

ALANA IN PERIL

BOOK TWO

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Contents

CHAPTER 1	3
CHAPTER 2	11
CHAPTER 3	22
CHAPTER 4	31
CHAPTER 5	37
CHAPTER 6	47
CHAPTER 7	53
CHAPTER 8	56
CHAPTER 9	65
CHAPTER 10	67
CHAPTER 11	74
CHAPTER 12	76
CHAPTER 13	82
CHAPTER 14	86
CHAPTER 15	93
CHAPTER 16	96
CHAPTER 17	109
CHAPTER 18	115
CHAPTER 19	124
After Word	126

CHAPTER 1

The beautiful young woman stared at what appeared to be a blank wall in her apartments of the Castle. Dressed in a formfitting gown with a tiara she wore only one jewel. An observer would need to closely examine the piece on a gold chain that lay in the cleavage of her chest before it became clear it was the royal seal of the great island kingdom of Branart.

Her appearance had not changed in the last year despite the horrors she had experienced. Long flowing golden red hair, huge green eyes, small upturned nose and pert red lips combined to make her appearance arresting, often stopping onlookers in their tracks. Tall with a generous bust tiny waist and extremely long legs, her figure made its statement by itself. Her long regal neck was perfect for her demeanor but was the only strange counterpoint to her incredible beauty. She bore the distinct marks of a course rope, scars indelibly imprinted on the soft tissues of her neck, left as memories of the torture and near death she had experienced.

Alana Cordant, Princess and Queen to be of the kingdom of Branart, just continued to stare at the wall. The nightmare refused to end. Her mind reeled from what had gone on the last nine months. Did she ever lead that sheltered pampered life? Princess and heir apparent to the great Kingdom of Branart. That had all changed in a matter of hours. Yes it was her stubbornness in insisting her uncle take her on his ambassadorial mission to Venderale. Once there, simply not being content with the life at the Satrap's castle. No, she had to disguise herself as one of her ladies-in-waiting and go to the fair in the town.

She barely remembered the end of the evening. Just that she had gotten extremely tired and had to take a nap. Gilbert said she had been drugged. Then she got tossed onto a costal pink and literally shanghaied to a distant point a day's sail away.

Waking up in the hold, her head swimming. Her mouth feeling like cotton. Finding the nearby Inn and ordering breakfast. Oh she did remember the Poet. She had never learned his name. Then came the part of paying for the bill for their food and realizing she had been robbed. Not a penny left. During the rising voices and confusion the Poet had cut a purse and she had been grabbed. She clearly recalled the dissolute face of the dark clothed man who grabbed her. She also clearly recalled almost braining him with a pitcher of honey water.

The next was a blue. The Poet dragging her out and onto a horse. Than nothing until she found herself kneeling next to him, her hands manacled behind her and hearing the words sentencing them both to hang for theft and attempted murder!

Her pleading with the Bailiff and trying to explain. His total disinterest in her story. His only aim to hang both of them as quickly as possible to earn his fee.

Standing on the gallows and watching the Poets clothes sold then witnessing his hanging naked on the gallows. She clearly remembered his agonies as he struggled fruitlessly. His massive erection and ejaculation when he died.

Then it was her turn. Her utter humiliation at having her clothing auctioned piece by piece until she stood there, completely naked except for her black stockings and neck tape. Having the Bailiff try to get her price of six crowns with no interest. Asking her to make her plea for life, salvation. Her desire to do, to be the basest of slaves, of drudges to avoid the horrible death that she had seen the Poet suffer just moments before. Yet her stubborn refusal. Him tying the noose tightly around her neck and about to tip over the stool when the whoremaster happened by. Yes that evil man in blue who looked her over like a prize animal. His hand reaching down to fondle her privates and her driving her knee into his groin.

He had tipped the Bailiff to make sure her death was exquisitely slow. He had retied the noose around her neck and brought her up on her toes...and then she hanged. She hanged for an eternity, her lungs exploding, her head bursting her body dancing in the agonies of the noose. Then the explosions of light and the massive orgasm followed by the echoes of excruciating pain and blackness.

Then finding herself alive but in terrible pain. Gilbert and Beaufort his great warhorse paying her fee and saving her after she had been kicking and hanging for over 30 minutes. Her finding herself naked with her wrists still pinioned behind her and no smithy to loosen them.

The next three days was filled with more pain and humiliation. The horrors of the multiple executions at each crossroads. The invading hoards of Norsemen and Celts. Finding Krystyana the only survivor of her murdered family. Fighting the Norsemen and then the Celts. Finding herself at the end of a noose again, but rescued by the girl she had saved.

Finally making it to safety and finding out that Gilbert was in actuality Duke Gilbert. Also discovering that no one believed her story of being a foreign princess, except for the warhorse Beaufort. He and Gilbert's huge dog, Wyvern became almost her only friends.

Finally convincing Gilbert to check on her story and him installing her as his 'mistress' for her protection. Wearing the approved Pleasure Girl attire which left both her breasts and pubic area exposed. The colored corsets, hose and high heels proclaiming her whore status to the world. Then wearing the gold manacles on her wrists and choker around her neck. Being spared the final indignity of having her nipples and clit pierced but having to wear the gold rings instead.

Learning Beaufort and Wyvern could communicate and teaching Wyvern to use a spelling board with the help of her darling Illicia. Finding herself at the mercy of Gilbert's former mistress Beth and suffered the painful whipping by her lackeys. Then having her

lie on her stomach with her ankles pulled back to the rope around her neck and leaving her to slowly strangle to death. Her long struggle to get free and finally loose.

Beth had run away when she realized her plot to kill Alana had failed. But someone in the Castle had drugged both she and Illicia and had them taken to the mines of Liticar where they were added to the girls stocked there for the miners' pleasures and ultimately for their cannibal delights.

Gilberts rescue of her and the war that started with the Duke deMornay. Finally having the truth revealed that she was the Princess of Branart, but to no avail with war on all sides.

Gilbert vesting her with the responsibility for the hospitals and camps for the women and children. Using Marissa and her cousins Giana and Valterra to administer one of the main camps had proved to be all their downfalls. While Gilbert was engaged in the west a raiding party of Norsemen had attacked the camp and when Alana had been notified, only she and her personal bodyguard could ride to its rescue.

They found a massacre, women and children killed in a wanton and perverse matter that left all of them sickened. One man, the leader of the attackers, awaited them. He had taken the three nobles prisoner and it was immediately obvious that the trap had been set for Alana. Despite the incredible stand she and her men put up they were overwhelmed. At the last minute she had sent her wonderful mount, Starfire, Beaufort's daughter off for help.

Alana Marissa Valterra and Giana had found themselves prisoners of the Duke and Duchess Roxanne. The Duke's plan was simple. He had determined Alana's story was true and would hold her ransom until her father paid him his requested huge ransom.

The Duchess had only one agenda. Surrounded by a dozen of her female love slaves she had perverse sexual obsessions that she indulged at every chance. She had heard of Alana's survival of her long hanging, and the fact that during her time on the rope she had fairly gushed love fluids. Since the Duchess used the female lubricants and ejaculates in her potions she tested Alana with a long torturous hanging and was amply rewarded.

In like manner she also tested the other girls. Valterra, slim, blond and lovely succumbed to the nooses embrace and died in her first test. Marissa and Giana were of sterner stuff and survived multiple tests. The Duchess was frustrated in using Alana for further "sessions" since the Duke did not want his crown jewel further damaged. Eventually Gilbert sent word that the ransom would be expanded if his cousins were also released so the girls were placed in their locked apartment to await their fate.

That had come suddenly with the appearance of the entire army of Branart led by Alana's father, uncle and Duke Gilbert surrounding the castle. The Duke realized that he had been outmaneuvered had used his final gambit, Stripping and binding the three

girls he had them set upon the ramparts noosed letting the army below know that they would be hanged with the first assault.

Alana had noted that the hawsers noosing them had not been tied off so urging her companions she had jumped off the wall to what appeared to be certain death. The hawser simply trailed after her and she landed in the moat. Marissa followed but Giana hesitated. Her hawser was wedged at the last second in a crack and she had died, her neck snapping like a twig on the castle's eastern wall.

With Alana safe her father made plans for the next day's taking of the castle. During that night the Duke and Duchess melted away and the castle surrendered in the morning.

From then on Alana and Marissa spent their time in the rear at Gilbert's castle following the campaign against Duke deMornay by messenger. Three days before, Alana had received word of a total victory, with the Duke's forces demolished and his death. The celebration and joy had been beyond measure. Then yesterday came the news that on the triumphant road home a landslide had killed her father, uncle and over a dozen senior advisors.

Now she was ruler of Branart. She had to return to her country and take up the mantle of Queen. Her second cousin Michael was acting as Regent. Her younger sister, Alisande was just twelve. She would be next in line but could not ascend unless Alana was dead. Even then she would have to wait for her fourteenth birthday. But Alana was simply heartbroken. Her heart ached for the loss of her father. He was all she had, her mother dying nine years before. Now he was gone and except for her sister, she was totally alone.

Yes, her closest companions, Illicia, Marissa, the girl Mira, and Krystyana, now her ward, would accompany her back to Branart but she was truly alone. All this time she had held the one comfort of returning to her father as the great hope in this horror of an existence and it had been snuffed out in an instant. So she sat staring at the wall while the remainder of her father's advisors, generals and captains decided what would be the fastest and safest way of returning her to her realm.

Just a short time before Gilbert had come to see her, and had professed his love for her. A love that had bloomed, he explained, the first moment he laid eyes on her dangling from that gallows almost a year before. He had taken her into his household as his private Pleasure Girl cum Mistress for her protection, but had never touched her. The moirés of the realm predicted that slaves would go almost completely nude, with no covering for their breasts or loins. She had spent the better part of the year on display for all to see and he could have taken her any time. But he had respected her and had given her his great warhorse Beaufort and huge dog, Wyvern as personal protection.

She was confused by the emotions inside of her. She respected and was grateful beyond words to Gilbert. He had saved her life a number of times and had proved his merit as a noble and a man. But did she love him? She had promised to use the sea

voyage back to Branart to sort out her 1000's of emotions and thoughts. Since speed was of the essence, the royal party left the next morning. Gilbert sent both Starfire and Wyvern to see them safely to the docks.

Over a score of Branart galleys lay at anchor, but it had been decided to make the voyage in the fastest of the group. It had only about 20 rowing positions per side, but it could sail quickly and it had room for the dozen passengers required. There was some concern since the ship was lightly armed and quite small. An argument had been made to make the voyage in the Royal Galley with a couple of escorts. Each could take up to 300 rowers in three decks, but this would have meant at least a 14 day delay, and Alana had agreed that the quicker she could return to Branart the better.

She said her goodbyes to Starfire and Wyvern tearfully.

As her personal retinue she was taking Marissa, Illicia, Krystyana and Mira. The small fast galley would not take more than they and her father's senior advisors. The voyage was an easy one compared to her first trip. The wind was true and the sea calm.

They would reach Branart by the end of the week. Alana took to spending her time on the quarterdeck gazing out to sea. Here she was barely 17, and she would be Queen. A queen who had survived execution, torture, humiliation, and sexual servitude. She was leaving a man who said he loved her for an uncertain reception by her own people.

The Regent her father had appointed to oversee the governing of the country while he lead the expedition to free Alana was trustworthy. She knew Michael was a good man. But the best of men had been tempted beyond their means by absolute power. So here she was on the fastest ship in the fleet racing for her destiny.

The next morning she was awakened by a drumbeat. The men on board were racing to their positions. She threw a wrap over her peignoir and came on the quarterdeck, The Captain was looking first to port and then starboard. "There's two of them. Lateen sales with far too many men and rowers. There is an outside chance that they could be on another mission but they have too many men on board for that. Must be Pirates!"

Alana could clearly see the two other vessels, galleys almost twice their size closing on them fast. They did have lateen sales and seemed crammed with men. Then an object hidden by a sail came into view. A huge trebuchet! These ships were out for blood.

"Your Highness, they have both the advantage in ships, weapons and men. They're faster than we are. They have us by the hip. I and my crew are pledged to defend you to the death. Please stay below. We will do our best to repel their boarders!"

Alana rushed below. Illicia had a gown ready for her, but she chose a tunic, leggings and short boots. She drew the sword Gilbert gave her, a belt knife and strapped a throwing knife to her right thigh. Her ladies took their cue from her. They had been training in self defense over the past few weeks so each donned similar clothes and weapons. Then came a thundering crash that was deafening. The entire vessel was

shaken by the impact as the galley was struck by the ships from both sides. There was tremendous cracking noise and then an impact on deck. "Mainsails down" she heard a voice call.

"Prepare to repel boarders!" came the Captain's voice.

Unable to restrain herself any further Alana raced up to the quarter deck followed by her ladies. It was total chaos. Bare chested men with scarves around their heads were swinging over from the galleys on either side. Her crew was badly outnumbered. Six or more of the Pirates took notice of the ladies on the quarter deck and began to climb the stairs. They were impeded by a young officer, no more than a boy, who sliced one and thrust at another. A pair of the Pirates literally cut him in two.

One large black man carrying a saber came right at Alana grinning viciously. He clumsily tried to knock her sword aside and grab her. She trust her sword deep in his belly and twisted. He doubled over and she kicked him aside. Two more came at her. She blocked their crude sword work and finished off one with a slice to the neck. Illicia got the second with a pike thrust. Then more came their way.

In the space of less than five minutes Alana had killed four more of the pirates, but she had taken minor wounds in her shoulder and left thigh. Still she and her ladies fought on. One pirate tried to climb up the rail behind them but Mira drove her sword into his eye. Alana had just dispatched another evil looking hunchback when a huge voice roared "Enough! They've struck their colors!!"

Sure enough the galley no longer flew the flag of Branart. As the insanity calmed down Alana realized that virtually the entire crew of the galley were dead. She and her ladies were the last she could see standing literally surrounded by the two pirate crews. A large black bearded man with a tricorn hat and carrying a bejeweled sword approached them.

"Yield or die!"

"There was no chance", Alana reasoned. "None at all." She threw down her sword in disgust. The bearded man looked over the chaos on the quarter deck. Over two dozen of his men lay dead or dying by the hands of these young women.

"You're a dangerous group aren't you? Yes you are!"

"I am Alana Princess of Branart and these are my ladies in waiting! You have attacked a diplomatic mission. I demand we be given diplomatic immunity!"

"Diplomatic immunity? Of course your highness! Ratface! Please see that these royal personages are stripped naked, placed in irons, and put in the cage across from the 12 trading bitches. Except for that one!" He pointed at Alana. "She's truly dangerous. See

that she has a collar with her wrists are pinioned behind her and that she wears attached leg manacles with a short chain!"

"Aye aye sir! With great pleasure sir!!" the little rat faced man bowed. And then a dozen men grabbed Alana and the rest and dragged them off.

The next hour was as painful as it was humiliating. Alana was the first to be debased. Once on board the lead pirate galley a knife was held to her throat as the little rat faced man stripped off all her clothes. He marveled at the rope burn scars on her throat. Then an iron collar was hammered around her neck. Then her wrists were crossed behind her and an unyielding pair of manacles fixed them there. Leg chains were fitted on her ankles with no more than an 18 inch chain between them. Then the collar was attached to the manacles by a short chain which forced her wrists up to waist height and another short chain down to the ankle restraints so she was hobbled in all her movements.

Alana then was forced to watch Marissa, Illicia, Krystyana, and Mira likewise stripped. Then manacles were placed on their wrists in front of them so they had some capacity, and no leg manacles were used. This accomplished they were taken below and placed in a cage across from 12 frightened naked girls in another enclosure. Once the doors were locked up the Pirates went back to looting the captured galley.

"Did you see if any of the crew or advisors made it through alive?" Alana asked. All the girls shook their heads.

"Then we are alone! You ladies!" she addressed the girls next to them. "Do you speak our language?"

"I do" responded a blond haired girl. "My name is Rena."

"How did you get here?"

"We came off of three vessels the Pirates took. They killed the crews looted them and took us prisoner."

"Are you being ransomed?"

"I don't think so. None of us is of high birth or from a rich family."

"How long have you been on board?"

"About a month, for the longest of us."

Rena proceeded to tell how the pirates had taken each of the ships they were on. Each had been looted and sunk with the girls the only survivors. About that time two crew members came into the hold and unlocked the door holding Alana and her ladies.

"You! The deadly one with the odd hair. The Captain wants to see you now!"

Alana did not have a chance to reply as two of them grabbed her by the arms and literally carried her out of the cell and up the stairs to the small Captain's cabin. She was dragged in with the Captain and his First Mate awaiting her. The Captain was seated behind his desk.

"Well now. If I'm to believe your word, You're the Princess and Queen to be of Branart. That would mean you would be worth a pretty penny for ransom."

Alana just stared at him coldly.

"I'll wager that if it's true you've made all our fortunes girl. But how to do this? Just right? Bring him in!"

A bleeding disheveled man was dragged into the cabin. It was her chief advisor Laurence!

"Lord Laurence! Alana cried "Are you alright?"

"I believe so highness. No serious wounds... But all the others are dead."

"This man claims to be one of your chief advisors. Is he telling the truth?"

"Yes. Yes, he is my chief advisor."

"And your people in Branart will know him?"

"Yes. He's a trusted Minister."

"Good then. He will be taken by my second ship, the Snark, and deliver my ransom demand. Take him out!"

And with that the poor man was dragged away.

"Since you are a valuable piece of merchandise let me explain the rules. I am Captain Martine and you are under my rule now. My whim is your command. Don't think that just because you're valuable you can disregard any of my or my people's rules. You can still be lashed and whipped. And if I deem your response to be insubordinate, I'll have one of your ladies pay the ultimate price. We do enjoy keelhauling a naked slut. Or having them walk the plank with a ten pound ball attached to an ankle. Our favorite though is slowly hanging them by the yardarm. We like to see the little naked tarts dance!"

He and the First Mate found that immensely funny.

"You and your ladies have experience with hanging from the scars you bare on your necks...so mark my words. Now take her back!"

CHAPTER 2

Alisande was fearful and anxious all the time now. At only twelve years old she should have been at the awkward lanky part of near adolescence. But she had matured quickly with the “death” of her sister. Everyone had said she would be Alana’s twin when she matured. She had the same golden red hair, green eyes, pert nose and small mouth. She had shot up in the last year so that she was nearly as tall. But only in the last couple of months had her figure started to fill out and she began to get the womanly curves that made her almost the spitting image of her sister.

He had almost resolved herself to Alana’s, disappearance in that far off land of Venderale. Her father had been almost inconsolable. Then, a year later came the word that Alana was alive but being held ransom in an even more remote corner of the world. Both her father and her only uncle had led the army to rescue her, leaving Alisande alone and bereft with only her ladies-in-waiting and her cousin Michael as Regent.

She had barely been eleven when Alana had wheedled the trip along with their Uncle from their father. She was so envious she was almost green. She had sulked for weeks. Then came the word of her sister’s disappearance. The loss was heart wrenching. She had desperately wanted to accompany her father but he had firmly said no. As the sole heir to the throne her responsibility was to stay safe. So off he had gone. With her mother dead and her only close relatives all overseas she was adrift in her misery.

Once back in the cage with her ladies Alana discussed the situation with them. It seemed like they were to be captive for a minimum of two weeks, if the second galley made good time and the ransom paid in full. And, of course, if the Pirates kept their word.

The conditions were terrible. The only saving grace being they were in a tropical climate so their nudity and lack of any blankets did not do them any harm. Each of the girls took their turn, though Illicia hotly contested it, taking care of Alana. She felt that this was her responsibility alone. However, Marissa convinced her that on the short rations they were being given and with all of them hampered by manacles each of them would be better caring for Alana's needs in turn, since with her wrists bound behind her she was virtually helpless.

A continuous dialog was kept up with the girls in the other cage. All were either daughters or wives of seamen or masters of the ships taken by the Pirates. They were given no explanation for their captivity, other than every other day or so two or three would be taken to the crew’s quarters and used for sport. Rena seemed to be the Captain's favorite so she was called to be used in his cabin alone.

Alana and her ladies were left to their own devices. She prayerfully hoped that the possibility of ransom would keep them from being "used" as the others were. A day later land was sighted and the ship was abuzz. Martine came below and picked out six girls from the cage across. Rena was not one of them.

As he turned to leave he peered at Alana. "You there" pointing at Illicia. "Get her ready for a short trip. Do up her hair and use some of this." He slid what turned out to be a ladies traveling case to the cage. It contained all manner of makeup and accoutrements. "Tart her up. She'll be coming with me. And have her wear this." A short length of colorful cloth was thrown into the cage. "It is what the native call a sarong."

For the next fifteen minutes all the girls helped arrange Alana's hair, applied a little makeup, and added some coloring around her eyes, the same procedure if she were to hold court. Rena showed them how the sarong was worn, tied on the hip barely covering the privates. Then a group of men came down for her and the other six girls. They were helped over the side into the long boat where Martine and his men were waiting.

"The chief here will be impressed by the color of your hair, and if he knows there are more like you available I should get a good price."

Alana looked at him with disgust. "Are these poor girls to be sold into slavery?"

"No...not slavery, but they are being sold."

There was no way Alana could reach the long boat manacled and chained as she was so Martine gave it some thought.

"Take those of her. I'll have your good conduct or you girls' lives are forfeit".

Alana just nodded.

With the chains and manacles off she was free for the first time in weeks. The short row to the beach was uneventful except for the captive girls' wailing. The chief and his warriors met them on the beach. The deliberations were long and led into the afternoon. Native refreshments were served, but Alana could not pick up the gist of the negotiations until the chief started to point at her.

"You should be flattered. He wants you badly. He's offered me quite a sum...quite a sum."

The Chief came over directly in front of Alana and looked her over from her hair down to her toes. Then with a slip of a crude knife he slicked off her sarong leaving her completely nude. There was much excitement among the natives and the Chief howled

in delight when it became clear that Alana had no body hair. Her nipples were dark and erect and her sex and clitoris were visibly engorged.

She sighed inwardly. It always went this way.

The Chief made another offer. He clearly wanted Alana. Martine turned down the offer and for a while things got testy. Finally an agreement was reached and shook on. The girls were handed over in their shackles and large bales of a dark substance was transferred to the longboats.

"These bastards may be totally despicable but they have the best copra in the world!" Martine chuckled.

As he started to take Alana back to the longboat the chief began talking again. Another negotiation ensued and Martine nodded his head. "It seems we've been invited to dinner and it would be impolitic to say no."

The girls had been taken down a path and the chief now lead them in the same direction which as it turned out was to the village. In the center of the village a roaring fire was being started. One young brown haired girl with large breasts whose name was Cara was tied to a post. Martine sat next to the chief and despite her fetters Alana sat next to him. She watched puzzled as the native women carefully shaved Cara removing all her hair except that on her head. Even this was cut to a short bob.

Cara was sobbing hysterically when they led her to a low table. Her wrists were already tied behind her and as she knelt on the table face down, rear in the air; her ankles were crossed and tied. Cara looked around crying desperately seeking any assistance. All she could see were the natives' eager faces.

"What are they going to do to her?" Alana asked.

"Watch and see" Martine grinned.

Two women brought out a sharpened stake about 10 feet long and about three inches in diameter out of one of the huts. As three women held Cara in place the sharpened end was lubricated with some sort of fat and inserted into her rectum. As the three women held her screaming in agony the other two slowly pushed the stake deeper and deeper into her bowels.

Alana couldn't watch and turned her head, but the Pirate laughed. Cara's screams continued as they pushed the stake deeper and deeper into her and then stopped suddenly. Alana looked up to see that the shaft was a good three feet into the tortured girl's body. Then she watched in horror and utter amazement as the bloody spear tip exited her mouth. She had been totally impaled!

One of the males now came over and split the poor girl's belly open and proceeded to remove all her internal organs which were wrapped up and discarded. Her body cavity

was filled with various tubers and other items and roughly sewn up. The girl's body on the stake was now transferred to the roasting pit and the celebration began. Everyone drank and danced for the hours it took to roast the girl's body. It took until way past sunset when the carving began.

Martine dug into his portion with relish. Alana just looked away, sick and disgusted. One of the native girls offered to feed her but she declined. The chief looked disturbed but Martine whispered something in his ear and he finally nodded.

Martine smiled lecherously at her. "Seems the chief here owes the local juju man of these islands and was thinking of buying you for him."

Alana just waited.

"I won't trade, of course. So he'll offer one of the other two. But if he doesn't take one of them. Well, one of your fine ladies may just have to do. Maybe that young one. What's her name? Krystyana?"

Alana tried to keep a look of disgust on her face and trap the worry and fear inside her.

"He sent a runner for the juju man so he should be here directly."

Sure enough, in a minute or two there came a ruckus from the crowd and an older man wearing some kind of animal fur and hat made his way to the chief. Behind him strode one of the most striking women Alana had ever seen.

Tall, slender, with dark brown hair below her waist, the woman had a heart shaped face with large brown eyes. But her eyes seemed vacant. Like so many of the women, she was completely naked but she seemed to walk stiffly and made no eye contact. Just stared straight ahead.

The Chief made much of the juju man. Inviting him to sit and serving him food and drink himself. What Alana took as small talk went on for a while and then the Chief had his men bring out the captive girls.

Alana turned to Martine frankly puzzled. "His wife is lovelier than any of the captives. Is he interested in their white skin?"

"Not his wife" Martine grunted. "She's zumbie."

Alana's puzzled look made him laugh.

"He chose her as his bride almost ten years ago but she spurned him. He took her by force and gave her a potion then killed her slowly. Now she's the undead and serves him forever. Look! She doesn't breathe. Doesn't blink. The perfect slave, if you don't mind a bedmate that never moves."

Now Alana perceived the open glassy eyes and lack of movement in a new light.

“Undead?” she asked.

“Yes. Only way to do in a zombie is to cut their head off. Only problem is everyone’s terrified of the old man. Her name was Sunna. Minor chief’s daughter. But even her family, former lover, no one will put her out of her misery.”

In the meantime the juju man was inspecting each of the captives closely. Finally he nodded at one.

“He’ll try her out and see if she’s to his taste” Martine laughed.

“What about her?” Alana asked pointing to the girl still standing there.

“She’ll just wait by the hut until she’s called for.”

As the group moved by Alana looked deep into the girl’s eyes. Nothing. And just then, a small spark.

“Well we’re stuck here until breakfast. But we’ve got a hut of our own where we won’t be disturbed Chief’s orders.”

The drinking and carousing went on for half the night and when Martine finally dragged her into the hut he fell on a pile of bedding, dead to the world. Alana slept lightly, if at all. Free for the first time in weeks she tried to carefully examine her options. She could kill Martine, here and now. But could she escape his men in the village. And even if she could there were the natives and the repercussions on her ladies would be terrible. Finally, after long hours she slept fitfully.

She awoke before dawn, at first not knowing where she was or how she had gotten there. Fully awakening, she realized that Martine was still passed out from the drink and carefully looked outside. Martine’s men were all sound asleep. The only one awake, if you could call it that, was Sunna standing outside the juju man’s hut.

Alana’s heart went out to this beautiful woman, bound to an eternity frozen obedience. Silent, she crept out of the hut and made her way across the clearing and stood before the girl staring into her eyes. Was there a flicker there? She thought she saw of shudder, a movement of her lips?

“She in terrible pain” a voice said behind her. It was so close Alana almost jumped.

An old woman crouched in the shadows. “I am old sub chief’s wife. Sunna my daughter.”

“Why haven’t you done something?”

“Juju kill all family”, she explained.

“She can feel pain?”

“Pain. Sorrow. Agony of death every day”

Alana looked back into the girl’s eyes and saw the flicker again and then a small movement of her hand. “Does that mean anything?”

“She ask you what she ask me every time I see her. She ask you to kill her”

“Kill her?”

“Take her head so she can finally rest”

Alana looked back in the girl’s eyes. Everything was still in the village. So still that the early morning sounds echoed. Her heart went out to this girl, but how could she...? And then the silence was shattered by a cry and the old juju man erupted out of his hut, almost running into Alana as he did so. He pushed by her and made his way to the chief’s hut waking everyone as he did so. Alana hurried back to Martine’s hut and barely made it inside when he finally roused himself. Hung over and still drunk Martine staggered into the daylight as one of his men ran up.

“The girl died in the night. Old man is furious. Now the chief claims we cheated him.”

Martine sobered immediately. The chief was shouting and his warriors, most still drunk and besotted from the night before staggered around trying to arm themselves. Still there were a great many warriors and some blocked the path to the beach. Martine snarled and it was cutlasses against spears. The spears should have had the edge but the warriors wielding them were virtually incapacitated. Martine and his men slashed through them and were almost clear when reinforcements arrived.

The sheer numbers forced the group back into the village. The only positive part was that it had mostly emptied out with all the men heading for the beach. Now it was a pitched battle with Martine and his five men against four times their number. Alana found herself crouching next to the juju man’s hut and watching for an opportunity. Sunna just stood motionless as they had left her. Martine was shouting orders that they break through for the boat, when one of the mates caught a spear thrust in the eye and fell over dying. With that break, it looked like the warriors might finally overwhelm Martine’s men.

Alana, however, saw her chance. In the melee she ran out and grasped the cutlass. She cursed her fortune, but realized that if she didn’t defend herself and get to the boat she was dead so she fought alongside Martine. The calls to the beach by the fighting warriors spurred Martine and his men on since they were close to being cutoff.

Alana had taken small wounds to her hip and arm but she helped beat back the warriors and started to edge with the men part the huts towards the beach. The warriors pulled back to reform and she saw her chance. Whirling, she swung back to the front of her hut and faced Sunna. Once again she saw the flicker in the girl's eyes. Spinning she brought the cutlass hard across the girls neck and cleanly cut her head from her body.

"No blood." She thought as the head rolled off, but she thought she could make out a faint smile on the dead girl's lips.

A howling behind her caused her to turn and the juju man rushed toward she, a spear held high. He was faster than he looked and her dodge almost did not work, but the spear barely flashed by her left side. She brought up the cutlass and almost eviscerated him, gouging him a long but shallow cut across the belly.

Then she was swarmed over by a host of warriors and pinned. The next thing she knew she was bound hand and foot and thrown into one of the huts. She lay there helplessly, blood oozing from three or four wounds, for an hour or more.

Then the old woman came into the hut. "I am last in tribe talks our talk. Chief angry. He lose many warriors. Juju man very angry. You kill Sunna. Tonight you take her place."

Alana lay trussed up the rest of the day hearing the sounds of the village mourning and angry shouts around her. Then as evening fell the warriors came for her. They didn't bother untying her. Just lifted her up and carried her to the chief's hut when he waited with the now bandaged juju man. Alana was thrown at her knees before them. The juju man smiled wickedly. He held a gourd of some kind in his hand filled with malevolence.

Once again the old woman was dragged up and translated as the fat man spoke. "Juju man say he pick your death carefully. First he thought slow poison. Or maybe use roasting pole. But he see you have marks on neck. No. You know what it feel like so he choose that."

Alana was dragged to the fire kneeling with her ankles and wrists bound as the juju man circled her. He motioned with the gourd for her to drink. She shook her head no. Then someone from behind her wrapped a thong around her neck and began to strangle her. He was strong. It was every bit as bad as the hangings. Because the thong encircled her whole throats, maybe worse. Alana wanted to gasp. To open her mouth and try to drag air into her lungs passing the choking halter. But the sight of the capering fat man ready with his potion caused her to clamp her mouth shut. Let them choke me until I'm dead, she thought. Then his potion won't work.

The seconds and then minutes ticked by and the juju man became incensed. He shouted at whoever strangled her and the pressure intensified. Her head felt like it would burst and the pressure on her throat was unrelenting agony. The juju man tried to push the cup past her lips but without success.

Her head pounded, her lungs screamed and the pain was indescribable. But still she held on. The huge juju man grinned evilly as he pushed the fluid against her locked lips.

Alana tried to turn away but her eyes involuntarily widened as she saw a half dozen figures with crossbows appear in the shadows.

Three bolts hit the juju man and he cried as he spun, dropping the flask. Two of the other three hit the guards holding her. Marine and a dozen of his men rushed in and grabbed her. In the confusion they made their way back to the boats and finally to the ship.

"A perfectly good trading partner ruined for life. You'd better be worth that huge ransom or I'll roast you myself" Martine snarled

Once alone with her ladies Alana became violently ill. It took some time before she could tell the whole story but most of the girls across and her ladies also became ill. The girls in the other cage now knew exactly why they were being kept and it terrified them! Two days later at sea, Rena tried to exact her revenge. Martine had made her his mistress so she had some freedom in his cabin. She stole a knife from the plate in his room and in the middle of the night tried to kill him. She truly had little idea on where to strike and ended up in only catching him in the side and bouncing off his ribs. When the wound had been cleaned and wrapped she was bound before him. He looked down at her in pity.

"I was thinking of keeping you for good, you know. Becoming permanently the Captain's lady and all that. Now I'll have to make an example of you. Mr. Johns let's give her two dozen lashes at 8 bells and rig up the keelhauling lines!"

Rena was taken away crying hysterically and bound to the capstan where she would be whipped.

At eight bells all the men were mustered and the captive girls as well as Alana's ladies were escorted to the front row. Rena had been tied with her wrists spread on a grate. Her legs were likewise spread, face against the grate.

The first mate had an evil looking short whip and Martine nodded. He brought it down across Rena's shoulders. She screamed. He said "one" mater of factly. Every few seconds the lash cut into Rena's naked flesh. It lacerated her back and shoulders then her hips and buttocks finally her thighs. The whistling crack of it landing across her bleeding buttocks ended with the First Mate saying "24".

Rena was barely conscious when two tubs of sea water were thrown on her lacerations adding the misery of its salt to the wounds. "There, that brought her back to consciousness" grinned Martine. "Now let's tie her up for keelhauling.

Rena could not move under her own power so two men carried her to the back of the quarter deck. One rope was tied to her wrists, the other to her ankles. Martine turned to Alana. "The front rope pulls her under the full length of the ship. The rear rope helps her

from being pulled to port or starboard. Trick is if she can make it the full way without drowning or being torn to shreds by the shells and such on the hull..."

The two men then took Rena and unceremoniously dropped her over the side. They then took the rear rope and held it. A dozen men up front pulled on the front rope and Alana pictured the poor girl being slowly pulled the length of the ship underwater. No one was in any hurry and Alana was sure the lackadaisical pace was to ensure the maximum torture or death of the victim.

Neither she or Marissa noticed that both were holding their breath as Rena went under. Marissa felt the seconds moving by as if time had virtually stopped. She felt her lungs burning and her face turned a bursting red trying to emulate the lungs of the victim under the water. Finally her breath exploded and she realized that she would have drowned if in Rena's place.

She turned to Alana whose eyes were closed and her face peaceful and composed. She still held her breath, seemingly without difficulty. Marissa could see a few changes, knowing her mistress intimately. Alana's nipples had turned dark and fully erect. A light sheen appeared on her breasts and a look of concentration replaced her calm demeanor. Her hands were tightly balled behind her and a careful examination would have revealed her pudendum was engorged; her clitoris fully erect and her vaginal fluids began to course.

It seemed like hours later the front group pulled the tortured girl out of the water. Her head lolled on her chest and water spewed out her mouth.

"She's dead alright, Captain. As nicely drowned as you could ask!"

"Fine" said Martine. "Now let this serve as warning to the rest of you sluts." With that he reached over and cut the rope holding the Rena's wrists and her body plunged beneath the waves.

Alana's eyes opened and she released her breath. She cried along with the rest of the girls. Rena had died needlessly and cruelly and none of them could do a thing about it. Martine brought her before him and grinned at her lasciviously. "That's what awaits the bitch that doesn't know her place!"

Alana knew it was futile but she lunged at him. Marissa cut in front of her and brought her knee up sharply and caught him in the groin. He doubled over and she spit in his face. The men growled and Alana felt herself pulled backwards with a knife on her throat. Marissa elbowed the man who tried to grab her and kicked the next one but she was quickly overpowered. She was tightly bound and brought before the Captain with a knife at her throat also.

Martine was getting his wind back. "No" he called. "She may be worth more alive than with a cut throat. We have a way of making ladies pay for their indiscretions, and it looks like you've experienced it before."

Marissa was taken to the capstan, about four foot tall ten inches in diameter. Its primary purpose was the main anchor for the compass. The top was just a slightly rounded dished surface. .

"Noose her" Martine cried. A one inch hawser was made into a crude noose and strung around Marissa's throat with the knot at the back.

"Pull her up!" She was bodily lifted into the air by the neck until she reached the top of the capstan.

"Pull her up on her toes!" Marissa ended up at the top of the capstan on the very tips of her toes.

"There you are my lovely. You'll be up there the full watch. On your toes slipping and sliding with every roll and pitch! Strangling, hanging. Oh don't worry. You may survive...barely. Seems a squall's coming up. It's difficult to stay on top of that capstan as the ship pitches back and forth. With it all slippery and such you'll get a good hanging for that knee you just gave me, believe me!"

Marissa did her best over the next hours to maintain her balance. The top of the capstan was slightly bowed so it made balancing on her toes difficult. With the sway of the ship she had to anticipate that roll or swing off stretching her neck. The knot they had used for the noose did not tighten, thank goodness, but it took her a few seconds to regain her perilous footing. But when the squall hit she was swung off the capstan dozens of times, swinging by the neck manacled and helpless until she could regain her precarious footing.

For a while there was no way she could hold herself steady and the pressure of the noose was building to the point she was sure she was dying when hands would grab her and set her firmly on the capstan. As her vision cleared she saw Illicia and Mira and even Kristina taking turns, trying to keep her centered. Alana with her wrists pinioned behind her was helpless to assist.

Marissa twisted and swung getting her purchase for a few seconds and then losing it spending most of it hanging at the very tips of her toes before, finally, she was released. Exhausted she fell at Martine's feet.

"Next time will be two full watches...and we'll have another one of your little ladies sharing it with you...less room for balance." he laughed.

Alana responded angrily..."Aren't you risking you ransom every time one of my ladies swing on that rope? The letter I wrote to my cousin Michael said that all of us would be freed unharmed!"

"No risk. Not with my master ready to cut her down at a second's notice!" he grinned and nodded at the man in the rigging ready to have cut the rope if Marissa had truly been in danger of death.

"Now that was a delightful little dance. Bring up the long haired Spanish beauty!"

One of the girls left in the other pen was brought up terrified and crying.

"Never liked your oral skills girl. String her up and let's see how long she lasts!"

The Spanish girl was lovely with long dark hair that ended mid thigh. She was hauled to the top on the capstan on her toes and she struggled to maintain her balance. Alana and her ladies were not permitted to assist her and without any help she didn't last the hour. She slipped off time and again. Finally she just swung there in the rain dangling naked and dead in her manacles.

"Don't cut her down until the end of the watch so the men have some eye candy to enjoy", Martine roared as he entered his warm cabin.

The ladies helped Alana below and gave her what hot food and coverings they could find.

CHAPTER 3

The next few days the ship seemed to be holding position. Sure enough, late one morning the top man, despite fierce and intermittent rain squalls that hid vast amounts of the sea, called out sight of the awaited galley. The two met and the First Mate rowed over. He and Martine spent hours together. Finally Martine had Alana brought to his cabin. She felt particularly vulnerable manacled and chained as she was.

"Your cousin Michael is a generous man."

"He's a good man and I expected he would do what is right."

"Right is right! He has given me assurance of the monies we asked for. I get my Letter of Marque legalizing my occupation, a nice estate on one of the outer islands, and even a Lordship!"

Alana looked at him frankly puzzled. "That was the price you asked for our ransom?"

"No. Actually that is the recompense your Cousin Michael has offered for your death! Seems he's rather taken with the job as Regent and would prefer to keep it permanently as King."

Alana had feared this and her heart sank.

"Seems I can do away with you ladies anyway I choose. The men have been chafing to dip their wicks. We can dispose of them as we may. But you my pretty. We need to bring your head back to confirm you are really dead. From your previous marks I can see you've enjoyed your time on the rope so my first thought is slow hanging from the yardarm, after my enjoyment, of course!"

"Look, whatever he's promised I can certainly meet and exceed!"

"Ah yes...all I would have to do is set you free and find a way to help you take back your kingdom, I'm sure."

"No. I have an ally in Duke Gilbert and I'm sure the people would rally to me if they knew I was alive and that Michael is a usurper!"

"Sorry Princess", smiled Martine holding up the sealed documents, "but this bird in the hand is worth far more than you can possibly match, especially when I get the bush" he leered at her.

Alana heard Mira and Krystyana's screams. "What are you doing with them?"

"We'll start the crew off with them but like I said I'm keeping you for myself."

"Captain!" called the first mate, "Sail two points to starboard. Coming out of the squall. Big ship from the looks of her!"

(Author's note: At this time it would be appropriate to note that in the film version one can make out the stirring and forceful theme of that great 1941 Errol Flynn opus "The Sea Hawk" in the background.)

"Take these sluts back below and have this one locked down for my pleasure. Get the men ready for action!"

The two crewmen dragged Alana back down to her cell, but instead of throwing her in with the girls they undid her ankle chains and threw her on her back, now chaining one ankle to each side of the cell so she was spread eagle.

"Oh my lady" cried Illicia, "Is it true? Has your cousin forsaken us?" as she assisted Alana to a sitting position, even with her ankles spread by the manacles.

"Forsaken isn't the word", she replied grimly, "Given us up to these foul beasts for lust and murder, to take the throne!" At that moment Krystyana and Mira were thrown back into the cell, both attempting to stifle their tears.

Alana craned her head to look at them. "Did they molest you?"

"No your highness, but that was their intent!"

They heard the men on the ships calling out commands. It seemed as if the two ships were parting company and intended to catch the ship coming toward them unawares from both sides.

"If there was some way we could warn them" Alana muttered.

They could see nothing from down in their cell but they could hear Martine's commands.

"That's right come up on both sides as close as we can get. Coo she's a big one! Square sails. No oars at all? Have you ever seen a flag like that before Mr. Wart?"

"No sir! But I don't make out any oars either."

"Just sails eh?" Martine looked troubled. "Alright get the boarding parties hidden."

"Coming up on her Captain."

Alana heard a faint "Ahoy there, what vessel is that?"

"The Ripshark out of Binson. Who are you?"

"Binson? Never heard of no Binson!"

"We're in range sir", called Wart.

"Grapples away, now let's board them!"

Alana heard the cries of the boarding parties as the grapples went out. Then suddenly the air was shattered by incredibly large loud explosions as if the entire sky had lit up with a hundred thunderstorms, and those cries turned to screams of pain.

"What in the name of Hell is that Mr. Wart?"

"Can't say, Captain. They're round tubes that spit fire and iron. Seemed to be fired out of those large sticks the men in red have. And they're cutting the grapples as fast as we can fling them."

"What manner of ship is this? Come one you dogs! Let's board her!"

There was another thundering volley and more screams. Wart called, "Once more you whore mongers!"

Then from the larboard side, came another thundering report as if the gates of hell itself had opened. The galley shook from impact after impact and a thunderous explosion racked the cell area. A hole four foot wide had appeared in the side of the ship on the opposite side, taking out the entire cell with the poor unfortunate captives while blowing the door off Alana's cell and exiting the other side.

Alana was pinned down and deafened by the roar. By the time she was able to hear she could see that all her ladies were alive and relatively well, though some were bleeding from small wounds.

"Your highness" called Marissa coming to her, "are you hurt?"

"I don't think so. What do you see?" Alana craned her head as Illicia picked her up as far as the chains would allow.

"Sorry your Highness but I don't see anything. Well at least the cell door is gone, blasted away!"

"And from the list in the ship" noted Alana, "we're sinking! Listen, all of you. Get away now. Get up on deck and away from these pirates. Whoever is on that other ship has to be better than these bastards!"

"We can't leave you your highness. You're sure to drown" cried Krystyana.

"Listen! You must obey me! Leave me. You can't save me so save yourselves!!"

"Quick!" Illicia called, "find the keys or a tool. We must free Alana."

The Ripshark jerked and listed further.

"Leave me and save yourselves!!" Alana commanded. Water was entering the holes in the side and Alana could see in minutes the entire deck would be flooded. The girls searched and Mira and Marissa climbed up to the next level. They found a large iron bar blasted from the other cage.

"Here" Illicia instructed. "Let's wedge it here between the ankle chain and the bar. Good! Now everyone pull!"

Illicia, Marissa and Krystyana put their weight behind the bar while Mira helped Alana sit up and keep her head above the waters rushing in. put her lap under Alana as the water threatened to splash over her. Nothing happened. "Again" Illicia called. By this time they were working with almost a foot two feet of water in the area and the ship was threatening to capsize.

With this effort the one chain snapped. Now at least Alana could stand upright. By the time they got her up the water was up to their knees. Then they heard a male voice from the stairs call, "Lieutenant Pullings?"

"What is it Bonden?"

"Captives chained below sir. I'll need at least six men and a crowbar, and we'd best call for the Captain!"

Before the girls could get another effort in strangely dressed sailors poured into the compartment and under command of "Pullings" muscled each of them out despite their pleas to save Alana. The girls had just gotten out when the Ripshark began its final death plunge.

Alana was on the tips of her toes to try to stay above water, still pinioned by the chain on her ankle, and then with a final breath, she was underwater.

"So this is how it ends", she thought "Drowning in a sinking Pirate ship."

She opened her eyes and was surprised to see a man dressed in white with long blond hair streaming after him tied in a bow, carrying a crowbar, swimming toward her. Their eyes met and he smiled and winked. She watched as he dove down to the chain, slipped the crowbar between it and the bar and in one pull broke her loose! Then he came up and put his arm around her and pulled her out the hole in the side. In a few seconds she was gasping on the surface.

"There, there" the man coaxed, "Just let me get a line here. Ahoy Bonden! Pull us in!"

"Aye aye Captain!"

The next Alana knew she and the man were being helped on board the largest ship she had ever seen. All her ladies were there crying in relief once she was aboard. A sailor threw a cloak over her and she looked about. The man in white was toweling himself off. He was tall and had blond hair, pulled back in a knot on the back of his head.

"Call for Mr. Lamb. Have him strike the chains off these ladies. Killick! Killick there! Get some slops for them. Ask the good Doctor to attend them and get them some warm grog in the great cabin."

"Aye aye sir!"

"Tom what's the situation with those galleys?"

"Three are gone One's already gone, Sir Captain. The second last should be on its way shortly. We salvaged some cargo off of her and some papers."

"And the crews?"

"Sorry to say there wasn't one that could swim sir. Those that weren't finished off by the gunfire and cannons went straight down with them."

"Damn. I'd have liked to get one of their bastard officers just so we could ask him what the blazes is going on! Well let me get some dry clothes and see if we can figure where in Hades we are!"

A harried man in a striped shirt appeared next to Alana. He carried a box of heavy tools. "Pardon m'am, but if you'll let me see those manacles I'll strike them off you."

"Thank you sir", she replied with the kindest smile she could manage, "but these are strong manacles."

Alana moved her shoulders and exposed her wrists, which had the added effect of dropping the boat cloak and leaving her exposed to the waist. Illicia reached forward protectively and picked the cloak up to cover her breasts.

"Ahem" the man called Lamb blushed but continued. "Well no mind m'am. Give me a minute and I'll have these off of you."

True to his word once he had set his steel block, one swing of his mallet broke the pinions off Alana's wrist. Truth be told, none of the girls could watch the blow even though a strong steel chisel actually made it a comparatively easy task. Alana brought her wrists in front of her for the first time in weeks. It actually hurt! She had trouble taking the boat cloak from Illicia since the hands at the ends of her wrists didn't seem to be hers.

Mr. Lamb looked on with a satisfied smile. Now let me get those off your ankles. Two more sure strokes and Alana was totally free. "Now, which of you ladies is next?"

The other girl's manacles were child's play compared to Alana's and by the time he had put his chisel away. Mr. Lamb had been deluged with thanks from all. A waiting sailor had mugs of hot drinks ready for all the ladies.

Alana took a sip of the drink the young sailor called "grog". It was warm and strong liquor she had never tasted before. At any other time she probably would have taken a sip or two and politely passed on it. Now it was the water of life and she drank it gratefully letting its warmth fill her in more ways than one.

"Pardon me ladies" the gentleman speaking was of medium build, short and thin with a studious look about him. "I am Dr. Maturin. The Captain has asked me to look after you. If you will accompany me to the great cabin I will examine you."

The Doctor showed the girls into the great cabin at the very rear of the ship. There they found a lovely young woman with black hair, striking blue eyes and a little girl with blonde hair. Dr. Maturin introduced them as Mrs. Clarissa Oakes and his own daughter Brigid.

After the introductions Mrs. Oakes took Brigid out to allow the Doctor and the ladies privacy.

He started with Alana and examined each of the girls in turn. "You ladies all appear to be a bit malnourished and in need of some ointments for those areas under the manacles. Especially you my dear", he nodded at Alana. "Your wrists and ankles were badly used."

"Thank you Doctor", she replied, unsure of how to begin asking the thousands of questions she had.

"I could not fail to notice that all you young ladies have old scars from what appear to be rope burns on your throats, except for you" he nodded at Illicia. "It has been my experience that these types of wounds could only be experienced if the victim had been hanged, either by execution or suicide attempt."

"You are correct Dr. Maturin" Alana responded. "The four of us have each found ourselves as innocent victims of the hangman's noose."

"You especially, my dear", the Doctor, said to Alana. "The extensive scarring you have could only have been caused by repetitive hangings."

"Correct again Doctor. I seem to attract a noose the way a rose attracts honeybees." Alana tried to make this sound light, but the Doctor frowned and only looked more concerned.

"I will want to talk with you at much greater length about this, but it's time for you to have some hot food and some warm clothes. Killick!"

"Aye! Aye! I hear you. Here's the food and Bonden behind me has some clothes for the ladies!"

Sure to his word Killick served a hot stew and more of the warm grog the girls had been given when first brought aboard. The young man named Bonden, whom they recognized as the first to recognize their plight aboard the Ripshark, waited patiently for them to finish their meal. Alana noticed him first. "Oh I am sorry. Have you been waiting all this time?"

"Yes mam, but it's no problem. I'm sorry for the poor quality. These are from the young men's extras. We don't have ladies on board as a rule. I think Mrs. Oakes and the Doctor's Brigid are trying to come up with something a little more feminine."

He put the clothes down on a table, nodded his head touching his knuckle to his forehead saluting and left them. There was a soft linen billowy shirt for each, some white hose, and a pair of soft linen pants. For the first time in weeks the girls were fully dressed.

"May I come in?" a strong voice inquired.

"Yes, we're decent" Alana replied.

In came the big man with the blond hair, but now he had a dress shirt and dark blue coat, with burnished gold ornaments and extensive braiding on it.

"I trust Killick has provided you with a warm supper."

"Yes thank you", Alana replied. "May I ask whom we have to thank for all our lives and especially mine?"

"Captain Jack Aubrey at your command, milady."

"And this would be your vessel then?"

"Yes, milady...HMS Surprise. And may I ask who I have the pleasure of addressing?"

"I am Alana Cordant, Princess of Branart, taken by pirates on the way to my coronation as Queen. This is my Lady in Waiting, the Lady Marissa, my ward Krystyana, and my two faithful servants, Illicia and Mira."

"Pardon me, ah..." and here the Captain seemed to be a bit confused, "...ah your Highness, but did you say Princess of Branart?"

"Yes that's correct Captain."

"I see."

"Captain, this is the largest and most magnificent ship I have ever set eyes upon. Yours must be the most powerful navy in the world, but I do not recognize the ensign you fly. What country do you represent?"

"England, Princess."

"You have me at a disadvantage, Captain. I was never strong on geography but I am afraid I have never heard of England."

"Likewise Princess" replied the Captain with a very puzzled look, "I am unfamiliar with the kingdom of Branart."

What followed was likely one of the most confusing conversations any of the participants had ever taken part in. In the opening minutes Captain Aubrey asked the man Killick to have Dr. Maturin join them. He summed things up for the Doctor as succinctly as he could.

"This is Princess Alana Cordant, heir to the throne of the kingdom of Branart and these are her retinue. She was being taken by a fast galley home to her country to be crowned Queen due to the recent death of her father, the king. Her ship was taken by the Pirates we met and all on board, save for one of her advisors, were killed. This advisor was sent back by one of the pirate vessels to claim a ransom for the Princess and her ladies, but the Regent of her kingdom offered the Pirates far more to make sure she died and never saw her shores. They were about to carry out these executions when we arrived on the scene. Is that correct your highness?"

"Very well summed up Captain."

"Now the only problem is I have never heard of these ladies' kingdom and they have never heard of England!"

To say that the Captain had a perplexed look on his face was to say the least. Stephen Maturin pondered for a moment. "Jack, these ladies have been under terrible toil and trouble these past few weeks, but I can stand for their sanity, at least as presented. Perhaps if we brought out your great map of the world we can come upon an explanation."

"Ah, an excellent suggestion Doctor! Killick there! Killick!"

"I heard the first time", the man Killick mumbled as he brought the large rolled map in the room.

The Captain unrolled the map on the table so it faced Alana. "Princess, if you would do us the pleasure of pointing out Branart on the map for us."

Alana studied the map. "I do not know anything about these land masses here to the west" she replied indicating the Americas, "but this would be Branart, but your map titles it as that land you spoke of, England!"

"Killick bring the brandy and glasses!" the Captain ordered. "You have told us of your last few weeks. Let me tell you of ours."

CHAPTER 4

The Captain proceeded to try to summarize the history of the Napoleonic wars and the Surprise's part in this conflict for the last month. "Then just a few days ago, we were here, to the west of the Bermuda's with the rest of the squadron", he pointed to a section of the map, "We were literally engulfed in a swirling storm the likes none of us had ever seen. The winds spun and the sea twisted as if we were in a great whirlpool. It set on us with no warning; none of the lookouts reported any disturbance other than a mist. Then as fast as it came it was gone. But we were not where we had been. Not within hundreds of miles of it. We ended up here, off the coast of central America. We have not sighted another vessel, either of the squadron or of any nature, so we have been making for land when we sighted those two galleys and you have been part of the story from there."

"This is impossible" Alana replied. Then a real fear came over her. "Captain, what is the date?"

"October 11th, 1817. What did you think it was Princess?"

Alana looked into his eyes with true fear for the first time since she found herself pinned to the sinking ship earlier, "To the best of our estimation, it is sometime in October, 1217."

"You're right", the Captain said, "this is impossible. Pass the word for Lieutenant Pullings"

A moment later the young officer that was part of the rescue team came in. "Yes sir?"

"Tom, I'm afraid you will have to push you and the midshipmen down and give your cabin to the Princess and her ladies here. Princess, I think we all need to sleep on what's just occurred and give it further consideration on the morrow!"

Pullings showed Alana and her ladies his cabin. "I am sorry for they are not more elegant quarters, Princess, but this is the second largest cabin on the ship. We aren't used to transporting ladies."

Alana liked the young man, despite the terrible scar he bore on his brow, nose and right cheek, likely from a cutlass. "Compared to our lodgings for the last three weeks or so, this is unbridled luxury Lieutenant."

He and the other officers quickly got their personal belongings together and were about to leave, when Alana asked him to stay a while.

"Lieutenant, what does the designation HMS stand for?"

"His Majesty's Ship, Princess. His Majesty King George of England."

"And the flag, that is the flag of England?"

"Yes Princess."

"I have never seen a ship without oars. Is this the largest ship in the King's navy?"

"Oh bless me no, Princess. Surprise is a frigate and a rather small one at that. We carry 28 guns. The largest ships of the line are three decks to our one and can carry as many as over a hundred!"

Alana just shook her head in wonder.

"You spoke of 'guns'. Where those the things that made such great blasts and roars when the Pirates attacked?"

"Yes mam", Pullings replied trying to suppress his surprise. "After her knees were strengthened the Captain had the Surprise fitted out with new braces. She can now fire a full broadside of her eighteen pounders!"

It was Alana's turn to shake her head. "So there are truly no oars?" she observed.

"No mam. We do not use sweeps or oars for propulsion. Wind power is all we need. However, if our rudder is blown away we can launch the ship's boats for a tow."

At that moment the young man named Bonden knocked on the door jamb.

"Beggin your pardon Lieutenant Pullings Sir."

"Yes Bonden?"

"The Captain asked me to tell the Princess that in the load of cargo off the second galley we found yards of silk, fine linen and stocking grade materials as well as velvet. Mam, we can make you some right proper dresses if you wouldn't mind."

Alana and all the girls smiled. "Thank you Mr. Bonden. That is right isn't it?"

"No mam! Just Bonden", as he touched his knuckle to his forehead.

"Illicia and Mira are accomplished seamstresses. If you will bring us the materials and some needles, thread, and cutting tools, we can make our own clothes."

Pullings smiled. "I will have them brought right up. I will see that Killick brings you your coffee and breakfast in the mornings, so until we settle the meal routine don't be concerned."

Bonden and Pullings turned to leave. "You two were the first to come across us in our need. If you hadn't acted so quickly I fear we would all have gone down with the Pirate craft. We owe you our lives and have no way to express our gratitude other than with our sincere thanks."

"Our pleasure Princess" replied Pullings grinning broadly and Bonden looked ecstatically happy.

"One last question. Was it just happenstance that it was Captain Aubrey who saved me?" Alana queried.

"Not happenstance, Princess" Pullings replied. "He's the strongest swimmer on the ship. I believe he would have taken that galley apart piece by piece before he let you drown!"

And then they were both gone. Alana sat back and stared into nothing. "Marissa, I'm almost afraid that I have drowned and this is some passing fancy that my mind brewed up to save me the terror of that horrible death."

"No your highness...we are real and this ship is real...but what it is doing here I cannot begin to imagine."

There was a polite knock on the doorjamb. Alana looked up to see Mrs. Oakes standing there. She curtsied prettily. "Sorry to be of bother your Highness."

"None whatsoever. How can I be of service Mrs. Oakes?"

"I am a reasonable seamstress. If I can help in whipping up some dresses and clothes please put me to use." Illicia and Mira smiled. While Marissa and Krystyana were both helpful, a true seamstress would be invaluable if they were to work rapidly.

"By all means! Please join us."

"We have barely been introduced," Clarissa continued.

"Is your husband aboard?" inquired Marissa.

"No your Highness. He was killed a number of years ago. He served under Captain Aubrey and it was through his and the Doctor's kindness that they allowed me to live at Woolcombe as governess to the Doctor's daughter Brigid. With the sudden passing of both Mrs. Aubrey and Mrs. Maturin the Doctor asked the Captain's permission to take us aboard ship. Though the Captain dislikes women aboard ship he felt a deep concern for our welfare on land so here we are." Clarissa could not help but note the rope burns on the girls' necks, but of course, they were used to a certain amount of staring.

"Oh! My sincere pardon! My staring was quite froward." She stammered dropping her eyes.

“No”, Alana replied. “We are quite used to it as all of us, even Illicia over there has felt the bite of the noose.”

“This is quite strange” Clarissa replied. “A few years ago I found myself in an impossible situation and was forced to defend myself. I killed the miscreant but his friends conspired to charge me with murder and I was condemned to death on the gallows. I recall the experience all too clearly. It was a horror that can never be erased from my memory.”

Alana could see the young woman’s pain, but also noted she did not bare the marks of the rope. All waited patiently for Clarissa to continue.

“After I was condemned I was moved to Newgate to await my turn on the Tyburn gallows. They were hanging a few dozen a day at the time so I was scheduled for the next week”

“A young girl was placed in the cell with me by the name of Kate. She was barely 13 and had been taken for stealing bread. During our first night advances were made by a half dozen jailors and two hangman’s assistants. All either of us had to do was give in to their lust and they would be sure our deaths would be quick and relatively painless. A certain turn to the rope a jerk or pressure on the legs or shoulders and it would be done.”

“Kate had been recently orphaned and had never had relations, being a virgin. She was quite a comely little thing and was frightened to death by both her imminent death and the slowness of the demise. I knew there was nothing I could do for either of us to remit our sentences ... but I could at least assure her a quick death, so I yielded to all the demands, saving her. They were truly odious men but previously I had been forced to make my living satisfying men’s basest urgings.”

“We were to die on the same day and the jailors arrived, tying our wrists and arms. We went to Tyburn in the same cart with Kate crying piteously against my bosom the whole time. To my consternation the hangman and his assistants were not the same ones that I had satisfied in Newgate.”

“It was a howling mob and they had tipped the hangman to see a good show. I protested but they tied slow nooses for us both. When we were placed on the low stools the ropes were drawn tight so there was no slack. I had witnessed the slow knot before and I begged them to let Kate die quickly as I would take her place and make up for the shortfall. Not only did they not listen but they tipped over Kate’s stool first.”

“The poor dear’s neck stretched and she ended up with her toes swinging barely a foot off the platform. Her struggles were long and hideous, eyes clenched, teeth gritted, kicking for what seemed forever. I begged the hangmen to pull her legs or snap her neck but they ignored me. It must have taken a good ten minutes before she dangled twitching, her agony over.”

"The hangman came over to me and purposefully cinched up the noose even tighter and removed any semblance of slack from the rope, He grinned at me licentiously as he secretly fondled my breasts and then moved behind me to finish the job".

"At that moment, one of my former 'clients' came forward with a sheriff and the paperwork to commute my sentence from death to transport. The hangman looked quite disappointed and the crowd almost rioted. They had been promised two ladies to swing and they felt they had been cheated."

"As I was taken away I could not look at poor Kate swinging gently on the rope."

When Clarissa raised her eyes she saw concern in the girl's faces but Alana's was one of horrified astonishment. Clarissa's experience was in many ways similar to her own on the gallows that it sent eerie chills down her spine. It was long minutes before she could compose herself. Also chagrined by the story it was a few moments before Marissa queried, "How did you come to be here?"

Clarrissa told her of the chance meeting with young Oakes at Botany Bay and her being smuggled aboard the Surprise. Her subsequent discovery by Captain Aubrey. Her hurried marriage to Oakes and their ultimate arrival in England. She seemed to glance over her husband's death in such a way that the group surmised that it was a marriage of convenience, and her being taken in by Jack and Stephen's wives, Diana and Sophie, and becoming governess to Stephen's daughter Brigid, and tutor to Jack's daughter's and son.

She was much more heart broken over their deaths, so close together. She again explained Stephen's begging Captain Aubrey to allow them to come aboard the Surprise for these latest sorties and being swept up and losing the squadron, finding themselves in their present predicament.

At that same moment Captain Aubrey and Dr. Maturin were finishing their port more troubled than ever.

"Stephen, this makes absolutely no sense!"

"For truth, I know nothing in the physical or for that matter metaphysical world that would explain these happenings."

"Well those ladies are absolutely real."

"More than you could imagine, Jack. The Princess bares scars of a truly horrific nature, yet she and her ladies are the comeliest group we have ever come upon. I don't believe even my late Diana would hold a candle to even the Princess' maids."

"We are feeling the effects of being widowers for too short a period, I'm afraid. You losing Diana in that coaching accident, and Sophie succumbing to fever just a month

later, it's left us particularly vulnerable. But you do speak the truth. When I dove under and saw the Princess fighting for her life I could not help but admire her charms. As I swam toward her she was pinned down there, by her ankle, her wrists pinioned behind her, her head lifted up toward the light, her hair a swirl of golden red. As I swam up to her, her huge eyes opened. No fear. Just a questioning look. What a truly magnificent woman, though I don't make her a day over 17."

"Well what are we to do Jack?"

"I put us a couple of days out, three at the most, of the Central American ports. We'll have to head there anyway as short on provisions as we are. They will be our touch stone whatever, wherever, or whenever we are."

CHAPTER 5

For Alana that night was not an easy one. The nightmare returned, in an even darker form.

She was standing on a chair. Was she alone? No. There was a figure across from her. Wait! No. It was her image in a full length mirror. She could see herself, in a soft transparent peignoir, completely nude beneath, highlighted by the soft glow of candles in the room. The only discordant note. The thick noose coiled around her throat.

In a start she realized that the noose was so tight that any give in her stature just increased the tension of the implacable coil on her neck and with that knowledge her desire grew. She could feel the glow between her legs beginning a fire that screamed for release.

"No!" she moaned weakly, half-heartedly.

"Look! See your image in the mirror," a voice in her mind beckoned. "What do you see? A beautiful young woman who can't wait to feel the noose make love to her. Go ahead! Give in to it. You know that is the only way to release the force within you."

She felt her legs starting to give way, causing the noose to tighten deliciously around her neck. She caught herself starting to step off and she moaned audibly. The torture was exquisite but she understood that the only relief from this horrible sexual tension was if she stepped off.

"That's it," the voice cooed. "You know you want to do it. You will hang anyway. Take that step."

Alana felt her arousal leaking out of her, her excitement running down her legs in tiny streams. She began to quiver as she tried to remain standing, knowing that sooner or later she would be too weak with fear and excitement to keep her legs underneath her, forcing the noose to take her in any event...

She became aware that she was starting to step off again and she caught herself once more. She moaned again as her entire body screamed at her and it was almost as if she were being consumed by the erotic fires of hell.

"Go ahead my dear; you KNOW you want to." The voice soft.. seductive... alluring... enticing her...

Alana wasn't even aware that she'd done it. One moment she was poised on the edge of eternity, the noose beguiling her with its coils... the next she'd stepped off into her destiny. A moment later the noose took her full weight.

Alana's eyes instantly went wide at what she'd done and her legs kicked wildly. A moment later the chair was knocked over backward by an accidental kick and her foundation was gone forever. Instinctively her hands flew up and clawed at the rope.

Alana stared into the mirror at the incredible sight of the beautiful honey haired young woman dangling from the noose. Then her head exploded like a canon. Her hands instantly flew down, her fingers finding the front opening in the peignoir and dancing madly over her clit.,

She jerked and kicked as her first orgasm battered her like one that she had only experienced previously at the end of a rope.

Her body jerked and arced as her legs kicked, almost as though she were embracing an invisible lover. ...and she was, a lover who held her in its vice like grip around her slender throat, its touch caressing her body as a thousand fires broke out all over her skin. Her nipples were painfully hard, her whole being awash with incredible sensations as her lungs fought in vain to pull a breath of air into her body.

Alana twisted and turned as though fighting the noose and yet making love to it, her painful cries totally cut off by the constriction of the rope around her neck. Once more her hands flew up to the noose as she tried to relieve the agony that was centered there.

Nothing. No air. No breath. Just the choking strangling agony. The pain was deliciously excruciating, the rope cutting off all access... and in the depths of her soul, a place she never really wanted to surrender to, she found herself LOVING it.

All at once she seemed to come to her senses of a sort and her feet stretched down for the chair that now lay uselessly on its side. She stretched and probed as any articulation fought to clear her throat. Then it was as if her mind told her that the chair would never return - that the pain around her neck was permanent. Her feet instantly responded by arching together as if she could somehow kick herself upward enough to ease the strain on her neck. But that failed miserably, resulting instead in the noose drawing ever tighter around her slender throat. Then her feet exploded once more into a wild dance of death.

All at once despite the pain or perhaps because of it Alana recognized another orgasm rapidly approaching her. Instinctively her hands gave up their useless clawing at the noose and flew down toward her pleasure center. Once more she began frantically fingering her clit as though the hounds of hell might catch up to her at any moment before she might achieve yet another climax.

...and once more her body responded with an explosion of eroticism...

This one was worse than the last, a monster of an orgasm that stole the last of the air in her lungs that she was trying so hard to fight for. She bucked and jerked in the noose,

her body twisting and turning wildly as though she were fighting hard in a futile attempt to ride out the pain and pleasure that was totally consuming her. Then it was mercifully gone, along with what remaining strength and fight she had left. Her vision exploded with globules of light, but soon that was gone...

...and so was all her strength...

How long had it been? A minute? An hour? An eternity! She hung weakly in the noose, her hands falling limply to her sides, her legs pointing straight down, giving up her physical exertions, instead putting all her efforts in trying to eke just one more breath past the vise that was the noose.

But this was impossible and as her vision started to darken she shuddered at the delicious sensation of not being able to breathe. Her expression started to change from one of pain to one of peaceful acceptance and she twitched and trembled in the noose's embrace.

She got one last look in the mirror and felt a flush of great excitement at the image reflected back at her. In it an incredibly beautiful young woman jerked and twitched rather sexily in the noose. Her expression was one of immense afterglow as though she'd had an incredibly orgasmic experience.

She felt a numbness creep up her legs, felt a tingle in her hands and arms as though they too had fallen asleep. The last thing she was distinctly aware of was a first a pleasant wash of warmth then a tidal wave as a final shattering orgasm coursed through her body, enveloping her as though her lover were wrapping her in his arms... the arms of the noose. Then Alana's vision failed her.

She gently swung back and forth as her body continued to twitch and jerk. Still partly conscious but unable to see she heard a roaring in her ears as darkness seemed to billow all around her. But for some reason she was not frightened. Then she lost all consciousness entirely as something rattled from somewhere deep in her throat and Alana swayed gently in the noose...

...softly...

...lifelessly.

With a horrified gasp she lurched awake, clothing her throat and gasping in terror.

"Oh Princess!" Illicia cried as she jumped from her cot and embraced the shaking girl. "The nightmares again?"

Alana could only nod, tears streaming down her face.

"Perhaps the good doctor will know of a cure. You should see him tomorrow. Now rest and I will stay with you."

Patting her gently, Illicia made a small space for herself and held the sobbing girl until she was asleep

The next morning, Alana was awakened to a polite knocking on the doorjamb.

Killick entered with coffee and breakfast. "The Captain insisted I use the fresh eggs, and the bacon and cheese is good. Sorry about the hardtack but it's all we have."

"Thank you, Killick, isn't it?" Alana replied smiling.

"My pleasure, my pleasure your Highness" his usual shrewish nature disappeared for the moment and he was gone.

Alana had not had a breakfast as good as she could remember in a long time. After they had eaten Illicia began to take charge.

"Now if Krystyana and Marissa will help us, we could have gowns and stockings in short order. As for you, your Highness, your place would be with our new Captain, if I may be so bold."

Alana smiled to herself. Illicia was right. There was much that had to be sorted out and the Captain was the logical place to start. She was about to find her way to the quarterdeck when a young midshipman interrupted her. "Excuse me your Highness..."

"Yes Mister?" she smiled the question.

"The name is Blakenly, your highness." He was a lovely looking blond boy not much over 14 she guessed. She noticed he had lost his right arm above the elbow.

"Doctor Maturin asked if you would be kind enough to join him in his quarters, at your convenience."

"I would be most happy" Alana smiled, "but I have no idea where that is or how to get there."

"My pleasure to guide you, your Highness." Then Blakenly stared at her feet. "The way can be rough below decks for someone not used to it Princess. Allow me to get you some slippers."

Alan looked down and realized she was still only glad in stockings. "That would be most kind"

He was hardly gone a moment when he returned with a pair of velvet slippers.

"If you don't mind mam, these are mine. They are clean!" he said urgently.

"I can't take these, Mr. Blakenly." Alana replied.

"Oh no mam! I am sure we can consider them just a loan. The velvet we took off the galley will make better slippers than these for you in a short while."

Truly touched Alana slipped them on and followed the young boy on the tortuous route through the huge ship.

Finally they came to a small alcove. Blakenly removed his hat and knocked.

"Yes Mr. Blakenly" Stephen's voice came from behind a cloth covering his current dissection.

"The Princess Alana to see you Sir"

"Ah Princess Alana. Thank you so much for coming. Please take a seat here."

Alana sat across the small table trying her best to ignore the odor coming from whatever was under the cloth.

"Princess, the scars you have on your throat concern me greatly. You say you have been the victim of a hanging?"

"More than one doctor. Depending on how you define the term at least three to be exact."

"That you have obviously survived is nothing short of a miracle. But to cause this type of scarring ...you had to have been either hanged for a long period or tortured extensively."

"Both" Alana confessed.

"Please explain!"

Thus Alana went into her explanation of her first hanging at the hands of the Bailiff in the coastal burg.

"And they say you hanged for about 30 minutes?" Stephen asked wonderingly.

"So I was told. From my standpoint it was hours!"

"I can well imagine."

"The second hanging happened by accident two days later." She retold the situation of the town square and her accidental hanging by the leather thong.

"Do you have any estimate of how long you hanged this time?"

"It seemed like hours but probably was no more than a couple of minutes."

"Pray continue!"

Alana, blushing related the bizarre erotic hanging at the hands of the Duchess and her female apprentices.

"The Duchess sounds like she could make that infamous dog, the Marquis DeSade blush. And you say she hanged you and your ladies to collect the vaginal secretions you emitted?"

"Yes Doctor."

"And your ladies tell you that you hanged for over ten minutes?"

"To their best estimation."

"Were there any other experiences?"

"Well I didn't exactly hang, but it was just as bad in my estimation."

Alana related her extended strangling at Beth's hands.

"Incredible! You understand Princess as a physician I am faced with a dilemma of impossible proportions. You should be dead, at least four times over. The first of your hanging experiences was far longer than any girl, woman, or man for that part could have survived. Hanging, at least the kind with virtually no drop as you have described, should bring about unconsciousness in under five minutes. After this time the brain, starved of air, would start to die. After ten, resuscitation is virtually impossible and even if successful, would result in mechanical life only, with no cognition or brain function. You, my dear Princess, are a miracle and an enigma!"

"Doctor Mauturin, in confidence, may I consult you on a very private matter?"

"Of course, Princess. My oath as a physician prescribes me from sharing any intimate revelations you may wish to share."

"Doctor, each of my hangings has resulted in the most intense sexual climax I have ever experienced. So intense, that normal sexual arousal simply does not bring forth a climax at all now. Is this normal?"

Maturin leaned back and looked at the Princess with a sharp but engaging visage. "It is very hard to say, Princess. You have survived horrific torture that no human was meant to endure. The erotic auspices of hanging have long been known and observed by even the most casual observer. I have participated in the dissection of many corpses that expired at Tyburn. While the vast majority were male there was a young woman, not over twenty. In the male we of course see erection and ejaculation, but in her case she had extreme protrubence of both the nipples and pudendum and a concomitant flow of erotic fluids that indicated she had also experienced a climax as she hanged. So for someone who has experienced the degree of intense persecution you have, it could be likely that it forged a pathway in your inner psyche never tapped before. I did not perform a full examination on you yesterday, so please let me ask...you have yet to reach your 18th birthday and are you a Virgin?"

"Yes, I have just had my 17th birthday, and I am a virgin, though how I have survived in that state I really cannot stay."

"Pray explain."

Alana recounted her misadventures, from her being forced to remain nude for her first three days with Gilbert, through her disposition as his assumed mistress, her sadistic encounters with the Duchess Roxanne and finally her naked imprisonment by the pirate Martine.

"You are correct. The fact you remain a virgin is absolutely amazing considering your travails. But, that may explain part of the problem. Without the experience of a normal sexual embrace and climax, this intense a sensation brought on by your hangings may have literally precipitated a predilection that will be difficult if not impossible to overcome."

Maturin became concerned as tears began to stream down Alana's cheeks.

"I am so sorry Princess! This is just a musing on my part. Please do not take this as any form of final statement on the matter," and he handed her his handkerchief.

"Thank you doctor." Alana sniffed. "My problem is made worse by my nightmares in reliving each of these experiences. And when I find myself...ah...desirous of uh...sexual release I find that the tightness of a noose, scarf, belt or anything along that line is necessary for me to achieve climax."

"It is the most dangerous of erotic pursuits, my dear. Here" Stephen reached into his cabinet and drew out a bottle.

"This is laudanum. Take 100 drops before bed. I can't say it will stop the nightmares, but it will help you sleep."

"Thank you" Alana smiled behind her tears.

Stephen rose and called out, "Mr. Blakenly?"

One of the young ensigns popped around the corner. "Stewart sir! Blakenly is on the quarterdeck, sir."

"Would you be so kind as to escort the Princess back to her quarters?"

"It would be my great pleasure, doctor!" The young man looked particularly delighted.

"If it would be agreeable with you, Princess, I would like to suggest you allow me to perform a full examination on you and your ladies, Mira, Krystyana and Marissa, I believe, who have all had similar experiences. I would like to delve into this situation more deeply."

"At your convenience, and thank you for your concern." Alana rose and followed the ensign down the hallway.

"Remarkable" Stephen thought. "I must make careful notes of all this."

Upon returning to the small cabin Alana found Clarissa and three of the girls deep into their cutting and stitching. Young Brigid was in a corner playing with scraps with Krystyana.

"There's no room for me here" she sighed. "I'll go up on deck and look around."

"Just don't go too far" Illicia interjected, "we should have this first gown ready for you to try on in a little while."

Alana smiled and started out of the cabin. The interior of the ship was perplexing but every time she saw a stairway she just took it up. She passed many of the men engaged in all sorts of activities, and they smiled and touched their knuckles to their heads, their form of salute. Finally she actually saw some daylight and followed it.

To her delight she found herself on the quarterdeck where Captain Aubrey was instructing the midshipmen in the use of an arcane device to determine the exact moment of noon. She had no idea what the triangular instrument with mirror and a small optical device was but she watched as one of the older young men called "Noon", which was reported to another officer who then reported it to the Captain.

"Lieutenant Pullings, make it noon!"

Jack turned to find Alana watching the group. "Ah Princess, thank you for joining me. Please...the quarterdeck is open for you and your ladies at any time" Alana smiled. She gathered that she had been afforded a great honor on the ship.

"Captain, I have not been able to come to a solution for the problem we encountered last night."

"Nor have I. We have a maximum of three days sailing until we reach the coasts and a port. That should tell us something. If it's a modern port then we have a problem with you and your ladies and getting you home properly. If it isn't then we must determine if we can get you home and somehow find our own way."

"Yes, that appears to be the only way of solving this 'Gordian's Knot'" Alana sighed.

"Ah there are similarities...we both have reference to the Gordian's Knot!" Jack smiled.

"I will have Lieutenant Pullings instruct you and your ladies in the running of the ship so you may find your way and its facilities. But as for dinner, you must dine with me in the great cabin. We have many things to discuss and dinner will be the start. I will invite Dr. Maturin of course, and three of my officers, Lieutenant Pullings, Mr. Blakenly and Mr. Howard this evening, as well as Mrs. Oakes."

"I heard someone, Dr. Maturin I believe, refer to Mr. Blakenly as "Lord Blakenly," Alana observed.

"Yes, he is actually the Earl of Summerland, and as such is in line for the throne, if about 30 or 40 close relatives die. However, he is the only one of noble birth on the ship and I thought he might make good company for you and your ladies."

"Thank you Captain. Would it be possible to have someone instruct me personally on the ship itself? All these ropes, sails, weapons, uniforms, are quite bewildering."

"Well, I would normally have a senior midshipman do that kind of instruction for someone coming on board, but since you are Royalty, if you will allow me to be your instructor for the afternoon we will start back here at the rail."

In moving to the railing the ship took a particularly nasty twisting jibe due to a cross current. Alana may have had good sea legs but she pitched forward and was about to slide past Jack forward on her face when he grabbed her around the waist. He held her a few seconds, maybe a little longer than strictly necessary.

Alana looked up into his eyes. "I fear this has become a habit of yours, Captain."

"Sorry Princess?"

"Saving me! "

Looking deep into her eyes in such close proximity, feeling the soft curves of her body and drinking in her heady fragrance, Jack found himself disinclined to let her go. And at that moment Alana was perfectly happy to be held.

But there was a call of "six bells" with its chiming ring and that brought them both back to reality and the lesson began. For Alana the afternoon flew by. Captain Aubrey was encyclopedic in his knowledge of his ship and its workings. And she was fascinated.

They had barely got to the huge steering wheel when a young ensign rushed up. "Begging your pardon, sir".

"Yes what is it Stewart?"

"I have a message for the Princess from her lady Illicia. She says she is to come down for her fitting this moment or she will have to come up and get her". He smiled in getting it perfectly.

"Ah, well our instruction is over for the time being."

"Thank you Captain. I look forward to many more sessions" Alana smiled. She gratefully followed the young man back to her cabin.

CHAPTER 6

"Ah there you are" Illicia looked a little miffed.

"Sorry. Just trying to understand this huge ship and the men who sail her" Alana smiled.

"Well we need to fit this on you if you're to wear it to dinner tonight...Oh...and that Lieutenant Pullings brought this for you."

It was a medium sized box. As it opened Alana burst into tears. It was obviously one of the Pirate's if not Martine's personal treasure. There, right on top, was her father's signet ring and the diadem Duke Gilbert had made for her. About the only two pieces of jewelry she cared about in the whole world.

A short time later, when a young midshipman came to escort the ladies to dinner he was amazed.

Each of them now wore a simple gown and had fixed their hair so that they actually looked like they were going to a formal dinner engagement.

Alana, however, had been their center of attention, and she was nothing short of magnificent. Her golden red hair cascaded down her shoulders. Her gown was a light champagne with a flattering neckline. The girdle made her tiny waist look absolutely minute and the rest hugged her slim hips and long legs like it was made of translucent liquid.

Arriving in the great cabin they saw a table set for nine. Jack, Stephen, Tom Pullings William Blakenly, and Marine Captain Howard all stared in wonder as Alana entered. All were dressed in their finest dress uniforms, except for Stephen who Killick had bullied into wearing his best black suit. For once all had been struck dumb.

"Thank you for the invitation Captain, Gentlemen" Alana smiled. Her only jewelry was her diadem and her father's signet ring worn on a light chain around her neck.

"Ah yes...Princess if you would sit here. Lady Marissa next to Dr. Maturin. Ah...Lady Krystyana next to Lord Blakenly, Miss Illicia next to Lieutenant Pullings and Miss Mira next to Captain Howard.

As was the norm each of the diners had a servant standing behind them to take care of their needs. Alana noticed her's was what looked like a small child, a beautiful little boy with a full head of blond curls, the others called Lufty. Alana took to him at once.

"I'm sorry, Captain Aubrey for my ignorance but I'm a bit confused" Marissa smiled. "Are there two Captains on the ship? You and Mr. Howard. And your uniforms are so different."

Mr. Howard was dressed in his finest Marine dress uniform in bright red.

"Ah yes", Jack replied. "Mr. Howard is the Captain of our Marine contingent. I see where that can be confusing. They are our land troops, shock troops if you will, so we can mount a land action with fully trained and experienced infantry troops as needed. His is an infantry officer ship."

"Thank you" Marissa smiled.

"Killick, I say Killick there" Aubrey called just as Killick came through the door with the first course, mumbling as usual.

As they ate, Aubrey suggested that they try to give as much background as each could so that they could understand their divergent cultures. He started with a much abbreviated summary of his career and that of England up to the Napoleonic wars.

This took the better part of the first two courses. By the time the port was being passed small talk was being made. Alana was able to see that Will Blakenly was obviously besotted with Krystyana. She had just turned 12 and she made him 14 so they were perfectly matched. Illicia and Tom Pullings were also deeply engaged. Alana smiled. That would be a good match. Stephen was engaging Marissa in a deep discussion on the natural world as it applied to each of the their two cultures.

It gave Alana the chance to concentrate on the Captain. Jack on the other hand, found it almost impossible to concentrate on her conversation. All that kept intruding was the thought that this was by far the most beautiful woman he had ever seen and the memory of her fully exposed charms as he rescued her made concentrating on anything else impossible.

"Ladies, I hope that you will allow me a toast. To the loveliest dinner guests the Surprise has ever seen!"

Each of the men added their hearty "Hear him! Hear him!" to that.

"We have another three days sailing until we reach Ilse del Muertes and the trading post there. The largest on the outer islands of Brazil. It will give us a touchstone to allow us to determine if we are in the 13th or 19th centuries and possibly which of our two realities exists at the current time."

"Jack" Stephen interjected "if you had told me a week ago that we could be sitting at this table calmly discussing time travel and other worlds I would have had to check my stock of Laudanum to be sure we hadn't all become opium addicts."

Aubrey smiled.

"Now please Princess, we have had your story in bits and pieces...perhaps we could beg you to give us a more detailed explanation."

Alana gave a much abbreviated version of her adventures over the last year and the basic history of Branart. It left all the men shaking their heads.

"If you will permit me Princess", Stephen started, "your world sounds very like ours in the 13th century. I dislike using the word barbaric but it seems appropriate."

"I suppose so Doctor. In my very sheltered world it seemed so refined and beautiful. But death and torture seems to be far more commonplace than I would have ever thought living my life in Branart."

"The stories you tell about the inflagrate use of hanging as virtually the only means of execution, or for that matter, the only recompense for virtually any crime, is horrific, my dear. And the predilection to condemn not only the miscreant but his or her whole family down to almost babes in arms is criminal in and of itself.!

"Hear, hear!!!" the men responded.

Alana looked into the Doctor's eyes. "If you could have seen all the small children dangling from gallows, trees anywhere they could be suspended...and my good doctor the excruciatingly long time it takes these little ones before they finally succumb...it's too horrible to continue" and tears streamed down her face.

"Still, from what you have told us, your Duke Gilbert is a fair man. If he succeeds in becoming king these atrocities will end."

Alana lifted her tern stained face, "Yes...he is a good man and if he can manage ascension he will put an end to them!" The dinner ended on a rather somber note.

The next morning was truly beautiful. Illicia had made the girls soft linen shifts to sleep in and Killick brought breakfast. Finishing her morning ablutions Alana dressed in the linen shirt, beeches, stockings and borrowed slippers. She tied her hair back. She was about to attempt to find the quarterdeck when Illicia stopped her. "I didn't sew my fingers to the bones so you could run around like a boy all day. I've got a lovely day gown right here for you."

Alana smiled. "It's far too impractical for where I hope to go today. Either all the men would be gathering around to peer up my skirt or I would have to lose it and climb completely naked...I think this is the more satisfying solution don't you?"

Illicia could only shake her head. Alana found the quarterdeck very quickly this time, and sure to his word Jack stood on the deck almost in anticipation of her arrival. He smiled at her warmly.

"Now Princess, what portion of the ship would you like to be instructed in today?"

"Up there!" She looked straight up at the main mast. "More than anything I would like to see the view from up there."

"Not a problem. Borden! Rig a sweeps chair for the Princess. We'll have them hoist you aloft and you can climb in through the lubber's hole."

"Lubbers hole?"

"Yes, the experienced seamen climb up on the inside courses than swing around and drop into the nest. The lubber's hole allows visitors to come up and make the transition onto the platform, safely."

Alana smiled. "With your permission Captain?" And before Jack could say a word she had hopped to the rail and was climbing the main guy ropes.

"Damn!" Jack muttered, threw his coat to a midshipman, and took off after her.

She was sure and confident, but not fast, and he caught up to her quickly.

"Princess, you are under my command on this ship and your life is too precious to be lost in an accident climbing the rigging for the first time."

Alana continued up. "What makes you think this was my first time, Captain? When I was young I climbed the rigging on our private galley, and longed to do it on the trip down to Venderale. This is wonderful!!"

To Jack's amazement she made it up and over the top, swung around and landed firmly on the platform. He joined her a second later.

"My God! This is magnificent. It truly makes you feel you are at the top of the world."

"One never tires of the view!"

A sudden gust of wind sent her back against him, and Jack put his arm around her protectively to be sure she did not end up careening down the Lubber's Hole and plummet to the deck. She felt it linger there. They stood silently enjoying the morning air for a goodly long time. As they climbed down and reached the quarter deck, Alana thanked Jack profoundly. "I have a favor to ask of My Captain", she smiled.

"Please", implored Aubrey. "Do not ask me to instruct you in the firing of the great guns..."

"No, but that does merit some consideration", she laughed. "Too many times over the last year or so I found myself helpless and imprisoned, often bound and in severe if not deadly peril. If you would have a small boot knife that my ladies could make a garter scabbard for I would be eternally grateful.

Jack mulled that a bit. "My personal weapons do not meet the size requirements you wish. The smallest would be a dirk and that would be far too large for your purpose. But Dr. Maturin has a wonderful collection of throwing knives that should fit the bill. Oh Stephen!" he called as the Doctor passed on the main deck below.

Stephen looked up startled by Jack's booming call. He led the way for Alana back down to the deck. "Good morning Princess" Stephen beamed. "How may I be of service, my dear?"

"The Princess would like to locate a knife that she could carry on her garter on the" ...and here he looked at Alana questioningly, "...inside or outside thigh?"

"Inside", she replied. "Easier to hide."

Jack smiled.

"Why the dear, of course I do Princess. Please come with me to my cabin and take your choice of three or four that might fit the bill."

In the cabin Alana was presented with four honed steel throwing knives. These were not for show. No filigree or jewel work on them. They were designed to be used for lethal purposes.

"I'm surprised Doctor. I did not know physicians and surgeons carried this type of cutting instrument."

"I am sometimes called upon to do a service for the Ministry that falls outside of my professional capacities." As if to emphasize the point he picked up the nearest knife and threw it the length of the corridor, planting it in the middle of the stay twelve feet away.

"Oh my, Dr. Maturin, you do have more than meets the eye."

He smiled and handed her a knife. "This is the first's brother. Honed fine surgical steel and perfectly balanced."

Alana took the blade and felt his assessment was right on.

"How can I ever repay you?"

"It is my please for sure, your Highness! It is enough of a reward knowing that one of my professional instruments will be kept in such an...ahh....intimate place on your Highness' person."

Alana felt pleasure in her blush.

She took the knife back to Illicia and she and Mira made much of its beauty and simplicity.

"Give me an hour and I'll have a garter scabbard so fine you'll wear it to bed", Illicia smiled.

Neither knew that in a few months time Dr. Maturin's knife would save the Princess' life.

CHAPTER 7

That evening the same group supped this time with the addition of Clarissa Oakes, and the discussion came around to the myths and superstitions of the high seas. Pullings was persuaded to tell the story of the Flying Dutchman, to everyone's delight.

Alana turned to Marissa..."Didn't you tell me that one of your servants had a strange thing happened when the Norsemen attacked?"

Marissa blushed. "Yes. It occurred to a group under the supervision of my maid servant Nadia. I had set her up as Nanny for a group of young girls that only spoke a strange dialect she was familiar with. Anyway when the Norsemen attacked, she took her small group, and we thought they escaped. She is a brave and resourceful woman, which is why I entrusted her with this group since all were orphans and needed someone special to look after them. She did not survive, but the oldest girl, who had some language skills told me about the incident. I chalked it up to her imagination but..."

He face became animated as she told the story. They were able to find their way clear of the massacre and avoided capture for two days. But on the third they were discovered by a band of about 30 Norsemen and taken prisoner. This group, being a raiding band, was not interested in prisoners. Nadia tried to buy the girls' freedom by sacrificing herself, and for a while it seemed possible.

The raiders used her cruelly. Imagine what it was like for her, to be raped in every manner possible by 30 barbarians. By the time they were finished she had blood and semen dripping from every orifice. When they were done, they argued on whether they had time to debauch the children or sacrifice them by hanging to their god Odin. Nadia was taken to a tree and tied by the neck to a branch with a loose stump under her.

The captain of the group was about to set her dangling when a voice on the hill above called, "These little ones are under my protection...release them and I may let you live!"

Nadia had already been badly used and the noose around her neck caused her to be quite faint. She and all the girls looked up and saw an incredulous sight. A bony nag, almost dead with a thin, emaciated rider in rusty armor, with long white hair and beard had called the challenge. The Norsemen roared in laughter.

"Again I say!" the figure called, "Release them and I may let you live!"

"And who are you grandfather that we should follow your orders?"

And here the girl is not sure, but believes she heard the figure roar in a voice many time stronger, "I AM THE DESTROYER OF EVIL!!"

Here things got very muddled. She was traumatized by the seeing the Norse captain kicking away the stump and hanging Nadia. She was mesmerized by watching her friend kick and dance at the end of the rope, her face turning a dull congested red, her toes straining just inches off the forest floor.

When the girl finally looked away from the horrific scene the scrawny old man on the bony horse was gone. He had been replaced by a grand War Horse mounted by a huge knight errant whose sword arm was more than a match for the Norseman. He cut through them like butter. The battle was fierce. When the Norsemen had turned to face their attacked the girl had run to Nadia to try to help her. The stump had rolled down the hill and she had nothing to cut the rope with. Nadia was still struggling but the noose was doing its work and she was close to death. The girl tried to lift her up and gave her a second or two of respite,. She recalls Nadia getting a breath or two, but she could not hold her. Dropping her was even worse. She heard a snapping sound and Nadia hung still. She could not believe that she had been somehow responsible for the girl's death and tried her best to lift her again and revive her. All she was rewarded with was a stream of hot urine pouring from Nadia's ravaged cunt and splashing the ground beneath her.

A moment later the knight, now finished with the Norsemen came over. He cut the rope hanging Nadia and felt for a pulse, but she was dead.

He put the youngest girls on his horse and lead the children to safety. They walked for an hour or two until they came to one of Duke Gilbert's emplacements. The knight helped the young girls off the horse and the oldest went over to the captain of the guard and explained the situation. When she turned to introduce the knight, he was gone. She never saw him again. But as they were all taken on a cart back to the infirmary, on a hill a mile away she saw the silhouette of the old gray man on the emaciated horse...and he waved to her as he disappeared.

"Right strange story" Captain Howard commented, but Stephen seemed far deeper in thought.

"The 'Destroyer of Evil', you say?"

"Yes" Marissa replied.

"She may have encountered the legend, the myth, the quintessential knight errant...Don Quixote de La mancha."

"Stephen", Jack asked. "You are familiar with this tale?"

"Ah Jack, you forget I am half Catalan, and anyone with any form of Spanish influence would be familiar with the legend of The Destroyer of Evil!"

Stephen summarized the story of the old man of LaMancha and his vow to be the protector of the innocent and destroyer of evil for all time.

"Ah Stephen", sighed Jack, "I would feel much more sanguine about the fate of this world if your Destroyer of Evil does roam the land. To the Destroyer of Evil, Don Quixote de LaMancha!"

CHAPTER 8

Alana was up very early the next day. She hurried up to the quarter deck where Captain Pullings stood watch. Dressed in her naval slops she felt quite at home. They were in the process of making small talk when Jack arrived on deck.

“Good morning your Highness!”

“Good morning Captain.”

“I trust you slept well”

“Wonderfully well. Your men had beds made for us but I tried your swinging hammock and found it to be perfectly delightful.”

Both Jack and Pullings smiled.

“Well what shall we take up as instruction for today?”

“Would it be possible to learn about the firearms your men carry?”

“Of course. Bonden! Bring a couple of braces of pistols up to the quarterdeck.”

With the pistols before them Jack explained the procedure of loading and priming them to Alana.

“So when this piece strikes that flint the spark causes the black powder to burn and the pressure pushes the shot out?”

“Exactly.”

“How far can this reach?”

“About a hundred feet or so with any accuracy. Bonden, rig a couple of targets for us.”

In a trice there were a number of old bottles swinging from a yardarm.

“Now the point is to aim down the barrel and sight along so the target lines up.”

Jack illustrated by aiming the pistol and pulling the trigger. The blast and plume of smoke resulted in the shattering of one of the bottles.

Alana gave a whoop and clapped. “Amazing” she enthused. “To have the power of those great guns in the palm of your hand!”

“Yes” Jack replied. “I suppose it is a miracle of sorts.”

“Now”, taking up the next pistol of smaller stature, “Would you like to try?”

Alana smiled as graciously as she could, “With all my heart.”

Jack instructed her on the grip and the process of aiming. She started by taking the gun in both hands, lining it up and firing. The largest bottle exploded. Jack looked very pleased. Alana looked amazed and Pullings applauded.

In the space of an hour she had progressed to the musket and other larger arms. Both officers were frankly amazed at her quick education and ability with all the firearms. The bell sounded and Jack turned satisfied. Time for Dinner. Let us retire to the great cabin and toast your excellent marksmanship. Alana blushed with pleasure., but excused herself to put on something more feminine for the meal. As she turned to go down the steps she found all her ladies watching her intently.

Illicia was the first to speak. “When can we learn?”

Alana smiled. “I shall ask Lieutenant Pullings to instruct all of you. Can you imagine what we could have done to those Pirates with a few of these weapons? They would never have been able to board the galley!”

“It’s far more impressive than a crossbow”, noted Marissa, “but also much noisier.”

“Yes”, Alana commented as they worked their weary way to their cabins, “but that gives it much of its power. The roar and thunder is terrifying in and of itself. And as loud as it is it does not even hold a candle to the great guns.”

They had been treated to the afternoon display of the great guns being rolled out and fired twice after the destruction of the Pirates and it thrilled and terrified all the ladies.

Once in the cabin she stripped off her tunic and breeches and slipped on her stockings gown and girdle, choosing a matching pair of velvet slippers. Illicia had already dressed so she set herself to do her hair. As was usual none of the ladies suggested any of the usual adornments and makeup that was available, since in their estimation any of it on Alana would be gilding the lily.

When brushing her hair Illicia always took the time to examine her mistress closely. Other than the burns on her throat from the noose, Alana showed absolutely no ill effects of her travails and when she smiled the world lit up. It took practically no time to do her hair. It seemed never to tangle and in minutes the ladies took their place and she led them to the great cabin where Jack and Stephen awaited.

Alana immediately went over and took the Doctor by both hands. "Dr. Maturin, we missed you for coffee this morning."

"Thank you Princess. I became enraptured when one of the men brought me a remora they plucked from the ship's hull and I have been engrossed in studying ever since."

Jack pulled out her chair and they all sat companionably to their dinner. Normally at any meal the Captain presided and the conversation was stilted, being the prerogative of his station to initiate any discussion. But with these ladies the talk was free and good natured. Very much like he and Stephen enjoyed when they were alone.

"Jack", Stephen interjected. "I heard firing from the deck. Small arms practice?"

"In a manner of speaking", Jack chuckled. "I was instructing the Princess on the use of firearms. She is an apt pupil."

"They are marvelous weapons", Alana enthused. "With a few of them we could have held off all those murdering Pirates."

"In a boarding action", Stephen observed, "it often comes down to the press of bodies and the numbers rather than the power of the weapon being yielded. I have seen numerous times when a small party highly motivated, routed a larger force with superior weapons."

This sobered the ladies as they all realized that they somehow had held the small quarter deck on their galley while their crew and protectors died around them.

"I do not wish to bring up dread memories, your Highness, but your recounting of some of your travails during your captivity by the Pirates seemed to be horrific at times."

"Worse than that Doctor" And Alana plunged into the story of the trade with the cannibals. Jack blanched at the description of the impaling and subsequent cannibalization of the girl Cara, but Stephen was fascinated.

"Doctor, your interest is almost ghoulish" Marissa observed.

"On the contrary, my dear lady. A physician is always fascinated by aberrant behavior, especially when it encompasses an entire civilization. We have encountered many tales of cannibals in our travels and likely met a number, though they certainly refused to practice their predilection when we were present."

"Is impalement as a method of execution unused in your time Princess?"

"No doctor. It has and continues to be used as an alternative to the various other forms of execution. Hanging is by far the most frequently used method. But when my father captured the evil Duke's redoubt we also captured all Roxanne's female consorts. These girls were so perverse in their enjoyment of the noose that they actually seemed

to rejoice at being found guilty and sentenced to death. It was my intervention that altered their executions to impalement.”

Stephen looked closer at Alana after this revelation. There was a steely resolve in her gaze that made him take a different assessment of this young woman. The meal ended with a reasonable pudding which Killick managed to steer onto the table without loss.

“I am completely enamored of this dessert”, Marissa gushed. “Our puddings do not have the silky texture you manage to acquire aboard ship.”

“Suet”, Jack replied complacently. “A good pudding must have just the right amount of suet to give it that wonderful transparency and silky texture.”

“Suet?”, Illicia repeated.

“Well I guess it could be virtually any form of animal fat but pork fat suet is the best.”

Alana looked at her plate slightly aghast. She quickly turned her attention to the wine, were she was more sure of her ground.

“I am very taken with your wine cellar Captain. We do not have nearly the quality or variety in Branart.”

“Tonight we shall have champagne. Killick! Killick there!”

“I’m here ain’t I?” his shrewish appearance materializing in the doorway.

“Killick do we still have a case of that wonderful champagne off that French doggerel we chased down?”

“One case left. I was saving it for Saluting Day,”

“Well we’ll drink grog. Have it trailed over the side and chilled perfectly for supper. Have you ever had Champagne Princess?”

“I am not familiar with the variety.”

“It is one of France’s great contributions to the world” Stephen interjected. “A bubbling white wine that raises the spirits and makes the heart light.”

“I look forward to it with great expectation”, Alana smiled.

After dinner Jack and Stephen lingered over their port.

“I had my doubts when we took Clarrissa Oakes and Brigid aboard”, Jack confessed, “but now with these four other ladies there is certainly much to be recommended having this type of companionship.”

“I am afraid that we are becoming too enamored of our new guests”, sighed Stephen. “I find myself drawn to them more and more each day.”

Jack looked out the great windows at the wake of the ship. “And what if we are in their world and not ours?”

“Something that is a current theme in all my waking hours.” They both stared out the windows with thoughtful airs.

In Lieutenant Pullings former cabin Krystyana and Brigid amused themselves as Clarissa Oakes applied herself to some seam work.

“How did you come to be the Princess’ ward?” Brigid enquired.

“She saved my life twice and then insisted, after they had confirmed her royal status that I come live with her in Duke Gilbert’s castle as her ward.”

“She saved your life!” Brigid cried.

“Yes. Twice The first time she and the Duck had found me after Norsemen had killed my brother and sisters and had tried to kill me. Another raiding band attacked and while the Duke and his horse, Beaufort took them on, one came at us. Alana had lost her clothes.” Both Brigid and Clarissa now were staring in wonder. “And her wrists were manacled behind her but she had a knife. As the beast came close enough she kicked him hard and then whirled with her bond wrists and drove the knife into his neck as he bent over in pain.”

“She was naked?” Brigid asked wonderingly.

“She had given me her dress and only had her black stockings and shoes.”

“And her hands were bound behind her?”

“She had been manacled and it would take a Smith to break them. All they had come across so far had either been killed or run for larger towns so she spent her entire time with the Duke naked and bound.”

Brigid was in awe. Clarissa just shoot her head in amazement.

“The second time Celts had set a trap in the trees and when we rode by slipped a noose around my neck. It jerked me off my horse and I would have hanged to death for sure except I could hold some of the branches and pulled myself up. She forced some hooligans to cut me down and then killed two of them. All this still naked and with her wrists pinioned behind her!”

Brigid tentatively raised her hand to push aside Kyrstyanna's golden locks. There was the distinct mark of the rope that hanged her. She pulled away her hand as if it had been burnt.

"Does it hurt?"

"No. Not anymore."

"Will it go away? Can my father heal it?"

"He had assured me that it will grow lighter and less visible with time and has given me an unguent for it."

Brigid was very pleased. She knew in her heart that her father could cure anyone of anything.

For the first time Clarissa spoke. "I have heard of some of the Princess' adventures. Until now I did not know that you were intimately involved."

"All of us in her retinue have seen terrible torture and danger. Illicia in the mines. Lady Marissa at the hands of the evil Duchess Roxanne. Mira and I again with the Pirates."

"It sounds as if the Princess attracts danger like a magnet."

"I suppose it does but you do feel inherently safe in her presence."

"I can guarantee that" Illicia had been listening in the doorway.

Clarissa smiled at her. "Krystyana had been regaling us with her tales of peril and Alana's daring."

"She has been very careful in the retelling as the details are not for Brigid's ears. But she had understated her case in every way. My mistress had a core of steel. But now come Krystyana. Alana wants us up on deck in our 'slops' so we can take a lesson from Captain Howard."

Krystyana gave a whoop and was out of her gown in a trice and into her breeches and linen shirt. She eagerly followed Illicia to the main deck. Brigid asked permission and she and Clarissa came also. Clarissa took her chair on the side of the main deck and both watched as Captain Howard instructed Alana and her ladies in the use of the cutlass. It was much heavier than any, save Alana had held. After an hour's work he brought out the small arms and gave them some pistol practice. Brigid whooped with joy as each lady tried her hand. As usual Alana was the surest of the five.

With practice over the ladies set off for their cabins with Alana following.

"Princess?"

“Yes Mrs. Oakes?”

“Krystyana has been retelling some of your adventures. The outline you gave us at the table the other night seems woefully inadequate” she said with a shy smile.

“We have had our misadventures. I will tell Krystyana not to be so descriptive when she’s around Brigid.”

“Oh she truly wasn’t. I mean she did mention your state of undress but...”

“For much of my time on this strange series of adventures I have spent it as I came on board. I admit that being in the nude has become second nature to me. However, I am sure that it would not be appropriate to discuss these things when a child such as Brigid...” she trailed off.

Clarissa smiled again. “I just want to say that it is an honor to have met a...” and hear she stopped herself. Girl? Woman? “A person such as yourself. Seeing you with a sword or pistol and I would not hesitate to become part of your retinue under any circumstances.”

Alana grinned back at her and took both her hands, then hurried down to change for the evening.

That evening the great cabin was ablaze. The food was served and drink poured. The champagne was greeted with great gusto and even Kystyanna was involved in the toasting. All the ladies were thrilled with this new tasty beverage.

“Captain” Alana began gaily, “I thought Gilbert’s was the finest wines I had ever tasted, but yours, especially this ambrosia you call Champagne is just wonderful! How do they get the bubbles?”

Jack looked thoughtful for a moment. Then Stephen came to his rescue. “It’s in the bottling and the special blending. All wines produce some gases but these are trapped by these special bottles” picking up an empty one and showing the strength of the bottom, “that can withstand the pressure.”

“Is that why they have those special cages over the tops?”

“Yes. It is to assure that the increasing pressure does not blow the top off. Of course some are lost due to imperfect blowing and other matters, but the result can be spectacular.”

Alana looked around the table and caught Krystyana and Blakenly enjoying their portions. “Have to be careful” she made a mental note. “She does not have much capacity, but then, neither do I.”

At the end of the meal another huge pudding made its arrival.

"It's called Figgy Dowdy" Jack explained. "We take ships biscuit and put it in a sack then beat it with a marlin spike."

"Yes" Pullings continued. "Then we add pork bits, figs currants and other things and it comes out as this lovely!"

With the mention of the pork and its glistening translucent quality Alana blanched slightly. Still after her imprisonment how could she look an obvious delicacy in the mouth and she ate her portion with apparent gusto.

As the evening progressed to the port Alana inquired, "Captain I have noticed the two stringed instruments in the alcove. One looks like a miniature of the other."

"Yes Princess. They are a violin and cello."

"Are they both yours?"

"I can lay claim to the former but the good Doctor is the master of the later."

"Might we persuade you to play for us."

"It would delight me to no end."

The melodious sounds of Mozart followed the Surprise far into the night.

The following morning Alana made her way to the quarterdeck where Jack was watching the sails with great interest. He was quite involved so she made her way over to Pullings who greeted her warmly.

"Lieutenant, if I am not mistaken, we are to make land today?"

"Yes Princess...Isle de Muertes off the main coast of Central America."

"This is called Central since it connects both North and South of the Americas"?"

"That is correct Princess."

"Is it a comely country?"

"Very lush and beautiful. Full of forests and jungles."

"Does it have any great civilizations?"

"It had Princess...a great people called the Maya but they flourished up until the 13th century."

“My time you mean.”

“Yes, of course.”

“It will be so good to see land again after all this time.”

“My sentiments exactly! And it will give us the touchstone to determine what course we all must navigate!”

“Morning Tom! Morning Princess!”

“Good morning Captain Aubrey...Lieutenant Pullings and I were just discussing landfall.”

‘Ah yes...sometime this afternoon I would expect.’

As they walked to the rear of the quarterdeck Alana asked, “Captain, have you thought about the alternatives?”

“They are constantly on my mind Princess.”

“Dare I say, that if we are in my century, my world, your Surprise is the most powerful ship on the face of the earth...with your great guns, portable firearms, Marines...you could make or break nations.”

“As you say Princess!”

CHAPTER 9

"And this is the poop. Captain Aubrey says that in close action, with top men firing at you, just having the poop is like having insurance against a musket ball in the back!"

Young Blakenly was touring Krystyana on the deck and she was following his explanations with the rapt attention that only a smitten young lady would have evidenced. Brigid trailed after them listening to Blakenly's explanations with like attention. Krystyana had adopted her as a little sister.

Krystyana, for some reason known only to women, wore her evening gown, a simple but elegant affair with a girdle. The drape followed her rapidly evolving womanly figure, and Alana could not help but feel a proprietary fondness for this blooming beauty whose life she had saved...saved twice!

Her thoughts stayed to her own sister Alisande. She would be twelve years old, just a couple years older than Brigid. Was she safe?. Was she Alive? Had that bastard Michael killed her? The doubt was enough to make her head spin.

Krystyana and Blakenly could have been a half a world away. Blakenly in his finest blue uniform, scrubbed, brushed and combed to a fare thee well. It was obvious to all on deck that the two were in a world of their own.

"Hmmm", Alana thought idly, "An Earl would make a suitable suitor for a Queen's ward." Then she smiled as the two walked past and Blakenly looked up in horror as he realized he had almost failed to acknowledge not just his Lieutenant, but the Captain himself!

"Sorry Captain! Apologies Mr. Pullings!" as he gave his salute. Pullings looked at Aubrey with a wry smile.

"Morning Mr. Blakenly...but I see you have far more important duties at the moment...carry on!"

"Yes Sir! Thank you sir!"

Krystyana caught Alana's eye and gave her a very shy smile. Alana smiled back.

"Ah young love...isn't it grand?" Stephen had made his way on deck with his coffee. "And tell me Tom, how is the Lady Illica today?" The entire crew had come to call all of the women, with the exception of Alana, ladies. She was still "the Princess" or "her Highness" and always with the greatest respect.

"Oh splendid Doctor, she's..." then realizing the trap he had fallen into Pullings blushed.

"Well I think they make a fine couple, don't you Princess?" Jack bluffed.

"I believe time will tell" Alana smiled. Actually she was more than thrilled with Illicia and Tom's affection for each other.

Then there was the budding attraction between Stephen and Marissa. Marissa had held the firm belief that no man could or ever would be able to get past the fact that she had been raped multiple times by both the Norsemen and the Duchess' lesbian whores and that she was condemned to spend her days alone and as a spinster.

For a short while, each seemed to mull their own feelings, then Stephen mumbled, "Well I have patients to look in on."

"Captain with your leave" Pullings saluted.

That left Alana and Jack alone.

"No matter what we find on Isle del Muertes we will be sending a landing party to confirm. I have no idea what we'll run into, but if it's our port or a friendly situation, I am confident you and your ladies would enjoy some time on dry land" he smiled.

"More than my heart could wish!"

"Then have them ready for shore leave when we sight land. Now, let me show you our chasers. They are my particular joy. Their workings will give you a basic understanding of how we handle the great guns."

CHAPTER 10

Sure enough, mid-afternoon came the call, "Land Ho!"

Everyone rushed to the larboard bow. Even from that far distance it was obvious that this was a verdant island, mostly jungle. As they approached everyone waited for a sign of any kind of civilization.

Bonden was at the mizzen top. "Call for the Captain!"

Jack and Tom climbed the ropes as they had as youngsters. Both peered where Bonden pointed.

Coming into sight around the point was a large dock area...with all native boats...

Coming into view behind and in the jungle was a large city...definitely Mayan...huge buildings and a great pyramid. No sign of modern civilization at all.

"Not good", Jack muttered, "Not good at all. Tom, lets beat to quarters. We'll anchor in the bay and have Captain Howard's full complement of Marines turn out. Let's see the greeting we receive."

The Surprise caused a remarkable effect on the dockside village. By the time she had anchored a score of vessels were on their way out to greet them.

As they approached, Bonden tried the standard hails. All met with puzzled looks. A very ornately dressed man with a huge headdress tried to address him but no one could make out the language.

Even Stephen with his linguistic abilities was unable to make out a word.

"Jack...these may be real Mayans and if so, I am afraid we are truly in the Princess' time and world!"

Over the afternoon representatives from the local government were welcomed aboard using sign language. Many different individuals from the city with diverse language skills came aboard to no avail. Then, as refreshments were being passed, Stephen's ears pricked up. A young woman dressed in white was trying her hand at conversing. Stephen listened carefully and responded tentatively. Soon both were smiling.

"What is it Stephen?" Jack asked.

"I believe it's a derivation of Portuguese. It is not the local language but she apparently speaks both...we may have found our translator!"

And so they had. The young woman, named Lana, was a shipwreck victim off a merchant galley blown by a fierce storm far off its course and lost in mid-ocean. She

had been found by a Mayan trimaran close to death and nursed back to health. She had been in the city for 10 years now so she was fairly fluent.

It seemed that another victim of the same wreck, a man this time, was also fairly fluent. He was in the city itself just inland. He was sent for at once. The rest of the day was spent in basic communication.

Yes, these were the Maya. No, there had been no contact with any of what could be called European civilization. In this present time, the Maya controlled the America's from Northern Central America to the Southern Brazils. This particular City State was ruled by a local Prince who owed a titular allegiance to the High King on the mainland.

No, there were no European trading posts. Except for the two shipwreck victims, there was no contact with Europe at all. And finally, the Surprise was by far the largest ship they had ever seen.

"Well", Jack murmured to Alana taking her aside, "Not good news for us, I'm afraid, but things do look good for you Princess."

Alana just nodded. Her feelings were mixed. Happy of course that she was in what appeared to be her world, but concerned about the 200 men on the Surprise, out of their time and reality. The newcomers were invited to dinner at the Prince's palace, which they were happy to accept.

After the introductions, the man, who had been a boson's mate on the Portuguese ship, was unofficially assigned to Jack, Stephen and the officers of the Surprise. Lena, stayed with Alana and her ladies. At the royal table Alana found herself seated across from a startling lovely woman in a haltered white gown. She had noticed her earlier since the gown had no back, leaving legs and buttocks exposed. She had been introduced as the High Priestess of the head deity of the island. Her name, as close to Alana could pronounce it was Queatoch. She carried herself with a regal bearing and Lana explained that before taking the vows as a Priestess she was the Prince's sister, making her a Princess also.

At dinner Queatoch spent the first half listening to what was said around her, the translation going slowly. Finally she said something to Lana motioning that she should translate for Alana.

Lana smiled and said, "Queatoch is High Priestess of the Goddess Ixtab here on the Island. She noticed that you have been blessed by the Goddess."

Alana looked very puzzled.

Queatoch again spoke to Lana. "The Priestess reminded me you may not be aware of our local customs. Ixtab is the Goddess of the hanged. The rope marks around your neck are usually found only on Senior and High priestesses with many decades in Ixtab's service. Both you and your Lady", she said motioning to Marissa nearby, "have

received the Goddess' blessing." Queatoch smiled and lifted her long hair. She had very distinct permanent rope scars around her neck.

"Now how to I explain this?" Alana's mind was spinning rapidly.

To buy time and help her frame an answer, Alana had the girl ask the Priestess if she would be so kind as to tell her more of the Goddess and her worship.

The reply was fascinating. As Goddess of the hanged, Ixtab conveyed the soul of the deceased who died in this manner directly to heaven, so any hanged man, woman or child for that matter was guaranteed a place. She was an erotic goddess, taking great pleasure in all things sexual. That is why in their theological explanation a hanged man or woman would exhibit sexual arousal during the process. It was interpreted as a further blessing from the Goddess. She was also the Goddess of warriors so all who died in battle were assured of her good offices.

Alana was totally taken aback. Was she insane or had they encountered an entire religion based upon the concept of erotic hanging?

The girl went on to explain that the Priestesses maintained a sacred grove of trees equipped with nooses and supports to stand on. Acolytes and Priestesses were available day and night to assist those who sought out the Goddess' blessing. In return they only asked to be allowed to collect the golden elixir (further explained as the men's' and women's ejaculates) which were used in sacred potions to obtain visions. The applicants were offered a special liquor which decreased the discomfort of the actual hanging but exacerbated the eroticism of the event. The Priestesses and Acolytes also participated in "services" daily wherein a number "visited" the Goddess (e.g. were hanged) to receive blessings or ask for a blessing for another. The length of time the subject allowed herself to hang was indicative of her faith and seriousness of their request.

Alana finally got up the courage to ask if these hangings often resulted in the deaths of the Priestesses and Acolytes.

The reply was this usually only happened with novices unprepared for the experience, or when a request was so important that the participant threw caution to the winds and stayed on the rope for far too long a time. But even here they were assured of the blessing and good offices of the Goddess in ushering them straight to heaven. It was considered a cause for great rejoicing.

The other group that was always at risk were the Acolytes. Those young women were accepted for training as a priestess and were studying to qualify. These had to build their knowledge and stamina in order to please the Goddess in spending as much time as possible on the "golden cord" (their euphemism for the type of noose in use, she would later discover). They were always to work in partnership as pairs so one would monitor the other and be sure that a session did not go too far. Of course, accidents did happen.

If there was a war or battle with another city or civilization, the captured became slaves. The Priestesses would have first choice for new Acolytes and general slaves. These slaves would be sacrificed to the Goddess on high occasions, their hangings in celebration of certain days holy to the Goddess.

There were exceptions, of course. The only time a male was allowed in the temple is when a new priestess was installed. Then a suitable male slave was chosen as her consort. This was considered a high privilege. The young man was chosen for his physical prowess and beauty. He was brought into the temple and adored by the acolytes. They bathed and prepared him, oiling his body and titillating him to the height of passion. As the highlight of her initiation into the priesthood the supplicant would change from an ivory gown into white.

She would then mount the platform to perform her first duty as a full priestess. The male consort had been prepared with the necessary potions. Bound and anally plugged he was brought to the platform and the priestess would ritually noose him. It was her responsibility to 'milk' him for his essential fluids and she used whatever skills needed for this. As he ejaculated and donated his seed to her inauguration he would be ritually hanged and sacrificed to the goddess. The whole affair was quite erotic and most of the male consorts went to their sacrifice quite willingly!

Alana was totally amazed.

The Priestess smiled. She had been watching Marissa, Krystyana and Mira and commented something to the interpreter, who responded. "Queatoch has noticed your servants also have been blessed by the goddess." Using their terminology Alana tried to explain that all of her ladies had been hanged at one time or another.

This seemed to both please and puzzle the Priestess.

Trying for clarity Alana gave an abbreviated telling of her tale ending with her rescue by Gilbert. After the translation Queatoch looked very puzzled. She gave careful instructions for a sentence by sentence translation for her response.

She explained the basics of how a High Priestess was chosen. When the former High Priestess died the senior (most with 20 years or more service) would offer sacrifices to the Goddess and she would choose the next. These sacrifices involved their voluntary and ritualistic hangings. At the stroke of noon each would take her place on the grand hall on elaborate wooden platforms and tie her noose around her neck.

Each would then step off and hang herself. The time was measured by what in effect was a sundial on the far wall of the temple itself. The actual time periods were what were used by all the priestesses for their sacrifices. The candidates would always with the time the previous high priestess had survived. If they signaled their associate priestesses they could not continue they were released and removed from competition, and no shame accrued. At a set period the remaining hanging participants were

released. It was common for the majority to have offered their supreme sacrifice to the Goddess and not survived. If more than one survived, they waited to determine if each participant's faculties were intact. If so, and more than one survived, this was carried out day after day, until the Goddess chose the next high priestess. If none survived than the priestess who had lasted the longest before signaling to be released took the position. Queatoch had ascended to the position five years before.

Alana took this in wondering amazement. Flustered she responded that she was amazed and thankful for the priestess' explanation.

Queatoch smiled. One of the items that had caused great interest in the Mayans was Stephen's Breguet repeating watch. The priestess had asked for a complete demonstration of its capabilities and the time keeping measurement that was used. At this point she looked Alana directly in her eyes and explained that no high priestess had ever survived being hanged for a quarter of the time Alana had hanged. Basically, in their religion, she would be considered the earthly incarnation of the Goddess herself.

Alana broke her gaze, looked down and blushed. How to respond?

Queatoch broke the silence. As the evening was coming to a close she invited Alana and her ladies to come to the temple the day after tomorrow (certain ceremonies were being carried out the next day) to see the grounds and become more familiar with their activities. Alana accepted gratefully.

After dinner back aboard Surprise, Jack sought her out. "You seemed to strike up a fine conversation with that holy woman. It seems that some of our female holy orders could take a lesson from what they consider to be appropriate garb!"

"The most strange encounter I have ever experienced", she replied. "We have been invited to the temple the day after tomorrow. Will there be time?"

"I expect we shall be here the better part of a month, performing repairs and re-supplying. But more importantly, we have to come up with some type of cogent plan of action. Since we don't seem to be in our time or world for that matter, we will have to formulate a scheme to allow us to return to our reality. And you Princess?"

"If this is my time, and being on the far side of the world, I have no guarantee what 'reality' truly is. I'm afraid that I am marooned here. None of the ships we've seen have the capability to make a long sea crossing such as the Surprise."

"Yes I take your meaning. We both seem to be in a kind of a conundrum."

Jack looked around at the blue sky and serene spread of the sea. "If you'll excuse me Princess it is my custom to take a swim, especially when we're moored or becalmed, and it would serve to whet my appetite for supper."

“Certainly”, Alana replied. “Lieutenant Pullings was explaining to me that you are the strongest swimmer on the ship...”

Jack had to suffuse a blush. His natural modesty, especially in front of a beautiful woman would not allow him to take full credit for the remark.

“I only remarked” she replied in an effort to ameliorate the effect of her comment, “as I am no great swimmer and, if it’s possible, I would like to learn!”

“Well I would be glad to instruct” Jack replied with distinct pleasure. “but it would not serve for us to swim in the altogether here in this place. Wouldn’t want to offend our new friends.”

Alana smiled inwardly. The extreme minimum of clothing and outright nudity of the Mayan Priestesses was obvious. “Well, if you will allow me a moment I will slip into something a little more appropriate” and she hurried below deck.

Jack waited on the rear rope ladder in his old sail trousers and Alana emerged in an outfit that in any other part of the world might be considered scandalous. The halter top and light skimpy drawers drew attention to her lovely breasts and ludicrously long legs.

“She looks ever finer than when she was completely nude” Jack thought.

“Can you float?” he asked before they descended.

“Oh yes, a little” she replied.

Slowly they dipped themselves into the warm water. Jack helped her onto her back and showed her the ease of floating in the still sea.

“Now” he said as he had her clap onto one of the Surprise’s light hawsers, “observe my motions.” And he struck out about twenty yards and back.

Alana watched closely. “You seem to use both your arms and your legs to propel you” she observed. “But surely it’s the power in your arms that does the work.”

“Not at all Princess. I have known many a swimmer to simply guide themselves with their arms, propelling themselves with their leg motions. The real trick”, he confided, “is being able to clearly take a breath every couple of strokes instead of trying to maintain your head above water at all times. It is an unnatural attitude that is both tiring and to be avoided”

Jack took her arm and eased her into position. “Now strike out while keeping your legs stiff and striking the water behind you!”

To his surprise Alana took off like a porpoise. She barely raised her head every few strokes or so and he had to strike out after her in a determined rush to keep up.

She stopped about 50 yards from the ship and looked around paddling water to keep her head up.

“That was wonderful!” she enthused. “I can see that it takes a great deal of effort. You must have to train like an athlete to do it with consistency.”

“You are right Princess. In calms or short sails I will swim every day a few times around the ship.”

“Then I shall make it my habit to join you” she declared. And they both swam happily back to the rear stairway.

As Alana climbed up it was impossible for Jack not to notice that her swimming garb had turned completely transparent. She seemed unaffected and totally at ease, reveling in the warmth of the sun. It was only Illicia’s cry and her throwing a towel around her that seemed to chastise her.

“Come below, Highness, before you catch your death!” she rumbled.

Alana looked over her shoulder smiling at Jack as she was lead below. “Good Lord!” she thought. “How could anyone not love that girl?”

Shaking his head he struck off for his usual dozen trips around the ship.

CHAPTER 11

Later in the great cabin Stephen with port in hand, summarized the situation. “We, of course, should attempt to get back to our world and time. The Princess needs to return to her country. Only if she does return she is sure to be executed as soon as she sets foot on her soil by that bloody usurping cousin of hers. Jack as a Captain of a King’s ship I know you have the primary responsibility to return to your duty as soon as possible. But do you suppose we could help her?”

“What are you suggesting?”

“Apparently the Surprise is the most powerful warship in this time and on these seas. In her descriptions to me of Branart, the Royal Castle and residence is the main fortification protecting the dock and bay, much like the Tower of London. They do not have firearms, cannons or carronades. If Surprise’s main guns could be brought to bear and the Marines used effectively we might take the entire government in an almost bloodless coup and turn the whole thing over to Alana!”

“Stephen it never fails to amaze me as how you see these convoluted plots and schemes to advance the cause of freedom even in this foreign world!” He was silent for a few minutes. “Well we’ll have to warp to Africa before cutting back to the Bermuda’s. Let’s see what a short trip north will add to the cost.”

In the midst of his calculations Jacks paused in deep thought. “But how would I explain any damage to the ship or loss of men to the admiralty when, or should I say, if we should return? I’m sure they will have as hard a time as the Pope in believing that not only have we traveled through time and space but decided to assist in the overthrow of a government while we were in the neighborhood!”

“Surely Jack, as a Post Captain and Master and Commander of a King’s ship you have plenipotentiary powers?”

“Of course, but not to the overthrow of regimes, and in an area of the world we may never return to!”

“But think of it this way Jack, we have no guarantee the process is reversible. We may sail our way to Bermuda and spend months, even years trying to find our way home without the least success. Would it not be in our interest to have a friendly port and nation at our disposal?”

This caused Jack to pause and consider.

“This is an extremely difficult position Stephen. It will bear much consideration.”

“By all means, but not the least would be the fate of our five lovely passengers. Are we not condemning them to horrible deaths if we don't take a part in this situation?”

“Certainly not! If we return them to a neutral or foreign power they would be safe!”

“For the love, Jack! If you were this usurper and heard a rumor that the true Queen was alive, living in exile, would you just let this go by the by? Or would you send your best assassins to see the threat was done away with once and for all?”

“I take your point.”

“These women are exceptional Jack. They are far lovelier than any from our time and space, and a number of your men have become ensnared in their webs, whether intentionally set for them or not.”

“I know Tom has fairly swooned over Illicia. After the passing of his dear wife, that horrible scar of his has always made him feel the leavings were all he could choose from...she is a remarkably beautiful girl...and she also seems besotted with him.”

“Quite so. And how about Blakenly?”

“Krystyana, Princess Alana's ward? Yes there is a high seas romance that is obvious to everyone who has seen the two of them together.”

“I need not point out that I find Marissa to be more than Diana's equal in all areas. And Jack...now tell me true...are you not the least interested in the Princess herself?”

“Stephen you wound me! Of course I am! How could any man not be? Has a more comely, spirited or enthusiastic woman ever lived?”

“Faith Jack...Given what you have just admitted and the fact that I find myself attracted more and more to Marissa each day! You would sacrifice these lovelies when you have the means to assure their safety?”

“Stephen, do you honestly believe that a poor ship's Captain could aspire to win the heart of a future Queen of what we know as England?” He shook his head ruefully. “This needs far more consideration Stephen. Far more. After all...I am twice her age.”

CHAPTER 12

The next morning the officers and Alana's retinue were given a tour of the city. Impeccably clean Stephen observed. No trash. No debris. Wonderfully maintained. All the visitors were impressed. In Alana's time all but the Royal roads were little more than mud pits, and most of the 19th century roads were little better.

That evening at a royal reception at the Prince's Palace Jack sought out Alana. "Princess?"

"Yes Captain?"

"Are you enjoying your time here so far?"

"It is by far the most thrilling adventure one could imagine."

"Are they treating you correctly?"

"Yes! As visiting royalty. All of us, including my servants."

"Excellent!"

"Will it truly take another four weeks to outfit the ship?"

"Another three to four weeks should allow us to ship all the stores we will need and do excellent repairs."

"I am afraid to ask, but what then?"

"I have given this much thought. It would seem my orders would encumber me to try to find my way back through the portal that took us here if it can be found."

Alana looked down.

"To do this, we will need to warp back with the winds and come back across the African coast and then back to the Bermudas. It seems to me that a trip North to Branart might be in order."

She smiled up at him, "Thank you, Captain, but I am afraid it would be impossible for me, in my present circumstances to return. Even with a host of faithful retainers it would be an impossible task to retake my throne without an army at my back. And think of the danger for my baby sister? If she is alive Michael has her under lock and key. I have given this much thought. She cannot ascend to the throne until her fourteenth birthday. If she is still alive Michael will likely force her to marry him and consolidate his power. If I return it might spell her doom and I fear that it will take years, if not a lifetime to

accomplish the goal of retaking the kingdom. And the horrific battles and loss of life might hardly be worth the effort.”

“That is a subject I much wanted to discuss...the Capital of Branart and Royal residence guards the sea and the main harbor, much like our Tower of London, if I'm not mistaken. What would you think about an assault by a Naval and Marine force armed with weapons 600 years advanced? Do you think they might make the difference?”

Alana looked up with hope in her eyes for the first time. “The Surprise?” she asked, her heart in her throat.

“Yes and Captain Howard's 30 crack Marines as the lead force...with another 170 or so Surprise's backing them up...”

Tears of gratitude streamed down Alana's face. “This is more than I could ever possibly have dreamt of. How can I ever thank you?”

“We have a lot of planning and work ahead. Right now we should take advantage of the resources for relaxation here.”

“Certainly.”

“I understand that you and your ladies have been invited to tour the temple of their Goddess...seems men are not allowed as a rule.”

“Yes they are very strict about that.”

“I've invited the worthies to dine with us on Surprise tomorrow so we should have a chance to get caught up.”

The next morning Alana with all four of her retinue were greeted on the beach by a lovely young girl in the Priestess' uniform, but instead of pure white her's was a pale yellow. Lana was with her as interpreter.

“This is Quetellach...she is a third year Acolyte. She has been sent as your guide in the temple.”

“Thank you Quetellach! We look forward to your hospitality”, Alana smiled.

Quetellach through Lana tried to give a brief history of the temple and Ixtab's worship on Isle del Muertes. The temple was the second major structure built on the island after the Royal palace. It had been enlarged a number of times as the need for services grew.

“Need for services?”, Alana asked.

As the population grew so did the need for the services and the blessings of the goddess. Quetellach explained that those ill, infirm, or saddened beyond their ability to recover made use of the goddess' blessings.

"Saddened?" inquired Marissa.

Yes...through lose of a loved one, the loss of position, the loss of physical goods virtually any form of depression was cause for seeking the services of the goddess.

"So those whose mourning could not be abated would come to the temple to hang themselves?"

"Yes...the Goddess would personally escort them to heaven. The Priestesses and Acolytes not only served the needs of the Temple but assisted those who desired the Goddess' blessing."

Alana needed clarification. "Then it is the job of the Priestesses and Acolytes to assist these individuals in hanging themselves?"

"Yes but not just in the actual hanging They are involved in getting the utmost blessing from the Goddess. It is our mission for every participant to have a productive orgasm while hanging."

"Productive?"

"Yes, for the males and females, ejaculation is the goal. Yes, it is the Goddess' desire for each man woman, even children to experience the bliss that comes from her embrace. They are assisted by the Temple's assistants to achieve the highest sexual pleasure during their blessing."

Alana could only shake her head in amazement. Marissa seemed very sobered, while Illicia, Krystyana and Mira were frankly dumbfounded. The temple was large in its interior. They were shown the small rooms for the acolytes and slightly larger ones for the priestesses. In each there was a noose of almost golden yellow rope made out of soft material at least an inch in diameter hanging from a center beam with a stool under it.

"That is the golden knot that we use for our devotions."

"Do you make use of the golden knot every day?"

"Yes, but only with our sister present."

"Amazing!" Alana muttered.

They were then shown the main chambers. In the center chamber was the large sculpture of the goddess herself. She was depicted as a beautiful young girl, kneeling. Her ankles appeared bound. She had one hand cupping her left breast with her nipple very erect. She wore a noose tightly tied around her neck.

On the walls surrounding the statue were colored depictions of various hangings. In each the central figure was the hanged looking peaceful and serene as they hung, with the priestesses in attendance. These were seen manually or orally stimulating the men and women as they hanged. In some cases the men and women were ejaculating with looks of pleasure on their faces as they hanged.

"This is just amazing!" Alana remarked.

"Yes", Quetellach replied. "It must seem very strange to someone never exposed to our beliefs."

"Is Ixtab the only deity worshipped by the Maya?" Marissa queried.

"No, There are quite a number of other deities. But here on Isle de Muertes, we center our worship on the Goddess as she has come to meet our many needs."

At that moment two other acolytes appeared.

"These two sisters have volunteered to give you an example of our devotions."

Alana and the ladies followed them into one of the rooms. Both girls appeared to be in their early teens, not fully developed but pretty with long black hair tied in a ponytail behind them. This is Queolan and Keotach. Queolan is a new Priestess and Keotach is her Acolyte.

Keotach brought in a pitcher of liquid and filled a cup for Queolan who drank it eagerly.

"The liquid relaxes the devotee and relieves her of most of the discomfort of her hanging."

For the first time Alana noticed that all the Priestesses and Acolytes shaved all the hair from their bodies except for their heads. A tray was brought in by a third girl and on it was a plum shaped onyx which seemed covered in lubricant and a smaller plug capped at one end and also lubricated.

"For our long ministrations, where we wish to be sure that the Goddess is truly honored, we do not wish our bodily waste to sully the process. Even though the devotees purge themselves these two are used as a guarantee of cleanliness."

Alana watched in almost horrid fascination as Queolan inserted the plum shaped onyx in her rectum and then took the other and inserted it in her urethra. "This assures that neither urine nor feces will mar the devotion."

"I can understand the onyx plug but isn't the other, in the urethra rather dangerous?"

"It can be problematical. Occasionally it will become lodged or broken off blocking the channel. The devotee is then faced with a slow and agonizing death. Often the choice is made to provide an ultimate sacrifice to the Goddess in this eventuality."

Queolan brought over a narrow stool and stood upon it. She adjusted the coil of the noose around her neck so its knot ended up behind her left ear. She then took up all the slack so that she ended up standing on her toes. This being done Keotach began to caress her and nibbling her nipples. Queolan herself stroked her clitoris and soon her face took on a suffused darkening as she became fully aroused. Abruptly she kicked away the stool and hanged. The cord cinched around her neck and she began to stroke herself more intensely.

Then as her face took on the congested red of the hanged woman she allowed herself to climax shuddering and cumming hard. As she went limp, Keotach released her and gently laid her on the floor as she breathed deeply and started to recover.

Alana found that she had held her breath during the last minute or so. She was stunned. She turned to her ladies and each had the same look on her face. Utter amazement. Krystyana was touching her throat with the wan look she had when reliving her worst nightmares. Alana put her arms around her and kissed her gently. "I should have realized that this would be too much for you my little love. Please escort my ward back to the ship."

A young acolyte took Krystyana by the arm gently smiling

Alana turned to Quetellach. "This is far too much to take in one visit. All of us", she nodded at the remaining girls, "have known the noose's embrace but never with this force of eroticism. "

"You are welcome to return and observe. I am at your service as guide and instructor. If any of you should wish to take part in the training or participate in any way the High Priestess has ordered me to instruct you and allow you full access. Each of you has more than the necessary preliminary qualifications to study."

Illicia looked puzzled. "Yes" said Quetellach to her. "I know you don't share the physical marks of the others but from the tales your Princess has told you have the experience, just not the physical results."

Illicia gave her a small smile.

"Tell me". Alana asked, "The plug that the girl inserts up front. Is the reed the Priestesses use strong enough?"

“The head priestess and her senior ladies have plugs made of gold, but these are far too expensive for the rest. Unfortunately there is constant danger. We try to choose the strongest reeds and lubricate them well but no matter what we do some become lodged and cannot be removed.”

“I believe our Doctor, Dr. Maturin, might be able to deal with this problem and save the girls.”

“If he has a way of dealing with this it would be very welcome. Just yesterday a young relative of mine, Quecato, had the end break off when inserted and she is in great pain and plans to sacrifice herself this evening.”

“With your permission I will see if Dr. Maturin can attend her.”

Alana and the girls returned hurriedly to the Surprise and found Stephen making notes of his various finds in his cabin. Alana described the situation and Stephen nodded.

“This may be able to be managed by dilating the urethra and with a probe and retractors removing the blocking object. But there is no telling how serious the current infection is from its being lodged.”

He took a bag of instruments and followed Alana back. Men were not allowed in the temple so the young girl, Quecato, was moved to the Prince’s residence.

Stephen examined her with Lana’s assistance as interpreter. Alana waited anxiously. He came out looking concerned. “The entire area is very inflamed but I believe I can remove the offending object. From then on we’ll just have to dose her and hope for the best.”

He gave the girl a goodly dose of laudanum and with it taking effect, and strong hands to hold her down, began the procedure. It was painful but over in minutes with the offending broken plug removed. The girl got immediate relief and the amount of urine that poured forth was exceptional. Even with the pain as the result of the surgery she was evidently very grateful.

“These plugs made of wood and reeds”, mused Stephen, “need to be done away with. If there is a need to temporarily block the urethra, steel plugs should be used with loops at the end to make it easy to remove. I will have Mr. Lamb make up a gross and send them to the temple with my compliments.”

By the next day young Quecato was much recovered and the Prince and Priestesses deluged Stephen with their thanks. That afternoon he had Alana present the High Priestess with a dozen bright and highly polished sounds created for their unique use. She accepted them gratefully. She bowed before Alana. “Princess, we will forever be in your debt!”

CHAPTER 13

Another dinner had been planned for that evening so Alana tried on the new blue gown Illicia had made. As usual it was a wonderful evening and the food, being fresh, was superb. After the dinner Jack, Stephen and Alana sat in the great room with a few sheets of blank paper and a fresh carafe of port.

"Your Highness, please describe the fortifications and troop strength of the main keep of Branart to the best of your abilities."

Alana let her mind travel back what seemed like eons, but what in truth was less than two years ago. She gave a remarkably accurate depiction of the harbor and its fortifications. Jack questioned her on the placement any weaponry, such as fire catapults or other pieces that could threaten the ship in the fortress and the staffing and reinforcements that could be expected.

Her father did not keep a strong standing army and what there was along with this personal guard had gone with him to free her. If Michael had kept what was left of that force in place there might be a significant armed force at the castle but it was highly unlikely. He was sure of her death and there would be no need to keep a military force against a possible rebellion. Besides the nobles needed their sons and workmen back for the planting seasons...No the fort would be minimally manned under normal circumstances.

The only real problem was her sister Alisande. If she were alive Michael would be holding her prisoner. He would likely pt her life as forfeit if his was in danger. There was a smaller port thirty miles to the south, Lugar. Alana was familiar with this fishing village also, as she and her cousins went there for holidays. It would be possible to buy or rent a smaller galley and use it to enter the main channel at Branart and check the condition of readiness of the castle.

It seemed reasonable that once all the fortifications had been mapped out a night attack by Surprise using her powerful long guns to destroy the castle's main offensive and defensive capabilities followed by an attack by the Marines fortified by the Surprises had a good opportunity to be successful. If they could just determine Alisande's condition and where she was being kept.

They talked and planned into the early morning hours. The more details they examined the more likely the plan had a good chance of working as long as the element of surprise was maintained. Alana felt truly exhilarated, but worried as well. She was truly agonizing over Alisande.

The next day, though another tour had been planned, Alana and her ladies begged off and beseeching Killick obtained the materials to make a scale model of the castle and

harbor of Branart. That evening she presented the model to Jack, Stephen and the other officers.

“Excellent!”, Tom enthused, “But how accurate is the scale?”

“I’ve had to rely totally on my memory as no one else has ever seen Branart. But I was raised at the castle and I do know it step for step. My main worry will be any changes that have occurred in the last year or so.”

“Now how deep is this channel?”, Jack queried.

“It’s a not a deep channel. Our largest ships and barges use it but they all draw much less than the Surprise.”

“Then we shall have to rely upon the Surprise for the bombardment. The Surprise will land the main detachment here. The Surprise draws less water. It will be up to the frigate to bombard the castle!”

“Should work”, mused Mowen the second lieutenant.

“Are the placement of these trebuchet batteries accurate?” asked Captain Howard.

“Yes, but they have very limited range. We have not developed cannons or firearms that make the Surprise and Surprise so deadly. There has never been an assault in the castle’s history from the sea so the vast majority of the catapults as they stand are facing the mainland.”

“Better and better”, Jack murmured.

“And this small port 10 miles south. We can rent a boat for a week so we can reconnoiter close enough?”

“Yes, Lugar will have many ships for rent that time of year. It’s out of season.”

“Good, that will allow us to confirm everything without using the Surprise or any of our boats.”

“Give me a wig and dress me as a fisherman’s wife”, said Alana, “and I can take you anywhere within the harbor we need to go.”

“Not a great deal of danger there I would presume”, mused Stephen, “but it would be best if you would allow me and a few picked men that job. We may have to infiltrate the castle to determine your sister’s status and whereabouts.”

Alana just smiled. That battle could be fought later.

“It would seem that our best bet would be to come in under the dark of the moon, slip into firing position and take out the batteries on this side of the castle”, Jack pointed to the side facing the sea, “with concentrated fire. If there is any threat on the other side the starboard batteries can deal with it.”

“Once we have battered this side of the castle into submission, and blasted those doors it will be up to Captain Howard and his men to lead the rest of the Surprise’s into taking the Castle.”

“This all presupposes”, Stephen mused, “that the tyrant is there in the Castle when we arrive and we can be sure of your sister’s welfare.”

“Princess, is there a holiday or celebration in the next few months that would guarantee you cousin being in attendance?”

“The midsummer solstices four months from now, will that give us enough time?”

“Just about perfect”, Jack smiled. “Alright, there's not a moment to lose! Tom, see to the provisioning. Mr. Mowan as acting first lieutenant I will want you to work with Captain Howard on the beginnings of the assault plan. Mr. Blakenly?”

“Yes sir”, Blakenly jumped to his feet.

“As of now you are acting Second Lieutenant. Your job will be to provide a security detail for her Highness and her ladies so that when the time is right they will be able to move with confidence through the captured area.”

“Yes Sir!” Blakenly looked as if he had been presented with the greatest gift imaginable. An actual Lieutenant's posting!

Krystyana smiled to herself. She was very happy for him. One worry all the men had had now that they knew they were not in their world was how the life onboard in this small part of the navy would continue. A promotion to acting lieutenant assured Blakenly of the actual position if and when they returned to his world. From then on the ship buzzed with an activity that rivaled anything any of them had seen before. That Sunday, after reading the Articles of War, Jack decided to give the word personally.

“Men, though we may be on the far side of a world that seems confusing and strange, this boat is our home. This is England. You have all come to know our Royal guests, some of you quite personally. You have all come to hear their tragic story and see the scars they bare. The truth is if left even on a comparatively friendly shore they would be hunted down like animals and hanged for the perverted lust of the usurper who holds the throne of the country they call Branart, and we call England.”

He had had Alana and her ladies join him on the quarterdeck.

“Do you want to leave these ladies to the mercy of their would be murderers?”

“NO!” 200 voices roared.

“Do you want to see them dangling from some gallows to be sure a usurper can steal a throne?”

“No!” An even greater roar.

“Then before we sail to attempt to find our home we will deliver them and do what we do best! And as we all know, SURPRISE is on our side!!”

CHAPTER 14

The next day was taken up in diplomatic negotiation. With the interpreters and Jack with Stephen's assistance a treaty was negotiated between the Kingdom of Branart and the Mayan Kingdom for mutual trade and benefit.

Branart would receive the bounty of the Mayan civilization and the Mayans would receive the technological help coming through the Surprise and her crew. Along with the signing of papers and exchanging of Royal signets, Jack made a present to the Prince of a hunting rifle and enough powder and shot for a year's shooting. This pleased the Prince so much that his gift of a chest of gold was far beyond any expectation.

Alana had had Illicia and Clarissa make up a set of fine gowns for the High Priestess embroidered with the Royal seal of Branart which pleased her greatly. She gave her a fragrant wooden box carved with the image of the goddess on the cover. Within was a large supply of the special Elixir, a priestly raiment and her own personal golden loop only provided to full priestesses of Ixtab. In addition, in their own fitted case was a onyx plum shaped plug for her anus and one of Stephen's new sounds/catheters that could be inserted in the urethra to prevent urination during the hanging. She was amazed with the gift.

That night the dinner held at the Prince's palace was more informal than usual. Both the Prince's party and Jack and Alana's had made major efforts to learn a few words in each other's languages and this was appreciated by both sides. An offer had been made to transport the translators back to their respective parts of the existing continent, but it was kindly rejected by both. They had new lives to live and were quite satisfied with their arrangements on Isle del Muertes.

The High Priestess had been slowly learning Alana's history and had finally divined that she was at great risk from her cousin. It was extremely surprising when the Prince offered to send a "delegation" of 50 of his finest warriors to accompany Alana, as a combination ambassadorial delegation and royal escort, on her trip back to Branart with the understanding they were to be trained by Jack and Captain Howard as part of the assault unit for the attack on the castle. This absolutely amazed all parties. In addition a 5th year adept Queonach, and one of the acolytes would also accompany the group, as their spiritual advisors.

Jack stammered his way through a thankful appreciation for the offer but he was very concerned on what a three month ship voyage would do for these men unused to the open sea. Stephen added his concerns from a purely medical viewpoint. The Prince took the caution seriously but he was also taken with Alana's plight and was sure an additional 50 soldiers trained as the fiercest of Mayan warriors and armed as marines would be a significant addition to the fighting force.

Jack again thanked the Prince but suggested that he and his advisors, as well as the men who would be leaders of the force tour the Surprise to see what conditions would be like for a long sea voyage. This was heartedly advocated by Stephen and it was set up for the next afternoon.

The following morning the Surprises worked their holystones as if the King himself was due on board. Each man wore his best uniform. Every rope was turned and every knot arranged. Below decks had been turned out to white glove perfection and at four bells the Prince and his retinue, including the High Priestess was welcomed on board with traditional horn blowing and smart uniformed marines and their finest pitch. The tour took forever for every man not in the touring party itself, especially the lieutenants and midshipmen. It ended in the great cabin with a toast of port for all.

The Prince and his party were absolutely amazed at the big guns and had been thoroughly taken by the full two decked broadside that had been fired on their behalf. The leader of the expeditionary force Q, was a cousin of the Prince and he was nothing short of enthusiastic about the project. Neither the close quarters nor admonitions on Stephen's part of the likelihood of seasickness in the short term came close to dissuading any of them.

Alana and the High Priestess were able to spend a few moments alone and even with the barrier of language their connection and sisterly bond was beyond question. The Priestess took Alana's face in her hands and tenderly kissed her on the forehead. Words did not need to express the love and concern that she felt. The next day Alana took her box and accompanied by all her ladies entered the temple. Her guides were waiting for her.

"It's time for me to begin my formal training" she said forcefully. The Mayans only smiled.

Quetellach h led them into a sunlit vestibule where there were a number of low seats. The instruction started and took quite a bit of time as Lana translated.

The Goddess Ixtab was sister to the sun God Though very sexually active she was unmarried. She loved the race of men and was very empathetic to their unhappiness. Being very attracted to warriors and their athletic prowess, she also had a deep love for their sacrifices.

Ixtab taught the first priestesses the link between the golden cord (hanging) and sexual climax, both in men and women. Because of its inherent danger she made as solemn promise. If any lost their lives on the golden cord she would personally escort them to eternal life in paradise. This would be granted to worshippers and non-worshippers alike. Therefore any human, man, woman or child who hanged was guaranteed eternal life.

In Mayan society it became permissible, therefore, if illness, sadness, depression, or any of the ills of mankind was too much for an individual, the noose was promised as a blessed way to end the pain and achieve eternal bliss. As part of that promise, she

granted men erections and ejaculations. Women too were granted all the physical results of lovemaking and superb climaxes from the noose. It became the responsibilities of the priestesses to assist any who so chose to end their lives. Each was to be assisted in the most gentle and erotic way of achieving paradise. As a reward the men's ejaculate and women's erotic fluids were collected and used in the making of all forms of potions to increase the sexual pleasures and increase the length of time one could enjoy the blessings of hanging.

The longer a priestess hanged, the greeted the blessing granted to her by the Goddess. Each novice, acolyte and priestess would practice their technique on a daily basis, all striving for the longest hanging possible and still survive.

As part of the ritual it was made mandatory that each work in pairs. The partner of the hanging girl watching as closely as possible to be sure she did not exceed her limits. Next followed a discussion of the construction of 'the golden cord' as the noose was called. The finest of these were constructed of human hair clipped from the conquered populations of the Maya. Though called 'golden' the cords varied in color from white to black. Thick and soft, its diameter was set at almost two inches.

The tying of the knot used in the hanging was carefully discussed. An entire set of murals showed the various knots and their use. Slip knots were forbidden, except in the case of ritual suicide. Various forms of knots that did not allow a cinching down on the throat were used. The simplest form of noose was actually no more than a loop slung over a beam and tied at eye level. The cord was then brought down and fitted around the front of the neck and under the curve of the jaw. It seemed to Alana that this would be the easiest to free oneself from.

Now they were led into another hall which showed, in graphic terms, the stages of the actual hanging experience. First, of course, was the address to the Goddess. The tying of the knot and its placement around the throat. There were literally dozens of variations, depending on the knot used and the position prior to the actual hanging. It varied from placement directly in the center of the back of the head, at almost ten degree intervals around the throat, until it reached the point where the pivot point was almost directly under the front of the chin. The priestess explained that it took many months of instruction as to the benefits and detriments of each placement and its effect on the length of the hanging, given the specifics of the individual involved.

Next followed an explanation of the training the neophytes were exposed to. The harder a girl struggled the shorter her time on the cord. Struggling and kicking used energy that was better expended in the Goddess' devotion. In their first hangings the neophytes had their wrists bound behind their backs and their ankles tied to reduce their struggles. As they progressed their ankles were loosed and they were taught to cross their ankles and lock their legs together. Finally their wrists were released and they were taught to grasp their wrists behind them. As they progressed they did away with these "locking" techniques and they naturally became more relaxed.

After this lecture each of the girls were asked for the specifics of her hanging, or hangings.

Illicia explained her upbringing and the cruelty of her mistress garroting the girls for her pleasure. Then she related her capture with Alana and trading identities in the mines. Her brutal gang rape and then her brief time faking a suicide by hanging from a knotted scarf. Neither she nor Alana could be absolutely sure of the placement of the knot, but the fact that it was not a slip knot was certain. Both she and Alana were sure she hadn't hanged for more than a minute or so.

Mira told of her arranged marriage to the miser. His cruel use of her and her virtual servitude. Finally his plan for her suicide and then remarriage to the rich widow. She explained her drugging and awaking noosed. She explained the rope her husband had used. The coarseness of the hemp. Its diameter, under a half inch. The fact that it was a slip knot just behind her right ear. She was not sure how long she hanged. She knew she fought and kicked for what seemed like an eternity and that she was close to death when she had been cut down.

Marissa was quiet and restrained in her explanations, starting with the Duchess' perversions. Yes, it had been more than once. The noose was a slip knot behind her left ear. No drop. She had been pulled up until there was no slack in the rope. How long? Yes. Forever. She looked over at Alana plaintively. Alana said her best estimation was over eight minutes each time. Then she related her punishment on the pirate ship, balancing noosed on the top of the capstan. Swinging off and hanging time after time. Thick hawser, about 2 inches. Surviving at least an hour on and off.

Finally came Alana's turn. She tried to relate each of her hangings objectively. The first, with the slow noose a good inch thick, naked on the gallows. Gilbert related that she had been hanging for over an hour when he had the bailiff cut her down. No, she was not conscious at the end, but according to Gilbert she was still kicking.

Then, two days later, being strung up in the town square by the Norsemen by the leather thong, no more than half inch wide. Not truly fully suspended. Her toes had touched the stone beneath her the whole time, but with no benefit. According to Krystyana she had hanged for over twenty minutes that time.

For the first time she described her self hangings. Using the noose to achieve orgasm and having it lose its fear and pain, replaced by a sense of peace and waves of orgasms. Finally the Duchess' hanging. Thick rope. At least an inch thick. Her torture just like Marissa's. Pulled up as far as she could on her toes and then fully hanged. How long? She looked over at Marissa. At least 30 minutes. Possibly over 40.

Quetellach listened carefully, using a stele and a pad to make notes. She looked at the information carefully then each girl. She first went to Illicia, taking her face in her hands. "You are the brave one, taking your mistress' place and putting your very life in danger. You have just had a brief taste of the Goddess. For you we must start as a novice."

Next to Mira. "You have tasted the Goddess' blessings but from a position of man's hate, not love. You also we will start as a novice."

Then Marissa. "You have been badly used. Milked for the golden pearls that the Goddess' blessing provides. You will be taught the ways of the acolytes and how to obtain the pleasure accompanying the blessing.

When she came to Alana, instead of taking her face she dropped to her knees and bowed her head. "Princess, we have never had one as blessed by the Goddess as you. I have discussed your experiences with the sisterhood and we have come to a unanimous decision. If all is as you say it is, you have the capacity to exceed the greatest of us, in the worship of the Goddess. We believe you are the incarnation of the Goddess herself and we rejoice that you are among us."

Alana's jaw dropped in amazement. The implications of this were staggering. "We would beg" Quetellach went on, "that you demonstrate your ability for us. After, we will install you as the Goddess' representative here on earth and beg you to instruct us in her art."

Alana just nodded. She shook her head, as if to clear it and responded, "This seems to be my destiny. Let us proceed."

All the girls were led into the inner chamber where there were golden beakers of liquids. Alana was offered a beaker and she drank it down. "It certainly isn't bad. Tastes like honey wine."

She was shown an alcove where Illicia helped her undress and get into her acolyte's garb. After being nude all those months in Duke Gilbert's service and on the Pirate ship the light fabric and open back did not bother her in the least. Being naturally free of body hair meant that the ritual shaving was not necessary. Next came the lubrication of the anal plug and the urethral sound. The elixir relaxed her to the point where both were inserted with a minimal amount of discomfort. She exited and all the girls complimented her as the dress fit her perfectly.

Waiting her in the middle of the room was a beam arrangement and a stool. She took the golden cord out of the box and checked the knot. It was exactly as she had been instructed. She took a deep breath and walked over and climbed up on the stool. She threw the loose end of the cord over the beam and adjusted it. She knew that she would have to tighten it around her neck for the final adjustment but she wanted to give the elixir a little more time to work.

After a minute or two she slid the noose over her head and made it snug behind the right ear. Then pulling on end of the line, as she had been instructed, she felt the tension of the cord and noose increase as the slack was taken up. Most of the observants tightened the noose until they were standing on the tips of their toes so Alana followed suit. She was feeling a little dreamy and light headed as the noose snugged tight.

Now she let her hands caress her breasts and hard nipples. Her left hand stayed on the nipples as the right crept down under her gown and between her legs massaging her now aching clit. Yes, she was approaching orgasm. Would she do it?

As her ardor rose and she felt the beginning of the orgasm crest she kicked away the stool and hanged. The full tightening of the noose now combined with her ministrations to bring her closer and closer to a superb orgasm. She marveled. Just a bit of pressure...no pain. Yes it felt like she was holding her breath but not the screaming agony of deprivation she experienced previously. Her mind floated her vision exploded and then she came and came gloriously...so completely she felt her consciousness begin to fly at the apex.

But she rode that marvelous orgasm through and continued to float.

Breathe? Who needed to breathe? Her head felt marvelously full. Her body light as a feather. She had no way of knowing but the sway of her body and the breeze in the temple lifted the front panel and exposed her from the waist down. Those watching could only marvel at the twin hard points of her nipples that seemed to expand by the minute.

Her body was floating on waves of eroticism, orgasm following orgasm. She found that manual stimulation was no longer necessary. So to concentrate on the crests of sensations flowing through her she moved her hands behind her grasping one wrist with the other and crossed her ankles. Her attitude, pivoting on the noose, was as a lithe and lovely ballerina caught in mid-pirouette. She was unsurprised to find her thighs and calves slippery with her erotic fluids. She was sure she was dripping. Her mind briefly wondered about her lack of breath. Didn't she need to breathe? After the more hammering orgasms a cleansing breath would have been nice but no, not necessary.

The girls watched in amazement as the long minutes clicked by. Illicia watched the time indicator on the temple wall like a hawk, only taking her eyes off it to check Alana's facial pallor and the obvious strength of her grip on her wrist, her fingers now white. She was concerned by Alana's expression. No, no pain. Not even a grimace. More like intense concentration. Still when the indicator was well past the notation for the current high Priestess' record. She started forward clearly alarmed.

Marissa held her back and shushed her. She had personally watched Alana hang for three times as long and knew her capacity. Illicia looked up in obvious distress. "Do not be concerned. Your mistress is just beginning her dance!"

And so it occurred. Twisting at the noose's end slowly, with barely a gentle arc, Alana hanged awash in a constant sea of orgasms beyond anyone's calculation. Then, when the time indicator was three times the length of the previous record she unclenched her wrists and reached for the noose. At that signal Illicia hit the release on the temple's side and Alana dropped heavily into Marissa and Mira's waiting arms. Then she was down and in the arms of her ladies. The noose was off her neck and all were looking at her with concern.

"I'm fine she smiled. More than fine! That was intense and glorious!! Just superb!"

Now the girls were all smiles. One of the acolytes brought a special salve for Alana to use on her neck, but it was hardly necessary. Now, over tea and a light repast in the temple garden the girls were truly abuzz.

"Alright" harrumphed Illicia. "I've been left out of this little circle for far too long. I think it's time I found out firsthand what this was all about!"

Alana looked at her with genuine love and concern. "Don't do this just to follow along, my love. It is dangerous. I would rather die on that rope than have any of you be injured in the least!"

Illicia smiled. Before the end of the repast the acolyte assigned to them had brought over gowns and cords for all the girls. It didn't surprise Alana to find that they all fit perfectly. It was an afternoon of extreme experimentation. They came back to the ship heady and giggling with new found wonders.

CHAPTER 15

It took another 10 days to provision the ship and during that time Captain Howard and his men began to train the Mayan warriors. They were amazed with their orderliness and obedience. The Royal Cousin explained in his best pidgin English that they were trained to act as a unit until released to fight as individuals. By the third day Howard had started them on rifle practice. and even though there were quite a few sore shoulders and blackened faces the huge grins from the Mayans told everyone that they would make superb marines.

During this period Alana's days were spent in three activities. She spent the early morning at the temple learning and practicing Ixtabian disciplines. Mid day was spent with Stephen and Captain Howard in weapons training. The latter part of the afternoon she spent with the Maya warriors learning their ways.

Jack had confided that Stephen was the finest swordsman on the ship, and likely, in the service. She asked him at the next opportunity and he graciously acquiesced. Stephen's favorite weapon was the short rapier, but he seemed adept at the larger bladed weapons also. She had always considered herself a reasonably good swordsman and felt that her few encounters during her time with Gilbert had proved that. She had had some remedial training with Captain Howard and felt confident of her skill.

Stephen quickly disabused her of that notion. From then on, and carrying on for the entire of their voyage across the sea she worked with him a minimum of an hour a day. He also had her practice her knife work including throwing the blade. In a short while she was at least having him work up a sweat. Unwilling to let her ladies become stale she asked for and got the midshipmen to work with them on their fighting skills. It became a kind of daily amusement for those sailors off duty and for the Mayans who were available to watch the five beautiful women training hard at the deadliest arts.

In the same way she trained with Stephen, she had Captain Howard continue her instruction in both the musket and pistol. Here necessity drew the line being that there was only a finite amount of shot and powder for the smaller weapons so Alana was the only one instructed with live ammunition every day. She became adept at both the rifle and horse pistol but they were such heavy weapons that neither she nor Howard thought that there would be much use for them in her stewardship.

Again it was Stephen who surprised her. Mr. Howard grudgingly admitted that he was the best pistol shot on the ship. He also had a small collection of personal firearms. Stephen made Alana a present of a small pistol that was deadly at short range but just the perfect size for a lady.

Next, after a short break for coffee...Yes! To everyone's amazement the Mayans cultivated the glorious crop, she met with and learned some of the skills of the Mayan warriors. They used both short sword and dagger, but their primary weapon was a type of club with sharp semicircle blades interspaced so it became both a cudgel and a cutting weapon.

In the end they made a present of a fine example to her, though she was sure it would be more for display than anything else. At the temple she dressed as an acolyte and attempted her best to learn the mystical techniques of the Ixtabians. Every day she and her group volunteered to extend the time on their new golden loops. Alana especially wanted to learn to use all the tools available for the longer most intense sacrifices to the Goddess.

Unfortunately within days the ship was ready. The weeks had flown and it was time to depart. The Mayan contingent, led by a cousin of the Prince, Lord Q, came on board permanently and were given assignments for bunks and their own mess. It made for a very crowded arrangement, but it was partially solved by having Alana and her retinue join Jack in the great cabin and freeing up the space for the senior Mayans. Quean and her acolyte also joined the ladies in the great cabin so it became much easier for all to learn each others language.

The officers had taken the arrangement of vesting their cabins to Alana and her ladies as more or less a permanent arrangement. Now with the addition of the Mayan Priestesses another cabin was made available.

With a final canon the Surprise left Isle del Muertes and stood out to sea.

Now the life became orderly again. Alana spent her days training in the martial arts with her ladies and working with the Mayas on learning both their languages. The evenings were spent with dinner and music in the great cabin.

Alana also found that she was sleeping far more soundly. She still started with nightmares of the horrors of her hangings, but this was overcome by the vision of a smiling face underwater, winking at her and freeing her from her peril, and she slept peacefully. Once a day she climbed with Jack to the top of the mainmast and looked at the world from their special point of view.

By the second month Captain Howard had the Mayans drilled in crack troops. Now skilled in both rifle and pistol, and with their facial and body tattoos, they were truly fearsome. Alana herself felt like spring steel, ready to take on an army if need be.

Their planning had continued until they were sure of all the points and complexities...the contingencies and fall backs.

Sure enough on the 90th day the lookout sang out "Land Ho!"

Jack was out with his glass. Bonden used none. "There it is Captain! Reef marker 2 points off the starboard bow!"

"Right you are. Fine eyes as usual Bonden! Let's get our bearings and see where we've made landfall."

It took some doing but they made their landfall about 20 miles north of their intended position.

CHAPTER 16

Alisande was becoming more upset each day. Slowly but surely she had been restricted in her movements, so that now she could not leave the Castle ground for any reason. Her contacts outside of the castle personnel had been restricted. Except for her Governess Tanya, six ladies in waiting and two grooms, she was totally cut off, even from her friends and relatives at court.

Suddenly she and her household had been shut up in a tower suite away from all her friends and court, “for security reasons”. When she asked for an explanation none was given. Frankly she was so angry she was ready to spit.

Then the First Minister arrived, ominously dressed totally in black. The news could not have been worse. Father and uncle killed in an avalanche. Alana drowned at sea. All gone! The effect was mind numbing. For days she sat and cried. Sobbed her eyes out with only ladies and Tanya for consolation.

Finally Cousin Michael appeared. Full of condolences and apologies. He had to keep her safe now. She would be the High Queen when she reached fourteen. It was his duty as Regent to protect the monarchy. It was the way that he said “protect the monarch” that set her teeth on edge. Something was wrong...very wrong. The security and safety issues were difficult to argue with. She could protest all she wanted but her contact with the outside world was effectively cutoff.

But Michael did try to mollify her loneliness. He smiled and said the only one he could trust was his step-daughter, Rowena. Alisande knew her well and they had been close friends a few years before. Then her mother had married Michael and she had to move to new estates. She had heard of the mother’s recent demise, so to have her old friend back was almost more than she could have wished.

Rowena arrived the next day, with no servants and very little luggage. The two girls hugged and kissed. Rowena was slightly older. She had large brown eyes and jet black hair just like her mother. She had filled out since their last meeting. But where Alisande had shot up, Rowena stood barely over five feet. She bitterly complained that none of her servants could attend her and that the soldiers had brutally ravaged her luggage and left her practically nothing. Still, she was welcomed by Alisande’s ladies and made to feel at home.

Alisande was frankly amazed at Rowena’s treatment. Didn’t Michael trust even his own daughter? It turned out he had good reason not to. Rowena was absolutely convinced that her mother had been poisoned and that this was her stepfather’s plan to get her out of the way and isolate her to cover up the deed.

Alisande could not be convinced. Michael had been nothing but kind and carrying to her in her Father's absence. But she knew nothing of the details so Rowena remained stubborn in her opinion.

As the weeks and months dragged on it became clearer that something was not right. Tanya brought in disquieting news. Unhappiness in the populace in Michael's rule, now known as the "King Regent". His consolidating his power and appointing cronies at every opportunity. The slow decimation of the existing structure of nobility, all this at an alarming rate.

Alisande became more concerned each day and naturally turned to Rowena. They took to sleeping together in the same bed cuddling for warmth and solace against the winds of misfortune that seemed to be churning around them.

Then, one night, as they hugged Alisande found Rowena staring into her eyes and suddenly their lips met. A brief kiss, but one that sent shivers down her spine. She pulled back but Rowena just smiled shyly and cuddled to sleep.

The next night came another kiss and then another. This was followed by soft embraces on her nipples and then a tentative hand between her legs. Alisande tried to protest but Rowena's kisses smothered her arguments. Then her lips took over from her fingers and Alisande experienced a shattering climax as her tongue and lips completed what her fingers had begun. Spent and shattered Alisande lay back as the girl stroked her hair and cooed to her.

"I...I don't think...I don't know if I can do that she stammered as the raven hair beauty kissed her again.

"You don't have to do anything. I'll do it all."

"But how...where did you learn...?"

"One of my maids showed me about a year ago. That and other things. I've wanted to do this for you since we found ourselves in this place. I was just afraid you would reject me. I've loved you for years."

Alisande couldn't speak. The forbidden nature of this love weighed heavily on her but as her only friend and confidant...and it did feel so wonderful!

For a few days they were happy. Tanya left the girls alone and the ladies-in-waiting became silent conspirators. Both girls were giddy with their new romance. Rowena was able to shown Alisande multiple ways to even greater climaxes. But it was all Alisande could do to embrace her and kiss her back. Still Rowena asked for nothing more and their evenings were long and rewarding.

Then Tanya brought truly horrific news. The summer equinox celebrations were coming and that day Michael had announced he would take Alisande as his bride, solidifying his

hold and title as King. Both girls were devastated. True, it was not unknown for girls, especially nobles to be married at 11 or 12, but this was a thunderbolt.

Rowena was just furious. She had intentionally distanced herself from her step father but now she demanded a meeting. And a meeting she got.

She came back in tears. Yes he was going to marry Alisande and the rest could be damned. He would sire and heir and begin a new dynasty! Rowena was just a minor annoyance and he had brushed her aside casually. Now Alisande was truly devastated. Betrayed and treated like chattel, used as nothing more than a convenience and a breeding mare to cement Michael and his line to the throne. They had less than a week but both madly schemed. There had to be a way to escape the tower!

But how? They were a hundred up. Barred windows. Locked doors double guarded around the clock. There was nothing viable they could discern.

They turned to their governess. She loved both girls and was truly sympathetic. And they found willing confederates in their servants and ladies-in waiting. They created a fairly complicated plot to fool the guards and find a way out in the darkness, involving faked illness and a distraction. But their simple plotting was no match for Michael's treachery. They had no idea they were being spied upon. The day of their planned escape a company of guards arrested the four ladies, Tanya and the two male servants. Despite Alisande and Rowena's protests they were all charged with treason! Michael had them brought before him and condemned them all to death. Alisande asked to see her cousin but was refused. Both girls begged to be allowed to see their friends and they were allowed a few minutes that evening as the gibbet was being constructed in the courtyard.

In the morning Alisande and Rowena were brought to the balcony it overlooked and saw the seven nooses dangling. First came the two male servants. They were little more than boys, terrified and crying. All they had on were their leggings and without a belt their wrists bound behind them were all they had to keep them around their waists.

Both girls tried to turn away from the ugly scene but two guards each held of them in place. Crying and begging the two boys were led to the scaffold and placed on short stools. The hangman noosed each taking up virtually all the slack. An official read the death sentence and then the hangman kicked away both stools. As each boy dropped he instinctively tried to free his hands and that loosed the hold of his waist band. The leggings fell away and promptly dropped to their ankles leaving them totally naked. Alisande and Rowena watched in horror as the young man danced naked on the gallows. In moments each had an obscene erection and both kicked so hard that the restraints of their leggings were thrown clear. Long minutes went by as they struggled and kicked, their teeth clenched their hands clawing to get free. Their faces turned a hideous crimson as they slowly succumbed, finally to twist silently on the ropes.

Alisande had to close her eyes for the last minutes, but opened them when she heard voices crying. It was her four ladies-in-waiting, wrists bound behind them, being led out

to the waiting nooses. They had been stripped of their dresses and each wore a short shift that they tugged desperately at to pull down over their hips.

The sight of the two boys swinging naked, with their erections pointed upward obscenely, brought cries of hysteria and each of the girls had a large guard dragging her to her fate. Not all the girls were crying hysterically. Alisande realized for the first time how different the girls were.

Brenada, the tall blonde sobbed terribly as she fought with her bound wrist to hold down the hem on her shift.

Ammalea, also blonde, but a head shorter, was not crying, but the look of terror on her face told everything.

Cara, with brown hair and a nice figure was begging as she was carried along.

Finally Fiona, long dark hair trailing, with a look of pure malevolence on her face, staring over her shoulder. Was that look for her? She made no attempt to hold down the hem of her shift, letting the breeze lift it up, exposing her long legs and buttocks.

“Please” Alisande begged to anyone who would listen. “There must be something I can do to save them?”

“No” a familiar voice replied behind her. Michael was watching over her shoulder. “That time is past. You will learn today that you have no power left at all.”

Alisande looked behind her at Michael’s evil smirk. This was who Fiona was looking at.

“Stepfather, please” Rowena begged. “These are just romantic little girls. If you have any feeling for me, make them prisoners or slaves, but let them live!”

Her stepfather just laughed. As the girls were forced to turn back to the tableau awaiting them all four girls had been noosed and the ropes pulled tight.

“Please”, Cara called. “May we have the benefit of clergy?”

The hangman looked over at the Court official who nodded. A cloaked monk entered the courtyard with a book. He stepped forward facing the noosed girls.

“Do you admit your guilt and your sins?”

Fiona spoke up. “If we are guilty of anything it is of serving our Princess.”

“A clear confession” he grunted and began to turn away.

“But”, Cara called, “ can we at least receive absolution?”

“Absolution?” he cackled. “You have been found guilty of treason toward your rightful ruler and deserving of death. You will face the same fate in hell as your last seconds of life. An eternity of agony on the rope...no breath...no succor...enjoy these last few seconds because you face agony forever!”

Brenada and Ammalea burst into tears.

Alisande turned on Michael furious. “Who is this travesty of a clergyman that sends four innocent girls to their deaths with no words of comfort...just a sadist’s scenario!”

“You will meet him. He will be your final confessor!”

Alisande was whirled around in time to see the Hangman kick away Brenada’s stool too. Her scream of fear was cut off in mid stream and she began to hang. One by one each of the other three followed.

As they dropped each gave up any thought of modesty as they fought to free their wrists. The breeze in the courtyard and their frantic kicking exposed their naked loins and long legs. Both Ali and Rowena were forced to watch for long minutes as the girls’ fought the halters and lost their battles one by one, until they all dangled limply on the gallows.

Ali was crying bitterly when Rowena gasped.

Tanya, their governess, was being led to the gallows. A handsome woman in her forties, she had long black hair, now plaited behind her. She was brought out bound and nude to the single noose left on the gallows.

Tanya had a full body and the guards enjoyed manhandling her up onto the stool so the hangman could noose her. She said nothing as the noose was tightened and the slack taken up. She looked Alisande in the eye as the stool was kicked over and she hanged.

Alisande watched in horror as she grimaced from the shock of the rope biting into her neck. After that first shock she desperately struggled to bring her bound wrists from behind her to reach the knot, kicking in her agony as she slowly strangled.

The hangman watched this dance of death with a different look on his face than the other six. Sure enough just as Tanya’s struggle began to lessen he cut the rope and let her drop heavily to the gallows floor.

Tanya’s face was a bright red and she gasped huge gulps of air into her tortured lungs as she lay there. Everything seemed to freeze for a moment, everyone watching the tortured woman gulping for breath.

Then two guards grasped her arms and pulled her off the gallows. The ropes on her wrists were cut and individual ropes were tied to each wrist and ankle. Tanya was

barely aware of the change as she lay on the courtyard cobbles still dazed from her near hanging. Then Alisande saw the four cart horses led in and, totally horrified, knew what was about to happen. Drawn and quartered!

The long ropes on each of Tanya's limbs were attached to each of the horses. With a little urging from their handlers, she was soon pulled taut. Then, at the official's signal, each horse was whipped and the agonized woman's scream filled the courtyard. Again and again the handlers whipped the horses and the woman's screams of agony combined with a sickening wrenching, then ripping sound, as she was torn to pieces.

Alisande became physically ill. When her heaves were over couldn't look at the horror in the courtyard any longer, so she focused on Michael. "I will avenge these murders if it is the last thing I ever do!" she screamed.

Michael just laughed gave the order for the girls to be taken back to their apartments. However, even this avenue was denied them when she was suddenly replaced by a new woman, harsh and strict. A wardress for her two prisoners.

She took all of Alisande's measurements and brought back the gowns and other clothes for her to try on, then took them away for alterations. No other servants allowed. Finally, two days before the nuptials, Alisande came to a final conclusion.

"I won't do it! I'll kill myself first!"

"No love! You can't. I won't let you. We have to escape."

"How? There is no way. And I won't let that scum Michael have me!"

"We can to the people!"

"Don't you remember? It's a small chapel with his handpicked people. It will be a done thing! No. I won't let him have me. I am my father's daughter and I will not be a party to this, willing or not."

"Then what will you do? How do you throw yourself off the tower when all the windows and exits are barred/? How do slit your wrists when we don't have any sharp objects? What can you poison yourself with? The bar of soap?"

"I will wait until everyone is asleep and hang myself. I admit it's not as quick as poison or a plunge from a high tower but if that is the only way then I shall just have to endure it. Just like those heroines of old. I have soft and long silk scarves and the beam is just here. Perfect and more than stout enough for my weight!"

Rowena burst into tears. "No. I won't allow it. I'll tell the new Governess!"

"Darling if you truly love me you won't say a word. You know I'm right."

Rowena just sobbed in despair. Then finally she wiped her tears and looked up into Alisande's eyes. "I cannot live without you, so we will die together!" And then Alisande collapsed in her arms and both cried out their despair.

They spend the last hours of the day planning their hanging. They chose the perfect scarves. Long, soft and so broad that they would cover the entire surface of their throats.

They searched for just the right support. A small stool near the door was perfect. About 18" tall and long enough for both of them to stand comfortably.

The Governess brought their dinner but was not surprised when neither girl ate any. Their appetites were nil the closer to the wedding it became. She took away the meals and returned to draw their bath and dutifully brush their hair and help them into their nightgowns. Then she cushioned all, bought one small candle and knocked so the guards would let her out and lock the girls in for the night.

They waited trembling for an hour to be sure that they would not be disturbed. Then barefoot, they got the scarves and the stool. They helped each other onto the stool and held the scarves expectantly. They had discussed how to tie the knots for the nooses but neither had any experience. Finally they settled on a plain square knot, Alana tying her's behind the left ear, Rowena's behind her right. Alana could reach up and throw the end of her scarf easily over the rafter, but Rowena, a good six inches shorter could not manage.

"Please love. Do this for me!" she begged.

Alisande easily tied her end off. Now they were snugly noosed standing bare footed in their gossamer gowns and the reality of their decisions hit them both at the same time.

"I'm frightened" Rowena trembled.

"I am too love. But you don't have to do this. I do. Just untie the knot and leave me."

"No. I meant it when I said I could not live without you. But please" and here Rowena's left hand gripped Alisande's right, "Don't let go no matter what!"

Alisande smiled, "I promise."

Then each took a last breath and kicked the stool over.

The shock of the drop, as short as the couple of inches was, and the tightening of the silken noose shocked both of them. Rowena immediately brought her right hand up to tug at the noose.

Alisande concentrated on the sensations the hanging elicited. The constriction of her throat and the closing off of her airway. This brought about her instinctively clawing at the noose around her neck.

“No!” she thought. “I’ve chosen this!” and she grasped Rowena’s hand tighter with her right hand and balled her left fist.

She sensed Rowena trying to break her grasp and opened her eyes. She could see her lover’s face clearly, eyes snapped shut, grimace on her face, clawing at the silk noose with her free hand, tugging at the one Alisande held to assist in fighting the agony of the silken halter.

Then suddenly her eyes opened and a flash of recognition. She still grimaced but her tugging ceased and a look of resignation and acceptance came to her. She almost smiled and in what must have been a sheer act of will dropped her hand from clawing at the noose around her neck.

Alisande shut her eyes and concentrated on the sensations flowing through her. No she couldn’t breathe, but what was breathe. The clean sensation of air through her lungs? But this was more like starting to hold your breath underwater. She had always been good at that. Out lasting all her friends and instructors sometimes forcing them to dive in and save her always met with questioning looks as they appeared frantic to drag her to the surface.

Then the waves of pleasure hit. Climax after climax washed through her like the pounding of the ocean on the shore. Rowena had ignited a flame within her and the silken noose fed it with a hungry fire. She didn’t kick or struggle just let the silk cause her to experience an eroticism she had not even dreamed of.

As she rode on crest to the other, a concern burst forth. Rowena? Did she still...? Then she realized she still held her hand, but it no longer pulled to free itself. She struggled to open her eyes and she was rewarded with a picture of serene peace. Rowena no longer grimaced or struggled She seemed to peacefully asleep, almost angelic in her rest.

Alisande felt another cresting orgasm and then surrendered, her vision failing, her eyes closing in peace, her left fist relaxing its fist, but her last force of will kept Rowena’s now limp hand firmly in her grip as the darkness spiraled in.

“Get me the smelling salts now!”

A splash of cold water on her face. An incredibly noxious smell up her nose that caused her to start.

“Princess! Princess! We need brandy quickly.”

“The Lady Rowena?”

“No...she’s gone, but the Princess still has a heartbeat and she is coming back to us!”

“How long...?”

“How long had they been hanging? In one respect I would say not long since the Princess survives...but the Lady Rowena is cold. Either she hanged herself long before the Princess joined her on her noose or...”

“Or what?”

“Or our future Queen has a capacity to endure the agonies of hanging by her neck and survive that is beyond our medical comprehension.”

She clearly heard all that but it only started to register. Her vision began to clear and she could see the senior physician taking a flask from an assistant above her. She looked to her right and lying next to her was Rowena. She looked beatific. Sublimely asleep with a lovely and peaceful expression. And then someone drew a sheet over her face.

Her head was wrenched around and brandy poured down her throat causing her to caught violently and realize her throat was very sore. But she forced herself to turn back to Rowena and she tried to cry out, “No! No! She can’t be dead. I was supposed to die, not her!”

And then she started to shudder and cry. The physician cried out, “Quick the hellebore!”

As she thrashed against the hands trying to hold her another noxious fluid was forced down her throat, and shortly after the darkness took her again. She awoke in her own bed, believing it had all been a horrific nightmare...until she realized her wrists were tied to each side and she was helpless.

She started to cry out when a voice she knew cut in, “There now my Princess. We can’t have you trying to harm yourself again, now can we?”

Michael stood over her. “I know why you tried to die, but I’m a bit puzzled by Rowena. Lovers were you? She was always a foolishly romantic little twit. At least I don’t have to worry about my late wife’s estates. They all escheat to me.”

“No!” she cried. “Untie me! Let me up!”

“ Now now my dear. You just rest. Our nuptials are soon. You of course will attend heavily veiled out of modesty and mourning for our beloved Rowena. And in consideration you will be excused from the Royal Ball. I will join you here later where I will enjoy my husbandly rights. They physicians tell me you’re still a virgin. Excellent! I will take you and take you, for weeks if need be. Until I can confirm you are bearing my heir. Then I will keep you, in bonds if necessary, for all nine months until you give birth.

At that point I will release you so you can join your precious Rowena. As a fact, I will enjoy watching you hang yourself. Or if not in a suicidal mood, I can arrange for a private execution right from the same beam."

Alisande fairly screamed in her frustration, and her Governess forced more hellebore down her throat. Michael just laughed at her until again the darkness spiraled in. But when he left the locked chamber his mood was subdued and in mourning for his lost step-daughter.

Jack carefully made their way down the coast until nightfall saw them just outside the little fishing village 10 miles north of the capital. "Time for us to head ashore and see just what the situation is", Jack smiled as he donned his lubbers clothes. "Lieutenant Pullings, you have command. Stephen, Bonden, you'll come with me."

"Aren't you forgetting someone?" a small voice asked.

Jack looked twice. He knew it was Alana but she was shorter. Her hair was dark and pulled back and under a scarf. Her face was dirty and her clothes non-descript. A fisherman's wife or daughter for sure.

"Wonderful disguise, Princess, but you won't be accompanying us"

"This is my Kingdom, my sister and people. I know it and none of you do not! I need to go!"

"No. If anything goes wrong it's imperative that you remain safe. Lieutenant Pullings and the crew are trained to handle this ship and our mission, but no one can replace you!"

Alana wanted to argue with all her might, but Jack was right. She slumped in defeat. Bonden had the five other men ready in the long boat as a number of the crew made sure Stephen arrived at his seat in the bow safely. Jack just clambered down and they were off. Illicia had never seen Alana cry in such sorrow since news of her father's death, but tears streamed down her face as the boat set off. Waiting was intolerable. Alana paced the quarterdeck inconsolable, as the minutes turned to hours that droned on.

Finally came a whispered, "Ahoy there!".

Willing hands grabbed the ropes and helped all hands on board.

"Ah, a taste of home", Jack smiled, "though can't say much for the porter."

"But useful very useful" Stephen chimed in. "We have our fishing craft for tomorrow. Though they think we're daft going out in this season."

"Were you able to learn anything?" Alana asked, the anxiety plain on her face.

"Quite a bit." replied Jack. "If we're to take the opinion of the townsfolk your cousin isn't too popular. He's using a very heavy hand to quash any opposition. Taxes are much higher. But he is supposed to be at the Castle and will be there the coming week for the yearly celebration. Your sister has not been seen in public for some time now. It's popular opinion that she's under arrest and the people do not like it. I am feared that you are right. Your cousin is planning on marrying her."

For the second time that day tears flowed down Alana's cheeks.

"Come now" Stephen consoled. "At least we have ascertained the usurper has not done away with her as far as the populace knows. No public notice. Now comes the interesting part of examining everything first hand for ourselves."

In the great cabin Alana argued her case forcefully. "I need to go with you tomorrow more than anything. I am the only one who knows the castle and fortifications and can see any changes immediately!"

Jack was unmoved. "Lieutenant Blakenly is an excellent artist. He will draw sketches of all the fortifications and buildings to compare with our model."

"NO!" Alana stamped her foot so hard she likely bruised it. "I am the only logical one to go! I will not be left to stew while others, with no experience in the area, go in my place!"

"Not tomorrow" Jack reasoned. "We need to reconnoiter and check out security.. If it looks safe you can join us the day after."

Alana stewed but was slightly mollified. The next day Jack, Stephen and the boat crew rowed into the small town under a nice bank of fog. In a short time they were back with a thoroughly disreputable looking fishing skiff.

"Smells worse than it looks" muttered Bonden.

"Tom just keep her in this fog bank. If it starts to clear take her out far enough so that you're clear of the coast. We'll be back at dusk."

Alana watched the ship go with heightening apprehension. She had not been able to sleep. And no one was able to console her about her sister. That day it was impossible to do more than pace the quarterdeck. No food or drink. Just pace.

As the sun was nearing the horizon the lookout called, "Sail ho!" and the nasty fishing boat soon was alongside. Jack held a general meeting in the great cabin with the model in their midst.

"Remarkably your memory was almost perfect", he smiled at Alana.

“There have been additional battlements built along the landward side but virtually nothing new here at dockside save for additional mooring space. While the channel is as deep as you predicted, there appear to be a number of new trebuchets emplaced. They appear to be facing inland so it will take some time, if ever, for them to attack the ship. And even with the celebration coming up the manning of the guard posts is almost all on the landward side.”

“Mr. Howard, you'll note these fortifications along the road and guard towns. We'll need a diversion to slip the Surprise into position.”

Howard turned to Prince Q. “The Prince and I have discussed the situation and we feel that it will be most effective for his men, taking along explosives, to attack from inland, moving from point to point and destroying each outpost driving the defenders back toward the castle. With the Mayan's skills and our weapons their attack should be truly terrifying!”

“Quite so”, Jack mused. “As the castle lights up and the manned posts begin to show their position, our cannons should make short work of them. Then we blow the gate and the main force of Marines and Surprises take the Castle. Our one problem will be where your sister is being held and how best to free her.”

“If they have her imprisoned it will be in one of the towers. By tradition the north tower is used for prisoners of noble birth. When will the attack happen?” Alana asked.

“Mr. Mowett” Jack turned to the second lieutenant. “It will be your responsibility to lead a party up into that tower and find the Princess Alisande and insure her safety.”

“Yes Sir.”

“Let's take tomorrow to get ready. The celebration is three days from now. So the day after tomorrow should be perfect.”

That evening, Alana in her cloak stood on the quarter deck and gazed out at the far coast of her home. Jack came up behind her.

“Mixed feelings, your highness?”

“For almost well over a year I've longed to see these shores, Captain, and now I fear all I will do is bring death and destruction with me. I would give anything, if I could guarantee her safety!”

“We could put this entire plan aside. It is not too late to call this off. We could send a party in and free her. You could come with us, in our search for our world. Our England.”

“And search for a world six centuries away? I may be a stranger to my people here but I would be truly be a stranger in a strange land there now wouldn't I?”

“You would always have the love and friendship of those you have come to know on this ship.”

“Love?” Alana looked up into his eyes.

“Humph!” ...and Jack looked at the coast again. “Forgive me your Highness if I spoke out of turn.”

“No...in all these months I have heard that word spoken in such a way only once before. It’s very nice to hear it from someone I respect and admire....”

Now they looked into each other’s eyes. Despite her height and heels Alana still had to look up to catch Jack’s gaze. Then Stephen showed up on deck muttering about the cold coffee being served and the moment passed.

CHAPTER 17

Just prior to the action Jack had the men mustered around the quarterdeck.

“Men, our lovely Royal guest represents a sure ally in this unsure world. And our ally has asked for our assistance and I mean to give it to her!”

The men cheered wildly.

“Our approach will be stealthily, but when the word is given you must fire as instructed for those areas of the castle that would contain the most threat. So quick’s the word and sharps the action! And remember... as always! Surprise is on our side!”

Another volley of cheers and then “Three cheers for Lucky Jack! Huzzah!! Huzzah!! Huzzah!!”

Four bells and the order was given to beat to quarters!

The crew of the Surprise rushed to their stations. The Marines with their additional Mayan contingent, in their fiercest headdresses but with red cloaks and modern arms joined them. Slowly Jack guided the ship to the tip of the headland and the boats, now loaded with the Mayans and their explosives took off. Jack and the officers knew that the boats would have to come back for the main landing force so Prince Q and his forces would be stranded if anything went long. The Mayans were also aware of this eventuality but they gave it no thought. They had their assignment and they would carry it out.

Slowly the ship came around the headland and worked its way up the great river to the castle. In the dark, with no lights it was just another shape moving on the great river. There was no challenge and no guards were spotted.

“Humph”...mused Jack to Stephen...”Whoever commands for this usurper Michael should be shot for his poor soldiership.”

Barely moving the Surprise edged its way past the smaller docks and opposite the great hulk of Castle Branart. The only lights were the two torches on either side of the great gate.

“Well at least it’s closed” muttered Stephen. “The way these people run things it might just as well have been wide open.”

“Now we wait. The first explosives should be going off any minute if Prince Q and his men have it right”

No sooner had Jack spoken when there was a muffled explosion. This was followed in rapid sequence by four others.

“Hopefully those are the first five guard outposts.”

Virtually immediately lights came on in the castle. Jack noted that immediately lights were also lit in the North tower. But the main activity was drawn away from the river and toward the mainland where the explosions were coming from. With the lights back lighting the main castle body, Jack called down to Pullings.

“Full broadside! Larboard side!”

In one huge explosion the fourteen 18 pounders of the Surprise let go. Each hit its target. An infantry emplacement or catapult in the castle or on its walls. Within 90 seconds the great guns spoke again and then again. In the fourth broadside the target was the main gate which was literally blown to splinters.

Jack gave the command and the Marines and Mowett’s rescue party set off for the shore. The Marines’ job was to secure the wharf side and the gate. They reached their objective without a shot being fired. In the meantime there had been a dozen more explosions from the land side. Jack gave the command and Bonden steered the Surprise up against the main wharf. Once it had been secured the command was given and 200 Surprises yelling like savages poured over the side and attacked the castle.

It was a rout. The broadsides had literally blown away the opposition. Those that had survived were almost scared witless by the noise and fire. Within a half hour Captain Howard returned to the ship and reported. “It was even more of a rout than we could have expected. There is virtually no opposition left Captain. The King and his retinue are barricaded in the throne room, but aside from some blades and a few crossbows they’re virtually unarmed.”

“Any word from Mowett?”

“Not as yet”

Mowett and the ten men under his command were making their way up the rubble strewn stairway to the tower. Not in the best of repair prior to the assault, the bombarding had collapsed some of the sections and it was slow going.

“Bonden, how far to the top?”

“I can see light at the top.”

There was a crash and rubble rained down. Bonden kept his eyes on the glimmer of light in the choking dust. With a pistol in one hand and a cutlass in the other he made his way up the choked corridor and stairway trusting the others to follow as best they

could. You cowards!" came a young female voice. "Leave me tied to the bed while you save your own skins!"

"Now, now my sweet. We wouldn't want you to succumb to this destruction without finding out what's it like having a man, instead of that sweet little flower you were cuddling up here with."

The man speaking was stripping off his armor, and a shriek of frustration came from the bed.

A couple of steps into the room confirmed for Bonden the identity of the girl on the bed. All he really needed was the identical golden red hair to prove this was the Princess Alisande. Outnumbered three to one and unsure of reinforcements he did what any good sailor would...he attacked. A slash across the back of the neck did for the first and a shot to the gut for the second. The third had his breeches around his ankles and almost looked comical whirling around trying to get to this sword as Bonden's cutlass gutted him.

The girl on the bed had raised herself up to watch the conflict. As he turned to her he could now see she was bound to the posts by her wrists and ankles in nothing but a short transparent night shirt. "I do not know you are brave sir, but you would do me a great service if you would kill me now!"

Bonden's look must have indicated his extreme puzzlement.

"I am chattel to my bastard cousin who would use me as a brood mare. I am a Princess of Royal blood and will not allow this to happen.

When Bonden hesitated, she pleaded, "Please just cut me loose and give me a blade. I will take my own life!"

Finally he found his tongue. "I'm Bonden mam. Lieutenant Mowett is coming behind. Your sister, Queen Alana has sent us to find and rescue you."

"Alana? Alive? Here?" The girl's eyes grew wide in amazement.

"Let's get you loose" and Bonden used his knife to cut her bonds.

Free at last Alisande stood shakily and rubbed her wrists.

"My eternal gratitude! Now how do we find Alana?"

Just then Mowett and the rest of the team arrived taking in the scene of the three dead guards and Bonden standing protectively in front of the nearly naked young Princess.

"Lieutenant Mowett, Your Highness. My men and I are charged to reunite you with your sister!"

The smile on Alisande's face was radiant, and anyone seeing her at that moment would have sworn she was her sister's twin. "By all means, Lieutenant, I am under your protection." But then she stopped. "If you will promise that this brave soldier will be my personal body guard" nodding to Bonden.

"That's able seaman Bonden Your Highness and we will be happy to accommodate."

One of the men took a slightly more modest robe from the bed and held it for Alisande to put on. Thus attired they started the trek back to the main hall.

"Captain" Pullings interjected. "It looks like Mowett and his men have been successful and are making their way back from the tower."

"Excellent. Lieutenant Blakenly?"

"Yes sir!"

"Prepare to escort the Queen" - for the first time Jack had used that title for Alana, "and her ladies to take possession of the castle."

Howard and his marines, now joined by Q and a contingent of his Mayans, had readied a battering ram. With three blows the door to the throne room was down and the cowering group inside exposed. The man at its center, with a shaky crown did his best to bluster. "Who has the temerity to disturb the king of Branart in the heart of his domain?"

Howard's men immediately dropped the half dozen crossbow men and the fire from their muskets terrified everyone in the room. Jack stepped forward.

"I am Captain Jack Aubrey (and here he extemporized) of Her Majesty's Ship Surprise. I assume you are the usurper Michael?"

"I am King Michael. Just who do you think you are? Who do you represent?"

Jack nodded and behind him Bonden called out "Make way for her Majesty the Queen!"

The Marines and even the Mayan guard snapped to attention as did the Surprises as Alana in her finest raiment and diadem entered the room. "All bow before her Royal Majesty, High Queen Alana of Branart!"

Michael's eyes popped and his jaw gaped open as he recognized his cousin. "You!?", he stammered. "But how?"

"I have powerful friends Cousin", Alana smiled, "and they have now taken the castle and the surrounding area. I assume we have your surrender?"

Michael looked around but none of his advisors or military men could meet his eye. Finally he looked down in defeat. "Yes."

With that single word the taking of Branart was accomplished. The rightful queen, Alana The First, had returned to take the throne. As Michael and what was left of his retinue were led away there was a shriek. "Alana! Oh Alana it really is you!" a tremulous voice called.

Alana whirled around and caught her sister in her arms.

"They said you were dead. You and papa and uncle. All dead. All that was left was Michael. He locked me away and killed the servants and my ladies-in-waiting. Then he locked me in the tower!"

Alana held the green eyed red blond girl who sobbed in her arms. "It is all right. It is done. The danger is now over."

"Over!" the girl cried amazedly. "'I heard thunder, worse than any storm. And there was fire and things blew apart. And there are strange men with marks on their faces and wild hair. But it is you isn't it?"

"Yes, it is me. And you will never have to fear again." She tenderly kissed the girl and realized that despite the probabilities she had returned home.

For the first time she actually looked closely at the girl. She had grown, matured. She felt a beginning of a woman's body under the gossamer of her nightgown. Then she focused on her face.

"Did that bastard Michael hurt you?" she cried as she made out the distinctive bruise mark on Alisande's tender throat.

"Not this. No. I did this myself."

Alana looked aghast. Very sheepish now Alisande related her suicide attempt and Rowena's death. Alana was totally stunned.

"You tried to hang yourself?"

Ali nodded.

"Rowena died but you're alright?"

Ali was crying now. "I don't know how it happened. We both stepped off together and I held her hand the whole time. But when I came to she was cold and dead and I survived."

Alana took her sister to her bosom and held her as she sobbed.

“I may know. I may know. We’ll talk later. Right now you’re alive and well and we’re together again!”

CHAPTER 18

Alana sat alone before the fireplace in her royal bedroom suite. The large chamber was extremely secure from assault so there were no windows...light had to be provided by candle stands around the room. Most of the time it felt too closed in but tonight it was perfect.

She had asked to be alone, supposedly to pore over a history compiled by her advisors on the Royal Traditions of Branart. Instead she was soberly considering her sister's story and confession. A lesbian affair between cousins? A suicide pact to hang themselves together? And Alisande had survived her hanging but Rowena was cold and dead when they were found still dangling.

How had her sins, as she thought them, been visited on her beloved baby sister? She knew that her predilection for the noose was a perversion against nature, but how had it found its way into her sister's consciousness and constitution?

She was confounded beyond explanation and her coronation was barely a week away. Planning had gone well. It turned out that Michael had a small but rather loyal contingent of followers, primarily in the northern part of the kingdom. But safely in the dungeon, he would do no one any harm. At least for the time being.

Once the coronation had taken place she would see about bringing this northern group into the fold of the new government. Jack and Stephen had described Britain's Parliamentary government and this seemed to make perfect sense. A way to involve both the nobles and citizens in the government and make it truly representative.

Alana had to find a way to convince Jack and the men of the Surprise to stay and support her during this period. And she thought she had found exactly the method. It would take some time to feel at home again. Poor Alisande wanted her nearby almost every waking moment.

Alana stretched. She was still sleeping poorly. But Stephen had promised to step by with a sleeping draught. He was the only one she felt comfortable discussing Alisande's revelations. As a matter of fact, she decided she might as well have her ladies get her ready for bed. She yawned and felt a cold shiver as if a door to the frigid snow outside had been opened. Then she heard a noise. Startled she turned around.

Standing at the far end of the chamber was the biggest man she had ever seen. He stood well over seven feet tall and must have weighed about 400 pounds. Alana had never been a screamer, as some girls were, but this truly terrified her.

"Who are you? What are you doing here?" and then she noticed the man in black behind him. It was her third cousin Martin.

"What's the meaning of this? Martin...how did you get in here?"

"Good evening cousin. You didn't really think that a four hundred year old castle might not have some secret passageways that even you were unfamiliar with, did you?"

Both men approached her. She instinctively stood.

"All I have to do is call and my guards will take care of both of you."

"Small point, your highness. After the bribes the six outside are my guards now. And scream as loud as you like. This chamber is very sound resistant. Your father did not like his servants hearing what went on in here."

For the first time Alana realized the truth in the way the chamber had been reinforced, double thick doors and walls, not just for security's sake. By this time the giant was almost within arms reach. He was bald and dressed in a leather tunic with an idiot's grin on his face.

"Take her!" Martin ordered.

The giant reached for Alana and she tried to dart out of his way. He was slow but grabbed her blouse and the tug he gave convinced Alana she was in trouble. She slipped the tie on the blouse and left him holding it as she ran to her bedside.

She still had her skirt, drawers and stockings, but with her breasts bare she felt naked already. She scanned the bed side of her quarters for a weapon that could injure this beast but nothing was visible. She heard him approaching and tried to jump out of his way again, but he anticipated her move and through a massive arm around her. He spun her around and pinned her arms to her side with one massive arm.

"Let me go!" she screamed.

"Now, now cousin" said Martin as he perused the draperies on one end of the room. "That's no way to treat visitors, is it?"

"What do you want Martin?"

He chose a luxurious velvet rope about an inch and a half thick and after slipping it from its fittings found that it was over ten feet long. "Ah, this will do nicely"

He walked toward Alana tying a knot in one end.

"My poor cousin. Don't you know that all your misadventures combined with your father's tragic death and your sister's attempted suicide, oh you didn't know we knew about that did you? It all has left you terribly depressed?"

Alana shook her head vigorously and tried to bite the giant's arm. The leather tunic prevented her from doing much damage.

"Combine this with your well known misadventures and the sudden responsibility to take over the kingdom and you just couldn't handle it. You snapped and took your own life. And since you have a well known affinity for hanging" he grinned as he now swung the knotted noose before him, "what better way to end your poor lovely, but tragic life?"

"Here's another scenario", he recited. "Just as plausible. You have become so enamored of your experiences on the rope that you have taken to it recreationally. Tonight, in an effort to satisfy your perverted lust you went too far."

"Bastard" she thought, "How close can he get to reality?"

Alana tried her best to struggle but she was truly pinned. The giant carried her like a child toward the center of the room as Martin slid over a chest and threw the rope over the center beam in the room.

"This should do fine. Hang her here Tark."

She heard the giant grunt. He swung her up with virtually no effort. He stood on the chest and lifted her up with his left arm and though she was kicking and fighting easily looped the noose over her head and around her neck.

"Make sure her hair is clear" Martin called. The giant swept Alana's long locks out of the way.

He tightened the rope around the beam. As the rope tightened around her neck Alana realized she couldn't even touch the chest with her straining toes.

"We'll put another smaller chest under her so it will make up the distance" Martin mused. Tark just grunted.

"Well cousin, at one time I had hoped to marry you. It's really tragic. I loved you then, but now you're just an impediment to power. Drop her!"

The giant let Alana go and she dropped a few inches before the noose tightened around her neck and she was hanging! The giant stepped away to admire his handy work.

Alana spun on the rope for a second or two, In those last few seconds she had formulated a rather simple plan. She vividly recalled the instructions of the Priestess and set her mind firmly upon the path of Ixtab.

First she reached up grabbing the rope above her and attempted to pull herself up all the time kicking vigorously. Her slippers flew across the room. She kicked and struggled for what seemed like an eternity, twisting on the rope. Silently, she counted off the seconds in her mind. Her hangings in the temple were all over 30 minutes, but she still

had to make this look realistic. She counted to 30, and when her struggles appeared useless she tried clawing at the velvet rope apparently crushing her slender throat still kicking wildly.

Despite the crushing pain of the noose she counted to ten than dropped her hands and began to flutter her legs. She had to forget the pain and learned to turn the choking pressure of the rope into a lovers embrace...she had to find found the expected pleasure in the noose's embrace and let it wash over her.

To convince her onlookers she turned her kicks into a flutter and allowed her hands to drop to her sides twitching and jerking. She counted an additional 30 and then hung still, swinging gently on the rope. This would be the hardest part...playing dead when all she wanted to do was tear at the noose. She allowed her features to relax and look as did her best to remove the grimace from her face and tried to hang looking a peaceful and serene as the Poet had next to her what seemed like another lifetime ago. Now if they only were deceived...

Martin walked around her and the giant grunted. "No Tark...I know you'd like to use her body, but this has to look like a suicide." He picked up her blouse and climbed on the chest and put it on her careful to get the tie correctly.

Stephen carried the carafe of sleeping draught down the hallway deep in thought. A possibility of becoming a titled nobleman with estates? And betrothed to the Lady Marissa? All a little heady. He started down the corridor to Alana's room when the two guards stopped him.

"No entrance!"

Funny, these were new men weren't they? Oh so they wouldn't recognize him. "I am the Princess' private physician come with a sleeping draught for her" he replied pleasantly.

"No admittance to anyone" the one responded and took a position in front on him belligerently.

"Not right" something in Stephen's intelligence agent apparatus rang off like an alarm.

"No problem" he smiled and began to turn. "I will be sure to have it sent to the Princess tomorrow." As he turned he noted the second guard in a relaxed but vigilant posture.

In a second he whirled smashing the carafe against the first's head and relieving him of his pike. The second guard lunged only to find himself impaled.

With a downward thrust of the pike, Stephen assured himself no further impediment from the first guard. Stephen divested the guards of their swords and moved slowly down the corridor.

It took every ounce of willpower for Alana not to kick out or grab Martin as he adjusted her blouse. Even hanging she was sure she could crush his larynx, but she would then have to way of dealing with Tark. All he would have to do was wait. It might take an hour but sooner or later she would strangle to death on the rope. What she had to do was concentrate on not losing consciousness. If she did not practice the Ixtabian discipline to her best effort then she would surely die.

Martin climbed down and brought another smaller chest over placing it on top of the larger chest so Alana's stockinged toes swung next to it. "There, now all she did was climb on the two chests and stepped off. When her ladies find her it will certainly be judged a suicide." He pushed both back a good foot. "There, even if she wanted to she wouldn't have been able to regain her footing. Time to leave."

He stood back a few feet and surveyed the scene. "What a waste. She was truly the most beautiful woman in the kingdom. Now we will just have to wait until we can orchestrate a similar fate for her sister."

Dimly now Alana heard the two walk to the end of the room and felt the chill as the secret door opened and hopefully closed behind them.

Not a second too soon as she felt a wave of orgasms wash over her. She locked her ankles and felt the fluids running down her thighs. She was close to orgasm and then unconsciousness. Her hands had almost no feeling as she reached under her skirt for her garter knife. It was the exquisitely honed throwing knife given to her on board the Surprise by Stephen himself. She almost dropped it but she gripped it tightly and grabbed the hanging rope with her other hand and swung. The sharp blade sliced through the thick rope neatly and she dropped into a heap onto the floor. She lay there a few seconds with her head buzzing and the lights continuing to flash until she could get her breath. Then pushed herself upright and tore the noose from her neck.

To her horror she felt the rush of cold again and heard Martin's voice. "Clever girl! Played dead and waited until we were gone, did you?"

"Always check your work is my motto. Tark!" he called into the black space in the open secret door, "Come back up here!"

Alana pushed herself to her feet and tried to decide on a plan of action. The lack of oxygen from the hanging had left her a bit muddled. She had to clear her head and shook it violently side to side, despite the pain!

Her garter knife was no match for the giant, and the guards would just be more to deal with. Making a split second decision she threw the knife at a sure target. It caught Martin in his left thigh. She was aiming for his heart but the hanging had left her dizzy so she would gladly take what she could get. Martin's leg buckled and he dropped striking his head on a chair on the way down. From the way he slumped she thought he might have knocked himself unconscious.

Just then Tark came through the secret door.

Stephen silently glided down the corridor to the second set of guards. They seemed to be intent on trying to make out what was going on inside the Princess' chamber. Then he heard her unmistakable cry. Without further hesitation he stepped forward and in three swift thrusts dispatched the next two guards.

The final pair, fully alerted, turned to face him, now grim set.

"Now how to deal with him?" Alana thought. "He could snap my back like a twig."

She backed away from the door to her dresser which held the candles illuminating that part of the room. The giant saw Martin lying in a pool of spreading blood and emitted a growl and came toward her. Instead of crying out again or trying to run she smiled at him. He looked at her with a puzzled look on his face.

She undid her top and bared her breasts again. "You like these, don't you?"

The giant looked at her with doubt.

"Here" she smiled as she dropped her skirt and slid off her cum soaked drawers.

Now all she had on was her gartered stockings. She pouted her lips and lifted her left leg sliding the foot against the calf of her right leg, all the while leaning back highlighting her breasts and thrusting her sex forward.

"If I'm to die I'd like to experience a true giant like you before I go" she breathed heavily.

The giant smiled and to her relief she saw his obvious erection under his tunic. He leered, then grinned as he came forward reaching for her breasts. He was almost on her when she reached back for the largest brass candlestick of the trio and hit him on the side of the head with all her might. The thud and his grunt of pain were satisfying but she didn't think she'd disabled him. Still he stumbled sideways and grabbed his head.

Outside the door Stephen had engaged the final two guards. They were professionals but simply not of his caliber. They lasted longer than the first two though and it took him a full minute before he burst into the room.

He came through the door to be met by the sight of a bleeding man on the floor, a giant's roaring and holding his bleeding head, and Alana naked except for her stockings trying to make her way around the mountain of a man.

She saw Stephen as the giant did. The huge beast lumbered forward as Stephen went on guard. "Careful Doctor!" Alana called. "He's wearing mail under the leather!" Then a giant hand swept her aside and throwing her back against a wall.

Stephen side stepped the initial lunge and ran to Alana. She was up but stunned. He noted the new bruising on her neck and shook his head. She just looked behind him in terror. Maturin spun and met the mountain with a slashing attack. It beat the beast back but drew hardly any blood. Alana was up behind him and trying to ease her way to the door of her dressing chamber.

It was obvious she had a plan so Stephen lunged and drew the giant away from her. He was successful at the loss of one of his blades being swatted out of his grasp. Now the beast had him cornered.

Alana had slid into the next room and opened the bottom drawer of her dresser. There, in its wooden case, was the pistol Stephen had given her six months ago. She checked it quickly and ran to the door.

The monster had advanced on Stephen and was about to attack again when she yelled his name as loud as she could, "TARK!!!"

He half turned, and she shot him cleanly in the temple. He fell like a sack of bricks.

The shot, though extremely muffled, roused the castle. It seemed to be just seconds before Jack, Pullings and a score of Mayan marines poured through the door. Trying to take stock, it was a few minutes before it became clear that Martin had survived and had taken off back down his secret stairway. Without a word the Mayans gave chase.

Illicia ran into the room brandishing both a sword and pistol. She took one look at Alana and immediately started to search for someone to kill. When she assured herself of the safety of the premises, she immediately took Alana's face in her hands and wept over the new bruises to her neck. Alana let her own tears start. There had been no time or place for them during the set to.

Just behind Illicia Alisande rushed into the room in near hysterics. She threw herself on Alana sobbing desperately. "It's all right love. I'm all right!" Alisande looked up at her rebruised neck and continued to cry.

Stephen had Padeen run for his kit and examined her carefully. "The ultra thick velvet rope did not do the damage of an actual hangman's cordage, but it is bad enough." He liberally dosed her with unguents from his Mayan sources to reduce the inflammation and bruising.

It took an hour before things were sorted out. Captain Howard examined the room inch by inch and found, to everyone's surprise, two other secret passages. Finally, with Mayan Marines inside and Royal Marines out, and Alisande on side and Illicia on the other, Stephen's sleeping draught took effect and Alana found rest.

The next morning she awoke to find Jack asleep in a chair next to the bed, his right hand on his cavalry sword and a pistol in his left. All the Marine's were on duty. Prince Q was waiting for an audience so she slipped on a robe and asked him to enter. He

carried a tray with a shrouded object. Removing the cloth it was Martin's head. That threat had been dealt with.

From then on the Marines, whether Royal or Mayan were her personal guard. That next morning, Alana sat down with her sister and broached the subject now foremost on her mind. "You and I are special love. Not because of our royal birth, but because we have an ability...a capacity, that is unique."

Alisande looked up questioningly.

"Do you remember our trips on Father's galley. The private one. Where we would go to those little coves and dive and swim?"

"Yes. Vividly!"

"Do you recall that when our governess taught you to swim she almost went insane with worry because you stayed underwater so long?"

"Yes, but we both did."

"Well I guess that's part of it. At least Dr. Maturin believes it's a part. For some reason having to do with our physical makeup, we can breathe differently than other people. Our ability to hold our breath for long periods of time is directly linked to why you survived your hanging and Rowena didn't."

Now Alisande looked puzzled.

"Apparently, when needed, we don't need to breathe as frequently as everyone else. When a person is hanged their breath is cut off and most die of asphyxiation. Since you and I need less air, we can survive longer on the rope."

Alisande just stared. But soon a tear ran down her cheek.

"It's not just that" Alana explained. "Dr. Maturin believes there is an integral part of our physical anatomy...well, not only does a person succumb to an inability to get air into their lungs as they hang, but the noose cuts off blood flow to the brain and causes unconsciousness and ultimately the brain dies from the lack of circulation. He believes that our anatomy in our throats allows some of the blood flow not to be cut off by the noose so we can survive longer hanging by the neck."

Alisande was crying silently now. "Poor Rowena. She had no idea!"

"Yes love. I know."

"But..." Alisande continued tears streaming, "why the ...the..."

“The erotic sensations? The climaxes? I don’t know” Alana replied truthfully. “In the America’s our Mayan allies have a religion based on the worship of the goddess Ixtab. It is she, in their belief system, who gives the sexual pleasure to those who hang themselves. It is an integral part of their worship.”

“What does Dr. Maturin say?”

“He is puzzled but has vowed to continue to study the relationship between hanging and orgasm until he finds an answer.”

“Alana. How long did you hang when they tried to execute you over there?”

“I don’t honestly know, but from all indications I was still kicking and struggling an hour after they hanged me. There are stories of victims who were hanged and resuscitated. But all of these were unconscious at the time, and most had no mental functioning. Do they know how long you hanged?”

Ali shook her head. “We hanged ourselves well after midnight, but they found us in the morning. It could have been a number of hours.”

“Little one”, and Alana cupped her sister in her hands, “I have found the sexual release from hanging far greater than any I have experienced to date. I just pray that when I...when we experience the actual sexual act after eventual marriage, this obsession will disappear.”

“After all you horrors, you are still a virgin?”

“Yes. Wonder of wonders. But that was largely due to the sacrifices of my ladies. Both Illicia and Marissa sacrificed themselves for me. I intend to find a suitable reward for them.”

“But now we have to concentrate on rebuilding the land and governing the people well. My experiences have taught me the impermanence of everything. You are the heir to this kingdom and I must be sure of your safety.”

“I am sorry”, Ali cried, “But I could not...would not, let Michael use me to steal the kingdom!”

“I know love. I know” Alana took her in her arms.

CHAPTER 19

The week passed quickly and the day of the coronation was upon them. It was almost anticlimactic, but when the Royal Crown of Branart was finally placed on her head and she was proclaimed Alana the First High Queen, the bells rang and the celebration began.

Alana was truly resplendent in a white and purple gown with long train and ermine trim. She insisted that a similar dress be prepared for Alisande and it was noted how in a short time she would be her sister's twin.

That evening, at a Royal reception for all nobles present, Alana made appointments of new nobles, officials and officers. Stephen was appointed head of the College of Physicians, Chief of Medicine for the Army and Navy and the Viscount of Chiron. The last pleased him greatly for, as was whispered in his ear, a Viscount would make the perfect suitor for the Lady Marissa.

Then came the ladies' appointments. Lady Marissa was elevated to Viscountess Marissa. Illicia became a lady in her own right. Mira became governess of the castle and Krystyana was officially made the High Queen's ward.

Will Blakenly was made a Knight. Tom Pullings was made a Baron of the realm and a full Post Captain. Captain Howard was made a Colonel in charge of training, the Royal Guard, and so on.

Finally Alana came to Jack. As he stood before her she proudly named him First Lord of the newly formed Admiralty and Commander of all her Majesty's forces, in charge of all operational and developmental agencies of the Army and the Navy. Jack smiled to himself. His would be a royal pennant, an Admiral's pennant, maybe not in His Majesty's navy but certainly in Her Majesty's. Then she had him kneel and Alana named him Duke of Summerfield and gifted him with vast lands and estates. It left Jack stunned.

Later that evening, he and Stephen were standing on a balcony musing over the day.

"We have quite a number of options", Jack mused. "I can stay here and build the navy I want, of course. I could also send expeditions out to the Bermudas and see if they can find their way through. Perhaps I should give it some time and see which of the men would truly like to find a way back and staff the expedition with them."

"How about you, my dear?" Stephen asked with a twinkle. "I know I very well may be quite satisfied as Viscount with Marissa as my bride, but how about you?"

“I would gladly stay if Alana could be mine. But now as High Queen she must find a Regent of suitable class, and I don’t think a mere sailor, even if he is First Lord would qualify.”

For once Stephen laughed out loud. A strange sound Jack had rarely heard. “Oh my dear, you do not have an inkling do you?” Jack was truly puzzled.

Stephen continued, “I have been instructed in the law of Branart by the ministers themselves to be sure that I could pass it on to you clearly. Dear Jack, the Royal Charter states that an unwed Queen of this country may only choose a suitor among the Prince’s of the realm. These, by definition, are the Dukes. By elevating you to the position of the Duke of Summerfield, Alana was virtually inviting you to marry her.”

Jack sat down on a bench in a pile and put his head in his hands, as close to being unhinged as Stephen had ever seen him. After a moment he looked up at Stephen. “You’re sure of this? Absolutely sure?”

“Yes! I was given this to assuage any doubts.”

It was a copy of the section of the Royal Charter dealing with the ascension to the throne and it specified exactly the terms Stephen had described.

“Jack, she loves you and obviously wants you as her husband. Only a fool would decline the invitation. And my best friend may at times be a stumbling dolt but he has never been a fool!”

Jack looked up, still in wonder. “I would hazard the guess that requesting an audience would be in order?”

Stephen smiled and nodded and Jack was off.

The coronation ball was in full regalia and Alana was its center. When Captain, now Colonel, Howard came up to her and passed on Jack’s request for an audience her heart leapt into her mouth and she nodded indicating a private chamber close by.

She waited and he entered looking embarrassed.

“I am apparently too stupid to have realized your intent. But thankfully Stephen has informed me of the realities. If he is correct, your Majesty”, and here he dropped to his knee and took her hand, “would it be too bold for a poor sailor to ask for your hand in marriage?”

Alana burst into tears of joy.

“Yes my dearest, I will happily be yours!”

He rose, took her in his arms, and kissed her...a kiss to make the heavens weep.

After Word

King John the First, or “Good King Jack” as he was generally known to the populace, looked up from his desk in the newly formed Admiralty. He finished up the requisitions and staffing quotas as well as order for the new ships under construction.

Tom Pullings had whipped the first squadron of sloops into shape and “Captain” Pullings was well onto appointment as Admiral of the White. Lord Blankeny, despite being a new father and very devoted to his wife (the Queen’s ward) Krystyana was now also a Master and Commander well on his way to becoming a Post Captain in short order.

Finally Lieutenant Mowett, now Post Captain Mowett, had also blossomed and his eminent rise was virtually assured.

“Twelve months” Jack mused. So much had happened. He and Alana had married and he was crowned King Regent. A bevy of marriages followed. Stephen Maturin, now Viscount Maturin, was absolutely delighted with running the College of Surgeons, his various “Royal Societies” for the advancement of natural knowledge, as well as forming a first rate intelligence service for Branart. Since he was now in charge of all public hygiene he began by creating indoor plumbing and underground sewage systems, as well as adopting new surgical techniques requiring the utmost cleanliness, a predilection he had acquired from the Mayans. Somehow, he and the Countess Marrison had found time for a daughter.

Jack stood and picked up his hat. It was a short walk from his Admiralty office to the Castle. Still so much to do, Jack mulled. The traitor Michael was locked securely in the lowest dungeon of the castle, but he still had followers and there was unrest in the north. But now General Howard had the troops well in hand and the Royal Mayan contingent had taken over the security of the Castle and the surrounding areas without a hint of trouble. Alana had allowed them to build their own compound and it included a small temple to their goddess Ixtab that she sometimes attended as a full priestess. But they kept to themselves and the temple was considered as their royal ambassador’s residence so as long as it remained that way no problems ensued.

Finally he made it to the bedchamber and began to undress cursing the dozen or so attendants out of his sight...a hot bath would do the trick! It was still just early evening but there were sure to be official meetings and a dinner later in the day.

Suddenly, in the window back-lit by the late afternoon sun, stood a vision of loveliness that took his breath away. She was tall and slim with perfect breasts, tiny waist and long legs. Her hair, which appeared a golden red in the back light from the sun, framed her face like halo. This vision of loveliness wore a black girdle with a diaphanes blouse underneath that hid neither her breasts nor her lower charms. Black gartered sheer silk

stockings and high heeled shoes set those lovely legs perfectly. She wore a black tape around her neck and black cuffs on her wrists.

“You’ve been working too hard, your Majesty. I think you need to take some time for a little bed rest and recreation!”

“Bed rest in virtual mid day? And what if my wife finds out? She’ll kill us both!!”

“Yes your wife is one to be wary of...her temper and skill at the deadly arts are well known. There were those in her past that would tie her to the bed and blindfold her so she could not interfere”, the vision suggested.

“Yes”, Jack mused, “we haven’t done that in a while have we?”

He swept Alana into his arms and she giggled and sighed as he carried her to the bed.

FIN