

# SECRETS OF THE DEEP - EXCERPT

RED SAILS

ANDRE JONES



## CHAPTER I

# EXCERPT



“Ship to port!” The lookout’s sharp cry pierced the salty air. Ripples of anticipation ebbed through the crew of the *Revenge*. Perched high in the crow’s nest, the lookout pointed toward the distant speck on the horizon. Below, the bustling deck of the ship stilled as heads turned toward their captain.

Corra Sienna stepped up to the gunwale with the grace of someone who had spent years mastering unpredictable seas. From a sheath crafted from the skin of the elusive barbon fish, she drew her long-eye, a finely crafted spyglass. Hooking her arm through the shrouds to steady herself, she peered at the ship in question.

Most of the crew carried on with their tasks, though they remained wary and upbeat, expecting a change in orders any moment.

“Are they pirates?” asked Olinda, one of the younger newlings, her wide-eyed eagerness betraying her inexperience. Leaning on the gunwale, she squinted at the horizon.

Corra lowered the long-eye and fixed Olinda with a

measured look. "Possibly. Too far to say. Olinda, isn't it? You're too keen by half. Pirate hunting sounds noble enough, but it's more dangerous than you realize. It's not something to sail into unwittingly."

Satisfied her caution had been heard, Corra turned her gaze back to the horizon. "Let's catch up with them," she ordered, her voice calm yet commanding. "See what they do."

"Aye, Cap'n!" Tully, the first mate, relayed the order with a bark, setting the crew into motion. With the sails adjusted, the helm spun to port. The *Revenge* surged forward, slicing through the oncoming waves. It was choppy at first, but then the ship found its rhythm and soon its movement was a steady and graceful rising and falling motion.

Olinda, still curious, tilted her head. "What's that noise?" she asked, as the sound caught her attention.

"That's water rippling along the hull." Corra replied with a faint smile. "You'll get used to it."

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After a couple of hours, the *Revenge* was steadily closing the gap between itself and the unknown ship. As they drew near, Tully called out, her telescope trained on the vessel's stern. "It's the *Dimantin*, Cap'n. A trader out of Erranier. Last I heard, Erdun Walsch was in command."

Captain Sienna nodded. "Flag our request to parley." She handed the sheathed long-eye to Tully.

A pennant was sent up *Revenge's* mainmast; a fluttering signal of peaceful intent. Minutes later, a reply came from the *Dimantin*, its own pennant rising in acknowledgment. The trader slowed as sails were pulled in.

As the two ships drew alongside, Corra maintained her ritual. Stepping to the gunwale, she gave a brief salute toward the *Dimantin's* ensign. Olinda, observing from the sidelines, turned to a crewmate. "Why'd she do that?"

“Marks o’respect,” one of the crew replied as they readied the gangplank. “Our cap’n always salutes, no matter who’s on the other side.”

“Even pirates?” Olinda failed to recall the name of the crewmember, but hoped she’d get to learn the names of the thirty-women crew in time.

“If they be showin’ the flag to parley, assumin’ we’re not already fightin’, or they’re not runnin’ in panic. The ship ain’t the problem. Wanna lend a hand ’stead of gawpin’?”

Blushing at the mild rebuke, Olinda rushed closer to help.

“Reduce sail,” Corra called out. “Slow speed. Helm, bring us alongside. Steady, still a bit choppy.”

Tully repeated the order before turning to her captain. “Want a Calmin’?”

The captain judged the swell between the two hulls separated by the length of the gangplank—about ten feet. “Sure. I don’t feel like swimming at the moment.”

Tully gave the command, and *Revenge* eased into position beside the larger vessel.

Four crew members—hydrons—elementalists trained in water magyk, spaced themselves along the port side. They raised their arms in unison, murmuring incantations that dampened the waves around the two ships. The sea’s natural rhythm was subdued, creating a still, mirror-like surface between the vessels.

Olinda gawked. “How are they doing that?” she whispered to herself, her astonishment growing as she climbed into the shrouds to get a better view. Beyond the immediate calm, the open sea swelled as usual. The contrast was mesmerizing, it was as if there were a hidden wall surrounding them.

Sienna strode across the gangplank, her balance as unerring as her reputation. She eyed the trader ship and its crew warily. Just because they complied, didn’t mean they

were not going to give any trouble. Many men were standing and watching with interest at both the metal-hulled ship and the all-female crew. She doubted they'd seen a woman crew before, and after a few whistles and catcalls, it definitely confirmed they had never seen the Red Sails before. As expected, her girls ignored them completely.

As she came to the end of the narrow walkway, she was met by two burly men, their long, curly black hair tied back. Their shirts were half undone, revealing broad chests. Bulging muscle evident with the short sleeves.

"Permission to come aboard?" she asked the two men approaching.

"For you lovely, anytime." One's grin showed surprisingly white teeth. He raised his hand to assist her down.

She ignored it and dropped like a cat to the deck. "Captain Walsch about?" She was thinking this man was too young to be a ship captain, then again, he wasn't much older than herself.

"He'll be along shortly. In the meantime, been at sea for a while. Why don't we get acquainted first? The lads here would be keen to meet yer girls too."

If it had been quiet before, it was deathly still now.

Corra breathed calmly. "You're either new to the sea, or a canvas short of full sail?" Her voice, heard over the unusually becalmed waters and wind, was crisp but not unfriendly.

Any crew that heard—men and women—chuckled.

"Nah. Plenty of experience, and in other things too." He winked.

"Right. So, you've not heard of the Red Sails?"

"I've heard *stories* in taverns and the like." He smirked to his companion. "But many tall tales are told in taverns. Can't believe everythin' some drunk says."

"What do these tall tales say?"

“Women chasin’ pirates and stuff and cuttin’ their balls off.” He chuckled. “I know women, an’ I seen pirates. I reckon I know who’d come off best.”

“I see. And where have you seen these pirates?”

“Samanka town square. The gallows jus’ afore they was hanged.” He shrugged. “Didn’t look like much.”

“Most aren’t. Then again, many men are like that, I find.” Corra was disappointed, though not overly surprised at the way this encounter was going. Too much to expect any respect from a man to a female captain. “I’d appreciate it if you’d go and fetch your captain. This conversation is getting tedious.”

“Off ya git.” He nudged his companion. “Don’t worry. I’ll save yer some.”

Once he left, Muscles turned his full attention back to the long-legged beauty in front of him. “Wot’s yer name, girl?” He raised his hand, reaching out to her.

She didn’t flinch and showed no interest. “I wouldn’t advise it.” Corra casually raised her arm.

“Why not?” The smile wavered. The hand paused.

She clicked her fingers. Seconds later, three arrows with red fletching thudded into the deck by his scuffed and worn-out boots.

Muscles jumped back in surprise and alarm. Some of the men cursed in anger, looking to see the archers high in the rigging. Their arrows already drawn for the next volley. An equal amount of his fellow crewmen chuckled at his discomfort.

“As to why not?” Unphased, Corra cocked her head to the side with a sly grin at his sudden change of stance. “Because I didn’t ask, and we’re not in a playful mood.”

Having backed away, Muscles covered his embarrassment with false bravado. “You dare attack me, on my ship?”

“*Your* ship, is it? And yes. I dare. The next arrow will be

painfully closer if you make any attempt to touch me again.” She raised her voice for the benefit of the others. “This goes to any man who tries. My girls haven’t drunk blood all week and are getting thirsty.”

Muscle’s tanned face quickly lost a few shades.

“What’s goin’ on ’ere?” An older man bellowed as he strode across the deck from his cabin. “Klort. Ye bein’ disrespectful again? Be off with ye, lout!” He turned to another senior man. “Veral, get these laggards workin’!”

“Aye, Cap’n.” Orders were yelled and the onlookers quickly went back to their tasks.

With a vengeful backwards glance, Muscles sauntered aft, the first mate berating him as he walked.

“Captain Walsch, I take it? Captain Sienna of the *Revenge*,” she addressed the older, grey haired and bearded man.

“I am.” The captain stepped closer. “Glad tidin’s to ye, Cap’n Sienna. Welcome to the *Diamantin*. My apologise for Klort, and not greetin’ yus,” Walsch replied, his own tone tinged with uncertainty, seeing the arrows in the deck. “If yer find yerself in Samanko, stay away from their eel dishes. Goes right throu yer, it does.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

Walsch nodded as he continued. “Klort’s a cad. I blame meself for not bein’ there for ’im more.”

“He was of little concern, so don’t fret.” Corra nodded, then changed the subject. “Thanks for not putting up more sail and avoiding us.”

“’eard of the Red Sails, I ’ave. ’ear’s ye’d catch us if ye wanted.” Walsch’s eyes flicked to the elementalists maintaining the calm waters and the all-woman crew, curiosity clear in his expression. “No point pissin’ yer off.”

“True enough,” Corra admitted, a slight smirk playing on her lips. “I’ve a good crew.”



“An’ a good ship too, so I ’ears. Be that a metal ’ull?” He stepped closer to the side and looked along the neighbouring ship’s length. “Ain’t never seen a metal one a’fore.”

“*Revenge* is a very unique and capable ship. One of three.” She waited for him to face her again and handed him a rolled document. “Just to allay any doubts or fear that we’re no threat to you and other merchants. The Red Sails are Privateers, commissioned by Pertram Olber, High Lord of Jaranabi, and countersigned by Logar Glerin, the ruler of Klarget.” Corra waited for him to read over the document.

“As I says. I’ve ’eard of ye. Tis why we’re headin’ sou’west now it be safer waters, thanks to yous. What can I do for ye?” The tension in his voice faded quickly now that he was assured they meant no harm. He rolled the parchment up and handed it back.

Corra slid it back into its leather holder as she spoke. “We’ve had reports of raiders in these waters. It’s a large area. I’m asking merchants if they’ve seen anything to narrow it down?”

Walsch frowned, his expression darkening. “Not seen ’em myself, but word is the *Gon Falmo* was ’it four nights past, north of ’ere. Damned pirate scum’s gettin’ bolder.” Walsch turned to his runner. “Get me charts, boy.”

Corra’s expression grew grave at the news. “How did the *Gon Falmo* fare?”

“Not well. Took ’eavy damage but was continuin’ on to Lashalk. These attacks are worse with every report.” He motioned for her to follow to where a chart was hastily laid out on a weather-worn bench. Several large pebbles were placed to prevent the parchment edges to curl up.

His runner ducked away, but his wide eyes watched the tall woman from behind a barrel.

Walsch pointed to a location north of the Chevron Reef. "They seem ta be stickin' to this region for now."

"No doubt because of the kraken season in other waters further south," Corra surmised. "The reef will give traders limited movement. Easier pickings."

"No doubt, and also why we're 'uggin' close to the reef to avoid the kraken. No sane captain will risk a kraken—even if it ain't the season. We're runnin' light, so takin' advantage of the shallower waters."

"And your destination?"

"Mostly cotton and oils for Port Angrom over in Dran'ali."

Corra nodded, looking over his chart. "Next time you venture to Herantia, go and see Farand Daral Shis. She's one of the best cartographers to date. Price is high, but better than ripping your keel in uncharted waters. May I?" She plucked a charcoal stick from an engraved pewter mug nearby.

At his dubious nod, Corra made a few minor additions.

"There are spurs to the reef, here ... and here."

When the captain of the *Revenge* was finished, Walsch studied the annotation to his chart and was well-pleased, remarking, "Many thanks to ye, Cap'n. I'll heed yer warnin' and keep 'n eye out and give those shoals a wide berth."

The parley concluded with mutual respect, and the *Revenge* set a course for Titonu Island to investigate the raid. The journey would take them through a treacherous channel, a shortcut known for its narrow and shallow waters. It was a risk, but one worth taking if they hoped to gain the advantage over the elusive raiders.

"If we're lucky, we'll be at the reef before sunset." Tully judged the angle of the lowering sun.

As *Revenge* turned toward its new heading, Captain Sienna addressed her crew. "Prepare for a reef crossing. Most of us

have done it before. Keep alert. We'll need every ounce of skill and a bit of magyk to see us through."

The crew cheered, bolstered by their captain's confidence and the possibility of action. Olinda, watching from the rigging, felt a spark of pride, excitement, and a bit of nervousness. She was part of something extraordinary, aboard a ship where courage and cunning charted their course.

And somewhere ahead, danger waited.

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"Reef starboard bow," came the call from above.

A short time later, the troubled waters of the reef became evident to all those on the deck.

"Helm, keep it on the horizon until we get to Keelhaul Channel." Corra ordered, then turned to Tully. "Looks like the tide isn't full yet. We'll need more water beneath us, and speed. Dusk will be upon us shortly. Assemble our mancres. I'm heading up to the bowsprit. Send a runner."

Tully pulled out her whistle and gave a series of short high-pitched blasts.

Overhearing the conversation and taking the initiative, Olinda took on the job as runner. She was a few steps behind her commander.

Captain Sienna walked briskly to the fo'c'sle, mounted the bowsprit and shinnied along the smooth metal spar until the lines for the jib boom were in reach. Pulling herself up, she slipped her boots into a loop of rope to secure her footing, curled her arm around a jib line, and surveyed the reef with her long-eye.

The search for a slightly smoother and darker section of water—the telltale sign of the deeper channel—was hampered now by the lowering sun. Every minute the light was waning.

"Keelhaul Channel sighted, cap'n," the spotter in the crow's

nest called out, her voice easily being carried forward by the wind.

“Just in time.” Raising her right arm, Sienna kept it there as the *Revenge* changed direction. The angle of the deck increased with the turn. Olly had to use both hands to hang on until the captain dropped her arm.

The bow of *Revenge* rose up the face of a wave.

Olinda lost sight of the sea for a frightening moment, then, as the bow dropped, there were some loud bangs and the ship shuddered when the hull hit the water. Spray cascaded over the deck, sending a brief shiver down her spine as the cold water soaked her clothes. Gradually the deck levelled as the ship straightened out of the turn.

“Keelhaul Channel now dead ahead, Cap’n.”

Corra studied the channel to make sure their line was true. When she pulled her gaze away, she saw the young newling, white faced and gripping the railing standing behind her.

“Tell Tully we need more speed and at least a fathom of swell.”

Olinda looked puzzled at the wording, but ran, dodging coils of rope, back to the first mate and repeated what she hoped was the correct order.

Tully nodded. “Olly, never run. Walk briskly and always try ta maintain hand contact otherwise the slightest roll will send ya a’fallin’.” The first mate then addressed the two groups of elementalists forming up nearby. “We need ’bout six feet under the keel and get ’er to flyin’ speed.” She turned back to Olinda, who was watching the new activity with interest. “You’re about ta see somethin’ no other ship can do, ’cept our Red Sails. Now, back to the bow ya go. Walkin’, mind.”

There were now six water elementalists—hydrons. Olinda followed them as they moved forward. They spoke briefly to one another before they lined up in a wedge shape and began

their concentration. In slow rhythm, they made circling motions with their hands like they were balling up yarn or fishing line.

The six air elementalists had moved to the stern. Like those at the bow, there was no need for chanting, it was simply a matter of concentration, a power of will, to summon a steady flow of air to fill the sails.

At the same time, there was a flurry of activity as the remainder of the crew began raising every yard of red canvas they could find. All but two strong women, Dari and Barb. While the others moved swiftly and precisely to do their tasks, this pair were facing each other, their hands on a wheel drum with six short thick handles on each end.

The sails began to fill as the wind picked up. As the ship gained speed, an order from the first mate got them turning the wheel drum steadily.

Olinda grabbed hold of the nearest line as she was buffeted by the increasing gusts.

Corra also firmed her grip as she concentrated on the reef ahead. Every so often she would put one of her arms out to indicate an adjustment to port or starboard.

It dawned on the young girl something unusual was happening. She had grown up around fishing boats—nothing as grand as the *Revenge*—and she knew there should have been far more movement of the ship, yawing port and starboard, and rising and falling as it pushed through each wave. This time though, the bow rose slightly and stayed level. It was the smoothest ride she'd ever felt on the ocean. There was also an unusual noise. At first, she thought it might have something to do with the volume of air the aeyrons were controlling, but she soon realised it was coming from below. Since the deck was much steadier now, Olinda moved to the gunwale and looked over the side.

She didn't know—or believe—what she was looking at. About a third of the way from the bow, strange metal struts came out of the hull and disappeared into the water. As she watched in awe, she spied a long thin shape below the surface stretching out of sight underneath the vessel. The keel was completely out of the water with the struts and rudder the only parts of the ship still in contact. Moving quickly to the other side, she saw the same thing.

"We call 'em waterwings."

So enthralled at the sight, Olly jumped at the voice beside her. One of the strong women, Dari, who had lowered the strange device, was also looking over the side, examining her work.

"We're in the channel! Olly, tell the helm to watch for my signal. Everyone brace yourselves." Corra, still on the bowsprit, slid the long-eye into its sheath and wrapped an arm tightly around the nearest line, but her concentration never wavered from keeping careful watch on the reef mere feet below the waterwing.

Olinda raced back to the helm and repeated the order.

"Brace. Brace." Tully called out. "Olly, stay 'ere for the moment, lass, and 'ang on."

"Here." Dari guided Olinda to the centre of the ship where loops of rope had been tied around the mast in case of rough seas. "This shouldn't take long. We'll be fine," she reassured her.

With only the waterwing and a few feet of rudder in the water, *Revenge* skimmed across the shallow channel splitting the reef.

Several tense minutes passed with only the sound of the wind reaching their ears.

Sienna suddenly flung her arm up to port. At the helm, the wheel was spun rapidly. The deck angled sharply. The ship

turned. Wide-eyed and hanging on tightly, Olinda looked for reassurance from Dari; she looked relaxed and gave her a confident smile.

And then, they were clear.

With one final look at the water, the captain climbed down to the deck and stopped in front of the water elementalists.

“Relax now, ladies. Good job. Rest up. We’ll probably need you if we cross any raiders.”

The six women lowered their arms and took deep breaths, clapping each other on the shoulders and backs in congratulations and relief as they found a place to sit and let the setting sun and warm breeze dry their clothes and hair.

“Olly. Go and get dried before you catch a chill,” Corra suggested as she strolled past to check the air elementalists.

Like the hydrons did, the young newling basked in the waning sunlight as the rough waters of the reef dwindled in the distance. When dry enough, she headed to the crew quarters, passing a couple of other newlings as they brought out covered lanterns under the guidance of a senior. She paused to see what they were going to do.

The vents on the lantern directed the light down towards the deck, allowing safe passage during the night. The cowlings on each lantern prevented the flame from blowing out or getting wet. The lanterns were also kept low so they couldn’t be seen by other ships.

There was a change of watch, and a number of other crew went topside after having a meal. Several minutes later, the day crew came downstairs to clean up and eat.

Dari and Barb were already lined up for their dinner. “Isn’t sailing at night dangerous?” Olinda asked them.

“Need to keep movin’ to keep the ship stable. A ship not under sail will bob and bounce all night.”

“An’ no one wants dinner to reappear ag’in,” Barb quipped. “Goin’ down once is bad enough.”

“Hey. I ’eard that!” Floria barked good-naturedly. “Jus’ for that, youse get extra. Make sure you finish it all, mind!”

Olinda smiled at the joking, but wanted to slap herself for her silly question. She should have known from her fishing experiences a rocking boat can cause great discomfort to many. “Um ... I mean, can they see, or do they know these waters that well?” She tried to cover her mistake.

“Seas at night look much the same, lass.” The two women chuckled. “But the night shift can touch a bit of spirit.”

“Spirit?”

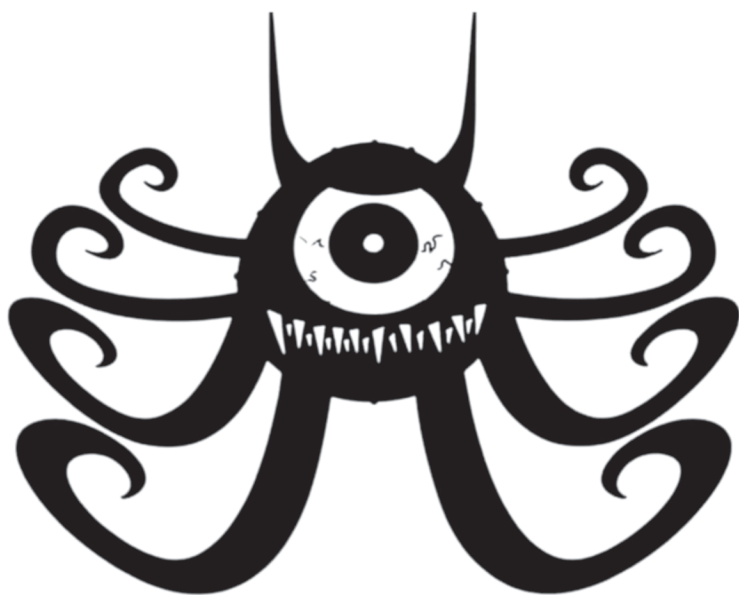
“Spirit, as in the element. Some spirones may not be strong with it outwardly like our other sisters with air and water, but internally, several of us can see pretty good in the dark, hence why they have the night-watch.”

Olinda realised she must have looked ridiculous with her mouth open and wasn’t sure if she was being teased. After her duties, and her meal, she decided to slip up top and see for herself.

She made sure she kept out of everyone’s way by standing between some canvas covered crates. She loved watching the night sky. Tonight was especially good as there were no moons, and the sky was crystal clear with thousands of stars twinkling down at her.

The newling watched the crew too, and it was true. While her eyes adjusted somewhat to the dark, the night shift were doing minor tasks, but as quickly and efficiently as any dayshift crew had been. Satisfied she hadn’t been the butt of a joke, she resumed staring at the stars for a bit longer before heading to her bunk.





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