

Chapter One—A Storm Hits Valparaíso

Catalina Flores de la Peña's tongue got her in more trouble than any other part of her body, even though there were far more likely candidates. However, as soon as anyone brought these to her attention, they realized why most men preferred to admire her from the dusty corners of her father's tavern, rather than approach her directly. So legendary was her temper that the mayor ordered her father to keep her upstairs when dignitaries came to visit the tavern, fearing a repeat of the night she broke the magistrate's nose.

When she was confined to her room, customers tended not to linger; there was no one to hasten the hours between the first *pisco* and the fall of night. Watching her glide between tables—flirting with one man, berating another, eyes flashing one moment, soft and kind the next—was one of the more pleasant ways to avoid thinking about the weather on Valparaíso's long winter nights.

Her father—Don Flores—was a stern man and no one was quite sure of his first name. One customer swore his uncle grew up with Don Flores in Pucon, and that he was called Ignacio. Another insisted his brother once loitered outside the confessional and heard old Father Guido refer to Don Flores as Ricardo. Catalina's father never let on, happy to give the men something to talk about other than his daughter. And anyway, the majority of his patrons were content simply calling him Don Flores, the honorific reflecting the distance he kept from them.

Don Flores' low opinion of his fellow man resulted from years of seeing them at their worst, for he slept when he wasn't working and he worked when he wasn't sleeping. His daughter was spared this judgment. He showered her with all the love and affection he withheld from the rest of society. When Catalina was old enough, he

insisted she work at the bar so that she would form the same useful opinion of humanity that protected and comforted him in equal measure.

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Catalina could feel his eyes—watching her. She tried to ignore him, but every time she looked, there he was. Most men had the decency to look away when she caught them, but this Spanish *puerco* just went on staring, with the faintest hint of a sneer at the corner of his lips.

Something about him kept her on edge. She tried to put him out of her mind; she had troubles enough tonight. The crew of the *Esmeralda* had descended on Valparaíso with no good in mind. Their ship had docked, needing repairs, and they were taking advantage of several days of unexpected shore leave before continuing on to Lima. It had been a long voyage from Spain. The sailors hadn't seen port during the journey across the Atlantic, down the barren coast of Patagonia, past the frozen wastelands of Tierra del Fuego, and around Cape Horn into the Pacific. The Chilean rebels had no ships worthy of the name, and their forces had withdrawn on sight of the frigate; their one paltry cannon was no match for the *Esmeralda's* forty-two guns. The Spaniards had secured the waterfront in under an hour, encountering no resistance. Sentries were posted at each street corner, and the sailors who escaped guard duty were determined to make the most of this opportunity.

Toward midnight, the bawdy crowd began to clear, following the musicians down the street, looking for whores and gambling tables. An hour later, only one table was left: Spanish sailors, drunk, shouting insults. Except for him; he just watched. She tried to shake it off, hoping they would be gone soon. Instead, they called for another drink.

"Very well, *señores*," said Don Flores, as he poured the *pisco*, "one more, then we close."

Catalina placed the drinks on the table, grateful the night was nearly over, already thinking of bed. As she turned to leave, the *puerco* grabbed her arm. “I hope you are not going to throw us out on the street just yet. It’s still early.”

Catalina glared at him. “Let go of me, *puerco*, or you’ll be out now.”

He pulled her down onto his lap, grabbing her breast. “*Chica*, the night’s only beginning—” He stopped short, her cold metal blade pressed against his throat. The bar fell silent—a silence quickly shattered by his companions jumping up from their chairs, upending the table in their haste. Catalina pulled the *puerco*’s head back, exposing his sweaty neck. One of the sailors edged closer. The tip of her dagger nicked the *puerco*’s skin, drawing a small bead of blood.

“Stand back lads,” he cautioned.

Catalina turned to his companions. “You two, leave.”

They paused. The *puerco* gave a slight nod, the knife still firmly at his neck. Eyes on Catalina, his companions staggered backward to the door and stepped outside. Her father hurried to her side and eased the knife from her fingers. With his other hand, he twisted the *puerco*’s arm up behind his back and marched him after his companions.

“You tell that bitch this isn’t finished.” The *puerco* struggled. “I’ll be back for her.”

Don Flores threw him out the door, bolting it shut. He sighed then looked at his daughter. “Go to bed *mi hija*. It has been a long night. Tomorrow we can clean.”

Catalina nodded and went upstairs.

The next morning, the air thick with stale sweat and tobacco, Catalina drummed her fingers on the bar as she surveyed the damage. *This day isn’t going to improve in a hurry*, she thought. Last night’s crowd had been rough. Aside from dirty glasses and plates, she had smashed bottles and broken chairs to contend with. At least her regulars knew the rules—and occasionally respected them—but those animals, they had no

respect for anything. She cursed as a glass slipped from her hand and shattered. A groan came from the doorway outside. *Pedro*, she thought, a smile sailing through the storm of her face.

Every night, Pedro Villar fell asleep in the doorway of the bar with a flower in his hand, intending to profess his love to Catalina. Every night, his courage would falter, leaving him slumped outside, cursing his cowardice and mourning his solitude. Every morning, Catalina sent him home to his mother—a stern woman who put a raw egg in his coffee as punishment for his nightly excesses.

Catalina opened the door and shooed Pedro away with the broom, unmindful of the heart she broke a little more each day.

“Pedro Villar?” Her father appeared as she was re-locking the door.

Catalina laughed. “Who else?”

“He has too much interest in you for my liking.”

“That drunk would chase a *burro* in a dress.”

Her father grunted. “Catalina, put down that broom. I want to talk to you.”

“What is it, Papa?”

“I’m sending you to Santiago for a few days, to your aunt. I don’t want any argument. It’s not safe for you here.”

“But Papa, we can’t let—”

“Sergeant Eduardo came by last night, after you went to bed. He is worried about these sailors. They are hot-headed and foolish enough to do something stupid.” Don Flores took a bottle of *pisco* from the shelf, cleaning the label with his thumb before pouring himself a healthy measure. “He can’t protect us. His hands are tied. None of his men can enter Valparaíso while there is a Spanish warship in the bay.” He emptied the

contents with one gulp. “He feels it would be best if you visited some relatives until the Spaniards leave town.”

“But this is my home.”

“I have made my decision, Catalina. Just for a few days, until these sailors leave.”

He raised his hands, as if to brook any further discussion.

“Papa—”

“That’s enough!”

Catalina continued cleaning in silence. There was no point arguing; her father’s mind was made up. She had no siblings to share the burden of her father’s protectiveness, no mother to soften his resolve; she was going to Santiago.

Chapter Two—The Sea Wolf

Lord Captain Thomas Cochrane waited in the musty, oak-paneled corridor and wondered what the next few hours would bring. He had been summoned for a meeting in Admiralty House, near Whitehall, by the First Lord of the Admiralty, Lord Musgrave. He had no doubt they had received his report warmly—the mission had been a success; however, he also knew he had enemies within the Royal Navy. As an M.P. he had long fought against naval corruption, allying with the more radical elements in Parliament. In short, he was not expecting a warm welcome.

Members of the naval establishment were notoriously cautious. Cochrane felt their conservatism had not only held him back, but also impeded England's progress in the war with France. How he longed for a leader like Napoleon Bonaparte—someone who respected daring and inventiveness in commanders rather than being suspicious of it. His superiors were pompous old farts who valued procedure and protocol over courage and verve.

He unfolded the article from the *Naval Chronicle* his uncle had kept for him:

Seeing what Captain Cochrane has done with a single ship upon the French shores, we may easily conceive what he might have achieved had he been entrusted with a sufficient squadron of ships and a few thousand military hovering over the whole extent of the French coast, which it would take a considerable portion of the army of France to defend.

The Admiralty might be narrow-minded, but Cochrane knew they were keenly aware of the public mood, and knew how important this was to their political masters.

The door opened and a liveried servant summoned him inside. "Sir, if I beg your pardon, the Lord requests your presence."

Cochrane rose, folded the newspaper cutting into his pocket, and entered the room. It was a grand, ornate chamber lined with portraits of dead kings and forgotten battles. Much of the space was taken up by a solid mahogany table at which Lord Musgrave was seated with a number of documents scattered in front of him. A blazing fire filled the room with heat, despite the sun streaming in from the ceiling-to-floor windows opposite.

Lord Musgrave gestured for Cochrane to sit and began leafing through his papers. "Well, I must say, events were concluded in a most satisfactory manner in Fort Trinidad. Napoleon's armies will have been delayed for weeks, if not longer."

Cochrane said nothing, his eye drawn to the outsized wind dial above the mantelpiece. He wondered if it still worked.

Lord Musgrave coughed, drawing his attention. "I won't be too fulsome in my praise; we don't want you losing your head." He locked eyes on Cochrane. "Press attention can lead one to get ideas above one's station."

Cochrane bit his lip, attempting to stop his displeasure registering on his face, as Lord Musgrave continued. "That being said, we have a ... situation at present that could benefit from your, shall we say, unconventional approach. As you may have heard from the latest naval dispatches, the French have taken advantage of some rather strong winds and have broken through our blockade at Brest. Eleven battleships and a number of frigates got through. This means—"

"Napoleon is free to attack British shipping."

"Indeed. As you have gathered, the situation is perilous in the extreme." Lord Musgrave's eyes darted toward the back of the room. "Stevens, if you don't mind." The

servant unfurled a large map of France and placed it on the table, securing it with three silver paperweights. “As luck would have it, some of their ships took damage in the storm and regrouped here, in The Basque Roads, just north of Rochefort-sur-mer in the Bay of Biscay.”

“Do we have any vessels nearby?”

Lord Musgrave nodded. “Admiral Gambier is some distance offshore, observing their movements, but is without sufficient numbers to launch an assault. He has suggested waiting for reinforcements or until the French leave the sanctity of the port. The shore batteries are causing him some concern.”

Cochrane couldn’t hold back any longer. “But if we wait, the French will have repaired their fleet. We can’t let this opportunity slip through our fingers. While Gambier is sitting on his hands—”

“Enough!” Lord Musgrave rose to his feet. “We know you prefer a direct approach, which is why you were summoned. If you calm down, I would like to hear your thoughts on how we should proceed.”

Cochrane inhaled, collecting himself. He decided to change tack. “I think Admiral Gambier is correct: a direct attack would be disastrous.” He pointed at Rochefort-sur-mer. “I’m wondering why the French would choose to shelter here. I’m not worried about their shore cannon, but my instinct tells me they have afforded themselves a greater level of protection than we realize. If I were commanding the French, I wouldn’t have docked here, unless my suspicions are correct.”

“Which are?” said Lord Musgrave, growing a little irritated by Cochrane’s grandstanding.

“I suspect the French have erected a boom across the mouth of the bay, from here,”—Cochrane traced a path across the map—“to here.”

“A boom? Are you sure?”

“Almost certain. And if I am right, it will block all access to the port, only leaving a small gap to let ships pass through. It would prevent our fleet from attacking the harbor, because as they slowed down to pass through one by one they could be easily picked off by the shore guns here, and here.”

“Are you suggesting we should draw them out somehow?”

“Not in the least. Quite the opposite, in fact. I have been working on a modified fireship that should be able to blow a hole in the boom wide enough for an attack to proceed. With a few of these explosion ships, as I like to call them, we will be able to cause sufficient damage to the boom to allow an attack.”

“And if you are wrong about the boom?”

Cochrane smiled. “Well then the explosion ships shall just sail right in and blow up the French!”

It took a few moments for the audacity of Cochrane’s plan to sink in. Lord Musgrave slowly arched an eyebrow. A smile flickered at the edge of his lips. “Tell me what you need.”

* * *

Three weeks later, Admiral Gambier waited aboard his ship for his visitor to arrive. He was not amused. The last thing he needed was this hotheaded Scot, Cochrane, charging into what was already a delicately-balanced position. How could the Admiralty send in this backward fellow, this impudent pup, to assist him? He had several well-educated, better officers, good Navy men, and this uncouth ruffian from some godforsaken glen had a hare-brained scheme to get himself in the newspapers again. He seethed as Cochrane approached.

“You may have been sent here by the Admiralty on special assignment, Captain Cochrane, but I want you to be clear on one thing: I am the Commander-in-Chief of the Royal Navy Fleet in the Bay of Biscay, and you take your orders from me.”

Cochrane stopped just short of Admiral Gambier and saluted. “I apologize for my presence, sir, particularly as you seem to find it so odious. I did attempt to refuse command of the fireships.” Admiral Gambier’s mouth fell open in shock as Cochrane continued. “Unfortunately for both of us, Lord Musgrave ordered me to accept. I will be on my ship if you need me.”

Admiral Gambier was taken aback. He had never been spoken to in such a manner, certainly not by a subordinate. He gathered himself. “One moment, Captain Cochrane. I gather you have convinced the Admiralty that we should use fireships in the attack. In your haste, you have failed to take account of one extremely pertinent fact: the French have erected a two-mile-long sturdy wooden boom at the mouth of the harbor. Doubtless, this is anchored with heavy chains.” Gambier paused to let this sink in, before continuing in a shrill tone. “If you choose to rush headlong into self-destruction, that is your own affair. But it is my duty to take care of the lives of the men, and I will not place the crews of the fireships in palpable danger.”

Cochrane smiled at Gambier. “Do not worry yourself. I will take care of the boom. Just make sure the fireships are released when you get my signal.”

Gambier’s face darkened as he watched Cochrane climb down to his gig. Everything he had heard about this wastrel Scot was correct. Fuming, he entered his cabin, determined to rein in this upstart.

Back aboard the *Imperieuse*, Cochrane made preparations with his Quartermaster. “For each of the explosion ships, I need fifteen hundred barrels of gunpowder, the same amount of ten inch shells, and three thousand grenades. Before these are placed aboard,

reinforce the hulls in the rear as well as both sides. This should focus the blast forward. When this is complete, I want all of the explosives placed carefully in the hold and bound together.”

“It’s like one giant floating mortar.”

“Exactly!”

“How much of a fuse will you need, sir?”

“Longer than usual. I’ll need ten minutes to get the men far enough back. I am expecting quite a bang. Now get me those supplies.”

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By the evening of April 11th, conditions were perfect: both wind and tide were heading in the direction of the port. Cochrane had meticulously assembled twenty-two fireships as well as three of his explosion ships. Admiral Gambier cautiously had the flotilla of fireships drop anchor eight miles from the coast, while Cochrane—with Lieutenant Bissel and a crew of just four men—began piloting the first of the explosion ships toward the giant boom. The two other ships would be timed to strike the boom moments later.

On the deck of the first explosion ship, Cochrane addressed his crewmen. “Listen up, we only get one chance at this. If we mess it up, it could cost us our lives.” Cochrane paused, glancing at each of them, making sure his point was understood. “When I give the order, I want everyone off this ship. Only when you are all safely in the gig will I light the fuse. Once the fuse is lit, we have less than ten minutes to get as far away as we can. The wind and the tide will be against us, so I will need everyone pulling their weight. Understood?”

The men knew it was a dangerous mission, but had readily volunteered. Cochrane had worked his way up the ranks and commanded a great deal of respect among his

men. They knew he would never order anyone to take a risk he would not take himself, and that he was not yet ready to die. "Aye, Captain."

Resuming his position at the prow, Cochrane clenched his jaw and drummed his fingers against the wooden rail, his eyes fixed on the horizon. If he misjudged the distance, the vessel would explode harmlessly before it reached the boom. If the fuse burned too quickly, he and his men would perish. If the explosives failed to ignite, half of Admiral Gambier's munitions stockpile would fall to the French, and the boats laden with precious gunpowder could be turned against them. They were close, but Cochrane waited; too many things could go wrong. If only he had an opportunity to test the explosion ship first. But he didn't have that luxury. It was time.

"To the gig. Go!" The men rushed to the rope-ladders, scrambling down into the small gig tethered to the ship's side. Cochrane lit the fuse and paused, wanting to make sure it caught. There was something else at the back of his mind, something he couldn't quite remember ... he shook his head, ran to the rope-ladder, and clambered into the gig, grabbing the remaining oar.

"Row! For God's sake, row! I don't want to be anywhere near this damned thing when she blows." They had only put sixty yards between themselves and the ship when Cochrane stood in panic, nearly toppling the gig. "Back! Back!" he screamed, his arms flailing. "We must go back."

The men held on to his legs, attempting to steady the gig. "Captain, the fuse is lit. We must press on."

Cochrane glowered at the crewman. "Turn around, that's an order."

The men were even more scared of their Captain than of the imminent explosion. Moments later, Cochrane was back at the ship, scaling the rope-ladder.

The crewman stared at each other. The only sound came from the waves slamming into the side of the gig. Just as one of them was about to speak, Cochrane appeared, sliding down the rope-ladder and landing awkwardly in the boat. From inside his coat, a pup's head appeared. Cochrane smiled. "We couldn't leave a man behind lads, even if it was only wee Blackie."

The men didn't know whether to laugh or cry, but they knew they had to row. They worked hard, but time and tide were against them. Wave after wave crashed over the small boat, knocking the frightened rowers—their eyes shut tight against the stinging salt—into one another, each stroke sapping the strength from their aching arms. Desperate to put some distance between themselves and the ship, mortal fear propelled the men forward. Cochrane urged them on, his exhortations cut short by slapping mouthfuls of brine.

Then the sky ripped itself apart. A fireball tore through the heavens and the little boat trembled, as if in anticipation of what was to come. The resultant wave threw them forward at a frightening speed, but somehow their vessel remained upright as debris and shrapnel whizzed over their heads.

The sea now calm, Cochrane stood, his face tinged red by the fire raining from above. Nobody was looking at the shattered remains of the French boom; all eyes were fixed on the point where the remnants of the explosion ship had landed.

"Good God," said one of the crewmen, "if he hadn't gone back for Blackie, we would have snuffed it."

Cochrane turned to face the boom, the boat rocking gently under his feet. As he surveyed the broken, twisted remains of the French defenses, his chest tightened. No longer could they ignore him. Finally, they would give him the ships to win this war. "Perhaps a little less gunpowder next time," he said.

Chapter Three—A Pact in Blood

In northwestern Argentina, in the foothills of the Andes, remote settlements consisted of just one or two houses separated by hours of hard riding. Only an occasional wayward merchant—seeking shelter from the elements, before continuing on to the markets of Tucuman and Salta—brought news from the outside world.

Inez Ramírez de las Rozas always considered herself luckier than most. After all, she had a faithful, hard-working husband, enough animals that food wasn't a constant worry, and two strong sons—although, in truth, only Jorge was her own. Her sister died in childbirth over seventeen years ago, and little Diego's father, gripped by a grief so consuming that he couldn't even hold his son, had abandoned him. Inez had raised Diego as her own, thankful that the Lord had seen fit to let her sister live on in this little boy.

She worried about him, though. There was too much of his father in him. Jorge was a good, serious boy. But Diego? His head was in the clouds. Often she would see him gazing off into the distance, lost in a world of his own making. It was worse on the rare nights a traveler passed through. Diego would pester them from the moment they arrived. Tucuman, Salta, Buenos Aires—Diego wanted to know everything. The buildings, the clothes, the food, the mechanical contraptions; it was impossible to get the boy to sleep afterwards, as he lay there in a fevered state of excitement, imagining these exotic places. On those nights, she would lie awake worrying, picturing Diego whispering to Jorge and putting crazy notions in his head.

She worried Diego would leave one day, just like his father. It was not that he wasn't a hard worker, and he was as good, if not better, than Jorge with the horses. What she had come to accept was that, just as Diego had been given to her by the grace of God, he might be spirited away again. After all, someday he might wish to find his

father. His real father. Her greatest fear was that Jorge would go with him—*that* she couldn't accept, and she didn't care whose will it was.

She had made the mistake of letting her husband, Miguel, take Diego to the market at Tucuman one spring. Inez knew it would only fire the boy's imagination, but Miguel was stubborn, especially where Diego was concerned. Miguel had hoped that seeing the noise and filth of the city would scare him a little, put some of his dreams to bed. But Diego was fascinated, plaguing Miguel with questions on the two-day ride home. Sighing, she collected the last of the eggs from the chicken coop then crossed the yard to watch the two boys saddle up their horses.

"I'll race you to the top of the hill." Diego spurred his horse.

Jorge kicked his horse and sped after him. Miguel had sent the two boys to track down a mare that had escaped during the night. He could have done it himself, but the boys were good riders, and he suspected they knew where the horse was anyway. He shook his head in dismay as he watched them in the distance, grappling for each other's reins.

"Those boys," Inez said, smiling as she walked toward him.

Miguel's face hardened. "I heard Diego creep from his bed last night. He lets those horses out just so they can go off for the day."

"Miguel, they are young." She put her hand on her husband's arm. "They need a little excitement."

Miguel frowned and silently disagreed. He knew Diego was a bad influence on Jorge. He vowed to keep that boy under control.

* * *

“Diego if we don’t find this horse soon, we are going to be in big trouble.” As the sky darkened, Jorge began to worry, remembering the strange look on Papa’s face as they were leaving. “I’m sure he knows what you are up to.”

Diego slowed his horse. “I haven’t lost one yet. Come on, let’s keep going.”

“Yes, but this time you didn’t tie the rope properly. She could be anywhere.” They zigzagged their way up the steep slope.

Diego followed Jorge’s gaze across the crest of the foothills until his eyes fixed on the granite wall beyond. Sometimes, when he looked at the mountains that encircled the smaller, flatter hills of his home, he could almost feel them closing in on him. Most mornings, when he went out into the yard, he swore they had inched closer in the night and he cursed them for taking another sliver of his freedom. But on mornings like this, he didn’t care; it seemed like the green hills would roll on forever, and he would never reach those grey mountains, no matter how fast he rode.

As they crested the hill, they spotted the black mare munching on some thick grass at the edge of the woods. “There she is, I told you!” Diego charged down the hill, drew up beside the startled mare, and dismounted. He approached her carefully, putting his arms around her neck and whispering in her ear. As Jorge drew up beside him, Diego turned. “I should be more careful next time. Maybe choose one of the older horses who won’t stray so far.”

“What do you mean next time?”

Diego tethered the mare to his horse. “You prefer chopping wood and cleaning up pig shit?”

“No, but...”

“Don’t worry; I’ll wait a little before we do it again.”

“Two months at least, promise.”

Diego laughed as he climbed back into his saddle. "If you insist."

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The two boys got a good scolding from their mother when they returned home. Then Miguel boxed their ears and sent them to bed without any dinner, promising further punishment in the morning. Inez was more relieved than angry by the time she saw the two dirty shadows approach the fire. *Miguel is always too hard on them*, she thought, *especially Diego*. She promised her sister in her prayers that she would raise Diego as her own, and that is what she did. But the truth was that Miguel never really got along with her sister, and had little respect for her sister's husband, especially after he left so suddenly.

"You are too soft on them," said Miguel when she returned to the fire after bringing the boys some *empanadas* and making Diego swear to behave.

"They need to eat. And why do you think Diego does it? Well?" She continued without giving her husband a chance to reply. "Ever since you told him we weren't his true parents, he has been doing everything he can to prove himself to you."

Miguel looked up. "What are you talking about? I told him what he needed to know. He's a man now."

"He was only sixteen, and for the last year he has doubled his work around this place, trying everything to please you."

Miguel poked the fire. "I don't see what you mean. I told the boy he would still inherit half the farm."

Inez placed her fists on her hips. There was no use talking to Miguel when he was in a mood like this. Stubborn as a *burro*, and smells even worse, her sister used to joke. He always closed in on himself when she brought up the subject, but she could never forget what he had done to Diego that day.

In the beginning, Miguel had been full of love for Diego, thankful that God had blessed their union with a child, even if it wasn't strictly their own. But almost a year later, when Jorge was born, Miguel grew cold toward Diego. It still shocked her to recall what Miguel had said to Diego that day a year ago, or rather the way he said it. She always knew Diego had to be told, but surely not like that. She had held him for hours afterward, as he cried for the mother he could never know and the father he would never meet; it broke her heart. Her face grew stony remembering, and Inez turned away and left her husband by the fire.

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Later that night, Jorge and Diego were lying awake when Miguel entered their room, carrying a brazier. The glowing embers illuminated his face, and Jorge could see that he was still angry.

Diego sat up. "Papa, please don't punish Jorge. It's all my fault. I let out the horses, I convinced him to keep quiet about it."

Miguel grabbed Diego by the arm. "I want you to stop this. I am sick of you getting *my* son into trouble."

Jorge winced at his father's words and wished there were something he could do. Diego spent the night unsuccessfully stifling sobs.

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Two weeks later, Jorge was shaken awake from a deep but dreamless sleep. He sat up, wiping the sleep from his eyes with the back of his hands. "Before you start, I don't care what you say, we are not letting a horse out tonight. You promised, remember?"

Diego waved away his objections. "It's not that. I have something special to show you. Or at least, I was going to." Diego pouted playfully. "I'm not so sure now."

"All right then."

The two boys slipped on their boots and overcoats and tiptoed out into the yard. At the large beech tree on the far side of the *campo*, Diego stopped. "Close your eyes."

"What?"

"Just close them, Jorge."

"Good. Now, I know it was your sixteenth birthday last month, and I didn't give you a gift."

"Is that what you woke me to tell me? I knew that already," said Jorge, still annoyed at being pulled from bed.

"No, you fool. I want to give you your present."

After scrabbling through the undergrowth, Diego removed a piece of tattered cloth. He unwrapped it. Inside was a knife, its sharp blade glistening in the moonlight.

"*Feliz cumpleaños.*"

Jorge turned the knife over in his hand. "It's so heavy ... it's beautiful."

The two boys stood in silence for a moment before Jorge sat down with his back to the trunk of the tree. Only half listening to Diego babble on about some story he had heard, Jorge thought about his brother. *Cousin*, he corrected himself, silently. It didn't seem right that Diego wasn't his brother anymore. Diego had been his brother his whole life; someone can't just take that away. He knew it must be even harder for Diego; he had lost a lot more. Slowly, a plan formed. Jorge looked at Diego and then at the knife. "Do you remember the traveler who came by during the harvest?"

Diego's face lit up. "Of course! How could I forget? Why?"

Jorge splayed his left hand. "Did you see his scar? While you and Papa were cleaning his horse, he told me about it."

"He said it was a burn."

“It wasn’t. He told me he and his friend made a pact when they were young, and they sealed it by cutting their hands and mixing their blood. It means they are friends for life. Brothers. Blood brothers.”

Diego eyed the knife. “But we are already brothers.”

“Not real ones,” said Jorge, a little too quickly. “Sorry, I didn’t mean that. Listen, being blood brothers is more important and it’s forever. Come on, let’s do it?”

“I don’t know. I’m not sure. How ... I mean ... do I cut myself or do I cut you and you cut me?”

Jorge handed the knife to Diego. “Don’t worry. Just make a small cut here. We only need to mix a little bit—it still counts.”

Diego trembled as he held Jorge’s left hand. “Don’t blame me if it hurts.”

“I won’t. Just be quick.”

Jorge winced as Diego drew the blade across his palm. “Diego, give me your hand. Hurry! We have to do it before all the blood drips away. Come on. It’s not that bad.”

Diego handed him the knife and held out his left hand, closing his eyes. He stifled a shout as he felt the cool metal slice his skin. When he opened his eyes, Jorge was beaming at him. Pressing their palms together, they both felt the warm, sticky blood mingling, binding their fate together.

Chapter Four—The Haunting Eyes of Robado Vivaldo

Zé had heard stories of the *quilombos* all his life: hushed tales around the fire, history passed in whisper, victories sung in secret, defeats silently mourned. In Brazil, there were only two roads to freedom for a slave—meeting your slave price with stolen or borrowed gold, or the *quilombo*. Death of the master only brought freedom for a lucky few; most slaves were passed down the family tree like a pocket-watch.

The slave-owners had tried to spread stories that all the uprisings had been quelled, all the runaways returned to chains or dead. But everyone knew the *quilombos* were still out there, existing as tiny communities of runaway slaves who lived in secret in the *sertão*, the vast, barren Brazilian interior. Many *quilombos* survived for only a few months before having to move on. Most slaves lasted only a few years before they were captured or killed. But most would take a few years of freedom over a lifetime in chains. That's why the price on Zé's head was so high—escaped slaves had to be recaptured and returned so the others couldn't dream, so the others would accept their place in the great scheme of things, their role in keeping sugar prices low for whites—that, and because of the blood on his hands.

Zé had been on the run for three nights now, making his way inland under the cover of darkness. By day, he lay as still as possible, waiting for the sun to set. Every time he closed his eyes, he saw the face of the man he had killed, for Robado Vivaldo would not let him sleep; those cold, dead eyes haunted him. Instead, he inhabited the eerie twilight of the insomniac—tracing the sun's slow progress in a sweeping arc across the sky, counting the seconds, minutes and hours until he would be hidden by the cloak of night and free to move again. They would still be looking for him when the sun went down, but at least he would be harder to find. He knew they would be looking for him, because there was a price on his head.

Most men have a vague notion of their own worth. Some count it in property, some count it in chickens, yet others in good deeds done or worse deeds avoided. Zé knew he was worth six hundred and seventy-six *mil-reais*. At least he *was*, before he killed Robado Vivaldo. It might be double now; an escaped slave was worth a lot more, but only when caught.

That was the price of his freedom: a price he could never afford. And now, he was here. Free, but trapped. Imprisoned by the glare of the sun and the watchful eyes of the slave catchers. He hadn't eaten in three days. Zé was used to going without food, but his strength was beginning to fail. Each night he made less progress, but he couldn't allow himself to lose hope, just as Robado Vivaldo wouldn't allow him to sleep.

Old Falcão's voice came to him again. *Follow the direction of the setting sun and keep going. Don't worry, they will find you before you find them. Only travel by night. Be careful, the slave catchers will be looking for you too.*

* * *

Zé woke with a start. The sun was high in the sky; he needed to hide, fast. He scanned his surroundings, spotting some brush in a gully not far to his left. Keeping low, he scurried toward it. Every snapped twig made him flinch as he eased under the foliage. As he lay down, a wave of nausea swept over him. Falcão's voice drifted back to him once more. *I will delay them as long as I can, but you have to leave, Zé. Now! If you don't, they will kill you. Go! Run! Stay off the roads and away from any villages. And stay out of sight. Go!*

Zé's shirt was torn, his back lacerated from the whip. He had cleaned the blood from his face and hands, but it still covered his clothes. And that face, he would never forget that face. He probably would have stood on that spot forever, still standing over the dead body of Robado Vivaldo, if his friend, old Falcão, had not grabbed him and

broken the spell. When they came for him, he would have still been standing there, frozen by the awfulness of the act he committed.

Follow the setting sun... Falcão's words echoed in Zé's head like the voice of a spirit. *Keep to the edge of the field and then cut through the trees. I will delay them as long as I can.* Zé wondered what punishments were inflicted on Falcão for that act of kindness. He wondered what other crimes he would have to answer for when the time came. He stared at the deep cuts around his knuckles, made when he struck Robado Vivaldo over and over. The hands of a killer. Zé closed his eyes. He wanted to see the face of his victim again; he wanted to suffer.

Blessing himself, Zé asked God for forgiveness.

He got no response.

Chapter Five—El Desertor

In the harbor of Cadiz, the crew of the HMS *Eagle* was becoming restless.

“Sir?” The First Officer approached the Captain, whose eyes were fixed on the dock. “What shall I tell the men?”

“Tell them to wait, as ordered.” The Captain knew he was running out of excuses. “Just take care of it, will you.”

“Sir, if I may, the men are beginning to talk. The Spanish authorities are starting to ask questions, and we’re short on answers.”

The Captain turned around. “What I am about to say must remain in the utmost confidence.” The First Officer nodded. “When we docked on Tuesday night, an emissary of Sir Charles Stuart came to see me.”

“The Crown’s man in Cadiz?”

“Precisely. It was intimated that Sir Charles wishes to transport a special cargo—a passenger—to England. He should have arrived a couple of hours ago, but we were warned to wait at all costs.”

“How will we know who it is?”

“I venture he will announce himself to us. Besides, he shall be carrying a letter bearing the seal of Lord Macduff.”

“That means—”

“Exactly—it comes from the top. Now find a way to keep these men quiet. Tell the Spanish we found a hole in the hold or a rip in our sails. Tell them we lost a man overboard; even better, throw one over. That should delay things a bit.”

The men had been away from home for more than a year and the Captain knew that any delay, especially this close to their return, was excruciating. He was in the midst of thinking up a further round of excuses when a carriage thundered down the

dock. Leaping from the carriage even before it drew to a halt, a cloaked figure then hurried up the gangplank and handed the Captain a letter sealed in heavy red wax. The Captain brought the stranger into his cabin, away from the curious eyes of his crew, and opened the letter.

I'm afraid I must dispense with the usual pleasantries. As soon as you receive this letter, bring the man below deck. He is not a prisoner, but you must insist that he remains out of sight until you are out of Spanish waters. He is to be treated with the utmost courtesy. Please extend to him every comfort at your disposal. He is very important to us. I must insist that you do not enquire as to his identity. Further, I depend on you to dispose of this letter immediately, and in secrecy. Your esteemed friend, Lord Macduff.

The Captain grunted and immediately brought the stranger below deck, posting a guard outside his quarters. "No one is to enter or leave this cabin without my express permission," he instructed his First Officer before making his way to his own cabin, where he sat in his chair and began to tear the mysterious letter into ever smaller pieces. Above deck, the crew's confusion turned to joy as the order to cast-off was given.

* * *

Below deck, in his cabin, José de San Martín removed his long black cloak, and placed it on the chair beside the writing desk. At the washbasin, he cleaned the grime from his face, looked at his reflection, and mouthed one word: "Deserter." As Lieutenant-Colonel in the Spanish Army, he had men shot for doing what he was doing tonight, but, unlike them, he wasn't running from a fight: he was running toward one.

San Martín reached into his cloak and removed a weather-beaten envelope. It had been given to him by Sir Charles Stuart, the British diplomat in Cadiz who had arranged his departure. Reaching for his dagger, he weighed the envelope in his hand before sliding the blade through the seal and removing the envelope's contents: a succession of

letters, all penned by Lord Macduff. Scant light from the flickering candle barely illuminated the desk and San Martín had to strain his eyes to read them. There were letters of credit, entitling him to funds, and letters of introduction to various personages of note, intended to facilitate his introduction into London society. He held each of them over the candle, watching as they caught fire; he didn't plan on staying long in England. Throwing the burning letters out of the porthole, he watched the sea fall away beneath him as the ship skipped through the waves.

The lights of Cadiz were soon out of view. He would never see them again. Not unless he were caught, and then only to face a firing squad. Spain had been his home for twenty-six years and he had only distant memories of Argentina; he was just a small boy when his family emigrated.

San Martín felt a sudden pang of guilt; he would never see his father's grave again, nor would he ever again see his mother. She was ill in Galicia, being tended to by his sister. They weren't sure how long she had left. His three brothers were still in the service, but he told them all nothing, hoping ignorance would shield them from retribution.

He hoped they would understand.

San Martín sat down at the writing desk and reviewed his plans once more. He was satisfied. Once in London, he could organize passage to the land of his birth. Only then could he begin to fulfill his greatest dream: independence.

Chapter Six—The Mountain That Eats Men

Once, Potosí was the center of the world—the merchant capital of América. The wealth generated by its silver mine was so vast that the rich had trouble spending it. They tried to squander it by dressing their slaves in Florentine satin. Bodyguards sported swords from Spain and daggers from Turkey. Scriveners scribbled on parchment from Genoa. The competing fragrances of spices from the Malay Peninsula filled the marketplace, where jewelers, masons, and weavers tempted the newly minted nobles with wares from faraway lands. But by August 1811, Potosí was cowering in the shadow of its past, no longer the richest nor the largest city in América.

The city's fortunes, like those of the miners, were tied to the dwindling mine. The *Cerro Rico* still yielded its precious metals, but grudgingly. More-enterprising merchants had long since left for Rio or Panama, and more-ambitious nobles had departed to Lima or Santiago. Potosí no longer provided a quarter of the Crown's revenue, but it provided enough, and the Spanish guarded it jealously. The Indians hadn't left; they couldn't. They were the fuel that powered the mine. Plucked from their villages to work as slaves, their families followed. Encamped on the southern base of the mountain, in a series of ramshackle huts that had sprung up to supply the mine, they waited and hoped.

Deep in the bowels of the *Cerro Rico* came a loud bang, followed by a deep rolling rumble. For the miners of Potosí, that meant only one thing. Pacha dropped his hammer and looked up. The low ceiling seemed to be shaking free from the gnarled wooden struts. Dust streamed into his eyes and choked the already thin air, but the roof was holding, for now.

"We have to get out of here." Pacha grabbed Chikan—who was on all fours, spitting incantations and blessings—by the neck. "*Pachamama* is awakening."

Moving as quickly as they could, they tried to keep to the rotted wooden slats of the track, all the while listening for the distant thunder of the ore-cart that could crush them without losing momentum. They scrambled up the first ladder, knowing their only chance of surviving a roof collapse was to get as high up as possible.

Pacha had been working in one of the most dangerous parts of the mine, the deepest tunnels. Three hundred years of intensive mining had bled most of the silver from Upper Perú, with thousands dying each year to feed the rapacious Spanish throne. Slaves imported from Africa couldn't cope with the extreme altitude and died in huge numbers before Spain turned to the natives. Pacha, like most Indians of his age, was taken from his village and forced to work in this pit of tears for six straight months. Six months without seeing his family, without breathing clean air. Six months without seeing the sun. The Spaniards' relentless thirst for precious metals pushed the Indians deeper and deeper into the mine. Those who survived the meager diet, the grim conditions, and the sadistic guards, were plagued with the fear that keeps all miners awake at night: a cave-in.

The few lucky enough to survive six months in the mines were haunted for the rest of their lives, knowing it was not skill, perseverance, or faith that spared them, but the whims of fortune. However, most of these men suffered the cruelest fate of all: the slow, coughing death that claimed the miners of Potosí. Before the silver ran out altogether, Potosí would claim eight million souls.

As he made his way upwards, Pacha knew something was afoot. The guards had disappeared; miners were streaming from adjacent tunnels. They had all heard the noise, but there was no word of a cave-in. As they approached the mouth of the mine, the group slowed, making the painful transition to the light they hadn't seen for months.

Pacha shielded his eyes, waiting for them to adjust, and kneeled down to pat the earth, murmuring a prayer. The city of Potosí spread out beneath him, in the shadow of the *Cerro Rico*, into which the mines had burrowed deep. Just below him, creeping up one side of the mountain, Pacha could make out the edges of the maze-like town that was home to the miners' families.

"Look!" Chikan grabbed his elbow and pointed southwest to where a large army was camped on the outskirts of the city. But Pacha's attention was drawn to the ramshackle buildings. His wife and only son were there. Pacha made his way down toward them, along with the other miners. As they approached, an anxious crowd intercepted them.

The children playing in street reveled in the commotion. Their faces bright, they ran toward the miners, tugging at their tattered clothing. Behind them were the hardened faces of the women: mothers calling the names of dead sons, wives searching the crowd for dead husbands. In the doorways, the old men sat, nodding greetings as Pacha passed, adding him to their short list of survivors. As he fought his way through the crowd, he saw his wife. Alone. No child at her hand. His chest tightened. He called her name and she turned.

"Pacha! You are alive!" She pressed her face against his, blackening herself with soot from the mountain that eats men. He kissed her and held her tighter, feeling his worry drain away, only to rise again immediately.

"Where is my son?"

"He's with my mother. He's safe. And he has gotten big. Big like his father."

* * *

The party that night was more like a wake. Each embrace was followed with furtive glances toward the widowed, the bereaved, and the orphaned. Pacha's head was

spinning, and not just from the amount of *aguardiente* in his stomach. Yesterday he was a prisoner of the mine; today, he had his wife on his knee and his son at his feet. The bottle reached him again and he took another swig, passing it to his right. Everyone was talking about the army from the south that had run the Spanish from Potosí. Pacha went looking for Chikan, finding him in the middle of an argument with two of the older villagers.

“You want to turn your back on your people and go and fight for the *Kastillas*?”

“We should go and hear what they have to say. After all, we wouldn’t have escaped the mine if it wasn’t for them.”

“We wouldn’t be in the mine if it wasn’t for them.”

“Let’s see what they have to say. It can’t do any harm.”

The argument continued, in circles, for most of the night.

* * *

The following day, Pacha stood with the others in the Plaza Antigua. They were all feeling ill effects from the night before, all except Chikan, who was snoring in the shadow of the fountain. Many had come simply out of curiosity. Everyone wanted to see the Indian who was fighting the *Kastillas*’ war. Stories of the short-haired Quechua man in the strange uniform had brought a large, if somewhat bawdy, crowd.

There was a gasp as the man entered the square on a large black stallion. Swinging his feet out of stirrups polished brighter than any Potosí silver, he leapt from his saddle and handed the reins to a young boy, pressing a coin into his hand. A table was brought out from an adjoining building and the man climbed up, held both his hands aloft, and waited for the crowd to settle. Chikan woke with a start when the horse leaned over him to drink from the fountain.

At first, most of those gathered weren't paying much attention to what the man was saying in his strange accent. Instead, debate raged about how he might have received the long, curved scar that started under his right eye and stopped just short of the corner of his mouth. Then the man smiled and his scar and his mouth became one, giving him the lopsided grin of a lunatic. Everyone stopped talking immediately.

He was from the mountains far to the south—past the Salt Plains—and he told them his army had come to fight the *Kastillas*. He spoke of the battles they had already fought and of the many more they were yet to win. And he warned them the Spanish would be back, with more men and more guns. He pointed at the *Cerro Rico*, asking the crowd if they wanted to die in there. Then he asked them if they wanted to kill the men who had put them there.

“Are you willing to fight? Are you willing to stop the Spanish dragging us into the mines while they rape our wives and daughters? Will you join me and fight for our freedom?”

The crowd roared its assent.