

**THE
SPANISH GATEKEEPER**

BOOK II

Gwellem's Hitch

a science fiction fantasy adventure

by

Bernard Dukas



Kaladar Books ♦ San Francisco

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The Spanish Gatekeeper Book II—Gwellem’s Hitch

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THIS BOOK BORROWS IN SMALL PART ON ACTUAL PERSONAGES AND EVENTS
FROM THE CLOSING YEARS OF THE 19TH CENTURY. IN EVERY OTHER RESPECT
IT IS A WORK OF FICTION AND A PRODUCT OF THE AUTHOR’S IMAGINATION.

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Chapter 1

Admiralty School

From her balcony high atop Admiralty Island, Bonifacia could see clear across the strait to a line of far-off mountains. Hemmed by high bluffs, the bustling anchorage at Debs reminded her a little of Vigo on the Pontevedra coast of Galicia. Her mother would sometimes take her to Vigo to enjoy a bowl of its famously delicious oysters. She did her best to shake off that particular train of thought. The result would only be heartache.

A myriad of tall ships jammed the quays at Debs, spilling into the sheltered channel between the far shore and the island that was to be her home.

“I hope they don’t forget to summon us for supper,” remarked Gemesh, while unscrewing the base from a candle lamp that sat atop her night stand.

“Stop that,” said Bonifacia. “Can’t you leave things alone?”

“Not really.” He pursed his lips and puffed his cheeks.

There was a knock at the door and a woman in typical Weshnut attire let herself in. Marador was proctor to the Fifth Division cadets and allotted the responsibility for settling Bonifacia into her new life. “Lord Admiral Tosha has asked to make your acquaintance, Bonifacia Espasande,” said the woman. “Your audience with the samkan is set for nine o’clock tomorrow morning.” She studied Bonifacia for a moment. “Hmm. We shall have to see about getting you some proper garments. It won’t do for her to see you dressed like that.”

Her? “The lord admiral is a woman?” stammered Bonifacia in disbelief.

“Yes of course, child. The sea is *our* dominion. Men could never be trusted with something so inestimable.” She laughed at the mere suggestion.

Bonifacia fingered her cuff as she mulled over Marador’s words. The clothes Lianne had provided her were thoroughly caked in mud and stank to high heaven thanks to Gemesh’s next-to-worthless topical paste. Marador hadn’t hesitated to throw them away, in the interim providing her with a plain white skirt, a blouse and soft leather boots the color of putty.

“What about Gemesh?” asked Bonifacia. “You haven’t forgotten Gemesh?”

The Gno’man stood with his back to the wall watching Marador suspiciously. His clothes were grubby and worn, but Gemesh steadfastly refused to remove them.

“What say you, Master Gno’man? Do we continue to pinch our noses in your company, or will you deign to receive a bath and some fresh attire?”

“Not until you find me a decent pair of trousers,” he insisted. “I’ll hang before I don one of your ridiculous skirts.”

Bonifacia found it difficult sometimes to tell Weshnut men and women apart at a distance. They all wore a variation on the same costume, including the voluminous skirt they called a *reyksha*, similar to the pleated *justanella* worn by Greek fighters in those romantic paintings by Dupré, but worn calf or ankle-length. Far from ridiculous, the Weshnut, in Bonifacia’s estimation, looked flat out splendid.

“That can be arranged,” said Marador, suggesting Gemesh might have it either way. “We simply cannot have you wandering about the Samkan Palace like that.”

Gemesh reacted to her veiled threat with an indignant sniff, an expression rather unlike his usual.

“Why does the samkan take such interest in me?” asked Bonifacia, drawing attention away from the little man. “I don’t understand why I’m not to be sold for a training thrall like Henrik or condemned to servitude like Gemesh.” The weight of her guilt was enough to crush her.

“Two very simple reasons,” replied Marador. “First, you’re a female without any previous history of serious trouble. And second, you’re an off-worlder.”

Such a fuss about being female! Bonifacia couldn't help but wonder at all this upside down thinking. She could see nothing appreciably different between her crime and that of Gemesh, or Henrik for that matter. "*Off-worlder*. Such a queer expression," observed Bonifacia, "but accurate I suppose."

Marador smiled politely.

"Who do these other beds belong to?" asked Bonifacia, gesturing toward the three empty cots. None was reserved for Gemesh. He was assigned his own quarters, more like a cell really, in the sub-ground levels of the palace. On the whole, he seemed quite pleased with the accommodation.

"Jovaline, Pasuana and Gampina," replied Marador. "They are your division mates for schooling. Their ship isn't due back until tomorrow afternoon."

"I'm to go to school here?"

"Yes, my dear. It would not do to have you idling about."

In all sincerity, Bonifacia was rather intrigued by the idea of attending a Weshnut school. The Catholic sisters that taught her lessons gave her mostly disapproving looks when she asked about things, like how tadpoles turn into frogs or what became of the giant lumbering lizards that once roamed the earth. Bonifacia hoped the Weshnut might espouse a different attitude. Even so, the implications were difficult to swallow. "Is there no one here who can help me return home?" she asked.

Marador's sweeping brows quivered sympathetically. "I'm afraid that's very unlikely."

"Are there no wizards here?" persisted Bonifacia.

"Not for a very long time now."

"Empress Xhôn knew of one," countered Bonifacia. "She must have. It was a wizard that opened the portal that Peter and I came through."

"I'm sure that's true, child. The samkan knows about many things, but wizards and portals I fear are not among them. The empress, rest her soul, kept many unusual associations."

Bonifacia pouted.

"I'll tell you what. Tomorrow when you meet the samkan, you may ask her yourself if she knows of any wizards in these parts," offered Marador, putting on a cheerful face.

It was a ray of hope, albeit a faint one. Marador was trying so hard to be kind and encouraging. Bonifacia smiled in return, revealing her disarming dimples.

The palace clothier kept rack upon rack of Weshnut garments in all sizes for his customers. Bonifacia was permitted to choose two ensembles. While the fabric, dye, and needlework hung in nearly infinite variety, all the outfits were characteristic Weshnut—a peasant blouse, short jacket, vest, wide waistband, reyksa, stretch leggings, pastel boots and hat with tassel. It took an experienced eye to tell pauper from prince in that costume, since the humblest salt might use his or her leisure time to richly embroider both jacket and vest.

The clothier offered to produce a set of powder blue trousers for Gemesh and even a new felt hat, brimless and pointed of course, which he gratefully accepted. “But in black,” he insisted. “I will not wear a red hat until I am released from servitude,” he announced proudly, a red cone-shaped topper apparently a mark of some distinction amongst Gno’men. The only strictly speaking “Weshnut” garment Gemesh condescended to wear was a handsome sable jacket with silver piping and tastefully embroidered knots above the cuffs.

Bonifacia, for her part, was thrilled with her new outfit. “Magnificent!” she proclaimed, while admiring herself in the mirror. “Mama would definitely approve.”

Marador sent Gemesh off to begin his service to the samkan, and then led the way to a large hall filled with long rows of empty tables and benches. “This is our division dining hall,” she trumpeted. “The *Rejoice* is not due in until tomorrow, but the kitchen is open.”

Marador and Bonifacia dined together at one end of a long table. “Are you settled in well enough that you think you can look after yourself for the rest of the day?” asked Marador as they finished up their meal.

“Yes, I believe so,” she replied.

“Good,” said Marador. “I’ve got other duties I must attend to, but I’ll check in on you before I retire for the night. Oh, I almost forgot. There’s a book on the nightstand next to your bed. I know it won’t be easy, but see what you can make of it. All right?”

She nodded and Marador departed, leaving Bonifacia to herself in the empty dining hall. She took her tray to the kitchen, handing it over to a pouty scullion boy. There seemed no reason to rush back to her room, so Bonifacia wandered the school hallways taking time to examine the displays, memorials and artworks left behind by generations of students and teachers. Everything was about the sea—models of ships, methods of rigging, charts of tides and winds, memorials to students lost upon the ocean, long records of achievement engraved on bronze tablets. There were also many drawings of plants and fish from the ocean depths, even a few stuffed examples. She took a step back from one particularly fierce looking creature, shuddering at the sight of needle-like teeth inside a gaping mouth.

Back at her room she found the book Marador had asked her to look over, the division code book—“*A Book of Rules, Regulations, Standards and Procedures for First through Fifth Level Cadets.*” The lettering was completely foreign to her, nothing at all like Spanish, English, or even Galician, which has more in common with Portuguese. Looking at it reminded Bonifacia of the time she’d browsed through a volume printed in German type-script on her uncle’s bookshelf. That book, like this one, was practically indecipherable. If all her readings were going to be as difficult as this, she was in for trouble.

Marador came to visit her at the end of her rounds. The proctor frowned when Bonifacia told her that she was unable to handle the text.

“Hmm. Well, don’t worry too much about it for now. Breakfast begins at three bells. I’ll meet you in the dining hall at a quarter past six. Good night, Bonifacia Espasande.”

“Marador?” asked Bonifacia, catching her at the door.

“Yes?”

“Please call me Bonnie. No one else here seems to use full names.” *Bonifacia Espasande is bad enough*, she thought. If Marador knew her complete name, *Bonifacia Ramona Magadan Espasande López de Soto*, introductions might become exceedingly awkward.

“Certainly, *Bonnie*. Good night.”

Bonifacia woke to the *tin-tin, tin* of three bells in the corridor. She’d slept well, but felt a rush of anxiety knowing that she

would be meeting with the samkan in just a few hours. She washed and dressed in her newly acquired Weshnut finery. Marador sensed her uneasiness during breakfast and did her utmost to reassure her.

“Just be yourself and answer the questions put to you honestly. Don’t forget to address the samkan as *Lord Admiral*. She much prefers that title.”

When it came near time for her audience, Marador met Bonifacia at her dorm and escorted her through the palace, most of which she could only glimpse from the edge of her balcony. The Samkan Palace wasn’t anything like the *Palacio Real* in Madrid, which was built in sensible blocks. It was more like an aggregation of buildings, emanating from a central edifice high atop the island’s only prominence and seeping away from it in all directions like rose-colored honey escaping the hive, each wing or “division” tacked on as a kind of after thought.

It was a long walk to the samkan’s offices, twisting and winding up stairs and endless hallways. Bonifacia could see that her division, *the Fifth Division*, was one of several within the palace complex. Many of the other divisions were in session and girls paused mid-stride or looked up from their desks to stare at her as she walked along—her brows, or rather the lack of them, a distracting curiosity. She returned their startled gazes with a smile or a polite nod of her head.

The mounting opulence of the furnishings alerted her to their destination. A hard-nosed woman sitting behind a curved marble-topped desk in the middle of a wide corridor greeted them brusquely. She eyed Marador and Bonifacia the way a falcon eyes its prey from a distance. “You’re early,” she grumbled.

Marador handed over a large manila envelope, while Bonifacia admired at arm’s length the exquisitely crafted trikymaion badge fastened below the secretary’s collar—a device consisting of three rolling waves radiating out from a common center. There was something about the way she worked her letter opener that gave Bonifacia reason to wonder if the woman might actually double as a body guard.

“Wait over there.” She pointed with the opener toward a domed rotunda furnished with several gold-leaf armchairs. “I’ll summon you when the lord admiral is ready.”

It occurred to Bonifacia to ask Marador, "Should I salute or curtsy when I'm introduced to the samkan?"

"Neither," replied Marador. "The samkan is no queen or grand principal. But it is proper to bow your head slightly." She demonstrated. Then together, they passed the time in heavy silence.

"Huh, hmm. Lord Admiral Tosha will see you now. Follow me." It was a short walk. The secretary preceded them through a set of towering doors. "Mistress Marador, proctor for the Admiralty School Fifth Division, Lord Admiral, and Cadet Bonifacia Espasande," announced the secretary, before departing. Marador and Bonifacia dipped their heads respectfully.

The samkan, Lord Admiral Tosha, was a sinewy woman with fine lines at the corner of her mouth, jet black hair and contrasting hazel eyes. *Probably dyed*, thought Bonifacia. Her expression at least appeared warm and welcoming. Other than the trikymaion device embroidered in gold above the cuffs on her jacket, there was nothing notably exceptional or unusual about her dress to identify her as the ruler of a sizable dominion.

The samkan was not alone in the room. Another woman, much older with wiry copper brows, stood quietly beside an exquisite jardinière filled with vermilion flowers. *She must have been quite striking in her youth*, guessed Bonifacia. *An aide or a minister, perhaps.*

"Welcome Marador," said the lord admiral. "It has been too long, has it not?" She indicated two chairs situated in front of a stylish bureau, while pulling her own chair around so as not to sit apart. The as yet unnamed woman remained standing.

"So this is the young off-worlder. I'm glad to finally make your acquaintance, Bonifacia Espasande."

Bonifacia was incredulous. *Glad to make my acquaintance?* Receiving the personal attention of a head of state was undeniably exhilarating, who could think otherwise? But Bonifacia was under no misapprehension. Her naïveté had netted her friend, Henrik, a virtual death sentence, and Gemesh, years of forced servitude. She had to tread carefully.

"The pleasure is all mine, Lord Admiral."

The samkan returned the compliment with a guarded smile. "You know, it has been a very long time since anyone has

passed through a portal into our world. We understood from reports that the doorway also retrieved the lord arbiter imperial. There was no mention of a young girl coming through, at least not at first.” She paused to offer Bonifacia a peppermint sweet from a silver dish. “The lord arbiter’s arrival was not altogether unexpected, you see, considering how dire things have been of late.

“I’m astounded the empress didn’t have the sense to send for him long before things reached this state of affairs. In any case, sightings of an off-worlder wearing the sigil of the lord arbiter imperial would appear to confirm his arrival. It must have come as a great shock to Empress Xhôn, to say the least, that the arbiter sided so precipitously with Lord Borganin.”

“That’s not how it happened!” interjected Bonifacia. She caught herself, adding, “*Lord Admiral.*”

“Really? You must tell me more of what you know about this, but in a moment.” She continued with her soliloquy. “Reports at last began to filter in from our agents that a young girl had indeed come through the portal together with the lord arbiter. The Duke of Menom has sent his scouts out in search of her. I can only guess what his interest in her may be.” She regarded Bonifacia intently. “The portals have been idle for over forty years and hardly used for a hundred before that,” she said, and paused again. “How old are you?”

“Fourteen, Lord Admiral.”

“I thought as much. Perhaps you can explain to me why, out of all the people in the universe, Bonifacia Espasande, a fourteen-year-old girl should be the one to walk through that galactic doorway? We expect there must be some important reason.”

A hard hitting question, indeed! Bonifacia had never for a single moment considered this particular viewpoint, and was momentarily flummoxed. “Important reason, Lord Admiral? Oh, no. Not at all. The whole thing was a gigantic mistake.”

Bonifacia proceeded to recount her tale from the very beginning for the benefit of the samkan and her taciturn companion. Marador sat forward in her chair, listening attentively. When she reached the part about Henrik taking her to his uncle’s island hideaway Bonifacia was stopped mid-sentence.

“Did you say *Bartle*?” interrupted the copper-haired woman, a look of utter astonishment painted across her face.

“Yes ma’am. Uncle Bartle.”

“And this Gwellem, *Uncle Bartle*, he kept a small stead on the River Chigraw?”

“Yes ma’am. He raises shorka for market.”

The woman’s face turned a bright shade of scarlet.

“You know the Gwellem she speaks of Feshan?”

“I believe I do, Lord Admiral. He saved my life during the Third War. We were...friends.”

Bonifacia remembered then, something Bartle had said to her. “Uncle Bartle told me a Weshnut sailor had built the boatswain’s chair across the river. Was that you?”

Feshan blushed an even deeper hue. Was it from embarrassment or shock? She did not bother to answer Bonifacia’s question.

“We will speak of this later, Feshan” said the samkan, deriving some perverse pleasure from the woman’s apparent discomfort. She could barely suppress her amusement.

Bonifacia finished her tale, adding that she was certain Peter was being forced to support the Duke of Menom against his will.

“So, you are a descendant of Manuel López,” repeated the samkan, “as is this cousin, Peter.”

“Yes, Lord Admiral. The little pendant that caused all this trouble belongs to my mother. It is an heirloom. Dashwan clearly expected to greet the original owner, my great-great-great-grandfather. All Peter and I wanted to do once we emerged from the tunnel was turn right around and go straight back home. We oughtn’t be here.”

“And now the empress is gone,” added the samkan, filling in the blanks.

“Yes, Lord Admiral. It would seem so,” said Bonifacia unhappily.

“Well, you needn’t fear, dear girl. We will attend to your education and upbringing, so long as you remain here. In the meantime, I will instruct our agents to keep their eyes and ears open for any news of this wizard who brought you to our world, but I make no promises.”

Bonifacia was overjoyed. "Thank you Lord Admiral. That is most gracious of you. I don't know how to properly thank you..." Bonifacia's voice trailed off.

"You have something to add, I think? Speak freely."

Does she really mean it? she wondered. "Lord Admiral," began Bonifacia, "I appreciate all your kindness, but..."

The samkan raised an impatient brow.

In for a penny, in for a pound, thought Bonifacia. "My two friends, Henrik and Gemesh. They have been unfairly imprisoned. It is my fault entirely. They were only trying to help me get home. You must release them, Lord Admiral, please."

The samkan looked into Marador's astonished face. "Have you not explained things to her?" asked the samkan.

"Yes, certainly, Lord Admiral, but on this count I think she will not desist until she hears it from your own lips."

"Very well." She turned to face Bonifacia with a barely masked sigh. "Bonifacia Espasande, I can understand how, from your perspective, the penalties imposed on your companions may seem a trifle unfair, but I can only confirm what Marador has already told you. It is both resoluteness and clarity that give force to the deterrent. To allow exceptions is to muddy the waters and invite trouble. Your companions transgressed long-standing conventions between our peoples. They knew the risks entailed when they decided to cross our borders."

Bonifacia was about to protest, but the samkan preempted her. "I know too that it may seem to you that I am the law here." She cast Feshan a rueful glance. "Sometimes I wish it were so, but the truth of the matter is that the old conventions are inviolable. You have some sense of the war that now wracks the Empire of the Ulfair? These conventions are the thin wedge that keep us apart from that conflict. I'm afraid there can be no exceptions."

"Mistress Feshan," said Bonifacia turning to the other woman in desperation. "Henrik is Uncle Bartle's nephew. Surely that counts for something?"

The woman, Feshan, did not enjoy being put on the spot. She bit her lip without reply.

The samkan repeated, "I'm sorry my dear. *No exceptions.*"

Well if not Henrik and Gemesh, thought Bonifacia...“Then perhaps you can help with another thing, Lord Admiral. My cousin Peter is held against his will by the Duke of Menom and unjustly used. Borganin is but a duke. You are the ruler of a great dominion. Surely you must have some influence over him?”

The samkan reflected for a moment. “That is something I may be able to help you with. Let me think on it a bit.”

“Lord Admiral, your next appointment,” interjected Feshan.

“Ah, yes. Thank you, Feshan. I regret I must conclude our conversation for the time being, Bonifacia Espasande. You will take good care of our guest, Marador?”

“Of course, Lord Admiral. The best of care.”

“Good. We will speak again. Next time I’d like hear more about your home world. Be well, Cadet Bonifacia.”

Bonifacia and Marador bowed their heads and departed the samkan’s office.

“I am truly sorry for your two friends,” said Marador as they marched past the hawk-like secretary, perched behind her desk. “I wish something more could have been done for them. The Gno’man seems a nice enough fellow.”

Bonifacia would try to do something to help Gemesh later. Regardless of what the samkan told her, she was bound and determined to find a way to save Henrik.

“The lord admiral called me *Cadet* Bonifacia.”

“You’ll soon get used to that,” replied Marador.

There were more than a hundred girls in the Fifth Division dining hall for supper, both younger and older than her. Those that were not of dark complexion by extraction were hardly less so from long exposure to the sun. Dark skin in sharp contrast to hair and brows the color of bleached bark, combined in some of the girls to create a disquietingly beautiful exterior. A hush settled on the hall when Bonifacia walked in accompanied by Marador. There were unsettling murmurs and snickers. “Look at her brows,” they whispered. “Someone’s clipped her,” remarked one girl. “I wonder what she did to deserve that?” asked another. “It must have been dreadful.”

“Everyone listen up!” Marador clapped her hands twice to gain their full attention. “This is Bonifacia. She will be joining our division as a personal guest of the samkan. I know you will

all do your very best to make her feel welcome.” There were murmurs of astonishment, not all approving. “Come with me Bonnie.”

Marador walked her over to a point midway down one side of the long row of tables. “Cadet Erinaf, there is a better seat for you over there by Cadet Simber. Would you be so kind?”

Erinaf glared at Bonifacia through narrowed eyes. “Yes, Mistress Marador.” She obediently vacated her seat on the bench, allowing Bonifacia to take her place.

“Bonnie, let me introduce you to your dorm mates, Jovaline, Pasuana and Gampina.”

“Our what?!” exclaimed all three girls in unison.

“Jovaline, I’m assigning you to personally see that Bonnie is shown to her classes and properly settled into division routine. Pasuana, you will tutor her in reading and writing.”

“Mistress!” protested Pasuana. “You don’t mean to say this bobtail can’t read or write?”

“Watch your tongue Pasuana or you’ll find yourself on extras for a week. She can read and write just fine. Our letters are unfamiliar to her, that’s all. I chose you for the task because you’ve the best talent for it.” She turned to face Gampina, who was sitting immediately to Bonifacia’s left. “Gampina, I want you to help Bonnie catch up with the rest of the second level cadets.”

The girl’s jaw dropped.

“I mean it,” warned Marador. “Bonnie is the personal ward of the samkan. I don’t want to hear that you’ve let Lord Admiral Tosha down. Besides, I think you’ll find that she has a lot to offer us in return.” Marador looked each girl in the eye until she was satisfied that she had at least obtained their grudging acceptance. “Good. I’m heading off now. Bonifacia is in your hands.” She patted her reassuringly on the shoulder. “You know where my office is, Bonnie. If you need to speak with me, don’t hesitate.”

“Yes, Mistress Marador.”

The proctor departed and the three girls sat brooding with scowls etched upon their unhappy faces.

“So what happened to your brows?” asked Pasuana, rather bluntly.

“Nothing *happened* to them,” replied Bonifacia. “This is the way they are.”

“She’s a freak,” cut in Gampina.

“Don’t say such things,” reproached Jovaline. “The proper term is mutant.”

“I’m nothing of the sort!” protested Bonifacia.

“What are you then?” asked Pasuana.

“I’m a human being, if you must know. An off-worlder.”

“An off-worlder?!” blurted Jovaline, Pasuana and Gampina.

“Yes. My home is on a planet called Earth. I came here through a portal.”

They gaped at her, not knowing if they should treat Bonifacia as a raving lunatic or just the sauciest liar they’d ever met. “It’s God’s honest truth,” declared Bonifacia.

“The portals are just made-up stories grownups tell to frighten children,” snapped Gampina.

“That’s not so,” admitted Jovaline. “Go back and read your history book, Gampina. The portals are how the Ulfair came into the World.”

“She may talk like an Ulfair, but she doesn’t look like one,” interjected Pasuana. “The Ulfair have muzzles and pointy teeth like the wolves in Kolin Forest.”

While she still lived, Bonifacia’s grandmother, Ramona, liked to tell stories about how the wolves in ancient times had taught her Celtic ancestors to turn rocks into iron and how to build small round houses out of stone so that they no longer had to live in caves. Galician folktales amused Bonifacia, but that didn’t equate to believing in stories about talking wolves. “The Ulfair can’t have come from Earth,” she retorted. “I’ve never met anyone who looked like that.”

“Where’d they come from then?” demanded Pasuana.

“I’ve no idea,” she replied. “There must be different portals that lead here, or different ways to get through them. Please, won’t you help me?”

The Weshnut girls grimaced. “It’s not like we’ve got a lot of choice now, have we?” replied Jovaline. “Marador will have us in front of the lord admiral if we don’t.”

Perhaps they’ll come around in time, thought Bonifacia hopefully.

She attended classes at the Admiralty School over the following weeks, while the Fifth Division ship, the *Rejoice*, underwent

a refitting between sailings. She understood very little of what was taught because she was so far behind the other second level cadets and because she had such an impossible time deciphering her assigned texts. Jovaline, Pasuana and Gampina were true to their promise to Marador, but only in the narrowest interpretation of their duties. Pasuana and Gampina spared her only an hour each day after classes, answering a list of questions Bonifacia had penned for herself, and then scooting off to socialize or study with other friends. Jovaline did little more than point Bonifacia in the direction of her next class or the nearest water closet. Not one of her second level peers went out of their way to offer Bonifacia an encouraging word or a helping hand unless prodded by their teachers. Most, if not all the cadets, seemed to regard her with either fear or disdain—sentiments apparently shared by some, but fortunately not most, of her instructors.

Even so, it was impossible for Bonifacia's division mates and teachers not to realize after some time had gone by that she was a quick study and a determined student. Bonifacia kept her candle lamp burning long past lights out each night, going over her notes, and dragging every tidbit of information she could from Pasuana and Gampina during her limited time with them each day. Her ability to decipher the strange typeface and peculiar Weshnut orthography steadily improved.

Away from their training ship, the emphasis was on theory and the broader aspects of navigation. Bonifacia learned a great deal about the geography of the world she now grudgingly called home, a planet largely covered by ocean—the pattern of its winds, the seasonal flow of its tides, even the great variety of cloud formations. During her history class on famous Weshnut mariners (all women), she listened with fascination to harrowing tales of bravery, cowardice, survival and determination.

Bonifacia slowly realized that there was something fundamentally odd about Weshnut civilization. Putting her finger on it was rather like solving a picture puzzle. With all the confused and jumbled pieces laid out before her, she began to methodically fit it all together. The emerging picture didn't make much sense until she was more than half way through. Then the fragments of what she'd begun to learn slipped into place with

increasing ease, and she came to see with startling clarity the bigger picture.

She hadn't given a moment's thought to the fact that there were no boys in any of her classes. *Nothing at all unusual in that.* She had just assumed the school for boys was off in a far part of the Samkan Palace, or at the other end of Admiralty Island. Then she remembered what the Weshnut dealer said to the Og'yre named Vokran: "*Weshnut may be children of The Mother, but we are Gwellem too.*" Weshnut might very well belong to the same genus as Gwellem, but like Mr. Darwin's finches, they had evolved in a very different direction, at least from a cultural standpoint. It took a great many questions and having to endure a lot of incredulous looks for Bonifacia to see the underlying reality. There simply were no schools for boys in Weshnut society.

"It goes back to the time of the Ulfair conquest," explained Jovaline in answer to a pointed question from Bonifacia. "When the Ulfair reunited the separate realms of the upper latitudes into a single empire, many Gwellem fled and took refuge here, beyond the Grith Mathrain."

"*Grith Mathrain?*" repeated Bonifacia.

"The Ulfair call them the Untold Mountains. A lot of people died crossing those mountains," inserted Pasuana. "From exposure, or battles with the Og'yre."

Jovaline went on with her impromptu history lesson. "Many generations passed with almost no contact between the old realms and our people. The Empire of the Ulfair went one way, you might say. We went another, taking the sea for our dominion. Weshnut means *voyager* in the old tongue."

"But what about your men?" asked Bonifacia.

"What about them?" replied Jovaline.

"Why are they not allowed to go to school or do anything important?"

"That's a stupid question. Isn't it obvious?" said Pasuana.

Bonifacia could only think of Peter. "It isn't at all stupid," retorted Bonifacia. "And no, it's not obvious. At least, not to me."

Jovaline frowned at her. "It's not that they aren't *allowed*, so much as they aren't suited to it."

"How do you mean?" persisted Bonifacia.

“Well, for a start, they aren’t able to speak with The Mother.”

“The Mother?” repeated Bonifacia. “Do you mean the samkan?”

“No, you addlepatated girl, *the Sea*. They haven’t got the gift.”

“You’ve lost me entirely,” said Bonifacia in frustration. “What gift?”

“You explain it to her Pasuana. I give up.”

Pasuana picked up the effort with an audible sigh. “When it comes to the Sea, Bonifacia Espasande, men are bumbler. That’s the only way I can explain it. They don’t know how to interpret her moods, how to persuade or please her. They tried at first, but it only led to disaster. She only responds to women. That’s why men folk have no hand in anything of importance.”

“You talk as if the sea were alive.”

“Of course she’s alive,” said Jovaline.

“That’s blasphemous!” cried Bonifacia.

Jovaline and Pasuana only laughed at her. “You’ve spent too much time amongst boomken Gwellem,” said Jovaline. “I’ve heard about their Eternal Architect who lives amongst the stars. A lot of Ulfair nonsense.”

Bonifacia grew red in the face. “What *you’re* saying is nonsense.”

“You’d better watch your tongue little bobtail. You’ll find that people who disrespect The Mother have a habit of disappearing at sea.”

A chill ran down Bonifacia’s spine. “You can’t possibly mean that.”

“You’re a stranger when it comes down to it,” replied Jovaline. “So maybe you can be forgiven for your ignorance. Perhaps you’ll learn about the World, in time. If not...” She shrugged her shoulders.

There were men that lived in Debs, of course, and throughout the Weshnut mainland. Some even served aboard ships as deck hands and the like. Bonifacia had so far only seen scullion boys, servants and palace guards, and the tailor, of course, that provided her beautiful clothes. Their education was restricted to mostly manual trades. Higher education and intellectual pursuits were confined to women and invariably focused on some aspect of the sea. Weshnut men could become wealthy as guildsmen or merchants, even influential in their own spheres,

but were categorically precluded from voting or holding office within the Weshnut dominion.

Bonifacia decided that whatever her personal beliefs, the better part of wisdom was to keep her gob shut. If these people wanted to worship the sea and treat men as second-class citizens, it was none of her business.

Only once did she catch a brief glimpse of Gemesh from her balcony, his tiny black clad figure slipping between buildings far below. She pondered how he was doing, the only Gno'man in Debs. She shouted to him, but he must not have heard. Seeing Gemesh reminded her of Henrik. *Where might he be?* she wondered.

All the students of the Fifth Division, including Bonifacia, gathered together early one morning, their belongings tucked into canvas shoulder bags. Chatting merrily, they marched in a leisurely fashion down the narrow streets to the wharf where they boarded the *Rejoice* for three weeks of instruction at sea.

Bonifacia put aside her larger worries for the time being. No two ways about it, a trip to sea held every prospect of adventure. As a very young girl, she'd once taken a steamer to England with her parents to visit with Peter and his father, but that was a relatively short passage across the Bay of Biscay to Plymouth. Her only other similar experience were day trips aboard the light skiffs and catboats that sailed up and down the Rio do Sil, and then never more than a passenger.

Even tied up to the pier, she could feel the roll of the ship beneath her feet. The raucous cries of dockside stevedores blended in the gentle morning breeze with the constant creak of overstretched hawsers and quarrelsome gulls. The *Rejoice* was a proper sailing ship, a barquentine, square-rigged in the foremast, fore-and-aft rigged in the main and mizzen masts. There was just enough room on board for the hundred or so cadets, five instructors, a physician, sail maker, shipwright, cook and master.

Marador saw her wards off, but did not join them at sea. The chandler had already filled the hold with all the necessities for a three-week voyage, including a few curly-haired ruminants and skids piled high with preserves. The cadets mustered on the

weatherdeck for a final roll call, then dispersed like strewn marbles. Amid all the hubbub Jovaline escorted Bonifacia below decks to show her where to swing her hammock.

“You can stow your jacket, reyksha and boots,” directed Jovaline. “Drawers over leggings and barefoot are the rule at sea. You can keep your shirt and vest on, if you like—most do.”

“Seriously?” exclaimed Bonifacia, instinctively wrapping her arms across her chest. “I don’t believe you.” Then without so much as a by-your-leave, Jovaline and the other cadets discarded their voluminous skirts and supple leather boots. Although taken aback, Bonifacia timidly followed along. Weshnut underpants were sensible affairs in any case, more like the exercise shorts for boys back home. She cast her eye about the gloomy deck as she undressed. “Why don’t you sleep on proper bunks?” she asked. “Wouldn’t that be a lot more comfortable?”

“You mean berths? A hammock is a heck of a lot more pleasant than a shared mattress after a few weeks at sea. Take my word for it. Besides, the *Rejoice* doesn’t exactly belong to the Fifth Division. You never know what use the admiralty might put it to.”

It wasn’t long before the sound of shrill pipes summoned the ship’s complement to muster back on the weatherdeck. The fifth level cadets stood front and center. The senior-most cadet, a girl named Camuel, was first officer for the voyage and reported to the ship’s master. Cadet Darmasine filled in for bosun, or “boatswain.” It was plain to see the ship’s commander, Captain Pemara, was a no-nonsense woman, missing half the pinky on her right hand.

“Thank you, Cadet Camuel” said Captain Pemara, after hearing out her report. “Wind and tide favor us, you may take us out.”

Camuel proffered the captain a deferential salute, and then turned to face the assembled division. “Cadet Rutarbi, you have the helm. Cadet Darmasine, standard rigging for departure. Set sail, if you please. Third level, stand by to cast off! Second level, ready the lines. Prepare to haul sheets and hal-yards! First level, stand fast. Fifth, to your posts!”

The *Rejoice* came to life as the first officer’s commands were repeated and carried out in detail by the bosun. The third level

cadets, with practiced ease, rushed to the rails and slipped the spring and breast lines while the first level cadets kept far out of the way, their faces flush with envy. The fourth levels meanwhile scrambled up the shrouds to loose sails, Cadet Darmasine and the fifth level cadets scrutinizing their every move.

The second level cadets, including Bonifacia, were kept busy hauling on the lines. Bonifacia followed Jovaline's self-assured lead, unable to resist glancing up every so often and watching spellbound as Cadet Darmasine trimmed the sails, first backing the ship gently away from the pier and then about and out into the strait.

Captain Pemara remained outwardly detached from all this activity, standing with her feet apart under a fair sky, impassively monitoring both the ship's progress and the competence of her student crew. Bonifacia was fit to burst, her heart pounding in her chest. *I'm going to sea*, was the only thought her mind could muster.