

Antigua Side Fortune of the High Seas



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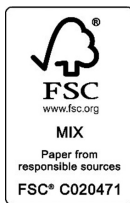
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For my family. Simon, Ellie, Charlie and Fern.
A.R.

*For anyone who has a story to tell, but no voice,
and to the people who help them speak.*
O.H.



CHAPTER I

Tiggy strode down the harbour, lifting her skirts so the sea breeze cooled her ankles. Since turning five, her brother, Diego, had refused to hold her hand in public, yet he happily walked beside her, his linen pouch of stacking stones cradled in his arms like a chest of treasure. She could sense the excitement in his step. Today marked the beginning of the Bloodmoon celebrations; three days dedicated to feasting, dancing and dressing up as sea creatures. Somehow, her good friend, Felipe – her best friend’s older brother – matched their pace,

though he had to trail his fishing rod behind him. The rhythmic clunk of his wooden leg against the planks always soothed Tiggy, like the tick of a watch or the click of beetles at night.

The trio stopped only when they reached the edge of the pier so the sea surrounded them on all sides. Panting slightly, Tiggy pulled off her boots and dangled her feet in the water. She sighed and imagined her legs were hollow reeds, that she could somehow suck the ocean into her body, starting from her toes.

Diego knelt and began to play, the soft clack of his stones mixing with the lap of waves.

‘Good idea,’ Felipe said as he plonked himself beside Tiggy and pretended to pinch his nose. ‘I didn’t know quite how to tell you, but those feet of yours . . .’

Tiggy shoved an elbow into his ribs, a laugh escaping into the briny air. ‘Seriously, if you had to wear all these stupid petticoats, you’d sweat like a cuttlefish too.’ She pulled a small wooden case from her pocket and clicked it open.

Diego peered over her shoulder. ‘Gross.’

The maggots squirmed around each other like podgy little snakes, gleaming in the sun. Tiggy

picked out two of the juiciest and handed them to her friend.

‘Cuttlefish don’t sweat.’ Felipe skewered the creamy blobs of flesh on to the silver hook.

‘I have it on good authority that they do indeed,’ Tiggy replied.

‘Yeah? Off who?’

‘Er . . . your very own madre told me, and let’s face it, she’d know.’

Embarrassment flickered beneath Felipe’s features and he cast his line into the water a little too vigorously, as though trying to rid himself of some uncomfortable feeling. Tiggy could have kicked herself. She knew that Felipe loved his mum, but any reference to her selkie background always made his cheeks redden. Funnily enough, Tiggy wished *her* mum was selkie-born because, being female, that might make Tiggy of selkie blood too, and imagine being able to turn into a seal at will. She briefly wondered if she’d ever bother turning back again. Maybe she would live out at sea for ever. She gazed longingly across the blue of the ocean, watching the sun as it fell slowly through the sky. Did it long to sink into those cool, cool waters too? She could almost hear the blissful fizz of the flames extinguishing.

‘Madre isn’t the oracle of the ocean, you know,’ Felipe eventually mumbled. ‘And cuttlefish don’t sweat. They just don’t. I mean, they haven’t even got skin.’

‘They have too,’ Diego piped up. ‘Slimy fish skin that smells of turtle poo.’

Before Tiggy could recite Madre’s words (*Now, Diego, nobody wants to think about poo*), she heard footsteps approaching from behind. She turned to see Lucia, an ex-pirate and captain of a run-down trading ship, renowned for keeping her motley crew in line with harsh words and bribes of rum. Lucia towered over them, the port spreading behind her like a colourful cape: boats tethered and bobbing in the breeze, galleons threatening to capsize anything which stood in their way, men unloading cargo and the flash of coins changing hands. Tiggy could smell the faint bite of liquor, hear the roar of drunkards from the taverns.

‘You shouldn’t be dipping your toes in the ocean, Antigua,’ Lucia said, using Tiggy’s full name. Her accent was thick with kindness and faraway adventures in other lands. ‘You know those waves are filled with mischief.’

‘Today of all days, I refuse to fear the ocean,’ Tiggy replied.

Lucia adjusted her headcloth, causing her braid to slide across her shoulder like a black rope. ‘Don’t let the Bloodmoon celebrations lull you into a false sense of security, Antigua – sharks can bite any day of the year. Isn’t that right, Felipe?’

Felipe grunted. He had never told Tiggy how he lost his leg, but rumour suggested it had something to do with a hungry shark and a merman.

‘Anyway,’ Lucia said, ‘it’s the annual Golem Ball tonight, isn’t it?’

Now it was Tiggy’s turn to grunt. She couldn’t bear the thought of the Golem Ball. This year, it meant she would be paraded before the Governor like a prize goat, whilst his vile son, Salvador, looked her up and down and mentally measured her for bridal gear. For the love of Kraken, she was only fourteen. She edged a little closer to the sea, letting the waters inhale her ankles and calves, thinking that perhaps a hungry shark wouldn’t be such an unfortunate fate after all.

Diego lifted his head from his stones and forced his voice into an indignant squeak, which Tiggy assumed was supposed to sound like her: ‘*I don’t want to talk about it. Balls are rubbish and Salvador is a sweaty pig.*’

‘Diego, quiet.’ Tiggy poked him in the ribs.

‘Oh, come on,’ Lucia said, ignoring Diego’s squeals of delight. ‘It won’t be so bad. You’ll be in the Governor’s house after all. You can stuff your face with fancy food, eat from silver dinner plates, heck, find his gold and stash it up your skirts. And if your conscience raises its ugly head, give the loot to my crew. Kraken knows we could do with it.’ Her cackle was infectious, causing Tiggy and Felipe to giggle too.

Lucia gestured to the water below, fear zipping across her dark features and eliminating her smile in an instant. ‘Just don’t say I didn’t warn you, Antigua de Fortune, for gone are the days when man was welcomed by the sea.’ And with that, she turned and sidled back up the pier, her long shadow sashaying after her.

Tiggy felt a flutter of jealousy in her chest. She wished she could wear breeches, braid her hair and sail the high seas. But no. She had to go to a stupid ball and dance with stupid Salvador. She slumped, watching the gulls pick at the fish as steadily as the frustration picked at her heart.

Eventually, Felipe tugged the fruitless line from the water, tutting at the drowned maggots like it was

their fault they weren't juicy enough. 'Come on, then. Your madre will string me up if you're late tonight.'

'But we didn't catch anything,' Tiggy said.

Diego didn't miss a beat. 'You never do.'

She pulled on her shoes, helped Diego pick up his stones and then drifted back up the pier, enjoying one last lungful of salty air. The trio passed the smaller boats where crews lounged on upturned barrels, the stink of sweat and *vino seco* hanging around them like a swarm of flies. They reached the port where they were dipped in shadow by the larger galleons and swept up by the bustle of brawny, sea-worn men lugging sacks of sugar cane and cochineal. By the time they'd wound their way through the various stalls and taverns, listening to the cries of the sellers and the laughter of the sailors, the sky was beginning to lose some of its heat.

Felipe paused beneath a sign boasting a picture of a seal reclining on a rock; the words above its fawn head read: *The Signum Tavern*. Felipe gestured to the door. 'Do you want to come inside for a second? Marina will want to see you.'

Diego tugged at her skirt, a silent indication that he wanted to go home to his supper. Tiggy sighed.

Marina, Felipe's younger sister, was Tiggy's best friend, and usually they were inseparable. But since Marina had failed to receive an invite to the Golem Ball, she'd distanced herself a little – forgetting to call at Tiggy's house, or being 'too tired' to go fishing.

Tiggy knew that Marina longed to wear those ridiculous frocks and to dance with Salvador, yet as the daughter of a barmaid and suspected selkie, she was destined to remain anchored firmly to the port. If only Tiggy and Marina could swap lives, they would both be happier. Something painful and hot pierced her heart. *And so would Madre*, she thought. *She would finally get the daughter she wanted.* Tears welled in her eyes and her throat ached with the effort of holding them in.

'Tiggy?' Felipe said, jolting her from her thoughts.

'Er, no. I better leave it a day or so.'

Felipe brushed her hand, so gently it felt like a moth's wing. 'She'll get over it,' he said. 'After the ball, she'll be back to her annoying self. And she won't miss tomorrow night's celebration for anything, so you'll see her there.'

Tiggy studied his face. He had definitely changed since returning from sea last year. He still had the

same olive skin, the same denim dungarees and ready smile, yet his face looked stronger, his eyes more knowing. Perhaps he just looked older. ‘Thanks, Felipe,’ she said, pulling an angry hand across her telltale eyes.

He slipped inside the tavern and she was left with a very impatient brother. ‘Come on, Tig. The kraken is rumbling inside my tummy.’

‘That means nothing, you’re always hungry – the kraken lives permanently inside your tummy.’

‘Is that why I can’t go to the Golem Ball?’ His bottom lip began to protrude. ‘Because my tummy is too noisy?’

She rested her hand on his wind-tousled hair. ‘Of course not, it’s because you’re too young.’

‘But I want to go too. I want to wear a mask and steal the Governor’s gold.’

‘Lucia was joking. Nobody’s stealing anything.’

‘Not even the fancy food?’ A note of sadness ran through his voice, causing Tiggy’s heart to swell.

‘Look.’ She held his gaze. ‘It’s like Felipe said, tomorrow night we’ll dress up as ghouls of the sea and go knocking on the neighbours’ doors, asking for honeyed fruits and pots of jam. You’ll forget all about the Golem Ball then.’

Diego's face lit up and he started dancing on his tiptoes, as if the cobbles had been replaced with hot coals. 'And the beach carnival, tell me about the beach carnival.'

'Well, that's the day after tomorrow, on Blood-moon Day. There's going to be an actual Bloodmoon eclipse where the full moon turns from pearl to crimson, as though she were dunked in the blood of the Pirate King himself. It will be the first in fifty years, Diego, imagine that? And there's going to be a carnival on the beach, with costumes and fireworks and cannons . . .' She waved her hands in the air, pumping her fists open and closed, painting explosions in his mind's eye. 'And the biggest band you've ever heard. Madre promised I could take you, so long as we stay out of the waves. It's going to be so much fun, we'll tell our children about it – *and* our children's children.'

'Will there be whipped sugar?' His eyes twinkled with the thought of it.

'More than we can eat.'

He gnashed his teeth and made chomping noises, all thoughts of the Golem Ball replaced with the promise of the sweet taste of sticky beet.

Tiggy laughed. 'Come on, we best get home.'

They turned towards the town. The maze of houses seemed to have grown from the cliff face itself, lining the twisting streets and rocky steps with their peach and yellow faces, dwindling in numbers into the green of the hills, where the air lay cool and moist and only the rich folk lived. Beyond, the mountains clawed up the sky, lava simmering in their vast, lazy bellies like a dark secret just waiting to erupt. It seemed fitting that the island was called Haven; it truly was a slice of paradise. So why did it never quite feel like home?

‘Come on, slowboat.’ She clipped her brother gently round his crown. ‘Madre will be pacing the floors by now.’

‘Slowboat?’ Diego exclaimed. ‘I’m faster than you any day.’

‘You reckon?’ Tiggy hitched up her skirt, demonstrating her readiness to race.

Diego glanced at his pouch of stones. ‘No fair, I’m carrying rocks and I’ve only got little legs.’

‘Rocks? They look more like pebbles to me.’ But she stretched out her hands all the same, allowing him to dump the collection in her arms. She then watched him race towards the hills, his laughter tumbling down the path as he ran. She couldn’t help

but smile as she began to follow him up the track to Madre, to her ridiculous frock – and to the arms of the vile Salvador.