

The Death of Compassion

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The Death of Compassion

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Summary

Everyone has heard tales of The Pirate Queen. A woman as unforgiving and vicious as the sea itself. They say Davy Jones dares not to claim any ship of hers for fear of getting on her bad side.

So how the hell did Anita end up on her ship?

Anita Williams finds herself as she finds reasons to be a pirate.

Notes

I started writing this very shortly after Ajay got the Pirate Queen skin (which of course I got). here it is! 21k later....

See the end of the work for [more notes](#)

The steady thunks sound from the deck as the man, larger than life, paces back and forth in front of them.

"Now, no one is getting hurt if they behave," the man continues.

Thunk, thunk, thunk.

"There are options. Always are. Some of you have more than others. You, for instance..." The man gestures to the captain. "Have the choice to cooperate and have the chance to get home. Or you can die."

The captain scowls at him.

"The rest of the crew, however... They can sign. Lots of benefits to being a gentleman of fortune." The man grins. It's charming, but it's obvious this man has no issue with his job. He will end anyone who tries anything right now.

" *Captain* ," the first mate starts, biting through the word with obvious distaste. "Do--"

He can't finish his sentence before the pirate cuts him off. "Oh, I ain't the captain, brudda. And I wouldn't be too impatient about meeting her. You won't like it if The Queen has to visit."

The first mate's mouth slams shut and his face, as well as that of the captain's, drain of colour.

The Queen. The *Pirate* Queen.

Well, they're all about to die, aren't they?

Anita grits her teeth. Should she be here? How fucking stupid of her was it to hide as a man to be here? She's going to die. She's going to die and her mother will have no one supporting her. Jackson is dead, her other brothers all in the navy, barely able to contribute to the family. She was her mother's main source of income. Was, because she's about to die to some damn pirate. Die as a man, what's more. She isn't fond of that.

"Now. I already said no one is getting hurt if they behave. Well. I won't hurt yuh. So either way, you've got options. Join us and our lives of freedom. Or stay here and be sent packing." He rests his hand on the sword at his hip. "Or fight me. That might be fun."

What's there to fight for? Everything has already been taken from the ship. All but a third of the rations have been loaded onto the pirate ships, ships *plural* , as the pirates have three. There was never a chance. Every bit of their cargo is gone.

No one moves. No one speaks.

Pirates . Anita is certain that she'll be killed no matter what this man says. She's certain they'll sink the ship as soon as they're done here. That's just the way of these types. And even if she isn't killed, she'll starve on the return journey.

And The Queen, well, her reputation is gruesome. She's good with a knife and has been known to dismember people. There are hundreds of stories, each worse than the last, of how she came to her throne. In one, she tied down the captain of the ship she was on and dissected him alive. In another, she fed a man his own ears. In a third, she had tested her "medicines" on him; electroshock therapy, tincture of belladonna laced with snake venom, and much more.

Rumour has it, the queen wears gloves to hide the blood staining her palms.

Pirates, however, all seem to sing her praises. They would, the disgusting criminals.

Anita needs to survive this. She needs to get back home to her mother and she has to do that with money. She can't leave the woman destitute.

A terrifying, startling idea hits her.

She could join them.

She could survive this if she signs on with them. She could make money if she joins them. She could help her mother be stable again.

Her mind races. Should she? If the navy finds her, she'll be hung.

But, she could claim she was a woman forced along with them and avoid it. Who cares if the pirates die? She can make it. She will be okay.

"I'll sign."

The man takes a few steps closer to her. He's grinning again. "Well done, brudda!" He claps her on the shoulder before turning to the rest of the crew. "This man here has more heart and bravery than the lot of you. He's smart. Knows he wants to be free."

Anita avoids her captain's eyes.

"Anyone else?" the pirate calls, but he doesn't wait for an answer. "No? Fine by me." He gestures to Anita. "Let's go. What's your name, friend?"

She follows him to the connection between the ships. "... Jackson," she answers.

"Good t' meet you. I'll introduce you to your new crew. After you sign, that is."

The Death of Compassion is a beautiful galleon. Anita sort of hates to admit it. Flanked by a schooner and a pinnace, it cuts a dashing figure as it passes silently through the water.

Anita is stationed on the pinnace. It goes by the name The Briar, which matches the schooner named The Rose.

What Anita doesn't expect is how well she's treated.

Everyone does their fair share of work. Everyone is held accountable but helped when needed. It's a change from the ship she'd signed on to. There, if you weren't high enough up, you were treated like shit.

Here, Anita finds herself getting comfortable. She doesn't know why. After all, she's surrounded by pirates.

But she's one now too, isn't she?

No, she tells herself. She isn't. She had done this to ensure her own safety. The ship she'd left had been sent back to sea with a third of the rations it needed to complete its voyage. Who knows if it had reached the shore? Who knows how many died on the way?

No, Anita is here to survive.

Some of the men she works with seem friendly. The Queen's first mate is a huge man named Makoa. He had been the one to bring Anita on board that first time. He's the working captain of The Briar, so Anita sees him every day. He's kind to her.

Upon signing the accord, Makoa had brought her onto The Briar right away and put her to work. She's yet to even get a glimpse of The Pirate Queen. She doesn't mind that too much, as she'd rather stay away from the bloodthirsty pirate captain. Her goal is still to get home to her mother, hopefully with some wealth to keep her provided for.

Part of surviving will include surviving any conflict this pirate ship comes into. Not every merchant vessel will surrender as hers had. Some will fight. She will have to fight with the others on her new crew.

Anita is no stranger to swords, nor to that of any guns. Her brothers had taught her much.

Of course, she has to survive the stupidity of the people around her. Most of the crew she works with are competent men. Some, though, are about as smart as bait.

Anita is working on deck, helping hoist the sail, when one of the idiots does something-- she doesn't get to see what, because something hits her and tosses her halfway across the deck. She lands unconscious and bleeding.

When Anita opens her eyes next, she's on her back in a room she doesn't recognize. It's well enough lit, and the ship beneath her still sways, so she knows she's still on board a ship. Whether or not it's the Briar, she doesn't know. She'd thought she'd seen every room of the Briar already. She doesn't recognize this one. But perhaps it's the fact her vision is rather blurry.

Anita groans and tries to sit up, to see her surroundings better, but a gloved hand presses her firmly back down.

"Stay still," comes a short order from a voice she doesn't recognize. A feminine voice.

She tries to blink away the blur in her eyes. "Where..?"

"Yuh on The Death of Compassion. Dun worry, The Briar is close by."

Anita's vision clears well enough to confirm she really doesn't recognize the room. But then, if she's on The Death of Compassion, she wouldn't have seen this room before.

And then her eyes land on the person speaking to her. It's a woman with artificially coloured hair tied in two buns on her head. She's dark skinned and covered in freckles. She's got a leather headband on that's covered in sewed on baubles. It matches the scarf she's got looped around her neck. Her outfit is... revealing, to say the least. Anita doesn't understand what it makes her feel. The woman's face is pretty, with eyes somewhere on the edge of hazel and a warm brown. Her full lips quirk into a smirk when she notices Anita examining her.

She looks familiar. Anita can't place it.

"We ain't met yet. I'm yuh captain. Some call me The Pirate Queen, but on my ships, they call me Lifeline."

Anita's blood runs cold. Why is she here? Why does The Pirate Queen, of all people, have her here? What happened?

"Yuh remember what happened?"

Anita shakes her head.

The captain's eyebrow raises. "One a' the deck hands was careless. Yuh got hit by a hoisted crate he lost his hand on." Looking almost amused, she purses her lips. "Rude not t' offer yuh name."

Anita frowns. It takes her a moment to remember. "Jackson. I'm-- Jackson Williams."

The Pirate Queen stares at her as if she's putting together a puzzle. "Yuh sure about that?" Her eyes flick over Anita.

Anita looks down herself. Her shirt is gone. She's laying here in her breast bindings and trousers. There's a nasty cut in the area just below her collarbone that isn't bleeding, but looks like it was recently.

They know. They know she's a woman.

Anita panics, trying to sit up, to cover herself. Again, that firm hand presses her back down.

" *Stay still* ," the captain says again. "I ain't done patchin' yuh up."

Anita goes deathly still. She watches as the Pirate Queen moves from the table and returns with white strips of linen. She hums to herself as she goes about wrapping a bandage over Anita's injury. Anita doesn't say anything and doesn't move unless told.

How is it she's here with this woman? The Pirate Queen? This woman might kill her for any reason. She's got enough kills to her name to fill Anita's home town. Ships set aflame, men keelhauled... If Anita says even one thing wrong, she could be next.

Eventually the captain steps back. "Alright. Yuh as good as yuh can be. I'm puttin' yuh on light work duty til that's healin' proper." She examines Anita's face as she tosses a shirt to her. "Yuh can get up now."

Slowly, Anita presses herself up. The Queen goes to help and Anita flinches away.

She hears a scoff. "New crew is always so jumpy. I ain't gonna hurt yuh. You're *my* crew. I watch out for my people."

That doesn't really make Anita feel better.

But Anita can't help but notice how much shorter this woman is compared to her.

The captain leans back, arms crossed. "So, *Jackson* . If yuh wanna go by that, if yuh really are a man, tha's fine. I'll send yuh back t' The Briar, no questions asked." Her look softens a touch. "But if yuh are a woman, yuh need to know I dun mind them on my ship. Yuh wouldn't be the only one 'sides me. My gals here are loyal members a' my crew. They do the same work as everyone else, and ain't no one holdin' their gender against 'em. They get their share of the haul as well."

Anita doesn't know how to respond to that. She's been going by Jackson for a full year now. No one can prove she's not, as her brother, the true Jackson, has been dead some five years.

Anita isn't a man. Isn't that obvious? Ajay can see that. But then, Anita doesn't understand much about these pirates. Maybe there are men that look like women. She doesn't know.

But she is a woman and she tires of going dressed as a man. Maybe she's only here to survive, but maybe she can breath again among these pirates. She could go back to being a woman.

Anita steels herself and meets The Pirate Queen's gaze. She opens her mouth and curiosity appears on the woman's face. It almost distracts her.

"My name is Anita Williams."

The Queen's eyes seem to sparkle. "Welcome to my crew, Anita." She uncrosses her arms. "Were yuh hiding as a man for long? Ain't no one forced yuh onto a ship, did they?"

Anita tries to fall into her standard pose for addressing someone of a higher rank. She keeps her sentences short and to the point.

"No, captain. And I've been going as a man for a year now."

The Queen seems amused by Anita's stance. "Told yuh. Yuh can call me Lifeline, more often than not." She tugs at the ends of her gloves. "Why yuh hidin' yuhself? Working a crew for fun or sometin' else?"

Anita clamps her mouth shut. She doesn't know if she should tell Lifeline that. No one knows but her mother.

Lifeline seems to read her hesitation. "Yuh dun gotta tell me. Just curious. All the ladies I got on the boat have a reason t' be here. I know a few of 'em. Not all."

Anita grits her teeth. "I would rather keep it to myself."

"Fair 'nough." Lifeline heads for the door. "Follow me. Yuh assigned to The Death of Compassion now. All women from my crew are. Helps me keep 'em safe."

"Are you the ship's doctor too?" Anita asks. She tries to keep her tone respectful.

"One of 'em. I treat the women. The doctor on The Briar started on you but didn't wanna intrude if yuh were a woman. That's why yuh ended up with me." She leads Anita out onto the deck. "I'm gonna pass yuh t' one of my gals. She'll get yuh acquainted with the ship. Got any talents, Williams?"

"None that come to mind for a ship."

"And off a ship?"

Anita has to think a moment. "I helped train dogs, a while back." She'd helped Jackson with it.

"We ain't got dogs for yuh. There's a couple ship cats, but they already do their job well." She shrugs. "Dun worry. Yuh'll find yuh place here."

Anita stays silent. She has no interest in testing this woman's patience, even if she doesn't seem to quite measure up to the rumours Anita has heard. She's a small woman but she's also The Pirate Queen. She had to have earned her reputation somehow.

Anita is led to an open area up on deck. There's a blond woman leaning over a table covered in some papers that seem to have some sort of plans scrawled out on them.

"Natalie! Just the lady I was lookin' for."

The blond looks up. Pretty blue eyes flick over Anita. "Lifeline! How is your patient?" Her accent is a lilting french.

"Doin' well enough, I think. She ain't the most talkative though." Lifeline urges Anita forward. "This is Anita Williams. She's joinin' us here."

The woman steps forward and offers a hand. Anita can't help but notice she's missing her pinky and to the first knuckle of her ring finger on the offered hand. "A pleasure to meet you! I am Natalie Paquette."

"She's our carpenter. Smartest woman yuh could know and she keeps our ship up t' date on the latest tech."

Anita shakes her hand. "Good to meet you."

"You came from the recent merchant we encountered, yes?"

She nods. "The Lamplight. Yeah."

"An odd name for a ship. It had a beautiful mast on it though. Not quite as nice as ours, but still finely crafted."

Anita doesn't know what to respond to that.

"I was hopin' yuh might take her under yuh wing for a bit. She's on light duty but I want her t' know the ship."

Natalie smiles brightly. "Of course! I am always willing for company."

"Thank yuh." Ajay turns and gives Anita a surprisingly friendly smile. "This is where we part for now. Dun be afraid to chat when we cross paths, alright?"

Anita gives her a confused look, wary of that prospect. "Yes, captain."

"I'm tellin' yuh. Jus' call me Lifeline." She taps the table with her hand. "I've got things t' get back to. Let me know if yuh need me."

Lifeline heads off, towards where Anita can see The Briar connected at the deck. Makoa is standing nearby and immediately turns to her as she approaches.

Anita turns back to Natalie.

"It is always nice to get another woman on board. It is rare for us to gain one." Natalie isn't even looking at her. Her eyes are on the paper she had been examining them before.

"How many women are on this ship?"

Natalie thinks for a moment. "I believe just over seventy."

Anita starts. "Seventy?"

"Oui. Lifeline provides protection to the women who need it. They are safe here." Natalie traces her finger over something on the paper.

"From what?"

Natalie shrugs. "It varies. Each has their own story. Some are similar, others are not. Plenty of them, I do not understand." She stands and claps her hands together. "Allow me to show you around!"

The Death of Compassion is a beautiful ship. Anita has to concede that after living on it for a few weeks. The women on the ship are able to sleep separate from the men. Hygiene is required. There are some things that every ship has; some of the men are crass, but everyone seems friendly enough. According to some of the women she's made friends with, Lifeline apparently keeps the worst of the men well in line. She keeps her ship running smoothly.

Anita doesn't understand Lifeline. She seems to be almost sweet, but if any of the rumours are true, this woman is blood thirsty. Keeping the worst of the men "in line" can read dark.

Lifeline is also incredibly familiar to Anita. She feels like the reason why is on the tip of her tongue, but she can't find it. Anita has seen this woman before, but where?

No matter the captain, Anita does her job on the ship.

Her first experience as a pirate, a true pirate-- she's not one, anyway, but regardless-- doesn't come to fighting.

They take a merchant ship a week after Anita boards the galleon. They don't fight, they simply let the pirates take what they have.

Like Anita's own merchant ship, Makoa is who boards to speak to them.

"Is it always Makoa who boards for Lifeline?" Anita asks the question of Renee, the woman standing beside her. Natalie had introduced them during her tour of the ship. Anita would count them both as friends at this point. She's one of the few on the crew that don't seem put off by Anita's more distant nature.

"Usually. She needs a reason to board."

"What would make her go?"

Renee shrugs. "I've really only seen her board for two reasons. If there's a woman on board, or for..." She gestures with her hand. "Intimidation."

Anita can believe the second. When you hear The Pirate Queen is about to board your ship, you either fall into line or risk death.

"Why would she go if there's women?"

Renee looks away before focusing her eyes on Makoa, across on the merchant ship. "She wants to make sure they're okay."

Anita purses her lips. "What do you mean?"

"She makes sure they're okay. That no one is touching them without permission. That... they're happy. And willingly there."

"That's... surprisingly good hearted."

Renee scowls but doesn't look at Anita. "You haven't been here long. You'll realize that's just how Lifeline is. She won't take any shit, but she's going to protect her own. Even if it's just some woman traveling overseas."

Anita doesn't know about that. This woman's entire persona is built around her ability to kill creatively, to scare the people she encounters.

Renee must catch Anita's disbelief. "Listen, Anita. What did she say to you when you said you were a woman? Do you remember any of it?"

She takes a moment to think before answering. "Uh... She asked how long I'd been going as a man. And... She asked if anyone had forced me onto a ship."

"See? She wanted to make sure you were willingly on a ship. If you weren't, she would have brought you wherever you wanted and made sure you were safe. You wouldn't have been the first. And knowing Lifeline the way I do, you definitely wouldn't have been the last." Renee uncrosses her arms and leans on the railing. "Lifeline is dangerous. I won't say she's not. But she's dangerous to bad people. Be a good person and she isn't dangerous to you."

"You're pirates," Anita responds, as if that is a counter to everything Renee has just said.

"So are you." Renee pushes away from the rail. "You'll figure it out. Or you won't. I hope it's the former."

And then Renee heads back below deck.

Anita doesn't know what to do with that.

The next ship they take fights.

Anita is good with a sword. Guns too, though she has none. All her brothers had used her to practice with or against. It's had her come out of things able to fight more than one person at once.

The merchant ship is overcome quickly. Anita barely has to fight before there's a surrender from the enemy crew and she is returned to her own ship.

She stands not far from the helm, watching as Makoa boards. The Briar is on the far side of the merchant, with The Death of Compassion near close enough to scrape on this close side. The Rose patrols, ready to give chase if the merchant tries to run.

Her adrenaline is pumping. She looks over the whole of the surrendered crew on the other deck. Most are bedraggled or bloody. There's a few dead.

And then she spots a man crouched behind some barrels on the forecastle deck. He's got a musket in his hands and, while hidden, is taking aim at Makoa.

Makoa is a pirate, yes, but he's a good man. Anita doesn't want to see him die, and certainly not to a coward attacking after surrender.

Anita looks around her. Not many are around, as most will be needed to empty the merchant of its goods. All eyes seem to be on Makoa. No one has spotted the sailor but herself.

She spots Nat nearby and motions her closer. "Hand me your pistol."

"What?" Natalie seems startled by the order.

“Your revolver-- I need it.”

Natalie fumbles in removing it from her belt.

Anita grabs it from her and takes aim. She knows she’s a good shot. Her brothers had taken her hunting before, much to the chagrin of her mother, but she knows she can do this.

A single gunshot rings out and--

The rifleman falls back.

Silence reigns.

“What did you do?” Nat asks in a whisper.

Anita pushes her way down onto the main deck, heading for the connection between the ships, when a hand catches her arm.

“Yuh want t’ tell me what yuh were aimin’ at?” comes an angry voice.

She glances back to see Lifeline, gripping her arm and holding her in place.

Anita flinches. “There was-- I shot a man with a musket who had been aiming at Makoa.”

The anger on Lifeline’s face shifts to apprehension. “Whatcha mean?”

“I’ll show you-- On the forecastle deck.”

Lifeline seems to consider something, but she nods. “Show me.”

Anita makes her way onto the merchant with Lifeline directly behind her. Makoa joins them as they board. Lifeline motions him to follow and Anita finds herself leading her captain and the first mate to the forecastle deck.

She shoves aside a barrel to show the man she’d shot. He’s groaning on the ground. A nasty chunk of his cheek and part of his jaw are staining the ground now

Lifeline’s expression drops into an angry scowl. She kicks the man over and spits on him. “Coward.” She takes in a breath and shakes her head. Kneeling beside him, she grabs his hair in a fist and jerks his head up to look at her. “Unlucky for yuh that Williams’ shot didn’t end yuh. But lucky for me, since I get t’ make an example of yuh.” She meets Anita’s eyes. “Yuh did good, Williams.”

Makoa seems to have cottoned on to what’s happened. “That explains the shot.” He claps Anita on the shoulder. “Thanks! I owe ya’.”

Lifeline instructs Makoa to drag the man with them before she leads both of them back down to where the captain of the merchant stands with what’s left of his crew behind him.

Makoa jerks the man up onto his feet.

“Listen up!” he calls out. “And show some respect for the queen.”

Lifeline gives them a grin that does nothing to hide the threat she holds. She calls out, addressing the crew. “Ain’t you all lucky? I wasn’t intendin’ t’ visit, but then yuh man there on the ground tried t’ shoot my first mate after yall had already surrendered.” She takes out a knife as she talks and practically dances it over her fingers. “Ain’t none of you welcome on my crew. Already obvious yuh ain’t t’ be trusted.”

She takes a few steps over to where Makoa is holding the injured man on his feet. Blood is dripping from his face and onto the deck. He looks barely conscious.

Lifeline grabs the back of his head. He stands, but just barely.

“This man a’ yours just made it all the worse for all a’ yuh.” Her free hand has her knife in it, held to his throat. “We coulda let a’ go after gettin’ just yuh standard cargo, but that just couldn’t happen, not t’ this man.”

The crew of this merchant look on in horror as she addresses them. Lifeline is shorter than Anita, but the presence she commands in this moment makes her seem larger than life.

She jerks the man she’s holding again. “Who told yuh t’ try for a shot?”

The man rasps, unable to speak through his injured mouth. She shakes him again and he raises an unsteady hand to point at the captain of the ship.

The captain goes pale.

Lifeline levels her gaze at him. “Is that true?”

“I-- Absolutely not, I would never-- We surrendered! I wouldn’t have told him--”

There’s no doubt in Anita’s mind that this man is lying. She knows Lifeline knows that too. She’s not certain how this will turn out, but it won’t be good for him.

Lifeline sinks her knife into the gut of the man she’s holding and lets him fall to the ground.

The captain flinches as she marches towards him, bloody knife in her hands. She grabs him by the side of the head and jerks him down to her level.

“Yuh shoulda told the truth.”

Some of the men near him step forward as if to try and help, but Makoa steps closer, looming over them in his height.

“I mighta been more merciful if yuh had just told the truth. Now yuh gonna have to live with this.” She lets go of him and flicks a hand to Makoa. “Grab him.”

Makoa wraps his arms around the man, facing him away from himself. He holds him low and Ajay moves in. Her knife works at his forehead.

Anita doesn't know what to do about this. She... She's witnessing first hand the cruelty The Pirate Queen is so well known for. She doesn't know what Ajay is doing, but is this really something Anita can just stand by and watch?

The man had ordered something that goes against the terms of the surrender and honestly, Anita has no respect for that. If he had wanted to fight to the end, he should have. She's not sure she has sympathy for him.

Lifeline pulls away and blood is dripping down his face. Carved into his forehead is the word "LIAR".

"Yuh lucky I didn't decide on 'coward', since yuh are one." She's gripping his throat and pulls him in closer. "Now yuh can't hide it in the future. Every person you meet will know you lied t' me."

She pushes him back and he stumbles before falling on his ass.

Lifeline snaps. "Makoa, Williams. With me." And then she turns and strides back to The Death of Compassion. Makoa and Anita are following very close behind.

Once they're back on deck, she addresses Makoa. "Clean 'em out further. Leave 'em with a fifth a' their rations. Make sure someone empties that captain's cabin. If there's anything' a worth there, it ends up on our ship."

"Rodger."

"And you to my cabin once yuh have people on it."

He nods and heads off.

"Alright. With that settled..." Lifeline turns to Anita. "I appreciate yuh quick thinkin' today, Williams. Yuh kept someone important t' me alive. Yuh deserve a reward." She gives Anita a surprisingly warm smile. "Come share a drink with Makoa n' me."

Anita feels her cheeks heat up but she doesn't get why.

"I, I should return Natalie's gun."

"Sure! But head t' my cabin as soon as yuh done. Actually, hold on." She calls out to Renee who's nearby as she takes the gun from Anita. "Get this back t' yuh woman for me, would yuh? Anita here borrowed it."

Renee says a quick affirmative before disappearing below deck.

"That's all done. Now, c'mon."

Lifeline tugs at her a bit before heading off to her cabin.

The captain's cabin isn't *terribly* extravagant but it still screams pirate. The bed in the corner has rich, bright colours. There's a table to the side with four chairs set at it. Even the table

cloth is dyed a quiet pink. The walls are well decorated with paintings and various smaller objects. A tall wardrobe takes space on the wall opposite the bed. There's a cabinet not far from the table that Lifeline has just opened. She pulls out three iron cups and a bottle of brandy.

It's half a second later when Makoa enters. He claps Anita on the shoulder again. "The woman of the hour!"

Anita gives him a smile as he ushers her to a seat at the table. She's still a bit nervous just being in Lifeline's presence, especially after seeing her use her knife.

"Now, we ain't gettin' drunk, but I dun think a drink or two will hurt. Not in these circumstances." She sets the cups down before handing Makoa the bottle. "Pour us some while I grab sometin'."

She darts back over to the cupboard as Makoa sits at the table with Anita. He pours her a generous glass.

A moment later, she returns with two flintlocks in her hands. She sets them on the table and slides them to Anita. "Yuh need yuh brace. You're a good shot."

Anita ignores the alcohol to pick up one of the pistols. She turns it over in her hands and examines it, grip to barrel. It's well made and well taken care of. It doesn't have a scratch on it. Neither does its sibling.

"I can have these?" she asks quietly. She can't help but wonder if there's a catch.

"I insist. Yuh saved the life of a man important t' me and yuh did it at that distance with an unfamiliar gun. I think yuh need 'em." Lifeline tosses back about half her drink in one go.

Anita gives the guns a closer look. She can't find a single damn flaw in them. She looks in every piece, unloads them, aims down the sight. They're excellent quality.

She looks up to see Lifeline watching her.

"Thank you," she says quietly.

Lifeline smiles at her and Anita feels weirdly warm. She quickly looks away, back at the guns, and downs a gulp of her brandy.

Anita spends another half an hour in the company of her captain and the first mate. When she leaves, she's got two pistols on her person and she's feeling pleasantly warm.

Anita isn't a pirate. She's not.

But she may feel okay on this ship, at least for the moment.

(She *might* be a pirate.)

The next day, Lifeline finds her at work on deck. Anita doesn't expect it. She starts a bit, seeing her captain suddenly standing before her.

"Ease up, Williams. Just needed t' ask yuh a few things."

Lifeline has her hands on her hips, but she's smiling up at Anita.

Anita doesn't know why that makes her feel off balance.

"What do you need?"

Lifeline bounces up and down on her feet. "Yuh a good shot. Yuh seemed like yuh knew those pistols well. That fair?"

"Yeah."

"Do yuh know more guns? Or just pistols?"

"More. I was taught alongside my brothers when I was growing up."

"Real teachin' or just pickin' things up from watchin' them?"

"Real teaching. My mother wasn't big on it, but my father felt better with me knowing."

Her captain still smiles. "Good. Been some time since I had anyone competent with guns on the ship. Real competence, not someone who boasts 'bout it but can't back it up." She motions to Anita. "Come with me. Gonna give you a better assignment, yeah?"

'Ah. Okay.'

Anita doesn't really understand the two sides of this woman she's met. Lifeline is dangerous. There's no doubt about that. But out of the three ships Anita has seen taken by Lifeline's crew, the merchant she'd been on included, only one had turned to bloodshed. The other two, she had left on low rations, but survivable if they were smart and no one was greedy. But then, people would be greedy. That's why Anita left. That, and the chance to get more money for her mother, something that certainly wouldn't have happened if she had stayed.

But there's a much sweeter side to Lifeline. She cares about her people. She's been kind to Anita and she openly jokes around to ease the tension when she thinks Anita might be uncomfortable. And she'd given Anita those guns. As a sort of reward for saving Makoa, but she didn't need to do it. Past captains Anita has had didn't reward anyone for good work.

Lifeline stops and tugs her into a room below deck. There's a very tall man wearing a ghutrah and an eye patch going through a crate.

"Alright, Williams. Dunno if you've met him yet," she starts. "But this is our quartermaster."

The man turns to them and smiles. One eye is covered with an eye patch. "Hello!"

Lifeline smiles. "Williams, this is Path. Path, this is Anita Williams."

“Good to meet you,” Anita greets.

“Anita here is gonna take care of the guns we got on board.”

Anita blinks. She is? That doesn’t sound too bad.

“Excellent! We have many that need care.”

“I’m going to be a gunner?” Anita can’t help but ask.

“Huh? Nuh. I got plenty a’ gunners. Yuh gonna care for the guns on board, keep ‘em functionin’ right. Keep track a’ the ones the crew have n’ such.” Lifeline gives her a warm look. “More like an armourer or a gunsmith, if yuh think yuh can handle it.”

“Hell yeah.” This is something Anita knows she can do.

“Seh one! You’ll be seein’ more a’ me. Makoa too. Not t’ mention Path here.” She bounces on the balls of her feet. “Yuh ain’t just a deckhand anymore, is what I’m sayin’. Yuh get a bigger share for yuh work.”

This is a real promotion. This means she can bring her mother back more money. Being around those in power hopefully won’t be a bad thing. As long as she doesn’t do something stupid, she might be safer amongst the officers of the ships.

“I... Yeah. Okay.”

“Path! Can yuh show her what she needs to know?”

“Certainly!”

"Thank yuh. Find me later, Williams. I'll make sure the crew knows yuh got authority now."

Anita watches Lifeline go and takes in a deep breath. She can do this.

She can do this.

Weeks pass and Anita finds herself in the company of her few friends more often than not. Her work on the ship is largely oriented around guns now. She helps keep those used on the ship pristine and well oiled. She also has the power to confiscate guns if they aren't being used well, give some orders, and works with the gunners on the ship to know what they need and supply it to them.

Anita, for the first time in a long time, feels respected. She's treated well enough and her proximity to those higher up on the ship doesn't hurt. She still helps out where she is needed, of course, but the change is still noticeable.

Anita also finds herself damn near fascinated with Lifeline.

She still can't place where she knows this woman's face from, but she's had a drink or two with her. She's loud, music oriented, and she can hold her own in a fight. She's kind to her people and makes sure everyone is taken care of.

While Anita's cut had healed, she had only ever been gentle when tending to it.

Maybe that's why Lifeline fascinates her. The woman can obviously heal when she needs to, but she's also unafraid to gut a man should she need to.

Among Lifeline's "inner circle", the place Anita has found herself, is Makoa, of course, as well as Renee, Natalie, Path, and the acting captain of The Rose, a man who just goes by Park. They all seem like good men and women.

The ones Anita seems to find herself around the most are the women. Renee, Natalie, and of course, Lifeline.

She enjoys her time around Natalie. Natalie talks about ships as though she's in love with them. She describes them in warm terms; beautiful, happy, splendid. She can wax rhapsodic about them with very little prompting. Anita finds she enjoys listening to it.

Renee is a bit more cynical than Natalie, but the two are near inseparable. She's still good company though, and Anita finds her own sense of humour fits well with the dark haired woman.

And then there's Lifeline. There are times she's outright scary, but more often than not, she's just... a woman. Anita can chat with her much more easily now, though it helps when Nat or Renee are around. It's a bit unnerving when Lifeline grabs her to help service her preferred guns. But Anita still finds herself enjoying her time with her captain.

But despite it all, they're all good company.

More than once now, she's fought beside them while boarding a ship. Lifeline rarely shows off then, often trying to blend in with the others to keep the surprise of "the queen" a secret. Despite her reputation, she rarely does anything outwardly cruel to the people they fight. There hasn't been another incident since the man Anita shot, but it's likely only a matter of time.

Anita has just put away her supplies for the day when Lifeline appears. She gives Anita a greeting, likely intending to get Anita's assistance on something. For the first time Anita has seen, her hair is loose from its usual buns. It frames her face in curls. Anita can't help but find it pretty.

It hits Anita then, why she knows Lifeline's face. How it took her months to remember, she doesn't know. But seeing Lifeline with her hair down, loose and curly around her shoulders, Anita remembers. She blurts out Lifeline's name before she can stop herself.

"You're Ajay Che."

All at once, Lifeline's cheerful expression falls. Anita's back hits the wall as Lifeline gives her a sharp shove to the center of her chest. Her knife, having been somewhere on her person only a moment before, is pressed to Anita's throat.

"You tell a damn soul and you'll find yuhself sinkin' in the sea with a new mouth cut south a' the first one."

Anita doesn't fight her.

"I-- I won't. I'm sorry I said it."

Something changes on Lifeline's face then. The anger melts away and she frowns. She pulls the knife away and returns it to its place.

"Suppose I know I can trust yuh." She looks worried, but doesn't move from how she has Anita pressed back. "Anita--"

"Hey, Lifeline--"

Renee's voice cuts between them and Ajay takes a quick step back.

Renee pauses. "Ah, sorry, I--"

"Whatcha need, Renee?"

Lifeline turns to her as if nothing happened, as if she hadn't just had a knife to Anita's throat a moment ago.

"Oh, just wanted you to know there's a sail on the horizon. If you wanted to chase it."

Lifeline waves her off. "Nuh. We should be headin' t' port soon t' offload what we got anyway."

"Got it. I'll let the others know." And, like she was never there, she disappears.

As soon as she does, Lifeline grabs Anita's wrist and drags her along.

"L-- Lifeline?"

"We need t' talk," is all she responds.

Anita follows; it's not like she has a choice, what with her captain hanging onto her wrist like a vice.

Lifeline pulls her into her cabin and closes the door behind them.

"Sit. I got questions." She doesn't look back at Anita. Instead, she marches over to where she keeps her alcohol, pours herself a bit, and downs it. She shoves it back away and sits down hard across from Anita at the table. "How d'ya know my name?"

Anita frowns, giving Lifeline a worried look. Obviously this is something she wants hidden. "Your parents have paintings of you all over their manor. You were younger and your hair was different, but... still recognizable."

"And how did yuh make it t' their manor?"

"My mother," Anita answers simply. "She worked for them as a cook."

Lifeline's look softens a touch. "Poor woman. They ain't treat their people right."

Anita snorts. "No kidding. They didn't pay her for her last month of work."

Again, Lifeline scowls. She looks like she wants to say something but she just shakes her head. She runs a hand down her face before speaking. "They still tellin' people about me?"

"There were a few rumours going around the house staff. One said they'd married you off to some far off duke. Another said they were hiding your death and pretending you were still alive so they could replace you so they still had an heir." There's more, Anita just has to remember them. "I think they, your parents, that is, said you were sent to be a nun? And," Anita cuts herself off with a snort. "Another rumour said you were kidnapped by pirates."

Lifeline actually laughs, though it's bitter. "That last one ain't far from the truth." She takes a deep breath. Leaning her weight on the table, she gives Anita a half amused smirk. "Have I told yuh how I ended up a pirate?"

Anita perks up. This is something she actually wants to hear. "No. How?"

"My parents had sent me t' a finishin' school. I raised an absolute riot there, 'nough t' get sent back home. On the way home, our ship got captured by a gorgeous pirate ship. Prettiest ship I'd ever seen, and I'd seen a lot." She sighs as if wistful for that first sight. "Think I fell in love with it right then. But that ain't somethin' t' stop pirates from boardin'. The captain comes aboard, not a man, not a woman. N' our captain had surrendered right away." She's looking off in the distance. She seems happy recounting it. "I was a right little brat then, but the captain goes by me and I just start pesterin' them with questions about their ship. They thought it was funny, so they gave me a tour a' it." She reaches over to touch the nearby wall and gives Anita a warm smile. "She's still a beauty, huh?"

Anita gulps, suddenly overwhelmed by that smile. She doesn't understand that.

"She is," she manages to respond, but she's not sure she's speaking about the ship.

"Anyway. I got a tour a' the ship. The captain had taken a likin' t' me so they say, once the tour is over, that I can ask one thing a' them, and if it's in their power, they'll do it." Lifeline grins. "Whatcha think I asked for?"

Anita chuckles. "Don't tell me you asked for their ship."

"Oh, I did. But they laughed and told me to ask for something else." She leans back. "So I asked to go with 'em."

Anita waits for her to continue the story. There must be more.

"Oh, the crew who'd been tasked with my safety thought I was bein' kidnapped. But nuh. I chose this life." Lifeline hums. "I'm free here. Not t' mention I got my ship in the end."

Anita can't help but laugh. "You got both of the things you wanted."

"Oh, I always get what I want," Lifeline practically purrs out.

A blush warms Anita's face.

"That captain. I visit 'em whenever we dock near where they're livin' now. They done more for me than I could list. They're family." She looks away, wistful. "Might have us head their way soon." She blinks a few times before returning her gaze to Anita. "Listen, 'Nita. Yuh ain't the only one on the ship t' know my name, just the first to know it without me tellin' first. Makoa, Renee, Natalie... Path too. And Park. They know who I am. And I trust yuh, what with yuh savin' 'Koa and how yuh act otherwise... So if it's jus' them around, yuh can call me Ajay too, mmkay?"

Anita is surprised by that. She lets out a quiet chuckle. "Not gonna pull a knife on me again, will you?"

Ajay grins at her, eyes sparkling. "Dun give me a reason to and yuh as safe as houses." She stands and motions to the door. "Yuh best get back to it, 'Nita. I know it's nearly end a' yuh shift, so you must be tired."

Anita stands and heads for the door. "Thanks for, well, not stabbing me. And trusting me to call you it."

"Yuh proved yuhself t' me a few times now. Least I could do."

Anita goes to leave but Lifeline catches her wrist. She doesn't say anything, just holds her still as she goes up on tiptoes to kiss her cheek.

"See yuh tomorrow, 'Nita."

Anita heads below deck. Her face feels hot and inside her chest is warm and full. She doesn't get why. She can't stop smiling either.

She gets down to where her hammock is and starts preparing for bed. She hadn't realized how tired she was until Ajay mentioned it.

"Anita," comes a voice right behind her.

She starts, nearly lashing out, but catches herself. "Fuck, Renee. Don't do that."

"What were you doing with Lifeline?"

"What?"

"You and Lifeline. I came around the corner and she had you against the wall."

Oh yeah. Renee had stumbled across that.

"I said something wrong and she pulled a knife on me."

"Bullshit. You'd be dead if you said something to make her do that."

Anita sighs but looks around. The other beds around are all empty. It's just her and Renee here. "I said her name. I-- I recognized her and said her name, so she pulled a knife on me."

Renee raises an eyebrow. She still doesn't seem to believe her. "She didn't even have a knife out. And how could you recognize her? She's not well known outside of her reputation as a pirate."

"My mother used to work for her family."

She still doesn't believe Anita, it looks like. She crosses her arms.

"She kissed you, didn't she." It's a statement, not a question.

Anita has no idea what that has to do with anything. "Yeah? Why?"

"I knew it."

"Why-- What does it have to do with this?"

"What *doesn't it* have to do with this?"

Anita scowls. "A kiss on the cheek to thank me for not being an ass? I don't see how it relates."

Renee looks confused, her arms dropping to her sides. "Just the cheek?"

She doesn't understand why Renee is making a big deal about this. "Where else?"

Comprehension seems to hit Renee then, but Anita has no clue what she understands. "Anita... Do you like women?"

Knitting her brow, she struggles to respond. "What? I-- I am one?"

Renee lets out a scoff. "*Anita*."

"What?!"

"I'm talking romantically."

"I'm not a man," Anita blurts out almost without meaning to. She's not going around as one anymore. She doesn't want to be. She's Anita, not her brother Jackson.

Renee looks vexed. "You-- Anita! As a woman, do you like women? Romantically?"

Anita is confused. She's never really considered that an option. Is it? Are there women like that? "Is... that a thing?"

"Oh my-- I don't know if I'm the one who should explain this to you, but yes." She sighs. "Have you been with anyone before? Like, been with a man?"

Anita frowns and nods.

"I don't want details, but did you enjoy yourself?"

She shakes her head. "No, but I was under the impression women aren't meant to."

Renee groans. "No, that's just society failing you. Women can and should enjoy sex." She huffs. "Anita, you have a chance to figure yourself out here. I thought you already knew what was up, what with how you interact with women. But... if you don't like men, you might like women. Hell, even if you did like men, you still might like women."

Anita feels like her brain is working slower than molasses. "I... didn't think that was an option."

"Didn't *think* it was or didn't *know* it was?"

Her face heats up. "I don't know."

"Okay, well, guess what I thought was happening isn't. But Anita... How the hell did you see me and Nat and not know women could like women?"

She turns a brighter shade of red. "You two are a couple?"

"For the love of... You know what? Go to bed. Think about things. If you have questions, ask me some other time."

Renee heads off.

"Wait, what did you think was happening?"

"Doesn't matter!" comes a call back.

Anita frowns. She isn't sure how to process this information. She's... admittedly she's always found herself *looking* at women. But that's not because she's attracted to them, it's because she's appreciative of their beauty. Right?

She lays down in her hammock. Her head suddenly feels too full.

Women can like women.

Okay.

Women can be with women.

Alright.

Anita still feels this disconnect, like she's making this up. But thinking on how Nat and Renee act to each other, she knows that it can't be made up. It makes sense, now that she's been told.

But it's really something?

Anita remembers in her teens when a boy from her town had been sweet on her. She had played her part, tried to be what she was supposed to.

None of it had felt right.

But then, she'd always heard things about women don't tend to enjoy sex the way a man does.

She had indulged him then, but she hasn't slept with anyone since. She hadn't gotten married, hadn't moved on to the next stage of life like the friends she'd had in her teens had done.

No, she'd focused on her family and keeping her mother provided for. She didn't need a husband and still doesn't.

Anita tries to imagine what it would be like to have a husband. She would have to care for him, cook and clean for him, and take care of any children that were born from the union.

Ugh, she doesn't want to get pregnant.

She doesn't want to have a husband either.

The logical place to go, given Renee's information, is to imagine having a wife.

Even following that train of thought scares Anita. That's not supposed to be how things are, right?

But no one can know if she entertains the idea unless she tells someone about it.

So she imagines it.

Her wife would be beautiful, with freckles and kind eyes and a sweet smile. Anita wouldn't mind cooking or cleaning for her. Her wife would gladly help where was needed. They would have a dog. At night, they could retire to bed and Anita could hold her wife close before falling asleep.

Warmth fills Anita's chest, making her feel over full, like whatever emotion she's holding in is going to burst out.

Oh.

Okay.

Anita wants to find Renee when she wakes up. She wants to ask her more questions.

But as she climbs out of her hammock, she stumbles. She feels like crap. Her legs feel shaky and her head is light.

She'd barely slept the previous night, too busy trying to figure out the things that were rattling around in her brain.

She sighs. She should feel better after some food.

She finds Renee after breakfast. The woman is chatting with Natalie as they finish their own breakfasts.

“Hey, uh... Renee. Can I talk to you?”

Renee grimaces. “Oh god.” She takes a deep breath. “Yep.”

It's really just them around, but Anita feels so awkward asking about things.

“Were you fucking with me last night?”

The woman huffs. “That's really what you took from that?”

“I don't know! I wanted to make sure.”

Renee stares at her, and, while doing that, says, “Hey, Nat? What are we to each other?”

Natalie is barely paying attention. She's looking over some blueprints as she eats. She doesn't even look up. “Lovers. You are my dearest, mon vie.”

Renee smiles at that. “See?” she says to Anita. “I wasn't messing with you. Women can be attracted to women.”

That seems to catch Natalie's attention. She looks up, her bright blue eyes looking to Anita curiously. “Oh, you as well?”

Anita purses her lips. “Keep it down. And... I don't know.”

“It is not something to be ashamed about! Many of the men and women on this boat are attracted to the same gender.”

“Why don't people hear about it on land then?”

Renee shrugs. “You have to know where to look. What words to listen for. There are people who think it's unnatural but screw them, you know?”

“Might I ask you something, Anita?” Nat is tilting her head to the side.

“Uh. Sure.”

“Do you enjoy looking at a beautiful woman?”

Anita feels her face heat up. This answer is one she has, but she feels embarrassed to say it. “I mean... yeah.”

“What about a handsome man? What do you feel then?”

Those two emotions are vastly different, she realizes. She likes to look at women. Men, she... she doesn't care. She has no feelings on the matter.

“I... I guess I feel indifferent.”

“That may be your answer,” Natalie responds. “Myself and Renee, we both like to look at both, oui? We do not care for the differences of gender. We simply enjoy. But if you get nothing from looking at a man, but enjoy looking at a woman, perhaps you will find women more to your taste.”

“That's not uncommon on this ship,” Renee adds. “There's a few women aboard who don't care for men.”

“Oui! One is our very own captain!”

That surprises Anita. “Really? I thought, well, Lifeline and Makoa...”

Renee laughs. “Makoa prefers to keep company with men. They're close, but it's strictly platonic.”

“Does any of this help?” Natalie asks. Her attention is completely on Anita now. “Or do you have more questions? We are happy to answer!”

Anita shrugs. She doesn't know. She's still not feeling great and having something like that to think about... It doesn't help.

“Why don't you think about it and if you think of anything else, you can ask later?” Renee suggests.

“Yeah. Okay. I've got to get to work anyway.”

Anita barely says a parting. She wanders away from them to go about her duties.

For the rest of the day, Anita steals looks at the women she encounters. Plenty on board are lovely women. She also tries to look at men the same way as she goes, but it feels wrong. They aren't as eye catching, they aren't as pleasing to look at, they aren't as attractive.

Shit.

How could she ignore this part of herself for so long?

She hadn't enjoyed herself with that boy when she was a teen because boys aren't what she enjoys.

It scares and liberates her in equal parts to realize she prefers the company of women.

But still, the fact she might be able to kiss a woman both terrifies her and excites her. She's not broken, she's not unusual, not here. She is simply... herself.

Despite her realizations, she feels shitty the rest of the day. Her body is achy and she keeps losing her balance.

By the time she falls into her hammock, not a thought passes through her mind before she's asleep.

Anita wakes up sicker than a dog. She manages to get a nearby crew mate's attention so the ship's doctor can be told. It hits her a few minutes later that Lifeline is the ship's doctor.

Ajay leans over her in the hammock and gives her a sympathetic look. "Yuh ain't lookin' too great there, sugar." She presses her wrist to Anita's forehead. "Yuh burnin' up. Think yuh can walk?"

"Dunno," Anita barely manages to respond.

Ajay hums. "Let's try. Lean on me, we'll get yuh t' the infirmary."

She helps Anita roll out of the hammock. Anita's legs shake like a newborn foal's as she leans most of her weight on Ajay. Ajay has no issues with the weight of her. The little woman is much stronger than anyone could know just looking at her.

Ajay drags more than leads Anita to the infirmary. She helps her lay down on the cot here.

"Yuh gonna haveta stay here 'til yuh better," Ajay says, leaning over her to feel her forehead again.

Anita's eyes start to drift closed again. The trek to the infirmary had taken what energy she had. The last thing she sees is Ajay's concerned face as she falls asleep.

She wakes later in the day. She feels completely wrecked. She blinks a bit, groaning as light hits her. She tries to sit herself up, but a hand presses back down.

"Easy, Anita," comes Lifeline's voice. "Stay down, mmkay?"

Anita lets herself stay back as she turns her head to find where Ajay is. "Lifeline?"

"I'm right here. How yuh feelin'?" Ajay looks worried as she leans over Anita.

"Thirsty," she admits in a rough voice.

Ajay grabs a waterskin and helps Anita sit up enough to drink. She murmurs encouragements as Anita drinks until the waterskin is empty. Once done, she helps her lay back again.

"Better?"

"Yeah..."

“How yuh feelin’?”

Exhausted. She says as much.

“Not surprised.” She places her hand on Anita's forehead again, but leaves it there for a moment. She brings her hand over the top of Anita's head with her fingers brushing through the curls there.

Anita pushes into the touch almost without meaning to.

Ajay smiles a bit. “Yuh fever ain't broken yet, but yuh just need rest n' water. I'm gonna go get yuh some broth, if yuh think yuh can stay awake?”

“Yeah...”

“Be right back, sugar.”

Anita does her best to look around the infirmary. It seems she's the only one sick. No one else has injuries either. She's alone here.

She stares at the ceiling. Her brain feels slow, but she still keeps thinking about what Renee has revealed to her.

And maybe it's the fever burning her up, but imagining herself with a woman feels right. The thought, the potential... Anita likes it. It feels better than anything imagined with a man.

She'll figure things out more when she isn't sick.

Ajay returns with a bowl in her hands. She sits on the edge of the cot and helps Anita sit up. She raises the bowl to Anita's lips.

Anita drinks as much as she can before she starts feeling nauseous. She pulls back and Ajay lowers the bowl.

She stays there for a moment with an arm holding Anita up. “That all yuh can do right now?”

“I'll... be sick if I have more,” Anita manages. She feels so weak and sore. She sort of droops against Lifeline, unwilling or unable to hold herself up.

Lifeline hums and gently lowers Anita back down on the cot.

“You should get more rest. I'll be here as much as I can. If I ain't here, I'll make sure someone else is here if yuh need me.”

Anita feels like she's already slipping into sleep. “Okay. Thank you, Ajay,” she murmurs out.

She only just catches a soft look from her captain and a quiet, “Thank me when yuh feelin' better.”

And then Anita is asleep again.

Over the next day or so, she wakes up for short durations, only just long enough to do anything she needs to, and then falls back asleep. More often than not, Ajay is the one who is there when she wakes and she's always the one there when Anita falls back asleep.

Her fever finally breaks later the next day. She wakes up and shoves the few covers off of her. She still feels weak, but at least she's not burning up.

"Yuh feelin' better?"

Ajay is sitting nearby. She's reading a book, but sets it aside when she sees Anita is sitting up.

"I... Yeah." She's starving, having only had water and broth for the past two days. On top of that she can feel the remnants of sweat from her fever sticking to her. She wants a chance to eat and bathe.

"Good! Had me worried for a bit there, 'Nita. Glad t' see yuh up." She taps her fingers on the book she has just set down. "Think yuh ready to get back t' real food?"

" Yes ," Anita blurts out. "I'm famished."

Ajay smiles at her and hops up. "Wait here. I'll getcha sometin'." And then she's off.

Anita swings her legs over the edge of the bed and waits patiently. She feels groggy. It's been a good while since she's gotten so sick.

Ajay reappears with a hot bowl of stew in her hands. She passes it to Anita.

"Eat up, then I'm gonna give yuh a quick check up. How yuh feelin'?"

Anita is already digging in when that question is asked. She pauses and shrugs. "I've still got a headache. But otherwise, fine."

"Gimme exacts. Still too warm? Seemed like your fever broke earlier, while yuh were sleepin'."

"I, I don't know. I feel like I need to wash, but other than that and some achiness, I'm okay."

Without warning, Ajay takes Anita by the chin and tilts her head up to examine her. Anita feels her cheeks heat up. Ajay tilts her head one way, then the other, before releasing her.

"Yuh still lookin' a little flushed, but if yuh feelin' okay, should be fine." Ajay hums. "I'm keepin' yuh in the infirmary for another day. Then yuh gonna have two days of light duty at least. Got it?"

"Got it."

"Good. We should be t' port tomorrow, so yuh ain't missin' a chance to go ashore. Jus' dun go too hard, yeah? No gettin' drunk. Doctor's orders."

Anita nods. "Okay."

Ajay's check up mostly consists of questions centered on how Anita is feeling. She answers them truthfully. Ajay seems satisfied after.

"Yuh got friends wonderin' after yuh. I'll let 'em visit now that yuh awake. Good with you?"

Anita isn't certain who wants to visit her but she doesn't mind finding out who wants to check in.

Ajay sits back when Natalie and Renee visit. Of course it's them. She feels like she keeps her distance from most of the crew, but she genuinely enjoys their company. Even if Renee has recently sent her thoughts down a confusing path. Better that than Anita never face the possibility of knowing her own self.

"Feeling better?" Renee asks as she sits.

"Not great, but definitely better."

"You will feel right as rain soon! I know it!" Nat seems to be cheery as usual. "Our captain always does well by those who are sick."

Anita catches Ajay's amused scoff. She's back in the corner of the room, giving them some space. Anita tries to keep her attention on Renee and Natalie.

"How's that other thing of yours?" Renee asks. "You figure it out yet?" She keeps her voice on the lower side, probably to make sure Anita is actually comfortable talking about it in present company.

Anita shrugs. "I think so."

"And?"

She frowns. She doesn't know how to say these things. She's too new to this. "I mean... I think it's... exclusively women. I didn't even know that was a damn option but... yeah."

"It is no shameful thing to have a love for women! You will find no one on this ship will hold it against you. Or on The Briar or The Rose."

Natalie obviously means well by saying it, but she doesn't bother to lower her voice at all. And Anita trusts Ajay-- which is a realization she will have to dig into more, later-- but why does it feel so strange to have her learn that about Anita?

Anita glances at her captain and finds Ajay looking at her. She seems curious more than anything else. Anita feels her face go warm when their eyes meet and she looks away.

"We can answer more questions if you have any," Natalie continues.

Renee looks at her quizzically, obviously noticing the blush on her cheeks. She glances in the direction Anita had been looking just in time to see Ajay stepping out of the room. A smirk appears on her lips.

With a scowl, Anita crosses her arms. She still needs time to figure out how she feels about things. To figure out how she feels about preferring women. Renee is seemingly all too ready to tease about Ajay-- why would she? Why would teasing about Ajay affect her?

Is Anita sweet on Ajay?

"Why don't you go with us one of the days we're in port?" Renee offers, cutting into Anita's train of thought. "Plenty of women to look at. Hell, maybe we find you one to spend the night with."

The heat in Anita's cheeks burn brighter at the thought. "I've known for all of three damn days that I like women. I'm not going to jump straight into bed with one, especially not some stranger."

"Suit yourself. The offer stands though."

Anita steers the conversation away from that. She needs to figure out at least some of it on her own.

Instead, Anita catches up on small things around the ship. There's nothing huge that she's missed. She finds what shore they'll be going to port at though. It's one Anita has visited once before, but that had been during her first voyage out from home.

It's strange to think she's visiting it now as a pirate.

They aren't chatting for long when Anita yawns. She's tired, despite sleeping for a majority of the last couple days.

"Alright, ladies," Ajay speaks up. She had reentered the room at some point, though Anita hadn't noticed. "Visitin' time is over. 'Nita needs more rest."

Renee and Nat stand and promise to see Anita tomorrow once they reach the dock. Ajay ushers them out. Once they're gone, Ajay turns back to Anita.

"Think yuh gonna be fine," she assures. "But like I said. Sleep here tonight. Tomorrow yuh can get back to it."

Anita nods, knowing better than to disobey her captain. She lays back down and covers a yawn.

"Ajay?"

The woman stops from where she'd been about to leave. "Yeah?"

"How'd you know you like women? How'd you find out?"

There's a chuckle from Lifeline before she leans on the wall, regarding Anita with a curious look. "Think I always knew. Never looked at a man the way I do at women. At least, wasn't a surprise to me when I found others like me." She shrugs. "I was pretty used t' being a disappointment t' my parents by then. Likin' women was just another thing on the list."

Anita purses her lips. "I don't get that."

"Dun get what?"

She shrugs. "The disappointment thing. You've got more of a reputation than they do at this point. A little more... pirate-y, but oh well."

Ajay actually laughs at that. "Oh, sugar, that ain't the kinda reputation most people want. Certainly not my parents."

Anita regards her for a moment. "I don't know," she admits. "From what I've seen of them and how they interact with their people... You're much better than they are. Pirate or no."

The expression that appears on Ajay's face is softer than Anita had yet to see. "Sweet of yuh, 'Nita." She hums. "Yuh different than yuh were when yuh first joined us."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Anita jokes.

Ajay just smiles and shakes her head. "I'm glad t' have yuh on my crew is all." She takes a deep breath. "Now get yuh rest. I'll see yuh in the mornin'."

It's been months since Anita has been on land. She's almost surprised at how little she missed it.

They're in a fairly well off port. There's plenty of ships and no sign of the navy so far.

"Besides restocking, why are we here?" Anita asks.

Renee makes a gesture towards the market. "Makoa and Park are selling off the haul we have so it can be split between the crew easier."

"Is Lifeline planning to divide soon?"

"Probably. It won't be at this port, though. Maybe one up the coast a bit."

Anita has thought about when it reaches that point. With the company divided, she could go home with her share. But half of it would have to be used to get home. She's not sure what her plan is. These ports, this coast, is far from home. She wouldn't mind going back on the account, if it was Lifeline's ship again. With the months she's been there, it's her home right now. She's comfortable there.

A good portion of the crew is at the tavern Renee and Natalie bring her to. She notices it's quite a few of the women from crew here. This must be a safer spot for the more piratical brand of women Anita has come to find herself near.

By the doctor's orders, Anita doesn't drink. She instead spends the evening with her crewmates and finds herself realizing that her bias against pirates really is... stupid. These are just people. And the women she knows from the crew, they couldn't be how they are if they

were stuck on shore. Natalie couldn't be a carpenter, she and Renee couldn't openly love each other. Ajay would be trapped in an unhappy life with cruel parents.

"Hey, does Lifeline ever get off the boat?"

Anita remembers the woman mentioning this morning that she would be staying on the ship.

"At most ports, no," Renee answers. "Why?"

Anita shrugs. "Just hadn't seen her."

The woman raises an eyebrow, but stays silent.

"It is safer for the captain to stay on the ship," Natalie pipes up. "A precaution, but I believe she is happier at sea than she is on land."

"Huh," is all Anita says in response.

The night progresses easily and the liquor flows. Anita heads back to the ship a little earlier than the others. There isn't terribly much to do with a crowd of drunken sailors that she is willing to do.

She passes the man left on watch with a nod.

She's tired, still low energy from being sick. She looks forward to climbing into her hammock and finally sleeping.

"Hey there, Williams!" comes a loud call from a familiar voice.

"Makoa," she greets as she heads over to him. "Not out with the others?"

"Nah, maybe tomorrow. About to have a nightcap with Ajay before heading to bed. Wanna join us?"

Anita shakes her head. "I won't intrude."

"Nonsense!" he says with a laugh. "Ajay will be glad to see you." He claps a hand on her shoulder. "If ya haven't figured it out yet, you're one of us. *The Queen's Court*, " he jokes. "And she considers you a friend. Come on."

Anita lets him guide her on to Ajay's cabin. She isn't sure why she doesn't fight it more, but she enjoys the company of them both.

He knocks and enters, announcing, "Brought a guest!"

Ajay is already seated at the table. She's got her hair down again. It falls curly around her shoulders, framing her pretty face.

Anita almost doesn't notice that Ajay isn't alone. Across from her is Park, the acting captain of The Rose. He's a dark haired man of Korean descent. He gives her a nod. They've only met

in passing.

"Nita!" Ajay says with a smile. "Yuh joinin' us for a glass before bed?"

"If I'm not intruding, sure."

"Nuh, yuh ain't. Yuh good company." Ajay pats the chair next to her. "Come sit. Have a bit a' wine before yuh sleep."

Anita sits in the offered chair. Ajay sets a hand on her arm and squeezes gently. "It's a little celebration anyway. Got our goods sold off, now we got the money t' pay for the people on the ships!"

"Made a good haul then?"

"You bet we did!" Makoa chimes in. "Great prices in this port. If a man thinks his share isn't enough after this, then there's no pleasing him."

Anita is happy to hear she'll get a decent share when the company is split. The more she gets, the more she can give to her mother later on.

Ajay pours wine for each of them. The atmosphere is relaxed, but Anita feels hyper aware of Ajay at her side. Sometimes, in Ajay's movements as she's recounting a story or simply chatting, she'll bump against Anita. It's never an issue.

But if it doesn't bug her, why does Anita feel so affected by it?

And then returns the thought that, maybe, just maybe, Anita is sweet on Ajay. It would probably explain the effect Ajay has on her, right? Why Anita feels warm and happy whenever Ajay gives her attention she didn't need to, why Anita feels like she might do anything for her captain?

She decides to think about that later.

Right now, she's enjoying the company she's with and the warmth of the wine she's drinking.

Sails are sighted on the horizon, and to Anita's surprise, the ship comes towards them. Renee is tense beside her.

"They're going to strike their colours," Renee whispers. "Pretty sure that's another pirate."

"What usually happens when two pirate ships meet?"

Renee purses her lips. "More often than not, they just trade information. It really depends on who's ship this is. If they're the decent sort, Lifeline will talk to their captain for a bit, and then they'll be on their way. If they aren't, there might be fighting."

Sure enough, both the other ship and The Death of Compassion strike their colours. The Briar and The Rose are nowhere to be seen, but Anita knows they're never far off.

Lifeline is on the deck not even a moment later.

As the ships come to be beside each other, Lifeline addresses the other captain. It's a man, which isn't really a surprise. Their chat starts out friendly enough, but Anita feels tense. Something is off here. Renee seems to feel the same. Her shoulders are braced and she's got a hand on the rapier on her hip.

Something changes in the dialogue. The man's tone turns a bit threatening, almost sinister, when Ajay answers a question in a way he must not like.

Anita readies herself. It won't be hard for the other pirates to board.

Sure enough, they're rushed. The other ship isn't much smaller than their own, so the numbers may be near equal.

The enemy crew seems surprised to take on women, but it's an advantage for Anita. She's got more skill than the men she's facing and she intends to show them.

Anita is not alone in her experience with a blade. The rest of the crew fight around her, repelling back the boarders.

Somehow in the fight, she ends up not far from Ajay. The woman is facing two men, both larger than her. She's handling them easily.

Anita dispatches the man she's fighting in time to see a third man attempting to take Ajay by surprise. Anita leaps forward, catching the blade on hers. The man sneers and is quick to flick the blade up and catch Anita's upper right arm. She grimaces and tosses her cutlass to her left hand to fight on.

She hears Ajay swear and suddenly they're fighting back to back.

"Yuh doin' alright, Williams?" Ajay calls to her.

"As fine as I can." It's then that Anita notices The Rose swooping in to flank the enemy ship. "Reinforcements are here!"

"About time!"

The enemy starts flagging immediately. They'd gone from a near even match to being incredibly outnumbered. It only gets worse when The Briar joins in.

It's not much later when the fighting stops. The enemy captain is in bad shape. Makoa has him tied to the mast to wait until Ajay can get at him.

But Ajay is busy right now. She's tending to the wounded as best she can, but there are quite a few.

Anita stows her cutlass and approaches. "Tell me how to help."

Ajay looks up and her and frowns. "Yuh gonna riskin' bleed out if yuh don't focus on yuhself for a second."

Anita is confused and looks to where Ajay's gaze is. "Shit."

Blood has soaked a good portion of her arm, running down from the cut she'd sustained earlier.

"Yuh ain't my highest priority patient right now, so wrap a bandage around it t' try t' stop the bleeding." Ajay's focus is back on the sailor in front of her. It looks like he's on death's door.

Anita does as she says, struggling to get the tie tight. Ajay wordlessly grabs it and tries the knot before heading to her next patient.

It's an hour later when Ajay finds her again.

"Alright, 'Nita. I got the other doctors from Briar n' Rose on board helpin' now, so lemme get a look atcha arm."

Anita nods. She's sitting on a crate, feeling lightheaded.

Ajay steps closer and examines the sleeve around the wound. "I'm gonna cut yuh sleeve away. Got it?"

Again, Anita only nods. She stays as still as she can as Ajay carefully cuts the fabric of her sleeve off. The drying blood pulls at the wound as Ajay peels the fabric away and Anita grits her teeth and swears through it.

Ajay's gaze, all soft and worried, flashes up to Anita's face. "Sorry, sugar," she whispers.

"It's fine," Anita bites out.

Ajay examines the wound closer, still frowning. It's still oozing blood, but it's not as deep as it could have been.

"I saw yuh get this stoppin' that man from gettin' t' me," Ajay whispers to her. "Real chivalrous of yuh."

"I couldn't just let you get flanked like that."

"Hm." Ajay seems to make a decision on the wound. "This is gonna hurt a bit, okay, 'Nita?"

Anita braces herself. "Go for it."

Ajay takes a clean cloth from a pouch on her hip and, after pouring some water over Anita's arm, begins to wipe away the blood around the wound. The bleeding is much slower now. Her quick and careful wipes pull at the wound and make Anita grimace. Ajay whispers another apology and wraps a new bandage around the wound as quickly as she can. The new one is much better done and is comfortably firm.

"Now, shouldn't get an infection. The bandage has a little bit 'a honey on it to keep infection out."

"It's already feeling better." After making sure they're plenty separated from anyone else, she murmurs a soft, "Thank you, Ajay."

Ajay meets her eyes with a sweet smile. It makes Anita's face feel warm and her chest feel full.

"Ain't a problem, sugar." She tilts her head to the side. "But this is the third time yuh needed treatment since joinin' my crew. If yuh just like my company, I'd prefer yuh visitin' my cabin, not gettin' hurt or sick."

Anita's face is burning brighter but she manages a smile. "You got me. Made myself sick just to see you more."

Ajay laughs, delighted. "Then yuh best come visit me rather than end up in the infirmary. I like yuh in one piece, 'Nita. Yuh best remember that."

"I'll try," comes the promise.

"Good. Get hurt again n' I'll put yuh on cleanin' duty for a week as punishment." Ajay winks at her and Anita feels like her face couldn't be any more red than it is in that moment.

"Now, since yuh all treated for now, I gotta make sure others are treated to. Then I'll deal with that asshole on the other ship."

"What do you plan to do about them?"

Ajay frowns. "Gonna talk to the crew first. Get a read on who's good and who's bad. Might let some join us here, but I'll probably try n' find a decent captain among 'em that knows better than to start fights with other pirates." A sigh escapes her. "The captain they got now is gonna die. I know him and what he's done. I'm makin' the world a better place by takin' him out of it," she says darkly.

Anita nods. She trusts Ajay to make the right decision.

Ajay takes in a deep breath. "Alright. Gotta get back to it." She bounces on her feet for a moment. "Why dun yuh come have a night cap with me tonight? When I'm done with this."

Anita is surprised by the invite. But before she can really process it, she's already answering with a quiet, "Sure."

Again, Ajay smiles at her. She reaches out to touch Anita's cheek ever so slightly before heading back to the infirmary.

Anita stays where she is. She's lightheaded for an entirely different reason now.

Anita waits until she sees Ajay head to her cabin to go that way herself.

She knocks and there's a call to have her come in.

"Hey, Ajay," she greets.

Ajay looks up at her where she's sitting at the table. She seems tired. She's slouched forward with her arms on the table.

"Hey, 'Nita," Ajay mumbles. "Glad yuh showed up. How's yuh arm feelin'?"

"Fine if I don't move it."

Ajay pats the open chair beside her and Anita takes it.

"Are you okay?" Anita asks. "You look beat."

Ajay lazily waves a hand. "I'm fine. Just tired from the day." She hums. "Hate fightin' other pirates. Ain't right t' make trouble for the people like yuh." She leans a bit against Anita. "Some a' the crew are dead. Plenty injured." She grits her teeth. "These are *my people*," she spits. "And now they're dead or hurt 'cause that ass couldn't just act like a respectable pirate."

The enemy pirate captain is dead now. Keelhauled, just to get him gone. Ajay had loudly considered other options while pacing in front of him. Keelhauling was a mercy compared to what could have been done.

Anita wants to comfort Ajay, but she's not sure how. At a loss, she sets a hand on Ajay's shoulder. Ajay raises a gloved hand to place on it, her body leaning just a bit more against Anita.

Still she speaks. "Pirates ain't suppose t' come to blows like that. We got enough trouble without being stupid." Her name eyes flicker over to look at Anita. "Sorry you got hurt for me, dumplin'."

Anita feels an ache in her chest.

"It's not your fault. You had no interest in fighting. And you patched me up after."

Ajay gives her a thankful smile, but it still seems sad. "I got your back. 'Membra me tell you."

"The crew knows you'd do anything to protect them. We all see you doing your best to keep us healthy. You work beside the other doctors to make sure we heal right. Ajay-- we all know how much effort you put into your crew. Hell, even I do, and do you remember what I was like when I first joined up?"

Ajay is smiling a little now. "Yuh mean when yuh would jump if I even looked at yuh?"

"That and before that too. I joined for shit reasons, just trying to get off The Lamplight, and I hated being a pirate."

Tilting her head, still looking amused, Ajay asks, "How yuh feelin' about it now?"

"Nervous but... I think things make more sense to me here. I got past my prejudices and things make sense." Anita shrugs. "And I know more about myself now. That alone is enough, I think."

Taking in a deep breath, Ajay shifts and tugs Anita into a hug. Anita goes into it willingly, wrapping her arms around Ajay's shoulders as Ajay's go around her waist. It pulls at her wound, but it's worth it. Anita turns her face a bit, nose in Ajay's hair. And they're both obviously sweaty from the day's events, but Ajay's hair somehow smells of lavender.

It takes a few long seconds before they part. Ajay turns back to rest against the table, but she stays against Anita's side. Anita hesitates for a moment but still gently lets her left arm rest over Ajay's shoulders. Ajay, who's got her chin resting on her crossed arms with her eyes closed, makes a contented noise at the back of her throat.

This is all new to Anita.

The feelings Ajay stirs in her are wild and uncharted. She enjoys the warmth they bring to be, despite the anxiety sitting with it. And this, this has got to be what she had been supposed to feel for that boy she'd been with in her teens. This is attraction, caring, romantic interest, or *something*, and it's all so new to Anita. She doesn't have the name for it.

There's a knock on the door and Anita starts as if she's been caught doing something she shouldn't. But then Ajay reaches up to tug her partially raised arm back down.

Anita takes a deep breath. She's okay here. She's safe here.

"Who issit?" Ajay asks. Her eyes are still closed and she's still leaned into Anita's side.

"Just us," comes Renee's voice.

"Come in."

Renee and Nat enter. Anita dips her head to acknowledge them. She half expects Renee to comment on their proximity, but the woman just comes over and wraps Ajay in a hug. Nat joins it instantly. They both must know how Ajay feels about this.

Anita, having properly withdrawn her arm, feels awkward, until Ajay turns her head and says, "You too, 'Nita. Get in on this."

With that, Anita wraps her arms around the three of them.

If only for the moment, things are okay.

Anita's arm heals fast. Ajay checks on it every day to make sure it isn't infected. She's lucky that it just forms into a scar. It's a rather large scar on her bicep, but she doesn't mind it.

She *really* doesn't mind it when Ajay pulls a finger down it and smiles, murmuring out, "Makes yuh look tough, 'Nita."

The company will be broken up at the next port, Anita knows. It's a bit nerve wracking. They've headed farther away from her home town where her mother is, so the fear of using up the money to get home is ever present. Her original plan had been to leave as soon as she had a chance, but...

She's going to sign on again.

Anita finds comfort in the life she's living right now. The work may be hard and some of the crew might be surly, but Anita is happy here.

She has no intention of touching her share of the haul while on the ship. Every cent that she can save will be going to her mother. Maybe they'll be able to fix the leak in the roof. Maybe they can finally get a new cow. There's a lot to be done with the money she'll have.

In the meantime, Anita is focused on figuring out her own shit. Natalie is great about Anita asking questions on things between women, but Anita turns bright red when Renee describes how it is that two women can engage in sex. Obvious in retrospect, but at least Anita can know more about this sort of thing.

It turns out many of the crew have preferences similar to her own. She feels among her own here. There's a sense of being that she finds here that she clings to.

It's an afternoon a few days out from the coast when they run into another ship. Ajay has no intention of chasing down another merchant.

Anita is nervous when it heads for them. Renee appears beside her, Natalie close behind.

"Another pirate, you think?"

Renee seems much more relaxed this time. She nods. "Yeah, but we don't have to worry."

"Why not?"

"That is the Wolf's Bounty," Natalie explains. "Ajay is friends with the captain. We do not cross her path often, but it is very unlikely to have a clash like our last one."

Ajay is already standing on deck, not far off. She watches the flags on the other ship and after a moment, smiles.

She calls out to the crew to have the ship pull alongside the other.

The crew around Anita seems to know the call and grow excited by it. A shanty starts low and is soon ringing out over the waves, echoed back to them by the other ship.

In the windy old weather, stormy old weather, when the wind blows we all pull together!

The mood of the ship is happy and bright. All at once, the ships move closer, until they're side by side.

"Yuh ship lookin' fine as always!" Lifeline calls over the water.

The reply is barely heard over the shanty. “Of course, beautiful! I would never let you show me up with the Death here!”

When up jumped a herring, the queen of the sea, says “Now, old skipper, you cannot catch me!”

Lifeline laughs.

“What’s happening?” Anita asks.

“This is your first time for this sort of thing,” Renee comments.

“It’s time for a party, ‘Nita!” Ajay gives her a smile. “Yuh already met the bad kinda pirate last fight. Now yuh can meet the type we like runnin’ into.”

And up jumped the mackerel with her stripped back! She sang out old skipper, hum haul your main tag!

Ajay joins in with the shanty, her voice strong and clear. Renee and Natalie join in the song too. Anita can’t help but do the same.

When Ajay had said party, she really meant party. There’s music and dancing and both The Wolf’s Bounty and The Death of Compassion. There’s plenty of drinking as well, enough that there are people stationed at the crossing between the boats to keep drunk sailors from falling in the sea.

Anita plays some music for a bit. It’s been a while since she did, but she gets back into it fast enough.

Later in the night, she follows Renee and Natalie to The Wolf’s Bounty. The deck has been cleared away for a dance floor. Anita sits back, simply enjoying being on the side lines as others dance. Nat has already pulled Renee out to dance.

Anita is leaning back, watching those on the dance floor, when someone walks up to her side.

“You must be new to Lifeline’s crew,” comes a smooth voice. “I thought I’d already met the prettiest of her people.”

Anita feels her cheeks heat up just a bit. She turns to the voice to find the captain of the Wolf’s Bounty. Renee had mentioned her name earlier. Loba, if Anita remembers right.

She dips her head in greeting. “Anita Williams. I joined her a few months ago now. I’m far from the newest crew member at this point.”

Loba waves her off. “The men tend to bore me. They’re so common at sea. But women, mm, it is such a *treat* to have them around.”

She moves closer to Anita, lightly touching her shoulder.

Anita isn't sure if she's into this or not. Loba is a beautiful woman, but Anita still feels very new to this knowledge that she's interested in women. It's nice to have a woman show interest in her, though.

Loba's touch shifts down, tracing the fresh scar on Anita's bicep. "Such a strong fighter too, hm? How unlucky was the person who gave you this?"

Anita tries to find a response to what Loba has asked, but she hears her name be called.

"Nita!"

Ajay is approaching her, apparently from off the dance floor.

"Hey, Lifeline," she greets with a smile.

Before Anita can really react, Ajay is grabbing her hand. "Come dance with me, sugar!" She pulls Anita away from Loba and out into the dance.

Anita can't resist following her captain out onto the dance floor. Ajay laughs and Anita can't help but match it as Ajay leads. It's been a long time since Anita properly enjoyed herself like this. She can barely look away from Ajay. Her buns are coming loose, curls starting to spill down to frame her face.

Looking at Ajay, Anita wonders how she never noticed she was attracted to women. And maybe it's just because it's late at night and the party has her feeling good, but she likes being here with this woman. She likes holding her for the sparse seconds where the dance calls for it.

The song ends and changes to something else.

Ajay and Anita come to a stop, laughing against each other.

"Chose myself quite a dance partner!" Ajay jokes. "Thank yuh for joinin' me."

"Of course. I had fun."

Anita remembers Loba then and glances over to where she'd been before.

Loba meets her eyes. With a small gesture of her hand and a dip of her head, she seems to concede. To what, Anita isn't sure. To Ajay?

But she turns and heads off.

Ajay steps back with a yawn. "Gettin' late. Might pass off watch t' one of the others so I can get some sleep." Her warm hazel eyes flick up to Anita. "See yuh in the mornin', kay, 'Nita?"

"Yeah! Goodnight."

Anita watches Ajay head off, back to The Death of Compassion.

She takes a deep breath. She's feeling pretty tired too.

Anita heads back to her ship and to her hammock. She dreams of dancing that night.

"Hey, Renee?"

"Hm?" The woman is tucking into her dinner. Natalie, surprisingly, has yet to join her.

"Can I ask your opinion on something?"

Renee nods but doesn't say anything as she chews her food.

"I was thinking about asking if Ajay would be willing to spend the day with me when we get to port." Anita feels awkward asking about this, but she trusts Renee. Not to mention, Renee knows Ajay. She'll be able to tell if this is a good idea or not. "She never seems to leave the boat, but I was thinking I could dress as a man so she could be out and about a bit easier."

Renee looks up at her. The expression is half curious. She pauses for just a moment before digging back into her food. "I would say go for it. I think she would really enjoy that."

"You do?"

"Yeah. Both getting off the ship and spending time with you." She shrugs. "Pretty sure she'll say yes."

Anita feels bolstered at that. "Great!"

"You should go ask soon. We'll be at port before morning. And she intends to split the company as soon as possible."

That sends a spike of anxiety through her. But yes, she should go ask soon. She pushes herself up, says a quick "thanks, Renee!" and heads for the captain's cabin.

Anita has to brace herself with a deep breath before she knocks.

"Who is it?"

"It's me. Anita."

"Come on in, sugar."

Ajay is seated in front of a mirror when Anita enters. She seems to be in the process of taking her hair down.

"What brings yuh my way, 'Nita?"

"You said you'd rather I visit instead of get hurt to see you," she jokes.

Ajay grins. "Glad yuh usin' yuh sense then. Any reason t' see me, or am I just lucky?"

Anita can't help but grin. "I have a reason. I was wondering if you'd like to spend some time with me when we reach port."

Her captain pauses and examines her with a warm expression. She's giving Anita a fond smile. "So I am lucky. Sure. What'd yuh have in mind?"

"I know you rarely get off the ship once we're in port, but I was thinking I could dress as a man again so I could escort you anywhere you wanted to go."

She seems almost surprised at Anita's offer. "Spend the day together?"

"Uh, yeah. If that's okay."

"Course it is. Think I might like the idea." She leans her chin on her hand. "Might like the idea a' us dressin' up a bit more. I'm sure we got some men's finery 'round here somewhere that would fit yuh."

"Works for me. My only plan was spending the day with you," Anita admits sort of sheepishly as she rubs a hand over the back of her neck.

That just seems to make Ajay smile more.

"Why dun yuh find Park when we dock? I'm sure he can lend yuh something' a' his. Yuh ain't too far off from the same size."

Anita finds herself standing outside Ajay's cabin dressed in a handsome outfit. It had taken some time to find one that worked. She'd gone for something in a muted red to bring some colour to her standard outfit. There are gold accents to it. She thinks she looks good, even with her chest bound.

Honestly, the only reason Anita had decided to present as a man was so she could be close to Ajay with no questions while on land. If she plays the part of a suitor, she can offer Ajay her arm and escort her wherever she likes. If she just played a bodyguard, simple closeness might be questioned. If they both dressed as women, it might make people wonder why two unaccompanied women were doing as they did.

No, it makes sense for Anita to do this.

She knocks.

"Come in!" is the immediate response.

Anita is greeted with a lovely sight. Ajay is in a pale pink dress with gold accents. Her hair is mostly down and curly. Her eyes seem to sparkle as she looks over Anita with a grin.

"Mm, yuh look lovely, 'Nita."

"Stunning!" Natalie chimes in.

Anita hadn't even noticed she was in the room. "Thanks." She trails her eyes over Ajay again. She looks gorgeous.

Nat hops up. "I am going to go get that hair piece you mentioned! I will be back!" She darts out of the cabin, leaving Anita alone with Ajay.

"You look amazing," Anita manages to say. She can't look away from Ajay's hands. This is the first time she's ever seen the woman out of gloves.

"Thank yuh, sugar." She catches where Anita's gaze is and steps closer. She offers a hand out. "Yuh can look, if yuh worried."

Anita takes Ajay's hand in both of her own. She traces the lines on her palm, almost in a trance. She's not even thinking about the rumour, not thinking about blood stained palms. She's thinking of the woman in front of her.

Ajay steps in even closer, turning her hands to hold Anita's. "Been a while since yuh jumped from me bein' near yuh," she murmurs. "But I'm glad yuh dun find me scary anymore."

"I don't know if you ever... *scared* me," Anita tries. It's a joke, because *yes*, The Pirate Queen scared her. No one with sense wouldn't be scared, if they had only heard the stories. "Intimidated, maybe."

"Mm, that why yuh were so jumpy?" Ajay is smiling at her. "Am I still intimidatin'?"

"Oh, fuck yes. But it's in a different way now."

Her eyes seem to light up with that. She tilts her head, curiosity getting the best of her. "That so? What's different?"

Anita doesn't really know how to respond. She starts to try, but the door opens.

Natalie comes in with Renee right behind her. "I have the hair piece!" comes the announcement.

Ajay and Anita don't part for a few short seconds before Ajay steps back to sit. Natalie gets right to fixing her hair. The piece is a pretty little bit of gold shaped like the silhouette of a bird.

"You both look good," Renee comments.

Natalie finishes with Ajay's hair and Ajay stands up again. Anita can barely take her eyes off her. Nat and Renee follow them as they head for the dock. Anita offers her arm to Ajay, who takes it with a happy little smile.

At the bottom of the ramp, the four part ways. Natalie and Renee head towards the taverns, where much of the crew are spending their portion of the haul. Ajay and Anita head, arm in arm, to the finer parts of town.

Anita lets Ajay take the lead. This is more about her than actually seeing the town for Anita. Ajay seems happy and rarely strays from Anita's side. If she sees something she wants to check out, she guides Anita that way.

At one point they stop in a general store. They browse what's available as they chat. No one but the shopkeeper gives them a second look, and the shopkeeper just tries to sell them the handsome musket on the wall.

Anita actually considers it for a moment; she's got the money since her share was generous. Despite that, she just can't see the sense in it. If she needs a musket for some reason, she can use one from the Death of Compassion's stores.

Ajay offers to buy it for Anita when she sees her eyeing it. Anita declines; this is about Ajay. There's no reason for Ajay to get her a gift. But before Anita can even finish saying "No thank you", Ajay has darted from her side and is speaking to the shopkeep.

A few minutes later, they're back outside with knowledge the musket will be delivered to the ship before they return that night.

Anita is bright red when she murmurs Ajay didn't have to do that. Ajay just laughs and assures her that she likes taking care of her people.

Later on in the day, they stumble onto a celebration of sorts that seems to have a third of the town taking part. Ajay pulls her to dance and time passes quickly after that. Hours seem to pass between them as they dance. It feels like barely any time at all has gone by when the sun starts to set.

Tired from the long day, they head back to the ship.

"Yuh seem t' be fittin' in better with the crew lately," Ajay comments. At some point in the walk home, she'd gone from holding onto Anita's arm to holding her hand. "No one treatin' yuh poorly, is there?"

Anita shrugs. "A few of the crew seem to just not like me, but I don't really care. One got angry when you put me in charge of the guns on the ship. Said you were treating me better because I was one of your favourites.

Ajay laughs; Anita loves the sound of it. "Yuh weren't one a' "my favourites" back then. Yuh skill got yuh that job."

"Back then, huh?"

She squeezes Anita's hand. "Yeah, back then. But now I get t' see yuh pretty face more often every day and I got t' know yuh better. 'Course yuh my favourite after all a' that." There's a brief moment of silence before she speaks up again. "Can I ask yuh sometin'?"

"Of course."

"Since we just split the company... Was this, what we did today... Was it more of a goodbye? Or am I lucky enough t' have yuh stick around?"

“I’m going back on the accord,” Anita answers with only a little hesitation. “I know I could go home, but... it’s pointless.”

“Why’s it pointless?”

Anita shrugs. “I’d have to spend most of the money I got today on passage. That defeats the point of trying to bring my mother more than a few dollars.”

“Yuh bringin’ yuh share t’ yuh mother?” Ajay asks quietly.

“Yes. My brothers aren’t home to help-- They send what they can when they can, which is why I’m not as nervous about how long I’ve been gone, but what I have right now could make it so she doesn’t have to worry for months. Maybe more.”

“Yuh a good woman, ‘Nita.”

They reach the ramp back to the ship. Anita can’t help but notice Ajay keeps hold of her hand, even past the woman stationed on watch. When they get to Ajay’s cabin door, Ajay looks up at her with a small smile.

“Wanna come in for a night cap?” she asks in a whisper.

Anita doesn’t think, just nods.

Ajay lets go of her hand as they get inside and gestures her to the table they always sit at. “I’ll get the drinks,” she says as she heads for the cabinet.

Anita sits and watches as Ajay finds them each a cup and pulls out a bottle of bourbon. She sets them on the table, but rather than sit beside or across from Anita, Ajay sits down right in Anita’s lap.

“Ajay?” Anita asks. She’s a little overwhelmed with the sudden closeness.

Ajay hooks her arms on Anita’s shoulders. “I had a very good time with yuh today, ‘Nita,” she murmurs.

Anita wants to respond in kind, that she enjoyed herself too, but she can barely think with Ajay so close.

“I’m glad yuh stayin’ on board for a while. Gives me time t’ properly thank yuh for such a good day out.” Ajay leans in but pauses. “Can I kiss yuh?”

“ Yes ,” Anita croaks out, almost desperate.

Ajay chuckles, but then she leans back in.

The kiss is chaste for a moment, but soon Ajay has a hand tangled in Anita’s hair and Anita has her arms around Ajay.

Anita feels stupid for not experiencing this before now, for not knowing she was attracted to women before her time on this ship. How could she have missed out on this? Ajay is close and her body is warm under Anita's hands.

Somewhere in the back of Anita's mind, she realizes this is The Pirate Queen she's kissing. It's the Pirate Queen who's kissing her. A woman who can put more fear in a man than Davy Jones himself is kissing her like their lives depend on it.

But at the front of Anita's mind, her thoughts are nothing but Ajay, Ajay, *Ajay*.

At some point Ajay shifts to straddling Anita's lap. Her dress is riding up and Anita is practically startled when her hands touch the warm flesh of Ajay's thighs. All at once, she feels completely overwhelmed.

Ajay pulls back, eyes dark and expression soft. "Nita?"

Anita finds herself short of breath. She's still got one hand on Ajay's thigh, the other still at her waist. It's overwhelming in the best ways, but Anita needs at least a little time to process before she goes farther.

But she does want to go farther. At some point.

"Sorry," she blurts. "I just... don't know what I'm ready for yet."

Ajay gives her a gentle smile. "Dun worry. We got time."

Anita meets the smile. "Yeah. We do."

The following time on the ship only improves for Anita. She spends what time she can with Ajay. This includes at least one meal a day, often more, and some time together before bed.

They keep their relationship quiet, but the people who need to know do. Renee and Nat are both happy for them. Makoa claps Anita on the shoulder and claims they both did well in finding each other. Park doesn't really respond, but he's always been a quiet one. Path seems ecstatic. He's always seemed like an emotional man, so Anita isn't terribly surprised.

Anita knows Ajay is moving slow with her, and she can't thank the woman enough for it. She's still finding her comfort zone when it comes to this and with how fresh the discovery still feels, Ajay letting her set the pace is necessary.

Anita's share of the bounty is tucked away. She's not the only person on the ship that's saving. Most, however, spent it all the first two nights in port. While Ajay and Anita spent time together, they were drinking away their share and spending it on anything and anyone they could.

The next time the company is split, Anita hopes it'll be closer to home. She doesn't like the thought of leaving Ajay, but family comes first. Maybe she can still keep in contact with Ajay and the others on the ship, but right now, she's not going to think about the future parting.

Right now, she's focused on her work on the ship, the friends she's made, and, of course, Ajay.

Some weeks into their travel, they take a ship.

It doesn't fight, but this ship has passengers on board. They've taken ships with such before, but the difference here lies in the fact two of them are women.

Lifeline boards. She brings Renee and Anita with her.

The other ship's crew all seem to whisper to each other as they walk pass. Anita hears more than one disbelieving "the queen?". The men part before Lifeline without her having to say a word.

Anita wonders if she should find that attractive. Ajay is feared and... Anita is more than okay with that.

The two women seem to be a mother and a daughter. The mother seems absolutely horrified that piratical women are addressing her. The daughter, likely no more than seventeen, seems half fearful and half angry.

Ajay speaks calmly, though the mother is being unruly.

She asks them how they are and if their trip has been good. The mother responds angrily with an almost sarcastic comment on how it was fine until the pirates boarded.

During this, the daughter seems to grow uneasy. She tries to speak more than once, but her mother simply talks over her.

Eventually, Ajay's patience seems to wear thin. She orders Renee to guide the mother back to the crew. The mother protests leaving her child behind, but the daughter doesn't seem to want to go with her.

As soon as her mother is gone, the girl speaks.

Her trip has been horrible. Her mother is controlling and has arranged her marriage to someone twice her age. The girl has no interest in marriage, even if she's of "a marriageable age", and the cruelty of her family in regards to her interests has made life near unbearable.

Anita can see the anger fuming below Ajay's carefully maintained composure.

Ajay's voice is caring as she starts asking the girl questions. It's all things like "Do you have somewhere safe you can go?"

But it seems this girl has nothing outside of her family. Not even her favourite horse is still something in reach, it having been sold off to "teach her a lesson".

Finally, Ajay asks the girl if she would like to be granted safety on The Death of Compassion. She explains that as long as she needs protection, Ajay will provide it, and she will allow her to do as she pleases, within reason.

The girl asks questions. Things about what's expected of her, what "within reason" means, and what her future is if she goes with them. Ajay answers each one, even getting Anita for backup as proof it's true. When Ajay mentions how the girl can wear what she wants and learn what skills she cares to learn, the girl agrees.

Ajay asks Anita to escort her back to the Death of Compassion.

Ajay stays on the captured ship to address the crew as Anita, met by Renee on deck, leads the girl across the ships.

Anita can hear the mother yelling at Lifeline even at this distance. She can see Ajay completely ignoring her too. She watches as Ajay signals to Makoa to wrap things up.

Things are quiet for a while after that. The girl nearly immediately cuts off most of her hair. In a few weeks, she's just part of the crew. She seems happier here.

Anita can relate.

One night, Anita falls asleep in Ajay's cabin. They haven't slept together-- in any sense-- at this point. But Anita wakes up with Ajay curled half around her and she feels so warm and her chest feels so full that she can't believe she's never slept beside her before then.

Ajay has no issue with having it happen more often.

This is life for a short while. Anita is surrounded by the people she cares about. There is danger, and there's hardship, but for a month or so, she's happy.

Anita notices something one day. Their course, which hasn't been terribly direct, is taking them to more familiar waters to Anita. The next port they stop at is one Anita knows the name of but had never visited before. She knows it because it's a common trading port that does plenty of business with her home port. They're still weeks away from her home, but she can't help but wonder if Ajay is doing this on purpose, or if it's coincidence.

Ajay knows Anita's home port. They've talked about each other's homes, each other's family, and what growing up was like. She very well could be headed that way to give Anita a chance to go home.

Anita wonders if she would take that.

The next night, when she's spending time with Ajay before bed, she asks.

"Are you heading us towards my home on purpose?"

Ajay seems half surprised by it, half chagrined. "Dunno what answer yuh want from me there."

"The truth works."

She chuckles and nods, taking the seat beside Anita. "Everytime yuh talk about yuh family, I can see how much yuh miss 'em." She leans against Anita. It's a spot she takes near every

night. "Yuh ain't spendin' anything if I get yuh there."

"But going home means..." Anita sighs. "I was honestly a little okay with it taking a bit longer. I like being around you. And I can't do work like the work I do here if I'm home. I'll have to do something womanly."

Ajay smiles. "I like bein' around yuh too, sugar." She lets out a little hum. "If yuh a woman and yuh good with guns, then that's a womanly job," she jokes. "I know they ain't great about that on the shore. Yuh deserve sometin' that makes you happy." She turns her head so her cheek is on Anita's chest. "And I know gettin' back to yuh mother is gonna make you happy."

It is. Anita knows as much. She misses her mother and she can't wait to bring her the money she'd gotten in the split.

But there's something bittersweet to it. Anita has found herself here. She knows, with certainty, who she is as a person and what makes her happy. Going home will mean hiding some of it. Her preference for women won't be acceptable. She knows that and she's talked plenty to Renee on that topic. On shore, off a pirate ship, she's more likely to end up a spinster than she is to marry. If she's lucky, she could find a partner who she could live quietly somewhere that doesn't ask questions but... no, the shore holds a lot of uncertainty for her right now.

Anita wants to go home, but she wants to be herself. She wants to find comfort at the side of a woman. She wants to enjoy her specialties and the things she has interest in rather than end up as some farmhand or the like. She wants to be her own happy.

Ajay has turned the whole of herself to curl up against Anita.

Ajay just wants her to be happy.

The woman was diverting three full ships to get Anita where she thinks Anita will be happy.

Without thinking much more, Anita leans down to kiss her. Ajay is enthusiastic in her response and soon she's on Anita's lap, kissing her like her life depends on it. This is common for their evenings together, if it's just them.

Eventually they break apart, light headed, but Anita keeps Ajay close. She's feeling a bit overwhelmed, but in the best ways. She tries to express it to Ajay but she feels tongue tied. Instead, she resorts to placing small kisses on Ajay's cheeks, her forehead, her jaw. Anywhere and everywhere she can reach.

Ajay laughs and lets it happen for a few brief moments before pulling away enough to look Anita in the eyes. "I'm glad yuh ended up on my ship, 'Nita." She leans in and kisses Anita again. It's slower and near chaste.

When she pulls back, Anita can only whisper out, "I want you."

Ajay grins. "Do yuh now?"

Anita feels her face heat up, but she does. She wants this. If her time with Ajay is more limited than she thought, then she wants to share this with Ajay now.

“Yes.”

Ajay bites her lip and climbs off Anita’s lap. She tugs her over to the bed, starts to climb on it, but pauses. As if second thinking something, she heads over to the door and locks it.

Anita sits down on the bed and watches as Ajay walks up to her.

“Lay back, sugar.”

Anita does as she’s told.

After looking over her for a moment, Ajay climbs on the bed and kneels between Anita’s legs. She rests her hands on Anita’s thighs, only just above her knees.

"I know you ain't been with a woman before but... ever been with anyone at all?"

"I mean... yeah. In my teens. I just sort of... thought I wasn't meant to like it. Y'know, cause I'm a woman." Anita feels dumb for saying it, but she knows that’s just how things are taught. She and Renee have talked about this before.

Ajay scoffs. "Trust me, sugar. Ya' gonna like it. I'll make sure of it." She scootches up a bit, making it so the top sides of her thighs are just touching the bottom of Anita’s. “Jus' let me know if you decide ya' dun want this, okay? Then we'll stop."

"I want you, Ajay," Anita breathes out. "I just have a learning curve."

With a grin, Ajay leans down to kiss her. "Ya' the prettiest thing I ever seen, ya' know that?" she murmurs after. "Mind if I find out how pretty ya' are under ya' clothes?"

Anita doesn't answer verbally. She just pulls her shirt off enjoys the attention Ajay immediately starts to dote on her.

" So pretty," she croons. "I'm gonna kiss every bit of you. Let ya' know how much I love havin' you around."

Anita can't find her words, but right now, she feels like she doesn’t need them.

The time to Anita’s home port shrinks rapidly. She hates how little time she feels like she has with Ajay, as well as her friends on the crew. She’ll miss them all when it comes time to head back to her mother.

Anita has found some semblance of peace on the sea. She’s not keen to lose it.

Perhaps she can find something close to it once she’s on shore. She’ll have to find out.

But in the last of her weeks on *The Death of Compassion*, she does everything she can to spend them with the people who matter most to her. It's not terribly different from her old schedule, but she goes out of her way to spend time with Natalie and Renee. Often that overlaps with time she spends with Ajay, as well as Makoa.

Anita doesn't like thinking back to when she refused to be a pirate and thought lesser of these people she has now. She knows better now.

Admittedly, it's strange to think of how she's seen Ajay do endlessly bloody things, carve words into men, punish the cruel, and more, but still they lay together at night and whisper to each other until they fall asleep. But there's so much to Ajay. More than an ability to kill, more than an ability to heal. Anita is interested in finding out more than she already knows.

But the time comes where they reach port.

The last night before they dock, Ajay dotes on her to no end. They have a good meal together with wine she's kept for special circumstances. Afterwards, Ajay ravishes Anita well into the night. They lay together and chat into the night. Anita doesn't want to go to sleep. She doesn't want to miss anything of Ajay. But eventually she submits to slumber when Ajay starts playing with her hair and humming to herself.

Eventually morning comes.

Anita says quiet goodbyes to Renee, Natalie, and Makoa. They each give her a hug and wish her well.

Finally, she gets one last moment with Ajay.

Before Anita can say anything, Ajay presses a coin purse into her hand. "For yuh ma. T' make up for what my parents did t' her."

Anita gulps, suddenly feeling a lot more emotional than she really wants to right now. She had wanted to be strong.

"She'll be thrilled. Thank you."

Ajay bounces on her feet. "I'm gonna miss yuh, 'Nita. A whole lot."

"I'm going to miss you too," Anita says in a low rasp, just for Ajay. "It'll be strange to be on shore again."

The Pirate Queen smiles, though it's sad. "Left the name of a place yuh can send letters to in the bag, if yuh feel like it. Would love t' hear from yuh in the future."

"Of course." Anita takes a deep breath. "If you ever find yourself here again, you know where to find me."

Ajay nods. Anita had told her much about the house her mother lives in just outside of town.

“Tell yuh ma that I’m sorry, would yuh? And that yuh captain said yuh the finest hand I’ve had on my ship.”

With a chuckle, she adjusts the pack she’s got hooked on her back. “If she’s not glad to hear it, I certainly am.” The smile on Anita’s face falters for just a moment. “I should get going,” she says softly.

“Suppose so.”

Anita hesitates for just a moment before pulling Ajay into a tight hug. They’re like this for a few long moments before Anita starts to let go, but Ajay just holds on to her tighter.

“Gimme another few seconds,” she whispers.

Anita has no issue obliging.

They part eventually. Anita is about to turn to go, too sad to really say anything more, when Ajay grabs her and kisses her hard. It lasts until both need to breathe.

And again, they part. “Goodbye, Anita Williams. I’ll miss yuh.”

“Goodbye, Ajay Che. I’ll miss you too.”

The walk home takes a couple hours.

It feels good to see the house again, a small little thing with a small chunk of space for the two goats they’ve had for ages.

Anita sees her mother out tending to them. She calls out and suddenly her mother is crying, all too happy at seeing her daughter again.

Anita helps tend the animals before they head inside. She has a lot to tell her mom about, even if she has to censor some things and leave other parts out entirely.

She doesn’t mention pirates. But her mother still knows. She doesn’t seem to take issue with it. If anything, the money Anita sets on the table quiets all of her mother’s fears and concerns, enough for her to accept the things that happened.

And eventually, Anita reaches the topic of Ajay. She’s quiet in letting her mother know that the extra money is, in some way, repayment from the time she’d been cheated by the Che household.

Anita has so much more to say than that though. She talks into the evening about the things she’s seen, about the friends she’s made. Her mother listens avidly. She’s always been the supportive type, though a little strict, but she seems simply happy to her daughter home again.

A day later, the high of being back at her mother’s dies down. She enjoys the feeling of being here, but she wants to be out at sea.

She feels listless, almost.

Her mother speaks of a nice man that helps her out from time to time, likely with the intention of introducing Anita. She deflects these as well as she can. She's not one for men, but how does someone say that to their mother? She may meet him just to get it over with, but if the meeting strays from friendly and into romantic, she'll have no part of it.

Anita finds she wants to tell her mother her preferences, but she resists. She loves her mother, but safety is best.

It's strange to sleep alone after the past few weeks. She finds herself waking and reaching for Ajay before realizing she's not there.

Her third day comes with a melancholy she can't shake.

Anita loves her mother. She does.

But she isn't sure this house, this place, is where she should be right now.

By the fourth day, she packs her bag back up.

Her mother is sad but admits she had seen it coming. Apparently how she spoke of her time aboard *The Death of Compassion* was a sign that she was a sailor at heart. She isn't the first of her family.

Her mother also, much quieter, asks Anita if she loves Ajay.

Anita is startled by the question, and she can't respond with more than a nod.

Her mother then assures her that, as her mother, she loves Anita unconditionally. Anita nearly cries. Of course her mother noticed. Of course she did.

After some assurances, her mother adds that, next time she's in port, she had better bring Ajay to visit.

Anita will never stop being amazed at how good her mother is.

The walk back to port feels longer than the walk home did.

Anita breathes a sigh of relief when she finally spots *The Death of Compassion* at the dock. It's just as beautiful as when she left.

Her steps feel confident and sure once she reaches the deck. She asks the nearest sailor where Ajay is, but gets cut off when she hears a loud call of, "Anita!"

She turns to find Ajay climbing down the rigging of the mast. The woman launches herself at Anita and Anita catches her with ease.

They both laugh as Anita spins her in a circle once. They come to a halt and their laughter dies as they simply hold each other.

Eventually, Ajay leans back to take a proper look at Anita.

Ajay herself looks happy, but she seems confused. There's a tilt to her head and a quiet smile on her lips. Her eyebrows tilt up as if she doesn't understand that Anita is standing here in front of her, is here in her arms again.

"I thought you were going home," she finally says, her grip on Anita still firm, as if to keep her from disappearing.

Anita just smiles. "I'm right here, aren't I?"

End Notes

This was,,, not supposed to get this long. but hey! it is.

Thanks for reading! I'm chloe-gayzer and a-softer-apex on tumblr!

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!