

THE AEROWYN TALES

Bellarose

✦ AND THE ✦

Pirate

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Chapter 1

Jasper

The day Jasper led a mutiny, a gentle breeze blew the *Black Fear*'s sails, but the sea only stirred where the ship sliced through it. Jasper's racing heart thumped in his chest, but his grip remained steady on his knife's hilt. His bare feet made almost no sound while he approached Captain Starr as the pock-faced man glared at a pod of dolphins on the starboard side.

"Don't take this personally," Jasper said as he deftly sliced the blade across the captain's throat.

The older man dropped to the deck, copper-scented crimson bubbling from his mouth.

Jasper's bloody weapon glinted in the sun. He stabbed it into the railing before he bent over the body.

"You taught me everything I needed to know to take this ship, but"—Jasper hoisted Starr with a grunt—"you forgot your most important lesson." He whispered in the dead man's ear, "*Never trust anyone.*"

His tattooed biceps flexed as he heaved the corpse over the side. Starr's body splashed into the water and bobbed for a while, but before the *Black Fear* had sailed far, the corpse sank beneath the billowing waves where it would be devoured by the ocean—or perhaps sirens.

After all, legends told of sirens who swam the oceans and wooed sailors into the water to feast on their hearts. Jasper paused. Were mer-

maids different from sirens? The fire-haired mergirl of his childhood dreams hadn't been vicious, only kind.

Bah! That's folklore and nonsense!

Jasper pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his hands clean. The late Captain Starr had been fond of saying, "No regrets and never look back."

That will be my next tattoo. I'll have it inked across my shoulder blades, so my enemies will see it as I leave them behind to rot.

"Is it finished, Cap'n?"

Jasper jerked around. The red-haired man looked from the bloody cloth to the water below, and Jasper drew a deep breath. Jeb's stealthy arrival had startled him, but he shoved any comparison of the sailor's sudden appearance to his attack on Starr aside. Now was not the time to allow anything to ruin his victory over putting Starr in Davy Jone's locker. Besides, Jeb was loyal. Jasper forced a smile.

"Yes, Jeb. Captain Starr has gone on a permanent leave to the bottom of the ocean."

"What next, Cap'n?"

Jeb's eager expression loosened the knots in Jasper's stomach. He pulled the knife free from the railing and straightened to his full height. He wouldn't let his guard down again, nor would he let the crew become dissatisfied with his leadership. He had learned from Starr's mistakes.

"Send Sven to me." Jeb left.

When footsteps slapped the deck behind him, Jasper pivoted, every sense alert.

The stout older man glanced around. "Jeb said the deed is finished."

"Yes."

"Aye Captain." Sven saluted. "Your orders, sir?"

“Sven, you are first mate now.” Jasper wiped his knife and tucked his filthy handkerchief back in his pocket. “Assemble everyone.”

“Aye aye, sir.” Sven pivoted and blew a whistle.

Men of all sizes and shapes scuffled onto the upper deck. Murmurs rose. Sven quieted them, but when Jasper strode forward, his presence made the men fall silent.

“I am your new captain.” Jasper made eye contact with each crew member. “Unlike Captain Starr, I won’t flog, shackle, or keelhaul any without just cause. I will be fair. You will be given your rations and an equal share of the booty from raids, but—” Jasper raised his bass voice. “—if you disobey me or break any pirate code, there will be *no* second chances. Do I make myself clear?”

“Aye, Captain!” the men shouted in unison.

Some grinned in approval, and others gazed up at Jasper almost adoringly.

A voice rose from the back. “Ye’ve saved us from Starr!”

“And his insane punishments,” someone else added.

Jasper ignored them and continued, “Everyone back to your duties! We sail until I choose our next course.”

One of the men brought Jasper his belongings to the captain’s quarters and he quickly discarded his blood-splattered clothes and replaced them with clean ones. He would adjust the space to his preferences later. First, he needed to let the day’s events soak in, so he made his way to the quarterdeck to watch the sun sink into the waves. Up until now his restless spirit was never content, but now the wishes he had as a young lad on the *Black Fear* were finally coming to fruition.

I always said that someday I’d want for nothing and become too powerful to abuse. I’d never go hungry, never cower before anyone. Someday is finally here.

Jasper jumped slightly until he recognized the familiar, noisy steps that alerted him to the first mate's approach.

"What do you need, Sven?"

"I only wanted some fresh air."

Jasper tilted his head to eye the older man. "You have something on your mind."

Sven gulped. "I guess I do have some questions, but I didn't want to be disrespectful."

Jasper fought back a smirk. "Sven, did you know I was only seven when I first came aboard the *Black Fear*? Now look at me. At the age of twenty, I might be the youngest pirate captain on the sea."

"It is an amazing accomplishment, but..." The older man looked down and shuffled his feet.

"Spit it out. I promise you won't be punished."

Sven stood taller and looked straight into Jasper's eyes. "How did it feel to kill your mentor?"

Reminding himself that he'd promised no punishment for Sven's questions, Jasper clenched his fists.

His narrowed eyes glared at Sven. "What exactly do you expect to discover from your question?"

"Starr was the closest thing to a father you had. You were his favorite. Did you have to kill him?"

"You hadn't been around the former captain as long as I had been."

Sven swallowed hard. "True, but he spared me once I told him of Ageless Isle."

"Of course he did. You said it had untold wealth and the secret to immortality." Jasper shifted his weight. "He would have killed you with the rest of your crew if you hadn't bribed him. The fact that you're a healer, sealed the deal."

"I know, sir, but he was kind to me while I was on this ship."

“Captain Starr had become more unhinged than normal. He cut out Jack’s left eye because he thought it had tried to cast an evil spell on him. Starr was always cruel like my own parents were.” Jasper gripped the railing. “He beat me to teach me not to flinch, but that wasn’t why I killed him.”

“Then why?”

“Starr said he would kill every man in their sleep and get a new crew at the next port. He forgot our names, thought we were strangers. He was growing more dangerous because he feared the crew was out to murder him.” Jasper’s voice pitched low. “I hid his worst behavior from everyone, but I knew those closest to him saw the writing on the wall.”

“Couldn’t you have locked him in his room rather than kill him?”

Jasper huffed. “Pirates don’t respect mercy. Our enemies wouldn’t fear an interim captain. I had to usurp Starr in the same brutal way he had done with his predecessor to gain allegiance and reputation.”

“So, you really were protecting us...” Sven rubbed a gold tear-shaped pendant that hung on a chain around his neck. “I understand.” The stout man tucked the pendant back underneath his shirt and then smothered a yawn.

“If he went mad, we’d all be dead, myself included. Him or me? I’ll always choose me.” He rubbed his chin. “Get some rest, Sven.”

“I will. Won’t let you down, sir. Goodnight Captain.”

Jasper glared up at the moon. Captain Starr had been right about one thing. Moral compass? No, the only compass a pirate needed was one that pointed north.

No regrets. Never look back.

Over the next year, the *Black Fear* carried out many successful raids. Jasper had replaced Starr’s black flag bearing a skull with starred

eye-sockets. Now, a white silhouette of a falcon on a black field boldly billowed on the mast. He smirked up at the symbol that had become synonymous with the cold-blooded Captain Falcon, the most successful pirate captain of the Caribbean.

Even so, discontent rose like storm clouds. Jasper glowered at the horizon. Sven's promise to lead them to Ageless Isle surfacing in his mind. Riches beyond measure and an immortal life. The Caribbean's wealth would be nothing in comparison. Maybe it was time to plan the trip.

Turning abruptly, Jasper made his way to his cabin, calling loudly for his first mate.

When the stocky man entered and shut the door, Jasper unrolled a map on his desk.

"Sven, how far is Ageless Isle from our current location?"

"Do you want me to summon the quartermaster to help chart a course, sir?"

"I don't want too many men aware of the destination until we're close to it."

"Very good, but it's a far sail." Sven bent over the map, then peered up at Jasper. "It would be wise to replenish our supplies first before heading to the island."

Jasper eyed the map. "We're close to the Port of New Orleans."

"Yes. We'll have to go to the Gulf and then channel through the Mississippi River here." Sven outlined the passage with his finger.

"Good. And it's the best place to trade and blend in. We can resupply and sell some of our valuable acquisitions." Jasper straightened. "All hands on deck."

"Aye, Captain."

Sven saluted and left, and Jasper headed to the quarterdeck to address the crew. Excitement drifted from the gathered men.

“What does Cap’n Falcon have planned now?”

“Must be somefin’ real important to gather everyone.”

“We already have more riches than I could have ever imagined!”

Jasper spoke above the din. “Men, it’s time we start planning a new adventure.”

Cheers erupted.

“We’re heading toward Port of New Orleans to restock our supplies. We may be a little longer than usual to prepare for the journey ahead of us because we’re going to an island none of us have seen before. Rumors say it holds great treasure.” He raised his voice over the men’s cheers. “Enjoy all the wenches you can while at port, because where we’re going, you may not see one for a while.”

Some men grunted, “Aye aye, Captain!”

A few chortled, and others made crude comments.



The illegally gained goods in the hold were offloaded and sold, and the quartermaster divided the profits. While the undisciplined men departed to squander their portions on ale and rum, Jasper stayed aboard. The ocean was his place of safety, and the ship was his home. He only planned to venture off the *Black Fear* to acquire food, liquor, and supplies for the voyage. After all, with the promise of ultimate wealth, he couldn’t risk anyone else knowing their destination.

So, while Sven wrote in the log book coordinates to Ageless Isle and Jeb scrubbed the deck, Jasper pulled out his cutlass to practice lunges, but in the day’s waning light, the hilt’s cracked leather seemed worse.

Starr had promised that one day he would get Jasper a finely crafted saber with an ivory handle. He never had.

The words came out before he knew they were coming. "Do you know where I could get a new sword?"

Sven put down his log book. "Quinn, the blacksmith next to The Swan is said to be the best."

Jasper knew the easily intimidated proprietor of the place, and his lips curled in a half-smile. "Can this Quinn make a sword worthy of me?"

"He's an expert at crafting artistic but deadly blades."

"Yes, you know me well." Jasper sheathed the sword and patted the short, white-haired man on the back. "My weapon should produce fear and awe before my adversaries."

"It will, sir."

He grinned. "Maybe I can find a delicious lass for distraction after I commission the blade."

Jeb dropped the scrub brush into the bucket. "Cap'n, does that mean you'll be joinin' us at The Swan? It's full of the mos' beau'iful women in Orlins."

The most beautiful...

The words summoned the images he'd tried to suppress since childhood.

He shook his head. *Bah, if there was such a woman, maybe she could drive out the ghostly imaginations of fiery red hair and a glistening red tail.*

Something splashed into the water below and pulled Jasper out of his ponderings.

His voice full of admiration, Jeb prattled on. "They says a 'ero drinks there, but you could take 'im in a fight."

Jasper squinted at the copper-haired ship's tailor and gave an irritated half-shrug. "Of course, I could defeat some local hero. But business before pleasure. Sven, you have the ship. I'll commission a new sword first."

Sven waved a loose salute. "Best be going, sir. Craftmanship like Quinn's takes time."

Jasper might want a new sword, but Sven was right. He didn't want to delay the trip to the mysterious island any more than necessary. He strode down the gangplank and pushed through the crowds on the dock. A young boy pointed him in the direction of The Swan, and Jasper strode toward the stables.

The odors of straw, horse manure, hot metal and smoke made Jasper grimace. He much preferred the briny smells of the sea. Heat radiated from the blazing forge, several weapons of fine craftsmanship lodged in a rack nearby. This had to be the correct place.

But instead of a strapping blacksmith, the young man wearing the thick, leather apron was hunched unevenly, one shoulder blade jutting far above the other. He and an exquisite, green-eyed girl faced each other, swords in hand. She appeared to be only a few years younger than Jasper, who cringed at the sight of the beastly man next to the beauty.

"Blimey, you're hideous! Why didn't your mother suffocate you at birth?"

The green-eyed girl turned to face him. "You have dreadful manners!"

"My, my, what a lovely contrast you are to this thing." Jasper settled back on his heels and scanned her from head to toe. "You don't appear to be a prostitute. But why would a proper young lady want to be in its company?"

"You're despicable," she said through clenched teeth. "His name is Quinn, not 'it.'"

Quinn remained silent.

Jasper raised his eyebrows. "Anyway, deformed or not, I want Quinn to make me a magnificent sword." He faced the blacksmith. "Are you even able to?"

"Of course he can, but should he?" The beautiful girl stabbed her sword into a bale of straw.

"Is *he* attempting to teach you how to wield that weapon?" Jasper pointed to her sword. "My expert tutelage would be more fun. I *am* after all the captain of the *Black Fear*."

The spunky girl replied, "Should I be impressed?"

"I'm Captain Jasper Falcon. I know my reputation has reached New Orleans."

Her eyes widened in some kind of recognition, even though she shook her head and said, "I've never heard of you."

Jasper leaned toward Bella. Bar maids threw themselves at him, but well-bred young ladies cowered away. This girl's behavior was a pleasant change.

"Who are you?"

"It doesn't matter, because you will never get to know me." She scowled, and turned to bestow a smile on Quinn. "I will see you tomorrow for another lesson."

Quinn blushed. "I, um, I look forward to it."

The young man's smooth tenor took Jasper aback, as did the way the misshapen man focused on the girl as she disappeared from sight.

Jasper scowled. Anyone who looked like Quinn deserved to have something nasty to match his physique. Not love.

The disgusting man was obviously attracted to the girl. Who wouldn't be? She'd turn any man's head, if he weren't blind or stupid. Jasper was neither.

"Who is she?" he asked.

Quinn straightened. "None of your concern. You came to see me about a sword?"

Jasper's jaw ticked. No one refused to answer his questions, but if he were going to get that sword, he'd have to excuse the rudeness this one time. "You must lack practice with proper manners because you hide from people. If I looked like you, I wouldn't go out in public."

"I know who you are, Captain Falcon, but when it comes to Miss Bonnay, you need to stay away." Quinn hobbled inside the stable and returned the sword to a rack.

"Miss Bonnay, is it?" Jasper closed the distance between them. "Who is she to you that you are willing to risk your life for hers?"

"Are you threatening my life?" The smith's brown eyes narrowed, and his hand reached for the sword he'd just put up. "I may look disabled, but don't underestimate my abilities. I would gladly face you in a sword fight to defend Miss Bonnay's honor."

Jasper laughed. "The creature has confidence! I like it!" He rubbed his hands together. "Back to business. Yes, I want the finest sword you can make, and I'll pay you handsomely for it." He reached in his pocket and threw out a sack of gold coins at Quinn.

The bulging pouch jingled. Quinn barely caught it.

"If you want it to be a masterpiece, you will need to give me several weeks to craft it." Quinn pulled out two gold coins and threw the bag back at Jasper. "I'll take these for now and when you return for the sword, you can give me one more."

“Tell me where I can find Miss Bonnay, and I’ll give you this entire purse.” Jasper dangled the bag in the air. “If I don’t like the sword, I won’t ask you to return any of this.”

Quinn held up the coins. “No, I’ll only take these.”

“It doesn’t matter. I have ways of finding out what I want to know, and the beautiful Miss Bonnay’s location will not elude me for long.” Jasper turned to exit the stable. “Good day, ogre. I’ll return in a few weeks for my sword.”

Jasper sauntered away from the stench of the smithy and stable, well content with the transaction. Everything was working out.

He mentally ticked off the things he had accomplished since the mutiny. The crew was safe from the abuse of the long-dead Captain Starr. He’d gained admiration from many because of his fierce and fearless behavior. All that was left was permanent security and respect and that will be accomplished at Ageless Island, which promised riches beyond his imagination.

All was exactly how he had desired for himself. Jasper had everything he’d ever wanted.

Except for that mermaid.

His steps slowed. No. The dream had haunted his nightscapes too long, tempting him to care again, just when he couldn’t afford sentimentality.

He was done with that. The mermaid wasn’t real, but Miss Bonnay was.

It was time to replace the fictional girl with a real one.