



Paolo lashed the helm in opposition to the sails, causing the “Iara - mãe d’água” to gradually drift to leeward. The vessel bobbed restlessly in the choppy sea, but slowed to the speed of the ocean drift.

“Why are we stopping, Papa?” Janaina asked her father. They had been tacking, or, to quote her father, “sailing as close as possible towards the wind in a zigzag course to attain an upwind direction to which it is impossible to sail directly.”

“I thought you were bored and wanted some adventure. I’m happy to oblige you, Princesa,” he said in his heavy accent. The light breeze tousled his jet black hair. He was tall and lean, his skin the creamy mocha color of his Spanish ancestors. He was heavily muscled from years at sea working the sails and from scuba diving.

The Endeavor 42, christened “Iara - mãe d’água”, was to be their sanctuary, their home away from home for the next two weeks. Paolo had once told her the vessel’s name meant “mother of the waters”. Her own name, Janaina, was another variation for Iara – the beautiful half-human, half-fish that lured fishermen with her song.

Her father had given her this trip as her Christmas present. She rarely saw him, not since her parents had divorced two years ago when she was twelve. He had moved back to his homeland of Brazil five months after the divorce was final. ‘Business reasons’ he’d said. So, Janaina only got to see him over Christmas break and one month each summer. He would sometimes surprise her and fly up to Tennessee for a long weekend. But, it wasn’t enough, it was never enough. She missed him – terribly. What she didn’t miss were the constant fights her parents were always having.

Why did adults never act like... well, adults?

Janaina had always been told she looked exactly like her mother. Anna was of Scandinavian descent, a natural blonde, with blue eyes and the lithe body of a ballerina. Janaina secretly wished she’d inherited her father’s dark, exotic looks instead. She loved her mom, but there was no one on earth she adored more than her father.

They’d planned this trip down to the minutest detail. They had two solid weeks, just her and her father, on the open seas off the coast of Brazil. Until now, she’d only been allowed to sail with him in what he considered ‘safe waters’, never in rough seas. This year was a chance for her to put her skills to the test - a chance to make her father proud of her. She had looked forward to this for months, ever since her mother had finally relented and agreed to let her spend her Christmas break proving her sea legs. Their goal was to visit and collect souvenirs from every island off the coast of Brazil, except one.

Afterwards, she was going to spend a couple days with her paternal grandparents in Sao Paulo before heading back to school. She got to see them less than she saw her father. This was going to be the perfect Christmas break.

“See that island over there?” her father asked.

“You mean that huge rock covered in thick

trees, it doesn’t even have a beach. Wait, Papa, isn’t that Ilha de Queimada or Snake Island?” she asked. Her father had told her the stories, of course.

Growing up, she’d always thought the tales to be no more than Brazilian mythology. Before they embarked on this trip, her father had once again regaled her with the stories of Snake Island. The island was so dangerous the Brazilian Navy permitted only highly trained scientists to visit it.

“Yes, it’s infested; an estimated 5,000 snakes inhabit the tiny island of less than 430,000 square meters of forest covered rock. Some say there are as many as three snakes per meter. Others say it’s only one snake per stride, while National Geographic cites it as one snake per one square meter. Either way, you’re never farther away than three feet from certain death,” he told her.

“What kinds of snakes, Papa?” she asked. They were standing on the deck at the railing, looking across the distance at the rugged landscape. The island was so beautiful. It was hard for her to imagine it as one of the top ten, if not the number one, deadliest place on earth. Her father stood behind her; she felt safe with his arms around her. The sailboat gently rocked to and fro, further lulling her into a false sense of calm.

“Not kinds, just one. It’s a type of pit viper, a relative of the deadly fer-de-lance, known as the Golden Lancehead. It is only found on Snake Island. Its venom is three to five times more potent than the fer-de-lance – the snake responsible for most of the snakebite deaths in all of South America. It is said the Golden Lancehead, which is nearly two-foot long, can inject enough venom with one bite to kill two men at once. The venom actually melts the flesh around the bite.” He felt her wince, squeezed her again and laughed when she cringed again. “But, not to worry, pet, we’ll stay far away from there.”

“Papa, some of the snakes, they are deformed, right?” she asked.

“Yes, you remember my amigo, Beto? He works with the Instituto Butantan in Sao Paulo. He was working with the last crew of scientists from the research facility that were allowed on the island. He says the population is so isolated that genetic mutations are occurring. Many of the snakes have two heads, but they usually don’t live long, the two heads actually bite each other to death.”

“You’re kidding!” she laughed, the thought of a two headed snake attacking itself was just too funny.

“No, Princesa, Beto says a lot of the snakes on the island do this. Some snakes have other, even more dramatic mutations.”

“How can any mutation be more dramatic?”

“Feet, talons, one was recently discovered climbing the wall of the old lighthouse,” he grinned at her.

“Papa, that’s not true!” she laughed.

“Princesa, it is true. It had a single clawed foot growing from its side, the snake was using its talons to hold to the wall.”

Janaina looked across the blue waves to the lush scenery of the island. How could any place

so beautiful, be so dangerous? She wondered what other secrets the island held, and remembered one of the horror stories her father had told her about. “Is it true, Papa, that a fisherman died there?”

“It’s a legend, though, many legends are indeed based on facts. The Golden Lancehead, being a pit viper, hunts by sensing heat through little pits in the side of its face. There is a story of a fisherman who unwittingly wandered onto the island to pick bananas. Yes, it very well could be true. It is said he was bitten, several times, yet managed to make it back to his boat before succumbing to the venom. He was supposedly found some time later on the deck in a great pool of his own blood. Though, I find it hard to believe the man wouldn’t have noticed them. Course, with their camouflage, it is possible he could have missed them before it was too late. They hide in the leaves, or on the ground and dangle from the trees like broken branches. Their strike is fast – and efficient. We’ll not be taking souvenirs from there.”

“I’m glad, Papa,” she responded, “I really don’t like snakes.”

“The next island is a good distance from here. We should eat. It will take a while tacking against these headwinds. Come, we’ll have feijoada. You can make the sauce and boil the rice while I prepare the meat.”

Janaina followed her father to the caboose, or kitchen. She started the water to boil the rice and then began mixing ingredients for the sauce. Her father added beef, smoked sausage, garlic and chili peppers to the beans in a sauté pan and stirred the mixture over a low heat.

“Ah, Janaina, it’s been too long. You remember, you must add the manioc flour to thicken the sauce. Stir it in slowly, yes, that’s it.” She mixed it in being sure to avoid lumps while her father set the table. She strained the white rice and spooned it onto the two plates. Her father added his concoction and she poured her sauce over it. Paolo garnished it with collard greens and orange slices. He said grace and they dug in.

“Papa, it’s as wonderful as I remember!”

“You have quite the way with the sauce, very smooth,” he beamed at her.

Pleasing her father made her happy. This trip made her happy. Paolo had let her do most of the sailing, rarely having to help or correct her. They were talking about the next island when the boat suddenly lurched.

“I’ll check this out, you finish eating, be sure to wash and put the dishes away. Don’t forget to lash the cabinets down. Don’t want plates falling to the floor.” He kissed her cheek and headed topside.

The boat continued to sway, bouncing a bit harder than Janaina was comfortable with. She quickly finished her chores, double-checking to be sure all the cabinets and drawers were properly secured.

“Janaina, when you’re done, come topside,” Paolo called down to her.

“Coming, Papa,” she said, quickly ascending the ladder to join him.

“Come, join me,” he motioned her over to join him, “a storm is brewing, see, there, just at the horizon.”

Janaina looked where her father was pointing. “I’ve never seen anything like that, Papa. WHAT IS THAT?”

Look for Part 2 next week!
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