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THE ASCENDANCE SERIES

BOOK FOUR

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THE  
CAPTIVE  
KINGDOM

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JENNIFER A. NIELSEN

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several of his friends are taken prisoner; the Prozarian captain seems  
to believe he had something to do with his parents' deaths and they also  
know a great deal about Jaron's long-missing older brother, Darius, the  
rightful heir to Carthya — who may be alive after all.

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· ONE ·

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For the past several months, my country of Carthya had been at peace. Imogen and I were happier than ever, our enemies were at bay, and the closest thing I had to a mortal wound was a bruise on my thigh from when I'd bumped into my own throne last month.

In other words, I was bored.

I was also irritable, restless, and, according to Imogen, the sole reason we'd gone through eight cooks in the last month. Nine, if we counted the one who ran out crying before we'd even offered her the position. That was only half of my recent failings. I had yet to fully explain to Imogen why the Carthyan flag appeared to have been torn free from the center spire of the castle.

For those reasons, when Imogen had ducked her head into my meeting with the regents three weeks ago, suggesting we go on a trading mission to Bymar, servants had actually come running into the throne room to see what all the commotion was. There was no commotion, only me doing a literal somersault across the meeting table and frightening Mistress Kitcher so

much that she leapt away and lost her wig. Hence all the screaming. Mine, not hers.

Three days after that, to the relief of a significant percentage of the Carthyian population, we had set sail for Bymar, where Amarinda was born and raised. She had been a princess there and betrothed to the throne of Carthya, which originally meant she was intended to marry my brother Darius. After his death, the task fell to me, but since Amarinda would have rather married a mossy rock, we broke the arrangement. She and Tobias were now betrothed, as were Imogen and I, and all was well.

Especially tonight.

The voyage had been an enormous success, an advantage to all parties, and now, a little over two weeks later, we were headed home as guests of the Avenian pirates aboard the *Red Serpent*, a small but comfortable cog ship. It felt right to be going home, though I already dreaded what awaited me. More meetings, more formal suppers. More routine.

With only three days left in our journey, I was spending the waning hours of sunlight studying Bevin Conner's old journal. I had read through it dozens of times since his death, always searching for a better understanding of his twisted motives and corrupted sense of heroism.

Conner had clearly specified the items that were to be passed along to his heirs, but as he had none, the items had stayed with me. Imogen wanted all his former possessions destroyed. She believed they were holding me too much in the past, but I felt there was more to be learned from them. Particularly his journal.

## THE CAPTIVE KINGDOM

I glanced up as a cheer rose from the lower deck, where nearly all the pirates were at supper. That was a good thing. If they were eating, they weren't stealing.

Over the last few days on this ship, I had often pointed out to Imogen that other than their constant attempts to steal from us, these pirates had been a pleasant crew. That was small comfort to her, but as I also had a long history of thieving, I could hardly criticize the pirates for the same behavior.

"Many of these same pirates tried to kill you once," she observed.

To be accurate, it was more than once, though I didn't feel the need to correct her. And to be perfectly accurate, I was one of "these same pirates" myself.

"Jaron, there's a ship on the starboard side," Erick called down to me. He was the pirate king, our helmsman, and a fine cook of fresh-caught fish, I'd recently discovered. But now his usually friendly voice bore a note of concern. "It's on a course aimed directly for us."

I replaced Conner's book in my shoulder bag and hurried up to the quarterdeck where he was. The ship he had observed was a caravel with a total of four mainsails; two large sails above the deck rose as high as the crow's nest, which was flanked by two smaller topsails. The crow's nest itself was accessed by a rope ladder. Above the topsail a flag hung from a mast. It was neither Avenian nor pirate, but instead a simple green flag with white trim. I did not recognize it.

A bowsprit jutted out from the front of the ship with a raised forecastle deck that would give the ship's crew an

advantage in fighting. It was wide enough for two rooms to fit below the quarterdeck, wherein we had only one, the captain's quarters. Erick and I had debated multiple times about whether he or I should have that room. I had won, on the condition that I let my thirteen-year-old adopted brother, Fink, bunk there too, so he would keep fewer crewmen awake with his talking each night.

The ship angled to match our exact change in course, and this time, a shiver crawled up my spine.

"What's the firepower on our ship?" I asked Erick.

"The usual number of cannons, but they've shown us no aggression."

I disagreed. "The cannons on their deck are already manned. Can we outrun them?"

Erick shook his head and turned the wheel again to steer us away. He whistled at another pirate to take the helm, leaving him with instructions that sent my heart pounding. "Take us in any direction away from that ship. Whatever else happens, don't let it get broadside of us."

Because if it did, its cannon fire would sink us.

Erick and I raced down the stairs, with Erick shouting orders to every pirate we passed along the way. He called back to me, "I'll get our cannons loaded as well, but they're a bigger ship. Unless we get a lucky hit first, if they intend to harm us, they can do it. You'd better get your people to safety."

I nodded at him and ran into the wardroom on the main deck where Imogen, Fink, and Mott were playing cards. "There's trouble," I said. "We've got to hide as many people as we can."

## THE CAPTIVE KINGDOM

Without a word, Mott stood and went belowdecks, calling for all Carthyans on board to meet him near the bunks.

Imogen looked at Fink. “Go into the galley and get as much food together as you can carry. Then report directly to Mott.”

She followed me back onto the deck where it was evident the other ship was closing in. A captain stood at the forecandle with a sword aimed directly at us.

“Is this another pirate ship?” she asked. “Are we being raided?”

I shook my head. “Erick assured me this part of the Eranbole Sea belongs to the Avenian pirates. I don’t think this is a raid.”

“Then it’s targeting us?” Her brows pressed together. “Why?”

I gave Imogen my shoulder bag and took her by the hand belowdecks where Mott was in the middle of assigning everyone a task.

“There are a few false walls in the storage areas. Take your places and the rest of us will seal you in. Stay as long as you can stand it, or until one of us pulls you out.” He looked around the group. “Fink, Amarinda, Imogen —”

“No!” she said. “Mott, I want to help fight!”

I turned to her. “There will be no fight when they attack. We cannot match their strength. You must hide.”

“As must you,” Mott said. “Jaron, there are four spaces. The fourth is for you.”

“Absolutely not!” I said. “Where’s my sword?”

Roden, the captain of my guard, touched my arm. “You’re the king. More than anyone else, you need to hide.”

I shook my head at him, ready with a response, but there was no time for even that before someone called from up on the main deck, "Jaron, you need to see this."

I gave Imogen's hand a squeeze and said to Mott, "Begin hiding the others. I'll be back. Can someone find my sword?" Then I raced up the steps back onto the main deck.

The invaders had raised a new flag, one with painted black letters that had begun to drip with the spray of water, leaving long streaks beneath the writing itself. It read one word only: JARON.

My heart was nearly beating out of my chest as I called down to Mott. "No one comes onto this main deck until this is resolved. Those are my orders."

"Why?" Imogen replied. "What is happening up there?"

"Get everyone into hiding! Every one of you."

"What about you?" Amarinda cried. "Jaron, come down here with us!"

"Mott?" I called. "Do you have my orders?"

A long silence followed before he answered, "The king has spoken. You all know what to do."

Erick pounded up the stairs, giving me a quick glare. "I'll go anywhere I want on my ship, and I will give the order of when to fire and when to attack." Then his eye turned to the sail with my name written on it. "Oh."

"We're not going to fire on them," I said. "We've got to defeat them."

"How?"

I walked to the side of the ship as it turned broadside of us,

## THE CAPTIVE KINGDOM

revealing the ship's name: *Shadow Tide*. On a single whistle I heard from where I stood, its gun ports opened to reveal a dozen cannons all aimed our way.

I looked over at Erick and sighed. "Well, that's the part I haven't figured out. But it seems defeating them is the only choice we have left."