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THE WICKED SHIP



On the vast ocean, inside the rotting ship, behind the locked door with the barred window, Cori was trying to escape again.

Sunrise must have been a while away yet, because the *Harridan's* hold was cooler than during the day, and utterly dark. The ship was quieter, too. Instead of her crewmates' voices or footsteps, Cori heard only the timbers creaking, and the scuffling of rats, and the smelly bilge water sloshing below her.

She had given up on trying to fall asleep. She'd spent most of the night shifting around on the wooden floor, with her body hurting in all the bony places. Instead, she was reaching through the bars of the lazarette, trying to pick the padlock with a bent

iron nail. She had to stand on tiptoe and strain her arm to reach the keyhole, because the nail was short, and so was she.

Not for the first time, she wished she could see what she was doing. With a dose of night-sight potion, or the natural power to see in the dark, or a magical artifice like the captain's, she could have got the lock undone by now.

Still, fumbling in the dark passed the time better than sulking did. And if she succeeded, Cori would achieve two great things.

Firstly, she could creep into the ship's kitchen at the other end of the hold. She was painfully hungry. Since she'd been locked in the lazarette the day before yesterday, her only meals had been cold rice, and not much of it.

More importantly, breaking out would prepare her for her *real* escape. She could tell by the rise and fall of the waves under the *Harridan* that the ship was sailing in open water, probably far away from land. But the next time Cori got the chance to run, she was determined to be ready, even if a locked door stood in her way.

She deserved real freedom.

She deserved revenge on this ship, and all the crew.

But for now, she would be content with a snack.

She stretched her arm to reach further. The crooked nail lodged inside the keyhole. She gasped with excitement and gave it a jiggle.

Footsteps thudded on the cannon deck above Cori's head.

She flinched. The nail slipped from her fingertips and clinked on the floor.

'Sink it!' she swore. She dropped to her knees and felt under the door, but her fingers only picked up dirt from the floorboards.

The footsteps came closer. Cori's chest tightened with dread. The *Harridan's* first mate, Blare, had a wooden leg. The rhythm of her walk was unlike anyone else's on board.

Cori quickly lay down on her side, as if she'd been asleep. She could not let Blare suspect that she had even *imagined* a way out of the lazarette. What would bring the first mate down to the hold at this time of night, anyway? Cori couldn't remember

making any noise that could have reached the upper decks and disturbed her.

The shadows of the window bars appeared on the wall as Blare and her dim lantern descended into the hold. ‘Wake up, Roach!’

The *Harridan’s* crew all went by nicknames they’d coined for one another. Cori didn’t mind hers anymore. Roaches were tough.

Blare banged her fist on the door of the lazarette. Cori rolled over, squinting against the light. Behind the bars, the grimy lantern threw stark shadows on the first mate’s wide red face. ‘Up you get. The captain has a job for you.’

As Cori sat up, she made a show of sleepily stretching her amber-brown arms above her head. It bought her a little time to think. Her stay in the lazarette was meant to last three days, not two – but she didn’t dare to hope that her punishment was being cut short. It was more likely that Blare and the captain wanted to make it worse for her, replacing sleep with some awful chore.

‘What kind of job?’ she asked. It was probably something dull and gruelling, like picking apart

tangled ropes until her fingers ached. Or maybe Blare and the captain would send Cori to patch up leaks in the ship's timbers with tar, which gave off foul fumes that burned her eyes and throat.

Blare's keys jangled as she fiddled with the padlock. 'I'll let the captain explain.' She opened the door but blocked the way with her body. 'First, I want to hear that you've learned your lesson.'

Cori folded her hands in her lap and tried to look regretful. 'I'm very sorry for breaking my pledge of loyalty to the *Harridan* and her crew.'

Blare did not move out of the way. 'Which parts of the pledge?'

Cori had only read the yellowed scroll once, when she'd first signed it, but it had been quoted to her many times. She had memorised the words she was supposed to say. '*We forbid keeping secrets or hiding loot from our crewmates*,' she recited. 'I picked butter seeds the last time we went ashore, and I didn't share them.'

'And what else?'

'*We forbid fighting one another with fists, magic or weapons*,' Cori said. 'Except I didn't do that.'

Blare's frown lines deepened. 'You bit your crewmate, you little nit.'

'The pledge doesn't mention teeth.' The mention of nits made Cori feel itchy. She raked her fingernails through her dark hair. 'Anyway, he started it when he snatched my bag of butter seeds and put me in a headlock. That's against the pledge, too. *We forbid stealing from our crewmates.*'

'It also says to follow orders from the captain, the first mate and the crew's majority vote,' Blare said. 'And as the first mate, I'm ordering *you* not to bite your crewmates. Next time, we just might decide that we'd rather maroon you on a sandbar and leave you to die of thirst. Count yourself lucky that no one else wants to do your job.'

Cori didn't want to do her job, either. She didn't say so, in case that counted as defying orders. 'I won't break the pledge again, I swear.'

Blare snorted. 'Don't give me that bilge.' But she stood aside and held the door open. 'Don't keep the captain waiting, now.'

As Cori climbed the stairs to the cannon deck, the timbers groaned under her bare feet. The sound

often made her imagine that the *Harriidan* was complaining, like the type of cranky old woman the ship was named for. Cori winced at the loudest creaks. Above the massive iron cannons, her crewmates snored in their hammocks. She would make herself even more unpopular if she woke them.

Cori ascended another staircase to the maindeck. A fresh breeze rippled through her tunic and breeches. The big yellow moon and the small pink moon were both full, at opposite sides of the sky. The ship's three masts, with their complicated web of rigging, towered above her. Even at this time of night, a few people stood around the maindeck, glancing up at the ropes and sails occasionally as they chatted among themselves. A ship on the move looked graceful and effortless, but in reality, her crew had to watch and adjust her sails all the time, making the wind work for them.

The rigging creaked above Cori's head. She whirled on the spot to see a lanky silhouette against the starry sky. Moonlight glittered on the metal claws he wore to replace his missing fingers.

'There she is,' he said, in a low sly voice. 'The

midnight snack that bites back.’ He dropped to the deck. Cori could see the bruised circle, dotted with scabs, that her teeth had left on his arm.

She backed away. ‘Get sunk, Nails. The captain wants me for something important.’

Nails chuckled. ‘I’m sure he does. Feeding the crew is *very* important.’ His favourite taunt was to tell her that if the ship ran out of food, the crew would eat her to survive. Cori could not trust that it was a joke.

She headed towards another stairway, which led up to the foredeck. The sound of footsteps came with her. ‘Stop following me.’ She tried to sound bored, instead of scared.

‘Nah,’ Nails said. ‘The captain called for me, too.’

Cori heard a heavy tread from further behind her. She glanced back and recognised the burly form of a sailor named Dirk coming up from the darkness of the cannon deck. He had broken the pledge recently, too, by smoking his pipe near the gunpowder room – a *very* bad idea.

Cori frowned. The captain often sent small groups of the crew on pointless, dangerous scouting

missions – up cliffs, down canyons, through rivers and swamps and caves. She suspected it was an odd form of punishment, more than a search for anything real, because he tended to pick people who had stepped out of line lately. But the captain never usually summoned people for these missions at night. Why, then, had he called on her, Dirk and Nails now?

Cori reached the foredeck.

Captain Scrimshaw stood at the railing, staring towards the horizon. His long jacket and silver braid waved in the wind. In his palm, he held a large jewelled pendant shaped like a teardrop or a pip.

The jewel, framed by golden metal, was glowing. Cori had seen the captain's pendant glow before – but only faintly, like luminous algae or mushrooms. Now, its turquoise light was as bright as a candle flame.

She was so amazed that she forgot why she had been called. 'Captain,' she exclaimed, 'is *that* what's meant to happen? Have you actually found it this time?'

Captain Scrimshaw turned to look at her.

His face was like a weathered cliff. The ends of his moustache were braided into his shaggy silver beard. One of his eyes was covered by a delicate device made of glass lenses in golden rings. The metal contained glister, the magic element. With this artifice, he could see in darkness as clearly as in daylight. He could see the tiniest scratches on a coin, or a gull perching on the mast of a distant ship. And it felt as if he could see into Cori's heart and knew exactly how little it was worth.

'You say that as if you doubted me,' the captain said crisply.

'No, Captain,' Cori lied. 'It's just ... I've never seen your jewel do that before.'

'Nor have I, Roach. But I take it as an excellent sign.' As Dirk and Nails came up the stairs, the captain pointed out to sea. 'That's Fin Island. We'll be landing at the village there.'

Cori could only see the stars, the moons and the rolling waves.

'Most of the island is covered by dense jungle,' the captain said. 'You three will be cutting a track through it. Prepare the necessary supplies.'

He slipped the golden chain over his head and let the pendant fall onto his hairy chest. It rose and fell as the captain sighed in satisfaction. ‘Today, at last, the weapon will be ours.’