

Lady of Umber Book One

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Prologue

“The savages were clad in rags and the pelts of wild beasts whom they must have considered their kin. It was evident that they could be tamed the moment that we met them. They ran no state, nor did they care for the children of theirs that we had taken from them. Truly they are like beasts.”

Over the weekend at least thirty homes in the colonial city of Crownheel were raided by the colonial militia. Clad in pith helmets and wearing their characteristic beige officer’s uniforms, the militia—working under the explicit orders from the crown from the mainland—raided the homes. The homes mostly belonged to half-born families, that is families with at least a quarter Xa ancestry, though exceptions were made if the patriarch of the household still held the dark skin of the Xa.

The God-King of the Xa Xadong was not happy at this turn of events. It was clear to him that severe action needed to be taken. He was aged long past the time of his glorious victories or wondrous campaigns in the north. This new enemy from beyond the south sea was a shrewd one, one not easily intimidated. Word had spread from the captured soldiers taken from the land that they referred to as Argentium had indicated that the emperor was of ailing health and that a succession crisis would take place in the Vanzi mainland territory. The God-King was pleased when he first heard this news. It was the first pleasant thing to come out of the mouth of one of those Vanzi bastards since they first arrived on his shores.

He told his scribes to prepare the message to be sent to the emperor of the Vanzi, whosoever it might be. Learning from the customs of the prisoners from rioned Argentium, he instructed him to embellish the details of the proclamation in order to reach the right audience.

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The thick, cowardly attitude that received the God-King's presence when they were first captured was what struck him the most about the prisoners. They were full of surprises. When his own warriors would offer themselves up to the enemy when it came time to accept loss, these supposed men from Vanzi cried and squealed like pigs or children when faced with the mere sight of Xa blades. When they were each stripped before him by his guards to have each of their tattoos revealed, to get at which tribe they hailed from, the God-King was shocked to find that their pasty white skin was unmarked.

"These people must be all infants if their best and brightest go around unmarked," thought the God-King incredulously.

Too many times their soldiers kidnapped his people and put them to work in their sugarfields and too many times his advisors had attempted to temper his rage. The God-King had had enough of this blatant disobedience to his will and was at a breaking point when the news hit of what had happened next.

The fools from the Vanzi empire thought themselves wise when they Built Argentium. To the Xa it was nothing but a putrid eyesore. The God-King ordered that it be destroyed in his name and that its people be made to know him and his power. They would be put to slavery for every one in ten of them—so was his decree.

Even now, as he overlooked the slaves taken from that initial raid, he knew that they could not be fully tamed.

By contrast, however, those who once were proud to call themselves members of his domain now raised children who pray to the strange gods of the Vanzi and now shudder away from the envoys that once invited celebration and merriment when their visits came to their villages. The men from Vanzi had taken a liking to the wives of his countrymen and have taken it upon themselves to despoil them from their husbands. The God-King ruled as a just master to his people. The

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Vanzi people's strange gods gave them license to murder and to steal that which is precious.

Never before has his empire seen such vile atrocities been committed. The Vanzi defile the sacred grounds of the ancestors and deprive the dwarf tribes of the coast of their privilege of tribute. They disrespect his borders and build more and more of their accursed colonies, even going so bold as to breach into one of his own outposts.

Their treasure ships were now his to do as he saw fit. It was time to make use of them. The first few battles fought against the Vanzi were one-sided.

His warriors against the coward creepers of the enemy were powerless against the burning rods that they held. Fire shot out of them when they merely push something on the weapon. The warriors of the Puma tribe had almost seemed to question the God-King for his being unprepared for such a thing. Almost.

It was not long before the prisoners squealed even harder, at the behest of the commander of the guard. One of their number, a "Gunsmith," was capable of building these weapons and, they promised, would do so for the Xa should they all be spared. This was the one condition placed on him as ruler.

He respected their wishes.

These weapons were now in the possession of the Puma tribe, Plume Tribe, and the Ochre Tribe. The short ones they called "fulent-laks" were particularly useful.

It would not be long before the entire army of his could be set up with these kinds of weapons and the blood would be spilt.

The map of the holy Xa Xadong empire was blemished by at least six major outposts of the enemy from which they deploy their troops and make war unto his people. In a few years, the God-King believed, his army would be able to leave but all but one of them destroyed.

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His will be done.

Chapter Zero: Hacienda

Aubrey was piss-ass drunk. She didn't know when it happened or which fucking moron was responsible, but she didn't give two shits about it either way. She was in the presence of friends after all. This was a party. A friend of hers was celebrating his seventeenth birthday and she was not about to miss out on the festivities.

"Whose party is this?" Aubrey blurted out to one of the patrons.

Lucky for her that this other person was as clueless as she was. It didn't fucking matter anyway, Aubrey was hammered as all hell and was not about to let whoever the birthday boy was ruin her fun.

Aubrey, like most of the patrons at this place, was rich. She was the heiress to the Boreas Excavation Corporation, run by her illustrious father, Giorgio Del Piazza. She was proud to be the daughter of the most influential man in the mainland save for the young emperor himself. She was waited on hand and foot by a veritable legion of servants in her colonial villa. Her family's properties boasted the highest share of land in all the colonies. They even once boasted about their part in the construction of Argentium. They don't talk about it anymore.

Aubrey set her sights on the birthday boy himself, standing at the end of the ballroom by himself. He was single and ready-to-mingle, Aubrey thought. All the girls her age were getting together with young men. Why shouldn't she be a part of that?

The birthday boy looked like he was a half-bred son of a Vanzi noble. Perhaps he was a little low-bred for her tastes, but he would do quite nicely, all things considered. Aubrey was an open-hearted girl, especially to such handsome boys as the one she dug her mental claws into. He was dressed in his finest traditional robes and beyond his skin tone and clear... exotic way of moving, he was a prime specimen of fine breeding.

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In a the drunken stupor that she was in though, Aubrey's procession toward her next conquest was hampered by her own shambling and ungraceful walk. Most of the rest of the crowd that had formed around the birthday boy was little better, as his servants (perhaps not in their best mind) were liberal with the serving of drink and food.

Shambling through the crowd, she could make out the gaudily dressed forms of two women come over to him. Aubrey wasn't sure if she recognized them as any friends of hers, but knew that any friends of hers would recognize the need to fuck off and die. That was simplt her way around here.

Ever since she had come by ship to the colonies, she had been the talk of the town. Back then she was the shy little girl, accompanied by her loyal and well-bred slave, trying to make her way in the world. The way she held herself was all to susceptible to the gazes of the parents. It wasn't long before her parentage and its connections to the illustrious Giorgio Del Piazza was revealed. At that point she was no mere nobility, she was a princess.

Within the succeeding months she was no longer following the procession of children to school, but leading it. She was no longer the charity case of her little town, but its saint.

But over time, she would notice attentions begin to fatler. She was slowly becoming more and more "Aubrey" when she had just grown used to being "That nice girl you should be friends with". She especially liked it when young boys' mothers would push them toward her.

But over time it seemed that she needed to grow up to meet the challenge. As the talk of the town moved to some other girl, Aubrey would make plans to dethrone her and get back to rightful throne.

Provocation after provocation would follow. She instructed her servants to spread rumors, terrible rumors, rumors about such laviscious things that she liked to get into when she so chose. She was a mistress to the governor, she would sleep with anyone if they knew her *very special*

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words, nothing was off limits for them to say about her. She wanted it all.

The birthday boy was to be her big chance. Despite everything that she wanted everyone to think about her, she was still a virgin. She watched as all the other girls boasted about their lovers twice their age, twice their size, twice their wealth, while Aubrey could only nod and impatiently wait for her chance.

This was the time of her youth, the dawning of the rest of her life. Why shouldn't she indulge herself in a little harmless sin?

Who knows? Maybe this gentleman was a nice boy too, whatever his name was.

As she was almost within sight of him, she could see the two women by his side more clearly. They were clad in uniforms, ones colored in pitch-black with yellow embroidery, carrying the insignia of the golden eagle.

Imperial Guardswomen.

There were lines that Aubrey was intent to and content with crossing, but upon realizing that her considered conquest was the likely scion of an imperial magistrate or something or other, she knew she was out of luck.

It was time to home.

Outside the birthday boy's mansion, she found Mason brushing the hair of the horse that pulled her carriage.

"Young Mistress, Aubrey! You're finished already. Do you need some help? You seem to be under the influence."

Aubrey let Mason do what he needed her to. She was used to his attitude and the way he held himself. He always did take things into his own hands like this. It was unbecoming of someone like him to be doing this often though. He was rather intelligent and forward thinking as a slave. When it came to performing Aubrey's day to day tasks, she knew

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not of what she would have done without his help and could hardly imagine what kind of a burning wreck she would collapse into without him.

She drifted off to sleep, being rocked by the carriage's movements to her villa. Tomorrow was an important day for her and a very momentous day, one that she had been dreading for a very long time.

It would be time to claim her inheritance.

It would be her seventeenth birthday.

Chapter One: 17th Birthday

“A young lady is to celebrate on her Seventeenth Birthday the beginning of her burgeoning adulthood. This would be the moment that she will first experience her new life in the adult world. It would do well to welcome her to it.”—Unknown, The National Guide to Childrearing

The distant crying of the Massit Birds over the quiet crashes of the waves over the coast along with the peeking of the sun greeted Aubrey to wake up. Today was an important day for Aubrey del Piazza, her birthday in fact. Today was the day when she was now to be considered a woman of maturity. She was an adult now, after having made the commendable achievement of existing for seventeen years. birthday celebration would be an occasion for joy and merry making at her Villa with her friends, another occasion to devote to filling the minds of

Normally Aubrey would be excited as another jealous onlookers with rage and envy as she would be the one who owned the day, dressed in the finest Xa silks and wearing the most glamorous pearls. These thoughts occupied Aubrey’s mind and raced through her blissful wistful soul for all but five minutes after waking up before her bedroom door opened.

“Young Mistress! It is time for you to wake!” greeted Mason, her servant, holding the door in his usual manner, showing a remarkable lack of tact as he usually did, as if today was just another day for her daily lessons or some date with some cute boy that she would have been content to wait for if not for greetings like this. Aubrey, tossing her disheveled hair away from her face, staring quietly at Mason, asked him what it was this time that *needed* her attention now.

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Mason, again in his usual manner, fought back with little resistance to his intended long-winded explanation with a deep inhale and a brushing of his receding hair back and offered his main point.

“Young Mistress, today is the day for our boarding. You had best be ready for when we go.”

“Oh... that was today?” was all that Aubrey could respond with, as if acting like the chance of his responding in the negative could put it off for just a bit longer.

“Yes. It is. You should know that I and the other servants have already packed your things and most of them are already aboard the boat. You’re the last to go.”

Aubrey remembered her bedroom. She in her pearl white sleeping gown sat on a pure white bed in an otherwise empty room. The lightened patches of floor that her possessions left when they were taken made the floor around her resemble a child’s eggshell artwork, pressing further into her mind that there was no going back anymore.

Her Father, who she never knew more personally than a few shared glances several cubits apart on a crowded dock and the occasional letter that instead of reading like it was a piece of legislation and more like the most sophomoric of creative writing attempts, had something important happen to him in the mainland.

He was a naval commander whose high rank was understood by Aubrey as high enough to support her regular shopping excursions for all the newest styles that colonial Xadai could offer, and fine lessons taught by the best and brightest that the colonies had to offer. The cash came monthly to meet her needs and every desire, enough to make her a veritable princess and celebrity on the island she called her home. That was all really, she tried to know about him. He was the provider for her and that was it.

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And now he was dead.

When Aubrey first received her letter from his estate in the mainland, he had died after being sick for months and for all she knew, simply decided to board the next ship out, leaving her as the last of her line. Mason delivered the reading of the letter in his usual manner, ignorant or expecting to be the one who needed to keep strong for Aubrey's reaction, which ended up ending with a resounding sigh and a question about whether that what he said was all and a request for him to leave on account her his presence spoiling her game of Jack Marks with her friends. In a few days it was made clear to her that she would be heading to the mainland to collect her inheritance and manage his estate.

All of this would not do. She would be meeting with his extended family members and dealing with his property and transferring to a new academy befitting and heiress in the mainland. She said her goodbyes and made her promises to her friends. There was no more putting it off. She wanted at least to celebrate her birthday before she left and was subsequently told by Mason that the ship would be arriving soon and that there was no time to make for non-essential actions.

It was time to board the ship and face up. But Aubrey would not have it.

"Remind me again," she said, brushing her hair, staring back at herself noticing again and again the open window behind her through which she could see the docks and all the ships leaving the colonies to the mainland," if you don't mind, why I need to go all the way to the mainland for this. Why must I be present for this, Mason?"

Mason, as her servant no different from any other, one dressed in the same butler's uniform and one who each and every day performs the same duties as any other, was peculiar in that the usual way that Aubrey at least, saw him express his anger was to give long explanations as if to remind whoever he speaks with just how *oh so knowledgeable* he was.

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Aubrey supposed that it was the way that intelligent people expressed their anger.

“Because of the Vanzi decree, you know. Colonial landowners must spend a certain amount of time no shorter than five or so years on the mainland in order to get their papers together and all their affairs in order. They *must* be in the mainland for this. Otherwi--”

“Yes, yes, YES.” She turned to face him, her raven hair now finished brushing and hanging straight down her shoulders. “I know. I know.”

She turned back around. It was time for Mason to start curling her hair into her preferred ringlets. If she was going to leave, it was going to be in style. Looking at herself in the mirror again, she could see herself and the amount of work it took to make her look like herself. Like usual Mason, in his usual manner ceded and proceeded with his expert hands.

Aubrey was fully dressed and ready to say goodbye to her simple life in Crownheel bay. She had spent all her life here and could scarcely think about returning to the mainland without feeling a tinge of apprehension.

Aubrey chose to dress herself up in the finest outdoors outfit that she could find reasonable to show off for a parting event. Pearl white was always her favorite color and she found it to be apt for a parting. She wouldn't be parting with a lover or close friend, but her beloved home in Crownheel, the finest city to ever grace the Xa Xadong colonies.

“You're looking upset, Lady Aubrey, “remarked Mason, carrying her bags as they walked the path to the docks. “You spent your earliest years in the mainland and—if my memory is reliable—spent your happiest days there.”

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"To be honest," Aubrey responded. "I really do feel that I am leaving behind my real life."

"Then may I repeat my statement as I don't think I quite understand. The mainland was where you spent your fondly remembered childhood, playing among the lush forests of the Sawridge hills or dancing in the presence of the local archbishop who crown *you* the queen of the midsummer's ball."

All of that was true to an extent, Mason knew. Mason himself had to bear the burden and responsibilities of the former experience when Aubrey's father fumed hotter than hell's own fire on finding out that his daughter had been lost and the latter when Mason bore the consequences and scorn after being seen purchasing a certain honor from the archbishop.

These were pleasant memories to mason nonetheless, if only for Aubrey's smiling face. Mason himself had barely remembered the mainland himself, finding it somewhat amusing the notion that clearest in his mind are the childhood memories of this girl.

Aubrey had been sullen, staring at the paved marble path leading to the docks.

"Childhood spent in the mainland, huh? Childhood completely spent more like."

Aubrey turned her head up and looked to the houses shrinking toward the bay, their distinct orange coloring, and shingled roofs. Aubrey imagined the lives that her friends would be living without her and imagined that they'd be living their lives without her just fine.

“Chin up, Milady. You’re about to begin your future out there. The ocean ahead of us is full of experience and will be a—dare I say—adventure. You may be apprehensive about it, Aubrey, but you may rest assured that the same brave man who helped you and held your hand when you first came here will still be there when you arrive in the mainland.

Mason had half-meant what he said. Indeed, he knew that he would still be there for Aubrey during the trip and likely during the greater stretch of her initial stay at New Hallstrom island where she will be processed, but he honestly wasn’t sure what would become of past that point. As a slave, he wasn’t entitled to free travel without his master’s presence, and he wasn’t confident about the Emperor’s new edicts regarding that very topic.

“You really mean that?” Aubrey said, at his dark face, into his hazel eyes.

Mason breathed a sigh of relief. “I’ll be there. Don’t you worry,” he said, raising his hand to ruffle her hair before pulling it back. He remembered how she felt about her hair getting messed up.

It became clear to her though that Mason was worried about something. Usually, she could read his face and find something in that day’s conversation to help her with his attitude, but it seemed like another one of those days.

The small two-storey houses gave way to quarried and unused chunks of white rubble stretching on for miles. They weren’t far from the docks since they could see the Imperial Quarries. A quick glance past the sheer cliff and a squint of her eyes revealed to Aubrey the miners working away, carrying loaded sacks and pushing carts filled with chalk-white stone.

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To think that a controlling stake in this mine would be all her own after collecting her inheritance. Aubrey looked down at the miners slaving away. Some of them were amputated in unfortunate locations, others were half her age working the same loads as their parents that she could see in the same mines.

“Mason...”

“Yes, Milady.” Mason knew that he could trust Aubrey with many of his own personal thoughts, but still took care to measure his thoughts and weigh his words. He still needed to watch himself.

“About my inheritance.”

“Yes, Milady.”

“I’ll be one of the owners of that mine right there, right?”

“Yes, Milady. A significant controlling stake and the right to direct to a degree the operations.”

“I can’t really imagine myself as the owner of such a place.”

To be honest, neither could Mason. The way that he saw Aubrey and the way that she saw herself were often at odds, though this time it seemed clear what she wanted to say.

They carried on the rest of the walk without exchanging many more words. Mason could barely imagine what to say to Aubrey. As the daughter of his master, he needed to keep vigilant around her. Appearances were deceiving and he was not about to let go of all that he had learned when he was first taken to the mainland.

Chapter Two: Beginning

"The beginning of the legend e

Aubrey had not been on a ship since she was ten years old. That wasn't quite right. She had been on yachts and dinghies owned by her friends in society. Peer Pressure and a not insignificant amount of drink forced to overcome her personal fear. Overcome may have been too strong a word. Rather, she would have said smothered, in that that was how she felt the moment she would sober up.

Aubrey nearly drowned once.

It was in the grounds of a plantation owner in CrownHeel's neighboring fiefdom of Thornbrook, at a party of the high society folk and the officials in colonial management, near the beach.

Aubrey wanted to stop thinking about it. It wouldn't do any good thinking about this any further. She was grown and mature now and had little more reason to fear the water. Even as it became increasingly clear to her that knowing that didn't do much for herself. Sweating palms and shivering legs protested heavily even as she herself made the resolve to accept her fate and take the trip.

They were now at the docks. Masts and sails punctured the skies around them, rings of hundreds of bells alerting hungry sailors to their midday meals, and shouts and cries of captains rang out throughout the docks as they made their way to their ship.

The Young Emperor

Aubrey had made acquaintance with its captain, Joebert Jameson, who introduced himself as a former naval captain who fought in the Xa

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Xadong extermination campaign which put an end to the native threat and fighting off the Xa back into the rainforest. Mason had his doubts as the veracity of these claims. Joebert himself was hesitant to give out his badge of accomplishment, claiming that as he was proud of it he didn't want any colonials touching it.

Joebert was probably below deck as they boarded. It was a decently sized boat, more than fit to house a young heiress like Aubrey and at least several servants. It would be sailing together with at least four other ships along with a convoy escorting them. A schooner like this one with its three sails was nothing too special but judging by its name it seemed to be brand new.

"No expense spared," Aubrey guessed.

Joebert came up from a grate leading below deck covered in sweat drenching his dark blue coat, greeting Aubrey and Mason with warmth and excitement. Aubrey Judged that it must not have been every day that he had a job like this. Mason held out his hand to shake before Joebert's smile faded. Mason knew where he was not wanted and went to check on their cabins where they would be sleeping over the few weeks' trip.

On Joebert's coat were the badges that he boasted about earning in his battles against the Xa, all fifteen of them it seemed. He seemed to have noticed Aubrey looking at them with curiosity.

"Y'like what you see, girl?" he smiled and looked down considering, rejecting, and repeating until he found one.

"Ah!" he excaimed as he picked it out. An embossed red eagle superimposed on a shield shape. Aubrey was sure she couldn't place its meaning and wanted increasingly to get back to Mason.

"No, no, no, don't be intimidated!" Joebert said. "This here is the Badge of Imperial Protection! It's the mark that the navy is on my side and can be called upon should I need their trouble. I was merely trying to assure

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you that this ship is as safe as can be, my darling. That there's no need to fear and that should something go awry, the Forty-Fifth column will be there to protect us should anything go wrong."

"Mister Joebert, though I have full confidence in... my father's choice in personal contact, I'm not truly sure about the veracity of any real danger out on the seas."

"Darling, darling, darling. You of all people ought to know. You know what time we're in?"

Aubrey knew the obvious answer to that question.

"The younger golden age of course."

"No, no, no. Perhaps out there in the mainland. And out there in the mainland, where there's no wars or battles, there's no fearing anything, anything at all out there..." He wiped his forehead of its sweat and brushing his hair back. "Younger Golden Age... heh... Golden age of Piracy more like. How does that sound for you?"

"I think that we can safely count out the threat of Piracy, captain."

"Safely count out, huh? And I thought you were fully confident in me... Your father would only hire me on if he was sure, absolutely sure that I could handle it, the threat of those vile threshers of the sea. I want you to know that I earned the badge of imperial protection from my efforts and achievements in the wars against the Xa. Crafty sons-of-bitches they are."

Aubrey really could not say anything to this. She was clearly now just a passive observer in this conversation.

"And you see..." Joebert then noticed Aubrey's subtle expression of disquiet.

"Ah, sorry, my lady. I can share all that later. You just calm your little head down, little miss. Just know that the Imperial Badge of Protection is with us."

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Aubrey thanked him and shook his hand. As soon as she was out of earshot of him, she breathed a sigh of relief and proceeded briskly to the cabin the Mason went into.

“Before, you go...” Joebert began. “Just know that I survived a battle, nay I endured a practical localized war with none other than John Raven. If you needed any more proof of my expertise, look only to that. John Raven.”

As soon as Aubrey was in her cabin below deck and as soon as Mason left the cabin—at her behest—to go see if any supper could come their way, she threw off her sun hat and looked at her bed. There wasn’t anything especially wrong with it and certainly nothing much in the way of anything particularly offensive about it to her and her tastes.

She sat down to sulk for a few more minutes before Mason would come in to snap her back to reality. She remembered her life from age ten onward and her life on the mainland, what little she remembered of it.

Mason was just procured from the auction house and Aubrey’s father was spending some time getting to know him at the Imperial Botanical Gardens, leaving Aubrey with seventeen dollars to do with as she wished. It was during those days during the reign of emperor David Barker that children were allowed and even encouraged to leave their parents’ sides, before the panics following Red Hedley’s murders.

Aubrey knew just what she wanted to spend her dollars on. Knowing that she had the rest of the afternoon to herself before she had to catch the train back home, she decided to visit the Colonial Exhibition at the Silver Halls. At age ten and with a mind filled to capacity with stories of the far-off adventures of brave sailors and beautiful heroines in the untamed colonies, visiting the Colonial Exhibition was one of her favorite pastimes. Her eyes would glimmer at the sight of what new and curious they brought in to show off.

She had made her decision. Going past the billowing smokestacks and Hemlock Furnace, across the bridge near the cathedral, and up and over

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the Ulbad's walkway, she would see the Silver Hall. It certainly lived up to its name, especially if—like young Aubrey—one looked past those ragged edges. Infesting the grounds around it were at least several dozen shops and stalls selling goods from lands as far off as Xa and even some selling wares from even further away. Aubrey knew she had to focus. Ignoring all the merchants desperately begging this young girl of clear and visible high birth, to at least sample ten to twenty of their wares, Aubrey stepped toward the Silver Hall's entrance. Standing guard beside it were two signs bearing paintings of today's main attraction. On them were pictures of a young man of the distinct Xa ethnicity, dark skin, and hair and all, dressed in the ragged loincloth that Aubrey was used to seeing from these shows at the Silver Hall, kneeling with hands clasped together in prayer. Around him in the background could be made out the ghoulish faces and grotesque features of what Aubrey knew had to be Xa citizens.

See it for yourself!

Marvel in amazement!

The Exiled Prince of Xa Xadong Lives to tell his stories of the savage Kingdom!

Not for the faint of heart!

Even before reading the text on the sign, Aubrey knew that the man had to be highborn without a shred of mongrel blood in him but was

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surprised. A prince of all things, ready to share his beguiling tales of the savage land out there. Aubrey never got the chance to know his name, but thought it right to think of him, even after the incident that would happen to her following her paying for the ticket and waiting in line, as the “Prince of Rags”.

The silver hall was usually packed, and that day was no different to her, but she could tell that the same fevered excitement at meeting a real prince of Xa Xadong that she felt was shared by everyone there. By the time that the line dwindled to but a handful of people, Aubrey had already prepared her questions. She knew she was limited to but three, but felt torn at having to choose between, “is it true that instead of disciplining your children you eat off a finger for every mean thing they do?” and “Why do you still worship your king when you must know by now that he is a fraud and charlatan”. Aubrey knew she had to be polite in the manner that her father taught and chose the former. The Xa are known to always enjoy talking about food.

It was her time to enter, right after a black shirted gentleman, wearing a constable’s cap who, unlike all the other attendees of the event kept quiet and didn’t express any remarks to an adjacent friend or express any excitement at meeting someone as strange as a Xa prince.

As he went in, Aubrey could barely hold herself back from the curtain in the doorway. She was almost tempted to peek in and watch herself, then she’d learn even more about all this. She—after noticing that the guard had gone away for a moment—decided that there would be no harm in peeking just a little bit.

Mason came back in and found Aubrey asleep in bed. He was carrying a serving of salted mutton with some mashed potatoes cooked decently, but not quite the way he knew Aubrey liked it. After setting the meal down on the table he took some steps to wake Aubrey up, but then heard shake of an anchor’s chain.

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It was time.

In his conversation with Captain Joebert, he managed to lure out of his salt encrusted lips a few interesting morsels of information. It was clear to him that he didn't know Aubrey's father as well as the captain of the del Piazza's of boat would be expected to. The captain had drawn suspicion the first time he visited the villa. He seemed rather low-born for the captain of something so valuable and didn't seem to respond to Mason's questioning him about conditions on the mainland and how Aubrey's father died. Indeed, it seemed that he barely recognized Aubrey's fathers name at all.

Mason thought about all this, failing to come through with a reasonable explanation. Mason had been sharing correspondence with Aubrey's father In the months leading up to his death and had never once read the name, Joebert Jameson, in said correspondence. Could it be possible that he was simply a new worker? Mason did recognize the *Young Emperor* as the ship belonging to the del Piazzas and a few faces in the crew did inspire some notion of familiarity, but its captain seemed to him questionable.

Mason didn't want to ask, for fear that he might get defensive and after that they would be getting nowhere.

He decided to sleep on it for now. He would be taking this up with the rest of the del Piazza estate in time.

Chapter Three: Bird of Prey

“Wise is the man who carries a weapon to a fight while his opponent carries none. Foolish is the opponent whose weapon has to be cocked and loaded.” –Xa Xadong Proverb

Mason awoke to the sound of creaking floorboards. He got up and left his cabin. He reached for the lantern beside his bed but held back. Mason remembered that this wasn't the villa; wooden ships have gaps where light can escape. He listened closely. Together with the sounds of waves crashing outside the ship, there was the sound of something stepping carefully, waiting seconds before the next.

It was coming from the room beside him.

Aubrey

He could start to notice a faint light from under the door to Aubrey's cabin. Lantern Light, he judged. Without hesitation and without looking away from the door, Mason felt around for something of moderate weight and found a thick book. Paying close attention to the footsteps behind the door, he timed his own to beside the door with the crash of the waves outside. The footsteps in Aubrey's cabin kept steady.

They didn't notice me

He threw the book to the wall opposite the door. The creak of the floor in the other room stopped. If it were Aubrey, a “Are you alright in there, Mason” would have followed. Instead, nothing.

Now, I've got your attention...

Mason held his breath, keeping his eyes focused on the door. The footsteps resumed, this time to his door. Mason looked around within reach and then back at the door to confirm once more that he could not use anything as a weapon. He had one chance to get this right.

Lady of Umber

He took a deep breath and assumed a fighting stance in the style of his teachers.

First strike

He knew that his opponent would likely be carrying a flintlock or hand knife. If it was the former, he would have at least four possible chances to hit at his opponent. The latter would have been too fast to call a struggle.

What if there was more than one?

There was only one set of footsteps, each making the same sound and lasting the same short duration. Medium height. Average Weight. Most Likely male.

Mason locked his door the night before to avoid unwanted theft. If the intruder should open the door, Mason knew where to strike. If they couldn't, a door makes a good enough weight to bash their head in.

The sound of a key being slid into its socket. The knob unlocked.

One of the staff members of the crew. Likely a crewmate thinking he could steal from poor, innocent, unsuspecting, Aubrey. Maybe he thought he could get away with copping a feel and leaving off before anyone could know or care.

The door opened.

A young cabin boy, no older than eighteen, carrying a flintlock pistol and a lantern came in. He looked to the wall opposite the door, kept looking and found Mason's bed empty.

It didn't take longer than thirty seconds to dislocate the boy's arm. Mason didn't like dealing injuries like that, but it would heal. The lantern he was carrying was a complication, but an expected one. He set it down quietly but quickly.

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He was still conscious after all that. A few well-timed blows to the head fixed that, leaving Mason to decide what to think about all this.

One of the crewmates on this ship was indeed carrying a gun into Aubrey's cabin with the intent to use it. By this time, they were already out to sea and further off from civilization than can be considered comfortable.

Mason had to deal with the cabin boy waking up before he could think about Aubrey. Luckily Mason was close to his bed and its blankets. Tearing them up to make makeshift rope to tie him up, Mason went to work.

Aubrey woke to the screeching noise of metal rubbing up against rough wood to find Mason pushing a drawer in front of the door. He was quick to greet her an advance good morning and promised to explain.

"Just don't touch the cabin boy over there," said Mason.

If Aubrey wasn't wide awake from Mason's actions she certainly was now.

"Mason! What did you do?!"

"Lady Aubrey, it's a bit of a mouthful. Know only that this boy carried a gun into your room and was prepared to shoot me if I got in his way to you."

"What are you talking about, Mason! What is happening?!"

Struggling with the last of the weights he was using to barricade the door, he explained what had happened earlier.

"But why would he want to d—"

"Doesn't matter. We just need to ensure that you stay safe, Young Mistress."

Lady of Umber

"If its about money, I can ensure that we will be cooperative. I don't think we should take any risks with this."

"If it *was* about money, Lady Aubrey, he wouldn't have brought a gun."

"Well, I don't see you coming up with any good ideas, Mason."

In his usual manner Mason said with a teacher's tone, "Milady, there are no good ideas in situations like these."

"Well..." Aubrey could really think of nothing to say to that, but continued with, "Do we expect a simple barricade like that to keep them out for long? How do we do this?"

Wiping the sweat from his worn face, Mason replied, "I don't expect it to hold for long nor need it to," indicating with a gesture the cabin boy.

Aubrey was already out of bed when Mason started with the cabin boy, tied up and gagged with his blankets. Aubrey didn't know what Mason did to wake him up, but it seemed to be exceptionally unpleasant, as he woke up with a muffled scream.

"Glad you're awake," said Mason with a sardonic grin.

The cabin boy responded in the only way he could at the time. A firm slap to the face was Mason's.

"Mason, what are you doing? How can you do this to somebody?" said Aubrey, clearly surprised that her friendly butler was capable of this.

"M'lady, if you don't mind, I need this," he said before turning to his captive, saying, "sad excuse for a sack of shit to focus."

"I'm going to let the gag off and when I do, I don't want you to scream," he continued before gesturing to the drawer by the door. "Today isn't your lucky day. You can scream for help all you want, but you're not

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going to get it in time before I,” he pulled up the cabin boy’s flintlock and aimed it at his head, before continuing with, “blow your brains out.”

“Now,” he continued, “you’re going to cooperate like a good little boy?”

All the cabin boy could do was nod.

Mason removed his gag, leaving the cabin boy gasping for breath.

“Mason!” went Aubrey, “let him go! He’s had enough!”

Mason didn’t turn to face her and kept his focus on the cabin boy, but did offer, “I’m sorry milady, but I’ll need to ignore that for now. Your kindly butler Mason will return shortly. Until then remember what I taught you about holding your tongue.”

Aubrey backed away to the wall. For the first time she feared her dear Mason. Mason, who had always been kind to her and everyone she knew, was now doing this.

“Now, where were we?” asked Mason.

“Look just let me go! I’ll tell you everything! I’ll tell you who set you up. I’ll tell yo—” was all that he could muster out before Mason grabbed his face with one hand and squeezed hard.

“Let’s calm down and start with the first one. Start.”

“This was supposed to be a routine thing. Y-y-you know. Just a simple robbery at sea is a-a-a-all.”

“Nothing more than that? You seemed to be hesitating...”

“U-u-until we got this job you see. The boss came to us and sai—”

“Who’s the boss, Jameson?”

“Captain Joebert, yeah. I-i-i-I swear I’ll tell you everything, He’s Red Hedley! He’s a killer and so am I! the boss was offered huge sums, more

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than enough to pay for this boat and m-m-more. I don't know how the buyer found us, but h—"

"And who is this buyer," pressed Mason.

"That girl's brother he called himself," said the cabin boy.

Indeed, that one seemed to actually surprise Mason. He was probably more worried what Aubrey would think after having heard that, but decided that he would deal with it later.

"My... Brother. I don't have a brother."

"How should I know?! That's what he said! 'Kill my godforsaken Bitch of a sister, that bastardess of a woman. I don't care how you do it. Just get it done', he said. We were all there. He promised us everything! The initial payment was more than proof that he could pay up. Promised us even more when we get the job done.

"Oh god, no," Mason thought. Aubrey was not going to react well to this. In fact it seemed that she wasn't going to make this easy.

"Now, I want you to tell me! How many of you make up this little bunch, you?"

"All of us in the ship. You're stuck out at sea with all of us. Please there's no chance for you. Let me go and I'll maybe talk something ov—" he said before his gag was reapplied.

Aubrey could barely remember anything about any brother that she had on the mainland, much less anything she might have done to him to deserve this. She saw Mason finish with the cabin boy and walk over to her.

"Any questions will have to wait, milady. For now, well have to work on surviving."

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Aubrey was desperate to be of any use here, but was at a loss for how to proceed. If they were literally on a ship of murderers just waiting for the moment to kill her and Mason, then what option did they have?

It's hopeless

Mason, however, did not have the luxury of losing hope. Aubrey looked at him take her head in his hands as he said, "It will be alright. I have a plan."

"Mason, maybe we should go an—" she managed to mutter out.

"No," said Mason bluntly and without a hint of doubt. "Listen," he continued. "Supposedly our gracious host, Captain Joebert Jameson is the captain of this ship. And supposedly this crew is his gang from the mainland, right?"

"Y-yes?"

"I like to think optimistically, Aubrey. I think my chances are good that I can sneak around the deck to where the captain is at an—"

"You can send out a flare! We can end up saved by the imperial Guard!"

"No. Listen. There's no guarantee that help is even within a thousand knots of here, Milady. No one's coming for us. I'm going to take down their Captain and implement *aggressive negotiations*."

"Mason, they're armed with flintlocks and who knows what. You need to think about yourself. You're a few years past sixty. You're not going to make it."

Mason breathed a sigh of relief. Aubrey was still worried about him. That made him feel good about what he did next.

"Mason, I'm scared for yo—"

With another well-placed strike to her neck. She wouldn't stay unconscious for long, probably about a minute or two. That would be enough to keep her down for what Mason was going to do next. He

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grabbed the cabin boy's flintlock and raided his pockets for bullets. After doing a count, he judged that he would have to be wise about who dies tonight. They were still the only sailors in proximity after all. There was little point in saving themselves if it meant killing their only chance at making it back. Aubrey would stay here. After some consideration, Mason thought about giving her a knife to defend herself with if he went down before deciding that if he went down, a knife was as good as a wet match in a dark cave. He just needed to reach the captain.

Aubrey woke up with a thick pain in her forehead.

"Ah."

The cabin boy was still laying there, tied up and gagged, crying out to her to tell her something.

Aubrey couldn't be bothered to pay him any mind. She remembered Mason and what he said he would do...

The door to the upper deck was open, exposing the pitch-black sky above. All Aubrey could hear was the sound of the waves crashing outside the ship.

It was too quiet.

Aubrey feared the worst and went to the cabin boy to ungag him.

Through his tear-soaked face, Aubrey could see his fear and worry before he even said a word. He kept whimpering and stammering before he began.

"They should be down here. They should be down here! I heard shots fire. Shots fired up deck! They should be here by now!"

"What are you talking about?" asked Aubrey.

"Your servant!" he started. "He went up there with the gun. I knew I shouldn't have come here! I messed it up, it was supposed to be clean!"

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“Mason! What happened to Mason!..”

“I-i-i-I don’t know, “escaped his lips softly. “It’s been too quiet up there. If they killed him, they’d be coming check up on me. Finish the job. He’s not coming down here either! Wh-“

“Oh, no!” Aubrey without thinking ran to the door to the outside.

“Wait! You need help!” yelled the cabin boy as she ran out the door.

She was without anything she could have used as a weapon but didn’t think of that at all when she got out there. The wood plank floor was lit orange by lantern light from the captain’s bridge. Remembering that she was among enemies, she backed quickly to the wall behind her. There, in the shadows underneath the bridge, she felt something cold and wet brush up against her back.

She jumped back, quickly turning around. Hidden in the dark was one of the sailors, the one who had given her the flower when she first boarded, bleeding from his chest. He was dead.

Aubrey shrieked, jumping away from him on reflex, before seeing even more of the sailors’ corpses. Only the ones nearest the door to below deck were shot. The others it seemed were each violently bludgeoned in the head. As if it would make it all go away, she put her hands on her face only to feel wet and cold when she did. Pulling them back from her face and pulling toward the light, she could see the dark red against her skin.

She screamed, engulfed in mindless panic, and ran—to nowhere in particular. She could still hear the cabin boy’s voice below deck growing fainter with distance, pleading for help. He was probably fearing the worst.

No one was coming for her. No one was coming to get her either. Surrounding her was the entire crew of the *Young Emperor* and they were all dead, killed by...

Mason

Aubrey remembered what he said and ran quickly up the stairs to the bridge. And there, through the door busted open she could see the man who called himself Joebert Jameson lying on the floor with a bloody hole in between his eyes and beside him a lantern miraculously unsplit of its oil. Despite the captain being dead and lying motionless, Aubrey feared taking any steps further, as if afraid of something appearing right out of the corner of her eye. Still she kept going. Measuring each pace through the doorway, taking care to avoid the red pooling up underneath the corpse in the room, she looked to her side and found him. Mason was lying to the wall perpendicular to the doorway unconscious and bleeding heavily.

"Mason!" Aubrey screamed.

She could see that he sustained several bullet wounds, one each for a quarter to even half of the crewmates. Luckily most of them seemed to just graze him, but a few of them left him bleeding heavily.

"Mason, wake up," whispered Aubrey softly to the response of silence from Mason. Out on the sea he was as good as dead, Aubrey knew. Injuries like this—she had read—were a practical death sentence even with immediate medical attention. He was going to die. If there was even a ghost of a chance that he could be saved, he needed someone to come to him within the next few hours, and before then needed to be bandaged up.

Near mason was the flintlock, which she grabbed and then brought below deck with her. She looked at the cabin boy straight in the eye and pointed the gun at him.

"I'll untie you. As long as you go and tell me where the bandages are... and the flare."

"Are you crazy? We're in the middle of pirate waters! That's suicide. All of us are going to b—"

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"All of you are dead. Every single member of your crew. Dead. You're going to get me that flare!" She shouted. " We don't have enough time!"

Aubrey didn't know if there were any bullets in the gun, but neither did the cabin boy. He could only respond in the affirmative.

With Aubrey still holding the gun toward his head behind him, the cabin boy led her updeck. He shared in Aubrey's revulsion at all the corpses covering the deck, but didn't have the luxury to bask in it for long. He knew that the scant pieces of medical equipment were held locked in the bridge where the captain was at.

He pointed toward the small shelf where the bandages are kept. A puddle of his vomit rested near the former captain. In some dark corner of his mind, he opined that all things considered, he was now the captain of the *young emperor* and was now the victim of mutiny on his first hour on the job.

With Mason now bandaged up and still unconscious. The gun was still aimed squarely at him when Aubrey said, "Now the flare!"

"Miss, I really do thin—"

"Now!"

The Cabin boy knew that there was no use in arguing and there was no use in convincing himself that that wasn't the best course either. The captain was the only one who could navigate and despite what he had said when they entered these waters, that they "were in pirate waters", the new captain of *the young emperor* was barely literate and barely capable of saving this operation.

The flare was found among the knives and spare vials of black powder. He himself saw nothing unusual about this, but noticed Aubrey breathe a sigh of exasperation.

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The flare was simple to use, just turn the knob and let it loose in the air. He could almost feel behind him Aubrey's sudden hesitation, but in vain. It was time to fire it out.

She led him out to the front of the deck and there they launched the flare. The cabin boy had never used any flares before when sailing before, but remembered that the flare was supposed to last the better part of a day before dissipating.

Out from his hands burst a bright red star, shooting up toward the pitch-black moonless sky, emanating a glow that for a moment lit up the deck and left nothing exposed.

Now all they had to do was wait. Mason would'nt even approach waking up for quite a while and unit they either died once the fresh water or food ran out of the ship or one killed the other, having decided that it was better to die alone.

Or they could be saved.

Intermission : A brief History of the Boreas Exochires

The story seems as old as time itself. A civilization, a nation, a people whose hubris grew to great for their more than sufficient lands and domain to contain expands to invade and persecute countless innocent peoples to satisfy some sort of inherent bloodlust. It doesn't matter how they started and it barely seems to matter how they ended up. Each and everyone of them had a name bestowed upon them in better times.

Allow me to make my position known. Civilization was a mistake.

Nowhere could it be seen more than with the rise and near-implosion of what once had the dubious honor of being called the black empire—so

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called after the monoliths, great pillars of black stone were left behind, the least of the things that they did.

The Vanzi Emperor's researchers have scoured countless examples of these ruins dotted throughout the land and—after at least one or two centuries—found that they tend to be far more densely clustered toward the northern coasts of the Vanzi territory. Expeditionary fleets were sent out to reach out and perhaps find the lost cities of the black empire.

Those far less respectable than the already questionable graverobbers who call themselves archaeologists or the raiding barbarians who call themselves explorers dreamt up the idea of impossible riches beyond their wildest dreams out there in the savage lands beyond the northern sea.

Foremost among them was Francois of the Magnolia Throne, the young emperor's father. It wasn't long after the discovery of the nation of Xa Xadong to the north, inhabited by all in the manner of aboriginal Pygmies, Bushmen, and the other strange peoples. Seeing the untamed jungles brushes that extended far off into the landscape, they believed that just beyond them lay the remnants of the black empire and their untold riches. Indeed, they could not be faulted for thinking so.

The same monolithic black pillars of unknown purpose and function could be found lining the beaches and standing alongside the jungle trees. The crew pressed on further before they encountered a pygmy, a small and diminutive, little creature if there ever was one. Their accounts tell of a small, almost rodent-like face to him with hair growing like tendrils from an Armfish. He was clothed in nothing but a small loincloth and carried a carved flint spear.

The pygmy ran off, seeming to react to the explorers' machete knives, leaving them no other option but to give chase. This was a rather unfortunate mistake. The Pygmy used his almost inborn knowledge of

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the terrain to his advantage, keeping never less than four cubits away from his pursuers, but curiously always keeping in sight.

In a patch of jungle, no different from every other, the Pygmy, for no known reason, stopped at a tree backing toward it as the explorers pushed closer. From the pygmy's mouth escaped a shout of some dreadful sounding barbarism. The exploer's considered this to be a cry of mercy, and made the sign of peace to him. The forefinger and middle finger raised upwards was known as the sign of peace in our own culture; not so in the pygmy's.

The pygmy erupted in laughter for a few moments for solemnly repeating the barbarism and repeating the same sign to his pursuers. A volley of arrows shot from the trees, killing most of the party and poisoning the greater part of those few who managed to return to the ship.

When news of this hit, the emperor was furious, commanding a return force to meet this act of aggression in kind. Other members of his court had considered an alternative option. In this time the plan set aside for the induction of new peoples into the empire was not written; instead, the opposing courtiers proposed sending a force of missionaries to the land and through conversion the brutalists may be made into finer subjects for the emperor.

The emperor himself decided to hold off on the decision. The North Sea needed to be explored further before investing further resources to this operation. Nonetheless, the land that would be known as Xa Xadong was to be placed under imperial claim. The decree was made and the land was officially declared to be under Pax Vanzi and therefore under the protection of the emperor's hand. Its familiar name of the Boreas. It wasn't long before word of the lands' richness in medicinal herbs and—more tantalizing to the emperor—high population alerted several enterprising groups.

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The cities of Crownheel and Sawridge were established after these groups, armed with flintlocks and rifles, invested heavily in the territories.

The foundation of the new port city of Argentium was the moment that the name Xa Xadong became burned into the memory of each Vanzi citizen of right birth. Little did its people know that the pygmies and bushmen that were soon to be burdened with the threat of extermination were not the only inhabitants of the Boreas Exochóries. The colonists did not consider the question of why exactly it was that the first pygmy reacted in the way that he did, nor did they remember what it was that set him off. Long iron blades in the form of machetes.

Such fears aren't inborn and—if it must be repeated—are learned through experience.

The first treasure ship was sacked and torn asunder by an unknown force. Argentium was directly in the center of the Boreas colonies and therefore was supposedly safe from further incursions. It was ruled a freak accident by the colonial governor at the time. The next few treasure ships' disappearances would dispel that notion handily.

A search party was dispatched to find the cause. Beyond the the jungle brush, the missing ships were found torched and black with soot and their crew inside were found charred, each with at least one arrow in a vital region. The treasures themselves were nowhere to be seen.

And that was all that the mainland had heard about the matter. Months passed without additional messages from Argentium. The next trade ship that approached the city found it in smoldering ruins. There was nothing that could convince them to step out onto what was left of the docks to investigate further. As they were leaving, a few of them could make out figures in the city gathering up bodies and placing them on a pile of sticks.

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It was their story that motivated the emperor to send out his a legion of the imperial guard to investigate. After a round trip, they reported back the details.

Argentium was now the domain of the Xa Xadong. The guard had met with an emissary, who first demanded that they kneel as befitting an emissary of the God-King himself and second—after the emperor’s guard refused—demanded that the God-King have this supposed emperor as his guest to discuss these matters further. The captain of the guard refused and commanded his legion to take this emissary and return him to Vanzi for questioning.

A mere quarter of the men sent returned, having witnessed the result and reported back the rest of the story. To the emperor, this God-King of these Xa Xadong must be a powerful enemy indeed and one not to be trifled with. It was clear that to maintain the colonies in the future, the empire would need to tread carefully.

The remaining legionnaires added a few details from the emissary’s words. The domain of the nation of Xa Xadong extends from the Vanzi called the Northrend River to what they called the great southern sea. Its armies were ten thousand men strong and its people are each trained in the use of the blade from the age of ten. Its God-King is claimed to be the victor of twenty battles when he joined the front and thirty when he didn’t.

The emperor hearing this, had reason to be skeptical. This was after all the speech of an emissary of a king; boasting was indisputable as part of the trade after all. The surviving legionnaires reported that those not so lucky had their throats each slit with their blood being drained and collected to perform some form of rite, some sick parody of the holy rites.

It was after this and more unfortunate incidents that the emperor declared war on the Xa Xadong. Conquest of their lands was to begin.

Chapter Four: Jojo

“The child possessed very little interest in the world around him. It was clear that his life was no more interesting to him than the images in the picture books showed to him.”

Josephine woke up to the familiar sound of waves. The little slit of sunlight peering through the small thin window of her room bothered her. Until now she was spending her time in sweet and blissful dreams, but now she had to face up to the day ahead. She remembered that her father had gone to leave for a time. She never knew when it was time for him to come back, nor did she have any way to.

A Josephine wiped the dust out of her eyes, she remembered the bowl of fruit that her father had left behind for her to pick from when she was hungry. Her father always brought the most bizarre and strange fruits and she liked each and every one of them. Except Shrubberries. She *hated* shrubberries. Her father couldn't figure out anything about what she hated about them. She indicated that they tasted good and that they had a nice juice, but they had such a *bitter* aftertaste than what she was used to. The tantrum that she threw after she first tasted Shrubberries was brief. Briefer than most that she threw in all her seventeen years. Josephine didn't like making her father worry. It was just that she couldn't help herself when she *hated* something, and it always made her cry.

Her father, always the doting parent to Josephine, his little “Jojo”, did all he could to keep her from throwing those exact kinds of tantrums. He didn't really know anything about what was wrong with his daughter. She was much like her mother in that way. He never knew what had bothered her so much before they met but could tell that she was—despite her great kindness and grace—not quite right in the head. Their

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daughter was named Josephine and seemed to follow in her mother's example since the age of about two.

Josephine opened her window and looked at the bright light of the early day sun, smiling. She brushed her long blonde hair back to soak in the ocean breeze. There could be nothing more calming and relaxing to Josephine than this and nothing she hated more than when she needed to be brought to shore and sit around. It always felt to her like an empty soulless experience.

This was where her home was at. Here where all her friends lived. She didn't know any of their names—or rather she didn't know which of the words they commonly said must have been their names—but remembered them well and fondly.

There was a short and stocky man around her father's age whose name she thought was Boozehound, always friendly with his friends, especially the way that he and they would play until they were red and purple in their skin; there was a woman she called Bich, who Josephine simply adored for the way that she would dress up her face in the prettiest colors whenever she would get red and purple in the skin; and then there was Captain, everyone listened to him. Josephine understood leadership and chain of command and all. She could see that everyone on the big ship only ever seemed to do one thing and one thing only and when they didn't do it, that was when Captain showed up.

Josephine, despite knowing that she didn't really *know* him or talk with him very much, considered him her friend because whenever he did show up, it was to make for father happy. He always seemed to smile ear to ear in his presence, holding his shivering hand behind his back and being careful to wipe the sweat from his face. Josephine didn't get why people had to do such things to each other. It just seemed pointless to show politeness like that. But she didn't question it.

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Josephine also knew these people as her friends because her father always took care to say “friend” to her and point to them, informing her of it. Friends keep quiet around other friends and don’t touch them like Josephine liked to often with the birds that perched on her little ship. Her father told her very often (it must have been his favorite hobby) that she was not to touch or pet her “friends” and that her father’s friends were her friends.

Josephine pretended that she understood but held back her hand whenever she felt the need to touch them.

It was yet another day when her father neglected to come back and sit her down to talk about whatever it was that he liked talking about, leaving Josephine to sit around like she did on those days. Her father had told her that when the bowl of fruit was empty or when drinking water would drip not longer from the barrel set aside for her, she needed to remember the steps to the light game and play it with someone on the big ship at night.

Josephine barely listened to what he explained as why, but at the end hugged him and told him that she understood.

There was still fruit in the bowl and still water in the barrel, so there was no need to think about what Father said for today. She also remembered that her father also told her that the bell that he had hung outside her door would ring if there was someone new for her to meet. Even if she didn’t know who this was, she was to treat them like a “friend”.

There was only one exception to this that he made sure to remind her of whenever possible. If it was a man or boy around her age, he was not a friend. He was bad and should not be allowed *ever* inside her room. She should keep her drawers and shelves to the door if any did try to come in. If they came in anyway, she should claw and scratch at them, kick and scream and do anything to make them hurt until they went away.

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Josephine considered herself a good girl and promised him that none would ever get in.

The cabin boy—whose name, incidentally, was Jason—was with Aubrey as the lights started appearing over the water a league away. A small search party, he judged, was coming to them in a small rowboat. Jason could see no ship from which this one emerged. Looking into the black expanse before them, he judged that the main ship could be anywhere between a small schooner and a massive galleon. He thought about the young woman looking at the rowboat with him.

She thought that she had wiped the blood he saw on her face, the blood now dried on her skin. She looked back to where her black servant was at and back to him and then back to the rowboat. Jason understood her anxiety, her fear. She must have been close to her servant, whoever he was. Jason wasn't optimistic about her fate after this but felt a pang of pity for her. He understood that it wasn't his place to feel anything for her. He tried to kill her. He tried and failed within the space of a minute to justify his actions but ended up with even more scorn for himself.

It was just then that she lowered the flintlock aimed at him. He didn't know how long she did or why she did, but she did. Did she trust him? Did she forget?

He remembered the black servant of hers. He wasn't long for this world. All the protection that she would have would have its responsibility fall on him. This girl...

Pirate Seas

He needed to do something. He turned to face her quickly. Before she could point the gun at him, he managed to blurt out it out.

"You're in danger!"

Lady of Umber

“What are you on about?!” she said, pointing the gun at him. “You and your friends got me into this! You’ve got Mason and i-i—i-“

“I know, I’m sorry. We need to get below deck!”

“What!? Why?”

“I’ll explain! Just follow me!”

They went below deck and passed through a short hallway into a small room in the back.

Inside was a small cushion that Aubrey assumed had passed for his bed, which Jason now rummaged through to find something. In this frenzy he was in, he tossed the one pile of rolled up blankets that must have been used as his pillow and other items, until he found it.

Raising it up near his face and taking no longer than a few seconds to inspect it, it was clearly a small polished dagger.

Trying to allay Aubrey whose empty flintlock was now pointed straight behind him, he explained.

“Okay... Okay... I get it,” he started. “You don’t get to hear about what happens to girls of pirate ships in those hippy-dip hovels or wherever you come from, but I do. Now put the gun down.”

“Why should I? You have a knife.”

“You have to trust me! That ship is coming for us and who knows what’s gonna happen to you when its here! I need to cut your hair.”

“What! Why do you need this? What do you think is going to happen over there!?”

“We’re in pirate waters, lady. Women and girls are sold into slavery of the unsavory sort out in these waters, but not before they’re inspected for *quality control*. I don’t want that happening to you.”

Lady of Umber

“What?” she asked, genuinely confused. “What could they do to me? The moment I make clear who I am, the worst they could do to me is to hold me for ransom an—”

“And! They’re going to receive nothing in return! Your father is dead! Your brother wants that inheritance! Nobody in the mainland wants you! Nobody!”

“The Imperial Guard! They’ll pay my ransom. I’m someone important! They’re not going to let us be taken!”

“They don’t care! They don’t care about anyone but themselves! You’ve never been on the mainland! They’re brutal and corrupt and don’t give a rat’s ass about what happens to some prim and proper little girl who cost way too much to spare anything, anything for...”

“No... No... the—”

“They don’t care. They won’t care. You’re nothing to them.”

“W-why do you need to cut my hair.”

“You’ll just be another man to them. Its better to be a slave of the normal sort than be woman in that place. After your hair, we’ll need to get to the rest of you. We’re gonna dress you up in my clothes and you’re gonna be a man.”

“Rest of me...”

“If you don’t trust me, keep the gun pointed at me. Take the knife and cut your hair yourself. After that, you’re gonna have to strap down your chest.”

Josiah was far from a brief hour or two of rowing, the man in charge. It wasn’t often that distress calls in the form of flares were sent out in the waters of the Blackened Fleet, even less so from a ship like this. Albeit it

Lady of Umber

must have been an emergency wafter all. The ship's upper deck was one fire. Josiah could make out the nameplate on the side, ornately embossed in gold.

The young emperor

Only a ship from the mainland could have such a blasphemous name to it. Josiah fought back the urge to spit when he set the ladder and led his crewmates to investigate the deck. Away from the now petering out fire, three individuals could be made out. Two young White boys, one tall and able-bodied, judging by his arms, and another shorter, probably a younger based on his baby face and soft features. There was also a black man whose head was lying on the younger boy's lap, sustaining several gunshot wounds, now bandaged up. He looked to be in poor condition.

After all the crewmates were up the ladder, Josiah was the first to speak, "Whose ship is this? What happened here?"

"A merchant ship. Burnt down due to an accident in the hold. Lighting the flare was our only chance at saving ourselves. Thank you."

Josiah's men went to search the deck.

"Very peculiar this ship. It seems to be more than a bit high-class for something sailin' round these parts. You from the mainland?"

"Colonies, mister. We were doing nothing but shipping goods. Goods an—"

"Sir!" yelled out one of the crewmembers. "I found in the hold some papers. What do they say?"

Josiah looked at the two boys as he was passed the papers. He could recognized them as some form of legal text. Contracts. Josiah wasn't very literate but could read names when it counted. He squinted his eyes and found a signature in cursive.

Aubrey Del Piazza

Lady of Umber

"Who is Aubrey woman?"

"What do you mean?" answered Jason.

"I found this paper at the top of a stack of 'em. This must be someone important here. I take it you're in the the crew here."

"Boss, look what I found," yelled one of the crewmembers. He ointed toward the now burned up upper deck. There was a body covered in ash, reduced to charred bone. It seemed to have been wearing a white dress, but it was burned too badly to tell for sure.

"Yes," explained Jason. "That *was* Aubrey del Piazza, the mistress of this ship. Now dead due to a fire in her room. She died in her sleep. This ship was meant to transport her to the mainland and--"

"I get it! said Josiah. "I get it. What happened to the rest of the crew?"

"Died in the fire, mister. We're all that's left."

An inspection by Josiah's crew reflected that statement. The *young emperor* fell victim to a truly unfortunate fate. It only made sense that its remaining crew would send the flare out like this.

"Take 'em aboard, gents. We'll be needing a few more mates to serve the fleet."

"Excuse me," started the taller fellow. "I couldn't see your flag through the fog. Under which captain do you serve?"

"Captain John Raven," said Josiah, confident in the name that needed no introduction.

"C-c-c-captain John Raven...? Of th—"

"Ebony Fleet. Let's get on with it. Board the rowboat, we'll be shoving right off."

The younger of the two men dragged the black man with him to the rowboat while the older continued to stare incredulously. He seemed to

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have an infinitude of questions to ask, but without the words to speak to them in. Understanding this, Josiah explained.

“We’ll be going to the ebony fleet. Specifically, my ship. You’ll be assessed for your skills and be put to work. You knew what you were getting yourselves into when firing that flare off.

“John Raven...” The boy continued, even after his partner had left to the rowboat, as the last of the salvageable goods were boarded as well.

“The John Raven?”

Chapter Five: Pirate Waters

Aubrey felt the worst. It was dawning on her that the good days that she had come to know at Crownheel were not merely gone, but a pulverized memory barely worthy of mention. Now she was with this miscreant, this criminal who seemed to think that he was the only thing between herself and the lustful touches of the pirates. Aubrey was too frustrated with the fact that that was right.

She sat along with Jason in the rowboat, crossing through the fog over to a bigger ship, one that the pirates had called, “Two Mothers’ Child”. It was a strange name, but Aubrey, in the situation that she was in, strangely refrained from asking.

Jason looked mortified when Aubrey looked at him, or rather, Jason remained mortified after what he had heard about their eventual destination. She didn’t pay much attention to him then but now started to hear whispers from his quivering lips. She couldn’t make out what he was saying, but got the foggy impression of a prayer from him.

Then, with particular stress and shift in tone, he said the name, John Raven.

Aubrey had heard stories of John Raven, the infamous pirate captain. Once a sailor serving the Vanzi Empire, he defected for unknown

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reasons to its enemies to the north and there he found his true passions in life. Aubrey had always heard different takes on what made him go rogue like he ended up doing.

Some said that he gained a taste for blood in the midst of the Xa wars, others guessed that he was the true identity of Red Hedley, who, after killing a score of children no older than ten, had gone into piracy to satiate his wild lustful appetite, others still claimed that he left because he was formally let go by the Imperial Navy and that they simply refused to admit their greatest maritime enemy (excepting the Xa) was their own fault.

Aubrey now understanding Jason a bit more, nudged closer to him.

“You’re concerned about John Raven,” she said without an ounce of self-awareness.

“No shit I am. He’s the deadliest pirate of the northern seas. He’s led raids on imperial Galleons and succeeded, fought off the Xa, and I’ve even heard he’s set up a small colony of his own on Xa lands.” He moved in closer to her. “He commits daily sacrifices in order to maintain that Xa land.”

“This is ridiculous. You can’t really expect most of that to be true.”

“If only one part in one hundred is, that’s still abysmal odds. I expected Pirates when I dressed you up like that. Not a monster in human form.”

“It was the only thing we could do, right?”

Jason sighed. “Aubrey, you just don’t get it.”

“What! What is it that I don’t get.”

“You just don’t get that these are pirates we’re talking about. There’s no depravity they will avoid sinking to, no vile scrape they will think twice about picking, and no woman too pure and innocent to reconsider turning into their own personal fucktoy.”

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“Jason...”

“I’m just concerned is all. You need to stick with me if you want to survive. From now on my fate is under the thumb of fucking John Raven and his menagerie of freaks. And you need to be under mine. You obey everything I tell you and you survive.”

“Alright, alright. You seem to know a lot about all this. I suppose all this is your experience?”

“Captain Joebert used to serve in Raven’s crew back in his younger years. John Raven according to him was everything they tell naughty children about before locking them in their rooms for goodnight and more.”

The door was open just a crack.

“We’ll need to cut this short. Next time we meet, we talk about our next move.”

“Wait!”

“What?”

“What will they call me? What’s my name? I can’t simply be Aubrey anymore.”

Without thinking for very long, Jason came to a satisfactory answer.

“Silver.”

“Silver? That’s it?”

“Not enough time. Get going.”

Josiah was experienced in vetting new prisoners and new potential crewmembers. This new one, Silver, seemed to be a keeper. He sat, thinking about what he was going to write back to the main fleet when

Lady of Umber

this matter was completed. And what story he was going to tell his daughter.

After completing the paperwork and documentation for the new crewmates who introduced themselves as Jason, Mason, and Silver. The Black man looked to be a butler, servant, or slave. Josiah couldn't tell how cooperative he was going to be, but knew not to underestimate a native of Xa Xadong. As for the other two, he wasn't sure.

The taller of the two, Jason, carried himself in suntanned skin, while the shorter, Silver's, was pale and pasty which suggested a high-class background to Josiah. It occupied his mind for a moment until he decided to simply leave it to himself to decide their fates.

Josiah had made a bit of a gamble coming all this way. Regretting it even more for what he imagined that his daughter may be feeling, he set aside for himself, some time to think. Luckily they had managed to avoid being sighted by Whitehood.

It was time to audit the new passengers.

He decided to deal with Silver first and give a brief rundown of Jason. The Black man would wake up after a few days and will be ready for more.

Now, sitting with Silver in his office, Josiah inspected him. Silver, when he came in, analyzed each little detail, absorbing every last mote of dust in there before sitting down. He was looking anxious. That, at least, Josiah judged, was normal.

Josiah prepared his questions to ask.

"What was your business in these waters, mister?"

The moment Silver opened his mouth, Josiah first mistook his voice for that of a woman. It was strange that a man as tall as this still hasn't had his voice drop.

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"I was on the crew of the *young emperor*, sailing to transport the young maiden, Aubrey del Piazza, to the mainland."

"I take it that that was young Aubrey we found, burnt to a crisp in the wreck of the *emperor*?"

Holding back a deep breath, Silver answered, "yes."

"That puts an end to any attempts at ransom then."

"Young man."

"Yes?"

"You know all about the way of the world, right? You know all about what keeps us going and alive, right?"

"Yes, sir I know."

"Then you know exactly why you need to make yourselves useful aboard this boat, see. You're eatin' our food and sleepin' on our beds and speaking to me instead o' drownin' like you might have."

"Yes."

"Then you know that these things don't come cheap. They're a privilege that has to be earned. Unlike your—" He stopped to clear his throat before continuing with, "client, Aubrey, you need to work to earn your keep here."

"Yes."

"I'm glad we understand ourselves here. Now I want you to tell me everything that you can do, everything that you can contribute to us, and then we can give you the honor of earning your keep. We saved you after all. I think it's the least you can do to repay us for that."

Silver sat there, looking anxious.

"What I can do?"

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"Yes, your skills and your talents. We'll be needing those."

"Well, I—" Silver muttered out before, Josiah Interrupted.

"Let me just say," said Josiah. "That your accent sounds rather high-class despite your station. Are you educated, by any chance?"

"In a school in the colonies. Crownheel."

"Fell on hard times, eh? What was it? raid by Xa savages? Attack by the imperial navy? Parents died?"

Silver kept silent but twitched for a moment when he mentioned that last part.

"Young boy, listen. You're among people who scorn and hate. You'd best not show weakness 'round here. You'd best pay attention to that."

"Until all of this happened to me, I was training to be a teacher. Before I became... what I am now, I wanted to be a teacher."

"Teacher?"

"Yes. Is there something wrong with that?"

"No, no, no... There won't be anything wrong with that at all," he said before Immediately trying to change the subject. "Care for a drink?"

He pulled out from under his table a small flask.

"No, I don't drink."

"Said like a true colonial, eh? You'll come 'round to it," he said, capping it up and taking back under his table. "You'll have to. B'cause around here, they don't take kindly to people who don't take kindly to them. You're not the foolish kind. I can tell."

"I'll be back tonight to show you your new job around here. We're almost to the fleet."

"What will it be?"

Lady of Umber

“I don’t have enough time to explain. Leave.”

Silver packed up himself and left. With that high pitched voice and soft looking face, he was sure. That cabin boy, Jason was right. It wasn’t everyday that a Eunuch would be brought here and an educated one at that. Josiah made plans for what he needed Silver for. At long last he has what he needs.

Thinking about what John Raven would think of this expenditure, he went back over the document containing all the winnings from the *young emperor* and crumpled it up, pulling out a fresh sheet, this time with one name omitted.

Aubrey was used to being touched. As she was escorted by two large pirates who looked at her with gruffness and either drunken disdain or bawdy understanding, she wondered, “what did I have to fear?”

Of course what Jason warned her about was rape, that was plain and simple. “But,” thought Aubrey, “I can hardly imagine what they would see in me to do something like that. I know that I should be more afraid than this, but I know bet”

The two men next to her, escorting her—rather curiously not to the lower deck and presumably to the brig where Jason was to be found—started to breach conversation.

Aubrey as *Silver* responded back in kind. They didn’t really say very much in the way of anything interesting, not at all. What Aubrey had expected from pirates based on what she had heard from imperial newspapers was half-confirmed. She got to know a few things about how they go about their day. Most days around here were slow, according to them. Things would get more interesting for Aubrey once they joined the main fleet with John Raven.

“Main Fleet?”

Lady of Umber

"The one that not even the imperial Navy could break," clarified the taller of the two. "Hundred Ships, probably thousands manning them. John Raven makes or breaks the laws there. What he says goes."

"What kind of a man is John Raven?"

The two of them stopped talking. Aubrey noticed the two of them look around and after seeing an empty upper deck continued in a hushed tone.

"You've heard about John Raven where you're from, right?"

"Vaguely, yes."

"I thought you were from the colonies?"

"Yeah that's what I heard," said the shorter pirate.

"Crownheel."

"Wah!" said the two of them in unison. The taller pirate began with, "Crownheel... Quite the swank place. I wish I could have seen it."

The shorter one, not to be outdone by his partner said, "Is it true you can see the ruins of Argentium still smoking there? What's it all like?"

"I can't do this for much longer, they'll blab about something and then someone will figure it out," thought Aubrey.

"Forget everything you've heard," Aubrey began, breaking from her previous mood. "Argentium still stands tall and proud. I know I've walked its hallowed streets in its heyday!"

They were almost to the back of the ship, far away from where the prisoners were kept. Aubrey could notice no doors on the walls to her side, while the two beside her showed no sign of confusion.

"Where are we going?"

"You're going to be meeting," started the taller pirate. "Jojo."

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“Yeah, Jojo’s been really restless over the past few days.”

“Jo... jo...”

“Yeah, you’ll meet up with Jojo. She’s been getting angry. We’ve heard her yell and scream.”

“Why what’s wrong with her? What’s Jojo got to do with me? What am I-i-i—”

“Jojo’s really hungry,” said the tall pirate followed closely by “Yeah, she’ll be needing company!”

“Who’s Jojo? Who’s Jojo?”

Aubrey’s panicked questions were drowned out by the laughter of the two around her. Aubrey recognized their tone, their ambiance. It was just like this back at crownheel. Back in the initiation...

And now she was the new meat.

The two of them grabbed her arms, squeezing tightly, sparing no room to wriggle free.

The Taller pirate came in front, and walking backwards to the back of the ship, facing her, said, “You’re going to love Jojo. Really you will.”

When they were at the handrail at the ship’s behind, Aubrey could see a small boat being towed by a few metal chains. She wondered what they could be keeping there before remembering what they said about Jojo being hungry.

Against her pained struggles and shrieks for freedom, thew threw her down to the small boat, having her land on a pile of supplies set in front of it. Aubrey was safe, though with a few aching joints.

Getting up, she saw the two pirates laughing it up, looking down at her below.

“We’ll drop you the ladder when you’re done, little Silver!”

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“Little Sliver more like!”

“Get me back! Please, I need to get back!”

Quickly before leaving, the tall pirate yelled out, “don’t worry. She’ll go easy on pussy boys like you!”

Aubrey turned back around to the small single room built into the boat.

Jojo

Aubrey was prepared this time. She brandished a knife. Jason gave it to her earlier. This time she was going to be prepared to fight this time. Whoever Jojo was, she was ready for them.

Intermission Two

The throne room of the young emperor was in an uproar. Emmisarries were arguing with one another, attnedants were at their busiest in years, carrying food and drink and clean it up when the politicians would end up tossing them aside.

The colonies were attacked. It was going to be another Argentium if nothing could be done about it. The scant two years that the poor excuse for a treaty had lasted, had been put ot good use by the Xa. They had at last made their move on the colonies and now it was clear that—far from total ahhnihilation—they would take no more alternatives.

The edict from the Xa Xadong God-King was read to the young emperor, sitting upon the magnolia throne beset on both sides by his attendants and sycophants. The one tasked with the reading, ArchMinister Belfort, belted out the message.

“Greetings, vile and repugnant fools. We speak for the people of Xa Xadong as we have for ages past and time and through time. In the Name of the God-King, he most holy and exalted, you outsiders are to end your vicious exploitation of our sacred lands and end your sacking of our people. We, as the God-King are not pleased with your Emperor’s hesitation in the face of our clear and unmistakable gestures of hatred and rage.”

“Your emperor is a coward whose lies to our people and whose lies to our enemies have proven bad. All mankind shall know the river of blood that shall flow from your lands and from each of your sons and daughters.”

“at least forty other pages follow from this.”

Thikc silence permeated the throne room. Nit a single member of the court stirred, each waiting for the young emperor to make a response.

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The young man, no older than thirteen, sitting on the throne, only stirred slightly.

"Is that all?"

"Excuse me?"

"Is that all that has been sent by the God-King? I was sure that the famed God-King of a nation of savages like Xa Xadong. I would have expected more from him."

"My lord, this is essentially a declaration of war. We must respond."

"And respond we will," he said before turning to one of his attendants.

"General, call up a commission with the navy. Make this proclamation hurt."

"Yes, M'lord."

"Meeting adjourned. You all know what to do."

Just then, from among the crowd of sycophants emerged a young man in a black longoat on whose back was embroidered a golden bird with its wings outstretched.

As the court was leaving to their stations, the emperor made a move to leave before he noticed the man in black.

"Oh, Sir Del Piazza, to what do we owe the honor?"

The man in black took off his hat, revealing his matted black hair. He was Roberto Del Piazza, the now presiding owner and reigning heir to the Vanzi North Industries corporate empire.

"Well," began Del Piazza. "I want the assurance that all is well in the disputed seas? I want to ensure that my investments are to be taken care of out there."

Lady of Umber

"According to my sentries, you have little to worry about, sir. I would think more about how things will fare in the colonies, sir. The Xa may end up the least of your troubles."

"I am well aware."

As he was about to leave the throneroom, the emperor called out to him.

"Ah, yes. Condolences for the loss of your sister. Your heart is as great as the heavens above. You must be simply devastated."

Holding back the urge to laugh in the emperor's little petulant face, Roberto could only reply in acceptance.

"The condolences of the emperor mean a lot to me."

"As they should. Now be gone. I shall plan the retaliation against the Xa with my court. You and your investmetns will be notified as to the results. Know this, though."

"What?"

"Know that should the armed forces of your company defy an explicit order fo the emperor, they will be dealth with harshly. And when we are done with them, you shall be next."

"I understand, Your Highness."

Roberto left the palace in a huff. The golden halls and decadent dances that the emperor's attendants play were making him sick only a few days after the good news hit. To be honest, he could not have hoped for anything better than the news that his bastardess sister had died not from the assassin he had sent, but from pirates. If she were alive, then she was likely suffering under slavery under who knows what kind of brutal master.

Taking his carriage home to the Del Piazza mansion, he mulled over what he was going to do next. Being the legitimate heir to his father's

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fortune had its perks, but had charms that were beginning to fray on the sides. As he greeted his servants outside the mansion gates, he wondered what he was going to do now.

The Del Piazzas were by right the owners and majority stakeholders in the northland Xa Enrichment Corporation and were wont to let their wealth speak for itself. The imperial government ruled the mainland, but they were *de facto* the rulers of all the colonies in the Boreas. But it would be only with the signing of a meager slip of paper that would sieze all their assets in the colonies and put to an end this state of affairs.

Aubrey he had not met since they were both ten years of age was simply not what they needed. She was vain, curious to a fault, and to Roberto, stupid. He felt no guilt at ordering her death. None whatsoever.

Now, sitting in his gilded dining room, surrounded by extended family members, preparing to eat supper while planning the next day's move, he did mull over a bit what it was that he inherited from his father. Every day was a calculated sequence of moves and actions to ensure that he could maintain his position for another day, only for him to repeat that cycle the next day.

"Perhaps," he thought. "I will simply be used to it by the end of the year. After all, dear father toward the end of his life had not even the hint of dissatisfaction in his life."

The extended family members that flanked him at both sides were fellow shareholders—or rather parasites, Roberto preferred to call them—interested now in gaining his favor as the heir, when just a few months ago, they would have missed him and everything about him entirely for the chance to speak with his father. He wasn't even disgusted. These people had families themselves to take care of and he knew that to all those under the president of the company, they were all amounting to nothing.

Still, something didn't add up. As he was enjoying his finished supper, he thought for a moment. When the imperial patrols responded to the

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signal flare shot out from Aubrey's ship, all hands were there, lying dead on the floor. Roberto didn't notice it when he was read the report when it happened, but now remembered the mention of the absence of three individuals.

Mason, Aubrey's servant was missing. Two crewmates were missing as well, reported to him. Purportedly a fire had burned Aubrey to death or else, something dreadful or other had taken place. But something didn't sit well with Robberto.

The recovered body of his sister now slept in a grave on the family grounds. There was something he needed to make sure of. The coroner who inspected the body, said that it was Aubrey, but something seemed wrong with that. One of the bones showed to him seemed a tad too long for a young woman's thigh bone.

Despite his attempts to perish these thoughts, he couldn't get them out of his mind. "What was the problem?" he thought. "Even if she survived, she would be nowhere in sight. Nowhere where she could interfere."

But then he remembered that, even among all the items that were recovered from the ship, all but one was recovered. The log of items that the captain, Joebert Jameson recounted everything that was recovered, except a book. That book was found to be missing from the ship when everything else was recovered.

Roberto was going to have quite the week ahead of him. It was time to work on ot.

Chapter Six: Making a Friend

Jojo, Aubrey wondered what Jojo was that those pirates thought it right to haze her here and onto this small ship, being towed by the main ship. Aubrey was tempted to yell out for help from the Captain Josiah, maybe even Jason, before she thought about how Jojo would feel

“Why, why am I here?” She began muttering, staring at the single room’s door. “What did I do to deserve this? Why am I here?”

She clutched the knife tightly by its handle, feeling it’s wood almost splinter into her skin. Holding it out toward the door that remained shut, she continued thinking about how she could get out of this. The metal chain that linked this small boat to the great one was something she could cling to. If only she had the strength to lift her own weight.

What if Jojo was some wild animal, hungry for meat that they kept around to toughen up the new crew? Could Jojo be some malicious psychopath, violent and cruel, eager to play sick games with her until dawn?

Aubrey wasn’t ready for whatever she was, but whatever she was Aubrey had to get ready.

Josephine woke to the sound of crying. Her father always told her to stop crying whenever it counted. Now it was someone else whose cries kept her attention. She didn’t really know what deserved that kind of reaction. Sometimes Josephine would cry just to get her father to calm her down, when otherwise she knew that she was far from that sad.

Maybe the voice outside was just lonely. Josephine didn’t know what loneliness was—or rather the fact that she had it—and so took some time before opening the door. It wasn’t everyday that she had guests at

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her tiny boat that weren't her father's "friends". Today must have been a special day.

There, he was, sobbing under the moonlight. It was a young man crying with his face in his hands, on his knees on the upper deck. He was dressed in dirtied up looking rags and had on his head short dark hair. He seemed to not notice as Josephine lightly stepped toward him, slowly working to where he was.

Just as she was almost within an arm's reach, the young man's hands loosened just a bit from his face. In that instant he backed away, scared for his life. Josephine knew there was nothing behind her that could be scaring him. She knew that he must have stubbed his toe instead.

She held out her hand toward him. For a split second, the man looked scared, then confused, then scared again. He seemed unsure of Josephine. Josephine herself knew that men weren't to be allowed on her boat, but this one seemed to be lost and confused. "Besides," she thought. "Father isn't here now."

She held out her hand even closer to the man whose fear had by then subsided for confused hesitation.

Josephine, now feeling offended by this man's refusal, pulled her hand back and just stared at him. On most occasions eye-contact with another person, especially a man would make Josephine anxious, but not this time. Josephine felt oddly warm around this person. Perhaps they were a friend of her father's and she had forgotten his face.

The man started up, his cold sweat twinkling off his face in the moonlight, and seemed to spot something behind Josephine. She turned around to remember the bell near her door father set aside for her. The man wanted it, looking intent.

Josephine wasn't done with him yet. She couldn't let him leave. He was a friend of her father's after all. If he left then who knows how angry

Lady of Umber

they might yell at her father. Josephine didn't much understand many words, but was well acquainted with how they made her father feel.

The man sidestepped slowly around the handrail of the boat, never breaking eye-contact with Josephine, who was starting to get annoyed by it. He seemed to notice her turn in dissatisfaction, and tried to mend it with a smile. Josephine could tell that it was a fake smile and didn't do it the respect she usually would, only pouting in response with her arms around her chest.

The man seemed to feel safe enough to chime in a remark or two to Josephine.

"Hey! What's your name, young lady?"

Josephine didn't really respond to words very much. They weren't exactly interesting to her.

"Ah, uh, did you hear me? What's your name, miss?" he sputtered out, continuing toward the bell, now halfway there. He seemed to think that Josephine couldn't tell.

"Jojo? Are you Jojo?"

Jojo. That was her father's special name for her. This man didn't have permission to use it. No. He wasn't allowed to.

"Oh, did I make you mad?" the very stupid, insensitive, callous man asked Josephine, responding to her now furious face, downturned with eyes still locked to his.

She ran to the bell, making it very clear that she knew what the man was trying to do, continuing to stare at him. The man, now feeling in trouble, took on a pleading face and begging voice.

"Please, miss. I need that. I need to get back up to that ship there," he pointed toward her father's ship. "Can you please let me go."

Lady of Umber

Josephine didn't let go of the bell's rope. She watched the man get closer and closer. The man's knife was plain to see. It was visible to Josephine the whole time. She knew how badly knives hurt and was not about to pick a fight with someone with one.

"Now... Jojo..."

Like an animal, Josephine snarled her teeth, hissing through them. This man made her angry.

"St-st-stop saying that," Josephine growled.

"Good, you're talking. Jojo, Now can you pleas—"

"STOP! STOP SAYING JOJO." She was now crying as she growled at her. This man was awful. Absolutely awful. He was not friend to her father's. He needed to go. Josephine was done with him. She hated him now.

"You're crying? You're crying. I'm sorry. I won't do it again. I won't say it."

The man took on his pleading stance again. He wanted forgiveness. Josephine was still incredibly angry. She almost didn't care about that knife the man was holding.

He was still fixed on her hand clutched around the bell. He wasn't going to get it now.

"Miss, it's alright. I can talk to you. J-just calm down. I'm with captain..." he seemed at a loss for words. "Captain Josiah."

He said her father's name. Maybe he was a friend of his, then. Josephine was always cordial to her father's friends. It was alright for him to be here then.

"Can you please stop crying? I'm sorry. I promise I won't do it again, miss. I really do want to know your name though." He said, coming closer to her and the bell with his knife.

Lady of Umber

Josephine was told to be a smart girl. If her father wasn't here with her then she had to be a big girl and know when to refuse a man. Her father, she remembered, didn't want her in the presence of men. Josephine knew to keep him away from the bell. Her tears gave way in a moment to more anger.

"I'm sorry?" the man said, reacting to Josephine's suddenly flushed face, backing away.

Josephine came closer to the man.

"Ma'am, I'm very confus—" was all he could spit out before Josephine slapped him.

"Go away!" she growled.

"I'm trying, miss. I'm trying. Can you please let me have the bell?"

"No! Go away!"

"I can't without the bell. Please."

"Don't care! Go away!"

"No!"

"Go! AWAY!"

The man pulled his knife on her, surprising himself despite himself. Josephine backed away instinctively.

"Please, miss. I-I-I just wanna—" he said before breaking down onto his knees, back to the same crying state that she saw him in earlier.

"I wanna go home!," he shouted in the air. "I'm sorry, alright. I'm no good at any of this. Just leave me alone. I didn't ask to be taken all this way to this boat to nowhere. And now I'm talking with a fucking, a fucking, afucki—" Was all he could muster before breaking into a loud and long sob.

Lady of Umber

Josephine, still with wet eyes from earlier, immediately stepped toward the man. His sobbing unsettled her. He seemed so unlike any of the men that her father came with to her little boat. Unlike them he was fragile and more than a little afraid. Josephine wondered what it was that made him feel so unhappy.

She honestly barely understood anything that he was saying, but despite that touched her hand to his shoulder as his sobbing had reached its peak. This man was different than the ones that came down to meet her, sent by the laughing men above.

Josephine rarely felt sorry for anyone, but here felt that he was worthy.

Aubrey was seventeen years old already. Only a few days ago she had reached adulthood and only a few minutes ago she was reduced to a sobering wreck by what she considered no more than a madwoman with the mind of a child. It must have been the stress of the trip, the pain of being unceremoniously dropped on her back onto a hardwood floor, and the non-sequiteur that was this woman's existence.

Just then she felt the warm touch on her shoulder. Slowly turning her head up to look at the woman, Aubrey saw her face. No longer twisted by her irrational rage it was now soft and inviting. Her long blonde hair reached all the way to her hips and was dreadfully ill-kept. Recoiling her shoulder from that innocent tap, Aubrey kept staring into this woman's eyes. Still wet with tears from earlier they looked on her with pity.

Aubrey had no idea what to think of this woman. She didn't even know what to call her. She was only the only one to take pity on her throughout this entire disaster of a voyage.

Jojo

Just saying that name seemed to infuriate her to no end. Stopping her slow crawl away from this woman, Aubrey took a moment to wipe her

Lady of Umber

tears and calm down. She received another tap on her shoulder from her.

Looking into her face, expecting nothing from it, all she could muster up to make sense of it was confusion.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I know I'm not wanted here," She said as a darkly humorous thought entered her mind, prompting a pained chuckle. "I know I'm not wanted anywhere anymore. There's nothing anyone wants from me now, ther—"

"You," said the woman, having lost patience with Aubrey. "What's your name?"

"Aub—" Aubrey said, before correcting to, "Silver. My name is Silver."

"Of Silver?"

"No, I mean my name is—"

"Your name is weird."

"Sorry. I didn't choose it y'know."

"no."

"No what?"

"You didn't choose your name. But I don't know."

"What?"

Aubrey finished wiping the snot from her face when the woman, seemingly a lot less interested than before went over to her cabin door, before turning around to face her. She waved, "come here."

"what?" Aubrey muttered under her breath.

She went over to the woman's cabin. It was pitch-black save for a few slits of moonlight peeking through the ceiling and walls. A problem that the woman rectified with an oil lantern.

Lady of Umber

Now lit up, her single room cabin was sparingly decorated. Lining the shelves were small toy soldiers lined up side-to-side, as if standing attention to their commander. Each was of a different make and yet despite that, sorted meticulously according to their color without fail. The small knick-knacks and colorful collectibles that made up this woman's other possessions were no different. Seashells, colored beads, what appeared to be old chipped pieces of chipped paint gathered up in a small pile.

This place could almost have been mistaken for a child's room if not for the woman Aubrey's age standing before her and the meticulous order and care taken in putting them together.

Past all the shelves and items, the woman went over to a bed whose sheets were an unusual shade of pink and sat on it, bidding Aubrey to do the same. Aubrey, distracted more than a little by the surreality of what surrounded her, didn't notice that gesture at first.

"Here! Now!" she growled.

"Alright, alright," Aubrey said, making haste to that spot there.

"Thank you."

Aubrey now had managed to reach some form of rapport with her. She had to maintain it or else.

"So..." Aubrey managed, realizing the blank that occupied her thoughts.

"What's your name?"

At this, the woman took a moment to consider. She turned her head down at a slight diagonal and whispered to herself inaudibly. She went on like that for a good few minutes before turning back to Aubrey.

"Silver. That's your name."

For a moment Aubrey didn't recognize the statement before answering in the affirmative.

Lady of Umber

"My daddy calls me Josephine. I don't know my name though."

"Josephine..." said Aubrey, before she had a double-take. "Wait what do you mean, you don't know your name? Didn't your father name you Josephine?"

"He did. That's what he told me. Mommy had another name for me though. I like that one better."

Aubrey had been through too much that day to really ask what she meant by that. The woman, who Aubrey decided was probably named Josephine put her hand on her shoulder again.

"You can stop that, really."

"You're still sad."

"No, really, I'm fine."

Josephine grumbled but pulled back her hand.

To Aubrey, all this was starting to make sense. Josephine was someone's daughter on this ship, most likely the captain, being held here. Everything was starting to make sense again for Aubrey. She started to remember what she was aiming for again.

She first cleared her throat before saying, "I—"

"What is my father doing out there?"

"Your father?"

"Yes. What is daddy doing out there?"

Noticing quickly her chance and eager to seize it, Aubrey began, "I'm needed by your father right now. I think he misses me. I really need to be there with him."

"Okay."

"So, can I go? Or...?"

"You may."

"Alright then. That was easy."

"Can you tell daddy that I miss him?"

"What?"

"I miss daddy. I wish he would come to meet me again. It has been many days."

Aubrey felt a pang of guilt for leaving her like this but thought that there was nothing she could really do short of telling her father. Assuming that Josiah was her father, like Aubrey did, it did seem like he was too busy a man to respond.

"I promise I will. I'm sorry for waking you up."

"I like you."

For a moment Aubrey was caught off guard and left speechless for a few seconds before she could think of a response.

"Thank you," suppressing the awkward cringing smile that wouldn't give up trying to tarnish her face. The back of Aubrey's neck broke out in a cold sweat.

"you're a really nice man," said Josephine. "If more men were like you I would be happy."

"Yeah, you and me both, Josephine," said Aubrey, taking relief in the fact that she still seemed like a man.

Feeling a sudden rush of courage, she was getting ready to leave before looking at Josephine sitting by her lonesome. She was not going to make this easy was she?

"Don't worry. I'll be back soon," she muttered a bit too loudly to be kept to herself.

Lady of UMBER

Josephine's eyes started to gleam. Her mouth curled up into a smile as Aubrey left. She was going to have nice dreams tonight, and was eager to wait for her new friend.

Aubrey didn't have it in her to just shut the door on her way out to the bell and just left it hanging open.

She rang the bell. It wasn't long before the same pirates who laughed at her after they threw her down here came laughing even harder to pick her back up. And behind them on the upper deck of the big ship, she could see Captain Josiah looking sullen, his face shadowed by the moonlight.

Chapter Seven:

Josiah was not happy. After talking to his navigator about the course they were charting, everything seemed to be going perfectly. They were on their way back to the main fleet of John Raven and from there would be under the protection of the Boreas Creed. There they would be safe.

Life always finds new ways to tear apart even humble dreams like those. One of his men had told him about strange lights to the west. One was fine. One was probably drunk, probably stupid probably lying and an invalid. Then another came and said the same thing. That made two and two was troubling, but not troubling enough to worry.

Josiah was not happy with the four more that came to his office with the same sighting. His navigator took out the spyglass and attempted to peek beyond the horizon. Out there, according to the navigator, *he* was there.

Jacob O'Dusk

"No," thought Josiah. "There had to be another possibility there had to be."

The navigator continued with at least ten more reasons why there couldn't be.

Even Josiah could see it now. The multicolored lights flashing on and off faster than a hummingbird's wings beat was unmistakable. He was coming.

Jacob O'Dusk was on his mind as Josiah ordered all his men to raise the sails, tie down everything that needed it, and to secure the passengers. Out from his mouth bellowed the name of their enemy and all who heard him understood the same gravity that he did. There could be no mistakes made today. There could be nothing left unattended to while Jacob O'Dusk was coming.

Lady of Umber

Josiah made sure that the new arrivals were taken care of, the black man who was on the *young emperor* was still not awake, that cabin boy, Jason was nowhere to be found.

Fuck him. He'll learn the ways of the sea soon enough

And as for silver, he was to be taken to the back for questioning. He would be safe there. All that left was...

Josephine

Josiah told his two right-hand men, Sever and Tirnag to go get her up to him and reminded them of what he would do to them if there was a single scratch on her. They understood.

Like a well-wound clock the ship was ready to escape from O'Dusk before he even noticed them. The ocean fog still would not let up and that would keep them safe. All he worried about now was Josephine. He was not going to let her, and her above all get into O'Dusk's hands. He knew that she would only trust him to get her, but for now that would have to wait.

Jacob O'Dusk was coming.

"Who's Jacob O'Dusk?" asked Aubrey.

"You really are quite the airheaded princess, are you?" answered Jason.

"This is serious! I don't know anything around here!"

"Alright alright."

"Jacob O'Dusk is a pirate. That much you probably won't be banging your head about. But here's the kicker. He's Imperial Navy."

For a moment Aubrey was overjoyed, "Great, then what are we worried about? We're probably out of this nightmare."

Lady of Umber

“No, you don’t get it. do you? Jacob O’Dusk. Back when I was a street urchin living out in the slums of the capital, I heard every sailor say that name in one kind of statement.”

He got up and raised his arms.

“Jacob O’Dusk has raided my ship. Jacob O’dusk, no survivors. Jacob O’ Dusk, responsible for the sinking of imperial galley. He’s not a nice man.”

“You just said he’s imperial navy.”

“Ah, for fuck’s sake, Aubrey! He’s a fucking lunatic! The sailors who come to the docks and tell those stories, they come back because he wanted them to.”

“What do you mean?”

“I know what I said about John Raven, I know what I said. That said, he’s a child with a box of matches compared to O’Dusk who’s a fucking forest fire.”

He continued, “Some say he rose from the slums of the colonial states as a former slave, others say he was the bastard son of an imperial ambassador in Xa Xadong, others still make cl—”

“All hands on deck! Turn off all your Lanterns! We want smooth sailing! Jacob Ghosthand is comin’ we best be goin’”

Quickly that pirate set all the lanterns in the common room to light burn, leaving them in the dim orange light.

“To get this straight. I’ll tell you. Out here in the sea, there’s honor among thieves. Most pirates follow a sort of honor code. The Boreas Creed. It’s a mouthful, but basically it means the simple rule that pirates don’t treat each other like shit. There’s always going to be bad eggs out there, but Jacob takes it to a new level. You don’t want to cross him. Understand?”

Aubrey nodded in the affirmative.

Lady of Umber

"Now," Jason began. "We need to just stay here. Our captors and gracious hosts will know how to keep themselves alive with him around. They're still here after all."

He took her hand.

"But just in case," he said before passing something to Aubrey's hand. She couldn't quite tell what it was in this light, but it felt like something in a small cloth bag.

"what is this?" asked Aubrey.

"Keep it safe."

"Alright."

"Now, just keep quiet. Whatever happens, for now we'll only have the night to keep us company. That'll be alright with me. I suggest you join me."

"So we just expect to keep quiet and wait it out? I thought it was some kind of emergency."

"It is. it is. There's just no way we could get out of it if we got into *real* trouble. I've learned to make peace with fate despite the reverse not being true."

"So... we wait."

"We do," he said calmly. "But keep this in mind, Aubrey. I'm not giving up on keeping you safe. Don't forget that. That thing I gave you. It's something precious to me. It's a token of trust. I want you to keep that in mind."

"Alright."

Aubrey's mind never handled stress well. Whenever someone would succeed in reassuring her of something—which, incidentally was rare—it always came to pass that she ended up worrying about the next thing

Lady of Umber

outside of her control, the next thing that she could never stop or alter the course of.

“Do you think Mason is going to wake up?”

“Why do you ask all of a sudden?”

“I want an answer, Jason.”

“I’m not one of your servants, y’know. I don’t have t—”

“Now.”

After some deliberation on his part, pitch-black silence on her end, he answered.

“The ship’s doctor isn’t optimistic. He says that they’ll need some supplies for when they meet the main fleet. Doesn’t seem all too likely out here in this situati—”

“Will you just shut up? I know that things are far from perfect in this ship, this voyage, this life. But they’re not going to get easier the more we mention them.”

“Beats walking into an open ditch, thinking that you’ll float across. Aubrey, there’s no getting around it, there’s n—”

“Hello, Silver, ” interrupted Josephine.

“Wah!” Jason exclaimed. “Who the hell are you?”

Aubrey’s mind faltered for a moment. It took her a few moments to respond.

“I’m sorry, who are you?” asked Jason. “How much of this did you hear?”

After a few moments of pitch-black silence, Josephine broke in with, “Silver? It was nice meeting you again.”

Not to be ignored, Jason replied, “Hey miss, if you don’t mind, I’m trying to talk to you.”

Lady of Umber

Aubrey's mind recollected itself at that moment.

"Her name is Josephine. She's the captain's daughter."

"Oh, okay that seems to answer everything. Josephine, do you mind leaving for a moment? I'm kind of in the middle of something."

"Silver, I'm glad that you're alright. Father is worried."

Thinking over what would be appropriate to say in this situation, Aubrey had in mind just the right thing to say. Jason stole her chance.

"Yeah, no shit. Jacob O'Dusk is upon us and we need to keep our heads down."

"We don't need to worry," began Josephine. "Father will protect us, like he always has."

Trying her best to keep positive, Aubrey began with, "Yeah, I mean this crew has kept alive this long after all. They have to have good heads on their shoulders."

"Small comfort that is," retorted Jason. "Bigger fish up the food chain still have no chance against a hungry shark."

"But an entire school of fish can kill a shark," retorted Josephine.

"Maybe two."

"What the bloody hell, are you talking about?"

"Hundreds or thousands of fish can make up a school and altogether they can kill a shark."

After a short beat, Jason went on, "Well there's no fish coming for us, regardless. We'll be staying in trouble for now."

"No we won't be. My father's friend will be coming to help us."

Lady of Umber

“Yes, yes, yes, I’ve heard all about bloody John Raven. He’s gone to piss off somewhere, leaving us to rot on this steaming ragheap. I think he’s got piss all to do with anything we have happening today, darling.”

“My father has good friends. He will come and he will protect us, as he always has. I’m sure of it.”

“I’m sorry, little miss, but I disagree at least in part with the second statement,” Jason began. “He’s not coming to our aid. Why in hell do you think he’s put you here with the rest of us poor and sorry sinners? He’s *afraid*.”

Despite Josephine’s usual energy in her previous responses to everything Jason said, this one left her without an answer. After a mutual exchange in silence, punctuated by at first occasional then frequent gasps indicative of quiet sobbing.

“Jason, can you *be* any less sensitive. She’s worried. We all are.”

“Tch. She’s worried. Didn’t sound like it. It sounded like she wa—”

Without a single moment of hesitation Aubrey was about to reply, “Shut up!”

She was about to say that of course. She didn’t get the chance when they all heard noise from above deck, someone shouting something in a language composed mainly of drunken obscenities.

Jason was well versed in that tongue and could understand it well while Josephine and Aubrey could only fail to make out the most basic meanings.

“Raven’s come to roost! Raven’s come to roost! The Raptor’s claws sink to the sea!”

“It took him long enough”, thought Josiah. The moment that the multicolored flashes from what *must* have been O’Dim’s ship went dim,

Lady of Umber

was not the moment that he felt them all safe. Rather it was the moment that the single flashing white signal light of help came within sight from the south.

The Talon fleet had at last arrived to their aid.

No doubt John Raven was there with them, no doubt John Raven had full confidence in his fleet's forces, and there was no doubt that they were at last safe. For less than an hour, Josiah really was at wits end as to what he was going to do if O'Dim had opened fire. Or worse, send his forces to board the ship.

Josiah looked at the signal light and pulled out the sheet of paper that he carried with him for occasions such as these. There was a pattern in the light flashes. If the light was shining for a moment, it corresponded to an upraised forefinger. If for a little longer it was a middle, and then so on.

This was how pirates like Josiah communicated over the knots of the seas over long distances. He marked down what was said to him and wrote a note to his communications officer to send a curt response.

It was time to come home. Josiah looked on at the advancing ship coming closer, as the fog of the sea rolled past it, revealing a galleon of the Talon fleet. And another, and another. He turned to look behind him in the direction O'Dusk's ship must have been. He didn't see anything over there. Josiah liked to imagine O'Dim with his crude attitude and smug countenance throwing a rage right then.

After a long few weeks, Josiah finally allowed himself a smile. Josephine was going to be safe.

Intermission Three

There are altogether three known continents to Vanzi empire and at least one whose existence remains in question.

Ever since the Vanzi empire rose to prominence before the younger golden age and the rise of Dimitrios II, they have looked over their proverbial shoulders over the northern ocean horizon into the seas. The Vanzi themselves owe their very continued advancement and technology to one sole power that once dominated the north seas, the Azel.

The Azel, as spoken of by legends, were a prominent oceanic empire whose reach extended as far as the east Vanzi coast, where the greybacks herd, and the southern coast of Xa Xadong.

The Azel were spoken of in Vanzi legends as being a powerful race whose mastery of technology and thaumaturgy was uncontested in their own time and all times since. The Vanzi ruling dynasty records their account of these events.

The Azelian empire ruled through their indomitable strength of force and numberless armies. There was no land that did not fly their banner. The most feared of their forces were known as Archons.

Archons wielded unimaginable power at their disposal. With a mere thought, they could put to hellfire the cities of mankind. Those who saw them could only recount the fear and hopelessness of the experience. The Archons were great storms or natural disasters clothed in human forms, appearing as grotesque beings that stood at least twice the size of a grown man.

With the power of these archons the Azelians made their presence known throughout the world. Their power was unrivalled by anything that existed in the world. They were—for all intents and purposes—gods. Gods held on leashes.

Lady of Umber

The rulers of the Azel, vain and corrupt as they were, knew not to mistreat their charges. The Archons that obeyed their orders, won their wars, and set entire nations on fire to satisfy their dark urges had to be satisfied themselves. This would prove to be the beginning of the end of the Azel people and their nation. As is known to all and has remained clear.

The familiar story of the nation, whose rulers grew proud, whose people grew complacent, whose defenders became its tormentors and subsequently its destroyers.

The Archons grew to curse their existences as slaves to the great powers that now dominated the world, as they knew it. They sought out freedom and sought to find ways to reach it.

It all related to what an Archon was.

It started with two, a master and slave, who through a thaumaturgical process unknown, would be made into super-soldiers for the Azelian Empire. The process pertained to not just an alteration of their bodies, but their minds. Master and slave would be united in thought, leaving neither without the knowledge of every single thought and action of the other. Master and slave would then—if they survived—would then become of one body.

A vessel prepared ahead of time, crafted in the likeness of the gods of the Azel, would be set in front of them. The ritual would be performed and the vessel would turn into mist before their eyes and enter both of their bodies like the air one breaths. Now, when together, master and slave were able to call upon the simple thought and with it merge themselves into one soul, now contained in the vessel, the body of the Archon.

The new being, the Archon is neither the master nor slave, but is a being above them both.

Lady of Umber

Once the Archon's mission was complete, the single soul would become two once again, and the master and slave would then return to their established identities.

The master, using her mental connection to her slave, would know all that they did and from there, keep her slave on a leash, always under control. This Microcosm of the way that the empire itself functioned, indeed was a microcosm of the way that it would come to meet its end.

The slave who made up half of the archon was not truly powerless. Just as the Master had—through her mental connection to the slave—control over her charge, the opposite could be true as well. The Master would typically undergo years of strenuous mental training to be able to control a slave through their mind, leaving their charge unable to resist. There inevitably comes a point when the whip has scarred the flesh so deeply, so much, and so often, that it no longer hurts.

One such master subjected her charge to the most grueling of pains, the harshest of punishments, but still could not be saved from her eventual fate. Her slave—whom history has failed to do the honor of remembering—forced the merger to become an Archon again. No longer would she serve under a master again.

In a single night, the capital city of Azel was rend asunder and would perish in white-hot flames. The Last Archon, the one who put an end to the grandest and most powerful of all peoples in all the world, was never recorded in history again. On that very specific date in that year, the Azel empire, every outpost, colony, city, holding, or other settlement was put to an end in the same way as its capital.

We may only speculate as to what the master and slave would do next after that point. Did the master mourn the loss of her people and beloved city? Did the slave kill her master as some final death knell for the civilization that ended her chance at happiness? Did they both learn to live on despite what they had both done and both witnessed?

Lady of Umber

Or, as some speculate, did the Archon never break up into either being? Did the now lone God-like being, destroyer of Azel, bringer of ruin to the greatest of all peoples, never become human again, remaining a single merged soul, devoid of humanity? If that were the case, then it may still exist in this world today. We may never know.

Since that time, the archaeologists of the Vanzi have been hard at work to remake the old technology and research the ancient Thaumaturgy that once powered the once great people. Evidence that the powers that the Azel used to maintain control originated from Xa Xadong and that descendants of the Azel may people that continent—albeit in a highly diluted form—and that may hold the key to accessing the great untold riches of this great people.

Lady of Umber

Chapter Nine

Aubrey's first few days being in utter confusion were now over. A week and a few days has passed. She was busy scrubbing the deck with a foul mixture that she could only describe as fetid animal fat mixed with a not insignificant amount of middle-aged men's urine and seawater. In all honesty it was just a rudimentary approximation of soap that the pirates used mixed with a non-insignificant amount of seawater.

Mason had woken up a few days prior and after a minor scuffle that involved a score of highly injured pirates, was approaching a position in which he would be able to recover well and take care of himself. Had Aubrey not been there to stop him from going too far with his self-defense, he likely would have killed everyone that score.

Jason was assigned to a different ship in the fleet that had seen the brunt of an unfortunate encounter with the Imperial Navy and needed more hands to staff it. The Talon fleet traded in slaves and indentured servants, but did not have the stomach for overworking them, lest they die before the purchase is made in the colonies. He bid her farewell but promised that he would be able to find a way to reach her. They, "needed to stay together", as he said.

And here Aubrey was stationed, On the Crimson Claw, the personal ship captained by and reporting to John Raven himself. Raven was a mystery by all accounts. Though she, Jason, Mason, and Josephine had him to thank for their salvation, she never got the chance to thank him or even reach out to him about this matter. She honestly had forgotten that she was "Silver" now, the simple young sailor boy taken by pirates and that Aubrey Del Piazza was dead, burned to a fine crisp on the *young emperor*. Despite Aubrey being dead, this person could hardly stomach being called Silver for much longer. It still had not dawned on her that she was never going back to her old life again.

Lady of Umber

When usually she would have started the day having the newspaper with the hottest gossip from the mainland read to her by Mason, she now scrubbed the deck aboard the pirate ship of the most reviled and hated of all those who fly the ebony flag. She was with a score of other cabin boys doing the exact same thing, serving under the Claw's steward, Antigonus.

Antigonus had already stomped on her previously smooth and untarnished olive-skinned hand several times to toughen her "Blue-Blood" skin and to punish her for not scrubbing in step with the others. To Antigonus, menial work like this was a rite of passage and though capable of mercy as he was (though Aubrey doubted it) he was not to make it any easier on the new recruits.

Quietly nursing the pain from the shoe mark imprinted onto her hand, Aubrey was nearly finished with her part of the deck. Antigonus was outside speaking with someone Aubrey couldn't see. It looked heated and intensive for Antigonus' end, prompting Aubrey to take her chances with the soapy water, dipping her hand in it to soothe her aching skin.

She couldn't help but mutter moan of relief, "Aaaah!"

"Not doing so well are we?" asked Kalliope, with her usual shit-eating grin.

Calliope was member of the Claw's crew who personally made a habit of making a unique impression on each and every member of the new meat to be processed here. She was also an out and out woman on this crew, peculiar for what Aubrey knew of pirates.

"Hey! I'm talkin' to you, Silver," Said Kalliope, "You don't seem to be too right in the head when I ask you questions."

"I'm trying my best. Its just. Its just..."

Kalliope smiled earnestly this time, saying, "You'll get used to it, young lad. When I was first brought on here I wasn't in the best shape either.

Lady of Umber

Had nothing to my name and no one to call a friend. I know you can make it out of this.”

“I have friends,” retorted Aubrey, remembering her friends back at the colonies whom she still couldn’t let go of—or refused to—as if that counted as some form of consent to this whole ordeal.

“The black gent you came with and that other gent are fine, I guess. I’m saying that you don’t have friends here, young l— .”

Thinking she was about to say “Lady” Aubrey shot back, “I don’t need anyone to take care of me. And I don’t need your help.”

“You’re scared of me still, I see. You’ll come ‘round soon,” She said as she walked away.

Aubrey pulled her hand out of the bucket after suddenly noticing a wriggling feeling tickle her flesh.

As Kalliope walked out of the common room, she giggled at her subordinates unfortunate and very loud discovery of worms in her soap bucket. She knew she was going to like this one especially.

Mason found himself sitting up in bed. This was yet another unfamiliar ceiling in an unfamiliar windowless room. Just when he was used to forgetting the sensation of waking up to unfamiliar ceilings, he meets them yet again. When he first found out about what had happened to him, he was angry, angry wnoight to risk his life with twice the number of men he ahd wounded in actuality. He was not ready to come back to a pirate ship. Not after so long away from one.

Aubrey had come to calm him down before. When she came dressed in men’s clothes—the cabin boy’s, he judged—he knew what had happened and stayed his hand. Blood did not need to flow today.

“How could life have come to this?” Thought Mason.

Lady of Umber

He had worked hard as a servant to Aubrey and the Del Piazzas for over a decade. He couldn't fail to please his masters, they were at that point the only thing between him and the gallows.

It took some coaxing of the nurses that the pirates kept on hand to figure out what was going on and where he was. When at first they told Mason that his mistress, Aubrey was not only dead but burnt to a crisp by the time that they found her body, they spoke kindly and softly. After seeing his reaction, they more hesitantly answered his later pleas for answers.

Apparently he was being held on the Crimson Claw, the infamous flagship of the Talon fleet, captained by the sealord, John Raven. Mason knew that name well. It wasn't long before he was able to coax out even more from his nurses, details and rumors.

The Talon fleet had just escape the pleasure boat of Jacob O'Dusk. That was a name that Mason wished had been left behind the day he was taken to the slave market. The fleet had appeared just in time to make a show of dominance to O'Dusk and ward him off.

From "Silver" Mason had managed to learn a few things about what happened next. He was not happy with it. Remembering what the cabin boy had told him. About Roberto. He wracked his mind, thinking about how it could have been possible that Roberto could have ordered such a hit on his own sister. It was true that they had been separated for over seven years, but there was no motivation clear to Mason regarding this.

At last Mason went to work, trying to get out of these women, what was going on in the world outside. What was going on in the empires, both Xa Xadong and Vanzi? What was the latest of petulant outbursts that the young emperor yelled out and who died as a result of it? What was the status of the Del Piazzas?

Exactly one of those questions could be answered and it had the most upsetting answer. The God-King, in his infinite divine wisdom had declared holy war against the Vanzi and was getting to work turning

Lady of Umber

Crownheel into a new Argentium. The young emperor's reaction to this was at least a little more befitting of someone of his stature. The war would not begin immediately at least.

Perhaps it was rather serendipitous that they all ended up here. Mason wondered what Aubrey would have been roped into without him to protect her in the mainland. All the court politics that she surely would have ended up getting caught up in would have ended with her becoming an altogether different person and one that Mason was glad to have missed out on the chance of meeting.

Jason needed to get to Aubrey. It was during that moment of weakness that he had handed it to her. He made a mental note that he would have to swipe it off of her the next chance that they would meet. There was a clear out and out appeal to her that he was starting to see. It was reaching for his heartstrings and he was not pleased by it. He had hardly known her for longer than a few days and now only knew each other through sideways glances from opposite ships and occasional light messages to each other.

She was the kind of vile and putrid slime that crawled out from the fetid and rotting sewers that he grew up in. Exactly the kind of person who—if they had grown up like he did—would have slit throats for a living and poisoned fiancées for a hobby. And yet she still held around her a sort of pleasant aura.

“Back to work, boy!” Yelled his ever so precious commanding officer, Kalliope of the Talon fleet.

She was one of the cruelest bosses that he had ever the privileges of getting to know. As a member of the fairer sex, she was adept in devising new ways of breaking her men. Her ship, the Muse, was the main treasure ship of the Talon fleet, laden with enough in the ways of gold, spices, and other unmentionable valuables to feed an average street family for at least seventeen generations.

Lady of UMBER

Kalliope was a vain master, vain to a fault, spending most of her free time—based on what Jason could see in his free time after work—looking over maps and styling her hair. It was from these periodic checks on her office that he could find out something important about their movements. A certain angry gentleman named, Antigonus, informed Kalliope about something that made Jason's jaw drop.

He was assigned guard duty over the food pantry when he had seen Antigonus walk over to Kalliope's office.

"Our boys on the mainland have informed us. Can't decide if it's rotten luck or the blank check of our lives. The God-King has declared war. War of all things!"

"And this affects our activities how?"

"Ugh! Use your imagination, woman. We have been able to maintain this jackpot of success as much as we have for so long by staying in traded waters."

"Shut up. We'll talk later."

That was all that Jason had heard. It seemed important.

Chapter Ten

this

Captain John Raven was the high lord of the seas. The age of piracy that began with the discovery and subsequent colonization of the southern

coast of what was now known as Xa Xadong was nothing but a boon to pirates, especially ones like John Raven.

Intermission Four:

Roberto pored through report after report. It was clear to him that something was wrong. He was sitting in his office at the Del Piazza mansion, where he managed his estate. Now free from the parasites that plagued his everyday, he was now ready to focus on his work as the head of the Boreas Exploration Corporation. It was not easy for him.

A stack of papers rose a quarter of a cubit above his ebony desk, submitted by his employees over the course of the last few days. The young emperor had made it explicitly clear the day before, that he personally would be managing in large part, the colonial expansion operations while his own imperial navy would work on establishing a perimeter around the contested territories.

The young emperor, not being a petulant child, donated a legion of his finest troops to this effort to serve as a “security detail” in case anything went awry.

Roberto was not in a position to refuse him, not at all. Therefore he was left to ponder the members of this legion. Each of their dossiers lay in front of him on his table and each of them was nothing special. Except for a strange few.

At least five papers appeared to show some form of “moral indiscretion” listed as an excuse for at least a few years spent out of active duty. One of them, Cassandra de Juris, was a clear example of this. She was listed as “top of her class” in marksmanship and “second to none” in terms of her skill with the blade, but there was that “moral indiscretion” line again with her.

If it was a clear out and out rule, then it certainly wasn’t to him.

Lady of Umber

In the paper, he had read the news. The mindless drones who wrote the daily paper had no sense of subtlety, none.

Devil King of Xa Xadong Declares Bloody Vendetta!

Emperor Dominic left no choice but retaliation!

Roberto had learned from his father about finding the truth through the finer details.

The matter with Aubrey was still thick in his mind though. The exhumation was scheduled for that day, and he was eager to see for himself. He almost couldn't believe himself and what he did. Despite Aubrey being the bastardess that she was, he still felt the shock of it for more than a week, composed mainly of waking up in a cold sweat.

"There was no helping it", he thought. "I might as well handle the *other* matter I'm to attend to today."

He left his office and took a sharp turn into the common room where, sitting between two harem girls at least ten years his senior, the young emperor sat.

"Good morning, Master Roberto," said the young emperor, "We have been expecting you for quite some time"

Practicing restraint mastered over the course of over ten years, Roberto cracked a smile and went over to the seat by the young emperor.

"Good morning, your highness."

"I am pleased to know that you have recovered at last from your stupor after the passing of your dear sister. We were all very moved by the stunning display that you made at the Silver hall. It was most amusing to us."

Both harem girls laughed in unison at that in their usual habit. Roberto never could remember their names, though had long suspected that

Lady of Umber

they kept giving out new ones to him each time he was forced by courtesy to ask.

"Enough," and at once the laughter of the harem girls ceased. "Leave us." They were all too happy to acquiesce.

It had become serious at that point. As the harem girls left, two middle-aged men in ornate golden robes walked in, as if on queue.

After they took the places of the harem girls beside their ruler, he began.

"We trust that your assessment of the escorts that we have provided you is acceptable? Or should we attend to some qu—"

"Now that the girls are gone I suppose with only these whores as company," said Roberto. "I may clearly explain something that has been on my mind."

"Choose your words carefully, sir. You are in the presence o—"

"Yes. These words are very deliberate, your highness. I accept your escort. The only thing that I ask is why? Why must I be summoned to Xia Xadong? Why now of all times, when everything seems to be going down the shitter."

"So to speak," he added after a pause.

It took approximately the amount of time for a kettle to whistle in a boil before the young emperor spoke.

"It seems that I am not the lone child here," he spoke with clear savage disdain in his eyes.

"I just want an answer, my lord. If you don't mind."

"You grow presumptuous. Just because your precious sister and your beloved little daddy are gone you don't have the excuse to break with tradition in front of us."

They traded vicious stares before the young emperor started.

Lady of Umber

"Most would appreciate a great deal more than you do the prospect of being chosen as the colonial governor to new Argentium. Most would be jumping at the prospect."

"Jumping at the prospect? Of being made ruler of a city whose name is synonymous with Imperial Folly? After the famously savage people of Xa Xadong declared holy war, after no more than a few years past the destruction of the first Argentium. You must be—"

"Joking? We do not joke, my dear," he said grinning ear to ear. Closing his eyes, he continued, "New Argentium will be the new capital and our new base of operations in the colonies from which we will launch the remainder of our forces. You must realize that we simply *must* have such a position to attack from."

The two generals stared at Roberto in similar synchronization to the two harem girls.

"I suppose that that is code for it being non-negotiable? I have no say in this?"

"We would not say none. We would say, 'choose your words wisely, your success is not a given that you may simply take for granted'".

Roberto knew that struggling was pointless the moment that the young emperor announced his arrival.

Governor of New Argentium. If he had Aubrey by his side by now, he knew that she would have let this little shit have it. Leave him crying home.

In truth, it was an honor to be bestowed this position, especially at his age. Too much of an honor. Too much.

He was obviously not in a position to argue.

"Fine. I accept."

Lady of Umber

“Good, you’ll be leaving post-haste. We have a galleon prepared for you and you will simply love the company that you’ll be keeping when you get there.”

After sending this message and making sure it was received, the young emperor left together with his generals. The caravan that he brought with him could be heard with each of their dozens of feet marching off into the distance.

Roberto left to his study to think about all of this. To think, that a mere few weeks after his sister had died and he claimed his inheritance, he would have this forced onto him.

He considered what he needed to do in order to ensure his safety on Xa Xadong.

Chapter Ten: Silver Spoon

Aubrey stopped counting the number of weeks that had passed since she had come to the Crimson Claw. She could feel her skin harden like Antigonus wanted, the once pale and fair skin that she wore grew red in spots and from too much time in the sun, started coming off in places. Antigonus was a harsh leader to her and all the other cabin boys over whom he presided. Out of all them Aubrey fared the worst. Her feminine appearance and thin body had given Antigonus the excuse to heap more and more work onto her.

She needed to become a strong man for him. Antigonus on a whim would often raise the stakes of her tasks, sometimes stating in front of the others that their work would be heaped an additional half of what he had assigned them if “Young Silver” could not bear that burden himself. Aubrey imagined this some sick way of encouraging the older cabin boys to teach her and raise her up to account for such a risk. Not here.

Lady of Umber

One night, while nursing the dark spots on her arm from their first beating of her, she could be heard quietly sobbing in her quarters. Who was she crying to, when no one would listen?

“Babies cry for their parents when they need to be taken care of,” she thought. “Who was going to take care of me?”

She had put off thinking about it even up till then, but knew in her heart what was going to happen to Mason. She refused to indulge the thought of his anguished face as he is whipped back into servitude under some awful master who knows where. That thought was always perished from her mind whenever it would come because inevitably more and more would follow and she would be reduced to such tears that she was no different from a mere infant.

She always knew what happened out here. She saw it with her own eyes everyday when passing her family’s mining quarry, but it never seemed real to her, nor did it seem like something she should have feared.

Everyday, she feared being seen through by the older cabin boys who liked to insult “Silver” whenever they were too tired to simply wait on him, calling him a “Wet Pussy Bitch” when they didn’t simply call him worse. Remembering the smiling, giggling, predatory faces they made when they looked at her was almost too much to bear.

She kept the knife that Jason had given her to protect herself. The knife was made, rather than from steel, of a Leviathan’s tooth. Aubrey could hardly imagine how a street urchin like Jason could have come across something like this with its ornate carving and elegant sharpening. Whenever she tried it out on the walls of her quarters, she could easily draw tallies on her walls or slice paper without even trying. The first time she pulled it out, she drew blood from her finger.

And as for what Jason had given to her that night when they encountered Jacob O’Dusk, the thing in the sack, it was nothing apparently valuable. Inside the scarlet sack was a small effigy of a woman carved out of the same stuff as the knife. The woman’s face was

Lady of Umber

beautiful and more extraordinary on account of the craftsmanship necessary to make something so small. She was standing on a small disk, the bottom of which had writing in some barbarian script. It looked like Xa writing but more deliberate, with more loosely flowing lines and curves.

What could Jason have wanted her to have this for?

She slipped the effigy back into the sack and kept it in an inner pocket in the jacket that Jason dressed her up in. She hung the knife from a strip of cloth hanging from the inside. She drifted off to sleep that night thinking about how she was going to maximize her efforts the next day. She needed to pull her weight and twice again if she was going to survive out here for longer than a few months.

Aubrey woke up to the sound of creaking wood bending back and forth to the crashes of waves. Through the cracks in her ceiling, there was only darkness. It was probably an hour before sunrise. Aubrey had developed a sense for that by this time. Trying to indulge herself a few more mealy minutes of rest, she tucked her head under her bundle of rags that passed for a pillow and tried to let the rocking of the ship lull her to sleep again.

A bell rang out from the end of the hallway connecting the cabin boy's rooms, with its ringer, Antigonous sounding the wake up call.

"A'right boys, you know what time it is. Get back to work and maybe we'll make it another day, eh?"

If that didn't wake Aubrey up then the sounds of everyone else around her, reverberating through the thin walls that she assumed everyone had did.

It was time to get to work.

Lady of Umber

Aubrey dressed herself in the same clothes that Jason gave her. To their credit, these pirates were at least capable of organizing cleaning operations and bringing a fresh change of clothes. She looked down on her body as she was switching shirts. The tanlines clearly delineating where she was hit by the sun starkly contrasted the pasty color of her skin underneath. Back at home she would have worn her girdle to flaunt to the boys in the neighborhood her growing body. Now she had to strap herself down in front of boys just like them. The only difference was the place and time.

She put on her pants and tightened the cloth that she kept tied around her breasts before donning the rest of the Cabin boy's attire. She gave herself a minute to breathe.

A knock on the door rang her ears out.

"“Ey Silver!” shouted Antigonous. “Get over ere before we leave ya! You’re on kitchen duty today!”

She could just *feel* the wagging of his stretches of flab slap her in the face just outside the door.

“Y-yes. I-I’m coming.”

Kitchen duty was not as physically demanding as the other tasks that they bade Silver do out there in the wild. To be perfectly honest, it was almost somewhat enjoyable for Aubrey. Back in the colonies, she spent her time working at being creative and artistic. It was what girls did where she lived. Kitchen work was utterly beyond her back then, but now she could try herself out and get to let loose. Feeding the crew was nothing special though. It was mostly gruel and wheat porridge to keep them from starving and *occasionally* a piece of fish was handed out when the Antigonous was feeling especially generous.

Despite that though, Aubrey kind of enjoyed working with ingredients in the kitchen like this. It did remind her of times when Mason allowed her to assist in the cooking of her meals. She felt like she was being useful.

Lady of Umber

It was still the worst of the tasks that she would end up with.

Laughter rang throughout the kitchen, raucous and slurred. The same usual japes and mocking growls, Aubrey heard from the entrance to the kitchen. A small gang of cabin boys walked in. This gang was made up of four boys a few years older than Aubrey, sometimes more. Aubrey tried to pay them no attention. It was none of her business what they did here, what they did anywhere.

Then behind her head, the warm moist breath exhaling came as two thick and worn hands captured her shoulders.

“Hello, Silver,” whispered the leader of the gang. “Great to see that we’ve been assigned the same duty.

Trying not to give him the satisfaction of getting attention, she kept quiet.

Out of the corner of her right eye she spied his hands work their way to the cutting board next to her. She was determined to avoid giving him eye contact. He’d like that.

His callused hands went to work chopping a radish. They were nible and skilled as they did it. Not a single wasted movement could be spotted. He was definitely serious about keeping his station here.

“I’m sorry I... Offended you...” he apologized through that same stupid grin like he usually did. “I just... sometimes get a little jumpy, y’know.”

She could hear two of his appendages laughing behind her. He was prepared to at least do actual work while they were just here to watch.

“What do you want, Marshall,” Aubrey said, finally fed up with keeping herself bottled up. “I’m busy right now. We can talk later.”

Snickers from behind her came up again on cue. Aubrey wondered if boys were incapable of feeling emotions beyond stupid laughter and pain.

Lady of Umber

"I respect that, you know. I'm just a simple man doing his simple job. Antigonus—little fat bastard he—he doesn't really speak for all of us you know. The rest of us... we have our good points."

The peanut gallery behind him could barely be considered as holding back their laughter at those last few words.

"that's true. There's some good points to him too."

"Oh, yeah? Like what?"

Aubrey looked straight at him and showed him her fury.

"Whoah, whoah! Don't need to get mad, you know!" she shouted in faux-surprise. Before resuming his smarmy faux charisma. "I won't hurt you."

Aubrey resumed her work chopping more vegetables.

"I just want another friend to add to my gang, you know. I know I'm not exactly strapped for... friends around here, but I am confident that we can find a place for you with us."

"Not interested," Aubrey replied, curtly.

"Antigonus, you may notice..." began Marshall, anger now seeping through his words. "...that he's not exactly the brightest if you know what I'm saying."

"I know what you're saying, and I disagree with it."

After a beat he continued, "He doesn't mess with us. He doesn't pick on us the way he does you. You seem to be his little special... little one, y'know."

"I'm proud of the privilege. I'm happy you recognize the honor."

"He likes to find new meat, you see. Eh likes to play with it when he gets it. I know. I've been there... Far more times than you have, my dear sir."

Lady of Umber

Aubrey continued chopping vegetables. She was a few pieces behind quota and needed to reach to get another. Once she reached quota, she could leave. She reached her hand up the shelf to get another radish.

“Not... so fast, Silver,” he said, slurring that last word. “We’re not done yet.”

Aubrey felt two hands grab her by the torso before she had time to react.

Two of Marshall’s gang had her pinned to the wall while Marshall, with his shit-eating grin, cocked his head to the side and continued talking.

“See, I don’t take rejection well. Kinda hurts my feelings when it happens. Don’t take it to personally what my boys do to you... They’re just here to protect little old me...”

“Bast—”

“Will you shut the FUCK UP! I offered you a place in my boys and you reject me,” he said, placing a hand on his chest. “ME! I swear some people have no respect around here. Some people...” he got closer.

He kept his knife from the table.

“Wh-what are you going to do with that?”

“What THE FUCK do you think I’m going to do with it?” he growled.

“What the fuck do you think I’m going to do with your face...?” he said as he brought it closer. “What the fuck do you think with your little...”

Giggles, emerged from the otherwise quiet captors that held her to the wall.

“You’re not going to like what I’m going to do down there, Silver. I’d like to hear a squeal, preferably the loudest and most bitch-like squeal you’re capable of.”

Struggling didn’t help Aubrey. It only made it more painful.

Lady of Umber

“Marshall! What.Are. You. Doing!” shouted Antigonus.

The two arms that held Aubrey to the wall released her. Their owners ran behind marshal as though he could do anything to protect them from what was going to happen next.

Antigonus stomped in, filling the kitchen with his presence.

“You little miscreant! Give me five good reasons why I shouldn’t blow your brains out right here!”

“I-i-I thought you were off-ship for today... “

“That’s one gone. Four chances left.”

“I’m sorry, boss. It was just a joke, a joke you see.”

“Cowards and Idiots. Good to get to know you better now after this. Three.

“Captain Kalliope, she can explain. She told us to get up to this.”

“It’s a sin to bear false witness, boy! You should be ashamed of yourself. Two.”

Antigonus was clearly drunk. And true to his word, he was carrying his flintlock.

“You have to believe me! She told me everything I needed to do! I was going to be—”

“Last one boy, you’d better be good at lyin’ cause the truth isn’t gonna save you now.”

“Please Stop!” yelled Aubrey.

Taking a few minites to work out the dust in his ears, Antigonus turned to look at Aubrey.

“Quiet, boy. I’m teaching your crewmate a lesson.”

Lady of Umber

"J-just leave him alone. I don't want anyone getting hurt for my sake, I—"

"This isn't for your *sake*, boy. The little miscreant has been trouble ever since he came along and I've had it..."

"I don't want to be a part of this! Just let him go!"

"'don't want to be a part of this?' then go! Its between me and him anyways."

Aubrey was at wit's end. She pulled out the knife in her pocket.

"Eh, what are you gonna do that?" Antigonus slurred. "You have a death wish?"

"To be honest, It doesn't seem so bad, all things considered. I'm actually not t—"

"Shut up!" he said, pointing his flintlock to her face. "You're going to stay out of this, boy! I've had enough with all this insubordination around here."

"J-j-just leave us alone..." said Aubrey, holding the knife, even as the gun stared her right between the eyes.

Antigonus pulled it way, seemingly calming down.

"You've better watch yourself, boy. Most of the others aboard this fleet have a lot less booze in them. Don't need it to get the heart to shoot to kill."

He made for the doorway.

"You'd best remember that," he said before walking off.

Marshal and the others ran off when they were sure that they were safe, leaving Aubrey holding the knife, keeping it aimed at a non-existent man. She was panting and tired.

Lady of Umber

She broke down, collapsing on the ground and entered a fetal position, still clutching the knife.

She was crying.

Josiah sat where he usually did when these meetings took place. Beside him were two of the dozen captains that John Raven had called to the Crimson Claw to discuss pertinent matters, Kalliope and the captain's right hand man, Antigonus. Opposite him was a thin red curtain through which could be seen the unmistakable silhouette of their captain, John Raven.

The captains only met when called upon by Raven and were only called upon when Raven had something on his mind and demanded that it be on everyone else's as well.

Antigonus got up from his chair and went behind the curtain to speak to Raven. Through the curtain the dark red shape of Raven whispered something to Antigonus who then slowly paced to the front of the curtain and began to announce it.

"The captain says that... 'it has finally happened. The empires are at war.'"

Audible grumbles erupted from the small procession seated among everyone there. The news was not altogether surprising, just disappointing.

"Our contacts within the Vanzis have confirmed it. The powers that be have responded in kind. War."

"We all could make use of this kind of thing," said Kalliope. "More ships travelling through the north sea, more goods to keep us all fat and well-fed."

"A fool's take," said Antigonus. "The greater presence of the Imperial navy would severely hamper our ability to move on in. Damned fools

Lady of Umber

like Jacob O'Dusk will become *far* more plentiful in the months to come. Our captain suspects that more and more of us may be willing to jump ship for that chance."

"And why don't we?" Asked Kalliope, . "Turn our cannons to the Xa! We'll get recognition for what we deserve! With the empire on our side, we coul—"

"No," said the shape sitting behind the curtain.

"Captain Raven, I did not mean t—"

"Do you.... Do all of you... Forget the crimes of the Empire so easily that such thoughts escape the nonsense of your dreams to meet my ears?"

Gaining some confidence in her position, Kalliope began. "Without the imperials on our side, Xa counterattacks have left our fleet with few options. We need this to work, Captain I—"

"the answer remains no. Not after everything we've seen from them. Do you all really believe that that precocious little *child* is capable fo turning around his empire? That all of the anger, vendettas, and vengeance seekers will be calmed down at his behest? Live in the real world!"

As he always did, the captain showed himself as a wise strategist, capable of formulating complex plans and organizing himself well. Kalliope begrudgingly sat herself down. There was no arguing with the captain. Not after all this.

The rest of the talk continud and mainly focused on what the fleet would be doing now that someehing so severe as the war was about to begin. They needed to alter their raiding paths to steer clear of the suspected imperial resupply routes, work on reestablishing the failed colony at Armisael, do all that they can to stay out of the way of the greater force that would soon be crushing everyhring in its path.

Lady of Umber

Aubrey was taken to a small room beside the brig. She had been warned about this. Marshall was gone and obviously would not be talking anytime soon. Antigonus was not happy about the recent turn of events. She and all the other new recruits had been warned when they first came about the punitive measures that these pirates employed.

Antigonus was light on details when it came to describing this place. He always seemed to make it out to be a place where people were to be tortured and beaten. Aubrey was already familiar with the color the skin turned when beaten. She was pretty sure that she would learn all over again when she was done here.

She pulled a knife on a commanding officer. That would be grounds for a whipping even in Crownheel.

She was loath to imagine what they would do here.

The doors unlocked and in came a familiar face.

Josiah

"Silver? Is that you?"

"Josiah? What are you—"

"I was told to rough up a bit some young punk who pulled a knife on his commanding officer. Expected it to be Marshall, to be perfectly honest."

"What are you going to do to me?"

"I-I-I don't know. I was told that you did that. Why?"

Aubrey told him every single excruciating detail of what happened earlier today.

"That does make sense then. What happened to Marshall?"

"Haven't seen him all day since what happened happened."

"I see."

Lady of Umber

"What are you going to do to me?" Aubrey reiterated.

"I'll be perfectly honest with you, Silver. I was planning on putting on my gloves and beating the ever-loving shit out of you, but here and now, I can see that you had considerable reason to do what you did."

Aubrey couldn't respond to that, still reeling from the events earlier.

"I have a way out for you that may be worth considering."

"What?"

"You can lay low for a time. A few months at least. Just enough time for you to get back on your feet. I'll give the good word to Antigonus that you'd been subjected to the worst lashes of your life aboard my ship. You'll just have to do something for me."

"Do what? What do I have to do?"

"I recognize that you're not all that you seem to be on the surface."

"What are you talking about?"

"I recognize your education. The way that you hold yourself."

"What do you mean?"

"I *mean* that you're more than you seem to be to the others."

Picking up some paranoia from Jason, she balked for a moment before holding back.

"Now you don't need to worry," he said. "I won't ask questions, unlike the others aboard the fleet."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that there's nothing for you to worry about. I told you. I know a place where you can lay low for a while."

"Where?" Aubrey asked. "Where could you take me?"

Lady of Umber

"Things are getting too dangerous for us out here. What with the declaration of war that came by from Xa Xadong, its jut not safe."

He put his hand to the table.

"I need to keep my daughter safe."

Aubrey already had her gueses from last time, but waited for Josiah to confirm her suspicions.

"You've already met my daughter, Josephine. She seems to think the world of you and doesn't keep quiet about you whenever the subject of this ship's crew is brought up. You've really made an impression on her."

"J-j-Josephine?"

"You guessed it. I don't trust you fully, but I know for certain the standards of character built on this fleet and the kinds of scum that it tends to breed. I'm not fond of it."

"What does she have to do with me though?"

"My crew showed me several of the boarding papers that were on hand at the young emperor. It seems that the young Aubrey del Piazza was taught in and was preparing for a career as a teacher in her time."

"What does that have to do with me?"

"Well, young man. Your friend really did a lot of good work in taking the time to burn the ship's records and its captain's logs. It would have fooled me too had it not been for one thing."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"It doesn't matter anyway, young amn. You can continue dressing like that for the time being. If you ask me, it suits you. My daughter needs someone to help her out int the world, someone to show her how to be her own woman. A pirate's life is becoming increasingly beyond me to handle handing over to her. I want her to be happy."

Lady of Umber

"Look, I don't know about you, but everything that's happened aboard this ship has been utter hell. I'm not about to get involved in anymore."

"Then don't," Josiah retorted. "On the condition that you stay with Josephine, protect her, do all that you can, I can ensure that the pirate's life will never come back for you."

Josiah had her attention.

"How?" Aubrey asked. "How can you guarantee that? Aubrey del Piazza is dead. She's never coming back. Her own family ordered her to death and sent some vile ruffians to rob her home and do it. How could it possibly get better than this?"

"I know it's not much, but..." he said, opening up a map, brown with age and pointing to a small stretch of open sea.

"This is where you'll be going. It's not much, but it's safe, safe from everyone you had any business of being afraid of. You'll be able to carry on with.... A life over there."

Aubrey looked him straight in the eyes and saw in them sincerity unlike any she'd seen before.

"There's an island down here. I'd discovered it on a routine scouting trip. I laid low there countless times. I know that the only people living there are of no threat to you or anyone else, I promise."

"And what if I refuse?"

"What do you think? You pulled a knife on Antigonous, the captain's right-hand man, his closest friend since their early days sailing out on the eastern sea. I don't think there's another option for you, *Silver*."

"What about Mason... and Jason... a-a-and..."

"I don't think you can guarantee what they'll treat her like there. It's going to take me some time to really *get to know them* like I ought to. All I can say is that I can guarantee that they'll be safe."

Lady of Umber

"And If I really am Silver, just some cabin boy who snuck up on the old *young emperor* and stowed away on it, pocketing the jewels of a young maiden, robbign her before burning her alive?"

"Then you're worse than bilgewater. If you really are who you say you are, against all hope, against all my sincere doubt, you will know what kind of man I am."

"And wwhat's that."

"Silver or not, Aubrey or not, I am not a kind-hearted soul, never was. It isn't out of the mercy in my heart that your friends stay alive you know."

"w-w-what do yo—"

"I'm just saying... If you really are who you say you are... the kind of bastard who sees no difference between stepping on a cat's tail for fun and having some fun with a scared, screaming girl who just wants to be with her father.... Or if you're the kind of low-life bastard who would leave a girl with the mind of a child to fend for herself out there in the wild..."

"Where are you...?"

"You're the kind of cold-hearted bastard who wouldn't miss one black slave.... Or some cabin boy that you never cared about in the least. Ant those two are hard enough to take care of, by themselves anyway."

"You monster! Yo—"

"I know what you were going to say. I agree. Will you take the opportunity... or not?"

"Do I have a choice? Why even ask me?"

After a moment to ponder it, seeming to actually think about it, he remarked, "you do have a choice. I don't know if you really do care. If you didn't, I'd have no reason to keep you alive."

Feeling defeated, Aubrey could only respond in the affirmative.

Lady of Umber

"Alright, then it's settled then. I want you taking good care of my daughter. You're going to teach her her letters and she's going to have a new playmate."

"I don't get it though... Why don't you just take the chance yourself." Why don't yo—"

"Listen, Kid. There's a lot you don't know. Knowing what I do, you're gonna wish you didn't ask. The slave and the boy will be taken care of. You have my word."

Intermission

Roberto gazed upon it. The sight before him seemed even more hideous. Before him was the shining example of imperial engineering, a preliminary craft designed to be a true mobile fortress at sea, the emblem that will usher in the new age for the Vanzi navy, one that will leave its burning mark on the Xa continent.

The Griffin.

The young emeperor really did all in his power to accomplish this deed. He was truly serious about making Roberto the governor of a colony. The thought was starting to appeal to him after a week's worth of continuous hesitation and a week's worth of unbridled rage at the task.

The mere fact that he would be leaving the mainland, he realized, meant that essentially, he was taking the place of dead Aubrey. The Aubrye that their father always described as nothing more than thrown away trash that was to be kept as far away from their illustrious family as possible, was now, Roberto understtod, what the young emperor may have seen him as.

Boarding the ship, he was accompanied by a "Hnadler", as the young emperor's admiral referred to her. She was young and pretty, two

Lady of Umber

adjectives that Roberto paid attention to exclusively before meeting her icy blue eyes. Her stare was like a cobra's bite, instantly deadly.

She was dressed in imperial regalia, as befitting someone of her rank. A rank that Roberto was not privy to the knowledge of.

By his side, she stayed, always keeping step with him everywhere he went. He still was not in a position to figure out what exactly the purpose of sending her out was.

Initial research on his part yielded few results. Her stated name, Julia, was dreadfully common, with her surname helping little in the search for answers.

"I'm sure that you will be pleased with the finest imperial engineering has to offer."

"If this is what they're selling, I don't know if I'm really in the... same league as them."

"Peerless. Much like yourself. There are few business leaders within this empire that have *quite* as much going on in their lives as yourself."

She was always like this. She deferred to the imperial creed and had seemingly memorized the imperial guidebook from cover to cover and would simply not *shut up* about it. This woman, this Julia, whoever she truly was, was not *normal* in the way that anyone else was.

Roberto was not going to enjoy the six weeks it took to sail from the mainland to the colonies.

"I don't suppose you'll be leaving my side anytime soon. Perhaps meet up with some friends on this boat."

"And you shouldn't suppose. There are no friends worth keeping here. None important enough to remember the names of."

"Oh, great. Wonderful. I'm going to have company aboard this trip."

Lady of Umber

Roberto did enjoy the view afforded to him by his cabin on the upper deck.

While taking the time enjoying the few days of freedom in his life that remained to him, slumming in the west-side, Roberto took the time to ask around. The secrets that the people of the west-side were not overly-attached to their secrets, far from it. Coming there was one of Roberto's favorite pleasures that now he was going to have to substitute with slumming in the colonies.

He liked to imagine that doing so would be awful. It would be simply more depressing than enjoyable.

"Such is life," he thought. "Better start getting used to it while you have the opportunity."

The young emperor's orders were explicit, "maintain the consistent flow of trade from the colonies and you will be entitled to protection."

The boy was ready to have his war but not a revolution, how surprising. Roberto was ready to take leave.

"Oh, by the way, governor," said Julia. "I have a message for you courtesy of the emperor. Would you like to hear it now?"

"Might as well take in all the bad news at once. You only get one chance to encounter shit in a day. What luck I must have to get it this oft—"

"The young emperor has issued a statement. Before you embark onto the colony of new Argentium, this ship will be making a stop at an island in the north sea some distance by it."

"What? Why? What's over there?" Asked Roberto.

"I'm not at liberty to say for now, sir. Simply trust in the words of the emperor and you can rest easy tonight."

Roberto had one petulant child to worry about, growing up. Now he had another as soon as the first had gone.

"I understand, Jullia." Replied Roberto, after he was sure that that was all. "Then do you have any idea as to what we'll be doing there?"

"Dropping off a survey team, sir."

"A survey team?"

"We'll be dropping them off and spending the next week aboard this ship supporting them until they are finished with the emperor's errand. Then we will be at liberty of leaving."

"A week doesn't seem enough time for something like that."

"A week is enough. You're not the surveyor. You're Roberto Del Piazza, Governor of the Boreas Territories and the protector of the North."

Roberto then felt an uncertain mixture of admiration of such a title and a sense of pure seething rage at the young emperor mocking him.

"Alright. Understood. See you tomorrow, then, Julia." He said before shoving off into his cabin.

Chapter Eleven

Blindfolded and bound by her hands, Aubrey was not afraid. Despite everything that Josiah had said to her before, everything that she had worried about and thought about and bashed the wooden wall of her cabin until the skin of her palms turned red, she was unafraid. Aubrey had been through enough manhandling throughout this entire journey and had had nothing to latch onto, nothing to keep herself steady, even with all this happening to her.

What she remembered from her conversation with Josiah was that she would have to serve as his daughter's caretaker. In retrospect, with enough time to think about it—especially with her having gone through hours and hours of denial—she saw this as at least better. Life on the ship was not about to improve with time, as she saw it. She saw herself

Lady of Umber

only growing harder and harder to meet those adversities until she got her throat slashed some Wednesday afternoon, her body ending up dumped in an unceremonious burial at sea.

That was not the life for her. It was not a life for anyone.

Now it was time to leave all of that. Never mind the fact that Mason and Jason were still aboard the Talon fleet ships and were likely faring little better wherever they were. But at this point, Aubrey had realized, she didn't have a choice in the matter. She never did.

In fact, in nothing that she ever did, did she have even the smallest quantum of choice. Not while her father lived and she was taken to the colonies to live her life in her pretty little gilded cage, not when her father was announced dead and she was forced to leave that life, and not now. To her, it seemed that only now did her life finally shape up and be honest with her about her lack of choice.

For hours and hours and hours, she listened to the waves crashing around her. She knew that she was being taken to the island that Josiah had mentioned. It was taking long to get there though. Though she knew nothing of the measures of sea travel, to her it might as well have been a trip to the edge of the globe.

The sound of the wind blowing at the sail above her didn't slow down, nor did it let up. They were making a constant speed to wherever it was. Aubrey thought that she might as well sleep. Nothing good happened to her in recent memory when she would wake up from sleep, she mused.

Then a familiar voice reentered her memory.

Josephine.

"I remember," she thought. "I'm supposed to be taking care of *her*..."

Aubrey didn't hate Josephine, far from it. It was just that to her, Josephine seemed to be—or rather was—some sort of invalid. They had taught Aubrey that word back when she was still in her studies.

Lady of Umber

Her memories of school became her only escape from this dreary silence. She was taught that Invalids were individuals whose minds were indisposed. The voice of her professor rung as vivid in her mind as it did when she first stumbled shyly into those halls. Invalids often lacked in intelligence to a great extent, being incapable of the simplest of tasks. Her professor's voice started to mumble into incoherence as she mustered all that she remembered about what he said about their origins.

At the class, he showed to the group images of invalids as they appeared to the doctors who studied them. Often, they had misshapen heads and rather ghoulish features. Invalid became the class's new insult for its members. Everyone ugly in class was probably stupid, like the professor had said.

Invalids, they taught, were unable to grow past a very crucial part of their infancy and thusly had some or all of their mental capacities rendered unable or incapable of rendering intelligent thought. It was impossible to educate them, and it was impossible to wring any use out of them as citizens of the empire for any jobs beyond the most menial and degrading. Aubrey remembered all of that when she thought about Josephine.

The way Josephine had acted, the way that she looked at Aubrey, it seemed to her that she was indeed an invalid like the professor had stated. There was basically no other logical way of looking at it.

"Although," Aubrey thought. "She didn't appear to resemble at all the grotesques that the professor showed us. In fact, I'd say that she looked rather... Beautiful."

Aubrey's memory of Josephine's face lit up in the moonlight struck her again. It was obvious without a doubt that Josephine was nothing more than an idiot. Her hair was raggedy and unkempt, her attitude was simply atrocious, and there was so much about her that Aubrey could have thought of.

Lady of Umber

"All I saw in her room were those toy soldiers arrayed like that on her shelves," Aubrey thought. "She certainly had an eye for taste in decorating, all things considered. The arrangement of them was rather pleasing to the eye when I saw it. So she, more than likely wasn't all stupid. There might have been hope for her yet."

Hours passed and still there was nothing. Aubrey's throat was parched, and her stomach ached terribly, crying out in hunger. She was almost tempted to call for help and perhaps get something, anything to eat. She stopped herself, scolding herself in her mind for thinking such foolish thoughts.

It was then that she heard a man yelling out something. A few minutes later followed the sound of the sails coming down amid the rush of voices issuing commands and grumbles. The door to the cabin opened.

The man who took off her blindfold was kind enough to pull what was left of her raven hair back as he untied her. She was nearly blinded by the tepid light coming through her cabin door, being taken aback and falling over on her seat.

The pirate had a laugh at that and made off after untying the restraints around her arms. The white rectangle that dominated the center of her vision made her eyes tear up as she made her way to it. As the dark shapes that surrounded her gave lightened up into the normal fixtures of the common boat cabin, she more clearly remembered where she was.

It was time to go.

From the deck where Aubrey now overlooked the small island that would serve as her home together with Josephine, she observed the men at work already in the process of leaving. She had remembered enough of what Antigonus had taught her to know that it was time to disembark. None of the pirates at work aboard the ship paid her any

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mind as she picked up the satchel marked for her, slung it around her back, and made her way to the rope ladder slung from the ship.

The island before her was lush with green tropical trees, the kind with the long trunks that extended to heights comparable to the buildings in the colonies that she called home. There were few signs that Aubrey could make out that this place was inhabited by anyone, much less Josephine and anyone else.

She was told that Josephine would not be her only companion here. Together with Josephine would be her caretaker, a woman that Josiah had called “Old Aboora”, whom he had indicated would instruct her in the care of Josephine and of her little “tics”.

The ship that brought her here was already in the process of leaving when Aubrey waved back, already several dozen cubits away.

The instructions that Josiah had given her about where she was to go, were clear: “keep going straight from where you disembark. You’ll find the shack.”

It seemed to be small help. Aubrey didn’t know if she was simply out of shape or if she had really walked further than the length of the academy back at Crownheel.

Josephine hated her father. She hated him every now and again when the mood struck her. Other times she loved him. Josephine liked to think about her father and all the things she liked and didn’t like about him. One example of the latter was what he had told her the night before: that she would be leaving his side for a time.

Josephine more or less understood the point of what he was saying, that things were going to be dangerous to her and that she needed to be kept safe. But just because she understood, it didn’t mean that she was happy about it. He pulled the same usual speech about how great it would be to spend another few weeks with “Old Aboora”. Josephine

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would always try to tell him that “Old Aboora did not make good company and that she was growing quitter and slower each time she had to be vrought there.

Josephine was sure that he had heard everything this time and was sure that he understood. He kissed her on the head and brushed her hair a bit before leaving to make the next few hours of preparations.s

The only consolation would be that she would be meeting Silver again. Her father had always paid attention to what it was that she liked and not really to how much she liked it. Josephine was fond of Silver, but not so fond that she would rather spend another few months with him instead of her father. She wondered why her father would put her through this, why he would break his own rule of never letting men be around her. Was he different now? What else was different about him? Josephine knew that she couldn't count on him being predictable anymore.

Still, though. As she went about her toy soldiers, wishing to bring one along to add to her collection on the island, she did remember something. She never really had someone to play with on the island whenever her father would put her there. Silver's presence would be a nice change of pace. She jumped at the possibility, thinking about all the things that they would do over there. Josephine could show her the curious things that she had collected from the island's beaches while there all those other times.

She went off to pack all of her things—now for the first time, excited at the prospect—thinking about all the things that they would do while there. After they played a game of checkers, they could go off into the black caves that the island hosted. She smiled with the purest glee when she packed her nicest clothes for that event. Josephine knew that she would love it there. Silver would make a good companion when making the trip, a big strong man who would protect her as she went deeper and deeper into the dark caves.

Lady of UMBER

She still hadn't picked out which of her toy soldiers she would bring though. Introducing her to the set at the island would be enough, though, she figured. Instead, Josephine thought, she should bring over something very special that she showed to no one, not even to her father. It was very special to her. Silver was going to ask so many questions when she showed it to him. Her imagination did all the work of creating the idea that would motivate her to bring it with her.

And so, after moving her bed aside, sliding the small wooden plank on the floor, reaching her hand as far as her arm could take it, finding it, and finally putting it in her satchel, she smiled.

It was going to be so much fun that they would have there. As she left her cabin, she imagined that face that he would make upon seeing it.

Intermission: Kalliope

War! The Vanzi empire has declared of all things war. The people of Xa Xadong are to be slaughtered in the thousands within the first few weeks. There was little chance for them to defend themselves from what was to come. The sky will run black with the ashes of their villages and their chiefs decapitated heads will look down on their subjects from Vanzi pikes while their children are torn from their mothers and fathers to be made into valuable citizens.

As a vertical slice of what was to come, that entire paragraph was only a fraction of what was possible.

Just as Kalliope had hoped.

The Revyn did not lie, as they always have. Kalliope thought herself foolish to question their words as she entered her private quarters and slowly closed her doors. She was going to consult them again today and required an hour's privacy for it.

Her ship in the Talon fleet, the *Siren*, trailed behind the rest of the fleet as it sailed toward their old hiding place. Her commands to the first mate were explicit, "at least a knot away from the rest of the fleet. Keep it within sight. No closer." The first mate gave his usual response and turned to the wheel. He knew what was going to happen that night and was ready for it.

Kalliope thought a bit about what she was going to ask them tonight. The Revyn had remaining only a little more time this month to get their message through. Normally Kalliope would have required a bucket of pig's blood to hold steady conversation with them, but was assured that nothing so precious would be required this time. The Equinox was upon the sea and with it came the convergence.

Lady of Umber

“Still,” thought Kalliope, looking at the cabin boy bound and gagged in the far corner of the room, “to be on the safe side tonight. I might as well prepare something.”

She lit her lantern and placed it in the center of the room. On the floor it rested on were inscribed in dark red marks of unknown script, the marks of the Revyn. Pulling out her pocketknife, she held it flat side to her face and looked at her reflection in its polished surface.

A few strands of her black curly hair were dropped into the lantern’s fire which ate them up slowly.

With the knife she held out her hand above the lantern. In the lantern’s light several diagonal scars running across her flesh would end up covered in her blood as she drew it yet again with the knife. Kalliope did not flinch or hesitate for a moment as the cold steel cut into her.

Little trails of mist emanated from the lantern for each drop of dark red that fed the fire. The quiet hissing sound that came with each drip was music to Kalliope’s ears. The Revyn accepted her.

She got down and crossed her legs, closing her eyes. From her lips slithered whispers, first only a few each second, then dozens, and finally she was speaking completely in tongues.

The Revyn found her in their domain. Kalliope stood in the center of a firmament chamber.

Each Revyn that approached her was the size of a galleon ship. Each body was composed of fleshy orbs loosely held together by what looked like hair.

“WHAT DO YOU WANT, HUMAN?” boomed the Revyn in unison.

“You were correct in your prophecy of the war in Xa.”

Lady of Umber

"OF COURSE WE ARE. TIME HAS REWARDED US WITH FORESIGHT. WHY DO YOU BREACH OUR REALM ON THE SUMMER SOLSTICE? WHAT REASON DOES A HUMAN HAVE FOR SUCH BLATANT SACRELIGE?"

"I am ready to make another offering. Interested?"

"WHAT HAVE YOU TO OFFER US NOW, DELIVERING UNTO US THE LAST OF THE DAUGHTERS OF HARBALIUM?"

Kalliope didn't remember doing anything of the sort. The name Harbaliium didn't ring any bells either. She remembered that all the REvyn saw all humans alike, unable to tell each of them apart. Some poor bloke must have broken his pact with the Revyn and paid in blood for it.

"I can offer you something of even greater value!"

"WHAT? WHAT CAN IT POSSIBLY BE?"

"The war that is about to break out over the Xa shores with the Vanzi. I want you to make a minor... modification to that plan of yours."

"YOU MEAN TO BARGAIN WITH US? AFTER ALL THAT WE HAVE REVEALED TO YOU BACK WHEN THE CITIES WERE YOUNG. WE WILL NOT MAKE SUCH A MISTAKE AGAIN."

"I assure you... This is no mistake. I can deliver you a prize far greater than any other that has been offered to you!"

"WHAT PRIZE COULD POSSIBLY BE SO GREAT THAT A MERE HUMAN CAN SIMPLY PROPOSE ANOTHER PACT WITH WE?"

"A bloody crest is going to be carved into Xa territory, right?"

"THIS MUCH IS TRUE."

"What if I could ensure that the blood spilt that day will be double. No, triple what you have planned?"

Lady of UMBER

"WE WOULD SMITE YOU FOR LIES, HUMAN. HOW DO YOU PROPOSE TO ACCOMPLISH THIS?"

"You lose nothing from allowing me to try. And it is through my loyalty to you that it may be accomplished. Trust me with this and you stand to be rewarded heavily for it."

"WHAT IS IT THEN, HUMAN? WHAT IS IT THEN, THAT EVEN WE OF THE REVYN SEE THE VALUE IN IT?"

"Oh, I have a few ideas..."

Chapter Twelve: Old Aboora

Aubrey had finally seen it. A few cubits and a span away she could see a small house. It was hidden in the trees, invisible to anyone spying the beaches of the island. The house was in the middle of a clearing in the jungle where the ground seemed to be somewhat well trodden and flattened. The light from the sky above shone through to keep the house lit.

Old Aboora was nowhere to be found though. Aubrey was told that Old Aboora was a woman of Xa descent, though one who spoke decent common tongue. Josephine couldn't be seen here either. Aubrey figured that they might be away for the moment.

She had no idea how they fed themselves here or how they drank clean water.

Seeing as she had the place to herself, she went inside. It was a fairly well-put-together little hovel in the woods. The common room held a small table in its center and a few chairs shifted to the walls. There was a small chest placed in the far corner of the room. Aubrey guessed that they might have slept here, seeing as there was no flight of stairs leading up, but didn't see any beds or anything.

On the table there was covered in dust, a small checkerboard. There were pieces placed neatly where they should be, as if ready for another game.

"How long has this place been left alone?" thought Aubrey. She wondered even more where Old Aboora was. This place seemingly hadn't been visited in some time. Then something caught her eye.

It was practically invisible with how much dust coated it, but she could now see a shelf stacked from top to bottom with small shapes no larger than an adult's hand. Toy Soldiers.

Lady of Umber

Aubrey at least had confirmation that this was the house she was meant to be in. Josephine would come over and then they would have to do... something here while she was meant to be kept safe. It suddenly dawned on her that after all this time, she ended up back in a place with peace and safety, but all alone with no one to share it with.

Josephine was almost ready to board the boat her father had prepared for her. Her satchel was packed and lugging it around was starting to pain her in the knees when she approached the boardwalk leading to it. Her father would personally escort her there, as he always did. Josephine would have prepared some interesting things to speak with him about if she was the type to do so.

As she was making her way there, she passed by a little man with a familiar face. It was Jason, Silver's friend that she had asked her father about. Apparently the two were fairly close. Josephine also remembered not liking him very much. He seemed to be in a hurry, sweating and looking very intense. Something looked like it concerned him with the way that he went about the deck. He stuck close to the walls and whenever possible, shadowed crewmembers who happened to be walking the direction he was headed. She noticed the direction he was headed, the same as her boat.

Josephine didn't much like the idea of *him* coming along, but supposed that her father must have commanded it. Silver, she figured, must be the type to be lonely being the only man in Josephine's company. They reminded her of her toy soldiers, one set upon her shelf was meaningless without the others of its kind. Josephine was almost tempted to throw those ones away that she could not find matching companions for.

She supposed Jason could come along.

Lady of Umber

The thick lump in her satchel, held together by the special object that Josephien was planning on showing Silver, was beginning to weigh on her. She could probably make it to the boat before her back gave out.

Just as she was almost there, she spotted Jason throwing his body off deck, only to hang by his hands on the rails.

Jason needed to get to Aubrey. Aubrey didn't show up to the daily assembly, failed to be sighted by anyone at the rollcalls, and seemingly was gone from everyone's minds after something to do with Antigonus had taken place. Everyone he asked about Silver only replied, "he's gone to Josiah."

Jason made a commitment to keep her safe. There was no way he wasn't going to reach her. She still held his knife and that memento that he gave her. He was not going to let either of those things go. But no one was offering any answers, any help, anything to help him reach that.

He spent the better part of two days after he noticed her absence searching the minds of everyone he viewed it safe to ask.

Nothing.

That was until an unexpected character came onto the scene. Jason was sitting despondently, counting on his two hands the people that he might have missed out of the dozens that made up his ship's crew. He had to have forgotten someone, there was no way that Aubrey could simply have disappeared with no one seeing anything.

"So, young man, have you lost a friend?" asked the last person Jason wanted to hear from.

"Kalliope..." said Jason, confused. "What do you want?"

"you didn't answer my question."

"It's none of your business. I can find him without your help."

Lady of Umber

"You don't really mean that."

She was right. He didn't. He just wasn't one to trust this woman after all that she put him through. Still though...

"What do you know?"

She coyly told him about Silver being taken bound and gagged to a small boat at the orders of Josiah and that the same boat was to be boarded by his daughter, Josephine. He would need to get aboard before they shoved off. Who knows what they could be doing with young silver?

"What? What are they going to do to her?"

"I don't know. They don't tell me these things."

"You're one of the captains of this fleet. You know something."

"I'll be honest, young man, he's just as like to be sent to one of our special prisons or he could be sent to Saint Germain's. There are dozens of potential places that little whelp could be taken to. I'm just giving you the good word that it's even happening."

"And what am I supposed to do with that?" asked Jason. "I have practically nothing to work off."

"I don't know. He's your friend after all. You're the one who cares."

Jason let out a short scream before storming off to where the smaller boats were boarded from.

"Oh, and by the way, Jason," Kalliope added.

"What?! What is it?"

"Good luck!" she said with a cruel wink.

Sneaking around like this was second nature to Jason. Pickpocketing out in the streets of Vanzi was how he made what little pocket money he

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called his fortune. That wasn't the hard part. The hard part was what he was going to do next.

The tales he overheard while throwing his old mates out pub windows back home about pirates did not breed hope. Did they find out the trick? What were they going to do to her? What did they *already* do to her?

None of that mattered. He was going to do everything in his power to help her. It wasn't right to him or even sane, but he knew that he would spend the rest of his life resenting himself for not taking this chance while he could have.

And then what?

Assuming that he did manage to save her and keep her out of harm, assuming that he without his knife that he gave to Aubrey could fight and win against the battle hardened and bloodthirsty pirates of the most feared fleet in the world, and assuming they didn't already do anything to her that he couldn't fix, what was next? Where were they going to go? They were surrounded by a wide expanse of ocean.

Jason didn't have time to pollute his thoughts with fears like those. There wasn't enough time. He needed to get there before it was too late.

Josephine could see him. She couldn't really see him, but she could feel the presence of that idiotic cabin bot doing something or other aboard the boat about to take her to Old Aboora's place. It was time to leave. There was no more time for playing around. Where did he think he was getting with this?

He climbed out from where he was hiding and got somewhere out of view, Josephine decided to think about it. She figured that Jason may have hid somewhere behind her cabin. She herself would have picked that place to hide. It was often her favorite for that kind of thing.

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As she got over that interruption in her boarding, she went on to wonder about a thing or two. That was when her father came in.

Josiah came into her cabin dressed in the same overcoat he put on yesterday which was probably the same one that he wore the day before. He was looking gaunt with his eyes looking even more tired than she knew him usually to have. He looked like he wanted to talk again.

“Good morning, Josephine.”

“Good morning, daddy.”

“I know what I told you the other day, but I want you to understand. I want you to understand that I am going to be very busy very soon and that I will need to focus on taking care of you.”

“Why am I going away? What is it for? Maybe I can help you with your work.”

“Jojo, you know why I can’t do that. I-I need you to be a big girl for daddy. I promise that I can take you back as soon as I can. My *friends* would like me to be there as soon as possible.”

In her understanding, Josephine picked up a few things about what it was that her father was getting into that he might have been worried about. Whichever one of them was true, she veered away from them.

“Daddy, how long will I be away? Why can’t yo—”

“Jojo, you don’t have to worry. All you need to think about is what you’ll be doing over there. You’ll be back with me before you know it. Besides, you won’t be alone there.”

“I know, daddy. Silver will be there too.”

Josephine had so much more to say to him, so many more questions, so many more ways to say her last few goodbyes to him. He was at least going to make sure she was dropped off safely there. That was enough she supposed.

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Josiah left to get over to the bridge.

Josephine dropped down her satchel onto a chair. Opening it up, she dipped her hand inside and felt around for the thing she knew would excite Silver so much. She pulled it out and held it in her hand.

It looked like some sort of idol. In her hand was a small carving of some strange figure carved out of a shiny black stone. Its surface was smooth to the touch wherever she traced her fingers around it. It depicted some sort of monster with an ugly face in a crouching position. Josephine had never seen anything like it in real life or in any other statues of this kind. Its features were grotesque and ugly to look at. Its face looked back at her with a snarling toothy grimace. Its hands, resting upon its knees, had fingers ending in sharp claws. The whole figure rested upon a flat base carved from the same material as the rest of it, on which was etched some strange writing in some strange script that she was unfamiliar with. Though she could not read the letters common to her father, she couldn't even recognize these.

Looking back around, making sure that no one was watching her, she slipped the idol back into her satchel, proud that she had managed to inspect it one more successful time. There was no telling when someone would take it away. She knew that her father wouldn't understand. She really, truly wanted to show it to someone and be sure that they wouldn't simply take it away.

"What was she doing with one of those?" thought Jason. He was looking through the window into her cabin, trying to make sure that she had not seen him when he saw it.

An Azelian Idol.

Jason had known these pirates for being thieves and murderers, but had not in his wildest imagination thought that they were so rewarded in those efforts that they gave could spare such precious items as toys for

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their children. He saw it. She was practically fondling it like it was one her toy soldiers. She sat for several minutes just staring into its eyes, like it had her in a trance. The moment that she pulled it out, the stupid smile she wore melted into her face as she held it to her face.

To think that they had one of those with them this whole time. By his judgement, it was a depiction of an Archon, one of the God Warriors of the Azel. Just one of those could easily be sold to the council of inquisitions and get the one who stole, hid, and sold it off very rich. He was not just about to take it, but it seemed very tempting. Never mind what it meant to this girl transfixed by it. She wasn't even going to do anything with it anyways aside from stare at it.

He went back to looking for a suitable place to hide himself. There was no way that he could keep the idol out of his mind. He berated himself to focus on it later. He managed to overhear what Josiah told Josephine and what it all must have meant.

Aubrey was going to be there. Kalliope wasn't lying about any of this. That was even less reason to bail. He needed to see this thing to its end. Aubrey was in trouble and he needed to find some way, any way to get to her.

He managed to find himself a nice place to hide in a cubbaord below deck where he was reasonably sure no one was likely to go into judging by the thick layer of dust that coated every surface. He rested his aching joints as he heard the sounds of the ship embarking on its trip. He needed to come up with a plan for what he was going to do there.

Chapter Thirteen: Light

Aubrey waited for what must have been the better part of the day for some company to show up. By this point she was pained from hunger. She had already searched each of the little cupboards around this shack

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and could find nothing. No food or anything. The darkness was filling the sky outside and she was anxious. About what she needed to do next.

Had she found the wrong house?

It seemed to her that she could have. There was no doubting the toy soldiers that were kept here on the shelves and all and that was indisputable all things considered. But it was also possible that this was simply a house that Josephine liked to play in while on this island. That was starting to make sense to her. She could have come here every now and again to drop off her things and come back home.

Aubrey sat idly by wrestling with these thoughts for the better part of her stay here and as the silence and absence of anyone here began to wear on her confidence, she considered going out.

"There's no way I could," she thought. "Its getting dark out there anyway. I'm not safe, no one is safe just wandering out there in the middle of the night like that. No one will hear me if I get injured. I should just stay here."

Aubrey decided to light up a lantern that she managed to find in the shack. It still had a little oil left in it. That was good. At least if someone came looking for her she could still be found here. She set it beside a window as she lay down on the floor that creaked as she did.

Roberto stepped on a beetle. The sound of its shell crunching underneath his feet, made him shudder more than a little bit. This island was already beginning to upset him. When it was first explained to him the notion that he would have to accompany some Imperial scouts to the island for some routine scouting, he was sure that he would have to stay aboard the ship.

Julia would still not explain their purpose in being here or what it was that the scouts were working on. The island marked on the maps in the captain's bridge was to be found between Vanzi and Xa Xadong. To him

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it seemed to be too small to provide any use to the imperial fleet as a resting station or a refueling hotspot. But then again, he was only the governor of the colonial territories. What reason did he have to know any of this?

Either way it was time to join them. Roberto was dressed in a trekking gear that caused him to chafe inside. Dozens of soldiers wearing pith helmets and armed with bayonets already infested the area, setting up equipment to be used by land surveyors. Together with them were some old fossils, bearded men giving orders and instructions to them.

Roberto had guessed that this was probably how these things went. Julia stood silently beside him, observing the proceedings, awaiting any further inquiries from her subject.

“Julia, what are we doing?”

“Sir, we are simply scouting the land ahead for potential use for the empire an—”

“No. I mean what are we doing here? Why are we poring through this island? What use does it have to us?”

“As stated befo—”

“Look will you shut—” He said before stopping himself, regaining composure with a deep breath. “I want to know what purpose does this scouting trip have. It doesn’t seem to do anything useful and—assuming that I am simply the fool here—I want to know if I have missed something that all of you think is obvious.”

“Sir, I am not at liberty to say. The inspection of this island is under imperial orders. Straight from the top.”

“But that implies that you know what it is that’s happening and you’re simply not telling me.”

“I’m glad that you’re catching on, sir.”

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Roberto knew that she was going to be difficult, but this was a different level.

“And what do they expect me to do then hmmm?”

“I’m sorry, sir. It seems to me that you have not been assigned any tasks for this excursion into Xa territory. I think it would be excusable for you to return to your cabin and wait this out.”

“Does that mean that I can leave?”

“Precisely, sir. Your presence is not required here for the moment until you are called upon. It would be more convenient though if you were available and on hand fo—”

“Alright, thank you. I’m leaving.”

Just as he made for the beach where the ship was impromptu docked, he spied something on the further end of the island.

“Hey... I thought you had said that the island was uninhabited, Julia.”

“It is sir,” she said, keeping her eyes focused on the operations. “It only hosts a non-volatile population. Nothing to worry about in the least.”

“Then why do I spy light over there?”

He pointed in the direction of the far side of the island where through a small stretch of jungle, lantern light was emanating.

That made Julia turn around. In an instant after seeing it light up, she yelled out.

“Men!”

The soldiers stopped what they were doing and got into formation around Julia. She performed some sort of maneuver with her hands to signal what they were supposed to do. Without exchanging any additional looks or questions, they proceeded forward in the direction of the light.

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"I don't suppose I need to be around for this, now do I?" said Roberto as they were moving out.

"Julia silently nodded and pointed him to the ship.

As he was leaving, he watched as she took command and sent the soldiers to work, issuing opaque commands to them. It sounded to him like some sort of code, maybe even some other language.

They made their way to the light.

Jason woke to the sound of distress and strife. Rapid footsteps shaking dust from the floor above him in the cupboard. The cacophony of voices above him rang out in his mind. At first, he couldn't understand what was going on until he heard a word repeated over and over, with increasing worry and volume.

Imperial

Jason thought that these pirates were better than this. Was the imperial navy on their tail?

Listening even more as he slipped out from the tight space between shelves he was hiding in, he could make out even more signs of danger mixed in with confusion and fear. They didn't expect any of this to happen. Just as he was about to slip out of the cupboard, he thought about something.

"There's no way Aubrey will have enough time to get out of there before this ship leaves."

There was no chance that they would come back for her, especially if the imperial navy were met in these waters. No one would risk themselves to get some cabin boy back. Jason needed to get to work immediately. He needed to think of something. He was more than desperate.

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"The Imperial Navy?! Here?!" shouted Josiah in express disbelief. He was with Josephine having conversation in her quarters when the first mate broke the news. It was time to get out of there. There was no fighting the imperial navy with just one small boat. If there was still a time to escape, it was then.

"Raise sails. Maybe they haven't noticed us yet..." he said, hopeful, afraid to ask what the truth of the situation was. He couldn't imagine that the Imperial Navy would come here. Why? Why here of all places?

"Father, what's going on?" asked Josephine, clearly worried from seeing the fear on his face.

Without a good answer to that question Josiah could only respond with, "We're leaving. Stay here. I need to do something."

"Father...? Father!" He heard as he left to lead his men out there.

Aubrey heard voices outside. She knew this time what happened when she drew attention without knowing who was out there and avoided making herself known. This time Jason wasn't there to help her.

She pulled out the knife that Jason gave her out of its scabbard and held it in front of her face. She tested her reflexes with a thrust forward and slash.

Sloppy.

There was no chance she could defend herself against a lowly cabin boy, much less whatever must have been out there. Who or what could it have been?

Aubrey was not intending to find out. She left the lantern on to keep the attention of whoever was coming for her as she left the shack.

Where did she have to run?

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She didn't know. She only wanted to survive. That's all that these past few months have been about for her, scavenging off whatever fetid leftovers fate threw her way. In this Aubrey knew that she was a rat, loving nothing more than the smallest scraps.

Without the lantern to help her on her way, she continued running, knowing that she would get lost in the dark like this. There was no better plan.

Jason needed to come up with something. He ended up doing something else. With a few moves, sneaking around the halls, getting past the running crewmembers picking up their arquebuses and passing each other jars of black powder, he went his way to the upper deck. When he was sure that Josiah was out in front commanding his men out there, he went into Josephine's quarters.

He found her sitting on a small sofa evidently waiting for her father. Jason knew that his plan was a longshot and probably the most foolish thing he could have thought of, but he had no time.

Josephine turned to him and asked what his business here was. He said nothing as he walked closer to her, making sure that he didn't scare her off. She asked again what he was doing there. Again, to no response.

She started to back away.

"No!" Jason thought.

All of his hesitation disappeared. With the chloroform soaked rag that he held behind his back he lurched forward, jumping onto her, keeping her down, forcing the rag onto her face. He couldn't make her stop struggling, stop screaming. He needed to get out of there, but she just wasn't going down.

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Josiah was struck with the sound of his daughter screaming from her quarters. Without a second thought he ran as fast as he could over there, only to find her gone.

Josephine...

Josiah commanded his men to take up arms, search the ship. Someone was there and needed to be found immediately.

Intermission

It has often been said that the people of Azel deserved the destruction that they were to end up receiving. They were granted the greatest of boons by the gods themselves, yet their pride and hubris grew past the point of satisfaction.

It may also be said that their annihilation had no lesson to be learned. Indeed, the story of its last slave and last master was something remarkable. To some it was an abject lesson in sympathy. Never mind that sympathy was a different thing altogether than fear. It was fear that motivated the Vanzi, who attempted to conquer the destruction that would befall them should they make the same mistake.

In the end though, the secret to rebuilding the fabled God-Warriors of the Azel has remained lost and will remain so for as long as I live.

Perhaps if there was a lesson to be learned from this parable, it was that only the powerful have it in them to make genuine change in the world that we live in. The head however cannot communicate with the hands without the heart. The Azel came to be known as a truly heartless race whose endless brutality knew no bounds. All that the Vanzi absolve themselves of everyday is but a mere trifle compared to what was possible.

The truth of the situation is that the Azel were never to achieve their great empire after that destruction. Its two colonies, Vanzi to the south

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and Udai were to become enemies in time. The Vanzi were enslaved for centuries, only to be eventually freed from their bondage when all the masters' chains loosed with the destruction of the Azel in their nation.

Whoever that infamous God-Warrior was, whatever possessed them to decide that all things, all aspects of Vanzi civilization must be destroyed, it must have been a small comfort, especially after what followed would take place.

What would eventually follow was especially unfortunate. The known world then was composed solely of several city states. What would eventually become Vanzi to the south, the burgeoning Xa Xadong protectorate to the north of the narrow sea, and the Barbarians to the east and west. There were continued sightings of the last God-Warrior since that time. Storytellers often told of the bad omen that it was, to see it meant death, to hear it meant the end of one's family line, and to look into its eyes as it looked into yours was to bring about the greatest suffering possible to the fool who did it.

Azel perished in the great destruction. There were few remnants of it. All the important centers from which its civilization could rise once again were reduced to smoldering ruin. The God-Warrior knew no mercy even to the most benign of settlements. None of them would be safe from its wrath.

Centuries passed and so to did the time of the great powers.

Quietly the Vanzi empire rose to its height. Its great influence grew to such a point that its only rivals lay on the other side of the world. The emperors ruled from their golden palaces from which they would command armies whose only mission was thus: the complete subjugation of all nations until at last the Vanzi empire was one under whom the sun would never set.

The current emperor succeeded the throne from his father, Dimitrios III and did not hesitate to bring about his new plans.

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Meanwhile, beyond what the Vanzi called the north sea, lay Xa Xadong, the Opal Empire. The Xa were ruled by the he who speaks behind all, the God-King. Under the God-King were his tribes, each of them suited to a particular role in his kingdom. The Puma tribe served him as his greatest warriors whose brutality knew no exception, the Hawk Tribe who explored the jungle interior to the north where the pygmies and amazons were to be taken from and sent to work the mines, and the Spider Tribe who ruled close to the God-King for their counsel was second only in wisdom to him.

Ever since the end of the Azel the two nations, in near isolation, grew to the power of empires without the assistance of the blood sorcery that the Azel used. Vanzi, through its people's knowledge and wisdom in the sciences and learned arts, acquired firearms from one of its many conquests. Xa Xadong expanded further in their own realm, working to achieve the ambitions of the God-King.

As of the era of exploration, the younger golden age, the God-King who reigns under the star of the archer commands his armies to prepare for brutal retaliation against the invaders, the outsiders who dared to bring terror into his domain.

The Vanzi Emperor was indeed no different from the God-King. The two of them wanted the same goal. The complete and utter subjugation of their rivals and the achievement of an eternal empire. A fool's dream, but their dream nonetheless.

Chapter Fourteen:

The voices of whoever was out there grew louder and louder. Aubrey could just make out the language they spoke. They were not Xa natives but Vanzi like her. Turning around and seeing the bright beams of light from their torches, she could just make out the shapes of pith helmets and arquebuses held in their hands.

Lady of Umber

It was the imperial navy.

"After all this time", Aubrey thought. "It's finally over. I can finally escape from all of this."

She could clear everything that happened to her, gain back her inheritance. She could get them to help Mason out and kill all the pirates that held him. She could even bring Jason with her back home and just tell them that he saved her life. Now that they were here, she could finally end this nightmare.

She stopped running from them and held out her hands above her head. Turned to face them and called out.

"Hey! Stop! Friendly! Friendly! Help me!"

They began to slow down but continue their approach toward her. She could still barely make out their faces with the bright light. She could at least make out a new figure, standing behind them watching patiently as they approached. It appeared to be a woman.

The marines stopped in their place, all with their guns still aimed at her.

"I'm not an enemy! I-I-I'm Aubrey Del Piazza..." at this she began to shed a tear.

"I-I-I was taken by pirates... a-a-a-and..."

"Wait," said the woman behind the marines as she paced closer to Aubrey, still keeping behind her men. Aubrey could see her face, cold and stiff like a statue. She started with, "Aubrey del Piazza?"

"Y-yes."

"Sister to Roberto Del Piazza?" she asked.

Roberto. Aubrey remembered. For all he knew, he had succeeded in his scheme to claim the inheritance for himself. He was probably living it up, making no good out of it. How sorry he was going to be that he was going to be hanged for putting her through this, Aubrey thought.

Lady of Umber

It was all going to be over at last.

Jason kept running, carrying Josephine's unconscious body. This had to be the worst idea that he could have possibly come to. Yet there was no way to take it back. As he ran the ship behind him rang its bells and the yells of her crew rung throughout the wood. If they found him, there would be no tomorrow. He was giving them more reason to stay on the island, which had dubious value as a strategic move.

Josephine was still out cold for now. They were in no danger then of being caught. It was going to be utter hell by the time they got there.

That was when Jason remembered, "How in hell am I supposed to find Aubrey?"

The anger that he felt toward himself was the only thing that eclipsed the terror at what his decision was going to cost him. He had always wondered why it was that criminals on the run never reconsidered right when they still had a chance to. He was honestly still confused about that, willing to take any chance to take any of this back.

The light. He had remembered that the Talon fleet communicated through light. He looked around himself, looking for something he could use to pinpoint Aubrey's location. What was he going to do when he found Aubrey? Was he just going to pass Josephine like a baton to her? Could he have just left there? No. Far too many things have happened because *he* was irresponsible. That was going to end on his terms.

He still needed answers for those questions, though.

Roberto looked down from his cabin on the upper deck of the ship. From this angle he could make out the shape of something in the dense brush of the jungle. The soldiers were lined up before Julia with their guns turned down. It looked like she was talking to someone. From

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there eh could only make out the faintest of voices exchanging words. There was something about the one owned by the one in the woods.

Roberto leaned in on the balcony to listen better and could make out *his name* being said. They were talking about him. After only a few moments' thought he ran down the steps to somewhere within earshot of the proceedings. There he saw Julia explaining something to someone hidden in the darkness of the trees.

Then he heard her response. It didn't fucking matter what it was all about. It was Aubrey.

He remembered that he was governor of the colonies and for the first time felt like exercising his Imperial Authority. What if Julia interjected? Fuck her. The soldiers answered to him. This was going to end here.

The endless chatter from his sister's voice, a voice that he had barely recognized from the phonographs that were sent to the mainland that father would incessantly play over and over in his study. He did manage to make out the sound of his sister's shock, her revulsion, her anger at his presence.

There was something about him being a dirty criminal guilty of fratricide and how he should be put away and jailed and hanged. How funny that that notion was. She was the one who looked like a pirate after all.

He made to Julia and received her question.

"Is this your sister, governor? This person claims to be your sister. I myself have had my doubts as to this claim. The simple way they are dressed is rather—"

"Let me take a look at her," said Roberto. "I think I would be able to tell my *sister* from a common criminal. If I couldn't, what kind of a brother—no---human being would I be?"

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Aubrey had spent too much time trying to prove herself to this woman, Julia. The soldiers were clear in their faces to be confused and unsure if Aubrey was to be trusted. Why wouldn't they be? Her raven hair was cut, her clothes stripped from her and exchanged for the rags she wore now, and her voice was going hoarse from an indecent amount of shouting.

That was when she noticed a figure coming up behind Julia. She almost didn't recognize him in that get-up, but his sneering face and vile expression held no doubt in her mind as to who it was.

"Roberto..." she muttered as Julia turned to face him. Julia exchanged words with him before he chuckled and turned to face her.

"No! No! don't trust him! He's the one who tried to have me killed!"

"Now how is that any way to talk to me?" Roberto asked. "If you really are my beloved sister... How about you prove it, eh?"

He was clearly relishing every word that came out of his lips. He knew exactly what he was doing.

"Men, stand down," he commanded.

When did Roberto get this kind of authority? Was he some kind of officer now?

"Now, mister. I don't believe we've met. I'm sorry if I don't recognize you. Now who did you say you were?"

Gritting through her teeth Aubrey said, "Very funny, Roberto. It's me."

"You're going to have to do better than that if you want to come with my troops." He laughed. "You *do* realize that you're at my mercy now. Do you?"

Aubrey could only stand speechless after that. Her face showed its defiance, but was weak and soft at what was going on.

Lady of Umber

"Now, mister..." He began. "I'm not even sure you're even a woman as you claim."

"What?" said Aubrey almost under her breath.

That was when she started shouting to his men. "I think someone should help us. What does this *woman* have to hide, eh?"

The soldiers around him looked at each other confused for a few moments before each getting on his face a little mischievous grin after the first one of them did.

"If what is before us... Is a woman, which, by the way," he turned to face her, "I seriously doubt, then *she* has nothing to hide!"

To the sound of a few snickers from the crowd, he backed away from Aubrey.

"Why doesn't one of us... put that to the test! If any of you are *real* men!"

One of the soldiers walked toward her. A large and wide-set man probably no younger than forty. Roberto stood behind him, watching.

"What are yo—"

The soldier grabbed her arm, and pulled her toward the others, accompanied by Roberto.

Roberto took her other arm and with the soldier, held her up and forward. The soldiers gathered around her, struggling body, coming closer, none of them daring to touch her.

"My boys? Do we think that this is a woman? Truly? Do we think that this dirty creature from the woods really is *my sister*!"

At that they each took turns taking her face in their hands, some for just a second, others for close to a minute.

"What do you boys think?"

Lady of Umber

A myriad of yells from the small crowd, rang out. Roberto's take on their consensus was no.

Pulling as tightly as he could on her arm, digging his fingers into her skin, he came up to her ear, whispering something.

"Fucking whore. I'm going to make you squeal."

"No! No! Roberto, stop! Roberto, Please!"

"You shouldn't have come back, little sister," he whispered. He turned to his men and yelled out, "Alright, boys! He doesn't seem to look like my sister! My sister is a beautiful little woman, not this ugly wretch." He pulled more on her arm until she screamed, making sure to leave screeches on her skin.

"My Sister is... Was... an honest woman. If she was truly alive somehow... She wouldn't have turned up like this. She wouldn't have turned out so filthy, ugly, and covered in thick sludge."

He let go of her hand with the soldier who did likewise, dropping her to the ground.

To the sound of insipid laughter, Aubrey tried to get up, only to have her hand stamped under Roberto's boot.

"AAAH!"

The soldiers around her could barely hold themselves back, crowding around her, tearing at her shirt, throwing off the strap that she used to keep her chest tied down.

"Ah! This *is* a woman then! What a surprise!"

Jason ran with Josephine, laying her down for a moment. He was following the light that he saw earlier. He was only a short distance away from where he thought Aubrey was.

Lady of Umber

Josiah's pirates were in hot puruit of him. They were not far from where he was. He needed to keep going but He could'nt go on carrying Josephine. He was also exhausted.

"Oh no...!"

He could see a young thin body being grabbed and thrown to the ground. The men were crowding around it. He knew exactly what was going to happen.

He reached out his hand in her direction. He almost screamed for her before stopping himself. Josiah's pirates were still in pursuit and he didn't want the imperial navy hearing.

"Wait!" he thought, coming to some idea he was going to regret.

There was only one thing left to him at this point. His voice.

"Help! Imperial Marines! They're here! Help!"

He was wrong. *This* was the most foolish thing he ever thought to do.

Chapter Fifteen:

Aubrey fell to the ground as a shot rang out from her side. From her left more shots rang out as the voices of the pirates she heard from Josiah's ship. The one that brought her there. Roberto ran off the moment he heard the shots fire off. Some of the soldiers around her ran off in his direction while others took up their arquebuses and opened fire on their enemy.

Aubrey picked herself up and ran off. The firefight happening behind her couldn't matter any less to her. She needed to flee as fast as possible. It didn't matter where. It didn't matter what she was going to do when she got there. She pulled out her knife from her pocket. She was ready to draw blood if it meant survival.

There was so much going through her mind then. The cruelty that her own brother showed her just a moment ago was almost too much to even think about. Out of the corner of her eye she could see him running in cowering fear just like she was. She saw him but didn't notice him, being too concerned with getting out of there.

Ahead of her was a labyrinth of trees lit from her left by an array of lanterns set by the marines before. From her right the voices of the pirates preceded their running past her to trade shots with the marines. She just kept running.

Josephine was starting to wake up from her daze. She needed a moment to regain her senses. After taking that moment she felt her skin feel rather clammy. It was hot and humid out there where she was. She opened her eyes to the dimly lit jungle before her. She remembered what had happened to her and felt inside her tension well up.

"Where am I?" she thought.

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She remembered these jungles. This was Old Aboora's island. She had played here when she was younger. She even recognized this patch of forest. She looked to both her sides and noticed that she was alone here. That was when the shots rang out.

Josephine flinched back when she heard the first one ring out and covered her ears, hearing the second and third. She looked around again and noticed her father's pirates holding their flintlocks and arquebuses, having taken position against people that she didn't recognize. Josephine didn't know what all of this was about but ran over to where her father's men were before she heard something.

It was Silver's voice.

Quickly turning around, she saw his form running off away from where she was and heading into the dark jungle beyond. Josephine knew what was out there and was sure that Silver didn't. She needed to help him.

She ran off in his direction.

Silver was headed toward the black caves. It wasn't safe, Josephine knew, to go in without a lantern or a friend or anything. He was going to get lost in there, she knew it. She had to catch up to him.

She kept calling out his name, but he never responded to it. The distance between them was steadily decreasing, as Silver would trip and stumble. Josephine kept nimble and knew how to jump.

She was right about where Silver was headed. He was going into the Black Caves. There was no telling what would happen to him. Before the both of them was the black shiny stone walls of the caves that rose straight up into the air and shone faintly in the moonlight. The cave's opening was the height of a ship's mast and led into a hallway that could have been miles deep into the caves.

Two statues flanked both sides of the cave, both depicted a woman holding a sword toward the sky.

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Aubrey was nearly out of breath as she made her way into out of the jungle. She had no idea where she was or how she came to this place before her. It appeared to be some sort of temple or other ancient structure. She had noticed the two statues carved in the Azel style, covered in moss and falling into disrepair. The hallway that extended from the temple's entrance was filled with pieces of rubble and old stagnant puddles covered with layers of moss. No one had been here for ages.

"Perfect," she thought, as she ran, intending to go deep inside and wait this whole thing out.

"Silver! Silver!" she heard from behind her.

"Josephine...?"

Aubrey turned around and saw Josephine running for her. How long had she been doing this? Where did she come from?

"Silver! Stop!"

Aubrey stopped at the temple's entrance. She was deathly tired anyway. She had never done so much running in her life. She knew that it was just Josephine catching up but didn't want to be seen by her. It was a firefight out there. She slipped inside the temple. Josephine's voice echoed through the dark halls. She only wanted to help. She was telling her to stop.

Eventually Aubrey heard it.

Josephine stood silhouetted by the temple doorway's mouth. She was dressed in the same kind of white dress that she wore that night when they first met. Aubrey sat herself down, back to the wall as Josephine approached.

She noticed Josephine come closer only to flinch backward, having seen something in Aubrey's hand.

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"Of course," Aubrey thought. "I'm still carrying Jason's knife."

When she slipped it into its scabbard, that was when she approached. Aubrey didn't even care anymore. It was going to be safe here at least.

Josephine stepped closer and closer as Aubrey watched.

"You shouldn't go this far, Silver!," Josephine said. "These are the black caves. They're not safe for anyone to go in alone. Y-you and me worried."

Her voice quivered when she said those last few words. She was really worried. Aubrey couldn't blame her. She had been running like mad in no direction at all. It was only natural that a proud princess like her would run like an ignorant coward the moment things got bad.

"We should go back to my father's ship. I can still see it in the distance out there. There's violence happening outside though."

"Yeah... I noticed," said Aubrey.

After a pause, Josephine said, "Are you hurt? It looked like you tripped and stumbled several times while on your way here."

Aubrey turned her eyes to her legs. Mixed in with the stains of dirt and foliage, blood had soaked a few long red streaks across her pants.

"Yeah... I guess I did."

"You should get yourself fixed up. My father's doctor can get help for those."

Aubrey just couldn't take any more of this. Josephine was a stupid invalid whose own childish temperament led to a one-sided care for others.

"Why are you crying?" Josephine asked.

"I'm not crying," said Aubrey.

"Yes, you are. I can see it there on your face."

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"You're a liar. You're crying. I know. I know what its like to cry. But I'm a young woman now and whatever it is will have to wait."

"Alright, so maybe I am crying. So what? Its none of your business."

"I hate it when people say that, Silver. It is my business."

"Alright, I'm crying because there's been nothing going right for me at all for the past few weeks. Okay?"

"That's no reason to cry, though."

Grunting, Aubrey replied, "Yes it is. I've been through too much. I can't forget about all this."

"You need to grow up, Silver."

"You just don't understand!" Aubrey said, slamming her fist into the wall behind her. "My father died only a few months ago..."

"My brother tried to have me killed!" she shouted, slamming against the wall again. "I was taken and tormented by pirates!" She was drawing some blood now. "And the *one*... chance I get to finally go back to..."

"My life... all gone... thanks to... to what?"

Aubrey held it all in, her hate, her anger, her burning rage. She grit her teeth, holding back the primal scream that welled up within. She had to be stronger than this. Josephine got down on her knees to look into Aubrey's eyes. Aubrey had so much to say to her, so much to berate her with, so much to rage on and on about, but couldn't. All Josephine wanted was to make her stop crying. It wasn't enough ot be strong. Aubrey had to hold together. It wasn't just her anymore.

"Jo-Josephine... I'm sorry. I'm sorry you must see me like this. I need to keep strong... for you."

"No you don't. I just want you to stop crying. Young women like us shouldn't cry, after all."

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"I understand. I really do. I just think tha—" Aubrey had taken a moment to realize what Josephine had just said. She couldn't have said that. Did Aubrey simply mishear?

"Young women like... us?"

"At first I didn't know you were a woman, Silver. Until I saw you just now. Your chest is hanging out after all."

Aubrey had in that split-second realized that her shirt was still unbuttoned. The strap that kept her chest held down was thrown away, she had realized as well. Josephine could see.

"How long could Josephine see me like...?" she thought, buttoning her shirt as quickly as she could.

"Its nothing to be ashamed of, Silver. I used to forget that all the time when I was younger. You'll learn."

Aubrey's face clammed. Josephine was the only one who saw her like this. Not even Jason or Mason had seen her like this. She was the only one in the Talon fleet who knew. It was a small comfort though, that thought.

"I-I-I thought that... "

"You were going around the jungle without your shirt buttoned. I had always thought you were a man. I guess you are a liar then. I understand."

"No, no, Josephine. It's not like that."

"Its okay. That means you can come onto my boat next time without having to worry about my father. Since we're both girls, we can talk to each other without him getting mad and beating you like the others."

Aubrey needed a few moments to take all that in. She felt that she needed to explain—desperately—what her situation was. Josephine

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was simple-minded, but now that she was in on this, she had to keep it close to her chest.

“Josephine, I can explain,” Aubrey began. “I can tell you... why I had to dress like this.”

“No need. I already understand that you’re a liar. You don’t need to keep lying to me.”

“Josephine, please.”

“Alright. Only if you promise to tell the truth,” Josephine said as she held out her hand to Aubrey to shake.

Josephine’s face was so sincere. Aubrey couldn’t look at it without feeling ashamed. What did Josephine see in her all this time? Aubrey intended to ask some day.

The moment she took Josephine’s hand, Aubrey tugged in it. The sounds of the fighting outside were becoming more and more hectic. They needed to wait this whole thing out until it got safe. Aubrey needed to keep them both safe. Pulling on Josephine’s arm, she guided her further into the darkness of the temple.

“What are you doing?” Josephine asked. “Where are we going? We shouldn’t go alone in there.”

“You’re not alone,” Aubrey said. It was faint but in the dim light that shone on her face, Josephine saw Aubrey smile.

Roberto began to collect himself for a moment. He was by the ship and caught his breath. Julia was right beside him, spooking him.

“What the hell were pirates doing here?!” said Roberto. “I was told that we would not be disturbed while we were here!”

Julia remained silent, crossing her arms. Her face was sullen, and no doubt betrayed the same shock that Roberto felt then. He let loose with

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himself and in front of Julia. No doubt she was judging him for that display. In time he would explain to her just what the situation was. It would be normal for this woman to display a bit of fear or hesitation at his humiliating his own sister like that, but Julia's face betrayed no such disgust.

It didn't matter to Roberto. He commanded the marines to defend the ship. It was just a few pirates. Nothing for them to really worry about. He was told that there would be nothing disturbing these proceedings.

Turning to look at Julia, Roberto readied himself to issue his next command. He took a stern face and was about to speak.

"Men!" Julia shouted. "Find Aubrey Del Piazza! She will not leave this island alive! She must be culled!"

Before he could even pronounce the words to her, she had spoken his exact sentiments in no uncertain terms. Julia returned to her position beside him and turned her head to face his.

"That was what you intended, yes?"

Roberto knew that was. He had just assumed that Julia was going to be a bit more *hesitant* than that.

"Miss, I simply thought you needed some... persuasio—"

"None is needed. I should think that you know me well by now, seeing as you have read from my dossier, after all."

"how did you...?"

Julia said nothing. She stared into his eyes, waiting for his next statement. She made clear that she was not in the mood to answer him. Roberto understood that and moved on.

The marines holding the line against the pirates were gaining ground. It was now safe for the rest of the company to return to infesting the island, now with Roberto's goal in mind.

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"I'm sorry," Roberto began again. "I had just assumed that you needed some..."

Julia sighed. "I *have* to explain, now don't I?"

Roberto's somewhat hesitant, "yes", made that explicit.

"I... We are already well aware of the circumstances of you and your... family, Lord Governor. You should know by now that there is nothing that you have done that can be considered surprising to me. As an officer, I should think that I am a patient woman."

Roberto knew he shouldn't have brought it up. He knew that, also knowing that he was not the one with power in this relationship. Despite all that, he *needed* to get an answer.

"Several consecutive counts of murder. Double Homicide. Poisoning and robbery. I should that a patient woman wouldn't be known for that kind of... activity."

Immediately regretting what he just said, he prepared for reprisal from Julia. Instead of that, she looked at him, placed her hand on his shoulder and smiled.

"I *am* a patient woman. Whoever you're talking about seems to be quite my opposite. While you are by my side..." she began tightening her grip around his shoulder. "I can assure that you will be safe from... *that woman*."

She let go of him and proceeded to the ship. Roberto stood there for a few moments, motionless. He was not ready to get back to the ship with her until the marines came back with him.

Josephine heard the cries of the marines echo through the tunnels. She couldn't tell from where they came. For all she knew they were all around her. She tried to be brave with Silver. He kept strong and brave throughout the entire escape. Through hallway after hallway in the

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black caves, they passed through phases of pitch-black, broken up by occasional passes under a crack in the ceiling through which the moonlight beamed. But for most of their run, she was kept in complete darkness.

"Please, Silver. I don't want to go in there! I-I'm afraid!" she told Silver.

Silver wouldn't answer back. She kept quiet and aloof as they ran through hallway after hallway. Turning a corner without bumping once and without reaching any dead ends. They needed to keep going.

"I'm afraid of the dark, Silver! I don't want to keep going! My father will—"

"We can't rely on your father now!" Silver shot out. "We are in danger now! He can't save us!"

The voices that Josephine heard echo behind them, were louder now, more audible. She could make out words. "Secure!", "Move!", and "Kill!" were all mixed in. She could almost feel the anger that the men running through the halls felt. And that only made her more afraid.

"Where are we going!? Silver, Tell me!"

"I... I don't know. We'll find a way out of this... just keep running. I'll protect you."

That did enough to calm Josephine down for what was to come, at least for a while. They kept running through the halls, turning corner after corner, the voices echoing behind them growing quieter and quieter, and the cracks in the ceiling becoming less and less frequent. They were in complete darkness.

Josephine would have stopped to turn back, in the possibility that they had gone lost and that they could take another path. Silver wouldn't slow down. Every time they had to was when Josephine tripped and needed help up.

The only hint that Josephine could figure from all this was the draft coming in from the direction in which they ran. It was warm and flowing steadily, unlike the wind from outside with its ebbs and flows. It may have been a way out.

Intermission Six

The Puma Tribe has been armed with all the weapons that they have been supplied.

Their commander, Acha'kai was informed by the God-King's own attendants about the potential of these new weapons. Acha'kai was not altogether impressed. These "Guns" held potential, but had disadvantages that were evident to him and all other warriors of the Puma Tribe. It took years for a warrior ascendant to rise from apprentice to fighter to fully accepted member of the tribe. This "Arquebus" was unlike any weapon that Acha'kai had ever wielded. It was as light as a short-spear, yet was as simple to use as none that the people of Xa Xadong had wielded.

A weapon like this would make the yearly culling of the nameless tribesmen with their children. It would make things far more convenient for Acha'kai if he would add it to his arsenal. He would not however.

With one of these weapons, a single man could reduce to bloody meat tens of enemies, as was demonstrated by the God-King's emissaries. In only a few months of training, a warrior whose level was below even an apprentice could kill as many as a high-level fighter. That was the most promising fact told to the emissaries and the most distressing that Acha'kai had to hear from his own fighters.

Already out there in the training camp, where the warriors had broken their bread and supped as brothers, there was unrest. Where previously the men at rest sit quietly, eating their rations, now they were in uproar. The order to learn the art of what the outsiders called "Marksmanship"

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was already making an uproar among his men. Yet not one of them shared his concerns. If any of them argued his points or fought with his brothers about what he could see, that would have been a relief.

No.

Instead, he watched as acolytes whose talent in the sword and spear faltered and failed now joined the ranks of his greater men. Here they made noise and sowed conflict among his otherwise disciplined men. Acha'kai knew why. Each time these men would fail in their coming-of-age they would try again the next year. If again they failed, they would try again and so on. That was the way of the Puma tribe before the arrival of the outsiders. Once the God-King brought these "Firearms" into his people's hands, the most lowly among his warriors could rise in rank to rival those whose efforts actually earned his prestige.

Lowly men who did not know respect could now sup with Acha'kai's finest. That was upsetting. That was not something he could continue to allow.

Acha'Kai himself learned how to use the Arquebus and did not find it to his tastes as a weapon. He was trained as a bowman in his youth and was considered the champion at last year's hunt, but he did not admire it. Its weight in his hands was promising when he did not pull its trigger. When he did, its weight, its force was enough to push him to his feet. There was something in it that was frightening to him that the others did not see. The gun carried weight that did not strain the back when it was not in use, but with roaring thunder made itself known.

The weight of one's quiver full of arrows was a burden to bear, that strengthened one's resolve and strength. Without that weight, killing becomes a mere chore, not the great ordeal that it is. There is no pleasure gained from its firing. The emissaries taught Acha'kai that the power of the gun needed to be respected otherwise it would harm its wielder. They treated it as if it were their new God, the outsiders did at least. Acha'kai knew that priests and monks walked around, in

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formation, in concert with one another, acting as one. They needed to, to avoid the act of disrespecting the spirits. Now his warriors were made to do the same. Disrespect the gun and your ears shall bleed, disrespect its weight and your bones shall crack, disrespect its laws and the battle will be lost.

This was all too much for him to bear. He turned away from the balcony overlooking the camp and returned to his quarters. He needed to sleep before the coming of the Hawk and Mongoose tribes. With them, they would be able to confront the outsiders, the Vanzi, and put an end to their encroachments. Their war against the God-King will not be tolerated.

The way that the gun changed his people, the way that it was going to continue changing his people, it was concerning.

Chapter Sixteen: Fire

The heat that emanated from the hallway ahead felt warmer with each step they made. And each step they made crossed at least a few cubits each second. The voices of the marines now only trailed behind them ever so slightly. If they were still within sight, they must have been the size of mere pinpricks. Josephine wondered if they had gone so far inside the cave that it would take hours to return back the way they came.

They had by this point, after turning countless corners and escaping every whisper of the marines, come to a place within the temple where a dim light emanated. The walls were lit up with a light glow from some faint light coming from the end of the hallway. Josephine was tired and would have collapsed to the floor if not for fear that Silver would let go over her and leave her alone in the dark, left to wander until she starved. Josephine was especially afraid when she was alone.

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Silver didn't look any worse for wear herself. In the dim light her face was worn and tired, but firm and intent. She had made her decision and was going to see it through to its finish. That was how it was going to be.

The closer they went to the light, the more they could feel the warm breeze. It wasn't flowing freely in their direction as Josephine had thought. It was ebbing and flowing. She could feel on her skin an inward pull then an outward push. She could smell something on the other side whose scent only got stronger when the breeze came their direction.

Now only a few dozen cubits away from the edge, Josephine could now see coming into focus what was on the other end of the hallway. A white room. She was sure Silver could see it as well. The moment that it came into focus in her eyes, Silver picked up in speed toward it.

As her eyes adjusted to the light, Josephine could make out details on the walls around the doorway into the white room. There appeared to be carvings, only slightly visible at the edges of where the light touched. Curving, flowing from the edge into the darkness.

When they eventually reached the edge of the white room, Josephine could see it. Inside it was almost impossibly bright in there. She squinted her eyes in the brightness of it all. When she opened them again, she could see the room in its entirety.

Its design was like that of the small statue that she meant to show Silver when her father brought her here. Flowing lines curving toward simple shapes that made up the subject of the image. Those were the designs that covered the walls, carved into them over every single span.

"Where are we?" thought Aubrey, as she led Josephine into the white chamber. After what must have been an hour of running away from the imperial Marines, they trudged through a horizontal void of pitch-black only occasionally punctuated by light from the ceiling. The light that drew Aubrey here, the light that seemed to emanate from every

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crevice of this room, lit the room. There was no sun or moon streaming light from the ceiling, nor were there candles, torches, or lanterns. This room was lit under its own power. On its walls were carved the bas-reliefs of animals, human figures and other strange shapes.

As Aubrey led Josephine inside by the hand, the very Josephine who had cowered in the darkness, pleading to leave it and now was very hesitant to come in.

The voices of the marines were nothing but a distant memory in here. There was no hint of their pursuit while they stepped inside. "We must have lost them by now," Aubrey thought. "What is this place?"

The more her eyes adjusted to the brightness around her, the clearer and sharper the images around them became. The human and animal figures seemed to be done up in the Azel style as Aubrey had learned about in school. Noticing the roughness of the floor, Aubrey turned her attention to it, noticing carved from a much darker stone than that of the walls was writing in the Azel script.

There was no doubt now that they were in an Azel temple. Aubrey had read about Vanzi archaeologists investigating these places, plumbing their depths for rare and forgotten treasures that would fetch high prices on the open market when they were taken back home.

The room itself must have been more than twenty cubits wide and long, a perfect square. Whatever this place was to the Azel people, it was very special to them. Aubrey kept going further in, until noticing a tugging on her arm.

"What is it?" Aubrey said, now looking into Josephine's eyes. She shrank away from the look.

"I'm scared. W-when can we g-get out of here? I want to go back..."

"Of course," Aubrey thought. There had to be something in here that could let them out. Aubrey was so lost in wonder for a moment that she forgot about getting them both out of there.

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"I'm sorry, Josephine," Aubrey began. "I'll get us out of here. We're safe from those men now."

Aubrey tightened her grip around Josephine's hand as they went deeper into the chamber. Contrasted against the pure white were two columns on which nothing was placed. They seemed to be carved out of the same stone as the writing that lined the floor. The lines of Azel script followed curved paths leading to the columns.

Remembering what little that she absorbed from her teacher in school about Azel script, Aubrey caught a few words out of the dozens that were carved out of the dark stone below them. Words like "power", "warrior", "hero", "master", and "slave". She knew enough to make those out, but not the whole statements that they signified. The curving paths of the Azel script led up to the columns.

Aubrey and Josephine checked the walls. Unlike much of the complex that led up to this room, the walls here appeared to be in the same pristine condition as what they must have looked like back when they were new. The walls themselves on closer inspection, almost seemed to not be carved out of stone at all. The texture and feel of them under Aubrey's fingers felt closer to Ivory from a wild Megathrium's tusk, when at first when they came in here, she thought it was pearl. She kept looking around for a way out of this room beyond the way they came.

"There had to be a way out of here," thought Aubrye." That warm updraft that guided us here had to have come from somewhere."

They spent a precious few minutes searching the rest of the room, finding nothing.

"Look, boys! I see light!" yelled a voice in the distance. Rapid stampeding sounds followed soon after.

"The marines," thought Aubrye, pulling out her knife. Seeing it in this light with the rest of the room, she could now tell that the knife was fashioned from the same ivory as the walls. Aubrey assumed the stance

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that she had seen Xa Xadong knife fighters take on in paintings or play in the theater. She had no real idea of how to fight except those notions impressed unto her by the pirates—and even then half remembered. Josephine had to run the moment that the marines were distracted. That was the only way that she could be safe in this situation.

“Josephine, you have to run. I’m going to fight them. They’re here for me. Just run and find your father. You’ll be fine. I promise.”

Josephine didn’t say anything. She looked afraid as she should have. This was a situation that could not be ignored or taken lightly.

The marines were starting to take shape in the little light that the room emitted through its narrow doorway. They ran with their guns and the moment that they got within sights of Aubrey and her knife, the ones in the rear opened fire.

Aubrey had never known the taste of such pain as a bullet wound before that day. Neither had Josephine. The fact that they were two young women didn’t make any difference to the marines. They were fodder for bullets and nothing more.

As their bodies lay, shot up with bullets and covered with blood-soaked clothes, the marines went to work with what they were used to as a profession, looting the bodies for anything valuable.

Nothing

Disappointment was not a foreign emotion to the imperial Marines. They were almost sort of used to it with the lack of action this whole voyage. They were far too tired to carry the body of the Governor’s sister. They settled for a handful of her raven hair, dipped in her blood for effect. There was no way that they were going to remain empty handed after all the effort it took to get there. That was final.

Who was this other person with the Governor’s sister. She didn’t matter now, they guessed. Just another casualty. It happens. They thought her probably another pirate.

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Just as they were about to make the trip back and claim the ogvernors prize, the other girl, still holding onto dear life, even as her partner had long since given up, grabbed the leader of the party's leg. A firm blast to the face would be enough to teach her a lesson. They were off. It was time to get back in the Governor's good graces. They wondered if the firefight with the pirtaes was over by now and if they could simply leave and get back to their posts.

The blood of the two ran down the letters of Azel script toward the columns. The two, if they wren't dead were very close to it. It was time for them to pass on into the next world.

The next world wouldn't have them.

One each of the two columns appeard a figure. It was a strange figure that closely resembled the one depiected on Josephine's small statue. It was the figure of the Azel God-Warrior.

Roberto waited anxiously aboard the ship. It was a rash decision to command the troops to find and kill Aubrey. It was perhaps to a degree irresponsible. He could not shake the notion that all of this was becoming a serious problem for him. The marines had not yet come back with any evidence of Aubrey's death. They did not come back yelling about what had happened. A few of the pirates were captured, including a young cabin boy aged about eighteen or so. Julia had already made the decision to have them interrogated.

Despite everything going on is his mind, there was at least a sense of calm. Even if Aubrey managed to get away from his marines and even if the ship left without proof of her death. At this point, what was she going to do? Roberto steadied himself with that thought. All was right with the world and they could finally get on with their lives. Still though, Julia did seem perplexed by the seething hatred that he showed toward Aubrey. Not sympathy, but confusion.

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Roberto made the decision to talk with her about this when he would get the chance. At least after he worked up the nerve to talk to her.

Roberto tried looking at positives. They had at least managed to capture the captain of that snooping vessel that dared to come close to their target. It was going to be simple to get him to talk. A little meeting with Julia should do the trick.

Roberto stewed with thoughts like those for the next few minutes before he again wondered, “Where are the remaining marines?” He waited even longer before getting up and going outside to where Julia was, observing the remaining men return to the ship.

Something seemed wrong.

The fighting had stopped all of a sudden on the side of the pirates, who appeared to be fleeing into the darkness of the jungle,—no doubt to where their boat was docked—but not from the marines. The pirates had managed to give a good fight when faced with trained imperial marines. Roberto expected that it would have taken longer. He turned to Julia who stood motionless.

“What is going on now?” Roberto said, trying to keep it cool for now. He needed to keep calm about all this uncertainty.

“I-I don’t know, sir...” said Julia. This was the first time he heard her falter like that. “My men... they’ve seen something.”

“Seen something? What the hell are you...?”

A scream rang out from the jungle beyond them. It was a lone marine, running out of the dense foliage and brush toward the ship. He was screaming for dear life. As he came into the light of the ship, Roberto could see something. Both of his arms were torn off. The marine was bleeding heavily. He wasn’t going to make it.

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Julia was taken aback by this sight. She stumbled back a bit before regaining her composure. She struck a pose before yelling out, "Men! To arms! An enemy appraocjes!"

The man without arms fell over, but that wouldn't stop him. Even on the ground he desperately *needed* to get to the safety of the ship. In between bursts of sobbing gibberish he yelled out words, begging for help. The marines knew that few things could make them squirm like that. Most of them assembled before the jungle and aimed their guns toward it. Most except one.

One marine, probably some friend of this man, ran in his direction. He held out his hand to reach for him and bring him to safety. And that was when it happened.

All of a sudden, before everyone's eyes, *something* came out of the jungle. All Roberto could make out was a large person sized creature running faster than his eyes could catch. It ran to the armless man and without slowing down, tore into him. Julia yelped slightly.

Roberto was the first to declare, "Men! Ready to fire! We need unity!"

Already the marines were starting to shiver and quake in their boots. The shape returned to the brush of jungle just out of easy reach. Roberto and the marines could still see its dark form, siillhouetting the trees. The marines knew what ot do without asking and ran to the brush of jungle with guns in hand, assuming formation. With a single yell of "On my command, Fire!" they opened fire on the shape.

Growls and shrieks of pain emanated from its direction, momentarily shocking the marines before they stopped firing. It appeared to sit motionless. But not dead. The commander of the troop ordered his men to fire again, but had his arm torn off by the shape before it killed him. It moved a little more slowly this time and now its form was more apparent. It appeared to be covered in some form of shell or armor. In the faint light of the moon it shone as if covered in some thick liquid. There were no bullet holes in it.

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One by one the marines were killed by this creature. There was no fighting against it. Most of them it killed without even moving from its spot, others dared to struggle against it. And with each of them the struggle was quick. In no more than a minute or two did the imperial naval officers fall to this *thing*.

It stood in a pool of the blood of its victims, its body coated with it, streaming down. It stood motionless.

Roberto and Julia were not fools. They knew what was coming.

"Men, to the ship!" Julia commanded.

The marines who were there were all too eager to acquiesce and crowded to the ramp leading up the ship. A few of them stayed behind to defend those remaining from the creature. They were armed with heavier duty guns than their comrades and would at least be able to slow it down.

It just stood there motionless for another minute. More marines were able to get away as the captain yelled out orders to his sailors to raise anchor and get out of there. And there it stood, doing nothing.

Roberto was ready to take his position as far away from this creature as possible. He ran to his quarters to get his gun. It was then that the creature noticed him. Its vision lingered on him. For a moment he could see the features that marked its face. Snarling teeth with brightglowing eyes met him with anger.

The creature got up from kneeling and ran to the ship. It tore into and killed the last few stragglers running up the ramp. There was no saving them anyway. The marines who stayed behind to defend the others shot at the thing with all their fire power and managed to last a few more seconds than their comrades. There was no fighting it. There was no way to get away from it.

Roberto panicked and ran further away. Julia was nowhere to be seen. The marines, running up the stairs had finished the captain raise anchor before the beast could come aboard, managing to get moving before it

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could reach them. They were already a dozen cubits away by the time that the creature was finished tearing of the flesh from the marines standing guard.

Roberto looked on at it. It stared at him with vicious fury, but it was powerless to reach them now. It was already too far waay to even think about reaching them.

"I want you to open fire on that thing," said Roberto.

"What?" asked Julia. "Why?"

"Just do it. Turn the cannons to it. I WANT THAT THING DEAD NOW!"

It didn't take long for his request o be accepted. The captain yelled a command and the cannons were aimed and ready to fire. The creature stood there. It didn't run off. To Roberto that was a sign that it didn't understand, nothing more than a mindless animal.

"On my command, fire!" the captain yelled. The canons burst into fire. And that was the end of it. There was noting more to be said about it. The creature was daed and there were no further reasons ot go back there.

Roberto should have been relieved. He should have been happy. He was lucky wnough to get another chance at killing Aubrey and now he survived an encounter with some hostile wild beast. But he wasn't. He needed time to think about it. time he would not get.

"Governor, Look!" yelled out a sailor, poiting toward the sky.

Roberto and Julia looked up and saw it. The spotlight that was mounted atop the ship poited at it. There it was, in stark light. The creature was now above them, hovering motionless. Roberto could just make out its details as he ran. To where he was intending to run, he did not know. From the beasts eyes emitted a ghastly light. From its hands a dim glow. The sky above it swirled like in a storm. Roberto wasn't there to see the lightning beat with the beat of its wings. He ran deeper into the ship as

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raised its arms to the sky. The lightning that was beginning to rumble above it caught. Its body was shocked and covered with it. It didn't hurt it.

With a roar, it quickly pointed both of its arms to the ship. The ship was engulfed in pure lightning. No one above deck was safe. It wasn't long before the ship began to catch fire. The steam engine overloaded and burst into flames. The men who did not die from the lightning, were left to burn in the fire that overtook the ship.

It was done.

Epilogue

Appendix

On The Vanzi Empire

The Year is 1032 in the Vanzi Calendar. In the Xa Xadong calendar, the year is the Seventy third year of the Fire Bird.

The Vanzi empire is one of the most powerful of empires to one side of the great northern sea. Its borders reach from the eastern coast to the great western coast. For

On Xa Xadong

Xa Xadong is the great empire whose reach spans the entire southern coast of the continent of Boreas, where the jungles lie. Its people are dark-skinned and mostly agricultural when they are not tribal hunter-gatherers. The empire of the God-King rules over all within its borders. The God-King is a figure worshipped as a Deity by the people of Xa Xadong all of whom must give tribute each year that passes. The God-King is beyond reproach as the ultimate leader in their eyes.

On Azel

Preview for Book 2

New Beginning

“The New Argentium internment zone?” asked Aubrey.

The three of them were sitting around a campfire that Jason had set the hour before. Aubrey sat with Josephine leaning her head on her shoulder, still wet from what had happened the encounter before. Jason poked the campfire with a twig, stoking it, trying to get all the fire he could out of the wood.

“There’s a New Argentium?” said Aubrey again with more gusto, seeing Jason unresponsive. “And what’s this about an interment zone?”

“What’s an internment zone?” asked Josephine.

“that’s what I want to know. What did they tell you?” asked Aubrey.

“Look! I don’t fucking know! That’s all they told me when I came by last night. It was insane. They had already set up miles of fence. No way was tha—”

“What I want to know is, ‘what does this mean for us?’” said Aubrey.

“We can’t just keep ourselves alive with more imperial presence around here.”

“I know. I know. W-we just need to think this over is all. Its not like they’re breaking down our door *today* after all, Aubrey. We still have and need time to think about this fucking thing.”

“Alright. I’m sorry. What else did they tell you?”

“

“They told me enough. They told me that New Argentium is apparently a thing that exists and that the... undesirables were to be interned there

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in the camp until such a point that the emperor decides what to do with them.”

Aubrey thought hard about what that meant. Did that mean that the Vanzi had broken through the Xa formation and destroyed what was left of the colonial resistance? What was going to happen to them now?

“No. That can’t be all. There has to be a way we can avoid their presence.”

“I didn’t say that they needed any kind of ID or something. I just said that the *undesirables* were to be interned there.”

“What do you mean *undesirable*?”

“all I saw there were crowds upon crowds of Xa natives or Xa half-borns. I think we can all still get away. Its not like we’re...”

“We’re not what?” asked Josephine.

“We’re not Xa. To put it simply, ” answered Jason

“What do you mean?”

“Jason, we don’t need to. We don’t need this right now.”

“We don’t. I’m telling her.”

“They’re gathering each and everyone of them up. This new argentium that they’re building is probably bad news for any of the real Xa people out there. Colonial forces are not going to jus—”

“What’s going to happen to Riji and John?” asked Josphine. “Is the Empire going t—”

“I told you not to speak so openly about this? Look what you did!”

“Look what I did? She’s asking fucking questions, Aubrey. How else is she gonna grown the hell up, huh?”

“She was going to hear about Riji and John when she was ready.”

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"Aubrey, think! The further and further we get into colonial territory the further and further we'll be getting into more of this. There is no option where she was going to just passively find out herself. Face it, Aubrey."

He was right. Aubrey hated him and he was right. This was life now. Josephine needed to understand that now. At the same time, Aubrey felt that perhaps for just a bit longer she could keep these things from Josephine, keep them from her for just long enough to keep her *pure*. There was a chance, a small chance, but still a chance that all of this could end by then.

"I've never asked by the way, but what was that back then?"

"What?"

"Back when we were on the island and after you lost those marine bastards. I lost you for a while. Where were you? Where were both of you when it happened?"

Aubrey knew exactly what he was talking about. The flash of light, the destruction of the marines' ship. Half the island getting torn apart. Aubrey couldn't remember where she was when it happened but she remembered waking up with Josephine in a pile of rubble near the beach.

Despite the fact she couldn't remember, there was one thing that never left her mind from then, whenever she tried thinking about what happened back then.

Hate

Aubrey couldn't explain it, but there was something primal inside her, something filled with rage that seemed to keep bubbling up everytime she thought about what happened.

"I remember what happened," said Josephine. "Aubrey and I were together when it happened."

"Alirhgt. What? What happened then?"

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"We killed everyone. All the marines. I helped her do it, but I know that Aubrey wanted to. She wanted to so much..."

What was she talking about. She looked into Jason's eyes, eyes filled with confusion and doubt about what Josephine was saying. There was no way that what she was saying was true.

"How did you do it, Josephine? How did you..."

"I don't want to talk about it right now. I'm tired."

"Aubrey, make her talk. I need to know thi—"

"No!"

Deep inside her chest she felt something clutch at it. Her chest was tightening the more she thought about what Josephine had just said. Jason was starting to make her mad. He didn't mean anything whatever he did. Whatever it was that he was asking, but Aubrey felt the need to crush his head in and pour his blood all over her face...

"I need to get to sleep soon as well. Good night," she said, taking Josephine away to their tent.

Hearing his voice quiet as she walked away, she knew she couldn't put it off any longer. There was no way. She tried, desperately tried to be normal.

"We have a long day ahead of us tomorrow. We... need some rest if you ask me."

"Need some rest? Is that what yo—" was all that she could hear as she turned a corner and went to her tent with Josephine.

Josephine lay down on the sleeping bag set aside for her next to Aubrey. Aubrey slept turned away from her. It looked like she wanted to be alone.

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Why would anyone want to be alone?

Josephine didn't know. Aubrey was troubled in her head. Josephine could remember so much more of what had happened that day on the island. She knew that Aubrey did—she must have—as well. It was her will that she felt when the marine's ship went up in flames, when Roberto ran in fear, it was Aubrey who felt such sadistic glee. Josephine knew the taste of such sinful emotions now. She was confident that Aubrey was just keeping secrets from Jason. There was no way he could understand.

Aubrey's back facing her quivered. Josephine thought nothing of it until that back quivered again and again. Then came the unmistakable sound of sobbing.

Josephine reached out to her, putting her hand on her arm. If Aubrey had noticed, she made no indication of it. Josephine understood that Aubrey didn't want to think about her for now. She didn't want to think about anyone. She understood that but didn't care.

"You know you did the right thing back there."

Aubrey kept on sniffing. Not turning to face Josephine at all.

"He was a liar after all. You did everyone he knew a favor. By doing that."

When it became clear that Aubrey wasn't going to stop, Josephine allowed herself a measure of sympathy. She understood what it was like to be like this. Feeling alone, the notion that someone hated one so much. To Josephine that just felt like the worst feeling. There was no taking away from that. Still, though. Aubrey should feel proud of her actions, Josephine thought. She was going to start any day now. It felt good what she helped Aubrey do back then. She didn't want that feeling to stop.

She understood now what Aubrey was so worried about as well. That there was a terrible power that she now possessed and all Josephine could do was help her support her in maintaining it.

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There was so much more that ehy could do. No one understood what was happening and no one would ever. Aubrey needed someone to take care of her. Josephine was about to turn out for bed before she heard Aubrey open her mouth.

“I don’t think I can... *ever* forget about what we... I... did back then, Josephine. That’s not something t-to feel proud of. I’m not some kind of angel or anything. Its not my place to make those decisions.”

Josephine didn’t know what to say to that. All she was prepared to talk about was how Aubrey needed to get it through her mind what kind of person she was, how Josephine felt about that. It was supposed to be good.

“I h-hate what we... I did back then. I hate that it felt *good*. I don’t ever want to go back to that. Never.”

Never.

Julia