

A DYSTOPIAN SEA ADVENTURE

# ONERO'S HUNT

J. R. DEVOE



DARK TIDE PUBLISHING

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LAW I:  
DEFEND THE MOTHER.

LAW II:  
EXPLORATION INTO ANCIENT CULTURE IS PROHIBITED.

LAW III:  
PRACTICE RESPONSIBLE INNOVATION.

LAW IV:  
PUBLIC PARTICIPATION IN COUNCIL MATTERS IS ESSENTIAL TO FAIR  
GOVERNANCE.

LAW V:  
CONSUME ONLY WHAT IS NECESSARY FOR HEALTHY LIVING.

LAW VI:  
SURPLUS CHILDREN SHALL BE REMANDED TO THE NATIONAL SERVICE.

LAW VII:  
NEVER LEAVE THE SAFETY OF ANTERRA.

LAW VIII:  
REPORT ANY INFRACTION OF THE ORDER WITHOUT DELAY.



**Onero** [oh-nair-oh]

*Modern Noun*

surname assigned to indentured servants of Polaria

*Old Verb*

burden, load, overwhelm

# ANTERRA

ANNO 2722 CE

Point  
Bay  
Station

Isle of  
AROKYA

penin sula

PORT  
ABERSALI

ALNITAK

ALBLAM

MINTAKA

POLY

THE  
ANTERRA

PORT  
CYPRES

ARDIS  
VALE

AMURIA









# ONE

It was too fine a day to watch a man hang.

Toris wobbled in the solstice heat, suffocating under the hood of his wool poncho, but he dared not remove it. He squinted to focus on the gallows ahead, felt the burn of sweat in his eyes and resisted the urge to wipe his face. Even the slightest movement may draw the attention of the peace officers watching the crowd. Not worth the risk. Normally he'd tie back his hair, but today he let the coal-black strands obscure his face.

On the platform before him, Captain Clavilla's knee-high boots clunked across the wooden planks, his long, black slicker matched by his greasy hair and beard. A scimitar rattled at his side as he paced before the audience.

"You all know the penalties for exploring," Clavilla said. "And yet this man chose to defy the laws that have kept Polaria from destruction...*three* whole times."

Behind Clavilla, Toris's shipwright mentor Sallus stood with a rope looped around his neck, shivering despite the heat. With his chin lowered to his chest, all that was visible was the white hair atop his head.

Toris tried to swallow the lump growing in his throat.

All around, wooden shutters squeaked open and clunked

against walls of whitewashed stone as newly-arrived spectators crammed into the upper floors of the surrounding shops. Seagulls squawked from the dock at the end of the lane, indifferent.

“For centuries the Order has protected Polaria from repeating the mistakes of our ancestors,” Clavilla boomed. “Bear witness to the fate of those who put *self* above all. Leave here and spread word far and wide in service to your country.”

In response, the crowd turned collectively back to the statue of the Sage Abelia sitting cross-legged in the center of the square, where the words ‘*Society over Self*’ were inscribed in its base.

Captain Clavilla pulled a black recording device from his slicker. “Are there any who wish to speak their last words to the damned?”

On the dais, Sallus looked up for the first time since the noose had slipped around his neck. In the three days since Toris had last seen him, the sixty-year-old shipwright appeared to have aged two decades. The grey hair skirting the side of his head had blanched full white, and where his eyes once hosted a defiant fire, there was now smoldering ash.

Toris felt a stirring at his side as Jayda brushed strands of her brown hair aside to give him a sidelong look with a slight shake of her head. Sunlight caught the ragged scar across her cheek as her glare shifted to Clavilla. Toris had told her that an execution was no place for a fourteen-year-old, but she’d insisted, reminding him that he’d been much younger when he’d witnessed his first hanging.

Toris stood on tiptoes to reveal himself in the fifth row to Sallus. He wished for nothing more than to go up and embrace the closest person to a father he’d ever known, but to reveal his presence on the mainland would be to declare a violation of his exile. Then he may as well wrap a noose around his own neck.

A sailor armed with a submachine gun standing to Sallus's left noticed Toris first and narrowed his eyes on him. Toris’s heels lowered to the ground along with his gaze. Everyone knew that

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the captain's offer was not an extension of humility, but a tactic to identify accomplices and sympathizers.

At the crowd's silence, Clavilla nodded and slid his scimitar from its sheath. He pointed the curved blade at the convicted.

"Sallus Cygnus, for your repeated crimes against Law Two of the Order, you have been sentenced to die."

Sallus lowered his head.

Clavilla gripped the hilt with both hands. "May the Mother have mercy on your soul."

As the captain raised the sword high, Toris's throat tightened as if the noose were around his own neck.

Jayda grabbed his hand and laced her fingers in his.

On the dais Sallus glanced up and locked his eyes on Toris, and Toris tried to offer an assuring smile, to resist stealing a glance at the blade swinging down. He held his mentor's stare until the blade sliced the rope and the plank slid back from under his feet.

Tense silence choked the crowd like the rope squeezing Sallus's neck, making the creaking wood of the noose post all the louder.

Toris squeezed his sister's hand as the only adult to have ever shown him dignity wriggled like a fish on a hook. Watching him struggle like a cod, his face twisted in agony...It was too much. Toris turned his eyes to the ground, where a single tear spattered on the flagstone between his bare feet.

When the sounds of struggle stopped, Clavilla stepped to the front of the stage. "No bell rings for the dead on this day."

Toris's head snapped up.

Clavilla waved his sword over the crowd. "Anyone who touches that bell in the next twenty-four hours will lose their hand," the captain said. Then he sheathed his sword and marched off the stage.

The simmering tears of Toris's sorrow boiled over to rage as he watched Sallus sway from the rope in silence. Every mariner deserved their toll, whether they disappeared at sea or hit their head on the tavern steps in a drunken stupor. It was the rite of every soul who danced the tides.

The crowd receded, but Toris remained with his head down whispering a prayer. They were the same words he and his foster siblings recited for their orphan kin who had donned the uniform to fight the savages at their border, only to return to the orphanry wrapped in sheets upon funeral carts.

*To live is to struggle. To serve is divine. To embrace death in life is to defeat it, for death is naught.*

His gaze lifted from under his sunken hood to the brass bell hanging from the post at the back of the stage.

*Death is naught.*

Jayda gave his hand a squeeze. "Come, brother. It's done."

If only that were true. "Meet me at the boat."

Jayda gave him a forbidding look, but did not protest. Instead, she unlaced her fingers from his and drifted away with the crowd.

An Omniguard officer remained at the dais steps, casting Toris the occasional suspicious glare. In his boredom, he pulled the navy-blue wedge cap from his head and fanned his face with it.

Toris sauntered to the edge of the square and sat upon the stone steps of a bakery. Its doors were locked, and its windows shuttered. With the rise of inland crop failures, all Polarian food-stuffs were now held in banks and distributed by the local Omniguard.

A horn blew, long and solemn, from the harbour.

Up the lane, citizens barged from inns and tea shops and flooded across the square toward the marina, each desperate for a crack at the catch before the Port Authority took its tally. More inland folk were relocating to the coast everyday as seafood became the more reliable food source. Toris had even noticed a few new residents on his home isle, Mintaka, which was a fair distance for mainland folk to move for better access to food.

Toris sat up on his haunches. There'd be a riot at the docks. People would fall into the water, even drown. The Omniguard would have their hands full.

He didn't have to wait long for the shrill blast of a whistle to beckon backup to the marina. As the Omniguard officer watching

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Sallus's body rushed down to help, Toris stood and marched across the square.

At the bottom of the steps he took a good look around, but the newly-arrived fishing boat had attracted both citizens and peace officers alike.

Still, the vacant square didn't ease his throbbing heart, which drummed loud in his ears. But there'd be no better time.

Planks groaned under his bare feet as he climbed the thirteen steps to the stage, wood that had felt the weight of many a man's last steps. The bell hung from a post at the back of the dais, for the days when the mayor stood upon this podium to read off the names of mariners who now belonged to the merciless sea.

Toris gripped the thick braided rope. He took one look at Sallus dangling from the noose, then pulled back and gave the clapper a hard whip forward.

*DING!*

Toris cringed as the ring rattled through every strand of his body, further splitting his already frayed nerves. Clapping wings rose from an array of solar panels atop a hydrogen motor repair shop as a flock of pigeons took flight.

They were not the only creatures to stir.

"Hey!" An Omniguard officer emerged from a food vault across the square. He pointed his baton at Toris and blew his whistle—an order for Toris to drop to his knees.

Instead, Toris ran.

Sliding from the dais and dashing to the opposite alley, Toris led the officer through a maze of white walls, the clunk of heavy boots rising ever louder. To shed some dead weight, Toris threw off the poncho and hiked up his shendyt, the band of black linen covering his waist to just above his knees. Rounding the next corner, he slammed into the alley's far wall and pushed himself along the white brick face in lieu of slowing.

At the end of the alley lined with waste bins, sunlight glittered off the harbour and beckoned him to safety.

The officer's boots skidded around the corner close behind

him. In three quick bounds he sounded as if he were within reaching distance. "Got ya now," the man huffed.

Toris hunched his shoulders in anticipation of a hand seizing his collar and drew the dive knife from his waistband, its polymer handle cold in his clammy hand.

From his left, an empty waste crate screeched over cobblestone as it slid into the alley, narrowly missing Toris. It rammed the officer at the knees and flipped him forward onto his face.

Jayda emerged from a doorway where the crate had originated and wrenched the officer's left boot from his foot. He swiped at her but missed as she darted back toward the square. Toris continued his run, and the officer looked between him and Jayda to consider which offender to chase before climbing out of the bin and continuing after Toris.

The end of the alley opened up to Finn's Marina, where three docks reached into the harbour like wooden fingers. Toris weaved through a mob to the longest dock in the center. A woman grabbed the pursuing Omniguard, pleading for his help in finding her child among the rabble, which gave Toris more of a lead. Splinters pricked his soles as he sprinted across the dock between empty boat slips. The escalating food shortage had forced the Port Authority to increase their fishing license approval tenfold, so anyone with a boat was out on the water trying to balance Polar-ia's crop losses—which left one vessel conspicuously tied up ahead.

The lone twenty-three-foot sailboat rocked patiently at the end of the dock, her wooden hull rubbing against the wharf pillars and peeling away more of her sky-blue paint. As the *Atlas* wrestled against the hemp rope holding her to the dock, a shriek rose from the officer's whistle.

Toris dared not steal a look back as he slid *Atlas'* fraying dock line over the cleat and jumped into her cockpit with it. His forward momentum sent the boat drifting into the harbour just in time for the Omniguard to skid to a halt at the edge of the wharf. The officer whipped out his data pad and set his thumbs to work,

surely noting a description of Toris and *Atlas*. But it didn't matter. *Atlas* needed a new paint job anyway.

If only Toris could change his own identity so easily.

At the start of the dock, Jayda's black attire broke through the crowd of brown and grey shawls. She waved Toris on, then pointed to the fishing vessel that had drawn the mob, which he now saw hailed from Mintaka. Jayda could catch a ride home with the crew after they unloaded their catch.

Toris got to work, hauling on the halyard with his callused hands. The sail rose, grey patches dotting the ragged white canvas as it luffed in the midsummer breeze. When it reached the masthead, it bulged full of wind and took the shape of a triangle, towing Toris away from the mainland.

His constant, all-around search for Coast Patrol vessels was interrupted by a pot clattering in the covered cabin below.

He shot to his feet, every fiber in his body taut as a harp string. He grabbed his cutlass from under the starboard bench and stood over the slanted cabin hatch. It was only a dull antique, but a stowaway wouldn't know that at first look. "I hear you down there. Show yourself."

Silence.

A wave rocked the boat and sent someone into a stumble below.

"Come out or I'll come down swinging!" He shoved the sword point through the hatch to bolster his threat.

"Hey, take it easy!" came a girl's voice.

The stowaway appeared in the patch of sunlight below. She pulled back the hood of her brown cloak to reveal a head of stubble that glistened with beads of sweat. Her icy blue eyes watched the sword tip nervously. "For Sage's sake, is that how you always greet your guests?"

Toris lowered the sword slightly, but kept the weapon at the ready. "Who else is down there?"

"I'm alone." She spread her cloak open. "And unarmed."

Toris crouched to peer as far into the cabin as he could see.

Unless someone was hiding in the crawl space below the cockpit, she was telling the truth. Which begged the question: what was a pretty girl on the cusp of womanhood doing aboard his boat?

"Awful nice clothes you're wearing, for a stowaway." Under her cloak, the frayed hem of her purple gown did not demean the luster of the rich silk, and the narrow red welts on her scalp suggested she'd shaved her own head and was not in the habit of doing so.

He sat at the tiller and set the cutlass at his feet. "Well? You comin' up?"

The girl stuck her head up through the hatch, craning her neck to see beyond Toris. "How far are we from land?"

"Close enough to bring you back."

"You can't!" The girl scrambled up into the cockpit, her anxious eyes fixated on Port Abersali, now far beyond *Atlas'* spreading wake.

"Who are you running from?" Toris said.

"Who are *you* running from? I heard someone chasing you."

"Look here, I'm first mate—I mean, this is my boat." He swallowed, trying not to think of Sallus. "So, I ask the questions. What's your name?"

The girl pressed her right palm to her belly and gave a slight bow. "You may call me *Lex*."

"Who are you so desperate to get away from that you'd hide in a random person's boat? Do you know what kind of scoundrels take to sea around here?"

"Are you a scoundrel, Brother . . .?"

"Toris. And no, I'm a perfect law-abiding Polarian. Now answer my first question."

Lex sat on the bench opposite him. "I'm running from my father." She gripped the edge of the seat nervously. "Please don't take me back. Just drop me off wherever you're going and I'll be on my way."

Toris's grip tightened on the tiller. Judging by the fine stitch of her clothing, he didn't like where this was going. "Who's your



father? Are you highborn? Will he come looking for you? Answer me."

"He's...well, there's no light way to put this. My full name is Alexandra Arcturus."

Toris's heart dropped like an anchor.

"You—you're lying." No way would the Chancellor's daughter stow away on a piece of driftwood like *Atlas*. "Alexandra Arcturus is supposed to marry General Aldebaran..." Toris struggled to recall the date he'd heard announced on the radio but couldn't.

"*Supposed* to marry," Lex said. "But if I'm somewhere else, like on this boat, then, well..." She shrugged and looked ahead toward the ocean horizon.

Toris felt a bad case of sea-belly swelling up, though not from the rocking motion. If this girl was telling the truth, then she had a lot of people looking for her. Powerful men with eyes and ears everywhere, people who might make improper assumptions about her relationship to present company.

He stood, leg muscles too tight to sit with, but the tiny cockpit offered little room for him to pace.

"Sit down," she said, glancing back at the port.

"I have to take you back."

Lex stood and jabbed a threatening finger at his face. "You do that, and I'll tell the Omniguard you kidnapped me."

Toris stepped back and saw from her challenging stare that she was serious. He sank to the bench and gripped the tiller. Suddenly the sea seemed like a very small place.

# TWO

Out past the Isle of Alnilam, Toris swung the bow directly into the wind. The sail deflated in the warm breeze as *Atlas* eased to a stop.

He double-checked the red circle on Sallus's map, comparing the mark with his position to Alnilam's north coast.

Lex looked around. "Where are we?"

Toris leaned overboard and stared at an undulating wreck below, which he and Sallus had explored two weeks past. The arrival of a Coast Patrol ship had forced them to abandon the site, so Sallus had marked the location and vowed to return.

Toris slicked back his coal-black hair and looked at the eagle gliding over Alnilam's green shores, which sat two miles away. Surely that bird was not the only predator watching these waters.

His gaze swept out to sea, where the glare of sunlight glittering off the blue water made nature's movements difficult to distinguish from anything other. To his left, the Antarctic peninsula's grey mountain range stretched from the mainland to the horizon like a bottom row of jagged teeth. Somewhere out past its point, the Decimators had once ruled the world with their toxic machinery. But it was not the ghosts of a drowned civilization that Toris now feared.

Back toward the mainland, he could see a few scattered fishing

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ships casting their nets to meet county quotas. Toris had never seen so many vessels upon the water, and he was grateful for them. The influx allowed his tiny sailboat to blend in while at the same time stretching the Coast Patrol's attention.

As the lazy flapping of the sail and the gentle rocking of the boat eased his apprehension, he pulled a spyglass from under the bench and handed it to Lex.

"Keep watch," he told her, pulling off his black tunic.

Lex set the brass cylinder aside and leaned over starboard to look at the wreck. She turned back to him with eyes flared wide.

"Has the heat fried your brain? That's illegal!"

Toris pulled a harpoon from under the bench. "Yet not the most illegal thing I did since waking up today."

Lex's eyes grew wider at seeing the brand on his left deltoid. The O of raised scar tissue marked him as an Onero, a member of Polaria's serving class. This alone was common enough, but it was the diagonal slash through the O that damned him.

"You *are* a scoundrel," Lex said. "Why are you banned from the mainland?"

"You want to find another ride? Keep asking awkward questions."

He stepped onto the swim deck, where a coiled cable hung from the pushpit. He tied one end around his ankle and clipped the other end to the rail.

"Didn't they just hang that guy in Abersali for exploring?" Lex said.

Toris suppressed a shiver. His mentor's blood hadn't even gone cold yet and he was doing the same thing that had earned Sallus a noose necklace. And to do it in the presence of the Chancellor's daughter on top of that? Madness. But the calm water all around assured him he'd have no better chance. *Slack tide*. No water flowing either way for fifteen minutes as the ebb tide reversed to flood. Such a rare occasion to find himself above a wreck with no current to whisk away his boat while he was down under. That's why, when on a vessel with no anchor, you needed a skilled

partner to keep bringing the boat back around. Toris couldn't even remember if he'd ever dived a slack tide, the occasion was so rare. He'd not get another chance, for time was running short. *Three days*. That was how much time his sister had before the Academy's admission deadline.

The prospect of getting her into school was enough to bolster his courage. And besides, the girl on his boat likely claimed to be the Chancellor's daughter to ensure no fool would dare harm her.

Such dives typically involved a tank on his back, but the Coast Patrol had seized all of Sallus's black market gear, so it was time Toris challenged his free dive record. He took a deep breath and then dove from the swim deck.

The warm water soothed his sunburnt skin. Bubbles cleared from before his face, revealing the ruins below—scraps and chunks of rusted metal that had littered the seabed since the birth days of Anterra, back when some still called it 'Antarctica'. Yet this wreck's fair condition suggested its demise had come considerably later than the first steel ships to make the perilous voyage in search of salvation seven hundred years ago.

When his dive momentum waned, a few breaststrokes and frog kicks brought him the rest of the distance to the safe that he and Sallus had been forced to drop during their last dive. He brushed silt from the box's rough surface, but there was no time to admire the prize while he couldn't breathe.

Wedging the harpoon tip beneath the box, he pried the bottom of the safe from the seabed, then removed the cable from his ankle and wrapped it around the box. Shaking hands crisscrossed it in opposite directions, ensuring a secure hold while his lungs and heart burned in their cry for oxygen. Finally, satisfied with the rigging, he launched up toward *Atlas*.

At the surface he clambered onto the swim deck.

Lex now sat on the starboard bench, hunched over a reading tablet on her lap, her bare skin red from the blazing sun. The spyglass he'd given her rolled gently across the wooden deck above the cabin, out of reach.

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Toris climbed into the cockpit. "I'm glad to see you've made yourself at home."

Lex looked up from his reader. "Where'd you get this data?"

"Found it." He grabbed the spyglass from the deck and waved it before her face. "Remember when I told you to keep watch? What do you think will happen if the Coast Patrol catches us out here scavenging?"

Lex picked up the cutlass at her feet and jumped atop the cabin, where she adopted a wide fencing stance, one foot back, the jagged hem of her purple dress rising to reveal the pale skin above her sunburned knees. "When I get through with them, they'll wish they'd picked another boat to harass."

Toris held up both hands in mocking surrender. "You'd make a fierce pirate." He grabbed the dull blade and twisted the hilt from Lex's hand, then offered her the spyglass in its place. "If only the Coast Patrol armed its boarding parties with antique swords."

She snatched the brass cylinder and jumped down into the cockpit.

"Find anything?" she said.

"Maybe."

Toris caught sight of a grey Coast Patrol battle cruiser weaving through a cluster of fishing vessels near the mainland. Its course suggested he should be safe for now, but it might not be the only patrol ship on the hunt.

Turning away, he unclipped the cable from the rail and fed it through a track of pulleys attached to a metal arm that reached astern, then wrapped the line around a small drum bolted to *Atlas'* swim deck. He cranked the winch handle, winding the groaning cable around the drum.

His arms burned as they wrestled his catch from its grave. A childhood of toiling in the fields at Lake Orion Orphanry had built up his endurance, and the prospect of securing Jayda's future provided strength enough to haul the slimy, dripping box above water. Seeing it in direct sunlight sent a ripple of hope through his heart.

He swung the hoist arm into the cockpit and lowered the safe onto the starboard bench, where for a moment all he could do was stare lustfully at it. Keeping his eyes on the safe, he dug a hammer and pry bar from under the bench. He jammed the flat end of the bar between the door edge and the body of the safe, then struck the other end with the hammer—*ting*—and the pressure of the wedged bar snapped the ancient hinges. The door hit the deck with a *thud*.

Toris's hand was inside the safe before the water had completely drained. His fingers skimmed over rusted coins and mounds of slime until they encountered a smooth object that made him giddy. He pulled the artifact from the safe and held it with trembling hands. The onyx finish of the circuit box inside the glass encasement filled his heart with lust.

Lex gasped. "*Sage's grace*. I didn't think you'd actually find anything."

He set the bounty down and tapped its clear shell with the hammer to shatter the glass. He picked up the black, palm-sized box and stroked the polymer casing. In their final days, the Decimators took to storing data from their world onto archives. The government viewed their knowledge as toxic, seeing the wrong combination of words as a sleeping virus waiting to wreak havoc across the world's last habitable land. That's why all literature predating the Decimation was forbidden, with the only exception being select writings from the Old Greeks. But the black market valued this rediscovered information higher than gold.

"If the young lady can learn to take orders, then I might keep her around," he said. "Then I'll show you a world long forgotten."

Lex planted her hands on her hips and frowned. "Young lady? I bet we're the same age."

Toris smirked. Same age in years, sure. But he had been forced to grow up faster in his seventeen winters as a serving class orphan than a sheltered highborn girl from the capital.

This wasn't the place to do this, but Toris couldn't help himself. He pulled his data harvester, a thumb-sized rectangular magnet,

from under the bench and set it on top of the archive. A red light flashed as the harvester absorbed data from the larger box, sorting what corruption it could and discarding what it could not. Polarian reading devices were designed to view state-approved texts only, but this black market harvester could interpret ancient archives and translate them to readable documents.

When the harvester finished extracting, it automatically exported the documents to Toris's reading tablet. The reader's black screen flashed blue. Blocks of files popped up in a grid pattern that covered the whole screen. Jackpot.

Lex leaned over his shoulder. "See if there's a story about Achilles."

Toris flicked through photos of people driving automobiles and groups gathered in dark dance temples lit by elaborate light displays until one image stopped him. The crimson-clad king sat stiffly upon his throne, but the smiling children seated on his lap and the rosy cheeks above his snow-white beard clashed with the malevolent depictions of capitalist rulers from that era.

"Well?" Lex said, leaning closer. Her warm hand on his shoulder and her bare leg against his sent a prickle down his spine.

He cleared his throat and shifted uncomfortably, then typed an A into the search field before struggling for the next letter. Orphans and surplus children of the Onero serving class were expected only to interpret blueprints and orders for their National Service, so the orphanry keepers never bothered teaching them to read beyond their occupational requirements.

Lex spelled out the rest. "C. H. I. L. L. E. S. It's okay. That was a hard one."

He typed it in. No results. Lex's enthusiasm deflated, but Toris's had grown.

"Let's get out of here," he said, then set about clearing the remaining items from the safe. He'd been away from Mintaka too long already. Though he was technically out of work until they assigned him to a new shipbuilding mentor, his island's warden

kept him busy gutting and salting fish to help meet the food quotas.

Toris flipped the empty safe overboard and sent it splashing toward the seabed, then pulled the tiller to swing the bow off-wind. The patched sail inflated and dragged them away from the mainland and toward Mintaka—the farthest satellite island in the three island chain that stretched out to sea in the same configuration as Orion’s belt, and the place Toris called home.

He glanced over his shoulder at the mainland. Toris hadn’t been allowed there since he was twelve, which was fine with him. In the five years since they’d exiled him to the islands, he hadn’t once had to scrape dirt with his bare hands to plant seeds like he’d had to do at the dreaded orphanry. He’d take building ships by the sea over plowing potato fields any day. And on the Isle of Mintaka, most citizens never knew his mother was a traitor or his father a ‘savage’ Ortarian.

What would Lex think if she knew the identity of his mother? Surely she’d heard of Anaraxa Centaurus, the Polarian Defence Force colonel who allowed one of her barbaric enemies to seduce her during Anterra’s only Peace Summit. Her arrest for treason had reignited hostilities between both nations when his father led a failed Ortarian attack against Polaria. He died in the fight and his mother immediately after Toris’s birth, when they slipped a rope around her neck and hanged her for thwarting Polaria’s only chance at peace. Would the Chancellor’s daughter have accompanied Toris so eagerly into exile had she known what blood pumped through his veins?

“What are you going to do with the archive?” Lex asked.

“Trade it for something I can use,” Toris said. His foster sister Jayda had her heart set on making the Capital Academy’s admission deadline this year, which was in three days. The school only accepted Oneros who displayed exceptional promise for a vocation in demand. Luckily, Mintaka’s prep school’s headmaster suffered from a reckless obsession with contraband literature, of which Toris provided the most exotic kind.



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Though Toris considered every Onero his brother or sister, Jayda held a special place in his heart. Back in their orphanry days, whenever a group of children attacked him because of his half-Ortarian lineage, Jayda was always eager to retaliate. Once, she led a boy into a bear trap. That earned her six weeks in the hole—the same length of time it took for his broken leg to heal. Such acts reinforced his suspicion that they had more than just Onero status in common. Her records listed her parents as *unknown*, but a lone child wandering up to the orphanry at Spring's dawn, full of fire where there should have been fear, suggested at least a taint of Ortarian blood.

Lex lounged over the cabin with her face buried in his reader, studying the new files.

"It's nice to see you're enjoying this little holiday," Toris said.

"I'm hard at work, I'll have you know."

"Is reading considered work where you're from?"

Lex turned the screen toward him. "It is when you're researching a solution to the food shortage. You know, saving lives and all that."

Toris squeezed the tiller. He'd heard the Chancellor on the radio, many times, insisting there wasn't a shortage. That food shipments to the capital were for safe-keeping and fair distribution. "Your father doesn't seem to think there's a problem. Maybe you can enlighten him when you go home."

Lex lowered the reader. "He knows. He just doesn't want to risk a vote of no confidence." She looked down at her feet and wiggled her toes. "That's why he's shifting the country's food to the capital's shelves. Amyria houses more voters than the rest of the country combined."

Toris shook his head in disgust. Of course the Chancellor would redistribute food according to a territory's voter strength. More First-Class Citizens resided in the capital than anywhere else, and each of their votes was worth thrice that of a third-class citizen. Keeping the capital happy would pay off in the next election.

Lex resumed her reading.

Toris pulled the mainsheet to trim the sail. "You really think ancient words can save us?"

Lex shrugged. "We know what the problem is. Our seeds don't have enough diversity to adapt to changing conditions. The Decimators may have faced the same problem." Lex tapped words into the search field. "But they didn't starve. Most likely they blew themselves into oblivion."

No one knew how the great infernos started, but many scholars asserted it was from nuclear war. Sallus had once told Toris this was wrong, because a decades-long winter would have followed such a catastrophe. But such knowledge was privy only to those who dared read ancient texts.

"It's just a matter of knowing what questions to ask," Lex said. "Let's try...*Genetic erosion*. I heard the council say those words a lot lately." She scanned the results and frowned. "Not that." She erased the words. "*Genetic diversity in crops*." She read the results until something on the screen caused her to inhale deeply, her wide eyes zipping side to side. She laughed in disbelief.

"All Odillian's glory, I think this could be it."

Toris leaned forward. "What?"

Lex stood, then turned the screen toward him. "This article describes a seed vault that the Decimators constructed to preserve the world's crop diversity."

Toris leaned in for a closer look at the photo of a tall rectangular doorway protruding from a snow-covered mountain slope. "If that was in the old world," he said, "then it's dust like the rest."

"You don't know that."

Lex flipped the reader back around for another look at the article.

"This says it was designed to last a thousand years, and that it was built to remain above the highest possible sea level rise. They even called it the *Doomsday Vault*. With those millions of varieties, genetic erosion will be a thing of the past. No more crop failures. If you show this to the council you could claim the Accolade. You

could wipe your debt clean and become a First-Class Citizen"—Lex snapped her fingers—"like that."

"If I show that to *anyone*, I'll end up slaving in a salt mine for two years." Tempting as the reward for reversing the crop failures was, with its promise of First-Class Citizenship and one million credits, Toris would have to admit to breaking the Order to bid on it.

"Then let me show them," Lex said. "I'll give you the reward."

Toris shook his head. "You'd be admitting to breaking the Second Law. Even *your* last name won't save you from that."

"Given the circumstance, they may make an exception."

"And stick you in the mine beside me?"

Lex frowned. "That's not what I meant."

"That world is long gone, Lex."

She tapped the screen to enlarge the image of the Svalbard archipelago. "The vault was in the Arctic, too isolated to waste bombs on."

"The Arctic?" Toris stifled a sardonic laugh. "Then that vault may as well be on the moon for all the good it'll do us. You forget the Seventh Law? *Never leave the safety of Anterra*. They made that law for a reason." He nodded toward the ocean horizon. "No one has ever crossed the sea and come back. Besides, the council will never sanction a breach of the Order to go look for it."

Lex lowered the tablet and gave him a scolding look. "They might send the Defence Force if it's our only hope. You have an obligation to help your country."

"I know my obligations," Toris snapped. The sixteen years of service he owed to pay off the debt of his upbringing ensured Polaria got from him the best years of his life. He'd not risk a sentence of two years in a salt mine on top of that.

"But—"

"Just let it go."

Lex sat on the bench and crossed her arms over her chest. But she didn't stay like that for long. She rose slowly to her feet, absently grabbing the mainsheet to steady herself as her eyes grew

wider. Toris followed her gaze astern, where a battleship carved through *Atlas'* fading wake like a shark on the hunt.

Toris's thumping heart almost burst. A quick look around confirmed his worst fear—that his *Atlas* was the only boat out here.

The Coast Patrol was coming for him.

# THREE

Toris scrambled to lower the sail. Normally he'd never pile the lines in such a mess on the cockpit floor, but this was far from a normal situation. This was his worst nightmare.

"What are you doing?" Lex said, rubbing both hands across her shaved head in distress. "We need to outrun them!"

Behind the *Atlas*, the Coast Patrol ship was cutting a line through their wake, its long shadow creeping closer to the sailboat. The semi-circular edges of overlapping steel plates glinted in the sun and gave the hull a scaly appearance.

Toris jumped down to the cabin and dragged a hydrogen motor from the crawl space beneath the cockpit. With the hunk of metal over his shoulder, he wobbled back up the steps. He tried to ignore the pursuing ship as he slammed the outboard motor onto the swim deck at the rear of the boat. With one hand he held the motor in place while with the other he twisted its mounting clamps to secure it to the rear ledge.

"That's a G-series hydrogen motor," Lex said, "approved for Coast Patrol use only. Where did you get that?"

Toris frowned. How did she know what this was?

"Do you know how to use it?" he asked.

Lex shook her head and held up both hands.

Toris twisted the mounting clamps tight, then pressed the start button. Nothing.

"They're gaining on us," Lex said. "Get us out of here!"

He traced the hydrogen line to the primer on the fuel tank, then pressed the button for ten seconds. Sallus had kept the motor for emergency use and, though Toris had never used this relic, he'd worked on a few newer models as a shipwright apprentice.

A second try brought the old motor sputtering to life.

The battleship was within a nautical mile and chewing up the remaining distance fast. In a few quick heartbeats she came close enough for Toris to read the ship's name scrawled across the bow in white—*Sea Serpent*.

Toris sat on the bench with the handle at chest height. "Sit," he told Lex, and she obeyed with her eyes trained on the growing cruiser. Toris twisted the handle throttle. The engine revved and shot *Atlas* forward, which sent Lex tumbling into Toris as the bow lifted above the water.

Bracing her with an arm, he twisted the throttle and sent the small sailboat skipping over whitecaps. The frequent wave-launching and landing forced Lex's head down against his chest, her torso shuddering as if she were about to heave. Toris pushed her away so she didn't spew on his lap and found that she was laughing.

Ahead of them, the green Isle of Mintaka rose higher from the sea. When the rocky shores came into sight above the choppy waves, he risked a look over his shoulder and saw the cruiser had fallen behind.

He kept on the throttle, ignoring the smoke and the smell of burning rubber as the engine strained. Sitting at the helm with so much power at his command, his hair whipping back in the spray, Toris had never felt so alive. Even *Atlas'* keel scraping over the reef didn't slow him, though it did make him cringe.

He cruised past the island until there was only the distant ocean horizon beyond the bow, then swung back around to Mintaka.

ka's north shore. Only here, where shallow waters denied the battleship entry, did Toris release the throttle.

"We lost them for now," he said, the tightness in his chest loosening as momentum and the tide carried *Atlas* into Isher Cove. Here, twisted arbutus branches reached out from the rocky hills, their shadows a welcome respite from the merciless sun. Without a whisper of wind to disturb the leaves, the cove offered the illusion of safe harbour.

Toris scanned for the cruiser through the trees. Why had they chased them in the first place? Had they seen him dumping the safe? Or spotted Lex aboard *Atlas*? Without solid proof of wrongdoing, the Coast Patrol may not pursue them on land—but if they felt the need, they possessed landing craft capable of following *Atlas* wherever she went.

Toris scooted across the top of the cabin, grabbed the prow line coiled at the bow, and then splashed down into the waist-deep water. He ran the line across the stony beach and hitched it around a smooth arbutus trunk, then climbed back aboard and set about furling the sail.

"Pull up the panel at your feet," he told Lex.

She obeyed. The instant she cracked open the lid, she gagged and shot upright while pinching her nose.

Toris pulled a basket from under the bench and set it at Lex's feet. "Load the fish into this," he said, stuffing the archive and reader into a canvas sling bag.

Lex's face twisted in disgust. "You expect me to just grab them...with my *hands*?"

He squeezed past her and slipped down into the cabin. "Unless you can think of a better way to scoop them up. Besides, you know how many people would risk death to get their hands on those fish right now? Come on, princess, we need to clear out of here."

Lex gagged again, and Toris couldn't keep an amused smile from tugging at the corner of his mouth. This capital girl couldn't be further out of her element. He felt a sliver of pity for her. But only a sliver.

Down in the cabin, he gathered every contraband artifact he could see into his pack until something on a shelf stopped him—Sallus's heirloom.

Toris held the brass ring before his face, studying its anchor emblem with blurry eyes. He'd always hoped his mentor would offer his father's ring at his passing, to acknowledge him as a son in the same way Toris had seen him as a father. But Sallus had never said the words, never accepted this burden Onero as family, so Toris set it back on the shelf and wiped the tears from his eyes.

Back up top, he slung the bag over his shoulder and jumped down onto the beach. Stones crunched beneath his feet as he marched toward the jagged dirt path that zigzagged up the rocky slope in the shape of a forked lightning bolt.

"Hey!"

He turned to see Lex sitting over the starboard rail, trying to slide down to the beach. He trudged over, took the basket of fish from her, and then helped her down.

The absence of anything but the clothes she was wearing gave Toris pause. Serving class Oneros were in the habit of carrying a hammock, cutlery, and a full canteen wherever they went, as sometimes understaffed projects required the workforce to shuffle around temporarily. To see someone venture so far from home without these necessities was puzzling to say the least.

"You didn't bring any belongings?" he asked.

Lex shrugged and marched past him. He shook his head and followed, and together they scrambled up the scree.

"You do know Mintaka is without fancy shops and lodgings," he said, his feet instinctively falling into familiar footholds.

Lex continued climbing. "I can take care of myself."

At the top, in the shade of the arbutus forest, the cheerful chirping of birds drowned out the rolling surf. Lex wandered left and Toris peeled right.

"Town is this way," he said.

Lex nodded and continued left, so Toris turned and left her to it. He'd fulfilled her request of dropping her off. He owed her



nothing more. A few hundred feet into his trek, however, he turned to check her progress. She was sitting on a rocky outcrop staring out to sea, hugging her knees to her chest.

*Keep going*, he told himself. *You owe her nothing.*

Lex rubbed a hand over her bald head as her shoulders shook, but Toris knew she wasn't laughing this time. He'd seen many new Onero cry like this at the orphanry—children who'd just become orphaned and at the same time had to accept they were now members of the serving class—*Oneros*.

His fists clenched.

"Come with me," he called to Lex.

She turned to watch him with puffy red eyes, which narrowed suspiciously.

"Or stay here," Toris said. "Makes no difference to me. But there's a storm coming in," he said, smelling a hint of fresh moisture in the air, "so you should find shelter somewhere."

Lex stood and wiped the dirt from her bottom. Toris led her uphill to a glade, where a hammock swayed between two trees and a ragged sail hung overhead for shade. Typical of the island's other habitations, Toris's private retreat sat high above the storm surges that frequented the island and offered a sweeping view of the endless sea. Even now, black clouds were rolling in from the ocean horizon.

"You can stay here," he told her, setting a cod from the basket onto a stone beside the fire pit. "You know how to prepare it?"

Lex's twisted expression was all the answer he needed.

"I'll be back later to show you," he said.

Lex nodded and hugged herself, shivering at the sight of the ominous clouds rolling in from the sea. "Feels like we're at the edge of the world out here," she said.

Toris paused and watched her watching the clouds. Odds of her getting passage back to the mainland anytime soon were slim, so she was staying whether she liked it or not. And if she was going to survive out here, she'd need some guidance. But he wasn't going to pander to her like a servant. She'd get her hands

dirty like everyone else on this island. "I won't be long," he said, then marched toward town.

He zigzagged through the forest, careful to avoid stamping a path to his private retreat-turned-hideout. At the edge of town he emerged from the tree line, where the Onero Block stood alone in a field of knee-high grass. The weathered wooden building housed the island's indentured servants in communal dorms. Though most of its inhabitants were skilled tradesmen or apprentices, the cubiform building had fallen into disrepair with only scrap material allotted to them for upkeep. A six-foot hedge rose behind the Block, ensuring the community's servants remained out of sight when not needed.

Aster saw him approach and shoved through the curtain that covered the front doorway during the summer months. The wooden steps creaked under his weight as he descended to the wild lawn.

"The warden was looking for you," he said. Delight flashed in his eyes as he saw the basket of fish. "That's twice as many as last time."

"Is the brat back yet?"

Aster reached for a cod. Toris swung the basket behind his back, awaiting an answer.

Aster huffed. "She's at the tower again."

Toris bristled. He'd practically begged her not to go up there alone.

He set the basket down and said, "Save some for the others this time."

Aster panted and groaned as he carried the catch into the dwelling. In the doorway he stopped and hunched his shoulders. "You coming to Lenus's *Calling* this time?"

"I'm busy."

"You should at least get Jayda to come."

*Good luck with that*, Toris wanted to say. "I'll try."

Lenus had left for the border four years ago. Not a week had gone by where he didn't write Jayda until a few months ago, when

the letters stopped. Many still held hope the savages hadn't skinned him alive, that his position in some remote mountain outpost had been cut off from its supply route temporarily, so the Oneros of Mintaka frequently held a *Calling* ceremony to summon word about his fate.

In Toris's experience, there was never a good reason for an Onero sibling to stop writing during their twenty-year border service. He'd stopped attending such ceremonies after the Defence Force sent what was left of their sister Layna's body to Lake Orion for her final rest, the skin peeled from her face and her eyes carved from their sockets. Rumours claimed it happened when she was alive.

Sometimes it was better not knowing.

With the threat of a Coast Patrol pursuit on land, Toris had to unload his bounty fast. So he carried on around the Onero Block and followed a dirt path to the ragged hedge-row, where he shoved through its shrinking gap. On the other side, he followed a dirt track up a hill toward the brick residence rows of the upper town, the shimmering blue harbour at his back.

At the edge of the first brick building, Kyer and Sweeney, the island's redhead Onero twins, were scouring the grass for chicken eggs, gathering them in their rolled up shirts. Neither lifted a head to acknowledge him as he passed.

Closer to the town center, spaces between the brick residences narrowed until the units became an unbroken row. Most doors were open, inviting a breeze, but no signs of life rose from within. When he reached the town square, Toris could see the citizens had gathered on the dock at the bottom of the lane to watch a fishing boat cruise into the harbour, its hydrogen motor humming across the water. Unlike on the mainland, citizens of Mintaka claimed a personal amount before the main haul went to the cannery, where many of the town folk earned their living.

Toris carried on to the public school grounds at the opposite end of town, eager to secure Jayda's letter of recommendation. Though designed for citizens, the education system allowed the

occasional attendance of Oneros, so long as it didn't interfere with their civil duties.

Behind the brick administration building, a path surrounded by rows of overgrown shrubs led him to the outdoor lecture pit. There, semi-circular rows of stone benches sloped down to a flat round floor, where Miss Seraphina addressed a group of adolescents scattered across the lower benches. Behind her shimmered a holographic map of Anterra from seven hundred years ago, when it was covered in ice.

"...the thick ice sheets that once covered our home had been pushing the land mass down," the teacher explained. "As the ice melted, a process called post-glacial rebound occurred, where the land sprang upward."

On the hologram, animation showed the white ice cover melt into the sea. Without the weight of the ice, the Antarctic land mass rose higher while distant continents shrivelled from rising sea levels.

"While this was happening," the teacher went on, "the rest of the world was overcome by rising seas until all that remained was our home—the continent they called 'Antarctica'."

The hologram zoomed in on Anterra. A red line traced the Borien Mountain range to divide the southern continent into its two countries. The Polarian section on the lower left was shaded green, and the larger Ortarian mass on the upper right shaded red. A valley corridor connected the two countries through the mountains, where a heavily manned border served as a dam to keep the Ortarian hordes out of Polaria.

Toris spotted the Headmaster sitting alone at the back, following the teacher's words from the script on his reader screen. Toris slid onto the bench beside him.

"During the days leading up to the Decimation," the teacher said, "a war was fought over the remaining land as the great sea devoured their homes. The Settlers called it the Thermal War, and attributed it to society's excessive liberties. The people thought they'd won a great victory when their governments began relin-

quishing their power, but in the absence of regulation they lost control of themselves. This illustrates the importance of firm governance. Without The Artican watching over us, we'd be no better than the savages across our border."

The hologram shimmered, and the map of Anterra was replaced by Polaria's capital, Amyria. The city's collective of geodesic domes bubbled like foam from a sea of golden wheat, each bearing a ring of panels that stored solar energy for the six months of darkness that the polar winter promised. This was where the Sage Abelia, distant descendant of the Sage Amyria, established Polaria's first democratic government. Her words were so sacred that even those mispronounced from her deathbed carried on through the decades, including the name of the newly-established council—"The *Artican* Government', surely meant to be *Antarctican* but slurred by failing muscles.

"You ever get sick of listening to the lies?" Toris said to the Headmaster.

The Headmaster's eyes kept pace with the words on his tablet. "A sweet lie goes down better than an inconvenient truth."

Normally Toris wouldn't conduct business in the open, but the threat of the Coast Patrol storming into town at any moment inspired him to drop protocol. He offered the Headmaster his reader with the newly scavenged data.

The Headmaster checked his surroundings, then accepted the device. He scanned through several documents, head bobbing with approval. "There's a lot of material here." He skimmed over a few articles, pausing for a close read of the occasional passage.

"I told you I'd come through," Toris said.

"That you did." The Headmaster returned the reader and pulled a folded letter from his robe.

Toris handed him the ancient archive and snatched the letter. His heart fluttered with the rare thrill of success. Just like that, it was done.

"Well," Miss Seraphina said, "that's enough for today, class."

The students dropped to their knees and lowered their faces to the ground, where they recited the Order's eight laws.

The Headmaster stood, smoothed the folds from his robe, and slid to the aisle. He turned back to Toris. "Oh, by the way, Jayda placed higher in her technical scores than anyone on this island. I just thought it best for you to deliver the news." He gave Toris a sly smile and waved the archive. "But I did put in a good word for her, so I'll be keeping this."

Toris held up the letter, his chest swelling with pride. He didn't even know Jayda had taken the technical test, had no idea she really had a chance at getting accepted on her own merit.

Feeling the first raindrops on his forehead, he slid the letter into his tunic and watched the Headmaster disappear behind the shrubs.

A sparrow landed on the stone rail before him. One instant it was there, the next—*whap*—gone in a puff of feathers.

Jayda scurried before the rail and scooped up the dead bird. She held it up proudly in one hand while waving her slingshot in the other. "That's next breakfast," she said.

Her bulging cheek, with its ragged scar rising and falling with her chewing, betrayed her return to an old habit. "On the *khat* again, I see."

Jayda stuffed more *khat* leaves into her mouth. "Just until I finish my project. Gives me that extra *uumph*." Wardens kept the stimulating plant readily available so Oneros remained productive through their long days of service.

"You're wound up enough without it. I heard you were at the tower."

"Had to check in at the stables," Jayda said, eyes narrowing, no doubt wondering who'd snitched about her whereabouts. "Just came to ask Miss Seraphina a question."

Toris stood and roughed her hair. He waited at the top of the stairs while Jayda descended to see the teacher. When she returned, she led their way out through the gardens.

When the rain wet her hair and Jayda tied back the brown

strands to expose the freshly shaved side of her head, Toris noticed three deep scratches on her neck. "You were scrapping with those stable boys again."

"Show no weakness," Jayda said, reciting their childhood mantra. She looked down and kicked a rock. "They say I'm wasting my time at school."

"They're right." Toris felt the letter in his pocket. "Your mind outgrew this place long ago. Thanks for coming to Port Abersali today."

Jayda shrugged.

Toris had planned to surprise her after scraping together a nice celebratory meal, but he couldn't wait. He pulled the letter from his pocket. "Here."

But Jayda's eyes caught something past the edge of town. "Aster! You little snitch!"

Across the field, Aster was on his way into the forest for Lenus's *Calling*. He froze stiff at Jayda's accusation, and when Jayda bolted into the field, Aster did what Aster does best and fled into the forest.

Toris waved the letter. "Jayda!"

But she couldn't hear him over the bells.

Toris shivered. Each chime rattled his nerves, demanding all Oneros report immediately to the town hall. This usually only happened when an Onero ran away or failed to report for duty. But sometimes it was for something worse—like when they came to arrest Sallus for exploring.

Jayda skidded to a stop and pointed across the field. Toris followed her gaze to the harbour, where a familiar battleship cruised out beyond the reef. Four landing craft sped into the shallow waters toward Mintaka's north shore, their course dead-set on the quay at the bottom of town.

Jayda marched stiffly back to Toris, her eyes locked on the approaching Coast Patrol boats. "Did you make a stop?" she said, eyes locking onto him in a *khat* frenzy. She shoved him. "Did you? What took you so long getting back?" The tears welling in her eyes

were nearly as shocking as the Coast Patrol coming ashore. Toris had never seen her cry. Her face twisted with a mix of betrayal and disbelief. "You did, didn't you."

Toris rubbed his neck but could not loosen the phantom rope squeezing his throat. Still, now that he'd traded with the Headmaster, they had no proof that he'd uncovered data.

He rubbed a hand over his hair. Should he cut it off as Lex had done? Or maybe they were actually here for her. For his sake he hoped so. Although the man she'd left at the altar was General Aldebaran, supreme commander of the Polarian Defence Force, abandoning an arranged marriage carried consequences far less severe than those that accompanied exploring.

He absently returned Jayda's letter to his pocket. He wasn't going to let a Coast Patrol visit spoil her special moment.

"Let's go," he said. "We have to report."