

PROLOGUE

Aleja was a girl so hungry for adventure that sometimes she found herself in strange places.

Tonight she was prowling the rooftops of Sevilla when she should have been sleeping, having stuffed a pillow under her bedsheets back home.

Scrambling from one roof to another, Aleja ventured deep into the oldest part of the city. Here the buildings loomed up, creating ramshackle paths. Crumbling stones tested Aleja's balance as she half climbed, half crawled along a narrow ledge. In the great domes and spires she imagined palaces, castles and cathedrals, and the stories their stones could tell, tales entrusted to kings and queens and explorers and

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scholars. Night was the best time for creeping along in the shadows, feeling the whisperings of the city in her blood.

Up here she could explore a whole new layer of her city and she loved it. Sweet Sevilla was scented with orange blossom and moored in history.

The darkness keeping her hidden from the ancient streets below, Aleja leaped across to another rooftop, and then ran across a flat white roof. Her little knapsack flapped against her back and she jumped as far as she could into the sky. Just for a moment it felt like she was flying. And then she hit the opposite wall with her arms outstretched and all the breath rushed out of her. As she scrambled to a safer position, Aleja grinned to herself. The city belonged to her.

She stared at the sails in the distance. Huge ships slunk in and out of the river port, full and heavy like gigantic sea beasts that had gorged themselves on riches. Sometimes, she knew, a ship would sail up the river with great chunks missing. Sailors would claim it had been attacked by monsters that lurked beneath the waves; giant kraken and leviathans and sirens with haunting songs were all waiting to take a bite out of passing ships. Sometimes the boats didn't come back at all.

With her back to a stubby tower, legs tucked beneath her, Aleja pulled out a book and opened it with a spine-

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cracking flourish. The Giralda – the tall, spindly bell tower that still carried ornate carvings from its time as a minaret – cast a soft glow on the pages, and she began to read.

Legendary Explorers told of Christopher Columbus's voyages from Sevilla and made Aleja thirsty for all the details of running expeditions and travelling across oceans. But those weren't her favourite stories.

More than anything else she loved reading about Thomas James, a British explorer who had travelled the world on his own ship and trekked through jungles and deserts and tundra. The book was written in English instead of Aleja's native Spanish, but she had taught herself to read English during long hours spent surrounded by books – the language had burrowed into her brain and stuck there. And she had read these words so many times they had clawed their way into her memory like familiar old friends.

A sudden noise snatched Aleja's attention. She stood up, peering down to the streets below. There, in one of the alleys, a man was scurrying along furtively with a large sack perched on his shoulder. She bit her lip, tempted to follow him, but he ducked out of sight and she lost him. She turned back to her book and soon lost herself in a world of adventure instead.

Sometime later, aware the night was slipping away from her, Aleja closed the book and whispered to herself,

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‘Thomas James was the king of explorers, sailing under a disguise of merchant flags to hide his true intentions of uncovering the secrets of the world. His ship was marked with an old sigil . . .’

These stories fed her dreams.



CHAPTER ONE

The Girl Who Dreamed

If she squinted her eyes just right, Aleja could almost pretend that the dust motes twinkling in the air were grains of sand thrown up from a desert storm. Or kicked up from a camel's hooves. She blinked, and now the motes were just the dust settling on the floor of El Puente, her family's tavern.

'More sweeping, less daydreaming, *cariño*,' her abuela said, shaking her head affectionately as she washed cups in a bucket of water. Pablo was helping – by steadily making everything wetter. A smaller, impish copy of their father except for the scar on his ear, Pablo was the younger of Aleja's two older brothers and had the clumsy touch of a toddler. He rushed through his chores

until he exasperated their grandmother into letting him go.

Aleja resumed her sweeping. The shutters were closed to keep out the growing heat of the day and the only light came from the wooden doors open to the street beyond, where she could see her father setting up stools round the old wine barrels they used for tables. He turned to grin at Aleja. His short black hair was retreating with age, his face was tanned, and today his cheeks were pink with mirth.

It had taken him what had felt like years to smile again after Aleja's mother had died of a fever when Aleja was only six years old. Her memories of her mother were fuzzy round the edges. Sometimes Aleja worried she'd forget what her mother had looked like, but her abuela hugged her the fiercest on those days, wrapping her in stories of her mother until her face reappeared in Aleja's dreams.

Aleja's own face was petite and heart-shaped with dark-green eyes (striking up too many comments on how she resembled a porcelain doll). After two grandsons, her abuela had been thrilled about the birth of a granddaughter. But Aleja's brown hair didn't fall in a silky wave, nor did she allow it to be brushed and plaited like her grandmother wore hers. And her eyes were too stuffed with daydreams to be soft and pretty.

From where she stood, brushing the dust out of the stout wooden doors, her view stretched out to a wide

square, and then, even further still, all the way to the sweeping Guadalquivir river and the Torre del Oro watchtower, which sparkled in the sunlight.

‘Out with you if you’re not going to be useful,’ Aleja’s grandmother was telling Pablo. ‘It’s going to be a busy day today and I don’t want you under my feet.’

‘Why? What’s happening today?’ Aleja instantly asked.

‘There’s a lot of activity down at the docks,’ her father said, stepping back inside and wiping the sweat from his brow. ‘The Flota de Indias is expected.’

Aleja shivered with anticipation; the Flota de Indias, the Spanish Treasure Fleet, was a large collection of ships that brought exotic goods and luxuries from the territories of the Spanish Empire across the Atlantic to the mainland. Aleja wasn’t fussed about gold or sugar, but she *was* interested in the explorers who turned up on those ships.

Her grandmother noticed her fidgeting. ‘You’re not to go; I’ll be needing your help in the kitchen today.’

Aleja slumped with disappointment.

‘I’ll tell you about it later!’ Pablo said with a sneaky grin, darting out before Aleja could scowl at him.

‘That’s not fair,’ Aleja said, gripping her broom tighter.

Abuela sighed. ‘That’s the way of the world, *cariño*. Pablo is older than you and too disastrous to be of use in the kitchen.’

‘Poor Aleja, she’d captain a ship in a heartbeat if she could!’ her father said, chortling.

Her grandmother’s lips vanished into a thin line. ‘Nice young girls don’t go chasing after adventure,’ she said, taking the broom off Aleja. She flung open the door to the kitchen. Aleja’s oldest and favourite brother, Miguel, looked up with a start. Although he was fifteen, his doe-like eyes, floppy hair and dreamy expression made him look much younger. He had the same green eyes as Aleja, but his were often glazed over with dreams of the kitchen while hers were wild for the open sea. His face was dusted with flour and there was butter in his hair. ‘You can bake the bread with Miguel,’ their grandmother said, taking a damp cloth and scrubbing Miguel’s face with it while making several loud tsking sounds.

Aleja hated baking every bit as much as Miguel adored it.

‘Where’s Pablo?’ Miguel asked once their grandmother had hustled back to the front of the tavern to help their father open it for the day.

‘He went out to the docks,’ Aleja said, slamming the dough on to the counter.

‘Ah.’ Miguel rescued the dough from Aleja. ‘You are the youngest; she’s protective of you,’ he added.

Aleja stared miserably at the dough. ‘No, she’s trying to mould me into the granddaughter she wants me to be.’

‘Well, you’re exactly the sister I want you to be,’ Miguel said, nudging her with a smile.

The day grew hotter and hotter under a blue sky that stretched from horizon to horizon with not a puff of cloud in sight. Even the palm trees looked like they were suffocating. The tavern windows had been thrown open to catch the breeze, but it hadn’t made the slightest difference. Stuck between sweat-stained shirts and the smell of too many people, their drinks and their tapas, Aleja quickly got bored. Sometimes the tavern talk was interesting, when it turned to rumours and stories of ghost ships or strange monsters or lost cities. Things that defied belief, that didn’t fit into the everyday world Aleja knew. Things that whispered of magic.

Most people laughed and dismissed these stories – only the most sea-battered men, deep in their tankards, shared those kinds of tales. But that didn’t stop Aleja fiercely believing in them all.

‘– pirate attacks in the Mediterranean.’

‘Two ships have gone down in flames from cannon fire.’

There were two sailors in the corner, talking rapidly in Spanish. Aleja looked up from the book she was sneakily reading.

‘Worse than the actual pirates themselves half the time,’ said one.

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‘If you ask me, pirate hunters interfere far more with port business, strutting around, filled with their own self-importance . . . and the Fury is the worst of the lot,’ the first man grumbled. ‘He’d decimate half the seas if he had the chance.’

‘Hopefully he won’t make port here,’ the second one replied, wiping his hands on his trousers as he dropped a few gold coins on the table and made to stand up.

Aleja craned her neck to hear them as they made their way towards the door, gossiping about other ships.

‘No, I hear it’s crewed by women,’ the first man was saying, while the other guffawed. ‘*Imagine.*’

‘It’s bad luck to have a woman on a ship, it is,’ the other added seriously.

Aleja rolled her eyes.

‘They say it’s haunted by the shadows of all the sailors they’ve killed,’ the first one whispered, his words trailing behind him like smoke. ‘And that’s why they call it the *Ship of –*’

Aleja slid her book into her knapsack, checked her abuela wasn’t looking and then furtively followed them out of the tavern. But when she emerged into the bright sunlight, she was greeted by the sound of giggling. Two local girls her own age were lurking just outside the door, their dresses as pretty as their peals of laughter. She cast a look behind them. The two sailors were nowhere to be seen. Deflated, Aleja turned her attention

back to the tavern, giving the girls a welcoming smile. One of them turned to whisper into the other's ear and they broke out in a fresh spurt of laughter.

Aleja's skin burned.

Ignore them, said Miguel's voice in her head.

She tried to forget the sick feeling in her stomach and return to El Puente, when suddenly she found herself face to face with someone even worse. Juan. He was Miguel's age and the son of a wealthy landlord, with a regal bone structure, deep grey eyes and words coated with venom.

She stepped back, her stomach tensing. Juan's best friend, Carlos, and his clingy twin, Pedro, fell back to stand behind her, their thin lips pulled in identical smiles. Aleja hated all three of them. Bullies were like wolves: they travelled in packs and would pick your bones clean. She tried to squeeze back into the tavern between Carlos and Pedro, but the twins moved quickly and closed the gap. Carlos pushed Aleja roughly back into the centre of the circle before crossing his arms, his grin displaying a mouthful of yellowing teeth. Juan snatched the books from Aleja's bag. She watched him try – and fail – to read the English titles, and instead look at the ships on the covers. He threw them on to the street one by one. Aleja resisted rushing over to pick them up; she didn't want to give Juan the satisfaction.

‘You’re not still waiting for some grand adventure to come along and sweep you away, are you?’ Aleja watched the sneer crawl over Juan’s face. He leaned in closer, dropping his voice to a whisper, as if he were going to share a jewel of a secret with her. ‘Because I hate to tell you this, but girls can’t be explorers. Female explorers don’t exist. And even if they did . . .’ He paused for effect and Aleja knew what followed would be especially vicious. ‘They wouldn’t want a scrawny runt like you in their ranks. You’re pathetic,’ he finished triumphantly, spitting at her.

Aleja closed her eyes, wishing she could disappear.

Juan stalked off with his friends amid a swirl of laughter. Aleja wiped the spit from her cheek, burning with anger and embarrassment, and scurried around in the dust, picking up her books.

Everybody knew her secret. Once she’d held it tight to herself, but she was too hot-headed to keep it private, and it had come bursting out in an argument with Pablo.

‘You don’t belong in the port; it’s no place for a girl,’ he had snarled.

‘You’re wrong!’ Aleja had snapped back. ‘You’ll see. One day I’ll be a famous explorer and I’ll travel through all the biggest ports on a ship of my own.’

There was a beat. Then Pablo let out a howl of laughter, tears leaking from his eyes.

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Mortified, Aleja had launched herself at him, turning his laughter into a scream. Their father had had to tear her away.

Two years later, Pablo's left ear still bore the crescent-shaped imprint of Aleja's teeth. These days, he pretended it was a wolf bite, but that hadn't stopped him telling half the city about her lonely dreams.



CHAPTER TWO

Books, Stars and Gunpowder

‘Miguel told me what happened,’ Aleja’s grandmother said later that evening, easing a brush through Aleja’s knotted hair. ‘Still no luck making friends?’

Aleja shrugged, using her foot to nudge her book further beneath her bed. Her abuela had interrupted her in the middle of a novel in which the heroine had written a secret letter using lemon juice for invisible ink. Distracted by the thought of an ink that had to be heated to be revealed, she’d almost been caught reading the sneakily borrowed book and had to quickly toss it under the bed.

‘They don’t like me. I’m too different.’

Her grandmother began to tame another section of Aleja's hair. 'I think it's important to have friends, Aleja. Miguel can't be your only companion in life.'

'It's not that I don't *want* friends,' Aleja began, but found that she couldn't finish; a lump had wedged itself in her throat.

'I know, *cariño*. Perhaps you could try talking to other girls about their interests?' Her grandmother didn't voice the words Aleja heard in her head – the ones that said *instead of yours*.

They sat in silence for a few minutes.

'Here,' her grandmother said, finished. 'I saved this one just for you.' She handed Aleja a small coin that had been polished until it shone. 'Your mother used to collect these,' she added.

'Thank you,' Aleja said, watching it glint in the candlelight.

'Sleep well, *cariño*.' She lay a hand on Aleja's cheek before she left, closing the wooden door behind her.

But Aleja had no intention of sleeping.

The large courtyard of the university quarter was empty, cobblestones glowing in the moonlight, palm trees and stars Aleja's only witnesses as she scurried across it, hiding behind the trunks of the trees to ensure she wasn't spotted.

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She gently lifted one of the heavy windows and climbed inside. The library was a long hall with marble flooring and tall wooden bookcases crammed everywhere, creating alleys of knowledge. As Aleja gazed around she noticed little spaces, secreted away to fit a handful of armchairs or a table and chairs. The sconces on the walls were lit for any scholars who might while away their nights in study, though the odd scholar Aleja came across was too immersed in their books to notice the girl who crept past them through the shadows.

She prowled in front of the shelves that reached to the ceiling and marvelled at their titles hinting at wonders around the world: *Unexplored Jungles of the Americas*; *Flora and Fauna of the Tundra*; *The Most Dangerous Pirates Who Sail the Seas*.

Aleja was in the mood for adventure after her eavesdropping. She lifted the last title from the shelf and took it to one of the old armchairs nestled between the shelves. The aged brown leather stuck to the back of her legs as she sat down. She flipped through the entries she knew well: Long Ben, also known as Henry Every, one of the richest and cruellest pirates to date. The *Ship of Shadows*, the legendary but barely documented pirate ship whose cut-throat crew inspired fear in the hearts of their foes. William Kidd, captain of the *Adventure Galley*, a savage pirate hunter turned pirate, and the Pirate Lord, an elusive but masterful treasure hunter.

Aleja skipped past many more accounts of murder and plunder, most of which she'd already heard in the tavern, before the book flopped shut. She glared at it. Juan's voice echoed in her thoughts: *Girls can't be explorers.*

Apparently they couldn't be pirates either.

Her frustration churned and bubbled inside her, ready to erupt like a volcano.

Aleja replaced the book with a sigh and picked up a volume of Herodotus's *The Histories* and slid it into her bag along with *Tales of Thomas James*. It was time to leave the library with its comforting smell of lingering pipe smoke and leather.

She didn't crawl back into bed. Instead Aleja tiptoed up to the roof. Up here, under the canopy of stars and a sliver of moon, listening to the lapping of the river on the ships' hulls, she breathed freely. She cracked open *Tales of Thomas James* and plummeted straight into an epic Thomas James adventure, written by one of his accompanying guides, Samuel Worthers. He commented that *Thomas was often seen scribbling away in his own journals*, and Aleja wished she could have read those, but according to her investigations they were long lost; no one had ever read them, though the passing references in books like these proved they had once existed.

She lay back, tracing the shapes of the constellations above her, picking out the harp that belonged to Lyra,

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the arcing wings of Cygnus, the swan, and the wingspan of Aquila, the eagle. As her eyes grew heavy she could have sworn one of them tumbled down from the sky, forming the shadow of a gigantic bird that swept over the roof, blotting out the moon's glow for a second. But before she had time to consider it, she was already melting into a dream of warm libraries and ancient books and old ships.

And then the smell of gunpowder tickled her nose.



CHAPTER THREE

The Sigil of Athena

Aleja sat bolt upright and stared out at the port.

Had she imagined it? She sniffed. No, there was definitely a charred scent floating in on the breeze. She squinted at the night, dark and thick around the ships. Nothing looked out of place.

Another flicker of moonlight. She looked up. A bird with an incredible wingspan was gliding over the port. It circled twice before flying away on silent wings to settle on the prow of an unfamiliar ship.

There.

The ship was sneaking into port.

It was a rather plain sloop with one great central mast. All the sails fanned out from there, though they were a

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little ragged from wear. The ship's slow speed must have been deliberate; Aleja knew that sloops were agile and fast, able to race past the heavier goods ships crossing the Atlantic and sailable by a small crew. But what really captured Aleja's attention, pressing her to the edge of the crumbling wall as she tracked the ship's progress into port with hungry eyes, was something else.

The ship was *smoking*.

Great slashes of the hull were blackened and stank of gunpowder from across the river. If she stared really hard, she could even see the outline of a hole left by a cannonball blast. This was a ship fresh from a battle. Aleja scanned it, curious. Stranger still, the ship didn't have gun decks.

She tried to make out the ship's flag. It had a white diagonal cross on a dark background: merchants. Why would someone attack a merchant's ship with no gun decks? Her fingers trembled with excitement. Maybe it had been attacked by pirates.

Aleja watched the sloop drop anchor at the far side of the port, away from the bigger ships, fading into the scenery and hiding its battered appearance in the dark. Everything was still for a few minutes but Aleja couldn't tear her attention away.

Then she spotted it.

At the prow something was glittering in the light of the ship's lantern. Aleja fumbled around for the piece

of glass she kept on the roof and peered through it. Her view of the ship magnified, she now saw it was an etching of an owl with outstretched wings. Each wing bore a golden eye. Hard to spot and even harder to understand. But it niggled at Aleja; it was familiar somehow. Before she could muddle through it, a rickety gangplank was lowered and a couple of figures disembarked. They were walking towards Aleja's end of the docks. Aleja flew down the stairs and on to the street to investigate.

She hid behind the corner of the tavern wall and waited to see if the figures would pass her. A minute went by. Then another. And just when she couldn't resist any longer, she heard it. A hushed conversation heading towards her. She pressed her back harder into the wall, trying to pick out their words, when she realized what was striking about the voices. One of them was English – not unusual in itself as people sailed into Sevilla from all over the world – but it was, without a doubt, a woman's.

She peered out into the street.

The two figures had dark hoods pulled over their heads, but Aleja caught a splash of blonde hair spilling out of one and heard the second woman answer the first in English accented in a way she'd never heard before. 'Don't know where we'll find that amount of wood at this time.'

'We can't wait. The ship needs it now.'

'We'll have to steal someone else's supply.'

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They walked out of earshot.

But instead of following them, Aleja rushed back in the opposite direction, away from the port. She knew exactly where she needed to be.

Dawn crested the horizon as Aleja raced against time, following the route she'd taken earlier that night – *yesterday?* – back to the university. She threaded through the courtyard, glancing up at the sky to see that it was already the colour of bruised oranges.

She clambered through the window and stole over to the stacks, slid *Legendary Explorers* out and sat on the floor. The book fell open to the page she'd read so often that she could almost summon the words from memory.

Thomas James was the king of explorers, sailing under a disguise of merchant flags to hide his true intentions, to uncover the secrets of the world. His ship was marked with an old sigil, that of Athena, heralding the knowledge he kept inside his ship. One that, rumour had it, could only be unlocked with his golden key. A shadow on the seas, Thomas James seems to have escaped the notice of his peers and history itself; little is known about his exploits, and his journals have long since been lost to the mists of time.

And there it was, at the bottom of the page: a tiny golden owl with outstretched wings bearing eyes.

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Aleja checked the library indexes on ancient Greece until she found a tome called *Symbology of the Gods*. She flipped through the musty pages to the Greek goddess and read:

Known for her wisdom and strategic warfare, Athena's symbols included those related to battle, along with olive trees and, to represent wisdom, owls.

There was no mistaking such a distinctive symbol. It *had* to be Thomas James's ship. But if Thomas James had gone missing more than eighty years earlier, who were the women who now sailed his ship?

What had she heard earlier? *'I hear it's crewed by women . . . They say it's haunted by the shadows of all the sailors they've killed and that's why they call it the Ship of –'*

Her heart thudding, Aleja grabbed the copy of *The Most Dangerous Pirates Who Sail the Seas* and found the entry she was looking for:

Ship of Shadows, *the*

Legendary pirate ship. Tales often heard in taverns of the ferocious cut-throat crew. No known sightings.

Aleja felt certain that Thomas James's ship, the *Ship of Shadows*, and the merchant sloop were all separate

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stories of the *same* ship. She hugged the books to her, thinking of the women she'd overheard in the port.

She knew in her bones that somewhere, somehow, there had been other girls like her. Girls who yearned so badly, so deeply, for adventure and excitement that it churned inside them. And they had grown up to become *pirates*.

She *had* to get a closer look at that ship.