

The Ocean's Orphan

Pirate. That's my dream. To be a pirate. 'You're just a girl,' people scoffed, "why would you want to be a *pirate*?' 'Because,' I replied. 'They're free.'

My worn boots crunched on the gravel, the familiar senses of the docks consumed me as I walked along the road, the smell of the salty ocean, the sailors yelling, cargo boxes being moved and new ships coming into port. I lived for this; it was the only reason I left the woods and my little shelter, to experience this every day, and to scrounge for food. I would sneak into the taverns and hide under the tables to steal food from their plates after they left. As I waited, I listened intently to sailors talking about the tides, trade routes and how to navigate with the stars.

The road eventually stopped, but I kept going. My hut was on the edge of the woods, with an expansive view of the ocean to watch any ships coming from the east. I have always loved the ocean. Whenever I looked out to sea I stopped being so on edge, it calmed me, drowned out my grief. My mother told me stories of pirates, back before she passed, her favorite was one about a young captain that fought off a sea monster to save his wife, the monster gave him a gnarly scar across his eye. I never knew my father, and I refuse to be forced into an orphanage even if that means living in the woods and fending for myself. I'd rather be alone than trapped in a cramped house with sick, sad little kids. As I stepped over a fallen log, I saw a ship out of the corner of my eye. This one was different; it was smaller, flew a raggedy black flag, and had more canons than any other ship I'd seen. That's when I realized, pirates.

I hurriedly packed a small bag with some essentials and sprinted as fast as a cannonball to the port. This was my chance. I reached the docks just as the ship pulled in. I had to be invisible for this to work. I hid behind a barrel as sixteen people jumped off and split up in different directions. "Now or never," I told myself, and ran up the gangplank.

I hid in a pile of supplies for so long my legs went numb before all the pirates gathered on the ship to set off. There were eighteen of them in total, two stayed on the ship while the others went out. Everything was going fine, until someone needed a spare rope, and what was sitting directly beside me? Right, a rope. The man had a wispy white beard, his face was screwed up with wrinkles and his arms were inked with tattoos, earned by many years at sea. He stared at me for a few seconds, I smiled back nervously, and he pulled me out by my arm.

"Cap'n Maydark!" He hollered to the man behind the helm. "I think we've got ourselves a stowaway!"

Their captain circled around me silently for a few minutes. The whole crew was watching, waiting for his reaction. The captain was surprisingly young, with raven black hair and an eye patch covering his right eye, the edges of a scar peeking out above it, the eye patch made him considerably scarier. Finally, he spoke.

"Why, girl, did you decide to stowaway on a pirate ship, of all your options?"

"To become a pirate, why else?" I replied. They all roared in laughter.

"You?" One of the crew members questioned between chuckles. "A pirate? That's ridiculous! You're a little kid!" I was sick of people saying that, so I threw my dagger at him. It just skimmed his ear, then thudded into the mast, half of the blade embedded in the wood. Their bout of laughter stopped immediately. The man's ear dribbled blood onto the deck, I had sliced part of it off, not the intention, but it had the desired effect. They were shocked, the captain glared at me.

"Did you just... try to kill one of my men?"

"No," I replied, heat rising to my cheeks. "Just, get him to stop talking. Can I please have my dagger back, they're hard to steal."

The captain marched up to the mast, removed the knife, inspected the damage, then walked back to where he was standing. He didn't return my dagger.

"Your parents are probably wondering where you are," he probed instead.

"Don't have any," there was silence for a moment.

"Guardian?" He tried again. I shook my head. He paused, thinking.

"Let's strike a deal," he began. "We will set up three trials for you, if you beat them all, which I highly doubt, then you get to join the crew." Shouts of protest erupted from the crew, they went on for a few minutes before the first mate shouted,

"ENOUGH! Let your captain speak!"

"Thank you, Ivan. As I was saying, if you lose, well, then," he smirked. "We'll make you walk the plank."

"Okay Girl, your first trial will be based on navigation," the captain stated.

Alright I can do that, I reassured myself, I use the knowledge from my tavern eavesdropping all the time when I'm walking around the woods at night, never get lost, and I know my town like the back of my hand.

"You will have a map and a compass; the goal is to get us to Bloodthirst Bay by dusk tomorrow. You will get to do anything, under the watch of Ivan, except steering, that's my job, you just tell me where to go." I nodded and he handed me the items. I unscrolled the map and recalled a conversation I'd overheard under a tavern table, 'The easiest way... due north...past the skull rock... Bloodthirst Bay'.

"Hard to port!" I commanded. Within seconds, the sails were down, and everyone was doing their job. I directed by map and compass, until the sun went down, then by the stars, I kept going overnight, and then again, the next day, until Bloodthirst Bay was in our sights, golden from the glow of the setting sun.

The ship hit the dock with a light *thud*, and Ivan jumped out to tie us to the cleat.

"You succeeded with your first trial, young girl," the captain commended with a slightly astonished tone. "Well done, your second will start soon."

Steal a sword, no big deal, it's not like they're one of the hardest objects to steal or anything, I got this. I weaved my way through the crowds, trying to learn the layout of this new environment, then I found it, a smithery, my new target. I walked through the door, fully expecting to be thrown out for being a child but was pleasantly surprised. The burly man addressed me from behind the counter.

"What are you after kid? Lost your parents?"

"No, actually. I'm picking up something for my father," I lied.

"Ginger George's, eh?" I nodded, having no idea who this 'Ginger Goerge' was. "Well, with hair that red you gotta be his daughter. Alright, I'll go grab it," He returned with a sword, and slammed a book down on the counter, "I'm just going to need you to sign here," he said, supplying a quill. *Oh no, how am I going to forge* that? The swirly, beautifully hand lettered signatures stared up at me from the page. These people like their sword collecting. Yelling and crashing stopped me from putting quill to parchment. A fight had started outside, one of the men involved slammed another into the window of the forge, sending spidery cracks up the glass. The blacksmith groaned.

"Wait here. I'll be back," but in fact, I would not wait there. As the forge door closed, I dashed out the back and sprinted all the way back to the ship, up the gangplank and tossed the sword in front of their captain.

"Got your sword," I panted, his eyebrows raised in surprise as it clanged to a stop at his feet. Now *that* was a look I wanted to see again.

Time for trial three. I jumped out of the hammock I'd been temporarily assigned, and thudded up the stairs, ready for new instructions. Instead, I was greeted with yelling and panic.

"You! Girl! Up here!" It was Captain Maydark at the helm. Once I reached him, I asked,

"What's going on? Why is everyone freaking out?"

"We've spotted an enemy pirate's ship heading straight for us. Looks like it's Captain Corwin the Uncontrollable. It's all hands-on deck to prepare for the attack."

"Attack?"

He nodded, "No doubt they're here to loot our ship." He was right, the ship I saw in the not-very-far distance had hostility radiating off it, and it was only getting closer.

The deafening *BANG* of blasting canons echoed in my ears; they missed us, we missed them. Then, they shot out something else, ropes with grapple hooks. They grasped the rails on our starboard side, pulling our ship closer to theirs, until the sides of our ships bumped together. They jumped over the small gap to board our boat. Cutlass swinging, their captain walked up to ours.

"I'm disappointed Maydark, I expected this to be harder," he sneered, and tried to stab our leader in the stomach. He easily dodged it, unsheathing his own sword, and chaos erupted across the deck. Everyone was engaged in their own little fight, except for me. No one ever bothered to challenge a little girl, which meant that I was able to scamper below deck to fetch the sword, which I had only stolen the day before, and scurry back to help. There was a murderous mariner running towards Captain Maydark, coming from his *right*, he wouldn't be able to see them coming! I charged at him and slammed my sword on the back of his head, knocking him unconscious. His body fell to the floor like a rag. Maydark took the distraction as an opportunity to run through Captain Corwin the Uncontrollable.

We threw the unconscious bodies of the other pirate crew into the water and sailed off in the other direction. After an hour of silence Captain Maydark summoned me to his quarters; the walls were covered, floor to ceiling, in maps and plundered treasures. He sat behind a mahogany desk in the middle of the room, and I sat in front of him. He inhaled deeply,

"What's your name girl?" He asked.

"Marina," I answered.

"Thank you, Marina." This took me by surprise. Pirates never used their manners, at least, not in the stories I had heard. He continued talking, "If you hadn't knocked out that enemy sea-rat at the right

time earlier, then, I might not be here talking to you now. I'm completely blind in my right eye, from a run-in with a sea monster a few years ago. So, I think saving the life of your captain is leagues better than succeeding in the next trial I had planned for you. Welcome to the crew Marina."

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My new boots thud onto the dock, and I tie the mooring line to the cleat as I breathe in the air of my old home, different to the salty brine of the sea. The familiar smells, sounds and sights of a life left behind. I had a new life now, one where I wasn't the only one who cared about me, and I didn't have to do everything alone. A life filled with trials, adventure, and... freedom.