

THE WILD SHIPS OF FAIRNY

By Carolyn Ives Gilman

* * * *

MARRY ME!” JUMBER SHOUTED as soon as his boat was in earshot.

Larkin shook her head and turned to pound more caulking into a crevice in Kittiwake’s deck. She had come out to work on her boat when the uncles had spotted a sail on the horizon. She had known it would have to be Jumber. No one else would come to Fairny this early in the year, when the sea hadn’t yet thrown off its winter melancholy.

“Marry me!” he yelled again, apparently thinking she hadn’t heard. He was practically standing on the bowsprit, clutching a forestay. A pink knit sweater stretched across his rotund torso, and a visored cap hid the thinning patch in his black hair. He had a bushy mustache and eyes crinkled from squinting into the sun. Larkin noted enviously that his boat was in even better repair than last year; painted green and red with shiny brass fittings, she was the brightest thing Fairny Bay had seen all winter. Larkin resolved to ask lumber to bring some paint for Kittiwake next time he came, even if it meant doing without new boots.

“You boat abuser!” she yelled back. “You’re risking Bobber’s life, taking her out this early.”

“It was love. So shoot me,” he said. Then, to his crew, “Come about, you rotting turds! Where’s the hawser? Do I have to do the whole blistering thing myself?”

Bobber nosed neatly in to the tumbledown dock where the great Fairny fleet had once moored. Jumber had two crewmen this year, Larkin saw. He had prospered. Back in Soris, the women were probably lined up to catch his eye. Inland women were like that.

The trader would have jumped onto the sagging gray dock, but stopped when another person emerged from Bobber’s hatch. He was a strange sight, swathed in a furry greatcoat. His long black hair fell about his shoulders; his close-cropped black beard was shaved away in comma-shaped sworls down his cheeks. He looked around at the empty bay, the bare hills, then the line of gray, leaning shacks that was the village. His brows contracted. “You have cheat me!” he cried shrilly.

“No, your honor, this is Fairny,” Jumber said.

“You gregious Torna, this is lie!” the man insisted. “Where are sheeps?”

“Oh, not again,” Jumber said with overtaxed patience. “Listen, I told you there wasn’t much here. You could have gotten your sheep much closer to Softs —

didn't I say that?"

The foreigner looked around. "There are no sheep!"

"They're out in the hills," Jumber said.

"What?" the foreigner said, looking startled.

Jumber gestured toward the windy grassland behind the village. "Out grazing. In the pastures. That's where the sheep are."

"You think I am numbskull?" the man said angrily.

Why does he want sheep? Larkin asked, resting her arms on Kittiwake's gunwale rail.

The foreigner's attention was diverted. He gave her a deep bow. "Pardons, precious lady. I am distract. I am dupe of salty schemer. I came on search for Fairny, where great sheep are build."

Larkin saw the problem. "Oh, you mean sheeps!" she said.

"Yes, yes," the foreigner said excitedly. "Big ones, that walk on water. Boom-boom."

"What?" Jumber said.

"Kind lady, can you tell where is Fairny of the sheep?"

"This is it," Larkin said.

The man looked incredulous. "Am I dream? There are no tree, no boatyard."

"You're fifty years too late," Larkin said, hearing in her own voice the trace of leaden bitterness that infected everyone in Fairny when they spoke of the time of ships. "We don't have ships anymore. Not to sell, not to sail. They're gone."

The man first looked puzzled, then crafty. "I think you pull my foot," he said. "You think I have not riches enough."

"No, there just aren't any ships. No more."

She turned back to her work, not wanting to face more questions. She ran her fingers down the smooth wood of Kittiwake's deck, weathered to the silver of a dragonfly's wing. Kittiwake was a handy little craft, agile on a close reach, well suited to shellfishing; but she was a far cry from the legendary vessels that had once

made Fairny famous.

They had been ships that no one who saw could forget. Mist, in which Gennaday of Rusk had sailed into the other circles; great Havenmaker, which Ison Gavro himself had led against the Torna usurpers. Their names were thick in the winter tales the uncles told at fireside. All through the thousand isles of Haven they had been famous. In those days mankind had ruled the land, but Fairny's ships had ruled the Widewater.

Larkin had been born in Fairny, but she had never seen one of the great ships— not by daylight, at least. They had come to her in dreams, so beautiful she would wake with her throat aching. Tall and slim, white canvas-winged, rigging singing like harp strings in the wind, they always passed a little beyond reach in her dreams—just as they had passed across Fairny's horizon. Now all that was left of them was a slow wake of memories.

Over the banging of her mallet she could hear a loud argument going on in Bobber — the stranger's voice shrill with indignation over something; Jumber shouting back in his demonstrative Toms way. Larkin wondered as she worked if she could ever marry a man who loved an argument so.

Presently the shouting ceased and footsteps approached across the dock. "Permission to board?" Jumber's voice said.

Larkin sat back on her heels, pushing a curl of dark hair out of her eyes. Jumber was grinning at his double entendre. His laughter was part of the spring to Larkin, like the meadow flowers and the nesting guillemots. It was always jarring at first, for each fall when the traders left, the village lapsed into a long silence; as the days dwindled Larkin grew accustomed to communicating in monosyllables with people who no longer had anything to say to each other. And then Jumber's laughter would come again, brassily shattering the comfortable monotony of grayness and decay.

"I thought one of those inland women would have gotten you by now," Larkin said.

"Worried?" he asked. She snorted in answer, but realized that she had been a little worried: that Jumber's boat wouldn't come again, that springtime would never return.

"It was a long winter," she said. "Old Father Gort died just before solstice, Mother Bira just after."

"That's all I ever hear in the spring," lumber said. "Who died?"

"It's all that happens here."

“You don’t belong here,” lumber said.

Larkin shrugged, still unused to navigating by word. She would never be as good a talker as lumber. He was Torna; they were all born talking.

“The aunties say I’m turning into a seawife,” she said.

“A what ?”

“You know, a woman married to her boat. Maybe they don’t have them where you come from;”

“No.” He held out a hand. “Come on over to Bobber. I brought something for you.”

Larkin looked at him hopefully. “Paint?”

“What do you mean, paint?” lumber protested. “What kind of suitor do you think I am?”

“Kittiwake needs it,” Larkin said. “Just look at her. Gray as driftwood.”

“Forget the damn boat,” Jumber said with mock irritation; then, seeing how Larkin frowned, he held up his hands and said, “All right, I’ll bring paint next time. Just let me give you something first. After all, I don’t want to marry the boat.”

Larkin was about to step onto the dock when Jumber’s crewmen emerged from Bobber’s hold hefting a huge, brass-bound trunk between them. The black-haired stranger followed, berating them incoherently and waving his hands.

“Who is that?” Larkin whispered.

“Some crazy mainlander,” Jumber answered, then laughed. “Would you believe all this time I thought he was talking about sheep?”

Stranger, crewmen, and trunk set off in a wobbling procession down the dock. Already half the village was standing at their doors or peering from windows at the sight.

“Come on,” Jumber said.

Bobber’s hold was crammed full of casks, bales, and crates that smelled of sawdust packing and cinnamon. He threaded his way through a tiny passage, ducking where the beams swooped low, into a little cabin they all had shared on the trip out. He pulled a black sea-chest from under his berth.

“Ready?” he said. Then, with a flourish, he brought them out: a pair of tall leather boots, intricately tooled. Larkin took them to the porthole to examine. They were polished on the outside to a rich cherry-wood color, and lined on the inside with chamois soft as felt. She ran a finger over them in awe. She had never owned anything so lovely; for a moment she hated her poverty.

“They’re beautiful,” she said. “Too beautiful to wear on the boat. I’d rain them.”

“You could wear them in Soris,” Jumber said. “You could wear anything you wanted there.”

Larkin wanted to believe it, but couldn’t. In Soris, she would have appearances to keep up. Everyone would be watching to see if she was just a savage outlander.

She put one arm around Jumber’s bulk and kissed him on the cheek, clutching the boots in the other arm. He was watching her expectantly; he hoped for something in return. Not sex; he knew he’d have that anyway. He wanted a commitment. And that was just the thing Larkin couldn’t bear to give.

She made a dash for the door then, hugging the boots tight. Through the tunnel of cargo she ran, up the companion ladder into the sunlight, and across the dock to Kittiwake. With a single movement she tossed the boots on deck and unlooped the mooring lines. Jumping aboard, she seized the boathook and pushed off, then scrambled to the mainmast and yanked at the halyard. The sheave at the mast top screeched unwillingly, but the sail climbed and caught the wind. Larkin hurried aft, catching up the sheet and tiller. Then, like a musician teasing the perfect note out of the tension of opposing forces, she made Kittiwake swoop away from the dock and out into the bay.

She stood there as the boat bucked across the choppy waves, trying to think only of the strain of the line in one hand and the balancing tug of the tiller in the other. For a while she played on them, feeling Kittiwake respond to each little adjustment. She could almost imagine the boat was waking under her hands, freed after the long winter ashore. If only it were true.

At the mouth of the bay the sharp cool of the ocean wind hit them; Kittiwake heeled over, water bubbling past her hull. The lines creaked, stretching taut. As a sheet of cold spray leaped skyward from the bow, Larkin laughed aloud, feeling the wind in her teeth. She braced her feet apart and rode the tossing deck.

This is where I belong, she thought. Not in Soris, among all those people with their landlocked minds. And not in Fairny either, where everyone lost their will to live when the ships left.

In Fairny Bay the sea had been indecisive, the waves just flopping around; but out here they were hurrying west as if they knew something. Larkin sniffed the wind and squinted across the gray landscape, trying to gauge the sea's mood. It was a fretful time of year. The sea had a preoccupied look, as if something were afoot.

She cleated the sheet loosely and secured the tiller in its collar, then went below to fetch the carved wooden box that held her dreamweed. She stood on the foredeck to toss a spring gift to the horned panther whose realm lay below the sea. A wave bared foamy teeth and swallowed the offering whole.

She stooped and picked up the boots she had tossed on deck. They were already spotted with salt water; she spit on them and tried to rub it off. Then she carried them hack and stood with the tiller under one arm, the boots under the other.

Jumber's offer was the best chance she would ever have to escape this desolate island and the village that had been dying as long as she had been alive. Over the winter she had constructed a mental image of what her life would be like. Jumber would prosper — there was little doubt of that. He would soon buy a bigger boat, and then a few more, and at last he would become a merchant with a fleet, like the ones in Tornabay. He would grow stout and solid, and probably she would too — for there would be children, enough to fill a bright, noisy houseful. It would be a good life, secure and happy. They would be leading citizens of Soris someday. She would gradually forget what it was like to live on haunted ground, always in the shadow of a lost past.

And she would never go to sea again.

She steered Kittiwake into the wind and went forward to raise the jib. When the big sail billowed out the little boat heeled till the lee rail was scraping the waves. Larkin leaned on the tiller with a whoop of exhilaration. As if sharing her mood, Kittiwake leaped forward, her bow shooting free into air, then crashing down again in spray.

It was getting on toward evening when Larkin came back into Fairny Bay. She was in a quieter mood, but no more decided than when she had set out. Whatever course she took, change was ahead.

"Where have you been?" Auntie Broil said when Larkin came into the small cottage, boots and tackle slung over her shoulder.

"Out," Larkin said.

"In that boat of yours?"

"Mmm." Larkin went to the stove to see what was cooking, she was ravenously hungry.

“Don’t you touch anything you didn’t fix,” Auntie said. She was cooking sweet roots, hoarded like jewels over the winter.

“Is Jumber coming?” Larkin asked. Auntie doted on Jumber; he always brought out her rare moods of extravagance.

“Yes, if we can set a table that won’t shame us.”

“As if he didn’t have enough to eat,” Larkin said.

In the warm comer behind the stove sat Mother Keer, hunched and frail, in her wide-armed chair. When Larkin came over a radiant smile lit her face and she held out a bony, age-spotted hand.

“How are you today, Mother?” Larkin asked.

“She’s had the trots all day long,” Auntie Broil said: Mother pursed her lips and shook her head at the way Auntie talked.

“Are you better now, Mother?”

“She’s just going to have some broth for supper, isn’t that right?” Auntie said.

Mother Keer gripped Larkin’s hand and said readily, “Jumber’s coming.”

“Yes, I know.”

“Have you married him yet ?” Mother Keer asked, as if it were something she might have missed.

“No. You’ll know if I do.”

Auntie Broil was rearranging the furniture with loud, purposeful thumps. “I wish you’d hurry up and do it. You wouldn’t need to be eating mutton and oatmeal all winter long.” Larkin heard the unsaid words: my mutton, my oatmeal.

“Your mother could have had an inland man,” Mother Keer said.

“Yes, I know,” Larkin said. She had heard the story at least four thousand times.

“She turned him down,” Mother Keer said, then added — as Larkin recited the often-heard words under her breath— “and regretted it the rest of her life.”

“I’m going to wash up,” Larkin said. “I’ll be back to help.”

When Jumber arrived, he brought his foreign passenger with him. Auntie Broll pretended to be honored at hosting someone who had come all the way from the mainland, but was privately frantic at the impression her simple fare would make. She kept whispering to Larkin, “I don’t care what he thinks. This is how we live. I’m too old to be putting on a show for guests.”

Fortunately, the stranger flirted and flattered her in outrageously broken language, and she gradually relaxed. After dinner, Larkin stoked up the cast-iron stove with peat and lit the oil lamps so that the tiny cottage seemed cozy and companionable. In the lulls of conversation they could hear the crash of waves against the shore and the wind tugging and prying at the shutters. “The Ashwin are in the air tonight,” Mother Keer said.

Soon the uncles started to arrive, curious to have a look at the foreigner. They took up seats on every chest, stool, and window sill, but left the chairs on either side of the stranger vacant.

The room was already full when Larkin looked up to see her brother Runar at the door. She nearly called out; she had scarcely seen him in a month. But the greeting fled her mind as she saw the unkempt mats in his black hair, the clothes that looked like they had been his bedding for many nights. His eyes were deep sunk in shadow under his prominent brows; he glanced around as if he were a trespasser.

The stranger was talking again on his old subject of “sheeps.” It was clear he suspected some conspiratorial rose at work around him, for he wheedled them to reveal all they would. And in a way he was right: for though the uncles would talk and talk again about the ships of their childhood, they were strangely reticent about crucial threads of information. There were just some things too close to the heart for words.

“Havenmaker came from Fairny, you know,” Uncle Bosk said. “She was a grand ship, like a floating fort. She had tall fore- and after castles, all carved with gilded seadogs. Havenmaker never lost an engagement when she could come alongside the enemy. The only reason she lost was that the Toms had cannons.”

Jumber said good-naturedly to the stranger, “They still think that was cheating.”

“She had eighteen sails,” Uncle Stole put in.

“No, seventeen,” Bosk said. “I ought to know, it was my great-granduncle who brought her in.”

“Well, my cousin’s grandfather sailed in her,” Stole maintained, “and she had

nine square sails, seven stay sails, a jib —”

“Right,” Bosk said, keeping track on his fingers. “That’s seventeen.” “— and a spritsail.”

“Oh yes. I forgot the spritsail.”

They could go on all night, debating the details of a hundred bygone ships, and whose family had delivered each one. But no one in the room seemed bored; even the stranger was listening attentively. As Larkin scanned their faces, her eyes kept returning to Runar, standing near the door where the light from one of the lamps carved sharp lines across his cheekbones and jaw. He didn’t see her; he was too absorbed in what the old men were saying. His weather-browned face was intense with interest, and a kind of longing. Larkin remembered what Auntie Broll’s dead husband used to say: “That boy was meant to be a shiphunter.”

He had been born on the Night of the Naked Bear, and the shadow of it had always followed him. As a child he had been a dreamer and a loner, Larkin his only real friend. Even then he had felt the world’s injustice more keenly than most. But lately, moods of black depression had been growing on him. He would leave the village for weeks on end, tramping out on the hills, living like a bear in the wind and rain. It had been hard for Larkin to accept that there was nothing she could do about it. Now, as she watched him listen to the ship-talk, it struck her that he looked happier than she had seen him in months.

“I helped my brother deliver a ship all the way to Tornabay once, when I was nineteen,” Father Orch was saying. “Her hull was low and sleek as an otter, but her mainmast nearly scraped the clouds. She had as many acres of sail as most farmers have of crops. Under all plain sail, she nearly flew: we hit twenty knots on the Windward Passage. We called her Rosalbin. When we cast anchor at Tornabay the harbormaster said we’d have to move her or no business would get done on the waterfront. Everyone was just standing on the docks, watching her. They’d never seen a ship so beautiful.”

From his eyes, they could all see how beautiful she had been; she had left a scar of loss in him, still visible after all these years.

“And what did you get for her? the stranger asked.

Father Orch looked down, and everyone was silent, for the ships had been like Fairny’s soul.

“Yes, we sold her,” Orch said. He looked up. “Fairny was a prosperous place then, not like you see today. Hundreds lived here, and we lived well, all because of the ships. Our homes had carpets and mirrors, and we ate beef all winter long.”

“You could again,” the stranger said. “I give as much as you get then. More. You give ten sheep, I still pay same.”

The uncles shook their heads silently.

“You think you cannot make sheep now,” the stranger said slyly. “You think, ‘Silly stranger, can he not see sheep impossible? We have cut down trees.’”

Everyone stared at him uncomprehending. He laughed. “You see, I am not numbskull. I know you must have wood for mast and hull, and pitch for seal the joint-holes. You think all such is gone. But tree is many other place. I take you there. Or if not, I bring forest here. Then you have sheep again.”

If only it were that easy. The uncles sat silent. How could they explain to a mainlander?

From near the doorway a grating voice came. “Just tell him.”

It was Runar. He was standing, arms crossed, surveying the uncles with a judgmental frown. Larkin gave him a signal of caution, but he barged on: “Go on, say it. You never built a ship in your lives.”

“That brother of yours!” Auntie Broll hissed in Larkin’s ear.

His voice rose. “The ships of the olden days weren’t dead and manmade things, like the boats we have today. They were the real thing. They used to come past in great herds, migrating north for the summer. Each spring you would go out to catch them. You would tame them, and tether them, and bring them back to live out lives of servitude to humans. Their spirits died when you brought them back, but that didn’t stop you. You sailed their empty shells:” His scowl darkened as he scanned the uncles’ faces turned to him, speechless. “You thought they would never grow less, no matter how many you took. And every year your greed grew, and you caught more, and finally the herd dwindled away. So that you could have carpets and beef you took everything and left your children nothing. Now your grandchildren have never even seen a ship alive, except in your stories.”

For a moment the room was utterly silent. Then everyone began speaking at once. Uncle Bosk stood, red-faced, to shout at Runar through the sudden pandemonium. “Get out of here, you mother’s blunder, and stop talking of things you know nothing about!”

Runar had begun to shout back when Larkin grasped his arm. “Come here,” she said firmly.

He let her drag him out the door. When she had closed it behind them and they stood in the cold, biting wind, they could still hear the unsettled voices inside.

“What do you want?” he said angrily at her.

Her mind was racing. “Runar, I’ve got an idea,” she said.

“Those old fools,” he said, making a combative movement as if to go back in. She blocked his way.

“Runar, how do we know the ships are all gone?”

He stared at her with madly gleaming eyes. “They all say —”

“That’s just it. All we have is their word on it. Fifty years old.”

“You’re crazy,” he said.

“I don’t want to take their word for it. I want to see for myself. It’s the right time of year, Runar: just when the hunters would have gone out in the old days. What do you say?”

“There aren’t any ships there.”

“Then we’ll come back.”

“And everyone will laugh at us.”

“So what ?”

“No!” Runar said. “I don’t have a boat.”

“We have Kittiwake.”

“She’s your boat. I wouldn’t go unless I was captain of my own.”

She knew that expression: it was his irrational stubborn streak. It stood in between him and all the things he really wanted, all the things that were good for him. There would be no budging him. “I’ll find a boat for you, then,” she said.

“Who would lend me a boat?” His voice was mocking.

“I’ll find someone.” She would have to. When she had started talking it had just been something to distract him, to keep him from going back inside. Now the idea was flaming in her. She wanted to go, and wanted him to go with her, before they grew so far apart they could not touch anymore. They had played at hunting ships when they were children. Now she wanted to do the real thing, to prove they were still the same people, to make continuity amid all the change.

“We’d need crews,” he said.

“I can think of half a dozen who would come.”

“No old ones,” he warned.

“No. Just people our age.”

The idea had finally caught him, as it had caught her. He began to talk about supplies, and timing. Then he suddenly-looked at her, with the wind blowing his hair back, and said, “What would we do if there were ships out there?”

“Are you crazy?” Larkin said. “Didn’t you hear what that mainlander is offering? You could buy a dozen boats. You could buy the whole village.”

He slowly smiled. “What would those old gull-baits think of that?”

“This whole place would come to life again,” Larkin said. “We’d have a town here, not a cemetery.” Inside her, a voice added, And I wouldn’t have to leave.

That last thought was not part of what she told Jumber that night as they snuggled together under a mound of woolen blankets in Auntie Broll’s loft. In fact, she was very careful what she told him; but he still sat bolt upright and said, “Do I look like a lunatic?”

She pulled him back down, for the air was cold and he was letting it all in. “It would only be for a day or two,” she said. “Runar would take good care of her.”

“Bobber’s my living,” he said. “I don’t lend her to anyone. No one. Not my own brother.”

“Runar would be your brother, you know, if...” She let that hang. “He needs it, Jumber. He’s had a bad time. This will be a healing thing for him. I just know it.”

“I can’t do it,” Jumber said. “She’s all laden, for one thing.”

“You wouldn’t have to take it all out. Just enough to make her faster; leave the rest for ballast.”

Jumber sat up again. “You’ve got it all thought out, haven’t you? You do think I’m a lunatic.”

When Larkin pulled him back this time she crawled on top of him to pin him down. “I just thought you’d want to help us out,” she said. “Like family.”

“No,” he said.

She bent down to kiss him.

“Never,” he said.

WHEN HER crew came aboard, shouldering their duffel bags, Larkin watched with a frown to make sure no one was smuggling aboard any forbidden things. No compass or chronometer, no sextant or chart could be taken shiphunting. The uncles all agreed: there was no way to find the ships but by setting a course on trust. “If you know where you are, you won’t be in the right place,” they said.

Across the dock, Runar was making Bobber ready to sail. He looked like a wild man with his shaggy black hair all windblown; but there was a quiet concentration in the way he checked every detail of the rigging, like a craftsman at work. Watching him, Larkin couldn’t help but feel a deep glow of satisfaction at what she had done.

“Ready?” she called.

“I have one more person coming,” Runar said.

They had found nine crew members. Five would go on Kittiwake; for though she was smaller, she was also faster and more likely to make a catch, if any were there to be made.

Larkin scanned the shore for the missing crew member and saw there only a stocky figure staring glumly at them, mustache a droop. Jumber. She waved gaily. He put his hands in his pockets. With a glance to make sure everything was ready, she leaped onto the dock and ran shoreward.

“I’m out of my mind,” he said when she came up.

“Nothing will happen to Bobber. We’ll be back in two days, I promise. Three at the most. Runar’s a good sailor; he’ll take care of her.”

Jumber looked at his feet. “I wish it was only Bobber that I was worried about.”

So he understood more than she had told him. He’d seen that she was smelling the fresh air of freedom. She had wheedled him into becoming her accomplice in a mad bid to escape all he offered. With a rush of warmth, she kissed his rough cheek. “I love you for this,” she said.

“Will I ever know where I stand with you?” he asked.

She would gladly have told him, if she had known.

Runar's last crew member came rushing toward the dock. "I've got to go," she said. "Maybe I'll bring you back a ship." She turned and fled then, back to Kittiwake.

"Ready to cast off!" she called out to her crew. "Stand by the halyard!" It seemed a little absurd to give orders on such a small boat, but the make-believe was irresistible. Her crew grinned good-naturedly at her and she could tell their hearts were as high as hers.

They had to tack out of the bay, for the wind was south and west. Once clear of Croggan Head, the full brunt of it met them, fresh enough to make the sinuses ache. They came about in a flurry of spray and set course westward toward the Faraway Islands. Kittiwake went first, prancing over the waves; Bobber followed, rolling and portly; her broad cargo hull made her look a little pregnant. She towed the small dinghy they would use for bait.

It was the females they were after, for those were the ships that had once migrated in herds that covered the sea. The males roamed solitary out on the untracked ocean, joining the females only for a mating season each spring and fall. It would have been possible to catch a male ship during mating but no one in Fairny had ever tried; they were combative vessels unfit for taming. The females were easier to catch and train, especially this time of year when they were raising their dinghies and gigs. It was why all true ships were called "she."

They sighted the Faraways on the northern horizon late in the afternoon. No one wanted to stop there; they were just barren rocks where the seals and birds mated, inhabited by strange, savage folk who lived in round stone houses sunk in the earth. They believed their hearthfires were the direct descendants of a flame that had been carried in a gem from sunken Alta six centuries ago. News from Fairny would mean nothing to them.

It was unnerving to set the tiller in its notch and watch the night fall with sails still pulling hard. But there was no risk in it; beyond the Faraways the islands ended. Only open sea lay ahead.

Cory, one of Larkin's crew, had brought a fiddle. After dinner they all sat below in the warm lamplight, singing and stomping to the old reels and hornpipes, as Kittiwake's motion rolled them rhythmically side to side. Content, Larkin looked from face to face. Cory gave her a freckled, large-toothed grin over the bow of the fiddle. Brill was stretching out his long legs with an air of coot sarcasm it was easy to see through; Gimble, the youngest of them, was foot-wrestling with her brother Gorran, a genial giant of a man with a mop of brown hair.

It was late when Larkin went out on deck to relieve quiet Bedwa, the woman

she had left on watch. The world was pitchy black — no horizon, no sky, only the occasional polished black gleam of a wave lit by the lanterns at Kittiwake’s mast and bowsprit. Far aft, Bobber’s lanterns gleamed yellow, points suspended in the dark. Larkin sat listening to the muffled fiddle music from below, and the enormous breathing of the sea.

It was a pearly dawn. Kittiwake was still pulling west when they gathered on the frosty deck in mittens and knit caps, their breath steaming in the air. The eastern sky changed slowly from mauve to azure to a clear, waterwashed blue. When the light reached the west they stared— for a solid bank of fog lay ahead, hugging the sea. Its low, rolling contours, touched pink by the rising sun, looked for all the world like the hills and valleys of a mystic coastline.

Larkin felt very far away from home. She gazed at the gray ghost-land ahead, and felt instinctively that what she saw was a boundary. Once she passed it, there would be no retracing her steps, for in such places lay transformation. She shivered, for the risk was like the cold: chilling and exhilarating at once. Only for a moment did she feel a twinge of sorrow for Jumber.

They took in the jib to slow the boat down, and signaled Bobber to come alongside. When they were yards apart, Larkin called to Runar, “We’d better stay close. Hang out some lanterns.”

Runar gave a nod and turned to look ahead at the fog. There was something incandescent in his face.

As they drew closer, the gray coastline came sharper into view. It almost looked as if they might land to walk over one of those billowy hillsides into the sky.

But there was no edge to it, no shore. Larkin stood on the foredeck as Kittiwake merged with the mist, and a shadow fell across the deck. A clammy wisp of fog brushed her face. For a while, looking astern, she could see the glow of daylight where they had entered. But as they continued on, ever deeper, the light grew dim and soon all was uniform gray, no feature anywhere to distinguish forward from behind.

Larkin joined the others sitting in the cockpit. They were silent, for the close air made words sound odd and flat. At first it was easy to see the worry on their faces; but soon even that grew blurry. Thicker and thicker the gray flannel muffled them, damply stifling, as if Kittiwake were a trinket being wrapped in batting to be stored away.

All they could see of Bobber was the dim glow of her stern lamps on their starboard bow. Larkin sent Gimble forward to conn, worried that they might either lose their companion or ram into her. She had expected the wind to die once they were inside the fog, but Kittiwake moved steadily forward— or so it seemed from

the vibration of the hull and the feel of the tiller when she took it. For all her eyes told her, they could have been standing stock still.

“How long do you suppose this goes on?” Gorran muttered.

“We could be going in circles,” Brill answered. “If we’d brought a compass, we might know.”

Larkin ignored them. It did feel like a long time had passed, but it was impossible to gauge in that world without sun or sky. For a while she tried counting her own pulse beats, but they seemed to be growing abnormally slow. She had been following the dim dot of Bobber’s light so long that her strained eyes began to play tricks. The light would fade, then appear again a little to starboard; then phantom lights began to dot the fog. She blinked and robbed her eyes.

“Run forward and hail them, will you?” she said to Cory. “We’re going to lose them unless we do something.”

Soon she heard Cory’s voice calling, “Ahoy, Bobber!” The heavy silence recoiled, disturbed.

The answer that came was unaccountably far away and off to port. Larkin hesitated, then altered course; the light she had been following faded from view. “Call again,” she said.

Again the answer had drifted portward. Frowning, Larkin pushed the tiller even farther from their old course. Off somewhere in the fog, there was a muffled series of shouts, then silence.

“There they are!” someone said. Indistinctly in the mist ahead they glimpsed the curve of a gray sail, and a trellised mast. The next moment it was gone. “Mirage,” Larkin said. “Not really there.” But she wondered. Was it only her own desire forming images on the mist? She could swear it had been a square rigger.

On their port beam a spot of light was swinging to and fro in an arc. Larkin was about to change course to chase it when the black shape of Bobber’s hull suddenly loomed out of the mist, too near. She slammed the tiller over to avoid colliding.

“Ahoy, Kittiwake!” It was Runar swinging the lamp. He now held it up high. “Where did you get to? We thought we saw you behind us.”

“We’ve got a tricky mist here,” Larkin called. “It’s been leading us on a chase.”

“We’d better stretch a towline,” Runar said.

He untied the dinghy from Bobber's stem and tossed the line over to Cory, who walked the little boat like a dog to the stem and made the leash fast. Meanwhile, Runar heaved a heavy coil of line across for Larkin to fasten at the bow. Then, with Kittiwake's sails struck, Bobber pulled forward. The line stretched taut.

When Larkin wet her finger and held it up, the wind was too light to detect. And yet, when she tossed a wad of dreamweed over the rail, it floated off astern. Somehow, Bobber was catching enough wind to drag two other boats behind her.

Again they settled into silence. The damp had penetrated everywhere by now; Kittiwake's bare rigging was dripping. The air seemed almost too thick to breathe.

After a while, Bobber started veering off to starboard. Larkin followed suit. Yet Bobber kept slewing ever farther right, till Larkin had the tiller pushed over as far as it could go: "They're steering in circles;" she said, but felt reluctant to send Cory forward to hail them, and break the silence.

The quiet had settled deeply around them when a low moan insinuated into the air. It seemed to come from below their feet, from Kittiwake's hull. It tapered off into silence, leaving Larkin with a cold feeling on the spine.

"What was that?" Gimble said.

"Whale," Larkin answered, too promptly. "The hull can vibrate to their songs, if conditions are right."

The explanation seemed to satisfy them. Before long another call, higher pitched, came from below their feet. It rose, then sank; as it was trailing away into resonant silence, a third overlapped it in a slow, eerie canon.

Around them the fog was changing, pulling back in billowy sworls. Larkin stood watching, feeling oddly remote from her body. Her hand rested limp on the tiller.

And then they were there. Sails— hundreds of sails. Lugs and spankers, jibs and spinnakers, top gallants and moonrakers, all spread to the wind. They moved through the fogbank, a roiling cloud of white wings.

A shudder ran through Kittiwake, from bowsprit to stem, as if she were in the grip of a strong current. It brought Larkin suddenly to her senses. "After them!" she shouted. "Up sails! Undo the towline, Cory!"

Her crew, who had been gazing mesmerized at the mist, sprang to life. Kittiwake's mainsail shot up the mast, and her jib billowed free. They threw off the lines that bound her to Bobber and the dinghy. The wind caught her wings and sent

her flying across the waves.

They quickly passed Bobber. The water was foaming by Kittiwake's hull. Larkin gave a yell of exhilaration. Ahead she could see the dark lines of a ship dodging porpoiselike through the mist. "How many masts?" she yelled to the foredeck. Gorran held up two fingers. "Too small," Larkin said.

With a shift of the wind, they found themselves in the thick of the herd. The mist was thinning on every side they were hemmed in by sleek oak bodies and sails piled high as thunderclouds. The little dinghies sailed in their mothers' wakes, crowding close to each other but never touching.

Larkin knew her prey the instant she saw that long, low hull peek from the mist, dark and gleaming like mahogany. The ship had three masts, three white pyramids of sails. Larkin knew instantly that she would call her Wellaway. "Ready the grappling hooks," Larkin called. "Then hide yourselves!"

The hunters dived for their canvas wraps, leaving Kittiwake's deck as if empty. Larkin drew a sheet over herself last, crouching down by the tiller, only her hand visible. She peered out tensely through a gap, ignoring the tarry small.

Kittiwake was slowly drawing close to their prey. At an unseen signal the herd changed course, synchronized like birds in flight. Larkin was slow to react, but it was just as well, for Wellaway had tacked athwart Kittiwake's path, making it easy to draw even closer. Larkin held motionless as the shadow of the big ship's rigging fell across the deck. Wellaway must have noticed them — no, not them, but Kittiwake, a lone youngster without any mother near.

With a distant jangle of rigging the big ship turned upwind, sails aback, as if to Kittiwake's unfamiliar smell. Cautiously, so as not to startle her, Larkin nosed closer. Soon Wellaway's hull loomed over them, only yards away. They came even with the chains where her mainmast shrouds were anchored to her hull.

"Now!" Larkin shouted, throwing off her concealing canvas.

The crew erupted from their hiding places. Two had boathooks; they snagged the chains and heaved Kittiwake close. Grappling hooks flew up and over the ship's rails to cinch them tight together. Then, shrieking like pirates, the crew swarmed up Wellaway's side.

A tremor passed through the ship's hull. As Larkin climbed the side she felt it quiver like a horse's hide plagued with flies. Looking up, she saw the lines contract like muscles. The sails swung round, and Wellaway went tearing off northward.

At first all they could do was hang on for dear life. The Ship was bucking and pitching across the waves in a desperate attempt to shake them off. Spray shot up as

she thrashed from side to side. Lashed to her side, Kittiwake's timbers groaned as their hulls smashed together, then plunged apart.

Larkin could see her crew scattered across the deck, hanging panic-stricken to anything they could grasp. "Cut the braces!" she shouted. "We've got to disable her!" She seized the cutlass from her own sash and waved it high, so they would understand.

Hand over hand she dragged herself back along the gunwale to where the port-side main brace was fastened. Hanging onto the rail with one hand, she began to saw at the line with the cutlass.

The hemp fibers contracted, flinching. The rope end squirmed and slithered around the cleat, letting out the line. Grimly Larkin started to saw at a new spot. The deck lurched then, throwing her against the gunwale so hard the air was knocked from her body;

When she caught her breath, she saw that big Gorran was attacking the starboard main brace across the broad deck from her. He had a hand axe. She saw him bring it down, half severing the cord. As the blow fell, the rope end lashed out at him. He raised an arm to fend it off, trying to swing the axe at it. It whipped his body with vicious force, then tangled in his legs, pulling him off balance. He fell and the rope wrapped around his body.

Crying out, Larkin started across the deck. The ship heeled over, the deck tilted, and she slipped back. She scabbled forward again, pulling herself up the steep slope from handhold to handhold. On the deck ahead, Gorran was a writhing mass of cordage. She was almost there, yet might as well have been a league away.

Brill reached him first, and started hacking away at the rope. Larkin lunged forward and brought her cutlass down on the spot where the axe-blow had almost severed the line. The fibers snapped, and the rope end went suddenly limp. The detached brace whipped and writhed through the air, unable to gain any purchase. The sail to which it was fastened, suddenly loosed, flapped uselessly in the wind.

Larkin waved her crew on. "Get the other braces!" she cried, then turned to help untangle Gorran. He was bruised and nearly senseless; there was an ugly red welt around his neck where the rope had tried to squeeze the air out of him. Larkin fingered the line with revulsion; but it was dead now, like normal rope.

Shouts from the quarterdeck brought her attention back. Cory and Bedwa were trying to seize control of the tiller. As Larkin was drawing breath to shout a warning, the tiller lashed out to one side, striking Bedwa across the body and throwing her violently against the taffrail, where she crumpled in a heap. Larkin seized up the length of dead line and clambered aft. A piece of rope slithered under her feet, nearly tripping her; she hacked it with her cutlass and it drew back.

When she tossed the rope to Cory he recoiled, thinking it was live. “Tie a loop in the middle,” she said. “We’ll have to collar the tiller.”

He saw instantly what she meant, and tied a slipknot in the rope, leaving a wide loop dangling. They each took an end then; Larkin passed hers around the starboard rail and stood ready to pull. Cory stood just outside the tiller’s range, the loop dangling from his hand. The tiller stood still, as if to watch him. He tossed the loop over it, and gave a sharp jerk to cinch it. Then he ran to the port rail to pass his end around.

“Now!” he shouted, and both of them pulled at once, stretching the rope tight and freezing the tiller’s motion. It tugged frantically, but the rope held it.

“Take in your side; I’ll let out!” Larkin called.

“Not too far!” Cory warned.

“Reposition your line, I want the tiller lashed to the side.”

Cory saw the sense in this, and obeyed. Soon they had the tiller helplessly bound to one side. Now the ship was hobbled, she could only go in circles.

Even then Wellaway didn’t give up; she fought for her freedom long after she should have known it was hopeless. They worked for an hour before they could strike all the sails and truly cripple the vessel. When it was over and her stately masts stood denuded, the lines dangling in limp dejection, the hunters all collapsed on the quarterdeck in exhaustion. Bedwa had broken several ribs and Gorran still had trouble swallowing; the rest of them sported an assortment of bruises and scrapes. But their spirits were soaring. They had caught themselves a ship.

“She’s lovely, isn’t she?” Larkin said, lying flat, gazing upward at the winter-forest tangle of rigging against the sky. She felt the deck’s smooth teak planking against her back; it gave a little quiver of exhaustion.

“What do you suppose we’ll get for her?” Brill said. They all stared at him, silent; no one wanted to think of giving her up yet.

“We’ll have to tame her before we can sail her back,” Larkin said.

“That will take a while,” Cory said with satisfaction. “She’s pretty feisty.”

Larkin tried not to think what would happen then. Once in the world of men, Wellaway would cease to be the wild, living being she was now. She would lose her will, and then her control, and become a thing of wood and hemp, no more animate than Kittiwake.

They heard a call then: “Ahoy, Kittiwake!”

Larkin sat up. “Bobber! I was wondering where they’d gotten to.”

Larkin and her crew lined Wellaway’s rail, waving and calling out, as Bobber came up to the starboard side. It was obvious the other boat had not had the same luck. When Larkin’s crew began calling out teasing comments she said, “Be quiet,” for she saw the anger and accusations in the others’ faces.

“We could have had one, too,” one of Bobber’s men called back. “We were almost upon her.” He glanced darkly back at Runar, who stood at the helm. Runar didn’t answer; he looked like he had barely heard. All his attention was on Wellaway.

They swarmed up the sides and soon half a dozen versions of the capture story were being told. Runar came aboard last. His deep-sunk eyes looked overcast as he scanned Wellaway’s deck and rigging.

“Congratulations,” he said to Larkin; his voice was dead.

She could only imagine he was jealous. She had succeeded and he hadn’t. “Everyone did their part,” she said, to dismiss her achievement.

“No!” Runar said; there was revulsion in his voice. “I had nothing to do with this.” He looked over the disabled ship, his eye snagging on every severed line.

Larkin realized it wasn’t jealousy. In an undertone she said, “What happened?”

“Nothing.”

“You almost had one....?”

“Yes. We were sneaking up on her just right: so cunning the uncles would have been proud. Then I looked up at her, and she was the freest, most beautiful thing I’d ever seen. It was enough to break your heart. So...I lost my nerve.”

“Runar!” Larkin said, appalled. It was so unlike him. “We need the ships back in Fairny!”

“For what?” he said in a cutting voice. “So we can buy more trinkets than our neighbors?”

“So we can survive! The village is dying, the ships can give it life again. What else did we come out here for?”

“Not that,” he said. “I don’t know what for, but not that.”

His eyes wandered to Wellaway’s graceful lines again. Unthinkingly, he put out one hand to stroke the curved wood rail. Watching, Larkin felt her own skin shiver at the lightness of his touch.

“You can hunt again tomorrow,” she said.

“And catch one to sell into a life of slavery?” he said bitterly.

“You can’t think of that!” Larkin said fiercely. “It’s something you can’t control. Just the way the world is.”

“What a good excuse,” he said.

She felt accused, assaulted. With cold control she said, “It’s too bad the ships have to lose their freedom. Someone must, to save Fairny.” “Fairny’s not worth it,” he said.

He turned away restlessly. “I can’t stand this. I’m going back to Bobber.”

As he was swinging his leg over the rail he stopped in mid-motion, catching hold of one of the severed lines that dangled in mid-air. He looked at it as if it made a part of him bleed. “Gods, did you have to maul her?” he said.

Larkin didn’t answer. Runar dropped down to Bobber’s deck and cast pushing away hard with a long boathook, then raising the mainsail so as to drop far downwind of them.

“Where’s he going?” someone said at Larkin’s side.

“I don’t know,” she answered.

“Well, good riddance,” she heard; but when she whirled around angrily to see who had spoken, no one would own up.

They were all tired, but she made them bring supplies over {tom Kittiwake and then put the boat on a towline. As they were working they spotted abate mast through the thickening mist on Wellaway’s port, quarter. At first they tried to hail it, thinking it was Bobber, but then realized it was just the dinghy they had set adrift. Soon they had it tied at the ship’s stem.

They fixed themselves a hearty meal and lounged on the open deck eating and passing around a pipe of shag. Larkin tried to join in the talk, but her merriment was forced. The voices seemed to jar the silent air. That night they all slept on the open deck, unwilling yet to trust the cabins where it would be easy to get trapped. For a

while Larkin lay awake on the quarterdeck, and felt a tear tickling down the side of her face to drip on the planking underneath.

She woke in a gray and clammy dawn, thinking she had heard a buoy bell ringing. The fog was thick again, and Wellaway's spars and lines were crusted with white hoarfrost, making her skeleton look like carved ivory. Then the sound came again: a deep, melodious call ringing through the water. Lying on the deck, Larkin could feel it vibrating through her body, and her whole being seemed to feel its yearning.

It was like the note of a vast musical instrument, played on a slower scale of time. As if Wellaway were a huge fiddle, resonating. Listening, Larkin thought that if she could dive into such a note she could reach a level of tranquility deeper than light, deeper than wind, down where the motes hung suspended in twilight. Perhaps the slow song was a meditation word, a sound in which an eternal moment lives, sustained, suspended.

Someone was shaking her, calling her name. She was sinking deep, crushed by the weight of water. She flailed toward air, following the trail of bubbles her drowning breath had left on the way down. When she broke the surface, consciousness shot through her sleeping nerves with an intense tingle of pain.

Cory was leaning over her, shouting against the flow of shipsong. She wrenched herself to her feet. All around, her crew were lying mesmerized on the deck. The air rang. "Your fiddle, Cory!" she gasped. "Go get it!"

The first scrape of the bow on the strings snagged at the shipsong like a rip saw on silk. Cory began to play a hornpipe, strident and out of tune.

"Stop that racket!" The crew were rousing angrily, wincing and holding their hands over their ears. The fiddle's voice gained strength as the slow bellsong faded before its dissonance.

Larkin gathered them all together. "We have to get to work," she said. "We won't be safe till we're back in our own waters. The first thing is to repair all the lines so we can sail her. Work fast, but be careful."

The splicing went fast with ten hands at work. They left the restored lines tied in safe coils on deck or looped from the spars till the time came to use them. When at last they were ready, Larkin gave the signal to let loose the main course. "One sail at a time," she said. "The instant she gets unruly, we strike it." Slowly Wellaway would learn to bend to their control.

As the big mainsail billowed out, they all stood alert for an attempt by the ship to break free; but her rigging hung limp and dead.

The day gave no hint as to the way home: the sun was obscured by mist. Larkin set the ship on a starboard reach, gambling that the wind had not shifted since yesterday. Then, it had been from the south; if she kept it on her right shoulder, she ought to be heading for land:

With only one sail up their progress was too slow, so presently Larkin ordered the main topsail set. Still Wellaway did not resist; it was as if the battle yesterday had broken her spirit. Even when they unbound the tiller she gave only a token struggle.

They were barely making headway. Larkin stood at the quarterdeck rail, chafing and staring out into the mist. From time to time it seemed that, hidden in the shifting whiteness, she glimpsed a sail; but always it dissolved, only a wisp of visible moisture. Each time she felt an obscure pang of disappointment.

It was irrational. She had what she wanted, more than she had ever dared to dream. There was no reason to want to see the ships again.

The mist watched her silently, opaque in its secrets. She could almost see Runar's face in it. She had begun to wonder where he had gone, and to worry that he would not be able to find them again. From the ache her heart gave at the thought, she knew what she really feared: that he did not want to rejoin them, now or ever. That he had dissolved in her hands, escaped. Found another home.

Her fists clenched over the rail, wanting to catch and reel him in. What sort of net would hold a thing of mist?

But the crowding fog hemmed her in, blocked off her options. Like a lifetime's worth of habits, steering her against her will to a future she hadn't chosen, only acquiesced to. She longed to see sails.

"Ship ahoy? someone called.

Larkin's attention snapped back. "Where away?"

"Starboard beam."

She squinted into the mist. Yes, there it was — but not a ship. It was Bobber's familiar outline. Larkin felt a surge of relief.

"Runar!" she called.

There was no answer. She could see him now, standing not at the helm but just forward of the mizzen mast, his hair blown back from his face. As she watched, Bobber came about. Her sails trimmed to the altered wind angle — and Runar had not laid a hand on them.

The realization throbbed through Larkin's body. Bobber was alive. No longer was she a poor wooden thing a manmade artifact, obedient and domestic. Somehow, the mist had made her fetal.

"Cory! Brill! Get the dinghy ready!" Larkin ordered.

Bobber was on a course that would take her past Wellaway's stem, between her and Kittiwake. "Runar, come about!" Larkin called from the stem. "You'll foul the towline!"

He glanced up at her and grinned, a wild-mischievous expression like a beast or a god. She realized then that he was not her ally: he was Bobber's. They were only yards from the towline when the boat came neatly about, her sails giving a chuckling sound as they luffed in the wind. Runar seized hold of the towline, and his cutlass flashed.

"Runar, stop!" Larkin screamed. He was setting Kittiwake free.

He paid her no heed. She raced over to where Cory and Brill had hauled the dinghy up. "Come with me," she said. "We've got to catch Kittiwake before..." She didn't finish the thought.

They clambered overside. Cory took the helm while Larkin jerked the little sail up. When they rounded Wellaway's side they saw Bobber standing alongside Kittiwake. Runar was aboard the sloop, raising the sails.

"Rot you, you blistered traitor!" Larkin shouted.

Runar jumped back over to Bobber. Instantly her lines tensed and she swooped away from Kittiwake's side. They could hear Runar laughing.

Kittiwake stood still on the waves, her sails flapping. Was it merely the wind, or was she undecided, confused by her new freedom? Larkin leaned forward as if she could speed the dinghy. She saw Kittiwake's main sheet tighten tentatively, and the tiller move.

"Kittiwake!" she screamed.

Of all the things in life, Kittiwake was the closest to a part of her. She knew every board, every fitting. To lose her boat would be to lose the thing in herself that yearned for freedom.

The sloop hesitated, as if sniffing the wind. A gust blew past, tearing the mist around them like gauze.

"Faster, faster!" Larkin said to the dinghy.

The sun broke through, the walls of mist drew back. They were surrounded again by billowy sails, spread in a swift-moving cluster, piled high before the wind. A cry trumpeted through the air.

Kittiwake jerked round in elation, tossing her bowsprit. She looked as if she had scented freedom.

The thought that she might escape pierced Larkin like honed loneliness. “Kittiwake, don’t leave me!” she cried out.

The boat hesitated, quivering but trapped by the agony in Larkin’s voice. The pause was enough for the dinghy to reach her. But as Larkin readied to jump aboard, Kittiwake shied away.

“Let me come aboard,” Larkin said, leaning across the water. “Please. I love you, Kittiwake. Think of all the good times we’ve had together. We’ve never let each other down, no matter what.”

Carefully Cory steered the dinghy close to the boat’s flank. This time she didn’t flinch. Larkin leaped across. She wrapped her arms around the mainmast in a painful rush of gratitude, pressing her face to the warm wood. “Never leave me,” she whispered. “I need you.”

The boat rocked as Brill leaped aboard. He reached out to take hold of the tiller, but Larkin said fiercely, “Don’t touch it! Don’t touch anything.”

“But “

“She won’t betray us.”“

There were shouts of alarm across the water. Cory shouted, “Look!” and they turned.

Ahead, two enormous ships had materialized out of the flock, one on each of Wellaway’s flanks. They were matching her speed, too close for safety. If any one of them altered course there would be a collision.

And then the ships did alter course— all three at once, synchronized like a school of fish. A fresh wind blew past, skittering across the waves. Wellaway’s topsails billowed down, loosed from her spars by knots gone slack. Larkin could see small figures rushing around in a panic on her deck. The ship had come alive again.

“After them!” Larkin shouted to Cory. Under her feet the hull shiftcall the mainsail snapped in the wind, then caught. Kittiwake had obeyed her command.

“Good girl,” she whispered, one hand stroking the mast.

The three ships were heading northwest now, out to sea. The humans aboard could not alter Wellaway’s course without ramming one of her escorts. Despite herself, Larkin smiled at the strategy. It was intimidating, clever teamwork. The ships had learned.

Kittiwake’s little sails were straining their hardest, but she was falling behind. Ahead, Wellaway’s sleek flanks strained through the water; her bow-wave peeled back in foam. Her sails reached for the sky. The sight was unbearably beautiful.

Larkin knew then: it was not the ship she wanted. Not the dead wood and flaccid canvas. It was that, the free thing that danced with the wind. The thing that died if she grasped it.

“Go free, Wellaway,” Larkin whispered. The wind blew tears from the edges of her eyes.

Small black figures were jumping off the ship’s stem like fleas from a dog. Larkin gestured to Cory to make sure he saw the heads bobbing in the water. He waved acknowledgment.

“Those cowards!” Brill growled. “Abandoning ship.”

“It’s all right,” Larkin answered. Her voice was strangely calm.

Wellaway was escaping, swift as a dream half-captured. She would never haul cargo now, or lie stabled in harbor, or labor in human harness. Larkin looked down to Kittiwake, feeling a pang. “I ought to free you, too,” she said softly.

The hull shivered; the mast seemed to nuzzle her ear. Brill said, “It was her own choice.”

“I know,” Larkin said. “I just feel selfish. She could have been free.”

“Lucky for us that she loves you,” Brill said.

She loves me, Larkin thought. And I love her. Is that bondage?”

By the time they had picked up all the swimmers, the sea around them was empty of sails.

THEY TIED up at the tumbledown Fairny dock in silence. No one came out to greet them; it looked as if their failure were complete. They had set out in two boats, and come back in one. There would be a lot of head-shaking and second-guessing to live

through.

Larkin let the others go ashore, then lingered to clean and straighten up things that didn't need straightening.

Jumber was standing on the dock when she looked up. "What happened?" he said.

"We lost Bobber," Larkin said. "Runar took her."

"He took her?" Jumber said, stunned.

"She took him. I can't explain, Jumber; you wouldn't believe it. But she's happy. She's free. They both are."

Jumber looked like a drowning man. He turned and walked away down the dock. Dropping the rope in her hand, Larkin followed him. He was standing looking at the dying village.

"I'm ruined," he said.

The sight of him made her go soft inside, as she had guessed it would. Not once had she feared he would get angry or blame her. It wasn't in him. She put a hand on his limp shoulder and suddenly knew she loved him very much.

"You're not mined," Larkin said. "I'm going to give you Kittiwake."

Jumber gave a humorless laugh. "She's not a cargo boat."

"She's better than nothing."

"I couldn't take her away from you."

"You won't. I'm coming with her."

It took him several seconds to react. He turned to look as if doubtful he'd heard right. She put her arms around his neck and pulled him tight, her head on his shoulder. He was solid, comforting, and smelled of wool.

"You're coming? You mean it?" Jumber said.

"I mean it," Larkin repeated.

He didn't try to kiss her, or say any more. He just held her as if afraid to let go.

For an instant her thoughts strayed, and she wondered where Bobber was at that moment, out on the wild sea. She brought her mind back to harbor.

“You’re sure?” Jumber asked again.

“I’m sure,” she said.

If it was bondage, it was one she could bear.

* * * *

Carolyn Ives Gilman makes her home in St. Louis, where she works as the Director for Exhibitions and Design for the Missouri Historical Society. Her most recent cover story for F&SF, “The Honeycrafters,” (Oct/Nov 1992) was a Nebula finalist. “The Wild Ships of Fairny” has also inspired a cover. This story is set in the same world as Carolyn’s fantasy novel, Haven.