

## Wherever the Wind Takes Us

Cordelia Ventus was out picking berries in a dense forest near the small port town of Highrock that she called home. She had grown up with her mother and father. Her father was a fisherman and often took Cordelia on his small boat. He had taught her how to pilot the ship so he could focus on the nets and avoid running into anything or getting tangled in the nets. Though her father only taught her how to sail out of necessity, she enjoyed sailing far more than helping her mother in the kitchen or sewing.

She picked up her berry basket, which was now heavy with fruit and made her way through the forest as she headed home. Her mother had been able to trade for some flour and was going to make a pie with the berries that Cordelia had picked. As she got closer to the edge of the forest, she started to smell smoke and a foul stench that she couldn't place. She stepped out to a scene of Highrock burning. As she stumbled towards the town, she saw a ship, its massive black clothed sails rising above the smoke making it look as though it was birthed from the flames themselves.

Without thinking she dropped her basket and ran into town. Smoke stung her lungs and eyes as she ran through the streets. By the time she made it to her house she was coughing and struggling to breath. She stepped into the burning remains where there was nothing left but charred wood and whatever metal frame work that wouldn't burn. She could just barely see her parent's bodies through the smoke, they had been crushed under the large burning beams that had made up the roof. She fell to her knees, her eyes too dry to form tears. She saw a shimmer in the corner of her vision. She slowly reached for it and pulled out a framed family photo, the glass shattered but the picture was still intact. She grabbed it and held it close.

"Who are you?" A steady voice came behind her. She turned around seeing a tall, thin, well-dressed man standing above her, his hand on the hilt of a blade at his waist.

"I'm Cordelia." She mumbled weakly through her dry throat.

"Where did you come from?" The man asked.

“I was picking berries in the forest nearby.” She responded looking down at the man’s boots.

“That’s fortunate. My captain ordered us to kill everyone in town.” His voice remained calm. “You were not in town when he gave that order.” The man relaxed his grip on the sword and offered his hand to Cordelia. Still in shock, she took the man’s hand as he helped her up.

“Do you have any other family you can go to?” The man asked looking over her shoulder into the wreckage of the house, no doubt noticing the two bodies in the rubble.

“No.” Cordelia responded. The man was quiet for a moment.

“Any friends?” Cordelia shook her head again. “You can come with me if you want, but you will have to follow my instruction closely.”

Cordelia thought for a moment, she had nowhere to go, no way to pull a living from the rubble. But this man, whoever he was seemed responsible for this destruction. Could she really trust him? She really had no other choice; he didn’t seem to want to harm her or else he would have just killed her when her back was turned. She looked at the man and nodded.

“You are going to have to try and become a member of the crew. Men stuck at sea for so long might take advantage of a young girl like you, so we’ll have to pass you off as a cabin boy.” The man pulled a dagger from a holster on his leg, reached for Cordelia’s hair, and cut it in one swift movement. He threw the clump of hair into the fire still burning nearby. Cordelia watched the hair quickly be consumed by the flames. The man put the dagger away and headed down the street towards the dock, Cordelia followed closely behind.

“You will call me Mr. Harlock. You will have to follow orders on the ship if you want to survive.” The two made their way to the large ship that was docked. Cordelia looked closer at the man as they walked. By now she reasoned that this man was a pirate. Her father had told her stories of pirates from time to time, but she had never seen a real one. The man’s hair was short, slicked back and graying. He wore a fancy looking tail coat with gold trimming and tall black boots that were now covered with gray ash.

As they got closer to the ship, Cordelia saw other men carrying crates of looted supplies onto the ship. They were not dressed as well as Mr. Harlock. Most of them not wearing much more than pants and a tattered shirt with a bandana of sorts to keep their long-ungroomed hair from their eyes. Some of the men glanced at Cordelia but didn't bother her. The two walked up the gangplank onto the deck of the ship.

"Mr. Harlock! What is the meaning of this?" Boomed a voice from a man standing on the upper deck. He was dressed just as well as Mr. Harlock but with more jeweled accessories. He wore a large hat with a feather sticking up from the brim. He was medium height but had a large belly that rumbled when he talked.

"Captain, I found this boy in the rubble. I wish to take him on as a cabin boy."

"Hmm, he'll be your responsibility."

"Yes sir."

"And it will be your responsibility to teach him his duties."

"Yes captain."

Mr. Harlock motioned for Cordelia to follow him. She followed him to a stairway amid ship leading below deck towards the bow. There were lines of cannons along the sides, tied in so that they wouldn't roll when the ship was in motion. There were large shelves that housed the cannon balls, though the gunpowder must have been stored in the lower decks. They turned to head towards the stern of the ship where there was a door. Harlock pulled a key on a chain from under his shirt and unlocked the door. Inside was a small room with a table, bed, dresser, and a chest.

"You'll stay in here with me, I'll have a hammock set up for you in the corner. I think it best if we try to limit your time with the rest of the crew to avoid letting the cat out of the bag. Your main duties will be to keep the ship clean by washing the deck, helping the chef in the galley, running messages, and running powder from the lower decks to the cannons on the upper deck." He paused for a moment. "Have you ever been on a ship?"

“Yes,” responded Cordelia, her voice still hoarse with smoke. Harlock grabbed a pitcher sitting on the table and poured Cordelia a glass of water. She took a sip of the water and continued, “My father taught me how to pilot his fishing boat.” Harlock gave a slight nod.

“Good, so you’ll be used to sea. I don’t have to deal with you getting seasick. Come I’ll show you around the ship.” Cordelia started to follow him out of the room. “I think you should leave that here.” She looked down and noticed that she was still grasping the family photo. She placed it face down on the table and followed Harlock out of the room as he locked it behind him.

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Cordelia had been serving on the ship for almost two years, mostly staying out of the way and performing her duty’s when one day the captain ordered an attack on a heavily populated trading port. The crew led by the captain had gone ashore to raid the port leaving the cabin boy to man the ship. After some time, the captain returned holding a small chest with what sounded like coins inside but the rest of the crew was nowhere to be seen.

“What happened to the crew, captain?” Cordelia asked.

He kept walking to his quarters and shut the door behind him. Cordelia looked out to see if the crew was on their way but no one came. She decided to go into town to see what had happened to them. As she stepped into town, she noticed imperial soldiers. Their informant told them that this trading post was easy pickings with no guards. The crew must have been ambushed and captured.

Cordelia grabbed a dress and shawl that was drying on a line and draped it over her cabin boy clothing. Presenting herself as a pirate now could get her captured like the rest of the crew. She headed to the most likely place the crew would be being held, where the soldiers had set up camp in an old fort. Cordelia walked to the fort's gate where two soldiers were standing guard.

“I’ve heard that you captured a group of pirates.”

“Yes ma’am.”

“My no-good husband ran away with pirates a couple of months ago and I wanted to see if he’s here so that I know he’s getting what he deserves.” The two guards looked at each other debating the request. They seemed to agree that one woman was no threat and opened the gate.

“If you would follow me ma’am.” Cordelia followed the soldier to the cells where she could hear the crew talking just down the hall.

“That sounds like my husband’s voice. Would you mind if I have a few minutes alone with him so I can tell him what for?”

The soldier gave a slight chuckle amused at the thought of an angry wife chewing her husband’s ear off.

“I’ll be just outside if any of them start causing trouble.” When the guard had left Cordelia pulled off the dress and shawl throwing them to the ground. She walked carefully back to the door and found a set of keys. She took the keys and headed back to the cells.

“Cabin boy!?” Exclaimed some of the crew in shock of seeing Cordelia standing there, keys in hand. She unlocked the cells letting the whole crew out.

“How did you get here?” Some of the crew asked.

“Now’s not the time for questions,” said Mr. Harlock stepping out from one of the cells.

“There are guards outside but they aren’t suspecting a break out so they should be easy to surprise and overpower.”

“You heard him men, let’s go!” He commanded quietly.

The crew rushed out easily knocking out the guard that had been waiting at the door. They managed to catch the soldiers by surprise and escape back to the ship. They cheered as they returned to the deck thanking the cabin boy that had managed to save them all.

“Celebrate later. We need to get this ship out of here before those soldiers decide to catch up with us,” Harlock declared and began barking orders to raise the anchor and sails. That

night the crew celebrated; the captain had still not emerged from his cabin. Later that night when the crew was still celebrating with several rounds of grog the captain came to Cordelia.

“I would like to see you in my quarters.” Cordelia followed the captain to his room. He held the door open for her, as she stepped in, he closed it behind him. “It was quite impressive what you did today, saving the crew like that.” He walked over to a cabinet where several bottles were held. He selected one of the bottles and poured out two drinks. Taking a sip of his drink he commented.

“A fine vintage. Won this bottle in a game of cards when I shot the other players.” He took another sip of his drink. “When you were gone, I found something interesting.” He pulled out my family picture that had been taken out of the frame and held it up. Cordelia sucked in a breath of air. “I know this ain’t Mr. Harlock’s... is it Miss. Cordelia?” he said flipping the picture over to reveal the family members’ names and the date. Cordelia looked down at the ground unable to speak.

“What would happen if the crew were to learn that you were a woman? Hmmm? Might have you thrown overboard.” He got up from his chair and walked closer to Cordelia. “We wouldn’t want that happening, now would we? I would be inclined to continue to keep the secret if you were to spend time with me here. Not too often, don’t want the crew to suspect.” He stroked Cordelia’s short hair, turned, and sat back down. “Come have a drink with me.”

On shaky legs Cordelia obeyed and sat in the chair across from the captain taking a sip of the drink he had poured earlier.

“See this isn’t so bad is it?” He looked her up and down and commented, “I’ll have to deal with Mr. Harlock though. Can’t have a traitor and a liar on my crew.” The captain glanced absentmindedly around the room. Cordelia looked up at the captain for the first time with strength and anger. She quickly grabbed the bottle on the table and bashed it over the captain’s head. He staggered out of his chair in shock. His head started to bleed. He whipped around to face Cordelia, anger burning in his eyes.

“Why you little wench!” He grunted reaching out one of his lumbering arms to grab Cordelia but she managed to step away from his grasp. Still dazed from the blow to his head he

stumbled forward trying to catch her. Cordelia's anger was now fueled by adrenaline giving her a fight response. Still clutching the neck of the shattered bottle, she lunged forward and plunged the serrated shard into the captain's chest.

He staggered back in shock as he looked down at his chest. He grabbed the neck of the bottle and pulled it out yelling as he did so. He threw it on the ground shattering it. In removing the bottle, he had pulled out the only thing controlling the bleeding. The captain fell to his knees, quickly bleeding out. Cordelia watched in silence, frozen, as the captain became still.

The door to the quarters was flung open to reveal Mr. Harlock in a fighting stance, his breath heavy. When he was able to take in the scene, he relaxed a bit.

“What happened?”

“The captain learned I was a woman; he knew my real name. He said he would keep the secret if I stayed with him.” The adrenaline started to wear off and Cordelia fell to the floor crying. Mr. Harlock walked over and kneeled beside her taking his coat off and placing it around Cordelia. “I was going to go through with it.” She said through tears. “But then he said he was going to have to deal with you. I couldn't let you get hurt because of me. I... I don't really remember what happened after. I was just filled with anger.”

“It's alright Cordelia you're safe now.”

There was a sound from the door. The two turned to see that a group of the crew had been listening in. Mr. Harlock stood up drawing his sword.

“If any of you want to harm her, you'll have to go through me!” He exclaimed.

The crew made no movement till one voice spoke up.

“I don't much care if she be man or woman. If it hadn't been fer her we'd be rottin in a jail cell. You killed the captain, that low down bilge rat who never cared if any of us lived or died. So, I say LONG LIVE CAPTAIN CORDELIA!” There was a silence then a wave of voices arose.

“LONG LIVE CAPTAIN CORDELIA!” Cordelia stood up, Harlock’s coat still hung from her shoulders. As she moved towards the door the crew parted letting her look out onto the deck where every crew member was chanting her name.

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Cordelia, dressed in the finest captain’s coat and hat, looked out onto the open sea. Her hair had grown back and was blowing in the breeze. It had been about six years since she had first come aboard this ship. Mr. Harlock stood beside her.

“Where to captain?”

“Wherever the wind takes us.” She said smiling.