

THE QUARRY

Emmeline

Isabella Brennan

Emmeline Chilcott did *not* like running.

She had never really grasped the extent of this distaste until she found herself running from three enormous men who, upon bursting into Pam’s tavern snarling her name, made a distinct impression that they did not just want to chat. Her breath came in short, concentrated bursts—the pressure on her lungs so immense she wondered whether she was inhaling actual fire and not the sharp salt of the sea air. Her fitness level was such a joke it was almost laughable... could people *die* from running?

A bullet whizzed past her head and ricocheted off a metal lamppost before embedding itself into an empty wooden crate, shattering the waterlogged wood and sending deadly splinters in every direction.

‘Stop running you fuckin’ brat. We won’t hurt ya! He needs you alive!’ the call echoed behind her, ringing in her ears. What the hell was that supposed to mean?

Trying to regulate her breath so the fire in her chest would subside a little, Emmeline barely noticed the vivid lights of the theatre district disappearing as she took a sharp turn and found herself on the infamous Bronze Docks of Markthaven—named for its hundreds of piers accented in a mottled blue-orange blend of salt-rusted bronze. Long wharves stretched out from the main dock like vines from a tree every hundred metres or so, with enough room in-between to house the hulls of two of the enormous trade ships. Tall masts stretched into the air, the ends disappearing into the low hanging fog that suffocated the city during the rainy season.

Emmeline's options for escape were becoming fewer with each laboured step as she spied the impenetrable void of the Zwart Cliff in the distance.

The sound of gunpowder igniting in her pursuers' pistol and the feel of the wind against her cheek were enough to tell her that another bullet had just ripped its way through the air. Waves of panic crashed through her, spreading out from the vice on her heart until her steps were so stiff it felt like she was freezing from the inside out.

She veered left; half jumping half falling onto the lower level wharf stretching out into the ocean. An enormous ship was moored at the wharf though there was no movement on board – the crew was probably in town, enjoying their limited time on land, seeing a show or drinking themselves into oblivion. Emmeline made quick work of the ropes as she climbed on board, ducking low beneath the side of the ship. She watched as the men carefully walked along the dock, peering into the darkness in search of her.

A blinding white pain thumped at the base of her head, spreading until she felt it behind her eyes and suddenly she couldn't see or hear anything.

She heard the sound of rope moving against wood and a shout from below,

'You guys check the end of the wharf. I'll start on this ship!'

Jolting upright at the sound of a man's shout, Captain Jules Navarre nearly hit his head on the low ceiling as he raced up from the bowels of the ship to the main deck.

He was supposed to be on watch.

Curses fell from his lips as he ran, hand clutching at the small dagger strapped to his hip before he burst through the door. Jules' eyes locked on the huddled form of a woman who was pressed so tightly against the bulwark she almost camouflaged into it. Her heavy breathing increased as her eyes flashed open and she spied Jules looking directly at her. With one final strangled breath, her entire body disappeared completely into the wood.

Stepping forward in surprise, Jules made to move towards the girl when a fat hand slapped against the rail, grimy black nails digging into the wood, attempting to haul himself onto the ship. Walking calmly over, Jules pressed the tip of the dagger against the man's splayed hand and lightly pressed down. With a shout, he let go of the rail, grabbing a piece of rope in time to stop from falling onto the wharf.

'Can I help you, mate?' Jules asked as though he was enquiring after a friend. The man howled as though he'd been stabbed—Jules hadn't even drawn blood.

'What the fuck did ya do that for?' he spat the words like Jules was in the wrong.

'Why are you attempting to board my ship?' he kept his voice civil, looking down at the seething man.

'We're looking for a girl? 'Ave you seen 'er? She owes our boss money.'

Jules shook his head.

'I believe it's just me down here tonight. Although my crew won't be far off coming home if my memory of their drinking stamina is correct.'

He placed the dagger on the rail once more, a small threat.

'I wouldn't be here when they return.'

'Sure, sure! No problems mate! Raff, Wilm... come on she's not here!'

The other two men shouted in acquiescence from the end of the wharf and Jules watched as they ambled back towards the main arm of the dock. Once they were gone from sight, he sheathed his dagger, shifting his gaze to the spot where she had disappeared. Slowly, he reached his hand out and felt around in the air.

*

From the opposite side of the ship, Emmeline watched the man feel around blindly. Hadn't he seen her crawl away? Why did he cover for her? He continued to slowly walk through the spot she had been in, feeling around blindly until he stood up straight and turned around.

'Alright sweetheart, they're gone, but you need to show yourself again. I know you haven't left, I was watching the ropes for movement.'

He yelled like she wasn't right across from him. Eyes so dark she couldn't tell if they were brown or black scanned the area and swept right past her. Why was he acting like she wasn't there? The sun was beginning to peek over the horizon; the docks would wake soon.

Looking down at herself she inhaled sharply. Her entire body and all of her clothing was covered in the mottled swirling greys and browns of the wood that formed the ship. Blending in seamlessly, she watched in shock as the pattern moved with her to match exactly with what was behind it. She felt a kick against her side and was shocked out of her position on the ground, scrambling to stand as her stiff legs screamed in agony.

'Found you!' The boy smiled at her as her skin rippled back and forth in time with the rush of the waves below; blue and grey and brown as it struggled to find its original colour once more. Her skin finally settled into its normal tone, and Emmeline tore her eyes from her own skin, to observe him.

'How did you—my skin—*my skin*—they were, I was...' Her mouth opened and closed silently as she struggled to pull her thoughts together.

He bent to look her in the eyes and grabbed her hand gently.

'It's alright... I can do it too, look.'

His hand slowly seemed to melt away, mimicking the colour of hers beneath his and the floor beneath where his hand touched nothing. His hand camouflaged flawlessly into her own. It was only the shadows cast by the slowly rising sun, draping everything in a faint crimson glow that showed her truly where it lay.

She withdrew from him and watched as his fingers, and then his palm returned to the deep tan of the rest of his body like it was soaking up the soft colour that fell over the silent docks.

'What are you? What am I?'

He looked at her and grinned, a dark curl flipped in front of his eye, and he pushed it away mindlessly. Ignoring her question, he looked her straight in the eyes,

‘My name’s Jules—you didn’t mention yours.’

‘Emmeline Chilcott.’ She drew herself up in the way she knew made her look taller and deepened her brows into a scowl, ‘Explain this. Explain yourself.’

‘Well, I don’t know if you know this Emmeline Chilcott but... you’re a mimic.’

‘And what, exactly, does that mean... Mister?’

‘Navarre. And it’s Captain Navarre, not Mister. But also, it’s not Captain Navarre you can just call me Jules,’ he winked, ‘Or I suppose Captain Jules if that’s what you’d prefer.’

Emmeline silenced the man’s chatter with a hand against his mouth.

‘Right, well Captain Navarre, what exactly does “I’m a mimic” mean? I don’t know if this is normal for you, but this is not exactly my every day!’

‘Of course! Sorry. I’m just so glad to finally meet another of Vanderan’s that made it. You have to be one of his, your abilities are so similar to mine—although mine doesn’t extend to clothing, now that is *really* impressive. That you could have control over matter that isn’t your own flesh is just incredible.’ He wasn’t even looking at her now, just rambling out loud.

‘Vanderan? Who is that? What are these abilities?’ releasing an exasperated sigh, Emmeline clicked her fingers in front of Jules’ face, ‘Mr Nav—*Captain* Navarre! I am trying my best not to freak out and you giving me an explanation would really be very helpful.’

‘Oh! Yes! Well, Vanderan was a Doctor, who worked for the Capital in my country—Floitá. He birthed children and every hundred or so babies he would administer a shot he created that was designed to enhance the child’s natural defence mechanisms... there was a plague at the time that was devastating my country, your parents would have told you of it, he wanted to trigger a biological defence to the plague in infants so they wouldn’t get sick in the first place. It was effective, but there were side effects... this was one of the good ones. See how you can camouflage—like a butterfly when it senses danger, you can mimic your surroundings!’

Emmeline gaped at Captain Navarre in shock. She looked down at her hand and concentrated for a second. Her fingertips began to adjust once more to match the deep grain of the wooden ship beneath her. Okay.

‘I’ve never been to Floitá how would I have received this shot? This seems like the story of a madman. There must be opiates in the air. This cannot be happening!’

There was too much to think about. How could this insane Doctor Vanderan have injected her? Surely such a man had to have a God-complex. Had he administered cures for the plague to select children as some sort of sick experiment to see who lived and died?

She knew of the plague Captain Navarre mentioned. It had desolated Floitá, a once powerful nation brought to its knees by the loss of seventy percent of its population. The spread of the plague had only been stopped by the complete cessation of trade and travel; Markthaven had taken years to recover from the loss as the Bronze Docks had lain unused for over a year.

‘Doctor Vanderan was forced to leave Floitá in disgrace after some of the side effects on the surviving children were revealed... children who grew spikes that shot from their skin when startled. Babies whose saliva produced poison and killed their mothers as they breastfed. Imagine not being able to breathe air as your lungs collapsed from within; when your only way to breathe oxygen into your lungs, is to inhale water like a fish.’ He spoke with a soft intensity. She felt the pain in his words and knew that he had seen these things happen.

‘Almost all of the children who were injected died. It is a shameful secret that Floitá does not speak of in fear of endangering the lives of the survivors. Imagine if your government here found out there were children who could change their skin like you or me? It would be chaos, we would live our lives on the run.’

‘But how could I have received the injection? I’ve lived in Markthaven my whole life!’

Jules grasped her chin between his thumb and forefinger and spoke slowly,

‘You did not listen. He was exiled from Floitá. There were rumours of his whereabouts, none were ever confirmed, but most people believe that he settled somewhere in this city—in Markthaven. It is very likely that he continued his career as a doctor here, treating children carefully so he could monitor them and take care of unsuccessful subjects. I’m sure there was

a time when you were young that you were incredibly sick. Do you remember being taken to a doctor?’

‘No I—I never saw Doctors when I was younger,’ Emmeline ran her hands through her hair tearing loose a handful of strands which whipped around her face in the salty breeze.

‘We were always just treated within the orphanage there was a professor who catalogued the library and treated us when we got sick I—’

‘Orphanage? You’re an orphan? Emmeline think... what became of the man who treated you there? What was his name? Were there any children who went missing?’

Her mind skimmed over hundreds of memories of her time in the orphanage, thoughts churning with the new information. Of course, there had been children that had gone missing, but it was an orphanage, that happened.

They could have been picked up by trade ships as crew or even taken from the streets to be trafficked as slaves. A few missing orphans were the least of the nun’s or the other children’s worries. And the man that had treated her when she’d been sick... he had taken care of her for weeks, insisting she stay in bed to recuperate, though she’d felt fine after only a few days. What had become of him? He’d left the orphanage abruptly, and the children had been instructed to take care of their own ailments.

‘His name, I think he went by Professor... Nared? I’m sure that was it; he went on to a job in the Heidspur working with the Governors. He has some sort of job in the Council, oh my God! He might be still doing this—what if the Governors know?’

Overwhelmed, Emmeline found her bottom lip start to tremble as she choked back panicked sobs. She had assumed that Mina and Klaus had been adopted or had found jobs when they’d disappeared but how many of the orphans had really died at the hands of this man? Captain Navarre put his hand on her shoulder and squeezed.

‘It’s okay Emmeline. He can’t harm you. He is in your past—’ Jules’ soothing stopped abruptly at the sound of three heavy thumps on the wood behind them.

Both Emmeline and Jules looked in dismay at the same three men who had chased her earlier that night as they ambled casually towards them, pistols aimed directly at their chests. Emmeline straightened her spine defiantly. She was surprised as she found herself automatically beginning to mimic the look of the wood beneath her; the feeling so natural already as she tried to escape the beady glare of the men’s eyes. Captain Navarre attempted to

do the same as they moved to run from their position, however, unlike Emmeline's, his clothing did not also begin to mimic the wood from beneath so they somewhat ridiculously appeared to be nothing but a pair of floating breeches and a dark shirt.

'Isn't this lovely. The Doctor sends us to collect one of 'is brats and we find two of 'em. He really will be happy with us this time.' He took a step towards the spot where they stood and raised his pistol,

'Don't do nothin' stupid alright?'

Emmeline looked at Captain Navarre's faint outline—his body barely visible in the watery morning sun. Grabbing onto his shirt, she pulled herself close to where she estimated his ear was and whispered,

'Captain Navarre... I do hope you know how to swim.'

Then, grabbing his waist with all her might, Emmeline Chilcott pulled the Captain backwards over the railing of the enormous ship, directly into the deep blue water below.

God, she hated swimming.