

It was two days before Portia Oronoco's fifteenth birthday, and if all went well, it would be her last day in her hometown. The isolated island village of Grotto was often mistaken for a curry stain on maps, if it was ever marked at all, and no traveling troubadour troupes bothered to anchor in its meager harbor. Besides, after this summer's growth spurt, Portia had obviously outgrown the little hamlet and was destined for the world that extended beyond Grotto's rocky shores.

*The only good thing about this rock,* Portia thought to herself as she doodled in her journal, *is this view.* Perched upon her favorite hill that overlooked the market and docks, Portia was whittling away the early hours of the eve of the eve of her birthday with a familiar routine. Portia visited this hill with such frequency that the rough dirt had been polished into a comfortable silt and half of her journal pages presented her nautical works of art. She was working on the sails, usually the trickiest bit, but the importance of this day had given her a creative vigor, and she stuck her tongue out in glee as she turned a stray line into a terrifying sea monster, engaged in battle with the ship's brave crew. Portia wasn't a naturally gifted artist, but flipping through her journal proved that her

excursions to the overlook improved her skills. She was happy with her efforts.

Perilously low on ink and time, Portia latched her journal shut and jogged down the windy path back to Grotto. The rest of the village was clambering up to its feet with a collective yawn as the sunlight rudely pierced through windows and announced the newborn day. Portia strode past the schoolhouse where she lived and made her way across the market to the docks. The girl had "borrowed" her teacher's only squid-ink pen and needed to refill it before it was missed; that meant a visit to her friend Cal, a sailor on the only ship currently docked, the *Graysby*.

Portia adjusted her long black braid so it laid perfectly straight behind her back. At least, as perfectly straight as her hair would allow, which wasn't much: it was so unruly and free-spirited that the children of Grotto suspected it was sentient. Portia was the tallest kid on the island. When her hair was liberated from the braid's clutches, she vaguely resembled a palm tree. The other kids were not unaware of this likeness.

Portia approached the *Graysby*, a small merchant ship that had modeled for many of Portia's drawings. While the captain argued loudly over prices with Wilky the fishmonger, the crew was busy loading crates of tiger trout and acu-acu onto the ship

without much of a fuss, except for one sailor crouched over the debris of a broken box. Cal.

Portia approached her friend as he gathered all the trout in his arms, looking over his shoulder to see if any crewmates—or the captain, he thought with a shudder—had seen his fishy fluke.

“Morning, Cal.”

“Oi!” Cal jumped with a shriek, sending more fish splattering down the dock planks. “Y’can’t be doin’ that t’me Porsh! Seen?”

“Sorry, I just—”

“Belay that, ‘elp me pick these buggers up, ‘fore m’cap’n ‘as me flogged. Chearly!”

Portia spent her early years at sea in the company of sailors, but the rules (or lack thereof) of that dialect were lost to her. She only ever understood a fraction of what Cal was saying but still complied. She didn’t like fish, especially with their heads still intact. They thoroughly creeped her out: it was the eyes, which looked dead even when alive, staring at her accusingly, mouth agape in presumed disbelief. Portia picked up each fish by the tail and held them out like a soiled diaper, head turned to the side.

After all the fish were returned to the crate, minus a few stragglers kicked into the shallow water, Cal wiped the sweat off his brow with a bandana.

"Reckon that'll keep m'behind intact for a few more moons at least. Now what brings me the pleasure of y'visit, Miss Portia?" She held out her pen.

"Need the ink refilled before class starts. Which was a few minutes ago." Cal took it with a smile, and lugged the crate back onto his ship. Portia sat on the docks and watched the sun rise over the swaying ship and lackadaisical waves. She would miss it. A gust of wind blew the smells of Wilky's market stall to Portia's innocent nostrils, which she decidedly would not miss.

Portia had called Grotto home for six years, the longest she had called any place home. She used to live at sea with her younger brother Prince and treasure-hunting parents, pitching tents in tombs or stargazing on beaches until the twinkling cosmos lulled them all to sleep. Then it all went wrong.

"'Ere ye go, Porsh, sorry t'keep ye waitin'." said Cal, returning the pen. "Cheers f'y'elp, ye'd make a fair deck'and."

"I wouldn't pick up a bunch of nasty fish for just anybody, y'know." said Portia. The village was much more lively and awake now, and Miss Galway would be tapping her foot, arms crossed, thinking of an appropriate punishment to help inspire the highly

inappropriate punishment she would eventually deliver. A wave of relief accompanied the thought of leaving Grotto forever. "Hey Cal, the *Graysby's* leaving port this evening, right?"

"Fore sunset, if all goes well."

"I'll pay you then. Have to leg it. Bye!" She sprinted through the market toward the schoolhouse.

"How wonderful! Portia has decided to join our class today, children. Isn't that wonderful?" said Miss Galway as a panting Portia opened the door.

"Yes, Miss Galway." replied a monotone chorus.

"Might you be so kind as to tell the class what was keeping you so busy this morning?" The teacher's foot moved like it was keeping the beat of a frantic song.

"I was drawing, Miss Galway, and lost track of the time."

"Ah! That explains why you reek of fish and your hands are covered in scales." A few kids giggled. "Try again and see if you can remember just a bit more clearly." Portia braced for what was to come.

"I was at the docks buying ink." *Tap tap tap tap tap.*

"That's very interesting, Portia! Isn't that interesting, class?"

"Yes, Miss Galway."

"Unless Wilky decided to expand into calligraphic merchandise this morning, no one on the island offers squid ink. So from whom were you buying this ink?"

"A sailor on the *Graysby*."

"A sailor on the *Graysby*. I'll assume that's the name of the rotting bucket infecting our once-pristine bay." Miss Galway had a look of satisfied arrogance that Portia had come to loathe over the last six years. Her teacher doubled as her caretaker and countless punishments had been preceded with this haughty grin. "Now since you've shown up, tardy I should add, spreading this wretch's concoction of blights and diseases he's no doubt riddled with, why don't you take a seat for today's lecture? In the *back*, please." Portia knew anything but complete compliance would be the last mistake she ever made.

"Today we will be learning about the enemies of all mankind that plague the waters of Libertalia: pirates." There were a few groans among the class. "As I hope you would all know by now, the most dangerous creature in all of Libertalia isn't the colossal *lusca*, or the ravenous ghost sharks of the depths, or even the amphibious crocoatl that prowl the rivers of the Tximec Kingdom. More cruel and deadly than perhaps all these monsters combined is the pirate, and your classmate decided it was better to conduct business with one than attend class."

"He's not a pirate, he's a merchant sailor!"

"Yes, now he's a sailor, but this is precisely why a pirate is such a threat: they're shapeshifters. A pirate could've been a merchant, or a soldier, or a fisherman. When they bore of their crimes they could settle down and govern an entire island for all we know! No one is born a pirate, but many are born rotten and evil, and in this part of the world those people take to the water where they think themselves free from all authority. Pirate ships house cutpurses from Guara and black magic users from Kree, along with every lowlife this archipelago has to offer. That is why you must never trust a sailor, children. Understood?"

"Yes, Miss Galway." droned the class, save for one voice.

"Portia, since you don't understand, would you like to tell us what you think?" All eyes turned to the girl in the back. Over the years, piles of extra assignments and chores had weathered down Portia's resistance. Today was different. She thought of her seafaring parents. She thought of the sailors she grew up with, ate with, laughed with, who accompanied her parents on a simple scouting mission while Portia cooked breakfast for Prince over a beachside campfire. She thought of the one sailor who returned, half-dead and bloody, to say that they had been ambushed by Chancellor Snelgrave Mackie, and no one else had made it out.

Today was going to be her last on Grotto, and she wanted to make it count.

"I think you're wrong." she said to an audible gasp from her classmates and a wry smile from her brother. "I think some pirates are just minding their own business. I think some are tired of the rich folk who think they can run everything and get away with it. I think some are fighting against these Imperians that show up and think they own the place. But where you're most wrong, Miss Galway, is that no one is born bad. They learn it, from people like you."

Her classmates weren't sure how to react: certainly in shock at Portia's defiance and grateful for the lapse in learning, but deathly afraid of Miss Galway's current expression, which would scare the salt out of seawater.

Miss Galway walked toward Portia, with quick, purposeful steps, baring her teeth like a rabid dog.

"Never in my years of teaching have I seen such a disgrace to the institution of education!" she barked, shaking with a rage unfamiliar even to the battle-worn students. She was interrupted by a familiar giggle that quickly surged into an even more familiar belly laugh.

"If you wanted to see a disgrace to the in-suh-too-shun of education you should've looked in the mirror Miss Galway!" said



Prince. "Every other day you talk about how bad pirate folk are. Tox been here his whole life and he can't read none!" Prince managed between laughs.

Tox looked up from carving into his chair with a gutting knife for the first time that morning.

"We don't mind none," continued Prince, "since we get to play more. But the grown-up folk pay you so we can know about diseases and spirits and animals and that kinda stuff."

All jaws dropped. Even Tox put his knife away. Prince had a reputation for troublemaking, but confronting Miss Galway had always been a specialty of his sister's. None was more shocked than Miss Galway, who was now in a unique predicament of deciding who needed to be yelled at first.

"Face it, Miss Galway." said Portia, leaning back in her chair. "You're scared."

"Why *wouldn't* I be scared, hm? Gangs of pirates roaming the seas, plundering whatever and *whomever* they so please, it's—"

"Not just of pirates, Miss. Of yourself. You had big plans, and you ended up teaching letters to a bunch of brats on an insignificant little rock. And you can't handle it, and that scares you, so you try to make us scared too. Not anymore. Understood?"

*Thwap.*

Portia held her burning cheek. The pain seemed distant, like she was just remembering it. Miss Galway was never above verbal and mental abuse but a truce had always been observed at physical. Violence, of course, was for pirates. Miss Galway had the bloodthirsty eyes of a ravenous buccaneer.

"I'm surprised at your insolence but perhaps I shouldn't be. Your behavior—or complete absence thereof—is to be expected coming from your blood. You were raised by greedy scavengers who put the pursuit of treasure over the lives of themselves and their children, and they deserved what came to them."

*Thwap!*

Portia's hand moved independently of her body and mind. She was just as shocked as everyone. Tox's knife clattered to the floor. Silence filled every corner of the room. All Portia could do was look at her hand, now a shade more red.

Miss Galway blinked. The schoolteacher looked around at her students as the weight of the situation settled in.

"Children," she breathed, "let's end class early today." The carnival that normally would have ensued was replaced with a class-wide understanding and orderly exit. Portia and Prince didn't budge. Miss Galway was similarly statuesque.

"I think we should all retire to our rooms." said Miss Galway after what could have been moments or minutes. The

siblings stood up and marched to their rooms deeper within the schoolhouse.

The building that housed the classroom as well as their living quarters once served as the mining foreman's offices back when copper in the hills of Grotto was as abundant as apples in an orchard. Mineshafts don't have a reputation for being comfortable, but that's only because they aren't. Dug into the limestone, Portia's room was cold, cramped, and dark, although at least she couldn't see the growing mold colonies on the wall. The only source of light was the pale turquoise glint of an algae lamp, which cast a ghostly bioluminescent veil across her room. Portia, still feeling a sting in both her cheek and her pride, looked upon the room's contents with pity, hopefully for the last time. A gull feather mattress that had shed most of said feathers, a few crumpled garments of clothing, and a smattering of empty ink vials rested on the cold stone floor.

Portia tossed her journal onto a driftwood table and flopped onto the bed, which ended around her knees these days. She felt along the wall until her fingers met a loose rock, which was clawed away to reveal her special hidey-hole. Many blisters were endured and old mining tools "misplaced" over the years to create this storage space in the wall. Inside, a small sack held dozens of coral, copper, and gold Beans that would help pay for her

first few meals until she started her maiden adventure. There were also some books that Portia was diligent to keep out of Miss Galway's eyesight: a nautical dictionary, two cheesy adventure novels set on the high seas, and a beginner's guide to navigation. She sifted through these tomes—one of the few sources of entertainment on the island—and pulled out a scrap of canvas. It was a fragment of a portrait commissioned years ago by the governor of Jimoro. The scrap of canvas depicted Desmond and Fortuna Oronoco, treasure hunting extraordinaries. On difficult nights Portia would pull out the portrait piece and try to feel the warmth of her mother's smile and hear the ringing baritone of her father's laugh. She wanted to cry, she wanted to scream, she wanted to feel anything but the lingering pain in her cheek and her palm. Portia stared at the fading oils but only managed to strain her eyes.

Someone tapped on her door. Portia stashed her precious canvas scrap and thrust the hunk of wall back into place before answering.

"You doin' alright?" It was only Prince. Portia sat herself back on her mattress while her brother squatted on the floor.

"What do you think?"

"You *slapped* her! In front of the class and everythin'!"

"I know, I was there. Keep your voice down."

"Here I was thinking we was having another boring day, then you come tellin' her off like you were some big boss man."

"We were having another boring day. And keep your voice down."

"You wa-...were acting in self defense, clear as the sea. Who gave her the right to hit you, what crime'd you commit, huh? Tellin' the truth?" He scrambled closer to his older sister so their noses were an apple's width apart. "Why'd she start talkin' 'bout mom and dad? If she kept going on like that and I would've give her a mean old slap, too. You had the right idea, Porsh, truth!" Portia shook her head.

"I shouldn't have done that. Doesn't matter now. Listen, Prince. I got something important to tell you. Something I have to do: big time stuff. And I need you to help me."

"You mean you're finally gonna stuff some rotten fish in Miss Galway's desk?"

"No. What? No, listen." Portia stood up and peered out into the narrow hallway, making sure Miss Galway's door was shut.

"C'mon Porsh, don't keep me waiting. You're sweet on someone! That's it, tell me about him, no lies."

The words hissed out of Portia's mouth like steam from a kettle.

"I'm leaving, Prince."