



LUNA STATION

Q U A R T E R L Y



Issue 061 | March 2025

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LUNA STATION PRESS
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First Paperback Edition March 2025

ISBN: 978-1-949077-58-2

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Luna Station Quarterly publishes short fiction on March 1st, June 1st,
September 1st, and December 1st. For more information and submission
guidelines, please visit our website at lunastationquarterly.com

For Luna Station Press

Creative Director - Tara Quinn Lindsey

Editor-in-Chief & Founder - Jennifer Lyn Parsons

www.lunastationpress.com



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Zvezdochka

Reyzl Grace

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—for E. R. Shaffer

Long, long ago, when Novgorod beckoned and dismissed her princes like disappointing lovers, and her wooden churches sprouted as though God might still—despite it all—take that wayward city back into the holy forest, there lived a merchant by the name of Ruslana Nilovna.

Ruslana was not a very great merchant. Indeed, she was little more than a peddler—an unassuming woman who, in a life long enough to leave crows' feet at the corners of eyes like tidal pools, exhibited little penchant for adventure save haggling with the market's traders each in his own tongue. It was the amusement of a quiet life, in which she had wanted only to love and to be loved, and to keep a little home in the city of her birth. But her husband had been a self-important man, too wed to his own suffering to keep a second wife, and Ruslana, castigated when not ignored, grew gunshy and lean as he frittered away fortunes until she had no choice but to gather all that she had and leave, giving her last few *grivny* for a shallow-bottomed boat hardly fit to ply the surface of a cup of tea. With a season's work, though, it was in the river, and Ruslana wrought a meagre living out of docks as far as Ladoga—as a ferrywoman, a fisherwoman, a dealer in mittens

and icons and salt, and the laughing stock of captains roosting on wharves up and down the Volkhov.

But Ruslana, who wanted for little and could live on less, nonetheless needed *something*, and she was determined to live if it killed her. Slowly, she began to work the portages, pushing her reach to Beloozero, Vologda, Todma . . . On every trip home, she would survey the Hansa traders in hushed, Low German about what they most coveted, and on every trip out, she would practice her Permyak on anyone who might help her find it, determined to load her little boat with the same furs and ivory and Sogdian silverware that the haughty merchants with their hired crews thought were all their own. And thus she came, on a September morning—wrapped in threadbare clothes and fed on little but berries and saltfish, sitting in her weathered vessel little bigger than a rowboat, to the mouth of the Dvina—to the wide expanse of the cold White Sea.

For three days, she followed the coast northeast, watching anxiously for the mouth of the Mezen, which would take her straight to the markets of Great Perm. But on the evening of the third day, just as the stars had begun to show in the sky, an implacable wind drove up from the south, overwhelming her exhausted arms and sweeping her out into open water. Ruslana could do nothing as the land left her vision in all directions, as little Morzhovets Island—which the Pomors held as a last resort for any off-course ship—appeared and disappeared portside. It was all she could do to keep her little boat from being capsized, murmuring prayers to St. Nicholas, and when her waves calmed as his had, she was alone beneath an unmarked sky, cold and wet and hungry, listening to the lap of the hungry sea.

It was a long day as she drifted thus, and when night fell, it fell again into clouds that mocked her hopes of silver, and she wept

at the thought of her city until the sting of her tears was all that assured her in the impenetrable dark that she was not as eyeless as some banished prince. At times, she rowed half-heartedly, not caring if one hour reversed the direction of the last, trusting God for a sign of land. At others, she resigned herself, said prayers for all who had been kind to her, and offered forgiveness to the wind and sea.

But what wrong had they done her? What loss to her if they swallowed her famished frame? If she returned draped in sables with silver to make boyars blush, still she would want no husband from among them, and if her pockets so dragged with gold that it relieved her to spend it on a fine house right beneath the kremlin wall, still it would greet her cold and empty, like a dead dog on a doorstep. She closed her eyes, listened, and wondered if, in fact, Providence answered the deepest longing of her heart in letting her give her body to the waters. Perhaps, she thought, that is all any of us have really wanted since Adam bit the apple—some little business to distract us from our pain, and then a starless doldrum where no one can blame us for laying it down.

“You are different.” The voice punched like wind into a canvas sail, ran steady as the slip of rope through tack. There was a subtle splash, and then the voice came from another side. “Who are you?”

“I am Ruslana Nilovna.” She tripped on a box of saltfish trying to stand. She tripped on her own name trying to render it in Permyak. “A trader from Novgorod. Lost. I am alone here.”

Again, the voice had moved. “You are not alone.” There was a pause—a silence the voice seemed, somehow, to titter—and then, “May I sing for you?” The boat rocked gently at another soft splash to starboard. The voice was dead off the bow, closer. “I like to sing for visitors, but the men who come here always want

something more.” The voice never seemed to draw breath, yet the night around it seemed to breathe. “They . . . *press* me for something else. It is fun to watch them drown, of course. But you . . .” The voice paused, inquisitive. “You are different. May I sing for you?”

So Ruslana sat, and said *thank you*, and let the strange voice sing—a haunting song of a sailor who welcomes shipwreck, preferring the ocean to the pasture of God, then a tale of a goddess who grazes cows on the floor of the sea, and a saga of a mermaid that fell in love with a fisherman and wept amber tears when he died. And then, again, there was only the soft lapping of the water’s chop—waiting.

“You sing beautifully,” Ruslana said, “but do you believe that?”

The voice swayed a little to port. “Who can say? There are other versions of the song I’ve heard, where the amber is the shattered remnants of her palace, destroyed by the god of thunder in a fit of disapproval. Does it matter which one happened, if either of them did?”

“No,” agreed Ruslana. “I mean, about mermaids gaining souls when they marry a man. It always seemed strange to me. To be the subject of a sacrament, mustn’t she have a soul already? Men think themselves important.”

“Indeed they do.” The darkness chuckled. “But I think you have missed the image. It is not about a man, or a marriage, or even a soul: these are symbols. It is about love and wanting to live.”

Suddenly, Ruslana remembered how cold she was—how the wind, even as gentle as it was now, cut through every loose stitch in her ragged clothes.

“How unbearable it would be,” the voice went on, musing, “to

live forever if one did not love.” It paused, but the night pressed too closely on Ruslana’s lips to let her interject. “Even a short life is too much for many. Why do you think that men are always so ready to drown?”

“Do they not love?” Ruslana asked.

“If they did, they would let me finish a song as you have. Tell me,” the voice said after a long time, “what is it that you love?”

Ruslana laid down in the boat, looked up at the pitch-black sky, and wondered if this was how it looked when a person looked up in hell. “I thought I loved, once,” she said at last, “but I only made a trade—at a small profit for a time, and then at a terrible loss.”

“And yet,” the voice insisted, “you live. So tell me, what do you love?”

Ruslana thought again, harder. “I love to sit on the banks of the Volkhov in the spring, surrounded by the flowers, watching the flowing water sparkle beneath the sun. I love to kindle the samovar on cold mornings in the late fall, take my tea on a walk to see the first dust of snow on the silver cupolas of St. Sophia’s.” Her eyes were far away. The spray of the sea was snow. “There is no city so lit from the inside as my Novgorod—a town that has not ceased to be a forest, with fairy circles hidden in its squares.”

“And yet,” observed the voice, “you are here, and not there.”

“You don’t understand.” Ruslana sat upright as a church spire. “It’s a trading city. We come and go all the time; we have to. The markets are like nothing you’ve ever seen—seas of people as restless as the waves and sure as the tide. You can buy anything in Novgorod, from any corner of the world, but you have to have something to sell. *That’s* why I’m here.”

“To find something to buy?”

“No, to sell.”

“But you have to buy it first?”

“Well, yes . . . Okay, then—something to buy.”

“That you’ll then sell.”

“Right.”

“So you can buy something else?”

“Uh huh.” Ruslana nodded futilely. The little waves slapped at the wood of her hull, as though counting off the miles she had travelled, the weeks she had been away. She could see it all now: her return with whatever she bartered for in the markets in Perm, the hawking and the haggling she would do in the streets at home, the little piles of gleaming *grivny* her buyers would chink into her hands, and the little piles she would make in turn in the hands of the innkeeper and the greengrocer and the priest while looking for a merchant to give the rest to in exchange for something else she would carry—through long weeks missing the sun on the river and the snow on the church—to God-knows-where to start it all again. And again. Until something gave her an excuse to stop.

“So what is the ultimate thing you will buy?” inquired the voice.

Ruslana sank against the edge of the boat. The snow turned back to spray. “A coffin.”

Little waves slapped the hull, counting the hours she’d drifted away from Morzhovets Island, the number of miracles it would take for her to find anything but the bottom of the sea.

“I’m sorry,” said the voice.

“Don’t apologize,” Ruslana sighed. “I needed to say it. You can tell me I’m welcome.”

So the voice began to sing again—a song of mourning for a beautiful princess who, with armies marching to win her hand, drowned herself to save her country, a tale of a little seal that froze without her coat, a saga of a charming prince who gave a bathing maiden back her wings. And at the end, the voice did not wait, but asked, “Do you believe that?”

“That a man would restore her wings for nothing in exchange? Not for a second. That would be love.” The boat rocked. The subtle splashes sounded closer. “But tell me, which love do you think greater—the love of the prince for the maiden, or of the princess for her people?”

“The love of the prince,” smiled the voice.

Ruslana frowned. “Why?”

The voice was indeed closer—softer. “The princess solves the problem at a stroke and goes to her peace knowing it is solved. The prince gives up the obvious answer to his problem and, instead, *makes* peace with it—decides to live in uncertainty. I think that is harder. And braver.”

Ruslana pondered. “You think his case uncertain?”

“Of course. He cannot know if she will stay.”

“It doesn’t matter; all possible outcomes move him to the same action. If they are a good match, and they will both be happy together, there is no danger, and he should give her the wings.”

“Obviously.”

“And if they are a bad match, and they will both be *unhappy* together, then there is no danger, and he should give her the wings.”

“Equally obvious.”

“And if she is happy and he is not, well . . . no one is holding *his* wings, and thus there is no risk in letting go of hers.”

“Plain enough, but what of the case where he is happy and she is not?”

“That is impossible; if he loves her, then all his happiness is in hers. He has to give her the wings.”

There was a petulant slap on the water. “I am not letting you off this hook so easily! You call yourself a trader—”

“Such has the world made of me.”

“Then trade! Strike our prince a bargain. The terms are these: if he does not give the wings, she may or may not be happy, but she stays. If he gives them, she will leave. Maybe not today. Maybe not tomorrow. But someday, she will break his heart. What is the best deal you can strike for him?”

Ruslana pulled her shawl a little tighter, peered into the darkness in the direction of the voice. “The song says the maiden smiled at him. We are not told how. Perhaps it was one of those broad, white smiles that breaks over someone’s face like a sunrise and remakes the whole world. Maybe it was one of those shy, little smiles that stir like healing pools at the corners of a person’s mouth. Or again, it might have been that lazy, sleepy smile you find on the face of your beloved when you burrow gently through the covers they have drawn across them on a frost-paned winter morning. But whatever kind it was, it changed everything for

him; it set him on a journey worth the telling—worth a thousand lines of epic verse and your voice.”

The darkness blushed. “What is your point?”

“My point is this,” Ruslana set her elbows on the edge of the boat, leaned her face out over the water. “The most precious thing he can trade for is that smile. If he gives her the wings, you’re right—he doesn’t know how long she’ll stay, how many times God will draw her lips again just so. But if he keeps the wings and she is not happy, he will never see that smile again. He loses everything. No good trader would leave their stock so uninsured.”

At this, the voice burst out in peals of laughter. “If I should ever lose all I have in this world,” it said at last, “I should very much like to come back as a swan and spend my days in the air you have filled with such wisdom.”

And so Ruslana blushed. “It is funny you say so, for I had been thinking that, in the same circumstance, I should like to return as a seal, spend my days in the waters in which all hearts seem to reveal their secrets to you.”

“Shall I tell you more of them?” the voice asked.

“Please do.”

So the voice sang thrice more: a song of a shaman who spent three lives as a ptarmigan seeking his lost love; a tale of three brothers who bickered over a woman until she was old and grey; a saga of a merchant from Novgorod who was offered any daughter of the Sea Tsar as a bride, chose the spirit of the Volkhov, and passed the night without touching her so that he might wake again in his own bed with his own, human wife. And when this last story had ended, Ruslana felt a tear slip down her cheek, like some offloaded ballast making room for a cargo she could not imagine,

but the voice said, “So you see, I know a thing or two about how you *novgorodtsy* love your city.”

And thus they talked effortlessly, hour after hour, through the night—the voice asking about the forest, and Ruslana’s childhood, and about the songs that are sung far from the sea, and Ruslana asking about the far shores, and the underwater palaces, and how mermaids keep their homes without fire and with everything being wet. And the longer they talked, the more it seemed to her that the voice did not so much speak as draw words to itself—like sunlight is drawn to warm earth or sparkling water—until finally, dawn silvered the horizon, and the voice had a face.

“By Sts. Boris and Gleb!” Ruslana gasped, and then, when she felt certain that morning had put every star to flight but one, she said, “You have not given me your name.”

The face smiled—a sharp, mischievous smile full of mirth and danger, as though one could run aground on a shoal of diamonds. “There is power in a name. I will keep mine, and it will be to me for one wing. You may give me another, if you like, and complete the pair.”

“Then I will call you *Zvezdochka*—little star.”

“You think me so beautiful?”

“I do,” said Ruslana, watching her companion’s hair twinkle between the deepest browns and the brightest golds and the most flaming reds, like a ring of autumn forest reflected in Lake Ilmen. And with all her companion’s words ringing in her ears like the circling wind. “But, much more importantly, I think you guide me true.”

At this, *Zvezdochka*’s face dripped with pity, and the little lost trader remembered how she must look—a bedraggled,

middle-aged woman clad in rags whose last real bath had been a fall into the middle of the Vaga river three weeks ago. She winced.

But Zvezdochka drew closer until she was right off the edge of the boat, and Ruslana could see every bead in her amber necklace. “I can help you,” she said. “But you must do as I say.”

“Help me how?”

“You must do as I say,” repeated Zvezdochka.

Ruslana nodded, and then gripped the side of the boat as Zvezdochka clasped her head and pressed her lips to hers—her tongue and her teeth, longer and sharper than any human’s could be. And Ruslana kissed her back, warm and alive, lifting her hands from the wood and setting them to the smooth shoulders dripping with water like ice melt. All at once, she was going over the edge of the boat, and she seized Zvezdochka’s throat as though her nails could claw through to the oxygen inside. Then she was rolling, spinning like a cormorant under the surface, soft, slick fingers pulling at her back, her breasts, her hips, her thighs, and with every tug of her skin beneath the siren’s touch everything in her moved—every muscle, every hair, every trickle of blood letting the saltwater in—everything pointing the same direction . . .

“Don’t!” Zvezdochka cried, gripping her shoulders with all her strength. They were on the surface again, Ruslana gulping air like a seagull taking fish. “Don’t turn to the north! You must never, *never* turn.” The siren’s dark eyes fixed the spluttering woman’s face and seemed to hold her by the chin with nothing but their darkness. “You are not lost anymore, trader, just as you weren’t alone. You will never be lost again. But if you let it pull you, if you let it face you—every part of you—*true north*, it will take you

straight to the kingdom of the Sea Tsar, and no sailor who docks there comes back with anything. Do you understand?”

Ruslana was treading water, slapping slick locks of hair out of her face, wet in more ways than she had known possible. She nodded. “I understand.”

When Ruslana was back in the boat, Zvezdochka asked to be pulled up behind her. She laid the wet clothes out to dry as best she could, and then she pulled the shivering woman close to keep her warm. Ruslana had never been so near to dying as she was in that moment, and she had never felt so safe in all her life. There she was, naked in the freezing cold, lying on the bottom of an ill-provisioned row boat adrift in the most feared sea of the north, and perfectly warm, perfectly full, perfectly happy with her face pressed to her saviour’s breast, and locks of shifting hair twirled in her fingers, and a heartbeat in her head that seemed to hum melodies—to spin them from the sound of the swirling foam.

“Come back with me!” she gasped. “Even just for a little while. I’ll take you by the rivers; you can stay in Lake Ilmen. It’s a beautiful lake, and you can see the skyline of the city on a clear day.” She looked up into the sharp, pretty face. “Won’t you, please?”

But Zvezdochka looked away. “Did you not hear the song? How the merchant picked out the spirit that was tied to his river? I cannot leave the waters I spawned from, Ruslana Nilovna. Go home to the city you love, and leave this sea to me and the drowning *Murmaner*.”

Again, Ruslana nodded, but not so convincingly as before.

When darkness fell, Zvezdochka returned to the water but reached her hand back over the edge of the boat to take Ruslana’s fingers—to pass one more night together like sea otters fast asleep.

In those bustling years when Novgorod's churches were turning from wood into stone, and the shifting winds of the *Veche* blew sometimes from the southwest and sometimes from the southeast, but the furs of the north still guarded well against both, Ruslana Nilovna lived by a bit of embroidery for boyars whose splendour she could not match, by a little interpreting for merchants whose wares she could not afford, and by such good deeds as the simple patter of her daily business about the city offered her to do and which her neighbours would accept.

For there was something strange about the quiet little woman who had spent every evening of three springs sitting in the flowers by the river, every morning of three falls staring at the church. What it was, however, none could say. She was in church every Sunday, and still the rumours were not wholly laid to rest from the winter she had been sick and the priest had come to bring her bread and salt and a blessing, and he had spied a marker hung upon her wall. She had succeeded in convincing him that she was not a secret Jew, as the marker graced the north wall rather than the east, but whispers have long echoes in a large town.

Another theory belonged to a grocer's wife, who had noticed, after a particularly poor harvest had left their shelves bare, that one of her regular customers always left the shop southbound on the road, although she had mentioned living to the north. With the help of a woman a couple streets over who suspected her husband of cheating, and a grieving father on the other side of the river desperate to explain the untimely loss of his son, and a slightly histrionic flower girl who simply felt it was unseasonably cold, she discovered that her customer *never* took a directly north-facing street and, logically, concluded she was a witch

anxious not to arouse attention from the devil's direction lest her debts be called in.

But such stories found no sympathy among the women whose husbands had found in Ruslana a friend, nor with the bishop, who knew she could always be counted on for her two coppers when the Church fund was in need, nor from the abbess of the Desyatinny Monastery who, after many long conversations over many months, entertained some reasonable hope of gaining a worthy novice.

Indeed, it might well have been that Ruslana, having passed the night in prayer, was on her way to see the abbess when she chanced—on a somewhat circuitous northwesterly street—to pass two ship's captains arguing.

"Twenty years I've had this sun compass," exclaimed the first, "and it has never led me wrong! It is clearly yours that errors."

"With respect, *ded*," the second replied, "it is probably warped after so many years of use. Mine has been carved with the highest precision; my pins, you can see, are perfectly straight. Your reading should adjust to mine. I wouldn't want you getting lost out there."

And so they went on for a couple of minutes, growing a little more heated all the time and gesticulating at odd angles as they tried to pull the best light between the awnings of the market stalls.

"Excuse me, gentlemen," Ruslana interposed at last. "As I should not like to see you come to blows, I must tell you that north is that way." And she pointed just to the left of the edge of the kremlin wall in the distance, her face and her feet carefully turned away.

The first captain balked. "And what would you know of the matter, woman? Go and busy yourself with your sewing."

The second, however, turned his dial a fraction of an inch. "She's right."

"Preposterous."

"Ma'am," began the second with a careful gaze, "if you will excuse my forwardness, could I ask you to cover your eyes?"

"Is it not you whom Sirach advises to avert them?" Ruslana smiled wickedly.

The captain blushed. "You mistake me, madam. I wish to see if you can repeat your feat with your eyes closed."

"Very well," she shrugged, and she drew her shawl down over her eyes.

"Now spin," said the first man, and she obliged. Fifteen or twenty times she spun herself around, as fast as she could, and, when she stopped, it took only a fraction of a second to fling one solitary finger toward the north. "By St. Nicholas . . ." he muttered into his beard.

They tried her on different streets and against different compasses. They tried her in darkened rooms, and they bought her drinks till she could hardly stand. Still, she found north every time, as easily as a man blinks.

At last, the first captain pursed his lips in thought, shot a glance toward the wharves where his ship was docked. "If you'll come aboard for a season," he offered, "I'll cut you in for a handsome share."

Ruslana's eyes shifted from one man to the other. Her raised

finger wobbled. "I love this city," she explained. "A good friend told me once that I shouldn't leave what I love. I'm like a . . . a swan. No! A duck! With one wing. That turns into a . . . seal. And plays an amber *gusli* for . . . for a Permyak. You know? Is there more of this?" She pointed into her glass.

"You come with me," said the captain, "and after a few seasons you can *buy* this city."

"No," Ruslana shook her head lazily.

"Come on!" the man thundered. "What else are you going to do, go back to whatever husband's waiting for you?"

Ruslana smirked. "I suppose you could say that. I'm thinking of taking orders."

"No shortage of those on my ship!" laughed the captain.

The second man scowled at him. "She means holy orders, obviously. We can respect that; it's also a fine seafaring vocation."

Now it was the first captain's turn to scowl. "What on earth are you talking about?"

"What am I talking about? It's in half a dozen sermons a year!" exclaimed the second. "The Church is the Ark; it carries us through the flood of the present world to new life in the next." When the expected dawn of recognition never surfaced on his interlocutor's face, the man added, "I guess we won't be seeing you docked in the New Jerusalem!"

The older captain huffed. "Now just because I don't know all the fancy symbols and oblique references—"

But Ruslana had stopped listening. Her head was pounding like

mallet strikes on gopher wood. Go out and buy something, to sell something, to buy something . . . Stay afloat. Stay afloat.

And if you do?

She thought of Noah and his family, everyone they had cared for—flawed as they may have been, like these two ridiculous, bickering men who had nonetheless been kind to her. She imagined the Ark's passengers looking down into the waters of the flood, their lives saved by being lifted above the messiness of living. It was what she imagined heaven might be like—and hell, too.

"And why would I do that?" she muttered.

The two men stopped and looked at her.

"Do what?" asked the second.

"Buy the city," she shrugged. "They don't sell what I want here."

"All the more reason to join me," the first captain boomed. "I ply the Baltic route: Reval, Riga, Bergen, Rostock, *Vineta*! There is *nothing* that cannot be had at *Vineta*! Whatever you're looking for, you'll come home with it."

"Nah," Ruslana slurred, "not from the Baltic. You!" She jabbed her finger into the second man's chest. "What's your route?"

"White Sea." He looked at her thoughtfully. "What is it you want?"

Ruslana held up her glass, eyed the bottom like she might see through it darkly. "You know what the problem with the cathedral is?"

The two men looked around, making sure everyone else in the tavern was busy in their own conversations.

"It's the icons! All those saints . . ." She hiccuped. "They're so pretty, with their halos and their robes, but have you noticed?" She waited for one of them to answer. Disappointed, she shook her head. "None of those motherfuckers is ever smiling. I want a *smile*. So *you*," she leaned hard toward the second man, until her face was only inches from his, "need to change your route. North." She pointed straight up at the ceiling. "You can run your White Sea ports, and then you take me north."

He looked perplexed. "There's nothing up there."

"Nothing you could get to before," she answered. "I know what's on the far shores, and I never get lost."

"You're mad," scoffed the first captain. "Take a good ship out into the Devil's Jaw? For what? Icicles on the rocks? Come on," he waved across her to his friend. "The old biddy's lucky on land, but no woman is lucky at sea anyway. We've wasted enough time."

But his friend didn't look at him. He was still searching Ruslana's face. "I'll give you two weeks to show me something worth visiting in the Murmaner Sea—*after* all the White Sea ports are done."

"Well then," Ruslana smiled, and then her face was searching. "Mr. . . . ?"

"Johann Paul, from Lübeck, ma'am."

"Well then, Herr Paul," she laughed back in Low German, "you have yourself a compass."

Others have sung and will sing again of the voyages of the great navigator, Ruslana Nilovna—how she made Johann Paul a rich man with the furs of Novaya Zemlya, how she bought his ship when he retired and became captain herself, sweeping across the Murmaner Sea summer after summer, eyes set low against the water, searching some treasure she would never name, even as the silver *grivny* flowed like water from her hands to the pockets of her crew and the mouths of Novgorod's poor. But the favourite story—the one I am sure you have come to hear—is always the tale of her last voyage.

It was a late-blooming summer, and the ship was caught in a terrible storm. Rain drove sideways across the deck, lightning split the sky like shattered glass, and the wind tore at the sails like a drunken sailor ripping a dress from the body of a whore. At least five men were overboard, and the desperate captain, determined not to lose another, turned toward the icon of St. Nicholas she kept fastened to the mast—faced her every toe and finger toward it to pray.

And no sooner had she begun to scream the words into the deafening gale than the old saint's halo shone with a blinding gleam, and sprays of green sea shot through the air like an aurora as the ship was dragged under. Such of the crew as had not already been swept off the deck leapt from it, preferring to trust their lives to the surface than to the deep—though neither promised much—while the captain went down with her ship, watching helplessly as the splintered boards and thrashing legs grew smaller and smaller above, disappearing at last—like so many extinguished stars—in the blackness.

And then, there were lights below—a whole city twinkling through the holes ripped in the hull—and the ship came to gently

rest on the bottom, surrounded by mermen tossing tow ropes and putting up gangplanks, beckoning Ruslana down to a waiting yellow carriage drawn by harbor seals. It was a long ride through streets of golden sand, past shops and houses of stone and sea glass, toward the city's kremlin, and Ruslana, to whom so much had happened so quickly, could scarcely take it all in. But down one particular street—drawn in this enchanting carriage in the fine clothes that, though now waterlogged, still marked her out as one of Novgorod's most successful merchants—she watched a merwoman in a simple apron fling open the shutters of an uneven little house to shoo the fish out, and she wept.

When the carriage stopped, and the door was opened for her, she was escorted into a vast palace carved from solid amber, each chamber splendid enough to shame throne rooms in Vladimir and Suzdal. No one spoke to her—no one even looked at her—until she reached the last and most magnificent set of doors, carved with the delicacy of dragonflies' wings and set on the hinges of city gates. She did not need a briefing; there was no mistaking whom she went to see.

As Ruslana passed through the doors, she lowered her eyes, waiting for the blare of the herald's burbling trumpet. "Ruslana Nilovna, navigatrix of Great Novgorod!"

At this, she knelt, but the voice of the Sea Tsar rolled through the room like a bore tide, "Approach, approach! You are a guest here, Ruslana Nilovna." His smile was white as a wave cap, his arms were a horizon. "I give my favour sparingly; nothing makes me happier than one who does good with it."

Ruslana was still thinking of the screams that stripped the deck, the splashes of the bodies in the unforgiving sea. "Your Majesty," she managed with a curtsy.

“Everyone’s time comes,” he said, as though reading her mind. “Yours might have come earlier, or it might yet come later. We all make choices.”

Ruslana looked up, trying not to appear quizzical. “Your Majesty?”

The Sea Tsar inspected his fingernails. “One of your countrymen was here not long ago. I don’t suppose you know him?”

“Sadko?” Ruslana laughed. “Oh, everyone engaged in the city’s business knows Sadko.”

“I trust he is well?”

“Hale and healthy. Still playing his *gusli*. Just made a very generous contribution to a new cathedral to be dedicated to Sts. Boris and Gleb.”

The Sea Tsar nodded with satisfaction. “Good, good,” he belated, then turned his eyes back on Ruslana. “You, too, are of a pious inclination, I believe? They tell me you have St. Nicholas nailed to your mast.”

“Your Majesty mistakes me for a wealthier merchant than I am,” demurred Ruslana. “It is only an icon on my mast, but that is for the best; having lost the ship, I would hate to have lost such a priceless relic, too.”

At this, the Sea Tsar laughed heartily. When the room stopped shaking, Ruslana said simply, “The good saint has been almost as kind to me as has Your Majesty.”

“Then you will understand,” the Sea Tsar’s face grew serious, “as did Sadko, the bargain that you have to strike.” And before Ruslana could reply, he lifted his hands—each as big across as a king crab—and clapped, sending waves throughout the palace.

Servants swam from all directions, bearing platters of food and fine table settings. Almost in an instant, the near-empty hall was transformed into an elegant banquet, and Ruslana was whisked into a high-backed chair at the right hand of the throne. “For all the good you have done,” the Tsar announced, “you may have the hand of one of my daughters. Choose well.”

A swirl of bubbles poured into the chamber as the south door opened, and in swam a procession of maidens, each as beautiful as the last. Some pinned their hair in elaborate curls, others let it flow behind them. Some arrayed themselves in luxurious brocades, others relied upon their natural charms. Their scales gleamed in copper, gold, and silver; their eyes glistened every colour of the rainbow. Rank by rank they filled the great hall—three and six and nine hundred—and Ruslana cursed that she had not paid more attention to the story, could not remember the signs (if they had been told) by which the old merchant had known the spirit of the Volkhov and, by choosing but not touching her, awoken on the river’s banks and returned to tell his tale.

“Your Majesty,” she began, but the Tsar cut off her timid voice.

“It is time to choose. You may claim your reward of me, or you may claim it of Nicholas, just as Sadko will claim it of Boris and Gleb.”

Ruslana frowned, thinking again of the cathedral, the brilliant gold leaf arrayed around those long, drawn faces. The sea of faces before her was so like them—so shining and intent—each like a sun she squinted into. “Your Majesty,” she began again, and her heart sank, though she might have thought there was nowhere further to sink it than this chamber of sober-faced strangers on sale. She could buy a wife, or she could buy a harp, but even at the great gates of the world, there lay only what could be bought.

And then, at the back of the crowd, there was a smile—faint and twinkling and sad.

“*Zvezdochka!*?” Ruslana rose from her seat, eyes wide as the untouched plates before her. “My *Zvezdochka!*”

The Sea Tsar pointed to the distant daughter biting her lip and shaking her head. “Her? That is Yalyane.”

Ruslana laughed. “Of course it is. Of course!”

“You will take her?” asked the Tsar.

“*Take* her!?” erupted Ruslana. “*Take* her!? I could no more snatch Polaris from the sky! She has kept her one wing, and I have already given her the other; she can fly where she pleases, and I will throw myself upon the trail of her starlight on the water—upon the smile in the crest of every wave.”

The Sea Tsar raised his hand, but Ruslana shook her head.

“Please, Your Majesty, do not beckon her. I must be the one to go.” And so saying, she made her way across the floor, careful to not so much as brush shoulders with any of the Tsar’s other daughters, until she came, at last, to the sobbing *Zvezdochka*.

“You should have told me,” said Ruslana, “that the gift pointed to you.”

Zvezdochka sniffed, shook her head. “No! I sent you back to the city you love—and thence to the golden-streeted city of which it is but a shadow—so that you could *live!*” Ruslana reached for her teary cheek, but she pulled away. “Don’t!” she wept. “Oh, Ruslana . . . *səqlakə jəpey*—my lost little fool! Don’t you understand? If you touch me now, you will never go home. You will have my smile, and then the foam.” Her eyes dropped to the floor like a single goodly pearl. “I am so sorry.”

So Ruslana bent down, looked gently up into the quavering face toward which every part of her body pointed. “*Səqlako*,” she repeated, as though handling a silver teapot. “I have a name in your tongue. A second wing! Don’t tell me you’re sorry. Tell me I’m welcome.”

And with that, the corners of both their mouths lifted like wings of paired swans, and a single smile curled them both together like a wave, and Ruslana—the bargain-driving trader, the found holy fool—gave herself away.