

6 MONTHS LATER

(After Samara leaves Ebonpeak, but before Raf Returns with villagers)

Raf

Hands on my hips, I stare at *La Condesa*, her sails lowered like wings, ready to soar through the sea in the morning breeze. Yes, it's a magnificent day to sail. It's been too long and I crave it—can't live without it, like the way the ocean requires the sand.

I'm not sure how it's possible that I can admire my father's legacy after so many years of fear and hatred, but a part of me still does. And no matter how much I yearn to be free of him, and how desperately I've worked to be a man of different ilk, this part of me lingers.

"Señor!"

Turning on my heel, I peer back at Albert clomping down the pier with two men at his side. Their dark skin glistens with sweat, and their shirts hanging from them in the humidity. But their eyes shine with excitement, because the sea beckons us. "The coal was not at the mine," he reports.

I nod to the last of the crates being hoisted to the storage deck by the pulley. "It's already being loaded."

Albert nods and hurries to help the rest of the crew, his two men at his side. Everyone is busy with their tasks, but there is one face missing.

Heading up the ramp, I board the ship. The sound of creaking boards beneath my feet is lost to the clank of chains, the snap of sails, the slap of waves against the pier, and bells ringing in the distance—a culmination of the last month's preparations to leave as the men load the ship. The men tighten ropes and secure cannons. They load the coal for the steamer when the wind fails us, roll barrels of ale and casks of agave wine for the nights that stretch too long. Some of them stack baskets and crates of provisions, while others ready the sails to disembark.

I make my way toward the helm, knowing exactly where I'll find the hellion. For all her protestations coming here, she has gladly taken over. I laugh to myself. I doubt Samara even realizes she was made for this life.

When I spot the Captain's cabin door open, I shake my head and take the stairs two at a time to the quarterdeck. "You're far too predictable," I tell her as I step inside.

As expected, Samara has every piece of parchment and every ledger open and strewn between my desk and the bed. She's not as harried as I would have expected, though. Her long, blonde hair is freshly braided and her clothes are new. "At least you showered," I mutter. All she's done is worry for the past few days.

I glare at the unsightliness of my quarters. "You're supposed to help me stay organized, not make it all worse," I gripe, gesturing at the chaos. I stop beside her, where she leans on the desk. She doesn't even peel her eyes away from the accord unfurled in front of her.

"I'm ensuring the verbiage is right—that we haven't forgotten to cover anything." She shakes her head. "That the terms—"

“Samara.”

“What, Raf?” she bites out, finally straightening to meet my gaze. “After what happened in Ebonpeak, Baja barely trusts you as it is. If I’m not there, they might assume the worst.”

“You’re right, they don’t trust me,” I agree, my voice blithe and unaffected; she’s serious enough for the both of us. “But they trust you. And this was the deal *you* brokered with them. That’s your signature on that paper, right next to mine. And look, what do you know? Governor Sandoval’s is there right beside that.” I feign surprise. “See, we’re all in agreement.”

With a huff, Samara crosses her arms over her chest, the scars lining her cheek pinching as she purses her lips. “You jest, but if they change their minds, Raf—if they decide our stone isn’t worth access to their salt flats, then what?”

“Then, I’ll change their minds—”

“You refused to remove the cannons—”

“Of course I did. I want peace, Samara, but I’m not a fool. I won’t sail into enemy territory unarmed and put my men’s lives at risk.”

“I thought you said you trusted Baja?” she counters. “Their salt flats—this trade with them was *your* idea, if you remember correctly.”

“It was Hector’s, if *you*’ll remember correctly,” I volley. “And I trust no one. Not even you and those narrowed eyes of yours.”

“Raf, don’t you take anything seriously? Maybe I should go with you.”

“No. Someone needs to stay here and look after things.” I sigh, clasping each of her shoulders. “Plus, your villagers will be here in two months and you have a lot of preparing to do,” I say more softly, as if it might actually soothe her. But the truth of the matter is, I’m as nervous as Samara is.

The people of Baja have survived decades of my family’s tyranny. My father’s and my grandfather’s before him. And they will be wary of me for a long time to come. But more than that, I am nervous because I don’t want to let Samara down. Not when I’ve made it my vow to carry out Abraham’s vision of the future. To show Samara I can be worthy of something more than the oppressive cruelty left in my father’s wake. And that, despite my mother’s influence, I am loyal to Samara, the only family I have now.

“If something doesn’t feel right, I’ll reassess the situation, okay? I’ll leave if I have to. Besides, Hector will be there, and everyone *loves* Hector. He is shrewd and well-spoken . . . He’s the level-headed one. You know you don’t have to worry about him; he’ll keep me in line.”

Though my words and reassurances are meant for Samara, the slightest bit of weight lifts from my shoulders. *Hector will be with me*. A heaviness that settled in ages ago, wrapping its way around each strained cord inside me, loosens and seems to slither away as I imagine my best friend at my side in all of this.

Samara’s blue eyes, bright like the ocean when the sun pours through the reef, shift over me, softening the way they do sometimes. In some unexpected way, her gaze makes me feel like a man of worth. “I trust you. And not only because Hector is going with you,” she says quietly. “But I can *still* worry. I don’t know how *not* to be.”

"I know," I murmur, pulling her into my chest. Samara wraps her arms around me, and I squeeze her, kissing the top of her head.

I'm not sure what it was that first day I saw her, eyes filled with fire and fear at the edge of the sunken city. But it was at that very moment I knew I had to figure out a way to protect her. Even if it took me a while to realize I could never go through with my mother's plans, I couldn't be responsible for another scar for this young woman to bear. I couldn't become my father.

A throat clears, and I roll my eyes before looking at Erik, looming in the doorway as always. "It's you," I grumble, though I'm only half kidding. I can't hold anything against him, even after how he's treated Samara over the years, because I've done far worse.

"Hey," Samara says, straightening as she blinks those big blues at him. The two of them would be sickening if they weren't so perfect together in their own strange way. "We were just saying goodbye, I guess," she says with a slight shrug. She takes a step back to look at me.

"Yes," I admit. "It's about that time."

Erik moves out of the way as Hector strides through the doorway, filling it with his presence, but not the way Erik does. Hector is not a brute, but he is the strength I rely on. "We're ready," he says, glancing between the three of us.

Resigned, I look at Samara. Not wanting to see the worry in her eyes, I wave her out the door. "Go on, get off my ship before this gets too sentimental."

With a smirk, Samara files out the door, Erik following her. I feel Hector's gaze, warm like a palm against sun-soaked glass, as I step past him out onto the deck. Our eyes meet for the briefest of moments, and I pat his arm.

The sea air is a much needed reprieve as I walk Samara and Erik to the pier. She stops at the platform and turns to face me. No, she looks at Hector standing behind me. "Take care of him for me?" she says.

Hector dips his chin, and I want to toss a snide comment between them, but the silent promise in Hector's eyes gives me pause.

Where has the shy slave boy from my childhood gone? And when did he become my protector? *I* was the one who protected *him*.

I've asked myself a hundred times when things between us shifted. Was it the night of our arrival feast in Ebonpeak? When I'd drunken myself into oblivion after learning how long we would have to stay, knowing there was no way I could follow through with my mother's plan, and Samara and her people to their death? Hector had promised me we would make it right, and he was right.

Or was it that night in the crew cabin last year, when Hector woke, drenched in fear after my father visited his dreams? The night I sat by his hammock, stroking his hair with the promise to never let harm come to him again.

Or had something changed between us long before that, when we were fifteen and Hector had held my hand as I cried in bed, blood staining my lips and cheek after my father's return?

"Raf?"

I look at Samara.

“Is everything all right? You’re not having second thoughts, are you?”

I grin, because it’s all I can think to do, and lean in to shove her shoulder. “You wish. I know you’ll miss me, Samara, but duty calls.” I wink at her, and she rolls her eyes.

“I’ll have them pull anchor,” Hector says, and with a quick goodbye, he disappears into the crowd of men bustling on deck.

“Safe travels,” Erik says, and though his voice gives nothing away, his eyes shimmer with sincerity, and maybe a little of that silent understanding we’ve forged between us over the months. He extends his hand to me.

“Take care of our girl,” I tell him, clasping his hand in mine.

“Of course I will.”

I shoo them down the ramp. “See you in a few months!” I call. “And there better not be any of your villagers squatting in my quarters when I return. I mean it, Samara!”

“No promises!” she flings back. “Hasta luego!” She waves over her shoulder, and I watch the two of them walk hand in hand down the pier toward the horses.

By the time they climb into their saddles, *La Condesa* is nearly out of the peninsula, and they’re nothing more than specks in the shrinking town.

I stare at the fishing village until it’s out of sight. Until my curls whip into my face, and the men’s banter is lost in the wind. It’s been almost a year since we left this very port, heading for Ebonpeak, and by the time I return, home will be an entirely new place once again. It strikes me how altered life becomes every time this ship sails in and out of port.

I feel Hector’s presence behind me like a sixth sense.

“Did you ever imagine our lives would be this way, when my father brought you home to me?” It’s a question I’ve pondered often, but never had the guts to ask him. For some reason, I ask him now, without a second thought.

Hector stands beside me, our sleeves billowing between us as we watch the coast disappear on the horizon. “No,” he admits. I can feel his eyes on me—can picture his amused contemplation, barely perceptible in his chiseled, stoic features. He is strong and quiet to many. Humble and kind to those who know him well. But to me, he is Hector. “All I knew was that a cruel man had brought me to a spoiled child, who had jewels and clothes and toys unlike any I’d ever seen before. I’d assumed the worst.”

I close my eyes, allowing the wind to batter my face and stave off the unwanted memories. The sickness I felt, seeing Hector for the first time. Skinny. Beaten. Half naked and afraid. Even after all these years, I’ve never asked him what my father did to him, too terrified to learn the answer.

“But in a matter of days,” Hector continues. “I became grateful.”

My eyes open, refocusing in the sunlight as Hector grips the railing. His hand is so close to mine, they nearly touch. “Your father bringing me to his home, to my best friend—my brother in all ways that count—saved me, and I would do all of it again.” His voice is low and reassuring, and when I finally look at him, his lips tilt with a smile. “Because what would you do

without me?” he jests. “You wouldn’t have lasted this long, that much is certain.” Though Hector smiles that warm, all-consuming smile of his, I can’t bring myself to smile back.

But whatever I think I might do or say in that moment—whatever emotion is written on my face—makes Hector’s brow twitch. “Come,” he says. Hector grasps my shoulder, squeezes it, and nods toward the bow of the ship. “The first one to spot a dolphin gets to pick tonight’s poison,” he says. It is tradition, one the men rely on us for, and though it feels like there’s a scroll of things to say, I let the moment between Hector and me pass, just like it always does.