**STAR CROSSED by Koko Brown**

“Don’t you have any decency?” he asked, lifting his gaze.

“I’m a pirate. Decency and modesty are distant memories. If they’d been instilled in me at all,” she scoffed. “Hard to find morality in a brothel.”

His gaze narrowed. “A brothel?”

“My mother was a gaggle of whores. I was one as well until I pledged my loyalty to Madame Shih.” She held out her hand and wiggled her fingers at him. “So you can rest assured you have nothing I have not seen before.”

He mulishly stood looking down at her, unyielding. Thinking she’d failed to sooth his ruffled feathers, she was mildly surprised when he unbuttoned his breeches. He slid the material down his legs, bending at the waist, giving her an enticing view of his back, the fluid cording of muscle evident even in the slanting shadows of the cabin. Lèsè bit the inside of her cheek. His large, powerful body was beautiful.

With irrepressible, flame-hot desire seeping into her veins, she second guessed her decision to shoot two hawks with one arrow. First and upmost, she wanted to gain his knowledge of foreign shipping routes, putting her one step closer to freedom.

As an added boon, his company would be a much needed distraction from the monotony of sea life, the loneliness of an empty bed. She didn’t need it to turn into a foolhardy venture which would be seen as treason. And she would not, she mused, shoving back her shoulders. After all she wasn’t some naïve virgin unaccustomed to a man’s company.

Body throbbing with awareness, she accepted his clothing. But not before she took a prolonged peek at the abnormally thick flesh between his legs. She lifted her gaze and caught him looking at her. She tried to diffuse the loss of oxygen in the room with an upward curl of her lips.

“Absolutely no sense of decorum,” he muttered, tan cheeks turning pink with embarrassment.

“No harm in looking,” she countered, pivoting on her bare feet. Chuckling, she padded across the room, his garments tucked under her arm. She opened the door then chucked them into the hall. As ordered, two buckets of hot water had been placed by the door.

Hoisting one of the steaming buckets into the air and then setting it on her head. Arms out stretched, crouching low, she pretended to walk a tight rope.

“I return bearing gifts,” she announced, a hint of playfulness coloring her tone.

Not exactly unbending, a shadow of a mile touched his lips.

Happy looked good on him. Delicious in fact. So delicious, she hungered for more of them.

With a dramatic flourish, she set the bowl in the washstand then went to retrieve the one she’d left in the hall. This one she set on the floor.

“This is nothing like the glorious soaking baths of Zhangzhou. Still, this should do the trick,” she reasoned, fingering her copper washing basin leaning against the wall. Resembling a sundial with a depth of exactly eight finger, the shallow pan scratched her yen for a bath.

“I may be a pirate but I like my luxuries,” she confessed. “I have clean linen rags, a couple of sponges from a trade with a fisherman and even a bar of soap from your fair England. I particularly like the lavender.” Unable to resist, she picked up one of the sleeves and sniffed. Feeling like she was talking to the wind, she glanced up.

He edged closer, practically towering over her. His eyes stole over the large basin like a man starving, and the pan had become a slow-roasted *dungpo* pork.

“Water’s warm?”

Seeing the fish on the hook, she nodded. “Not long from the coals.”

He didn’t say anything for the longest, but she imagined she could hear his smile.

“Wash rag and soap,” he finally requested.

With a smile, she handed him both. At the last minute he pulled his hand back.

“The catch?”

Lèsè opened her mouth to dissuade him of the notion but thought better of it. “I only require one thing—that I be allowed to watch.”

His gaze dropped to the washbasin and lingered. Again, a pregnant pause fell between them like a brick wall. “You may watch but not touch.”

“You’re no fun,” she pouted prettily yet not feeling the least bit put out. After all, he’d granted her a boon. Gloating, she spun about. Considering the bed held the most advantageous views, she ambled over to the day bed. With exaggerated purpose, she tucked her hands behind her head and crossed her feet at the ankles.

“Comfortable?” he groused.

“Quite,” she purred, digging her shoulder blades into the silk bedcovering.

“And the view is to your liking?”

“Far better than the bed,” she readily confessed. “As you Englishmen would say, “You cut a fine figure, Mr. Flynn. Very fine indeed.”

“Indecent—”

“Worse than a sailor on shore leave,” she smugly asserted.

“—immoral—”

“Never claimed to be a monk,” she countered with pride.

“—shameless—”

“My mother was a prostitute. The bar was set very low.”

“—corrupt—”

“I’ve seen too many pure souls starve and it’s not a pretty sight.”

“—licentious—”

Lèsè frowned. “I am not familiar with the word.”

“Lustful.” His eyes burned bright and it wasn’t anger.

“When I’m willing,” she pretended to look pensive as a yielding warmth flowed through. “It’s only with a select few. And you, Mr. Flynn, are definitively select.”

“Oh, joy. I live to be pleasing to my captive.”

His teasing jest restored her humor.

“Better I find you pleasing than distasteful.” She gave him an appreciative glance.

“It should rile me the way you eye me like a leg of succulent mutton,” he drawled. “And your openness is quite off putting…”

“But,” she coaxed. Interest piqued, Lèsè flipped onto her side.

He was obviously playing a game with her because he grinned as he changed the subject.

“You say the water is warm?”

“Right now, I wish it to be scalding,” she groused.

She lived for a good game of cat and mouse but only when *she* was the predator. Being the prey—particularly *his* prey—proved to be a discomforting, slippery slope especially when it played havoc with her insides.

Even when doing something as innocuous as simply filling the water basin with water, pleasure began to spread through her body. Or when he soaped his sponge, his thick strong fingers dripping with suds, her breath caught. And there was nothing she could do to stop it. She’d seen scores of men in various stages of undress. None of them—even lovers of her own choosing--made her body react like Christian Flynn.

Made by the gods. That’s what came to mind as she watched him begin his bath. Perfectly made, he’d been favored at birth. Every inch of him carved so beautifully, and so sinfully male she wanted to weep.

Her gaze devoured the lazy path of his hands. All that bare, beautiful alabaster skin and muscle covered in sudsy foam. Mouthwatering, she could taste every single bubble.