

THE SHATTERED ISLANDS

PART ONE – THE RAKAM



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PREFACE



I have seen a fallen ship once, heard the bone chill screams and swam in the blood red water. I have fought the rakam and lived. I have loved a woman and lost her to the waves. I have seen the black kiasheen. Now, I am on a ship I do not recognize with people I do not call friend. They ask me who I am. I tell them little...

For I am here for them.

I must find their secrets. I must speak to the woman with the blue eyes. When I am finished, perhaps I will tell them who I am, for they have heard my story, and they think they know the end.

They are wrong.

This is only the start.

And tonight, I begin.

AT SEA



The evening sun sets low in the sky as the maiden moon begins her slow crawl into the impending twilight. Her sisters, the matron moon and crone moon, won't join her for some hours yet, the matron peaking at full dusk and the crone not showing her face until the night is at its blackest. It is my favorite time of the day, when light and dark dance in the starlit sky, wooing and flirting, the sun giving way to the sister moons each night, waiting for his time to shine again come morning.

I breathe in deeply the scent of the sea, of the salt and wind, of the brackish waves that crash against the underbelly of the great kiasheen who glides effortlessly through it all, as if the giant shells packed with humans on its back matter little. I stand at the rostrum, peering over the great whale's head as it moves us toward our next port two days north, where jewels will trade hands for spices and cloths and the rich will get richer.

But I am not here for riches. For wealth. For the temporary haze of half-felt happiness those earthly pleasures offer.

My gloved hand clutches the ridge of the shell as the sea sends a splash of itself against the heat of my face. Dark locks of hair fall over my eyes and I close them, listening. Praying. Wondering. Searching for all that is lost.

"Sev!" A stern voice calls to me with a name that is not my given, and I turn to see Captain Kanen eyeing me with distrust. "Do ye not sleep, lad?"

"The moons keep me awake," I tell him truthfully. It might be the only true thing I've said in my entire time with his crew.

"The moons, the sun, the waves. Ye be drowning in ye own haze if ye don't lay yer head soon," he says, crossing heavily muscled arms over his broad chest. He is a man of the sea, hailing from one of the lesser families of the Shattered Islands. Hints of blue and turquoise in his hair, eyes and nails show his meager abilities to wield the island water stones, but he doesn't need them to captain. He was a man born to make love to the sea; you can see it in the way they peer at each other at night, when he thinks no one is looking. His face is weathered, lined with the sun and salt of a life on water, his body hardened from years of labor on the kiasheen whale-ships. His crew trusts him,

that I've seen clearly. It is not just the scars that occupy half his face and neck... the scars he earned at the sharp end of a rakam. His survival is a thing of legends in itself, and makes a man such as him a god in the eyes of his crew. And they do not follow him out of greed or fear, though that would certainly be enough motivation for some. They follow him because they see in him the sea-song that anyone drawn to this life craves.

It is why I chose him, chose his whale-ship, for this journey. "Whether I drown in my haze or not, you've gotten your pay."

He nods gruffly. "Aye, that I have. Not many men willingly part with that many stones for a trip like this. Makes my men nervous, it does. Yer secrets. Yer skulking."

He peers at me with dark eyes streaked with light blue.

My own eyes have none of their original darkness left. It is the one trait I cannot change, the startling blue of my eyes. I am a dark-haired man with too-blue eyes and too many secrets for his liking, but wealth often trumps suspicion, I've found, at least for a time.

"We will part ways at the next dock," I assure him. Barring any delays, I think, but I don't put that thought to words. No need to make him more restless.

His head jerks forward once, like a spasm at his neck. "See that we do, and all is well."

Sea folk are a superstitious lot, more so than most of the Shattered Islands. They spend their lives out here on the waters and they forget how to live within normal society. They are too much surrounded by monsters and waves and a world beyond their control.

The captain whistles and shouts commands at someone above me. I look up to the shell that rides atop ropes of kelp, its small passenger staring intently at the waters. She looks down from her perch as a young man climbs up the kelp to relieve her of her duty for the night. She shimmies down, giving the shelled seat to the boy, landing on bare feet slapping against the great shell, loose fitting bamboo knit pants flapping against her skinny legs. Her hair is black, her eyes slashed with sapphire, so she must have touched the stone once, and I wonder how she came upon such a rare gem. Her arms are thick and muscled, the arms of one who leads a kiasheen, pulling upon the heavy reins that guide the beast by its nostrils.

"I'm free till sunrise if ye be looking for something... or someone, to do." She winks at me and saunters off, not waiting for my response, making her way within the great shell to her quarters.

The first night I arrived on board, Calla cozied up to me during dinner and didn't take it personally when I wasn't interested. Since then she flirts lightly, as a young woman who has had many lovers and isn't concerned with where the next one comes from.

I don't mind, but I don't reciprocate. I'm not here to find a new lover.

Captain Kanen glares at me when he sees Calla's wink. I maintain eye contact with him, not aggressively, but not passively either. He averts his eyes first, and I turn and make my way inside the shell to my own cabin.

I've seen enough of this night, and the captain was right about one thing. I will fall into the haze if I don't try to sleep.

I climb down the alabaster stairs to the small shell, that odd space between the great shell and the kiasheen, where the whoosh of the ocean and the simmering sounds of the great beast's belly collide into a strange kind of music that is both beautiful and terrifying. My generous offerings bought me a private cabin toward the fluke, so I walk through the narrow shell halls until I reach the end of the tunnel. I'm about to open the door to my cabin when I pause and still my breath.

My gloved hand is soundless as it turns the shell knob and pushes the door in.

The man standing over my trunk does not see or hear me as I approach him from behind.

I can smell his stink as I reach for his arm and twist it behind his back, pulling his bulk against my chest as I hiss into his ear. "You'll kindly keep your grimy fingers off my belongings, or you won't be leaving with your hands."

THE RAKAM



The man stiffens in my arms, fear and panic warring with indignant anger over his face. But he is more coward than fighter and he slumps against me, sniveling. "I just be looking is all. No harm meant."

I glance over his shoulder and see my trunk open, my few belongings smeared with his sweaty palm prints. "What were you looking for?" I ask, twisting him around and pinning him against the shell wall, my forearm crossing over his windpipe to keep him in place.

"Yer so much to yerself, me mates and I had a wager on what treasures ye keep hidden."

I nearly gag at the liquor on his breath. The sea swill they drink in these parts has a particularly fishy odor. "You're the one they call Clam, yes?"

He nods.

"And did you find hidden treasure?" I ask, knowing the answer.

He shakes his head, shells and bits of bone clanking together in his long, weedy beard and locks of hair.

"And will you be intruding on my space again, Clam?"

He shakes his head again and I bore into him with my eyes, with my purpose, until I smell the piss running down his legs. I let him go and push him toward the door of my cabin. "Tell your *mates* I like my privacy, and if any of you are found in here again, you'll soon find yourself rakam bait."

His eyes widen and he taps three fingers on his chest three times, a superstitious sign to ward off evil, and then trips over himself to escape my room. I hope my warning keeps him and his friends away. I hope it doesn't push them to more violent action.

I close the door behind him after he leaves, latching a small shell to a strip of kelp to keep it locked from inside, then I move with one long stride back to my trunk. I shove aside the clothing and feel for the small lever that pops open the floorboard compartment. I move aside a long bundle wrapped in kelp and cloth to reveal a black

obsidian box. I breathe a sigh of relief as I feel the heat emanating from it, sending sparks through my fingers even while still closed.

Securing it and the kelp bundle back in place, I seal the compartment and fold my clothes neatly, returning them to their rightful place, before spreading myself over the hanging stretch of stitched kelp covered in swatches of bamboo cloth. Kelp is deceptively strong and holds my tall body and heavy muscle, suspending me in comfort as I attempt to sleep.

My eyes flutter closed, but sleep eludes me, as it always does. Instead I see her face. Hear her voice. Smell the sun and sand on her skin as her turquoise eyes crinkle with laughter.

Her hand reaches for me and my eyes flash open, my breathing coming too fast. I slip out of the sleeping net and leave my cabin in search of distraction.

I find it within the great shell, in the large mainroom where the crew eats and drinks together. Most are away, either on shift or resting between shifts, but a few men and one woman occupy a shelled table in the corner, their drinks clinking together as they toast the sea goddess and drink one—or more—for their fickle deity.

I find the bar and pour myself the sea swill I normally can't stand, clutching the shelled cup as I find a seat alone and away from the others. It's a bitter brew, with a fishy aftertaste that's acquired more than enjoyed, but it's strong and it bites my insides and burns me to the core, filling my blood with the song of the sea, a sweet far away floating that none other can match. This is why people drink the brew. Not for the taste—for the forgetting.

Garen, a large man two heads taller than I, finger bones clanking in his black beard, raises his voice to tell a story to those around him. He fills their ears with tales of legends, of those who rode rakam and lived to tell of it. But when he moves on to the legend of Dak'Ra, I look up, curious.

It is a version of the tale I have heard many times—of the legendary warrior of the famed Ra family from Ra'Kia'Ruu Island, who fell in love with the beautiful daughter of the Kia clan. They defied custom to be together, to make a new family separate from their first, and so they were banished to the sea. And there, under the three moons, they were taken by the depths, into the warm embrace of the Deep Mother.

His big voice fills the room. "They say Dak'Ra and Sa'Kia still haunt the sees, searching for one another, two halves of one soul," Garen finishes.

I down the last of the swill until I can no longer feel my lips and my head is numb. "Her name was La'Kia," I say softly.

Garen looks over at me. "Ye deaf? It was Sa'Kia."

I meet his eyes. He's in a haze over his drink and looking for a fight. I'm not. Not with him, at any rate. "You're right," I say, raising my cup. "I might be misremembering. Maybe it was Sa'Kia."

He narrows his eyes. There's a stillness in the room, as if everyone is holding their breath, then the big man raises his cup and laughs heartily. "Aye, maybe it was."

I smile at the man, whose face shifted with his smile, from menace to jovial. "Thank you for the tale," I say, grinning.

I'm walking back to the bar for a refill when an awful sound fills all the empty space around us. It's a loud whine followed by a shriek of awful pain. I have only a fraction of a moment to react before the entire great shell is tipped to its side like a cup being knocked over, its contents spilled across the floor, the sound of teeth scraping against shell creating a discordant and frightening harmony with the cries of the great whale.

The bar crashes into my legs, swill staining my beige bamboo pants, turning them red as blood.

The crew members who were drinking are now shouting orders, scurrying up and out of the shell to find out what happened.

But I know what happened. I knew at the first loud whine.

The rakam have come.

BLOOD IN THE WATER



The crew know. You can see the truth on their normally dark, fierce faces, now drained of color, their eyes, blends of browns with some light blues, all wide and hyper-focused. They scramble over the great shell, pulling on chords of kelp, tying things down, as others grab long spears made of the very creatures they now fight. Long poles of bamboo with the deadly chiseled swords that make the rakam so dangerous. They are fierce creatures of medium to large build, made for fast swimming and lethal hunting with long protruding faces that come out like a sword with teeth. They are nearly unbreakable, those mouths, and make excellent weapons, if you're lucky enough to kill one before it kills you.

Taking on one rakam is doable, if you have a team working together. But they rarely hunt alone. And when they come in a swarm, feeding on the full belly of the kiasheen, that's when you know you're in trouble.

If our kiasheen dies, we all fall in the water. And in the depths, where the rakam are faster and stronger, they do not worry about killing. They eat their prey alive.

I have seen a fallen ship once, heard the bone chill screams and swam in the blood red water. It was enough death for three lifetimes.

I take in the scene around me: Calla thrusts a spear into the depths, hitting a rakam in the belly as it snaps at the kiasheen's wing. Kanen shouts for someone to fetch the nets. Clam fires precious arrows into the waves. Garen, the storyteller from the mainroom, who is by far the biggest of the crew, howls and jumps onto a rakam, drives a spear into it's head, and jumps back onto the shell, laughing. The man is insane.

Something doesn't make sense. I grab the arm of someone scurrying by, stopping him. "Why didn't we fly over this section?" I ask. The kiasheen can fly. Not high and not for long stretches, but that is the beauty of their breed. They can fly over dangerous waters—rakam infested waters—and land its crew in safety.

The man looks at me wild-eyed. "There ain't been no rakam in these parts in over two hundred years. We ain't ne'er had to fly over these waters. It don't make sense. The goddess is angry. She has cursed us." He taps three fingers on his chest and pulls out of my grip, running off with spear in hand.

In the distance, amongst the dark clouds, I see a shadow drift over us. It could mean the death of the rakam, but no. Not now. I can't reveal myself just yet.

Instead, I find my own spear and aid in the best way I know how.

By killing.

The kiasheen is crying into the night, it's dark blood seeping into the water, attracting more and more deadly rakam.

Their fins break the surface of the choppy water as they surround us, dozens of them hungry, their sword mouths tearing at the flesh of the gentle whale who cannot defend itself against the onslaught. Who is trapped by shell and humans and the very girth of its body.

We are its only defense.

The spears, too precious a resource to be squandered, have a strand of tightly wound kelp at the end of them. I tie it around my wrist as the sky opens up, drowning us in the freshwater of rain even as the ocean swells up to swallow us.

I squint through the night, the crone moon now full in the sky. I take a breath, my vision focusing, my heart rate slowing, and I aim. A rakam sinks into the ocean, and I use the kelp to yank the spear out of the body and bring it back to my side. Again and again I aim, throw, kill.

I never miss. If anyone were to notice, I would be questioned—suspected of being more than I claim. But no one is paying attention to the mysterious stranger on their boat. They are all fighting to survive. As long as I don't hinder their survival, I am free to be myself—at least for now.

And so I continue my slaughter, killing one after another after another.

I hear a scream that is too human to ignore and see one of the crew members fly overboard, his spear not pulling free of the rakam in time. Before anyone can react, he is devoured by the great beasts, their long sharp mouths crunching into bone and flesh, making a quick meal out of the big man until his screams are only echoes in the sea, lost forever to his goddess.

I don't let that break my concentration. If the tide doesn't turn in our favor soon, I will have to reveal myself, and all my efforts, all my planning, will be for naught.

But none of that will matter if I am dead.

I am close to revealing myself, but I do not. I throw my spear, again and again. Then a young boy of no more than sixteen years stumbles into the water, and the rakam impale him in the gut, spilling his intestines into the murky water even as he still lives.

His suffering does not end until they tear the limbs from his body. He then falls silent, sinking into the Deep Mother's embrace at last as the rakam feed on his remains.

I break. I need to rush back to my room, back to the box within my chest. As more of the crew fall to their death, as the kiasheen is torn apart, piece by piece, floating into the dark waters, as the storm hits us harder, as if the heavens themselves are in collusion with the rakam... I cannot let more die.

But before I can move, before I can act on my new plan, another ship enters my line of sight. Their kiasheen is enormous, at least three times bigger than ours. The night sky lights up with brightly lit torches as spears shoot out from their whale-ship, impaling the remaining rakam and leaving the sea suddenly silent save for the low moaning of the still-injured kiasheen we ride atop.

Calla is already mustering a crew to administer healing to the kiasheen as the other whale-ship approaches closer. They show the flags of the Great House of Ruu—a red volcano framed by a white, cloudless sky—marking them as one of the three Great Families of the Shattered Islands. My heart trips over itself when I see those flags, and

I peer into their great shell, trying to identify their leader, to see if I recognize him. Or more importantly, to see if he will recognize me.

HOUSE OF RUU



There is a pause in the flurry of movement as Captain Kanen assesses our new allies.

"Permission to come aboard!" A voice calls from the larger whale-ship.

The captain looks around, seeing the injury and toll this attack has taken on his crew. Those not killed were injured or exhausted in a fight that felt hours but lasted no more than minutes.

"We have supplies we will gladly share!" The voice calls again.

"Permission granted," the captain shouts back, gesturing with a nod of his head for a member of his crew, who scrambles to untie the kelp that holds the bridged shell up.

As the bridge falls to the side of the ship, the other boat latches itself to us and stabilizes in the water, and three members of its crew walk across the shelled planks to greet our captain.

The man in the lead is tall with strong streaks of blue in his hair, nails and eyes. His eyes are sharp as he takes in the state of our ship. "I am Han'Ruu, of the Great Family, captain of this ship. We were traveling to a nearby port for trade when we heard the cries of your kiasheen."

He looks around, noting the injuries, the blood splashing against the great shell. "We have supplies, food, healers. We are happy to help if you'd like to take sanctuary on our ship while you make repairs and heal your kiasheen."

Captain Kanen nods a head. "Yer generosity and the generosity of yer great family will be remembered," he says.

It doesn't take long to move most of the crew to the larger whale-ship, while the healthiest members of the crew stay behind to make repairs. Han'Ruu sends his own men and women to help.

I stay to the side, observing, noticing. When Han'Ruu's eyes land on mine, I nod as a submissive to a greater house, and he acknowledges, giving a half nod. "You do not look like crew," he says.

"Just a passenger," I say.

"And yet you speared the rakam like one born with a blade in his hand," he observes.

Why was this man paying so much attention to me, I wonder. "I come from one of the lesser houses of the Shattered Islands, trained as a hunter. It comes in handy."

He studies me, then nods. "Fair enough, brother. I hope you will enjoy the comforts of our ship until yours is sea worthy again."

"Of course."

He speaks as one of the Ruu, his accent faint, sophisticated, but I don't recognize him. It's been many years since I last set foot in the Shattered Islands. Much has changed, it seems.

I disappear onto the Ruu ship, nodding to their crew, who are well-kept and well-organized. They wear the ornaments of traders, beads and shells that clank and clatter on their clothing, suggesting wealth and haggling abilities. I can smell the spices they have stored within the shell, cinnamon and nutmeg and more exotic flavors floating on the wet wind. The rain has stopped, and the damp world picks up the secondary scents more strongly now, with the cleansing of the clean water.

Another scent tickles my nose as I make my way deeper into the ship. I raise an eyebrow, intrigued, before I'm pulled into the mainroom where food and sea swill are being handed out liberally. I take my plate and cup from a burly woman with a thin mustache over her broad lips and find a seat alone.

I eat slowly, quietly, watching as the crews from the two ships mix and mingle. Some have just returned from having wounds bandaged and are slugging down the swill as if they haven't drunk in months. Others are inhaling their food like it's the last they might ever see. There's a rush that fills the blood after a life threatening experience, and I see it playing out around me. People who held on too tightly are now letting loose, relieved that they don't have to be in charge, that someone else is here to fix things so they can stop shaking and find a way to breathe again.

I never stopped breathing, myself, until the woman walks in, her long white and blue dress teasing at her bare ankles. I catch a small design on her right ankle, made with pigments of red, before her dress moves to cover it once again. She fills a tray with clams, steamed fish and fried seaweed, and fills a large mug with sea swill, her eyes darting around as she works. Her long black hair is streaked with light strands of blue and piled high in a bun on her head. When she looks up, our eyes meet. Hers are striking, deep blue—almost turquoise—and so sad. She reminds me of the woman in my dreams, but only for a moment. Her eyes are too sad, her body too pulled into itself as she averts her face, grabs the tray and scurries out of the room before anyone can speak to her.

But as she closes the door behind her, she glances at me one more time, briefly, and I feel a voice form between us. A message. A plea.

I stand and slip out of the room, leaving my food and drink on the table.

I don't know where I'm going or why. I know only one thing.

I must speak to the woman with the blue eyes.

THE DRAKRUU



When I enter the side shell, the girl is gone.

I walk through halls, past doors to private cabins, the eyes of the local crew regarding me with suspicion as I continue my search with a casual nonchalance I don't feel but must fake. By the time I give up looking for her, I have traversed most of the ship, including the armory and a rare bathing room. This kiasheen and crew must be at least three times the size of the one I commissioned. Their gear is of top quality: thrice thickened nets, stone tipped arrows, and even an iron pot in the kitchen. This is the opulence that comes with being part of a great family. I do not care for it, but I find myself wondering if they have any pillows.

I have not found the girl, nor the pillows, when I'm deep in the belly of the shell, and I hear a scraping sound coming from a deck below me. I follow the noise and find a set of stairs protruding from the wall, part of the shell, part of the original carved design. I take them down and reach a door that does not lead to a private cabin or deck. It is guarded by two crewmembers playing a popular game, Shells and Stones. It's a betting game, and they have a small pot of coppers piling up between them as they toss their shells and stones and pray for luck to guide them.

The bushy haired thin man looks up when I approach. He has a long goatee growing from the center of his pointed chin, the rest of his cheeks smooth as a child's. Bits of colored cloth are woven into his dark beard, with matching bits tied into his hair. He raises an eyebrow when he sees me. "You from the other ship." It's a statement, not a question.

I nod. "I think I got myself turned around looking for a place to piss."

The small round man with him guffaws and looks to his partner. "Man's got to piss, Mal'Ruu?" He turns back to me. "Ain't you ever heard of pissing off the side of the ship?"

His words are slurred, as if he's had too much sea swill while on duty.

"I'm a private man," I tell him.

"There be a latrine near the fluke," Mal'Ruu offers. "If you can't wait, there's a bucket in the kitchen. Tel'Ruu here just took a dump in it, so it be nice and fresh for you."

Neither man has moved from his seat, but I feel the tension in the air thicken when I don't immediately leave. "What's behind the door?"

Tel'Ruu sighs, seemingly annoyed, but Mal'Ruu smiles and leans forward. "We recently came upon a nest of drakruu," he says quietly. "Caught a youngin."

My eyes grow wide like a child's on drowning day. The blue shadow, the sapphire scale, the winged reptile that, when fully grown, can carry a man or woman over the seas, lies behind that door. They are born black, but once they feed on the sapphires deep within the ocean their scales begin to turn blue. A merchant once told me the beasts cost more than a small island, and only a few have ever seen one up close. Seen one and lived, that is.

I grin, sheepishly. "You think I can—"

"Sorry," says Mal'Ruu, raising a hand to his bearded chin. "But no one goes in. Not even us. You understand."

I nod and turn to leave.

"Hey," says the tall man. "Mind keeping this to yourself? Some men feel the gold calling when they hear of drakruu, yes?"

I think of people like Clam and nod again. "Be at ease, searunner. I shall tell no one as I search for that bucket."

The men chuckle and return to their game as I drift back down the hall I came from, my hope of finding the mysterious girl with blue eyes lost for the time being.

But knowing there are drakruu on board piques my curiosity. This crew is like me. We are both full of secrets, and we are both lying.

SEA SWILL



When I return to the great shell, I'm not surprised to find a section of the surface covered with dead rakam. In life they are fierce, deadly, terrifying. They do not lose their awe in death. If anything, they are more terrifying, their ever unblinking, unclosing white eyes still staring at you as if the fight isn't finished and they will prevail.

They are brutal hunters, first impaling their victim with the tip of their spear-like mouths, usually in the gut. As their victim bleeds out, releasing intestines in the process, they begin to feed, slowly. Some say, you die from the pain before the wounds.

But this time, the rakam are the dead ones, lying in small pools of water as crew members from both ships strip the beasts of their skins and mouths for use in weapon and clothing-making. The meat is saved for rare stews and broths—said to give a man a pair of fighting balls if eaten raw—and the useless bits are tossed back into the sea as food for other species.

The smell is strong, the stench carrying with the winds. I step away, letting my eyes fall back to the injured kiasheen. It's resting peacefully in the water, the healers doing their work to give the great whale its strength back as they use ancient balms and seaweed strips to close the wounds. I find the captain of my own ship supervising the process.

He looks up and grunts when he sees me. "If yer here to ask for those stones back, yer wasting yer breath. I told ye when we started this trip, once a man sets sail on these waters, his fate be in the hands of the goddess."

I shrug idly, never having intended to ask for compensation. It says much about the captain and the people he's dealt with, that he thought I would. "We were lucky the Ruu ship came when it did," I say, eyeing the grizzled old man.

He glares at me from the side of his eyes, his scar twisting over the clenched muscles of his jaw and neck. "I taught them, you know," he says, glancing back at the healers. "Taught every one of them."

I raise an eyebrow. "You were a healer?"

"Still smell the healing sap on my hands." He takes a swig from his flask. "Back then all I wanted was to be captain, but now, I think that was a simpler time. A better time." He smiles and points at the working crew. "See how they apply the balm in layers, not all at once like those big island folk? That's the right way." His words focus on the healers, but I see his mind is elsewhere. I see it in his stone heavy shoulders, in the way his smile never reaches his eyes, in the way his hands cradle his flask like a lover. His mind is yet to forget. His mind is yet to forgive.

"Any idea when we'll be back on the water?" I ask.

"If all goes well, two sun's time."

I mentally calculate all that could happen in two sun's time.

Too much.

For a moment, we sit silently in the darkness. Before I leave, I grip the captain's shoulder and use my softest voice, the one I learned from my mother. "You led your men well," I say. "No other captain would have saved as many." Then I walk away swiftly, for it is a rare thing to hear words of kindness and know that no words are needed in return.

I spend the rest of the afternoon exploring this new ship, talking to the crew, getting to know as many of them as I can. My cover as "Sev," a lower-family cast off, stands. No one questions why my eyes are so bright, why I wear gloves to hide my nails, why I'm on this trip at all.

And so both crews settle into a rhythm that is focused and efficient. When the final repairs are made and our whale is deemed seaworthy once more, Han'Ruu invites everyone for a final celebratory dinner to cement our friendship and say our goodbyes before we set sail the next morning.

The dinner takes place on the larger whale-ship, atop the great shell, with everyone in attendance. It's a grand affair, for a ship, with multiple courses of complex meals—including of course, roasted rakam—different flavors of wines and liquors and several choices of desserts. The alcohol flows freely and there isn't a sober man or woman left by the time the crone moon is high in the sky.

I am sitting at the edge of the shell, watching the festivities from afar, cradling a wine cup in my hands, when Calla saunters over to me. She runs a long finger down my chest as she puckers her lips. "Such a waste these last few days have been," she says, grinning mischievously. "You and I could have had so much fun, if you'd wanted." She leans into my shoulder and whispers into my ear, her breath hot on my neck. "They have beds, ye know. And the moon is still high. There is time."

"Perhaps in another life," I say, gently pushing her away. As I do, she opens her lips and brushes the side of my face with her hand, but there is no part of me that responds to her touch. That part of me belongs to another.

Seeing my lack of excitement, she shakes her head and settles into the chair next to mine, clutching her cup close to her. She eyes the bundle tied with kelp that hangs from the side of my chair. "Tell me a secret tonight. Just one." Her eyes are bright and glossy from the drink, but also from unshed tears of those recently lost.

"I have no secrets worth sharing."

She laughs loudly. "That is the boldest lie ye've told so far. Come on, play along for just one night."

I hold eyes with her for a moment, and a genuine smile crosses my lips. "Fair enough." I lean in conspiratorially, whispering. "I really, really, really hate roasted rakam. Anything made of rakam makes me sick."

I lean back against my chair and she swats at my arm, but she laughs, as I'd hoped. "Truth?" she asks.

I hold three fingers over my heart. "Goddess sworn," I say. "Now your turn."

She nods, and her eyes take on a faraway look, her smile lost to something sadder. "I always wished I'd been born a man," she says after a moment.

I raise an eyebrow in honest surprise. "Why? Women have all the power on the islands."

She shakes her head. "That power, yes, it's real. It's there, but it's also its own prison, too. Men get to set sail their whole lives, without worry of child birth and rulership. We have the power, but not the freedom."

"Men don't have freedom to stay," I remind her. "They are expendable, useful for hunting, for trading, maybe for leading crews, but they cannot choose their woman, claim and raise their own children, choose the life of their own desires."

She tilts her cup into her mouth and swallows what's left of her swill. "Ye speak truth. I suppose we are all trapped in our cages, some are just more gilded than others."

She stands then, her smile back. "I still have time, before I'm called back to bear children and take my place in society. I will make every moment count." She leans in, her breasts close to my face. "Ye should do the same."

She saunters away, her offer unspoken as she walks back to the great table at the middle of the shell, joining Clam and Garen in a game of Shells and Stones. Though I have always rejected her advances, she has never acted bitter, never cruel or spiteful. She even treats Clam well, though no one else does. Hers is a kind soul, one that, if things had been different, I could find happiness with. But there is another girl in my dreams, and her voice is the one I heed tonight.

Hours pass, and as the maiden moon begins to fade, Han'Ruu begins a game of Shells and Stones with a few of his men. I walk over to his side at the head of the great table. "May I join you?" I ask.

"Of course, brother. Of course. Sit down, have more wine." He snaps his fingers and the girl with the blue eyes refills my cup. I look at her, but she does not look at me as she finishes her duties and steps back behind Han'Ruu's chair.

"What shall we bet tonight, brothers?" asks Han'Ruu.

Mal'Ruu throws a dozen stones on the table and Tel'Ruu tosses an iron ring into the pile. I unfurl my bundle of kelp and lay a gleaming sword before them.

Their eyes grow wide. Their mouths curl in greedy smiles. The blade is carved from a pale blue rakam head. The guard and grip are forged from precious steel. But it is the pommel that draws their gaze. There, under the silver moonlight, glitters a deep blue sapphire.

Han'Ruu speaks softly. "What would you have me wager?"

I think it over, my eyes flashing to the girl. "Her," I say.

"But she is—"

"She is a slave, is she not?"

The captain's smile fades. Tel'Ruu watches us, his hand sliding below the table. I pay him little mind as I lock eyes with Han'Ruu, my words firm. "I will have her, and nothing else for this sword."

He looks to his men, then smiles. "Very well. Let us begin."

Tel'Ruu hands each of us a cup filled with three stones and three shells. No one else plays, for it is clear no one else has anything to match my wager. Han'Ruu and I shake our cups and place them face down upon the black table. I peek under my cup, counting the amount of shells with the ridges up and the stones showing three lines. Han'Ruu does the same. We both proclaim our points. We do not have to be honest.

"Two shells, two stones," says Han'Ruu. Tel'Ruu records four points, then a bonus two for the pair, writing with charcoal on a stone slate.

I shrug. "Three shells, one stone."

At this point, either player can challenge the other, and if Han'Ruu was to challenge me now, I would lift my cup and reveal my one shell. He would see that I lied, and I would lose. However, he must be sure, for if he is wrong, and I am being honest, then I am the winner.

There is no challenge, and we play three more rounds, adding up our points. I have nineteen. He has twenty three. The first to reach thirty, or to win a challenge, wins the game.

I pat my gloves and clean my side of the table. We shake our cups and peek at our stones and shells. "One shell, two stones," says Han'Ruu, grinning. He is almost certain to win next round.

I shrug, keeping my face calm. "Three stones, three shells." Nine points. Enough for me to win. Those who have followed along, grow still.

Han'Ruu snickers. "Challenge, brother."

I lift my cup. Three stones. Three shells.

"Inspect them," says Han'Ruu, and Tel'Ruu checks my stones to see if they are marked on only one side. They are. He tosses them three times to see if they are weighed evenly. They are. He does not notice the black powder on my gloves, the one I spread over my side of the table, the one that covers the second marks on my stones.

Han'Ruu laughs. "What a game, brother, what a game. You may have her tomorrow—"

"Tonight."

The crew chuckles.

"Tonight then," says Han'Ruu, smiling. "Feel free to use my cabin, brother."

I nod and stand and take my sword by the hilt and the blue-eyed girl by the arm. Calla catches my gaze as we leave the mainroom and smiles, clearly pleased I'm exercising my carnal rights, even if not with her.

My hand tightens on the blue-eyed girl's arm, and I escort her to the captain's quarters. Once inside, I secure the door and sit down, not on the bed, but on the floor, and motion for her to sit across from me. She remains standing, her eyes stabbing at me like rakam knives. She thought I was one thing, and now she thinks I am another. If, when her eyes pleaded with me earlier, she had any hope of escape, I have crushed it.

Now that I am within arm's length of her, I see where her beauty has been marred by bruises and scars, and the inked mark of the slave on her ankle. She is not as flawless as she seemed from a distance, but in her wounds she is made even more beautiful, like a broken bird who has almost forgotten how to fly.

"What is your name?" I ask.

"Vasa."

"Vasa, tonight, you must stay in this room," I say. "You must bar the door. You must not let anyone in until the sun has risen. Do you understand?"

Her eyes are confused, her lips trembling. "Why?"

"Because the men outside must pay."

She is quiet for a long moment, and then her voice turns harsh. "Fool, all of you will be asleep soon."

"We will not," I say. "My crew knows about the wine."

She blinks, then frowns, challenging me. "How?"

"Do not worry how," I say. "Will you stay in this room, Vasa?"

She nods.

I sigh with relief. "Then it begins." I take three deep breaths and exit the room. I lift the necklace around my neck and place the whistle to my lips. I blow.

And a roar rips through the skies.

The drakruu descends like shadow, like death. She glides around the ship, the beat of her wings a steady thrum amidst the shouts and screams as all look to the skies.

I walk forward, my sword flashing in the moonlight. "Drakruu," yells the man who calls himself Mal'Ruu, as he grabs a spear from the side of the ship. I step forward and slice open his calf. He sprays blood over the shell as he crumbles, cursing and spitting.

The crew rushes to fetch spears and arrows, and the man who calls himself Tel'Ruu notices my blade and draws his own. We exchange three moves, and then he falls, his sword hand cut from his arm. Han'Ruu yells for his men to fetch nets, yells of the stones a drakruu is worth, and then his eyes meet mine. They see the bloody men in my path, and they grow wide with fear.

He tells one of his crew, a woman larger than I, to stop me. She charges, yelling, rakam tipped spear pointed at my chest. She makes it three steps, and then she is pulled into the sky. My drakruu carries her high, shredding her body with sharp teeth, and once she no longer screams and jerks, her body falls into the water like a bloody rock casting red ripples over the dark sea.

"Everyone to me," yells Han'Ruu. "To me." His crew rallies around their captain, and that is when my crew draws their daggers, surrounding Han'Ruu and his men. My drakruu lands behind me, her sapphire scales catching the moonlight as she roars.

"How?" asks Han'Ruu. "The wine—"

"We changed the cask," I say.

"But how did you know? We had the ship of a Great Family. We knew their customs and their speech."

"Even the greatest of Ruu ships do not carry thrice thickened nets, nor stone tipped arrows. They are traders, not warriors. That is for the Ra."

"How would you know this? Who are you?"

My eyes drift to the rest of Han'Ruu's crew. "I am the one who has taken this ship. I am your captain now."

Some of the men and women glance at the bodies behind me. "What if we join you?" someone calls. "What then?"

"Then your lives will be spared."

Han'Ruu spits. "Spared only to be branded traitors and tied to a rock by the sea." His crew look to him, they look to me. Their faces shift from fear to anger, to curiosity and fear again, fitful as the wind.

"He is not wrong," I say. "Those who surrender will be given to the Ruu. You have dishonored them and done far worse, and they will deal with you as they see fit."

The crew recoils, and in their frightened eyes I see that I have lost them. Better to have a chance at life here, then a promised death soon after. They begin to shuffle forward, but I will not let them. There will be no glorious battle, no triumphant last stand. I have let too many die for my cause already.

I pull the sapphire, the one I kept in my box, from my pocket, palming it in my grip. It is almost too big to grasp. I put the thread that holds it over my neck, and the stone gleams and burns against my skin. I remove my gloves, revealing my bright azure nails, and I draw the heat of the sapphire within. My black hair turns blue, my eyes glow in the night.

Both crews stare at me with shock and wonder. Stormborn, they call me. Stonebearer, they whisper.

One of Han'Ruu's men breaks from the group and runs to the side shell. I do not follow, instead I sprint to the edge of the kiasheen and dive into the sea.

There is no splash, no cold shock, no dampness as I hit the water. I slice through the waves, the sapphire burning against my chest, allowing me to move through water easier than I move through air, allowing me to speed up faster and faster with nothing to stop me. I glide under the kiasheen faster than a rakam, faster than an arrow, and I burst out from the water toward the fluke of the ship. I fly through the sky, a trail of water still following me as I curve around onto the ship, and smash myself into the fleeing man. He crashes into the ground as I land on my feet, my breath steady, my clothes dry.

Women scream. Men cry. The false crew drops their weapons. Han'Ruu runs.

He is on the other side of the ship now, so I jump into the water, spiraling under the kiasheen's belly. The sapphire burns but it is no longer as hot as before. It must bathe in the sun and observe its rays to be of use to a Stonebearer, and the more it is used the more heat and light are drained, until the stone must be charged once more.

I explode from the water and curve myself to follow Han'Ruu as he reaches the door of the great shell. Someone—Calla—attempts to fight him off. They exchange a blow, but Calla's blade slips, and Han'Ruu's finds purchase in flesh.

Calla falls, her hands covering her bleeding chest, color draining from her face. She will not live from such a wound. She glances up, her gaze meeting mine for a brief moment. She smiles a bloody smile before the light in her eyes fades forever.

I take a breath, letting the rage burn and grow inside me, and then I fly through the door into the great shell, following Han'Ruu. Before I can catch him, my momentum runs out and I land running. Here, within the bowels of my ship, my sapphire will not aid me, my drakruu cannot help me.

I follow Han'Ruu deeper and deeper into the ship, letting my anger grow hotter, preparing myself for what is about to come.

I find him at the bottom of the ship, in a room that protrudes outward from the kiasheen and over the water. This room was locked before. It is locked no longer.

Han'Ruu stands over the pool of water at the base of the shell, over the wild rakam thrashing there, their teeth scraping against the walls of their prison. His back is turned to me, his voice is soft. "I am of the Ruu," he says.

"I know," I say, taking a step forward, my blade lowered. "Why did they banish you?"

"I loved a woman," he says, turning his face to me, his eyes red and weary. "All we wanted was a home together, a family. Children we could call our own. You understand, don't you, Dak'Ra?"

I pause at the sound of my true name. "You know who I am," I say, the fire cooling within me. I think of Calla and let it rage once more. "Then you know I cannot allow this."

"Why not? We were both banished," he roars. "We were both thrown to the seas, left to scavenge and scrape to survive. This was my ship, and I took it back after my first mother said I was no son of Ruu. Now, I take what I must, not because I wish to, but because they made me so. The Ra family did the same to you. You search for La'Kia because of them. You lost her because of them."

My mind drifts to La'Kia, to the sound of her laughter and the smell of her hair, and I imagine her warm embrace, her tender lips, and the way we lay atop the great mountain and talked of the children we would have and the dreams we would make real.

I take a breath, and let the image fade. I will not think of La'Kia when I do what comes next. I take a step forward. "We are not the same."

Han'Ruu sighs, and the weariness leaves his face, like a man who has had a great weight lifted, like a man who has been told he may come home. We exchange twelve moves, our blades ringing as shouts grow closer, as the rakam twist and snap and splash. Han'Ruu is fast, skilled in his way of Ratat, but I am faster, and on the thirteenth move, I pierce his belly. He falls to his knees, groaning and whimpering. The pain makes a boy out of man. "Sa'Ra," he mutters, voicing the name of his love. "Moon of my heart. The waves bring me home." He looks up at me. "Give me the quick death, brother."

I raise my blade to his neck. I could end it now, but Calla's bloody smile flashes in my mind.

I raise my foot and kick him backwards into the water.

In the depths, where the rakam are faster and stronger, they do not worry about killing. They eat their prey alive. Some say, you die from the pain before the wounds.

BLUE EYES



After a battle, when the blood rush fades, you are left with the ghosts of those you have killed. For me, it is harder than the killing—there is too much blood lust and battle cry to think on such things then, but in the end, when the calm returns and humanity settles back into you... in the end, you remember that you are alone in your mind, and you must live with what you have done.

I should not have given Han'Ruu to the rakam, but he had killed Calla and enslaved Vasa and so many others. I wanted him to suffer. A part of me hopes he suffers still in the Deep Mother's embrace.

Kanen's crew killed the rakam hidden in the bowels of the larger ship; their heads and skins and meat will fetch a nice price at trade.

The crew cleaned themselves and the decks of blood. Those who were injured received medical care, often in the form of strong sea swill.

Many songs were sung and many tears were shed and many toasts were shared over clinking cups.

I saved my tears for Calla, whose friendship extended to so many, who died with that contagious smile frozen on her lips. Captain Kanen gave me leave to honor her in my own way, so I took her body upon my drakruu, and together we flew over moonlit waves until we reached sapphire blue waters. There, I kissed her forehead and whispered the old words of my people. And when the crone moon set, I sent Calla into the waves, where she will once again smile and laugh in the company of those she loves.

The rakam will come. The blood in the water draws them. So I tell Garen, who now steers the Ruu kiasheen under my command, to take us skyward. He pulls hard upon the reins, and with a great moan the giant beast tilts its head

upwards and flaps its wings. We fly higher, drifting on the water. We fly higher, the wings barely touching waves. We fly higher, and we are free of the sea.

I look down upon the shimmering waves and up at the glowing sun. There is a peace in the sky that is not found in the sea. Here you feel as if you have found something man was never meant to find, a secret paradise away from the depths below. I remember La'Kia. I remember taking her flying on my drakruu, and the kisses and whispers we shared with no one around to hear. I told her then, that it was in the water I was strong, but it was in the sky I was free. How foolish I was then.

A loud moan breaks me from my haze. Kanen follows us in his ship and with half his crew, his kiasheen drifting beside mine. The blue skin of the whales is like dancing waves in the light. The shells are like gleaming pearls. The smaller kiasheen opens its mouth wide, and I know it's feeding on the small creatures that live in the sky, just as it feeds on the small creatures in the water during long voyages. The beasts are calm and peaceful. I wish I could be like them.

"You are Dak'Ra," says Vasa, standing behind me at the rostrum. She is the first to confront me, but I have heard the crew's whispers, and I know they have all guessed who I am.

"And you are of the Ra family as well," I say, turning to face her.

She nods, startled. "Yes. I have a sister back on Ra'Kia'Ruu. Three years ago, I was on a ship near the rakam teeth, training to be a Stonebearer, when this ship took me and mine. They were all sold in a week. I..."

"I understand," I say kindly. She need not relive the horrors Han'Ruu forced upon her for my sake. But there is one thing that puzzles me. "How is that you walked without chains? That you moved about the ship freely?"

Her blue eyes flash with ferocity. "Han'Ruu knew I would not reveal his schemes. If he had threatened me with my death, I would have spoken in a stone's throw. But he threatened pain and the deaths of any I told. I would not trade the chance of freedom for the lives of others."

I nod and place a hand on her shoulder.

She recoils, startling both of us. "I'm sorry," she says.

"Don't be."

She bites her lip and turns to leave, but there is one more question I must ask. One I have already asked of the false crew locked within the shells below. "Have you seen a black kiasheen?"

She pauses. "That is the ship that took your lover?"

"It took us both," I say softly. "Later, I was sold to a family of land, she to a ship much like this."

"That is why you ride the kiasheen," she says. "You search for crews who wreck and steal like this."

I nod.

She turns her face to the side, so I cannot see her blue eyes. "I have not seen the black ship," she says.

Hours pass, and when the sun is beginning to set, the kiasheen land. We tie our ships and set up planks between the shells to easily cross from one to another. On the great shell of the large kiasheen, Captain Kanen hands me a cup of swill and holds his up for a toast. "I owe you my life and the life of my crew and ship."

"You owe me nothing," I say, "but I do have one request."

"Name it and it be yers."

"Make sure the men and women below are given over to the Ruu, and make sure Vasa'Ra is returned to her family."

My drakruu roars amongst the clouds, and we hear the splash as she dives deep into the sea to catch her dinner.

"You won't be staying with us, then?" asks Captain Kanen.

I shake my head.

"Yer woman?"

I nod.

"Then may the goddess guide your way, and feel well knowing I will honor yer request. I swear it by the Deep Mother." I grasp his forearm as he does mine. "And if ever ye need help," he says, grinning, "remember ye have friends here."

I turn to leave, and Garen grabs me in a giant hug, lifting me, cracking my spine. "So it was La'Kia after all," he says. "I'll be getting that tale right from now on, brother. You best know I'll be getting that tale right and spreading it wide and far. Dak'Ra still rides the waves."

He chuckles, rattling the bones in his beard as he puts me down. I gasp for breath melodramatically and grin. "Thank you," I say, turning to the great shell and the rest of the crew. "It has been a pleaser to ride the waves with you, brothers and sisters, but there is one more thing I ask of you," I yell. "Tell all you see that Dak'Ra still lives. Tell them he comes for the black kiasheen."

It is late when I stand on the rostrum with my drakruu, tightening the saddle she wears on her back. Most of the crew is asleep, and even the kiasheen slumbers, when Vasa'Ra approaches me, her white dress billowing in the wind. "May I?" she asks, raising her hand to my drakruu.

I nod. "Here, behind me, away from the head."

She stands to my side and touches the blue scales below the wing. "What's its name?"

"Her name is Rin, but I call her Rakam Eater."

Vasa'Ra giggles, and I realize it's the first time I've seen her laugh. It is short-lived as her grin fades.

"I have seen the black ship," she says, her voice trembling, "and the man who leads it. He is the one who killed my first mother when my sister and I were but children. He is the one who took three Ra ships with one. Do not go to him," she pleads, touching my hand.

"If it was my life, I would stay. But my life is no longer mine. It belongs to another, and she waits amongst the waves." I push Vasa'Ra's hand away and mount Rin. I pull something from my pocket and toss it to the blue-eyed girl.

"No, you can't—"

"Keep it," I say.

Her eyes dazzle at the sapphire in her hands. "But why?"

"Because a man once did the same for me," I say, grinning as I pull on the reins and lift into the sky toward the maiden moon.

As I drift through the pale blue clouds, I think of that man who gave me my first sapphire.

He is the one who rides the black kiasheen.

THE END

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHORS

Call us Karpov Kinrade. We're the husband and wife team behind *The Shattered Islands*. And we want to say... thank you for reading it. We hope you enjoyed it. We began crafting this world many years ago, and we're thrilled that readers can finally experience its story and characters.

Ever since our first novel, we've benefited tremendously from the feedback readers have given us, and we encourage you to write us directly with your thoughts at contact@karpovkinrade.com. The inspiration and kindness we've received from so many of you has changed our entire career.

If you have time to write a review, please know that we will read it, and that we take feedback very seriously. Each and every review is important. Each and every review makes a difference. They increase the chances of people finding this novel, and they influence how we write.

And if you'd like to know when the next *Shattered Islands* is available, please sign up for our newsletter. We only send out quality updates and giveaways.

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ABOUT KARPOV KINRADE



Karpov Kinrade is the pen name for the husband and wife writing duo of USA TODAY bestselling, award-winning authors Lux Kinrade and Dmytry Karpov.

Together, they write fantasy and science fiction.

Look for more from Karpov Kinrade in *The Nightfall Chronicles* and *The Forbidden Trilogy*. If you're looking for their suspense and romance titles, you'll now find those under Alex Lux.

They live with three little girls who think they're ninja princesses with super powers and who are also showing a propensity for telling tall tales and using the written word to weave stories of wonder and magic.

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