Ryker grabbed her arm and yanked to stop her in her tracks. “No,” he muttered between clenched teeth, “we’re not done here.” He reached for her other arm to pull her around to him and held her there, fingers tightening on her skin.

Delia looked up at him, ignoring the pain for the moment. “You want to kiss me, don’t you?” she asked over her heart pounding in her ears. She didn’t move.

He hesitated, suspecting a trap, before giving in. “Yes.”

“But you won’t,” she replied immediately. She was disappointed, a little, but she knew him well enough to know that he’d hate himself if he did. And it would be a distraction from the topic, oddly enough.

He nodded and finally released her, leaving red stripes on her flesh where his fingers had been. She wanted to rub at them, but held off. He sighed heavily and fell into a sitting position on a couch, letting his head droop.

“I’m tired of this, captai….”

“Delia,” she corrected. “This isn’t the sort of conversation a bosun has with his captain. But it’s the sort of conversation Delia Abney and Ryker Everhart need to be having. So…Delia, please. No ‘darling’ required.” She grinned briefly and sat in a chair so as to give him space.

“I’m just tired of it. We’re attracted to each other, but we both make up all these excuses to avoid dealing with it, and I just…”

“Oh, here comes the ultimatum,” she mumbled.

“…I just wanna know if we’re going to go ahead or give up. Shit or get off the pot, y’know?”

“Ah, vulgar American colloquialisms, yes.” She leaned back in her chair. “But I take your point.” She thought for a moment, staring up at the ceiling. “It bothers you so very much that I’m your captain?”

“No more or less than it bothers you that I’m your bosun.”

“So. What does that leave? We’re both criminals. Money? Social status?”

“Yes and yes. Also, you’re a witch.”

That made her sit up straight and evaluate him. “It bothers you that I’m a witch?”

“Not ‘bother.’ I don’t give a damn if you dance around naked in the moonlight – though I’d like to watch. And yes, I know, you don’t, but it’s an expression; don’t get hung up on it. The point is I…I feel left out of that part of you. I’M sure as hell not ever doing magic. AND I’m not landed British gentry. In order to even be seen in your company, I have to at least be rich, and preferably old money. I’m not either of those. We’re too different….Delia.” He had to hesitate to add in her name; it felt odd saying it outside of those hated parties. “On top of which…”

“On top of what?” she prompted him when he fell silent again.

“I shouldn’t say this to you. It’s not my place.”

“Forget your place, Ryker.” His head shot up. To hear her actually say his name – his FIRST name – was a shock. “Please?”

He blinked a couple of times. “I don’t know who you are,” he admitted finally. “You’re like Lucius: you change masks depending on who you’re dealing with. With the gentry, you’re Delia Abney, the tabloids’ darling party girl. With the crew, you’re Capt. Abney, commanding officer of the *Desdemona*. To our targets, you’re the Black Lioness, fearsome pirate of the skies. But I can count on one hand the times I’ve seen you without any of those masks, and I’d still have fingers left over. I don’t know who that person is, under all those things and I…I’m not really convinced you know either.”

He stood up and looked down at her. She stared up at him sort of dumbfoundedly, and she was beginning to wish he’d just kissed her instead. If she was going to feel off-kilter no matter how things turned out, she’d rather have the snogging beforehand.

“Look, here’s where I stand: you’re beautiful. You’re clever and intelligent. You’re so damnably British and you’re the best captain I’ve ever served under. But I…don’t know how to handle you. I don’t know how to deal with you outside of ‘work,’ ‘cause when it comes right down to it, you and I are sort of like round holes and square pegs. We’re just not going to fit, no matter how much we bang our heads against the wall. It doesn’t mean I don’t want to; just means I don’t see it happening.

“So no, I won’t kiss you, even if I want to. I misunderstood a lot of what went on with us at first, and I get that now, but where I am now, all I can see is us screwing each other’s brains out for a month or two and then moving on. And it just makes working together harder after that. I like it here, and I like this crew, and I’d rather keep working for you than for any other pirate out there, so if we can just skip to the ‘moving on’ part without doing anything that’s going to make things awkward for us later, that’d be great.”

She boggled for a moment, then sighed. “I…I see your point. It’s an excellent analysis and I won’t say you’re wrong on any of it, but…I had sort of hoped we’d talk out our issues and get to a point where we could figure out a way to do a proper dinner-and-a-movie sort of thing. I suppose that’s naïve of me, given who we both are, but…” She barked a mirthless laugh and leaned back again. “Gods, all my childhood spent wanting to be the Black Lioness and now here I am, just wishing I were normal.” She stared at the ceiling. “So, we yell at each other again and then you decide to just give up.”

“Don’t put it that way.”

“Should I say that in the choice between shitting and getting off the pot, you chose the latter? Is that better?” She cleared her throat.

“Don’t get angry at me. You agreed with me, even.”

“Look, maybe I don’t know who I am without being the Black Lioness or without acting like I’ve got suntan oil and martinis for blood….” She stood and evaluated him. “But I know that, no matter what mask I’m wearing, I want to be with you. Even if it is only for a month or two. **I** think the awkwardness is worth it, because at any given moment we could be blown out of the sky. We could be thrown in prison and/or hanged. We could be shot, stabbed, or mutilated.

“So back to our separate corners for now, yes, fine. And you won’t kiss me without knowing who I am under all the masks. Well enough. But I don’t have that problem.” She kissed his lips quickly, more tactical strike than playground experiment, then headed for the door. “We never end up doing anything more than making each other insane, I know that.” She tossed him a look over her shoulder. “But from what I hear, that’s proof there’s something more than rampant lust going on. Good night.”