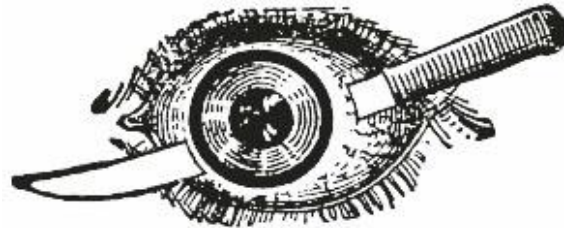




THE BIRTH OF AN OUTLAW



DEINA FURTH

“IS THIS HER?” the officer asked me, drawing back the stiff white sheets. I raised my fingers to my lips, obscuring my mouth from her view.

“Yes...” I turned to face my sister, who gawped at the bloated corpse in front of us for only a brief moment before closing her eyes, her light brown face blanching to a grayish-white color. I could understand why. That woman is—or was, I guess—our mother, and now she looks how a mother should never look: swollen, black and blue, bloated from death; skin distended from holding the water that filled her lungs and dragged her down under velvet ocean waves.

My sister let out a long sob, unearthly sounding, starting in a wail and ending in a guttural scream. She pounded her fists on the metal table over and over again, leaving behind greasy prints. Tears streamed down her cheeks, running into her mouth before dripping from her chin and falling to the floor. It was not a pretty cry. It was unabashed, raw, real grief flowing freely in spite of the surreality of it all.

“We need a moment, I think, if you don’t mind,” I said, drawing a little tear away from my own eye. Dammit. I had promised myself I wouldn’t do this in front of her. I was always the one who protected my sister, like older brothers should, even when she stomped on my toes on purpose and claimed it was an accident, or stole my sandwiches from me and left me hungry at school. Even then, and of course now.

“Of course,” the officer said. She gave us a sympathetic look and removed her hat, holding it in front of her chest, nervously gripping the brim and shifting it in a circle. “I’m sorry for your loss. It’s very brave of you to come and face this situation together.” She looked down for a moment, then replaced her hat and excused herself from the room. Once the door clicked shut behind her, my sister slid her eyes sideways, training her gaze on me, and ceased her sobbing, breathing in shallow gulps instead.

“It’s—harder—than—I—thought,” she said haltingly, sniffing and growing dangerously close to getting a case of those nigh-incurable, post-sob hiccups. I sniffled too, knowing she had seen me wick away that tear. Well, maybe it wasn’t so bad that she saw my grief.

Solidarity, my sister.

“I know. I’m sorry Verna,” I replied, and stepped toward my mother. God, this whole thing was like a trainwreck. I couldn’t stop staring at the way her eyes, purple and dried between the lids, swelled out like golfballs that had been jammed into her face. Her cheeks looked like she’d stuffed fifty bonbons between them and just held them there, refusing to spit them out. Her lips were cracked and dry and completely lifeless. She was barely recognizable, just a husk of the woman she was. Before, my mom was beautiful, with smooth brown skin and curly, black hair, and the perfect cheekbones and perfect jawline. Everyone commented how much alike we all were. I am her son, and it’s evident. My sister, my twin, is her spitting image.

I looked back at Verna. She seemed to be looking past me and through our mother, into some void or at something that I couldn’t see. Poor girl was having a really rough time of it. I couldn’t blame her.

“Bennet,” she whispered, drawing her hands together in front of her chest. “What do we do now?”

I bit my lip, considering our options.

Verna and I hadn’t spoken to her in fifteen years.

We were raised by our mother in New Redport, a trading anchorage located just off the coast of the Sea of Nila. Though it was a rich town by industrial standards, New Redport was notorious for its unpleasant characters, the dregs of society—merchants, sailors, bootleggers—who swindled travelers and smuggled illegal substances, filtering most of their foul products through a bustling black market in the heart of the town. Even before she threw away motherhood for the criminal life, we weren’t considered top-tier folks among the locals. We were poor, plain and simple, and the poor were always viewed as scavenging rats. But at least we were honest then.

When our mother told us what she was going to do, she assured us that she’d make some quick money and come back to a better life. And we had believed her. She thought the benefits outweighed the risk, and promised to be back in a few weeks. We waited. And waited.

Weeks turned into months, and those months stretched into years, and she never came back. We never saw a dime.

So Verna and I had joined the ranks of the dregs, stealing food and clothing, even taking to destroying city property to use as kindling to keep us warm while we slept on the streets. Verna started making things—weapons, mostly—to sell on the black market and to use against those who tried to take advantage of us, which, as it turns out, happens a lot when you're small and inexperienced in the ways of self-sufficiency. Over time, we got more and more used to it, until we had grown skins as thick as leather and smelted wills as tough as iron. We made a living together, Verna and I, meager though it was.

“They're going to make us sign her death certificate,” I said finally, trying to think of the simplest way to handle it all.

But it's never simple dealing with a death. There are so many facets of grief and so many loose ends to tie up that it can take years to finally close the book on someone's life, especially someone like my mother's. I walked over to Verna, unclasping her nervously twitching hands and taking them in mine. My skin is a bit darker than hers, but not by much. I've always loved that we had that little difference between us, marking us as different even though we were genetically the same.

“Once we've signed it, we can bury her. We can finally put her behind us. And if she left us even a bit of money, we can even escape this town, Verna. Just think of that.”

Verna nodded meekly.

I looked away, my cheeks beginning to flush. I'd just lied to my sister. She didn't know, though, how complicated this whole thing really was, and she never could. I just couldn't tell her. Or anyone.

Verna and I had seen her—our mother—in the market earlier in the week. Curiously, she was dressed in a man's slacks with combat boots and a leather jacket.

But even more curious than her garb was that she was purchasing a very specific kind of gun—one used primarily for killing people from long distances. Sniping, to be specific. They were marketed as bird hunting rifles, but those of us who were familiar with the area knew better. Although we recognized her immediately, we didn't know whether or not we should say anything to her. Had she really disappeared for all these years and been living within the same city's walls the entire time, disguised as a mercenary, or whatever she was supposed to be? Had she just stopped by on a routine trip and simply not had the chance to track us down yet?

Did she remember us, her children?

Did she even *care*?

With years of thievery practice under my belt, I had become quite good at smuggling all manner of things. I could sneak into a place, take half a kitchen's worth of food, and be gone before anyone suspected a thing. It had only taken me a moment to decide to put my skills to use and follow her. But judging by her purchase, she didn't seem to be divorced from her criminal past, and as such, it could easily turn out to be an unsafe trip. I had the better tracking skills, so Verna would have to remain here.

I left her standing by the statue of the founder of New Redport, and after squeezing her hands and assuring her I'd get the answers we needed, I went after our mother.

The story that Verna knows is that I followed mom, she ran into a crowd, and I had lost her. I'd spent an hour looking for her, I couldn't locate her, and sometime between that unlucky moment and yesterday evening, when the officer had contacted us, she had been shot and thrown into the harbor.

But that isn't *exactly* what happened.

I did indeed follow our mother. I quietly trailed her through the market down to the bird-dropping stained docks, where she went inside a shitty little wooden shack, one of those old fisherman's homes, with a broken radio antennae mounted on the roof and a door that barely remained on its oxidized hinges. As she entered, I saw wooden crates upon crates stacked flush against the walls. She slammed the door

shut, and I hesitated, cracking my knuckles so that the sound echoed in the salty harbor air.

Do I want to know what she's doing in there? *Do I?*

There was a knock on the door. Verna and I composed ourselves as the officer returned with a quill and parchment, her eyebrows knit and lips pursed.

“Since you have indeed confirmed the identity of the deceased, I’ll just need you to sign these documents,” she said, looking from my sister to me. “She had a few personal effects on her that you can claim just down the hall in the evidence room.”

I took the pen and parchment from her and skimmed over the words.

Trauma to the head. Gunshot wound to the chest. Drowning.

Huh. So she really was still alive when she hit that water.

I was barely even aware of my actions as the quill danced across the parchment and left my name behind; *her* name behind. I handed the document to my sister, who took the pen in her hands and scrawled her signature under my own.

The officer took the documents and nodded at us.

“If you need anything, please don’t hesitate to contact my office. We’ll do everything we can to identify and apprehend the perpetrator.”

I thanked the officer for her assistance, and she left us alone once more. As soon as she was gone, my sister came to me, silent, and fell into my arms. Her muscles were loose; tired. I supported her body without complaint.

“Let’s go,” I said softly, my words disappearing into the forest of curls against my cheek. She smelled like the wind when it carried warm cooking spices, the smell of our makeshift home.

As we turned to leave, I recalled the moment I made the choice to follow my mother into the shack. This is a decision I can never take back, and it’s one that I don’t know if I regret right now—or if I ever will.

I had followed her in there and caught her by surprise. When she turned around, she already had a look of recognition in her eyes. There was a long silence between us as we stared, our hearts practically banging upon our ribcages, our faces wearing pained expressions, our minds racing with excuses and words to express feelings we didn't know how to articulate. I broke the silence.

“How could you leave us?” I yelled at her, my voice powerful, my hands balling into fists. Tears stung at my eyes, and I could feel the skin on my face tighten as I flushed with anger. But I felt the opposite of powerful or strong in *her* presence. I felt like a child again, like I was throwing a tantrum.

She looked at me, her gaze absorbing my rage-twisted face: the face of a grown man and not of the child she would have remembered, one weathered by stress and the harsh ocean wind wearing on it night after night. She looked at my ragged, dirty clothing: the garb of a destitute person, of a beggar, of a thief. She reached a shaking hand to her lips and squeezed her eyes shut, shaking her head, her tight curls bouncing just how I remembered them, like young ivy tendrils in the breeze. She backed against the wall, moving away from me.

Everything felt like it swelled up inside of me. It grew and expanded until it burst, and my fury just came in unstoppable waves. I bellowed like a baby as my fists flew at her face, her chest, her shoulders. She blocked me with her elbows, shrieking that she was sorry, she was sorry, she didn't mean for it to be like this, and please, would I stop?

I screamed back at her, not bothering to filter my words. I roared that she killed the trust in her children; that she had no right to take our childhoods from us. To put us on the street—where we did things, things we should *never* have to—to make up for her failure as a mother. My fist connected with her eye socket, and my elbow with her throat. She coughed, trying to catch her breath, and I finally something snapped in my mind. I realized I was actually beating the woman who gave birth to me and I pulled away. I was repulsed by my actions.

But then I saw her claw for the rifle placed on the crate next to her. The wrath returned, even more intense than before.

The coward. Not only would she abandon us, but she would also shoot her *own child?*

I was far more experienced in street fighting than she was. I easily wrested the rifle from her, scrambled back a few paces, and trained it on her. For a moment, the only sound between us was our heavy breathing and the creak of the dock shifting in the water.

“Bennet, I’m sorry...” she said.

The fear in her eyes was real.

The apology was not.

It couldn’t be. It would never be good enough—she was going to *shoot* me, her son.

I was shaking so hard that I could barely position my finger behind the trigger guard. She gasped, her eyes rimmed in red and purple, wet with tears.

“Tell—me—” I finally choked out, my vision clouded by my crying. I furiously blinked away the tears, and my words came out in a whisper. “Why you did this to us.”

She folded a trembling hand over her heart. I watched her through the scope, seeing her eyes dart around as if she were trying to read the excuse from the damn air. Her lips quivered, and she took a deep breath.

“I’m sorry.”

That’s all she had to say?

She laughed a little, but it was a melancholy laugh.

“I was terrible to you. I know. I know. Just understand that—that I still love you, Bennet. And I love Verna, too.”

Did I want to do this?

“Would you have passed me by today if I hadn’t followed you here? Would you have come for us to tell us you were here? Or have you been here all along?”

She swallowed and wrapped her arms around herself as if there were a chill in the room, casting her gaze downward.

“I... can’t say that I would have come to find you,” she answered quietly. She shifted her eyes back to me. “I was only here for the day. I haven’t been here in a long time, Bennet. But you don’t understand, I did it—”

“Did it for what? Let me guess—for our safety?”

“Yes.”

Silence again.

“And what’s in these crates?” I asked, gesturing to them with a nod of my head. “What’s all this that adds up to be more valuable than your children?”

The words must have stung, because she shuddered. I can’t say I felt particularly bad for it. I wanted to know what she had put first in her life, if not Verna and me.

“Rum,” she said.

Rum. *Rum*.

“You bitch!” I screamed, my entire body now quaking, my hands’ movements fitful. “You left us to ship alcohol? Fucking *rum*? Do you know that I can make that shit on my own? Do you? I could bring you a fucking—”

It happened so fast that at first I thought it was thunder. But no lightning followed it.

Instead, the blood sprayed out in a sloppy arc, miraculously missing me, but hitting a row of boxes just to my right. My mother slumped to the ground, her pretty curls falling against her shoulder, her small hand limply falling across her legs as she crumpled into a heap of bruised flesh and crimson-stained clothing.

What have I done? I didn’t mean to—

“Do you think she suffered?” Verna asked me quietly as we walked down the narrow, sterilely-lit hallways. It smelled like formaldehyde and medical equipment,

mixed with a soft floral scent that I suppose was meant to cover it all up; the smell of death, that is. Chemicals are there to mask it too, but the flowers. The flowers are meant to give you a prettier picture so you forget about what happens to someone you love after they've ceased to be.

I squeezed her shoulders, trying to seem strong and confident, instead of uncertain and scared and confused like I actually felt.

"I think it happened fast," I replied. Verna nodded.

"I wish she could have seen us." She leaned her head on my shoulder. "I mean, I would have liked to see her one last time. To say goodbye, at least."

"Me too," I said, and I hoped it sounded convincing.

Rum. That was her last word. And I didn't say goodbye, I said *fucking*.

We had to get out of here. We had to leave before I trapped us here, before Verna lost her brother as well as her mother.

"Let's go take a look at what she left behind," I said.

We smiled at one another and stepped into the room containing our mother's secret, prized possessions, ones that she valued more than us. Maybe, somewhere in there, was a ticket to our new world.

The world where we would be outlaws.

I'm sorry, sister.