

# Sweet Charity

**Elizabeth Moon**

Krystal Winterborn eyed her lumpish fellow members of the Ladies Aid & Armor Society, and sighed. There they were: the brave, the bold, the strong . . . the plain.

She was tired of being the butt of their jokes, just because she paid extra on her health-care plan for a complexion spell to keep her peach-blossom cheeks and pearly teeth. They laughed at her herbal shampoos, the protective grease she wore on summer maneuvers. They rolled their eyes at her fringed leather outfits, her spike-heeled dress boots.

Well, this year's Charity Ball would show them. No more laughing, when she was Queen of the Ball, and raised many times more for the orphaned daughters of soldiers killed in the line of duty. She would never have to hear their condescending "Shut up, Krystal" again.

When the chair asked for volunteers, Krystal surprised everyone by signing up for Invitations.

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Harald Redbeard had come to the city in the character of an honest merchant. Downriver, on the coast, everyone knew he was a Fish Islands pirate. The coast patrol had almost trapped him in Hunport, but instead of making a break for the sea, he'd come upriver with his crew, until things quieted down.

It was nigh on midwinter when he reached the kingdom known to its downstream neighbors as the Swordladies' Domain. He grinned at that—most of the mountain kingdoms had a reputation for fierce warrior women. But the only warrior women he'd seen had been bouncers at Gully Blue's tavern in Hunport. He'd tossed both of them into the harbor.

An icy wind blew from the mountains, and lowering clouds promised snow as the crew offloaded their cargo; Harald sent old Boris One-eye off to find them an inn. One-eye reported that he'd found rooms at the Green Cat, and he'd seen some warrior women.

"Like soldiers, they are, in uniform."

"Not a problem," Harald said. "If they're part of the city guard, that'll make it all the easier for us."

"How?"

"City guards are city guards the world over," Harald said, rubbing fingers and thumb.

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That night in the Green Cat's bar, Harald kept eyes and ears open. One particular corner table caught his interest. A cute perky blonde wearing fringed black leather and polished brass pouted at the louts around her, who were all clearly ready to do anything for another glance down her cleavage.

If that was an example of local women warriors, he and his men had nothing to worry about. She was too pretty, too smooth-skinned and full-lipped, to know what to do with the fancy little dagger at her belt, let alone a real sword. Her followers, big and muscular enough, wore fashions he'd seen only in the grittier port brothels, but no visible weapons.

When the blonde pushed back from the table, he saw that she actually had cute little muscles in her arms. She glanced over at him, and he grinned, raising his mug appreciatively. She stuck out her adorable lower lip; one of her followers turned to glower at him. Harald shrugged, unperturbed. He watched as she undulated across the room. Every part of her—many visible through the long black fringe—suggested unspeakable delights.

Harald turned back to his ale, as she flounced out the door, to find that the burly fellow with the bits of metal through his ears and nose was now beside him. "She's beautiful," Harald said. Under the table, his hand slid down to the hilt of his boot knife. "You can't blame a man for looking."

"S'long as you're respectful," the man said.

"Oh, I am," Harald said. "But such beauty cannot be denied."

The burly man grinned. "Since you appreciate her many qualities, perhaps you'd like to make her acquaintance a little closer?"

What was this? Was the woman a high-priced whore, and this her pimp? Did they think he'd been born under a rhubarb leaf, and still had the dew on his backside?

Harald brought the knife up in one smooth motion, and laid the tip in an appropriate place. To his surprise, the burly man neither flinched nor changed expression.

"No need for that," he said. "I just wanted to invite you to the Ladies' Aid and Armor Society Charity Ball. Being as it's midwinter, and cruel dull for a stranger in town otherwise, with all the taverns closed for three days—I thought you might enjoy it."

"The Ladies' Aid and Armor Society? What's that, a bunch of women in bronze bras and fringe playing with toy swords?"

The man laughed. "Not exactly. But they clean up nicer than usual, for the Charity Ball for the Orphans' Fund. There's this contest, for queen; everybody who goes can vote. Thing is, the other cats pack the place with their supporters, so although our Krystal is far and away the most beautiful, she never wins. This year, we're changing that. All I want from you is a vote for her. We'll pay the donation and everything."

These upriver barbarians had strange customs. Collecting money to support girl orphans, when girl orphans properly managed could support him? Taverns closed three days? His crew would go crazy and start breaking open barrels on their own; he couldn't afford that. This ball now—fancy dress, jewels, money—looked like fun and profit combined.

"Tell you what," Harald said, slipping the knife back into his boot. "My friends wouldn't like it if I went and they had to stay here with nothing to drink. If you can get us all in, that's more votes. How about it?"

"Great. My name's Gordamish Ringwearer, by the way; you can call me Gordy. I'll need all your names for the invitations—nobody gets in without one."

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Mirabel Stonefist scowled at the stacks of invitations. Every year, she tried to argue the Planning Committee into hiring a real scribe to address them, and every year the Committee insisted it was too expensive. They had to have money for decorations, for the orchestra, for the food, and of course the drink. Which meant that each member of the LA&AS had to address a stack of envelopes herself, in whatever scrawly, scribbly, crabbed and illegible handwriting she possessed.

Primula Hardaxe, chair of the Committee, always made some remark about Mirabel's handwriting. *I never claimed to be an artist*, Mirabel thought, stabbing the tip of the quill into the ink-bowl. *Not with anything but a sword, that is*. She looked at the list she'd been given. Naturally she was not entrusted with the invitations to important persons. She hadn't been since the time her version of "Lord Pondicherry and Lady Cordelia" was misread as "Lard Pound and Laid Coldeels" and delivered to the butcher's.

She was halfway through the list when her old resentment cleared and she noticed the names. Harald Redbeard? She'd heard that name before, surely. She shook her head and copied it as carefully as she could. Skyver Twoswords? Again, something tickled her memory then withdrew. Gordamish Ringwearer? Probably the cavalry units; they recruited all sorts of people, not just the solid peasants and smalltraders' children who ended up in the *real* army.

She realized she'd just left the "g" out of Ringwearer, and muttered an oath. That's what thinking did for you, caused mistakes. It wasn't up to her to decide who got invitations; all she had to do was address the blasted things. She struggled through Piktush Drakbar, Zertin Dioth, Badaxe Oferbyte, and the rest.

At last, she had her stack finished—smudged with sweaty thumbprints, slightly rumpled, but finished. She put them in the basket (noting that it was now half full) and stirred them around. With luck, Primula wouldn't know who had done which. She hoped that every year.

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Three days before the ball, Mirabel tugged at the bodice of her green ball gown. Her armor still fit; what was the matter with this thing?

Of course she could wear a corset. She hated corsets. Just something else to take off, the way she looked at it. She tugged again, and something ripped.

Perhaps she could get through the ball without raising her arms. No. She liked to dance, and she liked to dance fast. She pawed through her trunk. The old copper silk still had that chocolate stain down the front where she'd jogged someone's elbow, and the midnight blue had moth all up the front center panel.

Time for a new gown, then; after all, she'd worn this one four years.

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Strictly speaking, it was not a costume ball. But it had become customary for guests to dress up in whatever fanciful outfits they chose. Thus the appearance of a crew of pirates (striped loose trousers, bucket boots, eye patches), several barechested barbarians, and someone clad mostly in chains and other bits of uncomfortable-looking metal attachments provoked little comment. They had invitations, surrendered at the door to a little girl wearing the red cloak of a Ladies' Aid & Armor Society ward, and that was all that mattered.

Sergeants Gorse, Covet, Biersley, Dogwood, Ellis, and Slays, all resplendent in dress blue, were not so lucky. They had attended the ball for years; the Ladies' Aid & Armor Society knew better than to exclude sergeants. This meant nothing to the stubborn nine-year-old who had been told to let no one through without a card. Last year she'd been banished to bed after singing "Sweet Sword of Mine" with the orphan chorus, and she was determined to prove she was old enough for the responsibility.

"They just forgot to send ours, or it got lost," Sergeant Gorse said. "We're *sergeants*, Missy. Sergeants are always invited."

"Miss Primula said no one can go in without an invitation, no matter what they say." The nine-year-old tossed her butter-colored braids and glared up at them. The sergeants shuffled their feet. Any one of them could have tucked her under one arm and had room for a barrel of beer, but she was an orphan. A soldier's orphan.

"Suppose you call Miss Primula, then."

"She said don't bother her," the nine-year-old said. "She's busy."

Sergeant Heath strolled up behind the other sergeants, also resplendent in dress blue. "What's going on here? Why are you fellows blocking the door?"

"They don't have invitations!" clashed with "This child won't let us in, and we're *sergeants*."

"Decided not to invite you lot this year, eh?" Sergeant Heath smiled unctuously at the child, and reached past Sergeant Gorse to hand over his card. "Remember your antics last year, do they? That bit with the tropical fruit surprise not quite so funny on second thought?" He strolled through, exuding virtue. The others glared after him, then at Sergeant Gorse.

"It wasn't my fault," Sergeant Gorse said. "It was really Corporal Nitley, and I know *he* got an invitation." He looked around and spotted a familiar figure hurrying along the street.

"She'll take care of this," he said confidently. She was, after all, in his unit.

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Mirabel Stonefist discovered that no one had time to make her a gown, or even repair the old one. She tried the plastic wizard the Ladies' Aid & Armor Society had on retainer, but he was overbooked, without even a spare six-hour reweaving or banish-stain spell.

She couldn't possibly mend it herself. She was even clumsier with needle and thread than with a pen. That left only one possibility, her sister Monica. The Monica who was still angry with her for not rescuing

Cavernous Dire from a dragon. Hoping for the best, Mirabel knocked on her sister's door and explained her problem.

"You have a lot of nerve," Monica said. "You didn't even invite us this year."

"I put your name on the list," Mirabel said. "I always do."

"I'm sure," Monica said, in the tone that meant she didn't believe it. "But when you need something—at the last minute I notice, never mind my convenience—here you are. I'll fix it for you all right!" Monica grabbed the dress, and ripped the bodice all the way to the waist. "There!" Then she slammed the door in Mirabel's face.

Mirabel turned away from the door. That was it, then. She would just have to go in uniform, and be laughed at. As she trudged down Sweet Street, someone hailed her.

"Why so gloomy?" Dorcas Doublejoints asked. Dorcas, an exotic dancer, had maintained her friendship with the LA&AS ever since they'd solved the mystery of her missing belly.

Mirabel explained, and displayed the torn bodice.

"Oh, that's not a problem." Dorcas eyed her. "You won't fit my clothes, but we have lots of clothes in my house. Come along with me."

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Mirabel stood in Dorcas's suite, with a flutter of lovely girls around her, all offering their best gowns. She noticed that they all called Dorcas "Miss Dorcas, dear" and drew her own conclusions. Somewhat to her surprise, she found that the strumpets' best gowns were fine silk of the first quality.

Her fashion advisors settled on an apricot-shot silk with shimmering highlights. It hugged her body to the hips, then flared into a wide rippling skirt. Three-puff sleeves ended in a drape of ivory lace. A small scrap of the same lace peeked from the depths of the décolletage in front. Mirabel had always liked low-cut gowns, but this one—she peered at herself in the mirror, wondering if she dared.

"Of course you do," Dorcas said, and the girls murmured agreement and admiration. "You have a beautiful back, and quite sufficient cleavage. Enjoy it while you can." Mirabel grinned at her image, thinking what her sister would say. No one had mentioned "corset," either.

The girls put up her hair, sprinkled it with something glittery, then painted her face. Ordinarily Mirabel didn't use cosmetics, but she liked what she saw in the mirror. A shy redhead offered her dangling emerald earrings, and a luscious brunette contributed an emerald necklace so spectacular that Mirabel knew it must be a fake. At last Dorcas handed her a fluffy shawl, refused her offer of payment for the loan of all this finery ("Don't be silly, dear; we're friends") and ushered her out the back door.

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So, in the gathering gloom, Mirabel Stonefist found herself going to the ball in the most gorgeous outfit she'd ever worn. Although it was a cold evening, and so much exposed flesh should have chilled her, she felt warm through with excitement. She would be careful with her borrowed glamour, she told herself. No jogging elbows, no tripping, no catching the lace on someone's belt buckle. She'd take everything back the next day, safe and sound.

"Hey—Stonefist!"

She looked up, and there were the sergeants—six of them anyway—in their dress blues.

"Yessir?" Even on Ball Night, she couldn't avoid calling them "sir," at least once.

"Did you write the invitations this year?"

"Some of them," Mirabel said cautiously. "Why?"

"We didn't get ours," Sergeant Gorse said. "Didn't you notice we weren't on the list?"

"I didn't do all of them," Mirabel said. "Everybody helps. Are you sure they didn't just get lost? What did Primula say?"

"We can't ask Primula," Sergeant Gorse said, "because that child at the door won't let us in without an invitation, and she won't call Primula to the door. Get this straightened out."

"Of course," Mirabel said. She paused. "Are you sure it didn't have anything to do with the tropical fruit surprise?"

"Yes!" they all said. Mirabel shrugged, and turned away to the door.

"Good evening, Miss Mirabel," said the child. The flaps of her red felt cap liner almost reached her shoulders; the little bronze cap with its tiny spike glittered in the torchlight. "I'm being really careful about the cards."

"Good for you," Mirabel said absently, looking around for Primula. Stalls offering the orphans' handiwork filled every alcove; guests were expected to buy patchwork pigs, lopsided clay bowls, and other useless items to swell the Orphans' Fund. Primula—wearing the same stiff black bombazine trimmed in purple bobbles that she'd worn for the past millennium—leaned over the piecework table. Mirabel threaded her way through the crowd, nodding to acquaintances, and heard the last of the lecture.

"—Now remember—you curtsy and say `Thank you, kind sir' or `kind missus' as the case may be, and hand them the purchase first, then the change. Is that clear?"

"Yes, Miss Primula." The freckled girl in charge of this stall was older than the doorkeeper—old enough to be allowed to handle money. Primula turned away, and caught sight of Mirabel.

"My dear! A new dress after all?"

"In a manner of speaking." Mirabel let the shawl drop, and Primula blinked.

"Is it that low in back?"

Mirabel twirled, to a chorus of wolf whistles.

"Well," Primula said. "I must say I'm surprised. I thought you'd be wearing that old green gown forever."

Mirabel ignored this. "Did you leave the sergeants off the list on purpose?"

"The list?"



"Invitations. Sergeant Gorse didn't get one. Or Sergeants Covet, Biersley, Dogwood, Ellis, and Slays. They're all outside—they were sure you'd *meant* to invite them—but little Sarajane at the door wouldn't let them in, or call you."

"But of course they're invited," Primula said. "Though I did think that tropical fruit surprise trick wasn't funny. Now who was it, who should have had their names . . . ?" She closed her eyes, evidently trying to remember. Mirabel touched her arm.

"Thing is, they're out there in the cold now. Don't you want to let them in?"

"Oh. Of course." She bustled away. Mirabel let the shawl drop again and looked around for people she knew. An eye-patched pirate with a red beard and moustache appeared in front of her, his visible eye twinkling.

"My dear, I am tempted to live up to my costume and carry you away into tropical captivity—you are delectable."

She didn't recognize his accent, or his face, but what did that matter? "Sirrah, I fear you admire only my jewels, and not my face—"

"T'would be useless to deny the beauty of your jewels, but you—" His eye raked her up and down, and his hand stroked his moustache. "You are the pearl beyond price, compared to which your emeralds are mere baubles of colored glass."

Mirabel blinked. With that glib tongue, he ought to be a horse trader, but she knew all the horse traders in town. "I fear, sir, I know you not."

"I'm Harald Redbeard," he said.

"I wrote your invitation," Mirabel said. "I've been wondering who you are. Shall we dance?"

"With a will," he said, and offered his arm.

In the course of the first two dances, Mirabel discovered that Harald suited her perfectly as a dance

partner. Tireless, nimble, quick-witted, familiar with all the standard dance patterns and variations . . . and with unflagging appreciation of her charms, which he described in terms that made her fantasize about the latter half of the ball.

She would happily have danced more with Harald Redbeard, but Nuttin Broadaxe tapped her firmly on the shoulder at the end of the second, and she remembered that she'd promised him a dance last week.

"Excuse me," she said, giving Harald a last squeeze of the hand and significant glance from under her lashes. He bowed.

Nutty was, after Harald, a letdown. A competent enough dancer, he felt no obligation to flatter someone he already knew beyond, "Gosh, Mirabel, this dress doesn't have any back at all!" and "Good thing that necklace isn't real; some thief would have it off you in no time." Instead, he regaled her with a description of the Queen's emerald necklace: "a lot like that paste thing you're wearing, actually, but of course hers is real." The last thing Mirabel wanted to hear about was the Queen; the Queen didn't like women soldiers in general, and Mirabel in particular.

Mirabel parted from Nutty at the end of that dance, pleading a need for something to drink, and went in search of Harald. Before she was halfway to the drinks table, Primula had caught her by the arm. "Mirabel, didn't you have Sergeant Gorse in your list of names?"

It took a moment to think what Primula was talking about, and then she shook her head. "No—I'd have remembered. At least half mine were people I'd never heard of."

"Oh." Primula let go and wandered off. Mirabel made her way to the drinks table, handed in her chit for a free drink, and spotted the chancellor, Sophora Segundiflora, chatting with two ministers of state, and a banker. Mirabel edged that way, keeping an eye out for Harald.

"Mirabel . . . what a lovely gown," Sophora said. "And necklace, too. So like the Queen's, did you know that?" Her voice had the slightest edge.

"No . . . it's borrowed."

"Ah. I'm glad you didn't wear it just to annoy her. It's amazingly good—it hardly looks like paste at all."

No one ignored Sophora's hints. "Do you think I should take it off?"

"Perhaps—oh, dear." Sophora looked past Mirabel and then murmured, very fast. "It's too late, be sure you tell her it's a cheap imitation and that you borrowed it." Then, in her usual ringing tone, "Good evening, Your Majesties. What an honor to have you at the ball."

Mirabel turned. The Queen's face squinched up as she recognized Mirabel—then paled in fury as she recognized the necklace.

"Where did you get that!?" the Queen demanded. "What are you playing at?"

Mirabel looked at the Queen's necklace—as like her borrowed one as if it were spell-doubled, except that the emeralds seemed somehow diluted of their rich green color. Perhaps that was because of the taupe gown the Queen wore, perhaps the colors cancelled out or something. "I'm—I'm sorry, Your Majesty," she said, attempting a curtsy. "I just borrowed this—I didn't know—"

"Borrowed! From whom, may I ask?"

"A—a friend." Instinct, racing ahead of thought, warned her not to give a name. "A—a dancer. It's only paste, Your Majesty, and I didn't know it was a copy of yours—"

"A likely story," the Queen sniffed. She turned to the King. "You promised me mine was unique. No other like it, you said, an exclusive design. And now I see it around the neck of a muscle-bound swordswoman who got it from some bawd. What do you say to that, eh? I demand that you take this up with the Royal Jeweler; if he's selling copies on the sly—"

Mirabel glanced at the King, who looked paler than the Queen. He patted the Queen's arm. "It's not like that—" he began.

"Not like what?" the Queen asked. Her brow furrowed. "Did you *know* about this? Did you intend for me to be humiliated in front of everyone?"

Mirabel edged away from what promised to be a royal spat of epic proportions, and bumped into a large well-muscled man in barbarian costume of fur and leather, who leered straight down her cleavage. She vaguely recalled seeing him with Krystal, but couldn't think of his name.

"You're . . . stunning," he said, dragging his gaze back up to her face, but only momentarily.

"Who are you?" Mirabel asked.

"Skyver Twoswords," he said.

Another one whose invitation she'd addressed, and wondered about. "You're a friend of Krystal's, aren't you?" she asked.

He gulped, blushed, and said, "Well, sort of. More than, actually."

Mirabel eyed him with more interest. "Sort of?"

"Well, she's . . . you know . . . she's different."

Different was not the adjective Mirabel would have chosen. Just then the band struck up "Granny Morely's Wedding," one of her favorite pattern dances, and she smiled at Skyver. "Want to dance?"

"Er . . . I'm sorry . . . Krystal told me to stay here."

"Do you always do what Krystal says?" *It was on a bright May morning . . . when Granny Morely came . . .* Her foot tapped the rhythm.

"Well . . . er . . . yes. I'm supposed to . . ."

. . . *With all her friends and relatives . . . to change her maiden name . . .* Skyver looked glum and embarrassed all at once, and Mirabel didn't want to miss the dance. She looked around for another partner.

"There you are!" Sergeant Gorse said. He beamed at her, not his usual expression. "May I have the

honor?"

They set off into the pattern: *She had pink ribbons in her hair . . . she had them on her shoe . . .* and Sergeant Gorse inserted his words where he could. "I wanted to thank you . . . for getting us in. Some mistake . . . just as we thought . . ."

"My pleasure," Mirabel said, ducking under his upraised arm twice for *She turned herself about again, as shy maids often do*, and caught sight of Krystal in the middle of the next row. She was dancing with Harald, and Mirabel almost tripped to see the same look given to Krystal that he had given to her. Then she shrugged—what did she expect from a smooth-tongued stranger at the ball? She continued the figure with her usual enthusiasm, all the way to *And so you see, dear children, was never such a sight, as Gramps and Granny Morely, upon their wedding night*, which ended with a whirling embrace.

"You dance as well as you . . . er . . . look," Sergeant Gorse said.

"My turn, Quill," said Sergeant Dogwood. He bowed to Mirabel. "If I might have the honor."

Mirabel spent the next five dances with the sergeants, one after the other; by then she wanted a rest. Though the sales booths hid the alcoves, she managed to squeeze in behind the patchwork animals, where she lounged sideways on the bench with her feet up. The freckled girl looked at her.

"I don't know if you're supposed to be here. Miss Primula said—"

"Miss Primula hasn't been dancing with six sergeants, child; my feet hurt."

From her vantage point, she could peek over the pile of patchwork animals and see the dancers. At one side of the ballroom, the King and Queen sat on a dais, pointedly not looking at each other. Sophora had collected another two ministers and the Duke of Mandergash. Then she spotted Harald by his red beard, and next to him Krystal.

Krystal leaned gracefully against a pillar, her followers around her . . . two barbarians, a man dressed in leather straps and chains, half a dozen pirates, and someone wearing a long plaid skirt with his face painted green and a green target painted on his naked chest. Krystal herself wore a gown like nothing Mirabel had ever seen—it might have been painted on, glittering silver mesh slit up the side to reveal her tall dress boots. She was, Mirabel had to admit, incredibly beautiful.

"Mirabel Stonefist, what *are* you doing back there lounging at your ease while the rest of us—" Primula glared over the stack of stuffed animals.

"I tried to tell her, Miss Primula," bleated the freckled girl. "She wouldn't listen."

"She never does," Primula said to the girl. Then to Mirabel, "Come right out of there; I need to talk to you."

"My feet hurt," Mirabel muttered, but she knew it would do no good. She got up and squeezed back past the corner post of the booth.

"I had to go to the office for my master lists," Primula said, "I have them here." She waved a sheaf of papers.

*"And now, majesties, lords and ladies, gentlemen and women of quality, it's time to vote for the Queen of the Ball—" That was Lord Mander Thunderblatt. "We honor the Ladies' Aid and Armor Society, by choosing one among them to reign as queen for a night—meaning no disrespect to Your Majesty, of course . . ."*

"Will you pay attention, Mirabel! Quickly now—you say you didn't have Sergeant Gorse on your list?"

"No, I told you."

"Do you remember who you did have?"

Mirabel thought about it. "Corporal Venturi, Corporal Dobbs, Granish the greengrocer, Stebbins the headgroom of the royal stables . . ." She noticed Primula ticking these off on the master list. "Er . . . Harald Redbeard, Skyver Twoswords, Gordamish Ringwearer, Piktush somebody . . . I can't remember anymore. Someone named Overbite or something like that."

"Just as I thought!" Primula looked simultaneously triumphant and furious. "Those are not on my list at all."

"All of them?"

"No, the last four. Who gave you your list?"

Mirabel blinked. "Krystal, of course."

*"Now you remember the rules," Lord Mander said. "Nominators contribute a gold piece to the Fund; voters contribute ten silvers. Ladies of the Society may not nominate themselves—not that any of our hostesses would—but may nominate another Member, as well as vote . . ."*

"That scheming little tramp!" Primula said. "I see it all now—"

*"I nominate Krystal Winterborn!"* someone called.

"She's wanted to be Queen for years," Primula said. "And now she's cheated—"

"Huh?"

"She stacked the lists," Primula said. "Erased some of the names she knew would vote against her and added her friends." Primula tapped her own sheaf of papers. "I'll soon put a stop to this nonsense—"

*"I nominate Cabella Ironhand!"* called someone else. Cabella had been Queen of the Ball for the past three years; as a sergeant herself, she could count on the sergeants and corporals to vote for her.

*"I nominate Sophora Segundiflora,"* yelled another.

"I refuse the nomination," Sophora said. "But thank you."

Across the floor, Harald Redbeard met Mirabel's eyes and grinned; then he winked. *"I nominate Mirabel Stonefist,"* he said loudly. Krystal whirled and glared at him; Mirabel felt as if she'd just had the wind knocked out of her. What did he mean? She'd never been a candidate for Queen of the Ball.

"What are you up to?" asked Primula.

"Nothing," Mirabel said. "I had nothing to do with it."

Primula glared at her, but apparently decided Krystal was the bigger game, and started across the floor.

"Nominators, make your way to the Donations Table," Lord Mander said. "Voters, you may begin lining up to vote when the nominations have been verified. Nominees, come join me at the front of the room."

"Go on, silly," said the freckle-faced girl when Mirabel hesitated. "I didn't realize you were important—imagine being nominated for Queen of the Ball."

Mirabel made her way through the crowd, accepting congratulations and wolf whistles, until she joined Krystal and Cabella at Lord Mander's side. The room seemed full of eyes; she had never been shy, but she'd also never stood on a dais being stared at by a roomful of people while wearing a whore's dress and a necklace that annoyed the Queen. She could see over the heads of the others to the Donations Table, where Harald was just then handing over a gold piece to one of the clerks.

"Look 'em over, folks," Lord Mander bellowed past her ear. "Here they are, three lovely and talented Members of the Ladies' Aid and Armor Society. For those who don't know them well, let me introduce . . . Krystal Winterborn." Krystal twirled; her gown glittered in the light. Enthusiastic cheers from part of the crowd, including her barbarian followers. "Cabella Ironhand." Cabella, in a handsome rose brocade, smiled and waved at the crowd, to similar cheers from her supporters.

Mirabel felt like a stray cow at auction, not a candidate for Queen of the Ball. As far as she knew, she had only one supporter, and he had his back turned, leaning over the Donations Table. "Mirabel Stonefist," Lord Mander said, and she struck an attitude and did a swirling dance step. To her surprise, another storm of wolf whistles and cheers broke out.

Lord Mander looked at the Donations Table, got the wave he was waiting for. "All right, folks—all the nominations have been verified. You vote with your silver . . . form three lines, have your coins ready . . . you know the rules." He nodded, and the band began to play "Stillwater Faire" to cover the shuffling and talking.

Cabella turned to Mirabel. "Do you know what Primula's upset about? She cornered me to ask about the list of people I'd addressed invitations to . . . she's never complained before."



Past Cabella's shoulder, Mirabel saw Krystal's tense face. "I'm not sure," she said. It wasn't her place to embarrass Krystal in front of the whole group. "I thought it was just me; she complains about my handwriting every year."

"Well, whatever it is, she thinks it's serious. She's talking to our Chancellor—" Cabella nodded to the far corner, where Primula, gesturing and waving papers, had trapped Sophora Segundiflora.

"She thinks everything is serious," Krystal said, with an edge to her voice.

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Harald Redbeard was relieved to find that aside from a few unarmed sergeants in dress uniforms the ball consisted of civilians in fancy outfits. Some costumes required weapons, to be sure—the barbarians had fake spears, and Gordamish Ringwearer had a peculiar looking knife that couldn't possibly work in a fight—but nothing he need worry about. No one had tried to relieve him or his crew of their pirate cutlasses, which were not fake at all, and with which he intended to make a clean sweep of the gathering's jewels and gold.

His nomination of Mirabel Stonefist—whom he did intend to steal away for later enjoyment—would generate more cash in easily-snatched piles. He'd explained to Gordamish that it took fewer votes overall to win in a three-way split than a two-way split.

Now Harald leaned against the wall, arms crossed, waiting for his moment and wondering where the city guard was. He hadn't seen a guardsman all day. He imagined they were all carousing in some illegally open tavern barred to the public. This crowd now—he eyed them professionally. From royalty obviously self-indulgent to citizens full of good food and strong drink . . . easy marks, every one.

The only problem he foresaw was that necklace. Which one was real? Maybe he'd better snatch both. As the lines of voters thinned out, Harald glanced around and signalled his crew.

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"And the winner is . . ." Lord Mander bellowed. Silence fell; the woman at the Donations Table pointed to one of the piles. "Krystal Winterborn!"

Cheers and groans from the crowd, a shriek of glee from Krystal, then a booming, "No, she's not!"

"Am *too*," Krystal said, stamping her foot. The crowd roared.

"No." Sophora Segundiflora made her way to the nominees' stand. "Some voters were not invited guests; Primula has explained how the misunderstanding occurred." She scowled at Krystal, who pouted back. "We are going to expel the wrongfully invited guests, and vote again." In a low voice that Mirabel could barely hear over the hubbub, Sophora said, "You're lucky, Krystal, that we care more about the reputation of the Society than you do, you naughty girl. Otherwise we'd expose you publicly."

"But Chancellor—"

"Shut up, Krystal," Sophora said. Then, more loudly, "As your names are called, please line up over there—" She pointed toward the band. "If your name is not called by the end of the list, you can simply leave and no questions will be asked."

"Oh, we'll leave now, if it's all the same to you!" Mirabel recognized that voice, but it took her a moment to realize that Harald Redbeard and the other pirates had surrounded the Donations Table, and the cutlasses laid to the clerks' necks were not decorative accessories. Two pirates were already scooping the piles of coin into the Society's brass-bound money chest. Another pirate was creeping up behind the Queen.

Even as she stared, Mirabel felt a sharp steel point at her back. "I'd come along if I was you," said someone behind her. "Cap'n's got a fancy for you, as well as them pretties you're wearing. Be a good girl now."

Mirabel's years of training took over, and she threw herself forward off the dais, tucked and came upright; she heard the pirate curse, the boom of his foot as he leaped after her, then the louder thud of his body as he hit the floor near Krystal. Sophora stood over him, his cutlass in her hand. "Here, dear—you're quicker." She tossed the cutlass to Mirabel. "Go save the Queen."

"I'll get you!" the pirate snarled at Sophora, reaching for the long dagger in his boot, but Krystal's accurate kick made him grab something else instead. Krystal took the knife and his life before he could move.

Mirabel whirled. The Queen screeched, hands to her neck, as the pirate tugged at her necklace one-handed, while fending off the King with his cutlass. Mirabel charged across the floor, but before she could intervene, the necklace broke. The pirate thrust it into his belt, and ran for the door. Mirabel followed.

Behind her, sergeants bellowed and corporals cursed. A good dozen of the members ran for the armory, where they could find weapons enough to deal with a mere handful of pirates, no matter how vicious, but in the meantime—Harald snatched one of the wards from her booth, and held a blade to her neck. His men did the same; one even had the child who had guarded the door, holding her by her braids, with the cutlass over her head.

"Now, now—you don't want me to hurt this sweet child, do you?"

The uproar sank to a growl, and Mirabel skidded to a stop just out of reach of Harald Redbeard. He winked at her. "Come on along, sweetheart—I'll teach you how to use that thing properly. I like a girl with spirit."

"Do you?" Mirabel said, and signalled.

The nine-year-old dropped abruptly to the length of her braids, then bounced up between her captor's legs. Her little bronze cap hit his pelvic arch with an audible crunch. He shrieked and fell; she grabbed his cutlass and hamstringed the pirate next in line. As Harald turned to look, the girl he was holding sank her teeth into his thumb; Mirabel stepped to one side and ran her blade up under his ribs.

"I already know how to use this thing," she said, wincing as blood splattered her borrowed gown. The girl grabbed his cutlass, and passed it to another adult. Two of the other pirates dropped the children they held, only to find that the girls were more dangerous loose, and all the guests knew how to use a cutlass when they had one.

"But you aren't *real* warriors," moaned the last survivor, cowering from the blows of three energetic orphans pelting him with misshapen pottery from the pottery stall. "Cap'n said so—"

"Your Cap'n might say something different now," Krystal said. "If he could." Her blade, already bloody, swung once more.

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In the aftermath of the brawl, in the flurry of cleaning up, no one could find the Queen's necklace. Not until they stripped the pirates' bodies, and the shattered remnants were found in the codpiece of the pirate who'd been felled by Sarajane. "So the Queen was wearing paste . . ." Sophora said, and looked at Mirabel. Mirabel sighed. She knew where her duty lay, but how she would explain to Dorcas . . . first blood on the gown, then this . . .

"Here." She unhooked the clasp and handed it over. "Tell her you found it, and mine was crushed."

Sophora smiled at her. "Mirabel, you're finally growing up. I'm proud of you."

When the crowd settled down, Lord Mander collected Cabella and Mirabel and tried to call for a second vote, but a loud yell of "We already *paid!*" drowned him out.

Cabella took Sophora aside. "Look—I've been Queen before, and you don't want to give it to Krystal. Why not Mirabel? She's decorative enough, she fought the pirates, and she gave up the necklace."

Sophora looked at Mirabel.

"But I—but I never imagined—"

"Sounds like a Queen to me," Sophora said. She gave Mirabel's name; cheers rang out. Lord Mander put the tinsel crown on Mirabel's head, and a score of men stood in line to dance with her, bring her drinks, fetch her snacks, anything she wanted.

She could get used to this Queen business.

The King himself took her hand for the last dance of the evening. The King danced better than Mirabel expected, though his gloved hand wandered along her spine.

"About that necklace," he murmured in her ear.

"I borrowed it," she said.

"From a gorgeous brunette in Dorcas's house?" he asked.

"Yes . . ." She worked it out—if he knew that, then—for the first time she felt a pang of sympathy for the Queen. Over his shoulder she saw Corporal Nitley lurking near the wine punch, only to be collared by Sergeants Gorse and Dogwood. No tropical fruit surprise this year, then. Over his other shoulder, she saw Primula herding a sulky Krystal and her followers, loaded with dirty dishes, toward the kitchen.

"Thank you, my dear," the King said, "for getting me out of a very sticky situation. I will, of course, explain to the . . . er . . . young woman who had been . . . er . . . taking care of it. But is there anything I can do for you?" His hand wandered lower.

"No, thank you," Mirabel said, surprised to realize that what he could give, she didn't want. Not from him, anyway. "Only a donation to help our poor defenseless orphans."

A resounding crash came from the kitchen passage; Krystal stormed back into the ballroom. "It's not *fair*," she said. "Why should I have to do all the work? I killed *two* pirates."

"Shut up, Krystal," Mirabel said, in chorus with others.