

## CHAPTER 1 – SHIP’S BOY (EXCERPT)

A trickle of sweat running down my spine called me back to the present and the hot tropical sun. With my dark gray skin, I didn’t have to worry much about sunburn, but the perspiration on my neck had dried to a horrible itch. Almost ritually, I scratched at it with the hook I have for a right hand and wished I could scratch at the boredom as well. Here we were, nearly a week out from Dvarghish Harbor, and not a single ship sighted.

The lieutenant shifted his bulk again, and I eyed him warily. It wouldn’t be the first time those heavy boots of his mashed my toes.

Suddenly, a flash of sky-blue uniform on the companion-ladder and a hearty laugh froze the lieutenant in mid-step. My exhaustion evaporated as the broomrider set foot on the quarterdeck.

We all stepped aside to make room for our passenger. Kellani of the Kell was a powerful girl with straight, short hair, a hawkish nose and a grin that nailed me to the deck planking as she lifted one reddish-brown hand in a salute.

There haven’t been many girls in my life; only the little shrews at the orphanage who were as horrible as the little bullyboys. I had avoided both like the plague.

Then I joined the navy. The *Tipred* was a mixed crew, but all female sailors were ancient; way past twenty. That made the arrival on board of a tough girl of my own age a Major Event. Especially one who was both nice to look at and one of those awesome broomriders. She was much bigger ‘n me, but I’m used to that. I’m disgustingly small for my seventeen years. “Skinny little beast,” the nice orphanage keepers used to call me.

I peered around the lieutenant’s back, hoping beyond hope the girl would discover I existed. I’d seen her often enough since she came aboard, but she never ever noticed me.

This time I must’ve breathed or something, for she did see me and winked. Navy discipline went by the board, and I grinned back like a maniac.

‘Strange ship at forty-one!’ The hoarse cry from the masthead made us all jump. The girl craned her neck, but then she must’ve realized the other ship wasn’t visible from the deck yet, for she smiled ruefully. Her hand went to the crooked broomstick on her back, and for a long second she looked about to fly away and investigate.

Then she relaxed as another cry followed the first.

‘Ship’s a threemaster barkentine; *Ahaude*, out of Dvarghish.’

I knew *Ahaude*. She was a Kell ship, a coal carrier. Like us, she’d be bound for Port Naar, the navy outpost on the desert coast.

The broomer caught my eye and gave a regretful smile. Maybe she’d also hoped for something exciting, like pirates.

I gave her a slight shrug and an apologetic grin. *Welcome to the Tipred. Nothing ever happens here.*

Lieutenant Wylmer had his usual moment of indecision. *Big body, slow mind.*

‘Let’s check up on her, Quartermaster,’ he said finally. ‘Show the navy’s presence.’

The petty officer was a stolid type, a real seaman, and he saluted without showing his thoughts.

‘Aye aye, sir.’ He relayed the order to the helmsman beside him, and the *Tipred* turned to intercept the big coaler.

Wylmer looked around the quarterdeck. ‘Where’s the little runt?’

*Another of his games*, I thought, exasperated. *I’m at my post, fool; right behind you. Where else would I be?*

Wylmer turned, his puffy face scowling like a rabid pug dog.