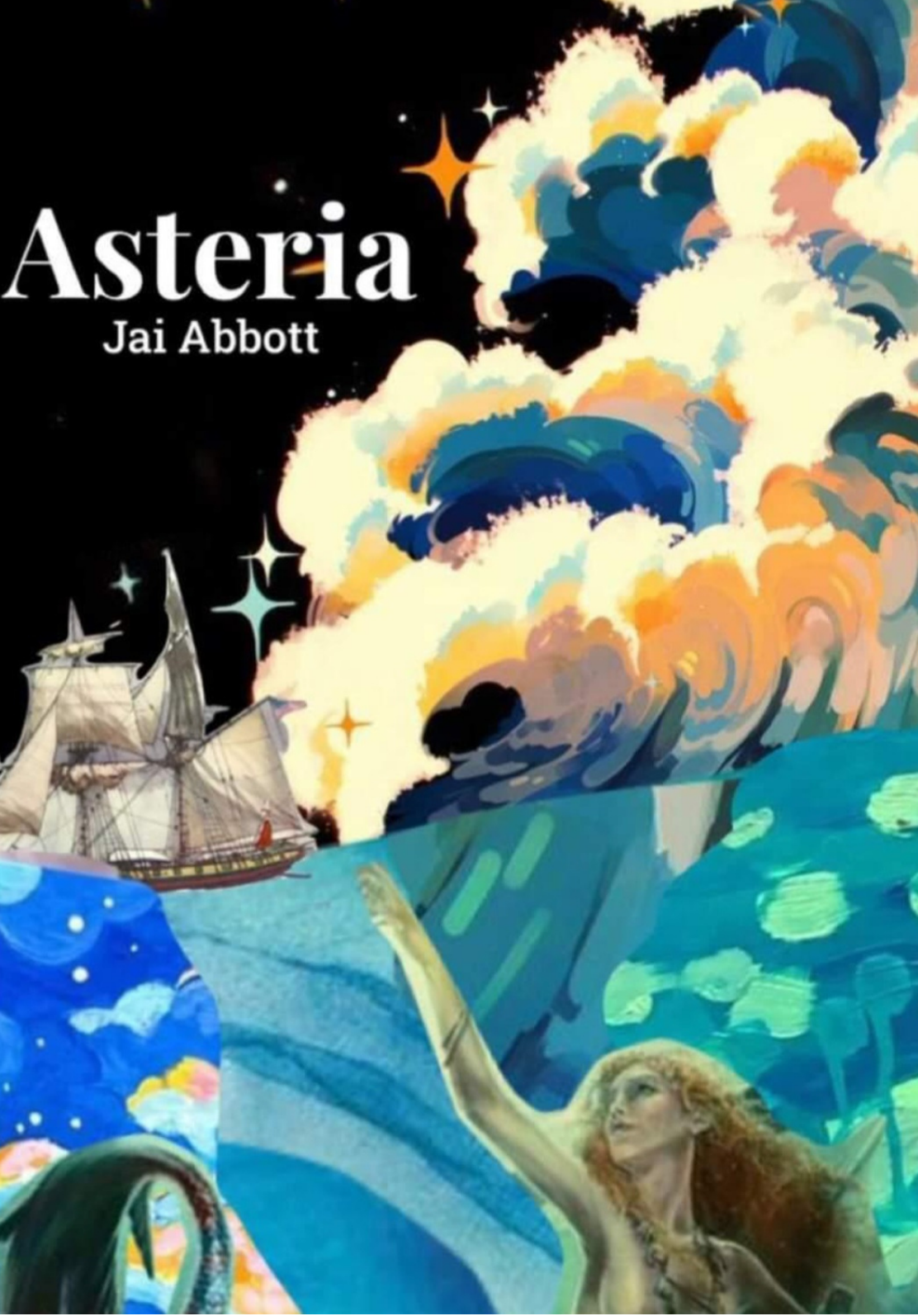


Asteria

Jai Abbott



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Chapter 1

John is silent as we step into our new lives. As I turn to the side, fitting my overly wide blue dress into the gate at the entrance. As the ship lurches forward, I wave back at my mother, knowing I will never see her again. He says nothing. He doesn't even touch me. I follow two steps behind my husband, almost in a daze, when I feel a pinprick.

And then another. I spin around in a moment, catching Lillian's wrist as she reaches forward to poke me again. She grins widely, unchasened, and I drag her to my side.

"Lillian." I've put on a stern tone, trying to get her to at least pretend to be serious, but she only laughs. I fake disgruntlement for about as long as I can manage, under a minute, before her expression forces an exasperated smile onto my face. She seems pleased by this, pulling me from John's trail and leaning close to my ear.

"I guess I just expected more of a warm reception, a little fanfare. We're stuck on this- this machine," she says it like a slur, "for months, months! The least I'd expect is some basic hospitality."

"They're a bit busy making sure we actually leave the port. These are workmen -"

She leans on my shoulder and I cut myself off. "My favorite kind. I bet I'll make it through at least four on this trip."

I wrinkle my nose, pretending to be dubious. "Two, maximum."

"You underestimate my skill, dearest. Four workmen, my new maid, my darling husband at least a dozen times over, and..." She looks around, eyes falling on an attractive member of the tour. "That one." She whispers, leaving me to swat at her arm.

The group stops all at once, and I almost run right into the man in front of me, and have to grab Lillian's arm to keep her from tumbling to the ground. She brushes her skirts down and returns to her polite persona with nothing more than a slight reddening of the cheeks.

A long-haired stubbly man introduces himself with a deep bow and a brash smile.

"Captain William Parson, my pleasure to meet you all." He goes on about this being a mission from God to spread Christianity and honor Queen and country. I do as is expected, stand beside John, and nod at the right moments, though Captain Parson looks over

at me every once in a while, smiling, reminding me somewhat that I exist.

...

"Excuse me, Madam, may I take your bag?" A man asks me as soon as I turn, making me jump. He's got a thick French accent and is abnormally tall, his dark hair sheared too close to his head. His simple tunic marks him a crewman, and I relax a little.

"I've got it," I want to say, but know well enough it would be improper. I hesitate, not looking up at him, suddenly finding myself bashful. Not able to find the words, despite the scripts I studied so well.

"You're welcome to mine, if you're willing to trade." Lillian pushes in front of me, more into the view of the man, though his eyes don't leave me. "More than."

"For what?" He has a half coy smile on his face. It's endearing. I know it's meant to be.

"Don't look at me like that, nothing so very important," Lillian giggles. The man looks terribly comfortable alongside her. "Just your name."

"I've been raised better than to give my name to just anyone. You never know what beautiful woman could be a member of the Fae." I'd be swooning already, his glances alone make me feel unsteady, but Lillian knows the game of flirtation; it is, perhaps, her first tongue.

"You can trust me, my good man," she says, tracing her fingers up and down his arm. I feel oddly like a voyeur but can't bring myself to walk away and lose the protection of having Lillian at my side, the looks and smiles from this handsome stranger, the excitement and anxiety of not knowing what to say.

"Richard Hastings, at your service," he says, giving an exaggerated bow, "and I should let you know now, I take 'good' as an insult." He smiles wide, like he thinks he's said something particularly clever.

"Oh, I quite like you already, Mr. Hastings," Lillian says, and I feel more comfortable already, now that she and I have fallen into our old routine. Lillian gets her bags hoisted upon the shoulders of a strapping young man, and I fall back to John's side, hearing him now talking business with his partner. He grips my hand tightly but makes no effort to bring me into the conversation.

...

John sits down quite heavily on the bed, dropping the bags he's been carrying while we wait for the rest of them to be delivered. He could have had even these carried for him, but he could do it himself, so he did. He rubs his brow and pauses. I stand, still in the doorway, and watch him.

"Alright," He says it like it's the start of a conversation.

"Yes?" I say probably too keenly. The silence had started tedious, and grown almost painful over the years. I feel too often like I'm begging him to say something, to let us talk informally for the first time in months. He struggles, opening his mouth, and closing it again. "Well, um, Camilla," He pauses, reaching back to rub his shoulder. I move, sitting behind him and replacing his hands with my own. He stiffens for a moment at the unfamiliarity of the motion, the touch, but doesn't move away. "This'll be good for us, it's a good opportunity. We'll get a nice place, start a family, it'll be..." He pauses again for a few seconds, trying to

think of something right. I don't prompt him. "Good. I promise." I know he's trying to convince himself more than me. I take my hands from his shoulders and awkwardly reach over and take his hand, which was playing with the edge of the glove he'd not yet taken off. I shift from behind him to his side and take the time to look him in the eye, to pull his glove from his hand. Let him see me, recognize me as I am. Something burns in me when he blinks, looking away.

"Okay," My voice is soft. I'm trying hard to believe him. To accept that this is all he can give me. He squeezes my hand and gets up, breaking our semblance of connection, and starting towards the chamberpot.

Chapter 2

I clutch my bag to my chest, zig-zagging across the crowded deck, muttering about the inconvenience of it all. Someone steps on the back of my dress, and I trip, grabbing hold of whatever's closest to me to keep from falling. It flinches.

"I am so sorry, Madam."

I pull away from Richard Hastings' arm as fast as I can manage, blushing. He ducks down for the bag I dropped before I even notice I dropped it. He looks up at me, and I smile, calculating. He stepped out of Lillian's rooms, clothes more rumpled than my grasping could possibly justify.

"It's quite alright," I say with more humor than I thought I felt. "My fault. Or rather whatever ruffian stepped on my train."

"Well allow me to apologize in his stead." Richard bows low.

I laugh, though not quite at his words.

"What is it?" He asks, finally holding out my bag for me, a pleased smile lighting his face.

"Richard, dear, you have lipstick on your cheek."

His shirt's undone by a few buttons too, but no hickeys marr his skin. She hasn't really gotten to him. Still, it's easy to tease. He blushes, rubbing at the wrong side of his face, and I want to lick my thumb, brush it off for him. I grasp my own wrist, watching.

"I'm really very sorry. It seems I was requested for more than my stewarding prowess."

"Don't be silly, I'm sure your prowess was the whole point."

We chuckle for a moment, and fall into silence, watching each other. A blanket of insecurity falling on my shoulders.

"I ran, pretty quickly, I assure you, Madam, nothing untoward happened. Real upright fellow, me." He says it like an inside joke.

"Pity," The look on his face brings me towards laughter. "I'll have to deal with Lillian moping later. Or her husband, depending on who summoned you." He looks at me a little oddly, and I realize all at once how much I've said in a breath. I grab for my bag, but he keeps it for an extra moment, flipping over the tag to find my name, and much to my embarrassment, I let him, waiting for him to drop it into my open hands.

"I hope we speak again, Camilla Dormer." He says, and I almost shiver at the honey-sweet sound.

"Mistress Dormer." I remind him, and if my voice wavers or I don't rush off as quickly as I possibly could, it hardly makes a difference.

...

"Settle, my dear," Lillian says as I drop down next to her at the round table squarely in the middle of her room. Grabbing and sipping from her cup and cringing at the overabundance of sugar in the tea. I ran all the way to the dining room, paused for only a few seconds, then ran back to her room. I grab her fan from the table and flap it noncommittally, hoping not to look as sweaty and piglike as I feel. I want more than I should to spill every detail of my interaction with Richard, but I know what she would read into it. Besides, she had her eye on him first. I take slow breaths, giving her a short smile, and pretending to be normal. Proper. *A real upright fellow, me.*

"So..." She tries to prompt, reaching for my hand, taking it across the table.

"It's nothing. I shouldn't have come." I say probably too reluctantly.

"You underestimate either our friendship or my own gullibility. I'm insulted regardless. Now spill, before I start guessing." She swipes back her cup, I let it go easily.

"I don't think--"

"You make me a gambling woman so easily." She smiles, and I already know what she's scheming. "How about this, if you beat me at checkers, I'll drop it, and I'll give you an outrageous story of my own"

I laugh. "I know all your secrets, or will soon enough. You hate keeping them to yourself. You think a diary is--"

"Terribly dull. It doesn't get nearly as scandalized as you do." This deal will go as she wants it to. Few are powerful enough to deny Lillian anything she wants. The only difference is what I'll win. I glance around the room.

"I want the Bordeaux." It's a good one, meant to toast our arrival. She gives me a look like she's thinking about it, before

laughing, and fetching the carved wooden box from the cabinet where it sticks out. The room is set up so perfectly after only a half-day here, they must have had it done up in advance.

"You drive a hard bargain," She says, grinning wide and taking a chocolate from the bowl in the center of the table.

"You love it."

We're just past halfway done the game when Christopher, Lillian's husband, slams open the door and rushes into the room, looking much like I did a few minutes ago. Sweaty and red, but with an overwhelming smile and a slightly dashing red suit. He nods to me, and whisks Lillian from her seat, taking her into his arms, spinning her around, kissing her quickly.

"Husband." She says it into his chest, not nearly tall enough to meet his ear.

"Wife," He pauses, looking at her for a long moment, cupping her cheeks, then bringing that giddy smile back to his face "you simply won't believe what I just did."

"Your chambermaid?" Lillian giggles and Christopher's face goes serious for less than a second.

"Still working on that one." He says with false gravity, and Lillian swats at his arm, at no point actually looking cross.

"So what'd you do?" Lillian asks, her eyes set on his face, as if memorizing his features.

"Found a letter from the Hansons. We've got the house!" They'd been trading letters for months, trying to get the place Lillian had her eye on the one time they visited.

"Good deal?" She asks. He's looking over her hungrily. She tilts her head just so, dark curls falling over the opposite shoulder.

"Oh, terrible." He dives down, mouthing her neck. She lets out an almost intoxicating noise, having clearly forgotten, or stopped caring, that I'm still there. I rise slowly from my seat and nick that bottle of wine on my way out.

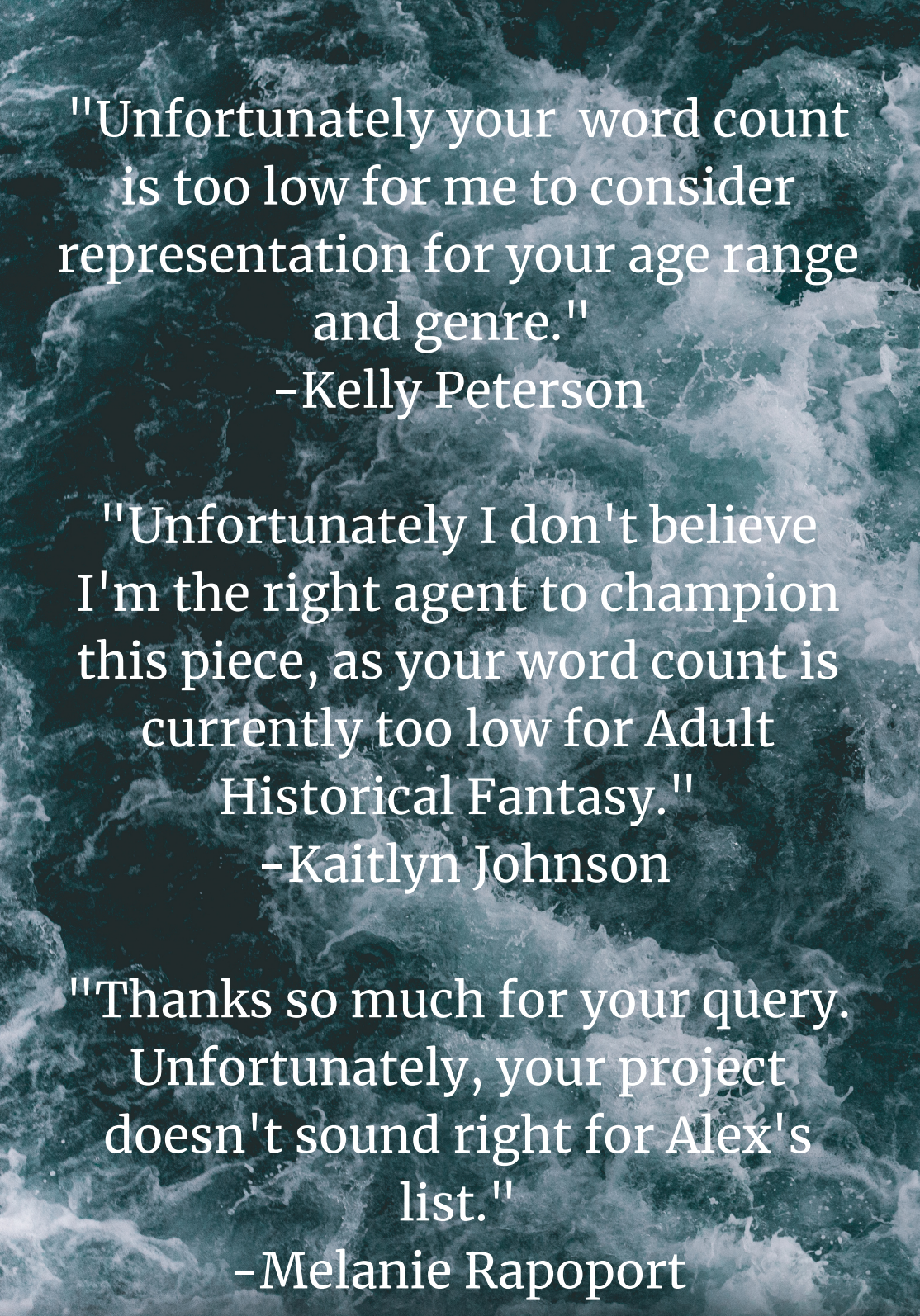
"You owe me that story later!" She yells at my back, disengaging from Christopher for a moment. She must notice the bottle at my side but doesn't mention it, too enamored with her man.

"We'll see." Absolutely not.

I trudge more than walk back to my rooms, thinking of that crewman again. Something about him had caught my attention and kept it. My stomach lets out a loud groan, and I remember I'm hungry. I've barely eaten in all of the fuss of the day, I look down at the bottle of wine I took from Lillian's room. I would've won it anyhow, given enough time (not that she'd ever accept loss). I uncork the bottle with my teeth and take a long pull, feeling I deserve it for my troubles.



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