

Stolen by the Wind

The wind pulled at my cap, threatening to tear it free as I twirled and lunged. The sword in my hand gleamed in the sunlight, flashing as it caught and rejected the sun's brilliant rays. Sand was kicked into the air by my feet as I nimbly danced the delicate dance of a swordfighter. By way of an opponent, I was attacking an imaginary foe of driftwood and wreckage. Had I been glimpsed, dashing about in the apparel of a young man by my schoolmates, their response would have been of horror and disgust-for I am a girl. As a young lady, my headmistress would say, it was my duty to provide the world with a sight of beauty and grace, and learn my place among society. But is not sword fighting an art of the most beautiful kind? A dance of the most graceful? The stiff, pinching dresses of an English schoolgirl did not permit the movement needed for use of a sword. Before my great discovery, when caught romping around the yard with the other boys or dancing in the wind, I was given a sound lecture about how I would never find my way into proper society. My headmistress then told me severely that my parents would have been thoroughly ashamed of me. Alas, I am an orphan; destined by fate to be left friendless in the harsh orphanage that was obliged to take me in. Many hard years are behind me, and as I look back, I marvel at how my optimism has survived all sixteen years. Without the discovery of an old tarnished sword I found seven years ago, I might've lost hope long ago. After I'd found the sword lying half-buried upon the beach, I lost no time in learning to use it. I bought the trousers, baggy shirt, and cap I'm now wearing from a vender- claiming to be purchasing them for a brother. Stealthily, I observed some young men who regularly fought with swords in an alley not far from the orphanage. Once fairly sure of the moves and footwork, I began to sneak away to an isolated corner of the beach next to the shipyard to practice. Now, it feels as if the sword is not a sword at all, but an extension of me- responding to my every whim.

I broke off my dance and wandered down the beach until I was underneath the pier. Just over the grassy sand dune, I could faintly hear the noise and commotion of the busy shipyard. The sound of captains barking orders, and seagulls asking for food wafted over to me. Sitting in the sand, I reveled at the freedom of it-coming and going with the ocean. If only I could gain such freedom. I imagined the spray of the waves on my face and the wind in my hair as I traveled to distant islands with my sword by my side. The ocean was calling me, the wind trying to tease my hair out from under the cap where it was confined. Laughing, I raced down to the water, parrying and thrusting against imaginary foes at every turn. Finally, I paused, gasping for breath but with a smile on my lips. I stuck my sword in the sand and leaned up against the wooden support beam. Suddenly, a rough heavy material was thrown over me and strong arms grabbed me from behind. Any effort on my part to scream or call out was muffled by the material wrapped around me; pressing up against my face. The arms picked me up, and with long strides, ran. Horizontally, I struggled and kicked, but to no avail.

“Now, now, lad, none of that” A gruff voice muttered under its breath. Though still muffled by the cloth around me, the noises of the shipyard were becoming clearer and more abrasive. Shouting voices, the resounding ring of hammers, and a general cacophony of sounds greeted me-all peppered with a generous helping of many sailors’ favorite words. The mysterious brawn holding me slowed to a walk, then eventually stopped. I heard a voice say,

“Ye took yer ol’ sweet time retrievin’ the new sails, eh, mate?” I assumed this was directed to my captor. Again I started to call for help only to have the breath squeezed out of me. As my vision grew blurry and I felt myself grow limp for lack of breath, I distantly heard the same gruff voice answer

“Er, aye, sails be in a bit in want these days.”

“Well, what are ye waitin’ fer? Load ‘em up!”

Concentrating on maintaining consciousness was my main priority, but I was dimly aware that the dizziness would not recede. As the spots faded from my vision, I was distinctly aware of the world still lurching around me. Then all the light disappeared

and a musty smell replaced the salt of the open ocean air. I was thrown to the ground, but before I had any time to defend myself, a cloth reeking with the sharp odor of chemicals was pressed roughly to my face. Smothered by the sail, I was unable to struggle and with my first breath of the fumes, a euphoric, sleepy feeling descended over me. Slowly I floated into the quiet deep abyss longing to enfold me forever.

When I woke up, I was bewildered by the lack of light and the lurching beneath me. A lantern languidly swinging from the ceiling threw ghoulish shadows around me. Suddenly, a door at the top of some wooden steps opened, and a man climbed down. He wore the ragged clothing of a sailor, barely concealing his brute muscle. Untangling myself from the heavy sail, I hurried to stand up, only to stumble as the ground lurched beneath me. *Oh no.* I thought. A heap of sail, swinging lanterns, and a lurching floor can only mean one thing...*I'm on a ship!* Reaching out, the scruffy sailor reached out and grabbed my arm, steadying me and holding me captive all at once.

"Come on lad," he said in a gruff voice "up ye go." I froze. This was the one who had abducted me. *Why did he keep calling me lad?* I wondered. Revelation broke upon my mind like a crashing wave. Of course! I'm still wearing the clothes I practice with my sword in. Although I tried to jerk away from him, he found no difficulty in hauling me up the steps. All at once I was in the open air, with the wind lovingly caressing my cheek. I was on the deck of a ship, as I had correctly assumed, and all around me water shimmered with the moon on its crests. Wait, if there's water all around, then where is the beach? Panicked, I spun out of the seaman's grip, and running to the balustrade, peered over. No land in sight. After searching the night seascape for familiar cliffs or the lengthy stone jetty, I tore across the deck to lean search the other side. On my way, I collided with a brick wall. At least, that's what it felt like. From my perch on the ground, I gazed up at a man I knew could only be the captain. He was tall with a shock of dark hair and a somber look on his countenance. "Raphael, what is the meaning of this?" he asked severely. The muscular man defiantly jutted his chin out and answered.

“Well, Cap’n, ye said we need a new pair ‘o hands, and I found this lad makin’ fine use of a sword down by the docks. “Here,” I told meself, “what young lad wouldn’t wish to be a dashing pirate on the high seas?” I figured we’d be doin’ him a favor.” My breath caught as I took the full meaning of his words. These men were pirates! The captain glared at the sailor and then glanced at me.

“I have no use for him.” And with that he walked dismissively away. My heart quickened. This could be a chance to live the life of adventure I’d been dreaming about. “No use for me?” I asked hotly, remembering to keep the pitch of my voice lower, “I’ll wager I’m a more skilled swordsman than any of you *pirates*.” I spat out the word. Turning, the captain hesitated, then spoke.

“Very well, we will let ye prove yourself worthy of walking on this here pirate vessel, eh lads? Get Rixon.” He then turned his back on me to wait, but not before I caught a glimpse of a brief smile cross his lips. My attention was captured by the two men who had started clambering up the ship’s rigging like two limber monkeys, eager for a good show. Halfway up, I heard them call.

“Rix, lad, get down here! We’ve got a boy down here willing to fight ye.”

Up in the crow’s nest at the top of the mast, a head peered down, too far away to be defined. By now at least twenty other sailors had gathered upon deck, and began cheering when a slim figure grabbed a rope and swung down to drop lightly on his feet beside the captain. While everyone else was distracted, he had retrieved two glinting rapiers. My heart quickened. Tossing one to me, he handed the other one to Rixon, who twirled it expertly in his hand. Examining mine closer, I noticed that edge was blunted. When I looked up, confused, it was Rixon himself who spoke.

“We wouldn’t want ye to get hurt.” He said smugly. I turned to the captain.

“If I win, may I stay on the ship and be a pirate too?” The men roared with laughter, “The lad actually wants to stay!” but the captain, after thinking about it, just gave a curt nod. With that I gripped the sword and bent my knees, readying myself. Rixon, too, conformed to the fighter’s stance I recognized from the duels behind the alley to show that he was ready to fight. For a brief minute we froze, and I took that time to assess my opponent. With brown wavy hair falling to his shoulders, he seemed to be

around my age-possibly a few years older. He was lean and well built, and the muscles on his arms were well defined. I could tell that I wouldn't be able to win this fight by strength or force. Back at the orphanage, I would disguise myself as a boy, hiding my hair under the cap, and duel against the other boys from the alley. At first my arms, unused to fighting an opponent, had failed me, and my rival would easily knock the sword out of my hand with one blow. But after years of practicing and getting stronger every day, I became the one claiming multiple victories.

Unfortunately, this boy, Rixon, seemed slightly larger than the boys I had dueled before. To have a chance of beating him, I would need to lean upon speed and agility, and hope to out maneuver him. My speculations were cut off as he made the first move and tapped his sword on mine. He oozed confidence. To gain myself an advantage, I delayed my reaction a fraction of a second, and cringed just slightly. Immediately, I saw the effect I had desired. Rixon relaxed, and a slow smile spread across his tan face. Slowly, he circled and then began a slow attack. He was just toying with me. He didn't want to win yet, I could tell. So, I kept my reactions slower. Not enough for them to suspect, but enough so you couldn't tell I had six years of sword fighting up my sleeve. Soon I noticed a gradual quickening in his jabs and thrusts. He was ready to finish this. Well, so am I. Slowly, I began to counter his parry's with my own thrusts until I was the one driving, forcing him into the defensive. Only for a minute, though. He had strength and size on his side and quickly began fighting more expertly. We danced around, circling each other-my brisk nimble movements being the only thing keeping his sword from ripping mine out of my grasp. All my observations of the men around us were cut off, as the arduous duel engaged my full concentration. Thrusting forward and then spinning out of his reach, I tried to find a gap in his defense. He was smiling now, aware of my ebbing strength. Lunging forward, his blade screamed in protest as I barely stopped his attack. Our weapons were crossed; we stood about six inches apart, my breathing heavy while his was light. My only chance now would be to pray for a miracle. Suddenly, a feisty gust of wind ripped my cap of my head, and my long brown hair streamed out behind me. I heard a collective gasp from around me and

witnessed conflicting emotions pass through Rixon's eyes as he hesitated. His hesitation was exactly the miracle I'd been praying for. I leapt forward, and twisted his sword out of his grasp with my blade; just like that, I'd disarmed him. The shocked look crossed his face as he slowly raised his hands, eyes on the blade at his neck. Slowly, the surprise faded and an amusement replaced it. Dropping the sword, I turned to the captain, who was silently contemplating me.

"May I become one of your crew members now, like you promised?"

Instant protests were voiced by the other pirates, but he cut them off with a withering look. Finally, after a minute of me waiting with baited breath, he sighed and nodded, saying,

"Aye, miss, I gave you my word as a captain, and it shall be kept."

I decided right then that I liked him. Who's to say that even pirates don't have standards? It was obvious this particular captain did.

An hour later, I dipped the sharpened quill into a mini bottle of ink and signed my name in the roster next to the article containing the Pirate Code. A cheer went up. I was confused. Why would these surly, gruff pirates be cheering at me joining their motley crew? I'm guessing I looked as confused as I felt, because Rixon, who was standing beside me whispered,

"They be cheering because ye earned their respect. Not many can last very long in a fight against me, certainly not one of your size. They are proud to have ye on board with them...as am I. What's your name miss?" after a pause, I realized I hadn't told anyone yet.

"Gabriella."

He leaned back against the rail of the deck in thought.

"It's a nice name, but not suitable for a lady pirate. We shall call ye Reylle-it suits ye."

I sat next to him, overjoyed by the sense of freedom crashing over me. In the background, pirates heartily sang an old sailor's ditty, and the waves silver with moonbeams crashed against the sides of the ship. Sensing my happiness, Rixon chuckled and leaning down, whispered into my ear,

"Welcome aboard, Reylle."