

# Blue Waters: A Pirate Tale

## Prologue

### *Jamaica, 1692*

Jamaica rested beneath the sun, shaped by cultivation and demand. Inland, fields followed rigid lines cut into the earth for distant markets. Along the southern coast, a city pressed outward from the shoreline, held together by timber, confidence, and trade. On the southern shore stood **Port Royal**, the busiest harbour in the English colonies. Cargo shifted daily. Taverns filled nightly with voices convinced of continuity. The city had grown quickly, a port hastily constructed and poorly built, its foundations reclaimed from water that did not consent to the arrangement. It thrived anyway. Most things do, for a few endearing moments. On top of a hill, it lay the prison.

On the morning of June 3rd, Sir Edward Jones woke to the sound of water striking stone. He lay shackled on his back, eyes moving along the fractures in the ceiling. He was tall, spare rather than thin, with long blond hair pulled loose at the nape of his neck, bleached nearly white by sun and salt. His face carried the sharp planes common to the western coasts of Britain, shaped by the wind. Blue-grey eyes tracked details that offered no distraction. Restless, watched the world as though it were perpetually negotiating with him. He counted the drops because routine made the treacherous time bearable. Edward had once been a privateer in the service of the English Crown, operating under letters of marque that legalized theft if it harmed the right people. When the War ended, those papers had no meaning. He had done the same things, only with a different flag this time. Below him, the city went about its business - Voices, music, the sound of commerce convincing itself was invincible. Edward listened to the way sailors listen to weather: he was not seeking meaning; he looked out for a change

He was now a pirate in custody, awaiting a public execution meant to reassure merchants and governors alike. Edward lay on the floor of his cell, staring at the cracked ceiling, mapping the fissures the way sailors mapped coastlines. "Jamaica," he murmured. "You took your time." He closed his eyes and thought - not of God, or fate - but of ships, and how poorly men understood weight and balance.

## **Chapter I: The Soul that remembers**

### ***June 4th–6th, 1692***

June 4th brought heat, flies, and a priest who recited forgiveness as if it were an obligation, standing well out of reach. Edward listened politely. “My dear child, you should confess...” the priest said. Edward regarded him through strands of loose hair. “I’ve already admitted to worse men than you.” The priest frowned, preached something about souls, and left.

The next day brought a list of condemned men. Edward Jones heard his name read aloud, followed by a date. He nodded once, as though acknowledging a clerk who had finally found the correct line. He felt relief. Uncertainty... it turned out, was worse than knowledge.

June 6th brought rain. The prison ceiling leaked, soaking his shirt and turning him briefly into an image of penitence he did not recognize. That night, Edward dreamed of the Mediterranean, as a memory, borrowed from other sailors’ stories. White limestone. Clear blue waters. Ports older than nations.

He woke before dawn on June 7th to silence. No footsteps or music. Just stillness...

## ***Chapter II: When the Earth screamed***

### ***June 7th, 1692***

The first tremor felt like a cart passing too close. Chains rattled softly. Dust fell in lazy spirals. Edward opened his eyes.

The second tremor was decisive. Stone shrieked. Iron screamed. The floor lurched violently, throwing Edward against the wall with enough force to knock breath and prayer from him alike.

Port Royal began to decay, as the reclaimed land beneath Port Royal failed at last, behaving exactly as neglected warnings always did - catastrophically and without apology.

The walls split. Water surged in with religious fury. Somewhere, a bell rang once - only once - before vanishing into noise too large to name. Edward’s chains snapped, not gloriously, but with the weary relief of metal surrendering to fate. Light poured into the cell as part of the ceiling collapsed. The rats - that were storming the place once - vanished under falling stone, making no final statement worth recording.

Edward stared at his freed wrists.

“Well,” he said hoarsely, “That’s a change of plans. Didn’t think I could push it this far, but here we are.” He ran. Through water, through ruin, through the unmaking of certainty. He stole a coat from a man who no longer required warmth and a knife from a guard who had lost his authority along with his footing. By morning, Port Royal was broken and sinking, half-swallowed by the sea it had mocked for decades. Edward Jones vanished with it.

Inland, the land received him without interest. Mud, insects, and silence offered neither judgment nor assistance. He slept poorly, ate what he could, and learned when to speak under other names. The Authorities, staggered by disaster, argued with numbers and paperwork. No one could chase a man already buried on a page.

He found a ship in a shallow inlet, a galleon, half-abandoned, her dark oak paint peeling honesty, her lines tired but sound. Edward walked her deck slowly, hand on rail, listening to how she answered his weight.

### ***Chapter III: People Who Should Not Be Trusted With a Ship***

#### ***June 18th–July 2nd, 1692***

A tall man with careful posture and sharper eyes joined first. James McKinley, Scottish-Irish by birth, evident in the cast of his features and the measured restraint of his movements. He had brown eyes that missed little and hair the colour of polished chestnut, worn long and tied back with habit instead of vanity. James stepped forward, hands clasped behind his back, looking like a man about to apologize for existence.

“You intend to sail her,” James said, not asking.

“Yes.”

James nodded. “Then we’ll require your orders, my Captain!”

Others followed as well.

John, broad-shouldered and taciturn, inspected the guns as though evaluating livestock.

Billy, lean with long dark hair and wonderful azure eyes, arrived with charts marked by erasures and confidence in equal measure.

Richard, stooped slightly from years bent over timber, came with a hammer and no conversation.

Catherine, sharp-eyed and steady-handed, joined without ceremony and asked only where she could work.

All in all, there were about 15.

They asked Edward what he intended.

“I want an honest crew and an honest Work. We’ll sail east.” he said. It was enough. They started to board and adjust the sails.

The ship was renamed once. Edward stood before the crew.

“She keeps the new name,” he said. “Queen. A fine and noble one.”

James inclined his head. “A mercy. Ships deserve something noble in nature.”

James spoke carefully, like a person who understood how easily words could become liabilities.

“You’re set on the Old World?” James asked later at the rail.

Edward nodded. “Yes. As I said before. East.”

“The Atlantic isn’t for you,” James said.

“Neither me, James. This New World has torn me apart. I’ve lived a couple of lives so far. Being tried, chased, tortured. What else does a man like me deserve at this point? I want to make a new beginning. A new life!”

“But why in the old, mate? Aren’t we supposed to run from the Old World in search of something better in the New? What made you take this decision anyway?”

“Maybe we can search for new in the old. Sounds strange, but I think it may work. Europe still has treasures and beauty that can be claimed.”

“You’ve got a point.” James replied, “After all, you are the Captain of this ship. If you don’t make any sense, then I don’t know who does.”

The crew spoke quietly in the evenings - of weather, of ports worth avoiding, of repairs that could wait. Laughter came rarely but sharp as flint.

As the ship pressed eastward, towardss older waters and older authorities, Edward stood at the rail, thinking about his next step.

The question of destination emerged slowly, the way rot announces itself through smell before sight.

Billy spread his charts across an overturned barrel and weighted the corners with a mug, a coil of rope, and James’s folded coat, which James reclaimed with visible irritation.

“You could have asked,” James said.

“I did,” Billy replied. “You said it was cold.”

James draped the coat over his arm. “By the way, that was commentary, clearly not consent.”

Edward stood close enough to see the pencil marks worn thin by correction.

Billy tapped the page. “The Atlantic gives us options. Fewer than it pretends, but more than people fear.”

“And which option are you pretending not to fear?” James asked.

Billy smiled, the expression of a man preparing to defend something he had already decided. “The Mediterranean.”

John looked up from cleaning a pistol. “That narrows things.”

“It complicates them,” James said. “Ports talk there. Authorities can remember faces.”

“They remember paperwork,” Billy said. “Faces usually tend to fade away. That’s the nature of them.”

James turned to Edward. “Do you have an opinion on that?”

Edward traced a finger along the chart, stopping where the sea tightened between coasts.

“I have experience,” he said. “The Levant listens carefully. Italy listens selectively, and the Ionian Islands listen when it suits them.”

Catherine leaned against the rail. “You sound as though you’ve been disappointed personally. Has anything happened to you that makes you say so?”

Edward smiled. “Yeah. I’ve been disappointed. Several times.”

Richard cleared his throat. “She will manage the distance. The question is what waits when she arrives.”

James nodded. “You see, ships survive crossings, but crews... survive ports.”

Billy folded his arms. “There are, however, places where questions can arrive slowly.”

James raised an eyebrow. “And... you’re suggesting a place that survives on slowness?”

“No. I’m suggesting a place that has learned to endure its occupations,” Billy said. “That, my friend, produces a certain discretion.”

Edward glanced at Catherine. “Any thoughts?”

Catherine considered. "People who live under layered authority tend to learn which truths to share. That can be useful. But it can also be expensive."

John set the pistol aside. "What kind of work awaits there then?"

Edward answered carefully. "The one that does not announce itself."

James studied him. "Really? You speak as though you expect trouble."

Edward met his gaze. "Actually, I expect people."

Silence gathered, not uncomfortable, but attentive.

Billy broke it. "Cephalonia," he said at last, naming it plainly.

James exhaled. "Greek waters have Greek problems."

"They also invite Venetian ones," Catherine said.

"And Turkish interests," Richard added.

Edward nodded. "All of which balance each other rather... poorly."

John wiped his hands. "Poor balance creates gaps."

Billy smiled again, completing the phrase. "And gaps create opportunity."

James looked around the group. "Gentlemen, we are discussing this as though agreement were optional."

Edward rested both hands on the rail. "It is optional, James."

James studied him. "And if we disagree?"

"Then we discuss it longer." Edward said.

Catherine laughed quietly. "That may be the most honest thing said today."

James shook his head, though a smile followed. "Very well. Let us be thorough."

The conversation stretched. They spoke of harbours and winds, of tariffs disguised as favors, of flags that opened doors and others that closed them. Stories surfaced, half-told and fully understood. Laughter arrived where memory loosened its grip.

By the time the sun's position had changed, the matter had settled into place through exhaustion and familiarity.

Billy rolled up his charts. "I'll make the adjustments."

James nodded. "And I'll prepare explanations."

John returned to his work. "I'll keep the guns honest."

Catherine looked at Edward. "And you?"

Edward gazed out over the water, where the sea darkened towards night.

"I'll remember who we say we are," he said. "And who we must avoid becoming..."

The ship held steady as the stars emerged, and the conversation drifted to other matters, none of them small.

Their course pointed towards **Cephalonia**, though no one felt the need to say so again.

## **Chapter IV: To Cephalonia**

### ***Mid-July 1692***

Land announced itself first through smell. The sea carried hints of resin, olive waste, and woodsmoke long before the island resolved into hills and stone. By the time Cephalonia came fully into view, the crew had already begun arguing about it.

Tim leaned against the rail with the satisfaction of a man whose charts had survived scrutiny. "She looks well-kept."

James squinted towards the shore. "She looks... occupied."

"Those are not mutually exclusive," Tim replied.

John shaded his eyes. "I see fortifications."

Catherine followed his gaze. "Yeah. Looks like they are the Venetian ones."

Richard nodded. "Clean angles, Expensive stone..."

Edward rested his forearms on the rail. The island rose in layers, green giving way to pale rock, and villages gathered where water and trade permitted them. Above the harbour stood walls that suggested repair and accounting.

"That flag," James said, pointing, "comes with paperwork."

Tim smiled. "The **Most Serene Republic of Venice** never met a problem it couldn't catalogue!"

"They will want to know where we came from," Catherine said.

Edward said nothing immediately.

Venetian banners moved in the breeze, the winged lion visible even at a distance. The harbour approached with deliberate slowness.

A small patrol boat detached itself from the quay and moved out to meet them. Its oars cut the water with the regularity of men paid to care.

Tim sighed. "They've noticed us."

James straightened his coat. "Alright Lads. Try not to look like a surprise."

The patrol drew alongside. An officer stood and regarded them with the practiced calm of someone who had already decided they were temporary.

"In the name of the Most Serene Republic," the officer called, his Venetian precise and tired native tongue, "state your business."

Tim opened his mouth.

James placed a hand on his arm. "Allow me."

James stepped forward, his accent softened by habit and diplomacy. And soon, he started speaking in Italian: "Trade, repairs, and rest. In that order, if the harbour permits."

The officer considered this. "Flag?"

Edward gestured towards the mast.

The officer looked at it, then back at Edward. "That flag has traveled."

Edward answered in Italian too. Although his fluency wasn't on the same level of that of James.

The officer's eyes moved across the deck, counting people, measuring intent. "You will dock under supervision. Fees apply. Movement within the port is restricted after dusk."

James nodded. "Naturally."

The officer paused. "And you are?"

Edward met his gaze. "The name's... Domenico Grazzi."

The name settled between them.

The officer wrote it down.

The quay received them with sound. Stone against wood. Rope against bollard. Voices layered in Venetian, Greek, languages that shared neither origin nor patience.

As they worked, the conversation resumed in fragments.

“Venetian docks,” Tim muttered, “always feel as though someone is watching your hands.”

“Usually, someone is,” James said.

Catherine surveyed the harbour. “They keep order here.”

“And also, they keep profit,” Richard replied.

James glanced at Edward. “You chose this place knowing all of this? Right?”

Edward nodded. “Yeah. Venice prefers stability. But Stability has the common flaw of producing gaps.”

Tim brightened. “Gaps are excellent!”

James sighed. “But they are also temporary. If you didn’t know”

A Venetian clerk approached, papers already prepared.

“You’ll have to sign here...” the clerk said, placing the document down. “You must pay 35 ducats. You will not ask questions about matters outside your concern. Understood?”

James scanned the page. “And if our concern expands?”

The clerk smiled faintly. “Then you will discover which walls are decorative.”

Catherine laughed under her breath.

Later, with the ship settled and the harbour accepting them provisionally, the crew gathered near the rail.

“Well,” Tim said, stretching his shoulders, “we’ve arrived in a place that tolerates us.”

James nodded. “That may be the highest form of welcome available, Lads.”

John glanced towards the fortifications. “How long do these cunts tolerate?”

Edward considered the question.

“Until we cost more than we earn,” he said.

Catherine folded her arms. “Then, I guess we shall remain useful.”

Richard smiled faintly. “Or quiet.”

Edward looked across the harbour, where Venetian banners stirred and merchants argued with practiced enthusiasm.

“Both,” he said. “We’ll try both.”

Conversation drifted towards food, repairs, and the price of wine. Laughter surfaced when James described his first encounter with Venetian accounting, and even John permitted a brief smile.

Cephalonia received them as it received most things. With interest and conditions.

And for the moment... that was enough.

### ***Late July 1692***

Venetian suspicion arrived with paperwork.

It began with delays. Dock permissions took longer to return. Fees adjusted themselves upward between one conversation and the next. A patrol lingered near the ship at inconvenient hours, its officers attentive to rope, cargo, and faces.

James noticed first.

“They have stopped ignoring us,” he said, lowering his voice as a clerk departed with unnecessary politeness.

Catherine glanced towards the quay, where two men in dark coats spoke with exaggerated calm. “Those coats belong to someone who enjoys asking suspicious people.”

John tightened a knot and tested it with his weight. “Fuck! We are being measured!”

Edward followed the direction of Catherine’s gaze. One of the men turned at that moment, as though he had felt the attention settle. A Venetian naval officer, Giacomo Morosini, did not hurry. He wore Venetian authority the way some men wore silk, aware of its texture, and cost. His hair had gone grey with intention rather than age. His eyes moved across the harbour with practiced ownership. He approached a clerk and a soldier who looked resentful of both roles.

“Capitano Grazzi,” Morosini said, consulting a page he did not need. “Or is it Signore Jones today? Names look like they shift so easily at sea...”

Edward inclined his head. “Oh, they serve the conversation.”

Morosini smiled faintly. “I appreciate cooperation. It saves ink. I, myself, am Giacomo Morosini. Head of the naval patrol of this harbour”

James stepped forward. "Signore. If there is a matter to resolve, we would prefer clarity."

Morosini regarded him. "Clarity is expensive. Our Serenity, however, offers some... installments."

He gestured towards the ship. "Your papers suggest trade. But your crew suggests experience in some very...odd things. Your route, on the other hand, suggests a dangerous opportunity that goes against some of our laws."

Edward met his gaze. "You have described most ships."

Morosini nodded. "Yes. That is the problem."

The clerk shifted, uncomfortable.

Morosini continued. "Our Serenity tolerates many things. Disorder, however, costs money. And piracy, it costs reputation."

James's jaw tightened. "Do you accuse us?"

"No. I simply observe you." Morosini said. "Accusations usually come later."

That evening, the patrol doubled.

The crew decided to take a walk in the port of Fiscardo. The central village near the bay. By the time the sun lifted itself above the hills, Venetian flags remained behind them, small and patient.

James exhaled slowly and spoke lower. "Morosini will follow."

Tim adjusted the rigging. "Those Venetians prefer conclusions."

Edward surveyed the coastline. "Then, we will deny him one."

They did not return to the ship by nightfall.

## ***Chapter V: The Prince***

### ***July 28 Fiscardo, Cephalonia***

The crew knew that the threat was coming from the port, and so they thought it was better to take a road inwards. The path rose into olive groves and broken stone. The countryside opened gradually, shaped by labor older than maps. After a long but manageable journey in the countryside of the beautiful Cephalonia, an old villa appeared where land flattened and the walls gathered their inner strength.

Stone held its colour. A typical grand villa of its time. Aside from its high value, however, the mansion showed a few marks of decadence. Windows remained

shuttered with neglect. Vines climbed, choking the structure beneath them. A thin layer of paint slowly vanishing from the walls.

Tim stopped. "Wait! That one looks inhabited."

James added. "But poorly maintained."

Edward approached and struck the door with his knuckles.

Footsteps answered, measured, and unhurried.

The door opened.

A man stood framed by the stone, tall and broad shouldered, his posture relaxed in a way that suggested confidence earned rather than displayed. His hair burned red in the light, cut short at the sides in a style borrowed from the eastern borders. Dark grey eyes assessed them without surprise. His name was Leopold.

Scars traced his forearms and disappeared beneath his collar, old work, done thoroughly.

"Edward Jones," Leopold said. "Or whatever you answer to this season."

Edward allowed himself a smile. "You remain well informed. How do you know me?"

Leopold inclined his head. "Some spies of mine told me everything I needed to know."

Leopold continued. "What brings you and your fellow company to this beautiful place?"

James studied him. "Well. You receive unexpected guests calmly."

Leopold stepped aside. "Not really. I just receive expected trouble politely."

Edward continued. "We came here from the West Indies; It's a long story, but it doesn't really matter for the moment. We just need some shelter."

"Then... you are welcome." Leopold eventually said, after pausing for a moment.

Inside, the villa carried the weight of continuity. Books lined the walls. Sculptures. Paintings. Weapons rested where they could be reached without ceremony. A table stood ready for argument.

Wine appeared shortly after. Leopold poured with care. "You have brought Venice's attention to me."

Tim winced. "We apologize for any trouble we have caused."

Leopold waved the thought aside. “The Most Serene Republic of Venice arrives everywhere eventually. You have only accelerated the schedule.”

Edward met Leopold’s eyes. “Someone named Morosini suspects piracy.”

Leopold smiled and laughed, “Morosini craves ambition. It’s the only thing that makes him live and breathe.”

Catherine leaned forward. “But will you protect us?”

Leopold considered this as he sipped his wine.

“For the moment...” he said. “La Serenissima respects hospitality when it belongs to old and noble names.”

James raised an eyebrow. “And yours?”

Leopold’s smile widened slightly. “Mine has survived worse than paperwork.”

John glanced at the scars. “Your scars. They suggest you have seen fighting.”

Leopold nodded. “I would prefer to say I have seen... causes.”

Silence settled deliberately.

Leopold set his cup down. “You may remain here until Morosini grows bored or creative. Either outcome produces opportunity.”

Edward inclined his head. “Thank you. You offer much.”

Leopold shrugged. “I just enjoy complications that speak, honestly.”

Outside, the cicadas resumed their work.

Inside, plans began to take shape through conversation, interruption, and laughter that carried more relief than joy.

Venice watched the coast.

But, for the moment, the villa held.

### ***Chapter VI: Leopold Speaks of War***

Night gathered itself inside the villa with patience. Oil lamps took their places along the walls, and the room grew warmer from bodies and from the expectation that something would be said aloud at last.

Leopold stood near the window, one hand resting on the stone as though the house itself required reassurance.

“I’ve got something to tell you. You will hear this whether you remain or leave,” he said without turning. “And better that you hear it while wine remains...”

James shifted in his chair. “We are listening.”

Leopold nodded once and began, his voice measured, shaped by habit.

“I was born to a name that travels faster than men. It came with lands, tutors, priests, and the certainty that history would eventually require me. Dynasties cultivate that certainty. Shit! It grows like a fever!”

He turned then, the lamplight tracing the scars along his throat and collarbone.

“When the Turks reached Vienna, we were at the edge of doom. We knew that nothing could stop them. I, myself, thought all this struggle, all this hope, was lost.”

Edward watched him closely. Leopold spoke as a man accustomed to command, yet his eyes revealed something quieter, a man who had long ago exhausted pride and now relied on clarity.

“I offered myself to the imperial cause at the **Battle of Vienna**,” Leopold continued. “I wanted to stand where the outcome would be decided. I wanted, at last, to defend my beloved country and save it from the scourge that fell upon us.”

Tim frowned. “You were young.”

Leopold smiled faintly. “Yes, I was. Youth is generous with absolution.”

His voice hardened. “I believed the Turks to be an invading darkness. I believed this with the confidence of a man who knows each and every one of his fellows!”

Catherine’s expression tightened. Leopold noticed that and inclined his head.

“I say this plainly because it is ugly. Hatred taught me courage quickly and wisdom, well... slowly.”

Silence followed, thick but not hostile.

“I fought well,” Leopold went on. “Well enough to be noticed. Well enough to be surrounded.”

He lifted his sleeve and exposed a pale, uneven scar that wrapped his forearm. “Captured. Stripped of banners, name, and purpose a few days later.”

John leaned forward. “They kept you?”

“Briefly,” Leopold replied. “The Turkish camp was confident and careless in victory.”

He drew a breath that carried memory with it.

“Then the Cossacks arrived, just before dawn.”

Leopold continued. “The **Zaporozhian Cossacks**. Hired blades, loyal only to the loot they will receive.”

His lips curved, not quite a smile. “They scattered the camp, took horses, supplies, and me.”

Edward spoke quietly. “You were... Rescued?”

“Captured again,” Leopold corrected. “They did not rescue me. They acquired me.”

“For nine years,” Leopold said, “I lived as they lived. They shaved my hair, taught me their songs, beat pride out of me when it surfaced, and gave me scars when lessons failed to hold.”

He paced slowly as he spoke now, the story loosening its grip on restraint.

“They taught me to ride without mercy, for bone or breath. To fight without ceremony. To accept death as nature’s greatest gift.”

Catherine asked softly, “Did they break you?”

Leopold stopped. As if something had changed in the grand momentum of the world

“No,” he said. “They liberated me. They unleashed me. They helped me find out who I really was.”

The room absorbed that.

“When I left them,” Leopold continued, “I did so with followers who understood the price of allegiance. We hunted Turkish detachments across the Balkans. Not strategically. Personally.”

James grimaced. “Vengeance...”

Leopold met his gaze. “Yes. And habit. War trains men poorly for the peace that comes.”

Edward spoke at last. “And then, Cephalonia.”

Leopold exhaled, the tension easing from his shoulders.

“And then **Cephalonia**,” he said. “Where the **Most Serene Republic of Venice** offers shelter with one hand and records names with the other.”

Tim tilted his head. “You trust them?”

“I understand them,” Leopold replied. “Which is safer. Don’t you think?”

He returned to the table and poured more wine.

“The war between Venice and the **Turkish Empire** continues,” Leopold said.

“Here, it wears a polite face. Elsewhere, it chews men into conflict.”

James leaned back. “Morosini will not ignore you.”

Leopold smiled. “Actually, he cannot afford to acknowledge me openly.”

Edward studied the man across from him. “And us?”

Leopold’s gaze sharpened with interest. “You are inconvenient, educated, and difficult to classify. Venice dislikes that ambiguity.”

Catherine raised her glass. “So do we.”

Leopold inclined his head in return. “Then I guess ,for now, our interests... overlap, my dear.”

He paused, then added with a trace of humour, “Try not to die before the Republic decides whether to tolerate you or throw you to the Ghetto!”

Laughter rose, genuine and brief.

Outside, the island rested under stars that had witnessed worse conversations.

Inside the villa, the past had been spoken into shape, and the present adjusted itself accordingly.

Protection had a context now.

So did the cost.

## ***Chapter VII: On Education, Departure, and the Shape of Loyalty***

***July 30 1692***

James discovered that Leopold enjoyed being contradicted.

This became clear one afternoon when the heat settled thickly in the villa and conversation took shelter indoors. Books lay open on the table, their margins bearing the quiet marks of argument.

“You are wrong,” James said pleasantly, turning a page. “The imperial cavalry at Vienna broke because their supply lines failed, not because courage ran thin.”

Leopold looked up from his wine. “You speak with wisdom, as though you were present in those trying times.”

“I read obsessively,” James replied with a small smirk on his face. “It actually spares me from dying of ignorance.”

Leopold laughed, a short sound that startled the room. “If I had known reading would insult generals so effectively, I might have stayed indoors.”

James smiled. “I’ll tell you this: History prefers the witnesses who survive, rather than the victors. If the victorious ones don’t pick the quill, then what has been gained? What has been lost?”

They spoke often after that. About campaigns and treaties. About maps that lied politely in the eyes of the man. Leopold corrected James on matters of lived experience. James corrected Leopold on dates, motives, and the parts of history polished smoothly by repetition.

“You see,” James said one evening, “your mistake lies in believing the war was ever about religion alone.”

Leopold leaned back. “And yours lies in believing men require reasons deeper than convenience. Without our faith, we would have already lost.”

Tim listened from the doorway. “You two sound married!”

James raised his glass, along with his voice. “He is less expensive!”

Leopold inclined his head. “And far less armed!”

Sarcasm became currency. Respect followed.

James understood Leopold’s past without reverence. Leopold, on the other hand, recognized James’s education without resentment. They spoke as men who had both outlived certainty and learned to travel light with their convictions.

On the night, as the moon climbed its careful arc, Leopold joined James outside, where cicadas stitched the dark together.

“You know,” Leopold said, “you are wasted on ships.”

James considered this. “I find them honest. They go where they are pushed.”

Leopold laughed. “You remind me of men who argued beside campfires and died before morning.”

James did not flinch. “Yeah... I do remind myself of them quite often.”

They stood in shared silence, which settled comfortably.

The month passed as such things do, unnoticed until absence threatened.

Venetian attention grew patient. Couriers arrived. Names were checked twice. Morosini's shadow stretched longer across the coast.

Leopold did not debate departure.

"My hospitality can become a liability once it attracts admiration," he said. "We must leave as soon as possible!"

The crew found its way back to the bay, where the Queen was waiting for them.

The ship waited in pieces, scattered like a story told too often.

Reassembly took a while. Wood remembered its purpose. Rigging accepted the hands that knew tension intimately. The name returned to the stern with quiet insistence.

### **Chapter VIII: The Queen.**

Edward watched the final work from the quay; his long blond hair tied back against the sun. "She still floats."

Tim wiped his hands. "Oh Yes! An encouraging quality!"

Catherine surveyed the horizon. "Do we know where we are going?"

Leopold answered before Edward could. "Southeast."

John frowned. "That is not a destination, mate."

"It is an intention," Leopold replied.

James joined him at the rail. "I must say that unknown waters invite fewer questions."

Leopold glanced at him. "And far better stories."

They sailed at dawn.

The island of **Cephalonia** receded without any ceremony. Olive groves gave way to the sea. The Venetian order surrendered itself to an open horizon.

Edward stood beside Leopold as the wind filled the sails. "You know. You could have stayed."

Leopold watched the coastline dissolve. "My dynasty teaches men how to endure. The Cossacks, on the other, teach them how to move."

James smiled faintly. "And ships teach patience."

Leopold regarded him. "You will make a dangerous companion."

James shrugged. "I have been told."

The Queen turned southeast, her course unrecorded and her company newly bound by shared inconvenience and earned regard.

Behind them lay paperwork, suspicion, and protection borrowed on time.

Ahead waited water that did not care for names. Which suited them all.

## ***Chapter IX: A Shore Without Welcome***

### ***August 3 1692***

Days at sea rearranged Leopold.

He did not announce this. It revealed itself through habit. He learned the temper of the rigging and the private language of the deck. He listened more than he spoke, which caused the crew to speak more carefully when he did.

With Tim, he discussed routes that were not on maps and currents that moved with a memory older than empires.

“With water,” Leopold said one afternoon, “you must assume it remembers every mistake.”

Tim squinted at the horizon. “That explains the sound it makes when it hits the hull.”

With Catherine, he spoke of supply and survival, of how long a crew could remain polite when food thinned.

“You plan for absence,” Leopold observed.

“I plan for good behaviour,” Catherine replied. “Hunger is predictable. Pride... less so.”

John drew Leopold into long arguments about the virtues of discipline versus improvisation. These ended without resolution and with shared laughter.

Only with Edward did Leopold grow quiet.

Edward moved through the ship with a confidence that lacked spectacle. He spoke when words served a purpose and listened when they did not. His courage expressed itself in decisions made early and defended later, a quality Leopold recognized with a private sense of relief.

One evening, as the stars arranged themselves overhead, Leopold joined Edward at the rail.

“You do not fear being remembered incorrectly,” Leopold said.

Edward smiled faintly. “Your Highness, History does not ask for permission.”

Leopold nodded. “You remind me that saying that says freedom functions best when practiced.”

Edward glanced at him. “It looks like you admire recklessness.”

“I mostly admire the momentum,” Leopold replied. “You can possess it without an apology.”

From that night on, Leopold referred to Edward as his second-favorite man, after James, who turned out to be an exceptional collector of knowledge.

Navigation passed to the stars as coastlines abandoned familiarity.

James marked the sky with careful certainty. “It seems that we approach land that refuses identification.”

Catherine watched the water change colour.

“It’s Volcanic.”

Tim sniffed the wind. “And... inhabited.”

They made shore at dawn.

The land rose sharply, scarred by stone and scrub. Paths cut themselves into the hills without planning. Smoke drifted from unseen fires, thin and watchful.

Edward set foot on the ground and felt it answer back, unsettled beneath his weight.

Leopold’s expression tightened. “This place survives by the teeth.”

James crouched, examining tracks. “No uniforms. No order that announces itself. It seems we are on strange tides and even stranger lands.”

John scanned the slopes. “The men who live here don’t want any permission.”

They had arrived at **Methana**, without knowing its name yet.

The hills belonged to the **Kleftes**, to warlords who borrowed legitimacy from strength, and to criminals who practiced loyalty in small, intense measures.

Tim broke the silence. “Shit! I dislike shores that observe first.”

Leopold added. “Looks like the men who inhabited this place learned distrust as a second language.”

Edward nodded. “Then, we will speak carefully.”

A figure appeared at the edge of the trees, then another. Faces remained indistinct, weapons less so.

James murmured, "Hospitality here will be negotiated."

Leopold smiled thinly. "As it should be."

The crew stood together, strangers on land that measured men quickly and forgot them just as fast.

Behind them, the Queen rested uneasily.

## **Chapter X: The Courtesy of the Hills**

Scouting began with Billy.

Billy moved ahead of the others with the relaxed precision of a man who treated land as a conversation rather than a surface. He walked without haste, pausing where the ground suggested memory. When he raised a hand, the crew halted without question.

The terrain offered little comfort. Stone ridges cut the land into narrow divisions. Scrub grew where it pleased. Old paths revealed themselves only after the foot committed to them.

Billy crouched and touched the earth. "This place listens..."

Billy advanced another dozen steps, then froze.

The sound arrived first, a short whistle that did not belong to wind or bird. The hillside answered it immediately.

Men rose from stone and brush with disciplined economy. No one rushed. No one shouted. The ambush unfolded as an agreement already made.

Billy turned sharply, drawing breath to warn them, and a club struck his shoulder with practiced force. He rolled with it, keeping his head, though the second blow sent him sprawling.

John moved towards him and caught a blow behind the knee. He dropped hard, swearing with appreciation for the accuracy.

Catherine reached for her knife and felt her arm taken and folded inward. She let herself fall, controlling the descent, eyes already searching for the next calculation.

Tim tried to retreat towards higher ground. A rope found his ankles. He hit the earth laughing once, then not at all.

Edward stepped forward with intent sharpened by habit. He parried one strike, then another, until weight overcame skill and a blow to the shoulder blurred the edge of the morning.

Leopold met the attack with grim familiarity. He broke a grip and drove an elbow into a throat, earning a shout of approval from somewhere above.

“Before this becomes insulting,” Edward shouted, “we surrender!”

The kleftes laughed, pleased by manners appearing where they were least expected.

Weapons were taken. Pockets were searched with intimacy rather than haste. A ring on Edward’s hand earned comment, and Leopold’s scars earned recognition.

They marched uphill along a path that revealed itself only when walked upon.

Their destination refused comfort.

An old Byzantine fort crowned the ridge, its walls cracked yet deliberate, stone fitted by hands that had trusted eternity. Nearby stood a small church, its dome darkened by time, icons within watching patiently through smoke and neglect.

## **Chapter XI: The Lord of Methana**

The sun pressed heat into the old Byzantine stone as the crew marched up the narrow slope, each step answering the one before. The church remained near the fort, its icons dulled by smoke and wind, its silence older than any poem.

At the top, a man waited, seated on a low column that could have been carved for him. Sunlight caught his greying beard, dust settling into it as though it had been there longer than he had. His hair was long and in decline, but his grey eyes carried something that couldn’t die.

He stood when they entered the courtyard.

His posture was easy, his gaze was direct. There was something theatrical in the way he regarded them, as though every arrival in his domain was part of an audience he had already judged.

“You have entered the tall tales of the hills,” he said in a voice that carried the casual conviction of someone accustomed to speaking for effect as much as for truth. “And here, my friends, we do not let tales walk free.”

Edward closed the distance, assessing him with the discipline of someone used to measuring intent.

“Your hospitality precedes you,” Edward said, calmly and precisely.

The man smiled easily, a slow widening that suggested amusement, coupled with calculation.

“Hah! Hospitality is cheap when offered by strangers,” he replied. “Here, we accept guests with a formal interrogation.”

His accent carried the tone of a man who had spent his life declaring opinions louder than anything.

James stepped forward, shoulders relaxed but alert.

“Then ask. My name is James, and I prefer the delicate ways of diplomacy.” James said. “We will answer.”

The man’s eyes flicked across the group, then settled on James’s calm posture and the glint of educated precision in his gaze.

“You!” he said, acknowledging him as though it pleased him. “You read men like books in thin light! That suggests either wisdom or too many battles that began in darkness.”

James raised a brow. “I read for context, mate. Men announce themselves... Eventually. Or as far as I know.”

The man grinned briefly, then let it go, as though he enjoyed the exchange.

He turned to Edward.

“You!” he said. “You carry authority like a shadow! The folks listen before you commit to sound.”

Edward inclined his head. “People usually respond when certainty is earned.”

The man laughed, slowly, and with warmth.

“Well said!” he said. “Here we honor honesty... or we study it until it collapses. Your honesty has teeth!”

Billy, still tight with the rope, watched him squarely.

The man’s gaze rested on Billy a moment longer.

“You walk into danger with a brag,” he said. “That is either bravery or a tragedy ready for the books!”

Billy met his stare.

“Then let the story be well told,” Billy answered.

The man clapped his hands once, lightly, as though delighted by the interaction.

“Good,” he announced. “Then we begin. My name is Paraskevas. I am the one who collects tales in these hills.”

Edward exchanged a glance with James.

Paraskevas continued, voice broadening with theatrical ease.

“You have been brought to my hall by notice. This soil tastes of blood, laughter, oath, and fear, all at once! I do enjoy that mixture. It is... honest.”

James leaned slightly forward.

“And what does honesty earn here?” he asked.

Paraskevas gestured expansively at the fort, at the ancient church where incense hung like a memory, at the men behind him who blended into stone and shadow.

“Honesty earns patience,” he said. “And stories. Stories are the currency here, young man.”

He circled them, slowly, like a wild animal savouring every insight he might extract.

“You have names that matter,” Paraskevas said. “Names make men valuable. Names make men dangerous. But names alone do not determine how they are spent.”

Catherine met his eyes. “We have each other.”

Paraskevas nodded once.

“Then we begin with that,” he said.

He pointed towards the interior, where light remained kind to shadows.

“You will speak with my council,” Paraskevas said, voice rich with the promise of discourse. “And we shall learn whether your worth is coin or... something else...”

## **Chapter XII: *The Council, Spoken Plainly***

Paraskevas did not invite them to sit. He watched them first, long enough to make the silence awkward on purpose, then gestured towards the benches with two fingers.

They took their places. Edward settled at the center without comment. James leaned back slightly, hands visible. Leopold remained loose, as though furniture was optional.

Paraskevas rested his forearms on the table.

“So,” he said, looking at no one in particular, “you walked into ground that does not belong to you. That already tells me something.”

Edward spoke evenly. “We did not know where we landed.”

Paraskevas smiled. “No one ever does. They only realize later what kind of mistake that was.”

Catherine folded her hands. “You seem... prepared for mistakes.”

Paraskevas glanced at her. “I had practice with that, my lady.”

James tilted his head. “You expected us?”

“I expected someone, to be honest.” Paraskevas replied. “The sea keeps delivering people who believe they are exceptions. All kinds of people, from slaves to lords.”

Tim cleared his throat. “We do not want anything from you, or your people. We just wanted to lay anchor in a safe harbour.”

Paraskevas looked at him sharply, then laughed. “Good! That saves time.”

He turned his attention back to Edward.

“You lead,” Paraskevas said. “The others look at you before they decide anything.”

Edward nodded once. “Yeah. That’s what usually happens.”

“Why?”

“Because it works. I guess...”

Paraskevas studied him. “You answer like someone who stopped explaining himself years ago.”

Edward did not deny it.

Paraskevas shifted his gaze to James. “And you think before speaking. That means you are educated.”

James smiled faintly. “I am.”

Paraskevas nodded.

He leaned back, chair scraping stone. “This place does not reward ambition. Men come here when other places have grown tired of them.”

John spoke up. “Then why keep it?”

Paraskevas looked at him. "Because I already paid for it! Walking away would feel wasteful!"

Billy grinned. "That is a terrible reason."

Paraskevas pointed at him. "You! You will be a problem."

Billy shrugged. "Frequently."

Paraskevas didn't succumb to giving his attention. Instead, he stood and walked behind Leopold, studying the scars without touching them.

"You have been owned by causes," Paraskevas said. "I can see it in your stand."

Leopold replied calmly. "I stopped believing they cared long ago, my friend."

Paraskevas nodded. "Well, that happens."

He returned to his seat.

"You want to know what happens next," Paraskevas said. "I'll tell you plainly."

Everyone listened.

"I do not like attention," Paraskevas continued. "Attention arrives with soldiers or officials, and both ask questions that cost me time and effort."

James spoke. "We do not intend to stay anyway."

Paraskevas raised an eyebrow. "Your intention is optimistic. I should say that."

Catherine leaned forward. "We can leave quietly. If you want this, of course."

Paraskevas considered her. "Quietly does not mean unnoticed."

Edward folded his hands on the table. "What would satisfy you?"

Paraskevas exhaled through his nose. "Fewer complications than yesterday. No men looking for you. No stories that wander uphill."

Tim frowned. "Stories wander no matter what."

"Yes," Paraskevas said. "That is why I dislike them."

Leopold spoke then. "We leave without ceremony. No farewell. No displays. We move on."

Paraskevas looked at him. "And you expect me to trust that?"

"No," Leopold replied. "You expect us to be consistent. Right?"

Silence settled again.

Paraskevas tapped the table once. "You will stay here! For three days."

Billy opened his mouth.

Paraskevas pointed at him. "You especially will stay quiet."

Billy closed his mouth.

"No visitors," Paraskevas continued. "No wandering. You eat what is given. You argue among yourselves, not with my people. Alright?"

James nodded. "And afterwards?"

Paraskevas smiled thinly. "Afterwards, I decide whether letting you leave creates more trouble than keeping you."

Edward met his gaze. "Fair deal."

Paraskevas laughed softly. "No! Just a practical one."

He stood and gestured towards the door.

"That is enough talking for today," he said. "If you are still alive in the morning, we will continue."

As they were led out, Paraskevas remained behind, staring at the table as though it might offer advice. But it didn't.

## **Chapter XIII: *Three Days***

### **The First Day**

The chamber smelled of damp stone and old breath. Water had crept through the walls for centuries and never learned when to stop. Light slid in low and thin, tracing the floor like a blade testing sharpness.

Their bonds were loosened enough to remind them they were owned, not enough to forget it.

The door opened with a sound like bone against bone.

A tall bald man filled the frame.

He was built square and final, shoulders like a locked gate, neck thick with muscle that had never learned to soften. His knuckles bore old splits that never healed clean. His eyes were dark and flat, the sort that measured a man's worth in how quickly he would stop moving.

"I am Giovanni," he said. "I keep order."

He looked at each of them as though choosing where to strike first.

“If you shout,” Giovanni continued, “I will shut you up. If you run, I will catch you. If you behave, we all eat and sleep.”

Billy smiled. “You rehearse this one?”

Giovanni stepped closer until Billy smelled sweat and iron. “Only once.”

Edward held Giovanni’s gaze. The air tightened.

After a moment, Giovanni nodded. “Good. You understand silence.”

He left without another word.

James exhaled slowly. “That man does violence the way priests do ritual.”

Leopold murmured, “And believes in it just as deeply.”

Night brought incense and perfume, badly chosen.

A priest entered, wrapped in robes that could not hide the shape of a man who had lived too well and repented only when necessary. His hair fell loose, his fingers heavy with rings that had known many hands.

“I bless this fort,” he said lightly, eyes lingering on Catherine.

Catherine did not look away. “You look like a man who traded salvation for pleasure.”

The priest smiled, teeth white and tired. “I traded salvation for certainty.”

He drank wine with devotion, kissed the icon’s cracked edge without reverence, and spoke of sins as one might talk about old lovers, fondly and without apology.

“I buried more vows than men,” he said. “Some still dig.”

He was Dionysius, the chief priest of Methana, with an average posture and brown eyes that tasted countless sins, but also great wealth. As can be understood, Dionysius wasn’t some ordinary priest covered and defined by devotion and piety.

## **The Second Day**

Sleep came in pieces.

Morning arrived with footsteps and laughter outside.

A young man announced himself by falling into the room and laughing on the floor.

He stank of spirits and old smoke. His coat hung off him like a bad decision. His small face was covered in crumbs and something darker.

“Peter Blake,” he croaked. “If you hear O’Sullivan, it means I owe someone money or blood.”

Tim grimaced. “You should lie down.”

Peter squinted. “I have been lying down most of my life, you cunt. Standing worries people.”

He sang half a song about a woman who never existed and a bottle that always did. His hands shook when empty and steadied when holding the cup.

Edward watched him closely. “What keeps you alive?”

Peter considered, then shrugged. “Curiosity. And spite.”

Billy laughed. “Respectable.”

Peter eventually left, unceremoniously, but yet, with a deep impact on the crew

Later that day came another man.

He stood apart, lean as a knife honed down too often, eyes dark with sleepless thought. His clothes were clean but mended too many times, each stitch an argument with poverty.

“I am Lazaros,” he said. “From **Chios**.”

James asked, “Who do you serve?”

Lazaros smiled thinly. “Whoever pays before the rope tightens.”

He spoke of carrying messages between Turks and gangs, of watching boys disappear into systems that fed on loyalty and spat out ghosts.

“I learned young that obedience does not save you,” Lazaros said. “It only delays the knife that is ready to be stuck in your heart.”

Leopold studied him. “You want out?”

Lazaros’s jaw tightened. “Actually, I want air that does not smell like orders. I don’t need any other directions and distractions anymore.”

He spoke of **Agrafa**, of villages that hid from empires and buried secrets deeper than their dead.

“There are places,” Lazaros said, “where names mean nothing and memory is optional.”

He also told them about the Peloponnesus. A peninsula ruled by all types of folk someone could expect.

“I’m the man who makes the deals and looks for the defences, along with Giovanni. You had probably seen him. Right?”

Everyone in the room agreed. Billy though, did so with a sense of regret

### **The Third Day**

Rain broke the sky open.

It drummed against stone and ran in dark lines down the walls, turning dust into paste and silence into pressure.

Paraskevas entered, soaked and sour-tempered, water dripping from his beard, eyes sharp with lack of sleep.

He listened while others spoke.

An argument had been made previously over who would have been “sacrificed” first

Edward waited until the noise thinned.

“We leave no bodies,” Edward said. “No names worth repeating. If chased, we scatter. If followed, we vanish. Simple as that.”

Paraskevas stared at him. “You look like you know what you're talking about.”

Edward nodded. “I do, because without knowing, I’m nothing.”

Paraskevas turned to Lazaros. “Hey! You guide them to the coast.”

Lazaros hesitated, then nodded. “And after?”

Paraskevas shrugged. “After, you decide whether freedom is worthy at last.”

He looked back at Edward. “You will not call this an alliance.”

Edward replied, “I would never call this anything but a mere partnership.”

Paraskevas smiled, weary and real. “Then we understand each other. A fruitful partnership shall be! You are free to do as you desire, but you must know that you are part of the place. What happens here... stays here.”

At dusk, the gates opened.

Rain erased footprints. Stone swallowed sound.

Behind them, Methana returned to its waiting.

Ahead, the dark opened its mouth.

And for the first time, none of them walked alone.

#### **Chapter XIV: *Candles and Oaths***

The lair lay beneath the fort like a thought men refused to finish.

Its ceiling curved low, blackened by old smoke. Candles burned in bottles stolen from churches and taverns alike, their flames bent sideways by drafts that carried the smell of damp earth and iron. Weapons leaned against the walls. Maps lay weighted by knives and cups.

This was where decisions came to die or to be born.

Edward stood near the table; hands braced against the wood. James sat opposite him, reading a Venetian chart with the confidence of a man who could still find mistakes in it. Billy hovered stoically near the entrance. Peter lounged on a crate, boots up, chewing on something unidentifiable. Leopold remained standing apart, back straight, face caught half in shadow.

Paraskevas spoke first.

“If we move together, we move once. After that, trust dies quickly.”

James replied,

“Trust always dies quickly. The trick is making it useful before the funeral.”

Peter raised his hand.

“I trust anyone who doesn’t kill me today. Tomorrow’s negotiable.”

Paraskevas ignored him.

Leopold finally stepped forward.

“I will be clear,” he said.

That alone quieted the room.

“I am hunted,” Leopold continued. “By men with uniforms, seals, and patience. I bring danger with me wherever I rest.”

Edward said calmly,

“We’ve noticed.”

Leopold continued.

“What happened in Cephalonia was nothing. I do not seek alliances out of sentiment. I seek it because standing alone in this world has grown tedious.”

James smiled faintly.

“A man after my own philosophy.”

Leopold exhaled slowly, then said the name as if testing whether it still existed.

“Helena.”

The sound shifted the air.

Peter stopped rocking. Billy frowned. Even Paraskevas tilted his head.

“She wrote under the name Iris,” Leopold said. “Poems, essays, letters sharp enough to draw blood politely.”

James leaned back.

“That sort usually does.”

Leopold’s mouth twitched, almost a smile.

“She dressed plainly when we were young. Modest cuts. Muted colors. Then I vanished.”

He paused.

“When I returned to Europe in the company of the dead, allegedly, she changed. Black cloth. Severe lines. Jewelry like mourning weapons. Gothic, they call it now. I call it armour.”

Edward asked quietly,

“Who is she to you?”

Leopold answered without hesitation.

“She is the only future I did not abandon willingly.”

Peter cleared his throat.

“Ah. A woman. That explains the self-destructive courage.”

Leopold shot him a look sharp enough to shave with.

“She comes from the **House of Liechtenstein**. Blood tied to the **Austrian crown**. Influence enough to ruin me properly.”

James whistled softly.

“That’s not romance. That’s politics with kissing.”

Leopold nodded.

“We met as teenagers. She argued like a duelist and listened like a judge. When I left for Vienna, she begged me not to become a symbol.”

Peter muttered,

“Symbols get murdered by committees.”

Leopold continued,  
“I did anyway. And she paid for it in her absence.”

Silence stretched.

Paraskevas spoke, voice rougher than before.  
“And you want her back?”

Leopold shook his head.  
“I want her alive. Free from whatever shadow my name still casts. If I must disappear for that, I will.”

Edward looked at him steadily.  
“You don’t sound like a man chasing revenge.”

Leopold met his gaze.  
“I chased it for years. It fed me scars and nothing else.”

James tapped the table.  
“So your motive is not war, nor gold.”

Leopold said simply,  
“My motive is to end this well. Even if I do not live long to see it.”

Peter raised his cup.  
“You romantic bastard.”

Leopold glanced at him.  
“You mock what you fear.”

Peter grinned.  
“I fear sincerity. It’s contagious.”

Edward straightened.  
“If we move together, we move towards uncertainty. No flags. No promises beyond tomorrow.”

Leopold inclined his head.  
“That is more than Venice could ever offer.”

Paraskevas studied the candles, then said,  
“Then we are aligned for now. When paths split, we part clean.”

James smirked.  
“Clean is optimistic.”

Peter hopped down from the crate.  
“Still. I like this alliance. It’s tragic, doomed, and poorly funded.”

Edward allowed himself the smallest smile.

The candles burned lower.

Above them, the world argued about borders and crowns.

Below, men chose each other anyway.

### **Chapter XV: *Ashes don't forget fire***

The pressure ebbed at first.

It left the room thinner, like smoke drawn through a crack, or a pipe.

Peter stood very still. Having not expressed any sign of a sway or grin. No muttered insult to fill the gap. His hands rested on the crate's edge as though he feared they might drift away if released.

James noticed and said quietly,

“Well, I'll be fucked sideways. The drunk's gone lucid.”

Peter did not answer.

He swallowed once, hard, and spoke as if testing a foreign language.

“You know... there was once a girl.”

Edward turned fully towards him. Leopold watched with a familiarity that stung.

Peter continued, voice stripped bare.

“A Jewish one. Alice was her name...”

The name landed with weight.

“She sang like she was bleeding through the throat,” Peter said. “Dressed as she'd just rolled out of a dream and into a fight. A smart lady. Cruel when she needed to be. Kinder than she admitted.”

James frowned.

“You never mentioned her.”

Peter snorted softly.

“I never mention anything that can still hurt me, mate.”

He paced now, slow and deliberate.

“She drank. I drank. We called it freedom. She was trying to find herself. I helped her lose the map.”

Billy muttered,  
“That’s a talent.”

Peter nodded.

“Yeah. She was getting better before me. Writing. Singing. Reading philosophies she pretended to hate. Thought she could outrun the past.”

He laughed once, sharp and humorless.

“Then she met me. And the past caught up laughing.”

Edward asked, carefully,

“You loved her?”

Peter stopped pacing.

“I do.”

The present tense hung there, defiant.

James winced.

“Those don’t usually end well.”

Peter looked at him.

“Neither do we. Am I right, lads?”

Leopold spoke gently.

“Why are you two apart?”

Peter rubbed his face, dragging his fingers down until his eyes reddened.

“Because love doesn’t survive two people trying to drown at once,” he said.

“Because I told her I’ll leave. She told me she will wait. We both lied. Of course.”

Silence returned, heavier this time.

“She’s out there,” Peter added. “Somewhere between a bottle and a revelation.

Singing to keep the dark polite. I look for her in ports, in voices, in women who almost sound right.”

James said, low and sincere,

“You’re not as funny when you’re honest.”

Peter smiled faintly.

“Don’t worry. I’ll relapse soon...”

Edward stepped closer.

“If paths cross again.”

Peter cut him off.

“They will! We’re too stubborn to end separately.”

Leopold inclined his head.

“Then you understand my concern.”

Peter met his gaze.

“Oh, I understand it perfectly. Love doesn’t ask permission from history. It just shows up and ruins your posture.”

A breath passed. Then Peter reached for his cup, hesitated, and set it down untouched.

James stared.

“Well I’ll be double-fucked. That’s new.”

Peter shrugged.

“She’d punch me if she saw me now.”

Edward allowed the moment to stand.

## **Chapter XVI: *Borrowed Lions***

Morning came in pieces. Rope creak. Salt sting. A gull screaming like it had a grievance. Edward stood on deck with a length of cloth pooled at his boots. Burgundy. Soft in the hand, heavy enough to drink the wind without shouting about it.

James stared at it.

“You’re repainting the sky now?”

Edward crouched, checking the seams.

“Old sails show their age. These won’t glare in the sun or the moon. They’ll pass as merchant cloth from a distance. ”

John scratched his beard.

“God, they look expensive.”

Peter joined the conversation and grinned.

“Everything that gets us killed usually is...”

Billy had been quiet since dawn, up in the rigging, moving with an ease that made the ropes look taugt to him rather than the other way around. He dropped down, boots thudding, eyes bright.

“They’ll take wind clean,” Billy said. “And they won’t sing. Less noise at night.”

Edward glanced up.

“You’re sure?”

Billy nodded.

“Watched sailmakers in Bridgetown. Learned which cloth listens.”

James tilted his head.

“That’s a strange way to put it.”

Billy shrugged.

“Sails have moods.”

Peter snorted.

“So do I. But nobody listens.”

The sails went up. Burgundy caught the light and softened it, turning glare into warmth. The Queen looked older, calmer, like she had learned restraint.

Then Edward reached for the flag.

The Lion of Saint Mark unfurled gold thread flashing.

The deck groaned.

John shouted.

“That’s madness, my captain!”

Richard shook his head.

“That flag gets men searched.”

Edward tied it off.

“It still gets men waved through.”

James crossed his arms.

“Until someone looks closely. Then the ”

Edward met his eyes.

“Then we keep them from looking.”

Peter raised a finger.

“If we die under a borrowed flag, I want it known I complained.”

Edward laughed for a bit.

“Duly recorded.”

They cast off with the Lion flying and the burgundy sails breathing easily.

Soon enough, the crew began to sail. This time to the island of Corfu. A place distinctively shelved in Leopold’s mind, as it was the place that Helena promised she would be waiting for him after the war, if things could have gone the right way for both of them.

After a couple of days in the sea, Corfu rose from the water like a promise with conditions.

Green hills. Pale stone. The old fort watching from high ground with the patience of men paid to wait. The harbour bustled, a polite chaos of oars and bells. Venetian colors everywhere, worn with confidence and elegance, but also with a thin but noticeable presence of decadence.

Leopold stood at the rail, hands steady, eyes moving fast.

“She loved this light,” he said. “Said it didn’t flatter. Said it spoke of truth without cruelty.”

James leaned beside him.

“She painted people?”

“Yes. And she used to paint rooms,” Leopold said. “Corners, windows, empty furniture. Said absence sometimes showed more character than faces.”

James nodded.

“Hmm. That tracks.”

Leopold smiled.

“You understand her better than most.”

James smirked.

“I understand the distance, mostly. I had my own fair share of love and regret. She came from Sweden. But, I guess that’s a story for another time...”

They watched a small boat skim past, its crew laughing loudly.

“She came here after Venice,” Leopold said. “Finished her studies and left, as much as I can believe. She gave me a letter just before her departure.”

“What did it say?” James asked.

Leopold took a breath.

“That she needed peace for her mind. That Venice taught her how to be seen, and Corfu might teach her how to live.”

James glanced back at the ship.

“And, you? What did you do?”

“She told me to survive and carry on,” Leopold said. “She always did.”

Billy moved through the ship as if he owned it. Checking knots. Adjusting angles. Speaking to deckhands in low tones. When a harbour boat drifted too close, Billy shifted a line, and the Queen slid away without a fuss.

Edward noticed.

“So,” Edward said later, near the helm, “you’ve done this before. Right?”

Billy kept his eyes on the water.

“Ports like this. Flags like that. Yes.”

James came soon enough and raised an eyebrow.

“You keep surprising us, Billy!”

Billy smiled, quick and unreadable.

“Those surprises are what keep you breathing, my brother.”

Peter wandered over, bottle in hand.

“You’re enjoying this shite?”

Billy shrugged again.

“Feels familiar. As much as I can tell...”

Edward let it sit.

The Queen passed inspection with a nod and a bored glance. The Lion did its work. The sails kept their counsel. As they eased along the coast, Leopold spoke more, the words coming easier with each mile.

“She used to laugh at my seriousness,” he said to James. “Called it *the armor I wore indoors*.”

James chuckled.

“Oh. She sounds dangerous.”

“She was,” Leopold said. “Still is.”

James smiled, then looked at him.

“You think you’ll find her?”

Leopold exhaled.

“I hope she wants to be found.”

James clapped his shoulder once.

“Well. And if she doesn’t, we’ll drink to the attempt.”

Peter called from the bow.

“I heard that! I’m already practicing.”

The Queen slid past Corfu’s walls and into deeper water, burgundy sails full, borrowed lion snapping overhead.

Billy stood near the prow, watching the shoreline fall away, with a calm expression, almost fond.

Edward clocked it and said nothing.

### **Chapter XVII: *Eyes in the Alleys***

Corfu smelled clean in the wrong way.

Too much lime. Too much water was thrown where blood had been. The streets shone like they were trying to forget something. They went ashore in daylight, spread loose, looking like traders who had learned to mind their business. The Lion still flew back on the Queen. Edward hated that part the most.

Peter muttered,

“I don’t like cities that look polite, mate. They shiver me timbers!”

James glanced around.

“The polite places bite harder. That’s for sure.”

They walked past merchants, natives, and government officials, having no eyes upon them. They looked like they were blended in. However, after a long but easy route, they decided to wander through the inner parts of the city. Soon, the streets narrowed as they moved inland. Shutters closed one by one. Footsteps echoed where no one stood. Somewhere behind them, leather creaked. Once or twice.

Billy slowed.

Edward felt it then. The pressure. The sense of being measured.

Peter whispered,

“Anyone else feel like we’ve stepped into someone else’s dream?”

Leopold said quietly,

“We’re being watched.”

They turned a corner and found the street blocked by uniforms.

Venetian guards. Clean boots. Tired eyes. Muskets held loose but ready.

One of them stepped forward and pointed.

“You!” he said, staring straight at Billy. “You’re coming with us!”

Billy didn’t blink. Instead, he responded in the proper language.

“I’m afraid you’ve got the wrong man, gentlemen.”

The guard shook his head.

“No! Same faccia. Same walk. Same scar under the left ear.”

James looked sharply at Billy.

“You never mentioned a scar.”

Billy smiled thinly.

“Didn’t think it mattered.”

The guard went on.

“We’ve been hunting a pretender. He supposedly claims the throne of Rome. Slips through ports and costs people’s money.”

Edward stepped in.

“He’s with us.”

The guard started to laugh.

“Then you’re with him.”

Hands moved. Steel flashed.

The first blow came fast and ugly. Edward took a shaft to the shoulder and answered with the pommel of his sword. James drove an elbow into a throat and swore loudly. Peter smashed a bottle and used the neck as it owed him money. Billy moved like the fight had been waiting for him. He ducked, twisted, broke a wrist, took a blade, and buried it clean. Without hesitation or panic. Leopold fought hard and silently, teeth bared, scars remembering.

Civilians panicked and screamed. Someone rang a bell.

Edward shouted,

“Move! Now!”

They ran.

Through laundry lines and fish stalls. Over crates. A shot grazed James’ hat.

Peter laughed while sprinting.

“I am too sober for this shite!”

They burst out of the city and didn’t stop until the walls were behind them and the road turned to dirt.

The countryside took them in like an old tale.

They were walking through the villages that surrounded the outskirts of the city. The farmers opened their doors. Women handed water without asking names. A boy led them through olive groves and vanished smiling.

“The locals don’t really like Venice,” James said between breaths.

“They love trouble,” Peter replied. “Same thing, really.”

By nightfall, they were deep inland, legs burning and tempers short.

An old man sat by the road, mending a net that hadn't seen water in years. Thick hands. Sharp eyes.

He looked up.

"You're lost."

Edward nodded.

"We are looking for someone."

The man snorted.

"Aren't we all?"

Leopold stepped forward.

"A woman. Painter. Calls herself Iris."

The old man paused.

"Ah. The quiet one."

James leaned in.

"You know her?"

The man nodded.

"Oh, everyone knows her! Doesn't talk too much, though."

Edward asked,

"Where is she?"

The man pointed with his chin towards the hills.

"North. Look for the old estate by the cypresses. You'll see light there even when there shouldn't be."

The old man met Edward's eyes.

"I think you brought trouble with you, young man."

Edward said,

"I know. I always do..."

The man smiled.

"Then hurry! Venice doesn't forget."

They thanked him and moved on.

As they climbed, James fell into step beside Billy.

"So," James said, "pretender."

Billy didn't look back.

"Depends who's asking."

James replied.

“I do. What really makes you a pretender to the old Rome?”

“I could rather talk about it, or I could shut your mouth.”

James nodded.

“Fair enough.”

Edward watched them from ahead, with an uneasy settling in his gut.

Above them, somewhere in the dark, a light waited.

### **Chapter XVIII: *Helena Is Dead***

They found the place where the road thinned, and the light stopped pretending.

An old estate sat above the cypresses, shutters half-closed, paint flaking like shed skin. The door seemed open.

Edward signaled a halt. Billy drifted wide without being told. James adjusted his coat like he was about to meet a creditor. Peter sniffed.

“This place smells like turpentine and regret,” he said. “She’s an artist, then.”

Leopold went in first.

The room was spare. Canvases leaned against the walls, faces turned inward as if they were ashamed. A woman stood at a table mixing pigments, rolled up sleeves, dark hair pinned back with a discipline that felt deliberate.

She did not turn when Leopold said her name.

“Helena.”

She kept stirring.

He took a step closer.

“Iris.”

She turned then.

The resemblance was there and gone at once. The girl Leopold loved had been softened by hope. This woman wore her beauty like a tool. Pale skin. Dark green eyes that didn’t rush. Wearing a black dress, simple cut, with brutal and gothic characteristics familiar to the folk of Northern Europe.

She looked at him the way one looks at a familiar street after a fire.

“You’re late,” she said.

Leopold swallowed.

“But, my Love. I lived.”

She nodded.

“That was always your problem, Leopold. You were always like a weed.”

Silence stretched, thin and tight.

James cleared his throat.

“Excuse me. We don’t mean to intrude. We’re actually very good at leaving.”

Iris glanced at him, then at Edward, then at Billy, who met her gaze without blinking.

“You brought half the sea with you,” she said. “Venice will notice.”

Edward said,

“They already have.”

She smiled faintly.

“Of course they have.”

Leopold stepped closer, voice low.

“I looked for you, my Dear. Something in my mind always knew that I could find you here. After Venezia, you intended to live on this island.”

“I know,” she said. “You were loud about it.”

His face tightened.

“I never stopped. Even when I was slashing Turks in Rumelia, I knew that some sunny day I would find your beautiful eyes.”

She met his eyes at last.

“That’s why Helena had to die.”

The words landed clean.

“Helena waited,” Iris went on. “She hoped. She wrote letters that sounded braver than she felt. Iris doesn’t do that. The old Helena is dead. Ahead of her lies a new face. A new spirit.”

Leopold nodded, accepting the cut.

“I’m here now. We are, once again, together.”

“Yes,” she said. “You are.”

She set the bowl down, wiped her hands, and looked past him at the others.

“I’m coming with you.”

She shrugged.

“I don’t have time to be careful, Leopold. The Venetians will come after me, and God only knows what assumptions they will make out of this. We need to sail to Parga!”

Edward asked,

“Why?”

She didn’t hesitate.

“I’m looking for my sister.”

Leopold stiffened.

“Are you talking about Maria?”

“Yes. My half-sister,” Iris said. “Maria.”

James perked up.

“Maria? What is she doing exactly?”

“She’s a medic.” Iris said. “A volunteer. Works for Venice when it suits her. Works for people when it doesn’t.”

Edward nodded slowly.

“I’m afraid that Parga will not be quiet.”

“No,” Iris agreed. “Neither is she.”

She moved to a canvas and pulled the cloth away. A woman stood painted there, red-gold hair loose, eyes bright with exhaustion and stubborn kindness. Freckles. A mouth that smiled even when it hurt. It was a portrait of Maria. One of the few portraits that Iris had kept for herself.

“Hmm. That Maria looks like trouble trying to be useful,” Peter said gently.

Iris looked at him, surprised, then softened a fraction.

“She always was.”

Leopold asked,

“Why now?”

“Because she stopped writing,” Iris said. “And Venice doesn’t lose medics unless something’s gone wrong.”

James sighed.

“So we sail into another mess.”

Edward said,

“We were already doing that.”

Billy spoke for the first time.

“Parga puts us close to things Venice doesn’t want watched.”

Iris studied him.

“You sound like a man who knows where not to stand. Is this inherited?”

Billy nodded once.

“No. Actually... I learned young.”

She looked back at Leopold.

“I won’t pretend to be who you remember.”

Leopold held her gaze.

“I won’t ask you to.”

She stepped past him towards the door.

“Good.”

Outside, the light shifted. The Queen waited below, burgundy sails muted, borrowed lion restless.

As they walked, James fell in beside Iris.

“So,” he said lightly, “painter with a death certificate chasing a medic with a conscience. Any other surprises, Miss Lichtenstein?”

She glanced at him.

“If there are, I won’t warn you.”

James smiled.

“I respect that.”

Leopold walked a step behind her, heart heavy and strangely steady.

Helena was gone, and Iris was moving this time.

## **Chapter XIX**

### **August 19th, 1692: To Parga**

The sun rose in a wash of gold and salt over Parga’s harbour, where the amphitheatrically stacked houses caught the first light. White and ochre walls climbed the hillside like thoughts given physical weight, with shaded alleys curling between them and the gentle slopes of olive and citrus groves behind. Birds called from the ancient stonework of the Venetian fortress that still guarded the town’s heights, a silent testament to centuries of coming and going.

Edward stepped onto the quay, the air sharp in his lungs. The cobblestones were uneven, worn smooth in places by generations of feet. Behind him, *the Queen* waited, sails furled, her crew dispersed through the town.

“Places like this,” he said quietly, “have memories built into the very ground.”

James grinned without humour.

“Then let us hope they forget our passage before supper.”

Peter wandered off towards a cluster of taverns, already seeking trouble, or wine, or both.

Billy watched the olive groves beyond the harbour, silent and unreadable.

Leopold stayed close to Edward, eyes scanning lanes and doorways like a man expecting news at every turn.

Parga’s town centre was alive with commerce. Merchants arranged fruit and fish on woven tables. Olives glistened in the sun. Citrus scents trailed through alleys like living beings.

It didn’t take long for Iris to find her long-lost sister. She remembered that she lived in an old house, built with stone and dyed in crimson. After about an hour, she found it.

She went to the door and gave a gentle but audible knock.

Soon afterwards, the door opened

She was standing in the front and looked exactly like her lovely portrait.

Maria spoke first

“Who is this?”

“I’m someone you should remember,” Iris answered.

After a few seconds of absolute silence, Maria looked right through her eyes and she understood who she was talking to.

“Helena? What... What happened?”

“Helena doesn’t live among us anymore...” Iris said with a piece of sadness and grief in her green eyes.

Iris went on to explain the whole story to her sister. How she became her new self and how she ended up in a group of pirates that sailed through the Ionian Sea.

“I can’t believe any of this! Have you gone insane?”

“Come with me. We have no time sitting here. Soon, La Serenissima will notice, and our End will be nigh.”

Without a second being wasted, the half-sister, albeit reluctantly, decided to join her sibling and participate in this play.

But before their departure, Maria had to fulfill her duty.

Maria led Iris quickly through the maze of streets towards a small courtyard where wounded soldiers and labourers gathered under shade. Maria pointed to a garden bed planted with olive trees and citrus, the soil rich and well-kept even in the tight quarters.

“This land gives,” Maria said softly, “and takes back.”

“Someone would’ve said it knows what hands have done,” Iris replied.

“And it remembers,” Maria added.

Nearby, James struck up a conversation with a fruit vendor while Iris and Maria were behind him, tended to a soldier with a twisted ankle. James laughed, telling the man how they’d mistaken every other Maria in town before finding this one.

“Yes,” the vendor said, grinning. “This town *will* make you dizzy with its charm and its names.”

It was then that Billy arrived, dusty from the olive groves, with information gleaned from local farmers who recognized Maria’s reputation as a healer.

“Olive growers spoke of her,” Billy said. “They said she sees pain the way others see weather. Like something that can be read. Like... a book.”

Iris turned and noticed Billy, startled for the first time since waking in Parga.

“You have listened?” she said.

“Always,” Billy replied laconically.

At last, the girl was found by the rest of them, and they began walking to the port.

When Maria finally spoke of their past, it was a murmur against the backdrop of Parga’s breathing stone.

“We grew up on the lovely prairies of Tyrol,” Maria said, looking out towards the harbour. “Not the kind of men sing about. Beautiful, yes, but cold. Wind cuts through you there. Teaches you early that comfort is something you make with your own hands.”

She rubbed her thumb against her palm as if feeling the ghost of something old.

“Our family kept contacts and gold. Trade routes, obligations, alliances. We learned the weight of those things before we even knew what they meant. When

other children were chasing goats through the fields, we were learning names. Who owed whom. Who could ruin whom.”

Iris watched her sister’s eyes: warm green, steady, and alive.

“That may be why you stayed on this earth for so long,” she said.

Maria gave a small breath that was almost a laugh.

“No. I stayed because someone had to. That’s the truth of it.” She looked down at her hands. “Someone always must remain behind and do the work. The kind that keeps other people alive.”

Iris said nothing for a moment. The harbour wind caught a loose strand of her dark hair and lifted it across her cheek.

Then she glanced towards the distant shape of a ship waiting offshore.

“The men I came with,” she said slowly. “They’re dangerous in different ways. But they are moving forward. Even when they don’t know why.”

Maria followed her gaze.

“Forward is just for the fools,” she said.

Iris looked surprised.

Maria smiled faintly.

“Direction matters more.”

“Towards what?”

Maria’s expression turned thoughtful.

“Towards something that forces you to become... honest.”

Iris had a quiet laugh.

“You’re suggesting honesty is the destination?”

“No,” Maria said. “It’s the toll.”

She gestured towards the sea again.

“That ship of yours. It isn’t sailing towards a place. It’s sailing towards consequences.”

Iris’s smile slowly returned, colder this time.

She looked back towards the streets of Parga.

“Well,” she said, almost casually, “good thing we’re about to find out.”

The light faded into amber. Olive branches turned black in silhouette. The sea below sighed against rock.

Edward stood with the crew and the sisters.

He exhaled.

“Gentlemen, we found her.”

Iris did not answer.

Maria stepped forward, head high.

“You brought noise to my door,” she said. “I didn’t ask for help. I wanted some choices.”

Edward nodded.

“And you will have them.”

James added,

“Even the messy ones.”

Maria’s gaze slipped towards the town’s lights, brightening one by one.

“Then let’s see what choices this crew of ruffians insists upon.”

Billy’s jaw tightened

Leopold watched Iris and Maria, a story older than war passing between them without words.

Peter clapped his hands once.

“So! Celebration then? Or... chaos?”

James smiled.

“Both. In equal measure, I guess...”

## **Chapter XX**

### **August 20th, 1692: A small problem arose**

Morning broke over Parga without any warning. The sea looked calm from afar.

Venetian patrols had already tightened around the lower streets by dawn. They started to move methodically.

A merchant tipped them off: coin exchanged quietly for names.

Billy noticed it first.

He stood near the market stairway overlooking the harbour when he saw soldiers converging from three separate alleys.

“Edward,” Billy said low.

Edward turned.

“What?”

“They’ve found us.”

“Well,” he muttered, “that is inconvenient.”

Leopold asked.

“How many?”

“Too many for comfort,” Billy replied.

A Venetian commander stepped forward with authority.

“Signore Edward Jones.”

“You are ordered to surrender in the name of the Most Serene Republic.”

Silence arose for a brief moment.

Peter laughed once.

“Ordered? Mate, you say that like we’re employees.”

Maria pulled civilians back from the courtyard instinctively.

Iris stood beside Leopold.

Her voice was calm.

“Do they want negotiation?”

Edward answered quietly.

“Not just that. They want too many to mention.”

The commander lifted his hand.

“Seize them.”

The soldiers surged, and the courtyard became a scene of controlled violence within seconds.

Billy moved first.

He stepped into the nearest soldier’s line, caught the wrist mid-strike, twisted - bone snapped with a sickening crack - and drove the man into the stone wall.

Another soldier lunged.

Billy blocked, redirected, and slammed his elbow into the man’s throat.

The soldier collapsed, choking.

Metal rang across cobblestone.

James ducked a blade.

“Seriously?” he snapped while sliding under an attack. He grabbed a chair and smashed it across the head. “Couldn’t you have announced yourself?”

He kicked the stunned soldier away.

“Uncivil...”

Leopold fought unhinged.

He met a Venetian officer blade to blade.

Their swords locked.

Face inches apart.

“You betrayed the Republic!” the officer spat.

Leopold’s eyes darkened.

“My blood betrayed me first.”

He shoved forward, forced the man off balance, and cut deep across the thigh.

The officer screamed and fell.

Leopold did not hesitate.

Peter swung wildly but effectively.

“Back off, you bastards!” he shouted.

He stabbed one soldier in the shoulder.

Pulled the blade free.

“Oi! That’s my shirt!”

He kicked another in the chest and laughed like the situation was entertainment.

Maria stayed defensive.

She dragged wounded civilians behind cover.

A soldier tried to grab her.

Before he touched her, Iris appeared behind him.

She grabbed the soldier’s collar, pulled him back, and slammed his head into the stone wall with brutal precision.

He collapsed instantly.

“Don’t touch her,” Iris said coldly.

Edward saw more reinforcements flooding in from the fortress stairs.

This wasn’t a skirmish anymore.

“Fall back!” he shouted.

They broke from the courtyard and ran towards the harbour streets.

Venetians pursued.

Boots thundered behind them.

They sprinted through narrow alleys.

People screamed and scattered.

Market stalls were overturned to slow pursuit.

James knocked a cart sideways into the path of two soldiers.

“Obstacle deployed,” he muttered.

A shot rang out.

Stone exploded beside Billy’s head.

He didn’t flinch.

“Snipers on the roofs!” he shouted.

Edward glanced up.

They burst into the harbour zone.

*The Queen* sat anchored.

Crew members already saw the chaos and were prepared. All of them. John, Catherine, Richard, and Tim looked in awe at their fleeing fellows.

Ropes were thrown.

Sails loosened.

But Venetian patrol boats were pushing off from the docks.

Shots, cannons, and a few projectiles flew from the dock towards the ship.

One struck the hull.

Another hit near the railing.

Edward ran first.

He grabbed a rope thrown from the deck and climbed without hesitation.

Peter followed, swearing.

“Bloody hell! I hate this shite!”

Billy turned briefly.

He saw Leopold still on land, fighting off two soldiers.

“Leopold!” Billy shouted.

Leopold finished one opponent - stabbed through - then disengaged and sprinted.

He leapt.

Caught the rope.

And climbed.

Maria was the last to board.

A soldier grabbed her ankle as she tried climbing.

She kicked free, barely.

Iris reached down from the deck and grabbed her wrist.

“Pull!”

Together, they hauled her up.

Cannons from Venetian patrol boats fired.

The first shot splashed dangerously close.

Wood splintered.

Crew members rushed to hoist sails.

James shouted commands.

“Turn starboard now! Use the harbour wind!”

Edward took the helm.

“Cut the anchor!”

The anchor chain broke free.

The Queen drifted forward.

Another cannon blast hit the water beside them.

Billy stood near the railing.

He watched Venetians shouting orders below.

“Are we running?” Peter asked breathlessly.

Billy shook his head.

“No.”

He turned towards the incoming patrol boats.

“Just adjusting...”

The Queen pulled it into open water.

Venetian ships followed, but the harbour exit narrowed.

They could not fully pursue without risking grounding.

Shots continued.

One cannonball clipped the edge of the ship.

Wood cracked violently.

But they pushed through.

As distance grew, the gunfire became distant echoes and Venetian ships slowed.

They would not risk chasing too far under unfavorable currents.

Edward exhaled slowly.

“Any damages upon her?”

James scanned the deck.

“Only some minor Structural. Emotionally, severe.”

Peter collapsed against a barrel.

“Remind me,” he gasped, “why we came to this shithole again?”

Maria answered quietly.

“Because some of you scallywags wanted to find and take me.”

Iris stood near the railing.

Her eyes looked back at the shrinking coastline.

“They won’t stop now.”

Billy nodded.

“No.”

He glanced at Edward.

“Next time they won’t knock.” As he tightened his grip on the wheel.

“Then we won’t answer to these bastards,” Edward replied.

The Queen sailed away from Parga under smoke and tension.

## **Chapter XXI: Just some minor adjustments**

**August 26th, 1692**

After quite some days, the Queen approached the harbour of a town called Preveza. The town was quieter than Parga, but still bustling with life.

A man named Anthony waited - Peter’s contact - near a concealed docking point.

Peter pointed.

“There. That’s him.”

Anthony was a shipwright who specialized in structural modifications and reinforced hull designs.

He stepped forward with a cautious look.

“Peter, my boy. You brought trouble,” Anthony said to Peter.

Peter grinned.

“Nah, not really. Only the usual.”

Anthony inspected the damage.

“This hull took a beating.”

Edward crossed his arms.

“Well. Can you fix it?”

Anthony nodded slowly.

“Yes. And perhaps even improve it. But keep in mind, it's going to cost big.”

James raised an eyebrow.

“Improve?”

Anthony gestured towards hidden storage areas and reinforced plating under construction.

“I can strengthen weak points. Add concealed compartments. And even reinforce the keel.”

Billy observed quietly.

“So, she survives longer for next time.”

Anthony looked at him.

“Exactly.”

Preveza did not look like a place where secrets could live, yet Anthony had built a life on them.

His workshop stood beyond the harbour, behind a row of weathered warehouses. From the outside, it looked abandoned. Salt had eaten the wood gray. The roof sagged slightly. Fishing nets hung like tired curtains across the entrance.

Inside, the space opened into a cavern of timber, rope, iron tools, and half-finished hull frames. Lanterns burned low along the walls. The air smelled of tar, resin, and sea salt.

The Queen rested hidden in a narrow inlet behind the structure, her wounded hull exposed where Anthony and his apprentices had begun repairs.

The crew gathered around a large worktable scarred by decades of chisels and knives.

Anthony leaned over a rough map of the Ionian coast.

“It looks like you cannot stay here for long,” he said calmly. “Preveza hears things. Eventually, the wrong ears will listen.”

Edward studied the map.

“Methana,” he said. “It gives us distance and friends.”

Peter nodded slowly.

“This place is quiet. It consists of fishermen and traders. People who mind their own business, you know.”

James rested his elbows on the table.

“And if we go somewhere no one expects?”

Anthony looked at him.

“You mean?”

James shrugged lightly.

“The unknown has advantages. No one hunts what they cannot predict.”

Billy stood near the door listening to the distant sounds of the harbour.

“Unknown routes also mean unknown enemies.”

James smiled faintly.

“Well, mate. We seem to collect those anyway.”

Leopold had said nothing since the meeting began.

He stood slightly apart, staring at the coastline drawn across the map.

Iris noticed first.

“What is it?” she asked quietly.

Leopold finally spoke.

“There is something else happening.”

Anthony nodded slowly.

“What? You heard rumours already?”

Edward looked up.

“What rumours?”

Anthony leaned back against the table.

“The Turks.”

The room grew still.

“About three weeks ago,” Anthony continued, “their court changed hands.”

James raised an eyebrow.

“A coup?”

“Something close to it.”

Anthony folded his arms.

“The new Sultan does not waste time. Mustafa is brutal and does not forgive.”

Edward’s voice hardened.

“What does he want?”

Anthony pointed east across the map.

“Venice.”

Peter frowned.

“Oh, that war never ends.”

Anthony shook his head.

“This time it might not stop there.”

Leopold’s eyes sharpened.

“Explain.”

Anthony looked directly at him.

“The Sultan believes the Holy League weakened his empire for too long. Venice is only the beginning.”

James spoke softly.

“And Austria?”

Anthony met Leopold’s gaze.

“Eventually.”

Leopold’s hand slowly closed into a fist. The thought that his greatest enemies were so close to him almost made him paranoid.

For a moment, the room felt smaller.

Billy watched him carefully.

“War does not start tomorrow.”

Leopold’s voice came low.

“It already started, friends.”

Edward stepped in.

“Leopold, listen. We are not an army.”

Leopold turned towards him.

“No. But we are armed! We are mobile! And we are free!”

James tapped the map thoughtfully.

“Freedom does not mean we charge into stranger wars.”

Leopold’s voice sharpened.

“You would rather hide?”

James shrugged.

“No, mate. I would rather win.”

Silence settled across the room again.

Maria, who had been standing near a window overlooking the inlet, finally spoke.

“Revenge is simple,” she said. “But it rarely solves the problem that created it.”

Leopold looked at her.

“And you believe peace solves it?”

“No,” Maria said calmly. “But understanding does.”

Leopold shook his head.

“You misunderstand me. I do not want peace. I want justice!”

Iris smirked slightly.

“And you think burning half the empire will achieve that?”

Leopold’s eyes flashed.

“If necessary...”

Edward exhaled slowly.

“This ship has one purpose.”

James nodded.

“Survival first. Profit second. Revenge, somewhere much lower.”

Leopold looked around the room.

“You all talk like merchants!”

Billy finally stepped forward.

“We talk because we are men who want to live!”

Leopold stared at him for a long moment.

Then Iris spoke again, her voice quieter than before.

“The Sultan is moving against Venice.”

James nodded.

“Yes.”

She pointed towards the sea beyond the window.

“Which means every port will soon choose a side.”

Edward followed her gaze.

“And we?”

Iris’s green eyes narrowed.

“We decide whether we sail towards Methana.”

She paused.

“Or towards history.”

No one spoke for several seconds.

Outside, somewhere beyond the workshop walls, the harbour wind shifted, and the Queen’s rigging creaked softly in the dark.

### **Chapter XXII: On the Seas again**

Night settled heavily over Anthony’s hidden yard in Preveza. Lantern light flickered against the ribs of unfinished hulls, and the smell of tar hung thick in the air. Outside, the harbour breathed slowly with the tide, but inside the workshop the atmosphere had tightened.

Edward stood at the end of the long table, the map still spread before him. Methana lay marked on the parchment, a small point along the Peloponnesian coast.

Leopold had not moved since the earlier conversation. His gaze remained fixed eastward on the map, towards lands controlled by the Turks.

“You are all pretending this is not happening,” he said at last.

James leaned back in his chair.

“No. We are recognizing the scale.”

Leopold turned sharply.

“Scale?”

“Yes,” James replied calmly. “Empires are not tavern brawls. You cannot settle them with a single strike of a sword.”

Leopold’s voice hardened.

“You mistake me. I am not talking about taverns.”

Billy folded his arms.

“You’re talking about war.”

Leopold met his eyes without hesitation.

“I am talking about vengeance.”

The word settled into the room like a thrown knife.

Edward spoke before the silence could grow worse.

“Vengeance is expensive, Leopold.”

Leopold laughed quietly.

“Spoken like a merchant once again.”

“No,” Edward replied. “Spoken like a captain.”

He gestured towards the hidden inlet where the Queen rested in darkness.

“That ship carries all of us. Every decision we make affects every plank beneath our feet.”

Leopold stepped closer to the table.

“You would run from this?”

James gave a faint smile.

“We would endure it.”

Leopold’s temper rose.

“You speak as if survival is some noble achievement.”

Billy’s voice came low and steady.

“Survival is the only achievement that lets you choose what comes next, Brother.”

Leopold looked at him, studying him carefully.

“You sound like a philosopher.”

Billy shrugged slightly.

“Pain and experience teach philosophy.”

Iris had been standing near one of Anthony’s workbenches, sharpening a dagger with slow, deliberate strokes. She had listened to every word without interruption.

Finally, she spoke.

“My Leopold is not entirely wrong.”

Everyone turned towards her.

She set the blade aside.

“The Turks are moving. Venice will respond. Austria will respond. The sea will fill with dead soldiers and ships.”

James nodded.

“Exactly. Which is why we should not place ourselves between them.”

Iris tilted her head.

“Unless we choose the right side.”

Edward’s expression hardened.

“This crew does not belong to empires.”

Iris walked towards the table.

“Perhaps not. But empires still influence the waters we sail.”

She looked down at the map.

“Methana sits close to Turkish routes. Close enough to listen.”

James’s eyes narrowed slightly.

“Listening, I approve of. Dying, I do not.”

Leopold leaned over the map.

“You are all afraid of consequences.”

Maria spoke quietly from near the doorway.

“No, Leopold. Consequences exist whether we fear them or not.”

Leopold looked at her.

“And you would advise patience?”

Maria met his gaze calmly.

“I would rather advise purpose.”

He frowned.

“Explain it.”

She gestured towards the harbour beyond the workshop walls.

“Every man here carries anger. Some carry grief. Some carry ambition. But if we allow those things to dictate our path entirely, we stop thinking.”

James nodded slowly.

“Now that is wisdom!”

Leopold exhaled through his nose, irritation still burning in his expression.

“You would all rather sail to safety.”

Edward shook his head.

“There is no safety.”

He pointed again at Methana.

“There is familiarity.”

Peter stepped forward then, wiping grease from his hands.

“Listen, lads. Methana shelters us. They’ve got quiet waters. People who mind their business.”

Anthony added from the far end of the room, “And from there you can watch what the Turks and Venetians can do next.”

James looked between them.

“Observation before action. That seems almost... civilised.”

Leopold’s jaw tightened.

“You are all delaying.”

Billy answered him calmly.

“Sometimes this is what wins wars.”

Leopold studied each face around the table.

Edward’s steady resolve, James’s calculating patience, Maria’s quiet conviction, Billy’s immovable calm. Even Iris, standing beside him, seemed thoughtful rather than eager. At last, she spoke to him in a low voice.

“Revenge tastes better when it’s served at the right time, my dear.”

Leopold looked at her.

“Are you telling me to wait?”

She gave a faint smile.

“I am telling you to choose your battlefield, my love. You can do as you like. As long as your will can be fulfilled.”

The tension slowly drained from the room, like a fire slowly fading out.

Leopold leaned back from the table and finally nodded.

“Very well...”

Edward spoke immediately.

“We sail for Methana.”

James rubbed his hands together lightly.

“Ah, a sensible compromise!”

Peter grinned.

“...And I have another idea that might keep us alive on the way.”

Edward looked at him.

“Go on.”

Peter pointed towards the harbour.

“Turkish ships pass through these waters constantly now. If we fly their colours, we draw less suspicion. Am I right?”

James raised an eyebrow.

“So, you are saying we use a disguise? Like the one in Parga?”

“Yeah! Or... something like that, I guess.”

Anthony nodded.

“I know a few men who could help. Greeks who speak the language. Men who understand the Turkish mindset.”

Billy considered it.

“That means more eyes on the deck.”

Edward gave a short nod.

“Then bring them with us.”

By dawn the following morning, the Queen slipped quietly from the hidden inlet. A fresh flag climbed the mast, its colours belonging to the Turkish Empire. Several new Greek sailors worked among the crew, their voices blending naturally with the region's language. From a distance, the ship looked like just another vessel moving along the Ionian coast under Turkish protection. Only those aboard knew otherwise.

As the harbour of Preveza faded behind them, Edward stood at the helm watching the open sea as Methana lay ahead.

### **Chapter XXIII: To the heart of trouble**

The Queen moved south through the Ionian waters under a borrowed Turkish flag.

From a distance, she looked harmless. A trade ship, or perhaps a courier vessel moving between ports while the winds were favourable. The disguise worked because no one could look too closely. In the hard times of the war, suspicion was everywhere, but certainty was rare.

The sea rolled quietly beneath the hull.

For two days, the voyage passed without pursuit. The crew worked normally, yet the air aboard the ship carried an unusual tension. The conversation in Anthony's workshop had not ended when they sailed.

Now the questions followed them onto the deck.

Edward stood at the helm during the evening watch. The sun had begun to sink behind the western horizon, painting the water with copper light.

James approached him with a cup of watered rum.

"You've been quiet," James said.

Edward took the cup.

"Yeah, I've been thinking."

James smiled slightly.

"Ooh. That can be dangerous."

Edward watched the horizon.

"Do you believe that we're doing the right thing, after all, James?"

"I believe we're doing the smart thing," James replied. "Right and wrong are luxuries, usually reserved for those standing safely on land."

Edward glanced at him.

"And you think survival is the only rule?"

James considered that question.

"No. Survival is simply the reason that allows rules to exist at all."

Edward drank slowly.

“So, if survival requires... betrayal?”

James shrugged.

“Then the real question becomes whether betrayal was avoidable.”

Edward frowned.

“Hmm. That sounds like an excuse.”

“It’s actually mathematics,” James said calmly.

Billy had been listening nearby.

“People who treat morality like numbers eventually miscalculate.”

James laughed softly.

“And people who refuse to calculate die before their end.”

Billy responded.

“Not always.”

James tilted his head.

“No?”

Billy looked out across the sea.

“Some men die because they refuse to leave their values. Sometimes these matter more than living.”

James studied him.

“You would die for your values?”

Billy answered plainly.

“For what it’s worth. Yeah”

James raised his cup.

“Well. Let’s hope we never discover which ones are.”

The wind shifted slightly, and the sails filled again.

Near the bow, Leopold and Iris stood watching the distant coastline appear faintly through the evening haze.

Leopold spoke first.

“Tell me something.”

Iris did not look at him.

“What?”

“Do you believe this revenge will fix anything?”

She smiled faintly.

“No.”

Leopold looked surprised.

“Then why pursue it at all?”

Iris rested her arms on the rail.

“Because some sins change the world.”

Leopold frowned.

“What do you mean by that, my dear?”

“If someone destroys something important,” she said, “the world becomes unstable. But revenge can restore that missing balance.”

Leopold considered that.

“So, vengeance is justice?”

“No,” Iris replied quietly. “Justice is order. Revenge is personal.”

Leopold’s expression darkened slightly.

“And yet... You enjoy it.”

Iris glanced at him.

“Of course I do.”

Leopold laughed under his breath.

“I knew it!”

She returned her gaze to the horizon.

“Most people enjoy it. They simply lie about it.”

Leopold said nothing for a moment.

Then he asked another question.

“If revenge does not fix the world, why chase it?”

Iris answered without hesitation.

“Because some enemies must be taught how to fear.”

Leopold nodded slowly.

“Yes.”

Below deck, Maria spoke quietly with Peter while examining a torn section of sailcloth.

Peter wiped grease from his hands.

“You think this crew will survive the coming storm, Bird?”

Maria continued stitching.

“I think storms reveal people.”

Peter laughed.

“That sounds kind of... philosophical.”

“It’s practical,” Maria replied. “War shows what people are willing to sacrifice.”

Peter, for a brief second, considered that.

“And what do you think we’ll sacrifice?”

Maria paused before answering.

“That depends on what we believe we’re defending.”

Three days later, the coastline of Methana rose from the horizon.

The volcanic peninsula stood dark against the sea, its cliffs cut by narrow coves and small harbours. Smoke rose from scattered homes along the shore.

Edward lowered the spyglass slowly.

“Methana.”

The word travelled across the deck.

James joined him.

“Hmm. Looks peaceful.”

Billy replied dryly.

“That won’t last, boys.”

The Queen sailed closer to the harbour.

As they approached the docks, figures began gathering along the shoreline. Fishermen, traders, villagers. Some carried tools. Others carried muskets.

Edward studied them carefully.

“Looks like these people expect some trouble.”

James muttered quietly.

“Well, everyone does now, mate.”

Leopold looked towards the town with interest.

“This town stands too close to the Turkish menace!”

“Yes,” Edward said.

“And Venice will be watching them as well.”

James smiled faintly.

“So, this small place may soon become very, very important.”

The Queen dropped anchor in the harbour.

Boats began moving towards them.

Among the figures gathering on the shore were familiar faces.

Paraskevas and the rest of the syndicate stood among the Methaniots, the native residents of Methana, speaking loudly with the militia forming along the docks.

Their voices carried across the water. Arguments, orders, swearing. Plans already being made.

Edward watched the scene carefully.

“This place is preparing for war.”

James nodded.

“And we just sailed straight into it.”

Leopold’s expression slowly shifted into something darker.

“Good.”

Iris glanced at him.

“You’re enjoying this already, dear. This is... appropriate”

Leopold looked towards the town where men were already moving crates of gunpowder and stacking barrels along the harbour wall.

“I told you,” Iris said quietly.

“Some enemies must be taught fear.”

The wind carried the smell of smoke from the peninsula.

Across the harbour, the Methaniots were already building defences.

War had not arrived yet, but Methana was preparing to greet it properly.

### **Chapter XXIV: La Voce**

Methana never pretended to be gentle. The peninsula rose from the sea like a dark scar. Narrow streets wound between low houses and workshops. Fishing boats knocked softly against the harbour wall, while soldiers and commoners argued in the same breath. Everywhere there was the smell of salt, wood, smoke, and gunpowder.

The Queen had been anchored only two days, yet already the town moved like a place expecting trouble. Men stacked barrels along the harbour. Muskets appeared where fishing nets had once hung. Arguments echoed through the taverns every night.

Peter preferred to listen rather than speak. That evening, he sat in the corner of a crowded inn near the harbour, the “Hippocampus”. It was a place he had visited years before, long before the Queen, long before the present mess with Venice and the Turks. The inn had not improved with time. The tables were rough, the drinks sour, and the patrons loud enough to drown the wind outside.

But it was a place where people talked freely.

Peter drank slowly while a group of Methaniot fishermen argued about patrol ships off the coast.

“Turkish everywhere,” one man muttered.

“Aye,” another answered, “and Venetian spies right behind them.”

Someone spat on the floor.

“War’s coming whether we bloody want it or not!”

Peter kept his head down.

Across the room, the innkeeper shouted something towards the kitchen.

“Get out there and sing if you’re going to sing!” he barked. “But don’t expect kindness from this lot.”

A woman stepped into the room.

At first, no one noticed. Then she opened her mouth.

Her voice cut through the noise like a blade through cloth.

It was not loud. It didn't need to be. The sound carried across the room with a strange clarity that silenced conversation without force.

Even the fishermen stopped arguing.

The song itself was unfamiliar to most of the room. A slow, aching melody that spoke of travelling roads, broken promises, and nights that refused to end. All in Greek.

A few men stared openly.

Others muttered under their breath.

One of them sneered.

"Another wandering Jew looking for coins!"

The insult carried across the room.

The girl did not stop singing.

She stood near the hearth, her dark hair falling loosely over her shoulders, eyes half-closed as if the room barely existed.

The man who had spoken spat again.

"You people bring nothing but trouble!"

The innkeeper shouted back quickly.

"Shut your bloody mouth and let her finish! The customers are listening."

The man grumbled but fell silent.

Peter had not moved.

His drink remained untouched in his hand.

Something in the voice had caught him off guard. Not just the sound, but the emotion behind it. Raw, sharp, and strangely... defiant.

He leaned forward slightly, studying her more carefully.

When the song ended, the room remained quiet for a moment.

Then, conversation returned slowly.

Coins clattered onto the table near the hearth.

The innkeeper nodded towards her.

"You'll earn your keep if you keep that up."

The girl gave a small shrug.

“I’m not here for kindness, sir.”

“Good,” the innkeeper replied. “Because you won’t fucking find much of it.”

A few men laughed.

Peter stood.

He walked across the room without hurry.

She noticed him approaching before he spoke.

Her eyes narrowed slightly, measuring him.

“You look like you’ve heard a ghost,” she said.

Peter stared at her.

For several seconds, he said nothing...

Then he laughed quietly.

“Well... I’m fucked!”

She blinked.

“Peter?”

He spread his hands.

“As I live and breathe.”

Her expression shifted instantly from suspicion to disbelief.

“You... arrogant... bastard,” she said. “You’re supposed to be dead!”

Peter grinned.

“So... should you.”

The room around them continued its noisy routine, but the moment between them had become rather chaotic.

She stepped closer.

“What the hell are you doing here?”

“Sailing,” Peter replied calmly.

“With whom?”

He nodded towards the harbour outside.

“With people who are about to make this town famous.”

She crossed her arms.

“Oh, poor Pete. You always had a talent for trouble.”

“And you, you always had a talent for walking straight into it. I told you I was trouble long ago.”

She glanced around the inn.

“Believe me,” she muttered, “I noticed.”

Peter lowered his voice slightly.

“Is this a rough welcome, Alice?”

She gave a humourless smile.

“Let’s just say this Place isn’t fond of strangers.”

Peter studied her for a moment.

“And yet, you stayed.”

“I needed work, you arrogant prick.”

“And singing pays that much?”

“It pays enough for the insults,” she replied.

Peter chuckled.

“Well. You picked the wrong town for peace.”

She tilted her head.

“When did you ever choose peace?”

Peter gestured towards the harbour.

“Fair point.”

She followed his gaze through the window where the dark outline of the Queen rested among the fishing boats.

“What ship is that?”

Peter’s grin widened slightly.

“That,” he said, “is a long story...”

Alice studied the vessel for a moment.

Then she looked back at him.

“I’ve got time.”

Peter laughed again.

“Oh, Alice.”

He leaned closer across the table.

“You might regret saying that.”

### **Chapter XXV: The Price she had to pay**

After that unexpected encounter, both of them decided to go back to their posts and pretend that nothing had ever happened.

Alice stood near the hearth again.

Her voice rose above the noise, steady and sharp, cutting through the drunken laughter like a knife. Even the roughest bastards in the room paused when she sang.

Peter sat with his mug untouched.

He watched her carefully.

Something about the scene bothered him more with each passing minute. Not the singing, but the crowd. The way certain men looked at her. The way the innkeeper treated her.

When the song ended, a fat sailor slammed his mug down.

“Sing another, Jewish girl!”

Another man snorted.

“Or maybe shut the fuck up and bring us wine.”

Alice did neither. She simply stepped away from the hearth.

The innkeeper grabbed her arm.

“You’re not done, girl.”

Peter stood.

The chair scraped loudly against the floor.

Heads turned.

The innkeeper frowned.

“Sit down, Pete. She’s working.”

Peter walked closer.

“She’s not a fucking mule!”

The innkeeper sneered.

“She works here. Don’t try to raise any trouble, lad. She is not for you.”

Peter’s voice remained calm.

“How much?”

The man blinked.

“What?”

“How much to release her from whatever hell you’ve got her trapped in?”

The room went quiet.

Then someone laughed.

The innkeeper’s face hardened.

“You think you can buy my staff?”

Peter shrugged.

“I think I can buy a lot of things, now that I’m thinking.”

The innkeeper leaned forward.

“You arrogant cunt.”

The word hung in the air.

Peter’s smile vanished.

“I’m trying to be polite.”

Alice stepped between them.

“Peter,” she muttered, “don’t start something stupid.”

He glanced at her.

“Too late.”

The innkeeper shoved him.

“Get the fuck out!”

Peter did not move.

“I just asked a question.”

One of the sailors nearby stood up.

“You deaf, cock? He said get out.”

Peter sighed.

“Well,” he said quietly, “this is going unpleasant.”

The first punch came fast.

A chair flew across the room seconds later.

Someone smashed a bottle against the table. Another man swung a fist wildly and missed.

The inn erupted into chaos.

Peter fought like a man who had survived too many docks and too many drunken sailors. He ducked a blow, drove his elbow into someone’s ribs, and shoved another attacker into the wall.

But there were too many.

A heavy fist crashed into his jaw.

Another man struck him in the ribs.

Then something solid cracked against his shoulder, and Peter staggered.

“Fucking bastard!” someone shouted.

Alice tried to pull him back.

“Peter, stop!”

Another punch caught him across the face.

Blood spilled down his lip.

The innkeeper grabbed a wooden club from behind the bar.

“Time to end this shite!”

Before he could swing it, the door slammed open.

Billy stepped inside.

Behind him came Edward, James, and Leopold.

Billy took one look at the scene.

Peter bleeding. Tables overturned. Half the room armed with bottles and clubs.

He exhaled slowly.

“For fuck’s sake, Peter!”

The innkeeper raised his club.

“Your friend started it.”

Billy walked forward calmly.

The room seemed to shrink around him. He spoke quietly, but every man heard it.

“Put that down.”

The innkeeper laughed.

“Or what?”

Billy’s voice turned cold.

“Or you’ll discover why certain families in this Place still command respect.”

The man blinked.

Billy stepped closer.

“My name,” he said slowly, “belongs to the Komnenoi. A house that has buried more officers and generals than you’ve got teeth.”

The room fell silent.

Billy’s eyes moved across the crowd.

“You want to beat a drunken sailor to death over a fucking singer?”

No one spoke.

Billy pointed towards Peter.

“That man sails with us.”

Then he pointed towards Alice.

“And she’s leaving with us.”

The innkeeper hesitated.

James leaned casually against the doorway.

“If you’d like to continue the fight,” he added mildly, “I assure you it will become extremely unpleasant.”

Leopold cracked his knuckles.

The tension broke.

The innkeeper spat on the floor.

“Take her and get the fuck out.”

Billy nodded once.

“Wise decision.”

Peter was barely standing by the time they reached the harbour.

Maria pressed a cloth against the cut near his temple.

“You stupid bastard,” she muttered.

Peter groaned.

“I’ve been called worse.”

Alice walked beside them, still stunned.

“You’re all insane!”

James laughed softly.

“You’re just discovering that, my love?”

They reached the Queen.

Lantern light flickered across the deck as they helped Peter aboard.

Once he was seated, Alice looked around the crew.

“You risked all that for... me?”

Peter wiped blood from his lip.

“You’ve got a better voice than half the idiots on this coast.”

Alice folded her arms.

“That’s not what I meant, you fucked – up rat!”

Edward stepped forward.

“Then tell us who you are.”

Alice hesitated.

Then she began.

“My father was a tailor in Hannover. The name was Tannenbaum.”

Her voice had lost its performance tone. Now it was simple and honest.

“After **The Wars in the Germanies**, the place turned uglier than it already was. Jews weren’t exactly welcomed.”

Billy nodded quietly.

“So, you ran.”

“Yes.”

She glanced at Peter.

“I fled to England when I was fifteen. Can’t remember when exactly, but I’m sure that I was still an innocent child.”

Peter smirked.

“And soon you found a pub full of drunk sailors. Just like me!”

“It was one of the few places that tolerated people like me.”

James tilted his head.

“You loved singing?”

Alice nodded slowly.

“Kind of. Not exactly. I wanted to become an actress. To go to the opera.”

Leopold raised an eyebrow.

“That’s a bold ambition, sweetheart.”

Alice laughed bitterly.

“Ambition doesn’t matter when they say you don’t belong.”

She looked out across the dark harbour.

“After the **Bloodless Revolution**, everything became complicated. Politics, religion, rumours. Someone accused me of things I didn’t do.”

James sighed.

“Ah, yes. Misunderstandings travelled quickly in those times.”

“I was forced out,” she continued. “France first. Then everywhere else. City after city.”

Her voice softened.

“I kept singing because it was the only thing no one could take from me.”

Silence settled over the deck.

Alice finally looked back at them.

“And now I’m here. In the miserable Rumelli!”

Peter grinned weakly.

“Well...”

He gestured towards the ship.

“Welcome to the Queen.”

Alice blinked.

“You’re serious?”

Edward answered before Peter could.

“If you stay, you work.”

Billy added dryly, “And try not to start another fucking tavern war.”

Alice looked at the crew one by one.

Then she smiled.

“I’ve travelled half of Europe to find a place that might accept me. And out of all the places. Out of all these cunts, You are the ones that let be whatever I want to be? You? Here?”

She glanced at Peter.

“I suppose a pirate ship is as good as any. Is that right? Peter Blake?”

### **Chapter XXVI: A Place Among Wolves**

That same day, Alice became a witness of the Queen, and as it was the case for Maria, she had to become part of the ship.

The next day, the harbour stirred with the same restless energy that had settled over the town since the rumours of Turkish movement began spreading across the sea. Men argued along the docks, militia drilled poorly with borrowed muskets, and merchants counted their supplies as if they were expecting a siege.

On the deck of the Queen, Peter groaned as Maria tightened a bandage around his ribs.

“Christ,” he muttered, “that bloody innkeeper hits like a fucking ox!”

Maria tied the cloth firmly.

“That’s what happens when you try to liberate singers in the middle of a drunken crowd, Peter Blake.”

Peter winced.

“You called me by my full name? I have to say, you make all of this sound foolish.”

Maria laughed

“It was.”

Across the deck, Alice leaned against the rail, watching the harbour. The early light caught the water in pale silver. Ships moved slowly in and out of the bay.

Edward stepped beside her.

“You slept?”

“Not really. Only a little.”

“You’re welcome to leave if this isn’t what you expected.”

Alice laughed quietly.

“You pulled me out of a tavern fight and brought me onto a pirate ship preparing for war?”

She turned to face him and spoke with a level of irony.

“This is exactly what I expected!”

Edward studied her for a moment.

“Peter says you’re intelligent.”

Peter called weakly from behind them.

“She is, captain. Don’t let her singing fool you.”

Alice rolled her eyes.

“I appreciate the vote of confidence. Thanks, Pete.”

Edward gestured towards the harbour.

“Tell me what you see.”

Alice followed his gaze. Fishing boats. Merchant vessels. The scattered sails of coastal traders. On the far side of the harbour, Methaniots continued building crude barricades along the shore. But she looked longer than most people would have.

Then she spoke.

“The harbour is too open.”

Edward nodded slightly.

“Continue.”

“If Turkish ships arrive,” she said, “they won’t attack immediately. They will simply anchor outside and watch.”

James, leaning against the mast nearby, raised an eyebrow.

“And why would they do that?”

Alice shrugged.

“To see who panics first? I guess...”

Billy crossed his arms.

“That’s not a bad answer, girl.”

Alice pointed towards the narrow road climbing the volcanic slope above the harbour.

“If Methana loses that ridge, the town loses everything. Cannons up there would control the bay.”

Leopold, standing behind them, gave a small approving nod.

“Correct.”

Alice looked slightly surprised.

“You’re the Austrian, yes?”

“Yes.”

“You’ve seen wars like this.”

Leopold’s expression darkened slightly.

“I did.”

Edward looked back towards the town.

“So,” he said quietly, “what do we do?”

Alice thought for a moment.

Then she answered.

“You stop thinking like pirates.”

James chuckled.

“That sounds dangerous.”

Alice continued.

“You become one with the town’s defence. Fishermen watch the sea. Militia guard the roads. The Queen becomes something else.”

Edward glanced at her.

“What?”

“A messenger,” she said. “A scout. A rumour.”

James smiled slowly.

“Now that,” he said, “that is interesting!”

Billy nodded.

“The Ship stays mobile.”

“And unpredictable,” James added.

Edward looked at Alice again.

“You’ve thought about this before.”

Alice shrugged.

“When you spend years travelling through Europe while everyone hates your guts, you learn to observe.”

Peter laughed painfully.

“See? Told you she’s clever.”

James straightened.

“In that case, I propose something.”

Edward gestured for him to continue.

“Every crew needs someone who listens better than the rest of us. Someone who notices things.”

James nodded towards Alice.

“Someone who understands people.”

Iris smirked.

“You’re suggesting we recruit the Jew as a spy?”

James shrugged.

“Observer sounds nicer, I would say.”

Edward considered the idea.

Alice spoke before he answered.

“I’m not interested in spying on allies.”

James smiled.

“Good. Neither am I.”

She crossed her arms.

“Then what exactly are you offering?”

Edward answered.

“A place aboard the Queen.”

Billy added bluntly.

“And responsibility.”

Alice looked at the crew.

“Doing what exactly?”

Edward gestured towards the town.

“Information. Listening in taverns, watching who enters the harbour; understanding rumours.”

James nodded.

“You already proved to us you can read a room. Or rather, a deck.”

Peter grinned.

“And you’ve got the voice to get the folks talking.”

Alice thought for a moment.

Then she nodded.

“All right.”

Edward extended his hand.

“Welcome aboard.”

She shook it.

Later that afternoon, Edward stood with several of the older crew members on the harbour wall.

These were sailors who had joined long before Methana. They watched the sea with quiet seriousness.

One of them finally spoke.

“You know this peace won’t last.”

Edward nodded.

“I know.”

Another man spat into the water.

“The Turks don’t move slowly anymore.”

Billy leaned against the stone beside them.

“Neither should we.”

Edward looked out across the horizon.

“So what are you suggesting?”

The oldest sailor answered.

“Prepare for everything.”

Edward glanced at him.

“That’s vague.”

The man shrugged.

“So is war.”

James approached them, hands in his coat pockets.

“The town’s nervous.”

Billy snorted.

“No shite.”

James nodded towards the ridge above Methana.

“If the Turks come, that hill becomes the key.”

Edward looked back at the Queen resting quietly in the harbour.

The ship rocked gently in the wind.

“Then we prepare,” he said.

Billy crossed his arms.

“For what exactly?”

Edward’s voice was calm.

“For anything.”

The sea beyond Methana remained quiet.

But every man standing on that harbour wall knew the same truth.

That the calm would not last long.

### **Chapter XXVII: Guns and Rumours**

Within days, the Queen and her crew were no longer strangers drifting through the harbour. They had become something else entirely. A presence. A force that the town could neither ignore nor fully trust.

Word travelled quickly in a place like Methana. And rumours moved faster than ships.

By the fourth evening, the crew had already begun entangling themselves in the town’s politics.

Paraskevas welcomed them openly.

He stood in the town square near the harbour wall, speaking with Edward while several Methaniots gathered around maps spread across a wooden table.

“The Turks will try us,” Paraskevas said bluntly.

Edward nodded.

“Of course they will. People like us are what empires fear most.”

Paraskevas pointed towards the ridge above the town.

“Do you see that hill? That hill is everything! Cannons there control the bay.”

Billy stood beside them, arms crossed.

“We’ve noticed that.”

Paraskevas looked at him with approval.

“You’ve fought before?”

Billy shrugged.

“Enough. To say the least...”

Lazaros arrived moments later, carrying a crate of gunpowder.

Unlike Paraskevas, Lazaros seemed openly pleased about the crew's presence.

"More fighters mean more problems for the Turks," he said with a grin. "And, God, I enjoy giving them problems."

Peter muttered from behind them, still sore from the inn fight.

"That's a healthy attitude, lad."

Not everyone shared the enthusiasm.

Giovanni leaned against a stone pillar nearby, watching the entire discussion with narrow eyes.

He spoke quietly but firmly.

"I do not like outsiders controlling our defence."

Paraskevas frowned.

"They are not controlling anything, Giovanni. They are just here for help."

Giovanni gestured towards the harbour.

"They brought a warship."

Edward replied calmly.

"We just brought a simple galleon."

Giovanni's voice sharpened.

"And galleons attract enemies."

James stepped forward with a faint smile.

"Enemies are already coming."

Giovanni studied him carefully.

"And you seem strangely comfortable with that."

James shrugged.

"I simply prefer to be prepared. That's all."

Dionysius remained even more distant.

He attended meetings when necessary but rarely involved himself in arguments. His attention always drifted elsewhere.

When Edward approached him near the harbour one evening, Dionysius spoke before the captain could even greet him.

“You are here for your own reasons.”

Edward nodded.

“And you?”

Dionysius smiled faintly.

“I always have my own reasons.”

Edward studied him.

“You’re not concerned about the Turks.”

Dionysius looked out towards the sea.

“Oh, I’m concerned.”

Then he added quietly,

“But I believe that the state of the Church shall be left out of this...”

Meanwhile, the rumour spread.

It started in the inn where Peter had nearly been beaten unconscious.

Someone repeated Billy’s words. Someone else exaggerated them. Within two days, the entire harbour had heard the story. Billy supposedly descended from Roman nobility. By the third day, the story had grown larger. Much larger than Methana itself. By the fourth day, fishermen began whispering the phrase:

“He is a Komnenos...”

Billy learned about the rumour while repairing a rope near the Queen’s deck.

Peter approached him with a grin.

“Congratulations.”

Billy frowned.

“For what?”

Peter leaned against the rail.

“You’re, apparently, a lost seed of the old Romans.”

Billy stared at him.

“What the fuck are you talking about?”

Peter laughed.

“That speech you gave in the inn.”

Billy sighed.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake!”

James walked past them, clearly amused.

“You must admit,” he said, “the myth has potential.”

Billy glared at him.

“It was just a threat.”

“Yes,” James replied calmly. “And now it’s a legend.”

Billy muttered something unprintable.

The matter became unavoidable two nights later.

Paraskevas, Lazaros, Giovanni, and Dionysius gathered in the old fortress.

Billy, Edward, and James arrived shortly afterward.

Paraskevas spoke first.

“We’ve been hearing stories.”

Billy sighed.

“I imagine you have.”

Giovanni folded his arms.

“They concern you.”

Billy remained calm.

“They concern a drunken threat in a tavern.”

Dionysius leaned forward slightly.

“People say you carry the blood of the Komnenoi. Is that true?”

Billy stared at him for a moment.

Then he answered plainly.

“My family once served the Empire. My father descended from the line of Alexios. We remained in secret depths by never revealing our true heritage to anyone. We were, supposedly, the Georgiou family. A simple change in the name was enough for us to survive and endure.”

Silence settled over the table.

Finally, Lazaros laughed.

“Well,” he said, raising his drink, “Rhomios or not, the man saved a woman and stopped a riot.”

He took a sip from the finest wine the locals could produce.

“That’s good enough for me.”

Paraskevas nodded.

“For now..”

Dionysius had been silent for most of the evening.

He turned his cup slowly between his fingers, watching the amber liquid shift with the lanternlight.

Edward noticed.

“You’ve said very little tonight.”

Dionysius smiled faintly.

“I prefer to speak when words actually matter.”

Giovanni snorted.

“They always matter.”

Dionysius shook his head.

“No. Most of the time, they’re simply noise.”

Billy leaned back in his chair.

“Well then, enlighten us. Philosopher.”

Dionysius finally raised his eyes towards the table.

“The Turks will come.”

No one argued.

Paraskevas nodded slowly.

“Yes.”

Dionysius continued.

“And if they do, Methana will fight.”

Lazaros grinned.

“Damn right!”

Dionysius turned slightly towards him.

“And then what?”

Lazaros frowned.

“What do you mean?”

“You repel them once,” Dionysius said calmly. “Perhaps twice.”

He gestured towards the harbour.

“But empires do not lose patience. They simply return with larger fleets...”

Giovanni tapped the table.

“So, we fight again.”

Dionysius gave a small, almost amused smile.

“And eventually the town burns...”

Silence crept across the table.

Billy spoke first.

“That’s a cheerful fucking prediction!”

Dionysius shrugged.

“It’s history.”

James had been watching him carefully.

“Which means,” James said slowly, “you have another idea. Right?”

Dionysius looked at him.

“Yes.”

Paraskevas leaned forward.

“What are you suggesting?”

Dionysius’ voice remained calm, almost gentle.

“I intend to speak with the Turks...”

The reaction was immediate.

Giovanni slammed his cup onto the table.

“You what?”

Lazaros leaned forward, anger flashing in his eyes.

“You’re talking about surrender.”

Dionysius shook his head.

“No.”

Paraskevas stared at him.

“Then explain yourself!”

Dionysius folded his hands.

“You all think in simple terms. Victory or defeat. Freedom or conquest.”

He gestured slowly around the table.

“But the world rarely works like that.”

James smiled faintly.

“Ooh. Now this is interesting!”

Dionysius continued.

“The Turks are not fools. They govern half the eastern Mediterranean. They understand trade, politics, and negotiation.”

Giovanni spat on the floor.

“They are conquerors.”

“Yes,” Dionysius replied. “But conquerors still prefer the efficient rule.”

Edward spoke quietly.

“And what exactly do you think they would accept?”

Dionysius leaned back slightly.

“A bargain.”

Billy narrowed his eyes.

“What kind of bargain?”

Dionysius’ voice lowered.

“A state.”

The word hung in the air.

Paraskevas stared at him.

“What?”

“A new Roman state,” Dionysius said calmly.

Giovanni laughed bitterly.

“You’re dreaming.”

Dionysius shook his head.

“Not dreaming. I’m calculating.”

James leaned forward, intrigued.

“Go on.”

Dionysius continued.

“The Turks already govern countless peoples: Romans, Armenians, Arabs.”

He pointed towards the harbour.

“Methana is small. But the Peloponnese... the islands... the coast...”

He paused.

“With the right leadership, those territories could become something useful.”

Edward frowned.

“Useful to whom?”

Dionysius smiled faintly.

“To everyone!”

Billy muttered,

“That sounds like political bullshit.”

Dionysius continued calmly.

“The Turks gain a stable tributary state. A buffer between their empire and the western powers.”

He looked towards James.

“You see, Venice loses direct influence.”

Then towards Edward.

“And We can gain autonomy.”

Paraskevas stared at him.

“You’re proposing we serve... the Turks?”

“No,” Dionysius replied.

“I’m proposing we survive them.”

Giovanni slammed his hand on the table.

“That is betrayal.”

Dionysius met his gaze calmly.

His voice sharpened slightly.

“Betrayal is allowing your people to die for pride.”

The room went quiet again.

Lazaros leaned back slowly.

“And you think they’d accept this?”

Dionysius nodded once.

“If the offer is presented correctly. Sure.”

James smiled.

“You plan to negotiate with an empire.”

Dionysius returned the smile.

“Empires negotiate constantly. That’s the trick.”

Edward studied him carefully.

“And what role do you see for yourself in this... state?”

Dionysius answered without hesitation.

“Leadership.”

Billy laughed.

“There it is.”

Dionysius shrugged.

“Someone must build it.”

James looked genuinely impressed.

“You’re either a visionary or a lunatic.”

Dionysius lifted his cup.

“History tends to confuse these two.”

Across the table, Paraskevas remained silent for several seconds.

Finally, he spoke:

“If the Turks arrive,” he said slowly, “we fight first.”

Dionysius nodded.

“Of course.”

Paraskevas leaned forward.

“And if we survive that...”

He looked directly at Dionysius.

“Then perhaps we can... talk.”

Dionysius raised his drink slightly.

“A reasonable compromise,”

Billy muttered under his breath.

“Bloody hell...”

James leaned back in his chair, smiling faintly.

The politics of Methana had just become far more complicated.

Outside, the sea remained calm.

But every man in that tavern now understood the same truth.

When the Turks arrived, they would not simply be fighting for a town.

They would be fighting over the future of an entire region.

### **Chapter XXIII: L’amour toujours**

Elsewhere in Methana, two very different relationships continued evolving.

Leopold and Iris often disappeared together during the evenings.

Their conversations drifted between philosophy, cruelty, and dark amusement.

One night, they stood overlooking the harbour cliffs.

Leopold spoke quietly.

“The War simplifies this world.”

Iris tilted her head.

“How?”

“Enemies become obvious.”

She smiled faintly.

“And you enjoy that?”

Leopold looked towards the horizon.

“Yes.”

Iris studied him.

“You’re a dangerous man, Leopold.”

Leopold replied calmly.

“So are you. My love.”

She laughed softly.

“That’s why this works.”

Then, they gave themselves a soft and short kiss, and they continued wandering through the hills and plains of the peninsula.

Meanwhile, Peter and Alice wandered through the town like two conspirators discovering a new world.

They spent too much time in taverns, and they encouraged each other’s worst ideas.

One evening, they sat near the harbour wall watching the sunset.

Alice spoke first.

“You realise we’re both completely mad. Right?”

Peter grinned.

“And that is that.”

Alice leaned back against the stone.

“Ever read a story where someone falls into a strange world, and everything becomes nonsense?”

Peter raised an eyebrow.

“Nah. Not really..”

Alice smiled.

“I think Methana might be that place.”

Peter laughed.

“Then I suppose I’m... the guide?”

Alice shook her head.

“No.”

She looked at him carefully.

“You’re just the one half of that someone.”

Peter stared at her.

“That sounds lovely.”

Alice grinned.

“It was meant to be.”

They both laughed.

But somewhere beneath the humour, something dangerous had begun growing. Two people who had spent their lives running from the world had finally found someone equally reckless.

### **Chapter XXIX: The City of the Winds**

The harbour of Methana had begun to feel smaller.

More ships appeared on the horizon each morning. Some were traders avoiding trouble, others were locals returning early with rumours rather than goods. Every conversation in the town carried the same quiet question.

“When would the Turks arrive?”

Inside the fortress, the Queen’s crew and the Big Five of Methana gathered around a long wooden table scarred by years of argument.

Maps covered its surface.

Paraskevas leaned over them, tracing the Peloponnesian coast with a rough finger.

“We can defend Methana,” he said. “But not forever...”

Giovanni folded his arms.

“That sounds dangerously close to surrender.”

Lazaros shook his head.

“No. It sounds like the bitter truth...”

Edward stood opposite them, studying the coastline.

“What happens when the Turks return with a larger fleet?”

Giovanni shrugged.

“We fight again.”

Billy snorted.

“And when they return with twenty-five ships instead of five?”

Giovanni said nothing.

James tapped the map lightly.

“There’s another option.”

Paraskevas looked at him.

“Let’s hear it.”

James moved his finger south across the Peloponnese.

“Mani.”

Several men around the table exchanged glances.

Paraskevas’ expression shifted slightly.

“You’re suggesting retreat?”

James nodded.

“A strategic one.”

Billy commented.

“The Mani peninsula is a fortress.”

Lazaros smiled faintly.

“Now that is true.”

James pointed to a small mark on the map.

“Aeropolis. I hope I’m pronouncing that right.”

Paraskevas exhaled slowly.

“You know about that place?”

James shrugged.

“I make it my business to know things. That’s all.”

Paraskevas leaned back in his chair.

“Aeropolis is called the City of the Winds for a reason.”

Lazaros nodded.

“The cliffs and towers make it nearly impossible to conquer.”

Giovanni frowned.

“You’re proposing we abandon Methana?”

Edward answered calmly.

“No.”

Giovanni looked at him sharply.

“Then what?”

Edward rested his hands on the table.

“We prepare two outcomes.”

Billy spoke bluntly.

“If Methana holds, we hold with it.”

James continued.

“And if it doesn’t?”

Paraskevas looked at Lazaros.

Both men understood immediately.

Lazaros finally spoke.

“Then we fall back to Mani.”

Paraskevas nodded slowly.

“Aeropolis.”

Giovanni still looked unconvinced.

“You think the Maniots will welcome an entire town fleeing war?”

Lazaros laughed.

“They’ll welcome anyone willing to fight.”

James added quietly,

“And anyone who brings a ship prepared for war.”

Edward looked around the room.

“So, we prepare an evacuation route.”

Paraskevas studied the map again.

“I know those mountains,” he said slowly. “And Lazaros does too.”

Then, he tapped the map.

“If things turn sour here, we move south along the coast. Fast.”

Billy nodded.

“The Queen will escort the convoy.”

Edward looked at the others.

“Does anyone have a better idea?”

Giovanni muttered under his breath but remained silent.

Dionysius, who had been quiet the entire meeting, finally spoke.

“Aeropolis could become something... interesting.”

James glanced at him.

“You’re already thinking about your Roman state?”

Dionysius smiled faintly.

“Every city has potential.”

Billy muttered,

“Bloody hell.”

Later that evening, the rumour reached Leopold.

He found out in the harbour tavern where sailors were discussing the plan over cheap wine and loud voices.

“Mani,” one man said. “The Turks hate those mountains.”

Another nodded.

“They’ve tried conquering them for centuries.”

Leopold sat alone at the table, listening.

Then someone mentioned Aeropolis.

“The Wind City,” a fisherman said. “Stone towers everywhere.”

Leopold’s expression sharpened slightly.

He finished his drink slowly.

Peter noticed from the next table.

“You look like a man who just discovered a treasure map.”

Leopold stood.

“Yeah. Something like that.”

Peter raised an eyebrow.

“What is it?”

Leopold walked towards the door.

“Opportunity.”

Peter followed him outside.

“What opportunity?”

Leopold stopped near the harbour wall and looked out at the dark sea.

“You remember the people who ruined my family?”

Peter nodded.

“Hard to forget.”

Leopold’s voice lowered.

“They fled south years ago.”

Peter frowned.

“South where?”

Leopold turned towards him.

“Here. In the heart of Rumelia.”

Peter blinked.

“You’re telling me the bastards who destroyed your life might be walking here?”

Leopold’s eyes glinted in the lantern light.

“Yes.”

Peter exhaled slowly.

“Well...”

He rubbed his chin.

“That sounds like the beginning of a fucking terrible idea.”

Leopold smiled faintly.

“No.”

He looked towards the distant southern horizon.

“It sounds more like... justice.”

Behind them, the harbour of Methana remained restless, filled with preparations and rumours.

And far beyond the sea, the approaching storm of war continued moving closer.

### **Chapter XXX: The Response**

The news arrived in **Constantinople** first as rumor among sailors and merchants, then as sealed reports carried by imperial couriers. By the time it reached the chambers of the **Sublime Porte**, the whispers had hardened into intelligence.

A Claimant of Rhomeania had appeared.

Not merely another mountain rebel or island corsair, but a man whose rumored ancestry was spreading like fire through the Aegean. The reports said captains were rallying to him. Militias were pledging loyalty. Even some former Venetian mercenaries had joined his cause.

Inside the Imperial Council chamber, the Grand Vizier finished reading the dispatch.

He waited.

Behind the lattice screen sat **Mustafa II**.

The Sultan did not speak immediately. He simply listened as the final words echoed through the hall.

Silence followed.

Then Mustafa II spoke softly.

“So, this man is a Roman?”

The Vizier bowed his head slightly.

“That is what the rebels say, Your Majesty.”

“And the people believe it?”

“They want to.”

The Sultan leaned back, his eyes fixed calmly on the ministers before him.

“Belief,” he said slowly, “is more dangerous than armies.”

No one in the chamber dared interrupt.

Mustafa II continued with measured calm.

“An army fights because it must. A believer fights because he chooses to...”

He folded his hands.

“And a man who gives people something to believe in...”

The Sultan paused.

“...is not a mere rebel.”

The Grand Vizier swallowed.

“What is he then, Your Majesty?”

Mustafa II looked directly towards the council.

“A rival.”

The word landed heavily.

A murmur moved through the chamber.

The Sultan raised a hand. Silence returned instantly.

“Tell me something,” he said quietly. “How many rebellions have we crushed in the last fifty years?”

“Many, Your Majesty.”

“And how many of those men were remembered?”

“None.”

Mustafa II nodded slowly.

“Exactly.”

He stood.

Mustafa II turned towards the naval minister.

“Where is the Kapudan Pasha?”

The doors opened.

A tall man entered wearing the dark naval kaftan of the Ottoman fleet.

This was **Kapudan Pasha Ibrahim**, Grand Admiral of the imperial navy.

He bowed deeply.

“Your servant awaits the command of the Shadow of God on Earth.”

The Sultan rose.

The court scribes prepared their pens as he began reciting his imperial titulature, the formal language used in proclamations of war.

“I, Mustafa Khan, son of Mehmed Khan,  
Padishah of the House of Osman,  
Sultan of Sultans and Khan of Khans,  
Commander of the Faithful,  
Shadow of God upon the Earth,  
Sovereign of Constantinople,  
Protector of the Two Seas and the Two Lands...”

His voice remained calm. Controlled. Precise.

“...declare that rebellion spreads among the Roman subjects of the empire.”

The Sultan turned towards the admiral standing near the chamber entrance.

“Come forward.”

The admiral stepped closer and bowed deeply.

“Your servant awaits your command.”

Mustafa II studied him for a long moment.

“Tell me, Ibrahim Pasha,” the Sultan said quietly, “what is the purpose of power?”

The admiral hesitated.

“To defend the empire, Your Majesty.”

Mustafa II gave a faint smile.

“No.”

The entire chamber froze.

“Power,” the Sultan continued calmly, “exists so that men do not forget who holds it.”

He stepped down from the throne platform.

“You will sail with the imperial fleet.”

“With how many ships, Majesty?”

The Sultan’s voice remained perfectly controlled.

“Enough to stop this threat. Bring a dozen of them!”

Mustafa II walked slowly across the chamber floor.

“The islands that support this man will be blockaded!”

He turned slightly.

“The ports that shelter him will be burned!”

Another step.

“The captains who swear loyalty to him will drown!”

The Sultan finally stopped.

“And this Roman pretender...”

He looked directly at the admiral.

“...shall be brought to **Constantinople** alive.”

The Vizier carefully asked,

“Alive, Your Majesty?”

Mustafa II’s expression did not change.

“Yes.”

A small pause followed.

“I want the empire to see what happens when someone mistakes ambition for destiny.”

The scribes completed the decree.

Within hours, the order spread through the great shipyards of the **Tersane-i Amire**, where galleys were armed and cannons loaded along the Golden Horn.

## **Chapter XXXI: Wine and Games**

The wind carried the smell of pitch and something worse. Fear had a way of settling into a place before the enemy ever arrived. Methana felt it now. Every narrow street, every cracked wall, every tired face waiting for sails on the horizon.

Myriads of people had gathered near the bay and the hills, prepared for everything that the Sublime Porte would throw at them, like prisoners waiting for their punishment. The crew, however, didn't want to get involved again in the war plans of the Methana and, instead, they decided to concentrate on their dynamic and chill for a bit by playing some games in an inn.

Inside the infamous "Hippocampus", the crew shut the door against the noise of the town. To escape it. To breathe without it clawing at their throats.

Peter dropped a worn deck of cards onto the table.

"Right," he said. "If we're about to die, we might as well do it properly, lads!"

Alice raised a brow. "And this is your... grand preparation, my love?"

"It's a Venetian game," Peter replied, already shuffling. "Scopa. Simple and fast, if you play it right, of course."

Billy leaned back. "Those cards won't stop the cannon fire."

"No," Peter said, dealing. "But they might stop us from losing our bloody minds before this fuckery of a war starts."

Catherine sat first, watching the cards with curiosity. John followed, arms crossed but attentive. Tim leaned in like a man trying to memorise something that might save him later.

Across from them, Leopold and Iris sat together. Close. Too close. Their silence carried weight.

Maria stood by the window at first, then slowly joined. Alice lingered last, then took a seat beside Peter, her fingers brushing his for just a second longer than needed.

"So, the rules?" John asked.

Peter smirked. "Take what you can. Leave nothing behind. Closest thing to war you'll find on a table, mate."

Iris gave a faint smile. "Oh, how fitting."

The first few rounds were quiet. Cards slapped wood. Eyes watched. Minds worked.

Tim frowned. "So, you just... take everything that adds up?"

“If you can,” Peter said. “If not, you wait. Or you lose. Simple as that.”

“Sounds familiar,” Catherine murmured.

Leopold glanced at her. “War teaches us the same lesson.”

John exhaled. “Everything comes back to war with you, doesn’t it?”

Leopold didn’t look away. “Everything is war.”

Iris spoke without lifting her eyes from her cards. “No. Everything ends in war. There’s a difference.”

Tim shifted. “That’s... not comforting.”

“It isn’t meant to be,” Iris replied.

Alice placed a card down, clean and precise.

“You all speak of war as if it’s some grand force,” she said. “But it’s just a meat of people, isn’t it? Angry, frightened people with weapons.”

Billy nodded once. “Aye.”

Leopold shook his head. “No. It’s history. It’s what people carry long after the fight ends.”

“And what do you carry, Austrian?” Alice asked, her voice soft but cutting.

Leopold met her gaze. “Enough.”

Silence held for a moment.

Then Peter snorted. “Brilliant. We’re all traumatised. Can we get back to the bloody game?”

Alice smirked. “Always the poet, I see.”

“Fuck poetry,” Peter said. “Play your card, Alice.”

Maria finally spoke, quiet but clear.

“In Tyrol, we were taught to prepare,” she said. “Not just for war, but for everything that might strike us with brute force and take from us the most desired loves we had.”

Catherine looked at her. “And? Did it help?”

Maria considered it. “No. But it made the loss rather... expected.”

John let out a low breath. “That might be worse.”

“It is,” Iris said.

Tim placed a card down too quickly.

Peter pounced on it. "And that, my friend, is how you lose everything!"

Tim groaned. "I'm shit at this."

"You're alive," Billy said. "That counts for something. Right?"

"For now," Tim muttered.

Outside, a bell rang.

Once. Twice.

No one moved.

John looked toward the door. "That's not good, is it?"

Edward's voice came from the corner, calm as ever.

"No," he said. "It means they've been sighted."

The room tightened.

Peter slowly set his cards down.

"Well," he said. "There's that."

Alice looked at him. "Are you afraid like a turkey?"

He let out a short laugh. "Terrified."

"Good," she said softly. "So am I."

Their eyes held.

Too long. Too much.

Leopold stood.

"Then we stop pretending," he said. "We fight!"

Edward stepped forward.

"We survive," he corrected.

Leopold's jaw tightened. "At what cost, captain?"

Edward met him evenly. "The one we can afford."

Iris rose beside Leopold, her voice low.

"Careful," she said. "Those who chase revenge end up feeding it."

Leopold didn't respond.

But he didn't sit back down either.

Peter picked the cards back up, tapping them against the table.

"One more round," he said. "Before the world ends."

Alice smiled faintly. "You really are mad, my love."

"Probably," he said. "But I'd rather be mad with you than sane out there."

She leaned closer.

"My love," she whispered, "there's nothing sane about either of us."

The cards fell again.

Outside, Methana prepared to burn.

Inside, they held onto something fragile. Not hope, or peace.

Just each other. For now.