

The Queen's Daughter

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The winds felt different in the elven forest. There was a freshness to it: a crisp, bright feeling that carried sweet smell of nature. Even along the ocean, miles away from the barely visible woods, the air held its magic. The salt and smell of ocean water were still there, but with an added calm. Whether by magic or nature, Avara could not tell.

Avara sat on the bow of her mother's ship, *Last Wish*, feeling the fresh air flow through the dark curls of her hair. She sat with her legs straddling the railing, dangling over the side above the still sea waters. She closed her brown eyes and enjoyed the rays against her sun-kissed skin, smiling in satisfaction.

Life on the sea was exhilarating and tense, especially when your mother was Queen of Pirates. They were wanted throughout the Free Cities and Resolute alike, pillaging merchant ships and plundering warships without prejudice. They were constantly rich and always running.

But today, in the Allied Strait, the winds blew full in the sails. No ships had been seen for hours, save a few fishing boats close to the shore. They were near the elven kingdom, boasting some of the greatest sailors in the world. But elves sailed for sport, riding in smaller ships made for crews less than half of what the *Last Wish* boasted, barely a threat.

Nay, today was a good day. Today, Avara was allowed on the top deck, able to rush about the open air and enjoy the sun. All around, the crew was hard at work, keeping the sails filled, clearing the deck, removing waste, and completing other various tasks. Standing ever watchful over all of them was Avara's mother, Adanna Surgelynn.

Avara turned around briefly to look up at her mother. On days like this, with clear skies and the sun overhead, Adanna resembled a goddess of the oceans. Her long black hair was tied in a tight braid that fell to the small of her back. She dressed in a simple white shirt; the sleeves cut off because of the heat. She wore a black leather vest over it, embroidered with golden silk runes that made it practically invincible. Her hat, a magnificent black one, was below deck, letting her enjoy the rays of sun that danced about her skin, a rich caramel that made Avara jealous. Two wicked daggers were strapped to Adanna's belt, holding tightly to a pair of black britches and matching boots. The pure shine of her eyes and the confidence in her gait was admirable to say the least.

Adanna locked eyes with Avara as she stared and smiled. She waved her hand and signaled for Avara to come and join her near the helm. She was quick to obey and made her way over.

"What do you think, Avara?" Adanna asked.

"About what?"

"The day of course," Adanna laughed. "You think we'll continue carrying on without incident?"

Avara looked out over the water for a moment, searching about the land for a clue as to their location. The coastline appeared unassuming as usual: constant rocks leading up to towering trees of rich green blocking out the land beyond. Looking hard, she could just make out a tall lighthouse, with a blue flame barely visible at its top.

"No, I don't think so," she surmised. "The lighthouse there, with a blue flame? That is the Western Light. That means we are almost away from the elven kingdom and coming up to the

edge of the strait. My guess: we're going to find some merchant vessel or other making their way back from White Pond."

"Not a bad guess," Adanna smiled and nodded to her youngest child. "Still, I think you're forgetting one important thing."

"I don't think I did."

"Your sister runs this part of the ocean now, remember?" Adanna laughed. "Any vessels we come across will be cut dry. No, the only ship we'll see is that of your sister's."

Avara's older sister, Moira, was barely past her twentieth birthday. Despite her youth, she had managed to become the youngest captain in the history of the Floating City, second only to Adanna. She lacked the looks Avara had- according to Avara anyways- but she had a wit rivaled by no one. Fearless. Daring. Genuine. There was no doubt in anyone's mind she would succeed her mother as Queen of Pirates.

"You think she'd actually stop if we hailed her ship?" Avara asked.

"She would have to, even if she wasn't my child," Adanna said. "I run the entire ocean. Anyone flying the colors knows: if I want an audience, they better be giving it. If we see Moira, she'll be meeting us."

"Great," Avara faked sincerity over her sarcasm as best she could.

Avara did not hate Moira. She admired her in the same way she admired her mother. No, what Avara hated was how the three of them all acted together. Her mother and sister would sit there for hours, talking about commands, and ship passages, and wars, and who the hell knew what. They were bred for the ocean life, as if the sea had been placed upon the world just for them to command.

As much as Avara loved the sea, she wanted to see more of the world. She wanted to explore the endless plains, see the rolling deserts, climb mountain peaks, and see real kingdoms, with walls and castles. She lacked the leadership her mother held and lacked the presence of her sister. Avara was not made to be a captain, despite any love she may have for the ocean.

“Don’t worry, Avara,” Adanna placed a comforting hand on her daughter’s shoulder. She spoke as if she could read Avara’s mind. “I know you hate talking about the comings and goings out here, but I promise this visit will be well worth your time. Trust me.”

Avara returned the smile to her mother, though she had little faith.

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The sun had just begun its decent when a familiar ship, the *Red Tide*, appeared over the horizon. This ship was the second fastest ship in the fleet, owned by none other than Moira Sugelynne. Signals were given, messages exchanged, and soon the two ships were on course for each other.

It was nightfall when the two ships came alongside each other and dropped anchor. A bridge was laid across for Adanna’s crew to cross. As the head of pirates, it would be Adanna who boarded the other vessel, accompanied by a selected few. She brought over a group of three: One-Eyed Flynn who was a helmsmen and longest tenured member of the ship, and her two bodyguards: Regina and Lila. Regina was a half-orc exiled from Thalador, then sold into slavery. She was liberated years ago by Adanna and swore her services as repayment of a life debt. She stood nearly seven feet tall, with muscles larger than the burliest men on the ship. She wielded a single axe, one that had cut down many would be assassins and political opponents of Adanna. Lila was a human, and cousin of Adanna’s. She grew up with Adanna and joined the crew shortly after running into debt troubles in Eastwood. Avara was the fifth member to pass over the bridge.

Across the way, Moira stood, regal as ever. She wore fanciful white collared shirt and blue trousers, with a set of throwing knives strapped diagonally across her chest. A blue overcoat shone over the entire ensemble, one that was just inches from dragging along the ship's main deck as she moved. Her short hair was tucked under her hat, an unnecessarily flashy white cap with blue lace and a large fluffed feather. She smiled as the crew of *Last Wish* came across.

“Welcome aboard mother,” Moira said with a slight bow. “Our finest wines have been prepared for you in the captain’s quarters.”

“Splendid,” Adanna nodded, then laughed to herself. “Alright, cut the formalities and give your mother a hug.”

Moira laughed as well and hugged her mother, then turned to look over at Avara. Avara tried to fake a smile, though she was already regretting coming aboard her sister’s ship.

“Does she know?” Moira asked her mother.

“Nope. I wanted to keep it a surprise until now.”

“Excellent!” Moira winked at Avara and motioned for her to join them in the captain’s quarters. “The rest of you crew- Flynn, Regina, Lila- I assure you my mother is safe. Please, feel free to dine with my mates. They have prepared a welcome meal and ale for your company.”

The three crewmembers nodded in unison, then dispersed into the crowd.

The family of three made their way through the crowd and entered Moira’s main cabin. Like her outfit, it was decorated with blue silks and overbearing pleasantries, especially for life on the sea. A desk and chair were bolted to the ground along the back wall, looking out through a stained window at the ocean beyond. Along one wall were two well-stocked dressers and a luxurious bed, likely stolen from a vessel near Valos. The opposite wall had two beautiful glass cases displaying the most ornate earrings. Below that was a small table and three beautifully

carved chairs, with a bottle of blue wine, likely from the Storm Plains, displayed beside three crystal glasses. If Avara did not know better, she would have looked about the cabin and written Moira off as an amateur, compensating for lack of true ability. But she did know better.

“I invite you all to take a seat.” Moira gestured as she sat and poured the wine. “I hope the seas have been kind along your journey.”

“Ha, they’re always kind to their queen,” Adanna boasted. “Especially these elven waters. Though I will say, there is a magic in these parts that is different from the rest of the world. I never feel quite at ease here.”

“I know the feeling,” Moira nodded. “I’ve grown used to it, and especially used to the wealth travelling on through. Still, I count down the days until my ship finds herself in true ocean.”

“I don’t know, I kind of like it,” Avara chimed in, sipping from her glass. “I mean, with all the running and shit on the ocean, it’s nice to just breathe. It’s rejuvenating if you ask me.”

“Ha! Spoken like someone who doesn’t know better,” Moira laughed. “Anything queer on the waters, like the crispness mixed with the salt of the sea, is a bad omen. I think it’s some type of curse placed on others, disguised as pleasantries. After all, the elves don’t exactly play nice, not even with allies.”

“I believe there may be some truth to that claim, though I’d refrain from sharing it with the crew,” Adanna cautioned. “But tell me, how was your visit to White Pond?”

“Rich, mother. Rich as all hell!”

Avara drained her glass, then filled it again with the sweet wine. Her mother and sister bore on about ships here and riches there and fights yonder, and on and on and on. Avara smiled every once in a while when they looked at her, even nodding a couple times. It was all for show

of course. Avara cared little for their conversation and cared less for being trapped by it. Instead she admired the belongings about the cabin, all while enjoying the sweet taste of blueberry wine dancing along her tongue and warming her stomach.

Looking about the cabin, her eyes were affixed to a singular dagger. It was elven, displayed beside its ornate sheath. The sheath was black, embroidered with silver vines and leaves. The blade outshone those intricacies: a green metal hilt with matching vines and silver pommel attached to a blade of pure silver, almost white despite the orange glow of the lanterns.

“You like it?” Moira asked, noting her sister’s interest. “That’s elven steel right there, the purest metal in the world, despite what the dwarves may say.”

“It’s beautiful,” Avara said.

“I got then when we raided a governor’s ship, just north of the Western Light. He had it on his persons and surrendered it to me all while begging for mercy. I would have let them live anyways, but I played along and took it. Finest craftsmanship I’ve ever seen if truth be told.”

“May I touch it?” Avara asked.

“Touch it? No, don’t touch it. Take it and try it out,” Moira tossed an apple over as she spoke. “Just cut into that and see how sharp it is.”

Avara caught the apple and left her seat. She removed the dagger from its casing, handling it with care. The blade felt nice in her hand, though its balance seemed off somehow. She twirled it around her fingers, like she did with her performing blades, then cut into the apple. The cut was easier than she had expected, slicing a perfect piece clean through with minimal effort.

“That’s impressive,” Adanna whistled through a third glass of wine.

“It’s yours, if you want it,” Moira addressed Avara.

“Really?”

“Sure, why not? I don’t use daggers. You on the other hand, if you still practice, are better with the little blade stuff than me. Besides, you’ll be needing it soon enough.”

At this Avara paused and looked questioningly towards her mother and sister. The two shared a look, and Adanna gestured for Moira to elaborate.

“This is the real purpose of the meeting right now,” Moira said. “We all know you’re not much for commanding ships. In fact, we all know you detest it. Which is good because I’m pretty sure you’d suck at it anyways.”

Adanna kicked Moira under the table and picked up the explanation while Moira held her shin. “What your sister is failing to mention is we’ve thought long and hard about how best to accommodate your hunger for adventure. I know it won’t be on the open seas, so I’ve decided to send you out on land.

“An old acquaintance of mine, a guy by the name of Marks, is going to take you along the road with him. He’s a traveler and owns a small shop. I saved him and his three boys from slavery, then he went and bought his wife with some coins I lent him. Moral of the story: he owes me.”

“You’re sending me on land?” Avara stammered.

“Yeah, I am. I personally hate to see you go, but I think this is the best thing to let you grow on your own,” Adanna sighed. “Anyways, you’ll join Marks and dance with the blades as your part of the act. It might be common on the pirate ships, but land folk will go crazy for the performance, especially with the skill you possess.”

“This is incredible!” Avara gasped. “When do I go?”

“You’ll be joining me on *Red Tide* tonight,” Moira rejoined the conversation. “Within the next two days, we should meet up with Marks and I’ll send you off with him.”

“I would have preferred to escort you myself, but it would be too much of a risk for me to take my ship that close to land that isn’t in the Pirate’s Foot,” Adanna said through a teary eye. “This will be our last night together for as long as you decide to adventure out there. But don’t worry, I promise I won’t cry. Not tonight anyways.”

“Thank you, thank you both!” Avara sheathed the elven dagger, then went over to hug both her mother and sister. “I’m very excited, you have no idea!”

“Don’t think on it too much,” Moira smiled pushing her sister back. “And listen, when you decide you’ve had enough, take the roads through Eastwood until you reach the Pirate’s Foot. There, we’ll have someone ready to bring you the rest of the way home.”

The night continued with more wine and eventual food. It was a celebration, though there was sadness underneath the merriment. This would be the last time the three of them would see each other, likely for several years to come. The three enjoyed it to the fullest, until morning came, and they bid final farewells.

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The next two days were all a blur, with Avara prepping her things and spending much of her time awake, anxious for the future.

She wanted this. She was ready to endeavor into the world like never before. But she was barely eighteen now, with little experience outside of life on pirate ships. This adventure would be new: new faces, new places, new rules. But she felt deep down, despite her nerves, she was ready for the task.

Land came into sight late morning on the second day. It was a rocky outcropping, with a small footpath visible through a looking glass. A small cart was parked along the edge, pulled by two massive beasts Avara had never seen before. Horses maybe? Standing outside the cart was a large fat man and equally large woman. Two men stood by the animals, tending to them. They were brawny boys with short cut hair, just older than Avara.

“That’s Marks and his family there,” Moira said taking the spyglass back from Avara. “They’ll be the ones you are travelling with.”

“They’re rather unimpressive huh?”

“I’ve met them once,” Moira spat over the rail. “He’s a god damn pig, and a coward. The sons are both a bunch of assholes. But at least their mother is kind. Hell, she’s the only reason mom even considered this escapade. You’ll be alright with them.”

“And if I’m not?” Avara asked.

“If you’re not, I’ll come to land myself and gut all four of them myself,” Moira winked, petting the hilt of her scimitars strapped to her waste. “You ready for this?”

“Probably,” Avara shrugged. “Why wouldn’t I be?”

“Just be careful out there alright,” Moira said. “On the ships, we may rule the seas, but you’re entering a different world out there. People are just as bad, sometimes worse, than the folks we have. Keep a steady watch as you go along, alright?”

“I understand,” Avara nodded.

“Oh, and above all else: have some fun. I hear the women on land know a few tricks you can’t manage on the ocean tides,” Moira nudged Avara. “Should be right up your alley.”

“Shut up,” Avara blushed and punched her sister back.

“Boats ready captain,” A man called over. “We can bring her in!”

Moira nodded, then boarded the boat along with Avara and a few other sailors. It was a simple paddle boat, with four men working the oars. They moved swiftly across the waters and made the rocky outcropping in no time. Most of the crew remained in the boat; Avara and Moira walked over to the four-person troupe.

“Welcome to land, Moira,” the woman spoke kindly giving a slight curtsy to the two.

“And I take it you are Avara?”

“Yes ma’am,” Avara nodded, seeing right through the pleasantries.

“Oh, how wonderful,” the woman smiled looking Avara over. “My goodness you are a beauty. I’m sure you’ll make some memorable performances with us for sure.”

“Thanks,” Avara said softly, unsure if she should actually be flattered.

“Why the hell isn’t Marks talking to me?” Moira snapped. “The arrangement was made with him. I expect him to show a little more interest.”

Marks heard this and turned away, pretending to be distracting by the cartwheels and the patterned wood that was suddenly the most interesting thing in the world.

“Please darling relax,” the woman smiled to them. “We’re all a family out here. I can handle affairs just as well as he can.”

“No shit, that’s not my problem,” Moira scowled. “You cut a deal, especially with my goddam sister involved, you show some damned respect.”

“I apologize, but we thought it best I speak on our behalf,” The woman smiled. “Afterall, I will personally be taking care of Avara and making sure she receives only the best care as we adventure through the land.”

“Personal care eh?” Moira seemed to simmer a bit, though Avara could see the anger still coursing through her veins. “Fine, I’ll accept that. But if harm befalls my sister, you know who is paying the price? It’s you now. You hear me woman?”

“Clear as day.”

“Fine. Now fuck off while I bid my sister farewell.”

“As you wish.” The woman bowed, though her smile was gone, and turned away from the two, giving them space.

“Listen, I don’t like any of this already,” Moira whispered. “This is your last chance to back out if you don’t want to go. I’ll find another way for you to explore, I promise.”

“Thank you,” Avara whispered, looking from Moira to the troupe. “But I’m going to see this through. I’ll be fine. Besides,” Avara motioned to her assortment of daggers and knives she was carrying in her travel bag. “I know a few tricks that they sure won’t be arguing with.”

At this Moira gave a soft smile and gave Avara a hug. “Be careful out there. I’ll be waiting for you when you come home.”

“I know. Goodbye Moira.” Avara smiled.

The two sisters parted then. Avara watched Moira return to the boat then sail back into the crashing waves, out towards the *Red Tide*. Avara waved until she could no longer make out Moira, then turned to the troupe that was waiting for her.

“Your sister is a bitch,” the woman spat, standing over Avara. “I hope you’re better mannered than her.”

“On the contrary,” Avara grinned and pushed past the woman with a knowing smile. “I’m much worse.”

The woman grabbed Avara's arm and held her tight. "Well you listen then. You may think you're some fancy princess, but that ends now. Now you're just a damned burden, so here's what you'll do: You walk along the cart. You make your own food, and you stay the hell away from us until it's your time to perform. You don't earn, I leave you on the street. You piss me off, I leave you on the street. Any questions?"

"No questions," Avara smiled, then twisted the woman's wrist about, placing it hard along the small of the fat woman's back. In the same motion, the elvish dagger was out of its sheath, shining pure white in the sunlight. "Now you listen here. You piss me off, I take what I need. You attack me or threaten me again, I return the favor twice over. I ride the cart, and you don't say a damn thing about it. You smile and wave to the crowds and get the hell out of my way when I perform. I'm not some little princess from fairy tales. I'm the Queen's daughter, a pirate through and through. You'd be best to remember that. Any questions?"

The woman was visibly sweating now and shook her head. Avara smiled and released the woman, then turned to the three men about the cart. Marks, turned away and went towards the horses. One of the younger two came forward and took Avara's bag, then helped her into the cart with a slight smile.

The journey was off to a rocky start, but at least the others were in line. As they began out, she could feel the piercing anger from the woman's stair on the small of Avara's back. She would have to be watched, though Avara was not worried.

Avara was the Queen's Daughter: she was ready for whatever Valandria had to offer.

