

# ***The Dark Eve:* A New Recruit**

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# CHAPTER ONE

## *The Crossroads*



Acantha's dark eyes burned out from the shadows of the second story balcony of the Three Crossroads pub. The tavern sign banged against the building, making her head pound, but her freshly opened bottle of rum would solve that problem soon enough. She peered down, invisible to the ground floor and its inhabitants. The shady faces, travelers from the dusty roads and those that ventured out only in the night, crowded the dank walls. An old grandfather clock chimed eleven o'clock, each ring bellowing as if it could be its last.

The vagabonds silently toasted to their pleasure. A stage spanned the room. Dancing girls kicked their heels for the whistling coins that flew their way as a man bounded out lively music from a piano box. The old tavern owner tilted his ear at the conversation near his bar.

"The Lady? What?" A large man at the table laughed.

The room went silent. Every head turned to the source of the disturbance and stared at the fool that dared voice the name. The piano player froze against the keys. The dancing girls stumbled. The old tavern creaked and groaned with the pounding wind.

The traveler relished another drink from his mug, spilling ale down his beard and gut. "Ha!" he chortled. "I can't believe you think such things! If such a fiend did exist..." His voice trailed off into another guzzle.

The two other blokes at the table sat wide-eyed and red faced, noting

the response from the room. The old tavern man, Cornelius, paused in wiping the counter. He peered up at her in the shadows of the balcony. “I tell you, stranger,” he said in a hush, “watch what you say. She be the devil if you ever meet her. Be warned.”

The stranger twisted his expression, ridiculing him.

Cornelius squinted his weather-worn face. “What is your name, fellow, and what is it that you do?” He began filling mugs at the bar.

“I am Hurly and a tradesman. I’ve come to town on business.” He pointed to the others with him, who shrank back under their hats. “These two are Hess and Sam.”

Cornelius leaned over the bar, his voice gruff and deep. “They say she was born with the mark of darkness. A vixen and horror of the seas, she is. As tall as a man and curved like Aphrodite, but dare you gaze upon her and your eyeballs would be plucked from your skull with her twin blades.” The bartender’s voice grew louder. “Her three closest crew be the deadliest. *The Dark Eve*, her ship, be stained red with blood. Sirens sing at the helm, estrangin’ men from their souls. And treasures—” Cornelius paused, his voice straining. “Mountains of gold, cursed by her blood, hidden.”

From above she gripped her bottle of rum at the familiar legendary words. A sly smile crept up her face.

Hurly rolled his eyes.

“I tell you, be careful!” Cornelius paused and spat behind the bar. “She’s not to be trifled with. Her crew will have no mercy on you.” The air of the tavern had grown thick with the influence of the speech.

“Old crow, keep your tales to yourself. I have no fear of ghost stories. Nor do I believe that a woman could take the fury of the sea.”

Gasps escaped from the women on stage.

“Beware what you say about the Lady.” Cornelius gazed at her, trying his plea once more.

Hurly guffawed and hollered, “Do be serious! It’s folklore!” He became aware of the stares boring holes in the back of his head and shifted his large weight.

Cornelius’s voice remained steady, but a fearful intensity grew in his wrinkled face. “The Queen of the Sea.” His words whispered with reverence. “She’s real, as real as your worst nightmare.”

The battered tavern sign’s thumping ceased and the wind faded. As the tavern grew eerily silent, all eyes looked to the walls and roof. She leaned

back in her chair and whispered to her sides, “Jennings, Scar.”

The balcony creaked with their heavy footsteps. The front door at the bottom of the stairs flew open with a force of the wind renewed—crashing against the wall. Dust surged into the pub. The sign resurrected its pounding, harder now. The musician rushed over and forced the door closed at the bottom of the stairs. The startled room peered with flinching eyes at the dark staircase.

Their figures appeared halfway down the steps. Guests rushed from their seats to the opposing walls. Jennings’s dark, massive hand gripped the railing and he ducked his bald head to avoid the beam. His bare chest inked with tattoos bulged in the low light. Scar was right behind, running a hand through his greasy, dirty-blond hair.

She stood and gripped the balcony railing, enjoying the fearful look that grew on Hurly’s face. Jennings covered the gap to the door and pounded his hand against it, glaring at the piano man. The performer scurried back, tripping over his tall round seat. Scar leaned back against the wall, where he pulled out his knife to clean the underside of his nails. Hurly gaped at the large scar that traveled from his mouth to his ear.

A nervous whisper vibrated through the crowd.

“Acantha.” Cornelius stepped back, gripping the bar.

The darkness of her shadow seeped down the stairs. Her tall black boots thumped against the worn wooden steps with authority. She sauntered to the center of the room. Hurly eyed her maroon corset and ruffled collar, avoiding her gaze. She brushed forward a lock of wild hair and traced her fingers down the silver chain to the large red pendant at her chest.

Hurly followed her lingering hand. His eyes widened and darted up.

Her dark stare burned from beneath the brim of her black hat. Hurly froze, the folklore burning into his reality. She shifted her eyes to Cornelius over the wide collar of her black coat. He wavered as he tipped his head toward her.

*The Vixen of the Sea, tall as a man, curved like Aphrodite.*

Her threatening glances darted around the room and then fell full upon Hurly. Sweat dripped down his forehead, which he quickly dabbed with his handkerchief. She spoke, her velvety voice cold and emotionless. “You were warned to take caution on mentioning my name and reputation.” Her full lips pursed as she glided toward his table. Hess and Sam rushed to the sides of the tavern with the rest.

Hurly looked nervously around—almost pleadingly—as he sat deserted.

“I...” he stuttered. “Was just...”

Without warning her coat flew open. She unsheathed two long silver swords. In a lightning-fast scissor motion, she thrust them toward Hurly. Her swords were sheathed again before his head hit the floor and rolled back to the end of the bar. Small screams burst from the tavern women, quickly silenced. No one dared to breathe, the room awkwardly quiet. The men at the bar scurried from their places as Acantha approached Cornelius while Jennings and Scar guarded the entrance.

“What did you hear?” she asked, scanning the cowering crowd.

Cornelius kept his head low and spoke the truth as he nervously glanced away. “I don’t know what was said. I just know that your name was mentioned.” There was a shuffle. The companions of the deceased shifted uneasily, eyeing the exit where her men stood sentinel.

Acantha jerked her head and in a sudden sweep, Jennings and Scar were upon them. Both men struggled. Nobody dared to protest. The crowd looked away from their fear-stricken faces as they were dragged kicking and screaming into the night. The sounds of a wagon and horses roared outside, muffling the cries of Hess and Sam.

Cornelius took a small, antique-stemmed glass from the top shelf behind him. He filled it with a flask of wine from a reserved cupboard and placed it on the bar. Then he backed up, giving distance to the space between them. Acantha turned, noticing his actions.

She brought the glass to her nose, smelling the sweet aroma of the wine. She brushed the crystal against her lips before tipping it down her throat. With delicacy she placed it in the exact spot Cornelius had set it. “You didn’t hear anything concerning Jennet?”

He shook his head. Acantha turned to the rest of the audience, darkly examining each face.

She leaned back against the bar. “I am in need of men.” She addressed no one in particular, but allowed her message to sink in. “If any have the desire to live less than long lives and to be paid for them, then visit the south end of this bar come morning. My man Vaster will be there. You will commission yourselves to sail the high seas on *The Dark Eve*.”

She stared hard at the man at the music box. He turned, pounding out a tune, prompting the girls to continue their dance. She stood straight and walked out, kicking Hurly’s severed head before disappearing into the night.