

## Blooming Vengeance

Grade Level 11-12

The overwhelming scent of vomit and decay wafted through the dimly lit room. Screams of babies mingled with cries of older children, their noise almost drowned out completely by the commotion occurring directly overhead. Their holding place was small, too small, and the women and children practically trampled each other upon any attempted movement. Besides the screams of children and the noise made from their captors, not a sound was uttered. In the instance a person wanted to speak, the sour taste in the air combined with the smell of sweat and human excrement prohibited elongated conversation. The prisoners could not remember the last meal that had crossed their lips, and the poorly cleaned water they had been provided left many ill. The rock of the waves against the ship lulled them into a daydream, far away from the nightmare they were living.

The trapdoor above the room was slung open with such force that the infants stopped their crying from the shock of the noise. A man dressed in fine black leather climbed down several rungs of the ladder before jumping carelessly to the deck below. No one dared to move as the man challenged them with his eyes.

“Jovie Gladiolus?” the man called across the sea of blinking eyes and fidgeting hands. No sign was given that anyone had even heard what had been said. “I am seeking Jovie Gladiolus. Step forward this instant.” Once again, it was if the bodies in the room had been turned to plaster.

Suddenly, a small boy was plucked out of the arms of his protesting mother. The boy could not have been more than 5 years of age, and he cried out immediately before he was struck roughly

in the cheek. The guttural sound that left his mother was heart wrenching, and yet the other women restrained her, in an effort to preserve her own safety. Like a turning tide, every pair of eyes that had been previously looking anywhere but up stared like daggers into the eyes of the man.

“Good,” he started with a low chuckle that made stomachs turn, “I finally have your attention. Let me repeat myself once more, and if my wish is not granted this sorry excuse of a lad will pay the price. Where is Jovie Gladiolus?”

She took a deep breath. Slowly, almost cautiously, she flexed each of her fingers individually. She composed herself as she had been taught by her mother. Her mother. The great Marjorie Gladiolus; teacher, patriot, hero, and the greatest fighter the country had ever seen. The flashbacks overtook her as she took her first steps toward the man.

*One step.* She is twelve years old, finally blossoming into her own identity. She is wild and free, and she feels she has the whole world at her feet. Her dreams consist of fairytale endings and perfect princes. She realizes now how stupid that girlish notion was.

*Two steps.* She is fifteen, sneaking out of her chambers late at night. She holds a flickering candle in her hand as she moves swiftly towards the sound of hushed whispers and papers turning. As she peeks through the door of the room, she sees a strange assortment of people she has never seen, with her mother at the head of a table. As they have their attention focused intently on the maps laid out before them, she looks with wonder at this side of her mother she has only heard about. Hot wax from the candle hits her arm and she hisses, earning startled glances from every pair of eyes in the room but one.

*Three steps.* At seventeen she knows her mother's newest mission. She has become an integral part of the plan. She understands how much bigger this is than herself, and she is willing to risk *anything*. Or so she thought until she heard the shrieks in the dead of night. Frantically throwing off the bedcovers and sliding down the halls she reached her mother's quarters just in time to see the spine chilling toothy grin given by the man as he jumped from the window. Frozen in shock, she watched in horror as they mounted their horses and took her mother into the inky darkness.

She stood squarely in front of the man as he gave her the same smile he had given her that night in her mother's room. The boy was harshly shoved in the direction of his mother, and a sigh of relief was heard from every mouth in the crowd. The man glanced her over from head to toe, recalling the same scene that was playing over and over like a broken record in her mind. She was taller than he remembered, but not extraordinarily so. Her unkempt blond hair hung in filthy tendrils around her sunken face. She was clearly malnourished and dehydrated, and was showing the early signs of scurvy. Her clothes closely resembled the rags worn by the women surrounding her, plain colored and tattered. She still stood apart from the group however, as her piercing blue eyes held a fire that was untraceable in the eyes of the others. As well as this, she had a small gold ring sat daintily on her right index finger. No other person in this dingy cabin space had any jewelry remaining, however Jovie managed to retain this elegant ornament. With a twisted gold band and a small, teardrop shaped diamond in its center, it was clear the ring had sentimental value to its wearer. She noticed his eyes catch on her hand and quickly clasped her hands behind her back.

“I am here; I am Jovie.” The words seemed to echo off the walls and bounce back inside her own head, but she gave no appearance that she was bothered. The man rubbed his hands across his beard; vexation fracturing his careful façade of calmness.

“Alright then,” he continued with his eyebrow cocked, “you are coming with me. Do not speak unless spoken to, do not attempt to run or escape. If you do so I will slaughter you, your mother, and every insignificant person on this ship. Do you understand?”

Jovie simply nods her head once, distinct and abrupt. She notices the gleaming silver hilt protruding from the man’s sheath as he climbs the ladder ahead of her. She feels a flicker of doubt for only a moment, until her mother’s screams play over again in her mind. As the man steps up the final rung of the ladder, she grabs his boots and yanks with the entire force of her body. He plummets back down into the room as the women cower in the corners. Speedily, Jovie leapt from the ladder and pressed her knee against the back of the man’s neck. She grabbed his sword and unsheathed it, with a loud whistling noise following. The women covered the eyes and ears of the youth in the cabin, just in time for Jovie to hit the man with the hilt of the sword. With a dull crack, he was unresponsive.

“I am coming Mother.”

