

Catarena's Journal #1

Port of Call



slightly altered copy of painting "The Sea Witch" by unknown artist

"I must down to the seas again, to the lonely sea and the sky,
And all I ask is a tall ship and a star to steer her by,
And the wheel's kick and the wind's song and the white sail's shaking,
And a grey mist on the sea's face, and a grey dawn breaking.
I must down to the seas again, for the call of the running tide
Is a wild call and a clear call that may not be denied;
And all I ask is a windy day with the white clouds flying,
And the flung spray and the blown spume, and the sea-gulls crying.
I must down to the seas again, to the vagrant gypsy life,
To the gull's way and the whale's way where the wind's like a
whetted knife;
And all I ask is a merry yarn from a laughing fellow-rover
And quiet sleep and a sweet dream when the long trick's over."

- *Sea-Fever*
John Masefield

Ship's Log 3 August 1564

We set sail with the tide this morning. Finished liquidating my assets yesterday; Fortaleza and Tortuga are getting boring. Every sailor worth anything knows my ship by now, and things aren't challenging anymore. I figure it's time to head for the China Sea, down around Cape Horn. A rough passage this time of year, but at least things'll be interesting.

Fleur Mare is running well, and the crew is in good spirits. We're well stocked for several months under sail, so things shouldn't be too difficult. I reckon we can make the passage in a month at the worst. The *Flying Cloud*'s record for rounding the Cape is 28 days, so I will aim to beat that, certainly. Course is plotted and we are under full sail.

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Storm's kicking up righteously. Looks like we found a hurricane, damn it all. I'll run her as fast as I can to try and skirt the edge, but I'll probably end up having to weather the worst.

"...rounding the Cape
In the eye of the storm...
They are the ghosts of Cape Horn"
- *Ghosts of Cape Horn*
Gordon Lightfoot

Ship's Log 6 August 1564

First mate Marris recordin'. Passed through the hurricane, but not without damage. Foremast snapped clean in half, sails're tore, an the rudder's busted. Cap'n lashed herself to the wheel when it got bad, but she wuz wash'd o'erboard when the rudder chain snapped. Whole damn wheel's gone.

Lost 6 men, 4 o'em same with the Cap'n when a wave taller 'en the mainmast hit us. Tis a miracle we didna sink. One was lost trying to cut free o' tangled riggin. Another when the mast busted. Taylor, Manson, Hicks, Reme', Gibson an Samuels.

Beginin repairs on what we can, cuttin' loose the damaged mast and we'll get the ship into the nearest port. Once we've got a workin' rudder agin, we'll look fer the Cap'n. She ain't the type to be kill't by a wave.

7 August 1564

I come to myself with the feeling of wood pressed against my face, the sun on my back, and somebody messing with my belt. I turn over quickly, and the situation becomes clear to me. The storm. I was lashed to the wheel. I now find myself on a beach, and a young pup of a man has cut me free of the tangled mess that used to be the wheel post.

I quickly gain my feet and shake loose of the remaining bits of cord. Damn.

"Where the hell is my ship?" Perhaps not the best way to begin a conversation, but it really is my most pressing concern.

"Probably on the bottom, somewhere out there." The youngster points out to sea. Looking at him, he's pretty well dressed. He's got a sword, and the air of someone who knows how to use it, but he doesn't look the brawling sort. Some rich lord's son or something.

I can understand the language he speaks, though I can't place exactly from where. I know I've heard it before, and it seems to make sense, but it isn't French, German, Spanish, English, Italian, or any other language I can put a name to. For some reason, I am reminded of the voice of my old wet nurse, when I was a small child. I try to match his tone and inflection, and find it easier than I thought. Wherever I know this language from, it's coming back to me easily enough.

"Nah." I scan the horizon, but I don't recognize this place. No familiar landmarks. No sign of *Fleur Mare*, either. "That

last wave was taller than the masts, but I don't think she's sunk."

"By the way, I'm Leonardo."

"Catarena dellaRosa. Captain of *Fleur Mare*, wherever she is."

"By the looks of you, I highly doubt she's above water."

"Ha! I designed that ship, and helped build her. Got McKay, the best man in the world, to help. She's still afloat. Somewhere. That was a hell of a storm, though."

"Probably a shadow storm."

"Shadow nothing, that was the biggest hurricane I've ever had the misfortune to weather."

"No. I mean a storm that sent you into a different reality."

"A what? Uh, Look, I admit I'm not from anywhere nearby to here, but..."

"Look, you familiar with cards?"

"Of course, but what does that have to do with anything?"

"Think of your world as one card in a deck of cards. You've fallen out of one card and onto another."

"Right." Just my luck, the whelp that found me is mad as a hatter.

"No, I'm serious. You've stepped out into the wider universe. Sailed beyond the edge of the world."

"I've sailed many places, from England to Avalon, Spain to Castile, The Holy Roman Empire, the Caribbean, the Mediterranean, the East Indies... But there is no edge to the world. Damn." That wheel was carved to fit my hands. Ah well. I take a few minutes to disentangle the wheel itself from the remains of the wheel post and chain. "Wherever *Fleur Mare* is, she's got a broken rudder." I roll the wheel before me down the beach as I start down the sandy stretch. I'll find my ship. I know it.

"Where are you from? I think you might be related to my family."

I snort with derision. "From? Most recently?"

"Originally. Or your last port. Or destination. Whatever."

"Originally? Castile. But that was a long time ago. I sailed from Tortuga four days ago, intending to round Cape Horn and head for the China Sea," I sigh, "But I sure as hell won't be setting a record time now."

"Well, I haven't been there, but I still think we're related. Who are your parents. Do you know?"

"Parents? I'm somebody's bastard, but it doesn't matter whose. Why should it matter?"

"The easy way you tossed that wheel makes me think you're of my family."

"Muscles come from use. I work for my living. Besides, from whom I was get don't matter. I never had any parents around growing up; they can all go fuck themselves as far as I'm concerned. My crew is my family now."

"You really think you're going to find them?"

"Yep." I start heading down the beach, rolling the wheel in front of me. I may not recognize this place, but there'll be a port or village somewhere. I'll get an idea of the terrain. And I'll find my ship. My white fire will get me there. It's never taken me wrong. That burning instinct leads me this way.

Leonardo follows on my heels quickly. After a few minutes he speaks up again. "Now I'm convinced you're of the family. You're shifting."

"Shifting what? I'm walking down the beach looking for my ship. Or a village. Whichever I find first." Shift?

"No, you're shifting Shadow. Bending reality."

"Look, I don't know what you're talking about. I'm walking down the beach. A shadow is just a bit of darkness cast when an object blocks the light. If you want to follow, fine. But enough with the crazy talk. I'm going to find *Fleur Mare*."

"Ok." He continues to walk behind me, and fiddles with a fancy spoked ring on his right hand.

As I top a rise on the beach, there she is. *Fleur Mare* is waiting for me, drifting listlessly on the tides. Funny that I didn't notice the masts before I reached the hilltop. Wait. Drifting? That isn't right. She ought to be anchored...

"There she is, what did I tell you?" I try to hail the ship, with a sharp whistle, but there is no answer.

"Yes, I brought her to you."

"Right, sure. She's afloat, and waiting for me. I highly doubt you had any hand in it." The foremast is snapped, and as I expected, the rudder is broken. But the sails have been taken down, and the tangled rigging has mostly been cut away, along with the broken piece of the mast. So the men've been working on her. Why don't they answer?

Leonardo fiddles with the ring again, and with a gesture of his hand, *Fleur Mare* is lifted from the water. He settles her down a bit closer to the shore.

"What the hell?" I panic for a moment, but I can tell that the ship isn't aground, just yet. "Look sorcerer, don't mess with my ship!" I swim out to the ship easily enough, and with some effort manage to climb onboard. There is no one on deck, and the anchor chain is up.

A quick search confirms my fears. The crew is gone. To a man. There's food served up in the mess, and the logbook lists only six men lost in the storm, other than myself. Marris was getting the ship back in order, before setting out to find me. What happened to them? Where are they and how were they taken from the ship with no sign of struggle? It gets worse when I go below decks. The cargo hold is empty. All the supplies we had laid in are gone.

When I reach the main deck again, the sorcerer Leonardo is waiting for me, dry and prim. "What now?" he asks.

"Now I try to limp this ship into the nearest port and figure out what happened to my crew and cargo!"

"Right." He seems terribly unimpressed by my resolve.

"Look sorcerer. You can help or you can leave. If you're staying, grab that rope," I point, "and pull it tight."

With a heave of his arms, Leonardo pulls the heavy rope to and snaps it clean in half. Either he's stronger than he looks, or that rope has gone rotten. "Damn. Don't tear the ship apart." He's a danger, that's for certain. "Look, just stay out of the way."

Leonardo shrugs.

And then I am firmly convinced that I've gone mad. Before I can do more than get one sail unfurled, reality itself goes funny. There's a tear in thin air, dripping blood, and screams seem to echo from it. Bloody hands emerge from it, and push the tear apart. From this shrieking gash steps a man in brown and gold, with eyes the color of blood. Either I've drunk too much, or far too little. Or maybe I've hit my head. I've seen magic before, but not like this...

"You might want to think things through a little better before the next time you try to have me killed, Leonardo." The blood-eyed man quips.

“Hello, Frederick.” Leonardo doesn’t seem terribly afraid of this fellow sorcerer. “I wasn’t really trying to kill you.”

The new arrival Frederick turns to me and introduces himself, and I return the courtesy. Whomever he is, at least he isn’t trying to break anything or sink my ship.

They banter for a few minutes, then this Frederick fellow leaves the same way he came. I am just left staring. What the hell is going on? Why am I suddenly attracting freak wizards?

I spend the rest of the day getting the a couple sails out, so I can slowly maneuver the ship without a rudder. Damn, but it is difficult work without a crew. I manage to get her away from shore before the tide goes out, but only barely. Tomorrow I’ll start looking for a port.

“She said I cast off the chains that I was born with
But it never was enough
So where were you when my ship went down
Where were you when I ran aground...
Silent souls washed upon the shores
Left to walk the sands
Evermore, evermore”
- *Ships*
Unknown

8 August 1564

Morning brings a neap tide, so it’s as well I’m off. Wherever I am, I don’t want to get mired on a shoal. It’s hard to navigate when you can’t see where you’re going. I’m left running up to the foredeck to check bearings, and then back again to adjust the sails. Frederick is still hanging about, but he’s little help. I get him to at least man one sail without breaking anything further.

Finally, in the late afternoon I spy land. And a small city port. Hallelujah! The folk on the docks spy my ship about the same time I can see the docks, and I run out a distress flag. An answering flag goes out. I don’t recognize it, but it seems like it is meant to lead me in.

Once I’m in the harbor, I drop anchor, and lower a boat to go ashore. I’ll have to arrange for *Fleur Mare* to be tugged into dry-dock to get a new mast fitted, if there are facilities for it here, but by the looks of the place there should be.

Reaching shore, I get yet another surprise. The harbormaster, and everyone I can see in fact, are all strange looking. Short fellows, they’re covered with thick dark hair or fur, though they look otherwise human. They also have six fingers on each hand. They speak in a gibbering language I don’t understand.

“I don’t understand you. Uh, habla Español? Sprechen sie Deutsch? Parlais vous Français?”

They listen to me, and the harbormaster speaks again, in a different tongue. “Ah, you are from the brother-gods.” This time I think I understand him. It’s the same odd language Leonardo and Frederick spoke. The one I understand though I can’t remember from where.

“What?” Brother-gods? What is going on here?

Leonardo speaks to them. What exactly he says is a bit lost on me. Finally I interject. “Uhm, what are you talking about? Have they seen any sign of my crew?”

Leonardo turns back to me. “They say that your crew, or at least I assume its your crew, sounds like it, are in jail right now.”

“Jail? Why am I not surprised?” I turn to the short men. “I’m looking for men like me. My crew.”

“Like you?” The short creature gestures in a way that makes it clear he indicates my breasts.

I give a derisive snort. “No. Men. Tall, five fingers, and relatively little hair.”

“Oh... the ugly ones. Yes.”

“Yes, I admit they are sort of ugly. They are here?”

“They in jail.”

“Why are they in jail?”

“They break law.”

“Which law.”

“They drink after sundown.”

Not surprising. “How do I get them out of jail.”

“Bring god.”

“What?”

“Religious law. Must bring god to release them.”

“Bring your god. Here.”

“Yes. Either one.”

“You have more than one god.”

“Yes. God of day and god of night.”

“And I am supposed to bring one here?”

“Either one. Have not seen them in some time. They come, and take warriors to fight against adversary god. They not come back.”

“And what do these gods look like?”

“Tall, not enough hair, five fingers.” He gestures to his chest. “No... uh...” he gestures meaning breasts.

“Males generally don’t have those.”

“And they both have fancy swords.”

“I see. Do you have any pictures of these gods?”

“Yes. In the cathedral.”

“May I see them?”

“No. Heathen are not allowed.”

“I see. Do they have names?”

“God of day and god of night.”

“I see. And where do these gods supposedly live?”

“In heavenly city.”

“Where is this city?”

“In heaven.”

Wonderful. The pygmy creatures want me to find their missing gods. Gods that look human, apparently.

“Well, can I see my men?”

“No.”

“Of course. Can I at least get my ship repaired?”

“You pay?”

“How much?”

He looks my battered vessel over skeptically. “Fifty wiji.”

I pull out a gold coin. “How much is this worth?”

He takes the coin, looks at it, and tosses it aside. “Not money.”

“Then what is a wiji? Will you show me one?”

He points to a carved stone the size of my ship’s wheel. “One wiji.”

Great. The aborigines use giant carved rocks as money. I can’t even fix my ship with what I have on me... Wait. “Did the men have boxes of cargo with them? Goods?”

“Yes. They traded them. Asked for...jum...gum...Rum! Didn't have rum. Had something they thought good enough. Then they break law.”

Wonderful. Marris let them trade the cargo for alcohol. I'll have to have a few words with him. “And if I can't find this god of yours, how long will my men be held?”

“Not long.”

Ok, this sounds more promising. If I can wait out the sentence working on the ship... “How long?”

“One month. Then we execute them.”

Argh. That isn't going to work. What now? How do I figure out something more concrete about these gods? “Ok...Look, can I speak to your priests about these gods?”

“No. Heathen are not allowed.”

“How do I become not a heathen?”

“Be chosen of gods.”

I'm not getting anywhere. And of course that wizard Leonardo has wandered away somewhere and vanished. I can't spot him anywhere. Lovely. So my choices have boiled down to a very few. Storm the city jail, possibly having to fight my way through dozens of the little creatures to rescue my crew. Give up on the crew and limp my crippled ship somewhere I can refit her and find a new crew. Or, set my sights on the gates of pygmy aborigine heaven.

Well, one thing is for certain. I'm not giving up on the crew. They're the only real family I have, and I won't abandon them, even if they got themselves into this mess. So do I storm the city or try to find the gods themselves? The latter seems like a pipe dream; an impossible mission. But storming a city alone is virtual suicide. Neither option is a good one.

I don't think the gods of these creatures are really divine; perhaps they are merely wizards. Despite a sort of city, these pygmies seem primitive in many respects. But without a clue, how am I to find them? Leonardo isn't one of these gods, by the reactions they had to him.

My instincts tell me that I can't manage a rescue on my own. Not right now. Perhaps if I follow the white fire, I can find these wizards or gods. I'll look for a couple weeks, and if I haven't found them, I'll return and then attempt a rescue. At least I might round up some help for a jailbreak if nothing else.

Pygmy city folk and quests for nameless gods. My ship scrapped like a child's toy. Strange wizards. Reality storms. Maybe I'm still unconscious and this is all a dream? Nah... My dreams aren't this weird.

“It's those changes in latitudes, changes in attitudes
Nothing remains quite the same.

With all of our running and all of our cunning,
If we couldn't laugh, we would all go insane.”

- *Changes in Latitudes, Changes in Attitudes*
Jimmy Buffett

8 August 1564 cont.

The wizard Leonardo showed up right as I was preparing to leave. Turns out he was around the whole time, though where he got off to I can't say. He said that the god of day and god of night sound like his father and one of his uncles; named Bleys and Corwin respectively. He also said that the 'heavenly

city' sounds like a place called 'Amber'. He agreed to lead me there, as he apparently had his own business in the vicinity.

He proceeded to round up a couple of horses that were running loose on the beach and insist that I ride with him. Urgh. I hate horses. Unpredictable, unreliable beasts!

Along the way he tries to explain his views on the universe or multi-verse, or whatever he calls it. Sounds like a whole bunch of hogwash to me. But at least he seems harmless enough, for all that he seems a bit cracked. He claims to be a scion of some royal family relating to this place Amber and another called 'Chaos'. Whatever...

“As a dreamer of dreams and a travelin' man,
I have chalked up many a mile.
Read dozens of books about heroes and crooks,
And I've learned much from both of their styles.”

- *Son of a Son of a Sailor*
Jimmy Buffett

11 August 1564

Been on the road for several days now, with Leonardo leading the way. At least we seem to be making progress. As for me, I'll be happy when we reach this Amber place; I hurt worse than a whore on payday. Damn horses. I swear the beasts are laughing at me.

Finally, when the sun is high in the sky, we end up under the canopy of some huge and ancient forest. I have no woods lore, so I can't be sure exactly where we are going, other than that we follow an obvious path. The trees here are hoary and old. Everything goes still as we pass. And then the attack comes.

Dozens of little needles come shooting from the bushes. They hit us, like a swarm of biting insects. Blowgun darts, I realize in a moment, as a number of short tattooed men come charging out of the underbrush. Shit! Their appearance reminds me of the cannibals from the Andaman islands. Their hostile intentions seem clear, so I ain't gonna wait to see where they come from. I draw my saber, and counterattack.

Leonardo draws his sword as well, and we make short work of the annoying little buggers. But by the end, the noble wizard isn't looking well. It seems that he took a number of the darts, and the poison, though I consider it weak, is working on him much more intensely than me. Personally, I hardly feel a thing; but I'm a tough bitch, and he seems more effete.

I practically toss him back onto the horse, and set off down the path. Amber is not terribly far ahead of us, according to Leonardo's chatter, so we may as well continue. Before long, I'm leading his horse, as he seems practically unconscious in the saddle.

After a while of this, I hear a horn - a hunting horn. In moments, huge slaving beasts the size of ponies, and that look like a cross between demons and mastiffs, surround us. But they do not attack. They circle like hunting dogs. Before I can make a decision on a course of action, their masters arrive. A party of thirty or so woodsmen, by the look of them, on horseback.

They are led by a black-haired man in white scale armor, with a stern visage. He rides a horse bigger than any I've ever

seen. The beast is grey, and looks as ferocious as the dogs. He recognizes Leonardo, and so calls off his men.

"You seem to have run into a bit of a scuffle."

"Yeah, a bit. Some sort of pygmy savages." I answer with a shrug. At least for the moment he isn't threatening us.

"Ah, them. They must have considered the two of you to be easy game, although they've pretty much stopped attacking my men. I guess they're smart enough to realize when they're overmatched. They can be a problem to travelers, but they are at least amusing to hunt."

"I suppose."

"Well, you seem to be alright, Leonardo, is she another of the... lost children?"

"Um-hm." Leonardo seems barely coherent.

"She at least seems to show more fortitude than you." He turns to me, "I think you'd better tie him to the saddle, so he doesn't fall off."

"Yeah well, he's a wizard, what can you expect?"

"We're all wizards, of one sort or another, in the family."

"If you say so."

"And where precisely were you headed?"

"Amber."

"Well, then perhaps I should offer you an escort."

"I'm awake," Leonardo mutters.

I just shrug. "Leonardo, so who are these folk?"

"Oh how rude. I'm Prince Julian of Amber, Lord Protector of the Forest of Arden."

A prince, hm. So perhaps Leonardo wasn't blowing smoke. "I'm Catarena dellaRosa, Captain of the *Fleur Mare*."

"Ah, a nautical sort. You might want to talk to my brother Gérard. He's the Admiral of the Royal Navy."

"Hm. I'd rather be on the water, myself," I wave at the tree cover, "at least out there you can see trouble coming."

"Except the ones that sneak up below you. Gérard says there are giant sea serpents that do that. He finds them amusing."

"If you say so. I'm more used to dealing with two-legged sharks myself."

"Oh those were amusing too. But I never could figure out why their jaws opened so wide..."

I can't tell if he's being serious or not. "I meant pirates."

"Oh some of them were... Oh you mean humans."

"Uhm, yes?"

"And do you find them challenging?"

"Honestly, no. After a bit they all get to know my ship on sight, and they all just roll over or run. No challenge at all."

"Hm. Perhaps you are a member of the family after all. Maybe we should take you up to Amber Castle and toss you on the Pattern, that would sort you out properly quick."

I just shrug. "I'm somebody's bastard. Whose don't matter."

"Oh, it will matter to us."

"Why is that?"

"Everyone has a hobby. For some of us, it's knowing everyone in the family."

"Right. Perhaps in a while. Right now I'm just here on an errand."

"Of what sort?"

"Why should I tell you?"

"Because I ask it?" Julian's tone is still polite, though I can hear a bit of steel in it. He's a prince, and not used to being countered.

I decide I may as well tell him. There really isn't a reason not to. "My crew is currently being held captive by a large group of rather odd fellows a few days back. They declared that they will execute them, unless I bring back one of their 'gods'. As I have rather exceptional requirements for my crewmen, I'm not keen on starting over from scratch."

"No, as one of our blood, I can imagine it would only be the most exceptional of humans who could keep up."

"Anyhow, I don't believe that the ones they're looking for are 'gods' at all, but perhaps just wizards or some such. And Leonardo here," I wave to the young man, trying terribly hard to shake off the effects of the darts, "said that the descriptions sounded like two fellows named Corwin and Bleys."

Julian laughs. "Well, they're certainly not gods. Usually they're more like asses."

I can't help but laugh as well, "Most men are."

Julian stops laughing suddenly. "Anyhow, Corwin isn't in residence at the moment. But Bleys may be."

"Well then, there's some promise. Say, are you folks on the gold standard around here?" I'm interested to know if my money actually counts as money in these parts.

"Gold standard?" This woodland prince seems confused. Not a good sign.

"What passes for money here? You know, currency?"

"Oh," Julian obviously is no longer confused. "Yes, we use gold, it's just been so long since I've even had to think about such a thing..."

"I suppose, being royal, that would be true. I'm a businessman, I have to keep such things in mind."

"Businesswoman," Julian mutters, looking quite intently at my cleavage, "Surely."

I wave the comment aside, "Of course, hon, I just asked so that I would be informed should such a need arise for me."

"I haven't been called 'Hun' since I rode with Attila. Appalling horseman, but for a human he had real potential..."

"Attila..." This man rode with the Huns? "Grandsire of Genghis?" He can't be serious...

"I believe so."

Oh dear. That was... twelve hundred years ago! Either he's having me on, and the best straight man I've ever met or... he's functionally immortal. He must be kidding.

Julian lets us pass, and we soon enough make our way out of the forest. Beyond is a great castle on a mountainside, with a town sprawling outside the walls at the mountain's foot. Beyond it I can see the ocean, and on the horizon I can just barely make out the silhouette of a lighthouse.

Approaching the castle, the guards seem quite leery. They recognize Leonardo, however. I suppose I must admit he honestly is connected with these royals. We are immediately shown into an apartment inside, and told not to emerge, as there is apparently some sort of security incident underway...

Stranger and stranger.

"When logic and proportion

Have fallen sloppy dead

And the White Knight is talking backwards

And the Red Queen's off with her head

Remember what the Dormouse said:

‘Feed your Head’
- *White Rabbit*
Jefferson Airplane

11 August 1564 cont.

Sitting around with Leo, he seems somewhat smug. I let him know that I'm not happy with him apparently taking over my business here. He seems very confident, though, that his connections will net a better result for me than my own efforts. I just shrug. If he's willing to do my legwork for me, it doesn't make sense to toss his help aside.

After a wait of an hour or so, a white-haired fellow enters. Very dapper in appearance, this bloke reeks of courtier. He immediately chides Leo as if he were a child. Something about causing a diplomatic incident by arriving unannounced. I am shown out to another, much plainer room, where I am left to wait. So much for Leo's superior social graces.

The white-haired fellow comes to see me after a while. Introduces himself as Mandor, Prime Minister of the Court of Chaos. He confirms that Leo is indeed the Regent of Chaos, and unfortunately since I showed up with him, that I am in the middle of the 'incident' his sudden arrival precipitated.

My, my. This guy just drips smarmy self-confidence. He acts like he's the real one in charge. Hm. We'll see. He even brought wine, and conjures rum for me, really good dark rum in fact, just trying to put me at ease.

He asks my business here, so I tell him. He seems happy enough that I'm not some fling Leo picked up. He even offers to rescue my crew for me, just to get rid of me, I think.

“How much?” I respond.

“Pardon?”

“Nothin's free, darlin. I'm a businesswoman. How much to rescue my crew?”

“Well I would hope friendship might be borne between us, but I can see how that would be a bit much to ask of a stranger. How about a few drops of blood then?”

Blood. Great, another wizard. “To ask someone to bleed for you is quite a request.”

“Oh, only a few drops. You wouldn't notice. It would allow me to settle the matter of your genealogy completely.”

“Still. It's the principle of the thing. Besides I don't care about genealogy much.”

“But we do.” He considers a moment, “Well, the alternative is to sit through a stuffy dinner here, in court, and try to put your request to the King here. Might not go so smoothly.”

“True enough, but I've been to courts before.”

“My way might be quicker.”

“Must I decide now?”

“No, not at all. The servants will be by shortly to dress you. Corsets and all that. It would take at least an hour.” Mandor seems confident that this would change my mind. He really doesn't know me very well.

“I'll think on it. I'll send a servant with a note should I change my mind.”

“Oh, this would be easier.” He fishes out a large card from his pocket. On it is an exquisite miniature portrait of himself.

“Nice portrait. Are the servants so thick here you have to show pictures to them instead of giving names?”

Mandor chuckles. “No. It's a Trump card. Direct communication.”

“Pardon?”

“You concentrate on it. It allows you to communicate directly with the pictured subject. Or to travel through them.”

More magic. Lovely. I'm not so sure that I like this. I've dealt with mages before, but it seems *everyone* around here is a sorcerer. Except me.

“Perhaps we should start more simply.” He puts that card back into his jacket and pulls out a card depicting a sandy beach. “Try this one.” When he hands it to me, I note the card is icy cold.

“Why, and how?”

“Come now, it seems you are *family* somehow or other. Time you learned how these work. Concentrate on the card, to the exclusion of everything else.”

I give him a look that clearly expresses my incredulity.

“Trust me.”

“Uh, no.”

Mandor chuckles again, “You're smarter than many of the others, but honestly, try it.”

I don't like this situation, but it seems he won't let it go, so I decide to humor him. As I concentrate on the card, it seems to become more real. Almost as real as reality. And then I feel a shove on my shoulder, and when I catch my balance, I am on a beach. The beach pictured in the card.

Oh, great. On a beach, no Amber castle in sight, far away from where I need to be. Damn! Tricked by the courtier. Oddly, the card depicting the beach is still in my hand. Now what?

Looking around, the only thing on the beach out of place appears to be another card. A portrait of Prime Minister Mandor. Seeing as the whole point of this exercise was to teach me to use these cards, perhaps this will get me back where I was. I pick up the card, which is as cold as the first, and concentrate upon it.

The feeling is odd. Like I am in touch with something, but I don't quite understand how. I decide not to think too hard on it. It's magic, of one sort or another. It doesn't have to make sense.

“Hello?”

“You're a fast learner.” It is Mandor's voice. The image on the card seems to come to life.

“Uh, so can you bring me back?”

“Of course, my dear. Take my hand.” The image seems to stretch out its hand to me.

Accepting it seems as much a mental act as a physical one, but I tell myself once again to just do it and not over think it.

In a moment, I am back in the castle room with Mandor.

“Keep the cards, and do let me know when you've made up your mind.”

“Sure. Thanks.”

And with that, Mandor leaves me with the rum, and the cards, and the promise of servants to dress me for dinner.

Well, that wasn't too bad...

“And you may find yourself
In another part of the world...”

And you may ask yourself-
Well...how did I get here?
...Into the blue again
after the money's gone
...Same as it ever was..."
- *Once in a Lifetime*
Talking Heads

11 August 1564 cont.

The servants show up as predicted. But dressing goes smoothly enough. A nice dress in purples and reds, with my favorite brooches transferred from my sash. Ah, a corset I could learn to love, for it makes me look dead sexy. My hair done up nicely. Hm. It's a rare pleasure to be waited on like this.

Dinner looks to be all pomp and circumstance, but most high uppity dinners are. I get seated comfortably far down the table from Leo and Mandor, and the rest of the high court. I honestly expect not to make any progress on my own business tonight. I'll ask for an audience tomorrow if I don't meet Bleys or Corwin personally before then.

I end up seated next to a bear of a man, tall and broad, though with not an ounce of flab on him. His garb is of blue of and trimmed in fur and grey.

"And whom do I have the pleasure of meeting?" he begins.

"Catarena dellaRosa, Captain of the *Fleur Mare*,"

"I am Prince Gérard, Admiral of the Royal Navy of Amber."

Gérard huh? "Ah, so you are Julian's brother?"

"Yes. And you are a Captain?"

"Of the fastest ship on any sea."

This seems to catch Gérard's attention. "Oh you think so?"

"Never been beat. Why, you up to trying? Perhaps we should have a bit of a wager on it?"

And so we spend the evening speaking of ships and all things relating to the sea. He inquires as to the design of my ship, in order to pull a suitable match from his fleet for our race, and we quickly devolve into sketches of hulls and debates on the benefits and costs of varying keel and rudder designs. The rest of the dinner guests quickly ignore us altogether.

Soon enough I have to admit that our race will have to wait until I recover my crew, and have my ship repaired. Which leads to another telling of my circumstances.

"Ah that must have been the Shadow Storm that passed through a few days back. See, the rudder chain broke. It is the weakness of your design." Gérard seems triumphant.

"I stand by it. The double rudder has less drag, and therefore more speed and maneuverability. Any other ship would've been on the bottom in a storm like that."

"Well, then perhaps after our speed trials, we'll try racing through a hurricane. But in the meantime, have you tried Trumping Bleys?"

"Trumping?" As Gérard pulls out a deck of cards, I understand. "Ah, those. Didn't even know what they were before a few hours ago."

"Understandable then, that you haven't tried yet. Here," he fishes out a card of a sly-looking red-haired man, "Bleys. You may borrow it."

I do so, and after the meal has finished, I step aside for a few moments to try out this unfamiliar communication method. Bleys answers, as odd as it seems, and I try to keep our conversation brief. I feel my initial interpretation of him being a rogue, albeit a good-looking one, is correct. He does, however, agree to put in an appearance if I return to where my crew is and Trump him from there. Fair enough. Although he too, asks if I am family, saying he prefers to 'save his good-faith efforts for real people', whatever that is supposed to mean. And he ends our conversation with a compliment to my cleavage. Men. No surprises there.

When I return, Gérard agrees to let me borrow the card until I return with ship and crew. I thank him, and instinctively shove the card down the front of my bodice for safekeeping. Damn! I forgot how cold these things are. I then quickly retrieve said card and place it in my handbag instead. Gérard just chuckles.

By now, the room has emptied, and it is just the two of us, this Admiral and me, having drinks among our shipboard sketches.

"As to the terms of this wager," Gérard says, "If you win, I'd be happy to give you a second ship. You could be a Commodore."

"A second ship? Twice the headaches. Besides, no other could match my *Fleur Mare*. I'd prefer to name my own forfeit."

"As you will. What will it be then?"

"Why not keep it a surprise? Nothing so large as another vessel."

Gérard smiles in an amused way. "Very well."

"I do believe I like you, Admiral. And what would you win, then?"

"Why ruin the surprise? Let that be a secret as well."

Oh my, a race for unnamed stakes. This could be fun, as long as he has a sense of humor when he loses. "I definitely like you. So be it."

"Just get in touch with me once you recover your ship and sail back here. I'm not a hard man to find."

"Indeed. I shall do just that."

Gérard bids me goodnight, and I am left to find my way to my quarters alone. A bit disappointing, but then if he like so many others here subscribes to the idea that I'm a relation, I can understand some reticence to... let the evening get any more interesting. Ah well. Perhaps I should consider settling this silly matter of genealogy after all. So many fine looking men, princes no less, it's bothersome that they all seem to think I'm a cousin or a niece or something.

"Well I was born an original sinner.

I was borne from original sin.

And if I had a dollar bill

For all the things I've done

There'd be a mountain of money

Piled up to my chin..."

- *Missionary Man*

Eurythmics

12 August 1564

Come morning the sky is clear, and the weather looks to be fine through the day. The only thing unpleasant about the day is the prospect of spending it on the back of a horse. Damned persnickety beasts.

Of course, while I'm in the midst of saddling the one I rode in on with Leo, Admiral Gérard appears.

"Not much of one for riding?"

I guess my displeasure shows. "Not when I can avoid it."

"Then why don't you sail back?"

"Well, for starters I don't presently have a ship."

"That can be easily remedied."

"The other problem being that I know the way back overland. I don't have any charts for the course back over sea."

"Oh come now, you don't need charts."

"Admiral, I would expect for you the waterways are familiar enough round these parts that is true, but I'm new to these waters, and don't know the currents and hazards."

"How did you get here?"

"Leo brought me here."

Gérard looks mildly displeased with me somehow. I can't quite figure what he's getting at. He grabs a stick and sketches a figure on the ground. A vaguely familiar figure.

"And are you familiar with this?"

"It looks like a labyrinth."

"And have you ever traversed, walked, sailed, or otherwise navigated a labyrinth like this?"

The more I look at the figure in the dust, the more it reminds me of the dream of white fire I had as a child. But that was just a dream, wasn't it? "Uhm, maybe?"

He seems a bit put out, like he's suddenly speaking to a small child. "Then you don't need Leo, or charts. Just fix your destination in mind and go."

Well, true enough. I have managed without charts before, by dead reckoning, to find many a place. Just keeping an eye out for the landmarks that should be there, for the currents, the tradewinds, and whatnot... "I still don't currently have a ship."

"I already have something arranged."

What is this guy's motive? Why on earth is he offering me a ship? Something really doesn't feel right here. It isn't any great desire to please me, that much I can tell. But I suppose my disbelief shows...

"If you would *rather* spend the trip back on horseback then..."

"Uh, no. If you are willing to loan a ship, I'd much prefer to sail." Something about gift horses... And a horse is something I'd much rather be without.

"This way then..."

"Admiral, any ship of yours is by definition a *navy* vessel. I'm not exactly a *navy* commander."

"Don't worry about it."

When we reach the docks I find out why he doesn't think I ought to worry. The boat, which is the only generous word I can think of, is a small one-man fishing dinghy. Ironically, it is named *Seahorse*, and it looks about as reliable as one of the temperamental beasts. But it is a vessel I can man by myself. Ah well. Better sailing even in the old rickety thing than

riding. And so I set out, with a grin to Gérard, who seems slightly surprised that I am neither offended nor upset. But then, there can be no offense where none is taken, and life is too short to sweat the small stuff. His joke at my expense fails, if I laugh.

"The Antelope sloop was a sickening sight.

She'd a list to port and her sails in rags,

And a cook in the scuppers with staggers and jags."

- *Barrett's Privateers*

Stan Rogers

19 August 1564

Finally I arrive at the little harbor where *Fleur Mare* lies at anchor. She's still floating, and she's hardly ever been a more welcome sight to me, even in her sad state.

Checking in with the local... *magistrate* I suppose he is, my men are still alive, though he reports them grumpy. Well, for the good. They got themselves into this fine pickle, so a little privation ought to be good for discipline in future. Of course, the magistrate is not ready to let them go yet.

"Well, then let me get right on summoning one of you gods..."

"You do that." He is certainly unimpressed with me at this point.

I pull forth the card of Bleys that the Admiral loaned me, and try to, well, contact him again. Still an odd sort of mental leap, but I manage.

"Hello, and who might you be?"

"Catarena... we spoke at dinner the other night?"

"Oh, yes. I didn't recognize you in the frock-coat."

I let my jacket hang open. "Better?"

His eyes immediately go to my cleavage, which is exactly what I expected.

"Yes, I recall now."

Men... No matter where you go, it's the same. "I've arrived at my destination, and you promised to make an appearance."

"So I did."

He reaches out his hand, which I accept, and in a rainbow flash, there he is beside me. A bit taller, but just as roguish as he appears on the card. All the natives immediately drop to the ground in postures of supplication.

"Dingy little backwater place. Vaguely familiar. Why am I here again?"

"These... *people*... are holding my ship and crew hostage pending your arrival."

"Oh, yes. Release her ship and men..."

I tip my hat to him as I follow in the wake of the folk heading to the prison. "Thanks, I owe ya one." And I throw a kiss in his direction.

Bleys just raises one flame-red eyebrow. "Don't worry, I'll come to collect."

My men are in as sad a state as my ship. As they are released, I cuff the ones I know are the worst troublemakers up side the head a bit and lay into them. Pity isn't what they need right now; discipline and purpose are. So I harangue them back to the ship. Maybe they'll learn something from this. In short order, the ship is moving again, and the little

fishing boat is placed in tow. I'll return it to the Admiral with thanks later... It may just irk him a bit.

"What do ya do with a drunken sailor...
Give 'em a hair o' the dog which bit 'em...
You ain't seen which dog 'at bit 'em,
You've never seen the captain's daughter
Early in the mornin'..."
- *Drunken Sailor*
Axel the Sot

23 August 1564

Back in Amber again. A much shorter trip on a proper vessel, even with it being in ill repair. Oddly though, when I contact the harbor master to berth the ship, I find that I am recognized. A drydock has already been arranged for me, along with shipwrights, and supplies, all courtesy of Admiral Gérard. This is awkward, somehow. But at least I can get repairs on *Fleur Mare* underway...

"We're homeward bound! 'Tis a grand old sound
On a good ship taut and free,
And we don't give a damn when we drink our rum
With the girls on old Maui."
- *Rolling Down to Old Maui*
Traditional

5 September 1564

Damn that Gérard! While being nothing but polite, he's been a royal pain. All I can do is laugh. He's been watching the repairs on my ship as they progress, from a distance. He's ordered all the materials, and even resupplied my ship, all without my asking. It rubs me wrong, it does. I'm indebted to him, and I never wanted or needed to be!

When I tried to return his Trump card to him a few days back, he told me to keep it as well, as 'I might need it one day'. And then he offered me the rest of the rum he had been quaffing. The stuff was so vile, it nearly took the back of my head off! When will his practical jokes end? I never took the 'Admiral' for a prankster. Good rum ought to sneak up and sap you from behind, not punch you in the face. I end up using the stuff to clean pitch off the deck. It even takes the stain out of the wood!

Two weeks underway, and *Fleur Mare* is finally starting to look like a fit ship again. I'll grant the shipwrights he sent me are fine workmen, I've no cause to complain there. *Fleur* sounds right again, when I lay my ears on her flank. But they don't take orders properly from me! And I can't even manage to *pay* them for their work, which would at least give me leverage to demand some obedience!

And the final straw is the arrival of the sails. Instead of the custom woolen sheet I ordered, I get this soft lightweight wool, all bleached fancy white.

"What the hell is this?" Is this even going to hold up under wind?

"Angora wool. The best there is."
"This isn't what I ordered."

"We don't work for you," replies the sailmaker smartly.

"Since when does my placing an order, and *paying* for it, constitute you not working for me?"

They hand me back a familiar purse of coin. "Admiral Gérard insists."

"Does he now? And since when does a *businessman* turn down a paid commission?"

"If you insist, we'll take your money, and give you the other sails, but these are better."

"Yes, I do insist." Lord help me, these prissy and *soft* woolen sheets might do for *parade* sails, but I wouldn't trust them in a hard blow. *Admiral Gérard* must be trying to sabotage the race. I'd better go back and recheck all the repairs, after I have a word with the man.

The sailmakers seem offended, but I don't much care. I turn on my heels and head for the naval docks. Upon my finding where the flagship is docked, I hail the ship.

"Is Admiral Gérard aboard?"

"Might you be Catarena?"

Since when does an enlisted man deny a title to an officer, much less answer a question with a question? "Aye, *Captain* Catarena."

"Then the Admiral is aboard."

Smart ass little punk. "May I *speak* to the Admiral?"

A gangplank is lowered and I am invited aboard. The Admiral is in his quarters, which are more overdone and opulent than any I've ever seen on any ship anywhere. Overdone, to the point of almost, but not quite, being tacky.

"Admiral."

"Captain." The tone of Gérard's voice seems almost amused. "What brings you to me today?"

"As a military man, I'm sure you're familiar with the heirarchy of command?"

"I am passingly familiar with it." He's still acting amused, but perhaps in a slightly more dangerous way. Good. Maybe for once he'll take me seriously.

"Well it doesn't do me any good to have my orders countermanded on my own vessel."

"Are your men that undisciplined?"

"No, but I don't appreciate the fact that when I give orders regarding the fitting out of *my* ship, I'm told *you* have already taken care of it. It sets a bad precedent when I can't even go to a merchant and buy something without being told 'no.'"

"Well then, if it bothers you so much, then your business shall be entirely your own."

"Thank you, *Admiral*." I put *just* enough respect in it to make it clear that although I recognize his position, he isn't *my* commanding officer. "By the by, we ought to be back in the water in another two days. Perhaps we ought to work out the details of our race."

"If you're in that much of a hurry to lose..." Gérard quips lightly.

I just laugh. "Many men have felt that way *before* racing me."

Gérard smiles. "We'll see how you'll feel afterwards."

"Likewise. I do hope you'll give me a challenge."

The Admiral pulls out some charts, and we mark a circular course that will take several days to traverse. It includes some coralhead areas close to shore, as well as a good run of open sea. With both of us having a copy of the charts, I prepare to depart.

“Oh, Admiral, did you care to place any terms on this little race of ours?”

Gérard raises an eyebrow. “Do you feel the need for any?”

“No, Admiral, just giving you the chance if you did.”

Once I’ve left, I run past a cartographer, to check the charts he gave me for accuracy. Then I return to check the repairs to my ship. I’m not taking any chances. I don’t put sabotage past this man. He’s already proved a prankster. But two can play this game...

“Come cheer up my lads, it’s to glory we steer,
To add something more to this wonderful year.
To honor we call you, as free men, not slaves,
For who are so free as the sons of the waves.
Heart of oak are our ships,
Heart of oak are our men.
We always are ready,
Steady, boys, steady,
We’ll fight and we’ll conquer, again and again.”

- *Heart of Oak*
David Garrick (1759)

7-10 September 1564 *The Race*

Race day. The wind is up, the sky is clear. And I’m in a better mood than I’ve been in for ages. Perhaps it’s the idea of finally having a proper challenge.

When I pull up in the Begma strait, Gérard’s flagship is already waiting. All neat military precision... I wonder how often he’s had to run against real pirates. Well, he will today. He placed no terms, so the gloves are off. All’s fair...

We salute each other from the wheels of our respective vessel, and the race is on. With a wave of my hand, my men unveil the first surprise I’ve prepared for him. A ballista loaded with chain shot. His sheets are torn asunder, and his rigging is fouled, as I pull out ahead of him into the strait.

I am slightly apprehensive, however, when I realize he’s just got a smug look on his face as he orders his men to lower the sheets and change them... And then I understand why. With a groaning snap, the wheel spins freely in my hands. The rudder chain has broken... How in the hell? Damn that Gérard! I checked those repairs personally! Ah well, I didn’t expect him to play fair anyhow.

“Sweeps out! Tack into the wind slowly, keep us moving!” The sweeps can steer the ship, awkwardly tis true, but at least unlike Gérard, I’m still moving for the moment. “Roberts, order the course while I’m below fixin’ the chain! Teach, Tew, with me!” I call out the strongest of my men to help with the chain. Any of them can man the sails and sweeps, but if I don’t help fix the chain myself, it’d take seven or eight of them to do what I can in the matter.

After a good hour, I’ve finally got the chain repaired. It was one link too loose, and gotten fouled. I couldn’t see that in dock, only once it’d been moving. Once jammed, it broke under the strain. But by the time I’ve repaired it, Gérard’s flagship has been re-rigged and overtaken us. I give him this, his men are at least efficient...

Once out of the strait, we’re in open water, but I find I don’t gain the ground I expected to. We’re fairly well nose

and nose through the rest of the day, gaining or losing a length to each other in turn. I’ve never met another ship that could match mine for speed... And his drafts significantly deeper than mine as well. Doesn’t make sense.

With nightfall, the weather turns, and the winds pick up. I can feel the pressure dropping precipitously. It seems Gérard is going to get his wish about racing through a hurricane.

The next day or two is pretty much a blur. The weather is horrid. Perversely, I love it. This is the most challenging race I’ve ever had. Through all the gale and waves, Gérard’s flagship is never quite out of sight. It makes me feel some justified glee when he finally reefs his sail, before I do. We’re both running to the wire, but my woolen sheets are tougher than his canvas ones, and he knows it. I’ve already ruined one set of his sheets, and I doubt he can spare another set.



painting “Glory of the Seas” by unknown artist

We clear the storm in the dead of the night, and I can see the lighthouse at Cabra as the skies clear. The last part of the loop is through shallower, more treacherous waters. This is where a lighter, more nimble ship like mine can shine. He drafts deeper, which is too bad for him.

Or so I thought. I can skate over top of many shoals, but he knows every nook and cranny of this place, and every narrow channel betwixt and between the coralheads. He turns and tries to swamp me with his wake at one point, but it doesn’t even slow me down. As I told him, my shallow draft and double rudder let me skip right over his wash. He seems annoyed that I’m so tight on his heels, and gaining!

And I have the advantage. I *know* there’s a tall reef ahead. The charts showed it. And I *know*, by my white fire, that the time and tides are right. Gérard doesn’t have enough water to cross it. But I do.

When I hear the groaning screech that tells me he’s hung his bottom on the coral, I’m elated. He seems somewhat surprised. But then I hear another groan. And I can feel the ship slowing, and drag increase. I know that feeling... A seal has broken somewhere, and we’re taking on water. Damn! Slowed again, but still moving.

And Gérard’s flagship isn’t mired for long. A timely shift in the wind shakes him free. Slower than he now, and near the finish, I know there isn’t much left I can do. He’s too close.

“Man the bilges!” I have one last trick left. I tack into a slanting course, right into Gérard’s path. He’ll either ram me, or turn aside and lose his wind. And my ship is too tough to be seriously scraped up by ramming.

Sure enough, with a boom, our hulls meet. My nose is in front of his, and he’ll either turn to disentangle and lose his wind, or he’ll push me to victory on his own prow.

He turns. But perversely, at that moment, so does the wind. Fate is fickle, and it pushes me aside, for him to win by the length of his keel. Damnation!

At least it was a good race. I’ve never before met another seaman as good as Gérard, and never another ship as good as mine. Until today.

“My hat’s off to ya, Admiral.” I shout across to him. “Nicely won. First one ever ta beat me. Name yer prize.”

Gérard grins wickedly. “You. You join my navy for a year.”

What? How does he mean join his navy? “Details, Admiral?”

“You serve as my First Mate, on my flagship.”

What! He demands to take away my command? Ouch! “You wound my pride, Admiral.”

“Your men will have to go through basic, but you...”

Oh, no he doesn’t! I won’t welch on a bet to free myself, but he’s *not* commandeering my ship and crew! “No, Admiral, you claimed *me*, not my ship and men. They go their own way.”

“As you insist. I just hope they aren’t so foolish as to pillage in my waters... I’d hate to have to sink your ship while you’re aboard.”

“They aren’t so foolish. Give me ten minutes Admiral, and I’ll be under your command.” Ah well, it’s only a year. I can bear it for that long. Besides, I have to look at this as an opportunity. I could learn the secrets of the only man to best me, and I’ll be the better for it.

“Take the rest of the day. Come aboard tomorrow at dawn.”

“As you wish.” I tip my hat to Gérard. “Marris, my quarters, now!”

“Aye Captain.”

Gérard takes a parting shot. “That’s *First Officer* now.”

“*Tomorrow* it is. *Today* I’m still Captain, *Admiral*.”

“So it is...”

Belowdecks, I give Marris a harsh looking over. He’s one of the few that’ve been with me since the beginning of my command, and he’s the most trustworthy of the scallywags that make up my crew. He earned his place as my first mate. And now...

“Marris, I’m giving you command of *Fleur Mare* while I’m serving *Admiral* Gérard.”

Marris just nods. It’s been our understanding for a number of years that he’s to take command when I’m gone.

“I expect you to take good care of the ship while I’m gone. When I return in a year, she better damn well be in at least as good a shape as when I left her. If not better. See if Amber issues letters of marques, or merchant if ya have to, but damn well don’t pirate in waters where the navy can catch ya. I ain’t gonna rescue ya again.” It’s a formality really, but I have to say it. He knows.

I give over my charts of the waters around Amber to Marris, as they’ve proved accurate enough. I then make the

announcement on deck of Marris’ command, and retire to my quarters alone while Marris takes her back to Amber’s port.

I take off my fancy coat, and my hat. Even my sash with all the badges of my past victories. I’ll not carry any of it onto Gérard’s flagship. I lock them in a trunk, and lock my quarters behind me. These things are the mark of my command, and of my freedom, both of which I have lost for the year.

But I don’t regret it; it was still the best race I ever had. Even if I did lose. And it’s only for a year.

When we’ve docked, I take only one bundle, of the basic things of life. As a part of Gérard’s navy for the year, my supply is his lookout now. I disembark without looking back. I think it better to make a clean break. I leave Marris in command, and I find a seedy bar, by the name of Bloody Bill’s, and decide that whatever minor resentment I have at my loss is better off drowned in rum.

Here’s to a new year.

“Oh, ’twas broadside to broadside a long time we lay,
Blow high, blow low, and so sailed we;
Until the *Prince of Luther* shot the pirate’s masts away,
Cruising down along the coast of the High Barbaree.”

- *High Barbaree*
Traditional

11 Sept. 1564-12 Sept. 1565

Morning after. I’ve a clear head at least; I don’t dare walk into a new situation like this hung over. I find myself slightly nervous, though I’m not sure why. I’ve run a ship for decades, the job itself ain’t any different. It’s Gérard himself, I finally decide. I’ve never met a man my equal, much less one who could beat me. It makes me wonder what other surprises are in store here. I almost feel like a kid again.

When I report to his flagship at the crack of dawn, Gérard himself meets me on the deck.

“Welcome aboard First Officer.” He hands me a clipboard. “Make up the duty roster for the next two weeks.”

“Aye, Admiral.”

No introductions, no tour, just right to work. In a way it’s a relief. I had half expected to have some awkward formal introduction, or to have to watch him demote his former first officer, or somesuch. But reviewing the roster for the past several weeks at least puts that one worry to rest. His previous first officer retired a week ago, it seems. Gérard just hadn’t appointed a new one yet. So I won’t have to deal with the jealousy of a supplanted officer.

It takes me a week to truly get the lie of this large ship, and used to her rhythms. Most things aren’t that different from any other ship, truth be told. Much to my surprise, this flagship is large enough that the officers have their own quarters, separate from the general crew quarters. But otherwise, well, a ship’s a ship, and sailors are sailors.

I make it a point to get the job done, saying as little to Gérard as possible in the meantime. I won’t lean on him, asking niggly questions I can as well find answers to myself. I understand command well enough, and how a ship runs. I just issue orders as I feel necessary, and unless Gérard chooses to gainsay them, then there they are. If there’s something I don’t

know when I need to, I do what any good leader does; fake it. For the most part, Gérard just watches with a somewhat amused expression. Why he's so tickled by this I have no idea. Can't fathom it.

The immediate task at hand is to head out into the waters around Kashfa for a few months of pirate hunting. Something about treaty enforcement. It's no different than what I used to do before I left the Caribbean. Hunting other ships really isn't any challenge.

Shortly after that tour begins, I finally see the Admiral himself take active role in shipboard discipline. Two of the men have the lack of judgment to let a disagreement between them come to blows, and disrupt their work. Before I can even take a breath to berate them, I hear Gérard bellow from the topdeck. He stalks down, and removing his coat, tosses it to me and wades in between the crewmen. In seconds, he's beaten both of them to a bloody pulp.

The strength he shows raises my eyebrows. Now I've taken on a passle of men at once before, but I've never seen anyone else do it... Mental note; don't get the Admiral angry, unless I want to get into the fight of my life...

Gérard just ambles back and plucks his coat from my arm, with a sigh. "One of these days, I might find one that will give me a workout."

Despite my better judgment, a smart reply leaps from my lips. "Perhaps you ought to try 'em seven or eight at once, Admiral."

"They just trip over each other." Gérard doesn't even acknowledge the sarcasm. He seems to treat it as a serious comment.

"They don't fight together? I taught my men to do so." I regret the comment as soon as I say it. I've intentionally avoided mentioning my own command. It makes me feel imprisoned here to think about it.

"They work together well enough, but they've never been trained to fight as a unit. Not part of navy protocol."

"Well then, I suppose if ya want 'em to, you've got yourself something to do in training them, Admiral."

Gérard looks over at me, and his eternal grin turns wry. "No, *you've* got something to do, first officer. Since you trained *your* men to do so... Besides, if I trained them, I'd know their moves, and there wouldn't be any element of surprise." The Admiral claps me on the back, staggering me, as he moves back up to the topdeck. "See to it, first officer."

"Aye, Admiral..."

And for the remainder of my time onboard the *Prince of Luther*, I reschedule the martial training exercises to focus on cooperative fighting. It isn't really unit tactics, but I'm still surprised that Gérard hadn't addressed it himself before. I do notice however, that the Admiral absents himself from the deck whenever practice comes up on the roster. I guess he was serious about wanting his men to surprise him. Odd, that. I'd want just the opposite.

At least I am assured that my style of discipline is not unique, and when at some point shortly thereafter, one of the crewmen has the balls to mouth off about 'not taking orders from a woman' I don't think twice about cuffing him. Of course, with me, that means the blighter went flying across the deck. Gérard, at the wheel, simply lifts an eyebrow and gives me the eternally amused grin.

After the buccaneers around Kashfa have pretty much all been broken, and mostly imprisoned or killed, we move on. Gérard declares it time to head to deep water, to go 'monster hunting'.

I didn't realize until our first catch how serious he was. A giant squid came up under us one night, after the Admiral ordered us to string the rigging with lights. Apparently to bait the thing, as it turns out. It takes me a bit by surprise, though not totally, as the men seem to know what is coming. They seem to be slightly more efficient for the lessons in cooperative melee. Gérard himself seems thrilled that he's got a 'real fight'. He comes out swinging a two-handed sword as tall as I am, and cuts the thing to calamari. It's the first time since I've been onboard that the Admiral doesn't seem bored.

The next one came upon us in daylight. A sea serpent, whose neck was as thick around as the Admiral's sword blade. Good grief. I just try to stay out of Gérard's way, as this seems to be his sport. I just keep a weather eye on the men, and make sure they don't fall too much afoot of the thing. And then order an extra shift to dispose of the body and clean the deck.

"The next one'll have to be yours, first officer."

"I wouldn't want to interfere with your fun, Admiral."

"Oh, come now, you can hardly call yourself an officer of mine without taking on a sea serpent yourself." Gérard seems determined to watch me fight a beast like that. I could, and I've done my part thusfar, but never sought to stand out too much, under the circumstances.

"Aye, Admiral..."

And sure enough, the next one he baits, he just leaves to me and the men, while he watches. And then he tsk's and fusses about the damage to the rigging. Typical.

It is by and large an uneventful tour, but any time onboard a ship is like that. Lots of menial labor and dead time, punctuated by a few moments of chaotic intensity here and there.

Finally my year comes up, and with surprise I note we are heading home, and within a day of Amber port when it does. I'd half expected him to pull a fast one, and have us months out in the deep water, just to force some extra time from me. I find myself going over charts and the new duty roster with the Admiral in his quarters that evening.

"So, your year is up tomorrow."

"So it is, Admiral." I keep my tone neutral; With less than a day to go, I have no intention of getting myself on his wrong side now. I'm nothing if not practical.

"I'd offer you a navy commission, but I know you'd turn it down."

"A year in your service Admiral, and there's still that about me which you don't understand." He assumes I'd turn him down. In truth, I'm not sure I would. It would depend on the terms. But then, he didn't really offer.

"I understand more than you think."

"As you say, Admiral."

"So, once you're back in Amber, what are your plans?"

"Reclaim my ship and my crew."

"And?"

"Depends which way the wind is blowing." I'm being obscure, I know. But I honestly hadn't made any plans. I had avoided thinking about my freedom until now. I wasn't sure where I'd be, or what I'd want to do.

"I figure now that we're about done here, it's time your *real* education begins." Gérard's tone turns deadly serious, perhaps for the first time since I've known him.

It stops me cold. "Admiral?"

"Your *real* education. Pattern. Shadow walking. All that which is your birthright. Have a seat."

And the Admiral talks. He tells me of Amber and Chaos. Of Pattern and Logrus. Of politics and power. Real power. It seems that Leo and Mandor, which I had so neatly put from my mind, and all the oddness they brought with them, are just the tip of the iceberg. Gérard too, is a part of it. And all of the descendents of Amber. He says that my navigational abilities, my strengths, they told him what I never voiced. That I too, am a part of this. Of the Amber royal family, though my exact parentage is yet unknown.

He talks the night away. It's all too much. I just sit there and listen in a stunned silence. Finally, he wraps up, about the time I hear the bosun's whistle. Dawn's light is creeping in the cabin windows.

"Any questions?"

"No intelligent ones, at the moment."

"Any unintelligent ones?"

I briefly consider 'what the fuck?' but set it aside as unworthy. Besides, it's morning. And now I'm free. I'm no longer his first officer. That brings with it a rush of elation that temporarily supplants all the confusion from the overwhelming information he has delivered unto me. And the only question that springs to mind, and immediately from my lips before I can reconsider is, "Dinner?"

Gérard's eternal grin returns. "Bloody Bill's?"

I nod. It doesn't surprise me in the least that he knows that seedy dive. "Tonight."

Gérard too nods. And so with a jaunty step and a wave goodbye, I depart the *Prince of Luther* as soon as we make dock. I can see *Fleur Mare's* sails in the harbor, and I have most of the day to re-establish myself with my own command. And let all that he told me sink in a bit. Maybe by tonight I might have some more intelligent questions.

Why on earth did I ask that man to dinner? He is, by his own acknowledgement, one of the most dangerous men in existence. Then again, he's the only man I've met in years that really has been worth any effort at all...

"Who am I? Why am I here?"

Forget the questions someone get me another beer...

Don't worry about the future

Soon or later it's the past

If they say the thrill is gone then it's time to take it back"

- *Everything Louder than Everything Else*

Meatloaf

13 Sept. 1565

Today is my birthday, huzzah. 56 and still grey. Spent the day with a bottle in hand, looking for something vaguely amusing to do. Decided to leave my crew, because today's significance is the last thing I want for them to latch onto. My real goals for today are to get drunk, and find a good lay, not necessarily in that order.

In a strange way, I suppose this is poetic irony. After the Admiral's bombshell last night, I feel like I'm starting a new life.

I decided to head over to Bloody Bill's early. Nothing was going on, though. I took a chair in a corner, with my back comfortably to the wall. Watched all the typical scum come and go. And young nobles slumming. Boring.

Finally Gérard shows up, cool but polite. We eat, and he introduces me to a decent wine, locally produced, called 'Bayle's Piss'. I'm leary, at first. It's the color of, well, piss. But it isn't another joke.

He confirms the weighty news from before. Yes, I am immortal. It blows my mind. My whole life seems so small and unimportant. Everything I've ever done has been insignificant.

Gérard just shrugs. He says what I do with myself now is up to me. But of course, that means I have to figure out what I want first. He departs, and for some reason I follow, as I feel the discussion isn't over yet.

When I ask about finding out my family ties, he says it would be possible, if I went to Fiona. But she is one of the most untrustworthy, and seeking such information would bring me to the attention of the family's power mongers. He says now may be the only chance I have to disappear, as he has kept inquiries about me at bay for the past year.

His attitude is not quite paternal, and definitely not interested in me, anymore. It seems that the year I spent in his service has left him bored with my company. In parting, he tosses me some keys. Apparently to an apartment in Amber Castle itself.

Still not having completed either of my goals for the day, and Gérard having no intentions of assisting, it seems, I head for the castle. At the very least, my curiosity has gotten the better of me. I'll have to check out these quarters.

When I find them, they are disappointing. It comes down to a small unfurnished apartment, barely larger than the captain's quarters on *Fleur Mare*. How depressing. I suppose I'll have to decorate eventually.

But that can wait until tomorrow. I have one of the servants bring up some run from the cellars, and the bottle is very dusty and exquisitely well-aged. Hallelujah, at least the booze here is good.

Bottle in hand, I wander the castle a bit, avoiding the largest gatherings. After a time, I hear a honey-laced voice singing, and follow it. The voice is attached to a decent-looking middle-aged man. He is regaling a couple of young ladies with some flowery songs of courtly love.

The other young ladies depart disappointed, as the bard loses interest in them shortly after my arrival. But then, that is very intentional. One thing I am fairly good at is getting a man's attention. Except for Gérard's, apparently. The bard is a Lord Rein, and as it so happens, he is the official Court Bard of Amber.

Lord Rein turns out to be a more than willing bedmate. At least I've managed to accomplish the two basic goals I set for myself today. Honey-tongued indeed! Happy Birthday to me!

"Dawn is breaking everywhere
Light a candle, curse the glare
Draw the curtains

I don't care 'cause
 It's all right...
 The only thing there is to say
 Every silver lining's got a
 Touch of grey...
 Oh well a Touch Of Grey
 Kind of suits you anyway.
 That was all I had to say
 It's all right...
 I will get by
 I will survive”
 - *Touch of Grey*
 Grateful Dead

14-15 Sept. 1565

I actually repress my first instinct to kick Rein out of my bed after we finished...entertaining each other. A bard can be quite a useful person to befriend. Who better to know all the scuttlebutt around here? Information can be very valuable.

And so I spend a couple days befriending Rein. I retrieve my violin from the ship, and get my boys to bring some furniture up to my quarters after I depart his in the morning. That evening I play host to him, and one sort of duet leads to another.

The current gossip is no more or less interesting than similar gossip from anywhere else. Who is bedding whom, and suchlike. Who is around in Amber proper, and who is out afield. The names and basic political structures. Helpful, but nothing earth-shattering. At least it means I have my sea-legs, so to speak, when it comes to the local situation.

After the second evening, Rein and I part ways, for now. No sense in ‘wearing out my welcome’. But I do think I’ll at least have a friend to keep in touch with here in the Court.

“There’s a party raging, somewhere in the world...
 And I ain’t in it for the power
 And I ain’t in it for my health
 I ain’t in it for the glory of anything at all
 And I sure ain’t in it for the wealth
 But I’m in it til’ it’s over
 And I just can’t stop
 If you want to get it done, you have to do it yourself”
 - *Everything Louder than Everything Else*
 Meatloaf

16-20 Sept. 1565

Back to the sea. I can’t leave my men unattended too long, or they’ll get bored and start trouble. I still don’t quite know what to do with myself.

I do know that I will only be considered a pawn here, or worse, a dupe. What Gérard’s motives have been over the past year is still a mystery to me. At the very least, I need to do something to prove myself worthy of being treated with respect. But I don’t want to stick my neck out too far... After all, I’m not some over-eager puppy. But still...

And so I set out to sea again. Course charted for the great unknown. Setting my Pattern-sight on a challenge worthy of note. Amber’s biggest seagoing menace.

Catarena’s Journal #1 – Port of Call

After a few days, I find myself in the port of Kashfa, in Amber’s Golden Circle. I stopped here once when on tour with Gérard, and I wonder what brings me here now. I head over to a tavern, and settle myself in the corner.

After a while a burly blonde fellow ambles in, oozing male attitude. He wears green, and around his neck is a large golden medallion. It depicts a lion mauling a unicorn. He heads to the bar, ordering ‘the usual’. Although his actions are so typical for men, I find him terribly interesting. He seems significant somehow.

When the bartender hands him a bottle, he pulls the cork out with his teeth, and downs the whole bottle. He then shatters the bottle and orders another. The patrons here seem accustomed to his behavior, so I count that he must be something of a regular here. He takes his second bottle and retires to a table.

Shortly thereafter, a red-headed rather handsome fellow comes in. He wears green as well. His clothes are cut in a nondescript fashion, but of very fine cloth. He greets the blonde like an old friend.

I end up moving to the bar to get a bottle of rum, and position myself there, just close enough to overhear the conversation. They start off with the typical male bragging, just catching up. They apparently hadn’t seen one another in a while.

Then finally the red-haired man, named Renaldo, comments about “the damned sea monster.”

“It may be outta your league, but not outta mine, though I’m no sailor,” comments the blonde, who is called Dalt.

“Good for you, it isn’t *your* shipping lanes it’s messing with.”

“Yeah, lucky I’m not king,” says Dalt.

Apparently they need a hand... And I know I’m here for a reason. Having something to occupy me while I figure out what brings me here would be a good thing. Give me a chance to get to know the characters around here. And so I take a breath and interject.

“Sea monster in the shipping lanes, eh?”

Renaldo turns to face me. “Yes, since you couldn’t help eavesdropping, I mean overhearing. I wondered how long it would take you to say something. I hope you aren’t a spy, you’re very bad at it. So why not join us?”

I pull up a seat. “Alright.”

“Get you something to drink?” Asks Red?

“Nah, I’m good.” I reply.

Introductions go around, and I offer my services to hunt down the seagoing menace. Being a mercenary, of course, this wouldn’t come free, but coin doesn’t interest me. Dalt seems amused that I ask for a future favor in payment. Renaldo seems dubious but agrees.

Dalt seems highly entertained by all the goings on. When I ask what he’s smirking at, he says he thinks I’m cute. I’m not sure whether it’s just machismo or what.

Renaldo summons a chart, and shows me the rough area threatened by the creature, whatever it is. No real reports are logged of it, since there haven’t been survivors. Just wreckage. Six ships lost in as many months.

When I ask Blondie if he wants to come along for the ride, he declines. Typical overblown man. All bluff. He says he wants to wait and see if I’m ‘worthy’ before he spends time on me. How hilarious! I think he doesn’t want to admit he

page 14 of 19,

can't stomach ocean travel. When I laugh, he only smiles again, and departs.

We all go our separate ways, and I have something to do for a while; monster hunting for the king of Kashfa.

And somehow I get the idea that the 'threat to Amber' I was seeking isn't this sea monster... A lion rending a unicorn, eh?

"I'm sailing away, set an open course for the virgin sea
I've got to be free, free to face the life that's ahead of me
On board, I'm the captain, so climb aboard..."

- *Come Sail Away*
Styx

21-24 Sept. 1565

I hit the water right properly now that I have something constructive to do... Although I admit it may take a while. Sea monsters don't just come when called. But if I hook up with a merchant fleet and provide an escort, at least I've got some hope of finding the beastie... or more precisely of it finding me.

But before I can find the said merchants, I am myself found. But not by a sea creature. On the horizon a tall ship appears, and tacks directly toward the *Fleur Mare*. I shortly recognize it as one of the ships of the Amber Navy. When I dip the flag in greeting, I notice that the colors it runs up are those of Admiral Gérard himself. Why is he not aboard his flagship? Something isn't right here. I allow the ship to approach, but subtly signal my men to arm themselves and await my order.

Sure enough, once the ship approaches closely enough, I see Leo at the wheel. He orders the men to board, and follows himself, sword in hand. What on earth is that pup up to? I order my men to dogpile him, which they do, but to little effect. The crew of the other ship basically surrenders when they recognize me... Some of them served with me on the Admiral's flagship.

But Leo isn't to be subdued. He closes with me, and I discover he's a much better swordsman than I thought he was. We fight in earnest, though he doesn't seem to particularly want to harm me...

"What is this about, Leo? What do you want?"

"Want? You!"

"Me?"

"You." He tries to steal a kiss.

Well now. This game I can play. Now I really don't care to sleep with Leo, as by what I've been told, he's a cousin or somesuch. But if it means I can subdue him and take him back to Amber, well, I do what I gotta. He commandeered one of the Admiral's ships. Bad boy.

Not one to give up though, I keep at it, trying to defeat him without resorting to 'womanly wiles', but it isn't to be. The longer the fight goes on, the more obvious it becomes that he'll win in the long run. Even when I use dirty tactics!

So I let him have what he wants. I let him have his 'victory' and carry me off. It isn't as if I don't *like* a good tumble now and again...

And once the evening leaves him sated and sleepy, well, that's when I have the upper hand, and haul him to the brig,

where I lock him away. It should hold him. I tested that cell myself. Now all there is to do I drag him back to Amber.

Problem is, he wakes up. And then he starts blathering like a madman. That he was possessed, by the spirit of his cousin Fred, and that 'Fred' is now possessing me, having apparently vacated him during our intimacy. *Right*. Just what I need. I bedded a lunatic.

"One generation of sin
Passed on to the next
Generation to sin
Woman such is your fate
You will never ever win"

- *The Girl Child & The Girl Mother*
Firoze Shakir

25-27 Sept. 1565

Sailing, as I've said before, is lots of boring with a few high points of pure chaos. But it's peaceful out there mostly. Or at least it's meant to be. I've barely turned about to head back to Amber when a yawning blackness opens on the main deck and a skillet-faced fella in fancy digs steps through.

Turns out its some guy named Dermott. Another Amber cousin, from what I gather. Will this never cease? How many are there? He seems to latch onto me like a barnacle. He acts like an overenthusiastic and stupid greenhorn, but something about him speaks different. He puts me on edge.

He claims he appeared because he wanted to find a beautiful and interesting lady he hadn't met yet... Whatever! He is nothing but trouble from the start. He acts intentionally thick, doing everything possible to get in the way and misinterpret my orders.

He acknowledges I'm the law on the ship, but he turns out to be a lawyer. He double-talks everything, and causes no end of trouble.

By dawn of the second day, what should have been a week or two's sail is cut short. He opens his black vortex in the night while I sleep, and brings *Fleur Mare* into Amber on his own. Despite the fact I told him not to. But the pain-in-the-ass rewrote the duty schedule to suit himself, making up whatever he pleased. Simply because I 'didn't tell him not to'.

I am at wit's end. The ship I was escorting home, whose officers and captain Leo killed when he commandeered her, has been left behind.

At least Barnacle proves almost competent when I ask him to fetch said ship. Soon both are anchored safely in Amber harbor.

"Where it all ends I can't fathom, my friends.
If I knew, I might toss out my anchor."

- *Son of a Son of a Sailor*
Jimmy Buffett

28 Sept. 1565

Come the morning, I set off to find Admiral Gérard. After all, aside from returning his ship, I have a delinquent to drop in his lap. One that flew *his* colors, besides stealing a ship. Either one of which could be a hanging offense somewhere

else. But Leo is apparently some foreign prince or whatnot, so he might escape with his life.

But the Admiral isn't in port. When the ship turned up missing, he went to find it himself. The best I can do is have the Royal Guard haul Leo off to the dungeons, while I head to the castle with Barnacle in tow. Hopefully I'll find some way to get in touch with the Admiral there. Like one of those cards.

Inside, I'm not rightly sure which way to go, but Barnacle quick enough gets the attention of a statuesque lady I vaguely remember from the first dinner I had around here. Florimel. Beauty by any other name. I could almost be jealous.

Well she suggests that we head up to the library, where 'family decks' of those cards are kept. A useful suggestion! So we do so. They don't seem to be so thrilled when I head for the closest deck and sort out the Admiral's card. As if I'm being anti-social to them.

But the Admiral answers, and seems a bit surprised to hear from me. When I tell him I returned his ship, he asks if I took it! As if! I assure him the true culprit, Leo, is in the dungeon. He thanks me, and asks if I'll be hanging around Amber when he gets back. I tell him its possible. We promise to meet up when he returns.

After that, I replace the card, and depart with Beauty and Barnacle. I'm feeling pretty damn good, and would love to celebrate. I do intend to be around for the Admiral's return, I just didn't want him to think I was eager. But a shopping trip for some nice clothes seems more than appropriate right now.

And Beauty is more than happy to accompany me.

That takes hours, with Barnacle in tow, but acting somewhat less annoying now. Or maybe I'm just getting used to it. Hard to say. But when we finally return, with armfuls of packages, I find myself in the midst of a right crowd in the castle hall. Besides the servants, and guards, that hardly count in this circumstance, Barnacle joins conversation with that red rogue Bleys. Beauty quickly joins in. With Bleys is a younger lady named either 'Melanie' or 'Mary', I didn't quite catch her name. *Another* cousin?

I just give Bleys a wink and a pinky-wave as I head on back to my quarters. I'm not keen on getting sucked into anyone else's business. Mary, or whatever her name is, seems rather put out and it doesn't look to bode well to hang about her.

Once I've gotten back and put up all my purchases, I have another sudden thought... I'd forgotten about my commission to Red. I need to head out again. And that means I'll probably miss the Admiral's return. My heart falls at the thought.

Unless....

29 Sept. - 14 October 1565

Barnacle was easy enough to find the next morning. And when I asked him to join me onboard my ship for a journey, he seemed quite pleased. He obliged me well enough when I requested that he use that vortex 'Abyss' transport to get the ship swiftly back to Kashfa waters as well.

He seemed oddly cagey when he found out about my commission. He apparently knows Red and Blondie, but doesn't want to speak of it right away. That's fine by me. Barnacle was almost bearable on land. But back out here he quickly makes himself a nuisance again.

Over the next two weeks of cruising in search of the sea monster I get completely sick of him. He acts like he wants to woo me, sort of. He constantly tries to 'help' and make me dinner, and deprive me of anything resembling privacy. It is highly annoying.

Especially when I discover that my problems are only beginning. I am pregnant. I feel the urge to strangle Leo, and I'm glad for him that he's very far away right now. One evening when I finally lock Barnacle out of my quarters for the night, I mix up an old solution to pregnancy problems; a strong tea of pennyroyal and other things. But it doesn't work. I only get sick as a dog. And stabbing pains seem to come whenever I try to take action to rid myself of the unwanted issue thereafter. It almost makes me pass out. Perhaps Leo wasn't completely crazy. It may be some sort of demon spawn after all. It wants to live.

Just what I need.

"Bury the unwanted child.

Beaten and torn

Sacrifice the unborn."

- *Silent Scream*

Children of Bodom

15 October 1565

Well, we found the monster. A kraken. While the men kept the beastie from damaging the ship too badly, I dove overboard to finish it off at the source. Squidy beasts have quite soft skulls, after all.

But in the midst of it all, as I'm closing in, almost out of breathe, everything goes black. Not dark like the squid's ink or blood. Like absolute darkness. Have I gone blind? But I can't seem to float to the surface, and my lungs are about to burst.

I am finally forced to inhale, and prepare for death... But there is air here, in a fashion. Am I already dead? Is this what comes after? Endless black?

No. Not dead. Inside Barnacle's black vortex. He's sucked us all in. Ship, kraken, crew and me. I shout my displeasure at his interference, and then find myself plunged again into the water with the beast.

I finish the kraken, and climb back aboard the *Fleur Mare* to find Barnacle seemingly offended. He claimed it was no mere beast. It was rather large, I admit, but I am still irked at him. He claims it was sent by someone. Yeah, right.

With the kraken's beak in tow as proof of the job's completion, I head back to Kashfa. At least I can get this job finished before this damned pregnancy gets in my way.

I've decided that rather then march right up to the castle, I'll hit the bar first. If I met Red there once, he may be there again. It'd save me a long hike up from the docks.

Sure enough, he's waiting. Why is beyond me, but maybe he likes to get a drink every afternoon... Whatever. He takes me at my word, and asks if I want my favor now, which I deny. I'm surprised he didn't ask for proof. He disdains trophies.

He does however, recognize Barnacle, who has followed me in from the ship. Turns out, in conversation, that he is

Barnacle's father! So Dermott is the son of the king of Kashfa? Curiouser and curiouser...

"Haul the sheet in as we ride on the wind that our
Forefathers harnessed before us.
Hear the bells ring as the tide rigging sings.
It's a son of a gun of a chorus."

- *Son of a Son of a Sailor*
Jimmy Buffett

16 October 1565

One thing Barnacle is good for is quick transport. I'm back at Amber in no time. I even ask him if he can teach me the trick, which he seems unsure of. The Admiral is in his office, and I drop by for a chat. Seems he already heard about the kraken, though how I can't figure. He says Julian heard as well, and is interested in talking with me... Trading tall tales and the like, according to the Admiral. Having me out for dinner.

Gérard suggests a family dinner. All the family. But I'm somewhat more interested in this date with Julian. Of course, the Admiral insists it isn't a date... since Julian is my uncle. Uh-huh. Sure. And how is it that anyone I think is interesting and even attractive turns out to be 'family'? Admiral's condescending tone is really starting to irk me.

"They say I'm wild and I'm reckless
I should be acting my age
I'm an impressionable child
In a tumultuous world
And they say I'm at a difficult stage"
- *Everything Louder than Everything Else*
Meatloaf

17 October 1565

It's always the way. Things seem to be going so well, and then they go to Hell. The next morning I'm actually pleased with myself, being knocked up aside. But I'm sure I can fix that as well.

Then I head out to the docks. Gotta keep an eye on that crew of mine. And the ship is gone. The berth is filled with another vessel.

I walk into the Admiral's office.
"Admiral, did you order my ship moved?"
"Good morning, Catarena. No. Why?"
"My ship is gone."

He looks at me totally amused. "Did you lose your ship?"
He acts like he's talking to a child.

I am instantly angry. I hate that he treats me as if I were a kid! All I can do is splutter. He even condescends to offer me his ship, 'as we both know its faster than mine'... Whatever.

I can't win this, so I decide to cut my losses and go. For whatever reason the ship is gone, I can't do anything about it now. Besides, Marris kept the ship in one piece for a year, I'm sure he can manage now. At least I hope so. I'm sure there was some reason for the ship to leave.

Since I'm supposed to meet Julian this evening, I decide to spend the day as productively as I can. I try to track down

Catarena's Journal #1 – Port of Call

Barnacle, but find he is gone as well. I wonder... But if he took my ship I'd have to wonder how, because he basically was incompetent when it came to anything shipboard.

Anyway, as Julian has always presented himself as something less than a social butterfly, the offer to chat has caught me unprepared. So I spend the afternoon putting together a good outfit for supper in the woods, and do a bit of poking around to find out things like his favorite drink.

When I show up, the camp seems settled enough. Practically a village of its own. A large something roasts over a fire, and it smells wonderful. Of course I'm expected, and shown right to Julian's pavilion.

Julian seems gracious enough, though I wonder if he ever takes off that white armor... It must be hell to keep clean. Unless when he hunts he simply never deigns to get his hands dirty personally. Fresh venison tastes wonderful.

Of course conversation quickly turns to the kraken. I quickly discover why he knew so quickly. It was his creation. What do you know? Barnacle was right. He had planned to stage an 'accident' for Red and Blondie. And he is upset that I interfered, whether or not I knew I was interfering. Personally, I couldn't care less, and I am unrepentant. I had no motives other than fulfilling a commission.

But Julian isn't satisfied. He offers vague threats of other 'accidents'. And then I am unceremoniously shown out. Alone in the dark, there's nothing left for me to do but to hike back towards the castle. So now Julian has made himself clear. He doesn't like me. How unsurprising.

And then I hear the baying. Julian's hellhounds? Is he trying to frighten me? If so, he's going to be disappointed. I just keep walking. Even if he sends them, I won't run. To run from a predator only makes it chase.

The baying gets closer and closer. I can finally make out a couple dozen of the great beasts closing in, and circling around. I'm half-tempted to face them, and kill a few, but there really is no point. I am unsure if I could take all of the pony-sized beasts. And Julian would only hate me worse for it. He seems almost fond of his pets. Besides I don't feel like getting torn up. Seems he's serious about 'accidents' happening.

So I pull out my Trumps; they are the only quick way I know to get away, being circled by the hellhounds. I won't ask for help from the Admiral. He already considers me a child. I don't trust the Prime Minister. But there is that beach. Not bad. Acceptable. And so there I go...

"Through war and love and friendship's length
I'll roister life to the end
For my worth is known by my enemies' strength
As much as strength of friends"

- *Drunken Angel*
Michael Longcor

18 October 1565

A night on the warm beach isn't unpleasant. The morning sun gives me a wake-up call. I figure I'd better be off, so I dust off my gear and set out along the tideline. I'll work my way back to Amber, since this shadow-walking is what I've come to understand my 'white fire' is. Or at least is part of it.

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But I don't get anywhere. No matter how I try, I am stuck on this beach. What is going on? I check the cards again, and find the Admiral's card is dead. Nothing more than paper here, it seems. Only Mandor's card is functional. A trap?

No way to know but to balls it out. I take a deep breath, and contact the Prime Minister. He is as creepy and polite as always, apologizing for my inconvenience. He claims he simply forgot that this little get-away of his wasn't accessible by Pattern, since he himself doesn't use Pattern. Uh-huh, whatever.

Anyway, having no other obvious exit, I accept Mandor's hand, and join him wherever he is. He holds my hand perhaps a few moments too long after I arrive, and I pull away, though I know I shouldn't.

"Congratulations. Who's the father?"

"Pardon?!" How could he know? I only just figured it out myself!

"I felt the child when I brought you through."

He goes on to offer any help he can, as he is a physician. He seems much too interested in the entire matter. I simply try to dismiss the matter, as a bastard's bastard is pretty irrelevant. But Mandor is like a dog with a bone, claiming that the child could be important if its father was.

Mandor eventually shows me out, leaving me wandering in Chaos alone, once it is plain to him I won't give over and answer all his questions. I know all too well that the father is this place's regent. And I have no intention of getting stuck in some court as the mother of the heir.

After wandering about a bit, I realize that finding my way anywhere here is well-nigh impossible. This place is crazy. I feel like I've walked into Hell itself. I see demonic beings wandering about. Time to get out of here.

The Admiral's card is cold, so I decide to suck it up and ask for a hand. But when I reach out, it isn't the Admiral I get. It's a red-headed fella in green. He looks vaguely like Bleys, and slightly moreso like Red. He introduces himself as Brand. He's all politeness as well.

I quickly discover that the locals here think of him something like a god. Like Bleys and the furry midgits that had hold of my crew a while back. He plays it off, saying jokingly that the locals simply know how to treat a lovely lady. I simply laugh and go along with him a bit while he offers to give me a tour.

He's trying too hard to try and make friends with me. I have to wonder why, but I don't let it show. He just says he likes to talk to someone that doesn't kowtow to him. He's 'family' as well, he claims. I just nod and smile, and play the perfect guest. He finally assigns quarters in the castle here for me and departs, promising to continue my tour tomorrow.

This place is much more opulent than the quarters I was given in Amber. Brand made a point to try and treat me like an equal, like someone he wanted to talk to. Part of me liked that. But another part was suspicious. Everyone else has treated me like a child. Why not him? He even offered to have me instructed in the Logrus; the local Power.

At any rate, after a few hours of sitting alone in the apartment, I decided to get out on my own. I had at least a slightly better idea of how to get around. I can't make any decision until I get a better idea of the true nature of the place. And that is something I certainly won't get while touring with the local 'god'.

Catarena's Journal #1 – Port of Call

So I decide to get a taste of the local flavor the best way I know how. Pub crawl! As I travel the streets, the demonic visages and inhuman inhabitants don't freak me out so much anymore. Wherever I go, they behave like citizens anywhere, going about daily business. It is only the surface appearance that is odd.

Finally I locate a likely bar and take a seat. Yeah, the folks here look freaky, but they act like any other drunks. A drink sounds good, and when I get a swallow, well then, I get another idea. The stuff is potent. Moreso than perhaps I've ever encountered. I feel like I've been hit in the head with a solid gold brick wrapped in a lemon. And as it turns out, this isn't the strongest stuff. The barkeep won't give me that, though, as he discerns I'm no shapeshifter, and thusly the strongest would kill me, apparently.

But the idea is in my head now. If pennyroyal and such won't rid me of the parasite in my womb, well perhaps alcohol can. Alcohol in great quantity.

"He was a sinner and he drank with the same,
And he mastered the fine art of blarney.
Have another drink, boys. Well, have one with me.
We're home from the sea. Yes, we're back on the shore;
And if you get too drunk, boys, in this company,
You'll roar 'round Cape Horn on the Rory O'Mor."

- *Dublin O'Shea*
Traditional

October 1565 - January 1566

Where does time go? I can't recall. Where am I going? No idea. But the rum is good. And the... I don't even know what they call it. But that thing in me is still there. I don't know if it is punishing me, or if it's only the hangovers. I never really got hangovers before. Neither drinking nor bar brawls have done a damn thing. Every fight I get into, it seems the stabbing pains make me flinch just so that I don't get hit in the abdomen.

But at least no one has bothered me. No one belittled me. I'm on my own, like I always have been. I don't really want to end up anywhere with the family again. Pregnant and 'only a child' to them. I couldn't bear being so pitied. Or so used.

"A million footsteps, this left foot drags behind my right
But I keep walking, from daybreak 'til the falling night
And as days turn into weeks and years
And years turn into lifetimes I just keep walking,
Like I've been walking for a thousand years
Walk away in emptiness, walk away in sorrow,
Walk away from yesterday, walk away tomorrow,"

- *Dead Man's Rope*
Sting

29 January 1566

I wake up someplace that looks vaguely familiar. Eventually my mind clears a little, and I realize that this place looks a lot like Bloody Bill's, in Amber. Except that I am apparently underwater. And breathing. How the hell? I've been in an underwater bar drinking?

My head is killing me. What a hangover. I can't even contemplate the absurdity of the situation. And I feel as bloated as a beached whale. I can't have been more than three months since I left Chaos... But I swear I look as pregnant as someone near full term. Must be my imagination; I'm just paranoid because I don't want it to show.

That's alright. I have ceased to care. With my head pounding, the only thought is that this isn't working. Maybe this won't be so bad after all. Go back to Chaos, tell them this is their regent's kid... Leech off it for a while, then leave once they've got him a regent.

Outside there's an odd crowd. The light here is weird and muted, but the whole area looks like a strange parody of Amber. Some of the folks look familiar. And when they see me, they make their way over like they recognize me too...

One, unconscious and being carried, is a woman that I know I've seen somewhere before. And one fellow talks to me like he knows me... Its who... Fred?! Oh no. He introduces the others but my head is pounding.

Then one of them... Manny? Says he needs my help getting back some Jewel from Bleys, because it might cause the end of the universe or something. He is less than convincing. He also comments on my pregnancy, which irks me no end.

All I want to do is leave again, and find somewhere quiet to sit out the rest of this. If the child is so tough, I may as well roll with it, and see if I can gain something by this.

But then I am wracked by pain again. Not just the protest of this unborn demon... This is worse. Suddenly there is blood in the water, I can taste it, and all I see is red.

I'm moved indoors somewhere, and the blood is everywhere. Vile copper taste. And then it contracts. The blood takes on a shape. A human shape. Not some babe, but a grown person, vaguely male.

"My son?"

It looks at me with a face as blank as a mannequin.

"Mother." It turns to Fred. "Father."

I am still pained and bleeding. It seems to gather strength from me, and I feel myself growing weaker. I can hear them speaking, but only catch bits of what is said.

"I suppose I should thank you for life, though you have spent every moment trying to kill me."

"And will she die?"

"No, mother will live, for now..."

At some point, it departs, like some red comet. The others continue to speak. I only wish to leave; to find some private place of safety to rest. But this is denied to me, just yet. When I try to stand, I collapse. They all but carry me elsewhere.

To a palace. Amber castle? No... We are still underwater. A room. A bed. Rest. At last rest, but no quiet. I tell them to leave me be, let me sleep, and the talkative mob finally departs.

After sleep, I awaken feeling much recovered. And the hangover is gone as well. I am still underwater, though the light is dimmer. And the mob still talks outside my door. The conversation seems to have gone on unabated, so I gather I cannot have slept too long.

These quarters are not unfamiliar in aspect, much like those in Amber, and I soon manage to find clean clothing, and to put myself in order. I seem to have quickly regained my

figure. These past months all seem a long, bad dream. But I know they were all too real.

Not wishing to be forced into some other mad quest by these 'cousins' of mine, I try to simply depart. But shadow-walking does not seem possible here. There is nothing to do but face the crowd outside. And pray that they will hold their tongues about what they have seen. A vain hope, I know.

Outside they once again implore me to help them retrieve this Jewel of Judgment from Bleys. But then another figure appears. She is introduced as Queen Llewella of Rebma, and the others treat her as kin as well. It seems we are all 'invited' to join her for supper, along with Bleys, and some others.

I simply go along with this, as I could at least use a meal. And I've met Bleys before. Although a rogue, he gave me hand when I needed it. And so I wish to scout out this situation for myself before I act, or take any side.

I already regret how I handled this child, and I don't want to regret anything else. I've never regretted before...

"I will forgive but I won't forget
And I hope you know you've lost my respect...
Cause I'm not a pawn for you to play...
Under pressure, you crumbled and you let me down
I'm not deaf and all I hear are your empty promises
Does it run in your blood, to betray the ones you love?"

- *Blood*
Papa Roach