

## Sister, Defeated

by Mia Sundby

The airship groaned and creaked around them as they flew through the sky. Distantly, Isobela could hear the mechanical sail-like paddles flapping bloatedly along. It was a miracle that this heap of rotted wood even stayed airborne -- let alone that the crew used it to chase down and bottle lightning. Then again, perhaps that was why the ship was in the sorry state that it was. Though, having spent a few days with its even more rundown captain, she somehow doubted this could be the leading factor.

The man in question smiled grimly down at her as he passed her a cold compress. That silly silver canine of his flashed as he did so. Really, it was like he was *\*trying\** to be a stereotype.

"No potions aboard, I'm afraid," he told her as she accepted the small flat sack of ice, "And I haven't got enough of these things to last a second round -- we'll have to restore it for another six hours before it cools down. So enjoy it whilst it's still cold."

Isobela grunted her acknowledgement before slapping the cloth onto her bruised face. The fabric was ice-cold against her closed eyes and she sighed, content. Across the table where she was sitting, she heard the thwump of the captain throwing himself down into a chair. It disrupted her moment of peace,

but still. The chilly cloth was deliciously cold on her sore face and she relished it.

"So," said the captain, ruining her last vestiges of peace, "that could have gone better."

Isobela bit down on the urge to scream. "...I'd say so, yes."

Wickham was quiet, as though waiting for her to continue. She did not. After a painfully short moment, he said, "I thought the Sisters of Seven were supposed to be undefeatable."

She gritted her teeth so hard that she heard her molars squeak. Slowly, Isobela lifted the cold compress from her eyes and narrowed them at the captain.

"We were."

"Not from what I saw."

"You--" Isobela felt her hand curl into a fist, and forced herself to unfurl it. She had no right to be angry; Wickham was right. She sighed, the stab of fury ebbing out of her like a vicious, quick-moving tide. They weren't undefeatable. Not anymore. Resting her elbows on the rough wood of the table between them, she pressed the ice bag to her swollen left eye. The sharp sting of pain was a comfort.

Wickham, who was pressing the cold cloth to his right knuckles --which had sustained severe bruising after he attempted to punch a giant, and had instead hit the fellow's metal-plated knee--, eyed her appraisingly.

"So what," he said, "are you the exception to the rule?"

She rolled her eyes at him. "If anything, I was proof of the rule until two years ago."

"Two years ago?"

"It's a long story."

"It's a long journey."

Isobela made a noncommittal noise. To his credit, for once Wickham didn't push her. They sat for a few minutes in silence. Then he smirked and said,

"You're clearly not used to it, though."

"Not used to what?" She asked, wondering if it was unfair of her to launch a cold compress at the pirate's face. She was after all a guest on his ship.

"To losing."

She furrowed her brow, staring at him. "And you are?"

Wickham shrugged, as a humble musician might when praised, "The art of losing isn't hard to master."

Despite herself, Isobela found herself smiling. Just a little.

"Well then," she said, "Perhaps I shall have to learn from your example."

Captain Wickham Silvergrim kicked his feet up onto the table and leaned back in his chair, cradling his bruised hand as though it were a most gruesome battle wound --one from which he might never recover, though his troops would remember his valiant fight. His silver tooth glinted as he said,

"You can try, Sister. You can certainly try."