

Surviving the Serris Sea

“...so I heard the school shooters coming my way. I knew didn’t have time to hide, and my gun was out in the car because I’d only been there to give an anti-drug lecture.” Emilena stretched her back on the therapy couch. “But I’d realized, according to the escaped teachers’ story, the shooters had only killed *specific* staff members; they seemed to have a motive beyond indiscriminate casualties. Which means they probably wouldn’t kill a random woman not on the hitlist, right? So I ducked into the art department, hid my outer uniform, and pretended to be a terrified art model when they bust through the doors--”

--Emi...” her therapist cut her off with a groan. “Yesterday was supposed to be your day off. Why were you giving a drug PSA?”

“Cause it’s volunteer,” she shrugged, letting her arm and leg dangle off the couch. “And I mean, nobody else at the station wanted to do it either, and they all had actual work to attend to.”

“I insisted Broadstreet give you a day off because you *need* it, not because you know how to dodge the definition of ‘work.’” The therapist set her clipboard down. “It seems like you avoid letting yourself relax. Would you say that’s accurate?”

Emilena sighed. “I guess. I just... don’t know how to justify not being productive. Even growing up in the orphanage, we had lists of assigned chores that would always take the whole day. My brain doesn’t factor recreation into the equation, it wants to get stuff done.”

Her therapist waited to see if she continued talking. When she seemed finished, she offered up, “It sounds like you developed workaholic tendencies as a survival mechanism when you were young. But everybody needs rest, and I refuse to count yesterday as your day off.”

“It was!” Emilena protested. “After I killed the ex-principal and arrested his flunkies, Lt. Evans volunteered to fill out all the paperwork at the station. I was home within a few hours.”

Her therapist shook her head. “No, we’re moving to Plan B.” She handed her patient a slip of paper.

“Three days on *Aurora Crystal*?” Emilena read the receipt. “I thought therapists weren’t allowed to prescribe drugs.”

“The *Aurora Crystal* is a cruise ship. It departs tonight, travels to the Vanilla Archipelago for the weekend, and returns on Monday. Broadstreet has already signed you off for paid leave until then.”

Emilena sat up with a disapproving grunt. “Hey now, this isn’t fair! You never said anything about a full-fledged *vacation*!”

“Only cause I knew you’d say no if I did.” The little ceramic music box started slowing down, indicating their time was up. “Just give it a shot. If you hate it, I’ll never force a tropical weekend on you again.”

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Emilena grumbled as she threw her tennis ball against the far wall of her private bunk. *I can’t believe my therapist and my boss conspired to get me to go on holiday...you think I’d at least get a say regarding what cruise line.* This one wasn’t the most luxurious ocean liner she’d ever seen, at least compared to the ones that advertise on television, but she did pass a casino while heading to her quarters. Worst case scenario she could loiter around and try to catch them cheating customers. *Or maybe somebody will get murdered, and I’ll have to investigate my fellow travelers on the high seas...* she fantasized wistfully. She had a hard time thinking of things to do when there were no laws being broken or cases investigated. *Do sovereign gambling laws even exist on the open ocean?* She climbed out of bed and opened the complimentary laptop to boot up the web browser.

Hi EMELINA! Aurora Crystal offers several convenient packages to get you online at affordable prices! the browser cheerfully informed, displaying three options with per-minute costs that almost made her gag. Shutting the laptop as quickly as she could, she cursed under her breath in frustration and finally decided to just explore the ship.

Despite looking like a mid-sized cruise liner from the docks and during the initial trek to her room, she found that her travels kept landing her in the same few spots; the casino, the decks, the passenger bunkers, the dining hall and the tennis courts. She finally resorted to tailing a worker and spotted them using specific doors that didn’t stand out from the accessible ones around them. *Clever architecture. Unless I was looking for them, I’d never notice the routes to the lower decks, which are probably reserved for the crew to prepare food and operate the ship.*

Unfortunately she had barely made it down the ladder of an unwatched hatch before discovering the lower levels were cramped corridors with little room for hiding. Within seconds she was spotted and told politely that guests were to remain on the top floors.

Ten minutes later, she found herself at the rear deck staring wistfully into the ocean as it reflected the setting sun. “Hey ma’am, Trivia Night’s beginning in the dining hall if you’re looking for something fun to do,” an elderly man with a steel gray mustache suggested, approaching her from behind.

“Thanks, but I’m good,” Emilena assured.

“You’ve been out here a mighty long time.” He joined her on the railing, and she noticed he was the ship’s captain. “Everything going well for you?”

"The cruise is fine, don't worry," she added hastily. "I just...don't think I'm really a cruise person."

"Fair enough. To tell you a secret, they're not really my thing either," he chuckled. "You be sure to let me know if I can do anything to make your trip better."

"Will do." Emilena stared down into the water speckling off the hull in choppy waves. "Hey, Captain?" she asked before he left. "What would happen if, hypothetically, someone fell off the side of the boat? If nobody was around to notice, would you even discover they were missing in time to turn around?"

"Probably not," he admitted. "Though that's never happened, and I'd certainly like to keep it that way. Any reason you ask?"

"It's just something I've always wondered." Emilena shielded her eyes as a ray from the setting sun reflected off the massive gleaming sheet of reflective metal on the side of the ship. "Also why does the *Aurora Crystal* have a giant mirror?"

"Two reasons," he answered, lighting a pipe when it appeared she wanted an extended conversation. "One, great for branding. Everyone knows it's our ship when they see us cross the horizon lit up like a torch. And two, during overcast days we can still offer sunbathing on the starboard deck. The Serris Sea is notoriously stormy, and we cross completely through it on the way to Vanilla."

"Interesting," she nodded. "What sort of protections does the ship have in case of a storm?"

"Oh, storms are no trouble at all. We've got weather equipment that would warn us of anything before it hits, and our hull is double-reinforced in the extremely rare chance we can't navigate around it."

"No offense, but a reinforced hull sounds more useful against, say, an iceberg," Emilena admitted. "Wouldn't storm protection be more about the strength of the masts and upper decks?"

"Trust me, even if a storm magically snuck through our weather trackers, the biggest concern would be passengers whining about being confined to the ship's interior. I swear we get the most cantankerous pantywaists in this line of work." The captain blew a smoke ring. "You seem oddly preoccupied in finding every possible way things could go wrong."

"Sorry. It's my job." Emilena looked away. "I'm a police investigator. Off-duty," she quickly added, "but spotting threads is basically all I do."

"I can respect that," he nodded. "But you needn't worry. I'm a retired naval officer, and I take the safety of my passengers, ship, and crew very seriously. Here," he handed her \$50 in tokens for the casino. "Go have a bit of fun and let me worry about the ship. I think you'll warm up to the cruise life once you settle in."

Emilena frowned at the tokens now that it was dark enough that he wouldn't see. She'd never gambled in her life, but this was her first risk-free opportunity to try it. *I can't see how throwing away money could be fun, but I guess I have nothing better to do...*

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"This is *awesome!*" Emilena marveled. "I keep losing but wanting to *go again!*"

A well-dressed man at the table flashed her an annoyed glance. "Call," he tossed several red chips into the pot.

The dealer nodded, and flipped his hand. "Aces and eights. House wins," he noted, glancing at the sorry hole cards revealed around the table.

"Is this rigged?" an upper-class woman sniffed. "The house has won the last four hands! In a table with six people, that's extremely unlikely!"

"Statistically, every outcome is equally probable," Emilena noted, earning herself another disgruntled glare. "My turn to ante, right? Let's jump straight to the blue chips!"

Ten minutes later she'd lost all her tokens and happily bid the casino adieu to go grab food at the buffet. Already high from the adrenaline rush of gambling, she was even more delighted to see the incredible selection of deep-fried foods and desserts available. "Is this *jello?*" she gasped, wiggling one of the many available plates with a blob of green goo. "I've never had jello before!"

"I think calling it jello is a bit generous," the man behind her in line sniffed. "I can hardly believe this sordid display. The meals are on *hot plates*. What are the cooks doing if not preparing this fresh?"

"Waiter!" another customer called from his table. "There was a *bone* in my lasagna! I demand a full refund!"

"Refund?" Emilena paused, three servings of chocolate mousse already piled on her plate. "Wait, we have to pay for this?"

"Only if you order off the menu," the dark-skinned server behind the buffet line assured. "The buffet is free."

"I'm not surprised. You should be paying *us* to eat this drivel." A rich woman in line left her limp salad behind in disgust, and Emilena didn't hesitate to add it to her own bounty.

After stuffing herself full from every possible offering, with no regard to what order she ate the various desserts, dinners, and side dishes, Emilena stumbled back towards her bunk to sleep off her new food coma. But she didn't get far until she found herself in a flooded hallway. "What happened?" she gasped to a pair of workers urgently bucketing the water and tossing it overboard.

"Nothing to worry about!" one of them assured. "One of the portholes sprung a leak. We've already plugged it, we're just bailing the water that got in. The problem's already been resolved!"

"*Excusez-moi?*" Emilena heard someone coming up behind her. "The net on your tennis court broke in the middle of my set! I--" An elder woman turned the corner and yelped in alarm at the water. "My designer athletic shoes!" she cried.

"Oh dear, if you go immerse them in rice, that should help," Emilena offered, though she wasn't sure why anyone would own athletic shoes that couldn't handle water.

The woman splashed back to dry carpet in indignation. "I swear to god this is the worst cruise I've ever had the displeasure of taking!" she kvetched. "Everything's falling apart, the amenities are substandard, and the weather's been atrocious! I plan on leaving an *extremely* negative review once we reach--" she noticed Emilena wasn't listening anymore. "Excuse me, are you *helping them* drain the hallway?" she gasped.

"Well, I mean they had a spare bucket," Emilena shrugged, heaving a round of water onto the deck where it drained through the railing.

"Well, I never!" The woman turned her nose. "*Some of us* have standards." And she strode off without another word.

Thirty minutes of manual labor later, Emilena limped back to her quarters, took a quick cold shower (the hot water wasn't working) and collapsed into her bed thoroughly content. "I was wrong..." she murmured to nobody in particular as the fatigue drained from her muscles. "...cruises are awesome. The rest of this trip is gonna be awesome."

The next day, they were raided by pirates.

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"Listen up! This can be easy or hard!" The lead pillager fired his pistol in the air, eliciting screams from the gathered prisoners. "Valuables, take 'em out! Wallets, purses, jewelry. Keycards to your rooms are *mandatory*! You give us any trouble, we huck you over the side!"

"I can't believe this!" grumbled Sir Graves, the well-dressed man from the poker game. "Could anything *e/se* have gone wrong on this godforsaken cruise?" The crewman and passengers were all being held at gunpoint on the pool deck. Emilena knew she could escape her zipties, as she'd swelled her wrists when they were applied, but at the moment she was near the center of kneeling captives and wouldn't get far if she gave this away.

"We are going to sue Aurora Cruises into the fucking *ground* when we get home!" the elderly woman from the tennis courts added, addressing a well-dressed crewman with a bushy brown beard.

"Can we talk about this later?" the crewman with the beard muttered. "Let's get through this first."

"My thoughts exactly," the lead pirate laughed, walking over and rolling the crewman into his back. "Are you the captain?"

"I am," he lied, glaring up at his abuser.

"Well captain, what's the password to the safe room? The keycards we confiscated aren't working."

"19-15-19," he replied. "Just don't hurt anybody, take your loot and be on your way."

"With pleasure." The pirate grinned toothily and nodded to a pair of his men. "Go get it."

"Belay that order!" A fierce female voice barked, and Emilena wasn't the only one who turned to see a well-dressed buccaneer board from the tethered pirate dinghy. "19-15-19 means SOS," she noted, as the other pirates quickly bowed upon her arrival. "It's the default password for a series of nautical safes that send an emergency distress call when that password is entered." She drew her ceremonial cutlass and pressed the tip against the crewman's neck. "Last chance, scuttlebutt. The *real* password."

"I...don't know it!" the crewman gasped. "I swear! I'm not the real captain, I'm just the first mate."

One of the captors frisked his wallet and handed it to the female, who flicked through it and nodded in agreement. "Well, Bradley, you better hope the default 0-0-0 works, because I don't believe that they didn't tell the true password to the first mate. Now, where's the real captain?" She didn't remove her sword.

"I...last saw him right before you boarded!" Bradley stammered. "It's been rather hectic since then, how should I have kept track of his whereabouts?"

"Hmmm." She narrowed her eyes. "I don't like wildcards in my raids. *Oh captain!*" she called out, unclipping a megaphone from her belt. *"I know you can hear me, captain! Stop whatever you're doing and meet me on the front deck! For every minute you're late, I kill one of your crew, starting with your first mate!"*

"Is that really necessary?" Bradley's eyes went wide. "What if he can't hear you?"

"This boat's not particularly big," she replied dismissively. "Honestly, it's the smallest cruise liner we've attacked this year. I hope you all didn't pay too much for this cruise." A series of grumbles rippled through the gathered prisoners.

Emilena glanced left and right to see if anyone else was going to intervene. She didn't see many options, but she couldn't stand aside and watch an innocent man get murdered. "Wait!" she called out as the minute expired and the pirate drew her cutlass for a swing. "Don't kill him! I know how to bust open safes."

The pirate regarded her as she struggled to her feet. "You're not a member of the crew. Why are you getting involved?"

"Get me a drill and a hose and I can open that safe," Emilena promised. "But you have to promise not to kill anybody. Including myself, the first mate and the captain."

The pirate captain grinned. "Well now, you've got me curious. Untie her," she ordered. "You're coming too, Bradley," she added as Emilena slipped from her bonds without assistance.

After a brief detour to collect the needed tools from the staff rooms, Emilena talked the pirate captain through her process as she set things up. "Safes are often too durable to drill, which is why you need to punch through the lock itself," she explained, boring a hole just large enough for the hose. "Now you insert this, turn the water on, and wait."

Bradley was looking suspiciously at her handiwork, but the pirate captain seemed impressed. "Are you a criminal?" she asked. "Fancy meeting a safecracker on a pleasure cruise. You must make a fortune."

"I'm not a criminal. I'm...a mystery novelist," Emilena lied hastily. "I just do my research."

"Indeed you do!" the captain agreed readily, gasping in delight when the water pressure blew the safe door off its hinges. "Are you worth anything? We might want to take you with us for a ransom." But something in her tone suggested she was merely teasing. "Alright, boys gather the goods and let's split."

"Erm, captain..." the man who'd been calling the shots upstairs held out a hand of shredded bills and warped jewelry. "The contents of the safe are destroyed."

"What?" she exclaimed, rounding on Emilena.

"Oh, sorry. You didn't specify you wanted what was inside to remain intact," Emilena shrugged, suppressing a grin. "Hey now..." she reminded as the captain drew her cutlass, "you promised you wouldn't harm anyone if I opened the safe!"

The captain snarled. "Take anything gold, it'll still be worth something." She led the way back to the front deck, where the other pirates were gathered.

"All rooms have been cleaned out, cap'n," one of her men nodded. "Not our greatest haul, but not a terrible one either."

"Wonderful. Let's leave these cityfolk to their fate." The captain threw Emilena and Bradley back into the pile and marched stiffly back to the gangplank.

"Not another step, Jackal!" cried a voice from the very top of the cruise ship. Everyone turned to see the cruise captain's head barely peeking over the top of the bridge.

"Ah, so you've heard of me, then?" the Jackal shouted back, using her megaphone. "And yet you're brave enough to pull stunts like this?"

"I've barricaded the way up here, and I have a clear shot onto your gangplank!" he called down. *"If you take one more step, I'll make sure it's your last!"*

"I could remove your head with a single shot from my pistol!" she challenged. "I wouldn't even need to climb up there! What's your endgame?"

"Drop all the valuables you've stolen and leave empty-handed!" he demanded.

"This is rather risky, wouldn't you say, captain?" the Jackal warned. "I'm sure these valuables are insured. You're risking the lives of your passengers and crew because you want to look like a badass!"

"I know how to deal with scum like you!" he shot back. *"I served three terms in the Scorched War pacific theater. I've negotiated hostage releases with men who would skin you alive in a fair fight. I'm not giving you an inch, and if you want to keep breathing, you'll change your tune before I count to ten! ONE! TWO--"*

Suddenly there was a massive explosion; while the Jackal was distracting him, her second-in-command had primed a grenade launcher and fired a single shot that blasted the captain into the sky. Emilena watched in horror as his shredded body ragdolled through the air and landed on the bough of the pirate's dinghy.

"Holy crap!" the Jackal gasped. "Victor, I'm impressed. That shot was one-in-a-million!" The other pirates cheered as Victor returned. The woman to Emilena's left was covering her eyes in terror. "Alright, men, let's get this show on the road!" the Jackal ordered, but suddenly she noticed the same thing Emilena was already staring at; her boat was currently on fire.

"Captain!" Victor gasped, running forward. "What happened?"

There was no time to do anything; they'd been sufficiently distracted by the rogue captain that nobody had noticed the other ship until it was too late. Within minutes, even the gangplank was on fire, and the Jackal kicked it overboard to prevent the conflagration from spreading to the cruise ship.

"What happened?" she breathed, watching her wreck sink into the ocean. "*What the hell happened?*" she rounded on the prisoners, as if somehow they could inform her.

And one of them could. "The mirror," Emilena realized aloud. "You were tethered to the starboard bow. This cruise ship has a massive mirror on that side for sunbathing; it amplified the sunlight and set your deck ablaze."

The Jackal's expression was an equal mixture of consternation and fury. "Well, I guess that changes things." She snapped her fingers, and her men jolted to attention. "Minor update in plans. I guess you're coming with us after all, novelist. And so is this cruise ship, and everybody else..."

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The pirates were swift and merciless in whipping their prisoners into shape. The captives were originally tied together and locked in the ballroom, with only a skeleton crew given free reign to keep the ship sailing as they changed course for whenever the pirates hoped to go. That quickly became too difficult for the relatively small band of pirates to coordinate bathroom breaks and food, so with apprehension the Jackal loaded her men down with every weapon on the ship and gathered her prisoners once again on the front deck.

"Since there's not really anywhere for y'all to go anyway, we're resuming free reign for anyone who doesn't do something to lose it," she commanded. "This is a *one-time* offer we will extend to each of you. If you do *anything* to violate our trust, you'll find your ass back in that disgusting ballroom shitting in buckets. So, starting with this guy," her men roughly grabbed the closest passenger, Sir Graves. "We need to hear from each of you. You gonna keep your head down and follow the rules, blueblood?"

"Yes!" Graves pleaded, as she sliced his zipties off with her cutlass. "I just want to survive these horrors!"

"Perfect!" She nodded in the direction of the oceans. "Clothes off. Huck 'em over the side."

"What?" he gasped. "Why?"

"Because it'll be hard enough keeping track of all you idiots without worrying that somebody's hiding a knife in their pocket!" she clicked her pistol's safety off and pointed it at him. "I won't say it again. Pull a Kate Winslett or enjoy the ballroom for the rest of the voyage."

One by one, each prisoner followed her instructions. "Please just don't kill us!" the last one, a prim-and-proper lady, begged as she tossed her silk dress to the wind. "I'm a Wrestwood, my family will pay massively for my ransom!"

"That's the plan, yeah," the Jackal nodded as she waved her pistol and Wrestwood returned to the circle of shame. "Cheer up, people!" she taunted the collective as the pirates finally lowered their weapons. "Normally you have to pay extra for a nudist cruise! Now get out of my sight."

Emilena dared to approach her even as the others quickly disbanded. "What's the plan for quartering? You took all the keycards, nobody knows who gets what room."

The Jackal regarded her. "Not my problem. You want to deal with it?" She fished a massive stack out of the bags of loot strapped to her belt. "Pick your favorite and go to town. You can give out the others if you really want."

"I do. I think real beds to sleep in...and some privacy...will go a long way to keeping the prisoners in check," Emilena nodded. "If you want, I can test all the keys and prioritize keeping everyone quartered in the same area. Ideally, you should cordon a section of the ship for us, and an overlooking section for your men."

"Any particular reason you're acting so *helpful* all of a sudden?" The Jackal raised an eye suspiciously.

Emilena shrugged. "I don't really have anything to lose. I got my cruise ticket for free, I'm not well off, and nobody's gonna be paying a ransom for me. If I don't get on your good side, you won't have a reason to keep me alive."

"Is that so?"

"It is. It's also harder to kill someone after you learn their name." She extended a hand. "I'm Leslie."

The Jackal didn't take it. "Well, Leslie, you've got guts, but you're on my shitlist right now because of that safecracking stunt. If you coordinate this quartering assignment as well as you promised, I'll bump you back up to neutral. After that, we'll see."

"Aye aye!" Emilena saluted, giving her a slight curtsy as she attended her new duties.

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"I keep forgetting you're not actually part of the crew," Bradley muttered as he and Emilena cleaned the engine room. "All the other passengers don't leave their rooms."

"Frankly, the other passengers are the most entitled twats I've ever had to share extended contact with." Emilena gritted her teeth as she scrubbed the grit out of a massive pipe connector.

"I take it you don't go on many cruises, then." Bradley glanced at the pirate who was overlooking their work. "Is that good enough?" he asked, wiping his hands on a dirty rag in lieu of pants.

"Captain said that clicking noise needs to stop," the guard replied in a thick Russian accent.

"That's an oil problem, and we don't have a solution because we don't have any more oil!" Bradley protested. "How much further away is your home base? We were only stocked for three days of travel!"

The guard sighed. "Fine. You may go. Tools down!" He raised his gun.

"We know..." Emilena and Bradley restocked their equipment and walked to the kitchens, whose sinks were doubling as showers for anyone on duty in the maintenance area. "What do you think they'll do to us when we actually get to where we're going?" Emilena asked under her breath; this was often their only chance to speak privately while their guard waited outside.

"Ransom the rich, of course. The rest of us...I don't want to think about it. However..." Bradley kept his voice low. "Cooper found a pair of hunting pistols in his room. Whoever was staying there left them under the bed."

"So we have some weapons?" Emilena pricked her ears. Cooper was the *Aurora's* chief of security. "But there's almost a dozen of them. And they're armed to the teeth."

"It's a long shot, but we don't need to fight them all." Bradley was practically whispering at this point; Emilena strained to hear him over the sound of water running. "We just need to reach a lifeboat. We were thinking me, you, and Cooper could try and fight our way to the port deck tonight."

"That's really risky," Emilena paled. "The pirates guard the prisoner rooms, even at night. Those pistols aren't silenced, we'll have the whole wing after us the minute we fire a shot. And what about the other crewmen?"

"What other choice do we have?" Bradley spread his arms. "Better some of us survive than none of us."

Emilena bit her lip. "No. I'll keep the secret, but I don't want to break out with you." She shook her head before he could protest. "I'm making progress on befriending the Jackal, I don't think she's gonna kill me. You and Cooper can take someone else."

Bradley sighed. "Was afraid you'd say that. All right..." he straightened his back when the guard peeked his head in curiously. "Sorry, was having trouble with some of these grease stains!" He quickly departed, leaving Emilena alone with her thoughts.

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"Wow, she fashioned a *flamethrower* out of body spray and a lighter?" the Jackal chuckled in delight at Emilena's tale. "I never even thought about the possibility of crafting weapons *after* going through airport security. Where did you even come up with that idea?"

"I was just in the airport, and got to pondering if it would be possible." Emilena had been regularly regaling the Jackal with plots from her 'books'. "Most of my stories are based at least partially on real life."

"If only you'd brought any copies of your novels on the trip." The Jackal stretched out on Emilena's bed. "I want to see if your prose can match your tongue. You certainly don't have the vocabulary of a good writer."

"I'll choose to focus on the compliment part of what you just said, so...thank you." Emilena rolled her eyes. "Honestly, this experience would make a pretty good book. It'd just need a bit more mystery."

"Make me the mystery," the Jackal struck a dramatic pose. "Where did the dashing pirate captain get her nickname? What's her backstory? How many people has she killed?"

"When is she gonna let the protagonist put some clothes on?" Emilena added.

"Never," the Jackal stuck out her tongue. "I like you better that way." She sat up with a groan. "I need to get going. The shifts end in ten minutes, and Victor's damnably bad at delegating transitions."

“Jackal, wait,” Emilena suddenly burst out as her captor laid a single hand on the doorknob. “I...” she bit the insides of her cheeks so they’d flush. “Is there any chance...when we reach wherever we’re headed...that I can stay with you? As a member of your crew?”

The Jackal regarded her curiously. “I don’t have any openings right now. Except perhaps a cabin wench. You think you can keep my cabin clean...?” Her voice lowered suggestively.

“...I think I can do that.” Emilena recognized the predatory look on her face, though she was used to seeing it on men.

“You’d be prepared to give up your novelist career?” The Jackal pushed her so she collapsed onto the bed. “You do realize what you’re asking for, right? Piracy is not a part-time gig.”

“There’s not as much money in publishing as you’d think,” Emilena assured, hoping she was reading the signs right. “Plus, why write about adventures when I can go on them with you, right?”

“In that case...” the Jackal climbed on top of her, pressed her into the blankets, and locked their lips passionately together. “...you can call me Jacqueline.”

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“So tell Bradley to hold off on that crazy breakout plan of his,” Emilena muttered, treading water next to Cooper, a muscled red-haired man manning the lifeboat they were using to hold their hull-scraping supplies. Unwanted barnacles had built up on the ship’s exterior, sealing the exhaust flappers, and Emilena had volunteered to pry them off with a crowbar so she’d get a chance to talk to Cooper alone.

“You seriously seduced the Jackal?” Cooper whistled. “How’s she in bed?”

“Well, she threatens to kill me once a bottle, and keeps a death grip on her cutlass the entire time,” Emilena appreciated seeing the smile drop from his face. “Trust me, it’s not pleasant.”

“I don’t get it. What’s your plan now?” he muttered, glancing up at the deck where two guards were watching.

Emilena breathed on her snorkel mask to clear the fog. “Her cabin is at the far end of the sleeping quarters. It has a whole window on the wall the guards don’t see. I’ll have access to the whole ship every night.”

“Okay, what then? You gonna take a lifeboat for yourself?”

"No, I don't make plans that leave innocents in jeopardy." Emilena clipped her oxygen tank back to her wetsuit; normally she wouldn't have removed it during a short break, but she needed the extra time to talk to Cooper. "The problem is that the ship's running too well. We need to spread the pirates' attention thinner. And I've worked enough shifts by this point that I know where and how to do that."

"Oy, *get a move on!*" one of the guards shouted down. "*What're ye talking about anyway?*"

Emilena sighed, slipped her rebreather on, and resubmerged with her crowbar.

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With a satisfied sigh, the Jackal collapsed on top of her. "Oh god...I'm not gonna miss the days you weren't around..." She traced Emilena's cheek lovingly.

"Really? I doubt I'm the best lay you've ever had." Emilena allowed the Jackal to cup her breast with a weak smile. "I wasn't very...explorative...in my landlubbing days."

"Yeah, but you're good enough," the Jackal assured. "I'm not exactly spoiled for choice in this line of work." With one last swig of her rum, she shimmied under the covers. "You just keep doing what I say, and we'll make a real wench out of you yet..."

"Looking forward to it," Emilena cooed, growing silent as the Jackal's drunken snores grew louder and more pronounced. As soon as she dared, she shimmied out of her lover's embrace and tiptoed to the window. She hesitated after sliding it open, but when there was no response from within or outside the cabin, she squeezed her way out to the rear deck.

The chill midnight air bit her skin as she tiptoed away from the populated area of the ship as quickly as she dared. The decks were slippery with mist this late, and she gulped as she peered over the side at the pitch-black ocean below her. *If I fall, nobody would ever see me again...*

It was with great relief that she reached a hatch and climbed her way into the recesses of the ship. Her first stop was the engine room, where she found several pipes that had loose screws. Bradley had warned Victor about them, but Victor had insisted they'd be fine for a few more days. *Let's teach them not to grow complacent.* Gritting her teeth, she slowly got to work removing the screws and reattaching them far looser than they'd been. *These will hold for a bit, then start coming apart sometime tomorrow. But until then I need to make more things for us to 'fix' in the morning.*

Next she reached the coal storage and poured several gallons of seawater into the bins. It would take hours to lay the coal out to dry, and most of it would be permanently unusable. Then she headed for the cargo bay and stacked the crates from lightest to heaviest, using the pulley system to lift the ones that were too big for her to carry. *As soon as they take a hard left or right*

turn, at least some of these stacks will collapse into each other, she panted, wiping sweat from her brow. There was only enough time for one more act of sabotage tonight.

She hesitated while heading for the observation deck when she noticed the damaged porthole that she'd helped drain on the first night of the cruise. *No, I can't touch that*, she concluded after weighing her options. *I'm trying to inconvenience the pirates, not send us all to a watery grave.*

At the control room, she stepped delicately over the door, which the pirates had rammed open, and observed the easiest target she'd had all night. The ship was already running low on power, so all she did was turn the lights and weather sensors on. They'd burn through the remaining power before everyone woke up, which will leave the boat without navigational equipment or sensors. She wished she could send a hailing frequency or some sort of distress call, but the radio was the first thing the pirates had destroyed upon taking over. *One problem at a time*, she reminded herself. *We deal with the pirates, and then we can find our way to an island or populated shipping route.*

Catching her breath, she mentally prepared for the journey back to the captain's quarters and set out. Seconds after she left, the weather equipment flashed an unseen warning about a massive tropical storm coming their way.

* * *

"Goddammit, Victor! Who was driving the ship last?" The Jackal snarled.

"I was!" Victor assured. "But I didn't leave the control room activated!"

"We are *out of power*, Victor! We are now sailing *blind*!" She slapped him across the face, sending him spinning into the wall. "Is the cruise's navigator still alive? Bring him to me!"

Emilena watched silently as a pair of pirates left and later returned with a mousy man whose hair was tied in a black ponytail. "What's your name?" the Jackal snarled.

"Robin," the young man answered nervously.

"And are you the navigator?"

"Umm, I'm the relief navigator," he shivered, glancing at Emilena in hopes of a supportive face. Emilena looked away.

"The main navigator is badly seasick, and locked himself in his quarters," the guard explained.

"They don't get to do that! Get down there and either bring him to me or kill him!" the Jackal growled. "Okay, Robin, until the real deal shows up, do you think you can navigate without power?"

"...Probably?" Robin shrugged helplessly. "We've got the tools. Would you like me to figure out where we are?"

"Yes, and if you'd like to keep your nuts, you better not lie." She drew her pistol and clicked the safety as a wholly unnecessary show of force.

"Captain," Emilena asked delicately as Robin sprinted to grab a sextant. "Could I go help the workers downstairs? I feel useless up here."

The Jackal sighed. "Normally I'd let you relax, but we have a lot of fires to put out today. Start in the engine room."

"Any chance I could have a jumpsuit?" Robin asked hopefully as Emilena left the room.

She was quickly put to work fixing the same pipes she'd sabotaged last night. This time, she was all alone due to others fixing damage done in other parts of the ship.

It was getting dark when she finally finished her chores and staggered into storage to meet Bradley laying the waterlogged coal out to dry. "Ugh, now you arrive..." he sighed, massaging his hands. "I'm almost done."

"You're not being guarded," she noted, nevertheless helping him finish up.

"True. Whatever you're doing, it's working," he nodded. "What's the next step?"

"Give me another night to set a few more traps. I'll be sabotaging the boiler room, kitchen, ventilator, and aft stabilizers. Can you remember that?" He nodded. "Make sure Cooper has those pistols ready. Tomorrow, the two of you will be going to those places and ambushing any pirates keeping guard. They won't be able to place more than one of themselves in each sector."

Bradley nodded. "I can't believe you're sleeping with the pirate captain," he chuckled.

"Why do you all keep bringing that up?" Emilena rolled her eyes. "You know it's terrifying, right? She gets violent when she's drunk."

"Yeah? I'd still go for it," he joked.

"Why don't you ask? Maybe she's still hiring," Emilena retorted sarcastically as she stood up. "Once she's out of the picture and we have control of the ship, we can worry about our actual goal: getting home."

Bradley nodded. "Best of luck tonight, and take care of yourself."

"Thanks," Emilena made to leave the room, but he abruptly grabbed her by the arm.

"I'm serious," he added. "Don't want to see you get hurt. If I could go on these nightly outings in your place, I would."

"Er...thanks, but I can handle myself." Emilena delicately extricated her arm and left the room. After a quick trip back to the captain's quarters, she showered and was waiting for the Jackal in bed when she loudly slammed the door open.

"I can't believe that oaf left the lights on..." Jackal snarled, stabbing her cutlass into the wall with enough gusto to make Emilena flinch. "This fucks *everything* even more than it already is!"

"We can still make it! I believe in you," Emilena assured, leaping up and easing the Jackal out of her coat. "Are we almost home?"

"If we'd followed the proper course, yes," Jackal griped, shedding her uniform and joining Emilena in bed. "But who knows if we did that. The navigator was too sick to be useful, it's all up to that stupid ponytail kid."

"Don't worry..." Emilena rubbed the Jackal's shoulderblades like she knew she liked. "Let's forget about all that until tomorrow. For now, you need sleep."

Her partner groaned with pleasure as Emilena worked her way down her back. "I ain't ready for sleep..." she grunted, grabbing the bottle beside her bed and taking a swig. "I ain't drunk enough to sleep..."

"Really? Then maybe I can help tire you out..." Even as her massage drifted closer and closer to the Jackal's erogenous zones, Emilena couldn't resist scheming. *That bottle...she left it unattended all day. If I could spike that with something--*

"Oh, right there!" her lover suddenly burst out, arching her back and dashing Emilena's thoughts. "Harder! Yesss..." Abruptly she rolled over and pinned Emilena roughly against the mattress, eliciting a yelp.

Fifteen harrowing minutes later, the Jackal grew too drunk to continue and drifted off to a satisfied sleep. After indulging in a brief recovery shower, Emilena crossed to the window and once again slipped out into the night.

Tonight a light rain was peppering the deck, forcing her to travel slower as she ensured she was holding onto something every leg of her journey. Her first objective was the stabilizers; tiny fins that were mounted laterally to the hull and helped keep the boat from tilting. At the moment, they were retracted, which gave her an obvious way to disrupt them.

About fifteen minutes later, she'd found sufficiently large boards to block several of the hatches that the stabilizers use to retract. She wasn't sure whether they would break or simply not retract when activated, but either way it would be something for at least one pirate to look into.

Next on her list was the kitchen, her easiest target of the night. *The Jackal won't settle for losing her hot meals*, she mused as she left a cupboard open and spilled flour as far across the wet floors as she could justify from gravity. *Hopefully mopping this up will be someone else's job...*

Several hours of vandalism later, she was having trouble seeing straight as she staggered tiredly back to the hatch that would return her to the decks. *These sleepless nights are starting to take their toll...* she admitted, shaking her head to keep her vision from swimming. *I hope this uprising goes off without a hitch tomorrow.*

She was surprised when she opened the hatch and a torrent of rainwater splashed her in the face. "What the...?" she muttered, gripping the ladder hard and peering outside. The rain had grown to dangerous levels, and slicks of seawater were splashing over the railings and turning the deck into a slalom.

Retreating back to the inner recesses of the ship, she weighed her options. She could no longer go outside, which was her secret way back into the captain's quarters. If she took the inside route, the pirates on guard would see her and she wouldn't have any valid excuses. *No...* she gritted her teeth. *I need to reach that window.* And she had a plan for doing so, but it wasn't going to be easy.

Ten minutes later, she returned to the top of the hatch ladder with two lengths of rigging rope tied tightly around her waist, both of which had strong clasps attached to the end. Taking a deep breath, she once again opened the hatch and was greeted with a downpour of chill water. Squinting into the darkness, she made out the nearest railing and grabbed it with her first clasp in hand. Securing herself to the baluster, she crawled blindly forward until she hit the next one and locked herself with her second clasp. Then she retraced her steps to undo her first.

In this way, she slowly made her way along the side of the ship. By the midpoint her limbs were screaming in protest and she worried she was going to lose her fingers to frostbite, and the rain only seemed to get worse. *This isn't a tropical storm, is it?* she thought wildly. *Do I need to warn somebody about what's happening?*

She should have kept her mind focused on the task at hand. Her shivering fingers fumbled the clasp, and before she could recover the wind had dragged her off the side of the ship to dangle precariously in the air, with only her previous clasp keeping her from a watery grave. She couldn't stop a scream from piercing the air, but the howling wind was more than enough to mask it. Clutching the rope wildly, she scrabbled her hands helplessly against the perfectly-smooth hull. *How do I get back up?* She tried to get a foothold and hoist herself up with her arms, but her exhausted body was not interested in playing ball.

For several minutes she felt the storm batter her mercilessly. *I'm completely exposed...I can't spend the night like this...* she winced as the wind swung her like a pendulum repeatedly across the side of the ship. *I don't know if my knot can take this abuse...* she realized in a panic, once against digging her hands into the wall hoping desperately for purchase.

And suddenly, as the wind dragged her along a wide arc, she found some when her fingers dug into a circular loop of raised bolts. *A porthole!* She ran her fingertips along the glass and her nails found a pattern of spindly cracks. *Oh, crap, not just any porthole. The damaged one...*

Beyond the glass was the storm cover, a heavy metal sheet that was being used to keep it shut, but they didn't latch so she'd be able to open it if she could get the glass out of the way. Swinging her loose rope, she pivoted and sent the metal clasp slamming into the porthole with a heavy thud.

Nothing happened for the first few whacks. Or the dozen after that. But slowly and surely she increased the cracks in the window, until she managed to widen the initial shatterpoint enough to get her finger in and start peeling glass away. Her fingers were lacerated by the time she managed to clear the majority of the glass, and from there she broke the remainder with strong dedicated whacks of her improvised flail.

After what felt like an eternity braving the elements, Emilena finally clambered through the porthole and untied herself, gasping up water and shivering violently. Dragging herself further away from the now-open window, she grew alarmed when she noticed the dangerous amounts of water flooding the hallway with her. *I gotta warn the others...* she realized. *The boat is going to sink...*

But her tortured limbs wouldn't respond; she'd used up all her adrenaline climbing through the porthole. After wedging herself between the wall and a bench, Emilena felt unconsciousness take her.

* * *

Every one of Emilena's body parts were still asleep when she came to several hours later, and her limbs were numb and unresponsive when she staggered out of her makeshift sleeping place. Her skin was dangerously pale, and the tropical morning temperatures were likely the

only reason she hadn't frozen to death. The floors were still soaked but only an inch deep; the water was still mostly flowing into the inner recesses of the ship.

Gasping in pain as her awakened extremities erupted in painful twinges, Emilena flopped on the floor like a fish and quickly lost the ability to walk. *The ship hasn't sank yet at least*, she noted while waiting for her balance to return, glancing out at the sun which was just peeking over the horizon. *It must be between 5 and 6 am. Everyone will be waking up within the hour.*

Stumbling back to her least-favorite hatch, Emilena returned to the decks and gasped in horror at the damage. *Holy crap...* she breathed, looking at the shattered masts and collapsed walls. Parts of the floor had collapsed down into the lower levels, and the damage extended as far as she could see down the deck. *My sabotage wasn't even necessary; this ship is already in no shape to sail.* Which means her conspirators didn't have a lot of time. *If the pirates see this, they'll realize that salvaging this trip is increasingly unlikely...and probably start dispatching the least valuable of their prisoners for survival reasons.*

Still weighing her options, Emilena returned to the captain's quarters and shimmied through the window. *I need to trigger the uprising before everyone wakes up*, she concluded, rubbing herself down furiously to bring some warmth back to her skin. *If I leave through the main cabin door, I can try to convince the guard to let me talk to Cooper or Bradley...*

"Hey Leslie."

Emilena's heart leaped into her throat when the Jackal opened her eyes abruptly. "What were you doing out there, Leslie...?"

* * *

Emilena braced herself as she hit the water with a painful splat. Her arms and legs were tied, preventing her from swimming, and she was so short on breath she couldn't inflate her lungs to keep herself buoyant. Spluttering desperately, she squeezed her eyes shut and refused to look at the endless dark water enveloping her as her consciousness faded with every second that ticked by.

And then she was back out, hitting the side of the ship painfully as they dragged her back onto the deck. "Well...?" the Jackal snarled, hoisting Emilena to her feet and socking her across the jaw. "What the hell were you doing?"

"I...woke up earlier than you...and wanted to purview the...damage from the storm..." Emilena coughed, then gasped as a follow-up push sent her plunging back into the watery depths.

"I'm not someone you can lie to!" the Jackal scowled a minute later after hauling Emilena back up. "And if you try to again, I'll keep you down there and drag you under the keel until you're dead!"

"What else could I possibly have been doing...?" Emilena wheezed, locking her knees to keep from falling over. "Look at this damage...we should be cataloging inventory...checking to make sure the food lockers aren't damaged..."

The Jackal kicked her viciously in the crotch. "*Nobody* is allowed to just wander the ship willy-nilly while everyone's sleeping!" she spat as her victim collapsed. "There's no way you're dumb enough to not know that! You're up to something!"

"Then throw me over and don't bring me back up," Emilena groaned, only able to see her torturer's boots at this angle. "If you truly believe that. You're the captain..."

The Jackal snarled. Both of the flanking pirates waited silently for orders as Emilena coughed up water for several seconds. Finally the Jackal knelt in front of her. "Do you swear to me you're telling the truth?" she asked slowly, lifting Emilena's chin so they were making eye contact.

Emilena drooled pitifully. "I just wanted some fresh air...it was already morning. It'll never happen again."

The Jackal let her fall. "Lock her in the brig," she ordered. "We'll let her think over what she did."

The two hoisted her to her feet and escorted her to the single heavy steel cell in the center of the ship. The ringing of the slamming door echoed in her ears as they walked away.

As soon as she was alone, Emilena collapsed dutifully to the floor, curling into a ball for warmth. With the adrenaline wearing off, she wanted only to sleep and let the world deal with its own problems for a while. But the sound of gunshots quickly dashed those hopes, and she sat up in alarm when she saw Cooper and Bradley storming her position, wearing freshly-confiscated outfits and wielding the rifles from her escorts. "Stand back," Bradley warned, blasting the doorlock open with a salvo of gunfire.

"They're going to hear us coming!" Emilena warned, sitting up and eagerly accepting a pistol.

"Yeah, well we're not gonna be alone." Cooper waved to someone behind him, and Emilena saw the rest of the crew were close behind them. "We killed two more when liberating the others. There's only six left."

"They can't stop all of us!" Robin cheered, brandishing a pistol.

With a rallying cry, Bradley led the charge down the corridor, and Emilena quickly fell into line. They emerged onto the decks, and two of the remaining pirates opened fire from upturned tables, but the retaliatory onslaught quickly gunned them down. "Grab their guns!" Cooper yelled.

Emilena sensed a trap and swiveled around as the others advanced, blasting a sharpshooter camped in the same spot where the cruise captain had once hid. One of her shots rang true, and she witnessed Victor's body fall limply over the side. "The lifeboats!" someone shouted, "They're escaping on the port side!" The posse double-timed it, and witnessed the final two guards releasing the rigging. Before either could even raise their weapons, a flurry of bullets sent both tumbling into the water.

The Jackal dove out of the lifeboat and over the side. "Don't shoot! She's unarmed!" Emilena shouted, rushing forward and looking over the railing. Several seconds later, the pirate captain resurfaced, looking resigned at the firing squad of barrels trained on her position.

"If you drop your sword, we'll lock you in the brig and surrender you to the proper authorities!" Bradley affirmed.

But the Jackal didn't have eyes for him. "Were you lying to me this whole time, Leslie? Were you really a part of this?"

Emilena bit her lip. "My name isn't Leslie..." she admitted. "It's Emilena. I'm a cop."

The Jackal's eyes widened. "I can't believe you..." she breathed. "I should have gutted you when I had the chance."

"That coat's gonna make you sink! Please let us lower a lifeboat, I can grab you!" Emilena urged. "You don't have to die."

The Jackal narrowed her eyes. "Did you love me, Leslie? Even for a moment?" When Emilena couldn't answer, she sighed and tightened her fur coat around her as it swelled with water.

"Jacqueline, what are you doing? Stop!" Emilena shouted as the woman disappeared from her sight. Desperately, she dove over the side, but the water was pitch-black. After kicking around looking frantically for anything in the dark, she was forced to surface for air, and the only people she could see were her crewmates watching her from the railing.

* * *

"So, you want a shirt or pants?" Bradley asked, meeting Emilena in her quarters where she was recovering from her multiple swims the previous day. "You can also pick both, since women are

getting priority. There's barely enough outfits for everyone to get a single article of clothing." He personally was wearing a shirt but on his torso as if it were shorts.

"Pants, I suppose." Emilena sighed when he acquiescently doled out a single pair of laundered boxers.

"You sure?" He dangled the extra shirt encouragingly. "You certainly earned special treatment. And I may be taking something of a fancy to you..."

"No, thanks. Just the pants." They were a bit large for her, but she hardly felt a need to be picky. "How are the other passengers handling things?"

"Oh, you know. Complaining about everything." Bradley sighed. "Never mind that we took the bloody ship back and they aren't getting sold into slavery now. The doctors haven't had much time to worry about them, I'm afraid. Several crewmen were badly wounded during the coup, and Gittsun has unfortunately succumbed to his seasickness."

"The navigator?" Emilena sat up. "Can Robin find a way home without him?"

"He's in the control room exploring our possibilities right now." Bradley handed her a bottle of whisky, but she politely declined. "Most of the others are draining the lower decks. Last thing we need is for the ship to sink after all this."

"I should help." Emilena pushed him away when he tried to stop her. "I'm fine. I just slept for almost thirteen hours, I don't need to be in bed anymore. We need all hands on deck."

Bradley didn't debate the point further. "Truth be told, I'm not sure we have a real shot in getting this hunk of junk to the nearest land either way," he admitted. "The engines are waterlogged, we'll need to navigate exclusively with wind power after we repair the masts. And if we sink any lower, I might even bust out oars and everyone can help paddle."

Emilena wasn't sure if he was joking.

After several hours of helping the surviving able crewmen shovel buckets of water out of the lower levels, Emilena limped back to what used to be the pool deck to see the passengers were mostly gathered in soggy huddles and whispering among themselves. "Any of you interested in helping repair the ship?" she asked. "We're short-staffed as is."

"Absolutely not!" Sir Graves exclaimed. "Those pirates barely fed us, I'm almost passing out from hunger!"

"None of us were getting much better, but suit yourself..." Emilena rolled her eyes.

"Oh, please," Lady Wrestwood tittered. "You were *sleeping with them* for preferential treatment. As if you have any right to complain to *us*."

Emilena didn't feel like debating the point. "How's it going, Robin?" she asked once she and Bradley reached the control room.

"Um, well, good news and bad news," the junior navigator admitted. "I know where we are. But we are way, way...way of course. Like, over multiple days' travel."

"So, unlikely any rescue parties will find us?" Bradley asked. "We're four days overdue from our planned arrival in the Vanilla Archipelago. They'll have search boats all along the route by now."

"Not, um, in our current position," Robin shrugged helplessly. "We passed the last route to Vanilla over a day ago. It's roughly in that direction." He waved in the direction of the setting sun.

"But is it still the closest land to our position?" Bradley asked.

"Not quite. We have one other option," Robin spread some maps. "There's a very small island cluster in the other direction, eastward. It's only about two days' sail away."

"Two days' sail?" Bradley checked the map. "These are uninhabited. They don't even have names."

"Yeah, well, in contrast it'd be almost four days to reach Vanilla."

"Yeah, but that's *Vanilla*," the ship's doctor suddenly interrupted, who had entered the room from the side door leading to the infirmary. "There'll be rescue parties everywhere, and we can get the passengers herded off to resorts."

"How are the wounded looking, Sinclair?" Bradley asked him.

"Most are fine," Dr. Sinclair nodded. Due to his important role on the ship, he got to wear the only remaining wetsuit as his clothing. "The majority will recover. I wasn't able to save Platzman though, he was shot in the liver and stomach."

"Platzman? The helmsman? Oh no..." Robin exhaled. "Does anyone else know how to steer the ship?"

"Multiple crewmen can handle helms," Bradley assured. "But Platzman was the final trained navigator on board." He drilled his gaze into Robin. "There's nobody else to double-check your

findings. Are you *positive* you've pinpointed our location and can reach those uninhabited islands?"

Robin nodded, despite his face turning pale.

"Hold on!" Sir Graves and several other passengers marched angrily into the control room. "Why are we headed to some tiny atolls when we know the way to Vanilla?" he demanded.

"Because Vanilla is twice as far away." Bradley pursed his lips. "This ship's not gonna last four days."

"Well, how long do you think we'll last on a desert island?" Lady Wrestwood challenged. "No food, no radio...we'll starve to death!"

"We *already* have no food or radio!" Emilena interjected. "What do you plan on eating for four days?"

"Maybe we should eat *you*," Wrestwood snapped back. "If I had my druthers, we'd be trying you as a pirate co-conspirator!"

"All right, no more of that," Bradley ushered the passengers out of the control room. "I'm the acting captain, and I'll take everyone's ideas into consideration, but the final decision rests with me." He sighed and shook his head when they were finally gone.

"Gotta admit," Dr. Sinclair tilted his head, "Vanilla sounds a hell of a lot nicer than *Gilligan's Island* but with a whole murder of millionaires."

Bradley sighed. "Let them stew. I haven't made up my mind yet in any case." He tried the destroyed radio forlornly. "Though if we can't get this heap moving, it won't matter either way."

* * *

Emilena choked for breath as she urgently surfaced and ripped her rebreather off. "Fuck!" she gasped, coughing violently as she paddled back to the lifeboat. "My tank ran out of oxygen near the end."

"Did you tighten the rudder?" Cooper asked.

"Yes," Emilena panted. "It's not gonna fall off." She quickly slipped out of the wetsuit; Dr. Sinclair had been quite clear he wanted it back as soon as she was out of the water.

"Well, that's it then," he sighed in relief, grasping the oars and heading for the ropes. "Rudder's repaired, engines are fixed...the ship's officially drivable. Can't wait to tell the captain."

Several sailors hoisted the lifeboat back onto the deck just as the sinking sun touched the horizon, and Emilena gratefully staggered back onto solid ground. "We did it," Cooper informed Bradley, who was conducting a group meeting on the pool deck. "We used up the last of our compressed oxygen, but the rudder's fixed."

"Perfect!" Sir Graves interrupted. "Now let's head to Vanilla!"

"I already explained--" Bradley started, but a whole chorus of voices shouted him down.

"You're trusting the word of a *junior navigator* over literally the entire crew!" Lady Wrestwood's shrill voice punctured through the noise.

"You're not crew, you're passengers!" Bradley countered.

"Ask the crew, then!" Lady Wrestwood pointed at Cooper. "Last night in the bar, he said he also wanted to take the risk and sail for Vanilla!" Cooper sheepishly nodded as Bradley flashed him an angry look.

"You're not even the real captain," Sir Graves added. "You should be making decisions by democratic vote." A unison of congruent nods rippled throughout the collective.

"This is not a talent show!" Bradley snapped, leaping to his feet. "I am a *trained professional* with over twenty years' experience, making the best call I can to *keep all of us alive*."

"Twenty years' experience in *cruise lines*," Wrestwood chortled, and several others joined in. "You're hardly better than we are!"

Emilena glanced at Cooper. "Are you seriously not going to defend your captain from this?" she hissed under her breath.

Cooper shrugged. "Bradley's basically brand new, this was his maiden voyage on *Aurora*. He hasn't done nothing to impress me yet," he admitted.

"I have over twenty years' experience with cruise lines too!" Sir Graves raised his voice. "I think I should be captain!" He raised his fist. "Let's put it to a vote!" The other passengers quickly raised their hands in solidarity. "Side with me, and we'll head to the Vanilla Archipelago!" he urged the collected crewmen, and several shrugged and joined in, starting with Dr. Sinclair.

Before long, Bradley and Emilena were the only ones not raising their hands. "Confine those two to quarters!" Sir Graves ordered.

"People...come on." Bradley took several delicate steps back as the crewmen with guns raised them. "Tensions are running high right now, and we all just want to get home safe. But you're committing a *mutiny*. Is this really what you want to do?"

"You're a suicidal captain with a pirate sympathizer!" Lady Wrestwood snapped as Cooper apologetically grabbed them. "And you were going to lead us to ruin. You practically forced us to do this to you."

* * *

Early the next morning, Emilena was roused with a rept knocking on her cabin door. "Hand over the boxers, please," Cooper ordered. "Captain doesn't want to waste what little clothes we've got on ex-pirates."

"Seriously? You think after all these days he'd get over being under-dressed." Emilena allowed herself to be led to the rear deck.

She found a small collection of guards defending the new captain from a small trio of prisoners: Bradley, Robin, and a dark-skinned young crewman whose name she never learned. "This is your last chance for clemency," Sir Graves warned, reading from a prepared statement scribbled on a torn-out page of book. "You four have insisted that we're mistaken in setting out for the Vanilla Archipelago. If you truly think your odds are better heading for Robin's unnamed island cluster, this is your chance to do so. We'll mercifully permit you to leave on a single lifeboat with a fishing rod, a notebook with pencil, and a spare sextant."

"Please do," Bradley answered angrily. "I'd rather chance two days on a lifeboat than four days in a deathtrap."

"It, uh...won't exactly be two days anymore, on a boat that small," Robin chuckled nervously. "But yeah, I'm not keen on this half-sunken derelict either."

Emilena and the dark-skinned crewman didn't say anything.

"Very well!" First Mate Wrestwood snapped. "Be off with them!" At gunpoint, the four were escorted onto their new ship and lowered into the water. Emilena noted with relief that it was one of the larger lifeboats that had a lower deck; at least they wouldn't be destined to die of sun exposure.

Nobody said anything for several minutes as they watched the *Aurora Crystal* disappear slowly into the distance. Then the dark-skinned crewman sighed, breaking the silence. "You sure you know what you're doing, Robin?" he asked.

"Of course I don't! Goddammit!" Robin balled his fists and smacked the side of the boat. "They fucking *abandoned us*! I didn't think they were going to do that!"

"Wait, isn't that a good thing?" Emilena asked. "They're sailing to their deaths."

"They didn't have to, though!" Even Bradley seemed enraged. "Those *idiots*! They've doomed everyone on this cursed voyage! How are we supposed to navigate in this glorified coffin?"

"Robin can do it!" the dark-skinned crewman urged. "Don't worry, we got this!"

"I've never navigated with a sextant!" Robin cried. "I mean, I have, but not from a tiny little boat! Not with lives on the line! And I have to do the math by *hand*? What do I look like, Ernest Shackleton?"

Bradley was in a world of his own, smashing his fists together and gnashing his teeth in rage. "I think we should leave the captain to himself for a while," Emilena advised, sliding over to the other side of the boat. There weren't two 'rooms' by strict definition, but a central wall of structural reinforcements evenly divided the interior into a port and starboard side. "I never caught your name. I'm Emilena," she offered a handshake to the final crewmember.

"I'm Fulton," he introduced himself. "I was Robin's bunkmate on the *Aurora*."

"Well, Fulton, what was your job?"

"I worked in the kitchens." He glanced out the window, and Emilena suddenly recognized him as the worker who'd been manning the buffet table on the first night. "I suppose that'd make me in charge of food, since Robin's navigating."

"Just do your best. I'm here to help with anything you need." She glanced at Robin. "Same to you. I know you're worried about having to navigate in a life-or-death situation, but you're literally the only one who could do it. "

Robin exhaled slowly. "No, I got this," he pumped himself up. "Gimme that sextant. Let's get this boat moving." He opened the notebook, and cursed at the blank pages. "*They took my notes?* ...Never mind, I remember the coordinates." He quickly started jotting down everything from his memory.

When Emilena heard less cursing and smashing, she went back to check on Bradley. "Got that out of your system yet?"

"I guess..." Bradley was slumped in one of the seats. "The least they coulda done is left us some booze..." he grumbled.

"It wouldn't have survived three days." Emilena say beside him. "I truly believe we're safer on this lifeboat than with the social powder keg currently steering that cruise ship. What do you think?"

Bradley sighed. "Yeah...at least now we don't need to worry about sinking at any moment." He glanced over. "Thanks. You always seem to know how to cheer me up."

"That's the spirit!" Emilena stood up. Now that everyone seemed to be in better moods, she grabbed the fishing rod and climbed onto the roof. "I'm gonna try and catch us something for Fulton to work with, before everyone starts getting hungry."

Normally she'd find fishing a dreadfully dull experience, but with the lack of things to do on the lifeboat she was more than happy to let the hours tick by with only occasional bouts of excitement as she reeled something in. Bradley spent most of the first day reading the on-board survival booklet, Fulton prepped the raincatcher for tomorrow's morning dew, and Robin was more than busy quadruple-checking every calculation to ensure he was sending them in the right direction.

"I tell ya, we certainly are lucky this is happening in a tropical climate," Bradley commented as they settled down for the night. He and Emilena would sleep on the port side, sharing one of the two reflective blankets.

"This could be worse," she agreed, adjusting her life jacket to serve as a pillow. "We have a source of food, water, and a direction. If the next two days go this well, I'm confident we can reach that island."

Her first clue that it wouldn't be so simple came when they woke up at 7am the next morning and it was still pitch-black.

"We need to batten down the ship!" Robin gasped, as rain battered the tiny craft. "We're headed into a storm, and it's only gonna get worse!"

"We lost the raincatcher!" Fulton cried, halfway outside the boat as he searched desperately to see if it got caught on something.

"Get inside!" Bradley ordered, and he and the others practically dragged Fulton back through the crawlspace.

"Is that thing waterproof?" Robin asked nervously as Bradley sealed the crawlspace shut.

"Of course, wouldn't be much of a lifeboat if it weren't!" he chuckled.

But as the waves grew larger, the rain grew heavier, and the sea started rocking their boat with all its might, each of them became painfully aware of the rivulets of water streaming down all sides of the crawlspace hatch.

“Did your cruise budget skimp on *everything*?” Emilena griped, passing out buckets. “How are we supposed to drain this without opening the hatch?”

“We don’t, until it reaches our knees!” Bradley ordered. “I read this in the booklet!”

Once the water was up to their waists, he regretfully opened the crawlspace and everyone began frantically shoveling bucketfuls of water out of the boat.

“We can’t bail fast enough!” Fulton panted.

“Keep going!” Emilena panted. “I think the water level’s lowering faster than it’s rising...” Her arms were killing her, but she knew nobody could stop.

“Shut the hatch!” screamed Robin, the only one with a good view of the outside, and Bradley complied seconds before a massive swell sent the boat dangerously tilting. Emilena and Fulton weren’t able to grab something and went tumbling to the far side of the boat.

“Get back!” she heard Bradley yell when she resubmerged, shaking her head in confusion. “We need you both to help shovel water!”

“Fulton’s down!” she gasped, dragging the youth back up.

“What? Fulton!” Robin cried.

“No, keep shoveling!” Bradley ordered.

Emilena sloshed to the other side of the boat and dragged Fulton gently to the less-flooded side. She quickly began giving chest compressions, cursing at the water level which kept broadsiding her and forcing her to keep both of them above the surface. Despite this, she sighed with relief when Fulton vomited a huge swallow of water and tried to stand up. “He’s fine!” she shouted, finally grabbing a bucket and doing her part.

Several harrowing hours later, their tortured craft bobbed languidly to a stop as the storm passed them. Everyone continued bailing water until they could see the floor again before Robin collapsed and hugged Fulton. “I thought I’d lost you...” he sobbed, and Emilena realized they were probably more than bunkmates.

Bradley was reviewing their scattered supplies. “I think all our gear survived the ordeal,” he noted. “Emilena, can you help me get all this back in the right compartments?”

Emilena gratefully left the two lovers to their half of the boat and helped collect things. “We did lose the raincatcher,” she noted. “Which fucking sucks because that was our primary way to keep hydrated.”

“We could try to fashion a new one from a thermal blanket,” he noted. “They looked pretty similar except one had the hose leading to a bottle.”

“I think that part’s kinda important.” Emilena untangled the fishing line and stuffed her fish back inside a waterlogged compartment doubling as a cooler.

The sky was still too cloudy for Robin to do any navigating, forcing him to use dead reckoning to estimate their ideal path. “It’s not a big deal!” he ensured, a shining ball of positivity since Fulton had survived. “Tomorrow when it clears I can get a real measurement and correct our course. We shouldn’t lose too much time from this.”

“Dinner time!” Fulton revealed the raw seafood he’d carefully deboned and prepared. “It’s not much, but it’ll help us sleep.”

After a light meal, Emilena settled down on the floor wearily. She almost drifted off to sleep, when Bradley nudged her. “You hear that?” he muttered under his breath.

“Mm?” Emilena pricked her ears, and only then picked up on the unmistakable sounds coming from the other side of the lifeboat. “Oh. Are they...?”

“Yeah.” The two sat in silence, listening to the telltale rustling and panting. “I always suspected, but never knew for sure,” he whispered.

“Okay? Whatever.” Emilena turned away. “They almost died, I don’t blame them.”

“You don’t blame them? What does that mean?” Bradley laid a single hand on her ass, causing her to stiffen up. “Are you suggesting we...?”

“Take your hand off me!” Emilena snapped, a bit too loud. She heard the other two quickly stop.

Bradley quickly withdrew, and Emilena quickly shimmied out from under the blanket. The rest of the night passed in awkward silence.

* * *

“How’s that navigating coming, Robin?” Bradley asked the next morning.

“Erm, good,” Robin laughed weakly. “I’ve fixed our course. I think we’ll get there in three days.”

“Awesome. Fulton? Any luck with food?”

“Not ‘till Emilena catches more fish.”

“Okay...” Bradley gulped. “Well, guess I’ll go see how she’s doing then.” Neither of them said anything as he hoisted himself onto the roof to check on the final crewmember.

Emilena didn’t spare him a glance as she continued fishing off the port bow. “Hey,” Bradley cleared his throat. “Any luck catching fish?”

“I got a few. We’ll have dinner tonight.” Emilena still wouldn’t look at him. “You gonna donate our thermal blanket to sit up here and collect water tonight?”

“I was considering it. Probably not the whole thing, we can cut a chunk off and make a funnel into a bucket.”

“Awesome.”

Several seconds passed. Bradley sighed and lowered his voice. “Look, about last night...I’m sorry,” he confessed. “I just...well, I was glad to be alive. Like they were. And I got carried away.”

“Then beat yourself off,” she growled. “If you wanna masturbate, nobody’s gonna stop you. But don’t try and get me involved.”

“I won’t. That’s why I asked last night,” he assured. “I’d never do anything without your permission.”

“That’s great, because it’s a small ship and we’re gonna spend a lot of time in close quarters.” She reeled her line in as something tugged, but it got away.

“You wanna switch bunkmates?” Bradley offered. “I can talk with Robin or Fulton, they’d understand.”

“God no, this trip is stressful enough for them.” Emilena finally sighed and spared him a exasperant look. “Look. I’m prepared to trust you’ll keep your hands to yourself, mostly due to lack of options and a desire not to disrupt this delicate situation we’ve setup. Just...let’s put this behind us and reach the damn island. Okay?”

Bradley quickly agreed, and retreated back below decks.

* * *

"I'm just saying," Bradley inorganically shoehorned into yet another conversation. "You slept with that pirate captain. Why would I be any different?"

Emilena groaned. "Robin, please tell me we'll get there soon."

"I'm not sure why we don't see it yet," the navigator confessed. It was over two days later, and Bradley had grown more insistent and desperate with his advances once they settled into a semi-comfortable routine. The makeshift raincatcher had worked well enough, and Fulton proved to be rather ingenious at finding new ways to craft meals out of fish and the occasional seagull.

"Well, keep your eyes peeled." Emilena hoisted herself onto the deck. "I'm gonna do some more fishing."

But she hadn't even earned a nibble before the heavy drizzle warned her to check behind them. "We got another storm coming!" She shouted down below. "Behind us!"

"Bring the raincatcher in with you!" Robin warned.

Emilena complied, even though the thing barely functioned and was providing them maybe a swallow of water a day. "We gonna implement the clogging idea?"

"Don't see why not." Fulton removed the cotton balls from the first-aid kit and jammed them into the sealant around the crawlhatch, then taped them down with adhesive bandages. "Step one complete!" he announced.

"Okay, Robin, help me with this tarp!" Together, the two of them rubbed sunscreen on one of the space blankets and pressed it onto the crawlhatch. "How's it looking out there?" he asked Fulton, who was near the window.

"It's on us!" he warned, but it was almost an unneeded warning; the boat was abruptly tossing and turning like a cork, and Emilena collided with Robin several times while trying to keep her balance.

Fulton and Bradley were occupied stuffing things into compartments to avoid loose objects flying around. "I think it's working!" Robin panted. A bit of water was leaking from the sides of their makeshift plug, but it was a far cry from the deluge that built up last time.

Emilena's arms were burning within ten minutes of the ship's rollicking, but she held out as long as she could. When it was clear she and Robin had reached their limit, they switched off and the other two kept the crawlspace shut. "See anything out there?" Fulton asked, noticing Robin was squinting out the lifeboat's port window.

"No, with all these clouds it might as well be the middle of the night," he shook his head, before a massive crash suddenly sent all four of them crashing to the ground.

"What the--" Emilena ducked as the ship rolled and she found herself head over heels. "We tipped!" she shouted.

"How?" Bradley gasped, covering his face as the first-aid kit spilled its contents all over him. "That didn't feel like a wave!"

Emilena hit the window with her face and almost chipped a tooth as the ship kept tumbling. *He's right; this doesn't feel like the boat's rolling in the ocean...* On the next bounce the window shattered, slicing her cheek with shards of glass and... *sand?* "It's land!" she gasped. "We hit the island!"

Before anyone could make any plans, the boat rolled a final time and dipped right back into the ocean. Water came flowing through the broken window, and Emilena couldn't even cry a warning before she was underwater. Everything went pitch black; she couldn't tell up from down. Casting her hand out, she grasped desperately and found the windowsill. Something hit her in the leg, and she staggered as a body forced her aside, cleared the window with a heavy object, and climbed into the open ocean. Running dangerously low on breath, Emilena wasted no time following them.

She took a relieved gulp of breath as she breached the water's surface and glanced around wildly to see her savior was Robin, still wielding the sextant as a bludgeoning tool. "Robin, where are the others?" she shouted, fighting to keep her head above the stormy waves.

Robin tried to reply, but he was having less success treading water. Emilena realized he was badly lacerated from passing through the window right as he slipped underwater. "No!" She quickly submerged and dragged him back to the surface. *I gotta get us to that island!* she gritted her teeth, paddling in the vague direction from where she thought the boat had come from. But it was slow going with Robin to carry, and she still couldn't see, and the rain was pelting her face...

Abruptly someone grabbed her arm. "This way!" Bradley shouted, helping her support Robin and taking control of their direction. Following his lead, Emilena eventually felt her toes hit sand with immense relief. Still stumbling through the stinging deluge, the two eased Robin onto the shore.

"Where's Fulton?" she shouted to Bradley.

"I got him!" he assured, and suddenly she could make out another massive shape slung over his other arm.

"You're carrying *both* of them? Give me Robin, I can handle him!" The two limped further ashore. "Did Robin say whether there's forest or cliffs ahead?"

"The map showed green!" Bradley shouted. "Just keep moving inland!"

Sure enough, the sand under Emilena's feet turned into grass after a short and hazardous hike, until finally they crawled gratefully under some heavier foliage and found protection from the brunt of the storm. Emilena immediately started giving Robin chest compressions.

"How's...Fulton?" she panted.

"He's passed out, but breathing!" Bradley checked the younger man's pulse. "Did you save any supplies?"

"I didn't get the chance..." Robin's sextant was missing as well. "Something to worry about tomorrow, Robin needs medical attention!"

Robin suddenly heaved and vomited water all over her front. Spluttering and clutching his stomach, he curled into a ball and spit to clear his mouth. "Ughh..." he groaned.

"There we go, take it easy," Emilena angled herself to shield him from the rain. "We're on dry land," she assured. "Well, dry-ish..."

"Uff..." he exhaled slowly. "The others?" he asked.

Emilena heard Fulton waking up behind her. "We're all here. I can hardly believe it, but the four of us got out." She squinted onto the beach. "That being said, we may have lost the boat."

"Once the storm dies down, we can search the nearby ocean floor," Bradley advised. "It's a heavy boat, it can't have gone too far."

Emilena shivered. Not from the relatively warm stormwater, but from the fear that Robin might need treatment faster than that.

* * *

Emilena dragged herself out of the surf the next morning. She hadn't seen a single clue as to where their lifeboat had ended up. She'd even searched the spot of ocean where she'd rescued Robin, hoping to possibly secure that sextant, but without luck.

Collapsing on the beach, she took a moment to overlook the relatively small island that was to be their semi-permanent home. The forest interior was incredibly small, not remotely large enough to house varmints or small game, but it would provide valuable shade from the sun whenever their current cloud canopy dissipated. There was another larger island within visible

distance, one that seemed even more lush and green, but she doubted anyone would be feeling fit enough for such a trip anytime soon.

She spotted Bradley emerging from the waves, likewise returning from his investigations. "Any luck?"

He shook his head. "Shame that the storm ended at night, we couldn't start looking until morning. It gave the lifeboat a bunch of extra time to get lost."

"If only we'd kept that first-aid kit..." Emilena led the way wearily back to their makeshift camp in the forest. "Even a single morphine shot would help Robin a ton."

Fulton waved them down as they approached. "I'm not a doctor, but I think he's doing better," he informed them hopefully. "He doesn't have a fever, and the ocean cleaned all the wounds. I've washed and wrapped them in leaves to stop the bleeding."

"That's the best we can do at the moment," Emilena nodded. "Any luck with food?"

"None of this plantlife seems to have fruit or seeds," Fulton admitted. "We may be reliant on seafood for a while longer."

"That should be okay. I saw crabs and fish while searching the ocean," Bradley noted, and Emilena nodded in agreement.

Their first order of business was to make some water collectors. Emilena dug several holes in the ground and layered them in fronds. Bradley fashioned fishing spears out of long sticks, though after all three of the able-bodied crewmen spent some time practising, only Fulton seemed to have the necessary aim to skewer fish. Emilena and Bradley settled for crabs.

Robin had managed to start a fire via whittling while the others were gone, and the marooners enjoyed their first cooked meal since being castaway.

"You're looking good, Robin!" Bradley encouraged.

"Yeah, the cuts weren't deep. I think I'll be okay," he grinned. "All thanks to Emilena. No way I'd have reached the shore in that state."

"Well, I only pulled it off because Bradley helped," Emilena noted.

"Yeah, he single-handedly saved me, too," Fulton added.

"I'm pretty awesome, aren't I?" Bradley chuckled good-naturedly. He flashed Emilena a look, and she realized where he was going with this. "So, now that you all owe me your lives, you think I've earned a...date? I like long walks along the beach..."

Emilena sighed. "Alright, I knew we were gonna need to have this talk eventually." She sat up straight. "I'm asexual. I have *no* sex drive. No matter what you do, I'm never going to want to sleep with you."

"But you slept with--"

--I was saving everybody's lives! It was not a consenting situation with the Jackal."

"Well, if you were willing to sleep with her, I don't see why it would be so terrible to sleep with me!" he pointed out.

"Put yourself in my shoes." She switched tactics. "Imagine the Jackal had wanted to bang you, and you had no attraction to her whatsoever. Would you have done it?"

He shrugged. "Yeah, totally."

"You would sleep with someone despite not being sexually interested in them?"

"Sure," he grinned. "Still got laid, right?"

"Then I have the perfect solution to your current problem!" She pointed at Robin and Fulton. "Sleep with them."

"What?" Bradley gasped.

"You just said you'd be willing to sleep with someone you weren't attracted to," she reminded.

Bradley gaped like a fish. "But that's..." He trailed off, and glanced at Robin and Fulton. "Don't you two have any objections with this train of thought?"

Fulton shook his head. "Emi talked to us about this on the lifeboat, that time you were napping."

"If you're open to the notion, and it'd get you off her back, that seems to be best for all of us," Robin agreed.

"But I'm not..." Bradley's objection died as he realized he'd trapped himself in his own logic. "Huh." He furrowed his brow as he worked through his mental barriers. "I guess...desperate times call for desperate measures."

“Awesome!” Emilena stood up. “You three have fun, take your time. I’m gonna collect a bunch of big sticks and make us tents.”

* * *

By the time it was dark, Emilena had found nine hooked sticks large enough to balance together as frames for three decent-sized tents. Then she draped the remaining sticks along the frame and layered fronds to make walls.

“Damn, these might almost be rainproof,” Robin nodded in approval when the others finally rejoined her.

“We’re almost certainly going to find out at some point,” she replied, waiting for Bradley to climb into a tent before choosing her own. “Personally, I suspect I’ll be rebuilding them every time there’s a storm.”

“How long do you think we’ll be able to survive out here?” Fulton asked. “We lost our sunscreen, so we’ll need to choose between hunting for food or hiding under trees in the daylight.”

“We’ll just need to stock up whenever it’s overcast, like it was today,” Robin winced as he lay down in the leafy carpet of his and Fulton’s tent. “Do you think we should investigate the larger island in the distance?”

“Once we build a raft, sure,” Bradley shrugged. “Which we’ll want to do sooner than later. This island’s only got so much wood.”

“We can start exploring our options once Robin’s healed up,” Emilena nodded in agreement. “For now, I’m just relieved we’ve graduated from that tiny boat to an island of any size.”

“Yup, we sure made the right call,” yawned Fulton. “Imagine we’d stayed on that godforsaken cruise ship. I bet they didn’t make it halfway to the Vanilla Archipelago.”

He turned out to be more correct than any of them expected. The next morning, all four awoke to see a familiar half-sunken wreck limping towards their island.

* * *

“What the fuck are *they* doing here?” Robin stammered, staring at the sorry ocean liner sputtering their way. It looked even worse from when they last saw it; a third of it was underwater, the walls and columns had long-collapsed, and the smoke was wispy and oddly patterned, implying they’d long run out of coal and were burning other things to keep the engines running.

"What could they possibly want?" Fulton breathed. "Do we talk to them?"

"We're not going to have much of a choice." Bradley stood up. "You three stay hidden. I'll meet them on the beach and figure out what they want."

"Are you sure that's a good idea?" Emilena whispered.

"I'm the captain! Maybe they saw the error of their ways and are ready to play by a professional's rules." Bradley brushed hair out of his eyes and steeled his jaw. "If I wave my hunting stick, that means it's safe to come out."

Wielding one of their spears, he left for the beach and watched the junker trundling slowly towards him...and come abruptly to a halt.

"Uhh, why'd they stop?" Robin whispered.

"They see him..." Emilena narrowed her eyes. "Maybe they're exploring options."

The ship continued staring him down. Bradley waved his hands and tried to urge the ship forward, like an airport marshall, but it ignored him. "I don't like this," Emilena finally concluded, standing up. "Bradley, get back behind cover!" she yelled, but before she could take more than a couple steps a massive explosion suddenly enveloped Bradley's body, obliterating him in a cloud of smoke and blood particles.

Fulton cried out in terror as their captain's body parts went spiralling in every direction. "What the fuck?" he cried. "Why did they do that?"

"*How* did they do that is the more pressing question!" Emilena dove back into the cover of the forest as the *Aurora* began circling the island. "That cruise ship didn't have cannons on board, did it?"

She heard a light *whiff* and something smacked into the ground behind them. "DUCK!" she screamed, and all three dove in different directions.

Nothing happened. Robin curiously pushed a fern aside, and all of them cried out in terror at the sight of a 40mm grenade. "Victor's grenade launcher!" he realized. "They're mortaring us!"

"If that shot hadn't been a dud, we'd all be obliterated," Emilena breathed. "Let's move! They know our current position!"

All three sprinted deeper into the forests as another grenade exploded somewhere to their left. "We can't run any further!" Fulton gasped. "We've already reached the other side of the forest!"

The *Aurora* was coming around for another pass, and a fresh blast sent shrapnel embedding into the trees in front of them.

"This island's too small to hide forever!" Robin gasped. "And who knows how many shots they're still carrying!"

"They're just gonna keep firing until this whole forest is a charred husk," Emilena agreed. "We need to take the fight to them."

"Yeah? How do you plan to--?" Fulton glanced over, but Emilena was already sprinting away. "Hey! Where are you going?"

"Just hunker down and keep finding cover!" she shouted over her shoulder. Grabbing the dud grenade out of the fern, Emilena sprinted through the forest and over the beach to dive headfirst into the ocean while the *Aurora* was still on the far side of the island.

Keeping underwater as much as possible, she surfaced only occasionally and squinted through the waves for a sight of her target's position. *There it is.* Swimming to intercept the incoming craft, Emilena boarded through the submerged rear deck and slinked urgently into the lower levels.

She worried she'd encounter resistance while sprinting through the inner recesses of the ship, but whoever remained of Sir Graves' followers were apparently on the upper decks. Wincing at the sound of the continuing bombardment outside, she reached the engine room and threw the hatch open. *It's only gonna take seconds for the flames to eat through this metal,* she reminded herself as she tossed the grenade inside and sprinted back from whence she came. *I need to get as far away as possi--*

BOOM! A massive explosion sent the walls and ceiling rupturing around her, and suddenly a torrent of water rose from below and slammed her into the ceiling. Taking an urgent breath, she swam for the exit and clawed her way into open ocean as the tortured ship began its final descent into the depths behind her.

Gasping for breath, Emilena dragged herself back ashore as the *Aurora* disappeared into the waves with a final sickening shriek. There had hardly been any time for the other passengers to disembark, but Emilena still expected someone else to emerge from the rapidly-expanding cloud of jetsam and disintegrating building materials.

"Emilena!" Robin and Fulton came sprinting out of the forest. "You did it!" the latter exclaimed. "Holy crap, you took out the whole ship!"

"They took themselves out," she shook her head, collapsing onto her back. "And now we'll never even know why."

“Or maybe we will...” Robin suddenly hefted his fishing spear defensively. All three looked to see a single spluttering figure swimming desperately for the island.

“Help me!” First mate Wrestwood gasped frantically. “I haven’t swam in years! I’m going to drown!”

“You *deserve* to drown!” Fulton snapped angrily as he and Robin grabbed her and hoisted her ashore. “Why did you idiots come here?”

“What?” Wrestwood blinked. “We were headed for Vanilla! We followed *his* notes!” She pointed accusatorily at Robin.

“Those were *mine*!” Robin facepalmed. “For *me*, and where *I* was going!”

“Well excuse us,” Wrestwood huffed, folding her arms. “You should have *noted* that! You knew we didn’t have a navigator!”

“And the mortaring?” Emilena snapped. “Which, by the way, murdered Bradley in cold blood? What was up with that?”

“We thought you were savages! Wearing no clothes and wielding spears, what were we supposed to think?”

Before Emilena could collect her thoughts enough to even craft a sufficiently-flippant response, Fulton interrupted the conversation as he stared behind them into the ocean. “Uhhh, guys?” He gulped, color draining from his face. “We got more visitors.”

All four watched as a small boat disembarked from the larger island and started rowing their way. “Who could that be?” Wrestwood asked.

“I’m not sure...let’s play it safe.” Emilena borrowed Robin’s spear. “You three hide in the forests. I’ll flag you down if it turns out they’re friendly.”

But she wouldn’t be so lucky. As it got closer, she realized with growing dread that she recognized the make and model of that dinghy; it was another vessel from the same pirates that the Jackal had worked for. *No wonder these islands were the only option we had except sailing for Vanilla*, she realized as she dropped his spear and raised her hands in surrender. *They were where the pirates had been taking us all along.*

* * *

"Whoo-ey!" whistled the crook-toothed leader as he reviewed the wreckage. "What the hell happened here?"

"Catastrophic engine failure," Emilena explained. She'd been quickly trussed up and bundled none-too-gently into the dinghy. "We'd been sailing for almost twice as long as the ship was stocked for; she was in sorry shape even before she fully sank."

"Where's all the valuables?" he complained. "Where the hell are ye clothes?"

"We burnt literally everything flammable to keep the engines running," she explained, quickly changing the topic back to the ship. "I don't know what Captain Graves stuck in there last, but it was *not* happy."

"I'll say." The pirate watched as his companions surfaced with comparably little salvageable bounty. "This hunk was a floatin' skeleton by the end. Damn shame. Looks like you're the only valuable thing we're gonna find," he leered at her.

"We spotted a few more bodies," a thickly-accented grunt informed. "And some halfway-decent scrap metal."

"Leave it all," the leader waved his hand dismissively. "Let's head back. Hey, hands off her!" he snapped at the coxswain who was encroaching on her personal space. "She'll be worth more unsullied."

Emilena thanked heaven for small mercies as the pirates rowed off without checking the forest for other survivors. "What price you think shes gonna fetch?" the first mate cackled.

"From that spark in her eye, I reckon she'll need to be *broken in* a bit afore anyone's gonna buy her," the leader let his gaze linger knowingly, and Emilena uncomfortably averted her eyes.

"Well, at least a few of them like their girls spunky, right?" one noted.

"Nah, all o' that lot got stabbed or strangled in their beds already," the leader laughed, eliciting a merry ripple from his mates joining in.

As they approached the other island, Emilena could see a ramshackle fortress with assorted huts that was completely hidden by the cliffs on the near side. The coxswain nimbly navigated them around the far coastline to a rundown harbor connected via an unpaved road.

The makeshift seaport was relatively busy with visiting seamen, longtime residents and other sundry folk going about their day, and she was quickly the center of attention as her detainees marched her right through the center of town and up to the fortress without interruption. She half

expected to be brought directly to the head honcho, but instead they marched her stiffly to the dungeon and threw her into a filthy cell.

"Well, I admit I didn't originally believe the story!" a flamboyant corsair interrupted her brooding much later, around the time the light was fading from her solitary barred window. "A lone survivor from a doomed derelict, and quite a specimen at that!" He was far better dressed than the armed men flanking him on both sides; Emilena suspected he was the closest thing this pirate bay had to a lord. "Care to shed a bit more light on how your ship wound up out here?" he pressed.

"You can blame your Jackal for that." Emilena smiled smugly when they jumped at the mention. "Yeah, we made her acquaintance. She looted us for valuables, but our captain fought back and sank her vessel, at the cost of his life. She and her men were stranded on that deathtrap with us, for days."

"What happened to them?" the pirate lord gasped. "We've been wondering why they never returned! Send a crew back to that shipwreck at once!" he ordered.

"Save your energy," Emilena interrupted. "I haven't finished my story yet." She stood up. "I befriended the Jackal, and even joined her side. She made me her cabin wench, said she was going to show me the world. Sadly, the other prisoners broke free and orchestrated a coup. They got ahold of the weapon cache and hunted us down one-by-one. The Jackal herself was captured and executed before my eyes, there was nothing I could do."

The pirate lord's eyes darkened, and he averted his gaze. "Why should we believe you?" he spat. "I fear you're telling the truth about her death, but you're probably lying about being her ally!"

"I know her real name." Emilena leaned forward and whispered it in his ear. "Now would she have told that to a random prisoner?"

The pirate lord paled. "Did you hold onto anything of hers?" he asked. "Even just her cutlass."

"They threw it all overboard. But I did something even better. I avenged her death." Emilena's eyes lit up. "After they slaughtered the pirates, they locked me in the brig. But then a storm badly damaged our ship, and my former crewmates realized we wouldn't be able to reach our destination. We set sail for these islands because they were the closest land on our maps." She gritted her teeth. "But I didn't want them to survive after what they did. As we approached salvation I escaped the brig, sneaked into the engine room, and destroyed it with a live shell from Victor's grenade launcher. The same one they killed him with."

"How did you escape the brig?" one of the lord's men demanded.

"I'm a slippery fish." To prove her point she let her restraints fall to the floor; she had been more than prepared to swell her wrists and ankles while being tied up. "And I could be a valuable member of your crew," she added as she dropped to one knee in a polite show of submission. "It was her final order, after all..."

* * *

The lord needed several days to decide, but ultimately accepted Emilena as a cleaner for the lower levels of the fortress. After getting her first full set of clothes in weeks, she got to work earning everyone's trust and getting to learn everything she could about the strengths and capabilities of the pirate vessels they used for their maritime forays. As the seaport dwellers grew more comfortable with her presence, she started requesting ship maintenance work, then combat training, and slowly planted the notions that she was ready to graduate from manual labor to seaboard marauding.

"Whew..." the pirate lord panted as she parried his under-arm swipe and pricked him in the chest with a delicate touch of her training saber. "You're getting good at this! To think you could barely hold a sword when you first got here."

"You're telling me," Emilena grinned. If she ever got home, she'd be the only police officer in Electra with swordfighting proficiency.

"I think that's enough for tonight," he concluded, massaging his breast where she'd poked him.

"Aw, can't we learn a new fighting style? At least give me a demonstration."

"Truthfully, I've run out of new ones to teach you," he admitted, unbuckling his leather armor. "And besides, don't you have cleaning duties to attend to?"

"Yes, but..." Emilena took a deep breath. "I want to move on from that. You must have realized the real reason I've been learning these new skills. I want to terrorize the Serris Sea like Jacqueline did before me."

He sighed. "I knew this was coming," he murmured. "Are you sure that's wise? You saw how it ended for her."

"I did! It ended *gloriously*," her eyes flashed. "With her life, she told a tale that will live on in legend. I'm not going to find my tale within the borders of this port."

"I think you're romanticizing piracy a bit much," he pointed out. "We raid ships, sometimes kill people, and come home. The end."

“Well, pardon me, I used to be a novelist you know.” She folded her arms. “Give me one good reason I’m not ready to set out on a crew, just like she once did.”

He shook his head in defeat. “Very well, if you’re going to insist. Find a captain willing to take you aboard, and see where the winds take you. God willing, you may find your way back here someday.”

Emilena certainly hoped not.

* * *

Captain Morrell of the trading vessel *Sternsplitter* felt his blood curdle as his first mate warned that a ship flying no flag was bearing down on their position. “Kill the engines!” he ordered, after confirming his worst fears through a spyglass. “Clear the decks, give them unrestricted passage to the cargo bay!” he ordered over the main masts’ intercom. “When they board us, keep your hands raised and just do what they say!” No cargo was worth risking his crew’s lives, and they weren’t properly equipped to fight anyone.

The obvious pirate vessel sailed triumphantly toward them. “*Wise move!*” the pirate captain taunted through a megaphone, standing on his bow with a Desert Eagle pointed right at Morrell, who was waving the white flag. “*Now don’t give us any trouble, and we can all walk away happy!*”

Captain Morrell nodded urgently, but suddenly there was a muffled *BOOM* and a shockwave emanated from within the pirate ship, sending his own rocking with the waves. “What was that?” Morrell’s first mate wondered.

Over on the pirate ship, they noticed panic was starting to set in. Fires were erupting from both decks, water was swelling upward from the lower levels, and crewmembers were deciding whether to fight the flames or leap desperately into the ocean. Before Morrell’s eyes, the enemy vessel sank blithely into the ocean almost as quickly as it had arrived. “What the...” he muttered in bemusement. “Uh, call the coast guard I guess?”

“Should we save them?” the first mate asked, looking down at the few pirates who had managed to escape their craft before it sank into the depths.

“I suppose so. Get what few guns we have up here, and then throw life preservers out,” Morrell ordered. “We’ll keep them ziptied here on deck until the authorities arrive.”

The only survivor who caught his eye was a female redhead, the one pirate who seemed excited at what was happening. “That was me!” she volunteered, quickly distancing herself from the other captives. “I blew up their ship. Ignited their barrels of gunpowder right in over the rear and forward beams, the most important parts of the hull.”

“Okay. Why did you do that, exactly?” Morrell asked, trading a glance with his first mate.

“I’m not a pirate. Well, not by choice.” She extended a hand. “Emilena Echo, I was a stranded passenger on the *Aurora Crystal*.”

“The disappeared cruise liner?” Morrell’s first mate gasped. “That went missing almost a month ago!”

“Yes, it did. And whoo boy, do I have a lot to say about what happened to it.” She exhaled.

“There are a few other survivors too, on a faraway desert island. I can tell you where it is. It’s also where the pirate bay is that keeps sending these guys.”

“Well, um... wow. That’s a lot to take in,” Morrell quickly extended a hand. “Welcome back, Ms. Echo. This isn’t the finest ship, but we can certainly get you back to civilization.”

“Trust me, I am *more* than pleased with your boat, you have no idea.” She took a deep breath of ocean air. “Holy crap...you can’t believe how relieved I am that this is all over!” she exhaled, collapsing giddily against the mast. “I actually made it! I’m home free!”

“I can imagine...” Morrell nodded. “Are you hungry? We can get you something to eat, or let you make a phone call.”

“Phone call, please. My boss hasn’t heard my voice in weeks, he must be worried sick. And can you get me the number for Aurora Cruises?” She sat up and grinned. “I want to see if I can use this to wrangle a free ticket for their *next* trip!”