already made it clear you don't wish to be a part of this conclave. Either leave, or we'll make you."

There was that terrifying smile again. "Oh, will you? You're welcome to try, old woman, but for now I think I'll stay right here."

I could have cut the tension in the room with a knife. Maharin was only a single woman against the massed ranks of the pirates, but there was something unsettling about her, and it was enough to stop everyone in their tracks. Maeve had spoken of a war – was it with this woman, and her alone?

If I'd been expecting an order to attack, though, I was surprised. Maeve didn't back down, but instead changed tack. "All right, here's my offer: if you stay, you join the discussion like a civilised woman. Maybe there's a way we can avert this war before it's started."

Maharin inclined her head. "As we all know you've gathered to talk about me anyway... I agree."

She sounded sincere enough, but it didn't seem to make much difference. I thought there'd been argument amongst the pirates, or at least heated debate, before our arrival, but now it was replaced by stony silence. Whatever they'd been discussing, they didn't want to continue it in front of the object of

their complaints. Because they *had* been complaining about this woman, I felt certain – not a single pair of eyes turned her way was friendly.

Maeve, at least, wasn't so easily cowed. She stayed on the edge of the circle with her arms folded, keeping Maharin outside it. "You've been disrupting the trade routes too often," she said. "Too many attacks, and too much loot taken. It can't continue."

"But we're pirates, are we not?" Maharin asked, with a sly smile. "That's what we do – supposedly."

If that was a dig at our present company, no-one rose to the bait. Maeve, though, looked increasingly incensed. "And what's going to happen when you push the merchants to their limits? Either they change their routes and we're all out of business, or the guards finally stop turning a blind eye. We've worked hard to keep Est'halin a safe haven for all of us, but keep this up and we'll be driven out of town."

"So what if we are? There are a hundred towns along this coastline, and a thousand more further afield. We'll just move on to easier pickings."

"Not everyone wants to move," Maeve ground out. "Some of these sailors have been plying this area for decades and–"

"Listen to yourself," Maharin interrupted, her voice a scathing whip-crack. "All this talk of 'business' – as if you're going to hand your ships down to your idiot children, so they can keep plundering the same idiot merchants. How can any one of you call yourselves a pirate? You might as well be beggars in the streets for all the notice those fat merchants take of you. You're a laughingstock, every one of you."

"So what if we are?" Maeve shot back. "You're a child living in a daydream if you think this life is how the stories make it out to be. We go out there and we ply our trade and we make a living. Sometimes times are fat and rich, sometimes they're lean, but this isn't one big adventure."

I could see Maharin's point, in a way; it was all very well to 'make a living', but these pirates were less cut-throat than the nobles my father dealt with every day. Maharin herself, though, seemed to have more interest in winding Maeve up than in making a point. I had the feeling she'd come here solely to start a fight.

And she was about to get one, because Maeve had finally had enough. "If you're not going to see reason, I still won't have you driving these sailors to their graves. Either relinquish command of your ship, here and now, or leave and never come back."

There was a flash of genuine anger in Maharin's eyes for the first time. "And if I refuse, on both counts?"

I didn't see her draw it, but suddenly Maeve had her sword in her hand; Maharin was quick to follow. "I wonder," Maeve said slowly, with a hint of glee in her voice, "which of us would win?"

They didn't get a chance to find out. Out of all the people present in that dingy warehouse, it was the one I'd least expected who chose to intervene: Daryus.

He stepped between them quite deliberately, hands raised. "Now now, ladies, this isn't getting us anywhere. Why don't we put the swords down?"

Maeve, though her sword didn't falter, looked amused more than anything. Maharin, on the other hand...

"Get out of my way, *boy*." Even as she spoke, her sword came up, flicking to rest on Daryus' collarbone before he had a chance to move. "Don't stick your nose into matters that don't concern you, or you might end up losing it."

She punctuated her last two words with quick swishes of her sword, scant inches from Daryus'

chest. He knew better than to flinch in the face of such posturing, but apparently he was too stupid to take an opening for retreat when it was offered. "I think you should listen to what Maeve is saying," he said firmly. "Nobody wants a war."

That was true as far as we were concerned, because the more upheaval the pirates were in, the less chance they'd take us on as crew. Unfortunately, that was one patronising suggestion too much for Maharin. She hissed like a cat and whipped her sword up, bringing it so close to Daryus' chin that he was forced to tilt his head back. "Why don't you say that again?" she said, stepping in closer. "Let's see who's really worth listening to."

I don't know what would have happened if we hadn't been interrupted. Daryus might think he was protecting Maeve's honour and our chance to join the pirates, but she didn't seem inclined to come to his rescue, and I had the feeling Maharin was every bit as dangerous as she looked. We *were* interrupted, though, by the warehouse door banging open for what must have been the third time that evening.

This time, there was neither a pair of runaways or a pirate captain making an entrance, but a contingent of armed men, dusty from the road – and, at a moment's glance, very familiar. Somehow, our pursuers had caught up with us, and we had nowhere left to run.

***

After the initial shock of their entrance, I found myself feeling rather sorry for our father's men. They must have bumped into our earlier pursuers from the tavern to have found us so quickly, and whilst I couldn't fault their diligence, their intelligence was rather more in question; though my instinct to flee was thwarted by any other exits being lost to darkness, I soon realised there was no need. There might be six armed men, including Stephen, but there were three times as many pirates – and the latter seemed to have assumed they'd been cornered by the local police.

That assumption might be wrong, but it worked to our advantage. As the pirates sprang forwards, I caught sight of a rather startled looking Stephen coming up short, his men behind him. They might almost have turned and fled, except they weren't given a chance; even Maharin forgot her interest in Daryus and turned to enter the fray.

And amid it all, whilst Daryus fumbled for his own sword and I debated grabbing a weapon off the nearest passing pirate, someone took me by the shoulder and swung me around.

I found myself facing Maeve, face set in a grimace. "They're after you, I take it?"

I nodded, which seemed to be answer enough.

"Then let's get you out of here whilst we've got the chance."

Maeve swung away, to what I realised was another door tucked into a corner. I grabbed Daryus before he could commit to the fight, and a moment later we were outside again, fresh air cooling sweat I hadn't even known was on my face.

"Where are we going?" Daryus asked, just as I broke into, "Why are you helping us?"

Maeve didn't look back as she wound her way into the labyrinth of little stone alleys behind the warehouse. "I'm taking you to my ship," she said, "and I'm doing it because I need fresh blood on my crew. Anyone who can stand up to Maharin like that deserves a chance."

"You didn't do badly yourself," Daryus said, shooting a grin at me. Somehow, I couldn't bring myself to return it, though I couldn't have said why. Maeve's offer seemed genuine enough, and yet the way she wouldn't look at us put me on edge.

Not that there was any point giving in to worry. If Maeve wanted to help, we had to give her the chance, particularly as I could hear voices echoing off the high stone walls behind us, some of Stephen's men spilling out into the lanes with the pirates behind them.

We ducked out past the restaurant we'd seen before, then turned onto a cobbled road running downhill. The rooftops of Est'halin spread below us, a patchwork of ochre and vermilion, giving way to pure blue sea. There were ships down there, little stick constructions from this height, bobbing on the waves; if Maeve's was amongst them, there was no way to tell it apart.

And for that, I soon realised, there was good reason. It wasn't long before Maeve turned aside from the cobbled road down to the harbour, instead making for one of its enclosing hills. There were ships up there, it was a true, but of a very different kind – which meant Maeve could only be a sky pirate.

Whilst they couldn't compete with the soaring structures in Quent, the sky docks of Est'halin were still impressive. They were tucked into the western hillside, row upon towering row of platforms, terraces and ladders built into the cliff. And at the top, a spiderweb of mooring platforms and ropes, to which two dozen airships of varying size were tied.

As we got closer, the hum of their sky engines filled the air. Most airships were relatively quiet when stationary, but it took the continual running of one of their engines to stay afloat, which meant the docks were never truly silent. The ships above us were moored in a great jumble, crammed in so tightly because they had far more manoeuvrability than an ocean-going vessel, but one still caught my eye. It was of medium size but effortlessly elegant, its sleek lines rising to a narrow bow, its hull a glossy mahogany shade, with black sails furled above.

Maeve snorted at the sight of it. "That's Maharin's. The *Black Viper*. Black sails, too – the bloody cheek of it. Might as well run up to the police and start screaming in their faces about what a dangerous pirate you are. It's a wonder she hasn't been arrested already."

Maybe Maharin had some trick up her sleeve, or maybe Maeve simply had too high an opinion of the local law enforcement, but it appeared the *Black Viper* remained free, and Maharin with it.

We started to climb, first up a flight of stone steps, then a steeper set of wooden ones, and finally a succession of rickety ladders. There was a fair amount of activity at the top, sailors and dock-hands going about their business; a few nodded to Maeve, but most made a show of not looking her way. I found myself looking drinking in all the movement and excitement, the views stretching to a seemingly limitless horizon. In that moment, I felt like the world was spread before me, ripe for the taking, as if everything I'd ever dreamed of was right there amongst those ship – until Daryus grabbed my arm and I realised I'd almost walked straight off a platform into empty air.

"This way," Maeve ordered, turning off the main docks and crossing a narrow plank onto the deck of a much plainer, stockier ship than Maharin's. Daryus and I followed her tentatively – for a moment, on the plank, the ground felt like a great weight below me, dragging me down – and then I was across, and able to pretend I was back on solid ground again.

Maeve turned a low circle as though inspecting her ship, and when she faced us again, it was with a satisfied smile. Which would have been reassuring if she hadn't had a pistol in her hand.

"They won't follow us here–" Daryus began, only to realise what was happening. "Oh."

Maeve gave an exaggerated sigh. "You're a pretty pair, the two of you, and I believe you're sincere in wanting to become pirates, so here's your first lesson. Don't. Trust. Anyone."

Daryus raised a hand. "Let's not do anything rash–"

"Oh, this is anything *but* rash, my pretty. I've had plenty of time to think this through." Maeve made a beckoning gesture with the pistol, without ever losing its aim on Daryus' chest. "Now, whichever of you has the money, hand it over, and no-one ends up with a bullet to the head."

"We don't have it," I said, trying not to let my voice waver.

"Ah, that story about stashing it somewhere?" Maeve looked thoughtful, though there was a hint

of mockery to it. "And where might this 'stash' be, if you've only just arrived in town?"

"That was a lie," I said, letting an only partially faked desperation enter my voice. "There never was a stash, because we don't *have* any money. We left nearly everything we owned in Requies, and then lost the rest to bandits outside Quent."

Maeve's eyes narrowed, gauging my story. "Then why mention a stash at all?"

"Because you mentioned it first, and it would have looked pretty bloody incompetent for even newly minted pirates to have lost everything to a gang of bandits," Daryus put in, sounding so convincing I almost believed it myself.

Maeve, though, had spent a lifetime amongst thieves, lowlifes and apparently liars, because she seemed to know instinctively that we weren't telling the truth. "Hand it over," she said roughly, before swinging the gun round to face me instead. "Now."

"All right, then." I could see the time for bluffing was at an end and spread my hands. "Come and get it."

Only in that moment did I realise just how over-confident Maeve was. It was a foolish, dangerous thing to do, but instead of turning the gun back on Daryus or ordering me to undress, she stepped closer. She wanted this over and done with before her crew returned, I realised, as she circled round behind me, looking for the tell-tale bulges under my clothes. If she looked close enough, she'd see where the jewels were hidden, but only if she looked very closely indeed–

I acted on instinct, above all. When Maeve's left hand began poking around in the small of my back, my right arm came up. It was sheer luck, more than anything, that the difference in our heights meant my elbow smashed straight into her nose. She gave a grunt of pain and fell back, her gun hand faltering long enough for Daryus to leap in and wrest it from her.

Maeve started swearing as profusely as the blood streaming from her nose. Daryus, meanwhile, was peering at the pistol. "It's not even loaded," he said incredulously, before tossing it over the rail of the ship and drawing his sword. Together we backed away, until only the narrow plank stood between us and the docks. Maeve, though, made no move to follow.

"Spoilt little brats," she called after us. "Have you any idea what I could have done with that money?"

"Like I said, we're not carrying any money," I said, quite truthfully given that all our wealth was in jewellery rather than coin. "You'll just have to make your fortune elsewhere."

For just a moment, Maeve looked wistful, as though all her hopes had been dashed; I found myself wondering just what she *had* intended to do with her ill-gotten gains. Most likely, being a pirate, she had debts in a dozen ports, and maybe fancy men in a dozen more. A heartbeat later, Daryus grabbed my hand and pulled me onto the docks, and then we were off and running again before anyone could stop us.

CHAPTER THREE

It was dusk by the time we left the sky docks. Our flight into the town, aided by darkness as it was, should have been easy – except nothing about our journey so far had been 'easy' and not one bit of it had gone to plan. We'd barely left the shadow of the docks, in fact, when we caught the sound of footsteps, and before we could hide, a figure had turned the corner.

Caria Maharin – *Captain* Caria Maharin, I supposed – was impossible to mistake even in semi-darkness. She was tall and gaunt, and though her face was hidden, she carried herself with a sense of purpose, almost a swagger, that couldn't belong to anyone else. I wondered how Stephen's men had fared against her, and whether any of them had dared to stand up to her.

I wondered, too, what she was doing out here, though I got my answer soon enough.

"There you are." Her voice was a growl, and I almost looked over my shoulder to see who she was addressing – but, of course, she was looking for us. "I want a word with you."

I took an involuntary step back and Daryus held up his hands. "I didn't mean to interfere," he said, perhaps realising a bit of contrition might not go amiss. "We don't really care what business you've got with Maeve."

"That makes two of us," Maharin said, with a grin. "It's you I'm after, you see."

"Are you sure?" Daryus tried, even as I began searching the street for an escape. "Because Maeve's right over there, you know, on her ship a few berths over from yours, and–"

"Tried to claim the reward, did she?" Maharin asked conversationally, cutting into Daryus' spiel – and whilst that wasn't the case, I wasn't about to reveal the value of our stash to yet another pirate. "Is that why you're so eager to give her up? I'm afraid it's not just Maeve who knows the value in you two."

"We're not going back," I said, with a ferocity that rather surprised me, and even seemed to take Maharin aback. "We'll fight to the death before anyone takes us back to Requies."

Daryus looked startled, but Maharin's expression became thoughtful. "Is that how it is? I know what it's like to be in exile, girl, and I know what running away feels like. Trouble is, the price of your freedom is just too high. Someone *really* wants you back."

I found myself wondering, all of a sudden, who'd put up the money for our return to Requies: our father, or Thomas? The former had provided the men and the posters, but that didn't mean he'd acted

alone. If Thomas was involved, the reward money must have come from my very own dowry – the du Bois family, into which I'd married, was ancient but notoriously poor, or at least had been before I arrived. How it must pain my husband to waste his newly acquired fortune on something as ignominious as a runaway wife.

"She's right," Daryus said, drawing his sword. "We're not going back."

For a moment, Maharin looked pained. Perhaps she was envious of Daryus' loyalty, or perhaps she simply didn't want to fight. She was quick to draw her sword, though, and fall into a stance that said she was every bit as skilled with it as a Requies nobleman, and probably with fewer scruples.

Sure enough, within the few seconds it took the two of them to engage, it became clear Maharin was going to fight dirty. She first tried kicking up dust, and when that failed to blind Daryus, she aimed her next kick at his knee. That one went wide – just – but it forced Daryus back, and as he staggered, Maharin brought her sword to bear. Daryus parried, barely, forced on the defensive whilst Maharin gained the upper hand.

Well, if she was going to fight dirty, so was I.

It took me only a few moments to locate a suitable missile: a handful of small stones, scooped off the side of the road. I didn't simply fling them at Maharin, either – long experience of having an irritating older brother had taught me I was an excellent shot.

The first pebble hit Maharin in the back, which she barely seemed to notice. The second, then the third, pinged off the back of her head, drawing curses. The fourth struck her sword hand, causing her to lurch backwards; Daryus used the opportunity to go on the offensive.

After that, we kept up a steady attack between us, Daryus with the rapid thrusts of his rapier and me with my impromptu weaponry. When the pebbles were gone, I sought ammunition in a nearby rubbish heap, choosing three rotten apples, two chicken bones and a pineapple, although I drew the line at the half brick I unearthed beneath. All the while, Maharin kept up a vociferous stream of insults, though they seemed to stem from her own frustration rather than any real hatred of us.

Finally, she and Daryus broke apart, Maharin gesturing with her sword to indicate the bout was done. "Fine," she growled, "we'll call this a draw. I'll be keeping an eye on you two, though – and I won't be the only one after you if that bounty gets any bigger."

I knew that well enough, as did Daryus. Perhaps it was that knowledge that prompted him to blurt out, "Take us with you."

Maharin looked genuinely surprised, and I couldn't blame her. Asking, on a whim, to join Maeve's crew and thus save our necks was one thing, but now we'd had time to think about it, did we really want to be allied with Caria Maharin?

But then there was her ship. The *Black Viper*, it had been called, and though I knew nothing about airships, I couldn't quite put it from my mind. It was a thing of singular beauty, and something about it sang to me, as though I was being called home.

I thought, for a hopeful moment, that Maharin was considering our offer – until I realised she was looking over my shoulder, with an expression that was half wary, half amused. "Sorry, children," she said, sheathing her sword. "Much as I'd love to stay and talk, it's time for me to go."

And she did, before either of us could stop her. Only then did I swing round, to see what she'd seen, and with a sinking feeling I recognised the figure hobbling along the street towards us. Not much of a threat to Maharin in his current state, but definitely a complication, and one I wished we didn't have to deal with either. Stephen.

***

I have, I suppose, known Stephen most of my life. The nobles of Requies, my family included,

don't keep private armies or even corps of guards, but their homes are always knee-deep in servants, maids, butlers and other associated staff. Stephen had worked in my father's stables for as long as I could remember; my chief memories of him were expressions of utter exasperation, usually when Daryus and I showed less interest in horse-riding than we did in rolling around in the muck.

As he strode towards us, I realised I hadn't seen him in some time, maybe even years. Gone were my tomboy days before my presentation to society and then my marriage; even before I'd left the family home, it'd been years since I'd had an opportunity to ride. Now, Stephen's look of exasperation had been replaced by grim-faced stoicism, lines engraved deeply around his mouth as though he was wont to frown rather than smile. That wasn't the man I knew, but I supposed things had changed in the Manteios family since then.

He was also, on this occasion, quite visibly battered and bruised. There was something of a hobble in his walk, though he was doing his best to hide it, and a lump was swelling on his temple. Maybe, I thought with a touch of guilt, it was chasing after Daryus and I that had made him look so old.

Daryus stepped in front of me, sword raised. "No closer, please," he said firmly, with a little flourish of the blade. "I know who you are, and I know you've been a loyal servant to our family – but if you push me, I'll use this."

Stephen stopped a few paces from us. He too carried a sword, and by the way he kept his hand on its hilt, I thought he knew how to use it. What had his life been like, I wondered, before he came to us? Was he a veteran of some distant war, fought before I was born? Or did he simply have a youthful passion for fencing?

I cast a glance round the street, looking for Stephen's men, but there was no sign of them or anyone else. Stephen, apparently, knew what I was looking for, and called out, "I come alone, my lady. None of my men are seriously hurt, but they've all had enough altercations for one day."

If he was trying to make me feel guilty, it was working. I realised I was still holding the squishy apple I'd been intending to throw at Maharin, and tossed it to the side of the street instead. "Well go on, then," I said, more harshly than I'd meant to. "State your case."

"My lady–"

"It's Fleet," I interrupted, a bit too loudly, my voice ringing along the street. "Fleet Manteios." I couldn't bring myself to mention my old name, as though doing so would conjure my past with it.

Stephen hesitated. "My lady Fleet," he began, which I supposed was good enough, "your father sent me to make sure you were safe. All he wants is for you to go back home. You don't even need to return to your husband, if that's your wish. Your father will–"

"Enough." Daryus cut him off. He knew, just as I did, that Stephen spoke purely out of desperation: if we went back to Requies, there wasn't a chance in hell I wouldn't be swept back to Thomas' side. My husband was a man who liked to keep his possessions close, and I was one prize he'd never willingly relinquish.

"You don't understand what you're asking," I said, directly to Stephen. "You don't know everything I've had to give up, or what my life has become."

Well, not exactly, anyway. I would be a fool not to believe that anyone of Stephen's class, locked into a life of servitude, would never feel the sense of frustration and imprisonment my marriage had left me with. Our lives were both traps, just in different ways.

I took a deep breath. "I'm sorry. I know you've been sent here solely for me, but I won't go back to Requies. I can't. My father and... and my husband will just have to do without me."

Stephen tried to take a step closer but Daryus gave another little flick of his sword. "You heard

my sister. Neither of us are going back."

Not for the first time, I felt a swell of pride for Daryus. He was a flirt and a womaniser, frequently intoxicated and infrequently able to pay his debts, but he was the only one who'd ever stood by me, consistently and with conviction. Maybe fleeing our noble lives was a game to my brother, but he'd still see it through to the end as long as I was involved.

For a moment, I thought Stephen was going to walk away, but apparently I'd misjudged the scale of his desperation. With a wince, he drew his sword, advancing on Daryus with a look of utter misery.

"Go." Daryus spoke over his shoulder to me, and I didn't stop to argue. I was halfway down the street when I heard the cry, mingled pain and frustration, and it was barely a minute before Daryus joined me.

"You didn't–" I began, a touch hesitantly.

"Kicked him in the shin," Daryus said, to my sigh of relief. "He was in no fit state for a proper fight."

I glanced back once, to see Stephen standing forlornly in the middle of the street, then we turned a corner and he was gone.

***

It was fully dark by the time Daryus and I found somewhere to hole up. We'd considered finding a tavern or boarding house, but there was so much movement on the streets of Est'halin that someone else was bound to notice us, and with Stephen, Maharin and Maeve all sniffing around, that was the last thing we needed.

Instead, we stumbled across a derelict building, what looked like a harbour-side mansion from the days when being beside the water was fashionable and the place wasn't surrounded by warehouses and fish guts. There were signs of transient habitation on the ground floor, but up the rickety stairs we found empty rooms, and a wide balcony roofed only by the stars. There we curled up with our few belongings and ate the stale loaf of bread Daryus had managed to snatch just before it went into the midden behind a bakery.

We ate in silence; I wasn't sure whether the bread or my thoughts took more chewing over. In the end, it was Daryus who asked the pertinent question. "What are we going to do?"

"What do you *want* to do?" I countered, because I didn't have a satisfactory answer.

Daryus didn't reply, but I noticed he was looking up. The mansion was right in the shadow of the sky docks – perhaps it had been abandoned when they were built – and a constellation of airships hung near-silently above our heads. It had been nothing more than a whim, a moment's inspiration, that had made me tell Maeve we wanted to be pirates, but now... Short of finding our way onto a ship of some description, I couldn't imagine getting out of Est'halin unscathed.

I fingered the jewels sewn into my coat. "Do you think... do you think we could buy one?"

Even in the gloom, I see Daryus' incredulity, but a moment later it smoothed into contemplation. "An airship? We don't know anything about flying, but..."

But we might actually have enough money. It was an extraordinary thought, that the jewels first my parents, and then Thomas (after he'd received my substantial dowry) had lavished on me could be worth so much. I found myself thinking of the *Black Viper*, Maharin's ship that had so effortlessly caught my eye. I couldn't imagine her being willing to sell, but surely someone in Est'halin would be, and once we were out of the country, our bounty would cease to matter – I hoped.

We sat in silence as the night darkened, watching the ember-glow of people passing by with lit cigarettes, smelling food wafting tantalising up from somewhere below, hearing the tap of footsteps

across the cobbles. After a time, I realised that last was getting louder, the tramp of multiple feet accompanied by low, urgent voices.

Daryus and I had both been keeping our heads down, staying well back against the wall of the building to avoid being seen from below, but now we crept to the balcony's edge. A group of men were coming up the street from the harbour, with the characteristic jingle of pirates who wore as much wealth about their persons as they had stashed safely elsewhere. I would have said they were out for a night of carousing, except I recognised one or two faces even by torchlight, and knew them to be Maeve's crew.

"Looking for us, no doubt," Daryus murmured, as the crew paused only a street away, then split into groups to better comb the area. We sat tense and silent for a time, preparing to flee, but none of them entered the house and soon their voices faded into the distance.

We had very little reprieve, though. Only half a minute passed before a fresh band appeared from the shadow of the sky docks, as though they'd just left an airship. This lot, I didn't recognise, save for the tall figure in their midst: Maharin. Her crew, too, had the look of bounty hunters about them, torches in their hands as they peered into the alleys they passed. Quite how any of them thought they'd simply bump into us, even in a town as small as Est'halin, I don't know, but we now had two full crews of pirates prepared to give it a go.

I slumped back against the wall of the house. "That bounty must be even more enticing than we thought."

"No bloody wonder." Daryus was still looking out over the street, and he pointed across it. On the other side was a warehouse, already plastered in posters and bills, but someone was pasting up another: one with our faces on, and this time a reward of four thousand silver pieces. Daryus gave a grunt. "Almost tempted to turn myself in for that much."

It was an extraordinary amount, indeed, and it really was no wonder so many people were after us. I assumed Stephen had been given permission to increase the reward, should he track us to a specific location; the picture on the bill might still be the same outdated one as before, but many of the searching pirates already knew what we looked like. There'd be no pretending they'd got the wrong siblings next time.

"We've got to do something," I muttered. "Maeve and Maharin are both pirates. Couldn't we get them arrested, or something?"

"Not unless they really piss off the authorities," Daryus said. "Didn't Maeve say this was a safe haven? They must have been careful not to do anything illegal here, so they've got one safe port to land in."

I considered that as I looked out over the jumbled rooftops of Est'halin. "Nothing illegal," I mused. "Yet."

Daryus, for a man of noble birth, had the mind of a criminal and was already grinning. "Yet," he echoed. "Shall I see what I can rustle up?"

CHAPTER FOUR

As I watched my brother scramble up the outer wall of the largest mansion in Est'halin, it occurred to me that he'd done this before. It was no surprise, really: Daryus might have grown up a nobleman, but he'd long had a penchant for disreputable taverns, brothels and bar fights, the sorts of outings from which he returned late and didn't want to draw too much attention to himself. Whether he'd broken into homes other than our own in Requies, I chose not to ask, as his proficiency rather seemed to speak for itself.

At the top of the garden wall, he stopped long enough to pull me up behind him, and together we crouched there, surveying the house. An autumn fog sat heavily on the sleeping town, an layer of extra concealment for our endeavour, though it made it difficult to tell much of our destination. There were a few lights burning low to the ground at the back, in what had to be the servants' rooms, and perhaps a single candle in an upper window. The rest of the place lay entirely in darkness.

There was a plum tree just inside the garden wall, allowing such easy access to the ground it was almost laughable; after that, it was only a short jog to the side of the house.

Est'halin mansions, it was clear, were very much modelled on Requies ones. As we got closer and the fog drew away, I could see four storeys, each one a confection of carved stone, intricate windows, and handily placed balconies; showing off your wealth, after all, was more immediately desirable than preventing the odd intruder who might try their luck. Daryus truly was an old hand at this, effortlessly choosing the easiest locations to climb, and as I'd spent as much of my childhood climbing trees and scraping my knees as possible, I followed him without much trouble.

We stopped on the third floor, at the far corner of the house to where we'd seen the lit candle. Daryus began poking between the casements of the nearest window with a short blade, then stopped and gave a low laugh. A moment later, the window swung open – it hadn't even been locked.

We scrambled over the sill, pausing to let our eyes adjust. The room might have been either bedroom or drawing room; it was impossible to say, as every piece of furniture was shrouded in white cloth.

"Bollocks," Daryus mumbled. "There isn't going to be anything worth taking."

Whilst I could see his logic – a closed-up house meant either a family away or in dire financial straits – it made not the slightest bit of difference. "Who said we *were* taking anything?"

Daryus took a few steps across the carpet, his shrug making his shoulder bump against mine. "Two birds with one stone, and all that."

I shook my head in exasperation. I didn't care what this family might have worth stealing, because all we needed to do was convince the authorities that either Maeve or Maharin – or both – *did*.

Beyond the shrouded room – a bedroom, I decided – was a plush hallway. Many of the doors stood partly open, revealing similar contents to the first. Only at the end of the hall did we find a closed door – and from behind it, a series of quite monumental snores.

I backtracked, searching for a separate dressing room entrance, but the doors to either side led only to more bedrooms. I shook my head at Daryus in despair: from the personal experience of growing up in a wealthy household, I knew the most immediately portable valuables would be in that dressing room, and the only way to it was through an occupied bedchamber.

There was no chance for discussion. One moment, Daryus was standing beside me, and the next he was opening the bedroom door. Thankfully, it didn't make so much as a whisper of a squeak, but my heart was pounding so hard I might not have heard it anyway.

I followed Daryus into the room, the deafening snores enveloping us as he quietly closed the door again. There was a single, rotund figure in the canopied bed – a woman, by the gowns hanging over the nearby divan and the cabinet top littered with perfume bottles. Across the room, there was only a single door, and my heart was in my mouth as we tiptoed towards it. There was a terrifying moment when one of the floorboards creaked under Daryus' weight, but the snores went on uninterrupted.

There was indeed a dressing room beyond the door, though its complete lack of a window left us fumbling around in the dark for a moment. Finally, Daryus got a candle lit, and together we surveyed the meagre collection of gowns hanging in the open wardrobe, beside a velvet-seated stool and a battered dressing table. Just looking at the whole collection made me feel a little bit sick. I'd have had that number of new gowns in a single season in Requies – in my youth, nothing had pleased me more – but even by candlelight these silks looked faded and out-of-date.

Daryus squeezed my arm and leaned to whisper into my ear, "We won't take anything. Promise."

At that, I remembered why we were here, and set to our task with renewed enthusiasm. The jewellery box was on the dressing table, and the one thing we'd so far encountered that was locked. Daryus made short work of that anyway, and a moment later we began strewing jewels – real or paste, I couldn't tell – across the room. Whether anything was stolen or not didn't matter to our plan: we had only to make it look like an interrupted burglary, and leave a few key pieces of incriminating evidence.

These, I removed from my pocket, hesitating over which to choose. One was a forged letter of credit in Maharin's name, the other a torn piece of maroon velvet, like enough to what we'd last seen Maeve wearing, and with a few grey hairs sticking to it for good measure. Both would be proved as fakes within days, no doubt, but that would be long enough for the police officers of Est'halin to arrest their suspects – suspects they'd no doubt long been looking to pin *something* on – and thus to allow Daryus and I time to get out of town without being followed. If we could lose Stephen too, we might finally make a clean getaway.

"Leave them both," Daryus whispered, as he finished scattering the last of the jewels. "They might have been working together."

I shrugged. That was a stretch if you actually *knew* Maeve and Maharin, but the police would consider the pair only as pirates, and thus perfectly likely to be in it together.

I left the velvet on the edge of the dressing table, where it might have been caught on the jewellery box; the note, I scrunched into a ball and tossed into a corner, as though it had been lost whilst someone was rummaging through their pockets. Crude, all of it, but it didn't need to be effective for long.

We left in something of a hurry, altogether too pleased with ourselves – and that was when I realised the snoring had stopped. I didn't even have time to warn Daryus, either, because that was when his foot hit the same loose board as before, hard enough to create a great creak that echoed right round the room.

Daryus and I both froze as the woman in the bed shot bolt upright, eyes wide and staring. We stared back at her in horror, my heart stopped in my chest, feeling as though I might suffocate from the strain – and then with a great squeaking of the bed springs, she flopped back down and resumed snoring as though nothing had happened.

After that, our escape was something of a blur. I expected at any moment for cries to surround us, for maids or footmen or even police officers to come leaping out of the woodwork. We reached the balcony without incident, though, climbing down the house and then scaling the outer wall with no more difficulty than before. Back in the street, I collapsed against the nearest building in relief, only for Daryus to tug me into motion again. It would be amusing and somewhat gratifying to see the morning uproar that was sure to follow, but right now we needed to be as far away as possible.

***

We retreated to our hideaway as dawn broke. Both the pirate crews searching for us seemed to have given up for the night, and the town was quiet, slumbering under what was left of the mist. By the time the sun tore through it, we were back on our balcony, where I was beginning to have second-thoughts.

"It'll never work," I grumbled. "Who's going to be stupid enough to fall for those 'clues' we left?"

"They don't really have to believe them," Daryus replied. "As soon as suspicion falls on our pirate friends, they'll be arrested, and by the time they're proved innocent, we'll be gone."

"And if they're *not* proved innocent?"

Daryus shrugged. "Would you really shed a tear for either of them?"

I wanted to say 'yes', but our weeks on the run had hardened me, forming a tough shell around the core of my emotions. Both Maeve and Maharin had tried to capture us for money – I couldn't feel much sympathy for them. If we outwitted them, it was their own fault for getting involved.

"What about Stephen?" I asked.

"What about him?"

"He's still looking for us."

Daryus snorted. "And he'll never find us. You worry too much, Fleet. It'll all be fine."

Maybe it would, but I couldn't bring myself to be quite as casual about Stephen's fate. Once we were out of Est'halin, he wouldn't be able to pursue us, which meant returning to Requies – where there was every chance our father would dismiss him for his failure. That, I couldn't help but feel guilty about; Stephen wasn't in this for himself, after all.

I was considering how we could go about softening the blow where Stephen was concerned when Daryus gave a low whistle. I shuffled to the edge of the balcony and looked down, to where the bill-poster of the night before was back. This time, he had two new notices, bearing a pair of very familiar faces. They were sketchily drawn and clearly produced in a hurry, but there was no doubt they were meant to depict Maeve and Maharin.

"Even quicker than I hoped," Daryus murmured. "We must have struck a nerve."

And so we had. The bottom of the posters gave a lurid, if brief, description of the 'crime', and mentioned the victim – who turned out to be the widow of the newly deceased mayor. I was suddenly even gladder we hadn't taken anything, though between her importance in the town and the outrage over an attempted theft from a widow, we couldn't have picked a better target to get Est'halin riled up.

"Now we just keep our heads down," Daryus said. "No-one will even notice we're still in town."

I nodded, feeling a sudden wave of exhaustion and relief overtaking me. I couldn't remember the last time we'd been able to properly rest, but with the pirates preoccupied, maybe we'd soon be able to slip away. We still had all my jewels, and the prospect of acquiring a ship of our own was too tantalising to ignore.

It was my own preoccupation that nearly scuppered all our plans. I heard the footsteps too late, followed by Daryus' yelp of surprise. By the time I looked round, the blade had already drawn a thin line of blood across his throat – and Maharin was holding it.

***

I didn't know how Maharin had found us, but it was abundantly obvious how angry she was. Her shoulders were tense with it, her eyes wide and staring, though thankfully her hand was steady around the sword she held. I was already formulating excuses for why the police were after her when she said, "Where is she?"

I was too surprised to speak. Daryus was trying his best to remain still, but managed to croak, "Who?"

He gave a hiss of pain as Maharin's blade bit deeper. She leaned down, close to Daryus' ear. "Maeve. *Where is she*?"

I wasn't entirely sure why Maharin thought we, of all people, should know. "Have you tried her ship?"

"Of course I have. It's empty. All her crew are out looking for you."

"Then..." That was my one and only idea. I'd no idea where Maeve holed herself – Maharin, I felt, was clutching at straws by seeking us out – and it was with a hint of impatience that I went on, "Look, we don't know. Why would we? We've been trying to hide from her for days. Just let Daryus go, all right?"

There was reluctance on Maharin's face as she finally stepped back, and frustration, too. "I need to find her," she growled, though I thought she was speaking to herself more than to us. "Damned bitch tried to set me up for a burglary. Might have got away with it, too, if she hadn't been stupid enough not to cover her tracks."

I was surprised at Maharin's assessment of the situation, and perhaps a little insulted. She thought Maeve was the one who'd framed her, only to have accidentally left evidence behind of her own presence in the mansion; whilst that spoke eloquently of the bad blood between them, that Maharin didn't seem to suspect either Daryus or me meant she clearly didn't think very highly of *our* intellect.

Daryus had regained his composure, and whilst he looked somewhat irritated (pride is a prickly thing, when your enemies underestimate you), he had the sense to keep his grievances to himself. "We've seen nothing of Maeve since she lured us back to her ship," he said. "And we don't want to, either."

"That's a shame," said a new voice, "because I've been looking *all over* for you."

We all shot to our feet at the same moment, to find Maeve crossing the empty room towards the

balcony. She, too, was carrying a blade, though it was pointed at Maharin; not surprisingly, Maharin whirled to meet her, until the two captains were facing one another over their drawn swords.

Maharin gave a low laugh. "Come to gloat, have you? Wanted to tell me personally how you set me up?"

Maeve was wearing an expression of incredulity, and not just because Maharin was suddenly a lot more concerned about the good graces of the authorities than she'd previously made out. "*You* set *me* up?" she said, and I realised she'd come to the exact same conclusion as Maharin, only in the opposite direction.

They were circling now, blades almost touching, their eyes never leaving one another. I was fairly certain either one of the captains could have worked out what was *really* going on, except neither could see past their enmity for the other. Daryus and I had almost ceased to exist.

Well, almost. There was a brief clash of swords, a flurry of steel that began and ended on cues I couldn't see, then both women drew back. "Only one of us is leaving here," Maharin said, a warning in her voice.

Maeve gave a little flourish of her sword. "And it'll be me," she said. "Between your dead body and these two handed in to the police, I reckon they'll let me walk out a free woman, and with the bounty money besides."

Ah, so Maeve had been planning to hand us in, in exchange for her own freedom; that explained why she – and perhaps Maharin, too – had come looking for us. I wasn't sure whether the pirates or Daryus and I were the more appealing prize for the police, though I suspected our father was paying rather more in reward money than the mayor's widow.

Another flurry, a ring and scrape of steel, accompanied by the staccato beat of feet as Maeve and Maharin closed, then retreated again. I realised Daryus was behind me and edging away, back out onto the balcony. I suspected turning and running at this point made us both cowards, but I was all for it.

We'd reached the balcony railing, and Daryus was climbing over to its outside, when there was a roar from the house. For a moment, I thought one of the captains had been victorious, only for both women to suddenly appear in the doorway. They had, at the very last moment, worked out who'd *really* framed them.

Maharin lunged for us, but Maeve was beside her, and they crashed into one another before even stepping onto the balcony. I followed Daryus over the railing, hands clasped around rusting metal and feet wedged onto the tiny ledge on the other side. It was only the height of a single storey to the street below, but it looked like a yawning, precipitous drop, and I felt my stomach lurch in response.

Maeve came for us next, but this time Daryus had his sword out, and beat her back with a crash of steel. She grunted, stepped back – right into Maharin's path – and that was when I heard the footsteps.

There was dozens of them, echoing all around, rattling across wood and cobbles like a peal of thunder. Quite how they'd managed to sneak up on us, I didn't know, but suddenly the room was full of uniformed officers, shouting fit to bring the roof down. They went for the two captains without hesitation, dragging them off the balcony and back into the shadowed interior.

And here was our chance. Daryus was already scrambling down one of the balcony's supporting iron pillars. With a last glance into the derelict house and the chaos of Maeve and Maharin's arrests, I followed.

CHAPTER FIVE

There was, it appeared, very little left for us to do save flee. Both Maharin and Maeve were now incarcerated, but it wouldn't be long before the police worked out neither one of them knew anything about the attempted burglary of the mayor's widow. At that point, they might be freed – or they might not. Either way, *someone* was bound to be back on our trail by then, which meant we'd be better off out of Est'halin entirely.

Where we might go, however, was something of a conundrum.

"We need a ship," Daryus said, not for the first time. "There's no way around it."

And there wasn't, as far as I could see. We'd reached the very edge of the land controlled by Requies, and thus the edge of the domain over which our father had any influence – but in the process, we'd also reached the edge of *land*. We had a choice, now, to either follow the coast and risk being pursued by Stephen, or take ship. Doing so would mean travelling farther than either Daryus or I had ever considered going, but if it meant our freedom, we'd take the risk.

"An airship, then?" Daryus asked.

"Of course," I replied, grimacing at the thought of going to sea. Taking to the skies, on the other hand, sent a thrill of anticipation down my spine. Requies had been somewhat lacking in airships, but I remembered the sense of wonder they'd given me on our occasional visits to Quent, and I had the distinct and inexplicable feeling that being in the air was what I'd been born to do.

We reached the sky docks without incident and began the long climb to the ships above. It was early afternoon, a brilliant blue sky arching above our heads, casting our shadows stark against the boards of the first platform we reached. The weather seemed like the perfect cap on my excitement, a marker of things to come, even though I knew we'd be all too visible if anyone was looking for us – and they were.

Because we'd barely climbed onto the second, higher tier of the sky docks when a figure emerged before us, barrelling along the walkway with such force the whole structure juddered. It didn't take me long to recognise Stephen.

He looked, if anything, even worse than when we'd last seen him, just a few short hours giving time for his bruises to ripen to the colour of a plum and his limp to stiffen into something that looked distinctly painful. Even so, he had his sword drawn, and it was quite clear he wasn't in the mood for

games.

"Where are your men?" Daryus asked, just before Stephen came into sword range. "They must have recuperated by now."

"I've given permission for some of them to stand down," Stephen replied stiffly, but with a hesitation that said he wasn't telling the whole truth. "I'll conclude this matter myself."

"Some of them?" Daryus echoed. "What happened to the rest?"

Not Maeve, I didn't think, her crew being too inept to completely incapacitate Stephen's men. However, he looked uncomfortable enough that I had a feeling I knew what'd happened. "They've left you," I guessed, "or rather they've left father's service. Wasn't he paying them enough?"

"Apparently not," Stephen said, taking another step along the boards. "It appears there's more than enough work in this town for any man so inclined to take it."

"Including you?" I suggested, which only got me a stony silence in return.

By now, Daryus had drawn his sword. "We've made our position clear – we're not going back."

"You must," Stephen said, the desperation in his voice making me feel truly terrible. "There's no other way."

"Why does this matter so much to you?" I asked. "What's father holding over your head?"

There was a pause, which told me I'd hit the mark, even if Stephen was unwilling to confide in us.

"Is it your job?" I pressed. "Will father dismiss you if you don't return with us?"

"It's not that," Stephen said, reluctantly, as though the words were being pulled out of him. "It's... it's my daughter. She got herself... in trouble with one of the footmen. Lord Manteios has promised they'll both keep their position, but only if they have a proper wedding before the child comes."

For which, of course, Stephen needed money – money no doubt being provided by father for our safe return. I felt a tearing guilt in my chest at Stephen's paternal loyalty, and wondered just how close to term his daughter now was, after weeks of chasing us across the countryside – but I also felt a spark of anger. Father was playing on his own man's vulnerabilities in order to hunt us down; apparently, he knew too well that financial reward alone wouldn't be enough.

"I'm sorry about your daughter," Daryus said, with a firmness that surprised me (though I was *almost* entirely certain he'd never fathered any illegitimate children of his own). "We're not going back to Requies, though, and nothing you say will change that."

Stephen took another step forwards, and this time I could see he was steeling himself. "Then if words will no longer suffice, I have no choice."

He attacked quickly, and with a mercilessness that made my breath catch in my throat. If Daryus hadn't been a swordsman of near equal skill, he'd quickly have been disabled, maybe even grievously wounded; as it was, they sparred back and forth along the boardwalk for half a minute, steel clashing, before I realised there was every chance Daryus was about to lose.

I cast about for some way to intervene, but there was nothing at hand to throw, nor could I have hit Stephen without fear of striking Daryus. They pounded back and forth, Daryus being edged further and further back towards me – and that was when I saw it. There was a rope off to the right of the walkway, dangling from an airship above our heads. I couldn't get close enough to use it to entangle Stephen, but maybe, just maybe...

A shout of pain went up, dragging my attention back to the fight. Daryus had retreated still further, and blood was dripping off his sword hand from a wound I couldn't see. I *could* see how his arm was shaking, how the sword looked unsteady in his grasp, and knew we were rapidly running out of options.

Well, if we were going to be airship pirates, we were going to have to learn to take risks.

I left the boardwalk at a run, leaping into the air with enough force to go hurtling past Daryus. The world whipped past me, too quickly to see what either combatant thought of my move, and the next thing I knew, the rope was speeding towards my face. I'd aimed my jump well, but even so, there was a horrible moment when my hands clapped around the rope and then slipped, scraping burns across my palms. By the time I'd firmed my grip, I was already swinging, fast enough to have completely lost track of my position.

I'd planned to curve round and drop back on the platform behind Stephen, aiming to distract him long enough for Daryus to make a move. Instead, I somewhat undershot, arcing round and slamming right into Stephen, sending us both tumbling across the boards. Only my grip on the rope stopped me careening right off the other side; when my world steadied again, I found Stephen clinging to a rough board at my side, and Daryus' sword pointing at his head.

I scrambled back onto the safety of the platform and finally let the rope go. Beside me, Stephen hauled himself up, but his sword was gone, and from his position at Daryus' feet it was clear there was little he could do anyway. He was beaten.

"I'm sorry," Daryus said roughly, before reaching to cut a length off the rope I'd just used. "But however you chase us, we'll always get away. It's just a matter of wanting something badly enough."

That, and sheer blind luck, anyway.

We tied a now unresisting Stephen to an empty airship mooring post, where he sat, looking frustrated and forlorn. Someone would free him eventually, I knew, and he likely had enough funds to make his way home, but what would father do when Stephen returned empty-handed?

On impulse, I crouched at his side. "Give father a message from us," I said, but then couldn't find the words to continue.

Daryus tugged the last knot tight. "Tell him," he said, taking up my cue, "that we love him, and mother too, but we need to make our own way in the world. Tell him we need the same freedom he had, when he left home for Requies. And tell him..."

"We'll be all right," I finished, taking Daryus' hand and giving it a tight squeeze.

For a moment, I wasn't sure Stephen was listening, but then he nodded, just once. I reached into my pocket, ripping open the jacket lining from inside, and fished out a handful of jewels. A man might live frugally on just one for a very long time, I knew, and he might hold an awful lot of weddings, too. Before Stephen could protest – and after making sure no-one was watching – I shoved them into his own jacket pocket, feeling them settle heavily to the bottom.

"For your daughter," I said, rising to my feet. "And for you to leave service, if you want to."

Stephen opened his mouth and sucked in a breath, but no words came out. After a moment, he nodded again. "Take care of yourselves," he said finally, voice a croak from exhaustion, or maybe something more.

I grinned down at him. "Oh, I'm sure we can think of something more exciting than that."

***

When we passed Maeve's ship, further along the dock, it was silent and empty beneath the bleached white sun of afternoon. Maeve herself was in police custody, of course, and her crew had either deserted or kept up their search for us. Daryus slowed, eyeing the ship curiously.

"Want to take a look around?" he asked.

"Not particularly," I replied, but an idea was forming in my back of my mind. "But what do you say we make sure Maeve can't chase us down later?"

Daryus raised an eyebrow. "What are you suggesting?"

"I don't know, exactly. Something to disable the ship long enough to stop Maeve following us." I didn't point out that Daryus and I didn't yet have a ship of our own; we were still hoping we'd be able to buy one somewhere along the docks, and if not, a fistful of jewels in exchange for passage would have to do.

We climbed aboard Maeve's ship, exploring the deck from bow to stern. It was trim and tidy, I'd give it that, but it had the heavy look of a cow wallowing in a muddy pool. "She might not be able to catch us anyway," Daryus said, obviously thinking along the same lines.

Even so, we went belowdecks, tentatively down past empty cabins and berths, into the ship's very lowest level. No bilges on an airship, of course, just the hold at one end, and at the other...

We could feel the vibrations long before we reached the engine room. A whole network of pipes and valves and machines filled the space, with wires and cables running up through the ceiling towards the wheel. And in the very centre, what had to be the sky engine, a gleaming mass of metal whirring with an ever-present hum of current and magnets. Being beside it made all the hairs on my arms stand up, and when I looked at Daryus, straggling strands of his otherwise cropped hair stood on end.

"What about this?" Daryus asked.

I looked at the thing uneasily. One wrong move and we could send the ship crashing to the ground; even if we hadn't been aboard, I wasn't quite ready for that scale of carnage. I circled the room instead, finally pointing to the mass of cables leading upwards. "What about these? They can't be easy to replace."

Daryus twanged one under his thumb, though it was under so much tension it barely moved at all. "Good choice. Stand back."

He drew out his sword, slicing first one cable, then another. They pinged into the air, frayed ends of twisted rope snapping against the cabin walls and then falling slack. In the end, Daryus left only two of a dozen, which I was fairly certain he chose at random. "They'll still have their sails," Daryus said, sheathing his sword again, "but I'm sure this'll slow them down."

"Good," I said, already making for the door. "Let's get out of here."

And that was when I saw it. Tucked into a corner beneath a panel of switches lay a locked chest, about the length of my foot. I pulled on it, only to find it nearly too heavy to lift – and for sound of coins clinking against coins to come quite audibly from inside.

"Could be everything Maeve owns," Daryus said contemplatively, helping me drag the chest into the light. A heavy iron chain followed it, looped around one of the thickest pipes of the sky engine. Yank the chain free, I suspected, and the ship would fall out of the sky.

There were, however, a pair of padlocks, one securing the chain and another holding the chest closed. I tapped the first with my finger. "What do you think?"

"I think," Daryus said, cracking his knuckles, "that's no match for me."

It took Daryus nearly a quarter of an hour with his picks before the padlock clicked open. Even then, we decided it was too great a risk to stay longer and open the second lock; instead, hoisting the chest between us, we made our way back up to the docks, clinking and jingling all the while. We'd made no conscious decision to steal Maeve's worldly wealth, I noticed, yet it had just seemed the thing to do. She, after all, had turned the hand of friendship against us and been ready to turn us in; not even Maharin had been so conniving.

We would, I supposed, have to do the same thing to Maharin's ship. "Let's just hope nobody sees us," I muttered, as we passed a sailor stretched out snoring on the deck of one of the ships. "Our luck can't hold forever."

And, sure enough, it didn't. By the time we reached the end of the docks, it became clear Maharin's ship was still occupied; with their captain captured, it appeared her crew had abandoned their hunt for us. We stared at it for a minute, taking in its sleek lines, its perfect poise, and wondering how on earth we were going to get past all those watchful eyes to disable the ship. Could we pay them off with Maeve's coin, perhaps?

We could, I realised suddenly, but not in that way – and from the grin on his face, Daryus had come to the same conclusion.

"What do you think?" he asked, with a nod towards Maharin's *Black Viper*. "Ready to become a pirate?"

I grinned back and shot him a salute with my free hand. "Aye, captain. Ready and willing."

***

It took less than an hour for Daryus and I to know we'd made the right decision. With the wind whipping past us and the sails snapping in the bright breeze, everything looked clearer, crystalline, more perfectly formed. We'd done it, really done it: we'd escaped Est'halin and our pursuers, and on what was now our very own airship.

The crew seemed more bemused than anything over our transition to owners of their vessel. They seemed to have no particular loyalty to Maharin who, as far as they were concerned, we'd out-witted fair and square – the coffer full of Maeve's coin we split between them went a long way toward healing any rifts, too. My pockets, on the other hand, felt strangely light after weeks of carrying all my wealth tucked into the linings. We'd paid a runner on the docks handsomely to deliver the jewels to Maharin on her release from police custody. Whilst I had a few doubts over whether they'd actually reach her, knowing we'd paid more than the ship was worth, even one as sublime as this, salved what little conscience I had the energy left to feel.

It helped, too, that the *Black Viper* was apparently in need of repairs Maharin hadn't been able to afford in some time. It was no wonder she'd been so keen to hit the trade routes around Est'halin harder than anyone else, or that she'd stirred up ill feeling in doing so – I'd have risked starting a war myself to maintain a ship as beautiful as this one.

We had indeed, after a brief discussion, appointed Daryus captain. He knew no more about the workings of an airship than I did, but he had the confidence and manners to fake it, and the crew seemed amused to have such a dandy at their head. Daryus wasn't, as far as I could tell, the only nobleman known to be slumming it as a pirate captain, and so the crew felt themselves to be in good company. As for our destination...

"South," Daryus had announced, to the pilot whose position I was already eyeing; it seemed the next best thing to being captain, after all, and I was eager to get my hands on the wheel. "How about... Numara."

That had gone down well enough, and so now we were speeding south across azure waves, Est'halin and everything it contained falling rapidly behind.

I didn't look back. I would have stopped myself even if I'd wanted to, but nothing could compel me to give my attention to the life I'd left behind. A whole new world lay before us, just over the horizon, and I wanted to drink it all in.

Daryus joined me at the bow. He had, for some unfathomable reason, stripped to the waist, apart from a silk sash into which he'd shoved his sword – he could, at first glance, have been a pirate all his life.

"Numara," I said to him, gesturing off to the south. "Why there?"

He shrugged. "First place that came to mind. It's a floating city, you know. Might be worth a

look."

'Worth a look'? Well, I supposed it would be that. "We need to rename the ship, make it harder for Maharin to find us."

"Maharin won't care, not when she gets her hands on those jewels," Daryus said dismissively. "But you're right, we do need a new name. Did you know, the Numarans have a goddess called Firene? She's supposed to be lithe and beautiful, just like this ship."

I knew the name, and I snorted in laughter. "We're not naming our ship after the goddess of falling."

Daryus laughed with me. "No, likely not. We'll think of something, though."

"We will." I flung an arm round Daryus' shoulders and closed my eyes, feeling a breeze heavy with sea spray and warm sun buffet my face. The world behind me didn't matter any more, not when we had this ship and a whole new future to look forwards to. A new future and, most importantly, our freedom.

Thank you for reading! I hope you enjoyed 'To The Skies', a prequel story to the Flight of the Lady Firene series. If you're reading this, you're probably already a member of my newsletter, which will keep you updated about the series, as well as my other new releases. If you've somehow missed the newsletter and want to sign up to get more goodies like this in the future, you can do so at amysanderson.co.uk/newsletter.

You can also find me at my blog, where I post more general news and writing tips, at amysanderson.co.uk/blog, or on Twitter @blueistari.

Want to know more about the series? Read on for the first chapter of 'The Sky Below', in which Fleet and Daryus have made themselves at home in the floating city of Numara, but are about to get more than they bargained for after raiding another pirate ship...


Amy Sanderson
The Sky Below
The Flight of the Lady Firene:
Book 1

CHAPTER ONE

The Lady Firene hovered in the shadow of ancient city walls, a construction of wood and canvas and iron floating as lightly as a feather. A little too lightly, in fact: I'd been watching the tips of her masts rise above those walls for several minutes when I could finally stand it no longer. I flicked open the speaking tube at my side and hissed into its depths, "We keep rising. Get that sky engine under control before we're seen."

An indistinct grumbling was my only reply, overridden by a voice behind me. "Don't start panicking, Fleet. You need to keep a level head in situations like these."

I turned to my brother with gritted teeth. "If you don't keep your voice down, being sighted will be the least of our problems."

Daryus stretched languorously. He was stripped to the waist like a boilerman and more than one pair of appreciative female eyes was turned his way. "You don't need to tell me what to do. I'm captain of this fine lady for a reason."

As if he needed to remind me. That 'reason' was Daryus' uncanny ability to attract the sort of low-lives that made the perfect airship crew and to keep them more-or-less in line. He was also terrible at reading maps, which meant if he'd been either pilot or navigator, we'd be halfway to Quent by now.

I left Daryus to his posing and moved to the bow. If I leaned out, my stomach pressed against the rail, I could just see past the crumbling walls that hid us. Our target, the Crystal Desert, was moored deeper in the ruins, but there was a buzz of activity around it now, men shinning up and down ropes and crates being hefted up onto the deck. It had been a lucrative haul, by the looks of things; there were rumours that Captain Izdubar was something of an amateur historian, as he had an unerring knack for finding ruins that had been previously been overlooked – and thus not yet looted. Historian or not, Izdubar's scholarly research was about to turn into our lucky day.

I was alerted to Daryus' renewed presence by the spyglass he rested on my shoulder. I pushed it away. "Put that down before it catches the light."

Daryus squinted in the direction of the rival ship. "They haven't set a watch. They're convinced they're alone. Don't be so paranoid, Fleet."

I snatched the dangling spyglass and retreated into the shade. Through it, I could see the Crystal Desert, only a handful of crates still on the ground beneath it. Captain Izdubar cut a flamboyant, red-coated figure at the prow. He was waving one arm around and the faint echo of his shouted orders reached me.

"He's making ready to sail," I relayed, but Daryus was already shouting orders into the speaking tubes. I winced at the noise, thankful the wind was blowing from Izdubar's direction.

Our crew had been ready and watchful before, but now they swarmed over the deck, preparing for the attack. Daryus gave orders with the assured nature of a man whose commands are always followed – because they were usually good ones, though the very best came from me. Sighing, I went to the wheel, where I found my fingers reaching unconsciously for the charms looped around its gleaming spokes.

"Heathen superstition," a laughing voice to my left said.

The woman standing there was as scruffy as the rest of us, but I didn't think I'd ever catch Jasmine wearing a charm against her black skin. She was too practical, too prosaic, and surprisingly staid for a pirate – but then this life attracted all sorts, and I couldn't deny she was handy with a sword.

I tapped the largest of the charms, a shark's tooth capped in silver. "It's never let me down yet."

"How do you know?" Jasmine was smirking in an irritating fashion.

"I'm not dead," I replied.

Daryus was shouting orders in my direction. The Crystal Desert had pulled away from the ruins, rendering stealth unnecessary. I flicked the bank of levers to open both the sails and the engines, and the Lady Firene shot forwards. A whoop went up from the crew, Daryus' shout louder than the rest. I could feel my own heart sing as the Lady flew from the shadows, white sails billowing.

A horn sounded, distorted by the wind but not masking the accompanying shouts. I smelt the burnt sugar scent of gunpowder.

"They're readying cannons," someone shouted – Jasmine, I thought.

I spun the wheel and the Lady banked smoothly in response. There was a thundering crack and the air filled with smoke, but the cannons went far wide as I sailed the Lady Firene easily out of their reach, then curved her back towards our prey.

We were closing quickly, the Crystal Desert too laden down with plunder to pull ahead. Not that she would ever outrun the Lady Firene anyway, I thought gleefully. No ship could.

"Grapples at the ready." That was Daryus, still bare-chested but trailing a red scarf from his neck as he prepared to lead the charge. For all his inadequacies – and I could string together a whole list of them – Daryus was always fearless in the face of danger when he had a crew at his back and a few drinks in his belly.

We were nearly upon the Desert now and I swung us broadside, cutting power to the engines. Our enemy had withdrawn their cannons to avoid sending us both up in a fireball of lit gunpowder. With a chorus of shouts and war chants, the crew began to swing across.

I nudged the wheel, bringing the two ships closer still. There was a shudder as they brushed each other, then a solid crack as the gap closed entirely. I locked the wheel, made sure the ship was steady, then finally ran to starboard. I couldn't risk leaving the Lady in case a swift retreat was needed, but I wanted to see what was going on.

Despite their motley nature, the Lady's crew were skilled pirates and knew their trade. The Desert's deck was a mess and the fighting had been fierce, but now its men and women were mostly on their knees, tied to masts or railings. Daryus never had the heart for bloodshed on a serious scale; where other captains would order whole crews put to the sword, he preferred to cripple their vessels and leave them stranded. He was a skilled swordsman when he had to be, though, and he'd backed Izdubar right to the prow of the ship, their swords weaving a flashing pattern in the bright air.

There was a pause and both swords drew back. Izdubar glanced over his shoulder then lifted one foot onto the rail, apparently prepared to abandon his ship if it meant escape. I tried to shout a warning but my tongue had stuck to the roof of my parched mouth, and I could only watch in horror as Izdubar began to plummet.

He'd been too slow, though. Daryus lunged, catching him by the back of his coat and hauling him aboard again. There was a shout of appreciation from our crew at that, and when Jasmine tied the captured Izdubar to the mainmast, it was with a touch more zeal than necessary.

Daryus began shouting orders again. A resonant clanking sounded from the depths of the ship as hammers were taken to the engines of the Crystal Desert. No real damage would be done – we had no wish to consign the Desert's crew to dehydration in this vast desert, and we wouldn't slash the sails as some pirates were known to do – but they'd be delayed by putting everything back together and would never catch us when we fled.

With the Lady Firene's crew swarming back aboard, hauling crates of stolen goods, I clambered over the railings to our rival ship. Daryus was posing by the mainmast, Izdubar's striking red coat hanging open around his bare chest.

"You look like a gigolo," I informed him.

At our feet, Izdubar snorted, but my brother shrugged. "Nothing wrong with that, sister. Gigolos get all the girls."

I raised an eyebrow. "The whores and those desperate enough to pay," I replied, thinking Daryus was missing the point, but it made no difference. My brother wasn't choosy when it came to women: he loved them all equally, whores included. It really was love, too, although only the abstract 'love thy neighbour' kind that only added to his charisma. Love had never really pained Daryus, which to my mind meant he'd never truly loved at all.

Izdubar coughed and I looked down. The Captain has sustained a bruise on his cheekbone, already ripening to the colour of a plum.

"A nice little souvenir to show your merchant buddies," I said.

Izdubar spat at my feet, although his aim was terrible. "I'm no merchant. You wouldn't have come for me if I was." He was referring to the Lady Firene's reputation for only preying on other predators, a scruple that Daryus and I agreed on. Izdubar was a known pirate and raider of ancient ruins, and he'd caused more destruction in the past two months than we had in two years.

Daryus scuffed the deck with his boot. "You might as well be a merchant with this old tub. Get yourself a proper ship, Izzy."

Izdubar growled and Daryus stalked off, hauling himself up a rope and swinging back to our own ship. I was about to follow when Izdubar called me back.

"You're Felicity du Bois, aren't you?"

I contemplated a swift kick to his crotch, but restrained myself. "Fleet, actually. Fleet Manteios."

"Ah yes, I've heard the name. I've also heard that you stand ever in your brother's shadow. Why not be a captain yourself?"

I'd asked myself the same question, once or twice, and come to the conclusion that Daryus made a better captain than I ever could. Leadership just wasn't in my nature. Besides, Izdubar was only angling for me to loosen his bonds. "I don't like working with people," I replied.

Izdubar paused. He had to squint against the sun to see me and I didn't bother to move my shadow over his face. "Fleet, I have a favour to ask," he said. "There's something amongst the plunder from the ruins. Only a little something, a trinket, but I was hoping to give it to my wife. Could I trouble you to retrieve it for me?"

A trinket for his wife? My eyes narrowed. I've never heard of Izdubar being married, and besides, pirates were greedy bastards. If the captain wanted something now, it was for his own damn hide.

"What sort of trinket?"

"A small sphere of blown glass, just the size to sit in a lady's palm. A purplish colour inside, darkly tinted on the outside."

It didn't sound valuable, I had to admit, but Daryus was shouting orders and I realised I was the only one left aboard the Crystal Desert – apart from its ill-fated crew, at least. I threw Izdubar a mock salute. "Sorry, Captain, your lady wife will have to do without."

I scrambled back to my own ship then ran to the wheel, Izdubar yelling after me. I ignored him. Within moments, I'd eased the Lady Firene away from our subdued foe. The shouts and songs of our victorious crew sprang into the air as we pulled away, making for the heart of the undulating desert

and a berth to enjoy our prize.

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We moored in the shadow of a statue overnight. It was a colossal thing of pale sandstone, sitting on a weathered throne. The hands held a sceptre and I assumed it depicted an ancient king, but the effect of magnificence was diminished by the statue's head lying face down in the sand, allowing some kind of large bird to make a nest in the stump of the neck. The king's striking barrel chest was now streaked with guano.

At dawn, I made my way on deck, one of the first to do so. The Lady was facing east, toward the paling sky; her sky engines still thrummed quietly, keeping us aloft. Behind us, the night remained dark and pricked with diamond stars. And with distant, flickering lights much lower to the ground.

I leaned a little further over the rail, squinting into the distance. Could that really be what I thought? Why hadn't any of the watch seen it? A quick scan of the deck was sufficient to answer that: the three watchmen were asleep in a huddle at the foot of the mainmast.

I kicked them awake with a shout. They grumbled to their feet and gave a half-hearted salute; they already knew their beloved Captain Daryus would never wake them so early after a successful raid.

"Get your arses up there and look west," I said. "Tell me what you see."

I waited, watching as their shoulders tightened. They were debating whether to tell me what they could see and risk getting into trouble for not spotting it sooner.

"It's another ship," I said, before they could decide. "And it's following us."

Relieved that I wasn't screaming at them in a murderous rage, they peeled away from the rail. Seconds later, the alarm bell was ringing and the rest of the sleep-dishevelled crew were appearing on deck. Daryus was in their midst, shirt unbuttoned and feet bare. He grunted at me and yawned. "Perfectly attired as always, sister. It's as if you never left the ballrooms of Requies."

I scowled at him. "There's a ship coming up from the west. Could be Izdubar."

Daryus squinted at the horizon. The sky had faded into a grey-blue murk, taking the lights with it. "We crippled the Desert," he said dubiously.

"We dismantled her engines," I argued. "Which Izdubar could have fixed by now."

"We beat Izzy fair and square."

"Fair? Who said anything about fair? If Izdubar wants his plunder back, he's only to come and get it."

"All right." Determination flooded into Daryus' voice. "If Izdubar wants a chase, he'll get it. The Lady can outrun him easily. Fleet, bring us about."

"Yes, Captain." I ran to the wheel, and with a quick rattle of my charms, began to swing the ship around. There was little in the way of a breeze to propel us by sail, but the main engines thundered to life. As their vibrations rattled up through the ship and into the soles of my feet, the Lady Firene pulled away from her statue berth and surged towards the rays of the rising sun.

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An hour, maybe less, at my best guess. I glanced at the sky again, aware I'd been checking the sun's position compulsively, charting how long we could keep running before we were caught. There was no doubt now that our pursuer was indeed the Crystal Desert, or that she was moving faster than we'd believed her capable. We'd both caught the same breeze, with engines running too, but Izdubar's ship was inexorably catching up.

"This isn't possible," Daryus snarled, yet again. He stamped his foot irritably. "The Desert doesn't have that kind of speed. The Lady is faster."

"She used to be," I said. Our rivals were perhaps a mile away now, speeding low over the dunes.

"But the Desert is so clumsy," Daryus complained, to which I had to agree. The Crystal Desert was an ugly, bulky ship, twice the size of the sleek and nimble Lady.

"Daryus, they're going to catch us. Stop whining and think of a plan."

"A plan?"

"There has to be a way out of this. There always is." I was aware of how desperate I sounded, but Daryus hadn't noticed. His face was screwed up in concentration.

"We'll make for Numara," he said. "Izdubar won't dare attack us there."

I shrugged. Not the most lucrative of markets for our goods, but piracy, or at least pirate feuds taken onto city streets, were punishable by hanging in the floating coastal city of Numara. It was also the closest thing to home Daryus and I had found in a long time, and there's something to be said for familiarity when you're in a bind. "Probably not. We have to outrun them first though."

"Well, then." Daryus had a gleam in his eye. I knew it too well, because it was mirrored on my own face. "Let's put our fair lady through her paces."

I flicked open the speaking tube leading to the engine room. "How much more speed can you give me?"

A low chuckle echoed up. This wasn't, after all, the first time I'd made such a request. "It's going to be one of those days, huh, Fleet?"

"Something like that. How much?"

There was a moment's silence, followed by the ringing noise of a metal tool being dropped. "You

push the speed and I'll push the engines to match," came the reply. "Let's see how far the Lady will go."

I wasn't sure whether to be reassured by the answer, but I pressed the lever up anyway. The Lady Firene surged forward, the extra speed vibrating through her hull. I grinned, my hair whipping back behind me and tangling with the scarf around my neck. "How's that?" I asked Daryus.

If I'd expected elation, I was disappointed. Daryus was staring fixedly behind us, to where the Crystal Desert had just accelerated to match our speed. No, not to match us, I realised with a cold, sinking feeling in my stomach. To overtake us.

"We have to start jettisoning," I said.

Daryus actually groaned. He put a hand to his forehead as if in pain. "We can't."

"It's that or let Izdubar catch us. Do you think he'll be as lenient as we were?"

Daryus' lips pressed into a white line. "No. We can still outrun him."

He strode off, leaving me muttering curses under my breath. I pressed the Lady's speed still further and she responded, but the vibrations rose to match. A coil of rope behind me began to shake out of its neat heap and snake across the deck, hitting a carelessly placed bucket, which went flying over the edge of the ship. Even over the noise of the engines, I could hear the rattling of the crew's belongings and our carefully stowed loot.

Half an hour later, the Desert was closer still, large enough to be visible around my fingers when I raised a hand to block her out. When Daryus stood beside me, the Crystal Desert's masts protruded above his head. I could hear her crew now, too, shouting obscenities at us. I tried not to listen too closely, because it was clear they were baying for our blood.

Beyond Daryus, the crew were assembling on deck, dragging between them crates of plunder. Daryus eyed them silently, until Jasmine stepped forward.

"You're making the decision for me, are you?" he asked.

Jasmine saluted. "Sorry, Captain. We know how much you wanted this. We did, too, but we value our hides more."

"So we jettison it." Daryus' voice was flat.

"There are always other ships to take. Izdubar got the better of us this time, but if we throw this lot overboard, he can't have it either."

Daryus seemed cheered by the idea, and perhaps a vision of Izdubar grubbing around in the sand to collect his stolen-then-discarded plunder. He made an expansive gesture. "Jettison away."

With much gusto and even more pained sighing, the crew began to heave the crates over the ship's

rails. They tumbled away behind us in glitteringly beautiful cascades, flashing gold and red and white in the sun. A howl went up from the Crystal Desert. Heartened still more, Daryus began to move one of the crates. Tying the Lady's wheel into position, I went to help him.

We shoved the crate towards the railing and stood looking down at it. Daryus bent to run his fingers through the pile of gold coins. "A shame. A damn shame."

"But better than handing it back to Izdubar?"

"Absolutely."

We bent to the crate, heaving it under the railing. As it began to tip, Daryus gave a shout and lunged forward, trying to pull the thing back. Swearing profusely, I grabbed hold of his stolen coat, pulling him back before he toppled off the deck. The crate went anyway, spinning away through the air in a stream of gold.

"Changed your mind?" I panted, as Daryus found his feet.

Dropping to a crouch, Daryus appeared to be balancing himself against something heavy. Something cradled in his cupped palms, I realised, that made the faintest of purple glows under the shadow of his chin.

"What is that?" I peered into his hands, but Daryus closed his fingers. "Oh, don't be so bloody childish. I don't want it."

Daryus looked up at me suspiciously, then uncurled his fingers. I took a deep breath, restraining myself from snatching the object from his hands. It had been a lie to say I didn't want it, at any rate.

"It was in the crate, buried beneath the coins," Daryus whispered. "But I couldn't let it fall. Not this."

Lying in his hand was a glass ball two inches across, darkly tinted and with a swirling radiance inside. I recalled Izdubar's words – a trinket for his wife. Quite some trinket, and he'd known it as well as Daryus did. Why had he even let it out of his sight?

"Captain." Jasmine was approaching, sending Daryus into a fluster as he dropped the glass ball into his pocket and stood. I had to forcibly pull my eyes away from the lump it made against the scarlet fabric.

"What is it, Jasmine?"

She pointed, behind us. The Lady Firene had put on a burst of speed as we'd lessened her weight, but somehow – miraculously – Izdubar's vessel had stayed with us. Not only that, they were still gaining.

"We have nothing left to jettison," Jasmine said.

"Fleet." Daryus turned to me, eyes beseeching. "You have to get us out of this."

My jaw dropped open. Me? But of course. I was the pilot. If I couldn't out-fly my counterpart on the Desert, we were lost.

A glance at the horizon made a plan unfold like a flower in my mind. Only minutes away at our current speed were the sand-caked protuberances of buildings. Although their outliers were wind-worn and rounded, in the middle distance there were greater heights, the remains of a settlement or temple complex like the one Izdubar had raided.

I grinned at Daryus. "You'd better hold onto something."

The Sky Below

The Flight of the Lady Firene: Book 1

When Fleet and her brother Daryus raid the airship of a rival pirate, the last thing they expect is to end up fleeing for their lives with only a single trinket to show for it. A return to the floating city of Numara in the hope of a safe haven also turns sour, as the city comes under siege from within. Shape-shifting wolves, sea monsters, and strange murders committed by even stranger creatures plague Numara, and Fleet's 'trinket' seems to be at the heart of it all.

Soon, she's attracting the wrong sort of attention from every quarter: vengeful pirate captains, priestesses, her estranged husband – and the mysterious Shan, who knows more than he's letting on. As Numara fractures around her, Fleet is left facing the possibility that the item she carries is the greatest threat she's ever known, and it's going to tear the city apart.

You can find *The Sky Below* on multiple online retailers - full details HERE.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Amy has been writing for as long as she can remember, inspired by a childhood fascination with books. By the time she was fifteen and confronted with school 'careers guidance', she'd decided being an author was the only profession she could possibly enjoy - which, of course, led to a string of other roles, including Archaeology student, bookseller and library assistant. These days, she lives in the North Yorkshire countryside with her partner, where they run a bed & breakfast business and smallholding. When she's not working or writing, Amy enjoys reading, gaming, photography, and trying to pretend she's a grown-up.

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