Pirates!

Fantasy Faction Monthly Writing Contest Anthology, September 2016

Various Authors

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# Pirates!

### Fantasy Faction Monthly Writing Contest Anthology, September 2016

Aug, 2012. Xiagan dresses as a pirate for some long forgotten joke on this lovely forum with its long gone pirates writing group.  
  
  
Ahoy, me beauties!!! Ye all know o' course that t' 19th o' September be Talk Like A Pirate Day.  
So better be prepared and polish up your pirate lin'o! Pirates have a tradition on this here forum and o' course it was no happenstance that Bea posted that pic o' hers today! So get your hooks polished and start spinnin' some yarn! Only bilge rats and land lubbers don't take part!

*All content originally appeared on the Fantasy Faction Forums in the Monthly Writing Contest. You can see more information (and even participate in the forums!) on this particular contest by visiting the site.*  
<http://fantasy-faction.com/forum/(sep-2016)-pirates%21/(sep-2016)-pirates%21-submission-thread/>

# Table of Contents

1. [Crisis of Faith by Alex Hormann](#story1)
2. [The Pirate-Maiden by The\_Gem\_Cutter](#story2)
3. [‘X’ Marks the Spot by m3mnoch](#story3)
4. [The Field of Broken Sails by NightWrite](#story4)
5. [The Treasure of Saint Curio by tebakutis](#story5)
6. [Greenship by Jmack](#story6)
7. [The Wrecker's Horn by Captain of the Guard](#story7)
8. [The Deep Blue by AlmightyZael](#story8)
9. [Pirats by wakarimasen](#story9)
10. [The Rule of the Curse by SugoiMe](#story10)
11. [The Spirit of Conflict by LightRunner](#story11)
12. [The Precious Cargo by Elfy](#story12)
13. [Tales From the Sea: Captain Longbraid and the Purple Kraken by night\_wrtr](#story13)
14. [The Young Sailor and The Pirate Prince by WarbossTae](#story14)
15. [A Seasick Sword by Anonymous](#story15)
16. [Friendly fire by Osahon](#story16)
17. [The Red Chicken by Lanko](#story17)

# Crisis of Faith

Iruep Vaket first realised his head was destined for the chopping block when his crew told him they'd accidentally kidnapped the Patriarch of Eroa.

"We will all lose our heads because of this," were the first words he said, barring his initial torrent of expletives.

The second thing he said, and the first step towards avoiding that grim fate, was, "How on God's blue seas did you manage that?"

Iruep's first mate, the leader of the offending kidnappers, scratched his head in a mirror of Iruep's own confusion. "Not a clue," he said.

*Plausible enough*, thought Iruep. Noke had never been famed for his intellect. Or his cunning. Or . . . Well to be honest Noke wasn't famed at all. "How can you capture the Patriarch of Eroa, and not be aware of it?" Iruper demanded, grabbing his first mate and shaking him by the shoulders. "He's seven feet tall, wears purple at all times and smells like God's own garden."

"In fairness, Captain," said Noke, "Ain't none of those things really true."

Iruep released his hold on the other man. "What do you mean, they're not true? I've seen the Patriarch. New Year's Feast, it was. Two years back. The man was massive. Huge. A giant. And he was definitely wearing purple."

"And the smell, Captain?"

Iruep slapped the grin off Noke's face. "I was a little too far away to be sniffing the most high holiness, you idiot. Funny thing about pirates, they don't let us get too close to people of wealth." Iruep began to pace back and forth across the wooden deck. How can you not notice a man like that?"

"Because he ain't a man like that," protested Noke, raising his hands in exasperation. "He's pretty short actually. Must be he wears stilts when he has to go and do his preaching. Like an actor, or one of those circus performers." Noke snorted. "He smells like the back end of a cow, too. If the colour of his cloth is anything to go by, he's spent too much time near the end of a cow, you ask me."

Iruep paused. "Noke," he said, his voice forcibly calm. "Is it possible that the man you have captured - the man you believe to be the Patriarch of Eroa - is in fact - " the facade of calmness gave way to rage " - A FARMER?!"

Noke, clearly flabbergasted by such an insult to his intelligence, proceeded to move his mouth in a rough approximation of a goldfish's eating habits. "Bu - bu - but he . . . " Noke trailed off.

"But what?"

"But he said he was the Patriarch of Eroa."

Iruep nearly punched the man. "You caused all this fuss over a farmer just because he said he's the Patriarch?"

Noke nodded.

"Would you like to take me trough what happened? In case there is some small, lonely hint of logic in what you have to say."

"Well we pulled ashore, and we hid the boat," said Noke. "And then we walked up to this house. I think it might have been a farmhouse, not sure." He paused. "There were a whole lot of cows sniffing about the place. Like wolves, they were. Anyways, we walked up to the house and did the usual thing, and then - "

"The usual thing?" interrupted Iruep.

"Yes, Captain," confirmed Noke. "The usual thing. So we does that and then the man says - "

Iruep interrupted again. "Care to explain 'the usual thing' to me?"

"Oh, right, yes. Forgot you weren't there when we made the plan. What we usually do is we turn up at the place we're going to rob, and we say 'We are the pirates of the Yellow Forest and we're here for your blood' and so they start panicking. So then we say 'but if you want to keep your blood, we'll take your coin instead' and then they hand us all their gold. Y'know. On account of them wanting to stay alive."

Iruep nodded. There was a startling level of planning to that. Not genius by any means, but more than he'd expected from the likes of Noke. "And then what?" the captain prompted.

"Well we do all that, and the man says, and he says it real fancy, 'forgive me friends for I have no coin, and my blood has already been gifted to God.' We get a little angry about that. Think he's trying to cheat us, I do, and so I says to him, I says 'why would God want your blood, you dirty little farmer?'"

"And he said . . . "

"He said 'I am God's chosen servant, the Patriarch of Eroa' and he starts threatening us with all sorts of religious smiting. So we back off a bit, don't want to tangle with the Patriarch, see? Only then the house burns down."

"What?"

"Remember I said we set fire to the barn?"

"I remember that you neglected to tell me that part of your story."

"Oh? Well, sorry Captain. But we set fire to the barn on pour way to the house and I guess the wind must've blown some sparks onto the house. So by the time the Patriarch's had his speech, his house has burned down around him. Bit of a shame. It was a nice house."

"So if the house burned down, and you were afraid of him, how did he end up on my ship?"

"Well, he ran towards us as the house went down. I figure he was pretty angry. And Boti - do you know Boti, he's one of the new lads. You must know Boti. He fell of the rigging last week, cracked his head open. All fixed now though - Um. where was I? Oh yeah, Boti. So the Patriarch runs at us, he was shouting something, and Boti steps up and whacks him round the head with his sword. Used the flat side, smart lad, or we'd be in trouble, I reckon. And then we panic a bit, because we've sort of just attacked the Patriarch, and we start arguing. Boti says we should run, but I say that we can't leave the Patriarch of Eroa near a burning building - he might get hurt - and so we bundle him into a sack and bring him back with us.

"That's the story, Captain. Simple as I can tell it."

Iruep was silent for a long while. Then he said, "Here's what I see: We have a man in our hold who looks nothing like the Patriarch of Eroa. We found him on a farm. He looks and smells like a farmer. However, for some reason, he tells people that he is the Patriarch of Eroa. My personal opinion on the matter is that he is a liar, and is just trying to save his skin. However, there will always be some idiots who believe a liar like this. So, all we have to do is get him far away enough from Eroa that he can't do any harm."

"But he'll still talk though won't he? What if someone believes him and takes him back to Eroa. Then we'll end up with a bounty on us. I don't want that."

"So we sell him to those northern barbarians. They can't even speak a decent language. And we'll cut out his tongue to be safe."

"What if he writes letters home?"

"We can cut of his hands."

Noke nodded, agrreing with what seemed to him like a perfectly logical course of action. Then he asked, "but what if they ask him questions and he nods yes and no to them?"

"Then we'll cut off his ears."

"What if they write the questions down?"

"Eye-gouging is fairly common practice, I'm given to understanding." Iruep smiled, and turned to leave. He paused. "Noke," he began.

"Yes Captain?"

"Did we just decide to torture and cripple a man before selling him into slavery?"

"Yes Captain."

Iruep's smile vanished. "Does the thought of all that blood make you a little queasy?"

"A bit, yes."

"On second thoughts," said Iruep. "Let's just throw him overboard. If he's the Patriarch, he'll probably know how to swim. Might even give us a reward for sparing his life."

"Seems unlikely Captain."

"A fair point. Throw him over and see if he makes it. Either way, he's God's problem now."

# The Pirate-Maiden

Windswept seas before me, star bright skies above,

Burning ports behind me, tiller held with love.

Not for hate or hunger, I chose blackened sails,

Fleeing farms and farmers, seeking sharks and whales.

Bringing dread to sailors, reaping what they sowed,

Preying on the weaklings, no debts ever owed.

Handsome men I often pulled from burning ships,

Tested strength and courage, tasted trembling lips.

Oceans vast and empty, winds that struck like bombs,

Gales that snapped the masts off, endless windless calms,

Canon fire and sword points glinting in the sun,

All of them I mastered. All of them save one.

Lady Luck that other maiden on these seas,

Ended all my sailing, brought me to my knees.

Corset ripped and dirty, rough the rope holds tight.

Staring boys will dream me, later on tonight.

Not for fear or sadness beats my heart so swift,

Fearing not the hangman, welcoming his gift.

Best to end my voyage swiftly like I sailed,

Windswept seas before me, spirit never jailed.

# ‘X’ Marks the Spot



“Why can’t we skip straight to the ‘X’? We know where the pirate treasure is. We can see it on the map.”

“It’s about the journey, man! We’re gonna do this right.”

Terrance stopped pushing a vine out of his face and stole a backward glance at their little boat, beached and empty. Not only was he sure to regret all of this, but he would probably get bitten by a disease-laden insect. Turning in the direction of Will, he tossed the vine aside and trudged on, “But, the guy had a dozen other maps, for crying out loud. He was wearing a hoodie.”

“That’s because you didn’t notice this map was different than the others. Unlike this one, they all had duplicates.” Will winked at Terrance, tapping the side of his head with his index finger, “But, *I* noticed.”

The two men halted in a clearing — Will, hands on hips, grinned at the choking foliage, while Terrance, wincing, stretched his back with a groan.

“I think we’re here.” Will approached an outcropping of dense scrub.

“Huh?” Terrance studied the glade as Will pawed through the leaves.

“Aha! We are.” Will, gripping the machete, pulled back a handful of branches and lopped them off. “Look at this.”

It was a wide stone wall. Now that Terrance got a good look, it stretched upwards, lost in the tree canopy. Thirty or forty feet of jungle-covered granite.

“It’s about the right shape, I guess. And, it’s certainly big enough. So, sure.”

“Whoa . . . Check this out.” Will was clearing moss and clusters of leaves from the base of the now-recognizable obelisk. There was some sort of animal carved into the stone, about knee height from the ground. “A monkey.”

Terrance glanced at the map. “I don’t see any monkey symbols. Are you sure this is the right place?”

“Of course. It’s not like giant, carved towers pop up naturally in jungles. I’m absolutely sure.” Will rolled up the map and shoved it into his back pocket. “North, we go.”



“That’s the dumbest thing I’ve ever heard.” Dripping with sweat, Terrance swung the machete and attacked the damp undergrowth.

“It’s only dumb because you’re not rich. When we find all that gold, I’ll be able to afford any medicine or medical procedures I’ll ever want.” Will upended his canteen and gurgled down a mouthful of water. “That means, if I want to only eat cinnamon toast, I can. I’ll just take vitamins, and if I get fat, have doctors suck it all out. Problem solved.”

“But, you can’t just eat cinnamon toast forever.”

“I sure can. And I will. With lots of butter, even.”

“No. You can’t. Your body will, like, dissolve or something. You need vegetables.”

“That’s what the vitamins are for.”

Terrance stopped talking. He continued hacking at the vines, imagining they were the synapses in Will’s brain.

“When you’re rich, you can do whatever you want. I mean, *you’re* probably going to do something lame with your half of the treasure. Like, buy a library or something.”

Terrance stopped mid-chop. “Buy a . . . ?”

“Yeah, sounds like something you’d do. Libraries don’t make any money, so you can write it off on your taxes.”

“Aside from libraries being public property that’s paid for by taxes, if it’s not making any money, there’s no income to tax, so no write-off to be had. That’s almost as dumb as the cinnamon toast thing.” Terrance turned back to lopping vines with almost-taxable vigor. His thirty minutes were almost up, then it would be Will’s turn to swing the stupid machete. “No, I’ll probably invest my share of this non-existent gold.”

“People like libraries. Or buy a city park. Just not a pub. The food cost alone would sink it.”

“That’s not how any of this works, Will. Assuming we find a buyer for these priceless gems and jewelry, the government is going to take out a bunch in taxes . . .”

“See? I told you. Tax deductions.”

“. . . And I’ll invest the rest. Probably live off of dividends or the principle or something. That way I’m not . . .”

Will halted, then ran ahead. “There it is! The canyon!”

Terrance gave up. He was thankful for the rest, but at this point, he almost hoped Will would tumble over the edge. His hand twitched. One little shove.

The “bridge”, swaying in the wind, sagged across the canyon in front of them. Far below, a river frothed through the gorge in jagged switchbacks, hungry to swallow travelers stupid enough to try crossing the rotted planks.

Terrance scowled at Will. “Are you kidding me?”

Will shrugged, “What? You wanted adventure.”

“No, I didn’t. You did. We’re going to die the moment we set foot on that bridge.” Terrance pointed to the bridge as it curled and flipped in the wind. “And I’m going to scream your middle name to the *entire* world the *entire* time we’re falling to our deaths.”

“Whoa, easy. There’s no need for threats.” Eyebrows high and eyes wide, he faced Terrance, and pointed. “Besides, see? There’s our monkey friend. We’re going to be safe as a babe in a barrel.”

Terrance sighed, ignoring thoughts of babies trapped, suffocating in a barrel of oranges. Or nails. Or diesel. Instead, he glanced down to where Will gestured, at the base of the wide stone pillars where the various ropes from the bridge attached. Indeed, there was the same monkey figure from the first marker, and it was carved into the rock near the cliff’s edge.

“Yeah, well, you’re going first.”



“Seriously, we could have skipped both Bug Jungle *and* Wet Noodle Bridge. And, we'd have already been here by now.” Standing in front of a dark hole in the base of a cliff, Terrance jerked a thumb over his shoulder. “Our boat is beached about half a mile that way.”

“But think of the fun we’d have missed.” Will hunched, and crept into the darkness.

“You mean the malaria we’d have missed?” Terrance followed close, hand on his friend’s back.

“No.”

“Bird flu?”

“No.”

“How about zika? I hear you can get that from bats.”

Something small winged by their heads, screeching, and they toppled together, slamming against the wall, and nearly fell to the rocky floor.

“When we get back, I’m telling your mom that you’re being a Negative Nelly again.”

“I’m telling your mom you’re trying to make your own decisions again.”

“Well, I’m telling your sister . . . Wait. Is that torchlight up ahead?”

As the two shuffled forward, Terrance watched as the flickering grew more distinct. It was definitely a torch, like one from the movies, and it was clipped to the corner, before the tunnel widened into a large recess.

A man stood at the edge of the firelight, pointing a pistol at the two of them.

Terrance frowned, “Hey, Frank.”

“Hi, Terrance." He nodded, chuckling. "Will.”

Will scrubbed his face with his hands and mumbled, “Oh yeah, I forgot. I may have shown the map to Frank before we left.”

“I guess unlike you two, I came straight here, and expected you guys to already have the treasure. So, I brought this —“ Frank twirled his gun. “— That way I could take it from you. Instead, I can use it to make you carry all *my* gold for me.”

“Good going, Will.” Terrance flipped his leg out and kicked Will in the shin.

Will grunted. “Ow. Jerk.”

Lowering the handgun, Frank shook his head and turned to continue along the dark tunnel beyond, “‘X’ marks the spot, boys.”

Frank clicked on the flashlight in his other hand, and vanished around the first bend. “I’ll be right back, so don’t go anywhere.”

With him gone, Terrance glanced around the tiny cave and noticed, for the first time, the ornate ‘X’ carved above the tunnel where Frank had disappeared. He pointed at it and growled at Will. “Bonehead, not only did you show him the map, but we should have just come straight here.”

Staring at the ground, Will shuffled his feet.

A scream, loud and strong, ripped through the tunnel, ending in a sharp, snapping sound.

The flashlight Frank had been carrying bounced back out of the mouth of the tunnel and rolled, forcing the cavern walls to swim and weave in the light until it finally rocked to a stop. There, exposed by the beam, was a smaller crawlspace behind Will, hidden in the shadows, on the opposite side of the carved ‘X’.

The entrance had the same monkey etched near the bottom of the opening.

Terrance and Will faced each other, their open-mouthed shock simultaneously turning into wide, toothy grins.

Will bent, scooping up the flashlight, got down on this knees, and plunged into the hole. Heartbeats after he disappeared from view, an echo tumbled out of the small opening, “Holy mother of . . . Get in here! We're rich!”

Terrance glanced at the other opening. "Sorry 'bout that Frank. Everyone knows you never go straight to the 'X'."

# The Field of Broken Sails

Bas could hear them scream and shout overhead. Could see it in his mind's eye as the passengers of the HMAS Titan struggled to reach lifeboats while her crew tried to keep them calm. Those set to watch him were long gone as thick smoke snaked down into the brig.

He knew an attack was a possibility. Knew it the moment his location had been broadcasted throughout imperial airspace. The minute he'd smuggled his way onto the airship her passengers and crew had been branded. Both the imperial armada and pirates alike would hunt him for the documents seen in his possession. Pirates had just gotten there first. The price paid for knowledge better left removed from the empire's hands.

A price he'd begun to pay with the destruction at the ministry of defense building days ago.

Bas shook himself. He needed to focus on the lock, needed to focus on his escape. The mission came first. A vigil for the innocent could come later.

Just as he'd gotten the lock, the world fell out from beneath him. The Titan's frame screeched all around him as it drowned out the cries of passengers.

A horrendous cacophony of sounds assaulted Bas as the world rushed up to meet him.

Bas awoke to smoke and fire, sludge and pain. He struggled to stand as disorientation gripped him. His ears rung and his head pounded, cuts and bruises peppered his skin. A long gash ran down his left hip and burned like the fires of damnation.

He thanked the Almighty he could feel anything at all.

His bag was next to an overturned table. Nothing was missing and only a few things were damaged; he sighed at the sight of his latest poem soggy with the remains of a sensory elixir. Bag secured, Bas made his way through the wreckage.

A heavy sense of gloom pressed upon his senses as he made his way out to look upon a swamp. Its forest of broken ships and spirits loomed overhead. A multitude of airships lay broken and smash like great beasts torn open by wolves to die. Ruins of a war decades past. The field of broken sails. By the betrayer, of course the ship would crash in such a haunted place.

Sounds drew his attention upwards to what he knew was the Iron Dragonfly upon sight of its colors. A skyboat had begun its descent. The pirates were coming to finish the job.

A curse and Bas rushed into the swamp, careful of sinkholes and false land. He dodged any ghosts he came upon, wary of their wrath should he run through them.

The sun was at its zenith when he hunkered down in the wreckage of an old slip-class airship, its small frame peaking out of the muck. Bas took a deep breath to steady himself as he dug a vial from his bag. He tried not to gag as the elixir of restoration passed through his lips. Cuts closed and bruises faded. The gash was slow to close and he feared infection, lacking the supplies to fight it off.

His focus was drawn towards the sky once more as the Dragonfly moved overhead. From a hole he saw a quartet of skyboats push off to descend into the swamp. Bas turned his focus inwards as he opened himself to his power. They would learn what Bas lacked in magical power or knowledge of the major arts he made up for in illusions.

As the sun moved towards the horizon many of his illusions encountered men from the Dragonfly. They led any who'd follow on a chase, often through dangerous terrain. Many were sucked under as the land shifted and gave way to deep spaces of muck and water. Some consumed by alligators or animalistic daemon. Others to drown, caught in masses of stranglevine.

The swamp fought for him, yet Bas knew he too would soon be swallowed by its haunted maw.

His illusions began to waver as his focus started to slip. He'd rarely slept since the keep and it was taking its toll, piled upon by the crash. The gash a persistent throb.

“Well, well, the little mite. Holed up like a little mouse,” called a voice from above.

Bas looked up through another hole to find a face found upon posters throughout the empire. Oneros, captain of the Iron Dragonfly.

“What do you want,” he said as his magic buckled. He winced as his power snapped close like a fist to the gut. No illusions would come to his aid now and he could feel his body failing. Bas reached into his bag as Oneros gave a lazy grin.

“How about you just had over your loot, little mite. I might even let you live. After you've answer some questions of course.”

Time had run out and the chase had come to an end. He couldn't be taken alive, they couldn't know it all a ruse. They wouldn't search for his companion if they thought the documents destroyed with him. They'd never know they'd left his hands long before he'd left the city. That he'd blown up the ministry building, snuck aboard the Titan, and sent out the signal to give away his own location just to keep all eyes focused on him.

Hundreds of dead left in his wake for a ruse.

Yet he wouldn't fail or betray his master. “I'd rather see you in oblivion,” Bas shouted. To himself he whispered, “All for the master.”

With a squeeze of his hand Bas triggered the sundisk in his bag. Fire exploded out around him.

Pain, then nothingness.

# The Treasure of Saint Curio

Sailing the seas for plunder and fame was often a glorious adventure, but it did not come without perils. Having a loaded flintlock shoved in one’s face was one peril among many others, and it was one with which Captain Amaro de la Plaza was well familiar. That didn’t mean it annoyed him any less.

“Captain.” Amaro greeted Peter “Dogface” Davis with a tip of his own feathered cap. “Is the pistol necessary?”

“Don’t ‘good evenin’ me, you wily Spaniard.” Davis looked like a dog had chewed up his face and spit it out. “What are you doing in this cave? Answer me, or you’ll answer to God Almighty!”

“This cave” was a tunnel that flooded at high tide. Smoldering torches in wall brackets offered illumination, just enough to make Davis look crazy.

“Accepting Horatio’s invitation,” Amara said in an airy tone. “You?” He hoped Davis’ finger didn’t slip.

“Why’d Horatio invite a pretty little sot like you out here?”

“A promise of treasure and glory?”

“My treasure,” Davis said, “and my glory. I should shoot you right now.”

“True. Yet wouldn’t your chances improve with a man watching your back?”

Davis scowled just a bit less. “You want to partner?”

“Fifty-fifty.”

“Seventy-thirty, or I shoot you right now.”

“Forty-sixty, and we work together to please Horatio.”

“One day,” Davis said, “I’ll smash that clever mouth of yours.” He uncocked his flintlock and holstered it with the others hanging on his chest. “Deal.”

Having now successfully not been shot in the face, Amaro cheerily followed Davis into a low sea cave. Captain Jean du Grammont waited inside, magnificent in a king’s silks. Horatio de Algier waited as well, dark-skinned and beautiful, and torchlight glistened on the gold in his nose, ears, and eyebrows.

“My captains, my captains!” Horatio called. “Today we shall crown one master among you!”

Captain Grammont offered a jaunty bow before rising. His perfect face would make an angel weep. “de la Plaza. Dogface. Did you have difficulty following the map?”

“Shut it, you briny peacock.” Davis spit again—the man did keep a remarkable reservoir of spit—and stomped into the cave. “What’s this ‘grand adventure’?”

“The treasure of Saint Curio.” Horatio beamed. “I’ve come into possession of his map.”

“You sun-dried monkey cock!” Davis worked his stubbled jaw. “You dragged me here for a sea shanty?”

“Is it no shanty,” Horatio said, in a melodic voice that had charmed many a man and woman into his bed, “and tonight, you shall compete for its location.”

Horatio had invited pirate captains from France, England, and Spain, but of course he had. That was, Amaro knew, classic Horatio. The best fence in the Indian Ocean lived for his games.

“As much as it pains me,” Grammont said, “I concur with Dogface. Saint Curio’s treasure is a legend.”

“You better have more,” Davis said, “or you’ll leave this cave with some new holes.”

“That would be … unwise,” Horatio said.

Amaro spun as a slab blocked the cave opening. Davis had flintlocks out faster than Amaro could blink, pointed at Horatio. “You mean to bury us, you coal-faced weasel?”

“Only if I die,” Horatio said, eyes not so merry now. “If I die, none of you shall ever leave.”

“A reasonable precaution,” Amaro added, “when tempers and pistols are involved. Let’s listen, shall we? Let’s hear what Horatio has to say.”

“I concur,” Grammont said. “Where’s your proof, dear man?”

“I hate the way you wankers talk.” Davis lowered his flintlocks and shot Amaro a not-so-subtle look.

Amaro shot a far more subtle nod back. Their partnership remained intact.

With the speed of a veteran cutpurse, three coins appeared between Horatio’s clenched fingers. He tossed one to Grammont, one to Amaro, and one to Davis, who dropped a flintlock to catch it.

Davis bit down and stared. “Real gold.”

“One of thousands,” Horatio promised, “that prove my map accurate.”

“This is the Vatican’s seal.” Grammont turned his coin in torchlight. “Could it be true?”

The gleam in Davis’ eyes revealed his belief. “So what’s tonight’s game?”

“Riddles.” Horatio beamed again. “Only the most clever captain shall claim Saint Curio’s treasure, and thus, only the most clever man shall leave with his map.”

“I do enjoy riddles,” Grammont said, as a gleam entered his own eyes.

“Bugger riddles,” Davis growled. “Let’s wrestle for it.”

“My cave,” Horatio said. “My rules. The first to answer three riddles shall claim the map, the treasure, and, of course, my contract. A ten percent commission.”

“Fair,” Grammont said. “l agree.”

“As do I,” Amaro added.

Davis just grunted. About as much as one could expect.

“First riddle.” Horatio preened. “What has one head, one tail, and no legs?”

“A coin,” Grammont said, before Davis or Amaro could so much as breathe.

“You snot-nosed pantywaist!” Davis glared. “You’re colluding!”

“I swear upon my dear mother’s soul,” Horatio said, “that I have discussed these riddles with no one. One point, so far, to Grammont.”

“Quite.” Grammont grinned wide.

“Second riddle. The more you take, the more you leave behind. What am I?”

“Booty!” Davis shouted.

Horatio merely smiled.

“The answer,” Grammont said, “is footsteps.”

“Two for Grammont,” Horatio said, cocking an eyebrow at Amaro. “Captain de la Plaza, has weather softened your tongue?”

Amaro shrugged. “You’re too clever for me, I’m afraid.”

“Next riddle,” Davis growled. “Now.” He shot Amaro another dirty look, one that said, *You aren’t helping.*

“What has six faces, but wears no makeup?” Horatio asked.

For once, Grammont only frowned.

“A dock whore!” Davis shouted. “A two-faced mutineer!” He grimaced. “A hydra!”

Amaro resisted the urge to roll his eyes. Where had Davis even heard of a hydra? The man obviously couldn’t read.

“No answer?” Horatio said. “A pity. What belongs to you, yet is more often used by others?”

“Ah,” Grammont said.

“Shut it,” Davis warned.

“My own name,” Grammont said, with hands on hips and a smile on his face.

Davis shot Grammont in the head faster than anyone could blink. He dropped the spent flintlock and pulled two more, one pointed at each of them.

“Treachery!” Horatio shrieked. “I will have your head for this!”

“Worry about your own head, you gold-encrusted leech.” Davis motioned with a flintlock. “Map, now.”

“No harbor will take your cursed ship. No pirate shall ever again parley with you!”

“I won’t need any of you,” Davis said, “once I claim Saint Curio’s treasure.”

Horatio glowered. “You violated my rules.”

“Technically,” Amaro added quietly, “he didn’t.”

“What?” Davis and Horatio glared at him.

“You said none would leave if you died,” Amaro pointed out. “As of now, you’re alive. Grammont isn’t,” and with that, he gestured to the warm corpse, “but you never said we couldn’t shoot each other.”

The evil grin that crossed Davis’ face was the best sign yet that Davis wasn’t going to shoot Amaro, too. He turned both flintlocks on Horatio.

“That’s right. You never said we couldn’t shoot each other. Give me that map, and you’ll get your ten percent. I swear.”

“Do as he says,” Amaro suggested. “Really, what choice do we have now?”

Horatio glared, but faced with the Davis’ ferocity (and, no doubt, reckless stupidity) he grudgingly handed over the map.

“The door,” Davis said.

“Open!” Horatio shouted, eyes narrow. “I expect my commission, Davis.”

“Oh, you’ll get that.” Davis backed from the cave, flintlocks raised. “Oh, and de la Plaza?”

“Yes?” Amaro smiled.

“You’re an idiot.” Davis cackled as he vanished.

Horatio sighed. “You’re quite useless in a fight, aren’t you?”

“I prefer not to fight,” Amaro said, “when I can avoid it.”

“Well, now you shall never fight for Saint Curio’s treasure.”

“True,” Amaro said, as he pulled another coin from his pocket. He flipped that coin, a *different* coin, to Horatio, who caught it instinctively.

Horatio’s eyes widened. “This is the Vatican’s seal.”

“Aye,” Amaro said. “It’s on all the coins Saint Curio stole.”

Horatio gasped. “You found the treasure?”

“How do you think you acquired that map?”

“But … I acquired this map from my best fence! She swore to its authenticity!”

“As I’m sure the thief who sold it to her did,” Amaro said. “The thief who stole it from me, after loose talk in a tavern inspired the biggest score of his meager life.”

Horatio stroked his chin, not smiling. “You deceived me.”

“I deceived Davis,” Amaro said, “and perhaps Grammont. Yesterday, three captains competed on the high seas. Now the pirates of England and France shall kill each other while Spain, ever blameless, shall benefit.”

Horatio ruefully shook his head. “You are a most interesting man.”

“And for your silence,” Amaro added, “you shall have your ten percent.”

Slowly, Horatio beamed again. “I have been considering retirement.”

“Oh, and those six faces?”

Horatio cocked his head.

“A die,” Amaro said. “One with twenty-one eyes.”

“You clever rat,” Horatio said. “You knew them all, didn’t you?”

“Aye,” Amaro said. “But I don’t care to be shot in the face.”

THE END

# Greenship

Night on the sea after the storm. The clatter and commotion of men working by lamplight to restore the shredded rigging of their crippled ship.

Lafttak climbs the ratlines, carrying whatever is needed to wherever the bigfolk want it. He may be a passenger, but he can help. Most laugh to see him lifting barrels of tar or coils of rope twice his height, and grunt their thanks, then make the evil eye when his back is turned. Greenfolk aren't very welcome on human ships.

He pauses on a crosstree and thinks of Rintikk, sleeping in their cabin below. He aches to hear her voice. If the wood of the ship was alive, he'd only need to whisper and she'd hear him. But deadwood like this, he'd have to shout; and after the pounding of the hurricane, she needs her sleep.

Belowdecks, Rintikk startles awake to a hand on her sleeve. Morwen, the bigfolk priestess, another passenger on the Kestrel, kneels by her.

"What's wrong?"

“Something comes,” says the priestess.

“Another storm?”

“Something worse.”

Rintikk raises up on an elbow. Lafttak’s place next to her is empty. “Why tell me?”

“The goddess sent me a dream,” The priestess says. “Black wings spreading over a red sky. I was a mouse, and it caught me. I was a fish, and it snared me. I was drowning, and you, Rintikk, were the raft that saved me.”

“Couldn’t the goddess have waited until morning?”

Morwen smiles. “You don’t think much of my goddess. But she thinks much of you." Then she frowns. "Look west.”

Rintikk touches her fingertips to the hull of the ship. Her voice travels easily to Lafttak. He might struggle to speak through deadwood, but Rintikk's magic is much stronger than his.

-Beloved?-

-Heh. You missed me-

-Quiet, idiot. Go higher. Look west-

Lafttak climbs to the crows nest, surprising the lookout. The sky in the east is the powdery grey of the hour before dawn. The west is black, shining with stars. Something dark moves on the horizon.

Lafttak points. The lookout stoops to line up his head with Lafttak’s. He stiffens, and cries out. “Sail ho!”

Mid-morning. Lafttak, Rintikk, and Morwen stand at the stern, watching the pursuing ship draw closer. The Ketrel's captain and crew have done what they can, but the jury-rigged sails just aren't enough.

Rintikk runs a hand along the ship's railing. “She wants to run. I could help.”

Lafttak shakes his head. "Even you can't breathe life into a dead ship." Rintikk's woodsense is what he first noticed about her. That, and her glorious eartips. But still - she should know her limits.

A bell rings, and the Kestrel's captain addresses the crew. His message is stark. The pirates have canon, guns, men - we have less of everything. If we fight, we'll die. Stay calm. Obey your officers. They'll take the ship, but leave us the longboats to reach land. All will be well.

A canon booms from the pirate's bow, sending a ball screaming into the sea ahead. At a nod from the captain, the boatswain lowers the colors.

The captain turns to the two greenfolk. “I'm not sure what to do with you two. Some of the crew think you're bad luck. But you paid your passage same as the priestess here." He lowers his voice. "But these are pirates, and pirates are a superstitious lot. You'd best hide until we're safely away, then swim out to the boats."

The thought of running galls Lafttak - it's all he's done since he declared his love for Rintikk and had to flee his father's palace - but Rintikk pulls him away. They climb the ratlines and crouch behind the bundled course sail. Rintikk puts on a brave smile. Lafttak kisses the point of her ear.

The black ship draws even with the Kestrel. Ragged men line its rails. In the center, one figure stands heads taller than the rest, swathed in red.

Rintikk presses her fingers to the mast and sends her mind into the wood, listening. Morwen brings out a small gong and begins to chant while striking it with gold mallet. Rintikk goes deeper. Her fingers sink into the wood up to the first joint. She sorts frightened voices from secretive.

"Where'd those devils go off to now?"

"D'you think they'll pay for 'em?"

The pirate ship lowers its boats. Many crewmen join Morwen's prayer. They sing louder the closer the pirates come, then go silent at the splash of oars, the thump of wood, and the scrape of boots scaling the boarding nets.

Pirates pour onto the Kestrel’s deck, shouting and swearing, swords and pistols ready. Seeing the crew standing in sullen lines, they signal below. Their leader climbs onto the ship like a mountain, and takes in the scene with cruel eyes.

The Kestrel's captain steps forward, hat under his arm. "I am --" he begins, but the giant pirate swings a lazy blow that hurls him against a bulwark in a broken heap.

"I speak!" the giant roars. "I command! This ship, you men, you belong to me!" He rushes the Kestrel's crew, who stumble back, cringing with fear, then plants his hands on his hips and laughs.

Rintikk is the Kestrel. The keel is her spine, the braces her ribs, the deck and planks her skin. It's her deck the pirates are fouling.

Morwen starts toward the Kestrel's injured captain, but the giant blocks her way. She is as small compared to him as the greenfolk are to her, but anger fills her. "Let me pass! I am a priestess --" Again the pirate moves before the words are finished. He wraps one hand around her neck and plucks her from the deck, her feet flailing.

"I speak!" he laughs, wagging a finger in her face. He carries Morwen to the rail, displaying her to the Kestrel's horrified crew. "See me, weaklings! Would I kill a goddess-sworn? Would I kill a woman?" He holds the struggling priestess easily out over the water. "No! That would be bad." He opens his hand and she drops. "I let the sharks do it!" Morwen strikes the water; her heavy robes fill and pull her under.

Lafttak doesn't think. He leaps. The sea rushes up, then he's down in the depths. Where is she? Where - there. He kicks deeper, faster.

"What was that?" yells the giant, sweeping the crew with a look that promises pain.

"One of them greenfolk," cries a Kestrel crewman. Another cry goes up. "There's the other one up there!" They're suddenly relieved to have the giant looking at something, anything, else.

Rintikk is puzzling through the nails and oakum that bind the Kestrel together. The giant's steps move toward the mainmast. This worries her for some reason. Where is Lafttak?

He is clawing his way to the surface, dragging the priestess, lungs bursting, head ringing. Idiot, he thinks. Idiot. He breaks the waves and gulps air before Morwen's weight pulls him down again. In desperation, he *reaches* for the deadwood of the ship and *pulls* on it until his scrabbling fingers find the bottom strand of the boarding net. He is struggling to haul up the priestess when Rintikk's voice finds him.

-Lafttak?-

The giant sends a pirate to pull Rintikk down from the rigging. "Why, it's a just wee girl!" he calls.

"Not a girl!" says a crewman. "Look at those ears."

"Goddess!" cries the man. "Her hands! They're stuck inside the mast. I mean, right up to the wrists!"

My hands? thinks Rintikk distantly. Oh yes. I pushed them in to see better.

"Who cares about her hands?" calls the giant. "She's not going to need them where I can sell her."

-Lafttak?-

-Rintikk, I need you. I can't pull her up-

-Beloved?-

-Rintikk!-

The pirate brings out a jagged rigging knife. "Well, fetch the sawbones then. He's gonna have to tie off the stumps."

As the knife cuts, Rintikk opens the Kestrel's woody skin. Water gushes in while living boards pull the net and two bodies inside, then seal themselves with suddenly sprouting branches.

Rintikk's connection with her body breaks as skin and bone fall away.

The Kestrel screams.

Lafttak checks Morwen, who is somehow spluttering and alive. The ship trembles around him. Heart pounding, he pushes through waist-high water to the ladder that connects to the ship's upper deck. He bursts into the clean air of day, his eyes going up to where he left Rintikk. The mast, crosstree and course sail are sheathed in blood, but Rintikk is gone.

-Lafttak- says the ship.

The deck is strangely peaceful. Thirty pirates are swimming back to their ship, and their giant captain swings gently from a thick rope of vines growing from a boom over his head.

Lafttak notices none of it. All he sees is the still form of his darling, his wife, his Rintikk, resting on a bed of fresh, green heather.

-Lafttak- says the ship. -I think I made a mistake-

# The Wrecker's Horn

” Over there ” the call came from the dunes just ahead of them. It was Alfred’s uncle, Valter, who called. The three boys started running towards the caller. When they came to the top of the closest dune, they saw Valter fifty yards away on the top another dune. He was standing there; pointing towards the horizon. “There she is, look at her” he smiled “We’re gonna get so rich on her, eh lads?” They could see her dirty white sails and Valter grabbed his crotch, showing them how excited he was.

Alfred watched how his cousins started to caper, doing some sort of jig. He smiled but he felt nervous as well. He looked out over the sea, watching the ship strive along following the coast.

She would be his first, and Valter said that there never was anyone or anything that could beat the feeling of the first… women or ships.

“They’ll be at the Great Sands by the evening, so we’d better ride for it. We have lot to prepare.” Alfred had his doubts about his part but he had never wrecked a ship before, and his mother said it was what her family used to do.

Valter led the three up onto the Cranners Moor that made up the most of Wrecker’s Horn. As Alfred sat there on his pony he wondered. Why did Valter insist on bringing me? And this ship, does it have something to do with the fight on the south coast. The latest news from Ortolia was that the Prince was riding to Vesenburgh to fight the Vicas brotherhood.

But he couldn’t understand how the knights could fight the pirate brotherhood, because they would be on horses, right?

He was deep in thought as their path crossed the small graveled road to Netherdown.

Valter kicked his small horse to get it to trot, the boys followed suit. Hildur turned to Alfred “ We’ll be there before well before dark” “But won’t there be other families there?” Alfred was concerned. “There probably will, but Valter is senior… I think” Hildur lost his smile and looked at the moving back of their uncle. “Let’s keep going” he said and threw back his heels at his horse, Alfred kept going at the same speed.

Ironically just the fact that Hildur felt some trepidation about the whole thing made Alfred feel a little bit better. His spirits lifted some, he followed the others on the small path across the moor, it was covered with heather and juniper bushes. He saw rabbits bouncing away for their holes, and the occasionally grouse who were frightened by the ponies.

“Ho, there it is” Valter turned to the boys and pointed. Alfred saw how the ground fell away but he could not see the cove yet. A moment later the small cove showed up among the rocky outcroppings. When they reached the small shed, there were already four families there. The Wardens and the Thatchers were of the same clan as the Masons. Valter wouldn’t have any problem taking charge of them and since the others were farming families, Valter would have everybody jumping to his commands by the time the Wainers showed up.

“Easy there, son” Tostig Warden warned as Alfred swung a long-handled sledgehammer turned mace and overbalanced. He felt annoyed but Tostig was the vice-wrecker now that order had been established with Valter in charge.

The reason Tostig had become second after his uncle was easily seen when he looked at the Wardens. They were large heavy men used to swing axes in the forest and would form First Boarders, when they climbed the ship.

“It’s easy,” Valter said in a low tone, when he walked up behind Alfred. “You follow them up the side and let them take the first hit, after you go around them and hit everyone trying to flank us.” “But Uncle, what if they have swords, bows and such?” Alfred tried to sound casual but his tone betrayed his nervousness.

“These small time merchant ships never have any trained fighting men let alone swords, and if they have it’ll never be more than a half-dozen, men or swords.” He smiled, “So keep to the flank ‘til there are no one standing, then we plunder.” Alfred was about to respond when he saw something, a movement, in the corner of his eye so he turned and looked. Gently and with no sound above the wind their prey came into full view.

“ It’s a...cray...no it’s a…cog ?” Tostig turned to look at Valter to get confirmation. “ I think you’re right Tostig, but she looks a little funny doesn’t she” Ha had his head tilted slightly to the side, as he wanted to look at the ship from another angle.” Yes it’s a cog” His voice firmed up with decision. “Alright everyone it’s a cog, they usually have ‘bout fifteen to twenty crew. So we’ll do this as we always do.”

Alfred let out his breath. Angels wept, this business was nerve-racking enough as it was, without new ships and other uncertainties, he thought.

The small, stubby merchant ship followed to coast trying to get through the sound, but the wreckers knew she would run aground on the sand reef in the middle of the natural canal. And being stuck there it would tilt as the ebb continued to flow through the waterway and just after nightfall the Moonwave would hit them as the tide turned.

“Careful now lads” Valters voice carried to the rest of their boats. They followed the tide, so they kept on course without much effort towards the large dark shadow of their wounded prey. Alfred was silent and tense, trying to see or hear anything from the ship. But other than creak from the hull and flap of loose sail and rope he heard nothing.

The three boats came up closer, and finally they came to rest next to the near barnacle-covered hull. Alfred’s nostrils were filled with the smell of wet wood, old tar and strangely… wet dog? His thoughts were interrupted before he could wonder why.

“First Boarders Up,” his uncle ordered and as the Wardens started to scramble up the side of the larger vessel. “We’re next lads.” He started to move closer to the front when suddenly a rope landed with a thump in the boat. “Careful I said, you whoresons,” he half whispered, “Let’s go!”

Alfred grabbed the rope and followed his uncle up, as he put his hand over railing he looked aft and saw how some sort flag hung limp but flew up in a gust of wind. He thought he saw a standing man with a sword in a hand, and it looked like, a skull in the other but wind let up before he could get a better look in the semi-darkness.

He quickly made his way to the left flank of the Wardens. He felt how Valter came up from behind as the whole boarding party slowly made their way aft, stopping every other step to listen. But still they only heard the creak and groaning of the stranded ship.

“This has the feel of witchcraft, “Tostig whispered nervously. Alfred felt his heart beat even harder and faster at the comment. If the experienced ones were nervous maybe this wasn’t a normal wreck after all, he thought. “Shut it,” Valter whispered back, “keep going.” Alfred kept his place but remembered the flag.

“Unc…Uncle, what traders has a sword wielding man as their mark?” He asked, with a slight turn of his head, he looked at Valter. He stared back in the darkness, his eyes looked unusually large. “What’cha mean,” he continued to whisper, “a sword wielding man. Where did you see that?” Valter moved closer to Alfred.

“There,” he nodded towards the stern, “I saw it when I climbed aboard.”

Even in the darkness Alfred saw how Valter paled. “Hold “Valters whisper was near enough a moan, everyone stopped, even the families who had just come up from the boats.

“Welcome aboard, little brothers!” the voice boomed out in the night. It came from the underneath the poop deck, and with flash of light a sword wielding man, with a torch in the other hand, stepped out onto the deck.

He had a large blond beard, a large hat with a plume, two baldrics festooned with daggers, hatchets, and cutlasses.

“Welcome aboard the Rose Virgin,” he smiled and waved expansively with the cutlass, “ and fare-the-well. You brothers picked the wrong ships to do your scavenger work on. My brothers will help you to shore.” His smile turned ugly in the torchlight. Alfred felt how a warm wetness followed his leg to the deck and he said “Holy mother, please s….”

All over the ship, from barrels, holds and covers, other men burst with a scream of vengeance, the last thing Alfred thought was

“Nothing is like your first, women or ships.”

…. Blackness.

# The Deep Blue

"Captain."

The man looked exhausted, felt worse. The ale in his hands was bitter and warm, no alleviation from the sticky heat of the night. We sail for cooler climes when this is all over. Or we're swallowed by the Deep Blue.

He answered with a grunt.

"Captain, there's been no sign of Dusty since dawn, sir." The first mate pause before she added, "Perhaps she got drunk and passed out on the wrong ship? Bronzefire's?"

*It wouldn't be the first time, but gods...* after what she'd told him last night it seemed unlikely. "First mate Hightide, you're the new quartermaster, congratulations." He waved for another drink, frowned at the bready foam head.

"That doesn't solve the issue, Heart. Dammit," Hightide slammed her fist against the tabletop, puddles of ale splashed to the planked floor. "What did Ralem tell you that's got your breeches in a twist? Since we left Serul you've been shaken. We're on edge, you bastard." She hesitated. Then added, "Sir."

Captain Heart stood, gave her a tired smile. "It'll be clear soon, lass. Ready the crew. We leave midday."

Stunned, she asked "For how long?"

*Did it really matter?* "A month's supplies will be fine, quartermaster."

"Aye, sir."

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As the grizzled man departed, the ship's surgeon came to Hightide's side. "A month ain't far. We'll soon know what's got him on edge. Drummer thinks he's been eating too much of Red Jenny's cooking. White reckons-"

"Drummer and White are imbeciles. And so are you, Cackle, believing something as stupid as that would rattle the Survivor of Erakahn."

The mustached man was silent for a long time. The chatter of other customers, the creak of the wooden walls, growing louder by the moment. "Long before we were born, that tale..."

"So?"

"So, lass," he said, resting a gentle hand on her shoulder. "Nobody alive has ever seen Erakahn; never mind lived long enough to have bloody visited it. Maybe it never existed is all I'm saying, lass."

*Lass?* Her temper flared. She shrugged his hand away. "If you have any doubts about the legitimacy of our captain, tell me now or I'll have you keel hauled, dammit. Don't think because you're the surgeon I won't do it, Cackle."

His frown cast a shadow over his eyes. "We work outside of the law, or what's left of it." Cackle's voice was a cold rumble. "Ain't no chance you're gonna convince our lot to do that to me."

"If they heard you broke the Code, surgeon, maybe we'd find out." She crossed her arms.

A twinkle in the man's eye gave him away. "Aye, quartermaster suits you well, lass. Er, sir." He turned and walked away, slapping White's back as the gunner rocked unsteadily at a passing wave, spilling ale over a red faced Drummer.

*The bastard was testing me. I feel my patience wearing thin already.*

\*\*\*

They were ready to sail a bell before midday. The crew had frantically accrued supplies and managed to load them over the night, taking shifts to get a little sleep when they could. The massive wooden ship could hold over a year's worth of essentials, but even this load proved to be grueling work. Barrels and crates and ropes were rolled, heaved, and thrown across the gangways, taken down into the storage hold.

The port they had docked with, Merun, rocked gently under the passing waves, each district bobbing higher or lower at the whim of the rippling current. A city born on the waves, supported by distant satellite farming units that sprawled across dozens of miles of ocean.

The captain watched the last of his crew untie the ropes that held fast to the port of Merun, launching them with casual expertise to be gathered by other shipmates on board. The pirates deftly swung over to the ship, one foot in a loop of the rough cord, climbing nimbly onto the deck even as the ship began to sail.

"Less slack next time, Jelan," an angry pirate called. "Got my bloody feet wet again."

"Well it won't do you any harm to have a bath, you-"

The captain turned his back on the arguing men and eventually found quartermaster Hightide scanning a map in his own cabin.

"Anything?" he asked.

"There's nothing, captain. There are no more settlements or ports this far east. I have no idea where they're going." She looked at him. "But you do, don't you?"

Heart scratched his bearded face, threw his hat across the room to a table opposite. He poured two glasses of watered wine and gave one to Hightide.

"I do." he said, taking a swig. "At least I think so. Ralem thinks there's something big out there. Something..." He couldn't finish.

"Captain?"

He downed the last of his wine, sighed and then faced her. "New land. He can feel... something. Something big, Hightide. The birth of a new island. The first since..."

"Erakahn," she finished, her wine forgotten, held in numb fingers, limp wrists. Heart could see the effort she made to straighten herself. "The wizard isn't usually wrong, captain."

*Aye. That's what I'm worried about.*

\*\*\*

*The Deep Blue. Waters reaching across the world, depths unknown and unseen. A cerulean blanket hiding all beneath it. Indigo and bronze fires beneath its surface danced as the sun set in the distant west. Veridian and amber, twinkling white and marigold in the dying fire's light. The breeze everpresent, the darkening sky a mirror to the ocean's skin. Unbroken until the ice-fields far to the north, the Deep Blue was all encompassing. A liquid deity, ruling all that dared dance above its salty embrace.Taking everything sooner or later with the cold, disconnected patience of eternity, a certainty of eventual finality.*

A single ship cut an eastward path through the surface. The pinprick light of white and blue stars shattered against the ocean's surface, casting a prism of rainbow illumination that danced around the vessel.

At the very bottom of the Deep Blue, where light was alien and darkness absolute, a god looked up.

\*\*\*

After weeks of sailing, they'd found them.

In the distance, white sails caught Grain's attention atop the crow's nest. "There they are! Bronzefire's ship!"

The disparate crew of pirates and outlaws pulled ropes and adjusted the sails at Grain's directions. Crashing through the waves at a moderate speed, they reached Bronzefire's ship in just three bells.

The pirates readied themselves for a battle, sharpened blades and silently prayed that they would survive. Crew mates pushed one another and screamed, exciting one another to a frenzy that promised the blood of their fellow pirate's captors.

Hightide and Heart readied themselves, too, but held on to their composure. *I've never seen him so much as twitch before a battle*, she thought. *The man is fearless...*

As the port-side came level with the enemy's starboard, a massive wave rocked both ships. Crews on both vessels were thrown to the floor, an unlucky few falling overboard. Before either party had managed to right themselves, another launched them skywards, to crash back down against the solid ocean surface. The foremast of Bronzefire's ship had snapped a man's height from the top, and both figurehead and jib-boom of Heart's had been shattered.

"Captain, what the hell's going on?" Hightide called.

The man looked deathly pale, her earlier measure of the man broken. "It's happening... we have to turn back."

She had no time to think, she had to act. "Hundred and eighty degrees! We pull back!"

It took the pirates moments to abandon their confusion, getting straight back to rigging sails and climbing into precarious positions amongst the shrouds. As the ship began its wheel, Hightide spied another wave approaching that would catch their flank.

"Brace! Brace!"

\*\*\*

The cold bodies of drowned men and women surrounded him. His ship now driftwood, Heart had no choice but to cling to one of the larger fragments. The ship itself was lost to the Deep Blue.

"How many?" he called over to Hightide, who was now swimming over to a piece of wreckage several feet away.

"Just Drummer, Hands, and Red Jenny, sir." The woman's breath came heavy. "And Dusty. We found her. Sole survivor of..."

*They both knew this was going to happen. Dusty and that mage Ralem... But how?*

Heart looked to the east. Low lying mist hung heavy in the air, blurring the horizon. The unnatural waves still came, but their anger had dissipated. Now they rocked the debris, both survivors and dead, gently, rhythmically. The empty, claustrophobic calm after a calamity. Balance returning so sudden, yet to a world vastly changed.

"What's over there, captain?" she asked, following his gaze.

*The new world. A new hope. A new life.* "Get everyone together, quartermaster. We've got a long swim ahead of us."

"What? Where?"

Captain Heart let out a soft laugh and began kicking himself forward. "To the hand of a god, lass. To Erakahn."

# Pirats

“Look at the way he's tied that off. Sloppy that is. First decent swell and that'll come loose.”

“Aye. Amateur. It's a bloody disgrace, we need more ex-navy boys I tell ya. This latest bunch are going to get us killed.”

“Are you two bilge rats whining again?”

Hexus and Nexus turned their beady eyes up to the Captain.

“Bilge? Who are you calling bilge? We're bloody thoroughbreds we are. You won't catch us living in stinking bilge water.”

“Be fair though brother, we might pop down there for a snack.”

“Oh yeah, maybe for a snack.”

The Captain shook her head.

“You two are disgusting.”

Hexus sniffled at her boot.

“Dining options are limited at sea Cap. We are what we are.”

“What you are is more of a liability than these greenhorns we've picked up. If they hear you talking, or see me gabbling with you, they'll jump ship at the first port. I don't have time to train new ones. The moon's full in three days and we've got too far to go.”

“Right. Keep it on the low round the kids. Got it Cap!”

Nexus flicked his scaly tail round in a mocking salute. The captain sighed and stomped off to berate her recent recruits on their knots.

“She's getting' a bit tense eh?

“Lot riding on this, brother mine. For us too. Maybe we should be taking it a bit more seriously.”

“I'm taking it serious enough Nex. Still not sure it's a great idea anyway. I mean, what does she need with a bloody great sea beast that tells the future? We pretty much pack the same skills but in a handy sized and elegantly furred package.”

“Oh we're sleek, no doubt. But remember The Viceroy's Delight? We got her in the right place but the bastards almost sank us. Made a god awful mess of half our lads.”

Hexus smoothed his whiskers and nodded happily.

“Guts everywhere. That was a tasty day alright.”

His brother grunted agreement and they shared a wistful moment of remembrance.

“Good times...still, if the Cap'n had press ganged a betentacled behemoth then it would've been a different story.”

“One in which we'd 've missed out on a good meal.” Hexus twitched.

“Food isn't everything Hex. Thing is. I can't help but think that with such a beastie on side, our value to the Captain will be somewhat reduced.”

Nexus thought for a second.

“That's a bloody good point. Don't seem likely she'll keep our spirits bound too. Be too tirin' having to focus on three of us.”

The boat rocked sharply on the swell, sending the pair skittering across the poop deck. A coil of rope stopped their slide and they scrabbled up to a higher perch. They could see the Captain stalking back their way.

“What do we do?” Nexus asked his twin.

“Well. We're the ones tellin' her the way to the rocks....” Their tails wound together and they began to plot.



The jagged weapons of warring clouds struck across the storm. Mountainous waves heaved up the jealous ocean. The ship scaled the straining peaks without choice, drawn inexorably to the summit by elemental force. A rope lashed wheel and Captain together against the fury, commander and vessel made one. Around her neck clung the rats. Tails spiralled tight, claws dug into braided epaulettes. Their eyes were burning rubies, the only fires that still held on the deck.

“Fools! You've doomed us!” Howled the captain into the gale. The spirits bound in the creatures' flesh hissed back in her mind.

This is nothing, we have sailed worse.

“Idiot spirits. Such a storm in the open sea we could survive. Here, near the reefs...” She screamed as the wheel tried to tear away from her again. “Why didn't you warn me? Why?”

We did not think such a challenge would defeat you. We sought merely to delay.

The tattered sails whipped about, crazed by the wind. The captain saw another of her crew swatted from the deck by the unfastened canvas. She took a hand from the wheel and tore Nexus from his perch, stripping his tail free of his brother's.

“Delay?” Was all she could manage to scream. The rodent squeaked, her grip crushing it's ribs as she brought it close to her rain soaked face.

“We was worried Cap'n.” The rat struggled. “We didn' know what you was intending. We thought you meant to replace my brother and me.”

The throw caught the rat spirit off by surprise. It landed on the few cannonballs that remained in their brass monkey. Most had splashed over the gunwales. A few had smashed the ankles of the first mate, hours before. On the Captains shoulder Hexus began to protest.

“We're sorry we didn' think about the reefs. We can find a way through them for you. We can..”

She fought to maintain their ascent. In only a few more seconds they crested the top and below them a flash of lightning showed hell laid bare. The wave had inhaled the sea, revealing it's submerged teeth. Bright coral and jagged rock promised no mercy. The waters rushing to recover them offered no escape.

Rage and fear swallowed the Captain and the storm swallowed her ship.



Small natural towers pierced the glassy sea, offering rare waypoints for the giant seabirds atop them. Their cries mixed with the hammering of the bosun's work from the main deck. The Captain clasped his hands tightly behind his back and oversaw the repairs with characteristic stoicism. In reality his legs felt weak from hours in the swell, his voice was hoarse from competing with the wind and his soul felt like praising the almighty for their deliverance. At least, he reflected, they had caught the storm in the open seas and managed to ride it clear.

“Wreckage!” Came a shout from the crow's nest. The Captain locked up, the bright sun etching the lookout into his vision. He blinked and followed to the point indicated.

“Brings us three points larboard Lieutenant. Let's investigate. Men at the sides!” The Captains voice protested at being raised, but it worked well enough to send crew to the edges of the deck. “Look for survivors!”

The storm had drained all energy from the wind and currents. It took twenty minutes to enter the main debris field. Parts of a vessel floated past, a gentle display of ruin. One of the watchers shouted an alarm and the first mate jogged to the side, then back, climbing breathlessly to the poop deck.

“Figurehead sir! Looks like the Maiden of Hades.”

“Erincall's ship? Are you sure?”

“I've never seen it myself, sir, but a couple of the lads have and it fits the descriptions.”

“Well, well. So the sea witch was finally caught.” He straightened. “I daresay her end was kinder than what His Majesty's courts would have provided. Any survivors?”

“None but a single rat on some flotsam, just passing now.”

“Well, we have plenty of those.” He raised his voice again. “A guinea to the man who can put a musket ball in that rat!”

There were cries of delight as several sailors ran for their weapons. A few marines began powdering the pistols they always carried. The Captain smiled. It was worth a coin to take their minds off the night before.

“The legend was she could never be caught. Always one step ahead.” The first mate said as he took up station next the Captain, adopting an identical pose.

“Superstition Lewis. Nothing but superstition. There are no goblins guiding these pirate scum, just their own dark greed.”

“As you say sir. Would now be a good time sir, what with the mizzen repairs almost done. To open the sealed orders? We are, after all, at the appointed rocks with the full moon due to rise tonight.”

The Captain nodded but did not reach for the waxed leather folio in his jacket. He was not a superstitious man. He knew because he reminded himself so every morning he was afloat. He was not easily shaken. He knew because he slept well every night he was afloat. So why he dreaded opening the strange letter, from the even stranger envoy, he could not say.

“Let us ensure all the repairs are made first, Lewis. Repairs first. Orders second.”

A cheer went up amongst the plumes of powder smoke and a smiling man was cajoled toward the officers by his ship mates. The Captain looked over the side. A bloody rat was smeared across a broken plank, bobbing gently by.

The Captain reached for his coin purse. He was not a superstitious man, but he was a cautious one.

He would open the orders in private and make his own decision.

# The Rule of the Curse

Stealth had always been Dawson’s forte until it didn't work anymore. The shipmate who'd found him twisted his ear as he hauled him on deck, and he squinted as a close dwarf star’s light pierced his eyes. The light temporarily stunted his focus. He wished it would stay that way, but his eyes soon cleared and he cringed at what he saw.

All around Dawson was death. Ol’ Patch Eye scrubbing the floors would get his throat slit. The pot-bellied chef talking to Patch Eye wouldn't have much of a gut left. One of the officers was going to be shoved off the side of the ship and drop into deep space until the dwarf star’s gravity sucked him in.

It's not that Dawson saw people’s futures. He just saw how they were going to die. It was his gift—or his curse—and he’d had it ever since he’d cheated death four years ago. He only knew one other person who’d had the same gift and that was only because Dawson hadn't been able to see his death. Dawson had killed him. He'd had to. That was the rule of the curse.

“Keep moving!” ordered the shipmate.

Dawson grunted, but complied. The shipmate pulled him into the captain’s cabin, leaving plenty of visions of death behind.

The captain stood at a desk, his first mate lieutenant by his side. Both looked up at the shipmate and Dawson when the door opened. Neither seemed pleased.

“Explain yourself, shipman,” the lieutenant ordered.

“Stowaway, sir. Found him hiding among the shipment.”

The lieutenant glared at Dawson. Dawson stared right back. Unfortunately, the first mate would live to see another day. Dawson had already plotted his escape, but it didn't involve sticking close to the lieutenant. There were others who wouldn't die on board that he'd planned to stay near. Dawson just hadn't expected to be caught before then.

“You know the law, shipman,” the lieutenant went on. “Chain him below until we can see to a proper execution.”

“Yes, sir.”

“He'll need to stand trial,” said the captain.

The lieutenant stiffened. “We can test him at the hanging.”

“Let's have him executed, then,” the captain resolved. He circled around the table to stand in front of the boy, studying him inquisitively.

“Now, captain?”

“I could use a change in mood. An execution would prove entertaining.”

Dawson thought quickly. “You're gonna die,” he said.

The captain grinned, then burst out laughing. “I think you've got it the wrong way around. You delusional kid?”

Dawson maintained his resolve. People always reacted that way. “You're gonna die. Your lieutenant’s gonna desert you in battle and you'll get a sword in the heart.”

The captain kept grinning. He turned to his lieutenant, who was looking at Dawson dumbfounded.

“Is this true, lieutenant? Would you desert me?”

“Of course not, captain.”

“It's true,” Dawson persisted.

“We could arrange an execution,” the lieutenant said, adjusting his collar. “It’d keep the crew entertained.”

“Then let's get on with it.”

Next thing Dawson knew, he was on deck again, tied to the main mast. The crew gathered round, ruffian creatures from various planets who'd seen more time out in space than on soil. The captain stood on the quarterdeck.

“Boy!” The lieutenant called down. “You have the right of one statement before your death. Have you anything to say?”

*Some trial.* Dawson opened his mouth to speak—

“Pirates!”

All eyes turned to the crow’s nest. An eight-eyed arachnid poked his head out from the top.

“Pirates, captain, off the starboard —!”

*Boom!*

The ship rattled from impact. Some lost their footing. Jaws dropped as another ship rose up from below on the starboard side as if out of nowhere. Atop its mast, black and red colours flapped.

“It's Zeher!” the lieutenant yelled.

A jolt of fear paralyzed Dawson’s body. The notorious Captain Zeher, ruthless pirate of the galaxy, left no survivors. Only one person had ever escaped and by the time his body was found dead in Outer Quadrant 623 on one of the Wilderplanets, word of the pirate had spread like an exploding supernova.

“To arms, men!” the captain yelled.

Few were able to grab their weapons before pirates boarded the ship. A snake man slithered past Dawson’s feet and slit ol’ Patch Eye’s throat. A freaky alien Dawson couldn't describe gorged out the chef’s gut. An enormous ox man, four horns on his head, slammed three crew members over the railing, one being the shipmate who'd captured Dawson, another an officer.

The captain leapt to the main deck, fending off the attackers like he was a one man army.

“Lieutenant!” he called.

Dawson saw a skiff zipping away. He could barely make out the lieutenant’s head poking out along with three others.

“Curses!” the captain spat.

He jumped out of the way of the charging ox and barely evaded the quick stab of the snake. He rushed the snake man, thrust his sword into its chest.

“You knew this would happen, boy!” he yelled at Dawson.

“I told you you're going to die,” Dawson replied. He tried to mask his fear, but his insides churned. He knew the pirates wouldn't let anyone live, him included.

“This can't be happening!” the captain sneered.

Another pirate swung from the enemy ship to the main deck. The others backed away as the new foe strode toward the captain with slow, steady steps.

The captain faced the new threat. His face twisted into a grin.

“A woman? You’d let a woman challenge me?”

The woman didn't respond. She drew her sword, her aspect emotionless.

The captain’s grin faded. “Fine, I'll play. Watch me cheat death, boy!”

He thrust. She parried and counter struck. They went back and forth like a vicious dance on the main deck, each dualist a solid match for the other. Dawson watched, his mouth agape. He still saw the captain’s death, but he was most concerned with the woman. He couldn't see her dying. And that meant…

He shuddered. If she saw him and realized he had the curse, he'd be dead in seconds. He had to break free somehow.

Frantically, he searched the deck. Fallen swords and daggers lay next to dead bodies, most too far to reach. He twisted and squirmed, trying to loosen the ties. The tight ropes dug into his skin and he gritted his teeth. No matter how much he tried, the ropes kept him stuck to the main mast.

The sound of clanging metal rang as the captain and woman fought. Dawson kept an eye on them and anyone else who might notice him, but everyone seemed to be engrossed in the dual. Eventually, the captain cried out, clutched his chest and slumped to the ground.

Dawson panicked. They'd come for him next.

He spotted a knife not far from him and for a moment, he felt tinge of hope. If he could just reach that knife, he could cut himself free. He stretched out his leg. His foot tapped the hilt…

A boot kicked the knife out of the way and a hand grabbed a handful of his hair. Dawson winced as his head snapped back.

“Well, well, well. A boy who cheated death.”

He looked into the woman’s eyes. Cold, unsympathetic grey looked back.

“Just hurry up and kill me,” said Dawson.

The woman cocked her head to the side. “Kill you? Why?”

“Because that's the rule. The last kid told me.”

“Is that so?”

She let go and backed away. Now that the fighting was over, Dawson got a better view of the pirates. He gasped. For some, he couldn't see them dying.

“If we all killed each other, I wouldn't have much of a crew,” the woman said. “Of course, traitors are worth killing, but rules bore me.”

“Y-you're Zeher?”

“Who did you think I was?”

“What're you going to do with me?”

“Keep you alive.”

Keep him alive? Why would she keep him alive?

“But understand this, kid. If you double cross me, you won't have so much as a prayer left after I've dealt with you.”

“What if I don't want to be on your crew?”

“Then I kill you now.”

Dawson didn't want that. He nodded.

“Good.”

She cut the ropes. Dawson knew better than to run.

“Go help the others.”

She walked away. Dawson watched her go, then hurried over to help with the stolen goods. He glanced at the pirates who had the curse, shrinking under their glaring eyes. Any one of them could kill him. They seemed like they wanted to anyway.

But he was alive. He didn't know if any of them adhered to the rule of the curse or not. Yet if he stayed with them, he could learn how to fight. He could get stronger. And when he was strong enough, he could kill Captain Zeher before she killed him.

After all, that was the rule of the curse, whether she adhered to it or not.

# The Spirit of Conflict

Jun waited in the bow as Ling guided their small boat through the mangrove forest. She kept her eyes on their target: a flat-bottom trader resting in the shallows of the estuary.

Ling really was getting quite good at steering the vessel, but Jun still had her doubts that the girl would make it through her apprenticeship. She was too solid, too interested in the humans as individuals.

Jun inspected the wispy container around her neck again. It could hold four conflicts. Depending on how many people were aboard, that might be enough, or it might not.

Their boat emerged into the open water of the river and Ling quickly brought it alongside the trader. She anchored it to the trader.

“What do you sense?” Jun asked.

The young spirit put a hand on the trader and closed her eyes in concentration. “Anguish…loneliness…confusion.” Jun looked at the container around her neck again. “We might need another box. Grab one from below and meet me on deck.”

Ling hurried to obey, and Jun turned toward the trader. She looked up, and willed herself to follow her gaze. She floated up and over the ship’s railing before alighting on the deck. Having some contact with solid matter always helped with the collection.

A man slept at the tiller to Jun’s left. She approached him, and a sense of frustration intensified. Jun knelt beside him, and gently laid a hand on his head. Not a hair moved, but the general sense of frustration clarified and resolved into the emotions of a man working the night shift to cover for the transgressions of his bunkmate. Jun smiled, extracting a portion of the man’s anger and feeding it into the container. It was now more solid, less misty and more rigid.

Jun left some of the frustration – memories of emotion generally led to better decision making, even when actual experiences of emotion did not.

She rose smoothly, turning back to the railing. Ling stood on deck with a wispy box around her neck.

“You take the lower deck while I finish up here,” instructed Jun. “If you run into anything you’re unsure about, come find me.” It was only Ling’s fifth night extracting conflict independently, but she had done well so far. Much better than the last one. Ling nodded, and then sank below decks. Jun sighed. Even if Ling was better than her last apprentice, she did have a tendency to forget protocol.

Jun headed for the single enclosed structure on the main deck, where the captain’s quarters likely were. People in leadership positions often carried magnified conflicts, and she wanted to make sure she had room for the biggest ones.

She found the door, and glided through. A large, square wooden table occupied the entire far wall, covered in charts and maps, in addition to those lining the wall. To her left, a chest was built into the wall, and to her right, a bed. With a scruffy, lined man laying in it. Jun ignored the maps, and headed straight for the man. Indecision, pain, and fear filled the room.

She laid her head on the old man, and pain shot up her arm. Chafing and splinters on the knee from the joint of a wooden leg. No need for the man to continue experiencing that. Jun left a mild ache, just so he would remember to do something about the leg.

Next, to deal with the fear. Ah, another easy one. Fear of making the wrong decision, and of his crew’s response. She left just enough worry to keep the man cautious.

The indecision would be harder. She could easily influence his decision by altering his emotions, and that was why the Guild of Conflict did not allow indecision to be traded. Jun had enough wealth now that she preferred to avoid the black market when possible.

But what was the indecision about? Could Jun lessen the intensity of the man’s negative feelings? She probed deeper…hmmm…a larger ship and a smaller ship emerged in her mind. The larger one was better defended, but likely had greater wealth. Ah. This was a pirate vessel. Jun smiled. She had a special affinity for those like herself. She would leave the man’s indecision alone. Making that kind of decision alone was good for a soul.

She left the room, and headed below decks. The galley was to port, and bunks to starboard. There were two rooms of bunks. Jun didn’t feel anything from the first room – Ling must have finished there - so she moved to the second, gliding through the door.

Ling was bent over a young man – a boy, really – with her hand on his head. She stared down at him, but didn’t appear to be seeing. Standard procedure for harvesting conflicts.

Jun watched her young pupil. The box around Ling’s neck was as solid as the one around Jun’s. She wouldn’t be able to fit much more in it, but Jun watched it carefully. Exceeding the limits of the container could be dangerous.

Then Jun heard a whimper, and the box started to shake, but did not solidify. Jun glanced at the apprentice, shaking with her hand on the boy.

“What was it?” asked Jun. Apprentices could be strongly affected by the emotions of humans. Jun had seen enough pain and suffering that every harvest was more like visiting an old enemy than suffering a fresh wound, but Ling did not have that perspective yet.

“He’s….he’s so alone,” whispered Ling.

“That often happens to humans at sea,” said Jun gently. “Never physically alone, but always distant from their shore bound network.”

Jun continued, encouraging Ling. “Your container is nearly full, but you can take some of his loneliness.”

Ling continued to stare at the young man’s face. She had pulled her hand away, and Jun waited for her to put it back on the boy’s head.

“I can help him,” said Ling. She put her hand back on the head, but instead of pressing firmly, she caressed it.

“Ling,” warned Jun. “Just relieve his loneliness, and we can go back to the boat.”

Ling turned her face to Jun, and Jun knew she had lost. “You will regret this,” she told the young spirit as Ling removed the box from around her neck and set it on the ground by Jun’s feet.

“I must do what I can,” said Ling. “Lessening an emotion does not fix the problem.”

Ling lay on the ground, closed her eyes, and began to dim. Particles swirled around her, covering and integrating with the young spirit.

When the dust disappeared, a young human form lay where Ling had been. Jun watched the young woman sit up, dazed. The woman looked over to where Jun waited. A puzzled expression crept over her face, and she shook her head, as if to clear it. Jun collected the box of conflict from the floor, while the human that had been Ling turned away from her.

Her pupils never understood. The problems that caused basic human emotions were not things that could be solved, or fixed, or eliminated by adding another human to the world. Stealing their pain to clear their minds was the best that could be done.

# The Precious Cargo

The Dunerunner moved silently across the sand. The large, menacing black bulk of the sandcruiser gave it the air of a deadly predator. In many ways that is exactly what it was; the craft was filled with the most feared pirate crew ever seen on the Desert of the Seven Sands.

Captain Tem brushed one of his large ears - a feature he was very proud of - back from his face, and put the telescope to his eye to peer at the caravan travelling slowly across the endless dunes. The jerboa snapped the telescope shut and waved his missing paw, the one that had been replaced with a knife, at his first mate Mara.

The black backed jackal nodded at her captain, and turned the wheel of the large craft a touch.

On seeing the exchange, another member of the crew; a meerkat who went by the name of Errol, shoved a cutlass into his belt, gave his bandanna a twist to make sure it was secure on his head, and asked Tem with a toothy grin, “We goin’ huntin’ cap’n?”

Tem’s long white tufted tail twitched, and he answered, “Aye, Errol, that we are. Look lively shipmates! We got a caravan to plunder!”

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Rumours had been circulating through the little towns and settlements that dotted the vast desert that a caravan with a precious cargo had come out of the Snowy Mountains to the west and was making its way across the Seven Sands to the mighty city of Utkubmit. That the caravan was said to be headed by the ruthless snow leopard Khushu, only made it of more interest to Tem and his crew of cutthroats. The crew of the Dunerunner had tangled with the spotted slaver on more than one occasion. She was the reason Tem had a knife in place of his left paw.

There was however another reason Tem wanted that cargo. No one knew exactly what it was, just that it was of inestimable value. As many of the inhabitants of the Seven Sands ran out of numbers once they’d counted all the digits of their fore and back paws meant inestimable value could be anything over the size of eight. This time the rumours were different. Khushu was involved for a start and the snow leopard didn’t do small deals. For years both she and Tem had been trying to locate the bottle of Prince Aliabeghwar. The legendary artifact was not only composed of precious gemstones making it priceless, it also contained a powerful djinn. Khushu wanted it purely for how much she could make out of it; she didn’t believe in djinn. Tem knew that if he could lay his paws on a djinn, he was would be set for life. He got three wishes and he only needed one; wealth beyond even his dreams, and for such a small creature, the long eared jerboa could dream awfully big.

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Two of the sandskimmer pilots; Bruce, the frill necked lizard and Gunn; a pot bellied prairie dog, were running for their small, fast and manoueverable craft. Tem jumped onto Bruce’s skimmer, he preferred riding with the lizard, who he counted as the most skilled of his team with the single sailed vehicles. Errol was riding with Gunn and the other attacking crewmembers, including Mara, all had their favourite pilots.

The doors on the side of the Dunerunner slammed open, the sandskimmers detached, and the craft were soon speeding down the dunes towards the unsuspecting caravan.

Khushu believed in hiring on mercenaries as her caravan guards. They were mostly composed of coyotes, hyenas and monitor lizards) They were big and strong, but they were also slow, stupid and not particularly loyal.

Tem leaned out from the strut he was mounted on, as Bruce drove the skimmer at a breakneck pace. The jerboa judged his moment, crouched and then with a flex of his powerful back legs shot up into the air. He was aiming himself at a surprised hyena guard.

The mercenary lifted his sword to stop Tem’s cutlass, and the pirate smiled. They always fell for this. He twisted himself in mid air and the hyena didn’t see the blade that was the pirate’s left paw until it was stabbing into his neck. The spotted dog fell from his mount, already dead and Tem rode his body to the sand, bouncing up and looking for his next opponent.

The rest of the Dunerunner’s crew had engaged the caravan guards. At least two of the caravan’s wagons were bouncing across the dunes, the camels that pulled them put to terrified flight. They’d be picked up by the Dunerunner’s remaining crew, as they were running right towards the big sandcruiser.

The wagon that Tem wanted, the one that had to contain the precious cargo, had been at the centre of the caravan, and that was being guarded by Khushu and a handful of her best and baddest.

Tem’s eyes narrowed as he saw his hated adversary. He stroked his whiskers with the tip of the knife that was his constant reminder of the leopard’s cruelty, and with a savage war cry on his lips, leapt back up into the air.

Khushu cut down two of the sand pirates - one fell to her blade and the other her claws - then saw the hopping mouse flying towards her. His outsized ears and long tufted tail streamed behind him and his lips were drawn back from his needle like teeth in a snarl. He landed in front of Khushu and stood his ground, waving his cutlass menacingly.

“So we meet again, my little long eared rat,” Khushu said in honeyed tones.

“I am a hopping mouse, you mangy spotted bitch!” Tem spat back at the leopard.

Khushu didn’t reply to the insult, but launched an attack at the jerboa. Tem slid to one side and narrowly avoided a thrust that was intended to skewer him. He jumped back and easily dodged a wild slash. He flicked his tail and relished Khushu’s cry of rage as the tuft temporarily blinded her.

The leopard had Tem covered on most fronts. She was much larger and stronger than him and even if she was missing one and an eye, the jerboa was fighting well out of his weight division. Where the smaller creature had an advantage was in speed and agility. If he could get inside Khushu’s range he could best her. He wasn’t the scared little refugee that she had enslaved years ago.

Tem dodged a vicious swipe of claws and darted under a furry muscular arm. He crouched low and then jumped, he held his cutlass vertically and stabbed upwards. He felt the shock through his arm as the point of the blade punched into Khushu’s throat. Tem jumped back to avoid both the shower of blood that gouted from the dying leopard and the falling body.

Khushu hit the ground hard, she gurgled once and then the light faded from her one remaining eye. Blood pumped from her ruined throat and soaked into the parched desert sands beneath her.

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Tem felt both relief and a strange sense of loss as he watched Khushu die. There had been times when his sheer hatred for the leopard had been the only thing that kept him going.

Bodies were scattered around the sand, like broken dolls discarded by a giant child. Tem’s eyes filled with sadness as he noticed that not all the bodies belonged to Khushu’s mercenary guards. Dunerunners lay amongst them.

“Cap’n,” Mara’s voice pulled Tem back into the present. “You need to see this.”

The jackal was standing at the entrance to the wagon, the one that contained Khushu’s precious cargo. She was flanked by Errol, Bruce and Gunn. Tem bounded over to her and eagerly jumped into the wagon. He narrowed his eyes and peered into the gloom inside the wagon.

Instead of the expected riches, with the priceless magic bottle seated atop a mountain of golden coins, Tem saw a pathetic huddle of desert youngsters. They wore chains and looked as if they could all use a big meal.

Tem frowned and turned to his crewmates behind him. “What’s this? Where’s the precious cargo?”

“I reckon that’s it, cap’n,” Bruce said.

“But they’re just kids.”

“If they were my kids I’d call them pretty damned precious,” Gunn said.

Mara nodded sadly. Her own cubs had been killed and she’d adopted the crew of the Dunerunner in their place.

“How many did we lose?” Tem asked.

“Seven,” Errol answered through clenched teeth. “Two more may not make it.”

“So we need some crew,” the sand pirate captain said. He turned to the enslaved children. “I can’t promise an easy life on the sands with me and the crew, but you’ll be free. Anyone for a pirate’s life?”

# Tales From the Sea: Captain Longbraid and the Purple Kraken

“Fly me flag high and proud.” Captain Isa Longbraid stood at the rail of the crow’s nest, staring out onto the open sea where the sun was slowly falling. She smiled to herself, begging the creature to challenge her. “Aye, I can see him, Shulz. He be makin’ ready for his attack. Let’m know we be not just any pirate ship.”

“Isa? I don’t think…” Captain Longbraid glared at the old man, his leathered face showing a bit of worry. Shulz cleared his throat. “Sorry. *Captain*. I don’t think we ought to be swapping flags again. You know I caught hell for it last time.”

“Shulz, ye be a bit of a coward,” she said. “Ye already have me stock of jelly biscuits. Did ye not accept that deal?” Shulz was easy to manipulate. His appetite for deserts made his façade of a hardened edge melt right into her hand.

He scratched his beard. “Aye, Captain. I just don’t want to hear it from your-“

“I won’t be askin’ again,” she said, raising her voice until it nearly broke. She took out a carved piece of wood resembling a pistol. “Do ye be wantin’ a night in the brig?” Shulz moaned, then brought down the Black Skull and replaced it with one of the Longbraid. *Her* flag. She had made it herself. By far the best one she had created so far. “That’s better.” Holstering her pistol, she reached for the rope she had fixed to the main mast.

“Best be dropping that accent, Isa.” Shulz helped her onto the footplank. “You know how she hates that.”

“Ye mind ye own business,” she said, looking down. “Avast!” Most of the sailors ignored her with the exception of Neels and Henry, who were mopping the main deck. Henry waved up at her. “Ahoy, Captain!”

“Ahoy!” Putting all her weight onto the flat piece of wood, she pushed away from the mast and fell as the pulley squeaked. She held the rope so tight her knuckles were white. The sack full of sand at the other end of the rope rose toward the nest and when she hit the deck, Shulz grabbed the sack and tied it off. Even Neels had been impressed with that the first time.

Henry set his mop aside and stood straight and tall. “Orders, Captain?”

“Aye, Sailing Master,” she said.

“Sailing Master?” Henry stood taller in his tattered rags that became the finest red coat she had ever seen. He nodded at Neels. “Did you hear that, Eel?”

Neels huffed. He hated the nickname Isa had given him and hated her games even more. “Aye.” He spit, then mopped it up. “I heard. Like you would ever be Sailing Master.”

“Never mind him, Master Henry,” she said. “Turn this ship! We be wasting daylight!” They were. The sun nearly touched the sea now. They wouldn’t have much time left before she had to get below deck to her cabin. “Bring a spring upon her cable! Make ready for *him*.”

Henry gasped. “Blow me down! Ye seen the kraken, Captain?”

“Aye! Make straight for him! We be ending this dance of ours before the sun sets.” The many battles between Captain Longbraid and the Kraken would go down in history as the greatest set of tales known from western Kelpot to eastern Vestur. She would be remembered as the wealthiest, trickiest and bravest pirate of all the open seas.

Master Henry ran to the helm, pushing aside a reluctant sailor named Jecoby. With an over exaggerated motion, Henry pretended to give the helm a heavy turn. “There we are, Captain,” he said, rushing back over. He stood at the rail, hand shielding his eyes from the sun’s glare. “Ye sure ye seen him?”

“More than that,” she said. “I can *feel* him.” That made Neels laugh. Her mother was always going on about her feelings and that a good captain could avoid trouble, or gain a bit of luck, because of it. So, she used that. It sounded right.

“Aye,” Henry said. “I feel it too, I do.” He walked back to retrieve his mop, then placed it to his shoulder as if it were a rifle. That made Isa smile. She could always count on Henry. With a growl, she pulled the wooden pistol from her side.

“Cannons be ready?”

“Right they are, Captain. The thirty two pounders, loaded and waiting on ye orders to fire.”

“Hold sharp, Master Henry. We must let him think he has us. When he reaches for the ship, be ready for me command!”

“Aye!”

“Isa!” Her younger sister Jaima ran up to her with a wooden sword that Henry had made. “I mean Captain!” She had on her red bandanna and black sash that was so long on her that it dragged the deck. Behind her came their little brother, Kolton. He had on mother’s trifold hat and held the second of the wooden pistols.

Captain Longbraid raised her fist. “Are ye ready for a battle!?”

Henry roared, followed by Jaima’s and Kolton’s high pitched squalling. The ship suddenly shuddered, then over the railing came a massive purple tentacled arm of the kraken. “There! He got the ship!” Henry raised his rifle and kicked backward a half step with each “boom” from his gun.

Kolton made “pow” noises while Jaima slashed with her sword. The kraken covered the ship with its arms. The sea splashed with each movement the creature made. It threatened to tear the ship apart as it began to squeeze, cracking the deck.

A thump came from behind her. She spun around and screamed. Neels looked at her with a blank face, then rolled his eyes. “Did it get me?”

“Oh, Eel!” She said, covering her mouth. “It squished you!” He huffed again, his favorite method of expression. He sat on the deck then fell back, arms and legs out. “Henry!” Her Sailing Master turned, darting toward Neels.

“Eel?” He said. “Are you alive?”

“You owe me a bottle of rum,” he said, still sprawled on the deck.

“He’s gone! No!” Henry ran back to the rail shouting, doubling his efforts with his rifle.

Jaima ran to the rail, stabbing her sword. “Take that ye ugly squid!”

“Ugh,” Isa said. “It’s not a squid. It’s a kraken!”

“Mom said krakens weren’t real,” Jaima said.

“Yes, they are!”

“Nope.”

“Do you want to be a swab next time?”

Jaima started to whine. “No! Please don’t make me a swab!”

“Then stab that kraken!” Captain Longbraid pointed her pistol. “Pow!” Jaima started slashing again. Kolton had wandered off and was sitting on the steps of the quarter deck with Boatswain Thomas, playing a game of flash cards. He was still learning his proper letters.

“Captain!” Henry ran up to her. “It’s lifting the ship from the water! We have to use the cannon!” Captain Longbraid could hear faint “boom” sounds coming from the crow’s nest. Shulz was giving him hell!

The head of the massive creature rose over the side of the ship. “Its eye!” She pointed. “Fire the cannon!” Jaima rushed to Captain Longbraid’s side, holding her ears. “Don’t worry,” she whispered. “It’s just make believe.”

“To Davey Jones’ Locker with ye!” Henry lit the fuse to the cannon. “Fire in the hole!” There was a frightening blast, a real blast of smoke and fire, that kicked the cannon back to its stops. Isa clapped her ears and screamed. A moment later she could hear the splash of a cannon ball smacking the water.

Laughter rose all around. Every sailor on deck wore a smirk. The loudest of the laughter came from the Captain’s Cabin below the quarter deck. Isa’s mother stood in the doorway.

“That wasn’t funny!” Isa said.

“I can play games, too!” Mother started shouting orders to turn in for the night, calling names for night watch. Each command was answered with “Aye, Captain.”

“And you,” she said, pointing at Isa, “get your tail below deck and get supper for your brother and sister. Make sure they eat more than jelly biscuits.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Isa stowed her pistol with a sigh and headed to the stairs to collect Jaima and Kolton.

“Did we get him?”

Isa turned to her mother. “What?”

“The kraken?” She said. “Did we get him?”

Debris and splintered wood littered the deck. The fore topmast and bowsprit had been snapped apart, but there was no sign of the kraken. Slimy green ichor lay scattered about where the cannon had fired. It had been a direct hit to the creature’s eye.

“We hit him,” Isa said. “Though I have the feeling he’s still alive.”

Mother nodded, looking up to the flag flying above the main mast. She smiled and shook her head. “Aye.” Her voice suddenly grew long and heavy with accent. “I do be thinkin’ he dare not bother ye again, Cap’n.”

Isa giggled. “Captain Longbraid wins again!”

# The Young Sailor and The Pirate Prince

Once the pirates had boarded the airship, the fight was clearly one-sided.

The Ithaxian sailors could barely delay the inevitable before finally throwing down their sabers and pistols in surrender.

A fearsome cry went up as the pirates gathered the surviving sailors on the deck of the Merchant Sky Cutter, three miles above ground.

Then, an uneasy silence fell, unbroken except for the steam-powered turbines and howling winds. A low murmur passed through the ranks of the attackers.

The Pirate Prince had arrived.

Jonavin Brine cut a terrible figure as he clomped down the wooden deck. The many silver buckles on his boots and overcoat jangled in time with his trademark spurs.

His bushy black beard was strung through with the finger bones of his most vicious rivals. Kevyn Portnoy, Reginald Wellmington, Edith Yardleydale. A score of decorated Captains and Admirals from the Royal Ithaxian Navy, all disgraced, now living their days in poverty and shame in the slums of Ithaxia.

“Somebody report.” Brine’s voice was deep and low, and rumbled like two boulders grinding away at each other. The captive Ithaxian sailors were lined up in rows, on their knees. They were bruised and bloodied, and they all trembled in fear at the dread pirate’s voice.

“We lost three.” Kyssandra Roach replied. She was his first mate, deadly with a cutlass, unerringly accurate with a flintlock pistol, and most importantly, able to keep the crew in line. She was the second pair of eyes that Brine trusted more than anyone else. She wasn’t a slouch in the sack, either. “Davies, Sleet, and Bohannon. Quentin also took a nasty hit to the chest. We’re making him comfortable, but his ghost is yearning to fly with the gulls.”

“Davies” Brine’s spurs rang out as he walked slowly, deliberately, down the line of captives. “We joined the Malvora Air Cavalry together. Sleet and I fought shoulder to shoulder in the Ninth Red Crusade, and Bohannon…well, he was a horse’s ass, wasn’t he, Kys?”

“He was.” She laughed.

“But he was a loyal son of Malvora, just like the rest of us.” Brine stopped at the end of the line of captives. A fresh-faced youth who couldn’t have seen more than fifteen summers raised his chin and defiantly met Brine’s gaze.

“Got some spirit left, do ye? Good lad. Kys, why is it that Ithaxian sailors keep getting younger? This one looks like he hasn’t even reached his first shave.”

Kyssandra stared at the boy with an unreadable expression on her face. Brine continued.

“What say ye, Captain? Is Emperor Nuvenor drafting boys now to guard his Merchant Airships? Or do you just like to surround yourself with ripe young lads?”

“I’ll not speak to you, pirate scum.” The Ithaxian Captain was Evelyn Belltower, oldest son of First Admiral Ian Belltower, High Commander of the entire Royal Air Fleet.

“I must say, Captain Belltower,” Jonavan Brine tsked disapprovingly. “I expected more from you. Aren’t you rumored to be the finest swordsman in the Southern Kingdoms? I’ve been told that you were found in the galley, hiding among the sacks of potatoes.”

The other pirates grinned, murmuring.

“Flintlock unloaded. Unable to even properly draw your sabre before you were disarmed and brought up here. Could this possibly be a different Evelyn Belltower?”

The Ithaxian Captain seethed in rage.

“Or are the tales vastly over-exaggerated? Maybe the elder Belltower knew you were incapable of properly commanding an actual Royal Airship, and had you commissioned here, on this Ithaxian Sky Cutter, far from the front, where you can’t do any harm?”

“Slander me all you please, bastard.” Belltower spat. “You won’t get anything out of me.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t make that claim just yet, Captain.”

Everyone turned to see a hunched figure hobbling forward with the aid of a large wooden staff. Long, straggly hair hung over his face, and his voice was a hissing croak.

“No, I would not make that claim at all.”

“This here’s Tarren Blacktooth!” First Mate Kyssandra shouted. “He is known and feared throughout the skies as Malvora’s Avenging Angel!”

“And for good reason.” Brine glared directly at Captain Belltower. “Captian Belltower, you will swear, before our crews and all the gods above, that you will hand in your commission when you return to Ithaxia. Your crew will likewise never set foot on an airship again. You may join Portnoy, Wellmington, and Yardleydale for drinks to talk about how unfair life is, or you may retire to a little cottage to grow potatoes. I do not care. All that matters is that you never again set foot on an Ithaxian airship.”

Belltower laughed.

“And why would I do that, pirate bastard?”

“Because I’m taking your finger, sir.”

Belltower’s face drained of color.

“Oh, dear gods-”

Kyssandra grabbed Belltower’s wrist. In one swift movement, her Mastodon-tooth knife sheared through the soft skin of Belltower’s pinky finger.

Evelyn Belltower shrieked.

“NO! No, stop! Mercy, please! Aaaaaauuuugh!”

Kyssandra laughed. “He’s singing opera!”

The sinister Blacktooth mumbled under his breath and his eyes rolled back. This was a familiar process that all the pirates knew well. The Ithaxian prisoners shuddered. One collapsed on the deck, fainting in terror.

As Blacktooth chanted, Brine knelt beside the whimpering Captain Belltower.

“You know what is happening, Evie? Aye, you’ve heard the stories. Blacktooth is cursin’ ye. Powerful magic, my man commands. He’s linking us now, just as he linked me to Portnoy, Wellmington, and Yardleydale. You’re in the club now, mate. Wherever you go, I’ll see. I’ll know. And the minute you step foot on another Ithaxian vessel, Blacktooth snaps his fingers. Then, you die. Do you hear me, Belltower? Stop sniveling and nod that you understand what I’m saying to ye.”

Belltower nodded weakly.

“Scum!” The fresh-faced lad had a sabre in his hand. Torgal was on the deck, gripping his throat as it sprayed red arterial blood into the air. “For Ithaxia!”

“Wait, Captain Brine-” Kyssandra started, but her words were lost as Brine rushed forward and met the boy with his own blade.

“Good! I salute you, boy! You’ve more fire in you than the entire Belltower line!”

“Die!”

Their sabers rang out as they traded blows. The young sailor and the pirate prince, dueling miles above ground on a floating airship, surrounded by pirates and their prisoners.

The boy was fast, but he couldn’t connect any of his swings. He was too fresh, too inexperienced. Captain Brine easily side-stepped each blow. When the boy had exhausted himself, Brine stepped in and with a brutal half-spin, smashed the lad’s face with the butt of his pistol. The boy fell to the deck in a heap.

“I hate to do this.” Captain Brine said as he knelt and pressed the barrel to the boy’s forehead. “You really remind me of myself, lad, and I’d take you on in a heartbeat. But I need your mates to fear me, and they won’t do that if I let you live.”

The pistol barked once, quelling any further thoughts of defiance.

The sky was overcast as Captain Brine walked arm in arm with Kyssandra Roach down the main boulevards of Ithaxia City.

Of course, none of their pirate band would recognize them, because they looked completely different today.

Brine had left the costume and fake beard at the inn, and was now clean shaven and dapper in a gentleman’s coat and top hat.

Kyssandra, meanwhile, looked lovely. Her dress was the latest fashion, and she had indulged in her ladylike vanity by wearing the newest style of makeup.

“Belltower?” Brine’s voice was pitched higher now, in his natural speaking tone.

“Stripped of his rank, dishonorably discharged from service, and disowned from the family,” Kyssandra waved at small children passing by.

“He’s better off.” Brine replied. “The elder Belltower is a disgrace to the military, and a horrible father. What about the men?”

“They believe we’re engaging in all manner of carnal sin.”

“We should. You know, keep up appearances.”

She smiled.

“So you know, the Blacktooth illusion is taxing on me. This last time, I almost lost my concentration when…that sailor attacked you. Blacktooth would have gone up in smoke. I will require at least a day’s rest when I teleport us back to the airship.”

“Of course. We would be nothing without your magic.”

He sighed.

“How long have we been at this, Kys? The whole pirate angle, fighting to destabilize Ithaxia, knowing that we will never again have a country to truly call our own? How long?”

She watched the children playing.

“Malvora may be gone, but it lives on in our hearts.”

“Come. The High Executor will be waiting to see what we’ve been up to in the clouds.”

She knew exactly how long they had been doing this. Fifteen years and nine months. The same age as her son, whom she had borne in secret, and had given to an Ithaxian adoption agency.

The sailor that Brine had shot in the head just days ago.

# A Seasick Sword

"Do you even know how to sail?"

Icewind stared straight ahead, hand on the tiller, eyes locked on the horizon. The temptation to conjure a wind was almost overpowering. Six months of magic-abstinence, and the build-up was *really* starting to make him twitchy.

"I don't think we should go this way."

The wizard rolled his eyes. "We don't have a choice."

"We could go back?"

"I thought you were 'seasick'."

"To talk, not fight."

"You don't just *talk* to pirates."

"You didn't try."

"I'm not suicidal."

"You're sailing a dinghy into the open ocean."

He gritted his teeth. "I'm not confronting a shipful of pirates with a sword which refuses to come out of its scabbard."

"*You* wouldn't want to swing around when you're feeling sick."

"You don't have a stomach."

Brightedge seemed to consider that for a moment. "I don't see your point."

"Without a stomach, you can't get sick."

The sword sighed theatrically. "Again with the prejudice."

"It's called logic."

"It's called a fallacy."

The wizard's grip tightened on the tiller. "Enlighten me."

"It's the *'swords aren't human therefore they're lumps of inanimate metal'* fallacy. It's pretty common. Surprised you haven't heard of it."

Icewind shot a venomous look at his sword, then looked back at the scene they had left in their wake.

Smoke meandered in the azure sky, the only blemish on the fathomless sky. Two ships floated side-by-side, twin spectres shrouded by the haze, shrinking slowly as the minutes drifted by. The pirates had chased them for days, with the relentless confidence of a merciless predator. That confidence had been well placed.

The merchantman's crew were honour bound to fight to the last. Icewind could have helped. He *would* have. He might even have made a difference. But he couldn't risk using magic, and his sword had serious issues.

He sighed and turned away.

Brightedge seemed to sense his mood. "I did nothing wrong."

"You didn't do anything at all."

"I was seasick!"

"There's always an excuse."

"It's not my fault!"

"It sure as hell isn't anyone else's!"

The sword sighed.

"This is the fourth time, too."

"It is not. I've never been to sea before."

"You know what I'm talking about."

"Never met pirates either."

Icewind slammed his fist on the rail. "But we've been in *fights* before. Or, rather, *I've* been in fights. You've been as unhelpful as you could possibly be."

"You don't think I'm menacing enough?"

"You're supposed to do more than look menacing."

"But I was seasick!"

"And when we were jumped at the port? And you wouldn't let go of that barrel?"

"You swung me too hard. I got stuck."

"And the bandits in the mountains, when you wouldn't come out of your damn scabbard?"

Brightedge sniffed. "I told you. I had a cold."

"And those raiders by the desert?"

"I was brand new. It was dusty. You can't expect me to just risk losing my lustre like that."

The wizard shook his head in disgust and turned his attention back to his task. With the heat of the sun and the cool of the breeze, sailing would have been quite pleasant without a cutthroat crew of corsairs to worry about.

"Are those sails getting bigger?"

Icewind looked back, and a chill ran down his spine. One ship had left the other behind. It was definitely getting bigger. "Looks like we won't be alone for long."

"They're not going to catch up, surely?" An edge of panic sharpened the sword's voice.

"They have bigger sails."

"We have to *do* something!"

"We have to fight."

"I'm seasick!"

"Tough. It's about time you proved just how magical a sword you really are."

The wizard adjusted the sails, trying to capture more of the wind, but it was hopeless. He barely knew port from starboard; the pirates would doubtless be a little less incompetent. His swordplay was merely adequate too—hence the need for a magical sword.

Of course, he could solve their problem in a heartbeat with magic. Was it worth the risk, or was that just his need for release talking?

If Brightedge would just let him use its power, magic wouldn't be necessary.

"If you stick in your scabbard again I'll throw you overboard."

"That's not fair! I hate water."

"Maybe you could complain them to death."

"I could try?" The sword sounded hopeful.

Icewind chuckled despite himself.

"By the way, I have a question."

"Is this really the time?"

"What kind of a name is 'Icewind'?"

The wizard frowned at his sword. "What?"

"I mean, none of the other people we've met have names like that. They're all called 'John' or 'James'."

"I thought you *didn't* want to be fish food."

"I've been thinking about it lately."

"You can't be senile. I had you forged six months ago."

"You've never told anyone but me your real name."

"And you were like this from the start."

"Who would have a name like yours—and hide it?"

"You haven't left my side since then."

"Even kings use normal names."

Icewind clenched his fist. "Maybe that's it."

"I've heard of people more pretentious than kings."

"She must have realised I planned to leave."

"But I've never seen you do it."

"She bribed that bastard to make me a faulty sword."

Brightedge's voice sharpened. "I'm not faulty. *You* are!"

"A sword that won't fight is pointless."

"As is a mage who won't use magic."

The wizard's tone softened. "I never hid what I am from you."

"You never told me either."

"I'm trying to *escape* from all that."

"And you always tell me off for not fighting."

"You're a sword! You're *supposed* to fight!"

"There's more than one way to cut a cake."

Icewind sighed. "It's not the same."

"You have your reasons. I have mine."

"What reason could you possibly have?"

"You'll laugh at me."

"Maybe you shouldn't be so bloody ridiculous."

"It's not ridiculous to hate hurting people."

*"That's* your problem?"

"Valuing life is *not* a 'problem'."

"It is if you're a sword."

Brightedge laughed. "So says the mage who doesn't do magic."

"I have a *valid* reason."

"You're not the only person in the world."

"Fine. What would it take to get you to work *with* me on this?"

"Two things. First: I don't want to kill anyone unless it's *really* unavoidable."

Icewind nodded. "That I can agree to."

"Second: I want to try cooking."

"I don't..."

"I've always dreamed of being cutlery."

"But you're a sword."

"Are people always happy with their life?"

"That's beside the—"

"Actually, I have a third condition."

The wizard rolled his eyes. "You want to be a princess too?"

"You have to pull your weight as well."

"What's *that* supposed to mean?"

"Use magic. If I have to do something distasteful, you should too."

"It's not distasteful, it's—"

"It doesn't matter that you're running from someone."

"But if I use magic she'll—"

"You're asking me to risk taking lives."

"You can't just—"

"Besides, there are things I can't do."

Icewind gritted his teeth. "You're a magic sword. You can—"

"One of those is kill an entire crew of pirates."

"What's that got—"

"Like the one behind us."

The wizard paused.

"They'll catch up eventually."

"I know that. But you can't—"

"You agreed not to take life unless it's unavoidable."

"Yes, but—"

"I won't kill a whole crew."

"If we kill the captain and disarm a few—"

"If you want my help, you have to do this."

"But she'll find me."

"If she does, I'll help."

Icewind took a deep breath, and looked out over the rolling waves. With an enchanted sword he could defeat her. Especially if she knew nothing of it. But could he really kill her? She was evil incarnate, of course, but the girl she used to be was still somewhere inside... Far better to disappear, and never have to face her.

But what good was disappearing if it meant he always had to hide who he was?

It had been mere months, and he was already longing for the touch of magic. Could he really hold back for centuries more? Would a sharp, quick end be better?

Brightedge interrupted his thoughts. "We've been travelling for six months, half of that by ship. Could we be far enough away by now?"

The wizard shrugged. "There's no way to know."

"I can think of a way."

"I might not be able to do it."

"So don't turn back. Live your life as yourself, and hope she lets go too."

"And if she doesn't?"

"Then we'll deal with it."

Icewind nodded. It wasn't perfect, but it was better to live in hope. He turned towards the dinghy's stern, set the raging fire of magic flowing through his heart, and prepared to show those pirates just who they were hunting.

# Friendly fire

You look old and tired now. You see your reflection in the mirror and your face is riddled with scars, each one telling a story. You brush your hand over the scar that cuts across your left eye and you never forget the horrors of that day.

But it’s over now; your story is done. You are sad, but excited to settle down with your share of the bounty that your crew has helped collect over the years. You are scared to leave the ship and not feel your baby’s rocking rhythm as it sails across the waves. You have never stayed more than a week or two on land, but to rest and die there seems strangely fitting.

You know the ship like the back of your hand and each route of the ocean courses through your veins; the waves have always been your mistress, but you have not yet danced with the dunes. You are not sure if she will accept you.

You wonder why you doubt yourself now, when you were so sure weeks ago. You know the crew can take care of themselves and you know Jonah will make an excellent captain. Jonah, your son on the sea—your real son a failure and a disgrace; you dare not speak his name.

The crew will raid more ships when you leave. You have become weak and old, your bones too brittle for the waters. You sigh and walk out of your chambers to face your crew.

They all stare at you, watching you with every step you take, your wooden legs creaking on the floorboards. They all take a sip of their ale and watch you walk towards Jonah, who still looks at you in legendary awe. They murmur, probably wondering why you made Jonah captain.

You know Jonah is nervous and you can see your son shaking in his boots as he stares at the ocean. You pat him on the back and smile at him and he smiles back. You worry if he may be too weak.

You wonder if some members of the crew still don’t understand why you are leaving all you have ever known and you wonder what they think about you. How many curses have they laid upon your head? You see Viros staring at you out of the corners of her eyes, and you wonder if she prayed that the waters would rise against you and swallow you up.

You can’t see your actions as traitorous, but the crew looks at you like you’re pox infested. You holler at them to piss off and face their work.

You frown deeply when you see Jonah running over like a lapdog towards Viros to fill her cup of ale and the girl smirks at you as she sips from her cup. You still believe Jonah will rise up and take up and take control. You have to.

You notice some new lads on the ship: survivors of the last ship they raided. You nod at them as they scrub the floor till it shines brighter than the sun for a few scraps. One looks up at you and you slam their heads on the plank of the floorboards. The lad dare not look the face of his sea father until his first raid.

You demand for everyone’s attention and they all stare at you immediately. It feels good to know your bones are not that brittle yet. You make Jonah stand by your side so he can look at things from the captain’s view and the boy still looks scared. The crew mates chug down the rest of their ale and you begin the first process of handing down the trinkets from your raids to Jonah. You give him the ivory crown you slit throats for on a royal ship; you give him the golden skull you stole from a merchant ship. You give Jonah everything before you remove the captain’s hat from your head: the hat that you sleep with, that never leaves your head. It is his now. He is captain now.

You see everyone’s eyes widen and you wonder if they are jealous, but that’s not the case. They fall to the floor and scream as their intestines boil and bubble like a fresh stew, their bodies contorting as blood pours out from their eyes and ears. You hear every piercing note and disturbing cries until the voices melt away. You look at the cups of ale lying on the floor, then you slowly turn and look at Jonah, who is no longer the scared little boy you thought you knew.

He is smiling, holding up the bottle of poison in one hand and a blade in the other. You can’t believe it. In the distance, you see a fleet of ships coming closer and closer; the ships Jonah was waiting for.

You look at you son and slowly nod. Out of fear or respect, you cannot tell.

He has risen up.

# 

The Red Chicken

Miles underwater, the strength of the waves, the sound of the crumbling coliseum and screams of panic amplified threefold inside the force bubble. Nothing upset Lannaria.

*Joshua? Joshua?*

No answer. No reaction from her ring either.

They reached the surface minutes later and were rescued by a ship. The wizard who brought them back collapsed. She was very lucky to be near him when the barrier spells failed and the windowed walls shattered under the pressure of the sea.

The next day the king executed the architect. Not for the tragedy, but because the Underwater Coliseum was supposed to be the crowning jewel of the nation. Instead, it made him a laughing stock among other rulers and this was unforgivable.

Her ring finger throbbed.

*Lanny? You there?*

Joshua! You are alive!

She rushed to the castle, as did many others. There were survivors still in the coliseum, those married communicating with their partner.

But there would be no rescue attempt. The coliseum sunk deeply. It was just too dangerous and expensive. The barriers still working could fail at any moment or the survivors starve to death.

Lanny didn’t give up. She went to the chief-wizard.

“A force tunnel in the sea?”

“Yes.”

“That’s ten million marks, Lady Lannaria. But after the coliseum fiasco we need to review our spells and rituals.”

Lanny returned home outraged. Specially when she heard the king just spent millions on imported beverages. And the people trapped in his vanity project? That money could be used to—

She had an idea. She painted her fencing mask, grabbed her equipment and rushed to the docks.

“Take me to your captain,” she said to the most suspect man around.

A masked woman with a rapier in plain day could make her point. Luckily, this man was indeed part of a true pirate crew disguised as merchants.

“Who is this chick?” asked the captain.

“Your new captain.”

Laughter boomed all around. It stopped when Lanny threw an egg on the captain’s face.

He attacked. Lanny parried and worked her footwork on constant advances and retreats, confusing him.

She saw an opening and lunged, wounding him in the shoulder and another slash sent his sword flying on the water.

“Glory and fame awaits us!” she said.

Everyone unsheathed their swords. Against her.

“I… I need intelligent and strong manly men like you!”

Everyone had death on their faces.

“It… it involves millions of marks!”

Everyone relaxed and smiled.

\*

The pirates accepted Lanny’s plan, but mocked her as captain. She knew nothing about the sea. They brought a chicken on board and put a mask on it. Soon enough they were calling her Red Chicken, because of her hair.

She took the joke with grace instead of anger, gaining some sympathy. At the moment of the attack, she ordered the former captain to initiate it by throwing an egg on the enemy ship.

The king’s selection of drinks amassed a fortune on the black market. After her crew’s share - more generous than the former captain’s - she made one million marks for herself.

Using her privileged position, she discovered many ships with cargo that interested the king (but not the kingdom) and focused them.

*Clack! Clack!*

What was that, Joshua?

Found a crab and named him Clark. Only company in here. Also, I started writing a book to distract myself. Squid ink is surprisingly good.

Joshua made a plan to last for three years.

But in two years, Lanny “only” made five million marks. The Red Chicken was no longer a mockery, her name feared throughout the coast. But her objective was still very far.

She decided to speed the rescue process and sailed to assault a massive cargo of gold that was surprisingly unprotected.

Only when arrows landed on the deck and both ships collided she realized the trap. It was no gold cargo. It was the Navy. And Lanny was confronted by the general himself.

Her own father.

*Oh no no no.*

“I knew you wouldn’t resist this bait… Red Chicken.” He spat at her feet. “It’s time to die now, bitch.”

“Wait!”

Lanny barely parried. She wouldn’t attack even if she could win.

She failed to sidestep an attack that opened a deep cut in her left arm, cried in pain and was kicked in the leg and in the stomach, losing her breath.

“I think I will make this very slow and painful. Retribution for the kingdom,” said her father.

Lanny crawled inside a cabin. Her father charged. She removed her mask and he froze, staring at her.

“Lanny?” Her father dropped his sword. “*Lanny*?”

She put her mask again, just in time as her pirates came to help. Her father ran and she saw her other ship coming for the rescue and the Navy called a retreat.

Hours later she returned home, barely standing. Her cut was painfully cleaned and stitched by a doctor. She had purple bruises on her stomach and leg. Slept for three whole days. Only then she explained everything to her father.

“The king I serve is destroying the country, I’m ordered back from the war, leaving behind men I served with for years. All to fight a pirate that turns out to be my daughter. She have been stealing and killing behind my back.” he said looking through the window. “What would your mother think if she was still alive, Lannaria?”

“I’ve never killed…”

“Here, your inheritance. Five million. Now you have your ten, right?”

Lanny opened her mouth.

“Now get out.”

“What?”

“You are no longer my daughter, *girl*. Go, and never appear in front of me again.”

“But…”

“*OUT*!”

Outside, shaking and holding back tears, she called Joshua.

*Lanny? I’m calling for days. The ring was crazy, like you were dying or something.*

I was… sick. And I have good news. Rescue is on the way.

Really? That’s… great. Great. And I’ve just finished the book too.

She limped her way to the castle, painfully breathing as well. But her leg, arm and torso, all would heal. Father would forgive her. Joshua would return. Three years ravaging the seas would pay out. Everything would be fine.

“Lady Lannaria, welcome back.”

“I have ten millions, chief-wizard. I need a force tunnel to the coliseum right away.”

“What?”

“You heard me.”

“Lady Lannaria, that’s the price for tunnels for close-to-surface level. The coliseum had such a tunnel. But it sunk too deep now. The deeper we go, the higher the pressure of the sea, more resources and wizards needed. The sea is royal property, you would also have to pay for permissions.”

“And… how much would all that cost?”

“At least a hundred million.”

\*

Lanny limped numbly through the streets, all hope lost.

But if one loses focus on their darkest moments they might also miss the light that will guide them out of the abyss.

She sit and thought, realizing the problem was the king. He didn’t save his own people and wouldn’t permit anyone to do it and make him look like a fool. Even if she had a hundred million marks. So she reunited her crew, divided it to three ships and told the plan: eize the throne.

Two ships distracted her father’s fleet and the other went directly for the royal docks. Fewer in numbers and taken by surprise, the castle fell. The king was drunk and sleeping.

The only one who could do anything about it was her father. Would he kill her for honor to a drunk king? As she expected, he didn’t, and joined the coup.

She bribed the chief-wizard and work on the force tunnel started. And it “only” cost forty million without the king’s permission.

To the public, she revealed the whole story. It was surprisingly good to not hold all that to herself. Lowering taxes and price on food and rent also helped.

Joshua was saved, but needed weeks to recover. Meanwhile, his squid-inked manuscript “Underwater” became a book, shocked the world and sold millions.

And her father forgave her.

“I’m sorry for before.” He hugged her. “I’m very proud of you. I’m ashamed I didn’t realize I’d have done the same if it was you.”

Relief washed over Lanny. The last problem solved.

She bought a ship to make up with lost time with Joshua. They baptized it *The Red Crab*.

“Pirate, revolutionary and queen. Did I miss anything?,” asked Joshua.

“Master fencer,” she replied slashing the air. She healed, just like she knew she would. “One match?”

“No way, it’s obvious who is gonna win,” he said. Lanny grinned. “The pen is way mightier than the sword. It wouldn’t be fair at all.”

Lanny slapped his shoulder.

“I will tell you everything as we sail.” She laughed. “I want a book of *my* story too. You better get it right!” She kissed him softly. “So, to where? Renice? How about Zaribbe?”

He smiled and kissed her back.

“How about the entire world?”