

THE AEROWYN TALES

Bellarose

✦ AND THE ✦

Captain

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Chapter 1

Bellarose

Bella made her way past the brigantine's masts to the bow and gazed across the turquoise depths. Overhead, ropes and riggings creaked in the wind, which tugged on her clean clothes and pulled the ribbon from her hair. The stiff breeze mussed her brown locks, and she pushed a wisp out of her mouth. Bella raised her chin to breathe in the salty air. The exhilarating motion of whipping tresses matched the wild spirit breaking free inside her. The prim and proper girl with perfectly coiffed hair no longer existed. Her messy strands and sun-reddened cheeks mirrored her internal transformation.

No story in any book—however detailed—could ever come close to being entangled in those heart-stopping moments like the fantastical ones she had read about in fairy tales, moments when the world no longer felt safe. Although...

Bella bit her lip. While visiting Ageless Isle with its mythical creatures had been perfectly enchanting, most of those events were harrowing times she wanted to forget. She breathed out.

Nothing was mundane about the way the *Notre Dame* sliced gracefully through the water. Only an hour before this mesmerizing calm, a hurricane had wreaked havoc on the now placid ocean. Captain Modo had swum through the tumultuous waves to rescue her from drowning. No, her current situation was far from humdrum.

Bella wrapped her arms around her middle. For all its beauty, the ocean reminded her of the thing she wished to forget—how an exciting voyage to a new world became a path to misery.

She mentally replayed her conversation with Modo after he salvaged her from the sea. He was too formal and stated rules of propriety like she needed to be schooled. Recalling the captain's stern demeanor didn't prevent Bella from pondering his handsome face. He would be even more dashing if he smiled.

Ocean mist moistened her cheeks and playful dolphins splashed before the ship, sending more spray into the air. She chuckled to herself. If the austere captain could channel the dolphins' energy, then perhaps the journey back to New Orleans wouldn't be as long and boring as it promised.

At least the spectacular views wouldn't be monotonous.

Bella did want a calmer life, so perhaps the no-nonsense captain was exactly the sort of person who could return normalcy.

The wind carried Modo's scent of pine and a hint of something familiar along with the sound of his boots on the wooden deck. She turned to face him. Sunlight caught on his brown hair revealing copper highlights, and his warm brown eyes would have been comforting, if they hadn't reminded her too much of Quinn, the one she loved and lost. She quickly blinked away the tears.

Captain Modo's posture was impeccably straight as he strode to her side, a leather pouch in one hand. Bella tilted her head to meet his eyes, but when their gazes connected, he quickly looked away and cleared his throat.

"Miss Bonnay, may I tend to your wounds?" He gestured to his satchel. "I would have done so earlier, but it was important that you changed from your wet clothing first."

Bella looked down at her sore palms. "I would appreciate that. I'm surprised my room didn't do that for me after it did everything else."

Modo's brows raised. "What do you mean?"

"You would have to see it to believe it. I still can't comprehend fully, but you did say Aerowyn provided this ship for you and she is a powerful enchantress. Magic must be seeping from every board on this vessel."

"If you only knew the half of it," Modo mumbled while he led Bella to some barrels.

He set the bag on the closest container and pulled out ointments and clean bandages. She rested her hands by the medical satchel. Modo was surprisingly gentle, even though his palms were strong and rough. His touch sent a pleasant tingle through Bella, despite the discomfort.

Bella couldn't help but replay how he had effortlessly hauled her to safety from the turbulent ocean. The rescue reminded her of a story's damsel in distress, where deliverance led to real love's kiss. She quickly dismissed that romantic notion.

Captain Modo was a stranger, and nothing like her Quinn. She couldn't love a man who was too solemn. Quinn's fabulous sense of humor had made her laugh every time they spent moments together.

Modo's rescue confirmed another difference between the two men. Though Quinn was a master at sword fighting, his hunched back would have made it difficult or even dangerous for him to swim through the witch's squall. As much as she longed for Quinn to be on the *Black Fear* with her, the idea that Quinn could have died at sea horrified her. She shook the thought away and concentrated on the man bandaging her scraped palms.

"I noticed your hands when I hoisted you onto the *Notre Dame*." Modo's voice was gentler than normal. "If the question isn't too personal, how did you manage to injure them?"

“When the storm hit, I grabbed onto the rigging to avoid getting tossed into the sea, but my hands were too slippery. Even when my grip loosened, the ropes yanked me across the deck and into the water. My palms were rope-burned, and I hit every hard surface before getting dunked. I’m bruised all over.”

Concern etched Modo’s face. “That tempest was unexpected and took us off course.”

“How long will it take us to reach New Orleans?”

“I do not know. Since we are in a magical realm, my maps do not show these oceans.” Modo finished wrapping her left hand. “Aerowyn told me she would keep our ship on the correct course and that once we reach territory on human maps, I would know.”

“I anticipate the worst whenever the enchantress is nearby.” Bella sighed in exasperation. “Callista—she’s the sea witch who created the storm—hates Aerowyn and her father, Peter. It only makes sense that she tried to ruin the fae’s designs with that squall.”

“I wonder what plans they had before the storm ruined them.”

“Other than the fae king’s mission to rid the world of selfishness and cruelty, which has created creatures ten times more dangerous than their original selves, I honestly don’t know.” She shrugged. “But I always seem to be in the middle of Peter, and Aerowyn’s schemes.”

Modo’s brows scrunched together like her words were disagreeable. “What do you mean?”

“Ever since a mysterious old lady in New Orleans told me where to find work on the plantation Aerowyn had enchanted, I seem to be embroiled in their plots. When Jasper Falcon kidnapped me, the fae king himself protected me from said pirate. Now, I find myself on a ship Aerowyn created to rescue me from that kidnapping? Why keep me safe from Jasper? Why send you to rescue me?”

"I see your point. I don't have answers for your questions, but it does seem the enchantress has pulled you into her plans." Modo's eyes darted to the side. "Anyway, please be careful what you do until your wounds heal."

"Thank you for helping me." Bella smiled. "I couldn't have managed this by myself."

Though he finished with her hands, he didn't release them right away. In a gruffer tone he replied, "It is a captain's duty to ensure all his crew and passengers are well. We do not have a doctor, but I know a few basics. I have had to dress injuries multiple times in my previous life."

"You haven't always been a captain?" She couldn't imagine him doing anything else, despite his apparent youth. "What did you do?"

"That is not important, Miss Bonnay." He let go of her hand. "How do the bandages feel? Are they too loose or too tight? They will need to be changed often until your rope burns and abrasions heal, to avoid infection."

"They're fine, thank you. But if we are to be friends, it's important to learn more about each other."

He squared his jaw and looked up, then, and his warm brown eyes were the only thing that seemed unguarded. Unless it was her imagination, they reminded her again of Quinn's. She looked down to avoid the comparison.

Despite having the same surname, Captain Modo and Quinn had such opposite personalities that it was absurd to think of the one she loved when in the presence of this stranger. The captain had already confirmed he was no relation to her Quinn. However, both men, evoked a stirring inside her. Bella quickly squashed it. She didn't need complications and heartbreak.

“As I said before, Miss Bonnay,” Captain Modo’s intimidating baritone reiterated, “we cannot be too familiar with each other. The crew would get the wrong idea about our relationship.” The captain shifted his weight, almost as if he were uncomfortable. “I am not like Captain Falcon. I will not be making inappropriate advances toward you.”

“I don’t think being friends with me would give the incorrect impression.” Bella stopped and added curtly, “But I do recall you telling me to address you by your title. I apologize, Captain, I forgot my place.”

Without another word, he gathered the satchel and strode away.

Bella exhaled. She wouldn’t mind a nice casual conversation to pass the time, but that wouldn’t happen with Captain Modo. His inability to relax his guard made it hard for her to know how to understand him, and the excuse of shielding her reputation seemed unwarranted. It was going to be a tedious journey returning to Louisiana.

Directionally-challenged Bella asked several sailors the way back to her cabin and found it soon enough. The ornately carved door was her first reminder of what she had forgotten. She hurried inside and shut it, then drew in a huge breath and took in the surroundings.

Bella chuckled. “Why was I so worried about time dragging with the stuffy captain?”

Whatever else the fae did, Aerowyn knew Bella loved books when the enchantress had conjured the shelves full of volumes in Bella’s quarters. The library contained everything she would need to spend the days in style.

Quick-passing visions of a place she couldn’t recall visiting startled her. It wasn’t France, her home country. Perhaps her wild imagination was leaking into reality. The pleasant décor seemed reminiscent of

Christmas-time—but the fact that she called the holiday Christmas instead of Noël made her second-guess the memory.

Wooden bowls of orange and clove pomander balls rested on the table, and pine garland draped the bookshelves.

The comforting scents made her quarters a respite, even though decorations shouldn't have been eerily familiar. In her Family French chateau, the servants put out more religious symbols for Noël and kept Yule logs burning in every hearth.

Determined to remain light-hearted and thankful, Bella forced herself to stop questioning the discrepancies of her recollections, pushing all the odd thoughts back into a compartment of unexplained occurrences, and skimmed the shelves' titles.

"Hmm... *The Princess Dragon* sounds intriguing." She grabbed the tome and settled into the nearby plush rose patterned chair to dive into a new adventure.



Bella ate up the tomes like a starved orphan would fresh bread from a bakery. Despite the way they took her to faraway lands where unsavory conditions stayed in the pages, however, she couldn't read for weeks on end. Even though a passenger, she wanted to pull her weight, so she begged the captain for busy work. Anything to do, from swabbing the deck to helping the cook cut vegetables. Captain Modo, however, forbade it until her wounds healed.

When her palms were finally free from blisters and abrasions, she found her way to the deck, where she spotted Jeb, a friend and former crew member of the *Black Fear*. She made her way aft to join him. No

longer on a pirate ship, Jeb had grown almost unrecognizable from his former self. His normally greasy red hair was cleaned and combed. His usual sweaty body odor was less noticeable, too, for which she was thankful.

"Jeb," she called. "I need something to do. Would you teach me to sew?"

He hesitated. "I dunno, Beller."

"See?" She held up her unbandaged hands. "My wounds are healed. I'm ready to become a contributing crew member."

"Aye," he said after a moment's consideration.

Jeb led her belowdecks where he mended whatever the ship needed repaired. The men's personal items and hammocks made it somewhat claustrophobic. Once more, Bella struggled with the smells that brought back the memories of her parents' deaths. She pushed the sharp pain to the farthest recesses of her mind.

"Sit 'ere in me sew'n corner," Jeb's voice brought her back to the present. "The men know to leave it alone."

Bella sat, and Jeb proceeded to show her how to darn a sock. Once she figured it out, she pulled the basketful close and repaired several holes while they conversed.

"Beller, wha' ya fink of Cap'n Modo?"

Bella finished her last sock and picked up a shirt. "I'm not sure what to think about him. He's polite, but—"

"No, ya mus' use fis for shirts." Jeb handed Bella a daintier needle.

Bella tried not to stare at the dirt under his fingernails.

"Thank you. I know it must seem strange that I don't have a clue what I'm doing, but a long time ago I was a privileged baron's daughter who didn't do anything for herself."

"I was'n judgin'. You was sayin' the cap'n is polite, but..."

“He’s too no-nonsense.” Bella made a lopsided stitch and hoped no one would notice. “When he brought us onboard the *Notre Dame*, I was struck by the fact that she’s named after the cathedral in Paris.”

“Is she?”

Bella nodded. “*Notre Dame* means ‘Our Lady’. I know ships are referred to with feminine pronouns, but to give one the same name as a church seems a little odd, even if it suits the captain’s personality. He’s formal... and distant and guarded. He reminds me of how I felt when Mère and Père took me to grand cathedrals in France.”

“Who took ya?”

“My mother and father. It’s what we call them in French.”

“French? Oh, aye. ‘At’s why ya talk funny.” Jeb cocked his head to the side. “Why ain’t ye wif yer folks?”

“They died on the ship we took to America.” Tears threatened to fall, so she blinked them away. “Even if they were alive, Jasper kidnapped me.”

Jeb squirmed. “Oh, aye. He did. I’m sorry about yer parents and the nabbing. Cap’n Falcon was a pirate an’ nothin’ like Modo. But I do see wha’ ya mean about the cap’n being a bit stuffy.”

Bella stopped her stitching to look at Jeb.

“We’re friends, right?”

He stopped sewing and gave her an earnest smile. “Yer like a sis’er to me.”

“Then I can tell you that Jasper sometimes made improper advances to me. I know you admired him, but he wasn’t a good man until he saved Cerise, the mermaid.” Bella let out a huge breath. It was a relief to get that off her chest. “I’m thankful Captain Modo isn’t like Jasper, but I wouldn’t mind a little more conversation from him. I feel like he doesn’t know how to relax or even smile.”

"I don' know. 'E smiles all the time when 'e stares at ya." Jeb sniggered and waggled his eyebrows.

"Stares at me?" Bella laughed. "I've never seen that. He barely makes eye contact with me."

"When yer 'ead is turn, 'e looks all the time."

Warmth crept into her cheeks. If she was completely honest with herself, the thought of Modo being attracted to her was flattering. He was probably only eighteen or nineteen but acted mature beyond his years, capable of leading a group of men who were older than he was. How had someone so young attained such a prestigious position? Well, Aerowyn *had* used him to rescue Bella. Her thoughts of the enchantress led her to remember fairy tales. The fairy godmother had turned mice into horses and some other animals into footmen for Cinderella's carriage to the ball.

Maybe Captain Modo was a mouse.

She chuckled.

Jeb crinkled his eyes. "Wha' so funny?"

"I recalled a story about a fairy godmother who turned mice into horses." She grinned. "And, since Aerowyn chose Captain Modo, perhaps he was a mouse or cat before she changed him into a captain."

Jeb hooted. "Ya means ya fink 'e acts unusual because 'e's an animal?"

Bella giggled. "Yes."

Their laughter hid the sound of footsteps, and when the captain suddenly appeared before them, Bella's face blazed with heat.