

Part V

If you have read up to the end of the entries that I enclosed within this letter, then you should know that the the unwitting protagonist of this tale languishes belowdecks, wracked by poison. Dark Elf slavers have just been sighted in the distance, and an attempted mutiny has been uncovered, a foul conspiracy whose purpose we could only begin to surmise. It is here where the gears begin to shift, the screws begin to turn, the seas begin to change. The winds that will propel us towards the great crucible of our lives can already be felt gently dashing themselves against our sails. Soon our mission in Anvil will be nothing but a distant dream, and we shall find ourselves caught in the maw of a crimson nightmare.

But let us not rush headlong towards that destination.

As my final journal entry before the storm reported, Ya'zin rushed into my quarters following Drazir's interrogation with a grim revelation, something far worse than any mutiny.

"Slavers, captain, slavers! Bastards! *Renrij!*" he spat, barely containing his rage. "But...that is not all."

The mere fact that we were being prayed upon by slavers was shocking, if unsurprising. They are known to ply the waters off the wild coasts of Valenwood, Black Marsh, and Elsweyr, secreting themselves in hidden coves and striking out by night to prey upon unsuspecting passersby. But what Ya'zin told me next was nigh unbelievable.

"What more, Ya'zin?" I asked, pulling myself upright, my voice cracking, "What's happening? Out with it!"

He sat at the foot of the bed, his back towards me, beyond the ring of candlelight emanating from my bedside table. His voice was different than before, small and chipped like an old teapot. It sent a chill down my spine.

"We have been tricked, captain. This one never would have thought...this one never could have imagined...it is known that such things happened, but he never guessed, he never considered...Does the captain understand? This one has seen many things—ugly things, terrible things. He has *done* many things—awful things, dreadful things, horrible things. But..."

“What is it?” I pressed, becoming irritated with his reticence.

What he said next seemed too ludicrous to be true.

Drazir, Jaga, J’Rasha, and all of their thrice-damned fellow conspirators, the whole lot of them were in on the slave trade. They had been giving directions to the slavers shadowing us along the coast ever since we departed from Senchal: signals in the dark, while the rest of the crew was slumbering in their beds. This is what Ya’zin had observed during his nightly vigils.

I immediately remembered J’Rasha’s persisting that we hug the coast of Valenwood on our way to Anvil, and the reason behind it was now blindingly obvious. In opting for the Goldhorn Current, we had undermined their plans; had we indeed kept to our previous course, we would have been easy pickings. But despite the change in itinerary, the slavers had still managed to pursue us out of sight and into deeper waters—all thanks to the machinations of the conspirators. We must’ve been quite the prize for the rats to venture so far away from the coast—such creatures tend to favor smaller, lighter vessels not meant to withstand long voyages or stout seas. And it was no wonder—ours was a ship, though packed to the gills with brawny Khajiiti sailors, that was lightly armed, captained by a buffoon, and bearing a secret cargo of refined moonsugar in the hold. If they managed to capture the lot, they would not only make a killing at the slave auctions, but would be able to attempt their own Anvil gambit, *and* walk away from it all with a fine ship to boot. Certainly a step up for the common slaver.

It was then that I realized something that chilled me to the bone. Something I didn’t want to imagine, something I didn’t want to believe, something that was too incredible, too inconceivable, yet which was the *only* logical conclusion that I could consider. The conspirators directed the slavers, but who had placed the conspirators? How had the slavers known about the Anvil scheme? Who had payed them?

All roads led to one man, or rather one *cat*—that wretched old cankerwort, Ab’soud.

“Yes, the captain says it true. Ab’soud! *Khrajar!* Never since Rajhin has there been a such a scoundrel!” Ya’zin hissed, pounding his claws on his knees.

Everything began to fall into place. I had always wondered where Ab’soud had acquired such a vast sum, in cash no less, for his purchase of the *Breath-of-Kyne*. If he had had the backing of a Great House, however, then such an amount would have been feasible,

especially if its investment promised such rich returns. Likely it was House Dres, Morrowind's slave masters par excellence, who gave him what he needed. I imagine that Ab'soud was a slave on a Dres plantation, and, after a particularly savage beating, was maimed and rendered useless in the saltrice fields. Being the clever little devil that he is, perhaps he found another way to make himself useful. He was very obviously no neophyte when it came to the realm of commerce, but rather something bordering on an expert; perhaps he had been instructed in the merchant's art, and then sent abroad to ply it for Dres' benefit. I imagine that Ma'zaka had been employed for the same purpose, and was working quietly in Senchal for his Dark Elf masters. I remembered that Redguard woman who had been branded with the mark of a slave...What had that meant?

All of this was, and still is, merely conjecture. The simple fact is that I will likely never know who Ab'soud really was and what he was up to. When I returned to Leyawiin after our ordeal I found our offices and warehouses empty, bereft of any sign of ever having been there. No one knows where he went, but it's said that one morning he simply vanished, taking all of the contents of the warehouses with him. Since then I've heard no word of him.

Had I ever noticed something off about him? Had I ever looked into his eyes and thought that this was a person who could condemn his own fellows to lives of misery, toil, and servitude? To a long and torturous death? Had I ever wondered if he was capable of murder and brutality? Together, of course, we had deceived others. We had carried out acts of petty crime—theft, robbery, even arson (on a rival's warehouses; none, I hasten to add, were injured). But there are orders of magnitude to such things just as there are layers to an onion, and I had never imagined that he was anything else than a loveable rogue like me. In truth, I liked Ab'soud. I considered him a dear friend, a kindred spirit.

And I imagined that he felt the same way.

What, in this horrific plot of his, did he intend for me? Was I to be enslaved too along with the rest, packed off to Morrowind to work in the fields till I dropped? Was I to be captured and brought back in chains to the cat himself, so that he could gloat at me and laugh at my idiocy? Or was I merely a footnote? Someone expendable, to be gutted and tossed overboard as an afterthought? *"Throw the silly man to the slaughterfish,"*?

To this day, I've never discovered the truth, and I likely never will.

Ab'soud's raspy cackle echoed from across the sea. I could see the old bastard in my mind's eye counting his freshly earned septims, puffing on a skooma pipe, a whore on each arm. In that moment, I think, both Ya'zin and I realized the enormity of our foolishness—I, for ever

having trusted Ab'soud, for having fallen into his trap as blindly as a moth to flame; and Ya'zin, for not having put an end to the traitorous cabal's scheming earlier, for waiting, for hesitating, for allowing a ship of seventy-two unwitting souls to be held at Ab'soud's mercy.

Guilt. Guilt is what we felt.

And rage, too.

For a Khajiit to sell their own littermates, fellow children of the moons...there is perhaps no greater crime. To impose upon a fellow Khajiit the idea that they can be owned, that they can be bartered and bought and sold, that they are *property*, well...You must understand, Albinia, that the very notion of property is one that does not have much clout amongst the Khajiit. Or at least *our* conception of property differs greatly from their own. And to be sure, the concept of slavery is *nowhere* to be found within their formulation. It is, both to them and to myself, a hateful thing. It has clapped uncounted thousands, even millions, of Khajiit and Argonian souls in irons in Morrowind; yet the common man or mer in Wayrest or Firsthold or (Eight forbid) Bravil only rarely turn their minds to thoughts of those beastfolk breaking their backs in kwama mines or toiling beneath the slave driver's whip on Telvanni and Indoril plantations.

I myself was once the very same.

In any case, the most pressing question was what to do next. We were a merchant vessel, not a warship. We had some armaments, aye, but certainly not enough to repel assault by Dark Elf slavers.

"How long do we have?" I asked, wiping the sweat from my brow.

"This one does not know...Drazir could not say where they were. This one thinks she is not the cat to question," Ya'zin replied, rising from the bed and adjusting his belt. "This one has sent his gang after J'Rasha and Jaga, but there will not be much time to play with them, Ya'zin thinks, or to claw the rats from their holes. The *renrij* come while the moons are out..."

He trailed off, and in the half-light I saw him rest a claw upon the pommel of his talwar.

"We must prepare for them, then. Do not be afraid, captain. This one knows the way of such things," he purred, his voice striking a sinister timbre. Then, he laughed, a dry and cold and bitter laugh, like dry leaves crackling underfoot. An intuition snuck upon me then,

something that I couldn't quite articulate. I knew in that moment, more than I ever had before, that the creature standing before me was capable of anything.

Good thing that he was on my side.

Ya'zin gave a terse nod, and turned to leave. But I wasn't done with him.

"Ya'zin," I called out. Stopping in his tracks, he turned back around and regarded me with a wide grin, his yellowing fangs gleaming dully in the candlelight.

"What does the captain require of this one?"

"Bring me that bottle there," I ordered, gesturing to a dusty green flagon of antique Chorrol brandy that I had been saving for the successful completion of the Anvil mission. No longer—I wanted a drink, and didn't care if it was the finest vintage Alto or firewater licked from an ogre's arse. I uncorked the thing, grabbed two pewter goblets from my bedside table, and poured us each a good swig.

"Here," I grunted, handing a goblet to Ya'zin, which he took gladly. I held my own aloft and proposed:

"To freedom."

Down the hatch.

"Ya'zin," I began, before a glob of phlegm caught in my throat suddenly rose to my palate, preventing me from proceeding any further.

There was a positively gleeful look in the cat's eye as he queried, almost seductively, "Yes?"

Finally, I managed to hack the stoppage out, accompanied by a hearty gob of fresh snot. In the firmest tone I could muster, I looked him square and the eye and declared (all while wiping my nose of the unwelcome mucus, I might add), "From this moment forward until I have sufficiently recuperated, you are the acting captain of this vessel and may make any and all decisions at your own discretion. I've but one final order: get us out of this mess and back home in one piece. Is that understood?"

Ya'zin beamed, his smile as ferocious as any lion's.

“How is it said? ‘Aye aye, captain?’”

“That’s right,” I replied.

“Very well. This one shall do as ordered.”

At that, he gave a curt nod. Then he was gone.