

# ~Boneshank Annie~



"Thirteen wraps round the hangman's noose,  
thirteen steps up the gallows,  
thirteen breaths till the line snaps tight,  
and ye dance wi' the Jack o' Shadows,"

# ~Boneshank Annie~

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# 1- The Hanging of Anne Stark

(Plymouth, Montserrat)

The past few months rotting in His Majesty's Royal Dungeons had taken all the fight out of Anne Stark. Well, that and the loss of her left leg just below the knee which she was still recuperating from. Not that it mattered how well she did so, as she was scheduled to be hanged this very morning. The bastard Magistrate had waited until she recuperated before putting her on trial, on account of her standing to face her accusers. More likely, he didn't want to hang a cripple and it would play better at the gallows if she were standing. She sat on the tiny rack in her lonely cell in her ruffled silk chemise. Her cell was smaller than most in the gaol by more than half, but still slightly larger than the Captain's cabin aboard "Starduster". She swayed slightly. Not that the room moved, but more-so that it did not. She had spent most of her six and thirty years aboard ship, the gentle swaying of the deck was more familiar to her than solid land. Her body still didn't compensate well to decks that didn't move.

Her peg leg was lying next to her on the dingy blanket like an incongruous exclamation mark to the end of her life. The rough-hewn end of a spruce spar was poorly formed, why bother with sensuous curves and fancy carvings for one of the damned. It was much lighter than expected, not being made of hardwood, but strong enough to keep her arse off the deck for the next few hours. She compared it to her own flesh and bone leg, singular, leg, as it was the only one she had left. At least they made it the right length so she wouldn't list like a drunkard. Anne slipped the soft leather cup of the wooden peg's cradle over her own scarred stump, fastened the leather support harness, and stood up. She almost fell, again, then forced the dead thing to respond to her will. "Not too woggy," Annie muttered to herself. She took three steps, crossing the small cell, turned and walked back with a thump, step, thump.

Annie sat back down and pulled her canvas breeches over new leg and old, covering the top of the ugly peg, sensuous curves, and silken chemise alike. Her sea boot was stamped on, then bodice, broad belt, and seacoat. Her gaolers had seen that her clothes were clean for her trial, and she had done her best to keep them that way afterwards. Her broad brimmed hat with a single plume completed her transformation, sitting atop her midnight curls like a ship on a dead black sea. In several short moments Annie was gone and Captain Stark stood before her in the small dingy mirror over her equally squalid wash stand. She stood on her own two legs. Anne's gray-green eyes beheld a spare woman, not so lofty in the bow like a tavern wench but obviously not a man by any means. Her softer curves and facial features were tempered by the hard life at sea, and her body was much more sinew than fluff. "Not too bloody shabby at all," she said to her own reflection. "Watch out, world, Spruceshank Annie's on deck."

It was midmorning when Anne, bound in irons with soldiers prodding her, was led to the gallows. She lumbered slowly up the stairs, unstable on her peg and unable to balance herself with her bound hands. The executioner fitted the noose around her slender neck as time itself seemed to slow for her.

“Thirteen wraps round the hangman's noose,  
thirteen steps up the gallows,  
thirteen breaths till the line snaps tight,  
and ye dance wi' the Jack o' Shadows,”

she sung quietly to herself.

Rope in place and secured, the executioner read her crimes aloud to the crowd in a loud but dryly monotonous voice, "Found guilty of conspiracy, destruction of property, murder, smuggling, and piracy on the high seas this woman, known by the name of Anne Stark, late the Captain of the privateer ship “Starduster”, will hang by the neck until dead."

Annie straightened her back, squared her shoulders, and faced her fate. She stared out into the crowd. Her eye caught that of a slender man with long greasy hair under his tricorn hat and kerchief, and he glowered at her. The man then mouthed several choice words at her. Unseen, she smiled as her demeanor changed. The gallows floor fell out from under her and the rope tightened around her slender neck. Then the rope broke.

The bound pirate captain landed badly on her new leg, driving the length of spruce into her tender stump, and she screamed bloody murder. The scream was muffled by several cannon shot and ensuing screams and mayhem from the crowd of onlookers as random bits of metal cut into them. A battered fork skittered across the cobbles near Annie's boot. The thick air began to reek of gun smoke and burning pitch. Someone slipped under the gallows beside her and unlocked the irons that bound her. The chains binding her fell away like melting butter. A cutlass was placed in her grasp and a heavy hand clutched her collar. Anne, still blinded by the pain and smoke, was more dragged to the edge of the overhanging gallows than led, and all but thrown onto the back of a roan gelding. Amid the screaming, panicking crowd, the cursing soldiers, and several pistol shots, three horses, a big roan gelding in the middle, thundered out of the cobbled square. Within moments they were lost to the maze of winding Plymouth side streets.

Several hours later found the trio on the rocky west shore near dusk. The pair of pirates, Anne's former crew, bo'sun Samuel Fitch and cook Benjamin Wilkes, dismounted and helped their former Captain off the roan. “Ye should 'ave left me fer the ravens,” she told them.

“Couldna' ave done that, Cap'n,” Wilkes replied. “Got's a launch over there, single mast, lateen rigged, good and stable for a single soul to handle. It'll get you away with any luck. We stocked it, Fitch an' me, for several days. Got's yer sextant and compass, and a couple o' borrowed charts as well as the Captain's share o' the last haul. She should square us all.”

“I stopped by the Magistrate's an' picked ye up a wee somethin' meself,” added Fitch. He produced a lacquered wooden box. Anne opened the ornate box, more suited to an office or lounge than a rough

seacoast, and found her scrimshaw handled pistol, Clive. Beside the once confiscated firearm rested a new, but matching, scrimshaw hilted main gauche`. Her sea green eyes met his coal black ones. "The box and pigsticker be sort of a gift from his honor, seein' as I were in a bit of a hurry when I stole Clive back," he explained.

Tears welled up in her eyes as she leaned hard into the two men, pulling them into a comrade's embrace. "Bloody crazy woggies," she whispered. Dropping the box, forgotten, on the stony beach she examined Clive. The tri-barrelled flintlock pistol had been cleaned and loaded, his honor had taken good care of it after 'confiscating' it from her. It was sweet of Fitch to steal it back. She sighted along the barrel, pulling back the hammer and feeling the solid weight of it. Spinning lightly on her good foot she fired, driving a lead ball point blank into Benjamin Wilkes's chest.

"Bloody hell," exclaimed Fitch. It was his last statement, as she drove the main gauche` between his rib and twisted the point upward into his heart.

"Sorry lads," she whispered, kissing him lightly on the cheek, "no witnesses." She wiped away her tears and added, "Bloody stupid, mates, ye should 'ave left me fer the ravens." She drove the horses off with the flat of her cutlass. Owing more to her peg leg than her physical strength it took her another good hour to muscle her friend's corpses into the launch, it wouldn't do for them to be found on the beach. Besides, good men like Fitch and Wilkes deserved an honest burial at sea. Lastly Anne picked up the discarded box. At first she was going to fill it with rocks and send it to Davy Jones, but thinking it might bring a couple pence she reconsidered and dropped it into the boat next to her dead comrades, and shoved off.

## 2- Transformations

(Lesser Antilles, St. Eustatius)

It was usually a short run from Montserrat to Saint Eustatius, but Anne Stark took her time. The corpses of Ben and Fitch went overboard as soon as she crossed into blue water, and then she pilfered and hid her way among the Lesser Antilles, dodging the British and French navies and generally keeping a low profile. She could easily have purchased what she needed, but that would have caused even more trouble for her. Women in their middle years, traveling alone in sailor's garb, and with a rudely carved peg leg to boot were very rare. One that could ably pilot a single craft, no matter how small, across open water even more so. In fact, any of these inconsistencies would arouse suspicion, all of them combined would put her right back on the gallows.

At first she would slip into a port town after dark, by land or sea, liberate an unattended item or two that she needed, and then never return to that port again. Once Anne had 'respectable' clothing, including a lovely pair of ladies riding boots that she managed to conceal her peg with, she became bolder. She would approach a town along some coastal road where she'd bivouacked the launch and actually purchase any needed items. It was on one such occasion, in Oranjestad on the Dutch island of St. Eustatius, that she finally decided to find an able woodcarver.

Anne arrived on foot, midmorning, in the port town of Fort de Windt. She wore a plain russet gingham skirt (liberated) over her riding boots (liberated again), a light cotton chemise (bartered for), and her own crimson bodice. Her main gauche` rode comfortably in her right boot top, Clive was strapped to her inner left thigh closer than a lover's kiss, and several other her sharp-and-pointies were nestled about her person. She carried a large hand-basket, as any goodwife might, with a light shawl and second cotton chemise covering the lacquered box she had decided to spare on that stony beach so many nights earlier. The box held a small share of her coinage, dry powder, and shot. The rest of her coin lay buried near her launch, which was concealed several leagues west of the town. Despite the new, commonplace clothing of an ordinary woman her age and her small arsenal, Anne felt as naked as a newborn.

Still, her heart trying to pound it's way out of her chest, Anne sauntered into the town as if she was a visitor who'd been on a simple morning walk. She stopped at a small pastry vendor for breakfast. She had selected that particular market stand because it's woodwork caught her eye. It was intricately carved all around with ivy, flowers, and frolicking cherubs and was brightly painted. Commenting to the baker's wife (because it would be inappropriate to make idle conversation with a strange man) that her late husband, John, had appreciated the art of woodcarving and would have found her stand quite lovely, she was informed that the woman's brother-in-law was a woodcarver in Oranjestad. The stand, it seemed was a wedding gift to them. The woman then quickly apologized, inquiring how long Anne had been a widow.

Anne waxed long, spinning an intricate tale of how her two sons, Benjamin and Samuel, had died of scarlet fever (well there was a bloody great scarlet stain on the beach, anyway), and her husband, John, was lost at sea. By the end of their conversation Anne had the woodcarver's name, the woman's endorsement, a new friend, and an extra pastry to boot. The extra pastry was because Anne apparently looked as if she was wasting away and should eat more. "Why," the goodwife commented, "that little handbasket looks as if it would pin you right to the cobbles!"

Well, it did have almost a quarter stone of gold doubloons in the bottom along with lead shot and powder for Clive, thankfully Anne was stronger than she appeared. Blessing the woman for her kindness, Anne continued on unhurriedly through the market square, and then hired a carriage for the mile or so trip inland to the town of Oranjestad.

"Quite a limp you got there, m'lady," the carriage driver commented.

"I had a dreadful fall about a fortnight ago," Anne explained. She then retold the Widow Darcy's sad tale, and how she was starting over with next to nothing. The tale was told again at the local public house and inn where she rented a small room, to the innkeepers wife, at the woodcarver's where she commissioned a replacement leg to his fiance, and later that evening at dinner during her conversation with the serving wench. By the next morning the entire town of Oranjestad was familiar with the visiting Widow Anne Darcy from Anguilla (and isn't it simply dreadful about her leg, after all she's been through!)

She knew, being Dutch, that the woodcarver would have little contact or concern for the British navy. The same was true of the rest of Oranjestad, and in fact the island of St. Eustatius, being a Dutch holding. Still, the four days it took for the woodcarver to complete the project was sheer torture for Anne, worse than anything the English dungeon had done to her. She spent the time shopping for needed items to complete her transformation, complete with a chest to carry it all, and the repeated telling of her fabricated story. By the time the carved length of whalebone was presented to her Anne was chomping at the bit to be away and gone.

The new leg was truly beautiful. It was scrimshaw cored with boxwood, intricately carved around the top edge with ivy and roses. The tapered, fluted shank ended in a simple flattened ball at the end. The entire thing was its natural white, save the floral carvings around the top; the ivy being a deep green contrasted with vibrant red roses. Strapping it on, she found the fit and balance of it yards better than the leg it replaced; the carver was quite an artist. It would have been John Darcy's most cherished gift to his beloved wife, Anne, before he was lost at sea. That is, of course, had either of them actually existed.

The next morning found Anne once again on a hired wagon, along with a new ladies trunk that was at once quite lovely, but unusually heavy. Her new leg shone brightly where her booted foot should have been, but she no longer chose to hide it. Captain Anne Stark had had two good legs, the Widow Anne

Darcy did not, it was as simple as that. She stayed a short time in Fort de Windt, once again renting a room at the local inn while she awaited passage aboard an outbound ship. She used the time to recover her remaining items from the launch under the cover of night, mostly navigational gear she was still unwilling to part with, and the extra funds she had buried. By the time the sloop, the “Wildcat” made port with an available outbound passenger berth, Captain Anne Stark was completely gone and the Widow Anne Darcy was ready to sail with her trunk packed.



### 3- Wildcat

(St. Eustatius, Saba, Kira's Roost)

When the “Wildcat” rounded the point at Fort de Windt, Anne Darcy's heart skipped a beat. Just like her beloved sloop “Starduster” the “Wildcat” was a square topsail schooner with a narrow beam and rakish lines; a fast, light ship that was simply made for smuggling. It only took a few moments for Anne to decide that this would be the ship to book passage on, wherever it was headed. It took far longer for her to figure out how 'Widow Darcy' was going to go about it without being discovered.

Anne decided on the direct approach. Leaving the inn where she was berthed, she simply strolled down to the quay where the “Wildcat” rested and asked to speak with her captain. “Cap'ns t' dinner in town,” the man on watch informed her.

“And where, praytell might that be?” Anne responded, “I have business to address with him.” She was told that the Captain favored a certain public room at the very inn where she was staying, and which she had just come from. “Bollocks,” she muttered to herself, then to the sailor she replied, “Why thank you ever so much.” Admonishing herself to keep her tongue in check, Anne headed back up the hill to the inn.

As she entered the public room, Anne quickly located the good Captain. It wasn't difficult, as she had been in town long enough to know most of the regulars. “Excuse me, sir,” she addressed him as she approached, “might you be the captain of the ship that just made port?” She felt his eyes roll down from her face and across her bosom. They slipped along the curve of her hips, down her thighs and calves, and ended at the ivory peg protruding where her left ankle should have been. His eyes immediately snapped back up to meet hers.

“Aye,” he replied, “I be the same, Captain Aidensen. An' who'd be askin' then?” Anne proceeded to recite the sad tale of 'Widow Darcy', her lost family, and her need to move on. She ended her soliloquy with a humble request to book passage on the “Wildcat”. With eyebrow raised the Captain responded with a simple, “An' where would ye be going then?”

“Anywhere that is not here, Captain Aidensen,” Anne replied, “perhaps as far as the American port of New Orleans. I here there is a great deal of opportunity there.”

“Well,” Aidensen explained, “next port be Fort Bay, on Saba. Course takes us as far as Cockburn Town in the Caicos. We'll make port a several places along the way.” Anne plotted their course in her mind as he spoke. There was not much British water until the Caicos, and she knew Cockburn Town to be a major British port. Still, she could jump ship at any port along the way, they were sure to make San Juan or even Santo Domingo. There was also little chance of the “Wildcat” being waylaid in open water by the British, it's speed and questionable appearance almost assured her of that. Her main worry

would be the crew. If Widow Darcy's wiles couldn't keep them at bay then Captain Stark's friend Clive would have to intervene on her behalf and all manner of difficulties would ensue.

“Still,” Anne thought to herself, “tis a damn sight more fun than another slow climb up the gallows.” She and Captain Aidensen began to dicker a price for passage, and finally agreed that the modest sum of seventeen guilders was fair to both. On the morrow of the second day Anne once again strode the deck of a ship as it sailed out of Fort de Windt.

It was another two days later, in a public room not unlike the one she and Captain Aidensen met, but this time on the island of Saba, that another request was made over dinner.

Widow Darcy was dining, alone, when she noticed Captain Aidensen approaching her table. “Excuse me, Misus Darcy,” he began. Her eyes rolled off of his face and across his thick neck and broad shoulders. They slipped along his chest, his flat stomach, and down his thighs and calves. Her gaze ended at the polished leather of his sea boots. Her eyes then returned to his, slowly, stopping at the more interesting bits she had missed on the way down.

“Yes, Captain, do have a seat,” she offered. He pulled out the other chair at her table and sat across from her.

“Misus Darcy, ma'am,” he began, “tis no easy way ta broach this. I'm afraid I canna accept yer passage further. I have ta ask ye ta disembark here on Saba.” He passed her a small leather pouch of coins, “sixteen guilder, less the one from St. Eustatius ta here. Ye can count it.” Anne was stunned as he added, “I'll have the lads bring 'round yer things an' all, here ta the inn.”

“Was there a problem with me, Captain? I assure you it was not intentional!”

“Nay ma'am,” he explained. “I've had a change o' course. Took a lucrative run, we did, but the waters we be sailin' 's no place fer a honest lass such as yerself.” Her expression forced him to add, “No offense, ma'am.” The stunned look on her face wasn't from the man's statement, but from the irony of playing 'Widow Darcy' too well!

Sliding the pouch back across the table to the Captain she offered, “I assure you, Captain, I can very much handle myself.” Aidensen looked at her, then furtively at the pouch of coins. Once again it took another trip across the table.

“Sorry, ma'am, but the port we be bound fer, well it ain't so much on any map. Tis no' a good idea fer ye ta know o' it.” Now Anne's curiosity was piqued. Her hand went to the pouch hanging at her own belt, extruded several more coins, and then added them to his. The Captain's pouch took it's trek back towards him again.

“Is there no way, Captain, that I could play on your good nature to take me further?” He looked at the offered pouch, balancing it against some unknown foe.

“Nay,” he said passing back, “I canna.”

“My late husband, as I’ve well told you Captain, was a boatman by trade. Many’s the time he returned from the sea on a ‘lucrative run’.” Her hand went into her basket, felt around, and came up with a single gold doubloon. Knowing that the Captain saw it, she slipped it into the pouch with the guilders and then once again sent the leather bag across the table. To add a little more encouragement she slid her other hand up her skirt and along her thigh, pulling the hammer back on the pistol strapped there. Upon hearing the familiar click, Captain Aidensen’s eyes met hers. “I assure you, Captain, there is no place short of Hell itself that I’m afraid of,” Anne Stark’s voice went cold and flat, “and I believe I have a foot in the door there as well.” His eyes went wide.

“As you’ll have it then, Misus Darcy,” he said nervously, taking the now much heavier pouch. “Ye’ve been warned.” He stood, shook a leg, and then headed for the door. Anne took a sigh at the Captain’s receding back.

“Tha’ went bloody well,” she muttered to herself.

Six days later found Widow Darcy standing on the rolling deck of the “Wildcat” with the wind in her hair and the spray in her face. “Wildcat” was being true to her name, running hard before a gale under lowering skies. Captain Aidensen was taking a chance in this weather under full sail. He glanced down from the poop deck at Anne Darcy, standing at the gunwale amidships. The woman was not a simple goodwife as she wished them to think, not by a long shot. In this weather a simple widow would be holding to the rigging, or more likely the gunwale, leaning over feeding the fish. Even with the peg leg, Anne’s hips rolled naturally with the deck. Her stance was wide and stable, and her hands were clasped casually behind her back at rest. Aidensen shuddered a bit as he recognized the stance, as it was his very own. It was the stance of a ship’s master at sea, and that was how the Widow Anne Darcy greeted the sight of Kira’s Roost as “Wildcat” rounded the point into the harbor.

## 4- On the Quay

(Kira's Roost)

It was midmorning by the time “Wildcat” made port. The storm that had threatened passed out to sea instead, and the sun had come out to bake the ship's busy deck. Anne had taken note, as they passed through the harbor, that there was no Royal Navy presence here. Oddly, there seemed to be no military ships at all, only privateers and well armed merchant ships. A few ships even displayed 'Jolly Roger', the skull-and-signet mark of open piracy, in several forms. “And there in,” thought Anne Stark to herself, “lies the meat o' the Cap'n's reluctance to share even the name o' this port, let alone bring me here.”

“Misus Darcy,” the Captain began, startling her as he interrupted her woolgathering. An epithet started to cross her lips, but he continued, “I'll 'ave t' ask ye t' go below, ma'am.”

“I am disembarking, Captain,” Anne informed him.

“No, ma'am, tis no place fer a lady. 'Tis no town ye'd care to be walkin' about it is,” Aidensen explained.

“No, Captain, you misunderstood, I am disembarking.” She was greeted with a confused look and added, “This be the end of my voyage, you may keep the balance of my passage.” Before the good Captain could object again she stated, “Have you been able to coerce me yet, sir? I can assure you my late husband was far more pigheaded than yerself.” The Captain relaxed then.

“Very good then, Misus Darcy,” he said with relief. “I'll 'ave the lads bring up ye'r trunk then. Will there be anything else ye'r needin' then?”

“Aye, Captain,” she replied, “Since I'm staying, I would finally have the name of this port, if it please you.”

A sparkle of mirth flickered in his eyes. “Kira's Roost, ma'am,” he said simply.

“We'll make her fast an' stow our gear,  
Leave her, Johnny, Leave her!  
The gals are a-waitin' on the pier.  
An it's time for us to leave her!”

By midday the 'Widow Darcy' was humming to herself, seated somewhat comfortably on her large trunk, dockside, next to “Wildcat's” berth. She was in her best calico blouse, overlaid with her favorite crimson bodice. As always, Clive was strapped to her inner left thigh closer than a lover's kiss, and her main gauche` was tucked into her right boot top. Anne wore a simple felt hat with a single plume and carried her ever present hand basket. The tip of her scrimshaw peg peeked out from underneath the hem

of her gingham skirt. "Kira's Roost, aye," Anne Stark said to herself as she scanned the passers by looking for a cart-man to hire and perhaps directions to lodging. "int'restin' town."

"The sails are furled, our work is done,  
Leave her, Johnny, leave her!  
And now on shore we'll have our fun,  
It's time for us to leave her."

Her morning business with the captain who'd unexpectedly delivered her missing cargo concluded, Lady Hu went out for her usual tour of the docks, accompanied by her diminutive assistant Ming Tze who carried the harbor master's schedule of anticipated ship arrivals, and by Big Ma who carried a rather formidable-looking parang tucked into his belt. Her office had a perfect view of the harbor in general, but there were things one could only learn by making the occasional survey up close where the finer details could be seen. And heard. As she walked, Ming Tze stayed dutifully close, while Big Ma, as always, followed along a respectful six steps behind them. It was unlikely that anyone of any familiarity with the Roost would seek to interfere with her, but new ships had a habit of bringing newcomers, newcomers who too often lacked the knowledge or the instinct to give the imperious-looking Celestial a wide berth unless they had business with her.

A new ship like the one which now occupied the first berth along her route. The mistress of the Emporium and Pleasure Palace waiting while Ming Tze consulted the harbor master's list. "Wildcat, my lady," the girl said after a moment. "Just arrived this morning. Captain Aidensen. Cargo not listed." "Wild Cat?" Hu murmured, eyeing the ship with a raised eyebrow. "Strange name to give a ship, considering the aversion most cats have to water."

As the trio drew nearer, Hu noticed the solitary woman sitting on a trunk on the ship's dock, looking around as if giving the town some measured thought. Something about the stranger's relaxed posture and assessing gaze gave her pause. Not the Captain, she decided quickly, and not crew. But more than a mere passenger. A stranger to the Roost, for certain, but not a stranger to towns like the Roost. Her curiosity piqued, Hu whispered a few words of Mandarin to her assistant, who nodded and stepped meekly forward.

Anne had been surveying the town. She had noticed that most of the buildings along the quay were fairly new, indicating that the town had a recent influx of prosperity. Unlike most port towns, Kira's Roost didn't have many urchins running about, but more than its share of rouges. The midday sun was warm and the breeze was fair and steady. The smells of several different eateries wafted through along with it, colliding with the tar, salt sea, and fishy smells along the docks. It had been a while since she just sat and observed instead of slinking, hiding, and running. It felt good.

"A thousand pardons, miss," came the interruption to her woolgathering. Anne's hand instinctively started to go for Clive, then realized that the speaker hadn't approached aggressively, and was actuality

a diminutive oriental woman. Once she saw that she had Anne's attention she continued, "but my mistress would inquire if you are new to Kira's Roost. And if so, if there is any way that she can be of assistance."

Anne's eyes bypassed the woman, obviously a servant, and considered the lady. Like her accoster, the Lady was oriental. She was similar in height to Anne herself, though somewhat slighter, and carried herself in dress and manner as someone in charge. There was also muscle standing slightly behind her. At first she seemed to be a well to do merchant, but the pirate in Anne picked her off as a madam, probably a house mother, and curiosity set in. Smiling her best 'Widow Darcy' smile she addressed the woman. "Tell your mistress that yes, I am in fact new to Kira's Roost." Looking at the Lady she added, "I am not at the moment looking for employment. I would, however, like to find a cart man or porter to assist me with my trunk, and perhaps direction to affordable lodging."

"I have the honor to introduce the Lady Hu," the diminutive servant girl said, bowing again to the lady seated on the trunk, "mistress of the Emporium and the Pleasure Palace of Kira's Roost. May I also have the honor of learning your name, illustrious visitor, that I may inform my mistress of whom she is speaking to?" Lady Hu gave her servant the slightest nod of approval. The girl was coming along well in both her mastery of the language and in her etiquette and deportment. Behind her, Big Ma continued to look on impassively, his broad face seemingly bland with disinterest but his eyes and ears were in fact quite alert, watching and listening for any sign of anything amiss.

Anne was initially taken aback by the servant's demeanor, it was as if the girl were reading from a script. She'd had little contact with orientals, so she thought perhaps that this was just their 'way'. Still, damning her earlier woolgathering, she gaged her surroundings in case she would have to fight her way out of a situation and flee. It was the Lady Hu's approving nod to the girl which told Anne that, in fact, the servant was simply being trained, and that Anne herself was not only an item of curiosity for the lady, but a lesson for the girl. She relaxed. "Tis fair enough," Anne thought to herself, "after all, this whole bleedin' town's a curiosity t' meself. I'll dance this dance."

Looking again to the lady, instead of the girl, Anne answered the servant's question, "You may inform your mistress, the Lady Hu, that you have the honor of speaking with Mrs. Anne Darcy, recently widowed, from Anguilla." She raised her left leg up, resting the 'foot' of her peg leg against the trunk. The act raised the hem of her skirt up enough to give a clear view of the missing foot, but nothing more. She watched for 'her Ladyship's' reaction, and that of her bodyguard as well. "I am dreadfully pleased to make her acquaintance. Mayhaps her Ladyship would know of lodging in town that a widow of modest means such as myself might afford?"

Her role fulfilled, Ming Tze silently retreated two steps so that Lady Hu was now foremost among the trio standing on the dock. When the newcomer revealed what now passed for her left foot by resting it on the trunk, the mistress of the Emporium and Pleasure Palace glanced at it briefly, as if it were on display in a curiosity shop window, then returned her gaze to Mrs. Darcy. Big Ma gave no sign of

noticing anything at all.

"The Main Street Hotel is probably your most favorable option," Lady Hu said, gesturing with a silk sleeved arm at a street that led directly up from the docks. "The rooms are clean, the servants honest and the proprietor a sober and industrious sort. It is a more respectable establishment than most here in the Roost, and as such may be above the modest means you speak of. But at least you will not be robbed or molested there, which I cannot say for most of the other places I could direct you to." She paused, as if weighing a consideration, then continued. "It might profit you to find the boy Mouse who works there," she said. "He has a notoriously soft heart and the ear of the master of the hotel. It is possible that he might be able to get you a more favorable rate."

"As for your trunk," Hu went on, "I would suggest caution. Any porter you are likely to find around the docks is likely to simply carry it off. Particularly when it seems your movements..." she nodded discreetly at the wooden stub now resting on the trunk "...might be somewhat... impaired." The mistress of the Emporium and Pleasure Palace let her gaze linger on the mock-foot for a moment before looking back to the woman, an eyebrow raised in open and direct inquiry. "Shark?"

Anne took the information in. The Main Street hotel sounded pricey, not above her current means but certainly above Widow Darcy's. The clean, honest, and respectable part wasn't really a concern, as she had recently resided in a gaol, but the security provided there would afford her time to recuperate, something she hadn't had in over a month. Besides, it sounded like the kind of place 'Widow Darcy' would patronize, and 'Mouse' sounded like someone who would take to her.

The trunk, however, was another matter. Anne certainly agreed with the Lady Hu's observation, she had already noticed a larger than average number of scoundrels hanging about the docks. Most looked the sort who would binge on shore, fail to make the ships departure, drink till their money ran out, and then catch another outbound ship needing hands. The ships, of course, always needed hands because some of them were too drunk to show up. It was a viscous circle, and Captain Stark had taken on many a good sailor herself only to lose them at the very next port of call to the demon rum. There were very few youths about. Most ports had scores of honest young men, barely more than boys, willing to help a widow in need for an extra shilling or two, but not Kira's Roost.

As for the honesty of an available porter, Clive could handle that. The problem was once that card was played, all manner of trouble would ensue and she'd only just arrived in town. Besides, Clive was only good for three scoundrels at a time. This was the main reason that she was still sitting here, on her trunk, shipside.

Anne liked Lady Hu's shark idea, so she ran with it. "Yes, actually. A few years ago my boys and I were down to the quay, awaiting Mr. Darcy's liberty. The boys, you know how boys can be, were carousing about when my Benjamin went off the dock. I jumped in after him, and managed to return him to the dock, when the thing hit me. I never even saw it." Anne sighed for emphasis and added, "Twasn't

anything the surgeon could do, most of the leg was gone from mid calf. John did his best to provide me with a lovely replacement though, the dear.”

Hu noticed the woman's references to a husband and sons - and the absence of any evidence of such currently accompanying her - but declined to inquire further. For the time being, anyway. There was something a bit off about Mrs. Darcy, with her trunk and feathered hat and the wooden leg resting on said trunk. It wasn't anything the mistress of the Emporium could put her finger on, but her years of dealing with all manner of dodgy denizens in any number of port towns had honed her instincts to a sharp edge. And her success with the Pleasure Palace was due in no small part to knowing the value of appearance and illusion. And the art of getting people to see what they wanted to see.

"I can be of assistance, at least in the manner of your trunk," Hu said after the woman had related the tale of how she'd come to lose her lower leg. She turned to the servant girl who immediately became alert. "Ming Tze, go to the Emporium and bring back two men, ones capable of carrying Mrs. Darcy's trunk. And tell them not to dawdle." The girl quickly bowed and hurried off up the street leading away from the docks.

"The question remains," Hu said, returning her attention to Mrs. Darcy, "of where to take your trunk when she returns with the men I've summoned. If you wish..." she shrugged her robed shoulders ever so slightly, as if the matter was of no great consequence "...you are welcome to the hospitality and comfort of my establishment while you consider exactly where it is that you wish to go."

Perhaps in Oranjestad, Plymouth, or Fort de Windt Anne would have jumped at the offer, but Kira's Roost was a much different town. Widow Darcy wanted very much to trust this woman. Captain Stark, however, wanted to shoot somebody and make a run for it, and damn the consequences. Anne split the difference and laughed, perhaps a little too loudly for a demure widow but far much quieter than a buccaneer. "And how," she asked Lady Hu with a twinkle in her eye and a wink, "am I to be sure you are not one of the very scoundrels that you yourself warned me of?" Before the lady took offense Anne added, "How can you be assured that I am not one such scoundrel? I'm sure the Main Street Hotel will suffice, until I can get my bearings at the very least. As for my trunk, it's far lighter than it appears; I fear I have only a few belongings. I will however, if your offer of hospitality still stands, pay a visit to your establishment once I've cleansed the filth of a fortnights travel from myself? We could discuss our travels thus far, and perhaps the nature of this town." Anne raised an eyebrow, "Mayhaps even what manner of business would be profitable and needed here in Kira's Roost?"

Hu's mouth quirked wryly, her dark eyes reflecting her amusement. "If I were a scoundrel intent on robbing or abducting you," she said dryly, holding up a finger with a long black-and-gold lacquered nail, "I would not be standing before you in the full light of day, not to mention in full view of any number of witnesses who happen to be about at the moment. I would instead simply send a few of my men to do so when you were alone and no witnesses were about. And if I were to bother to send my men out..." she held up a second finger with nail that matched the first "...it would be for more



promising spoil than I suspect you to have. And as for abduction..." the mistress of the Emporium and Pleasure Palace started to hold up a third finger but then seemed to think better of it and merely shrugged "...I already have a girl with a wooden leg."

She brushed aside the prospect of Mrs. Darcy's being a scoundrel with a dismissive wave of her hand. "Half the denizens of the Roost are scoundrels. And the other half pretend not to be." Regarding the newcomer evenly, Hu smiled as if at some private joke. "You'd have more to worry about if by chance you aren't a scoundrel."

At that moment the girl Ming Tze returned with two sturdy-looking Chinese men trailing after her. "If you truly do not need assistance, I will take your leave and return with my people to the Emporium," Hu said, bowing just enough to be polite. "Do feel free to come by though once you're settled. We can indeed discuss business." Her eyes seemed reflective and yet appraising as she added "And other matters, if you've a mind."

This time Anne truly laughed, full and deeply. "What the hell," she thought to herself, "I've a need t' jump back in somewhere." Looking at Lady Hu, Anne smiled. "I believe, your Ladyship, that we have reached an accord. I would be deeply in your debt for the assistance getting my trunk to the Main Street Hotel." She slipped off of her perch and approached the Lady. Her gait was the rolling, wide stanced stroll sported by most of the sailors along the quay. It was the 'sea legs' of someone accustomed to the deck of a ship, and not that of a simple land bound goodwife. Once close, her eyes still bore a faint bruising, and her neck, just above her collar, still carried faint, telltale scars. The skin of her face and hands hung slightly loose, indicating a recent weight loss. All of this was not noticeable from a distance, but up close became apparent. A touch of insanity flashed for the barest second in her sea green eyes as they met Lady Hu's dark, secretive, almond shaped ones. She offered her hand. "I do hope you will forgive me any offense," she offered with a curious tilt of her head, "I've not really been the trusting kind of late, what with all I've been through. Once I am settled, I will stop by your Emporium."

With that she spun spryly on the tip of her scrimshaw leg and turned back to her trunk, where Lady Hu's men awaited their mistress's orders. Looking back over her shoulder she added, "It is a comfort knowing that you already have a girl with a wooden leg though."

Hu noted the details as Mrs. Darcy walked towards her - the gait of a woman used to being on ships, the bruising and abrasions and shadow of gauntness that spoke of recent trouble of some sort - but again chose to not to inquire, for the moment at least. She motioned to the two men Ming Tze had brought from the Emporium, who promptly picked up the woman's trunk between them. "The Main Street Hotel," she said to her servant, who then relayed the instruction to the others in Chinese.

Turning back to Mrs. Darcy, Hu took the offered hand with just the tips of her fingers and gave it the slightest shake possible, just enough to be polite without completely succumbing to what she felt

was a decidedly strange Western custom. "No offense was taken," she assured the other woman. "It is wise to be cautious in a strange port, particularly a port in waters known to be favored by pirates, privateers and all other manner of nefarious goings on."

As they began walking up the street towards the center of the town where the Main Street Hotel resided, Lady Hu went on. "I look forward to your visit once you've gotten settled," she said amiably. "We can discuss matters at leisure at that time. There is one question I feel I should ask now, however." The mistress of the Emporium and Pleasure Palace lowered her voice slightly as she favored Mrs. Darcy with an inquiring sidelong look. "You have the look of someone who might have trouble following in her wake. If there is, I would ask that you not keep me in the dark if it's anything that's likely to show up on my doorstep."

The peg legged woman turned back to her at this. "I don't know how much you know about ships," Anne mused, "take the 'Wildcat' here. She is a square rigged topsail schooner; very fast and maneuverable with a narrow beam and small draft. She's perfect for running, well, questionable merchandise. She does not generally carry passengers to unnamed ports, but I can be persuasive." Anne smiled conspiratorially, "My Lady, be assured that if my 'trouble' finds me in Kira's Roost it did not follow me, it will have found me purely by chance. I am a woman who can cover her tracks. Also know that, much like yourself, I am a woman who keeps her cards close to her chest. If anything from my past does show up on your doorstep, it will only trouble you if you've seen my hand." Anne winked and added, "And that will only happen if I trust you, and you ask nicely." Once again Anne spun on the tip of her false leg and followed her trunk across the docks and up Main Street towards the aptly named Main Street Hotel.

"I shall hope then that your confidence in your abilities is justified," Lady Hu said, her mouth quirked wryly once again as she added "for both our sakes. My men will see your trunk to the hotel, but I fear I must return to my business. I'm expecting a delivery within the hour for which I must be present. You will find it just up the street. The Emporium has a pair of stone lanterns at the entrance. The Pleasure Palace..." she shrugged theatrically "...will be fairly obvious. Do come by once you're settled so that we make talk at our leisure."

"Until we meet again then, Mrs. Darcy," Lady Hu said, giving her an acknowledging bow, then turned and went on her way, her girl servant and bodyguard following dutifully after her.

As Anne followed her chest up Main Street she wished that Lady Hu had loaned her porters who spoke something other than Chinese, she had tried saying 'slow down' in several different languages to no avail. She wanted time to actually look at the town, but only had moments to see the buildings as they went by. They seemed to be the usual ports of call for lonely sailors, taverns, questionable food stalls, curio and pawn shops, 'room for rent' buildings with painted ladies hanging out of windows. As they went up Main Street the businesses became better maintained and fancier, the 'ladies' got classier and then disappeared, and the food vendors got cleaner. Finally they came to the Hotel, probably the

classiest place in port. It certainly looked like a place that 'Widow Darcy' would stay, even if it was above her means.

The two Chinese men hurried through the wide double doors, sat the incongruous trunk in front of the counter in the lobby, and then hurried back out stopping only to nod and smile at her. Anne was left in the lobby with her sea chest. The room was open and airy, designed to catch the ever present sea breeze on hot Caribbean days. To one side was a small bar and a comfortable looking lounge. A short hallway went back to what appeared to be bathing suites. Anne approached the counter, which was unmanned, and located a bell, which she rang. After a few moments a clerk came out of the back.

## 5- Let Free the Cat Stopper

Matthew came out of the office. He was glad to hear the bell ring because it gave him that much needed break. He'd been crunching numbers all day. He smiled at his patrons. "Welcome to the Main Street Hotel. I take it you want a room. How long are you planning to stay? Please sign the register."

The fair haired man that responded to the bell was tall and quite hansom, but slightly disheveled. He fit the atmosphere of the lobby, friendly and open, and he had the most amazing blue eyes and a pleasant smile. Fighting the urge to adjust her hat Anne smiled back, "Well yes, a room would be nice; this is a hotel after all. If it's not too dear perhaps I'll start out with four nights, nothing fancy. I'm relocating here and need a few days to take my soundings. I *would* prefer a room on one of the lower floors," Anne indicated her peg leg, "I'm not so good with stairs anymore." She turned the large book towards herself and took the quill from the inkpot. "Oh, and how much would a spell in the bath set me back?"

"Baths are free." Matthew informed Anne. "I will get a bath drawn up for you right away. I will assign you one of our rooms on the first floor." Matthew replied "As for the bath? We could set one up free of charge for you." He insisted. He assigned her to room 5 on the first floor. It happened to be one of the larger rooms since she planned to stay a little longer than overnight. "My name is Matthew Evans and I'm the owner of the hotel. If you need anything at all don't hesitate to ask. Please sign the register and I will show you to your room."

Anne smiled coyly and held out her hand, "Anne Darcy, pleased to make your acquaintance, Mister Evans. I believe, however, that I would prefer something on the second floor, s'il vous plaît. I fear that I have an aversion to street level windows." Eyeing him askance she added, "Perhaps one with a view of Main Street, if it's available?" A good view of the street, and perhaps the harbor, might give her some warning if His Majesty's Royal Navy sailed into port. Not that they would be looking for her specifically, but she could avoid them and not pique their interest. Before signing the register she parlayed about, and agreed to, the cost of a four night stay. She almost signed the register 'Captain Anne Stark' with her usual bold flourish, but recovered just in time to change it to 'Mrs. Anne Darcy'. Turning the book back around to Matthew she looked into his eyes, and was relieved when she realized he probably hadn't noticed her hesitation whilst signing it, nor the clumsy signature. The man's thoughts must be elsewhere. "So, would half an hour be good for that bath then, or will you need more time?" she asked.

Matthew looked at the lady with surprise. His eyes meeting hers. "Oh! Hello Mrs. Anne Darcy. I shall find you a room you prefer." He looked around and found a room. He grabbed the key and handed it to her. He made the adjustment on the register where the room number would go. "Room three and twenty. It's upstairs and to your left down the hallway." He smiled warmly. "Your bath will be ready in about three quarter's hour." He added. "I will let you know when one is ready." He promised. He would have to get the bath all ready for her since Mouse was out and about. Not that he minded at all. "I will

get your bags to your room. If you're hungry or thirsty there is a pub in the hotel. It's not as big as some of the others but it's usually open most days from sunrise to well late at night."

Anne took the key with a wink, "Tell ye what, lad, you get started on the bath and I'll get the chest." She pinned up the right side of her hat brim 'cavalier' style. Grasping the sea chest firmly by one handle, and with a practiced swing that counterbalanced hip and load, she placed the box on her right shoulder. Being so burdened, she walked slowly to the stairs with just a touch of her former swagger. "Oh," she said as she turned back towards Matthew, "you'll find me in the pub. I'm a might peckish and I could use a pint as well."

She made her way up the stairs with a step-thump motion that she was starting to get used to, relying on the stout banister for balance. "After all," she thought to herself, "Anne Darcy would have lost the leg to that shark quite a while ago. She should be proficient with it by now!" Making her way down the passageway, and fumbling only a moment with the key, she finally made it to her room and sat the heavier-than-it-looked chest down at the foot of the bed.

It was a clean room. The chamber was smaller than a Captain's cabin, but larger than a mates. There was a single bed with a small table and bedside candle. Behind a privy screen a was a chamber pot, and opposite that was a window that looked out on Main Street. Anne could see down an intersecting side street all the way to the harbor. Opening her chest she got out a clean flounced chemise and then pulled her sea coat from the bottom to use as a dressing gown as she didn't have one. Taking her change of clothes back downstairs with her, Anne took Matthew's suggestion and went into the pub. She ordered a plate of jerked goat and mash with a pint of grog, and awaited word of her bath.

Matthew was pretty surprised at her reaction to his offer to take her chest to the room. He began working on cleaning a tub out for her and although it had taken a while, he got some hot water in the tub. This had taken him just enough time that his patron could get something to eat and drink. Proceeding into the pub he approached her, letting her know her bath water was ready. "I could show you to the bathing room if you'd like."

Anne looked up from the remains of her lunch. "Yes," she replied, "that would be lovely." She pushed back her chair and gathered her belongings. Finishing the last of her grog she exited the pub and followed Matthew across the lobby. "I have to complement you on the quality of your pub fare. That was quite good." They went down a short hallway off the lobby to a plain door marked 'Ladies'.

"And this is where I leave you," Matthew dismissed himself as they stood at the doorway. "Enjoy your bath," he offered with a smile as he handed Anne a towel and soap.

Anne watched him walk away, enjoying his confidence and poise (at least that's what she told herself). Part of her, the part that had been drinking grog, wanted to ask him to stay and perhaps join her. The other part suggested that it probably wasn't wise, she was concealing several weapons and he was

obviously very busy. "Mayhaps later then," she muttered under her breath to his receding back. Once Matthew was out of sight Anne opened the door to the bathing room.

## 6- Bath, Bed, and Beyond

"Let free the shank painter, likewise the cat stopper,  
haul up the clewgarnets, let tacks and sheets fly!"

The bathing chamber was a small affair, whitewashed and filled mostly by a large metal tub full of hot water in the middle of the room. Opposite the door was a large mirror. There was a span wide shelf running the whole way around, stopping only for the mirror and door, about chest high. Just below the shelf was a row of pegs on which to hang clothes. Set into the ceiling was a lantern hook, as the room had no window for light. Anne sat the provided towels on the shelf nearest the door, and sat the lantern next to them. Then she did a curious thing, she closed the door and dropped the shade on the lantern plunging the small room into total darkness. After several moments her eyes adjusted and she noticed a pinpoint of light on the wall adjacent to the kitchen. She scanned the rest of the room, but found no more anomalies. Once again raising the shade, she chose the hook right above the pinpoint to hang her sea coat- i.e. 'dressing gown'. "Sorry, gents," she said to herself, "show's over for now."

Only then did Anne disrobe. She carefully removed everything, hanging her clothes on the pegs. Her boot and main gauche went on the floor near the head of the tub, and her pistol, once unstrapped and unholstered, was wrapped in a towel and placed under her head. It wasn't that she was modest, but it wouldn't do for too many people to know about 'Clive'. Lastly she removed the length of carved scrimshaw that served as her left leg and hung it by it's harness on one of the pegs near her clothes.

She stood there, next to the tub and using it for balance, and took a long look in the mirror. The last time she had done so was just before her hanging. The woman looking back at her was gaunter than the haughty pirate captain that had faced her that fateful day. She had been prepared to die, was actually welcoming it's dark embrace with bold defiance. Now she wore a mask of sadness. The reflected face was more angled, her neck yet bore the marks from the noose and her eyes were still a bit bruised from the trauma. Her body bore the scratches, cuts, and bruises of prolonged and vigorous flight. Anne smiled knowingly back at herself, then began laughing.

She laughed deep and full, perhaps with a touch of madness, perhaps it was the grog, and finally stopped as tears flowed down her cheeks. Easing herself into the hot water she sighed to herself. "So that's why people been so kind ta me this last fortnight," she muttered. "They thought I were runnin' from a bastard, wife beatin' husband."

Returning to her room, Anne locked the door behind her. She was more relaxed than she had been since the verdict. The end of her trial had been a surprisingly relaxing event, the guilty verdict had released a lot of tension. Since she had already accepted her own death, all she had to do was await it. She had slept like a stone that evening.

This was much the same, her run was over and she had found safe harbor. Anne laid her bundle of clothes on the bed, doffed her seacoat 'dressing gown', and dropped it over the bedpost. Sitting in the lone chair, in nothing more than a flounced chemise with Clive perched warily on her lap, she watched motes of dust play in the afternoon sun that streamed through the small window.

"Why'd ye do it, Cap'n?" came a voice from behind her. She turned, lifting Clive to point at the intruder, but the empty room glared back at her.

"Bloody hell." Anne muttered as she turned back to the window. The window, nay the entire side of the room, was gone and in its place was nothing more than a mist stretching into the distance. Within that mist stood shades of men, Ben Wilkes and Samuel Fitch in their forefront. They were the men that had died by her hand, the more recent and direct closer, and the ones she'd killed indirectly or long ago were furthest. They still bore their wounds, and stared back at her with dark, vacant eyes. In a split second she knew every face, even the ones whose names Anne never knew, and the circumstances of their demise.

Startled, she fell from the chair and awoke. Dust motes still danced in the waning sunlight. The shadows cast by the intruding light were only slightly longer. Realizing that she yet had time for a proper nap, Anne stretched out on the bed and although it wasn't anywhere near cold she pulled the blanket over herself.

The *Mystique* had docked a few hours earlier, all was settled and as always Captain Gabriel Moore wanted a night off of the ship. He went ashore, glad to be back in Kira's Roost....it had been a long time...six months he thought to himself. There were a few new ships in port....some he recognized from the sea others were very new to him. He made his way to the Main Street Hotel...found it to be under new management. A Matthew Evans. Nice chap. The male bathing room was occupied so he would have to wait. He had heard some crazed lady laughing in the ladies and decided to venture to his room.

He was sitting at the desk writing in his journal when he heard the occupant in the next room start muttering to herself. He wondered if she was dreaming as he heard no other voices. Then he heard a rather large crash that sounded like a person, then a chair hit the deck. He waited for a shout for help but heard none. He wondered if the lady was okay. Deciding to take a chance he left his room and went to the door. He knocked lightly then quietly asked, "Is everything alright in there?"

Just before Anne began nodding off once again she heard a tentative knock on her door. "Blimey," she mumbled to herself, "'tis the ghost 'o Ben Wilkes at the door I'll shoot 'im yet again." She got out of bed, wrapped the coverlet about herself as she was only in a chemise, and tucked Clive carefully in its folds to conceal him. The floor was cool and smooth against her feet, indicating to her that she was no longer dreaming. With her scrimshaw handled three barrel flintlock pistol pointed squarely at the midriff of whatever rouge, brigand, black'ard or specter had disturbed her she drew the latch and opened the door a scant fraction.



What she saw through the narrow opening was no ghost, it was a tall, rather handsome rouge and-or brigand standing there looking back with true concern. Anne looked deep into the sailor's brown eyes for any hint of ill intent. Seeing none, she slipped back into her 'Widow Darcy' persona, "Could you state your business again, sir, as I was in the midst of a rather pleasant nightmare when you knocked."

Gabriel tipped his brow, as he wasn't wearing a hat, "pardon me Miss, but I heard a crash a little bit ago and wanted to see if all was well. Forgive me for waking thee." He stood and waited to either have the door open a little more or be dismissed and thanked for his curiosity. "I see that you seem alright...so if ye wish to be left alone...I understand." He tipped his brow once more and was just about to step away from the door.

Anne smiled at him, opening the door a bit more and visibly relaxing. "Nay, sir, all is well. I would invite ye in, but as you might notice I'm not presentable at the nonce." She clenched the coverlet around herself a bit tighter to emphasize this fact. "As for waking me, your interruption of the nightmare was a blessing. I should be up and about anyway, as I've only just arrived in town and need to familiarize m'self with it. Mayhaps, if ye be familiar with hereabouts and agreeable, ye might show me about a bit?"

She hoped he would. Besides needing a native guide he appeared to be a boatman, perhaps even a captain. If, on the feeble chance the Royal Navy did show up in town, she needed an escape plan, a friend with a ship would come in handy. Besides, she really did not wish to be left alone.

"Aye...have been here a time or two and would be a willen to show thee about. Shall I wait for you in my room or in the lobby?" He asked, then added, "I am Captain Gabriel Moore." He felt that he needed to introduce himself before taking the lady on a tour of the Roost. He gave her a smile and waited for her response on where to wait for her.

She almost introduced herself as 'Captain Anne Stark', but caught herself just in time and answered, "Anne Darcy, Widow Anne Darcy that is." Fumbling with her clenched coverlet she offered her hand to the good Captain. The fumbling was a ruse for his benefit, for if she actually had lost it she would have had to introduce him to her friend Clive as well. "Give me a few moments to don more appropriate garb and I shall meet thee in the pub downstairs, if that would suit thee."

Gabriel gave the ladies hand a gently shake and being the gentleman that he was more often than not, gave the back of it a gentle kiss. "It is a pleasure, Ms. Anne. I will meet thee in the pub, downstairs then." He let her hand go and tipped his brow. Once she shut the door he went to his room and donned his captain's trench and decided to opt to not wear his tricorn hat.

He assured his room was locked and headed to the pub. He ordered a glass of white wine...deciding that drinking anything harder was not a good thing before escorting a widow around the Roost.

Anne closed the door and quickly turned to her trunk. Digging down to the bottom of it, she retrieved her broad brimmed hat with the single plume, the one she'd been hanged in. She considered donning her old attire, wondering if the transformation back to her old self would change her status with Captain Moore for better or ill, then consigned both seacoat and hat back to the false bottom of the trunk beside her crimson bodice, right bucket boot, navigational gear, and charts. Beneath the false bottom, she knew, lay a Lord's ransom in Spanish gold. Instead she selected her best gingham overskirt, the flounced linen chemise she was already wearing, and a bustier best suited for a wench in a rowdy dance hall. Concealing several knives about her person, she tucked Clive back against her thigh and slipped the heavy, matching dagger into her boot top under her skirts.

Checking herself for any telltale signs of concealed weaponry, and satisfied that she was ready, Anne carefully locked the door to her room behind her and went down the stairs. She crossed the lobby with the now familiar step- thump of a confident stride. As she entered the pub she located Gabriel and gave him a nod. "Good eve, Captain Moore," she said cheerfully, "we meet again."

Gabriel stood as he saw Anne approach. "Yes, seems we do. Would you like a drink or bite before we head out?" He asked the lady as he pulled her chair out for her and waited to see if she would take the seat or insist that they start their tour of the town.

Anne could almost hear her old shipmates snicker as Gabriel pulled her chair out. She admired his manners, even though he seemed a bit unaccustomed to using them. Wondering if he would still be so pleasant if he really knew her, she gave him a partial curtsy in return. She was a bit disappointed that his eyes hadn't strayed to her bosom. After all, she had taken quite a while adjusting her bodice just so, and had certainly let her own eyes stray across his bow. "Why, many thanks, Captain," she said, "I believe a grog would suit me at the moment, I am a bit parched." She perched herself on the offered chair, unconsciously situating herself with a view of the doorway. "So, Captain Moore," she began, smiling sweetly, "what manner of vessel do you command exactly?"

"Grog... well that is a stiff drink for a lady, but I guess we all have our own tastes. I prefer wines or ales." Gabriel said and gestured to the serving girl to bring Anne a drink. "My vessel...well I am one who works for higher I suppose. I have been a merchant, a privateer, a pirate...a passenger ship. Wherever the coins can be made I am often found. I do not like to be tied to do titles. To more accurately answer your question, it is a three masted Brigantine....I call her the Mystique." The serving girl brought Anne her drink and refilled Gabriel's white wine. Once she was gone, he asked, "tell my Ms. Anne, how did a widowed lady wind up here in Kira's Roost?"

As Anne listened to Gabriel's response a cold chill ran down her spine. She glanced over her companion's shoulder. Sitting at the bar with a mug in his hand, as she'd seen him many times, was Samuel Fitch. The sailor was dressed as she'd last seen him when she'd disposed of his body, complete with the bloody, ragged wound under his ribs. His face was pasty pale and bloodless as he looked at her and nodded, raising his mug in salute.

She quickly looked back at Gabriel, still a bit disappointed that his gaze hadn't strayed from her eyes. "If it's prepared properly," Anne began, "grog is no more potent than ale. I find the citrus in it pleasant to the palate and soothing to the throat." Changing the subject she smiled slyly, "A three masted brigantine? That's a rather large one!" Out of the corner of her eye she could see Fitch's ghost soundlessly laughing. Anne leaned back and took a drink of her grog, letting the tart lime soothe her throat. "As for how I find myself in Kira's Roost I simply needed a fresh start, and winds of chance have brought me here. I had booked passage on a, 'merchant', that made this a port of call."

"Well, to making new friends in new places," Gabriel said as he raised his mug in a toast. He wondered what she was glancing at behind him but didn't turn to look. He had glanced at all the lady had to offer but he did it subtly as she entered the bar area earlier. She was well endowed but he being the gentleman pirate he was didn't make comment or gesture to the thought. "Yes, I suppose she is a large ship, but very fast at the same time." He said then took another swallow of his wine. "If it is not too painful to tell, how did your husband pass?"

Raising her own tankard Anne replied, "To new friends, new places, fair winds, and following seas." She listened to Gabriel's description of his brigantine, the *Mystique*. The pirate in her was fairly sure it sported a fair amount of guns as well, which he hadn't mentioned. A brigantine of the *Mystique*'s size could easily handle a brace of twenty pounders, and she idly wondered how the gentlemanly Captain Moore comported himself under heavy fire. Would he continue his pleasant demeanor, or would his honest smile turn into a devilish grin and his eyes gleam with the flash of cannon fire?

"My husband," Anne sighed as she answered Gabriel's query. "His ship was reported lost with all hands, I'm afraid. After our sons both succumbed to scarlet fever John returned to sea. I'm not sure if it was to get away from the memories, or from myself. I'm sure I was no fair party to be around at the time. Anywise, not long after I got notice that his ship was lost and there were no known survivors." She leaned forward conspiratorially, "Truth be know I'd not half expect to find him wallowing in some low tavern in a seaport not unlike this one some day. My John was a fair man, but hardly an angel."

Hearing a sound behind her, Anne suddenly turned towards the door to the lobby fully expecting to see the ghost of Ben Wilkes there (for where Sam Fitch was, Mister Wilkes was sure to be near). Fully prepared to shoot him, and damn the consequences, she was surprised to see only a youth in a battered tricorne scurry through the lobby as if his arse were afire. She turned back to Gabriel. "Tis' naught but past, though. The marriage, for all purposes, died with my boys," she concluded. "And what of yourself, Captain? Is there a 'Missus Captain Moore' in another port?" She smiled and added, "or several other ports?"

Gabriel listened to the tale and did his best to not show pity but genuine concern. "Well, to happier times for you then ma'lady." He said then took a few swallows of his wine. He too looked towards the sound of the opening door, but then just gave a shrug at the lad as he moved through the lobby to the

stairs to go up them to the rooms.

"Alas, there is no Missus...and a gentleman does not kiss and tell, dear lady." He left it at that. He did have several lovers here and there, but no one serious and no children taht he was aware of. "What other places have you been to?" He asked with a smile.

"Well," Anne began, "I was born in London but I remember it not as I was but a babe when my family left. I lived most of my life on Anguilla in the Antilles. There were few marriageable choices from local lads, so I met and later married a sailor; my husband John Darcy. Of late, on my journey here, I've visited several mostly Dutch ports. I'm not as traveled as a boatman, but more so than a widow of my age." She took another drink of her grog, finding it mostly gone. "And yourself, Captain? Have you ever been to Anguilla? I would love to tell you how beautiful it is, but sadly it is not. The island is hot and dirty and prone to drought."

Anne glanced at Gabriel's wine glass and noticed it almost empty. She finished her last sip of grog and glanced toward where Samuel Fitch's specter had been sitting, finding it now gone. "Mayhaps, Captain, we should continue our conversation as we stroll? I am quite eager to see the town," she said as she stood and offered her arm to him.

## 7- A Pirate and a Widow on Tour

Gabriel finished the last of his wine, tossed a couple of silver pieces on the table for the drinks, stood up then pulled Anne's chair out as she stood, "I believe we can." Once she was standing he offered his arm and they headed out of the hotel. "You chose the direction and I will tell you what is what as we go." He knew the Roost fairly well....it had been a few years since he had been there, so figured there would be new places he wouldn't know much about.

They stepped from the hotel pub and Anne goggled about like a tourist. The warm afternoon sun had finally set and the cool evening breeze off the harbor brought with it the scents of sea salt, tar, and gunpowder. Her mind momentarily went back into her own past. "Well," she finally stated, "I've seen the quay, however briefly, and it seems to be populated with mostly taverns, inns, and public houses. There's nay much further inland, save some small freeholds, so mayhaps along the hillside here and then to the town square? The town square, she well knew, would show signs of British law if anywhere in Kira's Roost would. There would be a place to garrison close by, and perhaps even a gallows or a Union Jack on display. "Mayhaps," she said, "there will be a reputable place to sup along the way?"

"Well, yes the docks can be a bit unsavory...however if you wish to see my ship that would be where we would have to go. Another time though." They headed down main street. "At the end of this street around the corner to the left is Kira's home. You only go there if invited...which very few people have ever been. And here we are in the town square." They stood next to a large fountain. "One can see most if not all of the main businesses from here. A reputable place to sup...well the only place that I know of is the Titan and Ale House....over there." He pointed to the place. "The owner is an older man and Kira sees to it that only upper scale ladies work there....not wenches are found there. It is a place to dine without having to watch others fornicate in front of you."

Anne laughed. "My dear Captain," she said lightly, "I was married to a boatman for many years. Unsavory docks won't bother me, sir." She made a note of Kira's home, such information may or may not come in handy. The fact that few were invited there was also interesting.

When they arrived in the town square Anne looked for any sign of Royal presence and found absolutely none. Her heart felt that much lighter, for the first time in a fortnight she felt as if she were truly free and not just temporarily escaped. Anne sat on the edge of the fountain as Gabriel described the nearby businesses. His mentioning Kira again did not go unnoticed. Apparently she was not only the founder of the town but the local government as well, good work if you can get it.

"The Titan and Ale house sounds wonderful," Anne said as she stood. She offered her left arm to Gabriel. "So tell me a little more about Kira, Gabriel," she began conversationally, "how much of the town does she actually own? Is there any authority over her?"

Gabriel in turn let Anne wrap her arm around his and they started their way to the Ale House.

"Kira...well from what I know she owns the entire town as she is the founder of it. Sure she has people who own their own businesses and runs them how they want, but she has final say over everything." He paused to think if anyone had authority over Kira. "I do not believe anyone does...I believe she is her own boss and authority here in the Roost."

They arrived at the Ale House and were lead to a table in a quiet corner. The place was quiet this time of evening as most have eaten and were now out drinking and having their ways with wenches. The waitress came over and told them what the meals were for the night. There was a slow simmered lamb chops over rice with steamed vegetables or a beef and potato stew. Gabriel ordered the stew with a mug of ale.

As they crossed the square Anne counted the steps, finding it to be no more or less than thirteen. She softly hummed the tune to herself as the Captain steered her to a table. When the waitress asked, Anne replied that she would have the same as Gabriel. The ales came out quickly, and Anne sipped hers quietly.

The main taproom was paneled in dark wood and illuminated with sconces placed evenly along the walls and a large chandelier in the center. The stone fireplace was empty, it being a warm night, but the room was well lit. Now that the supper crowd had left the staff was moving tables about, clearing an area near the middle of the room. A fiddler and flute duo quickly set up and, having set out a hat, began playing.

"This is quite pleasant, Captain," Anne commented. "If the food is only half as nice as the ambiance it should be delicious." The waitress returned with two large trenchers of stew and set them on the table along with a portion of bread which she sat between them. She was eying Anne.

"Do I know you, ma'am?" she asked Anne with a quizzical look. "You appear vaguely familiar."

"I don't believe so," Anne replied, "have you ever been to Anguilla?"

"No, Ma'am, Plymouth's the closest I been, on Montserrat."

"Then probably not, as I haven't been in town long at all and haven't been off Anguilla since childhood. I probably bear a passing resemblance to someone else you knew."

"Very well then, enjoy your suppers, Captains," she replied.

"That," commented Anne to Gabriel, "was a trifle odd. Why would she assume I am a Captain as well as yourself?" She took a second look at the receding waitress as she took a spoonful of stew. "This is splendid," she said.

"I cannot say...perhaps she just assumed because many who come here for the first time are just as she said, Captains or at least part of a ships company in some way." Gabriel said as he began to enjoy the stew as well. "Mmm...yes it is quite good," he remarked on the meal. A few moments later the waitress brought them a basket of fresh biscuits. "Ah, yes...for the stew as well." He thanked the waitress and dipped one of the biscuits into the stew and enjoyed the flavors together.

He watched Anne eat and he began to notice little things about her that indicated that she was more traveled than she let on. She took a moment to eye the biscuit for mold like one would do if they were on a ship for a while. She kept looking around the room as if surveying it for anyone watching her and even though she appeared to be a relaxed widow there were times when a noise would make her startle just a little bit. "Perhaps she is not too far off base..." Gabriel said quietly to Anne.

Anne's sea green eyes met Gabriel's brown ones, and she knew that he suspected something. The conversation in the room continued, the music didn't change, but everything seemed to slow to Anne. "Would it matter at all, Gabriel?" she replied conspiratorially, "I obviously have no ship in port. If I actually had been a captain of my own ship at some point I am surely not one now." She dipped the biscuit that she'd been examining into her stew and took a bite. With a smile she added, "Besides, is it any surprise that a woman might have a few secrets?"

She tried to watch Gabriel for any adverse reaction, but was distracted by something over his left shoulder. She thought it was Samuel Fitch who winked and turned his back to her before disappearing into the smoky back of the room. The minstrels finished their reel and began playing what she could swear was an up tempo version of the hangman's dirge. "There might just be," she said softly, "a good reason to keep those secrets." She felt Clive against the inside of her thigh, and spread her knees slightly to give her access to it's trigger if necessary. Just then Anne noticed the tip of a piece of parchment peeking out from between her trencher and the plate it sat on. She only noted it's presence, and then paid it no other attention at all.

Gabriel continued to eat his meal when Anne asked if it mattered. "No, I do not believe it matters....this is a safe haven for pirates so if you are more than you say rest assured that you are safe in the Roost. Yes, women do have a few secrets....and some have good reasons to keep them. I will respect your wish to do just that." He gave her a wink and moved back to eating his meal.

"So then," Anne retorted, "there is no Royal Navy presence here in Kira's Roost? None of his Majesty's spies skulk in the back alleys listening for whispered tales?" She relaxed a bit, leaning back in her chair. "The mere fact that you would mention piracy, Captain, speaks the truth more than any proclamation." She took a long drink of her ale. "I will, however, keep my secrets for the nonce." Unconcerned now at what Gabriel might see, Anne removed the parchment from under her trencher. It was only a scrap, but it was a drawing of the skull and black rose, Anne's flag. "Well then," she stated flatly as she dropped it on the table in plain sight, "that's one secret that is no more."



Gabriel gave Anne a shrug. "I am not sure of that...if they are around they have been very quiet." He said as he took a couple of sips of his ale. He watched as she pulled something out from under her plate. "That is an interesting picture. How does it reveal a secret, it's simply a drawing?" He asked a little confused as to what the picture means.

"The drawing, dear Gabriel, is of a pirate captain's flag; a particular one belonging to Captain Anne Stark. The Royal Navy hung poor Anne a fortnight ago on Montserrat." Her face turned a little sad at that. "It means," Anne continued conspiratorially, "that someone in the tavern suspects I be she and not the widow Anne Darcy. The question is, be they friend or foe?"

"And mayhaps," she whispered after taking another drink of ale, "if ye be nae sure there are no 'whisperers of secrets' hanging about back alleys, our Captain Stark shall stay hanged for the nonce." She winked at Gabriel. "Lest ye be His Majesty's man, Gabriel, in which case I may be steering for the shoals or stove in on the rocks already, aye?"

Gabriel sat back in his chair and truly looked at the lady Anne. He took in the one thing that he had missed until now...she had the skin color and texture of someone who was used to being at sea for long periods of time. "Ah....I understand. You, dear widow, managed to survive the hanging and have been running ever since...invented a story of being a widow...which I must say is quite good." He said before taking a swallow of his ale.

"Ah....there it is....you suspect me of being such a person," he chuckled, "I can assure you that I do not work for the King of England...I would be one who would face the noose myself if I were to be found by one of his men." He took another sip of his ale....a long one as he considered the, now, Pirate Captain across from him. "What became of your ship?" He asked quietly.

Anne smiled. "Dear Gabriel," she said, "widow Darcy has survived only her husband and sons. T'was Boneshank Annie Stark, captain of the 'Starduster', what survived a hanging. If, in fact, survive it she did. I've heard tell that one does not take a dance wi' old Jack so lightly. If ye've the choice, Captain, twixt the noose or the blade, take the blade." She took a drink of her ale. Setting it back down on the table soundly she added, "An' if survive she did, 'ol Boneshank wouldna' be running, but simply setting sail on a less lethal course."

"As for the poor 'Starduster', I hear tell she's under a Union Jack now. His Royal bloody Majesty has renamed her the 'Inspid' or some such ludicrous moniker and is using her as an interceptor." She



laughed at that and added, "If I know the Royal bloody Navy she's prob'ly stove up on the shoals somewheres." Anne got real quiet then, took another sip of ale and muttered, "Bastards."

Gabriel listened to the captain sitting across from him and was glad that she felt comfortable enough to open up somewhat to him. "Annie Stark, captain of the Starduster. Sorry to hear that the Starduster is under the wrong guidance." He gave Anne a nod and lifted his mug. "To new beginnings on a less lethal course, Lady Anne Darcy." He said and waited to clink hers.

"Now then, you know who I am and I believe I know some what of who you used to be...or rather your other alias. So what is it that you wish to do here in Kira's Roost, or is this just a resting point before ye sail on to the next port of call?"

Anne touched her mug to Gabriel's. "To fair winds and following seas," she replied. "I think," she began thoughtfully, "that I'm resting at the moment, recovering. Being hanged by the neck until dead is awfully life altering. Mayhaps I'll find a ship in need of a captain, or a first mate although honestly I don't think I'd play second fiddle well, or for long." She winked. "Perhaps a shop front here in town. I had considered opening a pub, or a whorehouse, but there are already plenty of those in Kira's Roost. I canna bake, or cook well at all, and I canna mend clothes. I swear too much, drink heavily, steal, and shoot people." She spat on the floor. "And I spit on the floor," she grinned.

"I am," she said, "a damn fine shot with a pistol, and a skilled navigator and pilot." She leaned back in her chair and took a long drink of her ale as if in thought. "Perhaps a navigational supply shop, a chart house. I could deal in maps and rudders, and sell sextants, compasses and such. Mayhaps even give lessons for a price." She looked into Gabriel's eyes. "Do ye think such an endeavor has merit? There be no bloody Navy to teach such things here."

Gabriel listened to all that Anne Darcy wanted to do or thought she could do. He put in his mind that she was seeking a ship to work on or along with someone. He could always use a skillful fighter...a first mate/navigator. "I think that you have too much of a wander lust in your bones to want to remain in one place and do one thing for very long, at least on shore." He said as he took a couple sips of his wine. "Mayhaps, taking up being a navigator on a ship that needs one....once you have decided that you have had enough rest that is." He gave her a smile. He had to be careful though to not encourage her to join him...she had to want it and bring it up herself. The *Mystique* was named that for a reason and he had to be careful who he kept around.

A thoughtful look crossed Anne's face as she considered her options. To open a shop would probably work, for a while. One day would blur into another as she grew older and turned gray. Then she remembered the trip into port on the *Wildcat* with the wind in her hair and the spray in her face as the ship ran before a gale. Anne Darcy could handle a port-bound life, but Anne Stark would slowly go crazy pining for the sea. Maybe, eventually, she would finish what the Admiralty had started and they'd find a starchy old matron swinging from the shop's rafters one morning. She sat her mug of ale down

and called the waitress over. "Rum, lass," she said quietly.

Turning back to Gabriel she said, "Ye barely know me," she said, "and yet ye knew me better than m'self." Her rum arrived and she raised the mug to him, "to the short, happy life, Captain. Canna say I don't already have one foot on Hell's doorstep."

Gabriel in turn asked for rum after watching Anne think over her options. "Aye, I just know a sea captain when I see one...and you, ma'lady are no land lubber. I see you on the bow of a ship, the wind blowing back yer hair and the sea splashing at your feet. You are like me and long to be out on the water. Living on land is not for either of us." He chinked her mug with his and responded with, "we all have that one foot there and the other in Davey Jone's locker...either way we will all go down with our ships someday."

"Or dance wi' ol' Jack at the end of a rope," Anne winked, "but not today." Placing her empty mug on the table she stood. "I've need of the privy," she said, "then, mayhaps we can stroll down to the docks. I've a desire to smell the sea, we've been parted far too long." She swaggered, encumbered slightly by the peg she walked on, out the back door and across the small muddy inn yard. The Ale House was a fancy place, and had two privies. Anne picked the one marked 'Ladies' with a snort.

As she sat in the darkness she heard men's voices, muffled, and movements outside. She quietly released Clive, checking his charge, and noisily finished up. Slipping the main gauche from her boot top she pushed the door open and stepped out. The cudgel missed her head by a hair's breadth, and she brought up the heavy knife into the assailant's belly. Spinning on her peg, she fired point blank into another man just as a second cudgel made contact with her skull. As she fell, she spun Clive a third of a turn and shot again, this time hitting the last assailant in the leg. Her last thought as her face slammed into the mud was, "bastards, there were three of 'em."

Gabriel gave Anne a nod as she mentioned needing a privy and stood as she did, then sat back down once she had left the table. He was enjoying his rum when he suddenly heard two shots fired from behind the Ale House and knew that was where Anne had gone. He tossed a couple of coins onto the table for the drinks and meal before quickly making his way outside. He stopped when he saw the scene. Anne was laying in the mud unconscious?, her knife in a tree trunk and the two shots from her gun...one in a hitching post the other through the door of the loo.

He looked and saw no other signs of anyone else being there. "Anne," he said as he rolled her over and gently tapped her checks..."Anne, it's Gabriel, I think the loo out did you." He said with a chuckle as he worked to wake her up.

Anne came to with Gabriel patting her cheek, with one of his arms cradling her head. Her hand, still wrapped firmly around Clive's hilt, started to bring the three-barreled pistol up until she realized it was him. "Did ye see the bastards, Gabriel?" she asked. "Tried to nick me as I were leavin' the loo, they did.

Left me knife in one and lead in the other two.”

She looked at the pistol in her hand. It was still smoking but hopelessly fouled with mud, and would have probably misfired if she'd shot it again. She'd been down only a few seconds. Sitting up, she looked around. Her clothes were covered in mud. The door of the privy swayed gently in the breeze, a fresh hole graced it about chest high. Just visible in the light from the pub window she noticed another hole in a hitching post. To her astonishment her main gauche was planted firmly in the bowl of a breadfruit tree. “Bloody hell,” she said, “as God is my witness I was attacked by three men.” Looking around again she said, “weren't I?”

Gabriel was glad when Anne realized who he was and didn't finish raising her pistol. He looked around as she was after sitting up. He looked at the mud and saw a few boot prints going to and from the privy, but none indicated a struggle or attack. He had already took in the scene when he arrived to find her on the ground. “No, I think your imagination got the better of ye after being clonked by the door.” He said pointing to the loo. “Can you stand?” He asked to see if she was ready to try. He noticed a nice lump on her head. “I think we need to get something cold on that.” He said pointing to it and was glad that she wasn't bleeding as well. “And something for the pain that you will no doubt be feeling very soon.”

“Me imaginings been having their merry way with me, it seems. I heard the voices afore I stepped out, so I believe the door was me own fault, it was,” Anne explained. “I been seeing dead friends and smellin' gunpowder.” Her voice lowered and she added, “even felt the noose back around me neck a time or three.” She sighed, allowing Gabriel to pull her from the mud. “A cool compress would do me no harm,” Anne said brushing the mud from herself as best as she could, “nor another shot o' rum for the pain. I don't want to stroll through the pub like this, mayhaps we could walk around and steer for the hotel first?”

Gabriel just looked at Anne as he helped her up. “Aye...mayhaps they are. Sure, we can head back to the hotel for a clean up.” He looked at his own clothes at this point and realized he was also covered in mud. As they walked to the hotel he wondered what she was like as the pirate Captain who she truly was. He was attracted to her as the Widow Darcy, but had a feeling he would like her more as her true self...but he kept this to himself.

Once back at the hotel they managed to slip inside and head to their rooms without anyone taking too much notice. “What would you like to do at this point....get some sleep or....” He left the question hanging. They had just finished eating so he wasn't hungry....and he wasn't in the mood to tie one on...he wouldn't mind simply sitting and talking. But wanted to know what she had in mind.

By now they were at Anne's door and a grin blossomed on her lips. “Gabriel,” she said, “for all intents we both be sailors on shore leave.” She leaned against the door jamb and a warm glow touched her half lidded eyes. “I've a fair mind that the course you've set has nothing to do with sleep, as does my own course.” She giggled a bit, “I was actually pondering whether to ply ye with a wee bit more rum to

loosen ye up. I'm a bit flattered that I dinna have to get ye drunk first." She raised an eyebrow, "though truth be told I \*did\* pull me pistol on ye. Would ye care to come inside if I promise to stow most of me weaponry?"

## 8- Getting to Know You

Gabriel felt his own cheeks blush slightly at the thought that Anne was putting in his head. "Ma'lady...Captain...I must say that you are no shy violet and..." He stepped forward and placed his hand on her cheek, "...ye do not have to ply me with rum to entice me into your world." He gave her a wink and added, "Yes, I will come in since you have invited me." He did catch that she said most of her weaponry, he wanted to ask just how many weapons she had but knew that he wouldn't answer the question if he was asked. "Lead the way, Anne." He dropped his hand from her cheek and waited to follow her into her room.

Anne smiled slightly at her fellow captain's blush. 'Surely,' she thought, 'he be not shy. Mayhaps merely taken aback.' Gabriel was close enough now that she could smell the deep muskiness of him, she could feel the firm roughness of his hand on her cheek. It was a sailor's hand, worn from difficult labor and hardened by the rise to command. She knew such men, had worked under and commanded many of them herself. Anne thought for a moment, and the thought flashed in her eyes, she had murdered many of them as well. She felt their spirits at her back.

Her sea green eyes met Gabriel's brown ones. 'Boudoir eyes,' Anne thought. She turned slightly, reached behind her, and unlatched her door. Entangling her fingers in the flounce at the neck of Gabriel's shirt, she drew him forward into a deep kiss. His chest was warm, his shirt silky under her hand as she stepped backwards on her 'good leg' and drew him into her world.

Gabriel's reservations were quickly resolved the moment Anne's lips met his and he just as eagerly returned the deep kiss as they went through the door of her room. He kicked it closed behind him and quickly shed himself of his overcoat, tossing it onto a nearby chair without looking. He would let her lead him through all that she wanted from him. He was her willing captive at this moment in time. His hands began working her clothing as he continued kissing her...his lips trailed to her jawline then to her neck. He let out a sigh of arousal with a gruffy moan.

Anne arched her back, exposing her neck and also the laces of her bustier to Gabriel with a sigh. She silently lauded her choice of the bustier over the bodice, it would be much easier for Gabriel to remove. She helped by retrieving several small throwing daggers from it and dropping them on the floor next to her sea chest. Gabriel's deep, hair covered chest was framed pleasantly by the silky flounce of his shirt, so she left it on him for now. She enjoyed the contrast of coarse hair and smooth silk, and she moaned softly. Instead she went for his broad leather sword belt, undoing the heavy brass buckle and letting it thump against the floor boards. Several of his no longer concealed knives danced merrily on the floor as they scattered.

She fumbled for a moment with the buttons of his trousers, as he was straining against them and her eyes were pointed upwards. Anne smiled, it was nice to find him sporting a broadsword and not an

epee'. While it was true that size wasn't an issue with her, a run to Tortuga was much quicker in a schooner than a dinghy. By now Gabriel's hands were going along her knee near the top of her boot, and she looked into his eyes as he found the main gauche hidden there. She smiled again. "Wait till he meets Clive," she thought.

Gabriel was glad that they had about the same amount of hidden weapons on each other that he could hear clanking on the floor around them as clothing was opened and removed. As his hand climbed higher up Anna's leg he found the bottom of a holster. Deciding that she should remove what was probably her prize possession weapon, he gave her a smile as he slid his hand back down. "Anne, perhaps you should remove that one. Don't want to let it simply drop to the floor."

He released her from his arms so that she could remove the pistol. He at the same time removed his boots allowing the hidden dagger to remain inside. He waited while Anne worked her holster loose and removed Clive.

"Gabriel," Anne said with a lopsided smile, "I should like to introduce you to Clive." She pulled a three barreled flint lock pistol with an ornate scrimshaw grip from under her skirts. It was still a bit soiled from her encounter at the loo, and needed loading. She sat the weapon gently on her sea chest and removed the holster from her thigh. A deft kick finished removing the boot from her right leg and she stood in front of him with her hips at an odd angle. With a mischievous grin she put a hand on Gabriel's chest and pushed him backwards onto the bed.

Her unbound breasts swayed gently under her blouse as she pulled his trousers down to his knees and then crawled along his muscular body till her face was even with his. She gazed into his deep brown eyes as their lips met. "Prithee, give a lady a moment," she said softly when the kiss broke. Her hands reached down and undid the buckle and harness from her peg leg. The device thumped and rattled as it hit the floor.

"You have a leg up on me now, sir," Anne whispered next to Gabriel's ear, "of course, we be no longer standing." Her hand stroked the coarse hair on his chest.

"Ah, well, yes...it is nice to be properly introduced as I met Clive earlier." Gabriel said with a smile and an impressive air to his eyes as he watched her place the pistol on her sea chest. He let out a little bit of a yelp as he was suddenly falling backwards onto the bed. His trousers removed to his ankles he kicked them off. Now to get the lady undressed. He was about to start removing her skirts when she asked for a moment after kissing him. "Aye, seems I have." He said with a smirk before lifting up and rolling them so that she was now underneath him.

"I do say, thee are still a might over dressed for our little dance." He promptly removed the rest of her clothing so that he could enjoy the scene on the bed below him. "Better." He began his ministrations of caressing and kissing her entire body from her naval to her neck, across her breasts and finally ending

up above her and delivering a heated, wanton kiss.

Being the first time since her 'accident' at the gallows that she had actually been with a man, Anne winced a bit when Gabriel removed her skirts. She had faced down cutlass, canon fire, and gales that could send a ship spinning down to Davy's locker, but to see disapproval in a lover's eyes would have crushed her. She saw none of that in Gabriel's when he spied her missing shank, and she smiled. Returning his kiss with all of the passion it was offered she whispered, "took a wee bit t' get ye away from the docks, Captain, but put a little wind in your sails....."

Anne wrapped her good leg around Gabriel's waist to encourage him. Although she expected it, she gasped slightly when he entered her. "All the way to Tortuga, Captain," she sighed, "and thence shall we sail back." She fell into Gabriel's gentle rolling rhythm, finding it so much like the rolling waves of the deep salt sea.

Gabriel took the hint and as Anne's leg drew him forward he entered the waiting wet cave. He let out a sigh of pleasure as he felt it engulf his bulging mast. "Aye, and beyond..." He said as he began to make love to the new lover beneath him. He wasn't exactly the most attractive type of man to find himself wrapped in such loveliness was all that he could ask for. He delivered kisses and caresses, nibbles and tingles. His hands roamed over her body as they moved together in the dance of love making. There was no rush, no urgency, no threat of being shot. Simply enjoying one another's company and all that their bodies had to offer. He listened to her breath, moan, and felt what her body did in time with his. Even though he was on top he was letting her lead the dance.

They fell into familiar rhythm, each matching pace with the other and the bed began to sway. It creaked like the timbers of an old ship in heavy seas and Anne reached above her head to steady the headboard. Her hand brushed the grip of the small, German made wheel lock pistol she had stashed under the pillow upon her arrival. She finally relaxed then, feeling comforted by the smooth familiarity of it, and finally released herself into Gabriel's charms.

With a low moan she arched back and felt her whole body tighten. She grasped at Gabriel tightly as the stormy, rolling swells crested and her awareness became a pinpoint of just him. With a shudder she crossed the bar and passed into the smoother waters of port, finally settling on the gentle lapping of the harbor waves against her hull. "Welcome to Tortuga," she whispered to Gabriel.

Gabriel held on and as Anne crested the rolling sea within he too felt the rising, cresting and final release as the wave fell to a smoothness. "Aye, a slight rest then we can sail back again." Gabriel said giving Anne a loving kiss before slipping out and off of her. He rolled onto his back and slipped an arm around her shoulders to roll her to him. "Tell me, Ms. Darcy...how did your story of being a widow come about?"

With a chuckle Anne looked at him. "The truth then, and let only ye and the dead keep the secret. I

needed a way to travel, and as ye well know a single woman my age does nae travel alone. The tale then was to ward off unwanted scrutiny, and as such tales go it grew with the telling of it. Soon not only was I a widow, but a mother who'd lost a leg to a shark and two sons to scarlet fever." She laughed, remembering that there was, actually, quite a bit of scarlet at their demise.

Behind Gabriel the shadows flickering in the lamplight seemed to coalesce into ghostly forms. Anne stared past him, entranced as they danced there behind him, barely recognizable as the forms of men she had known, and killed. For long moments she remained silent, staring past her lover at the macabre spectacle.

Gabriel listened to Anne's tale and understood why she had started the story but to include losing her leg to a shark and children...that was quite a tale indeed. He was about to comment when he looked at her and noticed her staring past him. He looked in the direction she was but didn't see anything out of the usual. "Anne, you okay?" He asked lifting her chin so that she looked at him instead.

But Anne didn't answer, and her eyes still stared past Gabriel as if he no longer existed for her. Fitch and Wilkes were at the forefront, as before, and rows of men stood with them. All of the men still bore their wounds. Dark, vacant eyes stared into her soul and she knew every face, even the ones whose names Anne never knew, and the circumstances of each one's demise.

"Why'd ye do it, Cap'n," Wilkes asked.

"Ye were dead men already," Anne said. "The moment ye came back t' Plymouth, two men with three horses, an' both of 'em crew on the Starduster ye'd ha' been clamped in irons. They'd ha' tortured me situation from ye, an' ye both would ha' been swinging from the gallows afore they dragged me back." This time a tear touched her eye, "Sweet, stupid bastards. Ye should 'a left me t' dance wi' ol' Jack on the end o' that rope. I were ready fer it, deserved it even. I bargained fer ye're freedom, an' accepted the Magistrates price fer it, dear though it was."

"Nay, Cap'n," interjected the shade of Samuel Fitch and several others. "he mean's why'd ye do any o' it. Was it a twist o' fortune or and ill wind what brought ye into our midst?" The assembled shades mumbled and nodded heads in agreement.

Anne pondered the question for a moment, not understanding. Reaching behind her, under the pillow, her hand latched onto the wheel lock pistol. "Bugger off, ye bastards, I offed me score on the gallows. Twas the lot of ye that cheated me out o' it!" She drew and fired the pistol right next to Gabriel's head, putting a lead ball into the opposite wall.

The pistol shot broke the vision, and Anne realized what she'd done. "Bloody hell," she said, "Gabriel, forgive me. Twas naught but a vision."



As quickly as Anne drew and fired the pistol Gabriel jumped up and out of the bed. He was standing at the opposite side of the room from where the lead ball was. His eyes were wide and he wondered what had just happened. "Um...okay....what ye be shooting there, Anne?" He asked her a little unsure if he should return to the bed or not. "Should I ask if there are any other more weapons in the bed I should be worried about?"

With a wild gleam in her eyes and a loud cackle she looked at Gabriel. "Tis not you what should be worried about them," she said cryptically, putting the pistol aside. "Tis the shadows what haunt me should concern themselves."

She got quiet then, pondering the vision that she'd seen. "Why did I do it," Anne mused softly, mostly to herself. "What did I bloody do, anyway?"

Looking at Gabriel she patted the bed beside her. "Forgive me, Gabriel, I've a lot of past following me about. If ye're up for another tale, I have one that needs tellin'."

Gabriel chuckled when Anne said that it was the shadows that needed to worry. "Well, I do not see how a pistol is going to harm a shadow, so yes, I am a little worried about being suddenly shot." He wondered what she was talking about when she asked about what she had done. Then she mentioned telling him another tale and the cool evening breeze was starting to chill his naked body. "Alright....very well." He said as he returned to the bed and covered up waiting to hear the tale.

She waited for Gabriel to get settled, then began softly, "twas the last run the Starduster made, an' we hit the mother load we did. We took down a Spaniard laden with gold, rich as Kings were we. Sent 'im t' Davy Jones wi' all hands. Our luck wasn't to last though, the Navy found us holed up in a hidden cove. We give 'em the slip, did we. Jon D'Arcy, me first mate an' lover, and I figured to hide our spoils just in case though." She took a deep breath and continued, "had me by the heart, ol' Jon did, an the bastard knew it. I would'a done anything fer 'im."

Anne sighed a deep sigh, remembering the embrace of her only true love. "We made land," she continued. "Jon an' me took the chest inland alone and buried it. But he'd slipped up, he did, an' he let on that 'twas him what betrayed the Starduster to the bloody British. Twas his idea to hide the gold as well. I guess he thought to come back after the rest o' us was in irons and take it all for himself." Shuddering slightly she added, "so I marked the spot we buried the chest with his bones, did I."

"Anywise," Anne continued, "I was heartbroken. When I got back t' the Starduster the Royal Navy was rounding the point. We fought our way out, but at a cost. I had me heart torn out an' lost me shank on the same day, did I." She stopped for a few moments to gather her thoughts, sighed, and then said, "bastards chased us southward for three days. On the third night, knowing that we couldn't get away, I put most of the crew into the longboats under the cover of a driving rain. Seven men an' me kept on southward. Seven men an' a cap'n can't sail a ship far, they caught us near Montserrat."

"The fight were out o' me. I'd lost me heart, me leg, an' a fair amount o' blood. We struck our colors, and I parlayed for leniency for the crew. The eight o' us were dragged before the Magistrate in Plymouth. We was all to be hanged, but they wanted me standin' for it, the bastards." Her eyes teared up. "I had t' watch them hang me bloody crew, did I, then wait a fortnight under the shadow of the gallows." She began to sob. "But I didn't give 'em up, the ones what got away. Not a single one. Paid for their freedom on the gallows did I, an' I did it willingly. I were ready t' dance wi' ol' Jack was I."

Anne curled into Gabriel's comforting arm. "Then the stupid bastards sprung me," she said into his chest. "An' now only you, me, and the dead know the whole o' it."

Gabriel let Anne curl into his arms as the tale made her sadder and sadder. Once she was there and the tale was told he laid back with her in his arms. He brushed his fingers along her upper arm. "Seems that they sprung who didn't want to be. What happened to the ones who rescued you?" He asked wondering if they were still running free or if she had to put bullets in them to save herself. He had been a pirate a long time and had not a tale like that to tell. He let out a sigh as he had indeed been a lucky one and not had that kind of luck. "And now the Royal Navy has your beloved ship and who knows what they will do with her." He made the comment of what he thought she might be thinking.

"None but the dead know me tale," Anne replied, "save thee an' me. If me rescuers were found out, t'would be the gallows for them and the rest of the crew. I could'na have allowed that, not after making me own deal wi' ol' Jack. I put a pistol shot in Ben an' a dagger in Fitch, and buried their bodies at sea." She sobbed slightly and added, "Ben always loved the deep salt sea, he did."

"As for the Starduster, well, mayhaps our paths will yet cross again." Anne drifted off to sleep, cradled in Gabriel's arms, and slept better than she had since the gallows.

Gabriel drifted off to sleep shortly after he heard Anne's deep breathing. He slept a dreamless sleep as he always did. He remained holding Anne in his arms and the night passed by out side.

The dream came to her, like the visions, and Fitch posed his question again. "Why did I do it," Anne answered. "For love, lads, for I loved all o' ye. Love be a fickle, fleeting thing though, an' I love me'self as well."

One by one, in her dream, the specter's turned and walked away.