

Rites of Passage

Written by Cora Buhler

A pirate tale of passion and coming of age.



Parla, the dusty orange moon, was hanging low in the afternoon sky. He and his mate Jopla, the pale silver satellite, were the revered Gods of this world.

They were the movers of the sea, the bringers of the tide, the parents of all the people.

Tiro, boatmaster to the pirates of Tasso, looked up. Lord Parla would sink early today, never even showing his full splendour in the dark sky. The night was to be ruled by Lady Jopla alone, bathing the world in her silvery light.

A movement caught Tiro's eye. A movement where there was supposed to be none. Something or someone was moving among the boats. Tiro's hand tightened on the grip of his sword as he moved to investigate. As soundlessly as possible he followed the shadow that was moving around between the boats, until he was able to confront the intruder. Tiro drew his sword. *'Who there?'*, he bellowed.

The startled shadow turned around and stepped into the light. Now Tiro could see that it was not an intruder at all, but Philon, seventeen years of age, hot-headed and the son of the leader of the pirates of Tasso. *'Tiro, man, you scared me'*, Philon complained.

'That is my duty', Tiro said gravely,

'What are you doing here, Philon?'

'I need a boat. Tonight.'

'What for?'

Philon smiled. *'That's private'*, he said.

'I cannot let you have a boat, unless you tell me where you want to sail', Tiro insisted, *'Your father's orders.'*

Philon sighed. *'Sarava.'*

'And what would you want in Sarava? They are our enemies.'

'I have not forgotten.'

'Then why are you going there? To steal their treasures?'

'Just one treasure. The most precious one they have.'

'And what treasure would that be?'

Tiro inquired. From the way the boy behaved, he suspected that there was something else behind this than just a simple raid, even if it was a raid on Sarava, whose people, pirates as well, were the sworn enemies of Tasso.

'That's none of your business', Philon snapped.

So Tiro had been right. *'Nevertheless, you will have to tell me if you want a boat.'* Tiro was acting above his station and he knew it. It was not his place to question the boy. Philon was the captain's son and his heir to be. Upon a single word of his father he could have all the boats he wanted and Tiro could not do a thing about it. However, he was sure that Philon's father had no idea what his son was up

to and that he would approve of the boy's actions even less. Therefore, Tiro would do all he could to find out about Philon's plans and if necessary prevent them.

'So if you must know', Philon said angrily, *'Tonight I am going to take a wife. That's what I need the boat for.'*

'The Captain will certainly not approve of this', Tiro thought. He turned to the boy and said, *'Parla has scarcely twice returned since you undertook the ritual of manhood, and you already have a mind to take yourself a wife. And a woman from Sarava at that. As if there were no women here that could excite a man's fancy.'*

'No women like the one I have set my sights on.'

Tiro eyed the younger man speculatively, wondering how long it would take to wrest the secret of his sweetheart from him. *'You want to tell me more about her?'*, he asked slyly.

'I will', Philon replied hesitatingly, *'if you don't tell my father. Swear to me, Tiro, that you won't tell him.'*

Tiro swore, though he had little intention of keeping his oath. His first duty was to Philon's father. Should the boy (although he had undertaken the ritual of manhood, Tiro could not think of him in any other way) plan some folly because of the pretty eyes of a Sarava girl, Tiro would of course report it to his father. Besides, Philon should have learned by now that one should never trust a pirate's oath.

'So listen', Philon said, his eyes gleaming eagerly, *'Tonight Jopla will cast her silvery eyes upon the sacred terrace at Sarava, where Arianna Delora*

will undertake the ritual of womanhood this very night.'

Tiro had withstood many a storm in his time, but Philon's confession nearly knocked him of his feet. *'That's the one you want? Arianna Delora? Are you mad, boy?'*

'Not at all. And I am not a boy anymore.'

'But you behave like one, Philon. Arianna is the daughter of old Delor, your father's mortal enemy. She is his only child. Do you think he will let you have her?'

'Who said he will have a choice? Listen, Tiro, I have thought it all through. I will take a small boat to Sarava. The cliffs upon which the sacred terrace is set are unguarded. There I will anchor my boat. The cliffs are steep, but I can scale them. You know that I am a skilled climber. Once I am on the terrace, I will be safe. There are no guards there, on the sacred ground. I will be alone with Arianna.'

'So you think you will be safe once you are on the sacred terrace. I tell you, your problems will only start there. The sacred ground is forbidden to men. What do you think will they do if they find you there?'

'They won't find me. I will hide till the right moment. And Arianna won't betray me.'

'So you do have her consent?'

'Not exactly. But I will have.'

'I wouldn't be too sure of that. That girl has a demon inside her.' Tiro only too well remembered his last encounter with young Arianna Delora. She was a lovely girl, true. Dark hair and sparkling green-brown eyes. He could even

understand that Philon had fallen for her. But there was something inside her, a certain fire that one did not usually find in women. The last time he saw her she had been holding a sword in her hand. She knew how to use it, too. Tiro could attest for that. A woman fighting like a man; it was not natural. *'Have you ever seen her fight?'*, he inquired.

'Of course I have. From the moment we crossed our swords I knew that she was the only girl I would take for my wife. Arianna is the most beautiful woman I ever met. And one of the best fencers.'

'Women were not made for fencing practice', Tiro remarked.

'I know. But if all our sons are as skilled with their swords as Arianna, then what more can I ask for?'

The boy was determined to have her. No way to talk him out of it. Nevertheless, Tiro tried. *'But must it be tonight?'*, he wanted to know, *'Invading Sarava is dangerous. Why not wait till you can catch her at sea?'*

'I told you, tonight Arianna will undertake the ritual of womanhood. And once she has become a woman, she will have suitors aplenty. She is old Delor's only child. Whoever marries Arianna will be named his successor. And that is a position to which many will aspire. But I will be the one who wins it. Arianna is not the only prize I am after. In addition, I will get all of Sarava. I will achieve what my father has tried to do for so long. I will conquer Sarava and I will need nothing but this small boat to do it. My father will be pleased.'

Tiro sincerely doubted that.

'Isn't this exciting?', Jarina inquired, not for the first time that night. To her what was to happen certainly was reason enough for excitement. Soon, her friend Arianna would step onto the sacred terrace and undergo the ritual that would make her a woman. And Jarina would act as the attendant who would aid in the preparations and wait outside the sacred terrace till the ritual was completed. Usually, that was the task of a priestess, but since there were no priestesses in Sarava, it had been decided that Jarina would make a good replacement.

It was an honour for one who had not yet undergone the ritual of womanhood herself. It was even more amazing, since Jarina was supposed to be held as a hostage by the pirates of Sarava. She had been taken prisoner, and since she was a governor's daughter she had been held for ransom. But since the governor was not only chronically short of money but also the father of four other daughters, no ransom had yet been paid for Jarina.

Nobody had really known what to do with her then. It seemed cruel to kill her. After all, it was hardly her fault that her family chose to desert her. Besides, Arianna, the daughter of the pirates' leader, had taken a liking to Jarina and made the girl her attendant, confidant, friend. So Jarina found herself stuck here in Sarava. To her own amazement, she liked it far better than she should.

These people were not the fiends her father and the other officials had made her believe. They were pirates, true. They were outlaws, they made a living of stealing and plundering. But

they had always treated Jarina kindly, even when no ransom had been paid for her. They could have killed her then, but they did not. They had even granted her some freedom, more freedom in fact than she had had in the governor's palace. And Arianna was her friend, the closest friend she ever had. No, the people of Sarava were not evil.

Jarina looked up into the sky, where Lady Jopla had risen. She did not think that these people were evil. She cast her silvery light on them as she did on every other man and woman in the world. In fact, she looked even more beautiful hanging there in the indigo sky above the Bay of Sarava than Jarina had ever seen her in the city. Lord Parla, the larger orange moon, had descended beyond the horizon, when night fell. Now, the sky belonged exclusively to Lady Jopla. This was her night.

'She is so beautiful', Jarina remarked, *'I hope she will shine on me just as beautifully, when my time comes to undertake the ritual.'*

'You are really looking forward to the ritual, aren't you?', Arianna wanted to know.

'Of course. Isn't everybody?'

Arianna did not reply. She had been unusually quiet all evening long. Jarina attributed that to nervousness. After all, Arianna was about to experience one of the most important events in a woman's life. Even someone as self-assured as Arianna could not remain entirely untouched by that.

Arianna scanned the night sky with the experienced eye of a sailor. She saw Lady Jopla and Lord Parla and the myriad of stars up there not solely as

objects of devotion. To her they were more. They were landmarks to guide a ship safely through known and unknown waters. She had tried to teach it to Jarina, how to navigate by the stars and moons. Jarina did not pretend to understand much of it, but she was fascinated.

'It is time', Arianna said after taking a long look at Lady Jopla, *'She is almost at her zenith. Do your part, Jarina.'*

Carefully, Jarina picked up a silver bowl. *'Don't worry, I know exactly what I must do. I watched when my oldest sister undertook the ritual.'* She dipped her finger into the scented oil and marked Arianna's forehead and cheeks with it. *'Now go, devoted daughter of our Lady Jopla'*, she declared solemnly, *'May she cast her sacred light on you with blessings!'*

Jarina paused. She was pleased with herself, but also a little bit worried. After all, what she had just done might be considered sacrilege. *'Do you think I'll get in trouble if somebody finds out?'*, she said nervously, *'Officially, only a priestess is allowed to perform these rites.'*

'They won't find out', Arianna replied, *'And if they do, then just say that we forced you to do it.'* With that she turned away and began to mount the stairs that led up to the sacred terrace.

Jarina looked after her friend. *'Just say that we forced you to do it.'* That was what Arianna always said whenever Jarina was nervous about doing something that might be against the law. *'Just say that we forced you to do it.'*

'But I won't say that', Jarina thought,

'I won't. When I get home again [for there was still no doubt in her mind that she eventually would return to her home], then I will tell everybody that the pirates of Sarava are not the way they think.'

Feeling slightly uncomfortable, Arianna stepped onto the terrace high above the Bay of Sarava. She did not want to undertake this ritual. She enjoyed the life she was living and the freedom she had. But after this night it would all be over. Never again would she sit on the rail of a ship feeling the wind in her hair. Never again would she rush into battle with a sword in her hand. Tonight she would trade all that for the joys of womanhood, marriage, motherhood. But that was not the life she wanted. Not at all.

'Well', Arianna sighed, *'Let's get this over with!'* She unbuckled the heavy belt which held her sword and her dagger. With a sharp clang it fell to the marble floor of the terrace. Then she loosened the lacing of her wide dark red skirt and let the garment fall to the ground. Her white blouse, black wool stockings and leather shoes followed. Finally, she stepped out of her underclothes and stood naked in the silvery light of Jopla.

Unbeknownst to Arianna, Philon was watching her from his hiding place behind some flower pots with green aromatic shrubs. He gasped, as she slid into the basin for the ritual bath. She was breathtakingly beautiful. She looked like a marble statue in the pale light of Lady Jopla. The sweet smell of the petals floating in the water mingled

with the stronger odour of the shrubs in front of his nose, intoxicating him.

Arianna finished the ritual bath and rose from the water. She proceeded to put on the new clothes of womanhood that had been laid out for her. First, she slipped into the skirt, a long hip-hugging garment made of some shiny silvery fabric. It was uncomfortable, so Arianna noticed, and left the legs little room for movement. She wondered how she should ever walk in that, let alone run or fight.

Next came the top, which was fashioned of the same silvery fabric as the skirt. It was extremely tight-fitting, so much that it restricted her breath. On the other hand, it was also too short and left her belly entirely exposed. Finally, Arianna put on a heavy ornamental necklace and fastened a massive silver bangle around each of her upper arms.

Now, dressed in the new clothes of womanhood, Arianna stepped in front of the altar, which stood at the far end of the terrace. Twice she nearly tripped over the unfamiliarly long skirt. She bowed in front of the altar, then raised her eyes to Lady Jopla, standing high in the sky above the Bay. *'Oh, Lady Jopla, mother of women. I, your devoted daughter, pledge you, make me a woman. Give me children, as plentiful as...'*

In order to see what was going on now, Philon had to lean forward as far as he could. Unfortunately, he leant forward a bit too much, lost his balance and tumbled over the flower pots.

The sudden noise made Arianna spin around. She paled at the sight that greeted her. There Philon lay, amid

shards of broken flower pots and crushed plants, feeling very much like an idiot and cursing himself for his clumsiness.

For an instant neither of them said or did anything. Arianna still had to recover from the shock of the intruder's sudden appearance and Philon still had to regain his composure.

Arianna was the first to recover. Cautiously, she took a few steps forward, this time mindful of her skirt, until she towered above Philon like a vision of loveliness. *'Why do you interrupt this sacred ritual?'*, she demanded, *'Speak!'*

The sight of her so lovely and so close to him flooded Philon with a sudden surge of courage. Boldly, he sprang to his feet and announced, *'Arianna Delora, I have come to make you my wife!'*

'What?' Arianna moved a few steps back, nearly stumbling once.

'I am asking you to marry me', Philon repeated, taking a step forward.

This time Arianna did understand him. *'Never'*, she replied hotly. With as swift a movement as her attire would allow, she bent down and grabbed her sword, which was lying amid a pile of clothes on the floor. She unsheathed the blade and pointed it at Philon.

Philon made no movement towards his own sword. Instead, he cautiously advanced with his hands raised above his head. *'Arianna'*, he said, *'we can fight this out if you want to. I am not afraid of you. But I don't want to hurt you either. So why aren't you reasonable, lower your blade and behave like an grown woman ought to.'*

'I am not a grown woman', Arianna replied, still not lowering her sword.

'And what about the ritual you were just undertaking?', Philon asked.

'Thanks to your interruption I was not able to complete that ritual. Thus I am not a grown woman.'

'You can complete the ritual now. I promise I won't interfere. And afterwards we will get married, agreed?'

Arianna's answer was as swift as it was firm. *'No. Leave now or I will call for the guards!'*

Philon did not leave, however. Instead he moved even closer. *'I won't go, Arianna'*, he said gently, *'I love you and I am going to make you my wife. You cannot refuse me forever.'*

This was too much for Arianna. She screamed: *'I will never marry you, never!'* Then she jumped forward, tearing her long skirt in the process, and thrust her sword straight at Philon. Only a swift jump to the side saved him from being wounded.

'If you want to fight, then so be it', Philon declared and drew his own weapon. They fought, Arianna furiously, Philon only half-heartedly. He did not really want to fight her. He wanted to hurt her even less. But he could not help it. Arianna was a skilled swordswoman and her attack was dead serious. He had to defend himself or, so he was sure, she would kill him.

Desperately, Philon looked for a way to stop this battle, before either of them got hurt. He finally got his chance, when Arianna, struggling with her torn skirt, let down her guard. Her defenses were down for only a moment, but that moment was enough for Philon. He

charged. His sword made contact, cutting loose Arianna's silvery top. In shock, Arianna looked down expecting to see blood. But all she stared at was exposed skin. She screamed, more with shame than with pain, for Philon's sword had not even scratched her. Her sword clattered to the floor, as Arianna desperately tried to cover her nakedness with her hands.

Suddenly heavy footsteps could be heard on the stairs leading up to the terrace. Apparently, the commotion had alerted the guards. The terrace was sacred ground, forbidden to all men. Therefore, the guards were theoretically not allowed to enter it. But Philon was not willing to bet his life on that. He knew that if the guards suspected the least bit of wrong, they would come. And should they find him here, on the enemy's territory, on sacred ground, with the screaming undressed daughter of his father's mortal enemy, they would... . He had no idea what exactly they would do and he was not willing to find out. It would certainly not be pleasant, that much he knew.

'You have won, Arianna, for now. But I'll be back, my sweet', Philon said and swiftly kissed the stunned girl on the mouth. Then he climbed onto the rail and dived head first into the silvery waters of the bay so far below.

The next instant a troop of guards, led by Arianna's father himself, arrived on the terrace. The men were followed by Jarina. *'I heard sounds and I called them'*, she explained.

'Arianna, child, what has happened?', Captain Delor demanded.

Arianna flung herself into his arms. *'It was so terrible'*, she exclaimed, *'He said*

he wanted to marry me and then he ruined my clothes and then he kissed me.'

'Arianna, what are you talking about? Who...?'

'It was Philon', she said, *'the son of Urian. He went down there.'* She pointed at the waters far beneath the marble rail.

The expression of Captain Delor darkened. In his eyes, a dangerous gleam of white-hot anger appeared.

'Guards', he ordered, *'search the coast! I want the intruder found. Bring him to me! But don't even dare to touch him. I will deal with him myself.'*

'No', Arianna exclaimed, as she loosened herself from her father's embrace, *'I will deal with him.'*

The guards departed obediently. Now Arianna was alone with her father, Jarina and her mother, who had also hurried to the terrace as soon as she heard what had happened.

Once the guards were gone, any sort of dignity Arianna had tried to maintain was gone as well. She began to cry heavily. Both her parents and Jarina tried to comfort the sobbing girl.

Arianna's mother gathered up the discarded clothes of girlhood and handed them to her daughter. *'Here, darling, put these on. And never mind about the ritual. You don't have to complete it tonight after all you have been through. Everybody will understand. You will simply wait until the next night Jopla sheds her silvery light on this sacred ground.'* Having comforted her daughter, the woman turned to her husband. *'That impudent boy has defiled the sacred ground and it must be purified. You will just have to kidnap another priestess, dear.'*

'No', Arianna declared all of a sudden. Everybody stared at her in wonderment. *'I won't undertake this ritual again. Neither this night nor ever.'*

'But Arianna', her mother said, *'you must. Seventeen times has the sun returned to the day of your birth. You are grown up now. You must attain womanhood.'*

'I don't want to', Arianna insisted, *'I don't want the so-called joys of womanhood. I like my life just the way it is. I love cruising between the thousand isles of Taragon. I love to feel the wind in my hair and taste the salty water on my lips. I don't want to lose that. But I would. After undertaking the ritual of womanhood I could never go on another voyage again. My feet could never again walk across the planks of a ship. My hands could never hold a sword again.'*

'And someday, I know, another such idiot would come and marry me and we would have children and I would be grounded for life. Some might be satisfied with that, but I am not.'

Everybody was staring at her in shock. Arianna's mother was the first one to recover. *'But Arianna'*, she exclaimed, *'your talk is heresy.'*

'Really? Who says that?'

'You should not talk like that', Jarina said, *'The high priestess of our Lady Jopla is very strict. Should she hear...'*

'How should she hear? The high priestess is far away from here. She will never know. And even if she did, what could she do about it? Execute me? They will do that anyway, should they ever get me. We are pirates, outlaws. We are all under a death sentence. They can kill

me only once. And I don't much care whether they hang me for piracy or bury me alive for heresy.'

'Arianna!'

She had only been frank, she had said what they all knew was true. Yet they all stared at her, as if she had committed some unforgivable crime. Maybe it was unforgivable in the eyes of the law. She had done many an unforgivable thing in its eyes. But they cared not for the law. Her father had always told her that the law was not made for people like them. They were free. And that was all Arianna wanted to be. Free.

'Father', she said almost pleadingly, *'you said yourself that I was a good sailor and an excellent swordswoman. And I am your only child. You have no heir. So let me be your heir then. I promise I will be a worthy successor to you.'*

Arianna had expected opposition, but to her own surprise she met with none. For an instant she even thought she saw something akin to pride in her father's eyes. Then it was gone. *'Do what you think is right, child. You are old enough'*, he said.

Then the old captain took his wife by the hand. *'Come, my dear. She is determined. No use arguing with her now. Someday she will come to her senses.'*

Arianna's mother cast one last worried glance at her daughter. Then her eyes darted upwards to Lady Jopla, as if she expected her to fall from the sky in a stream of fire and boil up the sea and blacken the sun and stir up a tidal wave the likes of which no man's eye had ever

seen to wash away the heretics who had broken her sacred law, just as it was told in the legends of old. But nothing of that sort happened. The night was beautiful and clear. Lady Jopla continued to cast her silvery light on the terrace sacred to her. It almost seemed as if she was smiling upon her defiant daughter.

Finally, Arianna's mother turned around and followed her husband. Now Arianna was alone with Jarina. 'Are you sure you did the right thing?', the girl asked.

'Perfectly sure. Don't tell me that deep in your heart you do not think the way I do. Don't tell me that you do not enjoy the freedom we have. Don't tell me that you really want to undertake that ritual when the time for you comes.'

'I don't know', Jarina replied, *'I really don't. I have always been a good girl. I always did what was expected of me. I guess I'm just not used to so much freedom.'*

'You will get used to it in time', Arianna said, *'Best we start right away. Tomorrow a small boat leaves to patrol the Strait of Arras and look for prey. I want to be the one to command her. Are you coming with me?'*

Jarina nodded, still unsure of herself.

'Then let's go. Although there is one more thing I have to do. An oath I have to make here on this sacred ground.'

'This is not good, Arianna', Jarina said worriedly, *'You have just insulted Lady Jopla. You have rejected her teachings. You should not try her patience by swearing on her name.'*

Arianna ignored her. She had had enough of that for one night. Lady Jopla

was still peacefully shining down on the bay, though she had come noticeably closer to the horizon.

Once more Arianna placed herself in front of the altar. *'I will make Philon pay for what he did to me this night. Even if he saved me from doing what I would have regretted all my life. But nevertheless, he deserves death for what he has done. And I shall be his executioner. I hate him. I shall never forgive him for this and someday I will have his head for it. This I swear, by the Lady of Jopla, on this sacred ground.'*

A single grey cloud passed over the serene face of the moon Jopla, as she prepared to descend into the waters for a day's rest.