

CHAPTER ONE

By now, the bumps, dips, and nauseating drops should have become commonplace. At least, that's what Capra had assumed. Four days aboard a flying boat ought to be more than enough time to grow accustomed to the strange sensations.

She had assumed wrong.

The green tint of the face frowning in the mirror told her so, if her roiling stomach wasn't enough. But a lady ought to keep herself composed, especially when she was pretending to be one. She plunged her hands into her purse, sifted through small tools and knives and other unladylike things, only to confirm her initial fear—she had forgotten makeup, and would have to settle with this unstylish shade of green. Yes, to any other woman, an arsenal of cosmetics would be second only to their wedding dress on such an occasion. But Capra had deeper concerns.

The bathroom mirror, all gilt and modern leaf designs, rattled against the wall. She steadied herself on the edge of the counter and swallowed hard. Wasn't there a pressure point in the wrists that could rid a person of seasickness? If, that is, being sick in the air was the same as being sick at sea.

A voice, deadened by the bathroom door, addressed her. "Darling, is everything all right?"

She bit her tongue and imagined herself standing on the dusty plains back home. Firmly planted. Firmly planted and not bobbing up and down and swaying and rolling...

"Everything's just fine, dear. I'll be right out." She turned around and craned to catch the back of her neck in the mirror, just to be sure that her collar still covered her tattoo. An army brand was the last thing she wanted to explain to the Baron.

She wrenched open the tap and plunged her hands into the trickle, splashed her face.

Baron Parnas, the old bastard. He just had to make it difficult. Why couldn't it have been a younger, more attractive man who had what she wanted?

No point in whining. It would be over soon enough. Just hold on long enough to do it all calmly and avoid being sloppy, and it would all fall into place. She straightened her back, adjusted the bejewelled clothes that Parnas had given to her. They were shapeless and boring, but apparently that was the style among these people.

Once she joined the Baron in their cabin, he frowned and said, "You're still looking a bit ill, Capra."

She made a vague gesture and began to pace. "Maybe we weren't meant to fly." All around her was the sound of creaking wood and a constant rush of the wind.

"Or maybe it's just that you Valoii have some catching up to do with the rest of us." He said this with a strange grin, and Capra wondered if revealing her nationality had been a mistake. "Unless your famed sheep herds have grown wings." He chuckled, but Capra couldn't see the humour in it. Some people evidently still thought it was acceptable to poke fun at a Valoii. But Parnas was old, and men of his generation might never pull abreast of the social progress that had burst like a fountainhead after the war. The Valoii were still backward in his mind, despite his romantic interest in Capra. That interest, she had figured out, was probably for the sake of novelty.

It wasn't all bad. She just found it hard to enjoy the intricate floral rugs, the stunning arrangements of diamonds and triangles in the wall parquetry, and the modern furniture under the circumstances. The peacock feather motifs and feminine figures reminded her of the sophisticated land she had just left, for which she already longed.

Parnas suggested they take a walk around the deck ringing the sides of the flying boat, and it was the best idea she'd heard from the Baron since she'd sent him that initial love letter. Fresh air—that's what she needed.

On through the corridors. Red carpet pillowed their feet like thick moss. Numerous times they met with the ship's servants, done up in their grey waistcoats and yellow sashes, and Capra flattened against the wall to let them through. She caught up with the Baron, who simply barrelled past oncoming traffic, outside.

Her balance took leave again, and the Baron caught her. She gave him a coy smirk and gripped the railing. Overhead, the flying boat's wings hung and flexed, and she caught a whiff of sulphur from the machine's many engines. "It's so different here. I didn't think Naartland was this barren."

"Much of it isn't, my lady. This is just the Blightcross Administrative District. The province to the north has fjords and rainforests, everything I told you about in our correspondence. You'll see once we get there."

The sky around the ship was a field of blazing orange, and the ground was more of the same. Sand, dunes, and a vein of dark water cutting into the heart of Blightcross proper. There hung a haze about the entire city, just enough to smooth over most of its details. She saw the basic outline—swaths of tall buildings, and at the far end, near the river, a monstrosity of what she guessed were pipes and conduits. At the centre of this stood the tallest structure in the city, and its immense height was about all she could glean from the smudged view.

She could only stare at the landscape below for thirty seconds before the rhythm of her stomach swirled and boiled again. She jammed shut her eyes and clutched the brass railing harder, tried to concentrate on calming her gut.

"You seemed somewhat more outgoing in our letters. I hope I have not disappointed you in some way," Parnas said.

A burst of cold air lashed her face, and she was thankful for the icy wind. Somewhere in the distance, thunder rocked the sky.

"Not at all, Baron." She cleared her throat. "I am sure once we clear this dreadful land, my mood will improve. I am somewhat sensitive to these things, you see."

"Ah, yes. Behind your fiery confidence, you are at heart a delicate lady."

She did a slight curtsy and smiled. Maybe it wasn't a lie after all—this odd place could be the reason for her illness. She had grown up in a desolate land, but she didn't remember it being like this place. There was an odd smell in the air, and each breath of it seemed to anchor the vertigo already plaguing her.

"But of course, Baron."

"Such manners for a Valoii. I still cannot quite believe what a wonderful find you are, my dear. It is simply exquisite."

She felt her cheeks flush. But Parnas wouldn't see the reaction through her olive skin, and besides, his flattery carried a cruel edge. Sure, many of her people were uneducated shepherds, but the times had changed, and she would wager that her education was far more extensive than the Baron's privileged upbringing.

On the other hand, he was treating her well. She could do far worse, and this was something she wanted to shove into the recesses of her conscience. She felt sick, and the last thing she needed was to feel sorry for Parnas.

“Baron, you’ll spoil me with such flattery.” The ship dropped for leagues, it seemed, and she felt the blood drain from her face as quickly as it had flushed.

“Perhaps we should see the ship’s surgeon. It pains me to see you so uncomfortable. This should be a joyous trip, no?”

She nodded, then thought better of going back inside. At least the air out here was somewhat fresh. “It is joyous, Baron. I just need to get my bearings, that’s all. I think if I gaze at the horizon for a few moments, my mind will right itself.”

In the next while, she began to realize that Blightcross offered an attraction for the wealthy passengers. The deck soon filled with them—expensive frock coats and slim dresses, many of the men holding spyglasses and other devices even Capra could not identify, all with expectant looks and pointing at this or that feature.

Other than the peculiar monolith at the far edge of the city that appeared to grow out of the sand, and the strange odour endemic to the land, what could all the fuss be about?

For the first time since they had met in person, Parnas turned away and stared at someone other than Capra. She peered around him to find one of his business partners hurrying through the narrow deck. The man shoved one of the wealthy ladies aside, and when Parnas began to speak to his business partner, Capra at once felt invisible to them. She scanned the deck for a chair. There was one, right near Parnas’ friend—

Just behind the man, she spotted him, and quite unexpectedly. Dannac, trying to mimic the look of ennui prevalent in the men around him but instead looking more like he was suffering from the same gastrointestinal upset Capra had just come to know.

She caught snippets from Parnas’ conversation as she slowly angled around them to meet Dannac.

“I have a bad feeling, Parnas,” Parnas’ associate said.

“Come now. Your imagination is just getting the better of you. Perhaps it is this flying business. Are you new to it?”

“Baron, I am serious. That man has been following me. See? The one with the ridiculous jewel in his head?”

“I see nothing of the sort.”

“I still think...”

Capra looked back to find the two men hunched close together. The bastard friend of Parnas’ must be on to her scam. Parnas was trying to downplay it, but that little rat of a man with whom he did business with was clever. In all the dinners and parties she had attended with the Baron, that particular associate had never smiled nor kept his hands still and never failed to impress even Capra with his powers of observation and knowledge of every subject.

She found Dannac leaning over the railing like the others. “The rat man knows you’re following him,” she said.

Dannac kept his gaze on the city below. “I know. I will have to think of a way to calm his bloody nerves.”

“Did you find it?”

He nodded.

“Then all we need to do is wait.”

“If they keep it in the same locker. They might move it.”

“I can’t even imagine that right now, Dannac. Parnas is so not my type. This isn’t the way I like to do business, either. I feel like...”

“Don’t bother saying it.”

She sighed. This was the last time, so maybe it was justified. But Capra knew what regrets could do to a person. They were not feelings she needed to renew.

The deck inclined, and Capra felt her feet slide towards the bow of the ship. A falling sensation ravaged her head.

“Are you okay?”

She held her hand in front of her and shut her eyes, while willing her stomach to behave. Deep breaths, calm, calm...

No use. She leaned over the railing, ready to concede. “Why won’t it level?” she managed to say through gritted teeth.

“The flying boat is stopping in Blightcross. It is for a resupply or something like that.”

It was coming—acid warmth crawling in her throat. But she suddenly realized that in the current social context, letting it go over the railing might betray her as the peasant she was.

So she slipped past Dannac and muscled through the crowd, hand held to her mouth. There was a public washroom just inside the aft exit...

All of this—flying, chronic lies, prostitution, for what? Mineral rights?

A clap of thunder shook the ship, and she reached the privy with a whole two seconds to spare. But while she vomited, she pictured handing the proceeds from her future mining operation to some corrupt Valoii official from her hometown in Mizkov.

*Blheeeeeeghhhhh here you are, General. *Burp* Call off your attack dogs. There’s enough money here to outfit an entire aerial navy blehgghgouuuug.*

She wiped her mouth, washed her hands under the pathetic trickle at the sink, and burst out the door feeling much more optimistic. Maybe if she had just allowed herself to throw up in the first place...

“Hello, Jorassian.”

It was a male voice, and it spoke in Valoii.

She balled her hands into fists and would have rather vaulted over the rail outside than face the man. Not now. Not now, when she was so close...

“It’s time to come back, Capra.”

“I won’t.”

“Yes, you will.”

Even though she knew this would eventually happen, she did not expect that Alim would be the man to bring her back to Mizkov. It must have been him—no one else spoke in that tone, specifically when stumbling over her family name. The way he stressed the first syllable... it had to be him.

“Alim?” Finally she faced him, all the while a ghost-image of the man burned in her mind’s eye—average height, overworked biceps, and of course the blue eyes proven to be irresistible to Capra’s friend from the battalion back home. The image blended with the man standing there, dagger in hand and beads of sweat along his hairline. “Tell them I’m dead. It’s all you have to do. Everyone wins.”

She expected him to at least show a flicker of recognition, but he kept his parade ground coldness.

“Deserters need to be brought to justice, Capra.”

“They’re just arbitrary rules, Alim. They don’t protect anyone.” She let out a nervous laugh. “They don’t protect Mizkov.”

He stepped forward, and for a moment, she swore that he showed subtle signs of agreeing with her, but the momentary softening of his face flashed back to its martial scowl. Was he brainwashed? There had to be something more to it.

“It’s over, Jorassian.” He waved the dagger. “Did you honestly think you could shrug away your service so easily? But that’s something for the committee to deal with. Now, you can cooperate, or I can just kill you right here and we can all be assured that you won’t be handing out secrets to our enemies just to spite us.”

“No, that’s not—”

He lunged forward. Capra, having been on edge since lifting off in this awful machine, dodged him and sprinted back towards the outer deck. She could find Dannac there, and there were enough people gazing at that awful city below to make it inconvenient for Alim to commit a field execution.

She glanced back to find two men trailing Alim, and they wore the same brown coats as Alim.

Of course he wouldn’t have come alone.

During her dash through the crowd, the flying boat increased its descent. The passengers at the railing squealed at the sensation’s novelty and clinked their glasses in that funny way westerners always did.

She collided with Dannac. “We have to go. Now.”

“What?”

“Forget the claim. Forget the mine. We have to get away from here.” She panted and glanced over her shoulder.

“And waste months of preparation? When we could have been doing real work, and now you want to just abandon it?”

She shoved him into an alcove. “The army. They’ve found me. They’re here.” She thought for a moment. “And this stop in Blightcross isn’t for cargo or new passengers. Alim must have requested it so he can arrest me with the help of the local government.”

“But—”

“Bloody Naartland, there’s nothing they won’t do to impress the big boys. They’ll help anyone screaming about law and order and justice.”

They could fight—two against three was not the worst situation they had dealt with, but now Alim probably had the ship’s security under his command. Even though she was confident in their ability to escape, it was the last thing she wanted to do, other than die or face her superiors. Running would mean throwing away her ticket to freedom—barrels full of money, courtesy of the Baron’s blase mixing of business with his personal life.

She gestured to Dannac’s forehead, which was covered by a stylish hat. “Can you see them?”

She watched Dannac, in particular the dead left eye. There were twitches of movement, but it was all random; it was the jewel buried beneath the hat on his forehead that gave him sight. Still, since the clear stone neither blinked nor moved in its socket, Capra associated Dannac’s injured eye with his strange witch-sight.

“I see nobody coming that way. Maybe they went around the other side.”

A large form swooped in to block the alcove, and the orange sunlight vanished like a snuffed candle. “I say, what is the meaning of this?”

She recognized the man’s billowing blue cape, and the smell of clove cheroots had become a familiar stink during the past three days.

“Parnas,” she said, affecting a girlish tone. “I...” They were no longer after the documents stashed with his business partners. She could just tell him to sod off and be done with the old bastard.

She looked to Dannac, but he just shrugged.

“Listen, Baron...”

“Yes? Have I done something to offend you? Something that makes you want to punish me with this... obvious display of discontent?”

“Well, actually—”

“I suppose I should have known that an exotic beauty such as yourself would be socially incapable of being my wife.” Parnas sighed and dabbed his cheek with a handkerchief. “The barbarian women are impossible to train properly. I should have listened to their endless warnings! Oh, but it was just too tempting.”

She opened her mouth to tell him that she wasn’t lusting after another man, that she had aimed only to steal his business prospects, but stopped. There were soldiers from her homeland searching the ship for her, and each second she stood there like a stunned pig meant that the odds of escaping were significantly less, but she couldn’t ravage the old bastard’s fragile heart so callously. Not after hearing so much about the man’s mother. Something about that kind of familiarity made her unwilling to deliberately hurt him.

“Parnas, I should have told you. I didn’t think it would matter, but clearly it does.” She glanced to Dannac. “Every Valoii girl is sold into marriage at the age of ten. I was promised to this man before the war. You see, the war had ruined marriage plans all over, and only just now did he find me. I am afraid that no matter how much I love you, I cannot break my parents’ honour. I belong to this man.”

Parnas leaned forward slightly. “Is that so? I had no idea.” There was a hint of understanding in his voice. She half wondered if he thought it was interesting and romantic.

“Yes, and if I do not obey, he has the legal right to murder my family and take their land.”

“Oh, I do see. Well, what if I just killed him?”

Dannac moved his head from side to side slow enough and frowned deeply enough that no living person could miss the signal of intimidation.

“But I will miss you, my dear.”

“And I you.”

She curtsied to him once more, and pulled Dannac out of the alcove. It felt as though she had cut the act short at the wrong time, but under the circumstances about all she had time for was a quick lie. Let Parnas wonder. It would keep him busy enough to stop his sobbing.

They jogged around the outer deck, towards the one of the propellers at the ship’s tail. There was a vibration in her feet, and a clattering that sounded like a mechanical heartbeat.

Now the tall structure at the far end of the city stretched above them, and it appeared to reach farther into the sky than they had ever flown. The weak sun spilled across its polished surface, and some of the tower's details now showed through the haze. She bent backward to see the top, and found a gigantic clock face near the top. Below them flowed the dark river in which the flying boat would land.

"How far are we to the dock, do you think?" she asked Dannac. "The boat is practically in the water."

He grunted something and looked over the edge. "Too far for what you're thinking."

Behind them, the crowd began to part and jostle. Unless there was a sudden epidemic of what she had experienced a few minutes before and the impromptu party outside had become a battle royal for the privy, it had to be Alim.

"Are you sure?"

He looked over the edge once more, then towards the disrupted crowd. "Maybe not so much."

She scanned the layout below. There was a raised structure where the ship would moor, presumably after its already low speed dwindled to that of a proper boat and allowed it to turn around. On this stood three brass poles, on which flapped the flags of Naartland, Tamarck, and a rose emblem she had never seen before.

"We could still steal the deed, Capra."

"Are you insane? You of all people should know what Alim and his men are capable of."

"I think it's no more insane than your plan to jump off this ship. We can blend in with the passengers and disappear into the city once it lands."

"Alim won't allow that. He has the full cooperation of the government here. I know it. He wouldn't have revealed himself to me otherwise. I know how the Valoii military operates, Dannac. Did you forget about the tattoo around my neck?"

He gazed at the ground, which was slowly moving closer. "Either way, we're stuck in Blightcross." He growled.

"Come on, Dannac. At least this way we get a head start. There will be other jobs."

"But the point of this one was that it would be the last job either of us would need."

"There's money here. The Baron talked about it last night. Blightcross runs some kind of factory that produces... well, I'm not sure exactly what it was, but old Parnas was quite impressed with the place."

He snorted. "A factory?"

"Come on, there will be something for us here. There has to be. Forget about the mining scam."

She kicked off her uncomfortable shoes, and they tumbled across the deck only to disappear among scattering passengers. Without any of her previous hesitation, she hopped onto the railing, stayed there in a crouch, balanced on the thin bar of metal. "Well?"

"I still cannot fathom why your people allow women like you to fight as men would." Dannac tossed his hat over the edge and shrugged out of his frock coat. "Nor can I fathom why I continue to listen to you."

She grinned and stood, the brass comforting and cool against her bare feet.