

**Rackety Kate  
and  
The Pirates  
by  
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*With the kind assistance of the Newsletter Readers of the deniserossetti newsgroup.*

*<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/deniserossetti>*

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## CHAPTER 16

### Feint and Return

*The story so far:*

*The orgiastic battle of wills is virtually a dead-heat, Kate wins by a gasp, but she and Jack discover their strong, possessive feelings are mutual. Everyone finds satisfaction in their own way, such a considerable achievement that Kate passes out in gratitude.*

Someone was stroking Kate's hair, very gently. A woman's voice said, "I think she's coming `round."

"No," whispered Kate. "Not yet. Please."

The woman went on talking, but another voice rode over the top of her, drowning her out – a deep, burnished baritone with a beguiling lilt to it. "C'mon, pretty Kate, open your eyes."

Kate shot upright with a gasp – and nearly tipped herself ass over elbow out of the hammock.

"Whoa!" Jack caught her shoulders and held her steady. "Welcome back, sweetheart." His tiger eyes danced, but he wasn't smiling. He looked almost...sad. He was seated in a throne-like chair, woven out of golden cane.



Kate gripped his arm, feeling the heat of muscled flesh through the thin fabric of his shirt. "I nearly..." She swallowed. "I don't know how much longer I have left."

When Jack smoothed a hand over her hair, the sensation felt both beloved and familiar, as if he'd been doing it for some time. Kate found herself leaning into his touch, like a cat begging for a caress. He pressed his lips lightly to hers. Then he kissed her eyelids, the tip of her nose. "Look at me."

She stared into his burning gaze, drowning. A flush stained his cheeks above the trim beard. "What I said, before at the pool..." He came to a dead halt, clearing his throat.

Kate could barely speak. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw the Hormone Harlots, perched on the railing of what she realized now was the shady verandah of a palm-thatched bungalow. They appeared to be holding their breath, their wings barely stirring in the balmy air. She knew how they felt.

"Yes?" Her lips formed the word, but no sound came out.

"I've never said that to any woman, ever. Never wanted to."

"Did you mean it?"

Some of the old arrogance resurfaced. His eyes flashed. "Bloody Jack Cavanagh doesn't say things he doesn't mean."

Kate pressed closer. "Then say it again."

Jack balked. "You first."

"No, you."

They glared at each other, the air vibrating with tension.

Suddenly, Jack chuckled. "See?" he said. "The only woman who's ever matched me. You never take a backward step, do you, sweetheart?"

Kate shook her head. "In my world —" She broke off, her heart aching.

Jack's voice dropped an entire octave. "You're mine," he growled. "And I'm yours. What makes you think I can't find you - in this world or the next, in this lifetime or however many it takes?"

Kate reached up to cradle his face, his beard silky beneath her palms. "Promise?" she said, like a little girl.

"On my honour as a pirate, on my heart and my immortal soul, I swear. I hold what's mine. You belong to me, pretty Kate."

"And you to me, Jack Cavanagh."

"Aye." Leaning forward, he hauled her into his lap and sealed their lips together in the sweetest kiss Kate had ever experienced. It wasn't even especially sexual, just achingly tender. For the first time with Jack, she released herself fully, softening beneath him, her head tipping back into his secure grasp, offering no resistance. She'd never surrendered like this before, so completely, and with such joy. The intoxication of it spread through her blood, but it was new, different, nothing like the raw brandy burn of lust.

Instead, it was a draft of purest spring water, refreshing every part of her, washing her soul clean of years of hurt and failure. Finally. Oh God, she was finally *home*. She held her in her arms, the only refuge she'd ever want, or need.

The kiss went on and on, until she was floating, Jack brushing his lips over her brows, her eyes, her cheeks, her throat, crooning nonsense all the while. When he drew back, Kate's face was wet with tears and his tiger eyes were suspiciously bright.

He hugged her close, speaking into her hair, so softly she could hardly hear him. "Don't leave me, Kate." The words sounded as if they bruised his throat coming out, as if he hated to even think them. "I've only just found you."

Kate tightened her grip. "Not if I can help it."

*Tap, tap, tap.*

Oh hell, Rossetti. Kate's heart sank. Shit, shit, shit.

*Tap, tap. TAP! THUMP!*

She winced. Presumably, they were meant to "get on with it". The dratted woman must have a deadline. *Serves you right*, thought Kate. *Hope it's giving you fits.*

*Tap, tap.* Long pause. *Tap-p-p-p...*

Jeez, Rossetti made it sound as if she were starving in a garret, scratching in longhand with a quill pen. All by the light of a guttering candle.

"Pathetic!" snapped Tess, hovering in the air behind Jack's shoulder.

He twisted, glaring. "I am not! You keep out of this!"

"Not you," said Tess.

Before Jack could reply, a brisk breeze whirled the length of the verandah, tumbling Tess end over end in a flurry of lurid curses and fluttering wings, little biker boots thrashing in the air.

"All right, all right!" muttered Tess, jabbing a tiny finger skyward. "I got it."

"Stop that," murmured Tess, slapping at her sister's hand. She cast a nervous look at the clouds. "You'll make her mad." She rose high in the air, right up to rooftop level, shading her eyes with one hand. Her pink chiffon gown billowed prettily. "Anyway, look who's coming up the path."

Kate leaped off Jack's lap with a glad cry. "Peter!"

Peter beamed, the afternoon sun flashing off his spectacles. He had a leather satchel slung over one shoulder. When Kate held out her hands, he bowed extravagantly, pressing a kiss into each palm. His fair cheeks were flushed, but only with the pleasure of the reunion. He didn't seem at all embarrassed by the knowledge that just a few hours ago, he'd been buried balls-deep inside her, groaning his pleasure into her ear.

Kate strove to for equal nonchalance, but she could feel the heat rise in her cheeks.

"Ah, pretty Kate," said Peter. "You're a sight for sore eyes." He nodded at Jack. "Cap'n."

"What the hell do you want?" Jack snapped, tugging Kate back into his arms.

Peter twinkled at him. "The planning for tonight, Cap'n. The auction and all. I think you might have, um, forgotten?" He unslung the satchel, withdrew a couple of sheets of parchment and handed them to Jack.

Curious, Kate looked over his shoulder. Inscribed in exquisite copperplate was a list headed "Items for Auction at the Pendant" and beneath that, "Property of Captain Jack Cavanagh, Esq."

The list was extensive. It included things such as exotic fruits, jewelry, weapons, silks and much more. None of that was a problem, provided she could ignore the ill-gotten gains aspect.

Kate peered harder. She wrenched herself out of Jack's embrace, shoving her pointy little elbow hard into his belly. "You shit!" The pain was so huge she could barely breathe.

"Kate O'Reilly," the parchment said, in large flowing letters right at the top. Below her name were three others: Tom Cavanagh (First Officer, Lady Meroe), Venetia, Duchess of Dorchester and the Comte de Nothos.

"Kate, no!" For the first time since she'd met him, she saw fear flash across Jack's face. "It's a mistake." He wrapped his hands around Peter's biceps and shook so hard the young man's spectacles fell off his nose and his blond hair whipped around his jaw. "Did I or did I not tell you to remove Kate's name from the list?"

"Aye, Cap'n," gasped Peter. "You d-did."

"And when did I give you this order?" Another brisk shake.

Peter's eyes were wide and blue and frightened. "This m-morning, afore we even left the ship."

"Aye," growled Jack. "What is a suitable punishment, hmm?"

"I—" Peter swallowed hard. "I will substitute for Kate."

"Good." Slowly, Jack dropped his hands and stepped back.

Shakily, Kate scooped up Peter's glasses and handed them over. "Thanks," he whispered, his cheeks scarlet.

Kate looked again. Peter was keeping his head down, but he was breathing hard, the bulge in his breeches suspiciously prominent. What the—?

Jack's long fingers clasped the back of her neck, rubbed. "Don't be concerned, sweetheart. I'm no slave trader." His hand made soothing circles on her shoulder blades.

Her heart thudding, Kate turned to gaze up into his gold-shot, hazel eyes. "I don't understand. It's an *auction*, for God's sake."

Jack's firm mouth curved, very slightly. "Do you remember the Magic of Sweet Sisters Isle, sweetheart?"

How could she forget? The fluffy cloud, all pink and golden, the joy fizzing in her veins, sparkling like champagne.

"And the names of the twin peaks?" asked Jack.

Yes," she whispered. "Pleasure and Pain."

"It doesn't matter what we do or how we do it, Kate. Magic is the gift of the Sweet Sisters. Whatever measure you need of pleasure or pain to make you whole, the magic ensures you get it."

He stroked her cheek with his knuckles. "Their heart's desire, pretty Kate. That's what the auction will bring them." For the merest instant, he looked desolate. But then his gaze heated and she decided she'd imagined it.

"Who should stand on the block first, do you think?"

"Why do I get to decide?" asked Kate, a pulse beginning to patter between her thighs.

"Well..." Jack spread his hands, all sweet reason. "I'm the Captain, and you're the Captain's Lady. It's fitting."

Kate bit her lip. So much had happened since she'd last seen them...

But she could still remember the delight of big Tom Cavanagh's kiss, his bright blue eyes and genial manner. It might be best to keep that particular little episode from Jack. After all, Tom had sacrificed his freedom for her right to choose. And then there was the way he treated his gray tabby cat, the elegant Lady Meroe, almost as if she could speak.

*Cavanagh?* God, they knew each other! With a hot rush, she recalled how Jack had nearly kissed the First Officer.

She turned to Jack. "Tom?" she said. "Who is he?"

"A distant relation," said Jack. "Third cousin twice removed, or something like that. I'm older, but we played together as lads. He's a good man and a fine officer. A trifle impulsive though. Needs a firm hand." His teeth gleamed.

The Comte had interrupted that kiss. Deliberately, the snake. And he'd betrayed the Duchess. But oh, he was fascinating, as only the most dangerous of men can be. That suave, central European accent, the pointed canines in the lush mouth, the dark, hypnotic spice in his kiss... Kate slanted a glance at Jack from under her lashes. Better keep that one to herself as well. She had the feeling there was a good deal more to the Comte than even Jack realized.

Which brought her to the Duchess. Immediately, she frowned. The woman was an out-and-out bitch. What a pity Duka seemed so besotted. Her mind filled with images of his dark hand reddening the woman's pale bottom. God, the way she'd come, trying to stifle her screams of reluctant pleasure! Hell, Kate was wet just thinking about it. How she'd love to see that again - and more.

And then there was Peter. Darling Peter, sweet as sugar, whose name was on the top of the list at the moment. Kate's hungry gaze traced the hard muscular curve of his ass in the tight breeches. His cock had felt delicious, deep inside her. And she'd bet it tasted delicious too, but she hadn't got to do that. Her mouth watered. Surely he deserved some sort of reward for letting her use him the way she had?

Jack's arms slipped around her from behind. He nuzzled her ear, the silk of his beard sending delightful shivers all down her neck. "Well, pretty Kate, what have you decided? Who's to be first?"

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Who has Kate chosen to start the auction?

- A. First Officer, Tom Cavanagh
- B. The Comte de Nothos
- C. Venetia, Duchess of Dorchester
- D. Peter



## CHAPTER 17

### Luxury Goods

*The story so far:*

*Kate and Jack have a "heart-to-heart" that really is. When Peter arrives, she discovers to her astonishment that among the items on offer at the pirate auction are Tom Cavanaugh, the Comte de Nothos, the Duchess and Peter.*

"Best seat in the house." Jack nuzzled Kate's hair. "Comfortable?"

Kate murmured her assent, stroking the arm he'd wrapped under her ribs. Though it wasn't strictly true. Her heart thumped with a heavy expectant beat and she tingled as though her veins bubbled with champagne. But, yes, her body was also magnificently languid, almost boneless. After Peter had departed, Jack taken her to a sort of outdoor bathroom, roofed with a pergola draped with sweet-scented, flowering vines and fed by two trickling streams that splashed into a shallow rock-lined pool, one cool and one so hot it steamed.

He'd refused to let her do anything for herself, tenderly washing her hair and rinsing it, massaging her scalp until she purred. He'd been equally meticulous with the rest of her, soaping every inch of her skin with his hands. Of course, he'd lingered over her breasts, her bottom, her thighs. Grinning, his glorious chest rising and falling with his quickened breath, he'd made absolutely certain the quivering folds of her sex were squeaky clean.

But when she reached for him, he backed away. "Later," he said cryptically. "It'll be worth the wait."

Then he'd dried her off with big fluffy towels, laid her down on a clean one and proceeded to massage fragrant oils into every inch of her skin. God, it had been heaven. As for the foot rub—! When he pressed his thumbs hard all along her sole, she'd nearly come then and there.

He'd allowed her to kiss him, giving her his mouth, deep and soft and wet.

With a final smile, he carried her back to the hammock, covered her with a light linen sheet, pecked her cheek like a brother, and left her to doze contentedly in the perfumed shade.

She'd woken to the drift of soft fabric against her cheek and opened her eyes to see Jack holding an armful of diaphanous fabric. "Let's get you dressed," he said, the tiger eyes glinting.

Murmuring endearments and dusting her skin with kisses, he'd gowned her as deftly as a maid.

Now she felt like a queen, reclining with him against a bank of satin pillows. Smiling, she stroked the thin silk over her thighs, enjoying the sensual, slippery feel of it. It was the same shade of blue as her eyes, but shimmering with silver-shot iridescence. The cut was simplicity itself, but Jack had adjusted it with ties that fastened at the back. The bodice cradled her breasts like loving palms, cut so low that a hint of areola was revealed, two dusky-rose crescents. It fell, full and lush, to her bare feet, slit to the mid-thigh on both sides.

The gleam in Jack's eyes told her she looked edible.

The scene was like something from the Arabian nights, flaring torches set all around a natural amphitheatre. Tall screens, embroidered with complex oriental motifs, surrounded a small wooden stage. Behind them, Kate could see shapes moving about busily, but no real detail. All around her, bare-chested pirates lounged against silken cushions, tankards or wine jugs in hand. Jack's calendar of gorgeous men, she thought fuzzily, smiling like a fool. They looked like barbarian lords, a little scruffy, a whole lot wild and dangerous, specimens of every type of male beauty.

She watched Chan leaned forward to whisper something in Harley's ear, his almond eyes gleaming with anticipation. God, there was so much testosterone in the air, she could barely breathe!

Hormones were certainly amazing. Speaking of which, where were the Hormone Harlots?

Ah, there.

Tess was perched on top of a screen, almost overbalancing as she peered at whoever was on the other side. Kate stared. Was Tess a little...taller, or was that her imagination?

Wait a minute... *Tess, Ess. Hormone Harlots.* Kate's eyes widened. Of course!

No wonder Tess had grown, what with all the testosterone the pirates were pumping out.

But what about poor Ess? Estrogen was in pretty short supply on Sweet Sisters Isle. Kate scanned the room. With a sigh of relief, she relaxed. Good heavens, why had she even worried?

Ess sat primly on a cushion next to a burly pirate with a magnificent red beard and twinkly blue eyes. With one manicured fingertip, she stroked the length of his brawny thigh, over and over. The man obviously had no idea she was there, but his eyelids had slid to half-mast and his cock strained his breeches. Kate could almost hear his rumbling purr from where she lay in the shelter of Jack's arms.

She raised her gaze to the stars, shining like diamonds scattered across black velvet by a careless hand. The moon shone full and bright, seeming to hang lower in the sky than usual, illuminating the glade with a soft, clear light.

*Tap, tap, tap... tap...*

The sound trailed off, so slowly it could have ended with a wistful sigh. Kate's mouth curved in the smile opposing counsel had learned to dread. *Too bad, Rossetti,* she thought, as loudly as possible. *I'm here and you're not. Suffer.*



*Tap, THUMP! CLATTER!*

A chilly wind swept all around her, ruffling the silk of her gown, and Jack pulled her closer. Kate opened her mouth, but before she could speak, a bulky shape stepped out from behind the screens and the torches flared high.

Duka clapped his huge palms together and Kate caught her breath. She'd expected some sort of pirate get-up, but the First Mate looked more like a Zulu king. Her awed gaze traveled from his massive chest, adorned with a necklace of feathers and teeth, skittered over tight, dark nipples pierced with gold rings and down to the loincloth of leopard skin he wore slung negligently around his hard waist. His big feet were bare, planted solidly. Tied just below each knee was a bunch of pale feathers, with matching bands adorning his swelling biceps. The colour contrasted deliciously with the smooth chocolate of his skin.

God Almighty.

Jack chuckled in her ear, his breath tickling. "Impressive, isn't he?" His hand crept up to possess a quivering breast.

Kate gurgled something in reply.

"Shipmates!" called Duka, his bass baritone carrying easily. "It's auction night on Sweet Sisters Isle." He grinned, his teeth very white and straight. Kate thought he looked...hungry. "Want to see the goods, me `earties?"

An animal roar of approval erupted from the assembled pirates. Hot chills ran up and down Kate's spine.

Harley and Chan leaped up to pull the screens aside. Kate's mouth dropped open, all the breath punching out of her in a rush.

The four people on the stage had been arranged in a kind of erotic tableau, surrounded by the exotic prizes Jack had taken. Quivering with outrage, her blue eyes snapping fire, the Duchess of Dorchester sat on the floor at the foot of a chaise longue, a slim leather collar fastened around her neck. She was clothed from head to toe in a pale, semi-transparent garment fastened on the shoulder and at the waist with big bows that fairly screamed, "Untie me!"

Kate had to admit it was cunning. No matter how hard she stared, she could make out only the barest hint of delectable curves beneath the gown, the merest hint of a rosy nipple. It was a wonder the concentrated heat of the pirates' gazes didn't burn the fabric right off her aristocratic body.

In one hand, Peter held the leash that was attached to the collar. The other was propped beneath his head as he lay on one hip, artfully displayed on the chaise longue.



Already, Kate could see he was blushing delightfully. Hmm. Probably because he was almost entirely bare, save for a short kilt of crimson silk that clung lovingly to his slim, muscular thighs and half-hard cock.

Sitting bolt upright on rolls of jewel-toned velvets was the silver tabby cat from the ship, the elegant Lady Meroe, named after the vessel. Kate frowned. Unless it was the other way around...

The cat's unwinking gaze was fixed on the other side of the stage, on First Officer Tom Cavanagh. Unconsciously, Kate licked her lips. Jack growled something into her neck and nipped her earlobe. Tom wore the same sort of kilt as Peter, but on his burly frame, it seemed no bigger than a handkerchief.

He stood with his legs spread, glaring out past the flickering light of the torches. With a deep internal tremble, Kate realized he'd been chained to a tall St. Andrew's cross, ankles and wrists. The posture raised his hands above his head so that his pectoral and abdominal muscles flexed in a most attractive manner. An intriguing trail of hair led from the mat on his chest down over his cobbled belly, disappearing under the waistband of the kilt. Following its progress, Kate made a discovery.

"God, he's hard already!" she whispered to Jack.

"Aye." Jack's thumb rasped gently over her nipple. "He likes the restraint, does young Tom. The vulnerability. Not that he'll admit it."

Kate swallowed hard.

Next to Tom was a throne-like chair with all sorts of goods piled up around it. The heap glittered with the cold steel of sword blades, the warmth of a fortune in gold coins and jewelry. There were mysterious boxes of dark polished wood and waisted bottles in richly toned glass. Amidst the splendor of riches, the Comte de Nothos sat bolt upright in the chair, wearing nothing but a loose shirt of black linen. He should be ridiculous, with his white legs and pale hairless chest, instead he looked like study by Michelangelo done in ink, more beautiful than a marble David and infinitely more imposing. His dark eyes blazed with rage and his lips were pulled back from his teeth, exposing his sharply pointed canines. His chest rose and fell, as fast as if he'd been running.

Kate twined her fingers with Jack's. "He looks like he wants to bite," she whispered.

Jack chuckled. "He does. But the chains are silver, so he can't."

Oh my God! So they were. Heavy silver links, fastening his wrists and ankles to the chair.

Jack raised his voice. "Go ahead, Duka."

"Aye, Cap'n." Duka raised a hand and the deep buzz of speculation stopped immediately, to be replaced with a tense silence, palpable with anticipation and hunger. "The first item!" His deep voice rang like a great bronze bell. "Venetia, Duchess of Dorchester!" Without turning his head, he held out his hand and Peter placed the end of the leash in it.

With an unexpected pang of sympathy, Kate saw a flash of terror cross the woman's lovely face. When Duka gave the leash a gentle tug, she stumbled to her feet, her cheeks

as pale as milk. When the big man tucked her into his side, she gasped, flushing a delicate rose. She still glared at the audience, her chin tilted in scorn, but her body curved instinctively into Duka's. Absent-mindedly, he dropped a kiss on her brow.

It was actually rather sweet. Kate smiled, feeling the prickle of tears.

"Well, lads," called Duka. His brows snapped together, his massive chest expanding with his breath like a great beast about to pounce. "Who's got the balls to bid on this fine lady?" He bared his teeth in a snarl and the glade went quiet.

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Duka's going to win the Duchess – because anything else would be unthinkable!  
But what will his winning bid be?

- A. One month of his mastery.
- B. One hundred gold doubloons.
- C. One hour of his submission.
- D. A night at his expense in the best bawdy house in the East Indies, with two kegs of best brandy thrown in.



## CHAPTER 18

### High Bid

*The story so far:*

*Kate and Jack are guests of honour at the pirates' auction. Duka presides over a mouthwatering selection of goods, human and material. The bidding's about to start on the Duchess...*

"Aye!" called Harley, leaping to his feet. "I ain't skeered, ye great lummox. I'll bid a keg of finest brandy!"

Duka growled, but the red-bearded pirate waved his tankard, his teeth flashing in a grin. "Twenty gold doubloons!" He belched. Clapping a dainty hand over her nose, Ess rolled her eyes and fluttered away to perch on a palm tree.

"Fifty!" yelled Chan, his almond eyes snapping with excitement.

"Sixty doubloons and I'll write all yer letters fer a month." Peter's voice carried clearly in the soft night air.

Slowly, Duka turned his head and glared at Peter where he lay, delectably displayed on the couch. "You ain't allowed to bid," he rumbled. "You're goods, dammit."

"Oh." Peter flushed adorably. He cleared his throat. "Sorry. Got carried away."

"Hmpf." Duka turned back to the audience, the light of the torches gleaming on the dark bronze of his massive chest, sparking fire from his gold nipple rings. "Fifty doubloons. I'm bid fifty doubloons. Speak now, for God's sake, or shut the hell up."

Chan and Harley had their heads together, whispering.

Red Beard staggered to his feet. "A hundred!" he bellowed. "One-fuckin'-hundred gold doubloons!"

The silence was so complete, Kate could hear the torches spluttering.

Red Beard chuckled. "There, Cap'n," he said to Jack. "That's shut `em up."

"It certainly has," said Jack dryly. He nodded at Duka. "Go on."

But Duka's head was bent, whispering to the Duchess. Kate saw her white fingers clench hard on his dark forearm. The woman trembled, every limb vibrating with apprehension. Kate caught only the occasional word from the First Mate. "Can't beat...shit, sorry...don't cry, love." Clumsily, he patted her back. "Gotta...ah, fuck."

His shoulder sagged, he lifted his head and inhaled deeply. "Going, going..."

*Come on, Rossetti*, thought Kate in a fury. *Where the hell are you? Off having another stupid cup of tea?* Rigid with tension, Jack's arm circled her waist.

"Wait, wait!" shouted Harley. "I bid this!" Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out a streaming cascade of ruby fire. The gems trickled through his fingers, the necklace swinging gently, sending deep red sparks in all directions.

Far away and somewhat muffled, Kate heard it. *Tap, tap, tappity, tap.*

"An' my fifty doubloons," added Chan. "I'm throwin' them in. A syndicate, we be." His teeth shone very white and fluid muscle shifted under perfect golden skin.

Duka hauled in a massive breath. "That ain't in the rules."

He glanced at his captain for confirmation, but Jack shook his head. "It's not mentioned in the rules at all," he said. "Harley and Chan win the Duchess unless you make them an offer they can't refuse. Think quick, man."

Harley chortled and slapped Chan on the back.

"But I can't—" Duka broke off, his brow corrugated. The Duchess went up on her tiptoes to whisper in his ear. "Oh," he said. "Aye!"

He straightened. "I bid a month of my mastery." His bass baritone rang out across the clearing.

Harley's brows rose. He put his fists on his bad boy hips. "You do, do you?" Meditatively, he swung the ruby necklace in a small circle, admiring the blood-red gleams. He and Chan exchanged a long glance.

"You mean one month for each of us?" asked Harley. He grinned. "I like to be clear about my pleasures."

Duke tightened his grip on the Duchess. "Yes, damn it. If that's what it takes."

"Hmm." The two pirates conferred.

Finally, Chan looked up. "No," he said quietly.

Kate mouth fell open.

Chan stared his First Mate in the eye. "You know what we want."

Duka was too brown to go pale, but some of the healthy bloom left his skin. His Adam's apple bobbed in the thick column of his throat. "I don't..." he rumbled. "You know I don't...do that."

Chan shrugged, looking suitably inscrutable. "Take another look at what you'll be missin'," he advised. His eyes gleamed. "And what we'll be enjoyin'."

Duka stared down at the woman in his arms and a long shudder ran through his massive body. The Duchess stared back for an endless moment. Then she stretched up to slide her arms around the First Mate's bull-like neck. Long lashes swept down over her beautiful blue eyes. Lifting her chin, she pressed her pink satin mouth to Duka's lips.

An instant of startled immobility and Duka swept her up, his mouth opening over hers. His big hands splayed over her buttocks, her back, as he devoured what she offered. The pirates whooped and cheered.

An eon later, Duka came up for air. His eyes a little wild, he glared at Chan and Harley. "Half an hour," he said.

No one moved or spoke, or as much as breathed. Perched in the palm tree together, Tess and Ess held hands, goggling, their pretty pointed faces flushed, their wings quivering.

"A half hour of what?" said Chan, inexorable.

The big man swallowed. "My submission, damn you," he snarled.

"Not so fast, matey." With a wicked grin. Harley wagged a chiding finger. "A half hour each, Duka. One full hour."

Duka stiffened, lips pulling back from his strong, white teeth, his fists clenching.

Oh God, it was too much. He was going to refuse. No, no, no!

*Tap, tap, clatter, CLUNK!*

The Duchess rubbed her shapely hips against the bulge beneath Duka's leopard skin loincloth. Her husky whisper carried clearly. "I'll be there," she said. Flushing, she bit her lip and pulled back a little. "If you need me."

"If I—" Duka broke off and ran a hand over his shaven scalp. He stared into her eyes, pole-axed. "You'd do that?"

The haughty lines smoothed from the woman's face. Mutely, the Duchess nodded. The corners of her pretty mouth tucked up the slightest bit. "I, ah, wouldn't care to miss it."

The First Mate blew out a long breath. Then he looped the woman's leash several times around his wrist. His chin lifted, gazing out over the lights at the assembled pirates, daring them. To Kate, he'd never looked more dangerous – nor more impressive.

"Venetia, Duchess of Dorchester, is sold to Chan and Harley for the price of a ruby necklace and fifty gold doubloons," he boomed. "But Duka, First Mate of the *Brazen Hussy*, offers one hour of his submission. That price is...accepted."

A pause.

"Going, going...GONE!"

As one, the pirates leaped to their feet, yelling their approval. Beer mugs and wine cups waved about in the air. Someone struck up a lively air on a fiddle. A pipe joined in, Harley and Chan performing an impromptu jig. Harley's long black curls bounced as he threw his head back, laughing.

Passing the Duchess's leash to a wide-eyed Peter, Duka tugged the screens closed, concealing the stage and all the people on it. Kate released a breath. Whew! After that, it figured he might need a moment to compose himself.

Jack's hands cradled her breasts, her nipples stabbing into his palms. His body was so much bigger than hers, so much harder, but his hands were gentle. He made her feel...*safe*. Kate snuggled, the hot burn of tears behind her eyes. Had she ever felt entirely safe with a man?

Marvelling, she studied the rough men carousing all around her, dancing like overgrown kids at an adults-only birthday party. How she was going to hate leaving them when the time came. Because she had no doubt it would. Unless the Rossetti woman drowned in her own tea cup. One could but hope.

But she wouldn't think about that. Forcing a smile, she twisted to press a shy kiss to Jack's lips. Jack accepted the invitation with delightful enthusiasm and Kate's lawyerly brain retired to somewhere warm and fuzzy, while her body tingled and heated.

"Mmm." Jack dusted kisses down her throat and she lifted her chin, purring. "I think they're ready to start again," he murmured against her skin. "You ready, pretty Kate?"

Well, no, she wasn't. But what the hell. "Sure," she said, rubbing her palm over the smooth swell of his biceps.



## CHAPTER 19

### Delightfully Devious

*The story so far:*

*Duka has won his Duchess, but at the highest cost possible for a man like him. But he has a job to do. There are still more goods for sale...*

Duka stepped out from behind the screen. "Settle down, rot ye!" he roared.

One by one, the pirates quieted, save for the occasional rumble of laughter.

His natural dignity unimpaired, Duka eyed the crowd with profound disfavour. "We have an auction to finish, goods unsold. Shall we get on with it, shipmates?"

"Aye!" The shout echoed around the forest.

"But I thought we'd see..." whispered Kate to Jack. "You know...Duka."

He was holding her so closely that when he chuckled, she felt the reverberation through her whole body. Goose bumps of delight paraded down her spine. "You thought pirates weren't capable of self-control? Harley and Chan will wait a little for their pleasure, you'll see."

Actually, it was the Rossetti woman Kate had her doubts about. Fortunately, the excellent common sense of her readers kept the crazy one in check. They wouldn't rush headlong into sensual gratification, no way. A smug smile curved her lips. Rossetti's readers were people of restraint and self-discipline, intelligent and discerning in their pleasures.

Absently, she nuzzled Jack's shoulder, thinking how wonderful he smelled, of clean linen and warm healthy man. Sighing, she glanced up in time to see Harley and Chan tugging the screens aside as fast as they were able.

The scene on the stage hadn't changed. Tom Cavanagh was still fastened to his St. Andrew's cross, his cat now curled up against one big bare foot. The Count de Nothos still smouldered in his silver chains, Peter lay lounging on the couch with the Duchess's leash in his hand, while she sat neatly on the floor near his feet, looking down her aristocratic nose.

"Let's get to it, lads," called Duka. "What am I bid for this fine gentleman here?" He waved at Tom Cavanagh, magnificently helpless.

"Wait," croaked the First Officer. "Dammit, man, wait!"

Duka prowled closer to the bound man, muscles bunching beautifully under his dark polished skin. With an inward grin, Kate noticed the Duchess's wide blue gaze never left the First Mate.



"Wait?" rumbled Duka, with a panther's smile. "What for?"

"Meroe," gasped Tom. "My cat. She comes with me. We're...a job lot."

Hearing her name, Meroe sat up. A dainty pink tongue curled out to lick her chops.

Duka grinned. "She's a pretty lass if you don't mind the fur and whiskers. As you wish, matey. Now then—" He turned. "What am I bid?"

After that, the things got so fast and furious, Kate's head spun. Liquor, jewelry, gold doubloons, perfume - the pirates shouted their bids until the clearing rang. As the amounts got higher and higher, so did Tom's arousal beneath the brief kilt, though his face grew so pale Kate swore she could count each individual freckle.

Out of the corner of her eye, Kate saw Peter incline his head in an infinitesimal nod toward the pirate with the bushy red beard. She frowned. What was that about?

The man sprang to his feet. "I got me one hundred gold doubloons!" he yelled, surprisingly steady on his feet. He set his hands on his hips and glared around. "Can any o' ye scum beat that?"

Duka frowned him down. "That's a good forty ahead of the next nearest bid. What are ye playin' at, Red?"

Red opened his blue eyes very wide. "Playin'?" he said, all innocence. "Nah, would I do that?"

Duka opened his mouth, but before he could respond, Red surged on. "I got me an idea though." When he grinned, Kate realized he was younger than she'd thought at first, not much older than Peter, if that. And also stone-cold sober. How odd.

"Well go on then, spit it out, man," snapped the First Mate.

"What say—" Red paused for emphasis, enjoying the drama. "What say I take two of `em off your hands? One hundred gold doubloons for a pair - the big `un ye got shackled up all nice an' tight an' young Peter over there."

Jack went completely still, his breath stirring Kate's hair. When she twisted to look into his face, she found his gaze fixed on Peter's guileless face, his tiger eyes narrow with suspicion. "Why the crafty little—"

Kate jabbed a sharp elbow into his cobbled belly. "Sshh. Don't spoil it for him. Please, Jack."

Jack lifted a brow. "You'll owe me, pretty Kate," he whispered, his voice silky with dangerous promise.

"Don't forget the cat," said Peter.

When Duka gave him a hard stare, he dropped his head, the ready colour flooding over his cheek. The First Mate turned to Jack. "What do ye say, Cap'n?"

Kate held her breath and then noticed Peter was doing likewise. Meroe sat up very straight, her eyes huge, her whiskers fanning out with interest. Tom Cavanagh stared at Red, pole-axed.

"It's a fair price, even for the two of them," said Jack with the utmost calm. "Can anyone beat it?"

The pirates muttered and mumbled among themselves, but no one spoke up. Jack nodded at Duka.

"Going, going...gone!" Duka rolled a dark eye at the grinning Red. "Ye'd better be man enough, matey."

"Oh, aye," said Red. "I always wanted me a pair o' pretties. An' here's me first order." He waved a lordly hand at Peter. "Up ye get, lad and untie the big `un. Then ye're both comin' with me."

"Only if ye're real flexible!" shouted a tall pirate with a dashing eye-patch, laughing so hard he doubled over with mirth.

Still sporting that delectable flush, Peter rose and handed the Duchess's leash to Duka, receiving a key in return. Ignoring the catcalls and obscene suggestions, he crossed the stage to where Tom Cavanagh stood, still chained to his St. Andrew's cross. First, he crouched at Tom's feet to release the manacles. Purring like a feline motor-boat, Meroe wound herself through his legs, making him wobble. Even from where she lay, securely cradled in Jack's arms, Kate could hear the feminine rumble of it.

Very slowly, Peter rose, his bare chest brushing the First Officer's, their hips pressing together. Tom Cavanagh flinched, his jaw setting hard. Peter settled his spectacles on his cute nose with one finger and raised himself on tiptoe, reaching right up over their heads to free Tom's wrists. Fascinated, Kate watched a tide of red creep up over the big man's neck. Peter's breath must be hot on his collarbone, his short kilt riding up, almost to his taut backside. Lord, the kid had gorgeous legs, all muscle and grace. Unconsciously, Kate licked her lips.

*Hubba hubba, will ya look at that!* shouted Tess, right in her ear. Putting two tiny fingers in her mouth, she gave a piercing wolf whistle only Kate and Jack could hear. They winced.

Jack's fingers closed hard on Kate's shoulders. "No," he growled, "don't look. Feel."

His mouth came down on hers in a devouring kiss, no quarter given or taken. Sinking her fingers into his hair, she plastered her body against his, kissing back desperately, determined to live in the moment. Before Rossetti snatched her back to the real world, to her empty sterile apartment. Her empty, sterile life.

By the time they came up for air, Peter, Tom and Red had disappeared into the balmy tropical night, presumably taking the cat with them. Damn! She'd missed it.

With a decorous flutter of wings, Ess perched herself on the toe of Jack's boot. *I overheard them*, she said importantly. *When they stopped at the head of the path*. She paused to fluff her hair.

"You mean you were eavesdropping," said Kate severely.

*Pish, tosh*. She tossed her blonde head. *Do you want to know or not?*

"Let me guess," murmured Jack. "It was Peter's gold all along. He paid Red a commission to do the bidding for him."

The fairy's sweet pink mouth fell open. *How did you know?*

"I know Peter." Jack shook his head. "What he lacks in brawn he makes up for in brains." His eyes twinkled as they met Kate's. "He's been chasing Tom Cavanagh for as long as I can remember." A devastating wink. "And Tom's been running slower and slower."

"You told me the auction would bring them their heart's desire," said Kate slowly.

Jack nodded. "Aye."

"Then what about him?" She jerked her chin at the Comte de Nothos. Though he sat utterly still, she had the sense of coiled energy, poised to strike. She shivered. The silver chains gleamed at his wrists and ankles.

"Wait and trust, pretty Kate." He buried his nose in her hair. "Wait and trust."

"What am I bid?" shouted Duka. "For this —" His brow creased. "Whatever he is."

The Comte lifted his handsome head, a silky black lock falling into his flaming eyes. He sneered, his teeth shining white and pointed in a mouth made for sin. His nipples were broad, dark peaks on his hard, hairless chest. Muscles shifted fluidly under skin like the finest white porcelain, his modesty precariously preserved by the last two buttons of the black shirt.

Abruptly, he relaxed in the chair, displaying the beauty of his body. Then he smiled – and although there was hunger in it, plain to see, every pirate leaned forward, unwillingly enthralled.

Duka cleared his throat. "Well, mateys?"

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Yeah, yeah, I know. You were expecting Duka's submission. Don't kill me. The Muse works at her own pace and good things come to they who wait. Poor guy has a job to do. First things first.

What is the fate of the Comte de Nothos?

- A. Jack buys him as a gift for Kate.
- B. No one will bid, so Jack orders he be freed.
- C. Duka buys him as a gift for the Duchess.
- D. Jack buys him as a toy for the Hormone Harlots. Anything to be rid of the little pests.



## CHAPTER 20

### Shrink to Fit

*The story so far:*

*Somehow, Peter has managed to obtain not only Tom Cavanagh, but also his cat, the Lady Meroe. Now there's only the Comte left. But who'll be brave enough to bid?*

The stage was strangely empty without Tom's huge glowering presence and Peter's sweet smile. Duka turned to wither the Comte de Nothos with a warning glare. "Keep yer mouth shut, matey, if ye know what's good for you."

By way of answer, the Comte's lips pulled back from his teeth exposing his pointed canines. As his fists clenched, the lamplight gleamed off the silver chains around his wrists. Kate stared. She'd seen him flinch as sparks arced off the metal. Or had she?

Transylvanian Central Casting, without a doubt. She'd thought it from the first moment. That crazy Rossetti.

"Should be interesting," murmured Jack, his breath stirring her hair.

"What do you mean?"

"Look at their faces."

Kate studied the crowd. For once, the pirates were relatively subdued, muttering together, flicking sidelong glances at the lithe, dangerous form of the Comte.

What am I bid?" shouted Duka.

Silence.

Then, "A keg o' brandy!"

"Three bolts o' raw silk!"

"Five gold doubloons!"

Duka sighed as he glanced at Jack. "Cap'n?"

Jack shook his head.

Duka turned back to the crowd. "Ye ain't even reached reserve, ye craven bastards."

"If ye like him so much, take him yerself!" yelled the pirate with the eye patch.

Kate clutched Jack's arm. "You promised!"

"Promised what?" His teeth grazed her earlobe as if he were deciding which delicious portion of her body to devour first.

Kate twisted to stare straight into those gold-shot hazel eyes. "You said the magic of Sweet Sisters Isle would work - that they'd all find their heart's desire." Thinking of the

Comte's sinister handsome face, his darkly seductive voice, she shivered. "Even him." The words came out in a shaky whisper. Not like her at all.

Jack's brow darkened. "Why won't you trust me, Kate? I always —"

*He needs someone to love*, observed Ess, alighting on the toe of Jack's boot and slithering down to recline against his top of his foot like a tiny, pink-clad houri.

"If I may be permitted to finish my own sentence?" said Jack dryly.

*Nah*. Tess swooped down to straddle Jack's shin as if it were the saddle of her favorite Harley. *A firm hand would be best*. Her deep chuckle was positively lascivious.

Ess sat up straight. *Both! He needs both!* Her wings whirred with excitement, a silvery blur. *Oh, the things we could do with him!*

Tess leaped up to dance on the point of Jack's knee, her teeny-weeny biker boots connecting with a series of sharp clacks. *Yeah, babe! You're right!*

Kate winced. Jack growled.

"That does it!" Jack leaned forward, his pointing finger no more than an inch from Tess's tiny upturned nose. "I want you two gone. Now! Do you hear me?"

Tess grinned unrepentant. *I'd say everyone can you hear you, buddy.*

Kate glanced up to see a circle of puzzled masculine faces.

Uh, Cap'n," ventured Harley. "Is all well?"

"Why shouldn't it be?" snapped Jack.

"Ye jest told yer legs to go away. Both of them."

"I didn't, I—" Jack shut his mouth with a snap, his face dark. Kate suppressed a giggle.

But when she glanced at the Comte de Nothos, he was staring directly at the Hormone Harlots, his brow creased. A shiver cat-footed down her spine.

"C'mon, lads," boomed Duka. "Ye can do better than this."

The bids trickled in, all the way to eight gold doubloons. Duka's brow grew thunderous. "Lily-livered landlubbers!" he jeered.

Eyepatch offered nine, his heart clearly not in it.

Tess bounced with anxiety. Ess bit her lip and clasped her hands.

"Wait a—" Jack's body went rigid against Kate's, his fingers digging into her waist. When she mumbled a protest, he muttered an apology and relaxed his grip. "Yes! By God, yes!"

His eyes blazing, he lifted his chin. "I bid fifteen gold doubloons!"

"Ye do?" Duka's eyes went wide. "I mean, ye do. Cap'n bids fifteen gold doubloons. Any advance on fifteen?"

No one moved a muscle.

"Going, going... Gone to the Cap'n. I hope to hell ye know what ye're doin', Jack."

Jack's smile was evil. "Oh, I do, I do. Bring him here."

"Aye, Cap'n." Ignoring the Comte's growl, Duke unshackled the man's ankles and picked up the silver chain. "Auction's over, lads."

As he led the Comte over, Kate could have sworn the man's flat black gaze lingered on Tess and Ess. Her uneasiness increased. "Jack..." she began, but he placed a gentle finger on her lips.

"Sshh. Trust me, pretty Kate?"

It wasn't so much Jack she didn't trust as Rossetti. But the crazy one had been strangely silent for the last little while. Perhaps she was busy.

"Here." Duka slapped the chain into Jack's hand. He cleared his throat. "I'll see you at my place in...half an hour?"

"You sure?"

"Aye." Duka's strong brown throat moved as he swallowed.

Jack nodded. "We'll be there."

Without a word, Duka turned on his heel and hurried back to the stage to collect the Duchess, winding her leash several times about his wrist as if to ensure she couldn't get away. The Duchess shot him a sidelong glance from under lowered lashes, a small smile curving her lips. She followed meekly enough as he led her away into the night.

Hand in hand, Tess and Ess hovered at head-height, their wings beating in unison. *Oh*, breathed Ess, scanning the Comte's pale perfect chest, the shirt barely preserving his modesty. *He's beautiful.*

The Comte looked straight at her, his smile positively feral. "So are you, my dear. But that wouldn't prevent me from pulling your wings off."

Ess's rosebud mouth fell open. *You can see me?* She sounded more offended than terrified, which didn't seem at all wise to Kate.

"Of course."

*Then see this, dickhead!* Tess darted in like a kamikaze mosquito. Wham! Her hard little fist connected with the Comte's aristocratic cheekbone.

"Ow! Shit!" He had enough play in the chains to clap a hand to the hurt. "Little bitch!" Deep in his eyes, a spark glowed. Slowly, his elegant lips curved. "I look forward to our future, ah, association."

Jack was grinning now. "Dear ladies." He bowed. "Allow me to present you with a gift. The Comte de Nothos is yours, to do with as you will."

"Jack, are you mad?" Kate grabbed his arm. "He'll kill them!"

Jack captured her hands in his. "I doubt it. Trust in the magic of Sweet Sisters Isle, love." Negligently, he tossed the Comte's chain to Tess who caught it with a whoop.

Immediately, the Comte grasped the chain, reeling Tess in, Ess fluttering about his head like a frantic mother bird protecting its chick.

The bottom dropped out of Kate's stomach. No!

*Ready?* shouted Tess.

*Oh, yes!* fluted Ess.

Go!

Tess dropped the chain and surged toward the Comte. With one hand, she grasped his left ear, while Ess grabbed the right. Moving in perfect sync, they swooped in to press their mouths against the Comte's startled lips.

*Mmm*, murmured Ess as she nibbled.

*Yeah, Mama*. That was Tess.

The Comte groaned, the chain falling out of his hands with a clatter.

Kate stared. They seemed to fit so well together, as if it were meant to be. In fact...

She peered. Then rubbed her eyes. She must be seeing things.

The Comte was *shrinking*, faster and faster. Until he was exactly the same height as Tess and Ess. The three of them stood in the puddle of his shirt, still kissing like mad things.

Breathing heavily, Tess drew back. She slid a hand down to cradle an erection that was pretty impressive, even for a man only a foot high. *Still wanna pull my wings off?*

The Comte blinked. But Kate had to give him credit. "Afterwards," he said, making a quick recovery. "Perhaps." He raised a shaking hand and stroked. "They're so soft."

*Unlike you, lover*, whispered Ess, fingers wandering south to test. *Come on*. Nudging her sister out of the way, she tugged gently. The Comte disguised a yelp as a manly cough. *Let's get these nasty chains off so we can play*.

Totally bemused, Kate watched them saunter off into the forest, three tiny figures arm in arm. "They were right," she whispered. "That's what he wanted. Someone to love and a firm hand. Good heavens."

"Being good had nothing to do with it." Jack turned her in his arms. "Being clever did." Bending his burnished head, he took Kate's mouth in an endless kiss, long, leisurely and exceedingly thorough. Kate buried her hands in his hair and luxuriated. Every moment with him was precious, every second.

With a long sigh, Jack pressed her close. Then he brushed his lips against her cheek and took her hand. "Ah, pretty Kate. The things you do to me." He led her toward a path in the forest. "Duka and the others will be waiting." When his tiger eyes glowed, hot chills shot up and down Kate's spine. "We don't want to miss a moment, do we?"

"No," agreed Kate, her heart hammering. "We don't."