

AUTHOR OF *THE REBEL DUCHESS: BOOK ONE OF THE CHRONICLES OF ILSEADOR*

MANGALA MCNAMARA

*An All-Too-Surprising
Homecoming*

*Book Three
of the
Heir's Journey*



*A Knightess of
the Realm
Novel*

“Sais against a broadsword, laddie-buck?”

**Karana crouched down and made
a come-hither gesture with her dagger.**

The young pirate grinned, showing white teeth in his bronzed face, continuing to spin his strange, short weapons around in a dazzling display. He wriggled his hips at her, saying something that made about half the pirates roar with laughter. They were men, all of them, Ivan noted, all but their chief, the woman with the bandana in her hair.

Karana let her sword dangle carelessly from her fingers, and rested her dagger hand on her hip. “Is that t’best ye can do? Make pretty patterns in t’air? Or do ye use those things more often for something other than fighting?”

The youth’s face turned red beneath his bronze, but he didn’t make a move.

“Is he yers then, mistress? Which o’ ye gets to play wi’ his precious toys? Or are ye the type t’ share?” The knightess lowered her sword, and stood in a relaxed posture. She looked past the boy at the woman in the bandana – ah, Karana had marked her, too.

Ivan began to wonder nervously if she was pushing this too far, and gathered himself to rush to her aid if they should swarm her.

This last suggestion apparently needed no translation. The woman in the bandana looked amused, but the young pirate was scowling as his mates snickered.

**Karana laughed in the pirate lad’s face
and said a few words in a soft and sibilant tongue...
...and the boy lost his temper and flew at her, his metal rods whirling.**



AN
ALL-TOO-SURPRISING
HOMECOMING

Book Three of the
Heir's Journey

(A Knightess of the Realm Novel)



MANGALA McNAMARA

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, places or people, living or dead, is coincidental.

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Summary: Karana and her fiancés are headed to her home-city of Wave on the Great Goddess' orders, in order to be married... after they deal with pirates and a certain problem for Lord Andros of Wave – who just happens to be her foster-uncle..

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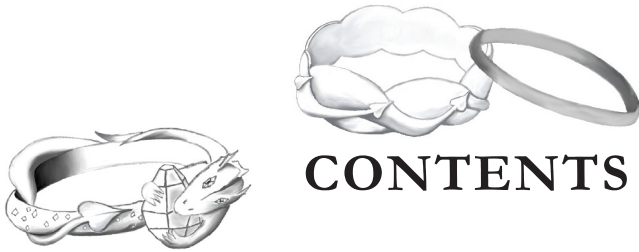
AN ALL-TOO-SURPRISING HOMECOMING

For Colin, our very own Sandypaws.
He was a very good dog.

A note to sensitive souls:

Kefen and Ivan are dealing with some fairly severe long-time childhood traumas. It may not be entirely what they remember... but their perceptions and memories are what made them who they are.

And in the end... love and understanding and a desire to move forwards are all that they have to offer hope...



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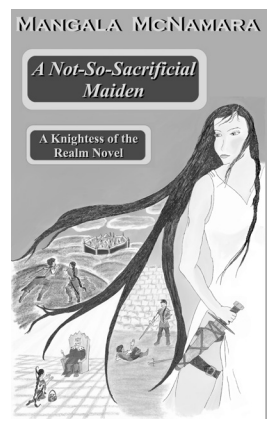
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PROLOGUE

(A reminder of things past)

THERE ARE TIMES IN THE history of a Realm – or a World – when simple events conspire to create great changes.



A SMALL BOY MISHEARS SOMETHING and believes his beloved older sister to have been dishonored by the man she loves – and whom she follows across the sea to wed. That small boy then devotes himself to the learning of magick to the delight of his parents... and hides from them the dark and evil spells he was seeking for in addition to what they have to teach him. And when he is grown, the boy travels across the sea and demands that the king of that land – his brother-in-law – make amends for the imagined insult to his sister, now the queen.

And when the baffled king and queen dismiss his youthful threats and arrogance – he casts his dark and evil spells, creating a Desert of Blackness where once the most prosperous province of the Realm lay. Obliterating nearly two hundred thousand people in a single hour, and laying a claim to the title of most Powerful Evil Wizard in the world.

He remains there, reveling in his vengeance, and sulking in that it has not brought back his adored sister to him.



A NAVAL CAPTAIN IS BLOWN off-course to make landfall on the Great Goddess' Own Blessed Isle and there accepts the divine injunction to fare across the sea to retrieve her Crown Prince – thought to be lost at sea – and his newfound bride... this despite the dire news that the child she had just realized she was carrying would not, *could* not be born alive.

Instead, she is told that the Goddess Herself will bear the spirit of the child that should have been the captain's, and that she will be given this daughter of her soul to raise.

The captain, of course, knows nothing of the princess-bride's younger brother and his mistaken assumptions... no more than does the princess herself, much less her betrothed...



THE YOUNG PRINCE – WHO becomes known as the Evil Wizard Henig – dreams from childhood of the woman who would be his perfect mate. But he doesn't realize that by taking the darker path he has abrogated any chance at winning her. After he creates the Desert of Blackness, destroying a full third of the Realm, Dawil, he sends a marriage proposal to the former captain and her husband, the master merchant... and when he is, trepidatiously, refused by parents who love their 'adopted' daughter more than, perhaps, sense, he begins to conspire to steal her away in some other manner

When a noble House offers a betrothal contract for their Goddess-born daughter, the parents (perhaps) see it as a way to hide her from the Wizard's sight. The Wizard, however, attacks their caravan with his minions and slays everyone... but the girl goes missing.

Enraged, he returns to King Theolore of Dawil, his much-hated brother-in-law, and demands that the girl be turned up and his sister, Queen Marlerite, returned to him – before three years have passed or he will expand his spell of desertification to encompass the entire Realm.

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THE GIRL, KARANA, IS PROTECTED by the Goddesses – including her unknown Mother – and hidden from the Wizard’s sight for a year, though in dire and painful isolation in the Forest. In that space of time, she is moved by divine providence some hundred leagues without her knowledge so that, when she emerges, the girl is within a half-day’s walk of King Theolore’s Crystal Castle.

She comes before the king exactly one year after her parents’ murder and the Evil Wizard’s threats to the Realm and persuades the king to allow her the remaining time – two years – to train as a knight that she might not approach her fate helpless... and to buy her time to seek for another solution. The king – for his own reasons – agrees to this and Binds to her two of his knights-in-training as Karana’s Companions according to the traditions of Dawil. The two he chooses are the Heir to his destroyed province and the youngest son of another of his Great Lords – the seventh son of a seventh son.

The three win their shields, but not without a cost to their hearts. Ivan, the seventh son of the seventh son, fears his father and flees in the middle of the Knighting Ceremony, leading his Companions to think he has abandoned them.

Kefen and Karana, the Heir and the girl, destroy the Evil Wizard, and restore the province of Taridawil, including the hundreds of thousands of people. The province is overgrown, the people and their animals and even plants and buildings aged by the seven years they had gone missing. The pair are named Heroes of the Realm... but the true reward is the one only they two know of: the kiss they shared atop the tallest Tower of Taridawil Keep... in all despite of Karana’s stunned discovery of the identities of her Bound Companions as revealed by the Wizard.

Ivan rejoins them, not without some contention over his abandonment, and the young knights are sent to ward the only child of the king and his queen on her Heir’s Journey to the Blessed Isle that she might be named Crown Princess and Heir to the Throne.

On the Isle it is revealed that the princess does not wish to rule, that Karana is the Daughter of the Goddess, and that, beyond their Companion-Bond and the love they have found for one another, a true soul-bond links Karana, the young Ducal-Heir, Kefen, and Ivan, the seventh son of a seventh son.

And... that the Evil Wizard Henig may... not be as dead as they had thought.

The Goddess and Her Sisters, including Silvestria, the Lady of Wild Places and Silver Dragon of Pathremir, enjoin the knights and their much put-upon ship’s

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captain to return not to the port-city of Delta from which they embarked, but to Karana's home-city of Wave. A different task awaits them there, one that their king has not anticipated.

And so, they depart from the Blessed Isle with their commission seemingly unfulfilled, for the princess – by her own request – has not received the Goddess' Blessing to become Heir. And ready to turn the Realm upon its ear, for Kefen must return to be Duke of Taridawil, the province which has been restored, and he plans to wed in a triad-marriage his two dear loves, Karana and Ivan. Only the most southern provinces accept triad-marriage, and the more northern ones, including his own Taridawil and Ivan's native Mountainmeadow, barely acknowledge that *pairs* of the same gender might love and be wed. For a Great Lord to choose such a different path will surely be challenged, and Kefen will be second only to the king once he is confirmed as Duke.

And then there is this mysterious mission the Goddesses have set them upon...



Chapter ONE

Pirates Ahoy!

WITH THE GODDESSES OF SEA and Wind looking after the *Windy Osprey* and her passengers to speed their journey, it might be expected that there were no storms. The crew went back to their shipboard routine – but Captain Hesorn excused the three young knights from ship-chores in the afternoons to facilitate Karana’s financial literacy class... which grew enormously and unexpectedly.

Karana had planned the course as a way to catch her nobleborn betrothed up to the realities of the world of finances that they were finding themselves thrust into. Kefen and Ivan were, after all, the future spouses of the Head of the pre-eminent merchant House in Dawil, and they knew barely more about the subject than how to do some basic accounting for the troops they might someday lead.

*(Although how necessary any of this would **actually** be was sort of unclear to Ivan. After all, Karana couldn’t be Head of House Metreedi and Duchess of Taridawil or... the other thing that the Great Goddess had more or less warned him and Kefen not to tell her about. But this was important to his beautiful love – even if Ivan didn’t find it an interesting challenge to learn something so far outside his areas of expertise, he could humor her...)*

Not that it was their fault – nobles rarely paid much attention to money unless they were landowners, and knights were invariably youngest sons with few other

prospects. In fact, even the little bit of information that had been incorporated into their education as part of their courses in Logistics had surprised Ivan. Likely it was one of the ‘radical reforms that Master Felerico had sneaked in over the last ten years – *he* had traveled abroad and had a wider perspective on what a knight should know.

These lessons were *supposed* to be a chance for Karana to snuggle up with her loves and introduce them to the vastness of the world of finance in as unintimidating a way as she could try to figure out. Ivan had guessed that was her plan anyways, and had been nearly as flummoxed as his bride-to-be when Kefen wanted to invite others to join them.

Instead, he found himself watching Karana lead an open seminar that included the princess, the cabin-girl Roverda, and half the younger crewfolk... Including the mysterious new crew-woman, though *she* hung to the back of the crowd and especially kept her distance from the nobles.

The captain kept himself back from the proceedings, but Commander Feredick joined in with comments from his own experiences. Ferry was a Metreedi after all, and Karana’s cousin as well as the grandson of the Head of House-Delta– he knew the subject, although he’d apparently never had a great deal to do with the business-side of things, having joined the Royal Navy as soon as he was old enough to do so.

Second Officer Seldrea weighed in occasionally as well, which was always interesting. Her people were of elvish stock, she had said, and had long ago come from ‘across the sea’ to Dawil... though *where* across the sea they had come from no one seemed to know, possibly even Officer Seldrea. Her perspective on economics was... unique.

Of course, those commentaries only occurred when Feredick or Seldrea could be persuaded to come down from the lookouts at the tops of the masts. Both officers had developed an absolute fascination with the highest, windiest parts of the ship ever since leaving the Blessed Isle.

At least, while Ferry was up there the winds never so much as faltered. And if he came down with a dreamy and satisfied expression, it did no one any harm. Being a favorite of the Wind-Goddess had some perks.

Seldrea, who would normally have covered the First Officer’s duties if he were ill or otherwise unable, was more of a mystery. Captain Hesorn viewed them both with tolerance and leaned harder on his other second-officer and his thirds.

Apparently, some changes were to be expected after a visit to the Blessed Isle.

In fact, the only person who seemed wholly untouched by the visit was the mousy Lady Emerald, who spent her time hovering timidly at the edges of things, sulking, and doing embroidery.

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Emeraud was officially Princess Karivas' chaperone at this point, but had no particular duties to attend to in the confines of the ship. She kept her dull, auburn hair perfectly coiffed, her gowns elegantly displayed on her well-shaped form, and her greyish-hazel eyes hungrily following Sir Ivan, rather than her royal charge.

Ivan kept his eyes where they should be – on Kefen or Karana. And since Emeraud made no attempt to approach him, the golden-haired knight paid the lady-in-waiting no mind.

There were no storms, emotional or meteorological, but the peaceful interlude was about to end.



On the *Windy Osprey's* third day out from the Blessed Isle of Kalapula, an osprey cried – much too far from land for a sea-hawk – and Commander Ferry called down “Ship ahoy!” before the regular crewman on lookout could say anything.

Ferry came down the shrouds faster than Ivan had ever seen anyone do it before.

“Pirates off the starboard stern!”

Karana's financial discussion seminar broke up instantly. Since the ship was barely a dot in the distance, there was plenty of time to get ready; there was haste but no panic. She took the time to collect and properly stow away the materials the group had been using – Ivan had quit paying attention sometime around Commander Ferry's first cry, but it had been some sort of exercise having to do with compounded interest and share valuations.

Ivan had been lost the first day, when she began by telling them that all money was a polite fiction created to expedite trade – he'd excelled at the demonstration she'd put them through, but it still made little sense to him. Money was *real* – he could hold it in his hand.

Today's exercise had taken them into realms of money that seemed *truly* fictitious and his attention had been wandering from the get-go.

He smiled slightly, thinking of last night's very private discussion that had gone into the wee hours of morning, with Kefen covering his head with a pillow and falling asleep while the two of them argued about what being ‘real’ meant. It was driving his beautiful love crazy that he could do so well with the games she devised to explain her points while at the same time he insisted that they made no ‘real’ sense whatsoever.

And the arguments were fun.

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The golden-haired knight headed over to where the captain, the marine lieutenant, and Sergeant Dahlia were in close conference. They accepted him into their group without comment, continuing the discussion without a pause. Officer Seldrea joined them a moment later and began giving them details about the approaching ship that Ivan could not imagine how she knew, but that Captain Hesorn accepted without question.

Ivan kept his ears open and his mouth closed. He might be a belted knight – but his belt was still shiny, while these men and women had been doing their job for decades. He had resented that at first, but arms-practice with the crew had won them his eternal respect.

The plan was two-fold. They had some hope of outrunning the privateer – the *Windy Osprey* was built for speed, after all, and they were running relatively light in the water with a good following wind. But pirate vessels could be built sleeker still than a ship designed for royal comforts, and the wind that favored them would do their pursuer no harm. Should they not be able to outrun, then the majority of the crew would go up into the shrouds for the advantage of ‘high ground,’ while the ‘landlubbers’ – the marines, royal men-at-arms, and the knights – would array themselves to defend the passenger cabin where Princess Karivas, Lady Emeraud, and their maid would stay hidden.

Ivan checked several times to make sure he understood his, and his Companions’, role, then stepped away from the conference. Kefen was waiting for him in an out-of-the-way spot on the deck, dressed lightly indeed for battle, with only toughened leather vambraces and a small leather helm for armor. He had similar items for Ivan, and Karana was double-checking her own laces; presumably they had helped each other armor up before coming up to the deck.

A bit wryly, Ivan remembered telling Karana that leather armor was useless against edged weapons, back when they were all squires. She had disagreed. Now, he understood that the chain and light plate they would wear on land would be the ending of them if they fell overboard during a fight.

All three of them were as barefoot as the sailors and for the same reason. Even the best boots couldn’t match bare soles for grip on wet decks. The riding boots that every knight wore regularly were almost worse than useless in this context.

Kefen and Karana wore their daggers, but had put aside the scabbards for their swords and held the blades unsheathed; no unnecessary encumbrances to catch on hawsers and rigging. Kefen, he noticed, wielded the same, plain sword he had been using since Midwinter, and *not* the decorated blade of the Duke of Taridawil that the Great Goddess had restored to him; there would be no cause for hesitation if it came to losing this weapon into the sea in order to save a life. Nor had Ivan’s handsome love gotten around yet to practicing with the storied blade

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and learning to be comfortable with its old-fashioned basket-hilt – presumably because it reminded him too much of his father to bear to do so, but that sort of nicety would do Kefen no good in a fight.

“Sergeant Dahlia and the other royal men-at-arms are to stay in the companionway before Princess Karivas’ quarters,” Ivan informed them, letting Kefen lace up the leather vambraces on his forearms and Karana remove his scabbard and sword-belt. And trying not to be too distracted by their activities – *his* betrotheds, armoring *him* for battle... “We’re to hold the hatch leading down there.”

Kefen nodded a tad more sharply than seemed necessary, and Karana looked grim as she handed them both back their naked blades, darting briefly down into the passenger hold to stow Ivan's scabbard.

“They’d be fools to actually attack,” Ivan went on, thinking to reassure them. “This is obviously a ship of the Royal Navy, not a merchant vessel. It’s full of fighters, not that fictitious money,” he added, trying for some humor.

Karana’s mouth twisted wryly in an expression that wasn’t a smile. “The pirates have known exactly which ships to attack for as long as anyone can remember, Ivan. Their sources of information are tight, and they don’t make mistakes. If they’re coming after us, they know exactly what – and who – is on board, and that is why they’re after us.”

“So, they’ll be after Princess Karivas.” Kefen stated what Ivan was thinking.

“Or *you*, love,” she reminded him. “Though the princess *is* a more likely target.”

Kefen and the princess? Wasn’t it *Karana* who controlled that ‘merchant empire’s worth’ of fictitious money and real goods?

Ivan fastened his small helm on, swallowing hard and trying not to be obvious about it. They’d be after his Kefen? Or... his Karana? “I didn’t think pirates went in for ransom.”

Karana shrugged. “Captain Ryan of the *Chelsea’s Eye* has been Pirate-King these last dozen years. *His* policy has been to avoid unnecessary bloodshed or anything else that might bring full-scale military vengeance upon his raiders. But there’s always rogues. And who’s to say Ryan is still King? Pirates are known to fight each other on the high seas, though it’s said there’s honor among the thieves on some misty islands where they keep their children.”

Ivan goggled a bit at her. “How do you know so much about them?”

“It’s *my job* to protect all that fictitious money that House Metreedi uses to keep Dawil’s economy going, Sir Ivan... Silvertree,” she replied archly. “It takes bloodshed or worse to get the military to do anything about pirates, so we *merchants* have to defend ourselves.”

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Ivan was astonished to hear her use his knighting-name – such things were more relics of a time when most knights did not come with their own family surnames and nowadays were largely relegated to the use of bards, to make their songs and tales sound more interesting. Well, and the King’s Knight-Commanders of the Royal Army and the masters at the training academy used theirs, to make it clear they were acting on the royal behest and not on behalf of their own families. The priestesses made some noises about finding the most appropriate ones, but everyone generally forgot about them after the knighting ceremony, he’d always thought.

Her slight hesitation made him wonder if she’d been about to use his family-name and then stopped herself. He himself didn’t want to use the Torvalds name any longer, but the troth-pledge and oath-swearing he had shared with Kefen had been so private that he wasn’t sure if he was entitled to use the Saralath name publicly. Yet.

“Worse than bloodshed?” Kefen asked, with something in his tone of averting an argument.

“Pirates take prisoners,” Karana said grimly. “The stories go that Captain Ryan himself became a pirate when the merchantman he was crewing for was captured – and that he spent two years chained to an oar, just as Sergeant Dahlia told us happened to her and the King and their companions on *his* Heir’s trip to Kalapula. It’s *said* Captain Ryan’s banned the practice...”

“*If* he’s still the Pirate-King,” Kefen nodded a bit grimly himself.

“But a boarding that everyone sails home from just serves to protect the pirates from naval retribution,” Karana went on. “It does nothing to help the families who lose their homes because their employer can no longer pay them because of the lost cargo.” She bowed her head. “My mother told me about a friend of hers who lost everything – she drowned herself in the bay before her creditors could come looking for her. Death cancels all debt, so at least her wife and children were debt-free... even if they were also homeless.”

Kefen put an arm around her, but she shook it off almost angrily.

Commander Feredick had paused beside them. “She’s right,” he said, and the grim expression sat poorly on his cheerful, open face. “There’s more homeless children begging on the streets of Wave and Delta than have been orphaned by pirates. Milord Andros and milady Mendria do what they can, but it’s a constant drain. They protect their own waters and our navies support all the cities along the coast, but it’s not *enough*. No matter what it may look like, even when everyone comes home, piracy is *not* a victimless crime.”

He nodded firmly and hurried back to his duties in preparing the ship to fight.

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“Were you on a ship that was raided, Karana?” Ivan asked, being careful to give her space.

“Me?” She laughed sardonically. “Oh, no. *I* served on my *mother’s* ship, the *Star of Home*.” She laughed darkly again, and stalked away, leaving her two Companions to look at each other in complete bafflement.

“That would have been the flagship of the Metreedi fleet, right?” Kefen asked. “From everything we’ve heard about her mother, she wouldn’t have taken only the safer runs, would she?”

Sergeant Dahlia, the most senior of the royal men-at-arms who were aboard to protect the princess, caught that comment as she was coming up to them, perhaps to finish coordinating their defense of Princess Karivas, and raised an eyebrow. “Restella Endeiroff was known as the boldest captain in the Wavian navy, true. But Restella Endeiroff *Metreedi* was a mother with her only child aboard, and a husband waiting at home. Would you risk *your* only child, lads?”

Kefen went white, and swallowed hard, staring after Karana’s retreating form. And Ivan checked to see if his naked sword was trembling in his own hands before speaking, very quietly, in answer to the sudden gale of sheer panic flowing down the soul-bond between them.

“She wouldn’t take kindly to that idea,” he murmured, carefully not looking at the other young man. “And she’s still better with a sword than you are.”

That was an exaggeration, but they *were* very, very close in skill...

“Only two rounds out of five. And she’s not better than *you*,” Kefen replied, not looking at him.

Sergeant Dahlia raised her other eyebrow. “Do you mean to tell me...?”

“She’d never forgive me.” Ivan was not about to fold his arms while holding a naked blade. “And she’d be right *not* to,” he added.

They might *need* Karana’s blade, and anyways, the only way to prevent her from using it would be to tie her hand and foot... which would make her *more* vulnerable, not less. Even if the idea of her – *or* Kefen – getting hurt was nearly enough to break him out of the cool, analytical mindset he did his best fighting in.

Kefen had a stubborn look on his face.

Sergeant Dahlia stepped in front of the shorter man, blocking his view of the knightess, and took hold of both of the young duke-to-be’s shoulders. “Kefen Saralath, you are *not* going to tell that young woman she can’t fight because she’s carrying the Heir to Taridawil,” she told him sternly. “Kindly remember that she’s not just a walking womb. And that if she lives and you die at this point, that child is a Metreedi, not a Saralath, anyways, and not yours to make choices for.”

“Sergeant...” The dark-haired young... ducal-prince... didn’t seem to know what to say, but he gaged beneath her steady gaze.

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Her gaze softened as Sergeant Dahlia saw that he was inclined to obey. Ivan knew *he* was unlikely to disobey the Sergeant in this mood. She'd watched over them – if from afar – since their earliest days as pages and squires, a motherly presence had they ever wanted or needed... well, more than *each other*. “Lad, she'll be fine. She's a fine swordswoman, and she knows how to fight on a ship. She's done it before, after all, and her only a child.”

“What?” Ivan exclaimed. “But she said she'd not been on a ship that was raided.”

Sergeant Dahlia laughed. “Well, that's true enough. They fought off the boarding party. But she heard plenty from her mother about her participation in that fight, or so our good captain tells me.” She saw she had both their attention and went on. “Karana was fourteen, you see. It was her mother's ship, but her mother had retired from the sea two years earlier – not intentionally at first, I hear, but when her leg healed, and she could walk again, she made the decision. Captain Hesorn had taken a leave of absence from the king's service to sail his sister's ship while she recovered... the rumor is still around that Master Devin was doing his best to keep him...”

“Captain Hesorn had a run down to Amberdia – the night lookout came down sick the day they were embarking, and he snagged Karana to fill the spot. Lookout's normally a low-risk position, and the port they were heading to wasn't far. She'd been told to stay high if anything happened, but the attack happened on her off-shift. She told her mother that she didn't have time to get high in the shrouds, but our good captain 'fessed up to his sister that Karana didn't make much of an effort to get to the rigging.” The sergeant gave them a wry grin. “I suspect she was much like young Roverda in those days – these champion shroud-swingers and rail-walkers tend to be cocky. At any rate, that was the last voyage Karana was allowed on, and Captain Hesorn returned to his commission with the Royal Navy in Delta shortly thereafter – though I've heard him swear up and down that his choice had nothing to do with that incident.”

Ivan and Kefen exchanged another look. They had noticed Roverda hopping all over the ship as the crew prepared for battle, delivering messages from the captain and being generally boisterous. *Their* Karana had been like *that*?

“Was she... okay?” Kefen ventured.

Sergeant Dahlia shrugged. “A sorry cut on her left arm, he said, but it healed well. He said he was glad to see she's settled down so well. I gather she got a few good blows in before his first mate – and that would be our Commander Feredick's mother, her Aunt Dimitria – managed to stuff her down a hatch into the cargo hold.” She shook her head with amusement, then let it fade to a certain grim sobriety. “They'll be wetting down the decks shortly. You'll want to get into

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position at the hatchway before that. I'll be inside with the rest of the Guards as a last defense for Her Royal Highness, but there's five of us and if two can't hold that passageway, then five will do little better. You're trained for strategic command, boys. Let me know if you think our help is needful." She waited a moment, looking into each of their eyes, nodded, and gripped each of them firmly by the shoulder. "You'll be fine, boys."

Ivan felt obscurely reassured as she walked away from them.

On the other side of the deck, Karana was chivvying the mysterious new crew-woman towards the hatch they would be guarding. Ivan started over to meet her there, Kefen trailing behind him.

"—stay in my cabin. You do *not* have the skills to fight, and trust me you do *not* want to find out how angry the captain gets when you distract him in battle! Go!" With a last nudge that was more of a push by the knightess, the woman disappeared down into the companionway.

"Karana...?" Ivan asked. She shook her head without explaining, peering down the passage to make sure her instructions had been followed. At the sound of a slamming door, she withdrew and began to batten down the hatch one-handed.

"*You* never mentioned you'd been in a pitched battle before *we* ever even *met* you," Kefen – no, surely his ever-phlegmatic friend wasn't *complaining*?

The knightess winced. "Someone's lips have been loose."

"Sergeant Dahlia had it from your uncle."

Finishing her task, the young woman leaned back against the bulkhead, balancing on one leg, the other knee propped up against the wall behind her. "What do you want to know? I was a young idiot. I didn't follow orders. I distracted my uncle and the crew, and I got royally reamed for it. Twice." She winced again. "No, make that three times."

"*Three* times?" Even Kefen seemed startled out of his irritation at that.

"Once by Uncle Hesorn when they beat the pirates off," she counted on her fingers. "Once by my mother when I told her what happened. And the last time by my father when she and Uncle Hesorn explained that I hadn't followed orders... or mentioned that part to my mother. At least Aunt Dimi – Captain Uncle's first officer – didn't feel a need to add *her* commentary. Though I suppose after she'd thrown me into the hold, she figured she'd more or less made her point."

She glared at the deck. "That was my first time with a real berth, not just as cabin-girl, and they forbade me to crew again – for *anyone* – for a year. And then it was milk-runs up and down the coast for the *next* year. I *think* that they were going to let me move on after I finished setting up the trade-routes to Pathremir and came back to Wave. I wanted to beat my mother's record – she was the youngest captain in the navy – and spending years off the ocean *isn't* the way to do that."

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Ivan choked a bit at that, trying to imagine his brother Peder's reaction to all of this. Perhaps, after all, it wasn't *Karana* who needed to be protected from the *Torvalds*... Quiet, easygoing Peder might be quite grateful that it was Ivan, and not he, who would marry her to fulfill that betrothal contract. If their lord father couldn't find a way to prevent it...

Kefen wasn't ready to give up. "You fought in a battle at *fourteen* – and you never *told* us."

She met his eyes at last, her own a green blaze of shame. "I *screwed up* in a battle when I was fourteen and nearly got my uncle killed trying to protect me. His first officer had to throw me down into the cargo hold – through one of the hatches that's flat on the deck."

She jerked her head to indicate one such to the side of where they stood. "The hold was filled with Amberdeen carpets, which is why I didn't break anything, including myself. I got a scratch on my arm, falling through the hatch, and bled all over the top carpet. My father made me *keep* that one and put it on the floor of my room so I wouldn't forget – and he took the cost of it out of my pay for the work I'd done. *And* my account. Because Amberdeen carpets cost more than a *captain* earns in a single short voyage and certainly more than a lookout."

She glared at him. "Happy now?"

Captain Hesorn leaned over the railing above them from the quarterdeck. Defending the steersman and the wheel was at top priority right along with defending Princess Karivas. The quarterdeck was the next-safest place to be. "All set down there?"

"Aye, Captain Uncle, sir!" Ivan responded for the three of them, earning himself a small, distracted smile from the captain.

"Excellent. Don't go wandering off your post," the captain warned. "No matter what it looks like is happening elsewhere. We've done this before, and you haven't."

"Aye, sir." Ivan acknowledged again.

"Karana?"

"Aye, sir." She didn't look up.

"I saw what you did. It was kindly thought of."

"Aye, sir."

Captain Hesorn gave her a slightly exasperated look, shook his head slightly, and went back to other matters.

"I don't think he's holding it against you," Ivan said quietly. "It *was* five years ago, after all."

Karana shrugged. Her eyes seemed drawn up unwillingly to the shrouds, and Roverda's slim figure flitting around. She pulled her gaze back down to the boards of the deck and her bare toes, an expression of some bitterness on her face.

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The two young men exchanged another glance and decided to leave well enough alone.

“Water, ho!” the bos’n hollered and water sluiced across the deck and their feet. Pirates, it had been explained to Ivan, sometimes tried to set their victim’s ships afire, so all the wooden surfaces that could be were soaked down prior to engagement. The remaining vulnerability would be the masts and sails, but buckets were being hoisted up to the lookouts on the three masts and they carried spare sails – though not a full set – in the holds below.

“Any word yet?” Karana asked the bos’n as he passed by.

“Officer Seldrea says ’tis not runnin’ t’Red Sails, but no word from t’lookouts.” And he was on by to another task.

Karana frowned after him. “That makes no sense.”

“What makes no sense?” Kefen asked, taking turns shaking the water off his feet to Ivan’s amusement. “What’s so special about red sails?” He stopped to look up. “That sounds familiar for some reason.”

“The Pirate-King’s is the only ship that runs with red sails,” Ivan reminded him. “Blazoned across the entire thing with the skull-and-crossbones, if I’m not wrong.” A demonstration of strength and skill and arrogance, since such a display would be sure to incite attack from any naval vessel that came across it.

Karana nodded distractedly. “They have to know who we are – and who we’re carrying. It doesn’t make sense for a lesser ship to be after us. They’d have to have the Pirate-King’s permission... or be setting up to challenge him by showing off that they have the skill and strength to take down the flagship of the Dawilm navy and steal the Crown Princess.” She frowned again. “Damn. I wish I could get up where I could see.” Her eyes went longingly upwards again.

“Karana...”

She scowled at Ivan. “I’m not *doing* anything about it. Just *wishing*.”

Kefen looked pale. “If they’re just out for glory... Then they won’t mind destroying this ship to get what they want, will they?”

The knightess shrugged. “Who knows? If they have enough crew to sail both, the *Osprey* might be a prize worth taking in and of itself.” She went back to looking up. “They’ll want prisoners, though, not drowned royals. They’ll be careful enough until they have their prize. Or prizes. If they want ransom money. Rovi might be small enough that she’s worth subduing.” She swallowed hard. “Without being able to chain down their prisoners to the oars, though, there’s no use and too much risk in keeping *fighters* alive.”

Kefen and Ivan exchanged a look. Princess Karivas was a hostage who would be ransomed without question. The Ducal-Prince of Taridawil and the Head of House Metreedi were other good possibilities. The youngest son of Mountainmeadow...

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might not be. Not to mention the captain and all their friends among the officers and crew, Sergeant Dahlia and the other men-at-arms of the Royal Guard...

Their first battle.

Ivan still hadn't told either of them that partners in a soul-bond usually didn't survive each other. This seemed like very much the wrong time to mention it. He was all too aware of the problem himself.



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