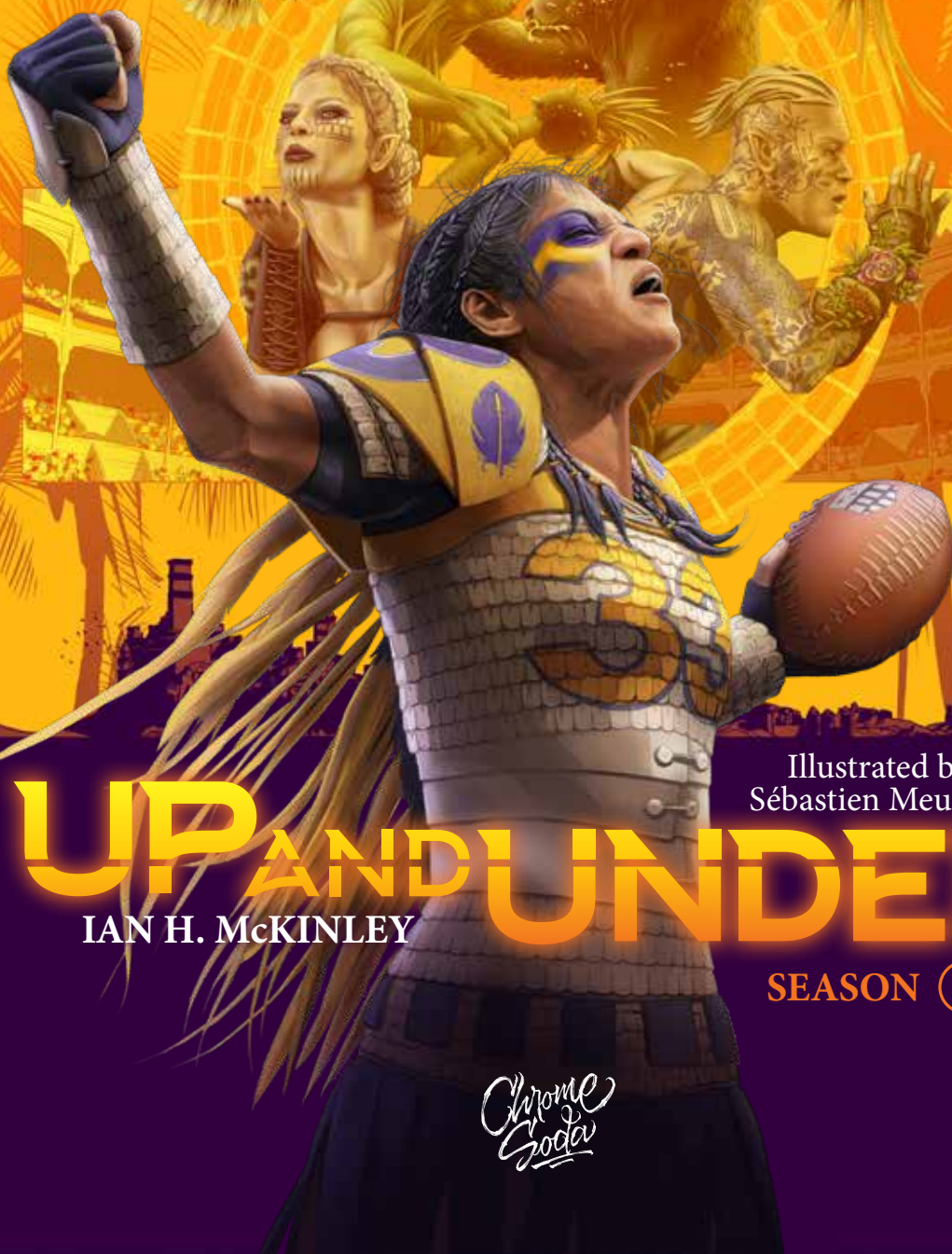


FOOTY IS THE NEW WARFARE



Illustrated by
Sébastien Meunier

UP AND UNDER

IAN H. MCKINLEY

SEASON ①

*Chrome
&
Soda*

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THE WORLD OF UP AND UNDER



PROLOGUE

SEVEN MONTHS HENCE

Get the bastard!
Jacyntha knew him, Pierce Rosethorn, knew he'd make for the sideline.
Get him now!

She had seen the Quarrel's thrower fade right and had known Rosethorn would be the target. She had backed off her sisters in the ruck and had done so just in the nick of time. The Sylvan thrower had threaded a pass right between Belyna's and Karolyse's outstretched arms, and guess who had slipped around the line to snatch the pass out of the air and head down the sideline?

Yup, that bastard Pierce Rosethorn.

With the Sanger roaring in her ears, the spectators sensing the inevitability of the winning score just as the championship game was heading to overtime, Jacyntha willed herself into full flight.

Widen the angle!

Rosethorn was quicker than her so she needed to get the angle right. Instead of closing him down as she'd normally do, she made for the corner flag. Her teeth flashed white, less a smile than a clenched snarl. In contrast, the bastard Sylvan grinned and dangled the ball on an outstretched arm towards her as he raced down the sideline.

She dug deeper, leaned further forward, and pumped her legs for all they were worth. She knew about Rosethorn's speed. She hoped he didn't know about hers. They flew down the pitch on convergent trajectories, crossing the half-way line at the same instant. The Sylvan, confident in his skill and playing to the crowd, pulled a rose out of *somewhere* and brandished it to the crowd as he ran.

Anger made her quicken her pace.

There was no one in the backfield to help. The Quarrels had reduced the Mytilan Militantes to eight players and Jacyntha's teammates were all in the ruck. But she realized that maybe she didn't need help. Pulling out the rose had cost Rosethorn a pace and her anger had given it to her. Indeed, he must have realized his error because he let the rose fall to the ground as he accelerated.

They were still stride for stride as they passed the twenty-pace marker. Rosethorn wasn't grinning anymore. He also leaned forward.

Fifteen paces ... ten ... five.

Then two things happened at precisely the same time: Jacyntha lunged in a blur of blue and yellow macaw feathers that were her team's sigil; Pierce Rosethorn skidded and slipped sideways, anticipating the tackle and avoiding it.

The crowd held its breath and as she sailed past the accursed Sylvan, a silence reigned, the intake of breath before the roar, and only the pounding of her heart filled her ears. Rosethorn leaned back as she careened past, the fingertips of her right hand brushing the nose of his honey badger tattoo on his chest.

There was no thought that guided her hand, no tactic practised on the training ground, no weapon that extended her reach, but as she flew towards the sideline she clutched at his belt.

The crowd roared!



CHAPTER 1

I

Crime doesn't pay ... until it does. It's a lie to say otherwise, though Cassandra Thordwall wasn't above lying when necessary. Pillaging and piracy had given Thordwall plenty of lucre over the years. And yet, not only had it been dangerous work, it had taken her away from her driving passion: footy.

And so, she had given her share of their caravel to her brother that very morning and had gone ashore in Guayamartí to meet Karsgaard Neuvil, the once-famous, now-disgraced footy coach. Umberto accompanied her, given the dangers that lurked on the filth-lined streets near the wharves, not to mention those presented by Neuvil himself. She had confidence in her ability to defend herself — piracy allowed you the opportunity to hone certain skills, after all — but being outnumbered or swarmed was always a possibility. And then there was the matter of the assassins ...

As she walked along the Maral Canal in the shade of the palm trees that

lined the strand, she spared a glance up at the region's most important cultural landmark: the Eztadio de Sanger.

"There it is, captain," Umberto gushed, which was curious because he was usually so taciturn. She supposed they had just made port that very morning and he hadn't been back home in many years. "That's where Slave'm Beggar'm lifted the Blue Blood Cup."

"The very place," she said. "Cemetery of Dreams, some call it, though I call it the Palladium of the Impossible. I prefer to think of all the reason-defying glory it has witnessed."

"I thought you didn't like witnesses, captain."

"Ha! Got me there." Then she added, "One thing: we're not pirates anymore, got it? So drop the 'captain' when you speak to me."

"What should I call you then, cap . . . er . . ."

"Let's go with 'boss.' That'll do. We don't want people connecting me to Pillaging Peggy," she said, referring to her pirating *nom de guerre*. "Look, we're entering respectable society . . . well . . . as respectable as this enterprise allows at any rate. We have to keep up appearances."

"So why we meeting Karsgaard Neuvil?"

"He's changed."

"You know that?"

She let her silence answer for her.

"And if it's all so respectable, why we meeting him at the Luffing Lateen?"

She stopped and faced her bodyguard. "There are only so many places that allow him in. Listen, I know the owner of the Lateen and he promised me a private corner in exchange for bringing the team here after the first game. He's a big fan." Umberto simply shrugged, his eyes scanning the narrow streets that gave on to the strand.

Telling Umberto that Gosling was a big fan was like telling him rats liked Guayamartí. *Hardly a stunner*. Footy was huge in this part of the world. Which was one of the reasons Umberto had suggested they come ashore here. Most of the inhabitants of the city would kill (or die) for an entry into the Sanger on high festival days, but they had also petitioned the city Hierarchs, violently and effectively, to proclaim a festival day every fortnight so that they

could go to more matches. The prospect of regular game days, and the silver offered in prizes, had brought many a team here from the nearby lands and fostered the creation of a league. It was now an unexceptional thing to see Dwarves or Elves or fouler things roaming the laneways.

Umberto had his reasons for coming ashore in Guayamartí, which probably went beyond football. He was certainly right that the average Guayamarteño was prepared to pay to see good footy. But Thordwall had a more important reason why she had wanted to come here, to this trading city sitting at the end of an archipelago splayed across the Sommer Sea. She knew that many of the league's team owners were merchants whose shipping was vulnerable to piracy.

As she had guessed, the Lateen had its shutters open given the clement weather, letting in the afternoon light and the sea air. Even if she had wanted a private corner, Thordwall had also wanted lots of light for the meeting. She didn't want Neuvil pulling a dagger out from some dark place that Umberto couldn't see. As they entered, Gosling greeted them and took them over to the tavern's snug. "It'ch lovely to shее you Mishtresh Thordwall! Or should I shay Manager Thordwall?"

"Mistress will do. Show him over when he arrives. And bring me some wine . . . and not that rubbish you foist off after midnight, either. A flagon of *Pinto Macia* would do."

Gosling bowed his head. "We pronounsh it *Pintó Mashía*, with the emphasish at the end, Mishtresh Thordwall, but howshoever you pronounsh it, a flagon is on itsh way."

Umberto investigated the snug, checking under the bench, behind the cushions on the bench, under the table. He confirmed the scimitar was in place with a nod. Then he took a dagger from his boot and tucked it behind the bench cushion and Cassandra sat next to it, leaning a packet of powder against the wall by her foot. Her bodyguard inspected the door to the snug and jammed it open before taking up a position directly across from the opening.

"Boss, you sure there'll be no more than two?"

She nodded. "Giamucci hasn't had the time to hire more," she said, referring to the owner of the Guayamartí Wharf Rats, one of the two most

popular local footy teams. She smiled at the irony; a wharf rat in her employ had confirmed the man had brought an Assassins' Guild representative into his home this morning, just as she had hoped he would.

They didn't have to wait long. Karsgaard Neuvil preceded Gosling, clearly needing no one to guide him. She rose from the bench and looked him over. Neuvil was big, perhaps two full paces tall and nearly as wide. He had a shock of red hair that hung down to his shoulders and bushy eyebrows of ochre. Someone had affectionately broken his nose at some point, re-setting it askew on his rough-hewn face. His eyes, though, burned, which Cassandra thought was a good sign. He walked with a limp, but it clearly didn't slow him down, for he was on her as quick as a mongoose on a cobra, scooping up her hand before she could react. He lifted it to his lips, though she didn't actually feel the kiss he planted there.

"Master Neuvil," she said, calling on every ounce of brassy confidence she'd ever mustered in her career in piracy. "Good of you to come."

He smiled and replied, "I am honoured to make your acquaintance."

"I didn't know you were so well-spoken," she said.

"I am sure there are many things about me you do not know, just as there are many things about you that I do not know." He acceded to her gesture and sat on the chair across the table from her.

"A goblet of *Pintó Macía*?"

He nodded. "Is that how you pronounce it?"

She graced him with a sweet smile. "So I'm told." Gosling poured them goblets and left a bowl of coconut shavings.

"Your man?" Neuvil asked, glancing at Umberto.

She shook her head. "That's Umberto de la Calle and he's your Thane of Player Personnel . . . if this chat goes well."

"Is he now? And the chat is to be about footy, I take it?"

"What else is there? And why else would anyone want to share a flagon of *Pintó Macía* with Karsgaard Neuvil?"

"There are a few people who would pay greatly for my company these days." It was a wry statement, devoid of humour and bluster.

"I thought you'd been cleared of the match-fixing accusations."

“By the Hierarchs, aye, but not by some others. So, what do you want?”

“Two things. I want a team and I want a truthful answer from my new head coach.”

His bushy red eyebrows shot upwards and he frowned. “Teams are costly. We are not talking silver, either. We are talking gold.”

Umberto tossed her the pouch she had prepared back on the caravel. She snatched it out of the air. Weighed it in her hand and let it drop to the table with a thump.

Neuvil’s eyes followed it.

“What is your question?”

She leaned forward. “Are you clean?”

II — TWENTY-TWO YEARS EARLIER

It was a hell of a play. Whatever one’s thoughts on hell, Karsgaard Neuvil’s detractors certainly called it “devilish,” implying that some foul power had aided him.

His Hammarskjöld Nordhammers had been drawing one – one heading into the final moments of their last game of the season against the Karthini Royalists. Their task was simple. They had to win. Then they’d qualify for the knock-out round of the Frozen Seas Cup and stay in Risrilda at least one week longer. If they lost or drew, the Nordhammers would row home for Val-Hallá the next day. The problem was the Nordmen’s inferior armour had meant they were playing eight against ten. The other problem was the Dark Elves had penetrated deep into the Nordhammer half and the ruck had been advancing towards the goal line.

Neuvil had seen his team lose containment and he had raced to plug the gap in the line. Then he had heard Iva Thorkellson call out. The Hall of Honour coach was waving him upfield, yelling that the team needed an outlet. The chances of causing a turn-over and gaining possession of the ball weren’t good, but Neuvil turned away from the ruck and drifted into the Royalists’ half. You don’t need to teach Dark Elves about the threat of a deep pass, so a Royalist striker had dropped back to help a teammate mark

the then-rookie. Being up two players meant being extra-careful wouldn't cost them their numerical advantage at the point of attack.

Lief Guthrumson had lost his cool and lunged into the ruck in a frenzied whirl, putting pressure on the ball-carrier. The Dark Elf obviously hadn't known that Guthrumson couldn't tackle worth shit and had dumped-off the ball to a teammate instead of dodging clear of the block ... the only problem being that the teammate in question had a berserker on top of her. She had dropped the ball and it had bounced between the legs of all the players in the ruck and come out in front of thrower Snorri Larsson. Larsson had snatched up the ball and had sprinted around the right side of the ruck, looking down-field ... and seeing only a rookie marked closely by two opponents.

Snorri had later told Neuville that the only reason he had thrown the long bomb was because he had seen the ref raising the whistle to her lips. Counting on there being a bit of injury time (there was always injury time in footy, largely because there were always injuries aplenty), Snorri had put every ounce of his renowned strength into the ball, hurling it in a tight spiral.

Perhaps because they hadn't expected a turn-over, Neuville's markers had delayed a split second, allowing him to get up in the air before they had jumped. He had gotten above them and, despite being hemmed in, had come down with the ball. The early jump meant he had also landed a split second before the Elves. He had dodged clear of the line-elf before they could react. Instead of trying to slip past the striker, his blood lust had taken hold of him; he had attacked and had not only upended his opponent, but had split the Dark Elf's skull. Then it had been a question of outlasting the line-elf as he had dashed towards the end zone. His opponent had grabbed a handful of shirt and was dragging Neuville down to the turf. He had slogged on, punching the Dark Elf in the head as he ran. One last slug had broken the Elf's neck and he had sprinted clear, lunging into the end zone to the trill of the final whistle.

The Dark Elf striker subsequently succumbed to his split skull, meaning Karsgaard Neuville became the only non-monster to get two kills in one match during the entire season. The fact that they had both come on the same play, with a brilliant catch in double-coverage and the winning



HE HAD GOTTEN ABOVE THEM AND, DESPITE BEING
HEMMED IN, HAD COME DOWN WITH THE BALL.

touchdown thrown in, meant the Nordman rookie got the player-of-the-match award and an immediate promotion to a suddenly vacant runner position following the maiming of Karlsefni Sveinson.

The Nordhammers had drained dry more than a single barrel of ale during the post-match celebrations that night. And, drawing on the player-of-the-match bonus, Neuvil had tried his first hit of rat-root.

III

“Are you clean?” Cassandra Thordwall, who rumour had it was a pirate, asked him over two decades later in the Luffing Lateen, a public house just off the Guayamartí strand.

What in the thirteen sweet hells does that mean?

For all he pondered the question, deep down he knew. Karsgaard Neuvil had fallen from heights he had never imagined attaining when he was a bairn growing up in Nordhaven and it wasn't for taking clean footy matches and making dirty, noisome things of them. He had fallen low for making a dirty, noisome thing of himself. Drink and rat-root: the fonts of all evil.

“We are in Guayamartí,” he said by way of explanation to the woman sitting across from him. He tugged at the breast of his blouse and continued, “I am sweating in this tropical heat. I walked through the entire Barrio to get here and likely picked up a new herd of fleas doing so. I am consorting with pirates. Of course I am not clean.”

Thordwall was striking, but not in the way men usually described women as striking. Rather, she looked like she was used to *striking* people. In response to what he said, she narrowed her dark eyebrows and her lips drew a thin line across her face. She suddenly looked on the verge of striking *him*. “I am no longer a . . . *mariner*,” she said. “As of today, I am an owner of a football team, one I expect to make the finals on a regular basis.”

He couldn't help but smile. “You do not *own* a team. Listen, a team is built over years, not cobbled together on a whim. Now, I grant you, that pouch there will secure the services of some thick-skulled men willing to put on a uniform, bask in the glory of walking out onto the pitch under



THORDWALL WAS STRIKING, BUT NOT IN
THE WAY MEN USUALLY DESCRIBED WOMEN AS STRIKING.

the shadow of the stands, but I guarantee you, they will not be basking in glory walking off the pitch. They shall be lucky if they can still walk at all.”

Thordwall smiled. “Who said I wanted you to hire men?”

It was Neuvil’s turn to narrow his eyes. He didn’t reply immediately, instead thinking of where they were in the world. “Geckoids? Exotherms are all strange creatures, particularly Geckoids, and they notoriously only play well for their own. Even *I* could not coach them.”

She shook her head. “No, not Geckoids.”

“Orcs would tear you to shreds. None of the Elven races would work for you . . .” He leaned forward, “Some of your pirate mates? Aye, they might do.”

“I was a *mariner* and I thank you to remember it. And no, my former crew is still gainfully employed by my brother, a successful *trader*.”

“Hmmm . . . did you pick up a shipload of my countrymen, by chance? Nordmen make great footy players.”

She sighed. “No, I did not sail to Val-Hallá.”

“You are not thinking of Halflings?”

“No, not Halflings,” she said.

“Good, because you would never reach a final with *them*. What do you have in mind?”

“I said I didn’t want men. Did you not think that perhaps I’d want women?”

“Oh.”

She arched a black eyebrow at him, making him think he should say something more.

“Are you thinking about those women warriors from that queendom in the N’Itgat Jungle? What are they called?”

Thordwall nodded. “Xonyxas.”

“Aye, them. Well, I suspect Xonyxas *would* work for you, though I hope you know some you can reach out to. But I can tell you, I have played against some nasty ’Nyxas teams, successful teams, but they usually do not do so well once they come up against armour, especially Dwarves.”

“That’s where you come in,” Thordwall said. “I’m not hiring one of the best coaches in the business for nothing. You’ll make them better, more resilient.”

“Ah, there you err,” Neuvil countered. “I *could* make them more resilient, but I remind you, I am not in the business. Not anymore.”

“Didn’t you say the Hierarchs had cleared you of match-fixing?”

“Aye, I did. But I also said that some others had not . . . the League Governors, for some.”

“I have a plan for that,” the striking woman said as though commenting on the monsoon rain that had swept in to engulf Guayamartí. She paused while the public house owner, Sam Gosling, went about closing the shutters and lighting tapers in the ensuing darkness. The denizens of the Barrio flooded into the tavern, escaping the torrent, but Umberto directed them to tables on the opposite side of the room. If Gosling didn’t appreciate having half his business closed off, he wisely kept his mouth shut.

Thordwall only explained further after her body-guard gave her a nod. She leaned forward and said, “I will not be the sole owner of the club. A . . . consortium . . . of interested partners in my former trade are willing to guarantee certain . . . trade concessions . . . that should sway three of the governors.”

“That will not be enough. You will need one more to overcome the two local clubs; they swore I would never coach again on this side of the Sommer Sea.”

“Someone else in my consortium has advised me not to worry about Duc Tancred de Baston’s Imperials. And as for the Wharf Rats, I have a plan for them,” Thordwall said.

Neuvil noticed Umberto had grown twitchier, as though expecting something. He turned his eyes back to the woman. “And what is your plan?”

“I made sure Eguardo Giamucci would know we were meeting here this afternoon.”

“You *what*?”

That was when the assassins struck.

Daggers scythed the air. One hit Umberto, another embedded itself into the snug’s door-frame. Neuvil jumped up and grabbed a stool.

Thordwall dove under the table and another dagger thumped into the wood panelling right behind where her head had been a second earlier. Two men and two women surged from the throng that had crowded into the Luffing Lateen, though one clattered to the floor in front of Gosling, who had stuck out a leg and tripped the assailant.

Two assassins lunged for the snug while a third went to finish off Umberto. Neuvil used the stool like a shield to block the opening with his left hand and, although he had agreed to come to the meeting unarmed, with his right hand he snatched a knife from his boot. One attacker stabbed at him, sticking the weapon into the stool's seat. The second made to clamber over the snug's short wall. Through Neuvil's legs, Thordwall saw Umberto's attacker jab with a long dirk, but her bodyguard wasn't as wounded as he let on and he leaned back, grabbing the assassin's wrist as he did so.

Thordwall wasn't under the table because she was scared; you don't last long as a pirate if you don't get stuck into a fight. No, her arrangements with Gosling hadn't only included reserving the snug, they had included weaponry of various assortments, those that she and Umberto had verified were in place before the meeting. She grabbed the powder-filled package leaning against the wall and pulled a mask over her face. Then she slid her scimitar from its leather sheath that Gosling had tacked to the underside of the table. Feet thumped onto the tabletop above her but she ignored that attacker. Instead, lying on her back, she pushed off from the wall with her legs and shot out from underneath the table. She slid between Neuvil's braced feet and stabbed upwards with her scimitar into the thigh of the first attacker. The sword cut deeply, fatally, and the assassin collapsed like a sail whose halyards had been severed.

Neuvil spun around to face the assassin on the table, swinging his stool and forcing the attacker to hop over it. Luckily the assassin hadn't accounted for being three feet off the ground already and her head thumped into the ceiling. She fell onto the table in a crumpled heap.

Umberto had subdued his assailant so Thordwall focussed on the fourth, a dirk-wielding blur who now darted into the fray. She spun to her knees and threw the dust. The attacker lunged at her through an erupting cloud



HE LEANED BACK, GRABBING
THE ASSASSIN'S WRIST AS HE DID SO.

of grey-green powder. The assassin twisted into the stab, but Thordwall ducked and rolled away, calling out to Neuvil, "Don't breathe the powder!"

The assassin stabbed again and again, but the third strike was clumsy and it didn't come close to her. The woman wobbled and then Gosling clubbed her on the crown, bringing the assault to an end.

"Gosling! Back off!" she yelled, scrambling across to the tavern owner and pushing him back to safety. Neuvil, the front of his blouse pulled up to cover his face beneath his wide eyes, retreated as far as he could into the snug, recoiling from the lingering powder in the air, whereupon he thought to check that the assassin lying on the table was truly unconscious.

Thordwall pushed Gosling towards the strand-side wall of the tavern, saying, "Open the shutters." The pub owner didn't need to be told twice. His bouncer kept the throng of patrons well back as Gosling opened the shutters, letting a droplet-laden breeze into the room. Umberto stood, his mask already affixed to his face, and he calmly re-arranged his shirt to cover the chainmail lying next to his skin before crossing to the snug and scooping up the pouch of gold coins Thordwall had let fall onto the table prior to the attack.

"What in the thirteen sweet hells was in that dust?" Neuvil asked, his voice muffled from the shirt pulled up to cover his face.

Thordwall said, "Finely ground kazati mushrooms laced with boomslang venom. It's fast, but settles quickly." She took off her mask. "We should be okay now."

He let the shirt drop, revealing an open mouth on an amazed face. "Holy shit. You do not mess around."

She shrugged, grinning.

"Except you do," Neuvil added, his face contorted into a snarl. "You messed around with my life!"

Thordwall felt her grin disappear. "Calm down! You're no worse for wear."

"Do not tell me to calm down!" His voice had risen to a bellow. He held up his forefinger and thumb a hair's-breadth apart. "I WAS THIS CLOSE TO DYING!"

She wiped the blade of her scimitar clean using the sleeve of a dead

assassin. “We were ready for them, and frankly, if you can’t defend yourself in a tight space anymore, then you’re not the man you were, and certainly not the man I need. But, good news! You did well, though the one on the table did your work for you. The job’s yours if you want it.”

Neuvil’s jaw hung open. She knew she had to act quickly. “Gosling, we need more of that *Pintó Macía*.” The owner nodded and scurried off. She called out to him, “Oh, and get the procurator to send an *inquestor* down here immediately to question the surviving assassins.”

She took Neuvil by the arm and pulled him over to one of the empty tables near the shutters, Umberto following closely. The squall had passed and the sun was coming out again. Neuvil’s eyes took in all the activity in the street, obviously looking for new threats. She sat him down and put a hand on each of his shoulders. Leaning down and peering into his eyes she said, “Karsgaard, see that man over there by the palm tree? He’s one of mine. See that one over there beside the cantina? He’s another. The situation is under control. No one’s going to kill you. However, someone *is* going to authorize your return to the league and that someone is Eguardo Giamucci, owner of the Wharf Rats.”

Gosling returned with the flagon of wine and poured them brimming goblets. “That’ll be two posht-match shelebrashons, Mishtresh Thordwall.”

She nodded and, despite herself, smiled at his temerity. Neuvil downed half the wine in two quick gulps and then asked, “Why would Giamucci clear the way for my return? He hates me almost as much as Duc Tancred de Baston.”

“Aye, he does. So much so that he took my bait and now we’ve got him over a barrel. *He* sent the assassins . . . and before you do any more yelling, I knew we could take them because I only gave him since mid-morning to contract them; he didn’t have time to get anyone good. Look at them! They didn’t even wear hoods to cover their identity. Trust Giamucci to slap together an assassination attempt using stevedores and not professionals.”

Neuvil settled down, though she could see he was still angry. She nodded to Umberto, who fished inside his vest and pulled out another pouch. She passed him this smaller purse and said, “Here. This is your first month’s pay and a signing bonus. Find us a place to work, train, and lodge players.

I'm staying at the Kingfisher. Come 'round tomorrow morning and we'll talk players."

He opened the pouch and peered inside. He looked ready to throw it back at her, so she said, "And don't think I didn't notice how you evaded my question. If you show up hungover or strung out on rat-root, I'll move on. I've a meeting tomorrow afternoon with ..."

"Rennigan Slythe," he finished for her. "So I am informed." He glanced up at her and chuckled upon seeing the look on her face. She stilled her features and waited. "Your information is good, I will grant you that, Thordwall. If there is one man in this world I never want to see get ahead in life, it is that self-centred brute who sees himself as the hero of every story going. Oh, he would love to coach a team of women, he who thinks all women worship him.

"I shall accept your offer, Mistress Thordwall," he concluded. "If not just to keep your Xonyxas safe from Slythe."

v

There are things that aren't done. In a sport that prides itself on its brutality, footy had written laws as well as an unwritten code of honour. Cynics would say the code of honour was unwritten because the players couldn't read, and they wouldn't be far from the truth. Even so, the players largely knew the laws and, equally, knew how the laws could be bent. Only a fool would trust the referees to protect them, so the code of honour kicked in when the odd player was tempted to bend the laws too far.

Hence, hitting a prone player was a foul and a breach of the laws of the game. But in the middle of a ruck, a referee couldn't spot everything that happened. Fouling occurred oftentimes. Players understood each other: if a heavily armoured Orc blocker fell beside you and if you could easily kick him, well, fouling was almost self-defence because if you didn't keep him down, that guy would get up and clobber you. No player wanted to fall victim to a foul, but they generally wanted to fall victim to an Orc blocker even less. Putting the boot in, as it was known, levelled the playing field.



HIS NAME WAS RENNIGAN SLYTHE AND HE
HAD ENDED KARSGAARD NEUVIL'S PLAYING CAREER.

But what if you were one of the big guys? They generally eschewed fouling. Why bother stomping on some prone weakling when there were ample upright weaklings to be attacked, all within the laws of the game? There was the odd player, though, who let his fellows take and receive hits, while he circled the ruck looking for those most vulnerable of victims, the prone ones. Such a player was hated by everyone except, perhaps, his teammates. A brute like that could easily end your career, and for most footy players, that would usually lead to a life of penury, begging for a living in temple doorways. Such a player, who spat in the face of the code of honour, became a target for other players.

One such brute, a freak of nature so strong he could take on a troll, had terrorized the Frozen Seas Football League a generation prior and had made a name for himself as the dirtiest player ever to have befouled the sport. Only one referee had ever spotted him breaking the laws of the game despite the scores of opponents he maimed. No fellow player had ever managed to exact revenge for his many, many transgressions; he was too quick, too cunning, too strong.

His name was Rennigan Slythe and he had ended Karsgaard Neuvil's playing career.

VI — FIFTEEN YEARS EARLIER

Naught says "You're not going to score" like a spike through the arm. It was Karsgaard Neuvil's approach to footy. You could swap out the specific body part, but the principle held: it's impossible to score a touchdown when impaled on a spike. In this particular case, it was the arm.

A Blood Devils' catcher had snatched a pass out of the air and had been running down the touchline, a striker escorting him. As the only Hammarskjöld Nordhammers not stuck in the ruck, Neuvil and berserker Björe Liefson reacted, Liefson marking the striker and Neuvil tackling the ball carrier. The catcher was a good dodger but not good enough. Neuvil's shoulder pad spike took the Blood Devil in the arm. True to form, the ball



HE LOOKED UP INTO SLYTHE'S CRAZED EYES AND FOR THE FIRST TIME SINCE HIS ROOKIE SEASON, HE FELT FEAR.

sprang free and bounced towards the Nordhammers' end zone, while Neuvil crashed to the pitch on top of the injured catcher.

The opposition striker knocked Liefson onto the ball, causing it to bounce deeper into the Nordhammer half and a new ruck formed around it. As Neuvil scrambled to his knees, the Blood Devils' Ogre stormed into the fray, knocking him down again. He rolled over and realized he was behind the Blood Devil line, the ref was nowhere to be seen, and there was no one nearby to support him.

That was when he saw Rennigan Slythe closing in. Over his years of footy, Neuvil had gotten to know few players like he then knew Slythe. The Blood Devil striker was one of those players who seemed perfectly reasonable and affable off the pitch but who, once the whistle sounded, transformed into a man of single-minded purpose . . . and that purpose was to maim. His eyes would go from icily stoic to enraged fiend at kick-off and once the game came to an end, he returned to the adulation-seeking, self-centred man consumed with sophistry and affectations of the landed gentleman. In truth he was no gentleman: his true nature came through on the footy pitch.

As Slythe's studded boot hurtled towards his face, Neuvil grabbed the incoming foot and twisted, hoping to bring the dirty brute down. Instead, he came away with Slythe's boot. The big man, near as tall as the Ogre, caught his balance as Neuvil rolled away. But Neuvil was still prone and Slythe came at him again, laughing. Quick for a big man and cunning in equal measure, Slythe feinted another kick, which Neuvil deflected, but the feint was meant only to pin down the Nordman and, instead of kicking, the foot stomped onto Neuvil's chest. With a horrible weight holding him down, Neuvil couldn't squirm free. He looked up into Slythe's crazed eyes and for the first time since his rookie season, he felt fear.

Slythe stomped, not once but thrice, torquing Neuvil's leg and exploding the knee.

The team apothecary examined the injury after the game, all solemn-looking, furrowed brow, bushy eyebrows pinched close together, a deep frown on his face. Then the healer went off and had a word with coach Iva Thor-kellson, who spoke to Neuvil once the team talk was over.

“You’ve had a good run, lad,” Thorkellson said. “You made something of yourself: best Nordman runner over the past decade. You should be proud.”

“I am not done, my jarl,” Neuvil replied. Thorkellson smiled but there was no warmth in it. He patted Neuvil on the shoulder. Neuvil snarled. “I am not done!”

Thorkellson grew stern. “Maybe not, Karsgaard. But you’re done here.”

“My jarl, you cannot cut me! Not after what I have given to this team! The ’Hammers had not won a cup in a generation . . . I helped us win *three* including the Twin Seas Super Cup! We managed the first unbeaten season in the Frozen Seas League history, and how many times did *I* prevent the loss? You owe me!”

“That’s enough! You’re upset, so I’ll forgive your insolence this once. But hold your tongue now or it’ll go ill for you.” Neuvil glared up at Thorkellson but said nothing. “That’s your first good decision. Let me help you make another. Yes, you and I took this team to another level, but now we’re here, we can’t carry players who aren’t the best. You’ll be out a year with that knee the way it is. When you get back to match fitness, you’ll have lost a pace, maybe three. You’re a runner! What use is a runner who can’t run?”

“So here’s your next decision: what do you do now?” Thorkellson continued. “The way I see it, you could heal up and then play in some backwater league for a mid-table team. Or, you could join me on the bench as an assistant coach.”

Neuvil shook his head, brooding on the jarl’s words. Finally he muttered, “Why would I want to coach a mob who did not even take revenge on Slythe for me?”

“Don’t go there!” Thorkellson snarled. “You know him. He’s hard to get. You yourself tried and failed a dozen times over the years. Don’t think the lads didn’t make the effort. Listen, you don’t have to decide right now. We sail for Mannheim tonight, making port tomorrow. You can either stay aboard and sail back to Val-Hallá, or you can come ashore and help get the lads ready to beat the Brawlers. Up to you. But I won’t have you griping about the team not swaddling you. I’ll toss you overboard.”

Neuvil glared daggers into Thorkellson as the coach turned and walked away. Then he gritted his teeth and got up onto his crutches. The agony flaring from his knee was like a stormy sea: it came in ever-mounting waves and threatened to drown him.

Rat-root eased the pain.

VII

“**Y**ou didn’t tell me you’d arranged watchers.” Walking out of the Luffing Lateen, Umberto de la Calle glanced at Cassandra Thordwall and added, “Boss, I could’a used more notice before those assassins struck.”

Cassandra glanced up at her bodyguard. “Hmmm?”

Umberto explained, “When you sat him down and pointed out the bloke by the cantina, and the other one by the palm tree.”

“Oh, that. Look, I was telling him what he needed to hear. If I’d really had watchers, I’d have told you. You did well, though.”

“And you said there’d be no more than two.”

“Okay, okay, I see where this is going. Neuvil got a signing bonus and you didn’t. I’ll rectify that when we get to the inn. But for now we’ve got to go visit Eguardo Giamucci, owner of the Wharf Rats.” Umberto grunted but seemed satisfied.

It wouldn’t do to arrive on foot, so her bodyguard procured a *mateo*, one of Guayamarti’s handsome open-air carriages. Their driver negotiated the way through the rabbits’ warren of the Barrio, passed underneath the Sea Gate, and arrived at Avenida Marman. The earlier squall had freshened the air and the ride was pleasant, especially once they got in amongst the tree-lined streets of the Merchant Quarter. At length, boutiques, cantinas, and workshops gave way to villas with high stone walls, often with wooden guard huts beside the gateways. They drew up to one and Thordwall demanded entry. The *mateo* did its job: rather than send them away, the guard sent for the steward. The *mateo* also helped when the steward came; although the woman grew indignant when presented with an audacious demand, she heard Thordwall out. When she got to the bit about *inquestors* coming



HE WAS SHORT, BALDING, AND SWEATY, THOUGH
THE LATTER MIGHT HAVE BEEN BECAUSE OF THE NEWS.

along soon as part of an investigation into an attempted assassination in the Barrio, the steward listened most attentively.

“As a witness, I felt duty-bound to tell them who I believed had financed the attempt on Karsgaard Neuvil. But I now repent of it. The tale I heard about how *Señor* Giamucci spent his morning might be simply that, a tale. Thus I need to speak to your master. He might set me to rights, allowing me to correct my testimony to the justiciary.”

The steward brought them inside the villa, giving Umberto an appraising look. They went down a marble-tiled hallway and through an elaborate wood-carved doorway, into the presence of the successful spice merchant, less successful footy team owner, and even less successful would-be killer. Giamucci, flanked by a pair of brooding men built exactly like Umberto, sat behind an oaken table in the middle of a luxurious, octagonal study. He was short, balding, and sweaty, though the latter might have been because of the news the steward had shared with him about a failed assassination attempt in the Barrio. Giamucci didn’t offer to have a chair brought to her.

“Do I know you?”

“You know *of* me,” Thordwall said. “I’m Cassandra Thordwall, though you might have heard me called by another name: Pillaging Peggy.”

Giamucci’s jaw dropped open. Then he gathered his wits about him and said, “Pillaging Peggy? Ha! I doubt that very much.”

She gave him the sort of smile a nursemaid gives a stupid brat. “Umberto.” Her bodyguard stepped forward. The men on either side of the spice merchant rose onto the balls of their feet but relaxed again when Umberto brought forth nothing more menacing than a doubled-over rectangle of cloth. She tossed it onto the table and Giamucci unfolded it, revealing the sigil of his trading house embroidered on a ship’s flag. “That was taken from the *Ghost Daughter* last month. I can put an end to the piracy that’s been plaguing you. I can also help you with the *inquestors* who’ll be coming shortly to talk of your attempt on the life of Karsgaard Neuvil. And my help won’t even cost you a copper. In fact, it’ll staunch your financial bleeding. It’ll even help the Wharf Rats.”

He narrowed his eyes, though she could see he was holding his rage in check: no wonder . . . she and her brother had been targeting the man's ships for the past half year. "I'm listening."

And so he listened. Then he raged, cursed, and even threw a statue across the room. It took him a while, but as Thordwall had suspected, he finally got around to thinking about the numbers.

"You said it'd help the Wharf Rats. How?"

"My team, even if it's coached by Neuvil, won't be very good. He told me today it takes years to build a squad. Approve our request to join the league and the Wharf Rats get a game against a team of rookies. I imagine a man like yourself might even be able to ensure we were your team's first opponents. Think about it, you'd be virtually guaranteed a win. One step closer to the play-offs with the stroke of a pen. Also, think of the spectacle, the rivalry! You can demand a higher purse for our game."

He thought about that, pursed lips and narrowed eyes.

She threw in the last bit of bait. "And while it wouldn't surprise anyone that the Wharf Rats win against my team, the comprehensiveness of the victory might be something we could discuss."

Giamucci looked genuinely shocked. "You wouldn't fix a match?"

"Me? Of course not. But I think I know someone who *would*."

He shook his head, "Too risky, especially if you've hired Neuvil. The league'd have their eyes on him, close like. It's the piracy that interests me. If you could make that stop . . ."

By the time the *mateo* got back to the Kingfisher, the inn at which she was staying, she was happy. Giamucci had promised her he'd bring her petition to join the league to the Board of Governors. He also said they'd discuss the matter of Neuvil's alleged past match fixing. While he might have been lying to her, her guts told her she had Giamucci's vote when the governors met at their next meeting, due the following week.

Her visits to three of the other governors, to talk about the "trade concessions" she could arrange (more protection from piracy), went even better than the meeting with Giamucci. By the end of the following week, she had permission for her Mytilan Militantes to begin play when

the season kicked off a month later. Karsgaard Neuville was also granted leave to return to the league and coach the Militantes.

Only, she didn't actually *have* any Militantes as yet.

And she couldn't stop thinking of Giamucci's last words to her: "I might vote for you, but don't for a minute think I'm done with you."

VIII — ELEVEN YEARS EARLIER

"**D**uck!"
Peggy's reactions kicked in: she dropped into a crouch, her legs bent under her, ready to spring away in an instant. And an instant was all the time she had to figure out what the fuck was happening. The legs of the guy coming at her gave way and he pitched onto the floorboards at her feet, a dagger protruding from his chest. The bat he'd been holding clattered to the floor and rolled under a table.

She dived for the bat, knocking aside a chair as she careened on her stomach underneath the table. The toppling chair tripped up the Half-orc with the dirk. By the time he grabbed at her ankle, she kicked his hand away and scrambled to the other side of the table like a crab. She had the bat.

Speaking of bats, it's all gone batshit!

She popped her head above the table to figure out what was going on. One guy was down, with a dagger in his chest. Another of the criminals bobbed and danced in front of a big, stoic-looking man who looked like he knew what he was about. Meanwhile, the leader of the criminals, the burly man with a chubby face, had gone red and he was bellowing, "Thief! Thief!" Half-orc was getting to his feet, looking delighted at being in a fight. And she, Peggy, now held the bat in both hands, ready to deal out some punishment.

Who's the guy fighting the dancer?

There wasn't time to think that through because Half-orc barged forward. He heaved the table out of the way, tipping it onto two drunks, knocking their flagons and drenching them with ale. "You thievin' sow!" Half-orc yelled. He stepped forward and jabbed his dagger.

She dodged backwards. “Don’t be nasty!”

“I *like* gettin’ nasty!” He closed again and this time gave a back-handed slice of the weapon.

Peggy danced sideways and swung. The bat cracked into Half-orc’s forearm, releasing both the dagger and a howl of agony. He bent double, clutching his wrist. She grinned. “Aye, you’re right! It’s *fun* getting angry!” Then she swung the bat against his ribs and pitched him sideways onto another table, scattering the goblets and plates of a quartet of cheering stevedores, though the cheers turned as sour as the Lamplighter Pump House’s ale once said ale spilled onto their laps. They surged to their feet, backing away from the spreading puddles, one yelling and bending to throttle the hurt Haft-orc.

Burly-man came at her. He was the one who’d dangled the earrings in front of her, the leader of the cell of criminals. He yelled, “Gimme back those earrings, girl, or I’ll send you to Fiddler’s Green right quick!”

I gotta get clear!

She reached inside her pocket and offered up the earrings in the palm of her outstretched right hand. He pulled up, a wary expression on his crimson countenance. “Here. Take them.”

Burly-man narrowed his eyes and took a step closer, reaching out to take back the jewelry. “Only smart thing you’ve done in your life,” he said. “You’re no southpaw are you?”

“I cursed them.”

His hand wavered.

“It’s what I do. I’m a bit of a witch.”

“You’re a stinking liar’s what you are. You didn’t ’ave the time.” He didn’t take the earrings, though.

“I was quick enough to snatch them out from under you. I’m quick at plenty of things.”

“You . . .”

The hesitation was enough. Yes, it so happened, she *was* a southpaw. As well as a cutthroat who felt no remorse at tricking people into an unfair fight. She didn’t need her right hand to swing a bat good and hard. Burly-man

ducked but she still gave the top of his crown a glancing blow and he fell backwards. She slipped the earrings back into her pocket, grabbed the bat in both hands, and gave his torso another pair of blows. Wailing, he curled into fetal position and covered his head with his hands. It revealed his money pouch hanging from his belt.

Maybe getting clear can wait . . .

She dropped the bat and picked up Half-orc's dagger lying on the floor and dove at Burly-man, driving her knee into his ribs. He cried out again and rolled. Peggy sprang upright and bolted for the Lamplighter's door. She had to dodge two of the stevedores with sodden breeks, but she was good at dodging. The dancer was lying on the floor clutching his elbow. She didn't see the stoic guy who'd helped her out.

Outside, in the narrow street that ran from the docks up to the church district, she darted uphill, thinking they'd look for her down by the wharves. She escaped the narrow lane and dashed down *Imperator Strasse*, careful to keep to the shadows and alert to the danger of *Nachtwächter*, what they called their corps of night watchmen here in Maintz.

She slipped into an inky-black alcove in one of the many churches in the holy city. When a voice emerged from the darkness, she gave a start and backed away, but a thick arm had reached across the mouth of the alcove to bar her way.

"I *said*, you've gotta be careful on the *Imperator Strasse*, see, 'cause the *Nachtwächter* hide in these here recesses."

Her eyes had grown accustomed enough to the darkness that she saw a uniformed, crumpled-up form lying in the depths of the alcove. She looked towards where the voice had come, using the thick arm to guess where the head might be. Despite her pounding heart, she spoke and was surprised at how calm she sounded. "You don't sound Gött."

"I suppose that'd be because I'm not. I'm from Guayamartí."

"What are you doing in Maintz?"

"Lots of folk come to the Göttlân, like the daring woman in this darkened recess with me."

"Daring?"

“Snapping up Gunter’s loot from under his nose.”

“You were . . . you *saw*? *You* threw the dagger and took out the dancer!”

The man, she could now see his black-hued face, nodded and she even glimpsed white teeth catching the lamplight.

“What’s so funny?”

“Nothing. It’s just that not many people would call Pytr a dancer, but I see what you mean. He likes to stay on the balls of his feet. And bob and sway.”

“How’d you know I’d come this way?”

“Only a fool would head straight back to the harbour and you don’t strike me as a fool. Once up here, I reckoned you’d double back this way. You want an escort back to your caravel?”

“I can take care of myself, thank you.”

“You look like it. But Maintz isn’t a place for rashness, see. For one thing, the *Nachtwächter* are probably already looking for someone matching your description, for another, the Predators frown on people thieving from them.”

Peggy couldn’t help but bark out a short laugh. “But the Predators are the biggest thieves of all?”

“Now, now, that doesn’t mean they like falling victim to a thief, does it? Thinking like that could get you into trouble, so it could. Let me walk you down to the wharves. I’ll see you right.”

She took a deep breath to steady her heartbeat.

“Okay, let’s go,” she said. “But just so as you know, I’ve got a dagger.”

“And I’m sure you can use it.”

“You are?”

“Uh huh. You’ve got the moves, see. C’mon.”

They slid back onto *Imperator Strasse* and took the first alleyway down towards the harbour. But instead of taking her back to the *Menace* directly, he took her left down a laneway, into another late-night pump house, through its kitchens, and out its back door, flipping a square coin to a stone-faced cook. That put them onto a wider street that wound first back up the hill, but then curved back again and ended in an empty plaza. He crossed to a stone building and took stairs down to a cellar with a sturdy wooden door. Rapping thrice, then twice, then thrice again, the door opened. The man

led her inside. She thought she caught the glint of coin again but then the light went out as someone shut the door behind them.

“Watch your footing,” the man said. She realized he spoke *Göttsprek* with a particular lilt.

“You spend time up-river? You speak with a Ludwigsburg accent.”

“I spent a few years there. Learning my craft.”

Only one craft would lure a man across the Sommer Sea from Guayamarti to Ludwigsburg.

He’s an assassin!

A door opened ahead and took them out onto a narrow wooden balcony stuck onto the side of the first floor above ground of a trading house that overlooked the harbour. She said, “You’re a useful man to have around.”

He shrugged, leading her down steps and towards the foreign vessels tied up along the quay. “Here’s the problem, see: I’m only useful to people who like to exhibit a certain . . . *rashness*.”

“Rashness isn’t exactly foreign to me. You work for anyone?”

The man chuckled. “Not much work for my kind these days. Too much law and order. The kind of patrons who need my services have sailed off to Wikselân.”

She nodded and they neared the caravel she helped crew. “Wikselân’s not a bad place. Great dockside taverns. Good food, almost as good as the nosh here. They do this thing where they melt cheese into a cauldron and dip those little potatoes into it.”

“Fondue.”

“Aye! That’s what they call it. But you know what I like about the place the best? They’ve got a footy team.”

He nodded, brightening up. “The Wolverines. I didn’t know . . . mariners . . . liked sports played on land.”

“I’m no mariner. I’m a pirate. And I mean to be a successful one. You see that caravel there? One day it’ll be mine.”

“Well, if that’s true, you’ll need to get a lot sneakier. You’ve gotta have moves, and pre-planned tactics . . . tricks, see . . . and something else besides.”

“What’s that?” Peggy asked.

“Someone guarding your back.”

“Know anyone good who’s looking for a job?”

“I just may know a guy.”

She stuck out her hand. “I’m Peggy. Come work for me. With you at my back, the *Menace* will be mine in no time.”

In the dim moonlight, she could see him pondering the sudden offer. Finally he took her hand and shook it. “I’m Umberto de la Calle. If you’re half the pirate you think you are, then you need a better name.”

She grinned. “Aye, but only once I’m a captain in my own right. I’ll figure out a name the day my brother and I, with your help, depose Keelhaul Kirk. In the meantime, you’ve gotta fit in, make like a regular crew member. It won’t be for long. With you at my back, I can make my move soon. Very soon.”