

Salt and Silk



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Chapter 1: A Disaster at Sea

“The empire is not held together by parchment or crowns, but by hulls and keels. The Navy is the empire made manifest: its law, its reach, its wrath. Where our ships sail, order follows. Where they anchor, dissent vanishes. Loyalty aboard is not assumed—it is monitored, tested, and enforced. Every captain is watched, every crewman assessed. That is why political officers are stationed on every vessel: to ensure that duty is not compromised by sentiment, and that no one forgets whom they truly serve.”

— Admiral Vellan Hurne, Strategic Address to Fleet Oversight Command

Even if he made it back, he knew he was dead. That thought coursed through the mind of Captain Henry of the Ablon Imperium as he surveyed the damage to his little ship. It had been a good life so far—plenty of struggle, plenty of glory. But now, with the azure blue flag marked with three red stars in tatters, burned, and sinking a half mile astern, his career and likely his life were at an end. No captain who lost Her Imperial Majesty’s colors remained at their post. Few remained with their heads. Of all the tragedies to befall the navy, though, this was the least that could be called his fault.

Henry was young for a commanding officer, only 25, when the master of the ship was over 50, and one of the men laboring in the hold appeared to be 80. Every man aboard shared a surname, none being of noble birth. It brought comfort to know they were all sons of Ablos, but it also meant anyone in power could replace them without consequence. No family to offend, no noble house to leverage their name. Perhaps it was slightly unusual to have an entire crew of commoners, no 12th son of a noble house stuck there, no disgraced lesser house, but even those with little choice could avoid tiny, inconsequential ships.

Among the remaining men, Lieutenant Reece stood out—not for his rank, but for the quiet, unyielding resolve in his gaze. Though only a

junior lieutenant, he carried himself with the steadiness of a seasoned officer. Quite a find to pick up the penniless boy on the streets. Even in the chaos, his hands moved with precision, securing loose rigging and directing the men with calm authority. Henry had seen men break under less, but Reece held firm, as if duty alone anchored him to this shattered ship. Something about that unyielding gaze... as though he'd seen worse storms than any he'd face at sea. Two sailors in the corner paused mid-conversation as he passed, their eyes following him a moment too long before they bent again to their work. It wasn't fear exactly—but something that looked uncomfortably like loyalty. Henry could only guess what kind of past forged such quiet determination. Not that it would matter, since there was a good chance Reece would die with Henry for his failure if the court of inquiry was vengeful.

Henry himself stood just as tall as his first lieutenant, darker than most but otherwise unremarkable. If he slouched, he could blend into any crowd in the Capital, but in his bright white uniform, he commanded respect from every man aboard. Until now.

Most would've considered him lucky. Many of his brother captains would have lost a ship under such circumstances. A few at Naval Command might even recognize that only his precautions had saved the vessel. Those staff officers who would likely denounce him publicly would at least have the wherewithal to recognize the steps he took privately. He'd warned the admirals a dozen times about the new powder, faulty and volatile, but with the northern route closed, there was no other choice. Natural gunpowder was scarce, and the northern Iryan powder nearly exhausted. High politics distracted him for a moment before a crash brought him back to the hell that was Her Imperial Majesty's armed frigate *Alexandra*.

To call *Alexandra* a frigate was generous. True frigates roamed from the frigid north to the warm summer isles, through storm-tossed seas with ease. *Alexandra* was a large brig, rated as a frigate only because of a quarterdeck, a clerical sleight of hand to make the Imperial navy seem larger than ever before. Still, she was fast and nimble, the best craft of her

size afloat—until now. The explosion had ripped out both masts, set half the ship aflame, and opened countless holes. The carpenter and his mates worked frantically, but for every patched breach, another sprang open. The pumps hadn't stopped their relentless clanking since the water began pouring in. The poor crew whose turn it was pumping must be in hell as they pumped monotonously to keep the water at bay.

Henry knelt on the quarterdeck as the surgeon worked on his wounds. Minor though they may have been, his head dripped blood onto his uniform. Reece knelt nearby, speaking softly to a wounded sailor, his voice low, almost tender. "Hold on, mate," he murmured, tying off a bandage. His face was unreadable, but Henry knew the weight behind those words. Reece carried the burden of every life lost, though he never spoke of it. That burden was a double-edged sword: the quiet empathy of a man who hadn't yet turned his heart to stone. That was the reason Henry told himself that he chose Reece to be the only other commissioned officer aboard... ignoring the fact that Reece was the only "volunteer" that the Political Officer had found.

As a sailor carried a comrade across the deck, probably dead, the timbers underneath his feet threatened to splinter by the way they groaned. The stench of gunpowder and chemicals filled the air. The surgeon, Ronald, was a convicted thief serving his sentence aboard. He did his best, but no man could work miracles. Of their crew of 73, 17 were dead. Ten of the surviving wounded, including the chaplain, might not last the night. A cry went up from the lower deck—someone shouting "Water's rising!" Henry clenched his jaw. He'd seen men hanged for less than losing Her Imperial Majesty's colors. But that was a concern for later. If they didn't patch this ship and reach shore soon, they'd all be dead men.

Henry forced himself to his feet, brushing aside the boy trying to bandage his head. He counted his available crew—fourteen men stood before him. A grim silence hung over them. The ship limped forward, dragged by boats tied to her prow, but the distant island seemed no closer. If they didn't make it before nightfall, they'd be dashed against the rocks.

“Reece,” Henry rasped, his voice hoarse.

The tall Lieutenant turned instantly, his eyes sharp despite the exhaustion. “Sir?”

“Take the helm.”

“Aye, sir.”

Henry watched as Reece stepped up, steady hands gripping the wheel. Reece was younger than him still, only 19, but his calm was infectious. Men drew strength from him without realizing it. He wasn’t loud or commanding, but he led by example. Henry had no doubt he’d see the job through. A perfect officer, though Henry could have bet that the officer had based his behavior on himself.

Henry didn’t see, nor did anyone, that when he went below to check the pumps, Reece paused by his quarters just long enough to slide a small, sealed packet into the locked drawer of his desk. He glanced over his shoulder before turning the key, the motion so quick it might have been nothing—except for the way his jaw tightened when footsteps sounded in the passage.

Slowly, unevenly, *Alexandra* crept toward the island that Henry had turned towards in the aftermath of the explosion. Reece’s silhouette at the helm was sharp against the darkening sky, a quiet figure of resilience. Henry thought, not for the first time, that Reece would outlast them all. Somewhere in that calm exterior lay a storm waiting to be unleashed—one that would take the right person to draw out. In the interim, Henry retook his feet, and directed the repair efforts.

The ship’s cobbled-together sails, propped up on small spars, caught a meager breeze, inching them forward. Carpenters’ hammers and clanking pumps merged into a somewhat soothing background while every remaining man worked to try and get some canvas up. Twin top spars, light enough to be propped up by a dozen men and lashed to the side

were used as twin masts in the middle of the ship, with spare sails and any canvas from hammocks to blankets were tied off. The wreck of the Alexandra looked as though a washing woman had laid out clothes to dry, but the effect slowly began bearing fruit.

Alexandra barely inched along at a few knots, but as the night began to overtake them, the ship slowly forced her way into a tiny protected bay on this strange island, her bow scraping sand with a vibration and sound that brought a hoarse cheer to all who felt it. Lanterns from the jolly boat lit the shore as the bow kissed the sand. Lines were hastily tied to the palm trees, and the crew dragged themselves ashore.

Henry slumped onto the beach alongside his men. Discipline and decorum forgotten, they huddled together in the sand, praying for dawn. Among them, Reece sat apart, eyes fixed on the horizon. That boy had come to the navy with nothing but the clothes on his back and a spark in his eyes. Strange, Henry thought, how quickly that spark had grown into an unshakable flame—one that might burn them both if this madness continued. His gaze was steady, unflinching, as though he could see something beyond the reach of the stars. But just for a second, Henry thought he saw a hint of something dark flickered in Reece's eyes, gone before Henry could name it. Duty alone can't anchor a man forever, Henry thought warily.

Little did any man now in a wet pile sleeping give a second thought for the disaster which has befallen them. Little did any man consider the ramifications of this explosion, or the way that such an event which the rest of the world might never have heard of even in rumor, might throw away a balancing act of nations that had stood for a thousand years.

Chapter 2: The Beachhead

“Captains are selected for their capacity to adapt, not their ability to obey. The sea requires judgment, speed, and invention—but these traits are only valuable when yoked to loyalty. A captain who wavers in his convictions invites decay below decks. It is his duty not only to command, but to correct, to confine, and to ensure ideological cohesion among his crew. Political officers serve to observe, advise, and if necessary, intervene. But make no mistake: it is the captain who sets the tone. Disloyalty is not an accident. It is a symptom of failed leadership.”

-Professor Sigmund Elizor, Imperial College of Strategic Harmony

It was well before first light that the men began to stir, but as soon as each of them did, he was pushed down again by his mates. Getting up would certainly mean rousing the captain, and rousing the captain would mean that it was time to begin some of the hardest work they would ever face in their lives. The men were not disloyal, they were acting on instinct. Two thirds of the crew shared the same story, criminals serving their time here instead of paying a visit to the axman, or serving as a slave on some godforsaken plantation. The rest of the crew had actually volunteered, something that was becoming harder and harder to find as these wars dragged on year after year. After years together, these vagabonds had managed to become brothers. But they knew what was facing them the moment the captain had enough strength in his bones to lift his head. Like children they hoped that it would never come.

Then with thunder and a roar, it came. “Divisions“ rasped the captain, and urged on with the fury of a man frustrated at himself, the men assembled in quick uneven rows. The captain stood in front of them all, his only lieutenant with him, the sailing master standing by. The purser was dead, the gunner was dead, but the carpenter looked eager to begin. Reece hadn't slept, that much was obvious, though Henry couldn't have said he was particularly rested.

“Midshipman,” the Captain said. There was no need to elaborate, of the five midshipmen who had begun this cruise, one had been lost when he fell off the mast in the middle of the night and could not be found, one had died of an infection, and two were injured in the accident yesterday. The Singular midshipmen, Smithers, a boy not older than 11, still unable to raise his voice without a squeak and a chuckle from the men many times his senior, began to check how many men remained, who they were, and their position. Reece helped the poor boy, though a pair of marines exchanging gear stopped speaking when Reece drew near. Their conversation broke off as if it had brushed too close to his name. One risked a glance, then looked away quickly, jaw tight.

The doctor, perhaps the only man who had remained awake, could be seen tending to the two fallen midshipmen and the other wounded survivors 15 yards away. The only shelter created was merely a fallen branch with a forlorn pile of leaves strewn across it, which covered the Political Officer Alfin Chapman, still unconscious from the blast. Alfin was separated from the rest not only due to his rank, but because no man aboard dared to speak to him without checking his tongue. A single word, a single look might break him. It might have been his imagination, but Henry felt... darkness come from that shelter. Fortunately for the present, Alfin was unconscious.

Henry continued orders as if these details running through his mind were not pinpricks upon his honor. “Send a party to look for water, Smithers will lead them. The carpenter's mates are to come with us, every other man is to pull down every tree he can find for shelter and firewood. Once we have started a camp, come find me for further orders.” Despite Henry's unhappiness at using the word every twice in a single sentence, no man spared it a look. While not in command, nearly all could have guessed the orders from their situation. Every man among them noticed how far over her side the ship listed, and could see the charred hole which dotted her port bow.

The men knew their business well, and a flurry of activity began on the beach, while the captain and the small party with him climbed back aboard the wreck that was his ship only two days ago.

It seemed as if an eternity had passed on board. A ship of war was never silent. Even while riding to her anchor in a flat calm, the rigging sang with every wave that lapped against her, the bare feet of the crew could be heard moving across the decks, but not anymore. It was as if the ship was no longer a living organism, but just the hulk of her former self.

“Lead on” directed the captain to the Carpenter.

“Aye aye sir” came the automatic reply. “Lets start below Sir, stern to forward I think is best.

And he did, almost reveling in how much work had to be done. With the ship bottomed and the tide having beached her thoroughly, he was able to show to the senior leadership every bit of damage that he had found, and audibly exclaim when a new split beam or broken seal was discovered. It seemed to the captain as if everything in the ship was lost already, but his face remained stoic. His Midshipman on the other hand grew more and more long in the face with every compartment, every hole poking through the side, every ruined timber.

“Like a blasted chunk of cheese!” he complained when they came across the shreds of Live Oak that formerly stood solid against a bulkhead. He cowed before the look the captain gave him. Had he been paying attention, he would have seen why Lieutenant Reece was so silent, why he stood back from the Captain. Every wound to the ship seemed to drain the life of Henry as if they were inflicted on himself. Perhaps they were, as the Captain of a ship was addressed by the name of that ship.

The carpenter, ever a man who loved a dramatic flair, finally showed the extent of the worst of the damage. The two barrels that had exploded on deck on the port beam had blasted downwards, missing the magazine by a matter of yards. What they did instead was blow a hole

through the planks beneath him, through the planks beneath those into the holes, and left a crater in the side of the ship as if a giant head carved it out with a spoon.

“This is where we will begin then” said the Captain. Then we will work from the bottom up, do you agree, Carpenter?”

“Aye aye Sir” said the Carpenter. In Her Majesty's service, any time a Captain asked something of the many specialists under him, that was the only response which could be given. He answered without thinking, like the machine that 12 years of service had turned him into. But he was met with a sharp glare from the Captain. A man fearful of punishment was not one whom he needed. Reece stood leaning on a bulkhead, shaking his head at the answer.

“Carpenter”, Henry rasped, weaker than he would’ve liked, “John, I want you to give me your honest opinion. We need the ship set properly if we are going to make it home. You know this work far better than I, and I want you to tell me what needs to be done.”

The mates were astonished, Lieutenant Reece lost his footing altogether, but this was nothing compared to the reaction of the carpenter. For a man whose voice could be heard going at all hours day and night, his reply did not come. His mouth opened, and stunningly, closed again before he could find an adequate response. Even though he was certainly the foremost expert on the wood that made up the ship, he had never before been asked his opinion by a commissioned officer to this extent. To his knowledge, no warrant officer in the fleet had ever been asked before to instruct a senior commander on what it is he needed to do. After a few moments of hesitation and an expectant pointed cough from the lieutenant, he began to stammer out what he knew he wanted to do from the beginning, from two days ago when he saw the first of the damage.

“W...Well sir”, he stuttered helplessly, “all of the large timbers that we have left, all the sheets of copper, everything that we need, is in the hull, below the water as she lays now. In my opinion sir it will be

much better if we emptied the ship completely, then pulled her up onto the beach and laid her on her side altogether. Then I don't have to plug the holes from the inside, I can properly repair them like we were back in the Navy Yard."

"How long is that going to take?" barked Henry, his voice returning with the prospect of action

"I don't rightly know sir, I won't have any idea until I see what her bottom looks like that I will know what needs to be done." Henry's mind was torn. No captain of Her Majesty's navy would ever be caught dead with her ship out of the water.

"We shall empty her out first I imagine" he said "glancing up while collecting his thoughts."

"Yes sir," said the carpenter "at least her portside first, Sir. The weight in the starboard side may well help us roll her over with everyone we've got left."

Lieutenant Reece bristled behind the captain so much that the captain could feel his response through the air. This man had been assigned his position because he was proficient working with wood, and now he was making suggestions about something which was not his business. A strict, disciplinarian Captain would've struck him to the ground for his insolence. There were some captains who might well have shot him on the spot. But this captain in front of him did nothing. He nodded instead, then turned on his heel, and arms class behind his back, began to walk back up the companion way, and with a pointed look at his next in command, the work began.

...

Remarkable progress had been made in a few short hours. Some of these men had not set foot on land in quite some time. Although this was hardly a port with women offering themselves up for a few coins, it was

still invigorating to the men now that they had become awake. A freshwater spring started up not 40 yards from their new encampment, and several of the men had located fruits growing nearby. Nothing substantial, large seeded bananas and small watermelon without any real meat inside them, but incredibly stimulating to men who lived on salt beef and biscuit their entire lives at sea. To men who had a guard give them their daily water allowance, leaning down to drink from a creek every time they walked past it was an inexpressible luxury.

A dozen lean-to shelters had been put together, each with plenty of room for the men who had built them. Together they put up another cabin for the officers, a rough wooden hut, but something that indicated that they knew where their captain belonged in a station above them. There was a second hut being built for the man still lying underneath the ferns that the doctor insisted on keeping his last patient in.

The crew had put together a nice stack of firewood as well, and the four boys still part of the crew had been set to work digging fire pits and ringing them with stone for the next cold night. The captain nodded quickly to the Carpenter as he joined him on the beach, giving the orders as they had discussed.. All of the men knew that Carpenter knew his business, though it was not a position of high esteem, no one was appointed Carpenter of a ship of war without knowing his craft.

Upon hearing that whistle, men immediately poured up the ladder and makeshift gangway, emptying the ship of most of the stores on her port side. Meanwhile others lashed a long cable to the stern, and as the tide slowly rose throughout the day they used weights tied to the trees near the shore, and what blocks and tackles remained to slowly swing her around. After three hours hard work, the ship was high up onto the shore as she was going to be, leaned over onto her starboard side. The guns of the port side were slowly taken out of her like decayed teeth, her munitions, food, water, everything that could be hoped for had been pulled out and set up inside the rough breastwork which had been constructed.

Men have been sent out in teams into the jungle around them, but no one had reported seeing anyone. The captain knew that this would change. In this part of the world, no island was truly abandoned. In any case he expected to start receiving reports soon, the men would be jumpy knowing where they were in a hostile country.

With the boards that had been stored below, the carpenter began to make his repairs. But after four days of work, he approached the captain's hut nervously. Four days had made a marvelous effect on the upper works of the ship, she looked as fresh and new as if she had been newly commissioned, or coppering had been repaired, and there was a small pile of Live Oak timber remaining. But it was this to which the Carpenter addressed the captain.

"Sir" he said, reverting to the stammering inarticulation that he found himself in before, we have enough stored timber and I can rescue enough of the wood to repair her outer hull, but we are going to need to use some of these trees for the rest of her, especially for her trim, her mast, and her rigging, or to replace the bottom below the waterline. "I can patch up her bottom somewhat, but..." he trailed off, seeing the look on Henry's face while he processed this news.

Henry had anticipated this problem, and was putting off a decision on it. In their country, live oak was the only wood available. If the records of the imperial court were to be believed, nearly 600 years ago His Imperial Majesty had ordered all other trees be chopped down, and reseeded with it. It was without a doubt the strongest in the world. Its vast availability grew with their forests that in the centuries that followed, so that larger and larger ships were able to be built, some of them strong enough to ricochet the canon of the enemy. But with the damage that had occurred, the captain had a terrific challenge in front of him. He had been sampling the wood that had grown around them for two days. Nothing but teak and rubber trees as far as the eye could see.

No man outside of the Navy or the merchant service would be able to tell the difference, but to men who were encased by the seasoned live

oak treated with pitch from the Navy yards, these teak trees appeared almost like soften leather. It was lighter to be sure, but a cannonball would punch right through it no matter how far away they were. Hell, members of the Imperial guard might be able to get through it with one of their sorts. But the captain knew his decision had to be made.

There were a thousand factors at play, but only two options remained in front of him. The last two spars Which had survived would serve As replacement masts, or they could be shot down, planed to bits, and used to fix the outer planking of the hole. He needed them for both, but he could always replace one of them with the teak. The trouble was, which was he to use?

The heavy sturdy wood upright as masts would give him an advantage sailing, they would stand their ground against any gale. They could be hit directly by several shots before they fell, and they looked professional. Any shape of the navy seeing a mast made of anything else would wonder what sort of man the captain was who commanded her. Many years ago, a colony in the east had partnered with the Navy of somewhere or other to build a dozen ships and assert their independence. They used the fur trees that grew in their country as masts for their ships. Every time he read the reports in “a history of imperial naval engagements “he would smirk at their foolishness. Even the smallest ship of the imperial Navy could shoot down a mast made out of fur with a single broadside. Teak was far stronger than fir, but it would still not stand up to the storms of their home waters. This fact alone had saved the empire more than once. During large storms, enemy ships which had snuck close to one of the home islands would try to deposit a spy on shore, only to have her masks ripped down, the crew dashed against the rocks, and the wreckage to be found when the storm lifted.

For the hull though would be another issue altogether. You cannot replace a dozen planks of a hull, the entire plankage below the waterline would need to be replaced board by board. The masts would then stand up to the enemy, the lower hull would not. Any shot which hit them below the waterline where the teak would lay, even if they were struck by a whale

trying to scratch his back, would put a hole in her bottom that she would not recover from.

“Sir,” asked the Carpenter.

The captain blinked. He had been running through these scenarios in his head for minutes now, blankly staring at the Carpenter in front of him. The boy walking nearby dropped the planks on his shoulder, hearing a man speak to his captain without being spoken to first. While a petty officer hurried him away, John continued.

“Sir, I’ve been testing the rubber with one of my mates”.

“Surely”, Henry replied, his eyes narrowing, “you are not about to suggest we use rubber trees for the ship”. Reece, standing behind his captain, scoffed. The suggestion was, of course, ludicrous. Rubber trees barely stood up under their own weight. They could be bent by a determined infant.

“No Sir, of course not sir” came the reply, “but Matthews here sir” (a young man’s face appeared behind his superior, peering widely at the carpenter and his captain) “he worked with rubber sir, and he thinks we have an answer to the hull.”

Henry thought well of this. It was good to him to see that an expert under him would give credit to the man who presented an idea. “What is it?”, he asked, addressing the boy.

“Sir” the boy said, nervous but emboldened by the hand of John on his small shoulder. “I worked before I was pressed in a rubber sheet shop. But this rubber sir, it’s very different. We took a look at it sir, and there’s some kind of iron in it sir.”

“What is it you are saying?” impatiently asked Henry

“Well sir” came the Carpenter’s reply, “We could use the teak, cut into smaller planks, and layer the rubber in between the planks. If there is enough metal within the rubber, it might just bounce off any shot that hits it.”

It was an incredible thought, if it could be done. If there was enough material treated and layered between the Teak, cannon shot at anything greater than pistol range would bounce off the hull. But there was a complication. Imperial ships were to be created out of seasoned live Oak, by the decree of every political officer from the Waste of the east to the icebergs of the northern sea.

But no live oak was available, and the only man to whom the decision could be appealed still laid unconscious under the Doctor’s clumsy care on the beach. But a decision had to be made, and made immediately to get them back to sea.

“Do it”

Chapter 3: Cassira

From “A Primer for Newly Commissioned Captains,” Imperial Naval Press, Year 1042

A captain’s loyalty must be proven daily—not merely to the flag, but to the eyes that watch it. The sea forgives many errors; the empire forgives none. Men have sailed through fire and storm only to be unseated by a single whispered doubt in the wrong ear. Remember this: command is a performance, and the audience is always listening.

Cassira and Mackenzie had always been bound by more than blood. As the eldest, barely of age now, Cassira carried not only her father’s sharper features but also the unspoken weight of responsibility. Their parents, Lord and Lady Whittaker, had raised them in defiance of the quiet expectations that clung to girls of their station. Beauty faded, Mama often said, but a sharp mind could change the world.

Cassira had tried, once, to be the daughter everyone admired. She’d lasted all of a month before trading embroidery needles for fencing foils, abandoning the solar for the stables, slipping away with maps of distant kingdoms in hand. Mackenzie, meanwhile, had mastered every art with effortless grace. Perfect marks. Perfect manners. Perfect smiles. The golden child. Cassira loved her fiercely for it, even when Mackenzie’s perfection made her own restless edges more obvious.

The grand library was their shared sanctuary—towering shelves drowning in leather and parchment, the air always scented faintly of cedar and ink. Their father’s collection rivaled that of the king’s archivists, each volume a treasure brought from far coasts and hidden ports. Here, the sisters read side by side but apart, their silence companionable, their presence enough to knit their hearts together.

The grounds of their small estate overlooked the farms of the people living under her father’s benevolent rule. As a very minor house on

the western continent, these small estates dotted the landscape, half independent, half confederated in a way that had seemed to be fashionable. While only a few hundred houses dotted her family's land, the small quiet village was fairly wealthy from the trade. Caravans from Taruca to Pavu came through every day, picking up as much silk as they could.

Above the village in clear view of the estate and the village was a long mountain range, far beyond their land on both ends. But the cliff faces were ideal for growing silk worms, and farms had sprouted up from one cliff to another. Silk worms feasted on the mulberry leaves and spun silk faster than anywhere in the world. Silk scarves, tapestries, dresses, and goods of all kinds were laid out in the charming market that surrounded the trade road, but most were empty by midday. There was never enough silk. The demand from the traders was too great.

That morning, frost rimed the windows, turning the world beyond to frosted glass. A fire burned low in the hearth, casting molten light on the carpet. Goose, their black lab, dozed at Mackenzie's feet, his dark eyes half-lidded but watchful. Cassira's book was a heavy atlas of ancient trade routes; Mackenzie's, a richly illustrated romance.

"Do you think Mama and Papa will return soon?" Mackenzie murmured.

Cassira looked up, meeting her sister's bright, curious eyes. "I hope so. The general's headquarters isn't far... but you know Mama."

Mackenzie's lips curved knowingly. "And Papa will talk to every merchant and scholar on the way back." Their laughter filled the space, warm and unguarded, until Goose thumped his tail in agreement.

By midday, Cassira's restlessness had taken hold. She closed her atlas and stood. "Let's go outside. Just for a little while." Snow had powdered the gardens overnight, clinging to the stubborn blooms that refused to bow to winter. Goose bounded ahead, scattering a

pair of doves into the cold air. Cassira knelt among the flowers, coaxing a few into her palm before weaving them into a crown for Mackenzie's hair.

"There," she said. "A princess, through and through."

Mackenzie twirled, skirts brushing snow into airy spirals. "And you, my lady, are a far better artist than you'll ever admit."

The pair's wandering took them to the forest's edge, where ancient oaks stood like sentinels, branches heavy with frost. Pale light slipped through the canopy, the air sharp in their lungs. "Do you remember when we found that baby deer?" Mackenzie asked.

Cassira smiled. "Of course. We named her Fawn. Mama nearly fainted when she saw her in the parlor."

"But Papa let us keep her for a few days," Mackenzie said, laughter warming the cold air.

They lingered there, wrapped in the quiet rhythm of shared memory, until the light began to fade. By the time they returned to the manor, the fire's glow had dimmed to embers. Cassira knelt to stir the flames...and froze.

Hoofbeats. Distant but rapid, the cadence too disciplined for travelers. Goose's head shot up, ears rigid, a low growl rumbling in his chest. The door slammed open.

Five men spilled inside, hoods shadowing their faces, steel flashing in the low light. The leader's fur cloak carried the faint reek of brine and pitch, and the curved blade in his hand bore the notch-toothed style Cassira had once seen in a Pearl trader's stall.

"Right, they are dead," he growled. "Kill the whelps. Take what you want."

Cassira's world contracted to that voice. That stare.

“Run, Mackenzie!” she screamed, seizing her sister’s hand. Goose lunged forward, barking like cannon fire, but the men moved with ruthless precision.

A blade struck.

Cassira felt the absence first—Mackenzie’s hand slipping away, the gasp of pain, the hot rush of blood spilling across pale wool.

“No!” Her scream was raw enough to tear her throat. She lurched forward, but Goose’s insistent shove against her leg dragged her into motion. There was no time. No chance. A single glance back saw a man as big as a bear and covered in fur trying to dislodge his sword and come after her... from her sister’s lifeless body. Mackenzie’s blank eyes stared up at her.

She fled.

The winter air slapped her face as she tore through the garden, branches raking her arms, roots clawing at her boots. Shouts chased her into the trees. Her breath came ragged, tasting of copper. She didn’t look back. Couldn’t.

The forest swallowed her, shadows pulling tight like a closing fist. She ran until her body threatened to give, until every heartbeat felt like it might break her ribs. At last she collapsed against an oak, Goose pressed close, his warmth the only thing tethering her to the present.

“We can’t stay,” she whispered.

And so they moved again—hours blurring in a haze of cold and grief. When night fell, Cassira found a small clearing hidden from the path. She dropped to the frost-stiff ground, Goose curling against her, sentinel and shield. Stars pierced the black above them. Cassira stared until her eyes burned. “I’m sorry, Mackenzie,” she breathed.

Morning found her hollow-eyed but unbroken. She rose, every muscle aching, and pressed deeper into the forest until the sound of water reached her. Following it, she came upon a brook spilling over smooth stones. She knelt, drinking until the ache in her throat eased. Goose lapped beside her, eyes scanning the trees.

“Come on,” she murmured. “We’re close. I can feel it.”

Close to what, she didn’t know.

But she kept walking.

Chapter 4: The Wait

Lecture Notes, School for Political Officers – Master Orven Salk

Ships are not built of timber and iron. They are built of obedience. Should that obedience falter, even the sturdiest hull will rot from within. A clever captain will guard against rot with discipline; a wise political officer will guard against it with fear. And between the two, the ship will sail true—whether the crew wills it or not.

The captain had hoped to be strolling across his quarterdeck, what could be called Quarterdeck in a little brig, in a week. It had been two and yet they were still stuck on this godforsaken island. The lookouts had ascended one of the cliffs nearby and had built themselves a lookout, far more reminiscent of the name the crows nest than the highest point on the ship. A man 20 yards away would never know that sitting near him were two men sharing a telescope and keeping an eye on the ocean. But they were two of the only four men not involved with the current operation.

They had begun this morning, after a finally arranged funeral service for those lost. Several men who had only been wounded had passed on the beach, while others had no body left to be found. A Long funeral service was out of the question, and yet it had to be done. Sailors were a superstitious lot. If the captain had ignored their precious rites, they might have thought him the reason the faulty powder had exploded. So for an hour at dawn, Henry read the funeral orders. Most men barely knew what he was saying, but all recognized the prayer at the end. Henry at last arrived at the one line every imperial man knew. "... The sea has called them home."

"May their course be true" came the chorus of a reply. The men were dismissed, and happily chattered away to breakfast. To them, death meant an eternity of sailing the calm waters under a light breeze in the afterlife with their ancestors. To Henry? All death meant was a failure to carry out

his orders. After their breakfast, extra hearty given their exertion to come, the work began.

Inch by inch the brig crept through the bay. With a rocky bottom the anchors could not be used to kedge off, but carpenter John had another ingenious idea. A few hours' work had created blocks as tall as a man, by which cables were lashed to the ship, and to a large tree on either side of the bay's entrance. Twenty men at either end were needed to move the vessel, but within an hour she floated free again on her new bottom. Once she was secure, riding and rolling so high on the water that her light tan keel could nearly be seen, she could have all of her weight put back where it belonged. The work was completed by nightfall, and while they could have carried on, Henry knew he had pushed his men hard as it was. Some captains in the service would push their men to the end of their being. Not him. Henry knew from experience that his men worked best with a little rest. A beast could be pushed until it dropped, but a beast did not have to think. A beast did not have to put their trust in their Captain to do what was best.

The shot and cartridges were laid through the hold, slowly balancing her out while the captain was rowed round and round the ship by two unlucky souls for hours, looking at her trim. After a few hours John sheepishly suggested that they build a platform for their captain to stand on, so the men exhausted from rowing could be used elsewhere. Henry of course could not accept. A platform the length of the ship would take all day to build, but he understood the point. While half of the crew loaded the ship he did something no Queen's captain had done in living memory, he rowed himself around the vessel.

The crew, relaying messages below to the lieutenant did not mask their surprise at all. Their tropical paradise had surprised them with the rebuilding of their wreck of a ship, but to see a captain, to see any officer perform a physical task by themselves was lunacy. But the worst was to come. Occasionally, captain Henry would come alongside and ask them what they thought, what they thought of the new layout of the vessel.

Henry knew well what every officer had been taught, a common sailor was an unthinking machine. It was drilled into them from the moment they took their commission, reinforced by every political officer at sea. Henry, however, disagreed. Every man was certainly not an equal, but all deserved, in his mind, a fair chance to prove himself.

There were three classes of subjects under her majesty. The workingmen were little more than cogs in the machine, requiring special permission for everything from opening a shop, to addressing their superiors. At the pinnacle were the gentry, those bearing lands, titles, and last names. Through their decisions the entire nation flowed. While they jostled for position amongst themselves, they were united in two causes. The first was merely on paper, the good of the nation. Second of course, was the maintenance of their current system. People who spoke above their station, people who had thoughts in their head of anything above obedience, these were all people to be made an example of.

Only in the last century did the third class of their society emerge, a professional class of soldier, sailor, and tradesmen not associated with the great houses. They were tolerated more than anything else, a necessary group given the rapid expansion of the empire. Henry and men like him had found some success, though certainly would not believe themselves safe.

All of the great houses of the land descended from great seafarers. With such poor availability of resources at home, only those skilled and strong enough could act as the merchant marine. Though the priests insisted that her imperial majesty descended from the gods, it was common knowledge that her family were the greatest pirates and colonists the world had ever seen, but their numbers were few. With hundreds of ships and colonies across the world, there were simply not enough members of the gentry to govern the empire.

Fortunately for the men, their purgatory on the island was approaching a rapid end. With every hour their little ship gained a little more of her life back that was taken away from her so explosively. Slowly

the masts and rigging were set up, and her stores were secured into the hold, until finally her paintwork was ready. Henry stood on the deck, discussing quarter bills and duty shifts with his officers, when a young boy shouted from the bow.

“Captain! The jolly boat is coming out to us!”

A chill immediately came over the crew, as every glass on the ship was trained onto the little boat. As expected the two lookouts were not aboard, and the small oars were pulled by the doctor, while sitting in the stern sheets sat Alfin Chapman, Political Officer of her Imperial Majesty’s service. Rather than his first appearance aboard the vessel at Port Charles, this man appeared to be a shell of his former self.

Routine had to be observed. All hands came to man the sides for the Political Officer, what was left of them. The pipes shrilled out a tune of welcome, what was left of them, and the officers stood in rigid attention on the quarterdeck of the now floating frigate what was left of them. The ship remained tied tightly to the sturdy trunks of the island while the jolly boat pulled the 40 feet necessary to her port side.

Nothing was said as Mr. Chapman was helped to the deck. It was not until he stood upright that the crew could see an alteration in his black suit, so distinctive among the white and blue of the navy crew. There, standing juxtaposed against his slim figure was his left sleeve pinned to his chest, which until a few days ago held his left arm.

He came to the quarterdeck, ignored the salutes from all but the captain, and a nod dismissed the men back to their repairs. While men sweated and buzzed around them like a well oiled machine, Alvin came up to the Captain, and the pair moved to the rear of the quarterdeck. It was a stunning sight for anyone who might have been watching, though no one was to be found. The rear of the quarterdeck had been blown off by the concussion of the explosion, leaving nothing but splinters where once

stood a wall of oak, engraved painstakingly with a mural of the princess who had given her name to the ship.

“Well”? said Alvin.

The captain did not reply. No words would be sufficient. Loss of the colors, near loss of his ship, men had been hanged for less, far less. Men had been thrown overboard and left to drown while their ship sailed on for far less. Henry felt for the first time as though a man who was condemned. No answer would be sufficient. He would be allowed to retain his command only long enough to return to port, where he would be tried, convicted, and killed. Escape was impossible. Any naval officer who ran from a sentence would condemn his family ashore to his own fate. Unless he could reach them first? The wheels began to turn in Henry’s mind while he gave a short report, but the reply was so shocking that the plan dissolved, and he stared until Alvin repeated himself after a cough.

“Could have happened to anyone. Lets get this ship fixed and we can continue on with our mission”.

One of the hands working in the cabin below, clearly eavesdropping, fell into the sea. He was fished out and had returned to cutting away splinters before the captain had time to form a reply, in which to his eternal shame he actually stammered.

“But...but the ship, its been crippled”

“You seem to know how to fix it well, Captain. Tell me when do you think we can set forth?”

“But Mr. Chapman... the disaster, the men we lost”

“Yes?”

The Captain stared at the man, the cold eyes of a week ago scrutinizing him gone, replaced with a stare he could not place. Almost as if this was a different man entirely. His voice dropped to a near whisper,

“But sir, I am to be court martialed for this. They will surely have me hanged.”

“No sense in that Henry, it could have happened aboard any ship. It's this powder the admiral put here. I heard you complain in port about it.” A lie to be sure, since the captain only spoke of the powder to a select few officers in an alleyway surely devoid of his political officer, but the spying was of no consequence compared to the final point.

“Mr. Chapman, the colors are gone”

“It's just some cloth. Make a new one before we get home.”

The statement stunned the captain into silence. To do as he was asked was more than treason, it was near heresy. Though certainly heresy counted for less in the empire, where religion was somewhat protected than it would be in another kingdom, treason was the worst crime of all. He would be chained to watch his family be put to death, then left for the rats to eat. And yet by the time his brain had left the image of the rats, he found the deck empty. The man in the black suit was being rowed back to the beach, back to his hut to leave the captain to his work, to his hulk. But at least, he thought when settling back into the routine of giving his orders, there was a spark of hope. He walked now along the edge of his own knife, failure and death on the one side, treason on the other. But perhaps, just perhaps, if he balanced carefully enough, there was another chance at the end.

The carpenter approached. “Sir”, he began, the picture of courtesy, “what are we to do sir?”

Henry replied automatically, an answer ready from a dozen years drilling, answering as a junior, prepared into the brain of every man who served as midshipman

“Your duty.”

Chapter 5: Forest

Trust no calm sea, no smiling captain, and no man who claims the wind is his ally. The first will betray you without warning, the second when it suits him, and the third already has.

-Sailor's Proverb, Common Across the Inner Isles

The forest stretched before Cassira like an endless sea of shadows. Each tree towered above her, their branches swaying as the wind carried its cold bite through the leaves. The air smelled of wet earth and pine, the scent sharp enough to bite into her senses. She swallowed, forcing herself to focus, even as the chill crept into her bones, lingering like an unwelcome memory.

Goose padded silently at her side, the dog's dark coat blending with the shadows, but Cassira's mind was too occupied to notice his presence. The weight of the pack on her back felt heavier than it ever had before. She couldn't remember the last time her body had felt this worn down, this tired. Her legs ached with each step, her feet heavy in her boots. But no matter how tired she was, she couldn't stop. Not yet.

The days since she'd lost Mackenzie had been a blur of grief and survival, her emotions constantly in flux, wavering between numbness and rage. When she'd first discovered Mackenzie's fate—when the full, suffocating reality of her loss had crashed into her—Cassira had stood frozen for a moment. But that moment had passed. She could not afford to stand still. She could not afford to feel the grief in its fullness. Not when there were other things demanding her attention.

Her heart clenched again, her chest tightening in a way that left her breathless. She pushed the feeling down, crushing it beneath the weight of her need to survive. Her body had learned long ago to bury its pain, to lock it away in the deepest parts of her soul where it wouldn't weigh her down. She had lost so much. She couldn't lose herself, too.

But sometimes, in the silence of the forest, her mind would wander. To the faces of the people she had lost—her parents, her sister, Mackenzie—and the ever-growing list of enemies who had taken them from her. The anger bubbled up, fiery and raw. She clenched her fists, nails digging into her palms. She had made a promise to herself the day Mackenzie died. She would make them all pay. She would make them all regret what they had done to her, to the ones she loved.

But vengeance was complicated. The very thing that burned in her veins was also the thing that threatened to consume her entirely. She had seen it before—the toll revenge took on those who sought it. And yet, with every step she took away from the pain of loss, she felt that hunger for justice growing stronger.

Her thoughts were interrupted by a rustling in the underbrush ahead, the soft snap of a twig breaking underfoot. She froze, every muscle tensing in an instant. Goose immediately stopped beside her, his ears twitching in the direction of the noise. He growled low, a rumble that came from deep within his chest. Cassira's heart began to race, each beat pounding in her ears as the tension in her body grew.

For a moment, there was nothing. Only the quiet whisper of the wind and the steady rhythm of her breath. But it was the stillness that unsettled her. The lack of movement, the complete absence of sound, only heightened her senses. Something wasn't right. She could feel it in the air, like a storm waiting to break.

Her eyes flicked over the forest, scanning the shadows between the trees, the twisted branches that reached like skeletal hands into the sky. Every movement, no matter how slight, caught her attention. Her gaze narrowed, focused on the darkened silhouette just ahead. The feeling that something was watching her—the sensation that she was no longer alone—settled in her gut like a lead weight.

Cassira exhaled, the breath shaky and uneven, and forced herself to move forward. One step. Then another. Her boots crunched on the forest floor, the sound far too loud in the silence around her. Goose stayed close, his body tense but steady. The bond between them was strong, unspoken

but undeniable. She trusted him—trusted his instincts—but even his presence didn't ease the unease creeping up her spine.

The trees around her seemed to close in, the path narrowing with each step. The feeling of being trapped, of being pursued, gripped her heart with cold fingers. She had to keep moving. She couldn't allow herself to be caught. She wouldn't let them catch her. Not when there was so much at stake.

Her thoughts drifted again—against her will—to Mackenzie, to the moment she had watched her friend die, her own helplessness flooding her memory in cruel flashes. The despair, the desperation—those final, hopeless seconds where Cassira had done everything she could to save her, but it hadn't been enough. It would never be enough.

She pushed the memory away with an effort, shoving it into the back of her mind, the place where it could gnaw at her but not cripple her. She didn't have the luxury of time to mourn. Not yet. Not while the hunt was still on.

Her pulse quickened again, an instinctual warning surged through her. The forest had grown unnaturally still, the shadows seeming to lengthen and twist as if they were alive. Goose's growl deepened, more insistent now, and Cassira's throat tightened. There was something there. She could feel it. She wasn't alone anymore.

She moved faster, her pace quickening as she tried to push the panic from her mind. The path before her was uneven, the terrain treacherous, but it no longer mattered. The sound of her heartbeat was the only thing she could hear, pounding in her ears as she ran, faster and faster, until her legs were screaming in protest. But still, she pushed herself onward, driven by something primal, something far more urgent than the dull ache in her muscles.

The trees blurred around her, their gnarled branches clawing at her face, her arms. She ducked and weaved through the underbrush, the sounds of her flight drowning out the world around her. She wasn't thinking anymore. She was simply reacting, the survival instinct taking over, pushing everything else aside.

The rustling noise behind her grew louder, more persistent. She didn't dare look back. She couldn't. The moment she slowed, the moment she hesitated, that's when they would catch her. She had to keep running. She had to outrun them.

A sudden crack split the air, sharp and loud, and Cassira flinched, her foot catching on an exposed root. She stumbled, her body pitching forward, but Goose was there, nudging her upright, his body braced against hers as she regained her balance.

"Come on," she muttered under her breath, pushing him away. "We can't stop now."

She righted herself, her breath ragged, her heart hammering in her chest as she pushed forward once more. But the forest had changed. What had been familiar just moments before was now alien, every shadow threatening, every whisper of wind seeming like a warning. She could feel the weight of eyes on her. Her skin prickled with the unmistakable sensation of being hunted.

But she couldn't afford to stop. She had come too far to falter now.

Her thoughts were a mess—grief and rage and fear swirling together until they became indistinguishable, a tangled knot that choked her. She wanted to scream, to lash out at the world for what it had taken from her, but the silence of the forest held her captive, pressing in on her, reminding her of her isolation. Her body moved without thought, her muscles working on instinct, carrying her deeper into the wilderness, away from the pursuit she knew was closing in.

A movement to her right. A figure—tall, dark, and all too familiar. Cassira's breath caught in her throat as she froze, her eyes darting to the shape among the trees. There was no mistaking it. A man. A shadow. A Bear.

The realization hit her like a blow to the chest. The moment she had feared was here. The moment her past would come to claim her. The man she had been running from—the man who would destroy everything

she had left. The man and a few behind him were clear, moving from place to place, searching... for her.

Her pulse thundered in her ears, and for a moment, she thought she might lose control, might fall apart right then and there. But Cassira fought to steady herself, to breathe through the fear. She couldn't let him win. Not now. Not after everything.

"Goose," she whispered, her voice hoarse. "Stay close."

She didn't wait for him to respond. She turned and ran, every step fueled by the primal need to escape, to survive. The forest closed in around her, but she didn't stop. She couldn't afford to stop. Not when everything was on the line. Not when the shadows were so close. The world became a blur of trees and branches and sharp breaths as she ran, the pursuit behind her a constant reminder of the cost of her survival. She couldn't outrun the past forever. But for now—just for now—she would keep running.

Chapter 6: Blizzard

Confidential Memorandum, Naval Intelligence Office

The most dangerous enemy is not the one who boards your deck, but the one invited to walk it freely. He will eat your bread, share your table, and count your steps, so that when the knife falls, it will be from the hand you never suspected.

Officers are reminded: the enemy wears many faces—sometimes even the uniform of your own fleet.

Two agonizing days later, the small ship had spread her wings of canvas and began standing on, retracing her path to the northwest, back to the hunting ground to which she had been sent. The orders which had been sent aboard many months ago were very similar to those sent aboard ships of the Alexandra's size. With a rare moment of privacy in his cabin, Henry opened to read again what he knew to be written on the paper.

"You are hereby requested and required" the orders began, "to await the specific appointment of a naval political officer who will provide a location from which Her Majesty's ship Alexandra will patrol, and to operate on said patrol while pursuing to the utmost of your strength the following directives:

1. That Her imperial Majesty's Ship Alexandra shall engage any enemy which purports to oppose her, and to sink, burn, otherwise destroy, or capture that enemy.
2. That Her imperial Majesty's Ship Alexandra shall engage in any activity which while not precipitating any unauthorized conflict, will in the views of the Political Officer provide intelligence or other advantage to her Imperial Majesty,

3. That Her imperial Majesty's Ship Alexandra shall protect to her destruction any shipping belonging to her Imperial Majesty,
4. That Her imperial Majesty's Ship Alexandra shall search for any source of naturally occurring gunpowder which may be of use to the empire, and
5. That Her imperial Majesty's Ship Alexandra shall obey the direction of her Political Officer.

Standard orders to be sure. Routine for these men. Only a single order, number four, was of any note. A year ago, when the Coalition of nations led by Pavu had cut the trade of powder, the empire had not taken the move seriously. Now, while their reserves ran low, only synthetic crap, mostly ash mixed with the powder and who knows what else was used. The Alexandra had been sent dozens of leagues west, through the teeth and into the western waters where no land lay beyond in search of the powder. Though no one wanted to admit it, certainly no outsider knew, the shortage was so bad that only the largest warships still had a full hold of proper powder.

This of course led to a terrible truth, none of their truly powerful vessels could leave port. With only those ships capable of a proper fight, their value was so high that they could not be risked on anything but the most dire of circumstances. Two months ago when a diplomat, a member of the royal family, had been shipwrecked, only a single of their ships of the line had been dispatched along with a swarm of smaller vessels to search. The other 30 or 40 stood where they had for more than a year, idle, suffering the gangrene of stillness that spelled death for a vessel. All the power in the world, and no way to use it. A few hours of gunfire and each ship would be empty of powder. Any man who knew the sea knew what this meant. Ships too valuable to lose were of no value at all.

Deep inside of the captain's mind, he could smile at his brother-captains. For years these ships had been captained by the powerful, the well connected, the men of noble birth, leaving the smaller ships to be captained by the most capable of low birth. Now this was

perhaps the most powerful ship still sent out on patrol. Since his vessel was expendable, no one at the admiralty minded using this synthetic gunpowder dreamt up in one of the laboratories of Chandler Street, where the best apothecaries in the Capital worked.

The day's routine continued much like any other, albeit with nearly a third of the crew no longer with them. The decks were wiped down with sand, all ropes properly coiled, and Alexandra gracefully moved through the waves. Captain Henry walked from his side of the quarterdeck to the helm, his eyes taking in the once more graceful motion of the vessel.

"How does she handle?" he asked. The helmsman spun the wheel a bit while eyeing the foretop before answering.

"Well enough sir" he answered, expanding further when he realized this new mood of his captain to ask questions. "She is much lighter now, so that might account for it, but there's something right queer about this hull. When the wind shifted from the south this morning Charlie told me sir, he told me that she was right sluggish."

This was concerning indeed. With the wind shifting from south, their nor-nor easterly course should have been the ships best point of sail, coming over her quarter. If she could no longer be relied upon at her fastest, she could not escape a vessel more powerful, but normally slower than herself. Morning Drills on the Alexandra were changed so that Henry could see for himself. He found the helmsman was telling the truth. The wind over her quarter seemingly slowed the vessel down compared to her beam. Certainly they moved no faster. The wind dead astern was even worse. Just as the captain let out perhaps his hundredth curse of the morning, Mr. Chapman came onto the deck.

Alfin stumbled into a man as the ship rolled, thanked him for steadying him, and walked aft to the quarterdeck. The poor hand who helped him stand up was so shocked at being spoken to.. being THANKED by a political officer, that he stood perfectly still long enough for a petty officer to grab him by the arm and pull him out of sight.

Alfin approached the captain, received his salute, and asked what they were doing, turning back and forth as sweetly as a wife asking her husband might. His eyes narrowed while the captain explained the change in wood, and experimenting with the speed of the ship. But his eyes lit up when the metal flakes in the rubber were mentioned.

“Try turning her upwind” he barked to the helm. The helmsmen almost imperceptibly paused. Only the captain could give orders to the crew, the Political Officer’s job was, on paper, to advise, not give orders. But only a fool would disobey their ship’s Political officer, regardless of their theoretical chain of command. As Alexandria turned into the wind, she did not heel over as one would expect, but rather began to groan through her timbers, and begin to speed up. Nothing dramatic, nothing which would give many pause, but slowly she crept up, knot over knot, until her canvas practically sang across the sky. Once she had settled on her course back for the coast north, a look from Chapman called the Captain to his cabin, but before the two could speak, a sharp knock sounded from the door.

“Enter”

The youngest midshipman, Earnest, barely a scrawny boy of 11 entered the cabin. Earnest was perhaps the smallest man, (a man, could he even be called that?) to ever wear the uniform. He came up short, forgetting what he needed to do, before stammering out “Master Biles reports we are passing Taruca point sir”.

“Very well. Said Henry, “you may go”.

Henry turned back to his political officer, expectantly. Alfin surveyed the captain before speaking. “I have come to a decision captain. Please set a course for Pavu at your convenience.”

Henry almost scoffed. “At your convenience” generally meant right the fuck now if not sooner, but this new Alfin almost seemed to mean

it. Henry took a moment to think about the wind, before replying. “Very good sir, we can make it there in a week if the wind holds”.

“Fine, fine” came the reply, as Alfin returned his gaze to a series of documents on his desk.

“Might I ask why?”

Alfin looked up sharply, before softening his expression. He has just opened his mouth when a cry from aloft distracted them both.

“SAIL HO! Deck there. Large Sail on the larboard beam. 8 miles and closing. She is right in the eye of the sun!”

Henry tipped his hat, as Alfin motioned towards the door. At sea, every moment was of vital importance. This was the first sail they had seen, where few ships could be expected for another day or two. Henry ascended the ladder, passing the young midshipman who was presumably coming below to inform him.

Back on the quarterdeck, the captain grabbed his spyglass from his pocket, one of the very few gifts his father could afford for him, and peered over the water.

Inside his glass the ship he saw seemed minute, but her numerous cannon rows dispelled that notion. This ship was on a course to pass them close astern in perhaps an hour. Being in the sun, she must have seen Alexandra long before they could return the favor.

The officers around him were making comments through their own glasses. A large frigate closing on them could mean anything or nothing. She could be an enemy, perhaps from the kingdoms of the north and sent to destroy her, but most likely just a fast trader headed south to paradise. But then why would she be here, nearly 3 leagues from her route? The ships were closing faster, only a few miles apart, when Henry thought he saw one of her gun ports open... no. No, it just came open with the roll of

the vessel. It came back shut as she came upright. The new imperial colors were already high above Henry, and now he could make out the response. A white circle on an azure field, a Pavunian ship. Must be a royal messenger or designed for important cargo... but still, Henry's soldiers' sense buzzed at the base of his skull. Something was off.

The youngest midshipman, a few feet away asked "how do they make her halyards gleam like that?"

Henry was about to reproach the boy but glanced upwards. The boy was right. The slings that held sails and masts were gleaming... but why.

Behind, Alfin was giving a few short orders. "Get the mailbags up. Get the gig ready. I'll have a short talk with her captain and see if they are headed to Pavu, perhaps they can bring a letter. You there! Grab my nice hat from my cabin, and the notebook while you're at it. Cook! Pass the word for him. We shall need something to offer them. Captain? Captain!" Men around stared. Henry was staring at the ship closing on them completely ignoring his political officer. Even this new one armed and humbled Alfin Chapman would certainly knock him overboard immediately. But he never had a chance. Henry was staring at the halyards of the other ship and watching it roll, part... no, no it was still there but had a hole... it must be metal, a chain sling!

Henry snapped shut his glass and hailed in a booming voice "drummer, beat to quarters!"

Alfin stared. The men froze, not believing the order, before the youngest boy on the ship at the glass grabbed his little drum and began to beat. The rolling drum left the officers on the quarterdeck staring for just a moment while the crew poured up and cleared the ship for action. Then all but the captain and political officer ran for their stations, clearing guns and bulkheads, sanding decks, securing everything to general quarters.

Alfin half whispered his next statement. "What the hell are you doing? That's a Perlian ship. They're having a vote to give us what we

need in less than a month and you're provoking them?? I'll have your ass."

"They aren't from Pavu and you can have it after I've saved the ship" came the short response. Alfin stared, then consulted his spyglass before turning back on the captain.

"That's Pavus flag, it's one of their frigates, what the hell are you talking about?"

"Midshipman!" Called the captain loudly, "escort the political officer below"

The midshipman, a young boy terrified to approach Alfin, let alone bring him anywhere, grabbed his shirt, knowing what an order meant. Alfin stared. Every man who was in earshot did. Alfin looked at Henry, who was standing with his back pointedly to him, then at the crew, before recognizing defeat. "You'd better be right" he muttered, and walked as dignified as possible down the companionway.

The third, now first mate, approached. "Ship cleared for action sir." He said nervously "we have enough men to work one side fully and maneuver, but not both. I've stationed the gunners to the port side."

"No," said Henry. Then he called. "All gunners man starboard batteries!"

The first mate stared. "Sir, he said, the enemy is on the port side." It was true. The two ships were converging, Alexandra's left side was facing the other ship, as she clawed upwind toward Alexandra.

Before Henry could reply, the other ship turned hard to port until the two ships were parallel, and at 50 yards her gun ports opened. "Hard a port" yelled Henry, and just as Alexandra began the turn, the enemy began to fire. Henry could read her name clearly, the Blizzard. The blizzard roared out her broadside, well aimed and fired with purpose. She fired low, aiming at the waterline to cripple Alexandra in one fell swoop, but

she never got the chance. Alexandra spun faster than the enemy anticipated, and was nearly 45 degrees onto the blizzard when the cannons reached her. Half of the enemy shots missed, while the rest, deflected by the angle of the sides, ricocheted off. Before Blizzard's captain took stock of what happened, Alexandra came tearing up on her stern at point blank range. The cry "fire as ye bear" came, and one by one the cannons roared out, harassing the vulnerable stern of the enemy.

Henry stood firm on the quarterdeck, his eyes fixed on the chaos unfolding before him. Smoke and flame belched from Alexandra's guns, the air thick with the acrid scent of gunpowder. The disciplined efficiency of his crew filled him with pride; every man knew his task, and performed it with the precision born of countless drills and battles.

"Reload! Reload and be quick about it!" Henry shouted, his voice carrying above the din. He could see the damage being wrought on the Blizzard's stern—the rudder shattered, the captain's quarters reduced to splinters. The enemy's return fire was sporadic and ineffective, their gunners unable to bring their pieces to bear on Alexandra's nimble form.

"Steady as she goes!" Henry commanded, his tone calm and measured. Alexandra responded beautifully, her sails taut, her rigging singing in the wind. He could see the panic beginning to set in aboard the Blizzard, the enemy crew scrambling to douse fires and tend to their wounded. Their once-proud ship was now a scene of disarray, smoke billowing from gaping holes in her stern.

The Blizzard's captain, a figure in a bright blue coat, was visible through the haze, barking orders with increasing desperation. Henry felt a grim satisfaction. This was the moment that tested a commander's mettle, and it was clear that the Blizzard's captain was found wanting.

"Bring us about! Ready larboard guns!" Henry's commands were met with swift compliance, the helmsman spinning the wheel, the crew hauling on lines to shift the sails. Alexandra heeled over gracefully,

coming alongside the Blizzard. The two ships were so close now that Henry could see the whites of the enemy sailors' eyes.

"Fire!" The order was given, and Alexandra's port broadside erupted with thunderous force. Cannonballs tore through the Blizzard's hull, sending wood and iron flying. The enemy ship shuddered under the assault, her mainmast splintering and crashing down in a tangle of rigging and sailcloth.

Amidst the carnage, a flag began to rise slowly up the Blizzard's mainmast—white, stark against the backdrop of battle smoke. Henry's keen eyes caught it, and a triumphant smile tugged at the corner of his lips. "They're striking their colors!" he announced, a cheer rising from the crew of the Alexandra. The sound of cannon fire died away, replaced by the victorious shouts of his men.

Henry allowed himself a moment to savor the victory before turning to Lieutenant Reece. "Signal our acceptance of their surrender and prepare a boarding party. We'll take their captain and officers into custody." Reece saluted, and the crew sprang into action, readying grappling hooks and boarding planks. Henry watched as the two ships were drawn together, the final act of this engagement drawing to a close. The Blizzard was a battered ruin, her spirit broken along with her timbers.

As Henry prepared to board the conquered ship, he spared a thought for the enemy captain. The man had fought bravely, if not wisely. In the annals of naval warfare, such encounters were common, and respect was due to any man who faced his fate with honor. Henry adjusted his hat and stepped onto the deck of the Blizzard, ready to claim his prize and write a new chapter in the storied history of the Alexandra.

Chapter 7: A Friendly Port

From “Principles of Seamanship,” Midshipman’s Edition

In squalls and politics alike, reef your sail early. Waiting too long will see you torn to pieces. An untimely reef is forgivable; a shredded canvas is not. The same is true for the alliances you make in service of the crown. A wise officer knows when to yield before the wind, even if his pride must bite down on the order.

The great men of Taruca had come out to see the sight, dressed in the green robes of many shades that they traditionally donned. Men of the merchant classes wore several styles of golden chains, while those who farmed wore simple wreaths. The fisherman bore chains similar to the merchants, made of fish wire. But by far the largest chains were simple chains of iron with a single granite stone in the center, marking them as the stonemasons which brought in the bulk of the city’s economic wealth.

The city itself sat precariously between mountains and the sea. As more and more of the mountains above were hollowed out, the city was built more and more underneath the high rocky outcroppings. Those who lived in the deepest part of the city had been in darkness for much of their lives, until the city’s vast wealthy class had begun moving deeper and sprung out money for a series of mirrors.

These mirrors shone sunlight nearly from first light to last to rocky crystals embedded into the rocky ceiling, so that the houses closest to the mines were often better lit than those who had a constant vision of the sun.

The women of the city gawked at the two ships coming in, dressed in more modern clothes, some in these new dresses with corsets now fashionable. While the men had remained largely in their ancestral robes, the women dressed like those in Pavuan attire, light pinks and blues. The harbor of Taruca had all of its eyes on the two ships entering port, the militant grace of Alexandra, towing the wreck of the Blizzard.

The rough granite rocks of the region spilled into the design of the harbor. Granite walkways crisscrossed down to the harbor, where a massive wharf extended behind a long Granite seawall. The harbor, built by men who knew nothing about the sea, had been rebuilt by architects from Paradise, and was now the pride of the western seas. A man barely able to stand could pilot a ship in or out of the harbor.

It is said that long ago, explorers from Pavu had found dragon eggs in the rough rocks and stored them deep beneath their city, buried in the gemstones and granite built by the flying beasts. Whether they found them, no one knows. What is known is that Taruca sends out gems, gold, and precious metals across the world, and no one has seen a dragon in any living memory or historical book.

Where came wealth, came man, and where men go to make their fortune, slavery comes. Taruca sent off ships of gold, stone, artisan designs, gems, but for every ship of gold, a hundred of Slaves entered the bay. While polished granite made up the city proper, high above the harbor, slave quarters stuck out for miles into the sweltering heat of the surrounding lands. Slaves in Taruca wore a heavy leather collar, and most stood half dressed. Many stood watching the ships enter the harbor, happy for a moment to repave as their masters stared. The slaves needed purchase often, for a very simple reason. The mines were not safe. But they were profitable.

Alexandra rounded to, dropping anchor smartly, a credit to any ship of the Imperial navy. She began firing off a single gun to the flag hanging from the rocky overhang of a black triangle on maroon. 6 cannon shots. The acceptable salute for entering a foreign port. Fortunately, the signal gun used as much powder as a musket.

No one on shore could tell that only thirty men craned her. With a dozen wounded, 30 men was the absolute bear minimum. The remainder crewed the blizzard, and had fought for two days to keep her afloat. Men constantly pump, planking, frantic activity from both the imperial crew, and that of Blizzard to save their ship. Normally, a captured crew would

sit back and drink, doing nothing. But as Alfin had informed them that if Blizzard sank, they would not be saved from the sea, they had worked themselves raw to fight the water. Blizzard's anchor roared alongside Alexandra's, with the imperial flag moving high above her only remaining mast.

Henry had complained for an hour to Alfin about this plan. Entering the port from which the Blizzard had sailed was madness. "Captain" Alfin explained calmly... far too calmly for an intelligence officer "Blizzard won't survive a passage any longer, correct?"

It was correct. But that didn't end the protest.

"The city of Taruca is led by a council of businessmen. One of them may be our enemy, but not all. Those men couldn't agree on the color of the sky. We will be able to refit, pick up fresh crew, and be ready for the voyage home."

"Slaves?" Henry replied, sickened by the thought of buying another man.

"Slaves or sinking, your decision Captain" Alfin replied, emphasizing the responsibility in the final word.

Small craft came out to ply their trade, holding up fish, fruits, breed, and tried to barter with the imperial sailors, who always kept an eye out for their political officer. Unauthorized trade with the shore was forbidden, but Alfin had another surprise, when he came up behind two sailors coiling rope.

"Good lord ya smell that pork" said Matthew.

"I'd give my earrings just for a taste," replied Gibbons.

"Then use this" the men jumped as Alfin spoke up. He tossed a small sack of coins to Matthew.

"Tell you what" he went on, "take this" giving a much larger sack to gibbons." distribute it evenly among the men. I want you to trade with any boat that comes close, buy whatever you like, but tell each boat that you'll pay more for information about who sent the Blizzard out after us." Gibbons and Matthews looked at the pouches of gold, shocked. Together they held more than a year's pay. But Alfin wasn't done. "oh, and send me some of that pork, it smells... delightful." The two men stared at his back as he slunk away, before dashing about to spread their orders.

No one ate the pork.

Alfin came up to the quarterdeck to Henry. "I sure hope you know what you're doing. That's a lot of gold!" he said. The men had quickly taken to their new job with vigor, just as one might expect of a sailor of the imperial navy getting to break the rules.

Henry was engrossed in scanning the harbor, but said "Blizzard came from this port. Their captain has kept his mouth shut, but the crew says they sailed right for our path and waited 3 days".

"Obviously, they couldn't have known when we were coming!"

"Obviously. But they have made that voyage several times before. They knew some imperial ship was headed this way. No privateering captain risks his ship without good reason," said Henry.

"Or" drawled Alton cynically "without being paid". The two men paused. Alain took a breath and continued. "right, you get Blizzard seaworthy so we can sail her home and collect some prize money to replace what I just spent. I'll find us our enemy."

"Yes Sir," said Henry. Then Alfin, for the first time, raised his arm to his chest in the formal imperial salute. Henry of course reciprocated, but stared at Alfin's back, wondering how it had ever gone this far. Alfin slipped off the ramp into the city, and was gone.

Work on the Blizzard progressed rapidly. Every man on the dockside was looking for work, and within two days, Blizzard had new masts and rigging set up. Henry found himself three days later on the quay, billeting sailors into her Majesty's navy. He did not get many, but work was scarce in Taraba. four dozen men all agreed to join up for a single voyage to the imperial islands if their return was guaranteed, with six agreeing to join the navy.

The paintwork was just being set up when Alfin approached, accompanied by two old men in emerald robes. Henry was startled. He had not seen the man in 5 days. He made the introductions. "This is Mr. Burke, and Mr. Blaire," he said. "They are the best shipwrights in the city". His pointed stare told Henry what he needed to know. These men were likely the dregs of society. Alfin continued. "I have been trying to convince them to sell us powder, but they say there is a small hiccup."

"Well you see" said Mr. Burke

"The trouble is," said Mr. Blaire.

"Thats an imperial ship," said Mr. Burke

"Mighty illegal it is to sell powder to an imperial ship" said Mr. Blaine. Henry was lost. Alfin was looking pointedly at him, but he had no idea what to say. Alfin sighed.

"I have told these two gentlemen that the Blizzard has not been purchased by the prize court yet, she is therefore not imperial and can be sold the powder. They wanted to hear from the captain and make sure that he agreed that we are abiding by the convention.

Henry saw the argument but did not agree. He was no sea-lawyer, but he knew that this was a sort of loophole... a loophole which could fill his hold with powder.

"Absolutely right," he barked, trying to sound important, " Blizzard is a captured ship, but not one of ours." Behind the men's back trotted up the

young midshipman, carrying a newly sewn Imperial flag, and was headed towards the ship. A wave from his captain sent him first into a panicked freeze, then sent him scurrying away.

Burke and Blaire looked pointedly at each other, then spoke.

"We could get into a lot of trouble for this captain, we aren't supposed to put powder into your hands at all." said Burke.

"We might be persuaded-like though," said Blair.

Henry sighed. "How much?"

"Oh, it isn't a question of money Captain" said Burke

"It's a matter of control," said Blaire. "We would need assurances that this powder doesn't go to Ablos. We would go to pick the captain of Blizzard, and make one she throws our powder overboard when she reaches your waters".

Henry spluttered "Theres no way in hell"

"Done" interjected Alfin, glaring at his objection. "I will come by your office later for dinner, you can send the powder abroad now."

"Captain" Alfin said when the two oily men had left, "I know what you think, but have no fear. This is all taken care of. be ready. here to meet me at six o'clock for supper, and to interview the captains"

"Yes Sir!" Henry replied.

Besides, mused Alfin as they walked off, we will toss this new captain of theirs overboard as soon as we clear the harbor. Hard to tell anyone what we did strapped to a cannonball at the bottom of the sea.

Chapter 8: Taruca Point

Private Diary of Lady Enarra Voss, Court Chamberlain's Wife

The navy loves its heroes. So long as they die at the proper moment, in the proper cause, and with the proper witnesses. A hero who lives too long begins to ask questions. And questions, in the empire, are more dangerous than enemy steel.

The smell of soot and the sound of gentle sobs preceded Cassira and Goose as they trudged down the road. Cassira's little pack was empty, her meager rations depleted by their three-day hike towards the coast. When Goose's stomach growled for the tenth time, Cassira stopped to pet him. "Nearly there, boy," Cassira murmured, though she had no idea where she was going. She had barely stopped moving for three days. Finding a small raspberry bush, she picked enough berries to sate the worst of her hunger, then she and Goose drank from a stream, avoiding the mud.

The road was unfamiliar to them. Far from the rolling green hills of her home, it meandered through rocky terrain, transitioning from dark rocks to granite. A squat roadside sign marked the distance: Taruca Point, 6 miles. "Come on, boy," Cassira said, patting her hip. Taruca wasn't a pleasant place, but it was something. Perhaps one of her family's few friends in the city would help her.

Ahead, a lonely cottage stood at a fork in the road, with a dozen small stands selling fruit. Berries long forgotten, Cassira mentally inventoried her bag. Her winter cloak might be worth an armful of peaches, but the nights were already growing colder. Her copy of *A History of the Known World* by Irendoll was worth nothing. That left her mother's ring, the sapphire embedded in steel on a chain around her neck. That wasn't going anywhere. Not now.

A young man at the stand seemed to read her mind. He sighed and looked back at his mother. Cassira guessed what they were thinking. No

stern woman selling fruit would allow her son to give away a handful of peaches. The young man was scarcely older than she was, perhaps thirteen or fourteen at most, but much taller. Dark brown curls framed sweet, dark blue eyes that looked down sympathetically at Cassira. After stealing a glance behind him, he motioned for her to come closer.

"Hello there. Could you carry a letter for me into Taruca?" His mother looked up from her knitting, sharply eyeing her son. Rumbling in her stomach taking a lurch, Cassira approached shyly. Goose seemed... suspicious.

"Well?" he asked again, "You can take a few peaches." Cassira nodded. He reached into his pocket and pulled out nothing at all, which he pretended to thrust into her hand. Cassira looked, understanding beginning to dawn on her.

"Now take that to Gerald, the shipping merchant on Iron Row. And here, for you," he said, dropping a dozen peaches into her bag.

"Th... Thank you," said Cassira.

"I'm Ethan, by the way, just in case you're—"

"Hey!" A deep, growling voice cried out, rumbling like a bear. Without a glance back to confirm what she knew, Cassira stuffed a half dozen peaches into her bag and ran down the road. Behind her, five men in pelts, the crimson flag and three white pearls, from Pavu, had revealed their identity. The men quickly pursued her. Goose led the way, darting forward until, at a fork, he and Cassira jumped off the raised road and into what appeared to be an abandoned mine. Long-worn-out equipment and half-moved blocks spread between the two roads, and it was behind a small hut that Cassira ran.

The men were closer now but could not have seen her hiding place before they crested the rise. When they reached the canyon floor, three seemed uncertain.

"Which way, Sir?" one asked, the smallest of the bunch, carrying a long trident. With some hesitation, the bear-man looked around, his eyes piercing through the gloom.

Cassira's heart skipped a beat as those yellow eyes spotted her through the cracks in the wood paneling. The rust on his blade... dried, uncleaned blood. The bear-man rounded on the smaller man.

"I'm no 'Sir.' You know that!" the man roared.

"I... I'm sorry. I just thought—"

"You fucking thought? Call me 'Sir' again and I'll gut you!" With a scoff, he resumed his hunt, but his heart wasn't in it. After a few paces, he grunted, smacked the offender with his empty hand, and started the long climb back to the road.

Cassira allowed herself to breathe and felt a tug at her bag. There, looking guiltily up at her, was Goose, a peach in his mouth.

Two days had passed. Nights as cold as shards of glass and days hotter than the sun. Cassira and Goose walked down the streets of Taruca Point. Rough stone and slowly sinking houses reflected the pale moonlight. Cassira had delivered her letter and sat down, softly beginning to cry. She thought of her parents, her sister, even that boy who gave her the peaches that fueled them thus far. She had just wiped her tears and hugged Goose when she saw two men stride out of the store across the street. One was a naval man... a commander? No! A captain in the Imperial Navy! They wore the blue, a dark blue she had read about. In her sister's fashion books, it was called Navy Blue... her sister... At that thought, she put her head down and sobbed.

When she looked up, the men were gone, but four men were following their tracks. One resembled a bear. Cassira tensed up to run, but none of the men saw her or Goose in the shadows, all focused on their prey. The man in front unhooked a large sword from his back.

With a tug at Goose and quick as a flash, Cassira moved down the next alley and onto a parallel street. She cut her feet more than once but barely noticed. She thundered down the street, nearly barreling into the captain as they passed.

"What the hell?" asked the captain, but the other man, who Cassira now saw had only a single arm, seemed to sense the danger in her eyes.

"How many were there?" He fired the question at her like a bullet. Cassira nodded behind them.

"Four," she wheezed.

"To the boat. Now," growled the one-armed man.

"Ship," muttered the officer, drawing a long sword. The party took off at a run, the one-armed man leading while the officer and Goose stayed at the rear. As the small band rounded the quayside, the four pursuers came around the previous corner, the bear-man taking off after them at a run. But the lead was too great. Cassira heard shouts from the ship at the wharf and a reply from the officer. The one-armed man shouted, and down the musket men lined the rails, just as the captain made it up the gangway. Cassira lay exhausted on the deck, and heard the men exchange insults, before one of the pursuers ran off. The bear-man, the one who killed her family, stood there shouting, and Cassira, without thinking, seized the musket of the nearest sailor, loaded it, and fired.

The recoil slammed her into a wood beam, and Cassira fell to the deck, unconscious.

Chapter 9: Taruca Point

Lecture Notes, School for Political Officers – Master Orven Salk

Captains are chosen for their resourcefulness. It is the political officer's task to ensure that resourcefulness remains in service to the empire and not to the captain's own ambition. A ship is a small kingdom, and every kingdom is one rebellion away from ruin. Your duty is not to the man in command—it is to the empire that allows him to command.

Henry adjusted his coat as he and Alfin stepped out of the dimly lit store onto the bustling streets of Taruca Point. The night air was thick with the scent of salt and fish, mingling unpleasantly with the acrid smell of smoke from the nearby foundries. Gunpowder from Alexandra had been stored on the quayside, with fresh, natural gunpowder filling her hold, and the hold of Blizzard, moored off the harbor. Alexandra had just finished her refit, and sat moored under one of the deepest docks in the city, the warehouses cut from the rocky walls of the city.

The cobblestones beneath their boots were slick with recent rain, reflecting the pale moonlight. Alfin wore a common coat, likely taken from the ship's spare chest. Not that he was inconspicuous, walking beside Henry in his full dress uniform. Alfin knew where he was going, clearly, and Henry silently fell into step behind him, only remarking once he stepped into something unsavory.

“Shit on my good boots, of course.”

A few minutes later, Captain Henry surveyed the dingy tavern Alfin had dragged him into with a practiced eye, his gaze sweeping over the scarred wooden tables and the grimy patrons huddled in shadowy corners. The air was thick with the smell of stale ale and sweat, and the low murmur of voices filled the room. The door to the back room creaked open, and Alfin gestured for Henry to follow. They stepped inside, the air even heavier with the scent of tobacco and the murmur of secretive

conversation. Around a large, battered table sat a group of men whose faces were half-hidden in the gloom. They eyed Henry with a mixture of suspicion and curiosity.

"Evening, gentlemen," Alfin said smoothly, taking a seat and motioning for Henry to do the same. "I appreciate you making the time to meet with us."

One of the men, a burly figure with a thick beard and a scar across his cheek, leaned forward. "Stranger, you know we don't do this out of the goodness of our hearts. What's this about?"

Henry settled into his chair, his gaze steady and commanding. "You know damn well..."

Alfin cut him off "Let's not play dumb gentlemen, our time is valuable. You all saw the Blizzard patrolling for us, and you see that she wears an imperial flag now. You'll tell us who sent her and why, or someone else will get the promised reward."

The men exchanged glances, their expressions wary. The burly man spoke again. "That's a dangerous thing to be asking about. But if you want our help, we need to know what's in it for us."

Alfin leaned back, a small smile playing at the corners of his mouth. "We have something that might interest you. A coin from Ablos, worth a favor from any imperial man. It could open many doors, clear many paths. And since you gentlemen know exactly what's what I came with, and why I brought the captain, let's have it." The men shifted uneasily. Apparently whatever men had followed Alfin were not as stealthy as they had thought.

"That's a rare prize. But first, let's hear what you know."

Henry leaned forward, his voice low and authoritative. "We know that Blizzard left this port under commission. We need to know who arranged it and why. This is a matter of great importance to the Empire."

One of the other men, a wiry fellow with sharp features and shifty eyes, spoke up. "Information like that doesn't come cheap. But if you can promise us that coin, we might be able to help."

Alfin reached into his coat and pulled out the gleaming coin, placing it on the table. The men leaned in, their eyes fixed on the precious metal. "This is your guarantee," Alfin said. "Now, what can you tell us?"

The burly man nodded slowly, his gaze never leaving the coin. "Alright, we have heard some things. The *Blizzard* was indeed commissioned from this port. The man who arranged it was from Pavu, but we don't know his name. He only spoke through runners and letters, kept to himself. Paid well, though. He wanted the ship for a special mission, something that needed to be done quickly and discreetly."

Henry's eyes narrowed. "What was it?"

The man shrugged. "We don't know exactly. The directive came to watch the exits to the central sea into the sunset sea. And to sink any imperial ship that came through. We... suppose that the captain got information on your vessel, but that we don't know."

Henry exchanged a glance with Alfin, who gave a slight nod. "And you have no more information about this man from Pavu?"

The wiry man shook his head. "No names, no details. Just that he was willing to pay a lot to keep things quiet. If we had more, we'd tell you. But that's all we've got."

Henry sighed, frustration gnawing at him. "Very well. You've been helpful, and you've earned this." He slid the coin across the table, and the burly man snatched it up with a greedy grin.

Alfin stood, signaling that the meeting was over. "Remember, gentlemen, this conversation stays between us. The Empire rewards loyalty."

The men nodded, their eyes still gleaming with the promise of the coin's worth. As they focused on the coin, a darker man against the back wall caught Alfin's eye. Alfin winked, and Henry paused, perplexed by the entire exchange. Henry and Alfin left the back room, stepping out into the cool night air. The tavern's noise faded behind them as they made their way back to the docks.

"We have a lead," Henry said, his voice low. "But there's not much to go on."

Alfin nodded. "It's a start. We'll have to follow the trail to Pavu and see what we can uncover there."

Henry glanced at his companion, the flicker of determination in his eyes. "We'll find out who this man is and what he's up to. The Empire's security depends on it. The Blizzard's captain... he will know who we need to find. I trust that... ahem... well, you know."

"That ill torture the man until he spills his guts and then drop him over the side for the sharks?" Alfin looked downcast. "Captain, when you see a hermit crab shell, you see a little creature tossed in the surf. To a beggar, a hermit crab is a part of a stew. To a rich kid playing on the beach, it's fun to watch. But if you never stop to take a look, maybe you'll never know that the shell is empty."

Henry looked at him, puzzled. Alfin cracked a smile. "I see my metaphors have to be more direct eh Henry?. Alfin chuckled to himself. No matter, the chest that came aboard this afternoon will have more answers."

They had just turned the corner when a small figure barreled into Henry, almost knocking him off his feet. He instinctively reached for his sword, but stopped when he saw the terrified face of a young girl, her clothes ragged and eyes wide with fear. A dog, a mutt by the look of it, hovered protectively at her side.

"What the hell?" Henry growled, stepping forward, but Henry held up a hand.

How many were there?" He fired the question at her like a bullet. Cassira nodded behind them.

"Four," she wheezed.

"To the boat. Now," growled Alfin.

Alfin nodded, his expression darkening. "To the boat. Quickly."

"Ship".

As they started to run, Henry kept a firm grip on the girl's arm, guiding her alongside him. The dog kept pace, its eyes darting around nervously. Behind them, Henry could hear the shouts and heavy footsteps of their pursuers. He glanced back and saw four men rounding the corner, the largest of them indeed resembling a bear, his eyes burning with murderous intent.

They reached the quayside, where Alexandra was fastened to the quay. Shouts rang out as the crew, alerted by the commotion, rushed to ready the ship. Henry pushed the girl ahead of him, urging her up the gangway.

"Get aboard!" Alfin barked, drawing his sword. Henry followed suit, turning to face their pursuers. The bear-like man led the charge, a vicious snarl on his face.

"Musketmen, line the rails!" Alfin ordered. The sailors scrambled to obey, leveling their weapons at the advancing threat. Half of the rifles probably weren't loaded, but it didn't matter. The bear-man faltered slightly but kept coming, his followers close behind.

Henry's heart pounded in his chest as he stood on the deck, sword at the ready. The girl had collapsed, exhausted, but her eyes remained fixed on the men chasing them. With a sudden burst of energy, she sprang to her feet, grabbed a musket from a nearby sailor, and fired. The shot echoed across the water, and Henry watched in shock as the bear-man fell, clutching his chest. The recoil from the shot sent the girl sprawling to the deck, unconscious. The remaining pursuers halted, their resolve wavering.

"Get us underway!" Alfin roared, sheathing his sword and rushing to the girl's side. Henry ran for the quarterdeck, while men poured up from belowdecks to the commotion. The man wearing a bear pelt... how tacky... stood, supported by one of his men. The bullet hit his shoulder, apparent from the blood. There the sailors of Alexandra and the four men on the dock traded insults, before the leader shouted to an underling,

"Wake the main harbor battery! Get them to train their guns here now!" The man shouted for Henry and alfin to face him, but Henry had already made up his mind. The better part of valor was discretion, and the port's 60 32 lb. cannons would sink Alexandra in minutes. A flurry of orders strung forth. While the marines held their muskets, the sailors ran back and forth, losing sails.

"Cut bow lines! Fend off the stern and haul in!" came Henry's command. Alexandra, still with her proverbial pants down, creaked to life and slowly separated from the dock, while the men on the dock hobbled away, half carrying their leader. High above them, a beating drum signaled the reveille of the garrison in the fort. Alexandra still had her topmasts down, a 20 minute operation to raise, at minimum. Without them, her speed was perhaps half, and as she raised sails and limped away, Henry knew instinctively it was no good. The fort would open fire any minute, and even in darkness, their cannons would sink Alexandra. Just as he started to panic, a Blue flare flew high above the night sky.

It seemed as though every single man aboard turned at once. The signal flare towered above the Blizzard, which was standing towards Alexandra, her new imperial ensign flapping in the breeze, as she set sail and ran out her guns. Henry paused, unsure.. What was that blasted lieutenant Smithers doing? Coming into her? Revealing their location? Of course, Blizzard at anchor would be twice as fast to come to life... but what...

Two red lights were shown at Blizzard's main truck, with a signal cannon fired a moment after. Henry knew the code. The midshipman who

was responsible for telling him what he knew was a minute too late. “Sir, Blizzard signals enemy in sight”.

The night code book was incredibly simplistic for obvious reasons, but then one light turned blue, while the other stood red. Henry scrunched his nose. “Target ahead? What?” Henry’s subconscious understood before his mind did. He grabbed at the helm and spun hard to port. Alexandra wheeled away from the path of Blizzard. As the ships passed, the fort above started firing, but it was too late. Blizzard’s mighty broadside opened up in a belch of flame and smoke, and the city of Taruca simply exploded.

Henry’s after-action report was dictated two days later at sea as follows:

Her Imperial Majesty’s Ship Alexandra conducted an effective retreat under my command under the cover of darkness while my prize-captain, Lieutenant Reece took the prize under my command, the Heavy Frigate Blizzard alongside to cover the retreat. The enemy had fired their shore batteries onto us, and seeing the danger, Blizzard fired to cover us, hitting quite accidentally, gunpowder storage warehouses, which led to a large collapse of the rocky overhand of the city of Taruca.

While such destruction is not glamorous, it was necessary and proper given the circumstances to ensure that the orders of the Right Honorable Secretary Castle, to whom orders to H.I.M.S. Alexandra are recorded duly, were followed, along with the general desire to protect these ships and their crews.

H.I.M.S. Alexandra observed a complete destruction of the city of Taruca’s ability to make war against the holdings of the Imperial power.

HENRY

Captain, Commanding.

“What a stupid letter” Alfin remarked.

Henry scowled. “You write it cunt.”

Chapter 10: Below Decks

Extract from “The Naval Code, Annotated,” Section VI: Conduct in Port

A ship in harbor is a fortress without walls. The captain must guard her as such. Disorder on shore will find its way back aboard, and discipline once lost is twice as hard to reclaim. A wise officer treats every leave as an opening for the enemy, for the enemy often wears the smile of a friend.

Cassira awoke to the relentless creaking of wood and the incessant pounding of the sea against the ship’s hull. The darkness around her was suffocating, the only light coming from a dim lantern swinging above her. Panic clawed at her chest as memories of Taruca Point flooded back—the chase, the chaos, the desperate escape. She tried to push herself up, but a sharp pain lanced through her shoulder, forcing her back down with a strangled gasp.

“Easy now,” came a voice, rough yet laced with something she couldn’t quite place—concern? Cassira turned her head, wincing as pain flared in her neck, to see a man seated beside her, his figure half-shrouded in shadow. He had a small, almost amused smile on his lips, but his eyes... his eyes held something that made her chest tighten. Something that looked too much like relief.

“Where—” Cassira’s voice cracked, her throat dry as sandpaper. She swallowed, trying again. “Where am I?”

“The Alexandra,” the man said, as if that answered everything. Seeing her confusion, he added, “Imperial frigate. You’re safe—for now.”

Cassira’s mind whirled, pieces of memory slotting back into place like jagged glass. The ship, the towering sails, the cold, unyielding deck beneath her as she collapsed from exhaustion. But everything after that was a blur of pain and darkness. She blinked, taking in the room around

her. The small wooden box was lit by a smelly oil lamp, and slightly rocked from side to side.

“The men...” she started, her heart pounding as images of her pursuers, the bear-man, flashed through her mind. “Did they—?”

“Dead or scattered,” the man interrupted, his tone darkening. “You shot one of them, you know. Nearly killed him, though I’m sure that fucker wishes you had.”

Cassira’s breath hitched. She remembered the musket, the weight of it in her hands, the recoil that had knocked her flat. She’d fired it... she’d actually fired it. And now... “Have you ever fired a musket before? Not many marines would have hit the target so quickly.”

“Who are you?” she asked, her voice trembling slightly. She didn’t recognize him, but there was something about the way he looked at her, like she was some kind of fucking puzzle he was desperate to solve. And this freak had a single arm.

“Alfin Chapman,” he said, leaning back slightly, the lantern light catching on the silver strands in his dark hair. “Political Officer of this fine vessel.” He paused, his gaze intensifying as it locked with hers. “And you, I take it, are Cassira.”

She blinked, stunned that he knew her name. “How...?”

“You were muttering it in your sleep,” Alfin said, his voice softer now, almost... protective? No, she was imagining it. “Along with a few other things. But that’s for another time.” Cassira felt a flush creep up her neck, embarrassment mingling with a spike of fear. She didn’t remember dreaming, didn’t remember saying anything, but the thought of this man—this stranger—knowing things about her that even she couldn’t recall, sent a shiver down her spine. What else had she said?

“I need to speak to the captain,” Cassira said, struggling to sit up again. The pain in her shoulder was a dull throb now, but it sent a wave of dizziness through her, making her curse under her breath. She didn’t necessarily know why she needed to talk to whoever was in charge, but it seemed a much needed thing to do.

Alfin sighed, like he was dealing with an unruly child, but there was an edge to it, something almost... fond? “You’re not in any condition to be up and about, but I’m sure Captain Henry will be along soon enough. He’s got a few questions for you, too.” Cassira’s stomach twisted. Of course, he would. She’d brought trouble onto his ship, fired a weapon without permission, and who knew what else. The Empire didn’t tolerate disobedience, not from anyone, least of all a girl with nowhere to go.

Cassira was taught by her tutors and her father about the Imperium, as every child well enough had. The central islands of the known world were full of greedy, selfish people that were driven to expand and raid the weak. They were all unforgiving, cruel people that she should stay away from. After all, they were the only nation that were not invited to join the Coalition of Nations.

“Why didn’t you leave me behind?” she asked quietly, more to herself than to Alfin. But he heard her, and for a moment, the weariness in his eyes softened into something that made her heart skip a beat. Shit... Why was this man looking at her like this? Alfin stood and filled her water, Cassira realizing that one of the man’s sleeves was pinned to her chest.

“Because,” he said, his voice gentler now, his gaze lingering on her face, “there are worse things than me out there, and I’m not about to let a kid face it alone. Happens too much as it is.” Cassira looked away, unable to bear the intensity of his gaze. Her thoughts were a chaotic jumble, a storm she couldn’t control. She’d been running for so long, trying to escape a fate she didn’t even fully understand, and now... now she was here, trapped on a ship with no way out and no idea what would happen

next. In her head she wondered why this imperial was even being kind. But just as she started to process all of this, she remembered Mackenzie.

“Shit,” she muttered under her breath, squeezing her eyes shut against the tears threatening to spill. She had to be strong, had to figure out what to do next, but it was so Fucking hard when everything seemed to be falling apart. When she coughed, maybe covering a small sob, a large black mass leapt onto the bed. Goose laid down beside her, insisting only slightly that Cassira’s hand touch his head.

“Rest,” Alfin said, rising to his feet. She felt his gaze on her, the weight of it lingering a moment too long, like he wanted to say something more, something important. “You’re going to need your strength. I’ll make sure no one bothers you.”

Cassira didn’t reply, too exhausted to argue, too caught up in the storm of her own thoughts. She closed her eyes, letting the sound of the ship, the endless rush of the waves, lull her back into a restless sleep. But even as she drifted off, the fear gnawed at her, a constant reminder that her troubles were far from over—and that there was something in Alfin’s gaze that she couldn’t afford to ignore. Something dangerous.

Cassira’s stomach churned the moment she moved, a deep, nauseating roll that had nothing to do with the pain in her shoulder. The gentle sway of the ship turned violent in her body, sending her stomach into a spiral. She barely managed to push herself upright before bile rose hot and fast in her throat.

Without warning, she leaned over the edge of the bed and retched. The sour burn of vomit hit her mouth, and she clutched the thin blankets, her body shaking with the force of it. Her vision blurred, and she felt weak, utterly exposed. Fuck. As if things weren’t bad enough. There were footsteps, quick and heavy, followed by a string of curses from one of the men. Three of them stood near the door, and now they were all fully

turned toward her. The first was a young man, perhaps a year or two older than Cassira. The second who entered was quite old, nearly bent double. The third stood back, hard to see through Cassira's swimming vision. Goose jumped down off the bed and slowly wagged his tail at the visitors.

The older man checked on her. "Dammit, she's awake and already getting acquainted with the sea," he muttered, rubbing a hand over his jaw. His accent was thick, Northern. "Never seen anyone take it quite like that." Next to him, the younger man, barely more than a boy really, paled at the sight of her retching. His dark curls bobbed as he took a step back, clearly regretting his decision to stand so close. He had the look of someone who was more used to stable ground beneath his feet, and less to the unpredictability of the ocean.

"Should we—uh—help her?" he asked, though his expression said he hoped the answer was a resounding no. The third man was older, with graying hair and a weathered face that spoke of countless years spent at sea. His arms were crossed over his chest, and he looked entirely unimpressed with the scene unfolding before him.

"Nothing to do," the older man said with a dismissive wave of his hand.

"Just her body adjusting. If she doesn't die of seasickness, she'll get used to it soon enough." Cassira wiped her mouth with the back of her hand, mortified beyond belief. Her limbs felt weak, her body betraying her. She wanted to curl into a ball and disappear into the ship's floorboards. The third one stepped forward, reaching into a pouch at his side and pulling out a small flask. "Here," he said, crouching beside her and handing it over. "Drink this. It'll help settle your stomach." Cassira hesitated for a second but then took it, too desperate for the nausea to subside to argue. She sipped the liquid, grimacing as it burned down her throat but soothed the roiling in her stomach. She swallowed again, slower this time, until she could take a deep breath without the world spinning.

"That's better, yeah?" the young man asked with a lopsided grin. Cassira nodded weakly, though her insides still felt like a shipwreck.

“Well,” the younger one said, trying to sound more composed now that the immediate crisis had passed, “this is one hell of a way to introduce ourselves.”

Cassira managed a shaky glance at the three men. The dark haired one was still crouched by her side, his grin easy, even if his eyes held a flicker of something deeper—pity, maybe. He swam in and out of focus. He was just about her age, maybe a year or two older, but stood easily a foot over each of the others.

“I’m Reece,” he said. “And that over there,” he gestured to the boy with the dark curls, “is Liam. Fresh off his first voyage, so don’t feel too bad. He’s only one nasty wave away from joining you.” Liam gave a nervous laugh, clearly uncomfortable, but Cassira could see the tension in his shoulders.

“And that grumpy bastard there,” Felix said with a nod toward the older man, “is Dorian. Don’t let the scowl fool you—he’s just as miserable on dry land.”

Dorian grunted, but there was the slightest twitch of amusement at the corner of his mouth. Cassira stared at them, her head spinning, though this time not from seasickness. It had been so long since she’d been around anyone without fearing for her life, since she’d allowed herself to feel anything besides fear or pain. And yet, here were these men, standing before her like it was the most normal thing in the world. She took another breath, steadying herself. “Cassira,” she said, her voice hoarse. “My name’s Cassira.”

Reece raised an eyebrow. “Cassira...?” he prompted, but she didn’t fill in the rest. Let them think about what they want. She wasn’t ready to share more than that—not with them, not with anyone. She was just trying to keep what was in her stomach down, not reveal anything to these men. Not an easy task as the ship rolled again.

“Well, Cassira,” Reece said, standing up and offering her a hand, “Welcome aboard the Alexandra. Try not to puke on any more of us, alright?”

Despite herself, Cassira let out a breath of laughter. Her stomach had settled, the nausea fading enough that she didn’t feel like collapsing. She took his hand and let him help her up, though the room still tilted slightly as she stood. As she steadied herself, Liam shuffled closer, eyes wide as if something had just dawned on him. “You... you’re from the South, aren’t you?” he asked, his voice almost reverent. “My family—they come from there. I recognize the way you speak.”

Cassira’s heart skipped a beat. Her homeland, the place she’d been running from for so long, and now this boy—this young sailor—was connected to it in some way. For the first time in what felt like forever, something tugged at her, something that felt like hope.

“Maybe,” she said carefully, meeting his wide-eyed gaze. “Maybe I am.”

Reece cut in "that's enough. The captain told ME to watch her until she gets up. Go on." The others left the doorway. Reece stepped inside and shut the door. In the reflected lamp she immediately noticed how tall he was, as he stood up to his full height. She blinked hard and let Reece finally come into focus. His loose fitting white shirt did nothing to hide the chiseled muscles beneath. His jaw was set in stone, but his most striking feature was a series of long curling tattoos up his neck. The black lines were coiled shapes with tiny, intricate patterns on the edges from what she could see. While the shirt covered the rest of the design, Cassira saw that they covered a portion of what she couldn’t see, then she noticed a single name tattooed on his right arm:

Alexandra

Reece followed her gaze, turning his wrist. "Alexandra, that’s our ship. She isn’t the prettiest or the toughest, but she is home.” Cassira's mouth had started this conversation dry, so she couldn't tell if it continued

lack of moisture was something to be concerned about. She may have been slightly more focused on the strong muscles as they flexed with the turn of his arm than she wanted. Cassira had a million questions, but the first that stammered out was "who are you?"

He smirked, eyes twinkling blue. "I'm Lieutenant Reece, and I'll keep an eye on you until we reach home. As long as I'm here of course. I've been in command of the Blizzard since we captured her, but the Captain decided to let some of the young ones try out their hand running a ship."

"Where's home?"

"The imperium of course. Four days or so east."

"You're from there? you don't sound like it"

Reece and his smirk darkened at once. He took a pull from his flask, and answered slowly. "Theres often more than meets the ear, you know."

"What... did something happen?" Cassira asked, before her stomach lurched again.

"You'll have to get me drunker than this to find out." Reece said, wiggling his flask. "Now, you rest a bit, and I'll come get you to find some fresh air in a bit." He patted her shoulder, hands like iron, but gentle. Goose, content previously to sit, lept. Reece was surprised, but caught the labrador halfway in the air, and gave him a hug, then neatly deposited him onto the bed, giving him a gentle pat, before receiving a lick. Reece and his damp hand smiled, and left.

By the next morning Cassira had taken her first steps out of bed, and found a broth of some kind on the bedside table next to her. After a few slow, tentative sips, she had drained the bowl and immediately wished that she hadn't, her stomach not ready for the intake. She crashed down onto the short, groaning, the noise inviting a knock. A moment later, a

seaman had popped his head around the door, and seeing that she was awake, closed it again. A few minutes later, Reece arrived.

Reece entered with a smirk that seemed to challenge the very air around him. “Ah, the lady rises,” he said, voice rich with amusement. “I was beginning to think you’d taken up permanent residence in that bed.”

Cassira lifted an eyebrow, her lips twitching despite herself. “Should I thank you for your concern?” Reece’s smile widened as he leaned against the doorframe, his blue eyes glinting with mischief. “Only if you plan to make it worth my while,” he shot back, the playful note in his voice carrying a hint of something deeper. “But I’ll settle for seeing you up and about. There’s a whole ship out there, and I intend to show you its secrets.”

Cassira felt a warmth that had nothing to do with the broth settling in her chest. As much as Reece’s words were laced with jest, there was an undeniable sincerity in his gaze. Her heart beat a little faster, the slow burn of curiosity and something more igniting within her.

She gave him a small, challenging smile. “Lead the way, then. Let’s see what secrets you’re willing to share.” Cassira was confident for about a second, when the lurch of the ship sent her careening into Reece’s chest, as he caught her without so much as a blink. His firm muscles braced her up as the ship returned to an even keel, and the moment passed.

Trying to ignore that, Cassira stepped out into the twilight stunned. “How long have I been asleep?”

“The better part of two days. I take it you’ve never been to sea before?”

“Never seen it.”

“You’ll get used to it. Everyone does. Come here and you can rest along the railing.”

Reece led Cassira up a short set of stairs onto the quarterdeck, though she didn’t know one end of the ship from the other. Alongside the taffrail right aft, a rough hewn canvas chair had been lashed to a stumpy

cannonade. Cassira allowed Reece to deposit her into the chair, as the two men she had seen in Taruca strode over to her side of the deck.

“Our savior” drawled Alfin, then courteously stood to the side. “May I introduce Captain Henry of the Alexandra.” Cassira looked up. Henry was a few years older than Reece, but had none of his dark handsome features. Henry looked as though he was a man who spent his life inside a library, pale and sunken eyed. But more than that, Henry was a man who appeared to be under a tremendous strain, not for a short time, but for years on end. The two men there painted a fantastic picture. Reece, handsome and sturdy, Henry, tall but thin. But despite appearances, when Henry spoke, his voice was firm.

“So you’re Cassira, the one who saved us eh? Seems as though we all owe you a great deal.”

Cassira’s stomach lurched, but she managed to reply “N.. no problem.”

Henry smiled, looking up at Lieutenant Reece, “not yet acquainted with her sea legs I take it”.

“No sir” Reece’s steady voice was calming to Cassira, though not as calming as perhaps a ship that didn’t lean over quite so much. Cassira moved to stand, and Reece guided her to the shrouds, a series of ropes woven into a lattice on the side of the quarterdeck for her to hold on to. Cassira was able to steady herself as the men talked, something about the wind veering, but her focus remained on staying upright. She barely composed herself as the men returned to her.

“Now, I must apologize for... well I suppose kidnapping you” Henry said with a dry smirk, “but we had precious little choice. You shot a man and fell down asleep on the deck after the musket recoiled into your face. Don’t worry by the way, the mark will fade.” Despite herself Cassira touched the right half of her cheek and felt an immediate bruise. She quickly moved towards the glass on the compass and looked at herself. Yep. That’s a bruise alright. Now wasn’t that just her luck? She meets the hottest guy she has ever seen and half her fucking face was purple. The return walk to the edge of the deck was humbling. Reece had a smile pinned to his face but was pointedly looking up at the rigging.

“Now I miss... I have some questions for you.” Henry said, a bit more sternly. Alfin from earlier had come up onto the quarterdeck, slowly striding behind the Captain. Reece didn't seem bothered, but Henry glanced back more than once at him. “What happened to you? How did you end up in Taruca point, and how is it you came to save us?” Alfin coughed. Henry sighed. “And why?”

The story came from Cassira, quietly at first, then slowly interspersed with choking sounds. One of the older sailors had brought Goose up on deck, and a motion from Reece brought him up to Cassira, where he quietly licked her hand as she told about her family, and how she felt like she could help save Henry and Alfin, as they were being hunted by the men that killed her family. Reece kept her eyes in a way that felt comforting. Alfin's far more penetrating, but Henry was by far the best audience member. He oo-d and aaahd at exactly the right moments, gasping at the tracking of the girl across the country and when she got to Taruca nodding approvingly. When she finally reached the end of the story, a small ruckus turned into clapping from the railing below her. A shout from a petty officer sent the eavesdropping men back to their duties, chattering like a herd of monkeys.

Reece smiled. “They'll be writing a song about you soon enough.” Cassira just looked away, ashamed of the attention. She looked out to the sea to avoid their gaze and saw the beauty of the emptiness every sailor learns to fear. The gentle rolling waves were only broken by the ship sailing nearby. Cassira stared at it. Henry answered her unspoken question.

“That's the Blizzard. She came after us a few days ago. We captured her and sailed to Tarcua point looking for answers. Seems someone didn't want us finding out.” Henry turned to Alfin. “We did find out what we wanted to know I hope.” Alfin coughed pointedly.

“Perhaps we should discuss this while Miss Cassira refreshes herself in her cabin.”

Reece was curt. “She saved both of your lives. She should be able to hear this.”

“Lieutenant.” Henry admonished automatically. Reece gracefully took a step back. Henry turned his neck to Alfin. “I assume only officers can know.” Alfin grunted and nodded his approval. Henry turned to Reece and smiled, while Reece stared at him for a second, then realization dawning, he smiled back. Henry turned back to Cassira. “Miss. For saving our lives, I appoint you as midshipman... er midshipwoman in Her Imperial Majesty’s navy.”

Chapter 11: On the way to deliverance

Lecture Notes, School for Political Officers – Master Orven Salk

The captain must be the voice of the ship; the political officer must be its conscience. But conscience need not be kind, and in truth, it rarely should be. Mercy is a currency we cannot afford in times of war.

Cassira stood at the ship's railing the next day, the endless ocean stretching before her in a sunlit expanse of blues and greens. The Alexandra's steady rhythm beneath her feet had become a reluctant comfort, a small reprieve from the chaos of her mind. Grief clung to her like a shadow, yet here, amidst the salt air and snapping sails, she found moments where the ache dulled. Her new uniform was softer than she expected, a done up collar and blue coat that fit her perfectly. The quartermaster clearly had been a civilian tailor for women, and had taken to the task of creating a uniform for her with gusto.

It was in one of those moments that Reece appeared. His shadow stretched long against the deck as he approached, his boots making a confident cadence on the planks. "You're going to learn something useful today," he said without preamble, his tone steady but not unkind.

Cassira turned to him, arching a brow. "Am I?"

"Unless you plan to spend the rest of the voyage brooding at the railing," he replied. A small flicker of humor danced at the corner of his mouth, though his blue eyes remained sharp, assessing. "Come on. Let's start with something simple."

Cassira followed him to the starboard side, where a set of coiled ropes lay waiting. The rigging overhead creaked, the wind tugging at the sails with a playful persistence. "Simple, you say?" she asked, crossing her arms.

"Simple for me," he countered, his voice low and edged with challenge.

“We’ll see how you fare.”

He handed her a length of rope and stepped closer, his presence solid and steady. She caught a faint whiff of him—sea salt, leather, and something faintly smoky. It was disarming, this closeness, and Cassira found herself gripping the rope tighter than necessary.

Reece demonstrated the knot with practiced ease, his fingers deft as they worked. “This is a bowline,” he explained. “Essential for securing lines. You’ll use this regularly, so watch closely.” Cassira tried to focus on the knot rather than the way his forearms flexed as he worked or the swirling tattoo that traced the back of his right hand. Her gaze betrayed her for a moment, drifting upward to his face. There was a quiet intensity there, an unspoken weight in the set of his jaw. She quickly looked away, heat creeping up her neck.

“Your turn,” he said, stepping back to give her space. She fumbled with the rope, the fibers rough against her palms. The first attempt ended in a tangled mess, and Cassira let out an exasperated sigh.

“You made it look too easy.”

“That’s because it is,” Reece said, though there was no malice in his words. He stepped beside her, his hands brushing hers as he guided her movements. “Here, like this.”

The brief contact sent a jolt through Cassira, and she cursed herself for the way her pulse quickened. She focused intently on the knot, determined to prove herself. Under his guidance, the loop took shape, and she tied her first successful bowline.

“Not bad,” Reece said, his voice quieter now. “With practice, you’ll be quick enough to even impress the Captain.”

“I’ll settle for keeping up with you,” Cassira replied, allowing a small smile to tug at her lips. It felt foreign, but welcome.

The lessons continued over the next several days, each one building on the last. Reece's demeanor remained formal, yet Cassira couldn't ignore the moments when his gaze lingered on her—not in judgment, but as if he saw something beyond her guarded exterior. She hated how it made her feel exposed, yet there was a strange comfort in it too.

One afternoon, as the sun dipped lower on the horizon, Reece brought her to the helm. The Alexandra's wheel stood tall, its polished wood gleaming in the golden light. "You're going to steer," he announced.

Cassira blinked at him. "Isn't that a bit... ambitious?"

"You've handled the ropes well enough. Time to see how you fare with the ship itself." He gestured for her to take the wheel.

She hesitated before stepping up, her hands tentative on the spokes. The wheel felt massive, its weight surprising as she tried to steady it. The ship responded sluggishly, and Cassira frowned in concentration.

Reece stood behind her, close enough that she could feel the warmth of him. "Ease into it," he said, his voice low and steady. "The Alexandra's a strong ship, but she needs a firm hand."

"Sounds like someone else I know," Cassira muttered under her breath.

Reece chuckled, the sound rich and unexpected. "Careful, or I'll have you scrubbing the deck next."

Cassira fought back a grin, focusing on the task at hand. She adjusted the wheel as Reece instructed, the ship responding more fluidly with each correction. The sensation was exhilarating, a rare moment where she felt in control.

"Good," Reece said, his tone carrying a hint of pride. "You're a natural." The compliment caught her off guard, and she glanced back at him. Their eyes met, and for a moment, the world seemed to shrink to just

the two of them. Cassira's breath hitched, and she quickly turned away, her cheeks burning.

By the end of the week, Cassira had gained a newfound respect for the complexities of seamanship. Reece's patience and steady guidance had surprised her, though she wouldn't admit it aloud. As they stood on the deck one evening, the stars beginning to emerge overhead, Cassira found herself speaking before she could stop herself.

"Why are you doing this?" she asked, her voice quieter than she intended. Reece looked at her, his expression unreadable in the dim light. "Because you're here. And because you've been through more than anyone should." Cassira's chest tightened, the weight of his words pressing against the barriers she'd built. She looked away, her fingers gripping the railing. "I don't need your pity."

"It's not pity," Reece said firmly. "It's... respect."

The word lingered between them, heavy and undeniable. Cassira didn't know how to respond, so she said nothing, letting the silence stretch out over the waves. Yet, as the ship carried them forward into the unknown, she couldn't help but feel a small flicker of warmth where there had only been cold.

The final lesson came as the Alexandra's hull creaked and groaned under a strong wind. Reece led her to the foredeck, where the unique design of the ship's planking was most visible.

"She's not like most ships," he explained, running his hand along the smooth curve of the wood. "Her hull's reinforced with ironwood. Makes her slower in some ways, but nearly indestructible."

Cassira traced the grain of the wood, marveling at its strength. "Sounds like someone else I know," she said softly, a hint of warmth in her tone.

Reece's gaze lingered on her, but he didn't reply. Instead, he stepped back, leaving her to study the ship as the stars above reflected in the dark waters below.

Chapter 12: Above Deck

Sailor's Proverb, Common in the Northern Reaches

Beware the shore you long to see—it may be the one that drowns you.

Alexandra made the final turn behind Blizzard, dropping anchor neatly around the point of Deliverance, arriving home for the first time in two years. An imperial ship entering an imperial port was hardly a noteworthy event, but today was different. Deliverance, one of the westernmost cities of the imperial archipelago, was built like most cities of the empire. The highest point of the rocky mountains was dominated by large semaphore arms, able to send and relieve signals from ships from many miles away. Many small points operated large wooden towers, but a city like Deliverance built theirs out of stone.

The city itself was a rugged mesh of the dark oak and stone permitted for civilian use. The stronger Live Oak was a royal monopoly in consequence of its scarcity, but although dark oak was unsuitable for ships, their homes were sturdy enough to stand up to the yearly hurricane season.

To an outsider, used to the districts of rich and poor that permeated the known world, an imperial city would seem like another planet. The inner city was a model of efficiency, with only the outer edges showing any life or character. Tall buildings, four towering stories with, dotted the landscape. The harbor was protected by three interlocking mock wells, one overlapping the next, to break up the storm surge of the hurricanes. Ships entering usually had three or four longboats, called Tugs, to tow them into one of the locks. These canal locks opened into a large, circular harbor, dotted with ships, cranes, even powerful horses to tow goods away.

Cassira had, at no one's invitation, come up on deck at the sound of a cannon. She had seemed so panicked that only a look from Reece and another sailor had calmed her down before she uttered a cry. She was not normally one to panic, perhaps the last few days had been too much. She

saw that the officers wore their full dress uniform white and gold with a diagonal stripe across the chest, and that only a single cannon had fired as they entered the crowded harbor. Though Cassira had not known it, in the days before the embargo, 9 cannons would be fired when entering home waters. Years ago, a directive had been issued to fire a single gun"... to eliminate wasteful pageantry," but everyone knew why.

Alfin Chapman motioned Cassira up to the quarterdeck. "Welcome to the imperium my dear. What do you think of one of our humble islands?" Cassira looked around. The monotone color, the utter lack of sound, of music, of light... this city was as dead as a picture in a book. There was not one ounce of color of green space. The city may well have been painted brown for all it should. There was something sad in her heart looking among it.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" said Alfin, not looking at Cassira. Henry caught her eye. A momentary look filled his eyes... Sympathy perhaps, before it was gone.

"Brace up there" Henry called, looking to the crew as Alexandra made the turn. Alexandra and Blizzard anchored neatly together in the main entranceway. As they stopped, Alfin turned to Henry. "I'll go speak to the port admiral. I shall send for you if needs be. In the meantime, unload all the extra powder to the hulk." Henry nodded. For safety, every port boasted a large dismasted ship to hold their powder reserve. Cassira retched against the railing as a boat carrying Alfin rowed off to a dock. Half an hour later, the powder hulk had been towed alongside, and barrel after barrel of gunpowder was lifted out of the Blizzard, and lowered into this hulk.

After three hours, Cassira's stomach gave a growl. Henry looked out and smiled. "Hungry my dear? Would you join me for breakfast?" Cassira had eaten very little on the voyage, preferring the solitude of the cabin... well, solitude wasn't correct.

"May Goose come?" she asked, feeling a wet nose on her leg.

"Of course" Henry smiled "he seems to be the one with the appetite among you". The three of them had sat down to breakfast, served cold. Henry had apologized that no hot food was permitted with gunpowder being transferred, but it seemed as though the captain had served any remaining delicacies in consequence of their arrival home. Henry spoke, but not to Cassira, to Goose. He constantly cooed and played with the retriever, feeding him the last of the smoked ham and biscuits. Cassira ate quietly, questions boiling inside her. When would she get home? Was any part of her family alive? Her friends? What about her home? Twice she opened her mouth to speak, but despite Henry raising one eye at her, she remained silent.

The third time she made to speak, Henry, a good enough captain to see an oncoming storm, cut her off. "You don't have to".

"What?" she answered, confused.

"If you don't want to, if you don't." Henry looked as if he couldn't find the words. Cassira made to interrupt, but Henry continued. "I've seen what loss looks like. You don't owe me anything."

The rest of the meal passed in silence, only the clink of the silverware. Cassira was grateful for a moment of peace, somehow. But of course, it had to end. A knock came at the door. Henry bellowed in the loud cry of the navy. "Enter."

Reece and his brilliant blue eyes entered the cabin and saluted. Instead of a flowing shirt, he was buttoned up in a white Imperial uniform, identical to Henry's with only a single epaulette on his shoulder. He glanced at Cassira only once, before addressing the Captain.

"Signal from the shore sir. Mr. Chapman and Admiral Rampart request our presence at the Admiral's office in an hour to discuss the recent voyage." Henry immediately stood, and started pacing at his stern windows. After two paces each way, he spoke.

"We had better get going then. Who is on watch?"

"Carpenter sir, all we can spare"

"He has the deck then. Miss Cassira, you shall find the ship comfortable until our return." Cassira immediately felt cold. She was being left behind? Ever since mom and dad had left... and her sister. Reece followed the glance she made closely.

"Sir, perhaps she should accompany us. In case the admiral has questions for her." he said, very casually.

Henry frowned "Nonsense. A lady cannot wear that to meet the Admiral, lieutenant." Cassira hadn't paid much mind, but the clothes she had worn when her sister was... killed... were rags. Her tunic had once been expensive, but little was left.

Reece smiled, and motioned to the door. "With your permission Sir?" Henry seemed puzzled, but waved his assent. Reece opened the door and said to the sentry "pass the word for the sailmaker." The man summoned must have been waiting just outside, for he entered a moment later, the old man Cassira met earlier helping lift a trunk into the cramped cabin. Henry looked interested, while Cassira stewed. The old mom left, smiling, while the sailmaker opened the chest, lifting four dresses out one at a time. Reece and the sailmaker laid them on the table, while Cassira looked at the table in surprise. Captain Henry cocked an eyebrow but seemed to understand.

Reece began explaining while the sailmaker helped, holding each up. "White, made from the extra number one sailcloth when we laid on that new spritsail. cut in western fashion." The dress was beautiful, just like a dozen back home she owned, except the material was dazzling white, cleaned no doubt however these men kept their uniforms so clean. Reece explained the next two, a yellow and black dress, but what she waited for clearly was the last. It was a deep blue.

"The last we took from the extra flag material aboard blizzard, or perhaps it was for trade. I had it cut in the imperial fashion, of course." The brilliant blue dress was long enough, past her knees, and stitched to snatch her waistline, before a plunging neckline dominated the top. The arms would go past her elbows. When she touched it, Cassira was amazed. She recognized it immediately. Soft silk. There was only one place in the world where this material could be made. She held in her hands her family's legacy. As she admired it, the sailmaker coughed pointedly. Reece, Cassira noticed, was drinking in her reaction, and must not have spoken for a few seconds.

"Ah yes" Reese smiled. "Since you saved the captain, the crew thought we should add a piece." The sailmaker brought out a belt, laid with gold. The gold spelled Alexandra, with the second A doubling as a buckle. Henry smiled, in an admonishing way.

"When I said you should get her something to wear. This wasn't what I had in mind Reece."

Reece smiled "Wait until she tries them on Sir." Cassira, meanwhile, had discovered the slit in the dress, and was mentally measuring how much of her thigh would be exposed to the chilled air. From the look on Reece and the sailmaker's faces... It was probably a lot.

The captain motioned to a door. "Please, change my night cabin." Cassira, finding happiness in something for the first time in weeks, grabbed the blue dress and hurried off. As soon as she shut the door, Henry fixed Reece with an appraising stare. "I hope the admiral approves of your... bombardment, lieutenant. "

Reece slid into a chair. "Nothing to do about it now except face the music, sir."

Chapter 13: Above Deck

From the Diary of Commander Drenn Fallow, executed for dereliction of duty

I thought the greatest threat to a captain was the enemy's cannon. I was wrong. The greatest threat is silence—orders unspoken, loyalties unspoken, truths unspoken—until the silence cracks and spills poison through the decks. By the time you hear it, it is already too late.

Cassira's heart thudded loud enough to rival the oars splashing against the harbor. She sat in the stern sheets of the launch, keenly aware that she was the only spot of color in a world of muted browns and greys. The other reason for the hush, of course, was the little ultimatum the boss had issued about any man who so much as looked at her too long. A dozen lashes for inappropriate staring.

She might have found it funny, if not for her nerves. The brilliant azure dress -- silk clinging to her curves, the slit of the dress nearly at her hip --felt scandalous against the briny breeze. She could practically taste the tension in the air. Her mother would have thrown a fit if she'd seen Cassira leaving the ship in something this revealing. But Mom was gone, and Cassira was no longer the obedient daughter who minded every rule of propriety, if for no other reason than that she could ignore what had happened.

A flicker of motion drew her gaze: Reece, seated beside her, fiddling absently with the worn epaulette of his lieutenant's uniform. The tight set of his shoulders screamed formality, but the sideways glance he risked whenever the wind teased her skirt made heat prickle along her skin. God that muscled arm screamed to her. Maybe he would be interested in seeing how high her dress...

"We'll dock soon," he murmured. "Just...brace yourself. Everyone here loves a good scandal, and you're offering quite the spectacle."

“Should I apologize?” Cassira asked sweetly, arching a brow. It pleased her, somehow, to watch that flush creep up his neck.

“Not to me,” he said under his breath, looking away. “But don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

She almost retorted, but Captain Henry - sitting at the stern, eyes on the rocky sprawl of Deliverance - lifted his voice: “Easy there, lads. We’ll have no mishaps right at the Admiral’s quay.”

The rowers’ arms strained at the oars, each man determinedly looking anywhere but at Cassira. A fresh ripple of amusement curled in her chest. If nothing else, she thought, this dress is good at reminding people I’m not some shy stowaway. She would not be invisible anymore.

The moment the boat bumped against the stone quay, half a dozen sailors practically leapt forward to help Cassira disembark. She let Reece offer his arm, stepping onto the worn stones of Deliverance’s lower district. Tall warehouses loomed above, semaphore towers perched on the cliffs beyond.

She felt eyes on her from every angle—merchants, fishwives, even grim-faced marines in the Empire’s uniform of crisp white and gold. They’re not used to seeing a woman in bold color, she realized, recalling how the local women wore layers of drab wool that hid everything but their faces. Her father’s voice flitted through her memory: The Imperium respects tradition above all else, Cassira. Well, she was smashing their tradition to pieces, one brazen footstep at a time.

Henry led them up a winding set of steps carved into the cliffside. Tired-looking officers paused mid-conversation to stare. A pair of them whispered behind their hats until the Captain’s hard look made them find sudden fascination in their boots.

Reece matched his stride to Cassira's as they climbed. His presence was warm at her side, yet she sensed the tension thrumming through him—excitement, fear, or both. She remembered how he'd once seemed so unflappable on deck, a calm center amid chaos. Now he was newly promoted, flung into the heart of a war council. A part of her wanted to ask if he was all right. Instead, she kept her chin high and let the swirl of her skirt speak for her.

The trio emerged into a grand corridor lined with portraits of past admirals in archaic uniforms. The hush here was different—heavy with authority. A secretary in a subdued grey gown ushered them into a wide office where Admiral Rampart stood behind a massive mahogany desk, smoking a thin cigar. He wore an ornate jacket, medals winking in the lamplight. As they entered, in a dark corner stood Alfin Chapman, seeming so thin and wiry behind the large admiral.

Rampart's eyes lingered on Cassira for half a heartbeat, taking in the scandalous cut of her dress with a curious arch of the brow. Then he shook his head, as though deciding it wasn't worth mentioning. "Captain Henry. Commander Reece. And... ah... Cassira, I presume?"

She dipped in what she hoped resembled a polite curtsy. No trembling, she reminded herself. You've come this far. She could feel Reece smirk behind her

"Well now captain, you've certainly been busy" the Admiral said.

"Yes admiral" was his reply. Cassira heard Henry's voice catch.

"You lost the colors, rebuilt your ship without proper materials, engaged a ship of twice your force, violated the embargo, picked up a stray" he motioned to Cassira, who didn't think the comment was particularly fair, "and destroyed most of Taruca point, a city we were not at war with, is that about right?" Henry said nothing. The stern admiral cracked a smile. "Well done." Henry's neck snapped up. Reece's eyebrows vanished into his thick black locks. The admiral laughed twice. "haven't had a captain as

enterprising since Ronan of the Intrepid! Hell of a job. The Imperial Court is all talk of your exploits. You've solved a lot of problems for us captain!"

Whatever Henry was expecting, Cassira knew it wasn't this. The Admiral carried on, his eyes locked on a certain piece of blue silk; "everyone at court agrees now. Pavu and her goddamn allies won't back down. So it must be open war soon. They approved my plan to arm us with powder!"

"Sir?" Reece asked, seeing Henry's silence. The admiral had lit a new cigar, and leaned back. He took a long look at Cassira, who felt strangely before answering. "The entire fleet is going to sortie out, break the blockade, and escort almost one hundred powder ships north and back south to fill our storerooms with powder. That should keep us firing for 3 or 4 years, eh Mr. Chapman?" "42 months is the best estimate" said Alfin, who was not smiling at all. He also, Cassira noticed, had not looked at anyone in the group.

Henry found his voice. "We are going to launch a first strike sir?" Cassira's breath hitched. An all out war between the league of states and the imperium?

The admiral nodded. "Exactly. We are planning it for the 13th next month. the dark of the moon. "The current plan" he stretched open a map of Pavu, "is to land three battalions of marines at the sea-gate, and to use a further battalion inside the harbor. Standard harbor raiding plan, these plans were thought of with Pavu in mind after all. The marines at the sea gate will seize any battery they can, and hold while the boys inside will cause chaos. Sailors will cut out or burn anything they can, then we will collapse the gate and leave."

"Targets?" asked Reece, as the three of them poured over the map.

"Here, here, and here" pointed out Admiral Rampart. Their main armory, dockyard, and ship supply facilities"

"Not their fleet in harbor sir?" Henry asked. In a surprise to everyone, even herself, Cassira piped up.

"Of course not. With the sea-gate destroyed those ships will be stuck for weeks inside the inner harbor. That's not the goal. The goal is to get the gunpowder back here. The threat is in the international fleet holding the blockade, whatever is left of it, using Pavu as a base of operations."

Admiral Rampart's eyebrows shot up "Correct".

Reece stared at her quizzically. Alfin let out a low chuckle behind them. Cassira went on. "Have you considered placing two or three cannons here?" She indicated a cliff face. "These heights could lift cannons up by rope, then they could bombard the port for days after the attack. They can pound any ship to a wreck. The men couldn't be hit with cannon that high up, and when infantry finally climbs the cliff, they can rappel down to a small boat. There's no danger, and it will keep them from starting repairs longer."

"Ingenious" said Henry. Alfin took a step forward to examine the map.

"That would give us the time to fill the powder ships and return. Perhaps even fill the battleships too." Admiral Rampart frowned. "Not a man in the fleet has knowledge of those cliffs. It's too dangerous." "I have." The men turned to stare at Reece, who looked grim as he spoke. The room stood silent. Admiral Rampart turned to Alfin. "Could the Jubilee do it?" Alfin thought, then turned to Henry. "25 ton Lugger, standard build, used by the coast guard." Henry nodded. "She is small enough, with four extra nine pounders... it could be done. But who would command her? Some junior lieutenant?" "Of course not," Admiral Rampart stood. "A Commander, who volunteered for it. And I'm sure we have one." Everyone stared at Reece, and Cassira noticed him slowly smile as it dawned on him. "Sir?"

"Lieutenant Reece, for your actions saving the Alexandra in Taruca point, I appoint you commander in her Imperial Majesty's Navy." Captain Henry sat stunned. He had thought a court martial was coming for his actions. But now, Reece has been promoted. Promotion of a first Lieutenant was his praise of a captain's conduct. Rampart, the old warhorse, was publicly approving of his fiasco.

Rampart let the tension hold for a moment, then dismissed them with a curt nod. “Henry, prepare the Alexandra. As for you, Miss Cassira...try not to spark too many riots with that dress, hmm?” She mustered a half-smile, ignoring the prickle of heat in her cheeks. “I make no promises.”

The trio stepped out into the corridor, the heavy doors shutting behind them. Henry exhaled in a rush. “I hate that we talk about invasions like they’re storms on the horizon.”

Cassira’s temper flared. “They—” her voice caught, and she forced it out. “They killed my sister. My parents. I want them to suffer.” The savage truth of it burned in her lungs.

Henry’s eyes softened. “You’re not the only one who’s lost people, Cassira.”

She refused to back down. “Then perhaps you should be more eager to see justice done.”

A tense silence. Reece rested a hand lightly at the small of her back, as if to say not now. She almost shrugged him off, but something in his gentle pressure—compassion, maybe—cooled her ire. She gave a curt nod, letting Henry lead the way outside.

The crisp air greeted them. Twilight cast long shadows across the harbor, lanterns sputtering to life along the quays. The bustle of soldiers and dockworkers paused again at the sight of Cassira’s shimmering gown. She sensed Reece’s gaze dart her way, but when she looked, he was focused on the launch bobbing at the wharf.

They filed into the boat. The rowers braced themselves, determined to keep eyes forward. Henry set his jaw, evidently still grappling with the Admiral’s orders. Reece exhaled quietly, fiddling with the gold on his shoulder as though the new rank sat awkwardly.

Cassira couldn't help herself. "Congratulations on the promotion, Commander," she said, voice softer. "How does it feel?"

He gave a short, humorless laugh. "Feels like I'm wearing a target, if I'm honest."

An unexpected pang of empathy surged in her. We're all wearing targets in our own ways, she thought. "You'll do well," she managed, trying to not let her thoughts turn to what else those muscles could do.

A muscle in his jaw ticked. "I hope so."

The boat lurched away from the dock, the oars slicing the water in a steady rhythm. Cassira's dress rippled in the evening breeze, and she noticed one of the rowers nearly lost his stroke when he glanced her way. With a sigh, she angled herself slightly, letting the slit drift closed.

"You'd better relax," she teased Reece, though her voice was faint with lingering anger and grief. "We've a war to fight soon. No point dying of a heart attack first."

He huffed. "Fuck, you do have a knack for dramatic entrances. But I'd rather you keep that fire—" He cleared his throat, voice dropping lower. "We'll need it, soon enough." She met his gaze, chest tight with unspoken fears. There, for the briefest moment, was the flicker of a possibility. Friends? Allies? Something more?

Henry, from behind them, coughed pointedly, snapping her from that thought. She turned to watch the silhouette of Deliverance fade into the distance, semaphore towers blinking messages in the dying light. The Empire was on the brink of war, and her heart was on the brink of something else entirely.

No one spoke again as the rowers propelled them back toward the Alexandra. But Cassira's thoughts churned, fierce and hungry. Pavu will

fall, she told herself. And maybe, in the aftermath, I'll finally find peace...or destroy myself trying. For now, she smoothed down the silk over her thighs and forced her gaze forward. If the men on board wanted to stare, let them. She had bigger battles to win than any moral scandal over a dress.

Just before she went to her cabin, Cassira turned to Reece, who followed her onto the ship. "You knew I'd wear this didn't you?"

"Yes"

Cassira pondered, "You figured that if the admiral had something to focus on, he might spare the captain... you used me as a distraction!"

Reece shrugged. "Meetings are boring. I needed to entertain myself somehow."

"Ass." She said, stomping off.

Reece smirked, cocking an eyebrow at a sailor going past, pointedly staring at Cassira's form. "Funny, I was thinking the same thing".

Chapter 14: Steamy

Excerpt from “On the Matter of Command,” by Admiral Serrik Vos (Ret.)

Command is not a right, nor a reward. It is a burden. Those who take it for the sake of glory are like sailors chasing the horizon—they will never reach what they seek, and will drown in the attempt.

Over the voyage westward, Cassira had started to notice more than what her core wanted her to. Reece had all of the officers to dinner regularly. His parties were pleasant enough, the bread with weevils had caused her to shriek to the laughter of the rest, except her new commander. Reece simply caught her eye and started tapping his biscuit, which to her horror caused two small weevils to crawl out. Reece gave her a sharp wink, and bit into it once the bugs had left.

Cassira ate no bread.

But although he chuckled at just the right moments, and kept the conversation going every night, he always seemed off. Reece and his smile seemed sometimes fake, forced into place as if he was being distracted constantly by his thoughts. Cassira thought she was perhaps just making it up in her head until she saw him on the quarterdeck reading while one of the other officers taught her about the cables... and she noticed he didn't turn the pages for more than an hour. He just stared at the page unblinking, looking a mile away.

Cassira pressed a palm against the hull's inside frame, bracing herself as the Jubilee lunged over a cresting wave. The air belowdecks was damp and smelled of oakum, salt, and something distinctly new—tar from the hurried refit. They'd set sail at dawn, leaving behind Henry, the Alexandra, and the rest of the fleet. She hated goodbyes more than storms, and right now, the wind was picking up.

She drew a steadying breath, the ache in her chest warring with the tightness in her belly. *Vengeance first*, she told herself. *You're here for vengeance*. The vow had echoed inside her since the day she fled her ruined home, her sister's last gasp for breath still etched in memory. But Henry's voice nagged at her, cautioning about the cost of war. She tried to shove it aside. Henry's voice may have been loud, but her sister's face swimming in her mind's eye was hard to ignore.

Footsteps resounded on the companionway ladder. Cassira lifted her gaze, seeing Reece's silhouette appear in the lantern light. Even after weeks of serving alongside him, the sight of his frame still made her throat constrict: tall and lean, shoulders broad from years of hauling sails and scrubbing decks, with rippling muscle across his forearms that tensed whenever he gripped the rigging. He wore a loose cotton shirt, half unlaced from the collar, which only hinted at the taut planes of his chest. A battered navy coat—slightly too large for him—hung from his left arm.

He paused upon seeing her, lips parting as though he had something urgent to say. A flicker of surprise in his gray eyes told her he hadn't expected her in the ship's corridor. She noticed his gaze dip—just for an instant—to where her blouse clung at her waist, still damp from the wave that crashed over the deck earlier. She straightened her spine, feigning nonchalance. She wouldn't let him see how that quick glance ignited a thrum of warmth beneath her skin. The air between them seemed to shrink with every breath, carrying the warmth of him until it clung to her skin. Somewhere below deck, a door slammed — distant and irrelevant.

"Cassira," he said quietly, not quite meeting her eyes. "You... all right?"

Her stomach gave a small, traitorous flutter. *Focus*. She nodded, forcing her tone cool. "I'm fine. I just got tired of the wind in my face. Decided to check on the supplies." A half-lie. They both knew she wasn't

rummaging for rations. A tense beat passed between them, the hush broken only by the Jubilee's timbers creaking underfoot.

"If the storm worsens," Reece murmured, "we'll need every man—and woman—above decks. I'd prefer you—" He stopped short, brow furrowing, as if catching himself from giving her an order. "That is, your help might be needed. The Jubilee's small crew can't spare a capable hand."

Her initial impulse was to snarl at him for treating her like some stray stowaway. But she could see the flicker of guilt in his expression. Guilt and... preoccupation. That day he'd parted from Henry, Reece had accepted a weighty command. *Duty*. The same chain that bound him also kept him from acknowledging whatever lay pulsing between them. She recognized it in his stance, the rigid line of his shoulders. A man trying too hard to remain detached. "That's what I'm here for," she finally replied.

He nodded, stepping aside in the cramped corridor so she could pass. The motion brought him close—close enough that she caught the faint scent of salt on his skin, an unshaved roughness along his jaw. Her pulse stumbled. She told herself it was the sway of the ship, nothing more—but the ship had swayed before, and it had never left her feeling unsteady like this. She swallowed. The swirl of conflicting emotions and raw, physical awareness churned in her gut. *He is your best ally in this mission*, she reminded herself. *Don't ruin it*. But oh, how she fucking wanted to. His hand shifted as if to bridge the space, then stopped short, fingers flexing once before curling into a fist at his side. Then just as quickly, he moved off, back to his cabin.

The afternoon sky had darkened, a sullen bruise of clouds gathering on the horizon. The Jubilee pitched and rolled, her slender hull cutting the waves. Cassira helped the bosun secure a slack line near the foremast, her fingers still trembling faintly from that brief encounter belowdecks. She hated how Reece—Commander Reece, she corrected herself—managed to rattle her with a mere glance.

Overhead, sails snapped. A sudden gust tore at Cassira's hair, unbound locks tangling in the salty wind. Another wave crashed over the bow, drenching the deck. She braced and gritted her teeth, setting her boots wide for stability. This was different from the bigger ships she'd known: the Jubilee was agile, but *vulnerable*, especially with a skeleton crew. That meant every pair of hands mattered. She glanced starboard, spotting Reece near the helm, conferring with the helmsman, voice low and urgent.

He wore a navy-blue coat now, epaulettes not quite formal but enough to mark him as Commander. Water dripped from his hair, strands plastered to his forehead. Despite the cold, color rose in his cheeks—a flush that underscored the intense glow in those gray eyes whenever he gave an order. She found herself staring too long, and only the bosun's bark, "All secure!" jerked her focus back. *Dammit, Cassira, get it together.*

She stomped across the slick planks, tugging her shirt closed. She'd worn it tied at the waist, to keep it from snagging. *Has Reece seen the strip of midriff?* She felt a stir of both embarrassment and a rebellious thrill at the thought. *Stop it.* Anger at herself flared. She was no naive girl to get flustered over a man's glance. She'd lost too much to let silly lust derail her. Still, the memory of the flicker in Reece's gaze lingered, maddeningly.

Henry's words echoed in her head: "*They'll want to use your passions against you. Don't let them.*" Fine advice, Captain, but who would have guessed she might sabotage herself?

By sundown, the crew had settled into a steadier routine, the storm threat receding as the wind slackened. Reece ordered half the sails furled, intending to sail conservatively through the night in case the weather shifted again. Cassira caught fragments of crew chatter: men griping about rations, a midshipman fussing over tangled lines. Their special mission—covert infiltration, sabotage, vengeance—loomed unspoken. The heavier tasks would come once they neared Pavu's waters.

Near the mainmast, a small lantern glow cast flickering shadows on the deck. Cassira leaned against a coil of rope to catch her breath, her heart still thundering from the day's exertions. Her arms ached from hauling, but she relished the burn. Physical fatigue was simpler than the emotional turmoil swirling inside.

A presence approached behind her. She recognized his footsteps before turning. Reece. *Why does he keep seeking me out?* The question rattled her. Maybe it was wishful thinking—maybe he was only ensuring all crew members were functional.

He paused at her side, the barest gap between them. She refused to step away. Let him crowd her space. She refused to yield.

"You held up well today," he remarked, voice low to avoid the crew overhearing.

"Surprised?"

His lips twitched. "Not at all." He exhaled, glancing away. "I meant to say... Thank you. I know you're not a strict crew, but you pulled your weight."

That small concession. A compliment. Her chest tightened. "You forget I've spent weeks on the *Alexandra*. I'm no passenger." She let a hint of challenge lace her tone, waiting for him to contradict her.

He did not. Instead, he lifted his gaze, meeting hers head-on. She caught the faint gleam of desire banked behind his disciplined calm. *He's fighting it*, she realized, a heady rush surging in her veins. *Damn him*. She felt her pulse in her throat, hot.

Lightning flickered in the distance—heat lightning, ephemeral. "Cassira," he murmured. "I want you to—"

Her breath stilled. *Say it. Whatever it is...*

He swallowed, jaw clenching. “I want you to... coordinate with the boss in tomorrow’s rigging checks.” A flicker of frustration crossed his face, as though he’d intended to speak different words. “We need to keep the Jubilee in top shape. He will be rigging her for quick action in shallow water.”

An odd pang shot through her. She wasn’t sure if it was relief or disappointment that he’d defaulted to duty. “Of course, Commander,” she said crisply, refusing to let her voice tremble. She tried not to stare at the hollow of his throat, where a drop of sweat or seawater clung.

He opened his mouth as if to add something but closed it, stepping back. Then he pivoted, heading toward the foredeck with an abruptness that stung. She set her jaw, refusing to watch him leave. “Idiot,” she whispered, though she wasn’t sure if she meant him or herself.

Night deepened. Lanterns swung from the bulkheads, painting corridors in warm gold. Cassira made her way along the lower deck, double-checking supplies. Voices drifted from the galley—men laughing, the cook barking orders. She slipped past them, intent on finding a quiet spot to gather her thoughts.

Rounding a corner, she nearly collided with Reece again. He was half out of his coat, as if preparing to stow it. The narrow corridor forced them close enough that the sleeve of his coat brushed her chest. Her body reacted instantly, warmth coiling low in her belly.

“Cassira,” he said, hushed. “I—sorry, I didn’t see you—”

She inhaled, the air thick with his scent: salt, soap, a faint musk from long hours on deck. His shirt hung open, revealing a glimpse of the corded muscle across his collarbones, the beginning of a finely sculpted chest. She forced her gaze upward, meeting his eyes.

She cleared her throat. “I was just—looking for some air.” *In the bowels of the ship? Good excuse, Cassira.*

He exhaled, voice slightly ragged. “I—well, I’m—” He broke off. Something like frustration flickered in his features. *He’s feeling it too*, she realized with a jolt.

A drop of sweat trickled along his temple. The corridor was stifling. She stepped aside, or tried to. His presence seemed to fill the space, leaving nowhere to go. Their arms brushed. His skin was warm, the faintest tremor in his biceps. Her heart hammered so loud she was certain he could hear it.

Desire warred with resentment in her mind. *This man is your commanding officer*, said logic. *He might as well be your accomplice in vengeance*, a darker thought hissed. She was so tired of containing her fury, her grief. For weeks, she’d used anger as armor. Now her body clamored for release—an entirely different sort of release—spurred by his quiet strength.

A slip in the ship’s motion pitched them together. She pressed a hand to the wall, and he automatically reached to steady her. Their faces ended up inches apart, breath mingling. She saw the line of his jaw tighten, saw the flicker of raw want in his eyes.

She parted her lips, a question forming. But he abruptly pulled back, his grip still on her elbow. “Careful,” he murmured, clearing his throat. His voice had gone husky, and it struck her like a jolt of lightning.

“Don’t,” she said, more harshly than intended. She needed him to let go before she did something idiotic, like yank him closer or kiss him against the damn bulkhead. “I’m fine.”

His hand released her elbow. A muscle in his jaw ticked. “Right. Of course.” He stepped aside stiffly, letting her pass. She brushed by, adrenaline coursing, half furious that he kept reining himself in, half

furious at her own reaction. She felt his gaze linger on her back as she walked away, every nerve ablaze.

Once out of sight, she leaned against a crate, exhaling shakily. *This is insane.* A singular realization struck her: *I want him. Badly.* But also, she hated wanting anything again. It gave the world leverage to hurt her. She shook her head to dispel the swirl of confusion, heading for the ladder to the upper deck. Maybe the night air would cool her.

Midnight approached, the ocean calm except for a low swell that rocked the Jubilee gently. The watch was minimal—just a handful of sailors posted, half dozing upright. Cassira, sleepless, climbed the companionway to the afterdeck. The stars above were a scattering of diamonds, and the moon cast a silver path across the water.

She breathed in the quiet, letting the hush settle in her chest. *Vengeance first*, she reminded herself. *That's why you're here. The mission.* She tried to conjure images of the home she lost, her sister's final screams. Anger usually comes easily. This time, though, her anger felt... overshadowed. By a pair of storm-gray eyes. By a voice that commanded both her mind and the entire ship. *Focus, damn it.*

A soft scrape of boots announced Reece's arrival. He approached from the wheel, apparently checking the night watch. She stiffened, determined not to be the first to speak. The pulse in her throat thumped annoyingly.

"You can't sleep either?" he asked, keeping his distance at last. The open deck offered more space than that corridor below, but the tension roiling in the air felt just as thick.

She shrugged. "Not much."

A beat. The wind rustled, carrying salt.

He glanced at the idle sails overhead, voice subdued. “We should be nearing the southwestern approaches in a few days. That’s where the intel suggests Pavu’s supply lines pass.”

Cassira nodded, her chest tight. She’d yearned for that confrontation—**the** confrontation that would let her cut down the men behind her family’s ruin. Reece, for his part, had never explicitly declared personal vengeance, but Henry once hinted Reece had his own reasons. She almost wanted to pry.

“What do you think we’ll find?” she asked, the words slipping out before she could stop them.

His gaze lowered. “Likely heavily patrolled routes... possibly coded signals. We’ll slip in, sabotage where needed, gather intel. If we do it right, we can tip the war. If we fail...” He trailed off.

She finished the sentence in her head: *We die*. The sea at night felt eerily vast, as though it would happily swallow their small brig. She swallowed. “We won’t fail,” she said fiercely. “I— I can’t afford to.”

He nodded, letting out a slow breath. Moonlight silvered the taut line of his jaw. *Handsome in every sense*, she thought bitterly, hating how her pulse jumped. She turned away, arms crossed, gazing at the shimmering water.

A half minute passed. She felt him edging closer, an invisible magnet drawing them. “Cassira,” he said softly, his tone turning that singular note that thrummed in her core. “I— This is... complicated.”

She refused to look at him. “I know.”

“I’m your commanding officer,” he continued in a hush. “I should remain... impartial. Focused. Duty.” He let the word hang, battered by the undercurrent of something else.

She closed her eyes, struggling to keep her voice steady. “I never asked for your partiality. Or anything.” A blatant lie—she could practically feel the burn of longing in her gut, wanting so much more from him. But acknowledging it felt too raw, too soon.

He didn’t refute her statement, just inhaled sharply. “I can’t let the men see me waver. I can’t let you—anyone—be a vulnerability. This mission is life or death.”

She whirled to face him, frustration flaring. “You think I don’t know that? I’m not some child. I can handle your—your stoic act, or whatever.” The words spilled out, more heated than intended. “But don’t assume I need your coddling.”

He stiffened. “You misunderstand me. This isn’t about coddling.” A flash of exasperation lit his eyes. “It’s about keeping focus. If you’re going to be in command, you’ve got to find the good in every situation.” Just for a split second Cassira could have sworn she saw a pang of pain in Reece, but the moment passed.

Her fury spiked. “Focus,” she echoed, stepping closer. “As if we’re not already dancing around something... bigger.” She refused to specify, refused to name the hunger that crackled between them. *She* was strong enough to say it, but she wouldn’t give him that satisfaction if he intended to deny it.

A tense moment. His gaze flicked to her mouth, and her breath caught. She could almost sense him wanting to close the gap, to claim her in a reckless kiss. The wind teased her hair across her cheek. She let silence speak volumes.

Finally, he broke eye contact, turning aside. “We’ll—discuss it later,” he managed, voice gravelly. “Right now, get some rest. That’s an order.” The faint smile tugging at his lips belied the harshness of the words.

She swallowed. “Commander,” she said, giving him a mocking half-salute. Then she strode past him, heart pounding an erratic beat. Did she imagine the heat radiating off him as she brushed by?

Once below, she found her hammock but couldn’t sleep. Every time she shut her eyes, she pictured that taut chest, the sleek lines of his arms, the unspoken promise in his stare. Her anger at him twisted with a fierce, visceral need. The result left her pulse throbbing and her mind aflame with fantasies. *Stop*. She tried to recall the pain of her sister’s dying words, and tried to conjure tears. The tears wouldn’t come. Only the craving.

The next several days I tested them. The Jubilee sailed deeper into southern waters, weaving among small islands where Pavu’s scouts might lurk. Reece kept the crew busy with drills, forging them into a sharper, more cohesive force. Cassira participated in everything, from navigation checks to rigging repairs—though the bosun still shot her skeptical looks, perhaps unused to a woman with such surety.

Between her and Reece, the tension only grew. They sparred verbally over trifles, snapping at each other in a way the crew eventually chalked up to “Commander Reece is strict, that’s all.” But beneath every argument about a sail angle or the schedule of watch, an undeniable friction simmered—an undercurrent of wanting. Neither of them named it aloud, though Cassira suspected half the crew guessed something was off. She once overheard a deckhand whisper, “They’re like two storms about to collide,” to which another responded, “I’d watch that from a mile away.”

She couldn’t help the small flush of grim satisfaction, knowing she wasn’t imagining the effect. Yet, her frustration mounted each time Reece retreated behind formality. *He wants me but fights it*. She alternated between pity, annoyance, and her own stifled desire. Meanwhile, each moment she caught sight of his sweat-slicked forearms rolling up a rope, or the flex of his back beneath that uniform, her mind spun with possibilities.

One evening, she was helping reorganize the cordage locker at Reece's request—some flimsy pretext. The enclosed space, reeking of hemp and salt, forced them side by side. She brushed his hand as they both reached for the same coil. The jolt of contact made her gasp inwardly, and for a heartbeat, she thought he'd lean in. Instead, he jerked away, color high on his cheeks. *Damn him*. She ended up tossing the coil aside with more force than necessary.

On the sixth night out, the moon rose as a perfect silver crescent. The Jubilee glided through surprisingly calm seas. The crew was mostly at rest, except the skeleton watch. Cassira found her nerves wound tight, as though the quiet harbored some threat.

She lingered on the quarterdeck, scanning the horizon for lights or sails. Nothing. Her heart hammered anyway, weighed down by the mission's gravity—and an unbidden pang of yearning. She realized, with a start, that she was waiting for Reece. Hoping he'd appear. *Pathetic*. But her body had other plans.

True to form, his footfalls eventually reached her. She turned to see him ascending the steps, hair slightly disheveled from dozing or from a gust of wind. In the faint moonlight, he looked almost younger, less burdened. But the tension in his jaw never fully disappeared.

"You're up late," he said softly.

She forced a shrug. "It's hard to sleep. We're near those isles. And..." She broke off. Then, spurred by the hush of the night, she added, "Too many thoughts."

He came to stand beside her at the rail, arms braced, gaze fixed on the dark sea. "Me too."

They stood that way for a long moment, silent in the lull of warm wind. Cassira felt her skin prickle, aware of every inch of space between

them—and how easy it would be to close it. She thought of her vow: *Use him to forget your pain*. The idea made her stomach twist with guilt. But it also ignited a swirl of excitement. Perhaps they could help each other forget.

She sighed. “Reece, this mission... Do you ever wonder if it’s even worth it?”

His brow furrowed. “What do you mean?”

She turned to face him, letting the moonlight reveal the earnestness in her eyes. “What if we succeed, but it doesn’t fill the hole inside?” The words spilled out, raw. She pressed on before he could respond: “I want Pavu to pay for what they’ve done, but sometimes I think no victory will bring back—” Her throat closed. “Never mind.”

He shifted, gazing at her with an intensity that made her heart stutter. “I understand loss more than you think,” he murmured. “But duty... it’s all that’s kept me upright some days. Because if I let myself break, the pain would be unstoppable.”

She met his eyes. “So you bury it under obligation. And what happens when duty isn’t enough?”

His lips parted. He looked poised to speak a confession, but a flicker of hesitation stilled him. She waited, breath shallow. Then, almost imperceptibly, he reached out and touched her shoulder. A light brush—his fingertips just grazing the fabric of her shirt. Heat bloomed across her skin.

“Cassira,” he said, voice hoarse, “I’m not sure I have that answer.”

Her pulse thundered. She wanted to yank him closer, to see if his lips felt as warm as his hand. But Reece carefully dropped his arm. The moment shattered, leaving them both trembling, tension so thick she could practically taste it in the night air.

She glared at him, frustration and longing tangled in her chest. *We're both cowards.* She turned abruptly. "Fine," she muttered, voice shaking only a little. "If you won't give me answers, I'll find them myself."

He let out a ragged breath. "Cassira—"

But she was already striding away. If she stayed, she might do something foolish. And she wasn't sure if she wanted to see him reciprocate or pull away again.

Early the next evening, the wind died almost entirely, leaving the Jubilee adrift on a glassy sea. The crew grumbled about the calm, but Reece ordered them to wait for a fresh breeze. With so little movement, the heat grew stifling belowdecks, driving Cassira topside to catch any whisper of air.

She climbed the short ladder to the quarterdeck, only to find Reece leaning against the rail, jacket off, shirt half undone, sweat sheening on his chest. She froze, heart jarring. He glanced over, face unreadable. The lines of his torso, the cut of muscle across his shoulders—too many details crashed into her mind at once. *Stop staring.* She coughed, stepping forward.

He straightened, wiping sweat from his brow. "This cursed calm," he said, tone clipped, though she sensed the tension beneath. "We can't do anything but drift."

Cassira offered a terse nod, determined to show no sign of how his near-bare state affected her. But each breath lodged in her throat. The sun's dying rays turned everything gold, including the hollow of his throat, the faint trail of hair descending from his collarbone. She bit the inside of her cheek. She'd never realized how starved she was for touch—**his** touch—until right now.

"Why not let the men rest?" she suggested, voice tight. "We're not going anywhere soon."

He studied her, eyes flicking over her face, then lower—though not disrespectfully. The awareness in his gaze sent a thrill along her spine. “I’ve given them free time,” he replied, dropping his voice. “But I can’t rest. Not now.”

He stepped closer, the heat between them magnifying. Cassira forced a steady glare, ignoring the staccato in her pulse. “Neither can I.”

Silence. And in that silence, the unspoken tension roared. The weight of weeks: denial, banter, near-touches. She felt a tremor in her hands, half expecting him to retreat again. But he didn’t. Instead, he reached out, stopping an inch from her cheek. His breath hitched, caution warring with desire in his eyes.

“Cassira,” he whispered, the single word carrying a thousand confessions. “This isn’t... wise.”

“I stopped caring about ‘wise’ a long time ago,” she said, voice trembling with pent-up need. “I only care about what I want.” She swallowed, letting her guard slip enough to add, “And I do want you.” The confession ripped free, leaving her heart pounding in her throat.

His eyes flashed. For a moment, it seemed he’d crush his mouth to hers right then. Instead, with a groan that sounded like self-condemnation, he brushed his knuckles over her cheek. The barest caress, yet it ignited fireworks under her skin. She inhaled sharply, noticing every detail: the heat of his palm, the faint calluses from rope-work. A low ache coiled inside her, longing flaring so strongly her knees almost buckled.

He withdrew his hand, but not far. “Cassira, I—”

“Are you going to run again?” she challenged, voice raw. “Because if so, do it. I’m sick of dancing around this.”

He shuddered, eyes half-lidded. “No,” he muttered. “Not anymore.” His posture radiated wariness, but also surrender. “I can’t keep—myself—away from you.”

Heart pounding, she let out a shaky breath. The admission lit a spark of triumph and relief in her chest. “Then stop trying.”

Another charged second. He dipped his head forward until his forehead almost touched hers, breathing ragged. She swore she felt the brush of his lips ghost near her temple. “I... want you so much,” he whispered, the words husky. “And I hate myself for risking this mission—”

She silenced him by pressing a finger to his lips, pulse hammering. “We’ll worry about the consequences later,” she breathed. “We both need something. Let’s just... take it.”

He closed his eyes, exhaling a tremulous breath against her finger. Her own chest felt molten, desire pooling low in her belly. Her entire body clamored to taste him, to forget everything—vengeance, war, guilt—inside the heat of his arms.

“Tonight,” she said quietly, her heart thumping so wildly she feared he might hear it. “In my cabin... or yours... I don’t care.” She swallowed. “But no more running.”

His eyes snapped open, raw hunger shining there. “Tonight,” he repeated, voice almost strangled. “Yes.”

A swirl of triumph and raw need surged in her gut. She dropped her hand from his lips, stepping back, breathing unsteadily. *We’re doing this*. Lightning sizzled in the space between them, the promise sealed. She could see it in the tension of his shoulders, the stark desire carved into every line of his face.

Neither of them kissed, but the moment crackled with the same potency as if they had. She nodded curtly, forcing her posture steady. “Good.” Then, with all the bravado she could muster, she turned on her heel and descended the ladder to the main deck, heart thrashing. She felt his gaze on her the whole way down.

Cassira paced in her cabin. The sunset's glow bathed the small space in amber. Her mind spun, balancing roiling desire with a prickling sense of emotional risk. She'd admitted wanting him—craving him. She was about to let Reece see her unguarded, bare in more ways than one. A fierce twinge of fear and excitement warred inside her. *Is this foolish? Will it ruin everything?*

But she'd reached a breaking point. The longing in her body soared higher each time she recalled his low voice, the brush of his knuckles on her cheek. She'd use this, use **him**, to drown her pain for a night. Maybe more. So what? *Aren't we both living on borrowed time?*

She shed her salt-stained overshirt, leaving a simple linen undershirt clinging to her curves. The air felt too warm. Every minute crawled. *He said tonight.* The uncertain possibility gnawed at her—**would** he come? Or would he balk again?

Just then, a firm rap sounded on the cabin door, quick but not frantic. Her pulse surged. She took a bracing breath. The handle turned. *This is it.* The door cracked open, revealing Reece in the low lamplight, expression unreadable but eyes blazing. He stepped inside, softly closing the door behind him. The cabin felt smaller, claustrophobic with tension.

He stood there, chest rising and falling. His usual crisp composure frayed at the edges. She swallowed, heart pounding. She parted her lips, a million words swirling—taunts, confessions, demands. But none emerged. Instead, their gazes locked in a searing confrontation.

“I—” he began, then stopped. His chest rose with a ragged breath. “I meant what I said.”

Heat coiled in her belly, the final barrier of denial crumbling. She lifted her chin, voice hushed. “So did I.”

He took a slow step forward. Every nerve in her body sparked to life. She saw the tension in the set of his shoulders, the flush on his neck. *He's not running this time.* She almost let herself smile. *Finally,* She reached for him, fingertips grazing the open laces of his shirt. A tremor ran through him.

But right at that moment, an abrupt knock sounded at the door—rapid and sharp. Both of them froze. A muffled voice from outside: “Commander Reece, we need you on deck! There’s movement on the horizon!”

Curses. Reece’s head jerked in frustration. Cassira’s heart jolted. She forced a steady exhale. Duty, always duty. A flicker of dread that this might slip away again warred with the hot surge of impatience.

Reece ground his jaw, then looked at Cassira, the primal need in his gaze undiminished. “I... must see what it is. But—” He breathed unsteadily, scanning her face. “Wait for me. Please.”

Her throat went tight. She nodded, mind whirling. “I’ll wait.”

He lingered just long enough to brush a hand across her forearm, a single desperate contact. Then he spun, yanking open the door, stepping out with controlled haste. The hatch closed behind him, footsteps echoing in the corridor.

Cassira let out a shaky sigh, bracing her hands on the small desk. *Dammit. Always an interruption.* But a fierce resolution unfurled in her chest. *This time, nothing will keep me from finishing what we started.*

She would have him tonight. Or tomorrow, or whenever the watch concluded. The mission might be life or death, but in these stolen hours, they’d seize what solace they could. She inhaled, the ache in her body blazing, certain that soon—**very** soon—the line they’d refused to cross would vanish in the swirl of bare skin, sweat, and unspoken confessions.

She turned, adjusting the lamp's wick to a softer glow, heart hammering with anticipation. Outside, men shouted, rigging clattered, and the sea whispered an endless lullaby. In her mind's eye, she saw Reece's intense gray eyes, and felt the lingering warmth of his near-touch. The decision was made. *Yes. Let them chase illusions on the horizon. Let the night be ours when he returns.* The corners of her lips curved.

She settled onto the small bunk, tension coiling in every muscle. Just a matter of time now. Her blood pulsed in her ears, an electric crescendo. The war, the vengeance, the grief—all receded, overshadowed by one fiery, undeniable desire:

She'd have Reece. And then see if the hole in her heart felt any less gaping, even for a night.

Chapter 15: Sex

Whispered in the halls of the Imperial Court:

Ships sail for the glory of the empire, but captains sail for the glory of themselves.

Cassira had lost all track of how many times she'd paced the cramped length of her cabin, but every turn kept bringing her back to the same spot near the foot of her narrow bunk—a small island of relative calm in the dim lantern glow. The heavy hush of the Jubilee at night only seemed to amplify her restless energy: the soft groan of timber, the echo of water slapping the hull, the distant low voices of a skeleton crew. She could almost feel the boat breathe around her.

All of it reminded her how different this vessel was from the larger Alexandra, how intimately the Jubilee's every motion was felt. And how intimately she herself might be felt, once Reece returned. A shiver coursed through her at the thought. She pressed a hand to her chest, feeling her heart thrash under her palm, each beat a testament to the swirl of tension building inside her.

He'd promised to come, to finish what they'd started hours ago, before the interruption on deck demanded he see to some crisis. She'd almost cursed aloud when the knock cut through their charged silence, stealing him away just as they'd finally given voice to what had simmered between them for weeks. Every time she recalled the way he'd looked at her, eyes dark with unspoken hunger, she felt her pulse race anew. She wanted him desperately, enough that the adrenaline left her trembling. Another wave rocked the ship, and she braced herself against the bunk's edge, exhaling. Normally, she'd hate feeling so off-kilter, but tonight, the sway of the deck was part of a bigger anticipation. She glanced at the small mirror hanging from a crooked nail, noticing how the lantern's flicker cast her reflection in waves of light and shadow. She was still in her breeches and a loose shirt, but the top few buttons were undone, baring

the hollow of her throat. She considered tugging them open further. Did that look too obvious, too hungry?

She huffed a quiet laugh at herself. Since when had she worried about appealing to a man's eye? But Reece was no ordinary man, and these weren't normal circumstances. They were on the brink of a war, behind enemy lines in many ways, with vengeance fueling her blood. She'd told herself she could use him to forget her pain. But as the night wore on, she realized there was more to it: she wanted him, wanted the closeness, wanted his solid presence and all the heat that sizzled whenever they locked gazes.

Her pacing slowed when she heard the faintest scrape at the door. Her heart jolted. She rushed a step forward, halting abruptly to steady her breathing before calling out, "Yes?"

The handle turned, and Reece slipped inside, shutting the door gently behind him. His shoulders sagged with relief the moment it clicked shut, as though a massive weight had been sloughed off. In the softly wavering lantern light, she noted the faint flush on his cheeks, the salt-laced ends of his hair, and the way his shirt clung to the ridges of his torso. Across his left bicep and shoulder, she could see the tail ends of his swirling tattoos—a sea serpent coiling over a stylized wave, ink that looked faintly alive in the flickering shadows. He scanned the cramped cabin, gaze locking on her with a look that made every hair on her body stand on end.

"Cassira," he said, voice low, as though even speaking her name was charged with meaning. "I'm sorry I was gone so long. Had to settle a... problem." She swallowed, reading the tension in every line of his stance. He seemed ready to bolt or pounce, and she wasn't sure which would happen first.

"Everything all right?" she asked, half to break the silence, half to confirm there'd be no more interruptions.

He nodded curtly. “No major threat. The men know not to disturb me again unless the entire ship’s in peril. From the look I gave one of the officers, they might not stop this even if the ship rolls right over.”

A jolt of excitement coursed through her. She nodded, letting out a breath she hadn’t realized she was holding. “Good,” she managed. “I didn’t want to wait... any longer.”

His lips parted, eyes raking down her body in a silent question: Are we truly doing this? One heartbeat passed, then another. She saw the moment he decided. He crossed the small space in two strides, and she stepped forward to meet him, their bodies colliding in a heady rush of heat. The first kiss landed messy and urgent, their mouths tangling at an angle that missed the perfect connection, but neither cared. The muffled gasp she gave spurred him on, and he angled his head to deepen the kiss, breath catching as her hands latched onto his arms.

She felt the firm swell of muscle beneath his shirt, the slickness of salt spray from an evening spent commanding men on deck. The taste of the sea, plus something distinctly him, filled her senses. A raw hunger flared in her belly, mingling with relief. At last. She let a soft moan slip into his mouth, and he responded with a groan that seemed to come from deep in his chest. The force of it made her knees wobble.

He tore his lips away, breath ragged, staring at her as if needing confirmation. She gripped the collar of his shirt and gave a small tug, heart hammering. “Yes,” she said, barely above a whisper. “Whatever... we started, let’s finish it.” A faint tremor belied how desperately she needed that completion, needed to share her body with him, if only to chase away the shadows of everything else.

He hissed a quiet exhale, stepping even closer so their hips aligned, pressing a tantalizing ridge of hardness against her belly. “I can’t stop thinking about you,” he rasped, voice laden with guilt and desire all at once. “Duty... revenge... none of it can overshadow this for me right now.”

She shivered, the admission stoking her own flames higher. “Then don’t overshadow it. Just... be here.” She raised onto her toes and kissed him again, letting her tongue slide along his lower lip, coaxing him deeper. He groaned, hands clasping her waist, and she gasped as he lifted her enough that her toes barely brushed the floor. Instinctively, she wound her arms around his shoulders, feeling the taut lines of his neck and the faint tickle of his hair against her wrists.

He backed her toward the bunk, each step bumping them against a crate or the wall, but they kept kissing, a delirious tangle of mouths. Her breath hitched each time his hand slipped under the hem of her shirt, skimming bare skin. When they finally reached the bunk, she let out a small laugh at how narrow it looked. “We might break it,” she teased, heart pounding.

“I don’t fucking care,” he said hoarsely. The flush that tinted his cheeks told her he was only half joking. In one fluid motion, he eased her onto the bed, kneeling at the edge, his gaze devouring her form. She propped herself on her elbows, realizing that she was panting, face flushed with anticipation. The sight of him kneeling between her legs, shirt rumpled, chest heaving, made her core clench.

She reached for the topmost button of her shirt, fumbling to open it further. He placed a gentle hand over hers, eyes locked on hers as he helped with the last few. When the fabric parted, the lantern light grazed her bare skin, and she saw him swallow hard. A flicker of self-consciousness nudged her—scars of old scrapes, faint bruises from life at sea—but the way he looked at her banished any doubt. He pushed the fabric off her shoulders, and she let him, arching slightly so he could pull it free.

His gaze fell to her breasts, naked and pebbled in the slight chill of the cabin air. He exhaled a wavering breath, lifting his hands to cup them gently. The warmth of his palms made her gasp, nipples tightening under his touch. “Gods, you’re beautiful,” he said, voice rough as though unused

to such honesty. She felt a surge of tenderness mingle with the arousal. She reached up, tangling a hand in the hair at his nape, pulling him down for another kiss.

While their mouths merged, his fingers teased across her breasts, coaxing soft cries from her throat. She let herself be immersed in the sensation, the swirl of lust that drew molten heat to her lower belly. When he broke the kiss to trail his mouth along her jaw, her neck, then lower, she gasped at the softness of his lips and the scrape of faint stubble. She pressed her head back against the bunk, breathing raggedly, as his lips found one breast, tongue flicking over the peak. A jolt of pleasure ricocheted through her, and she clenched her legs around his waist. He let out a low groan, responding by lavishing more attention, switching sides, his breath unsteady between each pass of his tongue.

She felt dizzy with desire, the tension in her core mounting swiftly. She slid one leg around his hip, coaxing him to shift closer. His hand slipped along her thigh, finding the waistband of her breeches. She nodded wordlessly, arching her pelvis so he could undo the ties. Each small gesture sent ripples of excitement through her body. She reached for his shirt, yanking it up, and he relented, pulling it off over his head. At last, she saw the full sprawl of his tattoos across his torso and shoulder—serpents, storms, waves in swirling black lines that accentuated the lean planes of muscle. She caught her breath at how vital he looked, how battered by a life at sea yet unbroken.

He let the shirt fall somewhere behind him, leaning forward again to kiss her collarbone, her sternum. She moaned softly, lost in the sensation. His hands returned to her breeches, slowly working them down her hips. The moment the fabric slid below her buttocks, she felt the cool air brush her heated skin, a contrast that made her squirm. She wanted them off—wanted everything off—so she lifted her hips, helping him drag the garment down her legs until her entire lower half was exposed. For a beat, he hovered, taking in the sight of her spread beneath him, wearing nothing but the sheen of sweat and the flush of arousal. A tremor passed through him, and she watched the lines of his tattoos shift with the flex of

his arms. “Cassira...” he said again, voice strangled. “You have no idea how badly I want you.”

She reached down, hooking her fingers into his waistband, returning the favor. He huffed a breathy laugh, shifting so she could unfasten him. She struggled with the ties for a moment, her hands shaking. He steadied her, murmuring curses under his breath until at last the fabric loosened. He pushed down his trousers, freeing the solid length of his erection, which sprang up thick and rigid. A dizzy wave of need made her core clench, warmth pooling between her thighs. She couldn’t help letting her gaze linger, swallowing hard. “Looks like I have some idea,” she whispered, a brazen quip, voice quivering.

He emitted a low sound of amusement and longing in one. Then he crawled onto the bunk fully, pressing his body to hers, and the sensation of bare skin on bare skin sent her reeling. They kissed again, fiercely, tongues tangling. Her breasts pressed to his chest, and she moaned at the friction. The cramped bunk wobbled beneath them, a faint squeak from the wood as they settled. She draped one leg around his waist, feeling the velvety hardness of him against her lower belly. Each brush made her gasp, heightened by the memory of how close they’d come to losing this moment.

Reece lowered his hand between their bodies, parting her thighs gently. She parted them further, inviting him, and nearly cried out when his fingers slid through her wetness. He stroked in a careful rhythm, exploring her folds until her breath caught in her throat. She dug her nails lightly into his back, the sheer pleasure almost too much. His mouth traveled to her neck, peppering kisses and soft bites, while his hand played over her center, pressing circles that wracked her with tremors.

“Let go,” he whispered, breath fanning her ear. “I’ll catch you.” The promise, simple and earnest, shattered her last restraint. She buried her face against his shoulder, muffling the moan that threatened to spill. Her body tensed as a wave of sensation spiraled into sweet release. She rode out the orgasm in silent shudders, clinging to his tattooed arms, feeling

him coax her through each pulse. It was a staggering rush, far stronger than she'd expected. She could barely breathe.

When the spasms subsided, she glanced up at him, chest heaving. He was watching her with something akin to awe. She cupped his jaw, pulling him down into a languid kiss, tasting the salt of her own sweat on his lips. The hunger still burned, unquenched. She needed more, needed to take him fully. By the wildness in his gaze, he felt the same.

She shifted, guiding him until he poised himself between her legs, tip nudging her entrance. A heartbeat passed where they stared into each other's eyes—her hair clinging to her forehead, his breath shallow. Then, with a mutual push, he slid inside, a slow, careful entry that drew a ragged groan from both of them. The stretch filled her senses, lighting every nerve in her body with electricity. He sank deeper, breath hissing, until he was fully sheathed. The intimacy of it left her panting, overwhelmed by pleasure and the faint bite of pressure. She clutched at his shoulders, nails grazing the inky lines, half-lost in sensation.

He began to move, shallow thrusts at first, as though testing their alignment in the precariously narrow bunk. She responded instinctively, rolling her hips up, meeting his rhythm. Their mouths found each other again in a sloppy kiss, teeth scraping, tongues tangling, a fusion of frantic longing and hard-won relief. The bunk creaked in protest, but neither slowed.

Her blood roared in her ears. She raked her hands down his back, feeling his muscles bunch with each thrust. "Cassira," he growled against her throat, half warning, half plea. His pace quickened, driving him deeper, each stroke sending sparks across her vision. She clung to him, keening softly as pleasure mounted anew. She couldn't believe how quickly her body responded—still tender from the first climax, but greedy for more.

They fell into a primal dance, each motion syncing with the other. He braced a hand near her head, the other gripping her thigh to angle her

hips perfectly. She cried out when he struck a spot that made her arch hard. He latched onto that reaction, focusing his thrusts to coax the same response again and again until she was half delirious, nails carving crescents into his skin. A buzzing need coiled at her core, poised on the brink once more.

His breath rasped in her ear, hot and urgent. She captured his mouth, swallowing his groans. The friction of his body sliding in and out, the slap of skin, the humid closeness of the cabin—every detail merged into a dizzying high. His pace turned frantic, his control fraying as he battered her senses. She loved that she could unravel him this way. Each time he moaned her name or gasped for breath, it stoked her desire.

She felt him slip a hand between their bodies, finding the spot that made her quake. The added stimulation tore an inarticulate cry from her. Pleasure flooded her nerves, building in waves too strong to contain. She braced her heels on his calves, pushing him deeper, and that final push broke her. Her second orgasm crashed over her, a crest of white-hot rapture that stole her voice. She twisted under him, biting her lip to stifle a wail, body clenching around his length.

That was all it took for him to follow. With a ragged groan, he let go, driving into her in shuddering thrusts. She felt his release surge, warmth blooming deep inside. The force of it sent aftershocks rolling through her muscles. He dropped his forehead against hers, breath rasping, sweat dripping from his temple. They clung there, locked in the throes of shared ecstasy, hearts hammering in wild tandem.

Long moments passed before either moved. Their chests rose and fell in sync, the bunk's squeaking finally slowing. Her limbs felt boneless, trembling with the echoes of pleasure. Reece exhaled a shaky laugh that vibrated against her ear, and she managed a breathless smile in return. The mix of heat, salt, and sated desire cloaked the cabin in a heady haze. She felt him slip free, oversensitivity making her gasp at the shift, and he murmured a soft apology.

He nearly collapsed beside her, catching himself at the last second so he could ease down gently. The bunk was definitely not made for two, but they made it work—she shifted sideways, pressing against the wall, and he slid in behind her. The thin blanket ended up half-tangled around her ankles, but she didn't mind the slight chill. He curled an arm over her waist, nestling his chest to her back. The raw intimacy of the moment stole her breath anew.

For a while, neither spoke. She focused on the steady thud of his heartbeat against her spine, the rasp of his breathing. Her own heart refused to slow, as though in disbelief of what they'd done. Vengeance, duty, war—none of it intruded yet. She let the warmth of the afterglow wrap her in a kind of dreamy haze.

Eventually, Reece pressed a faint kiss to her shoulder, voice husky. "Are you... all right?" He traced a line on her upper arm, a gentle, lazy stroke that made her eyelids heavy with contentment.

She hummed, turning slightly to meet his gaze. "I'm wonderful," she whispered, though that word felt too small. Her body was sated in a way she hadn't known she could crave. The swirl of old grief still lingered somewhere in her, but for now, it was muted, overshadowed by the comfort of his arms. She found herself trailing fingertips across his forearm, marveling at the ink patterns there.

A thin tension coiled in his posture, though. She sensed it. Leaning up, she brushed her lips across his jaw, hoping to soothe whatever worry brewed. "Don't regret it, Reece," she urged quietly. "Don't let duty steal this away the instant we catch our breath."

He let out a soft, shaky laugh, forehead crinkling. "I'm not sure I can regret it," he admitted, voice full of that earnest honesty she found so endearing. "I just never expected to find... comfort... in the midst of all this chaos." His arm tightened around her. "But I need to figure out what it means for us. I can't just be... your distraction."

Her heart twitched at the faint vulnerability in his tone. She turned fully, pressing a palm to his cheek, forcing him to meet her eyes. “You’re not just a distraction. I wanted this.” A half-smile tugged at her lips, equal parts teasing and tender. “If it also helps me sleep instead of thinking about bloodshed every hour, then that’s a bonus.”

His eyes softened. “Then let’s call it a bonus,” he murmured. With a slight tilt of his head, he captured her lips in a slower, more tender kiss, less frantic than before but no less charged. She melted into it, the taste of him now comforting rather than urgent.

They broke apart gradually, the tension defused into a softer intimacy. She shuffled in closer, letting him spoon her, pressing her back to his chest. The bunk squeaked in protest, but she found it almost endearing. His warm breath skimmed the nape of her neck. She felt the soft brush of his knuckles near her abdomen, absent-mindedly tracing circles.

Her limbs felt heavy and sated, the ache of her spent desire mingling with a comfortable weariness. Sleep tugged at her, but she was reluctant to slip under without savoring these final moments. The memory of their coupling—his body filling hers, the ragged pleas they’d uttered, the crash of shared release—rolled through her mind. A flush reignited in her cheeks. She’d never had a partner who’d driven her to such extremes. Or one who’d so gently caught her afterwards.

“Cassira,” he whispered, his tone pensive. “Thank you for letting me be... whoever I am right now.” A note of self-consciousness colored his words, as if he feared she’d dismiss him. “I know I play at being the unshakable officer, but I— you see me in ways I’m not used to.”

She breathed out, tangling her fingers with his. “I see you, Reece,” she echoed. The admission felt raw. “And you see me, with all my fury and grief. Maybe it’s enough to help us both.” She didn’t add that she had no illusions that night could magically fix her vendetta. But maybe it could keep her sane.

He pressed a firm kiss to her shoulder, then another to the crook of her neck, and she felt her body respond, a stirring that threatened to stoke more flames. But exhaustion was real, and the day had been long. For now, she let the sweet ache of satiation lull her.

She closed her eyes, letting the lull of the ship's motion meld with Reece's warm presence. The voices above decks had faded into near silence, the sea hushed under the star-swept sky. She felt his breathing slow, tangling with hers, hearts still beating in a quieter harmony. Tomorrow, duty would call, vengeance would beckon, and the mission would loom. But tonight, she allowed herself this stolen oasis of closeness and pleasure. She let her mind drift, chest loosening from the constant coil of tension. Reece's arm around her waist was an anchor she'd never expected to crave.

Moments later, she was nearly dozing when his arm tightened slightly, pulling her more snugly against his chest. A languid smile tugged at her lips. She murmured something unintelligible in acceptance, and he answered with a soft hum, his breath fanning her ear. There was a sense of fragile peace that she wanted to hold onto, if only for a few hours. As the final edges of consciousness faded, she reflected on how strange it was that she could find solace—and such explosive passion—in the arms of a man she'd once viewed as merely an obstacle or an ally of circumstance. But perhaps that was how life at sea worked, forging bonds in the midst of storms. She breathed deeply, inhaling his scent, letting her exhaustion wash over her at last.

Eventually, sleep claimed them both, bodies entwined on a bunk that felt far too small for two souls with so much baggage. Yet they fit, pressed together in the tight space. The oil lamp flickered low, guttering, until only a faint glow remained, painting their tangled silhouettes in a warm haze.

Outside, the Jubilee creaked softly, carrying them toward unknown waters, but for this single night, war and vengeance lay overshadowed by

the lingering taste of each other's skin and the promise they'd found in one another's arms.

Chapter 16: On the point

Lecture Notes, School for Political Officers – Master Orven Salk

You will be told to trust your captain. You will be told he is the only one who can keep you alive at sea. This is a half-truth. He will keep you alive only so long as it serves his orders. When those orders change, your survival will be weighed against his career. You must make sure the scales never tip against you.

The Imperial fleet rode before the wind, stretched across the northern horizon like a wall of steel and canvas. Twelve ships of the line, their gun decks bristling, cut through the waves in formation. Thirty frigates moved among them, wolves among lions, spread to screen the vulnerable transports behind. Two hundred and fifty merchant hulls bobbed under the protection of Imperial guns, heavy with men, powder, and supplies for the northern campaign.

Captain Henry stood firm at the quarterdeck rail of Alexandra, his gaze fixed ahead. He felt the steady thrum of the ship beneath him, a heartbeat of timber and canvas. Aft, the rising sun turned the sky the color of bloodied iron. Ahead lay the straits—and the enemy.

To the untrained eye, the enemy fleet appeared an unbroken wall of hulls and masts. But Henry saw the gaps, the indecision in their ranks. The Pavuan fleet—ten ships of the line, each an equal match to the Imperials—held the center but made no move to close the gap. The remaining twenty-five frigates, scattered across their respective patrol zones, hesitated.

On Alexandra's deck, Acting First Lieutenant Dane adjusted his spyglass. "Pavu's staying back, sir," he murmured. "No signal to advance."

Henry nodded. "They're waiting for someone else to take the first blow."

Alfin Chapman, ever at Henry's side, exhaled sharply. "They don't need to fight. This fleet here is less than half of the total sent to blockade. Their plan is to hit us on the way back. If the rest of the blockade holds, they win without firing a shot."

Henry's jaw tightened. "Then let's make sure they fire a shot."

A signal gun cracked from the flagship, Imperia. Red pennants fluttered until a midshipman approached the quarterdeck. "Message from flag sir".

"Read it out" said Henry, not removing his eye from his spyglass.

"Engage the enemy". The midshipman blankly read. Alfin scoffed at this order.

"Brilliant order. I was thinking we would smile at them."

The Imperial battle line adjusted course, following dutifully behind Imperia, bearing down on the nearest enemy division: a contingent of four ships under the banner of the Free Cities. Their commander hesitated, their ships unsure whether to hold the line or fall back toward the Pavuans. That hesitation sealed their fate.

Within minutes, Imperia's broadside ripped through the Free City flagship, stuck in irons as she could not reply, tearing open her gun deck. The second ship in the line turned to flee, exposing her vulnerable stern to the next Imperial ship, the Thunderer, which raked her with precision. Splintered wood and screams carried on the wind.

Henry watched the enemy reaction closely. The Pavuan ships remained unmoving, their captains content to let their supposed allies be torn apart. Further down the line, an Althoran brig and a Kronnish frigate exchanged confused signals, unsure whether to advance or withdraw.

"This is a rout waiting to happen," Henry muttered.

Alfin crossed his arms. "Then why doesn't it feel right?"

Henry understood his meaning. A battle so one-sided, so disorganized—it felt engineered. But by whom? Henry had no time to dwell on it. A trio of enemy frigates had broken off, moving fast to intercept the Imperial

convoy. Alexandra, part of the screening force, was already adjusting course to meet them.

“Beat to quarters,” Henry ordered.

Drums rattled. The deck transformed in moments—marines formed ranks, powder monkeys scurried, gunners loaded their weapons. The rigging swarmed with men, trimming the sail for maximum maneuverability.

The lead enemy frigate, Windrider, bore down on them, her guns running out. Alexandra and four others had broken from their screen to engage. It wouldn’t be a fair fight, but that was certainly the best fight to have. Henry waited until the range was right, then snapped, “Fire as you bear!”

Alexandra’s broadside thundered, belching smoke and flame. The enemy’s forward gun deck disintegrated, men and iron tumbling into the sea. The frigate astern of Alexandra had roared as well, and two masts of the enemy simply vanished as though cut by a puppetmaster. One of the very few returning shots by whoever this enemy ship was managed to sever a topmast of Alexandra, while debris clattered to the deck, impaling one poor sailor. Henry caught himself against the wheel as the ship bucked. Dane was already shouting orders to clear the wreckage. The second enemy frigate, Stormborn might be her name, was angling to cross their bow.

Henry saw it coming. “Hard to starboard! Bring us across her beam!”

The helmsman spun the wheel. Alexandra heeled sharply, cutting across Stormborn’s course. Another broadside roared, splinters flying. The enemy ship staggered, her foremast shearing away. The first enemy, crippled, tried to veer off, only for a pursuing Imperial frigate to close in and finish the job. The third enemy ship wisely turned and ran, two imperial ships cutting off their pursuit to turn back for the convoy.

Henry took a breath. First engagement won.

Alfin clapped him on the shoulder. “Well fought.”

Henry wasn't so sure. This was still too easy.

Across the straits, enemy formations collapsed. One after another, squadrons turned away, disengaging. The Free Cities fleet was all but shattered. The Althorans, seeing their allies withdraw, signaled for retreat. The Kronnish captains argued—some turning to flee, others holding position. Two of their number paid for their indecision with fire and steel.

Only Pavu remained untouched. Their line of battle remained intact, unchallenged, watching from a distance.

Henry lowered his spyglass. "They never intended to fight."

Alfin's expression darkened. "This was a show. A bloodletting to prove the Imperials are unstoppable."

"What, they wanted us to win here? That's foolish. To what purpose?"
Alfin didn't answer, striding belowdecks like a shadow before the sun.

On the flagship *Imperia*, Admiral Rampart's flag signaled victory. He was already celebrating. Without looking, Henry could tell that liquor had been brought up on almost every ship in the fleet. The party might well continue all night as the fleet reformed headed north to the rich gunpowder isles. Officers on all ships were cheering. Henry was not. The Imperials had won—but only because their enemies had let them.

As the Imperial fleet reformed, escorting the now-secure transports north, Henry watched the retreating ships vanish over the horizon. Among them, the Pavuan fleet sailed in perfect order, untouched, unstained by battle.

Chapter 17: Attack

Sailor's Proverb, Source Disputed

A storm will strip a man to his bones, but a lie will strip him to his soul.

The bright full moon hung heavy over the city of Pavu, a silver eye casting pale light upon the harbor's still waters. The sea, as if in anticipation, lay quiet, reflecting the ordered rows of anchored ships and the towering silhouette of the fortified sea wall that had kept enemies at bay for generations. But tonight, that wall would be breached—not by force, but by precision.

But for much of the night, the business was only of pleasure. Men from a dozen cities worked their way through the pleasure and gambling houses, losing just as much money at one as the next. Songs drifted up through the tightly winding streets, echoing against the rock as the sailors enjoyed the night, while the townsfolk, well used to this behavior, tried to sleep on.

The longboats slipped through the harbor mouth like shadows, their oars dipping into the water in perfect rhythm, muffled against the wooden locks with cloth and oakum to keep them from betraying their approach. Any guardsman on the sea gate had been taken quickly down an hour before by men of the Imperial Guard, specially trained men for actions just like these. Each boat carried Imperial Marines and army sappers, their faces blackened with soot, their hands steady despite the knowledge that they stood upon the precipice of war.

There had been whispers that Pavu expected an attack, but the absence of patrols spoke of complacency. That should have set the soldiers on edge, but instead, it emboldened them.

The first boots hit the stonework of the sea wall. Ropes hissed against rock as grappling hooks dug deep into mortar, and within moments, silent figures swarmed over the battlements, pressing against the parapets. No alarm had been raised. No horns had sounded. Men climbed up the wall to

see every thirty or so yards an imperial guardsman, identifiable from the plumage on his old style helmet, who had secured their approach.

The saboteurs moved as one, fanning out across the narrow walkways toward the sea gate's massive mechanisms. This was their priority—the iron gates that controlled entry into the harbor, a marvel of engineering that had allowed Pavu's navy to rule the northern seas uncontested, and remain safely in port even with a full tempest outside.

Charges were set. Carefully, precisely. The saboteurs worked quickly, fusing gunpowder with oil-drenched ropes, ensuring the detonation would destroy the gate's locking mechanisms without risking a chain explosion that might level the city.

A single whistle from the shadows signaled the retreat.

They faded into the darkness, the flames licking at their work. A second whistle. A match was struck.

The explosion split the night in two, a crack of thunder against stone. The sea gate trembled, the iron warped and shattered, twisted beyond repair. The blast echoed through the harbor, and still—no alarm, no rush of soldiers to repel the assault. While the city began to awaken at the blast, it was not an immediate military counterattack. This was the response of people looking to see which damn fool had started an accident.

Further along the waterfront, another unit had begun its own work. The dockyards stretched for miles, wooden piers extending into the water like fingers reaching for the trade vessels that lined them. Warehouses loomed beyond, filled with stores of sailcloth, cordage, and naval provisions that had supplied the Pavuan fleet for generations, and had been sold at considerable markup to neighboring cities.

Teams of soldiers moved like phantoms through the rows of supply houses, setting fires in calculated positions. The goal was not devastation, but precision—the destruction of key supplies, the kind that would take months, even years, to replenish.

Sails caught first. Then the barrels of tar. Then the rope stores.

By the time the first flames licked at the rooftops, the soldiers were already withdrawing, the air thick with the scent of burning pitch. The fire would do its work without their supervision.

And still—no army arrived. Men from the ships moored tried to respond, firing and hitting an occasional marine, but fearful for their ships, they began to hunker down on their decks, islands of calm while the docks burned.

The attack spilled beyond the docks. Smoke curled over the city's rooftops as the fire spread, leaping from warehouse to adjacent structures, touching the lower merchant quarters. Yet still, there was no rush of guards, no organized response. The fire brigade and the city's watch were the only reply, and when they came, they found nearly deserted streets as the imperials moved quickly on. Instead of fighting the enemy that had broken down the door, they merely fought the fire.

A few scattered citizens, woken by the sound of destruction, stumbled into the streets. They did not scream. They did not fight. They watched, as though uncertain whether they were truly awake.

It was wrong. **All of it was wrong.**

By now, the attackers should have been fighting through resistance, ducking cannon fire from the forts, dodging rifle volleys from city walls. Instead, the silence stretched, broken only by the crackling of fire and the rhythmic crash of waves against the stone piers.

A cold sensation trickled down the spine of the soldiers. **Why had Pavu not fought?**

The retreat was as meticulously planned as the assault. The longboats had been burned upon landing, ensuring there would be no second thoughts, no path but forward. The men sprinted back toward the high walls, scaling them with practiced efficiency before dropping onto the decks of the waiting brigs and frigates beyond.

The signal was given. The mooring lines were cut.

Sails unfurled.

And as the Imperial forces slipped back into the night, Pavu burned behind them.

Every mission objective had been reached, and the raiders had suffered less than one percent casualties. A God striking at the city from their air could not have had more success.

High above, in the tallest tower of the royal palace, a solitary figure stood at the balcony.

The Princess of Pavu watched the city burn, the flames reflecting in her eyes like dying stars.

She did not shout for her guards. She did not flee.

She simply watched.

And she smiled.

Chapter 18: On the point

From “A Treatise on Maritime Supply Lines,” Imperial War College

The empire’s reach is no stronger than the rope that ties ship to dock. A frayed line, whether of hemp or loyalty, must be mended at once—or cut, before it drags the ship under.

Cassira braced herself against the cannon’s recoil, her boots digging into the rocky ground as the barrel belched smoke and fire. The cannon lurched backwards while she plugged her ears, as she had done almost every minute to the second for more than an hour. The Jubilee’s makeshift battery of three long nines had been pounding Pavu’s harbor for hours now, raining destruction on the docks below. Cassira could feel every impact in her bones, the distant crash of stone and wood splintering in the city carrying back to them like the crack of a whip.

Commander Reece and Admiral Rampart’s plan was working so far. The fleet had recovered their raiders just before daybreak, and an hour after first light, Reece and Cassira were ready to fire on the city to hinder their repairs. In daylight, seaman and repair parties had come out of the untouched upper city, away from the quaysides, to start work clearing the mess, only to run for cover under the unexpected cannonfire from one of the city’s normally protective cliffs. Two seamen’s broken bodies from falling off the cliffs had been brought back to Jubilee, while the remainder of the landing party had managed, barely, to scale the cliffs and use pulleys to haul up cannons and supplies.

It had taken all night to haul up the three cannons, and their supporting supplies up the face of the cliff. The smoke from their position was choking, the air thick with the sharp tang of salt and gunpowder. The cannon crew moved with well-practiced efficiency: one man swabbed the barrel with a damp sponge, another rammed the charge home, and a third loaded the cannonball. The gun captain barked orders, timing each shot to

maximize accuracy as they methodically reduced the Pavuese defenses to rubble.

Cassira wiped soot from her face with her sleeve, her hand trembling faintly. Her heart still hammered from the chaos of the bombardment, though she'd never let anyone see it. Her hair clung to her neck and temples, damp with sweat and salty mist. She hated how much she felt alive in moments like these—hated how the cannon's roar drowned out the pain that always lingered just beneath the surface. Reece's voice cut through the chaos like a whip. "Keep the range steady! Don't waste your shot!"

He stood a dozen paces away, his lean figure outlined against the sea and sky. His coat was unbuttoned, sleeves rolled up, revealing forearms taut with muscle and dusted faintly with dark hair. Even as the wind whipped around him, teasing the strands of his dark hair into disarray, his posture was unshakable, commanding. He looked every inch the officer—and every inch the man who had unraveled her last night. Cassira cursed herself for letting her thoughts stray. For the way her body still hummed with the memory of his touch. She could still feel his hands on her skin, his lips tracing paths that had left her gasping. The heat that burned between them had been all-consuming, but now, in the cold light of day, it felt like a weakness. One she couldn't afford.

He glanced her way, his gaze locking on hers for a moment too long before he turned back to the crew. She felt exposed under his stare, as if he could read every thought that flickered through her mind. The way his shirt clung to his chest didn't help. Nor did the faint lines of ink she knew lay just beneath the fabric—those damn tattoos she had traced with her fingers in the dark.

Focus, Cassira. Focus on the mission.

The gun captain raised his voice. "Loaded and primed, sir! Ready to fire!"

“Fire,” Reece ordered, his voice steady. The cannon bucked as the shot flew, the recoil jarring the carriage back on its wheels. Smoke rolled over the cliffs again, thick and acrid, curling into the air like an omen. Cassira turned her gaze back to the city below, squinting against the haze. Fires raged across the waterfront. Ships burned at anchor, their masts collapsing into the sea. But something caught her eye amid the chaos—a group of figures moving toward the cliffs. She stiffened, recognizing the white flag they carried.

“Delegation,” she said, her voice cold.

Reece strode over to her, his face hard as stone. “Damn it,” he muttered. “Hold fire on the docks. Keep the city pinned, but not a shot near the delegation.”

She raised an eyebrow, her lips curling in disdain. “You’re stopping for a parley? After this?”

He didn’t answer, his jaw tightening as he turned to the battery. “Adjust your aim! Keep them off balance, but don’t touch the delegates.” The men obeyed, and Cassira crossed her arms, seething. She watched as the delegation climbed the narrow switchback path toward their position. Twelve figures, mostly unarmed, though a few carried sidearms at their hips. And there, in the center, stood *him*. The Bear Man.

Her blood turned to fire. The sight of that hulking brute, his massive shoulders and brutish face, made her stomach twist with rage. He was the one responsible for her family’s death—the monster who had done the princess’s dirty work without hesitation. Her hand drifted to the pistol at her hip. Cassira’s fingers brushed the worn grip of her pistol, the cool metal grounding her in the chaos of her fury. She knew that face. Knew it better than she knew her own reflection.

The Bear Man.

The butcher of Taruca. The monster who had laughed as her sister bled out on the stone floor. The man who had taken everything from her, who had turned her world to ash and bone. And now, under the mockery of a white flag, he dared approach like he was worthy of parley? Like he was worthy of anything but a bullet?

Cassira's pulse pounded in her ears. Her vision narrowed until all she could see was him.

He's right there.

A single shot. A clean, beautiful shot, and justice—real, burning justice—would finally be hers.

She pulled the pistol from its holster.

Behind her, Reece was still issuing orders to the gunners, still keeping the bombardment in check. He hadn't noticed. Not yet.

Her fingers tightened on the trigger.

One shot. That was all.

She raised the pistol, heart hammering in her chest. The Bear Man was halfway up the path now, the wind stirring the tattered coat draped over his broad shoulders. His scarred face was turned toward the cliffs, scanning for their position. If she fired now, he wouldn't even see it coming.

Her breath came fast. She curled her finger—

A hand seized her wrist.

Hard.

Pain lanced up her arm as Reece's grip crushed down, his fingers steel around her bones. His voice was a sharp whisper, edged with fury.

"Stand down."

She wrenched against him, but he didn't let go.

"Let. Me. Go."

"Put the damn gun down, Cassira." His grip tightened. His body was close, too close, his breath hot against her ear. "This isn't justice."

The rage inside her ignited.

"That man murdered my family!" she hissed, shoving against him. "He should be dead! You know he should be dead!"

"Not like this." His voice was raw, quiet but firm. "Not under a flag of truce."

She laughed—sharp, bitter, disbelieving. "You think he cares about a flag?" She tore her wrist free, took a step back, and leveled the pistol at the Bear Man's massive form. "I don't care about your rules, Reece. Not when it's him."

"Cassira." His voice was lower now, strained. A warning.

But she didn't hear it.

Didn't want to hear it.

She pulled the trigger.

The shot cracked like a whip through the air, slicing through the howl of the wind, the distant roar of cannon fire. The recoil jolted through her arm, but she barely felt it.

Below, the delegation scattered in panic. The Bear Man dove to the side, and Cassira's stomach twisted in rage as the shot missed its mark, striking the rocky path near his feet. Damn it! She reloaded, her fingers moving fast, ready to fire again, to correct her mistake—

But Reece was already on her.

He shoved her back, hard enough that she staggered, her boots slipping against the dust of the cliffside. Her pistol was ripped from her grip and tossed aside.

She turned on him, her breath ragged, her body shaking with fury.
“You—”

“Enough.” His voice was deathly quiet.

The weight of it hit her harder than any shove.

Cassira looked at him, really looked at him, and something in her gut twisted.

Reece wasn’t just angry. He wasn’t just furious.

He was done.

The Reece she knew—the man who had kissed her senseless in the dark, who had whispered her name like it was something precious, who had looked at her with fire in his eyes—was gone.

What was left in his place was a commander. A soldier.

And he was looking at her like she was his enemy.

Cassira’s breath hitched, but she refused to back down. “I had the shot.”

His jaw clenched, muscle ticking. “And you disobeyed my orders.”

“He deserved it!”

Reece’s eyes burned. “And so do a lot of men. But we don’t break the damn rules because of it.”

Cassira let out a sharp laugh. “You’re protecting him? That *thing*? After everything you’ve lost? After everything they did?”

His expression darkened, a storm breaking across his face. “I am protecting *us*. The crew. The mission. The *Empire*. You think I don’t want him dead? You think I don’t dream of putting a blade through his throat?”

Cassira stilled.

Reece took a step closer, his voice dangerously low. “But there’s a difference between vengeance and justice, Cassira. And today, you just became the very thing we’re fighting against.”

The words sliced through her like a blade.

The Bear Man was stumbling back to his feet now, his men pulling him away, up the switchback path. The white flag still hung limp in the wind. A truce, broken.

And Cassira had broken it.

Reece’s chest rose and fell, his breath coming hard. Then, without looking at her, he turned. “Tell all of the gunners,” he ordered to a nearby officer. “Tell them the parley delegation is leaving. No further action against them.”

Cassira’s throat closed. “You’re letting him go?”

Reece didn’t even look at her. “I have to. We broke the truce. He leaves. That’s the price.”

She stared at him, horror rising in her chest. “Reece, you *can’t*.”

His jaw was like stone. “I *have to*.”

Something inside Cassira cracked. This wasn’t how it was supposed to go. She had spent *years* building toward this moment. And now, after everything, the man who had slaughtered her family was walking away—because of Reece. Because of the man she had trusted. The man she had let into her heart, into her *bed*. A new kind of fury burned through her—hot, raw, betrayed.

Her voice was barely above a whisper. “Coward.”

That got his attention. Reece turned, his storm-gray eyes locking onto hers, colder than she had ever seen them.

“You don’t know a fucking thing about me,” he said quietly. “And after today? I don’t think you ever did.”

Cassira felt like the ground had been ripped out from beneath her. The wind howled between them, the only thing left in the space where something else had once been. Something fragile. Something that, she realized now, was already broken beyond repair.

Reece exhaled sharply, shaking his head, his expression unreadable. Then he turned away, striding toward the edge of the cliff where his officers waited. And Cassira was left standing alone, watching as the man she had once thought she could love became something else entirely.

A stranger.

An enemy.

Chapter 19: Escape

Journal of Lieutenant Varrec Sorn, lost at sea, Year 1038

The sea does not care for the empire's borders. It does not respect the chain of command. And it does not distinguish between those who go willingly into its arms and those dragged there in chains. It takes us all, in time.

Smoke poured over the cliffs in thick, acrid waves, curling like ghostly fingers around the gun battery. The cannon fire had ceased, but the air still thrummed with the echoes of their destruction—stone collapsing into the harbor, the dying screams of men caught in the inferno below. The wind carried the scent of burnt wood, scorched flesh, and gunpowder, mixing with the salt spray that clung to Cassira's skin.

The cliffs were no longer a fortress. After hours of bombardment, whoever it was in charge below had ordered the army to storm the cliff, casualties be damned. Cassira wiped soot from her brow, her fingers shaking, her pulse hammering against her ribs. Below, through the thinning smoke, she could see the enemy stirring—lines of Pavuan soldiers flooding the dockyards, abandoning their futile attempts at firefighting. They were coming. The thin silver of bayonets glinted in the growing daylight. Shouts echoed up the rock face, orders barked in sharp, foreign syllables, and then, the crack of rifles.

Bullets tore through the air, snapping past her ears. One ricocheted off the iron frame of a cannon, sending sparks flying. Cassira barely flinched. Let them come. She turned, locking onto Reece's tense figure at the zip line rig, where Jubilee's sailors were gripping their carabiners and trolleys, ready to retreat down the cliffside to the beach where the Jubilee was short hove on her anchor, preparing to depart in a matter of minutes. Admiral Rampart's plan to bombard the city from the heights may have succeeded, but only Reece had the foresight to put together this escape route.

"Get moving!" Reece barked, his voice cutting through the chaos like a blade.

The first sailor hooked himself in and leapt. The zip line hissed as he slid down, plunging over the rocky chasm, disappearing into the haze below. Another followed, and another, their bodies swallowed by the shifting morning fog, mixed with intense smoke from the cliffside.

But Cassira stood still.

She could feel Reece's presence behind her, tense, waiting. He was expecting her to fall in line, to obey. The thought made her blood boil. She wasn't the only one, as anger rolled off him like waves that it seemed all of the men could feel.

"Cassira," he said sharply. "You need to go. Now."

She turned slowly, staring at him through the lingering haze. His face was streaked with sweat and soot, his dark hair clinging to his forehead, damp from the effort of battle. He looked every inch the officer—spine rigid, jaw set, eyes scanning for threats even as he spoke to her. She hated him. Hated that he still thought he had the right to give her orders. Hated that he had taken everything from her—the chance to kill the Bear Man, the only justice she had left.

"You expect me to just leave?" Her voice was raw, scraped clean of anything but rage. "After what you did?"

Reece exhaled sharply, his patience wearing thin. "Cassira, I don't have time for this."

"You stole my revenge!" she spat, stepping toward him. Her body was taut, every muscle coiled, burning with a fury she could barely contain. "You let him walk away. You protected him!"

"I was protecting you, you dumb Bitch!" Reece snapped, his voice rising over the gunfire below. "Do you think shooting an unarmed man under a white flag would have brought you peace? Would have brought them

back? Or do you think that maybe they would have used your actions to justify the killing of hundreds? Thousands? Any civilians they could? Or used it to bring even more independent cities into their fold?”

The words struck like a slap. Cassira’s breath hitched, and for a fraction of a second, the pain under her anger cracked through. Then she snarled and shoved him. Reece stumbled back a step but held his ground. His hands clenched at his sides, jaw tight, a storm brewing in his silver eyes.

“I don’t need your protection,” Cassira growled. “I don’t need you.”

A gunshot split the air. Too close.

The Pavuan soldiers had reached the upper cliffs. More were coming, a tide of blue-and-gold uniforms scaling the rock face like ants on a carcass. The last of the sailors had slipped away, the Jubilee was already beginning to unfurl sails, set to depart as soon as her last two passengers had joined.

Reece swore, his entire body snapping into focus. “We don’t have time for this.” He reached for her arm.

Cassira yanked free. “Go to hell,” she snarled.

Reece’s eyes burned. Something fractured in them, something final.

Then he moved, not at her.

Too fast.

His hand shot out—not toward her, but to the rigging knife strapped to his belt. The silver blade flashed in the smoky light.

Cassira’s eyes widened.

“No—”

Reece slashed the rope.

The zip line snapped free with a sickening twang, the final sailor—mid-descent—barely making it aboard before the rig fell away.

The cable whipped through the air, curling like a severed lifeline as it tumbled into the void.

Cassira's stomach plummeted.

She lunged, but it was too late. The Jubilee was already filling her beautiful white sails with wind, her graceful form under strict orders to depart when the cable was cut, no matter which of her children she may have inadvertently left behind.

Cassira's breath came hard and fast, her chest burning with fury, with disbelief.

Reece had cut the line. He had stranded them. He began quickly moving while crouching to avoid the fire higher up the cliff face, towards the mountains overlooking the city.

She spun on him, following in a huff, eyes blazing. "You son of a—"

"They had to leave." Reece's voice was low, but unshakable, a blade's edge against stone. "If they waited any longer, they would've been blown apart by the Pavuan fleet."

Cassira's hands fisted at her sides, nails biting into her palms. "You chose them over us."

"I chose them over you." Reece stepped closer, his expression unreadable. His shirt was torn at the collar, exposing the line of his collarbone, a dark bruise forming along his jaw where debris had struck him earlier. "You were the reason we didn't make it out in time."

Her heart slammed against her ribs.

"What the hell are you saying?"

He kept his hike, his presence overwhelming, infuriating. “I told you to not fire on the parley, I told you to move. You refused. You delayed the crew because of your pride—because you had to be right. And now we’re both stranded here because of it.”

Cassira shook with rage. “I’ll fucking kill you for that.”

Reece huffed a bitter laugh, turning his back on her and continuing upwards away from the soldiers who were massing on the cliff, watching the Jubilee sail off. “You can try. But you won’t make it far alone.”

The words struck cold.

They both turned back towards the cliff’s edge after mounting a large rock. The reality of their situation loomed beneath the pair. The soldiers were trying to move the cannons abandoned at the top of the cliffs to fire upon the retreating ship. It took several men to swivel the cannons, and an officer screamed at them to fire. The cannon erupted in smoke, blowing itself to pieces. Reece smirked, Rahcel fucking hated how self satisfied he seemed, as the sabotaged cannons did not spout an ounce of lead, only smoke. The Jubilee was disappearing beyond the smoke, now a distant silhouette against the vast, burning horizon.

Cassira’s breath heaved. Her rage hadn’t settled, but something worse crept in its place. She was alone. With **him**.

Reece exhaled sharply, shoving a hand through his sweat-damp hair. He looked exhausted, but resolute. His body had settled into the practiced calm of a man used to surviving.

“We have to move,” he said at last. “Now.”

Cassira didn’t move. She wanted to fight, to scream, to curse him until her throat bled. But those soldiers were not going to stay staring at the last of their city’s attackers forever. One of them might spot the pair climbing at any time.

Reece grabbed her wrist, yanking her toward the mountain pass. She nearly wrenched away—nearly let herself get caught just to spite him—but her instincts kicked in. Survival over pride.

She ran.

They darted into the craggy pass, the mountains rising like jagged teeth around them. The heat from the burning city still licked at their backs, but the mountains were colder, the air sharper as the wind howled through the peaks.

Cassira didn't look back.

She didn't need to.

Because she knew—without a doubt—that whatever bond had existed between her and Reece had just been severed for good.

Chapter 20: Victory's Price

After-Action Handbook for Junior Officers, War College Press

Mark this well: a victory without an inventory is a defeat deferred. Count the dead. Count the powder. Count the friends who now look at you differently. The ledger balances, but not always in your favor—and the interest comes due at sea.

The harbor at Deliverance was shrouded in the golden light of late afternoon when Alexandra and the remnants of the fleet slipped into their moorings. Smoke still clung to the decks, the scent of gunpowder and salt intermingling as battle-weary sailors and officers staggered to the docks, some leaning on their shipmates, others still clutching at the wounds they had sustained. It should have been a triumphant return, and in some ways, it was—the raider's sabotage had crippled Pavu's ability to supply its navy, and the battle at sea had shattered much of the blockade.

And yet, there was no resounding cheer, no triumphal procession. Deliverance felt tense. There was a hush in the streets as Henry and Alfin disembarked, their boots striking the stone of the wharf with measured authority. The semaphore towers on the cliffs signaled coded messages inland, their long arms slicing through the sky.

Alfin's sharp eyes caught the absence first.

"No dockside welcome from the Admiral?" he murmured, hands clasped behind his back as he surveyed the harbor. "Not even an aide to greet us. Odd."

Henry grunted, adjusting his coat as they strode toward the naval headquarters, his mind already working through the possibilities. "Not odd. Worrisome."

Inside the Imperial naval offices, the atmosphere was suffocating. The clerks looked harried, orders and counter-orders being penned and

revised on thick parchment, runners dashing between rooms with dispatches. The victory that had been so decisive at sea seemed fragile here, in the halls of power.

Admiral Rampart stood behind a vast, dark mahogany desk, his uniform pristine despite the turmoil around him. Aides and lower officers moved in and out of the office gathering signatures and paperwork for the ships that had just arrived. A cigar smoldered in a brass ashtray, its embers glowing faintly. He regarded Henry and Alfin with his usual piercing gaze.

“You've done well,” he said, but his voice carried none of the satisfaction they had expected.

Alfin quirked an eyebrow. “Is that so? Because from the look of this office, I'd wager you'd rather we hadn't.”

Rampart ignored the remark, tapping a folded document on his desk. “The blockade is broken, but we are not the only ones who gained from this battle.” He gestured to the map spread across his desk. “Paradise and Maru are withdrawing their support from Pavu, yes—but the Althoran fleet is mobilizing. They didn't engage at the straits, but reports suggest they've dispatched reinforcements to the south.”

Henry frowned. “Are we expecting war with Althora, then?”

“Not yet,” Rampart admitted. “But our government fears that as League may fracture, Pavu will look to consolidate power by entrenching itself inland.” He slid a fresh sealed order across the table toward Henry. “You are to prepare Alexandra for another sortie. You'll be headed southwest to head off any enemy move and observe their efforts among Althoran and Pavu's territory. You're to find what efforts they are making and report back.”

Henry took the order but hesitated. “What of Reece?”

Rampart exhaled sharply, the ghost of impatience crossing his face. “Commander Reece's assignment was his own. I have no reason to believe he didn't make it out, but the Jubilee hasn't arrived back yet.”

Alfin, ever the cynic, let out a quiet chuckle. “That’s a dangerous assumption to make, Admiral.”

Rampart’s gaze sharpened. “We don’t have the luxury to go searching for a brig with your friend when the fleet must move.” He leaned forward. “You will forget about Reece, and you will follow your orders.”

- - -

That night, Henry found himself seated at Admiral Rampart’s table, alongside the other victorious captains of the fleet. The long, candlelit hall was filled with the scent of roast meat, spiced wine, and the low hum of conversation, punctuated by bursts of laughter from the younger officers. Silverware clinked against porcelain plates, the occasional toast being raised to the Empire’s success.

It was, in many ways, a naval officer’s dream of triumph. Yet Henry found the whole affair uneasy. The air was thick with the unspoken realities of war—the victories counted in supply lines seized and cities burned, in the crews that had returned diminished. The captains of the fleet sat at the head of the table, their coats freshly pressed, gold epaulettes gleaming. Among them was Captain Rowntree, a veteran of the blockade, who clinked his fork against his wine glass to gather attention.

“Well then, gentlemen,” he drawled, reclining with the air of a man who had just finished recounting a particularly thrilling naval skirmish. “I suppose we should drink to our success—Pavu may yet be burning, but by the gods, it was a fine display.”

There were murmurs of agreement, some officers raising their goblets, but others hesitated. Captain Lysander, a thin man with graying temples, shifted in his seat. “Still, I wonder if we struck too soon. This was not the war we meant to start.”

Rowntree laughed. “War isn’t a thing to be planned like a dance, Lysander. We crushed them. That’s what matters.”

Henry, who had remained silent until now, finally spoke. “And if we left our own behind?”

The table quieted slightly. A few eyes flickered toward Admiral Rampart at the head of the room, who was watching Henry with the expression of a man waiting to see just how much rope he would give himself. Alfin smirked slightly, but said nothing, swirling his wine.

Rowntree shrugged, unbothered. “You mean Reece and the shore battery?” He cut into his meat with precision. “I assume they made it out—after all, we are discussing victory, not missing men.”

Henry set his goblet down, his movements controlled. “We don’t know that.”

Rampart finally interjected, his voice smooth but firm. “You will act as though they did. And you will sail at first light Captain, so that you don’t ruin any further parties.” Henry knew a dismissal when he heard one. The tension eased as the conversation shifted back to more comfortable topics—ships taken, enemy losses exaggerated, tales of past naval glories. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Alfin Chapman slip out of a side door unobtrusively.

The dinner proceeded as one might expect. Despite the earlier tension, initial appetizers of shaved meat and cheese were replaced with gold plates, gold cutlery, and seemingly a waiter for each man. Henry groaned. Imperial state dinners were only called on when a great victory was achieved. Captains might kill to get a seat at the table, while Henry might have given his life to avoid the odyssey in front of him.

Each waiter stepped forward as one, whispering into each of the attending officer’s ears for the options of each course and wine pairing, before taking their orders and returning at once, placing their place with a practiced uniformity. A white uniformed petty officer, presumably issued the uniform only seconds before he stepped out onto the banquet hall judging from the stiffness of the collar and the dazzling white color, leaned down into Henry’s ear, whispering “Scallop or Duck Liver?”

Champagne or Brandy?” Henry had delivered a single, perfect scallop, kissed by fire and served atop a smooth saffron-infused cream, finished with flakes of sea salt, and a delightful cup of Imperial Reserve Champagne.

The food was delicious, prepared by chefs hired across the Known World, though perhaps more complicated than might be appreciated by fighting captains. Dish followed dish. Bisques and bread followed by chilled oysters from the northern Imperial isles. Conversation dies out until only the barest minimum of grunts accompanied the occasional remark about food, or nodding to the Admiral at the table’s head. Henry had just finished his delightful riesling from the northern isles when the fourth course presented large beef tenderloins and roast boar chops. Sticky wine reductions decorated the plates, as Henry noticed several captains audibly react with glee at the substantial roasts before them. Whiskey and sticky sauces made Henry’s head begin to swim, but after five or six glasses of alcohol, the noise returned to the banquet hall with a vengeance. Captains were lively chattering between mouthfuls, even breaking into song.

Henry was grateful for the next course, desperate to clear his head, and grateful that the waiter offered cool lemonade. Henry insisted on this going forward. He could drink as well as any man here, but his mood was not in it, and he knew that if he became drunk while in this state, he might just challenge someone to a knife fight at dawn. Most of the other captains barely touched their salad that followed the meats, awaiting the sixth course of swan breast or pheasant. Captains uncharacteristically began sharing food, wishing to taste both. The swans were those rejected from the imperial palace, and must have cost a fortune. Fortunately, Rampart’s fleet bringing home a dozen ships as prizes made any thought of cost vanish from the navy.

But beneath the polite toasts and the glittering silverware, Henry could feel it: the weight of what had been left unsaid. A waiter slipped in, odd mid course, and refilled only Henry’s glass, dropping a small folded note onto his lap. Henry covered it with his hand, then as he was sure no one was looking he peered nonchalantly down at the note:

Jubilee returned half an hour ago without Reece or Cassira. The lieutenant in command gave me a report. They were the last pair to rejoin the ship, and the line was cut from their end. He believes they climbed into the mountains and escaped. I have asked the sailing master to have Alexandra ready to leave in an hour. Don't forget to toast the Empress when they serve pudding. -Alfin

Henry stared down, frozen as the banquet doors opened, and the seventh course was served. As the junior most captain present, he stood automatically as the dishes were handed out and said "Gentlemen, Her Grace", the routine of a million junior men before him as the first of the after dinner courses were plated. The hall was filled with echoes of the toast as the men dug into the course. Dessert would last half an hour at least. Then cheeses for another half, then cigars and brandy, and cards... six hours at least. But there, at the side door, stood a waiter staring straight ahead holding Henry's cloak and sword. Henry smiled as he slipped away. If anyone noticed he had left, they would be too drunk to report him. In any case, the captain next to him had helped himself to the smoked cheese without even noticing Henry's departure. Henry found his ship as dark and as silent as the rest, but a trained glance up saw men already aloft, ready to loose sails as soon as he came on board and collapsed into his bunk to nurse what would be a terrible headache. Alexandra was underway half an hour to the minute after Henry received the note, and that was worth missing a cigar any day.

They were going back.

Chapter 21: A Long Hike

Notes of a Field Courier, anonymous pamphlet banned in the Capital

Roads lie. They promise nearness with every bend and deliver only more horizon. Walk anyway. Else the past will catch you at a standstill and put its hand on your shoulder as if it has a right.

The morning after their escape was gray and windless, the sky smothered in thick, leaden clouds that threatened rain. The fire-damaged Pavu had long since vanished behind them, swallowed by the dense inland forests and rocky ridges of the northern frontier.

Cassira adjusted the straps of the stolen rucksack over her shoulders, ignoring the ache in her back as they hiked up the steep incline. The narrow game trail they followed was overgrown, riddled with loose stones and tangled roots that clawed at her boots. Every step was slow, deliberate. The last thing she needed was to twist an ankle out here, miles from any real civilization. A farmhouse had provided a few small comforts, like the rucksack and poncho Cassira wore, packed with a canteen and a few fruits they had found along the way. She had thought about the theft from these farmers for a second too long, until Reece had scoffed at her. “Whats the matter? Grown a conscience?” Cassira wanted more than anything to retort, but couldn’t find the right words.

She threw a glance over her shoulder at Reece, who walked a few paces behind her, his expression unreadable. He hadn’t spoken anything but those questions since the farm, and nothing else, since he had *cut the damned zip line* and stranded them both. He moved like a shadow, his body as fluid and controlled as it had been at sea, every step precise despite the uneven ground. The last embers of fury still simmered in his storm-gray eyes, but his face remained impassive, closed off—his usual mask of self-control now thick as armor. The few times they had met eyes, his held dark storm clouds.

Cassira looked away quickly, frowning to herself. She refused to dwell on what she had done, on how she had ruined their escape. If she *hadn't* fired on the Bear Man and ended talks before they started, if the Pavuan's hadn't rushed the cliffs if she hadn't stayed and tried to , the Jubilee would have pulled them out without a fight. But there was no use thinking about that now. The past was fixed, unchangeable.

And Reece would never forgive her for it.

The air between them was a wasteland of silence. He didn't berate her, didn't scold her like he had last night. No, this silence was far worse than his anger. It was *dismissive*. As if she were nothing more than an unfortunate obligation, someone he was forced to endure for the sake of survival. To him, she was just someone he had to bring along lest she be captured and hurt his precious fucking honor.

Cassira clenched her jaw and forced her burning legs to keep moving.

Ahead, the narrow trail wound between towering pines, their dark green boughs thick enough to swallow the daylight. The woods were old, ancient even, their trunks gnarled and massive. Moss clung to everything—rocks, tree roots, even the skeletal remains of long-dead branches. The ground was damp and soft beneath her boots, thick with rotting leaves and pine needles.

For all the beauty of the landscape, Cassira felt no comfort in it. She had spent too long at sea to feel at home in a place like this, where the air was too still and the silence too absolute. Even the sounds of the forest—the occasional rustle of unseen creatures, the distant caw of a bird—felt foreign. She missed the steady creak of timbers, the snap of sails in the wind. But this was their reality now. Their only choice was to keep moving.

They walked for hours without stopping. Reece moved in front to set the pace—faster than Cassira would have liked, but she refused to complain. She wouldn't give him the satisfaction.

Even as her legs burned, even as the damp air made her clothes cling uncomfortably to her skin, she stayed silent. Reece, for his part, looked unaffected. He moved with the effortless grace of a man who *knew* this land, his strides sure, his boots silent against the forest floor. He didn't trip, didn't falter. It was infuriating. He seemed to find a stream exactly when her canteen ran low, berries and fruits came up with alarming regularity.

Cassira hated him.

She hated the way he had *forced* her to abandon the ship, hated the way he still carried himself like some noble, righteous officer when *he was the coward who had let the Bear Man walk away*. She *hated* how, even now, part of her couldn't stop *noticing* him. Even dressed in borrowed clothes—a plain linen shirt unlaced at the collar, sleeves rolled to the elbow, dark trousers tucked into sturdy boots—he still looked *like that*.

She had spent that night on the Jubilee wrapped around his body. She *knew* what was under that shirt, had traced the defined ridges of his chest with her hands, had pressed her mouth against the taut muscles of his abdomen, had felt the flex of his back beneath her fingertips. She knew how fast he breathed when he slept. And now, Fuck, every time he shifted, every time his arms tensed as he adjusted his pack or braced a hand against a tree to steady himself, she couldn't unsee it. The way his shirt clung to him, damp with sweat, outlining every plane of muscle beneath. The way his strong hands flexed when he reached for his water flask, veins running like dark lines along his forearms.

It was maddening.

And it was her own fault.

She should have never let it happen.

Not with *him*. Not with a man whose loyalty was bound in rules and duty. A man who had spent his entire life *belonging* to the navy. A man who had

abandoned her the moment she became an inconvenience. Cassira sucked in a sharp breath, forcing herself to focus on the road ahead.

It meant nothing, she told herself.

Nothing at all.

That night, long after darkness, they finally stopped to rest, Cassira's legs were shaking with exhaustion. Reece, of course, barely looked winded. He dropped his pack near a fallen tree and unfastened his water flask, taking a slow drink before wiping the sweat from his forehead with the back of his arm. He looked like he planned the move just to keep her eyes on him. Cassira sat on a nearby rock, rolling her shoulders to ease the stiffness creeping into them. She unbuckled her pack and rummaged through it, fishing out a stale piece of bread from the meager rations they had stolen before fleeing. She bit into it without care, barely tasting it. Something landed beside her foot with a soft *thud*.

Cassira glanced down. An apple. She looked up sharply. Reece was standing a few paces away, arms crossed, watching her with that same unreadable expression. His face was shadowed by the overcast sky, but she caught the flicker of something in his eyes—something that wasn't quite pity, but wasn't far from it either.

Her throat tightened.

"I don't need your Fucking charity," she snapped, kicking the apple aside.

Reece's jaw twitched. He didn't reply. Just turned and walked back toward the fallen log, sitting down with his back to her. Cassira clenched her teeth, gripping the rough edges of her bread so tightly it nearly crumbled in her hand. She hated this. She hated the silence, the distance, the way she couldn't read him anymore. He had always been so *damnably* predictable before, so rigid in his sense of right and wrong. Now he was something else, and she had no idea where that left them.

They had made camp near a shallow stream, hidden beneath a thick canopy of trees. As Cassira ruminated, she took in what Reece must have

thought. They were in a small depression, the firelight couldn't be seen 30 yards away, and the stream was babbling happily, with clean water. Reece had strung a shelter up for each of them out of a pair of old blankets covered in leaves kicked over onto the hanging fabrics in a matter of minutes.

Cassira sat near the small fire, rubbing warmth back into her fingers. The night air was cold, and without the thick walls of a ship or a cabin to shield her, she felt exposed. Reece sat across from her, methodically sharpening his knife against a whetstone. The sound was rhythmic, steady.

Scrape. Scrape. Scrape.

Cassira stared at the fire, refusing to look at him, which was reciprocated. Then all at once, both of them went still. There was a regular sound that came from the road beyond the trees, distant but clear. Hoofbeats. Reece exchanged a glance for the first time in hours before rising silently to his feet, kicking the fire, which darked almost instantly into embers, and slipped into the shadows beyond the firelight. Cassira followed, but felt as though she was stumbling. That man she hated was less than a yard ahead of her, and seemingly vanished into every patch of darkness. He came up to a rise, and Cassira ran into his outstretched arm, preventing her from stumbling into the road that was right in front of her. Gods... he didn't even look, he just assumed she would collapse onto the roadway. The pair crouched behind the thick undergrowth, listening.

Two riders passed along the trail, the horses moving at a hurried trot. The men wore the colors of Pavuan couriers, a leather satchel slung over one of their shoulders. They were talking as they went, enough that Cassira was able to catch bits and pieces.

“...militias searching inland...”

Cassira's breath caught.

“...looking for raiders... orders to track and capture...”

The couriers rode on, his voice fading into the distance.

Cassira turned to Reece, her pulse hammering.

His face was grim, jaw clenched.

“They’re looking for us?” she asked.

“Not necessarily. Their city was attacked. Its as good an excuse as any to send out scouting parties into the lands beyond their border, and while they're at it, conscript any of the locals they find.” Reece slunk back towards their campsite, and got the fire going again. Cassira returned to her curled up spot, and felt ashamed. Not at anything she had done, and certainly not for understanding the men’s intentions, but that she had enjoyed when Commander Reece had talked to her, which he did not do for the remainder of the night.

Chapter 22: The Inn

Sayings of the Sea, Dockside Edition

Never trust a quiet harbor or a quiet room. Both are loud with things you cannot hear yet.

Two days had passed as supplies had run low, the pair continued northeast. Cassira hadn't even asked where they were headed, but as they passed poster after poster on trees offering rewards to turn in raiders on Pavu, she didn't care. Reece seemed to know, and she wasn't going to fucking talk to him unless she had to. The sun was a molten smear on the horizon by the time Reece and Cassira stumbled upon the inn. The last of the sun cast long shadows over the muddy road leading to the structure—a squat, timber-framed building with a slanted roof thick with moss. A wooden sign dangled precariously over the doorway, creaking with every lazy gust of wind. The sign read: "The Lover's Respite."

Cassira halted mid-step, staring at the sign with narrowed eyes. "You have got to be fucking kidding me."

Reece exhaled sharply, tugging the hood of his cloak lower. "It's a bed and a meal. Take it or leave it."

The last remnants of warmth in the air died as the wind picked up, rustling through the trees lining the road. Cassira scowled but followed him up the worn steps. Their boots left trails of dust as they crossed the threshold. Inside, the inn was a tapestry of overwhelming coziness and excessive romance. A roaring fire crackled in the stone hearth, casting flickering shadows over the thick wooden beams of the ceiling. Heavy curtains in varying shades of deep crimson and scandalous burgundy framed the windows, and the air reeked of cinnamon, roasted meats, and something faintly floral.

Behind the bar stood the innkeeper, a broad, overly jolly man with a belly that jiggled when he laughed, his mustache curling at the ends in a way

that seemed almost too perfect to be real. He must, Cassira thought, stuff beeswax into it every hour to keep it so curly. His eyes twinkled like he knew every secret ever whispered between star-crossed lovers... Jesus she needed a good night's sleep, that thought was just ridiculous.

"Ah, weary travelers! Fleeing a dark past? Seeking solace in the arms of a forbidden love?" The innkeeper beamed, wiping a tankard with a cloth. "You've come to just the place! The Lover's Respite has never turned away a couple in need!"

Cassira froze, every muscle in her body locking. Reece, to his credit, merely sighed.

"We need a pair of rooms," he said, dropping a coin onto the counter. "Just one night."

The innkeeper clasped his hands together with a knowing sigh, his mustache twitching. "Ahhh, im sorry my boy but my poor inn is full up. Only the attic room is free! Of course one bed, then. Of course, of course. Fate has brought you here. Two lost souls, bound by circumstance, drawn together by forces beyond mortal comprehension!" He leaned in conspiratorially. "And what forces could be stronger than love?"

Cassira turned sharply to Reece, who was already pinching the bridge of his nose. "I'm going to kill him," she muttered.

The innkeeper chortled. "The bed is large, the linens are soft, and the walls? Oh-ho! The walls are thick, if you take my meaning!" He wiggled his eyebrows. "Perhaps you two will be the first to find out in my inn that the gods have fated you together as mates! Helpless to your own love!"

Cassira shot him a look so withering that the innkeeper took a hasty step back. Without meaning to, she had actually snarled at the man. Reece cracked a smile for the first time since that night on the Jubilee.

"Perhaps... you two would like some supper first?" he offered, wisely changing the subject. "A meal before your night of undeniable yearning and smoldering tension?"

"Food," Reece said flatly. "Then sleep."

The innkeeper grinned. "Oh, of course, of course. You'll want something hearty to keep your strength up, hmm?" He winked. "Two roasted chickens, spiced potatoes, and a tankard of the finest mead. A lover's special for our most enthralling guests."

Cassira had never wanted to stab a man more. Her fingers, maybe just out of comfort, clutched the sailor's knife at her waist before remembering that Reece gave it to her and quickly let it go. They took a seat at a long wooden table near the fire, the inn's other patrons stealing glances at them with that same irritating expression the innkeeper had worn, as if they were the main attraction in some sweeping, dramatic love story. Cassira glared at the fire, refusing to acknowledge the ridiculousness of the situation. Reece, as always, remained composed, though his fingers drummed idly against the table.

"You think we'll actually get any sleep?" she muttered.

"Not if he keeps narrating our lives," Reece replied dryly.

"How many lovers come through that door that this happens often enough for him to stay in business that way?" Cassira pressed.

Reece smirked again, "How many of those books of yours had some bullshit like this? Two travelers who can't stand each other forced to share a bed? Did you set this all up?"

Before Cassira could respond by cutting off whichever bit of Reece was closest, a voice from behind her spoke, creaking as though it had not been used in a long time "Ahhhh, tonight is the night then, isn't it you two?"

Reece cocked his head over Cassira's shoulder with a raised eyebrow. "What?" Cassira asked.

The woman, for it was clearly an ancient woman wrapped in a shaggy cloak, dragged herself to her feet and shuffled over from her dark booth behind Cassira before speaking. "It has been a long time since I felt the

pull of the magic. Not since the dragons left this world has any human had the spark. But you girl... theres something there... but how?"

Cassira looked at Reece completely bewildered. There was no magic. It was a fairy tale. Dragons? What was this woman talking about? the woman took a ragged breath before continuing. "The only human magic came when a pair of mates came together. But the odds of that? Theres too many of us and we travel so close to home. But if you two are fated?" The woman trailed off, and started digging into her cloak, pulling a moldy notebook and rifling through pages. Cassira was about to find her voice when a crash from the front distracted her.

The source of the noise was obvious, for the door had burst open. Four men strode in, boots slamming against the floorboards, their uniforms of deep blue and silver unmistakable even in the dim light. Pavuan soldiers. The inn fell into immediate silence. The innkeeper shrank back behind the bar. Cassira deeply wished he greeted them the same as her. Reece, with his back to them, glanced back and tugged his hood down over his eyes. The old woman was no longer behind her. Cassira didn't see her go.

The lead soldier, a brutish man with a scar along his jaw, surveyed the room before barking, "By order of the Crown, all citizens must report any sightings of Imperials immediately. Anyone caught harboring traitors will be hanged."

No one spoke.

The officer's gaze darkened. "No? Nothing?" He sneered. "Then we have another order. Every man in this inn is to be conscripted. Take them to the cart." There were murmurs of protest, but the soldiers began grabbing men by their collars, shoving them toward the door. Cassira tensed. Reece remained perfectly still. Then, one of the soldiers reached for him. A historian seated three tables away would write that this was perhaps the stupidest mistake he had ever seen firsthand.

"Up, now," the man growled, gripping Reece's cloak. He yanked—and the fabric tore away, and the man gasped like a teenage girl. There, along the

side of Reece's tanned, muscled neck, inked in deep black, were the swirling marks of his past. Tattoos that should never have been seen. Tattoos that Cassira traced with her fingers when basking in... The officer's face twisted in recognition. "Wait a minute—he's—"

Before the man could finish, before anyone could react, Reece's hand shot forward, gripping the officer's wrist, twisting hard enough that bone snapped like dry kindling. The man howled in pain. Cassira barely had time to process before Reece had the man's own dagger in his hand. A sharp, brutal slash across the throat, and blood sprayed against the inn's floorboards. Chaos erupted. Men around the inn began to run, push each other, anything to get away from conscription, an order that would mean most would never see home again, would never be harassed by this barkeep.

One of the remaining soldiers lunged, but Reece sidestepped smoothly, sending the man crashing into a chair. A quick, precise kick to the ribs—another grunt, another body down. A third soldier managed to draw his sword—Cassira barely had time to warn him before Reece had already ducked under the swing, grabbed the man's belt, and flipped him headfirst into the hearth. A sickening crunch. The final soldier tried to run. Reece grabbed him by the back of his collar before he made the door, drove a knee into his spine, and finished it with one clean, merciless strike to the throat.

Silence. It was over faster than it began. The room reeled in the aftermath. Blood soaked the wooden floor. The fire in the hearth crackled, as though indifferent to the carnage, indifferent to the corpse it was now cooking like pork.

Reece exhaled slowly. Then, without hesitation, concern, or urgency, he turned back and sat down calmly to his meal. He reached for his tankard. Took a long, slow sip. Then picked up his fork and cut another bite of his chicken. He worked his way through both chicken breasts, and just separated a wing by the time Cassira had found her voice.

Cassira stared at him. "Are you fucking serious you fucking psychopath?"

He chewed. Swallowed. Did not react. The innkeeper made a noise that sounded somewhere between a strangled gasp and sheer admiration.

"That was—" He cleared his throat. "That was—um—quite something."

Reece didn't respond. Cassira exhaled sharply. "We should leave. Now." Reece nodded once. He grabbed her nearly untouched chicken and unceremoniously dropped it into Cassira's pack before standing, tossing another coin to the innkeeper, and striding outside.

Minutes later, they were saddling two stolen horses, their saddlebags conveniently already packed with supplies. Cassira felt off again about the theft, but she realized very quickly that the men who owned the horses had no further need of them. With her cloak pulled tight, Cassira was still processing. She glanced at Reece, who swung onto his horse with infuriating ease, broad shoulders flexing, his jaw set in that same unshakable calm.

"You killed four men, sat down, and finished your meal," she said flatly.

"I was hungry," he replied, adjusting his reins.

They urged their horses onto the road, the dark night swallowing them whole.

After a long beat, Cassira muttered, "I can't believe we almost had to share a bed in an inn out of one of those romantasy novels before all that."

Reece snorted. "Ridiculous. There were like 10 people there, there's probably a dozen rooms, and half of them were just eating, no luggage. Probably 6 empty rooms... and what was all that shit about mates?"

Cassira rolled her eyes. "In a lot of romance books it turns out the love interest was fated to be 'Mates' with the main character. Its fate that they get together."

"You mean they don't have a choice? theyre forced to start fucking even if theyre incompatable? How does that work?"

“Shut up it's just a trope. Its fun, ok? Only a real cunt would get upset about that kind of thing.” Cassira actually watched Reece roll his eyes and chuckle as their horses hit the road. Looks like they would find another spot to camp.

"Would you have taken the floor?" she asked.

Reece glanced at her, then turned back to the road.

"No," he said simply.

Cassira hated that her stomach flipped.

Chapter 23: Children

Petition read before the Coalition Assembly, transcript excerpt

We were told the Empire and the Coalition quarrel over borders and taxes. Yet it is not borders that wake at night, nor taxes that bleed. It is children who learn the shapes of fear before the shapes of letters.

The Alexandra cut through gray waters south of Pavu, her sails taut against the wind as she lay close hauled against the breeze. The sky hung low and brooding, thick with the scent of an approaching storm. A shadow on the horizon resolved into a ship, a small merchantman lying to near the coast, riding to her anchor in the gentle swell. Henry narrowed his eyes as he adjusted his spyglass. The ship was a sleek, dark-hulled sloop, smaller than most Imperial vessels, with its flag barely visible in the dimming light. One of those southern cities far off. But why would they be sitting in a western cove nowhere near a shipping lane? The answer was clear a moment later, as the other ship got a good look at Alexandra, and her flag lowered, with the Imperial standard raised in its place.

“Sir... that ship there lowered her flag and raised ours...” one of the new Midshipman, Cormac Henry thought, reported, thirty seconds after Henry saw it himself.

“Send the private signal” Henry ordered. A series of flags rose up Alexandra’s yardarms, a challenge for the ship to identify herself. Almost immediately, the mystery ship answered the flags.

“A 15, 20, 14... then W...AT..C...H...E...R” Cormac reported. Henry knew the code from the first number. OTN Watcher. The Office of Trade and Navagation... Alfin’s office. Shit, Henry thought, he knew what this meant. Every Imperial captain was briefed on it. This ship, the Watcher, it was one of the Office of Trade and Navagation’s ghost ships, a vessel whose presence in any waters meant secrets and unseen machinations. It

meant every man aboard that ship had a last name, they were all special operations.

Alfin Chapman stood beside him, appearing as though drawn to the ship, hands folded behind his back, gaze calculating. “So... something is afoot eh Captain?”

Henry had to agree. Those ships were barely noticed by anyone who didn't know, but to those in the know, the sight of an OTN ship was usually followed by something terrible for everyone nearby. When he was a junior officer, four imperial ships had staged a raid on a southern port named Vesarin, a strategic port only a day's sail from Paradise that had offended someone or other. The attack had been repulsed. attempt after attempt for more than a week. While the captains met for dinner to discuss their next move, two supply ships had come to meet them, only one was no supply ship. Special forces had slipped ashore, spiked the fortress guns, and made it out without anyone noticing. The first the ship's captains knew of this, they were receiving the Political Officers from this ghost ship. The leading captain was hanged for his inefficiency.

“I haven't seen a ghost ship in a while Alfin”

“Nor i captain, not with the massive shortage in manpower.” Alfins allusion was correct. The OTN could only take volunteers per their Royal charter, and no one volunteered for a spy ship.

The Alexandra adjusted course, meeting the sloop as it loomed alongside them. A single officer, dressed in the black-and-silver coat of the OTN, stepped to the rail. His face was sharp and sunken, his uniform immaculate. Henry recognized the type; men who lived in the shadows, who knew every whisper before it even left a man's lips. The man nodded curtly at Alfin. “Chapman.”

“Yvarn”. Alfin was holding himself stiffly, and Henry was strangely pleased to see him a little bit uncomfortable. It seems the saying is true. There was always a bigger fist.

The officer, Commander Yvarn, did not bother with introductions. “We need to speak. Below decks. Now.” That voice was cold, as though it was not used often. Henry exchanged a look with Alfin before descending to the Captain’s cabin. Below decks were surprisingly spacious, hardly surprising actually given the skeleton crew and lack of armament that a merchantman might bear, but the lack of major cargo for trade allowed room for large staterooms, though Henry noticed every inch of these were covered in books, maps, and tables of leather suits and weaponry. The Captain’s cabin seemed to be the exception... it was almost entirely empty, but for a bed and desk.

Yvarn unfurled a map across the table, handed to him by a very young man. Henry imagined this would be one of the nobility’s youngest sons, gaining experience at sea before they might be trouble in the political machinations on land. Above the three, faint candlelight flickering against its inked lines. “Have you been briefed since you left Deliverance?”

Henry shot a glance at Alfin. “No... sir.”

Yvarn continued without looking up. “As soon as we saw which ship you were, we started putting the pieces together. We are here to foment a little trouble for the Queen of Pavu. Seems your boys did their job properly.” This last remark was pointed towards Henry, who swallowed but met his gaze. “The Pavuan army is tightening control over the interior. Our agents reported heavy patrols moving through the southern jungles and mountains. We intercepted whispers of two Imperials being hunted inland. We assumed them to be yours.”

Reece. Cassira. Henry’s gut clenched. He glanced at Alfin, but the intelligence officer’s face was unreadable. Yvarn continued, tapping a marked location along the southern shores of the occupied territory. “A large convoy left the city of Breaker’s Bay on the west coast heading towards Pavu, accompanied by at least two hundred soldiers. They’re guarding something important.”

Alfin arched an eyebrow. “Do we know what?”

Yvarn hesitated. “Not until this morning. One of our contacts fled north. His last message mentioned four large carts, under heavy guard. Destination: Pavu.” Henry’s blood ran cold. Slaves.

Pavu had never bothered hiding its abhorrent slave trade, but this was different. If the military was escorting human cargo, that meant one thing: these were valuable slaves. Political captives. Or worse, children.

He gripped the edge of the table. “We go after them.”

Yvarn gave a thin smile. “I thought you might. We’ll hold off reinforcements from the coast, but you’re on your own once you’re inland.” He reached into his coat and pulled out a bound packet of maps. “These are all we have of the interior. Use them wisely.”

Henry nodded grimly. He wasn’t sure what he was about to walk into, but he knew one thing—he would not let those carts reach Pavu. “Thank you for your information.”

Yvarn cracked a smile at long last. “Information is our business Captain. That’s how I know.” Henry was worried that this wasn’t an answer at all, but decided to return to Alexandra.

Hours later, the landing party moved under cover of darkness, their boots sinking into the mud as they left the rocky cove behind. Henry led the way, his cutlass strapped tight to his hip, while Alfin followed behind. Behind them, a dozen men, some seasoned sailors, some marines, trudged through the dense underbrush. All men were volunteers, save perhaps Henry and Alfin. With a ghost ship in the offing, staying aboard the ship meant trouble.

The forest was thick and unyielding, the air heavy with the scent of damp earth and decaying leaves. Cicadas shrieked from the canopy, and somewhere distant, a monkey howled—a sound that had startled many an Imperial soldier into drawing their swords. Alfin leaned in, voice low. “If this is a trap, we’re walking straight into it.”

Henry gave a grim smile. “Wouldn’t be the first time. If Cassira hadn’t come across us that night, we wouldn’t have made it out of Taruca point.”

They pushed deeper inland, moving parallel to the road. Soon, they spotted moving light through the trees. The convoy of carts and horses stretched along the road, moving steadily but slowly forward in their torchlight. The Pavuan escort was larger than expected—not two hundred men, but at least three hundred. Mounted officers in black-and-gold coats rode alongside dozens of armed guards. The convoy moved slowly, deliberately, the four large carts jostling along the uneven road. There were other carts of course, supplies, baggage for officers, but four of them had both roofs and bars on the side.

Henry motioned for the men to hold position. He crawled forward, peering through the foliage. The sight nearly stopped his heart, for the carts were filled with children. Small, frail figures huddled in the cramped wooden cages, their eyes hollow, their wrists shackled together in iron bands. Some wept silently, others stared blankly, as though they had already accepted whatever fate awaited them. Henry clenched his jaw so hard it hurt. He felt Alfin tense beside him. The intelligence officer’s usual detached demeanor cracked, his hands curling into fists. Henry exhaled, a breath full of steel and fury.

“They’re not reaching Pavu,” he whispered. The landing party followed behind the convoy for several miles waiting for an opening, before the enemy made camp. Henry lay flat as Pavuan soldiers chattered like monkeys, setting up tents and devouring their meager rations. Within an hour, all but a dozen men were asleep, only one standing by the carts of children, who, Henry noted, had not been fed.

Henry consulted with Alfin. “Do you think we can get the kids away?”

Alfin was grimacing. “I don’t see how Captain. We might be able to fool that man, but once we open the locks someone will notice.”

Cormac, one of the volunteers, piped up, saluting while squatting nearby.
“Permission to speak sir?”

“Yes what is it?”

“Sir, what if I went in pretending to be one of their midshipman or lower officers or something, and take him to inspect something? Then ill slip off?”

Henry exchanged a look with Alfin. The plan was bold. It would probably work, but that might easily mean this young lad wouldnt ever make it out.
“Might be dangerous son.”

“Ill... Ill risk it sir.” Henry saw Cormac’s lips shaking. The young man was aware of his odds, he thought.

“Very well Cormac. Lets see if we can get those children out.”

Cormac slipped off to the right. For a heartbeat, then two, Henry wondered if this was a bad decision. Then he saw a shadow move. Cormac had exited the brush without his coat thirty yards to the right, walking confidently towards a campfire. He held himself stiffly, but walked right past a half sleeping guard without a second look. One of the black officer’s coats by the fire vanished as Cormac passed it, and soon the young man was to them, indistinguishable to the enemy.

“Remind me never to play cards with this young man” Henry remarked. Alfin didnt answer, but two men behind him raised a smile. After all, when a captain made a joke, it was automatically funny to the crew. Cormac walked through the camp, approaching the cart guard from his direct front. Henry might have come up behind, but it was clear that Cormac intended to be seen. He made a show of ignoring the guard, checking the cart wheels, before finally engaging the guard in conversation. Together, the men chatted for several minutes before they started walking off together.

“Now” Henry whispered.

Moving low and silent, the volunteers came up to the carts. The few awake children roused the others, who were quickly shushed as they made alerting noises. Henry came up to one cart before checking to see that Cormac was far off with the other man. They appeared to be sitting by one of the fires. Henry turned to the carts, chest heaving.

Inside, the children stared at him with wide, untrusting eyes.

One, a boy no older than ten, whispered, “Are we free?”

Henry’s throat tightened. He sheathed his cutlass and stepped forward. “Yes,” he said softly. “You’re free. But only if you stay quiet and do exactly as you’re told. We are going to unlock you. Follow that man there” he motioned to one of the men standing at the edge of the clearing, “and don’t make a sound. Does everyone understand?” A handful of nods greeted him, while many stared in fear. The lock came undone as two sailors with grins as wide as cats had picked it.

Moments later, there was a steady stream of children padding their feet towards the brush and into darkness. The man leading them vanished into the brush back the way they had come. Cormac had spotted them, looking over his shoulder twice, but stayed at his position until all the children were beyond the brush. Then he lazily stood, and removed his stolen coat, making a show of putting it up by the fire while talking to the guard, ironically in the same spot that he had stolen it from. He walked off behind a tent, out of the soldier’s line of sight, and took off for the woods. Henry saw him go but wouldn’t waste any more time. That guard would eventually tire of the fire and see what had happened. He took off at a run after his volunteers and the children.

The party didn’t get far before they were found out. A hundred yards off, they heard a shout, then many more. One of the children screamed, and the hasty retreat became a full sprint for the boats. Two longboats and a large yawl waited at the shore, loading children into the longboats while the yawl stayed for the officers. Henry heard shouts behind him when he tumbled aboard the yawl, but as the men sprung to

their oars, Henry shouted at them “Wait!” Coming down the bluff behind him was cormac, followed by soldiers.

Cormac was at a dead sprint, and his boots hit water before a single CRACK sprang out behind him, and Cormac collapsed. Two sailors grabbed him and hauled him aboard, and the boat darted out to open waters for safety. Henry caught him. “Stay with me Cormac. We will have you patched up in no time.”

An obvious lie. Henrys hand on his back was drenched in blood. The bullet must have hit something vital.

Cormac gave a weak grin. “Would if I could, Cap’n. But dyin’ like this, after savin’ all them kids? Could be worse.”

Henry held him as he took his last breath. No one spoke. As the boat reached the Alexandra, Henry handed his body up onto the deck, before turning to all the men at hand. “Cormac saved all of those children. Pavu would have enslaved them, killed them, don't know. He volunteered and he paid the price for it. The sea has called him home.”

“May his course be true” came the sheepish reply. For men who had seen death, emotion was overtaking some of the sailors. Henry rested for a heartbeat, then two, then stood, noticing the empty deck and and empty longboat just being hauled aboard.

“Where are the children?” he asked. The first rays of the sun crept over the horizon as a jolly boat from the Watcher came alongside with a letter for Henry. The boat tore back towards Watcher, which was starting to get underway. Henry tore open the letter and read:

Sir,

A fabulous success. We shall take these children back to the Empire. Some will doubtless volunteer for service in the Office of Trade and Navigation, while the rest will be returned home. You shall be commended for this effort. I will personally speak to Alfin's father if he can spare a moment.

Sincerely yours,

Yvarn

Henry threw the letter at Alfin, who went pale. Henry caught the sickened look. “What?”

Alfin looked almost... ashamed. “They’re cold bastards, my office”. The water had made sail and was setting off to the east. Henry knew immediately what was happening.

“Corm-” he froze mid word, Cormac would not be there to help him at present. “Signal midshipman, send this to Watcher at once: How many volunteers?”

It was several minutes before the midshipman replacing Cormac reported. “Sir, Watcher replies that all children have volunteered.” Henry’s heart plummeted.

“They saved them,” Alfin murmured, voice empty. “Just to own them.”

Henry looked at the black sails of the departing sloop, the silhouettes of small figures standing on deck, watching him with the same hollow eyes as before.

“Manpower shortage must be bad.” Alfin muttered, clearly unhappy, before scurrying below to his cabin.

Henry didnt stop watching the children until the Watcher disappeared from sight.

“Orders sir?”

Chapter 24: The Cliffside Vigil

Journal of Steward Kell Drom, recovered from flotsam

Fire writes fast; the sea edits slow. Between them they
compose a record no court will read and no priest can bless.
We sail through the footnotes of our own disasters.

The sea whispered secrets tonight, though Cassira doubted they were anything she hadn't already heard in nightmares. Moonlight draped the waves in silver, casting the world in hushed stillness, as if holding its breath alongside her. The ocean stretched endlessly below the cliffs, a mirror of the storm churning behind her eyes. Several days had passed since the fiasco at the inn. The pair had gone farther north, a chill in the air even at midday, but hadn't discussed their path. Reece seemed to know where he was heading, and that was enough for Cassira. Patrols had been increasing, something about catching a rebel who had killed a number of guardsmen at an inn, or so the local shopkeepers had said.

The pair made camp far from the coastal road, a half mile or so up onto a cliffside. Cassira had rubbed down the horses while Reece pitched their tents and made supper. It was delicious. Roasted lamb seared on a hot flat stone over the fire, rubbed down with some kind of butter and herbs. It was amazing what Reece could make with a few coins.

The inn seemed to have changed their dynamic again, not fixed it per say, but they could chat while they road. Cassira could find herself almost admiring Reece's chiseled features without being reminded of that scene on the cliffs of Pavu. After they had eaten their lamb, and the vegetables Reece had selected, he had not made a comment when Cassira's mood soured while she thought of Mackenzie, and just cleaned up while she walked to the cliff face.

She stood at the edge of the bluff, barefoot in the damp grass, the scent of wet earth clinging to her cloak. The cloak was brown and bare, a faint patch where the seal of Pavu had been ripped off days prior. Wind tugged

at her unbound hair and the heavy folds wrapped tight around her shoulders. It was some small comfort to not be on the deck of a ship, though the constant fear of being recognized and hunted down was a poor replacement.

Footsteps approached—measured, deliberate. No surprise. She'd known he'd come. He always did. Reece couldn't ever just let her be alone.

“You planning to throw yourself off this time?” His voice was a low drawl behind her, calm and unreadable. Cassira didn't turn.

“No.”

A pause. “Comforting.”

He stepped beside her, close enough she could feel the warmth radiating off his body, even through the chill. She kept her gaze fixed on the sea. She wouldn't look at him. Not yet.

“You're not sleeping.”

Cassira gave a short, bitter laugh. “Neither are you.”

Reece didn't answer. Not right away. Eventually, he shifted his stance. “I sleep just fine.”

“You havent slept since the ship.”

Another silence. This one deeper. The kind that stretched out until your bones ached with the weight of it. Of course she had to bring up that damn night, the only night she knew he slept while she was draped over him. Reece didn't respond. She knew what silence meant with him. It was agreement. Or guilt. Or something worse.

She let the wind fill the void for a moment longer, before his voice cracked through it.

“You're still dreaming about when those men came for you and took your sister from you, aren't you?”

Cassira was going to stomp off, but decided, perhaps from the exhaustion of constant stress and travel almost involuntarily to answer. “The day they came... I didn't do anything. I didn't raise a finger. I just ran, and my sister couldn't get away. It was my job to protect her and I couldn't.”

Cassira stopped. Her jaw clenched. She wasn't crying. Those tears must be someone else's. Reece waited.

“I keep thinking about it all the time, every night I think about what I could have done to save her, but none of it matters, none of it will ever bring her back.”

She didn't finish the thought. Her fingers clenched the edge of the cloak until her knuckles ached.

“She died before I could get her to safety.”

The sea roared below them, but Reece didn't move. Didn't speak. But she felt the tension coil in the space between them.

“You blame yourself,” he said softly.

“I do.”

“That's what they want.”

Cassira turned then, met his eyes. “Who?”

His expression was shadowed. “The people who build their power on the backs of broken families. They want us to think it's our fault. Makes it easier to bury us.”

She blinked. It was the most he'd said about anything personal in days.

“You talk like you've been there.”

He smiled sadly “I grew up like most kids in the empire from a family with too many mouths to feed. You grow up on the streets, you learn to see danger, but eventually it starts to make sense. When a bully picks on a kid

who just spent all day picking up trash for just enough coppers to eat, he just wants the money and for the kid to go away. That's how he wins. But you do that enough times to enough people smart enough to see their game... four scrawny kids can't fight a big bully alone, but together they wear him down."

The night was falling fast, and the stillness seemed to overtake the pair, even the waves seemed to go respectfully silent.

"I've seen so much of the world," Reece said quietly. "Over and over again. And it's always the same. The goal of people in power is to make you silent. To use you until they've gotten what they want—and then hope you vanish."

He shifted his weight, gaze sweeping over Cassira, a soft, sad smile tugging at his lips. "Ever hear of the tragedy of King Aaron?"

"No." Cassira's voice came out hoarse—too loud in the quiet air. This was the most Reece had spoken to her since Pavu, and she became acutely aware of how deep his voice was, how it resonated low enough to settle under her skin.

"Well," he said, "I suppose it started in Pavu. About twenty years ago. You know its history, I'm sure?"

It was a bold assumption, but Cassira—the devout book-sniffer she was—nodded without hesitation. Of all the cities in the known world, Pavu was the only true source of precious pearls. Ships from across the seas came to gorge themselves on them, to sate the appetites of nobles everywhere.

Some wise old queen, long ago, had declared the wealth should be shared. By her time, Pavu had grown fat off trade, and almost every home grew pearls. The poor kept tanks of a dozen at home, while ordinary families owned shares in the vast pearl farms lining the rivers.

Unlike other kingdoms that hoarded production, Pavu's strange openness had allowed its people to grow rich—sometimes absurdly so.

Even the poorest families rarely went hungry, while the rest of the world couldn't say the same for their elites.

Of course, it wasn't that simple. Trade ships and army regiments were never short on men—conscripted like any imperial port. The city's crown jewel was the massive, gold-domed palace unimaginatively called the Golden Palace, home to the royal court. Cassira had once dreamed of visiting it with her father. She'd have worn the ridiculous gowns without complaint just to see the towering libraries, the humming factories. Now, they were probably ash. Her stomach tightened.

Reece continued. "King Saracen ruled then. A good enough king, I suppose. He reached his eightieth birthday around the time this all began. His son, Soren, was well-liked. Then there was a younger daughter—Anne. Soren would've been around thirty when Anne turned ten. And then... Soren vanished."

"Vanished?" Cassira echoed.

"Touring neighboring kingdoms. His ship disappeared. No trace. Not a clue. The whole city went into mourning, but time passed, and Saracen—he hadn't left his bed in nearly a decade. The real power was in the hands of the city's wealthy council. With no heir, they talked of a regency. Maybe finding some cousin to take the throne. But it never happened."

He glanced at her, watching her listen, then went on. "They told Anne they'd find her a husband. Her father was dying, and suddenly suitors from all over the world started lining up. The council didn't give a damn what Anne wanted. They only cared about who would become king—and how much control they could keep."

Cassira's brow furrowed, her arms tightening around her knees. "There was certainly no talk of Anne ruling."

"But then," Reece said, his tone shifting with interest, "her tutors came into the chamber. The tutors start listing Anne's achievements. By ten, she'd mastered reading, writing, math, geography. She was devouring the

royal library and had opened her own small banks. A queen wasn't unheard of in Pearl, and suddenly, the idea didn't seem so far-fetched to anyone who heard the rumors."

"I'm quoting the bastards, in a country where men only hold their power temporarily, princesses are dangerous. Opinionated women are bad for their business. A *clever* one? That's devastating." he said with a laugh. Cassira fixed Reece with a stare that might have felled a medium sized elephant, but Reece just put up his hands and laughed. "It's what they thought, ok?" Cassira dropped her look, and after a pause, Reece went on.

"It wasn't her math that frightened them. It was how she used it. At eleven, she joined the royal council—not to vote, but to observe. Pavu's laws were strict: five of nine council members to approve civil matters, six for foreign affairs, seven to name a regent. And even the wealthiest men on that council had to follow the law."

He leaned in slightly. "But Anne... she began pulling them to her side. Slowly. A trade deal here, a bribe there. She offered someone's brother a title, got a favorable vote. When a man tried to force her into marriage, she let him think he'd won—then maneuvered his ships into a trade route where he'd bleed gold. And when he was cash-poor, she used her banks to crush him. Replaced him on the council. By twelve, she had a majority."

Cassira hadn't heard this version before. She leaned in, shivering slightly—but not from the cold. Reece's voice had a quiet authority, and for the first time since Pavu, she saw something loosen in him. Like he'd been holding this story in for days, waiting for someone to really hear it.

"On her thirteenth birthday," he said, "her father died. The council made their move—they were going to marry her off before she could solidify power. So she found them a common enemy."

He paused. "There was a small kingdom to the north—Avalar. They traded with both Pavu and Kronnis. The Avalaran King was Aaron, and he planned to marry his son to a Kronnis princess. Anne claimed it was a plot against Pavu. The council refused to act, so she did," Reece said, his smile

dropping. “She snuck out of the city, rallied a nearby garrison, and marched for Avalor with her guards.” Cassira’s eyes widened.

“Avalor wasn’t defenseless, their army was up north, but the castle was a fortress—built on a tidal island with three narrow causeways. Impenetrable. They reached it after four days’ forced march, arriving under cover of night. Her soldiers started a foolish frontal assault, lining up to march over the causeways, but as the full moon rose, and the tide went out, the northern estuary drained to chest height. Anne, barely thirteen, had to be carried across the water, but no guards were on the wall there, focused on the diversion up the causeways.”

Cassira didn’t need him to finish, she could put the pieces together for herself, but Reece exhaled and went on. “She led a dozen mountaineers up the undefended north wall, and into the rear of the defenders. Opened the gates. The castle fell within an hour, and the King lay among the dead. Only four soldiers wounded, and she treated them herself.”

Cassira’s throat tightened. “And the rest?”

“When Avalor’s army arrived, they saw no camp outside the walls. They crossed the causeways in neat formation—right into an ambush. Every last one was killed, even the three sons of the King.”

Cassira sat frozen. “All of them?”

Reece nodded slowly. “But that was just the beginning. When she returned to Pavu, the military crowned her queen. Disbanded the council.”

“Why?” Cassira whispered.

He met her gaze. “Because she let them keep every scrap of loot from Avalor. Every jewel, every blade, every coin. Nothing unites people like a shared enemy—and nothing earns loyalty like giving them exactly what they’ve always wanted.”

Cassira waited, but as Reece stopped talking, the silence seemed far more deafening than before. A few seconds, or perhaps a decade passed without

a movement in their air, Cassira couldn't be sure. She shifted on her now sore legs, feeling the fatigue in them for the first time since Reece started talking. He noticed. Of course he noticed. "Quite a bedtime story huh?" he said, a faint ghost of his smile returning. Cassira felt her weariness from the travel set in, swaying uncomfortably.

"No, im sure it wont give me nightmares" she answered sarcastically, "Its just history/"

"Yeah. of course it is." In Reece's gaze there was a flicker of something close to stone. "Come on, lets go to bed." And with that, the pair climbed into the tent set up, onto their bedrolls. Reece stoked the fire before getting in, and Cassira felt the warmth spread lovingly through her, and felt sleep come and take her, barely noticing that Reece wasn't sleeping at all.

Chapter 25: Ash and Wake

Journal of Steward Kell Drom, recovered from flotsam

Fire writes fast; the sea edits slow. Between them they
compose a record no court will read and no priest can bless.
We sail through the footnotes of our own disasters.

The wind had shifted just before the second bell, coming down off the cliffs in cold, uneven gusts that made the Alexandra heel twice on her eastern tack. Henry stood braced at the forward rail of the quarterdeck, one hand steadying his coat against the sudden cold, eyes squinting toward the horizon. The clouds above were a dull pewter, threatening rain or worse. Still, the sea ahead was calm enough—restless, yes, but not violent. That worried him more. The sea and land breeze switched at dawn and dusk so regularly that tribes believed it was the gods of day and night fighting.

Beneath him, the ship moved with her usual rhythm. Sails creaked under strain, and boots thudded softly on the deck as the crew went about their work with the muted discipline of long weeks at sea. There had been no word on Reece or Cassira in five days. The last ship to pass the day before hadn't heard of a disturbance on shore.

Henry withdrew the local map from his pocket again and checked it by the light of the binnacle. The best information a week ago was given from a fisherman who heard of a disturbance on shore. The scuttlebutt was that a man and a woman had killed fifty men at an inn before taking off with a hundred on their tale. Alfin consulted a small book, and estimated that since it had taken at least four people to tell this man the story, it was probably a half dozen men at most. Speak of the devil. Footsteps behind him. Henry didn't need to look. No one else would dare to approach the captain.

"That's her, isn't it?" Alfin said quietly, nodding toward a dark speck of sail rising off the port bow. "The Orna. Not supposed to be in these waters."

“She is a fishing brigantine of about a hundred tons with a sloped foresail. Your notes have her north by about forty miles. her captain owes you a favor or something?” Henry asked, still watching the sea. Alfin had given him a list of ships to look out for, ships that might give them information.

“More or less.” Alfin replied. “Her captain is useful. Levi Morn. Smuggler, opportunist, and occasional spy. Good eyes. But i've never met him. Apparently he has sold intelligence to one of my... colleagues... in the past a few times”

Henry grunted. “Was your colleague the one who kidnapped the children we saved or one of the others?” Alfin didn't answer. The Orna was closing fast, angling toward them like a ship with purpose. She flew no colors, signaled no intent. But as the ships drew nearer, this strange ship adjusted course to fall alongside the Alexandra, sails trimming with quick precision. Too quick. Faster than a fisherman could ever handle. Henry's sense was buzzing. A ship that could spin and trim that fast did not have a crew of a dozen, she probably had fifty men aboard. “BEAT TO QUARTERS!” he bellowed out.

“BELAY THAT” screamed Alfin, and the crew, having just started moving, froze in shock. So did Henry. For all of Alfin's power, no man overrode a captain's decision. “This matches his history, I'll take full responsibility.” Henry allowed the maneuver, but only barely. He gave a nod to the helmsman and kept a hand near the pistol beneath his coat.

When the ships were within hailing distance, a figure rose from the Orna's rail—tall, broad, wrapped in a salt-stained coat that whipped in the wind. He looked... well Henry simply thought that he looked like a stereotypical pirate. He stood loosely on the rail gripping a rope with long dark hair. He raised a speaking trumpet and yelled over to Alexandra “What is worth more sealed than said?”

Answered immediately by Alfin “Secrets!” The ship dropped a jolly boat, and this pirate climbed assuredly up the side of Alexandra. Henry, and every sailor nearby were immediately taken by the same thought, that this man simply was not worth being on their ship. Perhaps it showed in the

captain's expression, because this visitor's dazzling smile faltered seeing Henry.

"Laur MacGuff, at your service" The man said, showing a number of gold teeth.

"Alfin Chapman, and this is the Captain, Henry" came the reply over Henry's shoulder. The visitor zeroed in on Alfin immediately, and the two strode to the railing, with Henry only reluctantly following.

"Welcome to the Alexandra" Alfin said politely.

"Such a pretty ship" Laur said, with greedy eyes inspecting the meticulously organized ropes and cannon. Alfin, fortunately, had the goodness to sense Henry's rising blood pressure and came to the point.

"We need anything you have on two imperials on shore, there was an incident at"

"The inn? That's a real story?" Laur let out a short barking laugh "We picked up the story with a market just this morning. Word we got was that they killed a hundred men, so probably 6 or 7 in reality. We heard that two were headed north being followed and tracked."

"Where is the closest point along their path to the sea?"

"Probably up by Goron point, but that's the best we have for you."

"You heard him," Henry said. "North by northeast. Full sail. Now."

Orders rang out. The Alexandra came alive, sailors rushing to lines and braces. Sails groaned as they filled with wind, and the ship surged forward like a beast unshackled.

Alfin fell in beside Henry, breath clouding in the sharp air. "They're close."

"Not fucking close enough," Henry said. "If the Imperials catch them on the cliffs, or if they have a good enough tracker among them and know to

cut them off as they move north, theyll be stuck.” The pair had moved aft from the wheel as Alexandra reached her cruising speed, and heeled over to the breeze as she plowed through the foaming trough of waves, Henry began to study the chart of the northeast coast.

Alexandra was approaching the site of the battle of the strait where she fought weeks ago. The land from the western continent that held Pavu jutted out into the sea before turning northwest and cutting in. Anyone in Reece’s position must know that this direction was risky... it made no sense why he would be leading Cassira this way. Henry shared his thoughts with Alfin, who was calmly lighting a cigar and paid no mind. Henry, exasperated, stared at Alfin.

“Well isn't it obvious?” Alfin said, as though speaking to a child, “He is headed north towards the city of Avalar was. Its not a bad plan, despite what the map says. Lot of anti-Pavu sentiment there thanks to the war. Someone would be sure to get them out to sea.”

“But they'd have to make it around the point first” Henry cut in.

“True enough, but south is Taruca, a city Reece blew up, and west is five hundred miles of Pavu’s client states.”

Henry still didn't like it. With good reason.

Chapter 26: The Cliff

From “On Keeping the Night Watches,” Master Gunner Hobb

When you stand a lonely watch, do not bargain with the dark.
It will offer you memory for company and take your courage
as payment. Keep your hands busy, your eyes honest, and
your mouth shut.

The fog rolled in thicker than soup, clinging to the cliff trail like it had no intention of leaving. Cassira kept her hands on the reins of her mare as she obediently followed behind Reece. They’d been riding single file along the ridge, wind biting at their cloaks, the sea crashing far below in a steady, ceaseless rhythm.

Reece rode just ahead of her, his stallion nearly being a silhouette in the mist. He hadn’t said much since dawn, only motioned when they’d needed to turn, stop, ride on. The air was sharp enough to cut against her cheeks as winter began awakening from her yearlong sleep, and the silence between them, which a week ago was heavy, was just as light as when she used to ride with her sister. She should have known something was wrong. Peace doesn’t last. When Cassira looked back at this moment while thinking of her books, she might even have laughed that of course something would happen now that she and Reece had made up.

Snap.

The crack of a branch, far too close. Cassira’s mare reared with a shriek, nearly throwing her. From the mist, arrows whistled—one thudded into a nearby tree trunk, another skipped off a stone beside her boot.

“Down!” Reece bellowed, swinging off his mount and yanking her off hers before she could react.

They tumbled into a shallow ravine at the side of the trail, shielded just barely by an outcrop of crumbling limestone. The horses screamed and bolted, disappearing into the fog.

Cassira scrambled for her bearings, heart hammering. “An ambush—”

Reece didn’t answer. His sword was already out, face set. “They’ve been tracking us. We’re boxed in.”

“How many?”

“Too many.”

Voices rang out—Pavuan. Commands. The distinct metallic click of rifles being readied.

Reece grabbed her arm. “There’s a drop just ahead. Fifty feet down. Water’s deep enough.”

Cassira stared at him. “You want us to jump?”

“I want *you* to jump,” he said. “There’s no other way.”

“No,” she said immediately. “We run. We take the ridge. If we push through—” She argued as they approached the cliff face, and Reece took one look to confirm what Cassira knew, that there was no way off of this cliff. He turned back and took a long look at her. It was a look of anguish, until his eyes flickered over her shoulder, just for a second. The tiniest hint of a smirk crossed his mouth, but Reece didn’t argue or say anything. He just quickly leaned in, grabbed her by the back of her hair, and kissed her. It wasn’t tender. It was desperate, raw, and full of all the things he hadn’t said since the day they met. Salt and sweat. Fear and finality.

And then he shoved her backward, hard.

Cassira fell, but it seemed so slow, like amber was slowing her down as her feet left the ground and she fell back, down, down, down.

Frigid water hit her before she knew what was happening, swallowing her whole. Cassira took a whole heartbeat to process what happened before kicking hard upwards, just as her father had taught her, and broke the surface. Her lungs burned from some salt, as she looked up at the fall.

Reece had mounted the ridge, the stolen blades flashing, driving into the line of attackers that had begun descending from all sides. He met them alone. She couldn't see what was happening the entire time with the cliff, and started to panic, looking around wildly as a hand grabbed her out of the fog. She turned and pulled, but saw a familiar face, the old man with Reece her first day on the ship. She furrowed her brow in surprise while four or five hands hauled her into the launch and dumped her neatly onto the thwarts. Henry was looking at her from the tiller, as the boat came round and quickly gained distance from the cliff. Cassira turned and looked back at the cliff, where musket fire had started to go off. One bullet passed close to the boat.

“Reece!” she screamed, but the roar of gunfire drowned her out. A musket flared, but the man was knocked to the side as a blur flew into his side. One man swung at the attacker, and Reece staggered, then kept fighting. Another came from the side. He struck one soldier down, then another. His twin swords swung like nothing Cassira had ever seen, and he seemed to dodge every musket shot at them while attacking any man shooting at the boat.

He looked at her just once. It was that same expression from the fire. The one he wore when he thought she wasn't watching. Like she was the only thing left in a world already on fire, and Cassira knew immediately. If Reece came, none of them would escape.

Far off, the sea roared, frothing against jagged rocks. But in the near distance, a ship's bell rang. A shape emerged from the fog, tall sails cutting the mist like knives. The launch pulled hard as Henry shouted obscenities at the rowers while they pulled alongside. Cassira could barely make out the fight until she saw Reece finally go down.

Then arms grabbed her. Shouts. Ropes. Warmth.

She was being pulled onto the deck of the *Alexandra* and dumped onto the planking as the boat was hauled up and the ship heeled away from the cliff, musket and cannon shot from somewhere else she couldn't locate. One tore a sail and rope above. She blinked against the blur, her vision swimming. Henry's face hovered above her—wet, pale, stricken. He shouted orders. A cannon fired from somewhere behind him. The ship rocked. Wood splintered.

But all Cassira could see was the cliffs. There was no sign of Reece.

Only the wind.

Only the fog.

And then—nothing.

Chapter 27: The Quiet

Private letter from Admiral Serrik Vos to his sister (suppressed)

Peace is less a ceasefire than an echo. You will still hear the last volley in the clink of a spoon, the creak of a door, the hush before sleep. Do not mistake quiet for safety.

The wind screamed across the quarterdeck, thick with salt and smoke and the stench of powder. Cassira shoved past a pair of soaked midshipmen and staggered into the chaos of sailcloth and shouted orders. But her eyes were fixed behind them—on the cliffs now vanishing into fog. Reece was still up there. Or not. She didn't know. And the *Alexandra* was sailing away. "No," she breathed, stumbling toward the helm.

Henry stood at the wheel, soaked to the bone, jaw locked. His hands gripped the spokes with practiced calm. He didn't look at her as she approached. "You're leaving him," Cassira said, loud enough to silence a nearby sailor. "We're running."

"We're sailing clear," Henry answered. His tone was tight, controlled.

She stepped in front of the wheel, forcing his eyes to meet hers. "He's still alive. I know he is."

"We don't know anything. We lost sight of him in the smoke."

"He kissed me," she said, voice cracking. "And then pushed me off the cliff. You think I can live with that? With sailing away?"

Alfin stood near the mast, arms folded, eyes wary. "Cassira—"

She turned on him and raised her voice. "Turn around! Right now!" Far from a confident shout, the words trembled as they came out, while Cassira shivered from the cold.

Neither man answered. Henry's jaw flexed. His grip on the wheel tightened until his knuckles went white. "If we had a heading, a plan,

something—but we don’t. All we know is that he’s gone, and we barely survived the first pass.”

“You think I care about that?” Cassira snapped. Her hands shook at her sides. “He threw me off the cliff to save me. And now we’re just going to *sail away*?”

She stepped closer, her voice rising. “We can’t leave him. Not like this. He—he *looked* at me like—”

“Enough,” Henry said sharply. For a heartbeat, he didn’t look at her. Then his voice dropped. “You’re in no condition to stand watch.”

“I’m not asking for orders, I’m asking for—”

He nodded to a lieutenant Cassira didn’t recognize. “Get her below. She needs time. And I need a damn clear deck.” The man hesitated, then moved toward her. Cassira shoved his hand off her arm.

“Cowards,” she spat. “Both of you.”

She didn’t wait for them to drag her. She turned and descended the ladder, boots thudding hard on the soaked steps. The stormy noise of the deck faded behind her, replaced by the muted creak of timbers and the rhythmic groan of the sea against hull. She made it halfway down the corridor before her legs failed. One hand caught the doorframe to her cabin. The other trembled uselessly. She reached for the latch—missed. Then she collapsed.

The floor hit her knees and palms hard. She slumped forward, shaking.

Goose barked once and bounded toward her from the far corner, tail wagging madly, tongue out, thrilled just to see her. He pressed his nose into her cheek, licking, wiggling, whining.

“Hey, boy,” she whispered, and her voice splintered.

He pressed against her chest, licking her face, trying to burrow into her lap. But when she clutched at him, he stilled. His weight settled gently across her ribs.

Then came the sob. It ripped through her like cannonfire, sharp and unstoppable. She buried her face in his shoulder, trying to muffle it, but the sound still broke free—high and keening. Goose didn't move. Just breathed. Pressed close. Warm.

"He kissed me," she whispered. "And then he let go." She curled into his side, her fingers tangled in his slick fur. Her voice was barely audible. "He let go. And they're going to leave him."

The sobs came softer then, but deeper. Like something breaking loose that had been splintered inside for days.

She remembered Reece's mouth on hers. The salt. The blood on his collar. The heat in his eyes as he threw her into the sea. What if it had meant nothing? What if it had been goodbye?

Goose licked her hand—slow, gentle, deliberate. She clenched her jaw.

"No," she said, barely more than breath. "I won't leave him."

That kiss wasn't the end. It was the beginning.

Chapter 28: Dinner

“Etiquette of Command,” Court Printer’s Edition

A table is a battlefield with knives concealed in napkins.
Toast the absent. Feed the hungry. Watch who eats and who
arranges their food into maps.

The *Alexandra* rode low and silent through the dusk, her hull trimmed to ghost through the sea with the barest ripple against her flanks. Her sails, reefed and balanced, bowed slightly in the steady breeze, whispering rather than snapping. The wind was from the southwest, steady but chilled, and the crew moved lightly on the decks, well-trained enough not to shout over a well-laid tack. With the coastline of Pavu hidden beneath low clouds, every order was passed in hushed tones.

Below deck, the brass-bound lamps swayed in rhythm with the hull, painting the passageways in slow golden arcs. Officers and crew alike had learned to navigate by this strange tide of shadows, knowing instinctively how far they could lean without toppling the ship’s balance—or their own.

Cassira had not spoken in nearly two watches. Her coat still smelled of smoke and seawater. She had laid on her cot staring at the timber seams above for hours, trying not to think about what it had felt like when Reece had pushed her. Goose lay sprawled across her legs, a warm weight she hadn’t asked for but couldn’t bring herself to move. Two days at least had passed, but Cassira lay in bed almost all day, barely getting up to relieve herself and gulp down enough water to keep the taste of salt from her mouth. Goose had been the more active, coming and going every few hours, but always returning, even if it was just long enough to poke his black nose through the door and look at her.

The knock came at last. Three sharp raps. Then: “Wardroom’s been laid, miss. Captain says you’re expected.” She sat up slowly. Goose did not stir until she reached for her boots, then followed her to the door, tail wagging once as if this were any other evening. Cassira had been

expecting this. She couldn't simply be permitted to lay there and try to figure out how she felt.

The wardroom was cramped, even more so than usual. Not because of clutter—everything was stowed, secured, military-clean—but because of what it represented. Authority. Plans. Orders. The final say of life and death on a ship with no reinforcements and no friendly port.

Henry sat at the head of the table, coat collar turned down neatly, one arm resting on the edge as he thumbed through a crumpled note. His expression didn't shift when she entered. Nor did Alfin's, though he looked up and nodded once as if they were old friends who'd merely skipped tea.

"Sit," Henry said, motioning to the end of the table.

Cassira did.

Dinner was already served: boiled salt pork cut in thick chunks, biscuit cracked with the handle of a marlinspike, and onions cooked in their skins until they burst with sweetness. There was a bottle of wine, the cork scored and reused, resting on its side in a sling. A pitcher of weak tea steamed faintly from the corner.

She didn't touch any of it.

Goose did, however. He sat at her heel for all of five seconds, staring at her expectantly before slipping around the corner of the table to where Henry sat. Without glancing down, Henry broke off a piece of pork and fed it to him.

Cassira blinked.

"He's been doing that since we took him on board while you were gone," Alfin said, his mouth twisting in a faint grin. "Dog hardly leaves the man alone. Tried to sleep outside the chart room last night."

Goose thumped his tail agreeably, but his eyes stayed fixed onto Henry. Henry gave him another bite.

Cassira opened her mouth to say something but closed it again. Goose had always been hers. Loyal in the way only war dogs and orphans could be. But Henry's hand on the dog's head looked... natural. Worn-in. She found she couldn't resent it. Dinner was quiet for several minutes. Just the clink of forks and the faint gurgle of the decanter. Outside the hull, the sea rolled in long, low swells.

Alfin cleared his throat. "We made contact with a local fisherman. Trades in salt fish and tidewood near the river mouth. Had something to say about a carriage that passed him just after dusk yesterday." Cassira didn't move, but her chest tightened. She knew immediately. Alfin wouldn't have brought it up without good reason.

"He said it was black lacquer, iron-shod wheels, drawn by six. Two outriders in the livery of the royal house. Said it was heading northeast toward Pavu proper. Claimed it bore the seal of the Crown."

"The same men?" Cassira asked.

"He didn't get close enough to tell, and if he had a description I wouldn't trust it. Fisherman don't exactly know different army uniforms, they're focused on their catch," Alfin said. "But the timeline fits. That carriage left the coast less than an hour after the skirmish. We've no confirmation they were carrying Reece, but given the secrecy, the escort, and the seal..."

"They're taking him to the palace," she said flatly.

Henry finally looked up. "So we assume. And if we're right, that means he's not just a prisoner. He's leverage. Or something worse."

Cassira's stomach turned.

"Unfortunately," Alfin continued, drawing out a folded, salt-crinkled map, "that makes him impossible to reach by conventional means." The map was inked in charcoal and grease pencil, a sailor's rendering of the coastline, river mouth, palace walls, and interior yard. Alfin laid a finger on a dark squiggle to the south of the palace grounds.

“There’s an outflow drain here. Used during high tide and storms to prevent flooding. Normally sealed, but a conscript we know used to service it, and he claims there’s a hatch that can be unlocked from the outside if you know how to find the key slot.”

“What kind of key?” Cassira asked.

“A flat forked iron bar, two inches long,” Alfin said. “We had one forged last time we were in Istal. Just in case.”

Henry tapped the map. “We approach at moonset. Shallows here are wide, but the tide drops low enough to keep the boat out of sight behind the reef. Eight men: two stay with the boat, six go to the culvert. You and Alfin go in.”

Cassira’s eyes flicked up. “Me?”

“You’re small, fast, and he’ll trust your voice,” Henry said. “That’s worth more than a musket in the dark.”

She didn’t respond immediately. But after a moment, she nodded. “Besides, Henry smirked, you would light the ship on fire if you had to stay and think about how he kissed you any more.”

“What about the exit?” she asked, pointedly ignoring the comment, ignoring the truth in it.

“Same way out,” Alfin said. “Tide turns four hours later. We have to be out by then or the tunnel seals shut under the pressure.”

“And if it’s a trap?”

Henry answered without blinking. “Then you’ll have four minutes to get him moving and three to get out before the whole shaft floods. I’ll have smoke boats ready if it comes to that—but we won’t get a second chance.”

Alfin coughed once. “Cassira... there’s one other thing. Reece cannot be left there alive. We want him out, but if it comes to it...” he drew a long knife from below the table and pushed it towards her. The meaning was clear. Cassira just stared at him, barely processing.

The lieutenant who forced her below, who had been silently reviewing the map, added, "I'll take command of the beach party. Set up a watch line and signal lanterns on the cliffs. If anything moves inside the palace yard, you'll know." Henry nodded his approval. Cassira noticed how the officer she didn't know was mimicking Henry, and wondered if all officers took after their captains.

Cassira leaned back slightly. The wardroom still smelled of pork, biscuits and wine, but now it smelled also of sweat. Of plans and risk and desperation. Goose, unaware of anything but biscuits, lay with his head on Henry's boot. As snacks fell down to him

She stared down at the map. Eight men. A tunnel. Reece alone in a fortress, possibly being tortured, possibly worse. And still she felt calmer than she had in days.

"He's not dead," she said, almost to herself.

Alfin looked at her. "No."

Henry's eyes flicked sideways. "We wouldn't be doing this if we thought otherwise." The rest of the meal passed in silence. Goose was fed again, and again, and again, but still acted as though he was starving. The claret ran thin. The tea had gone cold.

As she left the wardroom that night, Cassira paused at the door, one hand resting on the latch.

"You'll follow me in?" she asked Alfin quietly.

"To the gates of hell," he said, without flinching.

Cassira nodded once, and left.

Chapter 29: Into the Shit

Barracks chalk, attributed to Marines of the 3rd Company

Orders first. Courage second. Complaints after.

The sea had vanished behind them, swallowed by fog and cliff. Cassira's boots met stone first, the slick lip of the culvert ringing like a warning under her weight. The echo clinked away like the chime of a far-off bell, too sharp, too exposed. Alfin landed beside her in a crouch, knife already drawn, his movements as fluid as a predator's. Both were armed extensively with short blades, side pistols snug in thigh holsters, throwing knives cross-banded under their coats like ribs of silent intent. They had prepared for guards once they came into the prison. Alfin's intelligence had them ready for four guards at least, hoping surprise would get them through. Now, the weight of those weapons felt less like reassurance and more like unanswered questions.

The sewer mouth gaped wide, round and black as a cannon bore. Moss streaked the stone like verdigris tears, and the iron grate—bent at its hinges—had clearly been pried open. Not recent, but not old either. It groaned under Alfin's touch, rust flaking like old blood as he shoved it aside. A hinge squealed with reluctant protest, then gave.

"Looks like it's been opened from the inside," he muttered, crouching low. "Maybe an escape?" Cassira said nothing. She gripped the hilt of her blade tighter and followed him into the dark, jaw clenched, eyes scanning the unnatural black.

The tunnel walls narrowed almost immediately, the curve of stone squeezing them into shadows. Slime ran in greasy ribbons down the walls, pooled in patches, swallowed their steps with damp soundlessness. Whale phosphor lanterns flickered low, casting cold blue shadows around their boots like the footprints of ghosts. The scent of decay and damp rot pressed against Cassira's nose—familiar in theory, unbearable in practice, like walking into a crypt where breath turned to mold.

They walked in silence, every step a quiet oath not to die. The pair had no idea where Reece would end up—it was a matter of chance, and the stakes of that gamble coiled around Cassira's lungs. They slunk from wall to wall, pressing into the folds of shadow, blades drawn but unused. The weight of the silence pressed inward. No echoing of chains. No distant grunts or footfalls. Just drip... drip... drip. Each drop echoed like a clock counting down a fate they couldn't see.

Alfin paused suddenly. Cassira froze behind him, knife raised to chest height, breath held. He knelt. Held up a gloved hand, then pointed at the ground: a footprint. Small. Fresh. The tread was clean in the muck, sharp at the edges. Not more than an hour old. But that was not all. Alfin lifted his hand again and pointed further down the tunnel. Cassira's heart thudded once, hard. Someone was down here. The gate at the end of the tunnel should have been bolted. It was ajar. Not wide—but ajar.

Alfin pressed the door with his fingertips. It creaked open just wide enough to slip through. Beyond, stone corridors wound left and right in quiet geometry. Torches lined the walls like sentinels—but none were lit. The sconces were clean. No dust, no cobwebs, no signs of disuse. Recently tended. Recently watched. Cassira exchanged a glance with Alfin. He nodded once, then stepped left, blade held low in reverse grip. She went right, boots silent on damp stone.

She found an open cell two halls in. The iron bars stood wide, the air inside thick and metallic. The chains had been unfastened from the wall—but a wooden bowl sat in the corner, half-full with crusts of bread. Damp, not stale. Eaten from. The iron bars shimmered faintly with moisture, as if someone had breathed against them for hours. Then, there it was, in the center of the room, a shape in a chair. Cassira stopped. The shape was slumped, bloodstained. It was him.

Reece.

Slumped forward, wrists tied behind him, boots missing. Blood stained his shirt at the shoulder, dried in a black bloom that crusted against the seams. His jaw was purpled on one side, the temple swollen like a hornet sting, but his breathing was steady. Cassira didn't run. She

crouched beside the door, scanned the corners, saw no movement, then stepped in with the silence of someone walking into a church. Alfin scanned the hall behind, then slunk along the corridor's length, his arm drawing his short sword out fully, blade glinting in the whale light.

"Reece," Cassira whispered. His head stirred, slow and heavy, like a man surfacing from sea-bottom dreams.

"Cassira?" She crossed the room quickly now, falling to her knees beside him. Her hands went straight to the knots at his wrists, fingers working with urgency that trembled.

"You're alright," she said, but the words felt like ash. He was pale. Hurt. But not broken. His injuries were clearly a few days old, but as she looked up, she saw something she hadn't before. Tears. Darkened patches staining the front of his shirt. Reece had been crying. Not recently—but for a long time. There was silence as her fingers faltered. Then—

"Took you long enough."

Sitting behind a set of iron bars on the side of the room leading to a hallway, reading a small book, was Princess Anne.

Chapter 29: The Shit

Field Manual of Improvised Actions, Naval Infantry Annex

When the plan fails, promote the problem to a tool. A jam becomes a barricade; a fall becomes a feint; a wound becomes a clock. If you cannot win the field, win the timing.

“You’re late, and you smell like shit” The young girl drawled. Cassira couldn’t process what she was seeing. She barely recognized the princess, but as realization dawned on her she couldn’t help but remain paralyzed. The girl was about her age, blonde, short, with done up hair and bangs. Alfin stood and wiped off some of that shit, straightening his back with an exaggerated stretch and groan.

“What are you doing?” Cassira asked, unsure of what was going on.

“Simply getting comfortable. If we were expected, we aren’t leaving. There’s probably a hundred guards blocking the exit.” He said, far too matter-of-factly for Cassira’s liking. Cassira turned to Reece and tried cutting him loose, but she was stopped by the look on his face. It wasn’t the resigned calm of Alfin, it was... pain.

“Oh don’t be so dramatic” The princess claimed, fingering the pages of her book, “it’s just me. Reece and I were having our first proper chat in years, weren’t we?” Reece didn’t move. Cassira looked back and forth, from Reece who had produced a fresh tear to Alfin, who seemed confused. That scared Cassira.

“It’s been so long since I could just talk with someone who gets it. The pressure of family, the sense of *duty*.” Reece winced visibly at the word.

“You... know each other?” asked Cassira tentatively as Alfin seemed to be puzzling out the situation. The princess tossed her book to the side and gave a dry smirk towards Reece.

“Is this my replacement Reece? Such a quick little thing isn’t she? She managed to piece together that we know each other.” Cassira’s blood

started to boil... but she was more confused than mad. Alfin clicked his tongue.

“Is this where you give us some dramatic speech before killing us?” he asked. Cassira started coming back to herself and noticed the tactic. Throw the princess off her game, try and find some advantage. But the Princess didn’t oblige.

“No, you can go whenever you’d like. Use the gate down the end this time so you don’t drag Reece through shit and you’ll make it out. I’m done here. Just had to wait around and make sure you came and got him before my night. Thanks for taking forever. You know...” she smiled mischievously “You could have at least tried the gate. Its not locked.

Cassira was done caring about this. She cut Reece’s hands loose and started working on the ropes by his ankles. He winced as she touched his leg, a large bruise was covering his foot, probably sprained. Alfin, meanwhile, was more interested in the Princess. He spoke thoughtfully as he worked something out.

“You wanted us to take Reece. You need us to rescue him... so you can use that escape for something?”

“Very good” she said, looking up “but only half right. I expected more from an Imperial Political Officer. Any escaped officer would do, Reece coming was just good fortune.”

“Well forgive me for asking the obvious question then, I’m sure it is a disappointment” Cassira shot him a glance. Alfin was nearly bowing as he spoke, showing courtesy to this cunt. “But how do you know the Commander?”

The Princess’ eyes sparkled as she turned to Reece. “Commander?” she said, stretching the word out dramatically and spoke with the same faux courtesy of Alfin. “Well that is good news! Last I heard our prince was still a lieutenant!”

That finally got Cassira’s attention. “What? What are you talking about?”

Anne smiled. “Of course. No one told you? Reece is the Prince of Avalar.”

There was a pause. A long one. Anne's smirk returned like a blade sliding home. "You didn't know?" she cooed, tilting her head toward Cassira. "No one told you he was royalty? Reece, really. You've gotten better at hiding than I remember." Cassira stole a glance at Alfin. He was shocked.

Anne took a slow step forward, her boots echoing in the silence. "Prince of Avalor. Heir to a kingdom that used to matter. Once upon a time, Pavu and Avalor were so close we might as well have shared blood. Our nations sent children to each other's courts to learn diplomacy, swordplay, and propriety. It was tradition. Old. Noble."

Her voice softened with the memory. "That's how we met. Reece was sent to Pavu every spring. I'd go to Avalor in the fall. Back and forth, year after year. It started with sparring matches and library lessons, stealing sugared dates and reciting ship codes to impress each other. He'd quote the names of stars, and I'd teach him how to lie with a smile."

She laughed, a wistful, poisonous sound. "We grew up between parchment and sword hilts. And as we got older, it became more. More than duty. More than training. He kissed me once in the library. Right between the stacks on sea treaties and military taxes." She gave a small shake of her head, eyes distant. "It was the kind of kiss that makes promises even if you never speak a word."

Cassira didn't move, but her blade paused at the knot around Reece's ankle. Alfin watched like a man trying to read a windless sea. Cassira felt a tear in her own eye... she knew what that kiss felt like.

Anne's gaze snapped back to Reece. Her voice dipped. "Then the Duke of Tarantyl made his move." Her tone turned flat—dead and bitter beneath the lilt. "A powerful ally. A fleet twice the size of Avalor's. Coin enough to rebuild three palaces. He offered an alliance to Avalor All in exchange for Reece's hand for his eldest daughter. His daughter wasn't even clever. But she had a title. And she had timing. You see, my father had grown sick and weak. The ruling council was prepared to unite our lands as well, but several of them found a bribe from Tarantyl. So before

anyone in the world heard of the arrangement, two northern kingdoms were prepared to unite against my country.

She leaned forward slightly. “He didn’t even tell me at first. I heard it in court, the way one hears about a bad harvest or a war two continents away. I laughed. I thought it was a mistake.”

Reece’s jaw clenched. Still he said nothing. But his hand, now free of the rope, was trembling slightly. Anne went on, slower now. “I went to him. I said we could run. I said I’d walk away from Pavu, from my crown, from *everything*. I told him love was worth defiance.”

A beat passed.

“He looked me in the eye and said, *‘My family needs this. I have no choice.’*” Her voice didn’t crack. But her eyes turned sharp and wet. “I begged. I said we could find another way. He kissed my hand and said, *‘I’m sorry.’* Then he went off to marry her. The only thing he carried from me were those tattoos I spent weeks on for him.” She pulled the collar of her gown to the side, exposing part of her neck. “And of course I still have the matching set.” Cassira looked and at a glance knew it to be true. The black curl up the exposed neck of Anne was identical to the one she had traced.

Cassira stared at Reece, stunned. He wasn’t looking at anyone. The shame bleeding from him was worse than any wound. His silence was an answer in itself. Anne straightened, adjusting the sleeve of her dress like brushing off ash.

“I watched the procession from the cliffs above the harbor. Did you know that? I watched as Reece was presented to his new princess and they started their little courtship.” She turned her head, eyes cold again. “And then I burned the part of me that ever believed in him.”

She stepped back into torchlight.

“He thought it was over. That he could walk away. Live with his choice. Be a good husband. A dutiful son. But he forgot what I am.” Anne’s voice dropped. “I knew his secrets. Where his family slept. Which guards were drunk after feast day. I remembered the layout of the palace

he sketched for me on a napkin when we were in the library. I remembered *everything*.”

Alfin finally spoke, voice tight. “You used it as justification for the attack.” Cassira noted somewhere in Alfin’s voice was a disgusting note of approval.

“I *was* the justification,” Anne snapped, whirling on him. “I made the Duke believe Avarar was planning betrayal. And when Pavu struck first, no one questioned it. We were preemptive. Efficient. And very, very thorough.”

She looked back to Reece. “It’s like you always said Reece. If you’re going to be in command, you have to find the good in any situation.” The room went silent. Cassira saw Alfin cross to her and cut Reece free, hauling him to his feet and pulling him towards the exit. The Princess, safe behind the bars, blew a kiss.

Cassira rose from her crouch beside Reece, her knife still dangling from her hand, knuckles white. Her voice, when it came, was tight and controlled—but barely.

“You destroyed Avarar. Burned cities. Razed towns. Killed his family.”

Anne didn’t even glance at her.

“But you didn’t stop at the capital,” Cassira continued, stepping forward. “You sent your war south. Through the valley towns. Into the countryside. Into places that had nothing to do with your broken heart.”

Anne gave a small sigh. “Oh, here we go.”

“My family lived in Fairharbor,” Cassira said. “My father was Lord Whittaker. My mother, Lady Whittaker. Scholars. Teachers. They never raised a sword, never schemed for a crown. They built schools. Maintained the lighthouse chain. My sister was eleven. Her name was Mackenzie.”

Anne turned her head lazily toward her, eyes half-lidded. “Should I be impressed?”

Cassira's voice dropped into something dark. "They were murdered. Your forces came through under the banner of preemption. They killed my sister when they came to the house after they killed my fucking parents!"

Anne blinked once, and for a moment, Cassira saw nothing. No recognition. No regret.

"I hope someday you can appreciate how little you've managed to narrow it down for me," Anne said, almost bored. "If they were in the path of the purge, they were part of the problem."

Cassira stared. "They weren't soldiers."

"They weren't *me*," Anne replied simply. "And that was enough."

Cassira stepped forward again, fists clenched so tight her nails drew blood in her palm. "So you admit it?"

Anne tilted her head. "I don't have the faintest idea. Probably though."

She gave a faint, mocking smile. "Yes, Cassira. I don't know who your parents were. But if they're dead... well." She spread her hands. "Collateral. Fire spreads." A silence fell between them, heavy as the iron door.

"You don't even *remember* them," Cassira whispered, shaking. "You murdered them, and you don't even know their names."

Anne's smile disappeared, but not from guilt. Only boredom. "Do you remember the names of everyone who ever lost something because of *your* navy? The Imperium's blockades? Of course not. You remember the ones who mattered *to you*. I remember mine. A single death is a terrible event. Once we get above a few thousand, they all seem to mesh together."

Alfin made a noise and motioned towards the door. Anne had risen and started away up the locked passageway when Cassira found her voice. "I swore I'd find the woman who gave the order. I didn't expect her to be so... *small*."

Anne's eyes flashed at that, a crack beneath her composure. "Does Reece still remember that little trick with his tongue where he holds you at the edge just long enough for it to be perfect?" Cassira flushed, Anne's composure restored. Then Anne turned her back to them, slowly gathering her things with casual grace—as if she hadn't just confessed to ruining countless lives. Cassira knew from Alfin's look it was time to go. Alexandra would be ready to collect them and sail off, but she couldn't leave without one question. Cassira's voice broke the silence, hoarse and aching. "Why?"

Anne didn't turn. Didn't pause.

"Why did you do it?" Cassira whispered. "Why burn it all?"

Anne's hand hovered over her discarded book, fingers brushing the cover like an afterthought. Then, softly, she said, "Have you ever loved someone so much... you'd burn the world just to see if they'd look back at you, and found the fire almost as warm as their arms?"

Cassira said nothing. Couldn't.

She turned, slowly, to glance at Reece. His face was pale, lined with guilt. His lips parted, as if to say something—anything.

But by the time Cassira looked back, Anne was gone.

Epilogue:

As Queen, one must see usefulness in anything. A Defeat means nothing unless you let it beat you.

-Attributed to Princess Anne of Pavu, recorded by her ladies-in-waiting (Unconfirmed, Lady in waiting disappeared before official recording after she fled Pavu)

Hitball Arena

Temporary site of the Coalition of Nations

10:36, Local Time

The arena was a poor substitute for the grand dome of the coalition hall, but was necessary. Fire damage and a stray cannon shot still had the original hall unsafe for entry. In any case, the scene served to underscore the severity of the situation in the city. The stands were packed with people, all venting and wanting to hear the princess's speech. The city itself was just as packed, fearful villagers in outlying towns pouring in, even though the city had just been attacked. The effect of the crowd was certainly impacting the delegates, who sat at desks on the floor of the stadium, the noise deafening to those diplomats who were used to the quiet of their hall. At exactly 10:36, the delegation from the City of Pavu was given the floor, and an elderly man rose to speak. In the upper stands, a newsman would write down in his notepad, "Only six minutes late? Must be important."

"Mr. Speaker," the Pavu delegate began in a practiced tone, "We ask for the floor to be given to Princess Anne to address the delegation, to the honorable members, and to the leaders of the city-states assembled, in accordance with yesterday's schedule assignment."

"So agreed" the old parliamentarian announced with a knock of his gavel. The tables and desks on a normal day would be half empty, as these diplomats schemed in back rooms and antechambers, accomplishing little but talk. Not today. Diplomats and representatives had been supplemented

from Kings, Princess, Dukes, Consuls, and a dozen other titles of nobles who had come at the invitation of their host.

The woman who stepped into the center of the field wore no crown, but the way she moved suggested she expected one. She climbed the stone platform without glancing at the crowd, and when she turned to face the delegates, the air shifted. Somewhere in the stands, a baby stopped crying. A hundred quills paused over parchment. She did not raise her voice. She didn't need to.

“My lords. My ladies. The city of Pavu thanks you for gathering here. I must apologize for the intrusion upon your council.” A subtle nod to the diplomats, “But the situation warrants it. We again apologize for it, but even our best engineers have not managed to repair the damage of your great hall. Instead we gather here in the Hitball Arena. Most of you have seen a match here, but very few of you probably know that this place is filled most of the time not with professionals, but children playing. This makes the arena a fitting venue, for we are children, still, in the face of the storm that has come for us.” She let the silence hold. Not a performer's pause, but a queen's.

“When Taruca was destroyed, you called it a tragedy. But no embassies were summoned. No navies moved. When the fleet broke at the northern blockade against an imperial fleet smaller than her, and when six nations' ships sank beneath imperial fire, you called it a loss. But no coalitions were formed. No banners flown. When our harbor burned weeks ago, you sent condolences. Not soldiers.”

Her gaze swept across the rows of nobility seated below her. Discomfort was evident among the representatives. “And yet I do not come to you today with blame. I come with truth. The Empire is not winning because they are stronger. They are winning because we are separate.” A wave of noise rippled through the crowd, but she held up one hand, gloved in ash-gray silk. “But it is not just our separation, it is our belief in Imperial lies.” “Do you remember the grain silos of West Halden? Burned in the night. Their stores gone, their people starved. The Empire

claims it was rebels, but who benefits from our navies suffering shortages? Do you remember the mass sickness in Pelamir? The wells poisoned, the physicians hanged. They say it was a plague, but the armies of our great ally in Pelamir are short of doctors. Who benefits from that? Do you remember the three sons of King Edran, who vanished on the roads south of Derra? Taken, not killed — vanished. Rumors say they now serve the Imperium under different names.” Gasps and turning heads looked back up at the stage. It seemed as though these accusations would have the desired effect. The crowd saw the princess as a fellow asking questions, not as someone convincing them of her position.

“You know what happened in our own walls just last night!” she said, her voice raising among the crowds murmurs. “An imperial officer, captive in our custody, was rescued. Not by stealth. Not by skill. By aid. From within. Traitors in your courts. In your halls. They are here. They always were. So let it be known,” Anne said, her eyes hard as steel, “that any voice raised against this unity now... must answer why it stood silent when he slipped through our gates.”

The effect was immediate. The next few speakers, those against any form of unification, who were hardly listening but readying counterpoints, were stunned. Any argument they could make against her would be seen as guilt. It was a clever trap, one found on a rhetorical arguments book that Anne had devoured when she and Reece explored the library in their childhood.

“There is only one way to survive. One voice. One command. One queen.” The reaction was immediate — protests from several delegates, cheers from others. A slow rise of tension filled the arena like heat off sunbaked stone. “Let each city rule its own stone and soil. But let the world have one voice that speaks in storm. I offer not dominion. I offer protection. I do not seek tribute. I offer unity. Vote for this. Or do not. But know this: the Empire is already marching. If we do not stand together today, we will die alone tomorrow.”

She let her eyes drag across the assembly — from dukes to delegates, consuls to kings. “And if this coalition fails to name a queen before nightfall...” A pause. A breath. “There will be no coalition left to rule.” Anne stepped back from the podium. She made no move to bow, smile, wave, she left the silence hanging absolute and perfect then turned from the center of the field and descended the stone steps as if the outcome had already been written.

Because it had.

The first voice rose in the east stands. Then another. Then a dozen more men standing with arms raised, voices low and full. One pulled back his sleeve to show the brand of Pavu’s royal guard: a tower flanked by twin flames. Soldiers in plain clothes, planted through the crowd like seeds waiting for this very moment.

“From mountain spine to silver coast...
The fires of Pavu shine the most...”

A ripple passed through the delegates as the song continued and the noise thundered around the concave, concrete arena. One would think it was built or chosen for this very purpose. One by one, they stood. The supporters. Some sang. Most did not. But all understood: this was not a vote. This was a reckoning.

“One blood, one vow, one banner flown...
We kneel to none but crown and throne...”

Anne did not look back. Her cloak swept behind her like a shadow made of velvet and war. No one saw the quiet smirk, while behind her, the anthem rose.

“Through fire and tide our fate is built...
In threads of gold, through Salt and Silk...”