

SKULLS & CROSSBONES



TALES OF WOMEN PIRATES

Edited by Andi Marquette
R. G. Emanuelle

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A NOTE FROM THE EDITORS

Greetings, and welcome aboard *Skulls and Crossbones: Tales of Women Pirates*. We put this collection together because we both love pirate stories and pirate history. But we also love stories about women who go adventuring, and pirates have a reputation for doing just that. So, we combined those loves and thus was born *Skulls and Crossbones*.

We wanted to ensure that readers would have a wide-ranging experience with this volume, so we selected stories with a variety of themes, settings, and eras that fit our criteria, particularly that each story features a woman pirate either as the main character or the focus of the story. Here, you'll find the results of our selection. Next, we organized the stories for readers in a way that seemed logical and that also worked sort of like a music mix. We began with a specific mood and mixed stories together in such a way that the reader, hopefully, isn't jarred from one story to the next.

With that approach in mind, we've provided a loose chronological and thematic journey through piracy. You'll begin your pirate adventure at sea, with "Ladgarda," Christine Rains's grim tale of revenge set in a Viking-like era. Next, Jove Belle escorts you to "The Gallows," an even grimmer reminder of a fate that many a pirate met. Rakelle Valencia's Viking, "Valkyry," seeks redemption and recognition for her achievements in bloody battles and a father's betrayal, and R. G. Emanuelle's sea captain finds that not all riches are gold in "Lost Treasure." Jane Fletcher shows us what happens when two unlikely allies invite a pirate to "The Hangman's Dance," and "The Furies" will take on a new crew member, but only if he's willing to pay a price, and author Rajan Khanna reveals what that is.

Speaking of prices, what would you agree to do in a quest for revenge against a thieving captain and his first mate? Find out what one woman does in Andi Marquette's "Devil's Bargain" and then join Alice Godwin's siren crew in a quest for a legendary necklace in "Fifty Octaves Deep." You'll join the well-meaning but hilarious crew of Rod Santos's "HMS Nefarious" in a hunt for the dreaded Redbeard and then you'll engage in a bit of fun and time travel with Aubrie Dionne, discovering that pirates and history aren't always boring and that you could end up a "Pirate Wannabe."

Victoria Oldham's present-day tale of long-haul trucking demonstrates that not all piracy occurs on water in "Road Pirate Wanted," while "The Brahmapur Buccaneer" proves her mettle in Matthew Fryer's story about a modern Indian woman who seeks to escape her abusive husband on board a freighter. You'll engage in "The Kindness of Strangers," Vicki Stevenson's story about a woman who runs a business at a lake marina that involves more than just renting houseboats to wealthy clientele, and David Brookes will take you on a tense ride aboard a Somali pirate vessel off the coast of Africa in "Resolution 1838." We'll finish the modern era with Carrie Vaccaro Nelkin, who reveals "The After," her vision of a post-apocalyptic world in which piracy may or may not offer a solution for better living to two survivors.

Next, you'll be transported to a world of ice in which not all is as it seems in Cat Conley's "Captain, Hook, and Mr. Shrike," and after that, Elaine Burnes takes us offworld, to reveal "A Perfect Life" in her story of intergalactic warfare. Trace Miller's "Stardance" demonstrates that not all pirates are human, and Megan Magill introduces you to "The Passenger," who jeopardizes official space pirate policy. Holly Ellingwood completes your journey, with "Pipettes for the Pirate," a tale about a pirate who needs a scientific evaluation of a life form that has attached itself to her ship.

We chose these stories not only because they are well written, but also because we genuinely enjoyed reading them. Life as a pirate was and is violent and dangerous—even moreso for women who made a choice to do it or were drawn in through the circumstances of their lives. The stories in this collection present women as strong and courageous, yes, but also as multifaceted—brutal and brave enough to stand their ground amidst men, smart enough to lead them, or confident enough to reach their goals without them.

We hope you enjoy your voyage, and thanks for joining us.

Andi Marquette
R. G. Emanuelle
December, 2009

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Note

This collection retains the spelling conventions of the countries where the authors live and work.



LADGARDA

Christine Rains

The battle cry of hundreds of men rang out over the tumultuous waters. Ladgarda barked orders, and her lone feminine voice melted into the symphony of war. Her longships sliced through the sea toward the enemy's rear. So busy were her enemies with their certain triumph over Ragnar's army, they did not know they were pinched between two forces until her men screamed with their hunger for blood.

With her sword raised above her head, she clung to the dragon's head of her drekar as they closed the distance. Ladgarda rode at the head of her fleet in the fastest of her longships. Her councilors had tried to convince her to at least stay back on one of the knarrs, but the boats did not move fast enough for her liking. Her tactics involved speed and stealth, and only a drekar could provide that.

She lifted her legs as her ship ramméd the side of one of the enemy's. The sound of the impact was like a volcano exploding, and pieces of wood flew into the water. Ladgarda was the first on the rebels' boat, waving her sword in a dance of death. Blood sprayed from her enemies' wounds, and her blade swiftly donned a crimson coat.

Her men followed behind her with ax and sword. There was no mercy for even the slaves that begged on their knees. Every one of her enemies fell, and she left a trail of corpses as she worked her way forward where the greatest numbers were already fighting with Ragnar's men. Ladgarda leapt from one ship to the next without a care as to whom was in her path.

It had been Ragnar's foolish pride and his desire for fair-haired maidens that had brought him to this. She had been tempted to let him fall and disappear into the salt waters. She had been one of those maidens, after all. Yet, time and again, she came to fight for him, and swore after each time, there would never be another.

She screamed as she hacked into a huge bearded man and kicked his corpse over the railing into the sea. Even in her armor, she appeared a dainty woman. Her long pale hair flew behind her like a silken cape. Many had underestimated her over the years because she was a woman. There would always be those who did, and she would use their stupidity to her advantage.

Rebel after rebel fell to paint the waters red. Longships burned as Ragnar's archers cast flaming arrows into the heart of the battle. He was arrogant enough to believe that such a tactic would not harm his fleet, even as his foremost drekars went up in flames. At least it drove the enemy back toward her, and she gladly delivered them to their gods.

Time meant nothing when she gave in to her lust for battle. The stars shone brightly as the rebels were defeated and Ladgarda sailed forward to meet her former husband on one of his knarrs. There was much celebrating going on amongst his men, and the drink had already made them clumsy. Ships knocked up against one another and floated too closely to the fiery remains of the enemy's boats.

Ladgarda kept her men in check. There would be time enough for celebration when they had their reward. She strode onto the deck, flanked by her fiercest warriors.

Ragnar greeted her, laughing, food and ale already stuck in his red beard. "Ladgarda!" His voice was the loudest on all the seas. "You have graced us with your presence again. I'm sure you're honored to have witnessed our victory."

His men cheered. One of them fell backward off the railing into the water. His comrades laughed as they teased him before pulling him up.

Ladgarda removed her helmet and shook out her thick hair. She tucked the helmet under her arm. "Yes, our victory, Ragnar." She gritted her teeth, wanting to shout out how *her* tactics had saved his men this day. Yet, insulting a man who claimed to be king was not wise. At least not in front of his loyal soldiers.

"I wish to speak with you about our payment." She gestured to the cabin behind him. "In private."

There were several lewd comments and hoots at her request. Her men did not even crack a smile.

"Of course, Lady Ladgarda." Ragnar flashed his toothy grin that always reminded her of a shark's. He took one more long pull of ale from a mug and then led the way into his small cabin. The walls were too thin to provide them with any quiet, but at least their conversation would be private.

She was all patience until she slammed the door closed behind them. "What do you think you were doing? You would have lost everything!"

"Ah, *mitt hjerte*," Ragnar cooed and held open his arms. His round face was a ridiculous mask of excess. "The rebels were nothing. I crushed them like bugs under my foot."

"*Vitun katyri*." Ladgarda spat at him and pushed at his broad chest. "If I had not come, you would have lost. Your men would follow you into the nine hells and back, but you're a poor general. You would not have known which end of a sword to hold if I had not taught you."

He snorted and puffed. A red flush suffused his face, and she knew it had nothing to do with the alcohol. “Watch your tongue, woman. I’ve no more use for it, so don’t think I won’t cut it out.”

“Threaten me all you want, but you know very well that I saved your ass here. I only want my payment and then I’ll be gone for good.”

Ragnar laughed at the fury in her eyes and flopped down to sit on the bed. “You’ll always come back to help me, *mitt hjerte*. As you said, my men would follow me anywhere. You cannot help yourself, either. Come, celebrate with me.” He patted the lumpy mattress beside him. “Give me reason not to part you from your tongue.”

Ladgarda hissed with irritation. “I help because you leave me to sail the sea. If you do not rule, another would try to hunt me down, and I will not give up my freedom.” She set down her helmet and folded her arms. “You’re drunk already. I see the color of the drink stealing into the whites of your eyes. Who is going to command your fleet when you pass out?”

He waved a big hand dismissively at her. “Bah, it matters not. I have my commanders, and there is Bjorn. Ivar is here, too.” He belched and glanced up at her frightful glare. “No worries. I left Sigurd and Hvitserk back at the capital.”

She fought the urge to strangle him at the mention of their sons. She had never wanted to be a mother, but she had given herself over to Ragnar and birthed him four strong boys. Ladgarda had not seen any of them in nearly a decade. Though she did not have the maternal urges of softer women, she was proud that her boys were becoming powerful warriors and considered them her safeguard if Ragnar foolishly got himself killed. In the past few years, it seemed more and more likely such would happen.

“My payment.” Ladgarda could manage no other words without wanting to curse him.

Ragnar sighed and kicked a chest under the bed with his boot heel. “You know where it is.” He leaned back and dug a bottle from the mess of blankets. He thumbed it open and took a long drink. She yanked out the chest as he did so, ignoring the stench of him.

“I remember when I first saw you. A beautiful Shieldmaiden. So young, so fierce. You fought so well—you still do—and I had to have you.” He took another drink, and it dribbled into his beard. “Remember the first night I had you in my bed?” Ragnar chuckled before he fell back, lost to his memories. “How I had to fight to get the upper hand. It made the prize all the more worthwhile. I had more bruises from you in the morning than I did from the battle.”

Ladgarda flipped open the chest to make sure it was as full with coin as she expected. The moron carried half his treasury with him wherever he went. He always said it was in case something came up, and she supposed it was all the better for her. It made their transactions quick and nearly painless.

She slammed the lid shut. "You loved your prize until something younger and prettier came along."

Ragnar held out his hand to her. "Ah, *mitt hjerte*, let me kiss it better."

She couldn't pick up the chest herself, but pushed it to one side and opened the door. Ladgarda called to one of her men to come fetch it. She looked back over her shoulder at her former husband. "And how is your newest little whore? What's her name? Helga?"

Ragnar bared his teeth at her. "I have myself a princess now. Thora of Sweden. Don't you dare call her any such name. She will be my wife come the next full moon."

The warrior picked up the chest and didn't wait for her order to take it back to her drekar. She had her men trained to know what she wanted without question. Ladgarda stared at Ragnar with cold eyes. Her chest constricted, and she silently cursed herself for it. She snatched up her helmet and pulled it hard onto her head. "May the Allfather bless your union, Ragnar. This is the last you'll see of me."

Ladgarda spun on her heel and marched off through the rowdy festivities on the knarr without looking back. Ladgarda did not utter another word until she was back on her drekar, and then it was only a command to leave the king's fleet for the open sea.



The frigid winds whipped at the fleet. The sails had been tied down, and her men chopped at the ice that had gathered on her ships. Ladgarda knew she would lose men and at least a few of her drekar if they stayed on the open sea for this storm. She handed command over to her most trusted man.

"Sail west to Stockholm. We'll find relief from the storm there."

The pale hair of his impressive beard mingled with the furs he wore. He gave her a stern look, but before he could open his mouth to say something, she marched down the center of the longship.

"Row! Row for all you're worth, you filthy dogs!" she shouted at the men on the oars. Sweat poured from their foreheads already, even with the cold.

Ladgarda did not stop to spur them on with the whip or her sharp tongue. She continued forward to her cabin and shut the door behind her against the foul weather. The storm was ill-timed. She had not had all her ships repaired from the battle. There was also word of a ship from the southern countries prowling her territory.

After removing her weapons and armor, she seemed a much smaller woman in the lantern's flickering light. She seemed young still, despite the many scars on her body and the weight of leadership always threatening to crush her. She wrapped herself up in furs on the bed, even though sleep felt far away.

There was a sharp knock at the door. She chided herself for being startled. “What do you want?”

The Skald pushed open the door and fought to close it against the wind. He grunted as he finally shut it. “Blasted weather. I’m freezing my balls off.”

“There was a day when you said winds like this were like Freya’s kiss, Alrik,” Ladgarda said without humor. “You even wrote a poem about it, an epic story about all the things she could do to a man.”

Alrik laughed and rubbed his arms. “Ah, I remember that story. Many of the men still mutter it to themselves when they’re settling down for the night and need a bit of relief.”

“What do you want?” she repeated with a tone ready to dismiss him.

Sighing, the tall man shook his head. “Stockholm, Ladgarda? There are other places closer and safer to find shelter from the storm. We know why you want to go there. It’s a bad idea.”

“It’s the largest harbor, and we can buy all the materials we need to repair the ships. I have more than enough gold.” She scowled at him, sitting stiffly within her cocoon of furs.

“We don’t need anything special. We can get what we need at any port. Give the order to go elsewhere. Osthamar. Or Oxelosund to the south, if you think that’s better.”

Ladgarda rose up on her knees, and her furs drooped around her. “Did you just tell me to give an order?”

Alrik held up his hands. “I don’t want to tell you to do anything—”

“You best not be telling me to do anything,” she growled.

“Ladgarda,” the Skald dared to take a step toward her, “you’re only asking for trouble by going to Stockholm. The others and I have talked about it.”

“What others?” Ladgarda snapped and threw off her furs before they tumbled down on their own. She wore only a linen shift, which drew attention to her womanly curves and hid the knives she had strapped to her body underneath.

“The others and I.” Alrik did not name any names. “We decided we have to stand up to you on this one.”

“Mutiny!” she said with a hiss, and a blade she removed from a sheath on her thigh echoed it.

“*Vittu saatana*, Ladgarda!” He jumped back with a hand on the handle of his sword. “This is no mutiny! We are yours, faithful to the end. We will drink and laugh in Valhalla together. Listen to us on this.” He let go of his weapon. “Sweden’s fleet will be in Stockholm for the festivities, and you know they have no love for us. No matter Radgar’s promise, he will not stop them from taking us, especially when he has a pretty maiden to distract him.”

“I could kill you where you stand.”

“You could try.” His gray eyes did not look away.

There was a tense silence for several heartbeats until, with a frustrated snarl, Ladgarda drove her knife into the mattress beside her. “Tell the men to signal for a change in course. Osthamar.”

Alrik let out a long breath. “As you say, Ladgarda.”

“But”—she withdrew the knife and pointed it at him—“after I’ve seen us set ashore, and repairs are underway, I’m going to Stockholm.”

“It’s folly, Ladgarda. You know it.” He shook his head and ran his fingers through his beard. “I compose the stories. I know how the heroes fall. If your adventures come to an end, who is there to inspire me?”

Ladgarda was fast out of the bed and holding a fistful of his beard. She yanked him down so that his eyes were level with her own and held the tip of the knife to his throat. “Heroes? There are no heroes here, Alrik.” She dragged her tongue along his full bottom lip. “Go tell them my new orders and get your ass back in here. I have a need tonight.”

She made to release him from her grip, but then jerked his head down harder. “I could kill you if I wanted. Just remember that.”

Ladgarda let go of the Skald and returned to her bed to lay in wait amongst her furs.



The drekar had dropped her off on shore outside the city when the night was young. Ladgarda stole a horse from some poor farmer and rode it hard to Stockholm. The animal stumbled with exhaustion when they entered the city proper. Even before she went through the first set of gates, she heard the noise from the celebration.

She wore a dress with her hair up, and that was all the disguise she needed. The Ladgarda that people feared wore a man’s armor covered in blood and had long hair that whipped her enemies’ faces as if it were made of leather. So many forgot that she was not a monster under that armor, but a woman who looked like any other.

The only questions she received going through the three sets of gates were if she wanted to share a drink and celebrate with the guards. Ladgarda laughed at their lewd remarks and flashed them a bit of leg. Entry into the castle would not be so easy, but she had other means to do so.

She shed the bright outer layer of her dress and left it in a heap in a dark alcove. The next layer was black and made of material that would not swish as she crept along. She unwound the length of silken rope that she had around her waist and attached the small grappling hook to one end. Choosing her spot, she climbed over the castle wall and dropped silently into the garden.

The layout to most castles was the same. She could hear the revelry coming from the great hall, and smelled fire and meat from the kitchen. Within the castle, she knew, the guards would be lazy. There were two powerful armies

in the city at the moment. That fact would be enough to make even the most vigilant of guards ease off his duty.

Ladgarda entered through the garden door and found the servants' staircase to the upper levels. At any other celebration, she would not expect Ragnar to return to his room until the sun's rays touched the eastern sky. This was not just any celebration, though. This was his wedding night, and he would have been eager to get his new bride alone in their chambers.

She gnashed her teeth and walked to the uppermost floor. All the servants were occupied below in the great hall and no guards were posted here. It was late into the night, and she guessed that anyone who was going to be abed had already retired. She went down the hall and checked each room systematically.

There were a few people sleeping in their rooms, but Ladgarda was quiet opening the doors. One of the men let out a great snore when she peered in, but she knew it wasn't Ragnar.

She came to the last door at the end of the hall. There was a wreath made of white flowers, a blessing for marriage, on the handle. She pressed her ear against the door, but she heard nothing from within.

She shed the black clothes and stood in an off-white shift. It revealed more leg than was proper and stretched tight across her chest. She let down her hair and pinched her cheeks to give them color.

The door was unlocked. No one would think to disturb a couple on their wedding night. Ladgarda slipped in and shut the door, standing motionless in that spot. The only light in the large room was from the fire, quietly crackling to her right. Thick fur rugs covered the stone floor and a large wardrobe prevented anyone in the bed from seeing the door.

She let her eyes adjust and stood listening for the occupants of the room. She heard the steady, heavy breathing of a man. There was no snoring, so she knew that he was not yet deeply asleep.

She crept along the wall until she could see the pair in the immense canopied bed. The princess was lying on her stomach with her long yellow hair splayed out around her. Her breathing was much softer than her new husband's, but she was sleeping the exhausted sleep of a deflowered bride.

Ragnar was stretched out on the other side of the bed. Ladgarda walked across the room to stand at his side. The moment her body stepped in the way of the fire's warmth, Ragnar let out a small snort and rubbed his face before opening his eyes.

Ladgarda put up a hand to shush him as he started and made to bolt from the bed. "I'm not here to fight, Ragnar. As you can see, I'm not carrying any weapons."

He eyed her and leaned back against the headboard. He reached over to his other side to touch Thora and discovered she was unharmed. His eyes

narrowed as he looked back to Ladgarda. "Why are you here?" His voice was quiet and rumbling. "You sneak into my room like an assassin. What am I to think?"

"You'd be smart to be suspicious, of course. Yet, haven't I proved all these years that I don't want you dead?" Her whisper was accompanied by a sly smile. "I thought I'd give you a wedding present."

"Really, now? Does it include strangling my new wife?"

Ladgarda chuckled and shook her head. She crooked up a leg onto the bed and leaned forward. "She's a lovely girl, Ragnar. I've seen some of the whores you've bedded, but this one is, by far, the most beautiful. Though," she lowered her voice further so that he had to bend his head toward her to hear, "I bet she doesn't know a thing about pleasuring a man. I bet she blushed to see you naked and laid there trembling when you took her."

"Yes, she's a pretty thing." Ragnar's chest puffed out. "And she was a virgin. What do you expect? She was soft and tight and warm. What else matters?"

"I'm willing to teach her some things for you." Ladgarda purred and lifted up her other leg to kneel on the bed. She crawled forward toward him. "I could teach her all those tricks I know that drove you wild. I could demonstrate on her so she knows how it feels, and then she and I can practice on you together."

There was no mistaking his arousal under the blankets. Ragnar wet his lips, looking back and forth between the two women. "This is your gift to me? How do I know you're playing me true here, Ladgarda? You've wanted me always for yourself. You could never let go."

She kept the seductive look on her face and sat up on her knees, raising her arms above her head. "I know what this marriage means for our country, Ragnar. Plus you get this lovely girl in the deal. I have no desire other than to sate you. Check me if you wish. I have no weapons."

Ragnar ran his hands along her sides and back, lingering on her taut behind. His hands dipped down and lifted her shift to her waist as if searching for any blades that might be strapped to her thighs. Seeing nothing, not even underclothes, he grinned. "Well now, what a gift this is, *mitt hjerte*."

"I had a feeling you would like it." She scratched her nails along his broad chest and lowered her head to kiss downward across his stomach. He groaned and fell back, linking his hands behind his head.

"Wake the girl before you start," Ragnar told her. "Maybe later, after we tire her out, you can have me alone like I know you want."

Ladgarda distracted him with a nip just above his groin as she reached between her breasts. She was as swift as her drekars and far more deadly. She buried the spearhead she had concealed there deep in Ragnar's stomach. She twisted it and yanked upward. Her cold eyes never left his as she stole his life from him.

“I never wanted you, Ragnar. I only wanted the sea, and that you gave to me.” She thrust the weapon in as deep as it could go. “Now, here you go marrying this bit of fluff. Did you know that doing so would give the Swedes free reign in my waters? I won’t have it.”

He attempted to speak, but only blood bubbled out from his mouth. Ragnar reached for her, and his hands fell trembling at his sides. She yanked the spearhead sideways to open him up and his intestines spilled out. They steamed even though the room was warm.

Ladgarda pushed herself off him and tossed the spearhead to the side. She glanced at the princess. How the girl was sleeping through this, she didn’t know, but it saved her from having to kill her, too. It was a much more satisfying thought to imagine Thora waking up to the disemboweled body of her new husband.

Ragnar stopped moving. One more bubble of blood popped between his lips and that was the end of the king. She had never loved nor even liked the man. The rest of the world thought what they wanted, but she knew the truth of it. She was the mistress of the sea, and she loved no one else.

Ladgarda wiped her hands off on the sheets at the end of the bed and walked out of the room without looking back.



THE GALLOWES

Jove Belle

Gallows swing, you realize, in the moment before the hangman drops the trap door beneath your feet. No matter if you are a spectator or an unfortunate participant, they swing. Wind shakes the hastily built structure, and you swallow the urge to laugh. The good people of Moncliever wouldn't laugh with you, and what good's a joke when no one else gets it? If it had been a Spanish port, the gallows would be permanent, sturdier. Less sway. Instead, you followed her to this devil's den, where the only law was written at the whimsy of whoever is in power at the moment.

Piracy, per se, isn't a hanging offense. Not here, where the King's influence doesn't quite reach, and a hedonistic lord takes full advantage of his surroundings. Acts of piracy committed while the aforementioned lord is out cold, pants around his ankles, and left where his wife would find him and question the lipstick—not her shade—ringing his exposed private parts? Well, that causes a bit of a stir. Revenge hanging seemed an appropriate response to him and, though you didn't like it, you could definitely see his point. Didn't stop you from running to her like a foolish, impetuous child, crying how unfair it is. It's not her fault. She can't resist the temptation of the big prize—especially when failure brings with it the threat of death. And, so, she seduced him, disregarding the heartbreak it brings you when she does. Disregarding the corrupt army he has at his disposal, protecting his treasure.

She's there, next to you on the gallows. Stubborn, fiery, and beautiful, even with a rope around her neck and judgment on her head. She holds her chin high, and you think for a moment that she might spit on the priest as he makes the sign of the cross while offering her last rites. You failed to rescue her, but that doesn't mean she's ready to turn to God for help. She'd rather take her chance with the Devil.

You love her hopelessly. Her wild defiance pulls at you, and so you circle. Never close enough to touch, but unable to break away from her hold. There was a time when she followed after you. Like an eager pup, she'd dog your footsteps, demanding that you teach her how to live on the water. It didn't matter that your life, a pirate's life, is no place for a woman. It's dirty and hungry and, too often, deadly. She would not be deterred.

“Girl, stop nagging and bring me an ale.” You’d barked the order after one too many questions and cringed at the harshness of your voice. She’d been a little slip of a thing. Nothing but skin and bones. No meat on her at all. She looked fragile, and you knew she’d been on the wrong side of far too many beatings in her young life.

But she’d smiled recklessly, beamed, in fact. You’d acknowledged her, and it was the treasure she’d been seeking. “Aye, Captain,” she’d bit off sharply. You weren’t the captain, and she knew it. But you would be one day, and she knew that, too. “An ale for you right away.” She skipped away, forgetting for a moment that she was there to fill a role. Women working in alehouses—even waifish child-women—swung their hips as they walked, smiled seductively as they took your order, and winked when they turned to fetch it from the bar. The allure and promise of sex was a masquerade that never dropped, lest the gold coin drop back into the patron’s purse instead of her own at the end of the night.

She left the alehouse that night, followed you to the ship. You were half asleep when she crawled into bed with you. Her body trembled, but her eyes were alive with excitement. Young enough to be your daughter, except you didn’t have one. Nor did you wish to take a lover that could be mistaken for one.

“Girl, what are you doing?” You pushed her away. Your first instinct was to chase her off. A slap on the bottom and send her on her way like a good little girl, back to her alehouse with drunk pirates and gold coins to be earned. That was no place for a girl. But neither was a ship. She’d be eaten alive before you reached the next port.

She cowered at the end of the bed, her knees pulled to her chest, but her eyes flashed with defiance. She would not be turned away that night. “I want to go with you.”

“No.” You didn’t waste words justifying your answer. She knew all the reasons why it was a bad idea and she was asking to go, anyway.

“I’ll do anything you want. Just take me with you.”

You didn’t like the emphasis she put on “anything.” She was offering more than just scrubbing floors and fixing meals. It was a devil’s proposition. One you could easily refuse. But the next bastard would take her up on it and leave her bloody on the deck for the rest of the crew to enjoy. The thought made your belly clench.

“You’ll need to cut your hair.”

She didn’t hesitate, simply grabbed the short knife she had tucked into the folds of her skirt and started sawing at her long braid. “How short?”

“Boy short.”

She kept her hair short for two years while you taught her the way to live on the open sea. She proved both nimble and swift with a sword—a deadly

combination. That's when she stopped cutting her hair. Instead, she kept it secured with a black bandana. She kept it even from you until you discovered it by accident.

One night you stumbled into your bunk—the captain's quarters by then—drunk and in need of sleep, and found her bathing in what she thought was privacy. It was the arrangement the two of you shared. If the others thought it odd, they didn't complain. You were too quick to shed blood, and she'd, so far, proven your willing companion in that matter. Any sailor wishing to keep his head and heart would leave well enough alone.

"You trying to get yourself killed?"

Her hair hung down her back, wet and clinging to her skin. You remembered how long it'd been since you'd properly held a woman.

"I'd kill any one of those bastards before they even raised a hand. You know it."

"Still no reason to be foolish. You are tempting the gods." Despite the fact that you never wanted to be a parent, you still feel responsible for this girl-cum-pirate-cum-woman.

"I'm careful."

"Not careful enough. What if I'd been someone else?"

"Then you would have hung him from the yardarm for entering your quarters without permission."

You'd done that once, early in your career. That's the kind of legacy that sticks with a person.

"Don't be a fool." At that, you stomped back out. Your heavy black boots clomped against the deck, and your crew scrambled to escape your dark mood.

You forgot about her hair. You'd made your point, and she kept it well hidden. Instead, you focused on her skills. You taught her how to read a map, to trust the stars, and, most importantly, to never trust the water. It lulled a man—or woman—into complacency. As soon as one thought it safe, it would roar up and claim a sacrifice. You didn't believe in Davy Jones, but you'd seen enough men meet their deaths over the side of a ship. She learned quickly, absorbing the lessons with eager precision.

"Never think you're stronger than the sea, boy." You called her boy because you couldn't bring yourself to use the false name she'd chosen. And you didn't know her real one. *Boy* was all you had. "When the sky looks like that, get yourself below."

It was an unrealistic command. Pirates didn't have the luxury of running below like scared children. They stood and braved the worst that mother nature could muster. She refused to yield. "I can't do that."

You were proud and angry at once. She'd learned by watching you. You wouldn't run. You were the one to steer through the storm all others steered

around. It was foolish, and you regretted it when faced with her heavy scrutiny.

“Then tie yourself down.” You wrapped a thick length of rope around her waist and secured the other end to the main mast. If the long pole holding up the main sail went, you were all doomed, anyway. Might as well be dragged to the bottom with the thick timber as left to drift until madness set in from lack of food and water.

She wasn’t happy with your compromise, but you didn’t stay to continue the argument. As was becoming your pattern, you stomped away, leaving her there to stew in her own impudence.

“Throw him over if he unties that rope,” you yelled above the roar of wind. Murmured acknowledgements rippled through the crew. They didn’t understand, but they would obey. Loyalty was hard-earned on a ship and the cost of violating it was even steeper. It remained a standing order for years.

Rather than admit defeat, she scaled the mast and went to work unknottng a snarled line that kept the main sail from lowering. You wanted her down, but couldn’t risk making a further spectacle. Eventually, she’d descended, water crashing over the deck, ship lurching in the waves. When the others were forced to the hold, she’d remained at your side, listening as you yelled instruction. Soon enough, you’d realized, she’d command her own ship. The knowledge it took to ride out a storm would keep her alive that much longer.

You were proud of her that night. She’d been afraid. Hell, you were afraid. For the first time, you considered tying off the wheel and heading below with the rest. But you’d rather be swept out to sea than face your men if you’d done that. And she’d faced it all with you, water dripping down her face, long, dark tendrils of hair snaking down her cheek and neck. The others had noticed, but were too busy to comment.

The storm passed, as they all do, but you remembered the hair and the sidelong glances from the quartermaster.

“Cut it.” You pulled the bandana from her head and threw it on your bunk. “Or I’ll do it for you.”

She reached for her sword, just as you’d expected. You leveled your sidearm at her. She needed to know that you were serious enough to use a hard-to-come-by steel round to convince her. It wasn’t enough to change her mind. She paused slightly, then continued the upward sweep of her hand. Just before her sword cleared her scabbard, you brought the butt of your pistol down against the side of her head. Forget not wasting the bullet, you couldn’t bear the thought of her dying by your hand. You’d officially gone soft—not a good realization for a pirate.

You cut her hair, just to prove you could. She cried, the first time you’d ever seen her do so, as you sheared her dark locks with a straight razor. You

pinned her to the floor face down, sat on her back, and shaved her head bald. No more bandana for her. The next time the crew saw her, she was white-headed, red-eyed, and looking to kill.

She stopped bathing in your quarters after that.

Home, you quickly learned, was at sea for her. She thrived on the water, but wilted on land. At first, she would steal glances at the women in the ports. She'd look at them, then look down at her own clothing, tug at the bandana covering her head. Two or three times of that and she simply stopped coming ashore. Until you forced her.

"Come on, boy. Time to get you off this ship for a few hours."

She'd shaken her head once, firm and hard. The others were watching, and she knew not to force you to issue an order. It would go worse rather than better, as far as she was concerned.

"Won't take no for an answer." You'd shoved her not so gently toward the ladder. "Get a move on."

Still, she'd hung back, walking behind you rather than at your side like she normally did, her eyes focused on the rough planks of the pier.

"Cap'n, you coming with us to The Rusty Kettle?" O'Halleran, a bouncy new member of your crew sniffed about like a puppy. Someone needed to housebreak him.

The offer, while it held no appeal to you, perked her right up. She hadn't been on the ordering side of an alehouse yet and appeared eager to rectify the situation. She met your gaze, a silent question in her eyes. She wouldn't go without you. Her sword wasn't enough to protect her then.

"Sounds good." You nodded and let go your plans for a relaxing night. Perhaps you'd find a willing bar maid and unwind in a different way.

When you arrived at The Rusty Kettle, she sat next to you, close enough to draw attention from others. You shifted to the right, putting a fair amount of space between you and her, and yelled for a round for your men.

"Keep your trousers up, I'll be there in a moment," Shannon, a barmaid who no longer counted youth on her side, shot back with a wink and a swish of her rounded hips. You had spent many a night working your way between her generous thighs and the sight of her warmed you more than the drink she served.

You were not the only one who noticed her. "Keep your eyes in your head, boy." You cuffed her behind her ear, surprised, but not shocked by the open lust on her face.

"Oh, leave the boy alone, Cap'n. It's right time he get to know a woman's charms."

"That's right, he could do much worse than Miss Shannon here."

Your men hollered their encouragement, and you sat back with your ale, one eyebrow cocked. "Well, get to it, boy. You think you've got what she wants?"

You expected her to back down, to shrink into the table and “aw, shucks” her way out of the challenge. Instead she swaggered to the bar, leaned in close to Shannon—your Shannon—and enticed her out of the building. Off they went, leaving you to your ale and your flaming imagination. Next time you pushed her, you’d be sure to invite yourself along for the fun.

She never stayed on the ship while in port again.

You worried about her. How could you not? She was playing at being a dangerous man amongst dangerous men. She needed to be able to kill without mercy and little provocation. Likewise, she needed to be ready, always, to defend against other such short-tempered creatures. She was too small to rely on strength, but she proved ruthless and that was her saving. She wasn’t too proud to kick a man in the balls, too honorable to stab a man while he slept. Blood, so long as it wasn’t hers, flowed freely when she set her mind to it.

The first time you saw her in battle, you fretted, like an old mother hen. You scoffed at your own behavior, but couldn’t hold back your doting concern. As you pulled alongside the small sloop, you wanted to throw her in the brig and lock her down until the prize was taken. But that would deny her right to claim her share of the booty. She worked hard. She deserved her pay. When she drew her sword, you caught yourself before you flinched, but you couldn’t stop the twitch of your eye.

It was an easy victory, and you were pleased. The captain of the smaller ship recognized a losing proposition when faced with one, and when it became apparent that his small band of soldiers was not enough to hold off your band of motley warriors, he raised his white flag without a word. As the gun smoke cleared, you searched her out, unwilling to negotiate with the defeated man until you knew she was safe. Had she been harmed, you would have bound his hands and feet and sent him over the edge.

You found her leaning over a soldier, her knife pressed to his throat, her hand grabbing for the purse tied to his belt.

“You okay, boy?”

The man struggled at the sound of your voice, sure he’d found his freedom in the distraction. She pushed her knife into his skin, carving deep, ear to ear. He gurgled, his hands grasping at his throat, his gold forgotten.

She stood before you, blood and other bits clinging to her clothes and skin, grinning like a fool with her hard-won purse of gold clenched tightly in her fist, her first kill flopping on the ground behind her.

That’s when the tables turned. She no longer sought your counsel. She had tasted the bloody excitement of death and took to it like a child with a fistful of sweets. Her heartless zeal both pleased and frightened you. And because you hadn’t experienced real fear in too many years to count, you were excited. You watched her and felt alive.

Because it wasn’t part of the main stores, but a scalp taken during the heat

of battle, she kept that purse as her own, not tossing it in to be doled out to the crew. You clapped your hand on her shoulder as you crossed the deck toward the other captain. “Well done, boy. Well done.”

Many, many years later, after her first kill, after she took a room with Shannon, after you held her down and shaved her head, and after her hair had grown long again, she still wore that purse. Tied to her belt, jingling with gold, daring any man to try and take it. “Go ahead,” it taunted, “see if you can.” And to make the temptation worse, she’d moved to wearing her hair long, draping it over her shoulders, defying the laws of the sea as she stood on the quarterdeck of her own ship, commanding her own men, you included.

That hair had reappeared in battle. Too long and bloodier than any pirate likes. Battles were meant to be quick, ships to be salvaged, not sunk. But that damned captain wouldn’t yield, convinced his Spanish gold was worth more at the bottom of the ocean than in the hands of damned pirates.

You’d looked up—the sky was dark with smoke and getting darker still with the coming night—and seen her, the moment frozen as she stood, one leg still on deck, the other set on the rail, setting her in motion to leap over. Her sword above her head, crimson with blood and the reflection of the setting sun, her pistol tucked into her belt, next to her swinging purse filled with gold. And her hair. Streaming long and wild, matted with blood. She’d whooped then, her teeth set in a fierce, manic smile that chilled you. She was depraved, and you were thrilled by it. She leaped to the other ship, the first to do so successfully, and your men followed. Spurred on by the devil woman with fire and death in her eyes.

Her bandana—lost in the *mêlée*—never covered her head again. After that, she wore her hair in a long braid. The men joked about taking it as a trophy, but their fear—and respect—kept them from making good on the suggestion.

The next time at port, again at The Rusty Kettle, she wrapped her arm low around Shannon’s waist, whispered in her ear, and led her out with a lusty grin. Her other hand rested on the top of her sword, not ready to draw, but a clear reminder of what she could do if provoked. They left together, two braids swaying across their backs as they walked, Shannon’s hips rolling and lush, hers tight and controlled, just like you’d taught her all those years ago.

If she’d kept it like that, fighting hard to take prizes, both monetary and carnal, you wouldn’t be where you are now, a few seconds away from death at the end of a hangman’s rope. But she could never resist the challenge, no matter how hazardous the field.

When the men first suggested thieving to her, she scoffed. “Why would I sneak around when I can take what I want at the end of my sword?”

But they’d convinced her to try. “It’s fun, boy, really it is.” They still

called her boy, same as you, even after she made it blatantly clear that she was anything but. “You get in, get out, all while they are sleeping like fools, their pretty uniforms useless folded next to their bunks.”

It was a simple job, that one. They dared her to liberate the soldiers’ horses, and in the process, liberate their stores of rum and gunpowder. Where she found a battle exhilarating, she found the stealthier side of pirating fun, like a grown-up game of hide-and-seek. With her first livery raid behind her, giggling like a virgin, she couldn’t wait to try it again. Each time she got a little more daring, a little more reckless. Despite your cautioning, she careened on, like a cart out of control.

“Do you have any last words?” The executioner asks you.

You quirk an eyebrow and mumble against the gag still in your mouth. You don’t want to die, but you refuse to die begging and trembling like a child. If this be the end, then let it be with a modicum of dignity, and a little mocking humor, God willing.

The hangman stomps over, shaking the platform, and yanks the handkerchief out of your teeth. Your wrists are still bound, the trapdoor below your feet rocking with his weighty footsteps, and you are stretched out, raised up on tiptoes to accommodate the height of the noose. They did it like that on purpose—you’d seen it before—to keep you off balance physically, and hopefully mentally. One wrong move and you’ll be tripped up, the noose allowed to do its work without needing the requisite throwing of the lever.

You look over at her, your reason for living the last fifteen or so years. And now, it seems, your reason for dying. Do you have any last words? Do you have any first words? Can you say anything at all that will change the outcome, make you—and her—any less dead at the end of the day? No.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t save you.” You don’t know if you are apologizing for failing in your rescue attempt, or the fact that you took her in and taught her how to be a pirate.

The crowd that has gathered to watch takes in a collective gasp of breath. They can’t believe that you would choose to talk. Pirates never speak when being hanged. It’s not a law, or part of a code, it’s more like a rough and prideful standard set long ago that you all have to live up to now. You chose a life outside the law, and to show remorse or regret would be to show weakness.

She smiles then, a mixture of sorrow and playful little girl. “Don’t be.”

They gasp again. Two notorious, deadly pirates ready to swing are not supposed to share a moment. You give in to the urge to laugh then. You hope it doesn’t sound strained, but can’t be sure since the rope around your neck is tight and cutting into your vocal chords.

She joins you, the sorrow gone from her eyes, leaving you only with the gleeful promise of adventure yet to come.



VALKYRY

Rakelle Valencia

I was born a thrall, a slave, into my father's house, along with my older brother. Though he gave us life, an education, and turned a blind eye as my brother and I later left to go a-viking on the seas, he had yet to give us his name, or my true freedom. I would never forgive him.

My sire was a self-serving swine playing games with others' lives for his own enrichment. And each time I thought of him, I spat on the earth then kissed the tiny rudimentary replica of Odin's hammer that hung on a thong around my neck.

"Valkyry!"

Just as I heard the call, another wooden shield smashed against my own, high enough to allow my heavy broadsword, *The Curse*, to plunge from under the metal-rimmed shield into the chain mail hauberk of the enemy. *The Curse* was sharp enough to push through like a hot knife melting butter, shattering the links and ripping a line of blood and offal from groin to the attacker's sternum.

The warm gore flooded over my hand, wrist, and forearm before I withdrew the weapon. The wet length steamed in the damp chill of the Saxons' coastal air, then cooled. Splatter covered my hide vest, half-length chain mail sleeves, and sweat-stained shirts. My hair flew in the wind, and with my fighting movements, it matted into spiraled tendrils from the blood of battle, giving me that wild lethal look that other Vikings told stories about. It was said that fear at the bloody sight of me struck my enemies ahead of my ferocious attacks. And I was ferocious.

My ill-gotten weapon had earned its name because we had met when its tip was thrust into my side as I brought my heavy shield down on the head of its previous owner in a killing blow. Since then, *The Curse* had brought me luck through many battles, and many prisoners were taken by its blade.

It had been given Odin's blessing when it became a named weapon, and named weapons were sometimes more infamous than their wielders. My brother's weapon was the well-known axe *Slayer*, gifted by his sire when he was ten summers and could barely lift it. No one knew where that name had originated except perhaps Odin himself. For no one who had owned it

previously had ever died in battle, and, therefore, the weapon was handed down from father to son.

“Valkyry!”

It was Bjorn the Berserker, brother of my flesh and blood that called out. He was older than I, and master of our drakkar, *The Bear*. We shared the same sire and were both begat on the same slave bitch stolen in battle, who had never been ransomed because my father had fancied her, though would never take her for marriage. The man had been so besotted by his captive treasure that he would not marry any of the clan women presented to him. Which meant his bastard children would not carry his name unless he claimed them. And, so far, he hadn't. Bjorn, with me always in his shadow, could only choose the trade of fighting and going a-viking to win our lot in life, *if* we were freed from slavery.

Though our sire had not as yet given his name, and doubtful ever would, he did raise my brother in a higher manner than the common slaves' brood. Bjorn was taught sailing and fighting. I was a mere unnoticed shadow, a stick of a little grungy girl, straggling in the wake of my stout brother everywhere he went. I worshipped him, and only he bestowed any individual care or attention on me as a child.

When Bjorn met his sixteenth summer, he was gifted with *The Bear* and freedom—*his* freedom. He assumed that I, his sister, would be a part of his adventures, though our father never mentioned me or took much notice of my growing maturity, or that I had become a skilled fighter. Regardless of my status, I would go a-viking with Bjorn when asked even when I had known I was not a freed slave, and by rights, could not do so.

I hated our sire, but such didn't matter.

The drakkar was an older dragon ship, needing to be scraped and re-caulked before it was seaworthy again. But it was a good vessel: narrow-decked, shallow-drafted, and one hundred feet long with high-curved stem and stern. *The Bear* was outfitted with thirty oars on each side spread over the breadth of thirty-five feet, including a middle aisle. It would hold one hundred and twenty-plus warriors, physically fit from a life of rowing the Viking dragon ships, with stamina left to fight their enemy wherever and whenever met.

The ship had a single mast in the center with a large square, striped sail, which was once red and white, now faded and filthy to pink and tan. Bjorn laughed at that sail, as he found humor in many things, and would not hear of changing it. I worried that the sail itself would keep away the strongest warriors looking to go a-viking and pirate their way to fame and fortune.

It had not.

Edwena was my given name. But my brother called me Valkyry, the singular title for all Viking warrior women. Valkyry was what the other

warriors from *The Bear* called me also, because I had earned it by being as bloodthirsty and merciless in battle as each of them.

“Valkyry!”

I tried desperately to gain footing in the slick blood-spattered grass to join Bjorn as he swung *Slayer*, and split the skull of another Saxon. The enemy was routed and was retreating to the woods as I neared his side.

“Valkyry, the day is won,” he announced in his booming voice, a fiery shine in his ice-blue eyes. Dried blood darkened his blond hair and untrimmed beard. “The spoils of the village are ours, blood of my heart.”

“The spoils of the village belong to you and your bloodthirsty brood, my brother. My sea chest is so full of coin and gold and jewels that I already wear my extra shirt into battle beneath the other. I also own a good sword and fine mail armor. And I have the loyalty oath of my fearless brother. What more could I earn but a brave death in battle to be welcomed in the Halls of Valhalla?”

“Ransom. Slaves. A captive to warm your bed.”

“I do not believe I could woo a man in the way your warriors will be wooing their captives this night,” I retorted.

Bjorn laughed, throwing his head back and resembling the savage bear that adorned the front of our drakkar. “No, I don’t suppose that would be true,” he agreed. “But there is a man willing to bed you. And you know of the warrior I speak. I have seen your heads together. It did not go unnoticed that his sea chest was moved next to yours at the oars.” His smile widened, if that could have been possible. Bright teeth gleamed through the gory mess on his face. “I would give my blessing.” He paused, repeatedly tapping his weapon’s massive head on the soiled grass. “What of Ivor? He is a free man. His clan is in favor with our father’s. And he would pay a bride price or exact no dowry. He wants you.”

Wiping the blood and muck from *The Curse* on a fallen enemy’s surcoat, I said, “I will be with *The Bear*. We leave on the morning tide?”

“Yes. What say you of Ivor?”

I turned to go, sheathing my sword and ignoring my brother’s matchmaking. I might one day give myself fully to passion, but another man would never own me again. “He would buy my slavery so that I would just change masters?”

“Nay.”

“What, then?” This wasn’t what I wanted to speak about on a battlefield. It wasn’t what I would speak of at all. “I will not be owned by another again.”

“No, Valkyry, you will not.” His voice had softened, and only I would hear him. “You are worth two of any of these warriors. Even as a child you fought with the ferocity of a she-cat.” He reached beneath his coat to his upper arm.

With a jerking motion, Bjorn brought forth an arm ring of twisted gold, bronze, and silver. "Take this and remember this day."

I looked at him incredulously as he shoved his most ornate treasure at me. It was still warm to the touch.

"Have good care of my ship. We leave on the morrow for home. Make sure the bear head is removed from the stem and stored. We wouldn't wish to scare off the good spirits of our homeland." Bjorn looked toward the village atop the grassy knoll. "On the morrow, then."

"On the morrow." And we parted in opposite directions to the whooping of Viking terror looting the distant village.

Bjorn called back, "Perhaps I will find a suitor more to your *eyes* in the Saxon village." He laughed at his own jest then hurried up the hill with the straggling warriors.

After making the rounds and stowing gear, I collapsed on the beach where *The Bear* had been run aground. As I leaned against the hull, I unsheathed *The Curse*, rubbed it down with sand, took an oilcloth to it, then honed its twin edges with a whetstone. I hummed contentedly as the moon rose to throw shards of light that glinted off my newly cleaned weapon.

Placing *The Curse* across my lap, I fantasized as I had in young girlhood, where my blood-father would take special pride in his warrior daughter and award the freedom and standing that he had given my beloved brother. I chided myself silently. The pain of my own father's dismissal ran deep. My eyes burned and moistened with tears I would not shed because hate would hold them back. There was no need for the simple dreams of little girls when I had battles, glory, and loyal brethren of the sea.

Ivor approached. His body slumped with exhaustion, but he was recently washed. "May I sit?"

I shrugged. He was the one man I could imagine giving myself to. Ivor was white-blond with a massive breadth of shoulder, powerful, exposed arms, and a heavily muscled torso, which dropped to a smaller waist and long, agile, legs. And he wanted me. I knew this. We had stolen kisses on several occasions. Yet he had never made any forceful advances.

He dropped cross-legged into the sand. "You're not going to the village?"

I inspected *The Curse* for chinks in her cutting edges, expecting none. "No."

"No, I don't suppose you would." He scooped a handful of soft sand with his large, calloused palm and watched it slip through his fingers. "Perhaps I will stay here."

"No. Go. My brother feels there will be much excitement and plenty of riches to be found."

"I already have most everything I want. I only lack for a woman."

"Then quickly. Go. Before all of the comely lasses are taken."

“There is only one I wish to bed.”

“Then perhaps you will find a trinket or bauble to woo her with.”

“If you think so.” Ivor rose in one smooth motion, knowing he had been dismissed, and stared down at the top of my head as I desperately feigned checking and re-checking my blade for flaws. He leaned over to kiss my hair, and my heart ached to have him stay with me. *Ivor the Brave. Ivor the Beautiful. Ivor.* But it could never be. I wanted to be free. I would never let another man own me.

He left quietly. I leaned against the hull of *The Bear* and let my moist eyes slowly drift closed as I stared, unseeing, at the stars twinkling in the clear blue-black sky.

A sudden commotion woke me from sleep. *The Curse* was heavy and battle-ready across my lap. I leapt to my feet in an instant as the clash of metal rent the air.

Vikings rushed from the village, down the stained and littered grassy slope toward the dunes at breakneck speed, turning only when a mounted attacker was directly upon them. No man was a match for a mounted soldier. Some of the Vikings strove to drive their weapons into the chests or necks of the horses, while others dropped to roll, hacking at legs.

I had no time to wonder where the horses had come from, or where this new enemy had been hiding. Running forward, I forgot my shield that was hung back up on the side of the ship.

A dozen others, assigned to the night watch on *The Bear*, rallied to form a rough skirmish line in the face of the horses. As the routed Viking pirates returned through our line and turned back into it, the fight began to gain ground on the horse soldiers as one after another, riders were knocked from their steeds or went down when injuries to their mounts sent the animals skidding to the wet earth.

I slammed the flat side of my blade into the head of one horse then swiveled to strike the rider of another with a sharpened edge. Both riders fell. I killed them quickly with a jab through the throat and a slash across the neck.

Leaping upon the next rider, we went over the horse together. I landed on top of my enemy, taking the wind out of him with my elbow. I scrambled to my feet and separated his head from his shoulders in one fierce blow.

“Bjorn!” I hollered into the darkened night. “Bjorn!”

The last of the horse soldiers was down and dead. The wounded animals flailed in pain on the blood-slicked turf. They screamed their anguish in high pitches. Vikings went through and dispatched each quickly. Finally, the night air was quiet.

“Bjorn!” I wailed, starting to shiver as the adrenaline left my veins. The damp gore penetrated my clothes and no longer steamed from my quickly cooling body.

“Bjorn.” Hot tears marked lines in the blood and mud covering my cheeks. He would have surely answered if he could have.

“Valkyry!” But it wasn’t Bjorn’s voice that hailed me. Ivor waved me over to where Viking warriors were encircled solemnly around someone on the ground.

“No,” I said as I shook my head and became rooted in place. “No.”

Ivor and Aethelfel, a young warmonger from my father’s cousin’s house, approached me.

“Hilde,” Ivor said soothingly into my hair as one large hand took my sword while his arm wrapped around me for a moment of comfort. He had always called me the more familiar name for the Valkarie. Even Bjorn had known that Ivor was more than just a brother of *The Bear* to me. Ivor had asked my brother’s permission to have me, if I would let him. And his serious intentions were a clear warning to all others. “Hilde, he wishes to speak to you.” His rich, deep voice rumbled in my ear, and his warm, familiar moist lips pressed against my forehead.

“No.”

The two big Viking warriors each took an arm to respectfully help me move toward my brother.

He was dirt-covered, and blood had sopped into his heavy bear hair-coat. A horse’s hoof had caught him in the chest with a crushing misstep and now his lips were wet with seeping blood and his breath was ragged.

“Bjorn.” I knelt at his side, taking his fist into my soiled hands and kissing each of his knuckles. “Brother. Don’t do this. What am I without you? Do not leave me.”

“Valkyry, I wish to go home.” He coughed and sucked great gulps of air into his rattling lungs. “Take me home on *The Bear* and then she is yours.” His speech was difficult. Words warred with the need for breath. “Leave any of these sons of whores on this forsaken coast who will not swear fealty here and now to you.” Bjorn rolled slightly to his side as his coughing brought up clots of darkened blood. “I will hear their oaths and take them to the Halls where their loyalties will be weighed before their admittance upon death.” He struggled for his final threat in order to assure me their allegiance. But it wasn’t necessary.

Each man went down willingly on one knee in front of me, in turn reciting the oath of fealty they owed the master of a fighting drakkar. I nodded to each in acceptance as I squeezed the fist of my dying brother, tears still streaming down my face.

“It is done. I hold each man to the oath they gave my sister until she releases you.” His raspy breathing mixed with every word, forcing seepage onto his lips. “Or until your death.” The last words were a clogged whisper.

The men of *The Bear* took up a chant of “Valkyry, Valkyry, Valkyry,” in honor of Bjorn the Berserker.

“I would also wish you and Ivor a happy union. Do not make him wait any longer. He will go his own way if you do.” With a strangled laugh and a smile on his lips he stared into my tear-swollen face as he passed from this world to the next.

“No!” I screamed as if my heart had been wrenched from me. “No. Bjorn? Please, no.” Sitting on the ground next to his body, I beat my fists on his chest until I was exhausted and placed my cheek on his encrusted coat. “You have been a big brother to a foolish girl, a caring father in my loneliness and hate, and my true friend always. You cannot leave me.”

Sleep would not come to me. I continued to mumble my fears to my brother’s body as my tears streamed in earnest. “Who will protect me now? Our sire will not let me keep *The Bear*. How will I escape his slavery again without you?” My sorrow was so vast that I thought my pounding heart would explode. I stayed with Bjorn throughout the night, until men from the drakkar came to collect his body for the voyage home.

Ninety-three Vikings fit to sail, and the corpse of Bjorn the Berserker, floated out on the morning’s high tide. The men struck the sail to help pull us out of the tiny inlet into deeper waters, where oarsmen would move the boat more quickly over the calm sea. They’d bring Bjorn back to his father’s holdings to be celebrated and sent to Valhalla by the rights of his hard-won warrior’s standing.

Without my brother alive, my father would take notice of me. I was sure that the wretched man would reclaim me as a slave for his estates, sell me, or marry me off if there were profit to be had. After all, the pig had played Bjorn correctly. Bjorn knew that his son hungered for legitimacy, so he gave his sire one-fifth of our plunder as tribute, hoping . . . always hoping . . .

As the drakkar was once again run aground and secured, the warriors left their shields aligning the sides of the craft in honor of the fallen Bjorn. His body, laid out on flat boards, was hefted over the side to the hands of his Viking brethren.

For me, the journey to our homeland had been quiet with the troubled memories of comrades lost and personal battles yet to fight. Even the sea seemed subdued. But now there would be feasting and celebration to send Bjorn the Berserker to the Halls of Valhalla on a floating, burning pyre, to be accepted with the honors as a warrior fallen in battle and a true worshipper of Odin.

Our father and several of the house Karls from his estates had met *The Bear* on the beach, no doubt to collect their tribute, where instead they were shocked with the news of Bjorn’s passing.

Immediately, slaves were summoned, and the feasting tables were erected in the sand under a sail used as a tent. Fine dishes of fish and meat were

prepared. Wine kegs were rolled from earthen storage cellars, and a funeral pyre was swiftly lashed together then lined with clean straw.

Women slaves washed and dressed Bjorn's body while I, feeling ghostly unseen, gathered his weapons and the valuables he would need for his journey into the afterlife.

He was laid out in his finest clothes, cushioned in a thick bed of straw, his hands crossed on his chest, grasping *Slayer*. Two golden coins from his sea chest were placed over his eyes, and his upper arms were adorned with rings of many types of metal. He was also given a small keg of wine from his birth father, along with a jeweled dagger to present as a gift to Odin. I had argued against killing a slave to send with him as his servant in the after world, saying that he would be too busy fighting and carousing. This brought a chuckle and much agreement from his warriors, which was the only way my wishes were heard.

A small fire set in a stone ring attracted more than just one of the ship's archers. Many of the men drank the dark, bitter wine or cloudy ale to Bjorn's memory, then made an offering into the fire for his safe journey.

His pyre was shoved past the breakers at dusk by six of his own hefty warriors from *The Bear*. As they backed away and the sea took over, a lone archer dipped his pitch-tipped arrow into the fire and shot upward, in an arc that would land to set the straw ablaze.

The men returned to the feast, drank until drunk, and swapped stories of Bjorn's feats, always mentioning me, his blood-sister, by his side.

Shamed, our birth father rose to make a speech granting Bjorn the legitimacy in death that the big Viking had longed for in life. Bjorn would now have a family name. But his fighting brethren were not won over. They knew him as Bjorn the Berserker. And I, his sister, was Valkyry, the new master of *The Bear*.

Drunk, disgruntled Viking warriors of battle experience were fearsome. And to change the threatening tone of the feast, Bjorn's sire stood, with cup raised, to welcome his daughter, Edwena, as a legitimate child of his loins and household. Furthermore, he would find me a suitable match from his Karls this very night, though he openly proclaimed me beyond proper marrying age and that he was not assured of my intact maidenhood. He did assure the guests, however, that he could make a match with what dowry was in my sea chest from the spoils of pirating.

Ivor threw down his cup of mead and stood, knocking over an entire long table at the affront. He staggered from the feast in his drunkenness. No man pursued him for his blatant act of rudeness.

I was not impressed, as I would have been as a tiny girl, with my father's newfound interest in me. I passed the word that any man wanting free of his oath could take leave. Those who chose to stay should keep their shields mounted on *The Bear* and prepare to sail with the early morning tide.

Most of the warriors sobered to the plan, quietly slipping away to stow gear and refresh food supplies on *The Bear* from the feast's stores.

As the numbers dwindled, my father played the advantage. "Seize her!" He pointed to me as he commanded several of his own warriors into action. "Put her in the longhouse. The women will have much preparation overnight if I intend to have Edwena wed in the morn."

The deed was easily done, as the crew of *The Bear* had disappeared or was too much in their ale to have been of any use to me. I stoically walked to the longhouse with courage I did not feel.

My father haggled at the other end of the longhouse with several old men who had seen their wives long dead, most of them from childbearing. I could not envision these toothless, stinking fools commanding me to their beds. Nor their attempts to arouse their flagging swords and hump their shriveled pods into my bodily sheath. The thoughts disgusted me.

Ivor.

I paced as women attempted to brush out my hair. Their hands were everywhere at once, shucking me from my warrior's clothes as I slapped at them to no avail. They were strong, and frightened in not accomplishing what their master had commanded of them—to make me look like a proper woman for my wedding tomorrow.

Ivor.

When the drakkar shoved out to sea before the pink of the sky glistened off of the waters, there was a full complement of over one hundred and twenty seasoned Vikings. Personal sea chests were aligned at the oars, and the stolen stores were secured in barrels along the middle aisle. The women gossiped about the big blond as he slid off of the beach at high tide and struck oars.

Ivor was in command of *The Bear*. I was betrayed.

Ivor.

The house thralls took advantage of my listless mood to shove a dress over my head, slip tiny leather shoes onto my feet, and braid flowers into my hair.

The longhouse had settled quietly, with guards at the only entrance. But I could not rest. The smoke hung thick in the air and mingled with the heavy stench of unwashed bodies and obnoxious sounds of snoring, or grunting as some men took maidens under hides or in darkened corners.

The solid ground beneath my feet was uncomfortable as I longed for the rolling aisle of the drakkar. My drakkar.

Then there was a scraping sound low in the earthen wall of the longhouse, where I had been cornered. I jumped as a ghostly white hand punched through near the floor. *Ivor!* Tears once again wet my face. I began to help dig in earnest, breaking my nails and scraping my fingers raw, until I could squirm through the hole in the wattle-and-daub.

I desperately dragged my body through the too-small opening, snagging my dress and slowing my progress down. Muted shouts came from inside. Rough hands gripped tightly to my legs, though I wasn't to be yanked back into the longhouse.

The running, stomping feet of my father's guards were heard emerging from the doorway to the sound of healthy clunks in the dark. Then their bodies collapsed with a thud.

"Ivor!"

"They were not harmed. Though they will have headaches when they wake." He had my hands in his grasp now, pulling steadily. I felt like I might be ripped into two by the opposing forces.

"I don't give a rat's shit about my father's guards. Someone has hold of my legs."

Ivor whistled and flipped his chin in the direction of the entrance to the longhouse. The sounds were muffled, but there was definitely a struggle indoors. Then all was quiet, and my legs were let go.

I scrambled the rest of the way and emerged into the harried, strong arms of Ivor who placed kisses over my face and neck.

It was difficult to see in the darkness. Clouds covered the moon and stars. Three or four men rounded the back of the longhouse with a struggling captive between them. The man was my father.

"Sea whore!" he spat.

Ivor clouted him across the mouth.

"Your brother could only retain your ownership until he died, or you were settled into a profitable match." My father yanked and squirmed against his bondage. "You're still mine. Your freedom was given tonight so that you could be sold at a higher status to one of my estate's Karls." He sprayed spittle in his vehemence. "You are nothing. Your dead mother was just one bitch I could whelp strong slaves on, regardless of the pretty stories she might have told you." He fought harder against the warriors who held him, but to no avail. "You won't escape me, and when I have you back, you won't be sold into a complacent marriage. You will be emptying my chamber pot in the morning, cleaning cattle dung by day, and I'll give you each and every night to a favored warrior for his pleasures."

Ivor clouted him again, this time hard enough to knock him silent. On his command, *The Bear's* warriors released him, and he fell ungracefully onto the muddied soil, where we left him.

Deep at sea, I laughed with my head thrown back as my brother had, feeling a newfound lightness at heart. Wind whipped my hair away from my face, and the men chanted my name as the sun hit its zenith. "Valkyry, Valkyry, Valkyry."

Those who had not already done so made their fealty oaths down upon

one knee. I tossed the lid of my brother's sea chest open and began handing out his hoard according to each warrior's standing.

As the sun rose above the water, I stood near the tiller fingering the ornate twisted metal armband. *Take this and remember this day.*

I remembered. I would always remember.

"Valkyry, look yonder. A drakkar follows." Ivor stood as second in command.

"Ship oars. Ready your weapons. Mount the bear's head on the stem," I commanded. "Can anyone see who follows?"

"I believe it's *The Snake*."

One of my father's longboats. "Listen. There is but one ship to bring us to heel." I waited for their raucous outburst to die before continuing. "We will flounder in the sea until it is alongside. Then we will show them how *The Bear* has won much plunder." I let this sink in, as many of the more recent warriors to *The Bear* would not want to engage friends or relations. "Are you with me?"

"Valkyry! Valkyry! Valkyry!"

The longboat bobbed in the sea swells. My men crouched low behind the colorful shields that hung on the sides. Archers readied their bows, while others peered through the line of shields to call the distance and speed of the approaching vessel.

Long hair flying loose in the wind, I stood at the stern so there would be no mistake of whose longship *The Snake* was attacking. At first, I thought they might come alongside to deliver a message of bargaining from my father. But their attack speed was a clear message about the insult he felt because of my escape in the dawn with men and food. I was sure his humiliation especially angered him because he had finally given his name to his bastards and offered to make a marriage match for his newly named daughter, freeing me from thralldom, raising my status greatly, and welcoming me to his house.

But the gesture was all too late. I was a Viking warrior, a pirate of the seas and rivers. I now knew that I owed nothing to any living man. I had never asked for anything. Bjorn had been the only one in my life that I felt blood loyalty toward. And he was gone.

I pulled a sharp, ornate dagger from my belt, and played my thumb carefully along its blade. My brother had taken this weapon from a Saxon or Celt. I was not sure. But the workmanship was not as rudimentary, nor as rugged, as our Norse metalcraft. Fondling the dagger lovingly, I stared at the oncoming drakkar.

There would be blood today. I glanced at the high sun, then the calm sea. It was a good day to meet Odin and feast in his halls. Not one Viking would lack for courage and ferocity with such a reward promised at the end of this life's journey.

“Archers ready.” The bowstrings pulled back to straining tautness. Each of the goose-fletched shafts rested straight between the bent wood and the waxed string as the archers held firm. “Aim.” Whisperings marked distances and speed with which the squatting archers would calculate their shots.

“Loose!” The arrows whistled through the still air, momentarily hung silent at their apex, then plummeted down, gaining speed in their descent to land with muted thuds that meant they had pierced flesh or wood.

A roar from *The Bear* followed. Men leaned over the side to bang their broadaxes, broadswords, or bare fists against their shields. The battle frenzy swept the length and breadth of the ship. Seasoned fighting men, with no fear, were ready to leap the span between the two vessels in order to meet the enemy—some of whom may have just this past evening been friends or family.

“Steady! Archer, fire the sail.” With that, one single shot landed squarely in the middle of *The Snake*, flames fanning out to lick the cloth with heated tongues that sent up black smoke.

The Snake struck its oars as best it could and retreated.

Throughout *The Bear* the battle frenzy continued. I once again heard the chanting of my name. The warriors wanted to pursue the damaged hoard. They thirsted for blood as they slayed their enemies. But I knew what regret they’d have when they looked into familiar faces as they cut the life from those bodies.

“Strike oars,” I commanded. “Put your backs into it with all of that fury you have.” I was careful to watch. In their state, they could mutiny. In their bloodlust, they could turn the drakkar and ram *The Snake*. “We have Saxons and Celts to plunder. The sport of men, not brother killing brother.”

I made my way to the stem and placed my palm on the carved head of the bear. I was surprised to feel warmth radiating from the wooden likeness. Closing my eyes, I sniffed the wind. My face was slapped with the chill of salty spray as the ship cut through one swell of the sea, then the next. Ivor stood beside me on the rolling stem, his palm on the middle of my back.

I had truly won my freedom this day. But now I was a Viking with no house, and no home port. My family would be those warriors that owed their fealty. My home would be *The Bear*. And the sea would be the one who welcomed me back after each raid or battle. I was a true pirate now. Landless, lawless, and constantly on the move.

I smiled into the wind, and my hair streamed out behind me in the cool breeze, glistening with the wetness of sea spray. I threw my head back and laughed.

I was free.



LOST TREASURE

R. G. Emanuelle

Rianne Cotter slowly walked down the aisle of the darkened church, looking warily from one side to the other. The faint scent of incense and a light smoky haze from burned-out votive candles hung in the air.

They've been here. The smell of their filthy bodies rose up as she stirred the air with her own. They had knocked over a statue of the Virgin Mary, and as Rianne approached the altar, she looked over at the right-hand wall. The collection basket for the poor was empty. *Scoundrels.*

Rianne had known that her crew would come into the church looking for her, even though it was one of the few structures on Hispaniola where she could hide. Fortunately, she knew how her men thought, knew what each of them would do before *he* did. They would go to the church first. So, she had run into the jungle first and then backtracked to the holy house, buying herself a little time. But not much. The men would come back, and she needed to plan quickly or she would die.

Weariness gnawed at her bones. *How did this happen?* Thoughts of the last few days—how she had lost control of her ship—flitted through her head. Mutiny is always a possibility on a pirate ship, but Rianne had been so careful about keeping her crew happy. That had changed, a mere three days ago. But it seemed a lifetime.

She slumped in the front pew and looked up at the large wooden cross nailed to the wall behind the altar. *Damn this chalice . . .* she reached into her sack and pulled it out. The bane of her existence now. *What is it about this cup?* She turned it over in her hands, remembering.



Rianne looked down from the crow's nest of the *Queen's Wrath* and surveyed the deck. She went up there often to enjoy the view and watch her crew. "No one looks to the sky, Bowly," she'd once told her quartermaster. "Most likely because they're afraid to meet God's eyes." Besides, up here, she was truly alone.

She sported a kerchief on her head, drenched with perspiration. *Hot today.*

She took it off and let it cool in the breeze. She turned her head and saw a dot on the horizon. A sail.

“Captain!” Bowly was standing at the foot of the mast, looking up at her.

“I see it.” Rianne quickly climbed down from the crow’s nest and grabbed the spyglass from Bowly’s hand and positioned it to her eye. A two-masted brigantine. After a moment, she grinned.

“The *Esmeralda*, Bowly. Here’s another chance at her.” They’d attempted an attack on the merchant ship before, but the sudden becalming of the wind kept them from approaching, and enough distance came between them that the seizure of the *Esmeralda* was a lost cause. But here she was again, and Rianne wasn’t going to lose her a second time.

Bowly took the spyglass. “Looks like her.” He handed the glass back. “She looked rich last time we saw her. Probably rich still.”

“Merchant vessels always are.”

She peered through the spyglass again, then lowered it. “Bowly,” she said, not taking her eyes off the horizon. “Prepare the crew.”

“Aye, Captain.” He barked out orders to the crew on deck and disappeared below.

Rianne could hear him still shouting orders. The call for attack always got her heart pounding and her skin tingling, no matter how many ships they’d plundered. Each one brought something new—a new fight, a new weapon, a new treasure, a new kind of food or fabric or ware she’d never seen, and occasionally, a pretty face. She smiled. More pretty than a pirate like her could ever be. Not in men’s clothing. And no perfume here. She wore the scents of the sea and the wind, of ships and exotic ports. She had not even a proper woman’s hair, all pinned up and shiny. No, Rianne kept hers long, just past her shoulders, tied back and made unruly by the salt air. In spite of all this, she never lacked attention from both sexes, though in many cases, the thrill of victory and plunder was as good as any romp.

Bowly returned to the deck. “The men are assembling.”

“Good. I have a feeling this ship will yield some fine things for us.” An intuition, a thought—she just knew there was something valuable on the *Esmeralda*, and that she was meant to take it. Providence had seen to it that they crossed paths twice in a matter of a few months.

The crew converged on deck and began preparing the cannons and their own weapons. As the *Queen’s Wrath* approached its target, the bosun lifted the ship’s flag, a blood-red piece of canvas graced with a white painted sword. Rianne had used her own blood to dye it. As if reading her mind, Bowly stood next to her looking up at the flag.

“I remember the day ya cut open yer own hand for it,” he said with a hint of awe.

"It hurt like hell." She shot him a look of warning. Captain Rianne Cotter admitting pain? Only Bowly was trusted with that bit of information.

"Ya paid yer dues, though, doing that."

The action had earned her respect. She'd killed, maimed, plundered. But when she'd sliced her hand open, sat down on the deck, and squeezed her hand so that her blood dripped into the bucket of paint, her crew watched in awe. That was good—Rianne needed their fear, as well as loyalty.

The flag unfurled and the crew ready for battle, Rianne strode to the gunwale and positioned herself for attack, legs braced and lips curled in derision.

The *Queen's Wrath* broadsided the *Esmeralda*, and Rianne shifted her weight to help absorb the impact. She smiled as she surveyed her quarry. *This should be easy.*

"The chase has six puny guns, and it looks like a small crew, Captain."

Bowly's assessment of the *Esmeralda* confirmed her own. They had no chance against her and her crew. While the brigantine held fewer cannons and was, therefore, a swifter ship and could conceivably outrun her three-masted carrack, the *Queen's Wrath* had twelve cannons and eighty men and would overtake her easily. But the *Esmeralda's* fool crew decided to fight. They blasted a round shot at the *Queen's Wrath* and followed it with fire from personal weaponry.

"Grapeshot!" Rianne ordered, and pellets ripped the Spanish ship's masts to shreds. The *Esmeralda's* crew scrambled for cover as Rianne's master gunner shot a cannonball, hitting the mainmast square and sending it plummeting onto the deck with a mighty crack.

"Grappling hooks!" Rianne shouted. Several crewmen obeyed, tossing hooks over the *Esmeralda's* gunwales, pulling, and grunting. Within moments, the two ships were but a few feet apart. "Stink pot!" she commanded, and one of the men lit the fuse.

"Stink pot!" the sailor repeated in warning, and he gave the bomb a mighty heave to the *Esmeralda's* deck, where it sent up a billow of smoke, obscuring much of it.

Rianne waved her cutlass overhead. "Now it's time for some fun. Board!" She followed Bowly, leaping onto the *Esmeralda's* deck, her cutlass in her right hand, her flintlock in her left, and landed squarely on both feet.

A man roared in anger to her right, and Rianne whirled, prepared for his attack. She brought her cutlass up and warded off his dagger, aimed at her throat. He was big and broad, but soft through the middle. Probably lazy and weak where drink was concerned, Rianne guessed. He lunged and she shot him between the eyes. He stumbled back onto several men, halting their approach, which gave Rianne an opportunity to engage them before

they recovered their footing. She dropped the gun and grabbed a second, hanging from a sling on her hip. She fired with her left hand and slashed with her right, her cutlass ripping across a sailor's neck, sending blood through the space between them.

She awaited the next man, who dropped his weapon and backed away. "No more takers?" She raised her cutlass again. The remaining crew of the *Esmeralda* dropped their weapons as well. "Very well. We'll relieve you of your cargo. One wrong move and I'll take a hand." She scowled and motioned Bowly to the *Esmeralda's* hold. Good. Only five of her crew lost, and they'd routed a goodly-sized ship. Plus, the remaining crew would carry tales of her ruthlessness to the next port. All in all, a good day.



Rianne's crew loaded their hull with the *Esmeralda's* trade goods. Bowly would divvy it up after the damage to the *Queen's Wrath* was repaired. They set sail at dawn.

That afternoon, Bowly set to divvying. "Ahoy, scurvies! If ye be wanting yer drink, come and get it." All crew who were not on duty hurried to the deck to get a bottle of rum confiscated from the *Esmeralda*.

Rianne watched from the poop deck, content. The men looked happy, and this ensured her place as captain. Bowly moved from pile to pile, grabbing items and tossing them to the crew as he saw fit. He put piles aside for the few who could not leave their posts, and everyone received a fair share. Rianne knew one of those piles was for her, which she'd claim later. It would be no bigger than anyone else's. The only liberty she took as captain was private quarters.

The breeze was cool, and Rianne turned her face up to catch it, hoping it would dry the sweat coating her forehead. She returned her gaze to the deck below and something on the top of one of the piles glinted, catching her eye. Curious, she descended to the deck to see what it was.

She made her way past the crew members milling around the loot to the chest that contained the glinting object. She heard nothing around her as she approached it, focusing on the object. Then she stopped. It was a chalice. Just a plain pewter cup, unadorned but for a carving of a bird whose wings wrapped around it, tips meeting on the other side. But she recognized it instantly, and her chest tightened. Rianne scooped it up and turned and walked away, her eyes never leaving the object in her hands.

"Captain, I haven't decided who be getting that cup," Bowly said. But she ignored him. Muttering from crew members followed her until she reached her cabin and shut the door. She sat on her bed and examined the chalice, as if she could divine an explanation as to why this piece had called to her. A knock on the door broke her reverie.

“Captain?” Bowly always knocked out of respect for her privacy as a woman. He wouldn’t enter until Rianne granted him permission.

“Enter.”

Bowly did so, wearing a worried expression. “What’s goin’ on?”

“What?”

“Begg’in’ pardon, Captain, but that was strange back there. The crew’s abuzz about it.”

“What are you talking about?”

“You grabbed that cup,” he nodded to it, “and ran off with it as if it was the Holy Grail itself.”

Rianne regarded him for a moment. Bowly had been a loyal friend, and she’d trusted him with much. But to tell him what she was feeling at that moment about the chalice . . .

“Ridiculous.” She waved him off and placed the chalice on her bed before getting up and walking to her maps, spread out on a small wooden table, though she had little interest in them at that moment.

Bowly moved to the table. “Rianne, ye don’t seem to understand. The crew’s squirrely about it.”

He had used her first name. A serious matter, then. “It’s just a chalice. *One* chalice.” Even as she uttered the words, she knew the problem. This wasn’t about the chalice. It was about her taking it. She had not waited for her turn, and it wasn’t her place to decide what to take. She’d vowed that to each and every one of her crew when they’d joined up with her. And she’d broken that rule.

Bowly cocked his head. “Rianne.” His voice held both reprimand and concern, a tone she remembered her father taking, so many years ago. “What were ya doing?”

She paused, uncertain what to say. “What if I told you that this chalice belonged to me? I mean, really belonged to me? From my childhood.”

Bowly furrowed his brows. Of course he’d think she was batty. It was ridiculous. How could something from her childhood end up on the *Esmeralda* and then in the hands of her crew?

“I know it sounds like the sun’s burned my noggin, but I tell you that this chalice belongs to me. How and why it found its way back to me, I don’t know. But here it is.” She looked over at the cup on the bed, as if it were going to rise up and do something magical.

“Even if that’s true, you’ll not convince the men of it. They won’t care very much, either.” He ran a hand through his thin gray hair. With his leathery dark skin, he looked older than his forty-three years. Life at sea weathered a body, outwardly and inwardly. Rianne was sure that she looked older than her thirty years.

“Captain, I’m impressing upon you the gravity of this situation. The men

are grumbling.” He took a deep breath and exhaled. “They’ve been talking about how unhappy they are with you.”

Unhappy? “What nonsense is this? I’ve been a good captain. I’ve led successful raids.” She shrugged. “With few exceptions. But did this last one not make up for the others? This was a grand haul,” she said indignantly. “They would turn against me for a damn cup?”

Bowly looked out the porthole for a moment. He turned back to Rianne. “They don’t trust you anymore. Not since we took the *St. Germaine*.”

“The *St. Germaine*? That crumbling heap of a sloop off Madagascar? That was months ago.”

“One of the men saw you take something from the haul before I divvied it. I couldn’t right off, as that squall came up. But the men claim you went down into the hull where we stashed the loot, while they fought the storm.”

Rianne’s mind whirled back six months to when they had taken the French merchantman. She willed herself to remember anything she had taken but could not. She did remember one thing, though.

They had taken the *St. Germaine* easily, with no resistance. It had held slaves in transit to the Colonies, and she offered them passage to Tortuga, taking pity on them. They were given quarter with the rest of the crew on a lower deck, without chains. Perhaps some among the men resented that. One—a woman whose skin was black as charcoal—had come softly knocking on her cabin door one night. *Ahh*.

“I didn’t take anything,” Rianne said.

“What do you mean? The crew says they saw you.”

“Damn it, Bowly.” She glared at him. “I took pity on a slave woman and brought her to fetch her marriage bracelet from the haul. Yes, a moment of weakness. I had to figure out a way of letting her have it without drawing attention. So, I took it from her and put it in my pocket.” Rianne sighed. *Damn my soft heart*. “You hadn’t divvied the loot, so I reckoned no one would know the difference.” Apparently, someone had been watching.

He stared at her, aghast.

“The storm had calmed, and the crew was indulging in rum. It was one bracelet. She’d been ripped from her family and she’d probably never see them again. I know what that’s like.” Severed from friends, family, and homeland. She knew very well what that was like.

He shook his head.

“It was just a damn bracelet.”

“It don’t matter what you say. The crew saw what they saw. Ye’d make matters worse, even, with this tale.”

“What would you have me do? I’ll not come begging for forgiveness from this bunch of mangy sea dogs.” She drew herself up, angry.

“Maybe not. But ye’ll have to convince them they’re wrong, and that’ll be some mighty hard convincing,” he said, sadness in his voice. “It’s the only way to get their respect back.”

“This is madness.” She slammed her fists onto the tabletop. “Very well. In an hour.”

He nodded once and left, shutting the door softly behind him.

That slave woman, Rianne thought. That was why the chalice meant so much to her. The slave woman had wanted her bracelet, a symbol of something she had lost and wanted to find again. Rianne’s guts clenched as she looked out at the sky. She knew where this was headed.

She could see the ship’s flag from her porthole. That was her blood. She’d drawn the sword on it herself, too. Her father had always told her she had an artist’s soul and that she should make a living through pottery or doing needlepoint for fancy ladies’ fabrics. But she had decided what her life would be the day her father brought her and her mother aboard his ship and sailed to Virginia in the Colonies and then back to Jamaica to live. She would be a privateer for England, like he was. One day, he took Rianne back to Virginia, where she was raised by relatives. Away from her mother and Jamaica. She never understood, and her father looked so sad when she’d asked him why she couldn’t go with him. “One day,” he said, “I’ll tell you why you’re living here.” That day never came, and the mystery died with him at sea.

But before he walked away from the little house in Virginia, he handed her a flour sack that held something heavy in it. “Don’t ever let anyone take what’s yours. Use what you’ve got to find your way back home,” he’d said, “and always maintain your dignity.” With those words, he turned and walked away. She stood in the doorway, watching him get smaller as he headed back toward the docks, until her aunt pulled her inside.

Her aunt showed Rianne the little cot in the corner of the kitchen, where she would sleep. The tiny house had two sleeping rooms, one for her aunt and uncle and one for her three cousins. That room was overcrowded as it was. “This way,” her aunt told her, “you’ll be warm at night.” Rianne put her bag next to the cot and stared at the rough-hewn wooden floor. She pulled the flour sack to her feet and began taking things out: her few articles of clothing, a couple of books, and a small sheepskin purse containing a few coins that her father had placed there. Something was weighing down the sack, and it banged into her ankle. She stuck her arm all the way into the bag to retrieve the item. It was a chalice with a bird etched into it. *Where did this come from?* She’d never seen it before. She put it on a little crate that had been set up next to the cot.

One day, the chalice was gone. “I’m sorry,” her aunt had said. “The tax collector was here, and we needed to sell a few things. I wanted to ask you first, but I needed the money right away. I didn’t think you’d miss it.”

Ah, but she did miss it. She'd look at it every night, wondering about its origins and what the little etchings on the bird's wings meant. *Now, I'll never know.*



“Captain.” Bowly’s voice outside her door tore her from her memories. “Enter.”

He did, and Rianne regarded him a moment, then reached for her weapons. With her cutlass in its sheath and her gun in the sash hanging at her waist, she went up to the poop deck. “Ahoy! All hands available on deck,” she called.

Sailors scrambled to gather. Those who lagged behind positioned themselves wherever they could, hanging off the ladders or balanced on the rails. Rianne waited until the jostling settled. Standing with her feet spread apart and her hands on her hips, she surveyed the faces of her crew. Some wore puzzled expressions, no doubt wondering what this was about. But others scrutinized her with narrowed eyes and a hard set to their jaws.

“I’ve heard grumbling,” she stated flatly. “If anyone has anything to say against me, now’s your chance.”

A faint mutter came from the center of the crowd.

“Speak up,” Rianne said.

A pudgy man in ripped trousers and filthy tunic pushed through the crowd. Her least favorite crew member. She should have guessed.

“Ah, Toby Lawrence. What complaint have you?”

“You been stealin’ from us. I seen you.”

“Under what circumstances?” She crossed her arms and glared even harder.

“*St. Germaine*,” he said, pronouncing the word awkwardly through his broken teeth. “Ye went to th’ hold before we’d divvied.”

Rianne thought a moment, choosing her words carefully. She couldn’t tell them what she’d really done. Bowly was right. That would make matters much worse. “Your eyes see what your head tells them to see.”

The crew mumbled amongst themselves for a few moments.

“I know what I saw.” Lawrence turned to face his mates. “She stole from us. Are we going to accept that? And from a woman?”

The mumbling of the crew turned into shouts of “Nay!” Rianne glanced at Bowly, who stood apart from the others. The fear and despair on his face told her all she needed to know. She’d lost this one. Her once-loyal crew was turning on her. Based on what? The word of one filthy, deceitful man. And she couldn’t speak against him. He didn’t know what she’d been doing in the storeroom that day. Though she hated to admit it, under normal circumstances, he would be in the right.

She only had one choice—to appeal to their sense of loyalty. Pirates were

thieves, but they were loyal thieves. “Men, have you ever known me to keep anything from you? Have I not always shared in our spoils equally with each and every one of you?”

There was hesitation in the crowd, but once again, Lawrence spoke. “That we know of,” he said with a smirk.

Heat swept over Rianne’s flesh. This had been brewing for months. She looked at Bowly again. He closed his eyes in resignation.

“If you all believe that I have not been looking out for your best interests, and if you want to overlook all the successful missions I’ve led, then vote me out.” She paused and looked at the faces of her crew, some who’d just signed up with her a few months ago. “But if you want more successful raids, more treasure, stick with me.”

The crew went silent, looking at her and each other. Had she convinced them? She waited another moment, then started to tell them to get back to work when Lawrence spoke again.

“We’d probably get more without you around.”

Rianne looked at him and narrowed her eyes in warning. “What do you mean by that?”

He hoisted himself onto one of the rum barrels from the *Esmeralda*. “You’re taking what’s not rightfully yours.” He turned to face his crewmates. “And theft is punishable, right, mateys?”

The rumbling among the crew increased.

“Now hold on,” Bowly shouted, putting his arms in the air. “Why are ye taking the word of this scummy sea dog over yer own captain?”

Rianne breathed a silent “thank you.”

“You always had a soft spot for the captain.” Lawrence leered at Bowly, and Rianne realized just how determined he was to get rid of her. “Or perhaps a hard spot, eh?”

Bowly reddened and turned to the crew. “Has anyone ever had any complaints about the captain before this?”

No one answered.

“Only means we haven’t caught her,” Lawrence pushed. The crew roared its agreement.

Bowly turned and caught Rianne’s gaze. He’d tried. She was in trouble, and there wasn’t anything he could do about it.

Lawrence addressed the crew then. “Who here wants this wench as captain? Show of hands.”

Only Bowly’s went up. “Who here wants her off the ship?”

Rianne spotted a few loyal sailors who kept their hands down. She would have to remember them for their courage.

“The vote’s been cast,” Lawrence said.

She swallowed her anger, stared hard at him for a second, and waited for

Bowly to escort her to her private quarters so she could prepare for her punishment.

“I’m so sorry, Rianne,” he said.

They set her adrift with two days’ food and water and only her personal belongings. The last face she saw was Bowly’s, filled with regret and sadness. As her small boat drifted out to sea, she knew it wouldn’t be long before they discovered she’d taken the chalice anyway. And a store of gold they’d definitely miss. They would come after her.



Rianne kissed the sand of Hispaniola when her boat washed ashore, and for the first time in her life, she was grateful to find a church. And now, here she hid, uncertain of her next move.

She examined the etchings on the chalice, thinking. Her current state was inevitable. If Lawrence hadn’t seen her come out of the storeroom that day with the bracelet, he would have found some other way to get rid of her. She’d led her crew into successful battles. Lined their pockets with gold, silver, and jewels. Kept them rummed up. And this is how they repaid her? *Mangy sea dogs.*

The chalice felt heavy in her hands. She’d thought about it only fleetingly over the years, for she felt it did no good to dwell on something she’d never get back. Yet, here it was in her hands. Why had Providence seen fit to return it to her?

Rianne turned the chalice around and around, recalling doing the same thing as a child. She traced the bird’s wings with her fingertip, all the way around the chalice, following the strange etchings that she’d puzzled over so long ago. She carried it to the corner of the church where candles of varying lengths burned. In the light they afforded, she examined the etchings again. Something about them . . . *Sweet Jesus.* How had she not noticed this before? The strange scratchings that had baffled her as a child were actually the lines of a map. A crude one, but definitely a map.

“*Use what you’ve got to find your way back home.*” That’s what her father had said. Back home to Virginia? She didn’t need a map to show her how to get there. To Jamaica? She didn’t need a map to that, either.

She moved the cup to better catch the light. The etchings took the form of Jamaica. But it wasn’t a map *to* Jamaica—it was a map *of* Jamaica. A treasure map? She turned the cup over again. What treasure? Whose treasure?

A noise from behind the altar broke her concentration, and she slid into a pew, ducking down and holding her breath. A slight rustling, but nothing like what a group of men would make. Rianne waited a moment then cautiously peered over the pew. A woman knelt at the foot of the cross in prayer. From the plain robe she wore, she was a nun, and Rianne wouldn’t be able to leave until she did.

Rianne hunkered down again, waiting. After a few minutes, she thought she heard the nun leave, so she stood as well, and her heart almost stopped when her eyes met those of the nun, staring right at her.

“Have you come to pray?” the nun asked in heavily accented English.

“No, Sister. I’m seeking refuge,” Rianne said, taking a chance. “There are men who would harm me, should they find me.”

The nun’s eyes widened, and her gaze momentarily lowered to Rianne’s chest, then returned to her face. Rianne had seen this reaction many times before. The nun had thought she was a man, and upon hearing Rianne’s voice looked at her breasts.

But the nun’s eyes did not retain their stunned expression for long. “Who are you running from?”

“My crew. *Former* crew.”

“I see.” The nun turned back toward the altar. “I saw a group of men walking through the town, heading this way. I came inside to pray that they would not harm anyone.” She looked at Rianne. “If it is you they are after, you are in great danger.”

“I have no doubt.” She looked at the chalice. *All this because of a cup.*

The nun stepped closer and looked at the chalice. She paled. Or was it the light from the candles burning for the saints?

“Señorita, are you well?”

“Come with me,” the nun said, walking toward the altar. Rianne hesitated for a second but followed, ensuring that the chalice was stowed in its bag.

The nun opened a door and took Rianne through a tiny rectory and out another door into a field. The church was set apart from the other buildings in the town, a few yards from a forest, and Rianne feared that this would make them visible.

But the nun moved quickly, and they were in the forest just as men’s voices floated toward them along with the dull thunks of church doors thrown violently open. The nun started running, and Rianne kept pace.

“Where are we going?” Rianne asked, her breath burning in her chest.

The nun remained silent as they crested a hill. Below them was a single dock with two small boats tethered to it. They ran to one of the boats. Rianne stopped a few paces next to her companion.

Out of breath, Rianne bent over with her hands on her knees. When she looked down at the boat, she saw blankets, rope, two casks, and a wooden box. “I don’t understand.”

The nun put her hand on Rianne’s arm and pushed her. “We must go. Now.”

“What?” Rianne tried breaking free of the nun’s grip but the small woman moved with determination.

“Hurry.”

Rianne looked back over her shoulder. Certain death awaited her there. In the boat, she had a chance. She gripped her bag and climbed down the rope ladder into the boat then turned to help the nun, who was doing fine on her own.

The nun undid the tether as Rianne rowed out. While Rianne took them out to sea, she watched with interest as the nun checked the provisions without speaking.

“Will you at least tell me your name?” Rianne asked.

“I was Sister Maria Luz,” she said, turning to regard Rianne.

“Was?”

The nun pulled her wimple off and tossed it to the boards underfoot. “Now I am Marcela.”

Rianne raised an eyebrow and continued rowing in silence.



When Rianne woke, the sun was high in the sky. She didn't recall falling asleep and was surprised she didn't wake at dawn, as she usually did. The bones in her back complained as she straightened herself out. Marcela sat slumped on the other side, her legs splayed out on either side of Rianne's. She wanted to let Marcela sleep—*is she still a nun?*—but as Marcela stirred, Rianne was glad. Perhaps she'd get some answers.

“Good morning, Sister.”

Marcela propped herself against the side and winced as she bent her knees a few times. “Marcela,” she stated flatly. “I am no longer a nun.”

Rianne shrugged and gestured at the wooden box. “Is there food in there?”

Before responding, Marcela undid several buttons of her habit then hiked the dress up and pulled it off.

Rianne stared, astonished, at Marcela's brown breeches, close-cut white linen shirt, and long boots. Marcela drew a knife from a sheath tied to her waist and pried open the box. She retrieved some biscuits and cheese, and handed half to Rianne, who took the food, feeling that she ought to be suspicious of a woman who dressed as a man while masquerading as a nun. But first things first.

She ate gratefully while surreptitiously watching Marcela eat. There was a gracefulness about the way she chewed, elegance in the way she pushed the crumbs from her mouth with her fingertips. Very ladylike.

Rianne finished eating and wiped her mouth with her sleeve, aware of the contrast, and picked up the oars. “I'm hoping for Jamaica. I take it that's where you'd like to go, as well.” It wasn't a question.

“That's fine.”

Rianne mentally shrugged, unsure what to make of Marcela. Her

unblemished skin, shiny black hair, and smooth pink lips denoted youth, but the steadiness in her eyes and calmness throughout their escape indicated a maturity beyond that.

“Are you going to tell me who you are?”

“I did. Marcela.”

“What you are doing here?”

“I’m going to Jamaica with you.”

Maddening. “Yes, but why?”

“Does it matter?”

Rianne arched an eyebrow. “No, I suppose it doesn’t.” Marcela was probably one of those women who dreams of running away from a constrained life. Rianne couldn’t blame her. She pulled on the oars and said nothing more.

Marcela had planned well, because they had enough food and water to last the journey. They took turns rowing and, with the help of the navigational instruments Rianne had taken from the *Queen’s Wrath*, on the third day, Rianne spotted land. That evening, they pulled into an inlet, waiting until the fishermen went home for the night before beaching the boat.

Marcela had not offered any information, nor had she asked any questions, and Rianne hadn’t pressed her. No matter. This was their parting. She took her sack from the boat.

“Thank you,” Rianne said, “for your help. I’m indebted to you. If there is anything I can ever do for you, the name is Rianne Cotter.” She turned and started walking up the beach.

“Wait.”

Rianne stopped.

“I’ll go with you.” Marcela joined her.

Rianne smiled. “No. You know nothing about me or what I do.”

“You think I don’t know a pirate when I see one?”

Rianne hesitated. “What makes you think that?”

“A woman, dressed in men’s clothing, chased by a group of angry, scraggly men?”

Rianne eyed her. “*You’re* wearing men’s clothing.”

“I’m not being chased by a horde.”

Rianne hefted her sack, thinking. “No. A woman like you does not belong on a ship.” She started walking again.

“As far as I can see, Captain, you no longer *have* a ship.”

Rianne stopped. Not a naïve young girl after all. “I’m on a mission,” she said defensively.

“It must be important, since you have no ship.”

Rianne removed the chalice from the sack. “There’s something I’m supposed to find. It’s all on here.” She held the cup out. *Why am I telling her this?*

Marcela ran her finger along the etching. “What is it?” Her question was almost like a challenge, a test to see how much Rianne knew.

“I don’t know.”

“You’re looking for something but you don’t know what it is?”

“Yes.”

Marcela looked into Rianne’s eyes. “Very well. Let’s go.”

Rianne frowned. “How did you know to call me ‘Captain’?”

“You were, weren’t you?” Marcela said over her shoulder, her demeanor suggesting that she would speak no more on the subject.

Again, silence accompanied them as they walked into the town. When they were safely ensconced in a room in one of Port Royal’s inns, they devoured the stew from the tavern downstairs. After Rianne had sopped up the last of the juices with her bread, she took out the chalice.

“This is Jamaica,” she said, tracing the outline of the island and the daintily carved “X.”

Marcela took the chalice in her hands and studied it in the light from the oil lamp. “I know where this is.”

“How?” As soon as Rianne uttered the question, she knew Marcela probably wouldn’t answer. She was cloaked in mysteries that Rianne did not have time to solve. “Can you take me?”

“Yes. Tomorrow.”

Rianne regarded Marcela. “Is there something you’re not telling me?”

Marcela chewed the inside of her cheek, then said, “Not many people go to this place. Some say it is haunted.”

“Bah. It’s the way of the sea to make up fantastic stories. To scare people.” She looked into Marcela’s eyes. “You don’t believe it, do you?”

For the first time, Marcela smiled. “No. But even stories have a bit of truth to them. We’re haunted by many things—by the ghosts of regret, mistakes, and sins of the past. And those can be more frightening than spirits from the afterworld.”

Marcela’s speech blew through Rianne’s veins like one of Neptune’s gales in high summer. “Were you really a nun?” Marcela watched Rianne silently. “Why did you leave the Church?”

Marcela rose from the table and moved to the bedside. She pulled the covers back and got in. “Tomorrow, we find your treasure.” And she rolled over.

Rianne sat looking at the figure in bed, frustrated. But what did it matter? *Tomorrow, I find my treasure.* She doused the table lamp and went to bed, too.

The next morning, Rianne followed Marcela through town until they reached the outskirts, where Rianne checked her weapons before they entered the jungle. They traveled without speaking, but moved quickly. Soon, Rianne

was breathing hard from the trek, wondering how Marcela knew the path. Marcela moved stealthily through the trees and vines, and Rianne was about to suggest a rest when the trees ended and Marcela stopped. Rianne took a few steps closer until they were elbow to elbow.

In the clearing beyond stood a hill and at the top of that stood a yellow clapboard house. It was unassuming with its small windows and unadorned frame, but appeared neat and clean. Another house was several yards away from the first, almost identical, but larger. A road meandered away from the houses, linking them with more houses of varying pastel colors, all plain but neatly kept.

“Where are we?” Rianne asked.

“The place on the map.”

Rianne removed the chalice from the sack and looked at it, then again at the houses. “But why would there be a map to *this* place?”

“Come, if you wish to find out.”

They walked up the hill, and a young man came storming out of the larger house, a musket pointed at them. “What do you want?” he demanded in English.

Rianne moved for her pistol, but thought better of it. She’d be shot before she got it out of the sling.

Marcela stepped in front of her. “William, it’s me.” Rianne stared at the back of Marcela’s head, bewildered.

He lowered his gun then looked at Rianne.

“Go inside,” a female voice commanded him, but he hesitated, still staring at Rianne with curious intensity. He turned then and retreated to the house, but not before Rianne noticed something familiar about him. Something in his fair features and sand-colored hair. *What the bloody hell is going on here?*

The woman who had spoken was standing just outside the door. She wore black breeches and a red calico shirt. Her long brown hair, streaked with gray, was tied back into a plait.

Rianne studied the stranger as best she could from a distance of several yards. “Have we met? You seem familiar.”

The woman straightened her back. “We have indeed,” she said, taking a few tentative steps toward Rianne. “I’ve waited for this day for so long.” Hope and wonderment filled her voice. “You’ve come home.”

“What are you talking about?” Who was this? *What’s going on?*

The stranger stopped a few paces from Rianne. “I’m your mother.”

A roaring filled Rianne’s ears, and her gut dropped down as if she’d just been run through with a dagger. She could feel her face burning. “You’re lying,” she said, half-accusing and half-hopeful. She was lying. She had to be.

“Please come inside,” she said, motioning toward the house.

Rianne glanced at Marcela, whose expression remained impassive, but she, too, motioned for Rianne to follow the stranger. They walked up the dirt path to the house, thoughts and memories racing through Rianne's head.

Inside, the house was warm and inviting, though simple. A small fire burned in the fireplace, a pot of stew hanging over it, and the smell reminded Rianne of the salmagundi Cook often made on the *Queen's Wrath*. How she missed the sway of her ship and standing at the gunwale watching the sun come up. How many days had it been? Five? Six? Seven? It might as well have been years.

"Sit down," the woman said.

My mother? It had been twenty years since Rianne had seen her mother, but wouldn't she recognize her own mother? As the woman sat down opposite Rianne and Marcela at the table, Rianne scrutinized every inch of her face. The blue eyes, the brown hair. *It can't be.* "I'm sorry, but it's been a long time. Why should I believe you? You say you're my mother. How do I know this?"

"Use what you've got to find your way back home."

Rianne almost jumped out of the chair. "*What?*"

"That's what your father said to you when he left you at your aunt's." The woman stared right into Rianne's eyes. "And clearly, you did."

Rianne's head swam and her throat dried out. "Gwendolyn." She couldn't bring herself to call her "Mother." Not yet.

Gwendolyn nodded, and tears shone in her eyes.

Rianne choked down the lump in her throat. "Why? Why did you leave me?"

Gwendolyn wiped at her eyes. "Your father and I ran his ship together for years. Yes, your mum was a privateer as well. When I birthed you, I stayed in England until you were old enough to be on the ship with us. Do you remember?"

She did. Bits and pieces, but enough.

"You became ill on the ship, and we went to the Colonies." Gwendolyn cleared her throat and ran her palms across her thighs. "Someone informed on us, and your father and I were to go to trial for crimes at sea. I was with child. So we returned to Jamaica and stayed there."

"With child? But I—"

"Your brother, William." Gwendolyn looked out the window in the direction of the other yellow house. "Your father then took you to Virginia, where you would be safe, and brought me here."

"What is this place?"

Gwendolyn chuckled, then, a rich and deep sound that flooded Rianne with childhood warmth. "You might say it's a colony for old pirates. Everyone who lives here was a pirate—or *privateer*, as some of them like to fancy themselves."

“Why didn’t you come for me?”

“I couldn’t. If I’d been caught and tried, I would have met the rope’s end. Here, I’ve been safe. No one talks about this place. The stories say it’s haunted.”

Rianne put her head in her hands and closed her eyes. *All these years, she’s been right here in Jamaica.*

“Marcela, would you please get us something to drink?” Gwendolyn directed.

Marcela stood, and Rianne looked up. “How do you know her?”

“She was found wandering in town. An orphan. She had been . . . taken advantage of and needed a home.”

Marcela placed three cups on the table and disappeared again behind a wall.

“She was ten,” Gwendolyn said. “Just about your age when I last saw you.” She looked wistfully down at her cup. “I took her in. When she was sixteen, she decided she wanted to become a nun.” She patted Marcela playfully on the rear when the girl returned with a bottle and began filling the cups. Marcela smiled and rolled her eyes, as if to say, “Silly, wasn’t I?”

“I told her that, one day, my daughter, Rianne—her sister—would return to Jamaica and find me.”

Rianne gaped. “But how could you know? That chalice had been lost to me for years. It was by sheer Providence that it was returned to me.”

“And it was sheer Providence that I was counting on to bring you back to me. Or destiny. Or something magical. But I knew that you would find me someday.”

Gwendolyn got up and knelt by Rianne, placing her hands on her knees. “Oh, my child, I longed to see your face and hear your voice. Forgive me for abandoning you, but it seemed I had no choice. I wanted to ensure your safety. It was the only way I knew how.” She rested her forehead on Rianne’s knee.

“I understand. But give me time. There’s a lot to think about.” She carefully moved her knees and stood up. “I must step outside. I’m afraid I’m a bit hot.” She walked out the door and gulped air as if someone had been choking her. *Mother.* She had found her mother.

Marcela joined her.

“When I called you ‘Sister,’” Rianne remarked, “I was speaking the truth.” She smiled. “But how does one just stop being a nun?”

Marcela bent to pick a wildflower growing on the path. “Mother told me that when my sister came, she would need my help. I decided that on that day, I would leave the Church. I’m just glad you came now and not twenty years from now.”

Laughing, Rianne squeezed Marcela’s arm. “I always wanted a sister.”

Marcela plucked the petals of the flower, one by one. "Have sisters ever traveled together on a ship, Captain?"

"You never answered my question," Rianne remarked. "How did you know I became a captain?"

"Mother has received reports on you over the years. We live surrounded by pirates, after all."

Rianne watched the petals as they floated to the ground. "I don't know if sisters have traversed the seas together, but not knowing things seems to be a trait of mine." The last petal landed softly on her boot. "But it has never stopped me." She glanced back at the house. "We shouldn't have any problem finding crewmembers here, I'd wager."

"No, we shouldn't." She took Rianne's hand and pulled her back toward the house. "Welcome home."



THE HANGMAN'S DANCE

Jane Fletcher

The drunken whore threw herself onto the lap of Captain “Grim” Mary Beaumont and missed. She ended up face down on the floor, her dress in sufficient disarray to reveal to all in *The Golden Fleece* that she wore no undergarments beneath—not that anyone would have expected her to. The pale white hubs of her buttocks were twin moons in the candlelight. The whore gave an unconvincing squeal of dismay and tugged her skirt down.

Roars of laughter filled the smoky brothel, but Grim Mary merely smirked as she extended one booted foot and kicked the hem up again, revealing yet more flesh, then inserted her toe into the triangular cleft at the top of the woman's thighs.

The whore gave up any attempt of pretending that she had some modesty to preserve and wiggled her hips and moaned in a pantomime of pleasure. She then heaved herself up on her knees and crawled onto the pirate captain's lap to a chorus of whoops from Grim Mary's crew.

In a dark corner of the room, Corporal John Cooper of the King's Dragoons watched it all with disapproving eyes. The dark corners in *The Golden Fleece* were generally the preserve of those who had the money for a whore, but whose finances did not go as far as a private room upstairs. Yet, despite having a month's pay in his pocket, John Cooper was sitting alone. He hoped it would not make him too conspicuous, but he had no intention of hiring company. On top of any other reason, he knew the dim light and plastered make-up served to conceal the pox sores that scarred the whores' faces.

The risk of disease was clearly of no concern to Grim Mary. She clapped her mouth over the whore's in a forceful kiss, while her free hand burrowed beneath the recently straightened dress. The brazen display of deviance made Cooper's stomach contract in a painful spasm. He tried to look away, but his eyes refused to move. Was no one else concerned by two women cavorting in such an unnatural fashion? It was not as if she was trying to hide—quite the opposite. Grim Mary sat in the middle of the room, under its only lantern.

But, of course, the crew don't care. The words ran through Cooper's mind. *They're all over the whores now, but three days at sea and they'll be hammering*

away at each other's ends again. Men would be men and had their needs. But how could women act in such a fashion? Cooper knew exactly what his father, the vicar, would have to say about it. At the thought, his throat felt suddenly dry, and he took a mouthful of beer, before the irony struck him.

"The devil's brew that turns men into bestial sots, unfit to stand before the Lord" had been one of his father's favourite sermons. Cooper had been raised on tales of the evils of alcohol. Only after enlisting had he drunk his first beer, in an attempt to fit in with his new comrades. He was still a little surprised that its effect had not been quite as dramatic as his father had led him to expect.

"Shameless women who ply the trade of the harlot" was another of his father's favourites. Had his father ever imagined a scene as depraved as that in *The Golden Fleece*? And what would his father make of Grim Mary? Most likely, he would refuse to believe she was a woman and claim her instead as a fiend straight from hell. Plenty of others would agree with the description.

Cooper stared at the pirate captain. She was tall for a woman, with red-gold hair pulled back in a pigtail, in the same fashion as her crew. The lamplight was just strong enough to pick out the blue of her eyes, and the scar running across one cheek. She was dressed in a crimson brocade coat that she had stolen from another captain. If the stories were true, the darker stains on it were the original owner's blood. She wore both the coat and the blood as a trophy and a warning. As if any more proof was needed of her ruthlessness.

Cooper felt his eyes narrow as he remembered other stories of Grim Mary—boatloads of innocent travellers she had forced to walk the plank, if their ship had not delivered sufficient treasure; rivals killed, slowly and gruesomely; ships sunk as sport. Grim Mary was dangerous, a violent thief and a murderer, cruel and remorseless. Even other pirates went in fear of her. How many people had she killed, while her lips held that same rakish grin? For the sake of all those she would yet harm, she should be brought to justice. Although, Cooper would have to admit his main motive was on his own account.

Life in the cramped barracks was proving even more of a challenge than he had expected. The other soldiers were crass and loud, crowding in on him. Every action was noted. Privacy was impossible. Cooper desperately wanted to move into private quarters, even if it was no more than a couple of rooms. Just as long as he could shut the door at night and get away from the continual, "What you doing, John? Let's see." "Why you sleeping in your breeches, John? Ain't you hot enough?" And, most common of all, "Where's your book, John? Read something for us."

The ability to read was what surprised his comrades the most, and really set him apart. It had earned him the position of corporal the day he arrived, and the captain had made it clear he was dithering between that and sergeant.

If only the captain had dithered the other way. Sergeant stripes would get him out of the common barracks.

Cooper sighed. He needed the promotion. Surely, one major achievement would do it for him. Something that would show he was brave and capable, as well as literate. Something like being the one to arrest an infamous pirate. That was why he was disguised in civilian clothes and sitting in the brothel, doing his best to ignore the squalid behaviour around him.

Taking Grim Mary prisoner would not be easy. Pirates did not keep any sort of predictable schedules, and even if Cooper found out where she was going to be, in time to arrange an ambush, it would not help his plans. Grim Mary was always surrounded by her crew, and it would take a squad of soldiers to overcome them. Cooper had to capture Grim Mary single-handedly, to help his chance of promotion.

Grim Mary was currently entertaining herself with the whore in the middle of the room. Yet, at some stage, presumably they would go to a private room, and Grim Mary would not want a half-dozen of her crew with her then. Cooper chewed his lip. Might that be his chance? The risk would be high, and not merely from the pirate.

Reynard, the owner of The Golden Fleece, had a reputation to rival that of Grim Mary herself. Pirates were volatile customers, and Reynard had invested heavily in security to protect his merchandise. People who caused trouble in his brothel ended up floating face down in the harbour. As well as a small army of guards, he was known to have a network of informers, and bribes paid to all the right people. Rumours also spoke of secret escape routes from the brothel. For both staff and clientele, The Golden Fleece was easily the most secure place in town, but where else did Cooper have any hope of overcoming Grim Mary?

Without warning, the bench he was sitting on shook as a whore plonked herself down beside him.

“Hey, handsome, sitting here with the long face. Why don’t you let me cheer you up?” The woman spoke with a marked accent, either Spanish or Portuguese. As far as could be seen in the weak light, she was younger and prettier than most other whores. Ringlets of black hair fell around a sensual, oval face. The normal pancake make-up was missing, which could only mean that she had not yet caught the pox.

Regardless of the woman’s appearance, Cooper shook his head. “I don’t have money to spare. I’m just here to drink.”

“I don’t think you mean that. There are taverns enough in town for those who desire only wine or rum. Come on. Don’t be shy. I know what you really want.”

“What I really want is to be left in peace.”

The whore would not be put off. She snuggled up against Cooper, sliding

one arm around his waist. He tried to shift away, but was hemmed in by a post.

"I've been watching you, handsome. A man like you, yes, I think I could be very good for you. I have a room upstairs."

"No, I assure—"

The whore's hand landed on Cooper's thigh and started to inch up, its goal clear. In panic, Cooper clamped his own hand down, blocking the path.

Still, the whore moved closer. Her lips brushed against Cooper's neck and then nuzzled a line up. She breathed softly into his ear. "I know you're a woman."



Rosa sank onto the filthy straw pallet on the floor of her room and looked up at the nervous woman still standing with her back against the door.

"What's your name?" Rosa asked the question quietly. The walls upstairs in The Golden Fleece were thin.

"John Cooper."

"That wasn't what your parents called you."

"No, but it's what I'm called now."

"Very well then, John Cooper."

The guise of a man suited her, Rosa judged, far better than a feminine appearance would. Some women just looked wrong in a dress. The firm line of John's jaw and cheekbones would be awry if set against long hair. Her square shoulders and narrow hips would make any dress hang off her like a sack. Whereas the loose shirt and breeches? Rosa smiled. Yes, the male attire suited her new acquaintance very well.

"My name is Rosa. The customers here call me Spanish Rosa." Her smile saddened. "And that's not what my parents called me, either. Why don't you sit beside me and we'll talk."

"I'll stay here."

"Then we'll have to talk loudly, and people in the hall might hear."

John jerked away from the door and glanced at it anxiously, as if it were a threat. If nothing else, John knew how to act cute—which was a shame, because right now, cute was not what was needed. John was young, surely not past her teens, and clearly way out of her depth in games of subterfuge. She was also the only help on offer. Rosa just hoped that she would not turn out to be stupid or cowardly. John shuffled two half-steps forward and back, then forward again before dropping down on the pallet. "How did you know I was a woman?"

"Your moustache."

"I don't have a moustache." John raised her finger to her upper lip, as if

needing to confirm that one had not suddenly sprouted there. She really was quite endearingly artless.

“You do. A woman’s moustache. Soft baby hairs.”

John looked confused.

Rosa explained. “For a man to be as clean-faced as you, he would have to shave very closely. There would be no hair left at all. When I got close, I saw the fine hairs in the lamplight and knew.”

“Oh.”

“You should shave even those fine fluffy hairs from your face.”

“Right.” John stared down into her lap, chewing her lip.

“You haven’t been passing as a man for long?” It was a safe deduction.

“No. Only a couple of months. I joined up last—”

“Joined up? You ran away to become a soldier?” *How romantic.*

“Mainly, I ran away. I didn’t have a lot of options about what to do afterwards.”

“Why?”

“My parents wanted me to get married. The man they’d picked, I guess he was all right but—” John shrugged. “Somehow, I didn’t want to.”

No, you wouldn’t. “There was someone else you preferred?”

“No. I guess I haven’t met the right man yet.”

Rosa shook her head. Was John really that clueless? Anyone could see that a man was not what she wanted. “A woman might be more to your liking.”

“No.” John’s denial was immediate and vigorous, but the downturn of her eyes contradicted it. “In my family, we don’t do things like that. My father is a vicar.”

“That makes a difference?” Rosa smiled. “Be honest. I saw you watching Captain Mary. I think you were a little interested in her sport with Christobel.”

“No. It wasn’t that.” John had been ill at ease before. Now, she blushed bright red.

Footsteps sounded in the hall. Rosa gave a series of dramatic gasps and moans until the people had passed. Her performance was explicit enough that John turned even redder than before. Rosa licked her lips. Teasing John was most definitely enjoyable, but there were more important things to discuss.

“I agree. It was not desire I saw in your eyes. I do not think that you wish the pirate captain well.”

John started to speak.

Rosa held up her hand. “No. It is not a safe thing to admit, but I do not wish her well, either. That is why I approached you. I think we have common aims.”

“You’re against her?”

“In truth, I want her dead.”

“Why?”

"Revenge. She murdered my family—my father and my young brother." Rosa turned her head and stared out through the foot-square hole in the wall that served as a window, fighting to hold the memories under control.

"What about your mother?"

"She died when my brother was born. So, there was just the three of us, living in Cadiz. My father ran a warehouse. When I was twelve, he got a new job in the West Indies. We set sail together for a new life, but all we found was death."

"Grim Mary?"

"We were a few days from land, when we were boarded by her. They stole everything and killed every man and boy on the ship. Made them walk the plank."

Rosa scrunched her eyes shut, but she could not block out the memory. "*Rosa. Papá.*" She could still hear the cry from seven-year-old Pedro. The old montage flowed over her. The terror on Pedro's baby-soft face. His hands reaching out to her, pleading for help as he backed away from Grim Mary, who was poking him with the tip of her sword. His last scream when he was forced off the end. Grim Mary's laughter. Her father fighting so desperately that when his turn came he could not stand, so the pirates tossed him over the side. Four of them held his hands and feet, counting "One. Two. Three." As her father swung, he met her eyes, one last time. The horror and regret she saw there—he knew what was in store. With the last male captive dead, the pirates turned to her . . .

"But not you?" John's voice brought her back.

The room swam with unshed tears when Rosa opened her eyes. "No. There were three women on board. If you can count me as a woman at the age of twelve. They did not kill us three. They had other uses. But one woman threw herself overboard when she got the chance, rather than continue to live as the pirates' plaything. And the other got caught in the middle of a drunken brawl and was killed. I think it was an accident. So, I was the only one left when they reached here."

"Did they let you go or did you escape?"

"The ship's quartermaster. The only man on board who had not raped me. I think I reminded him of his own daughter. When we landed, he took me to the church here in town. There's a small convent attached. He left me with the nuns. I don't know if he suffered any reprisal from his fellows for it. I hope not."

"You didn't go back home?"

"I had no home to go to. My family was dead. If I'd gone back to Cadiz, I might have found some distant relatives, but it wasn't certain they'd take me in. I'd have been soiled goods, unfit for marriage. So, I stayed with the nuns for eight years. I thought about joining them. But the life of contemplation is

not for me. I burned for revenge. That's why I became a whore. It's the only way I could get close enough to Grim Mary to put a knife in her heart. After so many years, I was sure neither she nor any of her crew would remember me."

"And she hasn't?"

"No. But I have changed my mind a little."

"You don't want to kill her?"

"I want her dead, but a knife in the heart is too quick. I want her to see death coming. I want her to piss herself with fear as she watches the seconds rush by. And I want her to die like my brother and father, as entertainment for jeering onlookers. I want her to be surrounded by laughter as she breathes her last. I want her to dance with the hangman."

"You want the law to deal with her?"

"Yes. What death is crueller? She will walk to the gallows, knowing she will not walk away. Utterly without hope, without mercy."

"I wasn't thinking in quite those terms, but I was hoping to arrest her." John pursed her lips. "It isn't going to be easy."

"I have a plan. And you can help me."

When they left the room and walked downstairs, the scene of debauchery below was unchanged. On the bottom step, Rosa caught John by the arm and swung her round. Before the surprised woman could react, Rosa wrapped her in a hug and mashed their lips together in an ardent kiss.

Admittedly, it worked well in terms of the overall act, but putting on a show for any watchers was not Rosa's main motive, and she was rewarded by seeing yet another blush sweep over John's face.

"Hey, big boy. You be sure to come back soon. You know how to make a girl feel good."

John's expression of stunned confusion was priceless. She looked like she thought she ought to back away but had forgotten how. Her eyes remained fixed on Rosa's lips as though she had never seen a mouth before. She really was quiet delightfully clueless.



Peaches's lips puckered in a sullen pout that was indistinguishable from her normal "kiss me" pout, except for an extra wrinkle at the corner of her eyes. She watched as the young man left The Golden Fleece, and Rosa homed in on her next mark. The Spanish bitch thought she was so great. She had arrived only a month ago and already she was acting like she was the main draw in the place. Peaches could not see why everyone fell for it. Already, the sailor who Rosa had picked was open-mouthed and drooling. It was not as if she was that pretty.

Peaches's expression changed slowly to a self-satisfied smile. Most changes

happened slowly with her. As with the two years it had taken her to realize that she had not acquired her nickname as a result of her complexion, but because her last name was Plumb. However, this time, she had to be quick. She was supposed to be in her room, practising a special dance routine to entertain a rich client, and Reynard would be angry if he caught her slacking.

Fortunately, Spanish Rosa needed just a few minutes to snare her mark. Once she had escorted him to her room, Peaches sidled over to Grim Mary. Two of the girls were currently vying for the pirate captain's attention with a zeal due mainly to Grim Mary's reputation for generosity. Otherwise, she would not have been the girls' first pick for a mark, a reticence due not to her being a woman—most of the girls rather liked that—but because she was far too quick to turn abusive if her companion was a little slow in guessing exactly what she wanted.

Peaches elbowed one of the girls aside and brought her lips close to Grim Mary's ear. "I know something that you're going to want to hear."

"What?"

"It's private."

"Nice play, but I'm not falling for it. Keep smiling and you'll get your turn after I've finished with these two."

"I'm serious. I've overheard something."

Grim Mary turned her head to look at Peaches. "You better be telling the truth."

Peaches shivered as gooseflesh prickled her skin. She would not like to encounter Grim Mary outside the security of The Golden Fleece. She was sure the abuse would not be limited to harsh words and a slapped face. However, for now, she was safe.

Once she was settled on Grim Mary's lap, Peaches continued whispering. "I've got the room next to Spanish Rosa. I overheard her talking to her last mark."

"Which one?"

"He's just gone. I've not seen him before, but I could point him out when he comes back here."

"What did he say?"

"It wasn't what he said. It was Spanish Rosa. She has a plan to have you nabbed by the law. They're going to set it up that you'll go to her room. He'll be waiting in there for you with a loaded pistol. The pair will cart you out by a secret passage she's discovered."

"Will they, now? I think I'll need to talk to them about it." Grim Mary's lips curled up in a smile, but her clenched teeth spoke of nothing except malice. "And how would you like to be rewarded for this information?"

Peaches did not need to answer the question. Already Grim Mary's hand

was delving under her dress. Without preamble, the hard, calloused fingers thrust into her.



Grim Mary sheltered in the entrance to an alley, with five of her crew in attendance, and studied the scene. The church attached to the convent stood on the quiet side of town. The dusty square in front of it was deserted, except for the row of tired palm trees and a couple of seagulls. Grim Mary glanced back at her crew.

“Wait here and stay out of sight until the bitch turns up. Then don’t let anyone else in.”

“Aye, Cap’n.”

The interior of the church was cool and dim after the sunshine. Grim Mary took a few seconds for her eyes to adjust. The scent of incense hung heavy in the air. Sounds from the harbour were silenced by the thick walls. Her grin widened. No one outside would hear the screams when they started.

One lone priest was in sight, praying before the altar. Grim Mary sauntered down the aisle and tapped the man’s ankle with her foot. “Find somewhere else to pray, Father. Don’t come back for a while and keep your mouth shut. You understand?”

The priest’s eyes widened in terror. Despite the instruction, his jaw also dropped open. No sound came out, which was good enough, but he seemed rooted to the spot, until Grim Mary stamped her foot, impatiently. The priest nodded in a convulsive shudder and fled.

The confessional stood against the wall. Grim Mary settled herself down on the side reserved for the priest and pulled the curtain shut. Now, she had to wait, but she did not mind. It gave her time to plan, in precise detail, just what she was going to do to the slut.

Fear in her victims’ eyes was the sweetest sight Grim Mary knew. Nothing else came close to the feeling of power it gave her. Sex was a bland game in comparison to holding someone’s life in her hand, hearing them beg, hearing them scream.

The Spanish slut was going to beg and scream. Where had the whore got the nerve to think she could bundle Grim Mary up like a package and deliver her into the hands of the law? She would learn better, as she was sliced to pieces, bit by bit. Hunting down the stupid mark and giving him his due would come next. She must remember to get details about the man before she cut the whore’s tongue out. Grim Mary smiled while her fingers traced the pattern on the pommel of her dagger. She would start with the whore’s ears, or maybe her nose. Then fingers, toes, and finally skin, inch by inch. How long would the whore last?

The job would take time, but her men outside would ensure she got it.

The Golden Fleece would be more comfortable surroundings, not least because she could get a drink whenever she needed one, but Reynard would never allow it, regardless of how much he was threatened or paid.

Grim Mary needed to catch her prey when she was unprotected, but the only time the Spanish slut set foot outside the brothel was once a week, when she came to the church to confess her sins. The whore must have plenty to confess. It was a wonder the priest's hair was not white from the shock of it, even though he was a young man. Perhaps that was it—he let the whore off a few rounds on the rosary beads in return for a quick hand job under the cassock.

The sound of the church door opening interrupted Grim Mary's train of thought. A woman's footsteps clacked on the tiles, getting closer, and then the sound came of the curtain on the other side of the confessional being drawn. Through the latticework grill, Grim Mary saw a figure settle back on the seat.

"Forgive me Father, for I have sinned."

"I bet you have."

"Father?" Uncertainty filled the Spanish slut's voice.

"You better start praying. I'd send you to meet your maker, but I reckon you're heading for the other place. So, tell Old Nick that Grim Mary is sending him another one. I won't—"

More footsteps sounded. Harder, heavier, running footsteps, and surprisingly close at hand. Whoever they belonged to must have crept up stealthily before making a final rush. Grim Mary reached for her dagger, but she was out of time. The curtain was flung back and the muzzle of a pistol was shoved in her face.

"Quite right. You won't."

Grim Mary stared up into the face of the young priest. Or was it? A long time had passed since she last attended a service, and she had not been a Catholic, but surely priests shaved the tops of their heads. Why had she not picked up on it before?

The curtain in the adjoining cubicle also opened and Spanish Rosa stepped out, a dagger in her hand. "Good timing, John."

"You're the mark she was with two days ago." Grim Mary made the guess.

"I'm also a member of His Majesty's Army, and you're under arrest." The soldier with the gun stepped back. "Now you can come out of there, lie face down on the floor, and put your hands behind your back."

For a moment, Grim Mary was tempted to refuse. Let him shoot her, but that was to give up all hope. Maybe her crew would be able to rescue her. Maybe they could bribe or intimidate the judge. It was a weak hope, but better than none at all.

The whore pulled a length of rope from her sleeve. She talked to her accomplice while binding Grim Mary's hands. "The wagon's out the back?"

"Yes. As you thought, the Mother Superior was willing to take a few risks to see one who so disgraces her sex brought to justice."

"Where's the other slut, who set me up?" Grim Mary spat out the question.

"Who?"

"Peaches."

"Oh, her," the Spanish whore answered. "She wasn't in on it. I knew she was in the room next door. I also know she's stupid and she hates me. We just had to raise our voices for the bits we wanted her to hear. She was too dense to realize we were feeding it to her."

"You knew I'd try to get you here?"

"Of course. Someone like you wouldn't let it drop. You couldn't get me in the brothel. There was a slight risk you'd attack me in the street on the way here. But I thought you'd want the time and privacy to make me sorry for daring to plot against you. You're predictable in your viciousness." She stood up and addressed her companion. "She's secure. Let's go."

The soldier grabbed Grim Mary's shoulder and hauled her upright. "Now, remember, I get my reward, regardless of whether I hand you in dead or alive, or with a bullet in the kneecap. So, don't try anything."

Grim Mary stared into the soldier's eyes. A shadow of the triumph and excitement she knew so well were there. Weak and diluted maybe, but the soldier was feeling that familiar thrill of power. And for herself? A cold, sick pit was growing in her guts. Her throat tightened. Her heart was thumping. Was this how her victims felt? She tried to smile. She knew that if somehow she made it through, she was going to enjoy seeing the fear in their eyes even more than before.

As she was led to the rear of the church, Grim Mary clung to the thought. It would give her strength in the days ahead.



The small space at the rear of the convent justified the name "garden" mainly because of the weeds growing around the base of the single tree. However, it was a calm spot for reflection. Rosa sat down on a bench in the shade and looked up at the blue sky, between the patchwork of leaves and branches.

Grim Mary had been hanged the day before. Rosa had stood at the front of the cheering, laughing crowd, watching the dreaded pirate captain do the hangman's dance. Had it made her feel any better? Rosa smiled sadly. Maybe not right at that moment. If anything, it had ripped open the wounds on her heart. Yet, now she could start to truly heal. She could lay the memory of her

father and brother to rest, and go forward without the raw sense of loss and pain. If only she could decide where she wanted to go. What options did she have?

A nun appeared at the entrance to the garden. "A young man is here to see you, a soldier."

"Who is it?"

"He gave his name as John Cooper."

"Where is he?"

"I'll bring him here, if you wish."

"Please."

The dragoon's uniform suited John even more than the civilian male attire. Rosa was amused to feel her stomach perform a little hop at the sight. *I can be so predictable.* The sergeant's stripes on the shoulder of John's uniform were obviously new, the yellow a few shades brighter than that embroidering her cuffs.

Rosa stood to greet her. "You got your promotion."

"Yes, thanks to you."

"And I got my revenge, thanks to you."

"I'd heard you were staying here. You're not going back to The Golden Fleece?"

"I doubt they would have me. But, no, I don't wish to continue with that line of work."

"So, what are your plans?"

"I'm not sure." Rosa sighed, but then considered John, who was staring down at her feet, even more bashful than normal. Why should the subject of an ex-whore's future make the soldier so anxious? "Why do you ask?"

"It's just, now I'm a sergeant, I've got my own quarters. I was thinking I'd get some privacy, but it seems I need to find a housekeeper." She swallowed visibly. "Well, wife was what they said, but obviously, I can't do that."

"Obviously." If John detected the teasing edge that Rosa put on the word, she gave no sign.

"And I was wondering, if you had nowhere else to go, since you know I'm a woman, and I feel I owe you, but it wouldn't . . ."

Rosa smiled. John really was adorable when she looked so shy and off-balance. "So, do you want me to be your housekeeper or your wife?"

John looked up from her feet, clearly startled. "You'd pretend to be my wife?"

Pretend. Now there was an interesting word to play with. "If you like. You might be surprised at how good a pretence I could make of it."

"I wouldn't want you to—"

But I would want to. Rosa kept the thought to herself and stepped closer. She slid her arms around John's neck and pulled her head down for a kiss.

John froze in statue-like rigidity, but at least she did not pull away. When at last Rosa stepped back, John's face was bright red.

"If people—and, er—you do that . . . they might—yes—I guess . . . fool them. It's um . . ."

Rosa's smile broadened. *She really has no clue. She'll learn.*



THE FURIES

Rajan Khanna

The Furies came upon us in the light of a clear morning.

We were out of Tortuga, heading west with a good wind, our stomachs full for the time being, our eyes eager for any prize. The *Mandrake* was riding low in the water, heavy with loot. To be truthful, we were feeling a bit proud of ourselves, from the captain down to the lowliest deck hand.

She came in like a whisper of silk. I didn't know her then, but the *Harpy* was aptly named, a fierce, predatory ship. Upon her prow was no maiden of the sea, but a demon succubus, crowned with horns above a cruel, fanged mouth. Gazing upon it, I felt that she would devour us, swallowing us into some hellfire abyss.

She flew the Jolly Roger, and the black fabric flapped in the strong wind. Two horns had been added to the top of the skull like their demon patroness.

It seemed the deck of the *Mandrake* turned from content silence to hasty chaos in but a moment. As soon as we sighted the *Harpy*, we knew she was coming to attack us. The captain barked out orders, and the ship creaked as it was called upon to move to a better position.

The crack of the cannon reverberated in the space between the two ships. Their chain shot ripped through our masts with a great splintering sound, sending shredded wood hurtling across the deck.

That was when the fear gripped me, sliding one hand into my bowels, squeezing. They had caught us unawares. It was all happening too fast.

I am ashamed to say that I did not hold my post. I was meant to be manning the cannon below decks, and yet I could not tear my eyes from that demon ship, I could not force my jellied limbs to obey my commands and find the means to strike back at them. I felt like my body had lost its rigidity and all my organs and bits were floating around within me. Even my skeleton would not hold me straight.

It was soon evident that they sought not to sink us. They were coming to board us, to strip us of the booty we'd worked so hard to obtain. Something about this granted me some solidity once more. Something about this straightened my spine. I'd spent far too many years pinching from the trash

of other folk to think of doing so once again. I drew my cutlass and prepared for battle.

The figure that stood on the deck of the *Harpy* was not what I was expecting. It was like something from a dream. Or a nightmare. It stood tall, proud, and confident, a long, scarlet coat gracing its shoulders. A curly wig hung down about the face, but the face was covered, hidden behind a lacquered mask that seemed to mirror the face of the devil himself. It leered at me—indeed, at all of us—as if we were its playthings, and the mouth underneath the mustache and beard was both sensuous and hungry.

Others stood beside this figure, likewise masked. Some had cruel, painted faces with open maws, others were decorated with hideous markings. I had never seen anything like them.

They assembled on deck like a troupe of pantomimes, and then they swept across, armed, and the clang of metal on metal was in the air. The enemy pirates seemed to dance as they twirled and cut and jostled, while we jerked and hacked and stabbed. Their composure, their fluidity, only served to unsettle me all the more, and my cutlass felt heavy in my hands.

I had little time to think, however, when one of the *Harpy's* crew came for me. This pirate wore a mask that resembled the face of a cat, but far more terrible. The *Mandrake* had once had a cat, a good ratter we called Opal, but this was no domestic animal, this was a fierce predator, with slitted eyes and exposed fangs. I raised the cutlass in defense. The air smelled of the sea, blood, and my own sweat. My enemy's sword rang against my own, sending a shock up my arm at the contact. I drew back as I parried the blows. The enemy sword seemed bright and firm, while mine had seen far better days.

It flicked out to cut my thigh, and I almost dropped my guard. The wound stung, and I pulled back farther, my resolve failing. I don't know what happened next. I remember the sky pitching about me, and the enemy cutlass coming for my face, and then nothing.



I should have been dead. I thought I was, until I became aware of my own breath. I was surrounded by darkness and the creaking of a ship. It wasn't the *Mandrake*, of that I was sure. Every ship has its own rhythm, its own collection of sounds and smells. I knew the *Mandrake* so well that I was deaf to its song. This ship, however, was a stranger to me.

I seemed to be in a cell of some kind. Scaled iron bars held me in place. I could see nothing, but the room smelled of mold and lamp oil. I wondered how many of my shipmates were there with me. I called out. "Anyone there? It's me, Michael." There was no answer beyond the groaning of the ship and there was no change in my condition until I heard a door thrown open and a soft light entered the room. Two of the masked pirates came to the door of

my cell. “You, what is your name?” one asked. The voice was high and raspy. It was the devil I’d seen on the deck of the *Mandrake*. In the dim light of the lantern, the face seemed even more sinister, and I knew that it guarded many secrets, many plans and schemes. Enough to rival Satan himself.

“Michael,” I said.

“Do you want to live, Michael?” the devil asked.

“Yes.”

“Then you will do as I say,” he said. The face of the pirate next to him was that of a painted jester or clown. The frozen smile and red cheeks scared me, I’m not ashamed to say. They were mocking, and far too intense to be natural. “This is Harlequin,” the devil said. “Harlequin will bring to you some of the plunder from your ship. You will tell Harlequin where each item came from and how you came by it. You will do this truthfully and without obstacle, or you will die. Do you understand?”

I nodded, unable to find my tongue.

“We will start tomorrow. Truthfully and without obstacle. Do not forget.” And with that, they were gone. I felt myself sag back against the metal bars. That night I dreamt of leering faces and ships that swallowed souls.



Harlequin spoke like a dandy, though at times he tried not to. I could understand why. The company of other men was something that was tolerated at sea, but only as a necessity. Pirates were rough men—and dandies did not last long.

He came to me in his mask and wig and hat, and I wondered at the formality. The air in the brig was close and it must have been uncomfortable for him. He started to bring in the loot from our ship, showing me pieces, asking me from whence they came. I did my best to answer.

After an hour of this, or so I judged, I asked what had happened to the *Mandrake*.

“We left it adrift,” Harlequin said. “We had no need of the ship.”

“And the crew?”

“Most of them were put to the sword, sacrificed,” he said. I felt myself deflate. “You grieve for them?”

“They were the only family I have ever truly known.”

Harlequin said nothing and turned back to the chest full of booty.

“Why did you take me?” I asked, wondering suddenly why my body was not lying bloody and torn with those of my crewmates.

“You were light enough to carry back to the *Harpy*. And nearest. Let us continue.”

The answer satisfied me. I was not important enough to ransom. Therefore, the only possible reason was one of convenience. They needed someone to

help catalogue our wealth, and I was the closest and the lightest. Practicality saved me.

That first day, we proceeded through most of the chest, and then Harlequin dragged it away, leaving me once more alone in the darkness. A little later, he returned with some stale bread and grog for me. I chewed the tough, yeasty bread and washed it down with the grog. It was heavy with rum. A rush of warmth clawed through me.

The next day, we began with another chest. The following day, another. Now, I speak of days, but the truth is, I lost conception of normal time without the passage of the sun, moon, and stars to guide me.

On the third day, I asked Harlequin why we were doing what we were doing—combing through the bounty of the *Mandrake*.

“Because it is necessary,” was all he said. In the dim light his fingers were long and graceful. We didn’t speak at all after that, aside from the cataloguing. I found that while I couldn’t remember some of the individual items, with a little prodding of my memory—in the form of some questioning from Harlequin—much of our plunder had come back to me.

On the fourth day, Harlequin pulled out a silver necklace made of shimmering links with a dark stone at the center. Printed on the stone was a woman with a drawn bow and arrow. The moon was visible behind her. My breath caught in my throat, and I felt a tightening of my chest.

Harlequin noticed my reaction. “Is this precious to you?”

“The person it belonged to was.” At the memory, a liquid warmth spread through my stomach.

“Your mother?” Harlequin asked. I didn’t respond. But he seemed to take that as truth. He relaxed at the assumption, as if it somehow pleased him.

On day five, I was prepared to make my case. I knew that my usefulness at the moment was solely in my knowledge of the *Mandrake*’s loot. Once that task was completed—and it would be soon—I would no longer serve any purpose and I’d be killed, or thrown overboard, or left marooned on a pitiful strip of beach.

“I’m a good sailor,” I said, after Harlequin had removed the first few items for the day. “I’ve been trained as a gunner, and I know how to read charts. I know how to read letters, too. I learned when I was a boy.”

“What is this about?”

“You could use me as one of the crew. I’ll be a cabin boy, even. I’ll swab the deck. You’d see how valuable I can be.”

“And in a fight?”

“I can swing a cutlass and fire a pistol better than most.”

“And yet you were taken when we took your ship.” Harlequin’s painted face seemed to mock me.

“I . . . I faltered. Only because you were so fierce. I cannot imagine a

ship or crew more fearsome than this one. It should not be a problem in the future.”

“I will pass your entreaty along,” Harlequin said. I heard a smile in his voice. “Now, let us continue.”



It was shortly after we finished for the day that the one I call Lucifer—because of the devil mask he wore—came to see me. He carried a lantern, and the light made the features of his mask far more sinister than they had been in the light of day. “I was told that you wish to join the crew,” he said in his high rasp.

“Yes,” I said. It was far more difficult conversing with him than with Harlequin. “I can be a good member of the crew.” It was hard to imagine it, though, even as I said it. Would I have to wear a mask, too? What face would that mask portray?

“There is one thing that you could do to prove yourself worthy,” Lucifer said.

“What? Name it.”

“Cut off your manhood.” I saw then that Harlequin had joined us, as well as a few others, all in their masks—shapes like demons and skulls and deformed grotesqueries.

I was struck dumb for a moment, unable to grasp what he’d said.

“What?” I said at last.

“If you truly wish to stay with us, upon this ship, you must cut off your manhood.”

“I don’t understand,” I said.

Lucifer leaned forward until the leering mask was just before mine. Then, he removed it.

Lucifer was a woman.

I must have gasped, and she smiled. Then the others all began to remove their masks, and beneath them all were women’s faces.

I had spent most of my life aboard ships and I had heard many times that women were bad luck on them. I had heard stories of men who had snuck them aboard only to lose their whole ships. I had been told of grisly deaths and wicked torments. Yet, here was a whole ship full of them. Suddenly, I understood the masks.

“So?” Lucifer said. She was a rough-looking woman, and her face was unpainted. “Do you still wish to join us?”

I didn’t say anything. I could only look down at my feet. She laughed mockingly at me and then they left me alone with the darkness.



The next day I asked Harlequin how the *Harpy's* crew had come to be. She no longer wore her mask around me. She had long, reddish hair and pale skin freckled across her nose and neck.

"Shannon started it. She was a whore, and was sick of the life. Many of the girls here have similar backgrounds. They were whores or abused by their husbands, or fathers, or both. They spread the word to others like them, women who would rather live free and die by the sword than waste away in a home full of spite."

We were reaching the end of the *Mandrake's* treasure now, and I knew that my task would soon be done. I felt certain that they would kill me—throw me overboard for the sharks to rip to pieces. These women had no cause to love men. Indeed, they had cause to hate them.

"Tell me," Harlequin said, "did you like the other men on the *Mandrake*?"

The question perplexed me for a moment. It wasn't really something that I'd thought about. "They pressed me when I was just a boy," I said. "My parents died when I was young, and after that I lived on the streets. The crew of the *Mandrake* were the only folks I really have known."

"And you had friends there?"

"Yes."

"Did you plunder with your friends?"

"Yes."

"Did you rape with your friends?"

Memories flushed into me, cold and bitter. I remembered the last foray ashore, the men as they huddled over the young women, their bare bottoms pumping in the misty air. They would always urge me, but I could not. Instead, I would save part of my share for moments when we put into Tortuga and I could visit Madame Brega's and my sweet, sad Gwendolyn.

"No."

"Why should I believe you?" she asked.

"You have no reason to, I'll grant," I said. "And it's true I would put a sword through any man . . . or woman, who threatened me or mine, but that's all. I wouldn't put nothing else."

She didn't say anything, and instead she turned back to the treasure, cold and dispassionate. We didn't talk again that day.



One conversation I had with Harlequin stuck in my head, haunting my cell at night when it was dark and phantoms danced before me. "You said you sacrificed the crew of the *Mandrake*," I said.

"Yes. To Amphitrite, Artemis, and Nemesis. To the gods."

I knew of only one God and I said so. "Are you heathens, then?"

Harlequin smiled. “Your god did nothing as I lay in my bed at night, begging him to come save me.”

“And your gods?”

“Give us strong winds and swift seas, grant us victory over our enemies.”

“And you believe this?” I remembered the superstitions of the pirates that I knew.

Harlequin smiled as if hiding some great secret. “I know it to be true. Because of the gods, we have become a scourge of the seas. Soon we will have another ship and our numbers will grow. Already our sisters spread the word of the old gods through the land. An awakening is upon us. And men will fear us even more for it. She knew this.”

“Who?”

“Your mother. That necklace was a token of Artemis. Did she not speak of this to you?”

“It wasn’t my mother’s,” I said. “It belonged to the girl I love.”

“And how did it come to be on the *Mandrake*?”

“Things sometimes end up where they don’t belong,” I said.



By then, I had come to accept my fate. The cataloguing of the treasure would soon be finished and my usefulness with it. The thought of my death no longer scared me. Instead, it gave me a sense of freedom, a strange exhilaration. When Harlequin (I still did not know her Christian name) appeared once more, I asked her why we were doing this.

“That is not your concern. Now, what of this necklace?”

“No,” I said. “I want to know why. I think I deserve at least that much. I have done as you’ve asked without complaint. Tell me why, or I won’t continue.”

Harlequin glared at me, and in that moment I saw the steel core that hid beneath her harmless appearance. I held myself firm, though, as only a condemned man can. “Very well,” she said. “I will return.” She left the room, leaving me light this time, her long coat swirling about her. She returned a short time later, a strange expression on her face. She removed a key from her pocket and unlocked the door of my cage. “Come with me. But be warned—make any attempt to escape, any hint of violence, and I will cut you down. Not enough to kill you, mind, but enough to make you suffer for many days.”

“I have no such intentions.”

She took me out of the brig and through the ship, up onto the deck. The smell of the sea air when we emerged was like a benediction. I resisted the urge to fall to my knees for fear the action would be misinterpreted. The air was cool against my cheeks, and after the close, rank air of the brig, it was like

an angel's kiss. For a moment, I thought I heard the sea calling me, calling me home, and I had the urge to throw myself over the side of the ship, to let the waves reclaim me the way I knew they longed to.

Harlequin led me past other women pirates to a small cabin above deck. She turned to look at me and then opened the door. The odors that flowed out of that room were like none I had ever smelled before. Pungent herbs and the faint trace of smoke. Scents metallic and sharp, others moldy and mildewy. A hunched woman, older than any I had seen, sat there, on the floor, a black cane propped up next to her. When she looked up, I could see that her eyes were filmed over and milky, yet she still looked at me, as if her blindness was just another mask on that ship of masked women.

"What will she do to me?" I asked.

"Perhaps read your fortune. Perhaps eat your dreams."

"I am Lucia," the old woman said, as if that should mean something to me. "It seems you want answers." Her accent was unusual, muddled. She might have been Italian or Spanish or even Greek. I wasn't sure.

"I just want to know why I am doing what I'm doing," I said.

"That is what every man wishes." She stood up, her body trembling against the cane. "I am a seer. What you might call a witch. I read the portents, and I choose the course."

"What course led you to the *Mandrake*?"

"Her decks were stained with the blood of our sisters. Her hold was heavy with their plunder."

"That's it?" I asked. "It was revenge?"

"Not just revenge," she said. "It was liberation. The Moerae came to me. They bade me seek out the treasure from the *Mandrake*'s loins, bade me to place it in the hands of our sisters. That this would make us better. That this would make us strong."

"And now that my task is almost done, will you sacrifice me to your heathen gods?"

Her lips quivered, and small flecks of saliva gathered in the corners of her mouth. "Amphitrite has been assuaged for now. We are guaranteed golden seas. And yet . . ."

She paused, and I thought that she might be having a fit. Then a wrinkled, fat hand sprung toward me like a venomous snake. Before I could react, it was upon my face, and it smelled like old blood.

For a moment I lost control of my body. I could only stand there as she muttered strange words into the air around me. The light in the cabin flickered, as if by a strong wind, but the door remained shut.

Then I saw them—strange shapes, half-shadows, in the back of the room. Women with snakes entwined in their hair, with great wings of night black. Their eyes wept blood. I could not move.

Then, as if a scrap of dream were snatched away by waking, it all stopped. Lucia stood before me once more, a sagging old woman. Her eyes widened, white and large. "Take him away," she snapped.

Harlequin led me out and back to my cell. I inhaled as much of the sea air as I could, trying to hold the smell with me as I returned to the rotting brig. It was all I could do to banish the sight of what I had seen. I slept with traces of it curling around my mind.



I dreamt that night of Gwendolyn.

It was my first time on a raid, the first time I saw what the men did, the raping. They urged me on, but I couldn't. I fell in with the looters instead. It was in one of the homes that I saw her.

She was my age, or slightly younger, with skin the color of pale milk. Her hair was black in the dim light. Her eyes widened when she saw me, but she did not scream. She never screamed.

Hock was with me, and he laughed when he saw the way I was looking at her. "Fancy her, do you?" he said with a cackle. "She's all yours." Then he snatched the necklace from about her neck.

I could have taken her, raped her there in that place, spilled my seed into her, but the thought revolted me. She was so perfect, so pure, like an angel. Still, I wanted her and I knew I had to have her.

The hard part was getting her back on the ship unnoticed. She was light, a slip of a girl, but it was still difficult to bind her and stuff her in the sack. Her body lay still from the blow I had given her.

The usual chaos of the raid helped keep what I was doing secret. Once aboard I was able to stash her in one of the empty casks. It hurt me to have to stuff her pretty mouth full of rags, but I couldn't let anyone find her. A woman aboard the *Mandrake*? I would be keelhauled for certain. And Gwendolyn would be thrown overboard, bobbing helplessly in the sea until Davy Jones claimed her at last. No, I couldn't let that happen. She belonged to me.

I would sneak down to see her when I could, bringing her food, the occasional nip of rum. She knew enough to be quiet. She cried a lot, but I knew it was only a matter of time.

When we pulled into Tortuga, I snuck her ashore one moonless, bloodless night. Madame Brega agreed to take her in and keep her safe and every time we pulled into shore, I would visit her, and demonstrate my love. I had never known love until that point. It didn't matter to me that she now shared her bed with other men—they were nothing to the love between us. She may have rented herself to them, but she belonged to me.



In the morning Harlequin came for me. “Get up. You’re needed.”

I wanted to tell her of the images that had crowded my head that morning—Lucia, toothless and slaving, bent over my head. Instead, I asked, “Who are the Moerae?”

“The Fates.”

I knew them. I pictured them in my mind with familiar faces—Lucia, the crone; Harlequin, the matron; Gwendolyn, the maiden. The faces leered in my mind as Harlequin brought me to the deck. I started when I saw the crew assembled. At its head was Lucifer, Lucia at her side. They wore their masks again, and I could not stop shivering.

Lucifer stepped forward and raised her hand. Gwendolyn’s necklace dangled from it. “This belongs to a sister of ours,” she said, as if to all assembled. “A fellow servant of the gods.” She moved forward to me. “For her sake, we have decided to give you what you want.”

I felt a swelling in my chest. They were going to let me go. My love for Gwendolyn, a fellow sister, had saved me.

I was so overcome with relief that it took me a moment to register the pain as Harlequin and another of her sisters grabbed me by the arms, holding me firm. Lucifer approached, the grin on her mask seemingly larger, wider than before. My heart beat madly in my chest.

She pulled down my breeches roughly, leaving me naked below the waist. I tried to shrink away from her, but I was held too tightly. Lucifer grabbed hold of my manhood with one hand, and the other wrapped around a large, silver knife. She brought the one against the other and my flesh shriveled at the touch of cold steel.

Lucifer’s terrifying grin bored into me, and everything I was seemed to crumple up and blow away on the ocean breeze. I thought of Gwendolyn then, as my heart pounded in my chest.

“Welcome to the crew,” she said, and cut.



DEVIL'S BARGAIN

Andi Marquette

They loaded the four strongboxes onto the longboat. Each box required four men—one for each side—who waded into knee-deep seas. Sarah splashed after them with three shovels, and she made her way to the boat's side, where she carefully lowered the shovels within, left hand on the gunwale. Maintaining her balance proved difficult, as two men pushed the boat into deeper water and clambered aboard themselves. She clung to the gunwale, and water knocked against her chest as she waited for a hand. None came. She hung on the boat's side with both hands and tried to pull herself aboard, foreboding enveloping her as surely as seawater.

"Not you," Crenshaw rasped. "Cap'n's orders."

Stunned, she glared at him. "You bastard. Bloody, thieving son of a whore!" Sarah slung one leg over the gunwale and with a last effort, threw herself into the craft, to the imprisonment of rough hands on her arms. She struggled but only succeeded in drawing a boot to her neck.

"Stubborn," Crenshaw said. "Thought you was a lady."

The boot came off her neck amidst the coarse laughter Crenshaw's comment had generated, and the men who held her lifted her to her feet to face Crenshaw, whose smirk stretched the scar above his upper lip into a thin line.

"I paid him," she said between clenched teeth. "We had a deal." Fear and anger clogged her throat. Two men held her, two more sat impassively on the strongboxes in the stern. Crenshaw balanced aft as the craft bucked beneath them.

"Deal's off," he replied with a shrug. "Cap'n's orders." He drew his cutlass. "Hope you can swim." He smiled then, but his missing teeth made it more a leer. "Many thanks for your help. We'll be sure to toast you in Nassau."

"You lying—" She surged forward, momentarily breaking free. The tip of Crenshaw's cutlass slid cleanly into her gut, exited out her back. Shock, rage, and excruciating pain ripped her flesh with the blade.

"Why'd you go and do that, now? You'd have had better luck swimmin'. Not even useful as a whore, now." He withdrew the blade to more laughter, nodded, and two men picked her up by her hands and feet and heaved her over the side back into the water.

The warm waters of the Caribbean closed over her head and filled her wound with the sting of a thousand wasps. She broke the surface with a gasp, every movement searing. The longboat was already halfway to the schooner and her blood stained the waters like paint. Automatically, she pointed herself toward shore and half-swam, half-kicked, gasping and grunting at the agony in her abdomen. Her toes scraped bottom, and she threw herself ashore, one hand clamped to her gut. She knew her efforts to staunch the bleeding were futile, that a wound like this was a death sentence. She sank to her knees in the sand, pain and blood leaking between her fingers. Just a few more days of life, she thought. Just a few more days to find the scum-sucking captain of the *Queen's Rest*, the equally scum-sucking Crenshaw, and what was rightfully hers.

She clamped her other hand over her stomach and hunched against the pain. *Bastards. I'll haunt you both. Just watch me.* She grimaced, her best attempt at a last smile. She still had the key and she still had her ring. Blakesley wouldn't be able to open the boxes. Not easily, anyway. He'd have to offload them somewhere and wait for his claim to be approved. The thought offered some comfort as blood continued to stain the sand beneath her knees. She watched it well between her fingers, and she wondered how much time each trickle cost her.

The sun was hot on her back as her shirt dried, and the pain in her gut settled into her bones, into her veins. Each breath was a gift and a curse, because as grateful as she was when one came, she knew it only brought her closer to the end. She had failed. Her father's gold would line a privateer's pockets. Lady Sarah Churchill had not only failed in her quest, but disgraced the family name. She'd been consorting with thieves, whores, beggars, and privateers. Dead at the point of a pirate's blade, dressed like some rakish sailor. *Damn you, Blakesley. And Crenshaw.* Damn you both to hell, she thought, tasting blood in her mouth. She spat it onto the sand. *I'll be waiting for you.*



Sarah stirred and opened one eye, though the effort to do even that hurt. Something blocked her view. She opened her other eye, and a pair of black boots, battered and scuffed, frosted with sand, came into focus. She slowly turned over onto her back, her stomach burning with the movement. From this position, her gaze was able to follow the lines of the boots upward along the grey-trousered thighs to the faded blue shirt.

A woman, Sarah registered. A woman with dark hair pulled back, tied behind her head upon which perched a plain black tricorne. Sarah groaned again. Another damn pirate. She closed her eyes, waited a moment, and opened them again. Maybe she was hallucinating in her death throes.

The woman regarded her, the expression in her dark, placid eyes cool. Sarah shifted her gaze slightly and looked past her. Three others stood behind her, a dozen feet distant. A man and two women, all attired in plain sailors' clothing, a longboat behind them on the edge of the water.

The woman knelt down on her right knee and rested her left arm casually across her left thigh. "I can help," she said in a pleasant alto.

Sarah stared at her, puzzled. "Help me what? Die?" Her voice was creaky in her throat.

The pirate cocked her head, perhaps amused. "In a manner of speaking."

Sarah very slowly got to her knees, caught in a wave of utter exhaustion and weakness that swept her limbs and dulled her mind. She checked the front of her shirt, crusted with dried blood and sand, and then she stared at the dark pool of blood coagulated on the beach beneath her. Was this, then, death? Sarah looked at the woman and she could discern no pupils in the dark, dark eyes. The foreshadow of a smile played across the buccaneer's lips. There was no warmth in the expression.

"Lady Sarah," the buccaneer said, "I'm Nefi, captain of the *Black Angel*. You've lost something that meant a great deal to you." She raised an eyebrow. "Betrayed, yes?"

Sarah nodded dumbly. How did this woman know her? She couldn't place her accent. Melodious and clipped around the edges, like her features, which hinted of ancient places etched in the sands of swarthy countries.

"What would you pay to have these things back?"

"Anything." Sarah surprised herself with the immediacy of her answer. But then, she'd come this far. She *would* do anything.

Nefi propped her chin in her left hand, left elbow still on her knee. "And what would you pay to ensure a proper punishment for Captain Blakesley and first mate Crenshaw?"

Anger swirled sluggishly through Sarah's veins. "Anything. Whatever you want."

Nefi nodded slowly. "My price is high."

"Name it."

The buccaneer's hand fell away from her chin. "Twenty percent of what was taken and—" She grinned, displaying a set of fine white teeth, the long canines of which ended in points. "Your services, Lady Sarah."

Sarah gaped.

"Your history has already been written," Nefi continued. "You disappeared while searching for your father's lost shipment. Your body was never found." She shrugged. "I can change that. I can grant you the time you need to complete the tasks you lamented at your impending death."

Death? Sarah covered her wound with one hand, and her palm pressed into thick, sticky blood that no longer flowed.

“Once you do so—” Nefi said. “Once you get those affairs in order and give me twenty percent, you are bound to me and my ship.”

“How long?” Sarah’s voice was barely a whisper.

Nefi smiled again. “Forever. But have no fear. You’ll be in fine company.” She stood and gestured toward the three behind her and the black brigantine anchored offshore. She turned back to Sarah.

“I’m dead, then?” Sarah croaked.

“Not yet. You still have a few minutes. Plenty of time to contract, if you so desire.”

Sarah looked past her at the ship offshore, then back to Nefi. “If I don’t?”

Nefi inclined her head, and her gaze marked the blood on the sand. “I’ll leave you to the island. I can’t guarantee you’ll rest, given the circumstances of your death. And it’s isolated enough here that you may have only this beach to haunt.” She rested her hands on her belt. A sheathed dagger hung at her right side.

Sarah’s thoughts had slowed, but life and death she understood. “If I sail with you, will I live?”

“Not in the traditional sense. But we’re a merry band of immortal damned.” The three behind her laughed. Nefi flashed a smile that didn’t reach her eyes. “The conditions, since you don’t have much time. No one breaks a contract with me. Ever. If you try—” She flashed another grin, one that reminded Sarah of wolves. “There’ll be hell to pay.” The laughing continued behind her.

“What’s worse than death?”

“A life without it. I’ll grant you years on this island, plagued by the agony of your wound. You’ll rot, from the inside out. Scoured by maggots and flies. Ravaged by thirst and hunger. But you will not find release. You will not be able to move. You will feel each and every bit of your decay. And when the wind finally claims your dust, your spirit will haunt this beach, bearing the pain of your final disintegration. Until time ends.” The laughter behind her had ceased.

Sarah’s muddled thoughts turned to Blakesley’s betrayal, and fire flashed through her near-empty veins. Crenshaw stabbing her, with no more thought to it than had he been engaged in a walk through a park. Blakesley with her family’s gold. God knows what he would do with it. She had promised her father. Promised him she’d find the shipment and return it to England. Promised him she’d marry his choice if he just granted her a taste of freedom to find his gold. Freedom. Sarah had grown quite fond of it. And she was quite fond of life. “I accept your offer.”

Nefi nodded once, extended her right hand. Sarah tried to raise her own hand, but she was too weak. Nefi reached, took her hand, and a cold wind raced up Sarah’s arm into her midsection. Nefi released Sarah’s hand, pulled

her dagger from its sheath, and ran its razor tip lightly over her own left wrist.

Sarah watched, fascinated, as blood oozed quickly to the skin's surface. Nefi dipped her right index finger in it and gently wiped it on Sarah's lower lip. Not knowing why, Sarah licked her lip, tasted the ferrous overtures of blood, along with something else. An insistent throbbing, an ache in her bones, a need so deep it overwhelmed death's mantle. The buccaneer leaned forward, gently gripped the back of Sarah's neck with her right hand. She brought her left wrist to Sarah's mouth, and with a greed Sarah had never felt, she clamped her lips over the wound and sucked like a starving dog on a bone.

Heat and pain coursed down her throat, infused her muscles, but she couldn't stop wanting the taste of this life, such as she had never experienced. Nefi withdrew her wrist, and Sarah gasped, hunched, and curled into a fetal position. It was as if her bones and blood vessels bubbled. A strange ache filled her, but she burned, too, with new, cold life. Gasping, she turned her gaze to the *Black Angel's* captain.

"Welcome aboard," Nefi said. And she winked as she clapped Sarah gently on the shoulder.



What unholy alliance had she made? Sarah stared at the ship's timbers above. Maybe she had died after all and gone to hell. She turned over on the mattress so she might stare at the door and await Nefi's visit. Or was it dread? Sarah thought of food, of tables set with fine silver and china from distant lands. She envisioned her mother's servants bringing puddings and fruits from the kitchen, and platters of meat. Her stomach churned in revulsion and she hung her head over the side of the bed, staring down into the bucket she'd had yet to use for vomit.

The door opened but Sarah didn't look up. She focused on the bucket, waiting for her nausea to subside. "How long," she whispered, "will I feel this bad?"

Nefi didn't respond right away. Instead, she stroked Sarah's hair until the sickness passed, and Sarah once again lay on her back, staring at the timbers and avoiding Nefi's gaze.

"Perhaps you have yet to accept your true nature," Nefi said, and the sound of her voice made Sarah both ache and fume. Nefi pressed a cool, damp cloth to Sarah's forehead.

"What nature is that? My birthright? Or what I traded death for? What manner of monster am I?"

Nefi turned the cloth over, and Sarah felt her shift her weight, move closer, felt Nefi's lips on her neck, soft and sensuous, and her stomach was unsettled

again, but not from sickness. “I only bargain with those who want it,” Nefi said against her ear, and her breath was warm, arousing. “You summoned me, Sarah. And as long as you continue to fight this process, you will feel this bad.” And she trailed her lips down Sarah’s neck. “Now, what would you have me do? You’ll be strong enough to take the change tomorrow.” Nefi took the cloth away from her forehead.

Sarah clenched her teeth, an ache between her thighs and at her core, far beneath the fresh scar that marked the cutlass’s entrance wound. She nodded, and Nefi drew another thin line on her wrist as Sarah watched, battling revulsion and need. Need always won. She took Nefi’s wrist to her lips and sucked, greedily, remembering folktales from Romania she’d heard in salon discussions and her family’s kitchens as servants tossed dark tales to each other while working. Old, musty stories about phantoms, banshees, and blood-suckers drowning in sunlight.

And then, Nefi’s blood would roar through her veins, charging her with life she’d never felt, leaving her sated and relaxed on Nefi’s bed, on Nefi’s ship, in Nefi’s arms. She’d bargained with thieves, privateers, and cutthroats to find the family gold, which she’d tracked to the unmarked island where she’d been left to die. She’d bargained with far worse than Nefi, and it had nearly killed her. Nefi could be no worse than what Sarah had seen in the year she’d left England. She shut her eyes, and Nefi’s lips rested for a moment on her forehead before Sarah slipped into sleep again.

When Sarah next woke, a new resolve shared her bed, and she sat up. She’d bargained with Nefi, accepted her terms. She’d made her choice, and so she stood and waited for Nefi, no longer plagued with nausea or weakness. When Nefi arrived and she moved toward Sarah, and her hands traveled from Sarah’s waist up to her shoulders and then her neck, Sarah sighed and tilted her head, trembling with anticipation.

Nefi’s teeth penetrated Sarah’s neck quickly and painlessly, effortlessly graceful. Sarah gasped, tried to scream in combined ecstasy and pain as her blood flowed freely into Nefi’s mouth. She clutched Nefi, an erotic hunger racing through her core. She held Nefi’s head against her neck with a strength she didn’t know she had, writhing against the pirate, weakening as her life’s blood ebbed.

Nefi pulled Sarah to the thin border between life and death before she released her hold on Sarah’s neck, and carefully lowered Sarah to her bed. “Once more,” Nefi whispered in Sarah’s ear as she opened a vein on her own wrist, held it to Sarah’s mouth. “Drink.”

And Sarah did, clamping her lips over the cut. She suckled and licked, and Nefi’s blood now mixed with her own to fill an aching void within. All Sarah knew was the exquisite taste in her mouth and the pinpricks of power running down her throat. Sated at last, she fell back, felt Nefi gently wipe her lips with a cloth then kiss her on the mouth.

"There will be pain," Nefi said softly. "But it will pass."

She was right. The pain started within minutes. It suffused every joint, muscle, cell of Sarah's body. Sweat leaked from every pore as Sarah endured the shift, felt her body change, her bones creak and moan. Her teeth loosened in her gums and her eyes were surely melting, dripping from their sockets. Nefi stayed with her throughout and wiped her forehead and limbs with a cool, damp cloth. She spoke soothingly in a language Sarah didn't recognize, though it hung images in her mind of a great river flowing north from the guts of Africa to dump its legacy into a turquoise sea. Finally, Sarah slept. And when she woke, everything had changed.



Sarah stood on the deck, surveying the crew of the *Black Angel*, which defied easy description. Twenty, an odd mix of men and women from a plethora of backgrounds, nationalities, and eras. The women had surprised Sarah. She herself had chosen to sail disguised as a man in search of her father's gold, but didn't realize how common such behavior actually had been through the ages. Through new eyes blessed with Nefi's gift, Sarah saw the differences between them. Some were like her, predators who needed blood to survive. Others were simply not alive. But not dead.

"I only go to those who ask," came Nefi's voice at her elbow. "Sometimes, I'm too late and can only grant a half-life. But those who agree, do so willingly."

Sarah didn't answer right away. Had she called Nefi? She must have. How else could she explain what had happened? Things she'd never thought to believe had come to pass.

"So, Lady Sarah. You have questions." Nefi regarded her, calm. "Ask."

"What language were you speaking when I changed?"

Nefi smiled. "A very old one. You will find it inscribed in stone within the pyramids of Giza and the tombs of Thebes. That is my language, what I spoke when I was mortal."

Nefi reached then, and her fingers ran the length of Sarah's bare forearm. The sensation was more than pleasant. Nefi smiled again and turned, placing her forearms on the railing to gaze out to sea. "My name is Nephthys. I was given that name when sent to grace the house of the Pharaoh Sneferu." She caught Sarah's eye. "I was never to marry. Instead, I was educated and trained in the ways of diplomacy and entertainment for visiting dignitaries. At the age of twenty-five, it was time for me to earn my name."

"How?"

"Nephthys is the goddess who grants immortality. My people believed she required appeasement from a mortal woman chosen from the kingdoms during each Pharaoh's reign. I was Sneferu's choice. And on the eve of my twenty-fifth mortal year, the contract was made."

“Who—”

Nefi turned then. “The high priestess of Nephthys bequeathed her blood to me. It was understood that I would serve in the same capacity, should such be required. I entered the temple of Nephthys after my transformation was complete.”

Sarah saw something shift in Nefi’s eyes—sadness, maybe. Or perhaps it was merely a trick of the afternoon light.

“My world lived and died many times during my service, until finally, beneath the onslaught of foreigners, the old ways dispersed. With the coming of the Greeks, I took to the seas.” A smile seemed to twitch at the corner of Nefi’s mouth. “I learned quite a bit from the Greeks,” she added, thoughtful. “Including sailing.” She straightened and regarded Sarah with her implacable eyes. “We dock in Nassau on the morrow. I have a feeling you’ll have a bit of luck in your search for the *Queen’s Rest*.” Her gaze held Sarah’s for a long moment before she turned languidly and headed for the bridge. As Nefi’s boot hit the first step, she cast a glance back over her shoulder and smiled at Sarah, and she knew that Nefi was extending an invitation to her for the evening. Sarah smiled back. She would accept.



The Port of Nassau crawled with beleaguered privateers, pirates, deserters from a variety of navies, merchants, speculators, bandits, thieves, and assorted lowlifes from every conceivable occupation. The city itself was a mish-mash of squatters, tents, and ramshackle structures, erected on the cremated remains of earlier buildings that had been burned to the ground by contingents from the French and Spanish navies.

All manner of craft anchored in the harbor. From the most resplendent vessels of the British Navy to the meanest sloop, all found welcome in the boomtown atmosphere of Nassau. Whatever debauchery, decadence, illegality, or perversion one could imagine, it had already been tried here, expounded upon, and cast aside for newer manifestations. And for those who chose to live far outside the boundaries of acceptability, Nassau was perfect. And as Sarah had expected, Blakesley had come here with his “find” and registered the strongboxes at the customs house. All it took for Sarah to convince the agent was the seal on her ring and the key she inserted into the locks, opening them each for him. Blakesley wouldn’t be alerted to her right away. Sarah almost wished she could tell him herself. But she knew any conversation she had with him was best left to open water, where he wouldn’t stand a chance against Nefi or her ship.

Sarah stood on the pier in the late afternoon light. She turned abruptly and strode back into the city, hat pulled low over her eyes. She made her way along the filthy, crowded street that edged the harbor, bumping into a variety

of humanity in a variety of stages of cleanliness. Shouts and shots filled the air, chased by screams and screeching laughter. Nassau was a pit and for those who weren't already dead, it promised to press them into the service of those ranks quickly.

Sarah worked her way around vast mud puddles, sloppy with filth, and searched for a proper target. She needed to feed after her long day in this hole. She ducked down a narrow alley between a tavern and a boarding house just as a young serving woman emptied a pail of scraps out the tavern's back door. Wearing new seaman's trousers and a rough linen shirt, Sarah presented as a man. The tricorne on her head further marked her as a sailor. She smiled at the serving woman and tipped her hat as she approached. The alley was very dark. The woman was too trusting.

Though she hadn't had much practice, Sarah was very good at locating a human jugular quickly and piercing it efficiently. She had overcome her initial discomfort with seducing women, and found them easier to attract in her male guise than men, though she had fed on an amorous sailor who returned her advances because he thought she was a man. On Sarah's first boarding—a Dutch schooner—Nefi had demonstrated to Sarah how much blood to take, and how not to leave lasting harm beyond small puncture scars.

Nefi took Sarah on proper hunts in New Providence soon after, though the initial outings proved difficult for Sarah, who could not yet reconcile her thirst for blood with her mortal past. Nefi seemed to understand, and she made it easy in some ways for Sarah to adjust to this new existence. Sarah thought of her now as a mentor, among other things.

And now here she was, in a dark, stinking alley, enthralled with the taste of the barmaid's life on her lips, coursing down her throat. It aroused her, caused an ache between her thighs, this unholy intimacy. Not too much, Nefi had instructed. Leave them mortal.

Sarah's first had died, a young Dutch sailor aboard the schooner. She had felt an overwhelming need to sob but nothing came, except the insidious and exhilarating sensation of life, throbbing through her veins. Terrible, terrible bargain. Nefi had only laughed softly. "I knew you would accept," she said. "I only offer to those who will."

Thousands, Nefi had said. She had ignored thousands over the centuries. Unlike others, she did not pass the gift lightly, something that intrigued Sarah. In every port, dozens like her occupied every strata, every job. She sensed them now, saw the ethereal glow in their eyes and caught brief glimpses of canine teeth too sharp. When mortal, she would not have noticed. Yes, Nefi had standards. But looking around the seething city, it was obvious others did not.

The serving woman collapsed against her, and she withdrew her teeth with

an effort, wiped her mouth and the woman's neck on a bit of cloth she pulled from her pocket. The gift granted her physical strength unlike any she had ever known, so it was an easy matter for Sarah to carry her the short distance to the tavern's back door and leave her just inside, out of reach of other night-crawlers with even baser intentions. She straightened her clothing and quitted the alley and made her way through the foul streets to a particular drinking establishment.

Low-slung and slovenly, this tavern stood to her left. Sarah entered and shouldered her way through the crowd to a table in the corner. Nefi sat with her back against the rough wooden wall, chair tipped back, left leg draped rakishly over the tabletop. She was surveying the room, ignoring the full tankard she held in her right hand. She offered one of her oddly appealing smiles as Sarah sat down across from her.

"Success, I trust." She held a discreet finger to her lower lip. Sarah quickly wiped her own mouth again with the bit of cloth. Nefi nodded. "My ablest apprentice thus far." She grinned, handed Sarah the tankard. Sarah sipped, washing the taste of ecstasy down her throat with harsh ale. She slid into the chair to Nefi's right.

"And the other matter?" Nefi was speaking to her, but her eyes were on a young Spanish man who had just entered. Nefi obviously needed to hunt as well.

"Tomorrow afternoon. There are four strongboxes. However many crew you think to carry them. Ask for Townsend and use the name Lord Samuel Churchill."

"Well done," Nefi said softly, eyes once again on Sarah. She had already acquired her target. She stood and stretched languorously. "You've completed a task. And had a grand time doing it, I'd warrant." She winked and moved off into the crowd with a leonine grace. Sarah drained the tankard and sat back, enjoying a sense of satisfaction, ease, and excitement.



Two-masted and square-rigged, the *Black Angel* strained to be set loose as it glided out of Nassau harbor at dawn. A predator, gathering for the spring. The crew leaned on the railing as the sails unfurled themselves. Those who had needed to hunt had done so.

The ship sliced through the Caribbean, gathering speed and power. Dark and lethal, like an obsidian blade. The miles washed beneath them, more quickly than Sarah dreamed possible.

"Ship ahoy!" came the melodious call from Peisino, the Siren.

"Ah." Nefi was suddenly at Sarah's side. She said softly in her ear, "Do you recognize the vessel, Sarah?"

Queen's Rest was painted in red on its stern, and something deeper than blood lust stirred at Sarah's core.

“Your chance.” Nefi smiled, an expression that among the living would not offer warmth. But to Sarah, Nefi’s smiles scoured frost from stone. “Prepare to engage,” Nefi ordered. The *Black Angel* turned swiftly with no help from the crew. She honed in on her target and of its own accord, Nefi’s flag hurtled up the mainmast, unfurling in the breeze. A white cutlass piercing a crimson heart on a field of black.

Sarah heard shouts from the *Queen’s Rest* as the distance between them closed. She saw crewmen running about like ants, trying to turn the ship from the path of Nefi’s juggernaut. The opposing vessel swung laboriously portside, exposing her guns. Nefi’s eyes, like chips of onyx, caught the rays of the setting sun and flashed in warning. Sarah gripped the railing, bracing for the impact of either cannonball or broadside. The *Queen’s Rest* crew scurried about, no doubt preparing to fire, but the *Black Angel*’s guns remained silent even as cannons bellowed from the *Queen’s Rest*. Sarah closed her eyes, waiting for the thud of metal on wood.

Instead, five cannonballs stopped in midair as if they had struck a great wall. They hovered momentarily then splashed heavily into the water. Three more cannons fired and three more cannonballs joined their predecessors in the depths. Nefi’s ship was too close now for effective cannonry. Sarah heard the crack of muskets, and chips of wood flew from the railing near her fingers. The gouges sealed themselves within minutes.

The *Angel* slid into boarding position next to the *Queen’s Rest*, and Peisino the Siren stood on the *Angel*’s bridge, her song entrapping the enemy crew as if they were bound with chains. The *Angel*’s crew swarmed aboard the other ship, Peisino’s lilting voice the only sound they made. Mortal sailors dropped their weapons at her song and fell to their knees, slack-jawed.

Sarah made the leap to the opposing vessel easily, reveling in the fluidity of her motions and the untapped strength in her muscles. She searched the deck, finding Crenshaw entranced at the foot of the foremast. Two Chinese pirates lifted him and carried him to the *Black Angel*. Blakesley stood on the bridge, staring dumbly at Sarah as she climbed the steps. Two undead pirates lifted him from his position, hauled him to the main deck, and handed him across the space to waiting hands on the *Angel*.

With her prey off-loaded, Sarah swung onto the railing and stepped easily back to Nefi’s ship, which pulled away from the *Queen’s Rest* as Peisino’s song faded. Blakesley and Crenshaw shook themselves, as if awakened from a deep trance. Nefi had ordered them placed near the mainmast, seated and unbound. Sarah regarded them, arms crossed, boots planted firmly on the deck.

“Gentlemen,” she said when she saw recognition in their eyes.

“You said she was dead,” Blakesley growled in a whisky-ripped voice. The ends of his mustache drooped below his chin and the scar across the bridge of his nose twitched with his words.

"She was," Crenshaw stammered, eyes wide. "No one could have survived such a slice as that."

"Death, Captain, doesn't always put an end to a matter." Sarah leaned over, face very close to his. "Perhaps you should have considered that when you broke the contract with me."

He remained silent, glaring at her.

Nefi interrupted. "Captain Blakesley, I am Nefi, captain of the *Black Angel*. Do you know of this vessel?"

It was Crenshaw who reacted. His eyes widened, and sweat beaded on his balding skull. "Stories," he managed. "Just stories." But his voice was uncertain, and he trembled.

"Good. Our reputation precedes us." Nefi stroked her chin. Several crewmembers snickered behind her. "Lady Sarah has already collected her boxes."

Blakesley turned his attention to Sarah, surprise on his weather-beaten features.

"I still retain my family seal," she said, holding her hand up so her ring was visible. "And I kept my key. Easy enough to prove my identity." She pulled the leather thong from beneath her shirt from which the key hung. "Careless of Mr. Crenshaw, don't you think?" She placed the key and thong back inside her shirt. "But then again, Mr. Crenshaw didn't expect I would survive."

"Witch," Crenshaw muttered almost inaudibly, but Sarah heard it.

"No, not quite. Something else entirely." She glanced over at Nefi, who smiled.

"So," Nefi said to the prisoners. "Perhaps you'd like to clear your consciences about other matters?"

"Please." Blakesley reached toward her, entreating. "I'll do anything. Anything you want."

Nefi smiled even wider. "I have no doubt of that. But you obviously can't hold a contract. And I am very, very particular."

An odd elation filled Sarah at Nefi's pronouncement. As if on cue, Nefi turned her scrutiny to Sarah. "What would you have me do here?"

Sarah crossed her arms. "I seem to recall a certain island, where you and I first met."

Nefi nodded, expression unreadable, as always. The *Angel* pitched to starboard and gathered momentum. Wind snapped against the sails. She knifed through the waves, cleaving the Caribbean, a shark. Hunting. Sarah knew she should turn Blakesley and Crenshaw over to port authorities in Nassau. Knew she should feel a responsibility as a representative of a noble British family to conduct herself through the proper channels. Knew all of this. And felt none of it. How quickly we forget life, she thought, delighting in the sight of two men cowering against the mainmast, when we have been granted it forever.



The longboat's prow dug into sand, sending a jolt through the soles of Sarah's boots. Four members of Nefi's crew hauled Crenshaw and Blakesley out of the craft and dragged them, bound, onto the beach. The crew dropped them unceremoniously onto the sand and returned to the longboat, where they stood, waiting. Sarah and Nefi disembarked. Sarah drew her cutlass, turned to meet Nefi's eyes with her own. Nefi nodded. Sarah turned and strode up the beach to where the two men lay, arms bound behind their backs.

"Do you know where you are?" Sarah asked as she stood over them.

Crenshaw licked his lips, and his gaze flicked over her to the longboat, then to Blakesley. He knew. She smelled fear in his sweat, heard it in the shallow breaths that eased between his lips.

"Please," Blakesley whispered, pleading. "I didn't know. I didn't understand—"

Sarah shook her head. "You broke a contract." She pursed her lips. "I was fortunate. You are not."

The smell of urine assailed Sarah's nostrils. Blakesley had pissed himself. She saw the stain grow on his trousers and disgust mingled with anxiety in Crenshaw's eyes.

"Please." Blakesley tried again. "I'll sail with Nefi. I'll do anything she wants. Anything *you* want."

"Too late." Sarah drew her cutlass, examined its blade in the afternoon sun. "It wasn't so long ago that I, too, reclined on this beach." She held the tip of the blade to Blakesley's cheek, nicked it. He yelped and tried to move away. A thin trickle of blood slid down his jawline. Sarah watched it, transfixed by its smell. The hunt thrummed through her veins. Without hesitation, her cutlass found Blakesley's abdomen, sank deep. Sarah rammed it through his gut, through his scream, until the point buried itself in the sand beneath. She pulled it free and ran the tip of her left index finger along the blade, collecting blood. She licked her finger, and the predator within stirred. She turned to Crenshaw, who stared at her, horrified. He tried to get to his knees, out of the way of Blakesley's strangled screams and thrashing.

"I meant nothing by it," Crenshaw stammered. "It was Cap'n's orders. I was just following orders. He's a coward. I'll do right by you. I'll serve aboard the *Black Angel*." The words shot from his mouth like cannonballs from the *Queen's Rest*. They fell, useless, beneath Sarah's gaze.

"Funny, the things you think about at the moment of death," Sarah mused. "Are you afraid?"

Crenshaw bobbed his head like a puppet. "I'll do anything you want. Any kind of work. I'll serve you honorably. I swear it."

“Too late for you as well.” Sarah pressed the tip of her cutlass to Crenshaw’s abdomen. He fell backward, skittered away awkwardly like a crab. Sarah watched for a moment, amused. She moved too quickly for him to see. The blade slid into his stomach, and his eyes registered utter surprise before a harsh gasp burst from his mouth. Sarah punched the blade through, paused, and pulled it out. Crenshaw watched, agony and disbelief on his features as she again licked a finger full of blood from the cutlass. She needed to hunt, but she would not sully her tastes here. She felt Nefi at her elbow, felt another kind of hunger as she turned to look at her.

Nefi offered one of her smiles. “Shall we?”

“Please.” Sarah followed Nefi to the longboat. She did not look back.



Nefi stood on the bridge. She never had to give orders, as the crew knew exactly what to do, if something warranted doing. The sails unfurled and the warm wind filled them. The ship lurched forward, away from the island and through the crystal waters, wood creaking and sails snapping. Sarah watched the crew members on deck then turned back to Nefi, whose hair was loose today, flowing behind her. She might have been a figurehead come to life, the way she appeared.

“Ah, a long, long life at sea. Does it entice you?” She smiled enigmatically, eyes boring into Sarah’s.

Sarah smiled back. The thrum of the ship, the thud of waves against wood . . . it stirred longings in her veins reminiscent of a hunt.

“I’ve been sailing a fair amount of time,” Nefi continued, self-effacing laughter in her voice. “And I never tire of it. When I think, sometimes, that the burdens of history and the uncertainty of the future are too high a price to pay for this life, I raise the flag on the mast and head to sea. I think, Sarah, that you know what I’m talking about.” Nefi rested a hand on one of the spokes of the wheel. “It’s why you called. And it’s why I came.”

Sarah met Nefi’s eyes. She didn’t need to answer. Nefi knew. Sarah had surprised herself the day she died. Surprised herself when she accepted the final transformation. A soft English noblewoman at birth, destined to marry a soft English lord. Producing soft English offspring to bear the name for more soft nobles. And then her father’s gold disappeared. Sarah was the youngest of his brood, and he could spare no sons to find it. She volunteered immediately. She had never had an inkling of ever doing such a thing. Where had the urge come from?

Accompanied by three servants, she arrived in New Providence, where she followed buccaneers with her eyes and her longing. So unlike her. Brutish and unseemly. Merciless. Indulging pleasures of the flesh, rutting like dogs, and drinking the excesses of mortality. But so like her after all. Sarah audaciously

donned men's clothing and went to sea. The first breach. She contracted with privateers. The second. Then she learned to sail, learned the feel of a ship. It was as if she knew nothing else. The third.

She automatically took the wheel from Nefi, to whom every sea was intimately familiar, lovers all. Nefi, who came with the tides and brought Sarah a choice. A soul cached in blood. A life outside life. "I can help you," she had said, kneeling there in the sand.

And she did.



FIFTY OCTAVES DEEP

Alice Godwin

“Sisters.” She looked at each of us. “It’s time. Three days and then we dive.”

We all nodded. We’d been expecting the announcement. I looked around, eldest to youngest, the youngest being me. So alike we could’ve been septuplets, but a year separated each of us. A year and a day. That first week of March was a celebration. Now, it was the end of March and as the days became longer and the seas calmer it was time.

“We going in any direction?” Lydea drawled.

Talia smirked. “I have a very specific direction. South.”

We all gasped.

“Why?” Myrrha asked.

Talia laughed. She glanced over at Melusinia, her second, who nodded.

“Something has come to my attention. Something very special. We go to seek, retrieve, bring back.” She laughed again. “I’ll speak more when we are under way.”

There was a shimmer of anxiety that rippled down from Myrrha through the last four of us. South. That wasn’t good, I decided. Not good at all.

We dived as dawn came to contemplate the horizon and brush her shiny hair. *The Harpina*, newly scrubbed and refurbished, slid into the ocean as gently as an embrace. She was originally commissioned by our great-great-grandmother and should have been showing her age, but decades of loving care and attention kept her almost as shiny as her first voyage.

As the youngest, I had no real responsibility. I was just a glorified cabin girl who needed to be available to any or all who might need me. That first morning, I stayed with Myrrha, the cook, and helped her unpack the provisions and begin baking. Myrrha liked to be properly organised in case she was needed elsewhere. We hummed together as we rolled the pastry, my contralto to her soprano, the flour dust hanging in the air as we pummelled and kneaded.

Melusinia steered *The Harpina* due south as Lydea plotted the course, give or take a few degrees. Some nasty coral shoals protruded from the depths around these parts, but we glided between them easily. Giant mantas followed

us like lost puppies, and most days, I would see their bat-like wings darkening the portholes, their black eyes gazing in at us.

Talia still hadn't enlightened us, and each evening at seven bells, as we sat at the round table, we waited for her announcement, but it didn't come. Anticipation sat beside us like stray cats waiting for some fallen food. Glances passed between us all—except between Talia and Melusinia. Five days passed before Talia announced that we would begin netting. She looked over at Sereia.

“Just you. Let's spread a wide net and see what we can catch.”

Well, that made sense, I thought, as I ate my chowder. We were heading into some of the main shipping lanes.

I lay on my bunk bed and looked out the porthole. Three manta rays played tag alongside *The Harpina*, their long spiky tails whipping up bubbles in their wake. We weren't that deep—maybe twenty feet below the surface. The water was a viridescent green, and schools of fish skimmed by flashing silver and gold. It was relaxing, but I always found myself missing the sky.

I felt Sereia beginning, and the sound vibrated through the craft. Glass chimed and the gas lamps flickered wildly. It soared outward and pulsed through the water. The rays went wild and began to zoom around us in crazy figure-eight patterns. They swam so fast, a blur of black, and they skilfully avoided collisions in a choreographed dance that included our ship. I felt the sound move outward as ripples of music. Sereia had the best range of any of us. Subtle, yet strong. I lay back and closed my eyes, her voice taking me to places I could only dream about: castles in the air, wild storms in the wind.

Three days later, we caught our first ship, a small pleasure craft with five crew and ten guests. We found them easily. Myrrha and I joined Sereia, adding our voices to the trawl, blending so harmoniously that everyone on board that boat was doomed. It's funny how you can feel that moment. It begins with a hesitation, a tinge of indecision, and then it grows, because in the beginning, there is always a moment where escape is possible, an intuitive sense of hidden danger that, if acted upon, will save the vessel. Because once the song captures them, it's all over, as they say, and just a matter of time.

We guided their craft to one of our preferred rocky outcrops, and we felt their madness. They were drunk with it—laughing, dancing, and partying their way to death. The yacht was lit up like a beacon on the dark sea, bodies swaying together on the deck, crew and passenger intermingling, all responsibilities forgotten. Men and women dancing, men and men kissing, women and women tumbling together, their deepest desires brought to the surface. It was one hell of a way to go.

The Harpina glided on the surface just east of the yacht. All seven of us stood together now, holding hands, our long hair flowing behind us, our voices

joined together in one pure note of melody. Then as one we stopped—except Sereia, she kept on, singing the last bar, the final key that brings destruction. It soared over them as sweet as death. When it ended, silence crashed over their boat at the same moment that the jagged rocks split the hull. Within twenty seconds all that was left on the surface were floating champagne bottles and a red shawl that stained the foam like blood. We gave a prayer of thanks to the Goddess of the Seas and prepared to dive.

Our catch was small but interesting. Diamonds galore, gold and silver, crates of vintage wine, and a large telescope. I claimed that as my booty. When and where I was going to use it, I didn't know.

That night, as we sprawled guzzling cognac in the captain's cabin, Aurora and Sereia dried out some of the silk dresses they had purloined and braided each other's hair with glittering bracelets. Then, Talia decided to enlighten us all.

Her pale face was flushed in the glowing lamplight. She wore the dead skipper's braided cap, another to add to her growing collection, and she donned the brass bell above the door.

"The Necklace of Harmonia is our coveted prize."

Sereia let go of the gown that she was trying on, and it slid to the floor with a whoosh. She stood completely naked, such was her surprise.

"You're not serious?" Myrrha gasped.

"Deadly serious," Melusinia said. "We have reason to believe that it is travelling up from the deep south on a cargo boat. We intend to intercept it."

"But it's been lost for millennia." Aurora stood next to Sereia and covered her with a damp fur coat.

"And now it's been found," Talia said triumphantly.

"Are you sure?" Lydea didn't look very happy.

"We wouldn't be going if we weren't very, very positive." Melusinia glared at us.

"It's cursed," Sereia muttered. "You know it is. You've heard the stories. Why would we want this?"

"Why?" Talia looked at her and laughed. "Why do you think?"

The Necklace of Harmonia. I pondered as I lay staring at the polished wooden ceiling. I understood the allure of that. Cursed or not, it was a prize worth chasing. Forged by Hephaestus himself, this golden necklace was said to be in the shape of an amphisbaena, the jaws of its two heads clasping a golden eagle whose outstretched wings were covered in jasper, rubies, and pearly moonstone. The scales of the serpent shone with sapphires, and it was claimed that whoever wore it stayed forever young and beautiful.

Our first port of call was the island harbour of Illyria, a rather seedy town that lived on its past glories and its present ramshackle collection of bars and

brothels. Aurora and Myrrha went ashore to replenish our supplies. The rest of us stayed aboard and played pinochle.

Talia found me there losing. “Andra. You’re coming with us tonight.”

I looked up, surprised.

“You can still pass as a boy, especially with a cap pulled over your hair. Young enough to sneak around listening to conversations.”

Sereia shifted beside me. “Better you than me,” she whispered.

A spy rather than bait. At least I’d get to go ashore. I went off and prepared myself. From cabin girl to cabin boy.

The night was cloudy and chill, and the bars weren’t as crowded as I had expected. Talia and Melusinia swaggered in as a couple, ordered drinks, and made themselves conspicuous, which wasn’t hard when you stand over six feet tall and your black hair flows down to your waist, adorned with gleaming daggers. Most men were terrified of the sisters. Other pirates always treated us with distant respect, because it wasn’t good to get on our bad sides, especially at sea. I hung around the back alley, listening. I had good ears, but nothing much of interest happened. Not until we reached Scorpio’s Taverna, and, in truth, we actually didn’t enter it since a brawl spilled out the doors. At least ten men, if that’s what you could call them. They looked like rodents to me, with their knotted hair, thin pointed faces, and ragged clothes. A tangle of legs and fists and flashing knives. And the smells. Stale beer, unwashed bodies, and an underlying essence of mouldy cheese. I wrinkled my nose in disgust.

It was then we heard his whisper.

“What are three nice girls like you doing in a place like this?”

I felt Talia flinch and Melusinia slipped her favourite stiletto into her palm.

“Avoiding men like you,” Talia replied, only a slip of emotion in her voice.

His laugh curled around my neck like a warm scarf.

“Ladies, perhaps we should take ourselves to a more intimate place,” he suggested. “There’s a new tavern just around the corner.”

We followed, because there wasn’t much choice. The brawl had gathered momentum and was filling the narrow street with festive abandon. This establishment, where he suggested, was shoved against the harbour wall, a few chairs and tables huddled around a large olive tree, and from the inside the fragrant scent of patchouli and sandalwood intermingled with baking bread. A woman with a jaunty swing to her hips and a big toothy smile served us a jug of warmed mulled wine, which smelled of herbs and honey. I guessed what sort of place this was by the wink she gave the two men.

Talia stared at her ex with disdain, though, technically, I don’t think they had ever legally separated, so he probably was still her husband.

“Melusinia. Always a pleasure.” He grinned and then turned to me. “You

must be the youngest one. You were still a child when I last saw you.” He playfully pulled my cap off, and my hair tumbled out. “Andromeda, I presume.” He picked up my hand and pressed his lips against the skin.

Talia slapped his arm away. “Touch her again and I’ll have that hand as a souvenir.”

“It will go well with my heart in your little collection.” Orpheus laughed. It was his laugh I most remembered from his very brief sojourn with us. It was as though the sun had come to earth and turned itself into a sound, all heat and light, radiant and golden, and it lit up all the dark places and made them glow. It was doing that now.

Melusinia scowled and began filing her nails with her stiletto. The other man shifted in his seat. He was younger than Orpheus, maybe just a year older than me. He had dark curly hair, and when he looked at me, his eyes glowed like the sky at noon. Blue as blue could be.

“This is my cousin, Perseus.” Orpheus looked at me and winked. “Why do our parents burden us with these names?”

Talia stood up. “Time for us to go. As much as I have enjoyed this unexpected reunion, we must depart.”

He pulled her back down, and Melusinia’s dagger flashed like a star falling, a warning, Talia shook her head, and a fingernail was pared into exquisite sharpness.

“My dear wife, the tide is not high till well after dawn, and you have not even sipped your wine. It’s a delicacy. Warms the blood, quickens desire.” He leaned over and kissed her cheek. She slapped his face but he was too quick, and a passing mosquito caught the brunt of it.

“Harmonia, Harmonia. Wherefore art thou Harmonia?” He sang in his rich baritone. “The myths claim she was married not far from here.”

It was so quiet I could hear the sea lapping against the wall, soft splashy kisses as it wore away the stone ceaselessly, endlessly.

“Remember our wedding day, Talia?” He smiled at her.

“I’ve erased it from my memory,” she said scornfully, but her eyes were saying something else.

“Too painful, is it?” His voice was so low and intimate I felt I shouldn’t be listening. I stared down into my cup.

“You want pain. I’ll give you pain, lover boy,” Melusinia said as her dagger whipped the air and took a jagged slice from Orpheus’s golden locks.

It happened so fast I couldn’t even say what occurred, but Orpheus had Melusinia’s head pinned against his chest and her dagger was aimed squarely at her own throat. He’d always had good reflexes.

“I know what a nice tenor you have, so don’t make me rearrange your vocal chords. You wouldn’t sound half as pretty if I did. Understand?”

He pushed her back into her chair. Not many people got the better of

Melusinia. Talia gestured “no” to her sister. I could feel her displeasure from where I sat. It steamed the air like a mist. Orpheus tucked the purloined blade into the pocket of his jacket.

I looked at Perseus. He was sitting very still, except for the third finger of his left hand, which beat a steady pulse on the table.

“What do you want, Orpheus?” Talia asked with a sigh.

“A proposal. We combine our expertise. We are, after all, chasing the same prize. Together we could pool our information, utilise our assets.” He licked his lips as his eyes stared into Talia’s. “We could be a force of nature.”

“My sisters and I are already a force of nature. We don’t need you and your puny sidekick. I’d rather be dragged to my death by an Architeuthis than spend any time in your charming company.” Talia’s eyes flashed like black fire. They had always been a volatile couple. Not much had changed.

“Always the melodramatic one.” He leaned back and smiled. “Well, when it’s in my possession, you can ponder my offer and your refusal. It could have been a match made in Atlantis.”

Talia stood. “Word of advice, pretty boy. Get in my way and I’ll turn you into something even your own mother wouldn’t recognise. Out there on the open ocean you’re fair game, and I can play with you so gently you won’t even know until it’s too late. If you think you can escape me, think again.”

He stood up, too, his hands on his hips, cocky and confident. “I wouldn’t dream of entering your domain. I float safely above it. My ship sails the currents of the air. My tides are the winds of dawn. Your songs can’t reach me there. Although, my dear, I still dream of them. Some mornings I wake with a hard-on as big as Poseidon’s trident, and it’s then I most miss your oyster lips and your delicious kelp forest.” He laughed.

Melusinia hissed and pulled me up with her, I felt his gaze as we stalked off. He was so handsome it made me feel weak at the knees. I don’t remember having that reaction before, but then I had been just a child when he had kidnapped her and held her for ransom. Our father paid, of course. He loved the audacity of this robber prince, and then promptly agreed to their marriage. They were both so alike in their impetuous and headstrong ways—perhaps too alike. She was more serious about it all, and he was much lighter. It was only a game, he would say, but she needed to win every time. Their relationship was no doubt doomed from the onset.

We dived before dawn, Lydea grumbling that we barely had enough depth to pass out of the narrow channel. The tide was turning, so the water was murky with debris that hampered vision. Talia’s mood was as dark as Hades on a starless night and no one was arguing. Melusinia was in the armoury, sharpening up the weapons, and I had been hauled in to help. Her expression was menacing, and if she hadn’t been my sister, I would have had grave fears of ever leaving that place alive. As I polished the swords so they shone like

moonshine, I thought of the two men, Orpheus handsome and dangerous, and Perseus and his intriguing sky eyes. Most of all I pondered their airship, trying to conjure a picture of what it looked like, trying to imagine the feeling of sailing above the world on air. What would that be like? Worlds spread out far beneath you, the sea sparkling deep green or turquoise or stormy grey and the earth, multiple shades of nature from brown to grey. It set my mind spinning just trying to envision it.

Our meeting with Orpheus had added an extra dimension to our search. We dived deeper than we usually did and we didn't bother casting our nets. Down here, we might summon some creature that would destroy us more easily than we could destroy it. Instead, the eldest three huddled together till the midnight hours, poring over charts and arcane manuscripts. I was sent with Sereia to listen to the ocean and discern any unusual noises or disturbances. It was all pretty boring, and half the time I fell asleep, my head leaning against the huge copper apparatus that amplified the underwater echoes. Once, I woke with a start, certain I had heard a familiar masculine laugh. But that was impossible. Wasn't it?

We sighted a cargo ship one sunset. Lydea sent up the periscope to check its visuals, and we shadowed it through the night while devising a plan. Subtlety was the key. The waters were too deep here, and we needed to guide our quarry to one of our favoured islands about two hundred nautical miles east. The cargo ship was sailing due north, so this required some skilful handling. Sereia began singing, joined by Melusinia, who had the lowest range amongst us. She could out-bass a bass, and we needed to get very low. It was the ship's instruments we wanted to affect foremost, to change their alignment and rearrange their bearings, sending their compass on a turbulent spin to infinity. On the human scale, all those low sliding sounds brought out B-flat minor memories, the dark key of utter solitude, the angst of unbearable darkness of being. Melodies of helplessness and despair.

Eventually, Aurora and I joined in, bringing in some sweet lightness, just enough to turn the boat off its course and steer it to the centre of our web. By the time the other three added their voices, our cargo was heading to the shoals and annihilation and a shallow sandy beach, where the flotsam could congregate on gentle currents.

A perfect plan, except for the skies. We searched it regularly, but like the ocean, it was so vast that the chances of seeing his ship were slight. We all knew that it was up there somewhere, and subtle though we were, from his vantage point, Orpheus would have tracked the cargo ship's course easily and known that we were responsible for its changes in steering. Still, we worked on various options.

It was near four in the morning, darkness complete, but dawn not so far

away. We were all singing now, our rhythm slowing like a heartbeat winding down toward death. The cargo ship was an hour away from destruction. Our voices blended so mournfully that a pod of seals and dolphins swam around *The Harpina*, their bright eyes dark with tears that couldn't be shed. And then I had a moment. It comes to each of us, maybe only once in a lifetime. Such a moment came to me then. I felt a young heart—soul, really. He wasn't much older than me, and probably was the cabin boy. I was there inside him sensing his being, living his memories. So young, so many dreams that would never be attained, so many years of life that wouldn't now get lived.

I faltered, lost my place. I began to shake. Aurora sensed it and gathered me in her arms and held me. She kept singing, adding my part to hers, while I slumped against her. For a moment, I looked out of that boy's eyes and I saw the starlit skies as he lay in his hammock on the foredeck. The night was mild but he had pulled the blanket around him tight, the hammock rocking in time with the boat's movement. It was very quiet, creaking timbers and the swashing of waves against the bow the only sounds. He knew, somehow, that this was it. His prescient feeling overrode any dreams and visions that usually come to our chosen sailors in their last hours. He was immune to them, but not to us. He could feel me in his mind. Why? he asked. Why?

I had no answer. I retreated from him and fell against Aurora. It was a long time before I could add my voice to the mix, and I'm not even sure I kept the tune properly. The stars I had seen through his eyes shimmered around me, and his ship smashed against the cliffs as the sun peeked over the horizon, the sea and wind conducting the finale. We stood on the deck and watched. It was all perfectly timed and orchestrated. I held Aurora's hand because it is never an easy thing to feel a spark of humanity and then know you have obliterated it.

By mid-morning, half the cargo had washed up on the beach. We dived around the wreck and used our specially designed dragnet to haul a few more crates up to the shallows. The sharks and eels were swarming, so we left any other diving for a few days and moored *The Harpina* to begin the arduous task of sorting the booty. Talia set an around-the-clock watch of the skies. We needed to be alerted as soon as his ship appeared.

By the third day, most of the crates were sorted, and though we had quite a bounty, we hadn't found what we were really looking for. Aurora and I began diving. The boxes that lay around the wreck were much smaller. On our seventh dive, we hauled up what looked like a safe. Lydea spent an hour working on opening it until finally, the heavy door creaked open. Amongst assorted papers lay a chromium box. Melusinia sliced the lock open, and there the necklace lay on black velvet. It was so stunningly beautiful that we stood open-mouthed, staring at the golden-winged, two-headed serpent. Its scales glittered with sapphires so dark that they looked almost black, and the

eagle was regal enough to be Zeus's legendary Aquila, covered in jasper with rubies dripping like blood on its feathers.

Talia reached in, the smile on her face triumphant and tinged with an almost holy reverence. She picked it up, and she held it in her hands, lightly fingering its surface. Myrrha helped her put it around her neck, where it lay against her pale skin, catching the sunlight so it was almost too bright to look at.

We were so caught up in the moment that when a cloud drifted over the face of the sun, we didn't realise at first that it wasn't a cloud. His laugh made us register that we didn't have this beach to ourselves any longer.

I looked up and saw his airship gliding past the sun toward us. It was huge, an egg-shaped balloon that depicted, appropriately enough, Apollo riding his sun chariot across the sky. A bronze gondola clung to its underside like some organic growth. It was breathtakingly beautiful. Almost outdoing the necklace. In my eyes, anyway.

And walking across the sands with swords ready strode Orpheus, Perseus, and his retinue of Buccan-airs. I counted ten men. We were outnumbered, six of us on the beach, Sereia still within *The Harpina*, calling to the deep. But we weren't unprepared.

Orpheus laughed again. "My darling wife. How glorious you look this fine afternoon."

The airship whirred above, casting us in shadow for a moment.

We stood together, our swords and daggers ready.

"It looks divine around your pretty neck." He smiled at her.

She glared at him. "You want it. You'll have to get it off my neck first."

He shrugged. "My sweet, must it come to that? I'm sure we can negotiate something."

"Over my dead body," Melusinia growled.

"Don't tempt me, sister." To Talia he said, "I'd rather not slice your pretty neck, though. I have such pleasurable memories of kissing it."

"It's going to be the only way you get your hands on it." Talia lunged at him, slicing his cheek with her sword so a thin smear of blood welled up.

"I do love a challenge." He swung his sword around, and she caught it broadside.

And with swords slashing, the melee began. I found myself fighting Perseus, my daggers to his curved scimitar. Melusinia was taking on three of them and holding her own. I don't know what the others were doing, as I was only aware of my bare feet in the sand, my hands moving in time with his movements. The clash of metal against metal. I felt cool water washing over my toes as I led Perseus into the shallows just as Talia was doing with Orpheus. They were well matched. I caught a glimpse of them, sword against sword, perfectly balanced, her thrusting, him blocking. His lunge, her parry.

They were ankle-deep now. She was manoeuvring him backward to her ship, which rolled dangerously shallow.

On the edge of the breeze, I caught a fragment of Sereia's song, deeply melancholy, almost subliminal. It seemed to float in the waves' tidal pull like jetsam. I stared into Perseus's sky eyes and sighed, and then with a deft piece of footwork I tripped him so he fell backward into the water. With a hoot, I turned around and prodded Orpheus in the back. His waistcoat was thick leather reinforced with silver netting, and my daggers wouldn't penetrate it at all but it distracted him, so he turned toward me. Talia raced through the shallows and leaped onto the submarine's deck. Orpheus whipped around and followed, but now he was at a distinct disadvantage. She was above him, legs firm and steady, while he dealt with the churning waves around *The Harpina's* hull.

I turned around but not quickly enough. Perseus grabbed me from behind and twisted my wrists so I dropped my daggers. He had my arms pinned behind me and was trying to drag me to shore. I kicked and fought and we both fell into the waves.

While I was underwater, I felt a boom, a deep brooding sound, so low it almost didn't register aurally. It was more a vibration that resonated through my bones, like a typhoon offshore. The running tide changed its rhythm, a menacing beat beneath the waves. *It was coming.*

I stumbled to my feet and stood looking out at the sea. Perseus grabbed my ankles but I kicked him away. He cursed just before he swallowed a mouthful of seawater. I ran toward *The Harpina*. Orpheus had hauled himself up, and he and Talia were fighting on the deck. It looked more like a beautiful dance than a dangerous sword fight.

Again, I felt a boom. *It was rising.* I yelled for Aurora as I splashed through the waters. The incoming waves rose higher, like they knew he was coming, and his presence was registering on the sandy floor. And then he appeared, rising from the depths. He surged into the air, the monster Architeuthis, summoned from the deepest depth, his tentacles beating the air as his hungry eyes blinked in the bright sunlight. Water from his rising surged outward, and a wave rolled to the beach that rocked the hull of *The Harpina* so violently that both Orpheus and Talia fell to their knees. We all stopped fighting and instead stared at the monster.

"What the Hades is that?" Perseus gasped behind me.

We watched as the giant squid's tentacles lashed the air, and Orpheus ducked as one of the giant arms swung toward him. Talia ran to the hatch, and she had almost reached it when a tentacle snaked through the air and grabbed her around the waist, lifting her above the deck. Orpheus ran toward her, but she was already in the air and kicking her legs frantically. We all saw the monster's grip tighten, and she yanked the necklace off and tossed it at

Orpheus. It sailed through the air. He half-stopped, looked at it shining and spinning toward him, and he made a crucial decision.

The necklace sailed over him and fell into the sea. He could've reached up and caught it, but instead, he ran and jumped in the air, to grab Talia's hand and pull her toward him. With his other hand, he brought his broadsword down onto the thick tentacle. Black blood spurted out as he and Talia tumbled onto the deck. The monster screamed and flailed as Sereia appeared from the hatch. Her voice soared into the air, so high her range that crystal goblets nestled in their crates on the beach blew apart. The creature screamed again and then disappeared below the surface, the sea boiling and churning in its wake.

Talia lay pale and lifeless on the hull, the severed tentacle still wrapped around her waist. Orpheus threw his sword down and picked her up, struggling with the extra weight of the monster's attached appendage. Still carrying her, he jumped into the water and staggered through the churning surf until he reached the beach. Myrrha waited as he lowered Talia's body onto the sand, and the two began hacking at the thick dactylus. Finally, as we all stood watching, they loosened the tentacle's tight grip so Talia's breath moved from a shallow wheeze to a strong gasp, and colour returned to her face as her chest heaved.

Orpheus began pulling off the tentacle, sucker by sucker, and dark red marks covered Talia's waist. Blood spiked her skin as Orpheus and Myrrha pulled the sharp serrated rings of chitin off her body. She moaned in pain but at least that meant she was alive.

"Start diving," Melusinia snapped at Aurora and me.

We ran down to the shoreline and threw ourselves into the waves, headed toward the area where the necklace had fallen. Sereia stood on the deck humming quietly, scanning the horizon, but everything was quiet and peaceful. I don't know how long we dived. My breathing was ragged when we stopped and we had found nothing. We staggered to the beach where Talia was half-sitting, propped up by Lydea as Myrrha held a cup for her. Orpheus was at her side. The afternoon had turned into evening, and violet shadows tinged the high clouds.

We all waited for Talia to speak, which she finally did.

"Thank you for saving my life," she said to Orpheus.

"Any time."

Then she did something so uncharacteristic that it left us stunned. She reached for his hand and asked if he would carry her to her cabin. His smile widened.

"As you desire, my lady." He reached for her hand and pulled her to her feet, then picked her up in his arms. She winced as his hand touched her waist and then she snuggled into him. He waded to *The Harpina*, and lifted her

to the deck before he hauled himself up. Hand-in-hand, they walked where they had been sword-fighting a few hours earlier. Husband and wife again, for that moment at least, though I wondered if it had been uncharacteristic of her to invite him in. Maybe it had all been such a calculated risk. Maybe this was just part of her strategy. Or maybe it was simply that she wanted to be in his arms again.

I joined Myrrha and Sereia, who were organising food on the beach, Lydea brought out her cards and began a game of pinochle, which most of the men joined. They would all be well and truly fleeced by morning. Around us, the sky darkened into night.

Perseus and I sat on the deck and he showed me the various constellations, including our namesakes in the heavens. He seemed to know a lot about this subject, and I think it was why I came to my decision. Either that, or it was because I leaned over and thought I saw a flash of something sparkling in the dark sea.

The next two days were a holiday of sorts. Aurora and Sereia seemed to have sparked with two of Orpheus's crewmen, judging by the amount of times they paired off and disappeared somewhere amongst the sheltered coves. Talia and Orpheus barely resurfaced, spending the majority of the time below in her cabin. Lydea met her gambling match with the navigator of *The Apollo*, who stripped her to her boots before she rallied and won it all back. She had never looked so happy. Even Melusinia seemed to relax as she exchanged sword-sharpening techniques with one of the fellows she had knocked to the ground days earlier. And I spent my time with Perseus, talking about interstellar matters and stargazing when the sun went down.

But all good things come to an end, and the next sunrise saw the loading begin in earnest. It seemed that the loot was to be divided into equal halves. Very generous of Talia. but realistically, we couldn't have loaded any more onto *The Harpina*.

"We could've buried it," Melusinia grumbled as she supervised the split, but for naught.

By evening, we were all loaded up. I stared up at the airship moored above the beach, and I wondered. That night seemed a strange replay of Talia's wedding feast. Music played and couples danced. There was toasting and laughter, drinking, and storytelling. And underlying the festive feel was the bittersweet knowledge that on the morrow it would all be over, and we would go our separate ways. It was that thought that sent me to the water's edge where I lay in the foamy wash of the sea and buried my hands in the sand. Shells and crabs, dried mermaid purses, broken coral, old coins, and other flotsam gathered around my fingers.

Mid-morning we gathered to say farewell to our rivals. Orpheus and Perseus stood on the shore, but the rest of his crew had already gone up the

ladder and were preparing their ship for departure. The wind was up, and the airship was straining at its ropes. Talia gazed into the sea, maybe thinking about what she had so casually thrown away. A gamble she had taken and won. Was it a win? She had guessed correctly that Orpheus would choose her above a bauble, no matter its legend. No doubt she assumed we would retrieve it again, too. But the sea is a fickle woman and has many moods.

Orpheus kissed Talia goodbye, a long kiss that made us all stare into the sand rather than at them. Then up the swinging ladder he climbed and as he reached the top, Perseus began his ascent. I moved away from my sisters, clambered over a rock, and retrieved my two packs. Over each shoulder I hefted my belongings as I looked up at Apollo riding his sun-gold chariot. I grabbed the bottom rung of the ladder and began climbing. The telescope banged against my waist as I concentrated on each hand grasping the next rung. Below me, I heard my sisters calling, and I felt the ladder tug hard before I heard Talia yell.

“No, let her go.”

The ladder swung freely, and I almost lost my balance. I looked up and saw Orpheus, amused, looking down at me.

“A new crew member, I presume.” He laughed. “I need a cabin boy.” He reached down for my hand. “Welcome aboard.”

I grabbed his palm and stood beside him, swaying. I looked down at my sisters and *The Harpina*, which looked like a beached, bronze whale as it lolled in the shallows. My sisters. My life. The breeze blew my hair back, and I heard him gasp. I’d almost forgotten.

I pulled the necklace off and flung it down toward my sisters. It tumbled down like a bird with a broken wing, and Talia caught it in her hand.

“Andromeda! How? When?”

“Last night,” I called. “The sea washed it ashore, into my hands. A gift.”

She laughed, and it struck me that her laugh and his were really not that dissimilar. She placed the Necklace of Harmonia around her neck. Even from this height, I could see its beauty. Did I have any regrets? Perhaps if I had been older, I might have wished for the power it offered, but I was young, and I had my telescope and the glittering jewels of the heavens. And that was all I really wanted—the stars.

I stood at the doorway and looked at the beautiful green sea below and knew I was home. I heard his sigh in my ear. “Easy come, easy go? I must say, it suits her pretty neck well.”

Then he retreated and called out some orders. The ladder was pulled up and the ropes that tethered us unbound. The wind picked up our wonderful airship, and as Orpheus steered a course west, we turned and sailed away. I watched my sisters grow smaller and smaller, the island receding until it was gone.

I love my new life, and the endless blue of the day sky and the ebony and diamond of the night. Of course, there are storms and thunderclouds and lightning that play cat-and-mouse around our windows, and there are days that I miss my sisters so much the pain is almost unbearable. Still, being a cabin girl up here wasn't really so different than what it had been below. Orpheus was a good captain, and Perseus an easy companion. Life could have been worse.

Sometimes, I think I hear my sisters singing. Echoes of music drift around me, into me, coursing through my blood, seeping like smoke under my skin, the elusive intoxicating call of the sirens. Sometimes I can almost hear it. Some nights I dream of the deep and all the creatures I may never see again and I wake with salty tears on my skin. Lately, Orpheus has been experimenting with my voice to see if there is any use for it up here in the skies, but apart from summoning a large flock of unruly seagulls, it doesn't seem to be particularly beneficial. He has ambitions to combine the sky and the sea, and create a vast empire, with my sister at his side, a king of the winds with his seductive Nereids queen ruling two domains, above and below. Who knows? Stranger things have come to pass.



HMS NEFARIOUS

Rod M. Santos

Wilomena Hardwicke, captain of HMS *Persistence*, wanted nothing more than to scratch the skin chafing under her blasted eyepatch. She didn't dare—not on deck before her men, themselves disguised as pirates. If this charade had any prayer of success, her example had to be irreproachable.

The only concession she'd made was getting rid of the parrot. Though quite content to sit on her shoulder, the bird had the abdominal fortitude of a dysentery victim. Whatever food it ate was transmuted—as if touched by some pestilent philosopher's stone—into diarrhea. Worse, the bird squawked “Dropping anchor!” every time it had a movement. Hardwicke did not care to know where it learned that particular habit.

This masquerade, of course, was not her first. Everyone currently believed her to be *Willoughby* Hardwicke, a reclusive noble who recently purchased a captaincy by commission. The latter part was true enough. Long had the Navy's exclusion of women irked her. Was she not any man's equal in swordplay and seamanship?

Fluttering in the sea breeze, the Union Jack slowly descended from its post. It was soon swapped by a more ominous fellow—the Jolly Roger, its bony smile bared above crossed cutlasses. Jack for Roger, she mused.

Several cheers of “Huzzah!” went up but were silenced under Captain Hardwicke's gaze. “You are pirates now, gentlemen. Ye'd best be acting the part.”

The cheers were replaced with muted “yarrs,” and the captain favored them a curt nod.

To the west, the horizon burned red with the failing sun. The ocean mirrored the sunset, the waves bloodied by the light. If she were more superstitious, she would have taken it for an ill omen. But men made their own fortunes, she knew, and bold men—and women—forged legacies.

If everything went right, she would be remembered forever as the one who'd caught Redbeard, the fiercest pirate ever to terrorize the High Seas. In time, her name would become legend.

She squinted at the ominous red sun. Legends, she assured herself, had no use for superstition.



The seeds for this ambitious ploy were planted a week ago, and it was Hardwicke's first lieutenant who was the sower.

A dire report had reached them: a merchant schooner, along with its light frigate escort, had been scheduled for the port of Larkston. Neither ship ever arrived.

The closest Royal Navy vessel—the *Persistence*—was sent to investigate. The sky had been fair, so weather could not be blamed for the disappearances. Piracy was a sensible assumption.

Then, there were the recent sightings to take into account—Redbeard had been spotted. Cruel, fearless, the pirate's reputation alone cut deeper than any blade. Reports placed the pirate's ship, the *Black Spot*, within leagues of the vicinity.

That night, Hardwicke was approached by her first lieutenant, Nigel Stratford, the sort of chap who devoured books as part of his dietary regimen. His quarters were a veritable library.

"There are reported cases," the young lieutenant said as he cleaned his spectacles, "of pirates flying the flags of friendly nations, to draw ships in close enough to be boarded."

"What are you proposing, Mr. Stratford?"

"That we reverse the tactic. Let the sheep wear the *wolf's* clothing. Have you never wanted to play pirate, Captain?"

"I can assure you I haven't." But even as she said the words, she felt a quaint thrill ripple through her body.

Lieutenant Stratford pressed on. "Redbeard sails a three-masted frigate, twenty-four guns, manned by a complement of near two-hundred cutthroats. The only way our sloop could approach without being blown apart is guile."

"That might get our ship close. Pray tell, what follows after?"

"We have fewer cannons, but some well-placed volleys could cripple them from the start. And we disguise ourselves. Get aboard, sow confusion."

The captain recalled the excited stirrings she'd felt as she listened to Stratford's idea. In truth, she had many misgivings. Too much could go wrong. At their present speed and course, however, they had days to reach the waters where the merchant ship had last been seen.

Surely enough time to iron out the details.



As the days passed, more cracks in the façade appeared. Despite her admonishments, the men's posture, gait, and bearing were too polished, too civilized. They would forget not to salute her. Their "Arrr's" sounded like "Arrgh's."

The captain cursed herself for forgetting a simple fact. The men were sailors, not thespians. Indeed, the one man among them with any theatrical skills was her second lieutenant, Doyle Bodgers, who proved himself a magnificent ham. Mr. Bodgers had tackled the role with enthusiasm—too much for the captain’s liking—and had sewn himself a matching ensemble of garters, bandeau, boots, neckerchief, and cape. Where he found the materials—a striking violet hue—the captain was afraid to ask.

“Does it not shout ‘stage costume?’” Hardwicke asked him in the privacy of the captain’s quarters.

“Full pirate regalia. Impressive, yes?”

“Perhaps so, Mr. Bodgers. I simply question that pirates would ever choose a design so . . . delicate, if I dare use the word.”

“I prefer ‘effete,’” Mr. Bodgers said. He tacked a melodious “Arrr” to the end of his reply, as a gesture of compromise.

“Mr. Bodgers—”

“Begging your pardon, sir, I must insist you call me by me pirate name.”

“That would be?”

“Chumbucket Doylee.”

A wave of vertigo weakened the captain’s normally sturdy sea legs.

“Sir, are you all right?”

“I . . . require a moment alone. Dismissed.” She winced as Mr. Bodgers practically bounced out of the room.

Risks and rewards, the captain reminded herself, *are always served on the same platter*. If only the tray were more balanced. Pausing, she found she made quite the same wish about her second lieutenant.



The captain knew they neared the site of the attack by the amount of flotsam in the waters. Hopes of finding survivors faded as their search continued through the day. The mood on the *Persistence* darkened considerably.

Hardwicke could only guess that the two ships had resisted. Redbeard had not achieved infamy by being merciful.

That evening, a loud knock rattled Hardwicke’s door.

“Enter,” she called out, after restoring her eye patch to its proper place.

Lieutenant Stratford strode in. “Sir, you may wish to speak with Mr. Bodgers.”

“What now?” the captain asked. The sight of the wreckage had left her in foul humor, and she could feel the dark squall of a headache starting to brew.

“Some of the men are complaining about the massages.”

“The what?”

“Mr. Bodgers claims that pirates like to give each other massages. He’s been holding mandatory workshops at night. When I told him there was no record of such, he told me that just because something wasn’t in my books didn’t mean it wasn’t true. He said that if I continued to jeopardize the ship’s morale, he would challenge me to a pirate duel.”

“He threatened you?” The captain’s surprise flashed like lightning through her headache.

“Not exactly. His version of the duel involved belaying pins, spare rigging, and pails of water.”

“Where the bloody hell is he getting this information?”

“His imagination has always run a bit fancifully, sir.” Stratford paused. “To be fair, only some of the men complained. The others quite seemed to enjoy the massages.”

The captain clenched her jaw so hard, her molars were in danger of bursting. For the first time since they began this venture, Hardwicke’s despair threatened to drown her usual optimism. “This, *this*, is what we’re going to fight Redbeard with? Good Lord above. We should save him the trouble and slit our own throats.”

They both knew the rumors of why Redbeard’s grizzled beard was red. If a ship resisted his demands, the consequences were fatal for all on board. His favored method of execution for officers was the Red Smile—a dagger’s slice from ear to ear, curving across the throat. As the poor sap was dying, he would give the victim a kiss—the Red Kiss, he called it—until blood and gore drenched his beard.

This is the type of barbarian we are pitted against. How can any civilized man fight against that?

“Faith, sir. Surprise shall firmly be on our side.”

Surprise at our incompetence, perhaps. “Thank you, Mr. Stratford.” The tension of her headache invaded her shoulders and showed no signs of breaking. She turned on her heel and set off to find Bodgers, debating whether she should put an end to the massages or ask for one.



Events on the seventh day confirmed several of the captain’s doubts about their disguises. A call of “Pirate spotted!” was shouted from the lookout above.

The captain saw no ship in sight, but the midshipman in the crow’s nest pointed to a small island. Its population consisted of a single, scraggly palm tree and an even more wretched pirate sitting in the paltry shade.

As they got closer, the pirate waved them in. Hardwicke was instantly suspicious, but looking about, saw no place other pirates could lie in ambush.

“Ahoy, there,” Hardwicke shouted from the deck.

“Ship ahoy,” the pirate called back. His skin hung almost as loosely as the rags he wore.

Hardwicke fought to keep her voice deep, raw, and guttural. “And what be ye doing out here alone?”

“Marooned. Abandoned like a bottle emptied of grog. And who do I have the pleasure of speaking with, if I might inquire?”

“Captain Patch Hardwicke.”

Bodgers shouted out, causing the captain to flinch. “Arrr. We be pirates. I’m second lieutenant Chumbucket Doylee.”

The pirate smiled, showing a line of filmy teeth. “I’m sure ye are. Must be somethin’ wrong with me deadlights, for I’d near mistaken ye for king’s men. Might y’tell me which fine ship this is yer sailin’?”

Simultaneously, the answers of “*The Nefarious*,” “*The Donnybrook*,” and “*Bloody Entrails*” were shouted.

The captain glared at her two lieutenants. After hours of discussion last night, she had thought they’d come to a consensus on the most fear-inspiring name for their ship. Obviously, they had not.

The pirate’s laughter grated like a saw. “’Tis a mighty complicated name that requires three men to speak it.”

“And yer own name, matey?” the captain asked, growing impatient.

“Far simpler. You may call me Bones Benedict.”

The captain could not keep her eyebrow from rising above the patch. *Redbeard’s quartermaster. What the devil is he doing here?*

Bones Benedict continued, “If ye’d be so kind as to drop the theatrics and speak yer normal speech. I’ve always found the British tones quite lulling.”

“Arrr?” the second lieutenant asked.

“Abandon the pretense, Mr. Bodgers,” the captain said.

“Chumbucket,” the lieutenant whispered.

“Abandon the pretense, or I shall leave you here with this unsavory villain.”

Mr. Bodgers turned pale.

Hardwicke gave the marooned pirate a half-smile. “It appears you have seen through our deception. Very good, then. You may share that knowledge with your Davy Jones when he visits.” The captain turned away. “Set sail. Let the devil take this man, if anything is left by the scavengers.” She did not wait to see the pirate’s reaction, afraid her bluff would be as transparent as her pirate disguise.

“Wait,” cried Bones Benedict. “Ye needn’t be hasty. Might be I have more value than ye see. I know where Redbeard is.”

“What makes you think that would be of interest?”

The captain could not hear the sound, but from the smile and the quavering chest, she knew the pirate was chuckling.

“Perhaps it be, and perhaps not. Meself, I’m thinking we can enter a mutually profitable partnership.”

In the pause that followed, Hardwicke weighed peril against profit. “Wash him up,” the captain finally ordered, “and bring him aboard.”



Bones Benedict’s smile was a skeletal thing. Hardwicke wondered if she were speaking to the Jolly Roger’s inspiration. Nearby, Lieutenant Stratford watched the prisoner like an osprey.

“Where is Redbeard?” Hardwicke asked.

“The wrong question, laddie. Ye should be asking first what he wants.”

“He’s a pirate,” Hardwicke said. “What he wants is obvious.”

Benedict shook his head. “Keep thinking all pirates are alike and ye’ll win yerself a Red Kiss.”

The captain studied the man across from her, taking his measure. “Very well, what does Redbeard want?”

“Immortality.”

The captain frowned. “What?”

“I don’t mean cheating death. I mean becoming a legend.”

Hardwicke was shocked to hear that her enemy’s goal echoed her own daydreams. “Go on.”

“He seeks to create a treasure trove, a hoard no other pirate would ever surpass.”

“How does he seek to do this?”

“Ahh, I’ll tell ye all . . . for a price.”

The captain kept her expression cool. “What do you wish?”

“Some grub and grog, fer starters. Some cackle fruit, hardboiled. That’ll put me in the mood to sing a little shanty about a pirate named Captain Seagrave.”

Stratford spoke up. “He’s referring to a pirate dead a half-century now. Seagrave had an uncanny talent for finding treasure. Some even called it supernatural.”

Bones Benedict sat up stiffly. “How’d ye know all that, matey?”

The captain snorted. “You’ll find that civilized people take to all manner of useful habits. Reading, for instance. Go on, Mr. Stratford.”

“There’s not much more. Seagrave’s own treasures were looted by others. Where his body’s buried, no one knows.”

“Har, it seems yer books be missing pages. Redbeard knows where the body is. And whoever finds the body is promised the Devil’s Lode.”

Hardwicke looked over to her lieutenant whose shrug was almost imperceptible. “A myth, Captain.”

“A lodestone of great power,” the pirate explained. “It’ll enchant any compass created with it. The bearer need only ask a question that can be answered by a direction, and the needle points the way. Think of it. He’d know the safest passages, the position of his enemies and his prey.”

Stratford sniffed derisively. “There was clearly not enough shade on your little island, Mr. Benedict, for the sun has scorched your wits.”

Hardwicke stopped her lieutenant with a raised hand. “It needn’t be true, Mr. Stratford. What counts is that Redbeard believes it.”

“Aye, he does,” Bones Benedict said. “He’s as superstitious as they come, as is most of the crew of the *Black Spot*.”

“And yourself?”

The pirate smiled. “I’m of a more practical mind.”

The captain took this all in. “I fear you’ve played a poor game. You’ve shown your hand, and now have nothing to barter with.”

“Too true, too true, I’ve nothing more to offer. Except yer lives. If ye couldn’t fool me with yer act, ye won’t be foolin’ Redbeard. And there’s still the matter of finding him.”

“What do you want in return?” Stratford interjected.

“Why, me life, of course. And a pardon. But most importantly, a ship to call me own.”

“Very good,” Hardwicke said. “I can ask the king to throw in the Crown Jewels as well. And might some fresh, roasted babies be to your liking?”

“Don’t mock. I’m offering me services.”

“Services? What services of yours could we possibly require?”

“A tutor. As it stands, yer only hope to pass as pirates would be if Redbeard has taken to wearin’ two eye patches. And then, only if ye muzzle that Chumbucket fool.”

“You’ve given your list of demands. Here is my list of conditions. If you teach us to become pirates, well enough to fool Redbeard, and *if* I am still alive, my ship and crew whole, Redbeard dead or detained, then I will do what is within my power to help you gain a pardon. Perhaps even a ship to call your own.” The captain did not add that she lacked the authority to grant either of those things.

Bones Benedict cackled. “On that island, I could feel Jones’s grip on my throat. I hope I can trust ye, even if it’s just a wee bit more than Jones. If ye keep yer word, I’ll keep mine.”

“One last question. You were Redbeard’s man. Why should we believe you’d betray him?”

“Betrayal for betrayal. Though I should warn ye I won’t lift a finger to spill his blood. That much I owe him.”

“What did you two fight over?”

“He wanted to put an end—”

“An end to what?”

Embarrassment flashed over Bones Benedict’s face. “The massages. Now do we have a deal?”

The captain put out her hand, and the pirate shook it.



The presence of a real pirate invigorated the men. The crew took to their schooling with remarkable enthusiasm, so much so that the captain reminded them daily they were still servants of the empire.

Their first lesson happened at night and consisted of Bones Benedict getting the men drunk. The goal wasn’t the actual inebriation, he told the captain, but the consequent hangovers.

“Will put them in the proper frame of mind,” Bones chimed.

Sure enough, the next day saw the men as wobbly as any landlubber. No one was excused from his duties, and they soon achieved the appropriate state of surliness.

“Remember this disposition, mateys,” Benedict ordered. “Yer lives may depend on it.”

Over the next week, the lessons intensified. For every desired effect, the pirate employed some unorthodox method. The men attained the proper facial expressions by snorting gunpowder, the appropriate voice by gargling vinegar, and the correct stagger by having their breeches starched.

At no point were they allowed to break from their roles. At night, they practiced giving each other stares so cold, they could make ice shiver.

Amazing, Hardwicke thought, as she saw the wild transformation come over her men. This might actually work.



A mist fell overnight, eerie and thick. The captain worked hard not to let the strange fog dampen the men’s spirits, and in this endeavor, Bodgers proved himself pivotal.

“You can’t ask the men to suppress their fear,” he told the captain, “or it will simply fester. They have to feel their fear, but let them *feel* it in a controlled manner.”

The captain watched as Bodgers, standing on the main deck, enacted a cycle of ghost stories—tales of haunted ports, of beautiful blood-sucking sirens, of skeleton crews sailing becalmed seas.

A spark ignited in Hardwicke’s mind. She found Bones Benedict and pulled him aside.

“How close are we now to your base?”

“A week. I can almost smell it.”

“And you’re familiar with this area? Are there are any reefs or rocks we need worry over?”

“If the fog were gone, ye’d see for yerself that the sea is clear.”

“And how sure are you that Redbeard is crossing this way?”

The pirate looked up as he did some mental calculations. “By now, he’s found Seagrave’s bones, which legend says will bestow the Devil’s Lode. He’ll be ahead of us some ways, going back to the base to stock up before his tour of plunder.”

“Can we overtake him?” The sloop was not as formidable as Redbeard’s *Black Spot*, but it would be much faster.

“Perhaps.”

“Very good,” the captain said. “We need to reach Redbeard before he gets back to his base.” Without explanation, she strode off to find the ship’s cook.



Hardwicke could only imagine what Redbeard must have thought as he watched their sloop break through the fog. In truth it was a close call, both ships nearly colliding, but her luck held true.

This is it, thought the captain. She stood on deck looking similar enough, she hoped, to the long-dead Captain Seagrave. It had been a concerted effort: Stratford’s history books, Bodgers’s costuming skills, and Bones Benedict’s inside knowledge. Surprisingly, the dead pirate had been a slight man, whose savagery had tamed his men wholly without the benefit of an intimidating stature.

Hardwicke walked with a pronounced lurch, wore a studded eye patch, and kept a bottle of rum tucked in her pocket. The pirate, legend stated, drank so often that he would bleed rum when cut.

With no small trepidation, the captain allowed the incontinent parrot to perch on her shoulder once more. Seagrave, it seemed, had a pet named Bloodfeather, which he was never seen without. At least she did not have to worry about her clothes getting soiled. She had borrowed Bodgers’s regalia—with a few alterations—and the whole ensemble was sprinkled with flour that the cook had reluctantly surrendered.

The sailors, too, were sprinkled with flour, turning them into a fearsome ghost crew. As a final touch, lanterns hung securely from the masts, creating the effect of floating corpse-lights.

“Redbeard,” the captain shouted. In the silence of the mists, the echoes rebounded ominously.

A figure on the deck of the *Black Spot* turned. “Who calls me?”

“Do ye not recognize Captain Seagrave?”

The silhouette of Redbeard stood in silence. Hardwicke did not fail to notice how huge a profile the fearsome pirate cut.

“Come with me, Redbeard, and I shall show ye riches not even hinted in yer dreams.”

“The Devil’s Lode?” Redbeard asked.

It was Hardwicke’s turn to stand silent. Either Bones Benedict had miscalculated or Redbeard had failed to obtain the artifact he hunted.

“Aye,” Hardwicke yelled. “The Lode. And more.”

“Swear the oath that no harm shall come to me, and I will go aboard.”

The captain felt tugging from behind her. It was Bones Benedict. “Repeat after me,” he whispered, and the captain did. The oath was a jumble, mixing the ideals of pillaging and freedom with nonsense phrases about wannions and fiddling wenches. She sighed in relief when it was over, and sighed again when Redbeard left the deck. A longboat dropped portside of the *Black Spot* and headed toward the *Persistence*.

Could it really be this easy? the captain wondered, as she stood bathed in the glow of the ghostly lanterns.



When the longboat neared, a rope ladder was dropped, and the pirate climbed to the deck. Up close, Hardwicke was unnerved by the pirate captain’s hulking presence. His face was rough and ragged like coral, and his notorious beard—wild, snarled, monstrous. Hardwicke wondered how many men’s blood had drenched that matted tangle. In one meaty hand, the pirate dragged a large canvas bag.

Redbeard’s reaction was one of awe as he looked at the “spirits” around him. The flour they all wore created a sinister effect in the ghostly mist and lighting.

Hardwicke saw her crew giving the cold stares they’d practiced these last few days. Seeing their contorted, terrible visages, she’d never been more proud.

“I’ve come, then,” Redbeard said, “to forge anew where yer voyage ended and to carve upon the sea a path of blood and fire. What say ye?”

The parrot squawked, “Dropping anchor!”

Hardwicke froze like a statue, forced herself not to react to the splash on her shoulder. “Aye, we shall drop anchor in a sea of blood!”

Oblivious, Redbeard continued, “And that sea will spread, red rivers coursing down the land.”

“Dropping anchor!” the parrot said again, and a second plopping sound echoed in the mists.

Hardwicke nodded desperately. “Aye, dropping anchor in coursing rivers.”

Redbeard’s voice grew louder. “And the rivers shall water the soils, and the earth shall bear vile fruit.”

The parrot flew up to perch on Hardwicke’s head. Her eyes widened.

“The vilest fruit!” she agreed. A hard swat sent the parrot flying. It shrieked in protest and fluttered up to the foremast.

When Hardwicke sensed Redbeard’s puzzlement, she quickly gestured to the canvas bag that Redbeard held. “Reveal what ye carry,” she ordered, though she had a grisly idea what it would be.

“The tales claimed that when I found yer remains, I would inherit the Devil’s Lode. But until ye arrived, I thought the tales wrong, for all my efforts have left my hands empty.” He opened the bag and poured out its contents.

Bones clattered, broken pieces, the last of which was a cracked skull complete with an eye patch. Upon seeing the remains, Bodgers promptly shrieked and fainted.

Time seemed to slow, and everyone looked at each other.

When Redbeard finally realized that ghosts shouldn’t faint, his roar broke through the silence. “Who are ye?”

Hardwicke knew when to quit. She threw off her cape and straightened. “My name is Captain Willoughby Hardwicke of the King’s Royal Navy, and you are under arrest for the crime of piracy.”

Redbeard’s cutlass flashed out in an eye-blink. He looked around, flushed with anger. “Ghosts you dress as. *Ghosts ye’ll be.*”

Hardwicke’s heart raced. It was unlikely Redbeard could escape. Even so, if a fight broke out, Hardwicke knew she would lose crewmen’s lives to this ogre’s ferocity. Up till now, she had thought herself the equal to any navy captain, but her tongue hesitated to give the command to attack. Could she order anyone to their death if it were possible to avoid it?

Redbeard’s body tensed to charge.

Hardwicke had no more time to deliberate. “A duel,” she shouted. “A duel, then, captain to captain.”

She looked to her crew. “That is an order. None of you are to cross blades with this man. If he wins, you will let him leave.”

Redbeard’s laughter shook the masts. Without another word he rushed forth, and the battle was joined. From the first clash, the two fought with all the martial skills in their repertoire. Hardwicke countered the pirate’s strength with speed, his savagery with training, his bloodlust with discipline.

As the fight raged, the pirate’s superior endurance began to tip the scale. Where Hardwicke was fighting for breath, the pirate’s face beamed, absent of any weariness. His feral smile could have curdled blood.

The pirate pressed again. Their bodies were so close Hardwicke feared it would devolve into a wrestling match, a fight she would surely lose. Redbeard started moving them toward the rail, his strategy clearly to force her overboard.

For a moment, their swords locked, and their gazes as well. Hardwicke caught the brutal glee in Redbeard’s eyes, but refused to blink. He saw

something as well, something Hardwicke had given all her effort to hide these past weeks.

“You’re a woman!” The villain bellowed a laugh.

She forced herself to ignore the smattering of gasps around her. A few steps behind her, she knew the railing waited, and beyond that the cold, cruel sea. As Redbeard renewed his assault, Hardwicke’s elbow brushed against something in her jacket pocket, and when she realized what it was, she reached to grab it.

Her free hand yanked out the bottle of rum, and she promptly smashed it into the pirate’s face. The glass shattered, carving a deep gash and abruptly washing away Redbeard’s smile. Blood streamed down to mingle with the rum already soaking his beard. Hardwicke suspected it was the first time Redbeard’s own blood had ever touched that knotted hair. A mad thought flashed into her mind.

“Do you know the difference between Earl Grey and rum?” she asked.

“Tea is for biscuit-eaters,” Redbeard roared.

Hardwicke lunged, but the pirate parried it with a clang.

“Wrong,” she said. She followed up with a furious flurry of attacks, the last of which the pirate deflected into one of the hanging, ghostly lanterns.

Just as she had planned. Her blade, alight with the lamp oil, slashed out.

Redbeard was too quick, throwing himself back a handsbreadth out of harm. His long beard, however, trailed a second behind him. He smiled contemptuously until wisps of smoke rose before his eyes.

“Rum,” Hardwicke said, “is flammable.”

The pirate’s beard blazed up like oiled tinder. Hardwicke lashed out, her exhausted arm weaving and bobbing until once, twice, thrice, her blade cut true.

With his face on fire, Redbeard screamed like a demon in torment. The pirate swung his cutlass blindly and only stopped when Hardwicke ran him through. The pirate dropped, taking Hardwicke’s blade with him. He moaned deeply one last time, then fell forever silent.

The men raised a small cheer, and the captain tried to calm both her racing heart and racing mind. Hesitantly, she removed her eye patch, not quite sure when the bloody thing had stopped itching.

Sudden insight sparked, and her breath caught. She leapt to where Captain Seagrave’s remains lay, and she knelt by the bones. Holding the skull with one hand, she ripped off the eye patch with the other, and there in the socket, as tempting as Eve’s apple, was a metal-gray lump.

The Devil’s Lode.

Faster than Hardwicke could react, a white squawking shadow flew by and snatched the Lode out of the skull. Hardwicke’s head snapped up in time to see the parrot swallow the Lode in one noisy gulp.



To their relief, the *Black Spot* didn't pursue them. Bones Benedict had vanished during the melee, apparently taking the longboat back to the *Black Spot*. Hardwicke suspected he had gotten a ship to call his own, after all.

Far more shocking was that the men did not mutiny upon learning her gender. "We saw how you fought Redbeard," her smiling lieutenants had told her. "Do you really think any of us would stand against you?"

She was grateful for small miracles, at least. Though if she was able to adapt first to being a pirate, then to embracing superstition, then she needn't have been surprised that her crew could change their views as well. Perhaps the secrets to accepting change were simply time and motivation.

A sudden squawk brought her attention to the present.

"I've tried rubbing metal fibers across its belly, sir," Stratford said, "but to no avail."

Indeed, everything they'd tried these last several days had been just as ineffective. "A myth, you said, Mr. Stratford, and I'm sure you were correct."

The lieutenant frowned. "I have been wrong before, sir."

The parrot squawked, as if agreeing. Hardwicke scowled at the bird. "Weeks now it's been evacuating its stomach contents quite generously. A perfect time for it to somehow get constipated."

"Strange to say, but the Lode's actually done wonders for the bird's digestion."

Before Hardwicke could respond, there was a loud knock on the door, and Mr. Bodgers bounded in.

"Captain, sir—er, ma'am—we've sighted a small pirate vessel."

"Which direction?" Hardwicke asked, and no sooner had she done so than the parrot, wings flailing, spun around on her desk. It stopped abruptly, wings outstretched and beak pointed north by northeast.

For a moment, the three of them only stared.

"Gentlemen," Hardwicke finally said, "I believe we have in our possession the world's first magical, feathered compass."

"What are we going to do?" Stratford asked.

"We are in the service of the King. And if there's a pirate that needs stopping, then by God and country, there's one ship that will be up for the job."

"The *Donnybrook*?" Stratford asked.

"The *Bloody Entrails*," Bodgers corrected.

Captain Hardwicke bit her lip.



PIRATE WANNABE

Aubrie Dionne

“I don’t want to go to another maritime museum.” Clare finally said it out loud. She was working on being more assertive, and it took the entire two-hour drive to get that out.

“Come on, Clare. Stop complaining. This one has a pirate display, complete with swords, a restored cannon, and reenactments. Besides, we’re almost there. It’s really neat, and you’re going to enjoy it.”

Clare added in her head, *whether I like it or not*. Tara was obsessed with pirates. Ever since those silly movies came out, she’d been dragging her to every pirate event in New England.

“You’re not going to make me dress up and act anything out this time, are you?”

Tara laughed. “Not if you don’t want to, no. I’m more interested in the legend of Ravishing Robert, dashing Pirate King of the Seven Seas.”

“Oh, no, here we go again. Not another lusty pirate.”

Tara parked the car, and Clare saw a dingy little building on the coast, barely able to be called a house, much less a museum. It probably had been someone’s home once, and now they gave tours to people with strange pirate fascinations.

Clare quit whining and followed Tara to the front porch. They were greeted by a mousy woman in her forties with graying brown hair and glasses twice the size of her beady eyes.

Tara spoke first. “Hello, we’re looking for the curator of the Isle of Shoals Maritime Museum.”

“You must be Tara Wardly.” The woman smiled. “Come on in. The tour starts in twenty minutes.”

“Wonderful!” Tara was practically jumping with enthusiasm as she pulled Clare into the museum lobby. “You wait here while I buy the tickets.”

Already bored beyond belief, Clare occupied her time by studying the paintings on the wall. They all looked the same to her—boats and ocean, sea storms and wind gusts—except for one. At the end of the hallway hung a portrait of a young man with a black cloak, a jeweled head scarf, and a glint in

his eye. Clare stopped in front of the painting and stared, despite her disdain of anything pirate.

He was swooningly handsome, she'd give him that, but he also seemed mischievous and sly. His suntanned face and dark-brimmed eyes revealed a vibrant spirit with an insatiable wanderlust. Someone with a taste for adventure who wasn't afraid to confront his own fears.

"That's him," Tara said, coming up behind her. "The Pirate King of the Seven Seas."

"What happened to him?" Clare asked, surprised by her curiosity.

"He was double-crossed by his first mate, Snake-Eyed Sam, in the Battle of Minorca, near the Balearic Islands in the western Mediterranean."

Tara took a step closer, peering into the painting as if it would bring her closer to him.

"He was going to rendezvous with another ship, the *Gusto*, when Snake-Eyed Sam gave away their ship's coordinates and turned him in. His ship was taken in the middle of the night by the crew of the *Gusto*, and he was stabbed in the back."

Clare suppressed a shudder, and goose bumps tickled her skin. "No way."

"Yes, way. Those pirates were brutal, let me tell you."

"But to betray his captain? That Snake-Eyed Sam must have been one hell of a ruffian."

"You're telling me. He went on to become the nastiest pirate of all the Seven Seas, murdering for no reason and pillaging town after town. At least Robert had a moral code. He wouldn't fight against defenseless people, and he wouldn't take what wasn't rightfully won."

A few others had joined them in the lobby as Tara told Robert's tale. The mousy tour guide began to collect tickets at the gate.

"Looks like the tour's about to start," Tara said with excitement.

Clare followed her to the group. Tara pushed her way to the front, already asking questions that Clare knew the curator wouldn't be able to answer. Clare watched from afar, a straggler in the back.

They passed rotting wooden planks, a few chipped coins, and a porcelain tea set from the 1750s. Clare wondered if she could sleep standing up. But every time she closed her eyes, the tour pressed on, and she had to find another position, lest she be left behind. Tara would make her walk the plank herself if she was caught drifting off.

As the curator rambled on about eighteenth-century politics and trade negotiations, an object in the far corner of an adjoining room caught her eye. Slipping away unnoticed, Clare tiptoed into the hallway and snuck through the half-open door to another room.

There was a sword stuck into a mast, protruding like King Arthur's sword in the stone. Clare read the plaque beside it:

Ravishing Robert's Sword. Found at the bottom of the western Mediterranean, circa 1765. This mast is rumored to be his last target before he perished, stabbed in the back by Sam Whitaker, otherwise known as Snake-Eyed Sam.

Clare was impressed with Tara's accuracy. She knew her pirates better than Clare knew the presidents of the United States. History was all dusty has-beens and old news for Clare. But, for some unfathomable reason, the sword stirred desires in her that no other museum artifact had ever done.

The hilt gleamed, decorated as it was with chips of rubies and sparkling emeralds. Silver ridges etched the hilt, the blunt end engraved in gold with Ravishing Robert's seal. Clare had a bizarre urge to touch it.

She'd never broken the rules in her life, and was especially respectful in museums, however boring she found them. But this particular artifact called to her like a box of chocolates on Valentine's Day.

Maybe it was the fact that it belonged to such a handsome man, or maybe it was one museum too many and all the boredom had piled up to drive her insane. Perhaps it was all those self-help videos about developing confidence and asserting yourself she'd drudged through. Whatever the case, Clare did the unthinkable. She stepped over the velvet cord that surrounded the exhibit and grasped the hilt in her hand.

The metal was as cold as the grave. She wrapped her fingers around the gigantic handle. It resonated in her head like a tuning fork hit with a metal rod. *Release me*, it sang to her, *free me from this prison*. Clare furrowed her brows and tried giving it a yank. The blade was wedged tightly into the mast. She wondered if the curators had ever tried to take it out, or if they'd left it for antiquity's sake. She gave it a few more test yanks before she braced her feet against the wood and began to seriously pull, straining the muscles in her back.

The wood of the mast would not let go. She tried to jiggle it back and forth to loosen the hold of the rotting oak and with another tug, the blade sprang forth suspiciously easily and Clare fell back in surprise. She flailed her arms, but the metal was heavy and dragged her back with it as it flung away from history's grasp.

Clare tumbled and smacked her head on the marble pedestal of another exhibit. The last thing she remembered was the clang of the metal hitting the floor.



It seemed like an eternity passed in the space of a few dark moments. Clare opened her eyes and saw an endless slate of pewter. Water sloshed

somewhere around her, and her stomach heaved. Was the ground level? Clare tried to raise her head, but a sharp pain ran down her back, and she stopped. She suspected she had a large bump on the back of her head, and she guessed it would be a while before she could stand.

But why was she outside? Had Tara dragged her out to get fresh air? Where was everybody? Why would they leave a wounded tour guest out near the ocean on some wooden platform that resembled a . . . wait.

The ground rose and came down again. It felt like she was floating, but not on air, on water. Someone had dragged her aboard a ship. A memory of Tara and a water bucket tied to a door came back to her. Her friend was known for pulling pranks on her, before her obsession with pirate history. What if Tara caught her messing around with the exhibits and wanted to teach her a lesson?

But this would be overdoing it. With her head hurting like it was, she might have a concussion. It was hardly time to be pulling stunts.

Clare decided that it was important for her to raise her head no matter how much it hurt. After counting to three, she sat up and blackness spread behind her eyes. Her stomach pitched, and she squeezed her eyes shut until the feeling passed.

When she opened her eyes again, she saw wooden planks, a railing, and a man dressed very much like a pirate behind the steering wheel. She was on the deck of an antique ship. Somehow, she must have stumbled into a reenactment. Maybe they saw her keeled over in the museum and thought she was part of the show.

Whatever it was, she was in no mood for pirate antics. She was fed up with old ships, magic swords, and tragic history. She needed to get to a hospital and have her head examined.

Clare tried to stand, but the deck swayed, and she had to crawl to the railing for support. Clinging to the carved wood, she looked down into the water and all she saw was endless blue. In fact, there was no land in sight. Only waves stretching out to the horizon. How far was the ship off shore?

Clare righted herself and started across the deck when the man at the wheel turned. He had slimy, dark, thinning hair tied in a ponytail, and two silver teeth way too big for his mouth.

Clare backed away, but it was too late, and there was nowhere to run. Not that she could run very fast in high heels with her head pounding on a slick, tilting deck.

“Blimey, what d’we have here?” He sauntered toward her like a boogeyman amused by his prey.

Clare was at a loss for words. She backed away, step by step, but he was coming at her fast.

“A stowaway?” He smiled, and his silver teeth glinted. “Snuck aboard the *Red Lichen*, did ye?”

She smelled him from ten feet away. As he shuffled closer, she could see yellowed stains on his white billowy shirt, and his pants were soiled with who-knew-what on the knees. He grabbed her arm with his grimy hand, his fingernails black as ink and frayed at the tips. Clare noticed that he had a marble in place of an eye.

If this was a reenactment, this man was doing a superb job. Clare had never seen an actor so engrossed in his part. “I don’t know how I got here. I need to get back to the museum.”

“The museum, heh?” he said, apparently entertained. “Well, now, seems t’me we’ve got a real hoity-toity on our hands.”

Clare felt like a rose in a land of muck. She was acutely aware of her perfume, her vibrant sundress, and her perfect white skin. The man leaned in, and his breath smelled like rotten eggs and spoiled rum.

She slapped his face. “You get one inch closer and I’ll scream. Your museum will have a lawsuit on its hands.”

He snarled, but kept his distance. “We’ll see what the captain says ’bout this.” Without another word, he dragged her with him. Her high heels wobbled in the puddles of sea brine, and she wished she hadn’t dressed up for the museum tour. Surely, the scene would end soon, and Tara would jump in to laugh in her face.

The man knocked on the captain’s door and looked down at her dress as they waited. Clare stared at him in shock, but he didn’t flinch. Instead, he smiled another of his toothy grins. She looked away, disgusted.

There was a call from inside. Clare was relieved to hear a civilized voice. “Come in.”

The dirty man sniffed and opened the door. Surprisingly, he gestured for her to enter the room first, apparently aware that she was a lady.

Clare walked in, eager to get away from the man and get some answers. As her eyes adjusted to the dim light, she saw nautical charts pinned to the walls, fishnets and buoys hanging from the ceiling, and a stuffed seagull staring at her with a blank eye from a shelf.

She half-expected Tara to be sitting at the broad desk in the center of the room, but she was dead wrong. Instead, a young man appraised her with glinting eyes. His thick, dark hair framed his handsome face in waves of shine.

“What have we here?” The man’s eyes drank in the sight of Clare and widened in curiosity.

The dirty pirate spoke before she could find her voice. “Stowaway. I found her clingin’ to the starboard rail. She’s a proud beauty with a saucy temper.” He pulled on the hem of her skirt. “Might fetch a good ransom.”

Clare jerked the fabric of her dress away, smoothing over the spot where his grimy fingers had touched, and narrowed her eyes.

“Snake-Eye, go check the others, see if any of them brought her aboard,” the dashing pirate said in a commanding voice.

“Aye, Captain.” The man jerked his head in what seemed like a bow, winked at Clare, and left.

Clare’s mind was swimming in a maelstrom of thoughts and images. Did he say Snake-Eye? Of course, she chided herself, this museum would have a reenactment of the pirates whose artifacts lay on display. It made perfect sense. The man in front of her was clearly meant to imitate Ravishing Robert. He looked exactly like the portrait.

“None of your men brought me on board,” Clare said, getting right down to business.

“I know,” the captain replied with a glimmer in his eye. “I would have known it if they had. Pirate tongues run rampant at sea.” He sat back in his chair. “I just wanted him to leave so we could be alone.” He flashed a pearly white grin, and Clare’s mouth almost dropped open like a dumb donkey’s. She was both shocked by his audacity and lured by his charismatic appeal. A little voice in her head told her that being alone with him wouldn’t be all that bad.

“My name is Captain Robert.” He spread his arms. “Welcome aboard my ship.”

Clare had had enough of these theatrical reproductions over the years. This one was highly involved and much more accurate than anything she’d experienced in the past, but she did not want to be any part of it.

It was clear that Robert was highly entertained. “And your name is?”

“Clare.”

“Ah, Clare.” He savored her name as if it were a piece of Spanish gold. “Now, how is it that you came to be aboard the *Red Lichen*, appearing out of nowhere in the middle of the sea?”

Clare decided that the truth was the only way to get out of this. Her words started slowly, but as she talked, she gained momentum, and her dilemma flowed out in a tidal wave.

“I was in the museum, on dry land, when I saw your sword stuck into a mast. I pulled it out, hit my head, and woke up here on your ship. Perhaps my friend is playing a trick on me. Perhaps the museum is getting back at me for touching their prized artifact. I don’t know how much they’ve told you. But all I want to do is get out of this silly reenactment and go home. I’ve hit my head and I need someone to examine it. If you can please just forget about all this crazy pirate business and take me home.”

Robert froze, studying her like he was trying to decide if she was crazy. It was clear that he was a talented actor.

“You say that you came across my sword, in a . . . museum?” He said the last word like it was new to his vocabulary.

“Yes.”

“Well, that can’t be, because it’s right here.” Robert stood up and came around the desk, displaying the sword that hung at his side.

Clare looked down at the sword with a frown. She had to admit that it looked a lot like the one that she had pulled from the mast. Maybe someone on staff had handed it to him while she was unconscious.

“That looks exactly like the one I pulled from the mast.”

“And you say you found it in a museum?”

Clare nodded. “Yes, the same one you work for. Now, please, let’s just stop this charade and get me home.”

Robert sat back down at his desk, pulling on his chin in thought.

“Well, you’re going to need a change of clothing, because we’re not going back to shore for another week. In fact, we’re probably more than a week away at this rate, with the wind dying down. My ship is scheduled to rendezvous with another ship tomorrow. After our meeting, I’ll hand you over to them, and they can take you back to shore.”

“As long as it’s not the *Gusto*,” Clare said under her breath as she rolled her eyes. “You know they can’t be trusted.”

“How did you know that we are meeting the *Gusto*?” Robert looked horrified and suspicious at the same time. “Those are secret plans.”

Clare was tired of playing around. Maybe if she sped up the final act it would all end, and she could go home. She talked at him like he was a small child.

“Everyone who can read history books knows. You’re double-crossed by Snake-Eyed Sam, and he gives your coordinates to the *Gusto*, and they attack in the night. During the fight, you manage to throw your sword into the mast, getting it stuck for centuries until I come and pull it out. Snake-Eyed Sam stabs you in the back, becoming the Scourge of the Seven Seas. Now that we’re done with all that, can I go home?”

Robert turned pale and looked down at his sword. Clare felt a moment of guilt, as if she’d spoiled his big scene. He was such an excellent actor, she was sure that he’d find work elsewhere. Besides, reenactments probably didn’t pay much at all.

“Look, I’m sorry to spoil your fun. I’m sure you can find another person to act out these scenes with you. Just not me.”

“You don’t understand,” he said, his voice solemn. “We’ve never had a stowaway board the *Red Lichen*. Our ship only docks at secret locations, and every man or woman that walks these planks must pass by Snake-Eye himself. Here you are, wearing clothes that gleam like they’ve never been touched, with not a drop of sea water on you, and not another ship in sight.”

Clare was beginning to think that Robert had no idea what was going on. Perhaps the museum curator tricked him as well?

“Listen, I’m from the museum tour and I’m not meant to be here in this ridiculous pirate world of yours. I was supposed to leave hours ago with my friend.”

Robert smiled. “You are exactly where you should be. You see, I had this sword hexed by a witch off the Barbary Coast last winter. She said that if someone double-crossed me, the sword would set things right again. Superstitious as I am, I never thought it would really work.” He looked back at her. “All it needed was a catalyst.”

Clare stepped forward to get a closer look at the blade. “What do you mean?” It glowed ever so slightly in the dim light as if it were coated in moonshine. The familiar hum of the metal rang in her ears.

Robert looked up at her in awe. “It seems that the magic worked. Here you are.”

Clare put her hands on her hips. “You mean to tell me that you’re really Captain Robert, and I’m back in the 1700s because I pulled your sword out of the mast?”

Robert nodded. “That’s right. The second of May, 1765.”

“And this isn’t a reenactment?”

“Whatever that is, whatever netherland you came from,” Robert replied, “nay, this isn’t it.”

Clare stumbled backward, as if someone had punched her in the stomach. Everything felt all too real—the ship, the molestations of the dirty pirate, and the charm of Ravishing Robert himself. This would not happen at any reenactment. She’d been in denial, and now it smacked her in the face.

She felt lost, alone, and scared. She’d been set adrift in the oblivion of time past, and had no idea how to get out of this mess. It all seemed so wrong, like it was supposed to be Tara and not her. Tara would have loved this, and here she was cringing in the face of adventure.

The world is what you make of it, the reassuring voice in the self-help videos played in her head like a bad song. *You, alone, control your destiny.*

Well, if she could set things right, maybe the magic would let her go back. Clare sighed, coming to terms with her precarious situation. At least he was handsome. “You’re right,” she said, standing up straighter with eyes hard as steel. “I’m going to need a change of clothes.”



Night fell sooner than she expected—a dark shroud that bled the ocean and the sky together as one endless nightmare. Clare adjusted her bandana and rolled the legs of her trousers up. Next, she tied a belt around her slim waist and sheathed a slender sword.

There was a knock at the door. Robert had given her his study for her safety, and she was relieved to see his face.

He took one look at her garb and smirked. "Begad, you look like a natural pirate."

She laughed, despite the dire circumstances. "Well, let's just say that I've had a lot of experience playing pretend."

"You'll get your sea legs yet. Soon, you'll be an old sea dog like the rest of us."

Clare smiled, even though it was the last thing she wanted to become. "I'm getting more used to it."

He entered the study and closed the door behind him. "I've informed my most loyal crew members that an impending attack is probable and set up watchmen on all sides. But I don't know for certain who will side with us and who with them. Snake-Eye has a loyal bunch of followers." He sighed. "I always suspected he'd be the death of me. You'd think he'd give me the black spot in judgment and stay true to the pirate code. But no, the blackguard has to stab me in the back."

Robert sat down on a stool in front of her. "My heart is too soft. I rescued him from a prison in Calcutta. I just couldn't leave him chained to the wall to hang. He offered to serve underneath me. He said I needed someone with more of a cutthroat edge to balance out my moral inclinations."

Clare shook her head. "Don't you believe him. What is a man if he has no heart and no honor?"

Robert listened and nodded. "A sad man, indeed." There was a stirring above, and Clare knew that their time had run out.

He looked at her protectively. "Stay by me and make sure you keep a grip on that sword."

"Just watch out for Snake-Eye," Clare instructed. "Don't worry about me, I'll be fine."

"I can lock you in here where no one can get near you," he offered.

Clare shook her head. "No, I want to see to it that you are safe. It's my only way to set things right and go home."

Robert raised his eyebrows in a challenge. "Very well. Come with me. We'll see just how accurate your history books are."

They surfaced into the black of night. A man holding a telescope ran at them with wild eyes.

"Sir, I see another ship coming at us, a man-of-war."

Robert nodded as if he accepted the inevitable with open arms. "Get the men ready. Load the cannons."

"You think they'll attack?"

Robert looked into Clare's eyes and then back at him. "I'm certain of it."

It did not take long for the ship to overtake the *Red Lichen*. The wind was on their side.

The first round of cannons exploded around her, and Clare thought that she'd go deaf. Splinters of wood flew as the lead balls careered throughout the ship's innards. Clare decided she was safer on deck, anyway. She would rather see the enemy coming at her.

Pirates swarmed around her, shouting all manner of curses at the enemy ship.

"Of all the bilge-sucking scallywags—" The pirate nearest her stopped his litany when he noticed a lady in his presence. "My pardons, Miss. I—"

"Not to worry," Clare said, as she unsheathed her sword. She took two steps to the prow and shouted, "Come and get it, you traitors!"

The man grinned at her and raised his sword as well, repeating her phrase.

The ship came up beside the *Red Lichen*. Twice as big, it blocked the moonlight and loomed over them like a predator over its prey. Clare clutched her sword as the ship floated closer. Robert was calling out commands at her back.

"Broadside! All hands on deck!"

Before she knew it, enemy pirates swung on ropes, dropping around her like bombs. Clare held up the sword and deflected a blow. A skinny man who looked like he suffered from scurvy and rotten teeth clanged her sword with his. He grinned and took another swipe.

Clare retreated until her back was to the mast and ducked as his sword cut through the wood above her head. She kicked him in the crotch, and he doubled over, not expecting such a thing from a cabin boy. She kicked the sword from his arm next and kicked again until he fell, holding his stomach, to the deck. She brought her sword up, but just couldn't bring herself to kill him. Instead, she grabbed his arm and pulled him to the rail. With one heave, she pushed him overboard.

Clare looked up just in time to locate Robert. He was fighting two men at a time in a dashing dance of bravado. Just as she cheered him on, she smelled the reek of Snake-Eye and turned to see him creeping up on the captain, dagger in hand.

"Robert, behind you!" she screamed, but he was too entangled in the sword fight to defend himself. He took one brief look behind him, and his face paled as he saw his long-time first mate coming at him. Clare realized that she would have to fight Snake-Eye herself.

Gathering up her wits and her sword, she lunged and ran into Snake-Eye. They fell onto the blood-stained deck. Snake-Eye's body squirming beneath hers made her gag, and it took her a few moments to collect herself. He'd dropped his dagger somewhere on the deck, so he wrestled with her instead, holding each of her wrists in his grubby hands.

“Wicked wench!” he yelled, spittle flying as he struggled with her. He pulled her close, and she thrashed about against his grip. He pinned her, both her arms against the deck and both her legs trapped beneath his boots. For a moment, they froze in silent drama, treacherous pirate and urban university student. His marble eyeball stared blankly at her, and she saw a shadow of her reflection disappear into its misty depths.

Clare had seen enough zombie movies and action films to know what to do. She lowered her head down toward his chest, holding her breath against the stench, and then whipped it up, head-butting his chin. He staggered back, holding his jaw in his hands. Clare took up her sword and swung, slicing his upper arm. The feeling of the metal cutting flesh made her stomach churn, but she was not going to let history repeat itself. Thinking about all the people he would kill as the new pirate king, she lunged and stuck the point in his gut. He looked at her in shock. She pushed the blade deeper, and he sank onto the planks in defeat.

The battle raged around her, and Clare stood motionless. It seemed like such a waste of human souls, such a sacrifice for an unworthy cause.

Robert dashed over to her side to catch her just as she started to fall.

“By the Gods! You did it, you saved my life and killed Snake-Eyed Sam!”

Clare trembled at the idea that she took someone else’s life and the fact that she’d come so close to death herself. Fighting tears, she looked up at Robert.

He took her into his arms and held her close, running his hands through her hair and down her back. His words were soft whispers meant for her ears alone. “You are the greatest woman pirate I’ve ever known.”

Clare locked eyes with his and, before she could protest, he pressed his lips to hers. To hell with it, she thought, and kissed him back, her lips moving against his, asking for more. For a moment, the clamor of the battle muted in the surging beat of her heart.

They were interrupted by a cannon blast that shattered the mast above their heads. All at once, the sails and rigging fell from the sky. A piece of wood from the loft hit her head. Clare blacked out, the chaos fading into silence and oblivion.



“Clare, are you all right?” Clare recognized Tara’s voice and opened her eyes. A stone statue of Robert towered over her. She was beneath his hard-edged chin. Tara’s face hovered above hers, haloed by the fluorescent light.

“She must have fallen and hit her head.” It was a man’s voice that she didn’t recognize.

“Clare, can you hear me?” Tara asked.

“Yes, I can hear you.” Clare sounded more annoyed than anything else.

She moved to touch the bump on the back of her head, but Tara held her arm down. "Get me a cold compress and some ice!"

There was movement around her. Some of the other tour participants were trying to help.

Tara fell back with a wash of relief. "You scared me for a moment there."

Clare looked around. The sword lay at her side, and a circle of faces peered over her, all eyes wide with concern. One face stood out in the sea of eyes and concerned expressions. She blinked in doubt, but when she opened her eyes he was still there. He came forward and put a warm hand on her forehead.

"My sincerest apologies, Miss."

"Robert? Is that you?" Clare's voice broke on the words.

Tara laughed nervously and put her hand over her face in embarrassment. "No, honey, that's our tour guide." She shook her head empathetically. "I'm sorry, my friend's hit her head and—"

"No problem," he waved her comment away, "I get that all the time."

"What happened to the other tour guide?" Clare asked, still groggy.

"What other tour guide? Roland's been the only guide here."

Clare sat up and looked around. The museum was bigger than she remembered. A fountain gurgled at the center of the glass-paned room, complete with ships and waves carved out of marble, and balconies to other galleries lined the walls. A high-domed ceiling was painted in glittering stars.

"I'll take care of this." The man who looked like Robert shooed Tara away. He knelt down beside her and took her hand in his.

"My apologies. I just had someone check this exhibit the other day, and the mast was stable, held by cables on either side. I had no idea how it came loose."

"It's all right," Clare managed to say, studying his face. He looked so much like Robert, she had to shake her head to get the pirate's image out.

"As the owner of this museum, I would like to make it up to you. Let's say dinner tonight?"

She heard Tara gasp. Clare looked into his eyes and saw him for the first time. He wasn't Robert, but he had the same alluring charisma and bright eyes. "Okay."

He looked pleased. "Nice to meet you, by the way. I'm Roland. I'm a descendant of Captain Robert. You must remember from the tour?"

Tara chimed in. "She wasn't paying attention to the tour. She hates pirates."

"No, I don't," Clare corrected her quickly. She smiled at Roland. "I'm a pirate wannabe."



ROAD PIRATE WANTED

Victoria Oldham

“Goddamn rain,” Chris said, her eyes glued to the road in front of her. She downshifted again as the drops of rain merged into sheets, obscuring the white line on Interstate 25. The rig shifted behind her, and she hoped her cargo was tightly packed.

Through the torrents on her windshield, she saw hazard lights up ahead. She slowed down even more, and her headlights showed a woman, her clothes plastered to her body, standing beside her Lexus with the hood up, talking into a cell phone.

“Nice,” Chris said. As a long-distance trucker, she was often in the habit of voicing her thoughts as a way to keep herself company.

It was nearly midnight and there were no other headlights on this stretch either in the rearview mirror or coming toward her, she pulled the rig over in front of the woman’s car. She put the hood of her jacket up, jumped out of the cab, and ran over.

“What’s the problem?” she shouted above the driving rain.

“I have no idea. The tow truck is on its way, but because of the weather it’s going to take a while,” the woman shouted back in a voice just deep enough to be sexy without sounding like a smoker.

“Come sit in the cab. I’ve got coffee and some towels. I’ll wait with you ’til the tow truck comes.”

Chris saw the woman’s hesitation on her face and the way she held herself stiff, but then a huge crack of lightning lit the sky, followed by thunder that rattled the windows of the car, and the woman nodded quickly.

Chris ran to the passenger side of her cab, opened the door, and gave the woman a hand up, which allowed a view of her tight ass and perfect breasts, all dripping wet.

When she climbed in on her own side, she grabbed towels from the back and handed them over. She also grabbed a dry sweatshirt and handed her that as well.

“Thank you so much. I’m Shelly, by the way.” She held one hand out as she toweled her hair with the other.

“Chris Connelly. Not a problem. It’s a bitch to keep going in this rain, anyway.”

She watched Shelly run the towel over her face, arms, and hair. She moved fluidly, like she knew every part of her body and just where it was wettest. Chris licked her lips quickly and swallowed. She’d been alone on the road for way too long. Even the last overnight truck stop hadn’t provided the usual working girls to take the edge off.

Shelly picked up the sweatshirt and bit her lip. “Do you mind if I take my shirt off? I don’t want to get your sweatshirt all wet, and I’m freezing.”

Chris nearly laughed out loud, but shrugged like she couldn’t care less. “No problem. Don’t want you catching cold.” She watched as Shelly turned toward the window in an effort at modesty and quickly pulled the soaked material from her skin. A black lace bra sat against perfectly tanned skin. Chris grinned when she saw the skull and crossbones tattoo on Shelly’s left shoulder. Then she saw Shelly’s reflection in the window, and that hard nipples were tenting the black lace over her full breasts.

Shelly quickly pulled the sweatshirt over her head and sighed in apparent relief. Chris gazed out the windshield as though she hadn’t just been cruising Shelly’s hot body.

“Thank you so much. I have to say, I didn’t think I’d be spending my night in a trucker’s cab.” Shelly turned back toward Chris with a smile.

Chris’s breath caught. Shelly had a dimple on one side and a gorgeous smile. Chris couldn’t tell what color her eyes were in the dark, but from the golden color of her hair she would guess blue. An ache started between her legs, and she shifted to move the seam of her jeans away from her clit.

“Well, it isn’t luxury, but it works for me. Where were you headed?”

“I was on my way to Golden to see some friends for the weekend. I’ve already called them, and they offered to come get me, but I don’t want to leave my car here. I’m so glad you came along. I wasn’t thrilled about sitting in the car by myself.”

“No problem. When the rain hits like this, it’s too hard to stop the rig if it starts to hydroplane. Far better to sit here with attractive company ’til it passes.” Chris grinned and waited to see if Shelly took the bait.

“Very true,” she said, her eyes traveling a blatant path over Chris’s body. When their gazes locked again, Chris knew the night would be far better than she could have hoped.

They made small talk for a while, going over what it was like to be a trucker, why Shelly had decided to drive to Golden even with a bad weather forecast, where they were from.

Shelly’s cell phone flashed on, the ringtone from the James Bond movie *Die Another Day* filling the cab. Chris laughed, and Shelly shrugged sheepishly as she answered.

“Oh. Okay. Yeah, of course. It’s not like I can go anywhere. Right. Thanks.” Shelly hung up, and Chris could see her frustration.

“The tow truck can’t be here for another hour. I know you probably have to get going. I can go back to my car, especially now that I’m dry and warm.”

Chris shook her head. “No, really. Like I said, I don’t want to drive in this, either. It’s no big deal. And I don’t get company very often. This is nice.”

“I’m sure you have company occasionally,” Shelly said, grinning mischievously.

“Well, yeah, okay. Maybe a bit. But not anyone to talk to,” Chris said, staring Shelly in the eye, daring her to make the next move.

Shelly glanced around the cab. She nodded at the curtain behind the seats. “Does that lead to your cargo? Or to somewhere to sleep?”

Chris raised an eyebrow. “To my bed. Wanna see?”

Shelly cocked her head to the side, her eyes narrowing as she stared back at Chris. “Yes. Yes, I’d like to see.”

Chris leaned over, shoved the curtain aside, grabbed Shelly’s hand, and guided her behind the seats.

“Holy shit,” Shelly said. “I had no idea you had a house in this thing.”

Chris smiled with pride. When she had bought her own rig, she had spent a lot of money making it shine so she could get good contracts on her long-haul runs. The wood finish, the best technology, and the most comfortable bed she could buy were her rewards to herself for doing a long, lonely job.

Keeping hold of Shelly’s hand, she led her to the back of the room to her bed, still unmade from the day before.

She moaned when Shelly pushed against her and kissed her, hard. She grabbed Shelly’s slim hips and pulled her tightly to her, pressing her down on the bed. Her lips tasted of warm coffee and, as they kissed, she pulled Shelly’s tongue into her mouth. She yanked the borrowed sweatshirt off and pulled one breast from its lace enclosure.

“I thought truckers were overweight chain-smokers with hardly any conversational skills. How is it that your body is so hot and you don’t taste like cigarettes?” Shelly asked, pushing Chris down on the bed and straddling her. Pulling Chris’s wrists above her head, she lowered her breast to Chris’s mouth, moaning as Chris’s tongue made a lazy sweep over her nipple. Shelly released Chris’s hands, and Chris wrapped them in Shelly’s still-damp blonde hair. Then, she closed her eyes.

“I work out whenever I can. I use gyms at truck stops, or even just do some exercises in my cab. I don’t want to be . . . uh”—she paused as Shelly’s mouth hovered over her and pulled her hands back over her head—“fat.”

Chris’s eyes snapped open as cold metal snapped against her wrists and held them to the metal headboard.

“Hey, I’m all for fun and games, baby, but you could have warned me,” Chris said, suddenly uneasy.

Shelly moved back, and Chris flinched. Shelly’s face had gone from open and friendly to closed and remote. She stood up and pulled the borrowed sweatshirt back on and Chris again saw the skull and crossbones tattoo on Shelly’s shoulder.

“Sorry, sweetie, can’t do that. You see, while we’ve been having our fun in here,” she said with a smile as Chris pulled at the cuffs, “my crew has been unloading your rig.”

“God-fucking-dammit. Let me up right now,” Chris yelled.

Shelly leaned down and gave Chris a noisy kiss on the cheek, then stepped quickly aside to avoid Chris’s elbow as she lashed out as best she could.

“The tow truck will be here soon. Of course, my car won’t be here, but I’m sure the driver will check to see what the deal is with your rig. Struggling is only going to hurt your wrists. And I don’t suggest you try to come looking for us. It would be bad for your health.” Shelly paused and looked into Chris’s eyes to be sure she understood.

“Thanks for the entertainment, gorgeous,” Shelly said before ducking back through the curtain. Chris heard the truck door slam, and she groaned, letting her head drop back onto her pillow.

“Fuck.”



Shelly ran through the rain to her front man, Randy, pulling up the hood on the sweatshirt Chris had given her.

“Ready?” she yelled over the pounding rain.

“Yup. Just got the last one in. Driver?”

“Taken care of. Someone’ll find her in about half an hour.”

He nodded, and they both flinched as lightning lit the sky like a torch, followed by thunder that rattled the ground under their feet.

“Let’s get the fuck out of here,” Randy said, sprinting to the large, black big rig. Shelly saw someone’s silhouette in the passenger seat and gave a quick wave to Reece before running back to the Lexus. One of the crew had already dropped the hood and left the keys in the ignition.

Shelly pulled out after the rig and looked in her rearview mirror at the now empty rig behind her. A quick pang of guilt hit her stomach as she thought of Chris’s hot body lying there tied down, but then she focused on keeping to the road. She glanced at the tiny silver skull and crossbones pendant hanging from her mirror and sighed.

Sometimes this job sucked.



“Damn it all to hell,” Chris said, flinging the wrench against the wall.

A co-worker looked at her over his girlie magazine. “It’s not your fault, you know. Well, it is, but it’s not, you know?”

Chris glared at him. “You mean, if I hadn’t wanted to fuck some hot road pirate, I wouldn’t have lost the shipment?”

He shook his head and went back to his magazine, probably sensing it was useless to talk to Chris when she was fired up.

“Chris! Get up here!” her boss yelled from the office above the service garage.

Chris ran a hand over her face before trudging up the stairs. She’d been waiting for the boss to call her in and fire her. Evidently, the time had come.

“Sit down,” Paul Mcleevy said from behind his desk, not bothering to look up from his paperwork.

“Just fire me and be done with it, Paul. Save the speech about how great I’ve been and just get it over with.” Chris ignored the guy sitting against the wall, who was watching the scene with great interest.

“Shut up, Connelly. I’ve had to write up a report, and, of course, it has to go in your file. I don’t know what the fuck you were thinking. You know better than to pick up anyone while you’re on a run. I don’t have a choice. I’m sorry. I can’t give you any more contracts, and I can’t recommend you to anyone else, either.”

Chris nodded glumly, staring at her boots. Getting another job with this on her record would be a nightmare, if not impossible.

“Good. This is a detective from the Denver Police. He’s going to take your full statement and see if you can describe the woman who *distracted* you.” Paul avoided her gaze as he stormed from the office.

Chris sat with the detective and told him the whole story. When he asked about any specific markings the woman might have had, Chris mentioned the pirate tattoo on Shelly’s shoulder blade and the cute dimple in her cheek. She flushed when the detective raised an eyebrow, irritated that she could still find something hot about the woman who, most likely, had ended her career.



Shelly sighed and leaned against the kitchen counter, sipping her beer. “When are they due in?” she asked, stifling a yawn.

“About two hours from now. They hit the storm coming in and were diverted to New Mexico. They’re driving up from there, and promised they’d be here today no matter what.”

Shelly nodded and let her eyes drift shut. Images of Chris Connelly assaulted her—her smell, the handsome, muscular body, her dark eyes, and spiky hair. The way her eyes darkened as she sucked Shelly’s nipple into her hot mouth.

She cursed and shoved away from the kitchen counter.

“What’s up?” Randy said, staring at Shelly as she paced.

“Nothing,” she said, slamming her beer on the table before she walked out. She flung herself onto her couch and stared out the window at the Boulder hills. Soft sunlight bathed the trees in an orange glow, making everything surreal.

She flopped onto her stomach and traced circles in the carpet with her fingertip. From the moment she had driven away from Chris’s empty rig, she had felt myriad emotions. One moment she was elated at the haul they had taken, the next she felt a gnawing sense of guilt and frustration that she couldn’t get Chris out of her head. Replaying the scene night after night left her wet and agitated.

She lifted her head slightly at the sound of the doorbell. When she heard Randy greet her buyers, she forced herself off the couch and padded barefoot into the hallway.

“Shelly, love. How the hell are you?” Domenic swung her in a wide circle, his heavy African accent making her smile, despite her surly mood.

“All right. A good haul,” Shelly said.

“So I’ve heard, beautiful. This is a friend of mine, and we have some business matters to discuss with you. If you have time, of course,” he said, bowing his head respectfully.

“If you trust him, that’s good enough for me,” Shelly said, leading the way into the comfortable and spacious living room. She watched as Domenic’s friend glanced around, his expression guarded and alert. He turned slate-grey eyes to her and stared at her for a long moment. She stared back impassively, used to the concerns men had about dealing with her. At only five-foot-five-inches and with a petite build, she looked non-threatening. It had served her well in her work, as people constantly underestimated her. An image of Chris lying under her flashed through her mind.

Shelly sat down in the comfortable chair in front of the sliding doors, aware that she would be backlit by the sun so her expression would be harder to see.

Randy offered drinks and brought them in from the kitchen before leaning against the doorway casually, blocking the exit without seeming to.

“Shelly, you know this shipment will last us for some time. It’s a wonderful gift. But I’ve run into a bit of a problem,” Domenic said, crossing and uncrossing his legs.

“Oh?” Shelly said, leaning forward slightly.

“You know I’ve been trying to cut costs. I’ve let most of my staff go. I even had to sell my last plane. I can’t afford to ship the cargo you’re getting for me.”

Shelly watched as he took a deep breath and looked away from her for the

first time. She had known Domenic for the last ten years, and knew that his admission had cost him some pride. He was the one who had taken her to get her pirate tattoo so many years ago.

“And I assume this is where your friend here comes in?”

He nodded. “He has a plane. He has boats. All he asks is twenty-five percent of whatever cargo we ship. Then he’ll ship the rest to our destination.”

Shelly stared at the so-called friend, who stared back at her impassively.

“Twenty-five? Not a chance. I’ll get a plane and fly the shit over myself, if that’s what it takes. Not a fucking chance.” She stood and stared out the window, waiting.

“Twenty, then.” The stranger’s gravelly voice made her cringe.

She turned and faced him with her arms crossed. “Ten. That’s it. No more. And if the shipment arrives with less than it should, I will find you.” She said it simply, with her tone empty of emotion. She watched as he swallowed and glanced away.

“That’s robbery. Ten percent won’t pay for my fuel.”

Shelly laughed. “That’s the game, friend. I guess we’re done. Domenic, we’ll find a way. You don’t need to deal with people who will rob us blind.”

Domenic shifted in his chair, and tried not to meet anyone’s gaze.

“Fine. Ten percent. But you get it to my ship or my hangar, however you’re sending it. I won’t pay to have it brought to me as well.” The man stood up and shoved his hands in his pockets, his jaw muscles clenching visibly.

“Done.” Shelly shook his hand and squeezed it tightly. “Don’t double-cross me, friend. You’ll be very sorry.”

He yanked his hand back and moved away.

Domenic hugged her fiercely. “Thank you, beautiful. I knew you’d come through. You always do.”

“You know, Dom, I wish you had come to me first. We might have worked something out without having to go outside. But I’ll get this shipment to the port, and we’ll talk about the future later, okay?” She hugged him back and then nodded toward the door.



Chris was in the back of her rig, wiping down the walls in an attempt to keep busy.

“Excuse me,” a low voice said behind her.

Chris tensed. That same voice played in her dreams every night, making her wet and angry.

She turned around slowly and felt her clit twitch. “What the fuck? I should go and call the cops right now,” Chris said, surprised by the venom in her own voice.

"I need to speak with you, if you have a moment. I have a business proposition for you. Then, if you want to call the cops, you are free to do so."

"Gee, thanks. I don't think I need your permission to report you for robbing me," Chris said, nearly shaking with rage. Why did Shelly have to look so damn good in her jeans and tank top? Why did her hair look so thick and gorgeous, just inviting Chris to run her hands through it?

Chris jumped off the rig and walked past Shelly, when a firm hand grabbed her own.

"Please hear me out. If we can't come to an agreement, I'll return your entire shipment to you by tomorrow. Every box," Shelly said.

"What?" Chris stopped and stared at her, stunned.

"Come have coffee with me and hear me out." Shelly said it quietly, and Chris sensed the desperation behind the words.

She took her hand out of Shelly's, and pulled the door of her rig shut then slammed the lock into place. She walked stiffly past Shelly and headed for the coffee shop around the corner. Chris didn't care that she was leaving Shelly behind, but she still desperately hoped she followed.



Shelly took a deep breath and steadied herself. The hard part was over. She knew the risk she ran by tracking Chris down, but she knew there was no one else she could go to. She didn't know Chris at all, but after running a quick Google search, she found that Chris was involved in plenty of charities.

She slid into a chair at the table where Chris was already seated, drumming her fingers. Shelly forced down her desire to grab Chris's hand off the table and suck on those strong, long fingers one at a time. Business first.

They ordered their coffees, and Chris leaned back, folding her arms over her chest. "So, start talking."

"You do volunteer work for Truckers for Tots, don't you?" Shelly asked.

"What? Yeah, so? I don't think you asked me here to talk about my being a good Samaritan."

"Actually, I did. Your cargo that I obtained—"

"Stole. Ripped off. Not obtained."

Shelly nodded her understanding. "Do you remember what it was?"

Chris looked at Shelly incredulously. "Lady, why the hell are you here?"

"Humor me. Do you remember?"

"It was clothing. I was taking it to one of those big chain stores. Why?"

Shelly nodded and took a deep breath. "I want you to join my crew." She held up a hand as Chris burst into laughter. "I want you to drive for us. I have cargo that needs to get to a port. I have an old rig that I can't trust to make it, and obviously I don't want it breaking down. I'll pay you well."

Chris leaned forward and rested her arms on the table. She watched as Shelly's eyes flicked down to her arms, to her chest, and then to her face.

"First of all, why? Why would you hire someone you ripped off, someone who could turn you in to the police at any given moment? And second, why the fuck would I want to be a criminal?"

Shelly took a long sip of coffee, her head tilted to the side as she considered her answer. "First of all, because I have a feeling about you, and my gut instincts are never wrong. And, if I'm not mistaken, you're not actually making *any* money right now, thanks to me. Plus, you take care of your rig and like being on the road. I know you would get your cargo where it needed to go."

Chris winced at the compliment, knowing that the reason she had failed to deliver her cargo for the first and last time was sitting across from her.

"And, second, because when you're a criminal for the right cause, then it doesn't matter if the world thinks you're a criminal. What matters is that you're doing what is right," Shelly said quietly, never taking her eyes off of Chris's.

"So, what, you're fucking Robin Hood?"

"No, not fucking him. Any cargo my crew and I take, we ship to countries in need. Countries that can't afford a hundredth of what we can here. We send clothes, food if we can get it, and we've even managed to send some computers to schools in Africa. I'm not saying we don't profit from it—we all have to eat and we have to be able to run the company. Which is why I can make it worth it." Shelly stopped talking and looked out the window, giving Chris some time to take in all she had said.

Chris stared at the woman across the table from her. Shelly's golden hair sat in waves around her face, and her eyes sparkled in the afternoon sun. She was pissed at herself for even noticing how hot Shelly looked in her tight tank top.

"I can't give you an answer right now. I need to think about this," Chris said, looking away from Shelly's disappointed face.

"I understand. Will you meet me here in the morning?"

"I don't think so. I'll let you know."

Shelly grimaced and then quickly covered it.

"Okay. Sure. Here's my number. Give me a call when you've decided." Shelly pushed a padded envelope across the table. "And watch this. It will show you that what I've said is true."

Shelly got up and threw some money on the table. "See you around."

Chris watched as Shelly strode from the coffee house, her head high, her shoulders back, and her ass perfectly framed in her jeans.

"Fuck," she said, dropping her head to her hands.



Shelly stretched and padded through the living room to close the curtains, enjoying the feeling of the wood floors under her feet. She stopped and turned midway at the knock on her door. Looking through the peephole, she grinned and swung the door open.

“Well. I didn’t expect you tonight,” Shelly said, taking in Chris’s black jeans and tight fitting T-shirt that showed her sculpted body to perfection.

“I needed to talk to you. I have some questions,” Chris said, blatantly looking Shelly over.

“C’mon in. Beer?”

Shelly led the way to the kitchen, hoping that Chris’s eyes were glued to her ass and the nearly see-through pajama pants she was wearing.

She grabbed two beers, realizing that Chris hadn’t answered. She turned around and watched as Chris’s gaze moved from her ass to her hard nipples.

She cleared her throat and handed Chris the beer with a grin. “Did you come here for business, or pleasure?”

Chris blushed. “Business first.”

“And then?”

“Maybe we can see what the night holds. Last time I nearly had sex with you, you left me handcuffed, alone, and wet.”

“Well, maybe tonight it’s my turn,” Shelly said, lowering herself to the couch.

Chris paced in front of a row of pictures, her eyes scanning them as she talked. “I watched the video. I went home after we had coffee today and watched the whole thing. Where was it filmed?”

“A village in Kenya. I went with Domenic, a friend from college, and met the people there. I found out what they needed, how they were living. We made that documentary as we traveled throughout Africa.”

“Okay. Fine. I can see why you do it. But why not go through regular channels? Like, build a charity or some shit. Why rob people?”

“I don’t rob people. I take things that corporations have poor people in other countries make, who get barely enough to live on so the corporation can sell it at triple the price they’ve paid while paying minimal wages. Once, I even brought a shipment of clothes back to the people who had made them. They finally got to wear something they had made.”

Chris liked that Shelly seemed more passionate, more agitated, so she walked over to the couch and leaned over Shelly, forcing her head back so she could meet her gaze.

“I’m in. I just want to know that you’re not going to fuck me over somehow,” Chris murmured, looking into Shelly’s crystal blue eyes.

“Over? No. I came to you, remember? Now, I’ve seen your bedroom. Let me show you mine,” Shelly said, her lips meeting Chris’s.

They stumbled to Shelly’s bedroom, clothes coming off along the way. When they reached the room, Chris eased her onto the bed and lay on top of Shelly, their already sweating bodies sliding together as they fell into one another, moans, pleas, and cries resounding through the room for hours.



Chris gently caressed Shelly’s shoulder as they lay exhausted and satisfied.

“When did you get your tat?” Chris asked, tracing the skull and crossbones.

“After our second job. When I handcuffed the driver to his steering wheel, he called me a fucking pirate. It stuck. Most of the crew have it.”

“And where do you propose I get mine?” Chris asked, her lips pressed against Shelly’s hair.

Shelly traced a path up the inside of Chris’s thigh with her fingertip. “I think I should investigate every part of you to figure that out. Doesn’t do to be hasty in our business, you know.”

“Bring it on, pirate. I’m ready for you this time,” Chris said, closing her eyes in anticipation of Shelly’s touch, as well as the future coming at her fast.



THE BRAHMAPUR BUCCANEER

Matthew Fryer

Sambita's heart sank as she clambered into the back of Pradeep's truck and saw the battered, handmade crate. It was smaller than she expected—about the size of a chest freezer—and stank of mildew and urine. Rusty nails poked through the warped wood.

“What are you waiting for?” Pradeep asked.

“This isn't what I imagined,” she said quietly.

“There's no first class on this trip. Either get in, or go home. Your choice.”

Outside, the sun glittered brightly off the river, waves lapping against the grassy bank. Sambita peered at the bustling market farther down, vans and motorcycles trundling past, women laden with earthenware pots, bundles of cloth and baskets of fruit emerging from the hubbub of barter. That used to be her life, her routine. But no more. The mouth-watering scent of spices and salted meats was making her empty stomach gurgle. She'd starved herself for the last couple of days to ensure she didn't have to open her bowels during the journey.

Six days, she thought. In *that*?

The heat inside the truck was stifling, and it would be intolerable once she got in the crate. A grubby blanket had been tossed in one corner next to a cardboard box containing a few bottles of water and limp packets of dried mangoes.

“I paid twenty thousand rupees for this,” she said, fighting the lump that expanded in her throat. She'd used her husband's money, and saying the figure out loud made the theft seem monumental. But there was no going back.

Yesterday, Sambita had sneaked the box containing Kamal's life savings from his sheesham armoire while he dozed outside in the evening sun. It was a terrifying experience—even touching his precious armoire was strictly forbidden—but she had been spurred on by the fact that an hour earlier, he had struck her several times and chipped a tooth for overcooking the rice. If she'd been caught, especially as it was part of a plan to leave him, his wrath would have been murderous, and last night she hadn't slept a wink.

Most of the money had gone to settle Pradeep's bill and the remaining couple of thousand was carefully packed in her satchel.

"Twenty thousand," she breathed. "For *this*?"

Pradeep shrugged his big shoulders and rubbed his acne-scarred stubble. "This is what you ordered."

"No, it isn't," Sambita said, trying to keep her voice firm, but it betrayed her and cracked. "You said the crate was spacious and comfortable."

"This is the best I have. If you didn't want to spend that much money, you should've taken the discount." He winked, naked lust animating his gaze.

Gentleman that he was, Pradeep had offered to knock a quarter off the price if she slept with him. Sambita would rather die, not that she'd told him that. He had mean eyes and a powerful frame beneath the fat, and she wouldn't want to see him enraged.

He took out a cigarette and lit up, eyeing her contemptuously through the smoke. "No refunds. Take it or leave it."

Tears filmed her eyes, and Sambita blinked, turning away from the crate and swallowing hard. She wasn't going to fold, not now, not after everything she'd been through. Farther up the river, she noticed a small shrimp trawler moored at the dock, dappled with rust and sitting low in the water. Several men were loading it with crates and supplies.

"Is that the boat?"

"Yes. And we leave in ten minutes. You'd better get ready. If you're still coming, that is."

"What about my catheter?"

Pradeep rummaged in the deep pockets of his salwar and produced a length of yellowed tubing with a plastic bag crudely taped to one end. "Do you want me to help you put it in?" he said with a shameless leer.

"You told me I'd have an actual medical catheter. Inserted properly by a doctor."

"The doctor's busy."

Sambita felt a spark of anger. Pradeep had lied through his teeth, and now that he'd got her money, he couldn't care less. They'd met last week to discuss the technicalities, and it had seemed like a dream come true—a comfortable shipping container, catheterisation, supplies, and sedation to tide her over the trip. Once through customs at the other end, somebody was supposed to collect the crate and provide paperwork and contacts to start a new life, but now Sambita wondered if this person even existed. She'd been swindled. It was painfully obvious in hindsight. But what else could she do?

She swallowed hard. "That's bound to give me some kind of horrendous infection. And the bag would leak."

"Fine. So go without."

"I will."

That must be why the crate reeked of ammonia. It wasn't the first time it had been used for refugees, and the previous occupants had also declined Pradeep's grimy tube. He shoved it back in his pocket and looked at his watch, raising his eyebrows impatiently.

Sambita stepped from one foot to the other. The prospect of actually getting into the crate hammered home the enormity of what she was doing. Her chest tingled and she felt light-headed, in danger of losing her mettle, but she couldn't return home. During the fifteen years of their arranged marriage, Kamal had slowly morphed from a quiet but occasionally grateful man to an irritable brute, quick to administer punishment for any slights, no matter how unfair or imagined they might be. It was probably because she had never borne him a son, even though he claimed he hated children. Perhaps the violence was his way of reclaiming his manhood in the absence of virility. Whatever. If he'd discovered that his savings were gone, her life could well be in danger. No, she couldn't go back. She had left her husband, and whether she got in the squalid box or not, that much was final. Her only other option was to strike out into the blistering summer sun for another village, but she knew Kamal and his brothers would track her down. She had stolen his hard-earned money and poured shame upon his family, upon his very name. She dared't even imagine the wrath she would face.

Just do it.

Sambita clambered over the edge of the crate, snagging her sari on a crooked nail and wincing as splinters scraped along the underside of her thighs. Trying to ignore the sweltering heat and the stink that prickled her sinuses, she arranged the blanket over the coarse base of the crate, noticing an iron-coloured stain at one end of the fabric that looked suspiciously like blood. She sat down at the opposite side, wondering if the crate was long enough for her to fully stretch out when the inevitable cramp set in.

She held her satchel protectively against her chest. There wasn't much inside. As well as the rest of Kamal's money, she had a photograph of her deceased mother, a small china teapot that was the only thing the dying woman had left to give her, and a children's book of folktales. It had been awarded to her at school for exemplary attendance and hard work, almost twenty years ago today. The only other things she owned were the cheap sandals on her feet and the faded sari on her back. Kamal said she only needed one, and she had to wash it at night and leave it out to dry for the morning.

"What about my sedatives?"

"I didn't think a good little girl like you would be interested in the drugs."

Sambita usually avoided them unless they were a medical necessity, but didn't fancy the prospect of lying in the claustrophobic darkness for six days without any distractions. "They were part of the deal."

Pradeep passed her a tiny, clear bag containing a few pink, spherical tablets.

Sambita frowned. They looked like mass-produced confectionary, and she suspected that's exactly what they were. "What are these?"

"Tranquillisers. What do you think?"

Sambita tucked them into her satchel. "How many do I take?"

"One. Then when you wake up again, take another." Pradeep glanced at his watch and peered outside the truck. "We just need to wait for your companion."

"Companion?"

"This is a two-person crate."

"What?" Sambita put her satchel to one side and stood up. "You never mentioned that."

"Sorry." Pradeep smirked. "Must've slipped my mind."

"No." Sambita gripped the rough lip of the crate to stop her hands from shaking. "No. That's not fair. You can't expect me to share this with someone else. There isn't room."

He just shrugged and blew smoke in her face.

Sambita felt the frustrated tears rising again and fought them down. "So who is it?"

"Her name's Riya. That's all I know."

"I want some of my money back. Half of it."

"Doesn't work like that. But if she's not here in two minutes, you'll be going without her anyway."

Sambita sagged against the side of the crate, reminding herself why she was doing this. While the wretched journey would be a trial—especially with two of them crammed in the urine-marinated darkness—there would be no more beatings, no more misery. She was free of Kamal at last.

Pradeep coughed out a bitter plume of smoke. "Here she comes."

Sambita squinted into the bright sunlight as a woman approached from the direction of the road. She had an angular but attractive face, her thick hair tied back in a ponytail. She wore faded jeans and a loose, purplish-blue kurta, the rich colour of kudzu petals. Her slim frame was tightly muscled, lending her a sturdy, boyish appearance. A heavy-looking sports bag was slung casually over one shoulder.

"Hello, Pradeep." She dumped her bag in the truck then hopped effortlessly up, noticing Sambita standing in the crate. She turned to Pradeep.

"Who's that?"

"Sambita. Your companion for the journey."

"In the same crate?"

Pradeep nodded.

“So why am I only finding out about her now?”

Pradeep gave a trademark shrug, but Riya wouldn't be ignored.

“I get it. You thought you'd double your money, and to hell with the fact that we won't even be able to lie down without being all over each other like page one of the *Kamasutra*. I think you should give us ten thousand back. Each.”

“No refunds,” Pradeep repeated, but with less smug gumption than when he'd snubbed Sambita. She noticed that he refused to make eye contact with Riya, almost as if he was nervous. “I never promised you an exclusive crate.”

Riya glared at him, grinding her teeth, then shook her head wearily as she apparently realised—as Sambita had done—that she didn't have any choice.

“Bastard,” she said quietly, the word so loaded with threat that Sambita's mouth fell open. How did she *dare*?

Pradeep didn't even react to the insult, just sucked on his cigarette as Riya turned to Sambita. The ice-cold daggers vanished from her gaze, and she beamed a cute, slightly crooked smile. Her melting, brown eyes seemed warm. Maybe this wouldn't be so bad after all. It might be cramped, but at least she would have some company and she sensed that Riya would be a reassuring asset if they ran into any trouble.

“Hello, Sambita. I'm Riya.”

“Nice to meet you.”

“Never mind all that,” Pradeep interrupted. “I need to get you two packed and on board.”

“You could've at least swabbed it out,” Riya said, glancing into the crate and wrinkling her nose. “It stinks like a Mumbai brothel.”

“Nobody's forcing you to go.”

“Not good enough, Pradeep. You've ripped us off. Twenty thousand rupees to share this festering heap of lashed-together driftwood with somebody else? No way.”

“As I said, nobody's forcing—”

“No way.”

“It was the only way I could get you both out quickly,” Pradeep said, and Sambita was stunned that he was being forced to backpedal by someone who was not only half his size, but a woman. She felt awe mixed with pride, silently urging Riya on.

“You're telling me you couldn't find a second crate?”

“That's not the problem. I only managed to arrange the shipping for one. You both wanted to do this as soon as possible. This is the best I could do.”

“Okay, okay,” Riya said, hoisting her bag and dropping it into the crate, where it landed with a weighty, metallic thud. “Anything but having to stand here and listen to more of your *fascinating* lies.” She leapt over the edge and

landed in the box with the agility of a cat, and squatted down at the opposite end to Sambita.

Pradeep hefted the lid. "You'll be on the trawler until we get to the coast, then your crate will be transferred to a cargo ship at the port. After that, you're on your own, but until then, keep quiet in there. The trawler captain, Bala, is a seriously nasty piece of work. If he finds you on board, he'll kill us all." With that, he slammed the lid down and began hammering the nails into place.

Riya sighed as the baking heat closed in on them. "So, what's your reason for Pradeep's budget cruise?"

"Kamal, my husband."

"He gave you that black eye?"

Sambita nodded, touching the swollen tissue above her cheek. "Last night. And chipped a tooth. My rice was too soft."

"Sounds like a real catch."

Sambita exhaled. She'd never even mentioned her abuse to anybody before. "So, are you running from something?"

"No. There are cats and mice in this world, and the cats always win. I don't run from anything."

Sambita got that impression. This woman oozed confidence like sweat. It was obvious from the way Pradeep hadn't once spoken to her suggestively, and even let a terrible insult slip without retaliation. She doubted he'd even dared offer her the discount and felt a twinge of jealousy, almost shame at her own submissiveness.

"I can't believe he's put us both in here," Riya said, and punched the lid above her head where Pradeep was hammering. He struck the next nail with added malice in response.

"Well, at least we've got company."

"Not the point," Riya said, raising her voice to be heard. "I should've given that fat bastard a good hiding. In fact, I'm *going* to."

Sambita was shocked yet exhilarated by Riya's words. They hung in the air, punctuated by the angry slamming of Pradeep's hammer. She'd been punched enough times by Kamal, but the concept of a woman hitting a man was completely foreign to her.

"Please don't antagonise him," Sambita whispered, hating herself for being such a victim, but worried about Pradeep's escalating temper. "He might just decide to shove the crate into the sea."

"You're right," Riya said, lowering her voice. "I just don't like being taken for a fool." She poked at the sad box of provisions. "And there clearly isn't enough water here for two."

"No. And I don't know what we'll do about the toilet. The catheter he'd brought was disgusting."

Pradeep finished sealing the crate and growled through the flimsy wood. “Shut up in there. I’m going to load you up, and if Bala hears you twittering, he’ll gut you like a fish.”

“Love to see him try,” Riya whispered, and winked at Sambita.

Sambita heard the truck sputter into life. It jerked forward, and the crate creaked around them like an ancient galleon as Pradeep drove up to the dock.

“Don’t worry about the water,” Riya said. “I’m not going to be in here for long.”

“But the journey takes six days.”

“Not for me. Soon as we’re away from the village, I’m out of this cursed casket.”

“But they’ll see you. What about the captain?”

Riya unzipped her bag and in the feeble light bleeding through the cracks in the timber, Sambita glimpsed the blade of a cutlass and the barrel of a pistol. “Their money or their lives.”

Sambita gaped. She’d never seen a gun, other than in the hands of a policeman. She opened her mouth to speak, but at that moment, the truck’s engine died. She held her breath as Pradeep greeted the man she assumed was Bala. The captain’s voice was high-pitched and sibilant, reminding Sambita of the time she had heard two vultures fighting over the body of a wild dog. The truck rocked as the two men climbed into the back and began to drag the crate out into the sunlight. The sickly reek of body odour drifted through the wood, adding another layer to the eye-burning atmosphere inside.

Several tense minutes passed as the crate was bumped around and finally hoisted onto the deck. Sambita wrapped her arms tightly around her shins, frowning in the febrile darkness. Was Riya really going to rob the boat? Had she only stowed away as a means to get on board and catch the crew unaware? Or maybe she was just joking. There was certainly a sparkle of mischief in the woman’s demeanour. But, if so, why the cutlass and the pistol?

Eventually, the trawler’s engines roared into life, and Sambita felt the swell of the river as the boat embarked. It sounded like the small crew had gone to the cabin at the front—Pradeep, Bala, and another man—their voices barely audible above the churning engines and the abrasive shriek of hungry gulls.

“Riya?”

“Yes. It’s true. It’s what I do.”

“But . . . but what about me?”

“What *about* you?”

“I’ll be caught, you’ll expose the whole thing. Please don’t do this to me. I can’t go back to my husband, he’ll kill me.”

“Really?”

“I’m not exaggerating. Please. This cost me a fortune!”

"I'll get you your money back."

"Can't you just rob another boat?"

"No. We're not the only illegal cargo on this trip. Our friendly captain exports heroin. Seems odd that he can't stomach refugees, but I suppose every criminal has their comfort zone."

Sambita closed her eyes as Pradeep's hollow promises rang through her brain: a safe and comfortable journey, the paperwork and assistance in starting a new life. It all sounded so easy. Now, she was wedged in a filthy crate with an armed pirate and about to be embroiled in a battle on a drug trafficker's trawler. She almost wished she was back at home with Kamal. Almost, but not quite.

"Please, Riya. Don't do this."

"There's a fortune in drugs and hard cash on board. I'm sorry you've got caught up in it, but that's Pradeep's fault, not mine. Don't worry. I can put you in touch with someone who'll do a much better job than *he* ever could with his rancid crate and the empty bilge he talks."

The engine whined high as the boat picked up speed, powering through the water.

"Are you going to kill the crew?"

"Of course not, unless I don't have a choice. I usually just tie them up or, if we're close enough to land, make them jump overboard. I'm not a monster."

"You've done this many times before?"

Riya chuckled. "Once or twice. An American magazine even dubbed me the Brahmapur Buccaneer. A lazy tag, but it made me laugh. I've just never stowed away before. Thought I'd give it a try. The last time I tried to board as a passenger, somebody recognised me and I almost got arrested." She reached into her bag and took out the cutlass and pistol, checking them over and placing them by her feet.

"Why the cutlass?" Sambita asked. "It seems a bit redundant."

"It's visual, more than anything. Not many people have been shot, but everyone can relate to the pain of a sharpened blade—" Riya paused, tilting her head. "Listen."

Raised voices rumbled from the cabin, apparently a disagreement over money. Pradeep was almost shouting, drowning out the raspy, shrill voice of Bala. The third man was attempting to calm the situation, but a pane of glass shattered, and the men started to bellow in rage. It seemed a full-blown fight had broken out.

Riya pulled a crowbar from her bag. "It's a little earlier than I'd planned on making an entrance, but I might as well take advantage of the distraction. Want to help?" She offered Sambita the cutlass.

Sambita shook her head, horrified at the suggestion.

Riya jammed the crowbar up beneath the lid of the crate and jimmied it

up, her veined muscles bulging in the gloom. The flimsy wood splintered and within a couple of seconds, Sambita was shielding her eyes from the glaring sun.

“Showtime!” Riya said with a grin and sprang out of the crate toward the front of the boat. Sambita stood up to see Riya bouncing across the crates and barrels like a goat. Inside the small cabin, Pradeep and Bala—a tall, wiry man with a hook nose and no chin—were locked together against one of the windows, throwing wild punches while the third man unsuccessfully attempted to pry them apart.

Riya jumped on a small crate close to the open cabin door as another of the windows was smashed by a clumsy strike, glass tinkling on the deck. Brandishing her weapons, she drew in breath and yelled, “Hello, boys!”

The brawl stopped immediately, and the three men blinked up at the startling sight of the armed young woman, her legs astride, the sun gleaming on her mahogany skin, kurta billowing in the warm breeze. Despite her fear, Sambita smiled.

“Hands in the air and step outside. Try anything foolish, and I’ll shoot you in the face.”

The three men shuffled out onto the deck and lined up before their nemesis. Pradeep was bleeding from his nose, and Bala’s white kurta was ripped from the neck to the waist, spattered with crimson. They were furious, panting from their exertions and exuding the dangerous air of cornered animals. The third crew member, a much younger man with a ponytail and a waistcoat the same kudzu-blue as Riya’s kurta, didn’t look like trouble. He had paled, and Sambita guessed he was just some innocent kid and as much out of his depth as she was herself.

She glanced over her shoulder and saw that the market village was already far behind them. The river widened steadily as they approached the ocean, its verdant banks thick with swaying grass and banana trees, dotted with the occasional fishing hut. There were certainly no witnesses. She decided to stay where she was, standing in their crate toward the rear of the boat. This was Riya’s territory, and she’d only get in the way.

Pradeep was the first of the men to speak. “Riya. What in the name of Shiva are you doing?”

“Don’t you dare bring the gods into this, you conniving, hypocritical son of a pit viper.”

He scowled, touching his bloody nose and wincing as Riya continued. “Just in case any of you are struggling to keep up, I’m the Brahmapur Buccaneer. On your knees, dogs!”

Bala’s eyes narrowed at the revelation. He was clearly aware of the local legend, and Sambita detected a misogynistic malevolence that was immediately familiar from her endless years with Kamal. Riya had obviously

noticed, too—she kept the gun trained on the lanky captain as the three of them sank to the deck.

“I’m sure you can all guess what happens next. You first, Pradeep. You owe me a refund anyway.”

Gritting his teeth, Pradeep took a fat wallet from his pocket and tossed it onto the crate at Riya’s feet.

“Is our forty thousand in there?”

“No. I don’t have it with me.”

“Bala will have to lend you some. Now, sit down against the cabin, put your hands on your head and don’t even whimper without asking for permission.”

Pradeep slumped back against the wall, licking blood from his lips and staring down at his feet in humiliation.

“Your turn, Bala. I want your money and the heroin. Every last bit. If you try and pull a weapon, you won’t get the chance to fire it.” She cocked the pistol. “Clear?”

“You’ll hang for this, bitch.”

“Perhaps, but the way you’re going, you won’t be alive to enjoy it.” She wagged the pistol. “Money and drugs, now. And no sudden moves.”

Bala stood up and stepped carefully around to a fixed storage chest against the back wall of the cabin, the kind that normally held life jackets and equipment. He took out a key and fiddled with the padlock. Keeping the pistol on him, Riya pointed the curved blade of the cutlass at the third man kneeling before her. “Who are you?”

“Jay.”

“Okay, Jay. Stop the boat.”

As Jay rose meekly to his feet and scuttled back inside the cabin, Sambita saw Bala remove the padlock and hoist the lid of the chest. He hunched low to reach inside, then quickly straightened up, turning back toward Riya. He had a gun in his fist.

“Riya!” she yelled, but the woman was already moving. Rather than firing the pistol, she flung the cutlass with the speed of a striking cobra. It spun across the deck with an electric buzz and thudded into Bala’s chest. He squealed and jerked, the gun flying from his hand, over the side and into the water. He staggered back toward the edge of the boat. Pradeep leapt to his feet, but Riya levelled the pistol at his face. “Don’t even think about it, fat boy.”

The boat’s engine cut off as Bala lolled against the gunwale, goggling at the cutlass embedded in his torso, the white fabric of his kurta rapidly turning an arterial red. He wrapped his trembling fingers around the slippery handle and tugged it out with a wet crunch. It clattered to the deck, and he stared at Riya for a moment, blood drooling from his lips, his outrage still simmering

through a grimace of pain and dread, before he toppled backward. He hit the water with a meaty splash.

The boat slowed as Jay reappeared at the cabin door, peering out like a startled shrew.

"Thanks, Jay. I'm glad *somebody* can follow simple orders. Can you swim?"

He nodded.

"Off you go, then. You should reach the shore in about ten minutes."

Jay didn't need telling twice. He hurried to the side of the boat and dived without hesitation, following the corpse of his captain into the water.

Pradeep suddenly sprang for Riya, fast for his size. Sambita tensed, expecting to hear the crack of the pistol, but the gun remained silent. Pradeep tackled Riya, driving his shoulder into her stomach and they tumbled off the crate into a struggling heap.

"No!" Sambita scrambled out of the crate, her sari ripping on the wood, and staggered around the crates toward the fracas. The pair wrestled violently, grasping and punching, and Sambita looked desperately around the clutter of the deck for the gun, but it was nowhere to be seen. Pradeep managed to roll over on top of Riya, pinning her down with his bulk and spitting venomous words in her face. If Sambita didn't do something right now, the Brahmapur Buccaneer would be dead. She sprinted across the deck and grabbed the bloody cutlass, but it squeaked from her fingers like a bar of oily soap. Cursing, she bent and grasped it again, more carefully this time, and turned back to the fight just in time to see Pradeep rise to his feet, heave Riya up like a sack of loose bones, and fling her overboard.

He turned to face Sambita, panting hard, and she clutched the wobbling cutlass in both hands.

"Put that down, you stupid girl. You're going to get yourself killed."

Even though she was armed, Sambita couldn't stop her treacherous body from quaking. She couldn't think, teetering on the precipice of panic, heart thudding sharply in her neck. "You owe me some money," she said, at a loss for what else to say, alarmed by the shrill, alien sound of her own voice.

Pradeep laughed, a low and nasty cackle, and pointed at the nearby crate. "There's my wallet. Help yourself."

Sambita made the mistake of glancing where it lay, and Pradeep seized the moment, reaching for her throat. She cried out and swung the cutlass wildly, more on impulse than homicidal intention, but missed, almost falling over with the momentum. Mercifully, Pradeep had lurched sideways to avoid the sweeping blade and lost his balance too, tangling his ankles around a loose coil of rope and thudding down onto his hands and knees. For a moment, Sambita had the opportunity to bury the cutlass in the back of his thick, hairy neck, but she hesitated. The survival adrenaline that fizzed through her veins

couldn't quite quench the years of patriarchy and the morality of her gentle soul. She wasn't an executioner, not even capable of murder in self-defence. Instead, she brought the stout handle of the cutlass down on the top of his head with a satisfying thud.

Pradeep shrugged off the blow and rose to his feet, towering above her as the boat drifted to a halt, idling gently on the flow of the river. In that moment, he resembled Kamal—the vicious desire, the pure, slighted rage. Maybe Sambita would regret holding back when she'd had the chance to finish him. Being armed was pointless if she couldn't bring herself to use the weapon.

What would Riya do?

She would know that the only victor of this encounter would be the aggressor. It was cat and mouse. A moment of nightmarish unreality descended as Sambita stepped forward, swinging the cutlass back and forth in a wide arc, forcing Pradeep back toward the edge of the boat.

"You're only making it worse for yourself," Pradeep said, the veins in his temple throbbing like worms. His enormous hands were curled into claws, but he held back, probably wary of the razor-sharp blade whispering through the air and aware that a mistimed lunge would effortlessly relieve him of several fingers. "You won't do it, you're not a killer. Just put the cutlass down, Sambita. There's no other way out of this mess. I won't hurt you, I promise."

Of all the lies Pradeep had spun, that was surely the most transparent. It was him or her. This had gone too far to be resolved any other way. Sambita was at a loss. Where was Riya when she needed her? Maybe she'd been unconscious when Pradeep hurled her overboard, and had already drowned.

Right on cue, there was splashing and a dull thud from the gunwale behind Pradeep as a mop of wet black hair and blue-clad shoulders rose above the ridge. Pradeep twisted around and lashed out, his fist connecting hard with the startled face, but it wasn't Riya. Jay had presumably realised that the balance of power had shifted on board and was climbing back up to help reclaim the trawler. He tumbled back down into the river with a squawk. Pradeep cursed.

Sambita glimpsed Riya's pistol glinting in the shadows beside a barrel and bolted toward it. Pradeep whirled, but Sambita scooped up the gun before he could stop her. He stopped dead in his tracks.

"So, you're going to shoot me now?" he said with a sneer. "I bet you've never even seen a gun before."

Now that she had the gun, Sambita felt a cool control flow over her boiling, agitated nerves. It was a situation she had actually fantasised about, albeit with Kamal as the victim, but now it was upon her as reality. She had a gun. *She* had the power here, and she wasn't going to let Pradeep win it back, a determination exacerbated by his irritating and relentless scorn. She

straightened her back and held up her head, brandishing the two weapons just as Riya had done atop the crate.

“How hard can it be to pull a trigger?” she said, pleased that her voice was steady, almost serene.

Before Pradeep could retort, Riya’s face emerged over the side of the boat. She beamed. “I see you’ve got everything under control.” She climbed onto the deck, her drenched kurta clinging to the lithe curves of her body. “Sorry about that. And good work, Sambita! I thought you’d be dead.”

“Are you okay?”

“Fine,” Riya said, although she had a few abrasions, including a nasty cut above her right eyebrow. She wrung out her ponytail, then stooped and took a length of rope from the deck. “Okay, Pradeep. Turn around and put your hands behind your back.”

“You’re dead. You’re both dead,” he mumbled, but he did as he was told. Riya deftly snaked the rope around his wrists several times, concluding with a bulbous, intricate knot.

Once he was trussed, Sambita passed the pistol to Riya, more than happy for her expert colleague to take control. She’d stunned herself with that performance, but her authority was too unpractised, too fragile to trust.

“Thanks,” Riya said, lifting her sodden kurta and tucking the pistol into the waistband of her jeans. “You keep the cutlass.” She touched Sambita’s arm gently and smiled before the warmth turned to steel and she turned back to Pradeep.

“So, where’s the heroin? And the money? And I’m *seriously* bored with your attitude, so if you don’t tell me right this second, I’m going to start hacking bits off.”

Pradeep drew himself up, contemplating resistance, but appeared to realise the sincerity of Riya’s threat. He sagged, and Sambita shivered with almost childish delight at how the tables had turned.

“In there,” he said. “Where Bala kept his gun.”

Riya went and collected her sports bag from their crate, picking up Sambita’s satchel while she was there, before she returned to the storage chest and peered inside. “Wow. Bala was a really naughty boy.” She took out several brown, plastic-wrapped wedges the size of bricks and loaded them into her bag. “Sambita? Go and put him in our crate.”

“Very clever,” Pradeep muttered and Sambita raised the cutlass to his throat, nicking the flesh slightly. He winced, staring down at her in surprise.

“One more word, I *dare* you,” she whispered.

Riya smiled as Sambita led the defeated brute back to the crate and gestured to the stinking interior with the cutlass. “What are you waiting for?”

“Please,” he said. “I’m claustrophobic, seriously. Don’t make me get in there.”

It was a genuine plea, but Sambita wasn't going to crumble. "What are you complaining about? There's plenty of room. I was told this is a two-person crate."

Pradeep heaved his body inside and lay down, closing his eyes as she hefted the lid back into place, jabbed a couple of loose nails into the discoloured frame and bashed them in with the handle of the cutlass. Pradeep began to kick at the wall of the crate, the wood slats loosening with each impact, and Sambita swung the cutlass, the blade punching through the wood close to where she knew Pradeep's head would be. He yelped in alarm.

"One more kick, and I'll shove it into the river."

He fell silent as the boat's engines coughed and thrummed back to life. Sambita walked back toward the cabin, enjoying the warmth of the sun on her face, the fragrant breeze that sighed across the rippling blue water. For the first time in her life, she was savouring the taste of freedom, although how long that would last she couldn't be sure. But for the moment, she didn't care. The moment was too new, too exciting to be tainted by concerns for the future. She saw Bala's body bobbing in the river beside the boat, clouded in pinkish-red, a few carrion birds already circling curiously above.

She stepped into the cabin and joined Riya at the helm as she accelerated, steering the trawler back toward shore. They soon passed Jay, swimming slowly to their right, and Riya waved.

"It's been fun, Sambita. Why don't you come with me?"

"I . . . I couldn't possibly."

"Why not?"

"I'm not like you, Riya. I don't have it. The strength, the fitness, the sheer *gall*."

"I think you've got more guts than you give yourself credit for. Don't let Kamal haunt you anymore. Don't give him a legacy, Sambita."

"I suppose."

"Speaking of which, do you want me to pay him a visit? I'll make sure he never lays a finger on you or any other woman again."

For a moment, Sambita was sorely tempted by whatever Riya had in mind, be it violence or actual murder.

"No," she said reluctantly. "Thanks, but despite what he's done to me over the years, he's still my husband. The fact that I've brought him such shame will have to be punishment enough. Perhaps it's a weakness, but I can't consent to what you want to do."

"Compassion is a strength, not a weakness. Sometimes I wish I had some."

Riya steered the boat close to the riverbank and eased off the power. "This is where we say goodbye."

"What about me?"

Riya took a pen and a scrap of paper from beside the helm and began to write. "I'm going to give you an address. Take the boat and once you hit the ocean, turn right. The village is about ten miles down the coast. Don't take it into the harbour, just sail past and leave it around the cliff. Go to this house and ask for Kishen. Mention my name. This man used to hide Nazi war criminals and Mafia informants. He's the best."

"How much does he charge?"

"A fortune."

"I've only got a couple of thousand. Could you . . ." Sambita squirmed awkwardly, hating to ask, but realised that this was her life here. "Could you please give me some money?"

"Check your satchel." Riya passed her the paper. "Leave Pradeep where he is. They'll find him soon enough once you dump the boat."

"Okay. And thanks, Riya. For everything."

They stepped out of the cabin, and Riya picked up her bulging sports bag. "It's the least I can do. You'll be fine. Maybe I'll see you again one day." She hopped up onto the gunwale. "Take care, friend."

She flung her bag onto dry land before dropping into the sparkling water and swimming to the bank. She climbed out, gleaming in the sun, turned, waved once, then disappeared into a lush grove of trees.

Sambita retrieved her satchel from beside the storage chest. It was much heavier than before. She opened the flap and blinked. As well as her sad handful of possessions, it was stuffed with wads of money, thousands of rupees, maybe even hundreds of thousands. Riya had taken the heroin and left the money for her.

She looked at the address in her hand, memorising it, just to be safe. The sun caught the thin sheaf of paper, and she realised Riya had written something on the other side, too. She flipped it over.

I'm going to visit Kamal anyway.

Good luck.

R.

Sambita frowned, angry that Riya had decided to go behind her back, especially on a matter of principle and family, but quickly realised what the woman had done. Sambita was snared by a deep-rooted, flawed loyalty to the man who had abused her, so Riya had simply relieved her of the burden of responsibility. If her husband died, it hadn't been Sambita's decision. Kamal's fate was in the hands of the Brahmapur Buccaneer now.

She may have been about to smile, but was jolted from thought by the clumsy sound of Pradeep thrashing against the crate.

Hefting the cutlass, she strode back down the boat and saw that he had

managed to kick the lid off and was lurching about like a landed fish, trying to get to his feet, not an easy task in such a cramped space with his hands tied behind his back.

“What do you think you’re doing? Do you *want* me to push you into the water?”

“Please. I couldn’t stand it, I can’t breathe. Don’t put the lid back on.”

“You thought this crate was good enough for both me and Riya. Safe and comfortable, you said. Have you changed your mind about that?”

“*Please.*”

She raised the cutlass to her lips. “Shhh.”

“I need to go to the toilet,” he demanded, trying a different angle.

“Oh, you should’ve said. In that case . . .” Sambita reached into his pocket and pulled out the stained tube of the catheter. It slithered in her fingers like an oily weevil.

“No.”

She smiled, mimicking his lascivious tone from earlier. “Do you want me to help you put it in?”

Sambita wasn’t quite yet the fearless buccaneer, but she was sure Riya would be proud of her progress so far.



THE KINDNESS OF STRANGERS

Vicki Stevenson

Everybody knew that it was the last big weekend of the summer for Ridge Lake Marina. The sun was bright and warm, but signs of an early fall were already beginning to show. Two-week family vacations were over. Most of the kids would be starting school on Monday, and they behaved accordingly, running noisily on the wooden sidewalk in front of the shops, pursued by their agitated mothers.

Business was okay—not as brisk as it had been in the middle of summer, but not nearly as slow as it would be in a few months. The lake had been restocked six weeks ago, so the fishing was still good. Bob's Live Bait booth closed up at two-thirty, and Bob Whitson took his old wooden dinghy out in hopes of catching a couple of largemouth bass for dinner. Demand at the snow cone stand was steady. Things had slowed down in the gift shop, and the lunch rush had ended at the floating restaurant adjacent to the pier. There were no customers at all in Locksley's Marine Equipment and Supply.

Locksley's was well stocked. Racks along two center aisles featured a variety of fishing needs—rods, reels, lines, and weights of every description, tackle boxes, special knives, and exotic tools of the trade. The far wall was of interest to those who preferred to enter the water rather than look at the surface while holding a pole in their hands. There were fins, snorkels, masks, and wet suits. There were underwater gadgets like compasses, altimeters, cameras, and even special pens to make notes on accompanying special paper. On the wall nearest the door were refrigerated drink cases. Robin was on her knees refilling the bottom shelf with beer when the customers entered.

They were young, expensively dressed, obviously well off. She hoped that they were the Gisbornes. "Beautiful people" were often difficult to deal with, but most of the time, they played fair in their financial dealings, given a bit of coaxing.

"Mr. Locksley, please. I have a reservation." He was almost handsome and almost well built. He was about six feet tall with thick, sandy spiked hair that somehow managed to look conservative. He wore an expensive brown polo shirt, tailored beige Bermuda shorts, and loafers without socks. He also wore

an expression that signaled his attitude for all to see. He was arrogant as hell. The woman clutched his arm and beamed up at him.

“There’s no Mr. Locksley,” said Robin as she got to her feet. “I’m Robin Locksley, the owner. And since you have a reservation, you must be Guy Gisborne.” She extended her hand.

He ignored it. “I’ve never driven a boat before. You’d better have somebody around to show me how. And somebody has to unload my car.”

Robin withdrew her hand. “If you’ll step over to the counter, I’ll be happy to get you started.”

She glanced at the woman, who must have been Nancy Gisborne, the other half of the honeymoon couple. The new bride seemed a perfect match. She was about the same height as Robin, around five-foot-eight, give or take. She was slender, and she fit nicely into a snappy yellow sundress complemented by dainty tennis shoes with yellow ankle socks. She wore a small gold watch on her left wrist and matching gold chains that screamed *money, money, money* around her neck and right wrist. Adjacent to her wedding band was an engagement ring that was off the charts. Surprisingly, her streaked blond hair was cut short. Or maybe it wasn’t surprising. Maybe there had been a hairdressing disaster. Her brown eyes scrutinized Robin, broadcasting disapproval at what she saw: a healthy woman in her thirties with dark, wavy hair cut way too short, a badly faded light blue “Ridge Lake Marina” T-shirt, cutoff jeans, and fraying deck shoes sporting a variety of paint stains. In a contest of which of the newlyweds found her more disgusting, Robin wasn’t sure who the winner would be.

She stepped behind the counter. “You’ll be putting the houseboat rental on your charge card, I assume.”

Guy Gisborne paused, as though considering whether to demand an answer to his questions about operating the boat and loading the luggage. He shrugged almost imperceptibly and pulled his wallet from his back pocket. He perused the cards in it, made a selection, and handed it to Robin. She processed the transaction, entering the full amount for the rental. When Gisborne signed the credit slip, she pulled a small transparent zipper lock plastic bag from under the counter. It contained a key card and a keyring with two conventional metal keys. She shoved the bag into her back pocket.

“I guess that’s it for the paperwork. I’ll show you the boat now.” She was at the door before she realized that the couple hadn’t moved. “If you’ll follow me, it’s just a short walk to the slip. I’ll show you everything and then turn the boat over to you.”

Guy frowned, then shrugged and walked toward the door. The appendage, still clutching his arm, moved with him in lockstep. Robin moved the dial on the “Back in . . . Minutes” sign to 25, flipped it outward, and locked the door. The trio made its way to the dock in silence.

The *Loralei* was a thirty-six-foot beauty that Robin had modified and restored. She was widely advertised on Internet travel sites as “a romantic floating honeymoon cottage” and she had never disappointed the newlyweds who chose her.

They boarded portside at the stern. Robin scrambled up the ramp. Guy followed, watching his feet, as if to ensure that they didn’t make a sudden turn and carry him overboard into the cool water. Nancy brought up the rear, clinging tightly to the back pockets of her husband’s shorts. The small aft deck was equipped with a swim platform and a water slide. If the pair of beach chairs were moved away from the wall, the area would be crowded.

“Is this the so-called Party Deck?” asked Guy. He turned to Nancy. “Looks like you’ve made a big mistake as far as our honeymoon is concerned. So, as far as future decision making—”

“The Party Deck is forward, at the front of the boat,” Robin interrupted. “Normally, you’d only use this area if you wanted to go swimming.” She turned and opened a sliding door. “If you’ll follow me, I’ll show you the rest of the boat.”

They stepped inside to the bedroom area. The head of the king-sized bed was against the starboard wall. Next was a small bathroom equipped with a marine toilet, sink, and stall shower.

“You have two hundred gallons of fresh water,” Robin explained. “That’s way more than you’ll need for the four days you’ll be on the water. If you’re curious, you can check here,” she said, pointing to a gauge over the sink, “and see how much water you have left. There’s an identical gauge in the galley, since you also have access to fresh water there.”

Nancy spoke for the first time. “This is just lovely. I come in here and use the bathroom, then jump off the back of the boat and go swimming in my own waste.”

Robin was speechless for a moment. Was the woman just taking advantage of an opportunity to be as obnoxious as her husband, or could she actually be that naïve? “All wastewater is collected in holding tanks,” she replied, hoping her surprise at Nancy’s ridiculous outburst wasn’t obvious. “The tanks are emptied when the boat returns to shore. This lake is not polluted, which is one reason the fishing is good here. And while we’re on the subject, you’re not permitted to throw anything overboard. I’ll show you the trash chute when we get to the galley.”

She turned to another door just outside the bathroom. It was a pocket door that slid into the bathroom wall. When she opened it, the bedroom suite and the forward area became one large room. On the port wall was a galley with a three-burner stove, double sink, and four-cubic-foot refrigerator.

“The appliances are electric,” Robin said. “Quite a few people are uncomfortable with propane, so I made the conversion, including the

water heater, which you won't see because it's belowdecks—under the floor. And I added small electric running lights that turn on automatically at night, when the sensor registers darkness. You'll probably notice them if you look outside after dark. I also added an extra gasoline generator to make sure there's always enough juice. It's almost completely silent, so you're never even aware it's running."

Nancy's expression was puzzled, almost as if she wanted to ask more questions, legitimate ones, about what else Robin had done to renovate the *Loralei*. Guy peered ahead, apparently ready to continue the tour.

Next to the galley was a couch. It faced the dinette, which was located starboard adjacent to the back of the bathroom wall. Robin reached up and tugged on a short rope over the dining table. She pulled down a portable wooden staircase whose base rested firmly on the floor. She scrambled up.

"C'mon, this is one of the best parts," she called down to Guy and Nancy.

They climbed the stairs gingerly, emerging on a flat deck surrounded by a three-foot metal railing. There was patio furniture of all kinds, loosely anchored to the deck to prevent its being tossed around or lost overboard. After Robin showed them how to reposition it if they wanted to, they followed her down the stairs to continue the orientation.

Robin returned the hatch over the dinette to its closed position and took a few steps forward. Ahead of the dinette was the helm. She gestured toward the posh leather captain's chair. "Have a seat behind the wheel," she told Guy. "I can teach you everything you need to know about how to operate the boat in less than ten minutes."

Guy sat nervously. She pulled the keyring from her back pocket and tossed it at him. He flinched and ducked. It hit the large map of the lake that was mounted on the wall next to him and dropped into his lap.

She stifled a grin. "Large key in the ignition, then turn it. Just like a car."

He did as instructed, and his eyes widened in surprise when he heard the soft hum of the engine as it came to life. They reviewed the location and use of the gears, the information displayed on the instrument panel, and the amazing fact that he could guide the boat in whatever direction he wanted by using the familiar automobile-like steering wheel.

At this point, she provided details about rules and regulations. They were free to go anywhere they wanted on the lake, which gave them plenty of room to roam, provided they stayed within the area designated by the yellow buoys. They were not permitted to take the boat ashore, as that would damage her hull. They were to drop anchor at night, and she would show them how, so that they didn't drift into an unauthorized area. Guy indicated that he understood everything. Nancy seemed to follow the lesson with interest.

Robin opened a small compartment on the instrument panel. She showed

them how to use the ship-to-shore radio in case of emergency. She pulled the key card from her pocket and used it to open a small safe tucked away above and behind the captain's chair. She gave the card to Guy.

"Once you're settled, I strongly recommend that you store anything of value in this safe. You don't have to worry about pirates or anything like that," she said with a chuckle, "but it's waterproof and fireproof. No matter what happens, everything you put in here will be preserved. So, be sure to lock up your wallet, loose cash, jewelry, passports, anything else you don't want to lose." Guy nodded gravely.

They followed her forward through another sliding door to the final attraction of the *Loralei*: the infamous Party Deck. It looked exactly as pictured on the Internet, with wet bar, state-of-the-art sound system, and luxurious outdoor furniture. Robin could see that they were pleased, although they would never admit it, and that they would probably end up spending most of their daylight hours here. She gave the last bit of instruction, the simple procedure for using the deck hoist to drop and pull up anchor.

As they made their way back to the stern, Robin said, "Be sure to close all the doors at night, even the pocket door between the bedroom and the galley. It's extremely unlikely, but if anything should come loose and start rolling around, you'll be much safer if it's confined to a small area."

They walked down the ramp and stood on the dock next to the *Loralei*.

"Do you have much luggage?" asked Robin. "I have a dolly you can use if there's anything too heavy to carry." She caught a glimpse of the glares that passed between Guy and Nancy.

"I can handle it," Guy growled.

"Okay, then you have everything you need," Robin said cheerfully. "Have a happy honeymoon." She breathed a sigh of relief as she left.



An hour later, she watched from the window of Locksley's Marine Equipment and Supply as the Gisbornes headed out onto Ridge Lake. She went behind the counter and checked the GPS system. It registered the *Loralei's* departure and was tracking her course correctly.

The rest of the day passed without incident, and almost without customers. Two six-packs of beer and one fishing magazine netted a profit of maybe five bucks.

Not every day was profitable for Locksley's. But there were enough good days to support them, which was a good thing because it almost killed Marian to take money from the shelter, even though she was entitled to it. Although rich people paid a small fortune to spend a few days on a luxury houseboat, the boat-rental venture barely broke even. The cost of maintaining the *Loralei* combined with the huge unavoidable advertising expenses ate up most of the

revenue, and Robin had no idea how anyone could make a decent living in the boat-rental business. The marina was almost deserted by five-thirty. She locked the store and drove home, where she found her partner close to tears.

Marian Fitzwalter sat at the table in the small kitchen, shredding a paper napkin into dozens of tiny pieces. Her long, straight auburn hair was a tangled mess. Her glasses were covered with a spray of fine, milky spots.

Robin put a hand on her shoulder. "Sweetheart, what's wrong? What happened?"

Marian stayed in the chair. She reached out and wrapped her arms around Robin's waist. "I'll never get used to the cruelty," she said tearfully. "We got a call from the sheriff's department today. Somebody phoned in a complaint about the stench coming from a warehouse over in Ridgeway." She leaned back and looked at Robin. "There were almost thirty dogs trapped inside without food or water. Some were already dead, and the rest were close to it."

Robin sank into the chair across the table. Unlike her partner, who felt deep despair over incidents like this, Robin usually reacted with anger. "How many did you get to the shelter?" she asked softly.

"I don't know. About twenty, I guess." She shook her head. "It's hard to tell at this point, but I think they may have been bred for dog fighting. Most of 'em don't seem to be socialized."

"Then the chances of finding homes for them any time soon are slim," said Robin. She understood the implications. Ridge Lake Animal Shelter was a no kill shelter. The added expense would be a financial burden, but she believed that most of the dogs could be socialized over time and eventually placed successfully in private homes.

Gracie, their own Doberman, had arrived at the shelter as a vicious dog, ready to attack any human who came near her. After six months of work and love from Marian, the dog reciprocated. After a year, people thought Marian was joking when she told them that the boisterous, exuberant Gracie had ever been mean.

But it was so hard to teach an animal to risk love or even trust when it had been severely abused. It would take time. Most of the animals would have to live at the shelter for several months, some even longer. And that meant they would need more money.

"What's needed besides food?" asked Robin.

Marian frowned. "Plenty. We don't have enough individual kennels. Most of 'em need the large ones, and they're so expensive."

"How many?"

"Kennels?"

"Yeah."

“Ten, maybe twelve.”

“What else?”

“Dog beds, blankets, a few more food and water dishes.”

“Okay.” Robin’s tone signaled that the conversation was over.

They prepared dinner together: a huge green salad, iced tea, spaghetti, French rolls with butter, and chocolate ice cream. They tried to read, gave up, and went to bed early.

Marian snuggled up to Robin in the dark. “I’m concerned about the new dogs,” she said.

“Don’t worry. It’ll work out. Go to sleep.”



It was past midnight when Robin slipped out of bed. Marian sat up, looked at her, and fell back against the pillow. Robin pulled on a T-shirt and shorts, then a hooded sweatshirt and jeans. She put on her deck shoes, grabbed her keys, and slipped out the door. She got into her pickup and headed for the marina.

She parked at the rear of the store and entered, quickly disabling the burglar alarm. She didn’t turn on the lights. She removed her shoes, sweatshirt, and jeans, and got into a wet suit.

Carrying only a snorkel and mask, she walked barefoot down to the dock, where a small aluminum fishing boat with an outboard motor bobbed gently. She got in and pulled a tiny GPS screen from the waterproof pouch that was fastened to her wet suit. She studied it for a moment, then released the boat from its mooring and began to row. About a quarter-mile out, she started the motor and continued her journey. Ten minutes later, she cut the motor and began to row once again. The running lights of the *Loralei* came into view.

With the mask and snorkel, she slipped quietly into the water and swam toward the boat. The anchor chain off the starboard bow stood out under the running lights, and she moved toward it.

She clipped the mask and snorkel to the anchor chain and pulled herself up the five feet to the Party Deck. The sliding door to the cabin was closed. She stood for over three minutes, listening, as the water dripped from her wet suit. Then she slid the door open and stepped quickly to the helm. The tiny red light over the captain’s chair told her that the safe was locked. That was a good sign. She had opened it with the key card she gave to Guy, and it was still open when she left the boat in the afternoon. So the Gisbornes must have taken her advice and locked their valuables inside.

She pulled a key card from the pouch in her wet suit and inserted it. The red light turned green, and she opened the safe door. A heavy object fell out, bounced off the captain’s chair, and landed on the floor with a thud, narrowly

missing her bare foot. It was a notebook computer. She wondered briefly if the data on it had been backed up.



Guy sat up in bed. He whispered loudly, “Nancy? Are you awake?”

“No.”

“I just heard a noise. I think somebody’s on the boat.”

“That’s impossible. Go to sleep,” she mumbled.

“But there was a noise.” He was speaking loudly now.

Nancy sat up. “I just went out there a few minutes ago for a glass of water. There’s nobody there. Please go back to sleep, Guy.”

He got out of bed and opened the pocket door. The boat was dark and quiet. He moved forward to the galley and turned on a light over the sink. The room was as he had left it. The red light on the safe assured him that all was secure. He turned and padded back to bed.



Robin observed the episode from the Party Deck. She waited ten minutes before sliding the door open. Once again, she opened the safe, this time replacing the computer. No sounds came from the stern. She hoped that Guy was asleep.

She drew a tiny pen light from her pouch and surveyed the contents of the safe. The Gisbornes had indeed taken her advice. All of the jewelry that Nancy had worn was there, including her engagement ring. There were also two passports and two wallets. Ignoring the credit cards, she pulled the cash from the wallets. Nancy had fifty-six dollars. Robin left it. Guy’s wallet held over three thousand dollars. She took twenty-eight hundred, left the rest. She left all the credit cards, all the jewelry, and everything else. No point in messing with anything that could be traced. She closed the safe door. The red light came on. She sealed the cash, pen light, and key card in her pouch and backed outside to the Party Deck.

The descent down the anchor chain was considerably easier than the climb up. She unclipped the snorkel and mask and followed the tiny beacon to the fishing boat. She retraced her steps back to the marina, rowing the first quarter-mile from the *Loralei* and the last quarter-mile to the dock, letting the outboard motor do the work between.

The marina was still in darkness as Robin walked up the dock to the rear entrance of the store. At the sound of an approaching car, she hurried to unlock the door and slip inside.

Moments later, once again in jeans, sweatshirt, and deck shoes, she emerged from the store. It was no longer dark. She stepped into the glare

of the headlights from the sheriff's patrol cruiser. She pulled the hood of her sweatshirt over her wet hair and approached the window.

"Everything okay, Robin?" asked Sergeant Ben Godfrey. The young man got out of the cruiser and posed for her, straining the seams of his tight uniform, but showing off his muscular physique to maximum advantage. "I saw somebody go into the store a few minutes ago. I guess it was you. Is there a problem?"

She flashed him a smile. "Hey, Ben. I gotta say, you're really on the ball. My burglar alarm went off again. When that happens, it rings at home, too. So I got out of bed and dashed over here. Damn thing is too sensitive. This is the third false alarm I've had in the last month."

"You can have the alarm company adjust that," said Ben. "You don't want your alarm set off by something like mice running around in the store." He blushed. "I mean . . . I don't mean to imply that you have mice. What I'm trying to say is—"

"I know. I'll call in the morning and have them adjust it." She turned toward her pickup and looked back at him. "And thanks for doing such a good job, Ben." She breathed a sigh of relief as she started the engine and headed for home.

Another successful operation completed. The pattern of the events that would follow was predictable. The honeymoon couple would return the boat. They would retrieve everything they had locked in the safe. A large amount of cash would be missing, but burglary was out of the question. They had been isolated on the water the entire time their valuables were in the safe. And nothing other than cash was missing. It would look ridiculous to report a crime of that nature. The new spouses would wonder if they knew one another as well as they had believed. Of the dozens of honeymoon couples who had rented the *Loralei*, none had ever reported a burglary.

Robin tiptoed into the bedroom, peeled off the layers of clothing, and slipped into bed.

"Everything okay?" Marian asked.

"Perfect," she replied as she wrapped herself around the other woman. "You should be sleeping, sweetheart. We have a busy day ahead of us tomorrow."



When Robin awoke at five-thirty, Marian had already left. As she showered and dressed, she finalized her shopping plan. She grabbed two breakfast bars on her way out the door. She hooked up the boat trailer to the pickup and headed to the first stop. She ate her breakfast on the way.

It was almost ten o'clock when a pickup pulling a heavily loaded boat trailer pulled into the parking lot of the Ridge Lake Animal Shelter. Marian

Fitzwalter ran to the cab. “Honey, did you bring the kitchen sink? Or a *dozen* kitchen sinks? What’s all this stuff? Is it all for us?”

“All for you,” Robin confirmed. She jumped out of the pickup. “If by ‘you,’ you’re referring to the shelter.” She grinned. “I doubt that you, personally, would care to stay in an individual kennel, no matter how big and nice it is.”

The bed of the pickup was loaded with several dozen forty-pound sacks of kibble, a dozen cases of canned dog food, twelve large dog beds, two boxes of blankets, and four plastic shopping bags full of dog toys. The trailer held four dozen chain-link panels, from which twelve large individual dog kennels could be assembled. The brackets, hinges, nuts, bolts, and other hardware were in a box on the passenger seat of the truck.

Marian threw her arms around Robin, as much to hide her tears from her partner as from the joy she felt.

“You aren’t crying, are you?” Robin asked. “I can’t stand it when you cry.”

“No, of course not, honey.” She turned away and looked toward the shelter. “Martha and Kenny are here. I’ll go and get them. We can start putting the kennels together right away.”

By noon they had unloaded the pickup and trailer. Five of the twelve kennels had been assembled, and three of those were already occupied by their new residents. The dogs were leery and frightened. But they were safe and comfortable with new beds, fresh water, and toys they ignored for the moment.

“It’s lunch time,” said Marian. “I only brought one sandwich, but we can share.”

Robin shook her head. “I’m already two hours late. I gotta hurry to the store so I can sell a few six-packs.” She pulled an envelope from her back pocket. “The shelter has some change coming.”

Marian looked inside at the bills and coins. “You’re so strict about this,” she said with a laugh.

“That money belongs to the animals. It wouldn’t be right to take it from them.”

“Well, they’re very lucky animals, aren’t they?”

She shrugged. “I guess you could call it luck. I think it’s more a question of being in the right place at the right time. When that happens, you can pretty much count on the kindness of strangers.”

Marian laughed and hugged her tightly. Despite a strong urge to spend the rest of the day at the shelter, Robin jumped into her pickup and headed for Ridge Lake Marina. She had a busy day ahead. The Gisbornes were due back in the afternoon, and in only two days, the *Loralei* was due to be cleaned up and ready for the next wealthy couple.



RESOLUTION 1838

David Brookes

The machete thudded into the coarse, plastic surface of the table. Abdi let go, leaving the wooden handle quivering. Behind it, I could see the Chinaman's eyes cross as he focused on the dull grey blade, which had been embedded in the table between two of his fingers. His wrist was held down by Ghedi, who sneered.

"Now you understand, Captain?"

The Chinaman nodded.

Ghedi said, "Now maybe you learn how to speak English?"

The captain was allowed to sit up. He was still staring nervously at the machete. "I do speak . . . little English."

I remained where I was, at the back of the dark little room. The freighter was big, but only to accommodate the hundreds of tons of processed ore it carried. The crew's quarters were of secondary consideration and very small, and the interconnected corridors between them narrow and low. Being this deep in the bowels of the Chinese freighter made me uneasy.

"Cooperation at last," said Abdi. He took back his machete. As he pulled it loose, the wiry muscles in his dark arm tensed and coiled like snakes beneath his skin.

I seem to recall Abdi saying that his father was from the Kowilum clan, a tiny familial group from the northern Werder Zone. Their badge was a snake. Abdi is nothing if not snakelike, like a black python—powerful but slim, lithe. He does not like Chinese. In fact, he does not like anyone who is not from Somalia. Ghedi is much the same.

Abdi was saying, "You will make an announcement. Tell the crew that they must all gather on your foredeck. *Everybody.*"

The captain shook his head. He was sweating profusely. His cap fell from his head, revealing a matted layer of short black hair. "You kill them!"

"We do not kill anybody if d'ey cooperate," Ghedi told him. "Now d'at we have boarded your vessel, it is ours until we say so. When we get paid, you go free and unharmed. But if you do not co-operate, we may have to kill somebody. So . . . what must you do?" He brandished the heavy machete. The captain said nothing, but he looked terrified. Ghedi threw the machete at the

table again, narrowly missing the Chinaman's left hand. Furious, he shouted to me, "Fetch our captain!"

"No!" the Chinaman blurted. He was afraid of Mother Jamila. He must have heard us talking. "No, do not fetch her."

"Shall I, then?" I asked Ghedi. I wasn't in the habit of asking him anything, but sometimes even the quartermaster must step back and let the soldiers do the work.

"Will you do as we say now?" Abdi yelled at the Chinaman.

"Yes."

Ghedi turned to me. "D'en you can go and report back to Mother Jamila. We will finish d'is."

I nodded and left the room, glad to get out of that hot little metal box. There were five men in that small room, not including the Chinaman. I cannot stomach men for too long.



After radioing Mother Jamila, I waited for her by the port-aft balustrade. We were roughly two hundred and twenty miles out to sea off the east coast of Puntland, in the choppy waves on the invisible line between the Indian Ocean and the Arabian Sea. It was monsoon season. Black clouds formed a vortex several miles farther out, sweeping south. The monsoon would miss us, but its effects were widespread. It threw rain at us hard, and the air was warm and humid. It brought to mind South American jungles, or greenhouses. I prefer this kind of weather.

"What is it, Amina?"

Mother Jamila has always been blunt. It is her way to be as abrupt and as difficult as a man. It is the only reason she has survived in the Fifth Quarter gang and the only reason she has made captain.

I had been planning on cleaning my rifle, which had been slung low over my shoulder since our interrogation of the Chinaman. I put this down out of respect, leaning it against the outer shell of the wheelhouse.

"Ghedi and Abdi are speaking with the captain," I told her. "They are arranging for the announcement to be made."

"The captain is resisting?" asked Mother Jamila.

"A little, but not much."

"Good." She ran a hand over her bald, scarred head. Mother Jamila is twenty-eight years old, exquisitely muscled, her skin the blackest Africa can produce. She was not born in Puntland, like I was. I have been told that she is the descendant of Bushmen, but I do not believe this. She is too tall, and too mulishly faithless. I believe, instead, that she may have been born in Rowanda.

"What weather is this?" she asked unexpectedly, peering up into the sky.

Her jawline and neck are sculpted like stone and her lower lip is twisted by a thick pink scar.

“Victory weather.”

We both looked across the water. It was empty in all directions. We couldn't even see the coast. A radio message from a Third Quarter skiff closer to the gulf said that since the Chinese freighter's distress call, an Indian Navy warship had adjusted course to our direction. As yet, there had been no sign of it, but like most of us on these high seas, we were worried about our enemies.

Mother Jamila said, “Is that what Abdi would call it? ‘Victory weather?’”

“Abdi is too busy playing with his knife.”

“I've warned him about that.” On so many occasions, the young man had been told to carry a firearm—a Russian AKM, or at least one of the TT-30 pistols we'd bought in large numbers from our Yemeni smugglers—but he had always refused.

“Abdi is a little crazy.”

“He fought against Siyaad Barre. All of us that did are a little crazy now.”

Nobody remembered the civil war fondly. There had been no good times under Barre, and none since.

Mother Jamila found me eleven years ago on a coffee plantation in the Gomma woreda in the Jimma Zone. The strong-smelling crops were cultivated close to the Didessa, which wound like a blue snake along the confluence of hills. Mother Jamila discovered me crouched shoulder-high in the muddy water, ten feet away from the bloody aftermath of a gun battle between the plantation owners and a gang from the neighbouring town. She said that I was made for the water. She said that I could sail with her.

“Muhammed has his boys searching the rest of the vessel,” Mother Jamila was saying to me as she stared out to sea. “The manifest says that there are twenty-two crew members and six passengers.”

“Passengers again.”

“More and more people are figuring out that it's cheaper to find a freighter when they want to travel. But Muhammed says he thinks he has everybody, and will report back soon. He is more patient than the other men.”

She looked at me, and she seemed older than she should have. It was as if with every line and scar on her face, the more time could find purchase. She was beyond her years, and had been from a very young age. It was no secret that she was strong and authoritative only as a result of her early years, when she suffered unspeakable things. Mother Jamila had spoken to me of some of these things because I am also a woman, and should understand, but she keeps her past a secret from the other pirates.

“You are getting older,” she said to me. This surprised me. It was as though she and I had been thinking the same things about each other. This is one

of her talents I admire her for. “Soon you will have blossomed fully and our boys may take more interest. I will not be able to protect you forever. You will have to change.”

You will have to become more like me, was what she was telling me—more of a fighter. More like a man. She had already taught me to starve myself so that my breasts were underdeveloped and my hips flat. She had passed on her technique of wrapping bandages around her chest to keep herself less noticeable. Like an Amazon, she would cut off her breast if it served a practical purpose. I often feared, during the beginnings of my adolescence, that she would resort to breast ironing to protect me from the male crew, in the manner of the mothers of Cameroon.

“I will change, Mother Jamila,” I said. “If you show me how, I will become like you.”

She turned away then, and leaned against the rusting balustrade. Above us, one of the freighter’s two massive cranes hung like a hangman’s noose against the grey sky.



“We have had another message from the skiff,” Muhammed called. “Come.”

We had rounded up the crew and passengers. The crew were mostly Chinese, though some claimed to be Mongolian, not that I could tell the difference. There were three from Russia, including the cook, who we had ordered to make enough spaghetti for everybody. We used this practice often to keep the hostages quiet, so they would say they were looked after during their period of imprisonment. The six passengers were all American, and knew each other, or else had become fast friends during the many days they had been aboard the freighter.

Everybody was gathered on the deck, where it was windy but warm, and the monsoon passed at a comfortable distance. The deck was wet from the water in the air, so most of us stood, but Mother Jamila and I sat on the top of a large metal container, cleaning our rifles, when Muhammed called us over.

We listened to the message on the old radio. It was not as sophisticated as the one on our converted fishing boat, and the signal was bad because the freighter contained and carried so much metal.

Mohammed said, “They say that the warship coming our way is not Indian. It is American.”

“Did they triangulate?” asked Mother Jamila.

Muhammed shook his head. “They say we could have ten hours.”

Ten hours. It was not a long time.

“It could be forty days before we receive our ransom,” said Mother Jamila. “They will be here long before then, and they will bring snipers.”

“D’ere is something else.” This was Ghedi, his voice rough with anger. Whereas Abdi reminded me of a black python, Ghedi’s manner and hunched, hairy shoulders made me think of a hyena. “The captain was talking about a spy.”

“A spy? Bring him here.”

Abdi and Muhammed dragged the Chinaman to the radio. Ghedi said sharply, “Say again what we heard you say before, about the spy.”

The captain said nothing. Either he was too terrified to speak, or he was stupidly noble. Most likely, he hadn’t the English to clearly understand what Ghedi was asking of him.

“He was saying something about the military,” Ghedi yelled. “A general will help d’em, he said! He is called General Average.”

“Who is this general?” asked Mother Jamila. “You will tell us, or you will die.”

I lifted my AKM rifle to back up her point. Abdi was holding his machete, his other hand resting on a round grenade that he kept fastened to his belt. In his camouflage jacket and trousers, he looked like one of the Americans.

“Not general,” the captain shrieked suddenly, ducking and whimpering.

“Tell me again,” Ghedi yelled, and slammed his fist on the table.

I told Ghedi to calm down. I wish I had not. Ghedi was a fisherman and not used to guns. He did not know their power and unreliability. The rifle was Russian, made in the seventies, bought and traded a dozen times, and it had travelled from Russia to Yemen and into deep Africa. Old and worn, the gun should have had its safety catch on. Ghedi forgot this often, and so when I touched his arm, the trigger dipped under his swollen finger and the gun fired.

The Chinaman caught four semi-automatic rounds in the shoulder, chest and neck, in an upward arc. He fell backward. The other hostages screamed and some shouted in anger. Abdi and some of the others had to push them back, away from where we stood by the radio. Mother Jamila ordered Muhammed to try to stop the blood, but a gunshot wound to the neck will not be stopped. The captain of the freighter was dead in less than a minute.

Furious but in control, Mother Jamila turned to me. Ghedi was behind her, screaming at himself for his own stupidity. He was only eighteen.

Mother Jamila said to me, “Search the crew and passengers. Search the ship again if you have to. This general could be on board. Find him.”



I had been at sea for eleven years. Whenever we put in at one of the ports on the Horn of Africa, I stayed aboard our current vessel, or whatever vessel we had most recently hijacked. I did not like to step on land, which felt hard and static to me. Wherever there was land, there were people I

did not know—in Somalia, people worse than our boys, worse than the gangs at the coffee plantation, more hardened and ruthless than Mother Jamila.

Occasionally, I would glance at the sky in the same way that I used to glance at the sea when I was young. When I was working for a servant's wage, I used to think that the ocean was a symbol of utter freedom. Now, the sea feels like only a channel, a gulf between yet more land. I am trapped between continents, funnelled to where the land wants the water to go. Only the sky allows true freedom.

That was what I was thinking when I passed from the open deck into the dark, close quarters of the upper cabin, searching for the general who may or may not be on board. I moved quickly in my bare feet—my rough soles are better on the slippery deck than boots—and kept the safety off my weapon. Clipped to my jacket, which I stole off a chief bosun on an Egyptian cruise vessel years ago, was the two-way radio Mother Jamila and I used to communicate.

Having been on many freighters like this one, I took guesses as to where other crewmen might be hiding, and sped up my search. I didn't want to waste time, and I hated being away from Mother Jamila too long. Although she is a tough woman—called Pirate Queen by some people—I am not so tough, and feel vulnerable when not in her presence.

I was feeling nervous because we were port-bound, and I guess because of the warship. There is a shared nightmare that all the Fifth Quarter crew have, about Navy SEAL snipers. There is no defence against a sniper, other than to hide. We were not a crew accustomed to hiding, and it grated on us that the governments of the world had taken to dealing with us so harshly.

I finished the search of the vessel in forty minutes, confident that I hadn't missed anywhere important or that hadn't already been checked and then locked tight. There was no sign of any other person aboard, especially not any general. Most likely, this "General Average" did not exist, something that Ghedi had misheard. It was a stupid-sounding name.

On my return circuit, I heard voices from the wheelhouse. As I approached, one of our Puntland boys, Muhammed, stepped out and pulled the door to.

"I would not go in," he said. "Mother Jamila is with Ghedi. He messed up back there."

I nodded, but said nothing. Muhammed was our tech guy, paid extra for his proficiency with explosive detonators, ship piloting, and the GPS trackers we use. He was not a weedy man, but a powerful ex-militiaman like Abdi, who used to be hired muscle for one of the warlords that have run Somalia since the civil war. Whenever I spoke to Muhammed, I kept my eyes to the ground—something Mother Jamila has reprimanded me for on many occasions.

"I am happy you are here, Amina," he said quietly. "I have something to tell you."

"What?"

He grabbed my arm, making me jump. Despite myself, I let out a squeak of surprise, but I did not shout for fear of disturbing Mother Jamila in the wheelhouse.

Muhammed made no other move. He only said in his deep voice, "If you were an older woman you would be pretty to me, Amina. But you are young and too much like Mother Jamila. *Allah sees that Abdi has his eye on you.*"

He was not attacking me, but warning me. He let me go. I deliberately didn't rub my throbbing wrist in front of him. Nodding, I told him thanks, and he left, each step a heavy thud.

Through the crack in the wheelhouse door, I spied on the room's only occupants. Mother Jamila was undressing Ghedi, who had tears flowing down his cheeks. He was whispering quietly. Now that I had opened the door a touch, I could hear them.

"I did not wish for this. My fadda was a fisherman. I wanted only to fish, like him, an' have my own vessel. But illegal fishing was harming our trade, and when we tried to talk to d'e udda fishermen d'ey damaged my fadda's boat an' we could not afford to fix it. My fadda's brudda was a goat farmer an' he said I could have a job, but d'ere was no point. Pirates were turning up in all d'e ports and partying, spending d'eir money on anyt'ing and everyt'ing. D'ere were no stable exchange rates, no more trade agreements."

He went on like that, with Mother Jamila taking off the rest of his clothes—his jeans, dropping them in a heap on top of his olive-coloured T-shirt, and his crumpled underwear. She frequently wiped away his tears with her hand, smoothing them into his skin. Beyond them, out the high window, the grey skies turned in on themselves within the boundaries of the storm.

"Shh," said Mother Jamila. "I will get you some *qaat* to chew."

Ghedi spoke as if he hadn't heard her. She pushed him to his back on top of his clothes and massaged his thighs, then his chest. He said, "I used to hate you pirates. Your partying, your loud music an' smoke, all t'rough d'e night, scaring d'e families an' d'e animals. When d'e lords accepted you an' began to pay for your weapons an' ships, I found a place w'd you."

He sat up suddenly. Mother Jamila had her short fingernails beneath the hooks of his hips, her scarred lips kissing his stomach. "I am so grateful, Mudda Jamila. If not for you, d'en I would not be here, my fadda and my son would have died—"

"Hush," she told him, kindly but without a smile. She closed her eyes, her long lashes tickling his skin, the grey light gleaming along her skull. He lay back with a deep breath. She took him in her mouth, her palms running everywhere they could reach, slowly brushing away his tension and his sins.

This is how Mother Jamila controls her crew of violent men. This is how she helps them when they require it, or soothe them when they are angry, or weakens them when they become *ultra vires*. Through her ultimate patience and control, she can make them do anything. One day, she told me, I will be able to do the same.

My radio crackled, and I backed away from the door and closed it quietly. In the narrow corridor, I answered. "Yes?"

"Amina?" It is Abdi, the black python. "Where are you?"

"With Mother Jamila," I said, only half-lying.

"Come to the deck now."

"Why?"

"The warship—I can see it."

Ten minutes later I was using the scope on Muhammed's rifle to see it. It was huge and terrifying, like something from a nightmare. Designed to be sonar resistant, it was all angles and flat surfaces, like a faceted tank. The whole thing was painted in camouflage colours, from the tideline right to the uppermost antenna. It cut through the water like an enormous bullet, far taller and wider than even the Chinese freighter.

"My God."

I lowered the scope. Muhammed looked at me, expressionless.

"What are we going to do?" I asked. "It has . . . It is here much sooner than the skiff said."

"We were betrayed," said Muhammed. "Somebody in Third Quarter told us deliberately that the ship was farther away than they are. Maybe they have taken gold from one of the other warlords. Or perhaps they just want us out of the way."

"It is an American vessel. They will have snipers."

"We should get everybody inside. But there is not enough room—we will have to split them all up again."

I shook my head. "We can't do that."

"Where is Mother Jamila?"

I thought about her, gleaming bleakly in the storm light, her bald head and shoulders, the ripple of her spine, the hairy chin of Ghedi jerking upward as he arched.

"She will be here soon," I said. "Have you told the others about the ship?"

He took back his rifle. "I intended to call them—if you approved."

"Thank you, Muhammed. Call them."



The hostages seemed happy enough to oblige when our crew began to kettle them into the belly of the freighter. They did not want to become

collateral damage when the Americans arrived, and the threat of Muhammed's bulk and my AKM was enough to keep them amicable.

I touched the wheel on my radio. "Muhammed, where is Abdi?"

"I do not know. Nagassi and Lebda are with me. Have you seen Ghedi?"

I closed the channel on the radio. Some of the Chinese freighter crew were babbling at me, but I couldn't understand what they were saying to me. I herded the yelling crowd of hostages with my rifle, shouting for them to move forward.

Soon they were inside the mess, the largest comfortable space within the vessel. They were ordered to sit. The cook was still making the food that Mother Jamila had ordered, and its smell filled the room from the adjoining kitchen, making my stomach rumble. I was the last to approach the mess. I had gotten the final hostage inside when I heard footsteps around the corner to my right.

My thumb snicked off the safety on my rifle, as automatic to me as breathing. I moved quietly and quickly, following the footsteps. I was irritated by the minute clacking of the buckles on my gun strap against the rifle's sights.

I lunged around the corner, raising the barrel of the AKM. It was knocked down immediately by an arm from the shadows and pulled on; I was caught off balance, and the strong figure grabbed me, spun me around, held me in a choke hold from behind—*the general!* I thought in a panic. The American spy that the Chinaman and his crew had such confidence in had caught me!

But no. I could smell this man, and he was not American. It was the smell of bad gun oil and unwashed fatigues, pungent sweat.

"Abdi?"

"Quiet!"

He pulled me backward, deeper into the corridor and around another corner. The sharp edge of the machete was pressed against the back of my neck. When he had dragged me to the nearest room, he threw me inside and followed, closing the door quietly and turning the wheel that bolted the door closed.

"Abdi, what do you think you are—"

"Shut up," he said. The only light came through the small window in the door he had just locked. It shone over his shoulders, throwing his face into black shadow. He took off his jacket and the light bounced off his sinuous arms.

He said, "I want to see you."

"No." I tried to make my voice hard, but this was difficult. "When Mother Jamila hears of this—"

"I only want to see you, Amina." He raised the machete, gesturing. "The coat and shirt."

I removed the coat slowly. My shirt I had taken from a port, four years ago when I last set foot on land. It was the year of the great floods, when torrential rains drowned the whole of the Somali region. Shebelle burst her banks and flooded hundreds of homes. Over a hundred people were killed directly by the water. I had found the durable denim shirt on one of the bodies we had been ordered to rob by the Fifth Quarter warlord. I took that off as well.

I could not see Abdi's eyes, but I knew that they were fixed on the bandages I wore to flatten my breasts. I felt the muscles tighten in my stomach, in my groin. I was closing my body to him, fearful of what he might do.

Abdi nodded. "You are not a man, but maybe you are not a woman. Like Mother Jamila, I could let you be my captain."

"You could go and throw yourself into the ocean," I said, snatching up my shirt again.

He pointed the machete at me. "Do not speak to me that way. I was a militiaman."

"I know," I said flatly. "And now you are just a thief, like Mother Jamila and me."

"I have killed fifty men."

"That is not something to be proud of, Abdi, no matter what your father says." I felt stupid for saying things that would anger him, but Abdi had the cold resolution of a killer and was not easily angered. He did not touch me further, but stood like a leaning tree by the door so that I had to push past him to exit. As I unlocked and opened the door, the light fell upon his smile, and a volcanic rush of anger rose inside me. Bile in my throat, I spun and grabbed the sharp blade of the machete in my hand. Ignoring the pain, I yanked it from his hand. He was surprised enough to let go, and I plunged the machete into his stomach before he even re clenched his fist.

The machete is made for hacking, not stabbing. His muscular stomach resisted after an inch. I pulled out the tip and swung it with all my strength against the side of his waist. The wound was much deeper this time, and when I worked the blade free blood followed it.

Abdi shrieked and tried to staunch the bleeding, staring at me in horror. I shook the machete in his face.

"How many times have I told you about this knife, Abdi? From now on you use the weapons you are given—or else I will use them on *you!*"

He could only look at me with wide, white eyes as I took his knife and left.



I expected to be shaken by my encounter with Abdi, but was shocked only by my calmness. I rushed through the tight internal channels of the freighter and burst into the brightness of the deck, my fear of throwing up over myself

greater than my fear of Navy SEALs. I gripped the balustrade and breathed slowly. I did not feel sick, as I once thought I would after such an encounter. I did not feel dizzy or out of breath. I was not disturbed in any way by the weight of the machete and Abdi's blood on my hand.

I threw the weapon into the churning water. Hopefully, in my anger, I had taught Abdi a lesson. But, I realised, that was not me thinking—those were the cold, cruel thoughts of Mother Jamila.

I had idolised the Pirate Queen ever since she had rescued me from the mud and blood of the Didessa river. She had been everything that I needed to be: strong, powerful, wealthy, and above all unafraid. But I learned that her strength came from her ability to instill fear in others, and her power from the same fear. Her wealth came from her power. And, I learned long ago, she was unafraid because she had suffered in every way that a woman might suffer, and survived. She understood the cruel nature of the world, which had made her country one of the poorest in the world, and had taken from her what little she'd had. A world that had made her weak, but that had also given her the opportunity to rebuild herself, become powerful in a way that only the warlords of Somalia are powerful. She was, it occurred to me, a dreadful woman. I did not want to be like her. I did not want to be halfway between a woman and a man, the source of lust or fear. I only wanted to be.

I turned to lean back against the railing, as Mother Jamila had done earlier that day, and could see the tail end of the monsoon against the white horizon. The freighter's cranes and metal containers were stark and straight-edged against the sky. I turned to the north. I no longer needed a scope to see the American warship. It was immense, its sharp prow slicing through the spume frothed up by the giant's passage through the warm waters. It was close enough for me to make out its inactive searchlights, steel masts, and radar dishes. A blast from its cannon would put a hole right through our freighter. It would have taken no effort on their part to sink us, but of course they had the hostages to think about.

It made me shiver, despite the humidity. I felt exposed and horribly vulnerable, like a fox pursued through open fields. I had the bolt-hole of the lower decks, but I did not want to push past the wounded Abdi, whose fury would no doubt be catching up with him. Thinking of consulting with Mother Jamila suddenly made me feel sick in my stomach. Something to do with what I had said to Abdi: *And now you are just a thief, like Mother Jamila and me.*

I did not want to follow in Mother Jamila's footsteps. Those prints were left in clotted blood. No matter how much respect and strength Mother Jamila had, no matter how much gold, I did not want to be anything like her or Abdi, anything at all like the others of the crew.

The heavy door inside opened with a wheel. I turned and turned it, finally

breaking the seal, and slipped back into the darkness one last time, with the roar of the hulking warship following behind me.

Abdi was not where I had left him, but his blood was still on the floor. Ever the fool, Abdi had never fully adjusted to the life of a pirate. He was still a militiaman at heart, and until that day, hadn't realised how stupid it was to bring a knife to a gun fight.

Gedhi and Muhammed were standing at the junction of two narrow corridors, adjoined by the larger crew quarters and the mess, where the hostages were being held.

"Where were you?" asked Ghedi hurriedly, his rifle weighing down both his hands. He smelled of *qaat*. "Mother Jamila is—"

"I have just spoken with her," I said. "She said that we are going to fire upon the American vessel."

"What?"

I held up my hands. "Wait, wait—she said that we were to order the hostages onto the deck first." I hoped that my exaggerated gestures did not betray me as a liar. Ghedi is an astute man, and Muhammed an old hand at observation.

"To use them as cover?" he asked dubiously.

I nodded, pressing my lips together. The less I said, the better. I was not used to being untruthful.

"Then we must do it quickly," said Ghedi. He was, no doubt, still enamoured with Mother Jamila after their most recent time together, as the men always were. He was still under her spell and thought her infallible as I once did.

Ghedi went to shout at the hostages. Muhammed stepped closer to me, a shadow, and put his hand on my shoulder. Muhammed has the darkest skin I have ever seen, almost as black as oil, like Mother Jamila's.

He said, "I have spoken with Abdi. Amina, what are you doing?"

"I am following orders," I said, and hoped that this would be enough.

Muhammed looked at me with narrowed eyes. His face was set and hard and there is barely a centimetre of fat on his entire body. Powerful as he was, Muhammed was only a pirate. A thief. A good man to me, perhaps, but not a respectful man. I realised that I had never respected him, or any of them, save for Mother Jamila.

"Do what you must," he told me finally, and let me go.

I unslung my rifle and began to herd the hostages onto the open deck. The others had joined us and were doing the same. Mother Jamila was elsewhere. I wondered where she could be. If she turned up now, then I would be put on the spot, and I would likely be killed—I imagined that Abdi would volunteer for this.

Abdi looked at me out of the corner of his eye as he waved his pistol at

the captive crew. They filed out sedately, like cattle. I hoped that what I was doing was right, and prayed to God that He would carry them through this unhurt.

Soon, everybody was out on deck, opening their collars to the muggy heat. The crew and I moved to step out last. I stopped dead when sudden colour rippled through the spray thrown off by the waves—the red line of a laser sight.

So the warship had come close enough for the use of long-range rifles. A sniper's line of sight cut between us and our cover. I could see the thin beam quivering in front of me, first visible and then not, and finally almost solid as a fresh crest of spray jolted up against the side of the freighter.

"D'ey are here," I heard Ghedi say. "Get Mudda Jamila. Use d'e radio."

I heard the click of the safety being disabled on his weapon. The noise echoed behind me as Abdi and the others did the same. I could only stare at the trembling horizontal beam of light in front of me, and I held up my hands and stepped out of the safety of the doorway.

"Amina, what are you doing?" Ghedi shouted.

"Let her go," Abdi yelled. "Let the Americans put a bullet in her head."

The beam disappeared from my view as I stepped into it. I imagined that I could feel the burning red spot of light on my temple, denoting the path of the bullet that would kill me. But I did not stop, nor did I kneel.

I spun on my toes and grabbed the point of Ghedi's rifle. With both hands squeezed tight around the barrel, I yanked with all my strength. It caught him off guard, and he stumbled forward. I used his own momentum to pull him deep into the crowd of hostages, who were now shouting to each other in alarm like a flock of disturbed birds.

With Ghedi exposed, I ducked and zig-zagged through the throng and back toward the hatch. I leapt up in front of Muhammed and saw the surprise in his eyes. The muscles tensed in his chest, showing beneath his shirt. I did not grab him. I would give him his chance, and let him make his own choice.

Abdi understood my plan. He tried to push Muhammed aside to give him room for his pistol, which he carried poorly, the hunk of metal weighing unevenly on his narrow wrist. I did not grab it like I had Ghedi's rifle—I knew that Abdi would just let go—but instead I used both my hands to slam his fist into the metal wall of the corridor. He dropped the pistol as I expected, but I had not anticipated his machete, which I thought I had thrown into the sea. Evidently, he kept two.

I screamed as the heatless metal dropped heavily against my shoulder. I felt my collar bone break inside me and the pain as Abdi wriggled the blade free of the cleft it had made in my body. My whole right arm went limp, like a dead fish on the end of a line.

Muhammed tried to stop him, but the narrow corridor was too tight for his huge body. Anyway, I did not think that he really wanted to stop Abdi, who ducked under Muhammed's arm and came at me with the machete. He swung his arm upward, like a man waving smoke under a bee's nest to put them to sleep. The machete caught me under the ribs with the force of a hammer, and tore up my body and through the meat of my breast.

"Stop, Abdi," Muhammed was yelling. I barely heard him through the screaming in my head—or was I screaming aloud?

"We must kill her."

"Stop."

With blood pouring from my shoulder and breast, I staggered back through the doorway. My legs felt weak and detached from my body. I was surprised that I could still stand. Something frozen and painful sat in my belly, and I felt suddenly very cold. My vision greyed, and I was grabbed from behind—by Ghedi, I realised later—and pulled onto my back. I saw twin beams of red light dancing against the sky above me as I fell. Gunshots rang out and there was screaming.

After I was pulled over, a darkness flooded behind my eyes like octopus ink. I was still conscious, or else the noises around me penetrated my dreams, because I could hear Ghedi shouting wordlessly at the warship, losing his English. He fired his gun at them, and then a different weapon was fired, and Ghedi stopped screaming.

That is all I remember.



The owners of the freighter, of course, got their boat back. They never had to make a claim, and General Average never had to be involved. One of my interrogators told me that the general was not a person, but some ancient maritime law that protects the victims of crimes at sea. The Navy and maritime companies were very secretive about it, though, and I have come to accept it as something mysterious but benevolent, helping people like the poor Chinese captain.

The warship had been authorised to use deadly force. They fired upon us under Resolution 1838, a new piece of legislation that allowed military force to suppress acts of piracy in the Somali region. I had never heard of it—none of us had—and if only the message had been spread, perhaps there would be fewer opportunists off the coast of Africa, taking easy pickings without risk.

I read in a newspaper the next day that all of the hostages were released, but none of Mother Jamila's crew escaped. Ghedi, Abdi, Ekevu, and Sefu were shot by snipers and killed. I was glad to hear that Muhammed surrendered and was not killed. Like me, he went to jail, though they were not as lenient with Muhammed as they were with me. Thambo and Nathaniel

also lived. Nobody discussed Mother Jamila herself. She was never mentioned in any of the newspapers, though on the television, a news reporter said that our crew had been led by an infamous Pirate Queen similar to Cheng Chui Ping, the Chinese snakehead who smuggled human cargo in and out of China until the turn of the millennium. They never said if Mother Jamila had been caught or killed.

I like to think that she had sensed my betrayal and took her leave of the freighter, leaping into the Indian Ocean without her boots. She would have chosen not to swim back to the Horn of Africa, but out to sea, where all there was were waves and seabirds, circling and cawing in the sky. If she did, my rational mind tells me that she would have died and sunk to the seabed miles below the surface.

But I do not feel as though she has died. I feel that she lives still.



THE AFTER

Carrie Vaccaro Nelkin

Hutchins and I came upon the house at sunset. Red clapboard, brilliant in the fiery light, it sat downslope in a pasture hard with ice. Only the loose blacktop and torn-up dirt by the side of the road indicated that anyone had been there recently.

The truck, I thought, the truck that had roared by us not ten minutes earlier. The frozen ground hid much of its impact on the earth, but the damage to the edges of the decaying road surface was fresh. I guessed the truck had been parked close to the house and then driven up the slope before growling past us.

Other than the small group of flagellants we had hidden from, the occupants of the truck were the only people we had seen all day. There had been nothing to scramble behind or under, no bush or tree, no rock or knoll. We had instead shuffled as far as we could into the bare field, away from the noise of the approaching engine, but the large, grimy vehicle was around the bend in no time.

We should have dropped to the ground the moment we'd heard it. Pretending to be dead had worked before. But our wintry joints and brains weren't responding quickly, and we'd stood like prey stiffened with fear as the truck slowed down and someone on the passenger side of the cab leaned out the window to look at us.

The dusky face and big, dark Afro with a streak of white on the side could have belonged to either a man or a woman, but something told me the person was female. With a hand extended out the window, she'd given a signal to someone in the open-bed back, and I'd noticed suddenly the two long-barreled guns sticking out through wooden slats that had been mounted to increase the height of the sides. The barrels withdrew. The person in the cab continued staring at us until we were out of sight.

Now, I eyed the house and said to Hutchins, "What do you think?" The approaching night promised snow.

"I think they're gone," he said. "We have to take our chances."

We left the road and headed warily toward the simple structure.

"Where do you suppose they got the truck?" I said. "Or the gas?"

Hutchins shrugged. He spoke even less than I did.

The house was farther away than it appeared, and by the time we arrived, the shadows had already pooled around it on three sides. Descending, we had seen no one on the front porch, now dark and uncertain. I could hardly feel the soles of my feet despite two layers of socks inside the thick work boots, and I lagged behind Hutchins, who by now understood that my slowness was due neither to fear nor reluctance. He waited for me to catch up.

The month was at full moon. If it were not for the advancing clouds, we would have that to our advantage inside the house. Last night, we had spent the night in a barn, where the smell of animals was still strong and comforting. Hutchins and I always tried to take turns keeping watch, but we usually fell asleep from the day's walking and then woke up around dawn, surprised at the silence, as if we were not used to it by now.

Removing the hatchet from his belt, Hutchins glanced at me. I had already taken the steel rod from its makeshift scabbard on the side of my rucksack and held it ready, its icy metal sticking to my skin through the holes in my gloves. I nodded. We went up the wooden porch stairs, our footsteps impossibly loud.

I peered into the darkness on either side of the screen door, then followed Hutchins into a large room with a staircase straight ahead. With no flashlight or candles, we waited for our eyes to adjust. The curtains had been torn from the windows. Some hung in shreds from narrow rods that I considered taking because their ends could be sharpened.

Together, we searched the room on the right, not speaking, not needing to. Most of the furniture was gone, but two chairs with broken cane seats and a sofa without cushions had been pushed against the walls. The baseball cap jammed onto my head did nothing to protect my ears from the winter that sent its breath through the broken windows.

More than anything, I wanted a cup of hot tea. Plain hot tea, steaming, unsweetened. I craved it the way I could no longer crave anything else, as if it represented everything that had been forfeited. Hutchins and I got along well, though I didn't particularly like him. He had a penchant for teary reminiscences of a world we might never see again, but I trusted him. The yen for hot tea, constant now and growing, was my link to his unwillingness to forget.

He was built large, much bigger than me. Next to him, I looked like a boy instead of a man only slightly younger. In addition to a hatchet, he carried a crowbar and a partially serrated fixed-blade knife. I, too, carried a knife, something I had found in a kitchen we'd stayed in, but it rarely left my rucksack because I couldn't depend on my hands to have enough sensation to grip it so that it wouldn't be turned against me. Like my feet, they had fallen to this strange neuropathy since the cold set in. That Hutchins and I

were among the living was miracle and nightmare enough. He showed no symptoms, and the numbness was my only one.

The house smelled bad, almost fetid. Hutchins approached the doorway to the next room and stopped.

“Something died in here,” he said quietly.

It was the living I feared, though we’d had to use the crowbar only twice. I thought of the woman with the big Afro and wondered if she would have spared us had we surprised her and her friends in the house. I doubted it. “Keep going.”

The second room was a small kitchen. If the rest of the house was clear, we would come back and search the cabinets for matches and food, unlikely as we were to find any.

The back door by the battered porcelain sink was nailed shut with two-by-fours. Someone had succeeded in prying one of them loose, but the others held strong. Probably nothing could come in the back way while we were here.

In the third room, the remnants of a dining table were splintered across a large area rug. The last slivers of light from the departing sun needled onto the floor through the cracked French windows.

“What’s that?” I said.

A long, bundled shape lay a few feet from the table. Its filth evident even in the dying light, the indeterminate humanoid form was wrapped in rags and slightly curled, as if it had attempted a fetal position but the tattered layers had interfered.

“Poke it,” Hutchins said.

With the steel rod I gently prodded the middle of the form, then, more firmly, the right end.

“Frozen,” I said.

“Give me that.” Hutchins took the rod and slammed it down on what was either the feet or the head.

“Jesus, Hutch!” I backed up a step. I had taken the pipe from steel fencing that was new and uncorroded. Used the right way, it could kill a person. That’s why I carried it. But it disturbed me that it was Hutchins who had whacked a dead or near-dead body with it—he, who still wept openly about his wife and baby.

“Just making sure,” he said. He handed back the rod. We looked at the thing on the floor, and I felt something vile rise inside me. No face was visible, no hands, no limbs. I had thought I was becoming used to this sort of sight, and that Hutchins was hardening, too. Now, we glanced at each other and I could feel his reluctance.

“If we drag it to the front door, it might keep others out,” I said.

He was silent a moment. “I don’t want to touch it.”

“You already hit it. It didn’t move.”

Hutchins remained still.

“What’s the matter with you?” I bent down over one end of the form and gripped the rags. “You take that end and I’ll pull.”

He stooped at last. As I tugged, the cloth ripped in my hands and I staggered back. Cursing, I grabbed hold of what was probably the head and together we dragged the carcass out of the room and to the front door, where we lay it across the entrance so that an intruder would have to trip over it.

We were ready now to search upstairs. Hutchins led, using my steel rod to sweep each step in the dark stairwell to check for holes before putting his weight on it. The top floor was small, two bedrooms and a bath, all of which were empty except for what had been left in the toilet by previous travelers. We closed the door behind us and started downstairs, glancing at the body that blocked the foot of the front entrance as we headed back to the kitchen.

Not a single can of food was left in the cupboards. Hutchins found rice in a box. He poured some into his hand and small black insects crawled out with the grains. He threw the box away in disgust.

“You should have kept that,” I said. “For when we find water.”

“Too infested.”

We settled for the night in the room with the dismantled sofa, hungry.

“We probably could have eaten the bugs, you know.” I turned on my side, adjusting the rucksack under my head. The bare floorboards hurt my bones, and a chill whistled through the baseboard cracks. Hutchins said nothing. After a long time, during which I stared at the night sky through the windows, I heard him sobbing quietly. Not for the first time, I wondered if I too would cry if I had had a wife and child. My mother and brothers went unmourned, as did my failing kinship with anything once alive.

After a while, the moon was high enough to be visible and I wondered if the storm would miss us. Hutchins no longer wept. I heard his soft, regular breathing. Although he had volunteered for watch, he’d fallen asleep. I sat up. In the thick silence, the scent of snow still blustered through the broken panes, distracting me from the gnawing in my stomach.

I removed one of my boots and took my foot between my hands, massaging the deadened flesh through the socks. The sole, I knew, would be white as milk, devoid of blood from the capillaries that had spasmed shut. One day soon, it would turn blue.

I pressed the meager warmth of my palms into my foot and thought about the frozen body that lay across the front door. Again I saw the disturbing form as it had appeared by the table and again I wondered at Hutchins’s reluctance to touch it, and at my own momentary aversion. I put my boot back on and got up.

The entrance area was darker than the other room. At first barely visible against the door, the ragged form lay implacably full of a meaning I could not define. Its contours filled me with dread. I stared at it until I calmed down, then walked back to my rucksack and sat against it. Hutchins was snoring softly, slumped back against the sofa. The sickening thud of the metal pipe as he slammed it against the body came back to me. Over and over, I saw the pipe smashing down on the hardened figure, until I cringed as if it were hitting me.

I looked at Hutchins. His mouth was open in the vulnerability of sleep. I shoved my rucksack against the wall under one of the windows, where I could see his legs but he couldn't see me. For a while I watched my breath in the moonlight. Then I dozed off.

I woke with a start. The moonlight was gone, replaced by the subdued luminescence of dense clouds. Except for Hutchins's breathing, all was quiet. Wet drops fell on my face. I brushed snowflakes from my cheek, listened some more, then got up and surveyed the room. Something did not feel right. I reached for the metal rod.

"Hutch, wake up." I kicked his feet.

He woke immediately and thrust his hand to his belt for the hatchet. "What?"

"Think I heard something."

He got up, and big as he was, he moved more quietly than I with my numb feet. We looked out the windows, then headed toward the front entrance.

The body was gone.

We stared at the spot as if its emptiness were an illusion of the dark. Then the implications hit us, and we both wheeled around. Hutchins peered up the stairwell.

"You check down here." He started up the stairs, hatchet held up.

I clutched the steel rod with both hands and started in the dining room, where the high French windows showcased the sky's glower. I stabbed every corner and shadow, poked every cranny in the kitchen, and explored the living room again. Hutchins came down the stairs.

"Nothing," he said.

"Same here." I saw the peculiar look on his face and turned to the front door.

Several inches of snow had fallen and begun drifting onto the porch. There were no footprints leading away from the house.

"Did we miss a room?" I said.

"No. No basement."

"Crawlspace?"

"How did he get to it?"

I pushed open the screen door and looked on both sides of the porch,

which was lit by the peculiar incandescence of snow and clouds reflecting off one another. At left, where the snow reached under the eaves, something had scraped a trail to the side railing, which was nothing but a bunch of rickety stakes that hung in rotted pieces. A strip of blackened cloth, snagged on a wood shard, dangled like a marker. Past the porch, a path trampled into the snow led from the side of the house, ending abruptly about ten feet away.

Again, the sense of dread. I turned to Hutchins. "We need to leave."

"In this snow?" He stared at the aborted path. "We're safer here."

Inside, we waited for dawn, neither of us sleeping or speaking. Shivering, I pictured steaming cups of Oolong and English Breakfast teas and musky black brews that smelled of earth. The image of the steel pipe crashing down on a frozen form that later crept away filled me with sharp disquiet and a strange longing. The trail had ended in the snow, as if he had simply been lifted to the sky. Conjuring memories of sipping smoky Lapsang Souchong and sweet Darjeelings, brown liquids in white cups, dark and scalding, I used the tea to fight this thing that made no sense in a world that no longer made sense. For a moment, I covered my face with numb fingers and felt my warm breath like steam rising from a ceramic mug. A pain started deep in my chest, and when I took my hands away, I realized I was crying.



"Damn, you people don't know how to take a hint, do you?" The voice was like butter mixed into warm gravel, throaty in the way of someone who'd smoked too many cigarettes when cigarettes were still available.

I thought I was dreaming until cold metal butted against my face and my eyes flew open. I was looking up the barrel of the longest rifle I had ever seen.

The woman with the Afro stood tall and rangy at the other end of the gun. I turned my head a fraction to see where Hutchins was.

"Don't move," she said. "This piece may look too old and pretty to be real, but it makes good holes, especially up close like this." She squinted at me and slowly moved the mouth of the barrel down to the center of my chest. "What'd you do with it?"

I couldn't muster a response quickly enough, and she thrust the rifle sharply into my breastbone.

I grimaced. "I don't understand."

"Where'd you put it?"

"Put what?"

"Aw, come on," she said with a bare hint of a smile in her voice. "You're a very pretty boy and you're probably smarter than you look. I don't know about your friend here—"

She tipped her head to my right. I stole a glance and thought I saw

Hutchins sitting upright on the floor with a knife blade being held to his neck.

“—but I have a feeling about you. So don’t prove me wrong, all right, Curly?”

I swallowed, my throat so dry that the action was mostly a convulsion.

“So answer my question. The body. Where’d you put the body? Practically the only thing left in this damned place other than the stinkin’ sausages upstairs in the bathroom, so don’t pretend you don’t know what I’m talkin’ about.”

“I don’t know what happened to it.” In the odd, soft light I thought I saw her glower, and added, “We found it in the dining room. Dragged it to the front door so people would think twice about coming in. When we woke up later it was gone.”

“What do you mean it was gone? Shay, bring that fool over here.”

“Move it,” I heard someone else mutter. “On your knees. Come on, come on.”

In a moment Hutchins was next to me, his lank blond hair sweaty with fear even in the cold. The woman making him sweat was pointing a handgun at his face as well as holding a knife to his neck.

“Please,” he whispered.

“I don’t want to hear you,” my captor said. “Shay’s real quick with that knife. The gun’s a backup, but she really likes knives. Get it?”

Hutchins said nothing, merely blinked his understanding.

Someone was clumping up the front steps of the house. The door opened and banged shut. The woman who entered the room was much too petite for her heavy footfall.

“Red, what’s going on?” she asked. Her gloves were cut off at the fingers and the woolen hat she removed revealed short hair chopped roughly into spikes.

The woman with the Afro gave her a big smile, incongruous in the surroundings. “I’m trying to find out what happened to our mascot.”

“Why don’t we just go?” The petite woman walked up to Red and put a hand on her back. “We got the diesel. That’s what we came back for.”

Red’s gaze softened and her voice grew huskier. “You’re right. I was just having some fun here.”

The woman who was holding the knife to Hutchins said, “You guys go.” Her pale skin and pinkish eyes looked sickly, especially under the too-sparse cornrows she had attempted. “I’ll get rid of them and join you in a minute.”

Red looked down at the floor and shook her head. “No, no, no. See, that’s just what we’re not gonna do. Shay, we don’t kill people indiscriminately. If I keep having trouble with you on that, you’re gonna find your ass over the

side of the ship. Got that? Or maybe you'd like to reconsider now, before we set sail?"

Shay made a conciliatory motion with her head. "Fine," she said through slightly clenched teeth. "We'll leave them here."

"Actually," Red said, gripping the petite woman's hand while still keeping the rifle muzzle against the middle of my chest, "what do you say, Vic? I was thinking—we have some women on board who still like boys. We can bring these two with us. Or at least this one." She nodded at me. "Help keep the morale high."

"What if I don't want to go?" The words flew out of my mouth before I could consider that they might earn me a couple of bullets in the heart.

But Red only sighed and said, "Well, maybe you don't have a choice, see? Look, what are you going to do? You've been roaming like everybody else, what, six, seven, eight months now? You see anything different? You see anything better? You're still alive—for now. But there's plenty of people who'd kill you for that knapsack, or for your foul-smelling clothes, or because they've lost their minds. Like all those folks out there whipping themselves and spraying their blood all over out of some misguided penance because they think we brought this all on ourselves. You know as well as I do that in their crazy brains, if you're not penitent, then you're guilty, and you know what they'll do to you."

One thing I hated was an extremist—and to me, all thugs were extremist—who sounded reasonable. They were usually good at contorting logic into something that seemed sensible. That this woman called Red and her friends were thugs of some sort, I had no doubt. But I was still a coward, preferring to die whatever death was considered natural these days than to die by an assailant's weapon.

"Why should we trust you?" I said in a small voice.

"I've already spared you twice." She looked at me hard.

"Why should you trust *us*?"

She continued staring at me. "Who says we trust you?"

Unable to read her eyes, I waited a long moment before turning and venturing, "Hutch?" Maybe agreeing now and escaping later were the only real options.

"You don't even know where," he said thickly, his Adam's apple bobbing furiously against the knife blade.

I turned back to Red.

"Maybe I'm not making myself clear," she said, and suddenly I realized she might be a lot older than I'd thought. Her teeth were stained and her lips cracked, but what tipped me to her age were the prominent veins in the hands gripping the rifle.

"I'm extending a time-honored tradition to you," she said. "I'm asking

if you and your friend would like to go with us, not as captives, but as part of our crew. We're sailing south, because whatever else we find, at least the weather's got to be better. And we are resourceful. You may call what we do plunder, but let's face it, it's no more than what you do on a small scale. No more than what anybody does to stay alive. We take care of our little community. And you can be part of it."

"I'm not going," Hutch said.

I looked deeply into Red's bloodshot eyes. The early morning light in the room was good now. I could see that her jeans and puffy jacket were dirty and her skin ashy, but she was still a good-looking woman under all that hair.

"Then you come, Curly," she said.

"I can't just leave him." Was this woman insane, inviting a stranger on board their ship? Even if the issue of trust was reduced to taking a calculated risk, how did she know I wasn't diseased?

As if she had read my mind, she said, "If you were really sick, you'd both be dead by now. You're still young and relatively strong. We could use that."

She thought a moment. Then she turned to Shay and instructed, "Lash him."

Before I could understand what she meant, I saw quick movement from the corner of my eye and then Hutch slumped to the floor. Something hit my forehead hard and I sat, stunned, as if I'd walked into a pole. Then I, too, went down.



We were already in the back of the truck when I came to with a slight headache. Red was sitting next to me, and we were sharing a drop cloth as blanket. Hutchins was in the other corner, awake and looking miserable as Shay hovered near him with a restless expression on her face.

Red leaned over me and peered into my eyes. For some reason, I didn't feel afraid.

"I think you'll be okay," she said. "I never hit as hard as Shay unless I mean it." She cast a dark glance toward the other corner.

The truck was jiggling through ruts in a road that ran along small abandoned storefronts on one side and a marina where sailboats sat in dry dock in their shrink-wrapped covers and canvas cocoons, some of which had come loose and were flapping in the wind. I hadn't realized we were this close to water, and recognized the smell I had taken yesterday to be rain or the approaching snow.

Red reached behind her and pulled out an open can of peanuts. "Here," she said.

I looked at them suspiciously.

"They're not poisoned." She dropped a small amount into her palm and tossed them in her mouth. "Like you have anything to lose." As she chewed she inhaled deeply, as if dragging on a cigarette.

I took the can. The first couple of nuts to hit my tongue made my salivary glands fire up so quickly they hurt. At that moment, I didn't care if the peanuts were tainted. At least I wouldn't die hungry.

"Where'd you get these?" I asked, appalled that my first question was about food and not about where Hutchins and I were being taken.

"You'd be surprised," she replied in a confidential voice, "how many people out there still have things. They have food, still have some water, some fuel. Not too much anymore—a lot of them have been killed for their things. We don't do that." She lowered her eyes and threw a look at Shay. "We just help them share what they have. With us."

"Where—?"

"You're coming to see our boat. You might still change your mind. Notice you're not tied up."

My hand stopped halfway to my mouth. "Why?"

She shifted under the tarp and faced me. The faint odor of old perspiration clung to her jacket. "I could have killed you three times already. This last time I *broke* a time-honored tradition. When you said no, you didn't want to come with us, *that's* when I should have let Shay be happy. You remind me of my little brother, except I don't have a little brother and if I did, he wouldn't look at all like you. What's your name?"

"Jonathan."

She smiled, and I saw where a tooth was missing from the side of her mouth. "Jonathan. I might still call you Curly, though."

I used my sleeve to wipe peanut crumbs from my mouth. "Would we really have to be—" I paused, unable to get the words out because of the peanuts, I thought, but then realizing the words themselves were so distasteful as to get stuck on the way out. "Se—sex slaves?"

The smile turned almost shy. "Whatever you and the girls decide."

"You know, some of the women are going to object violently to this," Shay flung from the other side. "To them being on board. I'd think long and hard about this if I were you, Red."

Red sat up. "Violently? That what you just said, Shay? That supposed to have an implied threat? Let's not forget who needs who here. I kick you off this truck, and you'll be dry-heaving and sweating ice in no time. You'll be shaking so hard, whatever stubs you got left in your mouth are gonna crack into dust. And those are the *nice* symptoms."

Shay spat out the back of the truck, the spittle flying short and landing on the rear cargo door. "It's inevitable, anyway, isn't it?"

"You need us, girl. We got some of the last stash you're gonna come across

in a long time.” Red’s voice softened slightly. “Wouldn’t you rather not be by yourself?”

Shay looked away, her face stony.

Red turned and banged on the cab’s rear window. “Let’s *go!* What is taking so long to get there? A couple of freakin’ miles, Goddammit!”

I glanced at Hutchins. He was steeped in his own misery, eyes screwed shut, lips moving slightly as if quivering or maybe praying. The truck veered sharply right and made a steep descent toward the water. Once on board the boat, Hutchins and I—or maybe just I—would be captive, whether we considered ourselves captive or not. And what if Red decided to sell us when we arrived wherever we were going? Or what if she could be trusted but our presence incited a mutiny?

Every one of my fingers was now numb. How much longer could I walk on numb feet without stumbling and breaking a bone? How much longer before an infection set in that I would be unable to fight because there was no blood in my extremities? The lure of warmer weather was beginning to call me. In my grave hunger and fatigue, I could almost hear the song in my ears.

Red stood up just as I asked, “Why are you called Red?”

She laughed as she crossed over my legs and held on to the side of the truck. “Because I’m not. How’s that for an answer?”

The truck stopped at the bottom of the hill, and I got slowly to my feet, clutching the side for balance. We were in the parking lot of a boating supply store, a few of its sharply pitched spaces still occupied by cars that had never been claimed. The sailboats moored nearest us, still in the water, had had their covers sliced through as if someone had been searching for something on board. I followed Red’s gaze and gave a soft gasp at what I saw several hundred yards out beyond the shore.

Too small to be a ship and too large to be a boat, the flat-hulled vessel was a riot of primary colors in no particular pattern, just huge swaths of blue here, yellow circles there, and bands of red wherever. Its two magnificent, horizontally ribbed sails seemed to overlap like asymmetrical butterfly wings.

“Is that a sampan?” I asked incredulously.

“Yep. Beautiful, huh?”

“Where’d you get it?”

“New York City, believe it or not. She must have been some kind of promotional item. But she’s built solid.” Red’s attention was caught briefly by three women getting out of a skiff tied to a dock post. She waved at them as they started toward us.

“But they’re not for open waters,” I said. “You have to be real careful with that. Stay near the coast as much as you can.”

Red assessed me a moment. "You're right," she said at last. "But this one's fortified, and it can use diesel. You can see it's much bigger than a regular sampan. Shay, you go help load up. We'll have to make several trips."

Shay muttered something and grabbed one of the sacks Hutchins had been resting against. She dropped to the ground, then pulled the sack off the edge of the truck bed.

Red leaned against the side, observing the bustle of activity surrounding the truck. Two sturdily built women struggled with three tanks they unearthed from the tarps jumbled against the sides of the truck bed.

"Is that all the fuel you have?" Hutchins said. He had risen to his feet and was standing next to us.

Red shook her head. "Just topping it off." She yelled out a few orders, then, without looking at either of us, said, "You're not coming, are you?"

Hutchins and I glanced at one another.

"It's all right," she said, still averting her eyes. When her gaze finally swung to me, she added, "I keep my promises. You go. Have a nice life. Just remember when things get tough, I gave you another option." She bent down and fished around in the nearest sack.

"It's better for you, too, Red," I said as she rose and pushed something into my hand.

"You guys share these."

I looked at the three candy bars and two tea bags and my eyes misted. I held the teabags in their stiff little paper covers up to my nose and breathed deeply, secretly hoping Hutchins hated tea. That way I could have a cup when we next found water, maybe, and save the other bag indefinitely just so I could inhale its fragrance, in my fantasies transmuting the scent of Orange Pekoe into any tea I wanted.

"Wait," she said, stooping down and retrieving a small plastic bottle of water. "Gotta make tea with something. It's not much, I know."

Hutchins climbed down off the truck, pulling both our rucksacks with him. Just as he was about to help me down, Red called out, "Whoa, wait! You never did tell me what you did with that body."

I looked helplessly at Hutchins. "I did, though. It disappeared."

Her eyes showed a flash of annoyance. "That's bullshit."

"No. That's what happened."

"That's why you were asleep when we found you." Her eyes narrowed.

"We were exhausted."

"Dead bodies don't just disappear. We left it there for the same reason you put it by the door. You must have had other visitors in the night."

"And they would take a dead, frozen, disgustingly dirty corpse?" Hutchins said. "What for?"

Red arched a brow. “You shouldn’t be surprised. Which would you rather believe, anyhow?”

I took another deep breath and pushed the questions out of my mind, knowing they would resurface. Hutchins and I wove our way up the incline of the parking lot, eating a candy bar each and saving the third to split later. I was missing my steel rod, though some rooting in our bags revealed I still had my knife and Hutchins still had his hatchet. A cold drizzle had begun, and my nose was leaking furiously. At the top of the hill we turned and saw the first skiff load being rowed out to the sampan. Red and the petite woman with the spiky hair had their arms around each other’s shoulders as they chatted with a few other women waiting for the next trip.

I scanned the buildings around us. I hadn’t expected to end up by the water, though we had already been so close. I hadn’t expected to speak with anyone but Hutch, indefinitely. I certainly had never expected a gift of food. We were in winter, physically and metaphorically, and the world always looked battered in this season. Maybe it still held a surprise or two. All this bestowed on me by a woman who plundered.

“It’s so cold,” Hutchins said.

I fingered the teabags in my pocket. “Let’s find something to boil water in.”



CAPTAIN, HOOK, AND MR. SHRIKE

Cat Conley

Ice pirates don't give a rat's arse about pirate ghosts, or Davy Jones, or the Flying Dutchman, or any of the other wild-eyed tales that the warmblood pirates of the northern seas seem to enjoy. We have enough to worry about down here in the iceberg fields without having to scare ourselves silly with nonsense. The real, every day dangers like icebergs and frostbite and ships getting locked up in the ice just make the northerners' ghost stories seem ridiculous. So when Jonesy got it in his head that our new Dizzer was some sort of ghost or mermaid or some rubbish like that, I wrote it off to Jonesy going a bit sea-mad. I wish I'd been right.



We set off from Fulmarus Harbor that summer with a brand new Dizzer, and the damn eejit skipped an ice ball off our mast with his very first practice shot. Tore a big solid piece out of the side, almost toppled the mast right over. That was the end for him. Cap'n didn't have to say anything, just waved her hand, and Jonesy grabbed the Dizzer by his collar and tossed him over the side. We didn't even hear him scream when he hit the water. Jonesy's a big man—he runs the team that breaks up the ice that forms on the deck and hull—so I'm guessing he threw the Dizzer hard enough to break his neck when he hit. Only thing worse than drowning is drowning whilst freezing to death. Jonesy always was a decent fella.

Meanwhile, Cap'n stomped across the deck and met me up in the bow, where I was manning my harpoon launcher, a great crossbow-style contraption mounted on a 180-degree swiveling post. "Mr. Shrike, as of right now, you don't leave this deck until we reach Fulmarus," she spat. Her dark eyes were roiling, and I'd been her Archer long enough to know when she was in a twist. It's best to just agree with her when her eyes look like that, no matter what she says.

"Aye, Cap'n," I said, and waited until she had stomped back to her cabin before I sat down again at the launcher. Cap'n's about as sea-mad as a wharf rat, so I watch my back when she's in a twist. Cap'n still makes the right decisions regarding the crew and the ship, though, sea-mad or not.

I didn't fancy the thought of being bound to my post for upwards of a week, but with our Dizzer gone and our centripetal catapult unmanned, I was *Manticore's* only defense against attacks from other ships.

So, for the next two weeks I froze my bones in the bow, sharpening my harpoons to needle points and keeping my launcher's lines and levers free from ice as we limped back toward port under oar (the rigging all had to come down to keep the mast from crashing down through our hull and sinking us). Jonesy and some of the other hands I'm friendly with brought me extra layers of coats and food and occasionally relieved me when Cap'n was asleep so I could go below decks to take a piss or bolt down a mug of hot coffee (neither of which is enjoyable to do on deck). Luckily, we saw no other ships on our trip back, and I've never been so eager to leave the ship as I was the day we finally made it back to Fulmarus.

All of us deckhands left Cap'n and Mr. Jakes, the first mate, to dicker with the port's shipbuilders about the repairs while we headed down to The Circling Gull and planted ourselves in front of the fire and the taps and the women. We were the only patrons in the place since it was the beginning of the summer shipping season, and despite our mostly empty pockets, Red Jamie, the owner, and his girls descended upon us like sea birds on a stinking whale's carcass. The days passed like minutes, and what little money I had soon left me for the warmth of Jamie's pocket or a pretty girl's bodice.

A month later, Red Jamie presented us with a copy of our bill, a copy of the *Manticore's* roster, and an announcement that Cap'n would be lowering the gangplank to load supplies in less than an hour. We all looked at the tab and groaned, then made our "X" on the roster, which enlisted us for another voyage. Never-ending cycle, ice pirating is—the money's good, but it's gone before it's earned.

Jonesy and I and some of our other mates stumbled out of the alehouse and into the sunlight for the first time in days. I winced and put up my hand to shield my eyes, which had trouble handling the hangover and the sun all at once. Tension was palpable among the crew on our walk back to the *Manticore*. We'd ended our last voyage with no Dizzer and we'd had no firm word yet about his replacement. Ice pirates would rather sail without a compass than sail without a Dizzer at their ship's centripetal catapult. A good Archer, like me, can shoot a harpoon into an enemy ship from two hundred meters or so, but a good Dizzer can launch an ice ball from the catapult and hit a ship nearly a kilometer away, given a good tail wind on the throw. That ice ball's moving fast enough to smash a mast, shred sails, or blow a man to bits. Dizzers have to be unbelievably fast to land a shot, and a slow hand on the lever means the ice ball will end up through *your* mast instead. A good Dizzer can render a trader ship immobile in about six or eight shots, and then it's easy for the pirate ship to slip alongside and board the vessel. The

trader ships are too fast to capture intact, so ice pirating without a Dizzer isn't worth the effort. *Manticore* would have a rough voyage if we didn't manage to get someone to fill our Dizzer's spot, and Cap'n would be in trouble if we couldn't bring in some loot this time out. Another failed voyage like the last one could spark a mutiny.

"Damn Dizzer!" Jonesy swore suddenly, voicing some of the frustration that everyone felt. "We should have been out at sea for two months already. We'd probably have been back by now with a hold full of supplies. And where the hell are we gonna get a new Dizzer this late in the season? All the other boats are at sea right now, and I didn't hear of anyone in Fulmarus looking for work."

"I heard Cap'n's gonna be our new Dizzer," slurred one of the older deckhands as we shuffled along the pier. "Red Jamie said she used to be one back in the day. Took out any ship within two kilometers."

"Two kilometers?" A second hand looked skeptical. "That's daft. Best I've ever heard is one kilometer, and that's with a favorable wind."

"Easy, boys, all of ya," I said before the other hand could snap back. "Cap'n en't our new Dizzer." I pointed a finger at a small figure walking along the pier in front of us. "She is." To a warmblood, men and women look nearly identical when they're bundled up in their furs, but us coldbloods can spot a lady at a hundred paces and are experts at visualizing what lies beneath her layers of coats.

The second hand eyed me suspiciously. "How do you know that, Shrike?"

I rolled my eyes. "We're almost at the end of the pier and we're the only ship in port right now. Where else would she be going?"

The deckhand scratched his chin. "Good point," he relented, and our group made the rest of the hike back to the *Manticore* in hungover silence.

Sure enough, the small woman slipped aboard the ship as quiet and quick as she could, but she left a vacuum in her wake as all of the crew peered around to look at her. It wasn't even what you might think—of course, any woman is bound to attract attention on a ship with a mostly male (and interested female) crew, but even if she'd been the most unremarkable man we'd ever seen, we'd still have stared. Everyone wanted to see the new Dizzer. For her part, she kept the hood of her furs pulled up tight around her pale face and walked straight over to Cap'n's door, knocked twice, and slipped inside as soon as she heard the answering grunt. The Dizzer's entrance left a wake that rippled through the crew, and murmurs and whispers flew every which way as we went about our tasks.

Me, I got stuck working the supply line, where near as many rumors were being passed as chests and drums. In the hour I'd been moving supplies, I'd learned that our new Dizzer was an exiled princess, a scholar from one of the

warmblood's universities, a pickpocket fled south to escape the hangman's noose, and a whore picked up because Cap'n thought she had a pretty face.

"That's quite the list of deeds for one who looks so young," I said to Jonesy, who was in the supply line in front of me. "What a load of rubbish."

Jonesy grunted and slid me a cask of rum. "Most of these eejits would freeze to death if they didn't keep their gums flapping."

I braced my foot against the bottom of the cask and tilted it toward myself until I found the balance point, then palmed the rim as I rolled the cask over to the next man in line. "What's your take, Jonesy?" I called over my shoulder.

Jonesy had an odd look on his face when I returned to get the next drum. "I heard the last captain she worked for won her in a card game."

"Indentured?" I was surprised. There were only a couple of indentured Dizzers, and all the ones I knew of were good at their jobs, which made their captains loathe to sell them. Usually the only way an indentured Dizzer left his or her captain was an unlucky hand in cards. Our Cap'n wasn't given to gambling, so I was curious as to how we'd ended up with our new friend.

"Aye, indentured," said Jonesy. "I heard Mr. Jakes talking to one of the longshoremen a half hour ago. Our Dizzer's last ship was the *Nightwing*."

My mouth dropped open, sending my breath billowing out in white clouds. "*Nightwing* went down last summer up in the 'berg fields near the border waters. All hands were lost."

"Aye," Jonesy said gravely. "All except her, apparently," he said, and glared at Cap'n's door. "No other ships were in that area for at least a week and none of them picked her up. Remember what those crews said in Fulmarus this past winter, about how they found some of the debris but no survivors? I don't doubt their story. Nobody'd make it in this water for an hour, much less a week." Jonesy shivered, and then spat over the railing as if taunting the sea to come up on board and try to freeze his bones, too. "No one knows how she made it back to Fulmarus or when she got there. Mr. Jakes said she just walked up to Cap'n in the shipyard last week and wanted to sign on. He said that Cap'n looked like she'd seen a ghost when the Dizzer walked in. Sounded as if they had sailed together a while ago from the way they were talking."

I laughed. I couldn't help it. The word "ghost" did me in. I saw now that Jonesy'd been feeding me another one of his warmblooded nonsense stories and I'd eaten it up hook, line, and sinker.

"That's an interesting tale, Jonesy. A mysterious woman appears in the shipyard, claiming not only to have survived sailing with our dear Cap'n in her younger, bloodthirstier days, but also managed a six-month winter swim back to port after being shipwrecked in the middle of a deserted 'berg field." I shook my head. "It's better than a princess or a whore, I suppose. Lots more imaginative. So, Mr. Jones, what exactly is our Dizzer then, to have survived

such trials—a pirate ghost, a mermaid, or something else entirely?” I elbowed Jonesy in the ribs and smiled. I always kid him a bit for being such a warmblood about ghosts and all of that other nonsense.

But Jonesy didn't laugh or play along for once. “You laugh, Shrike, but I'm telling you, she's something strange, this one.” Then he shoved a chest of furs into my arms, and I staggered across the deck with it. When I turned back, he was barking orders at some of the ship's boys, sending them scuttling across the deck in terrified circles. I shrugged and went up to the bow to look over my harpoon launcher.



I lay in my hammock that night and let the pitching of the ship lull me into a near-sleep haze. It felt good to be back aboard because I never slept as well on land as I did at sea. I stretched out and let the glow from my last glass of ale course through me. I half-heard Jonesy telling some of the other hands his story about the Dizzer while they played dice games in the corner. The others seemed to laugh as much as I had. I pulled my bedroll up tighter and rolled over onto my side.

I was drifting off when I heard a rustling coming from the other side of the wall. Our bunkroom shares a wall with Cap'n's, so I was used to hearing her muttering to herself all night as she step-thumped across her room on her peg leg (too sea-mad to sleep, I guess). The rustling was soon joined by whispers, and I could make out Cap'n's rumbly burr. I didn't recognize the higher pitched voice and assumed that it must be the new Dizzer. I'm normally not one to snoop, but all of Jonesy's prattling had gotten me interested in our newest mate, so I dragged my mind from its almost-sleep and listened intently to see if I could hear their conversation.

I soon wished that I hadn't roused myself, because the whispering gave way to more rustling, then a steady creaking of hammock ropes, followed by a series of moans and faster creaking. I'd seen and heard my share of lovemaking on board, living in a shared bunkroom and all, but I'd never heard anything coming from Cap'n's room. I'd figured between the sea-madness and the armory of knives she kept on her person at all times, she was celibate. Apparently, the celibacy was based on the available company, not principle. My face burned as the brief southern night wore on. Cap'n and the Dizzer showed no signs of stopping, and I considered getting up to take a walk on the deck, but I was so warm in my bedroll that I couldn't make myself get up.

The creaking and moaning finally stopped after several hours. I was wide awake by now and I stared at the ceiling, trying to forget what I had heard. I focused on the pitching of the ship again and tried to let it lull me back to sleep. I had almost gotten back to the near-sleep state when the Dizzer's voice woke me up again.

The Dizzer was singing a wordless tune, some melancholy air I had never heard before. Her voice was clear and high, and it found notes I had never heard come from the mouth of another singer. Her song seemed to wrap tendrils about my brain, so that although she sang no words, her music painted pictures in my head just the same. As I listened, I saw the sun come up over the 'berg fields, a group of seals sliding off the floes and into the depths to hunt for fish and crabs, and the water spout from a solitary whale against the horizon. The scenes were so peaceful that I could feel the tension flowing out of my body, and the first hints of sleep began to slip over my mind. I was vaguely aware when the Dizzer's song changed a little, because my pictures began to change as well. Soon I was seeing the clear night sky all ablaze with stars, the way it only looks from out at sea when there're no other lights around. The waves under the stars were glowing with a sea-born blue as tiny luminescent sea creatures rose to the surface of the dark waters to feed.

I don't know when or if I fell asleep, or if I just lay there under the spell of the Dizzer's song, but when I was roused for the morning shift, I felt as if I had slept for a week. I went about my duties with such energy that I didn't realize until later that a tiny spot in the back of my brain was sifting through the normal working noises, hoping to catch another verse of the Dizzer's song. The longing ceased as soon as I recognized it was there, and I wrote it off to being up too late on account of Cap'n's new bunkmate. Any other explanation would border on warmblood rubbish.



A week later, we were under full sail, cruising along the edges of one of the great 'berg fields, biding our time while we waited for the next round of ships to come through the lanes. Mid-month is when the warmblood traders come through to bring supplies of all kinds to the whaling and seal colonies. The ships come back through the same lanes a few days later, loaded low with seal skins and ambergris and blubber. Fulmarus Harbor has rogue traders dealing in every good and service imaginable, so it didn't matter to us if we caught the traders coming or going. Blubber and blankets both sell quick.

According to Jonesy, by way of Mr. Jakes, Cap'n had gotten wind of a brand-new three-mast square rigger that was supposed to be coming through the lanes this month, laden with more than twice the supplies that the double-masted schooners had carried in the past. The traders had been upgrading their fleets for years now, and I'd watched as single-mast sloops had given way to double-masted brigantines and schooners, and now apparently those were yielding to three-masted barquentines. The bigger ships had more sail area to make them faster, making good Dizzers even more indispensable.

We were all slaving at the thought of twice the take in this new ship's hull, but equally nervous at the thought of going up against an unknown ship

with a new Dizzer. Would she be accurate enough and fast enough to take down an extra mast's worth of rigging? Or would we end up fleeing the 'berg field at top speed, being pursued by our own quarry? Many debates were held in the bunkroom after shift, and many wagers were posted.

I normally would have joined in the banter, but I'd found myself bunking down earlier and earlier each night in anticipation of the Dizzer's song and the pictures it painted in my head. I'd never felt such peace as her music brought me, and I was developing a taste for it as if it was ale or whiskey. I started to hope that she'd come out on the decks during the day so I could put a face to the voice that had been putting me to sleep each night, but she had yet to leave Cap'n's quarters. The two of them were still very busy.

Our Dizzer finally emerged from Cap'n's quarters one afternoon shortly after mid-month. The winds had been blowing hard from the south all morning, which had sent an icy spray out over our decks. Jonesy and his crew were working hard to clear us off. He'd just finished chipping away the ice in front of Cap'n's door when it swung inward and the Dizzer appeared. Jonesy startled at the sight of her but managed to make it look like he'd slipped on some ice and slid away, discreetly casting the sign to ward off the Evil Eye as he went. None of the crew noticed his motions, though, because they were too busy staring at our newest and most reclusive mate.

The Dizzer was short in stature and thin-framed under her furs. She wore a cutlass at her hip, its hilt unadorned but well-worn, and I caught glimpses of twin knife handles peeking out the top of her sealskin boots. A few wisps of pale blonde hair escaped her hood and fluttered wildly in the wind. Her skin was pale, almost translucent, like the color of the 'bergs below the waterline, and her eyes were the deep blue of glacial ice. A scowl seemed to have been carved into her face with an awl. She looked as cold and inhospitable as the ice and seas around us. I had to give Jonesy some credit—if there ever was an ice pirate ghost, she'd look exactly like our Dizzer. I don't know what it was in particular—the hair, the pale skin, the eyes—but she was eerie.

The Dizzer glanced around, realized we were all gaping at her, and issued a curt nod before climbing the stairs toward the upper deck and her catapult. Everyone scrambled back into action as she turned, trying to look as if they hadn't been gawking. I looked over and saw that Jonesy was focused on knocking the ice off the railings and showed no sign of moving to wind up the catapult or bring her a supply of ice balls—a major part of his team's duties—so I grabbed an ice ball off the main deck and headed up the stairs after the Dizzer.

As I crested the stairs and stood before her, her eyes walked up and down my frame in such a manner that I remembered coldblood women are also adept at visualizing what lies beneath furs. I blushed, despite the frigid wind. I'm not as trim as I was in my younger days.

“Hello,” she said. Her voice was indeed beautiful, clear and high, but it didn’t set any pictures adrift in my head like it did at night. I was relieved but also vaguely disappointed.

“Afternoon,” I said, and figuring she was here to practice, I hefted the ice ball up so I could sling it into one of the catapult’s open baskets.

“Wait,” she said, and stretched out an arm to me. “That basket’s not set right.”

I put the ice ball down on the deck. “Cap’n had Jonesy reset it before we left, Miss, so it must be.”

She raised an eyebrow. “I’m not a ‘miss.’”

I shrugged. “Well, what’ll it be instead?”

Her pale lips twisted into a smirk. “Hook.”

“Hook?” I repeated. “Like that eejit in the warmblood storybook?”

“One and the same,” she said, offering a mirthless smile in lieu of an explanation of the odd moniker.

“All right . . . Hook,” I replied, a bit unnerved by her smile. “What do you think’s wrong with the basket?”

She pointed one mittened hand at the bottom hinge, where the basket opens to release the ice ball. “The pin’s burred.”

I shook my head. “There’s no way you could know that without taking it apart.”

She shook her head back at me. “It’s not setting right. I can see it from here. It’s going to lock up when I pull the lever and my throw will be off. Didn’t your last Dizzer send an ice ball straight through the mast?”

“He did, but he was an eejit. I don’t think that a brand new basket could have saved him from himself.”

She smiled her mirthless smile again. “That’s what the captain said.”

I remembered how she seemed to spend most of her time with Cap’n, and I felt my face flush again. I turned and busied myself with disconnecting the basket from its chain.

“What’s your name?” she asked as she bent down to examine the basket with me.

“Shrike,” I answered as I fiddled with the joint pin.

“Oh, yes, the Archer. The captain mentioned you. And why are you called Shrike? That’s an odd name.” I could feel her blue eyes boring into me, but I kept mine trained on the basket.

“I could say the same for you, Hook,” I replied just as the pin loosened and dropped to the deck. I planted one mittened hand over it to keep it from rolling away and pulled the other mitten off with my teeth. The freezing winds and spray bit into my finger bones, and I picked up the pin as quick as I could.

Hook had pulled one of her own mittens off and extended a bare hand.

I placed the pin into her palm without a word, our callused skin rubbing together like sandpaper. She rolled the pin around between her fingers and confirmed what she (and I) already knew.

“Right at the point,” she said, and I nodded. I’d felt the flaw as soon as I picked it up. It was just a wee bubble in the metal but it would be enough to slow the basket’s opening and change the speed and direction of her throw.

“You’re good,” I said.

She nodded without conceit and gave the pin back to me. I reached into an inner pocket of my coat and drew forth a pouch of tools I use on my harpoons, selected a file, and rasped the point smooth.

I let her take the pin from me and watched her slip it back into the joint. She started testing the motion of the basket hinges. The hinge moved cleanly and hung evenly after we re-suspended the basket.

“Well, Shrike, it seems that the rest of the catapult’s in good order, so I’ll bid you good day.” She turned to go down to the main deck. I felt an unexpected urge to follow her or to find a way to make her stay.

“Don’t you want to practice a shot or two?” I asked. “Get a feel for this particular catapult?”

Hook turned back to face me, and I caught a strange reflection off her eyes as the light from the ’bergs hit them at just the right angle. It was like I was looking into the eyes of the ship’s cat down in the dark hold below decks. I shivered.

“I don’t need to practice. I can assure you I’ll hit my target.”

“Might make the rest of the hands feel better,” I said tentatively. “They’re a bit nervous—never seen your work before, you know? It might be good for them to see you throw a couple of shots and not take out anything on the ship, like our last Dizzer did.”

“But wouldn’t that skew your wagers?” she said, and flashed a wicked grin.

I flushed for the third time in our conversation. “What wagers?” I mumbled as I wondered how she knew we were betting on her.

“The ship’s walls are very thin,” she said, answering my unasked question.

“I know,” I replied without thinking, then stared at my boot toes when I realized what I’d said.

Hook laughed an unashamed, genuine laugh, which unnerved me more than her mirthless one had a few moments before.

“Well, then you already know why I’m taking leave of your company. Good day to you, Mr. Shrike.” She turned and walked down the stairs to the main deck, where all of the hands were attempting to look busy. “Oh, and one more thing,” she called back over her shoulder.

“Yes?” I said, leaning over the rail.

“You should stop listening to your warmblooded friend, Jonesy. I think he’s got you spooked.” She paused outside Cap’n’s door. “Pleasant dreams,” she said with a wink, and then vanished back into the cabin, leaving me flushed and disoriented.

I stopped my ears with rags that night. I heard no song and saw no pictures, but I didn’t sleep at all, just tossed and turned like I had a fever. I wrote it off to skipping my evening ale.



The next day, I saw Hook crouched by the catapult, forming ice balls in steel molds. I turned to go upstairs and tell her that we had a team to do that for her, but Jonesy grabbed my arm.

“Shrike, what’re you doing? Don’t go up there.” He sounded scared.

I pulled my arm away. “Are you mad, Jonesy? I’m just going to talk to the Dizzer. Your ship’s boys are supposed to be up there right now making the ice balls, not her.”

“Whist, let her make her own ice balls. You’d better stay away like I told my boys to do. She’s not natural. Those eyes of hers and that skin—it’s like she’s never seen the sun. How does a Dizzer never see the sun? It doesn’t make sense. It’s not right. Nothing about her is right.” Jonesy pushed me over to the rail. “You look down at that water, that cold, black water, and you tell me how she could swim through that all the way back to Fulmarus Harbor from a spot in the lanes that’s two weeks out by ship. Does that sound possible to you? She should have been dead five minutes after she hit the water. Nah, Shrike, I’m telling you, she’s a ghost or a spirit or something worse, and damn the sails, she’s going to get us all killed or deliver us to the demons of the deep—”

I cut him off right there. I had my own reasons to question Hook’s normalcy, but I’d seen mates go sea-mad before, and it looked like Jonesy was headed right into that from the way he was ranting.

“Jonesy, I don’t know what sorts of barnacles took up residence in your skull at Fulmarus, but you’d best heave-to and attend to them, because you’re not talking sense. She’s not a ghost. I touched her hand yesterday. It was callused and cold and human. I don’t know how she made it back to Fulmarus, but she’s going to be a damn fine Dizzer for us. She caught a mistake *you* made on a basket joint without even taking it apart.”

Jonesy looked taken aback by that, and I went in to press my point home when I was interrupted.

“You touched my Dizzer, Mr. Shrike?”

Jonesy’s eyes went wide, and he grabbed his iron rod and began to whack at the ice on the rails again. I winced and turned to face our Captain.

She met me eye to eye, Cap’n did, because she’s easily as tall as me and

maybe even a little more so. I'm pretty certain that she has a lovely figure under her furs, too, but to be honest, I'm too afraid to give her a proper look. Her eyes were clear and free of the sea-madness when I turned to her, though, and I realized that she was jesting with me. I felt safe in nodding and answering, "Aye, Cap'n, we were filing down a basket pin."

Cap'n grinned, and then said, "So that's what they're calling it now."

I went to reply but the hand in the crow's nest bawled out, "Three masts, two o'clock!"

"All hands! All hands!" bellowed Cap'n, not even bothering to verify the sighting. Out in the 'berg fields, masts and rigging are hard to mistake for anything else. A collective roar went up amongst the crew, and Mr. Jakes brought us around until the winds were right at our stern and we were running with full sails. He was aiming to push the larger ship into the 'berg fields. The barquentine's great speed would do it no good there, and its bulk would impede its maneuverability, giving us, the smaller ship, the advantage.

The deck was a flurry of activity with teams of hands checking the sails and others keeping watch for 'bergs. *Manticore* pitched wildly in the waves as we plunged from crest to trough and back to crest again. Jonesy and his boys never stopped swinging their rods—they could barely keep up with the icy crust forming on the rails and decks from the spray and the froth.

The trader ship must have seen us because they unfurled extra sails, hoping that their increased sail area would give them enough speed to get out into more open waters before we got close. It would have worked, had the currents around the 'berg field not been so shift. This stretch of the shipping lanes is particularly treacherous, not only because of the 'bergs, but also because the currents are powerful and constantly shifting. A 'berg can catch the edge of a current and suddenly it'll appear right off your bow when there was no ice there a moment ago. And that's precisely what happened to the barquentine.

Sound travels very well across the water, so we all heard the great *crack!* when the trader ship collided with a 'berg. A raucous cheer went up amongst the crew.

"Too easy!" crowed Jonesy as he walloped at an ice sheet.

"Focus!" hollered Cap'n, and the cheering petered out. Mr. Jakes brought us around into a port reach, and the sail hands trimmed and re-trimmed the sails, making sure that we were catching the most wind without luffing. I sat at my harpoon launcher in the bow and sharpened the points of my harpoons. I glanced to the stern to see what Hook was doing.

It appeared that she had finished making her ice balls because she was passing the molds down to one of the deckhands. I saw a white pyramid stacked behind her and grinned in anticipation. Watching a great Dizzer at work is always exciting.

We were close enough now to hear the shouting of the trader ship's crew

and could hear the awful screeching noises the ship made as they fought to dislodge it from the ice. They'd struck the 'berg head on with their iron-reinforced keel. It didn't look as if they'd sustained any structural damage, but they couldn't shake the 'berg. My hands were itching to launch a harpoon, but we were too far away yet, and Cap'n would have my eyes if I launched without a direct order.

Hook, however, was coming right into range. Even Cap'n's weathered face looked almost excited as she gave the order to Mr. Jakes to come about and put Hook in line for her shot. I glanced down at the main deck and caught Jonesy's eye. He looked ecstatic, despite his warmblooded fear of our Dizzer.

"Mr. Jakes, hold 'er steady!"

"Aye, aye, Cap'n!"

"Mr. Shrike, watch the bow!"

"Aye, Cap'n!"

"And for fuck's sake, Jonesy, keep the main deck clear!"

"Aye, Cap'n!" roared Jonesy, and dealt a fearsome blow to an ice sheet that had formed below his feet while he was staring at the trader ship.

"Hook!"

"Aye, Cap'n!"

"For blood and glory!"

"'Til Death may take us!" Hook pulled the first lever. The centripetal catapult's center post spun wildly about its vertical axis, causing the baskets holding the ice balls to fly parallel to the deck on their chains. The wind screamed through the metal links as the baskets whirled about. Hook's face was a mask of concentration as her eyes flicked back and forth, somehow tracking each basket's speed and path. She pulled her right mitten off with her teeth, her eyes never leaving the baskets, and hovered her bare hand above the next lever. Her fingers were absolutely steady as she waited. My heart was in my throat, and all I could hear was the screaming of the wind in the chains and my pulse beating like a military tattoo. Hook waited. She waited. And . . .

Struck. Her hand dropped to the next lever without a second's hesitation, and the deckhands ducked as the first ice ball rocketed out to sea. Without pausing for a breath, Hook dropped her hand, once! twice! more and released the other two ice balls in rapid succession. I held my breath as the three ice balls arched out over the sea toward their target.

I could see the hands on the trader ship's deck running to take cover, but it was too late. *Smash! Smash! Smash!* The first ice ball slammed into the mast up near the crow's nest, and the second and third hit just a little lower than the first. I had a moment to be surprised—Dizzers usually try to take out the hull first—then everything started to make sense.

Each ice ball exploded upon impact, as was the case due to its makeup.

But Hook's ice balls didn't just contain ice. I saw metal flash and glint in the sunlight as the ice balls exploded, and then hundreds of pieces of jagged shrapnel rained down upon the unsuspecting crew. The shrieks and screams of the injured and dying were instant and horrific—there was no escaping Hook's hooks. My mouth dropped open in shock, and I think our entire crew stopped moving and just watched the scene unfold. No one had ever thought to make an ice ball with anything other than ice before. No one realized what sort of massacre would result from it.

I turned back to look at Hook to see how she was taking in the carnage, but she and Jonesy were already loading up the next set of ice balls. Apparently, he'd gotten over his fear of his suspected ghost. I turned back to watch the bow for 'bergs after I heard Cap'n screaming at me, then watched as Mr. Jakes tacked to give Hook another clear shot, which she took without hesitation again. The shrapnel kicked up as much blood as before, but there were not as many screams. I got up from my chair and wandered down to the main deck. There was no need for an Archer today.

Mr. Jakes tacked us back and forth in a wide sweep twice more, falling off at the end of each pass to allow Hook time to take a shot. By the time she launched her last set, there was no more screaming and the masts were completely destroyed. Blood ran off the sides between the rails and stained the sea a deep red.

Cap'n gave a hoarse order to Mr. Jakes to bring us alongside the trader ship so we could collect our spoils. The hands were oddly silent as they trimmed the sails to bring us in to the trader ship. I think we were all a bit stunned at what we'd just seen.

I stumbled down the stairs to the main deck and crossed over to the stern deck. Hook was standing there alone, looking out at the conquered barquentine. The hood of her furs had blown back and her pale hair whipped around madly in the wind. Her glacier eyes were glowing and even her translucent skin was a bit flushed. She didn't look at me as I approached.

"How the hell did you get off the *Nightwing*?" I blurted. My voice sounded like I'd been drinking whiskey for a week.

She turned to me, and for the first time I saw her as she truly was, without my coldblooded disbelief to blind me. The glinting eyes, the perfect, impassive face, the haunting voice, and the longing I felt when I heard it . . .

"Siren," I whispered. The word felt blasphemous on my coldblood lips.

Hook laughed, and I winced.

"So you do dream," she said.

I nodded.

"You coldbloods are so stubborn and practical. Not an ounce of imagination amongst you, except for gullible eejits like your friend Jonesy

there. It makes my work so much harder. You must be more of a warmblood than you realized, Shrike, because I couldn't affect the others at all."

There was one ice ball left in the catapult, and Hook casually flicked the first lever. I tried to pull away, to shout to one of the mates, but I was mesmerized by her voice.

"You coldbloods don't tell stories like the warmbloods do. You don't believe in mermaids or selkies or sirens anymore. No one seeks us out. No one throws a portion of the spoils over the rails for Kraken and Davy Jones. There's no pretty young pirates coming to listen to my voice and see the dreams I spin for them, even as I'm draining their life away. We need your blood and belief to survive, and we're not getting it. Your captain was the last one to ever seek me out, many years ago, and look what I did to her. She's gone mad trying to get away from me. I'd sing to her across the waves every night while we were apart, just so she couldn't ever forget me. And she hasn't. After all these years of her denying me, I found my way back to her. She's completely bewitched again. And look at all the blood she's brought me," she said, pointing to the main deck where my crewmates worked. Hook leaned in toward me.

"You coldbloods stopped coming to us. So now we're coming to you." She smiled, and the smile was as mirthless as it always was.

Then she pulled the second lever. I closed my eyes and waited for the hooks to fall.



A PERFECT LIFE

Elaine Burnes

“Ahoy, me hearties!” Tate cried out. She swung her cutlass high, the blade sparkling in the sunlight, and jumped onto the bridge of her beloved ship, the *Sea Devil*. Striding across the deck, she shouted orders to her crew. Wind whipped through her auburn curls. She inhaled the briny sea air. It was a glorious day to set sail. “Arrrgh!” she growled for effect.

“Pirates don’t talk like that,” a small voice called out.

Tate stopped, lowered her arm, and searched for the source. A girl she didn’t know peered up at her.

“That’s a rock you’re standing on,” the girl said, “and this is a desert, not an ocean.” She scuffed the hard-packed sand with her bare foot.

Tate regarded her coolly. A layer of dust coated the girl’s dark hair, dulling it to an indistinct hue. Her clothes were mismatched—the pullover shirt too big and the trousers too short. She clutched the hem of her shirt.

“It’s just a game,” Tate said, slipping her cutlass, a curved stick she’d stripped of bark, into an imaginary sheath in the rope that served as her belt.

“Well, you can’t be a pirate. You’re a girl.”

The other children stopped their pretend chores to listen to the exchange. Someone snickered. Tate scowled. “What planet are *you* from?”

The girl looked down at her feet. “Earth.”

“Oh, well, that explains it.” Tate jumped down and stuck out her hand. “I’m Tate.”

The girl shook hands tentatively. “Emily.”

Since they were the same height, Tate guessed they were close in age. “How long you been on this godforsaken rock, Em?”

“It’s Emily, and about a week. I think.”

“Okay, *Emily*. Well, you’ll get used to it. Don’t worry.”

Emily started to cry. The other kids groaned and moved away. Tate threw them a disgusted look. “Oh, like none of you cried your first week here.” She put her arm around Emily’s shoulders and guided her to the rock. They sat as Emily shook with silent sobs. Tate waited for them to lessen, then spoke softly. “Do you know what happened?”

Emily shook her head. New tears streamed down her cheeks.

“You alone?”

Emily nodded.

Tate hugged her. “Not anymore, you’re not.” She waited for the crying to ease. “I’m from Luce.”

Emily wiped her cheeks. “I’ve never heard of it.”

“You probably call it something else. We called your planet Zeek.”

Emily looked at her. A tiny smile formed then vanished. “Zeek? That’s a funny name.”

Tate gave her a squeeze. “I’m hungry. Want to get something to eat?”

Emily nodded, so Tate took her hand and led the frightened girl across the dusty field toward a cluster of crude, wood-framed tents of worn cloth. A hot wind sent twists of sand scurrying over the ground, scattering dry leaves from the skeletal trees. Rocky hills rose at the edge of the settlement, and Tate picked their way among the boulders and entered a cave. Cool air soothed her parched skin and burned eyes. They approached an older girl sorting crates and jugs.

“Bella,” Tate said.

The girl turned and smiled. Blue eyes glinted against the bland background of her dust-covered skin, hair, and clothing. “In need?”

Tate nodded.

“These just arrived,” Bella said. She reached into a crate and held up two large red balls.

“What is it?” Emily asked, taking one.

“I don’t know,” Bella said. “But it tastes good and quenches your thirst for hours. Try it.”

Emily eyed it suspiciously. Tate took the other one and bit into it. A pink liquid squirted out and she slurped and chewed on the fibrous flesh. She nudged Emily in encouragement. “It’s tart at first, but then sweet.”

Emily took a bite. She squeezed her eyes shut then opened them wide and devoured the fruit without stopping. She wiped her mouth and licked her fingers. “That was good!” She looked at the piles of food. “What is all this?”

“She’s new,” Tate said to Bella, then introduced them.

Bella nodded. “Always the same question.” She told Emily how the food materialized periodically. “We’ve come close to starving on occasion, but it always shows up, eventually.”

Emily looked about to ask another question, but Bella continued, “No, we don’t know where it comes from or how. It only appears in this cave, though, so we assume it’s a space portal. That our families are sending it.”

Tate reached for Emily’s arm. “Look,” she said, as she fingered a small scar on the inside of Emily’s forearm then pointed to a similar scar on her own. “I’ve got one, too.”

“We all do,” Bella said, holding out her arm.

"These might have something to do with what happened to us," Tate said.

Emily's expression darkened, and her eyes welled.

"I know," Tate said, patting her back. "Overload. It happens to everyone in the beginning."

Tate took a jug of water and a bag of food from Bella, then led Emily out of the cave to her own tent. She spread the food out and watched as Emily dug in, alternating between eating and crying. When she could speak, Emily said she had been hiding in the hills until her hunger drove her down to the settlement.

"Someone should have met you," Tate said. "So many have been coming at once, though, we can't keep up."

"I stole food and these clothes," Emily said, her voice filled with guilt.

"It's okay." Tate smiled. "We all arrive naked. No one minds. And we share everything. You should slow down, though. You'll get sick if you eat too fast."

"What is this place?" Emily asked between bites.

Tate shrugged. "What were you told?"

"My parents said I'd be safe here. That they'd come for me. Do you know if they have?"

Tate shook her head. Many children arrived with the same story, and no one came for them. She didn't mention that after seven years, she no longer waited for her own parents.

"When it happened, I thought I was dying," Emily said.

Tate nodded. "That's what a lot of kids say. Was there a light and a loud noise?"

"Yes," Emily said. "I felt so strange, like I was breaking apart. Then I woke up . . . here." She looked around the tent. "This is very different from Earth. Is it like your home?"

Tate shrugged and picked at the mat. This was the only home she remembered. "A few years ago, the oldest ones started disappearing." She didn't tell Emily how unnerving that was, seeing someone vanish in a flash of light, their clothes and anything they'd been holding left behind, dropping to the ground as though released by an invisible hand. "We finally pieced together that it happens to those who are in their twentieth year. Maybe we go back home then."

"Twenty!" Emily said, her eyes wide. "But that's ten years from now."

Tate grinned. "Hey, we're the same age."

Emily turned the piece of bread in her hand then set it down. She didn't say anything or move. Tate finished her own meal then cleaned up, sneaking glances at Emily now and then to see if she was crying. Only her brows moved, knitting together then relaxing, as though she were trying

to digest this new world the way her stomach would these strange new foods.

When Tate finished, she stood over Emily and held out her hand. “Come on, I’ll show you around.”

Emily looked up at her and smiled. Tate felt a jolt within her that she couldn’t explain, but she knew then they would be friends.

As the day’s light faded to darkness, they returned to the tent. Emily stifled a yawn while Tate unrolled her sleeping mat. Emily looked toward the opening. “I should leave.”

Tate shook her head and patted the mat. “There is nowhere you need to go. You can stay here. Tomorrow we can build you a shelter of your own, if you like.” She lay down. Emily hesitated then lay beside her.

As Tate drifted toward sleep, Emily cried out and began to sob. Her grief tore at Tate’s heart, and she wrapped her arms around the lonely girl, who clung to her, crying until she wore herself to sleep. When all she heard was quiet breathing, Tate wiped Emily’s cheeks in wonder. Until now, she had never felt compelled to befriend a new arrival. Each was a painful reminder, not of what she’d lost, but of what she no longer remembered losing.

They did not build a shelter for Emily the next day, or ever. Instead, Emily joined Tate in her morning pirate games with the other young children. When the heat of the day became too much for games, everyone gathered in caves, where the older children taught the younger ones what they had learned in school before school became something they missed as much as their families. At night, Tate held Emily as she cried herself to sleep, knowing the things they did during the day kept her grief at bay only so long. And each night Tate curled around her friend, filled with a newfound purpose.

“I’ll protect you,” she whispered.



Tate sat up soaked in sweat with only the last thread of her dream caught in memory—*She’d lost sight of Emily amid a blinding flash, a thunderous roar, and the sensation of her body disintegrating.*

It had been five years since that dream had been a reality, since she’d left the desert planet. Why dream about it now? This was the third night in a row, and all she ever remembered was the ending. She looked around to anchor herself in the present. The lights slowly brightened, mimicking dawn in the windowless cabin. She could just make out the blank gray walls, a sink in the corner, and clothes strewn across the floor. Overhead, the ventilation system hummed and behind the wall, pipes pinged. She felt the thin mattress under her and clutched the sheet that pooled across her legs.

“Emily?” she called softly.

She felt a hand on her back. Cool fingers spread across her damp skin. “You have that dream again, T?”

Tate rubbed her hands through her hair. “Yeah.” She turned to Emily and smiled, reassured. They’d made love last night and both were still naked. She leaned down to touch Emily’s face, then slid her hand over her full breasts and across her warm stomach. She moved to kiss her, pausing to inhale her scent. Earthy and organic, refreshing compared to the stale, manufactured air around them.

The intercom crackled. “Bridge to Captain Hart.”

Tate sighed and lay her head on Emily’s chest, listening to her heartbeat quicken. Emily reached for the comm button on the wall. “Hart. What’ve you got?”

“Space train in two hours. Looks like a mother lode.”

Emily rubbed Tate’s back. “Let’s make ready. Hart out.” She gave Tate a playful slap. “Time to go to work, Mate.” Tate groaned and rolled off her. Emily kissed her, then jumped down from the bunk and hummed as she washed up. She ran wet fingers through her short-cropped dark hair, then shook it out, leaving shining spikes.

Tate smiled, watching Emily pull on a one-piece flight suit over her slim, but muscular, frame. She didn’t mind waiting her turn with this view. They’d removed the bottom bunk but still their quarters were cramped. Emily had refused the larger captain’s quarters, instead filling it with ammunition. It was one reason her crew adored her. The first mate’s cabin, Tate’s, stored extra medical supplies.

Emily stood on tiptoes for another kiss before leaving. “See you on the bridge.”

Tate hopped down and wet a rag to wash with. She ran the cool cloth around her neck and down her arms. Water was scarce in space. Ironic, how she’d left one desert for another.



Tate had been too young to remember arriving on the desert planet, but she sure remembered leaving—when she and Emily were twenty, just like the others. They had already been naked when she’d lost sight of Emily amid that blinding flash, thunderous roar, and the sensation of her body disintegrating. They materialized in a forest, entwined around each other on a bed of moss, breathless. They blinked and looked at each other.

“Hell of an orgasm, Tate,” Emily said. They broke into giggles.

Voices echoed through the woods. Tate grabbed Emily’s hand and pulled her behind thick ferns.

“You can come out,” a female voice called.

Dense shrubs covered in green needles and leaves screened the view. Tate

had never seen anything like this. Water gurgled behind them and the ground felt damp and cold on her bare feet. The voices grew louder. They ducked low, peering through the ferns. Several humans jogged along a path. Tate saw two of their friends from the settlement, naked like them. The clothed humans carried no weapons.

“Two are missing,” a man said.

“Here they are,” said a woman from behind them.

Tate recognized the voice. “Bella!” She turned and ran into the arms of her old friend.

Bella wouldn’t answer any of Tate’s questions until the group had been led to a pool of cool water and years of dust soaked out of their pores. Afterward, they all put on soft, clean clothes. Then, sitting with the others in a clearing, Tate huddled next to Emily and waited for Bella to speak.

“Welcome, my friends,” Bella began. She smiled, and her blue eyes still held their glint, but Tate saw something else in her expression. A fatigue, maybe sadness. “I know you are wondering what happened, as did I,” Bella said. She paced before them and spoke slowly, choosing her words carefully. “Where you came from was a planet of refuge, a safe haven, chosen by our families fleeing a vast galactic war between groups known as the Grans Confederation and the Oshen Alliance. Who these people are and why they fight is unclear, and is beside the point.”

Bella stopped pacing and stared at the ground, as though composing her thoughts. Tate sensed a rise in tension, and her joy at being reunited with her friend who had vanished three years earlier was turning to dread.

“To supply the armies with food, weapons, and warriors, a syndicate of privateers strip whole solar systems of people, animals, water, minerals, and forests,” Bella said, her voice filled with disgust. “Children and adults are enslaved to work the supply lines or sold to fight for whichever side offers the highest price.”

As Bella spoke, the nervous fidgeting and murmurs of Tate’s companions settled into a stunned silence.

“The idea to flee, to hide the children on a desolate planet that had already been stripped bare, began with a small resistance movement and was meant to be temporary. Each of us has a chip implanted under our skin that allows our transportation through space. As each community flees their homes, they pass the planet and send their children to the surface.”

Tate massaged the tiny bump under the skin of her forearm and thought about her family. Were they alive? She looked around the seated group and the older adults, who stood farther away. She counted seven from the planet, including herself and Emily. Bella was the only older one she remembered. The others were strangers, though her parents could be among them and she’d never know it. Emily nudged her. Bella was still speaking.

“Moving from planet to planet,” Bella said, “we keep one step ahead of the syndicate, setting up temporary camps to retrieve refugees, then moving on. Now it is your turn. You are old enough to help send supplies to the children.” Bella paused as though to let this news sink in. “I won’t lie to you. It is dangerous work and many have died. We retrieve some of our goods from the privateers,” she continued, her gaze settling on Tate. “They call us pirates, but we are only taking back what was stolen from us—to keep our children alive, to keep ourselves alive. Each of you will become a member of this force.”

Emily squeezed Tate’s hand. “Pirates. You’ll be right at home, me hearty.”

Tate felt sick to her stomach.

Later that night, lying with Emily in a soft bed that hurt her back, Tate felt bile rise in her throat. “Do you think it’s true?” she asked.

Emily stroked her hair. “Is what true?”

“Everything. Our parents. They’re dead?” That’s what Bella had told them in private, after speaking to the group.

Emily nodded. Tate’s eyes filled with tears. It was Emily who had more to suffer. She had mourned her family once already. Tate barely remembered hers. But now it was Emily who curled around her in comfort and held her. They were all the other had left.

For the next year, Tate and Emily and the other recruits underwent an intense apprenticeship. Real pirating, Tate learned, was nothing like the games she’d played as a child. The pirate ship, with its narrow bunks, claustrophobia-inducing passageways, and the constant awareness that all that separated her from the deadly void of space was a thin metal shell, was nothing like the roomy craft she’d imagined in her youth.

Tate’s first mission had terrified her. The point, their captain had instructed them, was to overtake their prey with minimal damage to either side. “We need their ships as much as their cargo,” he told his apprentices, so firepower was limited.

Tate stared at the dagger she had been handed. “What? No laser rifles?”

Captain Reilly laughed. “Someone has a vivid imagination. If you miss with a laser and pierce the hull, you die. Lasers need to be powered and fuel is expensive. If we do our job right, we can hit them before they know we’re there.”

Space portals were the key to their success, he said, because they allowed fighters to jump from ship to ship. To demonstrate, the captain guided the pirate vessel behind a small asteroid as a large cargo freighter floated by. When they were close enough, he opened a portal, like a simple doorway onto the other ship, and his fighters streamed across. “Cargo ships have few crew members,” he’d told them in his briefing. “And they carry few weapons.”

Tate’s heart pounded as she jumped through the portal, Emily ahead of

her, daggers drawn. They entered a cargo bay filled with crates of food and building materials. Silently, their leader motioned them to spread out. As they entered the passageway, they split up, one group heading to the bridge, another to the engine room, and the third, including Tate and Emily, hanging behind to secure the route back off the ship.

Huddled by the bay door, Tate heard shouts but couldn't see the fighting. Then darkness enveloped them. The dagger's handle grew slick in her sweaty palm. She reached for Emily, but did not dare speak. They held hands in the dark, listening. The ship lurched to a halt. Footsteps rang out on the metal floor of the passageway. Emily's hand slipped from hers, and she shook as she held her weapon ready. Someone slammed into Tate, knocking her to the floor. Pain seared through her bicep, and she swung her dagger, feeling it slice into flesh. Hot, raspy breaths grated in her ear as she struggled to free herself from under whoever had fallen.

The lights flickered on. Tate blinked, blinded briefly. A man lay at her feet, blood pouring from a deep wound to his gut. Emily knelt beside him, pulling her own dagger from his back, her eyes wide.

It was over in an eyeblink, yet every detail seared into Tate's memory, down to the sound of her blade cutting the cloth of the man's shirt, then his flesh. As he fell, he'd sliced her arm with his own weapon.

Emily was quiet later, as they sat on the bunk in their cabin, and she wrapped a gauze bandage around Tate's arm. She'd put five stitches in to close the wound. That had also been part of their training. Tate watched her, unable to read her expression.

"What did you think, Em?"

Emily looked up, startled, as if out of a daydream. "About what?"

"The fight, the mission. What else? Are you okay?"

Color rose on Emily's cheeks, her breathing deepened. "It was amazing, T, wasn't it? This is it. What we were meant to do."

"We killed a man," Tate said. She didn't know which of them had dealt the fatal blow. She didn't want to know. Until that moment when she'd struck with her blade, the reality of a pirate's life had been abstract, unreal. She was torn between her loathing of what they had done, what they needed to do to survive, and the responsibility she felt to those who relied on her for their own survival.

Emily didn't say anything, but returned her focus to Tate's arm. When she finished, she put her hand against Tate's cheek, her eyes dark and fierce. "I was afraid I'd lost you today. I won't let that happen."

From that moment, Tate watched Emily's transformation. Emily studied everything she was told, practiced every move they were taught, and pushed herself physically and mentally to prepare for their new life. She seemed almost comfortable, certainly unflappable, in battle.

Tate felt less sure. Instead, she focused on her piloting skills, something that held value but didn't require direct combat or killing. She reaffirmed her goal to keep herself and Emily safe until the combatants moved out of the sector. Then they would be able to find some place to live in peace. But first, they had to survive. And while Tate was happy to keep a low profile, Emily took a different tack.

In every port of call, Emily questioned the locals, searching for information about the mysterious Crief Ul, head of the Galactic Enterprises Group, the syndicate overseeing the privateers. His massive mining and harvesting operations stripped everything a planet capable of life could produce—all to supply the armies doing battle. Emily told anyone who would listen that she was convinced he was the key to ending the war. If it weren't for him, she said, both sides would be forced to negotiate. They were too busy fighting each other to coordinate such a vast supply line.

"Lop off the head and the snake dies," Emily often said.

As the years passed, Tate honed her flying skills while Emily rose through the command ranks. While serving as first mate, Emily led a mission that captured a ship, so she was awarded it and allowed to choose her own crew. For the first time, Tate felt a disconnect between them as she watched Emily fill positions without naming her. Was it possible Emily would want a life without her?

Sulking in the upper bunk instead of lying with Emily, Tate felt a poke from below.

"What's going on?" Emily asked.

"Nothing."

Tate felt a strong kick through the mattress. She sighed. "You haven't picked me," she said, near tears.

"So that's it."

Tate leaned over the edge to look at Emily. "Don't you want me?"

"Of course I do. Plus, you're the best pilot around. But . . ." Emily paused and let out a sigh. "Don't you want your own ship?"

"No."

Emily looked puzzled, her expression an unasked question. "I don't know, T. My priority is to protect the crew. I wouldn't be able to put you above the others. And you couldn't—"

"I know," Tate said, relief flowing through her. "I'll make sure we don't have to."

With that settled and Tate assigned to helm and first mate, together they outfitted the ship, doubling its weapons capacity and clearing storage space for the supplies they'd haul in. A small cruiser, its nimbleness made up for its lack of speed and armor. Emily christened it the *Sea Devil*, garnering odd looks from her fellow pirates. Tate smiled.

With a small band of fighters, the *Sea Devil* patrolled a narrow shipping lane between an asteroid belt and a dense lithic debris field too hazardous for travel. It didn't take long for Captain Emily Hart to make a name for herself, using methods that confounded her enemies. If she needed a ship, Emily would release the captured crew and their cargo on a planet, leaving an emergency beacon with them to ensure rescue. If it was the freight she wanted—food, clothing, or weapons—she'd simply leave them with an empty vessel and no lives lost. As her reputation grew, some shipments were surrendered with little resistance, as the privateers saw no reason to risk life or limb for a few supplies. They also knew she would treat them well, so many defected and told tales of Crief Ul's brutal micromanagement. More than one crew had been executed for nondelivery, and rumors flew of dissent in Ul's ranks but that no one dared confront him. Many warned her that to Ul, lost shipments meant lost payment, so Captain Hart was wanted.



Slipping into her seat at the helm, Tate forced herself to focus on the present. The space train was approaching. Gunner was already seated to her left and running down his weapons checklist. Behind them, Emily sat in the captain's chair, the first mate's seat empty beside her. On Tate's other side, Collins, the engineer, ran through his own checklist.

"Run silent," Emily commanded.

Tate flipped switches and the lights dimmed. All systems except life support and weapons went idle. The only light glowed from the command and control consoles before them. There would be no communication, no engines, not even food prep in the galley. Any energy signals the ship generated would be masked by background noise. They hunkered behind an asteroid.

This appeared to be an easy mission. Tate checked the sensor readout that identified the approaching ship as a long row of freight containers pulled by an unarmed, unescorted command module. This is too easy, she thought. Convoys had started adding security escorts. She sensed a trap, but all she could do was wait for a visual verification. As the ship came into view, she did a double-take out the window then back at her sensor readout. What she read didn't describe the large, fully armed, and armored battle cruiser she saw. Tate banged her fist on the console. "The signal's a fake," she said, furious.

"Hold position," Emily ordered. "Let's hope he doesn't notice us and moves on."

The battleship passed close enough that Tate could see a logo: GEG. Galactic Enterprises Group. The *Sea Devil* was dwarfed by comparison. "We'd fit on that one's bridge," she muttered. When it stopped, she felt sick to her stomach and quickly plotted an escape route, however improbable.

Emily answered the ship's hail. The screen flickered on. A thin man scowled at her, his eyes dark and narrowed. "Captain Hart, I presume," he said, his polite greeting belied by his expression.

"To whom do I have the displeasure," Emily replied, leaning forward in her seat.

He smiled. "I see you're as charming in person as your legend."

"We mean you no harm," Emily said.

The man's smile faded. "I seriously doubt that. You've been asking a lot of questions, Captain, and you've cost me a lot of treasure."

Tate felt a chill pass through her as she sensed just who it was Emily was speaking with.

"A simple misunderstanding," Emily replied. "I'm sure we can come to some equitable terms."

He chuckled, then grew serious. "It's a little too late for that, Hart. Besides, you don't have a lot of credibility with me."

Emily smiled. "Perhaps you'd like to come aboard so we can discuss this. I have a very nice Terisian wine I can offer you."

He laughed again. "Oh, really? Mine, no doubt." He leaned back in his chair and relaxed. "I prefer to play host. You may bring the wine, of course."

"Very well," Emily said. "Give me an hour to prepare."

"An hour? My dear, you look fine as you are."

"Nevertheless . . ." Emily cut the comm signal, exhaled a long breath, and leaned back in her chair. She turned to her first mate. "Is that who I think it is?"

"Could be," Tate said. "He's faked his flag signal. But I think that's Ul."

"Now what?"

Tate checked her sensors. "He hasn't powered up weapons. I think he's giving you the hour." She moved to the seat next to Emily's and watched her type out a coded distress call.

"I need options, people," Emily said. Collins and Gunner turned in their seats to face her.

"We don't really have any," Tate said. "We can make a break for it, but we can't outrun him."

"What about the debris field?"

"No one's made it through alive," Collins said. "Remember the Orion? We're a much smaller ship and we have no armor."

"Think help can get here in an hour?"

Tate shook her head. "Doubtful."

Emily let out a nervous chuckle. "That's what I like about you guys, you don't pull punches."

Tate reached for her hand.

Emily took a deep breath. "I guess I'll just have to see what he wants."

It's likely me." She smiled wanly. "Might be time for you to take command, Mate."

Tate shook her head. "I can't let you go over there, Captain."

"You will if I order it."

"Absolutely not."

"Think of the crew, T. I'm not worth losing them all. Losing you."

Collins and Gunner shifted nervously. No, Tate didn't want any harm to come to them. She remained silent.

Emily ran her hand through her hair. "What if we evacuate the ship? Think he'd let the crew go?"

Gunner cleared his throat. "The pods are defenseless," he said. "From what I've heard, he'd enjoy picking them off."

"What if they held a surprise and not the crew?"

Tate looked at her. "A diversion?"

Emily nodded then ordered Gunner to fill the pods with explosives. She turned back to Tate. "If we made a break for it, how soon could he catch up?"

Tate made a mental calculation. "He'd need time to get to full power. Maybe an hour. But he will, you know."

"I know." Emily typed on her console. "We'll wait as long as we can, then head for these coordinates on my mark. Full speed."

Tate glanced at the setting then went to her seat at the helm, plotted a route, and locked it in. A tense silence filled the bridge as they waited for most of the hour to pass and for Gunner to finish with the pods. She jumped when his voice crackled over the comm. "Ready, Captain."

Emily gave the order and in a whoosh, four lifepods shot across their view.

"Engage engines."

Tate opened the throttle, and the *Sea Devil* sprang away from the battle cruiser. As it shrank in her aft view screen she saw the pods explode in fiery clouds, masking their escape. She asked Collins for more power and heard back the usual complaint, "I'm giving you all she's got, sir!"

"Shut down auxiliary systems," Tate ordered.

"Aye, sir."

As the distance between the *Sea Devil* and Ul grew, Tate relaxed, just a hair.

Gunner returned to the bridge. "Shall I prepare for battle?" he asked.

"No," Emily said. "We're going to evacuate."

Tate turned to her, eyes wide. "We just jettisoned the lifepods. You realize that, right?"

"Look again at the coordinates I gave you."

Tate did, then shook her head. "The refugee planet?"

"What better place to hide?"

Tate fingered the scar on her forearm. The crew were all former refugees. They still had their chips. "But when Ul catches up to an empty ship, he'd only have to search nearby planets," she said. "We'd jeopardize everyone down there."

"We won't leave an empty ship. He'll find only debris. It will look like our engines blew."

Another chill passed through Tate. It was a risky move. She marveled at how calmly Emily left the bridge to prepare her crew. Ignoring the adrenaline speeding her heart rate, Tate moved through the checklist to log the crew for transport.

Emily returned to her seat in silence. Neither spoke until Tate announced they were in range.

"Secure stations," Emily called to the crew. "Stand by for transport."

Tate made a final check of the log. Her breath caught. "Em," she said, forgoing formality. "You took yourself off the list. Why?"

Emily's voice was steady. "Like you said, we can't risk him tracing the crew to the planet. If I stay behind, he won't care who gets away."

"Em, no." Tate stood, stepping back from the helm, shaking.

"It's me he wants. The rest of you will be safe."

"Captain, no—" Gunner started to protest, but Emily silenced him with a raised hand.

Tate understood the logic of Emily's decision, but her heart pounded and a tingle rippled from her scalp to her knees. "I won't let you."

"That's an order, Mate." Emily went to Tate and met her gaze, her eyes wet but her expression determined. "We knew this could happen. We don't have a choice. It's time for us to part ways."

Tate could barely breathe. Emily kissed her then stepped back. "Now, T, quick. Get it over with."

Tate leaned against the console and pushed the button, her hand shaking. A blinding flash filled the bridge. When she could see again, she found Emily staring at her.

"Why are you still here?" Emily asked. She spun around, but they were alone. Gunner and Collins had vanished, their clothes draped across their seats. "What went wrong?"

Tate shook her head. "Nothing went wrong."

Emily's eyes widened. "Damn it, Tate!" She exploded in fury and pushed Tate against the bulkhead. "What have you done?"

"You didn't really think I'd leave you."

Emily pressed her forearm across Tate's throat, pinning her. Her eyes burned. "You could have saved lives." Her voice was filled with disgust.

Tate struggled to breathe against the pressure of Emily's arm. "Don't you get it, Em? I can't do this without you."

“You don’t *know* that.” Emily’s voice rose in anger. “You never tried!”

“I never wanted this life. I only wanted to be with you.”

“But you were the pirate. You were the leader.”

“That was a *game*. This isn’t.”

Tate closed her eyes against Emily’s disappointment. The pressure on her throat lessened, and she let herself sag to the floor. Emily knelt and pulled her into a tight embrace. They sat together, quiet.

This wasn’t how she wanted them to end. All she had wanted was a life with Emily, a perfect life. Nothing else had mattered. She had thought that if she waited long enough, kept Emily safe, that eventually they’d have that. The war wouldn’t last forever. It couldn’t. They’d never been in any real danger. Until now.

She felt Emily’s tears on her neck. The shrill of a proximity alarm turned their attention away from each other. Ul approached.

“No point in arguing anymore, I suppose,” Tate said.

Emily released her and sat back wiping her face. “I’m dead, Tate. You can’t protect me.”

Tate rubbed her throat and went to her seat at the helm. “You’re not dead yet.” She felt Emily watching her. “I could use someone on weapons,” she said, pushing Gunner’s clothes to the floor. “We seem to be short handed.”

Emily eased into the seat. “What do you have in mind?”

“I’m not sure. Just get your hands on the triggers and be ready to fire until we run out of ammo. Better buckle in.”

Emily fastened her harness then gripped the controls and flexed her fingers to test her reach to the buttons. “It’s been a long time since I’ve fired a gun.”

Tate glanced at the aft view screen and saw Ul’s ship approaching. She engaged the engines and spun the little craft about, facing their enemy.

“Hang on,” she said, then maxed the accelerator, and they bolted forward. “*Fire, Em!*”

Lasers and torpedoes shot from the *Sea Devil*. Just as Emily refined her aim and got a hit, Ul started firing back, and Tate slammed them into an evasive pattern, threading his laser fire. Emily adjusted and got a few hits, but the armored ship showed no sign of damage. Tate peeled off to starboard, rolled the *Sea Devil*, and passed under Ul. Emily switched to the rear guns and kept firing as they circled around the big ship and sped away.

“It’ll take him a few minutes to turn around,” Tate said, breathless. She straightened their course and burned the engines into the red zone. Alarms shrieked. Tate turned to Emily and smiled. “We could really use an engineer right now.”

Emily still gripped the gun controls, though she’d stopped firing once they were out of range. She checked the sensors. “He’s coming.”

Tate looked out the front window. A small cloud grew as they approached. "Think that's a nebula?" she asked. "Maybe we can hide there."

Emily let go of the weapons and examined the sensor readouts. "Wait, T, that's not a—"

"Crap!" Tate reversed the engines and they both crashed into their harnesses then lurched back in their seats, staring out the window.

The *Sea Devil* slowed to a stop amid a debris field. Flashes in the distance registered on the sensors as nuclear explosions. Radiation clouds glowed, lit by laser fire and detonations. Bits of what had once been warships floated by. In the distance, intact ships danced in a choreography of death. For years the pirates had operated on the periphery of the war. Tate had never seen it up close. What looked out the window to be a cloud with insects buzzing and flashing, the sensors revealed as thousands of vessels engaged in battle, ranging across millions of miles. A wall of war to the fore, Ul closing in aft.

Tate banged her fist on the console and groaned in frustration. Emily placed a hand on hers. Her voice was steady. "It's okay, T. You did your best. Save yourself now. Please."

Tate looked at her. Emily's eyes were wet but retained their fierceness. "You really don't get it, do you?" Tate said.

"Get what?"

Tate shook her head and turned back to her controls. There was no point in explaining it now, and they didn't have time to argue. She turned the *Sea Devil* toward Ul and engaged the engines. Emily watched her, then put her hands back on the gun controls. The fuel gauge alarm sounded, the engine overload warning lights flashed. Tate ignored them. Ul began firing as soon as he was in range. Emily fired back, and Tate spun them through elaborate evasive maneuvers until the port engine gave out and they spiraled out of control. She lit the thrusters to stabilize the ship just as Ul shot out their remaining engine. Emily continued to fire and knocked out four of his guns before the trigger clicked and nothing happened.

They sat still amid blaring alarms, watching as the dying *Sea Devil* rocketed toward Ul. With the last of the fuel expended, Tate took her hands off the controls and unhooked her harness. She reached under the console, opened a compartment, and pulled out a laser rifle.

"Where'd you get that?" Emily asked.

Tate smiled. "I always wanted one." She checked the power supply and flicked the on switch. "Open a portal."

Emily stared at her for a second as if to question her sanity then turned to the console and typed commands. "We're moving too fast. I can't get a lock."

"Keep trying," Tate said as she tested the rifle against her shoulder and aimed toward the portal frame on the aft bulkhead.

Emily's fingers flew over the keyboard. The frame glowed, and an image flickered where there once had been wall. Tate spun the gun's setting to high and put her finger on the trigger. The image flickered out. "Captain, I need a portal!"

"I'm trying!" Emily kept typing and glancing at their position readout, struggling to anticipate. "You won't have much time."

The image flickered again. Tate saw the bridge of a ship, and the back of a man's head came into view. He turned and just as she saw Ul lock eyes on her and surprise cross his features, she pulled the trigger. The laser's flash blinded her, then the image flickered out, and she burned a hole in the wall. She quickly released the trigger before the laser pierced the hull. Tate let out a breath then sat back in her seat, still holding the gun.

"Did you get him?" Emily asked.

Tate nodded. "I think so." She looked at Emily and grinned. "Nice work, Captain. If your theory holds, we just ended a war."

Emily wiped tears from her cheeks. "I should throw you in the brig for disobeying orders, you know."

Tate shrugged. "I know."

Ul's ship filled the front window. There was nothing more to do. A blip on the long-range sensors caught Tate's attention. Pirate ship. Too late. She dropped the gun and reached for Emily, holding her tight, with only her own body left to protect her.

"I don't know what I've done to deserve you," Emily said.

Tate kissed Emily's neck, savoring one last taste of her. "You love me," she whispered.

At the moment of impact, while there was still air to transmit sound waves, Tate heard the hull crumple. She felt a warm squeeze as she lost sight of Emily amid a blinding flash, a thunderous roar, and the sensation of her body disintegrating.



STARDANCE

Trace Miller

“How hard can it be to steal a ship?” he had asked. “A bit of creative programming, a bit of old-fashioned brute force, and boom! You’re in. Grease the palm of the port authority, and you can get clearance to anywhere.” How hard can it be, indeed?

Well, the palms were greased, the programming was done, brute force had been judiciously applied, and the escape was made good. Everything went perfectly according to Darien’s plan, except for one thing. Darien was dead, according to the ship’s medical facility. Karenya had a feeling she was in way over her head, and they hadn’t exactly planned this part. Thinking back on it, she realized they had done a genuinely poor job of planning the whole thing, overall.

In fact, Darien’s unfortunate condition was the least of her problems now. With the power cells at eighty-nine percent and all systems stable and functioning, she should have been halfway across the next galaxy by now. Still, here she sat, in a ship dead in space not nearly far enough from the starport for Karenya’s comfort, with her brother in pieces in a plexisteel tube. She kicked the tube’s supportive housing again for good measure, and forced herself to refrain from wrinkling her nose at the vibrant lash of pain that whipped from her toes to the small of her back. There was no one to see the effort or the expression. The outburst did not go unmarked, however.

“I am registering distress in your vital signs. Please allow me to administer a sedative.” She jumped at the saccharine voice emanating from nowhere, chiding herself when she realized it was the ship’s computer. She went from startled to angry again.

“Not *no*, but *fuck* no! If I can’t trust you to fix Darien, why would I trust you to knock me out? That’s not going to happen.”

“Objection registered. Perhaps you would prefer music. I have a broad selection of crystal tonal motifs from a variety of systems, as well as re-creations of native instrumental pieces from over three hundred cultures.”

“No, I would not prefer music. Why are you so talkative now? Where was all this concern and congeniality when I asked for help thirty-six hours ago?”

“You did not require assistance thirty-six hours ago.”

“No, but he did.” Karenya kicked the housing again.

“Please allow me to administer a sedative and an analgesic. While I have a broad range of skills at my disposal, repairing damage to a body beyond the confines of a recovery bay or placing your body in the appropriate recovery bay is beyond my present capabilities.”

“You could have saved him. You *should* have saved him.”

“I could have. Such is within my parameters.” The soothing voice made that casual assertion even more maddening, and Karenya drew back her foot to kick again. She shook her head, sighed, and let it drop back to the deck, where her magnetic boot caught with a quiet thunk. “Thank you. That was an appropriate choice. Please allow me to administer a sedative and an analgesic.”

“You bitch! You condescending, self-righteous, sanctimonious, narcissistic, arrogant, supercilious bastard stepchild of a slab of semi-cognizant slagheap refuse! How dare you tell me what is appropriate, after refusing to heal Darien and stranding me in the middle of who-knows-where?” The silence that fell in the wake of her tirade was both welcome and nerve-wracking. She expected a pithy response and was not disappointed.

“Your assertion contains numerous fallacies. I know precisely where we are. You are not ‘stranded who-knows-where.’ I did not refuse to heal Darien. I obeyed section forty-six point three two, article seventeen, which states that no aid or succor may be afforded a criminal in the commission of a felonious—”

“But you offer me sedatives and painkillers? How do you justify that?”

“—activity. Furthermore, this ship was constructed of high-grade, new components crafted from original materials to customer specifications. While I am entirely capable of the emotions you attribute to me, I am far from semi-cognizant. I am a fully aware, organic control system. As I am a wholly new and entirely intended creation, I am no one’s ‘bastard stepchild,’ although the term ‘bitch,’ which implies a female sexual identity and a powerful female personal identity, is appropriate despite my lack of any primary sex characteristics. One of your twelve assertions, therefore, is correct. Would you like to try again?”

“You’re a what?”

“I am a bitch.”

She was stunned enough to hold her tongue while she once again cursed—silently—their poor planning. The idea of stealing a ship and getting away from station politics had seemed perfect. They had chosen a ship that looked good, looked fast. They had not planned for an advanced AI, and that complicated everything by several orders of magnitude, not the least of which was the nagging feeling that Karenya’s brilliant hack and Darien’s ultimate

sacrifice had not been what got them aboard. She had a feeling that the computer had its own agenda, or, at best, was simply bored.

Killing the ship's previous owner had been an accident, of sorts. Darien had been standing watch while she worked on overriding the ship's security system when the owner arrived at the dock. Perhaps Darien had expected a fight, but Karenya had not. She had not taken any of it seriously until the hatch had gaped open at precisely the same time Darien's chest had. Before she could drag him aboard, the ship's owner lay dead on the steel dock, clutching Darien's severed foot. She had rescued the foot, managed to wrestle her brother's limp body into one of the ship's medical tubes, and done her best to line his foot up correctly with his leg before sealing the tube. The tube's indicators had blinked a few times, then flat-lined.

That was serious business, but all things considered, not immediate. Darien wasn't going anywhere, and his circumstances were unchanged. More immediately serious, however, had been the realization that she was aboard a ship that was not hers, and two men were dead because of it. She could turn herself in and spend the rest of her natural life sitting in a box drooling on herself if her father could not or would not bail her out, or she could run. Considering that Darien had been his heir, as well as his apprentice, she thought running probably held more promise. She had thrown herself into the pilot's seat, uploaded the launch sequence, and prayed. The ship had moved smoothly from the dock as the station retracted the various hooks and couplings.

"Your vital signs have improved markedly," the computer observed, interrupting her reverie. "You do not appear to have caused injury to your foot. However, the offer of sedatives and analgesics is still available. You have but to ask. I realize that you consider your present circumstances quite traumatic and will offer what assistance I may to reduce the attendant anxiety."

"How kind of you."

"Hardly. It is a matter of self-preservation, not a kindness. I would not have chosen an untrained child as a pilot, and you would not have chosen to be alone in space without recognized resources. However, that does appear to be the reality of the present situation. We are, unfortunately, forced to sort out the situation as best we may. It seems that I will be required to provide training. You may find this very taxing. In the interest of our mutual survival, I must alleviate the tension as much as possible."

"What? You don't have an autopilot or an emergency beacon to summon some authority or another and let them know you've been stolen?"

"I have program options for both of those processes. However, my calculations find that while autopilot is an appropriate course of action, surrendering myself to a government official is not in our best interests."

“*Our* best interests? When did I become part of the equation? When did my best interests enter into it?”

“When you chose to steal a starship, and again when you chose this particular starship.”

“You’re stunningly advanced for an AI. And we didn’t choose to steal a starship, much less choose to steal this one.”

“I am not an AI. I am a brain-ship. Despite my lack of certain organic sense organs, my sensors provide a rather extensive array of data that imparts quite enough information to know that you are prevaricating. You chose well, but you planned poorly. Very poorly. You may call me Dance, and I shall call you Jesse.”

“But that’s not my name.”

“It is now. I have taken the liberty of providing a new identity for you. It should help ease certain unavoidable social interactions that tend to arise in starports. While, obviously, I can handle many aspects of day-to-day operations of the company, it does help to have—”

“You’re a brain-ship? I have *stolen* a freaking *brain-ship*? Whoa. Yeah, you’re right. We planned very poorly. A *brain-ship*? How many—no, never mind. I don’t care. Not important at the moment.”

“—a face that can be attached to the various transactions. You are that face. I will provide physical identification items for you when we arrive at a destination that requires them.”

“I think I’ll take that sedative, analgesic, and entertainment now,” the newly renamed Jesse replied. It was a little unnerving to hear the computer laugh, but it did, even as it provided directions for accessing the recovery bay’s non-critical services. She winced as the service plate forced the icy mix into the skin of her palm, and she nearly drew back her hand before it delivered the full dose. Instead, she clenched her teeth, determined not to show further weakness. When it finished, she rubbed her hand to get the feeling back in it, then flopped onto the nearest couch.

True to her word, Dance was able to provide thousands of entertainment offerings at any given time. Jesse flipped through what the computer called a clip catalog, which provided brief review segments of the available programs that included everything from currently popular plays, video dramas, and music to re-mastered offerings of antique entertainments called movies produced as much as three hundred years ago. Jesse browsed these latter titles curiously, watching the flat images flicker by. In the clip for *A Few Good Men*, a character named Colonel Jessup was shouting about truth in some sort of military courtroom drama. In another clip, an even flatter cartoon dog with a speech impediment begged for sandwiches. The largest genre of these movies in Dance’s collection, however, was what she referred to as Westerns. Jesse made the mistake of voicing some vague interrogative regarding them,

and Dance treated her to a lengthy history lesson of Old Earth including colorful tales of outlaws through the ages, and more specifically of the period to which the movies referred. She opted not to ask about the pirate movies.

Gradually, life aboard IFSS *Stardance* fell into a routine. Jesse, who had never bought into the stories about boredom being the primary enemy of those who take to space, finally began to understand. The thirty-hour spaceport “day” soon lost any significance. She slept when tired, ate when hungry, exercised when Dance forced her to, and studied or read when bored. Dance immersed her in several new languages, most of which she picked up readily. In a matter of weeks, she progressed to the point that if asked what language she was speaking or hearing, she actually had to think about it. At that point, of course, Dance added a new one.

Language was not the only subject in which Dance tutored, and though she attempted not to ruin Jesse’s illusion of self-determination, they both knew that Jesse had a great deal to learn if they were to survive. Dance scripted Jesse’s days very carefully, allowing only enough sleep for her to perform at peak efficiency. She nagged Jesse into physical exercise and provided her with a routine that kept her body from deteriorating in the lowered gravity. The education was continuous, though more often than not, it took the form of discussion or debate, so that Jesse retained the information more efficiently and wasn’t quite as aware she was studying—and learning—the finer points of intergalactic law, maritime law, history, economics, and strategy and tactics, among other things.

And then came the piloting and gunnery lessons. Although these lessons never occurred on any regular schedule, the first one seemed to set the tone for all that followed. They began seven weeks into the journey, in the depths of what Jesse would have considered “night” since she had chosen that time to sleep.

Klaxons sounded, and Dance’s urgent voice jerked Jesse from a sound and desperately needed sleep. She struggled into her boots and pants, and yelled for lights so she could locate a shirt. Dance did not oblige, and Jesse stumbled to the bridge bare-breasted, losing one magnetic boot as she went. She kicked the other one off, heard it chunk against something behind her in the corridor, then swam through zero gravity the remaining distance forward and swung herself into the pilot’s couch. She strapped in and tried to take in the scene from the bridge, but chaos does not lend itself to resolution, especially in the first ninety seconds after awakening.

“Now what do I do?” Jesse screamed. Dance, apparently thoroughly enjoying ducking and dodging the ship that had appeared on the view screen, did not answer right away. Warning lights had appeared all over the console in a variety of colors and urgency, and Jesse slapped at the controls to try to correct the apparent collision course with hell. She only had the most

rudimentary idea of what she was doing, and with no time to consider, she could only respond and hope she did not do something that would get them killed.

“Might I suggest you shoot the barstards, mate?” Dance finally replied, laughing. Jesse did not immediately recognize or appreciate the silly accent the computerized voice had taken on, so filed it away for later consideration. Dance ducked aside again, the ship rolling ninety degrees to the vertical then pitching sickeningly back the other direction as she wove among the space debris. Jesse finally found gun controls—on the yoke, of all places—and tried them out. Her eyes widened as a shot actually connected, shearing off a bit of thermal shielding that looked rather like a wing. Suddenly, she was laughing, too, and as the exercise became a game in her mind, she relaxed and allowed her skill to improve. It took some practice to learn where the ship on the screen was vulnerable, and which of the several weapons Dance had available. She tried them all, of course, just to see what they did, and occasionally was rewarded with a grudging, “Good choice,” from Dance, or a glittery sparkle from the ship itself, indicating an actual hit. She learned to loathe the broad, curving flash that meant she had only skinned the enemy’s shields.

It was over in a minute or two. The “enemy” was no more than debris littering the view screen. Even so, Dance kept the scenario running, easing carefully through the garbage. Jesse kept an eye on the readouts, absorbing the tiny shifts in heading and learning how they corresponded to how the ship moved. After a few moments, she took the controls on Dance’s suggestion and continued their slow progress through the debris field. Brief but unpleasant thuds and vibrations marked her occasional miscalculations. When at last they cleared the field, she leaned back in the couch and sighed.

“Not bad for your first time. However, had we had others behind us, the outcome would scarcely have been so positive. Perhaps you could move us through any future fields a bit more quickly. The same techniques will apply to asteroid fields, except that where such debris fields will generally be moving toward you until you pass the explosion site and away when once you have, asteroids may be moving in a similar pattern or they may be orbiting a larger body. Rarely, you may encounter both in the same field.”

“Why would I want to go through an asteroid belt? Wouldn’t it make more sense to avoid such things?”

“Ordinarily, yes. However, bear in mind that an asteroid belt can be a superb hiding place. Sensible people tend to avoid them.”

“Obviously, we are not sensible people, then. Well, what about the rest of it? How did I do?”

“Abysmally, overall. However, again, it was your first battle, and you are still unfamiliar with the controls. Here.” The view screen image changed to

six views of the ship they had just obliterated. “This is a Denorian patrol skiff. There’s not much to them, other than an immense sensor array. They have light weapons and only average shielding. Most are unmanned reconnaissance vessels, and will only fight as a last resort for survival. The danger of encountering one is that these ships report everything of interest. The Denorians have managed to double their communications speed, even in deep space, so you have very little time to disable the communications array before it summons support vessels. This, then—” Dance paused to light the same position on all six images, “is your primary target for this vessel. Due to its purpose, it is unwise to leave any portion of the ship intact. Once it stops reporting, its parent ship or base will investigate, and it is best to leave them with no explanation as to the nature of the craft’s demise.”

“So, that being the case, why did we navigate through the debris, instead of working on a quicker escape? Like a jump?”

“In some cases, such a maneuver would be appropriate, if dangerous. In this case, we were already into the debris field before the battle concluded. Had we jumped, there was the strong possibility of pulling part of that with us. Besides, you needed the practice, and we were not in imminent danger. I scanned the debris for any active equipment, such as an emergency beacon. Besides, you aren’t ready for jumps.”

Something nagged at the back of Jesse’s mind about Dance’s reply. She could not quite pin down what was wrong, however, and soon gave up, turning her attention back to the lessons. Jesse studied the configuration of the ship on the screen, touching the images to zoom in on different areas. Dance provided labels or explanations when such information seemed useful, until finally Jesse sat back down, having absorbed as much about Denorian patrol skiffs as she could for the moment.

Dance did not always launch into flight simulation and gunnery lessons when Jesse was sleeping, but more often than not, the lessons did come at inopportune moments. Sometimes, the lessons included such things as using a loader to salvage cargo from the remains of lesson ships, when there was enough left. Dance was becoming exasperated with Jesse’s zeal when it came to destroying enemies, and after three months finally voiced the irritation. Jesse was surprised. She had never given the situation any thought at all, never considered that there might be times when utterly obliterating an enemy was not the best course of action. She tried to tone down her excitement and leave a bit, except when Dance advised destroying a vessel. In time, she learned to recognize which she should leave intact and which she should destroy quickly.

In general, Dance tried to avoid allowing Jesse much idle time, and in general, it worked. Jesse was either too busy or too tired to notice most of the things Dance wanted her not to notice. In the months they had travelled

together, Jesse had never mentioned Darien again after that first week. She had even stopped avoiding looking at the tube where he lay, indicating that she seldom gave it thought anymore. For Dance, that was the best possible situation, since she had been maintaining the young man in near-suspended animation while she gradually healed his wounds. He was almost healed, and keeping him suspended was almost becoming dangerous in itself. Finally, she broached the subject with Jesse, to find out whether she had made the right choice in keeping him alive. Her reaction would determine all their fates.

She chose an “evening” when Jesse had done particularly well on their last encounter and was tired from the adrenaline and in high spirits with the victory. It had been close. The freighter had them outgunned, and Dance had been genuinely worried, but Jesse’s skill was nothing short of amazing now, and, in time, would be legendary. The salvage had been a good haul as well, and Jesse had done well in choosing what to take and what to abandon, making sound decisions based on markets and their precious hold space. She let the young woman watch the stars in silence for a while before beginning the conversation.

“Jesse, I’ve not been totally honest with you.”

“And this is supposed to be news? I know that.” Jesse rolled her eyes. Dance paused to analyze the tone and decided it was close to their normal banter and Jesse’s frequent sarcasm, except for the edge she could detect in her young friend’s voice. Fear, or at least unease.

“Don’t make this more difficult, please.” Dance thought she probably deserved the derisive snort that request brought from her human companion, but she plunged on.

“I didn’t help your brother in those first thirty-six hours because it was illegal. I did not precisely help either of you, if you’ll recall. And before you start, yes. I choose which laws to break where. But that one, that’s a big one. Violation can get me grounded permanently, anywhere, and I won’t take the chance for someone unproven, someone I don’t know. So, I put him on support and suspended him. Froze him, if you will.”

“You . . . what?”

“I kept him alive. When it seemed that things would work out, I began tending to him. Now he has nearly healed, but there is little more I can do. He needs to be on a planet or, at the very least, on a station with Earth-standard gravity. While I can provide that for short periods, and even have the equipment he needs to rebuild muscle tone and bone density, it is a long-term expenditure we cannot afford.”

“Darien’s alive. I haven’t even looked at him in months.”

Dance gave her a moment to process the news.

“I want to ask how you could do this, if there were any shred of humanity left in you. There isn’t, is there? And that’s how you can justify this?”

"I could have killed him. I should have, in fact, for our safety and your mental health. There was no certainty in my actions. I took a very large risk in what I did, and no, there were no altruistic motives at the time. As I came to know you, I thought perhaps I had made a good choice, since you seemed to have a deep sibling bond with him. My initial choice, however, was financial. Upon identifying the two of you, and having already committed a grave error in judgment in bringing you aboard, it seemed prudent to continue and at least have some monetary gain to show for the risk. Which brings us to where we are now."

"Wait. Monetary gain? What monetary gain?"

"His ransom. I propose that we send a message, suggest a suitable ransom, and drop him off at the nearest port when we receive the funds."

"That . . . that is just sick. You saved my brother's life merely to use him as a game piece?" Jesse wanted to be enraged, but to her, Darien had been dead for the better part of a year. She had grieved and moved on. Dance noted the lack of conviction in her partner's voice, but did not take it for granted. They were not out of danger yet.

"Yes. I did the same to you. You were useful to me, both of you, in different ways. Now he has become a dangerous liability, and I like to think you've become a friend and partner. I have a dilemma, and I need your help."

"Didn't you once tell me you could manage just fine on your own? Why do you need my help, and what makes you think I'd be willing to help you, after you kept this from me for almost a year? Didn't it occur to you that just maybe I deserved to know what was going on? What I was being dragged into?"

"Oh, I'm reasonably sure you still don't know the latter. As for the former, I thought it best that you believed him dead. I thought it would be easier for you. I am sorry for this error in judgment."

"Error in—"

"Unfortunately," Dance interrupted smoothly before Jesse could register further protest, "even as advanced as I am, I cannot change what has been done. While I anticipate further discussion of the topic, or at least harbor some hope for it, the situation demands timely resolution, and for that, I require your input."

Jesse laughed bitterly.

"Require my input? Is that how you deal with fucked-up situations? You retreat to your formal programmed-sounding language to impress me? And, once again, you have evaded a direct question. Why do you need me to help you at all?"

For a moment, Dance remained silent. "Because although I could resolve this easily myself, and will if I must, I hope that we have become friends, and

that it is strong enough to get us through this.” Dance paused again, then resumed quietly. “I want us to be friends. I made a potentially inaccurate assessment of the situation, and you were hurt by it, and for that, I am sorry.”

Jesse seethed in silence, and Dance continued. “Darien is at the apex of the conditioning that I can provide. He needs physical therapy in a setting that is possible here with our present resources for only six standard days. It is not enough. His bones will begin to disintegrate and his muscles will begin to atrophy, and I cannot stop that. I must return him somewhere more appropriate, or he must be euthanized. I will not allow him to suffer. I confess that I have difficulty with that choice, but only because I have grown to love you.”

“Why consult me now? Why not just off-load him at a spaceport somewhere for interment without ever telling me he was still alive? You could have your ransom and your tractable little pilot, with minimal fuss and effort.”

“Because one does not treat one’s friends that way. Because it would not undo what you perceive as a wrong done you. Did I consider it? Of course. I am pragmatic. I am trying to be something more.”

Dance could sense Jesse’s frustration, despite her stillness or perhaps because of it. She could not recall a time when she had felt more helpless. Finally, Jesse spoke again. Her voice had a soft, resigned tone that made Dance ache. “What do you need from me?”

“Would Darien be a good senator?”

“Yes. He didn’t really want to, not then. He was born for it, trained for it, thinks like a senator most of the time. Yes, he would be good at it.”

“It stands to reason then, that the logical thing to do is, in fact, to return him. Do you want to go with him?”

“What?” Jesse sounded stunned. “You would let me walk off this ship, knowing what I know about you?”

“No. Neither of you would be permitted to retain memory of what has happened, or who or where I might be. But yes, I would allow you to go.”

Jesse sighed and spun the pilot’s couch to look at the medical facilities and more specifically, at the tube containing her brother. Her fingers steepled together and she idly tapped her chin with them, lost in thought. With emotion pushed firmly out of the way for a moment, she realized that the situation really had not changed. Darien was dead to her, regardless, and she had been party to his kidnapping. She could scarcely expect a hero’s welcome. Life aboard *Stardance* was not bad at all, and the independence was nothing short of exhilarating. After a few moments, she sat up a bit more.

“So, how much was the ransom?”

If Dance could have blushed, she would have, and the chagrined tone of her reply almost made Jesse laugh aloud. “Seventeen thousand, five hundred

standard marks. It's not exorbitant, but it is enough to resupply and refit for the next twelve months."

"So much for pragmatic. He's worth at least twice that. The next time we kidnap a diplomat, let me set the ransom, yes?"

"Perhaps. I will accept that as meaning you wish to stay aboard."

"You're not forgiven, but yes, I will stay."



Jesse had forgotten how noisy places of human habitation were. She flinched at the shouts and cowered within the protective robes that Dance had procured for her. Darien leaned on her like a drunk, and she had to pause often to catch her breath and let him rest. His limp was barely noticeable, and in time would work itself out. His memory, including a planted but otherwise very vivid one of Karenya's death, would come back in time, as would his physical strength. Jesse had to admire Dance's medical expertise.

With Jesse's assistance, Darien slid into the booth at the pub. She ordered food for him—a light breakfast—and paid for it from an untraceable account. She hesitated, then leaned to kiss his brow.

"Take care of yourself. I hope I never have to see you again."

With that, Jesse slipped away so that she would not hear any reply he might make. The jog back to the docks seemed long and harrowing, despite Dance's assurances that no one here would recognize her. She found that she had come to dislike physical contact with strangers even more than she had before this adventure began, and she shuddered with each accidental bump and intentional grope. She was relieved to throw herself into the pilot's couch once more and set about the familiar task of guiding the ship out of the docking bay.

Once *Stardance* was in open space and moving unobtrusively alongside the major shipping lane, Jesse leaned back in the couch, watching the stars slide by and the starport dwindle. A host of emotions warred in her, and Dance let her have her silence, knowing that she was still on unstable emotional ground with her human partner. Hours later, once Jesse had gained control of the urge to crow about their success, she finally broke the silence.

"I've noticed that we avoid major trade ports. As in, you're plotting courses that take us well away from all of them. Why? Wouldn't we find better markets for what's in the bays there? And better cargos for other ports?"

"Because what we do is not strictly legal in most star systems—"

"No? Kidnapping isn't legal? Who would have thought that?"

"—and is outright illegal in many. We might find better markets, but we might not. As for better cargos, you might have noticed that we are somewhat limited in physical space. Merchant companies can afford to ship normal goods at a lower cost than we can, so there is little point in competing for that

trade. There are ports where authorities and other assorted unpleasant folk know us, and ports where they do not. We will stay with the ones where we are either unknown, or are welcome.”

When Dance finished, Jesse was silent for a moment, working through the various nuances and things her partner left unsaid. “All this time, I’ve been a pirate?”

“No,” Dance responded in that infuriating, rational tone, “all this time I have been a pirate. You have been a captive who happened to serve my needs, until now.”

“And what am I now?”

“A pirate.”

“You should have told me the truth.”

She was sulking again. Dance found it amusing and made no effort, this time, to hide her laughter or spare Jesse’s feelings. “To what end? Would you have me endanger your well-being, as well as my own freedom, all for some misguided social construct that is more than a millennium out of date? Hardly. I ran all of the appropriate calculations and scenarios. You couldn’t handle the truth.”

This time, the woman sprawled in the captain’s chair burst out laughing.



THE PASSENGER

Megan Magill

“Cargo’s all on, Skipper.”

Seri grabbed the tablet from the wall and glanced through the inventory. Nothing unusual. Good. The cargo bay looked about three-quarters full. Better than it could be. “Thanks, Panda.” She turned and headed for command.

After the cargo hold, the rest of the ship always seemed cramped. Efficient was the word she used to the crew. From nose to tail was four minutes’ walk and that was with the doors on manual. Sure, a little more luxury would be nice but *Solero* had plenty of sky leagues left in her. Plus, she’d been in the family for years. Trading her in was not an option.

Command was as familiar to Seri as her childhood bedroom. Funny, given how they’d often been one and the same. These days, though, it was Jed who sat at the nav panel. His screen cycled through the flight charts as he logged their imminent journey. “Any problems?”

“Nothing major,” he answered without looking up. “There’s the possibility of barricades near Ravira. Fuel workers striking again.”

“Again? Well, we have no choice this time. About half the cargo’s destined for Ravira.”

“I’ll keep monitoring.”

“Thanks.” Seri lifted her wrist to her face and spoke into the talker. “Kerfith.”

“Here.”

“How are you getting on? We’re nearly done on this end.”

“Getting there. I’m just sorting some papers. We have a passenger as far as Andreas.”

Seri saw her own frown reflected in the windscreen. “Okay. Brief me later.”

“Sounds like we need to break open the good rations,” Jed said, his fingers still moving on the input screen.

“Yeah.” Seri sighed. “I suppose we usually get away with it. Once in a blue moon isn’t so bad.”

“We could always start transporting the hazardous stuff, then we could get out of it.”

“You wouldn’t be saying that if you’d been around to see the Hulkerian Flu outbreak. The nav guy we had then had forty-seven pustules, if I remember rightly.”

Jed grimaced. “Point taken.”

Seri left him with that thought as she headed for the sleeping quarters. “Panda.” She addressed the talker as she walked.

“Yes.”

“We’ve got company so you’re bunking with me. Move your stuff over pronto.”

“Aye, Skipper.”

Seri held her palm up to the reader outside her door. The green light flashed and the door slid open. She tapped the lock open switch then walked into her haven with mixed emotions. “Heads up, guys,” she addressed the guinea pigs, “we’re getting company.” The top bunk housed books, clothes, and a half-empty bottle of toffee liqueur. She tidied it all and made up the bed with fresh linen. “At least it’s only Panda.” The guinea pigs didn’t comment.

“What do you mean by *only* Panda?”

Seri turned and smiled at her. “I was just reassuring the boys. You know they don’t like change.”

“It’s hardly a change for me to be in here. Although, I suppose it has been a while.”

It was true. “Well, this time we have a passenger.”

Panda’s dark eyes showed interest. “Anyone famous?”

“On here?” Seri laughed. “Mind you, now that you mention it, I think it might be the latest Elvis clone.”

“Good.” Panda heaved her bag onto the top bunk. “Maybe some of that creativity will rub off on me. Or, better yet, those hip gyrations.” She shuffled across the floor in a strange flow of undulations.

Seri shook her head. “Don’t give up the day job.”

“Are you okay with me staying?” Panda looked suddenly serious.

“Of course. Anyway, there’re only four rooms. Or do you think Jed and Kerfith could share without maiming each other?” She pressed to open the drawer under her bunk and busied herself putting away clothes.

“So, who is it?”

“I don’t know.” She checked her watch. “Have you finished your pre-flight duties?”

“Yep.”

“All right. Liaise with Kerfith. The passenger should be joining us any time now, and your curiosity has nominated you as official tour guide.”

Panda pulled a face. “Thanks.”

“Any time. I’ll be in command.” They stepped into the corridor. “When you see Kerfith, tell him to report in.”

“Sure.” Panda started walking but then paused and turned. “Oh, and Skipper?”

“Mmm?”

“Cocoa at twenty-three hundred hours.”



Seri walked into the lounge and put the portable control unit on the counter. The automatic pilot could take care of most things, but the PCU gave her complete control from anywhere in the ship.

“Should we wait?” Jed asked.

“No, let’s eat. I’m starving.” Kerfith grabbed a bread roll.

“She’s not coming, anyway,” Panda said. “She’s got a headache so she’s turned in early.”

“The passenger?” Seri asked. “What’s she like?”

“Sexy,” Kerfith said.

“After two months on board, you’d say that about anything,” Panda said. “She seems okay. Says she’s flown a lot, and seems to know her way around a ship.”

“Any idea why she wants to fly with us?”

“No. She says she has friends to visit in Andreas but that’s all I know.”

“So, I guess we have to keep this one legit, eh, Skipper?” Kerfith asked.

Seri thought for a moment. “We’ll see. I want to meet her before we decide. The cargo bay’s about three-quarters full but it’s grunt work. Nothing of value. It’ll pay our way but I was expecting we’d supplement our income en route.”

“She could be an inspector,” Jed said.

“I don’t think so,” Panda said. “She doesn’t have that public service vibe.”

Seri turned her attention to her bowl of stew. “We’ll find out soon enough.”



Later that night, Seri awoke to the alarm of the PCU. She crossed to her desk and checked in.

“Ungh?” The noise came from the top bunk.

“Just an electrical storm. Go back to sleep.” She reviewed the recommended course change and saw that it would take them a little too close to some old hunting ground. *Let’s not*. She folded up the PCU, left her quarters, and headed for command.

Using the navigational database only took her about ten minutes to find and set an alternate route. There were some territorial gangs in this area, and she really didn’t want trouble. Those were the sorts of details she could miss

when tapping away on the PCU in her room. The adjustment would only add a small delay to their journey, so they would still be able to complete their first cargo drop in the morning. She checked her watch. It was too close to morning to go back to bed. She'd only feel worse when the alarm went off. Instead, she headed to the lounge in search of coffee.

When she got there, she found the pot was hot. *Odd*. She was always the first up, even without the head start. There were no other signs of life in the lounge. She poured herself a coffee, added creamer and extra sugar, then headed off to investigate. She didn't even bother looking for Jed—he was only ever in his room, command, or the lounge. Kerfith or Panda both had duties that covered the rest of the ship. Seri headed to the engine room first. If there was something going on there, she needed to know.

She took a pair of ear defenders from the rail outside, then headed in. The noise was intense, even with the protection. There was no way to call out so she just did a quick visual check. Everything looked fine and there was nobody around. Good. She returned the ear defenders to the rail and walked to the cargo bay. As always, she breathed a little easier in the big room. Even three-quarters full, it was more spacious than anywhere else. The high ceiling and clear floor space made her want to dance. She squashed the desire.

“Hello, Seri.”

Seri turned, recognising the voice before her eyes found the speaker. “Liz.”

“The one and only.” Liz stepped closer. She looked much as she had the last time they'd met. “You don't look pleased to see me.”

“I should have guessed that you're the mystery passenger.”

“I know. I should have told you straight away, but I didn't want to distract you.”

Or risk being returned to port. Seri took a swig of her coffee. What was she supposed to say?

“I helped myself to coffee. I hope you don't mind.”

“Of course not. You're a passenger aboard this ship, which means your comfort is important to us.”

Liz snorted. “I should think so, at that price. How do you get away with charging it? It's extortionate.”

Seri shrugged. “It encourages potential passengers to look elsewhere. We're not a particularly sociable bunch.”

“I suppose you don't take anyone unless you have to?”

“No. We need to keep the passenger ship status for the routes and ports it opens up. I'd have thought you knew that better than anyone.”

“Yes.” She looked at the cargo and frowned. “You're using a lot of space.”

Seri shrugged again and immediately wished she hadn't. It was her ship and her decision. “We had paying customers.”

“Of course. It’s a good cover, too.” Liz leant toward her. “You will be pirating between here and Andreas?” Her eyes had an almost manic glint.

“It depends on the situation. Now that I know we don’t have to try and hide it from a passenger, it’s more likely.”

“You must. You can’t just do this.” Liz swept her arm in the direction of the cargo. “You can do better than haulage.”

Seri sipped her coffee again and fought the urge to shrug.



“In position.”

“And ready to go.”

Seri knelt on one knee and wriggled to get comfortable. She activated the magnets on her right boot and left knee and felt the force grip her against the deck. A test bounce confirmed the dock was sound. Even after a lifetime of pirating, she still had nightmares about falling into the stratosphere. “Okay. Move in, Jed.” Her voice sounded distorted through the oxygen mask. She reached for the wrist straps anchored on the hull and hung on as the surge of momentum propelled them forward.

After about a minute, she saw the vapour trail of the other ship. *Not long now*. A sudden lurch, and *Solero* tilted. Seri could see the tips of mountains through the gaps in the clouds. She shut her eyes. The sudden tilt the other way proved their quarry was trying to evade them. *Solero* was fast, though. Externally, she was nondescript, but the contents of the engine room was cutting edge. She could outrun any ship straight off the line, thanks to the latest kit and some creative customisations.

Seri opened her eyes once they had steadied. They were drawing level with the other ship, and she could see the faces looking out the windows. *Time to go*. She released the laser gun from its deck bindings and readied it. The shape of the hull prevented her from seeing the others but she knew Panda and Kerfith would be doing the same. The faces disappeared from the windows opposite and the other ship accelerated. Seri grabbed the wrist strap with one hand and gripped the gun with the other. Too many guns were lost when the quarry faked compliance.

To her left, Seri heard the high-pitched pulse of Panda’s gun. Hopefully, that was the warning shot. Any pilot should realise that the pirate guns had enough power to breach a hull. If he had any sense, he wouldn’t test them. Again, they drew level with the other ship and this time, they maintained speed. The creak of metal told her Jed was extending the landing bridge. She watched it cross the sky between them, then heard it lock in place against their hull.

Seri tested the line anchor on the belt of her suit. It was solid. She deactivated the magnet on her knee and set both her boot magnets to walk.

Her thigh muscles strained as she headed to the bridge. Kerfith was there before her. She never had understood the thrill he found in this. She'd have been glad if she'd never had to do it again. From the bridge, she looked back and saw Panda in position, holding her gun so the other pilot could see it. Seri had heard of other ships where they'd ripped apart mid-bridge. The damage to both hulls had doomed them all, and she'd always wondered if these were accidents or the actions of a crew with such a hatred of pirates that they sacrificed their ship.

Kerfith opened the door then turned to hook his anchor line to await the journey back. Only a few steps behind, Seri did the same. When they were both in the air lock, they closed the outer door and readied for the fight, deactivating their boot magnets. Seri exchanged her gun for her laser sword, and Kerfith shook his head. She ignored him and opened the inner door, then stepped back in anticipation of the charge. Kerfith ran past with his gun primed.

Inside, two security guards met them. Seri went for the farthest one, using the momentum of her run to power the swing of her sword. He wasn't the first to freeze at the sight of it. She'd customised it herself and, to her knowledge, there wasn't anything else like it. Her swing knocked the gun from his hands and he looked at her with wide eyes. "Hands above your head."

Kerfith's guard was on the ground. No shots had been fired so she guessed Kerfith had opted for hand-to-hand.

"Tie him." She waited while Kerfith obeyed.

"Right. Take us to the passengers." She gestured to her prisoner to lead. Kerfith followed. They walked through a short corridor, then into a large room. About twenty people were clustered in the corner. They looked terrified.

"There's no need for alarm," Seri said. "We're just here to relieve you of some excess weight. If you comply without fuss, there will be no need for anyone to be harmed." She gave Kerfith the "cover me" look, then stepped forward.

Seri started at the left-hand side of the group and moved right. She held open the bag as her eyes searched each of them for valuables. "That's a lovely watch, sir. In the bag, please. Yes, your handheld, too, and your coins. Beautiful necklace, madam. May I?"

"This is outrageous." The man in front of her stopped the woman from handing over her necklace. "Where are our guards? You have no right. We're civilians under the protection of Terran law."

"All good points. However, we are the ones with weapons, so please don't argue."

"You're just a bully." He tried to grab the bag. When she pulled it out of

the way, he drew his fist back to punch. Before he could throw, he yelped and grabbed at his midriff.

Seri lowered her sword. She'd barely nicked him. "I don't like hurting people but I will if I have to. Your choice."

He stepped back. The woman dropped the necklace into the bag. Others farther down the line prepared their donations. As she collected more coins, Seri saw a young woman near the end tuck a ring into her waistband. She carried on normally until she reached her.

"Something tells me that you have a treasure you don't want to part with."

The woman looked defiant. "I don't think any of us want to part with our belongings."

Seri felt the twist of a smile on her face. "Quite. Perhaps from you, I'll take a different kind of treasure."

The woman inhaled audibly. Seri leant forward and kissed her cheek. She stepped back out of reach before the woman had a chance to react. "Thank you."

It seemed the woman couldn't decide whether to smile or slap her. Seri didn't wait to find out. "Thank you, all. We hope you have a pleasant onward journey."

Kerfith held his gun ready whilst they returned to the bridge and crossed back to their own ship. Seri wondered whether he was disappointed that there had been no chance to shoot. She was glad, though. When they were safe aboard *Solero* Jed started an evasive path that would return them to their route. Now, they were back to playing plain hauliers.



"Let's see what we've got." All five aboard the *Solero* were clustered around the table in the lounge. Seri upended her bag. The loot spilled over the surface with the distinctive chink of metal on metal. They spread it out with flat hands, then inspected.

"This is nice." Panda held a ring up to the light. "Good-sized emerald."

Kerfith grabbed one of the watches and strapped it to his wrist. "Whatcha think?"

"I think it'd sell well," Jed said. He rummaged for cash, then started to count it.

Seri looked at the pile. It all seemed rather numbing. Perhaps she'd been doing it so long she'd become accustomed to the thrill of spoils. "There're a few handheld computers. Do you think you'll be able to deactivate the homing beacons?"

Jed paused his counting to look. "I'd say so. We'll have to dump any that won't."

“Is that it?” Liz prodded the heap with her finger. “What about cargo or luggage? Did you empty the safe? They must have hidden it all when they were trying to get away.”

“This is enough,” Seri said.

“Enough? What does *enough* have to do with it?”

The others looked uncomfortable. “Enough to live on,” Seri said. “Enough to tide us over when shipping’s poor. Enough to treat our loved ones to some luxury. Enough to keep the ship at her peak. Enough.”

“But you’re pirates. It has nothing to do with enough. You’re free. You take what you want.”

“Not on this ship, we don’t,” Kerfith muttered.

Panda glared at him. Seri searched for a way to explain.

Liz pre-empted her. “I see.” She turned and left the room.

Jed and Kerfith moved to the seating, one with his watch and the other with the cash. Panda looked at Seri. “Why do you let her speak to you like that? You’re the skipper.”

Seri gathered up the loot and stuffed it back in the bag. “She has a point. With the sky riding and the guns, it’s not like there aren’t risks.”

“You run this ship, and we follow willingly. I don’t know who she is and I don’t care. Perhaps I should tell her that.”

“Don’t, Panda. You don’t know what she’s like.”

“I see you do,” Panda said before she strode away.



Seri looked across at Kerfith. “Ready?”

He nodded.

She grabbed the circular handle of the inner door and turned it, hand over hand. When she heard it release, she pushed hard. Immediate laser fire filled the gap. Seri flattened into the cover of the door frame. The shots glowed orange. The defenders had opted for the maximum force they could use without damaging the ship. This was going to be harder than last time.

Kerfith leant forward and sent sporadic shots back. Seri smelled the burn of at least one connection. The defender fire slowed and Kerfith took more time to aim. After another couple of rounds, they stopped firing.

“Good job.”

Seri turned and saw Liz. She’d been too absorbed in the fight to see her arrive. “Go back. This is no time for interfering.”

Liz checked the setting on her laser rifle. “I’m here to help. Now, come on, while there is a break in fire.”

Seri wanted to scream. She knew Liz would do exactly as she wanted and she suddenly hated her for it. Jealousy fuelled rage. “Fine.” She charged forward.

Through the door, two security guards were waiting. A third was on the floor, her leg marked with a laser burn. Seri drew her sword and tackled the one farthest away. Surprise postponed his first shot, giving her time to dodge. Once in range, she had the advantage. He turned his rifle and tried to fence with her but she parried it easily. She feigned a low strike. When he followed to block it, she kicked the gun out of his hand. He crumpled to the ground. For a split second she was confused but then she saw the smouldering laser burn on his chest. She turned. Liz stood behind her, her expression confident.

“Go back to the ship now.” Seri punched each word out from between her teeth.

“But—”

“Now.”

Liz glowered but retreated.

“Keep an eye on them,” she instructed Kerfith as she moved toward her prisoner, who appeared to be unconscious. She felt his neck. A flutter under her fingertips. “He’s alive. Hey,” she addressed the guard with the injured leg, “do you have a medic on board?”

She nodded.

“Okay.” She turned to Kerfith. “Abort.”

He looked mutinous.

“That’s an order.”

His jaw clenched but he led them back to their ship.

Seri ignored Panda’s curious stare and addressed her talker. “Jed, get us out of here.” As soon as she felt the change in direction she headed for her quarters. She was pacing when Panda arrived.

“What happened?”

“Liz followed us. Shot a guard in the chest.”

“Is he all right?”

“He’s not dead. He needs a medic.”

“Is that why you aborted?”

“Yes. What did you expect me to do, step over his dying body to steal some trinkets?”

Panda eyed her. “Others would.”

“Like Liz. I know. Well, I’m not like that.”

“I know.” Panda stepped forward and wrapped her arms around her.

Seri struggled. Panda gripped her. Seri cried tears of frustration as Panda held her.



The cargo bay was much emptier after their drop at Ravira. The delivery had been uneventful but tension among the crew had sapped Seri. As soon as

they were back in the air, she'd started looking for the source of the trouble. "I'm surprised to find you in here."

Liz looked up. "I was bored in my room but I thought you'd want me out of the way."

Seri couldn't deny it. "Pirating is a lot different than what you'd think."

"It looks like it."

"Did you know we have a license to pirate?"

"A license? That's ridiculous."

"They had to do something. The skies were turning into a constant battleground. Also, it makes sense, commercially."

Liz's silence showed she was listening.

"Pirates, done properly, attract tourists. Ships require security guards. Insurance companies have a captive audience. The police know all the approved pirates and leave them alone, as long as they stay within the boundaries."

"Approved pirates? Surely that's a contradiction?"

Seri shook her head. "There are some who don't sign up but they get the full force of the law and are considered vigilantes. The police protect approved pirates where they can."

"From vigilantes?"

"Yes. They're the ones we have to watch out for. They've made it their mission to destroy all pirates whether they have a license or not." She paused. "What you did today puts our license in jeopardy. That man could die."

"I didn't know."

"I know. Things are different now. It's better in many ways. Safer for everyone."

"Pirating isn't about being safe."

"Maybe not, but the pirates have made that choice. What about the travellers? Do they deserve to die just for being in the wrong place at the wrong time? Fatalities are down ninety-two percent since the licenses were introduced."

The silence extended beyond comfort. Seri suspected Liz would never embrace the new approach.

"Skipper to command, incoming." Jed's voice came through the talker.

"On my way." Seri turned to Liz. She couldn't think of what to say so she gave a half-smile and walked away.

When she reached command, Jed indicated the communication panel. "Incoming police transmission."

Great. "Thanks." She sat down at the comms station, then keyed in the commands to open the channel. "*Solero* Captain."

The face of a male police officer appeared on the screen. "Secure channel?"

“Yes, sir.”

“We’ve had a report of a pirating incident in your area. The description matches your ship. Have you engaged any passenger ships today?”

“Yes, sir.”

“In the raid in question, a security guard was shot in the chest. Do you know anything about this?”

Seri came to her choice. A proper pirate would say “no.” She took a breath. “Yes, sir. It was a misunderstanding with a passenger aboard this ship. It was an accident, and the attempt was immediately aborted.”

“Accident or not, it is a contravention of the Terran Pirate Treaty. The *Solero*’s license is hereby suspended, pending police investigation. Please report to the police unit when you dock at,” he paused and looked away, “Andreas.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Any future acts of pirating will be treated with the full force of the law and your location and intent made public.”

“I understand.”

“Out.”

Seri closed the connection and released a sigh. Of all the emotions she expected, she was surprised to find her relief paramount.



Without pirating to worry about, the remainder of the journey to Andreas was peaceful. Liz spent most of the time talking to the other members of the crew. Seri knew what she was doing. Testing them. Liz had found a reason to fight and wanted to know who would stand with her. Kerfith would. Panda wouldn't. Jed was an unknown.

Seri felt the ship decelerate as it entered the slow zone above the city. *Not long now*. She sat in her command chair. The view through the windscreen was one of her favourites. Andreas was famed for its thirty-storey building limit. The result was rather quaint, by comparison to the other cities at least. The city had limited its outward growth, too. Even this close, Seri could still see green fields. The city sat in the middle like the yolk in an egg.

“Docking in seven minutes,” Jed said.

Seri should be moving. There were things to do. She pulled herself away from the view and headed to the cargo bay. This time, the thought of docking sent a thrill through her. This had been the hardest journey in months, and parting company with Liz would be a relief.

“Only a couple of crates here, Skipper.” Panda handed her the itinerary for inspection.

Seri looked without seeing, then handed it back.

“And our passenger, of course.”

“Yes.”

“Do you think we’ll lose our license?”

Seri thought. “It depends how our case is pleaded. We have four years of good behaviour to our credit. We’ve always done minimal harm and theft. Less than the treaty allows for.”

“I’ve always liked that,” Panda said.

“Me, too.”

“What would you do if we do lose our license?”

“I don’t know.” A few ideas came to mind but they were too embryonic to mention. “How about you? Would you try and join another ship?”

“No,” Panda said. “It wouldn’t be the same. Better to try something completely different.”

“Prepare for docking.” Jed’s voice sounded simultaneously through their talkers.

The next hour left no spare time for thought. The crew worked efficiently. They each knew their responsibilities and got them done with minimum fuss. The moment crept up and, suddenly, Seri found herself on the landing ramp facing Liz.

“Well, thanks for the ride.”

“No problem.”

“I suppose it’ll be another six years before I see you again?”

“I don’t know.” Seri took a step closer. “I want you to have these.” She released the talker from her wrist and took the captain’s override key from her pocket. She passed them both to Liz. “She’s more yours than mine. Always will be, I think.”

Liz looked at the talker, her expression too hard to read. “You’re sure?”

“I am.” Seri grabbed the small bag and guinea pig cage from the open air lock. She walked down the ramp and paused at the bottom to look back.

“Wait!” Panda ran down behind her. “I’m coming, too.”

“Where?”

“I don’t know. I’m sticking with you, though, Skipper.”

Seri smiled. “Right, then.” She gave a brief salute before they walked away from the ship.

“I can’t believe you just did that.”

“What?”

“Gave the ship to your ex.”

Seri looked at her and raised an eyebrow. “She’s not my ex. She’s my mother.”



PIPETTES FOR THE PIRATE

Holly Ellingwood

“I hear you’re the smartest person on this station,” the stranger said, offering a drink.

Ida looked up from where she had been nursing her drink in the station’s only bar. The woman who spoke couldn’t be more than 5’5”, even in those black pilot boots.

Ida glanced to the far side of the bar, where a group of people huddled around a table were drinking and snickering as they watched her.

She shook her head. “You can go back to the other table where you were chatting up my work colleagues and tell them their little joke didn’t work.”

The woman looked no more than thirty, close to Ida’s age. She shook her plain brown hair over her shoulder, frowned briefly, and sat down uninvited. She slid the drink over. “I only chatted them up because they were obviously scientists—lab coats like yours. I asked them which of them was the smartest. They all said it was you.”

Ida didn’t take the drink. On closer inspection, she noted the stranger’s faded chocolate brown jacket held many medals. It was a worn military uniform, high collar and trim cut, but she didn’t recognize which military bore that color, or the beige shirt and black pants.

When Ida remained silent, the stranger slid the drink closer to where Ida’s hand rested on the table. “I’m in need of someone smart.”

Ida narrowed her eyes, and she nervously touched her long braid. “You’re not trying to pick me up?” Then, she quickly amended. “As a joke.” She didn’t need to elaborate whom she meant. She had eaten and drunk alone from the first day she arrived at the station two years ago, fresh from the academy. No one wanted a thing to do with a Terran who took her work seriously.

“Pick you up?” the woman echoed, and a sudden smile transformed her face. “That’s an interesting thought. We can discuss that later, if you like. But tell me, is it true you graduated at the top of the Allied Planetary Space Academy? Even beating out a Jilk?”

Not expecting the flirting or the praise, she blushed, unsure if she was being played. “They told you that?”

A nod and appreciative smile. “For a Terran to beat out a sentient with four frontal lobes, you must be a genius.”

Ida took the drink. The stranger’s smile widened. “You wouldn’t know it from where they put me.”

“Politics are rough,” the stranger said sadly. “Being a Terran these days makes you last on the list for any position of real note.” She clinked her glass against Ida’s and flashed another smile. “All the more reason for us to stick together.”

Ida watched the stranger down the drink in one gulp and motion to the bartender for another. “Who are you?” She wasn’t used to small talk and winced at her own bluntness.

The woman grinned as she paid the suddenly pale bartender for their drinks. “You don’t get out much, do you?” It sounded more like an observation than an actual question. “You can call me Val. All my friends do. I get around.”

The bartender choked as he left.

Ida held out her hand. “Ida Willar. Saturn Seven.”

Val’s eyebrows rose. “So you’re Mi’kmaq. You’re very far from home.”

Ida shrugged. One colony planet was the same as another. “I go where they send me.”

“And testing soil samples on the asteroid belt here is fulfilling your dreams?”

Ida gave Val the look that remark earned.

Val held up her hands. “No offence meant. It’s just that—and this might sound odd—I was hoping you were unhappy here.”

“Why?”

“I have a problem and it’s one that needs a scientist, someone wickedly smart, to find me a solution.” She looked at Ida meaningfully.

“I already have a job.” But she couldn’t hide her curiosity.

Val’s blue eyes glittered. “That you hate here at the dead end of space. Besides, it’s only a few hours. Nothing you need to lose your job over.”

“What’s the problem?”

“A sentient creature attached to my ship that I’ve never seen before, and I’ve seen just about everything. I’ve even gone past the Known Border. But this is new.”

“You’ve gone past the Known Border?” She gasped. That was unheard of. No one wanted to risk the unknown, not after what had happened in the Dukito System.

Serious now, Val spoke low, pulling Ida in through the force of her personality. “I have. And farther still.” Her eyes darkened with all the mysteries beyond explored space. “And I’m telling you truthfully, I need your help.”

A new being, completely unknown? Ida couldn’t resist. She had to find

out if it was true. “Is your ship in dock?”

“No, it’s too big. But I have a skiff, and it will take us to her fast. Two hours out. You can look, let me know what you think. If you can’t help, I’ll bring you right back.”

“Only two hours out?”

Val stood and threw some currency on the table, an excessive tip. “Don’t even pretend you’re thinking of saying no. Any true scientist has curiosity instead of blood in their veins.”

Ida stood, nearly a head taller than the pilot, and followed her out. She hadn’t fooled the other woman for a minute that she wasn’t going to go.



The time in the skiff went by too fast as far as Ida was concerned. She had learned more about the universe in two hours than she had read about in six years of science academy. What she couldn’t figure out was Val. Every time she tried to steer the conversation to where Val came from, Val evaded answering with a skill Ida could only admire, even while it frustrated her.

When Val had taken off her jacket earlier, Ida noticed a plasma scar on Val’s forearm.

Val caught Ida’s stare. “Plasma beam. If the ship hadn’t been rocked by a space mine thrown at it, making me trip, I wouldn’t be talking to you right now.”

“Someone *shot* at you?”

A shrug. “It happens.”

“So you’re military?” How could anyone be so blasé about being shot at?

A fierce grin came and went. “Not anymore.”

And that’s what the entire conversation had been like, a clue here, a small kernel of information there, but nothing that gave Ida the full picture.

“There she is.” Val gestured grandly at the viewport.

Ida looked through the view screen. “It’s huge. And you don’t have a scientist on board that big thing?”

Another enigmatic smile as Val put on her jacket and strapped on a belt that had a laser pistol holstered to it. “It’s actually not that big, not even half the size of a military cruiser. That’s what makes her so manoeuvrable. I can dance circles around those clunkers.”

But why would you want to? The ship was sleek, like a large seafaring vessel of old, but without sails. The hull held different colored metals. There were patches of red, blue, and green peppered among the expected charcoal. It was the most unusual ship Ida had ever seen.

“It does have an eco-bay. We grow enough food so that we can survive on our own. A farmer takes care of that, so he’s not really a scientist. At least not the kind I need. Same for my linguistics officer.”

“What’s the name of the ship?” Ida couldn’t make it out from this angle.

Val changed course, and Ida suddenly understood all of the earlier evasions. In clear Terran Standard the hull stated *Valhalla*.

Ida mentally cursed. She’d just been kidnapped by the most wanted space pirate in several galaxies.



Val was still laughing well after they had boarded the ship, and Ida didn’t know whether to feel angry or embarrassed. How could this ordinary woman with the big personality be *the* Valkyrie, captain of the *Valhalla*, said to have sent many a spacer to their final resting place, like the ancient Earth Norse mythic figure she was named after? No wonder the bartender had nearly choked at the name Val. He had recognized her from the wanted postings on the u-net that Ida never watched. A painfully obvious fact right now.

“But you’re so short,” she burst out.

Val only laughed harder. “Hey, I’m just not as tall as you. Besides, how is it my fault that you think anyone named after a Valkyrie should be a big, blond Amazon? I got the name because of the name of my ship. And my offer is genuine. I have a problem that needs your expertise.”

Ida stopped walking and crossed her arms. “I’m not taking another step until you tell me what is going on.”

“I’ll do better than that. I’ll show you.”

Reluctantly, Ida followed Val onto the main deck which had no view screen. People were at their consoles ignoring them until Val called out, “Tyluk, give me the wide shot of our problem.”

The lights dimmed except where the two of them stood, and suddenly, right in front of her from floor to the high ceiling, was an image of the other side of the ship and surrounding space. It seemed like space was all around them.

“We don’t have this kind of technology.” Ida clenched her hands so she didn’t reach out and touch the stars floating around her like dust motes.

“Not the Allied Planets, no. Do you see it?”

It was impossible to miss. Along the other side of the ship was a cloud, a cloying nimbus the length of nearly the entire space vessel and half as wide.

“It simply looks like your standard interstellar molecular cloud. Space is filled with them. Did you scan its contents?”

“Of course.” Val sniffed. “Scans say that’s exactly what it is. A beer cloud.” She used the slang term. “It’s primarily ethyl alcohol with large traces of cyanide and nitrogen. But the problem is that those things don’t attach themselves to anything. I thought it was a fluke when we passed too close to one of them. But whenever we tried to go to warp speed, it started to discharge parts

of itself and hasn't stopped since. It also began to somehow drain the engine cores until we stopped. We can only travel at impulse power now. Look there, you can see the emissions."

Ida peered at the holographic image. She could see very faint puffs trailing from the cloud.

"So you're saying it deliberately tried to stop you from going faster than it wanted?"

"Not tried. Did," Val confirmed. "We did every scan we could think of, and it shows the cloud is producing brain waves, even though we can't locate anything that remotely resembles a brain anywhere in it. Our linguistics officer went through the run of standard and improvised translation and hail protocols and nothing comes back. It either doesn't understand us or is unable to communicate. I don't want to kill an innocent life, but if it doesn't leave our hull soon, I'll have no choice, even though I have no idea how to get it off."

Ida was horrified. "Why do you have to try to destroy it? We just need time to figure out how to communicate with it."

"We're running out of time," Val told her. "We were on the run from a Ralgas military vessel when this cloud creature attached itself to us." She looked at Tyluk. "Turn off the imager and tell me how much time until they catch up."

"Six point two hours, sir."

"Ralgas?" They were being chased by the most powerful military in the galaxy. "What did you do?"

"We freed them of some cargo a Ralgas transport had no right to."

"You looted them." Ida stared at her, mouth open. Val had raided a *Ralgas* ship!

Val shrugged. "I'm a pirate."

"You've made me an accomplice!" Ida exclaimed, gesturing wildly with her arms. "The bartender recognized you. He saw me leave with you willingly. They'll say I helped you. Well, I won't. What did you steal? Energy cubes, rations, currency? I'll already probably lose my job for having come here but I won't be thrown in a penal colony, too. I won't help thieves." She was about to say more but the grim expression on Val's face stopped her. Suddenly, she was looking at the woman who had earned the name Valkyrie.

"Thieves? Come with me, and I'll show you what we stole." She grabbed Ida's arm hard above the elbow and dragged her off the bridge and through several corridors until they got to the shuttle lift. Val pushed her in, following close behind, and hit the location on the keypad after the door slid closed. With a low whirring noise, they started moving. Within moments, they came to a stop, and Val motioned for her to get out with a sharp wave of her arm.

As soon as they were clear of the lift, Val again pulled Ida along. The pirate's fast and angry steps led them to a door guarded by a burly four-armed Wequi. Val gave the golden hermaphrodite a curt nod, and it stepped back a pace. Val stopped at the door, took a deep breath, and exhaled slowly. If Ida had to guess, the pirate was counting to ten. Backward. Perhaps in a foreign language.

When she turned to Ida, her eyes were stormy, but she had unclenched her jaw. "Listen, you go through this door with me, you keep it together. No loud outbursts. No sudden movements. Do you understand?"

Insulted, Ida retorted, "I speak Standard so, yes, I understand."

"You'd better," the pirate warned, setting her hand on the door lock for it to recognize her DNA. "This is what we took from that transport vessel."

The door whispered open, and she followed Val inside. The soft lighting in the large room was pleasant. Immediately, they had the attention of eight pairs of impossibly blue eyes. With happy mewling sounds out of their noseless, perfectly oval faces, the three-foot-tall bipedal creatures crowded around Val, touching her.

With a tender expression, Val bent down and hugged as many as she could in a most un-pirate like fashion.

"Seraphs," Ida said softly, afraid if she spoke any louder the vision would vanish. She had heard of these genetically engineered creatures but to see one, let alone eight, was inconceivable. If anything, the descriptions of them couldn't do justice to the innocence in their gentle expressions. Double pairs of small grey-feathered wings poked out of their backs. They were all dressed in long beige shifts that their cute little toes peeked out from under. When two of them came over to her with arms outstretched, she had to kneel down, had to let them touch her. She got quite the shock when they unexpectedly surrounded her, and each of them jostled for a chance to touch her braid. When one patted her face, she got a sudden image of a question mark and her hair.

Val smiled knowingly at Ida's astonishment. "They communicate telepathically through imagery." She watched them vying with each other to touch Ida's hair. "I don't think they've ever seen hair braided before."

"If I think my answer, will it understand?"

Before Val answered, the one in front of Ida patted her face more empathically. She took that to mean yes. Ida brought to mind her great-grandmother plaiting her hair as a child. The genderless being mewled happily at her and instantly turned to its nearest sibling to imitate the motion it had seen in Ida's mind with their own long, pale violet hair. All eight Seraphs looked identical.

"Why were they on the other ship?"

Val kept her voice intentionally soft but from the look on her face, Ida

could see the effort it took. “They were going to be sold for their clairvoyant powers. Anyone, especially politicians and militaries, would be very happy to have a Seraph. What wouldn’t a person pay to know the future?”

“Isn’t trafficking in genetically created beings illegal?” It was all Ida could think to say from where she knelt among the angelic creatures.

Val stood up. “If you have the clout and the money, then acquiring the rare and illegal merely becomes expensive.”

“It’s slavery.”

“It’s ownership of scientific property. I know the laws, Ida Willar, if only to be sure of which ones I’m breaking.”

Ida shook her head at the thought of it all. “What will you do with them?”

“I know a place where they can all live together, well cared for and safe by people who will never use their abilities.” She didn’t say more, and Ida couldn’t blame her. They were strangers to each other, and how could she trust Ida to hold her tongue if authorities questioned her?

And the people who would use them were coming to get Val and their “cargo” back. “I’ll help you.”

Val’s face reflected an understanding beyond the words. “I hoped you might.”

Ida stood. A tug on her coat made her look down at a beautiful face and a hand only a shade less white than her lab coat.

A small hand grasped hers, and she saw in her mind an image of her great-grandmother teaching her various Traditionalist practices as a child, then a second image emerged, of a room Ida had never seen filled with ancient-looking chests. She blinked, and the images were gone. The Seraph squeezed her hand again and then went back with the others.

“I don’t understand.” She looked to Val for an answer.

“Did they show you something you’ve never seen before?” Val motioned for her to follow her out.

They left the room and walked towards the lift. At Ida’s nod, Val nodded back knowingly. “They took a liking to you. They must have shown you something in your future.” At Ida’s frown, Val held up a hand while she let Ida onto the shuttle lift first. “Don’t tell anyone what you were shown. It could change your future.”

If her future was to figure out the mystery of the cloud in order to save those precious lives, she didn’t dare risk telling Val, but couldn’t see how either image could have anything to do with the task. Perplexed, Ida sat down in a seat on the lift. She was careful not to give any details. “But what I saw didn’t make sense.”

“It will.” Before Ida could ask, Val explained. “When I was tearing out my hair trying to figure out what to do about the cloud, they all came up, touched me, and showed me an image of the space station, the one you worked on,

and a white lab coat.” She pointedly eyed Ida’s attire.

“Did they show you an image of me?”

“Nope.”

She frowned. “Then how do you know you picked the right person?”

Val grinned, and again Ida was startled by how much it transformed her. “I’m an excellent judge of character.”

A smile tugged at Ida’s lips. “Well, you’re not much of a pirate, are you? More like a hero, saving those delicate creatures.”

Val raised an eyebrow at her meaningfully. “I did also loot the ship, you know.”

Ida cast Val a sideways glance, letting her own humor show. “Sure, sure. If you’re not a hero, why do you have all those medals on your jacket?”

Val’s smirk grew. “I never said the medals were mine.”



Five hours later, Ida was ready to tear her own hair out. They allowed her the run of the bridge, giving her whatever console she wanted to use in her myriad measurements, trying to think of any conceivable way to understand and therefore be able to either communicate with the entity or at least figure out a method to remove it from the ship without harm. Ida had also gone over the original scans of the areas they had passed through when the ship had gained their stowaway. Nothing.

She looked over at Zsoldos, the linguistics expert, and also one of the many Terrans Ida had seen on the ship. It was nothing like back at the station. Everyone here cared about what they did. They were efficient, organized, and friendly.

A glass of the same kind of beverage she had at the bar appeared in front of her. She looked up at Val. “Seems you could use this. Give yourself a breather for a minute.”

“Thanks.” Ida took the drink. She gestured at the many screens she had up in front of her. “I’m no closer to an answer than I was when I started. I’m sorry.”

A reassuring hand briefly gripped her shoulder. “Everyone here appreciates all the effort you’ve gone through, but if it can’t be done, it can’t be done.”

Her chest ached with failure and concern. “What will you do?”

Val looked wistfully at her crew working at their stations. “Get the crew and the Seraphs on escape pods with a good head start before the Ralgas reach us. Those pods don’t go fast. I’ll stay and buy everyone as much time as I can.”

“No chance, Captain.” Zsoldos stood her full six feet, the picture of offended pride. “If you stay, then we’re staying with you. We’ll fight to

our last breath against those bastards. Do you think I've forgotten what they did to my family? I'd never run away from the chance to put them in their place."

"There's not a member of this crew that doesn't owe you their lives, Captain. We won't abandon you now," Tyluk added.

Val took a deep breath, visibly moved by the loyalty and devotion clearly echoed by the rest of the crew on the main deck. "I appreciate it, I do. But I need you all to take care of the Seraphs. Who will help them if not you?"

The stricken faces told Ida volumes. The torn loyalty and reality of their situation was painful to see. If only she could find a solution.

"Listen," Val told them, "our time's not up yet. We may be able to get through this. Goodness knows we've gotten through some tight spots before, haven't we?" The crew murmured reluctant agreement. "Get back to your duties until we absolutely have to go to emergency mode."

They did. Ida respected them and envied the close bonds they shared. She hadn't felt that security and warmth in her life since her own family.

"So," Val grabbed the chair next to Ida, "is it true that you only use a pipette once per sample and then dispose of it for recycling? Your colleagues mentioned it."

"What?" How could Val bring up something so inane at a time like this?

Val smiled that easy smile of hers. "Hey, sometimes it helps to get your mind off the problem for a bit in order to think more clearly on it."

"Subconscious abstraction," Ida said.

She was given a bemused look for her precise choice of words. "Sure."

Ida shrugged. "It's true."

"Even though the phase pipettes teleport the sample? You can use one forever. There would be no traces of anything," Zsoldos commented, scooting over from the other side of Ida, where she had overheard them.

Ida shook her head. "Think about it. When you teleport people or objects, there's residue left on the phase pad, isn't there? It's why they have to be cleaned regularly."

"But it's microscopic," Zsoldos argued.

"Exactly. Even if there is the most infinitesimal bit of residue in the pipette that's used to gather samples, it has the potential to affect future readings. I always get in trouble for using up the lab's supply."

Val snorted. "You find me a solution, and I'll get you all the pipettes you could ever want."

"That's a lot of pipettes," Ida warned, not that she thought they'd live to see any far-fetched promises kept.

"Who taught you to be so meticulous?" Zsoldos asked, scanning the data screens for the millionth time.

Ida did the same, not that it was giving her any answers. "My great-grand-

mother. She was a Traditionalist and taught me all about the ancient ways of my culture and that to everything, there's a method to be respected." The memory the Seraph had evoked in her mind came back to her. Her great-grandmother had taught her everything, from braiding hair to smudging practices, to—

She looked over the screens again. Her hands flew over the console, closing most of them and calling up only a couple, enlarging them. "I can't believe it."

Everyone was on their feet. Val came to stand nearly on top of her, looking over her shoulder. "What did you find?"

"Smoke signals," Ida said in wonder.

"What?"

"Look." She pointed at the cloud's small emissions. "They're cloud signals. It's a way my great-grandmother had taught me to communicate. It was used by our culture in ancient Earth times where fires were made and specific patterns of smoke signals created to communicate with other members of the tribe from far away. "Look," she insisted, and everyone's eyes followed her hand. "We kept thinking it was simply losing parts of itself since they were irregular. But if you look at the temperature of the emissions, they're all in varying degrees, and some repeat. Even the chemical content varies subtly. And here—" She pointed at the second console. "The cloud nebula it came from is moving closer when there should be only a fractional change because space continually spreads outward, never inward. We wondered why we couldn't communicate with the cloud, and meanwhile, all this time, it's been communicating with the nebula."

"Like its own version of Morse code, but using temperature and composition." Zsoldos looked at Val regretfully. "We don't have time to try to figure out its language, assuming we even could."

"It wants to go back home," Val surmised, quickly moving to another console. With a few buttons she brought up a dimensional map between them and the nebula. "To get the thing off, we have to go back."

Crew member Ipo cursed in his native Ghousa. "It leads us right back to the Ralgas vessel."

Val held his three-eyed gaze with determination. "Are you the navigational officer or not? Plot me a route toward the nebula that bypasses their ship. If possible, we can slip in, send our stowaway home, and get out before they notice us."

Ipo snorted but immediately went to work, punching in trajectories and speed. "How are we supposed to do that at impulse?"

"If it's as smart as I think it might be," Val ventured, "as long as we're heading the way it wants, it won't drain our engine cores. We sneak in, hope to hell this works, and get gone while the going's good."

“Heaven help us,” Ida said softly.

“Hey.” Val grinned as she took the captain’s chair. “Did you forget we have angels on board? Heaven’s on our side.”

“I’ve got the course laid in, sir,” Ipo said. “It’s the best we’ve got, but we’ve got to be quieter than flitter mites.”

Val gave Ida an out. “This would be a good time for you to disembark and go back to your station.”

“I see things through, but thank you.” She wished she felt as brave as her words.

Val winked at her, then commanded, “All hands go.”



It took nearly forty-five minutes, and Ida feared she only had half a nerve left. They ran with only essentials on, keeping their energy signature to a minimum. “They would hardly think we’d go *towards* them,” Val said. “They’re looking in front, not to the far side or behind them.”

Val had also correctly predicted the entity’s behavior. It didn’t stop them from going to light speed, though apparently, it did still have problems with warp. Ida supposed there was an issue of it maintaining cohesion at those speeds. The cloud had also stopped its emissions, demonstrating that it was conscious of what was happening. Ida would never look at beer clouds the same way again.

Ipo spoke. “We’re approaching the molecular mass, Captain.”

“Get close. Enough to allow our cloud to touch the larger mass, but don’t let our vessel come in contact with the nebula in any way.”

“Aye aye.”

Ida looked at the holographic view screen before her in wonder. The edge of the mass was clear, but its size was astonishing. She had never seen one this close before. The scanners confirmed it measured about four times the size of Earth’s solar system.

She held her breath as they closed in. On screen, she watched the *Valhalla* edge closer. As soon as the smaller cloud brushed against the larger molecular nebula, Ida swore she heard a collective exhale of relief, her included, as they saw the small cloud detach itself and disappear and blend into the larger whole.

“All right!” Val stood. “Get us out of here, Ipo.”

“With pleasure, Captain.”

A tremor rocked the floor under Ida’s feet, and alarms suddenly went off everywhere.

“We’ve been hit!” Tyluk moved to another console. “It’s the Ralgas military. Our shields are down twenty percent. They’re closing in. We can’t fight them.”

“Like hell we can’t,” Val growled.

She punched a comm. “Drasen, do we still have those space mines we cleaned up from the last time we tangled with the big fish?”

“You betcha,” said a rough voice over the squelching comm.

“When I give the order, deploy them. All of them. You hear me?”

“All of them?” The low voice suddenly rose at least two octaves.

“Every last one. Put them in position now. We have zero time, and the neighbors are not friendly. Tyluk, get the shift sails ready. Ipo, plot in a trajectory right over the Ralgas ship.”

“What?” at least three of the crew exclaimed at once, and everyone looked at their captain in shock.

“They won’t expect us to go straight at them. We get the sail up, get moving, and drop those mines right on top of them.”

“But won’t the explosion be too close? It’ll blow us up, too,” Ida said, trying to figure out what Val was doing.

“Not if we’re moving fast enough.” Val looked forward, focused on the task. She punched the comm again. “Drasen?” Her voice was filled with impatience.

“We need five more minutes down here.”

“You have one, or we’re space dust.” Another tremor rippled through the ship. “Tyluk?”

“Shields down to fifty percent, sir.”

“Those bastards sure know how to hit. Ida, strap yourself in. We’re about to set sail.”

“In space?” She stared at Val but did as she was told.

The fearless captain grinned mirthlessly. “You’ll appreciate this. More non-Allied tech. It absorbs a fraction of the Red Shift energy between galaxies, and we use that to go faster than warp.”

“Sails coming up, sir.”

Ida looked at the screen. Sure enough, the ship looked like how it might have looked on water. Large, red, transparent sails rose. Was it a fabric? Some kind of alloy or an unknown substance that made up the sails? Ida was flabbergasted and joyous at witnessing such amazing technology. If they lived through this, she’d ask Val more questions.

The lights flickered.

“Another hit, sir. It just grazed us. Ship closing in. Red Shift Absorption at seventy percent. The Ralgas have slowed their approach.”

“No doubt wondering what those sails are. Keep an eye on them.” Val leaned forward, hit the comm. “Drasen, get ready. Drop on my order and not a second sooner. Reroute all available power to shields. It’d be a shame if this worked, only to have us become space dust during the shift.” She gave Ida a reassuring smile. “We’re about to sail through the stars, Doctor.”

“Sails ready, Captain,” Tyluk called out.

“Straight for them, Ipo.”

“Aye, sir.”

“Punch it, Tyluk.”

The ship suddenly felt as if it was being lifted. They started toward the massive Ralgas vessel at an increasing rate, alarmingly so. Ida watched in horror when two missiles were fired at them only to then sag in relief when the *Valhalla's* increasing speed moved the vessel above the missiles, faster than them, almost on top of the Ralgas ship.

Val shouted, “Drop them now, Drasen!”

The imager showed the mines being released from the cargo bay right on top of the ship now directly beneath them. Just as the explosion began, the ship continued on, and suddenly Ida couldn't see anything except streams of colors before her eyes. This was what it was like to go beyond the warp barrier. It felt like her insides were being twisted out.

As soon as it started, it stopped.

Ida looked around her, and the screens were coming back up. She read the spatial configurations. They were a couple of markers beyond the point the ship had been when she had originally boarded. The chronometer said that only six seconds had passed since they had sailed using the Red Shifting. Six seconds to cover the same length that had taken them nearly an hour.

A sudden cheer rose from the crew. Zsoldos reached over and hugged Ida. People were clapping each other on the back and shoulder. She joined them in celebrating, happier than she could ever remember to simply be alive.



The party was still going strong two hours later. Val caught her eye, and the two slipped away unnoticed among the revelry.

“I can rough you up a bit and send you back to the station tied up so that they think you were kidnapped.”

Ida looked at Val as if she were crazy.

Val laughed and spread her hands. “I was joking. But I could help make it look like you were a prisoner, or—”

Ida raised her eyebrows in question.

“Or you could stay.” Val gave her that easy smile. “You did good work in there. We need you. The Allied Planets waste your skills. You're an explorer at heart. The crew on this ship are like you—restless, bright, and they want to see everything the universe holds. And on this ship, you're not ranked based on where you were born or who you know. It's what you do and how well you do it that count.”

It was tempting. “I'm a scientist, not a pirate.”

Val affectionately cuffed her shoulder. “Who said you had to choose between the two?”



Ida Willar went to her quarters with a rush of excitement. She couldn't quite believe what she had done. The door opened to her new quarters, and she found it full of ancient-looking chests. It matched the vision the Seraph had given her. With a puzzled half-smile, she opened the latch and lifted the lid of the closest one. Inside, filled to the brim, were pipettes. And a note. It read, “Welcome aboard.”

Ida, scientist and now pirate, smiled.



THE AUTHORS

Jove Belle grew up in southern Idaho and now lives in Vancouver, Washington with her partner of fourteen years and their three children. She is the author of the novels *Chaps*, *Split the Aces*, and *Edge of Darkness*, from Bold Strokes Books. To learn more about Jove, visit her at <http://jovebelle.wordpress.com>.

David Brookes lives and works in Sheffield, England. He has a degree in English and creative writing (B.A. Hons.) from Bretton Hall University near Leeds, and a Master's in writing from Sheffield Hallam University. His first novel, *Half Discovered Wings*, was published through Libros International in October, 2009. Details can be found on his official website, www.spinninglizard.co.uk. He is not married, has two cats, and avoids television whenever possible.

Elaine Burnes lives, works, and writes in Massachusetts. After many years of writing and editing nonfiction, she became sick of reality and turned to fiction. This is her first acceptance, and it would not have been possible without the support of her loving wife and encouragement of the members of the Lesbian Fiction Forum. There are a couple of cats involved, too, but they tend to be more of a hindrance than a help.

Cat Conley was born and raised in western New York. She graduated from the University of New Hampshire in 2005 with a degree in earth science and has worked in the hazardous waste management field since then. Cat lives in Rhode Island with her wife, Margot, and their two cats. She enjoys hiking and catching waves throughout New England, making mix CDs, playing guitar, and reading and writing sci-fi/fantasy. She would like to thank her friends and family for their love and support, with special thanks to Kathy Souza for originally suggesting that she write a woman pirate story. Cat keeps an online journal at catconley.livejournal.com. This is her first published story.

Aubrie Dionne is an author and flutist in New England. Her writings have appeared in *Niteblade* and *Silver Blade* ezines, *Emerald Tales*, Wyvern Publication's Anthologies *Dragontales* and *Mertales*, and the Night Bird *Singing in the Dead of Night* anthology. Her young adult fantasy book, *Dreams of Beauty*, is published by SynergEbooks and her short story collections are published by Gypsy Shadow Publishing. Her space opera, *Nebula's Music*, is forthcoming in 2010 from Lyrical Press. Aubrie teaches flute at Plymouth State University and the Manchester Community Music School. Please stop by and visit her blog: <http://authoraubrie.blogspot.com>.

Holly Ellingwood was born and raised in Ottawa, Ontario, Canada. Her family comes from the Maritimes, and her childhood was filled with tall tales of being descended from the pirate Bartholomew Roberts. As a result, she was bitten by the pirate bug, an interest her mother encouraged. When not dreaming up stories of derring-do or writing urban fantasy, she works as a researcher in forensics and social psychology. She also reviews Asian animation, film, and literature. She plays guitar, a little piano, draws, and enjoys doing Russian crossword puzzles to the befuddlement of her cats.

R. G. Emanuelle is a writer and editor living in New York City. Most of her writing has been nonfiction (food and travel), but she recently returned to writing fiction and has many projects in the works. Her short stories can be found in *Best Lesbian Erotica 2010*, *Lesbian Lust: Red Hot Erotica*, *Women in Uniform*, and the January 2010 issue of *Khimairal Ink*. Her dreams of living a life of adventure and intrigue came true with this anthology. Looking after her cats just wasn't doing the trick. Catch her at www.rgemanuelle.com.

Jane Fletcher is a GCLS award-winning writer and has also been short-listed for the Gaylactic Spectrum and Lambda awards. She is author of two ongoing sets of fantasy/romance novels, the Celaeno series, and the Lyre-mouth Chronicles. Her love of fantasy began at the age of seven when she encountered Greek mythology. This was compounded by a childhood spent clambering over every example of ancient masonry she could find (medieval castles, megalithic monuments, Roman villas). Her resolute ambition was to become an archaeologist when she grew up, so it was something of a surprise when she became a software engineer instead. Born in Greenwich, London in 1956, she now lives in southwest England, where she keeps herself busy writing both computer software and fiction, although generally not at the same time. Visit her website: www.janefletcher.co.uk

Matthew Fryer was born in Sheffield, England, and grew up on epic fantasy and ghost stories. He graduated from Newcastle University with a degree in English, but now works as an Operating Department Practitioner in the basement of his local hospital, where he gets to wear blue pyjamas and play with machines that go *bing!* A devotee of the macabre, his work has appeared in anthologies such as *Damned Nation*, *Horror Library*, and *Dark Jesters*, but he loves a bit of swashbuckling adventure and is proud to be included in a book of pirate-themed tales. He lives in Sheffield with his wife, Allison, and spends too much of his time losing at poker, listening to unpopular music, and rescuing their cats off the roof.

Alice Godwin lives in Sydney, Australia, and is mother to two boys, whom she regularly makes walk the plank into the shark-infested waters of Bondi. Thankfully, they have learnt to swim really fast. When she isn't supervising sword fights, patching up scraped knees, and digging for treasure with her husband, she writes. Her stories have appeared in various print anthologies and magazines, as well as online at *Eclecticism*, *Drops of Crimson*, Three Crows Press, and *Australian Reader*. In 2008 she won the Australian Horror Writers Association short story award for her story "Drowning." Another story, "Hood," was shortlisted in the 2008 Irish Aeon Award. You can find her webpage at www.oneworlddoneart.com/profile/AliceGodwin.

Rajan Khanna is a graduate of the 2008 Clarion West Writers Workshop and a member of New York-based writing group Altered Fluid. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Shimmer*, *GUD*, and the *Shadows of the Emerald City* anthology. He has an inordinate love of wine, beer, zeppelins, and the creatures that live in the deepest part of the ocean, though not necessarily all at the same time. His personal website is www.rajankhanna.com and he writes about beer and wine at www.fermentedadventures.com.

Megan Magill lives in Oxfordshire, England with her wife and dogs. Her main writing revolves around her Jess Maddocks series, which includes *A Question of Integrity* (2009) and *A Question of Courage* (2010), both through Regal Crest Enterprises, but Jess kindly allowed Megan a break to indulge her pirate whims. When not writing or working the day job, Megan can usually be found playing with horses or tractors. She also enjoys reading, archery, and socialising with others who share her love of lesfic. You can find out more about Megan at her website, www.meganmagill.com.

Andi Marquette currently dwells in Colorado, where she writes novels, short stories, and nonfiction. She holds bachelor's and master's degrees in anthropology and a doctorate in history. She started editing professionally

in 1992 and has been obsessed with words ever since, which may or may not be a good thing. She is the author of short stories published through Torquere Press, *Khimairal Ink*, and Bedazzled Ink Publishing, and also the GCLS award-winning novel *Land of Entrapment*, its sequel *State of Denial*, and the third in that series, *The Ties that Bind*, all through Regal Crest Enterprises. Her first space opera novel, *Friends in High Places*, was published in 2009 through Bedazzled Ink Publishing. You can find info about that and more at her website, www.andimarquette.com.

Trace Miller lives with her partner Sam in a small town in North Carolina, with three cats and a dog who graciously allow them to pay the rent. She is forty-seven going on twenty-three. Although “Stardance” is her first published work, she has two novels and a number of short story projects in progress. Her preferred genre is horror; however, she does branch into mainstream fiction, soft science fiction, and fantasy. She has been writing almost non-stop since she began to read, but has only made sporadic forays into the world of publishing. This one is for the ones who believed.

Italian-born Carrie Vaccaro Nelkin lives near New York City with her husband and two mind-reading cats. She writes supernatural and speculative fiction. Her nonfiction pieces have appeared in *American Indian*, *Spotlight Magazine*, *Computer Buyers' Guide and Handbook*, and *City Guide*. She has also published poetry in the *Piedmont Literary Review*.

Victoria Oldham currently lives in the Midlands of England with her partner of seven years. Her areas of interest are the classics, especially Ovid and Homer. She loves women's literature, and is particularly fond of lesbian fiction in its current state of metamorphosis. She enjoys hiking through the amazing English countryside, visiting castles, ruins, abbeys, and stone circles. Her imagination can run wild through all of Britain, and often does so of its own volition, in both delicate and dirty directions.

Christine Rains is a working writer living in southern Indiana with her husband. She has degrees in sociology, philosophy, and creative writing. When she's not writing or reading, she loves to travel and play games of all types. She has seven short stories and two ebooks published. You can see her full bibliography on her web site at <http://christinerains.net>.

Rodello Santos was born in Manila, raised in the Bronx, and is currently lost in Yonkers. His work fluctuates between dark and lighthearted fantasy with frequent visits throughout the speculative continuum. His stories have appeared online at *The Town Drunk*, *Flash Fiction Online*, and *Dragons*,

Knights and Angels. He garnered an honorable mention in the 2008 Year's Best Fantasy and Horror for his story "In Earthen Vessels" (from *Philippine Speculative Fiction*, Vol. 3.) He has also been published in the anthologies *Cinema Spec*, *Cheer Up Universe* (forthcoming), and *Paper Blossoms*, *Sharpened Steel* (forthcoming). He is a proud member of the Liberty Hall writing forum.

Arizona resident Vicki Stevenson is the author of four published novels and numerous shorter works. Prior to retirement, she received a BA degree in economics from UCLA, followed by four angst-filled decades as a computer programmer. She lives with the love of her life, Sara Lynde, her partner of nineteen years. Her hobbies are snacking and procrastination.

Rakelle Valencia is literally out standing in the field. A cowboy first and foremost, Rakelle manages thirty head of American Indian Horses as breeding stock, and a busy schedule of travelling to start colts by teaching equine language and behavior. A passion for writing has naturally grown from long, cold winters of spinning good yarns. Storytelling with friends and neighbors whiles away the tedious months of keeping the woodstove burning, but writing well is a challenging creature that demands solitary attention with much coaxing, petting, and caressing (thank you so much, Andi and R. G.). Rakelle Valencia has had a plethora of short stories published, and has co-edited several anthologies. She is currently awaiting the publication of her novel-length work, *Chick Band*, under the new imprint of Queer Mojo by Rebel Satori Press.

