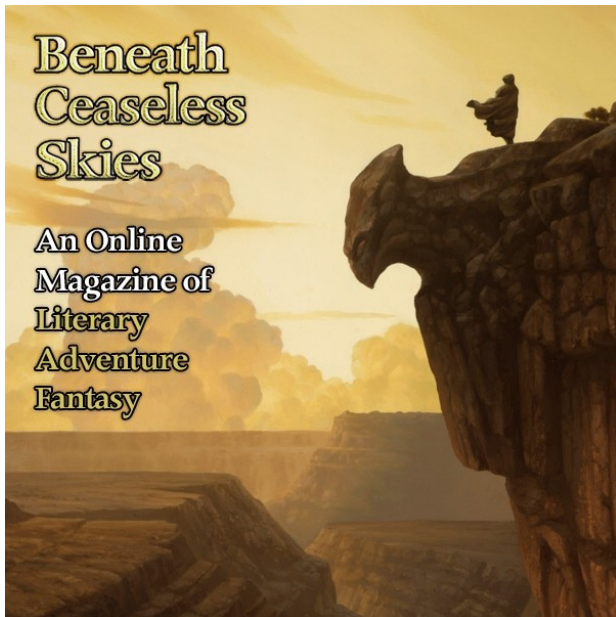


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THE CIRCUS OF KING MINOS' MASQUE

by Michael J. DeLuca

Propelled by the force of the centaur's blow, the cyclops' lifeless body shattered a section of plate-glass and toppled into the front rows of the crowd. The stands erupted in screams—those of adulation overwhelming those of pain. The hulking gray semblance of the cyclops flickered and faded, leaving its outline behind in splintered mahogany, broken bodies and blood-stained upholstery. The defeated sorcerer's corpse reassumed its true shape: a tiny, naked satyr. Beneath red-tinted fur and umber streaks of body paint, rich bruises decorated his skin.

Rose petals fluttered from the balconies, followed hard by the bare, thorny stems from which they'd been torn. Many of the nearest patrons climbed across the grisly corpses, heedless of the stains to their fine clothes, to lay reverent hands on a dead sorcerer's flesh.

In the second row, three seats from where the cyclops' outflung palm had crushed a woman's ribcage, Periphas came to his feet only briefly. The creases in his suit of eggplant-colored silk momentarily straightened. Then he sank down, the curled fingers of one hand pressed to his lips. People

clambered past him. A rose petal fell in his lap. *Three seats closer*, he thought.

Mourners carried the dead satyr away through the gates atop their shoulders, then the victorious centaur pranced out, mobbed by admirers. The crowd in the southeast loge of the Circus of King Minos' Masque thinned for intermission. Periphas was left alone. Snifters clinked and money changed hands in the distant upper boxes. Someone laughed. Iron-shod hooves clicked on scored sandstone. Late-morning desert sunlight prowled the cheaper seats beyond the awnings. A repair crew emerged from a service stairwell to replace the broken section of barrier, straining beneath the nine-foot high slab of plate glass. A woman in a feathered hat knelt, sobbing, in the indentation made by the cyclops' head.

I have too much self-respect for that, at least, thought Periphas. But then why else had he spent all that money on a second-row ticket to Eurytus' own arena? To sit and let a chance for an honorable death brush past three seats away? Death was the least his conscience owed for his service to Eurytus, lord of the half-horse centaurs, herder of minotaurs, eater of men.

Periphas pressed a finger and thumb to his temples and squeezed. *Relax*, he thought. *Relax. You'll have another chance. It's barely noon.* He leaned back, forced himself to

review his program. The inter-bout entertainment was billed as “Ape and Tortoise.”

A hollow boom sounded from under the floor. Vibrations rose through the soles of Periphas’ black-and-chocolate, minotaur-skin saddle shoes. Behind the pocked and spiderwebbed plate-glass, the arena’s central ring was filling with water.

A naked human slave cleared his throat at Periphas’ elbow. The slave’s high, native cheekbones gave his face a haughty expression, and a white spiral scar marred one statuesque shoulder: Eurytus’ mark. Periphas had to force down the hand that reached instinctively to his own shoulder. His brand was gone. His scars had changed. “Apsinth,” he said, flicking the lead-crystal goblet on his tray. The resonant tone surprised him. The glass was only half-empty. A glass of apsinth is never half-full. He lifted the goblet to his lips and tipped cloudy green poison down his throat. His eyes screwed closed and his chin struck his chest as the monumental bitterness of wormwood engulfed him.

He wiped his lips with the back of a hand, passed the goblet to the slave.

“Sugar, sir?”

Periphas shook his head. Delirium was meant to taste of death.

The flood and vibration ceased when the floor of the ring was three feet underwater. Two holding tanks creaked out of the menagerie on iron runners and clanged into place over the pool.

The splash as the first of the contenders struck the surface dusted the loge with a fine white mist. As the froth settled, the Tortoise sank, holding its breath and blinking: a loggerhead sea-turtle, massive as a human male and not yet full grown. The currents from its fins caught up flecks of shattered glass and sent them spinning, scattering sunlight. Periphas glanced suspiciously at the goblet in his hand. He had hunted such turtles, for Eurytus' amusement. He'd raced them, by sail over cloudy shoals, then dived with fins and harpoon for the kill—though fins and harpoon were never enough. Loggerheads were fast, thick-skinned. It took sorcery to slay them.

Periphas squinted up at the nine seating boxes that lined the arena's rim, his eyes watering, apsinth-swollen irises aching in the blinding sun. He wondered if Eurytus knew he had come. None of the boxes bore any crest or decoration—no indication where the Circus' centaur master might be sitting. Eurytus wouldn't be so careless.

Periphas had been born on the Abyssine Sea, on the beach among savages. Eurytus had orphaned him, raised him, trained him to earn his keep: to kill. The memory seemed as distant as

the gods—though he could still feel the stinging lick of wind on salt-burned skin, the warmth of subtropical seas, the ache of breath held half a minute longer than was safe or sane. The pressure of Eurytus' hands, tracing the sorcerous symbols on his wrists, his arms, his chest. Why could he still feel these things? He must have forgotten a hundred murders. He couldn't remember the faces of the corpses, nor their taste. That was a blessing. But the pleasures—rarer, sharper for the horrors that tainted them—the pleasures remained.

Labyrinthine markings covered the loggerhead's shell. Had they been carved there? Did a turtle's shell feel pain? He had seen pain before in a turtle's eyes; it had meant less than nothing to him then. He wondered what difference his new conscience really made.

He had to see closer.

The three enormous centaurs standing guard at the top of the aisle didn't seem to be paying attention. What did it matter if they were? A centaur's kick might shatter a spine just as well as a dying sorcerer's fist. Periphas clambered over the back of an empty seat into the first row. He pressed his face against the plate glass. A trick of the curve, from so close, magnified what could be seen beyond. Not for nothing did a seat here cost an honest year's pay.

He could see into the turtle's eyes: dark, placid, and as clouded as his own. Nearsighted—yes! He remembered. No wonder those eyes showed no terror, no self-hate. They couldn't see him watching, nor the hundred others sitting out among ten thousand empty seats. The thought made Periphas miss his own illusions.

Nothing he'd done as a slave to Eurytus made sense to him now: playing jester, jumping at his master's clap, cringing at his backhand, then curling up at the foot of the bed and allowing himself to be stroked.

But you escaped, some vestige of self-love tried to tell him.

The floor dropped out of the second holding tank. A howling ball of stringy red fur and flailing limbs hit the pool; the Ape bared yellow teeth and attacked the water in a white-eyed rage, a giant knife clutched saloon-brawl style in its fist. Infected-looking scars lined its forearms—the marks of a syringe.

The loggerhead was motionless. Awaiting death? Too blind to see it coming? Too composed to fear it? Or not awaiting death, but stalking it, like Periphas himself.

He allowed himself to wish the turtle knew some secret he did not. The carvings on its shell seemed to flare with hidden sorcery. A pale flash, green as the Abyssine Sea, insinuating the scent of salt and the shriek of seabirds. Then it was gone, and

the Ape was advancing, the knife carving arcs through the water. Periphas shook his head bitterly. How much apsinth must he drink before that green sea flooded in, overflowed the barriers and drowned the seats, smashed apart the Circus of King Minos' Masque and scattered its patrons on a tidal wave across the desert?

The Ape raised its blade for the killing stroke.

The turtle flicked a fin and twisted, turning its shell to the blow. The blade glanced harmlessly away—and pale green color flared in the water. The ape howled, toppling backwards. The knife spun out of its hand.

Periphas found himself shouting aloud, half-rising from his seat. A few other voices echoed his, thin and far away. Had they seen it? Had they seen that flash of color?

The ape hauled itself up, spitting and coughing, scrabbling for the knife. From the far end of the pool, Periphas again caught the flash.

He sat back, knuckles pressed to his lips. “That monkey’s going to die,” he said aloud.

“The odds are nine to one in the Ape’s favor.” Periphas jumped; the slave waiter had reappeared beside him. “He’s scored eleven kills: a bull, a lion, a shark—he’s even beaten sorcerers. The Ape is rather a favorite here. Perhaps it’s the

irony. Look for yourself; you'll find his record in your program.”

The loggerhead glided close to the barrier, circling. Periphas' fingers followed the yellow smoothness of its belly along the glass, only inches away. “What about the Tortoise?”

The slave pointedly arranged the glass of absinth beside Periphas' paid-for seat in the second row. “The Tortoise, I believe, is a newcomer.”

Condescension, from a slave, though Periphas. How appropriate. He got up, following the loggerhead along the aisle as it swam. The carvings on its shell were spidery and thin, interconnected traceries meaningless in any language of logic or linear thought. He doubted that an untrained eye, even in the first row, would know them for what they were: the marks of madness bent to will. The symbols of a sorcerer's attention.

He returned to the second row, taking his time, scrutinizing the nearest of the box seats, trying to guess if one held his former master. *Does he know I'm here? Does he know why?* “This match is rigged,” he told the slave. *Or else intended to torment me.*

The slave adjusted the absinth on the tray with practiced indifference. “Our matches are fair. Eurytus personally prepares—”

“Fair. An opiated monkey with a cleaver against an unarmed herbivore?”

The Ape had retrieved the knife. Tendons twitched in its neck as disturbed water lapped against its chest; it edged to intercept the Tortoise’s circling path.

The slave smirked. “I thought you predicted the Ape would die. Make up your mind.”

Periphas swallowed a snarl. He stuffed a hand into the pocket of his suit, closed his fingers around the stub of a grease pencil and a penknife inlaid with horn: either one more than weapon enough to slaughter this slave. Here was a way to be sure of Eurytus’ attention. Periphas knew he still had it in him—the murders, the feasts of flesh. He could carve Eurytus’ spiral mark from this slave’s shoulder just as he’d carved it from his own. The centaur bouncers would be grinding their hooves through his spine in an instant. The next, he’d be dead. Unless Eurytus stopped them. He *was* watching. He had to be. Periphas flicked the penknife open with a thumb.

Master, I’ve brought you a gift. Proof I still serve you. Proof I can still perform as you require. Let me take his place. Let me sew his spiral into my own skin.

No.

He snapped the penknife forcefully closed, barely missing a fingertip. He slumped into his seat and took the goblet from

the tray. He gulped apsinth.

The ape threw itself headlong at the turtle, clutching its pigsticker in both hands. This time, as the turtle's shell lit green, there was a thrum like a long note played on a bass viola. A ripple crossed the surface of the pool. The ape was blasted backwards. New cracks appeared in the barrier glass. The turtle went on circling.

The slave's eyes widened.

"A setup," Periphas mumbled into his chest. Ape and Tortoise—they were symbols. Props in some black comedy whose tragic end Eurytus meant him to enact.

When Eurytus first came north from the Abyssine Sea, before so many learned to fear him, he carried a shield of loggerhead shell, inlaid with his spiral standard in the teeth of crocodiles and sharks. Not once was he obliged to use it. A centaur, of a race not known for swimming, wandering the desert wearing an archaic armor made from the bodies of sea monsters—that shield turned him into a figure of myth, of visceral terror. A conqueror. Years later, once he'd forced his followers to wear the spiral branded in their flesh, Eurytus made them watch as he hung his shield totem on a traitor and blasted both apart with a cannon. Even Periphas, who knew that neither shield nor scars held any more sorcery than the shavings of Eurytus' hooves, had assumed himself dead when a

fleck of splintered shell struck his chest. Eurytus' laughter echoed in his head.

The memory stung him, and suddenly Periphas realized he couldn't just wait here to die. Not if that laugh would be the last thing he heard. He had to take some stand—even a futile one—but what?

He forced himself to take another drink.

“Forgive me, sir.” The slave cleared his throat, fingers tracing the ridge of the scar. “But if you know something I don't... That is, if you're certain of the outcome, shouldn't you place a bet?”

“I'm somewhat beyond the need for wealth,” said Periphas acidly.

Then he recalled that the person standing next to him was more than just an aspect of his thoughts, another symbol. This man was a slave to Eurytus. “—but that shouldn't stop *you* from making a wager.”

The naked slave laughed feebly, mimed turning out the pockets of clothes he didn't possess.

Periphas dug out the last handful of raw gold he'd earned without killing and offered it on open palm.

The slave blanched, glanced over his shoulder at the guards. “Sir....”

“Better hurry,” said Periphās. The Ape limped after the Tortoise, leaning on the plate glass for support, hiding the knife behind its back—coming rather late to misdirection. “This fight’s not going to last.”

The slave, in a frantic motion, scraped all he could of the gold from Periphās’ palm and rushed away.

Periphās brushed his hands together, scattering gold dust across the aisle among curling petals and congealing streaks of blood.

* * *

Heavy drums sounded for the end of intermission; the crowd flowed in, laden with refreshments and fresh roses. Periphās struggled up the aisle against the current. Meaningless sigils traced themselves across his vision like afterimages of sun. In his pocket, his fingers wrapped the knife and pencil tight.

He glanced over his shoulder, past the seat he’d left behind. A ring of ashen black stained the glass; beyond it, the ape’s carcass floated, the tips of its orange hair singed and still smoking. Beneath the crowd noise and the drums, Periphās felt the shudder and thrum of the water draining.

The slave. The slave would lead him to Eurytus.

The centaurs touched their truncheons as he passed beneath the arch, but did not stop him. On the keystone, two

empty-eyed faces were carved in relief: one raised to the heavens, the other turned inward. A slogan was chiseled beneath: “Masque of Suicides”.

On the reverse, the same faces were carved, but the slogan was different—meant for the thousands thronging into the arena, rather than the one who’d fought his way out: “Masque of Martyrs”.

Periphas made his way to the betting box: a booth built into the sandstone wall, sealed off with iron and glass. The slave who had served him sagged against the counter, looking even paler than before. “You won,” the slave said, seeing Periphas approach. “Look.” He held out cupped hands filled with money. “Take it. You won.”

“That’s yours,” said Periphas.

“No, it isn’t,” said the slave. “I don’t want it.”

“Why not?”

A centaur stalked up to a tobacco vendor’s stall, staring unsubtly in their direction. The slave’s eyes rolled frantically. “Do you know how much this is?” he hissed. “Enough to buy me free.”

“Then buy yourself free.”

“I don’t *want* to be free.”

Now the satyr in the betting box was watching too. Periphas planted a palm in the small of the slave’s naked back.

The skin was sweat-slick and trembling. He pressed hard, forcing the slave towards the washrooms.

“Look at me,” the slave was saying. “I can’t survive outside. The centaurs protect me. What in Hades would I do when the money ran out—get a job waiting tables? What makes you think Eurytus would *let* me buy freedom? What makes you think he wouldn’t cut off my head, send my meat off to the packing plants in a slaughterhouse freight-car?”

“You must be joking,” said Periphas. “If he took the trouble to kill you, he’d eat you himself.” *But he wouldn’t. Setting you free would be crueler.* Periphas shoved; the slave stumbled through the washroom door. He followed, slamming it behind them. A female slave stood by the sinks with a pile of towels, drowning in powder and paint. She cringed back against the tile. His reflection’s eyes were bloodshot in the mirror, bagged like the banks of the Acheron shored up for flood. He couldn’t face Eurytus like this. Not without power.

Periphas drew out the grease pencil, pushed back his sleeve and began scrawling lines up the inside of his arm—angular, crisscrossing lines of meaning to no one but himself, to himself only because he’d forced meaning upon them, burned their meaning with hot irons into his mind the way Eurytus burned shapes into flesh. His hands shook. The pencil

slipped. He cursed, snapped it in half and threw it away. He pulled out the penknife. *If he can scar me, why shouldn't I?*

The slave whimpered, still holding out the money for Periphas to take.

“So you don't want freedom. Why did you accept my offer?”

“Greed,” the slave said, all the pride and haughtiness gone from his face. “The desire for... possessions. A suit like yours. A glass of wine, a pair of shoes. But when I saw how much—those things would only get me killed.”

“Then give the money to Eurytus. A gift. A thanks, for all his kindness.”

The slave shook his head. “Don't you see? I can't. Please take it back.”

Periphas spun, struck the money from his hands. The bills scattered, fluttering. “Tell me where Eurytus sits, or I'll kill you right here. Which box? How many guards?”

Trembling, the slave fled from the room.

Periphas opened the knife and began to carve sorceries into his flesh, cursing the slave and himself under his breath, letting the blood run into the sink with his sanity, feeling the bloody symbols' power feed his resolve, his strength. Wondering how many he could kill before they brought him

down. Everyone in this place was complicit. There were no victims anymore.

The female slave dropped her towels and fell on hands and knees, reaching for the money, gathering it up off the fouled, sticky floor. She didn't look at him. Long, black hair thick with oil and powder obscured her face in the reflection. Her fingernails were pomegranate-red. She whispered something.

“What?”

“Box nine,” she said. “There's always a crowd of his toadies. I can't say how many. But more than a dozen.” She got to her feet, pressing the soiled bills to her chest. Her reflection stood beside his in the mirror. Her hair still hung over her face. There was paint in it now. The shadowed stuff beneath didn't look like a face at all.

“Kill him,” she said.

* * *

On the floor of box nine a centaur writhed, wheezing, his windpipe crushed, the angular patterns from Periphas' forearm inked in blood across his throat.

Eurytus, master of the Circus of King Minos' Masque, lord of the Labyrinth Ranch, controlling shareholder of the New Ilium and Acheron Railroad, sat in a backless chair like those of the Emperors, surrounded by gorgeous, seven-foot bay centaurs with repeating rifles. Gold and turquoise draped his

shoulders like the emblems of a savage king. He held one hand open in the air, decked with rings, as though testing for rain from the blank desert sky. If he closed that hand, the centaurs would fire, and Periphas would die.

He wouldn't close it.

The smoke from a calumet pipe curled out between Eurytus' lips. "Periphas! Periphas, my old friend and love, you look well! Better than I remember."

Better, thought Periphas. He'd seen himself in the washroom mirror, hollow-eyed as Minos, up to his elbows in his own blood.

He focused on the fingers of that hand, on the rings. Rather than think of Eurytus himself—of the cheekbones, the dark brows rimming irisless eyes preternaturally clear, the soft, cleft lips, drawn back across powerful jaws—he forced himself to wonder how many in this room believed those rings had the power, how many obeyed him for fear of them and not the hand that wore them.

"Join us! Sit!" Eurytus entreated, indicating another low-slung chair—the one the suffocating centaur on the floor had occupied when Periphas burst in. "We have so much to discuss!"

Periphas went to the rail at the box's edge and looked out. Restless chants prowled the balconies like wasting diseases,

stalking from section to section, draining one throat raw, then leaping to another. The stands were filled, sold out. The only empty seat he could see was his own—directly below. Box nine was squarely above the southeast loge.

Eurytus rose and moved to stand beside Periphas. His shadow fell across the Circus. The chants faltered; heads turned; the crowd began to shout Eurytus' name instead. He waved. His rings sparkled.

Periphas clenched the mahogany rail so tight that dizziness exploded in his head. Blood trickled down between his fingers, staining the wood. He slackened his grip, praying to Ares, to Orcus or the Erinyes, to whatever god under whose patronage vengeful, delirious impotence fell, that his self-inflicted wounds might clot just enough to keep him from bleeding to death.

Eurytus laid a hand beside his on the rail. "Must there be such reticence—such tension between us? I won't allow it! What can I do, Periphas? How can I put you at your ease? Let me see. Those rifles—put them up, boys. He's too feeble to hurt us—can't you see he's hardly strong enough to raise his head? Poor, greedy Amycus must have tried to swallow too large a bone. Won't you share with us, Periphas? As proof to my protective friends of your goodwill?"

He clapped his hands, and a slave brought the calumet pipe. Eurytus drew from it deeply, then pressed it on Periphas. It was shaped like a hatchet bound with birch rods, the bowl carved into the flat of the hatchet-blade, the rods defaced with carvings of animal totems—the horse, the bull, the man, the buzzard. He did not raise it to his lips.

What did it mean, this abomination of cultures consumed? The egotism, the conceit—to invite one's worst enemy into arm's reach, and hand him a weapon in the form of a symbol of peace!

“That's better,” said Eurytus, laughing. “You look so much less fragile! Now, relax. It will be some moments before the next bout—certain details remain to be decided. In the meantime we might as well converse like civil people. Take some refreshment. You were drinking apsinth, I think?” He waved a hand. A goblet was brought. Poison? Why should he bother? Eurytus called for music; slaves came pounding ominous drumbeats. He called for meat; two centaurs carried in a steaming, spitted haunch. Eurytus used no knife; he ripped with his teeth and spoke between mouthfuls.

“You must tell me who made that fine suit you've ruined so prettily. This cut looks familiar. My tailor, perhaps? And how did you come by the leather for those gorgeous shoes? Not by poaching my minotaurs? I can hardly believe that you're here,

in my own private box! You know, Periphas, if it didn't seem so absurd, I'd say you'd been stalking me."

"Stalking *you*?" Periphas blurted. *You knew I was here. You knew, the instant I walked through the gate.*

"Oh, you're absolutely right," replied Eurytus. "It's hard to comprehend. You were the one who left *me*, after all. But how else am I to take your presence here?"

The turtle, the ape, the screaming crowd, the soulless slave—he was suddenly certain that Eurytus had arranged it all. Just to see what new pathetic horror Periphas might sink to, now that he had sworn off cruelty, sworn off murder. Periphas picked up the goblet and drank. He gagged and spat; it was sickly, deathly sweet. The room full of centaurs burst into laughter.

He snarled and hurled the goblet across the room, then the hatchet pipe after it, both with such force that clots burst in his arms and droplets of his own blood followed through the air. The shattering of glass, then wood and metal, broke the rhythm of the drums and cut off the laughter.

The centaurs had leveled their rifles before the fragments hit the floor.

"No!" Eurytus shouted, the predatory smile for the first time falling from his face. "Leave him be!" He reached out with

a ring-decked hand as though to catch his servants' wills and strangle them. "The first one of you to fire shall—"

Eleven centaurs dropped their guns as though burned by them. The twelfth had already fired. The noise of the blast roared through Periphas and out of the box, echoing across the arena. Ten thousand faces turned towards box nine.

Periphas pushed a finger through the hole in his eggplant-colored jacket, through his once cream-colored waistcoat and white shirt, and into his chest. He drew it out, red. The first thing that came to his mind was surprise that he had any blood left.

The centaur who had fired leapt across the shattered glass for the door.

"No," Eurytus said again, his voice and features blank. He did not bother to give chase. Instead, he reached out with one massive arm and caught Periphas around the waist. Supporting him, holding him as a dancer holds his partner, Eurytus pressed a palm against the wound.

Periphas closed his eyes. He could feel Eurytus' breath.

Eurytus half-carried him to the table. He knocked aside the platter of meat, the whiskey snifters, the ashtrays, and laid down Periphas instead. "You can't die yet...you won't...I can use my sorcery to heal as well as slaughter." He spoke haltingly, as though to convince himself it were true. "The slug—we shall

dissolve it. Organ walls can be knit just like sorcerer's scrawl. I only need...I only need to see inside you."

Eurytus sucked a bit of Periphas' blood from his thumb, bit his lip, and set to tearing off the suit of eggplant-colored silk.

Periphas breathed deep. The bullet had missed his lungs, at least. Yes. He could feel it. He savored the pain—and the vindication. He knew why Eurytus had staged this masque of wretchedness, of failure. He could hear the reasons in Eurytus' voice: abjection, grief, self-hate.

Gathering strength from the red sorceries carved in his wrists, Periphas shoved his enemy away. "Enough," he said, dragging himself to his feet. "Enough, Eurytus! You won't touch me. No—not even to heal me. What is it you want? Why don't you just kill me? Why didn't you kill me an hour ago, or a year?"

Eurytus glanced out at the crowd. At the sound of the gunshot, the mere implication of death, they were roaring, hurling roses in the air. His lips twitched. Did a smile hide there? When he turned back they were slack. "I let you leave me, Periphas, because of love. I thought you understood that. I thought your desire for freedom sincere. I know I was vain not to kill you. I knew you'd only want to kill me in return. It's rare I take such risks, you know. But if you wish to scorn my

generosity...if you really desire to die...I'll help you any way I can."

"Then fight me. Now. Out there, where all the slaves and suicides can see. Because what I desire is to see you die with me."

Two slaves came, hunched, to sweep up broken glass and haul the soiled meat away.

"Of course," Eurytus said. "Of course. My former champion, my former love, deserves no less."

* * *

Slaves swung the gate closed. Periphas hobbled to the center of the ring and sank to his knees. He shrugged off his silk coat painfully, exposing the sheet of hard, dry blood that caked his torso. The crowd sucked in collective breath.

After a moment he pulled the coat towards him again, fumbled in a pocket and withdrew the knife. The patrons in the front row pressed their noses to the glass.

Eurytus trotted from the opposite gate, unarmored, unarmed, turquoise and copper beads gleaming against his bare chest. He raised a fist. The applause was deafening. "Fancy a wager?" he said. "Any terms you like."

"What terms should I ask, beyond our deaths?"

“Anything. I might suggest pensions for your loved ones, were there anyone who loved you. Stipulations for your funeral? Perhaps you’d like your suit pressed.”

Periphas spat on the ground, traced a spiral in it with a blood-caked finger. His thoughts followed the spiral to its center—to himself, the boy whose name was not yet Periphas, carnivore child of a cannibal people, kneeling on the beach of the Abyssine Sea, eating meat by the fire, when Eurytus and his man-monster-god tribe thundered through, crushing skulls beneath their hooves. He remembered the muscles of the man-horse’s back, moving between a boy’s thin legs.

“The loggerhead—the one you’ve turned into a weapon—release it. Set it free in the river.”

“An irresponsible request! A tame, domesticated beast such as that, unused to fending for itself, forced to survive in the wild? I fear for the safety of the crocodiles!” The crowd cackled and jeered. “From you, I should expect no less.”

“And you? What if you win?”

“All I ask is that, should you somehow be defeated, yet survive, *you return to my service.*”

No chance of that, thought Periphas. He shoved down the memories, filled his mind with the bloody sigils, the ones carved in his arms—the ones that meant obliteration and release.

He shook Eurytus' hand.

Eurytus turned to the crowd, raised his voice. "In the interest of fairness, given my opponent's weakened state, I choose, as is my privilege, a champion to take my place."

He wheeled and galloped out through the towering plate-glass gate, the crowd still cheering; the slaves slammed it closed and sealed it before Periphas could comprehend what had occurred.

Eurytus was laughing. Periphas couldn't hear it through the glass—but the teeth, the thrown-back head, the red maw were enough.

A holding tank slid into place, the creak of iron runners straining under some monster's weight. Periphas opened his knife. He shoved the tip of the blade through the skin of his palm and feverishly began to trace.

The bottom of the tank swung free. Its contents fell, hitting the floor with the slap of flesh on stone. Periphas surged to his feet, then swayed as though struck in the chest. Raucous laughter filled the stands. His new opponent flapped its fins helplessly, rolling those deep-green, innocent eyes. The loggerhead turtle. The labyrinth carved in its shell invited him along a dozen different paths.

Hoist it onto your shoulders. A rescue! Smash through the glass. Slay a hundred slaves and centaurs. Escape this circus, set the turtle free.

You are already dead. You couldn't even lift it. Refuse to fight. Drop the knife. Give in. You are beaten. Go back to Eurytus. Beg for his love, his forgiveness.

The knife slid to the tips of his fingers.

Behind the barrier, Eurytus smiled. Of course. It was what he'd desired all along.

Better to slit your own throat and be done with it. Throw yourself on the turtle's back and cling there until you fry.

Kill it. You know how. The meat between the head and shell—stab there, just once, deep. The Tortoise is released from pain, from meaning, from torment it doesn't even know it suffers. You gain another chance at death, redemption.

Periphas shifted the knife into his bleeding palm. He lurched forward.

Eurytus scowled.

The turtle's shell flared blue, freezing Periphas in place. He knew that color: the blue not of sunlit ocean but of desert sky, the color of starvation, thirst.

The turtle flicked its fins and shot away from the floor as though it were swimming in air. It spiraled high above the

crowd, then banked and dove. The patrons of the Circus roared.

And Periphas knew that his mercy and pity for this tormented creature's innocence had meant nothing at all. The turtle shape that now bore down upon him with murderous speed was nothing but a vessel, like the carvings on its shell, to be filled with rage, with silent laughter. Eurytus controlled it.

Periphas flung himself aside. Something tore in his chest; he felt the trickle of fresh blood. With a thrum, a blinding green flare and a concussion, the turtle hit the floor; the stone cracked with the impact. He barely had time to get to his feet before the turtle came at him again, low and fast. He dove; it hummed past overhead, so close that for a second time he could almost reach out and stroke its yellow underbelly. It wheeled, came back for a third pass.

He saw his chance as it came towards him—saw what had to happen. The gap in its shell, between neck and shoulder. The Tortoise moved too fast for him to harm it any other way.

Periphas rolled to his feet. He wiped his blood from the blade of the knife between thumb and finger. He whispered words to it; the steel smoldered, grew hot. The world slowed. The turtle came at him head-on, and he waited.

An arm's length and an instant from impact, he launched himself forward, striking with sorcerous force. The blade

pierced just to the left of the Tortoise's head. The whole knife disappeared without a sound, plunging deep into reptilian flesh, and his hand and arm were swallowed behind it. He felt the slipperiness and warmth as the turtle's innards closed around him. Then the shell slammed into his chest. The sea-green gleam of the Abyssine Sea washed over his vision.

* * *

The crunch of hooves on broken glass. The smell of singed hair and cooked flesh. His eyes opened barely to slits. Raising his head from the floor filled his skull with howling white pain. The desert sun drove into his eyes like a lance. The turtle lay beside him on its back, wheezing. Eurytus stood over him.

Periphas moistened his cracked lips. "I've won. I'm not your slave—get back."

Eurytus folded his arms, expressionless. "It isn't dead. Nor are you. I am waiting to see which dies first. In the interest of fairness. The Circus must have a victor."

Periphas' head was a beehive. His mouth tasted of sand. The ground whirled beneath him. All the sorcery he'd learned from Eurytus, the powers he'd wielded killing minotaurs, centaurs and men, overthrowing kings, destroying cities, was now just sufficient to keep him from slipping away. Periphas tensed his chest and shoulders painfully and drew his arm, slick with gore, out of the turtle's flesh.

Its eyes were still open, still cloudy green and full of pain. Was that pain an illusion, a trick of his enemy's power like everything else? Periphas searched for the hint of Eurytus' pure black eyes behind it. He searched a long time, taking great care, until it seemed that, in the dying turtle's eyes, he saw shadows as cast by a ship on the ocean, a cloud on the sand. In the end, he knew these were illusions, and the shape he saw was his own.

Wasn't this hollow shell of a living thing, its simple mind consumed by sorcery, exactly what he himself had been? The savage boy that Eurytus took and named and raised, so beautiful and gifted, had only once done anything other than his master's will—yet that same scarred, self-pitying, self-destructive slave had managed at last to defy his master utterly. Periphas smiled, a weak, cruel smile. His head fell back against the ground, his final, bloodshot, blurred gaze fixed upon Eurytus.

Eurytus did not laugh. He didn't sneer. He covered his eyes with a hand and shuddered as though he'd drunk wormwood.

And the circus patrons—from those in the farthest balconies who couldn't see or even guess to bet on what had occurred, to those in the front row whom the green flash and the shattering of glass had already slain, who watched from

their new seats where they waited their turns at the back of King Minos' court—they all were silent.

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PAWN'S GAMBIT

by Adam Heine

The netter's timing couldn't have been worse. I'd been in Savajinn a week, looking for a knocker named Tarc. A whole bleeding week. When Tarc finally agreed to meet, at the Sick Savaj, that's when the netter decided to show up.

Netters were all over Savajinn—had to be to catch their bounties—but only one was gully enough to walk into a Savaj pub alone. They called her Cold Crys, said she once took a bullet to the shoulder and smashed her ship just to net a guy worth a hundred notes—not even enough to pay the doctor to get the bullet out.

She walked straight to my table, ignoring the stares. She didn't try to grab me or anything, just waited. Her rep didn't scare me, but if she aimed to throw me back in the klack, I'd miss my meeting with Tarc, and then my daughter was good as dead.

I focused on the board in front of me like she wasn't there. The swabber I was playing against—Tarc's middleman, he said—had me in check. I moved my king out, away from the pawns. "So what are you doing here?"

“What do I do anywhere?” said Crys. Her expression was unreadable, hidden behind that black rag she always wore on her face.

“Aye, but here? Last time a netter grabbed a mark in this pub, he got swung from his own keel.”

She sniffed, but said nothing. The other thing about Crys is she’s always thinking ahead. You lose her in the streets, only to find her waiting for you in your safehouse. The way she strolled in there, all guns and blades looking for a fight, I reckon she wanted me to run. No doubt she had guards at the exits to make sure I didn’t get far.

So I didn’t run, no sir. Truth is, I hoped she would leave, wait to catch me outside. I could talk to Tarc then maybe, learn where my daughter was, before figuring out a way to outsmart Crys. “What’s your next move?” I asked.

“Ain’t my turn. And you’re nutterd.”

I thought she meant the arrest, but she was looking at the game. The middleman had put me in check again, soon to be ‘mate.

“No worries,” I said. “The pawns are safe.”

She gave me a queer look. “The king ain’t.”

“Maybe I ain’t playing to win.” She wasn’t leaving. I wondered if I was wrong. What if she wanted me to stay, and I was playing into her trap? Either way, I reckon I wasn’t gonna see

Tarc that night. But like I said, I couldn't go back to the klack. Not yet.

I waved at the barkeep. "Heyya, baron! More whisk, aye?"

"Oy! Take your turn," said the middleman.

"I will, Maggie. Don't wet your sheets. Hey, baron!" I turned, bumping the table with my hip. A couple pieces fell over.

"Watch the game!"

"What are you flailing about?" I picked up the fallen pieces and replaced them. "There, we breezy?"

"Oh, aye," he frowned, "so long as the king goes back here."

"What are you on? I put it where it was."

"You piking bastard."

"Actually, he's right," said Crys.

I smiled inside. Loud enough for the whole pub to hear, I said, "Oh, that so, netter? You're a bit out of your country to be telling a Savaj what's what. Next they'll be letting bleeding jacks in here, telling us what to do, aye? As for you," I told the swabber, "if you ain't happy with my king then why don't you move it yourself!"

I lifted the table, dumping it on Tarc's middleman. He took a swing at me, then the whole pub exploded. If there's one

thing Savajes like, it's a good brawl, and none better than with a bounty hunter what doesn't know her place.

I took my fair share of blows but managed to put some space between me and Crys. As for the men she had outside, it wasn't hard to get them involved in the fight too, not once I pointed out they were with the netter. Once they were busy, I got away clean.

About three blocks down the road, I turned two corners to an alley to catch my breath. I was fair certain nobody had followed me, but that didn't mean I was safe. No place was safe with Crys in town, even if the brawl *had* caught her off guard, which I doubted. She must have known, walking into the Sick Savaj like that, she was picking a fight with the whole bleeding pub.

I had a bigger problem, though. With Crys on me, and me billying with Tarc's middleman in there, I didn't see how I'd ever find the knocker again.

"That was a fancy trick, gunner, with the checkers."

I spun around. The man in front of me was small, wiry. His black hair and moustache fell flat and greasy around his face, and he held himself with all the confidence of a killer. I reached carefully for my gun.

"Easy, mate, I ain't here to pack you. You're Bancroft?"

"Aye?" My hand stayed on the pistol.

“I’m Tarc.”

I shook his hand carefully. “Chess.”

“How’s that?”

“The game,” I said. “It was chess.”

“Whatever floats you. Listen, we best be flying. Won’t take your netter more than five minutes to get out of the pub, and less to find you here, aye?”

I nodded and followed him to the street. We walked to the docks quickly, but casually. No sense drawing attention we didn’t need.

“What did B’Lasser tell you about me?”

I shrugged. “Just said you needed a crewmate, aye?” Though B’Lasser had told me fair more than that. He told me who Tarc was and who he’d been hired to kill. That’s why I’d escaped and why I sought Tarc out in the first place. Of course, I wasn’t going to tell him that, not until my gun was at his head and Jillan was safe.

“I’m a knocker, mate.”

I gave him my best blank stare. “Knocker?”

“Aye, you know. Grave filler, troubleshooter, hitman.”

“Really? Who all d’you kill?”

“Depends who’s paying. Welly ain’t getting his money on time, wants to make an example. Or a govvie wants his election

won the easy way. Mostly it's just folk though. Good old revenge."

A chill climbed my spine when he said revenge. "Sounds like you work alone then."

"In the main, but I need someone to help fly the ship, do lookout—turner stuff. Last guy, well... he went crying to the jacks without permission, get me?"

"Aye."

"So you in?"

He was bleeding chatty. I reckon he'd told me enough that, if I said no, he'd pack me right there. "What about the netter?"

"Crys, right? You know I heard she killed her husband for five notes and a pair of boots."

"You don't mind I got a netter on my keel?"

Tarc shrugged. "Who doesn't? This is my ship, here."

The airship was small—a single room enclosed in an oblong egg of ironwood, with two propellers at its stern. It was the ship of a man who traveled light and fast. The tanks that stored the ultra-light cydium gas were built flush with the upper hull; the ship was a dropout—so called for the way pirates would dump their cydium and drop suddenly out of the skies to surprise their targets. A useful feature for someone in Tarc's line of work.

Tarc climbed the rope to board the ship, leaving me to untie it. While he climbed, I had a clean shot. Ain't nothing he could've done. Maybe I should've done it; he was gonna kill my daughter, after all. But knockers were rain in the ocean—kill one, there's always more. If I wanted to keep Jillan alive, I needed to know who hired him.

Course, I would've preferred to find Jillan myself, take her somewhere safe. But between the two of us, Tarc was the only one who knew where she was.

* * *

It was two long days to Asimont. Tarc wanted us flying through the night to stay ahead of Crys, so we took shifts—me in the day, Tarc at night.

There ain't much to do on an airship built for two. I'd stoke the burner at times, or make sure the dropout was flying straight, but mostly I was stuck in my thoughts.

I thought about Jillan and the dark I'd put her in. I'd always been afraid one of my old bosses would find out I had a daughter and use her against me. That's why I kept her hid all those years. Apparently, I didn't hide her well enough.

Unfortunately, all those years being hid didn't sit well with my little girl either. When she grew up, and got some morals different from her Pa, she hid herself from me too.

I was never a good father, I admit. But I'd be bled if I was going to let her die for my mistakes, no matter what she thought of me.

Tarc was awake for a couple hours at the beginning and end of my shift, and those hours were longer than the ones I spent with my thoughts. He was chatty as a guiro-bug. I swear I don't know how he handled the night hours all alone. Maybe he talked at me while I slept.

He didn't just talk, though. He asked questions. The more he asked, the more chary I got that he'd figure out what I was doing—that one of his marks was my little girl, and that I meant to stop him.

“So what put you in the klack?” he asked the second night.

“I was a junk runner. Smuggled munitions into Salvadora.”

“Aye? How'd they net you?”

I shrugged. “Same way they net everyone, I reckon.”

He laughed. I didn't like to tell him any more than I had to. I'd already let slip that I escaped from prison. At least he didn't ask why; I guess the regular answer's good enough. I didn't want to lie more than I had to either—afraid he'd see through it.

“Do anything before that?”

“I was a merc,” I grunted, “in the war.” Played double agent, too, but I didn't tell Tarc that. It was a common enough

story for a merc, I reckon, but it was also why Jillan was in trouble. I didn't want more questions in that direction.

"Merc, eh? I like mercs."

That worried me. Nobody liked mercs. "Why?"

"Mercs got enemies. Enemies hire *me*."

"Aye? Like who?"

Tarc wagged a finger. "That's naughty, that is. Never ask after a knocker's employers." He looked to the skies as if he saw something, though we hadn't seen anybody since we left Savajinn. "Besides, I never know them anyway."

Damn. Though I don't know why I expected to get the answer so easy. I thought again about packing him then, but I couldn't decide which was the bigger risk: trying to find Jillan before another knocker came, or letting Tarc lead me to her.

"So you gonna tell me where we're headed?" I asked. We'd been flying over land for half my shift.

"Not far. Got a couple of marks here in Asimont."

"What'd they do?" Maybe one of them was the daughter of an old merc who took money from both sides.

Tarc scowled. "It was cute once, mate. Now you're bugging me. Just keep to your business and let me kee—"

The dropout shook violently, and we both fell to the floor. With a crash, the stern dropped out of sight, leaving a gaping hole where one of the propellers used to be.

“Take an eye!” Tarc tossed me a spyglass.

I climbed the ladder and poked my head out of the top hatch. “Gunship closing fast! Ain’t got a name or colors though.”

“It’s your netter.”

“You sure?” I looked through the spyglass again.

“You know many gunships got no name?”

He was right. It was bad luck not to name a ship, but Crys wouldn’t care. I thought—maybe just hoped—that I’d missed the name, but sure enough, on second look, her hull was blank. Like Crys was giving Fate the finger.

With a puff of smoke, an iron chain sailed towards us. “Harpoon!”

Tarc slapped a button on the wall, and a hundred tiny hatches opened on the roof, releasing hot, ginger-scented cydium. The dropout fell a hundred meters in seconds, and the harpoon sailed safely overhead.

At least it should have, but instead of a harpoon there was an empty chain above us. The real harpoon—fired shortly after the decoy—hit us square in the keel.

I dropped to the bridge. Tarc stared at the harpoon that had bit into his hull. “We’re nutted.”

I looked around for some solution; I'd be bled before I gave up. Either we were getting out of this, or I'd kill the knocker trying. "Lose the cydium."

"How's that?"

"All of it, drop us till we're swinging from that chain."

"You're loony," Tarc said, but he hit the button anyway.

I grabbed a support beam. Tarc did the same while still holding the button. The ship pitched down as the cydium escaped and more of the ship's weight was carried by the harpoon. It wasn't long before the prow pointed straight down and Tarc and I were hanging on the walls.

"That's as much as will go," he said.

I watched the harpoon, hoping the weight was too much for it. Already the wood had cracked under its iron barbs. Nevertheless, it held strong.

Tarc shouted, "Hold on, gunner!"

"What?" I followed his gaze out the roof hatch. Where there should've been clear skies ahead, I saw a mountainside.

I barely had time to tighten my grip before we crashed into the trees. Glass and wood shattered as the ship was dragged upside-down across the mountain. I dug my fingers into the support beam until my nails bled.

Finally the keel gave way; the harpoon shot out. With nothing holding us up, the dropout slid into the trees and collapsed on the jungle floor.

I let myself fall onto the ceiling—now the floor—of the airship. Whoever built it had built it tough. I got away with nothing more than bruised ribs and a hangover.

Tarc winced as he stood up. “Nice. Got a follow-up?”

I shrugged. I hadn’t thought much farther than getting off the harpoon. “Run?”

Tarc grunted his assent, but he didn’t leave the wreck right away. Instead, he opened a door hidden in the floor above him. He pulled out a length of cord and a box of firesticks. The cord hissed when he lit it. “Now we run.”

Headache or no, we ran like monks from a whore. A minute later, the hillside exploded in a shower of flame and kindling.

I picked myself off the ground. “Think she’ll buy it?”

“Don’t matter. She’ll have to search to be sure. By then, we could be halfway to Grenai.”

“Who’s in Grenai?”

Tarc was chatty, but not stupid. He didn’t answer, just turned and walked down the mountain. I had no choice but to follow.

* * *

It was midday before we reached a town. I was too tired to care which one. Tarc, who'd slept just before the attack, offered to keep watch until nightfall.

"We ain't safe in a wayhouse?" I asked.

"Weren't safe in the skies, were we? I reckon there ain't anywhere safe."

I was about to ask how he ever slept thinking like that, but I was out as soon as I hit the pillow.

Next thing I knew, Tarc shook me awake. "Move it, gunner. We gotta go."

I bolted up, wide-eyed.

"Easy. Crys ain't found us yet."

What was I doing? Jillan, right. I had to find Jillan. "Where are we?"

"Bendarin. Got a couple marks to pack, then we can fly."

The marks were here? "Which ones?"

"I told you to keep that flack to yourself. Ain't your trouble, and you don't want it, breezy?"

I said no more as I followed him out of the wayhouse to the street, but my heart clogged my throat. How was I going to find Jillan before he packed her? Was she here in Bendarin, or did he have marks somewhere else too?

Tarc slowed down, investigating the townhouses pressed together on either side of the road. When he found the one he

was looking for, he told me to stay outside. “Jacks come sniffing, you pound on that door, breezy? Knock and holler like your wife threw you out.”

I nodded. Tarc didn't enter the house he told me to knock at, but one across the street. He worked at the door a second, then slipped inside.

I waited a moment, then ran to that house. The outside bore only a street number, no name. I looked in the window, but it was too dark to make anything out. I paced the front of the house, rubbing my hands like it was winter. If this was Jillan's house, I had to stop him, but how? Worse: what if it wasn't?

Pike it. I had to take the risk. I opened the door as quietly as I could and stepped inside. Nobody was downstairs, so I tiptoed to the second floor. Through an open door on the right, I heard a man pleading for his life. “Whatever they're paying you, I'll double it.”

“I doubt that,” said Tarc. “This ain't the house of no welly.”

I poked my head in, but snapped it back just in time. Tarc's pistol gouged a hole in the doorway. “It's me!” I said.

“Jesus, mate, what the hell are you doing?”

I came around the corner slowly. “Sorry...” I needed a lie. Jillan was safe for the moment, but I still didn't know where she was. All I could think of was, “The jacks.”

Without taking his eyes off me, Tarc drove his knife into the other man's chest. "Didn't I tell you to knock, they come?"

I glanced back and forth between Tarc's gun and the dying man. The man gasped for air, his mouth opening and closing yet producing no sound. Mine did the same as I sought a reply.

"I'm starting to think that you—" Tarc stopped. Outside came a low rumbling—airship propellers. Tarc looked out the window and frowned. "Jacks."

"I told you." My voice shook, but the lie came easy then. "I didn't want to draw attention, if we didn't have it."

Tarc thought it over, still frowning. Finally, he removed his knife, wiped the blood on the dead man's nightshirt, and led the way downstairs. The jack's airship had passed by; they weren't looking for us, not yet.

"You scared me," Tarc said, reloading the shot he'd fired from his two-barrel pistol. "I thought you were cheating me, sure."

"If I were gonna do anything, I'd have done it in your sleep, aye?"

Tarc smiled. "Aye, s'truth."

Seeing I had his good humor, if not his trust, I hazarded a change of subject. "So one more, you said?"

"Aye. Once she's done, we can blow."

She. Jillan? How many marks might he have that were women? He hushed me before I could ask.

We came to a standalone house, with a fence and a yard. The yard grew chest-high, and the fence was rotted, held up only by the creepers that had grown over it. The boards that made the house looked just as rotted. “You sure this is it?”

Tarc motioned for me to stay on the street while he went to the front door. He found it unlocked and disappeared inside. I didn’t hesitate this time. I hopped the fence and ran through the tall grass to the back of the house. Sure enough, the door there was unlocked too, so I stepped inside.

I didn’t have a plan. I just prayed I could find her before Tarc did. As it turned out, she found me.

“What the hell are you doing here?” Jillan hissed. She’d come up behind me, held a knife to my back.

“Jill.”

“Never come back. Remember me saying that?”

She was loud. He would hear. “Jill, listen—”

“I thought getting you arrested would be hint enough.”

I paused. I didn’t know she’d done *that*. “There’s someone in your house, Jill.”

“Aye, and he ain’t leaving.”

“Someone *else*.”

That stopped her.

“He’s been hired to kill you.”

“Why?” She was whispering now.

“I don’t know. I think maybe someone I played in the war is trying to get back at me.”

I expected that to produce a new string of epithets. Instead, her eyes widened and she breathed the word, “Seth.”

“Who’s Seth?” I asked.

Jillan ran deeper into the house. I followed her, tried to grab her arm, but I was too slow. She threw open a door, and a pistol shot rang out. She fell to the ground.

I leapt into the room and pulled a gun on Tarc.

“You piking bastard,” he said. He had his two-barrel aimed at me. He had a knife out too, but instead of a pleading man in a bed, it was a boy. Bleed it, the boy looked just like Jillan.

Jillan groaned on the ground behind me. I silently thanked God.

“Who hired you?” Mostly I was stalling. Now I’d found Jillan, I could kill Tarc and deal with other knockers as they came. But he had the boy, crying softly, under his blade.

“I knew you were setting to cheat me,” he said. “You working with Crys too?”

“Nay.” Crys melted out of the shadows to my right.

I drew a second gun on her. Tarc turned his two-barrel to her, then thought better of it and aimed at my grandson. “So

it's true," he said. "You are the devil's bitch."

Crys raised empty hands. "Don't do anything stupid, aye? I ain't alone."

Tarc grabbed the boy by his collar—he couldn't have been more than five. Tarc held him close, a knife to his throat and a gun to his head. Slowly, he made his way towards me and the door.

I was nuttered. If I shot at Tarc without killing him, the boy was dead. Even if I did kill him, Crys was there to take me in, and Jillan would be left alone. If I wanted to protect Jillan from the knockers, I'd have to kill Crys too. But I wasn't sure I could hit them both.

Tarc came closer, his eyes darting quickly between me and Crys. I stepped aside, putting Tarc between me and her as he walked out the door. I still had a gun on each of them.

What was Crys's plan? She wouldn't have walked in there without one, but all she cared about was netting her marks. For all I knew, she'd let Tarc take the boy, if it meant catching him later. She might be willing to do that, but I wasn't.

Tarc passed between us. He was skittish; he kept trying to look at both of us at the same time. Meanwhile, my shot was getting easier. If I were going to pack two at once, now was my chance.

Tarc turned his head at a noise outside. I took the chance and fired. At the same time, Crys dropped her hand, her sleeve exploded, and I blacked out.

* * *

I woke to a bright light. Clouds. Sun. I was dead for sure, but when I glanced to the side, my brain went off like a cannon. The dead don't get migraines, do they?

A shadow hovered, put a hand on my chest, a cold towel on my head. "Ask your questions," said Crys. "Then rest."

Questions? Since when did Cold Crys care to explain anything to her marks?

I tried moving parts of my body. Nothing hurt aside from my head, but my hands and feet were tied down. I heard the hum of airship propellers and finally figured out where I was. "Why ain't I dead?"

"Wax bullet. Prison wanted you back alive."

So that's why my head felt like the devil had spit up my nose. Crys had had a gun up her sleeve. She'd come in empty-handed so as not to scare us into anything stupid. Or *more* stupid, I guess. "Tarc?"

"Nay," she said.

"What?"

"Didn't need him alive."

I breathed a short sigh. "And my daughter? The boy?"

“They’ll be right.”

I allowed myself a longer sigh.

Crys crossed her arms. “That was stupid, what you did. I admit I didn’t see it coming.”

“I ain’t always playing to win,” I said weakly.

I saw something—maybe admiration—in her eyes, but her expression was hidden behind the mask. “You ain’t like the stories I heard.”

“Stories?”

She paused a moment, as though remembering something. She laughed. “You were saving your pawns, weren’t you?”

“Didn’t want Jillan getting killed on account of my sins.”

“*Your* sins? You think the knocker was sent cuz of you?”

“Wasn’t he?”

She hesitated, probably deciding how much to tell me. “Jillan owed a welly some money. Weren’t about you at all.”

So... what then? It wasn’t my fight after all? But it was my fight. Whatever Jillan thought of me, she was my daughter, even if she’d brought the knocker on herself. “It don’t matter though. They’ll send another knocker. After you take me back, there’ll be no one to protect her. Jillan’s good as dead.”

“Nay, she’ll be right. Welly got his money, as it turns.”

“What? How?”

The expression behind her mask was unreadable. “Cuz sometimes, pawn lives long enough, she gets to be a queen.”

“You don’t mean *you*...?”

She waved me quiet and said, “The stories about me ain’t true either.” Then she got up to see to her ship and crew.

“Heyya, Crys.”

She turned.

“I.. I’m sorry I shot you.”

“No worries. You missed.”

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Adam Heine is an American what makes his home in Thailand, where he and his lass take in kids with nowhere to go. “Pawn’s Gambit” is his first published tale, and he’s gully enough to hope someone will pick up his novel set in the same world. He gales about writing, drawing, and other dark over at <http://adamheine.blogspot.com>.

**Beneath
Ceaseless
Skies**

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COVER ART

“The Canyon,” by Christophe Vacher



Christophe Vacher has provided artwork for the movie and animation industries since 1989, including the Disney films “Hercules,” “Tarzan,” and “Treasure Planet.” He served as Art Director for animated movies including the feature film “9,” for which he received an Annie Awards nomination for Best Production Design. Visit his galleries at www.vacher.com.

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