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THE
PIRATE QUEEN



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MAIDEN, 1535

“Storm Born”

GRACE IS FIVE YEARS OLD

The girl lifts a knife and with one trembling swipe severs her braid. In all fairness, the steel is sharp. Cook put it to the whetstone just this morning. But still, it is a shock to see the limp, dead thing in her hand. Like some rock pipit with threadbare wings. Or a clump of wilted flowers. Yet she shakes it in her father's face and hopes that her fear looks like anger instead.

He lurches forward a step. Eyes round and horrified. A hand outstretched as though to stop her. “What have you done, bird?”

“Now my hair won't get caught in the ropes,” she says. “Now I'll be going with you.”

He shakes his head. “That's not what I meant. That's not what I—”

“'Tis what you *said*.”

He lied. They both know it. But now she's called him out—in front of his crew, no less—and she can see the storm building in his eyes. To plead with her father in private is one thing. She has done so every day for a year. But to challenge him here, while he has one foot onshore and the other on deck, is a mutinous sin.

“*Gráinne*,” he warns, his voice now clipped and threatening.

Grace shifts back and forth on bare feet. It is summer but the dock is cool and damp, the dark gray stone a balm against the jag-

ged cut on the arch of her left foot—an injury from when she ran through the rock pools at low tide last week looking for anemones. Grace loves the soft red-hued creatures, how they glisten like bloody mushrooms when closed; then, once submerged again, bloom with a tentacled crown. Such a strange child, her mother says, always running barefoot, cursing the rocks. Grace feels the sting of salt water in the cut. Ignores it, afraid to break her father's gaze. Knows that if she blinks, he will send her back to the tower house, to her mother.

The galley bobs beside the quay, sails furled tight against the masts. It looks antsy, like a child bouncing on the balls of its feet, ready to leave. There are ninety men at oars, looking elsewhere, suddenly curious about the sky and the cliffs and the dirt beneath their fingernails. But their ears are tuned to the chieftain and his daughter. Telltale signs. Those bent heads and furrowed brows. The only one who dares to watch the spectacle is a boy of nine. Donal. He is four years older than Grace and dark, like their father. Grace has heard her mother complain that the boy should look more like Aisling, like his own mother, that Eóin O'Malley shouldn't have recreated himself quite so well in the bastard he made with that village girl. Her mother thinks it would be easier to look at Donal if he didn't wear her husband's face. But all Grace sees when she looks at her half brother is a boy who would happily trade places with her. She knows the sea is no friend to Donal, that he returns from every voyage green around the gills. And yet, Eóin tries. With *Donal*, he tries.

"Take me with you." It's a tiny whisper, nearly lost in the wind and spray rushing into the harbor.

"No," Eóin says, and he is angry now. Or perhaps ashamed. Quite often, there is little difference between the two.

But Grace is angry as well, and her chin wobbles, letting him know.

"You'll be staying with your mother. As is right."

"You said—"

"I made no promises."

She shakes her head. "Isn't fair."

"Fair or not, that's how it's done. The sea is no place for a girl."

Grace has been on *Niamb*—her father's galley—more times than she can count. The name is carved there on the prow, and she knows what each letter feels like beneath the pad of her fingers though she cannot yet read any of them. The girl loves nothing more than to tuck herself into the prow, her slender arms resting on the gunwale as she traces her hand across those deep, dark grooves. She thinks *Niamb* is a beautiful name. Wishes it were hers.

Grace knows every island in Clew Bay by name and by sight. Nishoo. Collan Moore. All the Inish: Turlin, Daff, Loy, Muck, Gowla, each with its own rolling hills and beaches and cliffs. Some no bigger than a field, others stretching for miles. But she has never gone far enough into the Atlantic to lose sight of them. Has never been allowed on a trading voyage. Has never been so far from home that the fat, square tower house that looms above them on the cliff fades from view. Home. Where her mother is and where she has been told to stay. Where a girl belongs because the sea is no place for her.

"*Please.*" Begging now. It sounds pathetic even to her small ears. Grace has never heard her mother beg, is ashamed to hear herself do so now.

She waits so long for her father to answer that her feet grow cold and her eyes burn. The braid feels heavy in her hand. This moment, at the age of five—standing in the wind, shorn curls whipping her eyes, cheeks reddening in humiliation—is the first time Grace O'Malley feels hatred. Her father has lied to her, and she *hates* him for it. It burns worse than the cut on her foot.

"Take me," she demands.

"No."

"You said it was my hair."

He rubs his face. Curses. "Isn't your hair, bird. 'Tis *you*. Do not ask again."

Decision made, Eóin O'Malley unwinds the mooring lines from the iron crossbar and tosses the sodden rope onto the galley. Then he lifts his foot from the stone and sets it onto the smooth wooden planks of *Niamb*'s polished deck, the boards nearly black, gleaming in the sun.

"Prepare to shove off!"

The call comes from on board, near the prow, and the voice sounds like rocks grinding together. It belongs to Sivney, her father's first mate. He's always been kind to Grace, but he doesn't look at her now.

Donal collects the mooring lines and loops them into a pile on the deck. Steps back. Glances at Grace. *Take my place*, his eyes implore, but his lips are pressed tight.

"Shove off!" Her father gives the order, and fifteen oars on the port side reach out and rest against the dock. "Push!"

Niamh groans and moves away from the rocky outcropping.

"Again!"

The oarsmen lean to the left, shoving the long wooden blades against the dock, then repeat the process. Now *Niamh* bobs far enough away for them to row.

"*Da.*" It is no longer a plea, but an accusation, and Grace takes a step forward, reaching for him.

Eóin shakes his head. "I'm sorry, bird."

Furious, Grace throws the braid at his head. The sight seems to startle him and he reaches for it on instinct, but her hair is caught by the wind and whisked away, a red sail flapping in the sun for a moment before it drops to the brackish water, tendrils spreading, soaking, then sinking.



Maeve. Wife and mother and—now—untangler of knots. She winces as the comb catches in what is left of her daughter's once-beautiful hair.

"Why?" Maeve asks.

Riled by the wind and her furious march up the hill, Gráinne's curls must be wetted down before they can be tamed. Maeve dips the ivory tines into a pitcher, then runs them through the now-short red strands. She combs, then lifts to see what can be salvaged and what must be trimmed. Finding a jagged section, she holds it aloft with one hand, then snips with her scissors, watches bits of copper

drift to the floor and disappear into the woven rush mat. The longest parts now fall to her daughter's chin. But the hair at her nape is little more than stubble. Gráinne is too pretty to look like a boy, but now, for the first time, she resembles her brother. An angry coil forms in Maeve's belly at the realization.

Again she asks, "*Why?*"

Gráinne slumps on the stool, then looks up at the cracked looking glass. She glares at her own reflection. "Da said I could go to Galway if I cut my hair."

Maeve breathes out the curse she's so often heard her husband mutter. *Fecking Galway.*

"There is a difference between what's said and what you wish to hear. Tell me what your father *said*."

"He said I can't go with him because my hair will get caught in the ropes."

"And you thought he'd take you if you cut it?"

A nod.

"Look at me." Maeve turns her so they are eye to eye. She leans closer. Speaks a harsh truth. "No one did this to you."

Gráinne opens her mouth to argue.

"No." Maeve gives her a gentle shake. "You did this to yourself."

"He lied."

"He's a man, isn't he? Won't be the last time."

"Fathers shouldn't lie."

Maeve looks to the window where *Niamh's* white sails bob at the far edge of the horizon. She sighs. "Neither should husbands. But they do. Do you understand me? Men. Lie. Sometimes *with* words. Sometimes without them."

"Do women lie?"

Maeve doesn't catch her smile in time, and it flashes wide across her face. Her daughter has unwittingly trapped her. To answer as she'd like, to tell her daughter no, would itself be a lie.

"*Tá.*"

"When?"

"Usually when our lives depend on it."

Gráinne thinks about this for a moment. Puckers her lips. Makes a face in the mirror. And Maeve laughs at that, at the crossed eyes and little pink tongue poking out.

“Why can’t girls go to sea?”

“Why would you want to?”

Gráinne points to the narrow window in the stone wall where two blue lines—one dark, one light—meet on the horizon. “Because everything fun is out there. I don’t want to *stay*. I want to *go*.”

Maeve is startled by what she sees in the gray eyes that look back at her. Something lovely and wild and spirited lives within those stormy depths. She would expect nothing less from the daughter she made with Eóin O’Malley. But there is something even deeper that pleads with her. A wildness Maeve has never encountered before. She blinks first, then looks away from her daughter, unnerved.

Some women are built for birthing. Broad-hipped and fertile. Maeve is not one of them. She has been pregnant a single time since she wed Eóin. The delivery was fraught and her body tells her in whispers—that *knowing* every woman has—that there will never be another child. Once she had a life as Margaret McConaughy, but now this house, this child, is her life. Now all she has is Eóin and Gráinne. Both of them wild and unruly and in need of constant management. Her daughter, it seems, will require a great deal more than her husband.

Maeve pulls the girl close so that Gráinne’s cheek rests against the nubby weave of her apron, then brushes the hair away from her little face. Kisses the top of her head. Lifts a shorn curl and twists it around her index finger. It is an effort not to cry. Her hair had truly been beautiful.

“Promise me you will never do this again.”

“Why?”

“Because men will never respect you if you try to be like them.”

Gráinne lifts her head and meets her mother’s gaze. “Then how will they respect me?”

“They won’t,” Maeve says with a shrug. Then she takes her daughter’s face in her hands and brings it close. Until their noses touch and their breath mingles. “Not unless you *make* them.”



Some days later, Eóin returns from Galway. Routine trading mission. A good haul of smoked turbot and salmon, packed in wooden barrels. It is easy enough to get the cargo to Galway, and from there it will go on to Spain, mostly, though France has developed a taste for Atlantic fish of late. He'd also carried a hold full of tallow and skins: deer, sheep, rabbit, and pine marten. The European demand grows larger every year and he is happy to meet it. And since he was lucky enough to run across a poorly guarded English cog? Well, wasn't it only fair to take a portion of the cloth and wine it carried? Safe passage and all. Sure, he has a wife and daughter to please.

He is glad to be home. The tower house is silent, nothing but the thick oak boards creaking beneath his boots as Eóin makes a quick survey of each floor on his way up. Cellars stocked. Dungeon empty. Now to the kitchen, where Cook sleeps on her pallet beside the hearth—snoring dreadfully—with an empty mug of mead by her limp outstretched hand. Eóin smells ashes in the banked fire and yeast where tomorrow's loaves rise beneath a towel. Dishes scrubbed and floors swept, all is tidy in Cook's domain, and he nods in approval until he sees the small bone-handled knife on the table. Remembers how it rested in Gráinne's clenched fist.

Scowling, he ascends to the next floor. Straight instead of spiral, this staircase is the only one of his fortresses not built with the traditional Norman defensive feature. The tower house had gone up when Eóin was a child, and he'd asked his father about the choice in staircase. *Your mother doesn't like the spirals* was all the old chieftain said. Eóin thought it odd at the time. He loved the circular stairs in every other family stronghold and had believed it silly that a woman should get any say at all. The thought makes him chuckle now as he passes through the Great Hall. It lies silent as well, the massive wooden table wiped clean and benches tucked beneath. One more flight of steps and here he is kicking off his boots in the privy chamber, moving closer to where Maeve sleeps in the next room.

He might be a fool, but damn, he missed his wife. She is the surprise he never saw coming. If Maeve didn't like spiral staircases and

asked him to build one made of feathers, he would kill a thousand seagulls with his bare hands and pluck their plumage until his fingers bled. Eóin was past twenty when his father arranged the marriage and was stunned when he saw her at their betrothal dinner. Stunned and pleased and more than a little flustered. And not only because of her beauty. Maeve was nothing like the village girls he'd known. And, yes, bedded. He regrets that now. Regrets that he came to his marriage with a son already. What he regrets most, however, is that no one—not even him—thought to tell Maeve about Donal until after they wed and she moved to Clare Island and into this tower as *Bean an Tí*—as Lady of the House. Aisling had taken that moment to claim her right of acknowledgment and brought the boy to him. Still a *tachrán*, barely able to walk.

Above them lies the garret, separated into two small rooms beneath the slate roof. One for Grace, and the other for Donal. But Eóin does not allow the boy to occupy his own room. That is the only amends he can make to his wife. Though Donal spends his waking hours here in the tower or at sea with Eóin, he is sent home every night into the village to be with his mother. It is cruel for all of them. He wishes now that someone had bothered to tell him that, though his marriage would be arranged, he might look at a girl one September day in Liscannor and fall in love on sight. He wishes that someone had bothered to tell him that he would come to regret bedding any woman before his wife.

Regret, it seems, is the burden of being Chief of the Name of the clan O'Malley. He is *The O'Malley*—a title that can only be held by a single man at any given time, a title that gives him the power to make treaties, declare war, and collect rents from those who live on his lands. A power he fought to earn and has killed to keep.

Eóin peels off more of his clothing, dropping it to the woven mats as he moves from privy chamber into bedchamber. Once at the door, he stands and watches his wife.

Maeve is a messy sleeper, sprawled out in the blankets, hair loose around her shoulders, arms akimbo. No matter, he'll wrap them around himself soon enough. She wears only her *leinie* and he wishes for more light so he might glimpse her form beneath the thin fab-

ric. It was what he noticed immediately upon meeting her: face and form. Seven years later and he has still not recovered from either.

It is the midpoint of the night and there would be no light at all if not for the peat glowing softly in the fireplace. All the candles have long since burned out. Heavy clouds surround the island, rendering the narrow windows little more than dark slits in the stone wall. It will be raining by morning. He can feel it in his marrow.

Eóin throws the quilt back, climbs into the sliver of bed left unclaimed by his wife, leans back against the pillow, arm behind his head, and stares at Maeve.

"Will you just be lookin', then? Or will you be doing somethin' about it?" Her voice is heavy with sleep and insinuation.

"I didn't think you were awake."

"Hard not to be when you're throwing boots against the wall."

"I didn't throw them." He feigns offense, then bends low to press a kiss beneath her ear. "I set them down. Daintily."

"Might as well have launched them from a catapult," she mumbles. "Could have woken my granny and she's been dead ten years."

Eóin scoots closer to his wife and pulls her against him, until her back is pressed into his chest and his arm is looped across her waist. He buries his face in the crook of her neck. Inhales the scent of her skin. Salt and mint and lavender. It would be easy enough to let sleep take him now, let it roll over him like a wave. He would be happily smothered beneath its weight. Until she speaks.

"Why did you lie to her?"

His heart catches. Like a rusted key in an old lock. It has been many years since he's lied to a woman. Since he made promises he had no intention of keeping. He's not done so since he married Maeve. But a number of faces flash before his eyes—Aisling among them—and he flinches. He's certain she can feel his body stiffen.

"What do you mean?"

"Gráinne believes what you tell her. You could say that if she flapped her arms fast enough she could fly to the moon, and that girl would repeat it to me later as fact. You should be telling her the *truth*, that girls can't go to sea. That it's bad luck, or the men would revolt, or the sea god Manannán would take every one of you to the