

Part IV

A letter penned to an errant lover

Loredas, 16th Sun's Dawn, 2E 807

To my dearest Albinia,

I realize that this must come as some surprise to you. I can see you now, grimacing at the sight of my name scrawled upon this parcel, scrunching your nose the way you always do. I remember fondly how you used to do that whenever you scowled at me.

Sorry for that. I'm only on the 4th line and I'm already apologizing. I suspect that this letter will be riddled with such pleas for forgiveness. But, if you are able, I pray that you will find it in your heart to read what I have written.

At this point, of course, you have crumpled this letter and cast it to the floor in anger. *He infuriates me!* you cry. *I promised myself, never again! Never again!*

You have every right to be angry. I have lost count of the innumerable vagaries of our love—the affairs, the false truces, the glorious ecstasies, the tear-stained skirmishes. As a soldier, I have not obeyed the unwritten laws of war. After our last conflict I would not be surprised if you were to plunge this envelope unopened into the nearest brazier. Ultimately, I tread upon ground familiar to us both. What does it matter if I have finally recognized how deeply I have wounded you? The heart is fickle, promises frivolous, and words capricious. What makes this anything more than one more brief reprieve in a war spanning decades?

At times, I think, there are tensions in our lives that build to a head and burst and break. Just as water poured into a glass rises and spills over in excess, so are we too like glasses and like water, only willing to accept so much before we run over and are emptied. And, my dearest Albinia, the waters of my life have spilled over, and with them have gone the infernal dregs which have lain on my heart for how long I do not know. The sea has delivered me and scoured me clean. Unlike ever before, I am empty, without course, without direction, caught in some kind of doldrums. But, perhaps undeservedly, that gives

me the hope that the wind will fill my sails once more, and I will run freely over blue seas, at peace.

I pray, Albinia, that you read this letter. You're the only thing I have left.

I direct your attentions (should I command them at all) to the packet enclosed with this letter. Within is contained my captain's journal. This you should read before all of the rest. On the island, maintaining a chronicle of the day's events quickly became an...untenable proposition, especially considering my tendency towards ornament. I attempted to write, from time to time, but these rough sketches hardly yield anything useful. This account, however, which has been the project of several weeks' writing (without a drop of brandy passing my lips, I should note—a condition of my convalescence) feverishly all throughout the day and deep into the night, will fill in the cracks.

I should explain myself though, briefly, before anything else. Allow me to begin at the beginning...

I have recently survived a shipwreck. But, I fear, that is not all.

After I left you that night in Kvatch—stealing into the darkness as if I were some vagabond—I went to find a ship. I will not ruminate upon my reasons for abandoning you, for you know them already. And I invoke Stendarr's mercy for that grievous sin.

But I digress.

As you may well recall, I had then come into a modest, but quite comfortable sum of septims at the behest of my aunt's unfortunate, albeit profitable demise, in an equestrian accident (may she rest in peace, the moldy old hag). Ideally, I would have reclaimed *The Piebald Pate*, but she was nowhere to be found. I still rue the day I sold her to that Breton rogue—you remember the one, Baltazar or Bartholomew or something like that, the one with the pot belly who stank of yeast—and shall until the end of my days. She was the best ship I ever sailed on. But I found one better, or so I thought, at the shipyards of Bravil.

Her name was *Breath-of-Kyne*, the *nom de guerre* of the bull-god Morihhaus. A Nibenese brigantine, made of strong timbers from the Jerrall. Fast and sleek, but made to stand a battering too. Her previous master had obviously loved her, and she exuded an aura of quality, charisma and character. There were a few holes to patch up, of course, but nothing

irremediable. I went to Bravil searching for the sea, and I knew that I had found it. But someone had gotten there before me.

His name was Ab'soud, a Khajiit. He was a merchant, the owner of a shipping firm in Leyawiin, and was eager to expand his margins. I was surprised to meet a Khajiit so interested in commerciality, though I remember thinking—*About time*. You must know that they do not share our understanding of property. This Ab'soud, however, was decidedly cut of a different cloth.

Despite a pitched mêlée, he simply had more coin in his possession than I could have ever hoped to muster. The ship's caretaker was obviously pleased with our sport, and urged us on until he was suitably indulged. The bidding began at 100.000, which I thought a high, but reasonable price. She was worth it—the *Breath-of-Kyne* oozed craftsmanship from every board. But Ab'soud was insatiable. I fell behind at 160.000 and was left in the dust, while the cat batted away tepid offers from less impassioned bidders. The agreed upon sum was finally set at 230.000 golden septims, which drew gasps of astonishment from the audience and cries of ecstasy from the owner. To further our bewilderment, this Ab'soud produced the agreed upon coin from some compartment of his robes, and paid the man in gold septims, hard cold imperial cash, right before our eyes. And even more riotous, he immediately approached me, agog as I was, and offered captainship of the vessel and employment in his firm.

One might say it was a spectacle.

I knew that in Ab'soud I had made the acquaintance of a clever little fiend. He appeared to be an older cat, with patches of silver streaking his coat of ruddy brown. His eyes were small and quick, the color of red gold. He walked about with a limp, as if he suffered from an old injury. I once suggested that he make use of a cane, but he was quick to shrug off the idea.

“Khajiit do not walk with man-stick. We *stick* man. *Hahaha!*”

It would be safe to say, I think, that we were fast friends. Likewise, it would be safe to say that I was, and *am*, a fool.

Ab'soud's firm was in Leyawiin, and it was decided that the *Breath-of-Kyne* would be based there.

I was somewhat bewildered by the city. I had passed through the place, to be sure, but had never spent any real time there, as I've always preferred Bravil as a port-of-call. Although for nearly all of its history it was a mannish city, the few centuries it has rested in Khajiiti dominion seems to have removed all traces of our ever having been there from the Mundus. Or should I say its mannish *populace*? A great many structures remain dating from the Second Empire and earlier. Say what you want about the Khajiit, but one cannot claim that they have no eye for aesthetics. The new buildings complement the old with a gratifying unity, and the city on the whole is quite beautiful, despite the hogwash you might hear that it's been turned into a skooma den. I've *been* to quite a number of skooma dens myself (as, I hasten to add, have you), and thus I can attest to the falsehood of that claim.

Though many Imperials, and indeed many of the mannish and merish races, can be found crowding the wharves, we are a rarer sight in Leyawiin proper. I rented a small room, little more than a closet, above a tavern which had been standing since the time of the Longhouse Emperors. It was owned by a leonine Khajiit named Karjazz, who had been raised in the Heartlands and even spoke in the first person. His inn was open to travellers of all races, and he kept a number of small rooms for rent upstairs with Cyrodilic accouterments for the odd Niben ship captain.

I found life in Leyawiin fascinating, if difficult. Karjazz eagerly conveyed me about the city, trying—and failing—to teach me Khajiiti culture. It was overwhelming, to say the least. It is said that at first brush, one is enamored with a foreign culture and finds its pleasures bottomless; but given time, like fermenting fish, its more unsavory perfumes begin to reach one's nostrils. It is easy to become disillusioned, and such frustrations can be doubly potent among the Khajiit.

But I acclimated, after a time, and came to terms with the things that at first had perplexed me. The food was the first thing. At the beginning, I was repulsed by Khajiiti cuisine's sickly sweetness. I even remember an idyll in Senchal during which I'd lived off nothing but bread and wine. But after a time I came to savor it, even *crave* it, though I do not claim that it is anything more than an acquired taste. With it came an appreciation for sugar itself, though I fear that I am as susceptible as all men to its psychotropic properties. The rest followed suit. Even so, my understanding of their culture is rudimentary at best. Hard to teach an old dog new tricks, especially when cats are involved.

But as usual, I tell far more than necessary.

I found, to my surprise and initial dismay, that Ab'soud, although appearing to have been a wealthy man, had spent much of his funds on the purchase of the *Breath-of-Kyne*, along

with the rent for his newly acquired warehouses—which, I should note, had nothing in them to ship! At first, I thought that I had been bamboozled. Yet the cat had a way with words, a way of stymying one's fears with the flick of his tongue. I questioned whether or not I should remain in Leyawiin after that. But despite everything, I stayed for the ship.

Ab'soud had a great deal of connections both in Leyawiin and in greater Nibenay. On top of my own, we had quite a portfolio. To build up capital, he loaned the *Breath-of-Kyne* out to various clients in and around Topal Bay—the Brothers Petritatus of Bravil, for instance, for whom I conveyed some shipments to Morrowind and various entrepôts in Black Marsh. Then there was Martius Lucius, a rare Cyrodiil operating out of Leyawiin, whose own ship was in the process of being repaired but whose crew was able and whose orders needed delivering. For him I laid anchor at Stros M'kai, Wayrest, and Auridon. You would be surprised, I think, to know how much coin one can earn as a courier. Port dues are oh-so-bothersome.

Yet I was baffled at just how much Ab'soud was able to procure through his own channels. It seems peculiar now, even wretched, at how much we reveled at the expense of others. Within the span of half a year we had gathered the necessary funds to begin financing our own expedition, and much of it was gained by illegality, deceit, and plain cheating.

One night, we celebrated in a particularly raucous manner in the warehouse. Ab'soud had a hankering for whores, and we had them. It was rather late into the evening, and the whores had gone to bed. The moons (as they know them, Jone and Jode) peeked through the high windows. It was humid, sweltering even, and the wine had done nothing to assuage the issue. I was prattling off some drunken nonsense when, all of a sudden, the cat fixed me with a curious look that, even in my inebriation, caused me to pause mid-bawdy and ask, "Well, what is it?" It was then that Ab'soud's plan was hatched.

I admitted that pawning moon sugar off on the Anvil black market would be a brilliant gambit, if it could be pulled off. Despite Anvil's ill-repute, the city has, as you might know, in the past decade has come under the sway of a rather prudish administrator by the name of Kilben Vass, who recaptured the city from the Red Sails with the aid of mercenaries paid for by Kvatch. This Vass, of course, is just another of those upjumped warlords with delusions of restoring the Empire that've been sprouting up along the Gold Coast like mushrooms. An ostensibly pious man, he has tried to pull out Anvil's evils, which have dug themselves deep after years of pirate rule, by the roots. To some degree he has succeeded in that endeavor. All ships coming into port are subject to exhaustive searches that, for the most part, result in damages to the ship which go uncompensated by the port authority. Whatever

“unsavory” cargoes discovered are confiscated and placed under lock and key in the municipal warehouses, though I’m certain they don’t remain there long. The word is that Vass himself sells the stuff at foreign markets (such as Senchal), using the coin to fund elaborate building projects and, of course, lining his own pockets in the process. One can’t say that he doesn’t have the right idea. It is an undoubtedly ingenious scheme, at least theoretically. The trouble is that the man has no sense of subtlety—after all, he is Colovian. A pity, really. I hope he’s enjoying his brief time in the sun.

In any event, Anvil, previously a haven for the damned and the n’er-do-well, had been and still is starved of a most precious commodity: moon sugar. Oh, certainly the craftier thieves have managed to smuggle some of the stuff in (where there’s a will, there’s a way, so the saying goes), but it was simply not enough to sate the rabid appetites of the skooma fiends and sugar junkies of the city. What we envisioned was a kind of mass injection of product into the market, bought cheaply from Ab’soud’s trusted sources in Senchal, and sold at exorbitant rates. Simple, of course, but it was the right place and the right time. Allegedly, Vass was implementing even more stringent deterrents against smuggling, though no one could say what they were. If our little scheme could be carried out, we had to do it *now*, before the gig was up.

But could it be done? From what I’d heard, Vass struck me as one of those fools blessed with dumb luck. Even the most carefully laid plans are upset by his machinations, or so the story goes. A thick chain is stretched across the harbor mouth, patrolled by a handful of warships packed to the gills with kitted out men-at-arms. Secret compartments and Illusion spells were foibled early on, and every crew is Silenced upon coming into port. A mesh barrier, suspended below the chain and enchanted to detect both Life and Magicka, rules out Water Breathing divers or magicka-propelled submersibles. To boot, the landward side of the city is equally well-fortified: a ten o’clock curfew and martial law by night, the entrance to the sewers under constant guard, the battlements patrolled by crossbowmen, battlemages, and sharpshooters, and the city perimeter heavily mined to prevent burrowing beneath the walls. The whole place is as tightly wound as a puckered arse. It seems that the only way to breach the city’s defenses is by force or a master stroke of subterfuge.

Ab’soud’s solution, frankly, was ridiculous, but just ridiculous enough that it might actually have worked. We would enter the city neither by land nor by sea, but by air. The method would make use of an obscure spell by the name of Icarian Flight. The thrust of the thing is simple enough: once cast, the user may launch themselves at immense speed high into the air for the duration of seven seconds or less. Then, they come tumbling down. For our

purposes, it had a number of advantages over typical Levitation. For one, we prioritized speed above all, as well as height, in order to avoid detection by the sentries posted atop the walls and Vass' Life and Magicka barriers. While one could theoretically reach such heights and speeds with Levitation, one would either have to have a lot of time on their hands, or be a rather powerful mage. We had neither of those things; thus, Icarian Flight provided us with what we needed most for a lesser premium. Ab'soud's plan also involved the usage of a Chameleon spell as camouflage, and a Feather enchantment, which would allow our "courier" to convey the cargo of moon sugar with relative ease. Both would've been taxing to maintain along with a potent Levitation spell. While we had the means to hire a good mage, even considering that we had to provision the ship and buy the cargo, Ab'soud argued that the task could be completed simply and comparatively cheaply with a scroll of Icarian Flight, which he could have made by a trusted enchanter who owed him a favor. (Perhaps you're beginning to see that Ab'soud had many "trusted associates" and "contacts"). I thought that such an important part of our mission (indeed, the entire crux of it) should be entrusted to a capable mage, but once again, Ab'soud dismissed my concerns. Only later did I realize that his refusal to enlist a mage for our voyage was deliberate in more ways than one.

The whole thing would be carefully choreographed. It almost felt like we were planning a mananauts' voidwalk rather than a heist to sell illegal goods on the black market—and, in a way, we were. Ab'soud brought in one of his many associates, a Khajiiti mathematician who had studied at the University of Gywlim (or so she said; I have reason to doubt that anything Ab'soud said was true) to take measurements and plan out the minutiae: how many nautical miles out from port we should launch from, accounting for wind speed, drag, velocity, speed, momentum, the weight of the cargo and of the "courier" themselves (who I later found out was Ya'zin-dar; you'll come to know him in time), when precisely to cast Slowfall, etc., etc. Eventually, a trajectory was calculated. Ab'soud's contact on the ground in Anvil, an Imperial merchant by the name of Lucius Decimus who was sympatico with the city guard, would arrange for the landing zone to be cleared for two minutes. That was all the commandant of the guard could promise. If we failed to make it within that window, the courier would be arrested, interrogated, and likely tortured, and Decimus would squawk so as not to be implicated—the commandant had him by the balls, to say it crudely. Consequently, the ship would be impounded, and the whole thing would have all gone to Oblivion. If, however, the courier reached the landing zone safely, Decimus would have him conveyed to the safe house, and the commandant would turn a blind eye—for a cut of the sugar, of course.

In short, it was an incredibly risky enterprise. However, if we pulled it off, if it was possible...we'd be rich. Perhaps I was drunk out of my wits, too naive, or too much of a damned fool—but I agreed.

Preparations were made, a crew was gathered, an itinerary made, provisions purchased, and by Last Seed of last year, we were off on the high seas.

And that's how it all began. If you've reached this point, you may begin reading the diary. It is a painful slog, which will no doubt make your eyes roll and your frown deepen, but I assure you, it is crucial to understanding what really happened.

Then I'll tell you how we were betrayed.