



I don't need to dissect the bird to know how it died. I watched it fly straight into the mast moments ago, its limp body falling to the deck, its fragmented skull rattling beneath my fingers as I picked it up. But its death isn't what interests me. I want to know how it lived.

At the first incision blood trickles down the black feathers on to my fingers. It's still warm. I wipe it away. Not because I'm squeamish, but because I want to see beyond, to the tiny organs hidden behind delicate bones. My previous attempts at this have taught me that my touch has to be gentle. One slip and the fragile body collapses in on itself, keeping its secrets buried within.

The knock on my door is unexpected and makes me jump. Cursing the unwanted interruption, I wrap the bird in a cloth and hide it in the nearby chest, not caring that the blood might seep out on to my belongings. Being discovered would be far worse.

Wiping my hands clean, I open the door as little as possible, in case I've overlooked any incriminating evidence, but it's just one of the crew, and his reluctance to be here is obvious.

'Captain wants to see you,' he says.

‘Thank you,’ I reply, and he hurries away.

Having learned a long time ago not to keep the Captain waiting, I give my clothes a cursory glance for stains, pause briefly to wash away the remaining traces of blood from under my nails, and make my way through the ship to his quarters.

Some of the crew greet me as I pass; a few don’t acknowledge me at all, but it doesn’t bother me. Respect has to be earned among Snakes, and I have done nothing to gain theirs yet.

Three of them are huddled together, whispering. They turn their backs to me as I pass, excluding me from the conversation, but their voices carry.

‘I heard there are still Mages in the West that can melt the flesh from your bones with a single word.’

My own skin prickles at the mere mention of magic. Real or not, I think I’d rather be on my way to see a Mage than the Captain right now, however cruel the stories say they were.

Outside the Captain’s cabin, someone is waiting for me. Bronn, the most lethal man on board, stands guard. His sleeves are rolled up and I try very hard not to look at his deeply tanned arms; they’re strong and deadly, but I also know how gentle they can be. They once made me feel safe. Now they exist only to protect his captain and to carry out his loathsome orders. I swallow back the bitterness that is quick to rise.

When he hears me approaching, Bronn turns and nods in a barely perceptible greeting. ‘He’s expecting you,’ he says, and opens the door, gesturing for me to enter.

The room is designed to intimidate captured foes, and I hate almost everything about it, especially the grotesque display of body parts exhibited in jars on a shelf. The smell of death lingers in the air, which, I suppose, is the intention.

Sitting at his table – surrounded by treasures and trophies that speak of his dominance over the Eastern Isles, his sea vulture Talon looming alert on a perch behind him – is the Captain.

My father.

He is not alone. Standing beside him is his first mate and oldest friend, Cleeve, whom I’m supposed to address as Uncle, but struggle to, because he’s a bloodthirsty lecher and I detest him.

In front of the desk two members of the crew flank a woman who is in shackles and has been badly beaten. I recognise her as one of our newer recruits, although her name momentarily escapes me.

Bronn moves silently across the room to stand on the other side of my father. Sensing I’m not going to like what’s about to happen, I dig deep to keep my voice steady as I speak. ‘You wanted to see me?’

My father’s solitary eye meets mine, a messy scar where the other should be. His heavily lined face reveals

no emotion. ‘Marianne, thank you for joining us.’ He says it in a way that suggests I’ve been keeping them waiting, despite my prompt attendance. Typical. ‘I want your judgement on a matter that has arisen concerning a member of our crew.’

He beckons to the men, and the shackled Snake is roughly shoved towards me, so I cannot help but smell fear mingled with her sweat and blood.

‘This scum,’ my father continues, ‘was caught stealing water from the barrel.’

My heart sinks. Stealing from the rations is a grave offence, and I don’t like to think of the punishments this poor woman has already received. Anders, that’s her name. I feel relieved to have remembered.

‘What do you suggest we do with this thief?’ The question is so heavily loaded that the room begins to spin.

Aware all eyes are fixed on me, waiting for my response, ready to judge any sign of weakness, I take a deep breath. My eyes meet the accused’s and I see the desperation in them, the hope I might be lenient. I cannot pardon her, that much is clear. It occurs to me that perhaps a thief should lose a limb befitting the crime – her hand maybe, or her tongue? I almost laugh out loud – the notion of me commanding such a thing is ludicrous. But this is no laughing matter.

‘Her crime is serious,’ I say, hoping my voice sounds as authoritative as I intend it to, ‘and cannot be excused.’

I face my father and glimpse a flicker of triumph in his eye. ‘Throw her in the brig, then leave her behind on the next sandbar we pass. Let her see how thirsty she is then.’

The spark of satisfaction seeps away from my father’s face at the delivery of my sentence. I have failed. This isn’t what my father wanted to hear. I glance across at Bronn, hoping to see something suggesting comprehension, admiration, respect. But his face is set like stone as always, revealing nothing, and anger simmers painfully inside me. Like I care what he thinks anyway.

Anders seems to sense her fate has been sealed and she begins to plead with my father, begging for forgiveness until one of her captors silences her with a harsh blow across the cheek.

Father turns to Cleeve. ‘Do it.’

A cruel grin flashes across Cleeve’s face as he steps out from behind the table. In no more than three steps he has reached the prisoner and slit her throat. Talon flaps his wings, though whether out of protest or approval it’s impossible to tell. Such a quick decision – such brutality – makes me sick, but I force myself to watch. After all, that is why I am here. Death was always going to be Anders’ sentence; it was just that my father hoped I would give the order. He knows this is not the first time I have witnessed the light diminish in someone’s eyes as life drains away – he has made me watch countless times – but he believes forcing me to endure what he deems

necessary will change me. What he does not comprehend is I do not wish to change.

‘Clean this mess up.’

My father’s men instantly respond, dragging the corpse from the room. It leaves a blood trail behind it as if the body is trying to send out one final message for help. It will be ignored, erased.

When only the two of us remain in his cabin my father turns to me, and I expect to feel the full force of his anger. Instead he says nothing, which is decidedly more sinister. I wish the others hadn’t left. When he eventually does speak, his voice is dangerously soft. ‘You knew what I wanted you to do.’

‘I did.’ No point in denying it.

‘Then why, Marianne? Why do you continue to resist?’

How do I answer? I cannot admit the truth, not to him, not ever. Not if I want to continue breathing. So instead I give him an approximation of what he wants to hear. ‘I am trying, Father. One day I’ll be able to give the orders you wish.’ My voice shakes slightly through the lie but he doesn’t seem to notice.

He strides over to his window, staring out at the inky sea.

‘Do you remember when you were young? You used to sit in here with me, lining up toy boats on my charts before sending them into battle. You would melt my

sealing wax in the candle and pour it over them. For the blood, you'd say. I should have had you thrashed because you ruined so many papers. But I didn't. You showed such promise and I was proud.'

'I think my fingers still have the burn marks,' I say with half a smile.

'And yet you have allowed your potential to rot away, until nothing remains but your weakness. You know what this means, don't you? You know what you are forcing me to do?'

Of course I do. My quiet defiance has always come at a cost. My father holds out his dagger for me.

'Please,' I say, not wanting to do this. Not again. 'I promise. I'll try harder. Next time—'

'Take it.' It's not just an order; it's a challenge.

Still I refuse, desperate to talk my way out of this. 'If you give me another chance—'

My father is in front of me in a heartbeat, his face in mine as he roughly pulls me towards him, the blade too close to my skin. He's breathing fast, enraged by my insolence, and slowly he lowers the dagger to rest it in my hand.

I'm shaking as he takes a step back to perch on the edge of his desk. There's no escape. There never is.

'Do it.' His voices trembles with excitement.

Shame burns my cheeks as I raise the blade and bring it down into the soft flesh of my palm. Beads of blood

rise quickly to the surface, before slowly tracing their way round my hand and dripping to the floor.

‘It gives me no pleasure to see you do this,’ my father says, though his sadistic smile suggests otherwise. ‘But it is for your own good.’

He says this every time he makes me purge my body of frailty and indecision. I used to believe him. Now I simply do what I must to survive.

It doesn’t hurt much, not really, as only a little blood is required. Just a small cut. Just enough to remind me of his authority. Just enough to humiliate. I listen as he gives me the usual speech about how he’s only seeking to protect me, that I’m my own worst enemy, how if I only obeyed him I could save myself pain, before ending it with the same old words . . .

‘We’re warriors, Marianne. And warriors aren’t weak.’

He walks over to reclaim his dagger and it sickens me how on some level I’m still seeking his approval, wanting to return to that time when I adored him, before I feared him. He steps back, turning from me, and I hate that he makes me feel so small. So nothing.

Reaching into one of his many chests, he pulls a pile of material from it and holds it out. ‘This is for you.’

Slightly confused, I take it from him, careful not to get any blood on it. Silky soft and aqua green, this is no Snake garb. Shaking out the folded fabric I see that, though it’s a gown, it couldn’t be more different from the

one I'm wearing; lines of embroidery mimic the ocean's waves, pearls embellish the cuffs and neckline. I cannot think of a more unsuitable garment to wear aboard a ship.

'We are soon to receive an important guest. I need you to impress him. Can you do that?'

'Of course.' Finally an order I can actually obey.

'Good. Go and get changed. I'll send for you later.'

And knowing I've been dismissed I turn to leave, taking care not to slip in the blood that precedes me.

Desperate for air, I head up on deck. As I weave between Snakes waxing the boards to protect them from decay, a gust of wind catches my skirt, sending it billowing in front of me. Wearing a dress is an impracticality I learned to deal with a long time ago, ostensibly an outward sign to all we meet that I'm not yet an official member of the crew. But as I've never seen anyone else be made to wear one, I'm inclined to think it's another of my father's torments. No one but me cares that it's forever dragging in the pools of water that naturally occur on board and is sopping wet most of the time. I can hardly wait to trade it for an even more impractical one. I stare up at the rigging, the light glinting off the harpoon mounted on top of the mainmast, and cannot tell from this distance the men from the women. How I long to shed these wretched petticoats and join them.

My palm stings, and I curl my hand into a fist, hoping no one will notice my latest shaming. They won't. The truth is, no one pays me enough attention to care; at times it's easy to believe I'm invisible on this ship.

Anders' death has rattled me, even though it's nothing new. I was six when I saw my first execution. Well, the first one I remember anyway. Everybody had congregated at the ship's helm, the atmosphere so menacing that despite my youth I sensed something was terribly wrong.

The man had been dragged up from the brig, where he'd clearly been for some time. He was in a wretched state: emaciated, beaten, filthy. The wind carried his stench to where I stood and made me gag.

The Captain had towered over the cowering man and told us all of his betrayal, how he'd failed to carry out an assignment entrusted to him. I hadn't really understood what was happening until the Captain grabbed him by the hair and slashed his throat. Always the throat. He likes a savage death, my father. The man had dropped to his knees before falling forward, blood bubbling from the wound to surround his body with a strange and deathly halo.

I didn't see a captain reprimanding a disobedient crewmember; I saw my father committing the murder of an unarmed man. And I'd cried.

It was the wrong reaction. My father was furious with me, both for disappointing and humiliating him.

Punishments had followed, the worst of which was having to clean the congealed mess left behind once the corpse had been flung into the deep waters. Who knew a dress could absorb so much of a man?

Perhaps that is why even now the memory lingers. Standing on the same part of the deck, I can identify the exact place where the evidence once lay soaking into the fabric of our ship, though there is nothing visible to the eye. I was made to scour and scrub until every trace of the crimson stain was gone, but that dress always bore the scar. Yet somehow the metallic smell of iron still reaches my nose, and I move slightly further away, wanting to leave the past where it belongs. After all, I have seen many men die since that day. Too many.

I look down at the freezing black waters, the grave of countless sailors, and wonder why anyone would prefer the unsettling waves to the solidity of the ground. My father's ship, *The Maiden's Revenge*, cuts through the water with ease, a silent predator feared by all in the Eastern Isles. She's untroubled by these treacherous seas, but I've seen what happens to those on lesser ships when caught in storms, and know the ocean to be as deadly as any assassin. Lurking in its depths is an army of its own, vicious killers hidden in the dark, waiting to strike at any opportunity. Merbeasts will hunt anything for prey, including humans, and more than one ship has been devoured by giant serpentsharks.

One of my earliest memories is of spiralling through the sea, my limbs tangling with the water as it filled my lungs. The weight of it. The unbearable, heavy darkness. I don't remember how I fell in, or who fished me out, but I do know the fear as if it were yesterday. My dreams remind me if I try to forget.

If the *Maiden* is my prison, then it is the ocean who is my gaoler.

For any Snake to feel this way is unthinkable. But for me – daughter of the Viper – to be afraid of the water? It is my greatest shame and my biggest failure. I have, after all, been born for this purpose.

Whether I like it or not.