

## Part III

*In which a plot rears its dark head*

### *Captain's Log—Tirdas, 9<sup>th</sup> Last Seed, 2E 806*

*Madness!*

I feel as though I am too enfeebled to put pen to ink, but at the very least it is not as bad as yesterday. Perhaps Stendarr has granted me a little of his mercy...No, I know it—I was very near death. And I might be still. In mortal danger, doubtlessly.

On Sundas, following my apparent “recovery” from my stomach pangs, I went to bed with the full intention of rising early the next morning. I have been prone to oversleep of late. I have no doubts about the identity of the perpetrator. I’ve always liked to awaken and pass some time in the early hours of the day with a book before duty draws me away.

To my chagrin, however, I awoke yesterday an hour after noon, struck with fever, my stomach roiling, and my limbs nearly plastered to the sheets with perspiration. For a time, I was capable of doing little more than croaking to clear the phlegm from my throat. Any attempt to rise was met with a spasm, with hammerlike blows assailing the inside of my skull. I can scarcely recall an occasion when I have ever been so ill, and still, even writing this, I feel the urge to vomit. The vertigo is horrible.

It was Drazir, curiously, who came to me first. She knocked hesitantly on my door, and, at my murmur, entered quietly. She wished to know whether I was hungry, and had brought me a tray of clear soup, a hunk of hard bread, some strips of salted meat, and a few cold plums—she knew I was sick, the bitch!

But I had no appetite, not even for the mildest of victuals—rather, I hankered for water, and motioned to the skin at my desk, which she brought to me meekly, averting her eyes. Then, to the extent that I was capable, I asked for her to bring the first mate. I couldn’t make out any expression on her face. Then she left, the tray still steaming at my bedside.

Ya'zin-dar stormed in shortly afterwards. I was rather taken aback, and, with great difficulty, managed to prop myself up to greet him. But he had none of it; he went directly to the tray, threw open the window, and hoisted it out into the sea. Whirling, he came, kneeled bedside me, and forced me to drink deeply. He was furious, I gathered, and, perplexed, I saw he was trembling.

“Did the captain eat any of that?” he asked breathlessly.

I told him that I had not, in a voice as clear as I could muster. Suddenly, he darted to my desk and brought my knife to me, pressing it into my hands. He told me to kill anyone that entered—I'm still chilled by this—and that he would return momentarily. As if I could've even held the thing aloft.

An explanation was in order, and I was soon to have one, though at the time, I wouldn't have cared even if the gates of Oblivion had opened up right in front of me.

Luckily, however, I had no unexpected visitors. Ya'zin-dar returned a few minutes later, bearing a fat medicine chest tinkling with bottles.

He told me that he was familiar Khajiiti medicinal lore, and hope that it would heal a man as well as it would a cat. I figured it couldn't hurt to try, though I was well aware that it *could* hurt. I simply didn't care.

First, he stripped my cot and laid down fresh sheets, took off my sweat-soaked nightshirt and replaced it with a new one, though doubtless it too would soon be drenched. Then, rummaging in his chest, he produced a small ball of what appeared to be a bundle of herbs and flowers, which he steeped in milk. The fire, I was surprised to note, was set by his own spark, to brew a kind of tea. Bile rose in my throat at the thought of dairy, but Ya'zin-dar insisted upon it. This, I know now, was intended to flush out my bowels.

And, I must relate, it succeeded in that purpose swimmingly. I wasn't keen on shitting in the presence of my mate, but it did not seem to bother him beyond surface revulsion; I gathered that given the situation, it was a necessary discomfort. He worked quickly, brewing another tea from some species of bark which smelled like anise mixed with mud; I could see why he was known as “Clever-Cutter”. He strewed sweet-smelling herbs and dried blooms around the cabin, and forced me to drain my waterskin countless times. He stole out stealthily once again afterwards, and returned producing a tray of his own making, which bore steamed roots, a broth with greens, and a plate of plain rice. I still did not wish to eat, but Ya'zin-dar was insistent, even going so far as to feed me himself. He

twitched even more often now, yet his hands never faltered; I gather that it was some consequence of concentration, or perhaps he truly is a skooma fiend.

Somehow, I trusted him implicitly.

He worked in silence, for the most part, and I raised few complaints at his ministrations. Some of the brews tasted rather of shit, but that is to be expected even of Cyrodilic medicine. It was eventually necessary to change the bedding once more (by that time I could scarce govern my bowels), and the fever had not yet abated. He told me frankly that my night would be a hellish one, at best.

“It will eat the captain from the inside,” he hissed, “*The poison.*”

At that, even in my delirious sickness I sat up, though I quickly regretted the decision. I barked at him to explain himself, choking as I did so.

Yes...I had been, *have* been, poisoned.

“Someone on the ship has tried to kill the captain,” he whispered, “Or incapacitate him. Probably the latter.”

The natural inquiries followed—the who, the why, and the how. He regarded me curiously, and said, with a kind of bitter grimace, that I already knew the culprit.

J’Rasha, then.

“With Drazir as her instrument, no?”

The first mate nodded grimly.

“This one does not know how many other whorecats she has in her service...not yet, at least. But there *are* others, captain, let there be no mistakings. This one knows of four already. How many more only Rajhin knows. This one suspects there are many telling purring lies among us.”

Rage rose in my belly along with the bubbling.

At the very least she does not hide it well. And I had thought the Khajiit maestros of subterfuge and deception! Perhaps the Stewardess is simply not suited to the purpose.

And how long, I asked, had he known that I had been poisoned?

He paused for a moment, the question sending brief shudders across his features at the thought.

Finally, he admitted, “Of the *poisoning* this one has known since this morning...” He trailed off, obviously leaving thoughts unvoiced, but I pleaded with him to disclose all.

Then, he told me the reason for his nightly vigils. The consequences of this revelation I can still scarcely grasp.

Ya’zin-dar had *known*, since the very first night, that something was amiss on this vessel. He had been a footpad of sorts, with the Renrijra Maor, something both less and more than a pirate—a mercenary, a freedom fighter, a saboteur, a scoundrel—and had learned the utility of reading the intricacies of faces, the intonation of voices.

From the outset, the atmosphere of the crew, which to me had smacked of coldness, to *him* had reeked of suspicion. Then, he had seen it—or rather, *heard* it. The whispering, the huddled conferences away from his view, the whiff of *conspiracy* that dissipated the moment he came too close.

And it seemed that his insomniac nature was equaled only by his quarries. Thus, each night, he lay awake, endeavoring to catch some wind of the plot being hatched—to no avail.

For the moment, he knows only that Drazir, J’Rasha, Jaga (a well-worn deckhand—quiet and rippling with muscle), and Qazir (the purser, unsurprisingly) were the chief conspirators; others, well, none can say.

I was, and am, both surprised and strangely unsurprised. I asked after the inevitable—if he had harbored suspicions since the beginning, why hadn’t he confided them to me?

He sighed, and matched my gaze with his own, yellow eyes curiously lightless.

“This one does not wish to dwell upon past mistakes.”

I mustered what iron I could.

“Had you performed your damned duty, perhaps we’d not be in the present fucking pickle.”

He scowled at that, and looked, for a moment’s breath, dejectedly down towards the boards.

“This one could prove nothing. This one thought, ‘Maybe it is simply the delusion of a ja’Khajit...’”

I was certainly in no position to scold him, seeing as he *had*, at least for now, saved my life. But, I thought, if I am to reclaim the sliver of authority I have amongst this crew, I had best start here.

I told him the predictable thing, to notify me in future if he had even an inkling of suspicion. But, in truth, I was less concerned with laying blame and more concerned with anticipating the next movements.

Ya’zin, I’m sorry to note, is as uncertain as I am.

He has set guards whom he knows are unscrupulous and above suspicion, and a shift of similarly clean cats to watch my door at all hours.

Beyond that, we have begun our own gambit. Entrapping one of them—and introducing them to the whip. Or so I expect. What machinations Ya’zin has devised I do not know, but having been one hair short of a bandit, I imagine that he has had some experience in the art of creative interrogation.

Ya’zin has suggested Drazir. He says she is weak-willed, and that perhaps has even been intimidated into collaboration. I tend to agree—as I have noted, she seemed shaken when she brought me poisoned tray. I doubt that she’s anything more than a tool.

“This one will break her,” Ya’zin said with a feline grin. Considering the circumstances, I didn’t know whether to shiver or to smile with him.

As for their ends, well, we can only speculate. Ya’zin suspects piracy, or a design of the Renrijra Maor to commandeer our vessel and use it as their own instrument, though he was quick to emphasize that he had burnt all bridges with his former cohorts.

But, if that is the case, how many of the crew are culpable? Surely such a mutiny would require the cooperation of a great number—far greater than four, to be sure. By the Eight, then, how many? The whole crew would have to be in on this wicked endeavor.

And what does this imply about Ab'soud? He selected a great deal of them himself, even saying that some of them had sailed together in the past.

What does he know? Is this his doing?

Ya'zin seems to doubt that, but his expression suggested that he was not certain. He says that if it is a conspiracy of a select few, then perhaps it is not a mutiny, but rather something more benign (if one could say that of a murderous plot).

Or something far more insidious than we might realize.

For now, we must do what we can. Drazir shall serve as our probe, and the others shall be seized in due course, if she tenders a confession. Meanwhile, we shall see how they behave in Drazir's absence.

Ya'zin was right—last night was a kind of hell. Despite his best efforts, I convulsed with tremors, pangs, loose bowels, retching, searing fever, coughing, and gods know what else. Sleep came in fits and starts, but even still, it was a scarce commodity. Finally, after dawn, I fell into a restless slumber, a brief armistice, which persisted until an hour past noon.

I have managed to eat some food taken from my own stores—and which I know to be untainted by Drazir's meddling, at least of yet. Following that, with what strength I have, I have endeavored to set ink to page.

My vitality falters, however. This work, along with my measly repast, has occupied the space of two hours. The pain, I fear, is returning, though in diminished form. I shall take to my bed and rest for a spell. I only hope that I won't have to down any more of that horrid tea.

I will call for Ya'zin soon. Perhaps he's made some progress.

I feel as if this is my tomb. Something *is* happening above decks, and I am powerless to do anything about it. I am bound to my bed and the chamberpot. I can only trust in Ya'zin, skooma fiend or no. I pray my faith is not ill-placed.

She appeared in my dreams, again, last night. Why? I know not. I dreamt we were lying upon our backs on a floating barge in Lake Rumare, and she was trailing her fingers in the black face of the water. She sighed, said my name, and I awoke.

Dreams, of course, obey no logic save their own. She hates boats—ironic, then, that she loved a sailor, isn't it?

Sometimes, when I am alone, I think of her. Like a phantom, she still follows me wherever I go, no matter how far.

I will write more later. I can no longer hold my eyes open.

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Can only write briefly.

Something has happened. It's well past midnight now, big moons, no clouds.

Ya'zin has taken Drazir and has her in the hold. Did it an hour ago. J'Rasha shouldn't know, not yet, at least. He and his posse are interrogating her as I write.

Still very sick, but don't know if I can sleep. Will write more if I'm able.

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By the Eight, it's as we suspected.

Ya'zin came back. I couldn't sleep. Drazir succumbed easily, and revealed all.

Pirates, but not just any.

Dark Elves.

*Slavers.*