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and The Speechless Island
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Chapter 1

In every port town, not far from where the ships dock, where the sailors swarm up and down about their business, and swear and scrap, there is always a tavern. It is rarely the sort of tavern that would appeal to the delicate sensibilities of the lords and ladies who dwell in the higher parts of the town, but there must always be a tavern near the port nonetheless. Very often, one particular port tavern looks almost indistinguishable from its cousin on another shore. This is part of the importance of these establishments. While it is true that the sailor, as one who spends months at a time pitting their small human lives against the dangers of thirst, hunger, blazing sun, piracy, and of course the mighty terror of the deep unknowable seas, is often prone to smoothing the edges of the marine life with the balm of drink, this is not the sole function of the port tavern. For you see, the sailor is a strange creature. A seagoer is a human being - a creature fitted for the land, and yet this variety of our species lives a fair proportion upon a perilous unstable element. The sailor has not cork-feet to run upon, nor gills to breathe deep of the briny water. Yet this strange salty specimen chooses to live upon the sea. This is because the sailor is neither one thing or the other. One who lives by the seas is not entirely like the average person upon the land, but nor will they ever be as the life born unto the sea. In their hearts, the mariner knows this, indeed, it may be precisely that which made them seek their fortunes upon the waves in the first place. When they are inevitably forced to return to land for their human needs - for hot drink, and food, and the many small conveniences that the land provides, the sailor always recalls that they do not truly belong on this strange unmoving field. That is where the tavern by the port plays its part. True, it is a place where the traders and mariners may quaff to a degree repugnant to the high society of the land, and true, there may be the odd fisticuffs or sword-fight amongst the patrons, but the true purpose of the port tavern is not merely to provide an outlet for these passions that are so strange to the stolid earth-bound types. The true purpose of the tavern is to provide a place on land that is something of a halfway house. Any port tavern worth its salt must be within sight of the water, to comfort the strange hybrid habits of the sailor. In the port tavern, likewise, sailors are surrounded by those who also do not truly belong in one place or another, and this rough fellowship gives unspoken comfort to this nation of the waves. This is one of the reasons why the port tavern, no matter the jumble of languages spoken in each particular place or the blend of local smells and noises, very often looks just like so many other establishments of its type in any other port. They are supposed to be more or less the same tavern, a place that gives unvarnished comfort to the sailor in many corners of the world, a home that is no home.

In this particular tavern on a coast in the South Seas, there was the usual collection of drunkards, singers, hagglers, cardsharps and dicers. In fact, the only feature that could not have been transplanted without any problem to any of the other port taverns was a small and fearful girl slipping through the crowd, clutching a bag tightly to her chest, looking anxiously about her in every direction, as if she expected some sudden attack any moment now, but could not say where it would come from. It was clear from every beady glance from the

patrons of the tavern as she passed that this young lady did not belong amongst them. She felt their eyes press against her from all sides. This timid intruder in the sailors' retreat paused uncertainly. Somebody spilled ale on her and she flinched. She swallowed down her fear and stepped forward.

"You, girl!" a rough voice shouted over the din. She glanced back, and there stood two men. They might not have been wearing uniforms at that particular moment, but by their swaggering gait anyone could see that they were soldiers - hired men sent by that most powerful of potentates, whose riches and reach stretched all about the world and back again - the Satrap. The indifferent and cruel look about them made it clear that these men were available for hire for any job of violence and dogged pursuit, if the right weight of silver was put in their hands.

The second man caught sight of the girl and pointed her out amidst the crowd in the tavern. "There she is!," he shouted, "Roza Soledad, you are to come with us."

Roza was not inclined to answer them. All she knew was that she could not fall into the hands of such men, especially not now when she was so close to finding somebody who could help her. She dropped down to her knees and scurried beneath the long wooden tables, clambering over boots and between chair legs. If only she could find the one person who might aid her! With great difficulty and no small amount of luck, Roza had managed to avoid capture until this time, and she had by now spent the last of her meagre funds - all in order to find the woman who might help her, that fearless buccaneer known as Captain Carnelian! She could hear the sounds of contented drinkers turning to outrage as the two mercenaries pushed the patrons of the tavern to one side. Roza slid back as one of the mercenaries caught sight of her.

"There you are, you little fool!" the mercenary growled, "Come here, or it will not go well for you. You will certainly make me a wealthy man, but we need not return you in one piece, if you continue to try and escape us!"

The mercenary reached for Roza, and she kicked at his fingers, then wormed her way out the other side beneath the table. It was too late! The second hireling was approaching her from the other side. A few days ago, Roza would not have considered herself the sort of young woman who would crawl about and kick and scamper, but without another thought, she jumped up on top of the table and ran down its length, away from the mercenaries, knocking over bowls of food and cups of strong drink as she ran.

"Oh!" she exclaimed to the angry patrons, "I'm so very sorry! I must get away from these men, at least until I find Captain Carnelian. I'm sure she's here, I'm sure!"

The mercenary on the left made a grab across the table, and although Roza squirmed back out of his grasp, the one on the right had already leaned over and seized her by the arms. She struggled and hit out at the rough hand holding her, but the mercenary crushed her arm all the tighter.

"It's time to go, Miss Soledad," he grunted, and pulled her down off the table. The second man was pushing his way to join them. It was too late. Roza would never get free now. These men would drag her to the Satrap, and all would be lost.

"Now, gentleman, hold on a minute there!" said a bright voice.

A lithe woman had leapt in a single bound atop the table, and stood there as if it was the most natural thing in the world. Clothed in a slim dark red mariner's coat and breeches, a fine curved sword in its scabbard at her side, this woman had a shock of bright red hair that seemed to be standing up all on its own, like a playful little flame. The red-haired woman

smiled with all the secret mischief of some manner of sea-sprite.
"This is none of your business, salt-cur," growled the man who held on to Roza, "We have official orders."
The redhead shrugged.
"Well, good fellow, I have some new official orders for you. That there is one of my crew, and I wouldn't be much of a Captain if I let every stomping woodenhead go around grabbing and dragging about one of my shipmates."
The two men snarled at the sprightly woman. They both drew small but unpleasant-looking daggers.
The woman shook her head cheerfully.
"Oh no, no, lads, that won't do at all. While we mayn't be much for rules around these parts, there's a sort of unspoken agreement not to draw weapons in the tavern. It makes for much nicer drinking, for I must assure you, nobody sane likes a dash of blood in their cup."
The man on the left advanced on the woman with his dagger outstretched.
"I don't blame you fellows, of course, you're not regulars here. But I'm afraid the matter still stands - knives or no, you'll not take that girl anywhere against her will."
The redheaded woman tapped the hilt of the sword at her side. But to Roza's great surprise, while the men kept their eyes on her hands, the woman gave Roza a cheerful wink, and kicked the man on the left right in the chin. He staggered back for just a moment, and the woman danced down the table as nimbly as foxfire, and with careless elegance booted the dagger right out of his hand, sending it flying off to some dark corner of the tavern. There was a roar of approval from the crowd who had realised that here was some fine entertainment, and the woman gave a modest bow.
Roza took the chance to bite the hand wrapped around her arm with all the might she had. This didn't seem to do much more than rile her captor, but it did distract him long enough for the redheaded woman to skip over and clip him in the side of the head with the edge of her boot. As the mercenary stumbled back, Roza wriggled out of his grasp.
The mercenaries' eyes narrowed, and making a noise like a pair of rabid dogs, they advanced on the redheaded woman. She held up her hands.
"Now just a moment there, lads, I can see you are men who are most enthusiastic for your work, but you should know that while my fellow patrons may be a shady, underhanded, and unhinged lot, even they don't care particularly for people who disturb their drinking and feasting. That'd be bad enough, of course, but then you go and wave around your knives and threaten to snatch up someone's crew!"
Roza was dumbfounded. Who was this strange woman, who stood before these dangerous men to defend someone she had never met before in her life? Who danced before daggers as if the whole thing was some sort of splendid game?
The woman leaned dangerously close to the two hired men. "That sort of behaviour might well even offend the rough sensibilities of this sordid lot," she whispered from behind her hand. As the woman had not cared to whisper very quietly, the attending crowd of sea-dogs and rogues growled in heartfelt agreement.
She shrugged and spread her hands. "Of course, if the pair of you are keen to fight an entire room of half-mad pirates, violent reprobates, and gallows-rogues to get this here lass, you are more than welcome. Why, every last one of this lot would consider it a fine delight and excellent evening well spent!"

The crowd's roar indicated that they would be pleased to invest their time in further fisticuffs with these intrusive men.
With a glance at each other, the two mercenaries decided that the odds were not in their favour, and while the pair of them would do almost anything for coin, the idea was to live long enough to get the use of said coin. They put away their knives, shot a venomous look at the redhead woman, and retreated from the tavern, accompanied by jeers and hoots from the crowd.
The redhead gave them a cheery wave good-bye as they went.
Roza rubbed her arm and nodded towards the woman who had saved her.
"Thank you, Madame, you have done me a very great service. Perhaps you could do me another, and direct me to Captain Carnelian. I must speak with her on a matter of the gravest urgency!"
The redhead flopped down and sat on the table.
"Well, crewmate, your luck has taken a fine turn. As it happens, I am Captain Carnelian."

Chapter 2

Captain Carnelian gestured to a table over in a corner. She dropped down into a chair and stretched her legs.
"So what urgent business is it that brings you into this scurvy, but reasonably-priced, den of fools and madmen?"
Roza sat gingerly down and took a deep breath.
"My name is Roza Julianne Magdalena Aeglaea Hypatia Soledad. I have been looking for you for some time. My life is in desperate danger, as you have seen for yourself. My father entrusted me with a mission, and told me that if I was to survive, I should seek the assistance of one Captain Lalla Carnelian."
Leaning forward, Carnelian scrutinised Roza for a moment. A sudden softness suddenly stole into her eyes, and some faint cloud of memory passed over her face.
"Soledad!" she murmured, "Why, who would have thought it? You father is that pensive Professor? I haven't heard that name in some time. How is that musty devil of a scholar?"
Roza bowed her head. "My father...is no more." For a moment, she could not speak. Roza Soledad forced a few breaths of air into her lungs, and ignored the stinging in her eyes.
"Men...came. I think, perhaps, the Satrap's men. My father helped me escape and told me to come to you. He trusted you, and he promised that I could put my faith in you too, Captain Carnelian."
The natural brightness of Carnelian's face dimmed for a moment.
"I am sorry to hear that. You father was a fellow who lived much more in his books than in this world, but he was a good man for all that. We had some fine adventures, once upon a time."
Gripping her bag, Roza leaned forward.
"My father did not merely send me to you for my protection, Captain," she said quietly, "He had discovered something. Some papers containing secret knowledge. Knowledge of a place where a strange hidden prize is to be found. Knowledge that people will do all manner of wickedness to obtain. His last wish was that I should carry out the research he had begun and find that secret, wherever it may lie hidden."
The spark began to return to Carnelian's eyes.
"A sort of paper-chase across the seas, ey? Just the sort of thing that your father loved in times gone by."
Roza looked shamefaced.
"Captain, I cannot lie to you, it has taken all my meagre resources to even reach you. If I am to fulfil my father's wishes, your assistance is imperative, but I... I haven't any funds to pay you for your services. Perhaps, if we can find what my father and I uncovered in our researches, and if it is as valuable as the forces pursuing me appear to believe, I would be able to give you repayment, but-"
Carnelian cut off Roza with a wave of her hand.
"None of that now, little Soledad. Your father was a true friend to me in times gone by. You need say no more. I will leap whole-heartedly, boots-first into this adventure of yours in

honour of the memory of your father." Here she grinned at Roza, "And you may ask anyone in any port of the world, if there's is one thing that delights Captain Carnelian, 'tis Adventure!"

What a strange creature this Captain turned out to be! Roza could not begin to imagine how a serious, bookish man like her father could have ever found himself crossing paths with this woman of the seas. And yet, this was precisely where her father had sent her in her time of greatest trouble, and she conceded to herself that Carnelian had such a lively and honest spark about her that Roza felt as if she could not help but trust her, even if her father had not already vouched for her. In any case, Carnelian had helped Roza out of that little scuffle with the mercenaries before they had even been properly introduced, which showed that she was the sort of noble person to come to the aid of a soul in distress without any prompting, and that was recommendation enough for Roza to put her faith in Carnelian!
"Captain," Roza confided in a low voice, "As you know, my father was a most eminent and wide-ranging scholar, and I have been trained by him in the same studies that he pursued for many year. My father has passed on papers to me that mention the place we must discover, a place called-"
"Why, see here, if it isn't Fancy Fausto!" Carnelian suddenly interrupted, and gave a warning look to Roza. The young miss Soledad turned and there approaching them was some sort of thin strutting rack of coloured cloth. The figure, on closer inspection turned out to be a lean man who walked with a slight hunch but with a rolling gait that bespoke both his confidence and his menace. His face had a hungry look about it, but it was his dress that was so extraordinary. The man's long coat was streaked with many different colours, and ribbons of sapphire blue and emerald green fluttered from all about his person and from the back of his tricorn hat, while a large many-hued feather stuck sharply out from the brim. There were even twists of colour through his thin beard. All about this festive scarecrow were various weapons, everywhich one gleaming as if it had been polished within an inch of its life. On every one of his fingers, he wore a ring with a different brightly coloured gem. The man smiled indulgently at Carnelian, and with a start Roza realised that even his teeth sparkled with different coloured gems!
The man gave a slow bow, but never took his eyes off Roza and Carnelian.
"My good Captain, what a fine performance you gave us this evening. More elegant dancing I haven't seen since I were lucky enough to witness the veiled dancers of the Kingdom o' the Silver Sands!"
Carnelian gave a modest shrug.
"When I have the liberty, Fancy Fausto, I'll have to teach you a step or two," she said lightly.
Fausto sucked his teeth. "And who might this young lady be, Carnelian? How is such a slight creature the cause of such a to-do, ey?"
Carnelian laughed, "Fausto, you've been the Captain of your gaudy rig almost as long as I have on mine - you know how crew get once they're on land."
Fancy Fausto's eyes narrowed. "She doesn't look much of a sailor, does she?"
Slapping the table, Carnelian sighed, "Aye, Fancy, don't I know it! Why, it's these raw recruits who get in the most trouble. They haven't got enough sea-salt about 'em yet, which makes their thoughts all higgedly-piggedly and variable. You never know what fool trouble they'll get into, as you can see."

Roza nodded vigorously in mute agreement.
Fancy Fausto tapped thoughtfully on his bejewelled teeth and Roza was struck by how long and clawlike his nails were, and yet how perfectly clean and polished. Roza had once had a governess who despaired of her charge's constantly inky fingers, and would have been overjoyed if she could get her nails half as clean as those of this mariner Fausto. The man reminded Roza of nothing less than a half-starved bird of prey, dressed up in all the glittering finery it had collected.
"Well, Fancy," Carnelian declared, jumping up and pulling Roza to her feet, "As fine as ever it may be to get an eye-full of you, but I can't stand around here all evening! it's about time I got this new sailor on board."
At this, Roza found herself dragged off towards the harbour by Carnelian.
"Best we not talk about this little treasure search out in the open," she muttered, "The rogues around these parts might look upon a little dust-up with an indulgent eye, but that lot have also got an ear out for any main chance. Let's keep quiet about the matter until we can get somewhere safe."
This seemed sensible to Roza. She glanced back, but Fancy Fausto in his many-coloured coat had disappeared back into the tavern.

It took some doing for Roza to keep pace with Carnelian's lofty strides. "Captain," Roza asked, puffing alongside, "Is it not foolish for that Mister Fancy to have so much wealth about him? Why, those jewels in his mouth alone must be worth a fortune!"
Carnelian laughed. "Fancy likes to keep his pretty valuables about his person. To his reckoning, there ain't no point to amassing riches if you can't show off."
"But, isn't that terribly dangerous for him?"
The Captain shook her head, "More like dangerous for anyone fool enough to take anything from Fancy. He doesn't take kindly to anybody trying to filch his pretties, especially since he went to so much trouble to take 'em from others."
Roza stopped in the street.
"My goodness!" the young Madame Soledad declared, shocked, "You don't mean to say that Mr. Fancy is a thief? A pirate?"
Carnelian beamed at Roza.
"Naturally that greedy buzzard is a thief and a pirate! Why, almost everyone in that tavern you dropped into is some form of rascal - some worse than others."
Roza looked confused.
"But, Captain, why on earth would you want to spend time in such a terrible place?"
The redheaded woman started off down the road again with a flip of her hand.
"Why wouldn't I want to drink and eat in a place full of rascals? There's never a dull moment in that sort of ragged company!"

From the tavern, Carnelian led Roza a rapid dance through twisting ways, to what destination the small young lady was not sure. As they went, Carnelian would begin with a leisurely (if rapid) stroll, then come to a sudden halt to hide around a corner, her eyes glinting in the dark as the sound of voices and footsteps passed by. Roza found these swift changes of pace rather difficult to keep up with, and her fear made what was no doubt a short journey feel much longer, as at every moment she expected a sharp edge to be at her throat. How had she ended

up in such a state? Was it only a week ago she had been ensconced at home with her father, discussing a point on historical variations of dialect? A lump formed in Roza's throat. She had been too occupied in running for her life, but to think - she was never to see her home again! That book-stuffed dwelling had been the better part of what she and her father had ever needed. The delight she had when her father returned home with some new volumes and she would peruse these new finds, and how it had always been her express and cherished role since she had been the merest child to find the right place to put them amongst the rows and piles of their fellow books! Wistfully, Roza recalled how often her father had shuffled about the room, pen and paper in hand, trying to find some particular volume or other - and then he would smile sheepishly at Roza and she, with gladness and pride, would go straight to the books he needed.

Roza shook her head. Now was not the time to think of such things.

By now the pair had reached the harbour, where the slapping sound of the waves on stone and wood accompanied their steps. Carnelian stopped in front of a gently-lit ship with her hands on her hips, beaming in pride.

"There she is! The 'Aurora'! Have you ever seen a finer ship?"

In truth, up until this day, Roza had seen but few ships, so she did not feel it an admission of untruth to agree that the 'Aurora' was indeed a very fine ship.

They stepped on the gangplank. From the shadows of the deck eyes turned to stare at Roza. The gangplank creaked rather badly as they walked upon it, and Roza wished the thing looked more reliable, especially once she chanced to look down into the waters that seemed so far below. Carnelian, of course, had bounded far ahead and was already upon the deck of her vessel. When Roza finally joined her, she realised she had been holding her breath, and exhaled with relief.

"Wait here a moment," Carnelian said, and went straight to one of the crew standing about the deck. He was a tall, drawn, grey-haired man with a lined, grave face. It was a face that looked as if it had never learned any expression but a frown. As Carnelian and this grey-haired man sunk into discussion, Roza saw his brow deepen into an expression of intense disapproval. The frowning man was clearly looking over at Roza with some part of that disapproval. Shuffling a few steps closer, Roza pricked up her ears.

"There's nothing else for it, me sulky old Grey Nurse," Carnelian said firmly, "She needs our help, I've seen that with me own peepers. And the poor old Professor was a good mate, and, on my ship at least, we never turn our back on that sort."

"We can't possibly be ready to depart that quickly!" he said through gritted teeth, "Would it be possible for you to go a week without chasing after some foolish and dangerous venture? Do you have any idea of the number of different supplies we still must obtain before we can even consider departing?"

Carnelian put her hand cheerfully on the dour man's shoulder,

"Ah, well, if anyone can make it so, it's you, me dear old Nurse."

"It can't be done!"

"Well, we ain't got any choice, anyroad. We're taking the girl on board, and I have a pretty good notion that things are going to be getting pretty choppy around these parts any moment now, based on what I've seen around the lass so far."

The grey-head made noise that was part sigh and part growl, which seemed to signal that he had given up on trying to convince the Captain of anything. Dourly, he cast one last critical

look at Roza, as if trying to measure how such a small lass could cause so much trouble so quickly, and trying to calculate how much more trouble she could cause yet. With a sour expression and a sigh, he left about his business.

Carnelian waved Roza over. The young Mademoiselle Soledad immediately began apologising profusely for causing so much trouble. Carnelian dismissed her apologies.

"Bosh and fish-guts!" Carnelian declared, "Trouble is our trade!"

"You will have to pardon my eavesdropping, Captain, but your crewmate there did not appear to be particularly pleased with my presence and the necessity of our swift departure to escape my pursuers."

Captain Carnelian grinned.

"Oh, don't worry about dear old Grey Nurse. He loves to worry. Why, I fancy if he had nothing to worry about, he would be even more morose a stone-face than he is now! And there's no better Master and Medic upon the seas, I can assure you - he'll sulk and carp, but there's no fellow who could put things in order with such care as that Nurse."

Here, Carnelian paused and leaned over to inspect Roza.

"Here now, look at the state of you. When did you last sleep?"

Roza rubbed her eyes and confessed that she could not even recall. She had scarce had a moment to think about anything but flight for the last few days.

"Well, you are safe for now on the Aurora. Or at least, safeish. We will put out to sea as quickly as we may, for I have a strong sense that those hounds after you will be back on your trail afore we know it. Grey Nurse and the crew will have everything in hand as quickly as they can. But for now, little Soledad, there's nothing better you can do than close your eyes for a while."

Roza nodded gratefully. Before the Captain could offer better accommodations, Roza had curled up off to one side of the ship, laid her bag as a pillow upon a thick coil of rope, and fallen quickly asleep. After a moment's consideration, Carnelian decided that it was perhaps better to let her rest where she was.

Chapter 3

Roza awoke to something poking her in the side. She raised her head and looked about her. The sun was just beginning to rise, streaks of light mixing with the lingering remains of the night. Roza wasn't certain how long she had been asleep, but it appeared that Carnelian had been right to have confidence in the man she called Grey Nurse, because the deck was a hive of activity.
"You are upon my rope," said a French-accented voice nearby. A small man was standing nearby. He was perhaps even shorter than Roza herself. His hair was tied back in a neat short pigtail, and he had a luxuriant curled moustache and a tiny immaculately shaped beard.
"I repeat, you are upon my rope," the little man said with imperious irritation.
Roza apologised profusely. She got up out of the way and rubbed her face. At some point while sleeping she must have rolled off her bag onto the coil, because she could feel that she had the pattern of the rope impressed into her face. She could only imagine how she looked. The little man sniffed haughtily at Roza, located the end of the rope, muttered to himself in French, and with a sudden leap, dashed up a mast with the most startling agility, pulling the rope up behind him and wrapping it about the beams without the slightest care for the heights where he raced back and forth. Roza stared in wonder. This haughty little man was more sure-footed high up above the deck than Roza would feel safely on earth. Not wanting to get in anybody else's way, Roza shuffled towards the prow of the boat. Here she found the man the Captain had called Grey Nurse directing all the crew as they carried and winched supplies quickly and surely, and taking stock of each little thing. He caught sight of Roza and took stock of her too, giving her a quick frown, although he clearly didn't have time to waste on disapproving of her presence for any longer than that.

Roza had just finished rubbing the sleep from her eyes when she and everyone else on board were drawn to the side of the ship by the noise of an approaching commotion. A clank-thud din resolved itself into three men giving chase to a fourth figure, the men all wearing noisy metal breastplates that clanged as they ran, swords rattling at their hips, and running so hard that they were sweating beneath the pointed helmets bearing the purple insignia of the Satrap. The fourth figure, the object of their pursuit, was Lalla Carnelian, who was loping ahead of her pursuers with effortlessness, as if entirely unconcerned that three well-armed and clearly very angry men were just a few paces behind her.

One of the crew of the Aurora, a woman with a shaved head and big sleepy eyes, leaned next to Roza to see what was happening. She whistled with admiration
"Oh my goodness, will you look at that Captain go!" she drawled.
Grey Nurse joined them at their vantage point, grumpily muttered something about how Roza's new companion, whose name appeared to be Essi, no doubt had something more productive she could be doing with her time. He folded his arms, noticed Carnelian in her flight and made clucking noises of disapproval, as if now was not the time for frivolous business like fighting off three violent soldiers. As Carnelian approached the dock, Roza

could see that one of the men chasing her had a very painful looking black eye, which was no doubt why he looked so angrily out of his uninjured eye at his quarry.
"We have to help her!" Roza declared. The woman called Essi turned to Roza uncomprehendingly.
"What for?" she said in confusion.
Roza pointed at the soldiers in exasperation.
Essi shook her head and giggled a little.
"Don't worry yourself," she said "There's only three of them. That Captain doesn't need to worry about only three of them." She grinned and shook her head as if what Roza had said was simply the funniest piece of foolishness she had heard in a good while.
"Essi," Grey harrumphed, "Clearly we will have to depart any moment now, so let's not stand around."
Essi waved a hand in Grey Nurse's general direction.
"Ah, Nursie, you are always in a rush," she said languidly, "Let's just watch a little. It's always a fine thing to watch that Captain do her work."
To Roza's exasperation, Grey Nurse stomped off, and from his grumbling it was clear that he was more concerned about how hard it was to get things done than he was about the safety of his Captain.
Essi cheered, as the chase had now reached the shore and Carnelian, with nowhere further to run, had turned to face her pursuers. The soldiers drew their swords and rushed at Carnelian. One deadly edge curved towards Lalla Carnelian, but she effortlessly leaned backwards and the blade passed over her. Snapping up again to the side, Carnelian's own sword was suddenly in her hand, as she danced between the three blades, spinning and parrying between the trio of attacks, and yet moving so quickly that their steel never so much as nicked her. Her thin curved sword moved as swift as sunlight glinting off the water, and the clumsy steel of her opponents was sluggish base metal in comparison. Again and again they hacked at Carnelian, but her gleaming edge was always there to deflect their blows.
From besides Roza, Essi clapped her hands and cheered.
One of the soldiers, in an enterprising sort of spirit, summoned forth his rage at this quicksilver swordswoman and bellowing, charged with all his might, hammering at the dancing sword and driving Carnelian back, back towards the very edge of the docks. Carnelian's heels were on the edge of the drop into the sea, and Roza gripped the wood of the ship in fear as she watched. The soldier's face was flushed with savage triumph, and he aimed a finishing blow at Carnelian. Yet, somehow Carnelian was no longer where she had been just a moment ago - she had flickered out of the way of the blow. The soldier was unbalanced, and Carnelian took this opportunity to boot him in the backside, causing him to tumble with a squeal into the waters below.
There was applause again from the ship, but this time Roza was astonished to discover that she herself was clapping her hands too. Essi nodded in mutual appreciation of Carnelian's skill.
The remaining two soldiers were more wary now of their opponent, approaching her slowly from either side, the murderous points of their blades aimed at the unruffled lithe woman. The second of the soldiers crept up behind her and he ruthlessly stabbed out, yet it was as if Carnelian had eyes in the back of her head, for she spun about and deflected the deadly sword strike. Moving faster than their eyes could follow, she cut ever so slightly into the soldiers

sword-hand - just enough to force him to drop his weapon with a pained yelp. As the sword was falling, Carnelian flicked the weapon away. It clattered into the distance. Disarmed, the soldier was suddenly paralysed, unable to think what he should do now. Carnelian took this opportunity to use her sword-point to knock the bewildered soldier's helmet off of his head. This had all been but the work of a moment for the Captain of the Aurora, but the remaining soldier was not going to let pass an opportunity to attack the occupied swordswoman. Her last armed opponent was the one with the blackened eye, and it was apparent from his fury that he had a score to settle. He swung his blade at her, only for Carnelian to swing her own sword swiftly behind her back, barring the course of the stroke. She pivoted nimbly about, ducked under a second slash from his steel, then straightened up and drove a fist forward. The soldier yowled in pain and dropped his sword. Carnelian had now given him a matching set of black eyes. Roza and Essi cheered profusely. The vanquished beat a hasty retreat.
Carnelian immediately started to run about untying various ropes and shouting something up to the ship.
"Pardon?" Roza shouted back, straining over the edge to try to hear better. Carnelian began a strange pantomime, but try as she might, Roza couldn't make head nor tails of it.
"Gangway up!" Carnelian shouted at the top of her lungs. Roza spied Grey Nurse engrossed in crossing things off a list.
"Pardon me, sir," Roza called out to Grey, "But I believe the Captain is trying to communicate something to the ship. Something about 'gangway up'?" Grey Nurse groaned and ran to the side of the ship.
"It means we are in trouble, naturally," he said with a sigh.
"And here it comes," said Essi.
A squad of fresh soldiers were marching in formation upon Carnelian. Grey Nurse sprang into action, barking instructions to the crew and every member of the company set to their tasks twice as quickly as before. Roza felt a lurch in the ship and saw that the crew had begun to raise the walkway, unfurl sails, and to push the vessel from the docks with boat-hook poles. Carnelian brandished her sword at the troop of the Satrap's soldiery, and they answered her by aiming their muskets straight at her.
"Ah." said Carnelian at the sight of the weapons, and immediately ran for the walkway to the Aurora.
"Gangway up, Gangway up, mates!" she shouted and indeed, they had the walkway halfway up and through strenuous efforts the ship was slowly moving away from the dock. Indeed, there were already several feet of water between the docks and the Aurora. The muskets of the soldiery cracked in a row and shot whizzed past Carnelian and thudded into the side of the ship. Black smoke rose from their weapons as they prepared to fire again.
"The gangway is almost up!" despaired Roza, "How will Captain Carnelian make it aboard?" Surely Carnelian could not dodge the musket fusillade for long! Without a second thought, she ran as hard as shecould to the very edge of the dock, and threw herself straight up towards the nearly closed gangway. For one terrible moment she hung in the air, before her fingers landed painfully on the closing edge of the gangway. Roza craned to see what was happening, hanging half off the side of the ship herself. As more shot flew towards the Aurora, the hands of the crew dragged their Captain inside. The soldiers on the dock continued their firing, but already the Aurora was drifting out of their range. In a moment, dusting herself off, Carnelian joined Roza on the deck.

"What on earth did you do to bring an entire troop of soldiers after us?" grumbled Grey Nurse fussing about Lalla to see if she had received any wounds.
"I assure you, Nursey dear, I was entirely on my best behaviour," she said with mischief in her eyes. Grey Nurse grunted disbelievingly and raised the Captain's arms, carefully poking and prodding.
"You can't see any pieces missing from me, can you?" Captain Carnelian asked Roza. Roza shook her head. "Excellent!" declared Carnelian happily, and shooed Grey Nurse away. "If that's everybody aboard who is coming, let's be on our way! A bit of sea will give us some breathing room, and our new recruit can perhaps explain to us what is at the bottom of these sudden goings-on!"

Chapter 4

The sun had lifted itself clear above the horizon. Roza looked nervously back towards the docks, where no doubt the Satrap's soldiery were making preparations to send a craft after the Aurora as rapidly as possible. Lalla noted the young Mademoiselle Soledad's concern and clapped her firmly upon the shoulder.
"Don't be afeared there, shipmate, for I find it never does a body any good. Trust in the Aurora! The wind ain't against us, and it won't be long before our sails will billow. You haven't seen my Aurora in motion, but let me assure as the proud Captain of this bark, our ship doesn't just sail once she gets up a gale, she positively flies across the waves! Now come along and meet the crew."
As an individual of scholarly training and disposition, Roza had a habit of scratching down little notes. She found ordering things in inky letters and scraps of paper gave her a great sense of peace . She began now to jot various things down as Carnelian showed her about the ship so that she might remember them later. Lalla stopped in astonishment when she noticed the scritch-scratch of Roza fumbling with pages.
"Well, strike me flat, " Carnelian exclaimed, "Will you look at all that scribbling away! What's it all about? Do you know, my bookish Scribbler, I do believe that your noble father had precisely the same habit! Well, come along, and you can write down each and every one of your crewmates!"
On their tour of the Aurora they first found Essi, the sleepy woman with the shaved head and the big eyes, running her fingers over various tools and singing to herself.
"Essi here might live half in the Land of Nod" Carnelian said, "But when she's more or less awake, she's our carpenter, and an ingenious one too. It's down to Essi to take care of the Aurora and keep her in one piece. She's a fine musician to boot. Why she's invented so many instruments with her bits and pieces of wood and string and whatnot that you can hardly keep track of 'em!"
Humming to herself as she went about her work, Essi nodded pleasantly to Roza, who was scribbling all this information in her pages.
"Essi, this here is our new crew mate, Roza Julianne Something Something Soledad. I'm afraid I've forgotten all those middle parts. You get the suspicion that father of yours was perhaps a bit too fond of words, Little Scribbler, what with leaving you with such a pile of names."
"It is very nice to meet you, Scribbler," Essi said with affable distraction, then returned to her work.
Indeed, from then on Carnelian decided that to save time she would simply introduce their new guest on board the Aurora as Roza the Scribbler.
Carnelian pointed up to the scurrying small form of the surly little individual Roza had met before.
"That's Pierre up there. He is perhaps the haughtiest fellow I've ever met, but he's as agile as a marmoset and dances about up there in the masts and sails like nobody's business."
Pierre, perched above their heads on a beam, eyed Roza critically.

"I am no mere danseur, Capitane Carnelian, I am Pierre Pasqual, greatest acrobatic performer of the famed Cirque de Merveilles!" Here the small mastman struck a posture with one hand on his hip and the other held high, his nose pointed to the sky as if awaiting the grateful applause of his audience.
Roza coughed politely, which made Pierre even more scornful. He frowned down upon Roza and in French, with elaborate gestures and poses, said several very rude and untoward things to his audience below. Indignantly, Roza responded in his own tongue (although free of the many improper words he chose to use) that she was pleased to meet him, even if he would use such unpleasant language. Pierre's eyes widened in surprise. He looked at her a second time, as if reassessing the young woman with the notebook below, then coming to a decision, he dismissed her from his mind.
"Pah! You speak French like a little baby nun!" Pierre declared, and then leapt back to his business with the ropes and sails high above the deck.

Next, Carnelian took Roza below deck, showed her where she might sleep, and led her on to the small kitchen, where Cook was found, chopping up some vegetables with such fury it was if they had done her some harm. Cook herself took up most of the kitchen, for she was a large overflowing woman in a broad apron that was of a pristine white cloth. Cook's arms, like powerful gigantic hams reaching out from within the white expanse of her apron, moved swiftly and violently about her enclosed domain below deck. Her head floated atop the apron - a ruddy sphere on a sea of white, her hair tucked up into a frilly white bonnet. The walls of the cramped kitchen were lined with all manners of pots and pans hung ingeniously upon nails in such a way to prevent them flying here and there while at sea. Roza also nervously noted that in addition to the rather large and sharp cleaver Cook was currently wielding, she also had quite the collection of chopping implements in her kitchen, each of them kept as clean and sharp as could be.
Lastly, they returned to Grey Nurse, who appeared particularly fretful and was bustling officiously about the ship.
"And finally, you've already met dear old Nursie. My second in command, and our occasional surgeon, the Grey Nurse!"
Grey Nurse looked resigned to this name, and indeed he had long ago given up trying to encourage those on board to call him by some other title, to such an extent that some days he barely remembered his original name.
"It is also my most burdensome duty," said Grey wearily, "To think of all the worries and concerns that somehow do not touch the mind of our dear and deeply frustrating Captain here. I think it perhaps behooves you, my frivolous Carnelian, to let us know where precisely we are rushing to, away from swords and musket shot."
Carnelian leaned in conspiratorially to Roza. "He's a terrible Wet Blanket, old Grey Nurse, but nobody keeps things running quite as well as old Nursie. D'you know he's served as a sort of factowhatsit - a physician and adviser in five royal courts all around the world?"
"Six," insisted Grey.
"And he was chucked out of all of 'em," added Carnelian cheerfully, "Couldn't stop trying to boss everyone around and improve organisations. None of the Queens and Emperors could put up with him. Several of the ingrates even tried to have him imprisoned, that's how much he got up their nose, did dear old Grey Nurse. Still, their loss is our gain, aye?"

Grey harrumphed.

Carnelian lead the way into the Captain's quarters, Grey and Roza following after. Grey Nurse tutted at the mess inside, but Roza gaped. Everywhere about the room, stacked with carelessness were all manner of wondrous treasures and trophies. Rows and rows of swords and daggers were strewn all about the place, a large bronze compass with strange symbols engraved around the edge lay on a table, an expansive chest in a corner was stuffed to overflowing with coins from forgotten nations, while on the walls were drawings of strange beasts. Everywhere - on the floor, on the table, on the bed, there were maps - maps of all shapes and sizes, maps ancient and new, plain and ornate, and from every reach of the seas.
"This room is a disgraceful mess, Lalla," grumbled Grey, his fingers clearly itching to tidy the Captain's quarters just a little bit.
Carnelian waved him off.
"Don't you dare, you officious old Nurse. I have everything exactly where I want it. Anyroad, never mind that." She turned to Roza, "Come now Scribbler, it's high time you gave us a little inkling of what precisely you are carrying that makes you such a temptation for the swords of the Satrap."
For a moment, Roza stood there uncertainly. She had gone to such great lengths to protect her secret over the last few terrible days. She swallowed, and opened her little bag, reverentially bringing out a scroll that was tattered and faded about the edges. You could tell at a glance that here was a venerable and ancient document. Carnelian's eyes lit up. She swept a big mess of charts off the table and onto the floor, which made Grey Nurse grimace, but he managed to hold his tongue. Roza carefully unfurled the worn hide of the scroll. Its surface was covered with strange rows of symbols, flowing lines and arcs and dots grouped together in dense sections. Carnelian stared at the page for a moment.
"I will be the first to admit, Scribbler, that I haven't the first idea what this thing is supposed to be." she declared.
"Neither did father and I, at least to begin with," her eyes bright with memory, "He found it on his travels, and we used to treat it like a sort of puzzle, you know, as a way to pass the time in the winter evenings when you need something stimulating."
Carnelian and Grey exchanged a look, which made it clear that this wasn't their idea of an amusing cold-weather diversion, but they nodded and encouraged Roza to go on.
"Well! It is understandable that you find these markings befuddling, for we could not make head nor tails of the whole matter for a very long time. It was not written in a script that matched any language that we knew or had ever heard of, and no matter how we searched and studied, we could find nothing like it in all the libraries of the world. The whole manuscript was a complete enigma, and I confess that I began to believe that it was all some manner of meaningless nonsense or some strange joke played upon us down through the ages. However, one day, father came across a reference to this particular style, and after long days and nights of reading and inquiring, we discovered the celebrated learned one, Suleyaman Al-Navar. Many, many years ago, long before there were even Satraps in this corner of the world, Al-Navar was a man who travelled all about the globe in pursuit of knowledge. He was a historian, an explorer,a botanist, an alchemist, a mathematician, and a great individual of letters."
"Never heard of him," muttered Grey Nurse.

Roza sighed.
"Yes, sadly, he isn't so well remembered these days. I believe there was some trouble at the time with the ruler of Al-Navar's native country. Al-Navar refused to pass some knowledge on to the potentate, who, in revenge, wiped Al-Navar's names from the history books!"
"But not entirely," Carnelian added thoughtfully.
"Yes!" Roza said happily, "I cannot tell you how overjoyed Father and I were to piece together the surviving scraps and fragments of Al-Navar's lost writings! The destruction of so much of his learned works was the most terrible possible punishment that cruel ruler could have imposed on the great scholar, for his studies were his entire life, with so much of that life dedicated to producing great and learned texts for all the world. After all, a person has but a single lifetime, but their words may live long beyond their own mortal span. Father and I were delighted to discover that we had found this lost document enscribed by Al-Navar's own hand, and naturally the mystery of the thing intrigued us, and our efforts to puzzle out the meaning of this scroll began to consume much of our time. If the great and learned Suleyaman Al-Navar had written this page, then there must be some meaning in it! This had been someone whose entire purpose was the pursuit of learning. And yet, why had he hidden this knowledge behind these markings? Perhaps this was a piece of the knowledge that Al-Navar had been so desperate to hide that it had cost him his very name and rightful place in history!" Here Roza's face light up at the memory. "As you've no doubt deduced very quickly what it took us many months to uncover, this is a sort of cypher. You see, we learned through scraps and hints that Al-Navar was very fond of codes and puzzles. It took us a good deal more work, but the Travelling Sage was not the sort of person who could bear to destroy knowledge. He merely wanted whatever he had learned to be hidden from anyone who did not seek the light of learning as he had!"
Grey Nurse waved over the page.
"Then if this is a cypher, what does it all mean?"
"It is on the one hand a cypher," Roza said gravely, "But it is also a map."
"To where?" whispered Carnelian with barely suppressed enthusiasm.
"To something that was so fascinating and so dangerous that Suleyaman Al-Navar had to hide it behind his most fiendish codes and puzzles. This map leads to somewhere that translates literally as The-Place-Empty-Of-One-Single-Utterance, or more comprehensibly, a place we called The Speechless Island."

Chapter 5

Roza placed her hands on either side of the cypher-map and stared intently at its strange constellation of symbols and glyphs.
"To even discover this small amount was the work of years for myself and my father. We could find no record left of precisely what Al-Navar had discovered or hidden on the Speechless Island. All we knew was that it was something valuable, something that powerful people would do terrible things to gain."
Carnelian nodded.
"People both then and now, which explains why the Satrap is so eager to hunt you down, Scribbler."
Roza sighed. "Unfortunately, the way of the world means that many great libraries belong solely to the rich and the powerful. During our studies of this cypher-map and of Al-Navar, my father and I by necessity often had to request access to the Satrap's extensive collection of ancient manuscripts. We..." here Roza swallowed a mournful sob, "Although scholars, we were foolish about matters of greed. My father, as you said, Captain Carnelian, only ever thought about his studies. It shames me to admit that it never even crossed our minds that we were unearthing knowledge that those like the Satrap would do anything to possess. The Satrap's soldiers, through means foul and underhanded, obtained a rough copy of the cypher-map."
"Then why do they need you?" Grey Nurse wondered.
"It is unlikely that the Satrap's own advisers and scholars will be able to fully decipher their poor copy of the map, even given enough time. Now that my father is...gone, I am currently the only living person who can begin to unravel Al-Navar's cryptic directions to the Speechless Isle." Here, the young woman raised her head high in passionate defiance. "But I will not help them! They do not even know precisely what is hidden at the Speechless Isle, and yet they will not cease to commit the most terrible crimes in pursuit of their wants. After what they have done already, the greed and cruelty they have show in their pursuit of the merest distant image of gain, it is clear that they are no different to those from whom Al-Navar wanted to conceal the secret of the island, and I intend to honour the memory of both Suleyaman Al-Navar and of Michal Constantine Vediovis Alexi Soledad, my father. We cannot let the Satrap discover Al-Navar's secret before us!"
Carnelian banged the hilt of a dagger on the table in agreement.
"Fear not, Scribbler," Lalla Carnelian declared, "We will fulfill old Professor Soledad's last wishes. If that Al-Navar and Professor Soledad thought whatever was on this Speechless Island was too dangerous to fall into the wrong hands, then by the sun and the sea, the Aurora will get there first!"
"It will be a most difficult journey, I fear, and one full of peril," Roza said, her voice sinking back into a quiet tone. Carnelian, however, seemed to be most pleased at the idea of fear and peril, for, where there were such things, there too would she find adventure, the one true aim of her life!
"My father and I have, through patient research, calculated the approximate area where

Al-Navar set out the guides for his map. We believed that ancient sage, with his love for codes and cryptic riddles, inscribed some of his directions in verse." Here, Roza, cleared her throat nervously, and as her eyes followed a path in the obscure markings on the cypher-map only she could decipher, she translated:

"Thence, where the swirling breezes doth bow,
And the wing's edges flutter and sleep,
There, traveller, you will find my flight.

Bright upon the face of darkened depths,
Where frail mortal eyes will scarce dare gaze,
In unearthly fire shineth the way.

Still at the limit of the waters,
The deathless bounds tower in the pale,
And where silence falls, is thine own end."

Carnelian scratched her chin and glanced at Grey Nurse, who shrugged. Neither of them could make head nor tail of that stuff.
"If that sage of yours wanted to bury meaning in nonsense, those verses seem to have done the job," decided Grey.
"And yet," insisted Roza, "I am certain that these lines, if only we can untangle them, will help guide us to the Speechless Isle!" She bowed her head, "I can only ask that you, Captain Carnelian, and the crew of the Aurora, will deign to help me in my quest, for you must understand that wherever the Isle is to be discovered, the cypher-map tells us the journey is through turbulent waters and grave dangers, for it was these very life-threatening obstacles that Al-Navar knew would keep the mysterious Isle hidden."
"Worry not!" declared Lalla Carnelian, "You have at your disposal the swiftest, nimblest ship, and the truest crew that ever rode the waves! We will brave every danger!"
Grey Nurse sighed. He had, however, already seen the glee on Carnelian's face, and knew very well from long experience that there was no point in trying to talk her out of sailing straight into the heart of this oncoming storm.
"If we must," he said reluctantly, "Then where do we start?"
Roza scanned across the surface of the page, jabbing a finger at one particular bunch of swirling symbols.
"Here! When Al-Navar visited it had a different name, but today it is known as Port Haren!"
Grey Nurse furrowed his brow in concern.
"Would that be Port Haren, the trading town where the famously avaricious and untrustworthy Governor Boleo has been stationed for several years?"
Carnelian slapped Grey Nurse on the back.
"Oh, tch, Nursie, worry not! I'm sure that the Governor has forgotten all about that little disagreement! Let us set the Aurora on a course straight for Port Haren!"

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While Roza had no doubts about the speed of the Aurora, she would have been hard-pressed to say how long the journey actually took. Ordinarily, she would have attempted to record the passing of time and the changes in the sea and weather by scribbling in her notepapers, but unfortunately, as soon as the Aurora reached the waters of the sea, she was far too sick to do anything of the sort. Terrible nausea rocked her to-and-fro, the very world around her became sickening and untrustworthy, and it was all she could do to lie suffering in her bunk, queasy faced, her precious bag clutched protectively to her chest, and a reassuringly heavy bucket by her side. The sea's harsh schooling seemed to keep Roza abed and unwell for an eternity. She was vaguely aware that she shared her bunk quarters with Essi the Carpenter, because occasionally that short-haired young woman would come into view and make absent-minded reassuring noises. At one point, although Roza couldn't swear whether it was real or a dizzy fever-dream, the all-encompassing form of Cook was filling every corner of the space before her, demanding that poor ill Roza drink a warm minty concoction. Roza was unsure that she could keep such a thing down, but Cook was so large and intimidating that the ill lass did not dare to disobey.

Whether it was the power of this warm drink she swallowed down, or whether Roza was beginning to become used to her new environs, in time she found that she could sit up. She now began to notice that Grey Nurse would appear from time to time, placing a hand on her forehead and generally inspecting her recovery with such a cantankerous air that Roza felt rather sorry to put him to the trouble of having to come and attend to this small unseaworthy passenger of the Aurora. Yet, in time Roza was strong enough to stand, and then she found that she had to go to the trouble of learning to walk all over again, a task she had never presumed she would need to repeat after infancy. While her steps on the rolling boards were hesitant and she preferred to keep a steadying hand at the ready in case the sea decided to give a sudden lurch or shiver, soon Roza Soledad was able to hobble cautiously up onto the deck and into the light. What a glorious change this made to her constitution! Here was the roar and crash of the Aurora cheerily cutting through the waves, here was good cool sea air, tinged with spray and with a tang of salt! Here were beams of sunlight, brighter and purer than it felt like she had ever seen, and so swiftly did the Aurora dance on, it felt as if the craft was racing against the very sunlight itself! Roza gripped tight on the rail and gazed at the open sea about her, filled with delight at finally feeling better, and at the striking beauty of the waves. For the first time since she had been forced to flee from her home and all that she knew of her mode of life, it felt as if a great weight had been hurled away by a whirling blast of sea breeze. Captain Carnelian, who was busy about the deck, caught sight of Roza and shouted out cheerfully.
"Ah, there's a look in your face I know, Little Scribbler! You've come through the worst of it, and now you're being struck by a new affliction! You're starting to fall before the spell of the beauty of the sea itself!"
At a loss for a response, Roza smiled at Carnelian.
"Pah!" shouted Pierre from high above them in the masts, "There is not a thing of beauty to be found in being sick all over the place, like a small ill dog."
"I seem to recall a time," Grey Nurse shouted in reply, "When you, you haughty acrobatic jumping flea, gobbled so much rice-wine and squid when we were at port that you had to be carried back on board in a sack, and were so struck down by your own remarkable gluttony

and subsequent sickness that you refused to move for the better part of week!"
"That was a matter entirely different!" retorted Pierre sniffily "It was some food that was most bad, as I have declared many times!"

Chapter 6

Now that she was able to walk about the ship, Roza decided that she wanted to make herself useful. Unfortunately, since she knew nothing about sea-work, she found certain tasks that the crew proper could do almost without a thought would provide the most time-consuming challenges in her hands. Yet, she persisted, writing down her instructions in her notes, scribbling away any useful bit of advice given to her in kindness or exasperation. She helped Pierre, although the small fellow barely deigned to recognise Roza's existence. Pierre refused to speak French with Roza for the most part, which put her out terribly, as she was fascinated by his dialect. She felt certain, however, that even his aloofness was beginning to wane as he sent her running about the deck on errands. The unhurried Essi, on the other hand, was very pleasant to work with, and although Roza was mostly employed merely to hold objects at the ready while Essi would work on her ship's carpentry, Essi's constant songs and calm demeanour delighted Roza, who wished she had hands enough to hold Essi's tools and to perhaps write some of the words of the carpenter's songs down at the same time. The one problem of working with the sleepy Essi was that she was sometimes inclined to forget that Roza was even there, so deeply entranced did she become in her work. Cook would not let Roza anywhere near the kitchen, although this seemed to be a general rule for all those aboard the ship, and in any case, there was little room for anybody else besides the ample Cook among those bubbling pots and flying knives. Cook did however allow Roza to sometimes run messages, and Roza's natural quietness and tact meant that the crew took to using her as an intermediary for the perilous task of attempting to make requests of Cook's menus.

For much of her time on board as they sailed to Port Haren, the Aurora's new resident Scribbler found the bulk of her work in following Grey Nurse, for that fellow was forever bustling about the ship to make sure that everything and everyone was as it should be, and Roza dutifully wrote down almost everything he said about the boat. Of course, it was a particular delight to run errands for the Captain herself, for Roza was conscious of the debt she owed to Carnelian, not merely for saving her life, but for also giving her the opportunity to fulfil the last wishes of her father in making the perilous journey to discover the Speechless Island.

In the evenings, those of the crew who had time to rest would pass the time eating and singing to the melodies Essi would coax from the latest fiddle or harp-like instrument she had constructed. Carnelian would regale the crew with tales of adventures past, leaping about and acting out all the parts with such enthusiasm and excitement that many a time Roza feared that in her zeal the Captain might unwittingly jump over the side of the Aurora just to demonstrate how she had once run upon the backs of a pod of dolphins to escape the hired thugs of the Empress of the Eastern Isles.

Early one morning, Pierre called from up in the crow's nest that Port Haren was in view. Roza

ran to the bow and squinted out over the waves. Port Haren was a bustling promontory, thick with ships coming and going. Great craggy hills lay high above the port, where fortifications and cannons squatted in wait for anyone who sailed into Port Haren thinking to make trouble for those who sat comfortable in their wealth and power in the upper city. Down the crags the town of Haren spread, flowing all the way towards to the shore - the dwellings in the upper reaches of the hills made of finest carved stone and marble that gave way to flimsy wooden shacks the closer the town came to the sea.

When the Aurora docked at the port, Roza was suddenly struck by the noises of shouting merchants and crowds milling about, haggling and frying and selling and arguing. After the crash and slap of the sea and the other predictable noises of the ship, coming ashore was quite jarring. Even walking upon unmoving land felt odd, although Roza told herself that this should not be so. After all, she had only spent a few days amongst the crew on the rolling deck of the Aurora. With the ship docked, the crew disembarked and bustled about their business - Grey Nurse hurried off to find what supplies they had lacked time to procure in their hasty departure, Cook lumbered away to buy foodstuffs, and the rest of the crew wandered in different directions, taking the opportunity of their visit to amuse themselves in the bustle of the port.

Once Roza had clambered down from the ship and along the rickety, noisy pier, she wobbled onto the shore of Port Haren. She jumped up and down on the ground experimentally and made a note of the sensation in her sheets of paper. Carnelian clapped her on the back.
"I'll warrant that dull and still dirt won't feel quite right to you for some time, Scribbler," she said with a grin, "For you are becoming one of our sea-going company, if I'm not mistaken."
Roza felt uncertain about that, but she was grateful for Carnelian's manner and mumbled some muddled words of thanks.
"Captain," Roza said, "Forgive my presumption, but I would suggest that we must start exploring Port Haren as soon as possible. Somewhere on this island, Al-Navar left some sign that will lead us on to the next stage of our journey, if only we can find it in time. We don't know how far the Satrap's subordinates lag behind us, but we cannot afford to let them find the first marker of Al-Navar before we do!"
Carnelian scratched her head.
"Aye, you're right there, Scrib, but it'd do us some good if we had some idea where to start looking for Al-Navar's little signpost, "Where the swirly winds doth bow" or whateversuch verse his poem had. Haren isn't a small place, as you can plainly see."
Roza nodded.
"I could have a look about the market here, to see if I might find some sort of map to the island."
"Good!" declared Carnelian, "You do that, and I shall just have a quick word with those fellows over there with spears who, flatteringly, seem to have recognised me, and who appear excited at the prospect of seeing myself and the Aurora here in Haren once again."
Indeed, Roza had not noticed, but a troop of the local soldiery were pushing their way through the crowd. They were dressed in smart navy blue uniforms with gold braiding, and each wore a tall helmet and tassel. The one at the front of the troop had a waxed moustache that he kept twisting in an officious manner, as befitted his status as a sergeant of the

government of Port Haren. The uniformed group of men came to a sudden stop, and the sergeant clicked his heels smartly and flicked the tassel hanging from his helmet.
"Captain Carnelian of the Aurora, in the name of Governor Boleo's pleasure, you will come with us."
"My, indeed, will I?" said Carnelian, innocently, her eyes wide.
In answer, the sergeant tapped at the pistol slung from his belt meaningfully.
Swallowing, Roza recalled that Grey Nurse had previously made mention of the fact that Carnelian had done something to upset Governor Boleo when last the Aurora was in Port Haren. She rather hoped Carnelian hadn't caused the sort of upset that meant Boleo was going to want to see how difficult it might be to remove Carnelian's head from her body and then work his way through the crew until he felt his mood improving. Having seen how much Captain Carnelian enjoyed a fight, Roza was even more concerned that she would draw her sword against the Haren Guards here, but instead, Carnelian looked completely relaxed, as if the moustached sergeant and his tassel-helmeted soldiers had approached them merely to discuss how pleasant the weather was looking today.
"On your way, Scribbler," Carnelian said, "You get along and look for them supplies you mentioned. There's hardly any other markets around the seas to compete for Haren's in noise and activity. No doubt you'll find what you are looking for. In the meantime, I'll just have a quiet little word with these fine representatives of Governor Boleo."
Unwilling to leave Carnelian with these armed guards, Roza hesitated, but the Captain shooed her away insistently. Reluctantly, Soledad took a few steps back, and before she knew it, the milling crowds of the market had pushed her along and the Captain was out of sight. In fact, in a few moments, she was completely lost in the bustling crowds, swept past all manner of sights and sounds and smells. A woman shouted at her to try some fried dumplings, while a man insisted that the young lady looked to be in the market for some snake skin, which was cheaper still if the young lady would buy more than a dozen skins. Roza politely declined and wandered on. Suddenly, she pulled up short - why, here beneath a tent-cloth was a watery-eyed bored man in a turban surrounded by shelves and stacks of books and scrolls. Surely here she would find a map of the island to help them on to the first marker! Roza felt a momentary sadness at the thought of the library she had left behind, and all those books that had been so much a part of the safety and comfort of her lost home. Well, at least here was the comforting sight of books! It was pleasant just to stand near these piles of parchment and paper, but before she knew it, she was making eager lists of the things she would carry out of here if she could. Why, here was Von Zeit's 'Omnium Animalium' with several plates of strange beasts, and over there was the letters of Goodwife Lambert! What an enticingly tatty little edition of Makir's 'Satirical Songs and Odes' was just here poking out at her from between two tomes on Italian Art, almost whispering at Roza to reach out and buy it! Roza discreetly examined her funds and sighed mournfully. She had nothing but a few coins. If only she could afford just three or four of these fine volumes - just enough to place by her head in her bunk on the Aurora, so that she might perhaps dream of home at night!

The bored man in the turban who owned the book stall had begun to take notice of Roza and wondered aloud without much enthusiasm whether she might want to purchase something. He had caught sight of Roza counting her few coins, which did not inspire him with much hope.
"Might you have such a thing as a map of this island of Haren?" Roza asked timidly.

The man in the turban grunted and unfurled a beautifully detailed map, painted with deep blue for the skies above the island, with gilt edges.
Roza felt her face flush.
"Might you perhaps have a somewhat...less grand map of the island of Haren?" Roza said apologetically, and held up her few remaining coins.
The man in the turban grunted again, this time in such a way that seemed to suggest that a poor book seller could not expect anything better from the cruel and no doubt illiterate fates. He rummaged until he found a torn and rumpled scrawling of the island that appeared to have been drawn on the back of a large faded bill of local ordinances. Roza inspected the map. Despite the roughness of the document, she was sure that it would suffice to set them on the trail of Al-Navar's first clue. The man in the turban took her coins and nodded. Roza folded the map safely away in her notebook.
"I can only wish that I had the power to purchase more of your wares," Roza said wistfully.
"And aren't wishes powerful gleamin' things, girl?" a voice muttered behind her. Roza did not even have time to turn to see who had spoken, when a clawed hand had a painful grip upon her arm and had dragged her from the bookseller's tent to a dark corner of the market before she even had a chance to shout out.

Chapter 7

"Now, now, no need for screaming, eh, little Bookworm," croaked the voice of the man who had seized her, "Why, you know me, don't you? It's your old friend Fausto, remember?"
Shining in the shadows were the bejewelled teeth of Fancy Fausto, his thin face looming over Roza, drawn taut in a smile.
"Seeing you, my learned young lass," Fausto cooed, "I thought perhaps we could have a little parley without that prancing firebrand Carnelian to get in our way."
"I do not believe I have anything to say to you, good sir!" Roza insisted and made an attempt to shake Fancy Fausto's sinewed hand from her arm, to no avail - his claws remained fast.
Fancy winked at Roza,
"Ah, but mad'moisselle, I think that an old sea dog like Fausto might have a thing or two to say to you. Something to your profit, aye?"
Roza began to protest that she had no need for any such offering, but Fausto cut her short with a clicking of his tongue.
"Now, now, lass, Fausto has seen and done all manner of things, and he has a little wisdom of his own. If you'd be good enough to heed him for a moment, perhaps you might learn a thing or two. Ah, listen now, girl, Fausto has sailed all about this shining world of ours and he has learned that all any mortal upon this earth truly wants is to have a little somethin' to make 'em feel good and satisfied. And, you'll forgive me, but there I saw you pawing about them tatty old books in the market, why almost hungry you were for them - now, don't bother to try and deny it, Fausto's lights always spot when someone wants somethin'. All that learnin' and thinkin' and readin' just right at your fingertips, and there's you with barely a coin in your pocket!" Fausto shook his head sadly and sighed at the very thought. With his free hand he reached into his multi-coloured coat and withdrew a pouch. He held the pouch by the drawstrings and swung it to and fro, the sound of coins gently tinkling inside.
"Ain't that a luverly tune, lass?" Fausto whispered reverently, "Why, it's one of the finest sounds in the world, you take it from Fausto."
Roza glared at him as fiercely as she could, although anxiety fluttered in her heart.
"You speak of knowing the wants of others, Captain Fausto, but what, pray, is it that you want with me?"
Fausto swung the bag of coins around in a loop thoughtfully.
"What do I want, lass? Why that we should be friends and perhaps do business together. Good business brings gladness to Fausto's heart. All I want to do is give you this bag of pretty, pretty shiny coins. My, think of all the dusty old books you could buy for yourself with 'em! Ain't that a thing!"
"And what would you expect in return?" Roza growled.
Fausto shrugged.
"Why, ever so small a return, lass! A light little matter that would hardly burden you at all! Fausto keeps his eyes open, and that ruckus back in the tavern with the Satrap's lot and that flashy Carnelian, Fausto didn't miss none of that." Fancy Fausto leaned forward and tapped by his eye. "It's clear as day that there's something about you that others want. So, for this

luverly big bag o' coin, all you've got to do is just talk to your dear friend Fausto, just a friendly parley about what it's all been about, young lass."
Roza shook her head.
"It scarce seems a fair bargain to strike, Captain Fausto."
The brightly dressed pirate cackled to himself.
"Don't worry about that, me girl, I told ye, Fausto has got an eye for the bargain. A sailor doesn't get as richly decked out as meself without being sure that he can spy the faint shimmer an' shine of value. I can tell when there's profitable business afoot, jest like a bird can sense when there's a catch of fish to be et."
Roza stiffened at the thought of unloosening her tongue for that money. What, betray Captain Carnelian, after all she had done? For a few shelves of books and a bag of coins? Never! She had been raised to be an honourable young woman, one who believed that one's word was one's bond, and she was beginning to suspect that gem-smiling Captain Fausto's word was not worth a scrap of coloured ribbon.
"You will have to forgive me, Captain," Roza squeaked, "But I fear that I have no aid to offer you."
Fausto snorted.
"Don't be hasty, little lass. Don't let that dancin' Carnelian's foolishness fill up your head. You think any of that high-minded nonsense will save you when the oceans be getting stormy? Or when there's a blade to your throat or your food has run out? The only safety lies in wealth, lass, good, solid wealth you can hold and bite, Fausto knows it! Don't be rattle-headed like Carnelian, puttin' your faith an' yer safety into something so aerated as ideals! Why they ain't things at all! Ideals ain't got no substance, no weight, no colour, no shine - there ain't a damn'd thing to 'em no matter how hard you be squintin'. Listen to Fausto. I've sailed from sea to sea and never seen such a single blasted coin's worth of ideals you could touch, and never saw no ideals buy a crumb of bread for a hungry belly. Get that ideals flotsam overboard, lass, stick to what you can hold and heft! Stick to what is worth anything!"
"I thank you for your offer and your advice, Captain Fausto," Roza said through gritted teeth, "But I will have to once again decline your offer, and insist that I have no particular information of any kind to share with you."
Fancy Fausto loomed menacingly and his clawed grip tightened on Roza's arm, digging painfully into her skin. She was about to cry out when Fancy suddenly released her and smiled. He looked at something out in the alleyway.
"Well, we shall see what we shall see, little bookworm," he murmured, before ducking his bird-like head deep and slipping off away into the crowds.
Roza rubbed her arm to make the soreness pass and wondered what had prompted Fausto to give up his quest so suddenly. In a moment she had her answer. There was a commotion in the market stalls. Roza did not even need to get a good look to know that here came Captain Carnelian running through the market, jumping and jostling through the crowds, her progress marked by angry curses and the synchronised stomping of Carnelian's escort of guards. Clutching her bag tight, Roza dashed alongside Carnelian as she came past.
"Didn't I tell you that all manner of excitements are to be found here in Port Haren, Scribbler? Why, wasn't that a many-hued Fancy Fausto I just spied?" Carnelian talked on as they ran, so practiced was she in the art of the fleet foot that she scarcely seemed short of breath even when in flight.

Roza nodded awkwardly while running alongside as she tried to keep up.
"Yes, Captain," Soledad puffed, "He wanted to buy information from me about our mission."
Carnelian laughed and leapt over a barrow of fruit.
"Why, the pretty-plumed vulture," Carnelian said with bemusement, "He'll never change, that thin greedy carcass."
Roza was most gratified that Carnelian's manner made it clear that she had not even considered the possibility of Roza agreeing to Fausto's terms in even the smallest detail.
"And how have you kept yourself busy, Captain?" Roza managed to get out, as a woman shouted at them for having knocked over a display of rugs.
"Oh, you know, this and that. I do have to admit that my little chat with Governor Boleo's guards perhaps didn't go as smoothly as I would have hoped. You know, you wouldn't think it, but I am beginning to suspect that the Governor might still be a trifle upset about that little misunderstanding when last we met, when we may have somewhat sunk his little pleasure cruiser of a boat. I tried to explain that holding grudges can lead to all manner of unpleasant ailments of the stomach, but the guards had their ears stopped. All their interrogations and accusations were becoming tiresome, so I thought I'd just step out for a little bit of air."
"Do you think we can outrun them?" Roza wondered aloud, for already her legs were beginning to pain her.
"Oh, I'd imagine we can escape that lot behind us," said Carnelian screeching to a sudden halt, "It's all those guards in front of us that I think will prove to be a little tricky."

Chapter 8

There was nothing for it but for Carnelian to shrug and follow along with the guards, flanked on all sides by large and well-armed individuals, many of whom had a sheen of sweat on their faces and were struggling to march imposingly when still out of breath. This sudden burst of forced exercise may have explained why there was a distinct attitude of hostility towards their captive. Somehow, Roza had become swept up in the escort, and the guards had decided that if she was an associate of the known trouble-maker and probable sea-devil, Captain Carnelian, then Roza would be obligated to remain under guard until the Captain had been escorted to the meeting with the Governor. Roza's chances of being set at liberty were not helped by Carnelian's steady flow of one-sided bantering conversation with the guards as they marched, as Lalla Carnelian explained at length and quite cheerily that Roza was her official Scribbler, and knowing the wiley ways of Governors, all things considered, she'd prefer to have her own Scribbler on hand to keep a record of the conversation, so there could not be any more of these unfortunate misunderstandings later.

They were marched up the steep hill via a discreet laneway that offered few opportunities for escape and kept the whole procession out of sight of the lofty residents of the upper reaches of Port Haren, who perhaps would not care to turn their busy and refined gazes at the somewhat sordid sight of prisoners being escorted to Governor Boleo.

Having been marched through a series of large gates of sturdy and unimpeachable construction, Soledad and Carnelian were then bumped into a large brown stone room built deep in one of the many basements of the Governor's palace. No doubt in the main section of the palace, all the rooms were decorated to the highest standards, Governor Boleo being famously fond of spending money on surrounding himself with the highest standards, finding that lower standards simply would not do for someone of his wealth and position. This large stone room, in contrast to the upper floors of the palace, was markedly bare and unadorned, which led Roza to suspect that this was a place not for the public eye, but rather a place for more discreet business of the Governor's, and no doubt for more unpleasant business at that. The guards locked the door behind them and prodded Carnelian and Roza to the centre of the room, standing all around them, at a spear's distance. At the far end of the room on a raised platform stood a long oak table covered with all manner of little tidbits, sweetmeats, and delicacies. A figure was distractedly picking at this fine fare, sitting nestled in a large chair cushioned with plush red and purple velvet. From the way this figure scowled at the sight of Captain Carnelian, it seemed probable to Roza that this was none other than Governor Boleo himself, a rotund, squat fellow, with lightly feathered hair and large staring eyes that were topped by suitably expansive and gubernatorial brows.
"Carnelian, you gallows-slave of a sea dog!" Boleo squawked.
While trying to remain still before this notable personage, Roza looked about her from the sides of her eyes for any sudden signs of violence from the guards all about them. Carnelian, on the other hand beamed as if having run into an old acquaintance by the merest chance.
"Governor Boleo, you plump old thing! Your palace simply has it all, doesn't it? I don't think

we've had the pleasure of meeting in this particular wing of you stately home, Governor. How well life atop the very top of Port Haren appears to be treating you! And may I remark upon what a fine stone room you've got yourself here - listen to those acoustics! It echoes wonderfully and ominously in here, but I'd be willing to bet that a whole pack of howling dogs couldn't be heard outside these walls."
Governor Boleo huffed and glared furiously, inflating his robes of office.
"Captain Lalla Carnelian!" The Governor piped in a high and scratching voice, "You may have avoided the reach of the law in the past, but you are summoned here today-"
"And I thank you for the invite, Boleo," said Carnelian cheekily, taking a seat on the stone floor, treating this as if it were as comfortable a perch as the Governor's own padded official seat, "But I must say you've got some damn strange ideas about hospitality here on Haren."
Roza wondered if she should apologise to the Governor on behalf of the Captain, but before she could get a word out, Boleo's rarified voice continued with an edge of irritation.
"In order to answer charges against your person, Carnelian, you have been brought her by the majesty of the law represented in this office-"
"And that majesty looks fine upon you, dear Governor, take it from me, and don't listen to those unkind souls who whisper you look a right rare house-bird in your finery."
This interruption was too much for the dignity of Governor Boleo, and enraged, he jumped to his feet and drew himself to his full height, a gesture that Roza thought was perhaps less majestic than the Governor had intended.
"A damn pox on you, Carnelian, you lawless vagabond!" Boleo screeched, thumping the imposing table in front of him several times for emphasis, "When last you showed that foolish grinning face of yours here, your disregard for the law cost Port Haren dearly!"
Carnelian inclined her head and made a sign to Roza to make a note of that. Roza swallowed and did so.
"Well," Carnelian said soothingly, as if talking to an infant, "I reckon perhaps you are still a little out of sorts, Boleo, because you missed out on a good little somethin' to fill your pocket, which has always got you fluffed up and bothered a lot more than anything else here in Haren."
The Governor banged the desk again.
"Calumny! I order the accused to keep silent and recall that for all intents and purposes, I am Port Haren, and it is me!" Boleo screeched, "And you, jackanape and gallows-rogue, were responsible for the sinking of one of my personal ships!"
Carnelian sprung up from the ground and marched over to Roza, tapping her notebook.
"Scribbler," Carnelian declared, "Let the record show that I'm sure I don't know what happened to Governor Boleo's little pleasure ship, but since there's word all about the sea that particular ship was carrying a whole mess of payments extracted by unsavoury types to be brought directly to Governor Boleo (who is Port Haren and who Port Haren is he), so that certain local sailors of the violently thieving occupation might buy a lovely gloss of respectability from the lofty Governor, and so that these barely concealed pirates might continue to rob and attack the weak all over the seas and find a comfortable berth in Governor Boleo's bosom. Well, when all is said and done, I warrant that you'd be better off without that little ship. I fancy you've got others, and who can say, maybe some of that plunder made its way back to those what first suffered for it?"
The Governor made a choking gurgle of anger, and his face began to turn a very alarming

colour.
"I'm sure the Captain is very sorry for anything she did do," ventured Roza, hoping to calm the temper of this individual who held their lives in his hand.
"And also sorry for anything I didn't do," added Carnelian, indicating that Roza should add that to the note.
"I will not be defied, Carnelian! I am the Governor here! I am the law and wisdom of rule! You are nothing more than a homeless water-vagabond, and if I say something is law on Port Haren, than so it is, and you may not defy me!"
The Governor collapsed into his padded seat and attempted to compose himself. He made a pretence of looking over some papers.
"Captain Carnelian, you and your friends must learn to obey and respect the law of the land and those invested with its power. To that end, I have taken the measure of confining your crew onboard the 'Aurora'."
"And what about us, sir?" whispered Roza fearfully, her pen raised for the Governor's sentence. Yet no matter how much she feared the anger of this man, she would not now desert the side of Captain Carnelian after all she had done. No, she would stand fast!
Governor Boleo inspected his nails with a sly and cruel look.
"I think something... special is called for in a recalcitrant case like yours, Carnelian. Perhaps you know that here in my mountain estates on Upper Haren, I have something of a little hobby. I collect birds and one or two other interesting creatures. They are most extraordinary beasts I've gathered from all over the world, I am not ashamed to admit - I have a rather unique collection in my Garden of Beasts and Birds. Oh, and all of my birds and beasts have a somewhat rough disposition, which is perhaps why I've heard my little Menagerie called the 'Claw Park' by some. A foolish name, but perhaps apt. Now, the good people of Port Haren need not worry about encountering my little collection, because my pets are kept safe and separate. However, I think perhaps, Captain Carnelian, given your own savage disposition, you could benefit from a night or two spent amongst my vicious pets in Claw Park."
The Governor laughed with glee, and before Roza could begin to lodge the very rational and persuasive arguments designed to sway the reason of the personage before them, Boleo waved his hand, and Carnelian and Soledad were surrounded by guards who dragged them away, the satisfied giggling of the Governor fading behind them.

Chapter 9

The path to the Governor's collection of beasts and birds did not offer any opportunity for escape, no matter how hard Roza looked all about her. Yet, the impossibility of escape did not seem to bother Carnelian a jot, and instead the Captain whistled and joked with the impassive-faced guards. This lightness of manner in the face of unknown dangers gave some small comfort to Roza, who began to think that from a Carnelian perspective, it wasn't so much a matter that escape was impossible, but rather that escape was impossible just at the moment. Carnelian's jaunty air seemed to say: who knows what might happen next? In the meantime, the pair were instructed to cross a narrow bridge at the point of a sword. It was a firm enough bridge, which Roza was thankful for, because she had rather been struck by a fear that it would sway unsafely underfoot and collapse before they even reached their imprisonment in the Menagerie. Unfortunately, just when she was thinking about how grateful she was that the Governor had seen fit to make this narrow bridge properly, Roza chanced to look down and was suddenly struck by a new sense of terror when she saw that the bridge crossed over such a deep chasm that they could barely see down to the deadly depths below. Governor Boleo's park was an entire island outcrop, and the Governor's pets were kept from harassing the populace of Port Haren by the barrier of this great watery gap between where they prowled and the city itself. This rope bridge appeared to be the only practical way in or out from the Menagerie, and once they had crossed over, they would be imprisoned amongst Boleo's collection. They had no choice but to proceed. Roza gripped tightly on the rope railing of the bridge and forced herself on. When Carnelian and Roza were about to step foot into the Menagerie, one of the soldiers shouted out.
"The Governor wants to give you some chance of surviving the night. He doesn't want your little visit to Claw Park to be over too quickly before you'd had a chance to appreciate his little collection."
With that, he carelessly flung something towards them that Captain Carnelian snatched from the air. It was her shining sword! Roza's spirits rose for a moment - perhaps they would now stand a fighting chance! At the other end of the bridge, the soldiers closed an imposing gate where a watch was posted. There was certainly no going back that way, and several of the soldiers had rifles that they waved in their direction, so there was nothing for it but to stand tall and face Claw Park. Carnelian strapped on her sword and swaggered forth with her usual confidence, while Roza warily eyed the great black wheeling clouds of birds she had spied about the highest reaches of the Governor's Menagerie.

Already the sun was beginning to set, and although Roza had little experience of nature and the creatures who roamed such environs, her learnings led her to assume that the falling of night would embolden whatever terrible creatures Governor Boleo had collected in this hilled menagerie for his cruel amusement. Roza suggested to Carnelian that they try to reach higher ground before it became too dark to safely continue on this treacherous terrain, and if they were lucky they would perhaps find some shelter for the night before some of the clawed inhabitants of the park first found them.

"Do you think the Governor means to let real harm come to us here?" huffed Roza as they clambered up the wooded slopes, scrabbling over dirt and stones.
"Well, Boleo will be keeping an eye on us," said Carnelian as she swung herself around a mossy tree trunk, "He has a very expensive and overly large telescope set up in the palace so he can watch what is happening all over Haren without having to get off his posterior. I imagine he'll swing his lens our way to give himself some small amusement, but I would not rely on the pampered puff to get over his bad temper in time to change his mind and let us loose. Boleo's a great one for the long tantrum, I'm afraid, little Scrib. No, we'd best look to our own welfare. Onwards and upwards!"
Roza nodded to Carnelian and tried not to weigh their chances in this unknown and hostile landscape. No, she would focus on the here and now and the climbing of this hill, thinking of nothing except overcoming the soreness in her arms and legs. Carnelian remained optimistic as ever, but Roza did catch her casting a wary eye upwards towards the cruel-screeching cloud of birds at the peak, which they were slowly drawing nearer as they climbed.

Roza was negotiating a tricky smooth boulder when she froze awkwardly half over the rock at a sudden lingering howl. It was unlike any animal she had ever heard before.
"I think the other residents of the park may have become curious about us," she whispered to Lalla Carnelian. Lalla set her mouth in a serious line, and pulled Roza up onto the boulder. The sun was low now, streaking the sky with the last shreds of pinks and orange, and beneath was the menacing grey that heralded the coming of the night.

On and on they went, and although the light faded, they continued their way through the undergrowth that was tenacious enough to grow clinging on the upper heights of the Governor's Menagerie. Roza was covered in scrapes and bruises from fighting her way through the bushes and brambles and stones. She wished that she was a little taller, for Lalla Carnelian skipped over thorny knotted branches that invariably tangled themselves about Roza's own person.
"I hope the rest of the crew are safe," gasped Roza.
"Oh, they'll be fine," Lalla Carnelian assured her, "This isn't the first time someone has tried to cage the Aurora and her crew. Grey Nurse and the others will take care of things until we can get back, worry not about that, little Scribbler!"
Roza Soledad was just about to respond that she hoped that they would in fact get back, when Carnelian suddenly hushed her and became completely still. She pointed to an outcrop just below them. To Roza's horror, there below them in the gloom of falling night were unblinking glowing eyes and wide grins filled with sharp teeth. They made chittering yowls to each other as if they were speaking of their delight at finding something to hunt, and one of them gave the same eerie howl they had heard earlier. The beasts were upon them! Carnelian drew out her sword and even in the little light that was left, her blade managed a small flash of light which gave the beasts a moment of pause. The things in the shadows growled at each other in discussion, but to Roza's dismay it was soon apparent that it would take more than the sight of shining steel to still these wild animals. The glowing eyes and vicious grins were coming closer to them! Roza and Carnelian backed up the slope as quickly as they could, but this would have been a difficult enough procedure in broad daylight while facing the way one was going. They could not hope to outpace the beasts in this manner. Their pursuers were eager

but cautious, drawing about them from various sides, and as they crept closer, Carnelian and Soledad began to see their forms taking shape. Of the animal kingdom, these beasts most closely resembled something of the family of cat-like creatures, with their reflective eyes and agility, leaping from stone to branch along the hilly terrain, perfectly able to see in the low light and as sure footed on the uneven ground as if it were a flat plain. They were covered with black-and-white shaggy fur and were as large as a well-fed hunting dog. Yet, there was something cruel and wolf-like about their snouts, too, and their great curled and tufted ears gave a menacing cast to their grinning jaws. They twitched long tails as they surrounded their prey, yowling and yapping to one another with fevered excitement. One of them, more ambitious than the rest of the pack, howled and leapt straight for Carnelian, a grey blur of noise and fur and claws that knocked Lalla to the ground. With a grunt, Captain Carnelian pushed this yowler off her with the edge of her blade, the overly ambitious creature shrieking in pain and anger as it was thrown to one side. Emboldened, the rest of the pack now decided to take their chance, bounding and leaping towards them and slashing at Roza and Carnelian with their claws. Roza scrabbled around the ground and seized a handful of rocks, throwing them as hard as she could at the beasts. Despite the poor light, she managed to strike one or two of the vicious furred attackers, and while her missiles did not do much lasting injury to the animals, the stones that flew true at least made those struck hold their distance for the moment. As Roza was throwing fistfuls of stones at the Yowlers, Carnelian slashed about her with her sword in great arcs, hissing and shouting in response to the noise the beasts made, trying to make herself appear as large, omnipresent, and imposing as she could. Not all the beasts were convinced by this display, and at one time, three Yowlers leapt in attack on Carnelian all at once, gnashing and clawing at her. Falling backwards, Lalla managed to kick her boots out at one of the animals, driving it off yelping into the distant, and another she knocked out of the way with the pommel of her sword, but then the third had its jaws triumphantly at Carnelian's throat, slavering in anticipation of biting down into flesh. Roza gave a shout of alarm, and without another thought, she lifted the largest stone she had to hand and brought it crashing down on the snout of the four-legged attacker. The tail of the beast went taut, it swivelled its ears to face the little young woman with a confused expression on its blood-stained muzzle. Roza drew herself up as high as she could and raised the stone above her head, bellowing loudly and roaring until her voice went hoarse. The gleaming eyes of the Yowler flickered, and howling in frustration, the beast retreated, the sounds of its fellows following after it back down the slope.

Panting, Roza dropped the stone to the ground and rushed over to the Captain's side. Carnelian's coat had been torn by the Yowler's zealous claws, and there were bloody teeth marks where the beast's teeth had attempted to tear the life from her flesh. Worst of all, when Roza leaned over the Captain, trying to make out the extent and severity of her injuries in the darkness, to her horror she realised that Lalla Carnelian was not moving.

Chapter 10

Roza frantically tried to remember all that she had read about medical matters and injuries. Von Osten's 'Illuminated Manuscript of Corporeal Physic and Anatomy'? Xi Bu's 'Book of One Thousand Remedies of the Home of the Soul'? Oh, if only she had her books and notes about her now! Gingerly, Roza lowered her ear to see if Lalla Carnelian was at least breathing. After a moment, with a grim smile she was convinced that the Captain still lived. Roza carefully inspected the worst-looking and bloodiest gashes Carnelian had received. She tore hasty strips from the Captain's ruined coat with bruised fingers and bandaged Carnelian's throat. Roza then fashioned some plasters from papers torn from her notebook, which she chewed into shape, applied to wounds on Carnelian's ribs, and bound them with further strips of cloth. Satisfied that the bleeding seemed to have stopped and wary lest the Yowlers return for another attack, Roza pried the Captain's sword from the hand that still gripped it, wiping it clean and replacing it safely into its scabbard. Roza then seized Carnelian beneath her arms and attempted to drag her further off to some semblance of safety. For all that the Captain was light and dancing when she was in good health and on her own two feet, Roza found her most cumbersome to move in her unconscious state, not least because her trailing boots and dangling hands were constantly being caught upon twigs and trapped between stones. Given the exertions of the evening thus far, Roza was soon exhausted.

Laying Carnelian down for a moment to rest her own arms and back, Roza was beginning to despair of what to do next, when the Captain mumbled something that sounded very much like "No Spinach!", then raised her head and looked about groggily.
"Sorry, Scrib," she croaked, "Bad moment to have a nap."
Young Soledad was overcome with relief merely because the Captain had awoken. She helped Carnelian to her feet, and with the Captain leaning clumsily down on to Roza's shoulder, they carefully wended their way on and up the hill, looking for shelter from Boleo's beasts.
"I'm afraid that I don't think much of the Governor's collection so far," said Roza with a smile.
Carnelian cackled, then winced at the pain in her throat. With her free hand, her fingers felt at the makeshift bandage Roza had applied.
"Feels like you've haven't done too bad a job, shipmate," Carnelian said hoarsely, "Grey Nurse himself couldn't have done much better in these circumstances."
Roza blushed. "I'm afraid that in fact my knowledge and experience of medical matters is limited, Captain, but hopefully these makeshift wrappings will do until we can get you back to the Aurora. I am pleased that you are faring as well as can be expected, in any case." Roza Soledad paused in thought. "Although, you did say something odd about spinach in your unconscious delirium."
Carnelian frowned and sighed.
"Oh, that's what I've got to look forward to, little Scribbler, when we wend our way back to the Aurora. That old fusspot of a Nurse has a fever for making Cook feed me spinach whenever he thinks I've had a few bumps and scratches. The stuff he pours down my throat is far worse than a little bit of a bothersome injury. And the poultices he makes! The smell of

the damned things alone are enough to make a body weak!"
Roza shook her head and laughed, but was cut short by a new and unnerving noise coming from above them - a sort of high rattling that sent a shiver down Soledad's spine.
"No doubt that's another branch of Boleo's nasty little collection of pets," Carnelian said quietly, "We'd best find shelter fast before we run into anything else."

This was easier said than done. Although the Captain stubbornly refused to admit it, Roza could see Carnelian was beginning to have difficulty staying awake, her body slackening now and then and only kept upright by the supreme efforts of both of them. Walking slowly upwards in the darkness, the Captain almost collapsed entirely, and to stave off despair, Roza willed her eyes to be as sharp as they could possibly be, staring intently for any sign of shelter. Carnelian couldn't be relied upon to find somewhere suitable, since she had barely enough strength to stand and stumble, much less to keep a keen eye out in the hope of spotting somewhere to hide from Boleo's Beasts. After what seemed like an eternity of anxious search, so relieved was the young Mademoiselle Soledad when she caught sight of a stony cavern in the hillside that she couldn't resist giving a cry of thanks, a noise that was disconcertingly answered by the rattling shrieks from the trees and air. Roza dragged Carnelian into the small cave, and tried to make the Captain as comfortable as possible on a hastily constructed bed of grass and moss. It did not look an especially commodious place to lay one's head, but Lalla Carnelian was in no condition to voice complaint. They rested there in the dark, Roza sitting and staring out the mouth of the cavern, on guard with a stone by her hand ready to be used as a weapon.

With a sudden jerk of her head, Roza realised she must have fallen asleep. It was still dark, and there was no way to tell how much time had passed. She cursed herself groggily - to fall asleep at a time like this, when the Captain needed watching! As she shook the sleep from her head, Roza began to wonder to herself what it was that had woken her from her weary slumber. She felt about the dirty cave floor for her stone, fear washing over her as she realised that she could see the glittering eyes of the Yowlers flashing past the view from the mouth of the cave. They could not hope to fight them off now, not with the impossibility of moving the Captain before she had a chance to rest and recover. If the Yowlers were bold enough to corner them here in this shelter, they would have no way to escape their snapping jaws. To calm herself, Roza wrote herself a list with her finger on the rocky floor of the cave. Firstly - they could not move. Secondly, they could not let the Yowlers dare to attack them here, especially as it seemed probable that the entire pack had tracked them to this shelter. Conclusion - she must find a way of preventing the beasts from desiring to approach any closer. Although she could not see her list in the darkness, Roza pondered the image of it in her mind and came to a decision. She needed something that made the kingdom of beasts withdraw in fear. She would have to build a fire.

Soledad once again was discovering that in difficult times, she could be more resourceful than she might have supposed. Her brief time travelling with the Captain and the rest of the crew of the Aurora had taught her that much. She decided to try and think like Lalla Carnelian, at least while Captain Carnelian herself was indisposed. Setting her jaw, she carefully made a nest of torn paper produced from her bag, mixed with what twigs and moss she could find

about the cave. Apologising, she decided that she would have to use much of the rough vegetation of Carnelian's makeshift bedding. Carnelian did not make a sound as Soledad pulled the assembled bed of vegetation out from under her. Roza had planned to use two rocks to try to produce a spark, but on reflection she had the sudden thought that the Captain might have something more appropriate about her person. Rummaging around the pockets of Carnelian's torn coat produced what her fingers suspected must be a flint, and a moment of experimenting with this device quickly gave off a bright and happy spark. Roza soon had a small fire going, and she was pleased to note that she had more or less positioned it so that thankfully most of the smoke would blow outwith the cave mouth, while the fire itself provided a bright and crackling deterrent for the Yowlers out in the darkness. Indeed, as she squinted past the fire, she assured herself that it appeared to be doing the job, for, while the beasts were not retreating, they were definitely not approaching any closer, put off by the choking smoke and sparking flames.

Perhaps they had managed to climb further up into the heights of Claw Park than they had imagined, for in the passing into night, the air had become biting cold, and Roza was thankful for the warmth of the fire. Now that she had a better sight about the cave, which did not extend more than a few lengths back into the hill. Roza wandered about to collect more fuel to keep the fire going, even daring to crawl carefully out of cover to scavenge whatever she could find just outside the mouth of the cave, before hurrying back to the protective light within. In time she had a modest but sufficient pile of wood that should keep the fire burning until morning. Another inspection of Carnelian showed that she was breathing evenly in her sleep. Since Roza had read in a treatise that The Most Studious Venizzio had mentioned how a good sleep was the best tonic for all ailments, she hoped that this meant that Lalla Carnelian was on the mend. She extracted some dried bread from her bag, and reserving half for the Captain, she spent the night nibbling away at her ration, keeping a watchful eye beyond the fire. If she felt herself starting to nod off, she would pace about the cavern, or write up some notes on points of interest of what they had seen of the beasts, or pored over her notes on Al-Navar, thoughtfully glancing at the map of Port Haren she had managed to buy at the market, which already felt a lifetime ago.

Chapter 11

It was one of the longest nights Roza had ever endured. Out in the wooded darkness were all manner of terrifying noises, and Roza sat crouched by the fire, unable to let her guard down for a moment. Just when it seemed that quiet and safety had descended, she felt herself become stiff with fear when the silence was broken by the shrieking or hissing or barking of some of the unseen deadly beasts of Claw Park. Roza also caught flashes of the Yowlers prowling about outside, but thankfully in time the gleaming eyes vanished back into the darkness with disappointed howls. Slowly the first light of sunrise began to paint in the details of the view outside the cavern.

"Morning!" said Carnelian brightly, sitting up and looking about her. Roza Soledad was so startled by the Captain returning to consciousness after all the hours of tense silence that she had to stop herself from leaping up and yelping.

Gingerly, Carnelian, raised herself. Unlike Roza, the Captain was too tall to stand up completely straight in the cramped cave. She inspected her torn coat in the early daylight, clucking her tongue at the tears and rents in the cloth.

"Well, we made it through a day and a night, at least, without being eaten," Carnelian declared, "That should get Governor Boleo good and furious!"

It was the most extraordinary thing. You wouldn't believe that all through the night Captain Carnelian had looked to be at Death's door, and now she looked a little stiff and ragged, but as full of life and vigour as ever, as if she was powered by some interior fire and spirit too strong to be bothered about troublesome little things like injuries. Roza offered the Captain her share of the rations, and the pair of them sat around the ashes of the fire while Carnelian ate her modest breakfast.

"Fine work keeping Boleo's beasties at arm's length all night, Scribbler," Carnelian said, "But after keeping guard all night long, I reckon you must be all done in from lack of sleep. You go on and close your eyes for a little while and I'll take my turn on watch, Scrib."

Roza began to protest but Carnelian waved away her objections.

"Now, now Scribbler, we've both had a time of it, and if we're going to find our way out of Boleo's park of horrors in more or less one piece, you'll need to have your wits about you."

In fact, Roza had to admit that she was indeed completely exhausted, and it transpired that she hadn't even the strength to argue with the Captain. She curled herself up against the wall of the cavern, barely feeling the uneven surface where she lay, and listening to Carnelian hum sea-songs to herself, the tired young Soledad was soon asleep.

When Roza's eyes opened, Lalla Carnelian had fallen silent and through the opening of the cave came the bright sunshine of morning proper. For a delightful moment or two, Roza barely remembered where she was, but slowly she began to feel her aches and pains more clearly as she stretched out her arms and legs. She gave a half smile to the morning and yawned, and all at once she remembered where she was and how danger surrounded her up and down the slopes of the Governor's Claw Park, not to mention the peril that awaited from the Satrap's far-reaching forces who would not hesitate to hunt her down relentlessly if herself

and Lalla Carnelian ever found a way out of this sadistic menagerie. Thankfully, as ever, Captain Carnelian was bright and certain in the face of any odds, and Roza followed suit and refused to dwell on the precariousness of their future.
"Morning, Scrib! You're looking ready to face any number of Boleo's scrabbling pets now! Why, after the pluck you showed last night, I shouldn't wonder if you could fight off a pack of those creatures from last night using nothing but your writin' quill gripped between your teeth!"
Roza smiled weakly at the thought, implausible as it seemed in the picture it painted of herself. And yet, Soledad had to admit that if Captain Carnelian stood by your side, the most improbable feats somehow suddenly seemed possible.
Roza opened her mouth to answer, but only a dry croak emerged. She had not realised how very thirsty she was this morning.
"Ah!" said Lalla Carnelian with a grin, and patting the ragged remains of her crimson coat, she found a small silver flask and handed it to Roza. The flask was dented and scuffed, but had a beautiful engraving of a lion on a flag dimly visible, as well as the inscription 'TO CAPTAIN CARNELIAN, WHO CAME FROM THE SEA IN THE HOUR OF OUR NEED.'
Unscrewing the lid, Roza cautiously sniffed the contents of the little flask. Since Carnelian gave insistent encouragement, Roza took a dainty little sip. It was nothing less than cool water, and a more delightful morning drink Roza could not recall. It was a great pity that there was only this small flask, but she was thankful for it all the same.
"Go on, get it down yer gullet, Scrib," Carnelian insisted, "I've already had my share, and I've a good feeling we'll find our way out of this entertainment of Governor Boleo's soon enough!"
Roza protested, but there was no arguing with the Captain, and in any case, she felt a desperate need to quench her thirst as much as the little flask was able. When she had drained the very last drops of water, shaking the empty flash mournfully, Roza returned it to the Captain, and they crept out of the cavern to try and seek higher ground.

Casting a wary eye behind them as they went, they started to hope that the Yowling Beasts that had attacked under cover of darkness might perhaps be instinctively disinclined to do their hunting during the hours of daylight. The unspoken thought that passed between them was that Boleo was not the sort of individual to only have a single deadly species of creature in his menagerie. A collector of his wealth, power, and avariciousness, who kept a wary eye on all the ships that came and went through Port Haren, would surely have obtained all manner of strange and deadly specimens from every point of the seas.

Due to the condition the pair of them were in, climbing the hills of Claw Park was slow going. Indeed, given the injuries sustained only a few hours before, it was a marvel that the indefatigable Carnelian could move as quickly as she did. So as not to overtax the Captain, Roza would make the excuse of periodically asking that they stop beneath the shade of a rock or tree so that she might turn over the map of Port Haren, referring to her notes and making humming and hahing noises to herself. Carnelian laughed when first she heard young Soledad making these sounds.
"Why, Scrib, with that serious, far away look in your face, and those mutterings to yerself, it's like a bit of your old dad is right here!"
Unfurling the map of Port Haren on a rock, Roza indicated more or less where she would

hazard a guess they might be in the Claw Park.
Carnelian scratched her head.
"Doesn't seem to be much for it, does it Scrib, other than to keep climbing until we can see over the whole bay and find our best path down to freedom. I don't mind admitting that I'm getting to worry about the Aurora. I don't like to be away from the ship for too long. Old Grey Nurse starts to lose his head if he's left on his own, making up all sorts of fool new rules and tidying away things where nobody can find them. By now, I wouldn't be at all surprised if Pierre is sulking up a mast and refusing to come down, and Cook is threatening that nobody on board will never eat anything but gruel again if Nurse doesn't stop interfering with her galley!"

There was perhaps one small advantage to their inability to rush up the slopes of the park - it meant that they kept an eye out as they went, and this transpired to be a good thing, too, because Roza almost trod on a large snake that was just beginning to waken and flick its forked tongue at the morning air. Holding her breath, Roza was thankful that the creature was not an early riser and quietly backed away, reflecting how close she had been to inadvertently offering her leg to the serpent's venomous fangs. They also caught sight of some large lizards adorned with glittering spikes that grew in a ridge along their backs, and while these creatures were basking on the nearby rocks their beady eyes swivelled past as the pair skirted around them.

The terrain was becoming steeper now, and the cold, clean air was sharp in their breath. Only the most tenacious and determined flora survived at this height, clinging tight to the crags. Roza made the mistake of looking down when she accidentally dislodged some pebbles, and stared at them as they clattered down over a ledge and out of sight. She swallowed hard and fixed her gaze on Carnelian in front of her and on the goal of climbing to the peak. At this height, there were strange fluttering passing shadows that made the sunlight flicker upon them, and there was also an unsettling noise, a sort of terrible rattling - like many balls of shot shaking back and forth in a damp tin bucket. The noise came from the clouds passing above. Roza shaded her eyes with her eyes and squinted upwards. With a sinking feeling, Roza realised that what she had taken for a harmless bank of drifting cloud was in fact a great flock of wheeling birds that looked something like gigantic vultures, cawing and rattling most unnervingly as they squabbled in the air, gliding and weaving upon jet black wings, a flash of blood-red colour in their bright crest about their heads like a shock of plumed mane. They were birds of a vicious feather, for they did not scruple to jostle and dive at one another with their talons and great hooked beaks. The peak of Claw Park was their domain, and if Carnelian and Roza had any hope of getting high enough to spy out the land, they had no choice but to face this next threat.

Unlike the leaping Yowlers, these birds were not interested in even the slightest caution. As soon as the winged devils caught sight of the ragged pair daring to climb towards their lofty territory in the park, they immediately began to swoop and dive at them, their powerful beaks snapping and their sharp claws slicing through the air. Barely betraying a sign that she was in any way hampered by her injuries, Captain Carnelian drew her sword and waved it at any feathered beast that dared come too close, the steel gleaming in the sunlight. For good

measure, Carnelian also made a range of whoops, shouts, and bellows to drive off the red-crested vultures. Roza, again making best use of what little she had to hand, rolled up her map of Port Haren and twirled it above her head, in the hope that the giant birds would suppose it might be a weapon too.
"Could be heading upwards wasn't the best plan!" declared Carnelian, narrowly ducking beneath a diving attack. The vultures were so worked up now that you could barely hear anything over their enraged rattling shrieks. Roza found she had to shout to even hear herself.
"No, we must continue up!" the young woman said as loudly as she could, "I've studied the map of the area again and again, and I think our only hope is up and over! I believe if we can get atop the highest point of the park, we should find a direction where the Governor will no longer be able to spy us out with his telescopes, and if we have a good deal of luck, we might be able to find some direct path down to the water that will do the least harm, and then we can attempt to swim for the Aurora and pray we have the strength!"
Carnelian dealt a blow with her free hand right amidst a mass of enraged feathers. "Well, Scrib, if you believe that's the way, then I believe it too, only let's not dilly-dally. I don't believe that these ill-humoured sacks of feathers and claws have the patience to wait until we are deceased to pick our bones!"

So furious were the attacks from the bloody-maned birds now that Roza barely dared to open her eyes, lest they scratch them out. They climbed higher and more and more of the vultures clawed and snapped and scratched at them, and inch by inch they were yet making progress to the high point of Claw Park. If only they could hold out just a little longer! Why, Roza could see what must be the highest point up ahead - there where the hill terminated in several great curved stone columns. It looked, Roza thought to herself foolishly as she batted away another great flapping noise, rather like a great claw itself.
"Look, Captain, over there!" Roza exclaimed, arm extended towards the stone claw before them, shaking with excitement.
Carnelian drove away the swirling vicious flock and chanced a glance.
"Well, it looks like we can't get any higher than this, so get to deciding which way you should start running downhill, Scrib!"
Roza shook her head, "Yes, yes, but you don't fully understand. I was right, you see, I wasn't sure, and I didn't dare say anything, but after poring over the map, I had hoped, and now here we are!"
This outburst of Roza's combined confused tones of surprise, delight, pride, and disbelief, but Carnelian hadn't the first idea what her companion was trying to convey. Roza grinned with childlike delight.
"It's real, Captain, oh I was so terribly worried we wouldn't find anything, but it's real. Remember:

Thence, where the swirling breezes doth bow,
And the wing's edges flutter and sleep,
There, traveller, you will find my flight.

Carnelian slashed away at the blood-maned vultures and furrowed her brow.
"Your riddling old Al-Navar fellow's poem? This is where your clues lead us?"

"This is the spot! The highest point of Port Haren, here in Claw Park, is "where the the swirling breezes doth bow"! Those markings on the stone columns are not natural - they must have been left here by Al-Navar himself! They are the same manner of cypher glyphs he uses in his map - these must be the coded coordinates that will to lead us to the next verse of his clue-song!"

"Excellent, Scrib," Carnelian said with a grunt, shaking a set of claws loose from her red hair, "But since these wing's edges here don't seem inclined to flutter and sleep just at the moment, you'd best get your pen and ink moving quicker than you ever have before. Get them coordinates down as fast as you can, because we have to get out of here!"

Without a moment's delay, Roza Soledad began transcribing the markings left on the lofty stone claws. Oh, how she wish she had time to examine them more carefully! She could easily devote days and days to their study! A rattling caw and a sharp prick of pain as a vicious beak snapped at her back reminded Roza that she did not have that particular luxury. She must get Al-Navar's symbols down on parchment quickly, but without a single mistake, or else they would never find the next location of the clue that would lead them to the Speechless Island!

Chapter 12

"Scrib!" demanded Carnelian, who was being overwhelmed by a violent mass of feathers and claws.
"One moment more, I pray you, Captain, I must get it transcribed correctly, or this is all for nothing! There!" she said with a last urgent flourish of her pen, stuffing the precious information into her satchel.
"Then let's say a hasty good-day to the delightful wildlife here and be on our way!" Carnelian shouted over the shrieking onslaught.
"This way!" Roza called out over her shoulder, running off down an incline away from the other side of the stone claw, "According to my study of the map, this is our best chance of reaching the water!"
And so the pair of them ran carelessly downhill, the frustrated rattling noises of the bloody-feathered birds just behind them.

The way Roza Soledad had marked down for their attempt at escape from the reaches of Claw Park was not in a strict sense, anything so clear and guiding as an actual path, and as they dashed down the slopes there were all manner of creeping obstacles that caught at their feet and threatened to bring them crashing down, or at least Roza found it so. Carnelian, as ever, was so nimble-footed that even in their awkward scrabble, she was never in danger of losing her balance and poise.

Although they did not dare pause to look back, the noise of the flesh-eating birds was not receding safely behind them as rapidly as they might have hoped. Worse still, their noisy rushing progress had roused many of the beasts of the Governor's menagerie. Fangs were bared and evil-sounding creatures hissed out at them as they dashed past, barely able to discern the things that crawled out of burrows or leapt at them from the hollows of trees and from between the rocks.
"There it is," Carnelian said with excitement. Roza dared a glance where she pointed - they could now see the bright glittering expanse of the sea that lay upon the shores of Port Haren! Roza had never felt such weightless delight at the sight of the ocean. Here, in that glittering, liquid medium, was hope and the possibility of escape and survival! And yet, now that she could see the water, she also began to wonder how far they would have to swim in order to reach the Aurora, and whether she could possibly have the strength to fight through the water over such a great length? Unfortunately, the anxiety of calculating the distance they would need to swim distracted the young Mademoiselle Soledad for long enough that she lost her footing, and found herself tumbling head over heels in an aimless racketing fall through the dirt and the scrub. With a great effort, Roza dug her hands into the dirt, and although she had picked up so much speed in her roll downwards that she could not stop, she managed at least to right herself so that she could see the onrushing obstacles as she slid downwards in a sort of uncomfortable sitting position. This moving vantage point brought bad news, however, as it looked as if there was a dangerous drop ahead and Roza could not slow her descent, no

matter how she dug her fingers in and scrabbled at passing branches, or attempted to steer her clumsy slide into an obstacle that might stop or at least slow her.

Her careening path was just approaching an edge when Roza Soledad found herself suddenly halted by something pulling at her from behind, and her stopping was so sudden after such a forceful slide down the hill that her clothing had been drawn back and constricted so tightly that it was if all the air was crushed right out of her. Roza took a brief moment to find her breath again. When her head stopped spinning, she looked forward and saw that the edge her legs were now dangling over led to a drop deep enough that Roza was not sure that she would have remained in one piece if she had continued sliding just a few feet. She looked back to find out what had caught her, and there straining to hold onto her clothes was Carnelian, who must have dashed down after and managed to snatch at Soledad's clothing just mere seconds before she toppled over the edge. As soon as she saw how painfully Carnelian's shoulder was stretched out, she immediately shuffled back, so the Captain could let go with a sigh of relief, swinging her arm gingerly and rubbing the shoulder.
"That's one way to flee Boleo's Beasties, anyway, Scrib," said Carnelian with a grin.
Roza nodded. "Yes, but I think perhaps we should try to find a slightly less severe path down to the water," she said solemnly, "I seem to have gone somewhat off track on my planned route here."
Soledad got up, brushed the dirt off herself as best she was able, wincing at the scratches and cuts she had given herself on her hands when trying to slow her descent. Thankfully, the beasts of Claw Park had not anticipated that little manoeuvre from their quarry, and by virtue of Roza rolling and sliding down the hill with Carnelian hot at her heels, they had for the moment escaped their pursuers.

As they hurried cautiously along, Carnelian never letting Roza get more than arm's length ahead in order to save the trouble of having to chase her down again, they soon came across a sharp rocky shore, and the free-wash sound of the sea.
"By the Deep, Scrib," Carnelian said happily, slapping Roza on the back, "You've got us this far, ey?"
A serious expression came across young Soledad's face.
"Captain, it looks to be some miles of swimming around in this direction before we have any hope of safety and returning to the Aurora. I confess... that I do not have much experience of such long distances in cold open water, and while I will strive to do my best, if I falter, you must continue on without me should I become a burden."
Carnelian scoffed.
"None of that noble-rot, Scribbler! The crew of the Aurora don't leave their shipmates at sea!"
The Captain shaded her eyes and looked out over the water.
"Besides, I don't think it will be quite as far to the Aurora as you might have reckoned."
Roza squinted in the same direction. There was a shape moving over the waters towards them, threading its way through rocks and rips. Roza's heart leapt for joy. It was the Aurora herself, and the ship was coming right towards them!

Chapter 13

"Come on, Scrib, you know how Nurse worries! Let's not keep 'em waiting!" said Carnelian. Without another word, she dived into the sea, cutting through the water with the speed and grace of a blade. Taking somewhat more care, Roza Soledad tiptoed over the rocks as far out as she could go towards the water. With infinite wariness, she wrapped her precious papers as tightly as she could in waterproof cloth, then sealed her bag as tightly as possible. Given how much effort and pain it had cost them to find the coordinates that would lead them to Al-Navar's next location, it would not do for them to be washed away by sea water now. Roza was checking that her writing bag was as safe it could be for the third time when she suddenly heard that familiar bone-chilling rattle-caw of the murderous birds of Claw Park, and without thinking a moment more, she found herself leaping out into the water.

Suddenly surrounded by a shock of cold, Roza sank for a moment, stunned by the chill of the water and momentarily paralysed. Gritting her teeth, she willed her legs to kick and slowly the tired muscles obeyed. Soon, she was swimming clumsily but with determination after Carnelian, who moved through the water with such ease that Roza would not have been at all surprised if the Captain whistled even as she swam.

As it happened, once young Soledad began to find a regular, if uncertain stroke, the water was not so painfully hostile. In fact, the sun was shining down upon them. If it weren't for how weary and worried she was, Roza might even have found this dip in the glinting waters of Port Haren rather enjoyable.

Forging through the sea, in time she came alongside the reassuring timbers of the Aurora. Someone called out and a rope was lowered down. Roza laid her hands upon it, and found herself shooting up into the air, tumbling over the side onto the deck. Sprawled on the timbers, Soledad looked up to see that Essi and Cook were at the other end of the rope, and she thanked them profusely. Essi smiled with mild surprise, like a fisherwoman who had accidentally reeled in an unexpected catch, while Cook simply grunted, dropping the rope and slapping her big beefy hands together at a job completed. Sitting up, Roza saw the Captain doing a sort of hop from one leg to the other to dry herself in the morning sun. Dripping all about the place, her tattered clothes sticking heavily to her skin, Roza Soledad inspected the precious contents of her satchel, breathing a sigh of relief that her notes were for the most part unharmed by that little trip in the water.

From his perch high above in the webbing, Pierre sang out:
"Ah, thank the heavens you have returned!"
Roza was about to reply with something about how it was nice to be back on board, but Pierre went on.
"Bah! We could not stand another moment without you! Monsieur Nurse, he makes a most awful Captain. If you had not returned when you did, no doubt there would have to be a riot

here on the Aurora!"

From the ship's wheel, Grey Nurse grimaced at Pierre. He then caught sight of the state Carnelian and Roza were in after their visit to Governor Boleo's Claw Park, and grimaced again. While there was some pity in Nurse's look, there was also a strong element of disapproval and chastisement too, that the pair of them could let themselves be scratched and cut up, and their clothes in such a state, as if to say here was precisely what happened when they went off gallivanting on their own.
"It was of course natural you were in trouble without us," Pierre announced, "Just as we would expect, and I asked around Port Haren and hear that fat wind-bladder of a Governor had seized you. But with bravery, and intrepid cunning - so! we were on a trail!"
Grey scanned the horizon nervously, and interrupted Pierre as he was acting out their investigation of the loss of their Captain and crewmate. Pierre looked mortally offended, but Grey Nurse finished the tale hurriedly.
"Yes, yes, and we suspected that the Governor, having strong and frankly unpleasant feelings about you, Captain, would throw you into his little menagerie to let the wildlife chew on you."
"And so," Pierre put in eagerly, "With great daring, we trick the foolish guards of Haren by starting a small fight in the market, and we slip away."
Essi smiled pleasantly.
"We knew you'd make a run for it, Captain," she said shrugging, "So we just thought it might be a good idea if we'd come along and pick you up."
Carnelian beamed with delight.
"Good work, all, and many thanks all around. Me and Scrib will stand you all a fine dinner at the next port where the governor doesn't want to throw us to the vultures! Couldn't have planned it all better myself!"
"I think plan is putting it a bit strongly," grumbled Nurse, "But since you both look to be more or less in one piece, we'd best get moving, and quickly if you please, because while we may, as Pierre said, have given the authorities the slip, we have not slipped terribly far. Boleo's forces are sailing right behind us, and those ships have rather large cannons that they most certainly will want to try out on the Aurora!"
Carnelian scoffed and leapt to her command post.
"Fret not! Those lumbering coast-huggers are too dull and slow to catch the Aurora! And Scrib here, the clever little sprout, has found the clue to lead us to our next stop. You get amongst the maps and papers, Scribbler, and tell us where we should be headed. Let's bid farewell to Port Haren and their rather cross and constricting manner, and get back on the high seas, where we belong!"

Everyone rushed into action, and just in time, for Pierre soon spied from his perch three large ships bearing down on them, no doubt filled to the brim with Boleo's guards and enough powder and shot to sink the Aurora one-hundred times over.
Essi sucked her teeth.
"Goodness, Cap'n, looks like this time you've made the Governor even more angry than last time."
Grey Nurse groaned with despair, but Carnelian simply laughed. Now that the crew of the

Aurora was reunited, what would it matter if every cannon of Port Haren were fired upon them? Nothing could stop them now!

And yet, despite the assurance of the Captain's mood and the confidence of the orders she sang out as the Aurora came about, there was the actual matter of the three ships coming towards them. The Aurora needed to pass this floating barricade if it was to reach the open sea. Roza, following her orders, tried not to think about the danger, and collected a mess of maps and navigation charts, beginning to decode the symbols she had copied from the Stone Claw that reached up to the heavens above Port Haren. All those aboard the Aurora had their part to play, and young Soledad chewed at the end of the quill as she made her translations, and willed herself to trust in the abilities of the rest of the crew to carry the ship through this peril and escape the clutches of Governor Boleo. Roza's faith, however, was sorely tested when a series of startling explosions rent the air, followed by a noise like a whistling tear in the sky nearby, and a crash of seawater so near to the flanks of the Aurora that spray misted over them.
"Too close!" shouted Grey Nurse.
"Pah, we have seen closer!" responded Pierre from above, "I think very little of the aim of these dogs in their ill-cut uniforms!"
"They don't need to aim especially well," countered Nurse, "Since they only need to hit us the once, and we are well and truly scuppered."
Without hesitation, Carnelian called out:
"To port, hard as you can, mates! Hug the shore of Boleo's Claw Park as near as she is able!"
Gliding towards the rocky shore from where Carnelian and herself had just escaped, Roza wondered at the Captain's plan. Surely she had something in mind to risk running them aground here, leaving them helpless prey to Boleo's indignant wrath? And yet, as the crew inched the Aurora as close to the shore of Claw Park as they dared, every nerve and fibre straining at the art of controlling the vessel, the explosions slackened and then stopped.
"Saint of the Seas! They have stopped firing!" said an astonished Pierre.
"Oh, that's nice," added Essi.
Carnelian grinned wildly and thrust her chin out in defiance at Boleo's blockade.
"Boleo's crew know it ain't worth their lives if they blow up some of his expensive collection of unpleasant birds and beasties. All we've got to do is hug the park for as long as we can, and then cut on past them!"
Roza watched on in wonder as Carnelian and the crew kept the Aurora so close to the shore that it looked as if you might leap out onto it. The ship moving with nerve-racking slowness, the ears of everyone aboard pricked up at the slightest scraping sound, lest the Aurora may have drifted too fearfully close to the trap of the shore. In the meantime, the Governor's three blockading ships, unable to risk cannon fire, chanced a few wild rifle shots. Although Roza knew, rationally, that hitting a target with a rifle with any accuracy from such a great distance was very improbable, yet she flinched at the reports of the weapons. Pierre, meanwhile, seemed to take these half-hearted attacks on the Aurora as a personal affront, and took to dancing a sort of contemptuous jeering jig upon the beams of the ship, loudly mocking the Governor's Guards.

"Hold fast, and keep her ready!" commanded Carnelian with a watchful eye on the three

looming opponents. In response to Carnelian's orders, the Aurora slowed even further until it had almost come to a halt, floating precariously in just enough water to keep off the rocky shore. For a tense few minutes, they all waited, everyone on board had their gaze fixed on the ships barring the way of the passage that would allow them to flee Port Haren. Not a word was spoken, and the mild rocking and creaking of the Aurora sounded almost as if the ship itself was waiting anxiously to see what would happen next. Then, the leftmost ship came lumbering slowly out of formation towards them. Carnelian's face split into a grin and she slapped her thigh.

"There we are, shipmates! You wouldn't think a bunch of fellows who live in a port would be such poor sailors, but that's Boleo's lot for you! They think we're as clumsy on the water as them, and have decided we must have become stuck. So here come they to seize us. Stay at the ready now, and await my word."

Wiggling her nose with gleeful anticipation, Carnelian waited until the approaching ship almost loomed over them, and just when they could see the colourful coats of the guards on board training the rifles in the direction of the Aurora, Carnelian raised her hand and shouted: "Winds up and away!"

The crew sprung into action, and with a creak of relief, the Aurora pulled away from the shore and with increasing speed, sailed into the middle of the watery passage. The large ship that had been bearing down attempted to correct its course to block their way, but so heavy and slow was that vessel that in their panic, they became ensnared on the shore, hindered in the very trap they thought had captured their prey.

"Dear me! What a lumpen lot!" Carnelian shouted out, "Did they think they could keep up with the fine dancing of our Aurora?"

Indeed, as their craft skilfully evaded the larger ships, Roza's heart leapt for joy - the rest of the crew must have felt something similar in their delight at the neat way the Aurora shifted and moved at their guidance so nimbly, for they all let out a hearty cheer, Roza raising her voice as loud as any of the others.

Chapter 14

Already the great hulks of the Governor's ships were receding into the distance, and then it was not long before the terrain of Port Haren - with the market, the Governor's Palace, and the terrible Claw Park, dwindled away to a remote stain, then a speck, and then could be seen no more. Roza felt a great sense of relief that Governor Boleo's beady eye would no longer be trained upon them through a telescope, and that they had well and truly slipped through that cruel puffed-up individual's powerful clutches.

Essi set to work to patch up any of the damage from their encounter with the Haren hulks, and although there were only mere nicks and scratches from the distant and ineffectual gunfire, yet she worked away methodically mending and polishing and making sure that every last inch of the ship was good as new, whistling marvellous and unplanned compositions of music to herself all the while. In the meantime, Roza joined Carnelian and Nurse in the Captain's cabin at the messy table of maps.

Roza laid out her notes and the decodings of the symbols they had found in Claw Park. She waved her hands over her papers.

"Al-Navar has left, in his own language of symbols, a signpost for our next waypoint on the journey to the secrets of the Silent Isle," Roza explained. Consulting the sheets before her and mumbling translations to herself, she traced a finger over one of the maps, stopping at a point, checking again, and nodding to herself. "Yes, that's the place. We must travel to this point if we are to find the next clue, and we can only hope that it remains there to be found!"

Grey Nurse peered at where Roza's finger lay upon the map.

"Never mind where the next damned bit of this riddle is to be found," he grumbled, "How can we sure there's anything at all to be found there? There's not a single accursed thing on the map out there!"

Roza realised this was true. Nothing but ocean was marked all about the point of her finger.

"Perhaps it is too small a place to be on the map?" she ventured, uncertain.

"Or more like, it just hasn't been discovered by anyone else yet!" insisted Carnelian cheerfully. "What a clever devil that Al-Navar of yours was, Scrib, leading us this merry chase back and forth about the seas!"

The downward turn of Grey Nurse's mouth indicated that he could not see any merriment in this perilous and uncertain quest, but Carnelian was not having it.

"Come now," Carnelian said cheerily, "If the Little Scribbler says that's where Claw Park has told us to go, we shall have faith in her. Why, she's the only one in the whole world who has the brains and learning to untangle all these old conundrums Signor Al-Navar left lying about! Why else would the Satrap be so keen to get a hold of her, if not for the fact that she can lead you to this mysterious Isle Al-Navar went to so much trouble to hide?"

Roza looked at Nurse's grimacing face.

"I am certain," Roza said with a swallow, and tried to make herself sound like she meant it, "As certain as can be that this is our next destination."

Grey Nurse grunted disbelievingly, but he and the Captain began plotting the best course to

reach their goal.
Roza checked and rechecked her decoding of Al-Navar's first clue again, and hoped she was right. She had to be correct! They would find the second clue, and there was no better crew to succeed in this dangerous task.
At least, she thought to herself hopefully, the next step in their journey couldn't be quite as terrifying as Claw Park!

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As they sailed off into the open seas, the wind blew strong in their favour, and like a creature let loose to run freely after a time of cramped enclosure, the Aurora sped joyfully across the waves.
At certain times, as the ship glided along the face of the sea, Roza felt a sudden sense of her own smallness and vulnerability, here out in open waters where not even a scrap of land could be seen. In this spreading vastness of the sea, even the Aurora itself was but a toy. The only solid things that could be relied on here where the sea reached from horizon to horizon were the reassuring timbers beneath her feet and the noisy squabbling crew around her. But how fragile that little reassurance seemed sometimes! She gave a nervous shiver, and it was as if Carnelian read her thoughts, for she leapt down from the wheel and grinned reassuringly at Roza.
"There's no need for concern, Scrib! There's no place safer to be than here on the Aurora. The further we sail, the less chance old Boleo has to reach us with his troops and hirelings!"
Roza smiled in acknowledgement.
"Of course," said Grey Nurse, pausing in his duties, "By this time, not only will the Governor of Port Haren have personal reasons for sending ships after us, but I imagine that news of our visit to that shore will have reached the Satrap, who will be swiftly on our trail. We now have not one, but two powerful figures who desire to halt our expedition. As I always used to advise in my courtly days, to fight one king is foolish, but to raise of the ire of two is ruination."
Carnelian laughed fearlessly.
"One, two, or even one hundred Satraps, Governors, or tiny tyrants won't stop the Aurora! We are sea-faring folk, and we sail free, and can no more be caught and caged than the light of the dawn itself!"
Was it Roza's imagination, or was there the slightest twitch of a smile at the corner of the dour Grey Nurse's mouth at this spirited outburst from Carnelian? For all the gloom of the second in command, even Nurse was not entirely immune to the the uplifting glow of Captain Carnelian's outlook.

As day slowly set into night, it was decided that their narrow escape from Governor Boleo and Port Haren deserved some small celebration. Cook, in a manner that seemed to defy the possible in the tiny galley she filled, had somehow managed to cook up scores and scores of hearty pasties, filled with all the best produce bought from the port and spiced with flavours Roza had not known even existed. There were even some small honey-soaked pastries made with dates and figs, little confectioned morsels that dissolved into sweetness and spice in your mouth. Roza ate with a hunger that surprised her, washing mouthfuls of delicious food down

with draughts of lime mixed with water and sugar. In truth, she had not realised how hungry she had been, for it had been some time since she had last eaten a proper meal. Once they had finished eating, the delight of this repast was further enhanced by the conversation and company as they sat and enjoyed the sense of satiety from their well-earned meal. To begin with, once she had finished producing this feast, Cook emerged from deep in her galley and sitting amongst them, sharpening her knives and cleavers all the while, the imposing woman proceeded to relate a truly extraordinary amount of news and gossip. It transpired that as Cook had cause to visit so many salespeople and merchants wherever they put into shore, the normally taciturn woman had a rather remarkable knack of hearing every little scrap of talk and rumour that was current. Cook told them all the jokes she had heard about the Governor, stories of the Satrap's spies being in position all over the land, and even wild fanciful rumours, such as that one of Governor Boleo's pets on Claw Park was part man and part beast, as well as stories of those who claimed that they had seen with their very own eyes unliving sailors who roamed in the distant north and preyed on unwitting travellers. When this supply of local report was exhausted, Pierre leapt up and declared that he would now bless the company with some entertainment, at which they all applauded heartily, a token of esteem that the haughty little fellow took as his due. Pierre flung a scrap of cloth about his shoulders as a rough sort of cloak and fashioned something like a crown from a length of rope wrapped around his head. Scurrying effortlessly on top of a locker for his stage, Pierre then proceeded to perform speeches, and to Roza's amazement, she soon forgot that this fellow proclaiming before them was wearing a cloak of scraps and a crown of rope, and felt as if she was in the presence of a tragic but noble king, so moving was Pierre's acting. When he came to the end of his performance, he bowed with a flourish of his makeshift cloak and Roza applauded until her hands were sore.

Chapter 15

The weather was clear and fine as they sailed on in the following days. Roza ran errands, carrying small things back and forth, learned to tar and repair with Essi, and began to have by heart the first principles of managing rope and sail with Pierre, while all in all doing what small jobs about the ship she was capable of handling, hoping to make herself useful and slowly learning of the workings of the Aurora, every time making a note of every new piece of shiplore and duty. Grey Nurse had taken to sighing at what he called Roza's 'Ship's Handbook of the Rigging and Operation of the Good Vessel Aurora'. Yet, even Grey Nurse had to admit that Roza continued to keep excellent notes of what needed doing on the ship, and this left more time for Nurse to find more things to fault and fret about. It was also quietly agreed that Roza's apologetic but enthusiastic face made Nurse's complaints somewhat more palatable to those on board, so Grey Nurse had come to rely more and more on Roza to convey messages to the rest of the crew, a situation that appeared to be so much more satisfactory to the whole Aurora, that the crew wondered how they had ever put up with the fussing, grumbling Grey Nurse for so long without a handy Little Scribbler to muffle the sounds of his anxieties. And as each day proceeded, with the occasional exasperated ministration of Grey Nurse, Roza found herself swiftly recovering from the knocks and scratches of her time on the peaks of Claw Park. In fact, given that so much of her life had been absorbed over books and manuscripts alongside her father, the young Soledad was feeling stronger and fitter than she had ever felt before - the sun warming her skin and the sharp sea air filling her lungs.

From Carnelian, in the little free time Roza had, she was learning more of the art of navigation. As they pored over maps and Roza related what she and her father had conjectured about the travels of Al-Navar in their studies, the Captain explained the intricacies of shipcraft required to travel along the best route that would bring them to reach the coordinates they had found, hopefully, if sea and sky were willing, before the Satrap's agents could track them down. Indeed, Roza was thankful that they were making all haste in search of Al-Navar's second sign, and as such, she was perplexed when she began to perceive that the Aurora was slowing. She ran immediately to see what event could be delaying them, and found Carnelian surveying the waters ahead with her glass.
"Is something wrong?" Roza ventured, "We appear to be losing speed, Captain."
Carnelian gestured at the waters shining in the sunlight before them.
"I'm all for speeding over the sea, Little Scribbler, I'm for it and the Aurora is for it, but sometimes you travel through spots where you have to slow down to sail proper."
Roza Soledad squinted out over the waves. There didn't appear to be anything unusual out there that she could see.
"Are the waters hazardous here, Captain? Is that why we've slowed?"
Carnelian beamed and squinted through her glass again, scanning the horizon.
"Hazardous? Well perhaps a little, but, more importantly, Scrib, these are wondrous waters we are passing through!" She pointed. "Now you just keep an eye over there, shipmate, and

you'll see!"
Roza stared intently for some time. Nothing appeared to be happening, besides the slap of the waves and the whistle of the wind. She was just about to say something when there was a sudden glorious explosion of water into the air just off the port side of the ship. Something incomprehensibly large was surging up out of the deep, something shining with blues and grey and white, shooting a great misty spray of vapour all about the place. The colossal thing sunk back between the waves, and then there was another rising up from the depths, then playfully rolling as it sank back between the water. Roza stared agape. What on earth were these things?
"Not a bad spectacle, ey?" said Carnelian, "It isn't every day a ship is fortunate enough to pass the Waters of Leviaton, where the great sea-beasts sport!"
Gently and cautiously the Aurora picked its way through this expanse that was the playground of these gargantuan swimming creatures. Roza had read stories of such things, but that was nothing compared to seeing them frolicking before one's very own eyes, to marvel how their strange hides glistened, to witness the great clouds of sea-water they sprayed in the air like gigantic playful fountains, and then to feel the very droplets of that same sea-spray fall light upon your face! It was such a startling, strange, alien and wondrous experience that Roza simply watched for how long she knew not. All the while, as remarkable as it seemed for the unofficial scribe of the Aurora, the thought of taking immediate and fresh notes on these marvellous animals did not even enter her head. Instead, Roza and the rest of the crew gazed in wonderment until the ship had passed through these waters, leaving the giant beasts to sink once more beneath the waves where they might once again play unseen by human eyes.

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As time wore on, Roza became more and more anxious about finding the location of the next clue left by Al-Navar. Surely they should be close by now? She checked and rechecked her translations, ruffling back and forth through sheaves of paper. It must be nearby! she thought to herself. But then, why was there no sight of their destination? No matter how often she stared out to sea, there was nothing but the rising and falling surface of the waters. So worried was the young scholar becoming that she had taken to regularly bothering Pierre to see if he had spied anything from his perch high up in the ships. With increasing infuriation and indignation, Pierre had told her countless times that he was yet to spy any land, and Roza feared that not only were her constant requests beginning to rouse the ever-volatile ire of Pierre, but that he and the rest of the crew might also be wondering if the ship had been led on a fool's errand. In despair one afternoon, Roza was listlessly trying to record her impressions of the sea-beasts, when she heard a whistle from above. She craned her neck and looked up. Pierre was waving at her.
"Mademoiselle Scribbler, you may put away your pens and inks," he shouted down, "Pierre, who has eyes like the soaring eagle, has seen something strange out to sea."
Pierre pointed and Roza strained her own eyes. Was there something there? She could not see it, if so. Wait! Was there a flash of something not far ahead? But surely it was simply the high sunlight glancing off the waves! Oh, if only she could see more clearly! She rushed to Captain Carnelian's side and begged the use of her spy-glass. Soledad pressed the eye-piece of the telescope to her eye and focussed on the horizon. She made a joyful noise - why there

was certainly something there! It was a small patch of what looked like land shot through with veins of bright orange and red. She felt certain this must be the place, and a sensation of inexpressible relief came over her to find out that she had not led the Aurora aimless and astray. Roza handed the glass to Carnelian.
"Never doubted for a moment you'd find it, Little Scrib," Carnelian said cheerfully, then turned to shout out to the rest of the crew. "There's our next stop, shipmates! Let us go and see what lovely spot our guide has brought us to visit this time!"

Chapter 16

As the ship approached closer to the point Pierre had indicated, it became clear that their destination was a shallow rocky outcrop, poking out of the sea. It hardly looked large enough to provide more than a half hour of wandering for anyone who would chance upon this out of the way scrap of land. It was no wonder that such an unimportant-looking piece of earth all alone in the sea had been noted by few sea-farers since Al-Navar's day - the wiley ancient traveller had chosen his second hiding place well. If anyone had chanced across this tiny patch of land hidden in the midst of the ocean, it would not have given any appearance of enticement to travellers. The one remarkable thing about the strange little landmass was the bright colours Roza had spied, and she began to suspect that they had only been visible because the sun had chanced to be in the right position in the sky to reveal them. As they approached, these hues looked in fact to be veins of some material shining and glowing with uncanny brightness in the sunlight.

"Ah!" Roza sang out, "Look,'Bright upon the face of darkened depths!' It's the first line of the second verse of Al-Navar's poem! This must be the place!"
Grey Nurse said some choice words about what he thought of burying navigation in blasted poetry, but Roza was too excited to pay him any mind.
The Aurora drew as close as it dared, inching towards what shelter the brightly-veined outcrop provided.
"This is no proper sort of port," cautioned Nurse, rubbing his chin.
Carnelian sniffed the air thoughtfully and glanced about.
"Wind and wave are calm for now," she said, "We should be safe for a few hours yet."
Grey Nurse did not seem entirely convinced, and indeed he was reluctant to encourage his captain to rush headlong into danger so soon after surviving Claw Park.
"Sooner we leave, sooner we're back, Nursie!" Carnelian declared. "I won't be long, I promise. Scribbler, we'll need you along to get the symbols down right when we find 'em. Pierre, you look like you could do with a stretch of your legs, yawning up there atop your mast, and nobody can clamber about unknown terrain as well as you."
"Of course you require the services of Pierre!" the little man declared, with a toss of his head.
Roza was struck by sudden cares. What would they find in this strange bright outcrop in the midst of the waves? If they were lucky, it would not take them long to find the next set of coordinates, and yet she was filled with foreboding. Grey Nurse caught her eye, and in that look he seemed to be saying: be brave, but be sensible, and get on with this business as quick as you can. Roza swallowed hard. She packed her pen and papers along with minor provisions into her satchel and sealed it shut. At the same time, Pierre busied himself by wrapping a coil of rope around his shoulder, while Carnelian gave her sword a quick inspection and polish. Once they were all ready, Essi brought forth a sort of rope ladder of her own construction, weighted at one end, which she threw out onto the rocky outcrop. Pierre scampered across the wobbling horizontal ladder without a moment's hesitation, and tying a few deft knots around some stone protrusions, he fastened the rope more securely. Roza

followed across, crawling along the taut rope ladder, gripping at the rungs until her knuckles were pained, but at last she was on the hard rock surface. Pierre yawned as Soledad set her uncertain feet on land, as if he had been kept waiting for an age. Carnelian gave a salute to the rest of the ship and flew across the ladder and was soon besides them.
"Keep your eyes sharp, crew," she said quietly. "Pierre, you tumbling jack, scout ahead and see if you can find us a path somewhere along this rock."
Pierre grunted and ran up along the incline of the stone surface, climbing out of sight. While they were waiting for Pierre to return, Roza inspected the bright veins running through the rock and recorded her observations. These thin shining lines ran spreading all over this rocky outpost, and were the most vivid yellows, whites, reds and oranges, glittering in such a way in the sunlight that they almost looked to be flowing down the rock face like shining rivulets of molten light. For the sake of making her observations more complete, Roza cautiously poked at the coloured veins to confirm that they were still and unmoving streaks in the rock. And yet, she thought that they were strangely warm. Perhaps this unusual mineral formation captured the warmth of the sun more readily than ordinary stone? The young Soledad was furthering her curiosity by scraping away at a particularly large stream of bright stone when her studies were interrupted by a call from Pierre. He was standing high above them on the topmost point of the outcrop.
"Did you find a path?" Carnelian shouted back.
"Not such a path that lumbering feet could follow after Pierre! There is not much to see on this shiny rock, excepting for one thing. Ever generous, Pierre will fix a rope so you may climb oh so slowly here and see with your own eyes."
With that, the nimble Frenchman unwound the spool of rope around his shoulder, hitched it firmly to a solid rocky protuberance, and tapped his foot impatiently while Carnelian and Roza made their way upwards to join him.
As they pulled themselves up onto the ledge, Pierre swept his arm and declaimed "Behold!" For they were not simply balancing at the peak of this mysterious rock formation - what they had taken for the cap was in fact nothing more than a stony lip, and beyond that lip, the rock was hollow, and they were staring down into an interior that must plunge far below the surface of the waves, somehow keeping the waters at bay with thick rock walls. Even more remarkable, glittering yellow and white light shone along the inside of the pit, as if something was glowing deep in its heart.
"Who would put such a foolish thing all the way out here?" demanded Pierre.
"I think it must be some extraordinary natural formation," said Roza.
"Well, we won't discover much standing about here," added Carnelian, and Pierre nodded. With infinitely more care this time, the nimble Frenchman retrieved his rope and lowered himself down into the glowing pit, his feet finding cracks and ledges as he moved carefully downwards. After a short time, he declared that he had found a ledge that might perhaps support his comrades, and Roza and Carnelian followed down the rope.
Within the hollow glowing rock, it took a moment for their eyes to adjust, but soon, despite the distance from the outside light, they could see well enough about them without needing to make use of a lantern. They had discovered another strange feature of this stone formation below the waves - whether the mineral veins reflected sunlight or produced it by some unknown phosphorescent process, there was light down here, light enough for the trio to be able to more or less see about them with no more source of illumination than the unusual

glow that arose from the stone walls.
They took stock for a moment. Pierre, his brow furrowed in concentration, measured out the remaining trailing rope, while Carnelian ran her hands over a series of strange broken rocks that projected in a descending curve on the inside of the walls.
"You know, Scribbler, I think these might have been stairs at one point long ago."
"Perhaps carved into the stone by Al-Navar and his crew!" whispered Roza in awe.
"Yes, but now they are not here - not the Al-Navar and not the stairs," put in Pierre with a sniff, "And because the stairs fall down from time or wind or who knows what, we must use the rope. The famous Pierre can climb up and down anything without any aid, but for you two, we have enough length of rope that we can descend the same distance again, I am hoping."
Carnelian's eyes flickered around the edges of the stone pit. She then stood at the very edge and squinted downwards into the mysterious depth, the toes of her boots hanging over the unknown emptiness in a fashion that Roza found most unnerving. Soledad shook her head, in an attempt to throw off the dizziness of consternation that had come over her.
"Well," Lalla Carnelian mused, running her fingers through her hair, "If the next riddle isn't here, then it stands to reason that is likely to be further down. Let's descend a little further, shipmates, and see if anything shows up. After all, how often do a bunch of sailors get the chance to go a-wandering in a hollow rock beneath the sea?"
It was agreed then, and Pierre led the way, shimmying down the rope first. Roza and Carnelian followed. They crept slowly down the line, and Roza forced herself to look about - for it was her responsibility to find the next coded coordinates. Her hands wrapped tight around the rope, her feet slipping and scraping against the stone walls, Roza rather felt as if the blood in her head was draining away in the wrong direction and again her equilibrium was somehow shaken by her surroundings. It almost appeared as if the light glowing along the walls was starting to streak and smear into great masses of colours before her eyes, and she had to blink rapidly and concentrate all her attention to make these effects disappear from her vision. Roza was in the process of convincing one of these trailing hypnotic flashes to vanish from her sight when it happened. Someone cried out - was it Roza herself? and there was a great motion, the rope slipped from her fingers, and she was plummeting through the stifling air.

Chapter 17

The next thing she knew, Roza felt a hard pain all along her side. She took a moment to reflect that she was in fact most pleased that this was the next thing she knew, for it meant that whatever had happened, at least she had survived. She opened her eyes to see the strange streaks of colour waving before her eyes even more uncontrollably than before. She heard the groan of a familiar voice not far away, and with a wince she forced herself up painfully from whatever surface was beneath her in order to investigate. As Roza crawled slowly along, she moved her fingers and limbs in small careful motions to measure the extent of her injuries. There was great pain along the hip and shoulder where she must have fallen, but besides the loud protest of that soreness, no part of her was refusing to move entirely. Roza coughed. There was a peculiar tingle in her mouth and lungs, and the colours on the walls of the pit insisted on shaking in spots and stains before her until the coughing ceased. Over to one side on the rock shelf, Soledad could make out a crumpled human figure. She edged her way towards the shape on her hands and knees, ignoring the pain in her side and the overpowering urge to burst into another fit of rasping coughs. Laying her hand on the figure she saw it was Pierre, but the haughty little man, who normally moved with such effortless aloofness was terribly still. Roza held her breath in terror. She leaned forward and lay her ear to his chest and then held it just above his open mouth. Thank goodness! Yes, she was sure now that she could hear the faint flutter of his heart and the exhalation of his breath. Pierre yet lived, although he had been struck insensible by his fall. Roza quickly inspected the rest of her comrade but could find no signs of blood. She could only hope that he would recover. Would it even be possible to escape from this pit without the assistance of their nimble comrade? Oh foolish creature of curiosity! Roza thought bitterly to herself. This suffering would never have happened if she had not begun this quest! If only Carnelian had never - Carnelian! Roza looked about wildly. Where was Carnelian? Soledad feared the worst and found her throat constricted with a sickly scratching feeling of guilt and remorse. She shuffled about on the rock ledge as quickly as she dared, but there was no sign that the Captain had landed on the same unyielding stone that had saved herself and Pierre for the moment. Tears began to form in Roza Soledad's eyes, tears that stung and burned. This was all her fault! She dug her nails into her hands, at a complete loss about what to do now. Was she to be trapped down in this sea-pit with no way to save herself and Pierre? If the remainder of the crew of the Aurora saved them, could she bear to face them when she was to blame for the loss of their bright and beloved leader? Her head swam. No! She must not give in to despair! Captain Carnelian would not give in, no matter how bleak the day! Carnelian would laugh at any obstacle, any danger! In an attempt to summon some small piece of that Carnelian spirit, Roza let out a half-maddened croaking laugh. How strange her voice sounded down here. There was even a kind of gurgling echo. She laughed again, and again, after a moment's pause, a noise replied from just beyond the edge of the stone ledge.

Inch by inch Soledad made her way towards the edge, but could see nobody there. A choking half sob escaped from her throat. Wait! There was a sound again in answer. She strained her

ears to their utmost, listening with complete concentration. It was not an echo, after all, but a noise coming from just below the stone ledge. Lying flat, Roza peered over the side and gave a cry of joyful surprise. It was Carnelian! She was hanging precariously below, and on inspection it became apparent that the only thing that held her from tumbling down into the pit was a sharp jutting piece of rock that had snagged inside the pocket of her red coat. Roza feared that this small salvation could not last long - a shift in the Captain's weight and she would slip away to her doom, falling like a helpless rag-doll into unknowable space.
"Captain Carnelian!" Roza hissed, her voice sore. She did not want to rouse the Captain with a start, lest her violent awakening unloose her from the temporary harness. Carnelian did not fully awaken, but merely mumbled something in response to the sound of Roza's voice. Like Pierre, the Captain had been rendered unconscious by the fall. Yet, Roza could not risk leaving Carnelian where she was for a moment longer, hanging there on the very precipice of disaster. The young Soledad unhooked her trusty bag from around herself and leaned as far forward as she dared. Gently, she lowered the strap of the bag in a strange form of fishing, attempting to gently loop it about the body of the Captain and hope that she had the strength to pull Carnelian to the safety of the ledge. Roza cursed silently. She could not quite reach! The strap scooped futilely at the air and bounced off the glittering stone wall. She needed to lean further out. Without hesitation, she inched forward. She was closer now - the strap brushed against Carnelian's face and she wriggled her nose and mumbled some more, but Roza was still not close enough to snag the strap around the unconscious woman's body. Roza crawled further forward, her hands clammy. She could feel her balance beginning to tip, as she teetered on the very limits of the ledge, and the slightest further tilt forward would leave her of no use to anybody, much less Carnelian. Yet, she must try! Gripping the rock with one small hand, she hung down, her entire body slowly beginning to slip away from safety. But Roza almost had the strap about Carnelian - it needed just a little more distance. There! She had hooked it under an upturned arm, but at that very moment she could could no longer hold on and her body began to slip off the edge entirely. For a terrible weightless moment she stared down into the doom of the pit, but suddenly small but strong hands wrapped themselves around her ankles. Pierre had awoken just in the nick of time.
"What is this foolishness, Mademoiselle Scribe?" he grunted, straining and sweating to the utmost of his compact strength, feet dug into the rock, striving to lift them up to safety.
"Pull! Pull!" cried Roza, who now had Carnelian's weight added to her own. The task may have proved impossible, if not for the fact that their noise and the violence of their exertions woke Carnelian enough that in a half-groggy state, she hooked her legs onto the stone ledge and almost folded herself upwards, causing the whole trio to tumble awkwardly into a pile. Pierre extracted himself and leapt to his feet, dusting himself off with an appearance of greatly offended dignity.
"Such amateur acrobatics are most perilous! Leave this sort of thing to Pierre."
Carnelian rubbed her head and blinked her eyes.
"A close one, from the look of things," she said eventually, "Too bad I slept through it. Good work and thanks, crew. But how did we end up in this tricky spot? One moment, we were climbing as well as you please-"
"Certainly, I know I was not the one to fall," insisted Pierre. He stood with his hands upon his hips to demonstrate that he was not the sort of person to forget how to climb when he had been doing so magnificently for many years now, but the attitude he had struck was rather

undone by a sudden coughing fit that had him momentarily bent double. Carnelian slapped him on the back until he regained his composure and shooed her away.
"And now these blasted spots before my eyes too!" Pierre said angrily.
Roza sat thoughtfully for a moment.
"I don't think anyone let go of the rope," she ventured, "At least it wasn't just a slip of the hands. I've been seeing spots and flashes of colour, too, and I don't think it's just because of the bright minerals in the walls. My throat has been sore for some time, too. I am beginning to suspect that there is something wrong with the air down here. Some reaction of elements far below may be producing a gas we can barely see, but that is slowly choking us and robbing us moment by moment of our senses and wakefulness!"
Captain Carnelian nodded.
"If you are right, Scrib, then we'd best hurry! Are we to try and return?"
Roza shook her head.
"We have come this far, Captain, and if we fail here, we will fail in our quest entirely. I say we go onwards."
Pierre nodded in agreement.
"As the Scribe says, so Pierre agrees! Pierre has no fear! We go onwards!"
"So be it!" Lalla Carnelian said with a salute and a twinkle in her eyes.

Chapter 18

Carnelian instructed them to take kerchiefs and cloths, dampen them with the moisture that glistened upon the stone walls, and tie them about their faces in the hope that by this method they might keep the effects of the unseen dangerous airs at bay for a little while longer. Once they were equipped to resist the unseen fumes of the glowing pit, Pierre crawled carefully down the side of the stone ledge. The small acrobat was gone for some time, and Roza was beginning to become anxious, when he pulled himself back up to their level. He sat down and wiped a sheen of sweat from his forehead. His voice was muffled by the cloth wrapped about his face.
"Bah!" Pierre exclaimed, "It is hot as the inferno down there, and becomes harder and harder to breathe, but the good news that Pierre brings, it is that there is a thin walking area not too far down, with more of the chiselling and marks that show this is the way that trouble-making Monsieur Al-Navar and his crew came so long ago. I can lead you down to this path, if you can follow Pierre most carefully."
The heavy hot air hung about them like a suffocating cloak slowly constricting around every inch of their persons, and the mere act of thought was becoming difficult, but with a quick glance at Pierre and Roza, the Captain knew they were not yet willing to give up the search. With a brief nod, Carnelian indicated that Pierre should lead the way, and they would follow as best as they could.

Pierre proceeded to move slowly across the uneven surface of the wall, carefully showing them how they should imitate exactly where his feet stepped and his hands gripped at all times. Roza feared that she would not be able to follow the nimble Pierre in the climb down the rock, but now that a single misstep might mean the end of his fellow crewmates, Pierre had become a patient and silent instructor, waiting until he was sure that Roza had the best possible position with every movement. Carnelian followed close behind, and although they could not see her face behind the mask she wore, the Captain's eyes shone with an encouraging smile, and she would make her eyebrows conduct an elaborate jig to show she had the utmost faith in her follow rock-climbers.

The descent seemed to take an eternity, but at last they lowered themselves onto a thin outcrop of rock that curved downwards along the inside of the pit. Carnelian made a sign that they should rest for a moment, which gave Roza some respite, as Pierre showed her how to turn and stretch her hands and wrists so that the feeling would return into them. Roza was imitating similar exercises for her ankles when she again found the lights on the walls of the pit flashing and streaking. She shook her head to clear the disconcerting effect, and for the moment the dizziness inflicted by the airs of the pit passed. It was clear that the fumes were already beginning to seep through the makeshift barriers of their masks. Carnelian knew that they could not dare to delay any longer, lest they succumb to the choking air. She gave a signal that they would continue.

Pierre led them on down a thin path - a rough affair of a stone walkway which offered little feeling of safety for the trio as they shuffled slowly downwards. So meagre was the curling outcrop under their feet that they walked in single file, each of them hugging close to the inner wall of the pit, for on the outer edge a mere half inch from their left was nothing but the endless plummet.

As they travelled lower into the shining pit, Roza Soledad was beginning to find it harder and harder to keep her eyes open and to see clearly. Every step forward felt tentative and uncertain. From behind her came an indistinct but regular sound, and in her addled state, it took Roza some time to realise that Captain Carnelian was singing something. The Captain did not allow the fact that her comrades could not hear a single note clearly through her cloth mask hinder her from giving voice. If she had felt less unsteady, Roza would have signalled that the Captain should save what little precious breath she had. In truth, Roza was finding it difficult to say anything, but she was thankful for the company of the Captain's indistinct tune, and for the fact that Carnelian was accompanying her performance by drumming her fingers carelessly on the hilt of her sword. Carnelian's tune raised their spirits, dispelled some of the weary faintness in their heads, and helped them to focus on moving forward in their cautious way.

In time, they were relieved to discover that the path widened - Roza idly noted to herself that the pit must become larger the further down one descended. Indeed, they had now reached a broad stone floor that stretched off before them to the right, away from the unknown depths. The torrid air at this level was becoming unbearable, and it was almost impossible to imagine that the cool dark of the sea pressed somewhere beyond the stone walls. Idly, Roza remarked to herself that if anything, the light seemed to have increased as they descended. Captain Carnelian stood carelessly on the edge of the pit, staring curiously downwards. Intolerable waves of heat washed upwards from whatever glowed so brightly below, and it was clear that nothing mortal could survive any further descent into that burning light, nor were there any signs of passage in that direction. Their only way forward now was to explore this spreading flat area. Yet, with the heat and the impure air, it was becoming harder and harder for the trio to take each step. Carnelian, who seemed as ever to have unfathomable reserves, walked slowly between Roza and Pierre, allowing them to lean on her so that they could move forwards without mishap. Drenched with sweat, their throats burning, they knew they could not last much longer at this depth, yet they pushed on.

Roza was attempting to keep count of every step to focus her mind on this slow advance when Pierre stopped, walked forwards and waved at the wall before them. For a moment, Roza feared that the heat and air had robbed Pierre of his senses, for all she could see there were more swirls and streaks of bright colour, but Pierre kept pointing insistently. Rubbing her eyes to try and clear her vision, Roza squinted. Why - what she had mistaken for more meaningless streaks of colour before her eyes were nothing of the kind! These were shapes, distinct shapes carved into the bright mineral veins running down the walls, shapes carved by human hand. They had found the second coordinates left by Al-Navar leading to the Silent Isle!

Roza stood and gaped at the symbols on the wall until she became aware that Pierre was making impatient gestures in her direction. She turned to look at the small fellow, his eyebrows pulled together in irritation, and realised he was miming the action of writing. Roza tried to look apologetic. She took out her writing equipment from her bag, sat cross-legged on the warm stone floor and forced herself to focus on the symbols so that she might transcribe them without error, but without any delay. She knew that every extra minute they spent down in the hot strength-sapping air of the pit she ran the risk of leaving themselves too weak to escape on their own. She did not even have the luxury of worrying about how they would return to the Aurora at the moment - every ounce of her intelligence was to be used on nothing more than getting those symbols down on paper. Carnelian and Pierre, seeing that there was nothing much to be done for the moment, took the opportunity to rest. Pierre slumped down on the ground with his back against rock, scratching feebly at his cloth mask as if it were some sort of fluttering moth bothering him. Carnelian leaned nearby to recuperate, extending her lanky leg to nudge Pierre with her boot when the small man looked to be in danger of closing his eyes in a sleepy unconsciousness. None of them could afford to give in to the dizzying sleep of the pit-air.

When Roza was as certain as she could be that she had transcribed Al-Navar's second riddling cypher, she packed her things away and got unsteadily to her feet. After staring at the bright glyphs on the wall, she could now barely see clearly at all. She made a sign towards the taller figure over at the wall that must have been Carnelian to indicate that they must leave now. Carnelian nodded, and with great effort on her behalf and groggy reluctance on Pierre's, she dragged the little man to his feet. Roza felt so light-headed and unwell now that it was difficult to walk without stumbling. She could hardly remember why they were down in this strange place. Perhaps she could close her eyes for a moment and sleep? She felt so hot and tired and unwell and moving was becoming so hard. Yet, when all she wanted was to rest, she still seemed to be moving forward. Her eyes flickered open and for a few seconds she realised that Lalla Carnelian was almost bodily dragging her comrades up the narrow pathway, ignoring the choking heat.

The next thing she knew, Carnelian was pouring some water into Roza's mouth. This brief respite from the burning in her throat and lungs revived Roza Soledad for the moment, and she could see that Pierre was in a similar state of trying to rouse himself to wakefulness, shaking his head, and slapping the cheeks beneath his cloth mask. With supreme effort, they had returned to just below the thin platform where they had fallen, and now they faced the daunting prospect of having to lift their weary and addled bodies upwards. First stretching his arms to the sky and then from side to side, Pierre threw off the fugue that had weakened him and scrambled up the rock footholds. It looked as if even in his dazed state, so prodigious was the nimble skill of the small man, that it was almost as if his compact form could leap and climb in an almost autonomous state. He hooked one arm on the rock ledge and offered a hand to Carnelian, who scrambled along the same holds to reach him. Finally, Roza scrabbled up until Carnelian seized her hand in turn, and with the trio linked, they inched their way on, assisting each other until they had climbed back onto the ledge.

Carnelian peered upwards, but their prospects did not look promising. The rope they had used

to climb down could not be seen, and there was not much chance of trying to claw their way along the mostly flat stone above them. Perhaps at his best Pierre might find a way to climb the forbidding and damp rock that would be impassable for any less agile person, but it would be an almost impossible task for the little mastman even at his full powers. No, the Captain did not wish to push Pierre any further in his weakened state. Even if the sure-footed fellow managed to ascend along the almost sheer inner wall of the pit above them, there was no guarantee that Carnelian and Roza would be able to follow him. Yet, something must be done, for they could not remain down here for much longer. Already Carnelian could see that the brief rallying of the spirits of her comrades was beginning to fade. Both Roza and Pierre had again collapsed, ignoring the narrow discomfort of this perch, desperate for a moment of rest to fight off the effects of the pit air. Just as Carnelian was racking her brains, her ears pricked up as the eerie deep echo of the pit was interrupted by some clatter from above. Carnelian strained to make out the noise. Why it sounded as if the noise was someone above talking! Could it be? It was as if someone was saying "No, Grey Nurse sir, I still can't see them." That voice was Essi's! Carnelian tore away her cloth mask and gave a high-pitched whistle. Pierre and Roza, too dazed to comprehend, wondered if a sudden madness had possessed the steadfast Captain, who was now shouting Essi's name at the top of her lungs, expending the last of her energy in a bid to let their comrades know where they were! And then, there was the sound of salvation! Essi returned the whistling signal and shouted down in her pleasant sleepy voice that they'd be with them in just a moment, if they wouldn't mind waiting a little longer. Clattering against the stone wall, another of Essi's ladder ropes descended. Amongst the maddening heat and light of the pit, here was an even more Wondrous sight for their eyes - there was the ship's carpenter herself, helping them up onto the ladder! Roza felt a great sense of relief, just as she was overwhelmed by the dizzy streaks of light before her eyes and slipped into insensibleness.

Chapter 19

Roza awoke confused and uncomfortable. Slowly the fuzzy sound of shouting came to her. It took her a while to realise that she was being carried over someone's shoulder.
"I am being careful!" came a growl. Roza recognised Cook's voice, and after some more thought, concluded that she must be on Cook's shoulder, although for the moment, she couldn't possibly think why she would be in such an odd place.
"I'm alright," Roza tried to say, but her words came out mumbled and blurred. Even if she couldn't make herself understood, she must at least have got the attention of the figures around her. Cook laid her gently on a wooden floor. Why, she thought she recognised the feeling of the boards. She must be back on the Aurora! Never in her life had Roza Soledad been so pleased to lie upon stiff wooden timbers, yet after her encounters with the stone floors of the shining pit, this surface felt positively reassuring and welcoming.
"Ah, that's nice," said Essi's voice, "She's smiling!" her face hovering above Roza and looking pleased.
The thought of Carnelian and Pierre came to her in a start.
"The others?" she mumbled as urgently as she could. Essi looked confused and disappeared from Roza's sight. She repeated her query again and again, trying to lift herself up to make herself better understood. She could barely even raise her head before falling back down.
"Stop moving," demanded another voice, and another face swam into view. It was a stern and disapproving face that could only belong to Grey Nurse. Roza couldn't remember what she had done to upset him, but it was clearly something substantial, judging by the severeness of his brows.
"What about the others?" Roza coughed. Grey Nurse frowned and seemed to be inspecting Roza's eyes.
"They will live," Nurse said, "Although it was a near thing for you three. The Captain's constitution is always extraordinary, mostly, I suspect because she refuses to consider that anything is doing any real harm to her. Cook managed to put her to bed. And Pierre will live on to be insufferable, it appears. He just gave me a slurred but extensive stream of French abuse, and no doubt we will have him looking down on us all in no time."
"Good," said Roza happily and lay back down. Essi appeared to be patting her hand until Nurse shooed her off and told her to pack up the ropes and ladders.
Thin fingers gently poked at Roza's ribs. She gave a little pained hiccough.
"Just bruised, I believe," Grey Nurse muttered, "And a lucky thing, too. At this rate, young Soledad, you are going to become as battered about by danger as our headstrong captain."
Roza tried to disagree, but couldn't make the words come out in any sensible order. Nurse was too preoccupied with fussing to listen to her in any case.
"We should not have left it so long to come after you three. Or we should have waited and made better preparations in the first place. If Essi hadn't been able to get that rig down so quickly - well. Another minute or two and..." He scowled and Roza found herself drifting off. No doubt Grey had many important things to say, but Roza could not concentrate on his words. She needed rest and good clean sea air, and she supposed there was nothing to worry

about for the moment, for she was on the Aurora now, and among friends.
She heard Grey and Cook arguing again about something and finding it strangely soothing, Roza Soledad fell into a deep, healing sleep.

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When Roza awoke she could hear the comforting creak of the ship, and the sound of the crew shouting to each other as they went about their business. She was pleased to see that she had her precious note-bag besides her - even in her weakened state she had apparently continued to clutch at it like a sort of protective talisman. She assumed that Grey Nurse must have ministered to her in her illness, and no doubt he had decided in the end that it was not worth trying to pry the satchel from his patient. Roza took a few experimental steps. Her throat still hurt and she was a bit woozy on her feet, but she could feel her strength returning. She had hobbled along a few clumsy steps when Essi walked by with what looked like the top of a barrel, whistling as she went along.
"Good morning there, my friend!" the carpenter said.
"Morning?" Roza said.
Essi nodded.
"Oh yes indeed. I think you slept through the day and night. The Captain, she woke a few hours ago and is running about, and Pierre, he is coughing very theatrically, it is most convincing, and he is now demanding very loudly that he be dropped off somewhere so he can have a recuperating holiday."
Roza supposed the vapours from the pit must have knocked her out for almost a full day. She cursed the wasted time.
"I must get to work on translating these new symbols," she said, and took what she had planned to be a bold step forward, only to wobble precariously and then tip to one side. Luckily, she managed to fall into Essi, who pondered for a moment, then laid aside the barrel lid and helped Roza to her feet. With Essi's help, and many mumbled apologies of her own, Roza made the slow trip up onto deck. Essi explained what the Aurora had been up to when the trio had descended into the pit - how they had waited until Grey Nurse's natural state of anxiety grew too much for the crew to bear and he insisted that they send a search party down, and as it happened, Essi had put together a few pulleys and rope ladders for just such an occasion. What with Nurse's frenzied instructions and some help from Cook's muscles, they had managed to lower Essi down far enough to retrieve the unconscious trio before too much harm was done to them.
"And oh my, what a funny colourful hole in the ground that was!" remarked Essi as they finally reached the sun-drenched deck of the ship, "I think I also have a little headache from going down to find you all, and I had very strange dreams last night, where I was looking for things in my pockets, and yet every one was filled with such things that should not be in pockets, such as the most colourful tigers, fish with tusks, and feathered snakes, and all kinds of beasts most angry that I was disturbing them!"
Roza assured Essi that she could manage from here, now that she was in the fresh air, and the carpenter smiled and wandered back to her business with the barrel lid, resuming her whistling.

As ever, Carnelian hardly appeared any worse the wear for their struggles in the shining pit, besides a slight reddish tinge to her eyes, no doubt a lingering temporary affect from the strange vapours they had breathed. At the moment, she was demonstrating how quickly she had recovered to the ever perturbed Nurse by jumping up and down on the spot and waving her arms. Carnelian paused in the midst of these exercises when she caught sight of Roza.
"Scribbler!" she said with delight, "Pleased to see you up and about! Feeling better?"
"Yes, thank you, Captain," Roza Soledad said. She rubbed at her throat. It pained her somewhat to speak. "And I must thank you too, Nurse, and Essi and Cook as well. If you had not ventured down into the pit after us, we would have been lost."
"You three reckless fools would do as much for any of us," said Grey Nurse, "And while I must accept that I have no influence on our Captain, I insist that you at least, young lady, should listen to my advice and not be moving about until you have fully recovered."
Roza shook her head.
"If the Captain and Pierre are back to work, then so am I," she insisted, "Besides, until I solve the symbols we found in the shining pit, we haven't got the first idea where Al-Navar is directing us, and the longer we wait in one place, the more danger that the Satrap's forces will track us down."
Carnelian bent down and inspected Roza.
"You sure you are feeling up to it, Scrib?" the Captain murmured.
Roza gave an insistent nod.
"Good enough for me!" declared Carnelian, "Scribbler, you get to your books - use my cabin and find our next heading as quick as you can! The rest of you noble citizens of the good ship Aurora, make everything ready for us to set sail as soon as Scribbler has done with her brainwork!"
"Aye-aye, Captain!" chorused the crew, and Roza walked as quickly as she dared to the map sprawled on the table in Lalla Carnelian's cabin, where she unpacked the precious transcription of the second code of Al-Navar and set to work.

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Even working as fast as she was able, it took Roza some hours until she was certain that she had found the new heading for the Aurora. By this time she was feeling much better, invigorated by the process of wrestling with Al-Navar's ancient cyphers and riddles. She rushed out and called Carnelian and Nurse to inspect the map, indicating where they would be led to the third and final clue on the voyage to the Silent Isle, in which lost place lay some unknown treasure concealed by the sage for these many years. Roza explained that they would sail north, and there, according to the riddling poem:
"Still at the limit of the waters,
The deathless bounds tower in the pale,
And where silence falls, is thine own end."
Grey Nurse frowned as Roza recited the last verse.
"I don't much like the sound of that. So far, your tricksy old traveller has led us to a mountain filled with vicious beasts and birds, and some sort of shining-hot infernal pit. I'm inclined to think whatever this last little spot is may be even worse."
"It isn't going to be an easy voyage," agreed Captain Carnelian thoughtfully. She dug out a

small dagger from beneath the mess on the table and tapped at the map with the hilt, tracing their prospective path over the waves.
"This stretch of land is allied with the Satrap. As we need to squeeze our way through the pass here, we'll have to sneak past there quick as you please. Then we've got to skirt the Iron-Bound Coast, where Old Mother Nature is often inclined to be lively, not to mention that once we sail far enough north, there's going to be a bit of an icy nip in the air this time of year."
Both Roza and Grey looked glum, but Carnelian beamed.
"But keep your spirits up, shipmates! After all, who wants a boring life, ey?"
Grey Nurse sighed.
"Let's cast off as quick as we can then, mates," Lalla Carnelian said, "And be on our way before we run into ships who might be interested in us. Our best defence against those that want Scribbler's notes is speed and movement."
"Aye, Captain," said Nurse wearily.

The Aurora weighed anchor, and as Roza tried to assist in the ship's departure without getting in the way, she cast one last look back at the shining pit. The late-day sun was becoming obscured by the clouds, and the streaks of colour of the rocky outcrop that had first led them here were almost impossible to see in this lowering light. It was almost as if this remarkable but dangerous place was vanishing. Soon, the Aurora was picking up speed, and the entrance to the glowing pit was entirely out of sight.

Chapter 20

The Aurora sped over the waves. When they were forced to skirt along land, wherever possible Carnelian would direct them to travel via winding routes where the landscape was either entirely wild, or at the very least, sparsely populated. If they were driven to pass near a point where they were in danger of being espied and reported, they would travel silently and under cover of little light. So deft was the Captain and crew in the handling of the Aurora that they seemed not to even need the soft illumination of starlight to direct the ship, as if their hands knew of themselves where they fitted and at what time they should act in the ministering of the vessel.

Late in some unknown hour, Roza noted that the Aurora was drifting in waters where simple fishing vessels were dotted about the waves, and she became seized by a terrible dread that they might report the Aurora's passing in exchange for the coin that the Satrap was surely offering in every part of the globe. Instead, as it happened, the fisher-folk seemed to know the Aurora and Carnelian from times gone by, and they exchanged friendly words from their rough tubs. Carnelian shouted out after families and local happenings as they went by, and as her conversation with each fishing-tub ended, she laughed and winked, making a gesture to request that these local acquaintances might be good enough to keep the news that the Aurora had come this way to themselves. Each and every one of the fishing folk returned the wink with a glint in their eye and a finger to their lips.

From there, the ship sailed on without incident towards the narrow passage they would eventually need to enter, keeping in constant motion over the waves with the wind favourable in its sails. Roza Soledad spent the time continuing her ship-board education and note-taking. She was particularly accustomed at this time to apprenticing herself to Pierre, ostensibly that she might learn not just more ship-lore, but also to be stronger and more nimble, as life with Carnelian and the Aurora required agile wits, strong limbs, and tireless fortitude. Roza was also there to make sure that the proud Pierre was not overburdened by his work on board, so that he might make a full recovery. Pierre, Roza suspected, was entirely aware of her concern for the mastman's health, and although he acted his normal snobbish self, yet she knew that he appreciated the unspoken reason for her constant requests to accompany him in his tasks. Of course, if you spent time with Pierre, you spent a great deal of it climbing rigging and scaling the mast, and in short time, Roza Soledad, a young woman who had always had her feet firmly planted on the ground, was beginning to push aside the natural fear of looking down from such heights on a constantly rocking vessel.

It so happened that one mid-day while assisting Pierre with his duties, Roza was hurrying to bring him a pot of pungent-smelling wood-varnish he had requested from Essi's supplies, when she heard the short fellow give an ominous shout from his perch in the rigging. Squinting over the waves, Pierre indicated that something was approaching the Aurora. Carnelian had just run over to spy out the approaching object with her glass when there was a

booming in the distance, and then a sound like the air being torn in two as some mass smashed through the railings of the Aurora, shards and scraps of wood spraying into the air. So startled was Roza by this sudden explosion that she scarcely knew what was occurring. Carnelian, on the other hand, leapt immediately into action.
"Twist in the wind, mates! Let's not make it too easy for them to sink our Aurora!"
It dawned on Roza Soledad that another ship was firing upon them! For want of anything better to do, she scurried below deck to find something to seal the pot of varnish in her hand so that she might put it back safely in its place. Soledad was only below deck for a brief time, but when she came back up, Essi, who normally was so slow and sleepy that she had barely put her boots on in the time it took for anyone else to dress, had appeared where the Aurora had been struck, and was intently at work on the wound done to the ship, labouring to ensure that there was no immediate mortal injury done to their faithful craft.

At the direction of the Captain, the Aurora lurched to starboard, and not a moment too soon, for just as they shifted course there was another explosion in the distance, and a second cannonball came hurtling towards them, missing by only a few feet this time, and plunging through the surface of the sea.
"Keep her moving, crew! Tack back again! Wend to and fro until we daze those bellicose rogues!"
The crew obeyed the Captain's orders almost without the need for thought. For a brief moment, Roza almost forgot the danger all around them, and had the distracting pleasure of watching the Captain and crew of the Aurora working together as if they were all one united being. A third cannonball roaring through the air just above their heads, however, snapped Soledad out of this admiring reverie.
Carnelian had the glass to her eye that she might better spy out their enemy. She frowned in recognition.
"Worse news, mates!" she said, "I recognise that gaudy crate that's taken a dislike to us. It's the Prancing Peacock." Lowering her glass, she nodded to Roza.
"Here's something for your papers, Scribbler. That Peacock there is a bauble of a vessel crewed by the most avaricious, grasping pirates that ever took to sea. And of course, you've already met the captain of the Peacock - that untrustworthy carrion-bird, Fancy Fausto!"
"They have only scratched us, Captain," Essi shouted over, "But even that makes me sad."
"Let's show the Peacock what the Aurora can do!" declared the Captain, "Give full sail and hard at 'em, crew! We'll not flinch!"
At the Captain's command, the Aurora ceased to dance around the enemy's cannons, and instead began rushing straight towards the opposing ship!
"Captain!" Roza shouted over the roar of wave and wind as they hurtled towards collision, "Won't they be able to shoot us to pieces if we get this close?"
Carnelian fixed the opposing boat with a grim stare.
"They'll not sink the Aurora before we smash into their ribs, and our trusty vessel has a hard head - she'll knock a hole there large enough to get Fausto and all his finery soaked before they can blow us apart!"
Roza swallowed. She hoped the Captain knew what she was about. At every passing second they seem to be speeding closer and closer to a catastrophic smash-up, but Carnelian's gaze never wavered.

The mettle of the captain and crew of the Peacock, however, was not made of material as stern as that of Lalla Carnelian.
"Signal flag is up!" Pierre declared from above, "Pah! As I had suspected. They are nothing more than a feeble show of feathers!"
Carnelian bellowed for the Aurora to "Slow to stop!".
Roza gave a sigh of relief. The Peacock had stopped firing at them for the moment, and the Aurora began to reduce speed, only very narrowly avoiding the side of the Peacock.
"They are giving the signals that they want to speak with us," announced Pierre with contempt, "What puffs of air and squawks!"
"They don't deserve to be spoken to," Essi added indignantly, "Scuffing at the Aurora like that!"
"And we shouldn't trust them for a single second," said Grey Nurse.
Carnelian nodded at her crew.
"Still, we needn't be as rude as they are, mates. Let's see what Fancy Fausto has to say for himself!"

Chapter 21

Lined up with the rest of the crew, Roza tensely awaited the small boat that carried a party from the Prancing Peacock. After a wary shouted exchange, the lean form of Fausto in his colourful coat and two of his crew came aboard. Fausto's entourage consisted of two large mean-looking sailors, who both had a good number of golden teeth and were adorned with brightly-gleaming cutlasses and pistols strapped all about their persons, as was apparently the required uniform aboard the Peacock. Fausto gave a smile without the slightest trace of warmth at the crowd he had been firing upon mere minutes before, the jewels set in his teeth flashing when he drew back his thin lips. Essi took great offence at this pretence of harmlessness.

"Don't you grin at us, Captain Fausto!" she said, crossing her arms, "Not after the way you tried to shoot up our Aurora!"

Carnelian nodded in agreement.

Fancy Fausto spread his bony hands wide.

"Come now, we're all folk of the sea here, ain't we? Why I hardly scratched your wood, an' we know what we're about on the Peacock. I never wanted to sink you, did I now? No indeed, it's no good to me if you'd all sunk beneath the waves. I just needed to make sure you didn't try to scurry away, and there's nothing for getting attention like a few cannon-balls, I always say." Putting his hands on his hips and winking at his comrades, Fausto and his two bodyguards laughed at this.

Carnelian folded her arms and waited until they were finished.

"You can see how we might have been struck with confusion, Fancy," she said, "Seeing as how we've never heard that particular interpretation of shooting at someone in all our time on the seas."

Fausto examined his long fingernails, produced a slender dagger and started slowly cleaning them with the point.

"Let's not fuss about that, ey, Carnelian? Let's come to the point. I ain't here to go over who did what. That's all past. You know me, I'm a man of business. I'm here to talk direct and honest."

Carnelian shook her head.

"Seems foolhardy to try and attempt honesty all of a sudden, when it ain't something you've ever turned your hand to before, but suit yourself, Fancy. Talk honest."

Fausto tucked away his little dagger and began pacing up and down before them with his hands behind his back, his head craned forward and bobbing as he went.

"We can all do well today, Carnelian, both our crews can make proper coin here, and all we have to do is borrow that little lady there." He stopped at Roza Soledad, looming over her, an avaricious grin splitting his thin face. "That's why I've tracked your tub up and down the seas, an' why I couldn't chance you trying to run away before we could have a little talk. But I knew I'd find you, because Fausto never misses a chance, an' this time I've landed the biggest, fattest chance of me whole life. Why, if powerful folks just want to have a little talk with this missy Soledad, powerful and rich people shall have what they want, say I, so long as they do

the payin'! Who'd be foolish enough to pass up a catch like this, ey?"
"You are working for the Satrap!" Roza blurted.
Fausto shrugged.
"Ain't no harm in that," he nodded at Captain Carnelian, "An' after I spied this here Soledad and Carnelian made her uproar over in Port Haren, just like she always likes to do, old Fausto kept his ears an' eyes open, an' got to hear what this unassumin' little lady was worth to the Satrap." Fausto whistled to himself at the thought. Roza looked upon the colourful-coated sailor with disgust. Clicking his tongue, Fausto wagged a bony finger at her.
"Now see here, little madame, you can makes your faces anyway you like. The Satrap pays well, and everybody has to work for somebody, little Miss, that's just the way of all things, so it's best to work for whoever can pay the best. But I ain't greedy-" someone among the onlookers made a scoffing noise. Fausto glared at the assembled faces. "I says I ain't greedy. Fausto is happy to share his bounty. You let us take this small item off your hands, an' I give you my oath you'll each have enough pay to buy yourselves a fleet of damn ships, each an' every one of you!"
Carnelian raised an eyebrow and smiled mischievously at her crew.
"What an offer, shipmates! What say you to that price?"
The crew of the Aurora answered in chorus with an immediate and resounding refusal that warmed Roza Soledad's heart, followed by some rather rude thoughts on Fancy Fausto's character.
"Come now, shipmates," said Carnelian, "Don't rush to a decision now! You could be swimming in gold! You could dress as nice and pretty as Captain Fausto, with all the gold rings and jewels you could get your hands on. And let us not be too hasty, when Captain Fausto has been kind enough to travel so far to bring this offer all the way to us! Think what he'd be missing out on, the poor old pirate, if this prize slips through his claws! And think what he'll gain if we let him! Ah, Fausto, no doubt they'll cover you with gold and silver. Why, I fancy the Satrap and company will make an admiral of you, and set you all over with such a plating of medals and ribbons, and if there's any justice in the world, you'll be so weighed down with riches and decorations that you'll sink with 'em down to the bottom of the sea, you plumed grasping vulture."
Carnelian fixed Fausto with an unbreakable gaze.
"Let your pay-master know," she boomed for all the seas to hear, "The Scribbler stays with us as long as she wants, and nothing that comes out of your mouth on the subject hereafter is worth our attention."
A flush of anger spread across Fausto's face.
"Ye damn'd fools! These are real things right at hand - wealth, an' power! An' what're you salt-headed bedlamites preferring? To live on this worthless boat with nothin' to your blasted names but some airy ideas? That ain't anything real or worth a speck o' dirt. It ain't real like coin is real an' worth somethin', an' not like steel is real! Let me take the time to teach you infants a little lesson on the topic!"
With that, Fausto drew out his cutlass, slicing at the air menacingly. There were rich gems in the polished hilt and coloured ribbons were tied about the blade that whipped through the air as the blade was deftly spun about in the thin man's skilled hands. Fausto's two bodyguards drew selections from among their collection of pistols and blades with vicious delight. Roza Soledad felt the crew of the Aurora tense, readying themselves to do battle.

"Now stop that at once!" Roza found herself piping up. This seemed to catch Fausto in his advance. "We outnumber you - do you think you can beat us all, Captain Fausto? Let's not settle this with needless violence, I beseech you!"
Fausto leered unpleasantly.
"We've buccaneers an' weapons enough there on my ship to finish off all these witless swabs aboard an' to take you by force, girl, an' don't be forgetting that the Peacock has her cannons trained upon you - you'll not get another chance at that ramming trick from this distance!"
Carnelian stepped smartly in front of Roza.
"No, Fancy, Scrib is right. There's no need to make a big mess on these nice clean decks. What say you we settle this ourselves, captain to captain?"
Uncertainly, Fancy Fausto glanced at his two bodyguards, for Fausto was not the sort of pirate who would ever pass up the smallest advantage.
"Come now, my fine-feathered Fancy," Carnelian said with gentle mockery, "You were going to give me a good old education on the realities and properties of steel, weren't you? You haven't gotten cold on the idea, have you?"
Fausto ground at his teeth. His bodyguards looked questioningly at their captain. He was no fool. He knew that he ruled the Peacock by virtue of his promises of great pay, and by the demonstration that no hand but his own taloned claw was firm enough to direct the ship and crew. The longer he delayed, the more his two men, slow as they were, began to become aware that Carnelian was casting doubt upon the daring and skill of their captain. He had no choice but to agree to fight Lalla Carnelian in a single duel for the fate of Roza Soledad!
"As you wish, Carnelian," Fausto spat. He motioned for his guards to stand well back and not to become involved in the clash of captains. Carnelian did likewise, quietly assuring her crew that she was sure all would be well.
"After all," she whispered, "Have you seen the number of jewels he has all over his blade and his person? I wouldn't be surprised if every one of his pockets are weighed down with bags of gold - and how fast can a pirate move if he insists on carrying his entire collection of wealth with him wherever he goes?"

Chapter 22

"Enough chitter, Carnelian," Fausto snarled and sprang forward, cutting out at Captain Carnelian. The agile captain of the Aurora skipped backwards, her hands loose at her sides. She made a tutting noise.
"Tush, Fancy," she chided her opponent, "Such impatience!"
Furiously, Fausto slashed at her a second and third time, yet just when it looked like the sword blow was going to land, Carnelian had somehow moved aside just far enough for the edge to pass her by. The crew of the Aurora applauded appreciatively at the spectacle, and Lalla Carnelian gave a cheery little wave in return.
This was too much for Fausto, who decided that the time for play was over, aiming a deadly blow right at the flame-haired captain's head. Roza Soledad thought over the moment later, but so quick was Carnelian that Roza never even saw the Captain's hands move or her sword being drawn - it was as if the blade had leapt without prompting into Carnelian's hands, just in time to block Fausto's attack.
Now the duel began in earnest. For all Carnelian's dancing skill, Fausto was not an opponent to be underestimated in a contest of blades. Fancy fought aggressively and with single-minded intent, slashing and stabbing at Carnelian with furious tenacity. Yet, despite Fausto's unyielding anger with the point of his blade, for the moment Carnelian's prowess was sufficient to riposte and parry these flurried attacks. Steel struck against steel and Roza gasped as Fausto's unyielding blows drove Carnelian back step by step, until she was pushed right up against the railing of the ship. There was nowhere for Carnelian to go now but over the edge into the depths! Fausto saw his victory at hand and cawed to himself with triumphant greed. Yet, just as he was bringing back his arm to deliver a slashing cut across his opponent, Carnelian put her feet to the railings of the ship and before anyone knew what was happening, the lithe woman was leaping over his blade, then tumbling over Fausto's head entirely, before landing smartly on her feet behind him. This brought on another round of applause from the crew, and Roza joined in heartily.
"Not bad, Captain, not too bad at all," called out Pierre, with the appreciative eye of a professional.
"Knock the plumed fool t'the ground!" demanded Cook.
But Carnelian shook her head. Rather than strike Fausto from behind, she stood with her sword flat against her shoulder and allowed him to regain his composure, waiting for the baffled man to spin about and face her. Fausto did not have any intention of allowing a dignified pause to the proceedings, and instead, with hate in his narrowed eyes, he resumed his barrage of blows. Even with eyes that were for the most part untrained in the arts of swordplay, Roza could see that the balance of the fight was shifting. Not only did Carnelian effortlessly flick aside these savage, almost desperate attacks, chipping and cutting at Fausto with her shining blade to keep him off balance, but every so often Fancy's strikes would sail past the quicksilver Carnelian as she spun and leapt all the while. A great sensation of hope washed over Roza who stood watching, fists clenched with apprehension, for she saw that while Fausto's attacks were becoming more wild, Carnelian had not lost a step of pace at all.

The Captain was wearing him down!
A dawning sense of the sword-fight slipping away from his control must have also occurred to Fancy Fausto, and a look of concern flooded across his face that threatened to become close to panic. Of course, Fausto had not become captain of the Prancing Peacock and its crew of greedy pirates by anything so foolish and amateurish as ever surrendering to a superior opponent. Gripping his sword-hilt with his right hand, he kept Lalla Carnelian at bay with a few well-timed strikes, while, unseen by Carnelian, Fancy Fausto's left hand secretly withdrew a small dagger from within the folds of his brightly-coloured coat. It was sheer chance that Roza happened to catch sight of the gleam of the knife as Fausto slipped it out. Soledad gave a warning cry before she was even entirely sure what she was looking at. With a swift and violent motion, Fausto hurdled the deadly little blade at Carnelian! Roza Soledad could not be certain whether Carnelian had been on guard because of the alarmed cry the young onlooker had given, or whether the Captain had been saved by her extraordinary reflexes, but the deadly projectile had been flicked aside from the air with a quick motion by Carnelian's sword.

When the other members of the crew Aurora saw Fausto's dagger fall to the deck and understood his treacherous mode of combat, there was a great noise of booing and jeering. Cook, in particular, rolled up her sleeves and was threatening "To twist the head off that sneaking filthy parrot of a pirate". Captain Carnelian, on the other hand, did not bother to take the time to protest at Fausto's tactics, as indeed she knew him too well to expect much more of the man. Instead, Carnelian pressed her attack without respite, her blade moving at such a silvery blur that Fausto, now worn out by the battle and having expended all his strength in his rage, could barely keep up. With a deft cut Carnelian struck out, and Fausto looked on in horror as his beautiful bejewelled sword flew in an arc into the air and fell, blade-first, shivering in the wooden planks of the deck some feet away. Carnelian then kicked the gaudy pirate's feet out from underneath him and before he had fallen to the timbers, her deft blade had moved quickly back and forth, cutting away at Fausto's ribbons and colourful coat, so that when he looked upon himself lying there on the deck, he presented a sorry and ragged sight in defeat. The Aurora gave a great cheer.

Fausto got to his feet with hatred in his eyes.
"What're ye two waiting for?" he snarled back at the pair who had accompanied him onto the Aurora, "Fire away, why don't you, you worthless lumps? Get the cannons this way an' we will sink this damn'd pile once and for all!"
Fausto's two crewmen withdrew cutlasses and pistols and advanced. To Roza's amazement, Captain Carnelian sheathed her sword and shook her head.
"Now Fancy, you don't want to do that. You're a greedy old sea-crow, but I wouldn't say you're stupid. Think for just a moment. Your two beefy lads over there have seen you beaten fair and square, and I reckon there'd be a few over on the Peacock who would have been watching our little show too. Your crew on the Peacock might be only prowling about the waves for the money, but how long d'ye think they'd respect you if they saw you shoot us down after a fair fight? D'ye think you'll be able to keep your claws tight around that bunch if they start thinking that you aren't to be relied on?"
"An' don't you think you can take the Aurora without a fight," said Cook with a menacing

look, "We ain't all as sentimental as the Captain here. We'll have your pretty Peacock all plucked, carved, an' a'roastin before your lot can get anywhere near them cannons."
"It's one thing to chase all that shiny gold, Fausto" Carnelian said, "But it's another thing altogether to blast apart your fellow citizens of the sea, just so you can patch up the wounded plumage of your pride. What kind of sailor is all as weak as that?" Carnelian nodded towards Fausto's men, "Surely you two big lads wouldn't want a fellow like that at the helm? Blazes! No seafarer would!"
Fausto looked hatefully at Carnelian, thinking that he might well trade all the gold the Satrap could offer to have that flame-haired woman at the bottom of the sea. Worse yet, Carnelian's words seems to be having an affect on his two guards, whose weapons were wavering as the pair of them put their heads together, murmuring to each other and nodding. The roaring desire for revenge fought with the sharp cunning within Fausto's breast. In the end, however, Fausto was nothing, if not a practical pirate. He was forced to admit to himself that if he ordered his crew to fight to seize Soledad now, he stood a good chance of losing what little loyalty they had for him. He ground his teeth.
"Blast you to hell, Carnelian!" Fausto hissed, "An' your whole moon-eyed crew. If you're too simple-headed to choose to be rich, then so be it! You fools can run from the Satrap, if you like, an' sail on into storm and squall. May the dark depths swallow the whole damn'd lot of ye!"
The crew of the Aurora jeered and booed at Fausto, which served only to increase his rage.
"Ye soft-headed jellyfish! Go on then! D'ye even know what yer sailing into? All that's ahead of you lunatics are wild waters that swaller up ships like yours as if they were but dainty morsels, an' if you somehow survive that, you haven't a thing to look forward to for yer comfort, except seas so cold they freeze unmovin' an' turn yer blood to ice. An' there's worse yet! Rush on to yer accursed end! Go on to where they say sails a ship more terrible an' unnatural than anything you've ever seen - a doomed ship they say is called The Flaw Ice, a terrible rotting hulk crewed by the Cold Sailors - unfeeling an' unlivin' creatures that prey on anything that lives an' is fool enough to come anywhere near 'em. That's what you've got to look forward to, and all for nothing!" Fancy Fausto gathered the scraps of his coat about him in an attempt to regain some dignity and turned to leave. "Be off with you then, Carnelian," he snarled over his shoulder, "You an' your whole blasted boat. For all the good it'll do anyone."

Carnelian pulled Fausto's jewelled sword from the deck and presented it hilt-first to its owner. Fausto shook with barely suppressed ire as he snatched it up, stalking away.
"Always lovely to see you, Fancy lad," declared Carnelian and gave a pleasant partying wave goodbye as Fausto retreated to the Prancing Peacock with his bodyguards behind him, muttering to himself angrily about the unbearable shame of all that coin lost.

Roza watched as the Prancing Peacock and Fausto slunk away to the sound of the crew of the Aurora singing out their last mocking farewells. Essi, deeply wounded by the Peacock daring to fire upon her beloved Aurora, had composed a ditty about Fancy Fausto the pretty-plumed and his ship of strutting vanities that was none too flattering, although it was a rather memorable little air. Roza was whistling the tune of what Essi had decided was called 'Fly, Fancy, fly', when she caught sight of Grey Nurse's sombre expression.

"Fausto is a fast and greedy pirate, all right," Grey said, "And he's always quick to try and be first to get his claws on any profit, but even if we've seen him off for now, there'll be other low rogues just as keen as Fausto to win the Satrap's golden gratitude by snatching the young lady Soledad through means fair or foul."

Carnelian nodded and stretched.

"Then we'd best be on our way as fast as the wind will take us. We needn't treat with the sort of pirates who cannot even reach Fancy Fausto's level of dedication to the mercenary profession. Once we're by the Iron Coast, they'll not be able to follow the Aurora. Even Fausto wouldn't be so avaricious as to try and match us in those rough waters."

Roza was greatly pleased to hear that not even the Satrap's coin could induce the pirates of these seas to chase them beyond that point, but she began quietly to fear that if what Fausto had said about the approaching dangers of the last part of their journey were true, would the Aurora itself be safe?

Chapter 23

As the Aurora sailed through the pass lying ahead where two peninsulas almost touched, it was as if they were passing beyond a gate that separated one world from another. To begin with, there was only a lonely scattering of distant fishing vessels to be seen, and it was not long before there were very few signs of human habitation.
After some time they reached a grey, stony, infertile coast where there were no people living at all. With the aid of Carnelian's glass, Roza could see that the only signs that human foot had ever trod on the desolate land they passed were the long-abandoned ruins of strewn log cabins and blasted, crumbling stone houses.
"The Iron Coast," said Grey Nurse with ominous foreboding as they looked upon this bleak landscape. An atmosphere of tense anticipation began to settle over the crew. Every nerve on board the Aurora was strained in wariness, as if the landscape itself lay in ambush, and at any moment they might be caught in the rocky teeth of the Iron Coast. The ship moved carefully alongside the jagged land, Carnelian always watchful for the slightest shift in the weather or hazard ahead in the waters. Each member of the crew worked silently at their post with similar devoted concentration. Grey Nurse silently signalled to Carnelian, who looked upwards and nodded. The sky was beginning to cloud over - great grey-black heavy clouds were rolling out and swallowing up the sky. Roza had never seen such foreboding heavens. It looked as if the bulging grey clouds might encompass them all. It was not long after the clouds were swelling that the winds began to spring up, but these were nothing like the clear whistling airs Roza had experienced thus far on her voyage with Captain Carnelian. No, Iron Coast winds spun and shrieked, whipping back and forth from the ocean to the coast, whirling so madly about that Roza felt her face sting and burn from these frenzied blasts, and so fearfully did the winds lash that tears were brought forth in her eyes.

As the winds cut about in their savage lunacy, the waves roiled and churned so greatly that Roza began to feel a sickness in her stomach as the deck of the Aurora rolled and spasmed about underneath her feet. She swallowed the rising bile down and held on tight to a rope. Roza did not have long to contemplate the nauseating buffeting of the sea, for she was startled by the sudden cracking of thunder echoing along the grey coast, echoing a song of approaching doom. The rains began to pour down on them now, cold rain that the shrieking winds could add to their painful scourgings of the ship, and then so great was the howling and the torrents that Roza Soledad could only see clearly when the air was lit up by bursts of lightning, capturing everything around her for a single moment in a fearful picture of burning light and twisting shadow. Carnelian bellowed over the storm, and although it was a great difficulty for Roza to make out the commands, the rest of the crew responded without hesitation.
"Reef the sails! Keep us off the rocks!" the Captain roared as the rain and wind lashed at her. So tormented was the sea and so violently was the ship being thrown about by the turbulent raging of these senseless elements that Roza could barely tell which way was sky, and which way sea. She clung on to her rope with all her might, for the ship felt like it was being thrown

aloft, tipped and twisting with scarcely any ability to resist this world gone mad. The sky blazed and thundered and it felt as if they were being torn apart by the storm. The very pieces of the ship groaned desperately at the torturous and unrelenting forces manically trying to break the Aurora.

Through stinging eyes, Roza could just make out the determined form of Essi crawling through the howling wind and rain, patching here and hammering there, trying to keep the ship from suffering any wounds fatal enough to sink her. Struck by the great smashing force of a towering wave, the ship was flung to the port side so violently that Essi was thrown like a rag-doll to the very edge of the ship, and only managed to keep herself from being lost in the tempest by clinging on desperately with a hammer hooked over the railing. Without a second thought, Roza crawled along as quickly as she could, trying to ignore how the storms of the Iron Coast were shaking them all terrifyingly back and forth. With both hands, Roza seized Essi's arm and bracing herself with her legs against the wooden edge of the ship - she pulled backwards with all her might. If things had gone otherwise, perhaps the diminutive Soledad would have failed to save her crewmate from the thrashing waters, but it happened that the Aurora tilted back just at that moment and Essi tumbled back onto the deck. Essi shouted her thanks over the sound of the storm, and despite having been close to being devoured by the ocean just a moment before, the ship's carpenter immediately returned to her duties. Indeed, Roza understood that amidst this danger, there was no time to give in to fear! They must do nothing but work to preserve the Aurora!

From her position at the wheel, where she fought as if wrestling the tempest with her bare hands, a storm-soaked Carnelian glanced over their way, gave a small sign of relief that her crew were safe for the moment, before returning to the unflinching battle with the elements. There was a terrible thud and scraping noise that resounded painfully through the Aurora and Essi scurried beneath deck to inspect the damage. Squinting, Roza could see that the storm of the Iron Coast had driven them towards the rocks that revealed themselves for a moment, and then were hidden by the swirling waves. The deadly coast had struck its first blow against them, and Roza Soledad feared the ship could not survive another without becoming caught and smashed to bits by the howling wind and battering force of the sea.

Carnelian shouted out orders and gritted her teeth, refusing to give an inch to the violence of the storm, resisting with every bit of fight in her body. They had come so far, Roza thought to herself - they must survive! They could not fail now, not when they were so close, not when, against all odds she could soon honour the last wishes of her poor father by solving the riddles of Al-Navar to discover the Silent Isle! Roza once again took up her position and looked defiantly at the storm. She may only be a small scholar, one used to nothing but libraries and books, but now she was a member of the Aurora, and she too refused to give in! And indeed, little by little, as Carnelian struggled with the wheel and guided the ship with short, sharp commands, as the crew of the Aurora worked untiringly to keep their vessel and their home afloat, little by little the Aurora was dragged away from the destruction that awaited them on the rocks of the Iron Coast.

Chapter 24

Inch by inch they forced their way through the waves and the rain and the wind, and in time Roza saw the tension in Carnelian's face loose somewhat and she knew that they had weathered the worst, and that every passing moment took them into safer waters, where the wind diminished from a howl to an angry buzz, the waves became more regular and less furious and the air became clear enough that they could begin to see about them. With the skies beginning to clear, Roza Soledad could see what a toll the storms of the Iron Coast had taken. The deck was flooded and littered with broken wooden slivers and strips of sails rent apart by the assault of nature. So too the crew showed the wear of fighting through the tempest. Not a one she laid eyes on had escaped a look of hollow-eyed weariness and every one aboard seemed to be moving about with the last bare drops of vigour that remained, as if at any moment they would collapse pitifully, no longer able to hold themselves on their weary feet. The only exception to this was Carnelian herself, and while Roza knew the Captain had suffered as badly, if not worse, in the fight to pass the storm, yet Carnelian gave no sign, but instead shone with an inner fire. As the Captain went about the ship, talking to every member of the crew and thanking them for their mighty efforts, it was as if a tiny spark of her inner fire warmed the poor sailors, and despite all they had suffered they found they had just enough strength to do the work necessary to ensure that the Aurora was restored and repaired as much as was possible.
Roza assisted in that work where she could. She carried tools for Essi, and helped with pumping out the innards of the ship. She apprenticed herself to Pierre as well, helping to stitch torn sails back together, unnerved as she was by the little acrobat's uncharacteristic silence as they worked.

So exhausted was the crew of the Aurora after their escape from the thrashing destruction of the Iron Coast that it was not the Aurora alone that needed repair. Each and everyone had strained against the elements, and there was no shortage of injuries from the relentless assault of the storm. Grey Nurse tended to all of them, fussily bandaging, poulticing, and prescribing, and while many of the crew grumbled and made faces while insisting that they were perfectly fine, yet they were thankful for Nurse's skill and solicitude. They all understood, after all, that just as the Aurora had to be cared for in such a way that it would be able to sail over the worst of the seas, so too must Captain Carnelian's crew be kept sharp and strong enough to weather such dangers again. Out here in the distant reaches of the ocean, those on board the Aurora knew that their mutual reliance and comradeship was the mainstay that kept all oncoming threats and dangers at bay. When she followed after Grey Nurse and kept notes on his instructions to his patients, Roza swore a private oath to herself that while she sailed with Captain Carnelian and her crew, she too would stand ready to do her utmost for all who sailed on board, just as they would for her.

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To aid in the restoration of the crew's strength, or, as she put it, to "Put a bit of ginger back in yer sorry skins", Cook had been doling up good meals and an abundance of warming broths. Grey Nurse would often squabble with Cook about what manner of food the crew should be eating to repair their health, but despite his need to advise all and sundry about their business, Cook would inevitably drive the thin second-in-command of the ship to defeat by virtue of the loudness and obstinacy of her counter-arguments, as well as by waving her collection of cleavers at him in a most menacing fashion. When Roza talked to Essi about Cook's vehement and unrestrained manner, Essi laughed and said that she would gladly endure twice as much shouting and threatening from someone who did as much with ship's provisions as Cook, and that the young lady Soledad must not have sailed on many other ships, where the food was invariably the sort of thing that would have to be thoroughly and roughly handled before it behaved anything like an edible substance. The rest of the crew tended to agree with Essi, and were much of the opinion that Cook could bellow her lungs out at anybody she liked on board, provided she continued to run the best little galley found almost anywhere upon the seas.

Roza was also thankful that the sea had become calm, nature apparently having exhausted all its strength in trying to tear apart the Aurora upon the ocean, and it had now subsided into a languid doze. This welcome respite from bad weather, along with Grey Nurse and Cook's care, helped give the crew time to rest and regather their strength. Indeed, it took Roza some days before she felt as if her head would ever feel still and safe, long after they had fled the storm. It was also becoming colder the further Carnelian took them along their northerly course. On the one hand, Roza was more than thankful to leave the storms of the Iron Coast behind them, but the waters in which they now sailed were so quiet that the young Soledad almost felt that there was some sinister hidden edge to these seas, and she found herself tense and watchful, without any precise idea what she was keeping an eye out for.

In the meantime, while trying to avoid Grey Nurse's doses of spinach and healthful but unpleasant medicines, Carnelian worked endlessly to keep the spirits of the crew up, and there were performances and songs every evening. Roza even summoned the courage to read to the crew in the evening from amongst the meagre collection of books she had found on board - going so far as to try different voices and the occasional acting out of dramatic sections. When she lay trying to sleep, Roza Soledad thought to herself that she no longer felt quite so uncomfortable reading and declaiming and capering to amuse the crew. No, she felt welcomed by the members of the ship. But then, in the dead of night, she would again find her thoughts turning from that warm sense of belonging towards the undefinable fear that had lurked at the back of her mind, a fear that a fresh danger stalked them now. Although she could not find the smallest scrap of evidence or explanation for this fearfulness, yet it would not budge from her mind for long.

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They sailed into the cold, and from far-off they occasionally saw solitary ships crawling behind curtains of fog as they went about their business. The Aurora always kept its distance. Roza argued with herself that this should give them all a sense of safety. There was almost no

possibility that the Satrap's agents or grasping pirates like Fausto would dare risk the storms of the Iron Coast to chase them through such lonely waters.

Each morning, a cold frost clung to the surface of the Aurora, and every morning that iciness took longer and longer to vanish. Grey Nurse had decided that the temperature had dropped too low now and in his capacity of chief health-fusser, he now insisted that everyone dress more warmly. With Roza's assistance, a stock of thick coats, hats and scarves were dug out of storage and pressed upon the members of the crew. Essi and Roza were now wrapped in so many layers that they almost wobbled sphere-like as they went about their duties, laughing at the silly sight they presented to each other. Even Pierre, who turned his nose up several times at the offerings Nurse and Soledad brought him, eventually agreed to wear a woollen hat and gloves that he did not find too objectionable. Captain Carnelian herself was so securely wrapped in red scarves by Grey Nurse that the only part of her face you could see on deck were her eyes twinkling mischievously. Somehow, the Captain often managed to forgetfully unwind these scarves as she went about her business, so much of Grey Nurse's free time was spent chasing her about to wrap her up again.

Unmoving white patches began to appear on the horizon that revealed themselves as the broken shards of frozen ice floes. It was now cold enough that the crew could always see their breath when on deck, and a good deal of work had to be devoted to making sure that the ropes and other equipment exposed to the chill were not left damp, lest they freeze in the night. Gradually more and more of their surroundings became white, as the ice floes became larger and larger. Roza wondered aloud whether they might see some snow, but Carnelian shook her head and assured her resident Scribbler that in these icy fields it was too cold for snow to fall. Indeed, the cold was now not the sort of matter that could be ignored, and Roza's skin stung from the few gaps in her wrappings where she was exposed to the air. Pierre was finding the low temperatures so difficult to work with that he had progressed from the occasional muttered complaint to an almost constant stream of shouted invective about the weather. He seemed to use up his gloves much faster than anyone else on board, and on occasion a French expletive from up in the ropes and masts was accompanied by the falling from above of the tattered scraps of the latest worn-out glove to be flung away in a fit of disdain.

Chapter 25

When it felt like it simply could not get any colder, they arrived at what must have been the source of all the floating ice floes they had encountered on their journey through this cold region. Those floes had been the merest chips and fragments in comparison to what now lay before the Aurora. All about them were white mountains of pure eternal ice.
"The Frozen Edges," Carnelian said quietly, nodding to their surroundings. This frozen landscape loomed so high above the ship and radiated such an eerie cold feeling that Roza and the crew felt compelled to speak in whispers in its presence, small and insignificant as they felt between these towering sheets and peaks of ice that appeared to be watching the Aurora as it sailed slowly past. Occasionally these frozen titans above them gave a distant creak or crack, the sound of the ice upon their surface moving when the white mountains shifted ever so slightly in the presence of these warm-blooded intruders. The light was somehow discomforting in these cold waters, and was often too piercing, apparently being lent an extra concentration and harshness as it reflected from the white expanses around them. Sometimes the way the light flashed from a point of the white mountains into the corner of the eye would lead them into thinking there were impossible movements of creeping just out of their sight.
"It feels as if we have reached the very ends of the earth," Roza said to herself as she gazed upon the icy expanses, "As Al-Navar wrote, we lie 'Still at the limits of the waters'."

The Aurora was forced to slow while they sailed through the Frozen Edges, as the great hunks of ice narrowed their path through the cold water. After surviving the jagged rocks of the Iron Coast, it would not do to run aground against these great white walls. There was a tense feeling aboard the ship. The Aurora was a craft that was happiest with space to move freely upon the open sea. Being hemmed in and restricted by these cliffs of ice was not at all to its taste.
The silence was suddenly broken when Pierre called out. He had spied something ahead. Carnelian and Roza ran forward to the bow to see what he had raised a cry about.
"Why, what is that?" Roza said through chattering teeth, "It doesn't look like the rest of the ice formations hereabouts."
Carnelian shook her head.
"Looks to be as good as ice now, Scrib, but them's the poor poking innards of ships wrecked hereabouts and trapped in the cold. These waters might look calm, but they're dangerous. We need to keep a wary eye out until we pass on through the rest of this frozen maze."

Threading through the narrow path was no simple matter, for the space between the ice had become so tight that the sides of the ship occasionally scraped uncomfortably off the frozen walls, the sound echoing in the fragile air. At many points they sailed so close to the stretches of ice that Roza could have reached out and pushed her glove against the cold surface, and there were numerous times where they dragged so long against the walls that she feared they might become trapped. As the ship crawled forward, they looked up and saw that some shade

was cast upon them, for the two sides of the great ice mountain bowed to each other and formed a vaulted cavern, like a great white cathedral arched over them. Grey Nurse was anxiously clutching the shaft of a boat hook, staring distrustfully at this high cold roof and the ice pressing from every side. It gave him considerable relief when he saw that, some way up ahead, the ice cavern opened back up into the piercing blue sky and the ship would again have some more freedom of movement. Grey almost smiled when the Aurora came out the other side, and that relief rippled through the crew. It was short lived however, as Pierre cried out that again there was a large object ahead in their path. At first they thought it was another sizeable wreck claimed by the Frozen Edges, but as they drew closer, the shape almost seemed to be sailing unerringly straight towards them.

They could see now that it was a ship, but it was not of a fashion anyone on board had ever seen before. This oncoming vessel had an air of chaos and ruin, it was a mis-shapen and ugly beast, and it was no surprise that Pierre had thought it another frozen wreck. Even with her limited knowledge of seacraft, Roza wondered how such a ship could even sail. The keel of the beast-ship was a mottled black colour, crawling menacingly through the cold sea, and above the water-line the spiked, rough exterior of the craft was a deathly pale white, as though the timbers had long lain in the cold sun until they had become white as bleached bones. It was almost as if a cruel shard of ice was bearing down to destroy them. Roza gave a shiver that had nothing to do with the cold. It seemed impossible, but she knew that this fearsome vessel must be the 'Flaw Ice' Fancy Fausto had mentioned - the ship he had said was sailed by cold and unliving creatures. Worse yet, there was no chance now that the Aurora could avoid this encroaching spectre of a craft.

"They haven't fired upon us," Roza whispered anxiously.
"You cannot eat what you sink to the bottom of the ocean," said Grey Nurse darkly.
The very sight of this unearthly ship had struck the crew of the Aurora with such fear and uncertainty that they stood paralysed. Roza felt this wave of terror would have overwhelmed all of them and rendered them helpless prey to the Flaw Ice, if Carnelian hadn't stood high on deck and let her gaze light upon every member of the crew. In that single look Carnelian was letting the crew understand that she knew that she could count on each and every one of them to face whatever was to come, and that simple knowledge broke the spell of terror that had its grip on the Aurora.
Carnelian set her jaw and laid her hand upon the pommel of her sword.
"No choice but to stand by, crew!" she called out, "Let's see what's what with these Cold Sailors."
"Ready for the worst!" added Grey Nurse, who was so tense now that his face looked even thinner than usual, and he stalked about the Aurora, making sure that everyone was prepared.

There was a sound in the air and then a clunk, as iron grapnels covered in some sticky black muck clawed their hooks into the side of the Aurora. The crew ran to try and remove them. Essi rushed about with her tools to throw these devices into the sea, their black ropes slinking down behind them, but as Roza discovered as she struggled with all her might against one of these grapnels, the iron points bit deep into the wood and were difficult to remove. She finally managed to pull one free and tip it overboard, but there was a hiss in the air as

black-stained snakes of rope flew overhead, and then a thud as two more sets of hooks bit into the side of their ship. No matter how they raced to pull hooks from the skin of the ship, they were only delaying the inevitable, and more and more of the barbed black ropes held fast to the Aurora. It was not long before the threatening pale form of the Flaw Ice crunched into the side of the ship, and Roza was thrown to the deck by the shock of impact. The ever-nimble Carnelian kept her feet effortlessly and with one smooth motion, drew her flashing sword.

"Here they come!" she shouted.

Chapter 26

High on the Flaw Ice stood three terrible figures - what appeared to be two women and one man. They were clothed in torn and tattered remnants and thick dark matted coats. White strips of cloth were wrapped all about their faces and hands, bleached animal skulls were worn upon their heads, while sharp bones were twisted through their matted hair and tied to their rags. These three figures on the Flaw Ice raised their left hands into the air simultaneously, and suddenly there was a rush of Cold Sailors swarming across the ropes to attack like a great whirling mass of fur, bones, and rags.

The fiends muttered and chanted grotesquely to themselves as they swept on to the Aurora with their muck-encrusted weapons drawn. Carnelian's crew drove them off where they could - Cook had a particularly effective technique, seizing one tattered invader in each hand and hurling them away with no more seeming effort than one would throw away a loaf of stale bread. Even so, the swarm from the Flaw Ice was too numerous and determined to keep them all from setting their boots on the deck of the Aurora, and when four Cold Sailors surrounded Cook at once, she drew out two great cleavers, ready to meet their blades.

Everywhere on board battle was joined. Gripping the handle with both hands, Essi swung great blows of her hammer at the invaders. Pierre leapt and tumbled over the shambling hordes, bowling himself at the legs of one enemy, leaping upon the back of another with a short dagger clenched in his teeth. Even the thin and angular form of Grey Nurse was there, wielding the staff of a boat hook to protect himself and drive the muttering attackers back. And of course, Captain Carnelian and her sword sped about the deck as the battle raged across the Aurora. Whenever the Cold Sailors were about to overwhelm one of the crew, Carnelian would leap to their side, sword darting quicker than the eye could follow to drive the ragged invaders back. And yet, as often as Carnelian dealt blows to the Cold Sailors, they still continued to advance, chanting to themselves. She had slashed at one opponent wearing a necklace of bones who was swinging a great misshapen club, and although this individual took a few stumbled steps backwards, yet the invader chanted and lifted the club aloft again as if it had barely noticed the precise attacks Carnelian had rained down with her sword.
"Fire and flood!" Carnelian declared in frustration, "These shambling hordes of bone and fur are a tough lot! P'rhaps there's something uncanny to these devils after all!"
As furiously as the crew of the Aurora fought, it was almost as if they were expending all their strength against unliving and unfeeling beings. It was madness to believe such a thing, but here among the Frozen Edges, the terrifying madness of the Flaw Ice seemed all too possible.

Roza Soledad, who had nothing about her person but her bag of pens and papers, spent most of the battle trying to stay out of the clutches of the Cold Sailors, and so that she might not be overwhelmed by the sense of dread created by the appearance of the unearthly attackers, she found herself attempting to drive away fear by studying, no mean task amongst all the noise

and violence on deck. Surely there was a sensible, comprehensible explanation for these creatures, no matter how strange it may seem? Roza thoughts were cut off as one of the Cold Sailors broke off from the main force. A chilly wave of fear crawled over Roza's skin. The creature had caught sight of her. This figure stalked towards her, a crude axe hanging in one hand. Like the others of the invading troops, this shape was clothed in pale rags and filthy tattered black furs. This did not look like an individual who was interested in being reasoned with, or indeed in anything Roza Soledad might have to say on the topic of the foolishness of violence. The Cold Sailor swung its axe experimentally at Roza, the edge whistling over her head and cutting into the wooden barrel behind her. Clearly, as rough as the axe looked, it was kept sharp enough. Scurrying and dodging, Roza managed to avoid two more blows from the ragged axe. The Cold Sailor had stalked closer now, moving without any hurry, confident that a little thing like her could not hope to escape. There was a feeling of something behind her, and Roza realised with dread that she had been backed into a corner and there was no space to flee the attacker advancing towards her! So close was the figure with the axe that Roza could see the dirt encrusted on the jagged fingernails wrapped around the axe. Willing her mind to work faster and more desperately then it had ever done before, Roza was transfixed by the Cold Sailor's eyes staring from within the pale rags wrapped about the face. Those were eyes suitable for beings of the icy wastes, eyes that stared through her without feeling or compassion, eyes that would not hesitate to cut Roza Soledad into pieces if she didn't think up some form of defence quickly. Unable to look away from that deadened stare, Roza's hand scrabbled fearfully in her satchel, fingertips digging past sheaves of paper and wishing she had something sharper than a pen in there that might stand up to this Cold Sailor's jagged axe! Her fingers brushed against a small lump in her bag and she grasped it with a frantic flash of inspiration. The figure in front of her mumbled something beneath its wrappings, the bones that hung from the coat clattering as it took a step forward and hefted the axe into the air, undoubting now that it would find its target. In a flash, Roza withdrew the object from her bag, tore off the cap, and dashed it against her opponent's face. Black ink from one of her ink bottle was splattered all over the Cold Sailor's face-wrappings. If nothing else, Roza had stopped that merciless gaze.

The Cold Sailor moaned piteously, stumbled back in confusion and chopped the axe down, but Roza now had enough space to slip past the dread attacker. Again and again, the axe swung harmlessly through the air, and the Cold Sailor's muttering became addled. Roza rejoiced at her narrow escape - it was a small victory, she knew, but thank all the heavens that good eyeful of ink had saved her. She dashed to where Carnelian was keeping a crowd of the invaders barely at bay with her sword, kicking her boot out to knock these raiders back when they would not react to the sting of her blade.

"Captain!" Roza called out at the top of her lungs, "Whatever these beings are, they are not so unearthly that they can see with their eyes clouded!" With a bravery she barely knew she possessed, Roza shouted to attract the attention of one of Carnelian's opponents, and when the deadened eyes turned to stare at her, Roza Soledad dashed another lash of black ink straight into this set of cold lights. This Cold Sailor clawed at the ink. Lalla Carnelian's face lit up. Roza threw the pot of ink into the air, and Captain Carnelian pushed back at the crude blades with her sword hand, dealt a blow to a boney helmet with her free hand, and neatly caught the

inkpot from the air in one smooth motion. Carnelian immediately took to painting her opponents' eyes with ink with gusto.
"Fine work, Scribbler! Spread it to the others!"
With a nod, Roza sped off through the clashing sound of weapons, digging out every last pot of ink she had in her bag, and throwing them to every member of the Aurora she could reach.
"In the eyes! In the eyes!" she ordered as she went.
Soon the Cold Sailors were stumbling about, blindly slashing at the air, and giving the crew a moment to snatch a brief respite.
"That won't hold them long," said a battered Grey Nurse, who was looking very much the worse for wear, supporting his weight on the pole of his boathook.
"Courage!" Carnelian's voice rang out, "Drive back as many of these piles of skin and bones into the seas as you can, shipmates! Scribbler, I need you to fetch me the biggest bucket of the foul-smelling varnish you can find, and get it back to me, quick as you can!"

Roza nodded, but Carnelian had already turned to try and drive some of the ink-blinded Cold Sailors over the edge of the Aurora with kicks and shoves. Grey Nurse's predictions looked to be true, for the Cold Sailors were already beginning to regain the use of their sight, and one must have been able to make out the blurred outline of Roza Soledad as she ran, for the muttering invader stalked towards her with arms outstretched. Too terrified to think clearly and far too full of fear to hesitate, Roza dove between the Cold Sailor's legs, sliding past the foul-smelling furs and out the other side. Before the Cold Sailor had even spun around, Roza had jumped down into the hold and was out of sight, running and scrabbling about until she reached the locker where the varnish was kept. Fumbling with the catches, she eventually threw it open. She seized upon the largest container of varnish she could lift in both arms, and made her way awkwardly back to where Captain Carnelian was deep in the fight. The return was difficult, the bucket of varnish strained Roza's arms, and despite being sealed, the lid was so close to her that the smell of the stuff was almost overpowering. Ignoring the dull pain in her side and how often she scraped and bumped and almost fell, Roza managed to drag the container back on to deck.

Thankfully, none of the Cold Sailors were focussed on her, as the crew of the Aurora were now returning to battle with an energy that Roza knew was merely a sign of how close to weary collapse they were against an enemy that hardly seemed to fall and gave no quarter.
"Captain Carnelian!" Roza called out over the sound of clashing steel. In one swift motion, Lalla Carnelian leapt into the air and had her boots upon the heads and shoulders of her attackers, landing on the deck behind them and running towards Roza. Fearing lest the Captain would not reach her before the ragged blades of the Cold Sailors caught up with her, Roza heaved the container of varnish on its side and pushed with all her might, rolling it straight and true to the Captain dashing towards her. Lalla Carnelian caught the container, tore it open and grinned. Quick as thought, she dipped her sword in the varnish, struck her tinder and let a pure flame spring up along the blade. When she thrust now at the oncoming Cold Sailors, the dancing flames gave them pause.
"Just keep these boneyards busy a little longer, shipmates," Carnelian called out, "I have to step out for a spell."

Even weighed down with the dangerous container of varnish, none of the attackers was swift enough to cut down Captain Carnelian with her burning sword. She slashed and burned and kicked and ran, before seizing the dangling end of a a rope that was tied high on the rigging of the Aurora. Taking a deep breath, she swung herself out over the side of the ship. She hung in the air for a moment, varnish pot under one arm and flaming sword clenched in the other, before tumbling down onto the nearby deck of the enemy ship. Jumping to her feet, Carnelian began throwing the liquid varnish all about the Flaw Ice. Besides the three commanders, the bulk of the force of the Cold Sailors was engaged in battle over on the Aurora, so there was almost nobody on the enemy ship to hinder Captain Carnelian. The trio that commanded the grim craft glared at Carnelian with a terrible clarity. They saw that Captain Carnelian, joyfully slopping flammable liquid all about their ship, and knew that she did not fear them or their ship, and they hated her with a desperate anger. The three drew bone-handled blades and cautiously stalked towards Carnelian. They had seen her fight and knew that her fiery sword was not to be trifled with. One of the grim commanders lunged point first and teeth bared, but Carnelian flicked the blade away and let her burning steel just touch the fingers of the attacker, who started back with a grunt. Another of the trio slashed down, but Carnelian held aloft the small barrel of varnish and the opponent's blade sunk into the the wood of the container. Carnelian drove back that attacker with flaming slashes and prised the sword edge out of the barrel, which immediately started to leak varnish. As the third grim commander of the Flaw Ice attacked from the side, Carnelian flung a good dash of leaking varnish over this third figure and held the dancing fire at the end of her blade up before her. The varnish-covered attacker froze at the prospect of being set alight. Before any of her opponents could take action, Carnelian renewed the flame on her blade with a careless sprinkle of burning liquid and dashed forward, throwing the remainder of the small barrel over ropes and sheets about the eerie ship. Hurling the near-empty barrel at the snarling trio, Carnelian spun about, touched the fiery point of her blade wherever she had poured the varnish, dashing on and leaving flames licking all across the enemy ship.

The three commanders looked about at the spreading fires upon their ship and conferred briefly, coming to swift agreement. They knew that taking the Aurora would mean very little if the Flaw Ice was consumed by fire. They raised their blades into the air and gave a strange cry like a mournful song. At that signal, their crew on board the Aurora halted their attack and heeding the call of their commanders, began crawling back over the remaining grappling cables to the Flaw Ice. Here the commanders of the Cold Sailors immediately set them to work at extinguishing the fires set by Carnelian, attempting to prevent their pale ship from burning to cinders. Captain Carnelian took advantage of this chaos to extinguish and sheathe her sword, secure a rope to the rigging of the Flaw Ice and start making her way to the edge of the burning craft. One commander, amidst directing the efforts of the Cold Sailors, caught sight of Carnelian trying to make her escape, and with a spiteful hiss gave chase through the flames with a throwing axe gripped in hand. Carnelian swung herself on a rope up into the air over towards the welcoming Aurora, but in a last act of vengeance, the pursuing commander of the Flaw Ice hurled the deadly hand axe at Lalla Carnelian. The blade did not strike Carnelian, and there was a brief half-thought of relief, before it became clear that the Cold Sailor had been aiming for the cable swinging Carnelian to safety, which it had sliced through with a single powerful throw. Carnelian was no longer being carried over to safety, but was

falling through the air with the icy waves beneath her.

She strained her self through space, desperately hoping that she had swung high enough to fall in an arc back to the Aurora. Every shipmate of Carnelian's held their breath as they saw their Captain plummet with arms outstretched - there was no hope that she would land safely on board! Then Carnelian was out of sight, and awash with dread, they all ran to see if they could make out her form somewhere in the freezing water below, knowing there was small chance of staying afloat in those dark waves, yet hoping that they might save her. But there was no sign of the Captain. Their hearts sank.
Then there was a whistle and with dawning delight, they turned to locate the sound. There, clinging for dear life with her strong slim fingers to the side of the Aurora was Lalla Carnelian.
Essi and Grey Nurse rushed over and let down a rope without delay, hauling the daring mariner up to safety.
Captain Carnelian brushed down her deep red coat, which was burnt and even still smouldering in patches.
"It might be a ghoulish ship, but it seems to burn well enough," Carnelian said with a grin.
"Of all your foolish plans!" croaked Grey Nurse, furiously overcome with worry, "That was perhaps the worst I have ever yet seen!"
"Time for lectures later, Nurse, " Carnelian insisted, "Let's push off while the bone-bags are occupied. We don't want to be anywhere nearby if they decide to come back over!"

Chapter 27

At the Captain's command, the remaining grappling hooks and lines were pulled free from the timbers of the Aurora. As the final black-stained rope fell squirming into the sea, Essi gave a loud sigh of relief, as if the sharp hooks had been pulled from her own flesh. The crew of the Aurora were bruised, battered, and cut up, but with the last reserves of their will, they gave sail to put as much distance as possible between themselves and the sight of the Flaw Ice. Roza watched with relief as the unsettling craft faded into the distance, her eyes upon the slow clouds of dark smoke spreading from the Flaw Ice into the chilly air. She felt almost as if she could feel the angry staring eyes of the Cold Sailors fixed upon them, a feeling that lingered even when she could no longer see the smoke from the burning sails.

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Nobody on board ship was for tarrying, and the Aurora travelled as fast as it was able across the great expanse of sea walled around with ice.
In time they reached the limits of the Frozen Edges, and when the ship exited through a passageway that wended out into open waters, everyone on board felt as if they could finally breathe again. The Aurora, with the translations and calculations of Soledad together with the sea-knowledge of Carnelian, began to take a curved course. In time, the biting cold began to fade as the ship drifted on to the last place indicated by Al-Navar's riddles. Although it was not what could be considered warm and clement weather, the temperature did rise enough that the crew could shed their heavy outer garments. Essi in particular gave a triumphant cry when it became warm enough that she no longer had to be weighed down by a bundle of furs, and threw off her winter apparel with glee, smiling with her eyes closed and arms out as if she could embrace the welcome warmth of the returning sun.

When thinking how close to their goal Captain Carnelian and the rest of the crew had brought her on this perilous adventure, Roza Soledad would read through her notes, recalling how she and her father had worked with such enthusiasm on unravelling Al-Navar's lost journey. Roza's eyes moistened when she fell to wishing in quiet moments that her father could have set foot along with her on the soil of the mysterious Silent Isle, to see something they had read about in such tantalising shadowy hints among their books, to have it just on the edge of the horizon, and even beneath their feet - a thing once of paper and letters having become now a real place that you could touch and smell. Grey Nurse must have noted how sadness sat upon Roza's small shoulders the closer they sailed to their destination, so he took it upon himself to keep her as occupied as possible, hoping that his fussing might help distract from her growing feeling of melancholy.

As it happened, Roza's assistance was in fact truly required by Grey after the battle with the Flaw Ice, for he had received such injuries from the Cold Sailors that he had one arm in a sling. Since the rest of the crew were just as injured, the incapacitated Grey Nurse found it

greatly troublesome to tend to their wounds with only one hand. To remedy this, Roza was duly deputised as a second pair of hands and while she was quickly convinced that she had no particular talent for healing and tending the wounded, under Grey Nurse's curt and often exasperated directions, she hoped that she at least gave the crew of the Aurora some small alleviation. When she wasn't being corrected by Grey about her amateurish sewing and splints and bandagings, they got to discussing their encounter with the Flaw Ice.

"It is my belief," Roza declared while reapplying an ointment to a nasty cut on the head of a squirming Pierre, "That they must have found some way of warding off injury amongst the Cold Sailors, to add to their fearsomeness. Their coats were so thick, they might have been sufficiently armoured to repel all but the most severe of attacks."

Grey Nurse nodded thoughtfully while Pierre cursed and winced under their care.

"Perhaps," Nurse mused, "And perhaps it is simply a matter of intentional self-inflicted lunacy that made them so formidable. I have seen people maddened by strong drink and other intoxicating liquors, or even by the maddened fever of their own thoughts. There is certainly precedent for such things. They might have costumed themselves as devils to frighten others, and even started to believe in their own devilry themselves. The mind is a strange and powerful thing. Indeed, I have served in the courts of royals where beggars and holy fools performed who so thoroughly believed in their own unearthliness that they could walk upon burning coals or pierce their flesh without fear."

"And yet," Roza said, "Beneath their bones and furs, they were perhaps nothing more than pirates at heart - strange pirates with strange ways, but merely more terrible brigands of the sea who prey upon the fears of those who fall into their clutches."

Captain Carnelian overheard them and came in to inspect Roza and Grey's handiwork with Pierre's injuries. She tutted sympathetically and patted their patient upon the back. Pierre must have found this a further unbearable insult to his dignity, for he assumed an aristocratic and distant air, which was no small feat given that he was swaddled in bandages and Roza and Grey Nurse continued to prod at him as they applied healing unguents.

"You can deal the Flaw Ice a final blow then, Scribbler," Carnelian said to Roza, "Get your thoughts on those sea-skeletons down in your papers, and we'll make sure that every port on the sea is wary of their tricks! We'll tell everyone how these boney devils fear a little speck of ink in the eyes. There'll not be even so much as a leaky fishing boat that fears 'em by the time we get done! And if they cannot make the folks of the sea fear 'em, then the Flaw Ice is as good as wrecked for ever."

Roza Soledad smiled at the thought.

"A tempting prospect, Captain," she said, "But not one I have the time or materials to pursue at this moment, as I regrettably find myself entirely depleted in my supplies of ink."

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Despite Roza's clumsiness as Grey Nurse's assistant, the crew grew strong and well as they drew nearer to their goal. And then one day they could see from the bow an island in the distance. An island seemingly unremarkable, distant from the noise of cities and hidden safely behind storms and dangerous seas, hidden too within the riddles of that wiley old traveller, Al-Navar. Roza did not feel she had to check her calculations with Carnelian again. This grey smudge on the horizon must be their final destination.

Lalla Carnelian stood by Roza's side.
"There's your Speechless Island, Scribbler."
Roza nodded.
"I can scarcely believe we have come through so many perils and obstacles to find it."
Carnelian smiled.
"Ain't nobody on sea or land who'd have the brains to find it but you, Scrib."
Roza Soledad bowed her head.
"For that matter, Captain, all that my father and I discovered of Al-Navar's clues, none of that would have meant a thing without the tireless efforts of yourself and the rest of the Aurora."
Carnelian waved a dismissive hand.
"Oh, it weren't anything much for our little ship. We didn't have anything else to do, after all, and there's nothing our sea-faring crew likes better than a good dose of adventure. Besides, I owed it to your father."
A small cloud of sadness drifted across Roza Soledad's face. She clutched at the bag of translations, calculations, references and notes that had brought them to this point.
"I wish he could have seen it himself, Captain," Roza said softly.
Carnelian nodded.
"He would have been proud of you in any case, Scribbler. You've completed his life's work, and become a useful little sailor to boot. Much better than your poor old dad, let me tell you. There was a fellow who went a very sickly shade at the thought of a voyage." Carnelian clapped her hands.
"Well, we've come a long way. What say we head ashore and see what that ancient rascal Al-Navar was all about?"

Chapter 28

Weighing anchor, Carnelian, Roza, and the crew took to the row boats and approached the island over still water with a touch of reverence. The isle appeared to consist of nothing more than a great forest of strange trees flourishing in twisting ranks in this distant place, far from mortal eyes. Once on land, they walked slowly towards a little clearing that welcomed them to the Isle. There was a subtle perfume to the air and, perhaps sheltered by virtue of the grove's remoteness, there was scarcely a sound to be heard. No creatures barked or grunted deep in the underbrush, no birds twittered loudly in the branches, no insects hummed about their ears, and it felt as if not even the wind dared to stir the canopy of proud leaves spread before them. Essi's eyes flashed at the sight of these trees, for she was a carpenter who had seen wood from every point of the compass, yet here was a type she could not honestly swear had ever come before her.

Leading the way from the shore into the grove, Carnelian pointed wordlessly at a stone marker set to welcome travellers many, many years ago. Roza Soledad ran her fingers over the stone, tracing the outlines of the inscription. It was one last message from Al-Navar, who had discovered this strange distant island and had hidden it for so very long, until Michal Constantine Soledad and his daughter Roza had toiled over their books to reveal it once again. Like a wry smile, Al-Navar had left one final word to those who could solve his riddles and dare the perilous journey to this island. Roza translated the lines carved into this rock:

Where silence falls, is thine own end,
and the realm of silence is an isle
at once both serene and terrible.

Roza knelt before the stone, tears forming in her eyes. For that moment, it did not matter what secret this forest held that was so wondrous that Al-Navar had not dared to let it be known openly. All that mattered to Roza as she knelt in the soft soil and breathed the scented still air was that she had honoured her father's last wishes. Even if they could not be here together before Al-Navar's stone, at least they had made this discovery together. With her own two hands, Roza began to dig at the soil in front of the marker stone. When it was deep enough, she took all the writings that had led them to this point, all the result of the work she had done with her father over many years, and she gently laid every last scrap of these papers in the hole, covering it with earth. She bowed her head, sad and joyful all at once. A great part of her father had been in that work, and so a part of him would lie here buried next to the stone left by Al-Navar here on the Silent Isle. Those papers would remain here, where Roza and the crew of the Aurora had been led, and would never fall into the hands of the cruel or the greedy. When Roza raised her head, Captain Lalla Carnelian was standing nearby, smiling gently, and all the rest of the crew stood about, their heads lowered in a moment of solemnity. Roza got up from her knees and dusted off her hands. She was thankful to Captain Carnelian

and to all her new friends on the Aurora, more thankful than any words could express.

They all set off in different directions, wandering about the forest to see what they might discover. There was a soft carpet of fallen leaves all about the island, cushioning every step they took. From end to end the island was covered with these unusual trees - great sprawling trees festooned with leaves of a deep wine-dark hue. Everywhere too were the flowers upon these trees, spreading grey-purple petals with a bright blue centre. As she walked amongst these trees, Roza realised that the soft carpet of nature upon the earth was made up of as much by fallen blossoms as by the dark leaves. When Roza bent to examine the petals on the ground, she held them in her hands and noted that as they lay there, they must have over time faded to a purer deep purple colour that almost had a hypnotic quality. Staring intently at these petals, Roza Soledad felt certain that the secret Al-Navar had hidden here must have something to do with these trees, and so, she took to collecting a great number of samples of leaves and blossoms. Essi, who was never without her tool belt, took to the hard work of chiselling out pieces of bark, digging out roots and even cutting large samples of the wood, which she found particular fascinating, endlessly examining the grain of this material as she worked. Pierre scurried up a tree to see if there was any sign of life in the canopy and seemed to simply stare out at the view above the Silent Isle for a good long while. Cook, satisfied that there was nothing to eat that she could see upon this blessed island at the ends of the earth, sat beneath the shade of one tree and drifted off to sleep. It took Captain Carnelian and Grey Nurse a great deal of effort to rouse her when Roza finally decided that they had enough material from the island to examine on board the anchored Aurora.

They returned to the ship with an unspoken agreement that there was something too otherworldly about the Silent Isle to make camp there. The Aurora was the place to be for Carnelian's crew, that faithful and familiar ship that had carried them all across the seas and through all manner of dangers. Cook, refreshed by a deeper sleep than she had experienced for she-didn't-know-how-long, made them all stew for dinner. While everyone on board rested with the same sort of deep sleep that had come over Cook on the Island, Roza roused herself to find what useful equipment she could discover onboard and began to set up a makeshift laboratory on the large table in Carnelian's cabin. Amongst all that clutter, Roza Soledad carefully examined the materials they had collected from the island, with the assistance of Grey Nurse. Nurse's arm was still not entirely healed, but he helped where he could, and appeared to be too exhausted from finally reaching the Silent Isle to work up much of a fuss about anything at all, thankful for some nice, quiet time with the samples taken from the island.

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A knocking sound woke Roza up with a start. She looked about her, and realised that she and Grey Nurse must have worked so late into the night that they had fallen asleep at the table. Grey Nurse, who had slept in the chair where he now sat, rubbed his eyes with his good hand and got to his feet with a series of creaks and cracks from his thin bones. The knocking heralded the arrival of Carnelian, who bound into the room, giving an appreciative whistle at the extra mess added to the cabin by Nurse and Soledad's experimental apparatus.

Roza began to apologise for occupying the Captain's cabin for the whole night with their researches, but Lalla Carnelian waved that aside.
"Not a bit of it! I slept on deck in the lovely open air, and slept like a happy duckling for all that! A fine morning to you two!" Carnelian declared cheerily, "Come out on deck and have a bite, professors Scribbler and Nurse, and tell us all if you've found anything in that pile of leaves and twigs."

Stumbling on to deck, they sat and Cook handed them bowls of sweet spiced porridge. Roza devoured the dish in record time.
"A night of sleep most eerie I had," grumbled Pierre, who periodically looked out at the island as if he was both in awe and mildly suspicious of the forest of flowers there.
"My goodness! I too!" agreed Essi, wiping porridge from her face, "Why, it was hardly sleep at all. It was almost like...like the dream was missing! All was at rest, but it was as if I was barely there!"
The crew murmured to each other at this.
"Something in the air," growled Cook, giving Roza a second helping before she even knew to ask.
"You could be right there," Grey said through a yawn, "The perfume of the Island, we suspect, may have a mild sedative effect."
"There's something in the blooms on the island," Roza explained, "We think that's what Al-Navar found here. Nurse and I believe there is a substance in the flowers that has a particular power over people. If the petals are treated and processed, we are fairly certain that the influence of the substance within would be substantially concentrated."
"Eh. What kinds of particular power?" Pierre said with a frown, rubbing his chin.
"Several effects, to be precise," Grey Nurse said in a lecturing tone, "Depending on the concentration in which the blooms are absorbed. At a low mixture, we believe that the Silent Blooms give a relief of pain."
"And if you use more?" asked Carnelian.
Roza shook her head. "It can be something like what Essi said about her sleep - if you had too much of the mixture, it would be like you were walking about and yet asleep - speechless, unaware, yet able to follow simple instructions. I believe that is what Al-Navar meant by his final message on the stone left on the island:

and the realm of silence is an isle
at once both serene and terrible.

You can make a substance from the flowers of this island that can be used to heal, but the same substance could also do great harm."
"And it grows in such abundance here," Grey Nurse added.
Carnelian nodded in understanding.
"Aye, think what someone like the Satrap could do with a potion like that. If the drug found its way into the mill flour and the wells, you could make tongueless servants of all the people, uncomplaining, unthinking tools of those who like to run things without the fuss of those who might cause them trouble."
"But the bloom could also be used for healing the likes of which the world has never seen

before," said Grey.
Carnelian scratched her head.
"I should have expected nothing less troublesome from that Al-Navar. Why couldn't he have left a good old horde of normal treasure of gold and jewels, ey? Well, I'm just a sailor and adventurer. Scrib, you've been pondering about this island for longer than anyone else, what do you think we should do?"
Roza sat and thought quietly for a time.
"We have taken some of the Silent Bloom," she said slowly, "Enough that we can try and understand the good it might do. As it happens, I suspect I will be able to make a most unusual dark purple ink from the non-potent part of the petals, if nothing else, which will help replenish some of my lost stock of writing material. I don't begrudge a noble physician like Grey Nurse the right to see what he can find further of the healing properties of the quantity we have taken from the island." Grey Nurse nodded a sleepy acknowledgement here, and Roza continued with a shake of her head. "But you are right too, that the great and the powerful could do terrible things with an entire island filled with these plants. This knowledge is 'serene and terrible' - it is not the sort of knowledge that should be bought and sold without thought." She nodded to herself decisively. "I think that Al-Navar was right. We cannot allow the secret of the Silent Isle to fall into the wrong hands - we cannot permit it to be used against the powerless."
"Certainly not!" declared Carnelian, jumping to her feet, and there was a rumble of agreement from the rest of the breakfasting crew, "And you can trust all of us, Scribbler! We'll not let even half a word slip about this place, if that's the way you want it!"
Roza Soledad smiled in thanks.
"Then we are all agreed. We shall keep the secret to ourselves as long as we might live."
"And what will you do now, Scribbler?" Carnelian said, her shoulders drooping slightly now that they had come to the end of their voyage. "The Aurora will take you wherever you need go, of course."
Roza frowned.
"I haven't any family left," Soledad said, "And I fear that while the Satrap may someday decide that it is no longer worth while attempting to lay hands on me to attempt to discover the secret of the isle, yet I do not think that I can safely stay in any one place for long."
Slapping the table, Carnelian grinned.
"Then live upon the Aurora, Scribbler, and live free! You've proved yourself a bold and clever shipmate, little scholar, and we'd be honoured to have you for as long as you'll stay!"
A chorus of noise from the rest of the crew showed that the entire ship was of the same opinion.
With a blush and a smile, Roza Soledad said simply: "I would be honoured. Thank you all."
Captain Carnelian clapped her hands.
"Good!" she said, "Then let us set sail right away. I think we'll just pop over to a little sea-side town I know, a most lively place, and I hear they hardly ever have sword fights in the streets these days!"
Grey Nurse groaned with trepidation, but looking at Captain Carnelian's beaming face, there wasn't a single person on board who didn't feel bright and alive at the prospect of new adventures.

THE END.