**Chapter 18 Pirates**

He stood on the bow of his ship staring at the moon. His frame trembled and his teeth gnashed. Off the stern, the city lights of Mahabalipuram twinkled. He sneered and spat over the side of the boat. It had been easy enough to figure out that the *Deschen* had docked there. *Do the tigers really think that I am that old? So feeble-minded that I would forget the name of their mother*? *No. They were just stupid. Weak. Like their father had been. Rajaram had run away rather than face him. He’d hid his family in the jungle, leaving his people to fend for themselves.*

After the royal family had escaped with the amulets, he’d lost interest in taking the throne. His intention had been to kill Rajaram and his sons and take Deschen for his bride. She obviously was capable of bearing strong sons, unlike his other wife. She’d only given him one child, Yesubai. He rubbed his jaw. *A girl.* She was simple and cowering like her mother. *At least she’d been beautiful like her mother had been.* Despite his former wife’s beauty, he’d killed her in a rage when she bore him a girl. He hadn’t intended to kill her…*then*. He shrugged. His temper had been harder to control during that time.

But a few years later, he met Deschen. *Now there was a woman full of fire.* The air crackled when she entered the room. Part of the fun of taking her would have been to break that spirit. To make her abase herself. Submit to him and him alone. The fight would have been exquisite. He imagined sinking his teeth into her soft shoulder as she cried out in fear, and smiled.

Below him the water roiled. Sharks circled the ship. Fins broke the water and then disappeared. A twenty-foot great white raised its head above the surface and snapped its powerful jaws at nothing, making a horrible sound like a bear trap springing shut. Lokesh studied the slick animals. They’d obviously responded to his mood. He’d noticed that predators from the sea, the earth, and the sky appeared to do his bidding when he touched those pieces of amulet. A pity he hadn’t learned about that power until recent years. Still, his circling friends had given him inspiration. He called his minions to bring out the prisoners one at a time.

They brought the maid to him first. Throwing her on the deck at his feet they stood by and watched with pleasure as he questioned her again half-heartedly. He was fairly certain that the crew of the *Deschen* did *not* know the whereabouts of those he sought, but perhaps they could remember some minor detail that would help him figure out what to do next. He pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his hands. *Filthy ship.* He’d hired a boat of mercenaries who knew the seas and had no scruples against kidnapping and murder as long as they were paid. Unfortunately, finding a crew of that sort meant he had to subsist in less than his standard accommodations.

He kicked the woman lightly in the shoulder with his polished shoe. She rolled over and moaned but didn’t open her eyes. The pirates had tortured the woman to the point of unconsciousness. *Imbeciles.* How was he supposed to question her if she couldn’t keep her eyes open? He sighed and noticed she was missing a hand. The stub at the end of her arm was wrapped with filthy rags covered in black blood.

*Amateurs*. Didn’t they know that working with the fingers and hands was not only one of the most painful methods of torture, almost guaranteeing cooperation, but that it also prolonged the experience? Once the hand was cut off, it was only a matter of time until the victim expired. There was no use keeping the woman. She knew nothing. “Toss her overboard,” he commanded. The men didn’t even hesitate. They knew his punishments were swift and severe. He told the men to bring over the next victim, warning them that the next few better be conscious.

He interviewed a deck hand, the kitchen help, and even a shopkeeper from a pet store in town, but none of them had any fresh information to give him. He fed them one by one to the sharks saving the boat captain for last. As he waited for the captain to be brought, he thought irritably about the fine son Deschen would have given him. An heir. He would have been splendid—as tall and courageous as Dhiren, as brawny and powerful as Kishan, but with his own wisdom, cunning, and thirst for power. A son of his own blood. He and his son would have ruled the world. But what he’d hoped for with Deschen had disappeared with her family.

Then a stroke of fate brought the tigers back into his life again. The amulets had surfaced. Destiny smiled on him. Once again he felt the hope of uniting the amulet. True, Deschen was dead, probably a decayed corpse in an unmarked grave, her sons being unable to spread her ashes on the Ganges due to their unfortunate bestial natures. Fortunately for him, her sons had found a satisfactory replacement. Miss Hayes. *Kelsey.* Not as striking in appearance, but what she lacked in stature she made up for in power. Yes. She had the same fiery bravery that Deschen had possessed. She was American which was not to his taste, but she was young enough to bear him a child with ease.

Surely she was special if she had caught the attention of both the tigers, and it would give him a perverse pleasure to take her away from the sons of Rajaram. The men of that family had been a thorn in his side for centuries. He might even let the tigers live so he could revel in the helpless turmoil it would cause them to know that he possessed the girl utterly. It was quite possible that he wouldn’t be able to kill the brothers until he reunited the amulet anyway. Dhiren seemed to be able to survive almost any kind of torture, including starvation. Yes. Caging them and making them watch as he subdued the girl would be highly pleasurable.

He rubbed his hands together in anticipation and small waves rocked the ship. He consciously put his hands to his sides, stilling his powers, and turned as he heard the captain being brought on deck. The man’s right eye was swollen shut and he had bloody lacerations across his chest and arms, but he walked under his own power. Lokesh removed his cuff links and rolled up his crisply starched white shirt sleeves.

“Ah. Captain Dixon is it?”

The captain hesitantly nodded.

“You know what I want you to tell me, do you not?”

“Aye. Ya want ta know da wheraboots of me boss and his fomily, eh?”

Lokesh smiled. “Very astute of you. Well?”

“Ya *know* nun of us know whare dey are. Da ship, she disappear’n. We all was very worried ta tell ya da trut. We filed da reports on da missing ship already. If you be harmin’ dem, dey atorities gwanna know aboot it.”

“What makes you think I intend them harm?”

The captain straightened up and just gave him a look.

Lokesh frowned and glanced at the assembly standing behind the captain. “I suppose we are a *bit* too obvious. Then tell me, friend, where you docked, what was your destination, and who were your passengers. What were they doing here in Mahabalipuram?”

The captain stubbornly shut his mouth and wouldn’t open it again. Lokesh slapped the man hard across the face, used his handkerchief to wipe his hand, and indicated that the motley crew could take over from there. The pirates beat the man until he could no longer stand. Blood trickled from the man’s scalp down a brown freckled cheek.

Lokesh crouched down in feigned sympathy. “Do reconsider your stand. Noble as it is to protect your employer, you surely don’t want to be fed to the sharks. Do you?”

He gestured to have the pirates bring the captain to the rail and they all stared at the water below. The moon was full but the waters were black and though it was too dark to make out what the sharks were eating, everyone could hear it—the chomping, the crack of bones breaking, the splashing of slick torpedo shaped bodies as they rushed after succulent pieces, the tails swishing back and forth as the jaws worked to rip the flesh off in chunks to swallow whole.

Lokesh smiled. Sharks were creatures to admire. *The ocean is as full of fish as the world is full of people. The only difference is that in the ocean, predators are born. In the human world a man chooses for himself what he will be. He can be the predator or he can be the prey. A man can learn to rip to pieces those who stand against him, crack the backbones of all who would oppose, and swallow his enemies.* Long ago he had decided that he wanted to be at the top of the food chain and now there was only one family left who stood in his way.

One of the pirates vomited over the side of the ship. The stench of half-digested food, stomach acid, and stale beer wafted through the air. Lokesh grimaced in disgust and turned back to the captain. The captain returned his gaze bravely despite knowing his death was moments away. Lokesh admired bravery in a man. He used his power to nudge the feet of the pirate who vomited. The man fell over the side and into the melee of the feeding frenzy below. The screams were quickly silenced. Lokesh briefly considered that he might like to have in his employ a captain as loyal as this one was, and considered keeping him alive, but with regret he knew that this was not the type of man to be bought. He sighed and had the men back away.

“Last chance, Mr. Dixon. Tell me about Kadam and the others.” He waited several seconds.

The captain finally said, “Even if I knew where dey was, nothin’ is what I’d be saying ta ya you now, sir.”

“You have no care for your life then?”

The captain answered, “Since I was a young boy playin’ in da water, I know’d dat ma bodee wood be laid ta rest far away from de shores. Ma bones wood lie on de bottom of de ocean. Da sea, you see…she is ma wife and yon sharkies are ma childr’n. I go ta her arms ta die in her embrace. I hab no regrets.”

Lokesh, disappointed and resigned, clapped the captain on the arm and used the power of the wind to pick him up and send him over the rail. To his credit, the captain fell silently. The winds cushioned the man on his way down and captain Dixon dropped slowly, turning in the air as if he was lying on a fluffy mattress.

Light as a feather, he descended towards the black water and when he at last touched it, the waves folded over him like a dark blanket. Silently his body sunk and was quickly followed by the sharks. Lokesh mentally commanded the sharks to not eat the man but to clamp on and escort the captain to his watery bed below. The fins disappeared. Soon the water was as black and as still as the soul of the man who stood at the rail watching.