



# Beneath Ceaseless Skies

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## DRAWN UP FROM DEEP PLACES

by Gemma Files

Ofttimes Jerusalem Parry dreamed of the noise—that one snap, so small yet final—which his mother’s neck had made giving way, or the creak of her body swaying from a Cornish gallows-tree; other times he dreamed that Solomon Rusk lay beside him in the bed that’d once been his, long rogue’s body pressed so close that he near to crushed the breath from Parry’s lungs and slipped a thigh ‘tween his knees to force them open, so their weapons might joust for precedence. From the former visions Parry woke with cheeks wet and throat restricted, while from the latter he woke with teeth all a-grind and trousers shamefully tight, for he well-knew that that great bastard’s ghost still lingered somewhere nearby, smirking invisibly at how easy his murderer was to discomfit.

Less often yet, however, he dreamed of the storm whose fury had first disclosed him, both to others and to himself—seen him bloom up a wizard under its tumult, little though that black apotheosis had seemed to benefit him, at the time. This night, it seemed, had been such a night, borne back on a rush of wind and thunder: a downpour alternately salt and sweet,

great swells and breakers tipping the Navy ship he'd signed onto at Portsmouth like a child's bath-toy while cold rain dashed straight in the crew's faces, stinging their all eyes half-blind.

Parry found himself handing his way up the deck, clinging to the guide-rope while those around him reeled and shrieked like Bacchantes, busy as any half-drowned ant-hill. Wherever he tried to help they scurried from him, averted their gaze and threw out signs to ward him off as though he were Satan or the plague; called out as soon as they recognized his face, bawling the same idiot warning from stem to stern, no matter their more pressing distractions—

“Tis him, the Jonah... Ensign Parry's a Jonah sure, cursed by God, so's any ship carries him will flounder! It's he our Savior hates, and we who suffer for it!”

“You rave, sir,” he recalled telling the bo'sun's mate, whom he'd seized by the collar—pulling him close as circumstance would allow for and channeling every jot of cold authority the Church had taught him into it, as he did. “Superstitious rot. There's no such thing, you fool!”

“So *you'd* say!” the man had thrown back, not quite brave enough to strike at him with aught but words. “Now give me room, you curst damned creature—let me to my work, that real men not perish on your sins' account!”

It cut him, enough to make him let go with a shove, feeling a cruel jolt of pleasure to see his accuser slip to bruise both knees and tear his palms in the scuppers' white backwash. Hearing himself roar, at the same time: "Then go, you scum, and good riddance! May the Sea take your bones and Hell itself tear your black heart in half, likewise!"

(That mate *had* died later on, Parry only now remembered, for which they'd blamed him too. But then, he had never held as short a bridle on his own tongue as he might have wished, under pressure; it was a fault his masters had tried to cure him of, and his back still bore the scars of their tutelage now, 'neath his current captain's coat.)

*Aye, so I recall, Solomon Rusk's hated voice told him, here. For I saw those many a time, when you and I were in our sin. But then, ye'd've made a terrible parson, my Jerusha, no matter had they managed to beat every last scrap of pride from you, having no great talent for forgiveness—as ye must surely know, if you're any sort of honest.*

But there was no point in answering, for conversation with Rusk was the most blatant of traps, now more than ever. So Parry only shrugged to himself instead, thinking in reply: *Well, we'll never have proof of it now, will we? And whose fault is that, pray tell?*

(God's surely. His, or the bloody Devil's.)

Then, in the way of dreams, he found himself standing several feet above-deck, as those who'd taken his name in vain stared upwards, faces blank and gaping: a moment of purest ecstasy, surer than any proof of the Divine love he'd chased after all his life—so immediate, so *real*. Ablaze from top to toe with blue-green Saint Elmo's fire, Parry watched the storm peel back 'round his presence as his will plunged upwards, parting the weather's knot, and felt himself lit so bright that all his store of gall was burnt away at once.

*I did this*, he remembered thinking. *This is my work*.

Such joy as he'd never known, before, or after. Yet it lasted only until the ship's witch-finder withdrew a heavy iron cross from his belt and fling it, cracking Parry 'cross the temple so hard that he hit the deck already unconscious.

\* \* \*

Here he felt himself bolt awake once more, iron-made collar scar 'round his neck puffed worse than usual, so choking-stiff he could hardly breathe. Whilst through the cabin door, his own bo'sun hammered hard and called to him, a cringing note of apology in his voice: "Cap'n, sorry t' disturb ye, but you're wanted on deck, soon as possible. Ye know we'd not rouse ye but 'twas necessary, given your orders... Cap'n Parry, sir?"

“I hear you, man,” he managed, at last, voice a bare rasp. “What is it?”

“That creature of yours, Mister Dolomance—he’s found somethin’ as has an air of... supernature about it, such that we thought it best ye take a look.”

“I’ll be up soon as modesty permits, then. Tell them to leave it be, ‘til I get there.”

“Yes sir,” the bo’sun replied, gratefully. “There were no great plans otherwise, believe me.”

*Oh, I do*, Parry thought, darkly. And levered himself upright, cracking his neck gingerly side to side, to loosen the scar’s hold on his wind.

Ignoring Captain Rusk’s phantom gaze, he refused to be hurried in his customary toilet: gathered his hair back in a neat tail and took care to re-order his linen, wrapping his cravat doubly high, brushing his coat ‘til he was satisfied with the way it shone. At last, he pulled his boots on and strode forth, flicking the lock to behind him with a blue-green whip of sparks. For though the door would not keep his evil angel confined, it pleased him to keep it closed between them, nevertheless, as proof of their division.

*You are dead, sir, if not gone; stubborn as ever, and greedy of this bond you still claim we share, for all I never*

*wished one. Yet much as I will one day break this curse you laid on me, I will see you learn, eventually, to leave me be.*

Rusk would have laughed at this last, and maybe did, since Parry couldn't hear it outside of dream, or drunkenness—a state to which Parry had seldom been used to abandon himself, even before he knew doing so would put him once more within reach of his former slave-master's growling voice and wandering hands. It was a different sort of skill to speak with the dead, one Parry was glad to know he did not share, unlike Rusk's half-sister in Porte Macoute, the sorceress known as Tante Ankolee. God alone knew that if he could have somehow banished Rusk back to her side, he would have, without delay... but given the man had met his well-merited end aboard-ship—*under* it, any road—that did not seem an option.

*Bitch of Hell*, Rusk had called her, then, this craft which became his grave, for he'd been a coarse man, loose of impulse and restricted in vocabulary. But Parry had put paid to that, overseeing her mast-head's re-painting himself, which now read *Salina Resurrecta*: a salt-borne lady, cobbled from shipwrecks. Since the curse Rusk in dying had laid upon him rendered her both home and prison to him now, he shaped her to his likes, which varied by occasion; stiff as he outwardly seemed, he could be mercurial when the fit was on him, or when the pain land's touch now bred in him reached up

through however many fathoms of ocean to curl 'round every limb, setting his blood a-boil in its most infinitesimal vessels.

A steep price to pay for his freedom, or so it sometimes seemed—yet they had always agreed on this, Captain Rusk and he, if little else: nothing came for nothing in this world; payment was always required, usually in whatever capital seemed most expensive.

On deck, Parry found Mister Dolomance lurking by the anchor-line with head down-hung far as his lack of neck allowed for, flat black eyes kept fixed on the salt-swollen boards beneath his nailless grey feet. He looked barely human, and Parry had made him so intentionally, that his presence would disturb those around him, rather than smooth the way. The creature was a born weapon, after all, birthed to roam and kill and eat without rest; to render him otherwise would have been to betray his true nature and leave the spells which kept him above-water prone to unravel at the slightest mis-step.

Wizardry was intuitive, in the main—none had tutored Parry at his craft, not since Tante Ankolee had so briefly quizzed him before sending him on his way, with a beginner's hex-bag and a borrowed fetish to grow it on from. The same hung at his belt even now, dangling with all sorts of fresh ammunition; the witch he glimpsed now and then in dreams,

like Rusk himself, seldom telling him anything useful. And he remained alone, as he always had been.

Still, better to it, without delay. Parry drew himself full height, staring down this monstrosity he'd wrought as scornfully as possible. "They say you've a gift for me, sir," he said. "Well, bring it out—I must have *some* recompense, to pay fee on my interrupted slumber."

Sheer rhetoric, of course, for the crew's benefit—Dolomance did not "speak" save for the occasional squeal and grumble, though if Parry cared to press him he could conjure a crude alignment of their thoughts, picking squeamishly through the nasty rush of hatred and hunger which resulted. Such proved unnecessary, however; instead, Dolomance flapped one four-fingered hand over the side, inviting the Captain's gaze to follow after. On the waves below, a longboat floated—debris from some wreck or another brig's overthrow, since its sides bore the smudged marks of fire from swift passage through lit oil. Its sole occupant, wrapped to the eyes 'gainst the sun's depredations, raised the portion Parry took to be its head and blinked at him incuriously, offering no greeting.

"Towed it 'ere, 'e did, with its rope in 'is teeth," offered a nearby salt Parry vaguely recalled having sworn the Articles after their last prize was taken, some verminous sot claiming

skill in carpentry but yet to give much proof of it. “We was just waitin’ on you to bring it closer, Cap’n... or not.”

*Great bunch of milksops.* “Do so, then.”

A haul and heave-ho commenced, and Parry stood frowning, arms crossed, as the boat drew near. The figure did not stir; he might almost believe it asleep save it sat upright, swaying slightly. When the boat’s prow struck the *Salina*’s, however, its passenger seemed to rouse, looking up again, sharply—its cerements fell away, disclosing a face that made all men present gasp, seeing it proved both female and of an undeniable attractiveness.

Pale skin, a red mouth, long black hair in ringlets to the waist. And blue-grey eyes almost light as Parry’s own, with their odd silver cast, yet stormier—more mutable and opaque as well, unreadable, even for him. Mercury, caught beneath a glaze of stone.

“Where am I?” this lady demanded. “It has been days... are you men, or dreams, only?”

“Surely, madam,” said Parry, “most dreams smell far less ill than my crew; only sniff the wind to find yourself assured of our existence.”

She shook her head. “Nay, but there was a thing that seized me, brought me here. Like a shark, if sharks had legs.”

Parry shrugged, waving Dolomance forward, and watched her start again as the shark-were grimaced down, fixed teeth a smile's bare parody. "My servant, madam. And you?"

"I am... they call me Clione, sir. My father was Haelam Attese, who doctored on the *Nymph*."

"And I am Jerusalem Parry—once of Cornwall, and the Navy. Pirate now, though not entirely by choice."

She obviously recognized the name. "A magician too, as your *servant* proves. And a cursed man, if other rumors be believed."

"Yes, though not so long as I stand on water. Still, 'tis true enough we are about no good business, by merest definition—so if you'd prefer to wait for less outlaw transport, I'm sure we can accommodate your scruples...."

The woman—Miss Attese, he should call her—furled her lip out prettily, thinking the matter over: elegant in every way, with her black-winged brows and a high spot of color on each smooth cheek, lush as any Spanish grandee's. "Clione" was one of Poseidon's conquests, if Parry recalled a'right, ocean-swept and transformed for his pleasure, which did seem to fit. At closer quarters, her viperous mane took on the shade of black shared by grapes grown on Veritay Island, seat of Captain's Rusk's familial holdings; her soft hands were two doves, and that mouth a bitten pomegranate. And though his experience

in such matters was woefully narrow, he had seldom seen anyone who pulled at him so, thus far... aside from one, and him only intermittently.

“I’ll come up,” she said, at last, so surlily Parry might almost believe he’d forced her to it. As though there might really be some other choice to make.

*A fine-made baggage*, he could almost hear Rusk’s ghost observe, as hands hauled her over the rail. *And aren’t ye taken wi’ her, too, my cold young gentleman... should I be jealous?*

*Of what?* Parry might have snapped, had he found himself alone. But even as the words formed, he saw those eyes of hers widen, as though she’d suddenly glimpsed something—some very *tall* thing—just over his shoulder, where Rusk had been all too wont to loom, in life.

*I will not turn*, he told himself. *’Tis some ruse. Who is the wizard here, she or I?*

And before he could think better of it he’d already reached out, slipping his gaze inside her own through some maneuver he could barely parse, the better to see what she saw: a man rearing up behind Parry, blotting out the sun—Black Scots, dark-tanned and leonine, with his King Charles hair and his single eye, the other a scar-messed socket. Captain Solomon Rusk, larger than life even in the utter lack of such, regarding her with a crooked smile and growling, in a voice like self-

satisfied thunder: *So she can see me, eh? You as well, through her. What a to-do!*

Miss Attese put one hand up, as though about to swoon; in anticipation, Parry withdrew himself perhaps quicker than was wise, for it made her give a hopeless little cry and all-over tremble, as though he'd felt up under her skirts. The crew exchanged glances, all equal-baffled. But Solomon Rusk's ghost threw back his half-there head and guffawed, with so little sympathy it made Parry long to kill him all over again.

*Welcome aboard, Madame Seer, Rusk said, finally. This will be quite the long voyage for you, I'm thinkin'. Though you and Master Parry may comfort each other against my presence, I s'pose, if ye've a mind to.*

Then vanished, leaving she who termed herself Clione Attese to roll her wave-colored eyes up and faint—and it was only Jerusalem Parry's memory of what deck hitting skull felt like, along with the speed it leant him in catching her, that saved her from a similar fate.

She hung in his arms, soft and limp, rounded in highly intriguing places; he stared down at her, baffled, wondering what came next.

*What am I to do with you?* Parry thought. *Whatever are we to do, with each other?*

No reply came, however. So he toted her back to his cabin and laid her in his bed, as Rusk had once done with him—then withdrew, unlike *that* rapine-inclined picaroon, so she might sleep her fear-trance off alone.

\* \* \*

Parry walked the deck until morning, disturbing his crew, a fact he took pride in. Through a process of trial and error, he had found it best to allow them to make a fear-object of him, if only to prevent them destroying themselves in useless attempts to take his place. In the time since Rusk's demise, he had put down three mutinies already, for though the memory of their former master's passing was enough to dissuade most of the older generation from underestimating their new one's power, the steady shifting of balance between those hands engaged under Rusk and those he'd signed on himself seemed doomed to eventually oblige Parry to prove himself once again whenever they began to see him an obstacle to their own upwards passage.

What none of them understood was that although he had never coveted his current position, now that Rusk's curse was in place, Parry would kill without a second thought to keep it—a man barred from shore must needs keep himself afloat, after all, and he had no compunctions over harshness where treason was involved. One early fool, idiot enough to fall upon him in

his repose, he'd accidentally atomized with an undirected blast—the touch of a stranger's hands on his neck-scar had been enough to catapult him back into unhappier days, and he'd struck out without thinking. Others he'd given to the shark-were's kin or swung from the yard-arm in Navy style, as a tribute to past training.

None had joined Rusk under-hull, however, for Parry did not care to risk populating his entire ship with dour phantoms, not when the company here was already so uncongenial. So things continued, with Parry knowing himself despised and avoided by all except Captain Rusk's leering fragment, of whom he could well-stand not to be reminded on quite so regular a basis.

(Miss Attesee, now: she did not fear him, not as yet. Though time might teach her otherwise.)

At length, Parry sat down on the fo'c'sle cross-legged and laid a protective circle 'round himself before sending out his spirit, that his body be left undisturbed. Then, reaching deep into the hex-bag, he ended up winding his dead witch-mother's hair in its frail red braid 'round one hand like a rosary, while at the same time rolling Rusk's false ivory eye 'tween two fingers of the other—victory's spoils turned fetish, sweet as any battlefield prize.

Power, Parry had learned (the hard way; he knew no other), was nothing at all without self-governance: a cracked gun-barrel, apt to explode when fired. It must be ordered, aligned properly with the secret lines of force that ran this sphere along its celestial track... and here those came now, blazing up at every compass-point, illumining a different world. A waking dream, wherein all things—however unlikely—became possible.

Was this what his mother had felt? he sometimes wondered, though he doubted it, given she'd had so little faith in her own powers as to shop him to the black-coat God-botherers the minute he proved educable. Then again, illiterate herself, Arranz Parry set great store by book-learning, and the Cornwall Church certainly had books enough to spare. At the time, however, he would have fought tooth and claw to stay with her, running barefoot through the marsh—did so, ably enough for his size, 'til some bull-sized farmhand-turned-sexton carted him away, screaming. And he had never seen her again, not before the day they pulled him from his studies to see her swung, telling him his blood put the lie to his vocation. How he had resented and denied her, all those intervening years, in his pursuit of a parson's collar—cursed her, even, a thing he now sorely regretted.

On the one hand, she was his mother, and he would always love her fiercely, no matter how he tried to do otherwise; on the other, she *did* worship the Lord of Horns, and made no claim to the contrary. But in a witch-hanging country, perhaps that had been as much effect as cause.

Up through the holes of his own skull Parry boiled, fine as smoke, to spread himself from bow to stern. Saw the silver cord that bound him to that meat-sack he normally wore stretch out behind, infinite extensible; saw the spark-knit chains linking him to the *Salina*, as well as those linking Mister Dolomance—unseen below-decks, lurking somewhere in the ship's guts, just as he would once have ridden the ocean floor's murky currents—to him. Not to mention the gross mechanics of Rusk's curse, twining in and out of his shucked flesh like a swarm of soot-worms, blackening his coronal light with limitation: fatally incurable, the same as life itself.

Inevitably, however, widening his perceptions thus showed him what he'd rather not see, as well as what he sought: Solomon bloody Rusk himself, leant up against the mast with arms crossed, staring down at Parry's back as though he yearned to lay one hand between its shoulder-blades.

*Be off with you, sir*, Parry told him, lips unmoving. *Take yourself elsewhere. Your presence is neither required, nor welcomed.*

*Ah, ye're a hard one, Jerusha. Surely I might do ye some small service in this enterprise, given it ensues we're of similar make?*

*How so, pray? What I know I learned, through hard study; you never dreamed you might share your family's gift for sorcery, not 'til you saw the Salina's hull at close range.*

*Yet your Salina was my Bitch once, Master Parry, and I know she has not forgotten me. What keeps me from resuming my post, if you leave her behind?*

*That not a man aboard could hear your orders, even were they inclined to obey?*

*Well, there is that. I'll attend your return, then, shall I?*

*As you please.*

Raising hand to forelock, the ghost turned away, upon which Parry closed his eyes and sank downwards through dark fathoms, great blooms of fish wheeling like starlings from his path on every side—seeking for some trace of Miss Attensee's vanished vessel, the *Nymph*. And soon found it, as though some lodestone charge pulled him there, currents drawing him on both swift and steady, imbrued with a briny musk that made his theoretical nostrils twitch.

Time soon fell away under-ocean, so Parry had no true sense of exactly *when* he finally saw a mass of drifting scraps before him resolve into a scuttled brig, open-broke and

upturned. Part of the prow still remained, blazoned in gold with what looked from this angle like H-P-M-Y-N, deformed to reverse through water's heavy lens. Around him, the blue-black swam with drifting corpses, torn and bleached, many entangled as though fighting; at his left hand, two men had their teeth sunk deep as fight-pit dogs' in each other, purple-haloed in blood too cold to dissipate.

Had it been battle that had done this, he wondered, or a mutiny? Some ship-wide outbreak of madness, or nother sort of infection entirely?

Parry saw no craft in it, one way or the other, just as he'd seen none in Miss Attesee herself—nothing beyond that vague flutter of power that some without witch-blood seemed to carry unawares, developing through various schemes to scry palms and dowse water, or the like. But he had been fooled before in such matters, as Ankolee Rusk had remarked during his first bout of curse-made land-fever, her spirit hanging over him as he sweated a sickbed-full of bloody sheets.

*Amazing, how ya can know so much and so pitiful little, all at the same time, she'd scoffed, when he voiced his doubt against her diagnosis. But then, ya never do trust nothing an' no one, even 'fore Solomon's curse take hold.*

*I've not had much cause to, madam. Least of all where that half-brother of yours is concerned.*

*Nah even that White-Christ God o' yours, eh, who you was t' serve an' praise your whole life long? But the Sea herself be my goddess, Cap'n Parry; far more our kin than yours, both we Rusks. So perhaps it follow we might know more'n you about some t'ings, whether ya like t'think so or nah....*

Parry shook what he presently called his head, impatient to clear it of such trash. And sent out an imperious call, demanding, of any whose souls might linger close enough to be listening—

*All they who made up the Nymph's compliment, I know you perceive my power: come now to my command, swiftly, and with courtesy. Which of you, in life, was Doctor Haelam Attesee?*

At last, he heard the reply, weak and warped, issuing from somewhere inside that murky cloud of wrack and decay—

*I... sir, 'tis I, I think. Who, once, was... he....*

Squinting harder still, Parry was just able to make out one more drowned man—Attesee—clawing towards him through his fellows' detritus, a clumsy crawl executed with stiff limbs. He was torn at the throat and the chest, skull perforated with at least two close-quarters shots and bruised all over as well, as though every man aboard had wanted a crack at him by his life's sorry end. Floated upright, he appeared barely five-and-

thirty, nothing like old enough to have a child Miss Clione's age... and nothing like her in other ways, either, with his puzzled brown eyes and his once-florid, now-peeling skin; upswept in the current, his wig-shorn hair was a green-tinged shade of blond rather than black, holding not a jot of her snaky, luscious curl.

Yet nevertheless: *Sir, Parry addressed him, your daughter has found shelter on my ship. I would know what passed here. Tell me, if you can.*

A salt-logged sigh. *Oh, my Clione... poor girl. Poor girl.*

*Yes, 'tis she I mean. I have put her under my protection, and will see to her comfort as well as I may, 'till we can put her ashore. Now—what trouble cut your vessel down, that I may avoid the same?*

The corpse shook his head, neck-bones grating, perhaps severing something; his skull fell sidelong, throat bulging unpleasantly.

*Poor girl, he repeated. Not... her fault. She does not, cannot... cannot know. 'Twas I who... erred, terribly. And all paid the price....*

Parry frowned. *'Not her fault' the ship sank? But why would it be, doctor?*

Another shake: now Attesee's jaw flapped open, one grind away from swinging free. A fish had made its home inside his

throat, blinking out at Parry's "face". *Cannot...* the doctor managed, voice a mere mucky groan. *Oh, my poor creature! These men, too... so many. 'Tis all my... if I had... only....*

—but even as Parry thought to press him harder, the man Clione Attese claimed as parent gave way, resolving into a quick-unraveling scum of bones. The fish darted off, no doubt headed to seek out less unstable shelter. And now there was a new voice beating down through the water, reeling Parry back in, pulling him up to the *Salina's* decks once more, where he wrenched back inside his body just in time to find the bo'sun (whose Christian name he never could recall) leaning in over him close as the protective circle's flames would allow, repeating—

“—must have words wi' ye, Cap'n, on a matter of some urgency... do ye hear me, Cap'n Parry? I said, do ye—”

“I *hear* you, sir, yes; one could not fail to, really. Now give me some room, and bloody well wait your turn.”

It took a sad amount of concentration to snuff the circle, pry his stiff legs apart and lever himself up gingerly—shins to knees, knees to feet—without causing injury; the bo'sun tried to help, but Parry waved him aside. “I am still capable of standing without aid, thank you. Now: what matter do you bring me, that it must be put with such urgency?”

“Sir, ye gave orders that the woman, the passenger—”

“Miss Attesee is her name.”

“—that she not be disturbed, and set your... Dolomance to watch on her, ‘fore ye bent to whatever you was just engaged in. Now there’s two hands bit and one stabbed, all for a-knockin’ on your cabin door wi’out permission.”

“I gave Mister Dolomance no such task. As to the other—why would they trouble her?” The bo’sun shot him a look. “Well, for *one* reason, of course, and more fool they, for thinking I would not learn of it. But otherwise.”

“Word is, there’s some thinks she’ll bring the ship t’ grief. That she’s some sort of, uh—”

“*Jonah*,” Parry said, the word ill-tasting yet, memory-poisoned. “God damn them all.”

A rage kindled, draining the ocean’s chill; Parry stood straight, eyes sparking—possibly literally—and was coldly pleased to watch the bo’sun cringe back. “She is under my protection,” he confirmed. “Who moves against her moves against *me*, with all that entails. What more need be said?”

This would have cowed better men, which the bo’sun most certainly was not. Yet he stood fast.

“I understand that, sir,” he replied, carefully. “Truly. But... there’s some others don’t, an’ that’s a problem.”

In which he had the right of it, of course. Annoying, contemptible man!

*Aye, a good sailor, that. You'd do well t' keep him close, my Jerusha.*

Parry hissed. *You do realize your very opinion of the man makes me disinclined to.*

*Naturally. Now go and see what that creature of yours is up to, before—*

*I had planned to!*

Ridiculous, how Rusk (or what little was left of him) could still disturb. It annoyed Parry enough to make him turn on his heel, striding off cabin-wards at such a pace he left the ghost in his wake, if only momentarily.

\* \* \*

He had expected to find the shark-were posted out-side, not in-, and certainly not crouched at Miss Attese's feet with its receding chin almost in her lap, stolid-worshipful as any sandpaper-skinned dog. Let alone for it to look up as he entered and dare to *bare its teeth*—begin to, any rate, 'til he fixed the damned thing with a stare that made it drop its lidless eyes and crawl away, groaning.

At the movement, Miss Attese looked up as well, recalled to herself; her gaze widened prettily, to find him standing before her. "Oh, Captain Parry! I did not hear you... your servant was keeping me company, as you see. Thank you for lending me him."

“Is that what you think I did, madam?”

“Did you not? He frightened me at first, but—when alone, he is surprisingly well-behaved. And....” She paused here, as if feeling her way. “...useful, in some circumstances.”

“So I have found.” He furred a dismissive little lick of sparks Dolomance’s way, urging it to remove itself, which it did, though not without a mournful glance Miss Attese’s way. She gestured for Parry to sit down beside her, which he did, even though there was no place other than the bed to do so. “Now... my bo’sun tells me you were disturbed, for which I tender my apologies. Those involved will be spoken to, harshly.”

“Oh sir, it was nothing so bad, really.”

“Bad enough to require Mister Dolomance’s interjection, or so I’m told. And believe me, madam, mercy is not looked on favorably, when dealing with sea-scum such as the *Salina*’s complement. They are men sworn to do ill and profit from it, if they may.”

“Yes, I suppose this is true. Though the men of the *Nymph* did not seem so evil, in the main; not before that last night. And then....”

*And then?* Parry longed to ask. *Please, elucidate; I have seen the fruits of it, heard your father struggle to give*

*warnings. Yet I cannot hope to understand, without your testimony....*

All this fell away, however, when her distress prompted him to lay a comforting hand on her sleeve, only to have her fold herself into his side and press her head beneath his jawline, shuddering slightly. It was a moment of such force he found he had pitifully few words to describe it: a jolt, a spark—what *was* that, exactly, raising the hairs and ruffling his spine?

(Rusk would know, damn him.)

At that, the man himself came fading through the wall, as if summoned. Leant down over them both, remarking: *Hmmm, she works fast, this drab of yours. Not that you seem all too happy wi' the results.*

Parry shook his head, gulping. *Nay, I dislike this... cannot order my thoughts, calm my pulse. Some enchantment, perhaps; was that what Attesee warned of? But I sense no real magic about her, beyond her ability to see such phantasms as you—*

Rusk all but rolled his eye, sardonically. *Oh, certain, he agreed. Or perhaps she likes your looks, had ye never thought of that? Can it be ye've had no dealings with females at all, before?*

Parry cast his mind back. There'd been no girls for him in Cornwall, since all knew his Church-bound intentions—besides

which, he was hardly the sort of young spark mother that mother-in-laws found suitable, being too lean, too reserved, too haughty by far to tempt most happy buxom village misses. *You are naught but a mire-bred witch-get brat, 'Master' Parry*, he remembered one good-wife shouting after him in the street, *who think yourself so far above us all!* And later on, those clots of women who clustered 'round Navy ships like rats after cheese, scouting for sailors on leave—they'd been a positive horror to him. Not to mention they wanted a man with money who'd drink enough to splash some of it out, then grow quick-fuddled enough not to be able to tell in the dark who might be poked, after....

*Ha! So I did pluck your flower, as I'd suspected. Lucky me.*

*Say your piece, you filthy bloody lump of—*

*She likes you, is all. So allow her t' show ye t'other side of things, and see if it suits ye better.*

It could hardly suit him *worse*, Parry supposed. But: *As I said, your counsel's enough to turn me elsewhere, from any subject. Besides, given how oft I've had it practiced on me, I've developed no particular taste for outrage.*

Rusk shrugged. *Cheat the both of ye, then, for all I care. 'Tis obvious she wants ye t' pay court to her, wi' no ravishing*

*involved—her choice, her will. You have only to bend to it. What can it cost?*

He didn't know, Parry realized. Which disquieted him all the more.

"I am sorry indeed, to inconvenience you so," Miss Attesee—might he call her Clione now, at least in his mind?—said, into his clavicle. "The shock, you see... I can still see my poor father, pushing me into that boat, setting the waters alight. How they fell on him when they perceived I was gone, like animals. And I had known each and every one of them, growing up. I thought them my *friends*."

"What changed?"

"Oh, if I only knew!" She drew back a bit, seeking his eyes. "I lived my whole childhood on the *Nymph*, sir—indeed, I cannot ever recall being *not* a-sea. That must be odd, surely."

"I... find it somewhat hard to know what is odd myself, madam, living as I have."

"Yes, I can see that." She stared, as thought committing him to memory. Then added, softer: "You are not as I had supposed you."

"Less piratical?"

"Younger. More gentlemanly. And kind, too."

"Not by most standards, I think."

“No, you are; far more civil than I’d thought you’d be, also, given your reputation. And handsome, as well. Those eyes of yours, they shine, like... fish-scales.”

“A pretty compliment.” Adding, as she looked away: “Beg pardon, madam. I am saturnine by nature and unused to company, particularly of the female kind.” He paused. “You know my limitations, but so long as we navigate carefully, we might come close enough to shore to put you off at Port Macoute. ‘Tis a rough place, yet there’s a woman there would surely take you in, if I but asked her....”

“Oh, then my estimation is confirmed, sir,” she replied, impulsively laying her hand upon his arm, and Parry felt it again—that sensation he could not easily name, or explain. “If I can only find some way to repay this fresh courtesy of yours...”

“Madam, any man would do the same.”

(*Not any man*, Rusk piped up. *Precious few, in fact. Oh, my poor innocent!*)

Miss Atteseew frowned in the ghost’s direction, brow wrinkling prettily. “Who is that man, Captain Parry? Must he be always here?”

*How oft have I asked myself the same thing.*

“‘Tis Captain Rusk, who had this ship before me,” Parry told, her shortly. “I took it from him, and was obliged to kill him over it.”

*(Only over that, Jerusha?)*

“Did you want it so very much, then?”

He sighed. “Not... as such, no. It is a complicated question.”

*(Ah, but explain it her anyhow, will ye—what we fell out over, and why. I do long t’ see you try.)*

Reaching for the words, carefully: “Captain Rusk did me a good turn, by saving me from a Navy ship’s hold and breaking my witch-collar—but he expected to be paid, and his idea of due recompense went far past what seemed fair, by my tallying. Eventually, I grew beyond his ability to halter, and then...” He spread his hands wide, fingers grasping at air, a blue-green flutter linking them briefly together, then passing away in a flourish. “...as you see.”

“He was a bad sort.”

“Undeniably, given his occupation. But considering I now share it, it might be more accurately said he proved himself untrustworthy.”

*(How so, man?)*

*How not, you great ape? You gave me your word, then broke it. You forced me—*

*(But how could I, Jerusha, beyond that first time? You, wi’ all your powers? You could’ve burnt my parts away, if*

*you'd a mind to—and why not, if I so offended you? Unless they were giving you too much joy, entirely....)*

*Your “parts” are gone now, sir, along with the rest of you. Put them by.*

*(My point stands: You could've unmanned me, with a second's thought. Yet ye did not.)*

*You... distracted me.*

*(As she does now, I'll warrant.)*

*Cease your prattle! She is speaking again, and I want to hear her.*

“Was there no peace to be made between you, then?” Clione asked. “Not ever?”

“No. He was a man of odd humors, and took pleasure in being hated. We had both had our fill of the other, I think, by the end.”

“I would think it would not be so easy to have one's fill of you, Captain,” she said, seriously. And cupped his chin in both her hands, studying his sharp-planed face closely, before sealing his half-open mouth with a kiss that tasted, as only befitted, of the deepest, darkest parts of the sea.

\* \* \*

So different, this sport, from any he'd experienced thus far: Clione Attesee was God's own gift, a lady born, all-observing, passionate and discreet, whose hungers and

interests matched his own. Though surely innocent as he'd once been, she had no modesty, and no seeming need of any. Parry felt himself swept away, fast and sure as he'd ever been while pinned in Rusk's arms, but without the sour accompanying tang of defeat, the total ruinous overthrow. Instead, he was allowed to set his pace in tidal fashion, their joining never quite complete and never entirely over. Great waves crashed then split apart, gathering themselves for a fresh crescendo, with everything in between rendered hot and salt and sweet, so all-encompassing he could never be entirely sure whether he had actually *spent* at any point, or no. Though neither did it truly seem to matter, overmuch....

“So many books, Captain Parry,” she observed, leaning in from above, so that her hair fell to curtain them both. “Have you really read them all?”

“Many times. For there is always far too much gold and jewelry on these ships we take, and never enough new literary matter.”

“Ah, is your hold quite stuffed with treasure, then?”

“Like as much. I do not concern myself with its reckoning—that job goes to my ship's purser, with the bo'sun watching over. But I somewhat doubt these bastards would resign themselves to my command if they were not paid for it, and plentifully.”

“I do not see how anyone could hate you, Captain, for all your prickliness, or the terror of your reputation. Though I *can* well see now why Captain Rusk wanted you kept chained to him, beyond mere utility.”

This was a note he'd not heard in her voice, before—coolly assessing, older than she seemed—and Parry stiffened at the sound of it, eyes skittering to where Rusk's ghost leant against the wall, alternately watchful and sulking, but increasingly frustrated by his own inability to join in.

“You... know? What passed between us?”

“Yes, of course.” She touched his scar, lightly stroking balm into the contorted tissues. “I can see it, the closer we draw together. What *you* feel, when you think on him—and what *he* feels, too, thinking on you.”

“But *how*?”

She shook her head. “I cannot tell. A voice seems to whisper it from the walls, or the planks below.”

At that very moment, the *Salina* juddered under them, for all the world like some great creature twitching in its sleep, a dog whose back legs kick when it senses its name being uttered. Parry looked at her, a bit wonderingly, and asked: “Are you a witch too, then? Like my mother, or myself?”

“They called you wizard whenever I was told your tale, previously.”

“Tis all the same, or almost so. ‘Man-witch’, Rusk called me, whenever he wished to tweak my pride—but there is no insult in truth. Cold iron burns me, and I bear the scars to prove it.”

“Yes,” she said, gently touching his collar’s print once more—then leant in, impulsively, to lay a small kiss upon it also, so sweet it set his sore head ringing. “Did she have such eyes as yours, your mother?”

“Aye, these I get from her, along with my craft. Of the rest, I know not exactly who to credit—only that the man I should, by rights, call father was some ‘man of parts’ who could not think of paying for my upkeep, or saving her the noose.”

“To see your mother hanged... oh, Captain. I am sorry.”

“Most witches end so, madam, at least where England reigns. Had she been Scots instead of Cornish, ‘twould have been the fire before, not after.”

“And yet she named you for the City of God.”

Parry paused, breath shortening. “She was... not an educated woman, by any means,” he said, finally. And counted himself grateful when Clione pulled him down with her, rolling them both so that he could take the upper hand, drowning himself in her again.

They were sweating hard by the time they pulled apart once more, panting, and Parry saw her eyes travel back to

where Rusk lurked. “How he scowls at us, now!” she exclaimed, with a sort of triumph. “Yet it only serves him right, and he knows it; he lost whatever chance he might have had to turn your hate to something softer long before you used him to scrape the ship clean. What an infamous fellow! He burns to have you still, were it only possible. But we shall confound him of that base desire, you and I—shall we not, Captain Parry?”

“Yes, with the world’s best will. And you may make free to call me Jerusalem, Miss Attesee—*Clione*—if it please you.”

“Oh, it does, Jerusalem... yes, there, please! It does, very much, indeed.”

Fireworks came and went behind his eyes, then, a shower of red-tinged silver bright as his own gaze’s reflection when briefly glimpsed in hers. Midst-caught, Parry thought he saw those eyes change—their pupils slide sidelong, opening like a cuttlefish’s, even as her hips slipped, knees gone triple-jointed, twining ‘round his legs like two fishtail tentacles. While the inside of her grew scaled and stringent, scraping him tip to root, leaving her mark forever.

*Mine*, he thought, incoherently. All blissful-unaware, at the time, how he’d traded ownership of one kind for one of another.

What followed in this maelstrom's spindrift, however, was pleasure piled on pleasure: laxity, satiation, a deep and pleasant slumber, and for once blessedly dreamless....

...but only to a point.

\* \* \*

As the ship's bells rang mid-night, Parry came to, opening his mind's eyes only to find himself already meshed tight in memory's toils: later in that first bout of "sport" after his initial defilement, with Rusk still at him like a rat with cheese. Tugging at the man's mane hard enough to rip scalp and hoping it hurt, as he complained: "Christ, leave off—leave *off*, did you hear me? What possible pleasure could you get from—"

Rusk laughed then, dark and growling as ever, be he man or ghost. "The pleasure of *your* pleasure, fool. To watch you work yourself up 'til you're fair panting for it, 'til you beg and weep for an end...."

"Sir! You go too far, entirely!"

"Aye, and would go further still, as I damn well know ye'd love t'allow me, much though you prate th' opposite. Come now, Jerusha, must I really bend the knee? What gestures must I play out, t' bring us both what we seek?"

"Ask—ask my permission, for once. Not that I dream you would."

“Like some puling schoolboy, some mother-may-I? Nay, doesn’t sound much like me at all... and yet, very well: Jerusalem Parry, will ye grant me the honor of you? Might I be let to breach that strait-laced gate, and make us both the happier for it?”

Settling back onto him before Parry could object, ‘til Parry fell limp at the feel, unable to do more than punch the air and gasp. Then heard himself answer, much against his better judgment—

“...you may.”

At this, Rusk gave a satisfied sort of snarl, a hungry lion’s half-cough, and heaved himself up, re-settling in. Smiling in triumph, as he crowed: “Ah, my Jerusha, you marvel, my poor sweet-heart! My nice divine, pretty little parson-to-be, aspirant soul-saver: *you*, who hate everybody and everything, yourself included...”

“Do not mistake me for some—Navy slug, sir! I know *my* sins, at least, instead of... *reveling* in them....”

Yet here he lost the thread, every part of him buzzing, raked and itching from the inside-out. Rusk laughed again to see it, dropping his face in the crook of Parry’s neck and keeping unmercifully on, voice flesh-muffled—

“Aye, as I do mine, ‘reveling’ aside. Which makes you no better than me, for all your airs! Or perhaps ‘tis that we’re neither of us so good, let alone so bad....”

“The one thing we’re alike in’s damnation!” Parry made to snarl, but groaned instead, knowing it far too late to stop his own disgrace. While the coda to this stew came, as ever, in a rush of heat and mess and awfulness, a dreadful coring joy. Parry tried to turn from it, but Rusk seized him fast and forced his gaze forward again. “Nay, none o’ that,” he growled. “Stay wi’ me ‘til the throes are done at least, if no further.”

“Leave me my *shame*, man, for Christ’s own love!”

“Ah, but ‘tis a foolish habit of yours, my Jerusha, that same shame. I aim t’ cure ye of it, if it takes me ‘til Doomsday.”

Parry cursed him roundly, to the very limits of his knowledge and invention, before invective at last turned silent. Then, exhausted, he lay awhile in Rusk’s arms, too tired to fight on, and was forced to accept the unhappy benefit of his ravisher’s cold comfort.

*Yes, ‘twas a brave bloody night, by Christ, Rusk’s ghost said from somewhere nearby, a trifle sadly. I think on’t often, who have little enough left to distract me, for all I’m sure you don’t do the same. But then again, the pleasures of the dead are few, as you’ll eventually discover.*

It was another of those contortionate dream-moments, twisting Parry free and fading the past in a single wink, so he sat once more upright next to Clione in their nest of sheets, staring Rusk's full-dressed specter down with all his hairs upright and his frame rage-rigid.

*Why would you?* Parry demanded, insult of it burning in the nose, like blood. *Bad enough in life, but to come to me thus in dream! You amaze me, sir.*

*Oh, I doubt that.* Rusk gave a sigh. *Yet how else am I to gain your attention, Jerusha, with you so enmeshed?*

Parry huffed. *Aye, on your advice, as I recall—and why not, since it ensues she does indeed find me pleasant, after all? I have little enough to make me happy in my waking life, forever confined by this curse you worked on me....*

*Yes, well: about that. Might be I was... inaccurate in my estimation, when first I pushed you t'wards her arms. For there are things in her I glimpse that I can only assume you don't, still bein' locked in your fleshly state—*

*Oh, do tell—or don't, rather, for I have no patience for it! Might be you shouldn't've played through my life's most humiliating night as preface, if you truly wished my attention on the matter!*

*Ye damned contrary creature! Are you a sailor born, now, to know the ocean's store of uncanniness better than*

*myself? For if 'twas me, I'd've thrown her back in the sea to sink or swim as she pleased, days ago. As there were many said I should have done with you, by Christ!*

*Indeed, sir? I confess myself unsurprised.*

*I did not mean—Jerusha, only listen t'me, for your own profit! She is not what ye think her—*

*Nor you, I warrant, when you seemed to mean me well, 'til you showed your true colors! When you broke your oath and treated me as no host would an honored guest, unless perhaps that host be Satan himself, welcoming damned souls into Hell—*

*But: Be still, a third voice intruded, cutting through their wrangle like Alexander's blade. Enough o' this muddle. We must put yah house in order, Cap'n Parry, 'fore ya sink yourself through foolishness, and all else along wi' you.*

*Parry did not even have to turn to know who it was who spoke, though he had not had the pleasure since his first attack. Merely inclined his head her way, all at once on best behavior, and acknowledged, with as great a courtesy as he might muster*

—

*...Miss Rusk, the inestimable Tante Ankolee. What is't brings you here, madam?*

*As this fool says, an' in support o' his arguments: because that yah done brung trouble on yaself, Jerusalem Parry—*

*terrible trouble indeed, drawn up from deep places, for all it treat ya sweet and look on you wi' love. More than she herself know, even, poor creature... not that ignorance ever any excuse for ill-doin', as we all three o' us well-know.*

Doctor Attesee's corpse swum into view once more, mouthing its curious warning fragments: *Oh, my poor girl... not her fault. Clione, my poor creature.* And Parry found it easier by far to read between the lines of that palimpsest now, with the fit of love no longer immediately upon him. Staring down upon the too-fluid curve of his sleeping lover's spine, vertebrae sharp-raised as if poised to tear free and form a sea-trench eel's dorsal fin, and knowing in his heart how it would have had to have been this way, all along. For who could ever feel pulled to him, in all his Cain-marked glory, who did not themselves bear such a taint in turn?

Clione, taming Dolomance without intent and tracing the lines of power linked between Parry and his ship, all ignorant of their import, before laying a cooling hand on Parry's sorest spots and folding him in, giving him so much delight he thought himself healed. Just like Rusk, in his way—so Devil-sure he could bend Parry to where he'd accept this bond he saw between 'em, without even a pennyworth of proof to that premise. Dying still so unconvinced, in fact, that the grim manner of his execution freed the power he didn't know he

owned in one great burst of ill-wishing, a reel of spellwork which proved both first and last.

*She is not human at all, then.* Parry said, sadly. *Is she?*

*Nah as such, no.*

There she sat, the shade of her anyhow, all decked out in her pagan finery—locked hair hung with bells, a bone through her blue-rimmed lip, and daring somehow to feel sorry for *him*, who'd once stood to take the pulpit, shepherd of every soul in the district! Who'd studied Greek and Latin, writ on holy things... by God, it was insupportable. Her with her green eyes and her tea-colored slave-girl's skin, the set of her nose so much like Rusk's own it made Parry want to break it with a single slap—

*(You are being ridiculous, Jerusalem, mabyn mine, his mother would have said, though, whenever some passion made him stamp and scream. Things are as they are; the world has its order, much as we may rue it. Not even magic can ever make it otherwise.)*

Prideful as always, therefore, he drew himself up, made himself cold and still. And put out a hand, demanding, that he might be the one ordering, rather than the reverse—

*So show me the truth of it, madam; I will believe it from you, if not from that "cousin" of yours. Show me it all.*

\* \* \*

*That one time, Haelam Attese, on th' bounding main—surgeon o' the Nymph, who study hard on nature for his own reward, an' seek t' steal the Sea's own secrets from Her t' gain him passin' land-locked fame an' fortune. That one time, he.*

*Dredging the ocean wi' a scoop-net of his own design, sent down along o' the Nymph's great anchor, in an uncharted corner of Her ever-changin' waters. An' one day, along wi' all the usual muck an' trash, he find something else entirely, drawn up from dark places: an egg made from jelly wi' a skin, nah, a shell, which he raise up towards the light, feelin' it warm in his hands. An' as he do, he see something deep inside start t' move, to change... to grow.*

*One day more an' that tiny thing a baby, whole an' perfect-formed, hoverin' inside the egg in its glass bottle, as it set on Doctor Attese's cabin desk. An' the egg get bigger as the baby do, growing 'til it fill the glass so full Doctor Attese take an' break the glass over an old hip-bath, pouring seawater in 'til the egg float up unbroken yet an' the baby open its eyes, blinking, making faces like it nah know whether it want to cry or nah—an' smile at him, too, like it recognize his face.*

*By the time a week gone, the egg split an' a child come out, a little girl-baby. Two month later, that girl-baby a girl for true, tall up to Doctor Attese's waist. An' so she keep on,*

*growin' and growin', 'til she as you see her now: a siren sure, made ta bend men to her will. Made ta tempt men to their death an' take 'em down with her, deep under, to that airless place from whence she born.*

*The crew think her a sweet child when she still look like one, an' treat her like they would have treated one of their own. But the minute she gain her maiden form an' commence ta bleed, they perk up they heads, like sniffin' dogs. First they start ta fight amongst 'emselves, an' then they turn on Doctor Attese to get ta her, ta fill her full of their seed an' see whah may grow of it—how can they help it, when she fillin' th' very air wi' heat an' botheration. An' she, she know no better, bein' lied to all her short life. For Doctor Attese never want to tell her the truth, nah an' risk him lose her love....*

*An' when the end come, how could he know where the Sea take her on to, once he commit her once more to Her own bosom? How Her currents would carry her on, ceaseless, 'til that creature o' yours recognize her an' pledge her his fealty—pull her on through wrack an' ruin ta where he know she best be welcomed—an' lay her at last at your feet, Jerusalem Parry. You with your craft, powerful enough ta protect her 'gainst all comers... not ta mention your ill-fatedness when it come ta such matters overall, forever doomed to be loved by*

*those ya never can, or love them who never love you th' exact same way in return....*

At these words, even in sleep's tight grip, Parry gave his head one fierce rejecting shake, thinking: *Who are you to say that, witch? Do you know my whole life, planned out beforehand? Perhaps I will never love at all, never having loved thus far, aside from she who bore me....*

But: *Oh, little wizard, Tante Ankolee's now very far away spell-voice told him, softly, sadly—water-warped, as though filtered through every watery mile between them. Be it here a-Sea, or on Veritay Isle where that half-me-blood brother o' mine first saw light, or them Cornwall marshes you an' ya mother call home, cunning-folk go only ever one o' two ways. Others we can make love for, but ourselves... to such as we, love is dangerous; worse than iron's kiss, an' far more lastin'.*

*An' as for you—you damn well know you love this sea-girl already, fast an' hard enough to drown in. You nah the triflin' sort, worse luck. If ya had been, well....*

*(...if so, I still have a "cousin", 'stead of his ghost. An' you nah be stuck afloat for the rest of ya life, just 'cause ya too proud ta bear the proof of someone else's love, true though it might be, so long as you nah share it.)*

Almost a whisper now, yet still he fought to rail against it, twisting in his sleep... 'til another voice again intruded, equal-familiar, if far more unwelcome. Commanding, in its turn—

*Jerusha, rouse yourself! Jerusha! Spring up and don your breeches, man, lest ye crave t' put down a full mutiny bare-arsed!*

*What—?*

That hammering at the cabin door, tweaking him sharply up from slumber into immediate waking danger—less like flesh than wood and metal, staves and mattocks, grappling hooks. The din of many feet and the blabber of many voices, all of them calling for his blood... or hers. Clione's.

*His Clione's.*

Rusk's ghost stood by the door, gesticulating peremptorily. *There, out there! Arm yourself, fool, for they come in force, and will not be long denied entry!*

“Those damnable dogs,” Parry exclaimed, torn between shock and rage, as he fumbled at his buttons; flame bloomed all 'round him, a blue-green protective conflagration, and by its prompting light Clione Attensee arose likewise, stumbling to her feet whilst still in a sweet state of nature, with only her long black hair for clothing. Grasped for his arm with one hand, her soft fingers now slightly webbed between with crepey folds of

skin, and asked: “Jerusalem, what is it? Has the madness come upon *this* ship, too? Are we safe?”

“While I yet have strength to make it thus, my dear, yes. But perhaps you should cover yourself, before we find ourselves in slightly less agreeable—”

‘Company’, he might have meant, before the door gave way at last, rendering the point moot. Men spilled in over the threshold, howling various obscenities and execrations, but Parry did not pay them much heed. Instead, he let loose at them full-force, much as he had with that earliest attacker—but doing so intentionally cost him more than he’d bargained for, causing blood to gush from his nose as though punched. The resultant blue-green wave bore the two closest hands away entirely, reducing them to fragments, and flayed the wall itself away behind them a good ten feet on either side, leaving the doorway’s frame to wobble a moment in the wreckage before falling backwards, resolving to splinters. Other men took it in their eyes or across their half-turned faces and thrown-up hands, like vitriol, before it finally broke over the railing; the deck was awash with dissipating force, rising screams punctuated by general discharge of pistols, and a ball had struck Parry’s upper shoulder before he could shield himself, spinning him Clione’s way.

“No!” she cried, face white with horror. Then: “To *me*, sir!”

*Who can she mean?* Parry wondered, queasily; he wavered, grabbing his wound and pumping yet more magic into it to push the lead forth and speed its healing, weeping bloody tears with the effort. At the same time, however, the question answered itself—Mister Dolomance came threshing into the back of the crowd, summoned by Clione’s cry like a dog to his whistle, and made wholesale bloody work of two more men before getting his teeth stuck into a third, slowing his slaughterhouse passage to a stand-still.

Up on the fo’c’sle, Parry glimpsed the bo’sun waving his arms like some carnival mountebank, trying to shout his damage-bent brethren down; when this had no effect, he seized the next one rushing to offer violence and fetched him a buffet that almost pitched him over the side. So perhaps Parry had, indeed, underestimated him—annoying to think Rusk might have been right on that score, or any—

—but that hardly mattered right now, not with Clione hissing beside him, teeth bared, and the shark-were finally pulling his head free with a wet red *crack*. Not with one more fool (a master’s mate, he thought) pointing his blade at her while snarling, in Parry’s direction: “You’re leakin’ power, man-witch. So call yer beast off, an’ quick-smart, or I’ll slit this wet bitch’s throat!”

Parry felt his eyes narrow, blood-clogged lids slow and sticky. “You *will not touch her*,” he heard himself grind out, barely recognizing his own voice. “She is *mine*.”

The closest on scoffed. “Don’t think ye’ll lose yer whole crew over some skirt, *Cap’n*.”

“Then *don’t* think, I pray—you’re none of you good at it, since you’ve failed to grasp that every man here stays aboard only at my sufferance. I can run this ship myself, if needs be.”

“Aye, ye talk a good game! But we’re many, you one. What can ye do, if we attack all at once?”

Parry smiled, grim as a blade. “*This*.”

For: his stores *were* running dry, true enough—but there was yet something else to call upon, in worst circumstances: a force he only seldom felt stir against his presence, stroking itself on him and purring, like some great spectral cat. It lurked all ‘round him in the very wood and weight of the ship itself, Rusk’s *Bitch* turned his *Salina*, and if Parry did not pretend to understand it (being no sailor, as Rusk had pointed out on so many different occasions), he nevertheless knew it ever faithful to his touch, eager to do his bidding and willing to lend him its connivance in all sorts of mischief, no matter the cost to others... or itself.

*I will have to hurt you now, he told it, soundlessly, this invisible daimon, and I am sorry for it, truly. I wish there was some other way.*

*I understand, something seemed to reply, meanwhile—but no, not so clearly. More consent as a twinge, at the very edge of consciousness, as he reached out with the next-to-last of everything in him and scooped a great chunk from the ship's own side, planks spraying everywhere. The hull cracked, deck tipping to slide the bulk of the troublemakers brine-wards, below the water-line, which Parry proceeded to suture over their screaming heads with a solid blue-green seal like ice or glass, two feet at least in depth. They hammered at it, desperate, but got no relief; he saw their lungs empty out, bubbles rising, and smiled through his bloody flux, straining to not cough up his guts.*

*Give me a moment, he thought. Only a moment... I can recoup. Can move the ship's parts back in place, fit nails to holes, trust in motion to keep us from taking on too much water....*

(Dolomance had made short work of those remaining, all but the bo'sun, who'd wisely gone aloft, taking refuge in the rigging. Those stubby fin-hands Parry had fashioned were not made for climbing, so the man was safe enough, for now. Parry

would have to calm the creature's blood-lust to make sure that stayed true, later on—)

Oh God, it hurt. It hurt so magnificently, all over. But 'twas almost worth it to see Clione gaze on him with worship, for all he could now clearly see the lines of gills fluttering open along her neck, neat-frilled as Mechlin lace.

*And now ye've gutted your own ship*, Rusk's ghost observed, from where the cabin had once stood, as though it were some great insight.

*And: How fortunate I am, to have you to note such things for me!* Parry snapped back, using a blue-green thread-net to fold the planks—haphazardly yet finally, all the same—back over the bulk of his thrashing, swearing, blood-maddened crew's heads.

"There," he said. "We are done, now. It is resolved."

"I knew you would save us, Jerusalem. Ah, but yet...."

"But yet?"

Turning to her, seeing her shake her head, fine eyes already growing bleached and transparent-lidded. The tentacle-sway of her naked body, dorsally raised spine barely concealed by hair. The Dolomance, snuffling to his knees, keen to lay that terrible head at her similarly-webbed feet.

"I cannot stay," she said, sadly. "My air is almost gone—I know it. Come with me."

“Where?”

“Down. Down. Oh, my magician... only come below, and we will rule together; you will be king of a dark place, beyond all their reaches. Dark, and deep, and shining.”

(Her sea-colored eyes, her weed-thick hair, her skin green-tinting. Oh, how he longed to change along with her, to rip his own skin off and take his chances with whatever he found beneath—or didn't.)

“The land does not love you, Jerusalem Parry; it never has, and never will. But I do.”

“Clione... madam. We... barely know each other.”

“Call it what it is, then. Call it magic.”

Rusk at his shoulder one more time, a buzzing bloody gnat: *No, my Jerusha, no. She's not for you, nor you for her. Do not try to make yourself over in her image, I pray, lest you lose your grip on life entirely—*

Reaching out a hand to stop him and failing to take hold, miserably; how it made Parry crouch to watch the bastard's grip slip straight through, his living flesh a mere ghost's ghost. And think, crazily—

*Why not? I could make myself breathe water, I'm certain. I can do... most anything.*

The storm again, but only in his head. And weak as they were, he hated Rusk's efforts to detain him worse than he ever

had the cold iron tether, the spectral keloid burn 'round his neck which tightened halter-tight as he heard the bastard yell:

*Jerusha, behind ye—'ware, damn you, contrary man! The shark!*

For here was Clione, damp hand slipping from his with a pitiful look, stepping backward towards the gap's scooped-out rim, gravity already taking hold—in another second she would arc backwards and down, hit water, be gone in a trice. And here was Mister Dolomance, thick legs already bent, poised to follow —

'Til Parry reached out one more time, with a single massive frozen shout of *NO!*, and stopped him.

\* \* \*

He came to expecting to find himself dead, torn to pieces by the monster he'd made—he knew it would happen, eventually. The spell itself required such a sacrifice. Instead, Parry found Dolomance fast-tethered once more, staring his usual sullen hatred at him; the deck was cleared, stuck back together at all angles, blood from Dolomance's kills dried under the same sun that had tanned Parry's hide almost to burning. And Rusk's ghost leant nearby, inevitably, his arms once again crossed, with an odd look on his one-eyed face—was that satisfaction, or sympathy? Did it matter?

*Not to me.*

No. For Clione was long gone, down deep, into that impossible darkness. And he had only the man he'd murdered left for company, along with the foolish-loyal bo'sun, unless one also took Dolomance into account.

"I would not let this creature of mine go," he said, out loud, meeting the shark-were's black doll-eyes head on. "That's why. If I had, I'd be with her still."

*And drowned as well, belike, Rusk pointed out. For I've never known ye t'go without air overlong, wi' all your craft.*

Parry did not seem to hear. "To keep him with me... make sure our bond stayed unbroken. Because, in the end—I wanted power, more than love."

*False love, man. She was not for you, or any upright creature. A thing apart, only.*

At these words, a great wrench pulled hard at Parry's heart, shivering it so sharp he almost thought he felt the organ itself (which he'd otherwise supposed merely vestigial, given how little it normally troubled him) shake apart entirely.

"Then what am I?" he cried out, in a tone that made Rusk's ghost wince before replying, gently as that gentleman knew how—

*That too, I s'pose, in the end. But better here than down there, surely.*

A frost fell on Parry then, hardening him within and without, thinning his voice to bitterest poison as he replied: “Yes, that *would* suit you best to have me think, I warrant.”

*Oh, Jerusalem. Yes, tell it yourself thus, if ye will—for I am culpable in much that brought ye to this pass, and can easily bear th’ extra burden. But think on this, and know it true, Hell-priest: we cannot help our natures. Not she, nor you, nor I....*

*Do not speak to me, sir!* Parry broke out at last, internally, all his other words leaving him in a rush, blood-hot and galling. *Never speak to me, ever again, ‘til we both be fleshless and Hell-bound alike. For I have more than done with you, along with all the rest.*

Though Parry expected protest, perhaps Clione had passed so far below already that Rusk truly could not, for the bastard only shook his head at him, an egregious look of sympathy on his face. And faded from his sight, leaving Parry blessedly alone at last, at least to all appearances.

Mister Dolomance turned, mulish and still with his cold blood up, only to cringe away from the heat of Parry’s glare. “*Get from me, you lump,*” Parry told him, hoarse, every breath agony. “Do as you please with those in the water, but do not let me see you ‘til I call.”

He stared the creature down until it turned those lidless eyes away, stumping to the side, where it disappeared without a splash. Then let himself sit down, panting, too exhausted even to weep.

He glimpsed the bo'sun peeping down at him through the rigging, half-hid behind a foremast, where he'd held on for dear life against his fellows' punishment. The man would come in handy later, of that Parry had no doubt, but for now he did not acknowledge him. Only looked at his own hands, flexing and unflexing of what seemed like their own accord, studying his fingernails for any trace of hidden claws.

*“Ensign Parry’s a Jonah,”* he thought, without rancor. *A monster amongst monsters, loved by them alone... this is what I’ll always be. My very blood foretold it.*

*Yet: If you’d gone in you’d have lost hold of the spell for sure,* another voice told him, insinuatingly, coldly logical—and was that voice his own, finally? The only one left in all his hollow aching head? *Beneath-waves, Dolomance becomes truly shark once more; neither you nor she could have hoped to stand before him, then. You saved her, thusly, and yourself as well. She will live on because of you... if that anything matters.*

Was that enough?

Well, it would have to be.

Later, he would bring those of the crew left yet intact by Dolomance's hunger back up, salt-cured and only slightly rotten, to pilot the *Salina* towards its next prize. Those who survived the attack he would offer the Articles, after dealing with whatever witch-finders might prove to be hidden amongst them in such a fashion as to honor his poor dead mother. Of Clione Attese, or the thing that had once called herself by that name, he was careful not to think; his mind he sent skipping from her, forming a habit that would eventually wipe her from him entirely. Until, one day, he closed his eyes to find he could barely recall the lines of the woman who he would have killed himself protecting's face, let alone her touch, or the sweetness of their time together. Not even the scent her dark, thick masses of hair had seemed to give off, when dragged across tender human skin.

And in the background, Rusk's dark form, always watching. *He have his hand ever on ya heart*, Tante Ankolee had told him, once... a thing Parry knew for nothing but uncomfortable truth, much though he might pretend otherwise.

"Do not speak to me," he repeated one more time, out loud —knowing himself bereft, yet somehow knowing also that it would not be long at all before he forgot his present wounds entirely. Then buried his face in his hands, shoulders shaking,

'til he raised it again with an exclamation over the odd clamminess of his cheeks, unable to remember why he had been crying.

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*Former film critic and teacher turned award-winning horror author Gemma Files is best-known for her Hexslinger novel series ([A Book of Tongues](#), [A Rope of Thorns](#), and [A Tree of Bones](#)). She has also published two collections of short fiction and two chapbooks of poetry, and she is currently hard at work on her fourth novel. The adventures of Jerusalem Parry and Solomon Rusk from “[Two Captains](#)” (*BCS* #125) and “Drawn Up From Deep Places” continue in “Trap-Weed” ([Clockwork Phoenix 4](#)) and “The Salt Wedding” ([Kaleidotrope](#), early 2015).*

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## THE BURNED MAN

by Hannah Strom-Martin

Having failed once more to win the hand of fair Dulcina, who sighed for countless suitors from her father's balcony, I was returning across the market when noon fell.

In the Raga all good men fear noon—a time when shadows shrink and true forms are concealed. In the dust and the heat you might doubt your own heart or that the man standing next to you is quite human. He smiles at you just like a man, but unless you see his shadow, lacking horns, are you sure?

In Div Kamia, noon also brings the tower—that bone-white shard in its shimmering square. If you are careless you will enter the square and encounter the being we call the Burned Man.

Everyone in Div Kamia knows the Burned Man. Everyone has seen his tower appear. The Burned Man stands before the tower with the white dust both rising and settling around him, and his face and his form are as black as the candles that Sanjiib fortunetellers burn in their tents. He is diminished, also, like a candle, and there are stripes—awful red—on his melted skin. His hands though, when he bares them from his

shroud, are lovely: brown and sinuous as the river. No one knows why his hands were spared. No one has ever seen the Burned Man's shadow.

I met the Burned Man by mistake, thinking neither of danger nor of noon. My thoughts were all with fair Dulcina; her rippling black hair, her strawberry mouth. For weeks I had stood with the other young men under her bower in the green part of town. Now I had taken the lute from my back and was plucking the strings with quiet despair. By the time I smelled the blowing white dust it was far too late to escape the Burned Man.

"You visit the goddess of the balcony," he said, taking my arm as if we were old friends.

"I visit a girl—fair Dulcina," I stammered.

"You think she's a girl, but she is a fire."

The Burned Man's smooth mouth hovered at my ear. I simpered as I tried to pull away. Yet even as I breathed the camphor scent of his robes his beautiful hands fascinated me. I was terrified that they would touch me—and yet, all the same, rapt with their awful perfection.

"Are you saying Dulcina is dangerous?" I said, stalling. It was true the girl had a vicious father. We all knew to run if he appeared on the balcony, and to accept no offer of refreshment he made.

The Burned Man snorted. “A fire!” he repeated. “Guarded by a beast who has already killed one of her suitors. He stuffed the poor boy in a barrel of oil, then set it on a cart and sent it rumbling off toward Kismé. Why do you pine for fair Dulcinea when it will only get you folded in half?”

The Burned Man spoke with a soft, flat voice, its edges rough like a pumice stone. I have known fellow singers who sound that way—who have lived hard lives and turned to drink. Their bleakness cannot rival that of the Burned Man, whose eyes are both cruel and terribly sad. The endless suffering of the Burned Man is the worst thing about him. It stung my heart like a scorpion’s barb.

“What do you care for a folded-up singer?” I asked him, ceasing, at last, my useless struggle. Heat and camphor swam in my head. His blistered face was an inverted sun.

“Because I was once a boy like you,” he said. And while noon held, he told me this tale.

\* \* \*

### **The Burned Man’s Story**

When you are young you think that you will live forever and that no harm will ever come to you. Your friends will stay friends and your lovers lovers, and the most dangerous thing is spotting a wrinkle in your looking glass.

Ah, this is not true, my boy! There are worse things than a safe old age. Trouble will come from within your own heart and still more from the hands of the ones you call friends. Such a friend I had in my youth: an esteemed young man named Indri Pasha.

Yes, Indri Pasha. The very same. The last king of beloved Div Kamia. You are thinking: that was years ago! Well, listen to me. To my tale.

Indri and I were two great peacocks and the whole city our menagerie. He sat on his beautiful lapis throne and I beside him, his beloved councilor. We shared our meals and our confidences and, of course, as we grew, also the charms of women. Do not blush or shrink from me, you who court the fair *Dulcina*. You know the allure of those gilded creatures. You know what they can do to friends.

Indri's harem was the greatest in antiquity, and he collected there the beauties of a dozen lands. I say 'he' but of course he needed help. Kings cannot always think of pleasure. They have wars and skirmishes—famines, even—and they depend upon friends to see them through. Such a friend I was to Indri. It is why he loved me. Why I burned.

Ah! I get ahead of myself. It is not of my meager procurements I speak. Not the meek girls of *Pench* who I bought with silver, nor the *Winterland* girls who dove for the

jewels in Indri's bath. I speak of one particular girl. Indri's last girl. Helené of Vervain.

Perhaps you think you have seen beauty. You have but known its twilight shadow—the moment that comes to you, just before the sunrise when the world is washed in a silvery hue. It is a fresh time, the morning of the world; yet it is not as sharp or as sweet as sunset. I speak of the beauty of the shadows, of the hard, dark angles in relief to the watch-fires. Helené of Vervain had such beauty. She bloomed at night like a breath-stoked coal.

Helené. Ah yes. She was a whore—a temple priestess I found for the Spring Rites. It was the fourth month, nearly time to plant, and I had gone to Pilara's Manse to arrange the ritual.

Pilara's Manse (you will remember it) once existed at the center of town. A black building carved round with onyx gods who postured in the throes of love and war. Her priestesses, all scattered now, wore veils of scraped muslin—cloudy black. Only at the very center of the temple, before the statue of the goddess, would they unveil. The priestesses were avatars of Pilara, and only men on the business of her beloved Yah might view them.

Of course, sometimes, men forgot. I'd known some who'd paid the priestesses to bless their fields. I would encounter them at temple, hitching up their breeches, and before the

rains came they would suffer tragedy. It is dangerous to pay Pilara for favors even if her priestesses take your coin. The wife of Yah has many guises, and even the most lowly should not be scorned.

Entering the sanctuary that morning, from streets made sticky with the onset of monsoon, I expected to see the elderly priestess sitting before the goddess's statue. But an acolyte told me she had died and that a new priestess had taken her place. I was sad. My mind wanted the crone who had performed the rites since I was a child. It was disconcerting to enter the sanctuary and hear the new woman's fluting voice.

"We know you." She sat before the statue, with Pilara's eight arms spread above her in a wheel. At first she sat so motionless I thought the statue itself had spoken. Then she moved her veiled head and my heart gave a leap, for the slenderness beneath her clothing was not at all a crone's sinew.

"I am sure you know me," I said to her. The goddess is Mother to all men. "The time arrives for my master to bless the fields and to draw Pilara's fruit from the silt of the river."

She laughed lightly at the ceremonial language. Her hands—shocking white—emerged from her robes. There were designs of red chná traced upon them, yet this emphasized rather than hid her foreignness.

“No, no,” she said. “We know *you*, Master. We have seen you since we were a child. A fellow slave is always of interest to us.”

Her statement took my tongue for a moment. Few people knew I’d been sold. I’d been a clever child and my family had wished to prosper but, how, by Yah, did this woman—

“We were a slave, too,” she said. “Do you recall the great bazaar where they stood us on chopping blocks?”

“Chopping blocks?” I *did* remember a market. A hot sun and a wooden stage.

“I call them that,” the priestess said with a shrug. “Perhaps my father was a butcher. You were sent to the palace and I to the temple but, by Pilara’s grace, I have seen you come and go.”

It is important for you to understand: at no time did her voice betray bitterness. No irony poisoned the well of her speech, which bubbled from her throat and came sweetly to my ear. Though I learned she had been taken from the North and nearly sold to the pleasure dens, it was all said lightly, without remorse. In an hour I longed to glimpse her face—but she did not grant this until the end of our interview.

“Light a candle to the Virgin,” she instructed—Pilara’s third guise, the most revered. As she spoke she unwound her sacred veil and I beheld her face and her bright, coiling hair.

The fading candles of the sanctuary seemed to flame. Indri would be very happy. He would pay her, I knew, as he had not paid her predecessor. He would think this foretold a joyous harvest. Yet leaving the sanctuary, I felt uneasy. It was not his joy I desired, but my own.

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Now I have not told you but perhaps you have guessed that Indri Pasha was a sorcerer.

Ah, you say! Of course he was. Surely no man who looks as *I* do could be so deformed save by magic.

Indri Pasha possessed such magic. Wherever he went a vague shadow surrounded him. When he wished to intimidate someone the shadow would swell. If he touched you with it you would know Yah's might. This, I'd heard, was a crushing pressure that could break your neck or snap you in two. Naturally, men did not cross Indri Pasha.

Yet as I left the temple my heart schemed.

I did not yet know the girl's name. I had only the certainty in my gut. I wanted her, and Indri would too—and indeed, a spark lit his eyes when I told of her.

Soon enough Indri went to the temple and, stumbling back like a drunk man, he assembled his gold. On the ritual night, when he left the palace, a clank of golden wheels followed him

down. He would make a grand gift to the new priestess and ask that she bless, with her body, his reign.

I sat up all night on a high balcony and let the roar of rejoicing that attended the ritual consume me. It was no less the roar that would swirl Indri's blood when he stood in the shrine and they were together.

When he came home with his empty wagon—looking spent and happy, his limbs streaked with oils, it was I who suggested he bring her to his harem, for I knew he would do so anyway. Indri and I had been friends twenty years. I could read him the way some men read books. He might have held back a few weeks without my encouragement, but with it, what permission would he not grant himself?

There is only one thing to tell of her bringing: one moment as we left Pilara's Manse. Indri, like a bridegroom, had her brought to him, and I, his trusted friend, was the officiant. I stood with her on the steps of the temple as her priestesses wept at their sudden loss. The smoke that rose from their holy censers had a blue tinge to symbolize tears. Still, what did I care for such wailing when this new bright girl was under my hand? I touched her, reverently, on her shoulder and whispered:

“Now goddess, tell me your name.”

When she told me her eyes were lowered to the earth.  
Above us the temple bells tolled noon.

So it was done. She came to his harem, but both of us knew we had only begun. She grasped my hand tightly when I guided her from the litter, and as days turned to weeks I received many signs. They speak their own language in the harem. As procurer I could speak it fluently. It is a language of flowers and gifts and gems and colors with more meaning than red, green, or blue. You may find declarations in the opening of certain windows or in the angle of pink stockings hung on a line. As a man of common blood I could not breach the harem, but I patrolled its borders and received its sighs. Little gifts came into my hands, folded within favors meant for servants or for me. (I often received small gifts from the women who were grateful for my tales of the outside world.)

Hidden in petals as crimson as blood I received notes in Helené's trembling hand. She was sad Indri had taken her from the temple but grateful she must serve no other man. She thanked me, for he bound her in girdles of jewels and was a kind lover, if overzealous. Indeed, all the city knew that he loved her and whiled away countless hours in her arms. Talk grew that he would make her Sultana, a title no Hhareem had won since Narissa of the Span.

“Would I then see you?” she asked me with a flower—a half wilting crocus the color of night.

“No,” I replied in a poorly rhymed poem. “A Sultana remains in the harem, always.”

“Ah! I am lonely!” This in a teapot. A cipher directed me to look through a latticed screen. Though the harem and palace did not touch they had several fortuitous vistas in common. On a clothesline fluttering high above the gardens I recognized her chemise with the star-trimmed hem. “I perish of loneliness for you.” I began to lose sleep but still I waited.

Helené waited too. We traded our notes. Perhaps a year passed before she discovered the passages.

I had encouraged her in this. Only Pashas know the secret highways of the harem. I had brought girls to Indri through false-bottomed chests which led to sub basements running under ground. I had smuggled him a shepherdess for his pleasure—disguising her with tin lockets and string like a bundlewoman. Yet any man might know these tricks and never gain the favorite’s rooms. Should such a one come to the very center of the harem he would be set upon by the eunuch guards.

Helené though, had found a path. We waited for some errand to take Indri from the city. When a dispute rose over

some northern border, he rode off to settle it, and Helené gave me directions to her room.

Do men still tell stories of Asmodeus—the lust-demon who prowls the edge of the desert? He takes the form of a great dark wolf whose tongue scents the air for tender flesh. No-one knows if he ravishes his girls or devours them whole in a fit of desire. Such a beast my waiting had made of me. In my mind I courted not a girl but a goddess. Her note might have been a map to fabled gold, so gorgeous and impossible did it seem I would find her.

Find her I did, though, on a night of summer lightning, Indri long gone and the city hushed. The air within the passages I wandered was thick with scents of ether and attar of rose. I fancied I could smell her—her oiled hair—the remembered fragrance drawing me on. Through underground tunnels and empty salons I passed and arrived at a golden, figure-carved door.

I'd brought a knife in case of incident, and my fingers had slowly adhered to the hilt. Indri, my mind whispered, could have planned this—he who jealously guarded his treasure. Though desire beat its small drums in my blood I had braced myself lest I encounter the guard. Rounding that last corner to that last room, in the instant before I saw the golden door, a

shadow rose in front of me, and my hand convulsed in sudden terror.

Yet it was no guard, just an odalisque whose dark skin nearly matched the shadows. The knife did not pass from the sleeve of my robe and my heart slowed as she smiled at me.

“This way, effendi,” she said softly. With no more ado she pushed open the door.

I passed in, to the inner sanctum, my fear-damp fingers brushing small golden bodies. The door was elaborate with pornography, the carven lovers entwined in endless embrace—and then it was closed and she was before me. The walls were close: pink and red, without windows.

“My lord,” she breathed. I was no lord. But for a long while she made me forget.

\* \* \*

I earned the pain that followed that night in the pleasure of those first few hours.

When I woke it was still the pleasure that had me, enveloping my heated skin. It took moments to comprehend Helené’s departure—that Indri now sat where my love had been sleeping. Oh, he had known and oh, he had tested me, and oh what revenge he would have on my crime. The great shadow of his Power turned the room to night and made my limbs into straw before he brought me to justice.

They had a way in those times of punishing thieves by removing their most offending hand. I had used both hands to cradle Helené and these were removed with a scimitar. Indri himself scalded the resulting stumps, letting his black Power flame at its edge, and then, in a voice as ringing as Yah's he proclaimed the rest of my punishment.

I thought I knew every page of Indri's life. Now he produced a hidden chapter. His Power was not confined to mere pain but could be used in the restoration and prolonging of life. He had thought, he said, long and hard on my fate, and in doing so remembered a once-loved dog. This had been the faithful pet of his youth until it bit his father's hand. The reigning Pasha, Emir, slew the beast, unmoved by its many years of service.

"But my father was not so wise as me," Indri said, his voice thundering through the hall. A halo of Power grew round him like wings, blotting the faces of his attendant wazirs. "I could not correct my poor Badal's behavior, yet it was wrong to so quickly dispose of the beast. That night, I crept down to the midden heap and bent my magic on bringing him back. He was a small dog with a small life. I revived him easily and my spies report he roams with the street packs even today. He is ragged, poor thing, and missing an ear, but it is right, don't you think,

he should reflect on his crimes? It is for this reflection I prolonged his life, and why, sweet friend, I will prolong yours.”

Idri's expression as he said this had only the faintest trace of malice. I did not doubt he wanted vengeance upon me, but he was like a stern father with a willful child. Or perhaps that is wrong. I once had a father. He too smiled slowly before bringing the strap.

In due course the thing was done. The Power reached for me, and I felt something change. I knew I would not die of my wounds—or of any mortal hurts—for a very long time. This did not stop Indri from giving me several such hurts before he ejected me from the palace.

Now let several dark days pass. Handless, I lay in a state of dreams. I had crawled to some stinking, lower-city alley to lie in my slick of dried blood and tears. I had not yet learned to steal food or to work without hands, as a second-class creature. A fever, also, lay upon me, festering like alley garbage in my roughed-over skin. In this state I thought I hallucinated the attentions of the woman who found me in the dark.

“Poor thing, poor thing,” the girl muttered. Her arms were as dark as Pilara's Manse. There was water, I think. Perhaps a balm. A smell of summer herbs and wax. A velvet voice whispered in my ear, and only then did I think she might be real.

“If you wish revenge,” the girl said, “watch for the red and follow where it goes. Go and learn the goddess’s mind and return, if you can, to Div Kamia.”

Her small arms lay me down again. I lolled as insubstantial as a child’s cloth doll. Soon enough the fever passed from me—or at least the mere burning of my flesh. I woke and began my second life, not as a man, but an avatar of revenge.

Let us not speak of trifling things: how I ate or slept or lived in those years. I am certain that I did all these things—all the while slowly hounded from the city by guards—but it was no longer mortal suffering which concerned me, only the burning insult on my heart. Men chased me off for stealing fruit, for pushing my head, face-first, into a wine vat. Everyone knew who I was and, eventually, I fled their angry familiarness.

A man with no hands is a hideous thing, stinking and wretched in the eyes of Yah. A new city brought me no relief, only more merchants and raging shopkeepers. I realized I was condemned to wander even as Bajan and the prophets of old. Therefore, I roamed ever farther, from Div Kamia to the outer edges of the empire. It took a long time to walk so far—longer, for I was often starving. The seasons raced ahead of me. Monsoons caught me, and desert sandstorms made my bed. Once, I was uncovered by a Sanjiib caravan and brought to a

corpse-yard for proper burial. The men fled screaming when I revived, thinking me an ifrit with unnatural powers.

I was at my most frail then. The city I had come to appears on no map. Beyond, the small towns and outposts began. The protection of Indri existed only on paper. There in that drowsing market square with its frightened herdsmen and shuttered stalls I wondered if I might kill myself; simply lie in my hunger and dust until I passed. I was too tired to move in any direction, and the ground, where the men had so recently tried to inter me, soothed me.

Resting with my head on a patch of dust I waited days to discover my fate. The Sanjiib merchants ventured back, tip-toeing around me and spitting if I stirred. They had picked up a passenger, a tall man swathed head to foot in a ragged black robe. At length his sandaled feet approached, his toes a bleached blond in their coating of dust. His skin above those streaks was black, and as he moved, the hem of a robe flashed scarlet.

“Red Desert,” I croaked. He would be a tribesman, though I’d never seen one of their kind so attired.

The fellow nodded. I drifted off. What did it matter if he were the Demon King of Kadaban! There was not a soul on earth who could help me; none to give succor to my limitless

life. I fell back into dark, hungry thoughts—and was awakened by a thump and the hawing of camels.

The tribesman had let fall a waterskin and retreated to join the departing Sanjiib. As they passed me, the bridles of their mounts jingling, the tribesman gestured at me from his precarious saddle. In the long light of evening his finger was thin, pointing spearlike towards the setting sun. I sat up through sheer incredulity. The rags of cloth that fringed his hand were red.

“Watch for the red,” the girl had told me. (Has she been of the Red Desert too?) Her nonsense suddenly cohered, sweet at the mineral taste of water. Watch for the red. Learn of the goddess.

Suddenly, I knew where I was going.

When the water had restored me I limped on my way—to where the sun sets and the desert turns red. You have heard tales of the Red Desert, but what civilized man in full grasp of his senses has gone there?

It wasn't easy. Nothing is. Not living. Not dying. Not knowing who to trust. I suppose it helped that, as I struck out, I had long since become uncivilized.

The space between the towns stretched. The walking took longer. I could not die. I could find little food or shelter, either. In that part of the world only rich men have oases. Their

gardens and keeps were far too strong for a worn thing like me to break into, and so I rolled, at times, like mere refuse, down windy streets and between the sand-eaten towns. I stole fruit from the stands of pauper merchants and drank with the street-pack dogs in the muck. Then even the towns were gone. There were only rude outposts and caravanserai.

The priests were still there, in the desert. The men who would lead me to the goddess.

I'd been aware of them for a long while now the way you become aware of new flowers after a rain. Since the nameless town of the Sanjiib merchants, I had caught, more and more, the flashes of red. They appeared in the shadows at temple doors. They sat in the alcoves set aside for street preachers. Red priests. They seemed to recognize me. Their scarlet-framed fingers pointed on.

The Red Desert is more than a name. The gods have done battle in that place. At its edges the sands take a rosy hue like a blood plume dispersing in crystalline water. Like any battlefield, the deeper you go, the redder and redder the land becomes.

When I passed the final priest the sands were ochre, the sun melting in the West like living fire. The priest (and who could tell if this was a new man or the very first that I had seen?) was waiting by his lean-to with his long, sharp shadow,

and the night that fell upon us was cool as the day had been hot. The Red Desert, I remember thinking, was as feverish as a flush on a young woman's skin.

"On," the red priest bid me, pointing. I had fallen, half-dead at his feet.

"How much farther?" I gasped, coughing. Not enough moisture remained for my sweat.

"You must go on, to the temple," he answered. Then both he and his lean-to were gone.

Was I hallucinating the man? Hallucination and reality mingled. Morning came and faded and returned. I lay on the sands like a fish on slow coals.

I could not die, though.

I could not die.

I got up.

I resumed my journey.

On, one foot before the other. On to the dark cliffs in the West. No more priests. No sound but the wind. The sands ever darkening like a stain.

I hallucinated the smell of water. That palaces appeared, and Helené waited for me. In my mind I killed Indri a hundred times and made love to my goddess upon his bones. I ruled them. I hurt them. I woke, still walking. The slave—the other slave—had told me to follow.

Then, like a slap to my blistered skin, I beheld the sharp dawn above the cliffs. A cool breeze that tasted of green things came to me and I stood in their blessed, sheltering shadow. The cliffs—yes, even they were red. And carved into them was the temple.

I call this place the Valley of Sleepers but at that moment, I awoke. The morning hovered, still and cooling, and water waited in a deep glassy pool. The shadow of the cliffs hung above it. Its long basin was carved in the fluid style favored by kings.

All around the pool were sleeping men, sheltered by the fanning leaves of plants.

The men lay entangled like the carvings on a door. Red priests and Sanjiib and pale-faced Northerners. Old men and young curled next to each other—young cheeks cradled golden on knobby, torn knees. Long robes in bright colors, poor trousers with patches, scuffed slippers, the heavy felt shoes of cameleers—all of them shifted together in slumber, overlain by green filigree traces of mold. In the heat and the damp of this hidden valley their clothing was peeling and sloughing away from their skin like mango rind, yet the men themselves remained perfectly preserved with skin young, old, and middling, untouched by decay. The gossamer treble of their snoring came faintly and shimmered the water of the pool.

I charged like a stallion into that water until its wetness stung my skin. Until I submerged myself utterly I had no idea of how blistered I had become. Screaming and thrashing I drank of the water and vomited half of it up again. Hours passed before the pain of my sunburned skin subsided and I relaxed to float as drunk as a lily pad. The sun moved and the sleepers snored.

I knew, of course: my journey was not done.

Insects and frogs chirred their small songs as I raised myself gingerly out of the pool. As I stood, letting the waters subside, I noticed, for the first time, my reflection. Alien eyes peered out at me from a thin unshaven tangle of a face. I touched it and the old man in the water did the same, then shed his ruined breeches and padded naked to the shore. Cool and fragrant night had fallen and torches burned in the temple doors. As I approached, the outdoor sounds gave way to the distinct chant of human voices.

The temple was made of basalt stone. Night already reigned within. Sinuous columns supported the ceiling, and unlighted passages trailed off. Torches and candles burned in the dark like stars in a miniature galaxy. Men guarded them: Red Priests who ignored me and murmured their prayers to the flickering flames. Slowly their chanting wound around me. Again I entered a kind of dream. Filled with calm lucidity I let

myself stumble towards a shrine. An eight limbed figure towered before me—Pilara, vast as the cliffs of her home.

I paused before her, breathing the dark and the distant tang of ambergris. The goddess's carven hands contained offerings: votives or flowers, or small, cunning bowls. Dark liquid gleamed in many of these. The incense barely covered its smell. I shifted and the floor shifted with me, objects clattering together with a soft, hollow sound. The face of the goddess regarded me: a flat, onyx surface without mouth, nose, or eyes. The flat surface merely gave back my reflection: a draggel-man wandering a field of bones.

At present the air around the statue shifted. The shadows, dark already, deepened still more.

“What do you want?” asked the mouthless goddess. Her voice was a sigh like a childish breeze.

My skin tightened, my belly curling inward around its months of wander and want. Though I had drunk the water of her pool and soothed some part of my tortured throat, I swallowed and my answer came out rasping as if I had chewed and swallowed a fan leaf.

“I want to strangle my friend,” I said.

“Ah.” A candle fluttered. “You realize: you have no hands?”

“You—can't *you* restore them to me?”

“For a price.” She sounded hesitant.

“What price have I not already paid?” I asked, thinking of the desert. “I am starving. It was you who bade me come. Now that I am here you must satisfy me.”

“With revenge?”

“Yes.”

“Do you not tire of such feasts? My courtyard offers water and shade.”

“Your courtyard?” I trembled like a candle—the flames all leaping and juttering now. The shadows, seething, reminded me of Indri and the Power that would pulse above his noble head. They reminded me of the shadows that had melded on the walls of the pink-red cave of Helené’s room.

As the thoughts took hold the goddess laughed. All at once, the effigy vanished.

My knees crumpled as Helené stepped from the plinth. She wore white robes, as fresh as springtime. Her hair fell in coils of coppery gold, and no veil obscured her glorious face.

“I see you do not wish to rest,” Helené said. My dusty mouth fell open, groaning. “You poor man.” She held my chin and tilted my face with a cool, soft hand. There I was: kneeling on the bones of her supplicants while her perfume dispersed the stink of the grave.

“Year after year they come,” she said. “Year after year they name their price. Then they leave and curse my name—but they

have done it to themselves. It is a lonely life, my love. Once more I ask: will you not stay and sleep?"

"I cannot sleep." Tears filled my mouth. "Helené! Please—help me!"

"I am not her." Her thumb stroked my lip. "I am but the face of desire. The Whore. Pilara. The burning flame. I can grant your fondest wish, but you will burn inside me."

I nodded. Yes. I wanted to—did I not burn already in my heart? Had I not crossed the endless desert? My blunted wrists pawed the edge of her robe.

"There is water," she said. "Water that soothes. Forgetful shade and peaceful dreams."

"I have no other dream but you."

She smiled. "Oh. You only think that.

With infinite care she drew me up, the tears in her eyes, to my shivering feet.

"I will give you your hands." She smiled at me. "I will give you the power to vanquish him. You will have your girl and your city again. But you will give me everything."

I nodded, suddenly unsure. Why should the goddess weep for me?

She took my stumps between her hands.

After that, I knew.

I knew.

\* \* \*

Have you seen a candle melted in a pan until it loses mass and form? Such a thing the goddess did to me—as greedy as a wick for nourishing oil.

The flames she burned me with were white. They devoured, like mouths, my bright, blank screams. She seemed to pull the fire from my heart, as if the spark had always been there, waiting for her.

I screamed and my lips melted into flaps.

I screamed and my stumps lengthened into hands. They were the only normal features she left me. I had knelt merely human. I rose as the Burned Man.

\* \* \*

Sometime later I awoke—vengeful in my wrath and pain. The temple had vanished and the sands blew red, but the heat of the desert no longer daunted me. Helené had, as promised, taken everything and given me power and a pair of hands. I spread my beautiful fingers before me and noted the webs of shadow between them. I rose then, turning my magic to wings and returned, at once, to the house of my friend.

\* \* \*

Now I must tell the rest of it: how I found Indri and how I destroyed him. You know there is no palace here. That my tower is all that remains. There are forces in this world, my

boy, that even the strongest man cannot overcome. Many of these forces are *hers*—though they cannot work without us to prey on.

So: to Indri in his palace. Indri who paled at my return. I came to him as a fearsome cloud—a ragged thing battering down from the sky. A woman sat near the arm of his throne, but at first I did not know her.

I twisted my friend between my hands and left him boneless on the floor. Only then did I turn to the startled woman who held a small child in her arms.

We were the only people in the hall. My new Power made a barrier that Indri's men could not cross. The woman let the child slip to the floor and, for a moment, I thought she would scream in terror.

But Helené of Vervain laughed instead. She laughed with the sound of a brassy bell.

For the first time in years I felt uncertain (years, yes, for she had had no babe, before). I had crossed the Red Desert on my belly and bared myself to the goddess's flame, yet this was the strangest thing of all: my paramour, beside Indri's body, laughing.

"The goddess is good," she told the sky. Her child howled and, with her foot, she shoved him towards me. "Oh, I had

thought you perished, betrayer—yet you lived, and suffered, and now free me from these chains.”

The bewildered child sobbed between us, cowering from her laughter as from my face. I was equally bewildered. Was this really Helené? Helené whom I had bedded? Who’d said she loved me?

“How have I betrayed you?” I asked. “It was Indri who discovered us.”

“But *you* discovered me.” She backed away from the child. “You came to the temple and took me from my goddess. I had been sold and dishonored—yet you sold me again. You! A fellow slave!”

Fire had been the substance of my days, but her words sent a cold trickle down my spine. “Helené!” I held out my hands to her; watched her flinch in disgust at my reaching fingers.

“I swore I would destroy you,” she said. “I swore I would destroy you and Indri Pasha. I thank the goddess for answering my prayers and aiding in my slow revenge.”

She laughed again at my confusion—but already that confusion was dissipating. I remembered the stinking alley where they’d dumped me and the maid who had bathed me and pointed me on. On and on; all fingers towards the goddess, seeing red—what I wanted to see—all the way.

Helene nodded. “I begged Indri to spare you—to curse you when he would have cut you down. I knew you would crawl to Her temple for mercy, but there are crimes Pilara cannot forgive. You men who worship Her as Mother neglect to consider her other aspects.”

As I stared at her, rage and sorrow fuming in my heart, her whole form seemed to blur at the edges like a thing viewed through water. I wiped at my eyes, and her child kept howling, and I had gone so long hoping, and now all hope was gone...

“The boy,” I said.

Helené smirked. She made no move to pick him up.

“The boy!” I insisted—yet my rage brought laughter and you who have suffered love must know what I did.

The child’s screams hovered over my vengeance and continued when his mother’s screams had died. They lasted until I picked him up, gently, with the only part of me still unburned and, with the dust of the palace settling around us, carried him down the hill to Pilara’s Temple in the city.

### **The End of the Burned Man’s Story**

\* \* \*

The Burned Man’s voice had faded to a whisper, and his grip had loosened as the first hour drew near. I sat stricken in the dust at his feet and watched his tears drop –tiny stains on the ground. I wanted to ask: Whose child was it? And: What

happened to the temple? for he had not told. Yet a terrible silence hung over us, and we seemed like the last two souls in the world.

“The curse never fades,” the Burned Man whispered. “All I loved is gone, and still I am here. I would spare you the same with fair Dulcina and the dangerous men who guard her bower. Do not return to woo with her. She is as lovely as a goddess but her touch will burn.”

As he spoke he stepped back and a bell rang once—whether in my own world or in his. I had but a moment to note the flicker—the shadow just peeping from under his robe. Then the tower and the square vanished, leaving me in an empty lot behind the market. I thought I heard a child cry, but it might have been my own voice—the wheeze in my throat.

I alone in Div Kamia have seen the Burned Man’s shadow. I alone am certain that he is a man. A cursed man. He has seen the goddess and lived and yet, even so, his torment endures.

I thought on all that the Burned Man had said. I thought of his face, once a young face like mine. I thought of Dulcina on her grand balcony, and of her deadly father, and of my treacherous heart.

Hugging my lute to my aching chest, I sat there a long time before I made my decision.

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*Hannah Strom-Martin's fiction has appeared in Realms of Fantasy, Andromeda Spaceways Inflight Magazine, Beneath Ceaseless Skies, and the anthology Amazons: Sexy Tales of Strong Women. Together with Erin Underwood, she is the co-editor of The Pop Fic Review and the anthology Futuredaze: A Collection of YA Science Fiction. She lives in California with her husband and the obligatory herd of cats-with-fantasy-names.*

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## COVER ART

“Golden Age,” by Juan Carlos Barquet



*Juan Carlos Barquet is an artist from Mexico City. He has done illustrations for books, album covers and tabletop games for clients such as Fantasy Flight Games; concept art and matte paintings for short films supervised by DreamWorks Animation and ILM, and exhibitions at Art Takes Times Square (New York, 2013), Parallax Art Fair (London, 2012), Euskal Exhibition Center (Bilbao, 2012) and more. View more of his work at [jcbarquet.com](http://jcbarquet.com).*

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