

# Cora of New York

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The Story of a Slave Ship

**Kari Thomas**

## Preface

On September 24<sup>th</sup>, 1860, the slave ship *Cora* set sail with seven hundred and five Africans trapped inside. *Cora's* captain John Latham, a mysterious man history knows almost nothing about, purchased the slaves at the Spanish fort Manque Grande on the West Coast of Africa earlier in the day. Many of the Africans had come from hundreds of miles inland, sold into slavery by their own people as punishment for supposed crimes, suffering a long, hazardous journey downriver and across jungles just to reach the coast. Their future held only the perils of the Middle Passage and a harsh existence on a sugar plantation, unless the African Squadron, a special taskforce of the American Navy, intervened. The sailors of the squadron were a diverse group, hailing from different continents, social classes, and even speaking different languages, but they were each charged with the same task: disrupting the transatlantic slave trade. On September 25<sup>th</sup>, barely twenty-four hours after Latham had secured his cargo, he and *Cora* were captured by the flagship of the African Squadron *USS Constellation*, whose crew, bored out of their minds by the monotony of the African coast, were thrilled at the aspect of some excitement. The following is a fictionalized account of slavers, human cargo, and pirate-hunters and of how they crossed paths.

## Chapter One

**May 1<sup>st</sup>, 1860-New York, New York**

John Latham stared at the whiskey in front of him. It was a light yellow color. Irish stuff. He was growing rather tired of Irish stuff. He was back in America, so goddamnit, why couldn't he have bourbon? The glass trembled as he put it to his lips. Because he had asked for whiskey, that's why. Remember: *keep your head down, Johnnie.*

He thought he was doing a good job of blending in with the local color with his plain brown eyes and hair the color of mouse droppings, yet there was someone staring at him. Latham could see the tip of his curled blond mustache peeking out from behind the bust of a mermaid. All the pillars in the tavern were adorned with old figureheads of dead ships, and this mermaid was particularly voluptuous.

"Here, whaddya want?" Latham slurred, spilling his whiskey over the pitted table in front of him.

The mustache twitched into a smile. The cold eyes buried in the slick face bore into Latham. This man was the type of handsome that would never age or go out of style. He stood up from his table, slipping his hands into his vest. He dropped a large envelope on Latham's table.

"Who are you?" Latham asked as the man seated himself.

The man extended a hand. "Mr. Peter Campbell."

Latham's gaze slid from the hand he did not shake to the envelope on the table. "What's that?"

Campbell laced his fingers together. "A proposition Mr.-excuse me- *Captain* Latham."

Latham laughed as he took another sip of whiskey. "Oh, no, no, Pete-may I call you that?"

"No."

Latham winced. "Well, whoever the hell you are, I'm not a captain. I gave up the sea."

Campbell spread his arms wide. "Mr. Latham, I am a sailor like you. We do not give up the sea."

Latham looked at the thick callouses on the man's hands. Those were the mark of a sailor, but he also noticed the gold cufflinks at the wrist, the well-tailored suit, the new shoes, which were not. Still, the man did have sunburnt hair and weather-beaten skin. *He could be a sailor*, Latham supposed. "You may be a sailor sir," Latham said aloud, "but not one like me."

Campbell crossed his arms and pretended to be wounded for a minute. Then, he smirked. "I suppose not. I never had a crew mutiny and maroon me in the middle of the Atlantic."

Latham swallowed the rest of his drink and reached for his coat. "Conversation's finished." He tried to stand.

Campbell pushed him back in his seat with a hand on the shoulder. "No, it is not."

"Let me go, sir."

"Look in the envelope." Campbell's voice was cold.

Latham stared at Campbell. There was no humor in those flat, blue eyes. Latham fingered the envelope to watch Campbell's reaction, but there was none. The man continued to stare at him with the same quiet intensity. Latham knew he could no longer walk out of the tavern without causing a fuss.

Slowly, with shaking hands, Latham opened the package. Inside was a broadside for the sale of a ship.

"The *Cora*?" Latham had seen advertisements for the fast little merchant ship around the docks. She was a fine barque, and Latham had been surprised that Edward Morgan & Co. was selling her. But as he had barely a dollar to his name, he hadn't given it much thought.

Campbell nodded. "Inside, you will also find a check for funds to purchase this vessel."

"Purchase?" Latham started mentally re-counting how many whiskies he'd consumed. He must be drunker than he thought.

"Yes, Captain." Campbell smiled again.

Latham pulled the check from the envelope, astonished. He kept turning it over in his hands. Captain again. Captain John Latham with a crew and a ship. That pretty little barque would be his. No. Latham pressed the check flat against the table. People do not walk into taverns with strange envelopes full of money.

"What's the cargo?"

Campbell tutted. "Captain, if my associates and I are coming to you, what do you think the cargo is?"

Latham ripped the check in half. "No," he said hoarsely.

Campbell leaned across the table. "You owe us, Mr. Latham."

Latham raised his eyebrows. "Oh, do I?"

Campbell leaned back in his seat and pinched his lip. “Mr. Latham, I vouched for your intelligence. Please do not prove me incorrect. How did I know you had been marooned?”

Latham smirked. “You’ll have to pardon me, sir. I’ve had a bit to drink. But I do understand. I have worked for your associates before. And they left me in a boat in the middle of the ocean.” Latham pushed the pieces of the check across the table. He remembered the last time someone had approached him in a bar just like this with a mysterious proposition. He had known that man; he wasn’t a stranger, but his news had been just as too good to be true. A yacht fast enough to make a profit. *Investors willing to get us across the ocean. No. Never again.*

Campbell grimaced. “That was not our fault. Choose a crew with fewer scruples this time.”

“There won’t be a this time,” Latham hissed.

Campbell sighed and tucked the two halves of the check in his vest. “You misunderstand. You lost us a ship and an entire hold of supplies. You are still wanted by the United States Government. I know where you are and your new name, so I’m afraid you have no choice.” Campbell wrote out a second check. “You will purchase the *Cora*, you will outfit her, and you will find a crew. Then, you will sail for West Africa.”

“You’re threatening me?”

“Yes.” Campbell stood and placed his bowler back upon his head. “You have four days.” He pushed the envelope slightly closer to Latham and left.

Latham ordered another whiskey. That would be his fifth-no sixth. It didn’t matter. He was pretty sure this place watered it all down anyway. He sucked on the ice at the bottom of the glass, contemplating going back to sea. Slaving was starting to get dangerous. It used to be an easy guaranteed payday, but Great and Holier-than-thou Britain was doing its best to make everyone miserable. They even had the US Navy trying to disrupt the piratical slave trade along the Western coast of Africa now. Latham snorted. *Me, a pirate? Don’t make me laugh. I am a businessman.*

He rubbed his eyes and sighed. He supposed he would have to take the job. They hadn’t left him much choice. He pulled the rest of the contents from the envelope.

Three days later, he attended the auction outside the customhouse as instructed. Several ships were up for sale, so the small square was packed with merchants and weather-beaten captains when Latham arrived. He chose to stand near the back of the crowd to keep an eye on his competitors, but it was a long wait of several hours as *Cora* was a later lot.

Latham's leg was just starting to cramp, when the auctioneer finally announced, "Ladies and gentlemen, next up on the block is a fine vessel from E.D. Morgan and Company, built in Baltimore in 1851, she's a fast three-masted barque, christened *Cora*, reliable too. In the right hands, she will turn a sizable profit quickly. Shall we start the bidding at seven thousand? Do I hear seven thousand?"

A tall woman near the front raised her hand. Latham could only see a fraction of her profile, but she looked older, shrewish. He raised his own hand and called out, "Eight thousand!"

"Eight thousand to the man in the back. Do I hear ten thousand? Come on, folks, she's our great governor's pride and joy." A ginger man to Latham's left waved. The auctioneer jabbed his gavel at him. "Eight thousand to the Irishman. Do I hear nine?"

Latham took a risk. *It's not my money.* "Eleven!" he shouted.

The auctioneer grinned. "We have a bid for elev-."

"Twelve," said the woman in front.

"Twelve-fifty," Latham countered.

The woman turned to look at him. Her features were calm, but they were not what anyone would ever mistake for beautiful. Latham recognized in her a woman of the world, a woman used to struggling for every scrap someone tossed into the air. He recognized a kindred spirit.

Without taking her eyes off Latham, she said, "Twelve thousand, seven hundred and fifty."

Latham smirked. "Fourteen thousand."

Her eyes widened just slightly. He knew her limit had been thirteen thousand. It was a substantial sum for a nine year old ship. Fourteen thousand dollars was also almost all of what Campbell had given him, but that was all right. Latham could outfit a crew on a modest budget. *Although, the last time I cut corners, I ended up alone, starving in the middle of the ocean. With no one but the gulls.*

The crack of the gavel forced Latham back into the present. “Sold to the gentleman in the back for fourteen thousand dollars. If you could step to the front to fill out the deed, thank you, sir. All right, onto the next lot.”

It took four days to correctly file all the paperwork, but by the fourth of May, he had the deed in hand and John Latham was now the legal and official owner of the barque known as *Cora*. He had had to take an oath at the customhouse that he would not use the ship for piracy, but he barely felt a prick of conscience when he falsely swore on the Good Book. It was not the first time he had perjured himself, and he had yet to be struck by lightning. With the deed in his possession, he immediately set to work, hiring the best riggers his mysterious benefactors could buy, which still included considerable talent. However, after three days of cracking the proverbial whip, the riggers said they needed another week at least to finish outfitting *Cora*.

Latham lost his temper when the master rigger delivered the news. He punched the air and hurled insults at the man, threatening to flog them all if they did not hurry up, although technically he did not have that jurisdiction. Latham knew the longer he stayed in port the more attention he would draw from the unwelcome law, so he pushed the dockworkers to their limit. Pier No. 52 quickly transformed into a swarming hive of nervous activity as men ran to deliver canvas and hemp while others rushed to put it all together before the captain lost his head again.

Latham would frequently stand on the pier, supposedly monitoring the work but really just admiring his ship. A week before, he had sworn up and down that he would never step foot off-land again, and now he was directing repairs on a three-masted barque that actually belonged to him. *Well, Johnnie, you've always been a liar. And what a ship, an almost perfect slaver.* She needed to be a bit faster, but the new rigging and sails would take care of that. She also unfortunately had only three decks: the spar deck, the berth deck, and the hold. Latham estimated he would need about 400 slaves to make a profit, but there wouldn't be enough room in the hold for them and the supplies necessary to keep them and the crew alive. *Cora* needed another deck, just for the slaves, but that would have to be constructed en route, an inconvenience made necessary by new anti-slave trading laws. *The typical hypocrisy of moral men,* Latham sneered. *Heaven forbid you kidnap any of our benighted*

*brothers, but if you happen to already have one, do whatever you like. Beat, murder, rape, it doesn't matter. The niggers are inferior anyway.*

Latham sighed. New deck, new rigging, new sails, might as well re-paint her while he was at it. “Mr. Fredericks,” he called to his second mate. Mr. Fredericks, who was on the deck supervising provisions going into the hold, turned at the sound of his name. He had a bad habit of slouching, his shoulders bent with practice. And his skin had yellowed from years of too much rum and not enough sauerkraut. Still, he usually asked few questions and did as he was told. He could be a perfect first mate, if Latham was sure of his loyalty. The captain had found the address and personal information of his first mate in the envelope along with a note from Campbell demanding that Fredericks be part of the crew. Latham knew the man was a spy and did not trust him, but what was most troubling was that neither Campbell nor Fredericks seemed particularly interested in hiding the mate’s espionage.

“Mr. Fredericks,” Latham called, “I want to repaint the ship.”

Mr. Fredericks raised his eyebrows in surprise. He trotted down the gangway, so he could speak to his captain a little more privately.

“Pardon me, sir, but that seems like an unnecessary expense.”

“Not at all, Mr. Fredericks. Our business is an ugly one; why should that mar the beauty of the ship?”

“Won’t it draw attention to us?”

Latham smiled and leaned toward Fredericks’ ear. “Mr. Fredericks, what is the last thing a slaver should ever do?”

“Draw attention to themselves?”

“Precisely. So if we are drawing attention to ourselves, what must we not be?”

“Slavers.”

Latham nodded and straightened up. The man had been sent to play a game and so far he was losing, badly. “I want the hull painted black and the spars re-varnished. Also, make sure ‘*Cora* of New York’ is repainted on the side.”

“Sir, would it not be more prudent to take this opportunity to erase the ‘of New York’ part?”



“Now, that really would draw attention to us. Have you had any luck filling the rolls?” As of the day before, Fredericks had only been able to sign on a cabin boy running away from an angry father.

Fredericks shook his head. “No, sir. It would be easier if you let me sign more Americans.”

“We need a Spanish crew. It’s our only hope if the African Squadron boards us.”

“Well, I did find someone who could make a good second mate. He’s American, but his name is John Wilson, and he’s staying at the Bridge Inn.”

“He has prior experience?”

Fredericks hesitated. “Not as an officer, no.”

Latham stared at Fredericks. Despite being unabashedly obedient, the man had a knack for be totally unhelpful. “All right, I will evaluate him myself.”

Latham was quite familiar with the Bridge Inn. It was an older establishment with a lewd reputation for cheap booze and even cheaper women, so an unscrupulous crew should be easy to find there.

The barroom was hazy with tobacco smoke, and a lesser man would have choked on the stench, but Latham had been sailing for over thirty years. He had endured worse smells emanating from his own body. As he passed through the entrance, he heard a wad hit the spittoon by his foot, and a man across the room cheered. “Told ya, I could expectorate.” There were several knots of men around the room, some of them entertaining ladies, most just enjoying a drink and a smoke. Latham glanced around and took off his top hat, less out of respect, and more out of the desire to prevent it from accidentally brushing the whale-oil residue coating the ceiling. He approached the bar where the owner was wiping it down with a greasy cloth.

“What can I get you?” the man asked gruffly.

“A man,” Latham replied calmly. “I’m looking for a Mr. Wilson. He’s staying here.”

“Aye,” the owner nodded to a man sitting at a table in the corner with the lamp turned down low.

“That’s him.”

Latham left a coin on the bar for the information and then approached Mr. Wilson. “Mind if I sit here?” he asked.

Wilson squinted up at Latham's face before shaking his head. "Go ahead."

Latham turned the rickety chair around so he could perch himself on it backwards. "Expecting someone?"

Wilson shrugged. "Don't remember the last couple-a days. Coppers could be here any second."

Latham laughed despite himself. Wilson smiled when he saw the joke had the desired effect. He was bent over the table, but Latham could see he was a lanky fellow with a neatly trimmed haircut. He also seemed young, although he was probably older than he looked. Latham pegged him about thirty. He was definitely a sailor though. The way he guarded his glass and wine bottle betrayed the fact that his subconscious was waiting for them to roll right off the table. But Latham wasn't looking for a sailor. He wanted an officer.

"Did you want something?" Wilson asked gruffly.

"Yes," Latham started, but then he picked up the wine bottle in surprise. It was a Spanish vintage of decent quality. "I didn't think they sold anything this nice here."

Wilson winked. "They don't. Would you like some?"

"Yes, please."

Wilson motioned to the bar-keep for a second glass, and poured it out once the glass arrived.

"Thank you very much," Latham said as he watched the wine level in his glass rise.

Wilson held up a finger. "Now, though, you owe me one. Tell me why you're looking for me. I heard you ask the bar-keep"

Latham smiled. The man was very drunk but still shrewd. *Yes*, he thought, *he might actually be exactly what I need.*

"First introductions." Latham held out a hand. "I'm John Latham."

Wilson shook. "Ah, another John, although perhaps I should call you 'Juan'."

Latham blushed. His mother, rest her soul, was one of those Spanish ladies immortalized in sea shanties sung by sailors the world over. And the accent was one of the many things he had tried to forget

about growing up the son of a whore. The smell was another, *goddamn the smell*. The fetor of sweat and lust would haunt his relationships forever, just as his mother's accent would always taint his speech.

Latham grimaced. "In Spanish waters, I go by 'Lorretto,' but I'm not Spanish. I was born in the Estados Unidos, although I have been a long time at sea with Spaniards."

"What finally pushed you back on land?"

Latham thought of the hot sun burning his face as his fingers trailed through the cool ocean water, water that he couldn't drink. He cleared his throat. "I was forced to reevaluate my life choices." He swallowed a large gulp of wine.

Wilson looked at him with wide, glossy eyes. "Are you going to make me reevaluate my life choices?"

"Maybe, how do you feel about sailing to West Africa?"

"Legitimate trade or slaving?"

Latham shrugged and took another sip. "Both."

Wilson smiled, "Slaving then. What's the rate of pay?"

"Well, for second mate, I was thinking somewhere around twenty-five dollars a month."

Wilson started choking. He spit some of his wine on the floor. "Second mate?"

Latham poured himself another glass. "Yes."

"B-but you hardly know me."

Latham held up the bottle. "I know you have excellent taste in wine. And you are clever."

"Oh, and how do you know that?"

"You ask the right questions," Latham answered, "which is more than can be said for my first mate."

Wilson smirked. "I guess this is where I try to push my luck to see if I can be first mate."

Latham swirled the wine in his glass methodically. "No," he said slowly, "I'm afraid for political reasons I must insist that Mr. Fredericks remain first mate.

"You don't trust him."

Latham's eyes locked on Wilson. The bottle had been half-gone when Latham sat down and Wilson was slurring his words, yet he could still make observations like that. This was a dangerous man.

“No,” Latham admitted. “That’s why I need a mate I can trust.”

Wilson laughed. “And you think that’s me? Maybe I’m not the drunk here.”

Latham tilted his chair so he was leaning a little over the table. “You’re staying at the Bridge Inn, Wilson. That means you’re low on cash and morals. I can give you the former and have no use for the latter.”

Wilson roared with laughter, attracting the attention of other patrons who couldn’t help but stare at the young maniac. One woman was so engrossed, she stopped tickling the beard of the man whose lap she was occupying. Wilson laughed loud and long with the wild abandon of the inebriated, while Latham helped himself to a third glass of wine. When Wilson finally hiccupped into silence, he wiped tears from the corners of his eyes, and held out his hand.

“You’ve found a second mate, but I want thirty dollars a month.”

Latham shook the proffered hand. “Deal. First order of business, go order two cases of that wine for the *Cora* on Pier 52.”

Wilson grinned as he drained the last from the bottle. “Aye, sir.” He stood up, somewhat unsteadily. “The *Cora*, huh? Morgan’s old boat?”

“That’s the one.”

Wilson half-saluted. “Using the governor’s own boat to catch niggers. I like it.”

A few hours later, Latham stumbled his way back to the ship. He’d enjoyed a few bourbons after Wilson left, and now the horizon was tilting dangerously. Latham’s foot twisted in a crack between cobblestones, and he clipped his shoulder against a lamppost.

“Damn it, Johnnie!” he shouted, rubbing his arm. The street was deserted except for the occasional passerby looking for another bar to replace the one he had just been ejected from. No one noticed his outburst. *Drunks*, Latham sneered, *can’t hold their liquor*.

Just then, he heard someone behind him step in a puddle. They were very close. Latham turned to look and caught the man’s eye for a split second before he hurriedly looked away. Latham stopped walking.

The man hesitated almost imperceptibly, but then continued past. As he shuffled by, Latham memorized his features, *a black goatee and watery eyes*. Latham smiled drunkenly. *I'm being followed.*

For the next two weeks, Latham's shadow assumed the shape of this mysterious man, who followed him into every bar, brothel, and shop he patronized. After a few days, Latham gave up trying to shake him. The man could not be deterred, not by weather or hunger or thirst. Latham wondered when he slept. He often saw the man standing on the dock, sun or rain, even during downpours that wouldn't let up, keeping vigil over *Cora*, watching for suspicious behavior. Latham inwardly cursed. *He's from the District Attorney's office. He has to be.*

Latham began to panic. He tried to maintain an outwardly calm appearance as he worked alongside his crew, but every time he saw the greasy lawyer hanging around or talking to beggars on the pier, the skin on the back of his neck prickled. *They know. They must know.* The ship was taking in large amounts of lumber and food, far more than a merchant vessel and crew would need. *And if they come aboard and find the Spanish colors*, he thought with dread. Fredericks wanted to wait until they reached the coast of West Africa to buy food for the slaves and purchase the lumber to build the extra deck, but Latham wasn't prepared to pay the traders' exorbitant prices. He was trying to turn as large a profit as possible, but there would be no profit at all if he let the moralistic government of the United States seize *Cora*. If he could just get her sailing before the District Attorney issued an injunction, they would be all right.

He started pushing the crew even harder, well beyond their absolute limit. He even grabbed a hammer and nails to help finish repairs, despite his belief that manual labor was beneath a captain. He sat for hours with the Spanish crewmembers, telling bawdy jokes and helping to splice the main brace. He also helped load supplies onto the ship, although he usually refrained from participating and just directed the operation because he didn't want the man from the District Attorney's office to see how unnerved he really was.

The other thorn in Latham's side proved to be Fredericks. Latham had known the man was one of Campbell's lickspittles, but the man seemed incapable of voicing an original opinion. Every word he spoke sounded scripted, as if Fredericks were starring in a play Campbell penned.

After vociferously arguing over the lumber supplies for what felt like the fiftieth time, Fredericks angrily stormed off the ship. Latham assumed he was running off to tell on the recalcitrant captain, so he had Wilson follow him.

"Do not be seen," Latham had commanded. Wilson had looked unsure, so Latham repeated, "Do not be seen. I want to know where Fredericks is every second of every day. I want to know who his friends are, what they do. I want to know their whole business network. But do not get caught. That is an order."

Latham remembered the world had been lost in fog that day. New England fog was the most unnerving weather phenomenon he had ever encountered. One minute the world was wider than man's imagining; the next it was barely a foot across and contained one living, breathing, thinking inhabitant, who was slowly turning mad with loneliness.

It was another foggy day when the ax finally fell. He was in his cabin changing his shirt. The young third mate Hans Olsen had been maneuvering a barrel of drinking water up the gangway when it escaped his control and in a mad fit of thanatos smashed itself against a stone cleat. Unfortunately for Olsen and his captain, Latham had been standing just on the other side of the mooring line and was now soaked to the bone. After chewing out Olsen for his clumsiness and Wilson for the purchase of the shoddy barrels, Latham had stormed on to the ship to change. Luckily he had an extra suit of clothes aboard for he had just finished furnishing his cabin: hanging uniforms, pinning charts and maps to the wall, framing a miniature portrait of a girl he once loved. He smiled when he saw the painting. He had thought it was lost to time, but his old landlady had hung onto it, saying she found the girl's eyes captivating. While Latham admitted her gaze was mysterious, it was actually Maggie's freckles that had first attracted him to her. That was the only year of his life he had passed in perfect happiness, the last year of her life. He gazed at the portrait, remembering her bright blush as he unsuccessfully tried to pin his wet shirt to a piece of twine hanging across the room. Suddenly, Fredericks burst in and looked his captain up and down, checking for clothing.

“Oh, good, you are decent, sir.”

“And what if I had not been?” Latham asked tersely.

“I would tell you to get dressed as quickly as possible because the assistant District Attorney is here to see you.”

Latham dropped his wet shirt.

The assistant District Attorney was a tall man with a pointed beard. He already had a few grey streaks in his black hair, and his eyes were excessively watery. Latham recognized him immediately as the man who had been following him. Latham had been expecting, dreading, this moment for days, but he still feigned surprise when the assistant district attorney tapped him on the shoulder with a piece of paper.

“I am here on the authority of District Attorney Roosevelt as a representative of the US Federal government. This is a notice that your ship is under arrest for suspicion of being a slaver.”

Latham snatched the paper away, quickly glancing over it. “This is ridiculous.”

“Mr. Latham, your ship’s manifest states that you are headed for West Africa-.”

“For legitimate trade!” Latham interrupted.

“And,” the man continued calmly, “your crew has been observed taking aboard large quantities of wine, lumber, and food.”

“So?” Latham quipped.

“So Mr. Latham, we believe you are a slaver and a poor one at that. Your crew will desist all activity on board. There are to be no more repairs until further notice.”

Latham laced his voice with venom. “I assume that I will be allowed to argue my case in front of a court. Mr. Roosevelt would not be one to abridge the rights of US citizens, would he?”

“Of course not.” The man gestured to the arrest notice. “You will see your court date is set for a week from now. Though do not expect to sail, sir. I’m afraid your slaving career has ended before it ever really began. Good day.” The lawyer turned on his heel and strutted off the pier. Latham quaked, the notice of arrest balled in his fist.

Fredericks was standing just behind him. “Do we obey, sir?”

“Aye!” Latham barked. He tossed the arrest notice into the water and immediately regretted it. *I can't afford to lose my head like that.* The paper floated on the surface for only a second and then sank. “Mierda,” he cursed. “I need a drink.”



## Chapter Two

### May 27th, 1860- New York, New York

There was a splinter jabbing Latham in the neck. He reached behind his head and twisted it off the deck. The tiny sliver of wood was only a quarter of an inch long but it felt monstrous. He flicked it into the wind. It was a grey day. The clouds pressed down on the city smothering all productive activity. Latham felt that he would never again be able to move from his spread-eagle position in the middle of *Cora's* deck. The sky was too heavy. Of course, if the United States government had its way, he never would.

He had lost the ship. Unsurprising in hindsight because he had hardly spoken a word during the proceedings. Latham had shown up early in a tie knotted in a bowline hitch. He was uncomfortable in the marble courthouse that doubled as a post office. Its small rooms were all stuffy and made Latham sweat, even more so than the uncomfortable tie he kept tugging at around his neck.

The judge presiding had turned out to be the Honorable Samuel Betts, sitting behind a long mahogany table with a jaded look in his eyes. There was no jury in the box because it was a summary trial. Instead, it was just Latham behind one table and Mr. Roosevelt, who had decided to argue the case himself, behind another. Latham noted that the District Attorney for Southern New York was tall and thin like his assistant. He was also clean-shaven with thinning hair and a wart on the side of a face that wore a perpetually dour and disapproving expression.

Roosevelt had argued that the ship's manifest was incontrovertible proof of Latham's intention to engage in the slave trade and that the United States therefore had the right to seize *Cora* without compensation. His honor had disagreed about the compensation part, so instead, he bonded the vessel for an amount Latham could never hope to pay or raise. This meant that Latham could keep the ship, but he couldn't sail her anywhere.

A sigh passed through Latham's lips. He doubted he would ever again move from this deck. *The captain should go down with his ship*, he mused rather morbidly. Latham sighed again, turning it this time into a whistle, which then became a slow and dirge-like tune. He realized after a few bars that it was "Spanish

Ladies," albeit sad and distorted. It made him think of his mother with her bright red lips and powdered face, lying on her back beneath a grunting man.

Latham pushed the memory away. He was never meant to see that. That was not how he was supposed to remember his mother. He dragged his fingertips across *Cora's* rough surface. She needed to be holystoned, badly, but all work on the ship had been suspended until further notice. *Until I can pay the bond, which I can't.* He saw a bird flying around the top mast. Latham watched for a moment and then closed his eyes and draped an arm across his face, trying to block out the world.

Someone kicked him in the thigh. His eyes flashed open. He sat up with his hands clenched. "What?" he grunted.

Campbell with his weaselly smile stood over him. There was a man on either side grinning broadly. "Gentlemen, our captain," Campbell said ironically.

The man on the left was portly with a wide, pasty face rimmed with lamb-chops. *A pig, a dull stupid pig,* Latham thought. The man licked his wide lips, strengthening the resemblance. His stomach bounced as he chuckled. "Mr. Latham, why are you laying down when there is work to be done?"

"What?" Latham repeated. Now the man on the right laughed. Latham stared at him.

He was thinner than his colleague but still looked like he could break Latham in half with an overenthusiastic hug. He had a smug goatee and a large red pimple right in the center of his forehead. Latham wanted to reach up and pop it, watch the pus squirt all over the man's snide face. The man's lip twisted into a half-smile. "We bonded your ship, Mr. Latham."

"Oh yes," Campbell said cheerily, "let me introduce my colleagues." Campbell pointed to the fat man on his right. "This is Mr. Charles Newmann." He pointed to man on the left with the goatee. "This is Mr. Robert Griffith. They have just bonded your ship for \$22, 128. 23. A sizeable amount, I am sure you are aware."

Latham ran a hand through his hair. It was more money than he had ever seen in his life. It also gave him another chance to make a success of this whole venture. "I suppose that makes *Cora* 'our' ship," he said, his voice cracking.

Campbell frowned a bit. "It was always our ship, Mr. Latham."

Latham glared for half a minute. *My name is on the title.* But he swallowed his pride and held out a hand for Mr. Newmann to shake. "Well, it is nice to finally meet an investor."

Mr. Newmann smiled pleasantly. "Yes, and it is grand to meet our captain."

"Now, Mr. Latham," continued Mr. Griffith, "we do have some business matters to discuss."

Latham shook his hand as well. "Such as?"

"Your passenger roster," Griffith said.

Latham frowned. "I do not have any passengers."

Campbell smirked. "You do now, Mr. Latham. I fear you are to be burdened with me." He bowed with a grand sweep of his hat.

*Fantastic,* Latham thought sarcastically, *the deal sweetens.* "I had not realized your business ventures in West Africa needed your attention so desperately, Mr. Campbell."

"They do not, Mr. Latham," Campbell answered. "You do."

Latham rubbed the bridge of his nose. He had to admit his record was patchy at best, so he understood that the investors wanted someone they could trust to oversee the operation. But he might very well throw Campbell overboard if he had to look at that sick smile for too long.

Mr. Newmann's eyebrows furrowed. "You look somewhat green, Mr. Latham."

Latham fiddled with a halyard wrapped around a belaying pin on the railing. He muttered, "Too much sugar rots the teeth and turns your stomach."

Campbell's smile twitched. "Pardon, Mr. Latham? I did not catch your words."

Latham swept his hand out and clapped Campbell on the back. "Welcome aboard! I said, 'Welcome aboard,' Mr. Campbell. May our winds be swift and our purses full."

Now Newmann was clapping Campbell on the back, saying, "Indeed. Indeed."

Campbell smiled graciously, but his eyes told the truth. He did not want to be touched by either of these two men.

Mr. Griffith cleared his throat. "While Mr. Campbell is here to oversee this venture, you are still the captain, Mr. Latham. We have instructed Mr. Campbell to not infringe upon that authority."

Campbell pressed his lips together in a thin line, and Latham smiled, although he did half-heartedly try to repress it. *The devil has a master.*

Mr. Griffith continued, not noticing the expressions on either man's face, "Now what is this about hiring only Spaniards?"

Latham smirked. "Hablo español. Puedo personificar un capitán español y escapar de escuadrón africano."

Mr. Griffith tugged on his goatee. "I am afraid my mastery of Spanish is limited. My tutor tended to focus on German and French."

Latham blinked slowly, counting to diez in his head. "I said that since I can speak Spanish fluently, I will be able to fool the African Squadron into thinking I am Spanish. Therefore, they will be forced to let me and my Spanish crew go. Of course, this ruse has a better chance of succeeding if the majority of my crew is actually Spanish."

"Hm, I see the logic in that." Mr. Griffith turned towards Campbell. "Do you speak Spanish, Mr. Campbell?"

"Claro que si," he answered.

Mr. Newmann clapped his flabby hands together. "All right then. We shall leave you two to your business. Mr. Latham, it was lovely to meet you." He shook Latham's hand again. "We expect you to set sail within the next week."

Latham's mouth opened against his will. Mr. Griffith noticed.

"You will be able to set sail that quickly, won't you Mr. Latham?"

Latham closed his mouth. "Uh, y-yes. Yes, of course. It will take some hard work, but my crew is prepared for that."

Newmann and Griffith smiled and nodded, pleased to hear that. They tipped their hats to the captain and his passenger before taking their leave of *Cora*.

As soon as they left, Latham turned to Campbell. "I am afraid I may have misled our investors somewhat." Latham scratched the back of his neck and let out a little laugh. Campbell did not share his levity. Campbell glared at the empty rigging.

"Captain, where is your crew?"

The Blue Dog had a unique and unmistakable smell, rum and ginger beer spilled across fresh wood varnish. Latham was not particularly fond of this combination. The varnish burned his nostrils. He much preferred the thick tobacco smell of the Bridge Inn, but he was looking for his crew, not himself.

The owner of the Blue Dog was perpetually re-painting his bar because the varnish never quite set right. It was gloppy with thick dribbles in some places and almost none in others, leaving the pale unfinished wood vulnerable to moisture rings. Whenever the bartender slid a mug of ale down the bar it would skip and stutter over the varnish dry spells and lose most of its contents. As a result, the floor was sticky and covered with clumps of mud. The tables were just as worn and pitted as the bar, although the owner had given up repainting those years ago. But even in their shabby state, those tables were always packed with men drinking, singing, and playing a sometimes not-so-friendly game of cards.

That day, three of The Blue Dog's tables were occupied by *Cora's* crew. Latham sighed with relief. He and Campbell had already searched four other pubs and they were quickly tiring of each others' company. "Thank goodness. Our search is over," Latham said.

Campbell covered his nose with a sleeve. "I cannot say I am surprised by your familiarity with these establishments, Mr. Latham, but I am a bit concerned."

"You knew who you were hiring," Latham retorted as he approached the nearest table.

Fredericks was deep in his cups. He was leaning dangerously far back in his seat laughing maniacally. Latham rolled his eyes and kicked out a leg of the chair. Fredericks threw his hands in the air as he fell back and splashed a pint of ale on the ceiling. Lying disoriented on the sticky floor, he gawked at the two men leaning over him.

"Uh, hello, boss." he slurred.

Latham looked at Campbell as if to say, “Did he mean you or me?”

Campbell shook his head and tried to take control of the situation. “Get up, Mr. Fredericks. There’s work to be done.”

Fredericks put a hand on the floor to push himself upright, but his hand slipped and his face crashed into the floor. Fredericks didn’t move, but he did manage to mumble, “When the room stops spinning.”

Campbell huffed as he grabbed Fredericks under the arm and roughly pulled the man to his feet. In return for the favor, Fredericks belched directly in Campbell’s face.

“Agh.” Campbell turned his face away in disgust. He smirked at Latham. “I never was a Scotch man, myself.”

That was a joke. Campbell was joking. Latham was growing tired of this. He was not a mark easily fooled, not by forced humor or even more insulting, false camaraderie. Still, two confidence men could play this game. He twitched his face into what he hoped was the semblance of a smile. Campbell chuckled.

Latham chuckled too. Then, he casually shouted, “Mr. Wilson, man the floor!”

Suddenly, a brown head popped up from the midst of the second floor. Wilson quickly extricated himself from the others and staggered to stand before Latham. He drunkenly saluted. He was still holding a hand of cards.

Someone shouted from the table, “Ah, Cap’n we were just about to take all his money.”

Wilson whipped around with his fists balled. “The hell you were, you picaroons!”

“Bilge rat!” someone shouted to the loud amusement of the others. Then, Wilson was in the fray. Fists flew, someone’s boot broke another man’s nose, tables toppled, glass shattered, and all the while, the bartender screamed. “Out! Out!”

Latham jumped in and started trying to pull men apart, but they were drunk. *A stampede of wild horses couldn’t stop this*, Latham thought.

“THAT IS ENOUGH.”

Everything in the Blue Dog went still. Latham wouldn’t have been surprised to see mugs frozen in midair. All eyes were on Campbell by the entrance. Even Latham turned to look at the quaking man. His

breath caught. Any trace of mirth on Campbell's handsome face was gone, replaced by the twisted features of an angry gargoyle.

"Now," Campbell announced severely, "if you want to keep your jobs, vacate the premises."

No one moved. Latham once again saw the suspended mugs in his mind's eye.

"NOW."

The mugs fell. Suddenly, Latham was standing in the stampede he had envisioned only moments before. Everyone was running, or at least trying to. Even the people who didn't work on *Cora*, who had just been minding their own business, were scrambling for the exit. The bartender was too cowed to complain about the loss of business, but his shock was obvious in the way his eyebrow kept twitching. In less than a minute, the place emptied except for Latham and Campbell who had recovered his gay composure.

Latham scratched the back of his head. He hated to admit it, but he was impressed. "Quite the speech, Mr. Campbell."

Campbell smiled his candied grin. "Brief. To the point. Those are the best oratories."

Latham nodded. *The Devil's words are always moving*. He knew that better than anyone. How else did he end up in this mess? "Well, I should probably get back to the ship before those drunkards do."

Campbell turned to the bar and slapped a few coins down on the counter. "Before you go, Mr. Latham, please promise me you will never embarrass me again as you just did."

Latham felt like he had been slapped. "Excuse me?"

The barkeeper nervously poured out a Scotch for Campbell.

Campbell watched the dark liquid with intense interest. "I do not associate with those who would engage in saloon brawls," he said.

Latham's retort dripped with sarcasm. "But slavers are all right?"

Campbell smirked and raised his glass to the captain. "The drunkards are leaving you behind."

Latham's face flushed. He quickly turned away so Campbell wouldn't see. *The Devil take it*, he cursed, as he left the pub. The thought of spending the next few months with that man made his skin crawl. *The faster this is over, the better*.

As it was, *Cora* did not set sail at the end of the week, nor at the end of the following week. No, as hard as Latham worked his crew and himself, sanding, painting, re-rigging, shifting canvas, steadying the tagline as the capstan raised and lowered its burdens, walking preponderously in a circle around the great machine with arms wrapped around the capstan bar, singing “What do you do with a Drunken Sailor?” until hoarse, the mere memory of it making Latham roll his eyes, *Cora* did not sail until exactly one month later on June 27<sup>th</sup>.

That day he couldn’t stop grinning. He told his steward to open the finest bottle of Spanish Red onboard and to have it ready for him in his cabin. He wanted to navigate his ship out of harbor himself.

Latham rubbed his calluses over the smooth wood of the old helm. It was one of the few things he had decided not to replace on *Cora*. It was made of darkly handsome lignum vitae and had yet to steer any of its crews wrong. Of course, Latham thought bitterly, the ship had never before encountered anything as disastrous as his luck. Maybe steering the ship out to sea himself wasn’t such a good idea.

“Olsen, take the helm.”

The young third mate jumped when he heard his name called. He scrambled to the quarterdeck nearly tripping over a coil of rope in the process. Latham rolled his eyes. Between this boy’s luck and his own, the ship was as good as sunk. Olsen took the wheel from Latham and tried to look confident as all the blood vacated his face.

“Just hold her steady, Olsen. You can do it,” Latham quietly commanded.

“Aye, sir,” Olsen whispered back. His voice cracked.

Latham looked over Olsen’s shoulder to shoot his second mate Wilson a look that said, “Make sure he doesn’t sink us.” Wilson, who was watching the third mate with exaggerated patience, caught the captain’s eye and nodded, moving a step closer to the helm.

Latham stretched his arms over his head and let out a contented sigh. “Well, we’re finally off,” he said to no one in particular before retiring to his cabin and falling into his softly upholstered chair. He was quite exhausted. The last few nights, he had been falling into bed with great pleasure and little energy, always



dreaming of his Margarita, the woman in miniature above his bed. In his dreams, she was rosy and strong with milky white skin swirling beneath her dark freckles. Her green eyes sparkled as she brushed her fingertips across his eyelids. He knotted his fingers in one of her perfect ringlets and inhaled. Lilacs. She always smelled of lilacs.

A knock on the door woke Latham with a jolt. His foot banged against an inkwell spilling the contents all over the Captain's Log.

"Damnit!" He grabbed a towel and tried to mop up the puddle but only succeeded in spreading it. A few drops splashed back onto his pants. He almost wiped his pants with the inky towel, but then threw it away in disgust.

There was another knock on the door.

"Enter." He shook the ledger trying to dislodge some of the ink.

The door opened to reveal Campbell frowning behind it.

Latham glanced at him. *I really dislike this man*, he thought bitterly as the dream of Maggie faded.

Campbell sneered. "Accident, Captain?" He gestured to the black stains on the desk and floor.

Latham smiled to himself. *The Devil made me do it*. "You startled me, Campbell." Latham sat back down behind his desk and gestured to a second chair in the corner.

Campbell sat on the very edge of the seat and twisted the end of his mustache. "I do sincerely hope we can be friends."

"That may prove difficult," Latham answered.

Campbell tilted his head to one side. "Oh?"

"Well, I am the captain of this ship. Aboard her, I am like a god." Everyone else was like a bug, annoying, something to be squished underfoot. Campbell had the added misfortune of being pompous, narcissistic and also a rival. But it didn't matter; Latham was captain. Latham was god. "And it is dangerous for a captain to mix with his crew," he told Campbell, "or his passenger."

Campbell laughed. "You may be Zeus, Mr. uh-Rintz-that's your chosen alias, yes? But Zeus is nothing without his lightning. And I am the Hephaestus who provides the bolts."

Latham flipped open a wooden box on his desk and took out a plug of tobacco. He did not offer any to Campbell. Latham slowly took his pipe from his pocket and lit it.

He blew a smoke ring in the other man's direction. "What do you want, Campbell?"

The other man twiddled his thumbs. "Well, to get to the point, your Mr. Wilson has been following my Mr. Fredericks."

"Yes," Latham answered quickly, "upon my orders."

Campbell narrowed his eyes. "What do you hope to achieve?"

Latham took a long drag on his pipe. "My aims are my own."

"Secrets between partners-."

"We are not partners," Latham interjected. Partners were equals, which they were not. On land, Campbell took every opportunity to remind Latham he was a subordinate, a slave, but at sea, Latham was free of that oppression.

Campbell's mustache twitched. "How would you define our relationship?"

Latham spread his hands triumphantly. "As you said, I'm the powerful Zeus and you are the ugly Hephaestus."

Campbell's face darkened. He jumped to his feet. "Tread carefully, Mr. Latham. You are captain only because I vouched for you, twice. I may not know what you intend to do with Wilson's information, but I will warn you: you are wasting your time; Mr. Fredericks knows as little as you."

"Maybe I know more than you think."

"No, you don't," Campbell snarled. He rocked forward off the chair. "No, you do not."

Latham smiled and rested his chin on his hand, hoping that he looked knowing.

Campbell growled and stormed out of the cabin. Latham watched him go and then put his feet back up on the desk. He grinned. The ship was now truly his, and they were finally sailing for the Congo. With delight, the words of "The Drunken Scotsman" popped into Latham's head. *I don't know where you've been lad, but I see you've won first prize.*

### Chapter Three

#### April 25<sup>th</sup>, 1860- Lunda Empire, Africa

Eight months before Kalomba was sold to the strange man from the faraway land of New York, he snuck into the jungle. Kalomba only went because his friend Chipangu asked. Otherwise, he would never have ventured into the forbidding darkness full of monsters, devils, and witches without the village's blessing. But Chipangu, a girl who spent half her adolescence in the bush searching for the cures to rashes and fevers, had promised to let him see her hair as long as he helped her get one item. Kalomba knew it must be a substance difficult to obtain if Chipangu was actually asking for help, especially, he felt, *his* help. But he couldn't pass up the chance to see one of the curls that she kept so closely guarded and tucked away beneath her bandana.

He was not disappointed. As soon as they had passed the first line of trees, Chipangu pulled the scarf from her head, revealing her long, dark hair, and his breath caught. Her tresses fell past her shoulders, as soft and brown as the wide eyes he found so entrancing. *She's so beautiful*, he thought. His heart cramped, and he lost his head to euphoria. When Chipangu told him to start searching tree trunks, he didn't even ask what he was looking for.

Kalomba patted down a few trunks before coming to a large tree that had been split straight down the middle by lightning, creating a large sheltered space at its center. Without even thinking, Kalomba reached inside. Something hissed deep in the hole. Frightened, Kalomba jerked his hand back. *That sounded like a snake*. Kalomba really did not like snakes.

He looked at his companion Chipangu. She was grinning from ear to ear.

"There's the snake I'm searching for." She plunged her whole arm into the hollow tree trunk. A loud hissing ensued and Chipangu struggled for a moment, gritting her teeth. Then she smiled. "Aha! Got you." She pulled her hand out to reveal a giant green snake trapped in her fist. It was still twisting and wriggling, trying to break free. It twined its tail around Chipangu's slender arm and her waist and then down her leg. Kalomba stared at the massive serpent.

*It's almost as long as a man*, he marveled. *It must be, no- a mamba!?* He reflexively took a step back. He knew mambas had great magic in their teeth that could kill a man with a single bite. His mother always warned him to run the other way if he ever crossed paths with one. Now Chipangu had one of the demons wrapped around her arm. Its coils flexed menacingly as it hissed, angry.

Kalomba flinched. He was trying not to shake, but he could feel his fingertips twitching as he stared into the giant, black eyes of the mamba. He couldn't believe Chipangu was touching it, letting it wrap itself around her like that. *This is not a good idea*, he thought. If Chipangu lost control even for an instant, there would be nothing he could do.

The mamba suddenly constricted, twisting Chipangu's arm in closer to her body, rearing its fangs to strike. Kalomba's heart stopped. The snake was going for her face. He tried to shout, but just as the snake's jaws shut, Chipangu jerked her hand away, safe. The mamba hissed long and low, frustrated. It was determined to kill the upstart girl.

Getting the snake back under control, Chipangu motioned to Kalomba to come closer. He honestly tried. He just had to put one foot in front of the other, but he couldn't do it.

Chipangu rolled her eyes. "Don't be such a child. Come help me." She fished a metal thimble out of a pouch around her waist and handed it to him. "Here, I need you to milk the snake."

"To wh-what?" Kalomba's voice came out like a squeak. His heart pounded. *Probably trying to escape my chest before it's too late.*

"Don't worry. It's not that hard."

"Then, why don't you do it?"

Chipangu put a hand on her hip. "Do you want to hold the snake?" As if on cue, it twisted violently, jerking her hand high in the air.

"No, that's all right," Kalomba said quickly. "Just tell me what to do."

Keeping a firm grip on the snake's neck with her right hand, Chipangu grabbed the base of its skull with her left and massaged the top of its head, forcing its mouth open. She held the mamba out in front of her, and Kalomba was suddenly staring down the yellow gullet of a monster. Its two impossibly long fangs

glistened translucently in the weak sunlight. Kalomba swallowed loudly and forced himself to take half a step forward.

Giving him the thimble, Chipangu showed him how to gently pull the snake's fang forward to release the magic inside without actually touching it. Kalomba nodded and repeated her directions in his head, trying desperately to feel more confident about the situation overall. He wanted her to think he was tough. *Why did it have to be a snake?*

Taking several deep breaths, he reached for the snake's mouth. Suddenly, it lunged for him. Kalomba leapt backward and tripped over a root, landing in a mud puddle. For a second, the world went silent as his mind tried to process the shock. Kalomba flicked the mud off his hands and looked up to see Chipangu silently shaking. With laughter.

"Chipangu, it's not funny!" he shouted indignantly.

With the snake still wrapped around her arm and totally under her control, she let out a loud, long cackle. "I-I'm sorry," she said, trying to breathe, "but you should've seen your face! Aah!" She widened her eyes in mock horror and then starting laughing again.

Kalomba pursed his lips in anger. He got to his feet and without a word milked the mamba until the thimble brimmed over. Kalomba did not look at her as he capped the vial and put it back in her bag. He let his arms fall back to his sides, waiting for her next instructions.

"Kalomba," she said quietly. "Kalomba, I'm sorry."

He shook his head. He didn't want her apology. He didn't even want to acknowledge how deeply she had wounded his pride.

Suddenly, Chipangu gasped. Kalomba's eyes snapped up. The snake had sharply constricted around her arm and waist, twisting her limbs uncomfortably. Her left hand scrambled at the snake's tail trying to unwind it from around her leg. "Please," she whispered. "Snake's stronger-." Her voice cut off as its coils tightened.

Kalomba dropped to his knees in front of her. Chipangu had just begged for his help, and Chipangu never begged for anything. As his eyes drew level with her waist, he suddenly realized how physically close he

was, closer than he had been in years, and his palms grew unbearably hot and sweaty. Ignoring his own excitement, he carefully wrapped his fingers around the mamba and began pulling it away from her thigh, trying not to touch her in the process. Despite his best efforts though, his fingertips brushed her bare skin the third time round. He felt his face grow warm, and his fingers started shaking. Suddenly, the snake tightened its grip even more, making Chipangu cry out.

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry.” Kalomba began unwinding the snake as fast as he could, letting his fingers trail all over her where necessary. In a matter of panicked seconds, he was holding the snake above his head with Chipangu. Their bodies were barely an inch apart, and Kalomba was desperately trying not to think about that.

Chipangu suppressed a smile. “Kalomba, let go.”

“W-what?” His arms were shaking.

“Let go of the snake.”

He immediately dropped his hands to his side.

With a deep breath, Chipangu tossed the snake as far into the jungle as she could.

Kalomba heard the mamba hit something further in and slither away. “I heard mambas hunt humans.”

Chipangu laughed and Kalomba felt his face grow even hotter. “Who told you that? Your mother?”

She shook her head. “No, they’re more scared of us than we are of them. Well, maybe not you.”

Kalomba rolled his eyes. “I think we have had enough fun at my expense today.”

Chipangu looped her arm around his. “Perhaps. We should be getting back anyway. Your mother’s probably worried.”

“She should be. I’m with you.”

It took them a few minutes to wind their way back out of the dark forest. After the previous year’s extra-dry dry season, the ferns and vines had grown back with a vengeance, draping themselves across trees and carpeting the ground. Kalomba had great difficulty picking his way through it. He kept tripping on roots hidden by the thick undergrowth. *Chipangu makes it seem so easy*, he thought as he stumbled for what felt like

the hundredth time. Without a word or even a glance, Chipangu reached back and grabbed his hand to steady him. She didn't let go.

His cheeks flamed. He wanted to pull his hand away, to tell her he was a man and could walk on his own, but then he felt her soft skin press against his and he shut up. She led him carefully, but her movements had the smooth grace of practice and Kalomba didn't trip anymore. When they reached the edge of the trees, she pulled him down behind a large leafy plant.

The village was spread out before them on the plain, an irregular collection of bamboo buildings elevated on stilts above the dusty grass and insects. Kalomba could see smoke rising from his house on the far side of the community. Kalomba frowned a bit; smoke meant his father was home and working in the smithy. Most buildings in the village consisted of one room, but some of the communal spaces and Kalomba's own home had additions and antechambers. The elders' hall at the center of the town had several rooms for meeting, deliberating, and sometimes even feasting, although Kalomba's favorite celebrations always took place outside, like the feast before the initiation rites every year. Each boy and girl in the village had to pass the trials to be initiated. What exactly the test entailed, no one ever revealed, but each year, just before the boys and girls disappeared into the bush to reemerge as adults, the villagers gathered around a roasting-pit to gorge upon food, dance, and sing the old songs. Even an "ancestor," usually revered and long-dead, would make an appearance. This year the feast held special significance for Kalomba because this was the year he was to stand his own trial. He had about a week still to wait, and the anticipation was eating away at him. There was no way he could know that they day of his initiation would never come.

"What are you thinking about?" Chipangu asked him.

"Oh," he smiled, "the future."

They were both quiet for a moment.

"Ready to go back?" She nodded towards the village.

Kalomba's gaze raked over the smooth curve of her shoulder. Her eyes were such a deep brown. He ached to say, "No," but he knew his mother would be furious if he delayed much longer. So he nodded instead.

“All right,” she whispered, “I’ll go first.”

He nodded again. She stood up and started casually walking towards the village like she did it all the time. *She does do it all the time*, Kalomba reminded himself. She was a medicine woman.

He waited behind the palm frond to make sure Chipangu made it to her grandmother’s hut without being molested. He had been hearing whispers, echoes of suspicions about what Chipangu was really up to in the bush, that maybe her frequent and solitary trips weren’t actually foraging expeditions. Maybe she was a witch, raising devils in the forest to terrorize her fellow villagers. Kalomba didn’t believe of word of it, although it was a dangerous rumor to spread because the penalty for witchcraft was a lifetime of slavery. He wished the gossip would just die already. She was innocent after all. He had just spent five hours helping her search for snake venom for Mbuyi, a childhood friend who was very ill. Unfortunately, Mbuyi had never quite outgrown his childhood fevers and was frequently bedridden, but he had been so sick the past few weeks, he couldn’t even eat, and he kept having visions of things that were not there. Kalomba knew he should visit, but he hadn’t in awhile because the visits always left him feeling miserable. It wasn’t that Mbuyi was bitter or resentful. He wasn’t trying to make everyone feel guilty, but the sight of his weak limbs and wasted face did that all on their own. *I should go see him though*, Kalomba thought as he kept watch. *They say he might die any day now*.

Chipangu made it to her door without anyone appearing. So after she disappeared inside her grandmother’s hut at the edge of the village, Kalomba finally stood. It was dangerous to go in the bush, alone, but even more so to go in together. If they were caught together, Kalomba would be automatically implicated in whatever rumors were swirling around Chipangu.

As he waited, he watched the breeze ripple through the grass. It carried the warm heady scent of the jungle, her scent. He closed his eyes and sucked in a deep breath. As Chipangu filled his lungs, he couldn’t help but smile.

Then, something hissed behind him. Kalomba startled so hard, he ran from the dark cover of the trees, nearly falling on his face in the process. He was halfway across the bright savanna when he experienced



the strange sensation that someone was watching him. He was certain it was Chipangu and that she was laughing at him. Kalomba ground his teeth as he slowed to a walk. She was always laughing at him.

He tried to look calm and collected as he walked home through the village, but his heart was still pounding. Luckily, there weren't too many people out and about. A few of the younger children were scurrying back and forth between huts, gathering firewood, and retrieving water from the well for dinner. As an only child, Kalomba still had to carry out the chores that would normally be delegated to someone younger. Looking at how low the sun was in the sky, Kalomba picked up his pace. *Mama is not going to be happy.*

As expected, his mother was displeased. As soon as he entered the hut, a ladle appeared out of nowhere and whipped his bare shoulders. "Kalomba! Where have you been?"

A second stroke of the ladle spun him round so hard, he was face to face with his mother. "I uh-I."

"Never mind!" She shouted as she pushed a bucket into his hand. "Go get some water for dinner."

Kalomba didn't even hesitate. He ran to the well at the center of the village and back as quickly as he could, so his mother could prepare dinner. She set the water over the fire crackling at the center of the hut and threw some cassava and pellets of millet in. As she stood stirring, she began interrogating Kalomba about his day. "Where have you been?"

Kalomba rubbed the small welt forming on his arm from the ladle. "Uh, out with Nsonyi."

Mama stopped stirring and looked at him sharply. "No, Nsonyi stopped by earlier."

"Oh." Kalomba didn't trust himself to say anything else. Across the room, there was an antelope skin spread across the rough floor. He flopped down on it and closed his eyes.

He heard her start stirring the pot again. "If I find you've been out with that witch again."

"Mama," he said exasperatedly, "she's not a witch." *If people keep saying she's a witch, they'll all believe it soon.*

He heard her tap her spoon against the pot. "She spends an awful lot of time in the bush."

Mentally sighing, Kalomba opened his eyes. "She has to, Mama. Where else would she get her magic?"

His mother was about to retort when Kalomba's father emerged from the smithy, smelling of molten ore. They each washed their hands in a bucket of water Kalomba had retrieved from the well earlier and then sat down to eat, thanking their ancestors for the meal.

Kalomba ate his cassava and spiced millet slowly, daydreaming about Chipangu's hair twisting in the wind while his father chattered away about his metallurgy and his mother discussed the progress of the village's harvest. Kalomba was so far away, he didn't hear his father ask him about his day. Tata repeated the question, but when Kalomba gave no response, Mama answered for him.

"He was with that witch-girl," she said darkly.

Tata put his bowl down. "Kalomba, you need to be more careful. I know you think there's nothing to these rumors-."

"Because there isn't!" he interrupted, snapping back to reality.

"But," his father continued over him, "the elders do not agree."

Kalomba's stomach did a somersault. *What?* "Surely, you're not giving credence to these ridicu-"

"I am," Tata rejoined angrily, "and so are others. You need to be careful. What were you doing with her today?"

Kalomba stared at the bowl in front of him, gritting his teeth. *I refuse. I won't tell you anything.*

"Kalomba!" Tata growled.

Kalomba looked up into his father's dark scowl. He had never hated his father as much as he did in that moment. *This is my day*, he thought. *My memory, not yours.* Tata did not break eye contact. He waited the boy out, confident that he would break. And he did.

"We were collecting medicine for Mbuyi," Kalomba said slowly and begrudgingly.

Tata's eyes narrowed. "You went into the bush." It was more of an accusation than a question.

Kalomba looked away from Tata, unable to confirm or deny the suspicion.

"Oh!" Mama exclaimed, rolling her eyes.

The temperature in the room shifted. Kalomba suddenly felt very warm around the ears. Tata seethed. "You will not endanger this family, boy. I forbid it."

He pressed his lips together. “What does that mean?”

“Stay away from Chipangu.”

Kalomba felt like he had been kicked in the stomach. *But today was a perfect day.* He had finally seen her hair. *And I will see it again.* He quietly swallowed his dinner with a minimal amount of chewing and stood up.

Anger was etched into every line on Tata ya Kalomba’s face. “If you walk out that door, do not come back.”

Kalomba said nothing. He simply turned on his heel and walked away.

He went to Mbuyi’s because he wasn’t sure where Chipangu was but she was a healer, so beside Mbuyi’s sickbed seemed like a good place to check.

Half the village seemed to be milling around the front of Mbuyi’s home, trying to comfort his parents and siblings. Kalomba noted the baskets of cassava and dried boar meat the older women were carrying. *Is he dead?* he thought, panicked. Kalomba’s stomach sank. Had Chipangu failed? Mbuyi was twin. Twins were supposed to be powerful. They had more magic than anyone else. How could this happen? *Is Kapa next?* The first time Mbuyi had gotten sick, when Kalomba was still small, he had overheard the older women gossiping about the twins. They said that it was known that sometimes one twin stole the other’s power in the womb, but if that should happen, both would die. So far, Mbuyi and Kapa had both survived, although much of Mbuyi’s life had been confined to a bed.

The village’s grief turned out to be premature though because inside the large hut, Kalomba found Mbuyi still alive, albeit barely. He was lying in a pile of furs, which Kalomba could just make out in the dim light, with incense burning all around him. Mama ya Makabi was shaking a leather bag of bones between her old, gnarled fingers over the center of Mbuyi’s body. She was humming a song to implore the boy’s ancestors to restore his power. Kapa, Mbuyi’s twin sister, was sitting on the floor beside her brother, clutching his hand as if she could give back the magic she had stolen at birth just by squeezing hard enough. Chipangu was standing over a table to the side, mixing a potion and occasionally glancing over the ritual with a look of skepticism.

Kalomba did not hesitate. He walked straight over to Chpango, to warn her, to tell about the grave danger she was in, but even before he got a single word out, she cut him off.

“Hello, Kalomba” She was studiously crushing tree bark with a pestle.

“Uh, hello, Chipangu. Can we talk?”

Chipangu emptied her pestle into a bowl and began crushing another piece of bark. “I am a little busy.”

Kalomba looked at the hut around him. “Everyone is acting like he’s already dead.”

“Because they’re all fools,” she said bluntly.

Kalomba watched her for a moment as she measured out a careful amount of dried herbs. He really needed to talk to her, but even in his panic, he could see that then was not a good time. “Can you save him?” he asked.

Chipangu stopped grinding and looked Kalomba in the eye. “Yes.”

Her confidence was reassuring, but Kalomba knew her fate depended on the villagers’ good will, so he pressed. “You’ve treated him before,” he said quietly, “and he’s always gotten sick again.

Chipangu seemed surprised at Kalomba’s lack of faith in her. “That’s because I haven’t found a cure yet, but I am getting close.”

Kalomba was so wrapped in his own concerns, it took him a minute to fully process her words. “A cure for childhood fevers?” He hadn’t thought it actually possible.

She nodded matter-of-factly. “If we were better at protecting ourselves from mosquitoes, our children would not get the fever in the first place, but yes, I’m working on a medicine.”

Kalomba was impressed. Chipangu definitely had more magic than anyone else he knew, but he still couldn’t help voicing his doubts. “Protection or no, if someone wishes you ill, the mosquitoes will come no matter what.”

Chipangu fixed him with a look that told Kalomba he had just dropped in her estimation.

He panicked. “What? What did I say?”

Chipangu relaxed the severity of her expression. “Nothing. I just thought-.” She shook her head. “Never mind.”

*Thought what?* Kalomba was about to press the issue, when Kapa suddenly cried out. Mbuyi’s eyes had opened. They were glazed and clearly seeing something not of this world. His fingers were outstretched above him, fingers clawing at the empty air. He looked like he was reaching for something, something he desperately needed.

“It’s the ancestors!” Mama ya Makabi exclaimed.

Kalomba saw Chipangu roll her eyes, although no one else caught it. He was puzzled by her attitude. She had more poison than anyone he knew, but she seemed disgruntled with the old ways. *Like the old ones have disappointed her somehow.*

“Keep him restrained,” Chipangu told Kapa. Kapa did not protest and did as she was told. Whatever her personal rancor towards Chipangu, of which the rest of the village was well aware, she never allowed it to jeopardize her twin’s health.

Chipangu pulled out the vial of snake venom she and Kalomba had spent several hours collecting and added a few drops of it to the potion in her mortar. He noticed the venom smoked a little when it was mixed in, although that could have been a trick of the light.

“I thought you didn’t have a cure.” Kalomba said, confused.

Chipangu’s mouth narrowed. Kalomba questioned many things, and it was beginning to annoy her. But she figured he was just curious, and somewhat ignorant, so she obliged him with an answer. “We overcame our fevers naturally when we were children because of the strength of our bodies, but Mbuyi did not, could not. This will give him the strength to overcome it. I hope.”

“You hope?” Kapa said with a sharp edge to her voice. She was a full two years younger than Chipangu but already had more curves. Kalomba knew half the boys in the village were enamored with her, but all he could see were gangly knees and elbows.

Mama ya Makabi put a hand on Kapa’s shoulder. “The magic over your brother is very strong. We are doing our best to break it.”

Kalomba could sense that for reasons he did not understand, Chipangu had taken offense at her grandmother's words. She didn't say anything about it though.

Instead, she asked, "Kapa, do you think you could sit him up?" Just then, Mbuyi began to violently convulse, still trying to reach that elusive thing floating just above his face.

"Never mind," Chipangu muttered. "All right, just hold him down. I'll spoon it in."

Kapa placed her hands on either of her brother's shoulders and pushed him back into the furs. Mama ya Makabi feebly tried to hang on to his shaking legs. Quickly, Chipangu scooped the medicine she had concocted into a wooden spoon that she forced between Mbuyi's cracked lips. His struggling intensified. His legs flailed so badly that he kicked Mama ya Makabi in the chest and one of his hands, half-closed in a fist struck his sister's eye. Chipangu had to kneel on his chest to keep administering the potion, but in his fever, he resisted, twisting his head at all sorts of strange angles. Chipangu probably got more of the medicine in Mbuyi's bed than in his mouth.

Despite the humor Kalomba discovered in watching the scene unfold, he decided to intervene. He sat behind the pile of furs and held Mbuyi's face still while Chipangu forced the spoon down his throat. Kalomba watched the sweat roll down her brow as she attended her patient. It ran down her neck to her chest which sharply rose and fell with each heavy breath. It took Kalomba several seconds to realize someone was calling him out of his trance.

"Kalomba. Kalomba!" Chipangu insisted.

"What? Yes?" He realized where he had been staring, and his face flushed.

"We need to let Mbuyi rest now. With any luck the fever will break."

"And without luck? What if your magic isn't strong enough?" Kapa demanded.

"Well, let's see what happens first. Then, I can make a decision about what to do next." Chipangu watched the other girl's frown deepen. "I won't let him die, Kapa," she said quietly.

Kapa nodded in resignation, but Kalomba saw something flash deep in her eyes. *Suspicion?* Whatever it was, the back of Kalomba's neck prickled when he saw it. He looked back at Mbuyi, now peacefully

sleeping, with his mouth slightly open. Kalomba hoped whatever Chipangu gave him worked because if it made the boy worse, Chipangu would definitely find herself facing charges of witchcraft.

Kapa stood to do as Chipangu said and leave her brother to rest when Kalomba suddenly remembered why he had come.

“Wait, Chipangu, I need to speak with you.” He caught the crook of her arm as she was wiping her hand on a towel.

She turned, read the urgency in his eyes, and nodded.

Outside, Kapa had dispersed the would-be mourners. One still hung around. Nsonyi, the Big Man’s youngest son, was a year older than Kalomba, but they had been close friends from a young age. He was nervously pacing back and forth in front of the hut, waiting for Chipangu. He looked very nervous.

When Nsonyi saw her, he bounded over. “I need to speak to you. Now.”

Chipangu looked over her shoulder at Kalomba. She didn’t know why she was so popular. Kalomba looked at Nsonyi. He was ashen and clearly upset, like he overheard something he should not have.

Kalomba hesitated for a half a second and then said, “I can wait.”

Chipangu nodded, and she and Nsonyi walked around the corner to talk in private. Kalomba leaned against the wooden wall behind him and inspected his fingertips. There was a welt forming across the inside of his fingers from where a particularly springy branch had slapped him that morning while trekking through the forest. The welt was an angry white, and it seared with pain when he pressed it, yet for whatever reason, he couldn’t stop pressing it. He was still playing with it when Chipangu returned without Nsonyi. He could tell from her face that the news had not been good.

“Chipangu, what’s wrong?”

She looked at him, staring wildly. She didn’t say anything, just shook her head. And then, as if she were in a dream, she wandered away.

Kalomba followed her, trying to get her attention. Finally he reached out and caught her by the elbow. “Chipangu, tell me what’s wrong.”

She looked at him with wide brown eyes and bit her lip. *She's frightened*, he realized. *The mamba-tamer is scared.*

“Nothing,” she said after a moment. Then, she shook her head. “No, that’s not true. Something-” She broke off and looked around. “Not here.”

They went to her house. She roughly pulled him through the entrance, checking to make sure her grandmother had not yet returned home. Chipangu shoved Kalomba onto the stool sitting by her table covered in potions. He thought she was going to empty the medicine bag around her waist, but she started filling it up instead. A few of the vials from the table went in automatically. Kalomba noticed the mamba poison was the first such one, but Chipangu had to ponder over some of the others.

Kalomba watched for a few minutes, trying to discern a pattern, but he still didn’t understand what was happening. “What is going on?”

She paused for a moment before turning away to collect a few baubles by her bed, including an obsidian necklace that Kalomba recognized as having once belonged to Chipangu’s mother. Although she rarely wore it, Chipangu always took the necklace with her when she ran away into the bush.

He tried again. “Chipangu-.”

She turned on him. “Do you love me?”

He stared at her. “Wh-what?”

She rolled her eyes and pressed the heel of her hand to her forehead. “It doesn’t matter.” She stared at the roof in reproach of herself. “It doesn’t matter.” She looked at Kalomba. “I have to leave. At least for a little while.” She rolled up a blanket to take with her.

Kalomba was flabbergasted. “Why?”

“It’s only for a little while,” she repeated; then she said reluctantly. “There’s been talk among the village.”

*She knows about the rumors.* A chill crept down Kalomba’s spine. *And now she’s leaving.* He stood as she hoisted a bag over her shoulder. “I’m coming with you.”



She looked at him sharply, but her eyes immediately softened. “Kalomba, I won’t drag you into this.” She tucked a stray lock of her hair back under the black headscarf.

*No*, he told himself, *today will not be the last time I see her hair*. “You couldn’t stop me.”

Chipangu rubbed her face. She was on the verge of crying, but that was beneath her.

Kalomba put a hand on her shoulder. “We could hide in the bush,” he said quietly.

Chipangu smirked, even as the first tears began to leak out of her eyes. “You would never survive.”

Kalomba shrugged. “I’ll have you with me.” He smiled, trying to inject some cheeriness into the situation.

She hiccupped. “I can’t ask this of you, Kalomba.”

Kalomba sighed. How could she think he would just let her leave? “You mean much more to me than that. We leave tonight.” He strode toward the door.

“But, no, Kalomba, wait.” She tried to grab his shoulder, but he was gone before she could stop him.

Waiting for his parents to fall asleep that night was a bitter agony. Kalomba didn’t dare sneak back into his house while his father was still awake, but Mama would not stop talking about Mbuyi’s illness or how much he seemed to have improved in the past few hours. Kalomba could not believe how many words his mother could cram in between breaths. According to her, all of the women in the village, especially Mama ya Makabi, were astonished at Chipangu’s skill. Kalomba wished his father would tell Mama to seal her lips and sleep, but instead, Tata indulged his wife’s chattiness. He let her babble for so long, Kalomba dozed off crouching in the shadows, dreaming uneasily that he was trapped inside a box and could not escape no matter how hard he struggled.

It was the rumble of his mother’s snores that woke him. In the dark, Kalomba strained to listen for a moment, holding his breath. Then, he heard them: the short, punctuated snorts of his father. His own breathing accelerated. *They’re both asleep*. He slowly stretched to his full height, realigning his spine with several pops. Quietly pulling the jackal hangings away from the entrance, he slipped inside the hut.

He stalked over to his bed and grabbed a satchel, stuffing it with everything he thought might be necessary to survival: dried meat, dried millet, a few plantains, a hatchet, a knife, his fetish. He looked around in quiet panic. Where was the fetish? It was a dark leather bag with a small crescent moon inked on it that held a single lock of his grandmother's hair. There was no way he could hope to survive in the wild without it, yet he couldn't find it anywhere. Just on a hunch, he crept close to his parents' bed.

His mother had it clutched in her hand, close to her face. It looked like she had fallen asleep gazing at it. Guilt suddenly twisted Kalomba's stomach. *I'm sorry, Mama*, he thought, *for breaking your heart*. He looked at his father on the other side of the bed. Tata was sprawled over the edge, with one arm thrown over his face and the other trailing on the floor. His mouth hung open, and for once, he looked vulnerable. Kalomba watched his father's face twitch. *I'm sorry, Tata, for disobeying you*. Kalomba paused for another moment.

"I'm sorry," he repeated aloud in a soft whisper. Then, he left.

The new moon darkened the night sky, considerably limiting visibility, so Kalomba had to be especially careful sneaking through the village. If he walked into a misplaced wall and called out, he might wake someone. And if that someone saw him, they might see Chipangu, too. And he didn't want to think about what might happen if someone saw Chipangu. Whatever Nsonyi said to her had scared her. That was plain in the way she had avoided answering his questions. *Do the elders really think she's a witch? Would they really be willing to sell her into slavery?* That was the punishment for witchcraft.

Kalomba shook his head, trying to push those thoughts away. He didn't have time for them just then. Painfully he crept, straining his body so as not to make a sound, darting between huts. Every sense was on high alert, every nerve on fire. He was so overwrought that when a beetle crawled over his foot, he almost screamed. *Why does she have to live on the other side of the village*, he moaned internally. He tried to steady his breath. *Calm down. It's only a little further*.

Chipangu was sitting on her porch with her head in her hands. He could dimly make out a bag lying at her feet.

"Chipangu," he whispered when he was within earshot.

She looked around for him. When she spotted him crouching a few feet away against the wall of her house, she smiled. "I thought maybe you had changed your mind."

He silently crept toward her and took her hand in his. "I will never change my mind. Are you ready to leave?"

She puffed out her cheeks with a sigh. "Yes, I suppose so." She clapped his hand between both of hers. "Let's go."

Stealthily, they snuck across the field that separated the village from the jungle. Kalomba tried to listen for guards or villagers who were having trouble sleeping, but all he could hear was the roaring of his heartbeat. Two hundred yards, only two hundred yards separated them from their freedom. *If only there was some sort of cover to hide our escape.* But there wasn't, so they crouched as close to ground as they could and crawled. About halfway across the field, Kalomba thought he heard a branch snap behind him and in sudden terror, ran the last hundred feet, plunging into the bush without a thought for Chipangu.

The total darkness of the jungle was all enveloping. It took a few minutes for Chipangu's eyes to adjust and even longer for Kalomba's. As such, they were forced to wander for a bit until they almost literally ran into each other. When they finally found each other, Kalomba was so relieved he pulled Chipangu close to him and embraced her with all his strength. This sudden expression of affection caught Chipangu so off-guard, she hugged him back. Suddenly, they heard a branch snap a few feet away.

Kalomba spun around and for the first time, actually examined the nighttime forest around him. He had thought it would be more magical, *like Chipangu*, but really, it was quite spooky. There were many dark, ominous shapes that swayed in the breeze. Kalomba stopped. He distinctly saw a shadow move between the trees. *Against the wind.* He shoved Chipangu behind him and drew the hunting knife from his bag. Whatever the shadow was, it didn't seem animal, which meant it was either an evil spirit, or worse, a human being. Kalomba heard the distinct sound of an arrow being drawn behind him. He spun around only to confront Kamanyi, Nsonyi's older brother, who had stepped into the dim light at the edge of the clearing. His bow and arrow were trained on Kalomba's chest.

"Drop the knife," he commanded. His expression brooked no argument.

Kalomba hesitated, but the ring of men around the couple finally revealed themselves. They had been standing in Kalomba's blind spots, just at the edge of his fuzzy night vision. Kalomba dropped his knife. There were at least ten men all armed with bows. He had no chance. He could feel Chipangu trembling beside him. The original shadow, the first man Kalomba had spotted was Luwi, the village's Big Man. He wasn't wearing his usual leopard skin cape, preferring black garments for the task at hand. The numerous gold and copper bangles around his wrists still clinked though, as a constant reminder of his already impressive presence. He stood before Kalomba smiling wickedly with his arms crossed haughtily across his broad chest.

"Young lovers?"

Chipangu reached for Kalomba's hand. She was too frightened to speak, but both Kalomba's hands were balled into fists and refused to admit hers into their embrace.

Luwi crossed the distance between him and Kalomba in a single stride. Now they were nose to nose, and although, Luwi was slightly shorter than Kalomba he could still look him in the eye. "I'm surprised to see you here, blacksmith. Ah well, we should have known the witch would have a thrall."

"She's not a witch!" Kalomba spat.

Luwi chuckled and placed a reassuring hand on Kalomba's shoulder. "It is all right, son, to admit that you've fallen under a spell."

Kalomba jerked his shoulder away. "I'm not under any spell."

Luwi drew his eyebrows together. "Then, you are an accomplice to her witchcraft."

Kalomba's skin grew clammy as the temperature of the jungle suddenly seemed to drop. He knew from the outside this looked anything but innocent. He and Chipangu were out in the bush in the middle of the night, when evil spirits were most easy to access. They were alone, and they had left in secret. Of course, they were witches; it was the only logical explanation. Kalomba looked at the sky, deciding. *Ancestors, forgive me.*

"I am not an accomplice," he forced out through his teeth. "I am the witch, not her."

Chipangu squeaked, "No!" She was shaking her head. "No, no, Luwi, he has nothing to do with this."

When Luwi heard her use his familiar name, he back-handed her across the face and she fell to the ground sobbing. “You do not call me Luwi.” He leaned over her and viciously whispered, “I gave you a way out, Chipangu. I offered you a place in my home to avoid this fate.” He glanced at Kalomba. “But it seems you had other plans.”

Kalomba felt sick. Deep down, he had guessed what Nsonyi overheard. He knew if Chipangu stayed in the village she would probably be accused, so she had to leave. But he would never have guessed that Luwi would use the accusation as leverage. *And why didn't she tell me about Luwi?*

From the ground, Chipangu started begging for the first time in her life. “Please, Tata ya Kamanyi, let Kalomba go. He has nothing to do with this.”

Luwi's gaze raked over the tall boy, passing judgment on each of his flaws. He looked back at Chipangu with a smile and cupped his hand under her chin. “I cannot. He confessed to being a witch, that same as you. You shall share the same fate.”

She screamed. It was the bone-chilling sound of total despair. The men all shuddered when they heard it. Luwi kicked her to shut her up, but it was too late. The jungle was already answering. Birds roosting in the trees suddenly shrieked in sympathetic horror. Things began to slither and hiss in the undergrowth, and something howled deep in the heart of the bush. The men began to visibly lose their nerve, casting nervous glances over their shoulders.

Kalomba decided to use the moment to be brave. “We demand trial by the village elders.”

Luwi stared at him as the sounds of the forest intensified. A second howl answered the first deep in the forest, then, a third that sounded much closer than the others. The bows pointed at Kalomba's chest all began to drop as the men's hands started to shake. Even Kamanyi looked scared. After a long tense moment, Luwi shrugged. “The outcome will still be the same,” he said. “There are witnesses to her witchcraft. She will be condemned, and she will be sold. As will you.”

Kalomba mustered every bit of false bravado he had left to say, “So be it.”

## Chapter Four

**May 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1860-** Lunda Empire, Africa

The mundos beat for three days, summoning the elders from nearby villages. An auspicious event like a witch's trial required a full palaver. Kalomba knew that outside the elders' hut men and their women from all over the countryside were gathering to decide his fate. *My fate and Chipangu's*. He looked over at his fellow prisoner.

She was lying, bound at the ankles and wrists, a few feet away from him in the center of a ring of crushed herbs. Whatever the herbs were, they stank to high heaven. When Luwi had forced Mama ya Makabi to draw the shape around Chipangu, he had proclaimed it was a well-known way to prevent witches from escaping. Kalomba did not believe for an instant that Chipangu was a witch, that she had sold her soul to the devil for the power to bend feeble-minded men like himself to her will. *No, what I feel for Chipangu is real*. He didn't know if what he felt was love, but it was real. Nor did he believe that Chipangu snuck off to the bush to offer her body to evil spirits or that they gave her the power to send sleeping sickness and fevers amongst the children. None of this he believed, but he had to admit whatever those herbs were, they had worked on Chipangu.

Bound in the middle of the circle, she could barely lift her head. She had lost consciousness almost as soon as Mama ya Makabi finished scattering the foul-smelling substance. And the girl had yet to recover.

Kalomba tried calling her name again. "Chipangu! Chipangu, wake up." It did no good. One of her feet twitched, but she did not answer.

Even though only his hands were bound, Kalomba dared not get any closer to the magic, lest it begin to affect him too. Luwi had taken Kalomba's little fetish when he arrested him, so Kalomba had neither the protection of his ancestors nor the supernatural. And he knew if he passed out, Luwi would just use it as evidence that Kalomba was a witch. He groaned and rubbed his forehead against his knee. He wished the palaver would start soon. The constant pounding of the drums felt like it was inside his head now, reverberating through the chambers of his skull, instead of just outside the elders' hall.

It had been a very boring three days. The elders' hall was completely empty except for him and Chipangu. There was no fire blazing in the hearth at the center of the hall, the benches for the council had been removed, and the various furs usually scattered across the floor for the villagers were nowhere to be seen. The only other human contact Kalomba had had was when one of Luwi's many wives appeared twice a day to feed him. She tried to feed Chipangu as well, but she was usually too weak to swallow.

The first day of his confinement, Kalomba had made the mistake of addressing Luwi's wife. Her eyes had gone wide with terror as she immediately dropped his bowl of millet, covered her ears to protect herself from the spell, and ran out of the hall. She did not come back later with the evening meal. Kalomba had had to crawl across the floor that night and lick up his food. The next day, he had wisely kept silent as she placed the bowl in front of him. However, she did not untie his hands from behind, so he was forced to bend over and push his face into the bowl, devouring his meal like an animal. Luwi's wife did not pay much attention to this spectacle as she had other matters to attend, like unsuccessfully entreating Chipangu to eat something.

The rest of the time, Kalomba was completely alone. He tried to turn his thoughts away from the impending trial, to remember happier times, but all he found he could think about was Kayongu, the last criminal sold as a slave to the Bobangi over ten years ago. Kayongu once was Luwi's older brother, but he had been caught stealing from Tata ya Kalomba's smithy and was subsequently sold. Because Kalomba's father was the aggrieved party, Luwi made sure to get copper and iron ore as part of the trade for Kayongu. He also got enough cloth to give all his wives new outfits. If Kayongu had not been a cripple, Luwi might have gotten new clothes for his sons, too. Kalomba, who was six at the time, remembered how the Bobangi river traders had trussed the old man up like an animal and carried him away never to be seen again.

Kalomba had liked the old man. Kayongu was a storyteller and whiled his days away entertaining the children of the village. Kalomba had spent every afternoon he could at the man's feet listening to the tales of the jackal gods and the warrior ancestors who defeated them. Kalomba especially loved the stories about Kinguri and Chinyami, the princely brothers, regal and strong, who together had set the Lunda Empire free from the shadows of division, war, and superstition. But Kayongu was gone now, and the only presence of

the old man Kalomba still felt was when his mother threatened him: “If you don’t behave, Kalomba, we will sell you to the Bobangi, and they’ll eat you just like they ate old Kayongu.”

Kalomba no longer believed the Bobangi were cannibals. *One meal every ten years!?* *How could they possibly survive?* But that did not mean he knew what was going to happen to him. He just wanted the palaver to be over. The indecision of the moment, the waiting, was slowly killing him. And it may have already done in Chipangu. He was about to try calling her name one more time when the front doors of the hall were thrown open. Sunlight flooded the room and momentarily blinded him. Chipangu groaned. *She’s alive*, he thought gratefully.

While he was still blinking to clear his vision, he heard someone hoist Chipangu to her feet. She moaned again, but before he could respond, someone grabbed him roughly by the shoulders and dragged him outside.

When he could finally see again, he found himself standing in front of a mass of people. They were surprisingly cheerful considering what they had gathered for. Friends from different villages reunited, laughing and embracing. Kalomba thought he heard someone in the back singing. And he could smell meat roasting nearby, making his stomach growl.

Kamanyi brought two tall stools over to Kalomba and Chipangu, so they could sit and still be seen by everyone. Chipangu hadn’t fully recovered from the herbs yet, and Kamanyi had to shake her to get her eyes to focus on him.

“Hey! Wake up.” He lightly slapped her cheek.

“Leave me alone,” she muttered. Her head was still lolling to one side, but her eyes had finally locked on Kamanyi. He roughly sat her on the stool, but she almost slipped off immediately.

“Cut her legs loose,” said Kalomba.

Kamanyi glared at him.

“Does she look like she can run anywhere?” Kalomba asked.



Kamanyi curled his lip at the boy's impertinence but took a knife from his belt and cut the ropes from her ankles. Chipangu instinctively wrapped her legs around the stool, regaining her balance. Kamanyi threw one more dirty look at Kalomba before returning to his seat among the elders.

Kamanyi had seen only thirty-seven changes of season, but last year, the village had elected him to replace old Wafwakanengu who had finally died, after outliving all other members of his generation. Usually, only men over forty were admitted to the council, but an exception had been made for Kamanyi because of his cunning. Kalomba's father was a member as was Nsonyi's, and Mbuyi's would be the following year. Kalomba could see his father sitting among the elders off to the left, near the back. His face was pained, although Kalomba could not tell if that was out of concern for him or the family's reputation. Having an accused witch for a son would certainly damage Tata's blacksmith business. Kalomba watched his father for a moment more, before turning his attention back to the crowd.

He knew most of these people. They were friends, extended family. And now he stood in front of them with the hot sun beating down the back of his neck. He scanned the sea of faces until he found his mama, standing near the back of the crowd with her hand over her heart. She looked wearied and sad. *I'm sorry, Mama*, he apologized again.

Abruptly, the drums stopped talking. The crowd immediately quieted and took their seats, turning to the front to hear the Big Man's words.

Luwi stood in front of the crowd with his arms spread wide as if he wished to embrace everyone at once. He was a sizeable man, almost as tall as Kalomba and twice as wide. His wealth was obvious in the scarlet sash wrapped over his shoulder and the large number of bangles around his wrists and ankles. He had made his fortune by out-foxing everyone else in the village and by preemptively removing all potential competition. His cunning and smooth-talking won him most of his wives, and even Kalomba's mother had run away with Luwi in her youth, although she eventually returned to her husband after a few months. Tata ya Kalomba took her back without hesitation because he had eyes for no one but her and he firmly believed no one could replace her as Kalomba's mother.

“My family,” Luwi spoke to everyone, not just the quarter of the village that was biologically his family, “I have asked you to gather here today to pass judgment on an evil that has arisen in our midst. This girl,” he pointed theatrically to Chipangu, “is a witch!” At the mention of witchcraft, Kalomba saw Chipangu straighten on her stool. She seemed to be recovering some of her old tenacity.

“Do you have anything to say?” Luwi asked her.

She smirked. “Only, that it is a lie.”

Luwi swept an arm over the crowd. “There are witnesses.”

Kalomba sat up straighter. Luwi had said that before, and Kalomba was curious to learn who these witnesses were. Luwi gave a signal with his hand, and several people stood up. A few of them were old, some young. They all told similar stories. One older woman proclaimed that Chipangu had cursed her little girl with sleeping sickness. It took Kalomba a few moments, but he did finally remember the little girl. It had started with a fever, as it usually did with those bitten by the tsetse. The fevers came and went, getting worse each time. Mama ya Makabi recognized the disease almost immediately. The bite on the girl’s hand had swollen and scabbed over, and lumps had appeared on the back of her neck, tell-tale signs, but despite the advanced warning, neither Mama ya Makabi nor Chipangu had been able to cure her. By the time the girl slipped into a coma, Chipangu was desperate. She needed to save the little girl; she’d lost two babies that month already, and she couldn’t let anyone else die. So she tried something new, a concoction never before used. Mama ya Makabi later called it reckless, after the girl died. *That was almost four dry seasons ago*, Kalomba realized with shock. Chipangu was twelve when it happened, and it was the first time she had run away into the bush. Kalomba remembered how she successfully evaded the search parties for three days. Kalomba’s father had been the one to find her. He had said she wouldn’t stop crying.

In the present, another man stood to denounce Chipangu, saying he had been gored on a boar-hunt because she had cursed him the day before. There was a woman who claimed her milk soured when Chipangu walked by, and it made her infant sick. One little girl declared that Chipangu used magic to steal her toys from her home. She knew it was Chipangu because the missing items would always turn up in Mama ya Makabi’s hut.

As preposterous as most of this sounded to Kalomba, he could see the heads of the crowd bobbing in agreement. More and more people stood to voice their grievances. And then to his shock, Kapa got up. Her face was stern and set with determination. She had never been bolder than in that moment, but to Kalomba, she still looked small, petty.

“This witch,” she shouted, “claims to make medicine, to heal.”

Suddenly, someone else in the crowd stood up. After a second, Kalomba realized it was Mbuyi. “She does heal!” he shouted. Kalomba’s mouth dropped open. The boy practically glowed. His once wasted limbs were strong and muscular. He stood confidently next to his sister. *It’s only been three days!* Kalomba could not believe his eyes. He blinked to make sure he wasn’t hallucinating. *What did Chipangu do to him!?*

“She made you sick, brother,” she said angrily. “To make her own power seem so astounding. She made you sick; then she miraculously healed you.”

Kalomba would have thought that absurd, but Mbuyi’s recovery was too remarkable to properly grasp. This more than anything seemed like witchcraft to him, but Mbuyi was better. So was this witchcraft really such a bad thing?

Mbuyi defended his savior. “Why would she do that, sister? That makes no sense.”

The sun glinted off a tear as it rolled down Kapa’s cheek. “To make you love her!”

No one said anything. Kalomba didn’t understand what Mbuyi’s feelings had to do with this. *Why does it matter if Mbuyi loves her?* And he doubted that he really loved her. Kapa was probably just jealous. Still, no one said anything. The uneasy silence rolled on and on, until one single laugh shattered it all. Everyone looked at Chipangu, who had chosen the worst possible moment to lose her head. She couldn’t stop cackling.

“Is this really what this is all about?” she shrieked. “You’re jealous, Kapa!?”

Kapa scowled. “How could I be jealous of a skinny witch like you?”

“Don’t speak to her like that!” Mbuyi hissed.

Kapa raised an eyebrow as if he had just proved her point. “Enchantment,” was all she said.

Kalomba fidgeted. No one was saying anything. No one was standing up for Chipangu.

Swallowing his fear, he called out, “Kapa is only blaming Chipangu to distract us from the real culprit: Kapal!”

Chipangu twisted on her stool to glare at Kalomba. The heat of her gaze shocked him. He was only trying to protect her.

He ignored her wrath and turned back to the crowd. “Kapa stole her twin’s power at birth. That is the cause of the sickness, not any spell cast by Chipangu.”

“Kalomba!” Chipangu snapped.

Kalomba turned towards her. *What!?*

“When I desire your help,” she said coldly, “I will ask for it.”

Her words were like a swift kick in the stomach. He bit his tongue to keep from shouting back at her as his face burned with shame. *How could she say that to me?*

Chipangu turned back to the crowd. “Kapa is no more to blame for her brother’s condition than I am,” she proclaimed. “It is common for one twin to be born stronger than the other, not because of magic or ill-will, but because the mother cannot support two small lives inside her.”

Kapa’s mother shouted defensively, “So it’s my fault!?”

Chipangu shook her head with a sad smile. “No, it is the fault of fate and fate alone. It is what it is!”

There was a small murmuring among the villagers. Luwi actually spat.

“You hear her lies for yourself.” He swept his arms across the crowd. “She attempts to fill our minds with falsehoods, to cast blame away from herself.” He pointed a damning finger at her. “She is the culprit. She enjoys dangling our lives before us, knowing that she is the only one with the power to release us from her poisons.” He twisted his finger toward Kalomba. “And he is her accomplice.”

“No!” Chipangu shrieked. “He has nothing to do with it.”

Luwi put his hands on his hips. “Then, why was he with you in the bush?”

Chipangu bit her lip, hesitating. Finally, she answered, “He didn’t know what I was doing. I asked him to come without telling him why I needed him.” She paused. “Which is how I got Nsonyi to go into the bush, too.”

The gasps were audible this time. Kalomba looked for his friend. He saw him sitting ramrod straight by the elders. He was visibly nervous, licking his lips, avoiding everyone's gaze.

Luwi looked hard at his son. "Nsonyi, is this true? Are you an accomplice to this witchcraft?"

He shook his head. "No, no."

"That's a lie!" someone shouted. "I saw them sneak off together."

Luwi looked around for the person who said it but instead saw several people nodding, confirming that they too had seen the illicit couple.

Kalomba suddenly felt sick. He stared at the ground, trying to calm his stomach. He knew what she was doing; she was trying to save him. If Nsonyi was an accomplice too, Luwi would have to banish them both. But, still, to think of Nsonyi alone in the woods with Chipangu made him angry. *Why did she have to take him out there?* He had thought of it as their special place, but clearly, it wasn't. Kalomba began to realize that his adventures with Chipangu may not have been so unique. He bit his lip hard enough to taste blood.

"Son, have you been in the bush with Chipangu?" pressed Luwi.

"Yes!" Kalomba looked up and saw that Nsonyi was on his feet, confronting his father. "Yes, I have accompanied Chipangu through the jungle, but she didn't trick me. I asked to go. I wanted to learn more about healing, so she took me along to show me how to forage for supplies."

Kamanyi spoke from his seat on the ground. "Did she show you how to use the things you collected?"

"Yes?" Nsonyi answered, unsure of the relevance of this.

Kamanyi smirked as the trap closed. "So, then, you know how her magic works?"

Nsonyi, not realizing the danger, shrugged. "Yes, I suppose."

Kamanyi raised an eyebrow. "Which means you're more than an accomplice; you're a witch, too."

Nsonyi stared at his brother, his jaw slack with shock. *He wasn't expecting the betrayal,* realized Kalomba. In hindsight, it was painfully obvious that Kamanyi would choose to eliminate his younger competition, just as Luwi, his father, had done.

Luwi pressed his lips into a thin line. This witch hunt was not following the course he had intended. To make matters worse, Mbuyi wouldn't stop interfering.

“If Chipangu really holds such sway over me,” he argued. “If the quality of my life depends on her mere whims, then I must be possessed. Possessed by her and her devils.” Whispers swept through the crowd.

Kapa turned towards her brother. “What?”

“Her magic is the reason I am alive. If she is a witch, then I am a product of witchcraft, and I demand to share her fate!”

Most of the color drained out of Kapa’s face. “No,” she said hollowly.

Luwi chewed on his thoughts for several seconds before shouting “Fine! The council shall vote on it.”

He sat down among the other older men, and they began arguing in a clipped tone. Kalomba could hear the villagers around him whispering, but he didn’t want to know what they were saying, so he turned to look at Chipangu. She was slumped over, staring at the ground, shaking. She looked like she wanted to run away, but Kalomba knew she never would.

Suddenly, Chipangu doubled over and began to retch. She hadn’t eaten in three days, so there was nothing to heave up. But the convulsions did not stop. The council ceased discussion and started to watch instead. Eventually she spat, clearing her mouth and bringing her body back under her own control.

The silence lasted for a few seconds before Kamanyi stood to deliver the verdict. “Chipangu, the witch, shall be sold along with her accomplices, Nsonyi and Kalomba, for the good of the village. As for Mbuyi,” Kamanyi paused, “we agree with him that he is the product of witchcraft and should be banished. He will be sold as well.”

Kapa screamed and several others, including Mama ya Makabi began to cry. Kamanyi sat back down among the elders. Kapa ran through the crowd and flung herself before Luwi, prostrating herself and kissing the hem of his robes. “Please, please. No! I’ll die if we’re separated. We’ll both die!”

Luwi slapped her hands away. “Then, by all means,” he said coldly, “go with him.”

She stared up into Luwi’s face, trembling. Her wide eyes flooded with tears.

Luwi turned to the other elders and sneered. “Are there any serious objections?”

No one spoke, not even Kalomba's father, a blacksmith whose work was sought as far as Katanga, the capital of the Lunda Empire. With just a word, he could have changed the whole course of these events.

But he did not speak. No one did, and Kapa became a prisoner alongside her brother.

Luwi had the five teenagers bound and left back-to-back in front of the elders' hall where everyone could pay their last respects. No one lingered for very long, either because they were afraid of being implicated or afraid of being spelled by the cult of Chipangu which had just been revealed in their midst, so as the crowds moved on to the feast, the five were left alone to contemplate their fate.

"They better get many beads for us," Nsonyi muttered, staring at the dirt. His brows knit together as he fought back tears.

Kalomba didn't know what to say besides, "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. What your brother-."

"Half-brother," Nsonyi hissed. Kamanyi and Nsonyi were the oldest and youngest sons of Luwi and as opposite as night and day. They had different mothers, too, who hated each other, and the animosity between the women had worn off on their sons.

Kalomba looked up at the sky, where a single cloud was scudding across the horizon. Something Luwi had said to Chipungo that night in the forest had been bothering him. "Did Luwi ask you to marry him before or after he accused you of being a witch?" The question was directed at Chipangu, but Nsonyi answered.

"I overheard his whole scheme the day when you two tried to run. He has had his eye on Chipangu for a long time, and when Kapa confided her suspicions, he saw his chance."

"Maybe I should have just said, 'yes,'" Chipangu grumbled.

Kalomba thought of that night, how he haphazardly threw a bag together after waiting for his parents to fall asleep, how they crept across the entire village in the dark, together. He suddenly felt very tired and irritated. "Were you ever planning on telling me?" Again, the question was directed at Chipangu.

She sighed. "To be honest, I tried to, but you were so wrapped up in the moment, so wrapped up in saving me that you didn't listen."

Kalomba blinked slowly. There was a white fluffy cloud gradually drawing close to the sun. *Why can't I listen?* His father had warned him. Chipangu had tried to warn him. Everyone had told him getting close to her would only lead to trouble. But he didn't listen.

Nsonyi interrupted Kalomba's train of thought. "Chipangu, why did *you* have to tell them magic doesn't exist?"

"Because it doesn't," Mbuyi answered for her. "I'm not sick because of my sister. I was just born that way."

Chipangu sighed. "Sometimes things happen for no reason at all."

"This is still all your fault," Kapa said bitterly. Her voice was starting to get dry and raspy from too much crying.

"My fault?" Chipangu chuckled dryly. "You were the one making wild accusations."

"I don't trust you," the other girl hissed.

"Will everyone just be quiet!?" Kalomba finally exploded. "Please."

They all fell silent. Kalomba returned to watching his cloud slowly eclipse the sun, trying not to think about the fact that his life as he knew it was now drawing to a close.



## Chapter Five

**September 8, 1860-** St. Paul de Loando

Hundreds of miles away, the African Squadron's flag ship *USS Constellation*, charged with the task of breaking up the West African slave trade, was stuck in port as her crew scurried to bring provisions on board and finish small maintenance repairs by the day's end. Eben Nichols, a young landsman from Boston, had been busy all week sweeping the ship, although it would always be a losing battle. The wooden deck and hemp sealant were in a continuous state of deterioration, and nothing Eben could accomplish with a broom would change that.

He had been sweeping up a particularly well ground-in pile of gunpowder on the gun deck when the traders arrived. Many traders in their longboats had paddled up beside the ship over the course of the past few days. This time they were a local family, a mother and her three daughters. Eben had seen them earlier across the harbor selling their wares to Portuguese sailors. He knew they sold many varied items, like strings of beads, silk scarves, soft cotton shirts, a few small precious stones, some metal baubles forged by master blacksmiths as well as the large bottles of palm wine hidden under their skirts, but Eben had no use for that. What he was looking for was not wine but rather something he could send home to his younger sister, a gift to prove he hadn't forgotten her, and although Eben would never admit it, something to make sure she hadn't forgotten him.

When he saw the two little rowboats pull up alongside the ship, he ran to the spar deck as quickly as he could and found the older woman conversing with Jack Frying Pan, one of the Africans sailing with *Constellation*. Because of the height difference between vessels, Jack had to shout to be heard, but as nearly no one beside the Krumen understood Grebo, it mattered very little.

Eben peered over the railing down at the wares, trying to decide what his sister Anabelle would want. How much had she changed in the past two years? Would she still disdain jewelry, or had she reached the age where her appearance started to matter? Was her favorite color still green, or would she prefer the rose scarf? *Maybe I should get her a shirt?* He was starting to panic when he saw the perfect gift sitting right beside the younger daughter, a small iron elephant, twisted so that its trunk rose triumphantly in the air. Anabelle loved

nature and was gravely disappointed when Eben informed her that he would not have the opportunity to see lions, zebras, and elephants.

Eben tried to contain his excitement while Jack and the trader continued talking because he didn't want to seem rude, but he could feel his ears growing red and his toe tapping without his consent and he feared he would soon burst. Luckily, Jack noticed him standing there.

"Ah, Mama, this be Eben Nichols."

The woman in the boat nodded. "He want buy?"

"Yes," Eben said eagerly. "He- I mean I- wish to buy the elephant." He pointed to the metal sculpture beside the daughter, and the girl turned her face a little at his forwardness.

Eben was about to make a stumbling apology, but he was interrupted by First Lieutenant Fairfax. The lean sandy-haired man had appeared at his shoulder with a smirk on his lips and a menacing glint in his eyes. "Mr. Nichols," he sneered. "You are not permitted to bring purchased alcohol aboard this vessel."

"I'm not purchasing alcohol, sir," Eben replied quickly. "I'm buying a trinket for my sister."

Fairfax narrowed his eyes. "Regardless, you are not permitted to interact with traders unless you are on shore leave. Are you on shore leave?"

"No, sir."

"So you are, in fact, violating a code of conduct."

Eben felt his face grow hot.

Captain Nicholas intervened. "Leave the boy alone, Lieutenant." The Captain was a portly man with a thick grey beard that contrasted with his ruddy face. "It is not a crime to send home a souvenir."

Fairfax scowled, "Forgive me, sir, but if we allow even one man of this crew to bend the rules, discipline on this vessel will deteriorate completely."

Nicholas sighed and waved a hand. "Fine, Lieutenant. Mr. Nichols, please wait until you are ashore to purchase souvenirs."

"Aye, sir."

Captain Nicholas nodded before walking away. He had many other matters to attend. Commodore Inman, the African Squadron's flag officer, had extended an invitation to tour the ship to Don Luis, the acting admiral of the Portuguese Navy. The Prince was expected later that day.

Eben turned away from the railing, disappointed. The elephant was a perfect gift. The woman in the boat felt her sale slipping away, so she started shouting the names of items and prices, holding up beads and charms. She rowed closer to the ship and started knocking on the hull with her oar, trying to entice sailors from the berth deck.

Fairfax leaned over the railing, frowning savagely. "They cannot be here when the Prince arrives. Mr. Parsons." He snapped his fingers. The sailmaker's mate who was hosing off the deck, jumped to attention.

Fairfax nodded to the woman in the boat. "Get those black scorpions off my ship."

The sailmaker's mate hesitated.

"Use your hose, sailor!" Fairfax barked. The man looked at Eben with wide eyes. If he didn't obey, Fairfax would court-martial him for insubordination. Parsons hesitated for half a second more, but Eben could already see the regret in his face and knew what he was about to do. Mr. Parsons turned his hose on the traders.

They screeched as the saltwater got in their eyes and noses. In their surprise, both mother and daughter began flailing, almost toppling the small craft. Mr. Parsons let up a little with the hose, and the mother started rowing away as quickly as she could. All of her goods were ruined and her boat now had a half-foot of water in the bottom.

Fairfax smirked. "Thank you, Mr. Parsons." He glanced at the sailors surrounding him. Jack Frying Pan was wearing an especially dark expression. "You should all change into your dress uniforms soon. We are expecting a royal visit."

Eben tasted something sour at the back of his throat. He said nothing though and went below to change.

"All hands aloft! Man the yards!"

Eben Nichols paused just a moment to scratch at his wool dress uniform before bounding up the ratlines. Sweat beaded on his upper lip as he put on an extra burst of speed. He didn't want to be the last one to the top, not in front of the Prince of Portugal. He smiled despite the exertion; Anabelle would never believe he'd met an actual prince. A prince is better than an elephant any day. As he gained the crossjack, Eben took a deep breath. Even after two years, the view of the deck far below could be dizzying. As the other men silently climbed up beside him, Eben assumed his stance along the footrope, pressing his knees into the burning hot wood of the yard for balance. He couldn't help but glance around with relief. He hadn't been the last one up.

Eben's messmate Willie Leonard gained the yard only a moment after Eben. Willie was already ranked an ordinary seaman although he was only five years older than Eben, having just celebrated his twenty-third birthday. He had been showing Eben the ropes, literally, teaching him knots, commands, and even a few phrases of Spanish and French. The two men, having both joined the crew in Boston, quickly discovered they had a lot in common and became fast friends. As they awaited their next order, Willie elbowed Eben in the ribs. "We must be a pretty sight, eh? All dressed up in our caps and trousers?"

"Aye, they won't believe it back home. I just wish the jackets didn't itch so." Eben scratched the back of his neck where a combination of wool, sweat, and mosquitoes was making standing still a near impossibility.

Alex Wilson, captain of the top, laughed and leaned over from in front of the mast. "Don't itch too hard, landsman. You'll fall right out the mizzen top."

"Aye," Willie replied, "but if he's as hard-headed as you, he'll be just fine."

Wilson grinned and rubbed the crown of his head, setting his cap askew. "Oh, the lasses love scars. Besides, if you rub it, it'll bring you luck." Wilson whipped off his hat and inclined his head towards Eben. A white ropey scar peeked through Wilson's dark curly hair where a spar had once split and cracked his skull when he was but a boy crossing the Atlantic for the first time. The scar used to turn Eben's stomach, but now he chuckled.

"Luck ye say? More like lice."

Wilson replaced his cap with a guffaw, punching Eben lightly in the shoulder. Far below, standing by the gangway, Lieutenant Fairfax suddenly glared up at the mast, his attention attracted by the sound. Every man in the rigging immediately quieted. Fairfax curled his lip and snapped to a smart salute as Don Luis, Admiral of the Portuguese Navy, stepped aboard.

The Prince was a young man of medium build, only five and half feet tall. He was dressed in a deep blue uniform with a wide, white sash, and the sun flashed off the medals pinned to his chest. His head was uncovered, revealing how the humidity made his light, brown hair curl at the ends. A similar phenomenon was occurring at the tips of his pale mustache, which quivered as the Prince greeted Commodore Inman and Captain Nicholas. Don Luis saluted each of them and shook their hands. He then said something that made the captain and commodore both laugh. It must have been quite amusing for even the lieutenant smiled.

Eben marveled. "He must speak English."

"Course, he does," replied Willie, leaning forward against the yard, "he's a prince. I say, he looks alright."

"He looks like a sailor," muttered Eben. Royalty were supposed to be grand and imposing with an ability to inspire men to charge to their deaths with just a look. This man seemed more bookish than battle-hardened.

"Good." Willie argued, "The Prince is foremost an admiral, and an admiral shouldn't look like a marine."

Just then, Captain Nicholas gave a signal to the boatswain. As three shrill notes pierced the air, the cabin boy sitting on the fife rail just in front of the main mast picked up his sticks and began playing the snare between his knees. It was the call to quarters.

The men scurried to obey. Eben swung down to the spar deck and quickly as possible and launched himself down the ladder to the gun deck. He was the side-tackle man on the number six guns. He hurried to his position as the snare drum rolled on and the gun captains began barking out orders.

"Silence! Man the port gun! Cast loose, and provide!"

Eben lifted the heavy metal tackle at his feet and hooked it to the back of the gun.

“Run in! Action!”

Eben grabbed the rope attached to the tackle. The train line ran through two block and tackles, one attached to the gun and the other to the ship, in order to give eight men enough strength to shift a three and a half ton gun.

“Haul!”

Eben and his comrades gave a mighty heave.

“Action! Haul! Action! Haul! Avast!”

Eben dropped the rope as sweat began to sting his eyes.

The gun captain continued to bark out orders, “Serve, vent, and sponge! Load! All right, run out! Action!”

Again, Eben grabbed the rope before him. There was one side-tackle on each side of the gun running through only one block instead of two. “Haul!” Eben pulled hard on the rope, trying to match the strength of the man across from him.

“Action! Haul! Action! Haul! Avast!”

Once more, Eben dropped the rope, breathing a little hard. The gun captain stepped forward to arm the gun by inserting the firing pin into the cartridge. “Prime!” he shouted, announcing his actions. In order to keep time with the other gun captains, he also shouted, “Aim! Elevate!” although no adjustments were necessary. When all of the crews were ready to fire, the captains shouted, “Make ready!”

Eben turned away from his gun, covering his ears, bending his knees, and opening his mouth just slightly to make sure he didn’t blow an eardrum or crack any teeth. He was proud of his smile. His mother had always said it was his best feature, and there were a few girls he knew back home who were very fond of it, too.

One by one the captains screamed “FIRE!” And thirteen of *USS Constellation’s* VIII-inch chambered shell guns fired in quick succession as a salute to Don Luis. The whole drill had taken not but five minutes of the Navy’s time and about a hundred pounds of black powder. Don Luis was quite pleased with the salute and bowed to the crew in gratitude. A few minutes later, the prince’s ship answered with her own guns, and

Eben cheered alongside his crewmates. Jolly grey-bearded Captain Nicholas beamed. When the cheering finally died, the Captain invited the Prince into his cabin at the stern of the gun deck, where the finest wine was kept for just such an occasion. The Commodore closed the door behind him, and the crew immediately returned to preparing the ship for sail.

Eben had been sweeping the berth deck when the Prince arrived, but now he couldn't find his broom. He hadn't bothered to return it to its proper place when he ran above deck to conserve time, but now of course, he was wasting the minute or two he had actually saved. *Maybe someone accidentally kicked it under a mess chest.* The light streaming through the portholes was barely enough to illuminate his surroundings, so Eben knelt on the deck and swept his hand under the first chest. He couldn't feel anything, so he moved to the second one. The only thing under that chest was an inch-long splinter that Eben lodged firmly in his palm.

"Son of a-!"

"Mr. Nichols!"

Eben leapt to his feet. Lieutenant Fairfax was standing just behind him with the Captain and the Prince.

"Mr. Nichols," Fairfax continued with ice in his voice, "we do not tolerate that kind of language on this ship." That wasn't strictly true. Eben had heard Fairfax curse his own mother before, but now was not the time to argue.

"Aye, sir."

"What, may I ask, were you doing?"

"I was looking for a broom, sir."

"Are we in the habit of keeping brooms under our mess chests, Mr. Nichols?"

Eben blushed. The Prince could see the landsman's discomfort, so he intervened.

"It is quite all right, Lieutenant," he said with a thick accent, "I believe I see a broom under that chest." Don Luis pointed to a box in the corner by the officers' quarters. A thin wooden handle peeked out from under the chest.

Eben saluted. “Thank you, sir- I mean- your majesty.” Eben’s face was almost purple with embarrassment.

Don Luis smiled. Then, he turned to Captain Nicholas. “Shall we resume the tour, Captain?”

“Of course.” Nicholas led the Prince into the officers’ quarters. Fairfax glared at Eben before following.

For a few seconds, Eben stood ramrod straight, waiting for his breathing to return to normal. Suddenly, his face flushed all over again as he realized that the Prince of Portugal had come across him with his posterior in the air. He had just mooned a prince. He must have seemed like such a fool. Humiliated, he retrieved the broom from under the chest. He started sweeping under the ladders collecting bits of hemp, dust, and splinters, trying to bite back his shame. Soon, his hand was throbbing. He realized he had never attended to the splinter, and his palm was still full of wood.

He would have stopped sweeping, but he didn’t want Fairfax to accuse him of being a slacker in front of the prince, so he kept on, attacking the sawdust bunnies with more and more gusto as his frustration mounted. He had joined the Navy for adventure on the high seas. Well, actually, strictly speaking, he had signed up for the steady meals and monthly pay. But still, he had expected excitement, pirates, heroic moments to shine. Instead, he got what felt like endless waiting, waiting to sail, waiting for a sail ho, waiting for prey worth chasing. He was tiring of constantly waiting.

Luckily, Eben did not have to wait long for Don Luis to reemerge from the officers’ quarters only a few minutes later. He was laughing. Eben tried to keep from blushing again as he stood at attention. The terrifying thought that the Prince might be laughing at him had crossed his mind. But, no, Don Luis had forgotten all about Eben, and the party of three passed without comment, much to Eben’s relief.

He tried to go back to sweeping, but a sudden stab of pain in his hand grabbed his attention. Almost the entire length of the splinter was embedded under his skin. A tiny, tiny sliver jutted out from his palm, but he couldn’t grip that well enough to pull the whole thing out. He sighed. He was going to have to cut it out. He sat on one of the chests and flicked open his knife. The splinter was in deeper than he thought, and his hand was soon gushing blood.



“Damn.” He had mooned a royal and maimed himself all in one day. Cradling his hand he walked to sickbay at the forward end of the ship. No one was there, so he searched the medicine cabinet for bandages but couldn’t find any. Luckily, he did find a box filled with old strips of rags. He dipped one in the alcohol sitting on the surgeon’s desk and wrapped it tightly around his hand.

While he waited for the bleeding to stop, Eben gazed out the tiny porthole. St. Paul de Loando was not much of a town. Several Naval Squadrons used it as a base of operations and storehouse, so the largest bamboo buildings were administrative offices and warehouses. The other buildings were mostly taverns, brothels, and small shops selling all sorts of bizarre wares to sailors on shore leave. Eben hated it there. He longed to be back at sea. Suddenly, there was shouting and heavy footfalls above Eben’s head. A few seconds later, Mr. Brown, the assistant surgeon burst into sick bay.

“Move, move!” Mr. Brown shooed Eben away from his desk. Behind the surgeon stood a marine and a Kruman. The Kru was bleeding profusely from a gash that extended from the tip of his eyebrow to his jaw. It took Eben a second to recognize Tar Bucket the Second, one of the two Kru allowed to train with Eben’s gun team. Tar Bucket was in bad shape. He was also missing the leather pouch that usually hung around his neck.

Brown gave Tar Bucket a leather strip to clench between his teeth. Then, he unwrapped a canvas package he’d had tucked in his coat. It contained a fresh set of bandages and a new sewing kit. Brown washed the wound with alcohol and then his needle and thread. When Brown first jabbed the needle into Tar Bucket’s cheek, Eben had been sure he would cry out, but the man was strong. His eyes didn’t even water. Eben watched in fascination as Brown quickly stitched the wound together. He could see the muscles in Tar Bucket’s jaw straining as he bit down on the leather, but the man made no sound or gave any sign of discomfort besides an occasional spasm of the blue-green tattoo on his forehead.

After Brown finished stitching, he wrapped a clean bandage around Tar Bucket’s head and instructed, “Keep this bandage on. Keep it dry. I will change it in a few days.” Then he rounded on Eben. “Mr. Nichols, what are you doing here?”

He held up his hand. “I cut myself.”

Brown shook his head, "Sailors." He undid Eben's make-shift bandage, cleaned the wound, and wrapped it with fresh gauze. When Brown poured alcohol into his cut, Eben tried not to cry out. He wanted to be as impressively silent as Tar Bucket had been, but he still gasped a little.

"Now I need to help Dr. Smith gather a few more supplies. Can you two try to avoid contact with knives while I am gone?" Brown asked.

Eben nodded, while Tar Bucket merely narrowed his eyes. Brown sighed and shook his head once more before leaving.

Eben waited until Brown was gone before asking Tar Bucket, "Are you alright?"

Tar Bucket grimaced. "I need no pity."

Eben hadn't meant to insult the man. He was just trying to be courteous. "What happened?"

Tar Bucket glared at Eben before answering. "Man who do this, I laugh at his friend. His friend not know how to barter or dosh. His friend steal my gree-gree." Tar Bucket touched his chest, where the leather pouch would usually hang. "Gree-gree keep me safe." He gestured to his face. "Never would happen with gree-gree. Me say I will cut man who steals gree-gree. His friend cut me."

"Tar Bucket-."

"Not my name."

Eben paused. He realized he didn't know any of the Kru's real names. Everyone on board had always used their improvised names. He had never really given it much thought, but now it felt awkward to ask after knowing Tar Bucket for over a year. Why had he never thought to ask before?

"Oh," he said, "but, h-how does a gree-gree keep you safe?"

Tar Bucket turned gravely serious. "Magic. The poison inside keep me safe. Me no get sick, me no fall overboard, no slave man snatch me as long I have gree-gree. Africa a dangerous place. How you live without gree-gree, I not know."

"Do you know the man who cut you?"

Tar Bucket nodded. "Yes. Man who cut me and his friend sail on this ship."

Tar Bucket was still distractedly fingering the place on his chest where the pouch would lay. Eben could see the anger and fear in Tar Bucket's eyes. His life was in danger, as well as his manhood, without the gree-gree. Eben knew there would be more fighting if it was not returned and proper compensation made for the theft. He resolved to talk to the Captain when next he saw him.

Suddenly the boatswain's pipe reverberated through the ship. "All hands aloft! Man the yards!"

The Prince must be leaving. Eben rushed to obey the command, climbing up two decks and then launching himself into the ratlines. This time, he was the last one to the cross jack. Lieutenant Fairfax noticed his tardiness, and Eben felt gooseflesh ripple across his back. Rarely would the first lieutenant allow so many mistakes in one day.

"Step careful. Villain's got his eye on you," Willie whispered.

Eben pressed his knees into the spar, trying to ignore the lieutenant's glare. On command, the crew saluted Don Luis who returned the sentiment with a bow before leaving the ship with his retinue. The Commodore gave the order to get *Constellation* underway before returning to his cabin. The officers took their places on the spar deck and began issuing orders. Hatches were battened down. Guns secured. Halyards fastened. The capstan men pushed their bars into place, and when Fairfax shouted, "Anchors aweigh! Heave round!" the men began to walk slowly in a circle around the machine dragging the anchor aboard. Forty men labored above on the spar deck, and another forty labored below on the gun deck. Eben did not envy their task. The anchor weighed six tons and had several fathoms to travel. It would take awhile to pull the anchor all the way up.

Eben leaned over the crossjack, waiting for the order to release his sail. His heart was pounding in time with the snare below. They were finally leaving port again. He always felt like he was missing the action when they were docked. Eben couldn't believe *USS San Jacinto* and *Mobican* had each caught a slaver in the time *Constellation* had squandered at St. Paul de Loando. Those crews had actually saved people, saved the slaves from the hellish plantations of Brazil. They were heroes. Eben had swept a deck. And he had done it badly enough to injure himself in the process. But that didn't matter just then because *Constellation* was back on the hunt, and maybe this time, Eben would actually catch something.

As the ship cleared the pier, the mizzen top men unfurled their sails. Eben made sure to do his part perfectly in time with the others and to not make any mistakes, but when he looked up, his mouth went dry.

“Is it just me, or are we rather close to the Arrogant?”

The other mizzen top men looked up. His Majesty’s Ship was anchored a little off-shore where the water’s depth could accommodate her draft. Her deck was crawling with activity. Her men had realized *Constellation* was on a head-on collision course with them a moment before *Constellation*’s crew realized it themselves.

Eben felt the ship jerk as the helmsman tried to correct course, but the wind was too strong. The Sailing Master Thomas Eastman roared, “Ready on the forward braces! Ready on the main braces! Ready on the mizzen braces!”

Eben climbed down to the deck and un-belayed the coil of rope attached to the port side of the cross jack. Willie uncoiled the braces on the starboard side. Every man anxiously laid a hand on the lines, awaiting Eastman’s command.

Eastman called out again, “Ready on the braces!”

“Ready on the mizzen braces, aye!” replied Eben. The ships were getting dangerously close. So close, Eben could see the worry in the eyes of the men on Arrogant readying their life boats.

“Brace for sharp port tack!”

“Brace for port tack, aye!”

“Haul and let go!”

Eben pulled on his line, hand over hand, with all his strength, trying to turn the yards quickly. If the crew could just turn the sails in time, the wind might push the two ships apart. *Constellation* creaked as she shifted direction in the water. The ships were so close now Eben could spit across the distance. The bows were about to collide. He heard Arrogant’s officers ordering everyone to “Stations for saving ship!”

“Damnit!” Willie swore. The wind had died, and *Constellation* was still drifting into Arrogant’s bow.

“Drop the anchor! Drop it!” Lieutenant Fairfax screamed.

The men on the tail-line unwound the rope around the capstan, lowering the anchor back into the water as quickly as possible.

*Constellation* shuddered, but it was too late. The ship was headed straight for Arrogant's bowsprit. Arrogant's crew reefed her jib sails, trying to minimize potential damage. Everyone braced for the impact. Eben closed his eyes. Suddenly, he felt a hot breeze on his face. The wind! It had returned just in time. The sails filled and pushed the two ships apart. Their bowsprits missed by mere inches.

Captain Nicholas was standing on the quarterdeck within earshot of Eben. He put his hand over his heart and took several deep breaths.

Then he barked, "Damage report!"

A midshipman came running forward. "There appears to be no damage, sir."

Nicholas sighed with relief. Another midshipman ran forward.

"Sir, our anchors are tangled!"

All of the color drained out of the Captain's face. "Mr. Eastman, turn her around!"

"Aye! Ready on the braces!" Eastman bellowed. Eben picked up his line again. If the anchors caught, they would drag the ships together, and the crash they had all just avoided would still happen. Eben's eyes stung with sweat, but he dared not take his hand off the rope. Any slack in the line could end up costing the ship.

"Brace for starboard tack!"

"Brace for starboard tack, aye!"

"Haul and let go!" Eben fed his line through the tackles on the mast, this time hand-under-hand. The helmsman pulled hard on the wheel, trying to force the ship around.

"Avast!" Eben dropped his line, and the crew collectively held their breath. The sails rippled for a second, but the wind finally caught, swinging the ship away from Arrogant. *Constellation* continued to spin around her anchor, coming under the Arrogant's stern.

"Hingerty!" Captain Nicholas yelled, "You better not scrape my ship!" The helmsman spun the wheel in the other direction, trying to break *Constellation's* momentum, which had carried her perilously close

to Arrogant's rudder. This time the ships missed each other by millimeters. *Constellation* hove too next to Arrogant on her starboard side. The anchors had been successfully untangled, and Captain Nicholas looked like he was about to faint, his face was so pale.

There was silence among the crew. Each was contemplating the catastrophe they had just averted by the smallest of margins. Some men directed a quiet prayer to the sky. Eben dropped to one knee, suddenly feeling light-headed.

Arrogant lowered a boat to send over a lieutenant. When he came aboard, he saluted Captain Nicholas and Commodore Inman, who had reappeared sometime during the initial chaos. The young man was dressed in a clean-cut jacket decorated with the gold brocade befitting a lieutenant of His Majesty's Navy.

"On behalf of the crew of His Majesty's Ship Arrogant, I am here to inquire as to whether you are in need of assistance."

The Commodore, rather brusquely turned to Nicholas, "Well, Captain, are we in need of assistance?"

The Captain's face regained some of its color. "No, sir, we are not."

"Well, then," Inman smiled at the lieutenant, "thank your captain for the offer, but we must decline."

The lieutenant nodded, gave another salute, and said, "Good day, then, sirs and good sailing."

The captain responded by giving his own salute. "You as well." After the young man returned to Arrogant, Inman rounded on Nicholas.

"We are losing time, Captain. I ordered the *San Jacinto* to rendezvous with us in ten days time, so we need to be underway *now*."

"I understand, sir. There will be no more complications."

"See to it." The Commodore turned on his heel and stalked back to his cabin.

Captain Nicholas tugged at his beard. His face twitched as he tried to regain his composure. He had just been embarrassed in front of his crew, twice.

"Master Eastman, get us sailing!" he shouted, somewhat roughly.

"Aye, sir."

Eben spent the rest of the evening alongside his crewmates adjusting the sails until they made it all the way out of the harbor. By the time the braces had been belayed and put away, Eben's stomach was moaning like a whale. He stumbled down the ladder to the berth deck to get some food.

The deck was buzzing with conversation. A few sailors, unfortunate enough to be assigned to the middle watch had hung their hammocks already, trying to squeeze in a few hours of sleep before midnight. Eben's messmates had spread out their blanket towards the stern of ship on the starboard side.

Mess Number 8 was a diverse group. Pete Daly, the mess cook, was a New Yorker with dark hair and eyes. He had spent much of his life at sea and had some stories to tell. Thomas Gaynor was the ship's corporal. He was from New York and had lost his two front teeth in a bar fight. He swore that the other man had started it, but knowing his temper, Gaynor's messmates were highly skeptical. Another member of the mess, Alvah Olds, was a freedman from Baltimore. He had warned Eben against joining the merchant marine after his enlistment was up.

"Ever heard the sayin', 'A cap'n's a god on his ship.'" he had asked Eben. "Well, god has a boss on a navy ship. Not in the merchant marine. They can do whatever they like to you. Beat ya, starve ya, and you just have to put up with it." After Alvah recounted everything he had been through, Eben decided to go back to his aunt and uncle's farm after he finished his term of service.

Willie Leonard was also a part of Mess No. 8 along with nine other men from all walks of life with varying levels of experience.

Pete Daly was passing out rations when Eben arrived. "Hey, Nichols! Perfect timing. Fresh fruit?"

"Aye." Eben peeled the plantain and took several large bites. "How long will these last?"

"A few weeks," Daly smiled, "as long as we keep them away from you."

"What's that mean?" Eben asked through a mouthful of banana. Everyone else laughed. Willie flopped down on the mess blanket beside his friend.

"Do we have any meat, Daly?"

"Aye, we have salted pork and some leftover beef from the Prince's visit. Which do you want?"

Willie thought for a second. "Well, we don't get beef everyday do we?"

“No, we don’t,” Daly answered. “We also don’t get to see a Prince every day.” He handed the boiled beef to Willie on a tin plate.

“Aye.” Willie laughed. “Eben thought he’d be taller.”

Eben blushed a little. “He looked like one of us. What makes a prince royal if he’s really just like us?”

Alvah Olds nodded. “He warn’t regal enough.”

“Maybe not to a moke like you,” Thomas Gaynor sneered.

Alvah jumped to his feet. “What did ya say?”

Gaynor worked a piece of hardtack in his mouth, “You’re only sore because it’s true, half-breed.”

“Do you wanna lose more teeth!?”

Daly passed Eben a ball of duff, a sugary dessert bread with raisins.

“You know,” Daly commented dryly, “it’s really a shame that our ship’s corporal stirs up so much trouble. Aren’t you s’posed to keep the peace, Mr. Gaynor?”

“Aye, sit down, Mr. Olds,” Willie said chewing his beef. “Pay no attention to ol’ six cent dinner man.” Daly and Eben laughed.

Gaynor’s face turned stony, and his mustache twitched in agitation. “Bostoners.” He spat through the gap of his missing teeth as he walked away from the mess. Gaynor had once made the mistake of boasting that in New York he could get a whole dinner for just six cents unlike Boston where everything was so expensive. Eben replied at the time, “That’s fortunate, since all ye can afford is six cents.” Sadly for Gaynor, the name “Six-cent dinner man” stuck.

While Eben was picking the worms out of his hardtack, Old Jimmy Thomson came round with the grog ration. He had to stoop to avoid the overheads. For a sailor, he was really quite tall, almost six-foot. His huge clomping boots announced his coming long before his actual arrival.

“Oi, who wants grog?”

Every member of Mess Number Eight, except for one strict temperance man, held up their tin cups for the filling.

“Here’s to Africa. The worst commission a man could ever receive!” toasted Daly.



“Here! Here!” the men answered, downing their rum.

After Eben finished his meal, he still had a few free hours before lights-out. He was tired after all the activity and adrenaline of the day, so he decided to go listen to an old tar on the spar deck.

The night air was warm and muggy and still. Eben glanced at the sails. They were completely slack. He sighed; it would be slow-going down the coast to the Congo River.

“Problems of the heart, Mr. Nichols?” Lieutenant Fairfax asked sarcastically. He was leaning over the railing watching *Constellation*’s wake. Eben started. He hadn’t seen the lieutenant in the shadows.

“Just thought I’d enjoy the night air, sir,” Eben answered, trying to hide his unease.

Fairfax turned and sneered at him. “Be careful, Mr. Nichols. We are still near the coast. We wouldn’t want you to catch a fever from the miasmas, would we?”

“I won’t stay out too late, sir.”

Fairfax nodded curtly. “We already have one court-martial scheduled for the day after tomorrow.” Disobeying curfew and risking malaria would land a sailor in the brig for a week under the lieutenant’s command. Fairfax moved towards the ladder, and Eben suddenly remembered his earlier resolution to talk to Captain Nicholas. In the excitement of the day, it had entirely slipped his mind.

“With respect, sir, it should be two.”

“What?” Fairfax stopped at the top of ladder.

“It should be two court-martials,” said Eben firmly. “One for cutting a Kruman and one for theft.”

“Theft?”

Eben nodded. “Tar Bucket said that the man who cut him had a friend who witnessed it all. The friend stole his gree-gree, causing the fight. Last time I checked, theft was punishable by a court-martial.”

Fairfax stiffened. “Watch your tongue, Mr. Nichols. Mr. Birchstead is the witness of whom you speak. He said that Tar Bucket threatened him, and that is why Mr. Keating cut him.”

“Tar Bucket only spoke out of turn because of the wrong done him.”

“And why should I believe the word of a nigger?”

Eben quelled his anger. It would do no good to shout at an officer. "Tar Bucket's gree-gree is missing, sir. That's undeniable."

"Oh?"

"He would never willingly take it off, sir. I fear there'll be trouble if it isn't returned."

"If the niggers are threatening to mutiny," muttered Fairfax.

Eben took a risk. "Perhaps I should speak to Captain Nicholas about this. Or Commodore Inman?"

Fairfax glared at Eben, sizing him up. "No. That will not be necessary. I will ask the Master at Arms to search Mr. Birchstead's personal items." Fairfax clicked his heels, and descended to the berth deck.

Eben puffed out his cheeks. Fairfax could still make life very difficult for him for threatening to go over his head, but if it meant justice was served, Eben supposed he could live with that. For the second time, someone addressed him from the shadows.

"Why did you stand up for Tar Bucket?" Jack Frying Pan stepped into the moonlight, frowning. His tattoo glowed menacingly, but Eben wasn't frightened. He counted the deputy head-Kruman amongst his friends.

"You shouldn't spy on officers."

Jack grinned. "No need for spying, when you shout your business for whole ship to hear."

Eben sighed, but still he smiled. "Jack, don't you think there's been enough trouble today?"

Jack frowned. "Yes. John Tobie not happy."

"If Tar Bucket's gree-gree is returned, will he be happy?"

Jack shrugged. "P'raps. If we take prize soon, he be happier."

Eben nodded. "Everyone seems restless for some action. Who knows when we'll see it though, what with this calm belt?"

Jack closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "The wind be back soon." As soon as he made the remark, a breeze whistled through the rigging. He winked at Eben before turning back to the shadows.

"Wait." Jack stopped, waiting for Eben's question. "What is Tar Bucket's real name?"

Jack hesitated. "Ah, Eben Nichols, my friend, there is great power in names, just as in gree-gree." And with that enigmatic answer, he disappeared into the darkness to talk to John Tobie. The Africans usually kept to themselves, choosing to sleep on the spar deck in the open air instead of in the stuffiness below.

Eben scratched the back of his neck, where a mosquito had bitten him. He decided to go back below. He was too tired to listen to an old yarn anyway. Eben retrieved his hammock from the stowage under the railing and returned to the berth deck. He was just in time to see Master D'Aroy forcing Mr. Birchstead into the hold.

"Damn it, Birchstead!" shouted D'Aroy as he kicked the man down the ladder. "Stop struggling! You know the punishment for theft."

"I didn't steal nothing," insisted Birchstead, "You know what's in there? Knuckle bones, human knuckle bones! Damn savages."

"That's enough outta you." D'Aroy shoved the sailor down the ladder.

"Ah, Mr. Nichols." Fairfax had spotted Eben from across the deck. Suddenly, the whole crew was looking at him in suspended animation. The Religious Society had stopped mid-prayer, some of them still holding hands in a circle. Willie, standing on a hatch, had been interrupted while performing a monologue for the Dramatics Club and had with his arms outstretched. Meanwhile, Alvah Olds, as one of the Negro Minstrel singers, was perched on a mess chest gripping his banjo in anticipation of a chord.

Fairfax held up a small leather pouch. "You were right. Mr. Birchstead did have Tar Bucket's gree-gree." The lieutenant smirked at Eben and then returned topside to give the pouch to John Tobie and smooth ruffled feathers.

Down below, Eben was staring at an entire nest of angry birds. His hammock slipped through his fingers to the deck. No one moved. A wave of muttering swept the crew.

"Darkie."

"Moke-lover."

"Benedict Arnold." One of the men from another mess stood up, balling his fists.

Willie stepped in front of Eben, his folded knife in hand.

“Anyone who takes issue with Eben, takes issue with me.” Willie flicked his knife open.

Master D’Aroy poked his head through the lower hatch. “Mr. Leonard, put that knife away, or so help me, I will lock you in the brig too.”

Willie closed his knife with a smile. “Just easing tension, sir.”

D’Aroy snorted as he ascended the ladder. “Listen, mutts!” He addressed the crew, “Mr. Nichols did what he thought was moral. If some son of a gun nicked your stuff, you would want Nichols to report it too. Besides, if we all start fighting each other, this station really will be hell on earth.”

The men remained silent and unmoved.

D’Aroy raised his voice, “So leave him alone! And turn! In!” There was another rustling of whispers, but the men started preparing for lights out by packing away the mess chests and retrieving their hammocks. Eben picked his up off the deck and hung it from the hooks in the over head. Willie swung in the hammock next to Eben shaking his head at him.

“What?” Eben said defensively, stripping out of his dress uniform.

Willie scowled. “You shouldn’t have done it.”

Eben grimaced. “The gree-grees mean a lot to the Kru. It would be like someone stealing your crucifix.”

Willie stroked the pendant beneath his shirt, but he shook his head again. “It’s not the same. This is a man o’war, Eben. We’re your family. Not them.”

Eben grunted and threw himself into his hammock, pulling the canvas over his head. He didn’t want to argue anymore, but he couldn’t understand how everyone else could be so short-sighted and intolerant. He was certain that he had done the right thing, hadn’t he?

## Chapter Six

**September 9, 1860-** At sea

Eben was sitting cross-legged in the aft fighting top, picking at the bandage on his hand. It was itchy. He needed to ask Dr. Brown to change it sometime that day. Just another thing to remember. Eben sighed and leaned his head against the mast. *Constellation's* timbers creaked in time with the sound of the ocean and the intermittent seagulls flying overhead. Eben watched the early morning sunlight play across the water. It reminded him of his sister's bright hair, flashing in the sun as she ran through a meadow of wildflowers. That was a happier time. Buttercups had been her favorite flowers. She had shrieked when Eben scooped her into his arms.

She had pressed a yellow petal against his chin, giggling. "You love butter, Eben!"

"Not as much as I love you!" He kissed her on the brow and tossed her to the sky, her pigtails sailing through the air.

The ship's bell chimed three times and shattered the memory. Eben shook his head and practically fell out of the top when he realized he was late for inspection.

On the berth deck, men hurriedly tucked away the last of their belongings. Mess chests were straightened and hammocks were stowed, all in time for Master D'Aroy to make his rounds. Eben arrived just in time to stand at attention with the rest of the men in their Sunday uniforms and wait for the Master at Arms to declare all things shipshape. Eben could feel the burning hot glares from the men on either side of him. They had not forgotten about Birchstead.

D'Aroy examined every corner of the berth deck for litter, contraband, stray dust bunnies. He passed in front of each man, examining their uniforms, hands, faces. He stopped in front of Eben. He looked at the overhead in exasperation.

"Mr. Nichols."

"Yes, sir?"

“Where is your cap?”

Eben’s hand flew to his head, where he felt his own sandy hair. He blushed.

“Rolled in my hammock, sir.”

D’Aroy pinched the bridge of his nose. “A uniform infraction, Mr. Nichols, will cost you meat and duff for three days. Mr. Daly!?”

“Aye, sir,” Daly answered from down the line.

“Mr. Nichols is on bread and water rations for three days.”

“Aye, sir.”

“Mr. Nichols, do you understand?” D’Aroy asked.

“Aye, sir.”

D’Aroy winked at Eben. A little discipline in the right place could always improve morale. D’Aroy knew that nothing united a crew faster than complaining about officers.

Eben needed all the help he could get. His mates were disinclined to ever forgive him for turning in Birchstead, even Willie, who like everyone else was giving Eben a cold shoulder. When the landsman had first arisen at half past seven, he’d heard sailors discussing the incident over breakfast, but all conversation ceased once Eben stood up to dress. In that atmosphere, Eben had not dared to ask for his morning rations, so he took up his watch in the crow’s nest with hunger still gnawing at his stomach. Eben couldn’t avoid the rest of the crew forever though.

“All right, you dogs!” the master-at-arms shouted. “You pass inspections! Now get back to work.” Many of the men, most of them friends with Birchstead, gave Eben the evil eye, but he did his best to ignore it.

As on all other Sundays, there was divine service on the gun deck. Eben paused to listen to part of the chaplain’s sermon before returning to the spar deck. Willie, as usual, was at the front of the congregation with hands folded and head bowed in prayer. The chaplain was extolling the virtues of their mission to rescue benighted Africa from its heathenism. “This is a continent of cannibalism and slavery. They do not know God’s love, not because they are incapable of knowing it, but simply because we Christians have failed to

embrace the African as our less fortunate brother. They are uncivilized, sinful barbarians, but if we extend our compassion and understanding, we can change that.”

Eben didn't stay long. He was set to stand another watch of look-out duty soon. Besides, he wasn't convinced that he had anything to offer Africa, no matter what the chaplain said. An illiterate boy from Boston who had to be taught how to tie a simple knot. What did he really have to give anyone? He didn't even have that metal elephant to give Anabelle. And was Africa really so benighted to begin with? It seemed to Eben that white men were just as guilty of greed and idolatry as any African he had ever met. *But what do I know?*

As he was standing on the aft railing thinking about this, someone in the main top cried out, “Sail ho! Sail ho! One point off the port bow! Hull down!” Eben looked to where the look-out was jabbing his finger. Commodore Inman came rushing up from the aft hatch with a telescope.

“Where is it? Where is it!”

Eben pointed to an indistinct but growing shape on the horizon. His heart thumped with excitement. Inman trained his glass on the dot, slowly adjusting and refining his view. Eben's pulse accelerated. Everyone who had been at the divine service was now on deck, eagerly awaiting the word to beat to quarters. Inman stared for a few seconds more and then sighed.

“All hands, stand down. It's just the *Mobican*.” He violently collapsed his telescope. “Captain Nicholas!”

“Aye, sir?” the Captain replied, approaching from behind.

“Inform your crew that I will personally reward fifty dollars to the man who truly sights a ship engaging in the slave trade.”

Nicholas' eyes bulged. “Aye, sir.” He could not keep the incredulity out of his voice. The Commodore must be under enormous pressure to capture something, anything, if he was offering that sum. The commodore's frustration was understandable. Over the past two years, *Constellation* had run down dozens of ships, but only one, the barque *Delicia*, had turned out to be a slaver and she was later acquitted in the courts for a lack of evidence. That was not a laurel on which Inman could rest his career.

After news of the reward spread, everyone wanted to be on lookout duty, so Eben resumed climbed back into the mizzen top as quickly as possible. Fifty dollars could buy Anabelle a new coat and some boots for the coming winter. *Or maybe paper and ink for school.* It could also buy a lot of liquor, which motivated several off-duty men to climb onto the cross trees with him. One of the newcomers was Ship's Corporal Gaynor, the six cent dinner man, and he could never pass up an opportunity to abuse a Bostonian.

"Well, well, if it isn't our little songbird?"

Eben ignored him, swinging his feet off the edge of the cross piece with his eyes trained on the horizon.

Gaynor grabbed Eben's jacket and jerked him backwards so they were face to face. "Don't ignore me, you little traitor!"

Without taking his eyes off Gaynor, Eben pointed to something off the starboard side of the ship.

"What you pointing at, boy?"

"Look." Eben nodded towards a distant dot. "A ship. If ye shout now, ye may just get that bonus." In his mind's eye, Eben saw himself brutally stripping Anabelle of a warm wool coat, leaving her exposed to the elements. *But, little sister, he told himself, it's to keep me alive with all my appendages intact. Besides, you can't miss what you never really had.*

Gaynor spun his head south. Several miles away, three tiny sails jutted up from the water.

"Sail ho." Gaynor's voice cracked. "Sail ho! Sail ho!" He let go of Eben and started waving. "Allo! Sail ho!" Some of the officers looked up from the deck. "Over there!" Gaynor pointed at the ship. "Sail ho!"

This time it was Captain Nicholas who emerged with a telescope. He pondered the sails. Then, he smiled.

"She's flying British colors, so let's at her, men."

"Aye, sir!" The joyful shout echoed through the timbers.

Gaynor was beside himself. He tapped out the first few steps of a jig right there in the nest.

"Well, songbird, what should I do with that fifty dollars ye spotted me?"

Eben smirked. "Buy yourself a thousand six cent dinners?"



Gaynor's face twitched but then burst into laughter. Even Eben's slight couldn't dampen his mood. "You are one cheeky devil." Gaynor whistled through his mustache and dropped through the lubber's hole to go brag to the crew. Eben leaned his head against the mast. He had a sick feeling in his stomach that the nickname "songbird" was going to stick.

The helmsman readjusted course to intercept the other ship. The wind was steady for almost thirty minutes before it suddenly faltered and died. Eben slid down a halyard to the deck as quickly as he could to help brace the yards. The other ship was still a ways off, but she had yet to change course. They would catch her if only they got the wind back on their side. When Eben heard the order, he hauled on his line as hard as he could. *I will catch a slaver.* He gritted his teeth and pulled hard. Suddenly, the sails caught, puffing full like a cloud. *Constellation* immediately picked up speed and soon over-took the British ship, all before eight bells had even chimed.

The ship was a small three-masted barque with six square sails on the forward and main masts and three triangular sails on the aft mast. She was bulky and slow.

Lieutenant Fairfax stood on the railing and shouted to the barque's crew, "Ahoy, there! Heave to!"

"On whose authority?" someone shouted back.

"The United States Navy with whom your king has an accord."

An older man, a little taller than Fairfax and with a great bushy black beard, stood on the railing of the opposing ship. "We are no slaver, sir."

Fairfax smirked. "And will your papers reflect that?"

The man glowered at Fairfax's impudence.

The lieutenant did not however change his patronizing tone. "Come, come. Heave to and show us your papers."

The captain chewed his mustache while he weighed his option. After a moment, he barked an order to reef the sails. Commodore Inman stood on the quarterdeck and watched the proceedings. A gangplank was laid across the brows of the ships, and the other captain came across to reluctantly present his manifest to Lieutenant Fairfax.

“Here,” he said darkly.

Fairfax took the papers with a flourish and began to flip through them, checking each seal carefully.

“Sir,” he said after a moment, holding out a page to the other captain, “this page appears to be misdated.”

The man’s eyes widened in horror when he realized the governor of Sierra Leone had mistakenly dated his signature August 1<sup>st</sup>, 1861, a year into the future.

Fairfax grinned with enough malice to turn Eben’s stomach. “Is this form a forgery, sir?” Even if the man was a slaver, Eben did not think that gave Fairfax the right to bully him.

The man stammered something that was probably an attempt at an explanation, but Fairfax ignored it. “Eastman, Bull, Daly, Nichols!” He called out. “With me.”

Inman ordered Mr. Foster, his flag lieutenant, a man of quiet but iron will to go with them, to make sure Fairfax did not spark an international incident.

Fairfax stepped onto the other deck and respectfully saluted the colors as well as the bearded captain. “I apologize for the intrusion,” he said.

The captain seethed. “May I at least know the name of the man searching my ship?”

“Lieutenant Fairfax of the United States Navy. This should only take a moment.” Fairfax couldn’t resist adding, “If you are telling the truth.”

Mr. Foster decided to intervene then and began placating the captain while the other men conducted a quick search. Eben found the nearest hatch and tripped down the ladder with Daly just behind him. The first deck was berthing as expected. They searched for weapons and found two pistols in the forward orlop, but there was no heavy armament aboard. The last space they inspected was the hold. Half the space down there was crammed with barrels and provisions for the crew. The other half was full of some hard, black substance. Eben took a deep breath. “Coal.”

“Aye, she’s not a slaver,” Daly answered.

Eben shook his head. “Gaynor isn’t gonna be happy.”

Daly laughed. "He's lost bigger fortunes quicker than that." He clapped Eben on the shoulder. "Let's go report to Fairfax."

Eben looked wistfully at the coal. *Another failure.*

Daly saw the look in the young man's eyes. "Cheer up, Songbird. You'll get the chance to play a hero soon."

Eben swallowed bitterly at the nickname but allowed his friend to lead him back above. Daly didn't, perhaps couldn't, understand how much the boy in Eben longed to be a hero, to make a real difference in the world around him.

Mr. Foster was still pacifying the captain when they reemerged, so Fairfax was the first to spot them. "Well?" he asked brusquely.

Daly stood at attention. "The hold is full of coal, sir."

Fairfax turned to the captain. "Then, it seems you were telling the truth. All right, well, best of luck, and the U.S. Navy wishes you safe passage to St. Paul de Loando."

The coal ship's captain turned purple with rage. Mr. Foster cut him off just before he began shouting.

"Here," he said handing the man a slip of paper bearing Commodore Inman's scrawl, "show this to anyone else who stops you to explain the misdate. We apologize deeply for the inconvenience and delay, and we appreciate your cooperation with our efforts to uphold the laws of both Great Britain and the United States. Best of luck and God bless the remainder of your journey." Before Fairfax could agitate the situation anymore, Foster shooed him off the ship.

Back on *Constellation*, Eben had to break the bad news to Gaynor, who was distraught.

"Didn't have the decency to have the right black cargo, huh?" he cursed at the retreating ship.

Eben's stomach clenched uncomfortably. "Shouldn't we be glad that there wasn't anyone on that ship?" he asked, somewhat hypocritically.

Gaynor glared at Eben. "Listen, landsman. We're here to do a job. I will never be happy about failing to do my job. I will also never be happy about losing a reward." Gaynor's mustache bristled. "Damn it." He

stomped away from Eben, still grumbling.

Duty and money. Was that why Eben was really here? Two years ago, he had waltzed onboard and volunteered. He had needed the money badly, so when he saw the broadsides advertising steady pay, new skills, and a chance to see the world, he thought, *why not?* Living in Boston on his own, he could only afford to eat once a day, sometimes less than that. It would be nice to have a full stomach again. Besides he figured when he was old and toothless, Africa would make an interesting story. So far, it had been anything but. He spent most of his time sweating in the breezeless heat staring at a coastline that never changed. *Always mangroves. Always!* If there was adventure in Africa, Eben hadn't found it. Every time they sailed into port, someone jumped ship. Maybe next time, it would be him. So far, all of the deserters had been caught, but that didn't mean Eben couldn't be the first, the first to waltz off into the sunset forever. *But I won't. I know I won't even though I don't know why I won't.*

Suddenly, Eben's stomach grumbled, interrupting his train of thought. He realized skipping breakfast was starting to catch up to him. It was a very long wait until four bells. When it was finally time for dinner, Eben's head was pounding so hard, he wasn't really sure that he wasn't being called to quarters. He was dizzy and kept losing his footing, almost falling through a hatch.

"Whoa, landsman." Willie caught him just before he fell headfirst down the ladder. "Is all well?"

Eben looked up at Willie. The seaman's eyes seemed distant, cold, but buried deep in their centers was the familiarity Eben was used to seeing.

"Willie, ye can trust me."

"Can I? How do I know ye won't run off and tell Fairfax every time I mock his squeaky boots?"

"Ye can trust me," Eben said through gritted teeth, "to do the right thing." Spots were beginning to float around the edges of his vision.

"Aye, and when right and wrong become confused?"

"I am loyal," Eben forced out through the vertigo, "to my country, to my ship, and to my friends."

Willie still seemed skeptical, but he helped Eben down to the berth deck and over to the mess blanket anyway.

Alvah Olds took one look at Eben's face and became alarmed. "What's wrong with the boy?"

Eben sat down heavily. "Nothing really. I forgot to eat this morning."

"Forgot ta eat?" Olds asked, astonished. "Lad, ya on a ship. Either you eat your rations or somebody else does."

Eben waved a hand. "I know. I know."

Daly arrived and unlocked the chest. He nodded towards Eben. "What's wrong with him?"

Willie frowned and patted Eben on the back. "He's feeling a bit faint."

"And what's wrong with you?" Daly asked Willie as the frown on the seaman's face deepened.

Olds chuckled. "He still hasn't forgiven, Eben."

Daly raised his eyebrows. "Well, choosing to defend an African over your own kind is either very brave or very foolhardy." Daly pushed a biscuit about the size and density of a hockey puck into Eben's hand along with a metal cup. "But either way, it is admirable."

Eben took a sip. He hated the tinny taste of water. Ole Jimmy, the quartermaster, made absolutely sure the water casks were of the highest quality and that nothing could get in to spoil the crew's supply. He even added lemon juice every now and again to improve the flavor, but Eben still hated it.

He had never liked the taste of Boston's water either. The copper in it was overpowering and made him gag. As soon as his father allowed it, Eben began drinking alcohol instead, and in the end, it saved his life when the cholera hit. The plague also spared Anabelle because at the time she was almost exclusively living off goat's milk, which Eben's father had started buying from a neighbor to fatten her up. But where the disease spared them, their father was not so lucky.

Eben stared into his cup, watching visions flash across the surface of the water, visions of his father's dark eyes staring out of a skull, the yellow emaciated hand reaching for Anabelle's face, her tears, enough to fill a small tin cup.

Willie broke Eben out of his reverie. "Well, maybe Tar Bucket can help you in the mizzen top from now on." The sarcasm in his voice was hard to miss.

"What?"

“Fairfax switched me to the main mast. I can’t help ye anymore, so try not to make too many mistakes.”

Eben was confused. “Did ye want to switch?” Had he really offended Willie that much?

Willie shrugged. “What does it matter? I just do as I’m told.”

The hostility emanating from Willie made Eben’s skin crawl. The seaman had declared himself to be anti-slavery, yet even he objected to Eben’s actions. But Eben knew in his bones that he had done the right thing. He closed his eyes for a moment, suddenly remembering a little black kitten Anabelle had once rescued from a clothesline where someone had left it pinned by its tail. She had named the kitten “Pitch” like the tar used on a ship. When she brought him home, she dumped him in Eben’s lap and declared that Pitch would be his best friend. Their parents were still living then, and Eben had never cast a thought to a maritime career. He had asked Anabelle why she saved the kitten since their father probably wouldn’t let her keep it. In response, she immediately snatched Pitch back and reprimanded Eben for being so callous towards someone who so obviously needed his help. Of course she had rescued the kitten without a thought to any consequences; it was the right thing to do. Eben swirled the water in his cup. Pitch was supposed to be his best friend, and now he had put his honor on the line for a man called Tar Bucket. Eben chuckled. Jack Frying Pan said there was magic in names. Maybe he was right.

## Chapter Seven

### September 15<sup>th</sup>, 1860- Maunqe Grande, a Spanish barracoon south of the Congo River

“Kapa, Kapa,” Nsonyi whispered over and over, trying to keep her conscious.

Kalomba scrabbled at the lice in his hair. He didn’t know what to do. None of them knew what to do, not even Chipangu. Kapa rattled her chains weakly as she shivered. Her skin was burning hot, and dark red swelling on the right side of her face had rendered her unrecognizable. Red spidery lines radiated from a gash on her cheekbone and ran down her neck, just crossing her collar bone. There were two large lumps under either side of her jaw, and she hadn’t been able to swallow food for days. The wound was from when a river trader smashed a musket butt into her face because she kept glaring at him. Kalomba didn’t see it happen because at the time, he was bound hand and foot, lying face-down in a canoe. He had heard her screams though. Chipangu knew only a few words in Grebo, but she said the man who hurt Kapa took a steep cut to his share of the profits for damaging the merchandise. Kalomba hoped that was true. He desperately wanted there to be some sort of justice for Kapa in this world.

. Mbuyi, of course, was beside himself.

“Reverse it! Undo whatever you did,” he hissed at Chipangu. “Undo it! She has to live. Take my life back!”

Chipangu shook her head. Kalomba could just make out her silhouette, hanging limply in chains against the wall, a few feet from him. It was so dark. None of them had seen the sun in weeks. They caught glimpses of light sometimes through the door when the guards brought meals, but that was it. Kalomba cried whenever he realized he slept through dinner because it meant he missed the sunset.

Kapa’s chains rattled again as her body spasmed. She was dying. No one said it, but they all knew.

The futility of it made Kalomba want to dash his head against the stone wall. She was dying, and he was powerless to help her. He couldn’t even hold Kapa’s hand to comfort her. What good was he? Even if his arms weren’t chained above his head, what comfort could he provide? It had all been so pointless, learning a trade, dreaming of becoming a blacksmith so renowned the queen in Katanga sought his work. It had been just as pointless for Chipangu to dedicate her life to medicine, only to be put on trial for witchcraft,

and for Mbuyi to finally get better, just to be sold into slavery. Or for Kapa to die in this dank hole surrounded by hundreds of other people, all unable to help her.

Kalomba did not know how many people were in the barracoon's dungeon, but it seemed like half a village was crammed into the small space. Some of them were chained to the floor. Others, like Kalomba, were chained to the walls. Some were dead. It would be a few days before the slavers noticed and dumped the corpses in the sea. The stench of decay had overwhelmed Kalomba in the beginning. He had even fainted when they first chained him up. Now it didn't bother him, and neither did the sharp tang of urine on the walls or the reeking stink of vomit. It seemed he had grown accustomed to sitting in his own filth and misery.

None of this helped Kapa of course. Her throat was so swollen she could no longer speak. Her last words had been directed to Chipangu.

"I blame you."

Chipangu said nothing then and had said nothing since. Not even when Kalomba called her name.

"Chipangu," he whispered, his voice cracking.

She turned away, refusing to answer.

Kapa moaned. She sounded like she was in tremendous pain. Nsonyi tried to get closer, but the shackles brought him up short.

"It's their fault." His voice shook with angry tears. "It's all their fault," he snarled, struggling against his bonds. "Those demons will pay!"

The trip downriver had been long and dispiriting. Weeks on end in a boat that wouldn't stop rocking. Kalomba had vomited so many times, he'd lost count. Whenever they came across rapids, the slavers would chain up their cargo and force-march them through the jungle. Being the tallest, Kalomba was usually the last in line, stumbling on behind the others. He watched them, slowly breaking down. Surprisingly, out of everyone, Mbuyi seemed to be thriving. He marched for miles without breaking a sweat. His back was straight and his head held high. Nsonyi, on the other hand, Kalomba feared his friend had been broken in a way he would never recover from. The boy had been betrayed by his father, his brother, men he thought of as friends. He had no one left to trust.



Kalomba watched him twist and writhe in his chains, helpless. Just then, the heavy door across the room creaked open. *Dinnertime already?* Kalomba had lost all track of time. Two dark shadows stood, imposed upon the blinding white rectangle. Kalomba stared at the light until his eyes watered. *It's so beautiful.*

“Kapa, turn your face,” Chipangu hissed. It was the first thing she had said in days. “Quick, before they see.” Chipangu stretched her chain as far as it would go and tried to shield Kapa with her body.

Kapa looked worse than Kalomba remembered. The bright red lines radiating from her cheek now extended across her breast. She could barely breathe, and her eyes bulged out of their sockets. She was staring at Chipangu, trying to understand.

“I won't let them throw you away,” Chipangu explained. “Now, turn your face.” Kapa did as her medicine woman commanded and turned to look at Nsonyi. Kalomba knew that wouldn't be enough.

They had successfully hidden Kapa's deteriorating health for a week and a half now, but in her current state, even the clueless slavers were bound to notice that she was dying. The two men in the doorway were carrying a giant pot of gruel, which they began to forcibly ladle out to each slave in turn. They would reach the Lundans last, which meant Kalomba had a few moments to think of a plan.

“Nsonyi, Mbuyi,” he whispered, “keep the girls safe.”

Mbuyi opened his mouth to ask what he was planning, but just then the white demons reached Kalomba.

One of the men shoved a spoonful of food in Kalomba's mouth, cutting his lower lip in the process. He spat the food back in the man's face. The other man slapped him and tried to push his jaw open. Kalomba refused to part his lips. The first man cursed and boxed him in the ear. Still, Kalomba refused. They shoved the spoon back in his mouth, but he again spat out the gruel. One of them kicked him in the stomach. Kalomba began to scream and thrash his legs about wildly, trying to make as big a scene as possible. They tried to restrain his legs, but he only screamed louder. Finally, the slavers took him out of his shackles and hauled him from the dungeon just as he wanted.

They dragged him up a flight of broken stairs out of the pit. Sunlight streamed through the holes in the wooden roof, blinding Kalomba. Outside, bits of grass sprouted sporadically among the gravel. A few feet

from the entrance, a single stone pillar jutted up from the ground. It was about the height of a man with a large iron hoop set at the top. One of the men used the belt around his waist to tie Kalomba's wrists to the hoop. The other man uncoiled the whip on his own belt and snapped it by Kalomba's face, making him flinch.

Kalomba tried to quiet the tremor in his stomach. He had planned to make a diversion to save Kapa, no matter the cost to his own body, but now he was afraid. The slaver snapped the whip by his face again, and Kalomba bit his lip to keep from pulling back. *It's just like the mamba. You just have to milk the mamba.* His heart had jumped into his throat, and it was pounding. He clenched his teeth tight together, praying to his grandmother's soul that he wouldn't scream.

The first lash of the whip landed like a hard blow, not too bad, but the second was like nothing he had ever felt before. As the whip landed over and over on his back, his flesh became more and more tender, suddenly susceptible to the burning, stinging, agonizing lash. After six strokes of the whip, he could no longer distinguish where it was landing. Everything from his neck down was pain in its purest form.

The slavers stopped at ten lashes because they did not want to risk the value or aesthetic of their product. They had been careful to break the skin in only a few places, but Kalomba's back was still crisscrossed with ugly yellow welts and it hurt to breathe. Despite Kalomba's best effort, he could feel his eyes beginning to well. Luckily, the slavers cut him down before he started outright crying. He didn't have the strength to stand, so they dragged him back through the broken arch and down the stairs to the pit. They laid him on his stomach by his friends and re-shackled his wrists. One of the slavers, not the one who flogged him, spat in his face. Then, they left, without feeding the others or noticing Kapa's fever. At the very least, Kalomba accomplished that.

When he heard the door close, Kalomba let out a whimper.

"You stupid man." Chipangu was crying. He could hear it in her voice.

Kalomba smiled through the pain. She had called him a man. Even though he made her cry.

It was days before Kalomba could sit up. All the while, Kapa's condition worsened. Mbuyi and Nsonyi both sacrificed their backs to protect Kapa's secret, but the slavers were beginning to suspect the commotion was a cover. Chipangu, however, refused to give up.

She spent hours pleading over Kapa's body, "Stay with us, please."

Kapa only ever glared at her, not speaking or forgiving.

Nsonyi couldn't stand the whispering. "Chipangu, stop. We can't save her."

Chipangu started to cry.

Kalomba slowly pulled himself to his knees. "We can't let her drown, Nsonyi." In the darkness, Kalomba had few solid truths left. This was one of them: "She deserves to die among us, her people."

Nsonyi sighed. It was agonizing. The slavers had been more vicious with him than with Kalomba, and the lacerations on his back had only just scabbed over.

A long moment passed before he finally said, "All right. All right."

Mbuyi gasped, both out of pain and relief. "Thank you."

No one replied to that. It hurt too much.

## Chapter Eight

### September 16th, 1860- At sea, sailing south of the Congo River

Eben dangled his feet on either side of the bowsprit, staring at the sea below. It was gently lapping against the hull, occasionally spraying the bottom of Eben's feet, cooling him a little. *Constellation* was caught in a dead calm, so there wasn't much to do besides lay around the deck, feeling hot and bored.

A flash of movement caught Eben's eye. Off to his left side, a large grey body slid through the sea. The shape spouted a jet of water straight to the sky. A tiny geyser erupted beside it. A mother and child.

"Look, Willie!" Eben pointed off to port. "Whales!"

Willie sat where the bowsprit and foremast joined, hunched over his journal. He extended one leg along the mast and swung the other back and forth over the deck. He looked up and smiled. He and Eben had started speaking again a few days before. Willie had actually approached Eben to apologize. "I'm sorry for being an ass," was how he'd started. "Ye were just doing the right thing, even if it took me awhile to see that."

Eben had nodded to show he accepted the apology, but on the inside, he had danced an Irish reel, overjoyed to have his friend back. He had accepted that the crew would probably forever call him 'songbird,' but he figured that he could endure that as long as Willie was his friend again. However, Eben wasn't totally forgiven yet. Many of the men felt he was still too close with the Africans, although he was at a loss to explain why that relationship precluded him from being trustworthy.

Birchstead and Keating's trial had won Eben a few converts. Both men had been court-martialed on the spar deck for all to witness and learn from. Lieutenant Fairfax had called the marines who had first arrested the defendants to testify, and they swore that Tar Bucket the Second had been unarmed when Keating had so viciously maimed him. Fairfax then allowed Keating to speak in his own defense. He claimed that he had cut Tar Bucket in retaliation for the Kru's threat against the well-being of Mr. Birchstead. Of course, Birchstead corroborated this story. When Lieutenant Fairfax asked Birchstead about the gree-gree, he admitted he had taken it but only because Tar Bucket had insulted him.

Fairfax did not call Eben as a witness, so he was able to watch the crew's reaction to the testimony. Many of them looked confused, some angry, but most just seemed uncomfortable. Eben could tell they didn't fully believe Birchstead's story. However, Tar Bucket, who was present, never got a chance to refute Birchstead's testimony because Lieutenant Fairfax never consulted him or asked for his side. In fact, the Kru was the only involved party not to testify. At the end, Captain Nicholas deliberated for only a few minutes and then sentenced Birchstead to the loss of thirty days' pay for theft and Keating to sixty day's pay-loss and seven days clapped in irons in the brig for aggravated assault. Lieutenant Fairfax advocated flogging, as he always did, but the Captain was against it. And with that, the matter was put to rest. For the most part.

There were whispers among the crew that Eben sang to Fairfax out of animosity toward Birchstead or for some sort of personal gain. Tar Bucket did not help to quell this rumor when he approached Eben after the court-martial to thank him, in front of everyone, and offer a boon to Eben for the return of the gree-gree. Eben's initial reaction was to refuse, and he was about to decline, but then he realized he had a rare opportunity. The Africans had knowledge and skills that no one else aboard had.

"Could you teach me to swim?" he asked of Tar Bucket.

Tar Bucket's eyes had widened, and then, he laughed. That was not the request he had been expecting. "I sorry, Eben Nichols." Tar Bucket pointed to the bandage on his face. "Doctor Brown says me no get wet."

Eben nodded. He understood, although he was disappointed.

Tar Bucket leaned his head to the right in thought. "Maybe I can ask Jack Fryin' Pan to teach you."

Eben immediately brightened. "Yes, please. I would enjoy that very much."

Jack had agreed to the proposal, and Eben would start learning to swim the next time they made land. Watching the whales skillfully cut through the waves filled Eben with excitement. Soon, he'd be able to do that, too.

"Magnificent creatures," Willie said, "Dolphins are friendly, but there's something majestic about how unattainable whales are."

"Whalers catch 'em."

Willie shook his head. “That’s not what I meant. Ye can train a dolphin. A whale, on the other hand, will ignore ye or become your enemy, but never your friend.” Willie leaned his head against the mast and scribbled a note in the corner of his page. “Ye’ll see more. They always travel in groups.”

Eben had heard that before; whales traveled together as a family. Eben watched the baby jump and roll in the waves, the sun shining off its white belly. *Family*. Eben looked at Willie and bit his lip.

“Willie,” he asked, “can you teach me to write?”

Willie’s head snapped up. “What?”

Eben hesitated. He put a hand in the breast pocket of his vest and felt the corner of his aunt’s wrinkled letter. He knew the message by heart even though he couldn’t read a single word of it, since Willie had been kind enough to read it aloud to him when it first arrived and several times afterwards.

“Our dearest Eben,” it started. “Your Uncle Mark and I were so happy to receive your last correspondence. Please be sure to thank Mr. Leonard for transcribing it. I cannot describe how glad it makes our hearts to hear news of you, even infrequent news. Anabelle is always especially glad when a letter arrives. Mr. Rodgers, the local school’s master, tells us she is the top of the class. She only started reading the Bible a few weeks ago and already she has read through Kings I. She is remarkably quick, Eben. She misses you quite a bit, although it seems she has taken up writing to move past this. Mr. Rodgers informed us that her subject is often your adventures on the high seas, fighting pirates, befriending dolphins, finding lost treasure, all sorts of fantastical things. She has your imagination, Eben. Wait until you see how she has grown. At nine years old, I can already see she will be a real beauty, like her mother.

Uncle Mark wants me to tell you that the harvest is late this year and he wishes he had a young strong back here to help him. I, for one, am happy that you are making efforts to better yourself. I hope this letter finds you, and if it does, it finds you well and in good health.” She had signed it, “Your loving aunt, Susan.”

Eben spent many of his evenings tracing the thin, sloping strokes curling over the paper. Aunt Susan was the daughter of a merchant. Her father had insured that she was well-versed in numbers and letters so she could take over the business some day. But then, her baby brother had been born, so she became a

teacher instead. She gave up her profession when she fell in love with Uncle Mark and moved out of the city onto a small farm with him. Mark's brother Simon, Eben's father, decided to stay in Boston, working in the shipyards. When Simon died, Eben worked tirelessly to provide for himself and Anabelle, but at the end of the day, he was a young man with no skills, no education, and they were starving. Uncle Mark and Aunt Susan weren't faring much better. A drought had wiped out most of their crops, but they could scrape just enough for themselves and Anabelle. They couldn't provide for Eben though, so he went to sea.

Eben smiled ruefully. He supposed eating worm-ridden hardtack dipped in sauerkraut juice was better than starving, but only marginally so. It had been two years since he'd seen Anabelle, and he was starting to lose the sound of her laughter. But he could still picture her smile and the way it made her eyes twinkle.

"I wanna write my family more," Eben told Willie, "and I always feel bad asking you to write for me."

Willie raised his eyebrows. "Ye think it'll be *less* hassle to teach ye?"

Two bright red spots burned on Eben's cheeks. "Ye'd only have to teach me once."

Willie smirked. "Yeh have a point. Why the sudden interest?"

Eben shrugged. "I just realized I have a lot to say. I've seen whales, met a prince, watched my best friend prance around in a dress."

Willie laughed. The dress had been orange. Willie wore it for the part of Clementine in the Dramatics Club's performance of "Robert Macaire." The play had been a success, and Willie had nursed a love for the stage ever since.

"Aye," he answered Eben, "that's a lot."

"And," Eben continued, "I want Anabelle to be proud of her big brother. If she can read and write, I should be able to, too."

"Right." Willie slid to the deck. "Well, let's get ye reading. We'll worry about the writing part later."

Eben grinned and jumped down beside him. His heart was pounding again. *On to a new adventure.*

**September 18th, 1860- Congo River, Anchored**

Something hiding in the thick wall of mangroves howled. All activity on *Cora* stopped. Latham heard the saws and mallets fall silent as everyone looked at the shore with wide, unblinking eyes. A chill crept up Latham's spine. He shuddered. The thing howled again. Several men gasped. Even Campbell who was sitting on a hatch enjoying a late night smoke looked unnerved. His face was completely white, and Latham thought he detected a slight tremor in the hand holding the pipe.

A second creature joined in the howling. Hans Olsen, practically quaking in his boots, actually took a step back from the railing. Latham could see the men below working on the slave deck through an open hatch. They were exchanging panicked glances. Latham wondered what could possibly make such an eerie sound. It wasn't a wolf. But then again, maybe it was. Latham had no idea what sort of creatures lived in the African jungle. It could be a monkey for all he knew, but it sounded like it had long razor teeth and a vicious appetite. Now there were three howling things.

"All right, men!" Latham shouted. "Get a move on! Finish that deck. We leave this god forsaken place in the morning!"

The men still looked uneasy, but Latham heard a few saws start going again.

"Look," Latham pronounced clearly and slowly. "Whatever those things are, they are across the river. They cannot reach us, so just ignore them and get on with it."

There were a few grumbles, but the men returned to work. Wilson approached the captain with a grave expression on his face.

"I am sorry, sir, but it does not look like the men will finish the deck by tomorrow morning."

Latham pinched his lower lip between his fingers. *The men can't handle another night here.* Whatever those things were howled again. Then, something screeched. There was a rustling in the undergrowth followed by a long, drawn-out wail that sounded like it would never end. The creature screamed for ten more minutes before finally dying. Someone below retched up his dinner. Latham wiped the cold spontaneous sweat from his forehead. *Hell, I can't handle another night here,* Latham thought. He turned back to Wilson who was still



standing beside him although his face was ashen now. “Then, grab a mallet, Mr. Wilson,” Latham instructed, “and go help.”

Wilson raised his eyebrows in surprise, “M-me? Well, aye, sir.” Wilson jumped through the hatch, *showoff*, to find out where he would be most useful.

Latham snapped his fingers. “Mr. Olsen, Mr. Fredericks, come on, grab a tool. We’re going to help finish the deck.” Latham used the ladder. Olsen and Fredericks followed him as did the men who had been taking a break on the spar deck. And the useless Campbell stayed where he was, smoking on the hatch. *Although, he is technically just a passenger. What else is a passenger supposed to do?* Campbell shook his head to clear his thoughts, and grabbed a mallet to start pounding boards into place.

Dawn broke before they finished the deck. The last board was pounded into place right above Latham’s head just as the sun gained the top of the trees. Latham was now sealed in the hold, doubled over in the dark. He had spent the last two hours passing boards to the sailors cutting and beating them into place. His legs were cramped. His back felt about twenty-five years older. And there was a knot in his neck tighter than Gordias’. He wondered wryly if he would have to cut this one with a scalpel. Latham tried to rub it out as he crawled toward the hold’s hatch. When he finally stood up on the slave deck, he could have cried with joy. He stretched his arms far over his head and smiled. “Well done, men.”

His crew was lying on the rough deck exhausted. One man started to snore. Another was panting with his eyes half-closed. They all look finished.

Latham sighed. *There is still a lot of work to do.* “Take a break for an hour, men. Then, all hands, make sail.”

One man grunted. “All hands, sir?”

“Aye. We will holystone and seal this deck later, after everyone is more rested, but we need to set sail this very morning, so I want you all up by seven bells. Your hour starts now.” Most of the men grunted something resembling an “aye,” before curling up on the deck. The others were already asleep. Latham

smirked. They were all too tired to notice that seven bells was actually an hour and a half from now. He'd given them an extra thirty minutes to sleep. *Enjoy it, men. No one said life at sea was easy.*

Latham pulled himself up the ladder, massaging his lower back. His head was starting to hurt, too. *I guess I need some sleep myself.* The bright morning sun did not help matters. It was a gorgeous sunrise though, a blood red sun inching over a dark green, almost violet forest. Latham stretched again trying to wring out the soreness. He spied a spotted hyena on the far riverbank nosing through a pile of bones. His skin crawled as he remembered the screams from the previous night. The hyena licked its black lips and scurried off to its den somewhere deeper in the forest.

*Thank goodness we are getting out of here.* Another night like last night and he would be at his wits' end. He looked to the sea in the east. *We sail for Manque Grande. And danger. And possible death.* He glanced back at the bones bleaching in the sun on the riverbank. *But that's better than here.* He sighed. Why hadn't he just torn up Campbell's second check like he did the first? What was he doing here? He yawned and rubbed at his eyes. *I clearly need more sleep. I might as well take advantage of my offer; everyone else is.* He put his hands in his pocket and slowly walked back to his cabin. As promised, they set sail within a few hours for Manque Grande and left that forsaken river behind, forever.

## Chapter Nine

**September 24th, 1860-** Manque Grande, Africa

A week later, Latham stood behind his helm with a telescope, scanning the waves all around, wondering, *where the hell is the African Squadron?* They hadn't run into a single American ship in the last six days, and this was where *Constellation* was supposed to be patrolling. Latham was beginning to wonder why they were even bothering flying the Spanish flag from their stern.

John Wilson was standing behind Latham, listening to the captain's grumblings. "Sir, pardon me. But is it not a good thing that we haven't seen any Squadron ships?"

Latham sighed in exasperation. "I tire of waiting for the ax to fall, Mr. Wilson. Both Mr. Campbell and I heard rumors that *Constellation* was sailing south to relieve *Portsmouth*. How we have not encountered either is beyond my understanding. And I do not believe in luck." *At least not good luck.* Latham scanned the area one more time. "All right take us a little closer to shore, Mr. Olsen. Then, drop anchor, Mr. Fredericks."

Olsen responded, "Aye," from the helm, and Fredericks said the same from his position by the capstan. *Cora* hove to in the shallow of waters of the barracoon's long shadow.

The fortress had once been impressive, a stone castle on a tall hill, but the slave trade had been declining for almost a decade. And now the fort was just a crumbling ruin, a vestige of another brutally golden era, hidden by a jagged curtain of stone that ringed the hill, although the giant holes in the wooden roof were still visible. Latham doubted it was a suitable habitat for even bats, yet he knew hundreds of slaves were crammed in there. *Crowded, starving and sick, sweltering in the afternoon and freezing in the rain; they must have worse luck than I.*

Fredericks had just dropped the anchor when someone in the rigging shouted, "Sail ho!" Latham whipped around with his telescope trained on the horizon.

After several heartbeats, Latham lowered the eye piece. "False alarm. It's a Spanish merchant. Falsa alarma. Es un comerciante español." The whole crew breathed a sigh of relief.

"Captain Rintz!" called Campbell from a nearby hatch.

"Aye," Latham answered.

“It is getting late,” Campbell explained as he stepped onto the spar deck. “I wish to take you ashore with me to strike a deal with the traders.”

Latham raised his eyebrows. “Oh?”

Campbell rolled his eyes. “If you insist on acting like a captain, I suppose I must treat you like one.”

Latham laughed. “That might be the nicest thing you have ever said to me Mr. Campbell. All right, let us be away.”

Latham’s initial judgment of the fortress proved accurate. The place was a rank hole. Latham could hear the moisture trickling between the stones, which explained the reek of mildew, which barely masked the smell of sweat, vomit, feces, and decay that was growing stronger with each step. Although the stench burned Latham’s nostrils, he refused to cover his nose. This was the smell of a slaver, and he was, for better or for worse, a slaver.

Campbell walked beside him, stoically. If Latham hadn’t known that Campbell usually had a stupid grin plastered across his face, he would have thought he was unaffected. But the less than desirable time they had been forced to spend together had taught them each something about the other. Now they could see the cracks in the others’ composure. Neither particularly enjoyed their chosen profession, although they both enjoyed the profit. That’s why they did it, damning their morals and their senses of smell in the process.

One of the Spaniards leading them through the fort said over his shoulder, “Cuidado en la escalera.” Latham had been surprised to learn that Spain was currently maintaining the fort, *although maintaining may be too strong a word*. Campbell had told him that they would be trading directly with the Imbangala, but that didn’t appear to be true. The escalera the man had mentioned was a dark spiral staircase slick with moss and mold that led into a pit almost opaque with miasma. Huge blocks were missing from several of the steps, and debris like leaves and tree branches were scattered down the path after having dropped through a hole in the roof. Latham tried to heed the guard’s warning, but he still slipped on a well-worn step and almost fell headlong, but Campbell caught his elbow at the last second and steadied him.

Latham muttered his thanks and Campbell rejoined with “Watch your step, idjit.”

“What happened to treating me like a captain?”

Campbell sneered. “We are on land, Mr. Rintz.”

When they reached the bottom, one of the guards held out a hand, signaling them to wait for the other guard to unlock the door. It was heavy and made from ekki with iron reinforcements. The door was only an inch or so thick, but Latham knew it would survive most assaults whether from a jealous slaver with a battering ram or a slave inside with only bare hands.

The door squeaked as it opened, the condensation that formed everywhere in the fort having rusted the hinges long ago. Inside was a huddled black mass. All Latham could see as he peered through the short doorway into the hole was eyes, hundreds of eyes, staring at him. They were all terrified. *Well, not all. A few look like they might pop my head off with their bare fingers when they get the chance.* There were two in the back that looked positively devilish. They were becoming more distinct as Latham’s eyes adjusted to the dim light. There was only one window in the whole room and it was less than a foot wide corner to corner. It was also right below the ceiling, letting in barely a sliver of light between its bars.

The two men in the back were growing clearer though. They were young and strong and murderous. The darkness could not disguise their hate.

“How many are there?” Latham asked in Spanish.

“Seven hundred and five,” the guard answered.

Campbell bristled. “We had agreed upon seven hundred and ten.”

The guard shrugged. “There are always casualties.”

Latham looked at the guard squarely. “Then, we expect the price to decrease as well.”

The guard sighed and scratched the back of his neck. “All right, I’ll take you to the jefe to negotiate.”

The guard swung the door shut and locked it again before leading Latham and Campbell back up the stairwell. Latham snuck one more glance over his shoulder before they ascended. Even though the door was shut, Latham felt the strange sensation that the two men were still watching him go. He hesitated for half a second before shaking his head clear of the ridiculous thought.

Outside the castle, the boss was waiting for them in an improvised building made from unfinished wood. He addressed Campbell in Spanish. “Did you find everything satisfactory, Mr. Campbell?”

Campbell gestured to Latham. “Actually, my captain feels we might be paying too high of a price, since five of our cargo died before even reaching us.”

The man smoothed his mustache. “Very well, come in.” He led them into the shelter where an incongruously nice desk sat. It was dark purple mahogany with a coat of arms carefully carved into its front. The boss sat in the chair behind the desk and began to flick through a ledger. He found the page he wanted and started reading, biting his thumb as he reviewed the figures.

There were no other chairs in the office. There was a small cot and a blanket pushed into the corner, but neither Latham nor Campbell felt that was an appropriate place to sit, so they stood, waiting.

“Ah, here,” the boss raised a finger. “It seems we agreed upon three pipes of red wine, one cask of sherry wine, five bottles of champagne, fifteen bottles of English ale, eight boxes of honey, two boxes of tea, five bags of coffee, one box of absinthe, one demijohn of brandy, one demijohn of anisado, one case of cigars, and two crates of crockery. Oh, and twelve thousand pine shingles to repair our roof.” He looked up at Campbell expectantly.

Latham answered instead. “Only two pipes of red wine and thirteen bottles of English ale, the rest as it is.”

“A whole pipe of wine for five slaves?”

“If you disagree,” Latham said as he cocked a hip, “you can refuse to sell, but,” he paused dramatically, “then, you would have to find another buyer before your roof caves in.”

The boss grimaced. He read the ledger over again. “I can see why you brought him along, Mr. Campbell. He drives a hard bargain.”

The corner of Latham’s mouth twitched. *Won’t talk directly to me, eh? Fine, maybe I’ll drive the price even lower. Keep all that Spanish red for myself.* As if reading Latham’s thoughts, Campbell shook his head almost imperceptibly. Latham smirked. *You not wanting me to negotiate further, Campbell, just makes me want to do it more.* But he chose to hold off. Perhaps, Campbell knew something he did not.

The boss bit his thumb. "I can agree to two pipes of red wine, but we need the rest as previously agreed."

Latham noticed that the man was looking directly at Campbell, but before Campbell could answer, Latham spoke on his own behalf. "Two pipes of red wine, fourteen bottles of English ale, and the rest as promised."

The other man sucked in his lower lip. "Fine," he said eventually. "When will you deliver the goods?" For the first time, the man addressed Latham.

"This afternoon," Latham answered with a smirk. "And we will take the slaves tonight."

The boss nodded, and they shook on it.

### **The Barracoon's Dungeon**

Kalomba had thought the Spaniards were pale, but the two men who had just peeked inside the dungeon looked like ghosts. "Our new owners," he grumbled.

He could just make out Nsonyi crouched and chained to the wall beside him.

"That man will regret the day he ever dared call himself my master," Nsonyi spat with undisguised loathing in his voice.

Kalomba watched his friend for a sad moment. His hate and his anger were justified, but there was no time for that now. Any minute, Kapa would draw her last breath.

Three nights, they had lain in the dark and listened to her rasping for air. She had not swallowed water for almost a week. Chipangu was doing what she could, but that was really nothing more than whispering comforting words. It was the most any of them could do. The links on Kapa's chain clinked softly as she shivered.

Kalomba closed his eyes to keep back the tears. *If only we'd gotten away*, he thought bitterly. *They would all be safe, Mbuyi and Nsonyi and Kapa. None of this would have happened.* He could hear Mbuyi sobbing. *They would all be safe.*

Kapa lasted for a few more hours, and then, with one last rattle, she died. Mbuyi was crying so hard, no one realized at first that Kapa had stopped breathing. After a few seconds, Nsonyi was the one who finally noticed. He crouched as close to her face as he could, trying to listen.

Then, he let out a sharp cry. “She’s gone.”

Mbuyi screamed. Chipangu gasped like *her* lungs had stopped working. She didn’t have any tears left to shed; she had cried too much, caught in that dark prison. Kalomba wanted to hold her, to soothe her, but all he could do was bow his head and pray that Kapa’s ghost found its way back to their homeland. If he weren’t already on the ground, the inevitable news would have swept him off his feet.

Hours passed while none of them spoke. It felt disrespectful when her body was still lying there on the floor. Kalomba couldn’t quite grasp that she was gone, that he would never hear her breathy laughter or get caught in one of her terrifying glares. His mind flashed back to the first time they met. He had seen six dry-seasons by then. Nsonyi and Kalomba had been pretending to hunt boar, tossing harmless sticks at each other, as they ran around in a circle at the edge of the village. All of a sudden, a short squat log flew out nowhere and struck Nsonyi in the square of his back, knocking him to the ground. Kalomba spun around to see who had thrown it, and there was this little four-year-old girl staring at them intensely, her hands balled into fists.

“What do you want!?” he had shouted at her. She didn’t answer him, and he realized she was not looking at him; she was watching Nsonyi struggle to get up from the ground.

As he had staggered to his feet, she finally answered, “I want to play.”

Kalomba smiled. She had always fought so hard, even when she didn’t need to. It was like she was trying to live life for both herself and her twin.

Mbuyi didn’t stop sobbing as they waited for the slavers to come and take her away. Kalomba could hear him sniffing and choking in the dark. Luwi had only sold Kapa because she didn’t want to be separated from her brother, and now they were separated by the ultimate distance.

Kalomba whispered, “Mbuyi,” but then stopped because he realized there was nothing he could say that wouldn’t ring hollow against those stone walls. It was entirely his fault. He had denounced Kapa at the



trial. He had failed to get Chipangu away in time. He was the reason Chipangu turned down Luwi's offer in the first place. They were all locked away, waiting to be sold yet again because of him. Even the scars on Nsonyi's and Mbuyi's backs were his fault. It was his brilliant idea to distract their captors from Kapa and get them all flogged in the process.

It was a relief when the Spaniards finally returned because they distracted Kalomba from these torturous thoughts. There were three men this time; two of them carried muskets with bayonets attached at the tip to scare the slaves into submission. The other clutched a large ring of keys between his pudgy fingers. With a sick grin, he began unlocking each slave who was then forced out of the dungeon at gunpoint. Kalomba and the others waited for their turn in silence.

When the men found Kapa, they immediately drew back. In the dim starlight streaming through the door, Kalomba saw for the first time how ghastly her corpse looked. Her skin was ashen, the back of her hands papery and shriveled. Spidery black lines stretched across her face and down her chest to her navel. Her eyes were a feverish grey and the lumps on the side of her neck had swollen to size of calabashes. She was truly dead.

The fat man with the keys started to shout at the others, animatedly waving his hands about. They kept bowing their heads like they were apologizing. The leader barked some sort of instruction at them and they grabbed Chipangu by the hair and jerked her head back, checking for signs of infection. They did the same to Mbuyi, whose cheeks still shone with tears. Nsonyi actually spat in the guard's face when he tried to inspect him, which earned Nsonyi a backhanded slap. Kalomba gasped when the man pulled on his hair. He had been scratching madly at the lice scurrying around, so now his scalp was tender and irritated. The man checked first one side of Kalomba's jaw and then the other. Then, he grunted to the man with the keys. They all appeared to be in good health. Whatever killed Kapa had not spread.

Kalomba did not have time to reflect on how this made him feel for they were immediately unshackled and pushed out the door. He turned to ascend into the moonlight, but the slaver behind him shoved him down the steps deeper into the fortress. The stairwell wound down and down into the darkness until Kalomba was convinced it would never end. Then suddenly he emerged into the light, blinking. The

moon was almost full, bathing the cliff in a bright white light. There was another Spaniard standing in front of Kalomba with a musket trained at his heart. The pale man motioned for him to continue down the stairs, which to Kalomba's astonishment continued down into the ocean. The steps, well-worn by salt spray and the wind, narrowed to a mere foot, barely jutting out from the cliff-face. Kalomba shook his head as he watched the waves hundreds of feet below. He was not walking down those stairs. The man behind him tapped his shoulder with the rifle butt. He grumbled something Kalomba was sure meant, "Get moving," but Kalomba shook his head again. The man smacked him a bit harder. Kalomba had never been up that high, and just then was a very inconvenient time to learn he was afraid of heights. He stubbornly stayed where he was, not daring to even shift his weight.

The Spaniard had had enough, so he pricked a half-healed welt on Kalomba's back with his bayonet, drawing blood. That still wasn't quite enough to overcome Kalomba's paralysis, so the guard pricked him again, finally forcing him to move. The descent was long and tortuous, winding back and forth down the cliff. Kalomba pressed himself as close to the rock as he could, placing one trembling foot in front of the other, praying to his grandmother's ghost that he wouldn't fall.

About halfway down, a dark shape flew past. For a split second, the body was suspended mid-air beside him, and Kalomba saw her lined face as she twisted toward him. *Kapa*. Then, she was gone. He heard a heavy splash below.

"No!" he screamed. "No! You just threw her away!" He choked; he couldn't breathe. It felt like the grief was crushing his chest, starving him of oxygen, so he pressed himself against the cliff, trying not to pass out. He kept repeating, "no, no."

Someone took him by the shoulders and led him down the rest of the way. He no longer resisted; he didn't have the strength. They bound his hands again and put him in a boat. This time he wasn't lying face down, and he could see the great water surrounding him, colored silver by the stars and moon. It looked like it stretched to the West forever. Kalomba considered pitching himself over the side. Maybe if he sacrificed himself, the sea would give her back. *Give her body back!* he silently demanded. *She didn't deserve this. Her body*

*should be with her people, with us. Give her back.* The rhythmic sound of the waves crashing against the cliff was the only answer he received.

Kalomba did not recognize any of the other men in the boat. Even the guards were strangers to him. They all looked rough, like they hadn't had a good night's sleep or a decent meal in weeks. *I must look just as bad*, he commented to himself. The cut on his back where the slaver had pricked him still stung. One of the guards in the boat was looking at the welts. The man was a dark fellow, darker than the men at the fort at least. And his black hair was tied back in a greasy braid. He was missing a few teeth, and Kalomba wished he would stop breathing so close to his face. *The pit behind smelled better.* The man addressed his companion in the same language the fort men had used. In response, the other man took one look at Kalomba's back and shouted at the oarsman sitting in the middle of the boat. They seemed annoyed that Kalomba was bleeding. The oarsman replied in a language Kalomba had never heard before. It sounded similar to how the fort men spoke, but this language was more guttural, choppy, without the same fluidity. The oarsman continued to speak in his strange tongue and gesture to something in the distance.

Kalomba's stomach roiled. It was another boat, although much larger than the ones he had been on before. He knew they were going to lock him up again in the belly of that beast and that it wouldn't stop moving, ever. He felt sick already. He thought about Kapa lying on the ocean floor, shifting back and forth in the current, condemned to an eternity of restlessness. She too had been swallowed, but unlike Kalomba, she would never re-emerge.

## Chapter Ten

**September 25th, 1860-** At sea, off the West Coast of Africa, south of the Congo

“Let-my-peo-peo-.”

“People,” Willie finished for Eben. He was lightly shading in a sketch he drew earlier of the coastline. He had three or four sketches just like this. Although they were based on locations hundreds of miles apart, they all looked relatively the same. It passed the time though.

“People go,” Eben read as he swung in the hammock next to Willie’s. He had one foot on the deck, gently rocking himself back and forth, slightly out of rhythm with the ship. The bible in his hands was well-read. When Captain Nicholas had discovered the two of them on the gun deck practicing Eben’s letters in the margins of old playbills from the Dramatics Club, he happily offered the use of his bible as long as Eben promised to take good care of it. The spine was creased at several of the captain’s favorite passages, and every few pages there was a saltwater stain. It seemed the bible’s naval career was almost as long as the captain’s.

Eben continued reading, haltingly. “So-that-they-may-kel?”

“Cell,” Willie answered without looking up from his sketch. He had memorized the entire King James Bible at the age of ten. His mother was a Methodist who believed education was the key to salvation.

“But it starts with a ‘c,’ which makes a ‘kuh’ sound,” Eben objected.

Willie stopped shading for a moment. “Usually, but not always. Sometimes a ‘c’ sounds like an ‘s.’”

“Why?”

Willie shrugged. “I dunno. Somebody decided, and that’s how ‘tis. Keep reading.”

Eben bit his lip, unsatisfied with Willie’s answer, but he skimmed the page again, looking for his place. “Cell,” he read aloud, “cel-e-brate?”

Willie nodded, “That’s right.”

“Celebrate-a-feast-to-me-in-the-desert.” Eben paused. When his mother was alive, she had dragged him to service every week. He remembered hearing some of these passages before, but there was still a lot he didn’t understand. “Willie, do you know what a desert is?”

“Aye, it’s like a beach, but there’s no water, just sand, and it goes on for hundreds of miles.”

“No water at all?”

Willie shook his head. “No water, and it’s really hot too. I’ve never seen one myself, but I’ve heard tales.”

Eben wondered why God would want to lead his people into a desert, and how could they possibly feast if they had no water? Eben was about to ask Willie, when the latter sat up in his hammock, swinging his feet around to the deck.

“Swell,” he said, “Yer reading’s coming along just fine.” He held out his picture to Eben. “I want ye to sign me name, right there.” He pointed to the bottom right-hand corner.

“Yer name?”

“Aye. William Ambrose Leonard.”

“But I can barely spell me own name.”

Willie rolled his eyes. “Eben, just do it. It’s for practice.”

Eben rolled the pen in his fingers clumsily. He scratched Willie’s name into the paper just below a clump of trees. The i’s were horribly blotched, and he had missed an ‘l’ in William and the ‘e’ at the end of Ambrose. But it was legible, and Willie hadn’t given Eben any hints. He figured it out all on his own. His rudimentary handwriting was starting to show the beginnings of true penmanship. If Eben kept practicing, he might one day have a rather flowery script.

Willie admired the signature. “Not bad my friend, not bad at all.”

Eben smiled. “The Captain’ll have ye learning the boys soon.”

Willie laid back in his hammock. “It would take a man more patient than I to get those boys to sit’n learn their letters.” Eben smiled to himself as he remembered those summer days from long ago when he played “Red Coats and Continentals” with the other neighborhood boys. He would wake at the crack of dawn, dress all in blue, and head out the door, completely ignoring his mother’s protests about the importance of schooling.

Eben’s eyelids fluttered behind the visions. His stomach was full of Daly’s spicy shark fin stew, and he was content to let the ship rock him to sleep.

“Sail ho!”

Eben opened his eyes. *Not again.* In the past five days, there had been six false alarms. Eben had an early watch the next day, so he shut his eyes again, determined to ignore the hopeless commotion around him.

Willie reached into the hammock. “Hey, get up.”

“No.”

Willie grabbed the end of the canvas and shook. “Get up, landsman. This one’s real.”

Eben sat up abruptly. “What? How do ye know?”

“Daly said she spotted us and took off.” He raised his eyebrows and smirked. “Prize is as good as ours.”

Eben jumped up, pulled his trousers on and ran up the ladder. The night air was cool, and there was a good breeze. Not a single cloud obscured the stars, and the full moon had just risen. Eben spotted the fugitive ship a few miles away. She had every stitch of canvas on that would draw wind, desperately trying to outrun *Constellation*. Suddenly, all the lanterns on the other ship went dark. *Constellation* followed suit, dousing every light aboard. Unfortunately for the fugitive, the moon was behind her, clearly silhouetting her masts and sails. She was getting closer.

“This is it,” Eben whispered, afraid that if he spoke any louder, he would jinx it. “We’re about to take a prize.”

Thomas Gaynor, always a betting man, expressed skepticism. “Oh, she’s probably a smuggler of some sort, but a slaver? I dunno. I don’t think the odds are in our favor.”

Daly took the bait. “Six cents says she’s a slaver.”

The corner of Gaynor’s mouth twisted. “Six cents says she’s not.”

Daly held out his hand. “It’s a bet.” They shook on it.

“What is that?” Eben asked, pointing to dark shapes floating in the water, a sea of flotsam getting closer. Eben craned over the railing, watching as barrels, spare yards, and a hatch or two gently bumped the ship’s hull. They were throwing everything overboard that they could afford to lose, trying to put on a little more speed. It was no use. *Constellation* was now within a quarter mile of the other ship.

The Captain and Commodore were both on deck, monitoring the pursuit. Captain Nicholas shouted to the other ship. "Heave to! That is an order! Heave to on the authority of the United States Navy!"

The other crew did not obey. Instead they lowered one of their lifeboats. It bobbed between the two ships.

"Wait! They might be dumping slaves. Don't hit the boat," Captain Nicholas shouted.

"Belay that!" Commodore Inman countered. "The boat is empty. Stay on the barque!"

The lifeboat was indeed empty. Eben could see that in the moonlight. He could also see the fugitives unfurling their studding sails.

"Heave to!" Nicholas barked again. The other ship sped up a little, but *Constellation* was still gaining on her. The Commodore was growing impatient though.

"First division to general quarters! Man your guns!"

Eben and the rest of the first division ran down to the gun deck. Only the first gun crew loaded their gun with shot, but the rest of the division stayed on alert. Eben peered out through the gun port, trying to watch the action.

The Commodore was on the gun deck with them, giving commands himself. "Elevate! Aim across her bow! Do not strike the ship." When the handspike-man finished adjusting the gun's quoin, Inman shouted, "Make ready! Fire!"

Eben covered his ears as the gunpowder ignited. The cannonball skipped across the water just in front of the prow. Still, the ship did not heave to.

"Serve, vent, and sponge!" Inman ordered. "Reload! Run out!"

The gun crew hauled on their ropes. The handspike-man strained against his bar, trying to shift the gun's aim to the right.

"Elevate! Aim for her forward studding sails! Make ready!" The crew crouched again in the ready stance. "FIRE!"

This time the shot ripped through the barque's forward sails, taking out part of the mast and several of the yards, slowly the barque considerably. Still, she sailed stubbornly on.

“My patience has run out,” Inman declared. “Serve, vent, and sponge! Reload with shell!”

*Constellation* was less than fifty yards away from the barque. A broadside attack using explosive shells would blow a ragged hole right through the small ship. Eben was aghast. They didn’t know if there were people in that hold. Any slaves stuck down there would be the first to drown.

“Sir, how?” slipped out from Eben’s lips.

The Commodore glanced at him. “Mr. Nichols, tell Captain Nicholas to repeat my orders on the spar deck.”

Eben dared not hesitate. He ran up the ladder, nearly colliding with the curious men gathered around the hatch, eavesdropping. Captain Nicholas was standing by the helm.

“Captain, sir!” Eben saluted. “Commodore Inman requests that you repeat his orders to load the gun with shell.”

The Captain nodded, “Of course.” He moved to the front of the ship, standing just behind the rail. “Forward gun!” he shouted. “Serve, vent, and sponge! Load with shell!”

Eben stood on the forward hatch listening for Inman’s orders. The Commodore appeared to be waiting for something to happen. The barque did not heave to. After waiting a full minute, Inman ordered, “Make ready!”

“Make ready!” Eben relayed.

“MAKE READY!” Nicholas shouted, using all of the might he could muster.

Finally, the barque dropped her anchor and reefed her main topsails. Eben understood now. The shell had been a bluff, one that the barque’s captain dared not call. *Constellation* lowered her own anchor, but no order was given to reef the sails.

Instead, Captain Nicholas called to the other ship. “My forward gun is still loaded! Reef your royal sails, or we will fire on you.”

“And risk innocent lives?” someone called back.

“Are you admitting that you have innocent lives aboard?” answered Nicholas wryly.



The other crew was silent, but they did reef the rest of their sails, albeit slowly and reluctantly. Captain Nicholas finally gave the order to secure *Constellation's* sails. Eben climbed onto the crossjack to secure his section of the mizzen topsail. He finally had a good view of the barque. With the full moon, he could just make out the name painted on her side, "*Cora of New York*," so she was definitely American, even if she appeared to be flying Spanish colors. She was a sleek, little boat, very fast. If any other ship of the squadron had tried to chase her down, she would have escaped. Her three masts were finely crafted, and her rigging looked all-new. She was a fine vessel.

First Lieutenant Fairfax stood at ease on the main hatch. "Fourth cutter crew!" he shouted. "Small arms!"

Eben was part of the fourth cutter crew, so he swung down to the spar deck. The cutlasses and pistols were kept in the aft orlop, just above the hold. Eben skidded down there and grabbed a belt containing one of each, quickly buckling it around his waist. Then, he reported to the starboard side of the ship.

The men had already begun lowering the boat. Eben climbed in, and when they hit the water, he picked up his oar and rowed in the time with his mates. There being less than fifty yards between the ships, it took only a couple of minutes to reach *Cora*. The pirate crew lowered a ladder. Fairfax was the first aboard the prize, Thomas Eastman was second, and the rest of the men followed close behind.

*Cora's* spar deck was absolute chaos. About twenty men were running around trying to clear the debris from the broken yards and torn sails. They were all yelling at each other in Spanish. Lieutenant Fairfax gave the order to search the ship, while he located the officers.

*Cora* was a small ship with only three decks. There was nothing too unusual on the berth deck besides the large quantity of provision casks. There was more food down there than a crew of twenty typically needed. There was also a strange smell. It made Eben think of his father, dying in his own excrement, unable to move. As he neared the hatch leading to the hold, the stench became unbearable. Eben gagged, nearly losing his stomach contents. It was the smell of unwashed bodies living and dying in their own filth. It was the smell of seasickness, sweat, and disease. It was the smell of a slaver.

The hatches were tightly secured, but as Eben drew near, he saw a few dark fingers reach up through the gaps. He could hear a child crying.

“Alvah,” Eben called to his shipmate, “help me open this hatch.” The freedman, with tears in his eyes, helped grabbed one end and lifted, prying the hatch open. Hundreds of white eyes in the darkness below turned to the two men.

“Oh, God.” Eben felt the bile rise back up in his throat. There were almost a thousand people crammed into the tiny hold. Most were chained lying down because there was simply no room for them all to stand. Somewhere, in that mass of people, the child continued to cry.

Suddenly, they were all crying. More like wailing. Eben had never been particularly religious, but in that moment, he believed in Hell. This was it. The pit had opened, and that yell was the sound of the Devil himself.

Alvah jumped back from the hatch. “What in heaven’s name’s wrong with ‘em?”

Eben covered his ears. “I think- I think they’re scared. They don’t know what’s going on. Speak to them, Alvah. Tell them it’s all right.”

Alvah stared at him in disbelief. “Boy! I don’t speak their language. My great-grandmammy’s from Africa, not me.”

Eben ran back to the spar deck. Jack Frying Pan had come as part of the prize crew. Fairfax stopped Eben before he even got to the top of the ladder.

“Mr. Nichols, what is going on down there?”

“It’s the slaves, sir. They’re panicking. P’raps they’ll calm down if Jack talks to them.” Jack Frying Pan was standing by the rope ladder, looking uneasy, as if he wanted to burn the whole ship before it burned him. Fairfax jerked his head, motioning Jack over to them. Then he turned to a rather short man with a very square face.

“Mr. Fredericks, I assume your cargo is chained.”

Mr. Fredericks nodded but did not say anything.

“Then, I require the keys.” Fairfax held out his hand. Fredericks pressed his lips together so tightly it looked as if he was attempting to pass a kidney stone. But he did reluctantly offer up his key ring to Fairfax, who took it with a smile. Then, he and Jack Frying Pan followed Eben to the hold.

Many of the captives were openly weeping now, and the noise was unbearable. Alvah Olds’ eyes were as wide as eggs. His lips were trembling as he slowly backed away from the hatch. Fairfax covered his nose with his sleeve.

“Jack, tell them we mean them no harm,” Fairfax commanded.

It took several minutes for Jack to relay the message. Eben was pretty sure he was repeating the same sentence just in different languages. Each time Jack shouted, a few more captives ceased screaming. They were staring up out of the hold, terrified, but quiet.

When Jack finished, Fairfax tossed Alvah the keys. “Unshackle them,” he ordered. Alvah stared at the hatch. He was tared to the spot. The key ring rattled as his hands shook. Eben gently took the keys from him.

“All s’well,” he said quietly. “I’ll do it.” Eben took a deep breath and plunged into the hold.

There were naked bodies everywhere. He could feel them, their heat, surrounding him, pressing against his skin.

“It’s all right.” He rattled the keys. “We’re here to set you free.”

It was a mistake. The Africans rushed him. The ones closest started swinging their chains in his face. One woman accidentally struck Eben, blinding him on one side. They were clawing at his clothes, his hair. There were fingers everywhere, prying at him. And the smell, the smell was suffocating. Eben screamed.

Suddenly, there was a shadow beside him, pushing the masses back. The shadow was shouting gibberish and roaring. Its white eyes turned to Eben.

“Eben Nichols, give me the key.” Eben dumbly held out his hand, and Jack began unlocking the shackles of those around him. Soon there was a sea of people pushing each other up the ladder. Eben stood stunned like a boulder in the middle of the river. Jack occasionally shouted, trying to keep everyone in line, but soon, the weeping above drowned out his voice.

“They are hungry,” Jack muttered. Eben could still hear that child crying. Whoever it was was still in the hold. Everyone else had left, but peering through the darkness, Eben still saw several huddled shapes in the darkness. He realized with horror, they were bodies.

The child was clutching one of them, wailing. It was a young boy, maybe eleven years of age. He kept wailing, “Mama! Mama!” over and over. He shook her shoulder, but her stare was empty and glossed over. There was dried vomit crusted on her lips, and several flies buzzed around scabbed-over sores. She had been sick before coming aboard and didn’t last longer than the twenty-four hours since they had left Manque Grande. Eben couldn’t hold it back anymore. He ran to the nearest scupper and lost all of his spicy shark fin stew.

Jack started arguing with the boy, yelling at him. The boy chattered back in his high broken voice.

Wiping his mouth on his sleeve, Eben asked Jack what the boy was saying.

“He will not leave his mama, Eben Nichols. I tell him poison will spread, but he not leave.”

The boy looked at Eben. His eyes stood out of the darkness, defiant and angry. He would never leave his mother. Eben slapped the boy, momentarily stunning him. Then, he twisted the boy’s arm behind his back and shoved him up the ladder, while Jack checked the rest of the bodies to see if anyone else could be saved.

There were hundreds of people on the spar deck. Many fell to their knees bowing and chanting to the East. Some started searching for loved ones. Others just stared silently at the stars as if they had never seen anything so beautiful.

The boy tried to run past Eben, back down into the hold, but Eben stopped him. When the boy finally gave up struggling, he crossed his arms and pouted with big fat tears rolling down his cheeks.

“All right, where is the Lieutenant?” Eben muttered, searching the throng for Fairfax. He wanted to dump the boy on someone else before he had a chance to make another break for it.

Fairfax had Mr. Fredericks pinned against the main mast as he mercilessly beat in the man’s head. “How long, sailor!? How long since they’ve eaten!!?” Fairfax’s fist landed square in Fredericks’ face. Something snapped. It sounded like Fredericks’ nose.

“I dunno! A day! A day and half maybe!” There was blood dripping on Fairfax’s boots.

Fairfax hit him again, this time boxing his ear.

Fredericks held up his hands, pleading, “Please, sir, please, they’re just niggers.”

Fairfax kicked him, and Fredericks fell to the deck, curling into a ball. “Aye, they’re just niggers.

Niggers, not animals. Niggers! You son of a gun! They’re still human! You bastard! You-!”

“Sir!” Eben called across the deck.

Fairfax twisted to see who had spoken, and Fredericks covered his head, fearing another blow.

“What, Mr. Nichols?”

“Sir, if it’s true that the captives haven’t eaten in over a day p’raps we should feed them?”

Fairfax delivered one more quick kick to Frederick’s stomach and then straightened his coat. “Yes. Master Eastman!” he called to the burly sailing master.

Eastman, who had been helping *Cora’s* crew clear the wreckage of the chase, looked up. “Yes, sir?”

“Go below,” Fairfax instructed, “and make a quick inventory of provisions. Then, I want these mokes well fed. That’s an order.” Eastman hurried below to comply, while Fairfax muttered, “We do not get bonuses for dead mokes.”

Jack came back from the hold. “Eben Nichols, we be lucky. Only four dead.”

Eben looked at all the people around him. Just moments before, they had been trying to tear him apart. Now, they were weeping at the sheer joy of still being alive. And he was expected to be happy that this disgusting business earned him a paycheck.

That night, Willie’s hand shook as he wrote his daily diary entry. What he had seen was dreadful. When Fairfax had hailed *Constellation*, “Ahoy! We got a fine hat prize! Chock full of darkies!” Willie had cheered with everyone else. But when he saw the prize they had netted, his stomach turned. Thomas Gaynor paid up his six cents to Pete Daly. Daly accepted it with a smile that did not touch his eyes. Alvah Olds had found a bottle of wine somewhere. He was hiding in the hold, taking deep draughts and staring off into space. Eben was reading the Captain’s Bible.

Men who had not been part of either the first or second prize crew kept approaching Eben trying to get the details of what he had seen, to hear what a slaver was actually like. He hated disappointing them. They were only curious, and in their position, he'd probably be asking the same questions. But he just couldn't explain to them how he was feeling. Numb, hollow, guilty.

He took those feelings and buried them in the Book of Exodus, a story of miracles and redemption. People didn't bother him while he was reading, so when he finished Exodus, he moved onto Leviticus. He was halfway through reading about how he shouldn't have gotten that last haircut when the lamps were doused. He turned in but didn't fall asleep.

Swinging in his hammock, he stared at the underside of the deck above, watching one whorl in particular shift and dance as the moonlight reflected off the water and flickered through the portholes. Slowly, the whorl in the wood morphed into a single crazed eye, wide with terror, staring back at him through the abyss. In his mind, Eben heard the Africans screaming as if the Devil was in their midst. His stomach was empty, but he still had to repress a dry heave. He couldn't sleep.

## Chapter Eleven

**September 26, 1860-** Anchored off the African Coast

In the daylight, *Cora* was a pretty ship. Her black hull had been recently repainted with her name re-lettered at the stern in white. Her rigging was a mess, but Eben still admired her. As part of the legitimate merchant marine, this sleek little ship could go very far very fast.

“Mr. Nichols! Wipe that smile off your face. You look idiotic,” shouted Master D’Aroy.

“Just enjoying the view, sir,” Eben responded. He was perched in *Cora*’s rigging re-tarring the lines. It was hot, sticky work, so, of course as a landsman, Eben got to go first. There was dried tar on his fingers, in his hair, on his face. End of watch could not come quickly enough.

When it did arrive and Eben was waiting on deck for a boat from *Constellation* to come and relieve the men on *Cora*, Jack Frying Pan sidled up next to him.

“Eben Nichols, you need bath.”

“Aye, a good scrub, I reckon.”

Jack smiled mischievously and held up a finger. “I promised to teach you swimming. First lesson: Hold ya breath.” Then, he pushed Eben off the ship.

Eben heard someone shout, “Man over board!” just as he hit the water. There was a second splash beside him. Eben did just as Jack instructed and held the half-gulp of air he managed to inhale before landing in the ocean. He was amazed. *I can float!* It was not by much, just enough to keep his eyes above water. *But still, I can float!*

He shouted a triumphant, “Ha!” immediately losing the air in his lungs and swallowing a stomach-full of seawater. He started to sink and cough at the same time, writhing in panic, all the while worsening his situation. Just as his hairline dipped below the surface, a strong arm wrapped around his chest and pulled him back up. Jack could tread water well enough to support them both.

“Good, Eben Nichols, good,” Jack soothed, “Perhaps I *can* teach ya.” Jack slowly began moving his arms and legs in clean strong strokes, steadily pulling back them towards *Cora*. Someone lowered a rope

ladder and Eben climbed aboard, feeling exhausted as the adrenaline left his system.

“Needed a bath that badly, Mr. Nichols?” scoffed D’Aroy.

Eben coughed up some water. “Jack said I smelled, sir.”

D’Aroy’s mouth twitched. He tried to suppress it, but soon he was laughing so hard, he was slapping his thighs.

After a few minutes, he clapped Eben on the back and wiped the tears from his eyes. “All right, son, let’s get you back aboard your own ship, so you can change.”

“Aye, sir.”

Eben was trying to cut the tar out of his hair with a knife when Willie came off watch.

Willie smirked. “I see re-rigging is going well.”

Eben ruffled his hair. “Aye, *Cora* should be sailing for Monrovia by tomorrow.”

Willie stripped off his blue jacket. “Apparently, we’re keeping the Spanish crew.”

“Wonderful. Have they figured out who’s Captain yet?”

“The Spanish one, Rintz.”

“Really?” Eben was surprised. Rintz was a slight man with a clean-shaven vanilla face. He didn’t seem remarkable in any way.

Willie nodded. “We’re to release him when we get to St Paul. Personally, I would’ve bet on that Campbell fellow, but the ship’s manifest lists him as a passenger.”

Campbell was definitely a smooth talker. He was tall for a sailor but stoutly built and very good-looking with a fine mustache that curled at the ends. From what Eben had observed, he was quick with a smile and very conciliatory. He told Captain Nicholas that when he bought passage on *Cora*, he thought the ship was sailing directly from New York to St. Thomas. He had no inkling of the cruise’s true purpose. The first and second mates confirmed his story. They said they purposefully misled Mr. Campbell so as to make a little extra side money, but no one actually believed Campbell’s version of events. However, Campbell was to be released when *Constellation* returned to St. Paul de Loando along with Rintz and the rest of the Spanish crew because they had no evidence to disprove Campbell’s claims.



Eben didn't like his eyes. They were shrewd. He could feel them sometimes, watching him, sizing him up as if he were a mark. When Campbell had first come aboard with the rest of the Spanish complement, Daly remarked, "A confidence man if I ever saw one." Eben had to agree.

"Has Alvah come out of the hold yet?" Eben asked Willie.

"No, but he has the next watch, so he better soon."

Eben sighed. "Why do I get the feeling, we're about to have another court martial?"

Willie shook his head. "Poor, Alvah. Ye know he's trying to save up to free his sweetheart back home?"

"I thought he was born free."

"He was," Willie asserted, "but in Baltimore there's lots of darkies, free and slave all mixed together."

Eben frowned. "Loss of three months' pay is going to set him back."

"Aye," Willie said gravely, "whatever ye saw down in that hold gave ol' Alvah a right shock."

Eben shivered as he remembered the hundreds of eyes staring up from the dark, from the stench. A part of him envied the solace Alvah had found in his stolen wine bottle. "It was truly dreadful."

"Mr. Nichols, Mr. Leonard." Lieutenant Fairfax had just emerged from Officers' Country. "Go find Mr. Blackford. He needs help taking new sails to *Cora*."

Eben ruffled his hair again. "But sir, we both just came off watch-."

"That's an order, landsman."

Eben blushed. "Aye, sir."

The extra sail was to replace *Cora's* fore-topmast studding sail, which had been shredded during the chase. As he and Willie were transporting the material, Eben realized it was about the same weight as their hammock canvas.

Mr. Blackford, the sail-maker, and his mate Mr. Parsons were very happy to have the assistance. They had the sail sewn and hoisted within a few hours and cut the old sail into square material that could be used as emergency patches aboard *Constellation*. Watching Parsons fold the squares gave Eben an idea. He asked Mr. Blackford if he could take a few of them.

“What on earth for?”

Eben blushed when Blackford asked. “Four people died in the cargo hold, during the stampede. It doesn’t feel right to just pitch them over the side.” He still saw the dark shapes when he closed his eyes. And when the wind fell silent, he heard the boy’s screams. Those shapes were four human beings who deserved proper funeral rites.

Blackford smiled. “You want to make hammocks for them.”

Eben scratched the back of his neck uncomfortably. “Aye, sir.”

“Here.” Blackford handed Eben two large squares. “I won’t tell Fairfax.”

Eben saluted with gratitude. “Thank you.” He spent the rest of his day on *Cora*’s berth deck sewing hammocks for the fallen captives.

Kalomba sat on the deck with Nsonyi for a long time. The sailors had given them strips of cloth to cover themselves if they so desired. The cloth was itchy, and Kalomba did not like the feel of it against his skin. It was so raspy and hot, but it was better than nothing. They also weren’t to be allowed on the top deck if they weren’t covered, and that was where he wanted to be, so he could smell the fresh air, salty and ancient, nothing like the smell of decay that had so recently surrounded them. For the first time in awhile, Kalomba took a deep breath, filling his lungs to capacity and cracking the knuckle bones in his chest. It hurt, but Kalomba didn’t mind. After all, it also hurt to stare at the sky as long as he did, but Kalomba never wanted to forget that shade of blue again, so he gazed unblinkingly until his eyes watered.

Above them, he noticed was a weird bird that kept circling over the ship. It was all white except for the orange beak and the black tips on its wings. He pointed it out to Nsonyi. Nsonyi looked up at it for only the briefest moment before going back to glaring at various crewmembers around the ship.

“White demons,” he muttered, “I will kill them all.”

Kalomba did not look at his friend; he was afraid he might not recognize him, not as twisted with malice as he seemed to be. Nsonyi had been mumbling for weeks about slaughtering their captors and returning to the village in a blaze of bloody glory. *None of that matters now, Nsonyi*, Kalomba thought

reproachfully. *Kapa's dead.* The fight was over, and they had lost. Yes, the white men had killed her, but so had Kalomba. It was his fault she was even there, so it was his fault just as much as any white stranger's that she died. Kalomba shuddered as he realized, *If he wants to avenge Kapa's death, he will have to begin with me.* Just then, he looked at Nsonyi and wished he hadn't.

Nsonyi's face was drawn, curled in on itself, the glower accentuated by menacingly arched eyebrows and a snarling mouth. He looked like a monster, the kind that haunts the night hunting for small children. Kalomba's heart painfully skipped a beat. He had lost two friends in one day. Nsonyi would never forgive the role Kalomba played in their captivity, nor did Kalomba think he should. He wanted to tell his comrade, *It's me. It's my fault. Begin with me. Avenge her death,* but he remained silent. He was too much of a coward to end his own life. What heroic triumph or honest deed could he take with him to the ancestors in death? He could not show up empty-handed. Was he to spend eternity haunting the ocean and making sailors' existences miserable? It may be what he thought he deserved, but it was certainly not what he wanted. And his fear of that hell was what kept him alive.

Nsonyi elbowed him out of his reverie. "What do you think he's doing?" He pointed to a young man sitting on the opposite side of the deck. He was a thin man, only a little older than they, with thick clumps of tar stuck in his hair. He was whistling as he sewed together two pieces of material that looked like the cloth hanging in the sky.

"Maybe he's making more of those," Kalomba answered pointing to the sail.

Nsonyi shook his head. "Not big enough."

Kalomba welcomed the distraction from his thoughts and began to watch the young man. The pieces of cloth he was cutting were about as long as a man and twice as wide. He was sewing two layers together to make the thing a bit thicker. When he had four of these prepared, he stopped and waited expectantly. Kalomba wondered what he was doing when another white sailor and the tattooed man who had spoken to them in their own language emerged from below with a body slung between them. It was an African.

Nsonyi leapt to his feet with anger flashing in his eyes. Kalomba was too fascinated to feel the same level of rage and continued to watch from his seat on the deck. *What are they doing?*

The two men carrying the body, gently placed her on the cloth, rearranging her limbs so that her arms crossed her chest. They laid a heavy ball of iron between her legs. Then, they wrapped the cloth carefully around her, and the young man covered in tar sewed it shut. Nsonyi took a step forward, clenching his jaw so hard it popped. Kalomba threw out an arm to restrain his friend. The dark man's expression when he had closed the cloth around the woman, relaxed, calm, pitying, told Kalomba that this action was not meant to insult. The three of them were doing this out of respect.

However, Kalomba seemed to be the only one to understand this because several other Africans rushed forward to prevent the ritual, one of whom was a small boy, continually crying, "Mama!" The man with the blue tattoo on his face wrestled the boy into a bear hug and spoke to the boy in his own tongue for several minutes before he finally calmed down. Meanwhile, the young man with the tar in his hair was trying unsuccessfully to explain to the rest of the crowd that he meant well. They either did not understand or simply didn't believe him. Their collective gaze was baleful as they all tightened their fists and curled their lips at the man. Thankfully, the tattooed man intervened just in time. One African had the young man by his shirt collar and was about to strike him.

The dark man declared that he was Kru in three different languages to win the crowd's trust. The last repetition was in a distant dialect of Bantu, so Kalomba could piece his message together, but only just. The man said something along the lines of, "We wish you no harm. We wish them," here he pointed to the body on the deck, "no harm. We only wish to pay respect to the dead. It custom on big boat to do this. To wrap fallen in his bed and throw him to sea. Eben Nichols," here he gestured to the tarred young man, "has made beds."

The crowd muttered a great deal. Kalomba was just as confused. *Such a strange custom. Why wrap them in their beds?* Back home, bodies were given to the flames so that their ashes and bones may become talismans to protect the village. The man called Eben Nichols was determined though. When he realized the crowd was still uncomfortable, he got down on his knees and bowed before them, pleading while the Kru translated.

"Eben Nichols sorry he cannot give your beloved proper rites. He wish he could return you all to your homes. He wish that there was more he could do. He wish we had found you sooner so maybe not even

four have died. The wrong his people have done your people runs deep and-," here he paused, trying to think of a word, "and is unpayable debt. Please, let him do what custom is and honor your beloved."

The other Africans looked at each other, questioningly. They wanted to still be angry, to rail against their situation and the sailors, but the honesty in Eben Nichols' face was undeniable and it mollified them. They took a step back and quietly watched as the other three bodies were brought above and sewn into hammocks. When Eben Nichols finished sewing, he took a small book from his vest pocket and began to read incantations aloud and make signs over the bodies.

Kalomba sat bolt upright. *They have magic!?* The other pale, brawny man and Eben Nichols frequently repeated the word "Amen," which Kalomba assumed must be a powerfully magic word; they said it so often. After Eben Nichols finished weaving his spells, he and the brawny man picked up each hammock and threw them overboard, committing the bodies to the sea. Kalomba thought of Kapa falling through the air, her face twisted into a silent scream. She was at the bottom of the ocean now without the protection of a hammock or the white man's charms. *I have condemned her in this world as well as the next*, he realized with horror. Bile rose at the back of his throat, and he was almost sick.

"Kalomba, are you all right?" Chipangu asked worriedly. He had been so intent on watching the ritual, he did not notice her sneak up behind him.

He nodded, although he had to double over to make the world stop spinning. *I murdered Kapa twice.*

Chipangu looked at him sharply. "You are not all right. What is wrong?"

Kalomba just shook his head. He couldn't speak. He could barely breathe. The guilt was squeezing his chest like a vice, freezing the blood in his veins. It was so overwhelming in that moment, he thought he might die.

"Kapa needs that ritual," Nsonyi said firmly, not acknowledging Chipangu's presence or Kalomba's discomfort.

Chipangu stared at Nsonyi for a moment, processing his words. Then, she asked Kalomba, "Will it make you feel better if they say words for Kapa's spirit?"

Kalomba pressed a hand to his chest, trying to loosen the vice so he could breathe again. “Do you think their magic will still work without her body?”

Chipangu bit her lip hesitantly. She glanced at Eben Nichols, then back at Kalomba. He could tell she didn’t want to say what she really thought. In her world, magic and ghosts didn’t exist. Kapa was simply gone. And no words, whether spoken by a shaman wearing eighteen fetishes or a white sailor reading from a book, could help her now. “Yes,” she lied. “And I think it will help you-,” she looked at Nsonyi, “both of you to feel better.” Kalomba met Nsonyi’s gaze. The other man would never forgive him for the role he played in Kapa’s death. He could see that, but he also saw in Nsonyi’s eyes the iron resolve to help and honor Kapa in any way possible. Kalomba felt that determination mirrored in his own soul. *Yes, this is the right thing to do.* He straightened up, no longer sick.

Chipangu explained their situation and Kapa’s death to the Kru, who in turn called over Eben Nichols and the other man. They had been just about to leave for *Constellation* but agreed to stay when the Kru explained what it was the Lundans wanted. Eben Nichols climbed onto *Cora*’s railing and steadied himself with a hand on a shroud line, beginning once more to read from his book. He shouted the words as loudly as he could so that Kapa’s ghost may hear them too and know she is loved. Every time the man said, “Amen,” Kalomba repeated it fervently, believing it to be the most magical in Eben Nichols’ long, incomprehensible string of words. When he was finished, the man made a strange sign over the water and snapped his book shut. He jumped back onto the deck and asked the Kru if there was anything else the Lundans needed.

Kalomba looked at his companions. Nsonyi looked more relaxed than he had before. His shoulders were less tense, and the scowl was gone from his face. The familiar joking twinkle in his eye was also missing, but at least his immediate rage had subsided. And Chipangu, despite her assertion that words could have no effect, had started crying during the ceremony. Kalomba was not sure if that was because she secretly hoped magic was real or because the ritual reminded her of her frustrating inability to heal Kapa. Mbuyi was still below. Even though the recaptives were allowed to move freely around the ship now, he had chosen to

return to the hold as soon as it was cleaned out and the chains were removed. He hadn't spoken a word since Kapa died, and Chipangu was worried that the shock of losing his twin might have rendered him permanently mute. Kalomba wished Mbuyi had come up for Kapa's last rites, but he hadn't answered when Nsonyi shouted down for him. Chipangu said time might help; Kalomba sincerely hoped it would because it seemed there was nothing else they could do but wait. Kalomba was tired of waiting. His destiny had been out of his own hands for far too long.

"No," he told the Kruman, "we don't need anything else from you."

Down in the dark of the hold, Mbuyi simply existed. He was so numb, he could not even feel the curve of the wooden hull beneath him. One thought kept intruding upon his mind, *I am alone. I am utterly alone.* This unwelcome realization froze him down to his bones so that his skin felt cold and puckered like plucked bird-flesh and his fingers were ice. His heart ached so badly, he wanted to claw it from his chest. He couldn't hold himself together and keep thinking about Kapa, so eventually he chose to stop thinking altogether. He didn't see or hear or feel; he just breathed in and out, in and out. He thought he heard someone call his name, but he ignored it. He just kept breathing.

"Mbuyi," the disembodied voice repeated. Then, someone was shaking him.

"Mbuyi, stop moping," Kalomba commanded harshly.

Mbuyi slapped Kalomba's hand away. "Don't tell me what to do."

"Mbuyi," he hissed, "you dishonor your sister."

"I am not Mbuyi!" he shouted. "Mbuyi was a twin. I have no twin! Kapa...Kapa is dead." His voice cracked.

Kalomba replied after a moment, "But you are not."

Mbuyi turned away. "Yes, I am."

Kalomba slapped him. "No, Mbuyi, I won't let you. I won't let you dishonor her like this. Yes, Kapa is dead, but we still live. We are alive, Mbuyi. And it is time to start acting like it."

Mbuyi drew his knees to his chest. "What's the point?"

For the first time in several days, Kalomba smiled. “I don’t know. Maybe there isn’t one, but we are headed to a new land. Who knows what awaits us there? We have to at least try to take back our fates.”

Kalomba held out his hand to help Mbuyi to his feet. He was not leaving that hold without his friend. Mbuyi stared at his hand for a long moment, but Kalomba was determined. He did not withdraw his hand, and finally, after a painfully long interval, Mbuyi took Kalomba’s and got to his feet.

Kalomba grinned. It was a start, and that was what they needed, a new beginning. The word the sailors used whenever they pointed to the horizon was Liberia. *Liberia*. Kalomba rolled the word around on his tongue, trying to get used to it. *Liberia, what will you be like?*



## Chapter Twelve

**October 2nd, 1860-** St. Paul de Loando

*Constellation's* crew eagerly gathered around Pete Campbell on the quarterdeck to hear one of his grand adventure stories for the last time. Fairfax had assured Campbell he would be released along with Captain Rintz and the rest of the Spanish crew when *Constellation* reached St. Paul de Loando, which she had, that morning. Many of the crew were sad to see Campbell go, so they begged him for one more story. Not Eben, even though he did like Campbell's yarns; he couldn't wait to see the back of that man. There was something deeply unsettling about his smile. Everyone else though seemed to like him. The man had started out recounting his life's story to the ship's boys, but as the afternoons passed, his audience grew, and now he had even the officers hanging on his words.

"I may have been just a passenger on this cruise," he started, "but I am not a land-lubbing pollywog. I was second mate on a voyage that went as far as China. We made lots of stops between here and there, trading laudanum for spices and silks throughout the East. The bo'sun had a hell of a time keeping the men out of the laudanum stores."

Campbell shook his head at the short-sightedness of his former crew. "Everyone knows you should never sample your own product. In Bombay, we had a very good haul. I tell you, Indian cotton is like nothing back home. It's soft and light and smooth against your skin, not like that rough-spun you're wearing." He pointed at their uniforms.

Eben almost interrupted to explain they were wearing wool, not cotton, but Willie elbowed him in the side.

"The haul was so good, friends, the Captain gave us an advance and a whole week ashore to waste every penny of it. Oh, the wonders of the East. There are women in the streets wearing nothing but beads. There are fortune tellers on every corner that predict your death for you. I'm told I will die happy in bed with a woman in each arm."

Campbell winked.

“I paid that Cassandra the most. The incense stalls will make you see into the beyond, into the infinite. And the liquor is so spicy, it sets your soul aflame. After two days, friends, I was blind with pleasure. I’d had so many women, so many exotic spices, I couldn’t even remember my name. When I came to, sober, I was in the jungle. Laying on giant palm fronds with creepers crawling all over me.” He ran his hands over his body with a mock look of horror on his face, eliciting giggles from the younger members of the audience.

He held up a finger. “What had awoken me though was the feel of something rough against my forehead. When I opened my eyes, friends, standing over me was a Cathay cat!”

The crew gasped.

“Yes! An actual Cathay cat!” Campbell continued. “It was bigger than three men combined. Its whiskers were nearly a foot-long. And its stripes- I had never seen a more menacing creature in my life! Its lips were pulled back over its teeth, which were as thick as my hand!”

He held a hand next to his mouth for comparison.

“It was sniffing me over, inhaling all the spirits and women I’d had in the past three days. I tried to wriggle away slowly, but it put a giant paw on my chest and pinned me to the ground. Then, it started licking me all over with its huge tongue as rough as a holystone. I’ll admit, friends, I panicked a little. I thought for sure it was going to eat me, that it was just getting a small taste before devouring the meal. Imagine my surprise when it scooped its paw under me and threw me into the air. As I sailed up into the sky, I pictured the beast’s jaws snapping closed around me.” He clapped his hands to emphasize the snap.

One of the ship’s boys interrupted, “But obviously it didn’t eat you.”

Campbell raised his arms. “No, it tossed me back into the air! It was playing with me, bouncing me on its paw. Well, I had no way of knowing how long this game would last, so I decided to escape. There were several vines hanging just above us. I waited until the Cathay cat tossed me very high, and then, I grabbed one and held on for dear life. Now, I don’t know if anyone has ever told you, but Cathay cats can jump very, very high. I was a clear thirty feet off the ground, and that beast still nearly tore my leg off. Well, friends, I started climbing faster than I knew was possible. The monster started pacing below me, waiting for me to fall, but unfortunately for that cat, I’m a seaman.

“When my vine started to run out, I reached for another, only to have its head rear back and try to bite my hand. It was a giant venomous snake disguised as a vine! I threw it at the cat, hoping to distract both. As hoped, the two started fighting.”

Campbell shuddered theatrically.

“Never have I heard a battle so fierce. There was so much hissing and growling and whimpering. The snake bit the cat, but the cat crushed its skull and ripped it to pieces.

“Now, I was swinging from vine to vine, trying to avoid the hidden snakes. The cat was limping along behind me, bleeding badly from one of its shoulders. I reached a tree and scaled it. I needed to locate the city. Thankfully, I saw the smoke from the coal ships nearby. I hadn’t wandered too far. I yelled down to the cat, ‘Don’t try and follow me. I’m off to the city where they’ll surely kill you.’

“It seemed to understand because it ceased pacing and sat back on its haunches, nursing its snakebite. I didn’t trust the cat though, so I kept on swinging through the trees like some sort of ape-man until I reached Bombay. I found out I had been in the jungle for three days and only had one day left to get staggeringly drunk.”

Campbell grinned.

“I tell you, friends, they had to send a search party for me, and when I came back, I wouldn’t stop singing, ‘God, Save the Queen.’”

One of the midshipmen looked confused. “But I thought you were American.”

Campbell winked. “I didn’t say I knew the words. Well, friends, I’m afraid that is it for the story. I must be off now. Let my shore leave begin anew.”

Fairfax, who had been listening along with the crew, sneered. “Why such a hurry, Mr. Campbell? Did no one tell you? We are not releasing you or your shipmates until tomorrow.”

Campbell’s eyes hardened but the smile remained plastered on his face. “Ah, well, what is one more night?”

“Indeed.” Fairfax crossed his arms behind his back and walked away.

“Ahoy!” someone shouted from the pier.

Eben was standing by the railing, and he leaned over to see who was hailing.

“Is that the commander of the *Mystic*?” Eben whispered to Willie.

“Aye, it’s been awhile since we’ve seen him.”

*USS Mystic*’s commander marched up the gangway where Lieutenant Fairfax greeted him.

“Lieutenant Commander Roy, well met.” He saluted.

The Commander was a slender man with a very young face. He returned the salute with a smile.

“Lieutenant, I heard that *Constellation* was lucky enough to take a prize.”

“I like to think that luck had very little to do with it.”

Roy’s smile widened, “Oho! So it is true, then. You took a prize.”

“Yes, *Cora of New York*.”

Roy’s eyebrows lifted in surprise. “The *Cora*? Why we boarded her just a few weeks ago, but she had no slaves aboard.”

“Well, she was chock full of darkies when we took her. Sergeant Keenan!” Fairfax shouted at the closest marine.

“Yes, sir?”

“Go below and fetch *Cora*’s crew.”

The marine ran to obey, and Roy continued to look surprised.

“You still have them on board?”

“Most of them are Spanish,” Fairfax answered, “so we have to release them.”

Roy nodded. The United States did not have a treaty with Spain as it did with Great Britain. As such, the African Squadron was not allowed to interfere with any slave trade operating under the Spanish colors. The Spanish crew, no matter their sins, were free to go.

The Spaniards blinked in the bright African sun as they stretched their limbs. They were not shackled because in the eyes of the law, they were not criminals. But Fairfax still kept them confined below.

“Que esta pasando?” they started asking each other. They looked to their captain, Loretto Rintz who was hiding at the back of the group.

Fairfax gestured to Rintz. "Lieutenant Commander, may I introduce-."

"John Latham!" Roy stepped off the gangway onto the deck.

Fairfax scowled in confusion. "What? No, this is Captain Rintz."

Roy started laughing.

Fairfax's scowl deepened. "What is so humorous?"

Roy parted the Spaniards so he could stand right in front of the captain. "John Latham, not so well met this time. Although, I supposed I should congratulate you on the loyalty of your crew. They did not maroon you. Yet."

Latham frowned. "Yo no comprendo."

"Claro." Roy chuckled. "Your accent, Mr. Latham, really has improved."

Fairfax's shoulders tensed. "What are you going on about, Lieutenant Commander?"

Roy spread his arms theatrically. "Ladies and gentleman, I give you John Latham, the formerly marooned pirate captain of the Yacht *Wanderer*, the true captain of *Cora*, and-." Roy lifted a finger. "an American."

"Seize him!" Fairfax shouted.

Latham bolted. He made for the nearest railing, trying to jump overboard. Eben, still standing by the railing, caught him at the very last second by the back of his collar and threw him to the deck.

Latham grunted as he landed heavily on his shoulder. "Estan ustedes equivocados!"

Several of the Spaniards started yelling. "Si, si! Es verdad! Se llama Lorretto Rintz! Loretto Rintz!"

Roy stood over Latham, gloating. "Seems they are loyal to the last. How quaint."

"Sergeant Keenan," Fairfax ordered, "put Mr. Latham in irons and lock him in the brig."

The marine pulled Latham to his feet.

Latham began to protest. "Me llamo Loretto Rintz. No conozco John Latham."

Keenan twisted Latham's arm sharply behind his back. "Ah, speak English, will ya?"

Latham switched to a broken accent. Eben thought it sounded forced, like when Willie tried to recite Shakespeare in cockney.

“I am not John Latham. My name-Loretto Rintz. I am de Espana.”

Roy pinched the bridge of his nose. “I tire of this drivel. Take him below.”

Keenan forced Latham through the nearest hatch.

“You will see,” Latham shouted from below. “when we reach Los Estados Unidos, I am not John Latham.”

Eben glanced at Campbell, who was still seated on the hatch. For once, he was not smiling. His expression was hard and bitter, but when he saw Eben watching him, he immediately brightened and winked. *A confidence man, all right*, Eben reflected.

Commodore Inman emerged from the aft hatch with Captain Nicholas just behind him. “Lieutenant Commander Roy, Lieutenant Fairfax did not inform us that you were aboard.”

Roy snapped to attention and saluted. “Sir, I came to see if the news of your prize was true. It seems it is.”

Inman shook his head in disbelief. “News travels faster than fleas on this coast. Yes, we captured a fine prize less than a week ago.”

Fairfax cleared his throat. “A finer prize than we first thought, Sir. The Lieutenant Commander informs me that we have caught the pirate captain of the *Wanderer*.”

The Commodore raised his eyebrows.

Roy explained, “Loretto Rintz is the alias of John Latham, whom I have had the misfortune of meeting before. He is an American, sir, and fully within our jurisdiction.”

The Commodore smiled. “Excellent.”

The Captain declared that good news like that deserved a toast, and the officers retired to the Captain’s cabin for some refreshment, leaving the crew free to return to their work and the Spaniards to wander around in the fresh air until one of the marines chased them back below. Eben couldn’t believe what Roy had said. They had caught the captain of *Wanderer*. He had read about her in a newspaper months ago.

Apparently, the captain hadn't told his crew what they were actually trading, and they were absolutely distraught when they discovered the ship was a slaver. The first mate aboard the yacht was a righteous man who believed in upholding the law, so he led a mutiny and marooned their captain before returning *Wanderer* to port. Now that Eben had seen Latham with his own eyes, he lent the story more credibility. Latham did not seem particularly forceful or inspiring. In fact, Eben wondered how he had enkindled such loyalty in the Spaniards on *Cora*. Eben imagined it would be easy to mutiny against such a lackluster man.

For the next few hours, the true identity of Loretto Rintz was all the crew talked discussed, none of them really believing who they had caught. Down in the brig, Latham had no idea his name was being whispered in such shocked tones. It might have cheered him if he had.

The next day, Latham was still locked in his cage, watching two beads of water race down the wooden wall of his cell. He had bet on the left trickle reaching the deck first, so of course, the right droplet won. Latham sat back on his haunches and glanced up at the overhead. There were three new beads forming. He quietly waited for the water to start dripping. This time, he picked the middle stream, and to his surprise, it won. He grinned. *Small victories can lead to larger ones.* Latham sighed and kicked the iron bars in front of him. Who was he kidding? He had lost the battle and the war. Now he was chained up in the hold of a ship with only a future of manacles in front of him. Latham slid a finger under the shackle on his left wrist. *Why do they have to be so tight?* He rubbed his finger back and forth, trying to lessen the pain. *Less than a day and they already chafe,* he groaned to himself. He felt a tender spot forming under the shackle on the inside of his wrist. *Ah, it's a blister. I am not going to last long in the career of prisoner.*

Latham leaned his head back against the damp wall behind him and closed his eyes. Bits of old prayers flashed across his mind. He used to know them, but his mother's words had conveniently slipped from his mind when he abandoned God. *Or did God abandon me?*

"Lead me not into temptation, and deliver me from evil," Latham muttered darkly. *If her god ever existed, he was a terrible god.*

“You never struck me as particularly religious, Mr. Rintz-or would you prefer me to call you Latham once again?”

The former captain glanced up. He was surprised to see a lamp in the distance where there had been near-total darkness before. He was glad of the light. Latham had grown tired of looking at his cell. *Apparently, only a few hours are required to totally memorize a fifteen square foot room with no furniture.* Still, he ground his teeth for he recognized his visitor’s voice. *The devil pays his respects in the familiar guise of Pete Campbell.*

“Not so well met,” Campbell greeted as he held his lantern close to the brig’s bars, doubling the light of the other lantern hanging a few feet away, just out of Latham’s reach.

Latham rattled his chains. “You are just in time. I was preparing my soul for a second deal with the devil.”

Campbell twisted the end of his mustache. “Come now, surely you are not implying I am the Evil One.”

Latham gave him a hard look. “You buy and sell souls for a living. What else should I call you?”

Campbell chortled. “You have a point, although that makes you a devil as well.”

Latham shrugged. “I never denied it.”

Campbell laughed again. “So then, what is this deal between devilish cohorts?”

Latham did not speak. He kept his features still and icy, and waited until he was absolutely sure Campbell realized that he was deadly serious. “You will get me out.”

Campbell smirked, “That is a demand, not an agreement.”

Latham raised his eyebrows. “It is neither. This is blackmail.”

Campbell’s face darkened. “Do not threaten me.”

Latham chuckled. “I do not deal with demons lightly, and I do not make empty threats.”

Campbell narrowed his eyes. “You are referring to the information you had Wilson collect. I told you Fredericks knew as little as you-” Latham grinned so wolfishly, Campbell stopped talking.



“Wilson did not just follow your foolish man. He also followed Newmann and Griffith.” Latham folded his hands in his lap and leaned his head back haughtily. “I now know your entire business network, Campbell.”

“You are bluffing,” Campbell said with certainty. Latham smiled to himself, *I’m sure I heard a note of fear in there.*

Latham maintained his cocky composure. “If you are waiting for me to reveal my hand, you will wait in vain. My lips are sealed until my conviction. Then, and only then, will I begin to sing.”

Campbell’s face had become a chiseled mask. There was no smile dancing around his lips or humor twinkling in his eyes. “I do not believe you.”

“What you believe is irrelevant. A simple game of probabilities reveals that you have everything to lose and nothing to gain. Therefore, you will get me out of here.”

“I could just kill you,” Campbell hissed.

“And risk raising more questions than you silence?” Latham sneered. “I doubt that.”

“Men die at sea every day,” Campbell pronounced coldly.

Latham tried to control the shivers running down his spine. He recognized a serious threat when he heard one, and Campbell certainly had wide influence.

But he forced himself to smile anyway. “Now who’s bluffing? I will be safe on a Relief Ship by tomorrow.”

Although his face showed no shock, Campbell said, “I am surprised you know that already.”

“Aye, a marine informed me earlier. Speaking of which, where are my delightful guards?”

“They stepped out for a moment to enjoy an unexpected allotment of grog.”

“Marines are thick.” *But even they would notice a corpse. No, Campbell will not risk killing me here.* Latham’s heart rolled over. *If I’m so certain of that, why is my heart threatening to jump out of my chest?*

“How much does Wilson know?” Campbell asked quietly.

Latham shrugged as he wiped his palms dry on his pants. “He was merely my eyes. Without the mind, the eyes know nothing. And in this instance, the mind is not sharing his advantage.”

Campbell twisted the end of his mustache. He did not laugh. Finally, he said, “Arrangements will be made.” Then, he turned on his heel and left, taking the lantern light with him.

Latham blinked in the sudden darkness. He wasn’t sure if he had actually won. *Arrangements?* What did that mean? Was Campbell going to kill him or rescue him? *To what exactly did we agree?* Latham replayed the debate with Campbell in his mind’s eye. He could draw no new conclusions. He had said his bit, and Campbell may have accepted it as rational. Or maybe not. Latham chuckled. *He is definitely a worthwhile adversary. I won’t be able to sleep with both eyes closed ever again.* Latham really had no idea if Campbell intended to free him or put him in the ground. There was no way to tell when Campbell’s ax would fall. Or whose neck it would strike.

## Chapter Thirteen

**December 12th, 1860-** New York, New York

The carriage rocked violently as it ran over a pothole, causing Latham to strike his head against the carriage's wall. The United States marshal sitting across from him smirked. *The buffoon finds me humorous, does he?* Latham glared at the world through the open chink in the curtain. Most of society was continuing to mind its own business, but every few feet, there was someone waving a picket with a sketch on it of a shackled Negro kneeling above the words, "Am I not a brother?"

Latham looked down at the black iron manacles scraping his deeply tanned skin. *I suppose I could be mistaken for your brother*, he mused to the drawing. He scowled. *But I would never admit that aloud*. He watched the marshal guarding him. The lawman, more like a law-boy, was clean-shaven with a thick cloud of freckles across his face. He was looking out the window too. There was a deep frown crinkling the corners of his mouth.

"Nigger-lovers," he muttered under his breath. Latham thought he detected a slight Irish brogue. *Fresh off the boat or first generation?* It was hard to tell in those days, and Latham had spent too much time on the high seas to distinguish the subtle differences between American accents anymore.

The marshal looked at his prisoner and caught him staring. "Oy, what you lookin' at?"

*A flea-ridden paddy*. Latham kept his mouth shut and looked back out the window.

The other man suddenly grabbed Latham by the collar and pulled the prisoner's face close to his own. "What are you, a mute?" Latham had always been a man of few words, especially now that every word could be used against him in a court of law. He could not remember ever haven spoken to this particular guard before. Now their noses were close enough to touch, and Latham was counting his freckles.

"No, sir."

The marshal thrust Latham back into his seat slamming his head against the carriage. Stars burst across his vision. It took several seconds for Latham to blink the spots away. When his vision finally cleared, he saw that his guard had returned to staring out the window. Latham decided to follow suit.

The abolitionists were growing in number as the carriage approached the court house. Latham sighed. This wasn't even a real trial. It was a hearing to see if there was enough evidence to try him. He had to go through due process twice in front of men he did not consider his peers. And to make it all worse, he was now besieged by pandering moralists demanding a gallows jig, even though the United States had never hanged a man for slaving. Latham supposed he could always be the first. He sighed again. Jail was looking more and more appealing.

The carriage came to a halt, so the marshal grabbed Latham by the scruff of his collar and forced him out into the populace. A rotting head of cabbage pelted him before he took two steps. Latham gasped. The woman had been waiting all morning to throw it and now she wore a wicked grin. She was lily-white, *not a drop of moke blood in her*, and she was getting ready to throw a turkey's leg bone.

Latham spat at her. "Punta!"

"Dog!" She screamed back as she launched the bone with all her might.

Latham ducked, and his marshal shoved him through the courthouse's doors. Either all the courtrooms in the place were identical or Latham had somehow ended up back in the same one where *Cora* had been summarily tried in May. There was the same long mahogany table at the front of the room although there was no judge behind it yet. The jury box to the right was full, unlike last time, with twelve middle-aged men who all looked damp and smelled worse. A man in the back corner of the box blew his nose loudly in a dirty handkerchief. *Animals, I'm to be tried by animals*. Latham looked to his right and saw someone he recognized. He could never forget that wart. District Attorney Roosevelt seemed eager for round two, so eager, the dour man was almost smiling. His assistant looked outright gleeful. If Latham hadn't been wearing chains, he would have knocked the self-righteous smirk right off the arrogant son of a gun's face. *Calm down, Johnnie*, he told himself. *Be glad somebody wants to see you*.

Latham looked around the rest of the courtroom. Most of the public had been barred from entering, but there were a few newspaper reporters sitting in the front row, hurriedly jotting things down in notebooks. Latham watched as they scribbled. None of them seemed the type to jump the gate and stab him. And there was no one hiding in the curtains either. If Campbell was going to kill him, he was running out of time.

Latham sat in a rickety chair beside his lawyer Mr. Donahue, who had been hired by a mysterious benefactor, which meant Latham always watched his hands, straining to spot any concealed letter openers.

The man seemed clean-cut, if a little desperate. His shirt was always missing a button, and the elbows of his coat were patched, although tastefully so. It seemed he could afford a third-rate tailor but not a new suit. Latham imagined that was where Campbell entered the picture.

Donahue leaned closer to Latham and breathed a cloud of stale whiskey into his face. “How’re they treating you?”

Latham shrugged. “Fine.”

Donahue smiled. “Don’t get too comfortable. You’ll be out tonight.”

“Is that so?” Latham asked flatly.

“Yeeees.” Donahue drew out the vowel as if he were gloating. “Mr. Roosevelt, over there,” Donahue raised his eyebrows in the district attorney’s direction, “pronounced on the record that he regrets having to try anti-slaving cases. He considers you no more a pirate than President Buchanan.”

Latham resisted rolling his eyes. The man was still sitting across the aisle waiting to prosecute him, wasn’t he? *Damned abolitionists*. The mob wanted to see some persecution, so of course, Roosevelt was going to humor them. He didn’t have to agree with them to do that much.

Latham shifted in his chair. When Campbell abandoned him in *Constellation’s* brig all those months ago, he had declared two options as viable. *Arrangements would be made*. Latham stared at Roosevelt from the corner of his eye. His face was severe and leathery, as if he had been concentrating so hard on frowning he didn’t notice when someone stole his face, cured it, tanned it, and plastered it back on his skull. Was that the face of someone who would take a bribe? *Maybe he’ll throw the case*. The assistant district attorney grinned at him like cat about to swallow a mouse. *No, I’m not that lucky*. Latham rubbed the top of his head and sighed. The prison had shorn his hair so short, his skull felt fuzzy and he couldn’t stop fluffing it. He could also feel the bumps and ropey scars laid bare on his crown. He ran his fingers across them. *So many head injuries. How have I lived this long?* He glanced at Donahue beside him. The attorney’s face was ruddy and bloated; the pink skin on his forearms was lined with spider veins.

*Because sailors are made of sterner stuff*, Latham concluded.

Suddenly, one of the marshals shouted, "All rise for honorable Commissioner Morrell."

Latham gingerly got to his feet, clinking his shackles. His muscles groaned with the effort. *Prison is really not good for me.*

A thin man in judge's robes entered the room and seated himself behind the table. He had a long, curly beard that partially obscured a prematurely lined face. His voice was thin and reedy. He waved a hand.

"Everyone, please sit." The cacophony of squeaking chairs filled the room. When the room finally fell silent, Commissioner Morrell greeted the prosecutors, "Mr. Roosevelt, Mr. Henry, it is very nice to see you today." He turned to the other side of the room. "And Mr. Donahue, it heartens me to see you found your way to the courthouse."

Latham dropped his head in his hand. *Dear God, if you exist, I'm praying to you right now.*

"We will now hear opening statements," Morrell whined, "Mr. Roosevelt."

Roosevelt jumped to his feet without dislodging his scowl. "Your honor, the evidence in an anti-slaving trial has rarely been so complete, so perfect, as in this trial. My colleague Mr. Henry and I will prove that *Cora of New York* was illegally used as a slaving ship on the coast of West Africa and that John Latham, that man," Roosevelt jabbed a finger at Latham, "is the legal owner and captain of the said vessel."

Latham said forcefully, "No soy Juan Latham. Soy Lorretto Rintz!"

Morrell slammed his gavel. "Mr. Donahue, restrain your client. If he speaks out of turn again, I will hold him in contempt."

Mr. Donahue gave Latham a thumbs-up under the table. "I apologize, your honor. Mr. Rintz's English is not very good."

"Mr. Latham," Roosevelt interrupted.

"I am sorry. Were you finished with your statement?" Donahue answered flippantly.

Roosevelt cleared his throat. "We will prove that Mr. *Latham* is a pirate. That is all, your honor."

Morrell nodded and waved Donahue forward. Latham's lawyer seemed almost fairylike when compared to Roosevelt's austerity. *Oh, God.* Donahue was practically prancing before the commissioner.

“Your honor, I will prove that this is all a case of mistaken identity. My client is not the John Latham the District Attorney’s Office claims he is. He is Mr. Lorretto Rintz, a citizen of the kingdom of Spain.”

Across the aisle, Mr. Henry rolled his eyes. “And as such, he is exempt from our anti-slaving laws.”

Henry burst out, “Oh, please!”

Roosevelt put a hand on his arm, silencing the young man. “Forgive my assistant’s outburst, your honor.”

Morrell nodded. “Do you have anything to add, Mr. Donahue?”

“No, your honor.”

“Very well, Mr. Roosevelt, call your first witness.”

Thomas Eastman glared at Latham as he took the stand. He looked older than the last time Latham had seen him. There was now grey sprouting at his temples and a deep wrinkle in the center of his forehead. Latham wasn’t sure how a man could age so quickly, but he did know Morgan Fredericks had escaped Eastman’s custody a few weeks earlier. When the man’s superiors discovered what had happened, he received the reprimand of his life. Eastman couldn’t sit for weeks, he’d been chewed out so hard. Now he was perched on the stand, glaring at the man he considered the source of most of his misery.

“Good day, Commander Eastman,” Roosevelt said as he paced in front of the stand.

“Good day,” Eastman answered evenly.

“You are Thomas Eastman, sailing master of the United States Navy’s sloop of war *Constellation*, yes?”

“I was. I have been released from my duties for the duration of this trial.”

Roosevelt nodded. “Ah, yes, I understand. You led the prize crew that sailed the barque *Cora* back to this port, correct?”

Eastman nodded. “That is correct.”

“You were serving on *USS Constellation* when *Cora* was captured?”

“Yes, that was the first time I met John Latham, although he called himself Lorretto Rintz.”

“Lorretto Rintz?”

“Yes, that was the name he gave when we captured him. He claimed to be Spanish.”

Roosevelt drew his eyebrows together. “Claimed? Did you believe him?”

Latham bit the inside of his cheek. He was aware his skill as a thespian was limited, but he had convinced at least some of *Constellation’s* crew for a time. And Eastman hadn’t even been there when Lieutenant Commander Roy blew his cover.

Eastman shook his head. “No, I always found his accent to be a bit-forced.”

Latham thought he saw the corner of Roosevelt’s mouth twitch. “And were you sure he was the captain?”

Eastman folded his hands in front of him. “Yes, he never disputed the fact that he was el capitán. He just misrepresented himself as Spanish.”

Donahue leapt to his feet, nearly knocking over his chair. “Objection! Your honor, Commander Eastman is speculating. The court has not yet decided my client’s identity.”

“Sustained,” Morrell intoned. “Commander Eastman, please keep your testimony strictly factual.”

Eastman’s hand twitched. Latham smiled. *He almost saluted.* The sailor nodded and swallowed loudly. *He doesn’t like being the center of attention.*

Roosevelt held up a piece of paper in front of the court and then handed it to Eastman. “What is this document, Commander Eastman?”

“This?” Eastman quickly scanned the document. “This is *Cora’s* shipping manifest.”

Beside Latham, Donahue sat up a little straighter. He was frowning. Latham was frowning; he was confused. His real name was on that manifest, not “Lorretto Rintz.”

“Could you read the name of the captain as listed there?”

Eastman glanced through the manifest again. “John Latham,” he read aloud.

“So the captain listed on the manifest is John Latham, and the man over there,” Roosevelt pointed at Latham again, “claimed to be, in your words, el capitán of the *Cora*. Is that correct, Commander Eastman?”

“Yes.”



Roosevelt turned to the jury and spread his arms dramatically. “Then, I must conclude, gentlemen, that the defendant who claimed to be *Cora’s* captain upon the vessel’s capture is in fact John Latham, since John Latham is the captain of *Cora* as listed on the manifest.”

Latham almost whistled. The district attorney’s reasoning was impeccable and a complete reversal of what Latham had been expecting. He looked at the jury, trying to gauge their reactions. They seemed confused. One man in the front of the box actually scratched his head.

Commissioner Morrell cleared his throat. “Did the members of the jury follow Mr. Roosevelt’s circuitous logic?”

The foreman stood up. “Yes, your honor?” The foreman sounded unsure, but the commissioner continued anyway.

“Well, all right.” Morrell gestured to Donahue. “Would you like to cross examine?”

Donahue stood and fingered the buttons on his jacket. “Yes, your honor, I would. Master Eastman, you were the commanding officer of the prize crew placed aboard *Cora*, yes?”

“Yes.” Eastman blinked. *Poor sap doesn’t know how often he’s going to have to repeat himself.*

“Could you please explain to the jury how the Navy’s African Squadron operates?”

Eastman coughed a little. “Uh, we are a small outfit that patrols up and down the West African coast, monitoring for American pirates, and occasionally British ones too. Uh, well, if we discover evidence onboard a ship that condemns it as a slaver, we arrest the crew, and they along with their vessel are placed under the supervision of a prize crew.” Eastman paused to see if he had said enough. Donahue motioned for him to continue. “The prize crew then sails the ship to Monrovia-uh- in Liberia-er-Africa. The slaves are released to the American Colonization Society who resettles the Africans.”

Donahue held up a finger. “Sir, allow me to interrupt here. What happens to the crew of the slaver at this juncture?”

Latham bit the cuticle on his right index finger. He understood where Donahue was leading with this line of questioning, but he doubted it would be enough to discredit Eastman.

“The slavers,” Eastman explained, “stay aboard their vessel under the supervision of the prize crew. We then sail the ship back to the United States, where we turn the slavers over to the US Marshals’ Office for trial.”

“Oh, so Mr. Rintz sailed with you then,” Donahue asserted.

Eastman shifted uneasily. “Well, no, Mr. Latham was not with me.”

“Where was Mr. Rintz?”

Latham grinned. He could see Mr. Roosevelt grinding his teeth each time Donahue said “Mr. Rintz,” and to Latham’s great satisfaction, the smirk on Mr. Henry’s face had curdled. *Mr. Henry is easily shaken.* Latham chuckled.

Eastman continued with his testimony. “Mr. Latham was placed on a relief ship returning to the United States after *Cora* had already sailed.”

Donahue nodded. “Why?”

Eastman hesitated.

“Commander?” pressed Donahue.

“Uh, Mr. Latham was not aboard *Cora* because he was mistaken for part of the Spanish crew who were to remain aboard *Constellation* until they were released somewhere along the coast.”

“Mistaken? How do you know Mr. Rintz is not Spanish?” Donahue asked with a poisonous voice.

“I’m told Lieutenant Commander Roy of *USS Mystic* recognized Mr. Latham as a United States citizen he had encountered before,” Eastman answered, trying to keep his voice even.

“Told? So you were not present when Lieutenant Commander Roy identified my client as John Latham?”

Eastman blushed. “No. I was already sailing for Monrovia.”

“Have you ever encountered the man known as John Latham before?”

“Before when?” Eastman countered angrily. “Before today in this courtroom?”

“Your honor!” Donahue appealed. Latham was beside himself. He wasn’t sure Donahue’s line of questioning could discredit Eastman, but he hadn’t taken into account the sailing master’s own anger and how easily riled he was.

Morrell waved a hand at Donahue’s objection. “Yes, yes. Commander Eastman, please answer the question posed and only that question.”

Eastman growled raising one of Morrell’s eyebrows. He hissed through his teeth, “Could you repeat the question?”

“How can you identify John Latham if you have never met John Latham?”

“I trust Commander Roy’s word.”

Donahue waved his hands in concern. “Oh, no, no, you misunderstand, Commander. I would never presume to accuse a naval officer of lying. But even the most admirable of us can make mistakes.”

Eastman’s hand shook as he pointed towards Latham. “That is John Latham. Right. There.”

Donahue put his hands in his pockets. “But how can you know that for sure, Master Eastman? When you left *Constellation*, your superiors still believed, and I assert believed correctly, that my defendant was a Spanish captain named Lorretto Rintz.”

Eastman jumped to his feet. “That is a lie!”

Commissioner Morrell intervened. “Restrain yourself, Commander! Do you have any more questions, Mr. Donahue?”

“No, your honor, I have finished.” Donahue unbuttoned his jacket and sat back down next to his client, who was positively beaming.

“Very well. You may step down Commander Eastman.”

Eastman saluted stiffly before leaving the witness stand and marching out of the courtroom with a look of total disgust on his face. Latham couldn’t help but internally gloat. *Git.*

“All right, Mr. Roosevelt, call your next witness.”

Donahue whispered under his breath, “And now things get interesting.” Latham leaned forward in his seat in total suspense.

Mr. Roosevelt stood. "Your honor, we call Michael Hoffman to the stand." A man in his thirties with a small mustache and round glasses stood up and walked towards the front of the room. He was quickly sworn in. He seemed very confident although Latham noticed his right pinky twitched every few seconds.

"Mr. Hoffman," Roosevelt began, "you are a Deputy Collector of the port of New York, are you not?"

"I am."

"Very good." Roosevelt hazarded a smile. He seemed out of practice as he mangled the smile into a grimace. Roosevelt handed the document he had given Eastman to Hoffman. "Now, just to confirm Master Eastman's impeccable eyesight, please read the name listed next to captain-slash-master."

"John Latham." Hoffman spoke clearly and calmly. Latham sucked on a fingernail, his gaze sliding to Donahue. *What's up his sleeve?* he wondered.

"And to whom does that signature at the bottom of the manifest belong?" asked Roosevelt.

"Well, there appear to be two. I can't read one, but the other is definitely mine, Michael Hoffman."

"You acknowledge that it is your signature?"

Hoffman nodded.

"Please vocalize your responses for the record," Roosevelt instructed.

Hoffman nodded again. "Y-yes, of course. I apologize. Yes, that is my signature."

"Which means you swore Mr. Latham in as master of *Cora* and signed as a witness, yes?"

Hoffman shrugged. "Well, yes, I suppose so. If my signature is on the manifest, I must have taken Mr. Latham's oath."

Latham was beginning to remember Hoffman. He had a taller colleague who also served as a witness to Latham's false oath to uphold the laws of the United States. *No doubt the prosecution will call him next. What was his name?* Latham could see out of the corner of his eye that Mr. Henry had recovered his gloating expression. *This witness must remember me*, thought Latham, *which means I'm done for*. Latham felt his heart roll over ominously.

Roosevelt licked his lips, reveling in the taste of his next question. “And do you see John Latham in court here today?”

“Well, no.”

There was a collective gasp from the newspaper reporters and the jurymen. Even Latham squeaked a little, although he passed it off as a hiccup. All the while, Latham could feel Donahue silently and invisibly smiling behind his poker faces. *Well, well*, Latham thought as he leaned back comfortably in his chair, *arrangements have been made*.

Roosevelt’s eyes were wide as supper plates. “Excuse me, sir? Are you saying the defendant is not John Latham?”

Hoffman peered at Latham for a long silent minute. “Well,” he said at last, drawing the word out for what felt like an eternity. “I cannot say definitively that that is or is not Mr. John Latham. This oath was signed on May 19th, seven months ago. I sign hundreds of these a day, Mr. Roosevelt. And no offense to you-Mr. Rintz is it?-but you are a very plain looking man. Even if I did witness an oath for you, I doubt very much that I would remember it the next day.”

Roosevelt’s upper lip began to curl. “So that is not John Latham!?”

Hoffman shrugged innocently. “It could be, but I do not know. For all I remember, the defendant could be Mr. Lorretto Rintz.”

Roosevelt’s scowl became so intense, Latham began to fear for Hoffman’s safety. *If looks could kill*. He chuckled. If Campbell had paid off all the witnesses this well, Donahue wouldn’t have to utter even a word.

Morrell cleared his throat, interrupting the gnashing of Roosevelt’s teeth. “Mr. Roosevelt, do you have any more questions?”

Mr. Roosevelt growled, “No, your honor.”

“And you, Mr. Donahue? Any questions?”

Donahue swaggered out from behind his seat. “Only one, your honor: Mr. Hoffman, do you even recognize the oath in your hand?”

Hoffman glanced down at the paper. "Not particularly. It's a standard oath. They all look the same. This one does bare my signature though, so I must assume that I have seen it before."

Donahue nodded knowingly. "I have no further questions, your honor."

He sat back down triumphantly. Latham, on the other hand, was ready to jump up and do a jig, even if it meant being held in contempt. He most definitely believed a few more days in jail were worth the chance to pull a horrid face at that noxious Mr. Henry.

Mr. Roosevelt called Samuel Browne, a tall nervous man with thinning hair to the stand. Latham recognized him as Mr. Hoffman's associate, the other witness to the oath. He kept tucking a stray lock of the little hair he had left behind his ear. The man was clearly having second thoughts about perjuring himself, but he still gave an almost identical testimony to that of his colleague.

"I-I apologize, but I'm handed these fifty at a time. I just sign them."

"You sign these oaths without actually hearing them spoken?" The righteous outrage in Roosevelt's voice was awe-inspiring.

Browne shook his head. "No, of course we hear them spoken. But sometimes we take hundreds of oaths a day. It's impossible to remember which face goes with which signature."

Roosevelt's scowl relaxed a fraction. "But you have seen Mr. Latham before?"

Browne stared at Latham for a very long moment. Latham found himself holding his breath. The man staring at him didn't blink. A bead of sweat rolled down the back of Latham's neck. Browne looked like he was deciding something. The realization that his fate rested upon this man's acting ability made Latham's skin crawl.

Finally, Browne blinked and scratched his lip. "Maybe. I really can't say. I mean, it is possible that that is John Latham." He gestured vaguely in Latham's direction. "But I really have no recollection of what the man who signed that oath looked like."

Mr. Roosevelt tried one more time. Grinding his teeth, he called Sidney Ingraham to the stand. Now this man, Latham remembered. He had coal black hair, obviously dyed, and a gold tooth set far back in his jaw that glittered when he opened his mouth wide, which of course he had the bad habit of doing. Latham

remembered the strong smell of sardines. He thought he could smell it wafting off Inghraham even now, but maybe that was just his imagination.

This time Mr. Henry took a turn examining the witness. Latham noticed that his bold swagger was a little forced. "Mr. Ingraham, you are a register clerk at the Manhattan Custom-house, are you not?"

The gold tooth flashed. "I am."

Henry passed Ingraham a document. "And can you identify this document?"

Ingraham read the form, twice. "It appears to be a register bond for a ship named *Cora*. That I signed."

Henry smiled pleasantly, although Latham was pretty sure the sentiment was fake. "And do you recall signing it?"

"Uh, vaguely," Ingraham answered, convincingly. "I believe it was the bond for a ship accused of slaving. Right?"

"Yes," Henry answered with a smirk, "although I am supposed to be the one asking the questions, Mr. Ingraham."

Mr. Ingraham's smile was so charming it almost fooled even Latham. "Of course, my apologies."

Henry chuckled at Morrell, *trying to establish camaraderie with the Commissioner. Little late, sonny.* Henry chuckled at Ingraham, too. "That's quite all right, Mr. Ingraham. Do you remember who collected the bond from the custom house?"

Ingraham glanced over the bond again. "Well, it says a Mr. John Latham collected it."

Mr. Henry spread his hands. "Why, yes. And do you see that man here in this room today?"

Ingraham was the only witness not to look at Latham. In fact, he was trying very hard to avoid looking at the defendant. "Uh, to be honest, I have no memory of John Latham. I remember the ship. A nice little three-masted barque. But I have no recollection of her owner."

Mr. Henry frowned unhappily. "Really? Are you absolutely sure of that?"

Ingraham looked down at his hands. "Yes."

The frustration was plain in Henry's eyes, and he couldn't keep the snark out of his voice when he asked, "You do know that perjury is a felony, don't you?"

Donahue leapt to his feet, knocking the table back an inch. "Objection, your honor! Argumentative."

Morrell slammed his gavel. "Sustained. Any more questions, Mr. Henry?"

"Just one, your honor." Henry held up another piece of paper. "Mr. Ingraham, do you recognize this?" Henry handed him the new evidence, relieving him of the earlier bond in the process.

Ingraham nodded after glancing over the document. "Yes, yes, this is a writ of sale, another piece of business that the Manhattan Custom House handles."

Mr. Henry nodded. "Very good. And can you read for the court what was for sale and by whom?"

"Uh, the vessel known as *Cora* by E.D. Morgan and Company."

"E.D. Morgan, as in Governor Morgan?"

"Ah, yes, I believe so."

"And who is the writ made out to and what did he pay?"

"Mr. John Latham and he paid \$14000."

"Do you know how much the ship was bonded for?"

"Not off the top of my head, no, but you do have it written on that piece of paper in your hand."

Mr. Henry acted totally surprised to find the bond back in his possession. "Why yes, I do. Let's see. According to this bond, the ship and her cargo was worth \$22, 128. 23. Now according to an outside appraiser, hired by this office, the ship was actually worth more than that, somewhere in the neighborhood of \$40,000. So Mr. Ingraham, would you agree with the statement that Mr. Latham, whoever he is or is not, bought the ship at a cut-rate price, effectively cheating Edward Morgan, a vocal abolitionist and the governor of our great state, only to turn around and use her for criminal purposes?"

The bluntness of the statement caught Mr. Ingraham, and indeed most of the court off-guard. Ingraham's mouth opened and closed like a fish gasping for water, making his gold tooth glitter like sunlight on a fountain. He really didn't know what to say.

Donahue intervened. "Objection, your honor! Leading the witness and relevance."



Morrell once again slammed his gavel. "Sustained. Please strike Mr. Henry's last comments from the record."

There was a slight titter amongst the jurymen. Latham could feel something had shifted in the air. Henry's words might no longer be part of the record, but they had been said. As soon as Henry had mentioned the governor, a chill had settled over the room.

"Mr. Donahue, do you have any questions for Mr. Ingraham?"

"No, your honor."

"Wonderful," Morrell said with a grimace, "then, we'll adjourn until tomorrow. Good day."

As soon as the commissioner left his bench, Latham leaned over and whispered in Donahue's ear.

"Que lo paso?"

Donahue frowned and muttered back, "Roosevelt switched tactics; that's what happened. He's hoping to indict you on the horror of your crimes."

Latham didn't drop the act of Lorretto Rintz even for a moment. "Pero soy de Espana, no Los Estados Unidos."

Donahue placed his trial notes and evidence back inside the envelope he had brought with him. "He's gambling that that won't matter. If he can convince the jury that you are a horrible human being, they will want to convict you whether or not they are legally allowed to." Donahue paused after he tied the envelope shut. He looked at Latham. "Did you mistreat your crew?"

Latham shook his head.

"Did you mistreat the slaves?"

The former captain hesitated. Then, he shrugged. "Estuvieron esclavos." He didn't think he treated them especially badly, but he was a slaver; he didn't treat anyone well, except maybe the occasional prostitute.

Donahue sighed. With that one pronouncement, Latham had suddenly just given him a lot more work to do.

## Chapter Fourteen

**March 18<sup>th</sup>, 1861**- Eldridge Street Jail, New York

With nothing else to do, Latham listened to horse's hooves clatter on the cobblestones outside. He could see the carriages rushing on the other side of his tiny barred window. *Rushing, rushing, always to the grave.* He tapped a rhythm on his knee to accompany the organic sounds of society like horses' shoes and vendors' yells, upstanding citizens saying, "Good morning," and less upstanding citizens finally saying "Good night." After a few minutes, the various strains of music ran together into a pleasant melody, but just then some cabrón late for work ran his horse by at top speed and ruined the whole thing. Latham threw his hands up. *Maybe I should make a noose out of my clothing just for something to do,* he thought. Latham had been pretending to be sick for the past few days on the recommendation of his lawyer, who was trying to get a continuance and delay the start of Latham's trial. *Maybe the noose isn't such a bad idea.*

Latham looked down at his clothes. He was still wearing the same linen shirt, pea coat, and wool pants he had been wearing when the grand jury had indicted him three months ago, which were the same clothes he had been wearing when he was taken prisoner aboard *Cora*. Of course, the clothes were freshly laundered without a spot on them, but Latham was beginning to see spots *in* them, which concerned him. There were several holes in his pants that could accommodate three of his fingers. And the pockets of his pea coat had fallen out weeks ago. *I must look a frightfully impoverished monster.*

A monster, that's what Mr. Roosevelt had called him during closing statements just before those hypocrites had indicted him. A monster who valued life so little he was willing to cram seven hundred men, women, and children, children the prosecutor had said with particular relish, into a space no larger than the courtroom, all to turn a small profit. Small? Latham had almost laughed then. Cubans were willing to pay the equivalent of almost \$900 per slave, sometimes more, sometimes less for the women and children, depending on the master's inclinations. So according to Mr. Latham's mathematics, he valued human life a great deal. *Certainly more than these stuck-up Yanks, who refuses to even drink from the same water as their supposedly infinitely valuable black brethren.* No, Latham refused to fall victim to that hypocrisy. *Everyone is for sale, and the only thing you can do about it is sell your soul first before someone sells it for you.* Latham leaned his head against the brick of his cell, playing

with a loose thread in his shirt. He watched the carriages pass the window for so long his eyes glazed and he fell asleep.

He dreamed of an auction block. He was standing upon it with a coil of rope hanging around his neck. The auctioneer was spouting off some nonsense about the health of his teeth and his stupendous work ethic. The man sounded like he was chewing cotton, he was so hard to hear. Latham looked around at his potential buyers. There was Mr. Roosevelt on his left, nightmarishly tall, with the huddled masses of the Great State of New York cowering behind his coattails. On the right, there was Mr. Campbell with a nauseating smile and hundreds of little devils with pitchforks dancing around his feet. Roosevelt shouted a number while the auctioneer continued to babble. Campbell screamed a number back, and the little devils cheered. Roosevelt shouted another number, and Campbell topped it. Meanwhile, the auctioneer had moved on to how even Latham's complexion was. The two buyers just kept screaming their bids while their followers swooned in the ecstasy of the moment, and the auctioneer would not shut up, and suddenly, Latham couldn't stand the cacophony any longer.

He turned on the auction block to discover behind him, just as he expected, the open maw of hell. It was a deep black pit, flickering with hideous red and black flames. Staring into the abyss, Latham instinctively knew this was the deepest, most fiery pit of Hades. So he closed his eyes and stepped off the block.

The sensation of falling is what woke him. He jerked awake just as his stomach jumped up into his throat, and he was startled to see someone leaning over him.

"Oh, Mr. Latham, I was just about to rouse you." It was the deputy marshal Culligan. Latham remembered seeing his wild red hair before, but only in passing.

"Where's Rynders?" Latham did his best to put on his broken English accent, but he was still groggy.

"Boss is on vacation. Lucky for you. Are you dressed?"

Latham's expression informed Culligan of his low opinion of the deputy marshal's intelligence.

Culligan smiled awkwardly. "Yes, of course, you're dressed. I can see that for myself. Besides, it's not like you have any other clothes to change into. Well," he continued cheerfully, "that's about to change."

Latham rubbed his eyes. "Oh, aye? And why is that?"

“A good citizen wrote to the marshal’s office to inform me of what they believed was a gross miscarriage of justice.”

“The whole trial’s a gross miscarriage. I’m not even Americano,” Latham grumbled.

Culligan licked his lips. “I’m afraid you haven’t convinced me of that, Mr. Latham.”

“Rintz!”

Culligan smirked. “Whatever you say, Mr. Latham, but back to this concerned citizen. He or she, the letters were signed P.C.L.R., but he or she is worried that your ruffian appearance may bias the jury against you during your trial.”

Latham looked down at his rag of a coat. “I daresay they’re right.” *P.C.L.R.? Pete Campbell to Lorretto Rintz? Are these the arrangements?* he wondered.

Culligan nodded about the coat. “That’s why I’ve agreed to accompany you to a shop called Brooks’ on Broadway so you can purchase a new suit of clothes.”

Latham narrowed his eyes. “Why are you really doing this?”

Culligan tapped his chest. “Out of the goodness of my heart... And my bank account.”

Latham looked out the window at the street. *Arrangements were made.*

“Now don’t get any ideas about escaping. I’m taking you to buy clothes, and that’s it. I will stick to you like horse glue, do you understand?”

Latham turned to see if there was a wink to accompany that remark, but no, the marshal made his last statement in earnest. He really had only been bribed to take Latham to the shop. The idiot had no idea what was coming next. *Oh well, that’s what happens when you sell yourself to someone much cleverer than you.* Latham stood up and brushed the brick dust from his threadbare pants.

“All right, let’s go find some ropa nueva.”

The cab ride to Brooks’ was so painfully awkward, Latham leapt from the carriage as soon as they arrived. Culligan had spent the whole ride staring at him, silently, and Latham had tried to ignore him by

looking out the window and watching the world he hadn't seen in weeks flash by. But he kept sneaking glances out of the corner of his eye, and Culligan never blinked.

When Latham flung himself out of the carriage, Culligan caught his elbow and dragged him to a halt. "No, no, you don't leave my sight, ever."

Latham pulled his arm away. He was still in handcuffs. Surely that was enough of a handicap to satisfy Culligan.

"I just needed air. The ride upset mi estómago."

Culligan shoved him through the glass doors. "Just get inside."

Brooks' Clothing Emporium was a young establishment run by an older gentlemen, the eponymous Mr. Brook, who had more hair sprouting out of his ears and nose than anywhere else on his body. When the small bell over the door chimed, Mr. Brook ran out between two racks of suit jackets to greet his new customers with a wheeze.

"Good afternoon, gentlemen. Oh-." He caught sight of the cuffs around Latham's wrists. Mr. Brook was known for carrying high-quality suits for little expense, but he was not accustomed to serving criminals.

Culligan tipped his broad-brimmed hat. "Well, hello, Mr. Brook. This poor man is in need of a new suit. I mean just look at his clothes." Culligan gestured to most of Latham's wardrobe.

Latham smiled and played along. *The village idiot is either the first or last to be beheaded.* He pretended not to feel the sting of Culligan's poorly concealed insults, even though without intending it, his left hand was balling into a fist. After a few more jabs like that, Latham would be swinging for the marshal's face.

Mr. Brook continued to stare at the cuffs, wondering the same thing Latham was. *How does one fit jacket sleeves over shackles? Tell me, idiot marshal.*

Culligan, catching on, said, "Oh, let me get those for you Mr. Latham."

"Mr. Rintz," Latham corrected as he held out his wrists.

Culligan smiled as he unlocked and removed the chain. "Whatever you say, Mr. Latham. Make sure to keep your person within sight and your budget within reason, hm?"

Latham sighed, "Sí."

He turned to Mr. Brook, who was half an inch shorter than he. If Latham stood on his tiptoes, he could manage to look down his nose at the shopkeeper but just barely. As it was, he kept his heels on the ground. Mr. Brook was still looking him over with mild distaste, and Latham wasn't sure if it was because he was a convict or because his coat had no pockets.

"Mr. Brook," Latham said with all the confidence he could muster, "I need a suit that will make people like me."

Brook frowned. "That would take a very nice suit indeed and maybe a less severe haircut. Tell me, what is your budget?"

Latham hesitated. Then, he decided to take a stab in the dark. *P.C.L.R.* "Put it on Peter Rintz's tab."

The shopkeeper brightened. "Oh, of course, sir." Then, he disappeared through a door behind the far counter that led to the more expensive merchandise. Culligan arched an eyebrow.

Latham shrugged. "Es mi primo, eh-how you say?- my cousin, my distant cousin."

Culligan's brows furrowed. "P.C.L.R. is your cousin?"

Latham's heart quickened. He nodded as his mouth went suddenly dry. Culligan stepped around a rack of shirts and grabbed Latham's tattered collar, pulling them nose-to-nose. The marshal's breath smelled like stale Scotch. Latham couldn't imagine what his own smelled like.

"Now you listen to me, you son of a bitch. I don't know what game you and your 'primo' got rigged, but if you step one foot out of line, I will shoot you." Culligan drew his revolver half-way out of his belt. "Is that understood?"

Latham nodded as adrenaline suddenly surged through his body, demanding that he make a break for it then and there. "Aye, Señor."

Culligan slapped him. "Cut the Spanish-speak. You talk English just fine. I've heard you."

Mr. Brook returned from the other room with a soft, dark blue cotton suit, so Culligan let go of Latham with a glare. Latham nursed his cheek. The adrenaline told him to go for it, to take his fist and smash in the ginger's nose. *Calm down, Johnnie*, he told himself. *Calm down. We need to save our energy for later, for when we*

*escape*. Because he was escaping. Campbell was coming for him; Brook had just confirmed that. But coming to save him or kill him? Latham's heart pounded. He didn't know. There was no way to know.

He had lived the last four months in constant dread, waiting for the fatal accident to befall him. He spooked near horses, waiting for them to trample him. He jumped at every loud or sudden noise. He fed his food to the rats in the cell to make sure it wasn't poisoned. He had nightmares nearly every night. Although, they didn't start out as nightmares. He would dream that a marshal slipped him a key in his laundered clothes or left the door to his cell unlocked. Not believing his luck, Latham would stumble out into the jail. It never quite looked like the real place though. Walls were shifted; corners weren't quite ninety degrees square. After a few paces, he'd realize he was trapped in a maze. He would begin to run, trying to escape, trying to find the way out, praying it was just around the corner. After what always felt like an eternity, he would see the light at the end of the brick tunnel, a shining white square. He would burst through the opening to discover he was lying in a field lined with crabapple trees. That never varied. It was always crabapple trees. Now, the very scent of crabapples made him break out in a cold sweat. The nightmares always ended the same way. He would land in the meadow, look up, and see Peter Campbell towering over him with a grin that literally split his face in two and a shotgun. Latham always woke up just as Campbell fired.

He was remembering the feeling of his head exploding with lead, when Culligan snapped his fingers. "Hey, Latham! Do you want to try the suit on or not?"

Latham opened his eyes. Mr. Brook was standing next to him proffering the dark blue suit. Latham took it by the hanger with a sigh. "Me llamo Rintz."

The suit was stiff. Latham waved his arms up and down, side to side, trying to test the sleeves of the cotton shirt Mr. Brook gave him. He did a couple squats to feel how the pants fit. Then, he threw on the jacket and hugged himself tight. A few of the stitches popped in the back, and Latham rolled his eyes. Now he'd have to buy it. He started disrobing when he heard the shop's tiny bell ring. He pulled his pants back up and peeked around the dressing room's curtain. A fat man with lamb-chops wearing a ridiculously tall hat had

just entered the shop. Latham had two impressions of him: one, he bore a striking and unfortunate resemblance to a pig and two, Latham had seen him before.

The man shook Mr. Brook's hand. "Hello, yes. My name's Mr. Newmann. I inquired a few days ago about purchasing a new wool coat."

Brook nodded emphatically. "Ah, yes, sir. I remember. You were interested in a charcoal grey pea coat, correct?"

Newmann licked his lips. "Spot on, sir."

Latham jumped back from the curtain. He did know Mr. Newmann; he was one of the lawyers who had bonded *Coru* almost a year ago. Latham ran his hand across his bumpy skull. This was it. The arrangements had been made. All he had to do was act his part. That was all he had ever had to do, act his part. He took a deep breath and threw back the curtain.

"Marshal, what do you think?" he asked in his forced accent.

Culligan looked up from his nails. "You look fine."

Latham tugged on the jacket as he walked over to Culligan. Latham made sure to keep himself between the marshal and the door. "All right, I think I will take it," he told Culligan.

Just then Brook returned with the coat. "Here it is, Mr. Newmann."

Newmann smiled. "Why, thank you. Do you mind if I try it on again?" He patted his considerable stomach. "I'm afraid food is my weakness, which complicates ventures like these."

Mr. Brook chuckled obligatorily and held out the coat for Newmann.

Culligan muttered to Latham, "As soon as he's done with the pig, we buy your clothes, and we're out of here."

Latham nodded. Every muscle under the stiff cotton was tensed. He was ready to run. He was just waiting for a sign, anything that could be construed as a signal.

Just then, Newmann spun around. "What do you think, Mr. Marshal-man?"

Culligan turned his head to look at the fat spectacle, and Latham ran for the door.



“Hey!” Culligan shouted. He grabbed the cuff of Latham’s sleeve, ripping it. “Get back here, you whoreson!”

The edges of Latham’s vision burned white. He hated that word. Spinning on his heel, he smashed his fist into Culligan’s face, knocking him flat on his back and breaking his nose.

“Don’t talk about my mother.” Latham straightened his suit. He looked at Newmann and Brook. They were both staring at him. Brook’s mouth was hanging open in astonishment. Newmann looked mildly impressed. A beat passed.

Then, Culligan groaned on the floor and Newmann shouted, “Police! Police!”

Latham ran out the door. Parked just in front of the shop was a carriage with a lean goateed man sitting atop it.

Latham grinned. “Well, hello, Mr. Griffiths.”

“Get in,” Griffiths said without even looking at him.

Latham glanced around and then dove in the carriage. To his relief, it was empty. As soon as Mr. Griffiths had his cargo safely stored, he set the horses off at a gallop, and the carriage that contained Mr. John Latham, once-captain of the slaver barque *Cora* disappeared into the mist of obscurity.

The tumultuous carriage ride ended in the center of a field ringed with crabapple trees. At first, Latham didn’t recognize the place. Then, his skin went cold. *No, no, no.* Griffiths roughly yanked the door open and pulled Latham out by the shirtsleeve, throwing him down on the wet grass.

“No!” he shouted, terrified.

Griffiths swung the door closed and wiped the dew from his palms on his pants. Then, he climbed back atop the carriage without a word or even a look in Latham’s direction.

Latham slowly got back to his feet. His skin was pimpled like gooseflesh under the new suit. Somehow, he sensed Campbell standing behind him before he saw him. Latham pivoted on his foot, and there Campbell was with his greasy smile, leaning cavalierly on a cane.

Latham ran to the carriage and tried to wrench the door open, but Griffiths slapped his hand with the riding crop.

“I’m afraid, Mr. Latham,” Campbell said with relish, “that our Mr. Griffiths is as disappointed in your performance as I am. You have cost us quite a bit of money, a small fortune in fact, not to mention time and effort. And our poor esteemed Mr. Griffiths was forced to play cabbie in your escaped convict routine all to defend his good name from your loose tongue.” Campbell twisted the end of his moustache, smirking.

After months locked in a cell by himself, Latham found his patience for this sort of thing had shortened remarkably. “Look, if you are going to shoot me, just do it already.” After all, they were in a deserted field with no witnesses. A field that reeked of crabapples. Latham was sure his body would never be found. Campbell wouldn’t allow it. Besides, no one would be looking for it. The law would just assume he was on the lamb. It would be the perfect execution.

Campbell burst out laughing. “Shoot you? I do not think you properly comprehend the enormous sum you owe my associates and me. No, Mr. Latham, you shall not escape your debt so easily.”

Campbell took a step closer Latham, who felt the blood drain out of his face and hands as his heart sank. *Everyone is up for sale*, he reminded himself, *and once someone buys you, they own you. Forever.*

He sighed. “What do you want me to do?”

Campbell chuckled and clapped him on the back. “That is what I like to hear, Mr. Latham. There is change coming to this country. I am sure you saw the abolitionists assembling outside your trial.”

Latham nodded that he had.

“There is talk that the slavery question will be finally answered once and for all. Soon. Of course, this answer will not be obtained without great bloodshed, Mr. Latham. There is talk of war, Mr. Latham. Now, my associates and I have a great number of assets in the South, and we want to make sure we come out on the winning side.”

Latham shook his head. “What precisely are you asking of me?”

Campbell twisted his cane in the grass, choosing his words carefully. “You are clever, Mr. Latham. I can see that. You are also observant, and your rather average face helps you to blend into your surroundings almost seamlessly.”

“And?” Latham asked impertinently.

“And I want you to be my eyes and ears in the coming war, Mr. Latham. I want you to be a spy.”

## Chapter Fifteen

**August 15<sup>th</sup>, 1861-** At sea, sailing for the United States

Eben lay on the deck drying in the sun. He had taken advantage of a temporary calm belt to practice some of the swim strokes Jack Frying Pan had taught him, but he had felt the breeze start to pick up again so he came back aboard the ship. He did not want to be the one who delayed their return home, even by a few minutes.

Eben grinned. *Constellation* was finally sailing for the United States. President Lincoln, the new Commander-in-chief, had ordered all vessels on foreign station to return to the States because there was war at home. Eleven states had seceded from the Union to create their own Confederation in the slave-holding South. Eben knew he should feel distraught over this, or least worried, but in truth he was overjoyed. He was finally going back to Boston. To Annabelle. He couldn't wait to see how much she had grown in the past three years.

"Jack would be proud of yer swimming," Willie commented. He was sitting cross-legged by Eben's head, sketching his face. Willie had started doing sketches of everyone over the past few days, captioning them with quotes and interesting facts. He said he didn't want to forget anyone.

"I miss that black bastard," Eben said, shielding his eyes from the sun. The *Krumen* had all disembarked months ago after having a dispute with Captain Nicholas over pay. Now, even Captain Nicholas was gone along with First Lieutenant Fairfax. Commodore Inman had decided finally that he'd had enough of Fairfax's antics and sent them both home. No one missed the lieutenant.

Few missed the *Kru* either, as Willie pointed out. "Ye may be the only one, Eben."

"Aye, but I don't care what anyone else thinks; Jack was a good friend."

"Aye," Willie agreed, shading in the stubble growing along Eben's jaw. "That he was."

Eben listened to the creak of *Constellation's* timbers and the wind whistling in her rigging, the song of his heart. He would miss this ship as well as everyone on her, even Ol' Six Cent Dinner Man Gaynor. Eben smiled, a bit sad now.

"Have you thought about what yer gonna do next, Willie?"

“Not rightly, no.” Willie shrugged. “I’ll probably just sign onto another crew. What with a war on, they must be looking for lots of sailors.”

“Aren’t ye worried about the danger?”

“Nay, sailing is sailing, whether in war or peacetime. It’s always dangerous.”

Eben thought about that, puzzling over it, for a long time. Eben supposed Willie was right, in a way, because ships were special spaces outside of time and place. Life aboard a ship almost seemed to exist independently of the life and world around it. Eben shook his head. He was just a landsman, not a philosopher. What did he know?

“What about ye?” Willie asked. “What are ye gonna do when ye get back to Boston?”

Eben smiled. “Well, first, I’m going to take Annabelle shopping.” He never did get her that souvenir he promised her. “Then, I’m going to tell her all about my adventures and Africa and the people who live there.” *And how everything anyone’s ever told her on the subject is wrong.*

“And then?” Willie asked, adding freckles to the end of Eben’s nose.

Eben paused. “And then, I might join the army.”

Willie looked up from his drawing. “The Army!?” he said in disbelief. “No, no, no, you’re a Navy man now.”

Eben laughed. If only it were that simple. “I want to make a difference,” Eben explained. “I want to fight.”

“Why do you think Mr. Lincoln recalled the Navy. We are going to fight.”

Eben smiled at the way Willie referred to the U.S. Navy as “we” and “us.” Eben still thought of it as an “it,” which was interchangeable with any other “it,” like an army.

“I don’t want to spend the war sitting on a blockade. I want to be on the frontlines, in the thick of it.”

Willie tutted. “And you were asking me if I was worried about the danger. Why are you so bent on this anyway?”

Eben remembered the screams, the way those Africans howled when they were certain they were about to die. He remembered the filth, the way they were packed in like animals. And as he sat there thinking,

he began to remember every freedman he'd ever encountered in Boston. Each one had an ancestor who had been through that torture, who had been stuffed in a hold, starved of food and fresh air, for months. He looked around the deck at his crewmates. He knew not all of them agreed; some were just itching to join the Confederacy. But that would not be his path.

“They deserve to be free, Willie, each and every one of them.”

Willie smiled ironically. “You really are a moke lover.”

Eben sat up with a hand over his heart. “And proud of it. Now show us that sketch.”

## Chapter Sixteen

**October 12<sup>th</sup>, 1860-** At sea, sailing for Liberia

It would be soon. Kalomba could smell it. The wind had shifted and was blowing from the east now, bringing with it the scent of dirt and jungle and *land*. Kalomba sucked in a breath. The tang of earth was almost undetectable under all the salt, but it was there. It meant they were close. Kalomba guessed they would land on the shores of Liberia within a few days. *Liberia*. Kalomba spoke the name with awe, the kind which only the unknown could inspire. *Cora*, Chipangu had discovered the name of the big boat they were on a few days ago, was sailing Northeast, which meant in a way, Kalomba was headed home, but he knew he would also be nowhere near his home. Liberia was a new land with a people, culture, and language all different from his own. He knew that. Still there was hope. He was already starting to pick up some words of the strange language that the sailors all spoke. For instance, he knew they called the big boat a ship, the “ship *Cora*.”

“Shhh-ip,” Kalomba pronounced slowly, rolling it over his tongue, as he watched the stars above him. The wind had died again, so the ship was not moving very fast. Kalomba didn’t mind. It was cool on the top deck, and he was pleasantly comfortable. Moreover, he was not in an especial hurry to reach the great unknown Liberia. He quite liked sea-life now that he had grown used to the rocking. It was rather freeing to be out in the middle of the ocean with water on all sides and only the night sky above. *The stars are so bright*, Kalomba thought with a smile. *Kapa, wherever you are, I hope you can see them, too*. A pang struck his heart as he thought of her, but it didn’t hurt as badly as it had before.

Mbuyi twitched in his sleep beside him. They all slept out on the open deck now. The sailors had locked up the slavers on the slave deck below, so it was a good thing that Kalomba convinced the boy to come out of the hold. He did insist that they call him Sampwejj now, which meant “stream of tears,” because Mbuyi had died alongside Kapa, but Kalomba could live with that if it meant Mbuyi started eating and talking again. *I promise, Kapa, one day I will make him smile again*.

“Kalomba,” Chipangu whispered softly, trying not to wake either Sampwejj or Nsonyi. “Are you still awake?”

“Yes,” he replied.

He heard her snuffle and realized she was crying. He quickly rolled on his side towards her and saw her face glistening in the starlight. She was shaking.

He reached out and caught one of her shining tears between his fingertips.

“I-I’m sorry,” she gasped.

*Sorry?* “Why?”

Her lips trembled. “It-it’s my fault. It’s all my fault.” Suddenly, she was sobbing, so Kalomba pulled her close and let her cry against his chest. She wept for almost an hour. Kalomba was silent throughout the whole ordeal. He knew in that moment, she did not need advice or understanding. She needed someone to comfort her, to be a safe place to break down and cry. So he held her.

When her wails finally subsided back to sniffles, Kalomba told her, “The guilt is not yours-.”

“Yes, it is,” she interrupted miserably.

Kalomba shushed her. “No, it is not. You saved Mbuyi and so many others. You fixed my arm when I fell off my roof trying to fix that hole. You brought Nsonyi soup everyday when he couldn’t keep anything else down. You are a healer, Chipangu, not a witch. This is not your fault.”

“But the rest of you-.”

“Chose to be here.” Kalomba realized it was true as soon as he said it. He, Mbuyi, and Nsonyi had all chosen to stand by Chipangu instead of denouncing her. They could have renounced their relationships with her, fabricated stories on the spot of her evil misdeeds, but they didn’t. They chose to tell the truth, no matter the consequences, and that is why they were here. Even Kapa had chosen to stay by her brother. None of it was Chipangu’s fault. The scars on his wrists were his choice. The scars on his back were his choice. Now, he was headed to a new land where he would be presented with another choice: to live or to die.

He looked down at the girl in his arms. She looked older and thinner than he remembered, but she was still beautiful. He started tracing the outline of a fern on her back with his finger. Her skin was still soft and warm.

“I choose to live,” he said quietly.

She shifted so she could see his face. Her eyes narrowed with the question: what?



As he stared into her deep, brown eyes, he decided. *No more guilt. No more regret.* “I choose to live,” he repeated, and then, he kissed her.

Two days later, they reached the shore and began their new lives. Chipangu became a live-in maid for a bright-skinned doctor and his wife. She learned English at a prodigious speed and was soon helping her employer in his clinic. Nsonyi, Sampwejj, and Kalomba were all at first assigned to a saw mill just outside Monrovia, but once the American Colonization Society discovered that Kalomba had metallurgical skills, he was reassigned to be one of the city blacksmith’s apprentices. He lived only a few doors away from Chipangu, which meant he got to see her uncovered hair almost every day. And he got to kiss her at least once a day too.

At the saw mill, Sampwejj struggled to find an identity without his sister by his side, but he threw himself into learning English and the doctrines of Christianity as a distraction. He had more success than he bargained for, becoming a fierce convert and patriot, even going so far as to join the Liberian Army in the war with the Grebo tribes. In contrast, Nsonyi never really felt comfortable in Liberian society, and at the first opportunity, he tried to run away. It took several attempts before he successfully absconded, vowing one day to return to avenge the only girl he ever loved, Kapa.

Kalomba never saw Nsonyi again, but he hoped his friend had found a quiet place to live, maybe on a river somewhere. Thoughts of the friends he had lost were never far from Kalomba’s mind. And true to his oath to Kapa, he made Sampwejj smile. It took months, and in the end, it was an accident, but Kalomba still took credit. It had rained all day that day, churning the ground into a muddy froth. Kalomba was coming back from the smithy and had just passed Sampwejj who was on his way to church, when Kalomba slipped in a puddle. He didn’t fall, catching himself at the last second, but it was enough. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the brief flash of a smile flit across Sampwejj’s face. *There is hope for him, Kapa,* Kalomba thought. *There is hope.*

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