

Three



Joseph startled awake, shaking his head to clear it of the final vestiges of sleep. Moonlight spilled onto the wooden floor from the porthole in his cabin. It was far from dawn.

Pounding reverberated on his door, followed by a muffled “Joseph!”

He fumbled for his spectacles and blinked at the small face of his watch fob. 12:08 a.m.

“Joseph, wake up!”

Georgina. Whatever was she doing at his cabin door in the middle of the night?

More knocking. “Joseph, please, Matthew needs you.”

At that pronouncement, he leaped into action. He’d tended to the young lad for the last three days, but the boy’s cough had only worsened despite repeated administrations of mustard plasters and tannic acid. They’d land in Honolulu later that afternoon around four pm, and the arrival couldn’t come soon enough. For any of them.

Joseph swung the door toward him, revealing Georgina clad in a gauzy dressing gown pacing the corridor’s small expanse.

She wasn’t even fully dressed.

Upon seeing him, her eyes widened, but it was too late for him

to rectify his untucked shirt and rebutton its top three buttons. Though they'd spent minimal time in each other's company since the night he'd discovered her serpent stow-away, every interaction with her had left him just as flustered as at present.

He pushed those unhelpful thoughts aside and directed his mind to his refuge of medicine. Once there, he could function normally, or mostly so.

"Tell me, what are his symptoms?" he asked as he turned, buttoning and tucking in his shirt before putting on his boots. He wouldn't be fully turned out, but such could be forgiven in these circumstances.

"He's coughing up blood."

"Haemoptysis," Joseph murmured, his brain supplying the medical term automatically.

"Is that serious?" Georgina's voice hitched higher.

"That remains to be seen." He grabbed his Gladstone from beneath the berth and pushed past her, out into the hallway, keeping a brisk pace toward the Dexters' cabin.

Georgina dogged at his heels. "Will Matthew be all right?"

"I need to see the patient before I can provide any prognosis." His tone was harsher than he'd intended. "You're welcome to return to your cabin," he tried, hopefully with more reassurance, "and I can send word when I know more." He quickened his step.

"I'm coming with you," Georgina said, all but running to keep up with him.

It appeared her determination didn't diminish despite the early hour. "I advise against it," he said. "There will likely be things a young woman of your vulnerability shouldn't see."

She scoffed. "I will not faint."

Defensiveness rang in her voice, but he didn't have the time to coddle her feelings at present. A critical patient needed his attention. "That remains to be seen."

"I'll have you know, I've accompanied Victoria many times on her rounds treating the orphans with acupressure and oils, and I've seen more than you think me capable of handling."

Stubborn indeed. He responded with a noncommittal "hmmm"

as they reached Mrs. Dexter's cabin. He rapped once on the door, then opened it and entered, Georgina trailing his every action.

His eyes darted to Matthew, who lay supine in the bottom bunk in a bloodstained nightshirt. Mrs. Dexter sat near Matthew's head, worrying the fabric of her dressing gown. She stood when he entered. "Dr. Livingston. Oh, thank you for coming in the middle of the night." Her nightcap bobbed with every word. "He started coughing up blood about fifteen minutes ago, and I knew not what to do. I ran to Georgina's cabin and, thankfully, she thought to find you."

"I'll take it from here," he said, edging past the distressed woman to Matthew's side. The young lad was already lanky for his age, made even more so by his sickness. His eyes were pinched shut, likely from pain, and his mouse-brown mop of hair was even more rumpled than usual. Change the hair's color from brown to blond and add spectacles, and Joseph could very well be looking at himself when he was younger.

Hopefully he could bring the lad back to his usual exuberance, including that gap-toothed grin.

Normally in the medical field, fifteen minutes wasn't long, but haemoptysis could turn dangerous if the patient lost blood too quickly.

"Will—will he be all right?" Mrs. Dexter's question ended on a sob, and she turned into Georgina's embrace.

He focused his attention on Matthew once more. "I'll need time to assess the patient's condition and diagnose the underlying cause of the haemoptysis. I advise you to leave the cabin while I work."

"We're staying here." Georgina's voice quavered slightly.

He sighed. It was too early an hour and too pressing a situation to argue further. Especially with Georgina. "Very well, but quietude is essential to maintain Matthew's calm and my focus."

"Y—yes, doctor," Mrs. Dexter stammered.

He tuned out the woman's sniffing and focused on his patient, murmuring his observations aloud. "Patient is quite lethargic, but not plethoric at present." Then, louder, "I need extra pillows." One

of the women met his demand, and he used the pillows to elevate Matthew's torso.

"No vomiting? Fever?"

"None," Mrs. Dexter whispered.

That would likely rule out haemoptysis from pulmonary tuberculosis. Good. Joseph retrieved his stethoscope from his bag and performed a quick auscultation, disturbing Matthew as little as possible. The elevated heartbeat was likely due to the stress of the situation, and the rasp present days ago in the boy's lungs had worsened.

"Has he ever had an injury to his chest?"

Mrs. Dexter nodded. "Y—yes, when he was four. An accident with a horse. But that's been almost six years ago now."

Not the best news, but at least it shed light on his patient's condition. "He likely has cardiac lesions from the incident, which the coughing exacerbated. This induced pulmonary congestion, resulting in bronchial hemorrhage. Though rare, we cannot rule out obstruction within the bronchial tubes and subsequent collapse of the pulmonary lobules as a complication. Extravasation of blood into the air-cells is also possible, followed by gangrene or even perforation."

"Wh—what does that mean?" Mrs. Dexter cried at the same time Georgina admonished, "Please use words we can understand, Joseph."

He spared them a glance over his shoulder. "We wait for more blood."

The wait wasn't long. Matthew's chest spasmed, and a trail of blood oozed from between his parted lips, tar-like in its thickness and color.

Mrs. Dexter moaned.

"Calm her, please," he grumbled in the women's general direction while he cleaned Matthew's lip and chin with his handkerchief. "The blood has coagulated before expectoration."

"Joseph, we do not know what you are saying," Georgina pleaded.

"Coagulation means slower expectoration," he huffed, folding the soiled handkerchief and setting it aside.

"And that's good, right?" Georgina must have left Mrs. Dexter's side because her voice cut right in his ear.

He hunched his shoulders against her intrusion. "Usually. I still cannot rule out extravasation."

"Then it would give us all great comfort if you told us so."

Her reprimand released something within him, and he whirled to face her. "I have."

She didn't cower. Instead, with hands poised on hips, she speared him with a frown. "With words we can comprehend."

He took a slow inhale and dug deep within for a final scrap of patience. The situation was hard enough without having to restate everything in terms they could understand. "My duty is first and foremost to the patient. You're welcome to—"

"I will remain." Fire lit her amber eyes.

He sighed. "Fine. Would you go to the galley and retrieve a bucket of as cold of water as possible for the compresses?"

She nodded.

"Good. Thank you. I'll attempt a temporary ligation of his arm. Venesection is contraindicated at present since he's not plethoric." She opened her mouth, but he cut her off before she could ask for a translation. "I won't resort to bloodletting at present since he has no facial swelling."

"Thank you." She dipped another quick nod, and after a brief, whispered exchange with Mrs. Dexter, donned the other woman's spare wrapper before leaving the cabin.

From where she stood hunched in the corner, Mrs. Dexter trembled, eyes wide, handkerchief clutched to her cheek.

With Georgina's admonition fresh in his mind, he opened his mouth, but no words of comfort came. Instead, all he managed was, "I'll do my best." She bobbed a slight nod, and he turned back to Matthew.

The lad hadn't coughed up any more blood, which provided a small measure of comfort. Joseph slipped the tourniquet band over Matthew's arm and turned the wooden pin to secure it in place.

Since he didn't have any ether, he'd have to make do with the cold compresses. He could perform a saline purgative, if needed, and had more tannic acid on hand if the coughing proved persistent.

It'd be touch and go for the next sixteen hours, and the weight of saving the boy's life rested entirely on his shoulders.



Georgina paced outside the ship's galley, waiting for the assistant cook to return with the bucket of cold water. Upon seeing her at so late an hour, the young man's eyes had grown to the size of saucers, but he'd quickly obliged when she explained the circumstances and her request. He'd also pledged his discretion about the incident, though he'd looked leery when she'd asked him not to alert the ship's doctor.

She didn't want that old lout of a medic tending to Matthew. She trusted Joseph's competence to handle the matter. His mannerisms toward those suffering alongside the patient, however, desperately needed improvement. She'd all but had a heart issue herself at his wordy explanations filled with medical jargon, and she'd only known the patient for a week. To think what poor Mrs. Dexter was experiencing as the boy's mother.

When the assistant cook returned, bucket in hand, she relieved him of it with a thanks and returned to the cabin as quickly as her heavy load would allow. Joseph was bent over Matthew's still-inert form, and Mrs. Dexter stood in the corner, silently weeping.

Her heart ached for the woman and her son who had come to mean so much to her in just a few short days. How unendurable the journey would have been without their company. She craved interaction with others, and Joseph had made it clear from the moment they met in San Francisco that he favored his medical treatises and the journal he always scrawled in over her presence.

There'd been that one brief instance—the night he'd met Nehushtan—where she thought they might finally begin a friendship, but he'd all but ignored her since. No matter, they'd

meet Isabella this evening, and Joseph could be as reclusive as he wanted after she joined the company of a family friend who'd rightfully earned the moniker "Aunt."

"Georgina? The water?" Joseph's voice cut through her ruminations.

"Oh, yes, sorry." She lugged the bucket until it was beside him. With his focus already returned to his patient, she lingered, observing as he dipped strips of cloth into the cool water then wrung out the excess moisture before placing them on Matthew's chest. His hands were steady and sure in his ministrations unlike when they'd trembled a few days ago as he'd accepted Nehushtan from her.

At such proximity, she couldn't help but breathe him in on her next inhale, her mouth speaking aloud at the same time her brain answered the question plaguing her since they'd boarded the *Nevada* together a week ago. "Calendula."

He halted his motion and sent a downcast glance over his shoulder. "I'm sorry?"

Her cheeks flamed. She hadn't meant to speak the thought aloud. "Th—that's what you smell of. I first smelled it when we boarded the ship in San Francisco, but I couldn't pinpoint the scent until now. It's Calendula." Now she was rambling.

"Y—yes," he said after a pause. "It's superior in treating xeroderma, particularly in these colder months."

"There you go again with the large words." In her fret and fatigue, she couldn't regain control of her mouth. Well, she'd meant to address the topic with him anyhow, though she'd imagined doing so with far more tact. "I'm sorry, I hadn't meant—" she started, but he cut her off.

"The blame for medical terminology's complexity can hardly be placed at my feet, Georgina." He didn't look her way, but his tone indicated she'd found a raw spot.

"Yes, but what of reassuring, comforting, and informing the patient and those concerned for him or her? Certainly, that's a component of doctoring too, is it not?"

"The term is known as bedside manner." He adjusted the cold compresses, then continued. "It was covered in our medical school curriculum, and rest assured, the Hippocratic corpus is replete with references to a doctor's proper deportment."

"Really?"

His back stiffened.

She hadn't meant to sound so surprised.

"Is now the time to criticize my handling of this emergency?"

Her stomach knotted. She'd done it again. "No, but—I wasn't—"

"But you were."

She had no rejoinder, for her throat clogged with unshed tears. Was it so wrong of her to ask him to show some compassion for her and Mrs. Dexter? To expect he explain the litany of terms rolling off his tongue, each sounding more serious and fatal than the last. Her mouth opened to at least ask him if Matthew would survive, because they too needed to properly understand the boy's condition, but it closed again when he spoke first.

"I propose you impart your abundance of empathy—what is apparently so lacking in me—on Mrs. Dexter right now. It seems she could use it, but then again, what do I know of others' emotions?"

She stumbled back. In his hurt—the hurt she'd inadvertently caused—he'd lashed out at her. It wasn't fair. She'd only tried to help. But her priority now was to maintain control over *her* emotions, to keep herself and Mrs. Dexter calm in this crisis. She moved to the other woman's side and ushered her into the empty bed across from Matthew. "Come, you need your rest so you can have your stamina when Matthew regains his."

"D—did Dr. Livingston say Matthew would recover?"

"I have full faith and confidence that Dr. Livingston will do everything in his power to ensure that result," Georgina said, settling on the foot of Mrs. Dexter's bed and casting her eyes across the cabin.

Joseph's back angled toward her. He gave no indication he'd

heard her praise, though even if he had, he likely wouldn't believe it coming from her lips. She sighed and closed her eyes, petitioning for sleep to come and that maybe, just maybe, she'd wake and discover this entire ordeal had only been a horrible nightmare.