

7th Sea Official fiction

Over the years, several official pieces of 7th Sea fiction have been released on the 7th Sea website. They have been collected them and re-formatted into the eBook format for convenience.

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Death from Above

by John Wick

The swift sea wind brought the smell of blood and smoke to his nostrils as he knelt still and silent in the rigging. High above the carnage, he looked down at the Castillian officers, a sneer growing on his lips.

"Dirty, stinkin' rotwater scum," he thought to himself as he watched them move across the deck of the ship. "A lucky shot was all it took. That's it, just one lucky shot."

He carefully peered over his right shoulder, where he saw the Castillian ship tied tight to the starboard side. He heard himself growl as he remembered them washing over the side, brandishing their steel, knowing they outnumbered the

pirates five to one. If Randall had known his captain would be such a coward, if he knew he would surrender at the first hint of a defeat, he would have cut the man's throat himself.

But surrender they did, and here he was, looking down from the rigging at the proud Castillians who had captured *The Morning Glory*. He saw his shipmates below him, all lined up in irons and ready to be led to the brig. Randall looked at the odds. There were at least twenty men below him. He might survive a moment or two before they killed him, but that *might* give him a chance to throw a sword - or even a key, if he was lucky - to his captured brothers before they put a bullet in his head.

"And if I was standing there, he thought, I'd be tellin' me grandkids of the man who leapt from the riggin' and saved me life. Either they find me up here and I die like a stuck pig, or I."



Randall took the pistol from his belt and wrapped a line around his arm.

"Dyin's the easy part," he said. Then, he pushed off the yardarm and screamed. The look in their faces alone was worth it.

The Highwayman

by John Wick

Biting hard on his own tongue the soldier fought the urge to gasp for breath. He clenched his fingers into the cold earth, and tried to slow his thudding heart. Somewhere above where he crouched in the tall grass, he heard the echoing clip clop of hooves, but he couldn't tell from which direction.

The soldier clenched his eyes shut tight. Robert, he knew, had gone down under his own horse when the attack first came. He and Cameron had fled in different directions, and he hadn't looked back or slowed down until his horse, mad with terror, threw him and galloped off. A sharp cry split the still night somewhere to his left, and he heard Cameron's voice plead, "Dear God No!" before it cut off in a gurgle.

Unable to keep his hiding place any longer, the soldier bolted, plunging into the darkness, grass whipping at his legs, and bare branches tearing at his face and chest. Out of no where, a chap reared up in the darkness just in front of



him, bowling him backwards and off of his feet. Quivering, he sat in the wet grass as the great black horse came closer, step by step. The steed and its rider were as black as

the shadows themselves, the only relief, the silver gleaming of the moonlight on his two drawn pistols.

"When men who should enforce the law hold themselves above it, just men must make them pay." His voice was deadly even and as sharp as a rapier. The soldier fought to make his tongue obey him, to beg for his life, but when the first pistol exploded, he still hadn't found the words.

The Sidhe Queen

by John Wick

I remember the night as clearly as yesterday. Perhaps it was yesterday.

I was a boy with only fifteen years behind me, wandering through the woods on my way home from the faire. I could still feel the kiss I earned on my cheek, and it spurred my step.

Just then, I felt the chilly wind whip down from the treetops. I shuddered, remembering my mother's warning to wear a coat that morning. Of course, I knew I didn't need a coat, but then again, I ignored many of my mother's warnings that day.

I knew the house lay near that old castle near Killbarney, the one my father warned me never go by, but running through the castle's old yard would save me precious minutes of sunlight. "Better to disturb the Sidhe when the sun is up," I said to myself and leapt from the roadway, cut through the dense woods and skedaddled toward Castle Killbarney.

The treetops cut off my view of the sky, and I could no

longer tell how far the twilight had crept across the sky. It seemed I had wandered too far into the woods. I wasn't sure where I was, even though I was certain I was headed in the right direction. I turned and looked back, but what lay behind me was as strange and unfamiliar as what lay ahead of me. Then, when I turned about, what I saw nearly knocked me to my backside.

Snow. All around me. As high as the tops of my boots.

I looked up and saw the twilight hanging in the sky, the moon lurking like a hunter high above me. I let my gaze fall back before me, and there, covered in the white crystal frost was a fountain and beside the fountain was a woman, her skin as white as the snow and her eyes the color of the sky. She leaned against the fountain and her expression that made me feel I was late for a rendez-vous.



"You are late," she said, and from somewhere, I knew I had heard her voice before. "Worry not," she said, her expression unchanged. "I am certain you will make up for your tardiness."

Bury them Deep

by Jennifer Mahr

"It is not enough to kill your enemies. You must bury them, and bury them deep. A good rain can dig them up again." - Berek's Proverbs

The thin sun of afternoon glinted off his father's sword where it lay on the bed. Umberto stood before his looking glass, assessing his reflection as if it were a rival suitor. With a smile, he pinned in place the favor Cecile had given him: an enamel brooch trimmed with a flourish of delicate lace. He positioned it on the lapel of his vest, directly over his heart. Smiling at the memory of last night, he spun on one heel - his short duelist's cloak whipping about his thin waist - snapped up the sword and headed out into the street.

The cobblestones clicked sharply under the wood of his boot heels, and in his excitement he barely noticed the thick smell of live poultry in the air or the belligerent calls of merchants and tavern owners hawking their wares. He struggled to concentrate on the duel before him, but his mind insisted on wandering.

Last night Cecile Deneuve had given him the opportunity to prove his devotion. For two weeks he had courted her slyly with passing glances and subtle gestures. Last night she had sought him out and they had passed the entire evening together. Before she left him to rejoin the friends she was staying with, she had even shared a confidence with him.

A young nobleman at court had professed love to her younger sister and then been inconstant. Cecile fretted that she had no way to strike back at him for his lack of consideration. Then, with a mischievous light in her eye, she had asked Umberto if she might hire him to challenge the noble in question to a public duel, a fight to the first blood to humiliate the impudent fop. "After all, Umberto," she whispered in a voice like sweet honey, "you are a swordsman by trade. Surely you can best a noble." And, of course, the hint of payment was there in her lips and in her eyes.

Despite Umberto's perpetual poverty, he gallantly refused the payment. He smiled to himself again thinking of the way he had handled the whole matter. Surely his generosity would win him further favor in her eyes.

The gates of the city's center garden rose up before him, gleaming and golden like the gates to paradise. With a quick breath, he strode inside and headed for the center courtyard. The center court was the fashionable place for all the local and visiting gentry to spend their early evenings. Turning past a great hedge sculpture, Umberto spotted his man. Dressed in a crisp blue coat, his hair drawn back in a casual tail, stood Cecile's enemy. He was speaking with two older gentlemen, members of Castille's own court.

Standing boldly forward among the well dressed lords and ladies, Umberto drew his blade, kissed it and pointed it directly at the young nobleman.

"Sir," he raised his voice for all those assembled to hear. "I challenge you to a match to the first point. The matter," he paused for effect, "is one of honor." Then he took a single

step forward and lowered his sword point to the floor before his feet.

The nobleman looked puzzled at first, glancing around to see if one of his companions might offer some explanation.

“Go on, Jeremy,” one of them said with a smile. “You must have upset somebody somehow.”

“It should be a good bit of before-supper sport,” agreed the other. “Go on and show us how Avalonians fight these days. Here, I’ll hold your coat for you.”

Jeremy agreeably undid the fastenings of his overcoat, folded it neatly and handed it off to his friend. Umberto removed his coat as well, setting it on a nearby bench. Walking forward to meet his opponent, he stretched his arms, swiveling them once, then twice, loosening the muscles.

The man called Jeremy stepped forward until only a few feet separated them. Then he stepped into a relaxed but deliberate stance, sword pointing upward. Umberto raised his own blade until they were tip to tip.

“Begin?” the other man asked. Umberto inclined his head and the two swords sprang apart as if on a pivot. Strike. Parry. Counter-strike. The two men moved across the square in a lightning-quick dance, their blades nearly invisible. The crowd gathered around them, moved and shifted like the waves of the sea, back as the duelists approached and forward again as they retreated.

Umberto felt the heat of the fight rise in him, one movement flowing into the next as he slipped into the rhythm of the duel. Parrying a deft blow and enjoying his opponent’s surprising skill, he threw his hair back over his left shoulder. It was possible that he might even lose this fight. That would be a shame if it lost him Cecile’s favor, but he was enormously pleased at finding so fine a swordsman. Well, there are other women in the world, he thought. And if the gentleman has played a little falsely to a young girl, it was all a part of the great game of love.

He brought up his blade to block the anticipated stroke and almost stumbled when it met no resistance. Surprised, he looked into the face of his opponent. All the humor and curiosity had gone out of Jeremy’s face. Instead he had the

look of a man fighting for a grave cause. Umberto only barely sidestepped the sudden thrust that came at his left ribs. The stroke hadn’t been a casual one. It had been meant to cut - deeply.

The nobleman followed it with a series of fast, furious blows. It was only years of training and a healthy amount of luck that saved Umberto from some of them. Confused, Umberto glanced around the assembly. Over the Avalonian’s shoulder he could see Cecile smiling sweetly at him. Then she turned to exchange words with the man beside her, laughing at whatever he said. No one else appeared to notice the change in the tone of the fight. They still watched with keen amusement, thinking the duel would end with the first flash of blood.

Knowing that he could expect no help from the courtiers surrounding him, Umberto concentrated on defending himself. Using a trick an old master had taught him, he let the other man come in for a strike; then, turning his body so that the blade slid past him, Umberto hooked the decorated edge of his basket hilt around the base of the blade and gave a sharp twist.

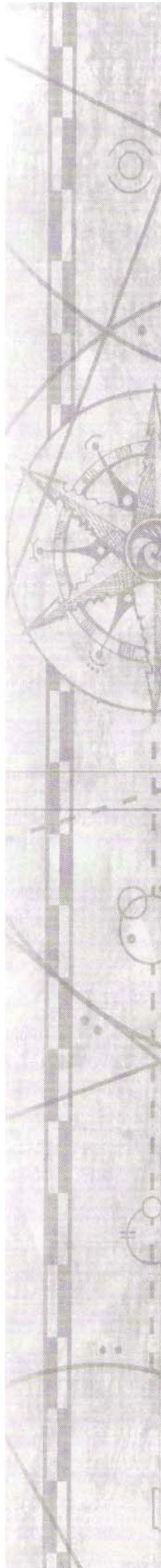
The sword flew out of the other man’s hand, clattering along the flagstones. Cursing, the disarmed Jeremy leaped away from Umberto. Feinting as if he would circle to the left after his lost blade, he instead threw himself at Umberto’s feet, bowling him over. By the time Umberto had regained his feet, Jeremy had regained his sword.

Umberto stepped forward only to feel his left leg give way, still stunned from the fall. As the ground came up, Jeremy closed, a killing look in his eyes. Umberto rolled to the side, bringing his own sword up between them. The blade passed so cleanly through the other man’s body that at first Umberto wasn’t sure he’d struck him at all. But then Jeremy fell forward onto Umberto’s chest and the hard, sluggish thudding of the man’s heart told him he had struck true.

A moment that lasted a lifetime. A single realization pounded against the back of his eyes.

I’ve killed him.

Jeremy’s eyes went vacant and his body buckled, like a puppet whose strings have been cut.



I've killed him.

Umberto tried to catch him, but the weight of the Avalonian was too much, falling too quickly, and they hit hard on the cold flagstones.

By the Prophets, I've killed him.

He searched the man's eyes, his face only a few inches from his own, and tried to form a question.

"Damn her," Jeremy whispered, blood flecking his lips. "But, you're damned already, aren't you? She'll pick your bones clean, boy, and eat your soul for dessert." The last words rattled out of the dead man's mouth.

Blood pounded in Umberto's ears and it seemed as if sound and sight ran out of the world hand in hand for a moment, leaving only the dead man's face in his mind. Then in a rush it came roaring back. All around him came gasps and cries and exclamations. Hands were pulling the body off of him, rolling it onto its back on the ground and seeking signs of life. Umberto's sword clanged to the ground where it lay in the pooling blood. Other hands hauled Umberto to his feet, and he became aware slowly of harsh voices demanding he answer them. Startled, he scanned the crowd for Cecile, but she was nowhere to be seen.

"It's murder, man," one of the men Jeremy had been speaking with before the fight said into Umberto's ear. "You'll hang if you can't answer for what you've done!"

"What possessed you?" demanded another. "What treachery is this?"

"It was a friendly fight!" Umberto tried to answer, but his tongue felt thick and his mouth was dry. "I don't understand what happened! Where is Cecile? She proposed the duel. Where is she?" He cast around desperately.

Cecile stepped out of the crowd before him. "Do you know this man?" asked one of the king's advisors. "Was the duel yours?"

Her pretty curls waving, Cecile Deneuve shook her head. "I know him only a little. And I have no idea what he is suggesting."

"That isn't true," Umberto gasped, stunned. "I have proof! I have her ..." The words trailed off as his gaze fell on the bare lapel of his vest. Slowly he raised his head. The brooch with its white lace trim stood out sharply against the deep crimson of Cecile's dress. Her perfect lips curved in just the faintest hint of a smile before she turned and disappeared back into the crowd.

Cecile did appear at the trial. She still wore the brooch, and this time the dress was a flushed rose that reminded Umberto of purity stained. Before a court of Castille's highest nobles she told them in her clear and lovely voice that she had met with Umberto on only one occasion, the night before the fight. He had professed affection to her, and she, shocked by his forward manner, had told him that she was already being courted by the visiting nobleman Jeremy Carruthers. In fact, she explained, she had only known the other man a little, but she had been frightened by Umberto's determination and had sought to put him off. Now of course, she regretted her words terribly, but who could have known that his jealousy would drive him to do such a violent thing?

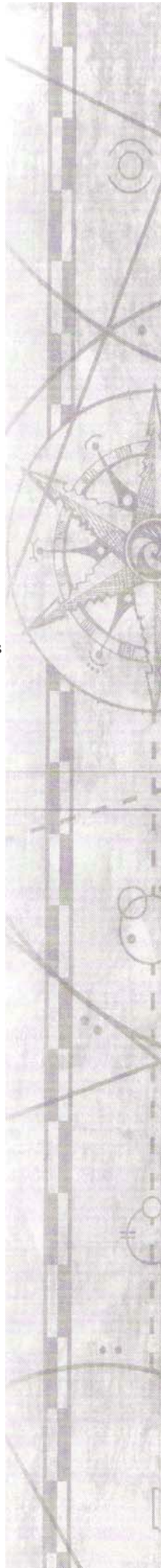
Other individuals testified that they had, on several occasions, seen Umberto follow Cecile with his eyes, and that he had inquired about her more than once. And this of course was true. Damning, but true.

Never called to testify in his own defense, Umberto stood in silence as the day of his death was announced.

His last dinner was overcooked lamb, and Umberto poked at the greasy meat with distaste. Then, he heard the footsteps coming toward his cell. Too slow to be the prison guards, and too light to belong to any man. Cecile stepped from the shadows and moved forward until the last light fading from the narrow cell window shone off her golden hair.

If only she would come a little closer, Umberto thought, he might reach her narrow, lying throat through the crude iron bars. As if she could hear the thought, Cecile smiled and stopped just out of reach.

"You did very well, you know," she said, and there was an amusement in her voice that seemed obscene in this miserable place. Mixed with the sweet fragrance of her perfume, the rot on the walls was all the more potent. "I didn't think you'd win, really. Jeremy was an excellent



champion.” The last word wounded him nearly as deeply as he had wounded Jeremy. Glancing around the place, she pulled a painted fan from the sleeve of her dress and toyed with it as she continued. “Really, I thought I would be visiting him here tonight, convicted for your murder. But that was the beauty of it, after all; either way, I won.” She smiled up at him with the innocence of a happy child.

“It seemed rude not to pay my respects, and to send you to the scaffold entirely ignorant. Cecile is a lovely name, but it isn’t my own. Neither was the one that Jeremy knew me by when we first met in Vodacce. We were very close there before I left, and that was my own foolishness. You see, I travel a great deal in my trade.

“When Jeremy arrived here, I was already established with all the right people as Cecile Deneuve. It wouldn’t do to have him upset all my work, and he knew it. He suspected that I might try to insure his silence. That’s why he grew so violent when he saw you with my token.” Her fingers brushed the brooch still pinned on her bodice. “I’m afraid he assumed you were an assassin.”

“But he hadn’t said anything.” Umberto fought to keep his voice level. “What made you think he would?”

“I didn’t, to tell you the truth. But I really couldn’t take the chance,” she said with a slight shake of her head. “This has been a very profitable trip.”

Umberto lunged forward, the bars thundering under his weight as he tried to reach her. “You’re a witch,” he spat. “A soulless demon!”

“So I’ve been told,” she murmured, lowering her eyes demurely. “At any rate, I seem to have overstayed my welcome here. I’m off for the highlands in the morning. I’m afraid I can’t stay for your show. Better luck next time, Umberto.” The last words were a whisper, intimate and low. She walked back into the darkness, Umberto’s howl of rage echoing after her.

The next day was gray and thick with the expectation of storm. It felt fitting to Umberto as he was led, arms bound, toward the scaffold. The wooden steps creaked under his weight as he climbed them. One. Two. Three. Four. He counted all thirteen, each step a little prayer. Then the

platform stretched ahead, the rope hanging thick and sure in its center. The crowd gathered around the stand was mostly made of peasants and a few tradesmen. It was market day and a crowd had gathered. Viewers of higher standing could watch from the comfort of their balconies above the square. True to her word, Cecile was not among them.

The guards led Umberto forward and the hooded executioner placed the rope around his neck. Thick and heavy, it felt like the weight of the whole world. Umberto’s vision closed in dark around the edges as he fought not to show the panic he felt. To his left, a priest chanted prayers too quietly for Umberto to make out the words. His stomach cold, Umberto closed his eyes tight.

He heard the ‘click’ of the lever being pulled and held his last breath. But the floor beneath him stayed solid. Letting go the breath slowly, he opened his eyes. Only inches in front of his face was a pistol, the hammer pulled back. That had been the “click.” The gun was in the hand of the priest, and it pointed directly at the executioner standing to Umberto’s left, his hand still on the switch. “Not today, my friend,” said the man in priest’s robes in a good-natured tone. His voice held an accent Umberto couldn’t place. “Cut the rope.”

The executioner nodded cautiously and, stepping away from the lever, drew a sharp knife. He moved it near to Umberto’s neck. “Higher please,” smiled the stranger. Obediently, the executioner raised the blade, cutting through the rope a foot above the condemned man’s head. Then he cut the ropes tying his hands. Hurriedly, Umberto loosened the noose and drew it over his head. It fell to the floor with a thud.

Cries of panic and surprise broke out in the street as four men on horseback thundered down the central road. Leading two more mounts behind them, they drew up beside the platform.

“Shall we?” asked Umberto’s rescuer, and the two leaped over the railing onto the waiting horses. Shouts and shots rained after them as they thundered away, but were too late to do any good.

From the hills overlooking Dolnerre, Umberto watched the sun set behind the only city he’d ever known. The last rays cast the peak-roofed buildings in silhouette, and flamed off

the gilded dome of the Great Cathedral in a blaze of red and gold. Umberto took a deep breath savoring the sight before him mixed with the sharp smell of cypress trees native to the place. He knew already that it would be a long time before he stood here again.

With a last sigh, he turned back to his new companions. Gustav, having cast aside his false priest's robes, stood comfortably in the heavy armor of an Eisenherz mercenary. Standing at his full height, without his affected hunch, he was a great bear of a man, more than six feet tall.

With him stood Belmont, a noble from one of the smaller houses of Montaign. Umberto had wanted to dislike him if only for Cecile's sake, but the Montaignian had such a pleasant manner and a gift for lewd jokes that he already found it difficult. Tending the horses and speaking to each other in low tones were the two brothers from Vodacce. Umberto still couldn't quite wrap his memory around their names. Both were of slight build with long fine black hair and eyes flat like a lizard's.

"Who are you?" Umberto had asked when their mad ride out of the city had slowed enough for talk.

"We're knights!" Belmont declared, laughing into the wind. "Can't you hear the armor creaking?" Umberto only shook his head in confusion.

"This is what he means," Gustav said, raising up his right hand. On the third finger, Umberto saw a gold ring, emblazoned with four roses entwining a four-pointed cross. "The rose and cross?" he whispered. Gustav nodded silently.

That was hours ago. Now, standing in the twilight, he looked at each of them, hoping he was hiding the wonder in his eyes. He had heard of the Order of the Rose and Cross, knew of the famous deeds and heroic rescues, but he never dreamed he would be standing with them - or that they would be saving him from the rope maker's daughter.

The last of the group, Nigel, approached him. He was nearly the same height as Umberto, and his eyes were of a peculiar bright shade of blue that seemed to expect Umberto to look right at them. "We'll be leaving in just a few moments," he said with a slight smile. "Have you finished with your good-byes?"

Umberto blushed to think his mood had been so transparent. "I'm ready. But where are we going?"

"After the conniving she-devil, of course," called out Belmont from a few yards away. "To keep her from wreaking any further havoc on the innocent and impressionable."

Nigel shook his head. "Belmont is blunt, but correct. We'll follow after her and try to keep any additional damage to a minimum. Fortunately, she was considerate enough to tell you where she's headed. The woman you knew as Cecile has left a trail of disaster in her wake. For a spy, she's incredibly unsubtle."

"How did you know to follow her here?" asked Umberto, still embarrassed by being called "innocent."

"I received a letter from my brother. He'd met her before." Nigel paused and took in a deep breath. "Before we go, I have something for you." Reaching beneath his thick cloak, he drew forth a sword Umberto had never thought he would see again.

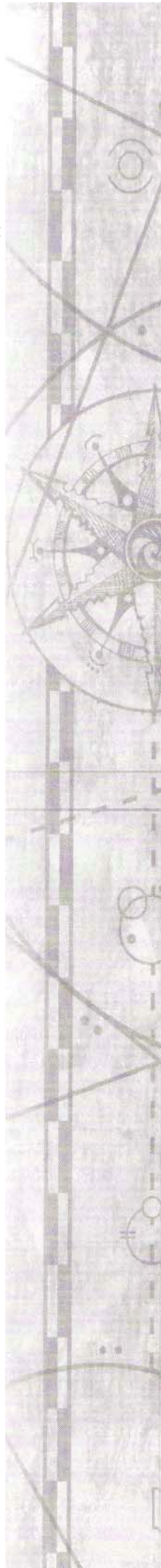
"How did you manage to lay hands on it?" Running his hands lovingly over the sheathed blade, Umberto felt the loneliness of leaving his home slip away, replaced by the familiarity of the heirloom. He stopped cold at Nigel's next words.

"The court gave it to me. As partial recompense for my brother's death." Nigel's voice stayed even, but low.

Umberto tried to speak, but felt his throat close on the words. Looking at Nigel now, he could see the same set of the brow, the crook to the nose.

"You didn't kill him," Nigel stated flatly, determinedly. "She did. And if we'd come any later, she would, in effect, have killed you too. Jeremy recognized her when he saw her here, and he wrote to me. But he didn't take the harm she could do him seriously enough."

The two men stood facing each other. Then Gustav's coarse voice broke the silence. "Time to ride. Let's go before we lose the rest of the daylight." Nigel nodded and gave Umberto a broad smile before turning to his horse.



Umberto followed suit, and with one last backward glance and the sword on his belt as familiar as the hand of an old friend, he spurred his horse after his new companions.

Avalon

by John Wick

Derwyddon walked the halls of Glenayre, a shuffle to his step. With his right eye he could see bright streams of sunlight shining through the high windows. The hall glimmered where the light fell on great golden pillars and a white marble floor. In his good eye, the light was too bright and he winced as it reflected off the polished surfaces. The gold paint on the pillars was cracked, but not quite peeling yet, and the floor wanted a sweeping.

He shook his head. It was hard to be what he was, half fooled by the glamour of Avalon, the other half immune. He took his time passing through the long Hall of Fathers, the eyes of a hundred painted gentlemen staring down at him. But moving slowly did not change the news he carried to his Queen.

Entering the throne room, he gazed at the tapestries, the courtiers, even the throne itself. Each one offered him a double image, one shining, the other plain. It was only when he looked upon the queen herself that everything came into focus. Bright and brilliant, although no one but him could see her wringing hands.

Taking a deep breath, he spoke. "They've arrived my lady. MacDuff, and the O'Bannon."

She nodded softly, and he gave her a low bow. The courtiers stared at him, and he half-heard their thoughts as they floated through the room. Sorcerer some of them threw at him. Beast whispered the others. He stepped back into the shadows and caught himself grinning at their words. If they knew the truth, they would be far more careful with their silent allegations.

The Pillars of Heaven

by Patrick Kapera

Vaticine City, Castille - 1666

"You have read this material - this 'light prism' nonsense?"

"Yes, your Eminence."

"It's blasphemy. It mocks the glory of Theus and defies all common sense. The very notion that light can be broken down into a - what does he call it? - a 'spectrum.' Blasphemy of the first order."

"I agree, your Eminence."

"This is exactly the threat I have been fighting against for so long. This so-called 'empiricism' is a disease in the Church. We must cut it out and destroy it before it devours us all."

"Yes, your Eminence."

"Alvara Arciniega has committed heresy against the Church with his vile studies, and blasphemy against Our Creator with his horrifying claims. He must pay the price, as the Book of the Prophets dictates. Hang him. Burn his body and commit his scribblings to the flames. Let him stand as an example to all who would follow him.

"Those who put an end to Arciniega will be welcomed into the kingdom of Theus. Tell them they will have absolution from their sins and be cleansed in the purifying light of the coming Prophet. Tell them that Cardinal Verdugo himself proclaims it."

"I shall, your Eminence. Arciniega will pay..."

La Ciencia, Castille - 1666

"They're coming."

The voice came from the rear of Alvara Arciniega's hidden laboratory, where the shadows pooled together. It belonged to Gruenhild, his groundskeeper, and a friend of the family since her father retired from the same position some fifty

years before.

“How many?” Arciniega’s words were firm, practiced.

“I’m not sure,” Gruenhild answered, “But they’re led by someone new.”

Arciniega turned from the stone block resting upon his workbench. A fragment of it had recently been chipped away, revealing a sliver of thin inhuman bone.

“New?” Alvara’s eyes narrowed. This was no time for surprises. “An Inquisitor?”

“I think, but I can’t know. He looks... dangerous.”

“Curious...” he mused, then sprang into action. Lifting a thick leather case from beneath the bench, he removed its contents - a small but heavy telescope - and replaced it with the chipped block of stone. Strapping the bag shut, he handed it to Gruenhild and ushered her toward the door from which she had emerged.

“Make sure this arrives safely in Aldana, and take Stefan with you. He knows his way around a sword.”

Gruenhild had worked for Arciniega long enough to recognize the urgency in his voice. Without responding, she ducked back into the dark rear corner of the room and vanished. The only sound of her escape was a brief gust of air followed by the click as the secret door locked behind her. The stairwell beyond was all but sound-proofed.

Now then, Alvara noted, drawing his fencing blade free of its thin sheath, on to more pressing matters.

The center of the heavy wooden door suddenly burst inward, showering splinters across the floor and revealing a heavy arm wrapped in smoke-black armor. The arm whipped about until it found the thick plank barring the portal, and ripped it up and away.

The door swung open slowly, revealing a tall swordsman dressed all in black and red, his tabard clearly displaying the Prophet’s Cross and his face hidden behind an impressive helmet. Behind him stood a pair of red-clad Inquisitors carrying weapons of varying lethality.

“Welcome, gentlemen,” Alvara quipped at the intruders. “Do step in and make yourselves at home.” He considered simply felling all of them now, and making away as the College had planned. But he fancied a bit of fun first.

Besides, he thought as the armor-clad Inquisitor stepped into the laboratory, this one deserves a closer look...

The foot soldiers moved to flank Arciniega, lining the walls on either side as their leader approached.

Alvara took two steps back, placing himself between his workbench and a long low table lined with his latest chemistry experiments. The armored man continued his brisk walk toward the scholar, never pausing, confident that his men would fall in where he expected them to be. When he finally drew his sword, it groaned with the death-cries of a hundred fallen heretics.

No speeches. Alvara braced for the man’s first lunge. Thank Theus for small favors.

When the attack finally came, Alvara ducked and kicked outward to the left, upending the chemistry table toward the Inquisitors. Remembering the reaction time of the vials’ contents, he swept the knight’s lunge aside and rolled to the right, out of range...

The explosion rocked the room and knocked the telescope from its perch upon the work bench, but as it sailed toward the ground Alvara shifted direction and rolled beneath it, snatching it from the air and coming up into a crouching position. His eyes darted to both sides in time to make out two figures nearing him from the right and one - the knight - from the left.

One direction or the other...

Leaping up onto the work bench, Alvara gauged his distance from the beams above, then leapt upward, depositing the telescope safely between two support pillars and crashing down into two of the three figures. Switching sword hands, he lunged outward at the nearest, catching him along the temple, and then kned him away. The man’s screams confirmed his accuracy; he would be blind in one eye when this was done.



A sudden burst of pain erupted from Alvara's right shoulder as the knight's blade cut through cloth and muscle, and the scholar tumbled forward, through a second work bench and onto the cool stone floor. Righting himself as quickly as he could, he rolled quickly to the left and came up on one knee. Behind them, the knight's swing fell heavily through the air, narrowly missing his neck.

No time. His shoulder throbbed but he still had his rapier. More Inquisitors coming - many more.

Alvara closed his eyes and focused for a moment, working the arrangement out in his head, visualizing the room and the remaining enemies, the surrounding furniture, the scattered devices, the debris -

Without looking, he reached out and yanked a lever to his left. A gush of hot wind behind him was followed by the knight's screams as an arm of fire leapt from the nearby burner to engulf him. The screams only intensified as the flames leapt about him, creeping into the tiny slits between plates, scalding flesh and bone. Within moments, the screaming was over, however, and only the sizzling within the knight's armor was heard, followed by a thundering crash as it fell sideways and came to rest.

Alvara opened his eyes, and caught sight of the remaining Inquisitor. His face was little more than a pale sheet as he observed the smoldering ruin of his former commander. He eyed the exit as he dragged his near-blind companion to his feet, but Alvara stepped in front of them.

"Lost your nerve?" Alvara chided them. "Come now, gentlemen. I'm sure you're responsible for worse..."

Both Inquisitors moved at once, as Alvara dove toward them. One fell before he could make it three steps, the scholar's rapier catching him along the neck. The second took up an awkward defensive position and moved out to Alvara's side, hoping to divide his attention.

Crafty devil, Alvara thought as he scanned the floor and surrounding tables. When his eye caught the fallen knight's blade, he grabbed for it and both arms whipped out toward the Inquisitor, stabbing through his torso in both directions.

But I invented the craft.

Freeing the blades, he wiped his own clean, leaving the second beside its former owner. Then he climbed up onto the work bench and retrieved his telescope, wrapped it in fine cloth, and made his way out to the stables.

The College would be retreating all over Théah by now, and he had to be at the rallying point by dawn.

Pulled from the Sea

by Rob Vaux

"Cut the ropes, Bonnie!" Berek tried to scream. "Cut the ropes before he kills you!" He moved slowly through the mass of attacking Rogers, brandishing his cutlass as best he could. It was like cutting through molasses. The pirates fell only to reform around him, stronger and deadlier than before. On the other side of them, he saw the ship - his ship - being torn apart by Captain Reis. Crewman after crewman stepped forward to challenge the bloody beast, and one by one he tore them apart. Harry, Roger, Celedoine... none could stand against the laughing fiend. Berek pressed harder against the wall of pirates, trying vainly to reach his crew before they were all devoured. He cut faster and faster, pushing through the countless Rogers who rose to block his way.

He reached *The Black Dawn* just in time to watch Reis cut McGee in half. She screamed in agony before falling to the deck, her blue eyes filling with blood Berek howled in fury and charged towards the murderer, but stopped short as Reis focused his attention on him. The face was not human, but a demon from Legion's Pit: fiery eyes and skeletal jaw hanging open in a leering grin. In a moment, Berek faltered. His sword arm quavered, and he felt his footing slip under the blood on the deck. Reis's fanged mouth opened in an inhuman laugh as he raised his scythe to cleave Berek in twain. The Avalon felt fear gnawing at his heart and he stumbled backward, only to find himself falling - falling into the cold merciless sea.

"Bonnie!" he screamed, jolting himself awake. His sheets were soaked with sweat and his body shook uncontrollably. He shook his head to clear it and then fell back against the cot: another nightmare.

The walls of the small cabin creaked quietly and the smell of the sea wafted in from an open porthole. Berek closed his eyes and tried to calm himself. He felt weak and dizzy, and his gorge rose every time he tried to stand up. I must look a fright, he thought as he mopped the sweat from his brow.

The door opened and a smiling Castillian entered the room. Tall and imposing, he wore a blue bandana over his black hair, and a red captain's coat not unlike Berek's own. He held a tray in his hands, containing what appeared to be a modest breakfast.

"Good morning," the stranger smiled jauntily. "I'm glad to see you're up."

Berek's eyes widened with recognition. "Allende?" he started. "The Pirate King?"

"Don't call me that, please." The Castillian set the tray down on a nearby table. "It smacks of ego."

"What... where am I?"

"*The Hanged Man*," Allende answered. "Specifically, my first mate's cabin. Before that, you were in the Forbidden Sea somewhere south of Vodacce. You're lucky we found you. We don't normally travel that far out of our way but certain parties were rather insistent."

"The Forbidden Sea," Berek mused, then started in horror. "Oh Theus! My crew... they-" He tried to stand up, but his muscles didn't want to cooperate.

"Your crew is out of reach for the moment," the Allende leaned over and handed him a bowl of what smelled like oatmeal. "Eat this."

Berek looked ready to retort, then he caught a whiff of the food and his hunger overcame all other concerns. Allende watched him wolf down the gruel with a crooked grin on his face.

"You're making progress. This is the first night you haven't vomited your dinner on your sheets."

The Avalon mumbled a reply through mouthfuls of spoon, and Allende laughed.

"When you've finished, perhaps you could enlighten me on what brought you to the desperate circumstances we found you in."

It took several more moments for Berek to polish off the bowl. When he had, he handed it back to his host with a nod.

"My crew and I took a risk to find you," Allende's face took a more serious look. "We have problems enough without taking on yours as well. Tell me a tale, Sea Dog. Tell me how the most notorious privateer in Théah ends up half-drowned in the middle of the Forbidden Sea."

"In the first place, thank you," the Sea Dog began. "I'm grateful for your hospitality, and I believe that you've saved my life."

"Your gratitude is appreciated," Allende leaned forward.

"You can demonstrate it further by telling me what happened."

"The Crimson Rogers," Berek smiled bitterly.

"They attacked you?"

"Like rabid wolves. We had stolen something of theirs and they wanted it back."

Allende's mouth opened in surprise. "You stole from Reis?!"

"I was quite the cheeky lad, wasn't I?" His words dripped with self-loathing. "Stupid, cocky, headstrong idiot."

"I assume that the Rogers weren't going to accept an apology," The Castillian pressed for more of the story.

"You could say that. I've never seen a ship move as fast as his. It came on us like a thunderstorm, and was taking no prisoners. They crossed in a heartbeat: William Toss was dead before he could take a step and the rest of us looked sure to follow."

"So what did you do?"

"I told my bosun to cut the lines, then crossed to face their captain alone."

Allende didn't bother to hide the shock. "Madre de Theus!



Were you that mad, or simply suicidal?"

"I thought I could take him," Berek explained. "I thought that Fortune would find some way to help me. Fortune always helps me..." He grimaced.

"Not this time, though."

"He cut me to pieces and threw me to the waves. I was alive when I hit the water, but I knew I was done for." He paused for a moment, lost in thought. "At least *The Black Dawn* got away."

"It appears, then, that your luck had not entirely abandoned you."

"No, though perhaps it should have. Stupid, pig-headed lout... I should have been eaten by the sirens!"

He rose again, and this time, his muscles supported him. "I have to find my crew! They got away, but Reis will be looking for them, and my bosun has a stubborn streak. She might be headstrong enough to--"

"To head straight for harbor and not look back," Allende held his hands up gently. "I have a contact in Carleon who says your crew hasn't left Avalon waters in nearly a week. Your bosun may be headstrong, but she's not stupid. Even Reis would think twice before taking on the entire Avalon fleet."

The explanation seemed to calm the Avalon somewhat, and he allowed himself to sit back in his bed. "I suppose I can wait then," he muttered. "As long as they're not paying for my arrogance."

"That's good," Allende said, "because I would have insisted otherwise. My first mate Alesio is a fate witch, and seems to believe that you will play an important role in the Brotherhood's future."

Berek looked at him. "What do you mean?"

"We didn't just happen by when we picked you up. Alesio sent us out there - to that exact spot - solely for the purpose of rescuing you."

"Why?"

"I wish I knew," Allende frowned. "But I don't need a fate witch to tell me that we could use the help. These are dangerous times for the Brotherhood. We have enemies both subtle and direct, and not all of our foes are easily dissuaded." He scratched his chin thoughtfully. "Less than a month ago, the General came within a hair's breadth of capturing us; others wait in the darkness, waiting for us to show a weakness. I can smell darkness approaching, and I fear it will get worse before it gets better."

"We found you in the middle of nowhere: Alesio lead us to the exact spot of empty ocean where you happened to be. Destiny surrounds you, and it was no accident that you are sitting here. My mate believes that you can save us, and even if she's wrong, you're a good sailor and a fierce captain. I'd be a fool to abandon such a man on the eve of an unknown threat. So I entreat you: stay here as our guest, recuperate your strength. Whatever fate has in store for us, it will make itself known soon enough, and I want you by my side when it does. What say you? Will you stand with us?"

Silence reigned for several moments.

"I'm ... I'm grateful to you," Berek said at last. "If I'm important to your future - important enough to pluck from the sea - then I should remain and see it through."

Allende smiled. "Gracias. The Brotherhood of the Coast is grateful for your patience."

"It's the least I can do," Berek shrugged. "You saved my life after all." The Castillian laughed quietly. "Don't worry señor. If what my first mate says is true, you'll have plenty of chances to return the favor."

Pride and Money

by Rob Vaux

The man in the eyepatch didn't look Montaigne, even though he wore the uniform of their navy. He sat at the bar with a drink in his hand, his ill-fitting wig perched awkwardly atop his head. A large square box lay next to his wine, locked securely with stout iron. He seemed morbidly fixated on the box, staring unblinking at its wooden top and ignoring the rest of San Augustin pressing around him. Unfortunately, the rest of San Augustin wasn't willing to return the favor.

A drunk Castillian, arms corded with muscles, staggered over to his seat and gave him a nasty shove.

"You. Pendejo. You're the one they call the General?"

"Go away." His voice betrayed his Eisen origins. "I have no quarrel with you."

"You work for the Montaigne. You sink our ships. You helped them capture our beautiful city. I have every reason to quarrel with you."

The General gritted his teeth. "Mein freund, you are drunk. I suggest you go back to your table -"

"No!" The Castillian screamed, drawing the attention of the other patrons. "My people suffer under the yoke of your masters and you have the nerve to sit there and drink our wine!" A blade flashed in his hand and the General's eyes narrowed. "Perhaps your blood can cleanse the sins against Castille!"

The General tensed, but his wine-soaked reflexes were not what they should have been. He could see the knife falling even before he turned and braced himself for the blow. If he were lucky, it would glance off his ribs, or...

A panzerhand crashed on the Castillian's head with a mug-rattling thud. The knife clattered harmlessly to the floor as its owner dropped like a lead weight. A huge blonde Eisen with a bushy mustache towered over him, wiping the blood off of his steel-covered fingers. He turned to the onlooking bar and treated them to a ferocious snarl.

"Go back to your drinks. Now."

The patrons knew better than to disobey. He kicked the unconscious Castillian out of the way and plopped down next to the surprised-looking naval officer.

"Thomas Metzger." He held out his hand. "And you are the infamous General."

"Ja," he grimaced. "Thank you for your assistance."

"It was nothing I assure you," Metzger returned. "We Eisen have to watch out for each other."

The General laughed bitterly. "I suppose you weren't listening to our Castillian friend here. I haven't worked for the Eisen in a long, long time. I serve Montaigne now. Or at least I did."

"You needn't explain to me," Metzger shrugged. "I'm a mercenary as well. All the more reason to lend a fellow countryman a hand. Reminds us of who we are."

The older man gauged that for a moment, then nodded.

"I suppose it's my own fault, drinking in a bar full of Castillians. I should have found somewhere closer to the garrison, but I don't find Montaigne company particularly comforting now."

Silence reigned between them for a moment.

"What happened?" Metzger asked at last.

"Apparently, I no longer lead *l'Empereur's* navy. They have found someone much more suited to the task. I have been recommissioned, left with but a single ship and ordered to stay out of the way."

"Your position mattered to you, did it?"

"No," he sneered, "but it means that my pay has been lessened considerably."

Metzger nodded. "I see. And your crew?"

"Montaigne nationals, most of them. They changed ships they instant a new admiral was named."

"Anyone left?"

"More than a few, which surprises me." The General stared philosophically into his wine. "Apparently, they think more of me than I do them."

Silence fell again. Metzger watched him unblinking, waiting for the other shoe to drop.

"I'm going to betray them," the General said at last.

"Betray them? Why?"

"Money of course." He patted the box, "There are enough



Guilder notes in here to live on for the rest of my life. All I have to do is turn my crew over to the Castillians. The Inquisition wants a show trial to assuage the populace, and the crew of the infamous General would fit the bill nicely”

Metzger’s jaw tightened.

“In three days,” the General continued. “I will meet with Admiral Orduño and fire a single shot into the air. They will board my vessel and take all hands, leaving me with the boat and a nice stipend in return..”

He laughed again, a sound full of bile and self-loathing. Metzger nodded slowly.

“It doesn’t sound like you’re convinced.”

“As you said, we’re mercenaries. The Castillians currently wish to pay me more than the Montaigne. So I work for them now.”

“And that’s why you’re drinking yourself into a stupor.”

The General’s fist slammed into the bar. “I don’t care a whit about this war, or the countries involved! Whoever pays me the most earns my services.” His voice lowered to a bitter whisper. “I serve the Empereur, a bloated pig of a man whose appetites destroy everything they touch. Or I serve the Inquisition, torch-wielding fanatics who attack everything they don’t understand. Two evils, equally balanced. I therefore should serve the one which rewards me the most.”

Metzger smiled, a sad smile his countrymen were rapidly becoming famous for. “That’s a mercenary’s life, and it has its own honor. But I fear you no longer embrace it the way you once did. Is that a fair assessment of your dilemma?”

A brooding glare answered him.

“I see that money there,” Metzger continued. “That’s a lot of money. If it’s what you want, you should take it with no regrets. I don’t know your crew, but from what you’ve told me, the ones left are loyal to you. If that’s what you want, you should honor them with no regrets. You’re not a Castillian, mein freund, nor a Montaigne. You’re an Eisen. We bend our necks for no one, we call no men our master. Stop thinking about what matters to *l’Empereur* or the Inquisition. What matters to you?”

The General’s lone eye squeezed shut. “I don’t know.”

“You’ll find out. In three days if not sooner.” Metzger stood and stretched. “Thank you for speaking to me. It was good to talk to a fellow countryman again.”

The blonde man turned and walked out of the bar, leaving the General alone with his thoughts.

Fate’s Choice

by Rob Vaux

“Fire again,” The General gestured at the gunner to his left and the great cannon belched merciless steel. Across the breach, the *Hanged Man* shuddered from another blow. The General smiled. “When they’ve had enough, board it and bring me Allende. He’ll face justice at *l’Empereur*’s pleasure.”

Alesio ignored the fire which spread across the deck. Silenced the cries of the wounded in her ears, drowned the smell of gunshot and burned flesh that filled her nostrils. The Strands were more important, the spiderweb links of fate and destiny that bound it all together. “It cannot end here,” she whispered as she grasped the first strand. “Allende does not die by the General’s gun.”

“But you will betray him,” her doubts whispered back “He will fall to his enemies by your hand.”

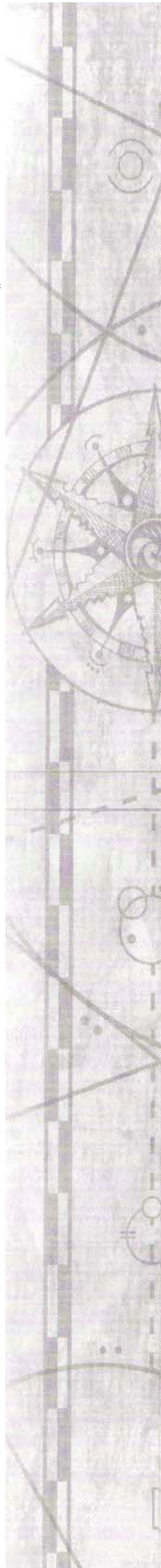
Her hand faltered and the strand fell from her fingers. “No...” she whispered “I can save him.”

“You will betray him. Now or later, your treachery is foretold.”

“I am a Fate Witch,” she cried waveringly. “Nothing is foretold!”

The laughter bit back at her like a razor.

The explosion ripped across the mast at the speed of sound. Sail and spars fell like rain as Grenouille du Grâce moved closer. Allende tried to shout orders at the screaming men around him, but his voice was smothered beneath the smoke. The *Hanged Man* lurched lower in the water and he wondered how long the hold would remain intact.



"Where's Alesio?!" he howled vainly. "Find my mate! Now!" Amid the chaos, he could find no sign of the wayward Fate Witch.

The Montaigne threw grappling hooks over. His eyes widened and he drew his cutlass. "Prepare to repel boarders!"

It was too much. Too many possibilities dancing in front of her. She does nothing, he dies by the guns. She silences the guns, he's taken by a knife. She saves him now, he falls by her hand. The webs became a tangle, taunting her, mocking her. "Your treachery is foretold. There is nothing you can do. Nothing."

Allende dove from the cannon an instant before it exploded. The Montaigne sailors bearing down on him vanished in a gout of flame. There were more where they came from, however. He looked up in time to see Denny la Bree plunge overboard, a half-dozen enemies falling with him.

"Alesio," he whispered. "We need you now, or the Brotherhood dies here." With the eyes of the damned, he drew his pistol and searched for a target.

"I can't..." she almost sobbed. "Too many strands, too strong a destiny. I will betray him..." The strands seemed to close in around her, wrapping around her like snakes. "It is foretold."

There. Her eyes narrowed as she saw it. Hidden beneath the tangle, buried by her doubts. One small shining strand. A long shot - a possibility so remote that none but the mad would even consider it. But it was there. Eagerly, she grasped it in her hands and began to pull...

The General could almost smile. The Brotherhood fought like men possessed, but it was only a matter of time now. All he had to do was wait.

The soft, wet tear of reality smacked behind him. He turned in time to bump into the breathless *Porté* messenger step through the shadows between worlds.

"My lord," the messenger panted. "You must come immediately back to San Augustin! Admiral Orduño has broken the blockade..."

From the tattered remnants of the *Hanged Man*, Alesio dropped the strand - the lifeline that had saved them.

"You will betray him..." her doubts still whispered.

"Yes," she answered. "But what happens then?"

Webs

by Ree Soesbee

She could still smell him on the cloth, his scent strong and wild even after all this time. Some nights, it overpowered her and she almost thought she could see him. Other nights, there was just the pain. She had long ago forgotten which one to fear more. More, more, she saw threads everywhere. She could touch them now, understand them. A tangled web, ensnaring everything in its path: the future, the past, the horizon and all that lay beyond. It stretched from a past filled with horror into a future she should not have. A future lost. Stolen. Taken. Destroyed. Her brown eyes gleamed with madness, and she could not help but laugh as she stared into the void.

"Her?" Rodriguez peered upward at the black shadow that hung from the main mast. Echoing laughter danced down from the sails, mingling with the clean sounds of the sea beneath the ship. "One day, she just appeared up there, laughin' like a storm."

"You don't know where she came from?" the boy asked, twisting a thick rope around his forearm and folding it into the rigging cables.

"Nope," the older sailor replied. "Though somewhere in Vodacce's a good guess. I always figured she was city-born; I know she can read, and they don't teach women that in the countryside. If she ain't from a city, she ended up there somehow. Dionna, maybe. Chiarisa. Other than that, your guess is as good as mine. Nobody seen her show up, and she ain't never come down. Since nobody's got the guts to go up and get her, she's been there ever since."

Lightning flashed and the black-clad form leapt across the deck. The boy gasped as she caught a loose sail line, then somersaulted over twenty feet of empty air before landing with a dancer's grace on an outlying spar. Her cackles rose as she spun a near-perfect pirouette and curtsied to the indifferent sky.



"She's mad, I think," the boy said somberly, as if this was the first time anyone had ever said it.

"Mad? Oh, I think so." The other sailor nodded. "Calls herself Lucrezia. The only time I've ever heard her talk is when I'm in the crow's nest. On occasion, she'll let me get close enough to give her food, and some men says she tells them stories."

"A Vodacce Witch? Telling stories?"

Rodriguez shrugged. "S'what they say, boy."

"What's she have to say?" the young sailor asked, staring up at the figure in black that continued to swing atop the spar. She stopped, raising her hands to the wind, and screamed a high-pitched keening wail. It sent shivers down the boy's spine, but Rodriguez hardly seemed to notice.

"Love, mostly. And death. She says she's got a strand to find, one that keeps escaping her. Something about changing what has passed." Rodriguez sighed. "I think she wants to find her lover. A man named Giuseppe. She talks mostly about him, when she can't remember that he's died and left her."

"How'd he die?"

"Easy question, boy. He died when she killed him."

Sailing on the masthead high above the tossing ship, Lucrezia opened her arms to the world and laughed.

Crossing the Line

by Kevin Wilson

Twenty years ago...

The tropical wind whistled through the lush trees on the distant isle, gently rocking Philip Gosse to sleep. He dreamed of native girls dancing to the sound of pounding drums, led by his beautiful wife, Clarissa, as he clapped in time to the beat.

Distantly, he heard his name called, but his mind simply blocked it out. Then, a moment later, he was being shaken awake by Hernando. His advisor's face was wrinkled with obvious worry.

"Philip! It's Claire. The Montaigne has taken her!"

Philip lunged from the hammock in a panic, and his eyebrows shot up in alarm, "What about Anne and my daughter?"

"Anne escaped with Melinda. The two of them are safe."

Philip nodded curtly, "Thanks be for that. Go tell the others to get the *Uncharted Course* ready, and call for volunteers to go after the Montaigne. This time he's finally crossed the line..."

Gosse leaned over his conquered foe, grinning down as his men rounded up the last of the Montaigne's crew. The ship had put up a pathetic fight after leading them on a mere two week chase, and now Gosse stood on the deck above its execrable captain.

"Where's my wife, Montaigne? Speak up, or I'll give you to my men to play with."

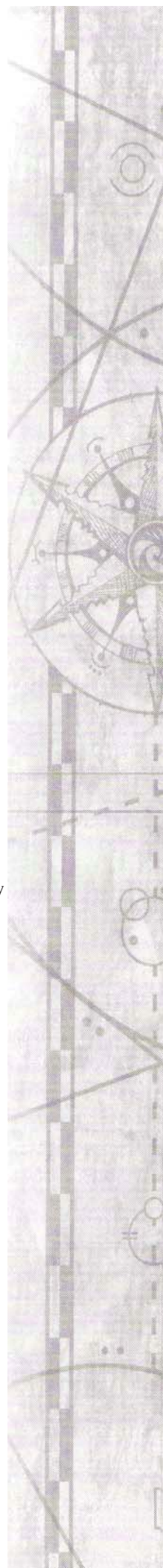
The Montaigne smiled sweetly back up at him, no hint of fear in his voice, "No need for violence, monsieur. She and I have been sharing my cabin most agreeably these past two weeks. However, I'm sorry to say that she got a bit too rowdy for me when she heard your ship had been sighted, and I was forced to quiet her down." He giggled, and his eyes rolled in his head.

His grin fading, and a cold knot forming in his stomach, Philip silently walked over to the cabin door and kicked it in. There was an inarticulate cry of grief and rage, and the crews' hearts fell as the scream faded to broken sobs. Gaspar reached down and jerked the Montaigne up to look him in the eye,

"You're dead, little sailor. You're nothing but chum for the sharks."

The captive laughed at him, "Dead? Please. Don't make empty threats, you imbecilic thug. Your Captain is renowned for his mercy and generosity. Killing me might sully his precious reputation."

At that instant, they both looked up as Philip came out of the



cabin with his clothing and lips covered in blood. He seemed to waver on the edge of madness for a moment, casting about for some solid ground to stand upon.

The Montaigne pursed his lips in a mock pout, "Oh, how tragic! How sad! ¡Que triste!" He began laughing once more.

Philip's gaze fixed itself upon his captive. His eyes narrowed and he drew a small knife from his belt. Stumbling across the deck almost drunkenly, he fell to a kneeling position over the captive. Then, he slowly ran the tip of his knife along the man's eyelids, drawing a trickle of hot, stinging blood that ran into his eyes. Even his own crew stepped away nervously as he leaned over and whispered into the Montaigne's ear, "Are you still sane enough to be afraid, Montaigne? My heart - my very soul - burns for your blood, but I'm only going to feed it a little at a time. Just enough to whet its appetite."

The Montaigne sneered back at him through the blood.

"Do your worst, old man. You haven't the taste for bloodshed."

Philip stood up, yanking the captive to his feet. Then he spun around to face his crew, who shrank back at the look in his eyes. "You men, chop down the sails and bring aboard six kegs of lamp oil. Make sure the Montaigne's men are securely tied up and left aboard. I'm going to be awhile."

With that, he dragged the Montaigne towards the Captain's cabin where his wife still lay.

Gaspar looked worriedly over at Hernando. "It's been quiet in there for too long." Ochoa grimaced, a haunted look in his eyes. "Would you rather the screaming started up again?"

"Theus, no. I lose my appetite just thinking about it. What's he going to do next, you think?"

"I have no idea." Ochoa's brow furrowed. "Absolutely none. I'm not really sure what he's capable of. I've never seen him like this."

The two of them jumped as the cabin door banged open, and the Captain emerged, dragging the half-dead and bloody Montaigne, behind him. The defiant look had faded from the

small man's face... what was left of the small man's face.

"Gaspar, Hernando," Gosse snapped. "Put my wife's body aboard the Course. We'll take her back to the island for a proper burial."

Hernando nodded at the captive, "Of course, my friend. And what about him?"

Gosse ignored the question. "Did you do as I ordered?"

"Yes, Captain. But...the prisoners?"

"Leave them to me."

With that, Philip tied the Montaigne to the remains of the main mast. The bloody captain groaned and swooned, the pain overwhelming his consciousness. Staving in one of the kegs of lamp oil, Gosse poured the liquid all around the man's feet.

Gaspar's eyes widened, "Captain...you're not serious...?"

Philip threw the empty keg to the ground angrily and spun around to face his friend, "I gave you an order! Now go see to it!" The madness in his eyes was all the answer Gaspar needed. He and Hernando rushed to retrieve Claire's body while they still could.

Gosse seemed to sag in on himself for a moment, then his eyes fell upon his shirt, still stained crimson. With a cry of anguish, he tore it from his back and held it up to show to the Montaigne and his crew. "Do you see this shirt? It's soaked in my wife's blood. Therefore, it's only fitting that it should aid in my revenge." Throwing it overboard, Philip listened for a moment, and a strange keening rose nearby and moved towards the ship.

"These waters are thick with sirens," Gosse noted, kicking in another barrel of oil, "And that shirt is going to make them very hungry. I'm going to offer you filthy murderers a choice." Crash. Two more barrels. "Trial by fire..." Smash. "or trial by them." Lifting his foot, he brought it down on the last barrel with a crunch. "I don't give a damn which."

Gaspar ran up to him, "Your wife is aboard, Captain." He looked around him, taking in the bound men, the broken barrels, and the heavy stink of oil. "Your next orders, sir?"



He whispered hoarsely

“Get me a hot coal from your oven, Gaspar.” No emotion found its way to the Captain’s face.

“Oh, Theus. No.” Gaspar croaked as his chest tightening up. “Captain, don’t.”

“I SAID DO IT!” Gosse howled. Tears running down his face, Gaspar turned and ran for his kitchen, while the Montaigne’s men shed tears of their own, praying to Theus while rocking back and forth in terror. Gosse’s eyes roamed over them angrily until Gaspar returned with a red hot coal, held in a pair of tongs.

“Cast off from this ship. I’ll be on board in a moment.”

Terrified, Gaspar fled as fast as his peg leg would carry him.

The Montaigne came sputtering back to his senses as a bucket of water was thrown in his face, and then another.

“There. I want you awake for this, you filth.” Gosse dropped the coal into a nearby pile of oil-soaked sails, and leapt back over to the *Uncharted Course*.

As the flames began to rise, and, one by one, his men chose the fire or the sirens, the Montaigne’s voice rose with hatred, “Damn you, Gosse! Was your wife worth all of this?! I called on Theus to save us before, and he ignored me! Maybe he’s too good for me, eh?! Well then, I’ll call on someone else now! Legion, come to us, and we will serve you for all time! Just let me have my vengeance on Philip Gosse! That’s all I ask! He must die by my hands!”

The *Uncharted Course* was almost out of earshot, and he could feel the fire sucking the breath from his lungs, so he cried out one last time...

“Damn you to the Abyss, Philip Gosse!”

Then they were swallowed up in the flames and waves.

Today...

Philip Gosse sat up in bed, rubbing his temples. Kissing the locket that held the tiny portrait of his wife, he held her close for awhile, driving away the nightmares. Before sleep wrapped him in its elusive blanket once more, he softly whispered to the night air...

“Theus, what did I do?”

Done Waiting

by Kevin Wilson and Rob Vaux

She was dancing again.

Her lithe form twisted and spun as her twin blades twirled through the air. Her dark hair trailed behind her, struggling to keep up as she moved faster and faster.

He saw himself lower his rapier in surrender - not to her sword - to her beauty. He allowed himself to be captured just to be near her and watch the sun shine on her golden skin and her midnight tresses.

He watched as the sun went down, and shadows gathered around his love. The moonlight gave her flesh a pale glow as she fought to keep the shadows at bay, but there were too many, and they carried her away, leaving only a slight bloodstain to show that she ever existed.

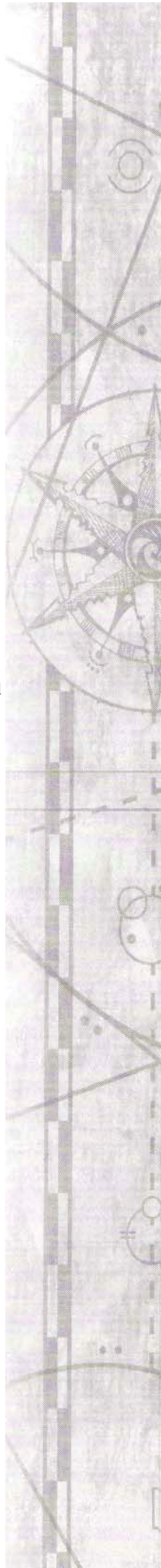
Espera listened as Kheired-Din gave her up for dead, and screamed out his denial, “Dalia!” Then he felt a heavy boot in his side, and woke up.

When his eyes opened, Espera was greeted by a sneering face, twisted and deformed by the cruelties of chance.

When Edahgo saw that he was awake, he smiled down at the captive. “Good evening, lovebird. I’m tired of waking up in the middle of the night listening to your pathetic mewling. It’s time to get your dainty little tongue clipped.”

With that, the hulking brute unchained Espera, threw him over his shoulder, and began to carry him down to his chamber of horrors.

As he struggled, Espera’s foot lashed out and caught the



hunchback in the stomach. Edahgo grunted in surprise and squeezed the pilot hard until he stopped moving.

“Just for that, I’m clipping one of your dainty little feet as well.”

Stomping down the stairs to his cabin, he lifted his captive just a bit, so that the man’s head thumped against the ceiling with each step. “You’re lucky you can pilot, little lovebird, or I’d do away with you this evening. Such a sorry excuse for a man. Always mooning over that dancing girl like a fool. She never even looked twice at you except to cut a notch in your neck, and still you kept after her, month after month. If the decision were up to me, I’d say that you were too stupid to live.”

Closing his cabin door behind them, Edahgo threw his burden onto the wooden floor with a loud thud, then turned to his brazier and began heating up a brand.

Groaning, his captive managed to sit up, cradling his forehead in his hands. He could feel the hatred for the hunchback that had built up during his captivity burning deep in his heart. He watched the sneering, twisted man reach gleefully for another pair of brands... and then he heard her, echoing in his mind like the coo of a dove.

The time is now, my darling.

Before he could stop them, the words flew past his lips, “Not that a freak like you would know anything about love, hunchback. I hear your mother killed herself the first time she saw you. Not that I can blame-”

Edahgo spun around furiously, holding the burning hot iron in his hand. “Hold your tongue, little songbird. You’ll have your chance to sing for me soon enough.”

With a sudden motion, he pressed the red hot tip to Espera’s cheek.

The pilot smiled. There was no sizzle of flesh. Instead, tiny flames began to dance within Espera’s eyes as he laughed. Edahgo squinted at him in confusion for a moment, then backed away in fear. “Wha-what?”

Espera stood up and began to slowly walk towards his tormentor. “You can’t burn me, you fool. I am Fire.” The

fires in his eyes flared up, “I am Passion. I am the blood of kings. I. Am. Castillus!”

Edahgo stared in horror as the fire in the brazier reared up and formed itself into a serpent, then began slithering towards him, leaving a scorched trail in its wake. Espera leaned in close. “Make a sound, and my serpent will climb down your throat and burn you to ashes from the inside out.”

His only reply was a tiny, strangled noise from deep within the hunchback’s chest. Picking up a handful of burning coals from the brazier, Espera made his way up to the deck.

Within a few minutes, tiny, controlled flames licked at strategic places on the ship - the anchor rope, the lines lashing the sails to the masts, and the ship’s wheel.

In the meantime, Espera was cautiously moving among the rowers below deck. Most of them slept as though dead, exhausted after their day’s trials. However, one battered and bruised man with matted red hair peered at the pilot with hope in his eyes.

“Hey, you!” he called softly, his voice thick with an Inish brogue, “Pilot, get me loose!”

Espera motioned for him to be quiet, but the man’s benchmate woke up, looking around him blearily: Donovich. The captain’s lapdog. Espera cursed under his breath.

“What do you do?” the Ussuran muttered sleepily. He spied Espera, and his eyes lit up in alarm, “Escape! KHEIRE-” His shout was cut short as the smaller man next to him leapt on him, wrapping the chains that bound them both around the would-be traitor’s throat. A grim smile formed on the small man’s lips as he choked the life out of him.

“Time ta go, Andres, me boy...sorry ye can’t come with me.”

Espera leaned over him, “Hush. You’ll wake the others. We need to do this quietly.” Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out a coal and fanned it with his magic until it was white-hot. The other man just stared.

“Doesn’t that hurt?”



“Would you rather stay here?” snapped Espera.

“No, no. I’d sign on with Legion if it would get me out of here, or my name ain’t Mike Fitzpatrick.”

He tried not to stare as blood began to run from his rescuer’s nose, concentrating on the rapidly melting chains holding him in place. With a soft tearing sensation, the chains parted, then cooled immediately as Espera laid his hands on the molten ends. The Castillian absently wiped the blood from his nose.

“You stand watch, I’ll start freeing the others...”

They emerged onto the moonlit deck, a small cluster of men led by the former pilot. Espera smiled as he saw small plumes of smoke rising from the corners of the ship. His sabotage efforts were already bearing fruit.

“What now, Castillian?” Fitzpatrick hissed behind him.

Espera grinned. “Now we find a lifeboat and leave this thrice-cursed vessel as quick as we can!” Then start looking for her, he added silently.

“You,” he handed a knife to one of the free captives. “Drop over the side and cut the anchor loose. We don’t want them following us once we’re free.” The man nodded, then clambered quietly over the nearby railing. After checking once more to make sure the deck was clear, Espera motioned for the others to follow him. They stole through the moonlit night, creeping silently towards the starboard side. Nothing moved onboard the *Strange Skies*; their escape plan had as of yet gone unnoticed. As they crossed the deck with the care of mice, Espera swore to keep it that way.

“They store the lifeboats just behind the wheelhouse,” he whispered back to the men. “I think we can all fit-”

His voice cut short as he skidded to a halt. Standing on the deck in front of him was Kheired-Din.

The Crescent captain had his back turned to the captives staring out into the empty night with a look of wonder on his face. His monastic pistolero, Dunti, sat quietly nearby, watching Din like a hawk. Espera gaped at the pair and

quickly slid back behind a stack of crates.

“Damnation,” he cursed as the other men crouched behind him.

“What is it?” Fitzpatrick whispered. Espera shot him a look.

“Quiet, you fool! Kheired-Din is right there!” He turned back to the captain, his mind feverishly working out ways to slip past him. “We have to get around him somehow.”

We could wait until he left, he mused. but that would take too long. Attacking him’s out of the question, but we can’t just sit here. The more time we waste, the greater the chance we’ll -

He stopped. Din hadn’t moved. Not a muscle had twitched, not a hair, not a finger. The captain might as well have been a statue. Espera followed the Crescent’s gaze, up above the waterline. Din was staring hard at a distant spot of empty air, his head slightly cocked as if listening to words that only he could hear.

He has the Prophet’s voice in his head, Espera smiled. He can’t see a thing.

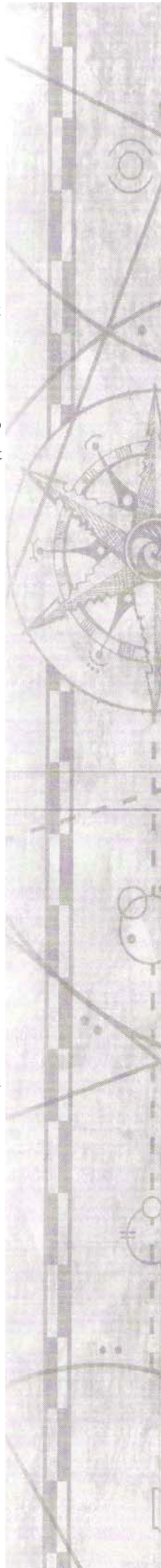
“Now’s our chance,” he hissed. “Go! Get to the lifeboats now!”

“Are you crazy?” one of them muttered. “He’ll see us!”

“He’s in one of his trances! He’ll never notice. Quickly now, before he comes out of it!”

Before anyone could reply, Espera darted out from their meager cover, straight towards the nearby lifeboat. He passed within an arm’s length of the entranced captain - he could have reached out and touched him - but neither Kheired-Din nor Dunti moved. He hopped into the boat and immediately began cutting the ropes binding to the deck. He frantically gestured to the others with his free hand; emboldened by his actions, the remaining captives stealthily followed after him.

They had crossed about half the distance when a quiet hum sounded through the night air. Fitzpatrick stopped short as a crossbow bolt thudded to the deck in front of him. The shadow of a sniper could be seen among the rigging, reloading his weapon. The cry went up, loud and authoritative, ringing across the open sea.



“ESCAPE!!!”

“Mad Jack’s Beard!” Fitzpatrick snarled. The Inishman didn’t have time to contemplate an action before a second quarrel slammed into his side. He howled in pain and staggered towards the railing, feeling the missile burn every time he moved.

“Go!” he shouted at the remaining men. “Get out of here!” He reached out to the railing to steady himself, but his fingers slipped and he found himself overbalanced. He teetered precariously for several moments before losing his footing and tumbling over the side.

Espera watched the Inishman fall with horrified eyes. On the far side of the deck, he could see hatches opening and Corsairs boiling out. Things were starting to fall apart. “Come on!” he called to his fellow captives. As the rowers rushed towards the lifeboat, he saw Kheired-Din shake himself, as if coming out of a heavy sleep. His guts turned to ice as the Crescent pirate turned and focused on him.

“You... Infidel!” Din howled in fury. “I give you every luxury and this is how you repay my blessings?!” He raised his scimitar and began advancing slowly towards the escapees. “Dunti,” he called back. “Kill them all!”

“I’m afraid not captain,” the dark skinned monk replied. Espera’s jaw dropped in disbelief as he watched Dunti slowly draw a pistol from his brace and level it at his captain. Din’s lip curled in anger. “What did you say?!” he snarled at the pistoleer, not bothering to turn around.

“I’ve been waiting a long time for this,” Dunti replied. “And no one will be allowed to stop it. Not even you.” Before Din could reply, he fired the pistol point-blank into the Crescent’s back. Din’s eyes widened in anger and pain; dark crimson sprayed from his mouth and the scimitar fell from his fingertips as he dropped like a stone to the deck. His body twitched once, then lay still; blood spread out in a growing pool beneath him.

Espera continued to gape at the sight. Dunti favored him with a strange, knowing look.

“Room for one more, Señor Castillius?” he asked.

“...ah...ah... yes! By Theus, yes!” Espera stammered as his fellow escapees began climbing into the lifeboat. “You should hurry, however. I doubt the Corsairs will treat your betrayal lightly.”

Behind them, the angry crew surged forward, their cries of rage leaving no doubt about their intention. Dunti hopped into the boat without a word, then drew another pistol and pointed it at the mob. Espera held out his hand.

“No. Permit me.” Tiny flames danced in his eyes. He stood up and gesturing at the approaching Corsairs.

The blood of kings defend me...

Flames leapt from his fingertips and spread out before them in a wide arc. A pair of Corsairs screamed as the fire engulfed their clothing; the rest halted their advance and began desperately trying to put the flames out before they spread to the entire ship. Espera nodded slowly and turn to his men.

“Cut the ropes, “ he said quietly. “Our time here is done.”

Epilogue

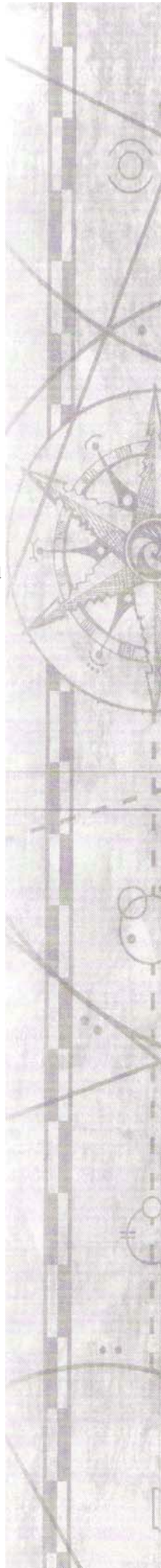
Kheired-Din’s eyes snapped open as the smell of burning wood wafted through his nostrils. He sat up with a lurch, shaking his head to clear the cobwebs. The hole in his chest had shrunk to a quarter of its former size, and vanished entirely as he staggered to his feet. His crew went on about their business around him, seemingly oblivious to his miraculous recovery. They had seen it before.

The ship was a mess. Scorch marks seared the deck and three Corsairs still struggle to put out a fire on the starboard end. The sails lay in tattered shreds and the wheel of the *Strange Skies* tilted awkwardly to one side. From the way the deck pitched beneath his, Kheired-Din knew that they were no longer moored. It was a disaster.

His second mate, Shala, walked softly up to him, her neck craned in a gesture of obedience.

“Where are they?” His words dripped venom.

“Gone,” Shala knew better than to lie to her captain. “The *Prophet’s Word* caught them about twenty five miles away, but they overpowered the crew and set them adrift. They



have their own ship now and until we complete repairs, we can't hope to capture them."

"They will pay," Kheired-Din growled. "Their flesh will burn from their bones until the Prophet himself grows tired of their screams."

"Aye, captain," Shala's rage matched her master's. "As soon as we have completed repairs, we shall hunt them down and..."

"No," Din cut her off. "I burn for revenge, but we cannot afford such luxuries yet. The Prophet's mission must continue."

"But--"

"No! It must wait! This is a challenge, Shala: a challenge of our resolve. My heart screams at me to find the pilot and flay the flesh from his belly, but we cannot. Not until His word is done. Theus has seen fit to test us, and we will not be deterred from His work! Once the gateway is open, we shall have all eternity to seek our vengeance."

Shala bowed her head in assent. "As you command. I shall tell the crew." She turned to go, then called back. "I assume, then, that you have some means of completing our mission without a pilot?"

Kheired-Din looked at her stonily. "The Prophet will provide Shala. The Prophet always provides..."

The Swordsmaster

by Dana DeVries

Tracey Anvilin shouted, "No!" as the two men swung at each other clumsily. They both stopped and stared at him disdainfully. "Your blows were slow, your feints predictable and your stance was completely unsuitable for rolling decks. The General hired me to teach you noblemen how to fight onboard a ship. If this is the best you can do, he should just push you overboard at the first chance and save the pirates the trouble." The second story salon's hardwood floors and high ceilings echoed with the swordsmaster's disdain. One mirrored wall reflected the three men while a sea breeze fluttered curtains on the windows.

Jean Paul Allais du Crieux lowered his weapon. "Odds bodkin, what did you expect? You arm us with these leviathans of swords and expect grace? We're fencers not porters to lug such heavy burdens! We hired you to train us in the nuances of fencing onboard ship, not to insult and demean us."

Tracey shrugged, "I didn't realize your delicate nature. Perhaps you'd feel more with a lady in waiting's fan instead of a blade?" The young fop's face grew pale with fury. "Perhaps a muscle-bound oaf could wield this sword, but speed and grace depend upon a more fitting blade. Allow me to demonstrate." He dropped his practice sword disdainfully and drew out a razor sharp rapier. His off hand drew out a main gauche.

Tracey gestured imperiously and the other student handed over his practice sword. Tracey swung it experimentally and nodded. He assumed a swaying stance and motioned with his off hand for du Crieux to attack.

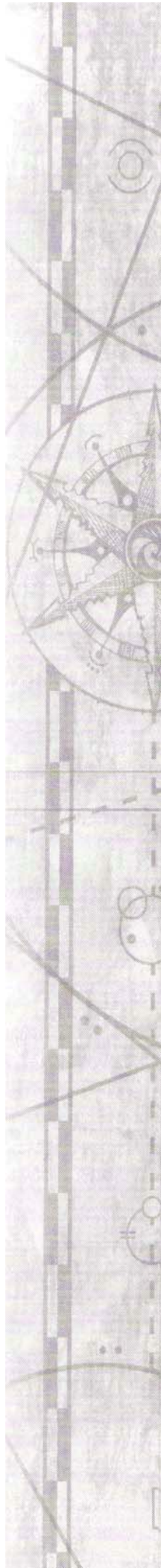
"The reason we use heavier weapons during training is to build strength and stamina. Plus they're blunted to prevent injury to the duelists."

The fop ignored Tracey's pedantic tone and flicked his rapier out at him. Tracey raised his blade to parry and du Crieux's blade dropped low beneath the parry. Before the fop could act upon his feint, the heavy practice sword crashed down upon the rapier. The thin blade bent sharply, but when du Crieux stepped back, it sprang back into shape.

"A rapier is always in danger of snapping against a heavier weapon. You carry a good blade." Tracey's voice held grudging respect for the young man's choice of weapons.

Du Crieux sneered, "Yes, unlike these iron bars, this is a real weapon. And I use a real swordsman school. Unlike that mishmash of styles you have been teaching us. How a man can fight with such lack of style is beyond me." He thrust his blade towards Tracey's chest in a typically quick Valroix attack.

The swordsmaster parried the thrust and twisted his blade around and drew it along the fop's wrist. "What you call a mishmash, is actually a simple matter of using what is best from a number of schools. When speed is called for use it.



But when something else is required, I do not hesitate. That is called the Donavan slash and would have sliced your wrist open to the bone. It's a maneuver unique to the Donavan School, but extremely useful for any swordsman who can master it. Flexibility will bring you much further than mindless adherence to a single style."

With a snort, du Crieux launched a quick thrust followed by a slash from his dagger. Tracey parried both with a twist of his wrist and then returned the attack with a thrust at head height. Du Crieux crossed his weapons to parry the thrust above his head and Tracey stepped in close and slammed his left fist into the fop's stomach. The young man doubled over in pain, gasping for breath. Tracey kicked the main gauche out of his hand and stepped back.

"Now you fight without the advantage of two weapons. Because you neglected to train for that, you are at a severe disadvantage so that even a gutter snipe could best you. Shall we continue?"

The fop arose with a snarl before composing his face. Then he replied coolly, "That was a low born trick, unworthy of a fencing instructor in *l'Emperor's* navy. But I shall not fall for another such trick." Then with a casual flick of his wrist, he slashed out at Tracey.

But the swordsmaster simply swayed out of the way. "No, you won't fall for that one, but the pirates have an endless number of low born tricks and if you fall for even one of them, they will kill you regardless of your high born pedigree." His stance was more rigid now and his steps more deliberately placed. He stomped his feet twice, flourished his arm and cried out, "Ole!"

Du Crieux lashed out with a flurry of blows that were all lightly parried. Then, Tracey smiled and began his own series of attacks. Du Crieux parried the first three with ease, but they kept coming and the tempo of the attacks increased. The next parry was slow and the fop found a the blunted blade laid gently across his throat.

With one arm poised in midstroke, he considered the weapon and then smiled wickedly. He swung his own sharpened blade at his opponent, but Tracey danced within the length of his arm. Before du Crieux could recover, Tracey grabbed the fop's blade with his off hand and twisted it out of his grasp.

Then he drove the pommel of his own weapon into the fop's chin. Du Crieux gasped at his opponent. "You would strike an unarmed noble? You shall hang for that!"

"I doubt it. I have a witness that you attacked me during practice with a live blade, correct Monsieur du Mar?" Tracey turned to the second student who was leaning against the wall nearby.

"Oh no, sir. I clearly saw you strike him after the exchange was finished." Du Mar's voice dripped with condescending scorn. Tracey snorted and turned away. He called back over his shoulder, "Well, if I'm going to hang, I'll hang onto your sword. Might as well get something out of all this trouble, right?" He testing the rapier upon the air. "Good balance, fine steel. A noble weapon, unfit for the likes of you. But, I really don't think that the Montaigne Navy will reprimand a swordsmaster for striking his student."

The whisper of a shoe upon the floor behind him was the only warning. Tracey leapt forward and twirled about. The rapier was extended and ready. Du Crieux continued running at him, main gauche stabbing down towards the swordsmaster. Then the fop staggered to a halt and stared down at the rapier piercing his chest.

Tracey swore quietly. "Of course, they'll certainly hang a swordsmaster who kills one of his noble students. Time to be off, I think. Monsieur du Mar, the lesson is over for today."

Then as du Mar watched in shock, Tracey pulled the blade from du Crieux's chest and wiped it off carefully. He sheathed it and strode towards the window. With a last nod to his student, he leapt out the window. Cries from pedestrians came from below as Tracey Anvilin fled for his life.

Quest of the Grim Sword by Dana DeVries

The midday sun shone down upon the streets of San Cristobal where brightly clad vendors and customers mingled and shifted in an intricate mercantile dance. The ancient domes of Crescent buildings stood cheek to cheek with churches and towering palatial homes as a man slipped through the crowd. Although he stared about in bewilderment at the people and towering buildings clustered around him,

his natural timing and grace allowed him to move quickly through the throngs of people.

He wore a newly tailored black outfit over a white silk shirt, but his sword belt and boots were comfortably worn. His face seemed far younger than his grey hair would account for and a smile often crossed his lips as he asked for directions to Casa Aldana. He finally arrived at a large, unassuming home set with sturdy doors directly upon the plaza. Several servants were loading a canvas covered wagon directly in front of the marble steps leading up to the door.

The man strode confidently up to the door and raised his hand to pound upon it just as it opened. A harried looking servant strode out with his arms were so filled with boxes and bundles that he blundered straight into the man who stepped back gracefully. The servant bowed his head and immediately apologized as he reached for the boxes he had dropped.

"My apologies, senor. I did not see you there. May I help you?"

The man straightened himself and said expectantly. "Think nothing of it. I am the Grim Sword. Don Marcos Rivera del Rios, son of Don Julian Rivera del Rios and I seek Don Aldana in a matter of honour."

"I regret that Don Alejandro is in the Vaticine City."

"Ah, my error. I meant Don Millano Rios del Aldana."

"Again my apologies, Don Marcos. Don Millano left this morning. His ship sails with the tide. We are not certain as to when he will be returning."

Don Marcos furrowed his brow slightly "Did he say what boat he was sailing on?"

"*El Corazon del...*" A startled look crossed the servant's face.

"Pardon me, but did you say that you are the son of Don Julian Rivera del Rios? The butcher of Soldano?"

Del Rios' eyes narrowed and he nodded. "That is indeed my father, but I suggest you do not dishonour his name. I am in the middle of a vendetta right now and I'd hate to interrupt it for the likes of you." His hand dropped to his sword and the servant's face blanched.

The servant dropped the bundles at his feet and stepped back into the house. Del Rios smiled in amusement as he heard the steward yelling for help inside. He turned from the Aldana Estate and looked about before stepping up to a street vendor selling cool drinks.

He asked for directions to the docks, bought a drink and tipped her well. Before he turned, he felt a hand upon his shoulder. Whirling around, he saw that the servants from the wagon had clustered about him and drawn steel. Drawing his own blade, del Rios called out, "I was just leaving. Are you certain you wish to challenge me with only six men?"

One of the servants rushed forward with his sword raised high. The swordsman swept his own blade up in a salute that turned into a strong parry. Before the man could recover, the swordsman dashed his drink into the man's face, stepped in close behind him, reached up and took the sword from his hand.

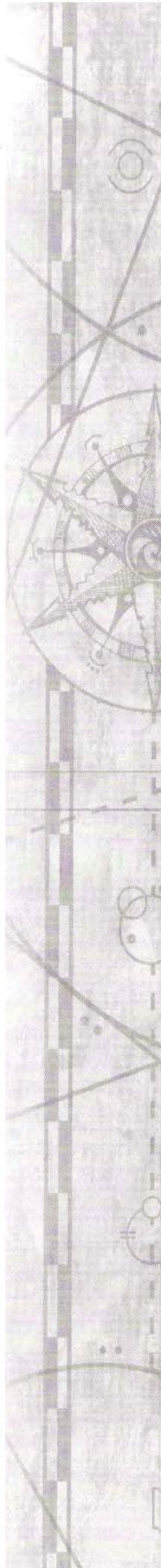
As the servant opened his mouth to speak, del Rios brought his own sword hilt down sharply upon the man's neck. As he crumpled, two other servants rushed from opposite sides. Del Rios extended his two swords in a graceful bow that neatly intercepted both incoming weapons.

He swayed from one side to the other for a moment as his arms gracefully twisted and turned to parry each of their attacks. Then he turned to one of them, his blades knocked aside the servant's weapon, and a quick thrust pierced the man's forearm. With a curse, the man dropped his weapon and clutched the wound.

The servant behind del Rios thrust towards his back but a quick side step allowed the sword to pass him harmlessly. A single slash across his hand and that servant dropped his weapon and backed away as well. The remaining men hung back fearfully from the smiling swordsmaster.

"As I was saying. I was just leaving. Surely you three should look after your wounded comrades?" With an elaborate gesture, Don Marcos sheathed his own weapon.

A heartbeat later, the door to the Aldana Estate slammed open and a horde of men swept through the doors led by the steward who pointed at the lone swordsman and shouted.



Don Marcos scowled. “This is really becoming quite tedious.”

Turning from the oncoming guards, he stepped lightly upon the back of the unconscious man and leapt onto the wagon. Two more steps and he was jumping off the far end of it into the plaza’s crowd with Aldana’s men in angry pursuit.

The street was less crowded than the plaza and the pedestrians quickly made way for a man carrying a bare blade and chased by a mob of guards. Ahead of him, Don Marcos saw a slow moving wagon filled with barrels rolling down the street ahead of him. He raced up to it and slashed out with his captured sword.

Coming to a halt a step later, he turned with a triumphant grin, only to notice that a pair of dirty young children stood only a few yards behind him staring at the wagon in fascination. The barrels slowly began to topple off the wagon with the dull slosh that indicated they held enough ale to crush the children into pulp.

Del Rios dropped his weapon, took two running steps, dove beneath the slowly falling barrels and swept the two street urchins out of the way. The barrels smashed into the ground with a series of bone shaking crashes and covered the street with the ale. Del Rios sighed deeply and gave each of the two children a rub on their head as he straightened up.

Then without turning from them, he drew his own sword in a flicker of movement and swept it behind his back to parry the stab of the first of Aldana’s men.

Turning from the children, his feet began to tap forward through the frothy ale in a series of quick short steps that carried him into the midst of the first four of his pursuers.

The first man lashed out again, but del Rios tapped the blade aside and then tapped the blade again from the other side in time to his quick steps. The swordmaster took three short steps back and his opponent rushed forward, only to feel his feet slip beneath him on the slick ale-soaked cobblestones.

The next man thrust for del Rios’ chest, but he dashed the blade to one side and slashed across his chest. The cut,

though shallow, was enough to convince the man to retreat from the fray. Before the others could move, del Rios began prancing in the circle of his foes as his blade whisked out in furious fashion.

Within a handful of breaths, all of his opponents were disarmed and sporting minor slashes and bruises.

They backed slowly away from him.

Raising his blade to his face, del Rios smiled then he whisked it down and started towards the docks again. He had only gone a few yards when he heard shouts from behind him. Another group of Aldana guards had just come into sight and were rushing past the opponents he had defeated towards him.

As he broke into a run, he muttered, “How much does Aldana pay these men?”

Del Rios slipped by dozens of Castilians strolling through the streets of San Cristobal while the men behind him ploughed them aside in an effort to reach the elusive swordsman. Glancing over his shoulder, he noticed a handful of them suddenly splitting away to run down a side street to the right.

Scanning the area, he realized that the street was gradually curved that way as well and the shops on the street were giving way to the shops and inns that cater to sailors, but only after they’ve expended themselves on the bars, tattoo parlours and brothels that line the docks. With a whispered curse, he remembered the vendor had given him the easiest path to the dock, not the quickest.

Del Rios turned onto a side street. The traffic here was lighter and he noticed a sign showing some sort of angel before him. “Posada de la Damisela Fugada.”

He had barely taken another step when he noticed a blockade of Aldana guardsman lined up across the street. He didn’t dare face those behind as well as those in front, so he charged into the midst of those in front, hoping to break through them quickly.

Del Rios drew his blade and rushed into their midst.

Parrying blows on every side, he pressed forward towards “Posada de la Damisela Fugada”. He twisted his blade and



pulled his cuts so that none of the men were injured too badly. After all, they were doing their job and he could find no fault in the manner in which they did it.

Just as he reached the Inn, a handful of men all wearing black followed by a lone swordsman rushed out of an adjacent warehouse and smashed into the melee. Everything dissolved into chaos as blades began flailing wildly and every man tried to determine whose side the new combatants would take. Del Rios ducked and slashed out, pivoted and thrust for several desperate moments, weaving a song of ringing steel around himself.

As one of the Aldana men finally got through his guard and cut a shallow gash across his arm, del Rios shouted out, "You men may be good, but I swear you will not stop me from reaching Millano Aldana!"

Time froze for an instant as everyone pulled away from his whirling blade. In the sudden opening, he thrust his sword into his belt, leapt up and grabbed the sign. Clambering up, he realized that the best handholds were rather inappropriate places to touch an angel, but he did not pause long enough to apologize. He scrambled onto the roof and saw only a few low buildings lay between him and the docks and *El Corazon* was plainly visible pulling away from the dock.

A sudden shout from below attracted his attention. Another man, wearing a voluminous black cloak, climbed onto the roof and faced him. He was a tall, thin man with intense green eyes and a mouth that smiled frequently. But not now.

With a tired sigh, the man asked del Rios, "Don't your kind ever tire of wearing black?" As he spoke, his weapon hissed out of its sheath and slashed forward.

"My kind?" del Rios' own weapon whispered out of his sheath and beat the attack aside.

His own weapon thrust towards his opponent but when the man's blade lowered to parry, del Rios' blade dipped around it and slipped free.

"I'm sure the first mercenary sell-sword to wear black leather probably looked menacing and impressive. But now it's just

tiresome."

As he answered, the man drew a dagger with his off hand and parried del Rios' blade.

"Forgive me, *senor*. I hadn't realized I'd stepped astray into a cliché. And while you must have me confused with someone else, I feel obliged to point out that you're wearing black too."

A slash with the knife made del Rios backpedal a step and his riposte was intercepted by both of the man's weapons crossed above his head.

"*Es verdad*, but with me..." The man shrugged aside his cloak and revealed a black tabard intricately embroidered with four intertwined red roses around a white cross. "It's a badge of office, not just a feeble attempt at a fashion statement."

He launched another attack with his fencing sword. Del Rios lashed out with his own blade and twisted his wrist sharply.

The Knight's sword leaped from his hand and del Rios caught it in his free hand as he protested, "I have no quarrel with you or the Knights of the Rose and Cross. After all, you aided Gosse when he needed it. I just want to reach Aldana."

For a moment, the man looked utterly lost. Then his face clenched in anger. "Gosse? You mean Phillip Gosse? Damnation! You're the one who swore that oath down below?"

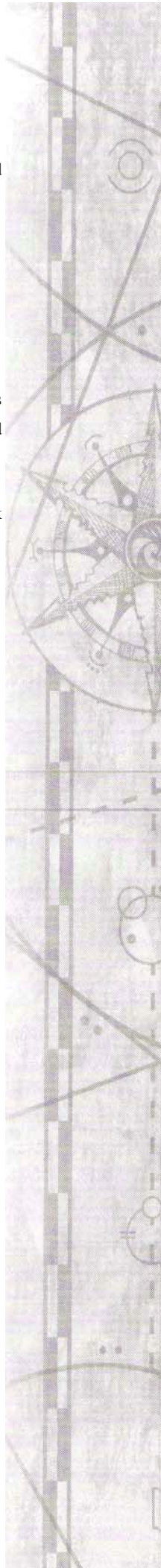
Confused, del Rios nodded.

The man continued, "I thought you were one of the men I was following. It's all the damned black clothing." The Knight of the Rose and Cross turned back to the edge of the roof and stared down. "No! They're gone."

Whirling back to Don Marcos, the Knight asked, "Did you see which way they went? No, of course not. I was too busy distracting you. Listen, those men stole something very important to my Order. Can you help me retrieve it?"

"Forgive me, sir Knight, but I must catch *El Corazon*. It is a matter of honor."

"Look if I don't get that book back, the Inquisition will have



enough to burn us at the stake. Aid me now and I swear I'll help you track down that ship later."

Again the world seemed to pause a moment, as if a bell had rung without sound and only the vibrations filled the air.

Del Rios stared into the Knight's eyes for a moment. Then he nodded sharply. "Alright. I will help you. I guess I owe Highport that much. So, I will be a deputy knight or something? Is there a test I have to pass or anything like that?"

"Do you protect the innocent?"

The swordmaster shrugged. "I try."

"Do you bring justice to the unjust?"

Del Rios grinned humourlessly. "That's the reason I seek for Aldana."

"Will you protect those who wear the Rose and Cross?"

Del Rios paused. "For now."

"Good enough for me. Allow me to introduce myself. I am Francisco Garcia del Torres."

"Don Marcos Rivera del Rios, the Grim Sword."

"I'd drop the title. Anyway, come on. We've got to catch those thugs before they deliver the book to the Inquisition."

The Knight began to lightly run across the rooftop with del Rios at his side.

"Where are you headed? I thought you said they were gone?"

"For now, yes. However, they will take it back to their den first. Look it over to see if there's anything in there of use to them first."

"Is there?"

"Not unless they can read ancient tikat-baraji." The Knight did not even slow down when he reached the end of the roof; he leapt the street below and continued on.

Del Rios kept pace without a problem.

"Teeka what?"

"Tikat-baraji, the sacred religious dialect of the Crescent Empire."

Del Rios was impressed. He'd heard tales of fabulous wealth in the mysterious lands east of Vodacce. Perhaps he would venture there himself someday, but for now there was urgent business at hand.

"So do you have a plan or are we simply barging in and dealing with a half dozen armed men?"

"Worried? You were facing more than that back there."

"No. I'm just tired of surprises."

Another street and another low rooftop passed beneath their feet.

"If they're acting like they were back at the Chapterhouse, they'll have one man keeping watch. You deal with him and I'll take care of the others."

"Why do you have all the fun?"

With a grin, del Torres answered, "Because you are just a deputy knight." Shaking his head, he continued. "Actually, the six men are just thugs, I can handle them. But they must have expected trouble breaking into the Chapterhouse because they hired an expert swordsman. One of the best I have ever seen. You just have to stall him for a little while."

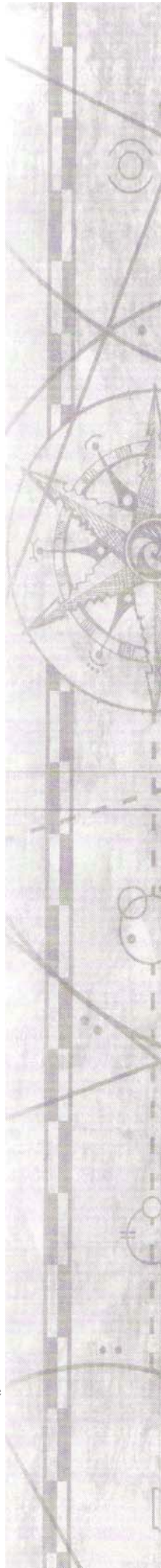
"Just stall him? You say that like you think he's better than I am."

"I don't know. I know you are a better swordsman than I am. I know he is a better swordsman than I am. I just don't know if you're good enough to best him."

"How encouraging. Any other words of advice?"

"Don't let him get too close. Every time I closed with him, he'd parry my sword aside and strike me with his fist."

The knight slowed to a stop and held up one hand. "Wait. See there. That's him." He pointed down into the alley beneath them.



A tall, strong man with outlandish bright multi-coloured scarves, a bandana and earrings stood alone before the entrance to a sailor's dive called El Loro Pulgoso.

Del Rios whispered to his companion, "So how did you get past him last time?"

"I cut a tapestry down onto him and ran after the ones who had the book."

"Wonderful. Alright. I'll go deal with him and you take care of the others."

"Done."

Del Rios leapt from the roof and dropped lightly onto the street below. Even under the bright afternoon sun, the street was dimly lit with the buildings pressing in from both sides. The gaily-attired man raised an eyebrow in surprise.

"Now swordsmen are falling from the sky?"

"Just from the rooftop. I'm supposed to keep you busy."

"Are you sure you're up to it, old man?"

"Appearances can be deceiving. I'm younger than I look."

"Well, then maybe this will be a challenge." The man drew a length of steel in one hand without touching the dagger at his side.

As Del Rios drew his sword, he asked, "Don't feel the need for your other weapon?"

"I'd hate to have it said Tracey Anvilin only defeated you because he used two weapons."

"You seem fairly confident."

"Yes. But then so do you."

Del Rios launched a series of quick cuts but Anvilin easily parried the blow. When del Rios launched a high thrust, Anvilin returned it with a lightning fast riposte that was tapped aside. Anvilin thrust towards him again and again. After a moment, del Rios smiled.

"What's so amusing?" Anvilin asked as he continued to probe for weaknesses in the Castilian's defences.

"Just...this." del Rios dashed his opponent's blade to the side and spun around. His blade slashed out at head level without encountering any resistance.

Realizing his danger, he dropped to the ground as a blade pierced his fluttering cloak above him. He rolled to the side, sprang to his feet, and glanced around.

Anvilin stood to one side grimacing. "Nicely done."

"I thought I had you."

"Likewise."

A loud crash from inside the bar distracted them for a moment.

Then the Avalon said, "Well, let's try it again." He charged forward swinging down broadly with the sword in both hand.

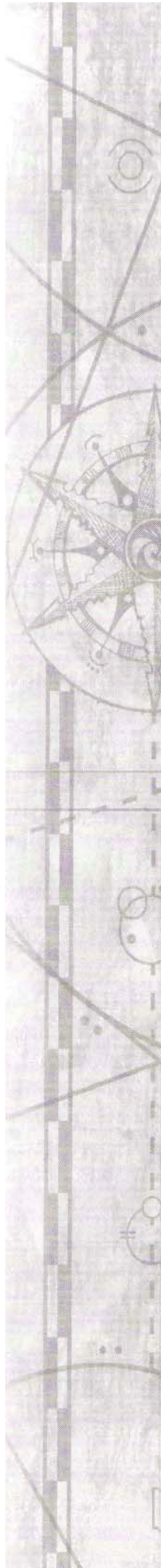
Del Rios dodged to one side, but before he could counterattack, he had to dodge again. The blows continued raining down, coming down strongly whenever he paused to riposte. He tried to parry the blows, but the strength of the beating attacks numbed his hands. After a moment, he rushed past the Avalon swordsman's offside.

With astonishing speed, Anvilin slashed across at him with the blade in his left hand at waist height. Del Rios struck the blade down, jumped over the blade and hit the ground rolling. Stopping suddenly, he lashed out behind him and sliced into his opponent's shin. Incredibly, Anvilin brought his feet back so the cut was just a scratch. Del Rios stood while staring at his opponent with narrowed eyes. Anvilin just shook his head in amazement.

The two crashed together in a flurry of steel rapid enough that it was impossible to follow the paths of the blades. Still, neither one could gain an advantage.

Anvilin stepped back, panting slightly. "You're very good. Your teacher must be very proud of you. How is Julian del Rios?"

"He is well. Complains about his scars whenever it rains, but



otherwise, he is well. How did you know?"

"I studied with him briefly before he was exiled. A fine swordsman and a good teacher. I think you might be his equal with a blade."

"High praise from the man who has fought me to a standstill."

"Well, I do have an advantage. I know your moves, your style. And I have a dozen different schools to draw upon to use against you."

"A dozen schools? Why so many?"

"I've discovered that each has something to teach me. You are extremely skilled, but too limited. You know the Aldana School..."

"The del Rios school!"

"My apologies. You know your school intimately. But you don't have any other techniques to fall back upon should your school be at a disadvantage."

"Again?"

"You do realize that your friend has the book already."

The Knight of the Rose and Cross slightly sheepishly emerged from the doorway to the bar. He held a wrapped bundle in one hand.

Incredulous, del Rios asked, "You knew?"

Why did you prolong this if you knew he was going in the other way?"

"My employers instructed me to guard this door and allow no one to enter. No one has. I left the defence of the rest of the bar to them. Besides, when we faced the Knight earlier, they abandoned me to fight him while they scurried off like rats. I have little sympathy for them or their plight."

"I see." After a pause, del Rios shook his head.

"I'd like to finish this. Find out who is better."

He glanced at the Knight of the Rose and Cross. Del Torres

simply nodded. The Avalon agreed.

For a long moment, the two men stared at each other and then the Castilian raised his blade in salute. The Avalon followed suit. They came together with a clash of steel. Long seconds passed as the two men vied for an advantage. Each attack was parried and each riposte missed its target. Del Rios pressed harder, swaying from side to side and bouncing slightly.

He kept reaching out with his sword for Anvilin's head again and again in an increasing tempo. Suddenly he swung his sword around and slashed down at his opponent's legs.

But the Avalon was ready. He slammed his blade down upon the Castilian's and drove it into the ground and swung out with his off hand fist. The blow sent del Rios crashing to the ground. He looked up to find Anvilin's sword poised above his chest. He bent his head in submission and steeled himself for the killing blow. But it never came, instead Anvilin helped him to his feet.

"Now you know who is better, at least today."

Don Marcos bowed before his Avalon opponent, "Thank you. Now I must take my leave to seek Don Millano and justice for my father."

"He's had years to learn as well. It won't be an easy fight."

"I'll take your advice while I seek him. Study another style or two. Prepare further. I must not fail in my task."

"Good luck to you, sir."

"And you? What are your plans?"

"I shall do what I always do. Look for more work. It's a sell-sword's lot."

"Care to travel with me for a while? It won't pay much, but I guarantee it won't be boring."

Tracey Anvillin smiled. "Why not?"

Francisco Garcia del Torres spoke up as well. "In return for his assistance, I have vowed to aid Don Marcos in his quest for justice. We should probably get about it."



The two swordmasters and the Knight strode out of the dockside slum discussing some of the finer points of Castillian swordsmanship.

Surprise Visit

By Dana DeVries and Vicki Kirchhoff-Martin

Cossette leaned back against the rigging and smiled up at the topman working the lines above her. “You’ll like Gus, Maggie. He’s worked a dozen different sites and manages to find the most incredible things. Then he just...moves on. Can’t stand the ‘crowds’ of people who show up when the interesting stuff starts coming out of the ground. But he’s always happy to have a few guests come by for some of his broiled herring. Says only Vestenmanjavenar can really cook it right.”

Maggie nodded as she leapt amidst the ropes and slowly let out the line. The sails shifted with the wind and the ship tacked about. She lightly danced across the beam, dropped off and caught herself to hang upside down face to face with the Explorer’s captain. Despite the heat and her exertions not a drop of sweat marred her forehead as Maggie asked, “You’re sure he won’t mind having us stop by so suddenly?”

“I just told you, he likes guests. He probably hasn’t seen anyone in weeks.”

“Even guests who...” Her voice trailed off uncertainly.

“Gus is a man who believes in a woman’s worth, not about her past. He claims that his ancestors were bloodthirsty warriors who could barely find the pointy end of a sword. That’s why he changed his name to honor his son instead of his father. Unfortunately, he couldn’t stop the warriors from invading his village and killing his son. That’s why he left the Vestenmanjavenar isles. Couldn’t stand the memories anymore and decided to devote himself to a past that didn’t involve warriors. Anyway, you need to get beyond this whole Lightbringer business and focus on living.”

“Easy for you to say. You don’t have strange sigils tattooed to the bottoms of your feet that proclaim you to be a religious icon or something.”

“Would it make you feel better if I got a tattoo? Maybe a big one right on my forehead.”

The topman chuckled, “Thanks, Cossette. But I don’t think that’ll be necessary.” Then she cocked her head and said, “Cannon fire.”

The lookout overhead called out, “Smoke on the horizon.”

Cossette stood and strode over to a chest next to the mast. She pulled out a tube of brass capped with strange amber colored lenses. Putting it to her eye, she peered towards the small tropical island dead ahead. A stream of smoke rose into the air from the far side of point that jutted out from the island. She called out sharply. “Brennen!”

The quartermaster came onto deck. He had been asleep just a few minutes ago, but was he was bright eyed and ready for action.

Cossette gestured with the odd spyglass and handed it to him. As Brennen examined the smoke, she asked quietly. “That’s Gus’s site isn’t it?”

“Could be. Or it could be from the harbor. He’s not defenseless you know.” “I know he can usually handle himself, but if they’re firing off cannons, it’s bad. Unless you think he’s the one firing the cannon.”

Brennen muttered, “Close enough,” as Cossette called out, “Jelena, bring us in as close to the island as you can, we’ll sweep around the point and take them by surprise.”

Brennen pointed out, “We could just leave now. They don’t even know we’re here.”

“Gus Heimfather is an Explorer, one of us. And that is one of our sites. I am not about to abandon one of our own.”

“I know. Just pointing out the path of prudence. By the way, I distributed some of the special ammunition to the gunners last watch.”

Cossette nodded. As the island came closer and the smoke grew in volume, the entire crew gathered at the bow, watching for any sign of what was happening before them. The sounds of cannon fire came clearly across the water, but the other ship was still hidden by the spur of land. Cossette

spoke to the pilot and the large vessel came in close enough to the island for two crewmen and Korintine Nocolovich to leap overboard and scramble ashore. Within moments, they had disappeared into the dense vegetation. The ship swept along until it reached the small peninsula. A gust of wind caught the sails as the Redeemer came around the point. She leapt into the spray.

Ahead, a Vodacce galleon fired ragged volleys into the dense jungle while men gathered timidly upon her deck, preparing to launch the ship's longboats. She flew a scarlet flag bearing a skull with a forked tongue above a flag bearing Bernoulli's colours. Smoke rose from the large sections of the hull that were blackened and smashed as if they had been struck with gout of flame. The sails were in tatters and the rigging was destroyed.

Cossette's voice called out "FIRE!" and the Redeemer's guns echoed with their own thunder. The Vodacce crew turned at the sound and caught the barrage in their teeth. Several of the cannonballs punched a hole through the ship and into the jungle beyond. Another exploded in green flames. Another smashed into the mainmast and stopped. After hanging in mid air for a heartbeat, it plunged straight down through the decking, the hull and into the briny depths.

Cossette turned with a frown. "I don't mind using some of the special ammunition but we don't need to use all of it! Continue firing with regular shot." She turned back towards the pirates and stroked her chin to cover the big grin. A few of the fastest gunners fired another volley off behind her. As it crashed into the pirates, they were already dropping their colours and searching for a white flag. Over her shoulder she called out, "Cease fire." and a cheer broke out amongst her men.

Now that the enemy was dealt with, she turned her attention to the shoreline. The sight erased the smile from her face. Craters amongst the trees showed where cannonballs had blasted back the foliage. A few fires burnt feebly in the wet jungle. The small house that the Explorers had built for Gus was nothing more than a smoldering pile of timber. The rock outcropping where the Vestenmanjavenar had worked so hard had shattered. Cossette's face was cold as she ordered the Redeemer brought alongside the Vodacce vessel.

A burst of orange light lit up the jungle for a moment. Then

another flash of the strange light that lasted a heartbeat. Cossette let out a deep breath as the lookout confirmed, "They've found Gus. He's alright!"

Then the Explorers captain turned her attention back to the Vodacce ship. Cut into her side was the name *Marauding Tongue*.

"Just lovely," she remarked as she called out her orders to the crew.

"Samuel, Jelena, Joseph. Take three men each. We're going across to visit our guests. Have the rest of your men out of sight, but standing ready with muskets. Those pirates give us any trouble, I want them to clear the decks over there."

Brennen asked from beside her, "Do you want to wait for Gus to get here before you board them?"

"No. They're going to start sinking soon. Best to deal with them now and get them repaired."

Cossette gestured to Samuel Sanderson who pulled out a silverish metal rod six inches in diameter. He rapped it sharply onto the railing and then held in onto the deck. It uncoiled faster than the eye could follow and a plank of the silverish metal stretched out between the two ships. J

elena smiled and said with a wicked grin, "Ladies first." She pushed past him and lightly ran across the plank.

Sam followed, calling after her, "Then why are you in the lead?"

Cossette let a few more crewman go and then crossed herself. The plank was rock solid despite the slight movement of the two boats. Partway across she noticed Korontine and his men emerge from the jungle along with Gus. She waved them in. Gus moved to a pile of brush and uncovered a small longboat that had miraculously survived the attack.

She stepped lightly down onto *Marauding Tongue* and she glanced around. Close up, the Vodacce ship was hurt, but not crippled. Most of the damage was to the sails, rigging and crew. The vital timbers were solid around the holes where the Redeemer's cannons had blasted them. Striding up to the knot of men gathered at the aft of the ship, Cossette noticed a pile of weaponry in the center of the main deck.

She asked loudly, "What's the meaning of attacking an Explorer site?"

Several of the crew turned towards a tall man with a hawk-like nose.

He stepped forward with a grimace, "My apologies, captain. We had no idea he was one of yours. We had been told that a Vendel treasure seeker had set up a camp here. Our orders are to seek out the Vendel and destroy them."

"I see. Your name and the name of the man who gave you this faulty information."

"Captain Linguetta. A respectable source, captain. I'm afraid I cannot reveal more than that."

"Meaning, you won't tell me unless I make it worth your while?"

The man smiled slightly. "Precisely. So good to deal with someone who understands how things are done."

"Well, I'll tell you how things will be done. I'm taking you and your men back to the nearest Mondavi port in chains to stand trial as pirates. Your boat I'm keeping as salvage rights."

The Vodacce captain sputtered, "You can't do that!"

Cossette smiled coldly. "Trust me. Explorers know all about Vodacce salvage rights."

"You would be signing our death warrants. Mondavi courts are completely corrupt!"

"Or at least as corrupt as any other courts in Vodacce, just not corrupt in your favor. See, I do know a bit about how things are done here. Just be glad I don't sell you to the Crescent slavers like Explorers caught by your thugs. Besides, you talk of our treatment when you're already plotting to attack us in our sleep."

"What?" The Vodacce seemed genuinely confused.

"Deny it if you like, but your men are going into our hold stripped of every possession, including clothing, unless you throw down the rest of your weapons right now." Her voice

was as cold as an Ussuran winter.

The Vodacce captain looked into her eyes for a long moment, then he grinned and gestured to his men. Another fifty pounds of weaponry rained down upon the deck. Belaying pins, pistols, blades of every description formed a tidy stack. "Perhaps we could come to an arrangement?"

Cossette nodded with a smile. "Certainly. I am not bloodthirsty. We are keeping your ship. After all, you destroyed the house we had built here. Seems only fitting that your boat should house our men."

"Alright. Perhaps if you could deliver my men and our cargo to a Bernoulli port..."

"I don't think so. You are going to be turned over to the authorities and I don't plan on being arrested for my trouble. As for the cargo, I'll turn it over to the authorities as long as there's nothing else stolen from the Explorers in it. Of course, if I find that, then I will turn you over to Mondavi."

"Perhaps I have a few pieces we took from some other pirates a few days ago. I believe they're from Explorer sites. You know certain Vodacce princes have authorized attacks against your sites. Even got it approved by the church."

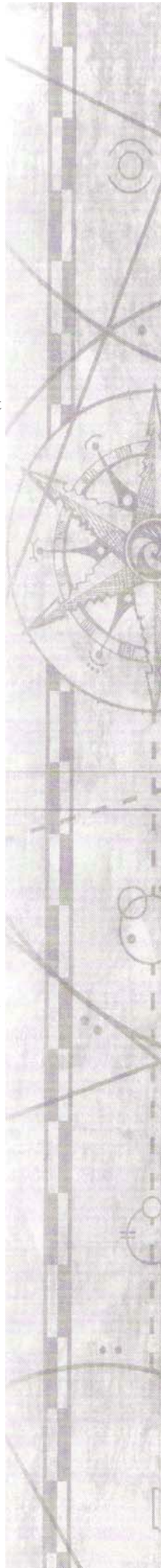
"Really. Which princes?"

"Well, Mondavi and Calagari."

"Meaning I shouldn't turn you over to them? Hmm. Any idea what happened to the other Explorers?"

"I heard that their sites were plundered, but they didn't resist so they were left alone. Unlike the men here. Whoever's on shore here wouldn't even let us get on shore. He just started firing bolts of lightning at us as soon as we came into sight!"

Cossette chuckled. "You poor thing. It looks like he kept firing while you destroyed the cave, the house and cannoned the island at random. Just trying to defend yourself against him, I'm sure. How rude. I'll tell you what. You tell me who provided the information about this site. I'll turn you and your boat over to Falisci's men. We keep your cargo. They can deal with you as they see fit. But I will spread the word to the other Explorers. You will not have any other dealings with us and you will not prey upon us again. Or we will



hunt you down and deal with you. No matter what name you choose to use, *Signor Tongue*.”

The pirate captain sighed as several of his men laughed. “A moderately generous offer, I must confess. But I don’t know who gave us the information. It was passed to me through an acquaintance. One that I cannot expose.”

She nodded to him for a moment. “I see, then we’ll keep the cargo and the boat, but we’ll hand you over to Falisci.” The pirate looked pained, but he nodded agreement as she called out orders to her men. “Alright. Search them. Then put them in our hold. Keep at least two armed men watching them at all times. Then get the carpenters over here and plug the leaks we made.”

Looking up she saw Gus coming toward her still holding an intricate musket in one hand. She called out, “What is that thing?”

He grinned ruefully at her. “Just a little something I picked up in Montaigne. Worked pretty good, but now it’s just a very old stick.”

Gus grimaced at the pirates still standing in a huddle. “I hope you’re making them pay. They blew up everything. My house, the cave, everything. Except the three artifacts I had uncovered. Those I moved into a pit in the jungle for safe keeping.”

Cossette grinned at her friend. “Good thinking. But does this mean that you won’t have dinner ready for us?”

“Afraid not.” Looking over he shook his head, “It looks like this dig is over. Need another hand over here?”

“I think we could find you a berth.”

“I should be able to catch dinner before too long.”

Cossette replied, “We do have supplies, I could cook something for us.”

“I’d eat hard tack and cheese before I’d let you feed me any of that slop you call food.”

An Inauspicious Start

By Dana DeVries and Vicki Kirchhoff-Martin

Cossette leaned back in her chair against the wall of her cabin and rubbed one hand across her eyes. “Are you certain, Brennan?”

The thin quartermaster across from her looked back with an insulted expression on his face.

“Captain, I’ve been collecting maps for close to fifteen years. I know the various cartographer’s better than you know your family, and I’ve never heard of any of these.” He gestured towards the maps covering Cossette’s desk. “I also know that they don’t match the maps of the cartographers I have heard of: Gustofson, Smythe, Reginald - none of them match the islands or the details that your maps do; Smythe shows a deserted island with good water right here, where your map shows a reef and a whirlpool.”

“But when I asked the Society for the most up to date maps, these are the ones they gave me!” Cossette shook her auburn hair back from her eyes and stared at the elaborately inked sheet of vellum before her. She pushed back from the desk, stalked across the room and opened one of the cabinets that lined every inch of the wall. Inside was a cluttered assortment of tools, supplies and artifacts. She took out a magnifying glass that spanned almost six inches and returned to the desk.

Bending over the desk beside Brennan, she peered at the map closely. Brennan backed up a pace to give her room and found his gaze drawn to where her vest-dress rode above her pantaloons clad legs. He stared for a moment until he noticed her looking over her shoulder at him. Turning beet red, he started to stammer out an apology.

“Just look at the map, Brennan. See those broad quill strokes, the salt stains. This doesn’t look like a forgery.”

“Just means someone took the time to make a good forgery.”

“You’re right, but why?” the Explorer captain considered for a moment and then pointed at one of the island. “Tell you what, we’ll stop here for water. Your maps show there’s

another island within sight and the Society's doesn't. If the island is there, we'll do without the Society's map. Alright?"

A high pitched scream cut across their discussion. Cossette was out the door while the echoes still hung in the air and Brennan followed a heartbeat later. A wild-eyed sailor stumbled out of the third storage hold and slammed it shut behind him. Cossette was on him instantly. "Riley, what is it? Who's still in there?"

"B-b-bugs!" Cossette looked puzzled as Brennan pounded up the stairs and slammed a lever closed on deck. "Me and J-J-John was getting a c-c-cask of b- b-biscuits for Gus. J-J-John d-d-dropped it and as we was p-p-picking 'em up, some sorta b-b-bug b-b-bit him. He screamed and f-f-fell to the d-d-deck in 'vulsions!" Brennan waved several crewmen away, came down the stairs and shut the hatch.

Cossette asked, "Was anyone else in there?"

"N-n-no. J-j-just us."

Cossette helped Riley to his feet and drew him towards her cabin. "What did this bug look like?"

"B-b-big as my fist. G-g-green and b-b-black."

Looking over her shoulder at Brennan, Cossette mouthed the words, "Ten second scarab?"

Brennan nodded and grabbed a bundle from one of the cupboards before going back into the hall.

Cossette settled the sailor down with a bottle of "medicinal rum" and came back to the hallway where Brennan was putting a pair of thick leather chaps on over his pants. Thick leather boots and gloves followed.

In response to her unvoiced question he replied, "That hold has been tarred so often, it should hold them, especially since I've never heard of them boring through wood. I closed the shutters up top, so they can't get out the windows. But we need those supplies, so someone has to go in there and kill the scarabs, and quietly, or we'll have a panic on our hands."

"Riley'll keep quiet for a while with a few drinks in him. Question is, how many are inside and where did they come from?"

"The Explorer Society provided most of our supplies. Those biscuits must have come from the Thalusian Isles."

"Never heard of a bakery out there." Cossette shook her head. "Bad maps, infested food. Not an auspicious start to our voyage of discovery."

"We'll deal with that later. For now, open the door slowly and I'll go in." "Just be quick about it. I don't want to leave the door open longer than I have to." A horrible thought crossed her face. "You're certain they can't just crawl under the sill?"

"Positive. I had the door made slightly too large. It will always stick, but it's almost air tight."

Nodding, Cossette shouldered the door open and Brennan stepped inside. He quickly scanned the room, the stacks of casks and crates, the shuttered windows, the broken barrel of biscuits, the man on the ground. No sign of a scarab in the flickering light of the lantern by the body. As the door closed behind him, he turned around and came face to face with the captain.

"Cossette! What are you doing in here? You'll be killed."

"My boots are at least as thick as yours and far more stylish." The quartermaster opened his mouth to speak, but she beat him to it. "It's my ship. No arguments. Let's find the scarabs and deal with them."

With a sigh, he squatted down beside the body and carefully examined it with his leather clad hands. John's muscles had all stiffened in death, his back arched and fists clenched. A red swelling stood out angrily on his right hand while the rest of his skin had gone pale. His face, which so often held an expression of relaxed enjoyment, was a mask of pain and terror.

Brennan commented to the room, "It was a scarab all right. I've never seen one, but I've read the accounts of the first expeditions to the Thalusians."

He drew a short thick bladed knife and began poking through the cask, looking for any sign of the creatures. "Nothing here."

Cossette's reponse froze him in his tracks, "Don't move."



He heard her footsteps coming closer. Straining all of his senses, he felt the feathery touch of legs slowly climbing across the fabric on the back of his shirt. Sweat beaded upon his brow and every muscle ached as he felt the thing's legs rasping against his wool shirt. He almost shrieked when he felt the flat of a cold metal blade press against his neck. Then the scarab's legs reached the collar of his shirt. Suddenly the blade and the scarab were both gone. He turned to see Cossette twirl the blade in her hand and stab down into the dull black creature, pinning it to the deck.

Brennan pulled the leather glove off his hand and drew out a handkerchief. Dabbing it lightly across his face, he whispered, "Thank you."

Cossette shook her head, "You're in here risking your life for my ship. No need for thanks."

She pulled her knife free but before she could clean it on her pants, he tossed her his handkerchief. She flashed a quick smile of understanding and cleaned off the blade.

Brennan nodded and spoke in a stronger voice. "Riley said it was green and black. That means there's another one in here. Let's check out the rest of the room. And Cossette -"

"Yes?"

"Thank you all the same."

The captain smiled. The two Explorers scanned the room again. Boxes and casks filled the entire room except for narrow aisles and an open space near the door where the body lay. The lantern lit up the open space and the aisles, but left deep shadows behind every stack of supplies.

The Explorer quartermaster reached out and grabbed a cask off of the first stack. He jabbed his knife into the barrel top and pried it off with a quick twist of his wrist. The thick smoky aroma of jerky came from the barrel and Brennan stabbed his knife into it. He pushed aside the jerky, looking for anything inside it. After a moment, he put the cask back on the ground and tapped the lid back into place.

After carefully examining it, Cossette reached out and rolled the next barrel into the cleared space. She dropped it next to the cask and levered it open with Brennan's knife. The

barrel was filled with water, but she wrinkled up her nose. "Brennan. When we stop for water, make sure we clean out this barrel. Some idiot used a barrel that had held lantern oil for drinking water."

"This is beginning to appear to be a bit more than coincidence. I think we're going to need to go through all of our supplies and see what other surprises we can discover." As he reached out for the next crate, he felt something touch him on the arm. He dropped the crate and whirled around wide-eyed while trying to draw his knife.

Cossette stood before him with her hand out. "Calm down, Brennan. I was just going to suggest that I help with that box." Peering into the shadows, Cossette continued, "Going through all of these supplies is going to take quite a while and with those windows closed, it's going to get stuffy in here pretty quick."

Brennan took a deep breath and then resheathed his knife. "You should get a few more crewman down here."

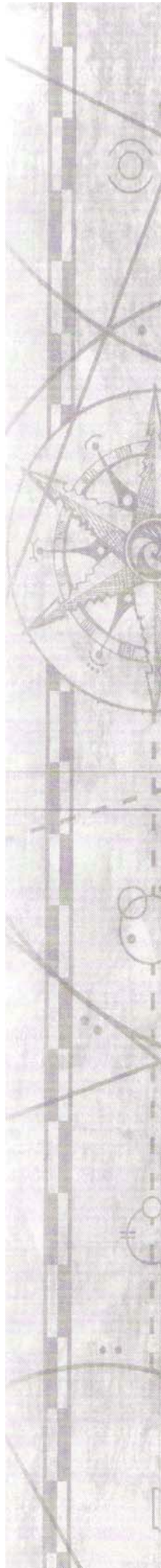
"Agreed. I'll be back in just a moment." She stepped towards the door, grabbed the doorknob and pulled without effect. "I always thought this door was a pain, now I'm glad it's so hard to get through."

She pulled again without effect. Grabbing it with both hands, she pulled back strongly and the door popped open. She wasn't quite ready and toppled backwards onto the deck. As she sat up, she saw a black and green scarab scuttle from one of the shadows towards the open doorway.

Cossette shouted out. Brennan turned and took two steps towards the insect only to trip over the captain as she lumbered to her feet. The two fell to the deck again and watched in horror as the scarab crawled through the door and into the hallway. Let loose on the boat, it would take days to find it and with a cost measured in human lives.

Before they could move, someone stepped into the doorway and crushed the scarab beneath his bare foot. The warning died on Cossette's lips as she saw Jacob Faust's scarred face turn towards them.

"You should be careful. Those bugs can be nasty." All traces of emotion had drained from his voice leaving him sounding



hollow.

Brennan snapped back, “Nasty? If that thing had stung you, you’d be dead by now.”

Faust raised an eyebrow and replied, “It did sting me.” He simply stared at the two of them as the seconds ticked away until Cossette shook her head slightly. “Alright. Hopefully that was the last of them, but let’s be sure. Jacob, get in here. The two of you keep sorting through these boxes. I’ll get Sanderson and Julietta down here. Between the five of us, this shouldn’t take too long.”

Faust nodded. His voice sounded distant and unemotional. “Then comes the tricky part. Convincing the men to continue west after we lay our first man to rest.”

The Explorer’s Dilemma

By Dana DeVries and Vicki Kirchhoff-Martin

The salt air swept across the deck of the *Redeemer* as Captain Cossette spoke in quiet tones with the ship’s quartermaster. The shriek of a *porté* portal ripping open attracted no more attention than the bosun shouting orders to the topmen. But when another portal opened seconds later, Cossette and half of the crew turned towards the bow. The ship’s *porté* mage stood upon the deck while the portal beside him ripped open even larger and two men emerged.

Cossette frowned and called down to the new arrivals. “Felix, brought home a few guests?”

“Aye, Abbotsford wanted to speak to you privately.”

“Well, he can sluice off the portal blood and meet me at my cabin.” Turning back to the quartermaster, she smiled. “Can we finish going over the supplies later.” She phrased it as a question, but the tone of her voice left no question that this interview was over.

Cossette slid down the ladder to the main deck and descended down to her small cabin. Cabinets and cupboards took up every inch of wall space and held myriad equipment for almost any situation. Reaching into one, she withdrew a bottle of wine and two glasses. Turning back to the cramped

table, she heard the door open without warning. Standing in the doorway was Warren Abbotsford. His hair, clothes, and the beginnings of a beard were all still wet with the otherworldly blood of the portal and his face was in a scowl rather than his typical wicked grin. The large bore pistol in his hands pointed straight at her.

She nodded pleasantly and motioned with her head towards the other chair as she sat down, “Hello, Warren. What brings the *Heaven’s Gate*’s captain to my command?”

“Why, Cossette, why? With the Barrier dropped there are no limits to what we can find out West now, why sabotage the other Explorer ships?” Warren took two steps into the room staring into her face with narrowed eyes.

“I don’t know what you are talking about. Would you like a glass of wine?” Her voice was curious and unconcerned.

“Twelve ships. The Explorers commissioned twelve ships to sail west beyond the Barrier. Of those twelve, only one has reported back ‘No Problems.’ Only one: you.”

“Is that so?” Cossette put the two wine glasses down and began wrenching out the cork of the wine bottle. “Why don’t we sit down like civilized people and talk about this, rather than pointing guns at each other. I don’t think either of us will benefit if Maggie has to blow your brains out.”

Warren turned to point his pistol at the door he’d left open and discovered the passageway empty. He dove forward and whirled around. Before he could bring his gun to bear, Cossette had smashed it aside with the wine bottle in her hand. The pistol shot smashed into one of the cabinets as the bottle shattered. Warren’s hand dropped to his sword only to find the smashed wine bottle held at his throat.

“Really. I mean it. Let’s sit down and talk this over. The fact that I haven’t reported trouble doesn’t mean I haven’t experienced any.”

Keeping his eyes on her, Warren grunted and sat down when she lowered her improvised weapon. Cossette tossed the bottle aside and grabbed another one out of the cabinet. Several crewmen appeared in the doorway, but Cossette just smiled.



"It's alright, but Faust, if you could come in here a moment?"

The tall, scarred man shooed the others away, closed the door and leaned up against it with all of the subtlety of an oak tree.

"Now what are you talking about? What happened to the other ships?"

"Gone. Lost. Destroyed."

"How? We took separate routes to ensure that nothing could ensnare all of us. What could get all of the ships?"

Abbotsford sighed, "We don't know. All of the ships were reporting problems. Sabotage, ruined provisions, bad luck, you name it. Remember that black bearded thug of a captain they hired to bring Caranolo and his linguist specialists? Looks like he went out about two days, cut most of their throats, joined up with another ship and they ambushed the *Sister Luck* within sight of land. Smythe's ship floundered on a reef that wasn't on his maps. Kurtz's men were stranded on a small island when something put a hole in his hull large enough to drop a cannon through. Some sort of explosion in the Phalanx's powder room reduced it to splinters; only a handful survived. The *Wind Dancer* had to turn around when they discovered all their drinking water had turned to vinegar. As for me, all of my cordage turned out to be... changed. Don't know what the hell happened to it. It seems fine until it gets really soaked, then the damned stuff shrinks. Ripped my mainsail to pieces in the first big blow."

For a moment, Cossette just stared at him blankly. "All of them?" Her voice was suddenly very small.

Warren scowled again, "Damn near. My ship. Yours. Flanagan hasn't reported in, but he must be pretty far off course. He was spotted south of Castille."

"Where exactly?"

"No. You said you'd run into problems. Like what? And why should I believe you?"

Cossette gestured towards Faust, "You tell him."

"Maps that were completely wrong, showed safe waters at every reef between Avalon and the Midnight Archipelago.

Two casks of infested biscuits."

Warren waved his hand contemptuously, "Bugs? Biscuits always have a few bugs."

Faust's voice was flat, "Ten second scarabs"

"Scarabs? Then it's true. No one has access to the Thalussian Isles except Explorers. One of us is doing this!"

Cossette nodded. "That was my reasoning, and if he knows we suspect that, he's got to stop us from telling anyone. That's why I didn't report our troubles. I didn't want to give him any reason to think I was onto him."

Warren's eyes went wide at the thought, "But who is it?"

"I suspected you. But even you aren't wicked enough to do all of this just to be the first Explorer to cross the Barrier." She shrugged. "Could be almost anyone. Just about the entire Explorer Society was involved in outfitting these expeditions. But this seems so well planned, that it must be someone fairly high ranking and closely involved with the expedition. Maybe one of the captains. Maybe he didn't want any competition for the fame and glory."

"But they've all turned back."

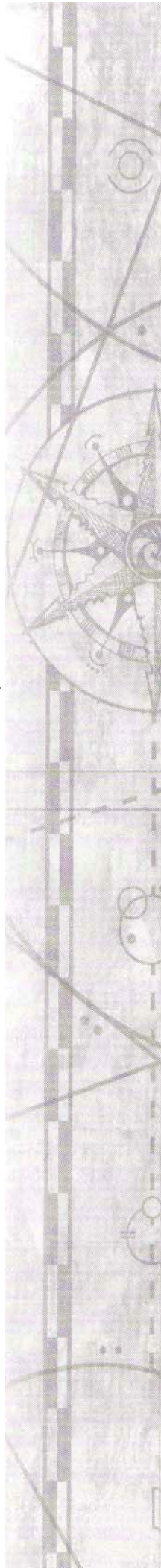
"All of them? What about Flanagan? You said he was off course, but he's far too persistent to be turned aside that easily."

Abbotsford looked around aimlessly until Cossette opened up another cabinet and pulled out a set of maps. At his suspicious look, she smiled. "Don't worry. These came from my quartermaster Brennan. They seem to be perfectly accurate."

The Explorer captain nodded and shuffled through the maps for a moment before pointing to a spot off the southern coast of Castille. "He was seen here. Heading east by south east."

"That doesn't make any sense. The only reason to go that far south is to try to avoid drawing attention to yourself."

"Exactly. His *porté* mage reported in the first day and then couldn't report back. His blooded object had been destroyed."



“Interesting, but there’s nothing much to be learned from that. What’s your position?”

Abbotsford shuffled through the papers again and indicated a small tropical island in the Midnight Archipelago. “Here. We stopped to take on water, and I decided to check back with the *porté* messenger to find the progress of the others.”

Cossette nodded and pointed to another spot on the map, “We’re here. I make it about a week’s sail south east of you. So should we meet or continue west?”

“West I think. Nothing personal, but I’m not sure how far to trust you.”

“I can understand that feeling. We’ve never exactly been friends.”

“No. But at this point, I’m beginning to think ‘Any port in a storm looks good.’”

“So now I’m a whole harbour? Thanks.”

The two captains exchanged the wild grins of those who dare to go where others do not.

“My *porté* mage brought one of your mage’s blooded objects over, right?” He nodded, and she continued, “All right. So we can keep in contact if we discover anything. And keep your eyes open. You’re only a few days from the Barrier and that’s when we can expect the really exciting part to begin.”

The two stood. Warren Abbotsford stared in Cossette’s eyes for a moment. “I have no reason to trust you, but you’re the only support I can reasonably expect should something go wrong out here, so like it or not, I guess we’re in this together.”

Cossette nodded and reached out a hand to him. He took it, but rather than a simple handshake, he raised it to his lips and placed a single kiss upon it. Something fierce and dark danced in his eyes for a moment and Cossette sharply inhaled. Then the moment passed. He nodded to her and brushed past Faust without seeming to notice on his way out of the cabin.

Faust stared after him for a moment darkly. Turning back to his captain, he asked, “Do you trust him?”

“No. That’s why we’re three days past where I claimed to be.”

He nodded thoughtfully. “What was that last bit all about?”

“I’m not sure. But I’m starting to get the feeling that there’s more to all of this than just a little sabotage. And what’s Flanagan up to? He was one of the most enthusiastic about heading West.”

For a moment, Cossette stared at the sprawl of maps upon her table and shrugged in frustration. She put the unopened bottle of wine back in the cupboard with the glasses and went back up on deck in time to see Warren and his *porté* mage enter the bloody portal.

A Chance Meeting

By Dana DeVries and Vicki Kirchhoff-Martin

Captain Cossette stared into the dense jungles before her. At her back, Brennen and Jacob Faust helped Ben Richards pull the launch up onto the sandy shore. Strange insects serenaded her and birds called from deeper inland but nothing threatened her party. She nodded slowly, turned around and waved one arm into the air at her ship, the *Discovery*. Two flashes from a mirror told her they had seen the signal and would wait for her. Her men fell in around her and the small party approached the mouth of the small river that penetrated the interior of the island.

Brennan and Jacob began speaking quiet tones behind them so Ben turned to Cossette and staggered slightly. He was a tall, thin Avalon with deeply tanned skin and hair so pale it was almost white. Despite the breeze off of the ocean, he had already broken into a sweat. Despite that, his face appeared youthful with a gleam of mischief. She looked at him with concern and asked, “Are you alright?”

“Sure, I’m fine. I’m just not used to being on solid ground. It doesn’t roll right. I’ll be fine in a few minutes.”

“I’ve heard some of the older sailors complain about that. How long have you been at sea?”

As they continued on, the trees pressing in around them cut



off the light until they were striding through dusk. Cut off from the shore, the temperature quickly rose until they all felt slightly lightheaded.

“Almost 30 years. I started out as a cabin boy in the merchant trade. When Elaine offered to make anyone a privateer, I jumped at the chance. Been sailing with the Sea Dogs ever since.”

Cossette wondered silently for a moment as they continued down the path away from the river towards the island’s village, then she asked, “If you’ve sailed with them that long, why sign on with us?”

Before Ben could respond a high-pitched scream echoed through the dense trees around them. He looked around quickly, scanning the thick boles and dark bushes, but saw nothing.

Cossette smiled, “It’s a Kobar bird: loud, but no bigger than your hand; no threat at all.”

“That’s why I joined the Explorers. With the Sea Dogs, I’ve been to every corner around Theah. I’ve seen Numan ruins, Castillian ports, Ussuran coves, and Montaigne ladies. But I’ve never been west. I wanted to see what was there, the mysteries of the Midnight Archipelago and everything else out here.”

Cossette grinned broadly. “Well, you’re in luck. We’re sure to find something extraordinary out this far. I can’t wait to see it either. Of course, first we have to get past all these islands we’ve already visited. But I doubt you’ve seen anything like the villagers here. They’re really quite peaceful and generous. A handful of trinkets was enough to fully supply our ship the last night I was here. And the women are something to behold. Their ears are almost as large as the rest of their head with an enormous hole in the lobe. It’s big enough that you could easily put your hand right through the center of it. Just don’t say anything about them being pretty.”

“Why?”

“If you admire a man’s unmarried daughter, he will often insist that you marry her on the spot. That’s how generous they...”

Without warning, a spear pierced the tree next to them. The four Explorers looked at it for an instant and then leaped into the undergrowth, looking for cover as another six spears flashed through the dim light and into the soil where they had been standing.

Ben stage-whispered over to Cossette, “I thought you said they were friendly.”

She replied in a normal tone, “They usually are.”

A half dozen spears immediately arched through the air towards her voice. As they flew into the thicket of bushes she hid within, a high pitched scream echoed through the jungle. As the last spear hit, she rolled out of the bushes and came to her feet running. Yelling at the top of her lungs, she charged towards the area from which the spears had come. Brennan and Jacob Faust fired pistols ahead of her while Ben Richards raced after her. The spearmen dropped to the ground at the firearms’ report and Cossette leapt into the middle of the spearmen before they could recover. She and Ben Richards easily kept the natives cowering while Brennan and Jacob grabbed vines and joined them. The natives were quickly trussed up and the Explorers turned to Cossette to examine her injuries.

Jacob was the first to ask, “Are you alright?”

“Yes. I’m fine. It’s not blood.” Cossette replied as she looked at her arms. Thick orange fluid and white feathers covered her arms, hair and shirt. Despite the seriousness of the situation, none of them could keep grins off their faces. Ben was the one to ask, “What is that stuff?”

The captain’s response was filled with disgust. “One of the spears broke open some sort of fruit above me and this... juice fell on me.” Cossette tried to wipe it off, but the sticky substance refused to come off. “Just find out why they attacked us, Jacob. I’ll be right back.”

Jacob Faust knelt beside one of the natives and uttered a phrase with more guttural stops than vowels. The bound man shook his head and responded in the same language. While they spoke, Cossette stalked off through the jungle towards the river. When Ben and Brennan moved to follow, she waved them back.



"I'm going to scrub this off, boys. I don't need any company."

Brennan nodded while Ben seemed torn between blushing and leering.

The Explorer captain easily pushed through the underbrush, slapping at mosquitoes for several hundred yards until she came to the river. Slow water swirled by muddily while a cloud of tiny gnats swarmed above. They quickly approached her, but the sickly sweet smell that clung to her drove them off. Dipping her hands into the water, she rubbed them strongly together until the orange gunk and feathers began to come off. Cossette smiled and quickly shed her shirt. A long low whistle came from across the river. She looked up in alarm and saw a tall blonde man with a beard and dressed in tailored silk and leather watching her with appreciation. In the blink of an eye, she covered her chest with the juice-stained shirt, but he had already leapt into the river, landing lightly on a jutting rock. The man's balance was superb as he hopped from rock to rock across the river.

When he stood beside her, he swept into a deep bow. "Good afternoon, my lady. Allow me to introduce myself..."

"No need, good sir. Every woman has heard of the infamous Jeremiah Berek: privateer, adventurer and all around good for nothing."

Berek drew back at her light hearted comment. "I've heard of you as well. Captain Cossette, leader of the Explorers heading West. Good for nothing? Surely you must have heard wrong. Many a fine lady has availed herself of my...talents."

In a formal voice with laughter lurking in her eyes, Cossette replied, "Luckily I am no lady and thus have no need of your talents, sir."

Berek mused, "But your beauty is that of the most precious flower. I just wish to tend you. Especially since you have the appearance of a flightless bird with all those feathers about you. I've always had a soft spot for birds."

"Flowers and birds? I had no idea you were interested in discuss flora and fauna."

Berek suddenly went rigid as he stared past her, "I'm very

interested in fauna right now. Rather large, hairy hostile fauna."

Cossette glanced over her shoulder and caught a glimpse of something large and furry charging straight towards her. Before she could do anything about it, Berek collided with her and the two tumbled into the river with a loud splash. The river was almost up to her armpits and pleasantly warm, but Cossette came up spluttering. Turning back to the shore, she saw a boar roaring at the edge of the water.

Berek quietly remarked, "I don't suppose you have a firearm?"

"Yes. I do. On my belt."

Berek glanced down into the water and grimaced. "Well, wait right here."

"I'm not one of your helpless damsels in distress."

"Certainly not. Of course, there goes your shirt." Berek pointed downstream at the shirt disappearing around the bend.

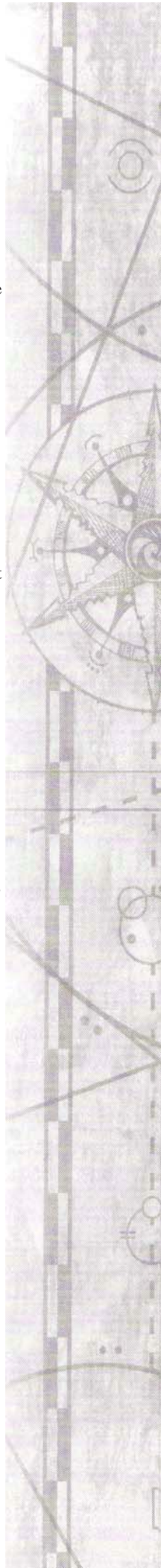
Cossette took a breath and smiled, "It won't bother me." Now it was Berek who sputtered for a moment until the boar roared again. Its tusks swung side to side as it peered towards them with beady red eyes. "We could just wait. My men will probably come to rescue me soon."

"I thought you didn't need any rescuing?"

"It's at least a plan. Do you have one?"

"Certainly." Berek drew out a bulky sheathed pistol from beneath the water. He unsealed the flap and drew out the dry pistol from within. "Dry powder is too useful to leave to chance -" A grappling hook protruded from the pistol's bore. "-but it's not really very good against boars."

Cossette gestured imperiously for the pistol and Berek handed it over with an amused look on his face. She looked the grappling hook over carefully and the area over carefully, calculating angles and trajectories. Finally, with a grin, she raised the pistol straight up and fired. The hook flew up into the air, far past the branch, before slowing and plunging back towards the ground. She followed the hook with her eyes



as it plummeted until it struck the boar in the small of the back. The creature roared again and twirled around, looking for what had attacked it. Seeing nothing except the rope, it launched itself at the rope, trying to stab it with its tusks.

Cossette turned to Berek and stated, "That should take care of it."

He nodded in agreement.

"So what brings you out this way?"

He grinned. "The usual. Plundering the enemies of Avalon and making sure that our wondrous queen gets her share of the booty."

The two captains watched with interest as the thing swung its tusks at the hanging rope. The rope gave no resistance, simply looping around the tusk.

"Found anyone to pillage yet?"

"Now, now. First you plunder, then you pillage. If you get the order wrong, everything falls apart in chaos."

"I see."

"We have found one or two small fry. Still looking for a really plump chicken to pluck."

"Again with the bird references. I think you're obsessing. Do you prefer white or dark meat?"

"I prefer white meat, always been a breast man."

Within moments, the boar had tangled itself upon the grappling hook. As one, the two captains took a hold of the grappling gun's line and pull it back to the far side of the river. The rope didn't even strain as it lifted the boar off the ground. They tied the rope to a tree and then crossed the river again, skirting the area the boar still struggled in.

"Cossette?" Brennan's call wasn't loud, but it was coming fairly close.

"Those would be my men." Looking down, Cossette realized that most of the juice had come off in her repeated dunkings in the water, but she was still naked from the waist up.

Before she could say anything more, Berek drew his own silk shirt over his head and handed it to her. She opened her mouth to thank him and he crushed her to him. Cossette breasts pressed up against his bare wet chest and something seemed to ignite in her chest. His lips hungrily sought hers and he passionately kissed her.

As he broke away, he whispered, "We will meet again, little bird." Then he dove into the river and disappeared into the jungle on the far side.

When Brennan appeared several minutes later, Berek was gone and his shirt hung somewhat loosely around Cossette.

The Explorer quartermaster called over his shoulder, "She's here."

Jacob Faust and Ben Richards appeared after another moment. "Captain, you're alright? I'm glad we found you. Those natives said that someone had warned them about our arrival. Told them all kinds of fantastic stories about how we ate human flesh and were looking for slaves. Seems you were the worst offender. When they saw you coming down the path, it spooked them enough to make them ambush us."

Cossette sharply asked, "Who warned them?"

"They didn't know his name. Just said he was a tall blonde man with a beard."

Cossette shook her head harshly and began to swear under her breath. Her cheek still stung slightly from the touch of Berek's whiskers.

Ben quietly asked, "That shirt. It's monogrammed with Berek's initials. It wasn't him, was it?"

"Yes. It was." Cossette's voice was icy. "Where does your loyalty lie, Richards?"

"With my captain: you."

"Alright. If he's turned the village against us, we're not going to get any supplies here. Let's get out of here. And if we see Berek again...well, we'll deal with him appropriately."



Interludes of the Heart

By Dana DeVries and Vicki Kirchhoff-Martin

The door to the captain's cabin slowly creaked open, and Annie Rush slipped inside with the last light of the day. The cabin was comfortable and held mementoes of the captain's many adventures, dimly visible in the dusky cabin. A Castillian ambassador's sombrero and a Montaigne puzzle sword rested upon an end table, a map stand held dozens of charts from across Theah, an ornamental dagger pinned a lace handkerchief to the wall. While snoring slightly, Jeremiah Berek himself slumped in an oak chair before his desk. His clothing was rumpled and he held a letter crumpled in his hand.

Annie shook her head slightly and stared down at him with a look of longing. She reached down, gently stroked his cheek and then brushed a lock of his hair away from his eyes. Then she reached out and gently shook his shoulder. With a jerk, Jeremiah sat upright and stared about him.

"Sorry, sir. You asked to be informed when the Explorers had stopped."

"Yes. Thanks, Annie."

The woman peered intently into Berek's face. "Are you alright? You haven't slept well in a week, ever since you ran into the Explorers."

"I'm fine. I just find myself with a conflict of interest." At her puzzled look, he elaborated, "I'm trailing behind an Explorer ship with the sole purpose of stealing what they find before they know what they've got. But now I'm hoping they don't find it so I won't have to take it from her."

"Her?" Annie's voice held a touch of heat, but Berek didn't notice.

"Cossette. I've met women like her before. Strong, confident, beautiful. But they never affected me this way." Berek stood and stared out the bay windows at the rear of the cabin. Outside the grey waves were tipped with the brilliant red of the setting sun. "She was sure of herself, but didn't mind when I acted first."

Berek turned and saw the grim expression on Annie's face. He reached out and raised her chin until their eyes met.

Annie grimaced. "I really wish you would talk of me that way."

A smile played across his lips and Berek's tone was light. "Who said I don't?"

Her voice was clear and angry. "Don't play game with me, Berek. You don't talk about anyone the way you talk about her. And you've only seen her for a few minutes."

The smile faded. "I'm sorry, Annie."

Annie smiled ruefully. "It's alright. You can't change your heart anymore than I can." She straightened up and crisply stated, "The Explorers stopped an hour again, sir. We should be in sight of them within another hour."

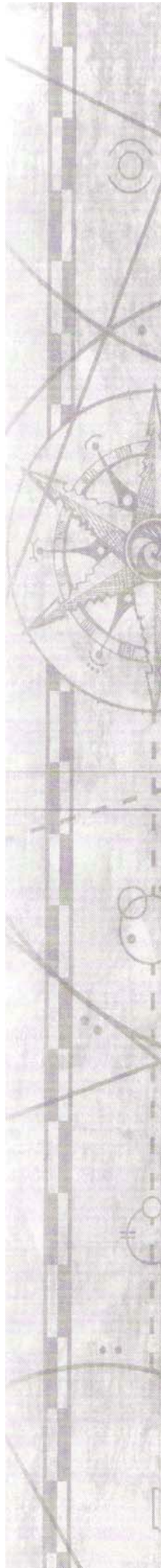
Berek did his best to stare into her eyes, though he found his gaze dropping lower. "Alright. How far past the barrier are we?"

She thought for a moment and replied, "Almost sixteen leagues and we haven't spotted any land yet, sir."

Berek nodded and found himself staring straight into her bosom before jerking his gaze back up. "Well, the Explorers didn't stop for tea, let's go in under cover of darkness. They may have found the fountain already."

Annie made a show of saluting properly. "Aye, aye, sir." Then she turned and left the cabin quietly, leaving Berek to his thoughts as the waves faded into darkness.

As dusk spread across the island, a leaping bonfire lit up the shoreline and Explorers slowly fanned out. Some gathered firewood while others kept their hands near weapons, ready to act. The center of the island was invisible behind a screen of trees that were neither oak nor pine. These trees were tall and slender without branches beneath their upper reaches where broad jagged leaves and enormous round objects popped out of the trunk like a snake leaping from its den. Beneath the trees by the light of a lantern, two scholars examined a rock outcropping that thrust up fifteen feet into



the air. The rock showed a figure reclining upon a stone, but time and the elements had weathered the figure until no details could be seen. Several men disappeared into the deepening shadows beside the statue. The bonfire roared on either side of two longboats pulled up on shore. Jacob Faust stood beside the fire and slowly scanned the edge of the trees for any sign of trouble.

Further out, the Discovery slowly rocked in the waves of the surf. Two lookouts stood in the crow's nest. One scanning the island and the other keeping an eye on the waves. The second lookout nodded, pointed out to sea and spoke briefly to the man behind him. Seconds later, the second lookout leapt for a line and lowered himself to the deck.

Captain Cossette stood in the prow of the boat staring at the shore party, intent for any sign of trouble, then returned her attention to the dagger in her hand. "It's a nice piece, Sean." The dagger's blade was eight inches of Eisen steel and sharpened enough to hold an edge without chipping. The handle was curved and polished bone and held a single walnut-sized topaz. Within the gem a gleam seemed to hide. "This bone isn't from any animal I've ever seen, but it appears similar to those we've found buried in the sewers of Montaigne. As for this glow..." The Explorer tilted the blade and the gleam strengthened. When she pointed the blade to the west, parallel to the ground, the gem glowed brightly through the dusky gloom. "You said that it's not directly west?"

Sean Garloise shook his head. The Avalon sailor smiled, "No. I thought it might and tried to use it for navigation my first few watches. Seemed to work fine first night, but the second it was off by at least ten degrees. It seems to vary by fifteen degrees to either side of true west."

"Too bad. I'm really not sure. Perhaps its pointing to something in the west? Or maybe back to something in Theah. Keep an eye on it, if it starts to deviate from a generally Western direction, you'll be getting closer to whatever it is and we can go investigate it."

Cossette handed the weapon back to him and her right hand dropped to the butt of a grappling gun that hung at her belt. "Probably nothing much. But we needed the water so it seemed like a good place to stop. Probably stay here for a day and then put back out." Her hand slowly stroked the

gun's butt as she turned back to the island.

Sean frowned for a moment and then cleared his throat. "Um... Captain. I know it's none of my business, but I keep this dagger at my side because it was a gift from a friend whom I respect greatly. Why do you still carry his grappling gun?"

Cossette dropped her hand to her side and opened her mouth silently for a moment and then licked her lips for a moment.

Sean stepped closer and said, "He's quite a man, isn't he?"

"Yes, he is. But he's also the man who turned the natives upon us. He even admitted to being out here looking to rob anyone who finds anything of value. I won't allow anyone to prey upon us and just get away with it. He'll pay for his arrogance."

Sean nodded and quietly asked, "Are you trying to convince me or yourself?"

Cossette glared at him for a minute while he looked back calmly. Then she began to chuckle. "I'm not sure. If I succeed in convincing you, let me know, alright?"

"Aye, captain."

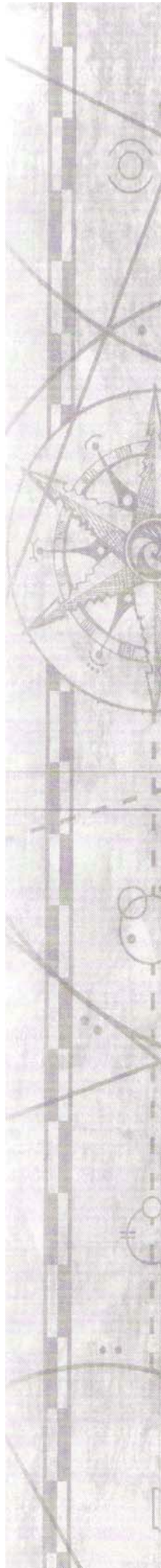
Cossette nodded with a rueful grin as the second lookouts stepped up to her side and whispered to her for a moment. She gave him a few quiet orders and then stood up.

As the lookout climbed back towards the crow's nest, she called out to the crew, "Explorers! We've got a visitor coming. We don't know who they are yet, but let's be ready to give them a warm welcome."

The crew grinned grimly and sprang into action. Gunner crews prepared their weapons, the master gunners went below for the special ammunition, cabin boys lit lanterns, the signalman advised the shore party, and the riggers adjusted the lines to be ready at a moment's notice. Cossette nodded in satisfaction.

Turning towards the darkening south east, she whispered fiercely, "Whoever you, we're ready this time."

The hours passed swiftly as the men on shore and on the



Discovery readied themselves. Just as Cossette prepared to raise anchor and go in search of the mysterious ship that had disappeared with nightfall, a cannon fired and a green explosion lit up the night sky. Immediately afterwards, several lanterns were lit and Cossette raised a spyglass to peer at the small spark of light beneath the star filled sky.

With a puzzled look, she called out to her men. "Stand down, men. It's one of ours. That's Abbotsford."

A babble broke out among her men until she called out again. "I don't know what he's doing here either. Just keep the powder dry a little longer. Let's see what's going on."

Turning to the starboard gunner she ordered him, "Load up a cannon with the signal powder and fire it off please."

After that she fell silent while the other Explorer vessel slowly came closer. Minutes later, the starboard gunner fired off his cannon and the shot arched high into the air before bursting in a blaze of blue light. As the light faded, one of the skiffs bumped up against the boat and Jacob Faust quickly climbed the rope ladder.

Cossette met him at the deck and quietly asked, "What's so urgent you've abandoned your position, Jacob?"

"I saw the flash. That was Abbotsford's signal. Do you want us to prepare the mortars on shore to fire on him?"

Cossette frowned at the hostility in his voice. "Let's see what he wants first. Probably not."

"Too bad. We'll probably have to share credit with him." Jacob frowned in mock irritation.

"Credit for what?"

Faust smiled widely. "One of the shore parties found something. Something large. I think it's a remnants of a building and it looks like it's built to the same dimensions as the buildings on Syrne."

Catching some of his excitement, the captain asked him, "Is this one in better shape?"

"Worse. It almost looks like it was hit by an earthquake, but the surroundings don't seem damaged. But it's still sealed. Of

course, whatever happened occurred a very long time ago."

"Trees and vegetation have grown back?"

Jacob nodded.

"Syrne was where Maggie was found. Maybe she'll notice something that we missed. We'll come ashore as soon as we deal without Abbotsford."

Maggie's Secret

By Dana DeVries and Vicki Kirchhoff-Martin

The tall Avalon Explorer Jacob Faust pushed his way through the thick underbrush and stared into the dark cave before him. Darkness had brought no relief from the tropical heat and sweat covered his bald scalp and its deep scars. His thick clothing had protected his arms and legs from scratches but only increased the effect of the temperature. He glanced around at the group which had preceded him. Young Maggie Malone stood to one side with a curiously blank expression beneath her tousled red hair, obviously seeing nothing of interest here. The other redhead, Captain Cossette, stood proudly but with concern in her eyes when she saw him hesitating. The third person was watching the captain with a smug expression of triumph that instantly dropped when Cossette's gaze turned back to him. He turned to greet the newcomer and his mouth dropped open in familiar horror for a moment.

Jacob felt his own face freeze into cold disdain and heard his voice say, "That's right, Warren. You haven't really seen me since you ordered me to investigate the Isle of Thalusia."

He knew that in tense moments like this, his bald scalp grew red and the pale scars showed up even more clearly. He did not care.

Warren Abbotsford swallowed hard and then nodded. Brushing his long blonde hair back from his face, he stepped forward and extended a hand to Jacob, "No, I should have, but I didn't think you'd care to see me. I'm - I'm sorry."

Jacob ignored Warren's hand and said to Cossett, "Warren Abbotsford was the first mate on the *Intrepid* when we first



discovered the Thalusions. When we didn't return within a few hours, he ordered another landing party. They didn't even make it off the beach before the insects drove them off. Warren declared us lost and set sail for the next island, hoping to find less resistance."

Cossette nodded and quietly asked, "Where was the ship's captain?"

Abbotsford turned towards her and found his voice again, "The captain was laid low with a fever. Mr. Faust is correct. The orders were mine. I regretfully took the course that I thought was best for the mission. After the second landing party was driven off, I didn't think there were any survivors from the first party."

Jacob stepped up beside Abbotsford and hissed into his ear, "I survived. I walked out of that damned jungle with blood pouring from bites and gouges over almost every inch of my body. The scars on my scalp are just the most obvious."

Warren did not step away, so he could not turn without touching the enraged Explorer, "I had to think of the rest of the expedition. I was relieved to hear that McCormick picked you up." Shaking his head slightly, he continued. "I didn't know you were with Cossette. I'll leave."

"No," Cossette's voice was clear and sharp, "Your messenger said that Berek attacked you. Where? How did you escape?"

Abbotsford cleared his throat, "He struck us two days back east by northeast of here. He may have captured our *porte* mage back in Carleon because he has not returned for several days and when the Sea Dogs attacked, they carefully tacked around to hit us on our starboard side. The side where a storm had damaged the gun deck. The gunner did not think we would even be able to fire a single volley without the ship cracking in half. Luckily, he was wrong and they retreated after the volley, perhaps thinking that they had crippled us. I came here to join up with you, thinking that there was safety in numbers and to restock supplies. We're very low on fresh water."

Cossette frowned, "We knew there was danger out here. That's why we agreed to sail separately. So one disaster wouldn't destroy more than one ship. However, if Berek is behind the troubles we have both been having, perhaps you

are right. Perhaps it is best if we stay together."

Abbotsford shook his head, "No. I see that - I was wrong. We will leave as soon as we have resupplied. My men found a fresh spring near the shore."

Maggie and Jacob remained silent as the Cossette attempted to dissuade her fellow Captain, but he had made up his mind and quickly left. Cossette frowned prettily and turned to her head scout. "I know you don't like him, but both of our ships might have been better off together."

Jacob loudly declared, "No, Abbotsford is a snake. Teaming up with him is like putting your hand into a python's mouth and hoping it won't decide to take a bite."

Maggie shrugged, "Don't know. Seemed like a nice enough guy, but I can see why you'd be bitter about being left for dead."

The captain stood thoughtfully for a moment and then put the thought out of her mind, "Anyway, the men did find something interesting on this island. Let me show you."

The two crewmen followed her into the dark cave. A guttering lamp sat on the floor of the cave and cast a dim light over a strange block of stone, measuring two feet wide, four feet tall and eight feet long. Cossette grabbed a small twig from the ground and used to light a second lantern. Turning back, she found the other two Explorers staring about them.

Jacob was the first to speak. "I recognize the block of course. It is the same shape as the ones on the island of Syrne. And that looks familiar too."

His hand pointed towards a small black and white checkerboard hovering in the air above the block. The checkerboard resembled a Squares board, but had only four squares on each side and all 4 pieces on it were black.

Turning to Maggie, he began to ask, "Any of this help -"

The short redhead was floating several inches off the ground and staring blankly at the wall behind the large stone block.

She opened her mouth and a gravelly voice echoed out softly, "All gone. They are all gone. I am the only one left."



Cossette stepped up to the girl and reached out to touch her, but something unseen blocked her hand a few inches away. "Who is gone? What do you see?"

"See?" A humourless chuckle rattled out of the topman's throat. "You don't see, do you? Look."

Maggie's eyes glanced around the room for a moment and focused upon the cutlass at Jacob's side. Without a sound, it slid from his belt and drifted towards the block. A shudder passed through Maggie and the sword simply shattered. Each piece breaking apart until only a thick cloud of dust hung in the air above the block. As the Explorers watched, the dust gently drifted towards the blank wall and coalesced into patterns. Within seconds, glyphs and pictographs were visible across the entire wall. Then the symbols faded from sight and the dust settled to the ground.

The young top man turned back towards them and the incongruously gravelly voice emerged again, "Now do you see? Now do you understand? I am alone."

As Jacob fumbled a piece of parchment out of his pouch and quickly scrawled as much of the glyphs as he could remember, Cossette asked, "Maggie, are you still in there?"

"She is...sleeping. Two minds cannot coexist within the body. For me to speak, she must be...quieted. She will be fine."

"So you are a second...mind? Another person? Where did you come from? Why Maggie?"

"I was one of a proud race, a guardian of my people. When death came for us, I held back to face it while the others fled. However, I could not let go easily. As I lay dying, I channeled my mind into the...you would call it machinery. I bound myself into the place where I had died. And so, I waited as days turned into years and years into decades. I dreamed away centuries. Until the one you called Maggie arrived. She had landed on my island by accident and when her wandering took her to the place where I lay, I seized her. I had thought to strip her mind away and put my own within her body, but her will was too strong. I found myself trapped. Unable to leave, but unable to take control of the body. For long...moments we struggled. Then others of her kind freed her, but I could not free myself. I could only ride within her, silent and unseen, only able to exert my powers occasionally.

It takes all the strength I have marshalled for years to control her body this long. And for only one purpose. I must be freed. There is a way for the two of us to be separated."

Cossette nodded, "That's all she wants too. To be simply human again."

Maggie's body snorted. "Simply human. The means lies to the north. Perhaps five days sail. There is an island there. I can feel it. Two of your miles wide. In the centre of the island, on top of the tallest hill, lies a slab of rock. Beneath it lays a pool. The waters of the pool will free us of our torment. One sip and it will be as before. Maggie will know what direction to take. I...am slipping. Our fates are up to you."

Maggie suddenly stopped moving and then collapsed, crumpling to the ground.

Cossette dropped to her knees beside her still form and stroked her hair gently back from her face, "You can trust me, Maggie. I will find a way to free you."

Hidden from sight, outside the cave entrance, Warren Abbottsford silently nodded and grinned in satisfaction. Then he turned away and slipped into the jungle towards his ship.

After he had left, a young woman rolled from beneath the thick bush she had lain beneath for several long moments. She frowned down at several stains on her shirt and then cast a dirty glare at the brightly coloured bird that had happily nested above her hiding spot and then she disappeared into the jungle. The other ships had not yet spotted the *Black Dawn* and the Sea Dogs would need to be far out to sea before the first rays of daylight to avoid discovery.

Who Has Time For An Ambush?

By Dana DeVries and Vicki Kirchhoff-Martin

Cossette looked out at the sea. "Get your head on straight, girl," she scolded herself, "You're too old for mooning about nonsense, and the notorious Jeremiah Berek of all people. What's gotten into you?"



“Captain?”

Faust’s gruff voice startled her out of her thoughts.

“What is it?” she asked.

“Maggie spotted a ship following us so far aft that she can’t make out any details. She seems to be pacing us, not getting any closer but not dropping back. They may not even realize we’ve spotted them yet.”

Cossette grumbled, “Well, we certainly can’t complain about boredom this trip.” She straightened herself up and faced Faust. “Have Maggie drop the sails and slow us down. Let’s see if they come closer. Then make a quick round of the guns. We don’t need to load them yet, but make sure that everything is ready. The way things have been going, she’s hostile until she proves otherwise. Understood?”

“Aye, Captain,” he replied and then strode off to relay her orders to the crew.

Cossette cursed herself as she found her hand straying again to the butt of the grappling pistol she couldn’t bring herself to leave in her cabin.

“Don’t think I won’t blow you out of the water if I have to,” she said to no one in particular.

She hoped it sounded more convincing than it felt. She needed to be focused. If that ship was hostile, she was going to need her head clear. She had to deal with the threat, no matter whom or what it was. With her ship, crew and mission at stake, there could be no hesitation.

“Captain?”

Sean Garloise stood beside her with his strange knife in his hand. “You said you wanted to know if this deviated from its normal direction.”

“It has?” she asked, not sure if she was grateful for the distraction or not.

He nodded. “Aye. Just after we left that island back there, it began to drift and now it’s pointing south.”

He handed it to her, and she moved it around until the gem in

the handle began shimmering with an emerald glow.

“South? That doesn’t make any sense. When exactly did you notice the change?”

“A couple hours after we were under way,” he replied

She tapped the glowing hilt in her palm, “I wonder…”

She glanced up and noticed the quartermaster on deck. “Brennan, did you take a sighting recently?” At his nod, she said, “Come with me. You too, Sean.”

Brennan gave her a curious glance and she replied, “We’ve got an unknown ship behind us. May be Berek, Abbotsford or Theus knows who all else and I can’t do anything about it until it gets closer. I need something to keep me occupied and this knife seems to be just what I need.”

The two men grinned and then followed her into her cabin. She shut the door and pulled out a couple pins and the map they’d been working on ever since they’d been out of charted waters. She spread it across her table after sweeping everything else onto the floor. Garloise and Brennan exchanged looks and shrugged.

“Where would you say we are?” she asked, tapping the map.

Brennan took a careful look. “About here,” he said.

Cossette turned the map so it lined up with their current direction and then placed the knife on the map. “So, that means that whatever it is that this dagger is pointing to is in this direction.”

She glanced around her cabin to find what she was looking for. “I need string or something.”

She considered digging through the nearby piles of gear, but decided it would be easier just to yank the lacing out of her vest instead. She laid it out along the line the dagger indicated, pinning each end. “Now, we’ll keep this course and Sean, I want you to come back to me in a couple hours and we’ll try this again. I want to see whether this thing is stationary or moving. If it’s stationary, then we’ve obviously passed it by and might want to try to locate it on our way back. If it’s moving…” She looked out her cabin window hoping to catch a glimpse of their pursuer. “If it’s moving,



then we've another mystery to solve."

She glanced over at the two men to find them both staring at her. "What?" She followed their gaze and realized that parts of her were no longer contained by the opaque vest and could now be seen through the translucent silk shirt. She started to laugh. "Come on, you two, they're just bosoms. You're both old enough to have seen plenty of them by now."

Brennan turned crimson and even Garloise, seasoned sailor that he was, looked away. She was trying not to giggle at their discomfort but it was hard not to.

"All right," she said finally. "Go on back topside. I'll be up as soon as I find another tie for my vest."

She thought they were going to trip on each other on their way out the door.

The wind riffled through Cossette's hair as she stepped up on deck. The lithe form of Maggie Malone climbed down the rigging and dropped easily beside her, "Captain, that ship is definitely making headway. They must have realized we could see her and put up more sail. I can't make out her name yet, but it's a galleon wearing that ludicrous Vodacce rigging."

Cossette smiled, "I know you don't care for them, but that doesn't make them ludicrous."

The red head shook her head and grudgingly admitted. "It may give them speed, but I still say that putting thirty sails up is just asking for trouble. They're closing."

"Any colours?" Cossette asked her Master of the Tops, but Maggie shook her head again.

The captain nodded and called out to the master gunner, Gus Heimfather. The broad Vestenmanjavenar swung towards her and approached with a grim expression.

"Yes, captain?"

"Come on, Gus. Shouldn't be that bad. I think the *Discovery* is a match for any galleon sailing. "

"Oh, it's worse than you think, captain."

"What do you mean?"

Gus looked at Maggie. The topman shrugged and pointed towards the pursuer again, "I think there might be another ship. It's staying behind the galleon and it's smaller, but I think it's there."

"Why didn't you mention this before?"

"I wanted to be sure so I told the helm to tack slightly. If they're back there, we'll spot them in just a minute."

Cossette's face fell into grim lines. "I am the captain here, and I need to be kept up to date on all information, confirmed or not. Is that understood?"

"Aye, aye, captain. Sorry, I just thought you had a lot on your mind and that second boat is much smaller, could be..."

"Could be what?" Cossette demanded.

Maggie and Gus looked at each uncomfortably for a moment, but before either could answer, the lookout called from above, "Sail ahoy! There's a second boat behind the first. Looks to be a frigate with that spiderwork rigging!"

Cossette took a deep breath. "All right, that changes things. We'll give them a few more minutes to close distance to us, then we tack into the wind. Maggie, make it a fast tack. Gus, I want you to throw one of those special cannonballs right through that rigging. Slow them down and we'll steer as close to the wind as we can. With that rigging that frigate won't be tacking into the wind and should blow right by us."

"You realize that when we turn into the wind, we're going to lose speed. They're going to be pretty close before we're done."

"I know, but it's that or let them both overhaul us."

Maggie nodded and grabbed a line.

The captain put a hand on her arm, "It doesn't matter who is back there. If they're a threat to us, we'll deal with them."

"Sorry, captain. I should have told you first."

Cossette replied in a severe tone, "That's right, you should



have.”

The two women stared at each other for a moment and then both chuckled.

“Just don’t do it again, Maggie.”

The topman nodded and then leapt back up into the rigging.

Gus rubbed his chin a moment, “That frigate’ll be on us like a Vendel on an open wallet. We’re going to have to deal with them quickly, or the galleon may come back to haunt us.”

“I’m relying on you to convince them there are easier targets out here.”

Gus’ face was bleak for a moment, “Not after those pirates destroyed my little home. I’m going to make sure that they don’t have a chance to prey upon anyone else.”

Cossette put a hand on his arm, “We’re Explorers, not killers, Gus. Just show them off, so we can focus on our real job: Finding what’s out here.”

Gus nodded and returned to his guns. Cossette turned to stare back at the pursuers, the galleon and the little Vodacce frigate were growing larger, visible to even an unaided eye now.

She smiled, because whoever was chasing them, it wasn’t Jeremiah Berek.

She shouted over to the helmsman to change course as Maggie and the others managed the sails. Who was following them was not bothering her nearly as much as why. They were out in the middle of unexplored and uncharted waters. No reason for pirates to be this far out, unless it was to prevent them from doing exactly what they were doing. They were simply exploring uncharted waters. No one knew what was out there. Or did they... Abbotsford’s words weeks earlier about the sabotage on the other explorers’ vessels came to mind, but gave her no answers... only more questions.

“They’re gaining!” Maggie called from the tops as the Discovery completed the course change.

Cossette could see both ships easily as they attempted to accommodate the course change. Even without the galleon’s

help, the frigate was going to be a problem, especially if it was out there with the sole purpose of destroying them. She had every confidence in the competence of her crew, but would it be enough? She watched Gus and his gunners busy themselves on the deck, treading lightly around several of the loads. Some of the Sryneth stuff was pretty touchy and sending the ship to a watery grave before a single shot was fired was a poor way to begin a battle. Her eyes swept the activity of her crew, searching for something else that could be done to give them an advantage, but although the galleon was lumbering off in the wrong direction while pulling down rigging and trying to tack about, the frigate seemed to be making swift progress.

“Captain! There’s a third ship!” came the cry from the lookout.

Cossette swore and peered back towards the frigate for the new enemy but the waters behind were clear. She was just about to shout up at the lookout when she noticed that several of her men were staring ahead of them.

“It’s the *Black Dawn*!” cried the lookout.

She had to leap over several of her crewmen to get to the prow of the ship. There was no mistaking the Avalon frigate or the colours of Berek’s Sea Dogs that flew atop her centre mast.

“Hard to port!” Cossette cried.

“That’ll take us directly into the path of the galleon,” Gus said.

“I know,” Cossette said gritting her teeth. “We cut in front and disable her, that should slow our other friends down.”

She paused. “I’m open for other suggestions.”

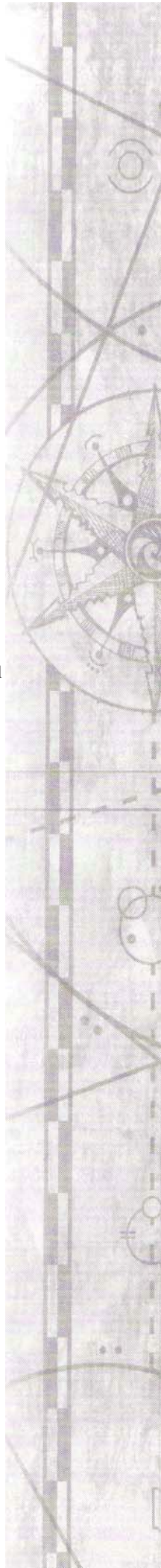
Sean stepped forward with his glowing knife in his hand.

“Um, Captain.”

“Not now, Sean,” she snapped. “I’m a little busy.”

“But...”

“I said not now. I’m a little more concerned about surviving the next hour than I am about where your knife is pointing.



Stow it and get back to your station. That's an order."

For a moment it looked as though he might argue, but Gus' glare made him think the better of it. Cossette shook her head. A seasoned sailor like Garloise should know better. The *Discovery* veered away from the *Black Dawn* and into the path of the galleon and Cossette held her breath and her hand moved to the butt of the grappling pistol. Hopefully some of the famed luck of Jermiah Berek clung to the pistol. She was going to need it.

Fifteen minutes later, she realized that Berek had kept his luck for himself. The *Discovery* had caught the Vodacce unaware with her sudden course change, but the galleon had quickly adjusted and was waiting for her to attempt to pass them. The frigate had fired a few long range shots as she passed them and then pursued. The two ships now had the *Discovery* trapped between them and they were getting closer while the *Black Dawn* grew larger with every moment.

With a grim nod, Cossette ordered her men to tack north and rake the galleon's stern. The ship turned quickly before the wind and the sails filled. Before her guns could bear, the frigate's cannons opened fire. One of the volley's shots smashed into the *Discovery's* cabins and Cossette winced, but the *Discovery* sped away from the frigate. Moments later her own guns opened fire upon the galleon and the full force of Explorer discoveries was unleashed.

One of the shots exploded in a ball of flame amidst the galleon's sails, another halted in mid air above the ship and then plummeted straight down through her decks. Chain shot from the other gun sheared through the main mast without slowing, and it slowly toppled over, ripping lines and men from the air as it fell. Even across the water, Cossette could hear the screams and prayers of the Vodacce sailors as her ship pulled away.

The small Vodacce boat ignored the distant Avalon privateer and fired another volley at the *Discovery*. The whistle of incoming cannonballs ended in a thunderous crash and the ship lurched. Cossette whirled around and saw that the volley had smashed into the stern of her ship. As it slowly limped to port as she looked over the side and cringed at the sight of the damaged rudder. The frigate then passed behind the

galleon.

With a grimace, Cossette began calling out orders, "Maggie, steer us by the sails. Get us as far from the Vodacce as you can. Garloise, I hope you know how to fix rudders."

The Avalon sailor appeared beside her and grinned for a moment before disappearing over the side with a length of line and a belaying pin.

Gus called out from the port guns, "Captain, we're going to be in the firing arc of the galleon soon and that frigate'll be coming around her soon enough too."

Cossette nodded, "I know, Gus. We're working on it."

She glanced to the horizon where the *Black Dawn* silently approached the three ships and wished she knew what Berek was up to. Then she looked up at the sails, "How's it coming, Maggie?"

"This isn't as easy as it looks captain!" Maggie called from the tops, "Especially with the rudder still in place." With a roar, the galleon's guns opened fire, but the shots fell short. The *Discovery's* guns returned fire and several shots smashed into the deck of the galleon and one of the Vodacce cannons fell into the sea.

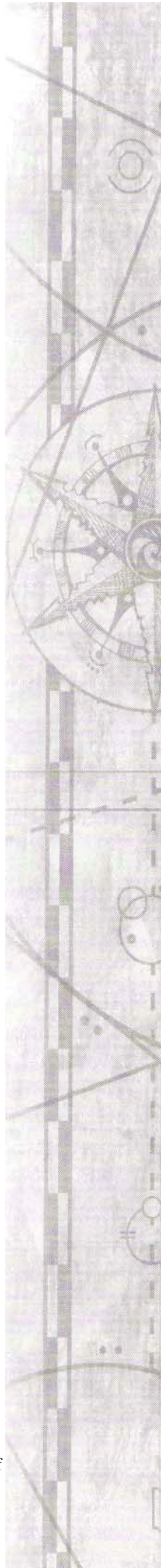
"Almost got it!" Maggie shouted over the din as the frigate swept around the galleon and tacked towards the drifting Explorer vessel. Cossette breathed a sigh of relief as her ship began to slowly turn before the wind again and the sails filled.

Gus fired a volley from the light chaser guns in the stern but the shots twisted in mid air and landed to starboard of the frigate and a patch of ice formed upon the surface of the sea. The gunner shrugged and moved to the broadside guns again.

On the way, he grumbled to Cossette, "Sorry captain, some of those special ammunitions just aren't that accurate."

"Don't fret, Gus. We'll be fine. Ready the grapeshot." Looking up, she called out, "Lower the boarding nets."

Seconds later, nets to entangle boarders fell down to the deck from the rigging overhead. The topmen continued scurrying from spot to spot, adjusting the rigging to catch every wisp of



air possible. The two ships quickly left the crippled galleon behind. Despite their efforts, the frigate quickly overtook them on the starboard. As it drew closer, the Vodacce tacked starboard and unleashed a cannon volley into the *Discovery*. The shots hammered into the stoutly built vessel. It shattered struts and supports but failed to critically damage her. The Vodacce gunners quickly began reloading while the frigate tacked again to bring her closer to the Explorers.

A shout from the stern of the ship attracted Cossette's attention as Sean Garloise climbed back on board. He was soaked and covered in bruises from hanging on through the ship's manoeuvres. Bowing low to her, he declared, "The rudder is repaired, my captain."

Cossette's smile was cold enough to make startle him, "Thank you, Garloise. Helm, five points to starboard. We deal with these pirates here and now."

A cheer went up from her men as the ship tacked about and the frigate suddenly loomed large. The Explorer gunners fired a volley of grapeshot across the assembled Vodacce sailors and cut huge swathes through them. With a bone shattering shudder, the two ships collided. Explorers and sailors threw grappling hooks across and tied the two ships together. With a shout, the crews launched themselves at their foes and merged into a bloody melee. Cossette leapt to the Vodacce ship. She parried one pirate's blow and emptied her pistol into his face. Dropping the now useless weapon to the deck, she switched her sword to her other hand. Around her she knew her crew was fighting for their lives, but hacking into the enemy was the only thing left for her to do. Their numbers were evenly matched and she tried not to think of the lives that would be lost in the combat. She hated the thought of losing even one of her crew and the idea of losing so many... Driving towards a group of sailors under attack by five swordsmen, she slashed a Vodacce sailor across the chest and shoved him over the side of the ship. Two of his companions noticed her and charged towards her. These men seemed better trained than their companions and were far too focused upon her specifically. She realized they were intentionally driving her away from the support of the rest of her crew, but as she frantically parried their blows, she was forced further back.

They kept pressing her until she was up against the starboard side of the Vodacce vessel with the rest of her crew far out

of reach. She cursed the two swordsmen and tried to press one of her opponents. He drove her sword down toward the deck and then slashed out at her left leg. With her sword out of position, all she could do was to leap above his blade. While still in mid-air, the other swordsman slammed his body against hers. She fell heavily to the deck at their feet as the two Vodacce grinned down at her. The sound of a gunshot close at hand shocked her and one of her opponents dropped clutching his chest. She took advantage of his companion's surprise and thrust her blade into the other man's thigh. He collapsed to the ground clutching his wounded leg.

She scrambled to her feet and someone's hand fell upon her shoulder. She spun around with her sword ready, stopping her blade less than an inch from the chest of Jeremiah Berek.

"What are you doing here?" she spat.

She couldn't believe she hadn't noticed the *Black Dawn* coming up alongside of the Vodacce vessel, but she saw it lashed to the other side of the frigate. Cossette let out a sigh of relief at the sight of Sea Dogs swarming over into the fray. She just hoped they were on her side

"Saving your life again," he replied with a grin.

"I was doing just fine," she lied, trying to assure herself that her heart was pounding because of the exertion of the fight, "And if you don't mind, I'm a little busy."

She turned to go back into the fight and Berek grabbed her arm, "What? No kiss for your brave hero?"

She shook him off, "Later. My crew is fighting for their lives and I'm not going to abandon them for your carnal pleasures."

He favored her with a lecherous grin. "Promise?"

She needed to get back to her crew and needed to be rid of him. "Fine, I promise."

She waded back into the melee. With the addition of the Sea Dogs, the outnumbered Vodacce crew quickly surrendered. Cossette rounded up her crew and ordered them back to *Discovery*, leaving Berek and his Sea Dogs to mop up the pirates. They had a lot of work to do to get her ship repaired and back on course. She also wanted to avoid any more

encounters with the charismatic captain.

“How bad is it, Sean?” she asked

“Could have been worse,” Garloise said. “We’ve lost four and have another dozen injured. Of those, about half of them are still fit for duty. The rudder’s repaired and I’ve got a crew on the hull damage right now. The masts and sails came out almost unharmed. We may be able to get underway in a couple of hours.”

Cossette breathed a silent prayer for the four lost. It was four too many.

“Get on it then,” she said.

Garloise turned to go and then stopped, “Um, Captain, there’s something I need to tell you, something I tried to tell you earlier.”

“For Theus’ sake, Sean, this isn’t about that damned knife, is it?”

He paused. “It is, but I think it’s important for you to know.”

She considered just ordering him off to do what she’d asked, but he was a seasoned sailor. Whatever it was, it probably was as important as he claimed. “All right then.”

He drew the knife. “I had this out as we were changing course. Figured if I watched it then that it would give me a better idea of where it was pointing. Anyway, as we started tacking...”

“Sean Garloise, it’s been a very long time.”

Cossette recognized Berek’s rich baritone voice behind her and was surprised at the unpleasant look on Garloise’s face. She’d thought he and his old captain had parted on amiable terms.

“Hello, Captain Berek,” he said tersely.

Cossette turned and saw that Berek also seemed surprised at the cool reception.

“My loss appears to be your gain, Captain,” he said. “Sean was one of the finest of my Sea Dogs. I was very sad to see

him go.”

Cossette put her hands on her hips, “What are you doing on my ship, Berek? I thought I’d sent word that the Vodacce ship was yours as long as you left mine alone.”

She turned back to Sean. “We’ll finish that talk later. See to the repairs.”

“Aye, captain.”

“Not so fast, Sean.” Berek’s voice held the sailor up short, “Our timely arrival and assistance were the only things that saved your captain’s life and saved your ship. I’d say you owe us and I mean to collect.”

Cossette furiously interrupted, “You bloodsucking weasel! I won’t be robbed blind just because you saved us from being robbed! Especially from the man who has ambushed and sabotaged so many other Explorer vessels! Did you think we wouldn’t know about that?”

Berek took a step backwards and raised his hands before him in protest, “Hang on. I’ll admit I’ve spied on you, but I’d hardly call that sabotage.”

“What about Warren Abbotsford’s boat? He claims you attacked him seven days ago.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. I’ve been keeping close to you. I have no idea where this Abbotsford thinks I was.”

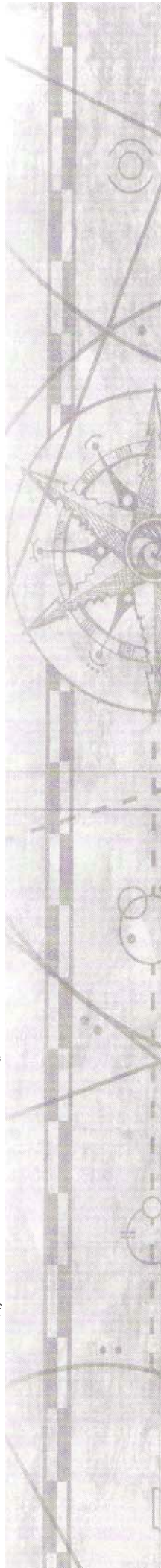
“A likely story, and now you want to steal what little we have after that attack?”

“Now, now, captain. I will settle for three things. Not so high a cost for what I’ve provided.”

She was liking the situation less and less. “We’ll see. What are your demands?”

“Don’t think of them as demands, my dear, simply the cost of doing business out here. First, I’d like Sean’s dagger.”

Sean looked suspiciously at Berek for a moment and then nodded.



Handing it over to the Sea Dog captain, he quietly asked, "Are you repenting your crime or just covering it up?"

"A man is allowed a mistake now and then, Sean." Berek's voice was pitched low. He held out his hand and the two men silently sized each other up.

Then with a grin, Sean grasped Berek's and shook it strongly. "Well met, sir."

"Yourself as well. You have a good captain here. Take care of her."

"I will. Against any and all threats."

"Agreed."

Cossette cleared her throat, "Are you both quite done? Mr. Garloise has work to do." Sean grinned sheepishly and then hurried off to his duties.

She faced Berek, trying to control the racing of her heart. The anger at his audacity was certainly helping but she still felt like a young girl with her first crush. She tried to hold onto her anger and asked, "Now, what else do you want?"

Tossing the dagger lightly, he declared. "I gave you the strength of my arms and took the arms of one of your crewmen. I altered my course to give you the aid of my ship so I would like your course. Where are you headed?"

Cossette noticed the gem's glow only flashed when it pointed towards Berek's ship. "What's it to you?"

"I believe your destination may hold something I must have," he said. "It's a small price to pay for saving your ship, don't you think? What is your course?"

Cossette looked at the *Black Dawn* for a moment. She was a fast ship, faster than the *Discovery* even before the damage she'd taken, but the island was only a day away so he wouldn't have much time there before she arrived.

"All right," she said finally. "North by northwest on a heading of 312."

Berek inclined his head to her in thanks. "See? Again, nothing horrible."

"Give me your third request and be done with it," She snarled anxious to be done with him and back to her ship repairs.

With a flourish, he went down on one knee and took her hand, "Since I met you a few weeks back, I have heard your voice in the wind. I see your face whenever I close my eyes, and my fingers long to feel your touch. You have enchanted me, and I do not want to be released. I love you, Cossette. I just want to be with you for the rest of my life, but I have my duties as you have yours so I cannot be with you just yet..." He lifted her hand and lightly brushed it with his lips. "So my third request is, now that I have given you my true feelings, I need to know, what are your feelings for me?"

Cossette stared down at him speechlessly for a moment then pulled her hand from his grasp. His eyes widened as she quietly stated, "I am sorry, captain. While I thank you for your aid today, I have no feelings for you whatsoever and all the flowery words and poetry will not change that."

Her voice was cold and she hoped he could not tell how fast her heart was beating.

Berek stared up at her for a moment in shock and then rose with a laugh. With a rueful smile, he declared, "I knew you were too smart to fall for that, but I had to try. Until we meet again, good captain." He turned away from her and then stopped. "There is one more thing."

Cossette gave an exasperated sigh. "What? You've had your three demands met, what else do you want?"

He gave her a mischievous smile. "Why, the kiss you promised me when I saved your life."

Part of her wanted to throw his Avalon ass off her ship, but the memory of their first kiss began to turn the fire of her anger into something else.

"Oh fine," she said. "Only if you promise to leave my ship when you're done and not come back."

"As you wish, Captain," he said. He swept her into his arms, covering her mouth with his. The kiss held more than their first one and she tried to hold back. She didn't want him to think that his words had swayed her, but her body had other ideas and she found herself matching his passion. When they

parted, she caught the surprised look in his face before he could hide it with his trademark mischievous smile.

He swept off his hat and bowed with a flourish, “Until we meet again,” he said.

It took her a few moments longer to compose herself. “You got what you wanted, now get off my ship.”

“As you wish,” he said again, giving her a wink. He stepped past her and quickly crossed to his own ship.

Cossette released the breath she didn’t realize she’d been holding and turned back to her ship. Her entire crew was staring at her, having witnessed the absurd spectacle. As Berek left the ship, they began to applaud.

Her face flushed, she shouted out, “All right. Back to work, all of you. We’ve got a lot of repairs to finish before nightfall.”

She turned and headed toward her cabin, her left hand brushed the butt of the grappling pistol. With a curse, she noticed that the *Black Dawn* had already pulled away. She was sure they’d meet at the island up ahead and she’d give him his back his gun and his shirt and be done with the Avalon pirate once and for all. The thought brought her small comfort. She cursed Berek for his stupid poetry and herself for wanting desperately to believe he hadn’t been lying.

The Fountain of Youth

By Dana DeVries and Vicki Kirchhoff-Martin

Not a cloud marred the sky and only a light breeze ruffled the surface of the water so the ship’s launch rocked very gently in the surf as Maggie and Cossette rowed closer to the small scrap of land. The *Discovery* lay anchored several ship lengths further out with her guns run out and trained across the isle to where the Sea Dog vessel *Black Dawn*, Jeremiah Berek’s own ship, crouched. The Avalon privateers had already landed and two men were combing the small rise, but the tall blonde captain strode out into the waves to catch the Explorers’ longboat and help pull it onto shore.

Berek smiled at the small, lithe topman as she tied the ship

up to a twisted piece of driftwood. “How are you holding up, Maggie? I heard about your ‘passenger’ and I was concerned.”

Maggie smiled and then glanced at her captain guiltily. “I’m fine, sir. A little surprised to find you here though.”

“I know. Hopefully we can both get what we’re after and move on.”

“That’d be real nice.”

The short red-headed captain stalked up to Berek and snarled as her hand toyed with the cutlass hanging at her side. “What are you after Berek? Why attack the other Explorers and rescue us? You’ve killed scores of men, what could be here that you want that badly?”

“I told you before, I didn’t ambush anyone. I’ve spied on you, but I don’t kill if I can help it. I’ll admit though, I’d hoped to find the fountain and leave before you even arrived. I knew it wouldn’t work, but I had to try.”

“How did you know it wouldn’t work? If we hadn’t worked through the night to get the repairs done, you’d have had another day or so before we arrived.”

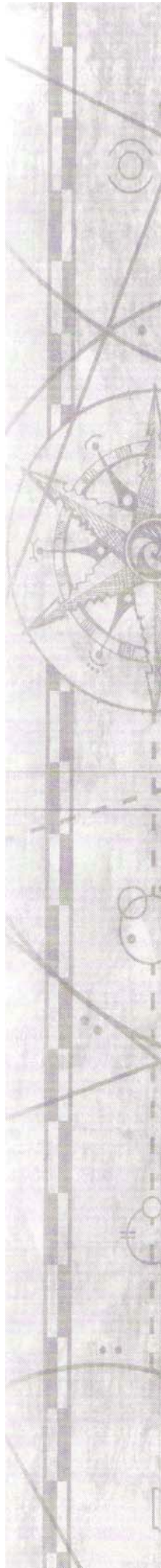
“A day or a week, it wouldn’t have mattered.” Berek drew a pair of daggers from his belt and lifted them up. “I think you’ll remember these? I gave one to Sean Garloise when he told me he was joining up with you. They’re a matched pair, always pointing to each other. That’s how I could keep just out of sight, but always near you.

Derwydonn warned me that I would not find what I sought, but that another would. I’m certain he was referring to you.”

“Am I supposed to believe that? Some Avalon crackpot gives you a prophecy and you’ve followed me thousands of miles based on that?”

Berek sheathed the daggers again and took her hand in his own. “Yes. I’ve come to realize that sometimes luck and skill are not enough. Sometimes you have to rely upon someone else.”

Cossette peered at him for a moment and then jerked her hand back, “This is the famous Jeremiah Berek? Rogue of



the seas and lady's man? You think I should trust the man that seduced the Marquis du Mar's wife before his very eyes and stole from Reis himself!"

"That's right. I stole from Reis. I paid the price." Berek's eyes grew hard at a sudden memory, and he turned away.

After a moment, he called over his shoulder. "Your semaphore stated that we'd search the island together. Let's get it over with."

For a long moment, Cossette stared at his back and then she reached out for him. Before she could touch him, Maggie called from the top of the hill, "I've found it."

The two captains turned towards her and began running up the hill. At the top of the hill lay a smoky grey flat stone larger than a human being.

Maggie pointed at it and loudly declared, "It's underneath that."

Berek frowned slightly. "How do you know?"

Cossette stared at her excited topman and smiled, "She just does. We brought some shovels in our longboats. We'll need to dig it out."

Maggie shook her head, "No. I don't think that'll be necessary."

The two captains turned back towards the rock and caught their breath. The stone was slowly rising out of the ground before their eyes. An inch and then another. Cossette glanced at Maggie and saw that the topman's hands were clenched into fists and her brow was furrowed in concentration. Long moments passed until the stone lifted completely above the ground and then slide to the side revealing a dark tunnel leading into the ground.

Maggie staggered for a moment and then suddenly sat. When she spoke, her voice was hoarse and low. "I'll be fine in a moment, Cossette. I just need to catch my breath."

Berek and Cossette exchanged glances.

The Sea Dog spoke first, "Shall we head down and take a look. We can bring whatever we find out to her."

The Explorer nodded in reluctant agreement as Berek motioned the searching Sea Dog over and ordered the man to watch Maggie.

Cossette grabbed the side of the tunnel with both hands and slowly lowered herself down. She called up, "It's only ten feet down. But be careful, it's slick."

Berek lowered the lantern down to her to reveal a rough hewn passage leading deeper into the ground. Water trickled through a carpet of moss along the floor. He leapt down and landed in a crouch beside Cossette.

Waving her forward, he declared, "After you."

She smiled "You only say that because you want me to find the death traps for you."

"You are the captain of an Explorer vessel and a talented woman, I am certain you have far more experience than I in searching ancient ruins. Besides, Derwyddon told me you would find the fountain."

Cossette shook her head slightly and led the way down the long slimy tunnel, pushing cobwebs aside. After only a few feet, the sounds of the surf faded away.

She stopped and asked, "Did you hear that?" The words came out quiet and muffled, as if she had spoken through cotton.

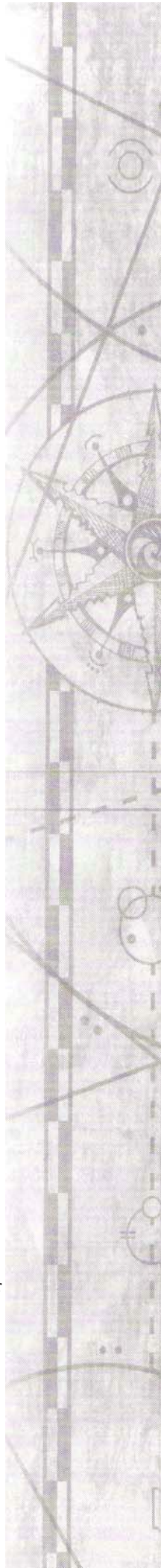
The two shrugged and headed down the passageway, cautiously checking for traps or dangers.

After several hundred feet, Berek commented "This part must be beneath the sea. The island didn't extend this far." His voice sounded odd in the muffled air of the tunnel.

Cossette merely nodded and the two continued.

Several minutes later, they pushed through a thick layer of spider webs and saw a wall only a few yards ahead. The water from the passageway trickled into a small pool of water at the foot of the wall. A faint greenish glow emanated from beneath the waters.

"At last," Berek whispered words were almost inaudible.



Cossette knelt beside the pool.

The Sea Dog laid his hand upon her shoulder and softly admonished her, “Don’t taste it. The waters of the Fountain of Youth hold dangers untold.”

Cossette nodded silently and took out several small flasks from her belt. She filled three of them, noting that the waters were a mere inch deep and that each one stirred silt and moss up into the waters. As each one filled, she placed it within a leather pouch that Berek handed her. When the shallow water was too low to fill another, she stood and turned around.

Standing at the edge of the lantern stood a shadowy figure who stepped into the light at her gasp. An Avalon man with long blonde hair, the worn leathers of an experienced digger and a drawn pistol in his hands. A hooded lantern sat on the ground next to him.

She shouted out, but the words came out barely above a whisper, “Warren Abbotsford! How did you get there?”

Abbotsford smiled and replied quietly, “You’ve been down here for several hours, Cossette. Long enough for us to drop anchor and put ashore.” His low tone cut through the strange airs of the tunnel and were clearly audible.

Berek turned to Cossette with a confused look. “How long have we been down here?”

“Only an hour or so, but sometimes time flows strangely within the ruins.” Cossette replied calmly.

Berek turned to the newcomer and pleasantly greeted him. “Hello, Warren. What are you doing here?”

“Just wanted to grab a few things and then pop back to Theah. You know how it is.”

“What were you looking for?”

“Oh, the normal things. A loaf of bread, the water of the Fountain of Youth -”

“Hmm, sorry, I don’t think there’s any bread down here.”

“Don’t trouble yourself. I’ll manage. Now, hand over the water.”

Cossette shook her head wildly and declared something firmly but her words were almost inaudible, “No. I need this water for Maggie. This will cure her.”

“That’s very sweet, but it’ll cure a lot of people. That is the water from the fountain of youth. A mere drink will restore years to your life. That’s why Queen Elaine is willing to send her favourite pirate out looking for it.”

Warren gently nudged his lantern’s shield aside and light spilled out to illuminate the tunnel.

Berek disagreed. “Gee. I know she likes me, but that hardly makes me her favourite.”

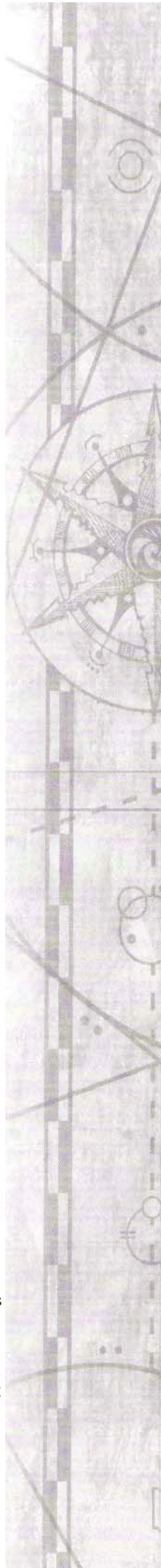
“It doesn’t matter. She will pay me a small fortune to anyone who has it. That is why you are going to turn it over. Well, that and because I’ll blow us all up if you refuse.” Warren pulled an oblong object from his pouch and tossed it up in the air before stooping and lighting the fuse on the lantern’s flame. “Give me the water and we’ll all walk away. Refuse, and you’ll die in this hole.”

Cossette grimaced, “It was you all along. You were the saboteur all along. You killed all those people...for money?”

“Not just money, my dear. For fame as well. I will be the man who brought back the fountain of youth. No one else will be able to claim that prize.”

Berek and Cossette glanced at each other for a moment until Warren prodded them, “I am holding a lit grenade, perhaps you could make cow eyes at each other some other time?”

Cossette suddenly smiled and turned away. She did not see the look of concern cross Berek’s face as she nodded agreement and tossed the leather pouch towards Warren. Time seemed to slow to a crawl as the pouch flew through the air. Warren tossed the grenade towards them and reached out for the pouch. Cossette began running towards him and drew for her sword. The blade whipped out and cut through the fuse. The grenade fell to the ground harmlessly as Berek’s dove. His hands grabbed Cossette’s ankle and toppled her to the ground, so Abbotsford’s shot hit Cossette’s arm rather than her head. The two looked up to find Abbotsford standing above them with a pistol in one hand and the pouch in his other.



“Nicely done, Jeremiah. I am glad that you saved her from her impetuous action. After all, I’d hate for her to miss my crowning moment.”

The traitorous Explorer fastened the pouch to his belt with one hand and drew out one of the flasks. Raising it to his mouth, he pulled the cork out with his teeth and spit it out.

“After all, before I grant youth to the scabrous hands of the nobles of Theah, I shall reap the benefits.”

Berek shook his head, “Don’t do it, Warren. The Queen will pay you handsomely for it, don’t drink it.”

“Ah, but you’re still young, Berek. Wait until you find grey amidst your hair, until your joints ache from the salt air and the indiscretions of your youth are behind you. For me, selling two flasks will suffice.”

Abbotsford lifted the flask to his lips and quickly drank its contents down. Lowering it, he stretched his neck and closed his eyes for an instant. When his eyes flew open in horror, Berek pulled Cossette in close and embraced her for a moment. Abbotsford’s hand clutched his throat convulsively and then he sank to the ground and hugged himself tightly for a moment. Then he glanced down at his hands and cocked his head curiously.

The Sea Dog and the Explorer stood up and walked towards him as he continued staring at the pistol with deep concentration. Berek merely shook his head and took both the pouch from Abbotsford’s belt and a third of Abbotsford’s pistols that lay on the ground.

Cossette asked curiously, “Are you alright, Warren?” She reached cautiously for the pistol, but Abbotsford hand convulsed. The pistol fired and the shot ricocheted off one wall and then another. Without a pause, Berek and Cossette both grabbed one of Abbotsford’s arms and rushed up the corridor they had descended so carefully.

Berek gasped as they ran, “What are the odds it’ll hit that bomb?” Cossette glanced over her shoulder in time to see the bullet smash into the grenade lying upon the ground only inches from the pool of water. A wave of fire erupted out towards the two as they ran. The explosion rocked the corridor and threw them down upon the thick moss covering

the rock floor as a cloud of dust and rock fragments flew overhead.

She grinned at him and wryly stated, “Pretty good, I’d say.”

The two staggered to their feet and continued forward, still dragging the man so curiously gazing at his hands across the slippery moss until they reached the exit. They lifted Abbotsford up and then Berek quickly interlocked his hands and boosted Cossette up to the surface where Maggie and the Sea Dog crewman helped her up. Berek quickly leapt up and grabbed the edge as well and lifted himself out. As the group stood there panting, a low rumbling came crashing out of the passageway along with another cloud of dust. The tunnel’s collapse was visible stretching out towards the sea. Looking around, they saw that the setting sun cast a bloody tinge across the entire island. The *Discovery* and the *Black Dawn* both continued to rock peacefully at anchor, but another ship had joined them. The galleon *Stargazer* also rode at anchor and her longboat had been pulled up onto the isle. With a grin, Berek reached into the leather pouch and pulled out the remaining two flasks. That grin faded as he noticed the crack down the side of one of the flasks. Uncorking the stopper, he peered inside. With a grimace, he looked at Cossette and turned the flask upside down. Nothing came out.

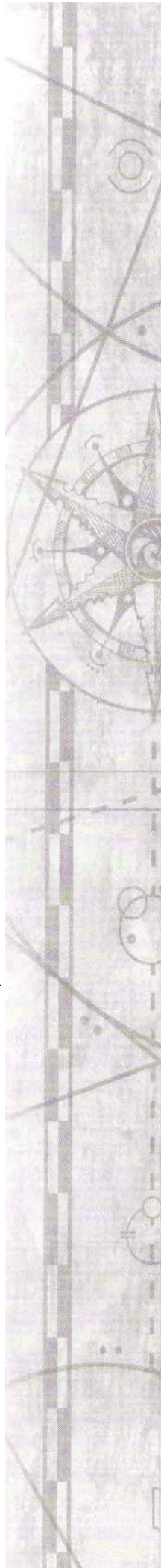
“The explosion must have broken it. I’m sorry, Cossette.” With a smooth gesture, he drew Abbotsford’s pistol out and pointed it towards the Explorers.

“No!” Cossette shouted. “I found that fountain. I don’t care if Elaine is about to die of old age, Maggie needs it more. This isn’t cosmetics, it’s her life, her sanity!”

“I know. However, Queen Elaine is hardly some dowager obsessed with her appearance.” He pointed at Abbotsford, “Plus, as you’ve already seen, the water affects the mind, not the body. I am certain Elaine has some need for the waters. I do not know the purpose, but she wouldn’t have sent me this far on a trivial errand.”

“I don’t know her, and I don’t care. I only care about my crew. Maggie’s hurt and this is the only cure. I need that water.”

“I know. But she is my lady, my liege. I have sworn to uphold her and honour her. I promised to bring her back the



water of the Fountain of Youth.” Berek backed away slowly and waved his crewman back to the longboat.

“I won’t let you do this.” Cossette drew her own pistol and pointed it at Berek. “I won’t let you condemn Maggie like this. You know that fountain is gone. This is her only hope!”

“I have my duty. My word. My honour. I cannot go back on all that. If you can shoot me, so be it. But I will not relinquish it while I yet breathe.”

Cossette stared at him for a long moment and then lowered her gun. “I...I can’t shoot you. Even for Maggie. Berek, I love you.”

Berek caught his breath for a moment and sighed. “I love you too. But we both have other duties. Other masters. Perhaps after I’ve given Queen Elaine her due, perhaps then we can be together.”

Cossette stared at Berek’s retreating form. “We’ll see.”

Berek stopped for an instant, his heart plainly tearing in two. He reached down and took out the intact flask. Holding it in his hand, he undid the pouch and tossed it towards her. “Maybe you could squeeze some water from the pouch. I hope its enough. I’m sorry.” Berek turned and rushed to his longboat.

Cossette stared at the pouch in her hand and quietly said to herself. “It’s worth a try.” She motioned Maggie towards the longboat.

The red-haired topman quietly stated, “We could pursue him. The *Discovery*’s repairs should be completed by now.”

“That’s the *Black Dawn*, Maggie. I doubt there is a faster ship in the entire Midnight Archipelago. We would never catch her. I’m sorry.”

Maggie nodded. “Don’t be sorry, captain. I have lived this long with that thing in my mind. I’ll survive.”

Cossette nodded absently and stared back as the Sea Dog ship set sail. For an instant, she thought she could feel Berek’s warm gaze passing along her skin. Then the sensation faded and she could only feel the cold breeze of the sea against her.

Credits

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