

## The End of Captain Juliet

“A captain always goes down with her ship,” Captain Juliet Orens reminded herself aloud.

“This is where I want to be.”

“We can still escape!” Her first mate, Mr. Carver said as the ship burned around them. The crew was already clamoring into the lifeboats, covering their escape with smoke from the burning sails. Once the attack ships had broken their mast, Juliet knew they were dead in the water and ordered the sails to be burned to hide the crew’s escape. Four Admiralty ships were closing in from the four compass points. The Sapphire Queen was trapped, but the smoke would let her crew escape...save for one.

“Mr. Carver,” Juliet said as the cannon fire died down, “they’re not interested in you. They don’t care about the helmsman, the cook, or the carpenter...just me. I’m the final prize in this fight. Any boat I go in will be a target, but I can buy you a few precious moments to scatter. It’ll be enough to escape.”

“We knew the risks when we joined your crew.”

“And when I agreed to take you all on as crew, I took responsibility for all your safety. You aren’t responsible for my revenge...nor my justice.”

“Captain—“

“Keep them safe,” Juliet urged, looking down at the crew. “If you won’t accept an order from your captain, consider it a request from your friend...”

Mr. Carver looked at the four ships as they closed in, turning their cannons away to board. Taking a deep breath, Mr. Carver scowled but nodded. “It’s been an honor to fight alongside you.”

“I need one more favor,” Juliet said. “And you’ll like it even less...”

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Juliet Orens was promised to a man who would bring her family status and wealth. True, he was older, but he was well-liked and respected throughout the town. Juliet, however, loathed the arranged marriage. As kind as John was, he was dull and dim-witted. He worked with the tax office and his most exciting tale had something to do with a horse that nibbled at his coat tails as he was leaving the office one evening. Juliet thought John was fine, but the union wasn’t of interest to her. Exhausted with being an idle trading piece in a social game, Juliet ran off with her dowry. If she was forced to marry, Juliet decided she would simply marry herself.

Life on the road was more interesting than Juliet could have dreamed. She made her way south towards the Bay of Oaks, a logging town turned major trading port. From there, she paid her way aboard a vessel and journeyed to the Garlan Islands. She found work in Port Barque in the Wailing Siren Inn, not just delivering drinks, but shuffling messages and helping smuggle goods for the pirates that found Barque’s lack of Admiralty Enforcement to be more profitable than risking death. Juliet made decent money at the Wailing Siren and lived simply. Eventually, she found someone willing to take her next bribe.

“And where are you looking to end up?” Captain Kay asked. He was a brusque, stout man with a thick, curly beard and a bandana to hold his long, dark braids out of his face. “Where does your journey end?”

“On a ship of my own,” Juliet said. “I’ve been smuggling for the likes of you under the table for so long, I figured ‘how hard could it be?’”

“Smuggling is hardly a ladylike profession, Ms. Orens...”

“And serving girl doesn’t half as well. If I must choose between being ladylike or living as myself? I would choose myself each day.”

“People may not care for that attitude,” Captain Kay grumbled. “However, this...apprentice fee, shall we call it? It intrigues me. Risking everything you have for something that may not work out is a brave act. I suppose we could take you on for this voyage if you’re willing to put in the work.”

“My softness faded long ago, Captain,” Juliet grinned. “Besides, you trust me to help you smuggle your goods more than your crew. I must have a knack for it.”

Captain Kay laughed and shook Juliet’s hand. “You’ll make a fine pirate yet!”

Juliet’s life on the sea turned the blisters on her hands into calluses. Heaving ropes made her strong and she was the fastest of the crew to climb up the mast when the captain demanded it. The sun made her skin fluctuate from pale to red to copper. Her brown lightened under the scorching light and she found a hat with a wide brim to protect her eyes from the sun. They fought rarely, but Juliet endeavored to learn everything she could to defend herself. She learned how to shoot a rifle from the lookout and spent six weeks training with the quartermaster to become a master with her sword. She was always invited to the table when Captain Kay would do business, being the only member of the crew who could read or do figures. Things were fine enough, but Juliet found her ship.

The Sapphire Queen was a beautiful brigantine with crisp, white sails and blue rails. With four cannons, she wasn’t a fighting ship. Still, the Sapphire Queen was a fast ship that Juliet fell in love with the moment they’d taken it. She couldn’t imagine anyone, let alone the captain,

leaving behind a ship so beautiful. Captain Kay must have noticed her fondness as she stood at the blue-tinged steering wheel.

“A modest twenty percent of your plunder,” Captain Kay offered over rum in his cabin later. “At least to start. Eventually, we’ll be more like...business partners. You’d like an ally to start your pirating career. Agreed?”

“Agreed,” Juliet smirked. “Although, I’ll offer a friendly ten percent of my plunder.”

With a few other members of Kay’s crew coming with her, Juliet sailed the seas in search of adventure. Smuggling made for good business and Juliet found that stealing from Admiralty ships often made for fancy profits. She prided herself on never killing, but she rarely left ships who opposed the Sapphire Queen with more than enough to limp back to the closest port. Juliet didn’t feel she was a proper pirate until she’d earned a wanted poster that hung from the wall of a tavern. Captain Juliet Orens: Wanted for thievery, smuggling, and piracy.

They held their own against incredible odds, but they heard the news of the Pirate Hunter. Henry Ryans had sworn to capture and kill every last pirate, especially the pirate captains of the seas. Juliet had survived a scrape with him once before, but the Pirate Hunter was ruthless. With the full force of the Admiralty behind him, the Pirate Hunter was almost unstoppable. Juliet herself had out-sailed Henry Ryans through three tropical storms, two coral reefs and survived four different skirmishes. When the Pirate Hunter pursued her with Iron Belly Destroyers, Juliet was almost flattered. As they attacked The Sapphire Queen—blowing her to pieces—Juliet knew the fight wouldn’t last long. She refused to die by the Pirate Hunter’s hands and on anyone’s terms but hers.

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Pirate Hunter Ryans marched off his ship, stomping on the railing and kicking through the ash that coated the deck. Juliet stood proudly, chains holding her to the broken mast straining against her ribs with each breath. Pirate Hunter Ryans smirked and looked around the deck.

“That didn’t seem to go as you planned, Captain Orens...”

“I made my choices. I’d make the same ones again if pushed to do it again.”

“Well, then you’d still spend the rest of your life in prison. Throw her in the brig!”

“You’ll find that a bit challenging, Pirate Hunter,” Juliet grinned, defiant. “The keys to these locks, I’m afraid, are with different members of my crew. By the time you find the keys or break through the chains? By then I’ll be down below with my Sapphire Queen. You can arrest me if you choose. But I will spend the rest of my life right here.”

“You’d rather die on your burning pile of wood than receive your due justice?”

“Yes,” Juliet smiled, “yes, I will not be torn down.”

“Then burn, Captain...” Pirate Hunter Ryans snarled. “We’ll catch the lifeboats and murder your crew. All the pirates will die today.”

“You have four warships,” Juliet began, “none built for speed. We had eight lifeboats. My crew knows these better than you and I promise you won’t find peace at any port they could make their way to.”

“I’ll take half of your crew then,” the Pirate Hunter growled. “Enjoy the fire, Captain. Or maybe you’ll drown first? Your story may live on, but you will die one way or another.”

“Stories are the only way we can live on,” Juliet smiled. “You may have killed the other pirate captains, but you didn’t kill me. Your grand conquest fell just one short. And even if part

of my crew makes it to safety, they'll tell my story. And it will become our story...your greatest failure becomes my legend. You failed to kill the last pirate captain."

"I could kill you now." The Pirate Hunter pulled out a pistol and pushed it against Juliet's head. Juliet didn't waver, staring him in the face even as he pulled back the hammer on his gun. She only smiled broader.

"Kill me or try to catch my crew. Do you kill me to get the glory, even if you know there will be those out there who will deny it? Or do you go and hunt down those who tell the truth to preserve your reputation? Whether on the lips of my crew or in the back of your mind, I will survive this."

Pirate Hunter Ryans fumed before putting his gun back in the holster at his hip. He turned back to his crew and started shouting orders. "Get back to the ships now! We give no quarter and show no mercy!"

The Admiralty sailors rushed off The Sapphire Queen, scrambling to get back to the Iron Belly Destroyers as more of the ship burned. With a final look of disgust, Pirate Hunter Ryans spat at Juliet's feet. Juliet only grinned as the furious man stormed off her ship. She'd won in the end. The captain embraced the wood of the mast as best as she could with her body bound to it. Juliet knew she should feel afraid, but this was where she wanted to be. The fire warmed her rather than burned her and the chains made it feel as if the ship was giving her one last, loving embrace.