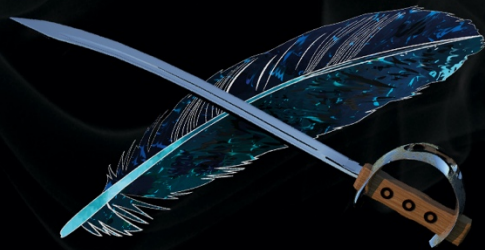




ALL
HAIL THE
PIRATE
QUEEN



A. A. Woods

ALL HAIL THE PIRATE QUEEN

a short story by
A. A. Woods



It was Iara's favorite moment, the split second between when the shadow fell over their faces and the airmen realized the danger closing in on them; when Blitz made the sun disappear for her enemies. Crouched on the saddle of her raptor, a dagger clenched in her teeth, Iara wondered wildly, euphorically why everyone in the world wasn't a pirate.

It was a hell of a lot more fun than being a princess.

A cry rose up from below her as a deckhand pointed from the stern of the chariot.

"It's the Featherhands!"

Iara grinned.

Time for her next favorite part.

With a flicker of thought, she pushed Blitz into a dive. The huge bird pulled his wings into his body, curved in a wide arc, and accelerated toward the sky chariot that had been, until this morning, on its way back to the Floating Isles. Iara felt her steed's exhilaration in her own body, his reckless thoughts tangling with her own. Her heart beat in tandem with his. It only took a few moments for them to fall, but it was enough for her to make out, through Blitz's sharp eyes, the Ceillan queen's insignia on the breastplates of the soldiers and the royal colors wrapped around the legs of the two raptors pulling their chariot through the clouds.

She snarled.

Blitz screeched.

The men below her scrambled.

"Pull the blades!" one shouted.

And then she leapt.

It had taken her months of practice to get her landing right, to aim for the center of a man's chest with her toes, to use his body to soften the impact, slide along the deck, and flip backwards, graceful as a cat. Malistar probably still had the bruises from her training. But here, now, with everything on the line, Iara's focus was sharper than ever. Her long legs hit a crewman in the dead center of his sternum, shoving the air from his lungs as they both went down. They hit hard, but she recovered quickly, exploding away from him and thumping down on the deck in a crouch.

As Iara straightened, a small cabin boy managed to yank the lever that activated the blades, giving the rails around the chariot the impression that they'd just sprouted teeth. Iara smiled. If Blitz had landed, his feet would have been impaled.

Queen Nell was learning.

But so was she.

Blitz cawed as he broke away, greeting the rest of Iara's crew who circled in on raptors of their own. But they didn't jump, didn't try to land on the deck. As instructed, they waited for her move.

Spitting the dagger into one hand and drawing another from a sheath at her belt, the leader of the Featherhands pushed back a mass of hair and iridescent bird plumes, flashing a grin at the hesitating sailors.

"What's wrong?" she asked, bouncing her knees. "Need an invitation?"

It was as if she'd broken a spell. They surged toward her, unified and clumsy.

She danced with them.

A perk of growing up noble was that Iara had been raised from birth to deal with chaos, with war. The Ceillan islands, despite floating almost a league above the surface of the ocean, were not immune to attacks. Nuri stormriders and Ferrenese *enhabitants* and even the odd aristocratic uprising had all threatened Iara's homeland in just her own twenty-two years. And, as one of the seven heirs from which the next leader of the tribe should have been chosen, Iara's life had needed more protecting than most.

Until she'd been banished, of course.

Now, combat skills honed even sharper by two years on the open sea, Iara played with these loyalists like a cat with string. She leapt, swung, kicked, rolled. The ship was a web and she was its spider, swift and dangerous and barbed with daggers. She threw one into the leg of an assailant, smoothly drawing another man's short sword to block an axe as it swung toward her head.

"How dare you?" the soldier growled, face contorted with rage. "We carry Her Majesty's blessing."

Iara cackled. "As if that means shit to me."

And then she knocked him across the face with the sword's pommel.

"Hurry up!" her first mate, Malistar shouted as he swooped over her, little Eri between his knees.

Right, Iara thought. She could toy with them later.

Twisting away from the feeble poking of a young airman's blade, Iara planted one foot on the rigging and flipped herself over the heads of the gathered men. She threw her arms out, twisting in midair, relishing the rush of the warm breeze on her skin. She landed, hopped, turned toward where the two huge raptors were hitched to the chariot.

A man was waiting for her, sword drawn, teeth bared.

For the first time in recent memory, Iara stumbled.

"Koro?" she gasped.

The young man—tall, brown-haired, handsome—stared at her as if she'd grown another head. His scowl faded into openmouthed shock.

"What the...?"

Iara didn't give him time to gather his thoughts. She lunged, cutting in and spinning fast to avoid his counterstrike. She darted for his side, but he was there, just as fast, just as instinctual. Of course he was.

Koro had taught her everything she knew.

Well, almost everything.

"Iara," he panted as they pulled close, her jabbing for his neck, him struggling to bring his blade down on her shoulder. "You're making a mistake."

"No," she answered, her smile fiercer now, more feral. "You are."

She ducked away. His sword slipped through, biting into the meat of her arm. Swallowing a gasp, she leapt back to avoid Koro's swing, sprinted forward, and slid on her knees to where the main towlines were anchored.

Sky chariots were built very specifically to detach from the birds that pulled them. It was critically important that, in a moment of panic or the blindness of a storm, the chariot could easily unhook from a terrified bird or tangled rigging. If all went according to protocol they were designed to glide, slowed by the properties of Ceillan wood.

Of course, *protocol* wasn't what she had in mind.

Iara wrapped her fingers around one slipknot, clutching the dangling end. She glanced back at Koro.

"Might want to hold onto something."

And then she freed one of the two gigantic birds.

The ship lurched. Everyone fell to their knees. For a moment, the deck was stable, level, gliding.

And then Malistar came up from below, his raptor hitting the chariot's underbelly and sending it into a wild spin.

Iara gripped the railing with both hands, careful to avoid the barbs. Her knives flew away, but she didn't need them anymore. She howled gleefully as the lone tethered raptor flapping madly to overcorrect what was already beyond saving. The other one, trailing rope, looped around with an angry, panicked *caaw*.

There was nothing it could do.

They were falling, gaining downward momentum. Sailors shouted, cargo tumbled out, but Iara only laughed as the ship plummeted toward the sea, queen's blessing be damned.

Served the bitch right.

Malistar shouted something unintelligible. The ocean loomed like a wall. Iara closed her eyes against the dizzying whirl, wearing a lunatic's smile.

And then, with an enormous, echoing *crash*, the chariot hit the water.

It bounced once.

Twice.

Iara's teeth knocked together. Her very bones seemed to protest the abuse. But she held on with dogged determination, arms locked in place.

Finally, the ship bobbed to a stop.

She blinked, unlocking her limbs from around the rails. There was a moment of dazed stillness, broken only by the unhappy splashing of a full-grown raptor, still bound to the gently rolling vessel.

Gathering herself, Iara dove for the lever that would pull the blades back in and allow her crew to fully commandeer the chariot.

But before she could reach it, she felt cold steel at her throat.

"Don't make me do this," Koro said, voice rusty from shouting.

Iara looked at him over one shoulder. "I've never *made* you do anything. It's always been your choice."

He spat. "Bullshit. You attacked my ship."

She turned as much as the sword would allow. "And you chose to serve a false queen."

"She's not false."

Iara's expression twisted into what could almost be called sympathy. "We both know that's not true."

"Captain!" called one of the sailors from further down the ship. "We have a problem!"

Careful to keep one eye on his captive, Koro glanced over the railing to where the sailor was pointing.

The sea was churning with sharks.

He looked at Iara with something halfway between exasperation and rage.

"You have a Seaspeaker?"

She smirked. "Oh, our Eri can *enhabit* more than just fish. It's surprising, really, his range. Insects, birds, crustaceans—"

"What do you want?" Koro asked, rubbing his hair with his free hand. She'd once loved to watch him do that, to *make* him do it. "If this is about Queen Nell..."

She turned fully to face him now, letting the sword cut a small slice in her neck. Koro pulled the blade away with a disgusted grimace.

"You're a man of honor," she said with uncharacteristic seriousness. "You know what she's doing, the way she's whored herself out to those cowards across the sea. She sells our secrets for gold, acts as if the integrity of our nation is worth less than a handful of jewels."

Koro was still ruffling his hair, glaring at the sky. "It's her right."

“Not if the council had anything to say about it.”

“They’re in hiding for their own protection. No one’s seen them in three years.”

“Since I was exiled,” she pointed out.

Koro ducked, as if he could avoid that inconvenient fact.

Iara was vaguely aware of his men, royal soldiers, clumped around them like schoolchildren waiting to see if a fight would break out. And she wasn’t quite sure herself. She wanted desperately to believe that there was still someone left who would trust in her, listen to her. But maybe that was too much to hope for.

“I didn’t do it,” she said softly. “You know me.”

Koro sighed. “I used to think so. And then you went off and turned into...” He used the sword to point at her ragged clothing, searching for a word before exhaling, “this. What was I supposed to believe?”

Her mouth pulled up in a halfhearted smile. “Piracy is an underrated endeavor. You should try it sometime.”

“Be serious, Iara.”

“Oh, I am.” She gestured at the churning water, the three birds circling his crashed chariot, the tethered one now snapping at sharks as long as her wings. “We need your ship and you’ll soon be one raptor short if you don’t give it to us. The way I see it, you can either surrender or your men can starve at sea.” Iara spread her hands. “Your choice, old friend.”

For a long moment, Koro glared at her. And it was like they were kids again, her taunting him from the top of an orange tree or the edge of a parapet, him scowling to hide the temptation to join her. But this was real. The future of their home hung in the balance. The lives of his men.

After what felt like an eternity, Koro reached over and drew back the blades to invite Iara’s crew onboard.



“You sure about this?” Malistar asked, arms hooked over the railing of their new ship. As he always did in moments of quiet, his thumb traced one of the ten iridescent feathers tattooed on each of his fingers, the mark of Iara’s crew.

She stared out at the waves, not answering. Above her head the freed raptors swooped in long, low circles, waiting to be hooked back up to their vessel. The soldiers and airmen were belowdecks, guarded by the twins. Eri was tossing salted pork to the sharks, laughing maniacally. And wrapped around them in a glorious blue infinity was the open ocean, her home these past three years.

Do I really want to give it up?

Iara turned, pushing herself up onto the railing so she was level with Malistar's head.

"What do you think you'd be doing, if you hadn't become a pirate?" she asked.

Malistar cocked one eyebrow, as if to say *are we really doing this now?* But he straightened, cracking his trunk-thick neck.

"I guess I'd be robbing people in back alleys instead of on ships, wouldn't I?"

Iara smirked. "Come now, indulge me."

"There's that noble-speak again."

She waited patiently, boots swinging.

When Iara had first met Malistar, she'd been terrified of him. He was huge and pale, with arms as big around as her thighs, and she'd been a slip of a girl in stolen servant's clothes, on the run from faceless assassins and a false accusation of treason. But after convincing him to join her—with more than a little blackmail—she'd grown to see his soft spots: his exasperated affection when she did something particularly insane, his deference to her education and upbringing. Unlike so many she met at sea, he didn't see her as too young, too weak, too female.

To him, she was already a queen.

"Always wanted to run a shop," he said at last, squinting at the horizon. "Sell the wares of our own people. Raebus art. Ebonal carvings. Faclan spices. None of that continental shit." He glanced at her, almost shy. "Seemed like the best way to show those foreigners what's what." He wagged his head. "Besides killing 'em, o'course."

Iara threw her head back, laughing. "I like your thinking, Malistar."

"You won't get to kill many colonists on some throne though. Not with your own hands."

Her smile faded. "Maybe." She tilted her head up, watching her crew's raptors try and tempt the other birds to play. A sigh burst out of her before she thought to stop it. "What am I doing?"

Even though the question had been rhetorical, Malistar answered, "Getting us all killed, I imagine. Probably tortured first."

She looked sideways at him. "And yet you stay?"

He shrugged his giant shoulders. "Who doesn't like a lost cause?"

She patted his arm, grinning. "That's the spirit. Now let's go corrupt us a captain."

The twins had left Koro tied to the strong beam that ran along the prow, scarred by the erosion of the towlines. For a moment Iara only watched him,

saddened by the way he sagged against his ropes, the wrinkles that had formed since she'd last seen him. This young man had taught her to dance, stolen a kiss in the garden, said he liked her best out of the seven who might be chosen to rule. That he hoped to serve her one day.

Well, now he had his chance.

"Don't you just look like the sorriest excuse for a Queensguard I've ever seen?" Iara said, sauntering up and planting her hands on her hips.

Koro's mouth twitched, but it couldn't quite be called a smile. "You forget, I lost my title when I spoke out against the culling."

She folded her arms. "Looks like we both lost something that mattered to us."

Koro snorted. "Please. You never cared about ruling. When all those other noble idiots were making fools of themselves to impress the council, you were off stealing cakes from the kitchens or taking raptors on joyrides."

"I seem to remember you enjoying our little adventures."

His face twisted. "I was seventeen. We were children. That's hardly the way to run a kingdom."

Iara frowned. "One of those joyrides saved my life."

"And I'm glad," he said, glowering at her. "But look at you now. Leader of the Featherhands?" He scoffed. "I'd heard the rumors, but I never actually believed it was you."

"I'm taking action."

"You're taking *revenge*. Burning supply ships—"

She took an aggressive step forward. "You mean colonist blood payments?"

"Iara, it's pointless to fight them. Their hold here is strong and getting stronger."

"Because of our *queen*." Iara got in his face. "She sits on a throne of their offerings like some kind of dragon and in return they take our girls. They steal our magic. They sink their claws deeper into the island and she does nothing to stop it. Koro, we're supposed to be the defenders of Ferren. The Floating Isles have always kept vigil over the gift the gods have seen fit to give our people. And she's *letting them steal it*."

Koro didn't seem upset by her outburst. To her surprise, he looked sad.

"You can't hold back this tide. Not on your own."

Her gaze held his, intense and unyielding. "Then help me."

"What? Kill the Queen?"

"Help me find where she's keeping the Council. By rights her term ended three years ago. It's time for fresh blood."

Koro's expression was skeptical. "Or spilled blood?"

She slapped the wood by his head. "Damnit, I have no reason to hurt my own people. I want what's best for Ceillans. I want to fight these would-be invaders. You know this!"

"Do I? Iara, it's been years."

"I haven't changed." She leaned in, close enough to see the yellow flecks in his eyes, the white rings around his pupils that marked him as different from the colonists. "Have you?"

Koro only pursed his lips.

"We used to dream about the things we would accomplish one day, in the name of our people. Help me save that dream. Help me fix this."

For a long moment, he didn't answer. Iara wasn't sure if he would. But she held steady, her eyes on his, her expression hard.

Finally, he asked, "How?"

Iara's mouth spread into a victorious grin. "You should know me better than to think I'd share my secrets that easily." She stepped back. "But as far as plans go, I think I've outdone myself this time."

Koro shook his head. "Kill me now."

"And have you miss the party?" Iara laughed, whipping out a dagger to cut him free. "Not a chance."



The castle was a feat of majestic beauty, built into the rocks that floated almost a mile over the ocean. No one knew what kept the Ceillan Isles in the sky (something to do with the trees they built their ships out of), but it was undeniably impressive to see that wide deck hanging over nothing, the intricate bending and twisting of wooden beams, all of it carefully manicured, tended.

And guarded.

Peering through the gaps in the railings of Koro's chariot, Iara counted the uniformed soldiers marching the perimeter, checking guests, watching the skies. There were more than usual, but that was to be expected for a night as important as this.

The Queen had done away with many traditions, but even she couldn't change the Solstice.

"Cocksuckers left an opening over there," Alma said, pointing to where a guard had lingered too long with a pretty woman, creating a gap in the rotation.

"Looks like that little miss will be the one doing the cocksucking today," Alex sniggered. Alma hit him.

"Show some fucking respect, you pig."

"You'll be ready then?" Iara asked the twins, interrupting their impending fight. She ducked low, watching Koro wave to a passing raptor and rider. "At my signal?"

Alma rolled her yellow-tinted eyes. "What do you think we are, amateurs?"

Alex snickered. "Always wanted to go to a fancy party."

Iara did her best to return the smile. But she was nervous. The voluminous skirts she'd borrowed from Koro's quarters—she'd chosen not to ask where and, more importantly, *from whom* he'd acquired a ballgown—were hot and stuffy, impractical for anything more than light dancing. Worse, she didn't know what she was striding into. Sure, she'd been to dances and parties before. But who knew what Queen Nell had changed in the years Iara had been gone? Things might be different, dangerously unforeseen.

And those differences might get all of them executed.

Koro stepped up beside her. "Your crew might want to get below. We're approaching the docks."

The twins rolled to their feet.

"Malistar will be bored by now anyways," Alma said with a stretch. "Big oaf is visible from a mile away."

Alex snorted. "Imagine what those ladies would think of *him*."

"I think Eri will be the bigger shock."

Alex's response was lost to the wind as the two pirates ducked through the hatch and disappeared.

"They're... charming," Koro said, peering at her sideways.

"You'll never find a more loyal crew," Iara said, straightening, smoothing out her ridiculous skirts. "But if it's manners you want, you won't find them among the Featherhands."

Koro's mouth pulled down. "Please tell me what you're planning. I want things to change as much as anyone, but smuggling pirates into my home..." he looked down at her through thick eyelashes, the very expression that had melted her heart all those seasons ago. "It goes against everything I've ever held myself to."

Iara lifted a hand and pressed her palm to his cheek. "These aren't scoundrels, Koro. I've made sure of it. Alex, Alma, Malistar? They have as much honor as you or me." Her lips quirked. "They just express it differently."

He flinched. "And the kid?"

Iara chuckled. "Well, he is a bit of a mystery, I'll admit. But there's no stronger *enhabiter* between here and Feur."

Koro's eyes drifted over her head, to the stretching spires of wood and glass. Their destination.

Iara pulled his face back to hers.

"Trust me," she said.

He smiled back, for real this time. "Don't make me regret it."



It was a strange sort of relief for Iara to realize, sweeping into the grand entrance of the castle, that she hadn't missed any of this. Life at sea had been challenging, dangerous, and at times quite miserable. It was easy, in the cold terror of a thunderstorm, to fantasize about silks and lace and endless platters of food. To dream about fish smoked for days and rare spring-berry wine, all of it made and poured and served by someone else. Iara had grown distant enough from luxury that it had begun to call to her again, like a pleasant, half-remembered dream.

Now, once again, she saw the waking truth.

The aloof expressions and detached smiles. The way ladies held themselves like breakable china. The infectious taint of foreign aristocracy that hung over the party like a fog. Iara could still remember when dresses were hitched up over bare feet to allow for dancing, when the voices had been loud and brazen and careless. Even as a girl, Iara had felt nostalgia for the *real* revelries, the ones that almost made it worth getting scrubbed and polished. Not these stiff, snooty events that the Queen had begun to favor.

That hateful decay of Ceillan tradition had become, if anything, worse during Iara's absence.

"Is this a funeral and no one told me?" she asked, making only a token attempt to keep her voice down as they waited in line to be announced in the feasting hall.

"Shh," Koro said, glancing around. "Remember, *darling*? It's the Solstice."

"Someone should inform them of that fact." Iara jerked a thumb over her shoulder at the line of guests wearing empty, soulless smiles. Koro grabbed her hand and held it, as if they were a young couple and not infiltrators. He leaned in to whisper in her ear, caressing her neck with his other hand to make it look like a romantic gesture.

"The queen has been somewhat... erratic lately. Her suspicions are intense, and she's executed more than one person who is generally believed to have been in the wrong place at the wrong time. It's created an atmosphere of distrust and instability that makes people nervous. And quiet."

Iara smiled, leaning in so that her lips were almost touching his jaw. "But I had to persuade you to join me?"

"There's a difference between instability and rebellion," Koro said, his breath warm on her ear. "I don't like to see innocent people die."

Iara's eyes flashed. "Neither do I."

Someone cleared their throat and the two of them pulled apart to find the announcer—a ridiculous imported idea—regarding them with stern disapproval. Iara giggled, fanning herself.

"I'm sorry, sir. I guess I just feel so lucky to be on the arm of a Queensguard."

From the corner of her eye, Iara saw Koro glance at the ceiling, as if to pray for patience.

"You're with a naval captain, miss, not a Queensguard."

Iara's smile didn't falter. "Oh, I'm not so sure about that."

"Captain Brethenach," Koro cut in, squeezing Iara's hand. "And guest."

The announcer nodded stiffly and stepped aside to let them in, calling out the given name.

"Is part of your plan blowing our cover at the door?" Koro hissed, pulling Iara into the corner.

She grabbed a buttered shrimp off a passing plate, stuffing it into her mouth. "Worried?"

"Of course."

"Well, that's nothing new," Iara said, scanning the room. With every detail, her rage grew. Where the doors should be thrown open, letting in the warm, salty air, they were closed and blocked by dark tapestries. Iara imagined the embroidered fabric must be valuable, but the depicted scenes were grisly and monotonous, ground battles and hillside victories that no Ceillan had ever seen, at least not willingly.

And there, perched in the middle of it all like a desiccated vulture, was Queen Nell.

She was still strong, thin and muscled and hard of jaw. But this woman, a powerful ruler in her day, had been bowed by paranoia, bent by treachery, withered by a surrendering of herself. On her brow was a heavy crown of hammered gold—nothing like the woven driftwood tiara befitting her station—and draped around her limbs were thick, gilded fabrics that were too hot, too restrictive. Iara glared at her, trying to find some shred of the brave, hopeful Ceillan who had been selected by a council who thought her the best choice.

She found none.

The queen looked up, finding Iara's eyes.

Iara tipped her head in greeting.

With an explosive sigh, Koro yanked her away, pressing a drink into her hand. "I've shackled myself to a madwoman," he muttered, rubbing the bridge of his nose.

"Where are her handmaids?" Iara asked, ignoring him.

"There," he said, pointing at a tittering group of ladies, dressed in startling red.

Iara's snorted in rather unladylike fashion. "What ridiculous costumes. No swords? Not even so much as a dueling spear?"

"Her Majesty doesn't allow weapons in the castle, except on her guards."

"What if her attendants need to protect her?"

"I assume they'd shield her with their bodies."

Iara snorted again. "Useless waste." She took a sip of the drink, relishing the taste of fresh palm juice laced with sea grape alcohol. It had been a long time since she'd enjoyed such things.

As the trickling influx of guests began to diminish, the musicians on the far corner of the room picked up their instruments.

"So?" Koro asked. "*Now* may I know the plan?"

Iara smiled as the music rose, halfhearted but familiar.

"No. But you can dance with me."

Grabbing his hand, Iara hauled Koro into the middle of the room. The gathered nobles scurried out of their way, tittering. Ignoring them, she placed his hands on her shoulders, put her own on his waist, and cocked her head as if to ask *what are you waiting for?*

"Iara, no one dances the—"

She didn't let him finish, thrusting forward and forcing him into movement.

Everyone was gaping at them, but she didn't much care. Iara knew she looked nothing like the girl who had fled years ago. She was tanned, weathered, less pretty but far more ferocious. Her limbs were wiry and strong, her movements predatory and sure, her brown hair bleached by long days in the sun. In short, Iara was a different woman.

Let them stare.

The island's elite whispered behind their hands, at once scandalized and fascinated. But after a moment the musicians seemed to pick up on the energy. The song intensified.

Other couples began to join.

"See?" Iara said, using the happy delirium of their spin to take in the room. "Change is possible."

Koro was laughing against his will. "And to think I missed you."

She wasn't listening. Her eyes were fixed on the red-clad women and the stern-faced guards around the queen.

Come on. Come dance, you sods.

A few men were tapping their feet, the ladies looking over shoulders, tempted. Iara whooped as Koro spun her, their feet moving faster now. Even he seemed to be enjoying himself. His expression softened, lightened, and Iara imagined she was glimpsing the boy she used to know like some kind of mirage over this reality, a ghost of the past.

Please let us find our way back to that happiness, she thought as more couples joined, as more dresses swirled.

The queen looked sour, but members of her entourage were grinning. One girl, the youngest of the handmaids, reached out a slender hand. A soldier barely out of boyhood accepted it. They stepped onto the floor.

"Stop!"

Her Majesty's voice rang out over the music, grinding it to a halt.

Everyone froze.

Except Iara, who immediately brought her fingers to her lips and released a loud, piercing whistle.



Koro watched, dumbfounded, as the tapestries blasted inward and Iara's crew leapt inside. Fabric ripped. Voices rose in screams and battle cries. The twins wielded axes in each of their hands and the small child cackled madly, bringing with him a swarm of birds. The huge one—Malistar—landed on a table of delicacies and crushed it beneath his weight.

"For the love of the gods..." Koro said, watching as the men he'd trained and served with fought the pirates he'd smuggled in.

"Don't just stand there," Iara said, grabbing hold of a large silver platter and dumping its contents on the floor. "Join the fun!"

She slung the plate into the crowd, forcing guests to scatter.

The ballroom was quickly devolving into pandemonium. Koro lost sight first of Queen Nell and then Iara in the terrified jostle of bodies around him.

"Keep calm! Everyone keep calm!" he shouted, but to no avail. How were the unarmed nobles supposed to notice that Iara's crew wasn't targeting them, that they were only killing who they had to? The pirates were loud, sure, but not unduly violent.

Koro had to admit he was impressed.

“Everyone out!” he yelled, funneling the innocents toward the door. He scooped up a small boy and hurried him out of the way as Malistar slammed into a table, knocking it over.

Iara, where are you?

The queen was already gone, smuggled to the mysterious safehouse whose location only two men knew beyond herself. But surely, Iara didn’t plan to capture the royal head of security or lead advisor. They’d have gone with the attendants, all of them fleeing to the same secret place in the maze beneath the castle. There was no way to find them.

“Thank you,” a round-faced woman gasped, lifting the boy from Koro’s arms. “Oh, thank you.”

He didn’t respond, too busy scanning the room. He wanted to help, to *do* something, but what? Malistar was surrounded by bodies, mostly unconscious. The young, wild boy named Eri was directing a flock of small songbirds like a conductor. The twins were taking turns eating and fighting off the guards left behind. Koro could hear the shouts of soldiers gathering outside, closing off their escape.

But where the hell was Iara?

One of the torn-down tapestries was moving, rolling and jerking as if someone was trapped beneath it. Koro had the strange sensation of being fully awake, buzzing with an instinct he hadn’t felt in a long time. He stumbled forward, letting it guide him.

With a graceful sweep, he pulled the fabric aside.

Then stumbled back.

“Goodness, I’m sorry!” he said, shielding his eyes.

Beneath the curtain was a young woman, pretty and slender and dressed in nothing but her underthings.

“She stole my clothes!” the girl shrieked. “That bitch stole my uniform!”

Koro’s apologies died on his lips.

Ah, he thought numbly. *That would do it.*



Queen Nell was pacing.

“What the *hell* happened?” she demanded of her advisor as she made another lap of the safehouse.

“We don’t know yet, m’Lady, we—”

“I thought you were supposed to *protect me.*”

Her head of guard cleared his throat. “We’re doing our best, but the tapestries don’t allow for—”

“We’re not having that conversation again.” She was growling now, her voice edging into a dark panic that everyone in the room knew enough to fear. For it was more than just her handmaids and personal guards watching her frantic march between the pillars. The exiled council was there too, kept alive—barely—because of a technicality.

The queen knew her hold on the Isles remained strong only because, when she’d suspended the Agreement of Seven, she’d hidden the council ‘for their own protection’. Framing that little bitch for the murder of her husband had allowed her to act with authority, to seize better control under the guise of maintaining security. It had been a loss, one she’d taken time to mourn and atone for. But her husband, along with the other six aspirants to the throne, had been necessary casualties. She’d acted for the good of the people, for their *future*.

And now they looked at her like *she* was the villain here.

She sneered, doing another lap.

Didn’t they *see*, didn’t they *understand* that she was doing this for their own good? There was no fighting the colonists. One had to *adapt*. She was guiding her people toward a safer future, toward peace. Some customs had to die on the road to progress.

Like the council.

They glared at her from their seats, cowed by the guards and years in confinement. Despite being natural-born mariners, people of air and sea, these dignified statesmen and women were all pale now, owl-eyed and angry. She dismissed the guilt before it could rise up in her.

All great changes require sacrifice.

She should have killed them already, rewritten the law herself. But the noble houses continued to swallow her uncontested rule because she insisted it was temporary. That the postponement would end. Even if she executed the council in secret, how could she be sure one of the soldiers wouldn’t talk? Or her handmaids? No one could guarantee silence, not in these unfaithful times. She knew full well what they whispered about her. Oh, she saw their averted eyes. There was no love, no *gratitude*, for what she’d done. What she’d given up.

Her temper snapped.

“Will someone tell me *what the fuck is going on out there?*” she demanded, expecting no answer.

To her surprise, she got one.

“I imagine your guests are fleeing back to their homes,” came an oddly familiar voice from the cluster of her handmaids. “Frightened, but also exhilarated

by the first real thing they've felt in years. A few might be bleeding, perhaps a broken bone here or there. But the true violence will be reserved for your loyal servants."

The queen froze. Straightened.

The mysterious voice continued. "Your naval captain, a real looker by the way, will instruct them to put down their swords. Perhaps some will obey. Perhaps some will even turn against the ones who don't. I imagine without your highness's fearsome presence, they might forget who rules them." Glittering eyes peered out from the shadow of a red cowl. "As they have forgotten so much else."

The other handmaids skittered away, leaving the stranger to stand alone.

"Show yourself," the queen commanded, her voice the crack of a whip.

The figure stepped forward, straightened, and yanked off the fabric.

It was a young woman, but not the one Her Majesty had selected to join her most exclusive retinue. No, it was an entirely different creature: rough, browned, with braided sun-streaked hair, hard eyes, and a wide, insolent grin. Tattooed feathers decorated her hands and real ones twisted in her hair.

So different was this face from the one she'd known that it took the queen a moment to place it.

When she did, her voice dropped into a true snarl.

"Iara."

The woman bowed with an elaborate flourish. "In the flesh."

"So the rumors are true," the queen snapped, dread trickling down her spine like perspiration. "What do you want?"

Iara cocked her head, the gesture so avian that Queen Nell wondered if she'd become half-feral out there in the wilderness. "That, your highness, should be fairly obvious."

Enough of this, Nell thought, turning to her guards.

"Kill her," the queen commanded, pointing, straightening.

"No."

The new voice was raspy with disuse and malnourishment, but rung with a deeper kind of strength. The council leader rose to his feet, making the guards freeze in the act of drawing their swords.

"Excuse me?" the queen asked, that instinct of rushing danger intensifying.

"Allow her to speak her case," the old man said, his voice dripping with the power that he only had here, only because this damn creature had *found him*.

Iara grinned savagely, wildly. "I'm here for your crown."

"That's impossible!" the queen said. "You're a pirate. A murderer! The council will never accept you."

"Let's allow them to decide, shall we?" Iara said, flexing her fists so that her tattoos seemed to flutter.

The queen rounded on the seated council, mouth open. They watched her with impassive eyes. How could they look so *calm*? This was the most excitement they'd seen in three years, and yet they maintained that cultivated air of detachment, the sterile, calculating distance that had always made them feel so alien.

"Arrest her," she said. "Detain her. She's a danger to us all." No one moved. "This is insane!"

"My specialty," Iara said, now shucking the heavy red cloth to reveal a molded leather vest, thin canvas slacks, a belt of daggers. "I accuse Queen Nell of murder and treason." She stepped out of the pooled fabric. "I bring to the attention of the council her many attempts to undermine or destroy the sanctity of our home and our sacred duty to protect the free island of Ferren. I charge her with the selfish endangerment of our people for her own personal gain." She stalked forward like a predator, like one of the Sibilese desert cats. "In short, I challenge her to a duel."

"And what, supplicant, do you hope to gain from this challenge?" the head of the council asked in a sonorous voice, the traditional question.

The queen shook her head, frantic. "No! Stop, arrest her now!"

But the guards didn't move, waiting for the council's orders. *Damnit*, she should have *destroyed them* and their entrenched hold over these naïve idiots. She cursed herself three times a fool as the young bitch responded in a careful, even tone.

"The honor of being considered for the Ceillan throne."

The council leader nodded. "The crown is henceforth disbanded until the culmination of this duel. Pick your weapon. As is customary, *enhabitation* is not allowed."

"This is madness," the queen protested, feeling like a child who had jumped off too high a ledge. "I shouldn't have to fight her. She killed my husband!"

"A crime for which she was never properly tried," the old man said, sitting back down. "This council considers her guilt as uncertain as your own, and therefore resolvable only by the blade."

The queen wanted to scream. She wanted to rip out her hair, throw things at them, flee for her life. But she kept her spine straight, her head high. She was a Ceillan queen after all, not some novice. She trained with sword and spear every day alongside the best of her guards. She did calisthenics with her handmaids. To her, this *brute* was nothing but a fly to be squashed by her own precise and meticulous thumb.

Queen Nell beckoned to one of her guards. He handed her his sword and then, upon further wordless instruction, his dueling spear. It was a Ceillan staple, necessary for attack between chariots. She tested the weight, the balance. Not ideal, but certainly good enough. Glancing over her shoulder, she watched the young woman twirl twin daggers, another sticking out of her belt. The queen fought the urge to smile.

Typical youthful arrogance, thinking that being *unorthodox* was the same as being *surprising*.

It was difficult to muster the determination to shed her gown. Not only because the dress itself was an expensive luxury, given to her by the traders she allowed pass beneath her Isles on their way to Ferren. No, it was also unnerving to reveal her body, her linen underthings and pantaloons. She'd abandoned the habit of wearing lightweight battle clothes beneath her regular attire—a silly, wasteful practice that shouldn't be necessary for a properly protected monarch.

Now, she wondered if that had been unwise.

Iara smiled roguishly, tossing one dagger into the air and snatching it as it fell. "Impressive, for someone beyond her ruling years."

"I am not beyond my ruling years, child," the queen said, striding into an imagined ring in the middle of the chamber, her footsteps light and soft. "I have many left."

Iara's lips curled higher, showing teeth. "We'll see."

And then she struck.

It was like fighting an insect. The girl was fast and unpredictable, jabbing and thrusting and slicing and spinning. Queen Nell blocked her every movement, but she'd been trained with deliberate planning and sweeping strikes. This pirate, this *savage*, didn't fight like a noblewoman. The talented youth the queen remembered from court had morphed into something else entirely.

No matter.

The queen swept out a tripping leg. She was surprised to find her opponent already gone, twisting around her with extraordinary speed. A sharp knock with a dagger hilt made the queen's sword fall with a clatter. Nell rebalanced, blocking the next strike with her spear and shifting onto her back foot to dance out of the way. They were both sweating, both panting, and for the first time the queen began to wonder if perhaps this was going to be more difficult than she'd anticipated.

And then Iara made a mistake.

She ducked in close, rushing under a thrust of the dueling spear. One of her daggers dove for the jugular, but Nell knocked it away. It skittered across the marble. Iara adjusted, twisting with the spare, but the queen was ready. She'd

planned this, carefully coordinated the attack so that the less experienced fighter would think it an advantage. Would see an opening and take it.

Leaving Nell an opening of her own.

The queen lunged with the dueling spear while her opponent was off-balance, driving it all the way through Iara's shoulder.

The girl cried out, dropping the dagger, her whole arm spasming with pain.

"I am the rightful queen of this island," Nell growled, leaning in and twisting the spear. "You are *nothing*."

Iara's head pulled up with visible effort.

"Well," she said with a strained smile. "Not exactly."

And then Queen Nell of the Ceillan Isles felt the bite of steel under her jawbone, tight against her throat. In her single-minded focus on skewering her opponent, she'd forgotten about the third dagger on the girl's belt.

She swallowed.

Iara tightened her grip and stepped back, spear still stuck in her shoulder. The arm hung uselessly, but it didn't matter. She'd won and they both knew it.

"Relent," Iara said.

"What will you do with me?"

"Does it matter? You'll live. Relent."

The queen's eyes flicked over the gathered council, the cold-eyed captives she'd kept imprisoned for three years. She'd watched them deflate, seen with every visit to these dark, secret corridors how the lack of sun and freedom wore on their minds. On their souls.

She swallowed again.

"Relent," Iara insisted, pressing harder with the knife.

The queen's eyes met those of the council leader. The old man looked at her with no emotion, detached as always. But did she imagine that little vengeful flare of pleasure to see her finally brought low?

"Re—"

Nell snapped her power around Iara's body like a bear trap, *enhabiting* her instantly. The white rims around her pupils blazed. Iara's eyes were a mirror, glowing white, muscles rigid and immobile. It was the worst of offenses, to hold another human body with magic. But Nell wasn't about to give up, not like this, not ever. She wouldn't allow them to—

The sword of her own soldier was a mercy, severing her spine.



Iara shook, fighting the urge to retch. She pulsed with horror from the invasion, unnerved by the nauseating sensation of losing control. But she could not show pain, could not allow for weakness, not now when she was *so close*.

But close to what?

She lifted her chin and faced the council.

"I surrender myself to your mercy," she said, gritting her teeth against the agony in her shoulder and the blurry exhaustion of her thoughts. "And humbly request your pardon for whatever crimes I am accused of."

The council leader, as was traditional, spoke for all of them. "Do you deny that you killed His Majesty, the queen's husband?"

"I do."

"And do you deny that you conspired, along with the six other aspirants, against the throne?"

"I do."

There was a pause. "Do you also deny the charges of piracy and theft?"

Now her grimace was internal, a twist of nerves and defensiveness. She didn't show it.

"I do not."

Those bushy white eyebrows pulled together. "Explain."

"I did it to survive." Iara took a deep breath, threw her shoulders back. "And because it was the right thing to do."

The council leader didn't respond, so Iara took it as a signal to continue.

"Unlike the usurper," she said, kicking the queen's corpse over with her boot, "I have no love for these foreign invaders. I've done my best to sabotage their supply lines, intercept their shipments, undo their progress stealing *our land*." Her voice was gaining heat, rolling like a stone down a slope. "I refuse to submit to their rule. If that makes me a murderer, fine. If that makes me a pirate, *fine*. But should you grant me this crown, know that I will continue to fight back in whatever way I see fit."

The council watched her outburst solemnly, their thoughts invisible. Iara felt like a child again, being presented to this very assembly by her proud parents. But she was alone this time. The other contenders for the Ceillan throne were gone, killed by the monster now dead at her feet. Iara was the only one left, their only chance to preserve the Agreement.

Suddenly, a new sound broke the stillness.

Footsteps.

Everyone turned to see shapes emerging from the shadows around the entrance, first Koro, then Malistar, Eri, and the twins.

"How...?" Iara whispered.

Koro gestured at Eri, whose eyes were glowing white.

"Guess there are things that can smell you down here," he said with a wince.

"Traitor!" said the head of the Queensguard, lunging forward.

Koro put up a hand. "You'll find that the soldiers you left upstairs don't agree," he said. "Turns out they weren't any happier about the situation than I was."

In the shocked silence, Koro's eyes ran over Iara's pierced shoulder. Worry creased his brow. But he said nothing.

She thanked him with her eyes.

"So?" Iara said, turning back to the council. "What is your decision?"

"It seems to me that you don't require our verdict," said a smaller woman in the back. "Why not just claim the title for yourself?"

"Because I value our customs," Iara said, bowing her head.

"Clearly not," said the old man, eyeing her tattoos, frowning at what they represented.

Iara looked up, mouth crooked into a smile. "Perhaps we also need some new ones."

"I think," Koro said, stepping up beside her. "That the Ceillan Isles would do well with our first pirate queen."

His smile was enough to melt all the residual anger around Iara's heart.

"All hail the pirate queen!" Malistar began to chant. "All hail the pirate queen!"

The twins joined. Then Eri, who didn't know the language but did his best to make the noises. Then Koro and a smattering of guards and handmaids.

"I suppose," the council leader interrupted in his somber, gravelly voice. Silence fell. "That there are worse things than a sovereign with a little life experience." He focused on Iara, his gaze drilling into her. "But you must vow to protect our home. To do what's best for the Ceillan Isles, no matter the cost. Do you accept this responsibility?"

Iara's grin was enough to make Koro shudder. "With everything I am."

The council leader bowed his head.

"Then, in the name of this assembly and the seven houses it speaks for," he said, lips twitching with the barest hint of a smile, "all hail."

The End

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