

# CIRSOVA



**Heroic Fantasy and Science Fiction Magazine**  
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**J. Comer**  
**J.D. Brink**  
**Tyler Young**  
**Kurt Magnus**  
**Jim Breyfogle**  
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**Edward McDermott**  
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**Michael A. Michaels**

# Cirsova

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**Fall Issue Vol.1, No 3**

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"Brian did a good job with this one.  
Dude's got skills." – LARRY CORREIA

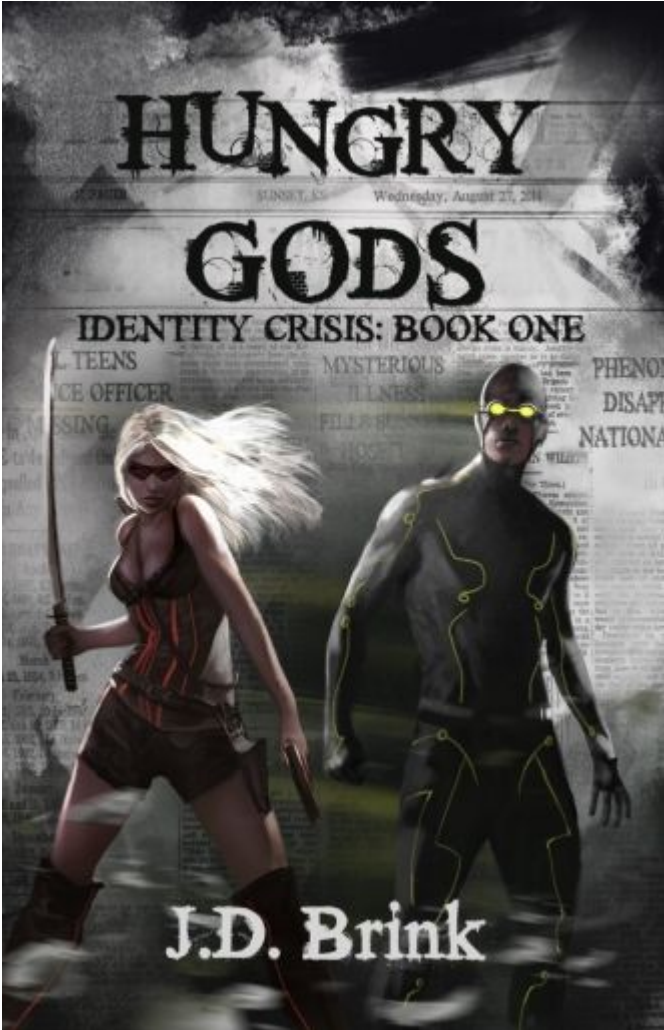
# NETHEREAL

SOUL CYCLE BOOK I



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# War in a Way That Suits You

By MICHAEL A. MICHAELS

***Sylt, a member of an elite group of mercenary shock troops, finds himself isolated and in need of Evac when bad intel puts the mission in jeopardy. Which will catch up with him first—his survivor guilt or the strange Venner-Florum plant men?!***

I'm watching Des sit against a tree, one hand holding a branch while the other shakes over a gaping wound in his side like some voodoo man performing an exorcism. Des tells me he's dying.

"Yeah," I respond.

"Don't you care, Sylt?"

"Yeah, Des, I care."

*You're my friend*, I want to say, but I know it will just make my next move harder. The Ronin code states that I have to go.

"You know I can't stay, Des."

Silently, I watch him. Even through the thick paneling of his FLEC-suit, I can tell he's trembling. I'm thankful the designers of the FLEC-suit decided to encase the face completely and make the eyepieces reflective. I don't want to see Des's expression.

He breaks the silence, says he's dying again. "Dying in some damn swamp on a planet I never saw until today." My bet is his liver's been fried a little; nothing will save him now.

After three years it was bound to happen. Des liked to brag about how good he was at sneak jobs—and he was the best—but he got too damn smug about it and let his conductor shield down. Today, he hadn't been sneaky enough.

Those ghostly fucking Venner-Florum. I can still hear them closing in around us, war cries on the wind.

Des brushes fingertips over the wound in his side. He laughs harshly, and from the way his shoulders shake, I can tell he's masking sobs.

"Swamps aren't so bad a place," I say. "Space would be worse, just frozen and drifting around. A swamp's a better break than most

contractors get.”

He tries to plead with me more. All I can do is shake my head then stare at my reflection in the eyepieces of his FLEC-suit—six feet of cold gray. I realize he’ll watch my back as I leave, and it will be one of the last images he ever sees. Damn. Des was good Ronin, a good friend.

I turn and jump into the knee-high swamp water. Des’s hoarse screams trail me as I move away. I have to get out of the hot zone before they’ll send a lifesaver pod to extract me.

My lungs burn as I push my way through the coal-colored water. Each step sinks a few inches in the mud, but my knees drive up and win free stride after stride. I can’t stop. Although our failed mission was carried out far from where the Venner-Florum and the conscript army of the Hayanthay battled, I still run the risk of getting swallowed up by the fighting.

A high keening comes from behind me, followed by the brief thudding of single-shock photon cannons. I don’t turn around but I know there are small colorful bursts landing only a few kilometers away. I know because a few years is a long time to work as a contractor. That’s the official name given to all war-for-hire-soldiers in the galaxy; one which Intelligence Commander Ramlyn would spit on.

I can see him now, eyes hidden behind pitch black glasses—looking God knows where—leaning back in a chair, leather gloved hands locked behind his head. “Fuck that! You’re a Ronin, Sylt. Other contractors don’t have shit for code. Nothing they can stand by like us Ronin.” He picks then flicks something from his nose. “We gotta stand by something.”

Black-limbed snare bushes scrape on the hard carbon panels of my FLEC-suit as I turn out of the swamp and onto the bank. The suit has absorbed enough moisture to sustain me a couple days, but my real concern is the possibility of ghosts tracking my unit from the mission site. Hopefully, the swamp makes it a little tougher for them. Maybe there will only be a couple of them and Des will kill them before he tags out himself.

I shut my eyes hard, try to blink away the image of Des’s fluttering hand, his pleas for help. I sprint on and flip open a panel on my forearm, switching my suit to maintain mode.

Nutrients, water, and rich oxygen flow into my body. As an afterthought, I also press the enhance symbol. There's a twinge in my thigh. A shot of aggresterone—a hormone extracted from Tytanox males—spreads throughout my body. The paneling around my ankles and knees contract, securing my joints.

Distant fields, hazy and diluted a moment earlier, resolve into clear contours and sharp dimensions as my vision intensifies. I get the feeling I want to break something. My testicles retreat upwards. I relax, like I'm trained to do, and allow my muscles to work naturally with the forceful impacts as I pick up speed. Where one running step had carried me less than two meters before, I now bound over five.

It is a drastic measure, using the enhance button, but the Ronin code is clear; break it and you'll never work again. That's why I had to leave Des. I recall the smell of meat and dank water by the swamp. *I'm dying, Sylt...*

I clear my head and think back to the day I signed the touch-grid to be a Ronin. "Run like the damned gingerbread man on steroids," Ramlyn had said, "literally. Save the 'fight to the last man standing' hero stigma bull-shit for flat-brained nationalists or those engineered lab-spunks from the Meta-Xeno Sphere." Ramlyn's mouth had split into a large toothed grin beneath his light brown mustache. He pointed at me, "Ronin pick smart engagements and special missions. We get out—quick, clean, and cost effective. If one guy stays behind—and yeah I know we got women too, just listen to what I'm telling you, not how I'm telling you—if one guy stays behind one time, then the next time it gives a whole group the go-ahead to stay behind. Pretty soon everyone is staying behind, and I got no more Ronin. Which means no more money."

I nodded, unblinking as he rubbed his thumb and forefinger together to indicate money. "We gotta get paid. You gotta get paid. I sure as hell better get paid. That doesn't happen if we don't have Ronin to fight our wars. Save yourself. That's the number one rule for a Ronin. Do *not* break it."

I remember asking why I would want to work as a Ronin when I knew I could get left for dead at any time.

More smiles from Ramlyn. "Good question. Here is your simple answer: don't be stupid and you won't get left for dead. Here is the



answer you'll probably like more: out of any contractors in the galaxy, no one can offer you the protection—the tech—we can. We're the only ones in the universe who can create these suits, and we—you—make a lot of money using them. Gun fighting is a ghost of the past, but only to us. Even if a client could afford a hundred of our suits, he wouldn't have the right soldiers to use them. Warfare is an evolution, and we are its future. We need masters of close quarters combat like you. So you get your ass home when the getting is good."

A beep accompanies a green glow on my ring finger, indicating I'm another kilometer closer to the safe zone. It won't be long before the lifesaver pod can get me.

Suddenly, I have a voice in my ear. "Secure: SR Sylt confirm status."

I slow down, bringing my muscles under control, each one itching with the need for use. "Secure," I say, and wait for the clicking sound that tells me the cryptograph recognizes my voice. "*Shining Sword*. Send a lifesaver—"

Des breaks in on the transmit. I forget he has a voice-jack and can pick up anything coming from the drop-ship. "*Shining Sword!*" he yells. "I got a hole in my side..." All I hear next is a soft moan as Des realizes the words he's spoken are all too real. "I'm tagged. I—send a lifesaver."

The reply from *Shining Sword* is immediate. "Secure: SR Des, you are not out of the hot zone. No pick up. Confirm."

My feet stop. I put my hand to my head as if this might help me hear. The aggresterone starts to hurt as I stop burning it and go completely inactive.

"No." Des mumbles. He screams. "No! No! Help me you bastards. I —"

A boom echoes through the transmit from Des's end. The transmit goes haywire for a couple seconds. *Shining Sword* repeats their earlier statement to Des, adding another, "Not out of the hot zone," to the end, affirming their statement like an adult speaking to a slow-witted child.

Des pops back on, panic in his voice. "Hurry. Please." His voice lowers to a frantic whisper. "I see them. They're heading this way. A quick-ship, and three ghosts. Please..."

Des forgets to end the transmit. He starts muttering prayers over and over. I've never heard him pray before. For some reason, it hurts, not knowing whether that might have been important to him or if it's just because he's dying. Now I'll never know. I kill the line, switch over to an emergency transmit circuit. My leg muscles spasm painfully.

"Secure: IC-Ramlyn, you there? Confirm."

My body thanks me, euphoria seeping into every fiber as I start sprinting again. A few minutes later, Ramlyn transmits. "Secure: Sylt where the hell have you been? Confirm."

"Secure: Bad info. Fifty ghosts in the hothouse, armed for close quarters like they expected us. Mission was aborted. Lost two on the run, Mosca's team separated from ours. Des got tagged. Confirm."

I leap a seven-meter wide river, ascend a rocky slope then crest it. A small valley greets me on the other side full of giant plant life. With my hormone enhanced vision, the array of colors is disorienting.

Ramlyn comes back on, all business. "Secure: Mosca's team got rescue missioned. Three dead on bad info, got it. Keep heading out of the hot zone. Confirm."

Three dead. Not two. I grit my teeth before replying. Pain shoots up my back as I tense. I focus on relaxing myself, or I will have to stop. Thirty seconds later, I'm back on the line. "Secure: No confirm on last transmit. Two dead. Only two. Des only tagged. Getting out of hotzone. Send lifesaver. Confirm."

Barely a second passes before Ramlyn is back on and shouting. "Secure: Quit messing around on this line, Sylt. This ain't a soap opera. Three dead. Confirm goddamnit."

I don't get a chance to reply, to say I could go back and get Des, take out the quick ship and ghosts with ease, because movement on the opposite ridge of the valley grabs my attention. I kill the transmit in case someone with the right equipment is close enough to catch the line.

My hands and toes sink into the earth. I drop to my belly and crawl down the slope like a lizard toward the vegetation below. Beauty is the last thing on the mind during war, but it's not so hard to notice when using it for cover. Like most things on the Eranthis Sphere planets, this bed of valley flora is interconnected. Great blooms of every color ride along enormous stalks that have grown and spiraled

to create a system of arcing tubes six meters in the air. The plants get larger towards the center of the bed, and I remember to be careful, that the Venner-Florum have been known to use random valley beds like this one as arms and resource depots, guarded by monster plants that will kill and eat anything from the Sapien Sphere planets.

My position is safer than it was, but my vision is blocked by flora. The aggresterone is starting to ebb, so I can move slow and subtle without my body protesting. I jump and snag the lip of a broken plant stalk then climb into the tube. Luckily it has grown deep and firm in the ground on the other side and takes my weight without buoying. There is just enough room for me to crawl on my hands and knees inside it. I check my ring finger: still blinking green, but faster now, which means I'm close to being out of the hot zone.

The tube runs for four or five meters before it bends down and away. I stop crawling at the start of the bend and unclip a metal cylinder as long as my forearm from my thigh. I grip it tightly in my hand and move my thumb into a notch on the side. It takes a split second for a telescoping katana blade to shoot out, accompanied by a sharp hiss. A half meter of the sword penetrates through the plant wall with ease. A repetitive thudding accompanies the faint flash of energy rippling up and down the blade from an ion-pulse. I maneuver my wrists down, making a narrow slit, and then hit the notch with my thumb again to recall my weapon, silencing it. It's all hands and aggresterone enhanced strength from there. I pry the fibrous wall open. I'm careful not to make the hole too big or my movements too quick, in case I'm not the only one on the lookout.

I peek out of the hole for half an hour before I see movement. The aggresterone shot has all but worn off, so my vision isn't as sharp as it was when I first saw movement on the ridge, but I think I spot the fully bloomed mane of a Venner-Florum soldier. Metal glints in the sunlight.

The ghost comes into view. It's dragging itself over the lip of the ridge, and I know it's in bad shape. The Venner-Florum are a civilized race, so I know they aren't using one of their own as bait, like the Sisters of Lunessa might do. All I have to do is pop out of my hidey-hole, kill it, and continue on my way out of the hot zone. I can't leave it alive, or *Shining Sword* will pick up its suit's electromagnetic waves

and refuse to send a lifesaver. Too expensive... too risky, Ramlyn would say.

The thudding of my katana is comforting as I reactivate it and cut my way out of the plant stalk and then make my way around the valley bed. My muscles begin to feel rubbery, my breathing ragged as the post-aggresterone crash washes over me. I banked on using it and getting out quick, a sure bet when things go right, but a dangerous gambit if they don't.

When I get to the spot where the ghost started its descent for cover, I see why it took me a half hour to see movement for the second time. There is a cloudy liquid, like oxygenated water, in a long trail up to the ridgeline from the other side, then another one beside it. It must have crawled to the top and then slipped and rolled back down before attempting the climb again.

I look down. The Venner-Florum soldier is lying on its back, barely cognizant, on a small outcrop of earth halfway down the slope. Slowly, I descend, coming to stand over the ghost.

Even lying down, muddled fluid spilling from two clean, long gashes across its leg-stalk and side, I can tell it's taller than me by a half meter—small for a Venner-Florum. Its face is a network of fibrous ridges, eyes perfect circles of emerald—no white. It lacks a mouth and ears. Its blooming mane is beautiful: broad petals of orange and pink cover its skull and neck to the waistline. A field generator vest—a weak attempt by the Venner-Florum to mimic FLEC-suit tech—is clamped around its chest, bulky and heavy-looking, almost the opposite of our flexible, sleek armor. I almost laugh.

It grabs feebly for a zip-knife at its hip. My katana whips through the space between us, ignoring the proximal field generator that can do nothing for him at this range. Its hand of twisted flora, dotted with colorful buds, flies through the air and into the plant bed below. I hear the ghost scream in my head as it releases a mass of complex, emotive pollens into the air that seeps through my helmet. It's eerie as hell when they do this; it's why we call them ghosts.

"I didn't make you reach for the zip-knife, asshole." I step closer. Its emerald eyes stay locked on me, awaiting the killing blow.

It raises its remaining hand. A bright orange glow emits from a fist-sized orb on the back of its command gauntlet. I've seen this before. I

know what it means. As I turn and sprint up the slope to get to high ground, the wounded Venner-Florum releases more emotive pollens, talking in my head: *war in a way that suits you, Ronin, and you will die the same*. Damn Venner-Florum, always talking like cryptic sages.

I reach the top. A quick-ship is speeding toward my position on the hill. It fires its short range cannon hoping to catch me with my shield down, but it's up; my conductor field absorbs the energy without harm. They will have to fight me close. Where it suits me.

The ship stops, hovering on the ridge fifteen meters away. With a quiet pop, the bubble top opens and three ghosts climb out. I smile, thinking they will probably see I'm not some conscript trooper or other inferior contractor—that I'm actually a Ronin—and take off knowing they don't stand a chance. In truth, I'm sick as hell from the hormone crash.

They lumber forward, single file along the ridge, three meters long, metal-alloy tridents clutched in their green hands.

Emotive pollens assail me. *A dog fed too much grows soft and knows not the hardship of the strays. We will teach you the determination of feral life.*

Shut up, I think, but instead I say: "I don't care how the Hyanthay treat you. Risking your life trying to kill one Ronin is stupid, no matter how feral you are. Come a little closer, ghost; I'll show you hardship, quick and dirty."

They don't, choosing to talk instead. I wonder if it's a game for them to see who can formulate the most poetic and ridiculous statements. *The dog can only think upon his master's actions, the scraps that will be fed him, unaware and uncaring if the boot finds the others of his litter.*

It's a lot of bull, but it makes me think of Des and I start to feel sicker than I should, even with the hormone crash. I glance down and spot the wounded ghost. If I weren't crashing so hard, the ghosts wouldn't stand much of a chance against me; they're big but slow, under-teched, and under-trained. They'd be facing likely death just for their comrade who might already be tagged out. The difference between Venner-Florum and Ronin isn't lost on me. I shake my head, angry at myself for getting sentimental before a fight, especially when I'm in such bad shape. I could hit enhance again, take another shot of

aggresterone... but I've never heard of anyone doing it and living, so I don't.

They spread out in front of me and approach. Battle cries resonate through my head. The closest one lunges at me. I sidestep and almost fall, aggresterone crash nausea giving me the spins, but I manage to hack its trident in two with a downward cut. In one continuous motion, I regain my balance, step forward and slash upward at an angle. Its head rolls down the hill like a huge, colorful cabbage.

Another ghost, with dense scarring where one of its eyes should be, tries to stab me as I step back from the falling body of its decapitated comrade. I'm a second slower than usual, but the blow is poorly aimed and skids off the carbon panels of my FLEC-suit. I twist away. I wonder if they can hear me sucking in heavy breaths while I prepare for the next attack.

The other ghost is trying to get around behind me. I feint towards it. It jumps back causing the tips of its violet and indigo flower mane to bounce in the air. The scar-eyed ghost takes the bait and comes at me again. I duck the blow then thrust my katana into its chest, straight through the metal field generator. Ghosts take a little more to kill than that, their organs vastly less sensitive and interdependent than Sapiens', so I pull out my blade and thrust again, this time through its face. The blue ion-pulse of my katana momentarily light up its emerald eyes before I withdraw it and let the ghost topple.

The remaining ghost charges. It's all I can do to get my katana up in time to deflect the thrust from its trident. It moves past me. I back away to buy myself a little time and catch my breath, each movement now a labor.

It charges again. This time I aggressively deflect the blow with the last of my strength and put the ghost off balance. It stumbles and I take its head off, and then watch huge petals of indigo and violet drift around me. The body lurches past and disappears down the slope.

By the time I make it down to the wounded Venner-Florum, it's already dead. I stare at its corpse for a minute then back to where its comrades attacked me. The ridge is littered with their remains, and I can't help but be mad at their stupidity. All dead, for one already tagged-out ghost; one of over fifty million on this planet. Just one.

*I'm dying, Sylt...*

Green light reflects off the chest of my FLEC-suit, drawing my attention. I lift my ring finger and see it is blipping faster now. I'm not too far from clearing the hot zone.

Before I go, I need to disable the ghosts' quick ship so I can transmit to *Shining Sword* without the risk of our transmit getting intercepted and funneled back to Venner-Florum's central intelligence. Ronin don't have the luxury to be lazy, or indiscreet; our mystique is a big part of what make us the most expensive and effective special-missions contractors in the game.

I look in the direction of the swamp where I left Des. The colorful lights of battle illuminate the horizon. The conscript army is undoubtedly pulling back now, back to Hyanthay; another feint by the army and a special recon mission for the Ronin, likely already in the works. Ramlyn is going to let our buyer have it, ask for compensation for bad info and three dead Ronin.

On the side of the ridge the ghosts came from, it's all rolling hills, and though I can't see it, I know, more valleys full of stunning plant-life. I'm somewhat relieved that the Hyanthay have decided to assault the swamp-lands, far away from the sprawling city-beds where plants tower as high as the highest buildings on the Sapien planets, and their half kilometer radius blooms catch the sun, casting hypnotic rainbow glows in all directions. I've only seen pictures of them in debriefings, but even then they were dazzling. I recall Ramlyn quickly moving past the photos, saying, "It isn't the beauty of the Venner-Florum that the Hyanthay covet; it's the soil, which has been proven to enhance the density of any organic energy source grown in it."

Money, it's always about money.

I approach the quick-ship cautiously, double checking my conductor field in case another ghost is hiding somewhere and takes a pot-shot. My katana is at the ready as soon as I spot the form of one of them in the back seat. But it's far too small to be a Venner-Florum. They have a captive.

As soon as I see him, I drop my katana. It's Des.

*I'm dying, Sylt...*

I walk over and lean in. He's dead. His mask is off. The expression I'd been so happy not to see earlier in the day is staring me in the

face, slack and pale. The wound his hand fluttered over so disbelievingly is now wrapped, completely soaked in blood. Two organic brown cords run from the ship to Des' wrist and side. Pools of fluid are gathering on the floor, a result of Des' body being unable to absorb any more of the meds they tried to pump into him. The Venner-Florum tried to save him. The enemy... my friend.

I turn away, fumbling for the button that unlatches my FLEC-suit mask as vomit rises in my throat. I swallow desperately. The feeling passes and I stop, hands on my knees, taking deep breaths that hurt. Angrily, I grab my katana from the ground.

I turn and slash the quick-ship's control panel: once, twice, a third time for good measure and satisfaction. I take a look at Des, and the satisfaction flees faster than it came. I open a transmit to *Shining Sword*.

"Secure: *Shining Sword*. SR Sylt is out of the hot zone. Send lifesaver. Confirm."

They confirm then give me pick-up coordinates which I plug into my forearm panel. I turn to Des's corpse. "I—at least you didn't die in the swamp." I feel the tears, falling down my face, spreading along the neckline of my suit. "I'm sorry, Des."

I kick myself for not bringing a combustion charge so I could give Des some semblance of a Sapien funeral pyre. Instead I stick a sucker-charge on the hull of the quick-ship. I run. I look back just in time to see the ship and a good chunk of the ridge be violently sucked in by a charge of amplified gravitational force, then collapse into a small heap of debris.

It takes a grueling half hour to finally make it to the pick-up, my feet barely clearing the ground for most of it. A small craft descends through the thick atmosphere of Venner-Florum. The lifesaver extraction pod.

Soundlessly it drops, slowing when it's directly over me. I stand motionless as two rings of metal expand outward from the center of the pod and begin to rotate in opposite directions. As soon as it's in position, I twist the green light on my ring finger. Four metal cables extend from the pod, hooking into my FLEC-suit, and then an energy bubble spreads out and around me, connecting with the rotating rings. The pod lifts into the air and speeds upward.



A transmit comes through from Ramlyn: "Secure: SR, Sylt. Good to have you coming back. Enough dead Ronin today already. Hope you left that crazy soap opera bullshit behind."

I don't respond. Nothing I say will help. Nothing I say could explain how much I left behind. I feel like I died in some damn swamp on a planet I never saw until today.

---

*When Michael A. Michaels isn't filling his role as a school counselor, father, or life coach, he can be found hammering away at a laptop in his favorite local coffee shop, or holding his own in a game of table tennis. With influences like George R. R. Martin, Cormac McCarthy, and R. Scott Bakker, he understands that light is brighter when framed in darkness, as evidenced by the gritty and psychological nature of his stories.*

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# The Lion's Share

By J.D. BRINK

***Captain Leonidas Hawksblood is a man of the sea of stars and a buccaneer of the spaceways; Leonidas prides himself as a gentleman privateer, but his patience is to be tried when an old freight tub carrying an unexpected cargo refuses to play ball!***

Helpless. Innocents cast adrift on the Vast Empty Sea. Victims of circumstance in desperate need of a benevolent rescue.

That was the ploy. A common pirates' gag: the wounded kitten in need. Please come a little closer, see me bleeding here, salve my wounds, help me up... Taste my dagger. Ah-ah, I wouldn't do that if I were you. Thanks for the assist, you're too kind. Now hand over your purse and hold full of goods, thank you very kindly.

Despite whatever heroic delusions you may be dreaming for us, ours is a villain's lot. Oh, I know I'm a handsome devil; you won't often find curly red lamb chops like these off the rack of a real wooly lamb. Even strong, healthy boys don't grow as thick as Pug outside of a natural gravity well. And Comely John—let's face it, we don't call him that without good reason. And if you're going to be trapped in a can on the long route between stars, he's a fine-smelling chap to be stuck with. But we're pirates, dear friends, and could never be anything but. And this sturdy boat you find yourselves sailing aboard, she's *The Lion's Share*. You may hear the ship's lovely voice call me 'Eon,' but the name's Leonidas Hawksblood. Pleased to make your proper acquaintance. You can call me Captain. The ship's brain we call Cher, but you should have no need to converse with her. If you fancy talking to the boat's essence, you can talk to our man Spleen instead; they're practically one and the same.

*The Lion's Share*, you may notice, is not a large vessel. She used to be an Atlantean 63C freighter, a smaller, private business-type model, though heavily modified since I came to own her. She's a petite lass, not one of those huge commercial haulers. We like those big whales, though. Easy to run them down, fill the *Lion's* belly with their choicest goods, and leave them to limp along their way. Big ships like that, and

the even bigger companies that own them, they've got insurance for our kind of play. The crew doesn't put up a fight. Ain't their stuff, why should they die for it? Those single-digit-Cs, or 100-class vessels, they're like big, lumbering mammoths; easy prey for a quick predator on the prowl.

But like I was saying, the old wounded kitten routine. Come pull the thorn out of my paw and I'll give you a big surprise...

We were resting adrift in the Volaris system—Old Fish, we call that neighborhood—just outside the big emptiness that serves as the usual Slip Space drop zone for incoming traffic. Volaris has a very wide belt of asteroids tumbling around, and you have to get past them to reach the inner planets with their orbital metropolises and big time mining ops. Rather than risk coming back to reality in the immediate path of a giant space rock, ships will drop out of the Slip right around where we were hanging out with our belly up and power low. The opposite side of the system, that's the outdoor, as it were. All those gas tankers and mammoths full of ore, they depart Volaris on that side. And since those freighters are freshly full of corporate treasure, that's where security forces are on the watch for pirates.

Thinking outside the kill box, that's me. That's why Leonidas Hawksblood and *The Lion's Share* are the most successful buccaneers you've never heard of.

Well, scarcely heard of. I do have a bit of an ego, I admit, and it needs feeding like anybody else's. What fun would being a pirate be if no one trembled in fear when you told them who they had the pleasure of being robbed by?

So I was telling a story. Apologies, I ramble sometimes.

The *Lion* was floating out there, an old 63, a privateer spacer. Imagine that dinner plate your ex-wife threw at you, striking the wall and stopping a half-second post-impact: an irregular circle with lightning-jagged cracks and some triangular puzzle pieces missing from it. That's what the *Lion* looks like in the Vast Emptiness. 'Course she's a lot thicker, with seemingly random doohickeys sticking out here and there, like a machinist pleasure specialist. The outer rim of the ship is mostly cargo spaces, the circular core being bridge and crew quarters. Half of those cargo bays are now permanently filled with pirate gear: torpedo tubes, big hull-locking grapnel launchers, even a couple shield gens and countermeasure pods. Military junk that ain't easy to come by. Costs a lot of money. Fortunately, we're good at what we do.

Now this cracked plate your wife tried to brain you with, it's hanging out there for almost two weeks, humming on reduced power and rationing food, 'cause we don't know how long we'll be waiting for a playmate to show up. We're used to it—it's the spacers' load to carry, after all—but one can't help but get antsy after a week or so of not moving forward. So the crew was starting to get a bit restless.

I was in the Hawk's Nest (what we call Captain Hawksblood's cabin—my quarters) with the lights low and my feet propped up on my bunk, playing another round of chess with Cher. The holographic board of deep sea blue hovered in the space before me, Cher's last bishop sliding along the battle lines, slitting the throat on one of my pawns, and taking up a bridegroom's stance next to my queen, protected there by her rook in a sniper's position. "Hades claim my daughters!" I cursed. "I fell into the same pit all over again!" I swept my open hand down in anger, passing straight through the image and failing to scatter the pieces in any satisfying manner. Then I dropped my booted feet and stood up in the middle of the board. "That's a rotten Spleen move, Cher. Are you taking lessons or is it his four-fingered hand I feel in my game?"

"I don't know what you mean, Eon," said the computer's voice, innocent music like wind chimes tinkling on the breeze. That feminine tone is calming for the male nerves, you see, and it's hard to get angry with her. Especially since she's not a real person.

But Cher's the only female aboard the *Lion* (although rumor has it that Pigeon used to be of the fairer gender). Sorry, ladies, but I have a somewhat sexist policy. Femmes tend to be a distraction to an otherwise male crew, jealous subplots and infighting and the like then tend to ensue. Can't have that when you're lost akimbo on the Empty Vast. So for those of you thinking to submit an application of employment, apologies for dashing your hopes and dreams. You'll all be getting off at the next stop.

No, one charming, incorporeal lady is enough for us. And she even has a pet name for me, which I programmed her to use: *Eon*. It's a bit of that ego of mine that I mentioned. My mother called me *Leon*, and I asked my ship to call me Eon, which has a more majestic, galaxy-spanning glow to it, don't you think?

Anyway, after Cher denied that Spleen was involved in my chess game, another voice cut in: that of my first mate, Pug. "Captain," he said—there's no music to Mister Pug's guttural barking, "Slip Space ripples

one-hundred twenty-two clicks off. Water's still muddy, but don't look like a very big boat. Might be our dinner coming."

"On my way," I said, butterflies stirring down deep. "Prep the crew for toe-dancing and swashbuckling."

I grabbed my saber on the way out, which always sits in its place next to the door. 'Course we use handguns and such too—it'd be foolhardy not to—but boarding a boat with swords is a very intimidating approach. Also feels good and natural in the pirate's role, you see.

I burst triumphantly onto the bridge with an old sea chanty on my lips. I have to be careful just how I burst, however, as the command deck of the *Lion* is not what I'd call spacious. There are only three seated stations, the captain's chair being between the other two. Pug stood center with his hands clasped behind his back, staring up at the Big Board. He's an oddly shaped brute, his chest and shoulders quite broad, too much so for buttoning his jacket, with narrow hips and stork-like legs. The man's top-heavy, you see, but somehow never falls over. Even his big square jaw sports a weighty wreath of thick, ebony beard. Spleen sat at the engineering station. He's a machinist, one of those strange folk who feel more affinity with technology than the lovely body Dog gave them. His face is rather fish-like, though you rarely see it behind his opaque, oversized visor. Catfishy, really, with all manner of limp antenna arcing down from his face, head, and neck. He wears a black rubber bodysuit under equally black, baggy coveralls. Spleen and Cher might be considered married for all practical purposes (including, I suspect, some form of physical love that I dare not imagine), with his machinist's brain electronically plugged into the ship's virtual consciousness. That's why we call him Spleen, after all: he's an ugly and function-not-quite-identified organ of the ship.

"Action stations are manned, Captain," Pug reported. "Soot is standing by with a wrench in his hand and the repair spider on his back. Pigeon and Comely John are suited up in fishbowls and booties." He nodded at the holographic display that hovered a centimeter off the forward bulkhead. "Our friendly boat's just coasting along, probably finishing up their post-Slip checks. She'll be underway any minute."

I took my seat and Pug took his at the helm. "Start the meowing, then," I ordered.

A basic distress message went out over the wavelengths, set to repeat every four minutes.

The ship coming into Old Fish space was a beat-up-looking 47C model, a cargo boat cousin to our own *Lion*. New Spaniard make, I figured. Just under our own size and easy prey. I might have gotten picky and let it go in hopes of snagging a better fish later, but we were all getting bored and ready for some action. And our due reward.

Our automated call for help went out, but was ignored. It was a suspicious set-up, I admit, but not as obvious as you might think. The orbital cities of Volaris Proper were several days out under conventional propulsion. And that was after negotiating the asteroid belt. And for any ship coming out of the Slip and re-entering real space, radiation and instrumentalities are all garbled and funkified during transition, unreliable as the ripples of reality smooth back out. For all that boat knew, our distress signal had been repeating every four minutes times two days, or a week, and they were just now noticing.

But if they had received our signal, they were playing hard to get. The 47C accelerated toward the slow dance of asteroids, intent on passing us by.

“We’re being snubbed, Captain,” Pug said, sounding offended.

I let the signal repeat once more, and when they showed no interest or change of course, I fingered the live radio. “Ship of mercy, thank Dog you’re here! We’ve had a bit of a fire in our engine compartment. Lost our propulsion and most of our power plant. You’ve arrived just in time.”

Nothing. We watched impatiently as the little white sliver continued on its course, sailing across our projected screen, now a hundred and seventy clicks away.

I was getting rather pissed now, I must admit. The nerve of some people.

I brought up the ship’s transponder code. The boat went by *Indigo Coyote* and supposedly hailed from Asia Minor. Either that little boat had done a lot of far-reach ranging over the years, or the transponder was telling fibs.

“Might be bucks of their own,” Pug suggested, meaning fellow buccaneers like us. It was a good possibility.

“*Indigo Coyote*,” I urged on the radio, “I’m talking at you, friends. We’re a might bit screwed out here in the big, cold dark and in desperate need of an angel’s hand.”

Finally the airwaves crackled a response: “Sorry, can’t help you. I’m in a hurry.”



Pug and I shared a disgruntled glance. “Rude!” Spleen belched from beneath his visor.

“*Coyote*, I must beg of you, on my knees, for assistance. And remind you of the Spacer’s Code. The Vast Empty Sea is too big, dark, and uncaring for we sailors to ignore one another in time of need. Especially we small-time indie traders, oh brother of mine. Please,” I said, this last word more cruel than sincere at this point, “you sentence us to death if you fail to respond.”

“Sorry,” came the reply again. “Can’t. Just don’t have room for your crew.”

“We’re a small band. We’d only take a single locker’s space between us. Voluptuous Vixen, she’s the only one requiring a mirror to keep herself pretty. The rest of us can all share a toilet stall to brush our pearly whites from.”

Even the promise of Voluptuous Vixen—whoever she might have been—wasn’t tempting enough for this man.

“Supplies too low,” insisted the *Coyote*’s dry-throated captain. His boat kept right on sailing by.

“We don’t eat much,” I said, already signaling my mates with a wave of my pointy finger.

“Coming to full power, Eon,” Spleen and Cher said in unison.

“Soot,” Pug ordered, “stand ready on the torpedo tubes.” The tubes were prone to malfunction, you see. Second-hand weapons: inexpensive, but probably discarded for a reason.

The *Lion* surged forward. “Coming around,” Pug announced, hands taking the helm controls. “Intercept course. Weapons range in nine minutes.”

Our prey already had a head start, and we were accelerating from a dead stop, but the asteroids were our buffer zone. They would force the *Coyote* to slow back down from straight-on-til-morning to dodge-and-parry speed. Most of the rocks were big enough to dance around easily, but there was always the possibility of smaller debris. Smaller being relative here, with stones and wrecked hull bits ranging in size from water closet to warship, and you didn’t want to smash into either one.

“The *Lion*’s been building up reserves these past several days, Captain,” Spleen said with glee and in his own voice. “Cher says she can grant us a boost, shave a minute and a half off intercept.”

“Do it,” I said. I didn’t want these scallywags to get into the funhouse hallways of the asteroid field. That would complicate things

considerably, and now I wanted this canine boat and her rude captain pretty badly.

There was a noticeable shift in gravity as Cher poured it on. Pug showed his golden teeth in a snarly grin. I overlaid a dotted line, targeting ring, and range finding count-down on the Big Board.

The target lock sang its high-pitched tune in just over seven minutes.

“Fire one!” Pug shouted. A torpedo was spit out the side, found its target, and sped past us. “Fire two! Eels in the water, Captain. Boys, reload!”

In bay two, Pigeon and Comely John would be in space suits, hand loading tubes one and two again, just in case we needed another round. Tube three stood full and ready with a more dangerous payload at all times. We aim to capture, but barring that, the *Lion* might need to slash with her claws from time to time.

On the Big Board, two torpedoes streaked toward the other ship, which resembled a giant doorstop with barnacles crusting its hull. We waited patiently for our weapons to make contact. The eels were electric ones: EMP payload designed to cripple the target. Space-faring vessels could partially shield themselves from an electromagnetic pulse, but it would take its toll. And only a very large, military-type vessel might be able to block several attempts. Even if a little turd like the *Coyote* shielded its vital organs from the first ‘pedo, the second coming a few seconds behind would finish it off.

Then something rather amazing happened: one of the turd’s barnacles launched a cluster of flares that streaked off in three whirly directions. The targeting ring on the Big Board flickered and switched priority. Our lead torpedo detonated on an empty patch of void where the flare had just been, waving its fiery hands like a beauty queen with a flat tire. A globe of electromagnetic chaos expanded from that point, rushing out to brush up against our own forward shields.

My head snapped to the right, where Spleen was on the edge of his seat giving a thumbs-up, assuring me that we were okay. (I’d have known soon enough anyway, I suppose.)

“Pretty tricky for a poor trader low on supplies,” Pug commented.

I had to agree. Now I *really* wanted to know what that bastard was carrying.

But our cunning friend hadn’t escaped completely from the first eel’s teeth. “She’s listing,” Pug said, pulling us back from our pursuit velocity. The *Coyote* had lost some control, at least, to that pulse. And just then,

the encore performance: torpedo number two slid dark and quiet up to the target and kissed it on the cheek.

The Big Board flickered, as did the bridge lights.

“Shield one’s popped its bellybutton,” Soot reported over the comm. It had done its job, blocking the EMP from taking out our own systems. Hopefully, we wouldn’t need to take another shot, especially as we closed for the kill.

The power signature of the *Indigo Coyote* had dropped to near zero. She was dead in the water, but wouldn’t be for long. Recoop systems would be kicking back in within seconds. They’d get life support and communications first. Anything else would need time and/or repairs, unless they were *really* well equipped. But no way this mangy coyote was *that* tricky.

I made a crab-claw pinching gesture.

Pug passed the order: “Man the grapnels!” Pigeon and Comely John were no doubt jumping into action. (Or clumsily skipping, more likely.)

Pug eased the ship in, close but cautious. Spleen manned the short guns: rapid-fire, high-velocity numbers that would punch the boat full of leaky holes if things suddenly got life-or-death desperate. Victim ships have been known to play possum, jumping up to bite you once you got in close enough. It was rare, but it happened.

This one, though, looked pretty near death, no play-acting. When enough lights blinked back on to make me think their radio worked again, I fingered the mike:

“*Indigo Coyote*, your attention, please! Despite your nasty lies, you’ve fallen prey to Captain Leonidas Hawksblood and *The Lion’s Share*. Prepare to be boarded.”

“Go in cautiously, brothers,” I advised. “They’ve already proven to be more cunning varmints than we expected.”

We were all in converted cargo hold number four, which was our boarding bay. We’d attached ourselves to our prey, much like a mighty lion hunkering down atop a gazelle with our vicious teeth in its flanks. The starboard grapnels launch from four, and so we launch ourselves from there as well. In boarding action, all but Spleen go aboard. We are a crew of only six nasty pirates, after all, and yet someone has to remain to man the boat. So myself, First Mate Pug, and our dirty crew of Soot, Pigeon, and Comely John were fitted snugly in our spacing suits. Soot still wore the repair spider on his back, a specialized omni-tool with

many spindly arms, good for fixing things. When boarding, however, the spider helps get us in.

We also went well-armed in other ways: the aforementioned sabers on our hips (or a big nasty hatchet, in Pug's case), sonic carbines, dart throwers, and magnetic blunderbusses; whatever the boys are feeling akin to when picking through our generous little armory. One never knows what will be of the most value in corsair-flavored combat. A sonic is no good in vacuum, and of little use in especially thin atmo or against certain suits. Similarly, a repeating dart thrower is good on people, poor on armor. Sometimes the mere sting of several small barbs tearing tender flesh is enough to discourage resistance. And loading them with slow poison (that's poison that slows, not slow-acting juice) or hallucinatory phantom meds proves very useful to our needs. We try not to be lethal unless absolutely necessary. We're highwaymen, after all, not murderers, and the motivation on bounty hunters and System Guard goes up around your ears if you start taking lives rather than loot.

The gap between the *Indigo Coyote* and the *Lion's Share* was only four to five meters. An easy obstacle in zero-gravity, especially when you have shipmates and manapults to give a boost. The boys tossed Soot over, who latched himself to their hull. He and the ugly mechanical spider went to work on a visible hatch, opening it in twenty seconds or less.

Pug was the first man in because, truth be told, he's wide enough to provide cover for whoever's behind him; that being Soot, in case some more sapping and engineering were needed. We all crammed into a personnel airlock, closed the hatch behind us, and opened the front door. Atmo hissed in to greet us, which is always welcoming for visitors coming in from the cold. (Even uninvited ones.) We filed in carefully, Pug and his blunderbuss at the lead. The 'buss is a versatile weapon. Its ferrous ammo can be shaped according to your needs, be they big slug, wide spread, or the deadly spinning bola. Or you can lock down the BB feeder and fire just the magnetic pulse itself, which has a myriad of uses too. Humanity's greatest inventions have generally sprung from new ways to kill one another.

Beyond the airlock was a cargo hold, largely empty. In one corner were some pallets of foodstuffs, compact spacer rations of one kind or another. "Guess he was lying about there not being enough food to go round," I said.

Then a bark of death and ricocheting. Someone had fired solid munitions at us. Deadly hornets raced past my head with muzzle flash in the darkened corridor leading amidships. We all crouched and moved, raising our own weapons. Pug fired his blunderbuss, lodging iron BBs in the bulkhead. John and I both fired sonics into the darkness. I saw something, a glint of reflected light, like an arm going up. Acting on instinct, I shuffled forward and laid down ultrafreq like I was painting the passageway from a distance. Another dancing step and I could see a man clutching his ears, dropping his handgun, and careening to the floor.

I moved into the passage and motioned for the boys to follow. "We've got atmo and they've got ears," I said through our comm. "Lead with the sonics." I stepped over our would-be killer. Pug stepped on him instead and ensured he wouldn't get up to disturb us anytime soon.

The dim red lighting of the ship's halls soon split off in two directions. With a wave of my hand, Comely John, Pug, and Soot went aft, while Pigeon and myself went forward. Being basically familiar with the build of a 47C light transport vessel, we knew where we were going. Those boys would secure the engine spaces and thus the ship's pulsing guts, while Pigeon and I went for the ship's brain.

A scruffy character with two thin, bionic limbs branching from his left shoulder socket ducked out from around a corner, shooting darts at me and Pidg. Both of the bastard's skeletal metal mitts held a shooter, and they spit a cluster in our direction. I should say *my direction*, as I was leading. One chinked off the facial glass of my dome and for an instant I imagined myself losing an eye. Another hit my shoulder but failed to penetrate the suit. The others went wide, and the cowardly shooter disappeared from sight.

I felt a hand on my shoulder, gently pulling me back. "I got this one, boss," Pigeon said. He's a wild one, our Pidg, and scarcely predictable. Usually the quiet, graceful sort, but prone to bouts of crazy misbehavings. Pigeon drew his saber in one hand, raised his own dart thrower in the other, and charged down the passage screaming his damned fool head off. I stood still for a moment, admiring the lad, then ran after him. Our prey stuck his head out at just the wrong moment, probably thinking he'd shoot down the wild yodeler point-blank. Instead, Pidg's blade clattered down on the man's artificial arms while his thrower spat venomous barbs into him. A moment later his three limbs were sprawled wide, his body numb on slow toxin.

Further down the gloomy corridor, a door slid shut.

We found it to be the door to the bridge. I knocked politely. "Hullo-hullo. Captain Hawksblood here, brain-root of the *Lion's Share*. I don't believe I ever got a name from those within...?"

No answer.

I raised Pug on the comm. "Aye, sir," he replied. "We've taken the rear. Shutting down atmo fans now."

A large aspect of the ambient background humming faded out.

I knocked again. "You hear that, dear friends? We've taken control of this vessel's heart and lungs, and can make it rather uncomfortable in there if you force us to."

After a moment's consideration, there came a bid to enter.

Naturally, we stood on either side of the door when it opened, so the pistol rounds that came harshly from within all missed us. I reached around with my carbine and painted the room an intense shade of ultrafreq. When I finally strolled inside, I found two patrons on the floor, one of them painting it a nauseating shade of vomit green.

Once the effects of the sonic had worn off, I found the puker to be captain of the vessel. A man named Bajwari, whose skin tones were as dark as our own Mister Pug and whose accent I recognized from our lively conversation on the radio. His quarters were decorated more luxuriously than my own, which I complimented him on. He seemed unwilling to accept my well-meaning words, however.

"So you have only a crew of four, including yourself," I was saying, "and yet the hold we entered by has nearly four pallets full of rations. Not enough to be worth transporting for sale, but more than I'd expect for your small team, especially given the well-stocked galley my man Pidgeon has already gone nosing through. Then again, mayhaps you just like to buy in bulk? Or you're a forward thinker who plans well in advance for staving off hunger? Or perhaps you're all planning to put on weight, a friendly fat-body contest to keep up the crew's morale?"

He stood before his finely-wrought wooden desk with his arms stubbornly crossed, his lips semi-pursed in what I interpreted as an offensive display. His sparse black whiskers barely formed a moustache, though I judged the man to be thirty Sol or more of age. He was a perplexing fellow.

I was comfortable at his desk with my feet up. The chair was padded and trimmed in real snow-colored animal fur. A gaudy article, but cozy

nonetheless. A similar safari theme ran amuck around his walls, with gilded animal heads and trophies and keepsakes from a plethora of ports stuck to the bulkheads. Nothing I saw, however, led me to believe the man had any tastes, a worthy sense of style, or that he was a pirate of any great skill. Other than his odor and pouty silence, he struck me as a rather non-threatening spacer. I told him as much.

“And yet,” I went on, “your boat is equipped with some impressive countermeasures. Not for dodging your fellow privateers, I’d wager, but for avoiding the authorities should they take an interest in you. So what is it that you’re carrying, Captain?”

He shrugged. “Nothing.”

“Jabber mouth, jabber mouth,” I teased, carving my initials into his desktop with my lucky dagger. “You know, I thought you and I were compadres. Brother buccaneers. I thought we would have a fraternal understanding between us.”

“I am a businessman,” he said matter-of-factly.

This was like pulling teeth, and it occurred to me things might go more swimmingly if I did pull a few. We like to be quick in my line of work. Get in, get out. The longer you’re tied up on a boarding action, the more opportunity for something to go wrong. And I certainly didn’t want another ship—particularly a System Guard patrol—cruising by and noticing our ships hung up like dogs mating.

But if a guided tour was what he wanted to provide, we were happy to take one. The remaining trio of the ship’s compliment we left bound together on the bridge under Comely John’s guard. Prisoners are less apt to get fidgety with John smiling down on them. I believe the red-feathered female among them was even making eyes at him.

Mister Bajwari gave us the run-around at first, showing us a couple of empty storage lockers. Pug’s a less patient man than myself, and he let the air out of our host with a swift upward blow under the ribcage. Bajwari, though, was a tough customer. Even when Pug threatened to groom his lower reaches with his razor-sharp hatchet, the captain was stiff-lipped. I decided that I would pick the next mystery door myself and that if Bajwari didn’t help us with the locking code, we’d promote someone else to captain. Or Soot would get it open, and we’d just blow some air holes in this boat on our way out.

We continued down the passageway, me stopping outside doors, holding my hand to it as if feeling for warmth or chills, and watching my true barometer, Captain Bajwari. On the second locker he appeared

anxious, so we ordered it open. Inside were perhaps twenty traveling bags of various sizes and states of disrepair. Soot and I opened a few and found them crammed with a wide array of used clothing and personal effects, including a very old-fashioned doll with one button eye missing.

“Yours?” I asked, receiving the usual pouty response. “What the hell does a crew of four need with all this baggage? And why wouldn’t their personal items be in their own quarters?”

“I’m beginning to get the picture, Captain,” Pug said.

“So am I.”

The next time my barometer acted strange was outside one of the larger cargo holds. “Knock,” I told Pug, who obliged using the flat end of his hatchet. The metallic ring vibrated through the door and was soon answered with a meek echo that barely penetrated the door. Knuckles rather than axe head, no doubt.

“Open it,” I commanded. Bajwari made with the pouty face, so Soot complied. The spindly legs reached around his thick-haired noggin, pushing buttons and prying panels, while his gloved fingers pressed buttons and twisted wires. In about eight seconds there came a click, and the hatch sighed open a centimeter’s breadth.

Bajwari must not have believed we’d get it open, for when we did he suddenly got all blubbery, his stiff façade instantly melting away. “I’m a businessman,” he babbled. “They hired me for this; they paid me to get them here. I’m doing just what they wanted. We’re brothers, you said. You said it! We’re the same—”

The metallic breath of a dart thrower came from the shadowy hall to my left. Barbs skipped against the bulkhead, one chinked the helm collar of my open suit; it very nearly buried its unfriendly, hooked nose into the soft, handsome meat of my neck.

Pug reacted faster than I. Bajwari got shoved forward, closer to the shooter. My first mate shouldered Soot backward, jerked open the cargo hold door, and hip-checked me inside. The hatch closed and locked behind me.

My brain and eyes took a long moment to realize what had happened, though my nose noticed a difference right away. It was assaulted by the stink of sweat, urine, and feces, barely discernible from one another in such an awful, collaged bouquet. The air was thick with these things, twice as heavy as the poor atmo I’d been breathing, and I physically choked on it. As my lungs coughed, my eyes adjusted. The darkness



within was not absolute, but dimly lit by red heat lanterns, four tiny crimson stars burning within plated jars. Then my brain made sense of other shapes: the remains of several human persons huddling around the lanterns, all looking in my direction.

I say “remains” because the dispersed crowd before me no longer looked very human.

As my wits came back to me, my hands scrambled for a means of self-defense. Trusty saber clung to my hip, and sonic carbine hung lazily over my shoulder. But I had all the time in the universe to ready my weapons—the poor wretches sealed within this scarlet tomb were not rushing me. In fact, most of them were cowering from me, as if expecting some punishment. I saw emaciated faces and near-skeletal bodies. The air I felt on my face, though thick with stench, was starved of oxygen and cold as Dog’s Hell. Judging by the shadowy corners, I figured the space to be about thirty meters square, housing around twenty... travelers? What had Bajwari been babbling about? They had paid for this?

“Food?” one of the living zombies asked. “You bring us more food?”

“*Please* more food,” another begged. I noticed the crumpled ration wrappers on the ground. A very small child, a mere babe, wore one such package as a diaper.

“Water?” asked a woman stepping nearer. She seemed less fearful than the rest. “We have used ours up.” Her thin hand gestured to a line of five-liter jugs along the wall. Three appeared near-full, however, and even the deck was pitter-pattered with moisture. Then my naive brain connected the urine smell to what I was seeing.

“You are new.” A young boy came forward, dressed in rags and cloaks wound tightly around his chilled little body. “We do not know you. Did we get there now? Are you here for us?” His Venusian language skills seemed better than the others.

This sparked an energy level that had appeared impossible for such wasted figures to muster. More clamored to their feet and staggered toward me, all pitching to me their short list of skills and loyal dedication to backbreaking labor. “We all work,” the first woman was telling me, waving her rake-like hand around at her fellow travelers. “We all work. Please, do not leave any behind! We come so far...”

I held up my hands to ask for silence. Some flinched, expecting something more terrible than words. “You’re workers?” I asked. “Where do you come from? Who are you?”

“Nirvana Paradise,” an old man croaked.

“We come a long way, sir,” the woman said, bony fingers straying in front of her, wanting to grasp my suit, my open collar ring, my face, wanting to pull and beg and plead. “We all work. Just give us your job. Give us food, water, some place for living.”

“Us get off ship, please,” gasped someone else from the crimson dark.

I held my hand up to the woman’s own like a looking glass reflection. Something in me made me do it: lace my fingers between hers. Her knees faltered just then and she nearly fell to them, so overwhelmed by my simple gesture of family and mercy.

“You’re refugees from Nirvana’s Paradise?”

She nodded, wispy hair bobbing before her sunken, skeletal face. That world’s story was a sad one, known throughout all of Dog’s Terrible Creation, I’d wager. A beautiful marble—a ninety-nine they call them, nearly perfect for human life. After a decade of terra-jerking it was perfect and soon settled by idealists and spiritualists hoping to make a world like none other. It was the kind of lush and luxurious wonderland that they make holoscenes from, so lonely spacers like me can paint their quarters with ferns and birds and babbling brooks, to pretend the void beyond their bulkheads isn’t the suffocating cold of the Vast Empty Sea. It was a world worth fighting over. So they did. A century ago Nirvana’s was a blissful Garden, but it had since become a war-torn hell. I’d known many men and women who went there to win coin and glory in the fighting corps. Never met a one who’d come back with either.

“He took your money?” I asked. “Bajwari?”

The woman bobbed in the affirmative. Her eyes glistened as if to make tears, but her deprived husk hadn’t sufficient moisture to do so. “Escape. He helped escape us. Promise us work far away. He get us out, give us life. Peace and work.”

The young boy was suddenly very close, perhaps hoping to glean some heat from my body. “We there now?” he begged. “We come to paradise now?”

“No,” I said, a note more final and cruel than I intended.

The hatch clicked again behind me.

I pushed back the nearest skeletons, whirled around, and brought my blade to bear.

Pug’s big bearded mug poked inside, eyes wide at my weapon so close. “Whoa, Captain. Fighting’s over.” Then his face crumpled up all

sour. "Holy Dog beyond the Heavens, what is that stink?"

In the passageway outside lay the corsair with the red-feathered scalp, prone in a pool of blood. Pug's blunderbuss had made a mess of her.

I kicked her corpse with the toe of my boot. "If you hurt one lovely hair on Comely John's head..."

The *Coyote's* spiteful captain sat on the deck with his hands over his face, blood oozing between his fingers; a smashed beak, I imagined. Soot was down too, rocking back and forth with the spider levered beneath him, eyes closed and legs working in pain.

"Took a few darts," Pug explained. "But old Soot's been poisoned by worse. We'll lay him under the med spider back home and she'll plant some fresh eggs in him, make him all better."

The prison hatch opened wider, swung inward by a dozen frail hands.

Pug's nose crinkled again. "That's what he's transporting?"

"Aye," I said. "Charging them first-class seating too, I'd wager. They're coming from Nirvana's P, think they're getting peace and freedom and fair rate's work when they get to wherever they're going. More likely, Mister Bajwari's got a contract with some Volaris mine or factory that'll pay him by the head. And then those bastards'll turn around and pull some indentured travel contract on these poor folks. 'Welcome to your new hell. Work hard enough and mayhaps you can pay off what you owe me.' 'Course they never say exactly what you owe, or why. I been in under one of those debts myself, once upon a time. Never paid it off, but I paid the master back, good and plenty..."

Been a rogue ever since.

"Captain." My first mate was giving me the old suspicious eye. "Ain't our job, sir. We ain't in the people business. Trafficking human animals is bad voodoo. I see it in the sky blue of your eyes..."

"Aye, you do."

He shook his head at me. "Give them this crate as their own," Pug suggested. "Let them go their own way."

"We no fly," someone said behind me. The same syllables were repeated a dozen times by a dozen dusty voices.

"Not our business," Pug said again, his final, halfhearted argument.

I activated my comm. "Spleen."

"Yes, Eon," came two replies, one machinist, one feminine machine.

"Prep the boat for a busy transfer and a heavy load. We take everything that ain't nailed down, and even what is. We get the lion's

share, like we're used to, and leave Bajwari's scraps for the buzzards."

'Course, you know the rest. Welcome to the next leg of your journey. I figure we'll drop you all at Python. The name doesn't sound too inviting, but it's a nice place. Ain't far, and for a big orbital tube, it's stuffed full of lush jungle and greenery.

Now mayhaps one of you might like to share a tale? One of you that speaks fair Venusian, that is. Pug seems to think a lot of you might only speak some dialect of Presbyterian or some-such, but I can tell by the smiles and nods that you've all enjoyed my story. Except for you, there. You've been slack-jawed the whole time. Sure you didn't take a sonic point-blank to the head sometime in life? Soot, get that young man some more to eat! I think his noggin might have starved past the point of no return.

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*J. D. Brink is an over-worked Navy Nurse Corps Officer taking care of U. S. military members and their families in Japan. When not on duty or entertaining his five-year-old son, he squeezes out novels and short stories like blood from wounds that he just won't allow to heal. You can follow his adventures at <https://brinkschaostheory.com>.*

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# Blood and Bones: Caribbean 1645

By JIM BREYFOGLE

***In a desperate gamble, John Brennan, a sorcerer of the high seas, has joined up with the notorious Captain Bones, pirate scourge of the Caribbean, all for the sake of one priceless prize transported aboard a Spanish ship guarded by gun and magic!***

John Brennan had faced death many times, but never so early in the morning. Fortunately it was not his death, but a pirate's. The surf lolled the body at his feet. It was a patchwork man, sun-browned on his face and hands, white where his clothes had been torn away, and pink where fish had nibbled his flesh. John could little ignore the fact that this had been done not by the man's enemies, but by his friends.

John drew his spell of invisibility more tightly around him. The sand squeaked under his feet as he strode forward. He passed the remnants of a great bonfire; several men lay baking in the sun, surrounded by empty bottles, still unconscious from last night's revelry.

Ahead, canvas stretched high between palm trees. He had a proposition to make, and that seemed the most likely place to find Captain Bones. The crew of the *Blood 'n Bones* lounged among the trees, surrounded by the tools of their trade: knives, guns, rum, gold, captive women, and more rum.

The heat didn't seem to bother Captain Bones. He sat under the canvas, a dozen tankards on the table before him. A half-dozen women huddled against him, staring at a knife driven through a golden bracelet into the tabletop.

Bones had coarse black hair—long and wild, growing from both scalp and chin. Veins crossed his pocked and ruddy cheeks like rivers on a map. His eyes were dark beneath bushy brows. A silver skull earring, its eyes glowing red, dangled from one ear. He wore his reputation like a second skin.

Bones pulled the knife from the table. The women leaned forward, hands twitching. Before any could move, he drove the knife back through the bracelet. The women sank back with sounds of disappointment.

John dropped his invisibility spell. The women shrieked at his appearance, but Bones merely curled his lip.

"Who are you, and why shouldn't I kill you?" Bones said, pulling out the knife and waving it at John. One of the women snatched the bracelet with a cry of triumph. Bones gave her a sour look, dug another bracelet from his pocket, flipped it onto the table and drove the knife through it into the table again.

"I'm John Brennan," John said, "and you don't profit from my death." He added, "Not the way you could from my life."

"Heh," Bones snorted, unimpressed by the introduction. "A bold mage, if that be true, but John Brennan be in Havana waiting on the unlikely event of the Admiralty deciding to pay his ransom."

Sweat dripped down the tankards on the table like it did down John's face. "I escaped."

"Well, me Lad, that be a good thing. For I'll tell you true, His Majesty's Royal Navy isn't fair to buy your freedom."

John nodded. It did no good to deny it. Being captured left a black mark on anybody's record.

"So what brings you to my shore? I've already a mage, and two mages be ask'n for trouble."

John licked his lips, which had become suddenly dry. "While in Havana," he said, "I learned when the *Princeptia* sails."

Bones froze. "The last galleon for Spain this season," he said.

"And laden with treasure."

"Tell me of this treasure," Bones said.

"More gold than usual, and more coined than not. There was talk of South American emeralds, some old Inca gold to satisfy the King's curiosity, and both coined silver and ingots. But the prize," John went on, "is the governor's gift."

"And what be that?"

"Governor Mendoza swore when he was assigned to Havana that he would donate a statue to the shrine of Santa Marina of the Waters

if he should return safely. It so happens he is returning to Spain on the *Princeptia*.”

“It be my recollection the new governor arrived in the spring with the new garrison,” Bones said.

“He did, but Mendoza stayed the summer to smooth the change. Now he takes his family home, and with them a statue to fulfill his vow.”

Bones brushed away his words with a gesture that knocked half the tankards from the table. “I’ve no use for grey rock, no matter how prettily carved.”

“This isn’t stone,” said John. “It’s gold: the Holy Saint made of gold and garbed in sea green emeralds. She stands this tall.” He lifted his right hand to shoulder height.

A slow smile cracked Bones’ beard. “Aye, that be a bonnie lass! What did you have in mind for this information?”

“The same as you, I suspect,” said John.

Bones laughed, though his eyes held no humor. The little skull earring joined him in a high, evil titter. “Aye, that be a rousing idea, but the *Princeptia* be no soft mark. She’ll have escorts and a Mage of the Seville Academy. My Hawk has fair, sharp talons, but not that sharp.”

John nodded. Few who sailed the Spanish Main hadn’t heard of David Hawk, the pirate mage of the *Blood ‘n Bones*. “With my help, it could be done.”

“Perhaps. ‘Tis said you had promise, before you were captured.” Bones drew the knife from the table, tapping it against his chin. A woman snatched for the bracelet. The knife flashed back down, pinning her hand to the wood. She shrieked.

Bones yanked the knife out, and she jerked her hand away, staring in horror.

“Take your crying elsewhere,” ordered Bones. All the women left, hurriedly and without comment. The wounded woman sobbed and held her hand close, so it stained her bodice with blood as she fled. “And the escorts?”

“The *Princeptia* sails with two,” John said. “But they will overnight at a certain river mouth to take fresh water, and the escorts will stand offshore to protect her from – adventurers.”



“A sound method,” growled Bones.

“Yes, but if we get there ahead of them we can anchor upriver. The escorts will be guarding the mouth of the bay, and we’ll already be inside. Let the current take us and we can approach in the night.”

Bones threw back his head and laughed, his earring joining in. “By the fates that be a bold plan!” He sobered. “But that leaves us bottled up in the river mouth.”

“With a fast ship, two mages, some valuable hostages, and enough gold for a man to take foolish risks.”

Bones laughed again. “I like you, lad; you’ve the right of it.” He leaned forward, “But I’ve a fancy to spend the swag I take. Fetch me my Hawk; I’d like to hear what he says of this, and of you.”

While he had heard of David Hawk, John had never seen the notorious pirate. Once a student at Oxford’s Mageholm College, Hawk had been assigned to the Royal Navy as a ship’s mage. He never reported for duty, instead slipping away to reappear in the Caribbean as one of the strongest renegade mages in the New World. The Navy dearly wished his capture.

John passed among the crew as he looked for Hawk. This was a test, a test of his courage among hard men who lived their lives desperately, caring little for anything, whether life or property, work of man or work of God. A man caressed a lizard, rubbing its head like one would a dog. Like a dog, the lizard wore a collar and a long steel chain.

They looked a tough lot: rough seaman’s clothes, knives and guns, scars and missing limbs, gold jewelry, silks and fine brocades. Amongst their fashion fancies John saw charms and amulets, no doubt taken from victims they had failed to protect.

Finally, he came to a man leaning over a boiling pot, inhaling the fumes and muttering; either to himself or the dissected lizard on the board behind him.

Red, orange, and gold flames leaked from the corner of his left eye to course down his cheek and flared across his jaw. The tattoo was so vivid his face looked as though it burned when he moved. John had found David Hawk.

Hawk’s left eye was black; it shone, slightly iridescent, when light hit it. It was, John realized, a black pearl of enormous size. There

couldn't be two such pearls in the world.

When he smiled a cruel looking smile, runes carved into his teeth—part of some enchantment, surely—glittered with gold.

Hawk sniffed the air. “There is something of the academy about you.” He sniffed again, like a dog after a meal. “And the pallor of dungeons is on your skin. But there is fire in your eyes. You want something badly.”

John did not answer. Hawk laughed at his silence. “Yes, be careful, lest I pluck the thoughts from your brain.”

“Captain Bones wants to speak with you,” John said.

“Does he now?” Hawk waved his hand over the lizard, disturbing a number of flies at their lunch. “I'm not finished here. Well, I can do it again.” He grinned, and John knew it didn't matter to Hawk whether he dissected a lizard or a man. “Maybe I should find myself a lady like some of the lads, eh? Be better than a lizard.”

John waited, sweating in the shade of a palm tree while Bones and Hawk argued about the plan. It was no small thing to attack a galleon, but as he had pointed out, the rewards were great.

Finally, Bones' voice rang out over the sand. “Ready the ship, lads! We're going after the greatest prize since Piet Hein took the plate fleet in '28!” He beckoned John over. “The crew be signed already, but you still be needing to put your name to the roll.

“Your cut be four shares,” Bones continued. “That be the same as Hawk's. You bring the information, but he be more experienced.”

John glanced at Hawk, who frowned. “I want one thing off the top,” John said. “I bring not just the date and route of the *Princeptia's* sailing, but the plan to take her.”

Bones narrowed his eyes. “What be you wanting?”

“I want the governor's bonnie lass.”

“That lass—it be worth more than its weight in gold,” Bones said.

“Indeed she is.”

“I'd more like give you the governor's life,” said Bones. The two locked eyes, but John didn't look away. Bones shrugged. “So be it, but it be costing you a full share. Three shares and the lass.”

John nodded agreement.

“There be the Articles,” said Bones, pointing to a sheet of parchment on the table. “If you be intending to sail with us you’d fair be signing.”

John expected this, but hesitated. His signature could be used against him should they be caught. He couldn’t even claim duress, for nobody forced a mage. Men swung for signing articles like this.

Prizes enough for a man to take foolish risks, he thought, lifting the quill and signing under the watchful gaze of Captain Bones and his sharp-taloned Hawk.

The crew hurried to clear the deck so they could sail with the evening tide. John wanted to speak with the sailing master before going to his cabin in the forecabin but stopped to watch a man drink the dregs from every rum bottle he gathered before pitching it overboard.

Knowing better than to comment, John climbed onto the quarterdeck. The first thing he saw was two concentric circles inscribed with runes; Hawk’s circle of power. He automatically took a step closer.

“I’d stay away from that, mate,” said the sailing master in a low voice. “He’ll be covering it now there’s another mage aboard, but he won’t fancy your looking before then.”

John stopped. Of course, he wanted to know how the pirate mage constructed his fighting platform, but mages were always jealous of their secrets. The circles amplified their power and served as protection. Knowing the runes allowed one to know the circle’s weaknesses.

John walked slowly to the wheel, his gaze trailing behind him. The concentric circles were burned into the deck, but the runes between them had been filled with silver. Every mage chooses patterns to link the runes, and it looked like Hawk used Celtic knots.

“You’ve signed up for trouble, me lad,” said the sailing master. He was so battered it was impossible to tell whether he was young or old. A slice of his scalp and one ear had been cut away, leaving him with long hair on one side of his head, which he had tied back, and mottled scars across the other. “Sailing with pirates be worse than

getting captured. The noose be waiting for you on London quay.” He seemed remarkably cheerful saying it.

“Few on this ship will hang,” said John. “Drink and the devil will have them first.”

“Aye, true enough, and both already be aboard. I be the sailing master, name o’ Dead Reckoning, but you can call me Dead. The tale be told you spent eight months in a Spanish jail.”

John shuddered, thinking of the long months in Havana. He remembered cold stone and being questioned by mages using techniques learned from the Inquisition: leather, water, fire, and stone. In spite of the sun, the darkness of those dungeons seemed very close.

“I saw the prison,” Dead said. “From the outside,” he added. “But was told they kept the mages elsewhere.”

“Yes, beneath the *Castillo de la Real Fuerza*.

Dead let out a brutal bark of laughter. “In the governor’s basement! I think more highly of the gent knowing he slept with a dungeon full of angry mages below. Takes some courage that does.”

“It doesn’t take courage, for Mendoza has none,” John said. “All it takes is stone. Stone protects from magic; that’s one reason castles are stone. A mage can break through anything but stone and a stronger mage’s circle.”

“Aye, seen Mr. Hawk battle a few times.” Dead nodded toward the circle.

After a few moments of silence, Dead said, “Never a mage escaped Havana before. O’Livier died there, and DeGruen, and One Hand Dick. And Renington. He had power, old Renington did, and he died there.”

“DeGruen is still alive,” said John automatically. “Mad, though.” He thought of being herded up to protect the governor’s beautiful daughter from attack by West African magic wielded by resentful slaves. He had been told that if she died, he died, and when he was successful, he was returned to the deep dungeons to brood and plot without even a candle as gratitude. After that glorious interlude, the cold and dark had been even worse. “A lot of madness there,” he said, trying to shake the shadow from his memory.

“Aye,” said Dead quietly, bringing him back to the present. “Here be madness too.”

David Hawk climbed onto the quarterdeck, flaming tattoo leaping as he growled like a bear. “Stand away from my circle,” he said to John, putting himself between John and the circle. He shook his fist—a fist that sparkled with power.

John took a step back, raised his own hands. “I’m not near your circle.”

Hawk sneered, “Already seen it?”

“No, you can ask Dead. He took care to keep me away.”

“I should kill you now,” said Hawk. “And damned be you and your plan.”

John called his magic; he could feel it tingle. “You’ll need me,” he said. “You can’t take a galleon mage by yourself.”

“How reassuring, since you were captured by the Spanish in the first place.” Hawk snarled, showing the runes on his teeth.

Poised to fight, John waited for Hawk to accept the truth. Only the strongest, best trained and most experienced mages were assigned to the treasure galleons. At last Hawk lowered his hands and muttered, “You did escape. Nobody’s done that before. I’ve always wanted the spell books of a Seville-trained mage. And I need something to replace the lizard.” He fixed a gaze on John, his pearl eye shimmering. “You’ll inscribe your circle on the fo’c’sle deck.”

As far from Hawk as possible. “That’s wise,” John said. Never taking his eyes off Hawk, he crossed the quarterdeck and climbed down to the main. He had not gotten the chance to talk to Dead about their course, but he figured best do that away from Hawk and his circle.

John ducked his head as he entered the forecastle cabin. It stank of mold and rum, and, if it wasn’t his imagination, treachery, and death. Refuse piled along the bulkheads. A dull hazy light battled its way through a porthole encrusted with salt and grime.

Not thinking, he straightened and banged his head on the underside of the deck. Raucous laughter drifted down. “Watch yer head, mate.” Several hard thumps next to his ear made him wince.

John ran his hand across the planking, feeling it vibrate from the men’s stomping. It felt like he could just reach up and grab their feet.

He dropped his hand. He would go above to scribe his own circle once they left.

He struggled to open the porthole and was rewarded with a fresh breeze and view of the beach. There, as if he needed another reminder not to trust these pirates, wallowed the patchwork man, alone, forgotten, and very dead.

As the *Blood 'n Bones* neared her destination two days later, John inscribed the last rune in his circle and stood to inspect it. A good job, he decided. The circles were precise, the runes clear. The ring of fire it generated should be without weakening wrinkles. He had a good combination of runes to augment his power, bolster defense, and aid in summoning.

All that remained was to wait. As they lay at anchor, tales of the treasure raced around the ship, growing larger with each telling. John half expected to hear of the *Princeptia's* sails of gold and jeweled keel. Through long days the men claimed and reclaimed their shares, reveled in Spanish blood yet unshed, gambled their un-won loot, argued, and fought. Bones spoke of the "governor's bonnie lass" wistfully and frowned at John as if regretting giving her away. When the *Princeptia* finally anchored downstream, everybody was more than ready for a fight.

The moon shone, making the water shimmer and brightening the night. It was inconceivable that they wouldn't be spotted as they came downriver. The men grumbled and argued, fearing chance, God, and the Spanish.

"Silence!" ordered Bones, his whisper nearly a shout. "Next man as makes a noise will be making his last."

John moved down the starboard side, murmuring amongst the guns. So quietly none could hear, he cast a spell of silence on them. Hawk did the same to the port guns.

They needed to keep the *Princeptia's* escorts ignorant. They would be undone if they sailed to her rescue.

When John came to the forecastle, he climbed the stairs and stepped into his runic circle. On the quarterdeck Hawk did likewise,

and John could see Hawk's circle glittering faintly, as though with starlight, ready to ignite.

Dead Reckoning stood at the wheel, waiting. The crew manned every gun. As if the devil had reached out to help them, a cloud crossed over the moon, the surface of the water going black.

"Slip the anchor," Bones ordered.

They drifted downstream. The river opened up, and John saw the *Princeptia* at anchor, lights at bow and stern. There was no sign of the escorts; they were outside the bay, screened by palm trees. The Spanish placed far too much confidence in their own secrecy.

Dead turned the wheel, and *Blood 'n Bones* turned slightly to bring her near the galleon. The crews of the port cannon abandoned their guns to become the boarding party. Cutlasses and pistols ready, they waited.

John's heart pounded. This was stealth and murder and robbery. A man must love or hate desperately to justify this.

Each gunner knew his target, and a difficult mark it was – the mage platform. One by one, as the *Blood 'n Bones* slid alongside the *Princeptia*, the cannons fired. John allowed himself a smile of satisfaction at the muffled retorts.

Grappling hooks arced up, snaring the *Princeptia's* rail. Pirate marksmen kept the Spanish from cutting free, and the ships shuddered as they banged together. Soon they were bound, swinging in the current, but the *Princeptia's* anchor held.

Bones led the pirates with a shout over the rail and fell on anybody he found. A few sailors pled for mercy but found none. The pirates killed everybody whether they fought or not. Blood showered the deck.

"¡Fuego!" A deep voice boomed above the confusion, and a sheet of flame leapt from the shadows under the aft cabin. The volley tore into the pirates, and they joined the screaming.

"¡Adelante!" A line of Spanish marines stepped into the lantern light. A robed figure, the galleon's mage, dashed up the stairs to the quarterdeck.

Before John could react, flames leapt from the Spanish circle, red and tinged with gold. Power crackled across the decks, so much that he could feel it on the bow of the *Blood 'n Bones*. "Del Sol," he said,

recognizing the famous red and gold fire. Now he understood why the Spanish weren't worried about lights.

Hawk ignited his own circle of black fire rimmed in purple, and the air shimmered between the two mages. He opened a magical gate, and a dozen hawks flew out.

Del Sol laughed.

"At 'em, lads!" Bones shouted, and the pirates attacked the marines. The marine's line collapsed as the two groups hacked and grappled with each other.

John ignited his circle of blue and silver flames and joined Hawk's attack. The two hammered Del Sol's circle, and it flexed. John could see the mage sway, but the circle held. Del Sol flung out his hands and John felt his magic recoil.

John stopped his attack and began a new spell. Sweat dripped down his face as he struggled with the exacting formula.

Del Sol taunted Hawk over the shouts and screams of the pirates and marines. "¿Llamaste a losalcones? *Me decepcionas. Ninguna creatura podría romper mi círculo.*" It seemed Del Sol was right, for Hawk's hawks could not break his circle.

John drew power, so much power his flesh tingled and light popped before his eyes. He reached out, magically groping inside the *Princeptia's* aft cabin, tore a gate in reality and beckoned, then pulled and dragged and forced his summoning to completion.

There was a lull in spite of the vicious fighting raging across the *Princeptia's* deck. Del Sol casually immolated Hawk's hawks while watching John curiously.

Nothing happened.

"*Lo que fuera que intentaste, falló*" said Del Sol.

John's stomach quivered. Had he truly failed? That summoning was his best and only hope.

Del Sol raised his arms, and red flames leapt up and began to twist above his head then settled back down, leaving a swirling disc of fire. The flames pulsed brighter and brighter then roared out to lash Hawk's black fire at Del Sol's gesture. The black fire disappeared, leaving wisps of smoke drifting up from the runes. Hawk fell to his knees.



Hawk's voice carried over the ship, "Damn you, Brennan, for bringing us here."

The red fire leapt again, forming another disc. Del Sol turned toward John. The burning disc pulsed, and Del Sol dashed it into John's circle.

Noise filled John's ears as his blue fire spun, flickered, and vanished for good. He felt all the energy drain from him as the circle disappeared, and he swayed like a drunk.

The Spanish marines raised a cheer.

*"Ahora para borrar la chusma,"* said Del Sol.

The pirates faltered, changing their aim from the marines to Del Sol. Red sparks showered around him, but not even a cannon could break a mage's circle.

John tried to raise his circle. He couldn't beat Del Sol, but maybe he could protect the pirates. Or delay their deaths. A musket ball struck the rail before him, sending splinters flying. He dropped to the deck.

Del Sol glimmered across the decks, and John stopped to throw up a shield, a weak one, but enough to turn aside Del Sol's attack. Just like Hawk's lizard, John thought, pinned to a board with our guts hanging out.

There came the sound of tearing wood.

Del Sol looked down, eyes and mouth wide. He jumped aside as something tore a section of the deck into the cabin below. Claws, red from reflected fire, clamped onto the deck, and a demon hoisted itself into the circle. Del Sol shrank back as the creature towered over him. All muscle, fangs, and claws, the demon pushed against Del Sol's circle; when it couldn't get out, it turned on the mage.

It shrugged off Del Sol's attacks, grabbing him with both claws. Its claws sank through robes and flesh; blood spurted, and the mage screamed. The demon tore him asunder. The screams and red fire died.

Fighting ceased on the main deck. All eyes turned to the demon. It dropped bloody chunks of mage and stepped out of the circle. Marines and pirates scrambled to get away, no longer interested in fighting.

“Are you mad?” Hawk screamed at John. “Nobody can control that beast!”

“Rewards enough for a man to take foolish risks!” John shouted back. He took a deep breath and raised his circle.

The demon roared and leapt from the quarterdeck. Men shrieked, running in all directions, terrified of the thing falling toward them.

John opened a gate in the main deck. Unable to avoid it, the demon fell through. John slammed it shut, wiped the sweat from his face. “Easier than getting it here.”

He ignored Hawk’s incredulous expression and began to dismantle any enchantments that remained aboard the *Princeptia*.

“Well fought, lads,” said Bones. “My guts fair turned to water for a second there.” His skull earring laughed shrilly. He paced the deck, prodding prostrate Spanish sailors with his boot. More than one prayed for mercy from both God and Bones. “Put them to the sword,” said Bones.

“There are some who can be ransomed,” said John.

Bones frowned. “Who? Oh, aye, the governor.”

“And his family,” said John.

“Spare the passengers, kill the rest,” said Bones. “And let’s be off to divide this swag. I’m fair to see this bonnie haul.”

They cut the *Blood ‘n Bones* free and raised the *Princeptia*’s anchor. Hawk had charge of her as she sailed out of the bay; lights lit, and charted a course east, she signaled to the escorts they should follow to seaward. It was a simple trap that depended on the darkness and the escorts’ hasty obedience. But who, the pirates reasoned, would refuse orders they thought given by Spain’s foremost mage?

Still aboard the *Blood ‘n Bones*, John heard the escorts tear out their hulls on the shallow reefs. “Here’s to the admirable discipline of the Spanish Navy!” he shouted, and the pirates cheered their escape.

By afternoon the *Blood ‘n Bones* joined the *Princeptia* in another hidden anchorage. Much of the treasure had already been piled on the beach.

The crew sweated, smiling as they cursed the weight, knowing it meant wealth. They threw crates, bales, and barrels into a growing mound of treasure. John and Bones joined Hawk to watch the unloading. Bones found a bag of emeralds and sat holding it as a burly gunner broke open the chests and tipped the riches on the sand.

The next to last boat beached, and six men struggled to unload a large crate. It was larger than the chests of silver coin, almost as tall as a man, and clearly very heavy. Bones leaned forward.

"I fair be wanting to see that," he said, his expression avaricious. "No doubt that be the governor's bonnie lass."

The last boat beached, and the men drove the captives ahead of them. John knew Felipe de Vasto Mendoza well, but if the governor recognized John, he pretended otherwise. Mendoza stumbled in the sand. His face was red from effort, anger, and sun, but he held his tongue as a crewman shoved him before Bones.

His wife looked ready to faint. The crew took special delight in taunting her. Wearing a fine gown as though meeting special guests, their daughter followed. Her knuckles showed white on her parasol, but she held her chin high and ignored the taunting pirates. She glanced around, as if looking for something she had lost amidst the plunder.

Hawk's tattoo flared as he grinned.

Mendoza opened his mouth to speak, but Bones scowled so ferociously he closed it again. "Open the crate, lads." The bag of emeralds slid, unheeded, off his lap.

Two men had the crate open in short order, one side falling onto the sand. Santa Marina stood in the shade of a sailor, her skin burnished gold, her robe a sea of emeralds, a jeweled Bible in one hand and a cross in the other. The sailor stepped aside so the sun struck her and she blazed with light, setting the entire crate aglow. Nobody spoke, and the only movement came from men falling to their knees and crossing themselves in reverence.

"Now that be a prize," said Bones, his voice full of wonder and desire. "John, me boy, claim your prize." He drew his cutlass and laid it on his lap.

Hawk stepped away from the two, hands held loosely, staring at John.

“Even you would not desecrate the Holy Saint,” said Mendoza in heavily accented English.

John did not move. He studied Bones and Hawk, noted their readiness. It was against the Articles to kill a crewmember while on a cruise, but once the treasure was divided the cruise was over.

“Claim her, lad. I’d not have any say I don’t keep my word.” Bones turned the cutlass over idly. Sun gleamed off the blade. With his other hand Bones, drew a pistol and rested it on one knee pointed loosely at John.

Hawk flexed his fingers, not blinking.

Still John did not move.

“I’m not a patient man,” said Bones. “And I don’t really care if I keep me word. But I’d as soon you claimed her before you die, just to keep things proper.” As Bones spoke, sparks jumped between Hawk’s fingers, and the pirate mage smiled, showing the glowing runes in his teeth.

John took two steps forward, and beckoned. Mendoza’s daughter stepped forward to take his hand.

“Your plan worked, Eilena,” he said. He pulled her close and kissed her before Bones and Hawk, before the crew, before her mother and her bastard father whose payment for saving her life had been to throw John into a deeper cell out of fear of his magic.

Mendoza swore, “*¡Perfidia! ¡Estoy arruinado por mi propio – no, no por mi sangre! Tú eres—*”

“*¡Cállese!*” said John. “*Tenía parte en crear todo eso con su crueldad y su desagradecimiento.*” He switched to English and repeated himself to underline Mendoza’s plight, “You had a part in this with your cruelty and ingratitude. And you can still make it worse.” He picked up a rum jug and jerked his head back, drawing Mendoza’s attention to the pirates around him. “Drink and shut up.”

Mendoza glared, but took the rum and drank vigorously.

Eilena drew a pistol, (only she and God knew how she kept it hidden) smiled at John, and together they confronted Bones.

Bones sat, stupefied. Hawk hid his reaction well, but sparks still danced on his fingers, and he leaned forward onto the balls of his

feet.

“I have what I wanted,” John said. “Santa Marina is yours.”

Bones suddenly laughed. “You stole the bracelet from beneath the Spanish dagger!” His earring laughed as he reached down into the bag of emeralds and drew out one the size of his fist. Still laughing, he tossed it to John, who caught it. “Well played!”

The smile slid from Hawk’s face, and the sparks died on his fingers. He spat in the sand.

“You be too clever to have around, Mr. Brennan,” Bones said. He called out to the sailing master, “Dead, load a chest of gold into the jolly boat. And don’t skimp—three full shares. Make Mr. Brennan a rich man.” To John, he added, “We’re quits, Mr. Brennan, and I’m fair hoping that you’re never tasked with hunting me.”

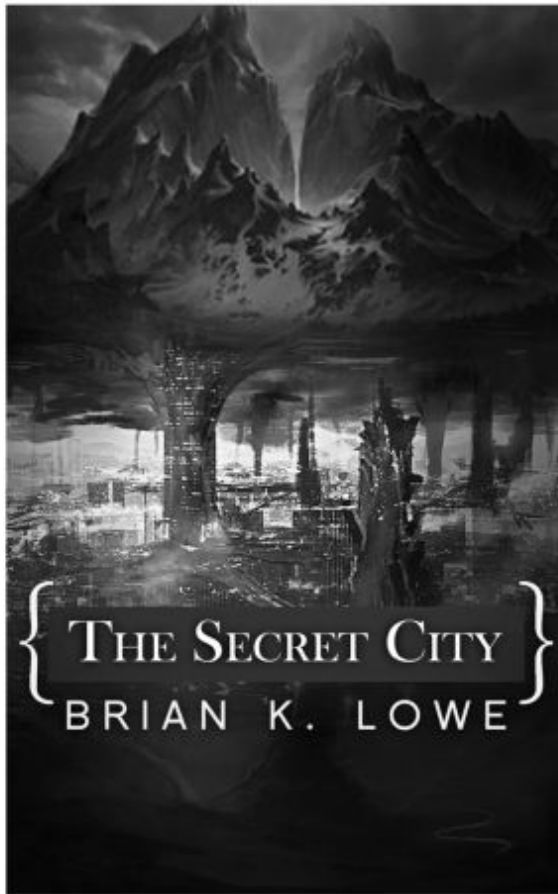
John shrugged. “I doubt the Admiralty will have me back after sailing with pirates.”

“Their loss, it be.” Bones returned to dividing the treasure, the silver skull in his ear chuckling with him, a high, gleeful sound, like jewels shaken in a tiny cup. “Their loss, it be.”

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*Jim Breyfogle currently resides in Pennsylvania. When he isn’t writing he is gathering an army of terra-cotta warriors with which to aggravate his English Mastiff—thus far, the dog still wins.*

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# The Mad God's Scepter

By EDWARD MCDERMOTT

***Brant had thought he'd prepared for all contingencies in his assignment to escort a young noble woman across the seas. When his ship is forced to take shelter in the cove of a lost island, he realizes he had not counted on the curse of an ancient god!***

*Below the thunders of the upper deep;  
Far far beneath in the abysmal sea,  
His ancient, dreamless, uninvaded sleep  
The Kraken sleepeth: faintest sunlights flee  
About his shadowy sides; above him swell  
Huge sponges of millennial growth and height;  
And far away into the sickly light,  
From many a wondrous grot and secret cell  
Unnumber'd and enormous polypi  
Winnow with giant arms the slumbering green.  
There hath he lain for ages and will lie  
Battening upon huge seaworms in his sleep,  
Until the latter fire shall heat the deep;  
Then once by man and angels to be seen,  
In roaring he shall rise and on the surface die.*

—Alfred, Lord Tennyson

In the oldest part of the city, short, narrow streets led nowhere. The wharfs were close and sailors from a hundred ports wandered about with the men and women who preyed on such. Beauties in diaphanous clothing wearing bells on their ankles made a special type of music as they strolled along. They offered the promise of love and caring for an hour, at only the cost of one small silver coin.

Brant, the bastard son of the duke of Barella, pulled his cloak about him and kept his hand on the hilt of his poniard. The cutpurses here would slit his throat for his doublet and count themselves rich.

Not that any but the boldest would have tried. Any judge of men could see the fellow in the cloak had shoulders as broad as any son of the sea who rowed for a living. He strode the street with the arrogance of a lion and the terrible power of a panther.



After walking another block, Brant found the sign of the 'Laughing Sailor' and entered. He stood for a moment by the door before crossing the room and climbing the stairs to the more refined seating. There mates and captains as well as burghers often sat and haggled over a ship's cargo. He did find a ship's captain and a burgher waiting for him, well back from the balcony, close to the fire and talking in low tones.

"If ever I saw two men plotting some doom," Brant said, with a laugh, "it is you two. If I were the guard, I would arrest you simply because you look guilty."

"Jest not about the guard," the burgher replied as he stood and hugged the younger man. "If you say a demon's name, he will hear you. So with the guard."

"Come, to business," the Captain said. "There's no gold in waiting. My cargo is disgorged. Either give me your commission or let me search out some other cargo."

"All in good time," the burgher said. "You will sail with my commission and my gold but only when I say so. First, let us see this ship you boast of. Come, take us aboard now."

Scowling, the Captain acquiesced. They left the tavern and walked to the wharfs. Once aboard, they inspected everything from the standing rigging to the ballast.

In the Captain's cabin over a bottle of red wine, Brant gave his judgment. "She is well cared for and well founded. I cannot say if she is as swift as the Captain claims, without diving underneath to inspect the bottom."

"Dive, if you wish," the Captain said sourly. "I had her beached and her bottom scraped not a year ago."

The burgher sighed with relief. "I hoped you would approve. While many ships anchor in the harbor, only a few meet our needs, a sound ship and a solid crew."

"Yes, a solid crew," The Captain replied. "They sail for a portion of the profit. Some may have been pirates in another time, but I ask no questions, only that they are good sailors and will stand by the ship when trouble starts."

The burgher moved the wine cups and the candle from the center of the table and spread out a piece of parchment. "There's the

contract. One month, carrying such men and cargo as I specify to a destination that will be made known to you after the ship leaves harbor. Half now and the rest when you return," concluded the burgher, placing a small sack beside the candle.

The Captain hefted the bag and tossed it into the drawer with the pen and ink. "We're both men of our word."

Brant lifted his cup of wine and said, "I will drink to that."

Three hours later Brant returned with thirty battle-hardened men, sworn to him on the hilts of their swords with oaths of loyalty that brooked no breakage. Hard, scarred men. Mercenaries to some; a band of brothers to themselves. Each man carried his own shield, sword, and poniard as well a bow and quiver of arrows. They marched up the gangplank and made the ship their own with a calm assurance that allowed no refusal.

The mate, Mahendra, roused the Captain at the sight of them and he came on deck with sleep still in his eyes.

"Ho, Captain," Brant said, as he oversaw his troops and their baggage. "We sail on the afternoon tide. Rouse your sailors to help. The burgher's servants should be here within the hour."

"This afternoon? Impossible. We must bring on food and water for the voyage. Tomorrow at the earliest."

"Supplies, better than those the usual chandler would supply, will arrive within the hour, and fresh water casks and some of beer as well. Sound the orders, open the hatches and start to make room."

The Captain ordered Mahendra to rouse the crew and clear the hold. The mercenaries lounged around the boat but stayed clear of the mariners. They were familiar with the ways of ships.

"What of the cargo?" the Captain asked. "It's size and weight. Is it fragile? I must know how to stow it."

Brant laughed. "Worry not. The cargo will use your cabin. You can share the mate's space with me, and he can sleep with the sailors. If he is one too eager with a clout, he might find the space with my tigers more comfortable."

"Tigers?" Then the Captain understood and looked at the mercenaries. "Yes, your tigers. I had thought a man as noble as you

above leading such as these."

"Captain, I'll tell you a simple tale. It's a common one. A noble lord with a barren wife got a young maid with child. The bastard son was born and loved as truly as an heir. The barren wife died, and an alliance brought a new bride. She bore an heir and two more sons. So I was raised with all the education and training of a lord but knowing that my younger half-brother would take my father's place."

"Wine?"

"No. Not until we have left and returned. What could a young man do who was neither noble in birth, nor base in training? I could have become a priest, or a captain of the guard, or perhaps a trader. My father would have given me enough to live comfortably, but steel rusts without use. Only by war can I rise to the station I was raised to. Hence, my dogs of war."

"Our cargo must be valuable," The Captain said. "A company such as yours, small though it be, is not without cost."

"A cargo rich in gold and love," Brant replied. "You will see and understand before the day is over."

"Our destination?"

"When we clear the harbor. The burgher has even supplied the needed charts. I cannot vouch for them, for I know little of such things."

"Charts from a strange hand? I would be a fool to trust such."

Brant shrugged. "My men will have a space in the hold. They will care for themselves. They do not answer to you or your mate. If they should interfere with the running of the ship, be quick to tell them so but use words. No man alive can whip them. I will see to their discipline and to their watches, for they will guard both day and night until we return home."

When the burgher arrived and stepped aboard, he examined everything and seemed pleased with the arrangements. After that, his servants carried aboard several large chests, down-filled mattresses and pillows. All this went to the Captain's cabin.

Once completed, the burgher turned to Brant and gave him a package of papers sealed in an envelope of fine leather that had been sewn shut.

"Here are the charts and the destination. Give this to the Captain once you are clear of the shore. And this," he said, taking out a second, smaller but similarly sealed package, "is for the bridegroom."

Brant took the packages and stowed them inside his tunic, close to his heart. "As you wish."

The burgher turned to the Captain. "My daughter sails to meet her bridegroom on your ship. She goes with her dowry and only one companion."

The burgher stopped. He looked at the ship and back toward the dock. His hands trembled, and he pulled out a handkerchief and blew his nose.

"The trading houses around the middle sea are tied to each other by alliances. Like the lords, we sometimes have little choice but to arrange marriages for our children. Still, it hurts to let your youngest sail away and never return."

Brant reached and grasped the burgher's shoulder. "Is it a good match for her? Is he a kind and gentle man?"

"Yes."

"Then you do what a father should. You provide for your daughter, giving her a husband that will give her comfort and a place where she can be the mistress of the house."

"How can I know for certain?"

"Not even the gods read the future with certainty. Say your goodbyes within the carriage, so none of your servants will see your tears."

The Captain and Brant watched as the burgher went ashore.

"Have you children?" the Captain asked.

"None that I know of. Until I attain a station, I will find no fathers with eligible daughters knocking at my door. At my father's house, the kitchen wenches might have been willing, but my mother would have known and I could not have borne her silent disapproval. And who tracks what happens to the women who follow the army. You?"

"Much like you. A Captain is wedded to his ship. It is his home, his duty, his mistress and his love. Someday, when I have sufficient wealth, I will go ashore and find a girl. She need not come with a dowry but must be gentle and kind and good, and hopefully pleasant

looking. I will find a small country inn, where the neighbors come to drink, and I will sit behind the bar and sometimes tell stories about my youth. There I will grow a parcel of sons and daughters and gray hair."

Brant said nothing. All men have a dream. It is the nature of men.

Two figures, cloaked with hoods pulled over their heads, climbed out of the coach. Nothing but their feet and their hands and the tips of their noses could be seen. They climbed aboard, and Brant led them to what was now their cabin.

No sooner had the door closed than the Captain shouted orders. The ropes were thrown off, and the boat moved away from the quay. As the tide pulled it toward the sea, its sails were raised, the sailors singing chants as they hauled in the ropes.

An hour later, the ship pulled clear of the headland. In the west, the sun hung less than a hand's breadth over the sea. Brant stood on the side of the poop deck, watching and judging the skill of Captain and crew and saying nothing. Now that the ship was free of the harbor, the Captain turned and held out his hand. After Brant handed him the package, the Captain left the deck.

Just as the sun touched the horizon, the Captain returned and altered the course. The sails were trimmed, and the voyage began.

"One more thing, Captain," Brant said, quietly, when the adjustments had been completed. "A simple word but one you should spread to your crew. The burgher's daughter and her companion are a most precious cargo. They should be treated as ladies of high estate. If any man were to do otherwise.... Well, gelding would be the least punishment."

"What of your tigers?" the Captain asked. "They don't have the look of household servants—or lapdogs."

"I have already given them the word. Any such infraction would cost the company its payment, and that makes those women more valuable to my tigers than their own mothers."

"Understood. I find that I don't like this arrangement. You, sir, are too quick to abrogate my power. Be careful it doesn't create harm. Do you know our destination?"

"In all things about the safety and handling of the boat, I defer to your expertise," Brant replied smoothly. "I do not know the destination. One port is much the same as another I would expect."

"Hmmp. Well, tell your men to keep their bows ready but to loose no shafts until I give you the word. We steer a careful course. In the waters we will traverse, the difference between a pirate and a revenue cutter is a small point. With luck we will see no other sails."

Still, the Captain had a worried look that hadn't been there when he had gone below. Something about their destination or the course they must follow had altered the man's demeanor. Brant shrugged. That was not his concern. Instead, he walked the length of the ship and spoke to his men, warning them that the sickness of the seas might strike any man.

By the next morning, Brant had become the victim of his own warning. The mate, Mahendra, smiled to see others upset at the unceasing motion of the ship on the ocean. Brant could not entirely fault him. It must be a bitter meal, to lose his bed to others.

The motion had also struck down one of the women. The other had traded her plain serving maid dress for a man's shirt and pants, with a bright red shawl drawn into a belt. Her white feet were bare, as was her head, and her lustrous brown hair was drawn into a bun and trapped under a knit cap. If it were not for her form, she could have passed for one of the crew—perhaps a cabin boy, but no boy had hips like that.

Brant watched her as she traveled over every part of the ship. She peered into crannies, talked with the cook, climbed the mast, learned to tie a rope and the purpose of each line. Her name was Tamara, and she stood tall and slender like the date palm. Her speech was noble, her manners perfect. Her smile made grizzled sailors stop and spend their time teaching her this and that.

Brant noticed that every man watched out for the girl. She had become the ship's mascot, and both the mercenaries and the crew had awarded her the position. Another person might have been spoiled by the attention, but this one was too sweet for that. Brant would have liked to talk to her but found no reason.

During the day, the Captain ordered a continuous watch from the highest mast. At night the ship ran with nearly no lights, and those

were carefully shielded. The ship ran close to the wind, and she cut the waves like a tuna before the porpoises. Still, the Captain paced when he should have sat. He stared out over the water as if not trusting the lookout.

On the third day he spoke to Brant. "We have been lucky so far. We will pass within sight of land after dark, and the night will keep us hidden. If you have a god, pray for a cloudy night—one that will hide the moon and us from prying eyes. And pray for wind. With the wind, we can run with the best of them, but if the air is still, the pirates have all the advantage. They can put fifty or a hundred men at the oars."

"Are pirates so common?"

"No more than brigands on a road in a land without castles. It is the nature of the lawless places that the strong take from the weak. The sea has no law but the law of the winds and the waves."

The next day the lookout cried out that ships were in pursuit. Three vessels. The Captain changed the ship's tack so that it took best advantage of the wind, and they sailed away from the true course and the known markers. Still, the pursuers followed.

Brant drew up his mercenaries in full kit—the sight of them lined up in a military formation stiffened the backs of the sailors. He inspected each man's weapons. The ship was filled with the sound of men sharpening swords that day.

That night the Captain stood the watch.

"Perhaps we will sail too far from home for them?" Brant suggested.

"No. They will pursue us until there is no chance of success. Should they grow short on water, they will only become more desperate, planning to return home with the water from our barrels. A storm is our best hope. Otherwise, your tigers will have a chance to prove themselves."

The weather failed them. The wind eased back and slowly faded away until the sails hung limp as cats paws of zephyrs played with them. The pirates lowered sails and unshipped oars.

The Captain ordered his sails lowered, and the crew rowed, but it didn't take a skilled eye to see the pirates were gaining with every hour.

"How long until the sun sets?" Brant asked.

"Two hours."

"Captain, I know little of the sea but I know battle. On this ship we are like soldiers in a castle. The sides of your ship are our battlements; we are besieged. There are no sally ports, no maneuvers. We cannot escape. We must fight."

"We can still hope for a wind tonight."

"If we must fight," Brant continued. "Our best hope is to battle one ship at a time. After dark, we should alter our course to strike one of their ships. They will not suspect that strategy, nor will they realize you have so large a force of fighting men aboard."

"What good will that do?"

"Perhaps with one ship destroyed, the remaining two will be reluctant to attack us. If nothing else, we will face fewer arrows tomorrow."

"We have a couple hours between twilight and the rising of the moon to alter our course. We can hope it works. Otherwise, tomorrow we fight for our lives," the Captain replied. "I'm going to eat and rest."

Brant knocked at the door, and Tamara answered.

"I must speak to your mistress," he said.

"We are more sisters than mistress and servant," Tamara replied as she let him inside the cabin. "What would you speak to us about?"

Brant explained the situation. "Until the fighting begins, no lights can show on the boat. After the fighting starts, stay inside this cabin. I will knock on the door to tell you when all is safe."

"Knock and speak, but take care," Tamara said. Her hand went to the sash around her waist and drew a knife such as a fisherman might use to fillet his catch. The blade was long and thin and sharp, the handle simple wood, worn to a satin sheen by much use. "I know where to cut."

Brant nodded, careful not to smile. The kitten had claws. "If there is fighting, even if we destroy one pirate ship, the other two may still pursue us. If the situation becomes desperate, I may suggest we steal the Captain's gig and leave this ship for the pirates to pursue. It would be a dangerous chance. You must be prepared to flee at a moment's notice."



Tamara dismissed Brant with a curt nod.

The moon was still down after twilight faded, and only the stars gave light. Brant's mercenaries replaced the weary sailors at the oars. The Captain sniffed as if he could smell wind and snorted in disgust. Then he changed the ship's course to one at right angles to the old. No lamps were lit, no candles burned. No one sharpened swords or spoke above a whisper. The ship glided through the water on its oars, a wraith.

Above the deck, the sharpest eyes stared into the blackness searching for the pirate ship. Brant spaced his archers on the forward deck. He stored grappling hooks along the rails. A ship's boy waited for the word that would send him to the cook's fire to bring back embers. Balls of cloth sat in pails of oil. Brant expected to use fire and steel to destroy the raider when the opportunity came.

One hour passed. Then another. The third hour was nearly gone when a whisper caught Brant's attention. There in the distance, less than a mile way, he could see the lights of the pirate ship.

"What should we do?" the Captain asked.

"If we were certain to slip by, I would try that course. But if it fails they would be onto us, raising alarm. They could harry us with arrows and slow our pace even further until the other ships arrive. If we close on them quickly and silently, we can attack with a force they do not expect."

"Your men will fight?"

"They were born to the bow and the sword. They will fight for the simple pleasure of it. Besides, wouldn't a pirate ship have treasure?"

"Maybe but only if they have caught another merchant ship between their harbor and spotting us. Pirates do not save much. What they cannot rape or steal, they burn. The money in their hands is spent as quickly as they stole it."

Brant laughed. "You speak from some experience. Steer for the pirate, and we will give them steel instead of gold and coals instead of rubies."

The distance closed with agonizing slowness. Five minutes, then another and another passed. The sailors now handled the oars, and Brant's tigers waited.

The moon began to peak over the horizon. The pirate ship was five hundred yards away, then four, then three. Brant held his breath. No alarm had been sounded.

The Captain aimed his ship dead at the pirate. One hundred yards. Now fifty.

"What ho?" a voice from the pirate ship cried.

"Arrows, fire," whispered Brant and thirty bows sang. Now the ships were only yards apart.

The Captain at the tiller cried for one more desperate sweep of the oars then ordered them pulled in. His ship glided forward, its bow catching the oars of one side of the pirate, breaking them and mangling those that worked them.

"Grappling hooks," shouted Brant. "Arrows off. Fire at will."

A man born to the bow can pluck an arrow from its place, draw it to his ear, aim and release it in one continuous action. At a distance of a few feet, the arrows spread death to any unshielded pirate.

The grappling hooks snatched at the ships and pulled them together with a fierce jerk that parted some of the ropes. However, others held. With a roar, Brant jumped across the space onto the deck of the pirate ship, his shield on his shoulder and his sword swinging to cut both man and rigging. His tigers dropped their bows and followed.

Half the pirate crew had been sleeping, and they were still groggy when the attack came. They staggered without armor from their hammocks, their heads bare. They were experienced killers, but this was a different foe. Brant's men fought as a unit, each relying on the shield and sword of the mate beside them. They marched down the deck killing all before them. A few desperate pirates jumped into the sea rather than face their swords. The battle ended in minutes.

"Kill any that remain alive," Brant ordered. "Take what you want, but I plan to sink her soon."

He clambered back on the merchant ship and climbed up the poop deck stairs to where the Captain stood. "How do we sink her?"

"Fire would be most effective, but the other pirates would be certain to notice that."

"Suggestions?"

"Too late."

Brant turned to see that the pirate ship was already ablaze. Some fool had knocked over a lantern and the fire spread quickly. He now understood why sailors feared fire above all other things on their wooden ships.

"Back to me now," he shouted at his men. "Cut the lines, push off. Watch for sparks. Get those pails of oil covered. We won't need them now."

The sailors returned to their oars and pulled with a will. One pirate ship had been destroyed but two remained. Every man prayed for a fog, a wind, or a cloudy night. Behind them, the pirate ship burned like a beacon on the sea. Every man aboard knew that the sinking inferno would act as a beacon and bring the remaining pirates after them.

All night the crew manned the oars, praying for a change in the weather—just before dawn, their prayers were rewarded. At first the clouds scudded across the sky. The sun rose, clothed in red. The wind began to blow. They stowed the oars and raised the sails gladly. Later, they were shortened as the strength of the wind rose.

All through the day the ship raced with the Captain at the helm and the lookout searching through the rain for any sign of danger. Three days and three nights the ship was blown and battered, and when the fourth day began and the wind started to die, a distant shore could be seen.

"What country is that?" Brant asked the Captain.

"Only the gods know. Far beyond my charts and perhaps any mariner's dreams. All I know is that the ship needs repairs. We'll scout the shore for a safe inlet. Once the sails and rigging are fixed, and we have landed fresh water, we'll be off again."

As they sailed closer to the shore, they saw no works of man along the strand, only a dark and oppressive jungle. No one aboard found the coast, with its strange sounds, appealing. Suddenly the surf opened into a bay. They sailed in and dropped anchor. The sailors' weary muscles now had some respite from the sea.

Brant ordered watch on watch and inspected everyone as the sailors and soldiers slept in any spot where they could find some comfort. When the sun rose, work began repairing the rigging and the sails.

"My mistress wishes to know—how long will this racket continue?" the saucy-eyed Tamara asked Brant as she climbed onto the poop deck to watch all the activity. "Are you not afraid that the noise will draw the pirates or possibly other foes from within the jungle?"

"I doubt the pirates followed us through that storm," Brant replied with a laugh. "The work must be done. The Captain has said so, and it is his ship."

"And you report to the Captain?"

"I sail on his ship, part of the cargo, until the burgher's daughter is delivered to her bridegroom," Brant said with a smile.

"So you are committed until then. And I was hoping that there would be some chance to go ashore. Who knows what could lie within that jungle, what spices, what sweet flowers, or precious stones?"

"More likely poisonous snakes and noxious weeds."

"Still, it would be worth some exploring."

Brant laughed. "What of the enemies you thought were lurking in the woods and we had awakened by the repairs."

She smiled. "You are a soldier. Ask the Captain and he will tell you that an anchorage like this would be defended in some way if any civilized people lived in this area."

"And we are not the first to sail here from a storm," Brant replied. "If the others had found wealth within the jungle, they would have stayed and built the defenses you mentioned. So, by this argument, there can be nothing of worth ashore."

She laughed. "You argue better than a soldier, more like a priest."

"I have been schooled in both."

Tamara turned but looked back with a smile, "I shall consider that as a warning. What the soldier does not take with his valor, the priest may steal with his words. The Captain will want to fill the water barrels before we leave, so you will command a shore party. My mistress will wish me to be part of it so that I can report any possibilities for trade back to her."

"Are you now a seer? Do you have unnatural powers? You see the future, and you enchant the crew. Perhaps you will put a spell on me as well."

She laughed again and left Brant thinking of her as he inspected his tigers and made certain every man had a full quiver of arrows.

Tamara's prophecy proved accurate. No sooner was the work completed on the rigging than the Captain wanted a shore party to fill the water casks.

"A small one, only a few hours," the Captain argued. "The pinnace will do the job nicely. My sailors will row and fill the casks. Some of your men should guard the party. I do not like this haunted harbor."

"Why do you call it that?" Brant asked.

"Look at this anchorage. You could hide a fleet in here, safe from the worst storm. Yet no one uses it. Worse still, no one has mapped it. That means that no ship has ever returned from here with charts and logs since men have gone to sea. Surely we are not the first to come here, yet no report of this place exists. I will sleep better when I am in a known port, drinking wine and laughing at my own superstition."

"We will fetch water quickly and sail with the next tide," Brant replied.

The crew lowered the pinnace and manned it. Brant, with his five most trusted tigers, climbed down the side to it. After the pinnace was clear of the ship, Tamara crawled from under a canvas cover, grinning with pleasure at outwitting the Captain and Brant. Brant shrugged. There were too many things about this supposed servant that bothered him. First mate Mahendra, leader of this expedition, scowled but ignored her.

The seamen rowed along the shore, probing under the verdant green for a stream or river and a landing spot. When they found the water too brackish for their needs, the men rowed upstream, with the oppressive jungle on every side. Above, the trees overhung the water.

"Here," Mahendra said, "The tide is turning. Can you not feel it? But you are not at the oars. We will tie up to the water's edge. Wait, see that? There is a stream that flows into this river. We will stop there and take the casks upward to be filled."

The pinnace came close to shore and grounded. Soldiers stepped into the waist high water holding their bows above their heads and clambered onto dry land. Brant led the way, his sword in hand. Once

under the trees, the view changed from green to brown. It felt like an immense church, the trees as the pillars that held up the leafy roof. The temperature was cooler and the wind silenced. The men whispered in reverence.

Little undergrowth interfered as the casks were manhandled onto dry land and rolled uphill. A few hundred steps led the men to the stream's source, a strange, silent and untouched pond—a perfect circle.

"Unnatural," a subdued Tamara said as she looked at it. "We should leave it be. There are other places to find water."

Mahendra ignored her. Instead, he opened the first cask and pushed it into the pond to fill. The ripples ranged outward from the cask to the center of the pond and then to the farthest edges.

"Half an hour and we'll have filled these barrels. Then back to the pinnacle. Two hours and we'll let the tide carry us to the ship."

Less confident than their First Mate, the men worked hastily, frightened by the silence that surrounded them. They spoke in whispers. Brant noticed another ripple. Where had that come from? What had disturbed the silent water? He could see nothing.

One sailor, waist-deep in the pool to hold a cask down so as to fill it, suddenly startled. "What the..." He disappeared with a splash.

"Look lively," Brant hissed to his men, unsheathing his sword once more. He roughly grabbed Tamara and pulled her behind him as he faced the pool. The cask suddenly disappeared under the water. Moments later the shattered ribs of oak floated to the surface.

Suddenly, long serpentine tentacles spurted out of the water and whipped around anything close to the pool. Soldier and sailor were equally caught by surprise. Arrows had no impact on the monstrosities. Fast as they came, Brant slashed out with his sword at anything that came close. Pushing Tamara behind him, he backed away from the pool.

"Men to me," he shouted. The remnants of his soldiers dashed to his side. The sailors that had not fled at the first sight of the monsters struggled helplessly as they were dragged into the pool. Mahendra, an ax in hand, hewed about him. One tentacle caught his ankle, and he hacked at it so closely that he trimmed his boot. Then he ran.

Slowly, carefully, through the jungle they retreated. They heard a bellow louder than any animal could make. Between them and the pinnacle came a thrashing sound, a thundering and thumping that shook the leaves on the tallest trees. Brant could feel its steps through the soles of his boots. Something enormous trod through the jungle in their direction. They were caught between the approaching unknown terror and the tentacles of the pool.

"You go that way, I'll go this way," Brant shouted. "One beast cannot follow two trails. Circle around and return to the pinnacle. Tamara, you are with me." Brant pulled her after him. They ran silently and quickly at right angles to the approaching monster.

The jungle faded away, and the grass grew long—taller than a man. Brant could see nothing but the grass immediately before his face. He slowed to a walk, the roots of the grass everywhere and eager to trip a careless foot. The sound of the monster had died away. It had either stopped its charge or gone in some other direction.

"There," Tamara whispered, pointing to the left. At first Brant didn't see it. Then he looked higher. It appeared to be a wall of rock. There might be a cave they could hide in.

Brant realized his mistake when they reached the wall. This was no natural formation but something hewn by men. Stones were set upon each other so tightly that nothing had been able to breach it. Now they were trapped against the wall, should anything be hunting them and following their trail.

He tried to scramble up the wall, but the stones were too smooth and the joints too narrow to give him purchase. Tamara pulled him to the left. That made sense, back toward the river. They followed the wall until a broken postern gate gave them another choice. Tamara slipped through it, her curiosity now overcoming her fear.

"Come back," Brant whispered.

"Just for a moment. We might find something. Besides, whatever made those sounds can't fit through here."

That last bit of logic convinced Brant. They snuck through the doorway and beyond the wall. At once they were in a dark passage. Fortunately, another door let them climb to a higher level where

some sunlight could reach. Climbing again, they reached the top of a small tower.

In the distance they could see the jungle and beyond it the bay. On the other side was nothing but black rock. The wall enclosed over a square mile of buildings. Beyond the structures, Brant could see a wall and then jungle again.

"What do you think this is?" Tamara asked in amazement.

"It looks like a fortified city to me," Brant replied.

"Where are the people? Where are the soldiers?"

"It must have been abandoned years ago."

"But not too long. Otherwise, the jungle would have grown over the wall," Tamara said.

"I don't know about that. See the grass? See how it makes a circle around this city?"

"Something within protects it still."

"And if it protects the city from the jungle, what else does it protect it from?"

Was there some monster lurking in those stone paved streets for them? Or had some unknown hideous specter already been dispatched to the very spot where they stood? Stay or go? Brant found the stone walls comforting. Whatever came for them would face his sword, and he planned to give a good accounting.

"We are here," he said after a second. "If death comes for us, there is little we can do. Until that moment, let us explore this city to find its secrets and possibly its treasures."

Tamara nodded. Perhaps she didn't trust her voice.

Despite the brave words, they crept through the city streets, making no sound. The streets' paving stones were untouched by dirt or grime. No plants sprang up between them. No blown sand or wind-tossed leaves covered them. Had they been freshly swept that morning?

Along the street, Brant searched for something familiar. In every city he had ever walked around, he had seen taverns, brothels, bazaars and artisans. Signs over doorways should be shouting in loud colors, but here there were none. Each door was identical to the next, solid wood slabs with sturdy hinges. No numbers, no signs, no individual markings of any kind.



Thirsty, Tamara was first to notice the sound. Her hand on his shoulder was enough to stop Brant in his tracks. She motioned, and he listened. The music of running water reminded him how dry his mouth was. They followed the sound to a square before the city's most impressive structure and found a fountain.

Tamara started to go to the water, but Brant held her back.

"No. Remember the pool. To touch it may awaken death in some hideous form. This is a trap for any creature that ventures within these walls. All life needs water."

Tamara swallowed silently, her hand clinging to him, her eyes darting in all directions. At the far side of the square they could see more steps rising up to the sky.

They kept to the edges of the square and, once on the opposite side, climbed the steps. The walls were covered with carvings. They depicted great wars, chariots with horses breathing fire, and captured prisoners yoked together and led away. On the second level, the floor was a map. In the center of the map was a raised chair—no, a throne. On the throne lay a long rod—a scepter—as if it had been left there only a few moments ago.

Tamara froze.

"We must go," she whispered. "Now."

"Why?"

"I recognize the symbol on the tip of that scepter and all the evil that it implies. It is the Kraken."

Brant searched the space for danger. Aside from the pillars that held up the roof and the throne with its rod, he could see nothing. He looked to the pillars again. Heads hung from each pillar. Only the skulls remained, and those appeared liable to crumble to dust at a touch. Each skull had been nailed to its pillar with a spike of gold driven through the left eye socket. He started to reach, but Tamara pulled at his arm.

"It is another trap, like the pool."

He pulled back. Too late. Something hissed and began to slither in the shadows. Brant did not hesitate. With a few quick steps, he reached the throne and plucked the scepter from its place. It felt heavier than he expected, with gold and jewels—a fortune that could buy him a kingdom if he survived.

"Tamara, run," he said, and they raced down the steps and through the streets of the city. Behind them, an obscene slurping sound grew closer. Tamara found the gate, and they raced through it, laughing. The oppressive mood that had held them in the city broke under the sun, in the golden grass.

"Straight this way," Brant commanded. "It will take us to the river."

"I would swim back to the ship if I must," Tamara gasped.

"No," Brant replied. "We need the pinnace. Besides, the others may have reached it."

They raced through the grass and into the jungle. The pinnace remained moored but empty. Tamara scurried on. Brant followed. They paused, waiting to see if any soldiers or sailors were hiding in the woods. None appeared. Another hideous bellow from the jungle convinced Brant that none still lived.

He cut the rope with a single swipe of his sword and forced the pinnace from shore with an oar. He heard a crashing in the woods. Turning, he saw a figure leaping from the shore into the water, only a few feet from the pinnace.

"For the love of the gods, don't leave me here," cried Mahendra as he desperately swam toward the pinnace. Brant held out his hand and pulled the mate from the water and into the boat.

"What happened to the rest?"

"That monster pursued us. It was as tall as a ship's side, made of gray leather—not fur—and bellowed as it charged. Some stood to face it, and it ran them down, its enormous feet crushing them. Arrows seemed to bounce off of its hide, and a knife couldn't draw blood. Others it gored with its horns. I saw it, and I ran. After it had killed the rest, I could hear it searching—hunting for me. I pulled myself up into the trees on a vine where it couldn't reach me. Then you returned to the boat and distracted it."

Brant realized the rest. The monster Mahendra described must have been what they had heard earlier. When it sensed they came to the boat it had followed them. For some reason it stopped suddenly at the river's edge. This gave Mahendra a chance to slide back to the forest floor and sneak toward the boat. When he saw that Brant was leaving, he'd desperately thrown himself into the water.

"We are safe now," Brant said.

Tamara shivered. "The Kraken."

"What?" Mahendra asked.

"We found the sign of the Kraken in the city," Brant replied in short bursts as he rowed. The pinnace was heavy. Even with the tide on their side, it needed more than two men at the oars.

"My family," Mahendra said, "have been sailors since before time. I remember stories about the Kraken. 'The scourge', they were called. Black ships with raiding on their mind. They attacked for gold and slaves, which they took back to their god and sacrificed to him. This was before my grandfather's grandfather's time, so I cannot say how long ago. I do not know why they were called such. Perhaps they worshiped the Kraken and so took it as a symbol."

Tamara spoke. "The Kraken were sea monsters as large as floating islands, with long tentacles that could tear a ship apart."

"I will stand and fight man or beast," Brant puffed out, "but what good is a sword against an island? What became of those raiders?"

"I don't know. Only that they stopped coming as suddenly as a winter storm breaks. For years after their last raid, men in watchtowers kept a lookout for them."

"I wonder why I never heard tales of them," Brant said.

"You grew up in a high house, a lord with land and domains," Mahendra replied. "The tales told where the smell of the sea is strong are different tales. The Kraken never raided inland."

The pinnace reached the mouth of the river. There in the distance, they could see their ship. A pod of river dolphins burst past them, leaping and bounding in the water, chattering to themselves. Something large moved beneath the boat.

"Did you see that?" whispered Mahendra.

"Pull in your oar and be silent for your life," commanded Brant, unsheathing his sword. What good would a sword do against so large a monster? The darkness passed away. Perhaps he had seen only a formation—a sandbar—they had crossed.

Still they kept the oars in, letting the wind and the current drive them closer to their ship. When they drifted close enough, a few strokes of the oars brought them to its side.

"Where are my men and my barrels?" the Captain demanded as the three stepped aboard.

"Dead," Brant said. "Cast off and let us leave this cursed shore before more evil follows us. Here is a bonus for our troubles."

With his knife, Brant began to pry the precious stones on the scepter from their settings. For each one he put in his own wallet, he tossed another to the crew and remaining men of his command. Only Tamara and Mahendra were not cheered by the precious baubles.

"Raise the anchor," the Captain shouted.

The men stood to the winch and pushed with a will, but the anchor would not rise. It felt as if something was holding onto it.

"Cut us loose," Brant cried.

"An anchor is a costly thing to lose," The Captain replied.

Brant flung him another stone. The anchor rode was cut, and the ship moved free on the tide as the men sprang to the ropes to raise the sails. Then the ship was jostled as if by a mighty wave. A scraping sound could be heard coming from beneath the hull. The sails strained, but the boat made no headway.

"Throw it overboard," Tamara shouted, pointing to the scepter. "The Kraken wants his scepter back. Oh God, save us."

From out of the sea came tentacles which grasped the boat both fore and aft and on either side. Brant acted with instinct, dropping the scepter and springing to the nearest tentacle, his sword in hand, but the blade bounced off the rubbery skin. Sheathing his sword, he picked up a boarding ax, used to sever lines and limbs. His first swing cut through the skin, and blue-green ochre fell on the deck. Another stroke and another, he made. It felt like hewing an enormous rubbery tree that was plated with scales. The timbers of the boat began to creak.

Tamara took up the scepter and threw it over the side. This sacrifice did not stop the attack.

"Fire," Brant said. He pulled the cover off one of the pots of oil and poured it onto the monstrous flesh nearest to him then set it afire with a bit of coal from the cook's stove. The oil burst into flames that flowed over the hideous flesh and down to the water. The tentacle pulled back.

Tamara grabbed another pail of oil and, splashing it on another tentacle that rose from the sea, followed it with a burning torch.

Mahendra and the crew imitated Brant's attack and the ship sprang forward on the wind toward the opening of the bay. The monster did not follow, but the sounds of its unearthly keening made a memory. On long night passages for years, the survivors would recall that sound.

"You threw away a fortune," Brant said to Tamara.

"The Kraken would never have abandoned its scepter," she replied.

"A waste," he said.

"There will be other fortunes for you to capture."

"Not the scepter, but you. Married to a trader, keeping house."

"Quiet—that is my secret. Besides, the bridegroom is a timid man whom I will rule easily."

He wanted to reach for her, crush her to his side and ask her if she truly wanted a man who could be ruled. Or did she want to... To what? To sleep by the ropes in his camp and rise with a shout and a tramp with the sun and moon for her lamp? A man like him sold his sword to men like her father. Instead of speaking, he remained silent.

She waited and waited. When she understood he wouldn't speak she left the deck. They never spoke again.

As the ship cleared the bay's mouth, no one relaxed. Instead, they waited, with lit torches and pails of oil ready. During the following days and nights, they kept double watches on half rations of water, anticipating another attack, until they reached their final destination.

As the Captain and Brant stood by the wheel in the night, they saw the lighthouse that marked their intended port. The Captain turned to Brant and said, "I think I will sell this ship and travel inland until I cannot smell the sea. I will find a tavern to buy and a wife for company."

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*Edward McDermott spends his spare time pursuing a writing career. Aside from writing, Edward takes time for sailing, fencing, and working as a movie extra. His web page is: <http://www.edwardmcdermott.net/>*

Thank You, A Poem
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This space was not bought to promote  
Instead it's a quick little note  
Of support for this great mag, Cirsova.  
With its stories of terra eld and terra nova,  
Long may its name quality, connote.

From Cirsova's #1 fan!

# The End of the Golden Age

By TYLER YOUNG

***When his surrogate father, the pirate captain Gentleman Jim, is murdered, Fenton inherits an incredible power and learns a fantastic secret! Can Fenton defeat the vicious pirate lord who killed his father and save the Caribbean from a terrible fate?!***

The Golden Age of Piracy spawned many fantastical tales, but none more amazing than the story of how it ended. It's a shame that none but I remember it, and one I hope to remedy.

It all started forty years ago, when I was but a lad serving under the great Gentleman Jim, the finest pirate ever to sail the Caribbean. The day everything changed began like any other. We were closing in on a plum prize, a merchant ship laden with fine fabrics and spices. Jim handed me the spyglass—he didn't need it, thanks to Jolo's magic—and let me watch as the merchant's crewmen fell over themselves in terror.

"Panic," the Captain told me, "is a pirate's greatest weapon." He slapped my back with an oar-sized hand. "And if that doesn't work," he told me, "a cannon will serve." Before I could say a word, Jim called for Jolo, who soared from the parrot's nest—we had no crow's nest on the Breeze—and landed on the thick leather patch on the Captain's jacket. She was beautiful: feathers so red they seemed too bright for this world, wings fringed with gold and blue, and bright knowing eyes. Jolo cried her challenge, and the Breeze surged forward.

We pulled aside our quarry, and before we could even sink our hooks, the Captain had already boarded her. I thought the crew might be cowed simply by the sight of him, cloaked in St. Elmo's fire, Jolo whirling above him. But their captain was bold, and their cargo was rich. So they fought.

They were well armed—this was the age of piracy, after all—and might have made a go of it, but no one could stand against

Gentleman Jim. He was everywhere at once, cutlass dripping blood, flintlock firing again and again. I managed to scabble over the rail and smash the nose of one of the sailors with the butt of my sword before their captain saw the red writing on the wall and surrendered.

Now, Gentleman Jim, he was as good as his name. When he took a ship, he'd ask the crew if their captain had treated them well. If they said aye, he'd allow the former captain to keep his sword and personal effects. If not, Jim'd send the man off missing vital parts of his anatomy. Jim bragged that the threat of his knife had done more for the common sailors of the Caribbean than any reform or maritime law.

That day, Jim had cause to sharpen his knife. But before he got down to business, Jolo cried out, announcing that another ship emerging from the fog.

"Man o'war!" cried the bosun, and my pulse quickened.

But our farsighted Captain shook his head. "That's Nate's ship."

We all relaxed. Nate the Red was a member of the Brotherhood, one of twelve pirates blessed with a Parrot. We left the merchants trussed and returned to the Breeze. As the Scourge pulled alongside us, Jim doffed his cap and shouted, "Ahoy, Nate!"

Nate, with Dillet perched on his shoulder, glowered back in silence. His response to his pirate brother's greeting was a full cannonade. The unexpected blast threw me to the deck. By the time I came to my senses and clambered back to my feet, Nate and Jim were already at each other, lightning crackling along their swords. The sky had darkened, and an eldritch wind had begun to howl.

I drew my sword and moved to aid my Captain, but an enormous corsair blocked my path. The man had fifty pounds on me, but I had the speed of youth. I rolled underneath his killing swing and thrust three feet of steel up between his legs. The wind was blowing hurricane strong, but I could still hear the man scream.

I clambered to my feet, looking for Jim. The Breeze was listing, black smoke pouring from her hold, and ball lightning crawling along her decks. I swiveled my head and finally caught sight of the captains, now battling among the ratlines, seeming to dance from rope to rope with impossible grace. Another broadside must have hit us then, for a piece of the deck sprang up and struck me in the face,



knocking me to my back. The last thing I remember seeing was Jolo and Dillet, tearing at each other as they spun through the maelstrom above.

I woke, floating on a jagged plank of wood, to the sound of Jolo singing. I couldn't understand her words, but I recognized the song as a lament. I knew then that Jim was dead.

He'd been my captain for eight years, ever since my mother died. More than a captain, really, as he always seemed to have a soft spot for me, too, teaching me navigation and history, swordplay and seamanship. So I feel no shame telling you that I sobbed until Jolo finished her dirge.

Then she tottered down our little raft and stared at me intently. She was hurt, I could see. Her feathers were broken and askew, and her legs were scored by long cuts. She spread her wings and, for the first time, flew to my shoulder. I winced as her talons bit into me, strong as a vice.

"Fenton" she called, but not the rasping voice I'd heard before. Now, her voice was melodious and warm to my ears. And she did not merely squawk simple words and phrases. To me, Jolo *spoke*.

She told me there was land two times over the horizon to the east, and she showed me how to call a gentle tide to pull us that way. It was a power I had never felt before, as if I were bending the very sea to my will. We had no sail, of course, so our little raft didn't reach land until nightfall.

During our slow cruise, Jolo told me many things. She taught me how to use her power to calm the waves and call the winds, how to see over the horizon and how to conjure fog from ocean air. Strangest of all, Jolo told me the history of her kind, and the deal they struck 50 years ago with the pirate kings. The Parrots granted the twelve worthiest pirates untold powers, and in return the pirates swore to keep the invaders—the British, the Spanish, the Portuguese, all of them—out of the Kalite sea, the great triangular stretch of ocean a hundred miles to the east of Barbados.

I was reeling. Jim had never even hinted at such a bargain. But one question still burned in my mind. I was but a green lad of

fourteen, and any pirate would've given his sword arm for her, so I asked, "why me, Jolo?"

"Don't you know, Fenton?" she answered. "He was your father. He suspected he was, and that's why he took you on when your mother died. But whether it was true by blood it became true in time."

I'd like to say that I set off straightaway to hunt down the cur that ambushed my father. But I'll tell you true: I never even considered it. You may think me a coward. And if so, I think you a fool. I was only a boy and new to my powers.

But I still had to live. So Jolo and I made for Tortuga and joined up with One-Eyed Bart's crew. Jolo did her best to stay out of sight, but a creature like her was tough to hide. And since I couldn't do a tenth of what Jim could with Jolo's power, I was a target. One night, three scoundrels jumped me, hoping to take Jolo for themselves. To this day I wonder how they planned to split a Parrot three ways. Jolo blinded one, and I gutted another. We let the third take his chances with the sharks.

Others tried the negotiated approach. One-Eyed Bart, who had always lusted after a Parrot of his own, offered me a small fortune for Jolo. When I laughed at that, he offered me my own ship, any one I cared to name. I tried to explain that I couldn't part with her any more than I could cut out my heart and sell it at the market. He nodded as if he understood and gave me good work aboard his ship. He was decent captain, I'll admit. But I could always feel his one eye on my back.

As Jolo and I grew closer, my powers grew. It was as if I woke up one morning and discovered a limb I'd never noticed before. I could flex it, strengthen it, strike with it. Soon I was able to dance along the ratlines and send lightning crackling down my sword, same as Jim. But strain as I might, I couldn't call the winds to favor the Strumpet, much to Bart's ire. When I finally asked Jolo why, she said simply, "It's not your ship."

At the end of a particularly lucrative maraud, I parted ways with Bart, taking my share in the form of one of the ships we'd captured. I

rechristened her the Panic. To my surprise, three of the hands from Bart's crew joined me. I picked up the rest in Tortuga.

The next two years were the best of my life. With each passing day, my bond with Jolo deepened, until I was always aware of what she was feeling. And we became the terror of the Spanish and British navies, capturing more than 100 merchant ships.

Now, a prudent man would have planned for the future and buried a few chests full of loot during those years. But I was young and thought I'd have Jolo on my shoulder forever, so I frittered it all away on clothes, wine, and women. Mostly women.

Looking back, I should've realized sooner that something was amiss. When I had sailed the Kalite Sea with Jim, we encountered one of the other twelve Parrotships every few weeks. In my first few months as captain, however, we hailed another member of the Brotherhood only every few months. And soon not at all.

On more than one occasion during those golden years, I sailed into a free port that had been entirely burned out. At the time, I thought it was one of the naval powers, punishing the Brotherhood in the only way they could, by striking at the cities under our protection. If only.

I was unwinding in Cerie's Cathouse, regaling Meg and Jess with tales of my latest exploits when I heard cannon fire from the harbor. Surprised, I pushed the girls away and sprang to my feet. Through the window I saw smoke rising from the harbor, but I couldn't see the source. This was a free port, and they paid their tribute, so I wasn't going to tolerate any upstart pirate trying his hand there.

I was pulling on my boots when I heard the brothel's front door crash open. The rickety building shuddered under the impact, and then a whole chorus of women began to scream. Buckling on my sword belt, I peered out through a peephole and saw a sight I'll never forget. I could see it was Nate, but he was something else entirely, enveloped in swirling, dancing lights of every color, so bright it hurt to look at him.

And he was *covered* in Parrots.

Some sat on his shoulders and some on his hat. Those who couldn't find a perch circled overhead. But every one of them had a

chain around its neck and each chain was tethered to a thick iron ring sewn to Nate's jacket. He moved to one of Cerie's girls and put his sword to her throat.

"You, girl," he growled, "where is Fenton?"

I didn't wait to hear her reply. With Jolo on my shoulder, I jumped out of the fourth-story window and glided to the ground. Without looking back, I pelted toward the harbor. I should've put things together sooner, of course, but I stopped dead in my tracks when the water came into view, and I saw the smoldering wreckage of the Panic. My home was gone.

But I had no time to mourn for my ship or her crew. Behind me, I could hear shots and screams and general pandemonium, so I commandeered a small but fleet-looking merchant ship. Seeing Jolo on my shoulder, the crew leapt overboard willingly enough, but the plump young merchant captain strutted up to me and protested.

"My house has paid the fee, sir! How profitable do you think piracy will be if you've no one to trade with?"

I was in no mood to debate legalities with some be-silked merchant princeling. "You've got it wrong," I growled. "I'm *buying* your ship. See, I'm selling you back your life. That's quite a bit more valuable than all of this timber, rope, and cloth, aye?"

The merchant went white as the sheets and started to edge away.

"But just so there are no hard feelings, here's a gratuity." I pressed one of my rings—easily worth twice the value of the entire ship—into the man's hand. He jumped overboard with a smile on his face.

"What in God's name is happening?" I asked, once Jolo and I were safely on the sea. "Why were the other eleven helping Nate?"

In answer, she let out a heartbroken cry, and I caught a flash of her mind. Enslavement. Despair. Misery.

"He's broken them somehow," she said. "They're slaves or near enough."

"How could he do that?"

Her reply was coldly furious. "He shouldn't have been able to." She screamed in fury. "Dillet."

"His first Parrot?"

“She was always arrogant, always thought she knew better. And she’s always been cruel. She chose Nate as her man all those years ago. She must have seen a glimpse of herself in him.”

I looked back at the harbor. Enormous columns of smoke were rising from the city, but I saw no ships in pursuit.

“Can we—“

“No, Fenton. You are young, and my magic is strong. But against all of the others—even if they’re resisting Nate as best they can—no, it’s hopeless.”

“So what? Do we flee, leave the Caribbean?”

Jolo shook her sleek head. “No, at least I cannot. I am a creature of this place. If I leave, I would become dumb, and our power would die.”

I smashed a barrel into splinters with my boot. “Then what, Jolo? I’ll not lose you to him and see you chained!”

“We have but one choice. We sail for Kaliton.”

She told me then what is now common knowledge to all of you now, I suppose. In the heart of the Kalite Sea sits a lush tear-drop-shaped island. Its beauty is incomparable, or at least it was four decades past. The Kalitens, a wise and gentle people, gifted in song, craft, and art, have lived there since the dawn of time. They remained there undiscovered, not by some accident of cartography, but by the will of their guardians, the Parrots.

“We’ll sail there,” Jolo said. “And tell of the horrible crime we saw.”

“To what end?”

“Fenton, I am not the last of my kind free of Nate’s domination. Do you think we left our people totally defenseless?”

“How many—enough to stop Nate?”

“There were thirteen left behind when I flew off to join Jim. But we left only the old and the young. I do not know how many are still alive.”

My fortunes had reversed, I thought. I started to pace the deck, planning the brutal revenge we would take.

“Aye, but surely some of them have bonded to warriors now, and when you tell them what Nate has done, they’ll join us.”

Jolo laughed. “If our people were warriors, why would we have bonded to the pirates at all? When the Kaliten bond, it is not for

power; it's for love alone, and for the joy of art, song, and story. No warriors will come to your aid. It will be up to you and me and whatever power we can draw from any of my brothers and sisters I can convince to join us."

My stomach plummeted. I wanted to rage at the foolishness of a peaceful people, but what was the use? What other choice did we have? I nodded to Jolo.

"Then we go."

Jolo flew to the wheel. A greenish lightning spouted from her crown, ran down her body, and spread over the entire ship. The air before us seemed to rip apart, from the water to the clouds above, like a curtain being pulled. Behind that veil, I saw another expanse of unbroken ocean, no different than what I saw in every other direction. But when we sailed through that aperture, I felt as though I were drenched in freezing water. Yet when I reached down to pat my chest, I was bone dry.

We sailed on through the night and sighted Kaliton at dawn. The island was more beautiful than any I had ever laid eyes upon: a perfect green jewel circumferenced by a white beach. I was so struck by the beauty of the place—I could feel Jolo's heart thrilling at the sight of it—that I didn't even notice the five Parrots flying out to meet us.

For a wonderful moment, I felt hope. And then a shadow fell over my ship—a shadow darker and more complete than could be cast by any cloud. I looked up and—call me a liar if you dare—I saw Nate's three-masted square-rigger, wrapped in a whorl of golden light, descending from the clouds. My mouth fell slack.

I stood watching, dumbstruck, as the warship slowly came about in midair and presented her broadside. I only snapped back to reality when twenty cannons fired at once. Many of the balls fell wide, but enough struck home. The barrage shattered the mainmast and tore five holes in the deck. I couldn't tell if we'd been hit below the waterline, but I knew we couldn't survive another salvo.

I glared at the Scourge hanging there in the air and screamed, "Coward!" at the top of my lungs. "Too afraid to face me man to man, Nate?"

He could've sunk me from the air easily enough. But the arrogant bastard landed right next to me. He strutted over to the rail, wearing the devil's own grin, and waved a cheerful hello. There wasn't a crewman in sight on the deck of his ship, only the enslaved Parrots.

I'm not sure what I would've done next if Jolo had given me a choice. She didn't. A beautiful red blur hurtled straight for Nate, and I could feel the fury coursing through her. I leapt aboard the Scourge behind her, hit the deck, and rolled to my feet. Nate seemed more amused than threatened.

"You're going to fight me, boy? Well, you've already done me a great service by leading me to this place. Now you can entertain me in your last moments!"

He lunged at me so fast I scarcely even saw him move. I barely got my blade up in time to ward off his slashing attack, and then his boot was in my belly, sending me sprawling to the deck.

"Pathetic," he sneered. But at that moment, five Parrots from the island landed on the Scourge. I don't know if Jolo explained the situation to them somehow or if they could sense the evil in Nate. But for whatever reason, I suddenly felt their power surge through me. It was intoxicating, overwhelming, exhilarating; I felt as if I was thrumming with a power that I had to release. I hurled myself at Nate, moving like lightning, striking faster than a cobra, stronger than I'd ever been before.

Now, Nate still had twice the Parrots, but I was younger and rage was flowing through me. If it had stayed a sword duel, I think I might have even gotten the better of him. But when I started to press my advantage, Nate pointed his hand at me and hurled a bolt of lightning into my chest. It nearly killed me. I was picked up, hoisted to the very top of the Scourge's tallest sail, and slammed down against her deck. I hit so hard that I crashed through into the cannon deck below.

My heart was stuttering, and all I could hear was a high-pitched ringing. But then Jolo was on my shoulder, amid the dust and smoke, and for the first time I could truly hear her thoughts, not just sense her feelings. She told me what I already knew in my bones: *we can't win*.

"I know," I croaked. "But what can we do?"

*Fire the cannon at the island, Fenton. Now!*

I could feel the desperation, the panic in her mind. I shook my head in confusion, and then the cannons and decks vanished, and I saw the heart of the island, a sacred place, a clearing with many benches facing an enormous pillar of stone, covered with carvings of parrots.

*Destroy it, she begged, please. Before it's too late.*

I looked into her eyes and understood what she was asking. I nodded.

Just as I heard Nate land behind me, I pressed my flintlock to the nearest cannon's breach and fired. I ignored Nate stalking toward me, sword tracing tight little circles of anticipation in the air. I had eyes only for Jolo. Together we saw the cannonball arcing through the air and pushed it, nudged it, guided it. Nate raised his sword to strike, and I saw the ball pound home, smashing the pillar.

And then all was noise and fury and winds that made a gale seem tame.

I woke on the beach in agony. My head was splitting, and I was covered in burns and cuts, but that wasn't the worst of it. I felt an emptiness in my soul that I couldn't understand and still can't express. I looked around wildly for Jolo. Instead, I saw Nate, lying motionless on the sand.

I reached for my belt, but my sword was gone, as was my knife and flintlock. I instinctively called on Jolo's power but felt no strength flow into me. I tried not to think about what that meant and staggered forward. Halfway there, I stopped and picked up a conch shell. When I reached him, he seemed almost pitiable. His body was emaciated; his beard was wild, with bits of food stuck in it. His eyes were open, but they were staring sightlessly. I brought the conch down on his right eye, thinking of Jim, the Breeze, the Panic, and Jolo. I didn't stop until his face was a red waste.

I walked away from my father's killer, finally avenged, and flopped down in the shade of a palm tree. A moment later, Jolo landed on a branch above me. I called out to her, but she just stared back. Finally, she flew down and landed on my shoulder.

"Fenton!" she said in a high squawking voice.

And that's the only word she's ever said since.



You know what happened next. Without the Parrots, the pirates couldn't keep the Spanish and the British out. Soon the pirates were branded and hanged, and Kaliton was "civilized" just like the rest of the islands. They're better off than they would've been under Nate. I know that much is true, or at least that's what I tell myself. But the Golden Age was over.

As for me, I've cared for Jolo these last forty years, hoping she'd come back to me but knowing she wouldn't. Her feathers turned all white last winter. She died this morning. And now that I've told our story I think I'll join her.

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*Tyler's writing has previously appeared in Daily Science Fiction. When he is not writing, he is usually at a zoo or museum with his wife and two young children. Follow him @Tyler\_A\_Young.*

## SWORDS OF STEEL

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# Othan, Liberator

By KURT MAGNUS

***Othan has been tasked with the rescue of a nobleman's daughter but finds himself in the clutches of an evil cult led by none other than the woman he was sent to find! Can Othan and his companions stop the wicked Mogala and her bloody minions!?***

His wrists bound tightly behind his back, Othan limped through the billowing dust, cruelly prodded by the militiamen of Joluum. Blood clogged his right eye, so with his left eye alone he eagerly searched the jeering crowd for a sign from his companions, but found none.

With whips and kicks the militiamen drove him onward, into a sun-streaked plaza, toward a raw, circular pit wide enough to swallow an ox-team whole. The militia's leader, a short, burly man with slits for eyes, jabbed him in the thigh with the butt of his spear. Othan collapsed to one knee. "I'll remember that," he grumbled, then braced for a lashing. It came.

Grinding his teeth, he arose again. Three more begrudging steps brought him to the edge of the pit, a deep hole in the amber clay without stair or ladder. Behind him was an arc of bristling spears.

The leader unwound a length of knotted, hempen rope from a knee-high dolmen, and dropped it at Othan's feet. Smiling a wicked grin, he cut Othan's bonds, then gestured toward the pit with his chin.

Without taking his eyes off his foes, Othan quickly crouched down and grabbed the rope with both hands. As he expected, the leader kicked. Othan toppled backward, but his grip held true, and he slapped belly first against the crumbly clay wall. Dangling like a Jessan acrobat, he dropped down knot by knot. Halfway down he ran out of rope.

He tried to land on his good leg but plopped onto the hard-packed floor like a bag of manure. Far above, the militiamen laughed and kicked dust at his upturned face. Othan spat the grit from his teeth and rubbed his eyes, which only made them burn more. When his

vision cleared the grimacing men had made a space for a richly dressed woman, short and heavy in the middle, with a pointed face and nose. Unlike the sun-drenched and dusty militiamen, she was clean and strikingly pale. Othan stood transfixed as she glared at him with pride and contempt. An abysmal feeling roiled his guts. Then the world went silent - everything faded to gray but her pale smirking face. Jarringly, all his senses returned at once as the strange woman backed out of sight.

Othan spewed a lengthy and inventive tirade of curses interlaced with desperate prayers to each of the major Cults and all of the minor Cults he could think of. Out of breath and ideas, he looked about his new home and realized he wasn't alone. Against the tawny clay wall sat a young man wrapped in a shawl of nearly matching color. He was small and smooth of face, with short, braided hair and mild features. He stared at Othan meekly, still as a lump of amber.

Othan asked, "No way out of here, huh?"

The man said nothing for an indeterminate while but eventually shook his head.

"I am Othan of Dix." He raised his fist, wrist out, in greeting. Othan was twenty or so summers old, tall, with light brown hair and matching eyes. He wore only simple travel clothes, having lost his cloak and all his gear.

The smaller man replied with a soft, whistley accent, "I am Lazan. You are not of Joluum. Why are you here?" Small metallic plugs decorated his front teeth.

"I'm not sure." Othan looked up to the rim for eavesdroppers but saw nobody. He moved closer anyway and lowered his voice. "I was at a tavern in the caravanserai. I asked the fellow next to me if they knew a young woman that I seek. He looked at me like I was a stone troll, and stormed off. I got about halfway into my palm wine when he came back with a half-dozen bruises and attacked me. I could have taken them, but I had left my cudgel with my friends back on the Caravan Road."

Lazan asked, "Who is it that you seek?"

"Her name is Mogala." Lazan's eyes lit up. "Was that her staring down at me?" He nodded solemnly.

Othan cursed. "I knew it. Her father is offering a thousand silver dnarls to anyone that can bring her back home to the city of Dix. That's a lot of money. What do you know about her?"

Lazan blurted, "She is the high priestess of a most foul God!" then fluttered his fingers: a ritual Othan couldn't recognize.

Othan cursed again. Old Gyhan, Mogala's father, didn't mention a rogue Cult. He slumped down beside his new cellmate. He had been imprisoned before, but by Constables, not fanatics.

"May I ask why you're here?"

Lazan hesitated, staring at his bare feet. Without looking up, he whispered, "Mogala called a tournament to honor her master, the demon Jwam. I refused to fight, as I am a devotee of the true god Thanus, the Light of the darkening world."

Othan had never heard of Jwam, but the cult of Thanus was one of the most powerful in the Land of Night and Day. The followers of Thanus ruled a great empire in the east and had a few temples in the mighty city of Dix, the navel of the spiritual world.

"The Temple of Thanus couldn't protect you?"

Lazan grimaced and his eyes opened wide. "They were expelled!" Fluttering his fingers again he muttered a quick mantra. "For three moons there has been no rain, and the heathens blamed Thanus. The old demons worshiped by our grandfathers awoke - Jwam the worst of them all. Mogala and her heathens stormed the Fane of Thanus, and now they use it for their unholy rites!"

Othan smiled. He saw in the young man a potential ally. "So she threw you in here because you wouldn't fight?"

Lazan shook his head, a distant look in his tender eyes. "There is more. The fights were not meant to be lethal, but the man set to face me is a brute, a true wildebeest. I tried to flee, but they caught me hiding in a caravan." By his thin neck, small hands, and demeanor it was clear to Othan that he had never truly fought another.

Lazan continued in a tearful voice, his face crinkled. "I have known Trez since we were children. He was a bully then and is a bully now. He promised to kill me to honor Jwam and win the heart of Mogala."

Othan stood up and gingerly limped the perimeter of the pit, rubbing his sore leg. "What are they going to do with you?"

“Now that Thanus has been cast out, there is no hope for justice here. So I wait for his avatars to come from the east to drive out the false gods.” He looked up at the sky. “I pray nightly to the Eye of Thanus, though I can’t see it from this awful hole.”

Back home the bright orb is known as the Beacon Moon. Unlike the true moon, it didn’t wax or wane, or travel the night sky at all; the faithful claimed it hovered unchanging high above their great temple.

Lazan added, “You too should expect no mercy.”

Othan sat right next to Lazan, ignoring the little man’s obvious discomfort. He whispered, “I don’t plan on being here much longer. Right now my friends are plotting my escape.” Othan’s stomach quivered for lack of confidence. “I can get you out too if you promise to help us.”

Lazan looked up. “Do not jest with a desperate man. I will do anything to bathe once more in the Light of Thanus. What is your desire?”

“Help me capture Mogala.”

Lazan slumped, but he didn’t say no.

Othan had dozed, and awoke shivering during the night’s darkest hour. The air was crisp, the night silent. Stars shone coldly but bright through a cloudless sky. How Lazan could sleep, he couldn’t imagine.

Othan paced about for warmth. After his third lap, he noticed that he could no longer see his sleeping companion. The stars seemed dimmed, like those above the hazy skies of his home city. Then his nose caught a faint odor, like a brush fire or burning jute. Distant shouts broke the evening silence. Othan grinned. He shook Lazan awake.

“They’re coming. This could be your only way out, but it is not without cost. You must help us.”

Lazan swallowed dryly and sighed. “I will go. By Thanus’s will, I will earn my freedom.”

Othan snickered. The thickening smoke in the plaza above nearly extinguished the remaining starlight. Coarse yells from all directions reverberated through the pit. Through the clamor Othan recognized the distinct whistle of the Wallowwink bird, a signal used only by him

and his companions. Soon after, the knotted hemp rope fell into the pit from above.

Othan pulled himself up into the smoke-filled plaza. Aletta stood waiting with her scimitar drawn, dressed entirely in form-fitting grey, with grey clay covering her face and hands and hair. In the billowing miasma she looked like a restive ghost.

“Come on, Hamil is hurt!” Aletta shouted, handing Othan his steel cudgel.

“Not yet!” Lazan struggled feebly to climb the rope. “I made a friend. We have to pull him up.”

“What? They’re coming, Othan!”

“He can help us. He told Lazan to hold on tight as he dug in his heel and started to pull. Aletta growled in frustration as she crouched beside him to help. Together they heaved, wrapping the rope's slack around the stone dolmen. Just as Lazan’s hand reached the lip, Aletta cursed and let go as she sprung to her feet. Othan nearly hurtled forward under the weight of Lazan, but he caught his footing at the very edge of the pit. A span to his right Aletta battled noisily with a Joluum militiaman. Othan gave the rope one last great heave. Lazan flopped out, while the militiaman tumbled in with a wail.

Under the cover of smoke, the three plunged into the narrow alleys of Joluum, Lazan at the lead. With just the filtered starlight to guide them, they stumbled about, scraping their fingertips against seemingly identical cubes of colorless plaster. Finally, they clambered over the low berm that separated the town from the now barren cropland beyond.

The smoke thinned rapidly on the flat, dusty plain. They dashed briskly through a field of withered seedlings, toward a range of low hills. When the shouts of the militia were too distant to be discerned, they stopped in pebble-strewn wadi to rest and drink from Aletta's waterskin.

“Who's your friend?” she asked, between strained breaths.

Lazan was too exhausted to speak. “An enemy of Mogala's” Othan answered. “He will help.”

“Doesn't look like much,” she added. Aletta was young and thin of limb, and even shorter than Lazan, but in prime fighting form.

Beneath the layer of clay her hair was ruddy brown and her skin olive-hued.

“Where's Hamil?” Othan asked.

“We found a refuge just past the next ridge.” Aletta looked at Lazan, who lay wheezing on his side. “Is he going to make it?”

“He's just out of practice.” Othan helped his new friend rise to his feet. Aletta took the lead as they entered the wild and flinty southern hills. They crossed a vale by way of a crumbling brick aqueduct, which ended in the ancient ruin of a springhouse, now completely dry and thoroughly picked over.

Hamil emerged from behind an overturned pillar, clutching his right arm. He was the youngest of the four, with the smirk of a petulant teenager.

“Who's that?” he asked, pointing to Lazan with his good hand. Before Othan could respond, Aletta blurted, “Othan's making friends again.”

They planned their assault from the shelter of a wadi, the languid town of Joluum sprawling out before them. The homes that seemed colorless by night glistened in pastel hues beneath the morning sun. Vapor wavered above the lazy Gab River, which was so low that barges were glued at odd angles to its muddy banks. Beside the Caravan Road loomed the tall, pillared galleries of the caravanserai. Militia patrols in threes or fours stalked the road and berm that ringed the town.

Lazan pointed to a tall square building of stone and adobe that towered above the central plaza. “That is the Fane of Thanus, where Mogala made her wretched den. It sickens me to think of what it has become.”

“Can you get us in there unseen?”

“If we can get past the militia. The rest of the town will be in the plaza for the tournament. I served the Rector, before the awakening of Jwam. There are two ways into the Fane.”

Othan smiled, congratulating himself for having helped the little man escape. A plan already flitted about in his mind. A simple plan. “I got it,” he blurted. To Aletta he said, “You and Hamil drive off the patrol and we will sneak in and grab her.”

“Not a chance. Last time you got caught in a heartbeat. I will go with you.”

“All four of us can't sneak in, and Hamil is hurt. He can't be left alone.”

“I'll be fine.” Hamil retorted, rolling his arm with a cringe.

Othan hushed the young man. “With Mogala's fights and the search for us, the militia is stretched thin. We simply sneak in and sneak her out. If we're caught, I'll threaten to slit her throat. They will let us go but pursue us. Once back here, you two ambush them.”

Her arms crossed, Aletta glowered like an unruly child. “I already saved you once on this ill-fated journey. What makes you think I'll do it again?”

“You have it all wrong, my doe. I am so appreciative of your brave rescue that I couldn't bear to put you at risk again. I blundered this mission, so I want to fix it myself.” Othan beamed behind a cocky grin.

She peered off into the distance, tapping her foot. “You expect me to believe that?” she asked, her arms crossed over her chest.

Othan chuckled, shaking his head. “No. But someone has to get rid of that patrol. Any better ideas?” Hamil shook his head, then Lazan, then finally Aletta.

She and Hamil departed first and were soon sighted. When the patrol gave chase, Othan and Lazan crossed the abandoned fields. Keeping low in the parched irrigation ditches, they reached the berm unseen.

Once in the city, all roads leading to the plaza burst with posturing athletes, revelers and laborers toiling under burdens. Young men cheered and play-fought, while their bearded fathers walked solemnly, playing cymbals and chanting a harsh and guttural mantra. Via narrow, underused alleys, Othan and Lazan bypassed the crowds and made it the rear of the Fane of Thanus. The tall square building of cut sandstone was windowless, and except for vulgar graffiti, unadorned. Lazan pointed to a humble plaster shack built onto the side of the temple and mouthed “The Rector's quarters.” Desiccated plants hung from the roof, and cracks in the plaster exposed the adobe bricks beneath. The single room within was strewn with broken



wood and pottery. Dung was smeared across the walls and moldered in a pile atop the Rector's simple pallet.

Once within the splintered doorway Lazan spun around, dumbfounded. Tears rolled down his cheek at the sight of the hearth, stuffed with the charred remains of sacred inscriptions. He bit back a moan. "They will be punished for this." With a creaking voice he mumbled, "The Avatars will come. The Avatars..."

Othan gripped Lazan's narrow shoulders with both hands. "Let's punish them ourselves, friend."

Lazan stood up straighter and nodded, sniffing back a final tear.

In the rear of the room was a solid wooden door covered in ritual symbols, now scratched out with garden tools. Lazan whispered, "This door leads to the chancel of the Fane. They thought the Rector took the key when he fled." He stepped on an overturned cupboard and grabbed the key from atop the door frame. "Simpletons!"

Lazan turned the lock over and slowly pulled the door inward. Just past the doorway was a thick curtain of grey linen, through which came the muffled sounds of shuffling feet. Crouching low, they pushed aside the curtain and peeked into the chancel, the temple's sacred altar room. Though Othan had never seen a Fane of Thanus before, the desecration was clearly thorough: statuary was strewn about, tapestries were shredded. Dead toads hung from an oil lamp, and butchered bats wings were stacked on a table like griddle cakes.

Past the chancel was the dome, its oculus open to the sky, where the worshippers of Thanus once bathed in the light of what Othan called the Beacon Moon. At its center, a good ten paces away, Mogala leaned over a man lying prone and half covered in a linen sheet on a stone altar. The squinty-eyed leader of the militia reclined on a divan beside her.

Lazan backed into the Rector's house and sunk down to the floor, his face in his hands. Othan gently closed the door and joined him. The young man looked deflated. With teary eyes he said, "That man on the divan. It's Trez. The man I was to fight."

"You may still get a chance," Othan replied, but quickly realized his mistake as Lazan shrunk back more. Othan grabbed his shoulders. "Lazan, look at me. I will deal with him. You go after the priestess."

"I'm frightened," he whispered through clenched teeth.

“That's normal. I am too, but we have to fight through it.” Othan handed him a hunk of sturdy wood that once held up a chair. “Mogala cast out your god and left you to die in that pit.”

Lazan took a deep breath and looked a little calmer. “You are right. I will fight, like the very Avatars.” He swung an awkward mock blow, his face an unimpressive snarl. Othan sighed. He regretted sending away Aletta, who was every bit as fierce a warrior as himself. They would have to settle for the advantage of surprise.

“When I spring, you run in with me and crack her over the head. I will handle your old friend.”

Othan carefully opened the door to peek once more through the curtain's crease. At the altar, Mogala loomed over the prone man's head, tools of strange design in each hand. Trez stood beside her, clean and oiled in a white toga. Drinking from a silver chalice, he watched her every move like a devoted pup.

Othan deemed it a good time to strike, but a strange curiosity held him back. Mogala pressed the tip of a long, thin wedge to the prone man's shaved head, then with a bronze mallet, struck it with a sickening clack. Blood poured out like a bung and pooled on the altar slab. Mogala, strutting sinuously on her toes, put down the tools. With an outstretched finger, she delicately stirred the growing red puddle.

Trez mewled and prostrated himself before her, begging like a dog in a refectory. With a wicked upturned smile, she rubbed her crimson fingertip on his lips. Satisfied, Trez kissed her feet until she pushed him away. With a dumb, contented expression, he wrapped the still bleeding head with a crimson turban.

To Othan's surprise, the man on the table awoke and unsteadily stood. Leaning heavily on Trez, he shuffled slowly toward the door. Trez quickly returned to recline at Mogala's feet. Quiet reigned in the altar room, except for an eerie music with no apparent source, like an undulating hum.

The pair seemed at ease. Unsuspecting. Othan nodded to his trembling companion. With his steel cudgel in one hand and a fistful of Lazan's tunic in the other, Othan dashed into the chancel, pulling his reluctant companion behind him.

The moment he entered the Fane, the priestess stood to face them, as if she expected their arrival. Pointing with a hooked

forefinger, she uttered a single word. A sudden weight bore down onto his shoulders like an ox yolk. His knees faltered, and he plopped belly first onto the marble floor. With a yelp Lazan crumpled in a heap beside him. Othan tried to push himself up off the ground, but he felt like an anchor hung from the center of his chest.

Trez stood over them and laughed heartily. "It's the heathen. And Lazan! What a happy surprise." He wore a cruel grin, but his eyes were dull, as if under a spell. "I get to beat you to death after all." Othan heard a dull thud, then Lazan's cry of pain. His fear didn't die, but it faded in favor of hatred for the witch and revulsion for her dullard devotee.

Mogala stroked her servant's muscled flank. Othan found her both ugly and beautiful at the same time, a clear sign of sorcerous illusion. Her down-turned breasts were only barely hidden by a white, diaphanous gown. Small, puckered lips smiled over crooked teeth, but her skin was smooth and fair. Her eyes were slanted, and like a parrot's hugged the sides of her face.

"How dare you disturb me on this sacred day while Jwam gorges on his offerings?" Her voice was nasal and wavering. "Speak."

Othan's invisible burden lightened enough to roll to his side. For lack of a convincing lie, he decided on the truth.

"Your father sent me, to bring you back to Dix." He hoped she would reminisce, and maybe even temper her cruelty.

Instead, Mogala glowered at Othan with defiant air. "My father is Jwam. Whoever sent you is a..." but before she could finish, Aletta bounded through the curtained doorway. With her upturned palm at her lips, she blew a cloud of fine white powder into Mogala's face. Screaming, the priestess collapsed onto her rear, clawing at her eyes.

All at once the weight fell away from Othan's limbs. Othan spun around and slammed his steel cudgel down onto Trez's sandaled foot. With a howl Trez crumbled backward, while Othan shakily arose, cudgel raised high. Trez flailed about desperately for anything to block the descending blows, but found nothing. Othan pounded him until he moved no longer.

With a long creak, the door to the Fane's ambulatory opened a crack. Everyone paused to see two militiamen peek meekly within. Aletta and Lazan sprung as one. Together they rammed the door shut

with the weight of their shoulders; Lazan jammed his chair leg into the handle like a make-shift crossbar. Immediately the door shook, and shouts erupted from without. "This won't hold long!" Lazan warned.

Meanwhile, the priestess crawled blindly on her hands and knees, chanting harsh and guttural words of power. Othan's belly quivered, a feeling that he knew presaged the release of magical power.

"Shut her mouth!" Othan yelled, looking about for a gag. Aletta tossed him a torn piece of linen, which he shoved between Mogala's teeth and tied behind her head. Just as he finished, a booming crash rattled the ambulatory door. Militiamen tore at the narrow slit between the door and the jamb, calling out hysterically for their master.

"Let's go!" Aletta shouted. She tried to yank the priestess to her feet by her hair, but a broad clod of scalp tore away instead. The skull beneath was damp with crimson dew, yet no blood flowed. All three stared, eyes wide and mouths agape, as the half-bald Mogala clawed savagely at her gag, her nails cutting into her own flesh. She ripped off the gag, taking with it a flap of her cheek and a bit of lip. Othan jumped back. Beneath it was not sinew and gore, but another skin, purplish and mottled with yellow lumps. The exposed eye was as large as an auroch's, with the vertical iris of a goat. She howled with the voice of a hundred roaring demons.

Suddenly, with a resounding crash, the chair-leg holding the ambulatory door broke nearly in two.

"Run!" Othan yelled. Lazan made it through the rear door, but Aletta stopped short—her ankle held tight by Mogala.

Othan bashed Mogala across the jaw with his spiked cudgel, sending teeth clattering on the marble like dice. Yet her grip held true. False flesh ripped away as he struck her forearm and elbow. Finally, with a sickening crack, Aletta broke free. Othan followed her out but nearly crashed into Lazan, who was rushing back into chancery. Lazan's eyes were crazed, and he brandished Mogala's bronze spike and hammer. Lazan stood over Mogala and cried, "The demoness must die!" He held the spike to her knobby, purple head and, in one great strike, drove it deep into her skull.

That very moment the ambulatory door burst open, spilling militiamen into the chancel. Othan met the first with a powerful kick to the chest, knocking him sprawling into his companions. Othan pulled

Lazan through the curtained door, which Aletta slammed shut. All three held their breath, expecting the militiamen to throw themselves upon it, but for a tense moment, the door remained unmolested.

Ignoring all caution they departed the temple at a full sprint. The back streets of Joluum were deserted, for the townsfolk were crowded in the central square. Their chants for Jwam, rising in intensity, echoed through the empty streets as they fled.

At the ruined springhouse Hamil was waiting.

“Where's the girl?” he asked.

Othan shook his head and sighed. “That wasn't her.”

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*Kurt Magnus's speculative fiction and sword-and-sorcery tales have been published in Sorcerous Signals, Anotherealm.com and Bride of Chaos. He lives in Chicago, with zero cats, where he works as an urban planner.*



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Parallel Universe Publications: <http://paralleluniversepublications.blogspot.co.uk/>

# The Space Witch

By SCHUYLER HERNSTROM

***His friends and allies lie scattered and dead about the base of the Black Pyramid, having given their lives to protect its cosmic secrets! Attalse alone now stands between the dreaded Space Witch and her desire to usher in an endless darkness!***

With a heavy heart, Attalse surveyed the battlefield. His comrades lay dead alongside their foes, the terrible revenants, those raised by the Space Witch to fight under her black banner. Only Attalse remained. His crystal armor, proof against spell or beam, was chipped in twoscore places. Through a dozen minor wounds his blood seeped, dark red against the spatters of his foes' black ichor.

His brothers looked peaceful now, as when in repose around the barrack's pleasant gardens, reciting verse for each other's amusement. At his back was the Black Pyramid. The twin-star suns were sinking behind it. The pyramid's shadow crept across the ground, a blanket of night to cover those resting in eternal slumber.

The feeling of being watched pulled him from his black reverie.

There across the field, the Space Witch stood in her chariot, glaring. With a snap of the reins, the steeds pulled, spitting purple flame from their haunches.

Attalse sheathed his sword at her approach and slung his beam-spitter across his broad back. She was naked but for a fluttering black cloak, her blue-white skin brilliant against its oily darkness. Her black high boots trod the bloody ground as she alit.

The warrior steeled himself against the charm of her voice as she spoke.

"Attalse, is it not? I watched you rally your men along the north ridge. It was a stirring sight, you at the fore, cutting a swathe through my ranks. But in the end, the numbers told."

"But I still stand. And all your husks lay broken."

She smiled with full lips, painted deep indigo, parting just enough to expose the sharp points of her teeth.

“You are all that remains. The spells marked to destroy me have gone with your Sorcerer into the void. And chivalry prevents you from striking me. I have won.”

“Though I may not strike you, I will not give way.” Attalse’s back stiffened as he pushed his helmet up to expose his face in the manner of the old hoplites. He met the Witch’s gaze, his deep set blue eyes fixed on hers, swirling orbs of deep green. Her black hair was loose under her elaborate cowl, stirring slightly in the breeze as seaweed might underneath gentle waves.

She laughed icy chimes which, carried by the dusty wind, echoed like music in the valleys.

“We are at an impasse. I am in no danger from your blade, and you are safe from my spells while your armor remains intact. And I imagine you are unwilling to break your oaths.”

Attalse’s expression was grim. “You are correct.”

“And I am unwilling to break mine.” The Witch placed her hands on her hips, shaking her head as she thought.

The warrior scoffed. “What oaths does the Space Witch swear?”

She wore an irritated expression as she replied, “Foolish man. Night whispers in my ear this very moment. I bear fealty to things which you cannot imagine. All throughout the universe are shadow and fog. Their caress envelopes me. Their love is a tonic against mortality. Their power is my well, to draw from as I please.”

Attalse’s face adopted a quizzical look.

“Is your form a bewitchment? Are you, in fact, female? One of your stature would seem to be beyond such considerations.”

“Have you ever had a nightmare, warrior?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Then you have known children born from my womb.”

The Space Witch drummed her fingers against her smooth thigh while her other hand massaged her pointed chin. Her eyes gleamed with sudden inspiration.

“It shall be a test of willpower!”

She strutted forward confidently and continued:

“If your cause is so just, your heart so pure, then it should be nothing for you to withstand my kiss, noble warrior. If you should, I will

consign myself to the void for one thousand times one thousand years.”

The warrior spared a glance behind him. There the pyramid sat, bathed in orange and purple as the suns descended. Within its labyrinthine chambers lay the secret that would enable the witch to undo the balance that had governed the universe for the last hundred billion years. He felt weak with exhaustion and fear. It was not supposed to be like this. His brothers and the Sorcerer were to have conquered this menace together. But he was alone. There was nothing to do but accept her challenge.

Attalse nodded.

The Witch smiled, full mouth twisted in wicked glee. She pushed his helmet back further until it fell to the ground. Her long nails teased the dark curls, still matted with sweat from the battle, which fell to his shoulders.

He bent forward and their lips found each other.

He was a man like any other and had known love and lust. But now, he understood the lure of the dark. He felt the desperate hunger of wolves hunting under moonlight. He felt the comfort of envelopment, submission to a formless totality. The weight of eternity was forged to the desperate desire common to all life, now a hammer to beat upon his soul for all time. He felt his soul slip to a place beyond recall.

But as he fell away, for the briefest of moments, the pyramid appeared before his mind's eye.

An eternity later, the kiss came to an end. The Space Witch stepped back as her eyes slowly opened. Her face showed unexpected displeasure. The warrior had not stepped forward to follow her.

“Impossible! You have defeated me!”

With an angry flourish of her cloak she turned and mounted her chariot, pointing the steeds to where no light had ever reached. In a moment she was gone from view.

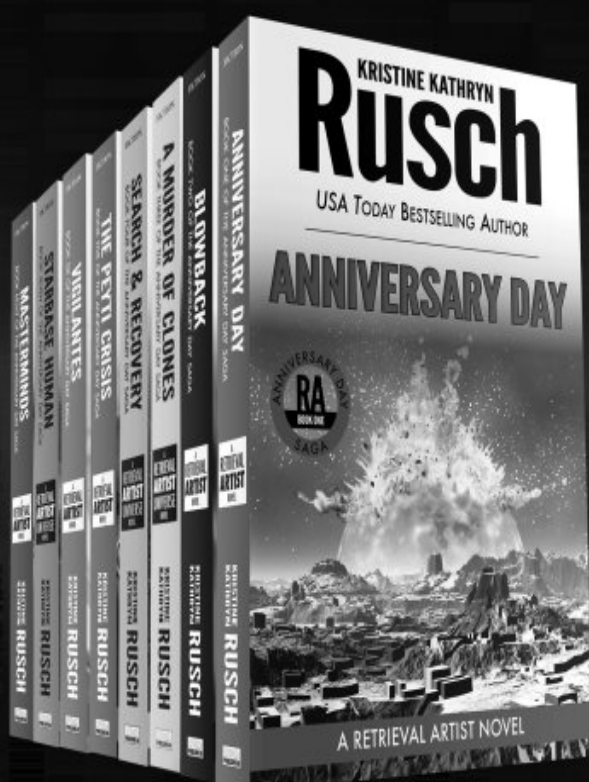
“No, I haven't,” Attalse whispered to no one.

He lay on the battlefield and let the lingering weight of the kiss carry him to where he could rejoin his fallen brothers.

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Schuyler Hernstrom's work has appeared in *Heroic Fantasy Quarterly* and *LORE Magazine*. He lives and works in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. He can be reached at [hernstrom at gmail dot com](mailto:hernstrom@gmail.com).



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# Clock's Watch

By MICHAEL REYES

***Bizarre creatures of darkness and chaos attempting to breach our world possess the body of a young mother! Can a strange observer unstuck from time put a stop to the threat from beyond or will it spill out from Coney Island to consume all in its path?!***

It sits alone as the Wonder Wheel rotates, watches as the amusement park below empties out. It feels the curves of her body with soft hands, runs them through her long blonde hair. Her beige dress is caked in sand from the beach, flip flops drenched in murky Atlantic ocean water. An early autumn breeze drifts into this late August morning, giving her goosebumps. It can feel the flow of her menses, and for several moments her stomach cramps.

It puts a stop to both.

The rusty Wonder Wheel car is poised at the summit. It looks out through her dark blue eyes at Coney Island. It's starting to rain. It stares at the ocean and grimaces. This will be its final call to shore, one way or another. This is the body. It has to be. Time is running out. Let the Tell rot. It wants the surface again. It wants life. It needs to bring back the man that can make that happen. It closes her eyes and takes a deep breath through stolen lungs. Greedy, inhaling so deeply it wheezes. The Wonder Wheel descends.

Jimmy 's been waiting for his mom for the past twenty minutes. She had been laying down on the beach blanket, thumbing through a magazine when he went out swimming. She was gone when he came back fifteen minutes later, though everything was still on the beach towel, her phone face down next to the suntan lotion and sand-plastered issue of Cosmopolitan. He tries to stay calm. Tries to act older than his nine years but he's starting to lose it. It's still morning, and there's nobody else around besides joggers and a distant beach goer who's packing up because it's starting to drizzle.

Jimmy gets dressed. He grabs his mom's cellphone and heads out to look for her.

He observed it all from the rooftop of a bar on the boardwalk. He had watched silently as the blonde haired woman suddenly smacked the magazine against the sand, right hand twitching uncontrollably. Her whole body jerked violently for several moments, then she went inert, catatonic for several more.

She seemed calm when she suddenly stood up from the beach blanket. She looked around, gave her son a passing glance as he splashed in the water. Then she walked in the direction of the boardwalk.

Clock saw it all.

He lowers his binoculars and eases back a bit as the boy runs to find his mother. Clock sits back on the ledge, small legs hanging off the side of the building. Nobody will notice him, and not just because he's small, a Little Person. The fact is very few people can see Jerry Clock, even when he's standing right in front of them. Nowadays people who see him have to have a sense for him, or not be people at all. Clock is human, solid flesh and bone. Something in humanity has changed. It wasn't always this way, but it has been for years now in New York City.

Clock adjusts his coonskin cap; he glances at his crossbow. A Barnet Ghost 410. They'll be back this way in no time. Patience, he thinks.

Jimmy watches her walk out of Luna Park under the now steady rain. He stares at her blankly. This walk isn't *her* walk at all. It's awkward and unsteady, a strange sideways gait, like a crustacean. Her facial expression is fierce, and he's never seen it on his mother before. Jimmy walks behind her, not saying anything. Her steps become more steady, but that strange sideways gait remains. Even though he's still wary, his anxiety gets the best of him when he sees her get back onto the sand and head underneath the boardwalk.

"Mom! Where are you going? What's wrong?" he grabs onto the back of her skirt.

She stops walking, slowly turns to face him. The mother stares down at her son with a look of complete unfamiliarity, then to Jimmy's horror, one of malice. The eyes in her skull begin to

transform...change color. They're no longer her own.. Jet black, shark-like. He takes his hand away from her skirt just as she viciously swipes it back. She stares at him, saying nothing.

The rain falls hard. She begins to bite down on her lower lip, drawing blood. He recoils and steps back. Within seconds the blood is gushing down her chin... She continues to leer, black eyes, cold and lifeless. His mother spits in his face... Then she walks onto the beach.

Jimmy wipes the blood off; he stares in shock, paralyzed. He watches in terror as she strips off her dress and disappears underneath the boardwalk. Several moments pass and he can sense her beneath his feet. Jimmy can hear voices below, speaking to his mother in a language he can't understand. He also hears an eerie music...faint. Ethereal. It's like no other instrument he's ever heard before. He runs away, looking for the nearest police officer.

Clock watches all of this through his binoculars. He lowers them when the kid bolts. Clock's sitting on a beach chair, with a large umbrella overhead, shielding him from the rain. He sighs and takes out a plastic wrapped Danish pastry from his knapsack. He eats it. Clock stays at his post.

Hours pass.

The rain tapers off as the cops search the boardwalk to no avail. The son is nowhere in sight. The police soon fade away like the rain. They could spend years searching. They won't find it.

It'll appear when it wants to.

Clock feels bad for the kid, but there's nothing he can do. He's more than likely invisible to the boy, and even if he wasn't what could he possibly say to console him? Clock remains well past midnight. Even though he's ninety percent sure of the outcome, call it a gut feeling, he still needs to see it emerge, see if the flesh has stuck.

It has. At a quarter to three it emerges from underneath the boardwalk and takes slow steps to where the beach towel had been. She stops there and stares up at empty space. She puts her hand out and it looks as if she's attempting to turn a knob and open an invisible door. It's not entirely hidden to Clock's eyes, however. He can faintly make out the large elephant shaped structure, he can even see windows and the front door of the building.

Her hand drops. Clock nearly jumps out of his skin when she lets out a sudden cry.

She stomps around the spectral base of the Elephantine Colossus and into the dark waves of the Atlantic. Clock cracks a can of Red Bull and continues to observe.

She emerges before dawn. Bleeding from small cuts all over her naked body, covered in moss and sea slime. She stands at the front of the large invisible building for several moments, then she walks back into the darkness underneath the boardwalk.

Clock wipes his eyes. A certainty now. It will surface occasionally, but now it's energy will be focused on one day. A date Clock has to discover. It could be months from now. Maybe longer. He stands and stretches. He closes his eyes as the August sun rises, unable to fight off sleep any longer. He pulls his coonskin cap over his eyes, crossbow close at hand, always at the ready.

Months pass. Jimmy dreams about his mother, his real mother, not the creature on the boardwalk. In the dreams she tells him she's a prisoner, but still alive. She needs his help. The police are worthless, and the aunt he now lives with has stopped believing her sister is alive. Jimmy bides his time, waiting for the message that will put all the pieces together.

The snow's falling heavily. He's in pursuit, small legs pumping hard. Clock moves quickly for someone his size; in this terrain it's all about the footing. His prey is cagey, fast. Clock's been hunting him for the better part of an hour now. Clock stops at the edge of the creek. Somewhere off to his left.... by the snow covered bush. He fires his crossbow into the thicket, hears a sharp, abrupt squeal. Wild thrashing, snow falls off the shaking bush in packed clumps. Sudden stillness, silence. Clock looks over his shoulder.

He's recently felt as if he's being followed. Clock grows more and more suspicious by the day. Every Chaos Magic ritual he does confirms it, though he can never find out exactly who or what it is. Even if the thing under the boardwalk knew about Clock would it risk expending its energy to stop him before its own rite? Clock doubts it, but it could be possible. Time will tell.

He walks forward, observes the bush. Clock sees his prey. It's dead, arrow buried deep into its chest. The raccoon is huge. Easily the size of a pit bull. Clock pulls the corpse out into the open bank. The chill waves wash onto the dull mud of the creek, brackish water threatening to touch Clock's leather boots. He steps back and drags the coon by its tail. Only his eyes see the infernal smoke rising from its belly, he can hear the sizzle and the murderous array of voices hiding in the animal's intestines. Clock hums a personal prayer of protection embedded in an old T.V. jingle, he takes out Typhon, his serpent handled dagger, and tosses it at the mud, evoking the winds of prime chaos. Typhon flies straight for a moment then, as if altered by an invisible hand, it lands horizontally along the muddy bank. Clock nods and picks it up, opening up the raccoon's stomach with it.

It's filled with them. This specimen, like so many others he's captured around here, seems to be infested. Clock's beginning to think it might be some kind of epidemic. He watches as they rise up out of the beast's guts, black and gnat-like. They murmur in lost tongues, they throw antediluvian curses down upon his large head. They try to make his veins pump mud, large brown eyes pop. Clock waves them away, his magic is strong. They try to escape, but Clock commands them to be still with a deep growl. These spirits, although wild and rabid, do not resist. A major epidemic of these spirits could easily spread from lower animals to humans, could even reanimate the dead if their numbers were high enough. Clock speaks words of banishment, waving his dagger in the air he traces the shape of Ouroboros then slices it.

The voices stop chattering, and they fall to the earth, get absorbed into it. He waits for several minutes and then he pisses on the spot where they disappeared. Clock throws the dead raccoon into Coney Island creek. He leaves and heads to Surf Avenue to grab lunch.

"You look worried, Jerry Clock.. What's wrong?" asks Tahir in his thick Pakistani accent.

He stares down at Clock in the alleyway of the small Pakistani restaurant on Surf Avenue.

Tahir is the restaurant's owner and one of the rare people who can see him. He's a friend.

“Nothing that you should concern yourself with, Tahir. At this point anyway.”

Tahir hands him a falafel and can of ginger ale. The snow's falling lightly in the cramped alleyway.

“You sure you don't want to come inside? It is empty.”

Clock bites into the falafel and shakes his head.

“No. In a little bit of a rush,” he says between bites. His crossbow is strapped onto his back, he wears a thick black pea coat, army fatigue pants and expensive boots. The coonskin hat as always.

“If something bothers you, it bothers me, does it not? You are a friend.”

Clock thinks this over as he eats, but he doesn't say anything. Tahir watches him.

“I want to help you. You help me all the time...”

“You help me enough, Tahir.”

Tahir shakes his kufi covered head, fat cheeks shaking viciously.

“That is not true...! Not enough! You pay me too much! Your people have no concept of money...”

“What do you mean, my people?” Clock asks between bites.

“The Jinn,” Tahir says.

“Jesus Christ, Tahir. How many times do I have to tell you? I'm not Jinn. You remember Sal the bus driver? He could see me too. You're just like him. He thought I was Italian. Kept saying I look like a little blonde haired Joe Mantegna. Wouldn't stop. But I'm not Italian or Jinn, Tahir. I'm just me. And I do have a very strong concept of money. It's just useless to me. And I find it everywhere. So I give to you.”

Tahir persists.

“Still, you are my friend. If you're troubled...”

Clock finishes his falafel. He cracks open the can of ginger ale and guzzles it.

“Don't sweat it. Say, Tahir, what's been going on with the alley cats? This place was filled with them last week.”

Tahir squints at Clock. He leans down close. Glances around the alley. Gets a few inches away from Clock's face.

“The raccoons have killed them all!” he barks. “They are ruthless... and sexually perverse... I think they also have their way with the

victims!”

Clock squints back at him.

“You're saying you got an infestation?”

“Yes! Possibly. I see many out here at night. Dozens.”

Clock looks around the alleyway.

“They carry rabies, no? Tahir asks.

Clock takes out a handful of hundred dollar bills and hands it to Tahir.

“These ones might be carrying something much worse. No hot sauce on the falafel next time, Tahir. You always forget. And watch your back. I'll keep an eye out around here for you as well.”

Clock turns and leaves without another word.

It's buried itself in the sand next to its secret Tell. The circular mound of abalone, whalebone, and sea glass is small, and though the voices of its kith sing softly they are blocked out. No more, it thinks as it lay coiled inside the woman. No more traveling in the dark lonely reaches of the abyss, not sure if it's the last member of its race. The aching loneliness. Waiting for the ghost music on the surface so it may brave the sun and come to shore... no. It will have life once again on the surface. It will break it's tribe taboo, its lost race's taboo... and claim absolute possession of a body above the surface. It will enjoy the sun once again for a lifetime, even if it's not in true form. It just needs help from the dark soul that can perform the ritual, one that unfortunately no longer has a body. Still, when the stars are aligned and the time is right that barrier can be crossed.

That time is near.

It had first encountered the Abyssinian when it visited this Tell over one hundred years ago. The man had been alive then, a carnival performer first at Sea Lion Park then Steeplechase. He was a gifted Bouda, a powerful Ethiopian sorcerer. He located the Tell and learned all about it through his magic. He was burned to death by rivals at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but his spirit remains. He refuses to fade into whatever afterlife these mortals suffer.

Even now he speaks. He tells her there is a threat, an adversary that wishes to stop the ritual. But no worry, the Bouda says. It will be taken care of. Rest and prepare yourself for the day. Our day. The threat will be dealt with.



Two days from now. He has the day and hour of the ritual. Clock opens his eyes, he's sweating profusely, seated in a meditative position. He's breathing heavily now. The mindscaping exercise has been extreme; Clock has been at it for eighteen hours.

It's been worth it.

He now knows more than enough. The elemental's weakness lay in a strange artifact. A sort of ceremonial stamp of its species' collective memory.... embedded in a tellurian object.

Ancient magic, he thinks. Clock wipes his eyes. Sighs heavily.

It wants to escape the abyss and live again, indefinitely, in that poor woman's body. It wishes to summon the spirit of a dead sorcerer, an Abyssinian who was killed years ago in that elephant-shaped building. It wants to offer the Bouda a body, living or dead, so it can reanimate and perform the ritual. Clock has to destroy the Tell and throw it back into the ocean. When the possessed woman leaves its side is when he must act.

Clock looks around his tent. The heater's on full blast, and the snow continues to fall outside. The tent is pitched by Coney Island creek, and his small generator hums loudly outside. He grabs a bottled water and drinks. The tent's large, filled with books and canned goods. There's a Polaroid taped to the tent wall, a picture of Clock ten years ago standing in the Red Desert in Wyoming with friends and his ex-wife. All dead now. His old life.

Clock puts the bottle of water down. He feels a sudden rush of fear, danger. He grabs his crossbow the moment they pounce onto his tent. They bark and tear at it- he can hear the voices inside their intestines, howling insanely. Clock manages to escape the tent, crawling out onto the snow covered ground.

The full moon illuminates the creek, and Clock can see the three raccoons tearing into his tent. The snow falls heavily, and he stands and fires his crossbow in rapid succession. Two go down instantly, the other turns and charges Clock. He reloads and fires. The arrow hits the raccoon dead on and it flips backwards, landing with a splash into the creek.

"I see you," a familiar voice says from behind. Clock's stomach drops.

“Tahir,” he says faintly.

Tahir stands there at the foot of the bank, rabid, frothing at the mouth. His eyes give off a red gleam. He carries a butcher knife. He's been infected by one of the things, possessed by those malicious, rabid spirits.

“We see you. We see you...” Tahir growls as he steps forward. Clock steps back, he tries to reload. Tahir screams and dashes toward him, slashing wildly with the butcher knife. Clock grabs a bolt out of one of the dead raccoons. He loads and fires. It hits Tahir square in his solar plexus. He screams and trips. He drops the knife and lands on it, neck first. His kufi tumbles off of his head. Still, he tries to stand and attack Clock. Clock calmly takes out another arrow. He fires it into Tahir's skull and he drops instantly. He stays down.

Clock stands over his old friend. He shakes his head. Personal now, he thinks. Two more days. The snow continues to fall heavily. He takes off his coonskin cap and reaches down. He picks up his dead friend's flattened kufi and places it on his own head. It looks more like a yarmulke than a kufi on Clock. He unsheathes Typhon and holds it to the sky, invoking the powers of primal chaos. Ready to unleash his own personal brand of old-time religion on his enemies.

She smiles at him in the aquarium. He smiles back. The man is young, early twenties. Possibly a student. She just needs to look into his glassy blue eyes to know the weakness of his aura. A perfect victim. It commands the woman buried deep inside to do the talking. She has no choice; she's a slave to its will. The man smiles and speaks, not noticing or caring about the sand on her brown dress or her emaciated frame. It has a glamor on, and it shields its host from scrutiny.

She leads the bewitched man onto the cold beach and under the boardwalk with the promise of cheap sex. When his back is turned, she hits him across the back of his head with a metal pipe and he falls. She suffocates the man and buries him in sand, and then lays down next to him. She can make out the ghostly outline of the

Elephantine Colossus; can feel the Bouda's dead eyes. Eager, ready.

One more night.

Jimmy slinks out of the Stillwell Avenue train station at around noon, black hoodie covering his head. He walks against the cold wind, heads to the boardwalk. Let his aunt call the police, tell them he ran away again. They won't catch him this time.

This is the night.

He knows he'll find her tonight. The dreams have led him here, on this day. They've even showed him visions of a protector. A Jewish elf. With a mighty crossbow. Jimmy continues to power walk toward the boardwalk, intent on saving his lost mother.

Clock isn't prepared for the child. He watches from the rooftop. The boy's been milling around the location since noon. He remembers the face. It's her son. Of all days. The kid's presence muddies things up. Clock watches him go walk the length of the beach, dipping under the boardwalk. After some time he walks away from the beach and disappears, much to Clock's relief. Hours pass. He puts the child out of mind.

At long last, the sun fades and the full moon rises. At midnight Clock does a protection ritual. Then he prepares to step onto the beach.

Jimmy hoped to find a trace of her before nightfall, before the sun went down. He hoped that it might be possible even though he knew in his gut it wasn't true. He knew she would emerge when the sun went down. Jimmy stepped onto the boardwalk in the late afternoon to grab some food then he doubled back onto the beach. There he waits by the fishing pier, watching the boardwalk.

She emerges several minutes after midnight, dragging the corpse along the hard sand. The sharp wind stings her body, and the full moon shines down on the empty beach. The magic of the night is strong. She drags the dead man before the ghostly motel door on the beach. It grows more visible with every passing moment.

Clock waits several moments then jumps onto the sand. He darts underneath the boardwalk with his flashlight. Its territory smells like death. He can hear the thing, and sees it shining brightly even

without the aid of the flashlight. It's mesmerizing. A bright light emanates from the sea glass. Shifting indigo, then emerald rays... images from a prehistoric past rise like smoke from the abalone... the spectral chorus of voices, an indescribable melody transcribed on the ancient whale bone. He has to gather all the will he has to complete his task.

Clock crushes it. The voices shriek. The light dissipates. Clock picks the shattered thing up with a gloved hand.

It feels the Tell being destroyed, and her head snaps around in the direction of the boardwalk.

The ghostly vision of the Bouda stands at the door of the motel. Dark skinned and wiry, bright red eyes that shine out of his skeletal face. The hour is now, and the window of time is small. He needs possession of the body at once. She forces her head away from the boardwalk and drags the corpse further up toward the ethereal door.

"Mom! I know you're in there somewhere! Fight!"

Her head snaps left. The vessel's child. The soul of the woman thought to be so thoroughly subjected suddenly kicks and scratches up, trying to seize control. The thing reels.

How was this possible? It realizes in an instant. Fear washes over the ancient creature. It had started to lose control when it shut out the music of its kith...and now that the Tell is destroyed its power on the woman is lessened...

It screams in rage. The phantom at the door begins to shimmer and disappear. The hour is passing...The boy doesn't see the portal but he steps toward it...

Clock races toward the scene. His vision allows him to see everything. He sees the evil spirit preparing to leap onto the unknowing boy as he backpedals toward it...

Clock aims the crossbow at the child.

The arrow flies and hits the kid in the leg, toppling him before he gets any closer to the portal. Jimmy cries out in pain.

The Bouda at the threshold shrieks. It begins to fade, and the creature fighting for control of the woman's body makes one last effort to drag the corpse forward. Clock yanks her backwards. She falls to the dirt. Clock takes the shards of the Tell and throws them out into the ocean.

It screams as it gets ripped out of her body, tumbling back into the ocean's depths.

Jimmy hears the cry, and he sees the elephant hotel and the man in it explode in a bright burst of blue ghost light. He screams. Then he stares at Clock. The beach is black once again. And quiet.

"Jimmy..." his mother's voice, shaky, uncertain, but not afraid.

"Mom!"

Clock stares at the mother as she stands and walks over to her son. She hugs him.

"Why is there an arrow in your leg?" she asks.

"It's you..." He points at Clock, ignoring the pain.

Clock stares at him, surprised by his vision. The mother doesn't notice Clock at all. He ignores the child.

"You're my Jewish elf..."

Clock stares at him, puzzled.

"Jewish elf? What the hell are you talking about?"

The boy screams in pain. Clock jumps back.

"Your yarmulke!" Jimmy cries out between clenched teeth.

"Who are you talking to?" his mom asks, turning around and staring right through Clock.

"Oh this," Clock says, taking the kufi off his head. He grabs his coonskin hat. Places it on his head.

"Thanks for saving us."

Clock nods.

"She'll get better over time. But she'll need your help."

Jimmy continues to stare at him, transfixed.

"Um...sorry about the arrow kid."

"I can see you. They can't. But I can."

"Forget you ever did. Take care of your mother."

Jimmy mutters thank you once more. Then he passes out from the pain.

"Help!!" Jimmy's mother screams. She stands and cries out, faces away from her son.

Clock walks over to the child and stares at him

"Brave kid," he says to himself.

He jams the kufi on top of Jimmy's head. Then he leaves without another word. She continues to scream for help at the top of her

lungs but stops for a moment when she sees the small shadow on the moonlit sand. It moves past her, growing taller with every passing step. It disappears from the beach as the sound of police sirens approach.

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*Michael Reyes is a writer from Brooklyn. His fiction has appeared in Weird Tales Magazine, Dark Eclipse, 31 More Nights Of Halloween by Rainstorm Press and Twisted Boulevard by Elektrik Milk Bath Press.*

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# The Wooing of Etroklos

By J. COMER

***On mankind's distant colony of Pendleton's World, a warrior has been sent forth to go a-wooing on her master's behalf. Set upon by bandits, can Sirat Tho'anchur count upon the aid of a travelling circus to break free and accomplish her mission?!***

The second-day was dusty and hot here at the end of the Dry. Soldiers groaned as the two tens crested the hill and saw a creek flowing below. "Hey, Second," said Jazherap. "Time to water the beasts? That stuff looks—"

"Wet," said old Venkop. "How about it, sir?"

Sirat Tho'anchur, Second of the wizard Etroklos' armsmen, surveyed the landscape with a jewel-tiny monocular, a magic device borrowed from her master. She didn't know the area but could see breadnut trees growing up and down the creek and smoke from upstream—a village? The ford where the path crossed the creek was shallow and wide, and a deep pool formed just below it where diorite boulders dammed the runoff from the ever-snow of the Chartha mountains' heights. Dog-bears? Or the marsh-lion, Sirat's namesake? Unlikely. This land was settled; villagers would have hunted out the beasts, surely. Even mantigers didn't prowl too close. One hoped.

"Water the manhorses, aye. Wash'em, too," Sirat said. Men whooped, yelled, and goaded the three-meter primates down to the water. "Peret, Khenn', guard." She stayed astride her own beast, Lop-Ear, atop the slope.

Twenty men and forty manhorses splashed in the water of the pool. Men stripped, hung their filthy clothes on the trees, and swam in the pool whilst the manhorses splashed themselves, their riders, and each other. "Go on in, Second," said Khennek, who stood guard with sword and bow. "We've got it."

Through the canopy they could see the white-banded crescent of Butros' World, which Pendleton's circled, and in front of it, the sliver-shape of Ngobi, the firemoon.

“Nay, I’ll stand guard also.” The men nodded. Sirat sent Lop-Ear to wash, sat atop a boulder, watched the avenues of attack, and reached for her pipe and pouch of weed. (Tobacco—along with kittens and beans—had been carried to Pendleton’s World, across the sky on ramscoops; smoking had come and gone on many worlds). As she packed the bowl and lit, she was acutely aware of what she was—and wasn’t—seeing and what the men would think if she undressed and bathed with them.

She never did. She lived as a man.

She was partway through the smoke when a flick of movement caught her eye. Sirat cocked her crossbow, a magazine of bolts loaded already. Bulky thing, but its rapid fire rate was helpful. Something blue, in the scrub under the trees? *Slide down, below the lip of the boulder, don’t skyline yourself, grab a branch close to the trunk, don’t shake twigs.* She hit the ground beside a tangle of breadnut roots and steadied herself with a hand. She crawled slow and leopard-like around the slope, that tree, and that one, then a long stand of grass, and finally to where she had a clear sightline...

Veiled shapes—women in long robes—watched the men from hiding, giggling. One carried a basket of soiled clothes, and one a sack—soapnut, maybe. They whispered to one another. Sirat was tempted to let them go; staring was surely harmless. Something was...

One saw her and nudged the other, whose eyes widened. The sight of an armored warrior closing in was not part of their fantasy, unless one or both hoped that Sirat would rape them. (She wouldn’t.) One made a sign to the other, and the unladen one scurried up the long bank. Running home? To warn someone? This was...

Not right. Was it that the runner’s sturdy boots, hobnailed and worn? Or the print, when the girl turned, of a dagger concealed inside her robes? Sirat moved back toward the sentries.

The first volley of arrows hit right about then. One of Sirat’s men died naked in the pond, an arrow in his face, scream choked in blood. Two manhorses felt the stab of war broadheads and bolted upstream, churning and trampling the creek bed. Another man took an arrow in the thigh, bled and bled, screaming. Sirat turned to the women and



saw them fleeing as a soldier was hit twice, one in the neck and one in the rump, before falling in water.

She crept fast and quiet, hoping she was out of sight of the snipers. She heard a manhorse scream, wounded. A fighting man hurried from the water to his arms but was shot four times, jerked, groaned and died. Sirat risked a quick survey of the sightlines. The archers were there, and there, and one was...there.

Now her crossbow could reach them. She sheltered prone behind a fallen breadnut log and loaded bolts smeared with nux vomica. She smiled grimly and heard the shout of Jazherap, "To me, men!" and the twang of his bow.

*He lives—and fights, too. Good.* She aimed carefully at what she thought was a head-and-shoulder shape and shot. Screams—and a man fell from concealment to jerk and twitch with strychnine poisoning in the leaf litter of the slope. Another shot, maybe a miss. Another, at a flash of movement, and a groan of pain, as a man-shape tumbled to the ground, accompanied by the heavy snap of a leg bone. Then he began to thrash with the toxin, and the screams became unnerving. Sirat's smile returned.

More man-shapes came downslope, bearing bows and spears. She shot quickly and carefully, thwok, thwack, thwok, thwok, thwok. Three men fell dead, and she got a clear look at them: ragged clothes, beards, jumble of assorted weapons—this was no Khus'[\[1\]](#) army nor was it a patrol of the village guard; these were the lowest kind of bandits.

And a lot of them. Four ran at her. Dropping the crossbow to her side, Sirat drew Whiteflame. She rushed one bandit to spear him with the point of the ancient blade, but seeing him pull his long knife to parry her, Sirat cut him in the neck instead. He staggered away, blood spurting.

Another had a long nusswood spear; she countered, wound up, deflected a blow from the third, and brought down Whiteflame on the spear. The impossible white metal chopped halfway through the wooden shaft, and she pulled, staggering the man as she retrieved the sword, and jabbed at the third man bearing an iron sword. He aimed a blow of the flat at her—Sirat parried it then struck with the edge of her sword at the spearman, cutting deeply into his arm and

shoulder, causing blood to spray everywhere. He grabbed the sword blade, slippery with his own gore, and the swordsman struck Sirat with the flat of the blade then reversed with the wheel-pommel as the blade sliced clean into his hand.

Dizzy, Sirat yanked Whiteflame from the bleeding man, spewing blood all over her, and chopped at the spearman, thinking to at least put him down. Another blow of the pommel came, and this she failed to deflect; she sank to the ground kicking and heard a bone break; an arm choked her unconscious.

*And to think I came here a-wooing.*

There was a long black place. Sirat woke with one of her men holding her head as she vomited, then choked, then vomited again. *I never like being knocked out: storytellers seemed unaware of how sick it made you.* She retched once more, her gut empty, and he let her sit up. They were in a grove of nuss-trees, their hands bound—eleven of her soldiers, she added quickly with blurred eyes, and five strangers. Where was she? She listened. “Second? Hear me? It is I, Venkop.”

Venkop? She knew the name—knew these soldiers. What campaign was this?

She nodded. “Know where we are?” She shook her head, disliked the sensation.

“The bandits captured us. For the manhorses, I think. Ransom, too. They kidnapped these folks,” Venkop motioned to the gaudily dressed civilians at the other end of the glade, “and their wagon. Maybe for ransom, too.” He sighed. “I don’t know where we are.”

Sirat surveyed the troops’ situation. Venkop brought her water in a bamboo bucket. She drank and managed not to retch. The men were wearing livery she half-knew (an engine in white as the badge), were well equipped, but disarmed and in chains. They were bound with enough freedom to eat and move a little—hobbled. Clothes thrown on willy-nilly, as if—

She remembered. The headache had fogged her memories, clouded her mind. But it had come back to her. They were wooing for the Wizard Etroklos.

Etroklos had spoken to her in the laboratory over glasses of wine after they'd driven off the army of the Khus Taranth. "Sirat, you are the dashing sort," the old wizard, head shaved, beardless, had said. "The girls, now, they like you."

"It may be so," she'd said. A rats-and-dragons board lay between them. She had taken the wizard's boat; Etroklos had moved til her elephant-pig and two soldiers were her only hope. "But I'm sworn," she went on, "not to share my bed. As you know, sir."

The liver-spotted hand moved a soldier. "I know," said the scholar-wizard who had harnessed the power of lightning to kill the soldiers of the Khus, with lore taken from the knowstones of the ancients. She studied the board, set for two players. "I do know that. And my proposal is this." He sipped a yellow wine, which on another world was called "white". "Go out; take you two tens of men. Manhorses, arms—draw what food you need from old Mrs. Vuzh. And find a bride for me."

"Lord," said the woman who lived and fought as a man, "if you seek a girl, then merely command. Enough will be brought here to the keep that you will wear out a bed testing them!" She dared a smile.

"And frighten the poor thing to death, summoning her like a maid or a butler, or round her up like a slave to be sold? If I wanted a slave girl, they're sold each market day, down in Nyotaishar." He sighed. "It would be nice to have one who'd some choice in the matter, wouldn't it?"

Sirat moved her knight and hoped that her master would not notice what she planned. "It would, sir. I agree. But why send a warrior to go a-wooing? Will that not fright the poor slip of a thing just as much?"

"I fear you're right. But my apprentice is worse than useless for wooing, and I'd trust Captain Vethas as far as I can toss him." Which wasn't very far, slight and small as the wizard was. Sirat grinned. Trusting Vethas and his men with a virgin was as sensible as trusting a chicken to a mantiger.

"So what I ask is this. Visit some village. Keep the peace, listen to the talk. I can't do that; no one talks around the master, and you know it."

"Aye, it's true." She was Etroklos' champion, second below old Vethas in his guard, and the wizard... trusted her. "And if we find

some likely gal?”

“Then ask concerning her. If she wishes to come here, she may. I will pay brideprice, of course. She need bring no dowry, except for good sense.”

“A pretty one?”

“It might be nice if she were. But I value sense first, or I’d buy one off the block.” The wizard moved a knight.

“Mother always said, ‘Kissing don’t last; cookin’ do.’”

“Or math. For Sun’s sake, get me one who can read.” The wizard looked sharp at the warrior. “Think you can?”

“Master, I won’t fail you,” said Sirat. “Boat takes elephant.”

Sirat’s head still hurt, but the effects of the blow were fading. She knew her mission. She was to find a bride for her master, the aged Wizard and master of engines, Etroklos of the Tower. He had given her twenty men and sent her off to woo for him; he was working on another mad invention and could not be bothered. And now, she and her troops had fallen into the hands of brigands.

Now, assets...

Sirat still wore her mail, but Whiteflame was out of its sheath. Removing her sword was easier than pulling mail off an unconscious body, as she knew. She couldn’t see her men’s manhorses or their arms. Most of them wore armor, but those without it were dressed, though in mismatched and hastily donned clothes.

How many wounded? Out of the eleven she saw five wounded—one plainly unable to fight, two maybes. She couldn’t see Khennek, who had been guarding—was he dead? Bearing the hallmarks of travelling performers, the civilian captives were a man in formal caftan, a young and delicate girl in a bright sari, a similarly dressed older gal, a huge man in kilt and cape, and a slight, dark fellow wearing brown silks. They were unarmed and bound as her soldiers were.

Two bandits armed with spears and machetes and wearing her soldiers’ armor coats were guarding them.

The girl who’d decoyed for the bandits entered bearing a basket of waybread and circled the group of prisoners, letting each take a

round of the stuff. The water jug was passed again. When the girl came to her, Sirat said, "You serve as decoy for them, then?"

"Oh! It's you." The girl clearly recognized Sirat. She looked at the ground. "I do. I... wash and cook for them."

"I see." From her shape, Sirat was sure that she did more than housekeeping for these thieves and killers. The girl was not big-bellied, but in a female body a thickening there meant one thing. Sirat thanked her for the waybread and smiled.

"Don' talk to them!" said a guard, glaring at the girl. She glanced fearfully, handed the rest of the bread to Sirat, and fled. Sirat passed the bread to her men and to the players as well.

By quietly questioning her men she had ascertained that six or seven had died, left in the woods for wild dogs and finch-vultures. *On my conscience. Lord Sun forgive me. You who are above Butros and the thunder, pardon me.*

When she had time to grieve she could say the prayers for each of them by name. It was her fault these men had died.

"Ah, good Khus," said the caftan-wearing ringmaster. "Hail." He spoke to her, Sirat realized, jarring her from her guilt.

"Hail, Fer," she said, greeting him as a craftsman. "I am the Khus Sirat, Thonchur's son, Second for the Wizard Etroklos' guard."

"May the day go well with you," said the man, whose speech had a Nantaishari accent, "I am Hufilaki, Cherot's son, and maestro of this pageant wagon, the Kawal Ihu'afilaki." The Wagon of Dreams, it was. She smiled. "If I may introduce my players?" She nodded. "They are Hesthak, Forthat's son, our strongman; Hiurchat, Hunan's son (the slim, dark man), our dancer and player; Cheron, (the older woman), daughter of Faram, singer and dancer; and Vesh, daughter of Sherr, musician extraordinaire and tumbler to boot. We travel, performing, as you see, and were captured and robbed. It profited them little, and so they hold us for ransom. What they hope to get, I can't imagine. Well. Who you are, I can't say, but you killed a great number of them, and they did not like that, you see."

Sirat told the mountebank of her errand; as usual, the performers took her for a man, which she preferred. "HmMMM," mused Hufilaki. "Could we combine our forces?"

Sirat had an idea. Looking forward, speaking so that it would not carry, she said, "We need to talk."

"Why, surely," Hiurchat said quietly. Louder, "Cheron and Vesh, dears, it's so tiresome sitting here with nothing to do. Why don't you two practice your songs for the show while we wait?"

"Music, too?" asked Vesh, looking at Hiurchat. "Good Khus," she addressed the guard, leaning into the man's gaze and putting on a winsome look. "May my friend here get his instruments from the wagon? You'll observe, of course, as he does so."

"Yeah, uh, sure." The guard took Hiurchat and watched him as he retrieved a chohuthorat, one with wire strings and inlay of unbreakable glass shining along the side of the soundbox; Hiurchat mutely asked for his chains to be removed. The guard settled for looping his leg shackles into a rope. Hiurchat then played a piece of popular hemeth, and the girls joined him in alternating parts then harmonized on the chorus. Sirat's soldiers listened with appreciation.

While the music went on, Sirat and Hufilaki plotted. She was surprised at his ability to speak without moving his lips, but he explained that players needed to do this sometimes; he could throw his voice as well but didn't demonstrate. They came up with a plan; Hufilaki would put it forth, if allowed. If not...

Sirat's scabbard was empty, but the whetstone of Whiteflame was a finger-sized brown bar of industrial diamond, nigh old as the sword. Iron chains would yield to it, in time. But where was Whiteflame? She was sure that the Khus Takach had it and told Hufilaki as much. He nodded and smiled mysteriously.

Hufilaki called a guard and asked to speak to the thieves' First. It was a long wait, since another guard had to be called to take them there while two remained, guarded them, and listened to the songs which the women knew, leavened with Hiurchat's playing. Then the guard took Hufilaki, who insisted that Sirat accompany him; she was searched, though she was sure that Hufilaki had some trick in mind.

They were brought to the tent of the leader, a scarred and bearded man. "This is the Khus Takach," said the guard, and withdrew.

"Good Khus, our greetings. I am the Fer Hufilaki, and this is the Khus Sirat." Outside, the sun was sinking.

“So you are. On what do you two wish to waste my time?” The man scowled. Behind his chair was a pallet and an arming-stand, upon which rested a sword wrapped in oilskins. Not much loot was to be seen; they had little, or they would not be manhorse-thieves. The tent...it was the circus’, wasn’t it? Hufilaki’s tent? She saw there was a litter of illusionists’ props in one corner.

“Good sir, it occurred to me, as a former military man myself, about the problem of the village ten kilometers that way.” He indicated the direction of the smoke that Sirat had seen earlier.

“The problem?” asked the Khus Takach.

“Their militia is reasonably-sized and well-armed. Sir, did you plan a frontal assault, or to take them by stealth?” Hufilaki’s tone suggested friendly curiosity.

“Did I... what?” The Khus wasn’t following.

“How to take them? The harvest is in; it will feed your men through the rains, you know.”

The man’s face was incredulous. “You’re concerned for my men’s welfare? Who are you? Saint Akelko?”

“We eat the same waybread,” Hufilaki pointed out mildly.

“So what is this?” The Khus was on the brink. Sirat could see, Hufilaki clearly wanted to hook him.

“You’re short on grain and low on manpower,” said the ringmaster.

“And this concerns you?”

“Do you want to take that village?” asked the circus man.

“If I want it, I’ll take it, juggler. You may—”

“You can’t take it. You lack the manpower, or you’d guard us all separately, not together. You lack the grain or your men would not eat the same way bread we do. I know how to take that village.”

“How,” asked the Khus. “By acrobatics?”

Hufilaki said, “Yes.”

Now the Khus was hooked, Sirat saw. “What nonsense is this?”

“We’ll announce the performance, the arrival of the pageant-wagon. They’re villagers; they will gather for the show if we promise some fun.”

The Khus was silent. The ringmaster went on. “You’ll hide half your men in the wagon. The others will wait outside the gates. We’ll do the show, of course. When the end comes, the fancy bit, there’ll be a

signal. The soldiers will rush out, unlock the village gate, take the villagers, and you'll have all you need for the rains."

The Khus Takach said, "This is a mad plan. It would never work."

"Then go back to robbing travelers, and starve when the rains rot what stores you have. Or face the Wizard's justice, and penalties won't be light or slow."

That was true, Sirat thought. Etroklos, like most landlords, enforced justice but called juries of the same caste as the accused. The guilty paid for theft, were beaten for fighting, castrated for rapes (thankfully rare), and murder caught the death penalty (but was also rare).

There was another thing. He didn't know she was Second of the wizard's men; he didn't recognize the livery or didn't know that she was the right hand of the Mage of the Tower. If he knew, he could never have been silent about it. These men would face the death penalty. Etroklos was the local Khus and could call a jury of soldiers, priests, maybe a neighboring landlord, and sentence these bandits to sure death. A child stealing bread might ask mercy; these men, never.

"Ho, Khuli!" called the Khus. A guard entered. "Take these two back to confinement."

The long dusk drew on. Many slept; through the lush trees Butros shone in half phase. Soldiers whispered questions for Sirat, and she answered as honestly as she could. When the last light faded from the Chartha peaks, the Khus of the bandits called a council. The guard took Hufilaki and Sirat to the trampled ground before the Khus' tent—Hufilaki's tent, really—as he had told her.

"Hail, my loyal men," said the Khus. He wore Whiteflame, she saw, thrust into a sheath that did not fit, but the unbreakable jewel on its pommel was like nothing else. Grimly she told the sword she would recover it.

Sirat counted silently in the twilight. There were scarce twenty bandits, even counting the four women who huddled together in one end of the clearing. This was a small robber band, and on hard times. Could she turn them against their leader?

The men hailed the Khus. He went on, "Already in this day you have proven yourselves, capturing whom you did not slay of the



foemen, the lackeys of the Wizard. Now luck hands us a chance to take a whole town, its riches and women for our own.”

“How, Lord?” asked a voice. As the twilight grew darker, a boy came and laid a fire on the earth.

“It will be no great feat for such as yourself. We shall trick them! This gang of wandering players shall go before us, and announce a show. We’ll hide a ten in their wagon, use the rest of the troops to circle the village square. They won’t go armed to see a show, and when the signal is given, we’ll strike and take the place.” Cheers followed, as did muttered talk.

“Khus,” said one. “How do you know that this will work?”

“I don’t, but it’s take a prize or waybread until we starve.” Men nodded, made sounds of approval.

Was this how they planned all their raids? Sloppy. *But my experience lost to their ambush. My fault, Dark it!*

Sirat didn’t know how these men worked. She was a soldier, not a thief, and there was a difference. She got orders, and lacking, improvised, but soldiers did not know how to plan tactics or strategy, or officers would not exist. Hufilaki’s plan was strange, but she had no better. Her men were dead, or chained, or—she-didn’t-know-how-many, but it couldn’t be more than one or two—lost in the woods. As for the manhorses, no one knew. They surely had no manhorse-doctor here, and even the legions’ men slew the half-ton beasts when the manhorses were wounded too sorely to walk. She drew her bound hands beneath her surcoat, as if against the cool of evening, and pulled the diamond bar from a sleeve. Slow, slow. She hated to ruin the diamond, but perhaps charcoal-forged iron (Pendleton’s World had no coal) would yield soon. She worked it across a link and felt the grate, grate.

“So how will we do it?” asked another spearman, and the circle of men fell to chattering. They would fire through the canvas. No, that was foolish; they’d hit no one. Another said that they could leap from the wagon. Another queried Hufilaki about how to tear the canvas from the wagon all at once, as if it were a magic-show. Hufilaki responded by describing how the canvas could be rigged, with his players’ help, to do so.

“Player. Why do you help us?” one soldier said.

Sirat scraped, scraped, and hoped the noise didn't carry.

"I help myself and my troupe," said Hufilaki. "We don't want to starve, and a village should be more than enough ransom, don't you think?"

Some agreed. Others argued that the women should be kept, since the bandits had few. Khus Takach told them the village girls would surely do what the bandits told them. Sirat, sworn to virginity, merely smiled at the banter and kept sawing—

There! The link was cut. Now, to tie it with a raveled thread...there. Done. The chain would part at a tug.

The men asked Hufilaki to do some magic tricks. He responded by pulling money-beads from soldiers' ears and producing cotton scarves dyed with safflower, glowing pink and gold in the fire's light. The soldiers gasped and laughed like children. Eventually the Khus told him to gather his troupe and work on the wagon. Sirat was sent back to her men, to whom she explained the situation, and quietly passed the whetstone. Her men napped, pretended to nap, or played games of dice where Butros' light came through the trees. She sensed—more than saw—that some at least managed to cut their bonds.

As first-night (the thirty-hour period before the midnight transit) began, the monotheists prayed, bowing as they could to the west and reciting the Charen. Sirat joined, nodding at old Venkop to lead the prayers. Under her recital, she noted that some of the bandits heard them and joined in. As for the circus, they didn't exactly seem churchy to her, but she saw Hiurchat repeating the verses of God with them.

The sunset prayer ended, and she went to the guard and asked whether the men might at least help the players in fixing their wagon. He nodded, and a bandit guard took them there.

Hufilaki was busy, with huge Hesthak's aid, peeling the canvas cover from the long hoops of bamboo which held it. As with most vehicles on Pendleton's World, the circus wagon was doweled and pegged together from bamboo, with little enough metal. Irksome, thought Sirat. She could use a nail or a spike.

She could use Whiteflame.

Hufilaki greeted her and set her and two other soldiers of her company to emptying the boxes, baskets, and crates of the troupe's things out of the wagon. Cheron directed the stacking of the boxes, and Vesh opened and rifled through them, her hands a quick blur in the dim light. A guard watched them and quickly grew bored.

Cheron touched Vesh on the hand, handing her a basket. When Sirat looked at her, Cheron looked boldly back, smiling in the blue of night. Sirat looked past the flirtation, the giggling, the tiny romances that broke purdah. (Not all the faNurro observed purdah, but so many places did that veiled women were no rare sight, and a man violated their sacred privacy at his peril.)

Vesh was moving things from one place to another. Sirat could not understand how stage illusions worked, but she knew that it was misdirection. One looked at the trickster's hands, seeing the very thing, and did not know it. She delighted in Hufilaki's antics but could never have done such things herself. Cheron's talk was merely the patter for the trick. Her flirtatious asides to the guard, her winks and smiles, were not attraction but distraction.

This was magic, wasn't it?

The magic worked by her wizard master relied on gears and chains and wires, on Lord Sun's power and wind harnessed like a manhorse, on weights and caustic and shackled lightning. But this was different.

Vesh passed her the razor. She didn't see how; the singer's hand brushed hers, and the thing was suddenly in her left hand, a heavy blade of bronze folded into its nacre-and-brass handle. She looked at the woman, who did not look at her, and then contrived, under the guise of pawing her own crotch, to conceal the Dark-damned thing in her pants. "Here, take this over there," said Cheron, "and stack it up with the others." The razor provided a manly silhouette; she knew sworn-virgins who padded their pants with rags.

She took a knife from the girl then was sent back to her men, as if the guard was suspicious. Or wanted to be alone with the girls.

She sat again among her imprisoned men as first night's sleep came. She gave Venkop the knife. The girl who'd served them appeared again and brought waybread. "How're you feeling?" asked Sirat of the girl.

"I ate some porridge, but I was sick."

“I am Sirat,” said the warrior who was named for the marsh-lion. “What do they call you?”

“I am Vureth,” said the girl. In the light of Butros, Sirat could see that she had been hit. “I am Takach’s woman.”

“He,” Sirat said, “is the father, then.”

“I guess he is,” said the girl, Vureth. “But the—”

“Don’t talk to them, girl!” The guard came over, arm raised, and the girl flinched, fearing.

“Khus!” said Sirat sharply. That got the guards’ attention. “Is she your foe?”

The man did not strike the girl, but thrust her roughly aside. “Don’t meddle, soldier, or you’ll know worse punishment,” the guard said.

“I am a warrior and don’t fear my fate,” said Sirat. “But this girl is no more my foe than she is yours.”

“Apeshit!” the guard snarled and walked to the other end of the glade. So, Sirat thought, he’s been ordered not to strike us, or he fears to. Which was it?

She didn’t know. After a while, the girl was brought back, hands chained, to sit with the imprisoned soldiers. “Sit here,” said the guard, “and think whether you’ll join them.” Sirat contrived to spread her blanket-cloak near where the girl Vureth was. The guards watching, they slept.

She woke, her men rousing her, in deep night, Butros in full above the glade. “Midnight prayer, Second. Will you lead us?”

She did, and afterward, as Pendleton’s tiny-seeming shadow crawled across the blue-and-white striped disc of Butros, she took stock: all the men had managed to cut their bonds using the whetstone. She knew that the circus group would take their wagon into the village soon. Was this the time to strike? She took stock of weapons—three knives, one folding razor and her own concealed one, some bits of rope and spikes that could be improvised to harm, two slings wrapped as headbands... And plenty of stones!

She told her men to slip their bonds at her signal and find their way into the village, warning it if they could. She could not write a note while guards watched, not even with Butros’ white-blue face lighting the indigo sky. It was too obvious.

She prayed to the Lady Sun, asking for light in finding the priceless blade, swearing to honor it. Then she sat in meditation for a while. When the midnight transit had commenced, they could see the bandits had begun to slip out; they were guarded by a single guard. "Here," Sirat whispered to Vureth who sat by them. "Go up to the guard and distract him, if you could? One way or another? It will help." The girl nodded, thought it over a bit.

Vureth rose, went to the guard, and began talking. Soon it became an argument—a noisy one. Sirat's men looked to her then, at her signal, slipped their bonds, rose and melted into the woods. As for the wounded, those who could not walk shammed sleep; the rest rose and went off, serving as decoys if nothing else. Sirat watched them go, stayed silent, and when the girl Vureth slapped the guard and screeched at him, she shed her own bonds and was off.

Now. Where was her sword? She crawled, like the great cat whose name she bore, round the camp to the circus tent where the bandits' Khus had spoken to them. There were no guards, though an aged woman dozing by the cookfire, her pans scrubbed with scouring-rushes and hung to dry. *Not my concern.* Bedroll, check—nothing there. Lockbox... she had it open, and there were sacks of money-beads, ten bolts of silk and some gold wire. She was no monk; she took strings of beads and a bracelet. Perhaps Vureth would like it, she thought and then wondered why she thought of Vureth. Armory? There was a rack of arms, though it was mostly empty.

She found their manhorses in a pen guarded by a boy. Slip up behind him? Strike him, hard, behind the ear? There was a voice—a manhorse's voice—from the corral, saying "Rider! Rider!"

It was Lop-Ear, her own well-trained beast.

Now the guard looked at the manhorse (not all of the huge primates could speak) and—

*Done!* he fell bloody and unconscious; she took his spear. While she gathered a remuda of manhorses, shoulder-saddled her own, and as many more as she could, he woke, dazed. She rode out, the huge primates stepping delicately over the boy. Maybe he would live. Manhorses made noise, of course, but she would rather ride than walk; the height advantage was good as well. Razor, a spear, her coat of mail—she was ready.

First she took the three-meter manhorse over to the prison glade. Two wounded men slept there, and the guard lay bloodied from a wound in the groin. The girl's work? She couldn't know. She rode, quartering the dark woods, the Hundred Stars dim tonight in the deep-blue sky, Butros' light sometimes visible, sometimes not, in the night. The deep leaf litter hid most tracks, but a manhorse was quieter than the sort with hooves, which Pendleton's World lacked.

She rode, casting Lop-Ear back and forth over the track of woods and finding two of her men, whom she mounted on spare manhorses. "When we see the bandits, do it quietly, but don't leave them alive," she spoke softly.

"Aye, Second," the men replied. The three of them and the remuda of mounts went on, coming to the rice-paddies, dry in the off-season and planted with ten-day maize and field peas; the manhorses moved quietly while Sirat looked for cover. "Second." It was Peret. "Got one here."

He had found a corpse, one of the bandits, she thought, from the man's smell and beard. The scabbard on the corpse's belt was empty. "Who did'im?" asked Jazherap. Sirat motioned for silence in the blue of night; save in the midnight eclipse, Pendleton's sky was never black because Butros filled so much of it.

She motioned Lop-Ear to kneel, staying mounted astride the great beast's shoulders. "Don't know." There was a bloody stab wound in the man's lower back, under the armor-coat, and a messy trail of blood behind him. "Someone stabbed him then didn't finish him off, and he tried to reach the village, maybe?" The men muttered the prayer for the dead, and then went on. A light breeze stirred the young maize tops. Something in the way it rustled...

"Down!" she cried as longbow arrows snapped at them from two men who had stayed hid in the maize, crawling almost flat. Peret screamed, an arrow in his chest. Jazharap, the other soldier with her, slapped his mount's chest between his own thighs and charged, Sirat following. The archers got off three more arrows. One hit Sirat in the belly and stuck in her mail—no worse than being punched, she thought. One cut into her manhorse's arm, and it hollered in pain. One just plain missed, arcing over Jazherap's head. He and his

mount reached the pair of archers, who stood ready to fight with long spears. The mounted warrior had the advantage of height, speed, and reach, but the bandit's spear was two meters of bavath-wood with an iron point, and braced against a mounted charge it would be deadly indeed. Jazherap knocked aside the spear and struck at the bandit using a wooden branch as a club; the sapote heartwood conked the man in the head and sent him sprawling.

The remaining spearman thrust at Sirat, saw her counter, and came past it at her thigh. Ow! She would bleed for that one; she had never been able to abide mail chausses in the heat of Pendleton's. She focused and reversed the spear—get him alive, question him—and clubbed at him with the butt.

Jazherap's club caught him in the ribs and staggered him. The bandit's jab with the spear cut across the thigh of Jazherap's mount, making it scream and ruining any hope of stealth. Jazherap parried with his club, snapping a blow in across the back of the man's neck.

The archer fell. Two down. *Now, where are my men? And where is Cheron?* Then she wondered why she cared about Cheron. The woman was a few years her junior, with bee-stung lips and long black hair; she was as likely to abandon her singer's life and don armor as Sirat was to marry some fat man with broken teeth and mother a flock of stepchildren. And Cheron only flirted with her because she thought Sirat was a man.

She dismounted, tended the wounded manhorse, then her soldiers, and pulled up enough of her mail and under-padding to let her bind the bleeding place where an arrow-splinter had stuck through her armor.

They strapped half-conscious Peret into his saddle and moved on, taking the fallen men's bows. They had to succeed in this. Ahead then, keeping to the line of sight between the tall breadnut patch and the village ahead: "Wouldn't it be shorter to—", asked Jazherap, unused to night stalks.

"Keeps us from being seen," said Sirat. They were best concealed in the black of trees against the indigo sky of Pendleton's night. Clouds moved in...

They saw lanterns and smelled cookfires—the village lay ahead, with its watchtower, protective palisade, and houses round a central

plaza. Sirat went nowhere near the gate; men were there in the blue dark—likely the bandits waiting to storm the place. *Dismount*, her hand signs told Jazherap. *Follow me*. Wounded, this was going to be no fun. How to manage it? A rope ladder wouldn't do; her injured thigh would not bear her armored weight. Jazherap set Peret on the ground, told him to wait. Sirat drew the manhorses closer and climbed atop them.

*Still too short*. Any taller and I'd be a freak, she thought wryly. Hauling Jazherap atop the manhorse's shoulders only made them irritated. Finally, she thought of the circus' tumbling. With much silent signing and no few thwacks, she got the smaller manhorse atop the shoulders of the larger, then climbed atop them and had Jazherap climb them as one did a stepladder and haul her over himself onto the walkway topping the timber palisade. She whispered to the manhorses to wait on the ground.

She felt a tap from Jazherap, who pointed to a watchman too close and noted the ragged beard and machete. The watchman was a bandit as well. They were all over this place, hidden.

Jazherap jumped the man, his hands empty save for the skill Sirat drilled into all her men, and pulled him down. The man bucked him off, took a deep breath to shout the alarm—

Sirat's fist came down on the guard's head, clenching the razor. The bronze and nacre thudded against the man's skull, and he went limp, unconscious or dead. With the razor's blade she cut strips from his dirty tunic and bound him. On, she motioned.

Music came from inside.

The circus!

Was the main group of bandits hidden in the circus wagon? They had to be, else they'd have swarmed out and taken the place.

The two of them crept forward, dodging two women rocking crying babies on doorsteps and a bored apprentice watching an oven (bread did not bake itself, even when the circus was in town). She saw a shape stalking behind a pen of gareep; they closed in and found a loose and crying meatape. Untidiness is not a crime.

They reached the gate, now closed and guarded by town militia, and surveyed it. No sign of the bandit troop yet. They went to the town square, where a crowd stood and sat in light from torches,



Butros and the fires of Ngobi; lovely Urmston showed round the limb of Butros. The girls were dancing as Hufilaki and Hiurchat played a lively tune: Sirat saw them smiling. Then great Hesthak emerged into the torchlight to the awed shrieks of the villagers, and the girls climbed as he threw them up and caught them.

How could Sirat, hiding in shadows, warn the village? Warned, they might turn on the bandits and massacre them in the wagon. But would they trust a ragged soldier, one wounded to boot? Likelier to assume she was a bandit herself. Present her learning?

That would work if this peasant village had a magic-maker, an adept who fixed steam-pumps, rotated crops, operated a clattering suntime. She knew of no such person, though many towns under Etroklos' sway boasted such. Etroklos prided himself on giving his subjects the small and useful magics.

How was she supposed to find... No, it wouldn't work. If a stranger—a soldier—appeared unannounced, then it would cause panic. Unless...

She motioned Jazherap to follow and began a crawl round the town square, slithering in stacks of firewood, bundles of bean curd hung to dry, stinking pickled fish in giant crocks, dyer's indigo cloth hung to dry, on and on.

She peeped between a stack of pots and saw the show: Hufilaki performed magic illusions, motioning an amazed child to stand so, to walk so, as he performed the tricks. Nice.

Presently they were behind the wagon. "Here's my idea," she told Jazherap. "If we just appear, the village will panic and be the bandits' meatapes for the killing. But if we slip on stage, the players know us, and they'll pretend we're part of the show, right?"

Jazherap thought for a while then said, "Second, are you sure that this is going to work?" He carried the bandit's machete; it seemed likely to serve well in close quarters.

She took a deep breath and then replied, "I'm not. But it's the best idea I've got. So here's what we'll do..."

Jazherap slinked around to where huge Hesthak had stepped off the stage and quietly spoke to him at length. When Hiurchat, took a short break, he joined the conversation and glanced at Sirat. He showed no amazement. Had he expected this? Planned on it?

“They can see us through the peep-slits in the wagon,” said dark Hiurchat. “They will wait till the end of the show and then surge out. Two will open the village gates and the rest, who wait outside, will rush in.”

“Can they see us here?” asked Sirat in a whisper. On stage, Hufilaki had begun a sort of juggling duel with the girls: they threw him silly objects, such as a wine-skin, a doll, and a glove, and he would juggle them in a fountain pattern, then throw one or two items back to the girls, and they’d throw him another. For a moment, Sirat watched dumbfounded as the girls invited the audience to throw anything into the stage area, and the villagers tossed in a sickle, a long braid of garlic, a lit torch, bricks of cheese, and so on and on. (To Sirat’s relief, no one threw in a baby.)

Hiurchat said, “They’ll see us if we keep talking. Can you juggle?”

“Sun’s blood, no! What do you think I am?” cried the warrior.

“Then can you fake a—I don’t know—a sword-duel?” asked the circus player.

Hesthak stood by, saying nothing. Sirat wondered what the huge man was thinking. “I can. Do you have swords, then?”

He produced two tin weapons suitable for a battle with mannequins and shrugged. As Vesh tossed a cactus pad into the juggling fountain, which Hufilaki batted deftly about with weavers’ battens, Sirat asked, “So what do we do? Battle with these and then get slain when the bandits come roaring out?”

“I think we can do better,” said Hiurchat. “Hufilaki has something for you, warrior. Though he’d thought to use it himself.” Sirat’s heart leaped. Could it be?

They leaped onto the stage as Hufilaki threw firewood and a saw into the air and didn’t so much as bat an eyelash as the two “warriors” engaged in a fierce-looking battle with their fake weapons. Up and down the stage Hiurchat and Sirat “raged”, with Cheron as the “captive princess” and slim Vesh as a “betraying minx”, roles they assumed without coaching. Hufilaki continued his crazy juggling act to the side of the stage, and then, when Hiurchat pretended to drive Sirat down, he whispered to the warrior, “Here!” Sirat rose, pretending to cut and thrust at Hiurchat then “dropped” the fake sword, on which Hiurchat put one boot. The audience gasped.

Then suddenly through the air came Whiteflame, concealed somehow in Hufilaki's robes, unsheathed and wrapped in pig's hide to prevent the terrible edge from killing him. Sirat grabbed it, brandished the ancient weapon, let the light of Butros' face glitter from the jewel at the hilt, grown with a faVashala saint's relic inside. There was a rumbling noise—

Bandits swarmed from the wagon. In the lead was the Khus Takach, Sirat's crossbow in his hands. He shot two village-men at once while his men killed three more, and the rest of the brigands left the cramped pageant-wagon armed and dangerous. "Surrender, or die! This is no jest, peasants. I am the Khus Takach. Who speaks for this village?"

An elderly woman got up. "I am the elder woman of the Mi'afma lineage. I speak for my people." Takach strode up to her with crossbow in hand. She walked with a stick of bamboo in one hand and wore a soldier's belt.

"Old woman, surrender to me, and you will live—your people also. Do you understand?"

Sirat discreetly withdrew to the shade—had they seen her against the bright lamps?

The old woman stood straight and proud, and she said "I know right well that you are a bandit and a thief, or else you'd wear some lord's colors and come by the rules of Hemishi, the warrior-path. To attack you when I have a stick, and you have bow and sword would be merely courting my death, but you won't profit from assaulting this place." Her words were spoken to carry.

"So, do you yield, elder woman?" said Takach.

"I do, as I must. My folk are common farmers, no more." She seemed to sag a bit.

"And you folk here, do you surrender to us?" He surveyed the villagers.

There were murmurs, assents, denials. "Aye, we do," said an older man whose two wives stood by him.

Just then Jazherap and Sirat shot two of the bandits from hiding.

Takach shouted, "Kill all who oppose us! Those who surrender, behind me!" His men formed a rough line and began shooting at ill-seen targets: Sirat, Jazherap, and two of the villagers who'd grabbed

hunting bows and spears. Arrows stuck in Jazherap's mail. Sirat fired back those she had taken from the fallen enemy archers then charged with Whiteflame in her hand. Takach's men rushed to the town gate, opened it, and more men—his reserves—rushed through shooting and stabbing.

One bandit came at Sirat with a spear. Sirat parried it and countered with a high cut, but the man dodged. She feinted at his face, jumped back from a spear-thrust, then swiped at him with the blade. He countered as a comrade of his chopped at her with a machete. The chop severed the spear, and as the spearman goggled at her, Sirat shoved the point through his neck.

The man with the machete hacked, but her parry weakened the blow enough that her mail stopped it. Mail wasn't magic, only metal, but it helped. She'd have a bruise, she thought, as she fenced with him. His heavy chopping weapon could hurt if it got through. A move to trick him—there! And Whiteflame's glasslike, porcelain-smooth blade chopped through the machete's, all her strength behind it, and stuck, lacking enough momentum to carry it through the forged iron of the machete blade. The two warriors wrestled, and Sirat reckoned that he was stronger than her. He forced the half-severed weapon toward her, toward her face; she wore no helmet. It came closer, and then she shifted her weight, near to falling, and hung from the blade for a moment. Whiteflame's blade snapped the machete's iron in two. Sirat fell into a crouch, counterattacked with a punch, and his machete-stump socked her in the belly, blunt but metal, and ugly. He hoped to knock the wind from her. She was sweating, drops flying from her short hair into the earth of the village common where they dueled the bandits. In the corner of her eye she saw Jazherap going at it with two of the thieves as two stout farmers beset Takach with axes. Great Hesthak battered the bandits nearest him with a beam taken from a porch. Focus, Kitten, she told herself and faked a cut. She came back with a thrust, and the bandit gasped as the blade cut into the side of his throat. He gave a gurgling scream, dropped his weapon, and fell.

Arrows were coming from a housetop. One bandit shouted, clutched his neck, and fell bleeding. Another fell with an arrow sticking crazily from one shoulder, thrashing.

Sirat breathed, slowly and deliberately, in the moment when no one attacked her and recalled what her teachers had beaten into her after she was no longer a girl named Kitten but a man named Sirat, the marsh-lion. She stood and surveyed the melee.

There! Men were sniping from a rooftop. They looked to be her own men's arrows, from the screaming and thrashing of their victims. Etroklos issued arrows poisoned with nux vomica, and Sirat issued orders not to waste them. Old Venkop was directing. Good.

The bandits were in two knots now, one round Takach and one by the great bavath tree which shaded the common. A maniac bandit leapt at giant Hesthak and threw a spear. The great strongman fell pierced through the face, roaring in a spew of blood. His club fell on the man who would kill him and crushed the bandit's chest. On the night breeze, the scent of bavath leaves contrasted with the blood-and-crap stink of battle. She was wounded. Drawing energy into her by the hemishi discipline, Sirat looked for where she could apply force.

If Takach fell, she could scare the others into yielding, perhaps. If he did not fall—

She walked toward where he fenced, two villagers dead at his feet. A scream from her right drew her eye for a moment: Hufilaki had fallen from some wound. Cheron stood atop him with a sword taken from a fallen bandit, daring any to come near and looking rather splendid with a torn sari and blood on her face.

Sirat called out, "Takach, bandit and thief! I am the Khus Sirat Tho'anchur, Second of the armsmen of the Wizard Etroklos. He enforces the laws of the Protector and the Parliament. Lay down arms and face the Wizard's justice, and you may yet live. Kill further and you'll meet death!"

It was clear from his reaction that her fame had not reached this man.

Takach shouted, "Yes, you might claim any great lord whose name lends you might, 'Lion'. Fight me, and I'll kill you, fool that I was to spare you before, you and your clowns, jugglers, and wenches!" They went at it, his own saber against her shining weapon, careful with his parries and counters, so as not to snap the carbon steel of his blade. Arrows rained into the melee and cut down bandits. She tried to catch

him in a disarm but failed. He was good, she thought, as a blow along her arm and hand bruised and cut her; she bled into her glove. Her men cornered the remaining bandits, who yielded, crying for mercy.

“Fine lot of jesters you’ll have, little creature,” Takach gibed. “When you next fight a real man, will you slay them with a clown’s toys? Or fight monks and priests next?” He slashed at her.

“You fight no better than a fat old priest, Takach. Now answer my blade.” She drove on at him, forced him back but failed to see the swordsman’s trick as he cut across her eyes, missed, then cut her forehead and laughed. *Dark!* she swore. *Dark him and apeshit. Breathe now, refuse to be drawn. Be drawn and you die. Feint, and when he expects a cut, feint again, and fast, cut—*

His mail took a cut not strong enough to chop square through the metal, and sweat and blood dripped into her eyes in the night heat. One of her men said, “Second, we’ll take this guy! Stand down, if you want to, sir, and we’ll break his arms, take him in for trial.” She wanted them to do that. She shook her head, and let Takach push her back and turn her so she could see. They dueled in the ring of spectators—bandits held by her men, villagers eager for the bandits’ deaths, angry and ready to mob him.

“Nay, I’ll take him,” said Sirat. “I’ll—”

Takach extracted a knife from his boot—fast—and threw it. It missed her and struck a villager. The woman shouted in pain and was taken away to be bandaged. “Tell them to pull away! This is no show.”

“Aye,” the alderwoman of the Mi’afma said and cleared the village square.

“Sir,” said one soldier, “We can—” Sirat saw movement at one corner of her eye. Takach came at her—

She cut at him, fast, where his armor did not cover his throat; he tried to parry with his hand, and Whiteflame’s point went through leather gauntlet, flesh and bone, and into his neck; his sword came at her in that instant, aiming for her uncovered head—

—to be parried by a bamboo staff in the hands of Vureth. “No,” she said and struck the Khus Takach over the head with the stick. “That,” the girl said, “is for taking me. You are a killer and a rapist.”

“I—” Sirat began, pulling her sword from Takach’s neck, where his blood poured and poured and poured, then turned to where the girl

Vureth wept; Sirat comforted her and told her she was a fine girl—a fine one, and would be a good mother and a lovely bride. And Vureth, with her face caked with dirt and mud and with blood on her skirts from the death wound of Takach, held to Sirat, saying she was a great man and a hero, for she had rescued—

“I am here,” Sirat resumed, “wooing for my master, the great wizard Etroklos, whose might exceeds mine as Lord Sun exceeds the moons. He seeks a fine girl, and to meet with her.”

“He shan’t want me, spoiled as I am; he wants a maiden. But I cook, and I can weave and sew, and I’m good on the trail. Would he want me for a housemaid? I’m no trouble, really, I’m not—”

“He would want,” Sirat said, suddenly decided, “to court you.” She seemed sturdy enough. Oh. Could she read? Sirat imagined teaching her.

“And not yourself, sir?”

“I am sworn from such things,” Sirat answered. “I took the oath long ago.”

“Oh!” She seemed let down. “Well, I could meet your master. If he doesn’t want me, perhaps someone will.” She tried to smile. “Someone nice.”

“Indeed.” They stood, and the elderwoman approached them and bowed.

“Lord Sirat, you have saved us,” she said, “and what we have is yours and for your men. Do you wish women? To be fed, or wine? As for money-beads, we have but little.” Her lineage-name, Mi’afma, meant Ivory. Did they keep elephant-pigs here? Did that matter?

“In truth,” the warrior said, “a bath would be awfully nice.” The elderwoman clapped her hands, and several villagers hurried away to make it so. An old man, skin nearly Rhuthuok-dark, came forth with pots of strong-smelling pastes and creams, bowed, pressing his palms together. “Khus, medicine is here, if you wish it.”

She nodded, and the oldster cleaned her head and arm wounds, with Vureth aiding her to remove her sodden mail and the cotton padding beneath till she wore but an under tunic and her ever-present chest-bindings. “This’ll heal ye, Khus, and no scars to it, if ye wish a jar t’ take with you,” said the bent-over old man as he smeared her

wounds with a brown ointment. “Made from laator, arnica, an’such,” he said.

“Fine work, healer,” she said when her treatment was done, and he refused her offer of pay. Instead she donated a few beads to the village’s little shrine. He bowed again and handed her a stoppered vial made from a joint of bamboo. She tucked it into her pouch, and the old healer went to treat Hufilaki. She saw the villagers boiling water (cooking was done outdoors in the hot season) and reckoned it would be a while ere she bathed. Hufilaki was aware, but badly wounded, with Cheron holding his hand. “You fight well,” Sirat said.

“For a mountebank,” he parried. “I did get you the blade, didn’t I?”

“I can’t thank you players enough. Now. I know that you magickers never explain your tricks. But. How?” Sirat asked.

“He will not explain it, and so it falls to me,” said Cheron, who was awfully nice-looking for someone who’d just been in a battle. (*How did she do it?* wondered the warrior). “The bandits climbed into the wagon, and he had got hold of Takach’s iron sword. Your magic sword was cutting into a man’s breeches, or some such, and when Takach shifted it to fit all the men into the wagon, Hufilaki switched the two, pretending to adjust it. Simple, really.”

“Simple if one knows how to do it,” said Sirat. “I never could. Hufilaki, Khoresh’s son, and Cheron, daughter of Faram, you are true magicians. Will you perform before my master, the wizard of the Tower?”

Hufilaki was asleep, eyelids shut, as the healer bound his wounds. “Many thanks, great Khus. Perhaps we shall. Your sword was the magic we needed,” said Cheron. Sirat kissed her on the forehead, which made her blush; she kissed the warrior’s hands in return. Vesh sat by Hesthak’s corpse, crying, as Sirat saw.

Sirat sent a detail out to bring the wounded in.

Vureth came and said, “Lord Sirat, will you bathe?” Sirat smiled to herself at the idea that Vureth was jealous—she couldn’t be, could she?

“I’ll bathe, yes,” and when Vureth drew near, she added, “Alone.” The girl looked relieved. “Thank you,” she said and nodded at Cheron, then went to the alderwoman’s house where there were towels, hot water, and soapnut.

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*J. Comer is a writer and teacher. He lives in Houston, Texas.*

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# Retrospective: The Best of C.L. Moore

By JEFFRO JOHNSON

***C.L. Moore, author *The Black God's Kiss*, billed as “the weirdest story ever told”, was both prolific and profound in her influence on science fiction in her day; Jeffro Johnson looks at the work of this author who is today often erased or forgotten!***

C. L. Moore is a difficult author to discuss. In the first place, she is so revered she makes for an imposing subject matter. On the other hand, the things that are most often asserted about her are in fact *false*. She did not, for instance, cloak her identity as a woman in order to break into the field of science fiction.<sup>[2]</sup> Meanwhile, the era in which she wrote has been virtually erased from science fiction history. If the pulp period comes up at all, it is often mischaracterized, dismissed, discounted, or even slandered. In the minds of even dedicated fans, science fiction leaps from the days of Jules Verne and H. G. Wells directly to the "The Big Three" of Heinlein, Clarke, and Asimov.

Where does that leave us? It means that if C. L. Moore is ever brought up, it is typically in a passing remark about how she revolutionized science fiction and fantasy with her groundbreaking female protagonists. People will venerate her... but very few people are discussing her actual work. And that's a shame, really—her stories are positively stellar, and they really hold up. She deserves better, really. You see, C. L. Moore wrote some of the best science fiction and fantasy ever penned. In fact, I think it's fair to say that her work is in some cases better than what is generally accepted as the "best" the field has to offer—better than *Dune*. Better than the *Foundation* Trilogy. Better even than *Earthsea* or *The Chronicles of Narnia*.

Now, a longtime fan might point out that this goes without saying, but it really doesn't. Fandom has moved on more than once since Moore's day. From any given era, there's often only room for a couple of giants to remain in the collective consciousness. In role-playing games, for instance, Marc Miller and Ken St. Andre do not have even a fraction of the stature of a Gary Gygax, despite the depth and breadth of their contributions. Moore is similarly overshadowed by H. P. Lovecraft and Robert E. Howard, perhaps because the latter two launched two distinctive genres that endure to this day. And while Moore can be credited with doing the first "time tours" story, that's a fairly niche thing that isn't really comparable to Cthulhu mythos or swords & sorcery.

The thing that most strikes me in reading *The Best of C. L. Moore* is the extent to which she fits in with the other writers of her period. This is something that is left out of the tributes to her by people that are only interested in portraying her as laying the groundwork that would prepare the way for later and radically subversive authors. But while Moore may have legitimately been an inspiration to such people, she betrays absolutely no desire to play the part of an iconoclast. Given that Francis Stevens actually followed that route decades before Moore even hit the scene, the fact that Moore passed on that approach is not because it was unthinkable at the time.<sup>[3]</sup>

Indeed, Moore was a fan of the top weird fiction authors of her day. In a letter to Robert E. Howard, she gushed that she stood "in absolute awe" of him. Her stories have countless connections to other pulp tales that betray just how deeply she embraced the conventions of the field. "Shambleau" is a horror story that reworks a classical myth in the context of a science fiction setting. The result is well in line with weird fiction dating back to even before the twenties. The low-gravity super-leaps of Edgar Rice Burroughs's John Carter put in an appearance in her "Black God's Kiss", as does the weird mind-bending geometry invoked in Lovecraft's stories. "Tryst in Time" begins like one of Stanley G. Weinbaum's Haskel van Manderpootz stories—with the hero being cut from virtually the same cloth as the protagonist from A. Merritt's "Through the Dragon Glass."

While it is not unusual for authors of this period to reference the classics in their stories—de Camp and Pratt's Harold Shea stories romped through everything from Spenser's *Fairie Queen*, the *Orlando Furioso*, and the *Kalevala*, for instance—Moore maybe shows a little more panache here. Her "No Woman Born" is in conversation with James Stephens's poem "Deirdre" while recapitulating Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. Her "Vintage Season" invokes Chaucer's Pardoner. Similarly, her famous Jirel of Joiry stories are not set in some watered-down never-never land but take place in a fully realized historical setting—a fact which is made clear the moment the title character dons the "greaves of some forgotten legionary" and heads off into a frightening underworld in search of some arcane implement of revenge.

It had to be that way, of course. Weird fiction necessarily drew on a wealth of literature, myth, legend, and history because there simply wasn't a large body of genre fiction to borrow from or build on at the time. *This* is the environment that the literary antecedents of Princess Leia, Han Solo, and Chewbacca sprang from. (They are patterned after characters like Edgar Rice Burroughs's Dejah Thoris and C. L. Moore's Northwest Smith and Yarol, of course.) While her peers are often chided for their facile and dated notions about how the future would ultimately play out, Moore succeeded in transcending the conventions of her day. Compare "Vintage Season" to Fredric Brown's depictions of far future vacuum tubes, Canada's prohibition, and bebop-like eighties music which he extrapolated in his story "Pi in the Sky". Just as Stanley G. Weinbaum produced some of the first aliens that were truly *alien*, Moore managed to create time travelers from the future that are just as believable now as they were in 1946.

I do have to admit that I do feel somewhat betrayed. C. L. Moore's work is so good that I really do wonder why no one insisted I read it before now. More than that, it puts the lie to nearly everything I've ever heard said about the pulp era. According to the reigning stereotypes, it's supposedly all about square-jawed heroes punching evil in the face in order to get the girl in the end. But far from being exercises in misogyny or Madonna-Whore complexes, it was not uncommon for the stories to achieve almost transcendental effects

when dealing with romance. Where Belit's love for Robert E. Howard's Conan made it possible for her to return from the grave to save him, C. L. Moore's love-struck characters from "The Bright Illusion" were willing to gamble everything on the small chance that they might be reunited in the afterlife. Her "Tryst in Time" presents a romance that is gradually developed across dozens of time periods. While the emotional beats she presents are often a little more nuanced thanks to the perspective that she brings that her male colleagues lacked, she is nevertheless just as much of a romantic as A. Merritt.

What is perhaps most surprising about Moore's stories is her handling of religious elements. Now... she was not unusual in her penchant for relying on Christian lore in her tales. That sort of thing was almost ubiquitous during the pulp era. Where Moore stood out from the crowd was in how far she went developing these elements. Sometimes she is subtle with them, of course—as in prayer and concepts of God being ancient invocations against a very real evil in "Shambleau", and in "Black Thirst" there is a palpable threat of a damnation—a fate worse than death that is never fully defined. In "Fruit of Knowledge", however, she turns the story of Adam and Eve into what can only be described as an epic romance which hinges on imbuing the concept of "forsaking all others" with a supernatural significance.

Recent fantasy and horror fans that have grown up under the assumption that these genres are necessarily irreligious or anti-Christian will be shocked to see that Jirel of Joiry—one of the most famous fighting-woman of all time—adventures in a setting where a Crucifix has significant power:

Abruptly she felt the immense, imponderable oppression cease. No longer was she conscious of the tons of earth pressing about her. The walls had fallen away and her feet struck a sudden rubble instead of the smooth floor. But the darkness that had bandaged her eyes was changed too, indescribably. It was no longer darkness, but void; not an absence of light, but simple nothingness. Abysses opened around her, yet she could see nothing. She only knew that she stood at the threshold of some immense space and sensed nameless things about her, and

battled vainly against that nothingness which was all her straining eyes could see. And at her throat something constricted painfully.

She lifted her hand and found the chain of her crucifix taut and vibrant around her neck. At that she smiled a little grimly for she began to understand. The crucifix. She found her hand shaking despite herself, but she unfastened the chain and dropped the cross to the ground. Then she gasped.

All about her, as suddenly as the awakening from a dream, the nothingness had opened out into undreamed-of distances. She stood high on a hilltop under a sky spangled with strange stars. Below she caught glimpses of misty plains and valleys with mountain peaks rising far away. And at her feet a ravening circle of small, slaving, blind things leaped with clashing teeth.

This is not a setting where its peoples' sincere beliefs are the root cause of the power of religious artifacts. Christianity here corresponds to reality in significant ways just as it does in Poul Anderson's "Three Hearts and Three Lions". And this is not the only parallel between Anderson and Moore on this point. Her story "Daemon" has passages like this that are very similar to ones in Anderson's "The Broken Sword":

"I asked about the banishment, and they said that it had happened long ago, very long ago. A great star had stood still in the sky over a stable in a town whose name I do not know. Once I knew it. I do not remember now. It was a town with a beautiful name.

The skies opened and there was singing in the heavens, and after that the gods of Greece had to flee. They have been fleeing ever since."

And for those wishing to know more about how the question of whether or not elves have souls can be an absolutely critical question in a fantasy setting, that same story has this passage:

"Those who lost their power when the Child was born can never lay hands upon men who possess a soul. Even a soul as evil as the captain's stood like a rock between him and the touch of Pan. Only the pipes could reach a human's ears, but there

was that in the sound of the pipes which did all Pan needed to do."

But it's not these explicitly Christian elements that cause so many of today's readers to recoil in horror from her work. Really it is the things that she brought to weird fiction *as a woman* that will be most "problematic." As Matthew Gatheringwater puts it in his review on Goodreads:

"C.L. Moore is on my feminist history of science fiction reading list, but the role of women in her stories is not exactly liberated. In fact, it is pretty disturbing, even when considered within its own cultural context. Despite this, she turns out to be the author [sic] of stories I've never forgotten after reading them once during childhood. *Vintage Season* is timeless, despite having been written in 1946. Still, her particular kind of horror--dark, wet, clinging, and feminine--is not mine."

And it's true. C. L. Moore's stories are drenched in an overpowering femininity that is practically unimaginable today. As tough and streetwise as Northwest Smith is, he is nevertheless powerless in the face of the *Shambleau's* glamour. He's so mesmerized that he can't even agree to kill such a dangerous creature on sight in spite of the mortal threat he knows it poses. *Jirel of Joiry*, in her most famous story, defeats her antagonist not with superior swordplay but with a demonic kiss.

"*Greater than Gods*" presents a woman-dominated future that is devoid of war as many later science fiction writers posit. The kicker is that it's nevertheless completely primitive due to woman's lack of interest in science, invention, mechanics, and engineering. Even that is not so offensive to today's ethos as what she did in "*No Woman Born*". Compare it to Kary English's 2014 story "*Totaled*" where a female scientist becomes a "brain in a jar"—the few weeks Kary's protagonist gains as a result of this are dedicated to completing her research and gaining recognition for it. In contrast, Moore's protagonist focused on song and dance—she is successful in making a comeback as a performer in her lithe robotic body... but even as she is consumed with being beautiful and feminine, there is

nevertheless a manic edge to her emotional state that threatens to turn her into a striking answer to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*.

Moore's writing *is* surprisingly potent horror. I'm not sure that people can really write something like that today. And though people like Mr. Gatheringwater are legion, I can't help but think that Moore had access to an emotional palette that far exceeds what is conceivable among today's creators. She certainly deserves every accolade she has ever gotten as a grandmaster of science fiction.

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# Notes from the Nest

By P. Alexander (Ed.)

It's been an exciting time to be a part of the new pulp revolution! The people have spoken and shown that they are hungry for exciting stories with action and romance. Over the last year, several new magazines devoted to telling stories like they used to have popped up, and thanks to the efforts of scanners, dozens of old pulps that were unavailable less than a year ago can now be perused on internet archives. Of course there will still be a place for the dull think piece or saccharine drollery, but you will find them neither here nor, hopefully, within the pages of the other exciting retro-pulp magazines which have been springing up.

One criticism we've received, which fascinates me, is that we've ended up being more *Weird Tales* than *Planet Stories*. And it's true, we've tended to receive more stories in the heroic fantasy vein than *Raygun Romance*, despite aiming to be more of a *Sword & Planet* zine from the outset. We do have a few more sci-fi stories in our next issue, though a lot of them still have a fantasy bent. That our biggest complaint is that we're like *Weird Tales* make me think that we're at least not missing the mark on recapturing pulpy goodness. Our Spring 2017 issue may disappoint those wanting more hard or semi-hard science fiction goodness, as we're planning on revisiting Misha Burnett's Eldritch Earth setting, devoting the entire issue to the stories of the Eldritch Earth Geophysical Society, but we can promise some returning fan favorite authors next year in that and our other issues.

If you want to see more stories and more variety (and more *Raygun Romance*), the best thing to do is to support the magazine and spread the word to your friends. We want to remain a place where authors can sell their stories and be paid better than token rates for their work. We want to make good SFF pay!

We'd also like to thank our awesome volunteer readers, Karl K., Carlos C., John P., and Xavier L. who has graciously offered his

copy-editing assistance.

See you all in time for Christmas with our double-stuffed Winter issue!

**-P.A., Ed.**

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[1] Meaning "Warrior" or sometimes "Priest". Though Khus is an honorific and title of nobility across Nurro, any with a sword might call themselves so.

[2] See "C. L. Moore and Leigh Brackett (pulp-1950s)" by Glason Marques for details.

[3] See my post at the Castalia House blog on "Friend Island" by Francis Stevens for more on this.