

ON THE BACK OF THE SEA, WHO DO WE TRUST?
OUR SISTERS.

WHEN OUR SHIP FALTERS, WHO DO WE TRUST?
OUR SISTERS.

IN A STORM OF BULLETS, WHO DO WE TRUST?
OUR SISTERS!

WE FIGHT TOGETHER!
OR NOT AT ALL!

SISTERHOOD IS SURVIVAL



PRAISE FOR
SEAFIRE

“A gutsy tale of sisterhood, courage, and unshakeable trust. You don’t want to miss this book!”
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*Sisters fight with each other,
for each other,
and by each other's side.
I'm lucky to have one like you, Rosie.*

SEAFIRE

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NATALIE C. PARKER

USBORNE

BEFORE



Caledonia stretched along the prow of the *Ghost* as the ship sliced through black water. At night, the ocean offered only a dark reflection of the sky above, and the promise of a cold grave below.

Her mother, Rhona, crouched near, a rifle balanced on her knees, eyes surveying the sea road ahead. “Our way forward is marred. Do you see?” she said.

Caledonia studied the eddies in the water, searching for the signs that meant there were rocks ahead, or a sunken ship, unusual swirls, or a sudden chop of waves. Rhona was always the first to spot them, but Caledonia was getting better.

“Rocks,” Caledonia said, and without waiting for permission, she turned and called to her father where he stood on the bridge. “Three degrees port!”

The *Ghost* nosed south to avoid the sharp danger. On either side, familiar outlines of small islands rose around the ship. These were the waters of the Bone Mouth, a series of islands and rocky protrusions that offered flimsy sanctuary

to anyone brave enough to sail them. They were treacherous in daylight, and nearly impassable at night, except by Caledonia's mother, Rhona Styx, captain of the *Ghost*. Under her command, they sailed as smoothly as if on open blue waters.

Years ago, Rhona liked to remind her daughter, they wouldn't have needed such stealth. When Rhona was a girl, she sailed from the colder northern currents, past the towering Rock Isles, all the way down to the Bone Mouth without any more danger than the occasional storm. Then, so gradually few noticed until it was too late, a man named Aric Athair had grown a fleet of ships armed and armoured for taking and killing. His fleet of Bullet ships stretched in a violent chain across the only way in or out of these expansive waters. Anyone on the wrong side of his notorious Net found themselves bent under the pressure of his thumb.

Now, after years of dodging Aric Athair and his Bullets, and facing dwindling resources, Rhona had decided the time had come for their small band to punch through the Net. For months, they'd searched for the best way. They'd studied the Bullet ships from a distance and determined the weakest point was at the tip of the Bone Mouth, where even Aric's ships were loath to sail. The *Ghost* could make it, but first they needed food – fruit, nuts and meat if they could get it – to supplement their stores for the unknown waters beyond.

Tonight, they resupplied. But tomorrow night, they ran for the very last time.

“You and your brother prep for the shore run.” Rhona's red hair rolled behind her, battling with the wind.

A small thrill straightened Caledonia's spine. From the age of six, she'd campaigned for the responsibility of shore runs to be hers. Only in the last year had her mother finally conceded and assigned her the task. But as much as Caledonia cherished the trust her mother placed in her on those occasions, she knew her little brother hated those long dark rides to shore. He would spend the entire night terrified of being so far from the safety of their ship.

“Let me take Pisces.” Caledonia climbed to her feet and followed her mother. “We're a good team. Besides, Donnally's too young for shore runs. He's only twelve turns, you know.”

Rhona laughed her grizzly laugh. “You know this from all your experience?”

Caledonia pictured Donnally's eyes tight with fear, his mouth pressed into a stoic line as he struggled not to disappoint their mother. “I do,” she answered.

“Cala, the only way your brother will learn is by your side,” Rhona said with a sigh, but there was no fight in her words.

Mother and daughter skirted the bridge, then took turns sliding down the companionway ladder to the deck below. Even in the moonless dark, they knew their way easily around the *Ghost*. The ship had become a refuge for families looking to escape Aric's rule. As their numbers grew, every inch of the ship was transformed to meet a variety of needs

– masts supported sails and laundry lines, the galley was transformed daily from a mess hall to a bunk room, even the deck was host to stacked garden beds and two goat pens. While more than a dozen men and women were still topside at this hour, most of the crew was asleep in the small cabins below. There were lookouts posted forward and stern and up in the nest, but here in the Bone Mouth, the *Ghost* had never come across one of Aric’s Bullet ships at night. Bullets were vicious and bold, but most lacked Rhona’s seafaring skill.

Caledonia spied her brother crouched behind one of the four mast blocks studding the centreline of the ship, an overlarge jacket hulking around him like a grey cloud. He had their father’s dark hair, their mother’s fair complexion, and a nose that curled up at the tip, giving him a look of perpetual surprise.

The lines of a blunted arrowhead tattoo half-filled with black ink peeked out from beneath his curls. A matching one was drawn on her own temple. It was custom on the *Ghost* for parents to mark their children with unique sigils in case of capture. The mark would give those children the chance to find their family again someday.

“I’ll take him next time.” Guilt nudged at Caledonia. Her mother was right. The only way to prepare Donnally for the world was to take him into it, but sometimes she feared for her little brother. The gentle pinch in her mother’s eyes said she did, too.

“Donnally!” Rhona called. “Hoist your eyes, son!”

Donnally started, rocketing awkwardly to his feet before he managed to spot his mother and sister. He trudged across the deck at a reluctant pace, dark hair flopping in his eyes. He schooled his features when he asked, “Shore run?” But the note of tension in his voice gave him away.

“Yes, but not for you. Cala’s taking Pi, which means I want you and Ares on watch. Clear?” Rhona pointed towards the nest.

Donnally nodded eagerly. “Clear,” he said, giving Caledonia a grateful smile.

Rhona pulled her daughter into her arms, planting a kiss on her head. “Get the job done.”

“And get back to the ship,” Caledonia finished.

By the time they dropped anchor near an island they called the Gem, Caledonia and Pisces were prepped and ready to go. They climbed into the bow boat harnessed against the hull of the *Ghost* and lowered it to the water as they’d done a dozen times before.

With quick strokes of the oars they covered the distance between their ship and the island. Recently, Pisces had grown several inches. She’d outgrown her little brother, Ares, and shot straight past Caledonia, and her height seemed to make her fearless. Pisces’s shoulders were broad and strong, her skin a warm, pale brown, and she wore her hair in four long braids. As they rowed, her eyes were full of excitement, focused on the island and its bounty, while

Caledonia kept one eye on the black ocean.

“It’s too quiet. I don’t like it,” Caledonia said.

Pisces pulled in a deep breath and tilted a ready smile towards her friend. “It’s peaceful, like being so far underwater you can’t see the surface.”

“That’s called drowning. Only you would find that peaceful.”

Pisces laughed quietly to avoid unsettling Caledonia further.

Together they moored their boat in a sheltered cove, securing it in a thicket of tall grass. The girls split up to make their work faster, agreeing to meet back at the cove when their sacks were full.

The path down the shore was narrow, the ocean as dark as the night sky and nearly as flat. Caledonia moved along the rocky tree line, stuffing fallen coconuts and bananas and jackfruit into the canvas sacks draped across her shoulders. There was enough that she could afford to be picky, though the more she gathered, the longer they’d be able to sail. No one knew what to expect when they broke through the Net. They might need to sail for days or months, and they needed to be prepared for both. People once said that beyond the Net were wide-open seas and towns where children weren’t forced into the service of a tyrant, but it was a world Caledonia could not quite imagine.

The tide was low and the waves sluggish, burbling and hissing as they surged and receded. In their wake, the sand

glittered with the pearlescent shells of burrowing crabs and the slick backs of beached jellyfish. From the dense forest came the looping songs of insects and tree frogs. Perhaps she would return with meat after all.

Footsteps, hurried and heavy, sounded behind her.

Caledonia’s heart tripped, her hands stuttered on the strap of her canvas bag, and she instinctively slipped through a fall of vines. There had been no other ships in sight for miles. These footsteps must belong to Pisces. They had to.

Still, the cadence of the steps refused to conjure the image of Pisces running, long black braids flying behind her.

Even away from the *Ghost*, the rules of the ship still applied. Number one: *Never be seen*. Caledonia stilled her breathing, adjusted her feet, and disentangled herself from the bag full of fruit. She would be ready to run. She would be ready to fight.

The steps grew louder and slower. A dark figure appeared: tall, muscled, male. Instead of racing past as Caledonia hoped he would, the boy stopped a few feet from her hiding place. His skin was suntanned and slick with sweat, his vest and trousers lined with guns and clips of ammo. His bicep was marked by a single scarred line that even in the dark was bright orange, saturated with the Silt in his blood. He was a Bullet, a soldier from Aric Athair’s army.

Aric conscripted children, dismantling families in order to build his empire. Rogue families like Caledonia’s had taken to the water rather than see their children stolen and

transformed into soldiers. But because they'd run, if they were ever captured, none would be spared. Not even the children. People more readily offered their children up as payment when they knew the only alternative was death for all.

This Bullet couldn't be much older than Caledonia, seventeen at the most, but the mark on his bicep meant he'd already killed in service to Aric.

She smelled the salt of his sweat and the sharp pinch of gunpowder and something unrecognizable and sweet. Caledonia shivered.

The boy didn't look at her, didn't seem to be aware she crouched so near, her fingers inching her pistol from its holster. Instead, he began to do exactly what she'd been doing. He bent down and collected fruit.

She'd never seen a Bullet this close; her parents did their best to keep the *Ghost* as far from Aric's fleet as possible. Over the years they'd outrun dozens of Bullet ships and collected as many families from other ships and outlying settlements, all while staying out of sight.

Rule number two: *Shoot first.*

Her pistol was in her hand, finger curled around the trigger. When the boy turned his back and kneeled to inspect a coconut, Caledonia had the perfect advantage. She would only need one bullet.

She raised her pistol and stepped quietly out of her hiding place.

The boy froze, dropping the coconut as he raised his hands.

"Whoever you are, you have me," he said.

Caledonia didn't respond, her throat tight as she considered pulling the trigger.

"Would it make a difference if I asked you not to shoot?" the boy asked, face forward and eyes on the ocean. "If I begged for mercy?"

"Killing you would be a mercy," she told the Bullet.

"Maybe so," he said, voice at once piteous and resigned. "At least, if you're going to kill me, let me see your face?"

Caledonia's pulse quickened. There was no time for this. Where there was one Bullet, there were a dozen or more. She needed to find Pisces and get back to the boat, and she needed to do it now. *Shoot*, her mother's voice urged, but this was one rule Caledonia had never had to follow.

Sensing her hesitation, the boy shifted on his knees, spinning to face her. His hands remained steady in the air, but now he watched her.

Alarmed, Caledonia took an involuntary step back. "Move again and I'll shoot." She raised her aim to his head.

He nodded, star-pale eyes fixed on the barrel of her pistol. He had a long face with a jaw that looked sharp enough to be a weapon on its own. Blond hair, thick with sea wind and salt, framed his forehead like a crown. One ear stuck out a little further than the other, but the effect was endearing. She counted two guns strapped to each of his thighs, which

likely meant there were at least two others she couldn't see. For the moment, she was the one in power, but she knew just how quickly that might change.

"At least if I'm to die, it'll be at the hands of someone lovely." His eyes charted a slow course across her face.

Warmth crept into Caledonia's cheeks. "Where's your crew? Your clip?"

"I – can I point?" When Caledonia nodded, he did, back in the direction he'd come from. "Ship's anchored off the northern tip of the island. Stopped for food."

"One ship?" Caledonia asked.

"One ship," he answered. "We were headed to the Net and moored here for the night. It's a bad moon for travelling."

He could be lying – he was probably lying – but this far from the Holster it could also be the truth. One ship on the opposite side of the island was survivable. As long as she and Pisces returned to the *Ghost* quickly.

But something had to be done about this Bullet.

"What's your name?" she asked.

The boy seemed to grow smaller under the weight of that question. "What does it matter if you're going to kill me?"

"It doesn't." Caledonia's finger found the trigger again, and again it stuck there.

A sad smile twisted his lips. "Lir. I'm called Lir. And I expect you'll be the last to know it."

He was so ready to die, and so young. Was he young enough to be saved? They said it didn't take long for the

children Aric took to succumb to the dreamy pull of Silt. Addiction made Bullets both loyal and mean. But they also said an encounter with a Bullet always, always ended in one of two ways: either you died, or he did.

Shoot, my brave girl, she heard her mother's voice whisper.

"I'm...I'm sorry," she said, preparing to fire. Her fingers trembled.

Now his eyes grew wide, his hands stiff and splayed in the air.

"Please," he said, "please, show me the mercy the Father never does. Take me with you. Whatever life you have, it's got to be better than the one he forces on us. Please, help me."

This was precisely why the rule was *shoot first* and not *shoot as soon as possible* or *shoot when you feel ready*. But she'd broken the rule and now this wasn't a Bullet, it was Lir.

Lir, who desperately wanted a way out.

Lir, who hadn't hurt her.

Lir, who might be someone's brother.

If it were Donnally on some other beach with some other girl's gun to his head, wouldn't Caledonia want that girl to help him?

"Stand up," she said, lowering her aim to his chest.

Lir complied, and his expression softened when Caledonia moved in and pulled six guns and two knives from holsters on his thighs, calves and back. Up close, he smelled even more like the ammunition he carried, but with a pinch of

something too sweet. He kept his hands up as she worked, eyes marking every place she touched him.

“Please,” he repeated. “I’ll never have a chance like this again. Please, help me.”

The ocean rushed towards them and away, the waves quickening as the tide began to roll in. It was the same tide that would carry all the families aboard the *Ghost* far away from this terrible life that turned children into warriors, that made Lir plead for his life on an empty beach in the middle of a moonless night. She *could* help him. And she wanted to, but it went against everything her mother had taught her.

Shaking her head, she pressed the muzzle of her gun into Lir’s chest.

Desperation surfaced in the tremulous bend of his mouth. “What’s your name?”

It wasn’t a secret, yet she frowned, refusing to give it up.

His smile turned mournful. “How about I call you Bale Blossom, then? It seems fitting.” His eyes raised to trace the frame of her hair. The smile on her own lips surprised her. It wasn’t the first time her hair had been likened to the deep orange of the baleflower, but it was the first time the comparison felt like a compliment.

“Call me whatever you like,” she answered. “I still won’t give you my name.”

“You don’t trust me. There’s no reason you should, but I’m going to show you why you can.”

Caledonia’s finger tightened on the trigger as he slipped

one hand into his vest and produced a push dagger she’d missed. The handle was small enough to fit inside his grip completely while the black blade protruded between his first and middle fingers. He held it out hilt-first in the narrow space between them.

She snatched it, noting how his body had warmed the metal, and tucked it into her belt.

“How’s that for trust, Bale Blossom?”

Caledonia wished desperately for her mother’s wisdom. Rhona would know what to do in this situation. She would know how to do the right thing even if it was a dangerous thing.

But Caledonia had only herself.

“No one trusts a Bullet,” she answered. “But maybe I can help.”

“Are you going to take me to your crew?” Lir smiled sadly, seeming to know the answer before Caledonia had given it.

Rule number three: *Never reveal the ship.*

“No,” she said, resolute. “But I’m not going to shoot you.”

Lir nodded, the bravery on his face haunted by disappointment. Even in the dark of the night she could see his jaw was carved with dirt and old scars. His eyes glittered dimly, and his mouth settled into a hard line. The flash of hope Caledonia had seen a moment before had been swept away by resignation.

When he spoke next, his voice was hollow. “You should leave. Go back to your ship. Get out of here. I’ll hide or I’ll die, but I’ll do it under my own sail.”

She glanced in the direction of the *Ghost*, wishing it was as simple as taking Lir with her.

Lir followed her gaze, and before her eyes, he became as steady and as cool as the gun in her hand. He asked, “Do you know what we call this moon?”

“There is no moon tonight,” Caledonia answered.

“It’s the Nascent Moon,” he said after a quiet moment, all trace of that sad resignation gone. “It’s a time of potential and growth. A promise for things to come.”

He touched her cheek, and Caledonia gasped, her arm lowering. She felt his hand slide into her hair, felt a spike of delicious heat follow his grazing fingers.

“It’s the moon of beginnings and endings.” His voice found a malicious edge.

Too late, she realized if she’d missed one dagger she might have missed another.

His fingers tightened in her hair. A slaked smile surfaced on his lips.

And the blade sank into her gut.

Lir gripped the back of her head. As hot blood spread across her stomach, he held her close. Her knees buckled and her gun hit the ground with a thud.

“Thank you for your mercy, Bale Blossom,” he whispered, lowering her almost gently to the sand. Nauseating pain burned through her body. “And thank you for your ship.”

Caledonia screamed, fighting to stay conscious. If they heard her, they might escape. She clutched at her wound

and felt sand against her face, rough against her lips. She knew there was pain, but all she felt was panic. She had to get up, find Pisces, warn the ship. She screamed again.

Footsteps. This time, she knew them to be Lir’s as he raced away, towards the Bullet clip that would soon find her family. She fumbled in the sand for her gun and fired three shots. It was still deadly dark, but she thought she saw him falter.

Even if those three bullets had missed their mark, everyone near the island would have heard the shots. Her family would have warning. They could escape, and as long as they followed the rules, they would.

Her nausea eased into a strange numbness. The blade, she realized, was still in her gut. A parting gift, and one that might just save her. Holding the knife in place to stanch the bleeding, she got slowly to her feet and began to stagger towards her cove and the bow boat, the only thought in her mind to see the *Ghost* safely on its way.

“Cala!” Pisces burst from the trees, her long braids swinging around her like ropes. “Oh, spirits, Cala!”

“Bullets.” Caledonia barely managed the word before falling again to her knees. “We have to hurry.”

Pisces nodded grimly and ripped a long strip of material from her shirt. The blade hurt even more coming out. Pisces worked quickly, binding the wound tightly before tucking her head beneath Caledonia’s arm and lifting her friend to her feet.

Together, the girls stumbled through the woods, taking the shortest possible path to where their little boat waited. Caledonia tried to run. With each step her legs felt weaker, her lungs more shallow. Her gut burned as she moved. Thorny plants clawed at their legs and arms, leaving small trails of blood on their skin. Thick vines slowed their progress even more. Before the ocean was visible again through the trees, the sound of gunfire ripped through the air.

Neither girl spoke until they'd returned to the cove. The boat they'd used to come ashore was still there, bobbing as the tide came in. But now, out where their family's ship lay at anchor, a Bullet ship approached, flared with light.

It was an assault ship with a sharp nose and grooves along the hull where Bullets waited with magnetized bombs. The *Ghost* fought to weigh its anchor and gain speed, but the assault ship was already upon it. Bombs soared across the narrowing channel of water. A *boom* rent the air as the missiles exploded against the *Ghost*, ripping open the ship and knocking the breath from Caledonia's lungs.

Flames spilled from a hole in the side of the hull. It was everything the girls had been taught to fear, to avoid, everything their parents had spent a lifetime protecting them from. And Caledonia had brought it right to their feet.

Screams replaced the sound of gunfire. Caledonia lurched, pushing past the pain and into the shallow water. She surged forward once, determined to swim, but her body faltered and she cried out in defeat. Her feet sank into sand,

salt burned in her gut, and Pisces gripped her shoulders to pull her back to shore. "Caledonia, no!" she cried.

The two girls could do nothing but witness. No one would be spared.

It lasted less than fifteen minutes.

The sun rose higher. Screams and gunfire waned.

Then the Bullets began their gruesome work of dragging the dead to their ship and hoisting the bodies of the slain on the metal pikes studding their rail.

One body, placed at the very front of the Bullet ship, wore an overly large coat that puffed in the air like a grey cloud. The feet dangled in the wind, and Caledonia choked on the memory of leaving Donnally behind just a few short hours ago.

Caledonia shivered in the warm dawn. Blood seeped down her body, but the pain in her gut was nothing compared to the pain in her chest.

"How?" Pisces whispered.

Caledonia slumped to her knees. She shook her head, unable to confess the truth to her friend. She'd failed her entire family; she couldn't fail Pisces, too. So she pushed the truth deep down, beneath her grief and her guilt and her anger.

"What do we do?" Pisces asked, her brown face bright with tears. "Cala, what do we do?"

Caledonia fixed her gaze on the Bullet ship, her ears on the final screams of her family. Fire reflected angrily across

the black surface of the ocean. For all its darkness, it had failed to keep her family a secret. But so had she. Her heart hardened over the memory of Lir. He had taken her mercy and turned it red. Now she and Pisces were all that remained.

Taking her friend's cold hand in her bloody one, she gave the only answer she could find. "I don't know."

CHAPTER ONE



FOUR YEARS LATER

Just before dawn, Caledonia climbed into the aft rigging of her ship. The ropes were rough against her calloused palms as she scaled fifty feet of the mizzenmast, confident and sure, her hands and feet flying faster and faster, daring the sun to beat her to the top.

The sky filled with the hazy blue glow of dawn, and Caledonia pushed harder, relishing the first kiss of sweat against her skin. She'd scarcely reached her chosen perch when she yelled to the team of girls on deck below, "Haul!"

Eager voices repeated the command, and four sets of strong hands took hold of the lines and heaved. Along the mast, pulleys squealed and churned; Caledonia kept her eyes on the gaff beam moving towards her.

"Break!" she shouted as the gaff rose level with her chest. From it hung their treasured sun sail; hundreds of shiny black scales made to absorb solar energy and feed their engines.

The girls below began to secure the ropes while Caledonia moved to balance atop the beam. The morning wind that