

~ Shell Game ~

by Zipplie

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Includes: a nasty war and references to various nasty things that happen therein, physical violence, threats of sexual violence, and what I can only describe as a sorta-kinda-BDSM relationship between consenting adult women.

He said, "My name is Hasak, and I am going to rule these islands."

She said, "My name is Darren, and I am going to punch you in the nose."

And this she did. Blood bubbled out juicily from Hasak's nostrils, dribbling down his chin and fouling the front of his second-hand chain mail shirt. He staggered backwards, smashed his head against the lintel of the nearest hut, and toppled. And that was the end of another would-be overlord.

Our village had been conquered four times in three days. The first set of raiders took all the young men, the ones with the muscle to row a warship. The second set took all the men older than twelve and most of the women as well. The third set took what food was left- sacks of flour and jugs of oil and piles of dried fish. The fourth set wasn't very impressive. Just a few men with old armour and rusty weapons. All of them, even their leader Hasak, had a sort of mangy hangdog look about them, as if they didn't really believe that they would get away with what they were doing. But they still roused us out of the huts, all ten of us, and half of them held us at swordpoint next to the drying posts while the other half rooted around in the village for something they could use.

All of Kila was like that, back then. It was a year into the civil war, and the various factions had stopped even pretending to make alliances. The islands had become a patchwork of tiny realms and protectorates and baronies, whose borders shifted daily. Every minor lord with a tin-pot navy was scheming for control. That meant assassinations and poisonings in all the larger towns, and bitter sea battles over the trading routes. Out in the poorer parts of Kila, where I lived, it meant that mauraders were common as ants. If you were wakened in the middle of the night by the sound of scratching from a storage hut, it was an even bet whether it was a raider or a rat. It wasn't a good idea to go and check.

I don't know if I can explain why we were all so calm when Hasak arrived. It's true that, by the time he came, we had almost nothing left to lose. But that doesn't necessarily matter, you know. I once saw a woman go ballistic, attacking a soldier three times her size with her nails and teeth, because he tried to take away the last thing she had: a battered baking tin. But that all happened later. When Hasak came, as I say, we were all very calm. I remember a sword somewhere near my throat, and the hand of the raider who was holding it shook so badly that it scratched skin more than once. But that didn't bother me. I had been through worse. Even the smaller children didn't cry. I can't tell you what all of *them* were thinking. All I can remember, myself, is a kind of dullness. I'd been through this time and time and time again, I knew how it always ended, and I

knew that nothing was going to change this time around.

But that was before Darren showed up.

We had our backs to the harbour; that's why we didn't see her ship arriving. I did see a sort of red flush in the corner of my vision, but it didn't mean anything to me. *These* days, of course, everyone knows that she's coming when they see the red sails. But back then she was just getting started. It wasn't like now, when a chill settles over crowded taverns when someone whispers her name. And even when I *saw* Darren that first time- when she tromped into the centre of the village, flanked by her crew- I wasn't exactly impressed. She looked strong, of course. Always that. Muscled shoulders poked from her sleeveless vest; her cutlass was the dark steely grey, with nicks and pit marks, that means long use. She and the crew- there were eight of them at the time- they all moved the same way, sort of steady and purposeful. You had the feeling that an earthquake wouldn't tip them over. But their clothes of grey-blue wool were weatherbeaten and their boots were crusted with salt and their faces burnt brown. They looked like cursed mariners touching shore for the first time in a hundred years.

Still, Hasak was afraid of her. You could tell that, even as he drew himself up and issued his challenge. And her expression barely changed when she knocked him out with that single punch. Afterwards, she shook her hand out slowly, giving a long, meaningful look around. The rest of the raiders seemed to remember that they had important things to do elsewhere and headed fast for the trees, abandoning their leader where he bled by the huts.

We were left in the village square, next to the drying nets, with the salt-crusted mariners. They were the fifth bunch of raiders to take us over in three days, and, I thought to myself, it was beginning to get a little old.

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Darren clearly put Hasak's men out of her mind, even as the last of them were ghosting away. She finished looking around, scratched her head, spat thoughtfully, and then said "Regon."

It was obviously an order, because a sailor- brawny but short- detached himself from the group and made a quick tour of the huts. Meanwhile Darren leant against a drying post. Her hands were in her trouser pockets and her eyes- grey-blue as her clothing- were fixed on the thatch of a nearby roof, as if it was the only thing in the area worth her attention.

That irritated me. So did the casual way that Regon was turning over baskets and raking through wreckage. And so did the way that the ten of us were tamely standing, there, waiting for them to finish. "He won't find anything," I spoke up. "They've already taken it all."

She gave me a cursory glance, and then dismissed me as Regon came jogging back to her side. "Bare as a whore's arse," he reported. "There's not enough here to get them through the month, let alone the winter."

"That's what I said," I pointed out.

Now her eyes settled on me again. "You. Are you in charge?"

I wasn't, but it struck me that I might as well be. I was, by far, the oldest- except for Klea and Aegle, both of whom were too ancient to do much other than mutter through toothless mouths. So I nodded.

"You'll starve if you stay here, you know," said Darren.

The irritation was building. "If that bothers you, you could always give us supplies."

She nodded absently. "I would, if I thought you would be able to hang on to them. But you can't. So I'm going to take you somewhere else. Someplace safe. Have your people pack whatever they still have- then we'll get you on the ship."

"Like hell you will," I said.

A number of the children looked at me in surprise. To be completely frank, I was a little surprised myself. But more than that, I was sick of being bullied. So I took a step forward and crossed my arms and stuck out my jaw and said "Like *hell* you will!" again.

It sounded better the second time. Even so, I was expecting at least a few snickers from the watching crew. I didn't get them. Regon gave a small, tight grin, but it was one of painful understanding more than anything else. On the other hand, I could tell that I now had Darren's full attention.

"I'm not a slaver, kid," she said. "Nor a murderer, nor a rapist. I know there's no proof, and you'd be an idiot to trust me if you had any better options. But you don't. I'm your only chance. So even if you're scared-"

"I'm not scared," I answered, "and I don't give a good goddamn whether you're a murderer. We're not getting on that boat."

There were murmurs around me. The other children obviously felt differently. Darren jerked her head at them. "You stay here and you'll die," she said. "All of you. You realize that?"

"That's not the point. Whether we stay or go is our choice. You've got no right to make it for us."

"You've got no right to make it for *them*," Darren pointed out, with maddening accuracy.

"Fine. *I'm* not coming with you."

Darren looked impatiently at the sun, checking the time. "I'm not forcing you, I'm *offering*-"

"So leave me alone."

The skin of her cheeks twisted and I realized that it was a small, rather bitter, smile. "No. Sorry. I don't let people die for stupid reasons."

"Well then," I answered.

We stood for a few moments, assessing each other. I was trying to think of a way out of the impasse when that little maverick part of my brain took over and announced "I'll fight you!"

The children's curious looks turned into stares of open shock. Darren seemed a bit taken aback herself. "You're a kid," she said.

"I'm twenty," I retorted.

She drew her cutlass, slowly. I got the sense that she was doing it to give herself time to think. "Do you know how to fight?" she said at last.

"No. Well, not really. I've fought fish. I mean, I've killed fish. I mean, I've fished. This is a fishing village," I explained hastily.

The doubtful crease in her forehead was turning into a deep trench.

"Oh, come on," I said, trying to encourage her. "Just fight me."

"What do you want to fight with?"

"Swords. What else? Crochet hooks?"

"Do you *have* a sword?"

"Of course I don't," I said impatiently. "You'll have to lend me one, won't you?"

The silence after I said this lasted a good few minutes.

"I'll tell you what," she said in the end. "Why don't you take mine?"

"Oh, no, I couldn't possibly-"

"No, no. Really. I insist."

"All right."

Our hands met briefly as she passed the cutlass over. Her skin felt cool and dry and rough and made me shiver a little. To take my mind off of that, I gave the cutlass a few experimental swings. It *swished* through the air in a very satisfying way, and I nodded and took the closest thing to a fighting stance that I could.

"I'm ready," I said, and then thought of something and looked back over my shoulder.

"Don't try to interfere!" I announced grandly to the cluster of villagers behind me. "This is my battle!"

Klea muttered something through a gummy mouth that might have been agreement or might not have been. Either way, it didn't matter much. None of them had any intention of interfering- that much was clear. The younger children actually took several steps backwards, clasped their hands behind their backs, and dug into the sand with their toes.

Darren was waiting, her arms resting loosely at her sides. I took a deep breath and then aimed a slash at her arm. I expected her to dodge it neatly, and she did. What I didn't expect was that her hand would dart out to grab my wrist and give it a single hard shake. The cutlass clattered from my grip.

"Surrender?" she said. And then she said something less polite when I seized her ear with my free hand and twisted as hard as I could. She grabbed my other wrist and forced it down, then swore again and jumped backwards when I lunged for her shoulder with my teeth.

Darren didn't want to hurt me, of course- that was her handicap, and I made full use of it as I twisted a hand free and went for her ear again. But now she was done playing. She wrestled one of my arms behind my back and forced me to my knees. I butted backwards with my head. She bore down on me, pushing me down full length on the ground.

She was panting. I could feel it in the way her breath hit the back of my neck. "What is *wrong* with you?" she hissed in my ear.

"I'm tired of being pushed around, that's what's wrong with me!" I tried to buck her off. She gave a frustrated grunt and bore down harder, making my chin scrape against the dirt.

"Look," she said. "Just calm down and I'll let you up."

"You let me up and I'll kill you." I sort of snarled as I said *kill*. Darren just gave a snort, clearly unimpressed, so I went after her with my teeth again. This time they clamped down on something soft. I clenched my jaw, forcing my teeth as hard into the flesh as I could; twisted my head from side to side, and tasted copper blood.

When she swore that time, she used words I had never heard before and I hoped I would be able to remember them all later.

She was hissing with pain as she tried to tear her arm free, and when I hung on, she gave me a quick cuff on the side of the head. I let go immediately. It didn't hurt that much, but I thought that I had made my point.

"Darren," I heard one of the sailors say. "Hate to interrupt you, but- tide's changing."

She was frozen for a second, her breathing still heavy. Then she forced me down heavily with her uninjured forearm- so that she could get a hand loose, I supposed. There was the rustling of cloth as she rummaged in a pocket, and then a leather cord slipped around my wrists and was pulled taut. Her weight came off of me and I scrambled to my feet, but she kept a firm hand on my bound wrists. A few of the sailors had sly grins, but they quickly straightened their faces when Darren glared.

"All right," she announced- breathless, but clearly trying to get things back on track. "Someone take her on board. I'll see to the others."

The stocky sailor- Regon- came forward (a little gingerly, I thought) and took hold of the leather lead. As soon as she let it go, she was turning away again, ramming her cutlass back in its sheath. Putting me out of her mind, once again. Well, I was having none of that.

"Hey!" I said, stomping twice on the ground.

She flinched as she looked back at me. Her face was almost pleading. "What?"

I jerked my chin in the direction of Regon. "Tell him to tie me to the mast," I instructed her.

Darren's eyebrows flew up her forehead. "Tell him to do *what?*"

"Tell him to tie me to the mast," I repeated slowly.

Her mouth opened and closed twice. "You *want* to be tied to the mast?"

"That's not the question," I said, as reasonably as I could. "The question is, do you want me running around your nice orderly ship like a lunatic? Knocking over barrels and throwing wineskins overboard and trying to bite your fingers off? The only sensible thing to do is to tie me to the mast."

"You wouldn't do that," she said- with more confidence than she felt, I could tell.

I grinned nastily. "Wouldn't I?"

Her face was an interesting study, right then. There was disbelief, but then as the seconds passed, she came to realize that I meant it. And then I saw her realize that the seconds *were* ticking past and that she didn't have time to sit around debating. She made an intriguing sound, somewhere between a moan and a snarl (I was to hear it quite a few times in the coming days) and she threw up her hands.

"Fine," she said. "Fine! Have it your way! Regon, you heard her. Tie her to the goddamn mast. Tie her to anything she wants to be tied to. Tie her to the *anchor* for all I care. But get her on the bloody boat, *now!*"

Then she was striding off, and the children scampered at her heels like puppies. Regon tried to

lead me away gently, but I set my heels in the dirt so he had to yank me along. Inside fifteen seconds, the cord was digging into the skin of my wrists and I'd stubbed a toe and there were sore spots in my back and my knees were scraped where I had knelt on the path.

And I was fantastically happy, and not quite certain why.

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Regon was tight-lipped to begin with, but we got quite chummy while he was tying me up. We talked about our favourite knots, and about fly fishing, and the weather and the best way to cook oysters. Everything but the war, really. I think that we were both sick of discussing it.

The small boat moved steadily back and forth between the ship and the shore, ferrying crew and passengers back and forth. The other villagers climbed on board the ship clutching a few possessions under their arms- Klea and Aegle had torn shawls and a few pots and pans; the children had broken toys, shiny clamshells, that kind of thing. All of them gave me quick, curious glances as they walked by the mast. Regon had done a careful job. Rather than tying my arms around the pole (which we agreed would be too uncomfortable), he had lashed me there with a few turns of rope around my waist, and then tied my hands in front of me. I was sitting cross-legged on the deck, the sails shielding me from the worst of the sun.

Darren boarded the ship last, looking surly, and stomped across the deck to where I sat. I squinted up at her. Her left arm, the one I had bitten, was heavily bandaged. I wondered whether someone had stitched it up, and, if so, whether they used a sail needle.

"Hello," I said.

She gave me a long, unfriendly look, and then dumped a bundle on the deck next to me. "These are your things. We picked them up for you."

"That was very thoughtful," I said, because it was.

She looked at my tied hands, and her expression softened. "I just want to help, you know."

"I know." I did.

"So...can I let you loose now?"

I smiled at her again, less savagely than before. "That's up to you," I said. "Do you mind me running around the place like a maniac, foaming at the mouth and doing my level best to knock every member of your crew into the drink?"

Darren blew out a breath, running a hand through her dark shaggy hair.

I shrugged (as best I could, under the circumstances). "I did warn you, you know."

"You warned me," she repeated. "You know something? Have it your way. I don't have time for this. We need to get moving."

"Go ahead. I'm not stopping you."

She gave me a last uncomfortable look, but then the breeze freshened. All sorts of interesting things happen on ships when the wind gets stronger. Masts and booms groan disturbingly and sails ripple out and sailors go bouncing all over the place trying to do twenty things at once. Darren forgot me immediately.

"Teek!" she called. "Hoist the small boat up, then weigh anchor. I want to be across the strait by sundown tomorrow; we're too damn exposed out here. Spinner, find something to feed those kids. Not too much. It'll be a rocky passage and I don't want to have to swab out the entire hold."

She took the tiller herself, and she was so absorbed that I don't think she even noticed how I stared.

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When the others were fed, someone brought me up a portion. The soup was watery but there were scraps of mutton in it, a taste I'd almost forgotten. I cradled the warm mug as I sipped. It was getting cold.

As I was tipping the dregs down my throat, a *clamp-clamp-clamp* of boots on the deck told me that Darren was stalking back over to the mast. Then there was a *shring* as her long knife came out of its sheath.

"Hey, hey, hey," I objected, as she knelt down with the blade in hand. "I haven't been *that* bad."

"Just shut up and hold your arms out."

I pulled back, trying to wrench my wrists away from her. My mug went clattering to the deckboards as we wrestled. "You're not cutting these ropes."

"Yes, yes, actually I am. You're a kid. This is insa- WAUGH!"

I had bared all my teeth and snarled at her, and she flinched away. Clearly, when I bit her earlier that day, it had left an impression. So to speak.

"Look, time out," I said. "You're new to this. I understand. But it isn't complicated. You can't let a prisoner roam around the ship. Not when she's trying to kill you."

Darren made a small, exasperated noise as she sheathed her knife. "I don't *care* if you try to kill me! You're about the size of badly nourished kitten! You ought to be in a place where some farmer's wife can make a fuss over you, not trussed up on a tub of a trading ship-"

Her eyes wandered as she spoke, and that's when I drew back my heel and kicked her in the pit of her stomach. Not hard. She gave a little *whoosh* and sat back, blinking. After a second she asked: "What the hell was that for?"

"For getting maudlin. I'm not a kitten."

"I just meant that you're tiny."

"Hey," I said defensively. "Do you have any idea how many assassins are short?"

"Um- what?"

"A *lot*, is the answer." She didn't seem convinced. I lowered my tone. "A hell of a lot."

"Kid-" She pulled herself back up to her knees.

"In fact, you know what kills *most* pirate queens?"

"I'm not a-"

"Monkeys," I intoned darkly. "Damn monkeys are much better with a knife than you'd ever-"

Her half-moan-half-snarl was strangled as her hand clamped across my face, over my mouth. I could feel the fingers quiver next to my skin as she just- barely- kept her temper in check.

"I'm not a pirate queen," she said tightly. "You're not an assassin, and you're not a prisoner, and you have to get a grip, kid, because the world is going up in goddamned flames. You think it's funny to make yourself helpless? I could cut your throat, here and now. You understand that?"

I moved my head to the side, just slightly, and as I had expected, she let me go right away. *Wimp*. The wind was cooler on my face where her hand had been pressed against it.

"Let's say I do understand," I said.

She spread her arms- *well?*

"Darren, captain, sir, whatever- I'm on a ship being taken the gods know where. I'm helpless. If you want to cut my throat, I'm not going to be able to stop you. Are you really saying I'll be safer if I don't talk about monkeys?"

Her jaw worked a little as she thought about that, but all she said was: "It's usually safer to do as you're told."

I snorted. "That doesn't make you safer," I said. "It just drags things out. Trust me, I know."

That was more than I had meant to say. I closed my mouth with an audible snap before anything

else could escape. Darren's eyes were on me, thoughtful, and there was the teetering moment of anxiety that I knew so well. The one where you've already revealed too much, and you know that if someone asks the right question...But one thing you could say for Darren, even then: she didn't go after people's secrets. She shifted her gaze to the pine wood of the mast above my head, and stared as though nothing else in the world mattered more. When she spoke, it was quiet: "I could just as easily tie you up below decks."

The relief was so strong, I had to blink twice before I could concentrate again. And blink twice more before I realized the total insanity of what she was suggesting. "All the others are below decks, right? The other people from my village?"

"What? Yes."

"Then they could untie me."

She blinked, not getting it. "Um- yes. I guess they could."

I sighed. "Then it wouldn't be a very good strategy to tie me up below decks, would it?"

There was a long pause. It was sunset. Darren's brooding face was half yellow and half pink.

"Is it all right to give a prisoner a blanket?" she asked at last, and with a hint of desperation.

I thought that over, carefully. "I think so."

"Would you like a blanket?"

"Yes please."

She came back with one after a brief disappearance. It was rough wool, and, like all the other cloth on board the ship, it was greyish blue. Did they get a special deal on grey-blue dye, I wondered, or was there an entire herd of grey-blue sheep running around naked somewhere?

Awkwardly, Darren folded the blanket around me, tucking the edges between me and the mast. I smiled up at her. "Thanks."

"You're welcome," she answered, and, with a last bewildered look, headed below.

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I woke halfway through the night, when the wind rose. Wavelets slapped the side of the ship every few minutes, sending cold briny mist through me. The blanket was sodden. The knots that bound me had swollen in the wet and were digging into flesh. I was trying to decide whether to scream for help when I heard her trudging up from below. She knelt down beside me and felt my chilly cheek.

"This is ridiculous. I'm taking you down."

Under the circumstances, that didn't seem so wholly unreasonable, but I hedged. "You could take me to your cabin?"

"I don't *have* a cabin," she said, as she picked at the rope on my wrists. "How big a ship do you think this is?"

"Damn." I bit my lip. "Do you have- barrels? Crates?"

"Ye-e-e-ss..."

"Okay. So go down and stack some crates around a corner and that can be your cabin. And you can bring me down to that."

There was a little choking sound then, but her face was invisible in the dark. I couldn't point with my hands tied, so I nodded at the steps.

"Go on. Get to work. I'll be here when you're done."

And- staggering a little, as though she was drunk- she went.

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It took Darren an hour to shift things around in the hold. The ship was a small two-masted trader-light and manoeuvrable, but without much in the way of living space. As Darren had told me, there were no closed cabins below. There wasn't even room to hang a hammock for each crew member. If the weather had been a little warmer, they would all have been sleeping on deck. As it was, they were crammed together in the open hold, along with water barrels, boxes of biscuit and dried meat, a tiny brazier for heat and light- and, of course, the eleven children and crones from my village. Any time you moved anything in the close-packed space, you ended up treading on someone's foot or ramming someone's skull. Darren told me all this, with some exasperation, as she brought me down to the tiny corner she had cleared behind a stack of biscuit boxes.

"You're more trouble than anything else that's ever been aboard this ship," she said, prodding me behind the wall of boxes. "And I carried cobras once. *And* they laid eggs."

"Poor baby," I told her, or rather I told her "P-p-p-p-p-p-p-oor b-b-b-b-b-aby." My teeth were chattering so hard that I thought they would splinter.

Her complaints broke off; she looked at me in concern. "You're soaked."

I didn't try to shoot out another pithy rejoinder; I just glared up at her.

"Gods in heaven, I'm an idiot," she said, the self-reproach returning to her voice. "Wait here a

moment."

She disappeared. My legs folded beneath me and I flopped onto the deck in the tiny cabin, feeling my wet clothing ooze into the wood. I wanted to call out to her, ask what she thought she was doing, leaving a prisoner alone *below decks*, in the nerve centre of the operation- but the thought of saying anything made my jaw tremble faster. I curled into a tighter ball. My sopping tunic squelched.

Darren was talking when she came back in, her arms full of blankets. "...don't know what the hell I was thinking, leaving you up there in the cold. I mean, you're obviously out of your gourd, and I know you asked for it, but that's no excuse. I should have-

"C-c-c-c-captain?"

"Yes, what?"

"B-b-b-b-blankets-

"Oh, *damn* it!" she said, and stooped to wrap one of them around me. She sounded disgusted but I could tell, even before she said another word, the disgust was for herself rather than for me.

"Look, warm up a second, then we'll have to get your wet things off. I mean, I won't get them off, you'll get them off, I'll leave you alone to-" She glared through the decks at a heaven she couldn't see. "Blast and bugger and damn. I'm so bad at this."

"At what?" The dry blanket was making a difference already. I could feel my fingers again.

"At- you know. Helping-" She grew awkward. "Never mind."

She was flustered and I didn't want her that way, so I quickly changed the subject.

"How many spare blankets do you have lying around, anyway?"

"Not enough. That one is mine. The other one is Regon's."

"He didn't need it?"

"He's not big enough to stop me from taking it, so it worked out fine." She sounded better now.

"Are you going to get difficult if I ask you to take your wet clothes off? I'll get out of the way."

Get difficult, she said, and I felt a bit annoyed. Hadn't I been difficult ever since we met? Lord knows I was trying hard enough. How much could one woman give? "No, I'll take them off. But you should find a rope."

The desperation was back. "Oh, what *now*?"

"Well, you have to tie me up again."

"Why, in the name of every god in creation, would I need to tie you up again?"

"Just think for a second, captain. You're going to be sleeping next to your prisoner- what if I suddenly decide to cut your throat in the middle of the night?"

"Who the hell said that I'm sleeping next to you?"

"This is your cabin. Of course you're sleeping next to me. So you need to take precautions-"

"Precautions."

"...precautions, to make sure that your vengeful prisoner-"

"- my UNARMED prisoner-"

"- don't forget naked- your vengeful, unarmed, naked prisoner-"

Even in the dim light, I saw her tear at her hair. "I brought you a spare tunic! Just what kind of sick bastard do you think I am?"

"A pirate queen. A pirate queen who far too trusting, given the circumstances." I thought about patting her tanned cheek, but it seemed too soon. "Go get the rope. I'll change while you're gone. Don't be too long though- you look tired."

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That was the first day. Darren, I learned, snored like a bull calf, and I made a mental note of that as one more thing to address when the time was right. In the meantime, I just draped a blanket over her face.

Things got into a pattern pretty quickly after that, and stayed that way for all of the week-long crossing to the mainland. I spent my nights down in the tiny improvised cabin with Darren, and she slept (snores burbling from beneath the blanket) pressed against the biscuit boxes so that she wouldn't brush against me accidentally. For that entire week, I don't think she touched me once while we were sleeping. That was an incredibly good score, considering that we were sharing a space about the size of a rowboat.

By day, I was fastened to the mast again- but I wasn't tied, either there or down in the hold. Regon had unearthed a short, broken length of anchor chain and an old padlock and improvised a fetter for my ankle. It made things easier for all concerned, though Darren still winced each night when I held my foot out to her. At least she had given up arguing- probably because she was too busy.

Looking back, I can see that we had a fairly easy crossing. The wind was strong and steady; the trading ship made light of its cargo as it sluiced through the waters of the channel. But at the

time, it seemed to me that we were always on the verge of disaster. Darren and her crew were never still a moment. Every hour of the day, from dawn to dawn, they were charging to and fro, frantically hauling at things and letting things go and throwing some things over deck and pulling other things on board. If there was ever a lapse in activity, then there would come a cry from a man on the masthead or another on the poop deck and they would all charge off again.

On top of that, all of the children from my village had voracious appetites, and most of them had weak stomachs, and none of them ever managed to get to the rail on time. The crew had to sluice the decks down at least twice a day. The children who weren't sick spent their time chasing after rats, or investigating interesting smells, or shrieking complaints when they were told they couldn't go swimming. Yes, the crew had a busy time.

It made me tired just to watch them, as I sat comfortably on deck, shaded by the sails. I used to rest my chained ankle out in front of me. Darren was always nearly tripping over it as she barrelled purposefully from one side of the ship to the other.

"She works hard for a noblewoman," I remarked to Regon halfway through the crossing. He was leaning against the mast beside me then, sharing my shade, but he sat bolt upright when I spoke.

"Who the hell said she was a noblewoman?"

I raised an eyebrow at him. "Practically all the captains of trading ships are nobles," I pointed out.

"But not all of them," he floundered.

"Oh, please. I've seen her use a sextant." (It was well worth watching- her utter focus as she stared at the sun.) "How many peasants know navigation?"

He looked unhappy. "Oh, damn," he gulped.

That didn't make any sense. "Why is it such a big secret?" I asked. "She's probably- what, a younger child from one of the great trading houses? And she went rogue after the war started? Started running cargoes for herself rather than her daddy? That's got to be a dead common story these days."

"It is," Regon admitted reluctantly. "But Darren's different- I really can't tell you any more about it."

"What?" I said casually. "Does she have a price on her head, or something?"

Silence. Dead, panicked silence. Ever so casually, I angled myself so I could see his face.

"So she's been banished, huh?"

The way his face fell told me everything I needed to know.

"Do you have *nothing* to do, Regon?" panted Darren, as she charged across the deck again. "Really? Honestly? Because I'm sure I could find some use for you. For one thing, I need a new anchor."

Regon shot to his feet, hurrying away from me without a backward glance. He might as well have hung a sign around his neck that said I TOLD THE PRISONER SOMETHING I SHOULDN'T HAVE. Fortunately, Darren was no more perceptive than usual that day.

"What about you?" she asked me. "Getting bored?"

"Not particularly," I told her as I studied my ten brown toes.

"Kash was thinking of trying to cook tonight," she said. "Bold man. He could use someone to seed the raisins for duff. And there are fish to scale."

"Ah, but I'm your helpless prisoner, remember?" I said. "Prisoners don't work. Unless they're slaves. And I don't think you're tough enough to make that kind of arrangement stick."

I gave her my special insolent stare, and waited. The moments crawled as she looked down at me, lips parted- for a second she glanced away and I thought she was going to give in- but finally, FINALLY- about TIME- her face hardened all over and she spoke with a snap in her voice.

"Prisoners don't have to eat, either," she said. "I've been damn patient with you, kid, but it's time for you to give something back. I'll send Kash up here, and you do what he tells you."

I wanted to give her a proud hug, but I just grinned instead. "You've got it," I promised.

She kept shooting glances at me for most of the rest of the night- first when Kash and I were scaling the mess of trout, and then when I cajoled a reluctant Regon to sit and eat with me. Perhaps she suspected that I was pumping them for details, gradually piecing together the story of her life- her early years, her career as a trade captain, everything right up to her exile. But if she did, she didn't interfere.

-

While I'm at it, I might as well set the record straight: It's not true that Darren was banished because she was caught sleeping with a woman. No matter what you've heard.

She was a noble, after all. And when nobles marry, it's to forge alliances and spawn heirs. Love doesn't come into it, of course. But neither does sex. No Kilan noble in history went to marriage as a virgin- especially not the younger children of the great houses, who are put to work captaining the merchant ships almost as soon as they can count. They grow up surrounded by sailors and sailor-talk, doxies in taverns and dock-front whores, and since their lives are a hard grind otherwise, they take every chance they get to forget about it for a while.

And they're not shy about sleeping with their own sex, either, at least when nothing else is on offer. What else would a captain do when he's becalmed for a week in the dead centre of the ocean, with forty other men about and only a ragged memory of the last time he saw a woman's breast? And everyone knows what's going on when a young countess- cloistered in her father's house and waiting for marriage- takes a "favourite" from among her serving girls. No-one even blinks an eye when they emerge from the brat's private bower horribly late for dinner, pink and giggly and staring at each other's navels. There's nothing shameful about a noble wanting something and taking it. That's just part of life. As long as it's done with gusto and bluster and sheer cheek, nobles can admit to wanting anything.

Darren's father Stribos had been notorious in his own youth, as I learned later. "A woman for duty," he always said. "But a boy for pleasure, and a goat for ecstasy."

So you see, no-one would have batted an eye if Darren had rutted every whore in the shipyards, chased servant women around the halls, or even if she had thrown a peasant girl on the banquet table and spanked her in full view. At the very worst, it would have been seen as a rough joke- a bit immature perhaps, but all in fun for a person of her rank.

No, Darren was banished for falling in love.

(4)

"We was going overland," Teek told me softly. He was leaning against the mast, all his attention apparently fixed on the rope yarn he was spinning between calloused fingertips. Our heads were close together so I could hear him. "Darren had a tip, like, there were sable skins going cheap well upcountry, and we was going like blazes before someone beat us to it. We got there first and bought'em damn near out- a fortune in fur, for the cost of a wagon of apples. But everything started going wrong, like, on the way back to the ship."

I'd spent several hours cajoling Teek into telling this last part of Darren's story. He was taciturn and stolid, nothing like Regon whose tongue ran away with him if I gave him a little encouragement. But I found Teek to be a better informant. For one thing, Regon swore that Darren had never made a mistake in her life, and would carve huge chunks out of his own memories if they seemed to show otherwise.

"She'd spent every coin she could on sable, leaving just bare enough to feed and supply us on the way back home. A gamble, that. She lost. Seemed the whole country was trying to slow us down. Winter shut in fast. There was a mudslide and we had to detour, then Regon, he got sick, and one of our mules broke its leg. Thing after thing. Tried hunting but there was nothing around but half-starved squirrels. The captain cut our rations but she had to beef 'em up again when bandits closed in and we barely had the strength to wield a sabre. We was two weeks going upcountry, and we'd spent seven coming back and we was nowhere near the coast. Ah, if you'd seen us! Ribs like washboards and the hunger-glitter in every eye, and we had to pull the wagon of furs ourselves, because we'd eaten the other mule. But then we happened on a valley."

Teek had suffered badly in the hungry time- I could tell that from the way his chin wobbled when he told me how they were finally saved. The valley was shielded from the worst of the weather, and held a thriving town which had no shortage of anything. Teek's chin wobbled worse as he described cheeses the size of wagon wheels, and hams that must have come from pigs as big as oxen, and mammoth tubs of butter and deep cream puddings.

"The captain, she was near to screaming," Teek went on. "She was hungry as any man there. Hungrier, for she'd pushed herself harder. And it was all she could do not to fling herself at the nearest string of sausages. But the trader in her was raving at the thought of what she'd have to pay for it."

"I thought you were out of money."

"And so we were. But remember, we had the furs. Any village that knew its business, seeing starving men, would've taken our wagon and tossed us some stale loaves and the heels of the cheeses. I knew that, we all knew that, but we were past caring. All but Darren."

I was already getting riled up. "Those bastards!"

He chuckled, knotting the end of the yarn. "Ah, but it didn't happen in the end. Because *she* was there, you see."

"She?"

"Name of Jess. She was the beekeeper, in summer time- got the honey for the village from a few dead trees. But in the winter she also kept a bit of a school, and she helped with birthings. This and that. What I mean- they all listened when she spoke. And she spoke *loud* when the whisper first went round that they could get our sable for a biscuit and a half-cup of sack. She spoke loud and not a one stood against her. They took us into the inn that night and gave us such a supper that we could have rolled the rest of the way home. Didn't ask for so much as an acorn in return."

"That's a bit better," I said, relaxing.

"Bit better? I should say so. Captain gave 'em a fair payment in fur, of course. We stayed a week and the inn was full so the captain went to sleep on the beekeeper's floor. And they went about the village together and they talked 'til late. You could see the lamps in Jess's windows burning well after dark." Teek paused a second, brooding. "Might 'ha been the food after all the starving, but it seemed to me that Darren was happy as she'd ever been, and she's not the happy sort."

"You don't say," I murmured- and then "So what happened?"

"We went home. Loaded the sable, sold it, made a fortune. Captain's father was pleased as could be."

"Yes...but what about *Jess*?"

"Coming to that," he said, unhurried. "I don't know properly- wasn't always with the captain- sometimes I was sailing on other ships- but seemed to me that she headed for the mainland every chance she damn well got, afterwards. More than once she came back from a journey with crocks of honey in the hold. And a stunned sort of funny sort of a grin."

I smiled myself. "So then what?"

His face darkened. "She got her courage up- the captain, I mean. Invited Jess to visit the House of Torasan. Her house. To meet her family. Damn fool move, or a damn brave one. Both."

"Did they know?" I asked. "About the two of them?"

"You could hardly have missed it, the way they looked at each other. But her father, her older brother- they could pretend, you understand? They could pretend not to see. Few times she tried to tell them and they cut her off before she'd gotten out three words. Gave her the if-you-know-what's-good-for-you speech. Well, the writing was on the wall- the choice she had to make. And she made it. Middle of a state dinner, with nobles from all over Kila tittering at the tables, she called Jess up to dance. Then kissed her full in front of her father's throne."

I pumped an arm in the air. "All right!"

Teek sighed. "Then she went straight to her room, she and Jess, and they grabbed what they could- knowing they only had as much time as it would take for the ink to dry on the banishment scroll. They were 'bout halfway done when the soldiers came and threw them out the front gate. She was left with almost nothing- the clothes on her back and a bag of copper."

"Then what?"

"Ah, well, then, the captain went to the dockmaster- and she'd once paid for a doctor for his son, so he wasn't too quick to desert her. There wasn't much he could do, but the captain managed to talk him out of an old trading ship which was holed and abandoned on the beach." Teek glanced around at the ancient deck. "She and Jess patched it as best they could, and then together they sailed it away from the islands. They came safe to Jess's valley, and there the captain retired from the sea. Helped Jess make honey."

"That's nice," I said fondly, pleased with the happy ending, before I realized- "Hey, wait! What happened?"

Teek put down his coil of yarn and propped his chin on his doubled-up knees. He followed a gull with his eyes as it screeched its way along the bottom of the horizon. "Land soon," he commented.

"Teek, *tell me what happened next*, or for the love of sweet mandarins I will tie your thumbs in a knot!"

Teek's face stayed impassive, staring out to sea. I was taking a breath, ready to make a new and

better threat, when the voice spoke right beside my ear: "I left her."

My head spun. Darren was crouching beside me, her jaw tight.

"Is that all you wanted to know?" she said. "Fine. I left her. That's the end of the story."

Teek gave me a pleading, warning look; I ignored him. "But why?"

Darren didn't answer. She stood and contemplated the sky, with what appeared to be loathing. "Teek, relieve the helmsman," she said presently. "And if any overpowering need to tell stories should strike you while you're back there, let me know so that I can whack it out of you."

Teek scuttled off, bowing his head as he went past her. I didn't blame him. Darren was properly angry this time. It hummed off of her in hot red waves.

I pulled myself up and leaned casually against the mast. "I made him tell me," I pointed out.

"Oh, I know." Her voice was dark and icy. I pressed on anyway.

"You have to realize, you're a pirate queen now. A public figure. Your life is going to be an open book. If you can't-

"Shut up." She spat out the words like they were poisonous. "You damn idiot kid." She raised her voice, roaring to the whole crew: "*Land bloody ho, you stupid bastards!*"

Sure enough, there was a green fuzz along the horizon. Trees.

She gave me one of her quick angry looks. "Shut up and sit down and don't get in the way. Or if you think you're a slave, find something useful to do. Either way, stop distracting my men."

I studied her back as she stalked off. It was rigid with fury. I had touched a nerve. About bloody time.

"She doesn't mean it," Regon told me, apologetically, as he made a rope fast.

"She does mean it," I said, flopping back down into my comfortable position. "But that's all right. I was being obnoxious."

"Oh, it's not you. She's always like this when we're going into this harbour."

"Why?"

"You'll see."

-

I soon found out why Teek had been called back to the helm. The ship was heading into a long inlet, with high cliffs on either side; a bewildering pattern of rocks and shoals poked out of the water. It looked like a sunken graveyard, and any half-sane person would have backed gently out and sailed the other way. Darren's fingers, rattling irritably on the gunwales, betrayed her nervousness, and even Regon looked a bit uncomfortable. But Teek was stone-faced, almost bored, and his hand was sure on the tiller as he wove the ship between jagged chunks of granite. I still found Teek sort of dull compared to Regon- and Darren of course- but there was no denying that he had his uses.

The cliffs gave way to shores of soft sand as we neared the inlet's end. Forest surrounded us on three sides: oak, aspen, and alder. This was waste land, that much was clear. Yet- I blinked- there on the coast was a dock, roughly built from large pine logs. It was big enough for only one ship- this, then, was Darren's secret harbour. But it wasn't entirely a secret. Beyond the dock, I could make out tents pitched in the shelter of the trees, and wagons, and smoke from cooking fires. Someone knew that Darren was coming.

The "someone" turned out to be a small woman with freckles across her nose and a searching, intent expression. Her hair was pulled back in a single dark braid and her hands rested in her pockets as she waited on the beach for the ship to moor. I looked back and forth between her and Darren, who was now leaning against the gunwales, her face sour and grim. They couldn't have been much more different. Where Darren was long and lean, this other woman was short and sturdy; where Darren was tanned and tough, she was softer, her face winged with laughter lines. She was dressed in a tunic and trousers of brown russet wool- anyone could see she was a landsman- where every salt inch of Darren screamed of the sea. Yet there was the same strength in both of them- though, when their eyes finally met, it was Darren who looked away first.

Regon was a short distance away, gulping from a flask. I reached to the full length of my chain and tugged on his shirt. "Is that Jess?"

He finished swallowing, sighed, and offered the flask to me. I took a pull. What was inside tasted something like sour apples and something like tar; it made my lips tingle and I licked them again and again.

"Not Jess," he answered then. "That's Holly. Jess's wife."

(5)

Holly was organized. A large cauldron waited at the far end of the dock, and Holly had set things boiling there as soon as the ship appeared at the far end of the inlet. By the time mooring was complete, smells were wafting out of it that made the smallest children roll and squeal. More landsmen, dressed like Holly, ducked into the tents and brought out wooden bowls and spoons. Then they helped lift the children, one by one, down from the side of Darren's boat; hoisted Klea and Aegle down as well, and took them all off to be fed. They did it so matter-of-factly that it was plain that this was well-oiled routine.

Regon tried to unchain me so that I could go with the others, but I beat his hands away and we

had a brief, whispered fight- trying not to attract the attention of Darren, who was still prowling around like a wounded cat. In the end, he gave in, left me where I was, and tossed a chunk of dried beef. Huddled by the gunwales, I nibbled it, as I listened to Darren and Holly. They were pacing up and down the dock as they talked, and I could hear the tension in Darren's voice. She was reining in her frustration.

"Only ten this time?" Holly was saying. "The war must be over."

"You know better." Darren growled. "There are ten because they're the only ones left after their village got stripped."

"I was kidding. Humour? Levity? Remember how that works? No? Well, there's one good thing. We'll be able to find places for all of them quite easily-"

They wandered out of hearing range, and as I waited for them to come back, I wondered idly what kind of "places" Holly and Jess were finding for Kilan refugees. I'm a cynic at heart (long practice) and normally I would have assumed that they were selling them off to silver mines or brothels. But I didn't believe it. Darren and Holly- and the rest of Darren's crew, if it came to that- had something about them that made my inner cynic shut up and sit down. There was just no grain of pretence or deception about them. They never for an instant tried to be anything but what they were. Darren was, I truly believed, doing the best she could for other people, purely because she believed it was right. I had never seen anyone do that before.

The voices came nearer again. "- but you'll be wanting to load the supplies first?"

The beach next to the dock had been lined with boxes and coils of rope, sides of beef and barrels of oil and wine and even chickens squawking their protests in wicker baskets. Darren and her crew ate surprisingly well while at sea. Now I knew why.

"I've told Jess before," Darren snapped. "She doesn't need to do this."

Holly didn't seem insulted by Darren's crust. "We know that you do important work," she said. "Is it so strange that we want to help you?"

"You do enough. I'm not asking for more."

"Darren, you never *do* ask."

Their footsteps kept coming closer. Too late, I realized they were heading up the gangplank. I took one desperate look around, found nothing to hide behind, and quickly arranged myself a casual position by the mast. Then I plastered my most innocent expression over my face. *Who, me? Eavesdropping?*

Darren stopped dead when she saw me. Then she gave a slow, measured sigh. "You just don't give up, do you, kid?"

"I'm sure I don't know what you're talking about," I said, twitching my ankle so that the chain clinked on the deck.

"It's not what you think," Darren said to Holly- whose posture had gone rigid all of a sudden. "I'll explain later."

"In the meantime," Holly said, a bit too calmly, "introduce us."

"What? Oh, right. Holly, this is-" She paused. "Well, I'll be damned. Kid, what *is* your name?"

I clinked the chain a little faster. "Really, captain. You should know the name of someone you've been sleeping with for a week."

I could almost see the frost forming in Holly's hazel eyes as she trained them on Darren.

"NOT what it sounds like!" Darren repeated frantically. "Let's just sort out the cargo and I'll explain-" Grabbing Holly's arm, she hustled her back to the gangplank, but spared me a look over her shoulder. "I'll deal with *you* later."

"Promises, promises," I muttered, and settled in for a nap on the sunny deck.

-

I was woken by the tramp of boots on the deck beside me. Not sea-boots- there were hobnails clicking against the wood. Instinctively, I snapped my knees up to protect my stomach, but there was no need. The footsteps came to an abrupt halt beside me, and a soft hand touched my shoulder.

I blinked upwards. Holly was crouched there, a bundle under one arm.

"So," she said. "You're her hostage. Or her slave?"

"Yes," I said, maybe a bit more defensively than necessary. "And if you're here to try to talk me out of it, you might as well get lost. I'm having a hard enough time dealing with *her* insecurities. I don't need you to get into the act."

Holly smiled wryly. "You two make quite the pair," she commented. "No, I'm not here to talk you out of it. I just thought that you would need a few things if you're to be on this ship much longer."

She placed her bundle on my lap. Blinking with confusion, I unfolded it. An old ivory comb and a small neat pocketknife sat at the centre. The bulk of it was clothes: a couple of linen shirts, a woollen overtunic, loose trousers, a warm cloak. All in shades of brown and deep cream and russet red; all well-made and sweet-smelling. Nothing like the rough, slapdash, "oh-well-that's-good-enough" outfits that Darren and her crew made shift with.

"They're mine," Holly said apologetically. "I didn't have the time to make anything new. But you're about my size. If you tell me just what you want, then I can run you up something of your own, and you can collect it the next time Darren's ship comes in."

I found my voice at last. "Why are you doing this?"

She held a shirt up against me, to check the fit. "I know Darren. And I know a thing or two about women- and a thing or two about life, as well. I know what you're up to. It may work out or it may not, but nothing else has worked with her up to this point. By the way, do you have a name?"

I never really know when a casual question is going to stir up the old dread inside me. This one did. My stomach twisted painfully. "Not one that I want to keep," I said.

She studied me. "What are you running from?"

"Nothing," I said automatically.

Holly didn't bother to tell me that I was lying. There was no need; we both knew it. She simply held my gaze.

"I don't want to talk about it now," I whispered, in answer to her wordless invitation. "Thanks, but- I'm not ready. I don't think I could get it out."

"Well," she said, "all right." She was reluctant to let the subject drop, I could tell, but, as she re-folded the clothes into a neat stack, she contented herself with asking: "Darren's treating you properly?"

"You know Darren, you said. What do you think?"

Holly smiled, but it was a little sad. "Darren's noble to the bone. Too much so for her own good."

"I know. Oh, how well I know."

"...well, then. Is there anything else I can get for you? In the meantime."

"No, that's- Wait." I sat up straighter as a thought struck. "While we're on the subject of names. Do you think you could give me one of those?"

Her eyebrows shot up. "Are you sure?"

"Yep. Just pick one. Something in your own language. I need something that doesn't come from Kila. Something new."

This was sheer impulse, but it made sense to me. Holly didn't seem surprised in the least. It was the first time I encountered her ability to take strange things in stride, and I've often been grateful

for it since.

"How about 'Lynn'?" she said at last.

My first reaction was to tell her that it wasn't much of a name. Not much of anything, in fact. But then, I realized, that was the point. There was a reason that I was shedding my entire identity, taking on a new one that was fresh and unmarked and clean. Lynn was a blank kind of name. Perfect for someone who was starting from scratch.

"Lynn," I said, tasting it. "Yes, that's fine, that'll do. Thanks. I'll keep it. What does it mean, by the way?"

She grinned- a real one this time, which showed little white teeth.

"It means, 'Kid'."

-

Darren was restless before she had been on shore an hour. She would have preferred to set sail again the first instant the supplies were loaded, but sundown was approaching and she was too much a sailor to risk the rocky inlet in the dark. Instead, she grudgingly told the crew that they would spend the night in the little cove.

Regon and Kash made up for the lost time by unshipping the rudder and scrubbing it clean of barnacles and dangling wisps of seaweed. As they did it, Darren stomped around and around them, giving lots of advice that they clearly didn't need.

"Talks a lot, doesn't she?" Holly observed, as we watched from the ship. "She always thinks that things are going to fall apart without her. Here, have some more cider."

"She's a noble," I shrugged, as she refilled my cup. "You're not Kilan- you might not understand. *Blood is right and blood is rank...*"

"*Blood alone is rulership,*" she said, finishing the quotation. "I've heard that. Sometimes, Darren needs a gentle little reminder that things don't work that way around here."

"I can imagine." I raised my voice. "Darren, will you leave those poor men alone? They've got it under control!"

She glanced up at me, irritated. "I'm making sure that-"

"You're just stepping on their feet." (By now Regon and Kash were hiding their smiles.) "Give them some room."

Darren folded her arms crossly, but she also backed off. As she wandered further down the beach, I could hear her muttering something about checking the stores.

Holly and I watched her go. "I've never really understood it," she said presently. "It doesn't seem to make much sense- this obsession with blood-lines."

"It doesn't," I agreed wholeheartedly. "But that's how it is. The most important thing for *any* Kilan lord is to make sure that their line continues. They can lose their thrones, you know, if they're childless." A breeze touched the aspen, and I shivered. "For Darren's father to have had to banish a full-grown child- that must have been quite the kick in the teeth."

Holly sipped her cider. "Is it very dangerous for her to do what she's doing? I mean, going back to the islands after her banishment?"

"Yes," I said flatly. "She's an exile. In the eyes of the nobles, she isn't even human. They could do anything to her and still be within the law. Kill her. Sell her. Paint her green and show her at fairs. Anything."

Darren's restless prowling had taken her near the stern of the ship, and something there caught her attention. She squinted, then backed away and took a good look. Then she marched back towards us with purposefulness in every taut line of her body. "Kid?"

"It's 'Lynn.' And yes?"

"You want to explain why my ship has the word BADGER painted in giant letters on the stern?"

"Oh. That's the ship's name now."

"You NAMED...my ship?"

"A pirate queen's flagship needs a name."

"My only ship! My ONLY ship! Not my bloody flagship! And what kind of a name is *Badger*?"

"Not sure; I was in the throes of inspiration. But it definitely looked like a *Badger*. Regon agreed."

She wheeled. "Regon, you're part of this...this conspiracy?"

"Well," he said reasonably, as he tossed a barnacle over his shoulder, "someone had to do the actual painting. She couldn't reach."

"She told you to paint BADGER on the ship, and you just trotted off and *did it*?"

"Not right away," Holly said, raising her cider cup. "He had to wait for Lynn to write down the letters first. And then she had to get the paint from me."

The noises that Darren made right then sounded like a kettle that had been left too long on the

fire.

"Now look," she said. "Who's in charge here?"

She tromped off with the last tatters of her dignity. Holly waited until she was out of earshot before speaking.

"She hasn't figured it out yet," she murmured. "Has she?"

"Give me time," I protested, stretching out my arms luxuriously. "It's early still."

"True, but I find it's better to get them over the hump as soon as possible. More cider? It's getting a little chilly."

-

It was very late when Darren came to our makeshift cabin, and her eyes were red-rimmed with drink. As she unbuckled her cutlass and set it on the floorboards, her movements were slow and deliberate. I sat up in my blankets, and waited.

At last, she said: "You know that we're leaving tomorrow."

"So?"

"So...you'll be wanting to get down on shore."

I tugged at a fistful of my hair- how long was this going to take? "I'm your chained, helpless prisoner," I pointed out for the sixtieth time. "How am I supposed to do that?"

She rubbed her forehead as if it was aching. "What if I suddenly decide to be merciful, and let my chained, helpless prisoner go free?"

"Oh, I don't think you'll do that," I said absently, tugging at my hair again. There seemed to be a bit too much of it; it was shaggy at the back. "I need a trim here," I told Darren. "Lend me your dagger?"

She drew it automatically, and then there was the shade of a smile. "Isn't it a bad idea to give a dagger to a slightly deranged prisoner?"

"There, now. Who said you were unteachable? You'll have to do it for me."

Darren lifted her hands. "I'm not going to do that!"

"Why not?"

"Because it's dangerous, that's why not."

"Come on, I trust you."

"I don't. Besides, you don't have all that much hair as it is."

"I like it short."

"You look like a boy. But if you *insist*, I've got some scissors around here somewhere."

She rooted around- it took her a minute or so. The shears that she came up with in the end were long and blunt and rusty and didn't look any safer than Darren's well-sharpened dagger, but she seemed happy with them, so I let it pass. I scooted around so that my back was to her. Absent-mindedly, she braced a doubled-up knee against me, to get leverage, and I leaned against it.

"I mean it," she said in between deliberate snips. "Even if I'm ruthless and pitiless, I might decide to let you go."

I cocked my head thoughtfully. "You could, of course. But you're a pirate queen. The captain of the formidable *Badger*. Even if you feel in a merciful mood, you can't do something that would erode your fearsome reputation."

"Hold still. I nearly chopped off your ear. And even pirate queens let prisoners go sometimes. I'd think."

"Hey, which of us is the expert on pirate queens? Besides. By now I'm so bitter about my captivity that, if you ever let me go, I would probably just raise an army of deranged ex-slaves and come after you. And kill you elaborately when you least expect it."

"Hold still, I said." She grabbed the top of my head in one big hand. "Someday you're going to have to tell me what you're bitter about. How do you kill someone elaborately, anyway?"

"Well, I have a few ideas. One involves marmalade."

"Does it."

"Another involves ten underripe mangoes and a rat on a stick. You said 'someday', by the way."

The snipping stopped. "I never-"

"You said I would have to tell you someday what I was so bitter about. And I will. But someday isn't today. Good thing that I'm not going anywhere."

There was the familiar sigh, and then she brushed wisps of hair from the back of my neck. "I still don't see why you want it so short."

"Because I like it short."

"For the love of- *look* at it."

She held out one of the larger locks, and I studied it gravely. "Yes," I agreed, after I felt I'd given it all the attention it deserved. "Yes, that is my hair."

"It's so pale," she said. "It looks like-" and from her frown, it seemed that she was summoning up every ounce of poetry in her soul. "It looks like *wheat* or something."

"Look at you, spouting compliments to captives," I said. "That's a pirate, all right."

She smiled in spite of herself. Then she looked down at her hands.

"I know you," I told her softly. "You're not a woman who just picks up slaves casually. And you're not a woman who would get rid of them casually either. You're not going to let me leave."

-

She wasn't there when I woke up. Even while sleeping, I had braced myself, expecting her to have an eleventh-hour change of heart. It would be just like her to stick someone else with the job of getting me off the ship, and to go and lurk in the bushes herself until it was done. But Holly wouldn't be Darren's stooge- I hoped- and Regon and Teek were both at least a little bit afraid of me. Kash and Spinner, more than a little. If Darren wanted me gone, she would have to do it herself.

So I didn't panic as I looked around the empty cabin. I combed my hair, drank some water (Darren had left a flask), and then did some deep breathing exercises, waiting for the combat.

But after a few minutes I felt the *thrum* beneath my hand where it rested on deck, and then next moment my heart was leaping in my throat. Motion- the *Badger* was underway, moving under full sail. We were outside the narrow inlet, sweeping through the open seas.

Regon's face peeked through the doorway. "Are you decent?" he asked dutifully.

"You're supposed to ask that before you look in, you know," I pointed out, as I tossed the blankets aside. "Where's the captain?"

"It's her turn at the tiller," he said, as he stooped to unlock my ankle chain. "She wants to know if you're so cowed and terrified that she can force you to help with the cooking."

"I don't know," I said doubtfully. "Is she looking very ruthless?"

His smile looked like a crease in an old saddle. "Most ruthless that I've ever seen her."

"Then I'm duly cowed. Let me get at the supplies and I'll see if I can make a duff that tastes a little better than Kash's boots."

-

The weather was worse on that second crossing, and we were heading into the wind, but everything around me was so fascinating that I barely noticed.

It only took me a week or so to get the hang of the cutlass. In terms of structure, a cutlass is like a big butter knife, and it's not much harder to use. Within a few days, I could make it swing and whistle through the air in a manner most gratifying, while Darren stood by tolerantly (if she was in a good mood), or disapprovingly (if she wasn't).

"If you really want to be able to fight," she would say, "I mean *really*, then you should be working on your upper body strength."

"But where's...the fun...in that?" I would pant in reply. "Watch this, I'm going to do the stab-behind-the-back thing."

Darren had argued that, by now, I must be sufficiently terrified of her to not try to escape during the day, at least. I had agreed, after due consideration, so I was unchained as I pranced around the deck wielding Darren's weapon. It made a nice change. Before long, though, I discovered something much more interesting than the cutlass.

Darren, in the rare moments when she wasn't busy, had a habit of staring out at the horizon pensively. (It was on my list of things to break her of.) When she was standing and staring, her hand often slipped into her pocket and pulled out a coil of thin leather cord, which she would work between her fingers, tugging at loops of it, winding it into elaborate knots.

It was this leather cord that she must have used to bind me on the day when we first met, and, now that I thought about it, it was a little strange that she had had it so readily to hand. So one night when she was sleeping, I pinched it from her pocket to have a look-see.

There was a full moon that night, and the dim blue glow trickled down from the galley stairs, and through gaps between the warped planks. I positioned the cord in the best of the light. It was braided sinew (from a bear, I later discovered), smooth and shiny with use. Uncoiled, it was a few feet long. At either end, a small bone bead kept the braid from unravelling. I tugged at the ends experimentally.

"Not for playing," Darren's voice came sleepily from the blankets.

I tugged at it a few more times anyway. It was incredibly strong. "It's a garrotte, isn't it?"

"Mmm."

I made a loop in the sinew and imagined slipping it over a man's head. He would buckle almost immediately when it was tightened; you could kick him in the back of the knees to hasten the process. Then when he fell, his full weight would be added to the strength of the pull. This

garrotte wasn't wire; it wouldn't cut the windpipe right away. But it was a weapon you could use to focus your strength, or to make up for your lack of it. To defend yourself or to kill.

Darren propped herself up on one elbow. "Lynn, please."

I coiled it carefully and handed it back before I flopped down beside her. "Teach me to use it?"

Her eyes had slipped shut again; groggily, she shook her head. "Snot like a cutlass. No way to practice with it safely..."

"How did you learn?"

"Post," she yawned. "Padded post."

"So we'll set up a padded post. Honestly, do I have to do all the thinking around here?"

Darren didn't answer. Her chest rose and fell. Then she said, "If this ship gets boarded, we're all dead."

There was the self-mockery in her tone. The anger directed only at herself. I waited, and the next words were halting.

"I'm scared shitless every time I leave that harbour. Every time we head back to Kila. Every time..."

I waited long minutes, motionless, but there was nothing more. She slept, or more likely, pretended to sleep. I didn't see any prospect of doing that myself, so I filched the garrotte from her again and practised knots.

-

I'm not stupid. And more than that, my mind works in a particular way. Whenever I get to a new place, the first thing I check to see is how well it could be defended, if it came to that. The *Badger*, as I've said, was a trader. It was light, fairly fast, but not exceptionally so. Darren's only choice in Kilan waters was to stay far away from any other ship. A workable strategy if she was just passing through now and again. But she was making repeated trips between the islands and the mainland, rescuing refugees. The sea she had to cross was crammed with galleys, and each of those galleys had a crew twice as big as the *Badger* which was itchy for action and hungry for plunder. They'd go after the trader whether or not they knew Darren was captaining it. And if someone did figure it out- well.

It was just a matter of time, and she knew it.

Her men knew it too, and I couldn't figure out why they were following along so tamely. They had all sailed with Darren for years before her banishment, that was true. But was that enough of a reason for them to keep heading straight into the centre of the storm? Were they like Darren,

possessed by some kind of stupid guilt that made them incapable of looking after themselves? Were they just do-gooders at heart? Or did serving on the *Badger* offer opportunities for profit that I hadn't yet seen?

At long last, I just asked Regon: "Why the hell do you follow her? What's in it for you?"

He scratched in the stubble of his beard for long moments before he responded. "I dunno," he said.

Which made me suspect that I'd been overthinking the whole thing.

-

Darren shrugged when I told her. "That's Kila for you. Those sailors have been told all their lives to jump when a noble whistles."

"They love you," I objected.

"Oh, piss off."

She was tense that day.

That wasn't surprising. As we got closer to the islands of Kila, she was just getting worse and worse. She slept badly, and rarely sat still for an entire meal. Halfway through, she pause in mid-mouthful, as if the bread or beef or beans had suddenly rotted on her tongue, and push her portion away and wander off to the rail. The rest of us would look at each other, and then return our attention to our food.

It wasn't bad food, either- I cooked now more often than not, since I still wasn't up to some of the harder work shipside. But she almost never finished. Teek and Regon would divide her share between them.

I knew our destination. I had ferreted it out of Spinner early in the voyage. We were headed for the far side of the islands, to work our way along the coast from Isla as far as the granite cliffs. Along the way, we would pick up anyone who wanted rescuing and then ferry them back to the mainland, to Jess and Holly and their protective hands, to their valley full of peace and plenty. It was a longer trip than the *Badger* had made before, I gathered, but the need was becoming acute on that side of Kila. War galleys were being sunk by the dozens and anyone with a pulse was liable to be conscripted as a rower. Teek and Regon had stories of the things they had seen: seven-year-old boys chained to oars, old men being dragged from their beds as they begged to be allowed to die at home, families murdered over a few dried fish.

During the daytime, I mostly managed to keep Darren distracted. But one evening, I caught her vomiting over the rail when she thought no-one could see. I know what it looks like when you vomit from sheer terror. There's a lot of bile in it. I brought her some water. She took the cup from me and stared blankly at the ripples on the surface.

"You must think I'm an idiot," she said abruptly.

"Well, frankly, Mistress, yes. But you're the very best *kind* of idiot." I tugged at her sleeve.
"Come on. Bedtime."

-

After she chained me up that night, she paced up and down the tiny cabin- two and a half steps either way.

"Okay," she said at last. "How about I take your shoes?"

I was getting dizzy watching her. "What will that accomplish?"

"So that you can't run. Hard to run without shoes. You'll have to stay on board where the decks are smooth. So I won't ever have to bother with chaining you to anything." She nodded, satisfied.
"I think that'll work. Don't you think that'll work?"

There were a few seconds of silence.

"Don't you?" she asked, crestfallen.

"It's a good plan, Darren," I told her, as gently as I could. "It's a very good plan."

Her shoulders sagged. "But?"

I lifted a bare foot, and wiggled my toes at her.

"Oh cripes." She sank down and raked her fingers through her hair.

"It *was* a good plan," I said, still trying to reassure her. "You're getting closer."

"You don't wear shoes? Ever ever?"

"Fishing village, remember? It's not as if the nobles came through distributing footwear."

"Mpmph."

"It wasn't your fault."

"I *know* it wasn't my fault."

"Well, don't be embarrassed. You'll think of something."

-

The next morning, we reached Isla.

If I have a special sense, it's the ability to detect trouble. I might not be good at getting out of the way once I've sensed it- and in fact, some would argue otherwise- but I do know when it's coming. And *I knew*, that day, what we were going to find. I knew it before the charred husks of huts showed up against the green of the horizon. Before a thing that looked like a whale skeleton reared above them- what must once have been a granary.

As the ruins of the village grew nearer, Regon joined me silently at the rail- then Kash and Monmain, and finally all the crew except for Teek, who stood as ever, solid and implacable, at the tiller.

The final touch was the seal carcass that had washed up on the village beach. It slapped heavily on the damp sand as the tide rolled it a few inches forward, a few inches back. Gulls, tearing at the eyes, hopped daintily whenever the corpse moved beneath them.

There are dead villages, and then there are villages that happen not to have any living occupants. Isla was dead, carrion. No-one would live in this boneyard until a century's worth of trees had grown and fallen and rotted to soil above it.

Monmain and Kash, sombre as gravediggers, put down the anchor. Long before they were done, Darren was lowering the small boat into the water, trying to work both winches herself and generally making a hash of it. Teek, still silent, joined her, and then the others, one by one. When Kash, the seventh, climbed in, his weight pushed the gunwale of the small boat almost level with the sea. Regon shook his head warningly at Spinner and me, the only ones left on deck, and pushed off from the *Badger* with his oar.

Spinner and I looked at each other. We had identical, skull-like, uncontrollable grins.

"It shouldn't take them long," Spinner said.

"No," I agreed. "But we might as well keep busy." I had stolen a set of bone dice from Darren the night before, and now I took them from my pocket. "Come on, have a seat. Do you know how to play koro? Never mind, I'll teach you."

-

The small boat came clanking against the *Badger's* side before we were done with our second round of koro. Spinner wasn't a very quick student, and my mind wasn't on the game either.

Darren was on board first. She virtually rolled over the side, her chest heaving like a half-drowned swimmer. At some point, in her pain and rage, she had bitten her own arm, and a trickle of blood was making its way unhurriedly down from the puncture marks. She went straight for the tiller and gripped it with both hands. To try to stop herself from hitting something, I guessed.

Without warning, she drove her own head against the wood, three times- *crack, crack, crack.*

I started forward, unthinking, but Regon caught my elbow.

"She just hit bottom," he muttered in warning. "I don't know if anything can bring her out of it. Apart from a damn good bollocking."

Darren was still folded over the tiller, her whole torso wrenching in silent sobs- or maybe she was just gagging. "Well, then," I said, "a bollocking she shall have. See if you can keep the others out of the way."

-

Once I'd gotten her down to our cabin, I tried to start the conversation off. "So, Mistress, you-"

"Shut up."

"Not one of our better-"

"- shut up," she went on without pause, "shut up, *don't say anything, don't say one goddamn word, dammit, dammit, dammit, dammit, dammit-*"

"If I were Jess," I began, "I would be bloody furious round about now."

"Do NOT say that name."

"*If I were Jess,*" I continued, raising my voice, "I would be *furious*. And why? Because you left me in the first place to go and chase ghosts and corpses around Kila? No, if I were Jess, if I knew you that well and loved you that much, I would know you were too damn *noble* to let people hurt when there was something you could do to prevent it. I would understand that if you stayed in the valley, surrounded by peace and happiness and crocks of honey, it would burn you up inside until you couldn't bear living."

Her fist crashed into the wall, and then she winced and discretely shook it out. I let her take a second before I went on.

"Jess understands. She *does*, Darren. So does Regon. So do I. So does everyone. You couldn't have made a different choice and continued to be yourself. You had to come back to Kila." I paused. "You did a number on that fist, didn't you? Give it here."

Darren must have been dazed; she let me take her hand and inspect the shreds of skin dangling from her raw, bloody knuckles. I clucked impatiently, found a handkerchief and began to wrap it.

"But here's the thing, Darren," I continued. "If I were Jess then I would understand why you couldn't spend your life with me. But I would be royally, mortally, pissed if you just threw that life away."

Mechanically, she pulled her hand away from me. "I'm not-"

"*You are, Darren.* Never mind the fact that you throw yourself into every suicidal situation you can find, you won't even give yourself *permission* to live. No matter what you do, who you help, you twist yourself in knots- *you hurt yourself, Darren-* thinking of the people you *didn't* help."

"I never do enough," she said; her voice was hoarse, from a throat scraped raw. "It's never enough-"

"*You cannot save all of Kila by yourself.*"

"It's my damn responsibility to-"

"*You cannot save all of Kila by yourself.*" Now I was screeching. "*You stupid, beautiful, heroic, sulky, overgrown child, you cannot!*"

I broke off, my chest heaving, and rubbed my face with the sleeve of the linen shirt that used to belong to Holly. Darren's eyes were wide and baffled. From the deck, there was total quiet, where there should have been creaking and grunting and swearing and the bark of orders, and I wondered how many of the men were listening in.

"You do as much as you can with the tools you have," I went on once I'd caught my breath. "If you want to do more, you have to *be* more."

"Be what?" she said, sarcastic and kind of rude. "A pirate queen?"

"Sure," I said steadily. "You *could* do that, you know. You could capture other ships, larger ships, warships, and build a fleet. Recruit renegade sailors to defend you as you go about your good works. Loot the flotillas of rich merchants to provide for the poor. You'd end up in some morally suspect situations, for sure, but you could also help more people. You might even help end the war. Or you can just keep doing the smaller jobs in the *Badger*, with men you know and trust. It's up to you, but whatever your decision, don't beat yourself over the head with it. You don't have to take the world on your shoulders, just because you're a noble."

It actually seemed to be sinking in. She let out a long sigh, and I suspect that a few unhelpful thoughts and emotions went out with it. Her eyes closed, and her face became almost mild. And I felt my guard slipping. That was a mistake.

"I was a little distracted when I came on board," she said, as if casually, "but I thought I saw you and Spinner playing something. Knucklebones?"

"No," I said, surprised, "we were playing koro."

"You can play koro," she said.

"Of course I can play-" I began without thinking. Then stopped. The bottom dropped out of my stomach.

Shit.

Darren's eyes were open just a slit. "You can play koro, the 'Game of Kings.' And you can read, and write. Well enough to spell *Badger*, at least. And you don't mix up your pronouns and you don't swear every time you open your mouth. You're awfully well-educated, Lynn. At least for a peasant girl who grew up in a fishing village in the centre of bugtussle. There are things that you're not telling me."

A million panicked voices were yammering away inside my skull. I had only moments to think of a distraction, and the one that I came up with probably wasn't my best ever.

"Hey, look!" I blurted, pointing behind her. "Pie!"

Dead silence.

Well, that didn't work.

"Really, there are all kinds of possible explanations," I said, talking a little too fast. "Maybe I'm not a peasant at all, did you ever think of that? Maybe I was born to a rich merchant family in Kafiru and was educated along with a nobleman's daughter. Maybe the civil war started when I was thirteen and my parents smuggled me out to a distant village in the care of a faithful retainer. Maybe the faithful retainer eloped with a fisherman's wife of loose morals and took all the money and abandoned me there."

She was inspecting my face as though there was writing there that she had to decipher a word at a time.

"Maybe I'm just a really smart peasant," I concluded. "*You* don't know."

"You are..." she started wonderingly, and then shook her head and started again. "You are a very strange little person, do you know that, Lynn?"

I shrugged. "But you wouldn't have it any other way, right?"

"I wouldn't go quite that far," Darren said slowly. "But I don't hate it. I definitely don't hate it."

As an invitation, it was lukewarm at best. But patience is not my strong suit. Without giving myself the time to think about it, I closed the distance between us. She only took one step back—probably because that step took her up against the wall. But the panic on her face seemed like the *good* sort. I assume you know what I mean when I talk about the *good* sort of total, mindless fear.

"Lynn," she said. "Are you—"

"Yes, yes, yes I am," I answered, slipping my hands into her trouser pockets. "The question is, are you?"

She blinked.

She licked her lips.

She didn't move.

That was enough of an answer

This would have been a much better distraction, I realized, belatedly, once my lips were on hers. But I only dwelt on it for a moment, since other matters now required my full attention.

-

As you can imagine, I overslept the next morning. When I first woke, the hold was hot and damp rather than cool and damp and I judged that it was about noon. The blankets beside me were empty, but the depression where Darren had rested was still warm to the touch. She had gotten up not long before. I grinned into the blankets, turned over and went to sleep again.

My second sleep wasn't nearly as pleasant as the first. There were strange sharp-edged dreams that rattled back and forth in my brain, pictures that didn't attach to each other: bitter-green fish with teeth like icicles, men with rats instead of hands. The visions all blended and fell, blended and fell, rolled over me in a great dark wave, and I was left somewhere dark and airless, with one thing, one thought thudding at my mind like the beat of a drum: *They will find you, they will get you back, they will find you-*

The heat was more oppressive, now. The heat was terrible.

"Leave me alone," I could hear myself saying, "damn your blood, can't you just leave me *alone?*-"

"Wake up. There's no time."

My eyes snapped open. Darren was a blur of furious motion around the cabin: snatching up her cutlass, sheathing a long dagger in each boot. Each motion quick and precise, never a fumble. You might think it strange that she wasn't afraid, but there's always an air of unreality right before violence erupts. That five minutes before a battle are like the five seconds after you fall out of a boat, when you feel like you might just be able to walk on water.

As soon as she saw me looking, her hand flew to a pocket and came out with the key to my leg chain. She threw it down beside me and it bounced three times against the boards, *tink- tink- tink*.

"Get loose," she tossed at me as she raced for the stairs. "Hurry up."

Still half-asleep, I sat upright, groping for the key. I wanted to refuse, yell at Darren, demand an explanation- but then there came a roaring in my ears, as though I had suddenly recovered from deafness, and a wave of sounds crashed at me. That hollow booming from the curved side of the ship- that was another ship alongside, colliding against us. There were creaks and howls as the men from that ship poured onto ours, battle roars, the *shring* of cutlasses, and then a *thud* I could feel through the planks as a body hit the deck hard. All of a sudden, I was wide awake, and all of a sudden too, Darren's suggestion didn't seem so completely ridiculous. I knelt down and fumbled with the chain on my ankle, but my hands were sweating and the key slipped from them. I scrabbled on the bare planks, felt metal- but the next second felt it slipping sideways into a crack between two planks- and under my searching fingertips, it fell all the way through.

The key was gone. Unbelieving, I rattled the manacle on my ankle. It held firm, of course. I wouldn't have settled for anything less. I scooted along the length of the chain and yanked at the end where it was bolted to a deck support. Regon had assured me that it wouldn't come loose. Unfortunately, he was right.

I was beginning to wonder whether perhaps I had been a little bit stupid when a body came crashing down the stairs from the deck, landed heavily on its side, rolled twice and lay still.

It was Darren. There were two bloody slashes on her that I could see, one along the ribs and one on her shoulder, plus the bruises and scrapes from her trips down the stairs, and a swelling, gory lump. But there was a quivering beneath her eyelids. She wasn't gone yet.

Yet. Yet. Shadows at the doorway paused, looking down at Darren's body, and moved away. The battle was still crashing away overhead, and whoever our attackers were, they had decided that they could deal with Darren after they brought down the rest of the crew. That gave me time. Perhaps five minutes. Five minutes to figure out how to save Darren when I was unarmed, chained to the deck, and half the size and weight of any of our attackers.

Blankly, I stared at the floor. There were footprints on it, Darren's footprints. The waves must have been high that day, wetting the decks up top, because, when she had rushed around the cabin getting her weapons a bare quarter-hour before, she had left footprint-shaped puddles of seawater. A quarter-hour before, Darren had been upright and walking; now she was prone on the boards. In all likelihood, someone would tramp down in five minutes and casually stab her where she lay.

Those two pictures on top of each other- Darren whole and walking, Darren prone and bleeding- nearly made me scream at the top of my lungs.

Yet it was those patches of sea water that gave me the idea.

It was absolutely and without question the stupidest idea I had ever had, and six months before, I would never have considered doing such a thing. Not to save my life. But this was Darren's life- and that was different. I don't think I hesitated more than ten seconds.

Reaching out, I moistened my fingers, then brought them to my face and scrubbed my eyes. Within a few seconds, they were stinging viciously and though I couldn't check on the effect, I was sure that they were red and swollen. My clothes were next and as I tried to rip the cloth, I muttered curses that Rowan's cast-offs were so well-made. I had to settle for tearing off a few buttons so that the shirt showed more than it should have. Last was my skin and here again I didn't give myself time to think. I scratched three nails along the length of my face, from forehead to chin, leaving open scratches that were soon beaded by tiny drops of blood. I bit my shoulder close to the breast, not managing to break the skin, but the tooth marks looked deep and convincing. I wanted to try for finger-shaped bruises on one wrist, but now the clamour on deck had quieted. There were shouts, some laughing voices, but none I knew and I wondered briefly how many of Darren's crew had died- but now footsteps were approaching the steps again. No time for more artistic touches.

I was tearing up already, but just in case, I dipped my fingers in the brine again, and flecked a few drops on my cheeks, just below my eyes. Then I huddled on the boards, my arms crossed protectively over my stomach, and lay like a dead thing.

-

It took supreme effort not to look up as whoever-it-was reached the bottom of the steps, but I managed it.

"She's still out," said a man's voice.

"From that little tap?" said a woman. "She always was a wimp."

Her accent was refined, cultured. This was another noblewoman, the captain of the attacking ship.

"Want to wait for her to wake up before you finish it?"

"I don't think that's necessary."

There was a creaking step as one of them moved forwards. That was my cue. I let out a choking, terrified sob.

I wasn't prepared for how fast the woman moved. Half a second later she was at the cabin doorway, bloody rapier upraised. My panic wasn't all an act as I scrambled backwards, away from her, as far as the chain would allow- cowered against the side of the boat, and peeped at her from behind my fingers. She assessed me, and the tip of the rapier lowered.

"Darren's got an on-board whore?" she asked lightly. "I didn't think that she had it in her."

I wet my lips before stammering out, "Is she dead?"

She glanced over her shoulder. "Nearly. Oh, by the way-"

One second she was nowhere near me, and the next second she had given me a vicious cuff on the side of the head, and the pain was like red-hot pincers. My hand flew to my ear, cradling it, as her face loomed over me. "I am the *Lady* Mara, of the house of Namor. Don't let the formalities slide, just because we're on a boat."

The circumstances didn't bode well for my relationship with Mara in any case, but I truly think that I would have disliked her- instinctively, immediately- wherever and whenever we had met. It was the voice, the spoiled sweetness of it. That, and something about the eyes.

"I'm sorry, my lady," I said automatically. My teeth were chattering, in spite of the heat. "But- please- my lady, are any of the others dead?"

There was a flicker of interest in those eyes now. "Just one, unfortunately. The big one with ears like a monkey."

Oh, Kash. I didn't let myself show any sign of the grief that came stabbing that moment- especially as Mara continued to talk.

"We're not supposed to be wasting sailors these days- they're in short supply, or something like that. We're supposed to *conserve* them during fights. It makes things horribly boring. But now I'd like to know-" There was a flash of that viper-fast movement again, and then she was holding my chin tightly between finger and thumb. "Just why exactly are you interested, little girl?"

I closed my eyes for a whisper of a moment, rummaged around me for all the hatred and fury I'd ever felt in my first seventeen years, and forced it all into my voice: "I want them dead. I want them all dead. Especially *her*."

She patted my cheek. It felt like getting slapped. "Be careful what you wish for, now. I'm going to kill her, yes, but you may end up looking back fondly on your time here. There are worse jobs in Kila these days than being chained to Darren's bed. Such as being chained to mine. And that's one of the few careers open to you at the moment."

I let a trickle of injured *hauteur* enter my tone. "But Lady Mara, you don't understand, you can't do that!"

She grabbed me by my injured ear this time, and I couldn't stop myself from crying out as she yanked it upwards. "What makes you think you can tell me what to do, peasant?"

"But...that's...just...it!" I pled, blinking the tears out of my eyes. "Not a peasant- I'm *not* a peasant..."

She let go of my ear. I hit the boards with a bump, my hands hovering protectively near my face.

"Talk fast," she said.

"I've been here almost four months," I said quickly. "She kidnapped me, that *pirate*- she kidnapped me from the north island. From Bero."

Her hands slapped down on my shoulders; her fingers dug in; she drew me close. "The House of Bain rules Bero," she said. "Are you trying to make me laugh? Everyone knows that the lord of Bain only has one child."

"That's me," I said, through my rattling teeth. "I'm Ariadne. I'm his daughter."

-

There were five frozen seconds then. I wondered whether she was going to laugh in my face. But then her legs straightened as though they had springs.

"Captain?" came the voice of Mara's crewman, from outside the cabin. "Everything all right?"

"Fine," Mara said, her eyes not moving from me.

"The pervert's moving around a bit here, you want me to finish her?"

"No!" I cut in hastily. "No, please, you can't!"

Mara's hand twitched, and I flinched back, but she controlled herself. Even if she didn't entirely believe me, she couldn't risk inflicting more damage on the heir to such a powerful house as Bain. She had to content herself with saying, "I thought I pointed out that I dislike being told what to do. Besides, you want her dead."

"My father has to execute her," I said desperately. "Because I've been- taken, I've been sullied- he has to execute her himself to take the stain away. Please, he'll pay anything if you bring me back to him, and deliver her alive."

She studied me. "I have a contract to get rid of Darren," she said. "She's embarrassing her daddy. Now what do you think will happen to my reputation if I don't make good, hmm?"

"Darren is of the house of Torasan," I said, with more than a little distaste. "Stribos is a miser and the bulk of his wealth comes from *salmon fishing*. My father Iason of Bain will take any fee you name, and triple it, and fill your ship with silver besides. Please," I said, gathering strength for the ultimate appeal. "*I am his only child*. If it's known that I'm gone, he'll lose everything."

There was a faint smile on Mara's lips now. Her hand moved, and I flinched again, but it just ruffled my hair lightly.

"You stay put, now," she said. "Don't move a muscle." Then she moved outside the cabin, and her steps creaked up the stairs, followed an instant later by the more hulking steps of the other sailor. I closed my eyes, slowed my breathing, and listened as hard as I could.

"If that girl is really Ariadne," came Mara's oily tone, "then she's worth her weight in diamonds."

"Yes, but-" the man's voice hesitated- "do you believe her, Lady Mara?"

"I'm not sure," Mara admitted. "Maybe I should check and see whether she can play koro."

-

The voices moved further up the stairs, and away. Gingerly, I touched my ear- it *really* hurt, though I'd had worse- and then edged across the floor to Darren. Stretching the chain to its full limit, I just managed to reach her. Most of her injuries looked worse than they were. The only dangerous one was the bump on her head. It was fever-hot, and sticky with blood, but she'd live.

"Ow," she muttered.

My fingers froze. "Were you listening?"

"Yes."

"Do you know this woman? Mara?"

"Distant cousin. Bounty hunter. Totally insane. Is it true, what you told them? About you and the House of Bain?"

I sighed. "No. And- yes. And no. It's complicated. Can we go with 'no' for now?"

"I met Lord Iason once," she murmured. "Didn't like him. He smiled too much." Her breath went in and out with a painful rattle. "I remember though- his hair. Very pale. Like wheat."

"Darren," I said firmly, "focus."

I hauled her into a sitting position and checked quickly for broken bones, then did my best to comb blood-stiffened hair away from her forehead. "You're a mess. Never mind. Are you listening?"

"Gah," she said, with a shake of the head. I decided to take that as a "yes."

"Darren, that barrel has oil in it- no, not that one, *that* one- the one I'm pointing at- would you look up, please?- thank you- yes, that barrel there. I need it. Get the bung out for me."

She blinked.

Oh, well. Sometimes pirate queens need a bit of extra encouragement, and don't we all? I took her face between my hands, carefully, and kissed both of her eyes. The sound she made was something like a squeak.

Then I turned her head to the side, careful not to touch the lump again, and spoke right in her ear. "Get on with it, Mistress."

Grey-blue eyes, wide and staring in the dark. Then, without warning, they narrowed. Focused.

Her boot-heel lashed out and struck the bung of the barrel neatly in its centre. It shot back into the barrel's depths, and oil began to spill over the floor in long, slow *gloops*. I scooted over to the puddle, took a handful of the stuff, and carefully rubbed it over my ankle and foot. I took another handful and dribbled it into the space between the shackle and my skin.

Darren had the idea, now. "Flex your foot," she said. "Straighten it as far as you can."

I flexed and she took the shackle between calloused hands. "This might hurt," she warned.

"I know. Do it fast."

She yanked. There was a single wrenching second when I thought my tendons would all snap and the flesh rip, but then my greasy foot shot out of the cuff. Darren flew backwards, just managing to catch herself on her elbows.

We both froze, listening. There was a *creak creak* on the planks near the stairs, as though someone was hovering indecisively. Mara was still dithering. We had a little time.

I helped Darren up again. She moved jerkily, wincing once she was on her feet. "I don't think I'm going to be able to do much fighting," she warned.

"You don't have to," I said. "Just come here a second."

I plunged a hand in her pocket (she squeaked again) and as I had hoped, my fingers closed on the garrotte. They hadn't noticed the thin coil of sinew when they disarmed her. I tied a careful slip-knot in it, as I had been taught, and then pulled it over my head.

I handed both ends to Darren, and watched her eyes widen as she realized what I was asking her to do. I hastily held up a finger. "Don't argue! Just try not to faint when we go up there."

Her hands were shaking. "Lynn," she said, "oh hell and damnation, Lynn, this is such a bad idea."

"It won't be if it works. Besides, I don't have a choice."

"I guess not," she said, and then she licked her lips. "You know- you remember that day, back in your village? When you told me that I didn't have the right to make the choice for you? Have you been getting your revenge on me ever since?"

"Nooooo," I said doubtfully, drawing out the word. "Or maybe I was in the beginning- but- I've always known that choices are overrated. Back when I was living in that godforsaken fishing

village, I had to make choices *all* the time. Where to look for food. Where to hide when the raiders came through. That sort of thing. But none of it mattered. Nothing I could choose to do would improve things, or save anyone, or change anything. I had plenty of choices, but I had no *control*. It's been like that all my life."

"And after I took you?" Her face was bare and inscrutable in the darkness.

"After you took me, it was exactly the opposite. Can't you see that?"

"I think so," she said slowly. "I think I do. So you don't want a choice about- well- whether to stay with me?"

"Let's say that I don't need one." I did my best to smile at her, though my throbbing ear was sending hot jolts through my head. "How about we get this over with?"

Painfully, she straightened her back. "Once we start with this, we can't stop for a break. It might get kind of intense."

"I can handle it," I promised.

She studied me. "Yeah, you can, can't you?" she said. Her shaking hand brushed a loose hair from my cheek. "Guess I just need to worry about myself, then. Let's get on with it."

She wound the garrotte around her left hand, and took my shoulder in her right. Then- her striding, me stumbling before her- we headed up the stairs.

-

The sunlight was blinding- could it be much later than noon? For a second, I could see nothing but a white glare and misty shapes moving up and down on the bobbing deck. Then things came into focus: Darren's crew, disarmed and bound, were kneeling next to the rails. Teek had lost half an ear, and Regon was bent over a stomach wound, but those were the worst injuries. Mara's crew was grouped around them. Mara herself leaned casually on the tiller- deep in thought, it seemed. Kash's body- huge, sprawled, leaking, horrible- lay propped against the mast. The whole scene was overshadowed by the war galley lashed to the *Badger's* right side. When I staggered, and caught at the cord around my own neck, I wasn't acting. The swaying deck, the spray, the bright splashes of blood over the boards, made everything seem more than a little unreal- a dream of a dream, the memory of a memory.

Darren, fortunately, was on top of things. "Get back!" she roared, and the sound made every hair on my head stand erect. "I can cut her throat any second I choose. GET BACK! DROP YOUR WEAPONS!"

At least five men lunged forwards instead. Mara clearly hadn't briefed them on the situation- but her voice rang out, "STOP!"

Her men were still instantly, recoiling. Mara walked up herself, using the tail of her shirt to wipe blood from her rapier.

"Well, well, Darren," she said. "This is unusual behaviour for you."

"I'll do it," Darren grated, and her hand twitched. "One pull, and your big payout is in two pieces on the floor."

"When you were a *child*, Darren, you wouldn't even hit your dog..."

Darren gave the garrotte a vicious yank. Actually, she didn't put any extra tension at all on the cord- she had tied the sinew to her wrist, and she yanked at the slack. But I gave a strangled gasp at the right moment and it must have seemed convincing enough, because the mocking look fell from Mara's face.

"You piece of scum," Darren said, "you think you know anything about me? How have you been spending your time since the war began? Chasing down petty criminals and begging my father for scraps? You were a bitch when you were a child, Mara, and that hasn't changed, has it? You always need someone's feet to lick."

For the first time, the smugness in Mara's eyes was gone. There was a tiny flame licking there.

"Big words," Mara said, "for someone whose only ship is an eight-man trader."

Darren laughed. "It's not in my interest to convince you of anything, Mara. But bear in mind that I made it past Iason's defences, his blockade, his entire navy, and got out again, with his daughter in my bed. Let's say that I have...resources."

"You expect me to believe-" Mara began falteringly, and that falter said everything. The story was, of course, ludicrous. The House of Bain, at the time, had the best coastal defences of any state in Kila. It still does, as a matter of fact. But every word from Darren's mouth carried conviction. It was her stance, her swagger, her- everything.

Darren laughed again. "You think I'm frightened of Iason? I don't do anyone's dirty work these days, Mara. You're the bitch of the great and powerful, *I am the pirate queen*. And you've taken on more than you can handle."

It was all I could do to not burst out cheering. Then Darren gave the cord another yank, and not cheering became easier.

"Now," Darren said. "Are you prepared to lose a windfall like this?" She patted my head again. "Because if you want her, you can have her. I can get a new one. You'll just need to let me and my men go on our way."

Mara barked a startled laugh. "I must admit, Darren- somewhere along the line, you developed balls of pure iron."

Darren shrugged. "I think it's a fair enough trade. She's worth a king's ransom, of course, but I took her for more personal reasons- and let me say, she doesn't disappoint. You might want to try her out a few times at first before you take her home. I'm sure you can convince her not to tell."

This was getting to be a bit much. Trying to look as though I was wrenching at the tight cord, I found Darren's hand and pinched her as hard as I could. She yelped, and then had to continue "YEES- that's the deal. And you've got ten seconds before I close it." She raised her hand, the one with the end of the garrotte, to show what she meant, but she didn't apply pressure again.

The seconds ticked by. I could hear my own heartbeat.

"Very well," Mara said at last. "How do you plan on doing this?"

"First step's easy. Unbind my men."

Mara gave a short nod to her sailors, and several of them stooped by Darren's crew. It's a peculiar thing about sailors that they *never* cut ropes when they can untie them, so it was several minutes, as sweat-beats prickled on my forehead, before Darren's six surviving crewmen stood up. Regon was still hunched over his wound. He gave me a shaky smile.

"Now. Back up. All of you. Onto your own ship. Mara, you'll be last, and you can have her as soon as you cross over."

One by one, they began moving. Even Mara was headed obediently backwards. The plan was working, so far as it went- the problem was, as I was beginning to realize, that it went no further. If Darren didn't let go of me, then Mara wouldn't back off. If Darren did let go of me, she would instantly lose her bargaining chip. There would be nothing to stop Mara and her men from swarming back over the *Badger*. None of our sailors had the strength for more than a token resistance, and Darren was already swaying on her feet.

This plan wouldn't accomplish anything. Mara, her hands raised, shuffling slowly back towards her war galley, knew that. Darren knew that too- I could tell when her hands suddenly sagged.

Which meant- I swallowed twice, and my head felt light and dizzy and heavy all at once- which meant that it was time for something drastic.

"Darren," I whispered, my breath barely stirring the air, "can you hear me?"

"Yeah. Look, this is-"

"Doomed, I know. I have an idea. Loosen the garrotte, push me at Mara just as she's stepping over the side."

The first of Mara's men were stepping over the rail, back onto their own ship. Darren's voice was tiny, desperate: "Please don't ask me to risk your life-"

"You're not," I assured her, hoping that she wouldn't question that statement further. "Just- just trust me, okay?"

The sun beat down. Mara's sailors hopped the rails, one by one.

Finally Mara stood alone, Darren a few feet away, me between them.

Darren put her hand between my neck and the cord. Slowly, she loosened it. A smile was creeping around Mara's face.

"Step up onto the rail," Darren instructed. Her voice was shaking, but not so you'd notice. Not unless you knew her well. "Step up, and- she's yours."

Mara stepped, adjusted her balance, held out a hand. The nails looked like claws.

The loop of the garrotte lifted up and over my neck. Darren's hand reached for my back, as though she was going to push me- but it was just a caress. Her fingers still shook.

I stepped forwards, and Mara's hand closed around my wrist and pulled me up-

-

I'm not Darren. Never have been, never will be. Sacrifice comes as easy to Darren as navigation, but Darren, you see, is noble. Noble in the true sense, noble in her core, completely free of any kind of meanness or selfishness. I myself never wanted to suffer for others. I did enough suffering on my own behalf. I thought it was enough if I dealt with that.

What I found out, that moment, is that sacrifice is easy if you have a good enough reason.

I could still imagine Darren's hand on my back. It was enough.

-

The instant that Mara pulled me up, to the ship's side, I grabbed her around the waist with one arm- then locked my knees behind hers and bent them. Her balance was thrown; one foot came off the rail entirely. She staggered, tried to jump down to the deck of one of the ships, but I held tight and pushed off with both legs. Together we slipped, stumbled, down the canyon between the two ships, bashing against the sides, and then into the water. Shouts from above us, screams which I ignored.

Mara was lashing out, her scream a furious gargle. I snaked my arms around her and went limp, a dead weight, pulling us both under. The waters closed above our heads- a green milky spill with the sun bobbing on the surface. Our heads clanged against barnacled wood. Mara was tearing at my arms, striking at any flesh she could reach, but within a few seconds even the blows seemed very distant.

Then it grew darker. Darker, darker...

-

There followed a wonderful glorious time of nothing. It was soft and dim and peaceful, something like being dipped in black cream. But it didn't last. There was a terrible, crushing blow to my chest- like a mule had kicked it, a boulder dropped on it, like a bull had pinned me against a wall and was pushing, pushing, pushing. The black around me shattered into spiky pieces with razor edges that glittered before they embedded themselves at the back of my brain. I was forced to take a long strangled breath, which felt like inhaling a million red-hot tacks. My whole chest bucked. And the next instant, the donkey kicked me in the chest again. I only managed to give a weak gurgling kind of sound in protest.

"Breathe, damn you, breathe, breathe, breathe-"

It was Darren's voice and she didn't sound good. Through the headache and the chestache and the everything-else-ache, I tried to flop my hand a little to reassure her. My hand ached too, I discovered.

"Will you open your eyes, damn you! *Damn you!* Open your goddamn eyes or I'm not going to be responsible for what happens next!" She was still pounding on my chest- it hurt as much as ever- and her words came out in time to the blows. "You- stupid- bloody- idiot- KID!"

My chest was about to cave in. I made a huge concentrated effort, and managed to pry one eye a slit open.

"Darren, stop, she's awake," came Teek's voice, deep and reassuring- and then his horn-hard hands were there too, gently prying us apart. "It's all right, captain. You can stop. You can stop."

She was breathing more heavily than usual. Has she been running, screaming, or crying? All three?

Without warning she lunged, twisted her hands in Holly's spare shirt, hauled me up, and gave me a bone-splintering hug that almost stopped my breathing again. Just as quickly she let go and I flopped back to the deckboards.

"Ow," I complained, opening my eye a little wider this time.

Her face- red, her hair- wild; her eyes- wild; her tunic- damp and salt-crust-ed; her face- oh, this is pointless. You know. Or at least, you know if you've ever felt anything like it. It was the pure explosion of feeling, at least half madness, that makes you drunk and dizzy and elated and terrified all at once, and which, once felt, you want to feel forever. She took my face gently between her hands, and that was it, that was the moment, when the game was over for Darren, formerly of the House of Torasan. She had been claimed, and she knew it, and she was no longer interested in resisting it.

It had taken her long enough. But it was worth the wait. I let her ride out the emotion for a minute before I asked the obvious question. "Where's Mara?"

Darren made a subtle thumbs-down. "Spinner and Teek and I had a little fight over who was going to go in after you. By the time we got in, it was over. She must have swallowed a lot of water, screaming that way."

"What about her crew?"

Darren glanced up, ruefully, and I followed her eyes. Mara's sailors were, again, on the deck of the *Badger*, but this time they were drawn up in respectful ranks, watching Darren attentively. They were obviously waiting for orders.

*Blood is rank and blood is right, blood alone is rulership...*No-one even had to explain things out loud. With Mara dead, her crew automatically looked to Darren- the only other person around whom they knew to have noble blood. She might be an outcast, but she was the best available- and the only one who could navigate.

"Solves one problem, I guess," she admitted. "But what am I supposed to do with *that* monstrosity?"

"The war galley? Isn't it obvious, Mistress? That's the next addition to your fleet." I let Darren help me sit up. "In fact, I think that we should name it after me."

"What?" She glanced at me sideways. "The *Lynn*?"

"I was thinking more along the lines of the *Idiot Kid*."

-

A long, weary while later, Darren and I finally got to go back down below. But even then she was brooding.

"You know, Ariadne," she began.

"Don't call me that," I said, cutting her off. "That's not my name."

"You know, *Lynn*, they'd all follow *you* if they knew that you were Iason's heir."

I shrugged. "I'm not..."

One eyebrow lifted.

"...really," I finished limply. "I mentioned that it was complicated, right?"

"Is this one of the things that you'll tell me one day?"

"Probably. I hope so." I flopped onto the blankets, wondering if I did in fact hope that I could tell her. When had that *ever* been something that I wanted to do? Well, whatever. I shrugged all that part of me away as I said, "Aren't you forgetting something?"

"What?"

I pointed to the length of anchor rope that I had brought to the cabin earlier, and she shrugged. "What's that for?"

"That is because you lost the key to the chain. Which was pretty bloody careless of you, if you want to know the truth."

"YOU lost the key," she said automatically, and it was only after a second that she added, "Um, *what?*"

I held out my ankle. "Get knotting. And you'd better make it good if you don't want me to slip loose in the middle of the night. Show off some of that sailor ingenuity."

"Oh, you're not going to make me keep doing this..."

"You really don't know the first thing about being a feared and dreaded pirate, do you?" I petted her dark shaggy head as she crouched by my ankle, knotting the tarry rope around it securely. "Never mind. I'll get you there."

"IF I don't go berserk and throw you overboard." She swivelled so that she could tie the other end of the rope to a deck support.

"No, I don't think you'll do that," I said serenely. "Besides, you won't have to keep me tied up much longer. Just until we design the mark."

Her face came up, baffled. "Until we design the *what* now?"

"Your mark. The one you're going to put on me."

"Wait, wait, WAIT. Are you talking about a brand? Because there is no chance I'm branding you. Not a flaming chance."

"Damn right you're not branding me. Ow. You're tattooing me. Once I've had a chance to come up with the design. I wouldn't want one that looks stupid."

"Lynn," she said, finished now with the rope, as she sat on the blankets beside me. "Why the hell do you want me to tattoo you?"

"Because it's the simplest way to keep me from escaping. You mark me so that if I run, anyone

who finds me will send me back. So obviously I won't bother to run."

"Oh, Lynn..."

"What?"

"Lynn, what happens next?"

She had never sounded so lost. Part of me wanted to stop, take her chin, make her look at me, explain. Explain how she worried about all the wrong things; explain to her why her guilt was needless; how I knew both what she wanted to be and what she could be- or I would never have bothered with her at all. I know you're tired, I wanted to say, I know you think everything rests on you. If you trust me, if you only trust me, I can make things get better, I will *make* things get better; I won't accept anything less.

But I wouldn't ask her to trust me that way. Not yet- just as there were things that she couldn't yet ask of me. For the time being, I would carry the weight for both of us- and I would simply give her what she needed.

"I'll tell you what happens next," I said, as I took her shoulder and eased her back with me onto the blankets. "You keep me on this ship for oh, at least a couple of years, as I become an expert sailor and a proven fighter. You capture more ships, and expand your fleet, and your fame spreads wider and wider. Eventually- after years in your service- I learn to believe in you and your cause, and, though I'm still bound to serve you, I become your most trusted captain. Together we turn your fleet into the most powerful fighting force in the east- feared by the rich and guilty and loved by the innocent. Admirals surrender as soon as they catch sight of your flag; entire armadas betray their leaders and flock to your command. In the end, you don't even have to fight to take the islands. Hordes of people demand that you take your rightful place on the throne of the High Queen, and they welcome you with cries of joy. And I'm at your side as you walk into the palace."

She looked at me- and she didn't roll her eyes, for a change. "Is that what's going to happen?"

As though the answer really mattered.

I shrugged. "You tell me, Mistress. You're in charge, after all."

Then I took her by the back of the neck and pulled her to me.

[\(Continued in Part Two: "What She Said."\)](#)

~ Shell Game ~

by Zipplie

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All characters and plotlines are my own. This is the second part of Shell Game and will make negative infinity sense if you have not read the first installment. Hopefully it will make some sense if you have. If not, feel free to chasten me by e-mail. You will note that this segment is narrated by Darren, formerly a broody merchant captain, and now pirate queen.

This story includes, among other things (deep breath): a violent civil war, kicks to the groin, pirates, piratical violence, onion bread, ropes, hickeys, swearing, references to sex between women, references to sex not between women, implied references to past abuse, two adult consenting women who are still in a sorta kinda BDSM relationship, and parsnip fritters. All feedback is very very welcome indeed. Yarr.

Part 2

WHAT SHE SAID

All right, I admitted to myself, I'm losing.

It's a bad idea to reach that conclusion in the middle of a fight. You make more mistakes when your confidence is rattled. Better to believe that you're a wizard, a sword saint, god of war, right up to the moment when someone slits you up the middle and your entrails come boiling out.

Except that we seemed to be nearing that point. I hadn't even marked Tyco yet, while his big sabre had carved a long bloody furrow along my side, and left a deep slash in my sword arm. It had come dangerously close to the tendon. I winced every time I tried to extend and even when I managed to slash or stab, Tyco batted my blade away with embarrassing ease. My own blood was streaming down into my right boot, making it *squish* when I took a step. We were beyond the denial stage. I was losing.

I'm not bad with a cutlass, but there's always someone better. I should have known that Tyco would be good. His ship, the *Kraken*, had struck three coastal towns over the past month, with a speed and ferocity that left little but red-churned soil in his wake. Before the war, he had been armsmaster to the House of Namor; now he was clearly enjoying the freedom that he had gained since the government crumbled and the seas turned wild. And his crew was much the same. Many of the sailors that I fought in those days had been ripped from their homes and sent to the warships against their will. Oftentimes they would fall at my feet in mid-battle and beg to be allowed to surrender. But not Tyco's men. They fought with bared teeth, snarling as often as not; the hilts of their weapons and the hems of their shirts bore a crust of dried blood.

Still, we weren't doing badly. My new flagship, the *Banshee*, had hooked Tyco's beast just before dawn. His crew managed to throw off the grappling hooks, but only after thirty of my best troops flowed over the side and onto the *Kraken*. On the deck below, they were slowly forcing back Tyco's wildmen. Near the bow, my quartermaster Corto was dealing beautiful strokes to the

Kraken's mate. Amidships, Latoya was fending off three bandits at once, making her length of heavy chain shrill as she whipped it through the air. Even skinny Spinner was holding his own. So what was the matter with *me*?

I wasn't the only one wondering. Tyco had stopped fighting his hardest. Now he was toying with me, flicking his sabre in quick slashes that left my shirtsleeves in bloody ribbons. His grin was wide and ugly. When I lunged too far and overbalanced, he actually sent me stumbling with a boot in my rear.

That was just *rude*. I caught myself against the side, then tried to catch my breath.

"You know," Tyco said, as he raised his sabre for the finish, "I expected more, from the pirate queen."

"You're not the only one," I muttered under my breath, and forced myself to lurch forwards.

-

I never *planned* to become a pirate queen.

But I also didn't plan to be stripped of my rank and title for kissing another woman in public. Nor did I plan for my homeland to get embroiled in the worst civil war since the days when dragons crawled the earth. And I definitely didn't plan to meet some cheeky kid of twenty who would demand to be chained to the mast of my ship and then refuse to be let go.

Plans change, is what I'm trying to say.

-

My arms were giving out. Each time I moved my right shoulder, my muscles screeched with agony. I was done, and Tyco knew it. He slapped away my last desperate strike and pulled back ready for a thrust. I should have ducked and rolled, but my reflexes had slowed to a crawl. I just gaped, and tried to remember whether I'd composed a set of heroic last words.

Then there was a flash of *something* in the air above Tyco's head. He could have saved himself, maybe, if his reaction had been instant, but he blinked, and that was enough. The next second, he stumbled, a gargling noise forced its way out of his throat, and his eyes bugged madly; fumbling fingers reached up towards his throat, feeling the thin leather braid that now encircled it. There was a jerk on the cord, and he was dragged up, still gargling, to the tips of his toes- then came a sharp *crack* as someone behind him delivered an expert kick to the back of his knees. The big man staggered forwards, falling, and the girl standing behind him let out enough slack on the cord that he crashed face-first into the deck.

I lowered my sword arm in utter relief. But the words burst out of me anyway: "I ordered you to stay on the damn *Banshee*, Lynn!"

"Did you, Mistress?" Lynn said vaguely, as she stooped to loosen the garrotte from around Tyco's neck. "That's not how I remember it. I think you ordered me to come save your hide when you were just about to get spitted."

"Oh, really?" I shook out my aching hand.

"Mmm-hmm. I heard you distinctly. And what a wise and foresightful order it turned out to be."

Lynn's eyes flicked over the scene, the struggling men on the lower deck, but as she watched, she unhooked a flask from her belt. "You also ordered me to bring the brandy."

That was more like it. I grabbed for the bottle and took three long gulps. The heat sang all the way through me, and my numb limbs began to tingle.

"You ordered me to drink some myself, too," Lynn went on, taking the bottle back and tipping it towards her mouth.

"Very considerate of me. How the hell did you get over here?" The *Banshee* was floating free, some thirty yards away.

"Swam," Lynn said succinctly, and I should have known that from the way her clothes were plastered to her body. "Don't blame Regon. He tried to stop me; I threatened to belt him in the happy sack. Now can we get back to business? Slashing and screaming and saving the world?"

My brain took its time processing this. Battle- fight- bloody death- right. Every inch of me stung, and I wanted nothing more than to curl up on the deck with Lynn for a nap. But that would have to wait. Reluctantly, I gripped my cutlass by its red, sticky hilt.

"Will you stay out of the fight if I order you?" I asked Lynn, almost as an afterthought, and without much hope.

"Mistress, I *always* do what you order me to do." Lynn's eyes fastened on Spinner, who was now hard pressed by his opponent. "It is, however, just possible that I will fail to hear you. I've still got some water in my ears."

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To be fair, Lynn did stay out of the worst part of the fighting. She made two darting sallies into the thick of things, to throttle men whose attention was elsewhere, and she pulped some knuckles with a well-aimed belaying pin. But when things were finally over, with the last of Tyco's men gurgling on the deck or crumpling to their knees, she bobbed up before me as fresh and unmarked as a lady's handkerchief.

As usual.

"That could have been worse," she told me, as I leaned, gasping, against the *Kraken's* side. "We

didn't lose as many as I expected. And you seem to have all of your important bits still attached. Are you in a lot of pain?"

I waved a hand, trying to look nonchalant. "No. I'm fine, I just need to catch my breath. Or crawl into a corner and die for a while. Finish up for me?"

"I hear and obey. Naturally." Taking my wrist, she guided my hand into place over the deep slash in my arm. "Spinner will be by to stitch you in a minute. Keep pressure there until he does."

She gave my hand a squeeze, turned, drew up her shoulders- and then walked unhurriedly to the poop deck.

She was a study, the small person who called herself my slave. For the swim to the ship, she had stripped down to a linen shirt and open-kneed breeches. They were more or less dry by now, but they still made her look waif-like, especially since her feet were bare, and her hair close-cropped. Weaponless, unarmoured, she looked utterly out of place amongst all that leather and steel. Yet she picked her way between the pools of blood with unconcern.

She reached Tyco just as he was beginning to twitch and blink. "Latoya?" she called. "A little help?"

Latoya was a recent acquisition- we'd picked her up in a raid down south- and a very useful one. She was over six feet high and built like a rhino, and she faced down raiders and thunderstorms with the same unflinching calm. I had appointed her bosun of the *Banshee*, but she had quietly appointed herself bodyguard to both me and Lynn, and watched over us as if we were slightly stupid children.

She had been wielding a length of anchor chain through the fight; now she calmly coiled it, draped it over one shoulder, and jogged up the steps to Tyco. In one motion, she twisted his arms together behind his back, then forced him to kneel upright. It brought his face almost level with Lynn's.

"Tyco Gorgionson," Lynn said to him softly, "you were warned that this would happen."

He was beginning, dazedly, to struggle. That was pointless. Latoya's face didn't even twitch as she held him still. When he found his tongue, he was as eloquent as men usually are in such a position. "You fucking bitch," he gasped.

"Ah," Lynn said, "a poet. If only you had decided to explore *that* side of your personality during the war."

Spinner appeared beside me, rapidly threading a needle with seal gut. "Don't get in my line of sight," I muttered at him. "This is gonna be good."

Tyco still hadn't learned. He was doing his best to thrash his way out of Latoya's iron hold, and flecks of foam were appearing on his lips. His eyes rolled wildly until they fastened on me. "I

won't kill you, Darren!" he screamed. "You hear me? You won't be that lucky! I'll slice you up, and I'll do it in front of your little whore- I'll take your eyes, your fucking tongue, I'll-"

Lynn snapped then. She gave Latoya a nod, and Latoya hoisted the struggling man a crucial four inches higher. Lynn always kicked with her heel, rather than her toes, since she so rarely wore shoes. But that didn't affect her technique. With a quick snap of her leg, she applied her foot to the exact part of Tyco's groin where it would do the most good. He screeched then, tears spurting.

"You have a thing about slicing people up, don't you?" Lynn went on when he had quieted. "You did it just last week, to a girl of sixteen near Retlio, and my mistress had to sit with her as she died. My mistress couldn't even hold her hand at the time, because you'd taken those from her too. Ring a bell? You were warned, Tyco Gorgionson, you were warned. There's law in the islands again. One law. The law of my mistress."

Tyco twisted so that he could look at me again. "You want to kill me, Darren?" he called. "Face me yourself!"

Lynn kicked him in the kidneys this time, and again he crumpled. "Why are you looking at her?" she asked. "*She's* not going to be the one to kill you. Know why? Because you don't deserve to boast, in the underworld, that the pirate queen sent you. You'll have to tell them that you got finished by her slave. A girl. The least of her servants. Not much to brag about, is it, on the other side?"

Tyco's face had turned grey, and sweat ran down it freely. Lynn let him wait a few seconds.

"But my mistress doesn't create martyrs," she said. "And she doesn't take rabid dogs more seriously than she has to. You won't die today, but I promise you won't enjoy what happens next. You're done, Tyco. It's over. Latoya, put him out for me."

My hulking bosun gave a sharp rap to the top of Tyco's head, and he careened to the deck again. Dropping unconscious, as so many men had dropped in the past year, by Lynn's feet.

-

"Behold," Lynn said, as she returned to my side. "Finished."

"Almost," I agreed. I had my breath back now. "One more thing. Now the unpleasantness is over, can I have my garrotte back?"

Her forehead wrinkled innocently. "What do you mean?"

I pointed. "That is my garrotte."

She glanced at it absently. "Is it? I guess you put it in my pocket by mistake."

"You don't have pockets. You were wearing it wrapped around your wrist."

"I guess you wrapped it around my wrist by mistake. Really, Darren, that was very thoughtless of you. I can't *always* be carrying your weapons around."

I put my free hand out. "Give it back."

"Oh, no, that's all right," she said, breezing past me as she wrapped it back around her wrist. "I don't mind suffering a bit in the service of my overlord. Corto, get us underway. We should drop these thugs off before evening."

Corto automatically reached for the helm, but I glared at him. "I *do* still give the commands around here, don't I?"

Corto cleared his throat, and waited.

"...get us underway," I muttered sulkily, and then turned to Lynn. "Does being an overlord mean that I don't get to do anything fun anymore?"

"Pretty much, yes," she agreed. "I get to do the fun stuff. It's the meagre compensation I get for my selfless service towards you."

"That and you get to steal my stuff."

"That too."

She gave me a comforting pat on the shoulder before she trotted away. Spinner gave a low whistle as he knotted off the thread in my arm. "Sometimes you have to wonder where that girl comes from."

And that was the thing. I did wonder. I wondered every day.

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Imagine this. You wake up, scratch, roll over, find yourself face to face with a sleeping woman, and realize that you have no idea who she is. How often does that happen to people?

Well- actually, now that I come to think of it, probably quite a bit. But those situations usually involve far too much wine, and maybe some mushrooms, and a number of slurred, drunken compliments, and, the next morning, an awkward race to find your trousers and escape before the sun comes up.

I, on the other hand, had woken up that way every day for sixteen months. Ever since I came across a scruffy, half-starved kid in a burned-out fishing village, who challenged me to a duel, lost resoundingly, and somehow ended up as my slave rather than my passenger. Which definitely had never been the plan.

But plans, as I say, change.

I always knew that she wasn't *ordinary*.

I knew it just from that first encounter. Ordinary peasants don't mouth off to the captain of a trading ship, who is likely to be a noble, as I was. Ordinary peasants scuff their feet and tug their forelocks and hope not to be noticed. Whereas Lynn shoved her way to the front of the crowd and demanded attention. As if she was used to it. As if she expected it.

That was the first warning. But it got more and more blatant as the weeks wore on.

I don't think she ever realized all the signs she gave. There were obvious ones- in particular, the fact that she could read and write. But it went further than that, much further. Little things- the words she used, the way that she walked. However secretive she tried to be- and she did- she couldn't hide the fact that she knew too much. She knew how the House of Torasan made most of its money; she could quote word for word the law against seducing a girl of good family. How she had ended up in a ramshackle fishing village, I hadn't a clue, but I was damned if she had been born there. If she would only let her hair grow out and put on a proper dress, I knew, she would look and sound like any of the girls that I had grown up with at the court of my father, Lord Stribos. And even when she was badly-fed, badly dressed, and chained up down in the hold, I couldn't shake the thought that she had grown up at court herself.

Then my ship was attacked by a deranged cousin of mine, who nearly slashed me to fish bait. And Lynn stepped in to distract her, at the last minute, with what was either a bald-faced lie or an even more bald-faced truth. And when the dust had settled, I knew two things.

First, it was just possible that the girl who called herself my slave was actually Ariadne, the only child of Lord Iason of Bain, heir to an absolutely obscene amount of wealth and power.

And second, if Lynn *was* Ariadne, she didn't want me to know.

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I did my best not to pry, I really did. People end up on the sea for all kinds of reasons. A good part of the time, they're running from something. My own past involved a humiliating banishment and a painful break-up, both of which I was doing my best to forget when I met Lynn. She had made it very clear that she wasn't interested in getting interrogated. So I told myself to let it go until she was ready.

A virtuous goal. And one that I absolutely could not carry through with. Not when it was possible that she was *Ariadne*.

I had been born to a ruling house. In the law of Kila, I was as far removed from peasants as a ruby is from acorns. Yet there were other lords who were equally far above me in station. Back then, there were hundreds of Kilan nobles, but at any given time, there were only three or four

families who truly mattered. And the House of Bain was one of them. It ruled the massive north island of Bero, which had the diamond mines and the best of the silver deposits. Its fleets were second to none. You were a fool not to be scared out of your wits if you saw ships bearing its white banners. But in one crucial area, the House of Bain was painfully fragile. Its lord, Iason, had only one child.

It was surprising, to say the least. For any Kilan noble, the highest and purest duty was to secure the survival of his line. Most would have as many children as their wives could breastfeed without being chewed raw, and a few more for good measure. I myself had somewhere in the neighbourhood of twelve siblings (they were hard to count, they moved around so fast.) To only have one child was an act of supreme hubris. And it was dangerous to boot. If Ariadne was lost, then Iason was finished, doomed to be toppled from his throne by the more ambitious of his dukes and generals. The girl must have spent her childhood swaddled safely away from everyone and everything.

So if Lynn was Ariadne, how the hell had she ended up in the fishy little town where I had found her? And what the hell was Iason doing about it now?

In the weeks and months after Mara's attack on the *Badger*, you can be sure that I kept my ears open. I never heard any report that Iason's daughter was missing or that he was hunting for her. But of course, if you were a supreme lord who had lost your only heir, you wouldn't exactly announce it from the rooftops.

I could put it out of my mind for days at a time. When Lynn was stripped to the waist, scrubbing the deck with the rest of the crew, or taking her turn at the dirtiest jobs (no-one else cleaned the head as thoroughly) it was easy to forget what her birthright might be. I could even forget about the hundreds of painful and creative things that Iason would do to me if he found out what I was up to with his daughter.

It was at night that I really thought about it. Or, more correctly, in the early morning. When I would wake up and scratch and turn over, and come face to face with her, and each time I would realize: I had no idea who she really was. And sometimes I would even say it out loud, repeating the question that I had once asked her in the darkness of the hold:

"Is it true, what you said? About you and the House of Bain?"

And I would remember the only answer she had ever given me:

"No. And yes. And no."

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All of this probably makes it sound as if I did nothing during those months but fret and wring my hands and watch Lynn scrub the head. Let me assure you, I kept busy.

My transformation into a pirate queen was more than half accidental, but once it began, it moved

swiftly. Mara's vessel became the first of my war galleys. Only a few weeks later, we took another while its sailors otherwise engaged. (A word of advice to would-be captains: never let your entire crew amble off to the brothel at the same time.) Lynn named it the *Banshee* and it became my flagship. And just like that, I had a fleet.

Not that it was easy. For one thing, I had to find captains for each of my ships- and, more than that, captains that I trusted. In the end, I taught the basics of navigation to the crew of the *Badger*, the men I'd known the longest, and parcelled them out one by one. Monmain became the captain of the *Idiot Kid*; Geraint took the *Sea Horse*. For a long time, I couldn't stand the thought of losing Teek, my best helmsman, but in the end I gritted my teeth and entrusted the *Badger* to him. I still had a strong sense of affection for the stinking little tub; at least I knew that Teek wouldn't run it into a reef. I refused to give up Regon, so he stayed on the *Banshee* as first mate, and I kept Spinner too, because he made Lynn laugh. Other than that, my original crew was all gone to the winds, and I was faced with the task of finding dozens- *hundreds*- more sailors.

That was tricky. No matter what you've heard, and no matter what you think, sailors are not gentle giants with rough exteriors and hearts of gold. It's an uphill job just finding a set who are sober more than three hours in the day. I chose the best I could find, and kept order in the usual way, with screamed insults and threats and the judicious application of a very pointy boot here and there.

What I had truly dreaded was the task of keeping them away from Lynn. She wasn't the only woman on my ships, but she was the smallest, and the youngest, and the best looking. Even her clothing was different- she wore shades of cream or brown or red, and they made her stick out, warm and exotic, among all the dim colours. More than once, I wondered desperately whether I would have to keep her in a small metal box to protect her from the others. But Lynn never allowed me to protect her. She had a sharp tongue, and a level head, and a strong sense of pride, and she gamely took on the job of carving out her own place on board ship. She did let me show her what parts to kick on the human body to inflict maximum pain, but that was about the limit of what I was allowed to do.

Over time, things sort of worked themselves out. Some of my sailors got to like her, and some got to respect her, and the rest came to see her as a kind of mascot. It helped that sailors are the most superstitious people alive. (If you don't believe me, try getting one to change his lucky shirt before a battle. Just try.) As the months rolled on and we grew stronger, and richer, and better-equipped, Lynn became a talisman, the embodiment of our luck. Every time we got hold of a new ship, my sailors would chase after Lynn to get her to name it. Sometimes she was enthusiastic, and came up with names like the *Sea Horse* and the *Cormorant*. Sometimes she was not, which was how we ended up with the *Name It Yourself This Time* and the *Oh, Sod Off*.

I still got the shakes every time I left a safe harbour and headed back to Kila. But Lynn always knew, and Lynn was always there. Sometimes it was very casual- she would just be somewhere nearby, coiling a rope or scaling a fish or studying a chart. But she always knew when it was time to drift to my side and find a hand to hold.

And every time, I would whisper, "You know, I'm really not a pirate queen."

And every time, she would whisper back: "As long as they think you are, that doesn't matter."

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The *Kraken*, Tyco's ship, was the twelfth that we took for my fleet.

If you capture ship after ship after ship, then you have an ongoing problem: what to do with their sailors. You can absorb some of them into your own crew, if you're good at picking out men who won't try to stab you at the first opportunity. (Lynn was. I wasn't.) But at the end of the culling process, you're left with a surly bunch of backstabbers that you have to dispose of somehow. Tradition holds that you throw them overboard, but I had balked at that. Fortunately, as Lynn pointed out, the sea is crammed full of islands that make perfectly serviceable prisons. With the added bonus that you don't have to feed or supervise the prisoners yourself. At the beginning of everything, I didn't like this thought much either, but, as Lynn said, what was the alternative?

I got used to it. Before long, I was flinging gangs of untrustworthy sailors onto desert islands every few weeks, and thinking no more of it than of tossing fish bones over the side.

For Tyco's men- none of whom I was prepared to take on- we'd selected a real winner of an island. Bare and rocky, with only two meagre clusters of trees. My sailors ferried the crew of the *Kraken* there just as they were- unconscious, or bleeding, or bound. I watched from on board the *Banshee*. The beach was too distant to make out details, but I knew what was going on. Latoya and Corto would stick two knives into the sand so that the sailors could free themselves once they were gone. Beside the knives, they would deposit a cook-pot, a flint, a saw, a spade, and a few sacks of seed. Next, Corto would explain things to the *Kraken's* crew. They could survive for several months on shellfish and the eggs of seabirds. If they wanted to live beyond then, they would have to raise crops. If they worked like blazes, enriching the soil with bird dung and food scraps, then they would survive. Maybe.

I was out of earshot, but I could see mouths opening and shutting furiously. I could imagine the kind of language currently being used over there. I had heard it often enough.

There was a sound behind me- Regon softly clearing his throat.

"I've put a prize crew of ten on Tyco's ship," he said. "With Benam in command. They'll sail east, meet up with the *Idiot Kid*, and take the galley to the coast to be manned and overhauled."

"Fine," I said, breaking from my funk. "Did Lynn name it?"

"She did, yes," he answered slowly. "It's to be the *One Law*."

It was a surprisingly solemn name for Lynn, and I knew why. The history of the *Kraken* had been so brutal, I would have been ticked if she had tried to make it into a joke- and she understood that. Even though, given her druthers, she probably would have named it the *Kumquat* or the *Up Yours, Tyco!* Or something of the kind.

"Fine," I said again. "It's your watch. Once everyone's aboard, head for the Freemarket- we're low on supplies."

None of my men ever bothered to salute, and I'd have smacked them if they tried, but Regon gave me a wink and a nod that served the same purpose, and went to talk to the helmsman.

I took a last look back at the barren island. Latoya and Corto were rowing back to the *Banshee*, with long, slow strokes. Tyco was staggering up and down the beach, screaming something that I was too far away to hear.

You'd think that a moment like this would make me happy. That there would be a little victory glow. Or at least that the blackness would lift for a minute- the heavy, choking blackness that had descended on me when I first heard about the barbarity of Tyco's raids. But it didn't happen. I was glad to be alive, I was glad we hadn't lost, I was glad Tyco was through- but I felt no real sense of triumph. Just the fact that Tyco existed meant that there were others like him. One more down. Thousands more to go.

Plus I was cold, and in pain, and I stank. I flexed my arms and they moved awkwardly- my leather jerkin was stiff with congealed blood, and it stuck to the skin beneath. Sooner or later, that night, I would have to haul up a few buckets of freezing, fishy seawater and try to scrub off the worst of it.

It wasn't an attractive thought. To put off the evil hour, I wandered into my cabin.

Gone were the old days of sleeping in the hold with my crew, hearing their every groan and snore and fart. The *Banshee* had a proper captain's cabin, practically big enough to swing a cat. After years of life on small ships, it was a glorious thing to be able to go into my own space and lock the door. Made even better by the identity of my roommate.

As I had expected, Lynn was in the cabin already, curled up on the bunk we shared. The bunk wasn't big enough for one person in the first place, and it was ridiculous to even try for two, but Lynn was determined. And bendy.

At some point, she had traded her sweaty clothes for a clean tunic. It was sleeveless, and exposed the tattoo on her right shoulder: a storm-petrel in flight, etched in lines of black ink. She had chosen that symbol as my personal mark not long after we first met. Now it was emblazoned on the flag of every one of my ships, and I used it as a signature on the rare occasions when I had to write letters. On Lynn's shoulder, it was supposed to act as proof that I owned her. The trouble was that a number of my men had aped Lynn and gotten the same mark. She was incensed when she first found out- I have never, repeat *never*, heard someone scream so long without taking a breath- but over time she got to accept the development. She did insist, though, that her tattoo was the prettiest.

She was also studying a paper of some kind.

"What are you doing?" I asked as I hung my sword-belt on a peg.

"Checking the map," she said, looking up. "I try to keep track of which islands we've used. Not that that matters, does it?"

"What do you mean?"

She rolled the map and tossed it into the open sea-chest. "Well, when you say 'What are you doing?' in that tone of voice, it means that you know perfectly well what I'm doing but you'd like me to stop because you want attention."

"I never-"

"You always. But that's fine. I want attention too." She swung her legs off of the bunk. "So-Tyco's marooned, all's well with the world?"

"All is certainly not well with the world."

"All is slightly more well with the world."

"All is marginally less screwed up with the world."

"Keep a sense of proportion, Mistress. We're alive, and the night is yet young. Want to ravish me?"

I looked blankly at my stained and sticky hands. "Um...sure, I guess. Listen, Lynn-"

"Um, sure, I guess?" Lynn repeated, eyebrow arched. "You sweet-talker, you. No wonder you scored so much tail during your misspent youth."

I flushed. "I didn't really."

"I can't think why," Lynn said seriously. "And you can calm down, Darren. I was just pulling your infinitely pullable leg. I know what you need right now."

The blessed girl had a pail of hot water ready, and rags and soap. The laces of my jerkin had gummed together, and she began on the tricky task of coaxing them loose without cutting them.

Why is it that, when people imagine mortals with divine powers, they always picture them being able to fly, or chop off lots of heads very quickly, or walk through fire? Lynn's own magical ability was far more miraculous and ten times as useful: she could give a complete bath to a filthy and reeking pirate queen using only a single basin of water. It took her full attention, and I closed my eyes as she worked: first peeling off the clotted jerkin, then the ruined shirt, then the rest of my clothes down to the boots; scrubbing off the bloodstains with one warm cloth, wiping off the pink soapy liquid with another, slowing where the skin was gashed or stitched.

The steady motions first lulled me to a doze, making me sway on my feet. Then- as she worked her way over me again, this time with a clean dry cloth- they began to stir me up. She was taking her time with this pass, letting her hands trail over sensitive spots as if by accident. The room suddenly seemed very warm, and my breath rasped faster and faster. Once I gasped.

"Should I stop?" Lynn said, pausing.

"Sweet fucking mother of- NO!" I ground out, not quite coherently.

She resumed, more slowly still. "You're loving this," she commented, as she worked on one of my calves. "Not just the bath, I mean. You love having me serve you."

"What's that supposed to- " I began, and then I gasped again.

"I mean- Mistress- that you like being reminded that I belong to you. That I'm yours. That you can go ahead and use me."

I probably would have said something in reply if I'd been able to breathe.

She wrung out the last cloth and set it gently in the basin. "This part makes you nervous," she said. "But it's so simple. You only have to ask. And you can ask for anything you want."

She rose to her feet. Her hands rested loosely at her sides, and her eyes rested on my collarbone. Her posture was- waiting, that's all, waiting for instructions, without any demanding or baiting. It was a very familiar stance. Not just because I had seen her take it countless times, but because I had seen servants in it from the moment that I knew what servants were. And it made my blood surge, and all at once I found my tongue.

"Take your clothes off," I whispered.

She must have been waiting for that, considering how quickly her tunic slithered to the ground.

-

The moment after I woke up, I felt a sense of such total peace and wellbeing that I thought I was about to float.

Two moments after I woke up, the pain crashed in. There was the sting of the sewn cuts, the web of scratches, the duller ache of the bruises, and then a throbbing in the muscles of my sword-arm, which I had overused the day before. Plus a throbbing in other muscles which I had overused the night before.

Three moments after I woke up, my brain came into gear. It started buzzing away with a kind of fizzy unease, circling around the mistakes I had made when we attacked the *Kraken*, listing all the things that I needed to accomplish that day.

Lynn was still sleeping, her right arm flung out of the bunk and dangling over open air, her left knee drawn up almost to her chest. It looked like a horribly uncomfortable position and I thought of waking her- but then she breathed deeply and a fold of her flimsy tunic fell back, exposing her chest. I recoiled.

When you're- you know- in the moment, you don't think about how these things are going to look when you're- you know- done. The marks were vicious, like giant purple-red bruises. They started at her neck and worked their way downwards. In between were smaller scrapes, fresh and glaring, as well as (I groaned) bite marks. One was right beneath the tattoo meant to stamp her as mine. A band around each wrist was mottled red- oh gods, the ropes. I remembered putting each of those marks on her- why was it so easy when my blood was up? I buried my face into the pillow before I could see anything else.

Why the hell do I do these things to her? I wondered. Why the hell does she let me?

-

The first thing that Lynn did when she woke was to streeetch, in one long motion, arching her feet down to the bottom of the bunk, and then shaking her whole body out. Her face bore the dreamy smile of someone who had nothing to do in the next four hours that required her to get out of bed.

"I dreamed about armadillos," she said. "You might want to make a note of that. Probably very meaningful. What's the matter?"

She *always* knew. I bit my lip.

"Darren," she said warningly. "Spill. You brood ten times more than is healthy in a person of your size and weight. Let's have it."

I had a life before I was a pirate queen. I captained trading ships once upon a time; I was a member of a royal house and represented it in councils and conclaves. I've haggled and bargained in half the major cities on the continent. I've critiqued a baron's fiscal policy so brutally that he dissolved into tears right there at the table. Yet somehow, when I try to have a conversation about *that kind of thing*, I always end up stammering and gulping like a half-wit child trying to recite the times-table.

"I just- you see- well, Lynn- You know, sometimes, you know, it's the morning after, and we- you know- the night before, and it just makes me wonder whether I- you know, whether I-"

"This again." She rolled to face me. "For the thousandth time, Darren, you're just fine in bed, and you'll be even better once you learn to relax."

"It's...not...*that*," I said stiffly. "I just mean...I want to make sure...Is this what you *want*, Lynn? Are you getting anything out of this?"

She didn't answer right away, but gave a deep sigh- then tossed the blankets aside and hopped out of the bunk. My heart plunged. "You aren't, are you? You're humouring me, or I pressured you somehow, or-"

"Hang on," she said, coming back to the bunk with my wine-cup filled. "I think you need to get at least a little squiffy if we're going to talk about this."

I took the cup, stared at the glassy gold surface. "Why?"

"Because you're shy. Take three good swallows, and then I'll answer you."

I had to force the stuff down. It was the godawful kind spiked with pine resin, and had a bitter, oily tang. Lynn wiped a drop from the corner of my lip before she went on.

"Mistress, a good rule of thumb for the future. If a girl is yelling 'More, more, more' while clawing all the skin off your back? Odds are, she's getting something out of it."

I rolled my shoulders. Now that she mentioned it, my back did sting a little. "But-"

"Look at me, please."

She didn't wait; she lifted my chin gently with two fingers. "What did you and Jess do in bed?"

My eyes slid away, tried to find anything to focus on but her face. Is it normal to have to tell your new lover what you did with your old one? "The usual, I guess. She would...and then I would...and then we would...well, you know...together. It was...nice."

"I'm glad. Darren, listen. It's all right to want something other than 'nice'."

Maybe the boat was about to sink, I mused. Better yet, maybe I could sink it. Anything to get me out of this conversation. Almost unconsciously, I looked around for a hatchet.

"Did you enjoy what we did last night?" Lynn continued, unmoved.

I found a fascinating piece of lint on the blanket to pick at.

"I'd like you to answer out loud, please. It'll only take one word. One syllable. Three letters at most."

It took a minute or so, but I *did* manage it. "Yes."

"How much?"

I snapped. "A lot. All right? A huge unhealthy hell of a lot."

"Thank you," she said solemnly. "So did I. So much that I'll probably go around the ship today

wearing a large silly grin."

I snorted softly. Her hand found its way into mine, soft and cool. "We both want this, Mistress. We *both* get something out of it. We never do anything that I haven't agreed to. So what in flaming hell is the problem?"

There was a loud, squawking chorus of voices in my head (they sounded partly like seagulls, partly like my maiden aunts)- and they all seemed to agree very heartily that there was a problem. Then again, neither seabirds nor my elderly relations had a tendency to give good advice. My quick-witted, self-assured partner, on the other hand, did.

"I guess you're right," I said.

She tugged a lock of my hair. "I generally am."

Someone gave two sharp raps at the door. "Coming up on Freemarket, captain!"

-

The Freemarket wasn't exactly a market, and it sure as hell wasn't free. It was a mid-sized island, some distance south of the seven larger land masses which made up Kila proper. Every inch of its coastline, at that time, was taken up with docks and harbours, and every inch of its dry land with shops, taverns, and food vendors. The purpose of every single person that lived there was to separate you from your money as quickly and pleasantly as possible.

The prices there were as dizzyingly high as any you could ever hope to scream at, and the quality of the goods was nothing to celebrate- the ale was sub-par, the wine unspeakable. Yet it was always rammed with ships desperate to pour money into its coffers. The whole region, you see, was covered by a strict truce that had stayed intact since the beginning of the war. Within the harbours of the Freemarket, you could dock next to a captain whom you'd cheerfully strangle on any other day, and both of you would still be kicking in the morning. You could meet your worst enemy in the fish market, and both of you would nod your heads grimly and pass by without a weapon being drawn. You paid for the truce through the nose, as you paid for everything else- a stiff tax to the island's harbourmasters and local watch. But it was worth it to be able to rummage through a cheese stall without forever looking over one shoulder. I'm very partial to a bit of cheese myself.

-

It was a bright, breezy, dew-fresh morning when Lynn and I came up on deck. Regon had already docked and moored the *Banshee*. The vendors' tents were not far distant, rippling in the light wind. They were of all colours from turquoise to lemon-yellow to scarlet to emerald, and carnival-bright banners streamed from their central poles. Smells came rippling from them: chicken, cumin, fresh-baked bread, honey, garlic, tomatoes. I breathed as deeply as I could without falling over backwards.

But Lynn was frowning, rubbing at one of her elbows. "There's going to be bad weather today. I can feel it."

I frowned myself. "I thought it was your right arm that ached before a storm?"

"Actually, they both do. The right one is a little bit worse most of the time, that's all."

"Why is that, anyway? Did they get broken?"

"A long time ago." She took a deeply suspicious look at the cloudless sky. "You should get on with it. Shopping isn't going to be nearly as much fun once it starts pissing down."

"Yeah, I'm going. Want to come this time?"

I said this very casually, and waited for today's threadbare excuse.

"I'd like to, Darren, but you know..." She moved her sore arm limply. "I should probably rest this. I'm starting to get a headache, too. I'll stay and watch things here."

Freemarket had a remarkable ability to provoke headaches in Lynn. Fifteen visits in the past year, and she'd never even set a foot on shore. I suppressed a sigh.

"Don't sulk," she said, mistaking my expression. "You can manage to buy a few barrels of biscuit without me. I have full confidence. But just in case..."

I was wearing my good blue coat that day; a little swagger never came amiss in Freemarket. Lynn held me at arm's length so that she could inspect me, adjusted the cloth here and there, did up a button that had come undone, and then carefully took me by the lapels.

"Lynn," I objected.

She just ignored that. "If anyone recognizes you as an exile and gives you a hard time, what do you do?"

"Give them the hairy eyeball," I recited, a bit sullenly.

"And if that doesn't work?"

This was too humiliating for words. A few of my sailors were standing about smirking; Regon was leaning against the mast, clearly loving every second. I made a mental note of the name of every man watching so that I could pound some respect back into them later. So what if Lynn tyrannized over me every now and then? It was still my damn fleet, wasn't it? *Me am boss.*

"Darren," Lynn repeated, in the don't-mess-with-me-I've-seen-you-naked voice. "What if the hairy eyeball doesn't work."

I surrendered. "I find the nearest watchman and offer him a ten-percent bonus to make them bleed a lot. I can handle myself, you know."

"No, Mistress, you can't," she corrected me, with a pat on the cheek, "and you shouldn't be allowed to try. Take Latoya, and a detail of ten men, and don't sneak away from them this time."

Regon's smirk was diabolical by then, but it was wiped instantly off of his face when Lynn wheeled on him. "And *you!* What are you doing still up? Your watch was over hours ago! You think my mistress has the time to come and pick you up if you faint and pitch overboard? Get the hell to your hammock, *now!*"

"Going!" he blurted, with hands upraised in surrender. "Going, going. Gone."

"*Pirates,*" Lynn muttered, as he shuffled for the stairs. "If you had brains, you'd be dangerous." Then she cast another glance at the sky. "I'm serious about the weather, Mistress. You really should get going. And be careful, please?"

"I'll be careful," I promised. "Don't you worry about it. Just rest. Put something cool on your head, huh?"

"Why would I want to put something cool on my- " she began automatically, and then clued in. "Oh, right." She laid a hand unconvincingly against her forehead. "Right, yes, I'll do that, right."

-

"Headache," I snorted, as I strode into the market beside my bosun. "Does she think I'm a moron, Latoya?"

Latoya wisely chose not to answer that. Or maybe she was out of breath, since she was lugging a haversack of coins which was about as heavy as a good-sized pig. My other bodyguards were further back, moving casual-like through the crowds just in case anyone got too interested in me.

At the moment, the crowds all seemed to be busy with the Freemarket's other attractions. It was only ten in the morning, but the hawkers were already setting out lunch. Every stall held giant wooden trays crammed with food: grilled chicken hissing hot on skewers, chunks of spicy sausage dusted with herbs, cherry pastries, onion bread. All of which I ignored. You could easily spend more in a morning at the Freemarket than you could earn in nine lives, if you didn't keep yourself on a very tight leash.

"It's not a good excuse to *begin* with," I went on, to take my mind off of the plaintive gurglings in my stomach. "The fifteenth time around, it's pathetic. It's not like Lynn to be so feeble. And what's the point? Lynn likes food, she likes people, she likes bossing me around. Why wouldn't she want to come to the market with me?"

"Afraid," Latoya said bluntly.

This made me grind to a halt in the middle of the street. I'd never expected her to answer. Most of the time, talking to Latoya was like talking to a wall. A wall that happened to be wearing trousers for some reason. "You mean, she's afraid? Afraid of what?"

"Don't know," Latoya said, "but she must be."

She said it as if it was obvious, and with a jolt, I realized that it was.

The question was, afraid of what?

-

We didn't spend much time at the shipbroker, but it was enough to almost empty Latoya's haversack. Stocking one of my ships, in those days, took a back-breaking load of hard-earned (or more likely, hard-stolen) coin. A far cry from the days when my old lover Jess and her new lover Holly would supply me with ropes and paint and oil and wine and biscuit and mutton, just out of the goodness of their landlubber hearts. But they couldn't be asked to stock twelve ships, and some part of me was grateful to be free of their charity.

Or at least part of their charity. Jess and Holly still maintained the secret harbour for us, and found homes for some of the refugees we rescued. But regardless, my life no longer consisted of a series of short hops between their valley and the coast of Kila. The distance made me feel good, less dependent. As if I had finally proved, to myself and everyone else, that I wasn't hung up on Jess anymore.

But that wasn't on my mind as we bought supplies for the *Banshee* that day. It was the job of Corto, the quartermaster, to do the actual bargaining; it was Latoya's to inspect the goods and count out the cash. Mine was to stand with crossed arms and scowl, and add a little sneer every now and then as I thought appropriate.

As I stood and scowled and sneered at the right moments, I thought, as usual, about Lynn. If she was afraid of coming to the market, why didn't she just tell me? Did she trust me that little? Or did she really believe that I was too thick to figure it out? Or maybe (and my thoughts wheeled around in the other direction) maybe she *did* know I would figure it out, maybe she *wanted* me to figure it out. Why else would she come up with such shabby excuses?

Maybe she was hoping that she wouldn't have to tell me herself.

All right. (I aimed a particularly savage sneer at a porter, and he gulped and ducked his head.) What about the market made Lynn afraid? Was it the fact that it was on shore? But we visited islands and deserted coasts all the time. Lynn didn't exactly dance down the gangplank, but she didn't seem unnerved by the experience, either.

Was it the people?

I almost dismissed that one. Lynn spent her entire life surrounded by sailors, vagabonds,

roustabouts. Why should she be afraid of the vendors and shipbrokers at the market? At least *they* were respectable-

Respectable. My eyes shot wide open. That was it. So simple.

Lynn was afraid that she'd be recognized.

"Finished here, captain," Corto said as he loped over. "Will we be taking the boxes straight back to the ship, then?"

"*You* are. Take the others and get a move on. I'll follow along shortly."

He put his thumbs in his pockets and wagged them worriedly. "Alone?"

There was no real risk that he'd disobey me- the Kilan commoner who can stand up to a noble is one in a thousand- but I snapped the words out anyway: "You heard me, you mutinous dog! If there's to be any more discussion, it'll be between you and a rope's end."

"Aye, captain," Corto said hurriedly, "aye. Understood."

"Good," I snarled. "Move your carcass."

He moved, but I also heard him mutter, "Your slave is going to kill us for this."

"It'll be good for you," I called after him, "it teaches humility."

Then I twiddled my thumbs and tried to look natural until they tramped out of sight.

-

As soon as the door swung shut behind my bosun, I picked my target. One of the merchants Corto had dealt with was a little fat man with beady, calculating eyes. The perfect informant is easy to threaten and easy to bribe, and the little man looked to be both. I put on a suitably forbidding expression and ambled up to him, taking my time.

The merchant was busy flicking the beads of an abacus and muttering under his breath, and for the first minute he pretended not to notice me, but I could see the sweat beading at the back of his neck. At last, he deliberately, oh so deliberately, set down his stylus. "Is there something more that I can do for you, my lady?"

I laid both my palms flat on his counting-table, and leaned over. "I need to speak with you. Privately."

He didn't seem nearly as frightened as I would have liked. "My lady, I'm- " he coughed- "well, I'm flattered, frankly. But I'm a married man, and- "

Oh, for the love of sainted trout. I got a good two-fisted grip on the front of his florid green shirt and hauled him up.

"Ah," he said, talking more quickly, "ah. Right. I can see we aren't looking for love. But you do remember the truce, right? The truce which will have your head on a stake in the harbour if you don't make an effort to be civil?"

That was true, and it severely cut down my options. I gave him a little snarl anyway as I let go of his shirt, but it wasn't one of my best. Then I reached inside my shirt, grabbed one of the heavy red-gold coins that I keep there for emergencies, and slapped it into his chubby hand.

He glanced at it casually, and then for just a second his eyes flickered wide. Then he stowed it swiftly in his bulging money pouch and ushered me to a small office at the back of the building.

"What can I offer you?" he said, broad and expansive, once we were back there. "Wine? Ale? Tea? I could send out for fig juice. Meat pies? Parsnip fritters! A girl? A boy? Or both at once? No? I could throw in some warmed oil. Perhaps a sheep?"

"I would settle for a heaping bowl of you shutting up right now, thanks ever so." I threw myself into a hide-covered chair. "All I want is information. What's your name?"

"Ballard," he said, inclining his head. "Was that the only information you wanted?"

Smug little ass. Moments like this I feel a lot more sympathetic to the people who wander around casually gutting merchants. I pushed it all back, forced one of my uglier smiles, and said, "What do you know about Lord Iason's daughter?"

-

Not much. That was the first fact that emerged, although he tried to hide it with bluster.

I waited impatiently as he waffled for five minutes, and then cut him off. "Everyone knows that Ariadne is his only child. Details, Ballard. What does she look like?"

"Look like," he murmured worriedly. "Well, of course she's been cloistered, she doesn't move in public, I've never seen her- "

"But you've heard things. Talk."

He pulled nervously at his lip. "Well, they do say that Ariadne takes after her father."

I had seen Lord Iason only once, and that from a distance, at the wedding of my second cousin four times removed. Everyone had been half-mad with delight and terror to have him on the guest list, and for the entire week of festivities, he'd been surrounded by drink-stewards and dancing girls. Though I could still picture him vaguely, I didn't want to trust my memory on a point like this. "And what does Lord Iason look like?"

"Very fair, my lady," Ballard said. "Pale blond hair, pale skin."

I pictured the girl I had left on the *Banshee* this morning, her hair almost white in the sun. She was as tanned as any of my sailors, but the inside of her wrists looked like milk.

"Slight of stature," Ballard continued. "Short, for a man."

Lynn barely came up to my shoulder; I could lift her with one hand. "How old is she?"

Ballard counted on his fingers. "I believe she would be twenty-one- there were great celebrations several years back for her eighteenth birthday. Perhaps you remember them?"

I didn't. That was around the time that I was being thrown out of my home for being a bit too affectionate with a certain lady beekeeper. "Do you know anything about her personally? Her character?"

He winced, thinking hard. "The only thing that comes to mind is that she's said to be- well, very outspoken. She has the stubbornness of a woman, so they say." He saw my expression and quickly amended: "A young woman, I mean. But that may have changed since her marriage."

At that moment, it felt like a stone the size of my head had dropped into the pits of my stomach, and then bounced back up to my throat. "Since her *what*?"

"Her marriage, my lady," Ballard said, surprised. "She was married shortly after she turned eighteen. To Lord Gerard of Saupon."

Gerard. I had met him, long, long ago, when he visited the stronghold of Torasan. He might have been the heir to a powerful house, but he was also a snivelling, useless boy, with a face like a flour weevil. He thought that his rank gave him the right to grope our serving girls, until one of them got sick of it and threw him in the fish pond- for which she was soundly whipped, while Gerard watched and glowered. It was impossible to imagine gallant little Lynn putting up with him for a second.

"This happened shortly after she turned eighteen?" I asked slowly.

"About three years ago, yes. But then Gerard was killed some time afterwards. A riding accident, I believe. I don't recall exactly when. There were no children from the marriage." He squinted. "I don't remember hearing any news of Ariadne after that. She has not yet remarried, that I know. Does that answer your question?"

I was still trying to process. Lynn, *my* Lynn, was really a noblewoman. Lynn had been a wife; Lynn was now a widow.

"My lady?"

"That's all," I said, shaking myself from my stupor. "You can keep the change; you've been very helpful."

He lifted his silly hat. "All my thanks, my lady."

I debated with myself for a minute, shrugged inwardly, and then grabbed his shirt again, pulled him in close, and gave him the most absolutely foul look that I could muster. "Don't go offering me any sheep the next time I'm here."

"I wouldn't dream of it, my lady," he said, gently detaching himself. "I wouldn't dream of it."

-

I walked slowly on my way back to the ship, a sack of the more expensive and delicate supplies on my shoulder. As I went, I tried to match up the dates. Lynn- Ariadne- was married at eighteen. Sometime in the next two years, she had run away and ended up in a miserable little fishing village without so much as a pair of shoes or a spare cloak. When did she run, and why?

It was probably Gerard, I decided. Gerard would make anyone want to head for the hills. Particularly someone as fiercely free-thinking as Lynn. Her duty after marriage would have been to whelp as many children as she possibly could. No surprise that she balked at it, especially since every pregnancy would have begun with a conjugal visit from the Maggot of Saupon. That's what she must have been running from- but what was she running towards? Did she *intend* to spend the rest of her life in that squalid village? Surely not. Maybe she had something better in mind, but the war scuppered her plans and she got stranded in the wilderness. She would probably have died there, except that she ended up on my ship. Where she was still.

Her parents- her parents must have kept it a secret that she was missing. Not *too* difficult, considering the isolation in which she must have lived. No-one would even think it strange that she wasn't popping out children, since her husband was now dead. Iason was probably looking for her, but he was doing it very, very quietly. Too quietly to get results, under the circumstances. You had to hand it to Lynn- she knew how to hide. First she buried herself in the poorest, most miserable village she could find, and then she became a slave on board a pirate ship. Not exactly where you would look for a princess.

So they wouldn't find her, and sooner or later the truth would come out, and Iason would be deposed and some other bastard would take his place. I couldn't make myself care much about the prospect. Iason's daughter obviously didn't.

The thought cheered me. I was in the harbour now, running a professional eye over every ship that I passed. The *Almathea* looked leaky, but that could be fixed with a good scraping and caulking. The *Silver Hind*- a large galley with a milky-eyed doe as its figurehead- was almost new; I like a ship that's weathered a few storms, myself. Chances were, some of the ships now lying so peacefully along the docks would come under my hand in the coming months. I gave them a piratical grin as I strolled along. *See you soon, my pretties.*

Me and Ariadne- an exiled noble and a runaway princess, turned pirate and slave. Quite a pair.

From a long way off, I could make out the red sails of the *Banshee*, and a small figure pacing restlessly in front of them. I checked my pace a little. I had forgotten that I would be in trouble.

Lynn clumped down the gangplank to meet me, and folded her arms. "I know you have an explanation," she said. "I know it's going to be *thrilling*."

"I'm sorry, all right?" I said, as we boarded the *Banshee* together. "I know you were right about bodyguards, I just get edgy having people at my elbow all the time. I won't do it again."

"Hmph," she said, but she sounded mollified.

I took the opportunity to distract her further. "Report. Everything all right with the ship?"

"The ship," she said, "is well. A couple of thugs have been standing on the dock there, peering at us inquisitively and scratching themselves where they shouldn't. I put the harbour patrol on notice. And Regon had a rush of blood to the head and challenged Latoya to arm wrestle. I expect him to make a full recovery. Eventually. Oh, you bought apples!"

"I bought apples," I confirmed, leaning over so she could snag one from the top of the pack. "Not giant rubies, as you would expect from the price of them, but apples. They better be good. Or I'll have to go back and snarl at the shopkeeper."

She was already halfway finished eating her first, but she paused. "Sorry, should I not have taken one?"

"No, it's fine. Just...take your time with it. Savour."

I slung the sack to the deck, took an apple myself, and perched on the gunwale beside her. The water and sky were orange and gold. The water lapped softly against the standing ships. Somehow, beautiful moments make me feel awkward. As if I'm stealing something I have no right to, because I've done nothing to earn them. Lynn, ever the pragmatist, would point out that it didn't matter whether I'd earned them, because I needed them to keep going. If you don't love the world, she would say, you won't fight for it.

I examined her sidelong. She was eating the second half of her apple in slow, deliberate bites, licking drops of juice from her fingertips. That was Ariadne of Bain, I told myself- supreme royalty, my mark of ownership stamped on her shoulder, wholly content as she munched a piece of fruit. The idea should have terrified me. Instead, I found myself warmed. She had a world of other options, but I was the one she wanted.

"I'm sorry I had that panic attack this morning," I said.

She waved that off. "You have panic attacks at regular intervals, Mistress. It saves me the trouble of checking to see that you're still breathing."

"Yeah, well." I rolled my own apple between my fingers. "What does it- Why do you- I mean- How does it make you feel?"

I congratulated myself for getting the words out without stammering, but, maddeningly, she came right back with, "How does what make me feel?"

"When I- you know-"

"When you tie me up?"

"Yeah."

She took a small, thoughtful nibble, her eyes on the horizon.

"Cherished," she said.

I grinned in spite of myself, but I aimed it downwards, towards the water. "You never feel scared?"

"Erg- no, Darren." She kept her tone as serious as possible, which wasn't very. I knew what Lynn sounded like when she was trying not to laugh. "No, pirate queen, for some reason I'm never scared of you. Go figure."

And why would she be scared of me, I reflected. Even at my worst, I was twenty times better than Gerard.

My edginess of the morning had vanished. Every part of me was suffused with peace. No more mysteries; I knew what was going on. Now, if she could only admit it to me...

That was how far my thoughts had gotten when a shadow fell over me. I twisted back to see a woman of my own height, dressed in the long split tunic of a landsman. Her amber hair- hair that I used to run my fingers through, once upon a time- was in a braid wound around her head, and she wore travelling boots rather than her usual calfskin shoes. This was clearly a woman with a mission.

"Guh buh buh wah?" I stammered.

If you can think of a better thing to say when your ex-lover suddenly shows up aboard your pirate ship, feel free to share.

"Hello," said Jess, "do you have a minute?"

-

"I decided that I needed to get hands-on with this business," Jess told us later, after she'd

refreshed herself with three of my very expensive apples. "You've been sending refugees through the valley for years now, and the numbers are piling up. I just didn't feel that I knew enough to help them properly. I thought that if I joined one of your ships and snooped around for a while, I could get a better idea the long-term plan should be."

"How did you get to Freemarket?" I asked, just as Lynn asked, "Was Holly all right with this?"

"Holly agrees that it's necessary," Jess said. "Though she did tell me to warn you, Darren, that she's going to gut you with a clam fork if you let anything happen to me."

I acknowledged the threat with a grunt and a wave of my hand. I am used to them, though I'll never understand why people always hold *me* responsible.

"And I got to Freemarket on a cattle boat," Jess went on. "*That* was a mistake. I don't think I'll ever be able to look at sirloin the same way. I know I've sprung this on you, but is it all right?"

I was opening my mouth to say something along the lines of *Actually, not really, now that you mention it*, but naturally Lynn jumped in. "That's fine. You can sail with us for as long as you want."

Jess did at least have the courtesy to look at me for confirmation. I sighed. "After all that you've done for me, Jess, it's the least I can do."

It was true, so I tried hard to mean it. But I was already feeling the first twinges of an ulcer.

-

Jess and Lynn spent most of that evening catching up, while I sat nearby, sharpening my cutlass and feeling left out. It was slightly freakish, how well they got along. Every now and then people ask me about this, so I should come clean: I don't know how you can make your old lover and your new lover get along if they don't want to. Any more than I know how you can stop them from getting along if they do want to. Either way, you're probably out of luck. Grit your teeth and find a cutlass to sharpen. It really does help to release the tension.

I left Jess about a year before I met Lynn- and the breakup wasn't what you would call smooth. I don't think that "smooth" is an option when your lover catches you sneaking out in the middle of the night, with your boots tucked under your arms.

I tried to explain that it was my duty as a Kilan noble to protect the peasants during the war. So the fact that I was leaving her forever had nothing to do with my *personal* feelings.

That didn't go down well at all.

For the next month, my face sported a bruise the exact size and shape of a wooden spoon.

Later, Lynn insisted that Jess had forgiven me. Which I found very comforting until I realized

that Lynn had reached that conclusion without once speaking with the woman.

The first time the two of them met face to face was early in my piracy career- this was when we were shipping in the *Idiot Kid*, and we had come to the secret harbour to restock. It was Holly, Jess's wife, who normally met us there. But on this day, it was Jess who was waiting by the dock, and even from hundreds of yards away I could see the thunderclouds in her face.

My first impulse was to go and hide under a pile of fish guts and have the crew tell Jess that I'd been eaten by landcrabs. I'm not ashamed to admit it.

But I was an adult, and a noblewoman, and a fearsome pirate, so I screwed my courage to the whatevering place and tromped down the gangplank once it was lowered. Then I got a close-quarters look at Jess, and wanted to tromp straight back up again.

"Where is she?" Jess demanded, without any preamble.

"What?" I said, confused. "You mean Lynn?"

"Don't play games with me, Darren. I want to know what you're doing with that girl."

"What girl?" said Lynn, popping up in that startling way of hers. "You mean, the girl who has almost perfect hearing and doesn't like to be talked about behind her back? That girl?"

Jess took her in, and I could feel the heat rising to my cheeks. It was a warm day and Lynn wasn't wearing particularly much; added to that was the fact that she was at least ten years younger than Jess herself.

"Heroics aren't enough entertainment for you anymore, Darren?" Jess asked. "You've turned to keeping a concubine?"

"I- uh- ah- " I looked desperately at Lynn for help, and she pressed my hand reassuringly.

"You must have heard about me from Holly," Lynn said. "And Holly understands that I want to be with Darren."

"My wife," Jess said, "light of my life though she is, can be appallingly stupid sometimes. *She* doesn't see any problem with this. And that is something that I simply do not understand."

Lynn shrugged. "Why?"

"What?"

"Why is there a problem with this? Because I'm Darren's slave?"

For just a minute, Jess was lost for words, and her jaw swung freely. Then she collected herself. "Well, yes, that would cover it, actually."

"Why?" Lynn said again. "This is Darren that we're talking about. It's not like she's going to sell me to corsairs, or clap me in irons." She glanced at me, and muttered: "Not unless I beg her to, anyway."

Jess gingerly placed her hands on her ears. "I did not in any way need to hear that."

"Well, you raised the subject, so you're going to have to cope. Look, what are you afraid of, specifically?"

Jess's face twitched- I don't think she'd expected so much resistance- but she stopped to think.

"You're giving up so much power," she said eventually. "Women like us, we so rarely get the chance to make our own choices, to control our own lives. I know that Darren didn't force you into this. But the fact that you want it in the first place- I'm sorry, that just seems bizarre."

"You want me to be able to make choices?" Lynn said.

"In essence, yes," Jess said. "I suppose."

Now she's in for it, I thought. Lynn's face was still solemn, but her eyes gleamed. I stood back and prepared to enjoy myself.

"Let's try a little experiment, shall we?" Lynn said. Clam-shells littered the beach around us. Lynn picked out three of the biggest, crouched, and set them side by side on top of a flat rock. "Darren, I need something small. Your ear-cuff, the silver one?"

I pulled it off with a wince, and tossed it to her. She slipped it under the middle shell, and then began to shuffle them, sliding them around each other on the smooth stone.

"I know what this is," Jess said, bending over Lynn to watch. "I've seen hucksters do it on side-streets."

"Beauty *and* brains," Lynn said approvingly, as she swapped the shells around one last time. "All right. So you know the point of this. Where's the ear-cuff? And this is a crucial question, because that's the only piece of jewellery that Darren ever wears."

"It's the only thing I've found that isn't too girly," I pointed out, but neither of them paid the slightest bit of attention.

"Choose a shell," Lynn said.

Jess frowned. "But- there's no point, is there?"

Lynn shrugged. "Well, that's how the game works."

Jess glanced at each of the shells in turn- her eyes flicked up to Lynn's, questioning, but Lynn just smiled pleasantly back at her.

At last, Jess reached out and set a finger on the middle shell.

Then she looked at Lynn again. "It isn't there, of course."

"Of course not," Lynn agreed, as she plucked the ear cuff out of her sleeve. "Here you go, Darren- no, careful, don't drop it- oh, you're hopeless, let me." She clipped the thing back in place. "In a shell game, whatever you're trying to find is up the huckster's sleeve. So you can't choose the correct shell- it's impossible."

Jess's voice grew sour. "I *knew* that."

"You *knew* that," Lynn repeated, "and you chose a shell anyway. Because it's hard not to make a choice that someone is telling you to make. But oftentimes, it's making that choice that leaves you powerless. It takes a hell of a strong will to refuse to play the game, or to twist it, and introduce your own rules. Enough that you actually stand a chance of winning."

"So you're comparing your life to a shell game."

"That's what it was for a long time. But then I learned to fiddle with the rules."

An unbelieving smile was beginning to crack Jess's face. "So what would you have done if I'd asked *you* to choose a shell?"

"Something you wouldn't have seen coming. I would have overturned the rock that the shells were resting on, maybe. Or distracted you with a naked dance. Pretended to be a rabid dog? *I* don't know. Whatever I did, it would have made me look insane to an impartial observer- like this fine, upstanding citizen here." She rubbed my arm. "People always seem kind of bizarre when they do something unexpected. But if you don't break out of the rules of the game, then the choices that you make aren't really choices at all."

She stood up. "I'm going to go say hello to Holly- we'll probably get some supper started. This one forgets to eat if somebody doesn't make her."

"I know," Jess said softly.

"I suppose you would, wouldn't you?" Lynn agreed, and it sounded like a peace-offering. "We'll call you for dinner in an hour or so. Assuming that I haven't seduced your wife and run away with her by then. I can be *very* convincing when I try."

She headed off into the trees, threading carefully between broken branches in her bare feet, and Jess followed her with her eyes until she was out of sight.

"I like your slave," Jess said simply.

And from then on, they were friends.

Like I say- go figure.

-

We hung a hammock for Jess in a quiet corner of the *Banshee*, and got to our bunk fairly late.

I woke an hour later to a distant rumble of thunder, and then the hissing of rain on the planks overhead. As usual, Lynn's aching arm had been right about the change in the weather. I lay with my head propped up for some time, but in the end, decided not to go up on deck. Regon was fully capable of handling the *Banshee*, even in foul conditions. And I was drowsy, and warm, and didn't want to move Lynn's head from my shoulder.

But I did take the opportunity to unwind my garrotte from her wrist, and stow it back in my own pocket.

The movement made her stir and groan. I ran a finger very gently down her cheek. Lynn had callous in all the same places that I did, but her face was soft as peach skin.

I wondered what kind of rules she had grown up with in the castle on the island of Bero, and how she had learned to twist them.

"When are you going to tell me the truth, Ariadne?" I asked her.

Her eyes didn't open, but her whole face contorted, as though she was about to cry. "Ar-i-ad-ne," she said haltingly.

She wasn't awake, that I knew. Lynn talked in her sleep, though it usually didn't make any sense. Just the other day she had sat bolt upright, her eyes blank, and said solemnly: "But I don't *want* to be a sandwich."

Tonight things sounded more promising, so I held still and waited. Her lips kept moving, but for some minutes all that came out were mumbles. Then she frowned, and snuggled into me, and the words became clearer.

"...selling...glorp...in...big buckets..." she murmured.

Not exactly what I had been hoping for, but I tried to encourage her. "Sounds good, but where would we get that much glorp in the first place?"

"...so why don't we...arm...the kittens?"

"If you can find any kitten-sized cutlasses around here, then you go right ahead."

"...I hate my life."

I straightened up a little. "What did you say?"

Her eyes opened. "I hate my life," she said again.

My throat felt dry. "Why the hell do you say that?"

No answer. She was staring straight ahead, her eyes glassy.

"Lynn, are you awake?"

Still no answer. I passed my hand a few times in front of her eyes. Not a blink, not a twitch.

"Lynn...?"

She was scaring me with that dead-codfish glare. I reached out a hand to shake her shoulder, but to my relief, her eyes slipped shut again, and she let out a long sigh.

Would I wake her if I touched her? I edged a little closer instead, my face a few inches away from hers. "I hope you're all right," I whispered to her in the dark. "I hope I'm giving you what you need. Because I don't have the faintest clue what that is. How can I, when you won't level with me?"

Lynn murmured something.

"What was that?"

She went on murmuring, very fast and so quiet that it sounded more like a buzz than anything else. Carefully, so carefully, I manoeuvred so that my ear was just above her lips.

"IhatemylifeIhatemyhomeIhatemylifeIhatemyhomeIhatemylifeIhatemyhome..."

Over and over and over and over. There was no emotion in it- she was saying it as matter-of-factly as the alphabet. And yet it somehow seemed like the most honest thing I had ever heard her say.

I lay down beside her again, biting my lip. "Sleep," I told her uncomprehending face. "Sleep. It'll get better."

-

I slept badly after that, which made me short the next morning. Lynn herself seemed fine, chatting breezily in our cabin as I pushed my porridge around and around the bowl. She probably noticed my black mood, but if so, she didn't mention it. She talked about the news that Jess had brought us, and Kilroy's aching hip, and the watch schedule for the next seven days. Then she

grimaced, as if remembering something, and tugged at one of the longer locks of her hair.

"I'm going to need it cut again soon," she said.

I grunted over the top of my cider cup. "You don't need to keep it *that* short. You're not a convict."

"We've been over this a million times. I keep it short because I like it that way."

"Whatever. I still don't understand it."

I expected her to snap at me, and was feeling just curt enough that I wanted her to. But instead, she glanced over at the wall, her expression one of fierce concentration.

"Let's say," she began slowly, "that hypothetically- I mean purely, totally hypothetically- let's say that once upon a time, someone *made* you wear your hair long. Would you understand it then?"

I pictured Lynn- *Ariadne*- in full court dress, with hair down to her waist. I didn't like the image as much as I had expected. It didn't seem like her, somehow. "I guess," I hedged. "Depends on why you were told to do it."

What I had in mind was an overprotective father who wanted his only daughter to look like a girl. But that didn't seem to be it, judging from the way that she was fidgeting.

"Well, let's say," she began again, "and this is all sheerly hypothetical, remember- let's say that someone liked to grab it."

"Grab what?"

"Your hair. My hair. Long hair. Whatever."

I can't be sure, but I think I gawked. "Who grabbed you by your hair?"

She held her hands up defensively. "We're talking hypothetically, remember? Purely hypothetically! You do know the meaning of the word, right?"

"Of course," I said haughtily, hoping that she wasn't about to ask me to define it.

"Hypothetically! As in, 'Let's say, hypothetically, that I was raised by baboons!'"

I was completely lost. "What does this have to do with your hair?"

She clutched her head and made a strangled noise. "*If*, and I say *if*, someone used to grab you by your hair..."

"Then I guess maybe I'd wear my hair short, yeah."

"There! You see? That's all I was looking for."

She took a fierce swig from her cider cup, and then fiddled with the hem of her tunic, not looking me in the face. I tried to sort through what she had said. If someone used to kick her around, then her husband was the likely culprit. Hardly an unusual story. Why couldn't she just say it out loud?

I set my own up down with a clink. It was time.

"Lynn," I said. "Tell me your name."

She raised her head, and then an eyebrow. "It's 'Lynn'," she answered. "If you don't know that by now, then there isn't much hope for you."

"I mean, your real name."

"Also 'Lynn'."

I hissed, frustrated. "Your birth name, then."

Lynn set down her empty bowl, placed her empty cup in it, set her elbows on her knees and her chin in her hands, and said two words, slowly and distinctly: "Stop it."

"What?"

"I said 'Stop it,' and I said it very clearly. Hopefully, this is where you give in and back off. You never used to snoop. I liked it better that way."

"It's been more than a year. I've done my best, but I'm sick of hints and hypotheticals. Let's get it over with."

She waved an impatient hand. "Mistress--"

"Don't call me that when we're arguing."

"...dickhead, then. Why are you so obsessed with my past? Everybody has one, and mine is no more interesting than Corto's or Regon's. You know that Regon had a twin brother who died of five-day fever when they were nine?"

"Yes," I lied sullenly.

"Regon had the fever too- it went straight to his balls. He can get it up, with an effort, but he can't get a girl pregnant. Now *that's* a story."

It was new information, and it distracted me for a second. No wonder women fought over Regon

at every brothel. But I shook my head and refocused. "Stop changing the subject. I want to know who you are."

She sighed. "I'm *yours*, you dozy bint. Does anything else have to matter?"

"Yes, actually, it does. Because it obviously matters to you. And I can't help you with it until I know. And helping you with it is my job. So you're going to tell me, Lynn. Right now."

Up until that point, she had been annoyed, nothing more. At that point, her face shut down. It was as if her entire self was a door which was slamming shut, and it did so in the time it took her drumming fingers to rattle twice on top of her knee.

"You don't tell me what to do," she said quietly.

"I just asked- "

"You didn't ask, you demanded. And you don't do that. You have no right to."

"Excuse me?" I said, beginning to get ruffled. "You're the one who insists on dressing like a slave and acting like a concubine. I didn't ask you to call me 'Mistress' or brand my damn mark into your arm!"

"Exactly. You didn't ask. *I* decided, Darren- *me*. And if I want you to tell me what to do, then I'll bloody well tell you what I want you to tell me to do!"

Despairingly, I flung up my hands. "ARGH!"

"Oh, poor baby. Is the fact that I think for myself giving you a rash?" She stalked over to the sea chest, and pulled out a fistful of maps with shaking hands. "Get out of here already. It's past ten, and I've got better things to do than to listen to you sulk."

-

Jess's face had a look of faint disbelief.

"Wait, hang on, let me get this straight," she said. "Lynn accused you of sulking..."

"Yes."

"And that made you mad..."

"Yes."

"So you decided to come up here and sulk some more?"

Grumpily, I tossed a few biscuit crumbs over the side. The water swirled as fish snapped them

up. "I wouldn't put it that way."

"No, you *wouldn't*, would you?"

It was three hours since our spat, and Lynn still hadn't emerged from the cabin. I had spent the time lurking around the rest of the ship, inspecting things that didn't need inspecting and yelling at sailors that didn't need to be yelled at. At last, Regon told me in the nicest possible way that I was being a horse's ass and should take a time out. Which was why I was standing by the gunwale throwing biscuit crumbs to fish and letting my old girlfriend rake me over the coals.

I've had better afternoons.

"I think she's made it perfectly clear that she'll tell you about herself when she's ready. Why can't you just wait?"

"Because it's getting ridiculous! I already know everything that she's going to say, more or less. What's she waiting for? Why can't she just trust me? Haven't I earned that from her by now?"

Jess rolled her eyes, and hugged her cloak more tightly around herself. There was a chill in the air. "Trust can be earned, Darren, but it can't be owed. You're just making things worse by demanding it."

I tossed the rest of the biscuit over the side, more violently than necessary. Why did everyone in my life treat me like a moron or a child? "I'm not asking for much here. She doesn't have to tell me her life story. All she has to do is to admit that she's Ariadne!"

"Has it occurred to you," she said slowly, "you inestimably stupid person, that maybe Lynn *isn't* Ariadne?"

"All the evidence supports it- "

"No, Darren." She freed a hand from her cloak so that she could tap my chest in emphasis. "You only *see* the evidence that supports it. Everything else, you ignore."

I caught her poking finger and pushed it away from me. "What do you mean, everything else?"

"Her *scars*, for one thing."

You can't live on board ship and be shy about your body. Just about everyone I sailed with must have seen the tracery of white marks on Lynn's skin. Mainly on her back and thighs and belly. Nobody on board paid much attention to them- probably because just about all my sailors were patterned the same way.

I shrugged. "What about her scars? They're rope burns. And that kind of thing. I have them too. You can't avoid them when you're a sailor."

"But Ariadne is an only child, right? She wouldn't have lived on board ship."

This was true. Ariadne, unlike me, wouldn't have been shoved out to captain merchant boats as soon as she turned fourteen. Lucky dog. "So she got them after she left home. Gods know how long she was in that fishing town. She must have picked them up there. Probably from working on the skiffs-"

At this point, Jess was forced to take a couple of deep breaths. "Have you *looked* at those scars?"

"I've seen them, of course. I don't hold a candle up to them and ogle inquisitively. Why would I want to do that?"

"*To learn something, you clot.* The lines of those scars are broken up."

"So?"

"So? SO? So she got them when she was still growing. Someone beat the holy hell out of her when she was a kid. How does that fit in with your precious theory?"

"Huh," I said, and then "well, there must be a way to explain that."

Jess threw up her hands. "Why? *Why* does there have to be a way to explain that? Because Darren of fucking Torasan likes the idea that her lover is royalty, so she won't bloody well let it go! Drop the theory and start from the facts. She's badly scarred. She's scrawny- probably didn't get enough to eat when she was little. She's a schemer and a survivor, and has nightmares, and she pushes you around unmercifully, because she's scared numb at the thought of someone else controlling her. Are you starting to get a picture here?"

Being told off makes me surly. I just grunted, though my stomach was beginning to sour.

"She's no pampered little princess, Darren. Someone messed with her, badly. I don't know how or who or when or why, but *that* much is obvious. And she's as much of a commoner as I am. You think a noblewoman would be willing to black your boots or gut your fish? I'm sorry if all this offends your aristocratic tastes, but- "

"Now *that's* not fair," I snapped. "I never gave a damn that you were a peasant."

"But you'd like it if Lynn turned out not to be."

I was floundering. "I just don't think that she is! You didn't see the village where I found her. Gods on high, I can still *smell* the place."

"Watch it, Darren," Jess warned me quietly, "just watch it. Chances are, you're talking about her hometown. I was chatting with her last night..."

"Were you?" I said grimly. "Sounds cosy."

"Stop it, you hopeless leech. We all know, I'm not her type. The point is, I asked her whether she missed anything from home."

I was bristling. "I'm sure she does. That village was terrible scenic. The piles of rotting whitebait; the dung-filled hovels; the hordes of raiders, their armour glinting faintly in the summer sun..."

"If you don't shut up I'm going to hurt you. Darren, she said that she misses her sister."

I was so jolted, I forgot to pretend I wasn't. "But...Ariadne is an only child."

"Finally sinking in, is it?"

It took a while. "Lynn has a sister."

"Yes, Darren."

A seabird skimmed the surface of the ocean nearby. Its cry seemed very loud.

I ran my tongue along my teeth. "Her sister- her sister wasn't one of the kids that we picked up in her village, was it? None of them looked anything like her."

"That's what I asked. She said no- and then she clammed up. So I didn't push it."

I snorted. "Well, that was damned inconsiderate of you, wasn't it? Now I'm going to have to spend a bloody age getting the goods out of her myself."

"She was crying," Holly said frostily, "so I don't advise it."

"She never cries in front of me," I muttered, parenthetically, and then my train of thought abruptly changed direction. "HANG ON! Did you imply back there that Lynn is *your* type?"

That time I thought she really was going to go after me with her bare hands, but instead she just stalked off to the other side of the ship, making strangled noises. By the time she got back, she was more or less under control. "Your brain," she told me tightly, "is composed entirely of soft unripened cheese. So it's in a spirit of charity that I tell you this. Every person in Lynn's village- every person except the handful you rescued- was snatched by some army or faction or bunch of thugs. If Lynn's sister was in that village, then she got taken. And she's most probably a camp whore, *if* she's still alive."

I was going limp all over. "But if that's true then- why hasn't Lynn said so? I could do something, maybe, I could help!"

"Because you're so in love with your own stupid fantasy! It practically *radiates* out of you, what you're hoping for. Lynn knows damn well that you're not ready for the truth."

My brain was sparking all over with frustration. "Well, if you're so in tune with her emotions, why don't you ask her? Just ask her flat out whether she's Ariadne!"

Jess's grey eyes burned into mine. "I did."

Ten seconds of silence; then I found my voice. "And what did she say?"

A tiny shrug. "She said 'No!'."

-

Lynn didn't cook that night. The new casks of salt beef proved to be maggot-ridden, so the men chewed cold biscuit and looked gloomy. To make it up to them, I had a barrel of ale hauled up to the deck. Before long, they were staggering about with drink-misted eyes, restored to grinning, back-slapping cheer. It wasn't particularly good for ship's discipline or for my mood, but I'll take drunken sailors over mutinous sailors most days. To keep casualties to a minimum, I had a lantern lit, and seated myself on a crate by the helm to keep a watchful eye on the festivities.

As I watched, I fretted. Should I tell Lynn that I knew about her sister? Offer to go looking for her? But surely Lynn would tell me if that was what she wanted. And wouldn't she have mentioned something earlier? No, the best approach was probably to swear up and down that I wouldn't ask more questions for the next million years. Maybe I'd have to buy her some presents, as well. I wondered if peasant girls liked getting flowers.

I was so deep in thought that I didn't see Lynn approaching until she plonked herself on my lap.

"Rejoice, O Mistress," she said, settling herself comfortably. "For I am over it. Come ye out of the doghouse, and bask in the sunshine of my smile."

I perked up instantly. "You're not mad?"

"I needed to cool down, but no, it's all right. I'm still breaking you of a few bad habits. It's an ongoing process."

She smiled lopsidedly, snaking an arm around my shoulders. With that touch, the tension all floated out of me in a big puffy cloud, and I smiled back.

"I'm sorry," I said, "I know I was being an ass. I won't try to pump you again."

"Yeah, she said that you wouldn't."

"She?"

"Jess put in a good word for you. She said that you take a while to learn things, but once you do, you take them to heart."

I raised my eyebrows. "Like a horse?"

"Like a parrot," she suggested.

"Like a pirate queen."

"Now you've got it."

-

Lynn showed no sign of wanting to budge from my lap, and my legs were asleep before ten minutes had passed, but I still remember that as a perfect evening.

The largest cask of ale I had bought at the Freemarket turned out to taste a little better than goat piss, for a change, and we celebrated by drinking just about all of it. Somewhere halfway down the cask, people got to dancing, and if you haven't seen a drunken pirate do a staggering jig, then you're missing something in your life. Jess didn't get into the action, but she sat near the mast, flickers of lantern-light on her hair, and her eyes sparking with amusement and interest. Sometimes Lynn talked and sometimes she drank and sometimes she sang, loudly and tunelessly. But whatever she was doing, she kept her right hand on me- rubbing her thumb back and forth against my shoulder, or drawing small circles on the skin of my back. It was like an unspoken promise that the next thing to happen would be even better than the last.

Times like that never last, do they?

-

There was no warning. Lynn had been telling (with great gusto and accompanying hand gestures) a fairly shocking limerick about a walrus in a brothel. All at once, she glanced up, and her body froze. If you think of a doe grazing, who suddenly snaps to high alert when a noise sounds nearby, then you'll have the right idea. I had seen her do this before, and had learned not to question it. Motionless, I waited.

Her head tilted ever so slightly as she listened to something that only she could hear- and then she reached above her head, flicked open the door of the lantern, and pinched out the flame.

Twenty different conversations, bawdy jokes, and peals of laughter went out with the light. Wind whispered, a board creaked underfoot. Lynn's voice sounded cool and calm in the darkness. "Weigh anchor, set the sails. *Quietly*. If anyone makes unnecessary noise, then my mistress will stuff your own feet down your throat."

I scowled around, to let the crew know that I would do just exactly that, but then realized that no one could see me in the moonless night. Anyway, there was no need. Regon and Corto were swiftly prodding the sailors into place. Ropes creaked as men sprang up the rigging, and then came the rattle of anchor chain. Lynn, meanwhile, had peeled herself off my lap and hurried to the *Banshee's* starboard side.

I joined her there. "What is it?" I hissed.

Instead of answering, she took my index finger and used it to trace a patch along the horizon. A dark patch, a ship-shaped shadow where the stars were blotted out. There was no way to see detail, but it seemed like a large one. I swore very softly.

She angled her head and spoke directly into my ear. "The big question is whether it's going to follow."

-

It followed.

The rattle of the anchor chain had given us away, and the other ship was moving almost as soon as we were. The wind dropped bit by bit throughout that long night, and though we crowded on more sail, I could feel the *Banshee* slow almost to a crawl in the water. Again and again, I lost sight of our pursuer and felt a great bound of hope- but each time Lynn would shake her head. Shortly afterward, I would see the telltale silhouette against the starry sky, often much closer than I had thought.

If Lynn hadn't ordered half the men below to sleep, I don't think I would have thought of it. She herself refused to go down. By dawn, I was moving at half speed, almost drunk with fatigue. Lynn still looked fairly fresh and whole, though every so often her right eyelid twitched.

By now we could see the pursuer. It was a war galley, a new one, with its sides still gold with varnish. The grappling hooks were coiled along its side, grim and threatening as ever but also somehow surgical, neat, precise. The figurehead was-

"That's the *Silver Hind*," I told Lynn, when I recognized the deer's head. "I saw it at the Freemarket. The bastards followed us."

"Not good," she murmured. "Ten different kinds of not good."

At that moment, there was a *flap-flap-flap* above us, the tell-tale sign of a loose sail. The red canvas flopped against the mast in limp folds, heavy and empty.

The wind had died completely.

"Eleven," Lynn amended.

-

Big enough for two, the cabin was cramped when we'd all crowded in. Jess, Spinner, and Regon fit side-by-side on the bunk. Latoya took up a position by the wall, feet shoulder width apart and arms clasped. Her expression promised a dreadful fate for anyone who asked her to sit down.

Lynn was perched on the closed lid of the sea-chest. That left just enough room for me to pace two steps back and forth.

"All right," I said, to open the session. "Suggestions."

Regon spoke first as usual. "Do nothing. Keep watch, wait for the calm to end. The *Banshee* will run away from those bastards under a fair wind."

"We don't know that," I said, pacing.

"The *Badger* and the *Sod Off* are somewhere nearby," he insisted. "They could arrive here any time."

"Not in a calm. Besides, how do we know that *they're* not waiting for reinforcements? They followed us for a reason. They probably didn't plan to take on the pirate queen alone. And I doubt they plan to let us just leave. Spinner, your turn."

He shrugged. "Spike and scuttle?"

By this, he meant a tricky, near-suicidal manoeuvre that involved a small picked party swimming or rowing to the enemy ship, then sinking it by way of a slow leak. I shook my head impatiently. "They'll be on the watch for something like that. Not like they have anything else to do. Latoya."

She cracked her knuckles. "Fight."

I might have known. "Too risky. The *Hind* ships somewhere around seventy crewmen, judging from the size..."

"We have fifty," she continued, implacable. "You and I could handle ten each of theirs."

I wasn't at all sure of that myself, and was grateful when Lynn's head snapped up. "Absolutely not," she said. "No out-and-out battle. We don't have a single advantage here- no intelligence, no element of surprise. We can't even manoeuvre. If we go into a hack-and-slash, half of us are going to die, whether or not we win. I won't tolerate those odds."

Privately, I agreed, though I didn't know whether we had a choice. "Lynn, it'll make me very happy if you say have a plan."

"Buy him off," she said simply. "That's the ship of a man who likes money. If he's being paid to go after the *Banshee*, then make him a counter-offer. One that doesn't involve him risking his hide."

"That makes us look weak," Latoya objected. "He'll be spurred to attack."

"Not if the offer's good enough. We can afford it. Anything else is too damn risky."

I mulled it over. It wasn't quite in keeping with the pirate queen's fearsome reputation. But there are times when staying alive just has to come first.

Jess cleared her throat. "For what it's worth, I would agree."

That clinched it. "Fine. Lynn, talk to Corto, do an inventory, fill a chest with shiny stuff. Regon, the parley flag. And Latoya, stop sulking. You'll get another chance to kill things soon enough."

-

It took half an hour of shouting and flag-flapping to get the *Hind* to agree to a parley. It took the better part of four hours to decide where it would be held.

I had tried to cut the discussion short by offering to go to the *Hind* myself. Lynn had responded with a flat "No" which was obviously meant to cover any other noble, self-sacrificing suggestions I might make.

"We can't make it that easy for them," was how she put it. I had never heard of an envoy being seized during a parley. It was against all the laws of the sea- and those laws may be unwritten and unspoken, but they're enforced viciously by the people who know them. But as Lynn patiently reminded me, I was an exile, and so it was the right of any Kilan to kill me on sight if we met outside a truce zone. I couldn't fault the logic, but I could grumble and I did. She patted my cheek and told me not to be a brat.

Finally, after a long, sweaty time of waiting, a longboat began to inch over from the *Hind*.

During the wait, Corto had prepared the deck for the envoys' reception. Biscuit boxes had been stacked into a kind of lounge shape at one end of the deck, and a crimson cloth draped over it to form a throne. Sitting on the thing, I felt, would make me look like twenty kinds of twat, but what the hell. It wouldn't be the first time that I had humiliated myself in order to feed the legend of the pirate queen. It wouldn't be the last.

Unless this thing went south and the men of the *Hind* cut us all to pieces, I thought morbidly. *Then* it would be the last.

Spinner bustled around the deck, setting goblets ready on an upturned barrel, but I roused myself from my funk when he produced a bottle of wine. "Not that stuff," I protested. "That's the foul kind that tastes of pine juice. Go get some of the red. Where's Lynn?"

"She went below," he told me, as he fussily dusted the goblets with his sleeve. "To change, she said."

"Thank the gods," I muttered fervently. I wasn't so stupid as to want to go through the parley without Lynn, but my spirits rose several notches at the thought that she would be wearing the same drab clothes as the rest of the crew, showing only a few square inches of skin.

But she hadn't resurfaced by the time that the longboat bumped against the side, and seven men from the *Hind* pulled themselves on deck.

They made my mouth go dry, if you want to know the truth. There's one thing in confrontations that matters more than anything else, and that's confidence, self-assurance. It doesn't matter how strong you actually are. If you're going in, go in with a swagger and that may be enough to end the fight. Birds know this, with their colours and plumage; lizards and moths know it, and above all, Lynn did. Even I know it, and it's saved my life more times that I can count.

But I'm not immune to the trick just because I understand it. They looked *so* bloody confident.

The one in the middle was obviously in charge, three sailors on either side flanking him. Dressed simply, in black jerkin and high boots, he wore no obvious weapon. Nor did he bother to glance around the deck, where my crew stood or sat in silent clumps. Without waiting to be asked, he seated himself on the stool that had been placed facing my throne.

"Darren of Torasan," he said by way of greeting. "You *have* been busy."

I inclined my head briefly. "Your name?"

He smiled. "Timor," he said- and nothing more.

It's a soft kind of snub to refuse to give your lineage or rank or allegiance when asked your name. It's also a way to deny your questioner any useful information. Timor's face and clothes gave no sign of what he was- noble or merchant, hired man or mercenary. I couldn't remember a lord named "Timor" but there are too many of us to keep track.

I didn't rise to the insult- after all, Lynn had been insulting me that way for over a year. Instead, I leaned back, folded my hands, and waited.

As I had expected, he grew impatient after a few moments of silence. "Well?" he said. "You suggested this- surely there's something you want to discuss?"

"Since you ask so politely, there is," I said. "I'd like to discuss how we can stop this situation from erupting into stupidity."

He looked politely baffled. "I can't think what you mean, Lady Darren. Or- forgive me- is there another term of address for pirates?"

Slimy bastard. "If you know my name, you should also know that I don't like beating around the bush. If you want to talk, talk straight. Otherwise, get the hell off my ship, and later on we'll meet in a less friendly setting."

His smile glinted, as if he was immensely pleased. "You can end this parley at any moment you choose, my lady. But of course, we both realize that you would regret that decision more than I would."

It was tense, and growing tenser. With six of his crewmen towering around him, Timor looked calm and assured, utterly at his ease. I had attendants of my own- Regon stood at my right hand, Spinner at my left, and behind me loomed Latoya, her massive shadow leaving my whole body in the shade. Jess lurked amidships, her face grave and stony with concentration. But the person I chiefly needed was still nowhere to be seen. Where the buggering fuck was Lynn?

I desperately wanted to call a time out and go hunt for her. But I quelled the longing and pressed ahead. "Let's make this simple. Someone, I don't care who, hired you to hunt me down."

"Correct, in essentials," he admitted, with another polite smile.

"Then surely they gave you the litany." Ever so slightly, I adjusted my weight in the chair, letting light glint along my cutlass. "Mara of Namor, Gorax the Savage, the hillmen of the eastern islands, the Tawran Beast, to name a few. Most recently, Tyco Gorgionson. All people who underestimated me. All dead, or wishing very fervently that they were. Do you want to be added to that list?"

"Your concern for my safety is very touching," he said. "But I don't quite see the point of it."

"I'm offering to make this easy. Five hundred crowns-"

He gave a startled laugh.

"- if you walk away," I finished. "Not what your employer is offering you, I'm certain-"

"Nowhere close," he said, amused. "You're underestimating what you're worth on the global market, my lady. I don't know if your ship could carry enough precious metal to make up the purchase price."

He rose. "I've enjoyed our conversation, my lady, and I'll enjoy meeting you again later, I'm sure."

He turned to go, and his sailors turned with him. Spinner gave me a frantic, desperate look- and I stared stonily back until he got the message. Scoffing at an offer, feigning disinterest, is the heart of bargaining. Timor's amusement at the bribe could well be an act, put on to drag a higher price from me. I had taken that possibility into account when fixing the amount of my first bid.

I waited until Timor had his hands on the rail, ready to pull himself over, and then I commented, "I might go as high as six hundred."

He looked over his shoulder, and his grin was cheery. "You really do underestimate your worth, pirate queen," he said, and hopped up on the side.

I gnawed the inside of my own cheek. There was also the possibility that his amusement wasn't an act at all.

-

"Watch yourself, girl!"

Something had bumped against Timor just as he was about to swing onto the rope ladder. He caught himself before he fell, looked around wildly, and caught the arm of the culprit.

I rose halfway out of my throne. Timor was clutching Lynn's upper arm, almost making her drop the wine-jug she carried. But it wasn't that which made my eyes bug out. She had gone below to change clothes, so Spinner had said, and that was true. She was now clothed- if you could call it that- in a piece of white linen, barely bigger than a handkerchief. It was caught at her shoulders with two brass buttons, and belted with a girdle of white rope. A coppery pattern played around the bottom edge, and a thin copper bracelet encircled each of her wrists.

That was all. But that was enough. The linen was thin as a sigh, almost sheer. It whispered. It clung. It did other things that made it hard for me to breathe. And Timor released her arm as though it was made of hot iron.

"Watch yourself," he repeated, more gently this time.

"Forgive me, lord," she answered. "Will you take a cup of wine before you go?"

He hesitated no more than a second, and then he swung back onto the deck. A part of me couldn't blame him. But that part of me was drowned out by the much greater part of me which now wanted to pound him into the deck until nothing was left but stains and bloody rags.

Lynn poured, deftly and silently, and handed Timor his goblet first. Her slave tattoo, the storm-petrel, was clearly visible, and Timor's eyes flicked to it. I gripped the hilt of my cutlass so tightly that its ridges cut into my palm. It seemed a long time before Lynn was at my side, pouring my own drink.

I spoke to her through gritted teeth: "And what in hell do you think you're doing?"

"Not now," she whispered, "trust me."

She bowed her head, ceremoniously, as she passed the wine to me, and I gave a little ceremonial wave of my hand in reply, hoping that would end it. Maybe now she would vanish back downstairs and change clothes again...

I should have known better. As soon as Lynn's hands were free, she turned in Timor's direction. Then, without the least trace of hesitation or shame, she knelt at the foot of my throne.

It was pure shock, I think, that prevented me from jumping up and yelping. That, and the knowledge that I was embroiled in a tremendously difficult negotiation, and that jumping up and yelping would be about as appropriate as farting during an execution. But I had to fake a

coughing fit to give myself a few spare seconds.

"I hope you're not ill, Lady Darren," Timor said in his oily tone. "It can't have been the drink. It's very fine."

This with his eyes fixed somewhere beneath Lynn's collarbone. Every last drop of my blood began to steam. I had to end this fast or I really would kill the man.

"Six hundred and fifty crowns," I said flatly. "In milled coins, full weight. I won't go higher. You can take it, or you can lose half your strength and maybe your head trying for more."

I gestured with my right hand as I said this, and my fingers brushed against something soft-Lynn's hair. Had she put her head in the way? I was about to pull back my hand, embarrassed, but Timor's sharp eyes were there, all over us. I let my hand rest where it was, cupping the top of Lynn's blond head.

"Six hundred and fifty," Timor repeated softly.

"Six hundred and fifty that you don't have to bleed for. Be sure to factor that part in." I took a furious gulp of wine with my free hand. "Has anyone ever told you what I do to the men I defeat? Because it's gripping. I intend to write a book."

Lynn's head dipped forwards, then tilted to the side. It made my hand slip down past her hair to her neck, as though I was- oh gods, it looked like I was stroking her. As if that wasn't bad enough, Lynn let out a little sigh as she pressed back against my hand. Exactly like an adoring pet. Red-faced, smouldering, I swigged more wine.

"Six...hundred...and...fifty," Timor said again, and it was clear that he was thinking about anything but the number. "It still seems a little inadequate, Lady Darren."

That was it. I was tired of this stupid dance. I uncrossed my heels, ready to surge to my feet and throw the man headlong from my ship, parley be damned- but that's when Lynn spoke up.

"Mistress," she said, her eyes still downcast. "May I speak?"

I hesitated for three full seconds. Her hand found its way back to my ankle and squeezed hard. *Trust me.*

"Very well, girl," I said gruffly. Oh, but she was going to pay for this later.

Lynn raised her head and sat up on her heels, looking Timor full in the face. "If you don't think the payment is enough, lord," she said, "then we could discuss it when I deliver the gold on behalf of my mistress." She paused delicately. "In depth."

My heart clenched into a fist-sized ball of stone.

"Ahhhhh," Timor said, leaning back. "Ah."

His smile this time was less mocking, more knowing, and it was all I could do not to go for his throat.

"I have to admit," he said gravely, "this gets more tempting by the minute."

No. *No*. Absolutely not. Now I did get to my feet, and Timor, startled, did likewise. Lynn stayed where she was, kneeling on the floor between us.

"You're a little too hasty," Timor warned me. "I never said that I agreed."

And you won't get a chance to agree, you slimy son of a so-and-so. I was opening my mouth to tell him exactly where he could go and exactly what he could do when he got there, when Lynn's hand touched my ankle again. It was almost apologetic, this time. *Trust me.*

The air hung heavy around me, waiting.

"Seven hundred," I whispered.

Timor nodded. "Done."

-

The crew was stone silent after Timor left. Lynn pulled herself to her feet and headed below without looking at anyone. I took a few deep breaths before I went after her.

When I entered our cabin, she had the sea-chest open and was rifling through its contents. Maybe she was searching for something. Maybe she just didn't want to face me.

I bolted the door and rubbed my hands. "All right," I asked her. "What's the plan?"

She glanced back briefly over her shoulder, but returned her attention to the contents of the chest before she answered. "I'm going to go over there with the money."

"Then what?"

"And then I'll come back."

"And in between?" I prodded. "You had me worried for a second there- but I know you're not planning to sleep with him. I know you better than that."

Now she did turn around, slim and pale in her skimpy tunic and copper jewellery. "Do you?" she asked simply.

There was no answer to that, really. The silence in the cabin stretched and stretched.

"Why?" I managed to say at last. It came out a lot louder and harsher than I had intended. "Why would you do that? Do you think you're some kind of whore? Do you think that I think of you that way?"

Lynn reflexively pulled off her bracelets, then pulled them back on. "I know damn well I'm not, and I know damn well you don't."

"Then *why*? Why did you even start the sex-kitten act? I had things under control!"

"He was bored, and you were losing him," Lynn said flatly. "That's not control. We had to sweeten the deal."

"That doesn't mean *you* have to be the sweetener! Hell, we could have offered him Latoya!"

"Men tend not to go for Latoya."

"Spinner, then!"

"How is that better? Darren, if this has to happen, why *shouldn't* it be me?"

"Because- " I began without thinking, and then stopped myself.

"Because I'm yours," Lynn finished the thought. "But that's not a good enough reason. Everyone on this ship is a person. Nobody deserves this."

My brain was spinning with that familiar reckless heat. "So let *me* do it!"

Lynn sorted slowly through linen shirts. "You can't, Darren. He doesn't want you. And don't get ruffled- that's not your fault. I'm little and I look helpless and that's what he's interested in. It's pretty obvious."

To my horror, I realized that tears were beginning to prick in the corners of my eyes. "For the love of the gods, Lynn, you can't possibly *want* to do this!"

She slammed the lid of the chest. "Of course I don't," she snapped.

"Then don't! We'll find another way! We'll take our chances in a hack-and-slash! Anything's better than delivering you to that bastard *gift-wrapped!*"

"Anything's better?" she repeated in disbelief. "How do you figure? Every time we attack a ship, I have to cope with the idea that you might end up headless. You think I *like* sending you out to collect another set of scars? How is this different?"

"Because it's different! Getting wounded in battle- it's *clean*. It's nothing like having to lie there and take- *that*."

"That' has a name. It's sex. It's just sex. It's as much of a weapon as anything else. Don't make too much of it."

"Do not you fucking tell me that I am fucking making too much of it! It matters, all right! It fucking matters!"

"*Nobles*," she muttered viciously to herself, her forearms resting on top of the sea chest. "My god, your priorities. Blood. Descendants. *Family purity*. You sit up straight at the table and you observe codes of honour and you tremble at the thought of getting your hands dirty. Darren, this is how it *works* in the real world. You think I've never had to do something like this before?"

I gaped. "Oh, Lynn. Oh Lynn, I'm so sorry- "

She rubbed her eyes fiercely. "Stop. *Stop*. Don't get maudlin on me *again*. I'm just trying to tell you- *this is life*. Timor may be creepy and unclean, but you know what? I'd sleep with him every day of the week. And twice on Tuesdays. If that's what it took to keep you alive."

I slammed my hand down on the bunk. "What if I told you I'd rather die?"

"For one thing, I wouldn't believe you," she snapped, as she got to her feet. "For another, I wouldn't care. *I don't let people die for stupid reasons*."

My words to her, on the day we met. My words when I told her that I was going to force her to leave her burnt-out village, whatever that took. I set my jaw.

"Besides, Darren," Lynn went on, "you're not the only one at stake here. I'd fuck Timor to save Latoya's life. Or Spinner's, or Regon's...Hell, it may not be customary to admit it, but I would fuck him to save my own."

"Then fuck him to save your own life! Leave *me* out of it!"

We were facing each other now, our chests heaving. Then, with an effort I could almost see, Lynn gathered up her anger and pushed it away.

"Fine," she said, low and weary. "That's what I'll do."

She brushed past me on her way to the steps. My anger had evaporated. I just felt cold.

But even through the numbness, I felt something tugging at my brain. *Nobles*, Lynn had said, *you nobles*...

So Lynn wasn't a noble. Jess had been right after all.

And maybe, I thought dimly as I headed after her, maybe that's why we had such different reactions to this. Maybe we were too different, deep in our core...

-

Nothing had been done when we got to the deck. The longboat was still waiting in the hoists; the chest of gold hadn't been loaded. Most of the crew was gaping at me with the same fixed, unbelieving expressions.

"Well?" I growled. "What are you bastards waiting for? A sign from heaven?"

They moved then, slowly. The longboat juddered down in the hoists, onto the surface of the sea. Lynn kicked the rope ladder over the side and, without a word, climbed down, hand over hand. I stood staring at her as she took up the oars.

Regon looked from her to me, his mouth round with shock. "Captain!-"

If he hadn't spoken up, I'm ashamed to say, I would have let Lynn board the *Hind* alone. But Regon's words revived some of my senses. "Latoya, go with her," I said, my voice cracking. "Spinner, you too."

They nearly flung themselves over the side. Lynn didn't seem happy to see them. She climbed forward into the bow, letting Latoya take the oars; drew her legs up, and hugged them with her bare arms.

Latoya began to row, step by steady stroke. Spinner's hand rested protectively on top of the chest of gold. The longboat cut a clean furrow in the water.

-

It was quiet as death over there.

The crew had wisely allowed me my space. I stood alone at the gunwales, shaving off slivers of wood with the edge of my dagger. I would have skewered any of my crew who defaced the ship in this way, but it was my damn boat and I was angry and if they didn't like it then I would happily toss them overboard. *Me am boss.*

A shadow, a presence behind me, and Jess joined me at the rail. "Aren't you cold?"

I grunted, not interested in pleasantries. Though, now that she mentioned it, there was a chill breeze now that the sun was down.

A chill breeze- I glanced up at the sails, saw them flutter. The calm had ended- well, wasn't that perfect. We could be running now, running before the wind, the *Hind* leagues away; Lynn and I could be squashed together in our tiny bunk, ignoring the entire rest of the world. If only she hadn't done it...

"I know what you're thinking," Jess said.

I grunted again. "You always think you know what I'm thinking."

She ignored that. "Maybe you're right, maybe we could have escaped, but maybe you're wrong. Timor might have attacked as soon as the wind rose. We can't know for certain."

I rested my elbows on the gunwale, and my chin in my hands. There were lanterns moving about on the deck of the other ship, pools of orange light. Any minute Lynn would appear there. Any minute, surely...it had been so long already.

"Do you know why it took Lynn so long to get back up to the deck?" Jess said abruptly.

"She was getting dressed. Picking out the outfit most likely to seduce that revolting rat-bastard-"

"She was throwing up. Repeatedly. Or so Corto tells me."

I stared blankly at my hands. "Are you blaming me for that?"

"No-"

"Because I didn't want her to do this." I felt the tears coming, and could only keep them at bay by speaking more savagely. "I didn't *ask* her to do this. I begged her not to! Why the hell couldn't she just listen to me?"

Jess smiled sadly. "Because she loves you."

I carved off another chip of wood and tossed it over the side. "So what?"

"What do you mean, so what?"

"She did it because she loves me. I asked her not to do it because I love her. We're partners, for fuck's sake! Doesn't my vote count?"

"Yes, but Darren, it's her body. You can plead and argue and cajole, but if she doesn't change her mind, that's it. She made her choice."

My gorge was rising. "So she can do whatever she damn well pleases, and I get to sit and take it- is that what you're saying?"

Jess's voice was filled with strain. "Of course you don't have to sit and take it. Any more than she has to cope with *your* temper tantrums. You could leave each other. Any time. For any reason. But if you don't- let me finish, Darren. If you don't choose to leave her, then you're choosing to deal with what happens- I *said*, let me finish. I'm not saying that what Lynn is doing is right, but she's doing it with courage and love, and she's doing it to protect all of us. You don't have to be grateful for that, but try to respect it."

"But I didn't *want* her to-

"And now you're just whining! Darren, the girl you adore just rowed out to risk her life- and the gods know what else- with her heart in her mouth and all her senses on overdrive. Soon she'll be back, and when that happens, what will you do? Chew her out because she didn't do what you wanted? Mope because someone else had a chance to play with your favourite toy?"

"That's not fair."

"None of this is fair. The point is that she'll need you. More than ever. I hope to heaven that you realize that."

I dug the tip of my dagger into the wood and wiggled it, making a deep hole. I knew that Jess probably had a point, but the bitterness in my stomach wouldn't go away. It felt like gall was eating away at the edges of a torn, jagged hole.

Suddenly Jess stiffened beside me. "Something's happening on the *Hind*."

-

An instant after she said it, a door banged over there- shut or open, I couldn't tell, because just at that minute, all their lanterns went out. Every one of my hairs stood on its end, my entire body poised, waiting for trouble.

"Captain?" Regon called to me. I should have known he wouldn't be far away.

"Look alive," I told him. "Wake the watch below, get the men at their posts. If that ship so much as *twitches*, then we're coming down on Timor like the bloody hand of god."

The men turned out silently, many of them still pulling on their trousers or fastening their belts as they hurried into position. Jess's eyes were wide.

"This is bad, isn't it?"

Twenty different sarcastic responses occurred to me at that moment. I pushed them all aside and went with "Yes."

One minute, two minutes- no sounds, nothing. I made my decision.

"Regon, get the *Banshee* underway. We're taking our people back."

Barely had I finished talking when a door banged on the *Hind* banged open again. But this time it was followed by the sound of hurried feet. Though the deck was almost invisible, I could just make out a cluster of men approaching their starboard side. Approaching it, and carrying something in their arms. A long, struggling bundle-

Then they bent, and heaved, and threw it over the side-

-

A second of no-time, a scream of fury- the struggling body crashed into the water. The sailors of the *Hind* didn't even wait to see whether it hit. They were already springing into action, already moving- the *Hind* was moving, setting its sails, preparing to run.

"Move, *move*, MOVE!" I screeched, dancing from one side of the deck to the other. "GET IN THE WATER, YOU USELESS DOGS!"

Five men plunged overboard even before I could finish talking. Jess, more composed, readied a coil of rope to throw. I pulled off one boot, getting ready to go in myself, but then realized I couldn't do much in the way of commanding from that position. Instead, I waved the boot for emphasis as I screamed. "Lights! *LIGHTS!*"

Someone rushed to the side with a lantern, casting a glow on the men in the water. Regon had been the first one overboard, and he had already reached the struggling swimmer. It was Spinner- half his face covered with a purple-black bruise, probably from a cosh. Regon held him steady on the surface and I saw the reason for his thrashings- his wrists were bound together. His ankles too, from the way he floundered.

Spinner was in the water. Lynn, and Latoya, were still on the *Hind*. The *Hind* had gathered speed, flying goosewinged into the wind. Regon had hold of the rope now and the swimmers were making their way back to the ship. But it was taking too long, too goddamned long- I nearly howled in relief when the last was finally aboard. Then I couldn't make any sound at all. I pointed furiously after the fleeing ship, and Regon, his dark hair slicked back with seawater, took up the call for me: "After them, you lazy scum!"

I stormed my way to the prow- with the breeze rushing behind me, I could convince myself that we were going a little faster than we actually were. I would kill Timor, I promised myself, I would pop his eyes like chestnuts, shred his skin, knot his guts into ornamental baskets; if he had touched Lynn with one fat finger then I would do far worse...

It wasn't an illusion- we were gaining. The *Hind* was looming larger. I rocked back and forth, with eagerness and terror- *yesyesyesyesyes-*

No. There was more movement by the side of the *Hind*. *NO*. Another body being carried out- far larger and this one was motionless. I knew what was going to happen, could picture it all perfectly in the moments beforehand. They didn't throw this body. They rolled it over the side, and it crashed into the waves like a sack of wet sand.

Latoya. Dead? If she wasn't, she soon would be. But if we stopped for her now- I pounded the rail in fury, not caring whether I broke the rail or my hand.

"Captain?" Regon's cry was desperate. We were already approaching the spot where she had

fallen, and there was no sign of her- the water was bare and black. She had already sunk.

I shut my eyes, gripped my cutlass hilt- "Oh gods..."

The obvious thought occurred to me.

I considered it. I'm not going to pretend that I didn't.

But the next second I gave the order, Regon bayed it back in total relief, and the *Banshee* swung about. Again, the lanterns were trained on the surface; again, there were splashes as my sailors plunged over the side. This time they had to dive, and the sea was full of bobbing heads, gasping for breath before they plunged back beneath.

The *Hind* was gaining ground, flying. I tore out a literal chunk of my hair, and hurled my boot down to the deck.

All my instincts screamed for me to leap over the side and go after Lynn myself. Instead, I stalked amidships to find Spinner. He was sprawled by the mast, and now I saw that, besides the bruise on his head, he had an ugly wound across his stomach, blood pulsing from it steadily. Jess was kneeling beside him, matter-of-factly folding rags into makeshift bandages.

But Spinner was talking, rasping out the words. "Latoya," he gasped, "Latoya- is she alive?"

"No idea yet," I said tightly.

"They coshed her," he said, his tone falling to a whisper. "Back of the head- soon as we were below- "

The bastards had always intended to run. They were waiting for the wind. We were being played from the beginning- the question was, *why?*

Unless, of course...Timor's face swam up in front of me. *Someone hired you to hunt me down*, I had said. *Correct, in essentials*, he had said.

He had been hired to hunt someone down.

But not me.

"Spinner," I said, "what did they do with Lynn?"

His eyes rolled until all I could see was the whites. Jess stopped packing the rags against his stomach long enough to hold a flask to his lips. He gasped, then swallowed.

"Let him rest-" Jess tried to say, but Spinner's eyes fluttered open.

"He didn't touch her," he managed to say. "Timor- he didn't-"

I grabbed his wrist. "Spinner, *tell me* or I swear on your mother's grave I will kill you myself!"

"He d-d-d-d-d-didn't hurt her," Spinner stammered, his whole body trembling. "He said- he said-"

"Don't try to talk yet," Jess cut in. "Take a moment first-"

"Gods' teeth, let him talk!" I roared.

Spinner's eyes rolled up to me. "He said: It's time for you to come home. She said- she said: O gods. Then she tried to talk, but he- he-"

"HE WHAT?"

"He said- shit, it's cold- He said, Save your strength. It's a long way to Bero."

I caught him by the shirt. "Bero! *BERO*? You're sure?"

"Sure," he rattled out. "Sure-"

I staggered to my feet. Bero, the northmost island in Kila. Bero, the stronghold of the most powerful royal family in Kila. Bero, home of the House of Bain.

Ariadne's home.

Spinner's body was giving little lurches now. "He s-s-s-said- "

"Save your strength," Jess put in quickly. "Darren, let him rest."

"Said," Spinner persisted, "he said: Lord Iason can't wait to have you back."

-

My brain convulsed, reeled, splintered. In the next few minutes, some part of me knew that my crew was hauling Latoya back on board, and then that Regon and Corto were hurling themselves on her chest and stomach, forcing out the water. I even noted it, vaguely, when she started to cough and choke. But all of it was happening at an impossible distance.

Jess must have finished with Spinner's wound, because when I next could notice anything, she was standing there, silent beside me, her hands stained red past the wrists.

"He'll live," she said softly. "If you let him rest a while before you do more interrogations."

The words grated out painfully. "You said Lynn couldn't *possibly* be Ariadne."

Never mind that I had reached the same conclusion on my own- I needed someone to blame.

It was the first time I had seen Jess truly baffled. "She can't be," she murmured. "And yet- I suppose she must be. But she can't be! It doesn't make any sense! But then," she caught herself, "it doesn't really matter, of course."

"No," I agreed hollowly, "it doesn't really matter."

The last of Latoya's rescuers swung over the gunwale and squelched to the deck. Regon snapped upwards. "Ready, captain!"

Those were probably the longest three seconds of my life.

Images from the past year flooded me: Lynn, chained to the mast of the *Badger* and dozing; Lynn's shoulder, bruised and bloody, the day that she was tattooed; Lynn sick as a dog during an eight-day storm the winter before; Lynn, just that afternoon, kneeling at my feet, head bowed.

I shut my eyes.

"Bring her about," I said hoarsely. "We're going south."

There was a chorus of smothered sound. Disbelief and confusion. The fury soared to my head, and I spoke in a snarl: "*Move*, you puking scuts! You heard me!"

They scattered, most of them. Regon still stood in front of me, his hands clenching and unclenching, and Jess's mouth was open and round.

"Turn about," I said again, just so there would be no mistake. "Let them go."

-

Maybe, I thought, maybe giving up lovers was something that got easier the more often you did it.

By this time I was safely down in our cabin- *my* cabin, I corrected myself, *my* cabin, mine mine mine. It was astonishing how few traces of Lynn there actually were in there now that she was gone. Once I'd closed the sea chest to hide her clothes, the space was as dour and bare as on any ship I'd ever commanded.

My brandy flask was half empty now. I took a long, rattling pull.

In the weeks and months after I left Jess, when I was wandering around the islands half-wild with fear and guilt, I used to do this just about every night. Sit and drink and think about her and get disgusted with myself. As the months went on, the memory of that time seemed more and more rose-tinted, and more and more dreamlike. I mean, honestly. Darren, formerly of the House of Torasan, learning to tend beehives? It had been soul-renewing, in a way, and I would always

be grateful for it. But it had been doomed from the start.

My time with Lynn- *Ariadne*- had been just the same. A blip in her life as the all-privileged daughter of an all-powerful man. I wouldn't forget about her, certainly, but the wound would scab over and become an ordinary kind of scar. She had given me new energy, a new purpose, and that's what I would remember. So it wouldn't really matter (my throat seemed to be dry; I swallowed hard) that *Ariadne* would come to her senses once she got back home.

They would ask her what she had been doing for the past couple of years.

"Oh, you know," she would say, scratching the back of her neck, "stuff."

And then quickly change the subject to horses or jewellery.

I downed the last of the brandy, and realized that I hadn't drunk nearly enough to render me unconscious.

I could always beat my head against the wall, I supposed.

-

And then there was a knock at the door.

"Go 'way," I said dully.

There seemed to be a whispered consultation going on out there. I pulled off my other boot and hurled it at the planks. "Go 'way, I sss-ss-aid! Geddout of it, or, by crumbs, I'll have your heads!"

The whispers grew a little softer.

Then there was a great splintering WHAM and the door flew inwards in two separate pieces. Latoya shook out her hand and stepped through. She was still unsteady on her feet. After her, there filed in Jess, and Regon, and Spinner, who flopped to the ground as soon as he got inside.

I glared murderously at each of them in turn. "And whaddid I tell you?"

"Begging your pardon, captain," Regon said gently. "But you never told us not to smash in your door."

"Goddamned technicalities," I muttered, and took another pull at the brandy bottle, forgetting that it was empty.

They were all glancing at each other, as if trying to appoint a spokesman- Jess won out, and she took a step forward. And said, "Darren, you total bastard, what in hell do you think you're doing?"

I blinked at her owlishly. The brandy was going to my head more than I had thought. "Iss perfectly simple," I explained. "Me am boss."

"You am- WHAT?"

Latoya actually had to catch Jess's arm to prevent her from leaping at me. "What the hell do you mean, Darren?" she was yelling. "Did you even think this through?"

"I did," I said, insulted. "Four reasons." I counted them off on my fingers. "Four reasons why. One, iss better for her. Two, iss better for me. Three, iss better for the ship. Four..." Well, I couldn't remember four, so I just waved the fourth finger around emphatically. "Sssso there."

Jess's mouth was opening and closing, but the noises coming out were totally incoherent. Regon took hold of her, carefully, and moved her to the door.

"Right," he said. "I don't see us getting any farther until we take some drastic measures."

He and Spinner and Latoya exchanged a knowing look.

"Long drink," Latoya said succinctly.

"Wait," I said, feeling much more sober all of a sudden. "I don't think that's necessary- no, I really don't- *oh, you bastards!* YOU BASTARDS!"

Latoya caught me around the middle, and hauled me dispassionately up to the deck as I did my best to pound her grip loose. Once I was there, all my crewmen busily whistled and looked the other way while Regon tied a rope around my waist. Then, for the third time that night, a body went crashing into the cold water.

They let me thrash around for a few minutes, swearing and yelling, until the last of the brandy had oozed from my pores. Then they hauled me up, gasping, freezing, soaking, and horribly clear-headed.

Jess had a blanket ready, I'll say that much for her, but her eyes hadn't softened any. As soon as I had coughed up my lungful of water, she resumed as if nothing had happened: "You were saying?"

"Jess," I said through chattering teeth, "you bleeding she-demon- "

"Long practice, continue."

"My leaving you- that turned out to be *right*. For both of us. Even Lynn thought so. Because you needed- whatever you needed- and I needed to go and do my work."

"Don't you dare try to use your work as an excuse," she said, "don't you dare. Because Lynn accepts your work, she's part of your work, you couldn't do a *fraction* of what you do without

her!"

"I KNOW THAT, JESS!" I yelled to the moon. "It's time that I stopped fucking *taking* from her!"

"Taking? TAKING?"

"You heard me! That man, Timor, he was sent by Lynn's father. Sent by Lynn's father because Lynn's father wants her back. And what did he find when he got to us?" I didn't have anything to throw or kick, so I smacked my thigh. "*He found Ariadne kneeling beside me like a goddamn terrier! He found me whoring that girl out to save my own skin!*"

"Captain," Regon put in. "Captain..."

"Don't you 'captain' me! I've been groping around in the dark, because she won't tell me anything! The only things that she *does* say are riddles or lies! I don't know how to help! I'M ONLY MAKING IT WORSE!"

The crew had stopped pretending to ignore me. There was a ghostly circle of faces all around. I pressed a hand to my heaving chest.

"Ariadne's being taken home to Bero," I went on, more quietly. "We couldn't reach her there anyway. Not without risking all your lives a thousand times over- and that's something that *she* wouldn't want. She'll be better off with her family. They have every reason on earth to treat her well."

It was Spinner, of all people, who spoke up. "So why was she so afraid?"

There was such total silence, I could hear the drops of water as they slid from my clothes and hit the deck.

"She was terrified, captain," Spinner went on. "Totally green. A hair's breath away from puking her guts out. From the moment that that man Timor mentioned the word 'home.' Of course I could only see her face a few seconds before they put the hood over her head- "

"Before they put the *what* over her *what*?"

"Hood. Head. A thick cloth bag. And they tied her hands. Then lashed them to her waist."

Silence.

Drops of water on the planks.

"You couldn't have told me this before?" I floundered.

"As usual, Darren," Jess said, "you hear only what you want to hear. Why are you so ready to believe that Lynn is better off without you?"

I looked off at the dim horizon. The *Silver Hind* was far out of sight.

"Captain," Regon said, "you'll forgive us for going so far. We wouldn't, if it was only to protect *your* happiness. But this is Lynn's life, if you take my meaning."

"We know you have trouble believing it," Spinner took up the thread. "But she's happy with you. More than happy. There's *joy* there. That's not easy to find."

Jess nodded. "Maybe she's Ariadne and maybe she isn't. I don't pretend to understand it anymore. But we know perfectly well what she wants- "

"Would you all, PLEASE, just shut up for ONE moment?" I asked, my eyes tightly closed.

Deep in my mind, rusty gears were finally starting to turn.

You can ask for anything you want, Lynn used to reassure me. But what had she ever asked me for?

Nothing, directly. But what if she was just as bad as asking for things as I was? What if she had to use hints, sideways nudges?

Why did she make me tie her to the mast, the first day we met? Why did she insist for so long that I had to keep her chained? Why had she tattooed my signature on her shoulder? What had she been saying? Only one thing, really: *You have to keep me with you.*

And what about the things she had done to me? Why did she prod me towards building a fleet? Why did she help me create an army? Why did she turn me into a pirate queen? Because she believed in my mission to help Kila? That was part of it, I was sure. But Lynn had always said that she wasn't a selfless person. Was there something in it for her as well?

I'd seen Lynn face down bounty hunters and raiders, lightning storms and ocelots, but if Jess was right, she was running from something that, for some reason, she couldn't cope with. What if- *what if*- she had been slowly, determinedly turning me into a person who was strong enough to protect her?

If that was true, my first instinct was to quit the job. I obviously wasn't doing well. I hadn't even made sure that Lynn had a weapon when she rowed off to the *Silver Hind*- I had delivered her up, easy pickings. The guilt spiked, so familiar- but all at once I crushed it down. My guilt had never done anything for anyone. It was just another thing that Lynn had to carry for both of us.

Lynn had always done the believing in our relationship. And now it was my turn to take a leap of faith.

I opened my eyes.

The stars on the horizon were tiny points of ice. My chest felt tight and hard.

"We're going to tear that girl from the bosom of her family," I rasped. "And we're going to drag her back into slavery, where she belongs."

Jess nodded. "That's more like it."

END OF PART TWO.

[CONCLUDED IN PART THREE: WHIPPED.](#)

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~ Shell Game ~

by Zipplic

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Disclaimers, content warnings, etc: All characters and plotlines are my own. This is the third part of Shell Game and will make negative infinity sense if you have not read the first installment. Hopefully it will make some sense if you have. If not, feel free to chasten me by e-mail. This segment is narrated both by Darren (former broody merchant captain, now pirate queen) and by Lynn (slave girl, secretive about her past, enjoys raisins).

This story includes, among other things (deep breath): a largish amount of violence, threats of violence, discussions of past violence, including violence against children. (nothing that has not been foreshadowed up to this point). Also purple velvet tights, pigeon pie, women in love, women not in love, women about to be in love, consenting adults in a sorta-kinda BDSM relationship, and an innovative use for a coconut.

Part 3

WHIPPED

Lynn

Afternoon, Day III

I guess I should have seen it coming. I guess, in a way, I did. But when you've been on the run for a while, you stop trusting the inner voice that tells you that it's time to panic. You stop trusting it because, if you didn't, you'd never do anything but retch and cower.

Or maybe I overcompensated. Sleeping with Timor, as I'm sure you can imagine, was not a prospect that I found exactly thrilling. You'd be able to imagine it even better if you'd seen the bastard up close. He had the over-smooth, over-starched look of a man who keeps his fantasies

bottled- and that's the kind of man who tends to go overboard when he suddenly gets the chance to cut loose.

While Darren was yelling at me down in our cabin, I was more than a little distracted by the thought of what I was about to do. I have a pretty vivid imagination and the scene wasn't hard to picture: the weight of Timor on top of me, the rasp of his bristly face, his smell. (I'd caught a whiff of him earlier, and he wasn't the sort of man who kept a pomander in his pocket, if you know what I mean.) Taken as a whole, the image made my blood curdle. Every instinct I had, every last one, was screaming at me: Don't. Don't. Don't. And maybe if Darren hadn't been so priggish, so self-righteous, so goddamn *noble*, I would have listened both to her and to my own gut, and let her talk me out of it. But she wasn't. So I didn't.

Whatever. I didn't see it coming. As Latoya rowed us over to the *Silver Hind*, my insides were crawling, but my plan was set: I was going to finish it as fast as I damn well could and go back home to the *Banshee*. Maybe Darren would be over it by then. Maybe she'd still be sullen and I'd have to let her mope for a few days before she came to her senses. I could cope with that- a moping Darren is a *living* Darren and, in my book, that counts for something. When I swung onto the *Hind's* ladder and started to pull myself on board ship, I was tired, I was nauseous, I was pissed as all hell- but I wasn't really afraid.

Not yet.

-

This is not my favourite memory, so I'm going to make things easy on myself and keep it short. Besides, the memory itself is kind of blurry- you have to understand, it happened so fast.

Latoya went through the cabin door first, so she was the first one dropped. There was next to no warning- the faintest whirring sound as the cosh whipped round to take her on the back of the skull. She turned slightly as she fell; I remember her eyes, round and almost thoughtful, before they rolled into the back of her head. They grabbed me just as they hit Spinner. I didn't see him go down.

At some point I might have yelled for help, I'm really not sure. There wouldn't have been much time. I was hooded and bound within a few seconds. But those few seconds were enough for Timor to tell me what was going on. That he knew who I was, and who it was that wanted me.

That moment- *that* moment- was the thing I had been dreading since the day I escaped. I had pictured it happening in so many ways, in so many times and places. I'd woken so often in the middle of the night, sweating and gasping, and thinking that it had happened for real. It overpowered my imagination whenever I let myself brood. It was the single thing that had the power to scare me speechless.

So I should have seen it coming.

I just didn't, that's all.

-

Timor was the only one who opened the door of the tiny storeroom where I'd been locked up. When he came in, he would take the hood off briefly so I could eat- but even then it wasn't much use for me to try to speak.

"They're alive," he told me, the sixth time I asked about Latoya and Spinner. "Least as far as I know. Which is more than they'll be if they try to follow you to Bero. So you'd better hope they're smart."

He lost patience with my talking after that, and gave me a sharp cuff on the ear every time I tried.

On the third day (my guess- it was flat dark down there) he led me upstairs, and let me put my tied hands on the rail, and then pulled the hood away.

When my eyes stopped burning from the glare, I saw it all at once. The great cliff of white limestone. The white limestone castle that roosted at the top, like a pale gargoyles- its crenulations spiking up like teeth and claws. And surrounding us on every side were white-bannered war ships, gliding through the calm waters of the bay. It was the exact same view that I had stared at for over ten years, from one of the towers somewhere up on that cliff. But back then I saw it in reverse: first the battlements of the castle, then the harbour and warships, and beyond that, free and wild and wonderful, the ocean.

Of course, I had known from the start where Timor was taking me. But I'd kept the panic at bay by telling myself that I would never reach it. Something would get in the way. A freak lightning storm, maybe. An attack by a giant sea serpent. Failing that, I'd escape. I'd done it once, after all, four years before, and since then I'd learned some useful new skills. Like how to strangle a man with his own tongue. I could have inflicted some damage on Timor any of the times that he opened the door of the storeroom. Even if I couldn't see him, his boots clicked in the dark.

But I'd forced myself to bide my time. There wasn't any point in rocking the boat (so to speak) until the *Silver Hind* reached some place that was better suited to an escape attempt. Like oh, say, some place with land. The best plan was to act meek and innocent, in the hope that Timor and his men would have lowered their guard by the time my chance came.

A wise plan. A sensible plan. But my chance hadn't surfaced. In no more than two hours, I would be back in Bero. Back with *her*. And as soon as I saw the fortress on the cliff, my brain leapt straight out of my skull and started to shriek. Screw what was sensible, I was *leaving!*

I didn't give myself any time to think about it. I pivoted, braced my back against the boat's side, and drove my heel into Timor's knee. I didn't use quite enough force to break the cap, but still he folded, howling, and that gave me the time to deal out two more kicks, one to his other knee and one to the groin. He howled good and proper that time, but I barely heard him. I was trying to use the momentum to hurl myself backwards over the rail, into the bay waters.

On an ordinary day, I could have managed it. But my brain was in pieces, my vision blurry, my stomach shrivelled- they hadn't been feeding me much. I couldn't get the height. My spine rammed into the rail, and all the breath *whooshed* out of me; the pain made me see red sparks. Then there were hands there, sailor's hands, callused and rough, pulling me back onto the deck. They lowered me with a kind of gentleness, but at Timor's snarl, they let me drop.

Gasping, I sprawled on the sun-hot boards. Timor's face loomed above me, staring with acute dislike.

"What?" I panted. "You expected me to make this easy?"

His eyes narrowed; that was all the warning I got but at least I had the chance to tense. His boot crashed into my stomach. I rolled to soften the impact, but he kicked again, this time at my back. The red sparks in my vision exploded into blood-red blooms of fire.

I screamed. Not much else to do in that situation.

Timor stood above me, his fist clenching and unclenching as he got himself under control. Then with a quick lunge, he grabbed the front of my tunic, hoisting me a few inches up. "You are damn lucky that your father wants you alive."

"Yeah," I managed to wheeze. "Lucky me."

Timor let go, and I slumped. He shook his fingers, as if cleansing them of something filthy, then snapped them. The hood sank over my head again.

"Take her back downstairs," I heard him say. "Chain her, this time."

-

Down in the dark mugginess of the storeroom, I tried to cudgel my brain back into action. It wasn't happening. My thoughts went around and around in a tight, unhappy spiral: the pain in my back, the saltiness of my bleeding lip, the tightness of the hood's drawstring around my throat, the shackles rasping on wrists and ankles. The hood kept in the air, so my lungs were taking in nothing but my own stale, warm breath. But somehow, the cloth still let in all of the smells: musty wood, rotten meat.

None of that mattered in a long-term sort of sense, though. What mattered was that, with every minute that passed, I was getting carried ever more swiftly back to *her*.

Escape, I reminded myself. Escape. I'd done it before. The odds had to be better this time. This time, who knew, Darren might even try to come after me- but I shoved that thought down and away, fast. An attack on Bero would be monumentally dangerous, almost impossible. My bashful lover had never taken on something so difficult- but then again, who would?

The answer was obvious: the pirate queen. The tattoo on my shoulder marked me as her slave,

and the pirate queen would rend whole cities apart to reclaim her property. But the pirate queen didn't exist. Not yet. The pirate queen was just an image, a picture, a hope for the future. She was what I had been helping Darren to become.

If I had only had a little more time...

But it was no use thinking about it. I couldn't afford to hope and wait- not again. And that meant that I couldn't wait for Darren. In the end, it always came down to your own will, your own wits. I would find a way. I was smarter this time, stronger, older; I wouldn't break or buckle, wouldn't crumble under the fear-

But even as I told myself that, I knew that I didn't believe it.

And then an invisible hand hoisted me to my feet.

-

"Timor," I said. "Timor, Timor, Timor, listen."

The hood was still tightly in place as I was jostled and dragged through the streets. The chain had been left on my legs so that I could only hobble, and I stumbled every other step. Before we left the ship, he had made me pull on a long, respectable woollen tunic over the shredded remains of my linen one. The weight and the length were both awkward, confining.

From the sounds and smells, I guessed that we were in the lower city, the part sloping down to the harbour. It was a long, uphill walk to the fortress. It couldn't be long enough for me. This was my last chance to make the man see sense.

"Timor..." I began again, through the thick cloth, but he caught me by the scruff of the neck and gave me a quick shake.

"Just keep your mouth shut, girl. You're not going to be my problem for much longer."

"*Nothing's* going to be your problem for much longer." A fold of the hood wedged itself between my lips; I pushed it back out with my tongue. "It's safer to swim naked in *boiling tar* than it is to discover one of my father's secrets. Now that you know who I am- now that you've seen me- you think he'll just hand you a bushel of cash and send you on your way?"

There was no answer. Maybe he couldn't even hear me through the hood. Maybe that was why he'd put it on me in the first place.

"Timor," I tried once more, but then my toe drove into a cobblestone and I tripped headlong. Timor grabbed me by the neck again and hauled me along a few paces until I could get my feet back under me.

Then we were moving from cobblestones to stone flags. The base of the path to the fortress.

My throat closed up, and I couldn't get another word out.

-

Higher and higher- up the hill, past the five concentric walls of the fortress (Timor nearly went hoarse, answering the questions of the guards at each one), through the inner wall of the castle itself, and at last through the door at the base of the keep. There, he finally unroped my hands, and unshackled my ankles, and pulled the hood off my head.

He appraised me- my sweat-soaked hair and bloodied lip. "You're not much to look at," he said. "But it's not your face that they care about, is it?"

I swallowed bile.

"Up," he said, his voice going ugly. "Now."

This was it, and my head was swimming. This was the last leg of the trip. We headed up the spiral staircase, around and around and around. Wild thoughts swarmed around my brain- I would hurl Timor down the steps, I would bite through the walls, I would throw myself out a window screaming- but something inside me had gone very cold and weak. Another step. Another step.

Then there was a door on our right, familiar as my own skin. Stained cherry-wood, with a gilt knocker in the shape of a ram's head.

Timor knocked with his right hand, gripped my arm with his left.

"Enter," came the voice from inside. And that was familiar too.

The room beyond, I didn't know as well- I hadn't spent much time inside the map-room. It had changed, too, since the civil war began. The walls were hung with charts, figures, diagrams- army rosters, notes on fortifications, pay schedules. The great sand-table, with its model of the islands, was dotted with tiny boats and figures of men. Someone was plotting troop movements.

And there he was: Iason of Bain, lord of Bero, standing by the sand-table, slowly revolving a tiny brass ship between his fingers as if he was fascinated by it. He wore a dressing-gown of violet silk, and his hair stood up in pale unruly tufts- it looked like he wasn't going to be holding court today. *She* wasn't there, and the pressure in my chest eased the smallest degree- but there was someone else waiting with Iason. A young woman- slightly older than me, slightly taller. Her face, I knew, was something like mine when it was bare, but now as usual it was powdered and rouged, and her blond hair was teased into a mass of ringlets. All the frills and flounces on her gown make her look like a giant meringue. She was slouched at Iason's desk, and her drumming fingers made his quill pens bounce in their cherry-wood cup.

Timor bowed; I didn't. "I brought her, my lord," he said unnecessarily.

Iason's milky blue eyes came up to me. His expression, as always, was part fond, part wounded, part disappointed. It irritated me, and that stilled the panic. I spoke as if I was calm as a glacier.

"Hello, father," I told him. Then I glanced at the girl. "Hello, Ariadne."

Darren of Torasan (Pirate Queen)
Afternoon, Day III

Pirates may not be what you would call masterminds, but they ain't exactly stupid. And the crew of the *Banshee* knew me well. So after Timor disappeared over the horizon with *my* woman, it didn't take them long to figure out that the mere mention of his name was enough to send me into a howling, stamping frenzy. Some of them, I think, mulled over the idea of repeating the name as often as possible just to see how far I'd go, but cooler heads prevailed. So it became routine to refer to Timor as "That Goat-Testicled, Slave-Stealing Sack of Shit." "Goat-boy" for short.

It was three days after Goat-boy's escape that we met up with the *Badger*. This is what they tell me. I wasn't in a state to notice details. I hadn't slept since the night before Lynn was kidnapped- and ninety-six hours without sleep, coupled with wracking, ball-shattering worry, don't leave you at your most alert. By the end of them, I couldn't do much except twitch and curse. Regon had humanely propped me up against the mast so that I could snarl at crewmen who weren't moving fast enough, but that was about the limit of my powers.

So I was leaning on the mast, snarling and cursing and doing my best not to fall over, when he all of a sudden swung himself on deck. Grizzled and grey and stern-faced and ugly, half of his right ear missing and a scar crossing his face from chin to brow- it was my old helmsman, now captain of the *Badger*- Teek.

Just the sight of him made ten pounds of lead roll off my shoulders. I captained my first merchant boat when I was fourteen, so green that I didn't know the difference between my own ass and a marline spike. It was Teek who had saved me from disaster on that first voyage, Teek who had quietly ignored my shrill commands as I tried to ram us into every available rock. He was the first person I knew who would guide you from triumph to triumph, and then, forever afterwards, pretend that you'd done it all yourself. Lynn was the second.

"You old bastard," I said, blinking at him through a fog of exhaustion. "Where were *you* a few days back?"

"Would'ha been here if I'd'ha known, captain," he said.

"You don't call me captain, *you're* a captain now. And we'll see how you like it. Regon's brought you up to speed?"

"Got the gist of it. You need to get your girl out of trouble. As usual."

Which was bull and he knew it- it was normally the other way around- but my pride appreciated the little white lie.

"And you're heading straight for Bero," he continued. "Best defended island in Kila, circled by ships that could take on a kraken, and you're charging straight at it, banners flying. Ambitious of you, captain, but that was always your style."

"I'm not charging straight at it," I said defensively. "I know we can't just waltz into their harbour. We'll need another plan."

"We'll need another plan *soon*, captain," he said, gentle but insistent. "We're almost to their waters already. Lucky as I met up with you first. Won't do your girl any good if you end up four fathoms deep."

"Mmph," I muttered.

"Teek's right," Regon said, stepping forward. "We can't put it off any longer."

I glared. "You couldn't have asked me about this before?"

"I did, captain," he said tactfully. "You threw a chunk of cheese at me, turned your pockets inside out, and then lay down on the deck and gurgled. You've been a bit funny the past day or so."

"I am having," I said, with an effort at dignity, "a *very* bad week."

With a sigh, I looked off the starboard bow. The *Badger* was pulled up alongside us, balky and battered as ever. A lot like Teek himself, in fact. The image sparked something, and my fingers began to drum along my arm.

"Only real answer is to turn the ships around," Teek was saying. "Go to the harbour, like, or to Freemarket, and think it out. Men been trying for years to break Bero without any luck. Can't expect the captain to come up with a plan in five minutes."

"And that, Teek," I said, rousing myself, "that is where you are wrong."

I peeled myself off of the mast, staggered to the nearest fresh-water barrel, stuck my whole head in, burbled for a minute or two, and pulled out gasping and revived. "Get Jess and Latoya and Spinner, meet in my cabin. Broach a new cask of ale and pour me a tankard big enough to fell a buffalo. I know *exactly* what we're going to do."

Lynn
Late Afternoon, Day III

"Hello, father. Hello, Ariadne."

There was silence for a few seconds, broken only by the tapping of Ariadne's nails.

Iason pinched the bridge of his nose and leaned forward. As though he had a nosebleed, or a terrible headache. All he said was, "Gwyneth..."

What he meant, of course, was that it just wasn't *done* for a bastard child to address her father as "Father." But saying that out loud would kind of defeat the point.

He waved his fingers at Timor without looking at him. "You, man. Report to my steward; he'll give you what you're owed."

Timor bowed hastily and went out with quick, impatient steps. I watched him go, knowing that I'd never see him again. There are many entrances to the dungeons on Bero, but the only exits are below the tide line. Now and then, the bodies wash up on shore, the corners of their burlap shrouds flapping. What can I say? I tried to warn him.

I had been doing my utmost not to think about her, but all at once the image flashed before me: Darren sewn into one of those burlap bags, a long lanky bundle among the other corpses. The sheer horror of the picture hit my brain like a flood of ice water- washed it clear and clean. Whatever happened, *whatever* happened, I had to keep Darren out of this.

We all listened to the clump of Timor's boots as they descended the stairway. Then, with a great effort, my father put on his oily smile. "It's good to see that you're all right, child."

I snorted. "Is it?"

He sighed. "Things have been rocky between the two of us sometimes, Gwyn. But you must believe that I care what happens to you."

My father's helpless-nice-bloke act was harder to take than his rages. I trained my gaze through the map-room's narrow window. We were about halfway up the tower, high enough to make out a patch of ocean. It was glassy green that day.

"Tell me what happened," he said.

"What happened when?" I said wearily.

"What happened three years ago. When you left us."

Left us- that was one way to put it, I supposed. I should have tried to placate him, but, as usual, my maverick side bobbed to the surface without any warning. "What's there to tell? I thumped Ariadne on the head, tied her up with her own petticoats, dressed in her clothes, and walked out of the castle. Stole her horse, sold it, used the money to pay for passage off the island. Since then, I've mostly been fishing. How the hell have *you* been?"

"You *see*?" Ariadne said, breaking into the conversation for the first time. "This is exactly what I've been telling you, Father! That little peon laid hands on me, she *assaulted* me! She just admitted it!"

"Yes, Ariadne, I know." Helpless-nice-bloke was giving way to highly-important-and-overstressed man. "It won't happen again. Your mother will take care of that."

I had been braced for it but there are some impulses I can't crush down. The mention of Melitta made my heart pummel the walls of my chest as if it wanted to burst through. Automatically- just as I used to- I pinched the soft skin inside of my elbow as hard as I could. The pain helped me focus.

"*My mother*," Ariadne was saying, "will do nothing of the kind. She obviously isn't able to keep the girl under control. If you insist on keeping her here at all, then you'd better let me deal with her. It doesn't seem like anyone else is able to cope."

"Gwyneth was your mother's chambermaid for something like ten years." Now he was using his pained-patience voice. "I assure you, Melitta can cope."

I found my tongue. "Father- "

"*Gwyneth, please.*"

"My lord," I corrected myself grimly. "If you're going to keep me here, then, for the love of all the gods, stick me in the dungeon or something. Or the stables. Or the pigeon cote. Really, I'm not fussy. But if you send me back to Melitta..."

He waved a weary hand. "No histrionics, please. Melitta's strict, that I'll grant, but she's fond of you, in her way."

"She hates my guts and you know it." There was a tight knot in my throat. "*You have always bloody known it.*"

His glance was tired, nothing more. "Don't swear."

Ariadne jumped in again. "Too much hating and not enough real discipline, is the problem. Now if you let me handle her- "

"Darling," my father interrupted. "I appreciate the input but this is slightly outside your area of expertise."

"But I..."

"Darling," he repeated, "go to your room."

She looked ready to launch an all-out tantrum- but Iason's eyes were hooded and she knew, as

well as I did, that it was no use trying to cross him for the present. She flounced to her feet and headed out, her skirts bouncing around her.

"I'll see you soon," she said warningly as she passed me. "*Very soon.*"

"Can't wait," I muttered.

The door shut behind her with a bang. My father stared at his sandtable. The parts that represented water were bare blue plaster. I looked at them and thought of waves, and typhoons, and ocean spray. The entire world that had been mine, just a week before.

"My lord, please," I said. "If you're not going to let me go, *please*. Just don't send me back to her."

There were two reasons that I rarely asked my father for anything: first, it made me sound pathetic, and second, it didn't work. On this occasion he gave a pained grimace, as if it embarrassed him even to hear it. "You might try provoking her less often."

"*I can't. I've tried.*" I could have howled. Four years of running, of fighting and scheming, only to end up back *here*. "You know that! *You know damn well why I ran.*"

"And you," he said, with rare honesty, "you know damn well why I can't let you leave." He spread his dainty hands, palms up- a nobleman's version of a shrug. "So we're at an impasse. Except that one of us is lord of the house of Bain, and one of us is a runaway servant. So one of us is slightly more likely to get his way." He flicked over one of the brass soldiers on his sand table, watched it wobble and fall. "I believe that we're done. You may go on up to Melitta's room."

I wouldn't, I told myself. I would run, fight, break apart, fly-

"She's waiting for you," he said more quietly. "And I don't think she'll be happy if she has to collect you herself."

-

Somehow I made it back to the stairway. My feet seemed to have acquired a mind of their own. I certainly wasn't the one telling them to head up, step by step...

Two turns up the flight of stairs, and there was another door, this one of rosewood- the entrance to Ariadne's bower. Two more turns, and another door- Iason's room. He and Melitta had slept apart for years, further back than I could remember. Maybe since the day Melitta found out about my father's fling with a palace servant, the one that resulted in my birth. But maybe it had been even longer. The two of them couldn't stand each other. Which made sense. I couldn't stand either of them.

Two more turns. The topmost floor of the tower. Another door. Its bronze handle was shaped like

a lion's head. To the right of the door, a narrow alcove. I was determined not to look at it- but of course I did and my jaw locked. Resting on the alcove floor, as always, was a narrow pallet of straw and a wadded blanket. Had someone else been using it while I was gone? Or had Melitta kept it exactly as it was, waiting for me?

The door was open. I could make out a little motion- an arm in a green sleeve moving rhythmically up and down, up and down, as she brushed her hair.

My brain said, run. But somehow my feet took me forwards instead.

I didn't bother to knock- she knew I was coming. Her back was to me, her face to the mirror. She didn't turn around but I could see her eyes flicking over my reflection, taking me in.

Her hair was speckled with more grey than it had been when I escaped. Salt and pepper. She set her brush down gently on her vanity table. And she still didn't bother to turn before she spoke.

"So," said Melitta. "You're back."

Darren of Torasan (Pirate Queen)
Late Afternoon, Day III

Once again, the cabin was crowded. But this time no-one tried to sit on the lid of the sea-chest, or even put an ale mug on top of it. I think they all knew that I would have slapped their heads off their necks if they had. That was Lynn's spot, and gods help me, I was going to bring her back there.

Little Spinner, his face still badged blue and purple from the hits he had taken on the *Hind*, poured out the ale. Mine had a sharp, funny aftertaste, but I put that down to exhaustion.

"All right," I said, sticking my thumbs in my pockets. "The Goat-Testicled, Slave-Stealing Sack of Shit took Lynn. We all have a problem with that, yes? So we need to go after her."

I unfurled the map, and they all leaned around me to see it. "We're here- about a day from Bero, as the gull flies. But there's a whole damn navy between us and the harbour. So that's a thing. Also, we know that Goat-Boy is taking Lynn to Lord Iason. That means she's being taken to the fortress on the cliff, here. Even if we can get to the lower city, we'll have to get past five or six enormous walls, manned by enormous numbers of archers, and enough swordsmen to choke the gates of hell. This is going to be just a little bit tricky, is what I'm trying to get at."

Regon scratched his chin. "I don't know, captain. Maybe we need to go back and assemble the fleet. All twelve ships together, we could make a stand of it- "

"Before we all died," Jess said flatly. "All your ships and men put together couldn't make a dent in the forces of Bero."

"Exactly." I took another gulp of ale. "We can't bash our way through the defences, so we're going to have to sneak. Land a shore party- a small one- and pussyfoot up to the fortress."

Jess looked deeply dubious. "And how are you going to get back off the island?"

"That?" I said. "I do not know. I cannot tell. But if we can reach Lynn, then she ought to be able to think of something. She *always* does. If we can't reach Lynn- well, then, I'm not leaving. Sorry, and all that, but I won't."

They digested this. It was Latoya who spoke first. "How many? And who?"

"In the shore party? Three. And more than that and we'll stick out too much. Me and two volunteers. I won't take anyone who's unwilling. But you, Regon, and you, Latoya, you're the ones I want." I glanced at the bruise that wrapped half around Latoya's sinewy neck. "As long as you're up to it. I'll understand if you're feeling a bit below par."

"How about if I break your face?" she offered. "Then who'll be below par?"

"A good point. Regon? You in?"

"Oh, sure," he said, from behind his ale mug. "Land on an island crawling with soldiers, with no idea how to get off again. That's all in a day's work, that is."

"Glad to hear it. Any questions?"

"Aye." Teek poked a stubby finger at the map. "You still haven't explained how you'll get *on* the damned island."

"Ah. Right. That. That's where you come in, Teek. Obviously, we can't charge straight for the harbour, flags waving and swords flying. So instead, we'll do this. East of Bero, there are reefs."

That was an understatement. There are reefs, and then there are *reefs*, and the rocks east of Bero fall into the latter camp. They're the gouging, jagged, ship-killing kind that can rip the bottom off a boat like the peel from an orange.

Teek knew all this, of course, and his face changed. "You're not serious, captain."

"I'm dead serious, captain. We're going through the reefs. You'll go first in the *Badger*, to sight out a path, and the *Banshee* will hug your wake." I drew on the map with my finger. "That'll get us within a few miles of shore."

"But what *then*?"

I told them.

There was silence for a few minutes afterwards.

"Did someone drop you on your head a bunch of times when you were a child?" Jess asked quite seriously. "I really don't think I can imagine a plan in which so many things could go wrong."

"It's all I can think of," I said. "And doing nothing is not an option. I have to get her back. You know I do."

Or at least, that's what I tried to say. It came out as a sort of burble. Strange. My tongue felt kind of thick, and my mouth dry. I shook my head, trying to clear it.

Spinner measured me with a narrowed eye. "Looks like the stuff finally kicked in."

"About damn time," Regon said.

Now blackish pools were swirling in the centre of my vision. Bollocks. Just *bollocks*. I ran my finger along the side of my ale cup, and felt a damp, gritty residue. Dried herbs.

"Oh, you rotters," I managed, as I dropped. Dimly, I felt Latoya catch me before I could hit the floor.

"You need your sleep, captain," I heard Regon saying, as someone pulled off my boots. "Got to be well-rested if you're going to do the impossible." And then, crisply, to the rest of them: "We've got our orders. Look alive."

Lynn
Evening, Day III

My pallet smelled the same as always- stale straw, must and mould. Different blanket though. Brown, not grey.

The stone floor was cold- there are always drafts, in castles- and Melitta was down at dinner. So, just like I always used to on cold nights, I crept inside her room and sat by the hearth, huddled in my blanket. The warmth lulled me to a doze. I hadn't realized until then how tired I was.

My name is Lynn now, I was telling myself. I have a life, I have a pirate; I can sail a ship and throw the long knife and throttle a man three times my weight. Sailors hop to attention when I clear my throat. I left this place; it's not who I am anymore.

But that was hard to believe. Everything was the same. The smell of the pine logs as they crackled in the coals; the reddish spot on the largest hearthstone; the way that violet curtains of Melitta's bed swayed in the draft through the door. And the sour dread, deep in my stomach, that this was the time that Melitta would catch me stealing her fire. I pinched the inside of my arm every few minutes to keep myself from falling properly asleep.

But the next sound I heard roused me completely.

Footsteps, soft slippers footsteps, were heading up the spiral staircase- and that was familiar too. Those footsteps had headed here once or twice weekly from the time I was eight, and they made a giant lump rise to my throat.

The footsteps grew faster as they came closer- a dark shape ghosted through the door- and all at once she had flung herself down by the pallet and her hands were on me. "Gwyneth!"

"It's all right, Ariadne," I said, gripping her forearms. "I'm all right."

"Like hell you're all right." She was already inspecting me- tilting my head gently towards the fire to check for bruises. "What did that bitch do to you this time?"

"Shhhh. Nothing. She gave me the fishy stare for a while, then had me fill her washbasin, then she just sent me to bed...How long do we have?"

"The banquet will go on for at least another hour, and both of them are dead drunk, so you can relax for now. Let me see your lip. Who bust it?"

I touched it gingerly. For some reason, it wasn't scabbing over. "Timor. We had some differences of opinion on the way back here."

"Timor," Ariadne growled, as she shook rags and vials out of her reticule. "That slimy, arrogant son of a bitch. Of all the people Father hired to go after you, he's one of the worst. And that's saying something. Here, take this."

I pressed the damp cloth against my lip. It smelt acid and strong, and stung where it touched raw flesh. "How many did he hire?"

She was still sorting out her vials, and she didn't answer for a few seconds. Sometime since we met in the map room, she had washed off the powder and rouge. With her face bare, and her hair simply braided, she looked older, infinitely shrewder. This was her real face- the one that she never let her parents see.

"At least twenty," she said at last. "It's been *bad* since you escaped. Every time they spoke about you, their eyes would *glitter*. As if they were rabid. Or mad." She stared blankly at a tiny bottle of lavender oil. "I'm so sorry, Gwyn, I'm so, so sorry. I did everything I could think of to put them off the scent."

"I know you did your best, Ariadne," I said weakly. "Please don't." It was selfish, I guess, but I couldn't take another of her fits of guilt- not right that minute.

There was silence for a few seconds, as she daubed at a bruise with a cloth dipped in some kind of sharp-smelling infusion. Arnica, probably. Then she went on, more quietly. "The way they looked when they heard that Timor was bringing you up. Mother's eyes went all hard, and Father paced around and around the room, with this *smirk*...Gods, I hate them! I'm going to *strangle*

them one day."

"Could you strangle them today? Does today work?"

To my relief, she laughed- the soft snuffling laugh that meant she was crying at the same time. "I've missed you so much. It's so strange. I hoped they'd never find you- but it's so good to see you again."

"Me, too. I mean, you." I propped myself up (which hurt) so I could look at her face. "You've mastered the stone-cold-bitch act since I left, I see. For a moment in there, you almost had me worried."

She laugh-hiccaped. "You like it?"

"What's not to like?" A thought struck me. "Hell- you got married, didn't you? What happened to Gerard?"

She waved that off. "Nothing much to tell. It was fine, I guess. Gerard was clean, even if he had fewer brains than a cream pudding. But he took a header from his horse a couple of years in and broke his neck. Father's still trying to negotiate a marriage deal with someone who has an equally good pedigree."

"I'm sorry. That must have been rough, when he died."

"Not really. I only saw him every other Monday, and all he did then was grunt for a while above me and then pass out."

My next question stuck on my lips for a second- it was an awkward thing to ask, but I had to know. "You didn't get pregnant, did you?"

She grinned a humourless grin. "You know I didn't. If I had, would you be here?"

Yes, I had known that, but I guess some part of me had hoped...I stared into the orange coals, and then stiffened. "Damn it. I am *really* out of practice as a chambermaid."

"Why? What is it?"

"Wood. I forgot to get more wood, and the fire's dying." The copper woodbin next to the fireplace held only a couple of logs, and a scattering of bark dust. "I have to take care of that before Melitta gets back, or-"

I didn't elaborate on the "or"; I didn't have to. Not to Ariadne. She had patched me up countless times after the "or" happened.

"Well, there's no need for *you* to get up. You look like you've been run over by an ox cart." Acres of silk flounced around her as she got to her feet. "Sit still and keep warm. I'll be back."

Her skirts swished out of the room and I leaned against the cooling side of the grate. I wasn't worried that she would get caught. Everything that I know about being sneaky, I learned at the knee of my big sister.

Since the two of us were tiny, Ariadne had been my best friend, my partner in crime, my secret sharer. When my mother was still alive, I lived with her down in the kitchens- territory completely off-limits to a pint-sized princess. But somehow Ariadne always found a way in. Our games took us all around the servants' quarters, from the roofs of the stables to the beer cellars. Together we investigated manure heaps, chased stray pigeons and got hideously sick sampling the leavings of the brandy. After we were finished playing, she would brush herself off, adopt a princessly scowl, and flounce off to dinner, no-one the wiser.

After I became Melitta's chambermaid and got moved upstairs, the differences between us became far plainer- we lived on the same few floors of the tower but might as well have been on different planets. Her days were spent with her nurse, and later on with her tutors. Mine were spent at Melitta's beck and call- learning afresh every day exactly how much she hated me, long before I understood why. Officially, I wasn't allowed to speak with anyone except Melitta and, now and then, my father, and there were days when the loneliness seemed worse than anything else they could have done.

But my sister fought back. During that entire miserable ten-year stretch, she visited me as often as she possibly could. Usually two or three times a week, always late at night. Those hours were somehow all the sweeter for being stolen. Sometimes we talked and sometimes we played, but more often, she taught me all the things that I wasn't supposed to know. It was from her that I learned to read and write, to do simple arithmetic and geometry. She used to sneak up a lump of chalk and spell out words and figures on the flagstones under my pallet. I learned less serious things as well- Ariadne liked games, and she taught me any number of them, from koro to knucklebones. Besides that, there were practical lessons, like how to accidentally-on-purpose trip an aggravating man into the fireplace and look innocent afterwards. She also passed on a number of the foulest curses you can imagine. She used them to describe her parents every time she had to tend my cuts and bruises.

But Iason and Melitta never knew. Outside of her late-night visits, Ariadne was all royal sneers and haughtiness towards me. She didn't even glance at me if we passed each other in the corridor. Even at the age of eight, she had understood what the consequences would be if someone realized what was going on.

-

It was a long way, as I well knew, to the woodpile at the bottom of the tower, but Ariadne was a quick mover. In a very few minutes, she was back, wobbling under an armload of ready-cut logs. She stacked them neatly in the woodbin, and then brushed sawdust and beads of resin from her sleeves. "Ruined another dress. Oh, well. I'll have to have a tantrum and blame it on the laundry."

She set a fresh log on the fire, and poked it, and the pearls around her throat seemed to burn

orange as they caught the glow. "All right," she announced, her tone all business. "We've got to get you out of here."

It sounded so easy, just said like that. "They'll all be looking for me to pose as you again," I warned her. "That trick won't work twice."

"No," she agreed. "We'll have to come up with something new this time. And it'll have to be good. The castle guard has tripled since the war began. And they'll be watching you closely."

My face was turned to the heat. It was something about the warmth, and Ariadne's closeness, but I felt something in me start to crack, and I bit my lip hard to keep anything from coming out. "You know, honestly, I think they might just kill me this time."

"You know better," she said grimly. "They can't. No matter how much they want to. They need you too much."

This was true, though not very reassuring.

The fire was flickering well, now. Ariadne flopped down on the pallet beside me, and her arms came around my shoulders.

"I like the haircut," she said. "By the way, is it true about you and the pirate?"

I smiled painfully. It was still too hard to think about Darren. "It *was* true. Don't know whether it's still true. I think I managed to really piss her off, right before I got grabbed."

"Why, what did you do?"

I sighed. It seemed so long ago. "I tried to seduce Timor."

"Hmm." I could see that she was trying to picture it. "I have to say, Gwyneth, that doesn't sound like your all-time-best-ever idea."

I leaned back into her. Her dress smelt reassuringly of bark and pitch from the firewood. "That's the other thing. I go by 'Lynn' now. Would you mind?"

"Lynn," she repeated. "That suits you, doesn't it? 'Gwyneth' always seemed sort of- I don't know- like lace and ribbons. Lynn is more-"

"Tough?" I asked ruefully. My head was beginning to throb again.

"Tough," she agreed, as she began to stroke my hair. "Definitely, tough."

Darren of Torasan (Pirate Queen)
Morning, Day IV

The herbs plunged me into a deep void. It was forever, or so it seemed, before I surfaced enough to dream...

With Lynn sick, everything around the Banshee had ground to a halt. Meals didn't get out at the right time, the men on the dog watches were sullen, and none of us knew exactly what we were supposed to be doing. I wasn't the only one who noticed. Every time I came up the gangway stairs to the deck, a bunch of expectant eyes turned to me hopefully, and then fell away when they realized that it wasn't her.

I spent as much time as I could in our cabin, but I wasn't much of a nurse. My hands seemed too big, too clumsy. Lynn had to remind me, in her painful rattling voice, to wipe the sweat off her forehead, air out the damp blankets. But after a few days, I made up my mind to take some initiative, and I set my shoulders and gritted my teeth and marched into the galley.

It took a lot of effort and my eyebrows got burned off in the process, but I managed to make something that I intended to call soup. I was kind of proud of it, though I didn't know why it moved so gloopily in the pot, nor where all the little gritty bits at the bottom had come from. Never mind- it was hot and I was reasonably sure it wouldn't kill her so I scooped out a cup of it and headed for the cabin.

I dropped it as soon as I got there. Lynn had been better when I left her that morning. At least, her eyes could focus on something for more than five seconds at a time, and she could gingerly sip a little water. But now she was sprawled across the bunk, motionless as a dead girl, pale lips parted.

I leapt across the cabin and grabbed the bits of her that came most easily to hand. "Lynn Lynn Lynn Lynn LYNN! Talk to me! Are you all right?"

One eye fluttered open. "I am definitely not all right."

"I have some soup for you- " I began to say, looking blankly around for it, before I realized that it was now in a gloopy puddle by the door. I wondered if I could get it back into the cup without her noticing.

"Soup," she said, "cannot help me now. Too great is my affliction. Pirate queen, mistress of my heart, I am so horribly, deathly bored that my brain is decaying into gruel. Have mercy on your powerless slave, and entertain me."

"Huh," I said, as I checked her forehead. It was definitely cooler. "Well, I'd love to help out, but I'm not much of a singer, and I haven't juggled in years."

"That does put a damper on the idea," Lynn admitted. "I suppose I'll just have to entertain myself."

Gods on high, that girl could move fast. One minute she was stretched on the bunk- the next she

had bounced up and onto me, clinging to my chest like a koala bear.

I staggered back, trying not to overbalance. "How the hell is THIS entertaining?"

"Well, I'm having fun."

I twisted, bucked- it was no good. "All right, you're not sick anymore if you can hang on like that."

"Victory is mine," she said into my chest. "I have defeated the mighty Darren. I have freed the world from the scourge of her godawful cooking."

"Just for that? You're not getting ANY of my wonderful soup. I'm going to go find a new slave and feed it to her." I tried bouncing on my heels. She just clung tighter.

"If that's what you plan to feed your slaves, you're gonna see a big increase in escape attempts."

"I need less picky slaves. Or maybe I should just buy a dog. Lynn, ow. You're hurting my back."

She hopped off immediately, guilt in her eyes. "Whoops. Sorry, I didn't mean- "

I pounced, grabbing her arms, shoving her backwards onto the bunk. In one hop, I was on top of her, straddling her chest. It took just one of my hands to encircle both of her skinny wrists, holding her hands immobile above her head.

"You're far too trusting, girl," I snarled.

Lynn wriggled- not to get loose, just to arrange herself in a more comfortable position. "Far too trusting," she agreed.

I put two fingers beneath her chin, forcing her to raise it. "You're uppity, too."

"That's what happens when you leave me unattended." She didn't bother to hide her smirk. "So, Mistress- if you're not going to feed me horrible soup- what are you going to do with me?"

-

I woke with a jump, as you do when your nerves are shot. Regon was squatting beside me, one hand on my shoulder; the other carried a cup that steamed.

"Storm's brewing on the east, captain, and we'll need you on deck." He cleared his throat. "Hated to wake you- you were smiling."

Lynn
Morning, Day IV

Ting...ting...ting...

I was awake by the second *ting*, and started to move without even opening my eyes. Rolled over, scratched the back of my neck, felt under the pallet for my spare shirt...

It wasn't there and that's when I remembered. My chest clamped and I curled up tightly.

*Ting...ting...ting...*that bloody bell. It was the noise that always woke me, from the time I was eight, as soon as Melitta was ready for me to come in to her and start my chores. After I escaped, it was hard to get used to waking up without it, and if that sounds like a complaint, it isn't. That first morning when I drowsed until noon and only woke when the sun was beating hard through branches above me, I opened my eyes with such a sense of peace and languor that I felt friendly to the entire world. When I realized the bell was gone, that's when I *really* knew that I had made it out.

Hearing it again was when I really knew that I was back.

Ting...ting...ting...

Now what? I sat up, hugging my knees, thinking. It was the old, familiar choice. Jump when Melitta whistled, or hold my ground and make her fight for everything she got? Resisting her always fed my self-respect, for a while, but before long she'd turn the tables by making things painful or hard enough that I'd break completely. Then for a time I would barely be able to speak without her say-so. My petty little rebellions were always doomed- and more than that, it sometimes seemed like Melitta enjoyed them. Sometimes, on days when I wasn't even trying to disobey, I would catch her looking at me with a kind of hunger. *Give me a reason*, she seemed to be saying, *I want you to give me a reason*.

*Ting ting ting ting...*she was getting impatient.

My heart was pounding now and I tried not to look at the door. This was insane. I wasn't a child anymore. I had escaped from the castle, crossed three islands, talked my way into a fishing village, learned to empty lobster pots and set drag nets, faced down marauders, seduced a pirate, built a navy- after all of *that*, was I just going to trot to Melitta's side as soon as she snapped a finger? Did they really think I would just fall in line?

They're counting on it, I could imagine Ariadne saying. *They think that if they act like nothing's changed, they can make you forget...*

*Tingtingtingtingting...*I had to make the choice now or it would be made for me. Few things made her as angry as when she had to come and get me herself. What would Ariadne think I should do? Hell (and my stomach plummeted) what would *Darren* think I should do? Ariadne would never think less of me for giving in. In fact, she often begged me to. ("What are you trying to prove?" she had hissed at me more than once, in the dead of night, as she wrapped a bad cut or splinted a fracture.) But *Darren*? Darren had never known me to back down. Not from anything.

And I believed...I had to believe...that she liked it that way.

But Darren wasn't there. What happened next wouldn't make a difference to anyone except me. And I had to husband my strength, now. I would need all of it.

From beyond the door, there came the sound of an exasperated snort, and then the swish of the heavy bedclothes being swept aside, and her feet hitting the floor. Despite the decision I had just reached, it was that noise, more than anything, that made me scramble up from the pallet. I smoothed my tunic with one hand, my hair with the other, and I pulled the door open just as she was rising. I bowed my head, hastily, so I wouldn't have to look at her.

"I'm sorry, my lady," I said.

No explanations, they never helped. I waited, not moving, and after a long stony pause, I heard the bedclothes rustle as she lay down again.

"Get started," she said. "You know the routine."

"Yes, my lady."

I headed for the mahogany nightstand that held her slop-pail. As I walked, I dared a quick glance at her face. The smugness that I had expected was there, in the lines of her lazy smile. I stared fixedly at my hands, trying to get myself under control, as I pulled out the pot. Full today. I could smell it.

"Don't take too long," she said.

"No, my lady." Out of the corner of my eye, I saw her smile again, and acid trickled through my guts.

This was my brilliant plan? Doing exactly what the bastards wanted me to do? How could that be the answer?

But there was no right answer. There had never been a right answer. That was the whole point.

-

Melitta's slop-pail hardly deserved the name. Its rim was edged in gold and there were climbing roses painted all over the lid. Typical of nobles, to want something beautiful to piss in.

Out of sheer force of habit, I studied the twining roses as I tromped down the stairs towards the middens. For ten years, I had carried that pail downstairs first thing each morning, and I knew each flower, each leaf, each godsbedamned artistic frond. About the only thing that stopped me from smashing the stupid thing down on the stone steps was that I didn't want to foul my bare feet. The old refrain was ticking away in my head. *I hate my life...I hate my home...I hate my life...I hate my home...*

Down in the stableyard, I emptied the pail, letting the stuff splash into a pile of stale hay and manure. Dipping water from the rain-barrel, I rinsed it. Hostlers and stableboys tromped by incuriously, not even seeing me. *IhatemylifeIhatemyhomeIhatemy- GODDAMIT!* I took a deep, shuddering breath, as heat prickled behind my eyelids. *Damned* if I was going to cry. I pressed my forehead against the cool stone of the fortress wall, reorienting myself, and took a couple of breaths.

What next?

You remember the routine, Melitta had said. Well, the slop-pail was done. Next was to carry up wood, carry up water, heat water for Melitta's washing, empty the washbasin, bring up the breakfast tray, take down the empty one, brush yesterday's clothes, clean yesterday's shoes. Then the dusting, then the sweeping, then the scrubbing, then more wood, then more water...It took no effort at all to remember the litany. There was an alternative, of course...carry up wood, carry up water, go stark raving mad, charge out of Melitta's rooms, hide in the pigeon coop or the laundry, get hungry, sneak out to filch food, get caught, get dragged up to my father, endure a doleful lecture, get turned over to Melitta, get thrashed, inspect bruises, sleep fitfully, have double chores tomorrow. That routine was almost as familiar. But not today...not today. Saving my strength and waiting for an opportunity wasn't much of a plan, but it was all I had at the moment.

In my head, an imaginary Darren dropped her jaw in disbelief. I closed my eyes hard, banishing the thought.

Then I headed for the woodpile.

Darren of Torasan (Pirate Queen)
Noon, Day IX

It was taking too bloody goddamn long. So long that I began to wonder whether all the gods in creation had decided to get their jollies that month by slowing me down. First there was the storm; even with all our sails reefed to the size of pillowcases, it blew us nearly a day off course. Then the slow, torturously slow creep through the reefs. Twisting and turning among the rocks, quanting off the large ones when we could, it sometimes took hours to make a few yards of progress towards Bero, and more than once I stormed down to the cabin, buried my face in the bunk, and screamed.

Every single minute that ground by, I imagined some different dreadful thing happened to Lynn. One minute she was murdered by an evil vizier- the next she was married off to a curly-haired prince with a sappy smile and enormous trousers. The next she was poisoned at a state dinner- the next, someone noticed my slave-mark on her shoulder and had it burned off her skin. Every second, she could be hurting, could be breaking, could be dying- and there was absolutely nothing I could do.

But it was no use howling at Teek. As usual, he was steering superbly, guiding the *Badger*

between the murderous rocks like a shuttle through warp and weft. It was the bigger, heavier *Banshee* that was the problem, as we lumbered along in his wake. Really, it would have been better to take only the one ship. But I needed Teek to get us through the reefs alive- and he couldn't follow me and Latoya and Regon where we were going.

At long, long last, when my throat was scratched from screaming and my nails had dug eight crescent-shaped scars into my palms, the boats eased to a halt, a whisper away from the far side of the reef. The cliffs of Bero reared no more than a mile or so away, forested with sentry-towers.

If you ever see a captain or noble or soldier looking stone-faced and silent before a battle, you may think that they're being stoic, too-tough-for-all-that. Take it from me. They're just keeping their mouths shut because they know that they'll vomit, or gibber madly, if they don't.

I myself tend to do either or both. So I was particularly stone-faced and silent as I watched the horizon. (Watching the horizon is another good trick when you're scared to death; it keeps you from having to look at anyone and helps control the nausea. The fact that it makes you look like you're deep in thought is a side benefit.)

I didn't see the shape come up behind me, but I felt the sudden shadow. "Report," I ordered.

"We're on," Teek said. "Anchored by the end of the reef, standing out like a couple of great yellow boils on a great red arse. Another few hours, they'll send half a fleet by to see what's what."

And they would know that the ships belonged to the pirate queen as soon as they saw the red sails. Things were coming together. I took a few deep breaths.

"Move your crew onto the *Banshee*," I said. I controlled my voice carefully, and it didn't squeak. "Then get the men up on the deck."

Some first mates like to pipe the men to assembly with a stupid little whistle. Regon prefers to bawl the order at the top of his lungs and break a nose or two if he really needs to. It works just as well. Within a minute, fifty-eight pirates were more or less lined up on the deck, in ragged rows. I let my eyes travel over them. Mismatched clothes, scarred leather jerkins, red silk kerchiefs, bare brown feet. Stubble-faced men, smooth-cheeked boys, a woman here and there. Some I had known since I was a child, and some had clambered on board a month before, barely knowing where to look to find the crow's nest.

Blood is rank and blood is right, blood alone is rulership... I had always known, at some level, that those tired old words were tripe. Noble blood wasn't holy, no matter what Kilans believed. But at the same time, I had somehow managed to convince myself that my own noble blood was the only reason my sailors obeyed me. Now I was beginning to think that I had been wrong. The faces in front of me all had a kind of fixed, almost frightening, intensity. You'll know that look if you ever see it. It means that, if you want to, you can ask your troops to follow you through ice and fire.

But I didn't want to.

And I wasn't going to.

Jess stood slightly to the side, her hands in the pocket of her landsman's tunic, and gave me an encouraging nod.

"Right," I said grimly, to everyone and no-one. "Right."

First I took off my open coat, folded it lengthwise and tossed it onto a crate. Then I loosened my belt buckle and slid off the clip that held my cutlass scabbard.

"Teek, Jess," I ordered. "Front and centre, let's be having you."

The grizzled helmsman pushed his way to the front instantly, standing soldier-straight in the front of the ranks. Jess drifted forward more warily, with a question in her eyes.

They had met already, but I did a brief introduction anyway, using the tip of my sheathed blade to point. "Teek, you remember Jess. She's my old girlfriend and she scares me to death, but she's very good at handling people. Jess, Teek- my old helmsman. He's the best sailor I've ever known." I stepped back from them, and raised my voice. "I'm leaving these two in charge. If I don't come back, they'll decide what happens next."

"What happens next?" Jess repeated. "With your fleet? Your resistance? The hundreds of people on the oceans who have sworn to obey you personally?"

"Yup," I agreed, "them."

"Captain, think this through," Teek said worriedly. "I know you have to go to Bero, but you can't just-"

I reached deep, summoned everything that Lynn had ever taught me, and sneered a full-out pirate sneer. It actually made the burly helmsman step back. "I believe I just did," I said. "You mangy dogs can save Kila just fine without my help. You can sail as well as me, fight as well as me, lead as well as me. So don't you dare try and keep me from where I'm needed. Lynn put herself in *my* keeping, and *she comes first*."

They didn't break out in cheers exactly, but I could see them taking it in. Jess, on the other hand, laughed in delighted disbelief. As though I was a slow student who had suddenly learned to count.

Only one of my sailors spoke up. "But captain," said Spinner. "You're the pirate queen."

"That all that's bothering you? Here-" I said, and I tossed him my cutlass. He caught it automatically around the middle. "Keep that from me until I get back," I told him. "And if I

never do, get used to bawling orders. Three cheers for the new king, everyone." I raised my voice in the dead quiet. "WELL? Cheer, you whoresons, *cheer!*"

They cheered, loud and startled, and they went on cheering as Regon and Latoya and I swung down the rope ladder onto the deck of the *Badger*. They kept cheering even when they raised the anchor of the *Banshee* and set the sails. I stood on the deck of a tiny trading boat, watching my flagship slip away in the path between the reefs. Spinner was still frozen by the gunwales, clutching my blade, looking young and skinny and lost, but at the last moment he collected himself enough to cry out to me: "I'm not a goddamn pirate king!"

"So bloody what?" I called back.

It was what Lynn might have said.

Then they were gone, a shadow on the water, too far away to exchange any more words- and that was it. The *Banshee*, my fleet, the future of Bero- all the things I had fought for and prized- they were all suddenly out of my hands. And the astonishing thing was that I didn't really mind.

Regon tapped my shoulder. "Ready to be a hero?"

"No. Well, I mean, yes- but no really. Because there's a good solid chance that we're about to die grim and horrible deaths."

Regon shook his head. "If we survive this, you're going to work on your pep talks."

"And you're going to learn to wash regularly."

Latoya didn't bother with the heart-to-heart- she had already picked up a hatchet and started work. I stepped over and joined her.

Lynn
Evening, Day IX

"That's it, I guess," I finished.

All the time I was talking, Ariadne had been perched beside me on the hearthstone, listening with total, furrow-browed attention. Not that I had been talking all that long. It was strange, and worrying, that my entire life with Darren could be summarized in half an hour. Fifteen minutes, if you cut out all the spicy bits.

Ariadne didn't comment, not right away, so I got up and put another log in the fireplace. The easiest way to measure time in the tower was to track the number of logs that had crumbled to embers. We had about an hour before Melitta returned from dinner.

As I settled back down, Ariadne spoke at last. "Darren's going to come for you."

"Why so sure?"

Her voice climbed with princessly outrage: "Because if she doesn't I'm going to find her and I'm going to beat her silly head in, that's why so sure!"

"That's very sweet," I said, poking the new log until its crumbling bark began to smoulder. "Now will you keep it down?"

She waved that off. "We're ten floors up from anyone who might be listening."

"You don't *know* that. Keep quiet."

"You're just on edge. I promise you, no-one's going to hear. Now will you please eat some more?"

I glanced at the greasy bundle she had brought, and swallowed carefully. "No, really, I've had enough-"

"*She* doesn't let you eat anywhere close to enough, she never has. And I don't know when I'll be able to get up here again, so no arguments. Have the pigeon pie. If you can get through that, it'll keep you going for a week."

I picked off a small bit of meat and pastry and went through the motions of chewing, hoping that would satisfy her. As always, Ariadne had only the best intentions, but she had never been really hungry herself- so she never *could* remember that rich food doesn't sit well on the stomach after days of dry bread and broth. There were uncomfortable gurgles going on down there already, the first stabs of cramps. I just hoped that I could hold off on throwing up until Ariadne went away. She didn't need something else to worry about.

While I dissected the pie, trying to make it look like I'd eaten more than I actually had, Ariadne played with the lacy sleeves of her gown. It was lilac that night.

After several minutes, she asked: "Melitta hasn't done anything...big...yet, has she?"

I crumbled some flakes of lard pastry between my fingers. "No. She's barely said two words to me, as a matter of fact. I've been doing my work and that's about it. Maybe Iason told her to lay off?"

"Maybe," Ariadne agreed. "Or she might be waiting for you to slip."

"Or that," I admitted. The smell of the pie was making my stomach clench, so I stood up and paced around the room as if I needed to stretch my legs. "And if so, she'll get it before long. I've played the trotting lapdog for six days already. I can't keep this up."

Ariadne snapped straight. "You have to, Gwyn- I mean Lynn. No, listen. If I know anything

about my mother, she's set to deliver something brutal as soon as you step out of line..."

"You think I don't know that?"

"So please, please, *please*, I'm begging you, just keep your head down. Whatever that takes. It may take us a while, but we'll find a way for you to get out of here. I *promise* that I'll think of something- does your arm still hurt in the damp?"

I had been rubbing my right forearm without thinking about it. Now I took my hand away. "It's nothing."

"Like hell it's nothing. That arm still hurts when the weather turns, doesn't it?"

Both of my arms were aching, but as usual the right one was worse. The pain in my left arm felt like tiny red threads criss-crossing the muscles; in my right, the pain was fat red ropes that throbbed. I shrugged.

"*Doesn't it?*"

A shrug and a glare were usually enough to stop Darren from asking questions. I'd almost forgotten how pushy my sister could be. "Yes, it hurts; yes, there's a storm coming; no, it's nothing new; no, there's nothing you can do about it and will you *stop shouting?*"

Instead, she slapped her hand against the hearthstone, almost triumphantly. "This is exactly what I was talking about!"

"When?"

"Just now! I'm the last person in the world who would defend my mother, but, Lynn, you know perfectly well she's insane. The day she did *that* to you-"

My right arm and my left arm got broken in two different incidents, on two different days, but we both knew the one that she was talking about. I was sixteen at the time and getting harder to handle. When the bone cracked, the noise was enough to bring my father storming up from his room below. Ariadne came up behind him, and the sight of her chalk-white face would have given away her feelings if either of her parents had been paying the least little bit of attention.

That time, they had no choice but to call for a healer. Some hours later, I lay on my pallet, still half-doped with the wine and opium I was given before the bone was set, and listened to Iason and Melitta arguing in the next room. In my foggy state, I couldn't make out any words, but I did hear it when the door banged open and Iason strode out. He went down the stairs very quickly, without looking back at me once. At that moment, even though I was drugged to a stupor, I knew that Melitta had won some kind of victory. She didn't do much to me while the bone was healing, but after that things got messy.

"What's your point?" I interrupted, before Ariadne could get into details.

"What did you do right beforehand? Right before she broke your arm?"

"I called her a heinous bitch. You know that."

Ariadne slapped the hearthstone again, and I winced, imagining twenty palace guards galloping up inquisitively to find out what was going on. "Please stop it," I told her. "Just cut it out..."

"You cut it out! You! Lynn, you *cannot* give her an excuse! None of it is your fault, none of it has ever been your fault, but if you can keep from being hurt, then put your pride in your pocket and bloody *do it!* Do what she tells you, just behave! Because I am not going to see you with bone splinters coming out of your arm again!"

"Ariadne- "

"Bones belong inside the skin! Not outside of it! Inside!"

"Shhh. Ariadne, just hush." I sat back down beside her. "I've always done what it took to survive. Always. Sometimes that means that you have to let yourself get hurt. Sometimes that's the only way to protect something bigger, more vital."

She had taken out a hanky of lilac lace, and was pressing it against her eyes as if she could push the tears back in.

I put a hand on her shoulder. "Hey."

The hanky went down, exposing her face, flushed and grim. "One day she's going to push you too far and you're going to jump out the tower window. I *know* it."

"I'm not going to jump out the stupid tower window. If I was going to do that, I'd have done it years ago. Calm down. Nothing's happened yet. My bones are all inside my skin. Why are you having fits?"

That just set her off again. "Because you're my sister, dammit! You're my baby sister!"

"I'm only four months younger than you, you drama queen."

"Still counts! You're still the baby! Deal with it!" She drew a deep breath and scrubbed her face with the hanky, leaving it even more flushed than before. "I should get going. I'm leaving the food- eat as much as you can before she gets back. That's an order. From your older and far wiser sister."

"Wiser?"

"Infinitely so. And better looking. Don't you forget it."

As soon as her slippers footsteps had whispered down the stair, I gathered the rest of the food into a squashy bundle, pried the window open a crack, and lobbed it out. When I pulled my hands back inside, they were slick with raindrops. The ache in my right arm had turned into a steady, pounding throb. It was going to be a hell of a storm.

Darren of Torasan (Pirate Queen)
Evening, Day IX

The rain began quickly. One minute it was fat, deliberate drops, and the next a heavy drenching downpour that made the horizon dissolve in a wash of grey. Here and there were glowing orange dots in the gloom: flames at the top of sentry-towers, along the cliff of Bero.

Latoya deftly rigged a sail into a tent, and, hunched beneath it, we had a makeshift meal of dried meat and goats. We weren't hungry, but we weren't sure when we would next get a chance to eat. Besides, it would help to keep us warm.

Beside us were three separate jumbles of wood and rope: sections of planking cut from the *Badger's* deck, lashed to sealed and empty casks. We were already carrying the rest of the gear. We each had a knife- two in my case- bound at the back of our belts; each of the blades was wrapped in cloth that had been smeared with pig fat, to protect the metal. Our boots would be tied to our waists. We couldn't take much more than that.

Regon and I sat on the wet deck to eat, but Latoya stayed on foot, her eyes roaming, restless. "We should go," she reminded us. "No sense in waiting."

"We're probably all about to die," Regon said thickly, chewing his fifth biscuit. "Putting that off makes sense to me."

She dismissed him with a flick of her eyes and looked to me instead. "The navy will have seen us, maybe sent scouts. We should go."

Reluctantly, I got to my feet. "Get your lazy arse to the tiller, Regon. Make your course west by northwest."

He crammed in the last of the biscuit, and licked his fingers. "West by northwest it is, captain. But couldn't you just say, 'Head for the damn big rock over there?'"

"Could," I admitted, "don't want to. Latoya. Set the sails."

I watched her sidelong as we worked. Regon and I had been laughing too loud and making unfunny jokes all through the evening. Latoya had been calm as a closed oyster.

"Aren't you scared?" I asked abruptly.

"No point," she said, making a knot fast. "If we die, we die."

There wasn't much arguing with that one but it annoyed me regardless. "Don't you try that with *me*, sailor."

"Try what?"

"The 'too tough for my shorts' act. I *invented* the 'too tough for my shorts' act. Hell, I *am* the stinking shorts!"

That was enough to make her glance up, eyebrow raised.

"That might not have been the best phrasing," I admitted.

"You spout crap when you're nervous," Latoya said with interest. "Maybe you ought to gag yourself or something."

"No, no...it's probably good that I'm getting it out of my system before I see Lynn again."

I looked up, raindrops drumming on my face. The sails were billowing out now. The *Badger* was underway, for the last time.

"Heading for the big damn rock, captain!" Regon yelled from his spot by the tiller.

I could just make it out- a black humpbacked shape in the gloom. "You'd better get over here!"

He didn't bother to respond, but I heard him rustling back there and I knew what he was doing: lashing the tiller in place, then hurrying to join us amidships. Latoya and I were already waiting by the gunwales by the pile of planks and barrels. The three of us stood almost reverently, watching the rock loom larger and larger in the choppy sea.

"Will she keep together until we get there?" Regon said, largely to break the silence.

"She'll do," I murmured, giving a fond stroke to the gunwale, and then, "Time to be stupid."

We picked up one knotted mass of planks and barrels and heaved it over the side. It hit the water with a loud wet smack, but, I was relieved to see, floated immediately. Regon spat, rubbed his hands, and vaulted over the side himself. In two strokes, he caught up with the floating planks, pulled himself on top of them, and got a good grip on the ropes with fingers and toes.

Latoya and I tossed in the other two makeshift rafts, and then Latoya herself crashed down into the water. I stood at the gunwale waiting to make my own jump, and thought the thoughts that one thinks when one is about to jump into ice-cold water in the middle of a raging storm. Which can all pretty much be summed up as *Oh, shit*.

The rock was looming very large now.

I've never been religious, exactly, but an old sailor's prayer swam into my head as I looked at the shuddering waves. *Lords of the deep, see our weakness; lords of the deep, allow us passage. Lords of the deep, know our need; lords of the deep, allow us passage.*

Lords of the deep, let me find Lynn, I finished off, adapting the end of the prayer for the occasion. *Lords of the deep, don't let her be too pissed at me-*

I leapt.

-

In the first ten seconds after I hit the water, the *Badger* hit the rock. It hoveed in the bow, and the little ship almost immediately began to take on water. That wasn't all the fault of the wreck; Latoya had done some careful work with the hatchet when she was down in the hold. The *Badger* would break apart or go to the bottom, and if any of Iason's ships came by to see what was what, that was all they would find: the shattered bits of my first boat. It was a good plan, sacrificing the *Badger* to put Iason's navy off the scent- but my throat almost closed as I watched the little ship flounder.

Pirates have their sentimental side. I'm no exception. Deal with it.

But I didn't have long to think sentimental thoughts- or rational thoughts, or plan-related thoughts, or indeed anything that you could call thoughts.

What was running through my head, at any given moment, was this: "Bad idea bad idea shit cold very cold shit dammit dying now bad idea bad idea ow was that a shark? shit cold stupid Darren bad bad bad bad BAD!"

For the million years that I was in the water, I did my best to focus on breathing. The trapped air in the casks kept me at the surface, more or less. But with whitecaps breaking over my head every few seconds, and solid sheets of rain bucketing down at the same time, that didn't seem to make much of a difference. With my mouth always open and gasping, I drank pints of seawater within a few minutes, and before long my throat was on fire, my stomach cramping, and my tongue swollen to a fat slug.

It was a toss-up which was worse, the thirst or the cold. Every now and then I would upturn my face to the rainy sky, trying to get a mouthful of fresh water. The drops smacked every part of my face, it seemed, except my salty tongue- and the rainwater was so much colder than the surrounding sea that within a few seconds I would dunk my head under the surface to get rid of the freezing slick.

Again and again, I raised my head and squinted desperately around, trying to make out the orange flames of the sentry-towers somewhere in the murk. Sometimes I thought I saw them in the distance, and sometimes up close, and sometimes I didn't know whether I was seeing towers, or the reflection of stars on the water, or fireflies, or death, or dreams. It was no good trying to swim properly, to make headway, and the three of us had made up our minds not to try. With an

immense amount of luck, the tide would wash us up on shore. Without an immense amount of luck, we were dead anyway. But as the night wore on and I got more tired, the animal part of me came to the forefront. I found myself struggling madly, kicking and thrashing and yelling myself hoarse, for minutes at a time before I could force myself to go limp again.

It was hard to remember that two of my crew were somewhere nearby. Once- just once- a wave sent me crashing headlong against Latoya's raft. She looked like damp seaweed draped over a piece of flotsam until lightning flashed on her face, showed it calm and thoughtful.

"Ow," she commented darkly.

And then the waves tore us apart again.

A few eternities later, when nothing was real to me but the salt and the cold and each gasp of air, some part of me became dimly aware that my shoulder was scraping against barnacled planks. I looked up. My raft was floating alongside a tall white warship. There were lights moving on deck. I flattened myself against the raft, waiting for the whistles and shouts, the roar from the sailors on board- but there was nothing. The tiny craft drifted harmlessly past.

That was the first of many encounters in that long stormy night. Again and again, the raft slipped through the ships of the mighty navy of Bero, invisible in the downpour. I couldn't see Regon and Latoya any more, and could only hope that they were having the same luck, in the rare moments that I had the energy to hope.

Then the storm was fading, and a grey glow lit the horizon-

And then without warning my knuckles were scraping rock.

I was so bleary after the bashing I had taken that it took me a good few minutes to realize where I was. The raft had washed up at the harbour of Bero, and I was draped across the rocks that steadied the dock pilings. Groggy as I was, I knew that I couldn't waste a minute getting undercover. I couldn't see anyone watching, but I couldn't see anything anyway, with my salt-scarred eyes. After a few tries, I managed to free my knife with a trembling hand, and cut the ropes that held the raft together. The planks and casks, I floated underneath the dock. With any luck they wouldn't be noticed soon. Then I slipped into the water and half-swum, half-staggered to the beach. The nearest shelter was a boat overturned for scraping, and I slipped underneath it.

Plan, I thought, need a plan-

That was as far as I got before I passed out.

-

"Captain, wake up. Captain- "

Not very patient, that voice. With great reluctance, I opened my eyes.

Latoya and Regon were crouched beneath the overturned boat with me, both of them looking like they'd been stoned by a hostile crowd, and then drowned for good measure.

Latoya summed up the situation in her usual accurate way: "That sucked."

There didn't seem to be much more to say about it. Latoya had lashed a skin of fresh water to the underside of her raft. We passed it round, swilling our mouths and spitting out the brine.

"All right," I said when that was done. "Everybody functional?"

Regon winced and Latoya rolled her eyes. I counted limbs and shrugged mentally. It would have to do.

I cracked my knuckles. "First of all we're going to have to get into the city. So I think we should start by- Latoya? Pay attention to the fascinating things that I'm saying."

She was peering under the bottom edge of the boat. "Don't think we need to get into the city."

"What? Of course we do."

She jerked her head. "Look there."

I looked there. My heart stopped beating for a full five seconds, and then began to pound out a loud and triumphant tattoo. *Lynn*- it was bloody *Lynn*, blond hair almost white in the pre-dawn glow as she hurried across the beach. Her progress was halting- every other minute she stopped to glance behind a beached ship or a boathouse, obviously looking for something. *Someone*. Granted, she was in a dress that made her look totally unlike herself (mounds upon mounds of pale apricot silk) and there was something different about her hair- but that wasn't the point. She was there and I didn't think, not for a second.

I lurched out from beneath the boat. My legs almost buckled beneath me, but I got my balance back when I grabbed her. One hand on her head, the other at the small of her back, I pulled her in and kissed her with all my might. She froze a second, startled, but then relaxed into it.

It was only after the first ten seconds of mind-melting relief that I began to notice things. I wasn't bending over as much as I usually had to when I kissed Lynn. The shoulder I could see looked fleshy rather than muscled. And she didn't taste quite right.

That was also when I became aware that the girl in my arms was gently, ever-so-gently, pulling away.

I released her and took a step back, baffled.

"Thank you," said the girl politely, "that was very nice. But I think you meant to give it to my sister."

Lynn

Morning, Day X

Something was definitely up.

When I came up the stairs with Melitta's breakfast tray, there was a green handkerchief wedged in the crack of Ariadne's bedroom door. This was a message in our old code, and meant simply, "*We need to talk. I'll find you later.*"

My father spent an hour in the maproom with his advisors, and when he left he was wiping his forehead on his sleeve. He looked tired, but pleased, so I figured that something must have gone right for him that morning.

But when I got back from dumping the washwater, he and Melitta were at it again, behind the closed door of her bedroom. I went partway down the stairs so that I could listen without being seen.

"...solves one thing," Iason was saying. "But *that's* beside the point. I think you're being deliberately dense."

Melitta's response was quieter- I could hear the venom in it, but couldn't make out any words until the very end, when her tone suddenly soared: "- that *defiant, sullen little slut!*"

You never hear anything good about yourself when you eavesdrop.

Iason's voice was half highly-important-and-overstressed-man, half helpless-nice-bloke this time around. "Woman, listen to yourself. You don't *need* to go that far."

"You have always said, you have *ALWAYS* said that it was my decision."

"It was, it is, but Melitta. If you go too far, you'll kill her. And you know as well as I do what will happen if that girl dies!"

I pinched my inner elbow, hard.

Their voices sunk to murmurs. I considered going closer, but I couldn't rule out the possibility that one of them would suddenly yank open the door.

At last, Iason spoke hard and businesslike: "It seems like you have it all figured out. Why are you asking me?"

"I want you to say it, Iason." Melitta's voice had grown even sharper now that she had almost won. "Tell me that I can do what I feel is necessary-"

The voices went quiet again. I strained my ears until my jaw hurt, but the next thing I heard was the door opening. It swung, it didn't bang, which meant that they had reached some kind of agreement.

Not good. Not good at all.

My father, Lord Iason, clumped down the stairway at a methodical pace, left-right-left-right. A tired man, a busy man, who wished that people wouldn't bother him with unnecessary drama. He gave me the merest glance as he passed.

"She wants you," he said. "Go on now."

Darren of Torasan (Pirate Queen)
Morning, Day X

"You're Ariadne?" I repeated for the fourth time.

"Yes, yes," the noblewoman said impatiently. She was leading us through a labyrinth of narrow alleyways at high speed; the three of us had almost to jog to stay level with her.

"You're Ariadne," I repeated again, for a total of five, "and Lynn is your *sister*? But Iason only has one child- everybody knows that!"

"Everybody knows it, do they?" The scorn in her voice was stinging. "Well, you're daft if you think that the public knows everything about my father. He has any number of guilty little secrets, and Lynn is the biggest. Here we are."

She ground to a halt by a low-slung plank building. It had a heavy, iron-clamped door with a bastard of a padlock, but the princess produced a key from somewhere in the billowing folds of her dress, and clicked it open. The door didn't budge when Ariadne tugged on the handle, but Latoya quickly joined her and wrenched it ajar with one hand. Beyond was the smell of musty straw and leather. A disused stable, it looked like.

"This used to belong to my husband," she said breathlessly. "It was his hunting stable, and he's very dead now, so I suppose it belongs to me. Anyway, no-one will wander in here. You two- yes, you, the short man, and the other one that looks like a bear in trousers- you'll have to wait here. Darren- you are Darren, aren't you? Pirate queen, right? Darren will be back in an hour or so."

Regon gave me a quick sidelong glance and I nodded my approval. The two of them slipped inside, and I heard the grunt as Latoya hauled the door back in place.

Ariadne tapped her foot. "Quick, we have to hurry."

I didn't know how much hurrying she could manage, considering the yards of apricot-coloured

silk that were draped around her- but she bundled her skirts up under one arm and trotted along gamely. Within a very few seconds we had emerged onto a busy, rain-soaked street, with soldiers and sailors and fishermen tramping on every side. I straightened my salt-streaked clothing and tried to act natural.

"I haven't got long," Ariadne said over her shoulder as she picked her way through the puddles. "They know that one of your ships crashed on the reef last night; I heard my father talking about it this morning. I figured that you wouldn't come to Bero without some kind of plan, so I thought I'd better get down here in case you'd found a way into the city. I had to throw a really terrible tantrum to get out of the castle- said I wanted to go riding- slipped all six of my bodyguards and lord knows where they're looking for me. I've only time to show you the way."

"Where are we going?" I panted, trailing after her. "Where's Lynn? How is she? Can you get me to her?"

"Halfway up to the wall. In the high turret. Pretty awful. And no. The guards on the towers have tripled ever since Timor got back with her. This is going to be a tough nut to crack."

A brilliant thought occurred to me. "Wait- *you* can get outside, right? What if she pretended to be *you*, and-"

She gave a snort of the utmost impatience. "Did you honestly think we haven't thought of that? That's how we got her out three years ago, of course. But they're watching for it now. And no-one can know that I'm on her side, or- well, really, I'd rather not think about that. I think it's going to be up to you, this time."

"Is it?" I said weakly. "Oh, good."

-

There was silence then as she led me through a dizzying series of back-alleys and narrow streets, up stairways and down other ones. I gave up trying to figure out what was going on, and just tried to keep up. I'm not much of a runner. I mean, I'm in shape, and everything, but you don't get much practice jogging when you live on board ship.

"Ariadne," I said at last, as I puffed along behind her. "I'm sorry about this, but if you don't explain to me exactly what's going on, then I'm afraid I'm going to scream. I'm sorry but I shall."

"Lynn said you were smart," she called, again over her shoulder.

"She's over-generous. Use small words."

"Oh, fine." She waited for me to catch up. "It's not complicated, really. It's the simplest of stories. The oldest of stories. My father is lord of the house of Bain and I am his firstborn, his heir. My father is also a selfish pig and while my mother was pregnant and he couldn't sleep with her, he used her handmaid instead. Elain, her name was. Nice lady. Liked cats. Before long it became

clear she was pregnant. My mother Melitta- who is likewise a selfish pig, but nobody's fool- figured it out very quickly. She flew into a rage, dragged Elain twice around the keep by her hair, then threw her out. She went down to live in the lower city- here, in other words. Fortunately for her, she had an uncle here who was willing to take her in. And a few months later she had her baby..."

"Lynn," I finished. "So Lynn is Iason's bastard. But why was he so hell-bent on finding her?"

Nobles aren't famous for restraint. Most lords have at least a few half-blood children scampering around the servant quarters. But it's well understood that they can never take the throne, or indeed, wield any real power. So their fathers either ignore them or get rid of them before they can cause trouble- tossing them into the army is a common trick. I'd never heard of anyone going to such lengths to get one back.

Ariadne knew all of this. She raised an expressive eyebrow. "Five-day fever."

"What-" I began, and then, slowly. "Ohhhh."

"My father caught it off of a Tyranese ambassador, and my mother from him and I from her. It didn't spread any farther, but that was bad enough. They had running scabs over half their bodies, so I'm told."

"Oh lord," I breathed. I had to slow to a halt, leaning on a nearby wall for support, as everything suddenly snapped into place. Five-day fever is about as ugly an illness as you can imagine, but it has one lasting effect that, to a noble, would matter more than any other. "*It left them both sterile.*"

"Sterile as hot glass. I haven't seen for myself, of course, but apparently my father's balls actually *withered*. So you see. We need to go up here."

I barely saw the stairs beneath my feet as I followed Ariadne. I can try to explain how a Kilan noble would feel about losing the ability to bear children- but unless you're a Kilan noble yourself, I doubt that you'll understand. *Nothing* meant more to nobles than the survival of their bloodline. Children meant continuation, immortality. Childlessness meant failure, dissolution, annihilation; it meant a once-great house would crumble, be eaten from within by rebellion and rivalries, and would finally die.

It had always been suspicious that Iason had only one daughter, and of course there had been rumours. But there are rumours about every lord in the islands- myths that breed the catcalls and insults that sailors swap in taverns. I had never for a moment thought that one of them could be true- that Iason of Bain actually *was* unable to father children. Just as I had never thought that Oropat of Jiras *actually* slept with turtles.

This changed everything. And obviously it had changed everything for Iason as well.

Sometime during my musing, we had emerged onto a stone porch that jutted from some high

building- a temple, maybe- far above the streets. The lower city was spread out beneath us, and we had a good view of the castle up the cliff to the west. But I couldn't concentrate on that, not when things were finally beginning to make sense. "So if anything happened to you, the house of Bain would be completely wiped out."

"It's worse than that," she said grimly, resting her arms on the balustrade. "I had the fever as well, remember."

"You mean, you're...well..." I couldn't quite bring myself to say it, but I gestured vaguely in the direction of her stomach, and she grinned.

"You're shy for a pirate. And I don't know whether I'm barren. Not for certain. None of us do. I had a much lighter case of the fever than either of my parents. No scarring, and I was only in bed for a week. But my physicians at the time said that there was a fifty-fifty chance."

I was willing to bet that the physicians who had made that assessment hadn't lived long afterwards. "Is it true that you were married?"

"For a full two years," she agreed, "and for all that time, I was being rutted as regularly as a prize mare. And nothing came of it but some medium-bad chafing. Now, that's not proof. Maybe Gerard was the one shooting blanks. But I wouldn't place any large bets on it."

My jaw locked. "And that means..."

"That means that my mother and father can never have another child. And I probably can't have one at all. And you know that I won't be able to hold the throne if I'm childless. If the house of Bain, my father's line, is going to survive, then he needs grandchildren and there's only one place he can get them. There's only one person who has both my father's blood and a working womb. And that's- "

Lynn
Noon, Day X

"Gwyneth." Melitta actually looked up at me when I entered the room. "Sit down."

She was at the small tea-table; I sat opposite from her, warily. Something was definitely up.

The table held a tray of cakes, and hot spiced wine steaming in two silver tumblers.

"Please," said Melitta, waving an airy hand towards the food. "Eat something. Wherever you've been, you can't have been fed well. You're a skeleton."

The sheer hypocrisy of it made my bones itch, but I'd been sick three times the night before and hadn't been given breakfast that morning. The cakes were probably richer than was good for me,

but I was hungry enough not to care. I took a cake and cracked it in half. It was filled with sweet almond paste, and that broke down the last of my resistance. I moved the tray closer to me and set to work. Within five minutes, half of the cakes were gone. The wine was strong and scalding. After a few mouthfuls, there was a comfortable burn all the way through my torso.

Melitta watched me indulgently as I ate. "Good, aren't they?" she asked. "When Iason conquered Gantra last month, he brought me back a new pastry cook. I've told him that he needs to conquer Retlio and bring back a new seamstress."

I wiped my mouth on my sleeve. The wine had made me light-headed. "I'm not a pet, you know. You can't buy my love with food. Iason never really understood that, but I thought *you* were smarter."

"It would be stupid you try to win you over that way, wouldn't it?" Melitta agreed. "Considering the history of our relationship. And we do have a lot of history, don't we? Go on and think about it."

I didn't want to. "What's your point?" I asked, as I reached for my cup of wine again.

Her hand darted- I flinched back but her target was my wine-cup. She hit it backhand; the wine splashed over the table in a long stream, dripping from the table's edge. The next second, she had grabbed the tray of cakes and flung it against the wall. The tray clashed horribly; the cakes pattered onto the stones.

It didn't startle me, exactly. I was surprised that she hadn't done it earlier, and was glad that I'd eaten as fast as I had. But it was a sign that we were moving into a less pleasant stage of our conversation. Under the table, I rubbed my sweaty palms against my tunic.

"Gwyneth, I couldn't care less whether you love me," Melitta began. "I care about one thing. Just one. Exactly one. I care about whether you do what you are told to do, *when* you are told to do it- instantly, perfectly, and respectfully. Because you haven't done that in the past, have you, Gwyneth? You're rude, or you're sullen, or you're slow, or you're lazy, or you talk back, or you go off and whimper to my husband. I don't think you know how much trouble you've given me, over the years. Do you think I *enjoy* having to straighten you out?"

"I'm sorry," I said, because it seemed to be expected.

That seemed to excite her. "There, you see? That's it! That's the insolence! No matter what you're saying, there's never a grain of *real* respect, real...submission. You still fancy yourself a sort of princess, don't you? You still think that your attachment to Iason makes you *special* in some way. And that, my girl, makes you believe that you're too good to do what I ask of you. Too good to be a servant, too good to do chores for your keep, too good to run errands for Iason's wife, too good to bow your head to the lady of Bero..."

Her voice got higher as it got more spiteful. As if as an afterthought, she picked up her own glass of wine and took a long swallow. That seemed to calm her, and she gave a long, reflective sigh.

"Isn't that what you think?" she said, now smiling pleasantly. "That you're different?"

I knew I was making a mistake but couldn't help it; wine makes me blurt things out. "I *am* different, or you wouldn't bother with me," I said. "Because Iason's my father-"

I literally slapped a hand over my own mouth, but the damage was done. Melitta's face turned ugly- as if a flat stone had been flipped over to reveal the crawling things beneath. I stumbled backwards, knocking over my chair, and started to scramble away, but she caught up with me in three long strides. This was the moment, back in the day, when she would have grabbed me by my hair, and sure enough she tried, but the short locks slipped out of her fist. Even in my panic, I felt a moment of triumph, but that was cut short when she snatched my right ear instead. Her thumbnail and the nail of her forefinger almost met as her pinch pierced the skin.

Some faint cool voice was telling me that I knew how to deal with this, how to fight back. But I was deep, deep, deep in trouble and that fact drove every other thought out of my brain. As the blows began to hammer down on my face and head, I launched a half-hearted kick at Melitta's shin, but that just made the force of the hits redouble. I shielded my head with my forearms as best I could and let the rest of me go limp. Sounds from somewhere far away buzzed in my ears.

Some time later, Melitta tossed me down. She was breathing through her nose, in short snorts, and she settled herself back into her chair gingerly, as though she was the one in pain. Tears stood out in her eyes, and her chin trembled. She was always like this afterwards. While she was composing herself, I picked myself up- very, very carefully- and stood my chair upright again, and waited alongside it, tasting the blood on my teeth.

A few minutes later, she smiled again, and waved a hand at my chair. "Please. Sit."

I sunk down, my heart ticking painfully on my ribs.

"Iason's not your father," she said, still smiling. "Because that would make me your stepmother. Which I'm not. I'm just your keeper. Iason gave you to me long ago, did you realize that? I have his blessing to do whatever I like with you, and if it wasn't for one thing, I would have thrown you out the tower window by now."

She sighed, tracing the pattern on her wine goblet. "Blood. That unfortunate matter of blood. Something very precious, Iason's blood, is trapped inside you. It's as if you stole a giant diamond and swallowed the thing. You're holding all his descendants prisoner."

If you want my blood, I thought for the thousandth time, *cut me open and take it out, I don't care, I don't want it-* The tightness of her smile then told me that she knew what I was thinking, and, more than that, she had considered it.

"So what does all of this have to do with almond cakes?" she said conversationally. "Well, Gwyneth, this is how it is. I'm sick of your defiance, so I've decided that it's never going to happen again. From now on, every moment that you are awake, you will be obedient, and

attentive, and subservient. You will do what I tell you to do, and only that. You will live how and where I decide. You will do this because every moment of pleasure or comfort in your life- every moment that you spend without broken bones and lash marks- will be a gift to you from me. And you will get those gifts only when I'm satisfied. Iason is not going to intervene. No-one will. So you'd better start improving."

"I'm not a child anymore," I said. I had meant for it to be louder- a ringingly defiant proclamation. But it came out as a whisper instead and there was a hint of pleading in it.

"You're right," she agreed. "You're not a child anymore. It's a great relief, have I told you that? You're not a little blond imp for whom Iason has a bit of a soft spot. You're a common, cheap sort of woman who is making life difficult for my family. Meaning that there are any number of things that I'd like to do to you. And I'm rather hoping that you'll make it necessary."

My chest was getting tighter and tighter. "You need me. You need me to-"

"We may need you to whelp a couple of times, yes," Melitta agreed. "Do you need both of your hands to bear children? Do you need both your feet? Do you need your hamstrings unsevered, do you need your ears attached? Look at me and tell me that I wouldn't do it."

I didn't even try.

"So understand this clearly," she said, as her fingers curled again around her goblet. "You obey me. That is all you do. Whether I order you to pour a glass of wine, or bow, or kneel, or knock your own head against the wall, or bed the stable boy. Your purpose in this life is to do as you are told. So remember. The next time you disobey me, I will beat you with an iron bar. And if you leave this tower without permission, then I will blind you with one."

She broke off to take a swallow, then set the cup down with a click. "I prefer you with long hair. We'll have to take care of that."

Darren of Torasan (Pirate Queen)
Noon, Day X

Far beneath the stone porch where Ariadne and I were standing, sailors and soldiers trooped, unaware. I barely saw them.

"So you had the fever when you were little," I said to Ariadne. "And Iason knew that it might have made you barren. All the way back then, he knew that you might never be able to give him an heir. So what did he do?"

"What do you think he did? He went and found Gwyneth- Lynn, I mean- and he had her brought up to the castle. She was two."

"And her mother? Elain?"

"Oh, he brought Elain up as well. She became a scullion- rotten job, but at least it got her away from my mother. She lived in the kitchens with Lynn for about seven years."

"What happened then?"

"Elain died."

"How?"

"She fell down some stairs. That's what I remember being told."

I knew this story. "And it was very sudden and Elain was in perfect health beforehand and they buried her very very quickly?"

"Yeeesss..." she said, confused now, "why?"

"Oh, come on," I said. "When somebody's existence is an embarrassment to a powerful man, and that somebody dies very suddenly, then chances are that it wasn't an accident. You *must* have thought of that before."

I watched her eyes grow stricken.

"Apparently not," I murmured.

"Are you saying," she asked very slowly, "are you saying that my parents murdered Elain?"

"Can't be sure. It's not like I was peeking around the corner and taking notes at the time. But it seems the likely thing. It's what *my* father would have done. He would have killed Jess if we hadn't managed to- well." I coughed. "Anyway."

Ariadne was sporting an odd look by then. It seemed that she was turning over this new information, and weighing it, and then accepting it, and mentally scribing it on the thousandth page of a book entitled *Why I Hate My Parents*.

"She was always kind to me," she said at last. She bowed her head, and long blond curls fell around it, shutting out her face from view.

I gave her, oh, two and a half seconds to mourn. We were in mid-crisis, after all. "What happened then?"

"Then Melitta took Lynn out of the kitchens, and brought her upstairs and took her as a chambermaid."

"But Lynn must have been- what, nine years old?"

"Eight."

"That's ridiculous- " I began, and then I stopped myself. It wasn't ridiculous. I had servants that young myself, once upon a time. With a pang, I remembered a fawn-eyed girl who used to bring the washwater to me and my siblings in the early morning. The jug was too big for her and she walked very slowly with it, swaying from one side to the other. If the water had cooled by the time she got to us, it was considered the done thing to give her a clump on the head. I didn't participate in the clumping, preferring to wash before the water grew even colder. But now it appalled me to remember how I used to turn my back on the whole scene, blocking out the girls' protests and yelps as I got dressed.

I had forgotten that entirely, put it out of my head. My entire adult life had been spent feeling guilt about the wrong things.

"Melitta used to beat the hell out of Lynn," I stated rather than asked.

Ariadne's fingers drummed on the balustrade. She nodded.

"Anything else?" I said savagely.

"Yes. Of course. My mother is an innovative person. She could always find new ways to punish Lynn for being born. She humiliated her, she piled work on her, she wouldn't let her eat enough, wouldn't let her sleep. There's a closet in Melitta's room where she used to put her- Honestly, Darren, I can't talk about this. I may be sick."

"But *why?* *Why?* Is it just because Melitta hates her?"

"Hates her, resents her, uses her to take out her anger at my father. Thinks that Lynn isn't fully human, because she's a bastard and therefore a peasant."

"But what about your father? Doesn't he care about all this?"

"Not he," she said, scornfully. "Sometimes he plays the sorrowful-eyed innocent, but don't let that fool you- it suits him fine, the way my mother treats her. It would be a horrible loss of face for him if people knew about his- you know- "

"His withered balls," I contributed.

"Yes. Those. So he can never let anyone find out who Lynn is and what he needs her for. That means that he has to keep her close, but under control. Dependent and unambitious. Every now and then, when she was small, he used to spoil her a bit, just to keep her off balance. You know, he would give her sweets and fruit and let her play with my toys, that kind of thing. But she never bought the act. Not ever. One of the best moments of my entire childhood was when she took an apple from him and then used it to sock him in the side of the head."

There was so much pride in her tone, I had to smile ruefully. The funny thing was that I had seen

Lynn pull off the same manoeuvre myself. Except, that time, her opponent was a marauder the size of a gorilla and instead of an apple, she used a coconut.

"But say that you are barren- say that he needs Lynn to breed the next generation. Would he acknowledge her as the mother? As his child?"

"We've wondered about that," Ariadne said absently. "There are a number of possibilities, of course. The most likely, I think, is that he would keep her hidden during her pregnancies, have me fake a big belly and morning sickness, and then smuggle the babies to me as soon as they were born. She would have to be well-hidden for that to work- maybe locked up. Or he could try to pass her off as a relative of his- cousin or niece or something- marry her to some minor nobleman and adopt her children when they were born. Or, if he's *really* desperate, he could get rid of me and have Lynn take my place. I don't think that last one is very likely, but it's possible."

"My god, Ariadne- "

She threw up her hands. "My parents are horrible people! This is what I've been trying to explain!"

"He expects Lynn to just go along with any of those plans?" I couldn't picture it for a second.

"He would have a hard time keeping her in line whatever he does," Ariadne agreed. "So he must be counting on my mother to have her squashed good and proper by the time he's ready to start. Unless I miss my guess, my mother's been told to pummel her until she doesn't know which way is up. So you see, we don't have much time."

I stared at her, not sure why she was so calm. Lynn, impregnated by force, locked away or beaten into silence- There were tremors of electricity up and down my spine. After a minute I recognized what they were: sheer, pulsing fury.

"I really need to get back," Ariadne said suddenly. "Let's get to work."

-

Ariadne spoke in rapid, clipped sentences, pointing out the important features of the lower city: guardhouses, armourers, sentry towers. Then she moved on to describing the castle, the parts of it that weren't visible from our perch. I was listening carefully, of course, but at the same time I couldn't stop myself from staring at her.

She really didn't look *that* much like Lynn, not when you were paying attention. The eyes and the hair colour were the same, the faces were a similar shape. And they both had the same breathless way of speaking, the same (I searched for a word) strong-mindedness. But Ariadne was at least three inches taller, curvy at the waist and hips where Lynn was scrawny; her hair was fuller and thicker, and her skin was unmarked.

They would have been almost identical, I realized, *if* Lynn had been decently fed and treated

when she was a child. And now it seemed all too obvious: Lynn's waifishness was the pinched look of somebody used to the thin end of the stick. Jess was right. I had ignored the signs, because I wanted to believe that Lynn was a noble like me. That she came from the same place I did, that she was...as *good* as me?

I'm a moron, I thought dazedly. *Lynn's in love with a moron*.

"...and that's about it," Ariadne finished up. "Have you got all that? Now, about getting you into the castle. Is there some clever pirate trick you can use?"

"Um," I said, as I tried to think clever thoughts. "We could try going over the walls, I guess."

She clucked impatiently. "That's always the first thing people try. Well, here's *my* idea. There's a guest coming to the castle soon, and he'll have attendants. My father's never seen him before, so with a bit of luck and a lot of violence you can sneak in on his coattails. What do you think?"

"I like all of it except the word 'soon.' When is this guest coming?"

"The day after tomorrow. I know. I know. But Lynn's been sort of all right for almost a week now- "

"You said she was awful."

"*Pretty* awful, I said. Look, here's what we'll do. See that tower?"

"The big bastard? Topmost bit of the cliff?"

"That's the one. The third window from the top? That's mine. At dawn tomorrow, and again the day after that, I'll fly a flag out the window. If it's blue, then things are going as well as can be expected and you should wait to sneak in with the guest. If it's red, then there's an emergency and you need to get your bony pirate rear into the castle. Immediately if not sooner."

"Yes...but *how*?"

Ariadne stomped her foot. "I cannot think of *everything*, Darren!"

She seemed on the verge of having a regular royal hissy fit, and I had seen those before, so I raised my hands, surrendering. "You'll need to tell me more about this guest."

Exasperated, she glanced at the sun, checking the time. "I suppose so. I *really* need to get back. I don't suppose you can find your way back to the stable from here? Fine. Fine. We can talk as we walk."

-

"Finally," Ariadne gasped, when we reached the stable door. "My god, it's been hours. I'll have to

lie myself blue in the face to explain this one. Look, I'm going to talk to Lynn tonight, tell her that you're on your way. Should I tell her something else from you?"

"Tell her- " My mind went blank. *Tell her I love her? Tell her I'm not mad about Timor anymore? Tell her that I'm sorry, as usual, for being a stupid chump, as usual?*

"Tell her I'm coming as fast as I can," I said at last. "And give her this."

I dug in my pocket for the coil of leather, pressed it into Ariadne's hand, and closed her fingers over it. She inspected the thing, and then her eyes came up to meet mine.

"This is a weapon, right? A- a garrotte, you call it? Does Lynn know how to use it?"

"Lynn's an *artist* with it. I'd feel a hell of a lot better if I knew she had it with her."

She winced. "If my mother finds it, things are going to get worse in a very big hurry."

"It's a strip of sinew, it's easy to hide. Please, Ariadne."

She still looked reluctant, but she tucked it somewhere into the piles of apricot silk.

"And now I really *have* to go," she concluded. "Remember to watch for the flag. Oh, and Darren?"

"Yes?"

She grabbed a fistful of my shirt and yanked me down to her. "You *do* plan to marry her, don't you?"

"Erg- " I said, and then went with the safest, and only, answer. "Yes?"

She jerked me down further.

"Of course," I added. And then, when that didn't seem to be working, "Very soon." And then, "Next week?"

She released my shirt, and dusted her hands off like someone who had just performed an unpleasant but necessary task. Then she solemnly shook my hand.

"So glad to have met you," she said. And then she was off, her blond curly head bobbing through the crowds.

My gods, I realized, there are two of them.

Maybe we did have a chance of winning.

Lynn
Evening, Day X

"Come on, Ariadne," I muttered to myself, pacing up and down Melitta's room. "Come on, come on, come on..."

It was late in the evening, and, for the first time in almost ten hours, I had been left alone. Melitta had kept me at her side all through the day. First I trailed behind her as she made a tour of inspection around the castle (and you can be sure that the servants all snapped to attention when they heard *her* coming), then I stood behind her chair when she and Iason ate lunch in their private dining room. Afterwards, we returned to her chamber and she handed me a heavy piece of embroidery to unpick while she sewed. She hadn't said another word to me in all that time; she would beckon to show where she wanted me, frown when I made a misstep.

I wasn't even made to go down the stairs for wood and water that day- a footman did that, slinging the buckets around with casual ease. It should have been a relief (toting an armload of logs up a hundred and twenty stairs is no joke), but wasn't. I would have taken that or any other job which would have gotten me out of Melitta's sight for a couple of minutes.

The only thing that had carried me through the day was the knowledge that Ariadne was coming that evening. We might be able to figure some way to deal with the crackdown, the two of us together. Just as the two of us together had been able to engineer my escape.

We had talked about running away, on and off, ever since my mother died and I was moved upstairs. But it was Ariadne's looming marriage that finally pushed us into action. Once married, she would either have children or she wouldn't. If Ariadne had children of her own, then I wouldn't be needed, and Melitta would make sure that I ended up in a burlap bag below the tideline. If Ariadne turned out to be barren, then I *would* be needed, and Melitta would make sure that what happened next was nowhere close to fun.

We knew it wouldn't be easy. We knew that they would come after me. But if I could manage to stay clear until Ariadne got pregnant, then they would stop looking. Surely. Even *Melitta* wouldn't track me across the known world, just for the pleasure of throwing me out a tower window.

"Don't take this the wrong way," I told my sister, the day of the escape, as I was tying her into a chair with strips of cloth torn from her petticoat. "But I hope that you get pregnant very, very fast. Tomorrow, even. Does that make me an awful person?"

"Don't worry about it. I actually- " She fidgeted, as best she could, considering that she was bound hand and foot with all of the best knots that I knew. "I actually *want* children. Not for the greater glory of the house of Bain, I mean. I just want- you know- children. I want to be a mother. And maybe I never can be."

That brought me up short. I had come to think of babies as things that you had only because

someone else forced you to. If someone had offered to cut my womb out, I'd have thanked them with tears in my eyes. But what the hell. People want different things.

"If you want children, you'll have them," I told her. "Somehow. Even if you turn out to be barren, there's always another way. Right?"

"That's what we're hoping," she agreed. "Now gag me before I start to snicker. You look truly ridiculous in that dress, have I mentioned that? Remind me again why we chose the pink one?"

There's always another way, I reminded myself as I paced up and down the tower room. I knew that it was true; I just hoped that we could find the way in time.

-

"About time you got up here," I snapped when I heard the door open. "Now tell me what was so important- "

I turned, and my voice, quite simply, died.

It was *her*, it was *her*, it was Melitta; the candle she was holding made a demon-light leap in the pupils of her eyes. "I can't say that I'm disappointed," she said slowly. "Because I expected this, of course. But oh Gwyneth, little Gwyneth, this is something you should not have done."

All the blood in my body surged down towards my feet. "I didn't- I haven't- "

"Hush, Gwyneth, hush," she said, as though it was meant to be soothing; she set the candle down on her nightstand. "I know perfectly well what's going on, so don't dig yourself in any deeper. Sit down."

My legs folded beneath me, and I started to sit on the floor. Melitta snapped her fingers impatiently. "Beside me, on the bench. *That's* right. And now we can wait together, can't we, my Gwyneth? We can see who it is that you're so eager to meet with."

Her long fingers reached out and snuffed the flame of the candle. We were left in the flickering firelight. Her hand found mine and clutched it tightly, her nails digging into my palm.

"You'll need to be quiet now, Gwyneth," she said, and her voice was still light, dreamy. "Quiet as a mouse..."

The fire snapped in the hearth. Melitta's breathing was quick and eager beside me. On the stairs below, dead silence. I felt my hand, the one in Melitta's grip, growing clammier and colder.

It would be fine, I told myself fiercely. Ariadne would burst in any moment, but she would lie or bluster her way out of it. Or even if she couldn't, what would happen to her? Ariadne *never* got punished. She would be sent to her room, maybe. *Maybe*. And only if Melitta was in an especially bad mood.

Footsteps. Soft, slippered footsteps as someone took the stairs two at a time. Melitta's grip on my hand grew even tighter, crushing my fingers together. Her breathing rasped louder. She was excited; the energy of it was *pulsing* from her. And I knew-

I knew it didn't matter that Ariadne wouldn't be punished. I had just given Melitta the opening that she had waited for, longed for. If she found out about my friendship with her daughter, then it didn't matter whose fault it was. I would be the one to bleed for it...

The footsteps began to head up the last landing.

"*She's here!*" I yelled- the words ripped out of me. "*She's here, she knows, go, run! RUN!*"

Melitta was on her feet and so was I- she stalked for the door and I threw myself in the way; she brushed me aside, wrenched the thing open and took a cursory look around- but she already knew what I knew. Those few seconds had been enough of a delay; the person mounting the tower stairs had heard me, the footsteps had fled back down. Ariadne was gone, the blood sang in my ears, and Melitta's face was a plaster mask as she closed the door again.

"That was pointless," she commented, moving towards the fire. "I'll find out who it was soon enough."

"He'll never be back here," I said wildly- as a bluff, it was probably too little and too late, but anything to muddy the trail. "He's not stupid- "

"Then he's got a damn sight more brains than you have." She had the fireplace poker now, and was carefully raking over the logs. They hissed, steamed.

"I'm leaving this room now," I said, as if by saying it I could make it happen. "I'm going to go to bed."

"No," she said, giving the logs another thoughtful poke. "No, I don't think so. I don't think that you're leaving this room. You've been getting up to all kinds of things in the dark hours- *that* much is clear. It seems that I've been giving you entirely too much freedom. Especially at night. That will have to change. You've been running wild, my girl, and the only thing to do about it is to shorten your leash."

Just those few quiet words, and I felt myself slipping. I knew that she meant it. She wouldn't leave me alone in the tower anymore, wouldn't leave me *alone*, wouldn't give Ariadne any chance to reach me. And with that, the one thing that made life bearable in the castle would be gone. Just like my mother- who I now barely remembered- just like *Darren*-

"I won't let you do this," I said, to her and myself. "*I won't.*"

She turned, still holding the poker. "Gwyneth, Gwyneth. We've discussed this, don't you remember? You have that tendency, that *unfortunate* habit, of thinking that you're special. But

you're not, Gwyneth, are you? You're my servant; you belong to me just as my horse and hound and falcon do, except that you weren't nearly as expensive. You tame a horse by breaking its will, and you tame a hound with whippings and a falcon with darkness and hunger. I'm not sure what will work best on you, but I'm prepared to try them all. For as long as it takes, Gwyneth. Until you sit or kneel or run or hunt on command. Until you are able to remember what you are. I wonder what would help to jog your memory? Perhaps if you sleep at the foot of your mistress's bed- "

"YOU are NOT my MISTRESS!"

I screamed it, louder than anything I've screamed before or since, and her eyes seemed to go wide for a second, but perhaps that was just a trick of the light. An instant later, certainly, her face was the same as ever- pale, faintly amused, faintly scornful.

"Get on your knees," she said, and the tip of the poker twitched. "Go on now- "

I launched myself at her. It was pure fury, no trace of method, but I think I meant to go for her eyes. She stepped out of the way nimbly, the tip of the poker weaving patterns in the air.

"Every second, you're making it worse," she said. "Every second that you disobey me, you're getting in deeper. You've been here before, Gwyneth, you know how it ends. This is pointless; you know how it ends- "

There was a fierce pain tearing at my chest and I knew I was close to breaking down. I went after her again, but this time there was no real strength in my fists. I pounded her chest harmlessly, three times, four times- the blows wouldn't have dented a pound of butter. Then, without any effort, it seemed, Melitta caught me by the back of the neck and tossed me down on the floor. The poker glinted in the firelight as she raised it over her head.

It came down, it came down, it came down, it came down, and in the next minute, I lived sixty different violent lives and died sixty ugly deaths. The pain was crimson wells, it was dragons' teeth, it was singing birds and it was tines of lightning. I screamed, I went numb, I thrashed, I couldn't move, I begged her to kill me, I begged her not to; I blacked out and woke up and screamed again through tears, my face was a mask of mucus.

At last the blows stopped; I curled, waiting, and flinched when there was a gentle touch on my face- Melitta wiping it clean with her own handkerchief.

"This can happen for as long as it needs to," she said softly. "This will just keep happening until you learn. Now *get up*."

I didn't think that my legs could possibly carry me, but the poker twitched in her hand and I somehow lurched upwards.

"You are not going anywhere," she said. "*Say it*."

There was no conscious thought involved; I blurted: "I'm not going anywhere."

"You belong here."

Another twitch. Glean of fire along the metal. "I belong here."

"You belong to me."

"I belong to- " The words stuck in my mouth for a moment, no more, but that was too long. The end of the poker crashed on my elbow. I don't know how hard a hit it was that time, but it seemed to crush nerves that scorched all the way up my arm. The scream that came out of me didn't even sound human.

I staggered, nearly fell- but she pointed the tip of the poker at my chest, as if it was a sword. "GET- UP!"

I straightened, gasping for air.

"Step back. Twice."

She must have opened the closet door when I was unconscious. Two hobbling backwards steps took me into it. The walls closed in on either side.

Melitta was a dark shadow, framed by the door. "You belong to me," she repeated. "And you are not going anywhere. Get used to it."

The door crashed shut.

And it felt like another one crashed shut in my own mind.

Darren of Torasan (Pirate Queen)

Morning, Day XI

"I don't care if it's traditional, I'm not gonna say it!"

Lynn's eyes danced. "You've forgotten about my superhuman powers of persuasion, have you?"

"Oh-ho-ho, no." I clawed my way out of the bunk, wrapping the blanket around me. "No more persuading. You've been persuading me for hours now. I love being persuaded and all, but I think I pulled a muscle in a very important place. Besides, it's my turn; I still haven't done you."

Lynn propped herself up on an arm, lounging across the narrow wooden shelf. She was completely bare- I'd taken the only blanket- but that never bothered her. "Mistress, the sky is not going to fall if I take two turns in a row. You're the boss, remember? Besides, I'm enjoying myself."

"I hate being a taker."

"You have to take things sometimes. You took me, right? Where would you be if that hadn't happened?"

That was easy. "Dead."

"Exactly. But if you're really feeling guilty, then why don't you get off your piratical high horse and say it already?"

There was just no way I was going to win this one. I let out a feeble sigh, and kicked the deckboards with my toes.

"Shiver my timbers," I muttered, and then hurried on. "Lynn, it just sounds ridiculous. What is that even supposed to mean?"

"Well, your timbers are your legs," she said, slipping off the bunk. "As for the 'shiver' part-"

"Captain- captain- captain- "

"What, what, what?" I snapped, rubbing my eyes. "Dammit, Regon, there ought to be a rule against waking your captain in the middle of a very good dream."

Heavy shutters fit over the stable windows, so the light was dim, but I could make out the grim lines on my first mate's face. "The flag is up at the tower. And captain- "

I didn't need him to finish. Hurriedly I pulled myself out of the pile of stale straw where I'd been sleeping. We had found out the day before that you could get to the stable roof quite easily by pulling yourself up on a railing and using the lintel as a step. I did so now, kicking away a couple of offended chickens who were nesting in the thatch.

Latoya was already up there, and she gave me a curt nod without moving her eyes from the tower. The flag that Ariadne had promised was there, almost too tiny to make out, a bright speck against the white stone. Red.

"Oh, for the love of- "

My vocabulary got a work-out then. I used every curse that I knew. The thatch of the roof shuddered around me as I went at it. Latoya waited patiently until the torrent slowed.

"Better?" she asked.

*"...on a *stick!*" I roared, finishing. "I knew this would happen. She could be *dead*, Latoya, she could be dying, she could be- "*

"Anything," she agreed. "So we need to get to her. How?"

That was the question I had dreaded. I sucked my back teeth.

"We can't," I admitted at last. "Not yet. We tried to hash this out yesterday. None of us has any sliver of an idea how to get into the castle, unless we go with Ariadne's plan. The walls are too high for climbing, and we don't have the time for digging, and all the supplies that go up the hill are triple-checked for stowaways. We could poke around and try to think of something else, but if we keep tramping around the city, then sooner or later someone will realize we don't belong here. And we're all that there is, Latoya. Lynn has no-one else to come after her. We are IT. She loses her only rescuers if we charge in blindly. We need to wait for our chance."

She nodded slowly. "Which of us are you trying to convince?"

"Me," I said miserably. "I'll go down and tell Regon. We need to do something useful while we're waiting."

-

We didn't. Our clothes were still salty and battered from our raft-ride, so we collected strange looks whenever we went out the door. We couldn't afford to be questioned by guards, so we huddled in the stable, not talking much. Around noon, it began to rain again, and a puddle collected below a leak in the roof. Every few seconds, a drop of rainwater smacked into its centre, and the reflections on the water rippled, as if forming a different horrible picture. *Drip-* and Lynn was writhing in Melitta's grip, her left arm broken. *Drip-* and she was thrown into an oubliette under the walls. *Drip-* and she was raped by a grinning soldier. *Drip-*

As the minutes crawled, I pounded my brain, trying to think of some way, *any* way, to get up the castle that day. The massive white walls loomed in my imagination, stark and blank.

When the rain started to come down harder, Latoya and Regon left me to my mood, slipping out into the grey streets. They came back with armloads of plunder: a few loaves of bread, melons, oranges, a wedge of sheep's milk cheese. Dinner the night before had been a few handfuls of wizened hazelnuts that we'd found at the bottom of an abandoned saddlebag, so I did my best to get through my share. Every bite tasted like ashes.

-

I slept very little that night and woke with a pounding headache; stumbled over Regon's prone body as I staggered to the stable door. He gurgled in protest.

Once again, Latoya was on the roof before me. This time she was sitting cross-legged in the damp thatch, studying the distant flag.

"Red again," she observed.

"Right," I said, and bit my hand in frustration.

"Bigger today," she went on.

That was true. The red speck in the distance had become a long red tail billowing from the window. Ariadne must have tied together every red piece of cloth that she owned.

"Things are bad," I said, translating the obvious message. "Things are very bad- *buggering fuck*. I don't know what to do. I'm empty here. Completely dry. I don't do the plans, Lynn does the plans, I just yell at people. And sometimes I snarl. If you can think of anything, Latoya, anything at all, then hell on a biscuit would it *ever* be a good time to say so."

Latoya never hurried, never seemed rushed, but her brow furrowed and her grey eyes turned to slits. The signs of deep, deep thought. I waited, chewing my lip.

At last, she said, "What's that on the end?"

"What's what on the end of what?"

"The end of the flag. Look."

I glanced up, hassled. The tip of the red banner was divided in two, like a snake's tongue. "That's a pair of bloomers. Silk ones."

"A pair of *what*?"

"Underwear. Fancy underwear."

"That...*that*...is underwear?" I could see Latoya mentally measuring the size of the billowing knickers. Her head was cocked to the side in fascination.

"Underwear for a noblewoman. The richer you are, the more important, the more layers they make you put on."

"But *why*?"

"Probably because it makes it more difficult to get 'em naked that way. Extracting a noblewoman from her clothes is a little like getting at the meat of a crab. You can *do* it, but you need a lot of patience, sometimes some special equipment..." I shook away old memories. "Does this help us? Like, at all?"

"No," she admitted. "I've just never seen anything like that before."

"Fine," I announced to an uncaring sky. "Fine. Wonderful. Lovely. I'll go see whether Regon can pull a rabbit out of his ass- "

"Captain?"

"It's a figure of speech, Latoya."

"How do you get a girl?"

It was the softest thing I had ever heard coming out of her barrel of a chest, and even in my panic, it stopped me short. "How do you get- you mean, how do you get a girlfriend? A partner?"

She gave a small, embarrassed shrug.

It was the first time in my life that anyone asked me for advice about women, and I had never in my life felt less qualified to give any. But Latoya had followed me to virtually-certain death, so it wouldn't have been fair for me to respond with a snarl and a well-aimed boot. I rubbed the back of my head and tried to think.

"Well, in my experience...you wander the seas rescuing peasants and fishermen until a girl storms out of nowhere and challenges you to a duel. Then you haul her on board your ship, tie her to your mast, and within a few days she's running the place. Is that helpful?"

"No."

An honest woman was Latoya. "I guess...I guess...you try to recognize the right one when you meet her, and you try to hold on to her afterwards. And if you don't let her get kidnapped by a goat-testicled slave-stealing sack of shit, then you're doing better than me." I poked the woman in her beefy shoulder. "Come on, let's get inside."

-

More waiting.

Latoya confiscated all our knives, and put a fine edge on each of them. The slow, measured sound of the honing rasped on my second-last nerve. Regon whistled tunelessly, and that rasped on my last one.

After an epoch of waiting, I pulled a shutter ajar for the thousandth time and saw that the sun was finally down.

"Let's move out," I ordered, with vast relief, and tickled my palm with a fresh-honed knife point.

-

All the streets in the lower city were narrow; space is at a premium when you live in a fortress town. The three of us were crouched in alleyways that let out on the main road. From my post, I could have reached out and touched the leg of any passing horse.

Ariadne's planning was perfect. It was an hour after sundown, just as she had calculated, when the carriage came rattling up the narrow street. The moonlight glistened on its gilt trim, and on the silver buttons of the coachman. The coachman, two footmen- they were all the attendants that I could see. I glanced to the other side of the street, where Latoya and Regon were waiting, for confirmation. Latoya nodded, holding up three fingers.

Three men was a ridiculously small escort for a lord as important as this. But- as Ariadne had told me- Iason was so afraid of assassination attempts that he didn't allow even his most important visitors to bring their own troops and bodyguards into the city. For once, his paranoia would work in our favour. I cracked my knuckles and waited.

When the carriage came abreast of us, we all struck at once. Regon bounded up onto the shafts, his knife a silver flash as he cut the traces. The horses, spooked, began to bolt free; Regon thrust the knife between his teeth and raced after them. The carriage box skidded to a halt. The gaping coachman sat frozen, holding the ends of the useless reins; he was still gaping when I put him out with a chop on the neck. From behind the carriage, I could hear the muffled thuds as Latoya took care of the footmen. Pounding each of their heads against the cobblestones, from what I could tell.

While all of this was going on, a piping, peevish voice within the carriage was shrieking its objections. As soon as I got the carriage door open, I found the face that fit the voice: a young man whose downy face was cranky, whose hands dripped with gold rings, and whose plum velvet suit must have cost as much as the average warship.

"Lord Jubal?" I asked him. "Jubal of Orapat?"

"What?" he said, surprised. "Yes!"

"Good," I answered, and swung my homemade cosh. It was a rock tied into the end of a rag, nothing more than that- cheap and very effective. One quick blow sent him snoring.

After that there was no need to discuss anything. Latoya stuffed the three prone bodies into the box of the carriage, Regon brought back the horses and repaired the traces with a few bulky knots. We ghosted back to the stable through the quiet streets, hauled the bodies out onto the stable floor, stripped them, and tied them up with old pieces of harness.

For once, it had all gone right. I just hoped that we hadn't used up our entire store of luck yet.

-

An hour later, I sat in the gently rocking carriage as it rolled through the last of the castle gates. I was about as uncomfortable as a person can possibly be when sitting on a plush velvet bench. My breasts were tightly bound so that I could fit into Jubal's fine shirt, and I was encased from the waist down in his foppish purple hose. All I'd been able to keep of my own clothing was my leather gambeson. It didn't match the rest of the outfit even remotely, so I had to wear Jubal's mink-lined cape on top. Breathless, overheated, and sweaty, I was almost miserable enough to

forget what we were doing.

Regon, on the other hand, was smirking wide as the moon as he opened the carriage door. The coachman's uniform fit him well enough, though we'd had to cut off the ends of the trousers. "Captain, you look good enough to eat with a silver spoon."

"Thanks for that," I muttered to him, stepping down into the courtyard. "I still think you should be playing Lord Jubal."

"I couldn't hack it, captain. No-one would be convinced."

"How am I going to make a more convincing Lord Jubal than you? I'm not even a man!" A palace steward was bustling over to us across the courtyard. I directed a patronizing little nod in his direction.

"You're a noble," Regon hissed under his breath. "Or you were once. That's all that they'll see."

True enough. I hadn't been to court in years, I'd believed that part of my life was over for good. But now, just the feel of the velvet and gold against my skin was causing old instincts and feelings and understandings to flock back. I was remembering the thousand habits and mannerisms that nobles absorb as a matter of course during their upbringing.

So when the steward came panting up, and bowed so low that his forehead nearly touched his pointy shoes, I didn't even acknowledge him. Instead, I sneered around at the castle courtyard as if it wasn't nearly as big as I had expected.

"Lord Jubal," the steward said reverently, and bowed even further, almost tipping. "We are most honoured that you have chosen to favour the Lady Ariadne with your courtship."

"Naturally," I said, with a sniff. "That being the case, why is it that I'm being welcomed by Iason's butler rather than the man himself?"

The steward coloured. He had obviously been dreading this question. "My apologies, my lord- my *deepest* apologies- but Lord Iason receives guests only in his own chambers. He will make no exceptions. If you will follow me, I will take you to his private dining room for refreshment."

I sniffed again, and stalked past him, so the tubby man had to scamper to take up a position in front of me. Lord Jubal wouldn't have looked back at his servants, so I didn't turn back either. I'd have to trust Regon and Latoya to keep close.

-

A private dining room on the fourth floor. What a stupid way of showing off.

The steward prattled on as he trotted in front of me. Back where I came from, I mused idly, a servant who talked so much would be given a good whipping- then I caught myself. Where the

hell did that come from?

"And *here* we are, my lord," the steward said at last, bowing me through an open door. "May I humbly wish you the best of luck in your wooing."

Wooing. Right. I was supposed to be wooing Ariadne. A thought that was so wrong on so very many wrong levels...but there was no other way, so I gave the steward one last sniff and stalked through the doorway.

The room beyond *glistened*, there's no other way of putting it: with silver plate and candles, with gold-edged doublets and jewelled brooches. It took a few seconds of blinking before I could even make out the people. There was Lord Iason, ensconced at the head of the table, so splendid in his crown and brocade that you didn't notice all at once how short he was. There was Ariadne to his left, primed and powdered into a kind of doll, though the eyes that glared out from under the curly bangs were keenly sharp. Further down the table were a clutch of other men- generals, perhaps, or minor lords. And at Iason's right-

The only thing I could think of, looking at the Lady Melitta, was...ordinary, ordinary, ordinary. Dark hair, a pleasant-enough face, lined around the eyes and cheeks. Her green gown was sleeveless, in the new, fashionable style, and the flesh of her arms was soft, drooping a bit with middle age. *This* was the demon of Lynn's childhood? The youngest of my sailors could have knocked her to the ground without breaking a sweat. Lynn had fought experienced soldiers before, had fought them barefoot, with no weapon except a coiled garrotte and a small sharp blade. She had pressed her every advantage, pounced on their every weakness, *forced* them to respect her. How could this fleshy old broad give her any trouble?

I knew that Lynn wouldn't be in the dining room- chambermaids didn't serve at supper. Nevertheless I cast a quick glance along the row of servants who stood motionless against the wall, waiting for orders. An older woman whose knees trembled as she waited, a tall attentive man- he would be Iason's body servant- a sallow dark-haired girl, a plump little boy- sure enough, no Lynn. I resigned myself to an evening of awful and awkward conversation, and made my bow.

Lord Iason had remained seated when I entered. The house of Bain ranked above the house of Orapat in the hierarchy of the islands, and the niceties had to be maintained. But now he did rise and come towards me, and Ariadne came with him.

I'll spare you an account of the back-and-forth that nobles exchange when they meet on a formal occasion. Life's too short to spend repeating that drivel. But after we had called down blessings from all the appropriate gods, and smarmily praised each other's houses and our own, Iason finally nudged Ariadne forwards. "And this is the greatest treasure of the house of Bain- my daughter."

"My lady," I murmured, and bent to kiss her hand. While I was down there, she found my nose and gave it a vicious pinch and a twist. It took all my self-control not to yelp. Instead I just straightened up and handed her a dirty look.

"My lord," she tittered. "I'm delighted to meet you. Positively delighted that you're here. I've been so *eagerly* anticipating your arrival. In fact, I had hoped that you would *get here earlier?*"

Her voice turned hard at the end. I hoped that Jason wasn't watching too closely. "A thousand apologies," I said. "I came as fast as I could."

Jason laughed the kind of breezy, meaningless laugh that I've always hated. "My daughter has been without a man for far too long," he said. "And now, Lord Jubal, will you sit?"

He pointed to a seat beside Ariadne's; I bowed again, took her arm, and led her around the far side of the table.

"Seriously," I muttered, hoping we were out of earshot. "I came as fast as I could."

"Tell that to Lynn," she hissed.

By that time we had reached our chairs; I was pulling Ariadne's out, ready to seat her, but I leaned close and asked, "Where?"

For a second it seemed that she hadn't heard me, or that she had chosen not to respond. Then, as if casually, she tossed a glance towards the back wall where the servants waited. I looked myself, saw nothing, was about to tell Ariadne so when one of the servants- the sallow girl- lifted her head.

I almost fell out of my seat. It was Lynn. They had dyed her pale hair, and not very well- it was now a piebald kind of brown that made me think of liver-spots and mange. A long tunic covered most of her, including her storm-petrel tattoo, the slave mark. There were a few bruises I could see on her neck; a large one, dark mahogany, over her cheekbone, and someone had blacked her right eye. But those were details. The real difference was in her bearing. This wasn't the girl who had throttled Tyco Gorgionson, who had outbluffed, and then drowned, Mara of Namor. This wasn't the girl who planned the strategy of an entire fleet of ships and whispered unrepeatable things to me late at night. This wasn't the girl who-

"Gwyneth." Lady Melitta didn't have a loud voice, but it carried. "Eyes."

This must have been a command of some sort, because, without any hesitation, Lynn bowed her head again. Yet she *must* have seen me. I studied her out of the corner of my eye, and saw her tongue come out to wet her lips, her fists flex. She had seen me, all right. She knew who I was.

But I hadn't known her, not in her cowed state. She looked like a servant and I had looked right through her. I felt like snatching up a silver platter from the table and beating my head against it. But it wasn't quite the moment for that.

Jason clapped his hands. Dinner began.

-

I tried to catch Lynn's eye while the servants were passing around finger-bowls and pouring wine, but she either didn't realize or was ignoring me. When she wasn't going the rounds of the tables, she waited at the back wall. Melitta didn't have to warn her again to keep her head down. Could she actually be frightened? Or was she just that pissed off?

It stunned me so that I could barely keep my mind on what was passing for conversation around the table. Again and again, I lapsed into a dark daze, and there were awkward pauses that even Ariadne, labouring mightily, couldn't fill.

At last, Iason appeared to make a determined effort. He leaned across the table to me. "Lord Jubal, tell us about your younger brother. How is Haddrian getting on?"

"Haddrian," I repeated carefully. "Well, Haddrian is...fine. Really fine, absolutely fine. Very very fine, actually."

Ariadne hissed beneath her breath, and I couldn't blame her. I wasn't exactly carrying off the impersonation with aplomb. But Iason seemed satisfied. He leaned forward even further, and asked, "So he's no longer planning to give up his title and go off to become a travelling musician?"

"No," I said, "that turned out to be a passing phase."

"He doesn't keep you up until all hours of the night, playing improvisational drum solos?"

"No, he's over that now."

"And he's no longer in a relationship with a lobster?"

"No...um...he broke up with the lobster after...ah." Iason's features were no longer looking friendly, and at long last I clued in. "I don't have a brother Haddrian, do I?"

"Lord Jubal of Oropat certainly doesn't," Iason said, his tone still dangerously light. "Perhaps you do. Whoever you are."

An utter silence fell over the dining hall. There was just the barest *clink* as Ariadne set down her spoon. There were no guards in the room- not obvious ones- but the tall servant at the back of the room was watching carefully, and his hand had begun to stray to the back of his belt.

My mind raced- or, more accurately, it tried to start running and fell flat on its face. Plan, plan, I needed a plan, I needed someone who could plan, I needed *Lynn*-

And then it hit me. I had her.

Not the living person of Lynn, I mean. That Lynn hadn't even looked up yet. She seemed half-

dead, or drugged, as she leaned on the wall with downcast eyes. But I didn't need to talk to her. I already knew what she would tell me.

If you don't know what to do, she used to say, then do something. Anything. If you stand around gaping like a stuffed dummy, everyone's going to know that you don't have a clue. If you're doing something, as long as you do it with a bang, everyone will think that it's what you meant to do from the start.

I did it all in one motion: threw back my chair and leapt up on the tabletop, kicking over a bowl of fruit and flowers on the way. Jubal's silly purple cape fluttered to the ground, revealing my leather armour, and I ripped the longer of my knives from its sheath. There were a couple of shrieks around the table.

Nothing scares an opponent like confidence. You can never, never go into a fight thinking that you're going to lose. With every motion, every word, every gesture, tell your enemies that they don't have a chance. Make them believe it.

Iason was beginning to rise from his chair. I gave him a nasty, feral smile, in warning. He hesitated, and that's when I kicked his wine goblet into his lap. It landed with a thud and a splash, soaking his pale blue hose, and he stumbled back into his seat.

You think that you can't be a hero, Lynn's imaginary voice ground on. You think you're not good enough. But nobody's good enough. You, O my mistress, you are just decent and stubborn and stupid enough to keep trying to do the impossible. And that's why you got stuck with the hero gig, gods help you. But remember, you're not alone in this.

"Who exactly *are* you?" Iason asked tightly, murder in his eyes.

"Me?" I said. "I'm the pirate queen."

-

I sauntered up and down the table once or twice, to make sure that no-one was moving for the time being, and to give myself time to think. Sooner or later they would figure out that they could mob me. But if I could scare them badly enough, then no-one would want to be the first to move.

In the end, it was Iason who broke the silence. "Well, you've gone to great lengths to ruin a formal dinner, so you might as well tell me what you're here for."

He was impressively calm. I was beginning to think that Lynn inherited her courage from her father, as well as her blond hair and her sneakiness.

Before I answered Iason, I bent, speared an apple with my long dagger, brought it to my lips, and bit off a piece. This kind of thing always looks good, but it takes some serious leather to do it casually. I'm always scared that I'm going to cut my tongue in half. I chewed the fruit as I strode

up and down, taking my time.

When I was good and ready, I said: "It's nothing big. Nothing dramatic. I'm just here to collect a piece of lost property." I wagged the apple in Lynn's direction.

Iason followed my line of sight, and then, just for a moment, his mouth fell open.

I grinned toothily. "What, she never told you what she was doing while she was away?"

Obviously not, from the way that Iason and Melitta traded a grim glance.

"I picked up that girl in a fishing town a couple of years back," I went on. "She's nothing special, you understand, but she got to be a habit. Then she ran away *juuuuust* as I was getting her broken in. Talk about frustration." I took another cautious bite of apple, and spoke with my mouth full, spraying bits of pulp. "So if you'll just hand her over, then I'll get out of your way."

Iason steepled his fingers. "Why should I do that when I could simply nail you to a stake and have your throat cut?"

It was a valid question. I was still trying to think of a suitably piratical answer when there was a soft *twang*, and then a *thud*, and then a black-feathered arrow was reverberating in the oak panelling to the right of Iason's head.

Latoya had a fine sense of timing, and even better aim. She rose from her crouch by the door, nocking another arrow to the bow she'd somehow found. Regon was behind her, sighting down an arrow of his own. He was a lousy archer, but Iason didn't need to know that.

Give Iason credit, he barely flinched. "If you harm anyone in this room," he said, "then you'll pray for death for months before it's granted to you."

I shrugged. "Duly noted. But you'll be dead first, and you don't want that. Besides, aren't you making a bit much of this? I don't think I'm being unreasonable. All I want is the girl. A chambermaid, a nothing. Why are you making such a fuss over her?"

There were murmurs at this. The others in the room- courtiers and the like- had no idea who Lynn was, and why Iason needed her. All they saw was pointy objects aimed at their heads. And Iason couldn't explain without blowing his secret wide open. I saw him realize it, saw his mouth open and shut twice before he thought of an answer.

"That girl," he said, "is an orphan under my protection. And I won't abandon her to you."

"*That girl*," I corrected him, "is mine, and I really don't see the issue. Why are you making such a song and dance about a peasant slut who's no better than she ought to be? She's hardly irreplaceable. You really want to go to the wire for her when I've got arrows aimed at your family?"

At that moment, Ariadne let out a snivelling kind of wail. She was quite the performer.

I was beginning to feel almost good. Planting myself right in front of Iason, I sneered down at his frozen face. "What say we try to work out a civilized compromise? How would that be? Doesn't that sound better than having a hole drilled right between your eyes?"

Being the pirate queen, I should tell you, is a lot like being in a relationship. One minute everything is rattling along fine, then you take your eye off the ball and before you know it, everything's gone to shit.

Latoya didn't even have time to loose another arrow- that was how fast it was. A hand snaked out at viper-speed and grabbed me around the ankle. Melitta might not have been all *that* strong, but she was strong enough, and viciously determined besides. The yank that she gave threw me off balance. I took a few staggering steps, arms wheeling wildly. Then I fell off the table and landed flat on my face.

Pandemonium. Regon and Latoya were trying to fight their way inside, closer to me, as the panicking courtiers tried to fight their way out. Iason was on his feet, screaming to everyone and no-one: "*Kill her! Kill the bitch!*"

It's always the same. Just once, I'd like someone to point at me and scream: "*Give her a foot massage! Give a foot massage to the bitch!*"

But no.

It took a few moments for me to scramble upright, with Regon's help, and by that time we were surrounded by a group of grim-faced men: the generals and captains, the more muscular of the servants. Latoya had snatched up a chair and was swinging furiously to keep them at bay, but already people were streaming out the door, and they would fetch reinforcements.

And then I saw another pair on the move. Melitta had her arm around Lynn's shoulder, and Lynn was moving like a sleepwalker as she let herself be escorted away.

"Get away from her!" I yelled. "Let go of her, *now!*"

Melitta was not going to be drawn into a debate, that much was clear. She cast a single dark glance at me, and then carried on with what she was doing: whispering softly, unceasingly, into Lynn's ear, as she backed the two of them towards the door.

Latoya and Regon were flanking me now. The chair Latoya was swinging was a whistling hurricane, and Regon had the coachman's short sword. It left me free to focus.

"*Lynn!* Get over here! Get clear of her, I'm right here!"

It would be so simple. A hard stomp to Melitta's foot, enough to break the smaller bones, a chop to the ribs, a backwards elbow into Melitta's face...I'd seen Lynn do that kind of thing dozens of

times. Hundreds even. But not that day. She shuffled along dutifully where Melitta led. And now they were almost at the door.

Now bear in mind: I hadn't had a good night's sleep in almost two weeks, and I hadn't been eating enough to keep a rat alive. Nothing was really keeping me upright but anger and adrenalin. Bile burnt my throat. I know that doesn't excuse what I said next, but maybe it helps explain it.

"Lynn, don't you *dare* ignore me! *Don't- you- dare!* You belong to *me*, girl, you do what *I* tell you, and I will tan your hide if you don't get over here *right now!* Lynn, *fight!* *I am ordering you to fight!*"

Lynn's head finally came up- and it was only then that I realized my mistake. There was total misery in her eyes, a darkness so deep that it roared. Humiliation, and shame, and an emptiness that I had never seen there before. She had nothing left- that was the bottom line. It didn't matter what I asked of her, because there was nothing there she could give.

Lynn, I thought in a daze, oh Lynn, what in hell have they done to you.

I didn't say it out loud. Didn't have a chance. Melitta and her captive had slipped out the door. The next second, I became aware again of the chaos boiling around me, the fists and swords and boots. Regon was panting heavily, and even Latoya was slowing down. There was the tell-tale *tramp tramp* of hobnails from the hallway outside. Iason's soldiers were on their way, just as the last few drops of my energy ran out.

It was over; we had lost. Lynn was about to lose her last chance at a rescue- just as I realized how much she needed one.

-

Then there came a determined tap on my shoulder.

I wheeled, raising my knife, but pulled back before I could use it. It was Ariadne who was standing behind me, and her face was white, but she didn't hesitate. She spun, pressing her back into me, then grabbed my wrist, and guided my knife into place against her own throat.

I gaped down at the top of her head. I was so out of it, by then, that I wouldn't even have been able to pronounce the word *hostage*, let alone remember what one was used for. But I wasn't the only one in the room. One of our attackers- burly man with a tooled leather tunic; he looked important- pulled back immediately. "Keep back, watch for the princess!"

It was like a lodestone pulling shards of iron, how they all leapt away from me. Weapons clattered down to the stone floor and hands were clasped behind heads. And I could have howled with the sheer stupidity of it all. It wasn't Ariadne they were protecting, it was the House of Bain: the all-important royal line, which they thought was bound up in her blood. If they knew the truth- that she was barren as a kiln brick, her womb destroyed by a fever while she was barely

more than an infant- then not one of them would jump to her defence.

Latoya and Regon didn't miss a beat. They each grabbed one of my shoulders and hurried me out of the room, past stock-still generals and wide-eyed servants, my knife still quivering at Ariadne's throat. Once we were halfway down the corridor, she ducked out and under my arm. "And now," she said, with dangerous calm, "we've got to run."

Lynn
Evening, Day XII

It had never been so hard to make it up the tower steps. Melitta held me at her side, helping me up each one, and every time I wobbled, I clutched at her hard to keep myself from going over backwards.

"That's it," she kept repeating. "Almost there now, keep going. Good girl. Good girl, good girl."

When we reached her room, I was staggering, spent; my eyes had closed and I let her lead me.

"Sit. Sit down, Gwyneth, it's all right-"

It took a few seconds. My knees didn't seem to want to bend.

Melitta sat beside me; one arm encircled my shoulders, the other took my head, holding it softly against her. I relaxed into her, numbly; my mind was nothing but cobwebs and dust, her voice just kept going-

"It's all right now. Good girl. You did so well, so very well. That's right. *That's* right. Good girl. You're all right now-"

And I don't like to admit it, but it's true: the tears started rolling out of me, in choking sobs. Melitta held me tighter, stroking my head with great gentleness.

"That's my girl," she whispered, "there, that's the worst of it over. Everything will be better now, everything. Shhh, calm down, I'm here. There's nothing you need to do now. Just relax-"

She disentangled herself from me, carefully; the warmth of her was gone from my side and I felt a flutter of unreasoning fear. My eyes were still closed, but somewhere in the room there was a swishing sound, a heavy cloth being pulled back, and a door creaked open.

I knew what the sounds meant, somewhere in some dim part of me, but the broken bits of my mind could do nothing with the knowledge. I just sat, and breathed through the tears, and thought nothing at all until Melitta's hands were back, coaxing me up, leading me across the room.

"Nothing you need to do," she repeated, "you're safe, you're safe, I've got you, I'll take care of everything. All right, in you go. Now, sit. That's it, good girl. Just sit. I'll be back."

I slid to the stone floor of the closet. My back rested against one wall; my bare toes touched the other.

Melitta stroked my head, one last time, and then she took a step back, and closed the cupboard door on me. The key grated in the lock.

For a second, there were glimmers of light in there, a yellow spark that was the keyhole and a shining line beneath the door. Then the tapestry swished back to its place in front of the closet, and even those winked out.

I put my hands on my knees and stared ahead into nothing.

Just sit, I repeated to myself. *Just sit. Just sit, just sit...*

Darren of Torasan (Pirate Queen)
Evening, Day XII

Ariadne almost flew as she led the way. The castle, like the lower city, was a maze of narrow passageways and hidden staircases and secret doors. I didn't even try to pay attention to where we were going, just jogged behind her numbly.

We charged through a bake-house where the ovens still glowed red, down another short flight of stairs, and through a must-smelling wine cellar. Then there was a blast of cold air on our faces, and grit underfoot- we were outside, in the castle courtyard, our backs against the outer wall of the fortress. A stack of drying firewood the size of an average house stood in front of us, shielding us from view. There Ariadne ground to a halt, wheeled, and slapped me across the face with all her strength.

Regon leapt forward, but I waved him off, panting. The slap had felt almost good- waking me, focusing me, jump-starting my thoughts. "It's all right- all right. I deserved that."

"Damn straight you deserved it," Ariadne said crisply. "You muffed that one good and proper, didn't you? And who do you think you *are*, talking to my sister that way?"

"It was a mistake," I said. "It was a stupid, idiotic mistake which I'm not about to repeat. But try to understand. I've never seen her that way before. Never."

"Haven't you?" Ariadne asked grimly. "I have."

She was contorting herself, reaching for the hooks that held her pale green gown closed at the back. It clearly wasn't working, because she stomped a small foot. "You- the terrifyingly enormous woman- help me get out of this thing. I can't move in it worth a damn."

There was near-panic on Latoya's face as she began to unhook Ariadne's bodice with her large, calloused hands. The princess angled to let her get on with it, and kept talking.

"Lynn usually sleeps on the floor outside my mother's room. But for the past few days, my mother's been keeping her locked in the room itself. That's probably been where she's been taken. The room's on the top floor of the high tower, which is that one on the right."

Latoya had lost patience with the finicky hooks. She gave a good yank and they all popped free. Ariadne climbed out of the ruined gown, not missing a beat. "There are a bunch of soldiers out front, as you can see, but none of the guard-houses face the back of the tower. Which means that you might be able to climb it. Could you get up to that top window?"

I measured the distance with my eye and thumb. On an ordinary day, the answer to Ariadne's question would have been "No." Or, more accurately, "Hell, no!" with perhaps a hysterical laugh thrown in. But this wasn't an ordinary day.

"I'll need a rope and grapnel," I said in the end, evading the question itself. "Latoya, see what you can find."

She peeled off obediently, though she glanced backwards at the princess, who was shedding several layers of petticoats. Regon looked worried. "No rope on earth is going to reach to the top of that beast."

"Yeah, I know. I'll have to do it in stages." I tried to stay nonchalant. "You know- climb to each window in turn, and sit on each ledge while I throw the grapnel to the next floor. Nothing to it." I blew on my cold hands, and tried desperately to persuade my dinner to get back down where it belonged. "But what if Lynn isn't up there?"

"Then come down again," Ariadne directed. She had gotten rid of most of her underwear by then- now she was left in a white linen sheath which still covered more skin than almost anything that Lynn liked to wear. "We'll have to find my mother and convince her to tell us where Lynn is."

"Convince her," I repeated. "I don't know if I want to have to convince that bitch of anything."

"We could always use the magic stick," Regon suggested, his bushy eyebrows twitching upwards.

"The magic stick?" Ariadne asked. "Is that some kind of pirate thing?"

I gave Regon a withering glare before I answered. "Um. Yes. It's not a magic stick so much as a normal stick which is- oh, how to explain- used in an innovative way."

"Does it *hurt*?"

"Um. Yeah. A lot. Relax, I wouldn't do that to your mother."

Her eyes were flinty. "Why not? I would. As long as no sex was involved."

This wholly disturbing line of discussion was cut short when Latoya slipped back behind the stack of firewood, a long coil of grass rope draped over her shoulder. I transferred it to my own, and took a few deep breaths.

"All right," I said, "I'm going."

Ariadne looked at me, then up at the tower, and for the first time there was some doubt on her face. "Can you do this?"

"I don't have a choice," I told her. "So yes, I can."

Lynn
Evening, Day XII

For a long time I floated, unthinking, in a place where I wasn't aware of anything- hunger or cold or memory or pain. What tore me out of my beatific state was noise.

First there was a crash- glass breaking- and then a second one, as metal hit stone. In my sluggish state, it took me at least a minute to reach the obvious conclusion: *someone* had thrown *something* through the tower window. And by then I could hear something else: the scraping of boots against stone as someone climbed. Overlaying the scraping sound- nearby, and coming nearer- was a voice which spoke in short, breathless spurts. It sounded something like this:

"Stupid...*pant*..."

"Tower...*pant*..."

"Stupid...*pant*..."

"Slave...*pant*..."

"Oh...*pant*...sod...*pant*...this..."

"For...*pant*...a...*pant*...sodding...*pant*...game...*pant*...of...*pant*...soldiers..."

A final pant, a final scrape, and then, so far as I could tell, a gasping body flung itself over the windowsill. Then, once again, there came the sound of glass breaking. And a yelp.

"Blasted motherbollocking son of a TWAT!"

Darren had different curses for different occasions. That one meant that she had cut her finger. When she spoke again, it was muffled, and I knew she was sucking the wound.

"Lynn, are you there?"

I held my breath, said nothing, and waited, hoping the distraction would vanish. Nothing for five seconds- but Darren's voice just bored in again. "Lynn. Please. We need to move, fast. I know you're ticked, but we can deal with that once we're out of here. Where the hell are you?"

The voice was beginning to take on that edge of theatrical desperation. The one that meant that she had taken on more than she could handle. That was Darren- she would take all the problems of the world on herself, and then look around vaguely for a place to offload them.

"*Lynn. Please. We have to- we need to- "*

I closed my eyes tightly. She didn't get it. I couldn't save her. Not this time.

There were footsteps- she seemed to be turning in a small, bewildered circle.

"All right," she said, more softly, and then, "all right. How about I just talk for a while? You can jump in any time you like."

Rope springs creaked as she sat down on Melitta's bed. I winced at the thought.

"I'm sorry that I wasn't here earlier," she began. "No excuses. I'm so sorry."

I pressed my face into the top of my knees, trying to control my breathing. But in my head, I answered her: *Kind of late for that now, pirate queen.*

"Melitta is the biggest bitch that I've ever encountered."

No shit.

"If I'd grown up with her, then I- I don't know what I would have done. I don't know if I would have made it."

This just made the nausea surge again. I bit my lip and rocked.

"I really hope that you can hear me, by the way. It's going to be bloody annoying if I have to repeat this in all the corners of the tower-" She caught herself. "But whatever time it takes for this to happen, that's fine. Because this is *it*, you know. This is it. The most important thing. And nothing matters more. Nothing."

I heard her weight shift, and her boots touch the floor. She was beginning to prowl around the room, slowly- I could picture her checking under the furniture.

You need to get out of here.

"You remember when we met? When I cold-clocked that thug Hasak, and then you challenged me to a duel and almost twisted my ear off?"

It was the tension, maybe, or just the mental image- but I couldn't help it; I sniggered. I caught it almost at once, but Darren had heard; her feet were silent on the flagstones outside the closet. Then, very slowly, taking her time, she started to come nearer.

"At the time, I just figured you were insane."

Not so far from the truth.

"But these past few days, you know, I've been thinking-"

Sounds painful.

"And I think I figured something out. I think I did. And I hope- I hope that I'm right, because I kind of like to imagine that this is what happened."

Her voice was nearer, nearer- she was right on the other side of the door. Light prickled through the keyhole as she nudged the tapestry aside- and I stiffened- but she didn't touch the handle. Instead, she slowly sat down on the other side of the door.

That sent the panic surging- Iason's men would come charging up here while she was still crooning at me through a keyhole. *Melitta* would come back, and if she found Darren here, she would...I couldn't picture it; just the thought hit my stomach so hard that I thought I'd been stabbed. My tongue still felt too thick to speak, but I thought the words at her harder: *You really need to go, you really, really need to go. Right bloody now.*

"So what I was thinking was- oh, by the way, I'm touching the door now. Right below the keyhole."

Darren could be stupidly mushy sometimes. What was I supposed to do? Touch the same spot on the door, only on the other side? Pretend that I could feel her through the wood? Embarrassingly sappy. I snorted. And did it anyway.

"So what I was thinking was this," she went on. "I think that, all through your childhood, you were completely powerless. Right? Getting thrashed whenever you spoke up. And you fought it as much as you could- because you're you, and you're the bravest person I've ever known. But there was no way you could win, in the end."

I closed my eyes. Her voice was as gentle as I'd ever heard it. I let my fingernails scritch against the wood.

"You were just a kid. There was no way you could win."

Then why do I feel so guilty?

"But when you met me, even that first day- well, you can tell me if I'm wrong here. I think, I believe, that you trusted me from the start. That you felt safe with me from the start. Or at least-" and her tone turned wry- "you knew you could take me, any day of the week."

And twice on Tuesdays.

"You knew I would never hurt you."

You couldn't, you stupid bint.

"So you could stand up to me. You could yell and scream and say that you were pissed off, and pound me and bite me- and still know that you were safe. You could let me take the lead, you could let me make the choices- and not panic. For the first time. So what I'm trying to say is- thanks. For trusting me so much."

I licked my dry lips, my blood sounding painfully in my ears.

"So here's what I'm asking you for, Lynn- and I know it's a lot. Do you think you can trust me again? Here, now, today? Can you trust me to get you out of this fucking pisshole? Because this time, it won't be your job to prop me up, you know. You won't have to reassure me or cajole me or soothe me. You don't have to be the strong one. Not this time."

Silence, then softer: "Lynn, please. Tell me to open this door."

Just sit, Melitta had said, *just sit, just sit*- the words slipped out almost by accident. "If they catch us- "

There was no sign of surprise in her voice. "Then horrible things will happen. I know."

"No, you don't," I said, harshly. "You don't, you can't. This is different, this is- you couldn't possibly understand."

A short pause, and a great effort: "All right. I guess I don't understand. Because I haven't lived what you've lived. But that's why I have to take the lead this time. That's why it's my turn."

"Do you have a *plan*?"

"Well..." She had been hoping, clearly, that I wouldn't ask that question. "Not a plan *as such*, no. Things have been working out so far."

"You want me to charge blindly out of here, looking for an escape route that probably doesn't exist. Knowing that all of this will probably end with you dead, and me locked in a kennel somewhere, with stumps where my thumbs ought to be. How does that make sense, Darren? Tell me how."

"It doesn't make sense," Darren admitted softly. "It never does make sense to fight when there's no way to win. But you do it anyway. You always have."

I didn't answer. Light through the keyhole. Void roaring in me. The words, my keeper's last order, still ringing: *just sit, just sit, just sit, just sit...*

A scraping sound on the flagstones. Darren was sliding something under the door. I felt for it, picked it up- the ridges, the small scalloped shape. A shell.

I folded the thing in my palm. Squeezed it hard.

"Darren," I said, my voice oddly loud.

Tense now: "Yes?"

"What, you just happened to have a shell in your pocket?"

"Well- yes, as a matter of fact. Why, is there anything wrong with having a shell in your pocket? When I was a kid-"

"Darren," I interrupted her, "open this fucking door."

She was brought up short. "Did you say-"

"Open the door," I interrupted again- the small space was crashing in on me all of a sudden, the air was too warm and there wasn't enough of it. "Open the door, open the door, open this goddamned fucking door!"

She was already on her feet and light winked out in the keyhole; Darren had thrust the point of her dagger there, forcing the lock. The door was flung open. I was trying, awkwardly, to get to my feet, expected Darren to reach into the closet and hoist me up by the front of my tunic- but instead, she bent, got an arm around my shoulders and another under my knees, and hefted me like a small child. Staggering a little under the weight, she made her way across the room and set me down on Melitta's bed as if I was a bruised peach. I forced down the instinct to jump straight back off of it.

Darren was doing her best not to blanch at the sight of my face, but it wasn't going well. She had that panicked, searching expression- she always gets it when she's looking for a way to change the subject, and it always ends disastrously.

I waited for it.

Her eyes went wide, and she blurted, "I kissed your sister. With tongue."

I only smacked her six times for that one. The rest were because she showed up so damn late.

Darren of Torasan (Pirate Queen)
Night, Day XII

After Lynn was finished venting her frustration, I rubbed my aching arms and took stock.

She looked far worse at close quarters, and I had to do my best not to stare. She knew, and her battered face was hot with embarrassment, but she tried to speak normally: "So, what's first?"

"First," I said, all business, "you need to strip."

I led the way myself, unlacing my leather gambeson and tossing it aside, then pulling off my shirt. Lynn watched me, forehead wrinkled.

"I'm happy to see you, and all," she said. "But is this really the moment?"

I shoved my shirt at her. "To change clothes? Yes, it is. Because I'm damned if you're going to wear something that bitch put you in for an instant longer than necessary."

I think I can say, that's the moment when I first honestly, seriously astonished my slave. A smile broke out on her bruised face; it looked like another wound. "You had a good idea," she said, wonderingly. "When did you start having good ideas?"

In three and a half seconds, she was out of her long respectable tunic and into my shirt. It hung down to her mid-thighs, and after she cinched it tight with Jubal's belt, it fit her well enough. Which is to say, it looked nowhere near respectable, and far more like Lynn. I pulled my gambeson back on over my bare skin, doing my best not to think about how badly I'd chafe the next day. One thing at a time.

As I was lacing it up, Lynn used her teeth to tear a long strip from her servant's tunic. She knotted it into a pouch with a few deft jerks. Then she toured the room as quickly as her battered body could handle, filling the pouch with objects off the shelves and dressing table. There didn't seem to be any reason or pattern behind her choices- I saw her grab a snuff-box, two small bottles of perfume, a little elephant carved of ivory, and a paperweight, among other things. But I wasn't about to argue. If Lynn wanted trophies, more power to her. I'd try to get her one of Melitta's fingers to add to the bag later on.

While she was at it, I retrieved the grappling hook, coiling the rope neatly- it wasn't long enough for us to climb back down. We finished at about the same time.

"Stairs, right?" she asked. "You'd better let me carry that. You'll probably be fighting."

True enough. I handed the coil of rope off to her, unsheathed Jubal's rapier, and led the way out of the room.

Outside the bedchamber was a small alcove, where a straw pallet and crumpled blanket rested on

the floor. From what Ariadne had said, this was where Lynn used to sleep, and the sight affected me more than I would have expected. It looked like a kennel; all that was missing was a water dish and a leash. I was beginning to realize that nothing in the way Lynn had been treated was simple neglect or cruelty- every last aspect of her life was designed to keep her small, and shamed, and powerless.

Lynn very studiously didn't look in the direction of the alcove, so I didn't mention it, and we just hurried to the stairs.

"Damn," Lynn muttered before we got more than a few steps down.

I tensed. "What?"

"Listen. But keep moving."

I listened and I kept moving. It took three turns down the stairway before I heard what she had heard- the clicking of soldiers' hobnailed boots against the flagstones.

"Damn," I concurred wearily. "Stay behind me. We've got the high ground, that's something."

These old stairways are all designed the same way, to favour the defender. If you're coming down, you have free play for your sword; if you're coming up, you're hampered by the central post, slamming into it every time you swing.

It wasn't much but it was something, so when I saw shadows flickering on the stairs beneath us, I hurried to get past the landing. I wanted to meet them where they couldn't come at me at once.

There were only two in that first wave, and the first was stupid and eager enough to race up the stairs ahead of his comrade. I ducked under his blow and smashed the rapier hilt against his temple, and he dropped, rolling limply down the stairs. The next one gave me some more trouble, but while we were still clashing back and forth, a snuff-box flew past my shoulder and struck him full on the forehead. It didn't put him out- he just staggered- but that gave me the chance to slice his inner thigh. Blood spurted, and he went down quickly.

"Thanks for that," I tossed back at Lynn.

"Don't mention it." She was already digging more ammunition out of her pouch.

There were four in the next cluster, and though they were all weak swordsmen, there were enough of them to give me a few very bad moments. Lynn had thrown the ivory elephant, and the paperweight, and several other items of bric-a-brac, before even the first of them dropped. But there was a lull in her throwing while I was battling the last one. Long enough that I almost forgot she was there, and focused on other things: my arm muscles, which felt like burning bits of string, and the sweat running into my eyes. Her shout burst out of nowhere, and it made me jump:

"You were NEVER SUPPOSED to SEE me this WAY!"

Lynn punctuated this remark by throwing the perfume bottles. Three of them bounced off the luckless soldier's forehead, and the last smashed solidly into his crotch. He gurgled weakly as he went down.

"What way?" I asked, hopping over the body.

"You *know* what way!" Her voice was high-pitched, and I knew she was having trouble keeping it together. "I never wanted you to see me as some kind of victim- some *pathetic, mewling, helpless little kid.*"

Another few soldiers came charging up the stairs, and I tiredly raised the rapier again. "Is that why you never told me who you really were?"

Her response, when it came, was so soft that I barely heard it over the clanging swords. "Sort of. Maybe. I guess. I never wanted you to picture me like this."

"Lynn, you crackpot," I panted. "You really thought that I would respect you less because that bitch used to beat you?"

The last soldier was pressing me hard. I ducked; Lynn took the cue, and smashed the grappling hook into his face. He sagged and we kept heading down.

"I didn't really think it over," she admitted. "I hoped that it would never matter, because I'd never be back here again, and I just wanted- I just wanted to leave it all behind."

"But you never even told me about your sister." More footsteps on the stairs. I shook out my aching fingers before I gripped the rapier again. "And she was a huge part of your life."

"I know. I know. It's all so screwed up. But it was hard to think about her when I thought that I would never see her again."

"Just tell me this," I said. My rapier thrust through a man's shoulder, and I raised my voice over his scream. "Was it because of anything I did?"

"Was what because of anything you did?"

"That you couldn't tell me the truth." I got nicked on the shoulder and flinched, but another paperweight came flying over my shoulder, smashing my opponent's throat. His eyes bugged like a sick frog.

"No, it wasn't because of you," Lynn said. "But I always kind of thought that you would get ten times as guilty and bashful if you knew. That you'd treat me like some kind of delicate flower- or like a kid who didn't know her own mind. And you'd get all Darren-knows-best and overprotective, and you'd think it was your duty not to exploit me, and you'd refuse to do

anything in bed other than cuddle. Darren, hang on. Don't kill that one."

My rapier point froze an inch from the soldier's throat. "Why not?"

"I know him from before- he carried some wood up the stairs for me. A few times. When I couldn't do it on my own. When my arm was broken."

It didn't seem like much, set against everything that had been done to Lynn in this castle, but oh well. I reversed the rapier and smashed him with the pommel, and Lynn quickly bent, tying his thumbs together with a strip of rawhide. When she was done, I cupped her chin. "Look. I may be a slow learner, but there are two things that I've managed to figure out. One is that you're stronger than I'll ever be. And the other is that you *know* what you want. The two of us decide what goes on in our bed. All the people who don't like it can go, collectively, to hell."

Her smile was pained, but it *was* a smile. "Thanks, Mistress."

"You're welcome."

"...We're not getting out of this one, are we?"

I looked down. We were only a couple of turns of the staircase above the tower door. But even after we emerged, we were going to have to figure out how to get out of the fortress- when Lord Iason knew we were there, and the entire army of Bero had been turned out to track us down. I didn't dare tell Lynn that I'd been counting on her for an exit plan. I just said, "We're not done yet."

"Stupid optimism," she noted, as we headed down the last few stairs. "See, I always said that you were the hero."

-

This next part, I admit, is a little dim in my memory. Horns had begun to ring in the gloom, army drums pattered warnings; torches moved at a fast clip in the darkness; the tramp of soldiers' boots was everywhere. It was like the last part of a hunt, the seconds before the fox is torn apart or the stag is brought to its knees.

We met up with the other three; they were still behind the woodpile. All our faces were chalk-white, I don't suppose I looked any different, and we stared around at each other blankly.

"The cellars," Ariadne said at last. "We can hide there until things cool down."

Things weren't going to cool down and every one of us knew it, but we roused ourselves and followed her once more. Lynn's hand was in mine- small and cold as a that of a dead child.

Through the wine cellar and through another passage, Ariadne still pattering on in front. "By the way," I asked Lynn. "What was your mother like?"

Her mouth opened, but she never got a chance to answer. Torchlight suddenly blared in our faces and my stomach plunged to somewhere in the neighbourhood of my feet. Once I'd blinked the orange flares from my vision, I saw them- rows on rows of soldiers, choking the narrow passageway; shadows of swords and spears cast along the wall. Too many to count; too many to fight. The guard that Lynn had asked me to spare back in the tower was there, and I thought I saw him give me an apologetic shrug.

Regon had his short sword out. "Lynn," he promised, "they'll only come at you over our dead bodies."

"Thanks," Lynn said half-heartedly, "that's very comforting."

The rows of guardsmen parted as if split with a knife, and Iason and Melitta both walked through. Iason didn't look small now, not with fury pouring off of every square inch of his body, and Melitta looked anything but ordinary. Seeing her that moment, I got a tiny taste of what Lynn used to have to face every day, and I wondered all over again how she'd made it.

"Father," Ariadne was saying, through false tears. "You have to get back, you have to leave- they'll kill me, they've said that they'll kill me- "

"Ariadne," Iason said. "Do not ever again make the mistake of thinking that I'm an idiot."

Somewhere nearby, water dripped from the ceiling.

The princess's voice was weakening. "But you don't understand- "

"Darling," he said, but not as if he meant it. "I do understand. You've had a rush of blood to the head and started consorting with criminals. Very well. We all commit acts of appalling stupidity now and then. But it changes nothing about what is going to happen. Come here this minute."

"Don't move," Lynn said immediately. "Ariadne, you can't- "

She sounded desperate and I knew why- Iason's two daughters were acting as human shields, keeping the soldiers from rushing us. We were dead as soon as they moved away. Ariadne knew this, she *must* have known it, but her face crumpled, and her strength along with it. Maybe she had given up hope, I thought. Or maybe she too, in her way, had been so badly hurt by Iason and Melitta that she couldn't stand up to them. Whatever the reason, she walked unsteadily over to her father, and he snatched her wrist and swung her behind him.

Lynn hissed, then pushed in front of Regon and Latoya and I, her wiry arms outstretched as if she could use them to block crossbow bolts. Iason shook his head, with something like pride.

"Very well," he said. "Melitta, over to you."

Melitta smiled slightly, and her eyes focused on Lynn. "Gwyneth," she began.

Her hand found its way back to me, and I gripped it. It was all I could do.

"Gwyneth," Melitta said again. "It's time to end this."

"Don't listen," I said to Lynn, and she gave a quick sharp nod. Her eyes were tightly closed.

"Oh, Gwyneth," Melitta said, sounding hurt. "You know better than this, you truly do... You can't sacrifice yourself to save them. Things are going to work the other way around. They are going to die. You're not. Whatever happens in the next five minutes, it ends with you coming back upstairs, with me."

I could feel the pulse in Lynn's wrist- a racing, skipping beat. "If I were smart," she said to me, "then I would ask you to cut my throat right now."

"But you're not going to, are you?"

"No," she said softly. "In spite of everything- it's still not my style."

"Just as well. I couldn't do it even if you did ask me to."

Melitta's face was darkening; her voice sharpened as the pitch soared higher. "Gwyneth, I'm only going to say this once more- "

"You aren't going to say anything more, you hoary old bitch," I told her, hefting the rapier in my free hand. "If you're going to murder us all down here, then let's bloody well get on with it already. But, fair warning. If you don't kill this girl, then she'll crush you in the end. Because she changes the world, just by living in it, and she changes people, just by knowing them. And I don't believe that you can break her, not for good."

Melitta's smile glinted. "Ah, well," she said lightly. "I can try, anyway."

The voice that spoke up then was halfway between a sob and a snarl, with an edge of desperation thrown in.

"Wrong," it said. "*You won't.*"

I had seen this before- the flash of *something* in the air above Melitta's head, and, an instant later, a line drawing itself across the woman's throat as the cord was yanked tight. But it wasn't Lynn doing it this time- Lynn was beside me, gaping just as I did at Melitta choking, at the white foam that dripped from her lips. The soldiers to the left and right of her stood dumbstruck, Iason stumbled backwards, as Melitta struggled for breath. A strangling death isn't a pretty thing when it's being done by an amateur, and it seemed a long, long time before Melitta finally crashed to her knees. Behind her stood Ariadne, tear streaks in the dust down her face as she pulled the garrotte still tighter.

For once I didn't hesitate. I threw down my rapier, grabbed a knife from the back of my belt, flipped it to grab the blade, and hurled it with all my might. Iason had just enough time to widen his eyes before the knife *thunked* solidly into the centre of his chest. His delicate white fingers splayed, tracing patterns in the air; and then he wheezed, and went down, folding on the floor of the tunnel. His eyes drifted shut.

The soldiers didn't react to that as quickly as you might expect. There were too many disbelieving stares trained on Ariadne, and she was turning pale in the face of them.

"They deserved it," she announced, her voice shaking mightily. "They deserved it, they deserved it, they asked for it fifty times over! They killed your mother, Lynn, did you know that?"

"I know," Lynn said, softly, so softly.

"And they killed my husband, poor *stupid* Gerard. Didn't they? Got him out of the picture, so no-one could ask why I wasn't getting pregnant. *Didn't they?* They *used* people, they broke them and bent them and tossed them away." She was getting properly hysterical now. "You don't understand! The things that they did to *my sister*- and I couldn't do anything but *watch!*"

That cracked it. She crumpled on the stones, put her face in her shaking hands, and then she started crying. Not delicate maidenly blubbing, but full rolling sobs that made her entire chest shake. The soldiers who surrounded her shuffled their feet. They were a bit embarrassed, perhaps a little regretful, but it changed nothing. Ariadne had killed her own mother, in the full view of witnesses. She had put herself outside the bounds of the law. She could never take the throne of Bero now- her rank and title would be stripped from her, just as mine had been from me. Exile was the best future she could hope for. Execution, more likely.

We had seconds before the guardsmen came back to life. Their lord was dead, his heir a criminal- no-one, least of all me, knew what was going to happen next. As I bent to pick up the rapier, all my muscles screeching their protests, I tried to cudgel my brain into thinking up one-more- plan.

But there was a soft touch on my wrist.

"It's all right, Mistress," said Lynn. "I've got this one."

Except her voice was her own again, *really* her own, and relief flooded me in a warm wave. Lynn, *my* Lynn, was back.

Lynn
Morning, Day XIII

When I walked forwards, the eyes of the soldiers flicked over me quickly, looking for a weapon. A few hands tightened on sword-hilts, but no-one moved.

As I passed Melitta's body, I gingerly prodded her side with a bare toe. It wasn't meant to be an insult, I just had to know. There was no motion from the prone figure- she was really, truly gone. It was strange, I remember thinking, that I didn't feel more.

Ariadne was still crumpled, shaking. I nudged her to her feet, then moved her the few steps back to the others.

"Take care of her, Latoya," I directed. The burly sailor blinked, nervous, but she bent over my sister, and, though she looked like an oak next to a sunflower, her hands were gentle as she took hold of Ariadne's shoulders. That was all it took. The next second, Ariadne had flung herself, bawling, into the bosun's arms.

"Stand down, all of you." One of the soldiers had finally found his tongue. "In the name of the house of Bain, you are under arrest for treason, and murder, and...and sedition, and..."

I singled out the soldier who was speaking. I should have known. It was the soldier I had asked Darren not to kill, and searching in the corners of my mind, I found that I did know his name. "Captain Whytock, there is no House of Bain. It's over."

"You have killed our lord," he said- and he was speaking too loudly, as if trying to compensate for his own confusion. "You must be arrested; we have no choice."

"Wrong," I said, "you just think you don't. You can kill all of us, it doesn't change the facts. Iason is dead. His line is snuffed out. Before long, the generals and the minor lords will figure it out, and you'll be in for a power struggle that will make the war in the islands look like a chess match between neighbouring girls' schools."

Whytock tried to forge on anyway. "You are all under sentence of death- "

"So are you. You'll all be swept into different factions and you'll spend the next year fighting pitched battles up and down Bero. Civil wars are the bloodiest conflicts out there. How long do you think you can survive? And what will your death purchase? At best, you'll have moved some idiot baron an inch closer to the throne of Bero. An idiot baron who doesn't deserve it. Most of the people who'll be fighting for the crown shouldn't be trusted with a puppy, let alone a kingdom. Your lives should mean more than that."

I was talking too fast, but I had them, I could tell. Not one of them was moving to attack.

"I know how it is," I told them. "You're doomed if you just follow the rules, so you'd better get used to the idea of breaking them. You don't have to let this happen. You don't have to let things come apart. You can save yourselves if you're brave enough, if you have enough imagination. Here and now, you can create a new lord."

-

You wouldn't believe unless you've seen it, how *suddenly* freedom can happen. A day before, I'd

been a captive servant, and an hour before, I'd been facing execution. But in the faint flow of the pre-dawn, with Lord Whytock striding before us, we passed unchallenged through gate after gate.

Ariadne had a thing for poetry when we were still quite small. There was one that she would repeat to me endlessly- "in hope", she would always say. *Forgotten the fear that once held me in thrall*, it began. *And my bonds have become light as dreams...*

It used to make me roll my eyes. But as I walked through the walls that had shut me in for most of my life, with Darren beside me, her face radiant in the pink light, all I could think was- well, exactly.

Ariadne had collected herself, more or less. She was talking to Whytock at high speed as we descended through the lower city. "You can keep the barons under control as long as you hold the tax coffers," she was saying. "Put your most trusted men in that department, and pay them well enough to keep them from taking bribes. And hire a different steward- the old one listens at doors."

I watched Whytock out of the corner of my eye, trying to assess how he would do as lord of the most powerful state in Kila. I didn't know much about his brains or his talent. But he had taken a load of wood from me once when I was too tired even to stagger. That was a straw in the wind.

"How are you doing?" Darren said, interrupting my thoughts.

I squinted up at her sideways. She looked exhausted. Her leather armour was slashed and crumpled. Threads of blood etched the right side of her face. She was beautiful.

Instead of answering her question, I announced: "I am *never* going to have children. Ever."

She shrugged. "Lynn, it's your damn body. Your choice. Besides, there's a war on, right? Orphans everywhere. If we ever decide that we want a kid, then we can pick up a slightly used toddler."

"Ha. Not for me. But Ariadne, maybe...she really does want to be a mother. Go figure..."

Latoya was pacing alongside Ariadne, looking protective. Every so often, she would touch my sister's sleeve with a gentle fingertip, as if reassuring herself that she was still there.

"I think my bosun's head over heels for Ariadne," Darren noted.

"Of course. Didn't you see it coming? After all, my sister is a lady." I gave her a crooked grin. "And Latoya is a gentleman."

-

When we got down to the wharf, I sucked in air as fast as I could. Salt and seaweed and fish and

damp wood. Darren's hand tightened on mine, giving it a squeeze to let me know that she shared my delight.

"All right," Darren said, in her I-suppose-I-ought-to-take-charge-now voice. "Whytock- I mean, *Lord* Whytock- can you loan us a ship? Nothing fancy, just something that'll get us off the island."

"A ship," Whytock repeated, as though he'd never heard the word before. "Yes, I suppose so. There's a wreck that they pulled off the reefs a few nights back- they've just patched the hull. It isn't much. Bit of an old tub, I'm afraid. Called, uh- the *Badger*, or something. Do you think that'll do?"

-

Darren denies it, but I'll swear on a stack of gold nobles *that* high that there were tears in her eyes as she caressed the *Badger's* gunwale.

"I swear," I told her, "you love this ship more than me."

"Do not," she said. "I sunk the damn thing so that I could come after you- doesn't that tell you anything?"

"Just that you were getting randy. Let's face it, there are some things that ships *can't* do."

Latoya and Regon both grinned at that- they were stowing the supplies that Whytock had provided- and Regon gave me a sly wink. I nodded graciously back, accepting the tribute.

We were ready to go- only Ariadne was still down on the dock, in the middle of a fevered conversation with Whytock. I was about to come after her when they broke apart. Whytock whispered something more, and then stood back politely.

"What was that all about?" I asked warily.

Ariadne's face was pinched and grey. "He said that I'm welcome to stay, if I want. He'll cover up the murder so that I can remain here as his advisor."

"*Do* you want?"

"I don't know," she said unhappily, with a glance back over her shoulder. "Let's face it, court intrigue is what I'm good at. It's where I really belong."

"That's total rubbish. You belong anywhere you want to be. Right now you belong on a pirate ship. I'm already figuring out where to put your hammock."

"But I don't know a thing about sailing."

"Darren's *got* sailors," I pointed out. "What she doesn't have is a ship's surgeon."

"But I'm not- "

I looked at Darren. "She knows about herbs and specifics, she can bandage and split with the best of them, and she knows when to back off and let nature take its course. Plus, she can sew."

Darren cocked an eyebrow. "Did she ever stitch you up?"

"Well, not exactly- but she's done a hell of a lot of embroidery."

"It would be *nice* to have someone on the *Banshee* who could put in stitches properly," Darren said thoughtfully. "Spinner's been doing that, and he's got hands like- well, like a sailor."

Ariadne looked ragged and tired, with her face streaked with mud and streams of lace dripping from what was left of her gown. "But I know Bero. I could maybe ease the transition. Stop some of the conflict. Don't I really have a duty to the people? To stay?"

The silence crawled, and then Darren rubbed her face fiercely. "It's what I would have done," she admitted. "Ow. Lynn. Don't kick me, I wasn't going to stop there. I can't make this decision for you, Ariadne. All I can say is- duty is kind of overrated. Wherever you go, you can find people who need help. But you have to take love where you find it."

Ariadne looked back at the castle.

And then back at me.

"The hell with it," she announced.

And in two great bounds, she was up the gangplank, and took me into a crushing embrace.

Darren of Torasan (Pirate Queen)
Morning, Day XIII

There was a freshening wind from the south as we pulled out of the harbour. It would be a long trek to find the *Banshee*. But for once I didn't feel tired. It felt like the beginning of one of my early voyages, when every square inch of the ocean was new, and death was something that happened only to other people.

Regon had the tiller, and Lynn and I worked together to deal with the sails. It was no good asking Ariadne and Latoya to do anything. They were huddled together by the side, Latoya's arm wrapped around the princess. Every now and then, she cast a sort of "how'm-I-doing?" glance over her shoulder.

"So," I said to Lynn, "I've been thinking."

She peeked around the sail. Definitely concerned, if not panicked. "Have you?" she hedged.

I clucked my tongue. "Ye of little faith. I've been thinking that we should revise our long-term plan."

"Revise what part of it?"

"The part that involves me becoming the High Queen of Kila after we're done with this whole civil war thing. I fret and panic enough when I'm in charge of twelve ships. I don't need an excuse to take all of the sins of the nation on my back."

She thought about that as she tied off a rope. "Hmm," she said. "You might have a point- and frankly, the queen business seems sort of labour intensive. I'm not interested in having you work twenty hour days."

"Exactly. Besides, there's a better person for the job now."

"Ariadne?"

"That's the one."

"But then, what would *we* do? After the war?"

I angled my head back and felt the sun on my face. "I thought that we would just keep doing this," I said. "Forever. Unless we get sick of it and decide to do something different."

She studied me. "You know? I think that is a well-conceived plan."

"Glad you agree. Now go and use your superhuman powers of persuasion on my lazy bosun. Get her to come over here and handle the sails. Because you and I are going down to the hold and we are not coming up until both of us are good and ready."

"We don't have a cabin down there."

"I'll build you one. Did it before."

"What if I refuse?"

"Well then, girl, I have my own powers of persuasion."

"Watch it, babe."

"Don't you mean 'Mistress'?"

"Don't push your luck. Now are you going to get your bony pirate ass below, or do I have to kick

it down the stairs?"

I grinned. "Lynn, oh come on. I know better than to try and cross you, by now."

Epilogue- Six Years Later

*Now they talk about a time that seems as shapeless as a dream,
When the stars all spiralled backwards, and the rivers ran upstream,
In the middle of a war that brought our nation to the brink,
When nothing ever worked out in the way that you would think.*

*For they say there was a girl, back in the maelstrom of the war,
Who was whipped and shamed and tortured for the royal blood she bore-
But as a nameless slave girl on a vicious, war-torn sea,
Bound and branded by her lover, she found pride and dignity.*

*And her lover was an exile who had known a bitter time-
An unrepentant criminal, a kiss her only crime,
Who always stood the steadiest when tossing on the foam,
Who, had she not been banished, would have never found her home.*

*And they say a shining princess in a castle high above
Kissed her father out of hatred; killed her mother out of love.
And from that bloody murder, a new hope began to spring-
And a pirate and her slave girl were the source of everything.*

*Now I'm not much of a scholar, but it's clear to even fools
That sometimes there's no fairness 'til you start breaking the rules-
And it isn't really justice to treat everyone the same-
And if you've got no way to win, it's time to change the game.*

*So we're here now to start twisting things like bits of linen thread;
We'll bend the laws all back to front, turn ethics on their head;
For no matter what the jurists and philosophers assert
There's just one human duty: it's to help more than you hurt.*

*We'll be wiser than our parents, question everything they knew-
And we'll hope like hell our children will be wiser than us, too.
The world must turn and change, whatever gloomy prophets say-
And if you can't accept that? Get the hell out of my way.*

"Are you ever gonna put out the lamp?"

Ariadne, high queen of Kila, laid her pen down on top of the completed poem, and glanced out the window. White electric threads of lightning whipped across the purple sky, like cracks in a

dark stone. "I'm worried about them," she admitted.

"Don't be," Latoya said, propping herself up on one elbow in the canopied bed. "It'd take more than a bit of a storm to sink the *Banshee*."

"I know, oh I know," Ariadne said. "But it might slow them down, and I'm going to have the biggest tantrum in the history of *time* if they're not here for the birth. Seriously, it'll be epic. You'll be able to sell tickets."

Latoya yawned and settled her head back down. "Is it raining like a bitch?"

"Yes."

"Are the waves whitecapped and horrible?"

"Yes."

"Does the whole sea look like a scene from a nightmare?"

"Yes."

"They'll be here tomorrow morning," Latoya predicted sleepily. "Doing the impossible is kind of what they do."

There was no denying that one.. Ariadne stared at the frothing sea. Somewhere out there was a pirate ship, its red sails streaming water, and a storm-petrel flag streaking out against the sky. Darren would be on deck, bawling orders, and Lynn would be at her side, blond hair plastered back with rain, eyes alive with delight. Or maybe they weren't on deck at all- maybe Lynn's arms were aching in the damp weather, so they were down in their cabin, and Darren was diligently rubbing out the sore muscles. Or maybe-

"Ariadne," Latoya groaned from behind the curtains.

After a last glance at the ocean, Ariadne blew out the lamp, kicked off her slippers, pulled off her robe, and slipped into bed. The coverlets were mounded over Latoya's bulging stomach, and Ariadne touched the top of it gently- right on cue, felt a kick.

There's always another way, Ariadne thought, with drowsy happiness, and settled her head on Latoya's shoulder, her arm around the pregnant belly. Ten seconds later, they were both asleep.