

The Pirate in the Stables

“And then,” Catherine Winslow said, cradling the infant Audrey in her arms and adding a dramatic pause for the four children gathered around her, “the Pirate King swung down his mighty saber! He cut the grappling ropes of the men trying to board his ship with three heavy chops! The attackers tumbled backward as the Pirate King held his sword aloft and sailed away, leaving the swimming men as chum for the sharks!”

“Then what happened, Miss Winslow?” Calvin, the youngest son, asked. “Where’s the Pirate King now?”

“With any luck?” Mr. Arnold said, walking into the room, “behind bars or in a shallow grave.”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Arnold,” Catherine said, standing and rocking the infant. “Audrey was making a fuss and I remember pirate stories better than lullabies. Babies like the sound of other people’s voices, but I didn’t expect such an audience.”

“It’s alright, Miss Winslow,” Mr. Arnold said. “I suppose Mrs. Arnold and I are glad that the children are here listening to pirate fantasies rather than finding real trouble.”

“Did you ever hang a pirate, dad?” Elizabeth, the oldest girl, asked.

“If we caught them, yes,” Mr. Arnold said. “In my time as a sheriff, we had to execute a few pirates for breaking the law.”

“Did you ever meet the Pirate King?” John, the oldest of all the children, looked up at his father. “Was he as fierce as Miss Winslow’s stories?”

“Pirates, in my experience, often speak more highly of their fame than is earned. You’d do well to remember that few men could cut through a thick rope in a single swing unless he has something more than a flamboyant saber.”

“So, you never saw the Pirate King?” Calvin asked, a little disappointed.

“If such a rogue existed,” Mr. Arnold laughed, “he was smart enough to stay away from me. I hate to pry you away, Miss Winslow, but Mrs. Arnold needs you to fetch some things from town if you can spare a moment. The cook is up to her elbows in dirty pots and Mrs. Arnold needs some things for her dinner party tomorrow.”

“I’ll head over right away,” Catherine said, setting Audrey into her crib to sleep. “I’ll be back as soon as I can, sir.”

“You’re welcome to any of the horses in the stable,” Mr. Arnold said. “Save you a bit of

time getting there and back.”

“Thank you, sir,” Catherine said.

“Now,” Mr. Arnold said, smiling to his children, “how about I tell you, children, the story of a real hero? The admiral had his brush with a handful of pirates and he lived long enough to enjoy the fame that comes with it!”

The other children clamored after their father, allowing Catherine to escape before she had to start another story to keep them quiet while Audrey napped. Even though she had been at the house less than a week, Catherine decided the Arnolds were a good family to work for. The children were a lively bunch if they weren’t entertained, but Catherine knew enough games and stories to occupy the children away from their parents when they weren’t at lessons. While the children were an eager audience, she was relieved for the quick break away from the house to shop for Mrs. Arnold.

After getting the list from the cook in the kitchen, Catherine walked over to the Arnold’s modest stable. Catherine had never been in the stables before but was pleased that it lacked the stench of manure and piss that so many other stables seemed to swim in. The gear hung on one wall and the stable floor was freshly swept. A few horses poked their heads curiously out of their stalls as she walked in, but another voice crooning caught Catherine’s ear.

*“Well, we’d be doing fine,
If the wind was in our sails!
Yes, we’d be doing fine,
If the wind was in our sails!
Oh, we’d be doing fine,
If the wind was in our sails!
And we’ll all hang from behind...”*

Catherine peered into one of the stables and saw an old man with grey, thinning hair and burnt red skin. He was wearing a grey shirt and black trousers with tall boots, all kept impeccably clean as he stomped around the matted hay. One of his hands brushed the coat of a fine, chestnut mare while the other pet her snout in broad strokes. He sang quietly and

the horse seemed enchanted by the tune, bobbing her head to keep time with the song. The spell broke when the stablehand saw Catherine and looked up from the horse's coat with a smile. "Afternoon, miss!"

"Afternoon," Catherine smiled. "I heard I could borrow a horse so I can go to town for—"

"Ah, you must be the new maid!" The stablehand said.

"And governess, for now," Catherine smiled. "At least when the tutor isn't around to give their lessons."

"Well, you've been doing a fine job of keeping them out from underfoot. Last place we all want Tom to end up is behind an irritated mare. Lord knows the cook's swatted him with her spoon once or twice, but a mare is half as patient and twice as mean."

Catherine laughed. "Do you have a recommendation? They all look like such fine horses, Mr..."

"Mr. Grey...or William, if you want a break from the formality of working in the house all week. Mr. Arnold prefers a certain amount of decorum, but I'm old enough that I don't need the reminder."

"Thank you, William," Catherine said. "You keep a fine stable."

"Well, if we aren't all sunshine and compliments!" William said. "I got just the horse for you. Sweet Belle here is the smoothest ride you could ask for. Closer to riding a cloud than a horse!"

"Sounds perfect!" Catherine smiled. William led the chestnut mare out of the stable with a few soft words and a sharp click of his tongue. Catherine held the horse's face while William grabbed the tack and saddle off the opposite wall.

"That song you were singing," Catherine said. "I haven't heard that one in a long while."

"Oh?"

"My granddad," Catherine explained. "He was an old merchant sailor before he settled down with a farm. He used to sing those songs every time there was work needed doing."

"Ah, it's a good workin' song. Easy to keep time, easy to sing...you don't work too fast that you hurt your body, but you don't work too hard that you hurt your spirit! And when you're doing backbreaking work? A good spirit is harder to come by than a good body."

"Were you a sailor?"

"Aye," William said, dropping the saddle on Belle's back. "For a long while, I sailed for

her majesty in England. A long and honorable service.”

“Why did you leave?” Catherine asked, rubbing under the horse’s jaw as she fussed.

“Ah, your granddad knows, I’m sure,” William smiled, “but you don’t see many old sailors. The longer you love the sea, the less the sea loves you back.”

“Ah, run aground by a broken heart?”

“My skin may be leather thick, but I’ve got a poet’s soul underneath. Sadly, poetry don’t pay for food in most homes.”

“So you sing for the horses?”

“Keeps them calm,” William said. “And I don’t mind the appreciative audience. The kids come down once in a while and I have to sing the less...colorful songs for the sake of their parents. But if you grew up with them, I reckon you’ve heard worse than ‘Old Chariot.’”

“Oh, granddad sang every song he knows,” Catherine said as William started pulling the reins around Belle’s face. “He had to edit a few for a younger girl’s ears, but I’ve heard most stories the sea has to offer.”

“Really? Any favorites?”

“I’m a bit partial to the Pirate King stories.”

“Oh, don’t let Mr. Arnold hear that!” William laughed. “He’s a good sport, but for a land-bound lawman, the former sheriff has a bit of a sore spot for the likes of the Pirate King.”

“I’ve noticed,” Catherine said. “What about you?”

“Privately?” William smiled. “The Pirate King is one of my favorites. I mean, you’d be hard-pressed to find a lifetime sailor who hasn’t romanticized about piracy once or twice in his life. And the stories of the Pirate King make it feel that much more appealing.”

Belle jerked her head back as the bit slid into her mouth and William’s hand shot up to soothe her. As his hand touched on the horse’s nose, Catherine noticed a black mark peeking out from under the cuff of his shirt. Catherine’s grandfather had a few marks from his service, but this one surprised her. The crown was carefully drawn under a skull with a sword over it, long and curved with the arch of the skull.

“More than just a casual storyteller, I see,” Catherine said. “Unless I’m mistaken, that’s the mark on the Pirate King’s colors.”

“We all make mistakes in our youth,” William grinned, dismissing Catherine’s suspicious look and tugging his sleeve up. “And I warned you, I fancied myself a bit of a pirate.”

“Still, bold of you to bear the symbol of the most notorious pirate that ever sailed. That’s a risky symbol to wear in places that might know what it means.”

“I suppose so,” William said. “However, you’re the first to recognize it this far inland. Besides, no one’s seen the Pirate King in well over twenty years. I heard he died and his crew scattered to the four winds.”

“It was never confirmed,” Catherine said, cautiously accepting the reins.

“Are you implying something?” William asked, confused.

“I wonder if you know about a bit more about the Pirate King than you seem to let on. It strikes me as a bit odd that you’d be a fan of a pirate who would have been your mortal enemy. Military sailor or merchantman...a pirate would hardly be worth celebrating.”

“Do you think I was in his crew?” William smirked.

“I don’t know if you only left the sea for your age...” Catherine said, blocking William with the horse.

“Ah,” William laughed. “That’s quite the story. A retired Pirate King hiding in a horse stable? And in the house of a sheriff no less! He wiles away the hours grooming stallions and saddling mares, but he brings himself back to the ocean through song. With each stanza, he feels the spray of the sea and hears the cawing of gulls. And so—for a moment—he’s transported back to the life he so misses and loves. But he’s cursed to stay inland where he avoids the bounty that a group of governors put on his head. He stays so far inland that only legends of his valor reach the ears of little ones who don’t even know what sails to raise when the winds pick up.”

William looked off a little dreamily, stroking Belle’s mane as he considered the thought. After a while, he smiled back at Catherine and shook his head. “I’m afraid you may have been telling too many tales. Though I do like that one! I might have to make that one an epic to tell during the winter months. The Last Escape of the Pirate King would be something to warm the bones around the cook’s hearth.”

“I guess I have been telling stories for the last hour,” Catherine grinned and shook her head. “I must have a bit too much fantasy on my mind.”

“I’m sure the children enjoy it,” William smirked and walked around Belle’s front with a hand on the mare’s face. “And what pirate doesn’t want their legacy built on legends? Would you like a hand up?”

“Please,” Catherine said. William gave her a step with his fingers and Catherine tossed her leg over the horse.

“Be sure to let me know when you bring her back,” William asked. “Belle doesn’t like to stay in the saddle for too long.”

“Thank you, William,” Catherine said. She clicked her tongue and Belle started her slow trot out into the yard. William watched Catherine turn the horse away from the estate and head down towards the village. Idly, William reached up and scratched an older, black horse under the chin.

“Best be watching her, eh, Buck?” William asked. “She’s more observant than the master of the house. No need for anything unsavory, but she knows more than your average maid.”

The dark horse shook his head with a loud snort. William chuckled and walked back into the stable, singing as he walked.

*“And we’ll roll the old chariot along,
We’ll roll the old chariot along,
We’ll roll the old chariot along,
And we’ll all hang from behind...”*