PLEASE NOTE:

These few chapters have not yet been edited, nor has the book been completely finished. Therefore, it is subject to change.

Temple

Of

Lost tears

By Nicholaus C Hutton

BOOK I

LIARS, THIEF, AND PIRACY

Chapter One

Brew to Brawls

Trampled mud made its way into *The Hairy Barrel* by the boots of the few that entered this early. The stench of manure crept in with each new consumer; the stables, most would agree, were far too close to the entrance. The rain had ceased for the day as the heavy clouds rolled away to drench other dry lands beneath them. The sun brightened the woodland area for the last hour, creating a rising mist seen through the rays that shot in between the damp branches before it dipped, dimmed, and disappeared. It was now night’s time to consume the land.

The barkeep, who had just woken up a couple hours prior, did his minimal job of picking up fallen chairs and wiping down used glasses from the night before. He took little notice of a traveler waiting to be served at the bar. The regulars had already helped themselves to the only barrel of brew in the center of the tavern. A brew that wouldn’t be served to the other, more populated, towns and cities. The smell was almost, if not, as bad, as the stables themselves. The stench would make make any high-elf gag, yet the regulars still poured the thick liquid into their bellies.

The stranger continued to wait patiently for the barkeep to serve him something he could stomach. The barkeep finally fully noticed the stranger but still took his time serving him. Visitors usually felt that they were above these folk and so the barkeep wanted to address that they were dependent on him, not the other way around. Gauging that the stranger was in no way displeased, he finally dropped his used rag to welcome the new consumer with greetings.

“What do you want?”

“I’ll take any dark ale you have.” The stranger nodded toward the back of the bar. “I’m familiar with those dwarven barrels. I’m sure I’ll be pleased with whatever they hold.”

“Ah. Haven’t served that in a while. Due to low demand and my cost, most can’t afford it. Five reds.”

“My travels are allowing me to spoil myself. I appreciate it,” the stranger said with a smile.

The barkeep’s eyebrow raised, unaccustomed with such manners.

“Think nothing of it.” The barkeep said as he got ready to tap the unopened barrel.

Marx was the stranger’s name. Black hair came down like icicles over the top part of his head. Green eyes with brown specks matched the same beauty the forests provided. His tan skin told of his time out in the sun. The lines around his eyes, which deepened with each expression, gave away his age of late thirties. Beneath his traveled, dirt-smudged cloak, fine blue silks and other soft fabric were hidden. Although he wasn’t considered wealthy, he enjoyed the comfort of such loose clothes and was happy to hide them in the company that surrounded him. Strapped to his side was a blade with a handle longer than the blade itself. Marx stacked the five copper coins just as the barkeep came back to make the swap.

“Enjoy,” the barkeep said expressionlessly.

“Many thanks,” Marx replied as he brought the glass up to his lips; a slight sniff assured it was indeed halfway decent.

As Marx turned to decide what table to choose, he found a young woman who just sat next to him. Green overalls, an off white shirt with light blue frills around her shoulders; her clothes appeared nice enough at first glance, but the edges displayed that she had spent time out in the forest for days if not weeks. Strains of brown hair played with one another as they dropped around her face and shoulders. Her brightened, almost yellow, hazel eyes scanned his features before resting with his gaze. She smiled a half-hearted smile that baited him to suggest that times have been tough for her. Familiar with her kind, he felt like engaging with a welcomed smile.

“Never seen you here before,” the young woman said.

“Never been here before,” Marx replied.

“What brings you out here?”

“I was just asking myself the same question. I tend to go where the wind takes me.”

The young lady, intrigued, smiled at this response. Something told Marx that she too, lived a similar life. A moment of silent added awkwardness before Marx decided to continue their dialogue.

“Name is Marx, and you are?”

“Kara, nice to meet you,” Kara said with a flirtatious smirk that Marx assumed was coming, just as he saw the next question coming.

“You gonna offer a girl a drink?” Kara’s eyebrows rose slightly.

“Are you even old enough to drink?” Marx asked.

“Not that you have to be way out here, but yes, for your information, I’m nineteen,” Kara said with a suggestive squint in her eyes.

“Although you may be old enough to drink, you’re not old enough for me,” Marx placed two steel coins down. “This should buy you a night’s worth of that raw swish.” Marx nodded a graceful farewell as he walked away.

Kara, glad that she got what she came for, nodded back, then walked behind the bar, grabbed a glass, and yelled at the barkeep. “Vonnie, coins on the bar.”

“He didn’t try to keep ya? Ha!” Vonnie said.

“It seems there are *some* good men out there. Could have fooled me,” Kara said as she walked over to the barrel of the foul-smelling brew located in the center of the tavern.

Marx found a table in the corner that was dimly lit by the few candles throughout the tavern. Reaching into his pockets, he fished until he found a used candle. Using a match, he lit the candle and placed it to his liking. He then pulled out his journal. He hadn’t found the time nor the dry atmosphere that allowed him to write what had happened in the last few days. The tragic ending of his canine companion prolonged his desire to record such a painful event. Replaying what happened, he thought about what he would write leading up to this point. Feeling around for the last thing he needed, his pen, he noticed the nib was damaged. Taking it out, he examined that it was beyond repair. A smile rose for he was sure, just as he normally concluded in every situation, it had broken for a reason. He placed everything back into his pockets and while he did, he ensured that one item, a pendant attached to a necklace strap, was still with him. He pressed his fingerprints up against the sharp edges of the engravings. Feeling its coolness, he blew out the candle, sat back and observed those who dwelt around him.

Kara greeted a young boy by shaking his shaved head. The boy had to be around twelve. A Skinny frame and filthy clothes told of a humbling life he must have lived. He had a wooden sword strapped to his side. Marx tuned in to their conversation.

“Come on Ethen, you can sip off of mine. Vonnie won’t know and probably doesn’t care. This fermented urine doesn’t cost him much of anything and you know very well there are no guards around here. Come on, let loose,” Kara said as she brought her glass to his face as he quickly pushed it away.

“We are supposed to see if we could get recruited tomorrow morning. Did you forget?” Ethen said.

“No, I didn’t forget. They’re having a listing all day at *Laneloon*. You know, little brother, I wrote a new song today. This is what *I* dream about.”

Ethen rolled his eyes.

“You know as much as I, that I don’t want to join some stupid army.” Kara took a drink. “I want to write songs all day.”

Ethen turned away before he reengaged. “We already talked about this. Writing songs won’t feed us. We need a real job. I’m tired of living off scraps of food every day. They will pay to train us. Then we can leave, become mercenaries. People will hire us just to escort them around the world.”

“Or we can die in the first day on the battlefield, fighting someone else’s fight.” Kara replied.

“So, all that talk the other day was just lies?”

“No, I just didn’t think it through.”

“You never think anything through,” Ethen scowled.

“Like running away to take care of you?” Kara tethered back.

Both of their faces softened with regret.

“Look, I’m sorry. We’ll go to *Laneloon* *Harbor* tomorrow to see what they’re offering. *If* you take a drink and listen to my song,” Kara said with a smile.

After a moment, Ethen broke his silence. “I’m sorry too,” He smiled as he took Kara’s glass. Squinted eyes and an exaggerated frown seemed about the right response to such a taste.

More folk started filling the small bar. Marx was surprised by how many found this place. Not only that but humans were all that he assumed would be around this area. He saw a dwarf, then a half-orc and finally a troll that could barely make it in through the doorway. Others gathered around to help squeeze him through, as if this was a daily routine. As rare as this sight was, what he saw next was truly astounding.

A lily elf accompanied by a goblin. Both were sworn enemies by nature and by history. Lily elves were smaller than their cousins, standing about three and half feet tall and their ears were much larger by comparison. Most elves shared their noble, well-mannered behavior. As far as Marx knew, none would be caught dead in a place like this. Still, it was the Goblin that was the most curious thing he laid his eyes on.

Goblins were usually killed on the spot. Although weak compared to most, they are immune to pain, fearless, ill-tempered and usually don’t mind fighting to the death when provoked, which didn’t take much more than an awkward glance. These traits alone were reasons enough to kill them quick and get it over with. On top of that, the goblin’s homeland was on the other side of the world. Marx thought how glad he was to take the night off from his journal, as this was becoming quite the show.

The unlikely duo ended up sitting at Kara’s and Ethen’s table after they too got their glasses full. Soon, the crowds talked over each other as the barrel of brew in the center became more empty. Pipes and rolled cigarettes filled the tavern with a stale smoke. Marx watched the dwarf join Kara’s table and started playing a game of cards. After a couple of hands, the dwarf made a motion to Kara. Marx wasn’t sure at first what was being suggested, just that Kara kept shaking her head in refusal. Finally, a smile from Kara was followed with an agreed upon nod. The dwarf then stepped on top of the table and boomed his voice that was easily heard over everyone elses.

“Quiet, the lot of you! Kara’s gotta new tune and I wanna hear it. What say you?” the dwarf yelled.

The crowd yelled back in affirmation.

“Good to hear. Lass? You got it from here?” The dwarf grabbed her by the wrist and easily lifted her up as he got down.

“Okay, I just wrote it today and I kinda wrote it for all you scumbags.” Kara smiled.

The crowd laughed.

“Okay, I’ll need your help. When I stomp like this.” Kara stomped. “I need you all to stomp as well. And if you break anything, you buy it.”

“You got that right!” Vonnie yelled with a smile of excitement to watch the show.

Kara took out her flute and played a song that ended with three notes repeating, letting the crowd know when to stomp as well as getting the notes stuck in their heads. After she was convinced they had gotten a hang of the beat, she began to sing.

*“In the night misfits creep to meet such a feeling,*

*That the day never stayed long enough to offer healing,*

*Blades are placed,*

*die are rolled to raise the stakes,*

*The fiends seek,*

*achieving their dreams to…”*

Kara jumped from her table to another in the center before she signaled by raising her foot. The rest of the folk followed her lead by raising their hands, readying for the first slam on the tables.

*“Plots to cause the good to rot,*

*Schemes to tease the good to leave,*

*Lies to convince the good to die,*

*Abuse to ruse that the good will lose,”*

She slowed her stomping pace to match the new shattering tempo.

*“Steal for the sake to take,*

*kill at will for the thrill,*

*why so bad, some will ask…*

*because the bad got nothing better to do”*

Kara repeated the chorus enough that the crowd started to sing in as well. Soon the entire tavern joined in.

*“Steal for the sake to take,*

*…kill at will for the thrill,*

*why so bad, some will ask…*

*because the bad got nothing better to do!”* the entire cavern yelled together.

Everyone laughed and cheered as Kara played her flute hopping around the tavern. She ended up standing on the bar to tell the ending.

*“As the night begins to lose in sight,*

*the day comes to take away,*

*and for all the bad, I’m sorry to say…,*

*the good will triumph any way,”*

“Aww.” The crowd collectively groaned playfully.

She played one last flute solo before singing.

*“Good day”*

“Sorry fellas.” Kara said with a smile as she shrugged her shoulders and jumped down to receive praise from anyone that was on her way back to her table.

She looked over to Marx who raised his glass of ale. He smiled when he noticed the goblin even showed his enjoyment by welcoming Kara back to her seat. He never saw a goblin smile, much less show appreciation.

“Truly remarkable,” Marx said to himself as he finished his last sip.

The entrance opened, and a woman walked in, one who seemed to regret it as soon as she looked at the room that looked right back. In her mid-twenties, she was well-dressed compared to the rest of the folk, wearing a yellow skirt with embedded black rhinestones at the bottom. Dark red hair and dark eyes to match with a light brown skin tone. She was beautiful, not just compared to this lot, but to all of Iris.

She took another quick glance, locking eyes with Marx before quickly exiting. Something didn’t quite sit right with him. Although the song Kara sang was more playful than not, it had some truth to it. This small tavern was far away from any capital or major city just as it was far from the law. Before the lady’s quick visit Marx was already planning on checking on his horse after finishing his drink. However, he figured he’d wait a few moments, so as not to appear that he was chasing after her.

When he stood up and made his way to the door, Kara approached him. He could tell that she was a bit tipsy as she was alive from achieving praise for her talent.

“Did you like my song?” she asked joyfully.

“I did. It was clever as it was humorous. And need I say, catchy. Do you write songs often?” he asked.

“As much as I can.” Kara replied, “I just wish I could get paid for doing so.”

“That, little lady, is a dream worth chasing,” he assured.

“Not sure how. No one wants to pay to listen to the songs *I* write,” Kara said.

“That’s not true, not from what I just witnessed. However, you might be better off somewhere where they serve more than just month-old swish. Just a thought.” Marx started to make his way past her.

“Where you staying tonight?” Kara asked.

“I usually camp but I may ask Vonnie if he has an extra room,” Marx said.

“I’m sure he does. I’ll ask. Take care, mister, and thanks for the advice.”

“No, thank you for the show. It alone was worth my travels.”

Marx opened the door to invite the smokeless clear air into his lungs. Although the stables influenced the smell, it was much preferred. Raring around the stables, he heard a man’s voice coming from the other side.

“Hold still, won’t take but a minute.”

“Let go!” a woman’s voice screamed.

“I will and be gone once I’m done with ya. Not until then”

The man felt two fingers press behind his collarbone.

“I’ll make this extremely easy. Leave, at once,” Marx stated calmly.

The man tried to turn to confront but as he did, Marx simply pressed down further on the man’s pressure point, forcing him to fall to his knees.

“Ma’am, do you mind moving?” Marx asked.

The lady moved just as Marx used the bottom of his boot to kick the man facedown into a convenient pile of horse maneuver. Enraged, the man turned to find a drawn blade at his throat. A lit lantern coming from inside the stables gave Marx the details he needed to identify the man if he decided to take vengeance sometime later.

“Now, will you leave?” Marx asked.

The man’s dung-covered face, scowled, and then finally nodded in agreement, “Yeah, I’ll leave.”

“We appreciate it.” Marx lowered his blade and stepped to the side.

The man quickly departed.

“Are you okay?” Marx asked.

“I’m fine. Thank you…” the lady trailed off not knowing what to call him.

“Marx, may I ask your name?” Marx asked.

The dim light showed her hesitance.

“You don’t have to give it if you don’t want to. However, I am curious, what brings you way out here?”

“Business, but I can’t find who I’m looking for.”

“Care to describe him for me?”

“He’s not from around here that’s for sure. I’ll be headed back to the harbor. Thank you, again.” She smiled as she went into the stable to retrieve her horse.

Marx didn’t usually allow attraction to nudge him to make any decision. However, he thought she may actually need an escort this late on her way back. He figured he’d gauge it on her response to a simple question. Who knows, he thought, maybe this is why he was here.

“You think it’s safe riding back alone?” Marx asked.

“I’ll be fine. I was without my bow. Thank you once again, Marx.”

“Sorry girl. You won’t be resting as I assured you would. Double cups of oats for you when we get back.”

Heather snorted with a flap of her lips and a whip of her tail.

Marx made his way into the stable as the lady took off into the darkness of night. He looked out into the stars. “Watch out for her, will you?”

He felt that his prayer was heard and so he took the next few minutes to converse with his own horse. While he talked with his riding companion the blood of those inside the tavern were getting thinner as were their judgements.

“Rifi! You cheated!” Kara accused.

The lily elf was taken aback, “did not!”

“Many more card cards,” the goblin strung together words that agreed with Kara.

“Kagü, I do not. See,” Rifi showed the back of his cards.

“Me thinked more,” Kagü replied, his black beady eyes lost in confusion.

“It’s okay buddy,” Rifi said.

“Let’s see inside those pockets,” the dwarf suggested.

“Whärnook, are you serious?’ Rifi asked.

“I got twenty reds at stake, and I already lost twelve,” Whärnook claimed.

“Fine. Be my guest.” Rifi took off his jacket to let Kara search, “the nerve,” he added.

Kara did a thorough search before handing it to Whärnook.

“Sorry Rifi.” Kara sighed, “looks like you win then.”

“Apology accepted. From *you* Kara, I don’t recall getting one from Whärnook.” Rifi said stiffly.

“Aye, when I’m wrong, I’m wrong. And therefore, I’m done for the night.” Whärnook returned Rifi’s jacket and let go of the thought of what he lost that night while he started to get up.

Noticing that Kagü was picking at something under the table, Ethen tried to signal Kagü to stop. Kara, picking up on this as well, decided to distract Whärnook.

“I hear ya. I hope luck finds its way back to you *and* me. I’m out too. Ethen, you ready?” Kara made eye contact with Rifi in hopes he could stop Kagü when it was too late.

Kagü lifted up a card that he found stuck underneath the table. Whärnook was just about to turn to walk away when he gave one last glance at the table.

“Where’d that come from?” Whärnook asked.

“Kagü, you cheated!” Rifi said defensively, trying to cover the truth.

“Kagü that’s not okay.” Kara said.

“Me no cheat. Founded low low table.” Kagü pointed underneath the table.

“He lost a long time ago. Why would *he* cheat?” Whärnook pointed out. “That explains everything. Rifi, you cheated for the last time.”

Whärnook got up and reached over to grab Rifi by the collar. Rifi quickly evaded him by jumping out of his seat.

“You can’t prove that I did anything,” Rift said as he jumped out of the corner. “Kara, can you collect my winnings for me? I’ll be going now.”

Whärnook’s eyebrows furrowed the same way all dwarves do when readying to fight.

“You aren’t going anywhere you little scamp,” Whärnook roared, flinging his chair like a piece of kindling, unknowingly hitting a retired war veteran.

“Calm down. We don’t know Kagü didn’t find that card there himself. Who knows what goes on inside a goblin’s head?” Kara said.

“Don’t defend him, lass. We all might not know what goes on inside a goblin’s head, but we sure know they’re too stupid to stash cards. Especially, when he was out five games ago,” Whärnook started his walk toward Rifi.

“Who threw this chair?” a tall muscular man, in his late fifties yelled, reaching for his sword.

“You’re the cause of this baby elf. This isn’t over,” Whärnook shifted his attention, and rage, toward the retired warrior. It is well-known that once a Dwarf reaches a certain level of anger, they tend to keep it for a while. “It was an accident. Now, lower your sword, old man before you get hurt.”

“Me no stupid!” Kagü screeched as he lunged toward Whärnook, landing on his back while pulling on his beard from behind.

“Mindless gutter trash!” Whärnook roared as he frantically tried to use his stubby arms to grab a hold of Kagü.

“Me no mutter trash too,” Kagü yelled.

The old veteran laughed as he sat back down. “Suits you right, stumpy.”

Kagü crawled around until Whärnook could grab a hold of one of his legs. With a yank, he detached the goblin and flung him across the tavern who landed on the same old veteran.

“What the? That’s it, you short stack of troll excrement.” The old man pulled free his sword.

Whärnook reached for his axe. “I’ll make it quick geezer.”

Confused at the sudden experience of flying and landing, Kagü’s eyes darted around and stopped on the man towering over him with a sword in hand. The close threat caused him to bare his razor-sharp teeth in a snarling growl.

Kara rushed to intervene. “Everyone calm down. Whärnook, you can have all your money back. Here it is.” She gestured to all the coin she gathered from the table. She then turned to face the vet. “Sir, please don’t kill him. He’s not your average goblin.”

“The only good goblin is a dead one,” the man replied.

“He’s just scared is all,” Kara continued.

Ethen joined her, with his wooden sword in hand. Rifi rounded the other tables, to help defend his goblin friend if needed from the rear.

“Out of my way, street hussy,” the old man said.

“Take that back,” Ethen demanded as he stepped forward.

“Ethen! Get back.” Kara went to grab him, but Ethen’s pace was quick enough to continue his advance.

“Boy, I can’t take back truth,” the man said with a snicker.

“Kagü, attack!” Ethen said as he got ready to swing his sword when the veteran got preoccupied defending against a ferocious goblin.

Kagü sprung as quick and high as a cricket toward the vet’s face. An instinctive elbow was thrown, smashing Kagü’s side jaw. The strike was precise as it was forceful, knocking the goblin unconscious. Ethen didn’t find the distraction he was hoping for. Hesitant, he slowly edged his way toward the more experienced warrior. His eyes moved to Rifi who had one of his daggers out, ready to make a sneak attack and so he hoped, once again, that he could catch the vet off guard. The veteran caught Ethen’s gaze and quickly spun to kick Rifi square in the chest. Ethen took the opportunity to attack but the old vet turned his attention back just in time to block.

“A wooden sword? Ha!” the man mocked and swung hard enough to chip away at Ethen’s sword. Two more swings caused the wooden sword to break in half. “Time to teach the young a lesson. A price you’ll pay by the hand you used to strike me.”

“Ethen!” Kara screamed as the man raised his sword.

Kara was forcefully pushed out of the way. Whärnook’s speed took the vet by surprise. Using his head as a battering ram, Wharnook aimed for the vet’s stomach. With no time to counterattack the vet’s wind was instantly taken out of him. The charge lifted the man up and was carried through tables, chairs and any persons that were in the way. The veteran tried to recover as Whärnook jumped, lifting his stout body high up before bringing down his thick club of a fist. He traded hands so he wouldn’t lose his beating tempo. The first few punches thudded loudly, silencing everyone and their drunk conversations. The thuds turned to shattering cracks.

“Dwarf! Get off him!” Vonnie pointed a crossbow at Whärnook’s head. “Last thing I need is an investigation. Is he dead?”

Whärnook looked down at a caved-in face. “Aye, he won’t be chopping off any wee lad’s limbs anytime soon.”

“Oh, that’s just great! He was part of Queen Cilla’s army. Well-known too. Some even say a hero. Well, everyone, fun’s over. Hullbert grab a few men and shovels. I’m sure Whärnook will be glad to help.” Vonnie raised his eyebrow. “Well?”

“Sorry bout that Vonnie. Sure, I’ll help,” Whärnook said shamefully.

“And what about my furniture?”

Kara walked up with a handful of coins, “This ought about cover the mess and the trouble.”

Folks joined in as the body almost instantly disappeared out the back entrance.

The front entrance’s door then swung open as a confused Marx entered. The look on everyone’s faces and voices were unusually quiet.

Vonnie lowered his crossbow, turned to Marx and spoke, “Kara said you’re interested in a room. We just had one open.”

Chapter Two

Blame it on the swish

*“I still didn’t catch your name,” Marx said.*

*“I still never threw it,” the woman in the yellow dress replied with a smile, “but I’m sure one day I will. Good day Marx, I need you more than you know.”*

*Marx went to look at her, to see what she meant but she was no longer there. He wondered if she was ever really there or just a thought…*

Marx woke up just as his room was lit by the morning sun. Thanks to the late drinkers he didn’t receive the full night’s sleep he’d hoped for. Still, he found time to meditate and pray until the drunkards drank themselves into silence. He let a few minutes pass as he allowed his mind’s wheels to turn.

He thought of his dream. It was of the same woman he saved just the night before. He remembered toward the beginning she was off-putting. However, toward the end, she seemed to warm up to him, willingly engaging in conversation and even teasing him playfully. Her words came to him once again, as if to remind him.

*“I need you more than you know.”*

He sat up. Was that the reason he came to this hole-in-the-wall of a tavern? Thinking back, it was clear that he should have given it a little more consideration, as she was something, or someone out of place to say the least; what a clear sign usually entails.

The only other thing he thought of were the siblings, Kara, and Ethen. Kara was strong-willed and extremely talented. While Ethen apparently was looking to become a swordsman; so young yet so determined to become something much more. Kara had made a good point in their disagreement; they could very well die on the battlefield. That would be a pity but death is a necessity in any war. Although death is certain in life itself, he saw no reason such young, spirited ones should invite death so early. Although this part of the world may not noticed such worth, he saw the priceless value they had to offer.

Well, he thought, looks like they’re going to Laneloon Harbor as well. If fate throws them in my direction once again, I’ll do my part by extending a hand. It will be up to them to grab hold of it.

He decided that he should make his way to the harbor in the chance to catch up with lady in the yellow dress. Being early enough, he could make it there by noon. With the decision made, he collected his things, knelt, and whispered a soft prayer for safe travels and wise discernment.

Making his way back into the bar, he chuckled to himself when he saw bodies lying on tables and on the floor. The barrel that gave the tavern its name was empty and knocked over. Scanning he saw Ethen lying next to Kara in the corner. His detective skills kicked in when he saw blood marks of a body being dragged out toward the back door, and some particular heavy clumps of mud linked to a pair of boots of one of the fellows sleeping on top of the table. A pair of muddy shovels behind the bar along with the looks the folks gave him when he reentered last night strengthened his suspicion of what must have happened. A regular occasion, Marx assumed, as he put the thought out of his mind.

Stepping outside, he was happy to bid the smell of *The Hairy Barrel* farewell, once and for all. He came up behind his horse who was happy to see his rider.

“Ages, old boy. How’d you sleep?” Marx asked. rubbing Ages’ nose. “Ready to see the Laneloon harbor? The first harbor some see in months for some. You see, even after seeing land on both sides of the northern strait, there isn’t one piece of land that isn’t too steep to dock for hundreds of miles. So, Laneloon is the first harbor after being teased of land for days. It has been quite some time since I visited.

“Well, how about it? You ready?” Marx saddled up and jumped on Ages’ back. “Then let’s get.”

Marx rode for a couple hours out into the woods on the only path that led him toward the harbor. It was nice to see the sun come out. The last few days had been dark and wet compared to this one, where there wasn’t a single cloud in the sky. With his old dog in mind, who had just passed away before the storm, the sun reminded him that life intended to move along and leave the dark past behind. Still, he wished he could turn sideways to scratch his late canine companion behind his ear. The sting kept him focused on Ages’ tempo to reach their destination before the sun hung directly above him. He kept his pace strong until he heard what sounded like a child begging for help out in the woods on his left. Something sounded off about the voice. Either way Marx felt inclined to check it out.

“Is anyone there? My mum, she’s dead!” the voice yelled.

Hearing the voice again, Marx was sure something was off. The voice lacked emotion as childlike as it sounded. He jumped off his horse and reached for his sword. He reared around a thicket and instead of seeing a small child, he found an overweight man with folds of belly fat pouring out of his armor that were two or three sizes too small.

Catching the man still in character he heard him say. “I don’t know what to do. Please help me…” the man stopped at the sight of Marx.

“That’s pretty good,” Marx admitted. “Can you do any other impersonations?”

The fat man chuckled, trading his high-pitched tone in for a much deeper one. “How bout a sucker who fell for an ambush?”

“Hmm, haven’t heard that one before. How’s it go?” Marx’s eyes caught figures coming out from behind trees and bushes; all pointing their bows at him.

“Let me show you,” the fat man picked up a large club that was leaning against him, “resist and you die. We just want the necklace.”

“How’d you know about that?” Marx asked with genuine interest.

“We been on you for quite some time. You’ve had a good run, now give it here. Those boys up there can split an apple from double the distance they are now. You don’t have to die today.”

“Although I don’t have to die today, I do have to die *some*day. Funny how our warped perspective of time drives us to make decisions we ought not do. Time is equal to nothing when eternity is presented.”

“Beautifully said *poet*. Now drop your blade or *time* will no longer be a factor,” the fat man raised his club.

Marx lowered his head and gripped his handle.

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Kara forced her eyes open. Her head felt heavy as she dragged herself to a nearby window to gauge what time it was. Forth hour, she noticed. As the thoughts of what today had planned for her, she grumbled. She in no way wanted to join any army. Especially one she didn’t feel at all passionate about. She did, however, want to go to Laneloon Harbor. It was always a treat to see the many kinds of people come together in the arrangement to trade. Her favorite were the ones with clean and fancy clothes paired with the lack of wit. She saw her brother still sleeping and decided against waking him up. Although she still had a mind to keep her end of the deal by checking out the recruitment tent, she figured she would prolong the journey in hopes that the chances of joining were slimmed.

Standing up, the blood in her head didn’t circulate fast enough as she rubbed her temples to assist. Finally, the throbbing lessened as her daily schemes to survive started to lay their foundation. Well, she thought, if we do join the army, I most likely won’t be coming back here any time soon. She wondered if Vonnie would trust her enough to take his carriage to the harbor. She recalled him saying something about needing some supplies and how he hates to travel at his age. Too bad to find out that his carriage, and any money he might give her for supplies, never made it back. Still, he’d be alright, she convinced herself.

She looked around the tavern and saw Rifi laying next to Wharnook. The last she remembered Wharnook was about to tear Rifi’s head off. Then the memory of the old, retired veteran came to her mind as she recalled his corpse being dragged out the backdoor. After that, vague images of Rifi somehow getting Vonnie’s crossbow and pointing it at Wharnook, a rogue bolt that nearly missed Hallbert’s hand and the three laughing as one with their arms slung around each other. I think I’ll give the swish a fond farewell as well, she thought. Sluggishly, she made it to the bar where a bowl of water was left out for those who desperately needed to hydrate themselves.

“Uhh, Kara?” Ethen mumbled as he sat up. “I don’t feel good.”

“That makes two of us,” Kara replied as she gulped down a handful of water. “We can always try again tomorrow.”

“I almost forgot! What time is it?” Ethen got up to gauge the sun. “We gotta go. We can still make it.”

Kara cursed herself for reminding him. She halfway wanted to protest but she was starting to grow fond of the idea of leaving this place for good. She had plenty of ways of getting out of joining the army from here all the way to Laneloon.

“Very well brother. A deal’s a deal.” Kara raised her eyebrow slightly and shot Ethen a smirk that he knew well. “I wanted to see if Vonnie might need some help getting anything at Laneloon.”

Ethen’s stomach turned in agreement to do whatever it must to survive, and so he nodded.

“That’s very kind of you Kara,” Vonnie said as he came out of the doorway behind the bar. “I could use the help. I need to stay here anyways as that stoop Wharnook created a potential pain in my arse.”

Kara wasn’t sure if he was baiting or not, just as she wasn’t sure if he knew that they were trying to get recruited.

“We just wanted enough to get something to eat at Laneloon, if that’s okay.” Kara focused on his reaction.

“I suppose that’s fair. Nothing too fancy. How’s eight reds sound?”

“Sounds good to me,” Kara smiled at both the offer and the thought that he had no idea what he was agreeing to.

“Hallbert,” Vonnie yelled toward one of the rooms down the hallway.

“Hallbert?” Kara asked.

“Sure, I need to send someone to make sure you won’t run off with my carriage and coin.”

“You don’t trust me?” Kara tried to pass as offended.

“I’m gonna miss ya Kara. Don’t get killed too early after recruitment.”

“I should’ve known you knew. Part of the reason we’re leaving is we’re tired of lying and stealing to survive.” She looked up at Vonnie. “You mad?”

“Nah. If you got away with stealing from me, I’d blame myself. You know my code and my view: possessions are only temporary. But you lied to me again, you’re not tired of lying and stealing. He is.” Vonnie tilted his head at Ethen. “He’s a wise and ambitious boy. You’d be dim not to pay him heed.”

Kara looked back at Ethen to see that he heard before she turned back to Vonnie in agreement.

Hallbert appeared in his sleep attire that didn’t quite match his grungy self. Bright yellow silk with dark-blue star patches stitched in loose pajamas appeared very comfortable and that they belonged to a well-off commoner. His thick red beard mirrored his hair that went in all directions. His sunken eyes that had seen death many times always waited for others to notice them and assume the worst. His skin showed that the years of dirt and grime won the battle against the days of river baths. His thick fingers each had long, yellow fingernails that he used to scratch his hairy underbelly as he stopped mid step to finish his yawn.

“What is it?” Hallbert asked.

“We need supplies. I have a list and we need to check that our dear late friend doesn’t have any other friends that knows he was here, but for the god’s sake, go get dressed first. You look like a overgrown, hairy five-year-old.” Vonnie shooed him away.

Hallbert looked down as if he’d forgotten what he was wearing. Understanding Vonnie’s comment, he shrugged and walked off.

“Uhhh,” a moan that was deeper and louder than most mortals came from the stirring dwarf by the fireplace.

“Get up Wharnook! You owe me more than what Kara was nice enough to pay last night. I have a mission for you,” Vonnie yelled.

Wharnook stood up. “After serving that poison and making *us* pay for it, I think you owe me.”

Vonnie eyed Wharnook as he approached the bar.

“Aye, just a joke. Keep your shirt on. I understand the position I put you in.” Wharnook grabbed the bowl of water and drank it down to its last drop before dropping it and expelling a ‘aaah.’ “What would you have me do?”

Vonnie looked around before saying. “Follow me.”

The two left through the door behind the bar.

“Oh no! My sword, I forgot that old skum…” Ethen remembered what happened to the retired veteran before he finished his sentence and then decided to curse the swish instead.

All the bodies at this point were all groggily getting up.

“Oh boy do I feel useless. What was in that barrel?” Rifi said as he looked around. “Where’s Kagu?”

“I don’t know,” Ethen said as he too hadn’t seen him. “Kara, you seen Kagu?”

“Nope.” Kara didn’t find the desire to search for the aimless goblin at this time.

“That green death trap,” Rifi said as he made his way around the bar yelling Kagu’s name that eventually led him outside.

“It looks like Vonnie’s gonna buy us one last meal and a free ride to Laneloon,” Kara said as she grabbed the empty bowl that held the water and made her way outside; Ethen followed.

The sunlight brought back the pounding in both their heads.

“I can’t believe I let you talk me into drinking that pee,” Ethen said.

“I’m told it will put hair on that chest of yours,” Kara replied.

“I’d rather be rid of this headache.”

Kara made her way to a nearby well to fill up the bowl.

“Kagu….Kagu…” Rifi kept yelling.

After Ethen got his fill of water he too got concerned for their beady-eyed friend.

“You think he’s okay?” Ethen asked.

“I’m tired of looking after that scamp. No wonder no one knows how long goblins live naturally. I can see why they all die beforehand,” Kara’s face stiffened for only a moment before she too started worry as well.

None saw Kagu behind them up above, on the very edge of the horse stable roof. He was lying down, dead asleep as he rolled over and fell.

*THUMP*

They all turned to see Kagu slowly get up in front of them, utterly confused. Looking and seeing Ethen and Kara, he smiled with blood smeared around his mouth.

“Kar Kar, Ethone. Sun high sooner me wake,” Kagu said while pointing at the sun overhead.

“Yes, you slept in. We all did,” Ethen said. “Are you okay? Where did that blood come from?”

“Dark skies bites. Find bush bush tails,” Kagu explained.

Ethen looked over to Kara to see if she knew what he was talking about.

“I think he went to find a midnight snack. I assume he found a squirrel,” Kara guessed.

Kagu only stared back, giving no indication of the answer.

“Kagu! Where were you? Didn’t you hear me yelling your name?” Rifi came to check on his companion.

“Sky?” Kagu said with a blank stare, hoping he got the answer correct.

“I’m just glad you’re okay,” Rifi said.

Vonnie, Wharnook, and Hallbert all came out of the tavern, Hallbert in his much more appropriate, leather armor.

“Hallbert, get the coach ready,” Vonnie said as he handed Wharnook something before he noticed something amiss at the stable before giving an exhausted sigh. “Hallbert, looks like our unfamiliar friend must of left this morning. You know what to do if you see our friend again, right?”

Hallbert nodded before he turned back to make his way behind the stable. Vonnie walked up to Kara and Ethen.

“You two be careful out there. You will soon discover that those who desire war are much less honorable than thieves. They easily trade lives for personal gain and call themselves the heroes. Stay sharp,” Vonnie said as he threw Kara a small sack.

By the sound and weight of it, it felt like a fair bit of coin. Kara looked in to confirm before looking up. “Vonnie, you don’t have to give me this much. After I tried to steal from you?”

“That was the entertainment from last night. You’re welcome,” Vonnie said with a smile that lasted a few seconds before he turned around. “Now get out of here you little heaps.”

“Thank you!” Kara yelled before he walked into *The Hairy Barrel* and shut the door behind him.

Wharnook laughed as he looked at Rifi. “To think how upset I got that you cheated me. Little did you know, I cheated the second game in.” They both shared a laugh as Kagu joined in, although it was apparent he had no idea what he was laughing at. Wharnook continued. “I could swear there was something off about that brew last night.”

“So, you think we could catch a ride with you to Laneloon?” Rifi asked Kara.

“It’s not up to me but I don’t see why not. Hallbert’s a big softy. Wait, how can Kagu go?” Kara asked as she saw Hallbert come around with a two-horse carriage.

“We just strap some shackles on him and he becomes a prisoner. We might even be able to sell him for some coin.” Rifi’s chuckle quickly disappeared when he saw that Kagu did not like nor understand the joke. “Just kidding bud, I wouldn’t sell ya.” Then muttered under his breath toward Wharnook. “depends on how much.”

Hallbert stopped in front of the five.

“You coming with?” Rifi asked Wharnook.

“Nye. I must go the opposite direction. I have rumors to spread and a false mission to fake. Once again, I wasn’t thinking straight last night. You all take care now. Fine singing lass and thanks for teaching me the words. I’ll sing it every tavern I come across.” Wharnook looked at Ethen. “I heard you want to join the army. It’s not so bad. Pay is pay and you two aren’t as dimwitted as most. You may end up leading those empty skulls or rob them all blind. Either way, you’ll fare just fine.” Finally, he turned to address everyone. “I must be off now. Take care you good for nothings.”

“You mind if we catch a ride?” Rifi asked Hallbert.

“Join or jump off a cliff, I don’t care which,” Hallbert said.

“I think we’ll join,” Rifi said.

Wharnook went right, humming Kara’s tune as they rest all went left.

\* \* \* \* \*

The carriage kept steady as everyone on board were enjoying the silence. Not due to the desire for peace but due to the hangover they were experiencing. Rifi and Kagu were the first to hear someone out of place. As they turned their larger ears, they could hear what sounded like a child screaming for help. Rifi explained what he heard and advised to keep the carriage going until they all could hear a child crying for help.

“Hallbert, stop,” Kara said.

Hallbert stopped and shared a look that they should go check it out. They all jumped off and approached cautiously. Hallbert held his longsword, as Rifi held both his twin knives, Kagu pulled free his jagged short sword, while Ethen, missing his wooden sword, held out his pocket blade.

Kara stepped in front. “It’s just a kid. Calm down, will ya?”

“It seems you’ve never been ambushed or set an ambush before. Just stay behind me?” Hallbert said as he approached surprisingly quietly.

Turning around a large thicket, he saw several men tied up against a large tree with shot arrows lodged into the surroundings. Hallbert noticed an extra-large man was the one talking in a child’s voice. Giving the surroundings one last look, he felt it was safe to lower his weapon and come out. The man who was still pretending saw Hallbert. Switching to his normal, lower voice, he started pleading.

“Oh, thank the gods. Sorry, I was faking. I just wasn’t sure anyone would be willing to help us. Please quick, free us,” the man’s face expressed urgency.

Kara and the rest came behind Hallbert.

“There’s no kid,” Hullbert confirmed.

“Like I told him, I’m sorry. I didn’t think anyone would come. That was a voice I do for my daughter.” The man chuckled slightly. “Pretty good huh?”

“Boy is he a bad liar,” Rifi said walking up a few steps.

“Liar? Why do you say that?” The man held firm with a strange glance at Kagu who looked back with a dead stare and dried blood around his mouth.

“Well for starters, your eyes shift three times too many. Your breathing is irregularly high, and I’m not talking about the charade you pulled. Which I admit, wasn’t half bad,” Rifi said.

“Rifi here is a bit of a lie detector. So, we’re gonna start with three simple questions and see how you do. Who are you? What are you doing out here? And why are you tied up?” Hallbert got comfortable as he leaned up against a nearby tree.

“We are mercenaries…”

Halbert cut the man off. “Sorry to interrupt you so early but I felt it necessary to give you a fair warning. I saw you notice our unusual friend there.” He pointed at Kagu before he continued. “Not sure how much you know about goblins. I’d bet you know that they fight to the death and due to their much smaller size don’t last long. However, you’re in no position to defend yourself and goblins enjoy their meals to squirm while they eat. Do you catch my meaning?”

“He means he won’t kill as he eats you. If he can help it anyways,” Rifi answered.

“That was my meaning, yes. Thank you, Todd,” Hallbert said. “Now, this saves me the trouble of dealing with you, if you are lying, that is, while feeding my friend here at the same time. Two birds. Understand as far as the law goes this ill fate of yours is not necessarily murder, as all I’m doing is not stopping him from eating you. Extremely hard to prove otherwise. If your lot is something special that is. Do we understand each other?”

The man’s face dropped any act he was prepared to make. Giving Kagu one last look and seeing him lick his lips, he began to explain.

“We *are* in fact mercenaries but we’re not after any person but an item. There is a man who came from the tavern east of here who carries it. We lured him right where that boy stands now.” He nodded to Ethen. “He was the target we were told has the item.”

“What’s he look like?” Hallbert asked.

“Black hair, tan skin, handsome. He wore a cloak that had been well traveled,” the man said.

Kara and Hallbert shared a look.

“So, you’ve seen him?” the man said.

“I’ll be asking the questions.” Hallbert quickly took control of the conversation. “So, how is it you failed to acquire this item?”

The man paused as if he wasn’t sure how to respond.

“Well?” Hallbert pressed.

Sighing, he began. “He was faster than anything known. The arrows you noticed were evaded as soon as they were shot. Each time he slowed back down we’d try again. I swung my club wide with as much strength and speed as I could muster, and he just let me. He was toying with us. When he was done playing and we were out of breath, he told us that he would be tying us to this tree.

“We tried to stop him, but he easily did as he pleased and ignored our attempt to fend him off as a parent would a stubborn toddler. Again, he was faster than anything known.” The man’s eyes looked up at Hallbert. “I swear it.”

“He’s telling the truth,” Rifi confirmed.

“He is?” Hallbert said amused. “What do you think possessed this man to achieve such a feat?”

“He was either a witch or a wizard. Or perhaps a demon,” the man replied.

“Not likely, as each of those, or at least as powerful as what you explained, no longer exist.” Halbert got up from leaning.

“We know what we saw, and I can’t imagine anything else,” the man protested.

Hallbert knelt to eye the man more closely. “Tell me more about this item.”

The man’s gaze shifted back at Kagu as if to ask if it was worth it.

“Trust me fella, I’m not good at bluffing because I never do. Part of the reason I never play cards.” Hallbert moved his head to block the man’s view of Kagu, reminding him that he just asked a question that he intended to get an answer to.

“Will you let us go?” the man asked.

“I will if you answer me.”

“A pendant, a necklace. An intricate engraving of five strands that come together in the center, like a knot of five pieces of rope.”

“Hmm. Did you ever stop and think that it was the necklace that gave this man his powers?” Hallbert asked. “As those items, as rare as they are, do exist. It would of been wise to achieve the necklace a bit more cautiously.” Hallbert looked back to his friends. “Well, this was quite the chapter to the day.”

“You gonna free us?” the man asked.

Hallbert laughed. “Not before I rob you blind. Those weapons of yours aren’t cheap and that armor…”

“You son of a shite-soaked pig!” the man yelled.

“No need for name calling, as accurate as that claim might be. I *was* gonna free ya naked and defenseless but bringing my moms into this crossed some sort of polite line, I’m sure.” Hallbert turned back to Rifi, Kara, Kagu and Ethen. “You guys wanna make some extra coin? I need help stripping these fellas of their armor and weaponry.”

Chapter Three

Let down but fried food

Laneloon Harbor was unusually busy this afternoon. Some of those who needed to conduct business were forced to wait out the storm while others got bored inside their homes. The rest simply took this chance to enjoy the beautiful day with a stroll down the streets or a ride in their boats. In the center of town was a park in the shape of a circle where all the shops down each of the streets met.

A few locals who had all come from different walks of life joined each other years back to form the harbor’s known band named *The Fishy School*. They each shared their interest in music and instruments to play off one another creating quite a unique sound that most found delightfully catchy. This was just one of the many touches that most found appealing here at the harbor.

Another highlight was the food. Due to the strait that led up north came the combined trades of herbs and recipes from the dwarves, halflings and even the secluded elves. With the entire continent of Ambalon the humans, and their taste for seafood, had created delectable dishes. The taste alone, some would say, was worth the months’ of travel.

Under the protection of Queen Cilla and her capital city of *Ivan’s Bridge* to the east*, Laneloon* was able to protect not only its inhabitants, but those of other races that came to barter. Whether or not certain treaties were fulfilled in the past, each person, aside from orc, ogres, and goblins, was granted access. The only rules were that they kept the peace, didn’t have any warrants, and didn’t stray east without their papers. Some say this was the Queen’s way of inviting peace, while some thought it was a way for her to tax the other races, even her enemies.

The truth was that Laneloon had created its own laws. They didn’t bother receiving any aid from Queen Cilla or the surrounding kingdoms. They made enough coin to contribute their taxes and pay and train their own army. The harbor had always found the balance to be a big support for their eastern neighbors while maintaining a large enough army to suggest a hassle that no one kingdom could deal with financially. All in all, peace was seen here plainly in the streets. However, although it was peaceful for most, corruption was found hidden beneath, just like any city that was left unchecked.

Marx passed through the city gate after proving his citizenship. He was surprised at how many people were present. The harbor appeared to double the last time he visited. Right away he noticed a few new buildings and attractions. As children ran past him, he thought how funny it was that they didn’t exist the last time he walked this same road. He scanned the different shops, some known and some new, to find his destination. His eyes landed on a building that he knew well. He smiled as the building was the only one that didn’t change one bit.

Marx added a harmonized hop to his step due to the catchy rhythm found across the street. He noticed a nearby hitch across the shops that he had never seen before providing more than enough room to tie off his horse. He was pleasantly surprised to see that there was a long trough that allowed his horse to drink.

“Would you look at that? Here you go, Ages old boy. I need to get something to eat as I am famished.” Marx tied Ages down as his stomach turned at the first smell of baked goods and delicious meats being cooked.

He made his way across the street, to his friend Pete's diner called *the squirming squid*. Opening the door, everything looked the same besides the furniture and new faces that were taking orders. A young woman at the front smiled as he entered.

“Hello, Sir. Is it just you today?” she asked.

“It is. Thank you,” Marx answered with a smile.

She walked him to a small table by the front window.

“Would you like me to fetch you a menu?” the young woman asked.

“Menu?”

“It has the items listed of what we serve here.”

“You still serve lemon steamed mussels and fried squid?” Marx asked.

“We sure do.”

“I’ll have both. I have some catching up to do,” Marx said.

“I’ll have that up as soon as possible,” the girl returned with a bow and almost left before Marx stopped her.

“Excuse miss. Does Pete still run this place?”

“I’m sorry sir, I’m not sure who that is,” the girl replied.

“Who owns this diner?” Marx asked.

“Eddy. I think he is still here. Would you like to speak with him?”

Eddy, Marx thought. He was nearly ten the last time he was here. To think that would make him in his mid-twenties now.

“Wow, time does fly. Enjoy it little miss. It tends to get away from you. Yes, please. Tell him an old friend of his dad would like to pay him a visit.”

“I’ll go check to see if he is still here and put in this order. Just a moment,” the waitress gave another bow before she walked away.

“I’m most appreciative.” Marx bowed his head.

As he looked out the window he enjoyed watching the activity outside. He didn’t have time to stare too long as a young man with short brown hair, freckles and dark eyes approached him.

“Hello sir, may I help you?”

“Eddy? Is that you?” Marx stood up to eye him closely. “It is you. I’m an old friend of your dad’s. Do you remember me? My name is Marx. I, too, looked much younger when we last met. Oh, about fourteen or fifteen years ago. I taught you that dice game *dead kraken*.”

Eddy’s smile told Marx he did remember.

“I have taught quite a bit of customers that game over the years.” Eddy’s cheery demeanor stiffened. “I’m sorry to say, my father is no longer with us. He passed away two winters ago. He had a stomach disease that lasted a year before that until it finally claimed him. He was not well.” Marx saw the pain in his eyes before the peace. “I’m almost not sorry he finally passed. At least now he is free from the pain.”

Marx put his hand on Eddy’s shoulder. “You have grown to become quite the wise young man. Yes, I believe he is in a much better place. I’m going to miss him. He was the best cook there was, and I’ve never met a funnier man, and I’ve been around most of the world.”

The two shared a smile at just the thought of some of Pete’s crude jokes.

“It doesn’t look like you’re doing too bad. I’ve never seen so many people in here and by the smell of it he taught you the tricks of the trade,” Marx said.

“He did but I added a few of my own specialties to the menu. I must recommend *Pete’s Demise.* It’s a spicy dish I concocted. It’s the local’s favorite.”

“Pete’s demise? It seems you have also gained his sick sense of humor,” Marx laughed.

“I was about to leave but I would love to catch up with one of my father’s old friends. That is if you got some good stories to tell. Perhaps of you two getting into trouble?”

“I think I got you covered,” Marx pulled out a chair for his friend as he got ready to tell a story that Eddy was now old enough to hear.

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Hallbert was handed back his papers as were the others. The guard at the gate and Hallbert shared a laugh as the guard advised that Hallbert’s cell will be kept warm for him, an on-running joke that had lasted years. Rifi was instructed to keep Kagu shackled; Rifi convinced the guard that he would do just that while he held his knife at the goblin’s throat. Hallbert led the way to a large barn on the outskirts of town that was used to sell weapons, armor, and other miscellaneous items.

The barn was not open to the public but to a select few that were aware of the underground trading world most referred to as t*he thieves guild*. However, those involved didn’t like the name because they didn’t like any name that would identify themselves with those who got caught. They also had their own language. Vocal communication seemed an obvious way to get found out. Rather they used distinct hand and facial gestures that communicated more than enough to conduct business, warn others and suggestive bartering techniques. This kept trading illegal items out of the ears of those trying to accumulate enough evidence for a bust.

A good number of thieves had a code of honor. By paying a certain percent to the underground and keeping their mouths shut, they were granted certain privileges.. Those who paid were allowed access to secret shop locations, and even were bailed out of jail in some circumstances. This privilege spread to other major cities.. Those who weren’t considered friends among these thieves had a hard time getting by living the criminal life. One thing the underground funded was sketch artists and reporters who were paid to promptly draw or write a summary, detailing certain enemies, or those who caused risks, and alert certain members and authorities to take necessary action.

Hallbert pulled back on the reins as the carriage came to a halt. The rest on board jumped off and stretched their legs.

“Wait out here. I’ll be back with your coin.” Hallbert signaled to a fellow outside the barn who then opened the large doors to allow Hallbert and his coach, loaded with goods, inside.

Twenty or so minutes later, Hallbert came back out and tossed Rifi and Kara each a sack of coin.

“I think you’ll find that fair,” Hallbert said.

“I think you and I have different definitions of ‘fair’,” Rifi said.

“Oh? How is it you’d manage getting your share here in the first place?” Hallbert raised his pinkie twice while tilting his arm slightly to the right.

Rifi scratched behind his left ear while raising his upper lip. The rest of the silent conversation consisted of stares that ultimately got Rifi to admit it was fair enough.

“I heard you’re going to try to join Cilla’s army,” Hallbert said to Kara and Ethen. “Good luck. I’ve always wondered what my life would look like if I decided to join myself. I could be some sergeant or maybe retired by now.”

“Or dead,” Rifi said.

“Or dead,” Hallbert agreed with a smile that immediately disappeared when he saw Kara’s concerned look. “Not that you should be worried. Wharnook was right to suggest you’ll be just fine. Either way, it was good knowing you two. If you’re ever in the area, stop by and say hi. Unless you’re there to arrest me.” Hallbert turned to Rifi and Kagu. “What about you two?”

“I’m going to make my rounds around town. Meet up at *The Gist*?” Rifi said.

“Sure, I’ll be staying there tonight. I have no desire to run into that naked lot of angry men this evening. See you there.” Hallbert snapped his whip as the carriage moved along.

“Kara, Ethen, I’d be lying to say I won’t miss you two. But as Hallbert suggested, this life isn’t as rewarding long term as it’s cracked up to be. Just keep your wits about you. Bring it in,” Rifi said as he went in for a hug that was quickly met with a handshake.

“I’ll be better off with my property still with me thanks,” Kara said with a smirk.

“There’s that wit I was talking about. Ethen?” Rifi extended his hand as Ethen accepted and shook it.

Kagu, confused, didn’t know what was going on until this point.

“You go forever gone?” Kagu said sadly.

“Yes Kagu. We have a chance to live a better life than this.” Ethen laid out his hand for a handshake.

“You are a very special goblin. Proof that looks aren’t everything,” Kara finished.

Kagu’s eyes glossed over with a layer of liquid.

“Me no forever gone!” Kagu yelled as he tried to fling his chained hands around the siblings, resulting in a snuggle.

“There, there. Not forever gone. Just a little while gone,” Kara exerted as she patted his back.

“Yeah, we’ll be back some time.” Ethen went along.

“Yeah, buddy. They’ll be back in no time. Come on Kagu, let’s go get some bites. Farewell you two,” Rifi said as he pushed Kagu in the other direction.

Convinced that Ethen and Kara weren’t leaving forever, Kagu gingerly walked away.

“Come on Kara. Recruitment tent is this way,” Ethen said as he started his walk.

Kara followed as she recounted the two sacks of coin she received that day.

“You know, we have enough here for both of us to live like kings for at least a week. Live like we usually do for over a month.” Kara said, dropping coins as she calculated their daily expenses a second time.

“After that, then what? We steal some more? We lie to more of our friends? Or we get someone else killed? *Or* we put that to our retirement or maybe buy a small home in the east?” Ethen kept his pace.

Kara didn’t want to admit he had a point and so she remained silent as she followed. A breeze brought with it tasty smells that told Ethen what Kara was about to say.

“Let’s just go check out the tent, ask some questions and we’ll get something to eat. It’s right here,” Ethen said.

“Fine.”

The tent had a short line of two young men waiting to talk to the recruitment officers up front. Each was given time to ask questions and get answers about pay, requirements and duties. All sounded reasonably fair, and it was confirmed with a look that both Ethen and Kara shared. Kara suddenly gripped her own hand as the thought of joining the army was abruptly becoming a reality. She forced her mind, that had already run out of excuses, to not give up quite yet. There had to be a way out, she thought. With fair pay, free housing, free training, and travels that she was even excited about, she knew talking Ethen out of this was becoming nearly impossible. Maybe this is for the best, she thought. Looking past the officers in front of her, she could see and hear soldiers running in line and being yelled at. She was about to grab Ethen by the hand and pull him away when it became their turn to talk.

“Next!” the recruitment soldier yelled.

“We’re here to join Queen Cilla’s army. I overheard and it all sounds great. What do you think Kara?” Ethen turned in excitement to confirm.

“Well, I…” Kara was cut off.

“I’m sorry young lad, you are too young and far too skinny. I’m not sure you could even hold a blade properly. You’d be more of a liability. The Queen does not desire blood to be spilled by those who cannot defend themselves. Maybe in a year or two.” The officer smiled. “I hope that the rest of your generation is as brave as you are.”

“But I practice with my sword all day. I only had a wooden one, but I swear I could defend myself. Please sir,” Ethen pleaded.

“I’m sorry son. We will not accept boys your age…” his gaze went to Kara. “Or ladies. I’m sorry. Try again next year.”

The officer looked past Ethen to another young man looking to get some answers about recruitment. Kara tried hard to hold back her excitement just as she tried to pretend that she was bummed out. All she could do next was to say she was sorry.

“Give me a break. You’re not sorry,” Ethen scowled as he walked off.

“You’re right. I’m not sorry because I didn’t do anything. But what if this means we’re not supposed to join some stupid army. I honestly don’t remember ever having this much money before. Let’s go get something to eat and we’ll talk about it. Let’s do something we both want to do. You smell that? I’m about to faint if I don’t get something in me soon.”

“Okay,” Ethen sighed.

Kara wanted to skip her way along the harbor’s shops but kept her pace down to a jolly walk. She felt like this deserved a celebration.

“What are you hungry for? Whatever you want little brother. Let’s treat ourselves. Come on Ethen. This doesn’t have to be as bad as you’re making it. You heard the officer. It’s like you don’t care that you could get killed.” Kara reached around Ethen’s shoulder to bring him closer so she could tickle him on his side, forcing a smile.

“Stop it!” Ethen’s lips turned back into a frown.

“I saw a smile.”

Ethen held firm.

“Never mind, you can’t smile. You’re not allowed to. That’s right, *don’t smile.”* Kara got into Ethen’s face. “You better not smile, little brother. You smile and I swear you’ll be sorry.”

Ethen couldn’t last any longer as he finally gave in as his lips curved upward.

“I hate it when you do that,” Ethen said, pushing her away.

“Cheer up with ya? For me? You truly can’t think of any good reason *not* to join the military?” Kara said.

“I guess you’re right. I just want to make a difference in the world,” Ethen said.

“I know what you mean.” Kara glanced at the band playing music in the center of the town.

“They’re pretty good. Hey you should see if they’ll buy your songs,” Ethen suggested.

“Yeah, they’re really good. Actually, too good. I’m sure they wouldn’t be interested in my songs,” Kara stated.

“Oh, come on. Your songs are good,” Ethen pressed.

“Ethen stop!” Kara glanced inside one of the shops. “That’s Marx. He’s the one that tied up all those guys.”

Kara started thinking to herself. She immediately thought of the magical emblem that he supposedly carried. She thought how much that item must be worth if all those men were hired to achieve it. She figured she’d keep her intentions to herself as ways to interact with Marx came to mind. Ethen unknowingly helped her out.

“I wonder if he could train us,” Ethen said.

“I bet he could. You know, I’m sure Hallbert has a mind to steal that item that fat man said he was carrying. What if we warned him? What if we asked him to train us for compensation?”

“You think that would work?” Ethen asked.

“Doesn’t hurt to try. Does this mean, at least, we know where we’re eating because I’m about to eat my own hair if we don’t pick soon,” Kara said.

“Sure, let’s go,’ Ethen replied.

The siblings walked in and were greeted by a suspicious hostess. “Hi. Can I um help you?”

“Table for two *ma’am*,” Kara said with an attitude.

“Sure, right this way.” The hostess walked them to a table near the back.

Kara saw that Marx was engaged in a conversation with a young man. Empty plates and bowls told her they had been there for a while. She was pleased to see several empty glasses as well. Anything that might impair Marx brought her closer to claiming that emblem for herself.

“You know Eddy?” the waitress asked catching Kara’s stare. “They’ve been here all day talking. Let me know if you need anything,” the hostess said as she turned to walk away; Kara grabbed her.

“We won’t need any time. I’ll have anything fried,” Kara said.

“And I’ll have that barbeque beef,” Ethen said right after.

“Fried squid is one of our top dishes sold.” The hostess gave an awkward glance. “I’m sorry but can I see payment first? We’ve had some come in who eat and run.”

Rolling her eyes, Kara showed her more than enough to pay. “Friend squid sounds great. Also, you got any dessert?”

“We have strawberry custard pie.”

“We’ll have two of those as well. Here payment up front. Any chance we can get that pie served first?” Kara handed her a steel coin. “A red. For your troubles.”

The hostess pretended to show appreciation before she put in the order and returned to the front of the diner.

“You going to talk to him?” Ethen asked.

“I’ll make sure he doesn’t leave. I feel like I need to eat first. The smell in here has me feeling lightheaded.”

Ethen nodded in agreement. The pie was served and was eaten almost as quickly as it was set down.

“I’m sure Hallbert has plans to try to get that necklace. Marx probably has no idea that anyone would say anything about it. Or at least doesn’t think anyone would believe what they heard. Like Hallbert said, magical items are pretty rare. I don’t know how many here in Laneloon Hallbert knows and can get the word out. But if he’s staying at *The Gist* tonight, that will give him time to plot and tell others. All he would need to do…” Kara was cut off.

“Look, it’s Rifi and Kagu,” Ethen said.

Marx saw the same unusual pair he saw the night before as Eddy noticed the goblin shackled by a lily elf and pointed them out. Rifi took notice right back and stopped his steady pace.

“Forget Hallbert, Rifi’s just as capable, if not more so, to steal something on Marx’s person.” Kara stopped to think before she reached into her satchel and pulled out her parchment and pencil. “We can’t let them see that we’re here to warn Marx. Go distract them. Go say ‘hi’ or something.”

“I know those two. Well not actually. I saw them miles east of here,” Marx said.

“It’s not every day you see goblin and libby elf,” Eddy slurred.

“You inebriated?” Marx asked. “It’s not even dark. You should slow down.”

“Ah, I’m alright. How many have you had?” Eddy asked.

“Two.” Marx answered as he noticed Ethen. “Wait, I’ve seen him too.”

“Can I help you miss missy?” Eddy said.

Marx turned to see Kara standing over him.

“Kara? Has the entire hairy barrel come to Laneloon?” Marx asked.

“Just read this.” Kara laid a note on the table and walked to greet Rifi and Kagu.

Marx read:

*We met that bunch of mercenaries on the way here. There are others after your necklace. Meet me out back after I’m done eating and keep that thing safe.*

Marx cursed. He didn’t think anyone would believe what those men had to say, or that they would say anything themselves. What a mess I made, he thought.

“What’s that note say?” Eddy asked.

“Never mind.”

“You filthy weasel,” Eddy said with a wink and a laugh.

“You were saying something about your horse.” Marx veered the conversation back to what it was.

“Poor Betsy. She died. Poor thing was running on her last leg after dad passed. Now I don’t have a way to get my supplies from Fallwell. Just one more problem. Not sure how my father did it. Running a diner isn’t as easy as you might think.” Eddy went on about overhead calculations and how his lack of sleep will end up killing him like he was sure it did his dad.

Marx eventually stopped listening as his thoughts were forcefully dragged to what Kara knew. He had no choice but to wait until she was done eating.

Chapter Four

Set sail to bail

“Hey Rifi, what are you doing here?” Kara asked as she stepped out of *the squirming squid.*

“Just walking my goblin. What are *you* guysdoing here? I thought you were looking to get recruited,” Rifi said.

“We were turned down. I’m too young and too skinny.” Ethen kicked the dirt, not hiding his disappointment.

“Ethone no meat. Bones show here,” Kagu pointed at Ethen midsection, agreeing that he was far too skinny.

“I’m sure it’s for the best. I see you chose The Squirming Squid of all places to eat today.” Rifi’s eyes quickly glanced at the window that showed Marx on the other side.

“Yeah, what of it?” Kara challenged.

Rifi lowered his voice and displayed a different mouth pattern than what he was saying, a skill known for thieves to throw off those who have mastered lip reading. “Nothing other than we want in. I’m sure Hallbert is already putting together a team to be on the lookout for speedy there. Which means that we might have the advantage. The only thing Hallbert bests me at is knowing the right people. So, rather than let him take the spoils, we have the chance to spoil ourselves. What do you say?”

Kara looked to Ethen with a slightly raised eyebrow; a sign only Ethen recognized.

“Oh, all right. Look, I met him last night. We spoke before you even came in. Which means Ethen and I get sixty percent,” Kara said.

“You don’t have the ranking to purpose mid-majority,” Rifi replied.

“Not before now I hadn’t. Look, we don’t want him to get suspicious.” Kara laughed and playfully shook Rifi’s shoulder as if she had just heard a joke.

“Fine, what’s the plan *boss?”* Rifi asked.

“Just let me spend some time with him. I’ll give the signal or send a note with more details of where he is staying.” Kara raised her voice. “You two take care. I’ll probably see you back at the barrel.”

“Barrel bring grums and dizzy face,” Kagu said, grabbing his stomach.

Rifi said his farewell as he pulled on Kagu’s chains to start moving forward.

Ethen and Kara reentered to find their food waiting for them. Kara was happy that part of her plan started with filling her belly and giving her brain a break before it decided what was best.

“Oh, brother. When was the last time we ate like this?” Kara sat and immediately started to fill her mouth.

Ethen didn’t answer until he filled his mouth first and swallowed.

“When mom was alive,” Ethen replied.

The sting of their mom’s death was so normalized that it didn’t usually cause a stir. However, the taste of the delicious food compared to their mom’s cooking, or lack-their-of, brought Kara’s failure of being a proper provider into light. Kara dropped her fork. The sound brought with it the realization of what Ethen had said.

“I didn’t mean…” Ethen’s heart sank.

He knew Kara, failure or not, did her best to look after him. Having separate fathers, Kara was taken by her father when their mother decided that she didn’t love him anymore. Years later, their mother remarried and bore a boy, Ethen. At the young age of ten, Kara found out that she had a three-year-old brother. As she gained the ability to sneak out and visit him and her mother, she realized that Ethen’s father had left them to love another woman. Depressed and falling ill, their mother eventually died when Ethen was only eight, Kara fifteen.

Kara tried her best to convince her father to take Ethen in when he had nowhere proper to go. There was a chance that Ethen could have been taken in by someone that would have looked after him. Just as there was a chance that he could have been abandoned and starved to death, something she heard happens to some unfortunate young ones. Her father refused, despising the idea to have the hurtful reminder in human form of his once beloved who eloped with another man. This brought her father’s character into a light that she had never seen before. An answer to the question why her mom left him in the first place. Finally, Kara got the nerve to run away, find Ethen and care for him herself. They ran off to the villages outside the capital that they grew up in, Elmester, who helped raise him. A turn of events later had them stealing to survive and eventually landing them at *the hairy barrel.*

Kara didn’t mean to drop her fork. Her daily struggle was avoiding certain truths so when harsh reality came knocking, she sometimes froze. At this moment, her fear was that she wouldn’t be able to take another bite, guilting her brother, hurting him even more. She picked up the fork.

“It’s okay Ethen, I mean it.” Kara picked at her food.

“I know you do your best and I know you told Rifi what he wanted to hear. Just like I know that part of you wants that necklace for yourself. So, you can take care of us. But I don’t think Vonnie knows what he was talking about. I think deep down, you really are sick of lying and stealing. We don’t know that man over there but when I saw him, I saw an honest man. Something that sticks out,” Ethen said.

Kara thought of the first sign that Marx was, indeed, an honest man and how she first felt about it. Part of her thought that he must be living in a naïve state of mind, unaware of the world’s cruel intentions. But another part of her nudged her to think otherwise. Perhaps it was the world that was unaware of truths that existed that she had known little about.

“Vonnie was right about something. You are very wise, little brother.”

Kara made up her mind then and there. A decision that not only brought back her appetite but lifted a heavy burden she wore daily. She decided she was actually going to be honest with this man, Marx. To warn him and do everything she could to protect him and his magical necklace. Who knows, she thought, maybe he will end up training Ethen like Ethen wants. Either way, it revealed what truth she decided to live by from this moment further and for that, she was relieved. She turned to look at Marx who just happened to turn his head as well. A look they shared told her that it seemed she gained his trust. Something that concreted her choice even further. She turned back, smiled, and told her brother, “You’re right, no more lies,” and continued devouring the food on her plate.

After her and Ethen were finished, she looked to see the man at Marx’s table get up as a waitress cleaned up the used dishes after them. Marx’s eyes asked Kara if this was a good time to talk. She gulped a glass of nearby water, wiped her mouth with the back of her hand and nodded. Marx pointed to the back entrance; Kara agreed with a stance that was leaning toward the same direction. The three met in the back, next to the kitchen, as Eddy granted them access to the back patio that usually only permitted the workers to enjoy their breaks. The patio was empty.

“Hi Kara, and you are Ethen? Sorry, I overheard you talk yesterday at the tavern,” Marx extended his hand.

“Yes sir. And you’re Marx,” Ethen said.

“What is it you know?” Marx asked Kara.

“That you have some magical necklace, that it gives you super speed. Or at least that is what Hallbert guessed. Which by the way, is why you’re in trouble. He knows this city well and knows enough people in it to get what he wants. Unless you feel like tying up a hundred thieves, I’d say you’re in a good amount of trouble.”

“Why are you helping me?” Marx asked.

“Because we want you to train us?” Ethen quickly intervened anything his sister might try to concoct.

“That’s right. We want out of this town and out of this life. We steal and lie for a living, and we want to change. We can help you escape or advise what to look out for. Maybe you train my little brother, and you get me somewhere I can pursue my song writing,” Kara said. “It was, after all, *your* advice to start somewhere other than the barrel and Laneloon is no longer an option. What do you say?”

Marx smiled, went to open his mouth when Kara interrupted him.

“Either way, we are happy to help. I’m doing this to clear my conscience, you might say,” Kara said.

Ethen looked at her amazed. He wasn’t so sure she meant what she said in saying ‘*no more lies.”* He was happy to be convinced she meant it.

“I first want to thank you for your honesty *if* you are indeed being honest. *And* if you are, I will greatly consider your proposal,” Marx said.

“Really? Just like that?” Kara said.

“Historical events at times begin with moments *just like that.* I told you before, I tend to go where the wind takes me. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I need to speak with my horse. Meet me in the circle across the street in a few hours,” Marx said.

“Okay. Hey, be careful. Remember what I told you. These guys are everywhere and have more means to get what they want than just an average pickpocket. Understand?” Kara said.

“I’ll manage. Thanks.” Marx walked inside.

As he made his way back in, he saw Eddy. Eddy said that he was going home, which was a second story attached to the back end of the building. He showed him the way toward the entrance and invited him to visit anytime. Marx told him how happy he was that they caught up and that they ought to do it again sometime. As he made his way outside, he heard the last bit of the last song as *the fishy school* said good day and the people around them cheered. Marx greeted Ages.

“Hey boy, sorry about that. Saw an old friend. Actually, in a way, I met a new friend. Unfortunately, the friend I had originally hoped for had passed on to the next life.”

Ages snorted as if to give his condolences.

“I appreciate the sympathy. Pete will be missed but his own offspring is a spitting image and Pete’s gift to the world.” A yellow dress caught Marx’s eye.

There she was again. The same woman he saved and the same woman that visited him in his dream before he first opened his eyes to this same day. She went along with the crowd as it dispersed. Her dark red hair came alive in the sun, brightening with a metallic shimmer. Marx couldn’t help but be caught staring, as if he hadn’t noticed she was walking right toward him. Finally, he was caught as their eyes met. Unfamiliar at the embarrassment he felt, he turned in the most obvious way. He instantly turned back to see if she noticed. Her smile affirmed that she did.

“Are you following me?” she asked.

“I suppose in a way I am. But not in the way you might imagine. Those guys are pretty good.” Marx nodded in the way of the stage.

“Ah, they are fun. Sorry I was off putting last night. I should have given my name. It’s Elet. Um, Mark, is it?” Elet said.

“Marx,” Marx corrected.

“That’s right. Thank you again for saving me. I’m still haunted by the thought of what would have happened if you didn’t show up,” Elet’s eyes expressed her gratitude.

“Think nothing of it. I’m sorry I wasn’t there before, as to prevent the haunted thoughts.”

“I’ll be okay. If anything, it will leave me better prepared next time. Believe me, the lesson was learned.”

The two sat staring at each other long enough that the silence was unavoidably noticeable. Elet’s smile added a comfort that added a level of comfort.

“I’m sorry Marx, but I am leaving this place this evening. I know this is sudden, but I must ask, are you bound here at Laneloon? I am in need of an escort up the northern strait. A man of your skills could come in handy. That is if you are capable of doing what you did again.” Elet paused.

Marx was taken aback by the question.

“I’m so sorry. I shouldn’t have assumed you are some sword-for-hire. It’s just after last night and the crew I have decided to sail with… It’s just that I now have reason to be cautious and something tells me I can trust you. Figured there is no harm is asking. I can pay more than enough for your time and travel.”

Marx wasn’t often surprised by what he believed was the god’s way of offering him a clear sign but with the dream and Kara’s warning to leave this place, things were aligned almost too perfectly for him to say no. He did have a few loose ends he must address.

“Where are you needing to go?” Marx asked.

“Stumpford.”

“Friends with halflings?”

Elet laughed. “Not exactly. We will be going about five miles inland from there.

“I am willing *if* I can bring two with me. They will not be any trouble. One is a girl, nineteen, and another is her younger brother, about twelve. No more than a moment before I came out to talk to Ages here, I had been offered a similar request. Will that be a problem?” Marx asked.

“I don’t mind. The crew I’m sailing with, they aren’t the most prestigious bunch. In fact, quite the contrary. But they are the only ones traveling in the direction I need to go as the sun sets.”

“That’s fantastic. The prestigious can be rather boring. No need to worry ma’am. They will fair just fine. Then it’s almost settled.” Marx gave Ages a sad look before turning toward *the squirming squid.* “If you don’t mind, you must excuse me.”

“Do what you must. I’ll be at the southern docks.” She looked down at her bright dress. “I’ll be hard to miss. No later than dusk now.”

“Yes ma’am.” Marx assured.

Marx arrived at the door that Eddy advised was his home and gave it a knock. Eddy answered.

“Hey there. I wanted to give you a gift. You said that you were down a horse. Well, as fate would have it, I need to part with my loyal companion, Ages. Will you promise me you will take good care of him?” Marx asked.

Eddy, surprised, promised he would.

“He enjoys conversations and is a good listener.”

Eddy smiled as if Marx was joking. Marx’s stare assured him he wasn’t. Eddy promised again, this time in understanding. The two conversed about some of the adventures Ages and Marx shared and ended with Eddy’s complete appreciation in both the gift and the passion Marx had for Eddy’s new horse. Eddy joined Marx as he returned to Ages to say his good-byes.

\* \* \* \* \*

“You think Marx is really going to train me?” Ethen asked.

The siblings walked along the shops.

“I don’t know. He seemed pretty serious. He is unlike anyone I have ever met.” Kara grinned as one shop in particular came into view. Turning her head toward Ethen she widened her eyes and grinned.

“What is it?” Ethen asked.

“You need a sword to train with. And we have enough to get you one. It won’t be anything fancy but a shy better than the wooden one you had.”

“Really?” Ethen said.

“To make up for all the poor meals over the years.” Kara said, pushing Ethen playfully.

“Stop it. You have done fine looking after me. And I’ll never forget what you gave up to do so,” Ethen said, shoving her back before initiating a race with a sprint.

Kara ran after him. Turning into the shop they both ran right into a wall named Hallbert. He towered over the two as if he anticipated their decision to enter. The straight face he wore provided an uneasy smile.

“Hallbert? Good to see ya,” Kara said.

“You guys getting recruited?” Hallbert asked.

“Ethen is too young for recruitment,” Kara said.

“That’s too bad. Now that you ain’t joining no army, you interested in some work? I asked around and that *item,* those buffoons were after, is worth a high bit more than what I originally assumed. Enough to let you guys in on the profit. Even enough to get you two a cottage in the woods if you play your cards right. Interested?” Hallbert’s dead stare was known to be consistently unmoved. He made it easier by adding: “We know you spoke with him out back of that diner. Rifi was the one who told me. He figured he’d tell me your guy’s alignment to gain some information. He is tracking him as we speak. You will not be getting mid-majority, but I assure you, you’ll be getting more than you originally thought and not nearly as much work. What do you say?”

Kara looked at Ethen and before he had a chance to give away his own answer, she spoke.

“Ethen, that is everything we’ve ever wanted. Plus, we are in over our heads,” Kara’s eyebrow rose slightly.

“Our own cottage? No foolin?” Ethen asked.

“Boy, with the amount I was told that thing is worth, you can buy two cottages, one for each of you. Here, to sweeten the deal, I get you this sword.” Hallbert placed his hand on a short sword hung by his side. “I know you guys gained his trust. Something those naked men in the woods never had.”

Ethen looked at Kara who just shrugged her shoulders as if to suggest to *go for it.*

“*And* this shield?” Ethen pointed to a small shield.

“You little swindler, ha. You drive a hard bargain. Fine, the shield as well but *only* if you get him to sleep in *The Gist* tonight. Deal?”

“That shouldn’t be too hard. He said he was looking for an inn to rest in tonight. I think I can sway his decision. Any chance you could throw in this blade?” Kara said with a smirk, pointing at a knife decorated with ruby roses.

\* \* \* \* \*

The sun drifted across the sky in its last hour of the day. Shadows that inherited most of the harbor’s city told of the upcoming darkness. On the dock’s side of the city, the sun was still shining on those under it. Most of the sailors tied up and secured their ships while those in smaller boats were taking turns in line to exit and carry their boats on the docks that allowed them to. On one dock at the southern part of the harbor, one ship, about thirty feet in length, named *The Path of Righteousness* was getting ready to make sail. Two of the ship’s sailors were making the preparations while the captain’s eyes were searching the streets. They rested at ease when they landed on a beautiful woman in a yellow dress. She approached him.

“Thank you for waiting, Captain Larker. If you don’t mind waiting a little while longer, I have company coming as well.” Elet handed him some coin. “For any extra trouble.”

Seeing gold, he smiled, showing his teeth with their own gold as if welcoming home a missed relative. His bright blue eyes shun more brightly in contrast to his extremely dark skin; a rare feature that mirrored his character. A combination of matted and braided hair was tied together, hung over one side of his shoulders and fell past his knees. Each braid was decorated with beads that told a story of his past ventures across the seas. His worn leather vest showed patches that were ripped and torn, while underneath was a shirt  that was on the verge of unthreading. Where his clothes failed to convince anyone of his expertise, he made up for it in confidence in both language and posture.

“Please missy, call me Skye,” Captain Skye Larker said. His eyes reminded those of his name as the bright sky behind them matched.

“Excuse me, Skye. Well, I’m all gathered up. My guest should arrive any moment. Would you mind?” Elet smiled at her baggage of belongings laid next to the small ship.

“My pleasure.” Skye said softly before he snapped his order, loud enough to startle Elet. “Kork! Come get the lady here’s bags.”

A gnome arrived, well muscular, as far as gnomes go. Large eyes, nose and mouth, gnome’s facial expressions always appeared exaggerated compared to the other races. This gnome’s eyebrows furrowed, and his bottom lips balled at the rather loud command. Grey hair gave away his later years of at least two hundred, but he had a pep that was spry enough to follow his order. Elet, noticing his height disadvantage of three feet, she interjected.

“Oh, allow me,” she said.

“Oh missy, I wouldn’t…” Skye was cut off.

“I got it!” Kork said defensively. “You’d think we gnomes are more useless than a sack of rice.”

“I’m terribly sorry. I didn’t mean…”

Kork’s stare told her to save it.

Skye laughed as he stood directly in front of Kork to raise his hand toward the ship. “After you missy.”

In the center of the town’s circle, Kara and Ethen met with Marx. Marx gave Ages a last farewell and a hug. Ages snorted his goodbyes and lightly stomped the ground as if to wave as they parted. Marx advised the siblings that he would agree to their arrangement and of his sudden plans to go up the northern strait on a ship with someone he had met the night before. He explained that this was the god’s way of giving them a way out of this city and their unlawful way of life for good.

Careful not to be too excited and looking around to see if any spy’s eyes were on her, Kara spoke softly. “There are more people involved than I thought. The sooner we get out of here, the better,” Kara said.

“I have really made a mess of things. I should have fled. My rambunctious behavior never did serve me well. The item I carry is most precious. It cannot fall into the wrong hands. You must not say anything to anyone any further. The necklace and its secret must remain safe. I assume the thieves in this town don’t have the slightest idea what they are agreeing to,” Marx said.

“As long as it pays well, they’d sell their own mother’s medicine,” Kara replied.

As they neared the southern docks, it wasn’t hard for Marx to spot Elet in her yellow dress. She was on a ship and in view but looking away from him, facing the sun setting. As Marx approached the gangway that allowed access he was greeted by a dark-skinned man with striking blue eyes.

“You missy’s company? We’d been waiting for ye. Ah, little whippers,” Skye said as he eyed Ethen and Kara. “All welcome. Come now. Haste is key.”

“Much appreciated,” Marx said as he bowed. “I’m Marx, this is Ethen and Kara.”

“Captain Skye Larker, at your service,” Skye bowed.

Elet must not have heard the introduction as she still stood, her back to Marx.

“Elet, we made it. I have some friends I’d like you to meet,” Marx said.

A beautiful green and red bird flew from in front of Elet as she turned and smiled.

“Were you just holding a bird?” Kara asked, amused.

“The birds and I understand each other. Perks I have acquired over time. They have advised the waters and skies are clear up ahead. Not that they have to be on the strait but at least it means we get to enjoy the stars tonight.” Elet came to Kara offering her hands that cupped around Kara’s. “I sure am glad I now have a lady friend. No offense sir Marx.”

“None taken. I understand completely,” Marx replied.

“Nice to meet you. I’m Kara. We’ve never been on a ship before,” Kara said.

“And who is this strapping young man? A sword and a shield? I didn’t know I was paying for two bodyguards.” Elet gripped Ethen’s shoulder. “Worth every expense, I’m sure.”

“I’m Ethen. Marx is goin to train me. Hope you don’t mind,” Ethen said.

“No at all,” Elet replied as they all heard chained links make a racket as the anchor was being raised.

Kara’s heart thumped at the idea of actually leaving behind her life that consisted of a clutter of lies, struggles to feed her and her brother and stealing to do so. She was afraid to look back in case Hallbert was there staring, which made her look all the more. Instead of seeing Hallbert, she saw Rifi and Kagu who took full notice of her.

None of them took notice of a boy at the age of around five, in bright orange trousers, running up to a nearby guard and offer him a piece of paper. On it was a drawing of a dark-skinned man with blue eyes, the blue ink was something that the guard had never seen on a declaration of arrest before. The words that stood out were *piracy,* a reward of five hundred gold coin and the option to bring in the prisoner, and any persons in his company, dead or alive. The boy pointed to Skye who was off his ship, looking at it from certain angles before leaving the port for good. The guard quickly signaled his comrades who gathered around the ship. Skye turned just in time to notice the number of guards and his chances of escaping becoming bare to none.

“Hoist those sails! Or we spend the night in a cell or the gallows,” Captain Skye Larker yelled at Kork over the guard’s whistles being blown.

“Sail. We only have one,” Kork corrected as he raised it.

Skye lifted the gangway just in time. A set of guards had already brought their own; one much longer, with hooks at the end to stop the small ship from moving. They were successful. Soon the guards were making their way on board as Kork excitedly smiled. He grabbed what looked like a bomb and rubbed its wick. It started to fizzle before he rolled it under the uninvited men in uniform that were about to jump on deck.

“I’d stay back if I were you,” Kork advised Elet and the rest.

The bomb burst but without explosion. Instead, thick smoke quickly rose from under the guards, giving them no warning not to inhale it. Fear stricken, the guards started to feel a sudden change in reality. First, was the feeling of something slithering under their skin, next came the warped perception of gravity and finally the hallucinations.

“This is my favorite part,” Kork said, trying hard to hold back his laughter.

Fireworks shot out as the men screamed in horror and then jumped into the water beneath them.

“The gangway,” Skye yelled as he tried his best to detach it and avoid the smoke from Kork’s contraption that he had just kicked to the side.

“We’re hooked. What have I taught you about leverage?” Kork said annoyed.

Using two knives, one of his and one he quickly took from Skye’s boot, he placed them under the hooks and pulled back. The hooks separated themselves just enough for Kork to fling them off causing the gangway, and any guards still on it, falling to the water below. Kork then lifted himself up to see the guards in the water flinging around in utter distress. Giving him a good chuckle, Kork was forced to drop back down. Skye snickered before turning to another one of his mates, the only one not yet introduced to Elet and her guests.

“Phin, do you mind?” Skye asked.

Phin, a man in his late fifties who shared an attire similar to Skye’s, started chanting. His black and grey straggly hair on his head and face both blew back as the ship swiftly departed. Kara looked back to see Rifi and Kagu’s shoot her a confused looked. Kara simply shrugged her shoulders, shifted her gaze, allowing the wind to blow directly on her face as the ship sailed into the open sea.

Chapter Five

Captain Skye Larker’s fate & mates

“Where are you taking us? You are supposed to take us up north, not south!” Elet shouted.

“Need to make a slight detour to *Rimcaster* first. I’ll make good on our deal,” Skye replied as he looked back at Laneloon’s harbor.

“Why were they after you? What did you do?” Elet pressed.

“I can’t honestly remember. Coulda been a number of things from my past. I wasn’t always a cutting gentleman as I am now. My most humble apologies missy. I’ll knock off forty percent for the few days of delay. But I assure you, still, that I will get you where you intend to go,” Skye reached for his spyglass to study the guard’s movement.

Elet stepped next to Marx and spoke in a whisper. “You may have to do something. We might end up getting hanged along with them.”

Marx nodded in understanding and went for his sword.

“Not so fast.” Kork uncorked a bottle, while pulling his arm back, readying the liquid inside to freely splash on Marx. “This is that same chemical that turned those fearless guards into screaming children. Actually, it’s an extract, about ten times more powerful. All is well. Just listen to the captain. We’re just making a quick stop for the next few nights and please drop your blade and kick them over. All of you.”

After Kara shot Marx a look, he slightly shook his head and did as he was told. He had no intention of using the necklace if he could help it. The rest followed.

“You will all be alright. If we do get caught, I’ll make sure to let the govies know you’re innocent. I may even tie you up for appearances,” Skye said as he kept studying the docks.

“*Is it* only appearances?” Marx asked.

“Here they come!” Skye yelled, ignoring Marx. With a glance and seeing Marx’s persistent concern he responded. “I understand your position. All that you ask is you understand mine. They mean to hang me and my crew. Now whether or not we deserve such extreme punishment is up for debate. I say the punishment outweighs the crime as they would strongly disagree. However, we will either be stripped of our right to speak, or we might make a strong enough case, and in that circumstance our argument will be dismissed either way. You understand? It’s not right and they call it justice. Although you may yield to the govies, I yield only to the gods.”

“How long can your friend there aid this ship’s speed? It’s our only chance to out sail them. Magic alone is worth the noose or worse,” Marx said in a tone that shared Skye’s concern.

Skye eyed Marx and smiled. “We have the gods, and we have our wit. They haven’t failed me yet. Does this mean we can trust each other? I swear it, to the best of my ability, I will plead or prove your innocence or fight to the death trying. I trust you will be fine. Laneloon’s govies are much more merciful than the rest of the world’s.”

“You can trust me,” Marx assured.

“You don’t mind that we keep your steel, do you? Keep my mate’s minds at ease.”

“As long as we don’t need them, I don’t see why not. I do have means to train the boy there some time later so please keep that in mind.” Marx went to stand next to Elet.

“What’s going on?” she asked.

“Looks like we are going to *Rimcaster*,” Marx said. “They *will* hang these men and might even turn in that wizard to the high council where I hear they do much worse. I’m not convinced that they are guilty and I’m not sure we’re in a position to barter. Best we stay on their good side. If we get caught, Skye assured me he’ll plead our innocence.”

“And you think they’ll listen?”

“They did take our weapons and I have no arrest record, do you?”

“No.”

“Then all we can do is hope. But I do believe survival is best on this course.”

An hour or so passed since the veil of night crossed the sky. Phin, exhausted, rested at the back of the ship as the ship slowed down. Skye went to give his support.

“Good job, Phin. How far did that spell take us?”

“About fifty miles,” Phin answered between his heavy breaths.

“Will that give us the edge we need?”

Phin smiled and Skye nodded in return.

A couple more hours passed. The only light came from one of two of Iris’s moons that drifted over the northern part of the sky, directly over a large ship that pursued them. The many white sails were nothing but a small speck when they were first seen but were becoming larger by the moment, clearly indicating that they were gaining on them. Elet’s bird friend was correct in advising her that the sky would remain clear. The stars shined brighter at sea, away from any city lights at these late hours. Skye had no need for his compass when the stars were present. Finally, after making his calculations that mainly included the ship’s speed that chased them, he spoke with Phin and Kork in private before he walked up to Marx and Elet.

“I have spoken with my mates. We do not intend to put you or your company in any more danger than we already have. I am sorry for the inconvenience that we have caused already.” He looked at Marx. “We will not make it to Rimcaster fast enough and so maybe it will be best that *you* tie *me* up*,”* Captain Skye Larker said. “You will need to convince them you overthrew us and lit this here lantern to alert them properly.” Skye lit a nearby lantern and turned the knob, raising the wick to its brightest potential. “We are tired of running. Maybe this is the sign we needed to finally face our past.”

“If we do this, we will not be able to convince them of a fair trial,” Marx said.

Marx looked troubled at the fate the three faced, especially the wizard who appeared to be a nice enough fellow. He had heard some of the gruesome stories of those who were caught practicing the ancient, magical arts. None of what he heard done to the wizards he considered at all justified. Part of the reason he cursed himself for letting his necklace’s abilities out into the world.

“I have spoken to my mates, and we all agree we must face what we have been running from. Our fate, as it always is, is in the god’s hands. Those ships have cannons. Not sure if you’d seen those in action but they will tear apart an entire city, let alone this small vessel. Our decision is final so promise me not to intervene.” Skye’s tone was firm, and Marx nodded.

“I’m sorry missy, we weren’t able to get you where you needed to go.” Skye said.

Elet’s face softened at such bravery. Perhaps her view of these men was misplaced. Still, she had a schedule to keep. At least now she could return to Laneloon and try again.

“I’m sure I’ll figure something out when we get back,” Elet said.

“I’m going to go spend the rest of my free time with my mates. Don’t forget your weapons. Give me just a few moments before you tie us up?” Skye turned and walked toward the back of the ship.

“Are they really going to be hanged?” Kara asked.

“Unfortunately, the trouble they put those Laneloon guards in, I’m sure of it,” Marx said.

“We have to save them,” Ethen urged.

“I’m not so sure we can. Plus, Skye was pretty adamant that I wouldn’t intervene,” Marx said.

The four sat in silence trying to think this situation through. Kara, Ethen, and Marx knew that trouble wasn’t just found back at Laneloon for Skye and his mates but for them as well. Marx was the only one who knew how important it was to not let his necklace fall into the wrong hands. He excused himself to the back end of the ship, got on his knees and prayed. With Skye’s request and the trouble they faced, the decision should have been pretty easy to make. Still, Marx didn’t feel right about letting them hang and when he prayed, he confirmed his conviction. As he looked directly in front of him, he saw the ship was well within view. It was then he got up and walked to the back where Skye and his mates were huddled close to each other, out of sight from the large approaching vessel.

“It’s time to tie us up. Hurry now.” Skye hit a pile of rope to his side.

“Okay, but I want to help you escape once we get back. I too, only yield to the gods. I feel they want me to help you,” Marx said.

“I’d be lying to say that I wasn’t touched, truly. But I asked you not to intervene and I, *we* mean it. And you agreed,” Skye replied.

“Please, just let me help,” Marx pressed while Skye only smiled back and shook his head.

Kork and Phin shook their heads as well in agreement. After accepting their request Marx agreed one last time before he quickly tied them up.

“You’re pretty good at that. I can’t move a muscle,” Kork said, impressed.

“May the god’s show mercy,” Marx said before he turned and started waving his hands in the other ship’s direction and spoke to Elet, Ethen, and Kara in a low voice. “Raise your hands. They might shoot you. Let me do the talking.”

He yelled across. “Don’t shoot. We took over the ship and tied up the ones who escaped. We lit this lantern to show you where we are.”

“Keep your hands raised and come as close as you can. No sudden movements. Where are the others?” a soldier yelled back.

“They are tied up in the back of the ship,” Marx advised.

“Stay right where you are. Rest your hands over the bow. We’re coming on board.”

Everyone did as they were told as the much larger ship crept next to theirs. Crossbows were pointed and a gangway was hooked as soldiers came on board with swords in hand. One unarmed man walked up to Marx.

“They’re in the back you say?” he said.

Marx nodded as the soldier’s finger pointed, his eyes never leaving Marx. Armed soldiers ran to the back.

“They’re here sir. And they’re tied up,” a soldier yelled.

The one whose eyes were still on Marx smiled.

“Impressive. We will have questions for you on board.” He turned to the rest. “Each of you. If you don’t mind, that way.” He pointed to the gangway.

Once each was on board the larger ship, several crossbows were pointed at them. The captain, singled out by his uniform of hanging metals, waited until they were brought in front of him.

“Please hand over your weapons if you don’t mind,” the captain commanded as Marx and Ethen handed over their weapons that they had just gotten back not more than a few moments before.

“We detained those men. I had a chance to seize them, and I took it. I am efficient in battle sir,” Marx said.

“Then we better shackle *you* up. You will have your hearing back at the harbor. Pip, put them all in the brig,” the captain said to the one who stared down Marx.

“Aye, Captain,” Pip replied.

Marx was about to protest when the captain made it obvious that their conversation had ended. He was then shackled and dragged away.

“Don’t worry,” Marx told Elet and Kara. “They can’t hurt us. Best we do as we’re told.”

Skye, Kork and Phin were pulled in front of the captain.

“Captain Skye Larker, is it? With features such as yours, I’m surprised you’ve gotten away this long. You will pay capital punishment for what you did in your past.” The captain grinned.

“And what is it I did?” Skye asked.

“Piracy, I don’t know all the specifics. Either way you will hang dead for what you did to my men back there. You’ve had a good long run. It has seemed that run has met its abrupt end.” The captain was enjoying the moment. “Now, who was it that cast that spell?”

They each remained silent.

“The quiet types huh? Each of you know very well the evil the wizards had on this world. We have ways of knowing and judgement carried out to those who dabble in such wickedness. Shackle them each and bind all their mouths. No more spells tonight. And do not spare any pain you might want to inflict before we get back. We aren’t allowed such pleasure at the harbor.” The captain flicked his wrist and turned away.

They walked down a few sets of stairs. On their way, any eyes who had a chance to stare did so. Marx saw one man treated poorly by the other crewmembers who used mockery and the nicknames *seagull’s shite,* and *swab.* He was the only one not in a uniform, wearing clothes below standard. The poor man found that he was suddenly in Pip’s and his prisoner’s way.

“Out of the way Jerry!” Pip yelled as Jerry quickly stepped to the side with a salute.

Down below, on the lowest deck was the brig. A place that shared buckets of urine and feces that had not yet been thrown overboard from the ship’s last voyage. A request to keep such filth onboard came from the captain who was now pleased to provide the brig some guests. The smell caused breaths to be held and hands to cover mouths. Marx tried again to protest to Pip by asking if this was necessary. Pip replied with silence and one last shove into Marx’s new cell. Once he was convinced that everyone was securely imprisoned, Pip turned. Walking up to the pair of guards at the bottom of the stairs he barked orders to ensure that they kept the prisoners caged until they made it back.

“Aye aye sir,” they replied nervously.

“Tight ship,” Marx said to Skye in the cell next to him.

Gagged, Skye shrugged as if to say, *what do you expect?*

Marx always knew that Iris’s world governments, or govies as Skye referred to them, weren’t perfect. He still thought them to be more good than bad. However, he was starting to find out that justice here appeared twisted. He wondered how deep this skewed view of morality went.

“Yuck! It smells worse than the barrel,” Kara said.

“Why do they have buckets of poos?” Ethen said, plugging his nose.

“Part of the treatment I’m sure,” Elet said as she turned to Marx. “You sure we’ll be treated fairly back on land?”

“I believe so,” Marx replied, although that idea was starting to dwindle.

“I wonder if Halbert will be mad that we took off,” Ethen said.

Kara didn’t want to think about what would happen back at the harbor. Either way it panned out, she thought maybe she was never meant to live another life. The cell she sat in represented the way she felt, trapped. She wondered if she never ran away to take care of Ethen maybe he would be better off. She’d be better off too, she thought. Sure, her dad wasn’t perfect, but he did provide food and shelter. Lost in the thoughts of *what-ifs,* Kara’s eyes stood still, staring into the black shadows across from her. She was so lost in thought that she almost didn’t notice two pairs of beady eyes that were seen by the reflection of the small amount of light down in the brig. Two faces came into view.

“Rifi? Kagu?” she said before cupping her mouth.

Ethen was the only one to notice her words. Kara quickly looked to see if the guards noticed and seeing that they remained as they were, she turned to Ethen. Nudging her head, she signaled that Ethen take a look. The darkness hid the lily elf and goblin but after staring long enough, Ethen saw them as well. Kara used what little sign language she knew to try to communicate. All that she should gather was that she was to remain still for now. Something to do with taking care of the guards first.

“What are you doing?” Marx asked Kara.

Kara shot him a look and placed her finger over her mouth to keep quiet. Marx looked into the shadows but didn’t see anything. After a few minutes he saw a foot, the size of a child, or a lily elf, briefly expose itself. He finally figured out what was happening.

“Kara, no,” Marx whispered. “If they try to help us escape, we *then* will be in trouble we can’t walk away from. I know our position seems dim, but you have to trust me…”

A sound came from the guards that hushed Marx up. It was the one they called Jerry. Seeing how he was treated up above, he halfway expected the guards to belittle him as well. However, they remained still. Jerry walked up to the cell that held Skye. Skye stood up and leaned against the door. Jerry pulled out a knife and cut loose the binding around his mouth. Marx immediately looked to the guards who still remained unmoved.

“Where are we?” Skye asked.

“We should be close enough. However, I haven’t heard or seen anything yet,” Jerry replied.

“Then why are you down here?” Skye asked annoyed.

“For orders. What do we do if we don’t engage?”

“Oh Joni, you have so little faith. We’ll engage. Now that you *are* down here. Is everything in place?” Skye asked.

“Yes sir.”

“Then we can’t risk getting found out yet. Go back up and double your rounds. Suspicion is our only weakness. And Joni, you’ve done great so far and assuming everything goes as planned, you’ll be ranked as boatswain. You’ve deserved it.” Skye closed his eyes and bowed his head in respect.

“Aye sir. Thank you, sir. You’ll receive the signal soon enough,” Joni said before he hustled passed the unmoved guards and up the stairs.

“Oui, Sammy,” Skye whispered loudly in the guard’s direction.

One of them turned. “Yes sir?”

“How’s your moms? Did she receive the medicine and payment?” Skye asked.

“Yes sir. I can’t thank you enough. She is better than ever,” Sammy said.

“Good to hear lad. I hear she is as sweet as a boiled sugar plum. Stay in character a wee bit more and you’ll be able to spend the rest of your days with her.”

“Aye sir,” Sammy said smiling.

Captain Skye Larker turned to see four transfixed faces on him.

“What? You think I’d let myself get caught by these foul govies. Prepare to witness a ploy a year in the making.” Skye came close as he could to Marx’s cell and stared into his eyes. “You were tested back there and I’m glad I don’t have to strip you and leave you stranded. Who knows? We might be looking to offer you a job.”

He turned to Elet. “And you missy. I told you I’d get you up the northern strait and I intend to. Sorry again for the delay but what you were paying, I couldn’t turn it down. Are we good?”

“I’m not so sure,” Elet said, still in shock.

The guard’s face turned to stone as they started to walk up.

“At ease gents. Let me handle this,” Skye said as he walked closer to Elet. “I will offer you half off for the inconvenience. It just so happens we have trades up there as well. We both know you wouldn’t be able to leave until tomorrow anyways, *if* you were lucky enough and definitely not for that price.”

“*If* I’m not hanged in the process,” Elet scowled.

“A fair point. Let’s continue this conversation after I am made captain of this ship first.”

Elet controlled her emotions, admitting to herself that was probably best. Especially if he does end up as Captain.

“Fine,” she said.

After Kara and Ethen looked at each other, they looked back into the shadows. The beady eyes and any small feet were absent.

Joni walked each floor with his bucket of filthy water and scrub brush as he normally did. He locked eyes with certain men on each level as he made his way up to the top. Studying the stars, he noticed they had finally turned the ship around and were making their way back as fast as the wind would allow. Seeing no eyes on him, he snuck to the stern in hopes he would see what he’d been waiting for. He knew soon enough they’d be too far, and this entire operation would be for nothing. Stepping out of the light on the main deck, his eyes adjusted to the darkness and stared out into the sea. The ends of his mouth curved upward.

“Swab! What are you doing back there? I seriously doubt you have scrubbed the entire lower deck. Get back down there,” Pip yelled.

“Extremely sorry sir. Felt a bit queasy. I thought a bit of fresh air might help is all,” Joni replied.

“You thought? I’m not so sure that pea brain ever mustered up a thought in your life. Back downstairs,” Pip demanded.

“Aye sir. A hundred more apologies,” Joni said as he hurried down the stairs.

Ignoring his orders he swiftly made it to a particular area on the second deck. Using the heel of his boot, he stomped four times in a unique rhythm. Two men underneath him heard the signal and departed from their station to send a signal of their own to the deck below them. Skye, Kork and Phin looked at each other with smiles on their faces as they each stood up when they heard four districted taps from up above.

The guards made their way over to unlock the door. Shouts were heard before whistles were blown. Feet pounded on each level as men were ordered to get to their stations. Next came the shift of the entire ship turning. Soon, everyone on board either saw or heard that pirates were attempting to capture the ship,

“Ready the long-nines!” Pip yelled to his officers, readying the ship’s forty cannons.

“Those fools must not know what we’re capable of. Cannons are quite the new invention. Most haven’t witnessed them,” the captain said amused. “We’ll tear them in half on the first go. Just as we practiced there, Pip.”

“Aye, sir.” Pip said, excited to finally use the cannon in an actual fight.

Each level of cannons had their orders and filled the neck up with powder before the cannonballs were tightly pushed as far back as it would go.

“Ready to fire sir,” a soldier shouted.

“Hold. Just a little further. The closer the better,” Pip said, still not ready to show their new enemy what they had in store for them.

“Raise the gunports!” he yelled.

Each gunport hatch was raised, revealing the cannons that protruded out of the ship.

“Light the linstocks!”

The approaching ship was now close enough to see faces, raised blades and notched arrows.

“Aim! Fire!” Pip yelled as his eyes flared open in anticipation of the upcoming carnage.

Nothing happened.

“Fire!” he yelled again, this time a squeak escaped; part from the excitement and part from the upcoming fear of what would happen if they didn’t fire soon.

Still nothing.

“What in the depths is happening?” he screamed.

“They aren’t firing sir,” a soldier reported.

“I’ve put that together you sorry sack! Why aren’t they firing?” Pip’s rage was being overtaken by fear that he’d soon have to fight.

“I don’t know sir,” the soldier replied.

“Everyone, ready to fight. Draw your swords and aim your crossbows,” the captain yelled as he drew his own blade and made his way down the stairs. “I’ll be in my cabin.”

Once he got down to the second deck he saw pairs of daunting eyes on him.

“What are you looking at?” he yelled. “Back to your stations!”

A closer look around and he saw that blades were drawn on other soldiers. A pair of men with crossbows raised their weapons toward the captain.

“Back up to the main deck, sir,” one of his soldier told him.

The captain didn’t wait before he turned to run back upstairs.

“We are being turned on. Quick fire on the men behind me!” The captain saw Pip shouting as well.

Some of the soldiers tried shooting their crossbows with no such luck, while others pointed theirs at the ones struggling.

“Our crossbows are jammed!” one shouted.

When the soldiers went for their swordd they found a blade at their throats by their once fellow comrades. Swinging pirates landed in front of their unarmed enemies. The surprise was never expected. So much so that the pirates that came on board had little to do.

One pirate, dressed in black came up to the captain. “Something the matter with your guns?” he said.

The captain, Pip and the few who knew little of what was going on were corralled, speechless.

“There’s nothing wrong with the guns. But if I were you, Captain, I’d look to get a return on that gun powder. It’s a bit weak,” Captain Skye Larker emerged from underneath with Kork and Phin behind him. “And I must say, you should treat your crew with a bit more respect.”

The newly arrived pirates gathered around Skye as he raised his hands. The sleeves of a long coat were placed over his elevated arms as the rest of the heavy leather wrapped around him. A lit pipe was set in one hand and a wine filled chalice in the other. Finally, a curved, intricate stitched, leather hat with a long red feather was placed on top of his head. He took a few long gulps that emptied his cup and then he puffed his pipe as he stared at the captain and smiled.

“Show off,” Kork said, rolling his large eyes.