

## Ashton's Abduction

We hurried down to the docks and looked everywhere. Several ships were in dock and workers were loading and unloading goods on wagons. Seagulls sent piercing calls through the air and the ships softly thumped against their moorings with the rhythm of the sea. The smell of fish and fermented drinks hung in the air. Just off the dock facing the ships were taverns and inns, their signs swaying in the wind. Music poured from the taverns, mingled with laughter and merry voices. Seamen were coming and going from them, some with the effects of too much ale.

We began to search the docks, asking the men working the dock if they had seen the boy and the man with the tattoos. One long-haired man with a rag tied around his head and wearing a light tunic, crudely made, set a box down and stared at Winter for a degree. She is beautiful

and men stare at her, but it just added to my irritation. I wanted to shout at him to answer her question.

“Aye,” he said finally, “I seed ‘em.”

“Where?” I said sharply

“Put the boy in ah boat and rowed out to’rd the ships. He pointed at several ships with two and three masts bobbing in the sea some ways out.

“Shram!”

“Which one?” Winter asked hastily.

The man looked out for a degree and then looked back at Winter. “She’s gon’,” he said, his eyes searching Winter’s face. “Must’a pulled out soon as they got aboard.”

“What was the name of the ship?” I asked, to which he shrugged.

“Would you recognize it, if you saw it?” Winter pressed him.

“Aye, I would,” he assured her.

“We need a ship,” Winter said to him. “One ready to sail, whose Captain is willing to go after that ship and we need you to go with us. You find us a fearless Captain and I will give you one hundred pence and pay you good for your time, if you will go to identify the ship.”

The man blinked at her in disbelief, his leathery face with a short beard twisted in thought. Then he said, “Name’s Woods. Think I kno’ just the Cap. Wait here.” He dashed away down the docks.

“We’ll get him back,” I tried to console her, but down inside I doubted it. I was dreading the time to come. “Why would he want to take the boy?” I asked more to myself than to her.

“Slavery, probably,” she responded, and I saw the weight of her words, but that was not what was in my mind.

“He is using the boy,” I told her. “You will probably have to fight that gladiator to get him back.” By the look on her face I was sure she would like that very much, right now.

“There is more to it than that,” she returned.

However, if that was what he wanted, she would have a hell of a fight on her hands. He was big and strong with bulging muscles. As she told Ashton, this just might be the fight she would lose.

The dockworker returned and with him was a man who looked to be a Captain. "I am Quirus, Captain of the Wind Wench. I hear you are looking for a ship." He smiled at us. He had a beard that hid a deep scar on his cheek, his hair nearly white and his eyes the color of the sky. He was robust with a cloth shirt belted at the waist from which hung a falchion. Daring was in his eyes and, I was sure, adventure in his soul.

Winter said, "I will pay you five thousand pence if you will catch a ship for me."

"And what is so important about that ship that you are willing to pay that much?" he returned.

"It is a slave ship or a pirate ship and they have taken Ashton to make a slave of him or worse," Winter informed.

"The boy is only eleven," I added, "...and probably scared to death."

"Hmmm," the Captain frowned and cocked one eyebrow. "My men are seamen not fighting men. They will fight if we are boarded, but they have no fighting skill."

"How many men does it take to run a ship?" Winter asked.

"About twenty," he tilted his head and studied her and then me.

"Can your ship hold us, two friends, and ten good fighting men?" She asked.

"Sure," He nodded, "Twenty if you need them."

"Will you do it then?" Winter asked.

"For that amount, I will take you anywhere, but the fight is yours."

With that, Winter turned and headed for one of the taverns. Inside, there was a Captain of a ship sitting at a desk and before him was a long line of seamen waiting to

sign up on his ship. I followed Winter over to the tavern keeper and she asked him the going wage for a seamen. He told her and she went over to an empty table, climbed up on it and said, "I need ten or so good seamen who are good fighters to go after a pirate ship. I will pay one hundred pence when you sign up and ten pence a day. When we catch the ship, we will split the booty. I need you to be able to leave now."

The room erupted into shouts and scooting of chairs and before she climbed down from the table there was a line forming. Men were pushing and shoving each other to get a place in the line.

A weathered old seaman drew her attention and said, "You will need someone to captain the ship once you take her. I will do it for the ship."

I laughed at him and she said, "If you want a ship, go buy one." He turned away angrily and shoved through the crowd.

There were nearly thirty men in the line, but we signed up only twenty of them and I wrote their names on a parchment. "We will pay your signing bonus on board the *Wind Wench*," I told them.

Then we hurried back to the inn and found Kay and Dez waiting anxiously for us. We told them of the boy, his kidnapping and of our plan. We made arrangements for our horses, gathered our belongings and headed for the ship.

They only had a few hours head start so we were hopeful to catch up with them soon. I knew the boy would be scared to death. Winter fell once again into a solemn mood and her face wore a serious expression.

We set sail as soon as everyone was aboard ship, even though the tide was against us. Soon we were skimming along, leaving the coast behind. "She is a fast ship," the Captain said. "We will catch up with them before long."

Winter set her vigil at the bow of the ship, her eyes searched the dark waters for a white sail. I drew near her and put my arms around her from behind and pulled her against me. She leaned on me and we watched together for a while, her hands upon mine. I would never tire of the feel of her. Then I kissed her neck, but she did not respond. I said, "Come down in the ship and eat with us." She shook her head, but I insisted. "It will do the boy no good for you to be weak from the lack of food when we make our attack." She then turned in my arms, looked at me with grief etched on her face and half smiled. "Come," I took her hand and she came with me.

When it became dark and we had not caught up to them, I once again came to Winter at the bow of the ship and persuaded her to come get some sleep. I held her in my arms and slept. At some point, I woke and she was not there. I sighed and went back to sleep.

I stayed by her side the next day and we searched the curve of the sea for any signs of another ship. Dez and Kay would come periodically and watch for a while, then go off again. As we stood watch, a strong wind suddenly hit the side of ship, caught the sails and tilted the ship violently to one side. We were cast onto the deck and rolled with the tilt. My body slammed into the inside of the ship and Winter smashed into me. We were pressed against the ship's side as high waves splashed upon us, threatening to wash us out to sea. We clung to each other and to the ropes that hold the sails in place. "Shram! You all right?" I yelled above the gale of the wind. Winter nodded and put her face on her arm to protect it from the sting of her flying hair.

Then as quickly as it came, it was gone and the ship lifted up, but she sat listing in the water. I looked for Dez and Kay, but saw them not. Had they been on deck and got cast into the sea? I helped Winter to her feet and we went below to see the damage and change clothes. The place down there was a mess, our belongings were scattered

about and there was much grumbling from the men. But to my relief Dez and Kay were there, righting the table while the other men were gathering their things.

“What a ride,” Kay grinned at us. “Glad to see you are safe.”

Dez came near and gave Winter a hug, “We were afraid for you. We knew you were on deck.”

Then the Captain came below to see if everyone was accounted for. He told us two of the sails had been torn, but the men were putting up the spare one they carried. However, that would take some time and we would fall further behind. Seamen began to form a long line and pass buckets full of water along, bailing out the ship. When we got under way again, the Captain set a man in the watch atop the main sail.

The next day, our attention was drawn to a group of seamen. There seemed to be some kind of trouble. We went over and they were dragging a man away toward the hold. “What happened?” I said to a seaman standing nearby.

“Captain does not like troublemakers on board.” That was understandable since life aboard ship depended on everyone working together. That evening, everyone gathered on deck and we went along to see what was happening. The prisoner was tied to the mast and given lashes. Then the Captain said, “Take him below and let the ships doctor look at him.” Then he came over to us and said, “I apologize that you had to see this, but I must maintain discipline on the ship.”

“What did he do?” I asked out of curiosity.

“He was stirring up the crew, complaining about the women,” he explained. Then I understood, for it was known that seamen as a whole feel that a woman aboard a ship is bad luck. He was probably blaming Winter and Dez for the windstorm.

Life aboard ship is very boring, especially for adventurers who draw upon the unknown for freshness and

vitality. There was nothing to see but water and it became a sickening sight, as there was very little to do. Soon tells of past adventures and legends were all told. We were therefore left to our imaginations, which ran rampant with tormenting thought, thoughts of little Ashton being mistreated, some deed left undone, or some unfulfilled dream that seemed so out of reach.

I watched Winter become more depressed as the days were put behind us. I felt so helpless and my heart ached for her. That boy meant so much to her. He was her lifeline in a time when she had given up on life, and then to lose him would be unbearable. "We'll find him," I encouraged and she nodded. "I only hope the little guy knows we are coming for him."

Winter simply said, "He knows."

Three days later, we made port at Alazzria, on the large Isle of Mazziria.

Mazziria is a kingdom ruled by a Council of powerful mages. It sits on the eastern mainland coast of the continent and has a large island to its east, connected to the mainland by a string of small islands and bridges. There is a Chantry of Arcane Lore there. The Mage Guild is on this island where the Council of Mages sits to discuss magic and the happenings concerning rare and noble deeds. It is also a heavily used commerce seaport. Most powerful magic items come from here, and mages make up most of the population of Alazzria, and certainly Mazziria.

We rowed ashore to see if anyone saw the boy or the gladiator. Woods came along and began to search the docks for the ship. Our search reaped nothing, but we did learn that a ship named the Red Tide was a pirate ship and sailed these waters. They also had their fingers in the slave trade.

"I will bet anything that is our ship," I ventured.

Then Woods came to meet us. "Not here," he shook his head.

We rowed back to the ship and filled the Captain in on what we had found out about the ship. He said he knew about her, but had never run into her and hoped he never would. To which Winter informed him that he was about to, and we would rid the sea of it when we did.

The Captain said, "The ship did not come straight here or we would have found her. She must have followed the coast line, which means we need to head up the coast if we hoped to intercept her."

"They are probably picking up salves along the way," Dez injected.

"Let us find them," Winter said in determination.

So, we set sail again, Winter keeping her vigil. Five days later, as we passed between the mainland coast and a group of islands, we spotted the sails of a ship coming toward us. We watched her approach intently.

Winter said to the Captain, "If this ship is the pirate ship, it will not pass up a chance for an easy take. Let us drop anchor, put up the torn sails and pretend we are in trouble. We will be waiting below and when she comes alongside to attack we will rush out, catching them by surprise."

"That sounds good. I will see to it," the Captain gave orders and the men scurried about to follow them. We went below and set forth her plan to the fighters we had brought with us.

A seaman called, Jarreth said unto her, "After ya' take the ship, what'll ya' do with her?"

"Take her back to Karath and find a buyer," Winter informed him.

"Ta do that ya'll need a Capt'in for her. I am not a Capt'in, yet, but I can sail her," he stated.

He was not very old, with chiseled features, a short beard and short choppy hair the color of wine. When he smiled, a dent in his chin deepened. He had massive shoulders and bulging muscles.

“All right,” Winter nodded. “You sail her back to Karath with these men as your crew. You get your Captains papers and we will claim the ship. Then we can start shipping goods and we will split the profit with you.”

Jarreth broke into a big grin, “Aye, aye! I will make ya’ a good Capt’in.” No doubt he would, too. Winter looked at us. It sounded good to me and I nodded, as did Dez and Kay.

So, we prepared ourselves for the fight to come. We took Woods and went on deck to watch the approach of the ship. Soon the Captain steered his ship in our direction and when it drew near we saw her name on the bow. It was the Red Tide. Winter looked at Woods anxiously and he nodded, “That’s her.” We went down below to wait with Kay, Dez and the men.

The boy would be held below decks and out of harm’s way. Winter was as a horse at the starting line in a race. She shifted her weight anxiously and opened and closed her fingers on her axe handle. She could taste the satisfaction of our journey. “I want that gladiator,” she said between gritted teeth. That was fine with me and I knew the rage in her would give her an edge against him.

The Captain called, “Now!” And we burst forth upon them as they tried to come over the side of their ship. Winter waded into the midst of them sending seamen to their knees and on their backs. She was not stopping. She was headed for the hold of the ship and the gods help any that stood in her way.

The men gave war cries that mingled with the screams of agony from the wounded and dying. The fight spilled out onto both ships, falchions, daggers and shortswords waved in the air, cutting flesh and bone, covering the decks in blood to the point that it became hard to keep your footing. The pirates were no match for us and the battle was short. The pirate Captain threw down his weapon, one arm dangling at his side like a limp rag and

blood running down his face from a large cut at his hairline. When he did that, the few remaining pirates did the same.

I saw Winter disappear into the hold of the ship and I followed her. I heard her call the boy's name, but there was no answer. When I drew up to her side, there were several young boys and a few damsels huddled together on a pile of straw, staring at us in sheer terror. Ashton was not among them and the gladiator was nowhere to be found. I saw Winter's face go ashen and her lips were hid in a thin line. I knew the fear that tested her mind and the ache in her heart for it was in mine, too, but not nearly as it was in hers, I am sure. Then I became aware that Dez and Kay were behind us.

Kaybern said what we had not the courage to say, "He's not here."

Winter whirled around and nearly knocked him off his feet as she burst past him and raced up the stairs to the deck. We all followed. She grabbed the pirate Captain by the shirt and nearly raised him off the deck and shouted in his face, "Where's the boy and the gladiator?"

He turned his head slightly, closed his eyes and said, "He took a boat and rowed to shore in the region of Parth." Winter released him in disgust and he staggered to keep his feet. Then she turned and went to the side of the ship and stared out over the water.

Locklan claims the region known as Parth to be part of their Republic, but they had never been able to displace the barbarian tribes there. The best they could do was to patrol the trade route, but they came under attack repeatedly.

Jarreth said to some of the men stand there watching Winter, "Take these pirates down and put 'em in leg irons." He had taken command of the ship. I went over to him. "There are several children below, see that they get returned to their families and I will pay you well." He nodded and began to shout orders.