

CAPITANA



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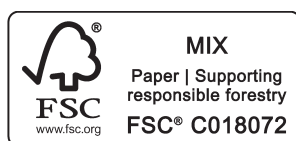
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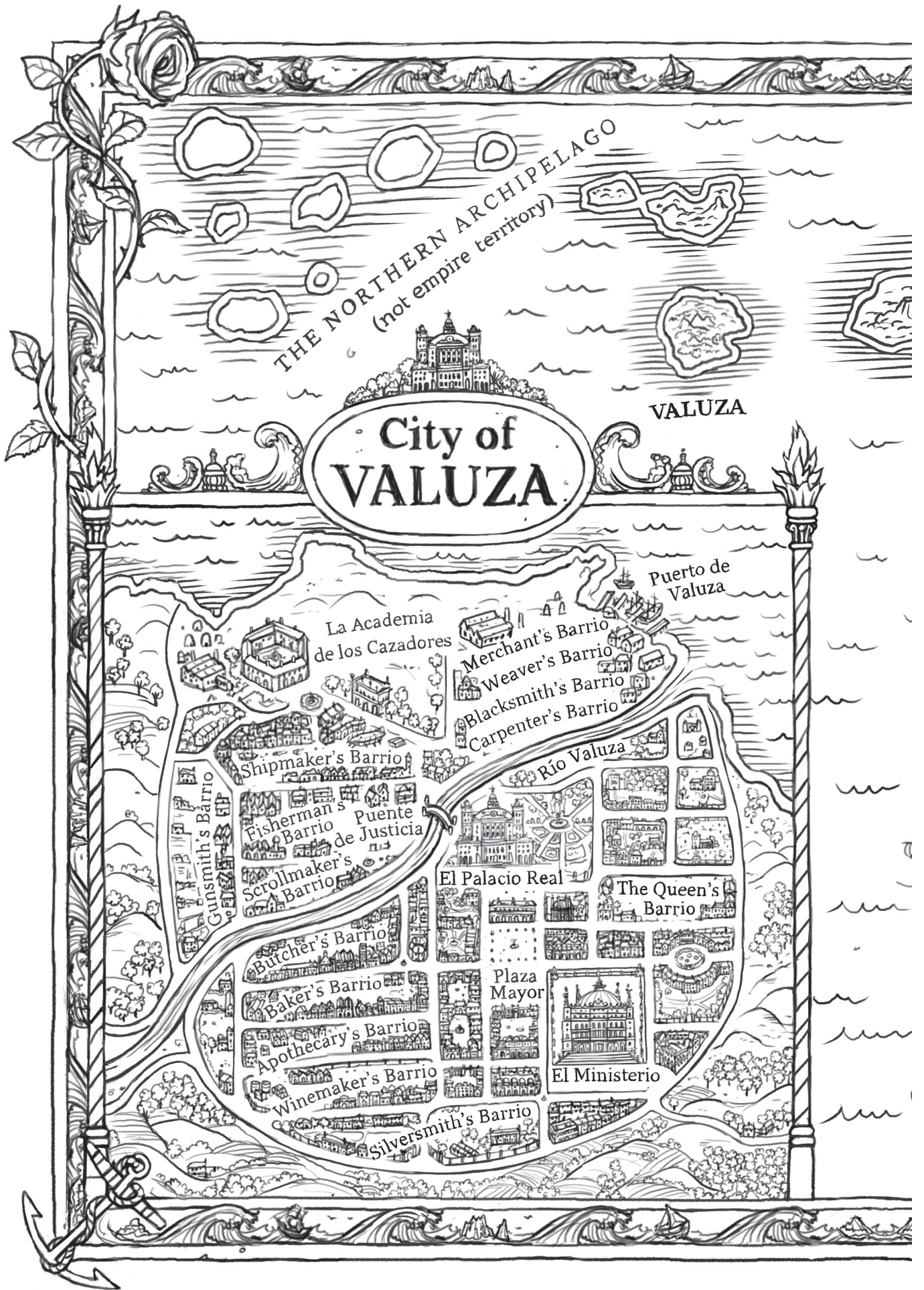
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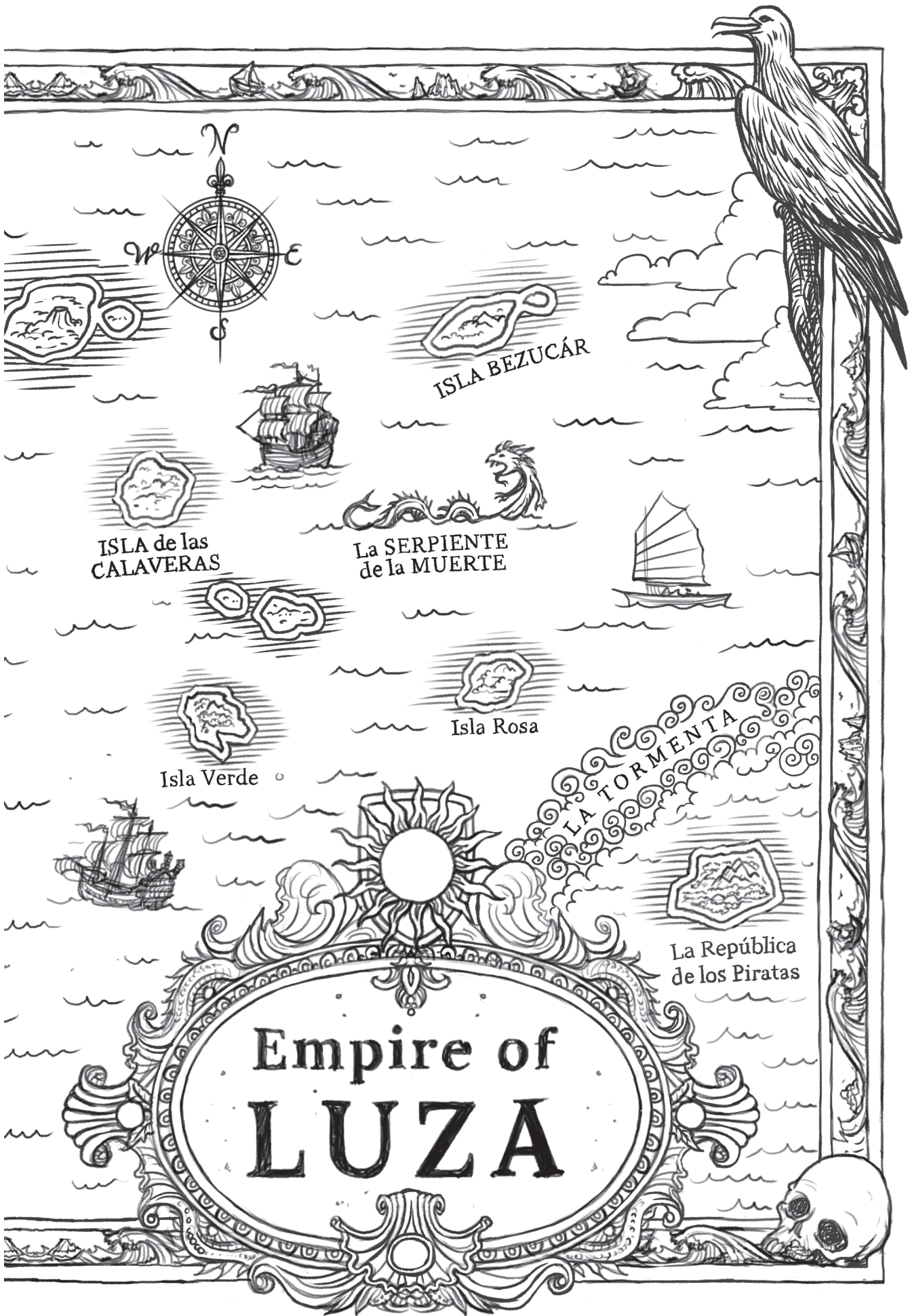


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*For Daddy.
You held the ladder.*







ISLA de las
CALAVERAS

ISLA BEZUCÁR

La SERPIENTE
de la MUERTE

Isla Rosa

Isla Verde

LA TORMENTA

La República
de los Piratas

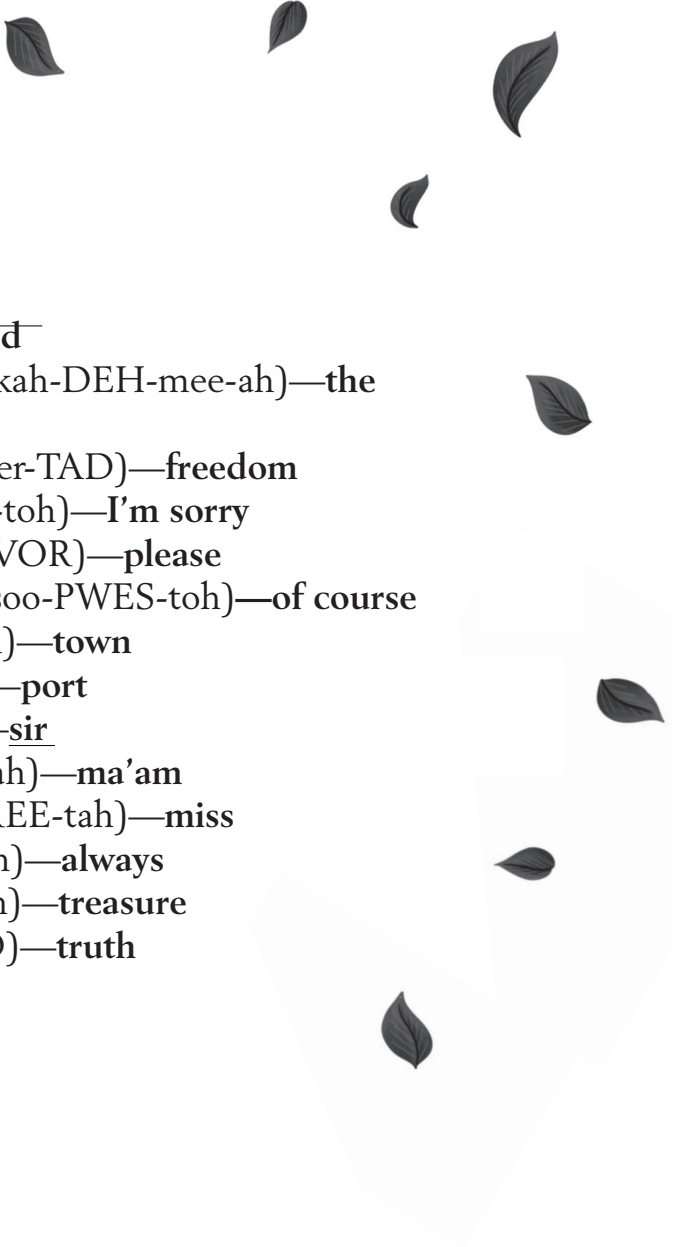
Empire of
LUZA



A PRELIMINARY GUIDE TO LUZAN VOCABULARY

(with phonetic notes by Archivist Pía Sánchez)

absolutamente (ab-so-loo-ta-MEN-te)—**absolutely**
barrio (BAH-ree-oh)—**neighborhood**
basta (BAH-stah)—**enough**
bien hecho (byen EH-cho)—**well done**
buenos días (BWEH-nos DEE-as)—**good day**
cantina (kan-TEE-nah)—**bar/eatery**
caso especial (KAH-soh es-peh-SYAL)—**special case**
cazador (kah-sah-DOR)—**hunter**
cuidado (koo-ee-DAH-doh)—**careful**
el idioma prohibido (el ee-DYOH-mah proh-ee-BEE-doh)—**the forbidden language**
el ministerio (el mee-nees-TEH-ree-oh)—**the ministry**
el palacio real (el pah-LAH-syo reh-AL)—**the royal palace**
entiende (en-tee-EN-deh)—**understand**
espada (es-PAH-dah)—**sword**
exactamente (ehk-sahk-tah-MEN-teh)—**exactly**
felicidades (feh-lee-see-DAH-des)—**congratulations**
fiesta (fee-ES-tah)—**party**
gracias (GRAH-syahs)—**thank you**
hermana (er-MAH-nah)—**sister**
hermano (er-MAH-noh)—**brother**
hermosa (er-MOH-sah)—**beautiful**

The page features several dark grey leaves scattered across the top and right sides. A large, faint, light grey outline of the map of Spain is positioned on the right side, partially overlapping the text.

isla (EES-lah)—**island**
la academia (lah ah-kah-DEH-mee-ah)—**the academy**
la libertad (lah lee-ber-TAD)—**freedom**
lo siento (loh SYEN-toh)—**I'm sorry**
por favor (pohr fah-VOR)—**please**
por supuesto (pohr soo-PWES-toh)—**of course**
pueblo (PWEH-bloh)—**town**
puerta (PWER-tah)—**port**
señor (seh-NYOR)—**sir**
señora (seh-NYOR-ah)—**ma'am**
señorita (seh-nyoh-REE-tah)—**miss**
siempre (SYEM-preh)—**always**
tesoro (teh-SOH-roh)—**treasure**
verdad (behr-DAHD)—**truth**

The title is presented on two overlapping, flowing ribbons. The top ribbon, which is slightly higher and further to the right, contains the word "CAPÍTULO" in a serif font. The bottom ribbon, which is slightly lower and further to the left, contains the word "UNO" in the same serif font. Each ribbon is adorned with a detailed rose illustration at its right end (for the top ribbon) and left end (for the bottom ribbon).

CAPÍTULO UNO

IT WAS A FINE DAY FOR AN EXECUTION.

The sun had just hit high noon, the sky was cloudless, and the candidates of la Academia de los Cazadores stood in long, crisp rows, looking appropriately grim in their black uniforms. Not a sound broke the silence; the air smelled of freshly cut grass. In the exact center of the hexagonal courtyard, a large wooden gallows awaited its victim, and the colors of the Luzan Empire—black, white, and gold—stirred in a mild sea breeze. So it was a fine day to die, and everything was just as it should be.

Ximena Reale had arrived an hour early to ensure she would be standing in the front row. Her uniform was pressed to perfection, her spine was as rigid as a ship's mast, and the three gold badges on her chest gleamed from a recent polishing. She had even taken the time to shine the patch that covered her missing left eye. After all, she was the reason that a man's life would end that afternoon. She couldn't look anything less than her best.

"De la preparación surge la perfección."

From preparation comes perfection.

It was the compass that guided her life.

She muttered the words under her breath, drumming her gloved

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fingers against her thigh as she and the other cazador candidates watched la academia's clock tower, waiting for the bell to toll. The seconds crawled by like centuries.

At last, the noon bell rang. Admiral Gabriel Pérez stepped onto the gallows platform, looking every bit like the hero he was: broad-shouldered, black-browed, with the bronzed and weathered skin of a man who had traveled to the furthest reaches of the Luzan Archipelago and back. No one could deny that he was the greatest cazador alive, with more pirate captures to his name than any other hunter currently serving the empire, and the youngest admiral to ever lead the armada, the fleet of cazadores. In other words, he was everything Ximena aspired to be.

So when his eyes found hers in the crowd, her heart tripped over itself in her chest.

"Treveda Ximena Reale."

She waited a moment as her name and rank echoed over the courtyard, savoring the sound of it. Then she stepped forward.

"I am yours to command, sir."

"Approach."

Obedience came naturally to Ximena. She strode up the platform steps and came to a stop in front of the admiral, placing two fingers to her lips in a salute. He acknowledged her with a nod. His shark-eyed stare cut through her like a rapier blade.

"Treveda Reale, do you confirm that you are responsible for the capture of the accused?"

"Sí, señor."

"And will you carry out the sentence as it is declared, in the name of your law, your queen, and your empire?"

"Sí, señor."

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“Very well, then,” said the admiral. “Bring forth the prisoner.”

At the foot of the gallows, a pair of drummers struck up a solemn beat. The iron doors of la academia’s west wing swung wide open—four grim-faced cazador candidates stepped into the afternoon sun, flanking the prisoner. To Ximena, there was no sound in the world quite as satisfying as the metallic clank of a pirate in chains. She pulsed her restless fingers against her thigh while the candidates positioned the prisoner beneath the noose, saluted the admiral, and retreated to the courtyard. She was so close now. Victory dangled in front of her like a fisherman’s hook.

The admiral lifted a fist. The drums stopped; silence fell. All eyes landed on the man in chains who waited with his head bowed. In the colorless courtyard, he was a parrot among ravens: his loose-fitting clothes were an obnoxious tangerine color, and every one of his fingers and toes (the man was noticeably barefoot) sported three silver rings. The candidates of la academia knew his crime before it was even announced. Only one kind of person would dress with such a garish disdain for propriety.

A pirate.

“Captain Salvador Domínguez,” the admiral boomed. “You have been found guilty of piracy, murder, and treason against the Empire of Luza. Therefore, you have been sentenced by the high court of el Ministerio de Justicia to hang by the neck until dead. Do you wish to repent for your crimes before your sentence is carried out?”

For the first time, Captain Salvador Domínguez looked up. He was not a young man, falling somewhere between forty and fifty, with eyes like black mollusks and an overgrown nose. Most pirates were caught and killed long before they reached his age.

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His survival up until this point was indicative of his skill.

Just as his death would be indicative of Ximena's.

"Repent?" The pirate laughed. "What do I have to repent for, admiral? I gave my life to the only cause worth dying for." He smiled at the admiral with blackened teeth. "Freedom. So no, I won't repent. ¡Viva Gasparilla! ¡Viva la libertad!"

Gasparilla. The word struck the courtyard like a lightning bolt. An uncomfortable rustling moved through the assembled candidates—declaring that name aloud, as everyone knew, was an act of treason. After all, it belonged to the most notorious pirate captain in the Luzan Empire's history, the man who had led the bloody Scarlet Siege against the capital island of Valuza and ransacked its silver vaults.

Captain Domínguez sensed their fear; his black-toothed smile grew wider. "¡Viva Gasparilla!" he shouted again. "¡Viva la libertad!"

Ximena frowned. A few years ago, the candidates of la academia would have laughed at such a threat, and they would have been right to do so. Gasparilla was two hundred years dead, caught and killed by the armada of cazadores at the end of the Scarlet Siege. But whispers had traveled to Valuza from the furthest reaches of the archipelago, carried by merchants and fishermen and pirates alike, whispers that infected the islands like plague. They said Gasparilla had returned. They said he'd been resurrected from the dead using el idioma prohibido, the forbidden language of magic.

They said the legendary pirate was preparing to strike again.

Even worse, pirates captured by the cazadores had begun invoking Gasparilla's name just before their executions in direct defiance of the Luzan Empire. They declared it boldly, proudly, in the same breath as *liberty*, as if the sound of it were a threat

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or a prophesy or a battle cry. As if they knew something the cazadores did not.

But the time for guessing games and superstition had long since passed. El ministerio had delivered its verdict, and Domínguez was doomed to die. So the admiral raised his fist again, restoring order with a single glare.

“Enough,” he said. “The accused has elected not to repent for his crimes. Therefore, his execution will be carried out forthwith.”

Domínguez laughed again. “I hoped you would say that.”

He slipped his head through the noose. The candidates let out a collective gasp. No pirate had ever noosed himself before.

“Well?” said Domínguez, raising his eyebrows. “Dispatch me to a better world, admiral. Then we will have both done one another a great service.”

The admiral ignored him; he was far too noble to engage with a pirate’s antics.

“Treveda Reale,” he said. “Carry out your orders.”

It was time, then. Ximena moved to the wooden lever on the other side of the platform. With careful precision, she curled both gloved hands around it just as she had watched older candidates do so many times before. The drummers struck up their beat again. Her heart pounded along with the rhythm. *Boom ba-boom. Boom ba-boom.* She took a long, slow breath.

“De la preparación surge la perfección,” she repeated in a whisper.

Ximena had spent the last four years training for this moment. Four years of brutal courses and examinations in maritime history, combat, seamanship, espionage, and battle strategy. Four years of sleepless nights and sore muscles and endless study sessions, moving

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from the lowest rank of uveda to dotreda and then to treveda, the stage of training when candidates were finally deployed on their first pirate hunting expedition with the cazadores. Four years of preparing to stand on this platform next to a pirate whom she had brought to justice.

Now the moment had come. She was staring into the eyes of Captain Salvador Domínguez, and she held his life in her hands. But the pirate didn't look the slightest bit concerned. In fact, he was smiling still, his eyes as bright as stolen silver coins.

"Do it, little cazadora," he said. "Orders are orders, no?"

His arrogance made up her mind for her. Ximena breathed out. She pulled the lever. There was a creak, a pop, and a snap like the crackle of fish bones—then it was over. The great Captain Salvador Domínguez was dead.

As his corpse swayed in the wind, quiet descended once more over the courtyard. Ximena stepped back from the lever and reminded herself to keep breathing. Some candidates swooned or vomited the first time they executed a pirate, but she would be hanged herself before she revealed that kind of weakness in front of anyone at la academia. Thankfully, the admiral's booming voice was enough to distract her.

"May this violence not be in vain," he declared. "Rather, may it remind us of our duty to the law, to the queen, and to the empire."

"To law, queen, and empire!" the candidates chanted in response.

Two candidates hurried to remove the pirate's body from the noose and carry it off the platform toward the north gate. From there, Ximena knew it would be paraded through the city by cart to el Cementerio de los Traidores, the Traitors' Cemetery, where all the empire's pirates were buried. The captain whose name had

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once echoed throughout the empire and its archipelago would rest in an unmarked grave, condemned and forgotten. *As it should be*, thought Ximena. That was the price one paid for defying the law.

But the ceremony was not finished yet. The admiral beckoned her forward. She stood at attention and performed a second salute. In response, he unsheathed the rapier that hung at his hip and addressed the assembly.

“As you are all aware, there are two channels by which a candidate of la academia may be promoted to a higher rank. The first is by being selected to take the Royal Examination, offered every two years. The second is by demonstrating undeniable and extraordinary merit. Treveda Reale . . .” She liked to imagine that there was an edge of pride in his voice. “. . . you have proven your commitment to the law and to your queen by capturing the notorious pirate Salvador Domínguez during your deployment. You have demonstrated the highest standards of honor, valor, and love of justice that la academia strives to reflect. For these reasons, I hereby promote you for exceptional merit to the rank of *cuatreda*.”

Ximena dropped to one knee. The admiral touched his rapier to her head.

“With this rank, you have reached the final and most rigorous level of training at la academia. Should you prove yourself worthy, you will be chosen for the Royal Examination and have your chance to earn the title of *cazadora*.” The admiral offered one of his rare half-smiles. “May the seas be with you, Ximena.”

“And with you, admiral,” she replied.

She stared straight ahead as the admiral took a gold rectangular badge from his pocket and pinned it beside the others on her

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chest. Though her expression remained blank and her posture impossibly stiff, the flush on her cheeks betrayed her excitement. She was one step away from becoming Cazadora Ximena Reale, weapon of the empire, bane of the lawless.

A pirate hunter.

“You’ve set an academia record,” said the admiral as he fastened her badge. “No one has ever reached the rank of *cuatreda* so quickly.”

Pride burned in Ximena’s chest. It took most candidates eight years to earn their *cuatreda* badge. They were recruited at thirteen years old and spent two years in each rank, moving steadily upward through their training and examinations until they graduated at twenty-one with their *Cazador Cloak*. That is, if they even made it that far—it was a well-known fact that only one out of every ten candidates recruited to *la academia* would become *cazadores* themselves. Half were cut in their first year; the rest would be slowly eliminated by examination until none but the best of the best remained.

So it took most candidates eight years to earn their *cuatreda* badge.

Ximena had done it in four.

“I serve under an excellent commanding officer, sir,” answered Ximena.

The admiral’s half-smile returned. He was her commanding officer, after all. She had been assigned to him when she was promoted to *treveda* and had served her deployment under his command. She wouldn’t be where she was without him.

“I am proud to have you in my service, *Cuatreda Reale*,” the admiral said. “But it’s a pity your sister wasn’t here for the

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ceremony. It might have served to motivate her.”

Scanning the section of the crowd reserved for archivists, Ximena searched for a pair of familiar hazel eyes. But in the place where her sister should have been, there was a sneezing archivist who was missing a glove. Her stomach sank. Marquesa was gone. Again.

“My sincerest apologies, admiral,” Ximena said. “I’ll correct my sister’s behavior personally.”

“See that you do.”

She saluted and retreated from the platform. No sooner had she taken her place in the front row than the whispers began to fly.

“Pirate spawn.”

“She only gets promoted because she’s the admiral’s little pet.”

“We’ll see how well she does on the Royal Examination.”

But Ximena was hardly listening. Her golden badge gleamed on her chest. She was finally a *cuatreda*. Her *Cazador Cloak* was within reach. If she had been capable of smiling, she would have grinned. She had never come so close to true happiness in all her life.

So naturally, Dante de León had to spoil it.

“Bien hecho, *Cuatreda Reale*. The highest standards of honor, valor, and love of justice. High praise indeed.”

Her shoulders stiffened. She would have recognized his voice anywhere in the archipelago; though he spoke in a whisper, it grated on her nerves like a gull’s screech. She didn’t know how or when he had come to be standing behind her. But as far as she was concerned, he didn’t exist if she didn’t acknowledge him. So she kept her gaze fixed on the admiral as Dante de León drawled on in her ear.

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“Truly, I have nothing but the utmost respect for you. It must have been incredibly difficult to end poor Domínguez’s life yourself, given your background.”

Background. The word was a knife pressed between her shoulder blades. But after four long years, she was used to Dante’s jabs. So she answered calmly, “No more difficult than it would be for any other candidate.”

“¿De verdad? I’m glad to hear it. We were all concerned on your behalf, you know. The sound of the lever, the snap.” She heard him click his tongue against his teeth for effect. “You never know what memories that might bring to the surface.”

“Your concern is appreciated, but ultimately unnecessary,” Ximena replied, though she would have preferred to toss his concern into the sea.

But Dante wasn’t finished. He leaned closer—she could smell the expensive perfume on his skin—and she just barely resisted the urge to unsheathe her rapier.

“Remind me again,” he said. “How many years ago was your parents’ execution? Six? Seven?”

“Five.”

“Ah, claro que sí, of course.”

He spoke as if he had forgotten, though of course he hadn’t. Not a single person at la academia had forgotten that Ximena’s parents were fallen cazadores, hunters who had betrayed the empire by resorting to piracy for their own personal gain. She was reminded of it every waking moment.

“Well,” Dante continued, “if you need someone to process your feelings with, you know that I’m always happy to assist a fellow candidate—”

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“As I said, that won’t be necessary. I have no sympathy for Captain Domínguez, just as I had no sympathy for my parents. I would expect the same punishment to be dealt to me if I committed their crimes. It is the law.”

Dante sniffed, drawing back. “The perfect little capitana, siempre.”

“Not everyone has the privilege of surviving on their family name alone, Treveda de León.”

“True enough,” he acknowledged. “But isn’t it fantastic when you do?”

As if to prove his point, the admiral’s booming voice interrupted them: “Dante de León!”

“Duty calls.”

Dante winked at her over his shoulder and swaggered up to receive his promotion to *cuatreda*. Ximena grimaced, her mood soured. If Dante de León had been anyone else, she believed he would have been cut from *la academia* years ago. His grades were abysmal, his combat skills a disgrace, and in Ximena’s estimation, he possessed the cumulative intelligence of a small, dull rock. But he was a *de León*. His mother was high minister of *Luza*, head of *el ministerio*, second only to the queen. His older brother, Mateo, was one of the most promising young *cazadores* currently sailing for the armada. In other words, Dante de León was as untouchable as the sun over the sea.

Of course, that didn’t stop Ximena from hoping that, one day, he would make a mistake so terrible that the admiral would terminate his candidacy without hesitation. But the boy had an incredible talent for disappointing those hopes. Every two years, he managed to accomplish a feat so extraordinary that the admiral

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had no choice but to promote him. In their uveda years, he had saved another candidate from drowning (though Ximena was convinced the drowning had been staged); in their dotreda years, he had successfully commandeered a rival ship during a training exercise (though Ximena was certain he had bribed the candidates crewing the other ship). Then, on this latest deployment, he had assisted her in the capture of Salvador Domínguez, which really meant that *she* had captured the pirate and he had unsheathed his rapier just in time for the admiral to see him standing there, triumphant. So while Ximena fought every waking hour for her perfect grades, top examination scores, and flawless displays of extraordinary merit, Dante de León coasted by with nothing but a flash of his perfect smile.

Perhaps she should have told the admiral that the boy had spent half the voyage drunk out of his mind. Maybe then he wouldn't have been so quick to hand Dante a promotion to cuatreda. But Ximena Reale was nothing if not honorable. She wouldn't be accused of betraying her crewmates. Ever.

After the admiral had pinned the cuatreda badge to Dante's chest, he half-skipped down from the stage and returned to Ximena's side.

"Felicidades," she said through gritted teeth.

"Couldn't have done it without you, capitana," he replied.

No, she thought. *You couldn't have.*

"Shall I write a poem of gratitude in your honor? Songs praising your courage and beauty? I've been told I'm a great singer, and an even better liar."

Ximena remained silent; Dante grinned, victorious. This was the game they had played for years. He would bait her, and she

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would say nothing because he could afford to say whatever he wanted, and she couldn't afford to say anything at all.

So Ximena Reale hated piracy.

But she *detested* Dante de León.

After giving out two more promotions, the admiral finally dismissed the candidates from the courtyard. They filed back to their respective wings in la academia: uvedas to the northwest wing, dotredas to the northeast, trevedas to the east wing, and cuatredas to the southeast. Only the cazadores were allowed into the southwest wing, and the west wing, of course, was reserved for prisoners and the Maritime Archives. This would be the last time Ximena would leave the courtyard with the trevedas. Tomorrow, she would pack her things and move to the cuatreda dormitories, where she would begin the most difficult stage of training at la academia. The thought made her heart drum against her ribs.

When they entered the familiar halls of the east wing and the iron doors were shut behind them, the candidates relaxed. They stripped off their gloves, loosened their collars, and wiped the midday sweat from their foreheads, congratulating the two other trevedas who had been promoted. No one congratulated Ximena, of course. She lurked in the corner as she always did, tall, severe, and alone. If a candidate accidentally made eye contact with her, they were quick to look away, and when one stepped too far backward and stumbled into her, he recoiled as if he'd seen a ghost, muttering, "Lo—lo—lo siento, Cuatreda Reale."

None of this surprised her. After all, Ximena did not believe in friends. She considered them to be the second most dangerous distraction to her training (the first being romance of any kind), and therefore endeavored to dwell on the outskirts of all social

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circles. Over the course of her career at la academia, she had been mostly successful. Her peers considered her to be cruel, taciturn, and more arrogant than the daughter of infamous pirates had any right to be. So they left her alone, whispering about her from a distance, and that suited Ximena well enough. The only person she could bear to talk with was Marquesa—and Marquesa was usually missing. *Idiota*, thought Ximena. Her sister would get an earful before the day was through.

So while the other trevedas laughed and chattered among themselves, Ximena slipped around the crowd toward the stairs. She still had a few hours before dinner. If she hurried, she could make it to the archives to see her sister and still have time to spare. She didn't have the luxury of celebrating her promotion any longer than was strictly necessary. She had to get back to training, for both her and her sister's sake.

But just as Ximena's boot hit the first limestone tread, she felt a hand catch her sleeve.

"Where are you running off to, Cuatreda Reale?"

She turned. "To the archives to register Domínguez's execution. But fortunately for both of us, you are not my commanding officer, Cuatreda de León. So I have no reason to inform you of my plans."

Ximena may have only had one good eye, but she was fully aware that Dante possessed the same beauty all the de Leóns shared. His square jaw and broad shoulders were offset by his full lips and delicate nose; his eyes, always laughing, were wine-dark and framed by lashes any girl would envy. If only Dante himself weren't also aware of it. But he knew the effect he had on the people around him all too well. Worse, he reveled in it, winking and swaggering his way through life without shame.

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Even his hair—curls so blond they were almost silver—was a reminder of his superiority over her. La academia's rules forbade candidates from altering their appearance in any way. But Dante knew none of his fellow candidates were brave enough to report his indiscretions, so he dyed his hair with abandon, just as he kissed girls he wasn't supposed to kiss and drank liquor he wasn't supposed to drink. Ximena had tried to report him for it once, years ago, when she was thirteen and naive, brand new to la academia. But Dante had slipped his dye canister into her dormitory and blamed the whole incident on her, resulting in her getting disciplined and him receiving praise. She had learned her lesson quickly then: she was a Reale. The daughter of pirates executed for their crimes against the empire.

She would never best Dante de León, no matter how hard she tried.

"According to Section 857 of the Cazador Code of Conduct," he said, furrowing his brow in a mockery of thought, "candidates are forbidden from leaving their fellow peers behind in the line of duty."

"Section 857 of the code is only applicable at sea, pursuant to Addendum 4."

"Only when one is certain of the law may one begin to break it," Dante quoted. "Alessandra, esteemed founder of the Luzan Empire."

"If one argues with a fool, one is certain to become one," replied Ximena. "Also Alessandra."

"Well," he said, "then I must never argue with you again, capitana."

Laughter ricocheted off the polished limestone walls.

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Predictably, a crowd had gathered around Dante de León, girls and boys alike ready to shower him with compliments at a moment's notice. They were mostly other patrimonios, the children of ministers, merchants, or royal family members, admitted to la academia because of their last names rather than their abilities. Perhaps they thought that if they could please the high minister's handsome second son, he would snap his fingers and have his mother crown them with the title of cazador. But Ximena knew better. The minister's son had never cared about the cazadores, and he never would. He only attended la academia because if he didn't, his mother would disown him.

"We're going into the city to celebrate my—*our*—promotion," Dante said. "You could come with us, capitana. Get your head out of those books for a while."

"Leaving la academia premises without permission is a violation of the code, according to Section 368—"

"Hang the code."

"I must make our report—"

"Hang the report." Dante waved a hand dismissively. "You don't become a *cuatreda* every day. Besides, my mother isn't high minister for nothing. We won't get anything more than a slap on the wrist."

Ximena's good eye narrowed. "One doesn't follow the law for fear of punishment. One follows the law because they love it as they love themselves," she quoted.

"And who said that?" asked Dante.

"Your mother."

As Dante's grin faded, she twisted her wrist from his hand and marched up the stairs.

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“Suit yourself, capitana,” Dante called after her. “I’ve already asked Marquesa to join us. I’d be happy to buy her a drink in your place.”

Ximena didn’t look back. She even pretended not to hear when he turned to one of the many girls at his side and said, “It’s not like either of them will be any competition. My mother will see to that.”

He was baiting her again, she knew. Perhaps he hoped that one day she would snap and spear him through with a rapier. He didn’t share her scruples about betraying fellow crewmates. He would report her to Admiral Pérez for untoward conduct without a second thought, and just like that, their four-year battle would be over. No doubt that was why he had asked her to join him in the city—he would have reported her, had her disciplined, or even expelled, and exonerated himself with a well-placed mention of his mother’s name. And since he had failed to entice Ximena, she knew he would hunt for easier prey: Marquesa.

Which meant that Ximena had to get to her first.

She made her way down the long hallway that led to the west wing. As she walked by, wide-eyed archivists-in-training leapt from her path, straightening their rumpled uniforms.

“That’s her,” one whispered. “The one who caught Domínguez.”

“Heard she lost her eye to a pirate,” said another.

“What’s she doing here?”

“Hopefully nothing to do with me.”

Ximena paid them no heed. With her chin up and eye fixed ahead, she made her way to the archivist dormitories, stopping at the door labeled 142—Marquesa’s room.

“Open the door, Marquesa,” she said.

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No answer.

“Open the door, ahora mismo.”

Still no answer.

“Fine,” said Ximena. “Then I’ll tell Dante de León you’re too sick to join him in the city tonight.”

Silence. Then the turn of a lock, and two hazel eyes peeking through the crack in the door. That was all Ximena needed. She burst into the room, ignoring Marquesa’s squeak of protest, and spun on her sister with her good eye blazing.

“How dare you dishonor us this way?” she said.

“Lo siento.” Marquesa’s voice was like seafoam melting away. “I couldn’t . . . I didn’t . . .”

“By the law, finish your sentences, Marquesa,” Ximena said. She’d been trying to correct her older sister’s habit of letting her words dissolve for years to no avail. “You skip class, barely pass your examinations, and miss the most important execution of the year as if it were a birthday party.”

Marquesa shivered, folding her skinny arms around her ribs. “You know I hate executions, Ximena.”

“Did you stop to think about how that would look? What people would think?”

“I’m sure they don’t think . . .” Marquesa began.

Ximena shut the door, ensuring no one would overhear them. Then she swiveled back to her sister and pulled herself to her full height. Though she rarely lost her temper, Marquesa’s weakness never failed to provoke her.

“They think we are the unholy spawn of two convicted traitors. They think we are a disgrace to the law and the empire. They think we don’t deserve our place at la academia. And you are

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doing everything in your power to prove them right.”

Marquesa sat down on the bed, hands trembling in her lap. In times like these it was easy to forget that she was nineteen, two years older than Ximena: her eyes were large and glassy like a doll’s, and her uniform sagged like melting wax. Her legs were bowed, and her chest caved, likely from the asthma that prevented her from participating in la academia’s exercises. When she was nervous, she bit her nails with her small, sharp teeth—and Marquesa was always nervous. So her fingers were red and sometimes blood-crustled. Ximena made her hide them beneath thick, black gloves, but she always forgot to wear them. Watching her quiver, Ximena’s lip curled in disgust.

“Get up,” she said.

Marquesa obeyed without complaint, gnawing at her thumbnail.

“Basta,” Ximena said, swatting the hand from her sister’s mouth.

“Lo siento.”

Ximena walked across the cramped, sparsely furnished room: the dormitories in la academia were equipped with nothing but a bed, dresser, and chair. Upon reaching the dresser, she sifted through the bottles of half-finished rouge that were strewn over the top.

“Where did you get this?” she said.

Marquesa bit her lip. “One of Dante’s friends. She said it would look nice, so I . . .”

“Makeup is against the code,” Ximena said.

“Lo siento,” said Marquesa for the third time that day.

“Turn.”

Marquesa shifted until her back faced her sister. Then Ximena pulled her own gloves off, tucked them into her trouser pocket,

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and dipped one hand into a clay pot of whale oil. She raked it through her sister's unruly curls without a hint of gentleness. Marquesa flinched.

"I wish you didn't have to . . ."

"Cazadores don't wish," said Ximena, and that was that.

When Marquesa's hair was dark and slick with oil, Ximena reached for a ribbon, tying it off into a neat ponytail. It was as if they were children again—Marquesa fourteen and Ximena twelve, gangly girls preparing to attend their parents' trial. The Reales' execution had reduced Marquesa to a ghost, neither living nor dead. She had lost all her zeal for the law and her purpose along with it. So the task had fallen to Ximena to ensure they wouldn't end up on the streets, which began with concealing their signature Reale curls. She refused to give people one more reason to believe they were the rebellious, unruly daughters of rebellious, unruly pirates.

This, in the end, was Ximena's one weakness. She loved her sister. She loved her so fiercely that she hated her—for giving up, for becoming this shell of herself, for being so easily shattered on the rocks of life by every passing storm. But Ximena had sworn the day their parents died that she would do everything in her power to keep Marquesa safe under the law, and that was not the kind of oath one broke.

If only Marquesa didn't make it so difficult to keep.

"You're not leaving me many options, hermana," Ximena said. "Do you even know how hard I had to beg the admiral to move you to archivist training when you failed the cazador track two years ago? He's already made an exception once. He won't do it again."

"Tal vez eso sería mejor," Marquesa whispered.

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“Louder.”

“Maybe that would be better,” she repeated. “We both know I’m not going to pass the Royal Examination.”

“You will if you listen to me and study, for once.”

“But I *have* studied. I just don’t . . . I don’t have the talent for it that you do.”

“That’s not true.”

“But it is true. Maybe if I left la academia, things would be . . . easier.”

“Absolutely not.”

“For both of us,” Marquesa insisted. “You could come with me, you know.”

Ximena sniffed. As if she would ever leave la academia. This place was her lifeblood, her reason for being. She couldn’t leave it any more than she could become someone else.

“I know you don’t want to hear this . . . which is why I don’t ever . . .” said her sister.

“Speak up, hermana.”

Marquesa lowered her eyes. “I know my odds of passing the Royal Examination. Do you . . . know yours?”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“I only meant . . . it’s just . . .”

“Por favor, Marquesa, finish your sentences.”

“They aren’t going to let you win. They aren’t going to let you become a cazadora.”

The words, spoken so softly, may as well have been a cannon blast. Ximena’s good eye narrowed to a slit. It was one thing to hear it from Dante de León. It was quite another to hear such thoughts from her sister.

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“This conversation is over,” she said. “Cazadores who doubt are cazadores who lose. We have our heading, Marquesa, and it is the same as it has always been. You’ll become an archivist, and I will become a cazadora, and we will work together for the law just as we always planned. The second I leave this room,” she added, toweling off her hands, “you’re going to see the admiral in his office.”

“Ximena . . .”

“You’re going to apologize for your absence at the execution this afternoon, tell him that you were feeling ill, and that you will serve double the usual number of shifts in the archives.”

“No,” her sister whispered. “No, I couldn’t possibly . . .”

“You can, and you will. Now stand up so I can fix your uniform.”

It was at that moment that Marquesa’s frigate bird flew in through the open window and landed on the bedpost. Watching the girls with eyes that knew too much, it tipped its beak, puffed out the rubbery red pouch that dangled from its throat, and flapped its black wings, which were sharp and curved like knife blades. Marquesa had rescued it from drowning and decided to keep it as a pet a few years ago. She greeted it now with a smile and offered it a salted fish from a jar under her bed, cooing to it in a soothing whisper.

Ximena, who was afraid of birds but would never admit it, only glowered.

“I thought I told you to get rid of that creature. If anyone else finds it in here, they’ll have enough reason to expel you.”

“*That creature* has a name, you know,” said Marquesa.

“And what is it, pray tell?”

Marquesa’s smile was a shadow of things long gone.

“I call it Ximena,” she answered.

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A stray wind blew the window shut. The heat was stifling.

“Go and see the admiral,” Ximena said, turning to leave. “Tonight. This might be your last chance, hermana. ¿Entiendes? Your very last chance. If you obey the law—”

“The law will protect you.” Marquesa’s voice was hollow. “How could I forget.”

The frigate bird squawked. Cringing, Ximena opened the door and stepped into the hallway. But her boot paused over the doorframe, and she said over her shoulder, “I was promoted to *cuatreda* today.”

“Felicidades,” replied Marquesa, though there was no joy in it.

Ximena sighed. “Don’t go with Dante de León tonight. He only invited you to get under my skin.”

But Marquesa wasn’t listening anymore. She was sitting on her bed and petting her frigate bird—she had shaken her hair out, resurrecting her mane of black curls.

How long would it take? Ximena wondered. How long would it take before the admiral lost patience and expelled Marquesa from *la academia* for good? Ximena knew exactly what would happen to a girl without fortune or family to protect her: she would end up on the street, begging for scraps, sleeping in the gutter, or worse. The law could not protect those who did not follow it.

“Did you hear what I said?”

“Yes,” said Marquesa. “I heard you.”

“And you’re not eating enough. You’ve lost weight.”

Long afterward, when she took time to consider what had gone so terribly wrong, Ximena would remember that curl of Marquesa’s lip.

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“Gracias, hermana,” her sister said. “For everything.”

Ximena wanted to warn her one last time about the dangers of going anywhere with Dante de León. But it was almost dinnertime, and she hadn't been to the archives yet. So she straightened her spine, pulled her gloves back on, and strode out into the hallway without another word.

If the guard in the hallway saw her remove her eye patch and swipe at the scarred skin beneath it, he didn't say anything. No one in their right mind would dare assume that Ximena Reale had the capacity for tears.