



## Chapter 1

The Bastard's sails swelled and snapped, jarring the mighty whaler atop the roiling sea.

Lasasha dropped her sandstone and dug her nails into the deck. An enormous wave rolled beneath the hull, lifting them thirty footfalls into the air before dropping the vessel back into the sea with a horrendous boom.

Above her, the main mast ominously creaked and groaned. It had cracked only two calls ago, nearly crippling the vessel in fifty footfall high waters.

*And now just six pieces of sundried planking and tar coated rope stand between us and death,* she thought as she stared at the jury-rigged patch.

“Keep scrubbing, mutie,” the deck lord shouted as a vein of lightning flashed behind him. “Unlike you she can’t lick herself clean.”

Several crewmen chuckled as the deck lord turned back to the bow.

Lasasha ignored them. After three weeks at sea, she had grown used to their jibes.

“I’ve seen you before, haven’t I mutie?” a voice asked.

Lasasha turned. *Starks*, she thought, cringing as the man leered at her. A pederast Kraken had purchased in Ix for two barrels of laxore oil.

“Yeah. A brothel bunny... out of Cumlety.” Starks dropped his sandstone and leaned close to her ear. “Perhaps one of these days we could reacquaint ourselves, eh?”

Lasasha continued scrubbing. *Keep working... he just wants a reason to fight.*

The deck bell tolled three times, signaling a shift change.

Lasasha sighed as a line of haggard souls poured onto the deck.

“Find your cots,” the deck lord barked. “A storm is brewing, and we’ll be needing all your sweat come morning.”

Starks grabbed Lasasha’s arm. “I’ll be seeing ya soon kitty.”

Lasasha pushed his hand aside and filed in behind the exhausted crew.

“You best stay clear of that one,” a man whispered behind her. “His name is known in dark circles.”

“I plan to,” Lasasha said. She glanced up at the deck lord, who had watched the entire exchange with cold indifference.

“For fuck’s sake, don’t stare at him,” the man whispered. “He’s tossed men overboard for less.”

Lasasha tightened her laptane hood. “The Kraken puts a lot of trust in him.”

“He was one of his father’s shipmates,” the man said. “Saved Kraken when Mircala took down the Baleard. Supposedly he was wearing that same suit when it happened.”

Lasasha stole another glance at the man. His suit was faded and gray, its once orange sheen all but stripped clean by acid exposure.

The bell rang three times, signaling the start of the new shift.

Exhausted, Lasasha glanced up at the Bastard’s tallest crow’s nest.

Dead Man’s Perch. A nickname it had earned well according to the crew. For it was completely exposed, save for a patched roof barely large enough to keep out the rain, let alone the countless poison mists and rain they encountered daily.

Her heart sank as Michael and Waypman’s silhouettes huddled atop it. They had been up there since they left port, a cruel joke the crew delighted in.

A man laughed beside her. "Count yourself lucky it ain't you up there, mutie. The last two greenhorns the Kraken sent there were never seen again."

Lasasha ignored the crewman and headed below deck.

In the dim, humid cabin, dozens of sweat stained hammocks swayed before her.

*How can they live this way?* she wondered as snores and flatulence permeated the vaporous air. Three men had already died of exhaustion since leaving port. And now five more lay in their deathbeds in the rear cabin, tucked out of site so as to not jinx the rest of the superstitious crew.

*It's the damn oars*, she thought as she wove between the hammocks. For the last three days, half the crew had been forced to work them. A grueling task normally reserved for slaves and prisoners. But the Kraken had refused to bring any on this voyage, leaving the backbreaking work to his deckhands.

"Ya best take a good long look," a voice whispered behind her.

Lasasha turned.

Starks stood a few footfalls away, his bloodshot eyes leering at her.

"If ya don't please old Starky tonight, maybe you'll find yourself rowing beside them come first call."

Lasasha instinctively reached for her blade, only to remember it had been locked away in the ship's armory when she boarded.

Starks grinned. "Missing something, kitty?"

"I don't want any trouble."

The man's bloodshot eyes rolled up and down her body. "Come, come, mutie. One twirl. Just one... quick... twirl." He lunged forward and tackled her to the floor.

“Get off of me!” Lasasha hissed as Starks straddled her, pinning her arms to the deck with his knees.

“It’s been so long since I’ve had a woman,” he slurred, drool dripping from the corner of his acid-scarred mouth. “A mutie will do just fine, though.”

Desperate, Lasasha drove her knee hard into his back.

Starks doubled over, groaning. “You bitch!”

Before he could recover, Lasasha grabbed him by the throat and thrust him against the hull.

“I’ll kill you, mutie!” he gasped as she strangled him. “Before we hit sand, I’ll see your blood!”

Lasasha squeezed harder, her nails pricking his flesh. “Come near me again and I’ll tear out your throat! Understand?”

Starks clawed at her hands, his eyes bulging as she cut off his air.

“Understand!!!”

He nodded.

Lasasha tossed him aside and watched as he scampered back into the shadows.

“It will be a long voyage for you,” a voice said behind her.

Lasasha turned.

A man lay in the folds of a hammock, his face bathed in shadow. He struck a match, revealing twin chains tattooed across his bald, acid-scarred scalp.

*A Rider’s mark*, Lasasha thought. Outcasts and rogues who roamed the sea atop the backs of laptane sharks. They were said to live beyond the Dead Reefs, deep in the Silent Waters above Northern Alg. But no man outside of the clans knew exactly where.

Smoke poured from the man's nostrils. "I've been watching you, you know."

Lasasha tensed. "Is that so?"

"You and me... we're not all that different. Two outcasts... adrift on the tides." He pulled a dagger from the folds of his hammock and extended it to her. "You would do well to keep this close."

Lasasha looked at the blade. "Why give me such a thing?"

"Because you'll need it before the journey's through. And because I know your people."

Lasasha huffed. "How do you know my people?"

"My first tratoten, or what you would call a wife, was from the Waste. We met in Ix and rode the seas for nigh on twenty turns before the sea called her back to the Black Halls."

Lasasha glanced at the weapon. It was little more than a laptane fang embedded in a leatherbound, wood handle.

She gestured toward his tattoo. "Your clan's crest?"

The Rider grinned. "Black Gill. The strongest to ride the tides."

Lasasha took a seat in the hammock opposite him. "So why take up with this Kraken? You're a free man."

"I was," the Rider replied. He pointed to a set of ankle cuffs tethering him to the floor. "Lost my beast to shark poachers near Ix and was plucked from the sea by the Bastard."

"So why imprison you?"

The man laughed. "My men and I were trying to sink the Bastard."

Lasasha tensed. "In the name of the gods, why?"

“She hunts laptane pods just as often as laxore,” he replied. “And that is something my clan cannot abide.” He extended the blade to her again. “We are both prisoners now, friend. Whether you know it or not. But things change. Like the tides, they always change.”

Lasasha cautiously accepted the gift. It was six inches long and black as coal, with naturally serrated edges running down either side of it.

“Your name?” she asked.

The Rider sat up and bowed. “Gar Tenem.”

She nodded. “I am Lasasha.”

He smiled. “I think you came to me for a purpose, Lasasha of the Waste. Not like these other starving dogs. You and your brood chase after something quite special, yes?”

Lasasha tensed. *Already the vultures circle.*

“Come, come,” he went on. “We’ve all heard Tria speak of it. Meridium, yes? More than any charger has seen since the war.”

Lasasha felt her chest tighten. *How quickly secrets ride the Culver winds.*

“My people may be nothing more than faded legend,” he spoke, “but bands are reforming, clans reuniting. And they gather for one purpose and one purpose only.”

“And that is?”

The man smiled again. “To reclaim that which is ours. The sea.”

Footfalls thudded down the stairwell. “Next shift, third turn!” a voice cried.

The Rider stood and sealed his laptane suit. “The winds are changing. You have but to choose a side.” And with that said, he climbed the stairs and filed in behind the new shift.

Lasasha lay back in her hammock, the blade tucked at her side. With the Rider’s words still fresh in her head, she closed her eyes. But there would be no sleep tonight.

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The next day was as grueling as the previous. Lasasha's shift awoke at dawn and scrubbed the deck with sand stones. At noon, they stopped to wipe down tattered sails with laptane grease. When that was finished, they hauled the crew's waste buckets fore and aft, dumping their vile contents into the sea.

But through it all Lasasha never once saw the mysterious Rider. When she asked several deckhands about him, the men laughed and cursed at her.

"A shark rider my arse," an elderly oarsman named Ud bellowed. "He's nothing but a thief the Kraken plucked from the water after a failed raid."

"He's got the right of it," a man named Qwan added as he spooned moldy porridge into his toothless maw. "The lout and his brethren fled like jelly fish when they saw us coming. Useless if you ask me, gutless and without honor."

The sun slowly arched across the cloudy, colorless sky, casting Dead Man's Perch in silhouette. *May the gods watch over you*, Lasasha prayed as she brushed grease across a patched section of laptane sail.

"Did you hear? We're going after that damn laxore," a man mumbled beside her.

Lasasha dropped her brush. "They've spotted it?"

"Not yet. But I heard Artan blabbing about it with the deck lord."

"That's just great," another man spat. "With that much weight at our bow, we'll go under, bladders or not."

"That ain't the worst of it," one of the slaves cut in. "I heard we're skirting the Shelf."

Lasasha's fur prickled. The Shelf was the edge of the known sea, the last charted zone before they sailed off the map.

"In the name of the gods, why?" one of the men asked. "There's nothing there but fire coral and acid plumes."

"He's obsessed," the man beside Lasasha replied. "You all heard him crying the beast's name above the storm last night."

A chill danced down Lasasha's spine. She had heard him. Even the witch woman, Tria, had confined herself atop the aft nest as her lover lamented.

A cold breeze gusted across the deck, bringing with it tiny snowflakes which drifted down like spectral flies.

*An elemental*, Lasasha thought as thunder grumbled in the west. And it was close. Real close. A crimson colored cloud slithered across the western horizon, bands of yellow and tan curling through it like rivers of vomit.

*Frost trap*, she thought. Most were left over from the Meridium War, manufactured by chargers to protect the Culver shores from Circle armies. But after turns of abandonment, they now roamed the Acid like blind, feral animals.

"Heads down!" one of the deckhands whispered.

Kraken stepped atop the forecastle, Tria nestled at his side. As lightning cast them in silhouette, the witch woman's lifeless eyes scanned the deck.

*Black ways lurk behind that woman's eyes*, Lasasha thought as a clap of thunder shook the Bastard's planks.

"Back to work!" the deck lord barked. "Shift end isn't for ten calls."

Lasasha turned back to the sail. But not before glancing one last time at Tria.

*She will see us to the abyss before this is through, she thought.*

The woman noticed her and smiled, her eyes glistening with torchlight.

Lasasha touched the dagger concealed against her chest. *Starks may be the least of my problems now, she thought.*

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Kraken leaned against the aft railing, his blind eyes gazing across the angry sea. At his side, Tria nestled deep in the folds of her cloak, her silver hair dancing in the wind.

“It grows worse,” she said.

Kraken took in a deep breath. He could smell the storms on the easterly winds.

“How many are there today?” Kraken asked.

“At least two storms starboard and aft,” Tria replied. “Maybe another to port.”

Kraken turned skyward. The warmth of a distant fire elemental caressed his sensitive flesh. “We run dark, yes?”

Tria smiled. “The Bastard is as black as your eyes, my fish lord.”

Kraken nodded. He had ordered all lamps and torches snuffed at dusk. There were other whalers out there, Algian and Garfax hunters who prowled the Shelf. If any were to spot the Bastard, they would shadow him for the rest of voyage.

“A fog approaches,” Tria spoke. “It will aid us in the coming calls.”

Kraken nodded. “Tonight we end this.”

“Indeed.” Tria curled into his arms. “The sea shall ripple red with our vengeance.”

Kraken ran a hand across her face. Time and meridium addiction had been cruel to her; Tria's once smooth and dimpled flesh was now covered in waxen scar tissue and wrinkles. *My love*, he thought. *You breathe beside me, yet I lost you long ago.*

“Have the deck lord beat to quarters at first sight of the post,” he ordered.

“Very well, my lord.”

Kraken touched his necklace. The Baleard’s sole remaining nail felt warm and sharp against his thumb.

*Like my rage.*

“Tonight we shall meet again, Mircalla.” He closed his blind eyes and took a deep breath. The Acid vapors burned his throat and sinuses, but he no longer cared.

*We will soon be done with this, father. Tonight you will know peace.*