

THE TRAITOR BARU CORMORANT

"Smart. Brutal. Gut-wrenching... Highly recommended."—KAMERON HURLEY



SETH DICKINSON

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BARU CORMORANT



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For Gillian

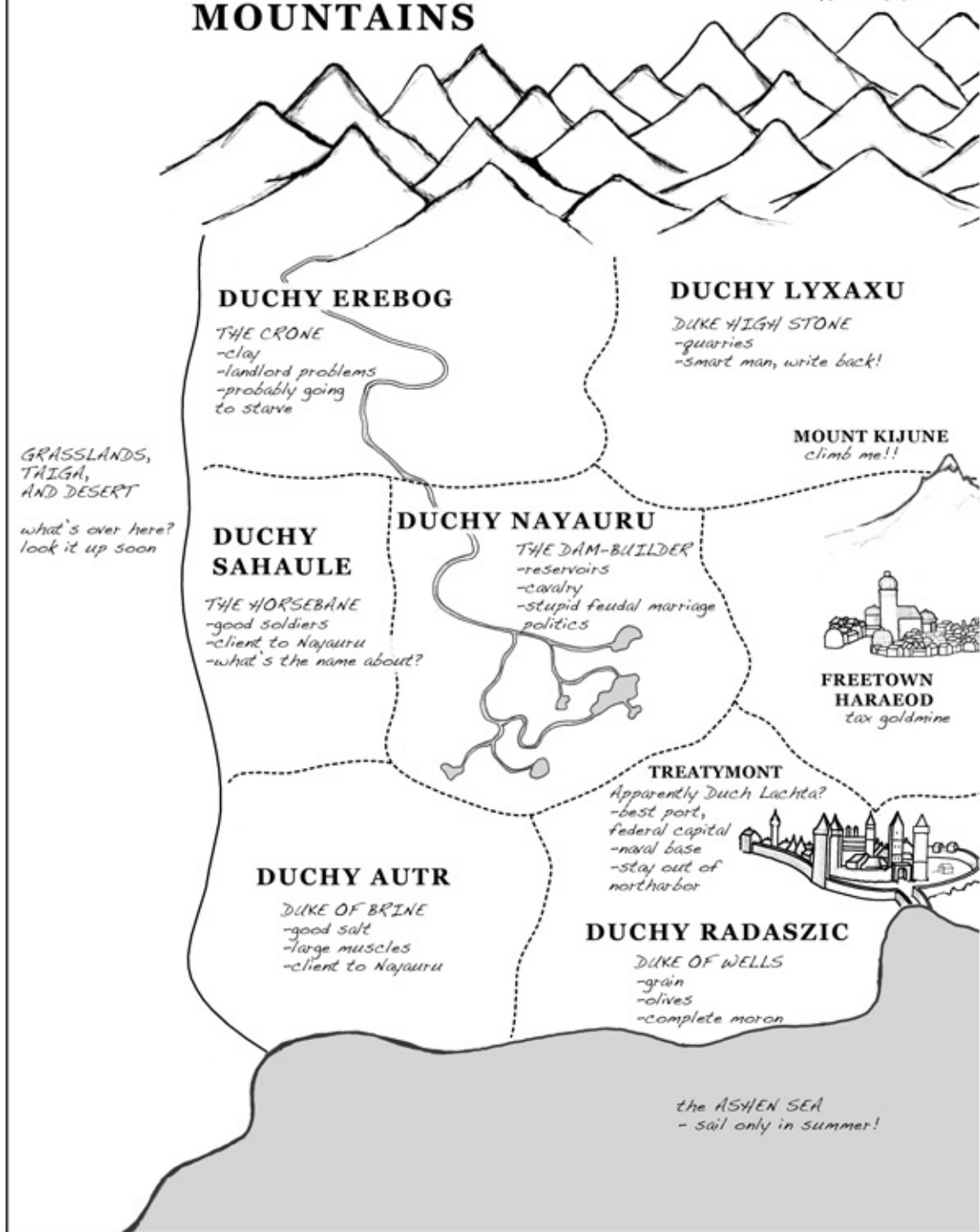
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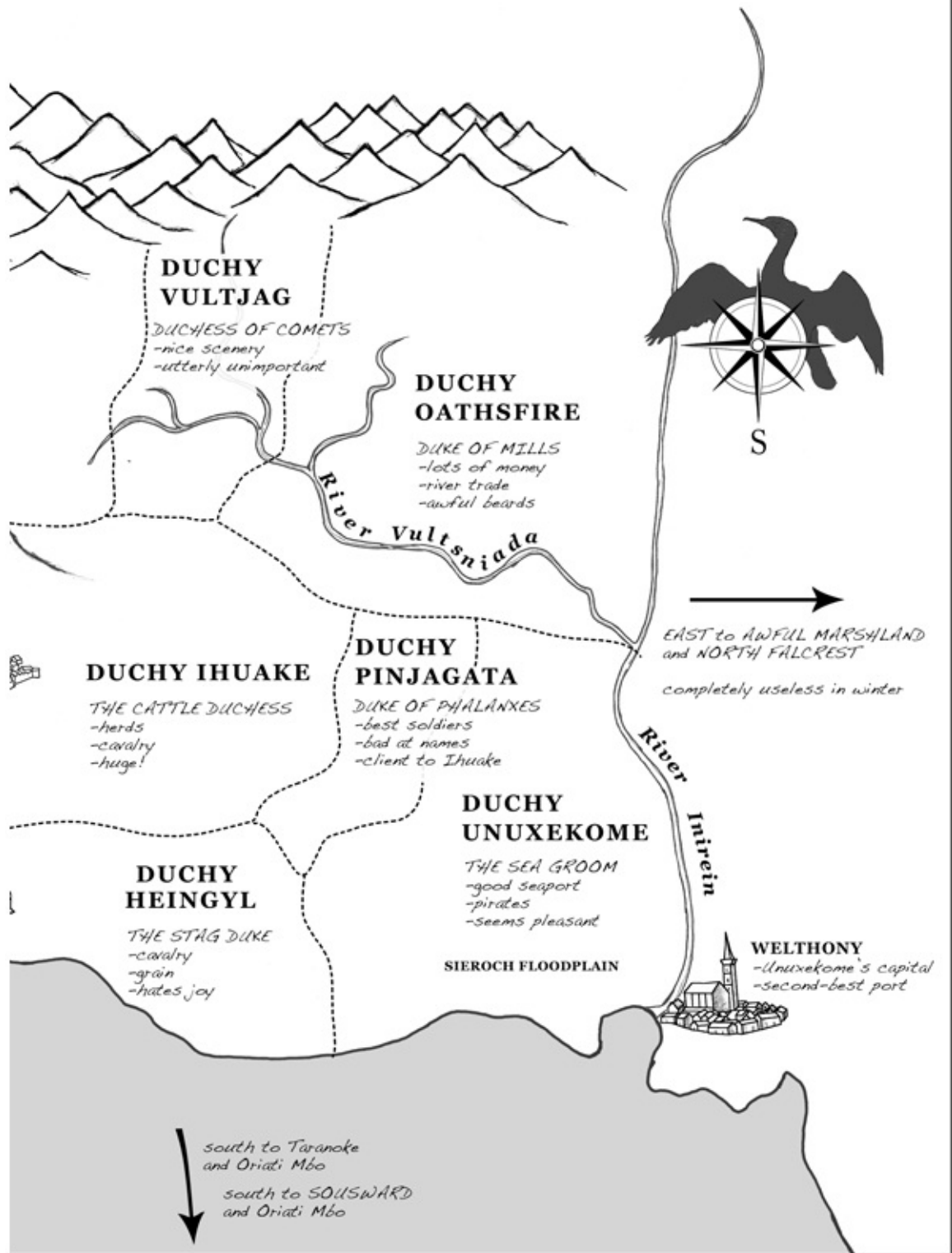
Sine qua non: Rachel Sobel. Jennifer Jackson. Marco Palmieri.

Sophia and colleagues. Jackals, Blue Planet, my brother, and a loon.

WINTERCREST MOUNTAINS

↑
STAKHI EMPIRE?





A PROMISE

This is the truth. You will know because it hurts.

ACCOUNTANT

1

TRADE season came around again. Baru was still too young to smell the empire wind.

The Masquerade sent its favorite soldiers to conquer Taranoke: sailcloth, dyes, glazed ceramic sealskin and oils, paper currency printed in their Falcrest tongue. Little Baru, playing castles in the black sand, liked to watch their traders come in to harbor. She learned to count by tallying the ships and the seabirds that circled them.

Nearly two decades later, watching firebearer frigates heel in the aurora light, she would remember those sails on the horizon. But at age seven, the girl Baru Cormorant gave them no weight. She cared mostly for arithmetic and birds and her parents, who could show her the stars.

But it was her parents who taught her to be afraid.

In the red autumn evening before the stars rose, her fathers took Baru down to the beach to gather kelp for ash, the ash meant for glass, the glass for telescope lenses ground flat by volcanic stone, the lenses meant for the new trade. When they came to the beach, Baru saw Masquerade merchant ships on the horizon, making a wary circuit around Halae's Reef.

"Look, Das," Baru said. "They're coming in for the Iriad market."

"I see them." Father Salm shaded his eyes and watched the ships, peeling lips pressed thin. He had the shoulders of a mountain and they corded as he moved. "Go fill your bucket."

"Watch." Father Solit, keen-eyed, took his husband's hand and pointed. "There's a third ship. They're sailing in convoys now."

Baru pretended to dig for kelp and listened.

"Pirates make a good excuse for convoy," Salm said. "And the convoy makes a good excuse for escort." He spat into the surf. "Pinion was right. Poison in that treaty."

Watching their reflections, Baru saw Solit take Salm's shoulder, callused hand pressed against his husband's bare strength. Each man wore his hair braided, Solit's burnt short for the smithy, Salm's an elaborate waist-length fall—for glory in the killing circle, against the plainsmen.

"Can you see it, then?" Solit asked.

"No. It's out there, though. Over the horizon."

"What's out there, Da?" Baru asked.

"Fill your bucket, Baru," Salm rumbled.

Baru loved her mother and her fathers dearly, but she loved to know things just a small measure more, and she had recently discovered cunning. "Da," she said, speaking to Solit, who was more often agreeable, "will we go to Iriad market and see the ships tomorrow?"

"Fill your bucket, Baru," Solit said, and because he echoed Salm instead of indulging her, Baru knew he was worried. But after a moment, he added: "Grind your glass tonight, and we'll have enough"

to sell. You can come along to Iriad and see the ships.”

She opened her mother’s hand-copied dictionary that night, squinting at the narrow script in the candlelight, and counted through the letters of the Urunoki alphabet until she came to: *convoy—caravan, or a group of ships, gathered for mutual protection, especially under the escort of a warship*

A warship. Hm.

It’s out there, father Salm had said.

From the courtyard of their ash-concrete home came the shriek of stone on glass and the low worried voices of her mother and fathers, a huntress and a blacksmith and a shield-bearer. Worrying about *the treaty* again.

She looked that word up too, hoping to understand it, as understanding gave her power over things. But she did not see how a treaty could be poison. Perhaps she would learn at the Iriad market.

Baru put her mother’s dictionary back and then hesitated, fingers still on the chained stitches of the binding. Mother had a new book in her collection, bound in foreign leather. From the first page—printed in strange regular blocks, impersonal and crisp—she sounded out the title: *A Primer of Aphalone, the Imperial Trade Tongue; Made Available to the People of Taranoke For Their Ease*.

There was a copy number in the bottom corner, almost higher than she could count.

* * *

WHERE the sea curled up in the basalt arms of the Iriad cove, beneath the fields of sugarcane and macadamia and coffee that grew from the volcanic loam, the market preened like a golden youth.

Since a time before Baru could remember how to remember the market had filled the Iriad docks with the most noisy and joyous thing in the world. There were more ships in harbor this year—not just Taranoki fishers and felucca, not just familiar Oriati traders from the south, but tall white-sailed Masquerade merchant ships. With their coming the market had outgrown the boardwalks and drifted out onto bobbing floats of koa and walnut where drummers sounded in the warmth and the light.

Today Baru went to market with a new joy: the joy of plots. She would learn what troubled her parents, this knot of warships and treaties. She would repair it.

Her family went by canoe. Baru rode in the prow while mother Pinion and father Salm paddled and father Solit kept nervous watch over the telescopes. The wind off the sea lifted flocks of scaups and merganser ducks, gangs of bristle-throated alawa giving two-toned calls, egrets and petrels and frigate birds, and high above great black jaegers like wedges of night. She tried determinedly to count them and keep all the varieties straight.

“Baru Cormorant,” mother Pinion said, smiling. In Baru’s eyes she was a coil of storm surf, a thunderbolt, as slow and powerful as sunlight. Her dark eyes and the teeth in her smile were the shape that Baru imagined when she read about panthers. She worked her paddle in strokes as smooth and certain as the waves. “It was a good name.”

Baru, warm and loved and hungry to impress with accurate bird-count, hugged her mother’s thigh.

They found a quay to unload the telescopes and the market swept up around them. Baru navigated the crowd of knees and ankles, trailing behind her parents because the commerce distracted her. Taranoke had always been a trading port, a safe island stop for Oriati dromons and islander canoes, and Baru grew up knowing a little of the structure of trade: arbitrage, currency exchange, import and

export. *We sell sugarcane and honey and coffee and citrus fruits, mother Pinion said, and buy textile sailcloth, kinds of money that other traders want—Baru, pay attention!*

Lately she always paid attention. Something fragile had come into the air, a storm smell, and no understanding made her afraid.

The market smelled of cooked pineapple and fresh ginger, red iron salt and anise. Through the drums and the calls of the dancers and the shouts of the audience in Urunoki and Oriati and the new trade tongue Ashalone came the ring of hard coin and reef pearl changing hands.

“Sol-i-i-i-i-i-t,” Baru called. “I want to see—!”

“I know.” Solit spared a smile from his work. He had been a smith, and he was generous with everything he made, including Baru. “Go wander.”

Excellent. Now she would pursue the true meaning of *treaty*.

She found a foreign trader’s stall painted in Masquerade white. The man who watched over the piled broadcloth—woven from sheep, which she understood were large dull beasts made entirely of hair—could have passed for Taranoki from a distance, though up close the different fold of his eyelids and flat of his nose gave him away. This was the first impression Baru had of the Falcrest people: stubborn jaws, flat noses, deep folded eyes, their skin a paler shade of brown or copper or oat. At the time they hardly seemed so different.

The man looked bored, so Baru felt no qualms about climbing up onto his stall. He had guards, two women with shaved heads and sailors’ breeches, but they were busy trying to bridge the language barrier with a young Taranoki fisherman.

“Hello, dear,” the man in the stall said. He moved a stack of samples and made a space for her. Baru made curious note of his excellent Urunoki. He must be a very dedicated trader, or very good with tongues—and cultures, too, because traders did not often understand how to be friendly to Taranoke. “Do your parents need cold-weather cloth?”

“Why are they bald?” Baru asked, pointing to the guards. By gesture or linguistic skill, they had made their fisherman friend blush.

“There are lice on ships,” the merchant said, looking wearily out into the market. He had heavy brows, like fortresses to guard his eyes. “They live in hair. And I don’t suppose your parents need cloth, given the climate. What was I thinking, trying to sell broadcloth here? I’ll go home a pauper.”

“Oh, no,” Baru assured him. “We make things from your cloth, I’m sure, and besides, we can sell to traders headed north, and make a profit. Do you use the paper money?”

“I prefer coin and gem, though when I buy, I’ll pay in paper notes.”

He had to his left a stack of sheepskin palimpsest—ink-scratched records that could be scraped clean and used again. “Are those your figures?”

“They are, and they are certainly too important to show to you.” The broadcloth merchant bleated irritably at a buzzing fly. “Do your parents use paper money, then?”

Baru caught the fly and crushed it. “No one used it at first. But now that your ships come in so often, everyone must have some, because it can buy so many things.” Then she asked about something she already knew, because it was useful to hide her wit: “Are you from the Masquerade?”

“The Empire of Masks, dear, or the Imperial Republic. It’s rude to abbreviate.” The man watched his guards with a paternal frown, as if afraid they might need supervision. “Yes, that’s my home.”

Though I haven't seen Falcrest in some years."

"Are you going to conquer us?"

He looked at her slowly, his eyes narrowed in thought. "We never conquer anyone. Conquest is a bloody business, and causes plagues besides. We're here as friends."

"It's curious, then, that you'd sell goods for coins and gems, but only buy with paper," said Baru. The shape of her words changed here, not entirely by her will: for a few moments she spoke like her mother. "Because if I understand my figures, that means you are taking all the things we use to trade with others, and giving us paper that is only good with you."

The broadcloth merchant watched her with sudden sharpness.

"My parents are scared," Baru added, embarrassed by his regard.

He leaned forward, and abruptly she recognized his expression from markets and traders past. He was avarice. "Are your parents here?"

"I'm fine alone," she said. "Everyone here knows everyone else. I can't get lost. But if you want to buy a telescope—"

"I *crave* telescopes," he said, perhaps thinking she had never heard of sarcasm. "Where are they?"

"Up there," she said, pointing. "My mother is the huntress Pinion, and my fathers are Solit the blacksmith and Salm the shield-bearer."

At that his mouth pursed, as if the idea of fathers troubled him. Perhaps they had no fathers like Baru and Falcrest. "And you?"

"My name's Baru," she said, as names were gladly given on Taranoke. "Baru Cormorant, because the cormorant was the only thing that made me stop crying."

"You're a very clever girl, Baru," the merchant said. "You're going to have a brilliant future. Come back to see me again. Ask for Cairdine Farrier."

When he came to speak to her parents later, he could not seem to stop looking at her fathers, and then her mother, and pursing his lips as if he had swallowed his own snot. But he bought two telescopes and a set of mirrors, and even wary Salm was happy.

* * *

THE last Masquerade convoy of the trade season circled Halae's Reef and anchored off Iriad harbor in the company of a sleek red-sailed frigate—the warship that father Salm had expected. Barking sailors swarmed her deck. A child with a spyglass might, if she were too curious for her own good and too poor a daughter to attend to her work, climb the volcano and watch their proceedings all day long. Baru had such a spyglass, and she was just that kind of daughter.

"They have soldiers on board," Baru told her parents, excited to discover such a portentous thing for herself. Now she could be included in the courtyard councils and whispers of poison treaties. "Will they have armor and spears!"

But father Salm did not buckle on his shield to fight them. Mother Pinion did not take Baru aside to explain the taxonomy of sergeants and officers and the nature and variety of Masquerade weapons. Father Solit fed her no pineapple and asked for no details. They worked in the courtyard, murmuring about treaties and embassies. "Once they have built it," Salm would say, "they will never leave." And Solit would answer in flat fighting-without-fighting words: "They will build it whether v

sign or not. We must make terms.”

Feeling neglected and therefore unwilling to attend to her chores and figures, Baru nagged them. “Solit,” she said, as he bagged their kelp harvest to carry to the burners, “when can you start smithing again?”

When Baru was young he had made beautiful and dangerous things out of ores that came from the earth and the hot springs. “Once the trading season’s over, Baru,” he said.

“And will mother go across the mountain, into the plains, and use the boar-killing spear you made for her?”

“I’m sure she will.”

Baru looked happily to her mother, whose long strides and broad shoulders were better suited to the hunt than to telescope-making, and then to her other father, who could drum as fiercely as he could fight. “And when the soldiers come, will father Salm use the man-killing spear you made for him?”

“You’re covered in filth, child,” Solit said. “Go to Lea Pearldiver’s home and get some pumice. Take some paper money and buy their olive oil, too.”

* * *

BARU read at great length about *treaties* and *currency* and *arbitrage*, and when she could read and understand no more, she bothered mother Pinion, or sat in thought. Clearly there had been some mistake: her parents had been happier last year than this.

The trend would have to be reversed. But how?

At Iriad market the merchant Cairdine Farrier sat in his stall with his two guards, who had the satisfied look of gulls. That market fell on a stormy end-of-season day, gray and forbidding, close to the time when the Ashen Sea’s circular trade winds would collapse into winter storm. But the Iriad cove sheltered the market from the worst of the chop and the drummers still drummed. Baru made straight for the wool-merchant’s stall.

Farrier was speaking to a Taranoki plainsman who had clearly come all the way across the mountain, and Baru had always been taught not to speak to plainsmen, so she went to Farrier’s guards instead. The bald women looked down at her, first with perfunctory regard, then irritation, and then, when she stayed, a little smile—from one of them, at least. The other woman looked to her companion for guidance, and thus told Baru that they were probably soldiers, and also which one was in charge.

Her reading and her thought had not been idly spent.

“Hello, little one,” the woman in charge said. She had skin the color of good earth, wide lips, and brilliant blue eyes like a jungle crow. She wore a stained white tunic with her breeches. Her Uruno was as superb as Cairdine Farrier’s.

“You’ve been here all season,” Baru said. “You never leave with the trading ships.”

“We’ll go home with the last convoy.”

“I don’t think you will,” Baru said. The other woman straightened a little. “I don’t think you’ll leave Cairdine Farrier’s personal guards, or even merchants at all, because if you were you would have learned by now that you don’t need guards at Iriad market, and he would have sent you to find more business.”

The stiff woman said something in Aphalone, the Falcresti language, and from reading the

dictionary Baru caught the words *native* and *steal*. But the woman with the blue eyes only knelt. “He said you were a very clever girl.”

“You’re soldiers, aren’t you,” Baru said. “From that ship. The warship that stayed here all season anchored out of sight while the other traders came and went, sending back your reports. That’s obvious, too. A trader wouldn’t learn a little island’s language as well as you have, which makes you spies. And now that the trade winds are dying, your ship’s come in to harbor to stay.”

The blue-eyed woman took her by the shoulders. “Little lark, I know what it means to see strange sails in the harbor. My name’s Shir and I’m from Aurdwynn. When I was a child, the Masquerade harbored in Treatymont, our great city. They fought with the Duke Lachta, and I was scared, too. But it all ended well, and my aunt even got to kill the awful duke. Here—take a coin. Go buy a mango and bring it back to me, and I’ll cut you a piece.”

Baru kept the coin.

At the end of the day the red-sailed frigate in the harbor put down boats. The soldiers began to come ashore, led by officers in salt-stained leather and steel masks. Through her spyglass Baru watched Iriad’s elders escort the Masquerade soldiers into their new building: a white embassy made of ash concrete.

Later Baru decided this must have been when the treaty was signed: *An Act of Federation, For the Mutual Benefit of the People of Taranoke and the Imperial Republic of Falcrest*.

At sunset they raised their banner: two open eyes in a mask, circled in clasped hands. And the next morning they began to cut tufa to build the school.

* * *

STORM season blew down on Taranoke and everything began to fall.

Baru relied on her mother’s love of knowing and telling to understand. But Pinion grew distant and temperamental, her loves overshadowed by a terrible brooding anger, and so left Baru to piece together the clues herself.

This was how she explained it to some of the other children, Lea Pearldiver’s and Haea Ashcoke’s, her second cousin Lao oldest among them and already growing into a long-limbed stork of a person who had to fold herself up between the salty rocks of their secret seaside bolt-hole to listen to Baru’s stories—

“The plainsmen are angry with us,” Baru would say, “because of the treaty. They say it’s because Taranoke stands alone, and we’ve betrayed that by letting the Masquerade build an embassy. But we know better.” (At this everyone would murmur in agreement, having been raised to know the jealous ways of the soggy people from Taranoke’s eastern plains.) “They think we’ve bought a foreign ally to hold over them. They think we want a monopoly on the new trade.”

And events proved her right. Early in the rainy season all the children from around Halae’s Reef packed themselves into their briny seaside fortress so Baru could explain the fires. “The plainsmen sent a war party,” she told them, relishing the power to make them gasp and lean in, and especially the power to make Lao hug her knees and stare at Baru in terror and admiration. “They came over the mountain and burned some of our sugarcane and coffee. It was a message, you see? So the harborside families took council at Iriad, and sent out a war party of our own. Champions to bear their shields

east and answer the challenge.”

“What will they do?” Lao asked, to Baru’s immense satisfaction.

“Talk if they can,” Baru said, playing at nonchalance by tossing a stone to herself. “Fight if they can’t.”

“How do they fight?”

How extraordinarily satisfying to be the daughter of Salm the shield-bearer and Pinion the huntress, foremost among the harborside champions. “Wars are fought between champions in a circle of drums. The drums beat and the champions trade spear-cast and shield-push until the loser yields or dies. Baru cracked her throwing stone against the stone beneath her, to make them leap. “And then the plainsmen go home to sulk, and we sell them textiles at outrageous prices.”

But it didn’t happen this way. When the war party set out to cross the mountain and challenge the plainsmen, the Masquerade garrison marched with them. The treaty spoke of *mutual defense*.

This was where Baru lost track of events, because mother Pinion and father Salm marched with them too—the war party with their shields and man-spears and obsidian knives climbing the flank of the mountain in a motley peacock throng, Salm’s braids a mark of glory among them, Pinion’s spear strapped across her brown back. And the Masquerade garrison masked and columned behind them, banners flying, churning the road to mud.

It had been a long time since war between harborside and plainsmen. Around Iriad there were old vendettas, wives who would not take plainside husbands, men who would not add their seed to a plainside woman’s child. But it had been easy to forget that hate as long as times were fat.

Baru and father Solit stayed at home. The glassmakers had stopped burning kelp and so there were no mirrors to grind. Without Masquerade traders in harbor the paper money was worthless, except for what wasn’t, because everyone wanted to have it when the trade winds picked up again, and bartered it outrageously for even a few slips.

The wool-merchant Cairdine Farrier came in person to invite Baru to attend the new school, a great tufa-walled compound above the cove. “Oh,” father Solit said, his voice hard. “I don’t know. Who could you teach her that she couldn’t learn from us?”

“Lands around the Ashen Sea,” Farrier said, smiling conspiratorially at Baru. “New sorts of arithmetic and algebra. Astronomy—we have an excellent telescope, built by the Stakhieczi in the distant north. Science and the disciplines within it. Various catalogues”—his smile held—“of sin and social failure. The Imperial Republic is determined to help those we meet.”

“No,” father Solit said, taking her shoulder. “Your help is a fishhook.”

“You know best, of course,” Farrier said, though the avarice had not gone from his eyes.

But without Salm and Pinion, father Solit was lonely and disconsolate, and Baru insisted that she be allowed to attend this wonderful school, which might be full of answers to questions she had barely begun to form—*what is the world* and *who runs it* and more. Whether because she made Solit furious or sad, or led him to realize he no longer had any control, her pleas struck home. (She wondered about this often, later, and decided it was none of that. He had seen the fire on the horizon and wanted his daughter safe.)

She went into the school, with her own uniform and her own bed in the crowded dormitory, and there in her first class on Scientific Society and Incrasticism she learned the words *sodomite* and

tribadist and social crime and sanitary inheritance, and even the mantra of rule: *order is preferable to disorder*. There were rhymes and syllogisms to learn, the Qualms of revolutionary philosophy, and readings from a child's version of the Falcresti *Handbook of Manumission*.

They know so much, Baru thought. I must learn it all. I must name every star and sin, find the secrets of treaty-writing and world-changing. Then I can go home and I will know how to make Solit happy again.

She learned a great many other things as well: astronomy and social heredity and geography. Solit made a map of the Ashen Sea and its seasonal trade winds, which carried ships in a great easy circle that ran clockwise (another new word) around the ocean, starting at Falcrest in the east and running south near Taranoke and Oriati Mbo, onward past lands with many names, all the way north to Aurdwynn and then back to Falcrest again.

So many lands. Oriati Mbo below, learned and fractious, a quilt of federations. Cold Aurdwynn above, where instead of a storm season they had *winter*, and no decent fruit, and wolves.

And Falcrest. It must be full of secrets to learn.

“You *could* go to Falcrest, Baru Cormorant!” The social hygienist Diline, a gentle man the color of whitefish, aimed his stylus at her. “At the end of your schooling, every child of promise will sit the civil service exam, the Empire's great leveler. Through the methods of Incrastic thought, we will determine your social function. You may become a translator, a scholar, even a technocrat in a distant land.”

“Does the Emperor live in Falcrest?” second cousin Lao asked. At night they whispered rumors of the silent Emperor and the Faceless Throne on which he sat.

Diline smiled blandly. “He does. Who can recite the Hierarchic Qualm?”

Baru could.

The civil service exam became Baru's guide-star. It would ask her to recite the secrets of power she imagined. It would require her to make father Solit smile again.

But that very same day Diline taught them the proof of strict limited inheritance. “One man one father,” he said, watching the class carefully, as if waiting for a boar to burst out from among them. “One female mother. No less. No more.”

The class did not believe him. Cousin Lao began to cry. Baru tried to disprove this idiot *proof*, and she had her first shouting match. She was the daughter of a huntress and a blacksmith and a shield-bearer, and now they would tell her she was *not*?

She had to ask mother Pinion.

But Pinion came home alone.

Came home from the war, the blood-soaked catastrophe at Jupora, where Masquerade marines shot dead the plainsmen champions and slaughtered their war party. Cradling father Solit's trembling face in her hands, she rasped her own catastrophe: “Salm vanished on the march home. There were men among the foreign soldiers who hated him. I think they took him.”

“For what?” Solit's voice sealed, frozen, desperate to keep things within or without. “What could they find to hate?”

“You. None of these men have husbands. They *hate* husbands.” She lowered her forehead to his. “He's gone, Solit. I looked—I looked so long—”

When this happened, it was because of the class on Scientific Society and Incasticism that Baru could only think to ask: “Was Salm my real father? Or was he only a sodomite?”

It was because of this that father Solit cried out, and told mother Pinion about the school. It was because of this that mother Pinion struck her in rage, and cast Baru out of the courtyard to run sobbing back to the white walls and the masked banner.

Her mother came to apologize, of course, and they cried and were reunited as a family, or at least a grieving part of one. But the hurt was dealt, and the school seemed to know more than even mother Pinion, who taught no more—only whispered with Solit about fire and spear and *resistance*.

“Stay at school,” Solit said. “You’ll be safest there. The Farrier man”—his nostrils flared in disgust—“will not let you be harmed.”

I must learn why this happened to Salm, Baru thought. I must understand it, so I can stop it from ever happening again. I will not cry. I will understand.

This was Baru Cormorant’s first lesson in causality. But it was not quite the most important thing she ever learned from her mother.

That came earlier, long before the school or the disappearance of brave father Salm. Watching the red-sailed warship in Iriad harbor, Baru asked: “Mother, why do they come here and make treaties? Why do we not go to *them*? Why are they so powerful?”

“I don’t know, child,” mother Pinion said.

It was the first time Baru could ever remember hearing those words from her.

2

SHE lost her father Salm, and from this she nearly lost her mother, too.

“You cannot believe what they teach you,” mother Pinion hissed in her ear. (They smiled together at the chaperones who brought Baru to visit her home, which seemed strangely squalid now.) “You must remember what they did to Salm, and give them nothing. The families are taking secret council. We will find a way to drive them back into the sea.”

“They will never go back,” Baru whispered, pleading. “You cannot fight them, Mother. You don’t understand how huge they are. Please find some way to make peace—please don’t die like Salm—”

“He isn’t dead,” Pinion growled. “Your father lives.”

Baru looked at her mother, at Pinion’s eyes red with fatigue, her shoulders bunched in anger, and wondered what had happened to the woman who was a thunderbolt, a storm cloud, a panther. Of all things Pinion looked most like a wound.

And Pinion, looking back, must have seen an equal disappointment in Baru’s eyes. “He lives,” she said again, and turned away.

The argument grew between them like a reef.

By Baru’s tenth birthday, she came to expect visits from the wool merchant Cairdine Farrier more often than her mother or father. He always had advice. Dress this way, never that way. Befriend her, not him—but not him. She liked his advice better than Pinion’s, because it was full of things to accomplish now rather than things to avoid forever.

The school’s Charitable Service instructors came from many foreign places. There were more and stranger people among the Masquerade garrison than Baru had ever seen at Iriad market. “If they can be teachers,” Baru asked, “then I can be one, too? I can go to another land and make little girls stop reading at unjustly early hours?”

“You can be anything you want in the Empire of Masks!” Cairdine Farrier, grown fat these past few years on island life, tugged affectionately on her ear. “Man and woman, rich and poor, Stakhieczki or Oriati or Maia or Falcrest born—in our Imperial Republic you can be what you desire, if you are disciplined in your actions and rigorous in your thoughts. That’s why it’s an Empire of Masks, dear. When you wear a mask, your *wits* matter.”

“You don’t wear a mask,” Baru said, studying him intently, wondering if there might be flaps behind his ears, fastenings in his hair.

Farrier laughed at her words, or her stare. He was like Pinion or Solit in his love of her sharper thoughts. But he was like lost Salm in another way, in the way he relished Baru’s effrontery, her willingness to reach out and ask or take. “The mask is for acts of service. The soldier wears a mask on his patrol. The mathematician wears a mask defending her proof. In Parliament they are all maske-

because they are vessels for the will of the Republic. And on the Faceless Throne the Emperor sits masked forever.”

A deflection. How unacceptable. Baru pursued her question. “When do you wear a mask? How do you serve?”

“It’s too hot on Taranoke for masks. But I am here to sell wool, and help occasionally in matters of charity.” He scrubbed Baru’s close-shaved scalp with his knuckles. Fat had plumped out his cheeks and weighted his jaw, but when Baru thought of fat men she thought of happy old storytellers at Iriad. He was pleased to be old, and large with joy. Cairdine Farrier did not seem that way. He carried his weight like a thoughtful provision, stored in preparation.

“What if you could wear a mask?” he asked. “What would you want, Baru?”

It had not occurred to Baru to want anything except stars and letters until the day when the red-sailed frigate moored in Iriad harbor. It had not occurred to her to want the impossible until she lost her father Salm, first to that awful *doctrine*, and then to death.

Perhaps the death of fathers could be outlawed.

Perhaps doctrines could be rewritten.

“I want to be powerful,” she said.

Cairdine Farrier looked down fondly. “You should study hard for your service exam,” he said. “Study very hard.”

* * *

THE service exam would not come for eight years. Baru worked herself raw for it.

Falcrest, she whispered to herself at night. Empiricism. Incrasticism. The academies of Falcrest, the Parliament, and the Metademe, and the Morrow Ministry, and all their secrets. If only I can go to Falcrest—

So much to master, in that distant axis around which the Empire of Masks and the world turned. Secrets her mother had never dreamed of.

The terror did not stop with Salm.

Outside the walls of the Masquerade school, plague swept Taranoke. Quarantine closed the gates. The Taranoki children in the school, unable to get news of their relatives, waited bravely through the inoculations (a Masquerade concept, like a feeble sickness carried on a swab or a needle). But the quarantine did not lift, not that trade season nor the storm season after.

When rumors of the dead crept into the school, the sobs of bereaved students kept Baru from his sleep. Sometimes the rumors were false. Not often.

On lonely nights in the dormitories, surrounded by mourning, Baru would think with cold resentment: at least you know. Better to see the body, and to know how your beloved kin passed—better that than to lose your father in the night, as if he were a misplaced toy, a ship at a fraying moor.

Then the scale of the death outside became clear—the pyramids of corpses burning on the black stone, the weeping sores and lye stink of the quarantine pens. Baru didn’t weep at that either, but she desperately wanted to.

“Why is this happening?” She cornered Cairdine Farrier during one of his visits, furious and desperate. “What does this mean?” And when he made a gentle face, a face for blandishments and

reassurance, she screamed into the space before the lie: “You brought this with you!”

And he looked at her with open eyes, the bone of his heavy brow a bastion above, the flesh of his face wealthy below, and in those eyes she glimpsed an imperium, a mechanism of rule building itself from the work of so many million hands. Remorseless not out of cruelty or hate but because it was too vast and too set on its destiny to care for the small tragedies of its growth. She saw this not merely in the shape of his eyes and the flatness of his regard, but in what they recalled—things he had said and done suddenly understood. And she knew that Farrier had let her see this, as a warning, as a promise.

“The tide is coming in,” he said. “The ocean has reached this little pool. There will be turbulence and confusion, and ruin. This is what happens when something small joins something vast. But—” Later she would hold to this moment, because it felt that he had offered her something true and grown up and powerful rather than a lie to shield her. “When the joining is done there will be a sea for you to swim in.”

The Masquerade teachers and sailors came and went freely. They were immune. Baru deduced the arrival of a second Masquerade frigate from a whole flock of new faces, including a lanky black-skinned midshipwoman who couldn’t have had more than two years on Baru but got to wear a sword. Baru was too embarrassed of her accented Aphalone to say hello, to ask how an Oriati girl had made herself an officer in the service of the Masquerade so soon after the great Armada War between the two powers.

Children began to vanish from the school, sent back out onto the island, into the plague. “The behavior was not hygienic,” the teachers said. *Social conditions*, the students whispered. *He was found playing the game of fathers—*

The teachers watched them coldly as their puberty came, waiting for unhygienic behavior to manifest itself. Baru saw why Cairdine Farrier had advised her on her friendships. Some of the students collaborated in the surveillance.

When Baru turned thirteen, her friend and second cousin Lao, two years older and bitterly unhappy, came to her with twisting hands. “Lao,” Baru whispered, in the limited privacy of her curtained bed. “What’s wrong?”

“My special tutor,” Lao said, eyes downcast, “is a—” She lapsed from Aphalone into the childhood Urunoki. “A pervert.”

Lao’s special tutor was the social hygienist Diline, from Falcrest—gentle, patronizing, skin exotically pale. He took sessions with rebellious or homesick students. Baru had decided a long time ago that Diline could not help her on the civil service exam. “What has he done?” she hissed. “Lao, look at me—”

“He thinks I have a social condition.” Lao covered her eyes in shame, a gesture they’d all learned from their teachers. “He thinks I’m a tribadist.”

“Oh,” Baru said.

Later she would hate herself for the calculation she made here: *What will it cost me to be associated with her, if she is?* For the science of sanitary inheritance they had learned made it very clear what a horror it was to lie with another woman, and what punishment the tribadist would receive. The Imperial Republic had been born in revolt against a degenerate aristocracy, their bodies and minds twisted, Diline had explained, by centuries of unhygienic mating. From this Falcrest had

learned the value of sanitary behavior and carefully planned inheritance. *The diseases of tribadism and sodomy must be eradicated from the body and the bloodline ...*

But she and Lao were both Taranoki, born of Taranoki families, and that loyalty had come before the Masquerade and its doctrines.

“What will he do?” Baru asked.

Lao drew her knees to her chest and looked out through the curtains around the bed. “There’s treatment. Conducted with the hands. Last time he suggested it, I told him I was on my period.”

Baru nodded. “But you have appointments with him every week.”

Lao’s face folded in the shadows. “I don’t think there’s anything we can do,” she said. “Even you, though you’re their favorite. Perhaps it’s for the best—it has to be cured young, they say, before it enters the hereditary cells—”

“No. No!” Baru took her hands. “Lao, I know exactly who to talk to. I can fix this.”

Lao squeezed her hands gratefully. “I can survive this. You have so much to lose.”

But Baru was already planning her movements, drunk on the thrill of it. Later, just as she would hate herself for her calculation, she would remember: *This was my first exercise of power. My first treason.*

* * *

BUT she was wrong. She did not know exactly who to talk to. Cairdine Farrier was no help at all.

“Listen to me, Baru,” he said, speaking softly, as if afraid they would be overheard here in the empty tufa courtyard in the corner of the school compound. “Young women express numerous hysterias and neuroses. It is a scientific fact, an inevitable consequence of the hereditary pathways that have shaped the sexes, that the young man is given to rage, violence, and promiscuity, while the young lady is given to hysteria, perversion, and disorders of the mind. If you want to be a powerful woman—and there are powerful women in the Empire, a great many of them—you must be a *strong* young woman. Is that clear?”

She took a step away from him, her eyes too wide, her mouth betraying her shock. It was the first time he had ever seemed angry with her. “No,” she said, with a naïve directness that she would later regret. “That’s not true! And besides, it’s Lao who has this problem, and—and why is it about Lao anyway? It’s that tutor Diline who wants to put his hands on her!”

“Quiet!” Cairdine Farrier hissed. “Diline reports on social hygiene to the headmaster, and those reports go into your permanent files. Do you understand what it means for your future if you make an enemy of him?”

A year or two past she would have shouted *I don’t care!* but now she knew that sounded like hysteria, and despite her revulsion she focused on practicalities. “If you act,” she said, “then *I* won’t be making an enemy of him, will I? Just have Lao ejected from the school. She hates it here anyway. The headmaster could judge her unfit for service.”

From the near distance came the sound of a dish shattering in the kitchen and a man shouting angrily in Aphalone. Cairdine Farrier steepled his hands, a gesture that he always made when explaining things he thought were complicated. “Men like Diline give up their lives to work for your betterment. You will respect them. You will be agreeable toward their arts, even when they seem

unpleasant. If Diline thinks your friend shows unhygienic tendencies, then he will cure her.” His eyes were dark beneath the redoubts of his brow. “Child, believe me: the alternatives will bring her much more pain.”

He’s explaining it to me, Baru thought, which means he thinks I can be convinced, which means he hasn’t given up on me. But if I push—

It’s not worth losing his patronage over this.

“All right,” she said. “Forget I asked.”

Cairdine Farrier smiled in pleased relief.

* * *

“DID it work?” Lao whispered, while they swept the floor beneath the quarantine seals.

Baru met her eyes and smiled half a smile, a crow smile, a lie. “I’m still exploring the options,” she said.

Looking back on this from adulthood she could not deny that she had considered abandoning Lao. Sacrificing her in the name of forward progress.

If she got to Falcrest, if she learned the mechanisms of power, surely she could save more than just one Taranoki girl. No matter how clever and brave Lao was, no matter how dear.

But Baru had another plan.

* * *

“HEY,” Baru said, as throatily as she could manage. She was thirteen, gawkily tall, intimidated by her target.

“Hey yourself,” the lanky Oriati midshipman said. Every other day she brought a package to the headmaster’s office and left the school through this back corridor, and that was where Baru had waited to intercept her.

Baru combed her louse-free stubble with one hand. “You’re an officer, aren’t you?”

“With an officer’s duties.” The midshipman squared her shoulders and began to push past, toward the outer door. Her Aphalone had its own accent. Perhaps she had been raised in a Masquerade school just like Baru. “As you were, student.”

“Wait.” Baru caught her by the elbow. “I need your help.”

They stared at each other, almost nose to nose, Baru trying to stay up on her toes just to match the other woman’s height. She had very brown eyes and very dark skin and an intelligent brow and her arm worked with muscle.

“You’re a curious thing,” the midshipman drawled, adopting the easy superiority of Masquerade officers speaking to Taranoki. “Mind your hands.”

“That’s my problem,” Baru muttered, drawing closer, gambling that her impudence was more intriguing than revolting. “Hands. If you know what I mean.”

She had done a little thinking and a little reading about the Imperial Navy, a navy that expected its sailors to climb masts and work ropes and rigging, a navy that boasted a cadre of women captains and admirals who were by any account capable and respected. A navy that must, in the course of packing its crews of mostly men onto tiny ships for months at a time, have confronted problems of this order.

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