

Legend of the Downdraft: Book 1 — 2nd Edition

EVASIVE WINDS

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<p>Content Warning</p>	<p>Alcohol Abuse Intense Violence Brief Mention of Child Pornography</p>
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PROLOGUE

THE SPIRITS OF LAND, SEA, AND SKY

In the beginning, the First Light sparked a realm of fire and chaos, stirring the three Great Spirits. These spirits, awoken from a deep slumber, worked to quell the chaos. Tellus curled his strong claws to carve deep into the brittle ground and trapped the fires. Proluvous sprayed his colossal maw to quench the flames. Ventus beat her vast wings against the smoke and steam. After a while, the air cleared and water filled the immeasurable gouges in the burned land.

In the calm, Proluvous slithered into this new ocean and reveled in the weightless space. He danced and spun as his infinite tail slashed currents across the waters and threw waves against the scorched shores. Tellus and Ventus stomped and hopped in the cooled spray with glee. Together, their combined play crushed the land into dirt and sand as they called for more. Proluvous lifted his head from the water's depths to spray into the cleared sky.

Virtuous rain fell onto the new soil and sprouted fragile Life. Tellus took notice first, and lowered their armored body to shield the new life from Ventus' harsh winds and Proluvous' relentless waves.

"Look, my friends," they called, "see what we have created."

"I see nothing," Ventus said as she flew above.

"If it is there, leave it and let us play," Proluvous said as he weaved along the shore.

"It is here, and I see much need and great potential," Tellus said.

Proluvous and Ventus continued to play together as Tellus scooped up Life to wander toward calmer land. Tellus continued to shield Life from rain and wind as they worked on Life's needs. Life cowered, so Tellus carved rock into shelter. Life thirsted, so Tellus dug rivers to the ocean. Life hungered, so Tellus ground their claws into fertile soil. Life struggled to stand the tides and winds, so Tellus stacked their shed scales into mountains.

Tired and proud, Tellus watched Life finally flourish as Proluvous and Ventus approached in curiosity.

"You did well, friend," Ventus said as Life used her wind to spread and prosper.

"You have filled the land and water with boundless playmates," Proluvous said as Life spread to the ocean's depths. "But you are now drained."

"And you are weakened," Ventus added.

"I will recover with rest, my friends," Tellus said. "Please, look after our creation for me and soon we shall all play together."

Ventus and Proluvous agreed, and took Life within their wings and tail as Tellus burrowed into a bed of gentle soil. They allowed Life to adventure as they flew and swam and danced. Time passed, and Life became independent as it weathered danger and thrived among the elements until Mankind sprouted from Life's forces.

Mankind worked the land, explored the caves, and conquered the mountains and seas. Mankind turned the rest of Life into bounty and goods, and asked Tellus for more. Tellus gave what they could and fell into a deep slumber. Mankind toiled with its gifts until it needed more, but Tellus no longer answered. Expecting approval, Mankind took and did as it wished.

After much searching, Ventus discovered Tellus, now beaten, skinned, and poisoned. She sent great gusts across the land and cried to Proluvous. He sprayed and thrashed in fury. How could Life destroy who created and cared for it?

He stormed onto land as his wrath rose beyond the mountains. Mankind cowered as their home disappeared beneath a Great Flood.

Some begged for Proluvous' mercy, and prayed to live peacefully on the water's surface in ships. Others fled to the sky on flying arks and prayed for Ventus to hold them.

Proluvous and Ventus looked beyond their remorse, and resigned to fulfill the promise to their now silent friend.

Generations passed, and Proluvous' anger eventually receded. Mankind returned to land and reunited with their kin. Careful to protect the honor and pride of their gods, Mankind fought to crown their true savior. Proluvians called Ventus' followers cowards who ran and did nothing. Veninites argued that guilty worship would never quell a god's vengeance, and that Ventus had soothed Proluvous' wrath.

Meanwhile Ventus and Proluvous remained silent as they watched the receding waters to discover Tellus gone. The two Great Spirits grieved.

CHAPTER ONE

STORM ON THE HORIZON

The woman in the corner had a dangerous air about her. She lounged against the table, short sword and revolver visible beneath the long captain's coat. Movements lazy, her crimson eyes slid across the room of drunken sailors in boredom. Voice low, she talked with the thin man beside her.

At the bar on the far side of the room, Samantha looked away. At least the pair kept quiet unlike the other patrons.

She picked up the tray of drinks laid out by Tristan, the bartender, and delivered them to the table a few feet away. The better-natured sailors commented on her beauty, while others winked with playful grins.

A sharp whistle from across the room piqued her ear. Across the room, the woman in the corner held up her empty mug.

Samantha quickly weaved between the scattered tables, and noted the puddles of wasted drinks on the floor. Other whistles vied for her attention, which she acknowledged with polite nods and smiles.

At the woman's table, she took the empty mug. "Sorry for the wait. Anything for the gentleman?"

"Not at the moment," the man said as he looked her in the eye. Though his hair was a bright blond, his gaze held the color and ominous intensity of the ocean's depths.

"'Bout as fun as a rusted sword," the woman commented, cheek propped on a fist.

"We have more important things to be doing than drinking," the man pointed out.

The woman scoffed and looked up at Samantha in impatience. "Cup ain't fillin' itself, lass."

"Yes, of course. Rum, was it?"

"Always."

Samantha nodded, and quickly walked away. She returned to the table in time to hear the man mention leaving before the storm hit. As she set the mug down, she glanced out the front window to the sun-washed street.

The woman waved her companion off and took a drink.

A call from Tristan pulled Samantha back to work.

The sailors provided her only connection to the world outside Davenport. She enjoyed their stories of adventure, from battling storms to encountering pirates. She found most tales hard to believe, but they were entertainment on a long shift.

One of the tables finished a loud, boastful tale about saving a port up north from sky pirates when Samantha approached to collect empty mugs.

"Why involve yourself with sky pirates at all when the military was there?"

"Because the military weren't doing nothin'! Or nothin' useful anyway," the man claimed heartily. "Was a sight: the air ships goin' at it in the sky, but there were already pirates on the ground causin' havoc. I didn't see no military with their boots on the ground, and the town guards were fat from sittin' in their safe little station all day long. So, we stepped in, gotta show those bloody bird brains that we're not just some slack jawed guppies down here! Sods didn't stand a chance. Guardsmen weren't too happy with us showin' them up, but if they were doin' their job proper it weren't o' been a problem, now would it?"

"Then I suppose we're perfectly safe while you're here," Samantha brightly told the sailor. She pulled wayward strands of her long black hair behind an ear. "Will you be in port long?"

"Through the night at least with that storm on the horizon," he replied. "Only a fool would go anywhere tonight."

"Don't worry girlie," another at the table slurred, cheeks red. "Ain't no dirty pirate gettin' past this man." He jabbed his puffed chest with

a thumb. "I could even get ya home, never know what could 'appen out there. Dangerous world, an' all."

Samantha held the empty serving tray close to her chest, her smile tightened. "No, that's alright, it's not that far, I'll be fine."

She watched the rejection register on his face with a pang of dread.

"What's that, I ain't good 'nough fer a simple walk home?" he accused, hands pressed on the table.

"That's not what I—"

"Order's ready!" Tristan called from the bar.

"Ex—excuse me," she muttered and turned away. Wooden chair legs scraped against the floorboards. A large hand enveloped her wrist. She twisted around as the man towered over her. His breath made her eyes water. "Release me," she ordered. "Please," she added as his grip crushed her arm.

Still seated, the men at the table told the sailor to let her go.

"I work all day 'n night, an' get one day o' shore leave and this is 'ow some wench treats me?" the man spat.

"Hey!" Tristan shouted as he hurried from behind the bar.

Samantha's serving tray clattered to the floor as she tried to jerk free. "Let go!" she exclaimed, and kicked his ankle. Her eyes widened as he swore and raised his free hand.

Beer mugs clattered nearby, and wind rushed over Samantha's head. A chair crashed into the man's face and tumbled over his head to tumble behind him.

Samantha snatched her arm away as his grip loosened, and she stumbled back.

The woman from earlier dropped down from a near table as the man fumbled for footing with more swears. He snarled and jumped forward. She smoothly dropped under his thrown punch, and sprang up with an uppercut to his jaw. As his head snapped back, she drove her fist into his stomach. Doubled over, he staggered into her hands; where she guided his face into her knee.

The woman looked back at Samantha with a devilish grin. "Can't kick a man in boots, leather's too thick." She tossed a large, cheaply made coin purse at Samantha.

The man straightened as he wiped his bloodied nose. "Little bitch."

The woman sidestepped his next attack, caught his passing wrist, and twisted his arm to reach behind him. A kick to the back of the knee dropped him to the floor, and a driving elbow snapped his hyper-extended arm. He yowled in pain as the woman released the broken arm. Knee hiked, she kicked the back of the head with a heavy boot, which smashed his face into a table edge. He crumbled the rest of the way to the floor with a dazed groan.

A group of sailors leapt to their feet, but froze as the woman swiftly drew a revolver to hold inches from the nearest man's nose.

"Wouldn't bother, if I were ya," she said lowly, though the glint of chaos in her eager eyes dared them forward.

For a moment no one moved. Then, from the corner, the woman's companion calmly stood. "Captain, I believe we're done here."

The woman's mouth thinned as she stepped to meet him at the door, gun steadily trained on the sailors.

"Unnecessary, as always," he commented as he opened the door. "Knew you didn't have it in you."

"Ye said I couldn't kill fer a day. He'll live." Her gun lowered as she stepped out the door. "Our wager's still on."

"Thank you," Samantha called after her.

Without looking back, the woman raised a hand in a noncommittal wave before the door swung shut behind her.

Samantha flinched as a light hand landed on her shoulder.

"You okay?" Tristan asked.

"Yes, I believe so," she said quietly.

One of the men from the table stepped forward. "I'll be taking my mate's money back now."

Samantha realized she still held the coin purse, heavy with the pedlar inside.

Tristan pulled her back and stepped forward. "I think your mate there's had enough," he told the sailors. "There's a doctor down the street. I don't rightly care where he goes, but he can't stay here. We'll be keeping this pedlar to pay for your collective tabs," he added, taking the coin purse from Samantha. "You can pay him back later, or not." With crossed arms, he watched the sailors collect the broken man from the floor and drag him outside.

"Who was that woman?" Samantha wondered.

Tristan rubbed his neck as he nervously watched the closed door. "I have an idea, but gods, I hope I'm wrong."

"Who?" Samantha asked again as Tristan moved to the bar. He quietly emptied the coin purse. The pedlar slid onto the counter behind the bar's raised platform, the gold and silver coins shining.

"Bloody Anne," Tristan told the money. His hand shook as he organized the coins into piles. "She matched the description: long black hair, green coat, red eyes, the weapons. It's been a while since I studied the wanted posters from the guard station and I doubted it when she came in, but the way she handled that drunk... I think we're lucky she left when she did."

Samantha looked at the front windows, the day's dying light a fiery orange.

"Damn," Tristan muttered as he finished counting. "This isn't going to cover the whole table. Old man's going to have my hide. At least no furniture was broken, and that sailor's gone. There's always a bad one in the bunch." He looked at Samantha. "That... could have been bad. You can go home if you want, I can handle this."

Samantha looked about the bar. With the sun going down, business was in full swing. Two employees could barely cover the demand.

"I don't think you can," Samantha commented as the room recovered from the recent drama and demands for service rose.

Tristan swung the bar towel over his shoulder, nose turned up. "Might kick you out for the insult." He smiled at her. "I'll be fine."

"If you're sure," Samantha said with a guilty frown.

He waved her off. "Go on before it gets dark."

She gave a small nod and headed for the door.

Sailors called out their disappointment to see her go.

"Come off it, you Proluvian dogs," Tristan called over them. "Any one of you so-called men could have stepped up but you didn't. Now all of you gotta get up and walk your happy asses over here if you want drinks."

Samantha closed the front door on the grumbles from within The Brine Board. She cautiously looked up and down the empty street.

Down the hill she could see the harbor, and the expanse of ocean beyond. The sun set into a wall of dark clouds, their edges a fiery red.

She swept a glance across the wooden ships in harbor. Did one of them belong to Captain Bloody Anne?

She pondered the idea as she turned away to walk up the street.

She had heard of Bloody Anne before. When Samantha was young, her uncle would arrive on his merchant air ship, forced to land out on the hills as Davenport lacked a proper air port. He taught her the mysteries of navigation, and told her stories of the endless seas, limitless skies, sparkling cities, and even the pirates.

The greatest tale centered on a ship that conquered them all—that flew and sailed and left nothing but destruction and death in its wake: *The Red Nightmare*, painted in the blood of its countless victims. Bloody Anne Cash captained the monstrous vessel, quick to murder any that stood in her way. A living legend that roamed the world in a never-ending search for gold and death.

Why would a source of chaos save her from a drunk?

Several blocks from The Brine Board, Samantha approached the front steps of a modest wooden house. The front door opened. Her father, Philip, stepped out in the flowing deep blue robes of a Proluvian priest, a thick book of scriptures tucked into the crook of his arm. Door closed behind him, he turned to descend the steps when he noticed Samantha at the bottom. Glasses perched on the end of his nose, he looked her up and down with a sneer of disapproval. "You are back early. Finally seen the error of associating yourself with that cesspool of an establishment, and have come to destroy that ridiculous garment before you attend service?"

Samantha fidgeted with her fingertips. "No, father. I was released early because of... an incident with a sailor."

Philip raised a thin, black eyebrow. "Incident?"

"One of the sailors was drunk, and wanted to walk me home," Samantha explained uncomfortably. "I declined, and he grabbed me."

Thunder quietly rolled in the distance.

"And then what happened?" Philip demanded.

She frowned. "I told him to release me, but he wouldn't. I don't know what would have happened, but another sailor, a woman, intervened. She, um, dissuaded him, and left."

Philip stiffly descended the front steps. "It is unfortunate that such devoted servants of the mighty Proluvous are so susceptible to the vices

of alcohol." Samantha frowned as he stepped to the ground. "Even so, you should not have denied him his request."

"But father—"

"Silence," he sharply cut across her. "The actions of seamen are the will of Proluvous, and though you have yet to show such wisdom, you would be wise to heed my words and their requests." He shook his head out of disappointment. "We shall pray for forgiveness of your transgression. Bow your head my child."

"But—"

"Bow your head," he snapped.

Samantha complied to hide her contempt, hands folded in front of her. Philip bowed his own head over the book of scriptures and prayed. Samantha remained quiet. If she interrupted, he would start over.

She rolled her eyes when he apologized for her ignorant ways, having strayed from the righteous path years ago following the unfortunate death of her mother. He prayed for the continued protection of the town despite the blemish of the tavern. Thankfully, he ended there instead of moving on to the forgiveness of all humanity, as he needed to be on his way.

"M-may still waters be," she stammered out when she realized he finished.

Gaze cold, he lowered the scripture book. "I do hope you plan to rid yourself of those garments and attend the sermon tonight. I must be going, I have already been made late, but I'm sure the great Proluvous will understand the reasoning and at least take pity."

"I think I'll stay in," Samantha stated quietly. "I would not want to insult him by arriving late and interrupting your teachings."

"Unfortunate," Philip said crisply before he turned to walk up the street, the opposite direction as The Brine Board.

Samantha's shoulders slumped before she climbed the front steps.

Inside, she locked the door, and went to change from her barmaid uniform to a longer dress.

She cooked dinner to the sound of rain on the windows. Despite the occasional deep bass of thunder, she found the constant sound pleasant. While she ate, the rain strengthened into a storm. Bright flashes filled the dim house.

After dinner, she washed the dishes, and climbed to the second floor. The wind howled on the far side of the walls. In her room, she sat on her bed to read books of far off lands.

The storm gradually weakened to a calm trickle. Lightning continued to brighten the night sky. Eventually, she heard the front door open.

"Samantha!" her father's voice called.

She hurried downstairs.

Philip stood in the entryway as his robes dripped onto the floorboards. "I do hope you are happy now," he quietly seethed. "Proluvous knows you do not pray to him, and now you have truly angered him with your actions this day! He sent this storm to show us his anger. We should pray for his mercy to not flood the world again!"

Samantha doubted her refusal to entertain a drunk would be cause to destroy all of humanity, but she remained silent as Philip pulled her into the sitting room. Her silence continued as they sat with bowed heads and folded hands. He muttered fiercely through well practiced prayers. She hoped he remained too occupied to notice her lack of conviction.

Time dragged on. The storm strengthened despite his prayers. Many years ago, Philip would explain how Proluvous protected and wept for them. Now his patience with her had run out and he expected her to realize the error of her ways.

She felt the same.

CHAPTER TWO

FALLEN GLORY

Rain plagued Davenport for a week.

On Samantha's walks to work she pulled her father's old coat tight around her bare shoulders. Curtains dropped shut as she walked by windows. She ignored accusatory glares from across the street as she muttered, "May still waters be."

Finally, as the week neared completion, the clouds parted.

At the end of another long shift, Samantha exited The Brine Board and smiled at a clear sky. The air smelled clean with the sound of birdsong in the wind.

She stepped over calm puddles toward the harbor. She examined the docked ships, with their sky-scraping masts and organized spiderwebs of rigging.

It hardly seemed possible one of them had been *The Red Nightmare*. She didn't know what *The Red Nightmare* looked like, but a ship fabled to sail and fly would be noticeable. Perhaps the ship had landed away from town, and Bloody Anne had walked the hills or coast to The Brine Board.

"Long walk for a drink," she commented to herself. "And why help me?"

She turned before she reached the harbor to trade dirt roads for soft sand.

On the edge of town, a cliff towered over the beach. Atop this cliff she liked to sit by herself, away from her father's house and the neighbor's disapproval. The great height provided a wonderful view of the horizon, and an occasional glimpse of the mysteries beyond.

She often fantasized about putting Davenport behind her, to either join a ship or take the train that passed through town once a week. Yet in the back of her mind, she believed Davenport held the residents in place. Sailors came and went, but the residents never left.

As she approached the cliff, the lifeless metal body of a small aircraft winked in greeting. Field grass clung to the landing wheels, and birds plucked at the seat upholstery. Her uncle's book of aircrafts called it a terra hopper.

The small two-man craft had landed some years back. The story claimed the pilot suffered a heart attack during a storm. He managed a mostly graceful landing under the circumstances. Unfortunately, despite the local doctor's best efforts, the pilot died a few days later. The abandoned terra hopper never moved again.

A distant shine in the sky caught her attention. She smiled and ran to the cliff edge. A flying island hung over the ocean, haloed by puffy white clouds; the technological genius of their ancestors, humanity's savior in the face of the Great Flood.

She sighed and looked down on the impossible distance from the cliff edge to the flying island. Below, the sea relentlessly churned against the gray beach.

She frowned at a patch of dark emerald dropped against the rocks at the cliff base; too big to be seaweed thrown up by the prior storm. Curious, she descended the hill to investigate. The closer she drew, the more the color took shape into a person propped against the rocks. A drunk that wandered too far from port?

She cautiously approached. "Hello?"

Large patches of the green coat were nearly black with dampness. Samantha put a hand to her mouth. A reddened trail dragged through the sand connected the sea to the body.

She hurried to their side and dropped to her knees. Beneath the dark coat, blood stained a lighter shirt. On their belt, a gun holster and a dagger sheath sat empty.

With an unsteady hand, Samantha touched their shoulder. They jerked with a pained hiss.

Samantha fell back in surprise. "You're alive!"

Their chest heaved in heavy breaths through clenched teeth. A sand coated hand pushed tangled black hair out of the woman's face to properly glare at the sun with a squinted eye.

Samantha stared. It was her. The woman that saved her a week ago, but could she really be... "A-are you...?"

The open eye rolled to regard her, the other held shut under a dried ribbon of blood from a deep cut above the eyebrow. Her left arm attempted to lift, but she cringed with a sudden gasp. Her right hand grabbed for the shoulder. "Leave," she hissed through cracked lips.

Disbelief buzzed through Samantha's mind. "You're Bloody Anne, aren't you."

The woman's left hand gripped a fistful of sand. "In more ways than one."

"You're dying."

"Fully... aware..." Anne coughed. Each heave prompted a harder cringe.

"Just— just wait, I'll get help," Samantha blurted as she got up.

"No," Anne snapped, voice hard with authority.

"You need a doctor."

Anne glared up at her with exhausted contempt. "I'll get a hangman." Her eye closed as her head fell back against the rock behind her. "Just... go. Don't come back."

Samantha sprinted away.

She ran passed the first set of buildings and up the streets, the red light of the setting sun at her back. She raced her shadow to her house, knowing her father was at the church.

Lightheaded with bewilderment and exhilaration, she pulled a sheet from the linen closet and large scissors from the sewing kit.

The sky bruised into night as she returned to the beach. At the rocks, Anne appeared unmoved, though a single, bloody bullet now lay in her open palm.

"Leave," she ordered as Samantha again knelt at her side.

"You'll die out here like this," Samantha stubbornly told her. "Let me help you."

"Why?" Anne asked.

Samantha glanced her in the eye before she used the scissors on the sheet to create bandages. "A week ago you were at a bar, and defended me from a drunk. Now I can return the favor."

A hand crusted in maroon sand grabbed the edge of the sheet and weakly pulled. "Lemme die."

Samantha continued to form bandages. "I can move you into town, but first we need to hold you together." From what Samantha could tell, the wounds were shallow, but numerous. The largest concern was Anne's shoulder; torn by a bullet wound.

Red eyes watched her as she fumbled the thin bandage around the maimed shoulder. She fashioned the remains of the sheet into a sling. Anne hissed as Samantha maneuvered the arm into place.

Samantha looked toward the horizon. The sun gone, the final streaks of daylight started to fade. She settled Anne's right arm around her neck and carefully stood. Anne heavily leaned against her to shuffle along the beach.

Samantha's mind raced in dizzying circles as they trudged together.

Housing a pirate, especially one with such a reputation, was a felony. Part of her knew she should go to the guard station, condemn this creature of destruction to death. Yet, Samantha could not find it in her to alert the guards. Could she destroy a life already beaten? A life that had defended hers?

Memory of the one-sided fight at The Brine Board flashed through her mind. The unrestrained violence and devilish grin.

A woman's scream echoed up from a black trench in her memory, which she quickly covered with a new worry: the location of Bloody Anne's equally infamous crew. Did they lie in wait in the growing

darkness? Had the storm wiped them out? Or had they finally met someone more dangerous?

Samantha pushed the troublesome thoughts aside to focus on the long walk. Guided by the lights of the port, they moved around the town and pushed through narrow, heavily shadowed alleys. Anne remained silent the whole time, pained grunts swallowed. Finally, they arrived on the side of the house and Samantha let them through the door into the cold, dark kitchen.

"Now for the hard part," Samantha breathed as she kicked the door shut. "We need to get you cleaned up." Legs weak, Samantha pulled them up the stairs.

Anne gasped a profanity with every step.

Finally in the washroom, Samantha gently lowered Anne onto the lid of the toilet seat. With the light flicked on, she leaned against the shut door to catch her breath.

Anne held her left arm. She slowly rocked where she sat, barely conscious.

Dedicated to finish what she started; Samantha started the warm bathwater.

Careful where her eyes fell, she carefully stripped Anne of the many layers of bloodied clothing. Beneath it all, she found several dark bruises and knife wounds that churned her stomach. "Almost there," she encouraged and moved Anne into the tub.

She turned the water off to leave a shallow depth in the tub. Sponge in hand, she worked to clean the wounds. Anne's complaints ceased while she stared at the wall in a pale daze.

As the blood washed away, Samantha discovered a history of faded straight, white scars. The results of numerous knife fights throughout the years. The most interesting mark, however, was a tattoo on Anne's left bicep, which featured a bleeding skull diagonally impaled by a cutlass. The mark of *The Red Nightmare*.

The sound of the front door interrupted Samantha's work. Heart rising to her throat, she quickly straightened to her feet. Passing the mirror, she noticed the blood that had rubbed onto her hands and coat

sleeves. Coat discarded on the floor with Anne's clothing, she grabbed a towel to hide her hands, and went to answer Philip's call.

"Yes, father?"

"Tonight was a wonderful sermon, a shame you missed it," Philip claimed. "I would like to bathe tonight."

Samantha's stained hands tightened on the towel that concealed them. "O-of course father, but I'm currently cleaning the bathroom. I—I thought I'd finish before your return. My apologies, I'll finish as quickly as I can. Please, you should relax in the meantime, you've worked hard all day."

Philip's mouth thinned. "Very well. You shall find me in my study."

Samantha bowed her head in relief as he walked away.

She returned to the washroom and the mess she created. She rushed through the final cleaning, drained the tub, and struggled to lift Anne. The movement roused Anne from her exhausted stupor. Their waning combined strength extracted Anne from the bathtub.

On the floor heaped the filthy ruins of Anne's clothing.

Samantha accepted the risk of moving a bare pirate downstairs while her father sat on the other end of the house. In the kitchen, she rested Anne on a chair.

Beneath the staircase, she pulled open the thick door. The storage room was cold, dark, and secluded. She collected winter blankets from a chest and laid them out on the floor. From another trunk in the furthest corner of the room, she regarded a pile of abandoned dresses. She swallowed the lump in her throat, and added the useless clothes to the blankets.

At the kitchen table, Anne hunched, unconscious.

Exhausted herself, Samantha used the chair to drag Anne into the storage room. The scratch of wooden legs on the floorboards tore at her nerves. She destroyed another sheet for bandages, and carefully wrapped the limp body in the blankets.

Storage door locked behind her, she returned to the washroom. A new wave of fatigue washed over her from the bloodied tub and clothes.

She cleaned as fast as she could, and buried the clothes and makeshift bandages in the bottom of the kitchen trash.

Hands clean, she prepped a new bath, and informed Philip.

As the washroom door closed, she double checked the storage room lock and finally shambled upstairs to collapse into bed under a black window.

—

The next morning, Samantha woke to bright sunshine; her mind full of doubt, and body full of aches. She crept down to the kitchen, and unlocked the storage room to peek inside. The blanket nest remained in the middle of the floor, undisturbed.

Footsteps from upstairs made her shut and lock the door. With a deep breath she started breakfast.

Philip descended the stairs in time for eggs and fried potatoes. They sat at the table together. He prayed over their food while she patiently waited.

"May still waters be," she said at the end of the prayer with a curt nod and ate in silence.

Philip stood after he finished. "One day I hope you will be grateful for everything you have been provided. When that day comes, I will be happy to assist you in relaying your appreciation to Proluvous. I must be off to the church, you are still welcome to join."

"I know, father," Samantha said quietly, and waited for him to leave before she rushed out the door to the drugstore. The clerk, an older woman and devout Proluvian, looked at her pile of bandages and pain killers. "There is no pain that the great Proluvous cannot ease."

"I'm sure," Samantha said pleasantly as she paid.

She hurried back to the house as her legs burned.

In the storage room she found no sign Anne had moved. Samantha pulled the blankets back to exchange the ripped sheet for proper bandages.

It was strange to think this was the same woman from the tavern a week ago. Anne had taken that sailor down in moments. What could have happened that put such a person in such a state?

—

Anne woke in darkness, unable to move.

Time slipped like sand through her fingers. Occasionally two sets of footsteps sounded overhead. Both were light, though one seemed quicker and more active. When the steps faded away, a strange silence pressed in. There was no whistle of the high winds, the click of gears, not even an underlying buzz of high voltage electricity. This was not her ship, nor any other.

Thoughts forced through a headache, she remembered a beach, and a very stubborn angel of torment.

She drifted back into oblivion.

The room filled with light. The stubborn creature from the beach—a young woman, long black hair tied back into a braid—knelt beside her to peel back a bandage on her bare left shoulder. The woman's brown eyes were dull, and quiet. Her skin had the tan of a life outside, but lacked the roughness of one at sea or in high wind.

"Who're you?" Anne asked.

Startled, the woman drew back. "My name is Samantha, Samantha Patel."

Anne turned her head for a look at the rest of the storage room. She eventually noticed the bucket at Samantha's side, used to clean Anne's wounds. "Drink."

Samantha quickly got to her feet and went through the only door. She returned a moment later with a cup. "Can you sit up?" she asked as she lowered herself back to the floor.

Anne tried with a heavy grunt. She made it halfway to an upright position before Samantha slipped an arm behind her for support. Anne sourly took the cup in her right hand to drink and spat the liquid out. She shoved the cup into Samantha's chest. "Rum."

Samantha lightly pushed the cup back at her. "Water, you'll heal faster."

"Rum'll feel better."

"We don't have any alcohol, father wouldn't allow it, and I'd rather not drink," Samantha explained.

"Father allow pirates?"

Samantha stared at her, face troubled though Anne could see the smallest spark of defiance. "You get water."

Anne sourly drank, and pushed the empty cup away. Samantha took it, and lowered Anne back down, blanket pulled over her chest.

"Where're m'clothes?" Anne demanded tiredly.

"They were torn to shreds, I had to get rid of them," Samantha explained. "We can get you new clothes, you might fit in mine."

Anne closed her eyes with a dismayed moan. "Was m'fav'rite coat..."

—

The days passed in a strange routine.

As the worst of Anne's wounds healed Samantha bought less bandages, but continued to gather painkillers. The woman at the drug store gave her an increasingly judgmental look with each visit.

Anne remained confined to the nest of blankets locked in the storage room, Philip none the wiser.

In the mornings, Samantha prepared food for first Philip and herself, and then went to the storage room to tend to Anne. Then, she was off to work before returning to prepare dinner for Philip and herself, and then again check on Anne and her recovery.

On the seventh day, Samantha sat with her after her shift. At this point, Anne could sit on her own, though she remained confined to the blankets.

"How are you feeling today?" Samantha asked.

Anne regarded her blanket covered lap in scorn. "Like I was left fer dead by a mutinous crew o' weaponed cowards," she answered, eyes filled with an anger her body could not convey.

"So, you were mutinied," Samantha muttered. "They left you marooned so close to a port town?" she questioned louder.

"Not on purpose," Anne corrected bitterly. "Should've been killed on deck. *Nightmare* is my ship," she spat. "I'll kill 'em all." After a moment, she looked at Samantha. "Y'knew who I was, on the beach. Ye should know the stories, 'bout the ship, 'bout me."

Samantha picked at her fingers. "I do."

"Why let me live? Many'd say ye'd be doin' humanity a favor jus' to kill me now." Anne's eyes narrowed. "Best chance ye'll ever get."

Samantha shrugged. "You helped me. When I found you, I couldn't just walk away, and now that I've started helping you... well I can't just take it back. The talk in the tavern is that you're dead. Sailors are hearing it from others, word's spreading quickly."

"Frik must be claimin' I died that night, guess all evidence points it," Anne huffed. "S'pose it won't be long 'fore e'ryone thinks it."

"Who's Frik?"

"The bastard at the top 'o me list," Anne said heatedly. "First mate, or, was. S'pose he took up role as captain now, slimy dog."

"What are you going to do now?"

"*The Red Nightmare* belongs to me," Anne growled. "I'll hunt the damn bastards down, slaughter the lot o' 'em."

Samantha drew her knees up to her chest, cold hands squeezed between her calf and thigh. "How're you going to do that?"

"Need a ship, an' a handful o' cannons," Anne said simply.

"May be a while before you can manage that. You're healing, but not that quickly," Samantha said.

Anne looked at her. "An' what then? I aim to kill again. Ye gonna stop me?"

Samantha looked away. The calm black sea of her mind rippled as a memory rose from the depths: shouting from an ajar door and a scripture book gripped in a reddened hand. The vision shifted to a drunk's bloodied face smashed into the table edge by Anne's boot. She gripped the sides of her long skirt. "Do you plan to kill me?"

Anne looked Samantha over before her eyes closed with a painful chuckle. Samantha quickly stood to move for the door. She let herself out and turned off the light. The room plunged into darkness. The door softly clicked shut before the lock heavily slammed home.

Confined to the floor, Anne grinned.

—

As the days passed, Samantha pondered telling someone of her house guest. The only person she could trust was Tristan, but she was

unsure if he would tell the guardsmen. His betrayal would have Anne executed, and Samantha arrested. If he kept the secret, she feared Anne's discovery would get Tristan arrested as well. She didn't know how long she could keep Anne hidden.

Two weeks after finding Anne on the beach, The Brine Board bustled with a marine ship in harbor.

The stiff military uniforms stabbed at Samantha's nerves as she avoided eyes.

"Everything alright?" Tristan asked as he refilled orders.

"Why do you ask?"

"You're acting like someone's about to bite you. If anyone's causing trouble just point him out, I'll cut him off." He leaned forward to whisper, "Those uniforms don't mean as much as they think."

"No, everything's fine," Samantha assured him.

Unconvinced, he went back to work. She kept at the tables, and ignored the knot in her stomach. No one knew about Anne at home, and she always made sure to lock the storage room. Everything was fine.

With a decisive nod, she pushed her worried thoughts away to throw herself into work with a smile on her face. The marines belted out drinking songs with fifty verses and started up drinking competitions that Tristan happily sponsored. Samantha danced about the tables with practiced grace, the men thirstier with every drink. She ignored the increasing number of winks and slurred suggestions.

Suddenly, a pair of strong hands grabbed her waist. She yelped in surprise as her feet left the floor. The drink tray clattered to the ground, ale and rum splashing across the floorboards. She pried at the hands amid the laughter around her.

Across the room, Tristan yelled for her release as he abandoned the bar.

The grip on Samantha's hips loosened long enough for her to jump to her feet. The marine grabbed her wrist as she tried to step away. With a gasp and without a thought, she turned and slapped him across

the face. The shock of the blow opened his hand, and she stumbled back with tears in her eyes.

The men around them laughed while the marine that grabbed her scrunched his face in embarrassed anger.

Tristan stepped in front of Samantha. She noticed the gun tucked into the back of his waistband, below the knot of his apron ties. There had always been a gun beneath the counter of the bar. She wondered when he had started to carry it on his person.

"That's enough for you," Tristan snapped angrily. "We've got no tolerance for trouble here. I have to ask you to leave."

The man that grabbed her balled his fists. "Oh, was just a joke, she's the one what overreacted!" he claimed as his friends at the table agreed.

"You can tell that to your commanding officer from the jail cell if you don't get on your way," Tristan warned, hands on his hips.

With a scowl, the marine swayed to his feet.

Shorter than him, Tristan squared his shoulders.

The marine jabbed a finger toward Tristan's chest. "I risk m'life an' limb out there fer the likes of you."

"Maybe on sea, but this is land, and I will get the town guard to help you back to your ship," Tristan promised calmly.

Samantha watched the gun against Tristan's back, her heart pounding.

Another marine stood and placed a hand on the drunk's shoulder. "Come on, you've had enough. Let's not repeat Port Chance." With a firm hand, he steered the drunk marine toward the door.

Once the door closed, Tristan collected the fallen mugs. He turned to Samantha with the tray. "You going to be okay?"

A large part of her wanted to request to go home, to curl in her bed and possibly cry. She blinked the water from her eyes and took the tray from him. "It's alright," she decided. "Just like any other night, right?" She forced a smile.

Tristan frowned at her. "Right. Only a few more hours until closing, let's make the most of it. I'll grab the mop."

As the night wore on, Samantha held onto her tight-lipped smile. Hands graced her rear, but she pushed through. Eventually, Tristan announced last call before he pushed the marines onto the street. He locked the door behind the last one as Samantha swept the floor.

They went about the room together; straightening the tables, pushing in chairs, polishing the bar, and washing mugs. Tristan counted the till. Samantha washed the windows.

The Brine Board finally restored to a respectable state, Tristan hung his apron on a hook and took up his coat. "I'll walk you home," he offered.

A stab of anxiety went through Samantha's stomach, but she quickly suppressed it. She accepted his offer, aware how long drunks could roam.

They walked together through the calm night, the sky brightened by the moon and stars. Samantha thought about telling him. Uncertainty of his reaction battled with the secret that ate at her. Maybe if she just told one person, if she wasn't so completely alone.

They stopped at the steps of her father's house.

"Thanks," she said.

"No problem, it's on my way, anyhow," Tristan pointed out. "See you tomorrow?"

"Oh... yeah, same as always," Samantha said.

Tristan turned to continue up the street, but hesitated. "You know," he plucked at the hem of his coat, "if you need to talk about something, you can tell me."

Samantha looked at him, her face hidden in shadow from the street lights. "I... I'll keep that in mind. See you tomorrow."

Tristan nodded and walked away.

Samantha stood on the side of the street, alone. She looked up at dark windows. Philip should be in bed.

She walked around the side of the house to the dark path between buildings. Through the kitchen, she went to the storage room to unlock the door.

The inner light surprised her.

Anne stood among opened chests and boxes, dressed in a set of Philip's old clothes. She held her injured shoulder as her left hand gripped a thick book of scriptures. Anne regarded Samantha in the doorway. She curled her left arm against the heavy book's weight before she dropped it. The book tumbled to the floor, covers splayed.

"I'm hungry."

Samantha pulled herself together. "Yes. I'll make you something." She shut the door and quickly locked it. Breath unsteady, she gripped the key. The metal teeth bit into her palm.

She prepared potato soup, a simple dish that spurred the least number of complaints. As she filled a wooden bowl, she counted the handles in the knife block.

In the storage room, Anne sat in the nest of blankets; face drawn as she massaged her shoulder.

Samantha knelt beside her.

Anne took the bowl and scowled at the contents. "Again?"

"Potatoes are very nutritious," Samantha pointed out with a stab of annoyance.

Anne grunted and raised the spoon to her mouth. "Bland, an' salty. Again."

Samantha's mouth twitched over a scowl. "There's hardly any salt this time."

"Salty," Anne claimed stubbornly.

"Then don't eat it," Samantha snapped, hand out.

Anne held the bowl closer. "This's the food off the sea ships," she guessed. "Everythin' tastes like salt in sea ports." With a huff, she dropped the spoon and drank the soup in a single go. Emptied bowl lowered, she looked at Samantha watching her. "Somethin' on yer mind, Salty?" she asked with a mischievous grin.

"Why do you do it? The pirating?" Samantha finally asked.

"Different reason e'ery day." Anne shoved the empty bowl toward her. "More."

"It won't kill you to ask nicely," Samantha said as she stood.

Anne grinned again. "Might kill you."

Samantha said nothing as she went to the kitchen and returned shortly after.

"What brought the question?" Anne asked as she took the bowl back. "Ye thinkin' o' joinin' the ranks? Escapin' that father o' yers? I can hear 'im through the door when the two o' ye eat, piece o' work. He the one what bruised ye?" She pointed her spoon toward Samantha's wrist.

Samantha looked at her arm to see the beginnings of a hand shaped bruise where the marine grabbed her. "No, this happened at work tonight. Father has— father has never hit— me."

Anne watched her. "Don't 'ave to be physical to leave scars."

"Everything he does is in our best interest," Samantha claimed.

"He's an ass."

Samantha caught herself nodding and looked away.

"A priest, aye? Excusin' their actions fer a ghost in the sky. Or— in the sea, rather." Anne's mouth curled in amusement. "Ye don' believe in it, do ye?"

Samantha forced back the thought of a red stained scripture book. She opened her fists and shook her head.

"A priest's daughter, godless." Anne snickered and coughed. "Least ye got some brain, not cowerin' in fear o' storms that'll happen whether ye pray or not. Rather be godless than spineless." She watched Samantha's defeated face with a thinned mouth. "Why're ye still 'ere? Ye're old 'nough to strike out on yer own, an' stayin' with that priest ain't doin' ye any favors."

Samantha folded her hands in her lap. "No money, nowhere to go, and no way to get there. I've thought about signing onto a ship, but sea ships aren't as welcoming to women as I've heard about sky vessels, and there's no air port here. There's the train, but I can't afford a ticket or anything after that."

Anne seemed to consider the explanation before she downed the rest of the soup. With a burp she thrust the empty dish at Samantha. "Leave me, Salty."

Samantha took the bowl and left. The door's lock struck the silence.

—

As the weeks passed, Anne pushed through pain. She used objects of various weights found throughout the storage room. On growing occasions Samantha discovered Anne standing as she worked the shot shoulder back to strength.

With each sundown, anxiety grew heavier in Samantha's stomach. She feared the day Anne would strike her down. She could end the charade before the tables turned on her. Whenever she reached for the kitchen knife, her hand pulled away empty.

At night, after her shifts at The Brine Board, Samantha's worries quieted as Anne trapped her within adventurous stories. The seasoned pirate spun tales of dastardly deeds, of havoc wrecked across the high seas and flying islands, of theft from aristocrats and embarrassment on military officers. Enthralled, Samantha listened, unable to decipher between truth and attempts to scare and impress her.

Some nights Samantha repeated her question as to why Anne chose piracy. True to her word, each day brought a different answer. Sometimes Anne claimed freedom from others' rule. Sometimes, the thrill of not knowing what day would be her last. Sometimes, to disrupt the careful comfort of the rich who believed themselves beyond a poor man's chaos. Sometimes, it was all to afford another drink for another night.

Nearly three months after discovering the body on the beach, Samantha again lost herself in a fantastical tale. Anne recalled an encounter with the native, cannibalistic island tribe after her ship barely survived a harrowing battle with the air force. Her first mate, Timothy Frik, had deciphered the basic language and managed to strike a deal before a war broke out between pirates and cannibals.

"We could've taken 'em, but easier to fix a ship wit'out a spear in yer ass."

Head propped on her hand, elbow pressed to her thigh, Samantha heavily nodded. Her eyes swam as Anne launched into another story about fighting a rival crew for rights over a cove. Her head continued to drift through Anne's words until her chin dropped. She jerked upright, and looked around the shifted shadows. Ice trickled down her spine.

The storage room door hung open.

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