



Beneath Ceaseless Skies

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REMEMBERING LIGHT

by Marie Brennan

In her first light, Noirin never thought it strange that her world should be only a few blocks square, and that on the other side of the Palace Way (whose Palace had vanished before her grandmother was born) there should be a place where the people had four arms and water always fell from the sky. She never gave it any thought at all, until the day the chantry disappeared.

It stood—had stood—on the other side of Surnyao from the Palace Way, and at first dawn its long shadow had stretched across the intervening blocks, all the way to the boundary with Yimg, the place of rain. The Asurnya measured their world by that tower, the tallest they had left. Then one day the first sun rose and no shadow answered; the Asurnya looked to the sky and found it empty, and Noirin realized what they meant by measuring the world, what her mother was talking about when she said there was once a sunset chantry on the other side of the Palace Way—that there had once been an other side that was not Yimg but Surnyao.

She grew up in the absence of that shadow, one absence among many. One more thing her people had lost. Noirin underwent the rites of early light in a ramshackle tower built to replace the missing chantry; by the time she reached her increasing light, that tower had collapsed. She departed her girlhood in a shabby building of only four storeys, where the remaining suns could barely find her at all.

There were only two left. But Noirin faced the horizon anyway; she covered her eyes seven times, and whispered a sacred vow to the wind.

“I will recover what we have lost.”

Surnyao, as it had been before the seventh sun burned out, and the end of the world began.

Before they came to Driftwood.

* * *

“You must not go,” the Chant Leader said despairingly, when she told him of her intent. “I’m not a traditionalist, Noirin; you know I’m not. We once had the luxury of following the chants in the matter of travel, letting the suns dictate how far we went, but that was before the—” He choked on the words. “What you propose, though, is too much.”

“In my increasing light,” she answered him, inflecting her verbs with both respect and determination, “I am permitted to

go out of the city of my birth. If that city has dwindled, it makes no difference; there is no reason I should not go.”

Casuistry, and they both knew it. Before the end of the world, the chants had said that only those in their glorious light should go to the far ends of the earth. The traditionalist opinion, since Surnyao’s arrival in Driftwood, held that to go *past* the ends of the earth was out of the question, even for such elders. But the world was a smaller place than it had been—much smaller, and ever shrinking—and tradition was, as the Chant Leader said, a luxury they could not afford. The fields that once fed them had withered and vanished, their mines crumbled into oblivion, and to survive, they were forced to trade with those beyond their borders. Those from other worlds.

Other worlds which, like Surnyao, were dying. Because that was Driftwood: an accumulation of fragments, universes in their final throes. Just before the seventh sun burned out, whole realms of Surnyao fell into Absent Light and were never seen again. But where they had been, instead there was a dark mist, and then something else in that mist: another land, foreign beyond comprehension, which had suffered its own disaster. Was still suffering. Flakes of fire whirled through the air there, and some of its people stood out in that wind until they burned to cinders, accepting—even welcoming—their demise. The rest dug into the ground for shelter, and traded with

Surnyao and their neighbors through cramped tunnels that stank of ash.

That place was gone now. Noirin had never seen it. It had crumbled faster than Surnyao, slipping toward the center of Driftwood, into the Crush itself, from which nothing emerged again.

The Chant Leader would have buried his hands in his beard, but it had thinned with time, only a few black wires left. He had pulled the rest out, in his agony over the doom of their world. “We need you here, Noirin. You’ve memorized all the chants, every one we still remember—even the ones we no longer use. Who else cares as much as you? Who else can become Chant Leader, after I’m gone?”

She put her hand on his arm, felt it tremble beneath the thin silk of his robes. Worn, and much patched, but it was the last silk they had. “I’ll come back. When I’ve found him.”

“When!” he cried. “That was ages ago, Noirin. How many races in Driftwood live that long? Even if he lives, it will be like finding one spark of light in the blaze of seven suns.”

Beneath that, the real protest: *if he ever lived at all*. The Chant Leader thought it a myth. But it was his job to remember everything, as much as he could, and so he told the story: the man who came to Surnyao, who lived among the Asurnya for a

time, and then went away. A man who might, if the stories were true, still live.

The Chant Leader dropped his face into his hands. “Noirin, the—” His voice caught again, and when he recovered, his whisper was low and intense. “The second sun will burn out soon.”

It struck her with the chill of Absent Light. He could not know that for sure; it was a common pastime in Driftwood, trying to predict the decay of worlds, and equally common to mock those who tried. Would the first sun—the last one—come with them into the Crush, or would Surnyao go to that ultimate end in darkness? Either way, the loss of the suns was the best metric they had, and to lose one of the remaining two was a sign of how little time they had left.

How little time she had to find her quarry.

Noirin chose the strongest inflections she knew. “I will go out under the light of two suns,” she said, “and return before the last burns out. I promise you, Chant Leader: I will come back. And I will bring hope with me.”

* * *

But hunting through the Shreds was not so easy.

Here in the heart of Driftwood, nothing went very far. Not the worlds she walked through, small fragments like her own home, struggling to preserve themselves against the unstoppable decay. Not the oddments she brought with her, barter-

pieces in an odd economy where strange things could acquire value.

Even her determination faded faster than it should.

She expected her search to take a while. If the man she sought were nearby, she would have heard; Noirin therefore went to the edge of her range, the point at which people ceased to understand the pidgin she spoke. There she stopped for a time, taking a job in a Drifter bar, among people so crossbred they belonged to no world at all. She washed dishes with the juice of a plant whose original name was lost along with the world it came from, but which grew now in many parts of Driftwood and went by the humble name of rinseweed. While she worked, she learned a new trade-tongue, one used in Shreds more distant from her home. And then she moved on: all part of her plan.

What she hadn't planned for was loneliness.

Not for people—or at least, not only. She missed the two suns; too many Shreds had only one. She missed the chants, patched and ragged though they were. Those things had always kept her company before, and now their loss caught in her throat, so that she dwelt obsessively on her vow. *I will recover what we have lost.* It eroded her patience, as she found a new job, learned a new tongue, asked after the man she sought.

The sound of his name changed between languages, but the meaning did not. And he was a one-blood, not a crossbred Drifter; it made him distinctive. She found people who had heard of him, certainly—or at least heard the stories. But how to find him, where he lived... that, no one seemed to know.

One spark of light in the blaze of seven suns. How many people lived in Driftwood? She asked three scholars and got seven different answers; it depended on whether she meant just the Shreds, or also the Edge, the place where worlds arrived out of the Mist. But all seven numbers were high, and Noirin was seeking a single man.

She had terrible dreams of the second sun burning out. One Absent Light the dream was worse than it had ever been, and she jerked awake, wondering whether that was a sign. Whether her people now dwelt under the light of a single sun. Could she tell, this far beyond the edge of Surnyao? Worlds worked according to their own rules, and the Shred she was living in was nothing like her home. But some things a person could carry within herself.

She moved onward. Another Shred, another job, another tongue to learn. Her grasp of it was halting at best. She spoke it well enough, though, to understand a bird-winged man when he told her the most helpful thing she'd learned yet. "He does-

n't like to be hunted," the creature said. "Hired, yes. Hunted, no."

Noirin thought this over while she chopped vegetables she didn't know the names of and threw them into a bin next to the bar's cook. Hired, not hunted.

Very well.

* * *

The third public house she worked in occupied the massive trunk of a tree in a Shred whose people had vanished before memory, leaving a forest that resisted the attempts of neighboring Shreds to cut it for wood. The tree had no doors—its bark flexed open to allow passage—so Noirin had to watch in all directions, but she had no difficulty spotting the man when he walked in.

And he spotted her just as easily. He stopped halfway in, growled something that sounded like a curse, and turned around.

"Wait," Noirin called, but he had already left.

She ran after him. He was easy to find, too tall to move quickly through the low branches, his skin silver-blue in the muted air. A branch snagged the loose fabric of his tunic, and it ripped with a sound like the rattle some Drifter musicians used. He swore again—then a third time, as Noirin caught up to him.

“Why did you run away?” she asked.

He glared at her. His eyes were as deep a black as her own, oddly reassuring. “You’re the one who’s been hunting me.”

What did she expect? She was a one-blood, as distinctive as he was among the Drifters; no one in this part of the Shreds had skin as dark as hers. She had moved to a new area before trying to hire him, but he was clever enough to make the connection on sight.

Noirin freed the torn edge of his tunic from the branch and wished any of the pidgins had the inflections of her native tongue; she couldn’t express supplication well enough. “No. The rumor I spread was true; I want to hire you. To help my people.”

He pulled away from her in disgust and fury. If the trees had let him, he likely would have walked away again, but there was no graceful exit to be had. “I can’t save your gods-damned world.”

A sound of startlement escaped her. “I didn’t think you could.”

Now she had his attention. He considered her, while he tucked the trailing flap of his tunic into his sash. “Then what did you want me for?”

Noirin wished they stood in sunlight, rather than the oppressive dark of the trees, but feared that asking him to move

elsewhere would exhaust the small patience she'd won. "Are you the man known as Last?" The meaning stayed the same, no matter the tongue; she named him in the language of her home.

He went still at the sound of it; she could almost see the rapid dance of his thoughts, recognizing the language, trying to identify it. "Surnyao," he said at last, and a small sun of joy burned beneath Noirin's ribs. "The place of light."

"It used to be. And that is why I've searched you out."

"I can't put it back the way it was, either," he said, with a surprisingly bitter cast to the words.

She shook her head. Now was the time to ask; the bitterness wasn't directed at her. "Could we go somewhere... more comfortable?"

After a heartbeat, a grin broke through the twist of his face. "Either you're propositioning me, or you want sunlight."

Another startled sound. "No! You—you aren't—"

"Asurnya?"

"A *woman*," Noirin said. "At least you don't appear to be."

Understanding dawned in his eyes. "That's right; your people have rules about that sort of thing. So you're how old—third sun?"

Both the heat of embarrassment and the light of joy faded a little. "Nearly fourth," Noirin said. This time she was glad for

the pidgin, so she didn't have to decide whether to inflect for shame or not. "Maybe fourth, by now; I'm not sure how long I've been gone."

"I'm not arrogant enough to think you'd hunt me out for breeding, anyway. So you want sunlight, and to ask me about something else entirely." His next words were addressed to the trees. "All right, I'm listening to her. Will you let me go now?"

The branches, without seeming to move, opened up around them. Last grinned again at Noirin's wide eyes and said, "Little-known secret. The people of this Shred never vanished; it was only ever inhabited by trees. You've been waiting tables inside their king. Come on."

She absorbed that in wonderment, then stretched with relief as they came into the open air. The sun in this next Shred was weak, leaving her cold all the time, but it was better than nothing. Last led her between two buildings and into a courtyard she didn't know existed, where the ground gave way to a shallow bowl of beaten copper ten paces across. It caught the sun's weak light and gave back gentle warmth, and Noirin almost wept with sudden homesickness.

He gave her time to compose herself, then said, "So what *do* you want me for?"

At his nod, she seated herself gingerly on the copper, pressing her hands against the sun-heated metal. "We still have

stories of you,” she told him, faintly embarrassed to admit it. “They say you were in the place of fire, and the first outsider to set foot in Surnyao.”

“Place of fire....” His eyes went distant, and then he snapped his fingers. “E Si Ge Tchi. I think. They were trying to negotiate a treaty with another world, for protection against that firestorm. Yes, I remember.”

Radiant light, within and without. He remembered. Noirin said, “You are the only one who does.”

“I thought you said your people told stories about it.”

“About *you*. And a little about Surnyao, what it was like then. But the truth is that we’ve forgotten most of it. We talk about Absent Light and the vanished suns, but it’s empty words, fragments without meaning. Nobody understands well enough to explain.”

He turned his head away. She took the opportunity to study his profile: the folds of his eyelids, the sharp slope of his jaw, the copper light giving his skin a violet cast. So unlike an Asurnya man. And old—how old? He must come from a very long-lived race indeed, to have been there when Surnyao was new to Driftwood, and still be here now. But he had seen it with his own eyes, not filtered through generations of broken chants, memories warped by pain and loss.

Last said, almost too quiet for her to hear, “That’s the nature of Driftwood. Fragments.”

The pain in his voice made it hard for Noirin to speak. “And it’s in the nature of those who come to Driftwood to fight against it. You *remember*. You can tell me how Surnyao was. And then I can go home, and tell my people, and we will take that light with us into the darkness.”

It would come regardless. She knew that much. The last suns would burn out, and Surnyao would go into the Crush, as countless worlds had gone before them. But they could go as Asurnya, with the strength of all they had forgotten. They could make their own light.

He let out a breathless laugh. “Tell you? An entire world. Or most of one, anyway. I lived there for some time—no doubt your stories tell you that—from mid-sun to Absent Light. I could talk from now until your last sun dies and not tell you everything I saw, and you’d forget half of it before I was done.”

She felt the pulse of her heart in her tongue. “You could come to Surnyao—”

He was on his feet before she saw him move, retreating to the center of the shallow copper bowl. “And see the wreckage of a place I once loved? No. I won’t be your new Chant Leader, won’t bind myself to—”

And then he stopped, before Noirin could find a response, and in the warm glow she saw speculation dawn on his face. “Though perhaps,” he said, and stopped again.

She dug her fingers into the unyielding copper. “What?”

He hesitated for a moment, then said, “You’d have to do something for me in return.”

“I always intended to,” she said. “Nothing in Driftwood is free. What do you want?”

Last said, “To forget.”

* * *

The sign above the archway was illegible to Noirin, but Last told her it read *Quinendeniua*. The Court of Memory.

Walls of packed and polished mud surrounded the courtyard, and fragrant trees bloomed along the walls, breathing forth their scent in the light of flickering torches. In one corner, a creature of amorphous shadow served drinks to patrons, and in another, four musicians provided a melody to the dancers who swayed across the paving-stones.

And that was all. *Quinendeniua* was the only remnant of its world; beyond its earthen walls, other Shreds went about their business. But the sound did not carry across the threshold, as if this were a sacred space.

Last felt it, too, for he spoke in a quiet tone that went no farther than Noirin’s ears. “There are two ways to do this. But if

you chased me down to find the memory of Surnyao's past, I doubt you want to begin with blasphemy. You haven't been presented to the fourth sun yet."

In the warm darkness, she could scarcely feel the heating of her own cheeks, and she managed a light response. "Even if I were—you're not arrogant enough to expect that."

His teeth glinted silver when he grinned. "Right. Well, for this to work, we have to match each other; we have to move as one. So, like most people who come here, we dance."

"Are—" She stared at the figures moving in the torchlight. "Are they all here for memory?"

"One way or another. It's the magic of this place. Some people want to remember someone else's memories—for education, or just for escape. Others want to forget. Memories can be shared, or given away." His eyes vanished into the darkness beneath his brows when he looked down at her. "How do you want to begin?"

The memory he wished to lose was not Surnyao; he'd refused to tell her what it was. What could be so bad that this man would want to erase it from his mind? It was at least partly morbid curiosity that made Noirin say, "My payment is that you will forget. Let that be done first."

“So I don’t have to worry you’ll skip out on the bill,” he said, and managed a hint of amusement. “I appreciate it. But no—I’ll give you what you came for, first.”

His fingers curled around hers, and he pulled her forward before she could protest.

The music was foreign but lovely, a slow beat from skin-covered drums and some kind of rattle, stringed instruments like leudani weaving melody and harmony around it. Noirin could not understand the singer’s words, but the sense of them reached her anyway: memory and forgetfulness, the foundations and chains of the past. She didn’t know whether the connection of minds came about through the music, or if Quinen-deniuua did it to all who came within, but she believed what Last had told her was true.

Here, she could see what he had seen, more completely than words could ever convey.

Here, she would remember Surnyao.

The dances of her home were long forgotten. She had seen others in her travels, some frantic, some like the slow movement of statues. This was neither. *We have to move as one*, Last had said; he drew her close, wrapped one arm about her waist. They were closer in height than she had thought, and could lay their heads upon each other’s shoulders. She felt the

tremor of his laughter. “I know it’s strange. Just relax. In a moment, you won’t notice this at all.”

She wasn’t sure she believed him. But he began to move, in slow, easy steps, and she moved with them; she couldn’t *not*, as close as they were. His free hand held hers lightly, like a bird. Despite the darkness, the air was warm, and a pleasant sweat beaded her skin. Noirin closed her eyes, gave Last her trust, felt him give the same to her. There was nothing but the darkness and the music, the scented breeze, the firmness of the paving-stones beneath their feet, and memory....

* * *

Seven suns, blazing their glory across the sky, a brightness and a heat that gave life to everything below.

Chants, *always* chants, not just at certain times but continually, their steady pace the means by which the Asurnya measured their days. *I will meet you at the Hyacinth Canto. You haven’t come to see me in a hundred cycles. Fry the meat for one stanza.*

Tall towers that cast no shadow, lit from every side by the suns. In the catacombs beneath them, warriors with spears of black iron, the priesthood of Absent Light. Figures of terror, to small children—*behave, or I’ll apprentice you to the Harbingers of the Dark.*

Markets that sold a thousand spices, each one distinct on the tongue. Aromatic flowers that danced in the gentle air, their seeds spreading in the ceaseless light. Serpents dozing in the warmth, sold as pets, as sacrifices, as food. Vast fields, kept damp by intricate irrigation, regulated by a caste called the saerapavas.

A young man. Tall and slender, black as obsidian, with a merry grin. In his third sun, he was too young for breeding, and so he dallied with his male friends until that time came. Even with a silver-pale outsider, horrifying the Chant Leader, who insisted that contact with someone from beyond the edges of the world would be an abomination, regardless of age.

Last loved Chahaya, and mourned when he reached his median light, moving into the world of women and family.

Grief threatened to suffocate Noirin—hers and Last's. *This* was the world they had lost, in all of its wondrous complexity, from the heartbreaking perfection of the ancient chants to the shameful poverty of the beggars in the streets. Good and bad, grand and humble, all the different aspects of Surnyao, and the suns watching it all in their slow march across the sky.

Absent Light.

Wails throughout the city, the terrified shrieks of children. She could not feel the terror herself: to Last, it was simply night, a common enough occurrence in most worlds. And now

it came too often for her to comprehend its full horror. But she witnessed the paralysis of the Asurnya, the Harbingers walking the streets with their black iron spears, and heard the silence where the chants had been.

Then dawn, the First Sun, blessing the world with its light.
And Surnyao came to life once more.

* * *

The shoulder of Last's shirt was wet with tears when Noirin lifted her head.

"I'm sorry," she said, and tried ineffectually to brush it dry.

He stopped her with one hand. "It's all right." Grief shadowed his eyes, too; he had remembered Surnyao with her. So much lost! She thanked light he'd left when he did; she did not want to remember the moment after his departure, when the Glorious Sun burned to cinders on the horizon. That horror lived on well enough in tales.

He let her pull free. Noirin retreated out of the way of their fellow dancers, going to stand beneath one of the trees. Tiny pink petals drifted down, reminding her of similar trees that had once bloomed in the gardens of the chantries.

When she had composed herself once more, she turned and found Last waiting at a discreet distance. Torchlight flickered behind his head, but his face was in shadow. "What do you

want to forget?" she asked him. "What is so terrible, the very memory of it must be torn from your mind?"

He didn't answer at first. This was not part of their agreement, that she should ask questions. But finally he said, "Not terrible. Just—" A ragged breath, and for the first time it occurred to her that he might have chosen his position deliberately, to hide his expression in darkness. She understood him better now, and she knew the ways in which honesty was hard for this man.

"Just painful," he finished.

Noirin left him his distance, but not his reticence. "You bear so much grief. Why is this pain worse than all the others? Last... what are you trying to forget?"

And she knew, fleetingly, as she said it, that she had used the wrong name; he was not always called Last. But she didn't know what his real name was.

He answered her anyway. "My world."

The weight of it was there, in her memory. Rarely at the forefront of his mind, but always present. He was old, far older than she had realized; old when Surnyao came to Driftwood, and far older than he should ever have been.

Last of his race. Last of his world, which had long since gone into the Crush. Living on, with no idea why, ages after he should have been dead. And something had happened to him, a

recent pain, which made him want to forget where he had come from, forget there was one world he would grieve for beyond all others, now and forever, with no end in sight.

She didn't know what that recent pain was, how it had driven him to this desperate point. But she knew why he'd chosen to share Surnyao with her first: to postpone the moment when he would give up the memory of his own home. And she could guess the reason for that, too.

"You're the only one who remembers," Noirin said. His world, and countless others that had come and gone. "If you forget... then they're dead, even if you live."

"Maybe I want that," he said harshly, cutting across the steady rise and fall of the music.

"For now. But not forever. There will come a time when you regret the loss of those memories. And who will remember them for you then?"

Last dropped his chin. Staring at the paving-stones, he said, "This is not what we agreed."

No, it wasn't. And Noirin could not deny the curiosity burning within her. To know the origin of this man—his name, the name of his world, the path that had led to his immortality, even if he didn't understand it himself. She would know what he knew, what no one else in Driftwood did.

But she would be stealing his very self from him. If he forgot those things, he wouldn't be Last anymore. It was a form of suicide.

She had agreed. Noirin struggled with her conscience, then snatched at the hope of compromise. "If we do this... that memory becomes mine, in its entirety."

"Yes."

"Then I could keep it for you. And when you ask, we'll come back here, and I'll return it to you."

His head came up in a swift arc. Small shifts in his posture told Noirin he almost spoke several times, pulling the words back just before they reached his lips. Finally a broken half-laugh escaped him, and he said, "I should have known better than to think Quinendeniua would be so simple. Letting you in my head like that... you understand me too well now, don't you?"

She had no idea what he meant by that, but kept her silence.

"You could walk out that archway and be mugged in the streets of Vaiciai, or a dozen other Shreds between here and your home. You could die of old age or disease before I come find you. We could return and find Quinendeniua gone, just a crumbled chunk of wall dissolving in the Crush, and no world

left that can do what this place does. A hundred and one ways for that memory to be lost. And without it....”

Another long pause. This time, Noirin completed the sentence for him, because he’d said enough that she did indeed understand him now. “Without it, you might die.”

“I don’t know why I haven’t,” he said. “For all I know, forgetting might make it happen.”

“Then the question is: are you prepared to destroy the last piece of your world?”

She didn’t want to ask it; if he said yes, then she would have to do as she promised, taking his memory, destroying him in spirit, and maybe in body, too. But that was his choice, not hers.

Last buried his head in his hands, while behind him the dancers swayed and whirled, trading memories, remembering and forgetting events, people, worlds.

He lowered his hands. “No. I don’t want to forget.”

Noirin let out the breath she hadn’t realized she was holding. Giving Last space for privacy, she went past him to the bar, paid for a drink with the ingots of iron that were her wages in the sentient tree where she had waited tables, what felt like a world’s lifetime ago. Surnyao had no iron anymore, no Harbingers of the Dark. She pushed the memory aside and returned to Last with the cup.

He downed its contents, unconcerned with the possibility that the drink of this world might be poison to him. Then again, could anything harm him? She hadn't seen enough to know.

"Thank you," she said, and not just on behalf of Surnyao.

Last grunted. Then he seemed to reconsider that answer, staring at his empty cup, and said, "It'll pass. I've wanted to forget before—but this is the first time I've had a way to follow through. I think... I think I'll be glad when Quinendeniua is gone."

And with it, the temptation of oblivion. Noirin understood.

He set the cup aside and said, "I'll guide you back to Surnyao. There's some bad Shreds between here and there."

Side by side, not quite touching, they passed under the arch of Quinendeniua, leaving behind the dancers and the music, the falling petals of the trees. Seven suns burned in Noirin's mind, lighting the way home.

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Marie Brennan is an anthropologist and folklorist who shamelessly pillages her academic fields for material. Her

short stories have sold to more than a dozen venues, including Talebones, On Spec, and Intergalactic Medicine Show. A previous story set in the same Driftwood world as “Remembering Light” appeared in [Beneath Ceaseless Skies #14](#). She is currently working on a series of historical fantasy novels centering on the faerie court of London: Midnight Never Come, In Ashes Lie, and the upcoming A Star Shall Fall, due out this September.

Beneath
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Skies

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THE JEWELS OF MONTFORTE, PT. I

by Adam Corbin Fusco

“It’s the latest fashion, sar,” the tailor said.

Captain Monteroy Absinthe looked down at the lace cuffs of his shirt that were so long they covered his palms. They itched. “How can there be fashion in the world when most of it is drowned?” he asked, irritated.

The tailor, sighing, marked with a sliver of chalk an adjustment to be made to the hem of Absinthe’s breeches. “The last bits of decorum keep us civilized, sar, if I may say so. Even for pyrates. Besides, one must make a favorable impression.”

“I’m going to rob Lady Montforte, not marry her.”

“Aye, sar,” said the tailor, who sighed again—a neat trick, given the pins he held in his mouth—and smoothed the white hose on Absinthe’s leg, which also itched.

The tailor was dressed in simple wool breeches and a shirt that hung on him like a wet sail. *What could he know about fashion?* Absinthe thought. And though the tailor’s shop was against the hull of the ship and therefore had a choice porthole to let in light as they sailed over clouds in Cordelio, it was small and cramped and an inconvenient twenty decks below the

maindeck. It all put Absinthe out of sorts—and no one should have to wear cuffs such as these.

He raised his hands and lowered them, the cuffs falling back and pitching forward. “How can I hold a sword properly with these things in the way?”

“I believe that’s the idea, sar,” the tailor said as he knelt to work on the other leg. “A gentleman is not a threat if something hampers his swordplay.”

“Well, make the stitches weak so that I can tear them off when the time comes.”

“Sar doesn’t intend on being a gentleman?”

“Certainly not.”

Sometimes it was all a bit much being the captain of one of the last two greatships in the world. He and all other pyrates, though not unified, could sail unchallenged through almost any level of cloud in Greensea, unless pursued by ships from Isla or fighting among themselves. Blowing things to bits among the landed and plundering what was left, however, was not always the best way to provide for one’s people; sometimes what one needed got blown to bits as well.

His ship, the *Crimson Moon*, was inhabited by thousands of civilians accumulated through years of disappearing land as the waters of Ocean rose; it was not only a ship of battle but a city, and he had a population to feed and shelter. And then

there was the ship itself, with sails that needed mending, rope that needed replacing, and hull that needed patching. As the Wyrm of the World, Leviathan, devoured the land, and entire cities sank beneath the waves, there was more to provide for and less to steal from. Sometimes one had to sail close-hauled to a finer goal than just rampaging through villages waving swords about. Sometimes one had to go for the big score.

“Dressing like a harlequin is hardly going to make an impression,” Absinthe said, “except one of buffoonery.”

“You are not dressed like a harlequin, sar,” the tailor said. “You are dressed as a landed royal. There are some among them who would kill for an invitation to the ball.”

Well, it didn't come to that, Absinthe thought, *but it did take a little more than bribery to secure mine.* Lady Montforte's ball celebrating the anniversary of her husband's death was hailed as the event of the year in the Tumbledown Archipelago. More importantly, the lady possessed a treasury of jewels that dated back to the city-state burghers, said to contain diamonds, emeralds, and rubies as big as albatross eggs. The real prize, however, was the gem known as the Searock, or Seawrack, if it truly existed—green, glowing, and cursed, it was said, with power over Ocean.

He bent forward to note the tailor's progress, getting an impression of creamy frills, but stopped suddenly, aware that

he was about to upset his enormous hat. "I should hardly worry about making an impression on Lady Montforte. Apparently she is quite a shrew, and ugly besides." A needle pricked him in the leg. "Ow!"

"My pardons, sar," the tailor said. "My hands aren't as sure as they used to be."

"I'm sure you don't want this white monstrosity covered in red. Be careful!"

Oh, who am I fooling anyway? Absinthe thought. They would spot him for what he was, despite any disguise. His hands, after a lifetime of handling rope and swinging a sword, were tough and callused, and his skin had been bronzed by sun and burnished by wind. He had lived his entire life on the *Moon*, sailing level upon level of cloud and hardly ever touching land. His father had been captain before him and his father before that, through centuries of hereditary captaincy. One could no more hide the wind and sky from his features than turn a cow into a swan by applying rouge to its cheeks.

The tailor stood, looking him over with one eyebrow raised. "There, sar. That does it. I'll make the final adjustments and have it delivered updeck in the morning." He made to guide him to a pier glass, but Absinthe closed his eyes.

"I don't want to look."

"Please, sar, just this once."

Absinthe leaned over to peek into the mirror. “Oh.”

The person who stood before him in the glass was a landed royal of the highest order. His white shoes a handbreadth high glowed with buckles of ivory. His breeches scintillated with diamond-like sparkles against a field of milk. A creamy sash hung about his middle and his shirt erupted in cloudy plumes. Even the hat was not so bad, trimmed as it was in moonfish scales.

The tailor helped him into a greatcoat the color of fog. With one knee bent and a hand on hip, Absinthe turned to look at himself, pleased. He certainly cut a royal figure, much different, he supposed, than how people usually saw him in his common sailor’s breeches and simple shirt.

I am the Alabaster Duke, he thought.

“Just one more piece, sar, so I can see the entirety,” said the tailor, taking up a length of white silk.

Absinthe stopped his hand. “What’s that?”

He knew what it was: a neckerchief or such to cover the scar across his throat. For most of his life he had worn a scarf like a noose around his neck to hide it, his hidden mark given to him by his father, who sought sacrifice to Leviathan.

The tailor wanted to conceal the scar; it was an ugly sign to be covered up, stinking of curse. Absinthe felt a fool. It was his secret shame he hoped would shame him no longer. There were times when he forgot about it. He could not see it himself ex-

cept in a mirror, of course, and he had been accustomed to the tightness of it at his throat since a child; but others saw it, every day, and that was something he should never forget.

“My pardons, sar,” said the tailor, taken aback. “No offense was intended. It is merely part of the disguise. Your... mark, sar—it will give away your identity to Lady Montforte and her retinue more than anything else.”

“Oh. Aye. I see,” Absinthe said, recovering himself. “Of course.” He reluctantly raised his chin to allow the tailor to tie the silk at his neck. “Yes, hide it,” he said. “Hide it completely.”

* * *

Despite being truncated by the rising waters of Ocean, Montforte was still an imposing mountain, though it rose lone from the sea and, instead of commanding a vast expanse of land, merely frowned over a set of islands that freckled the waters to the north. The rock was known for its network of caves that peeked from steep cliffs. Many of these were now hidden and drowned, but the ones at the current level of the waters had turned to grottoes, washed by the tides and glittering with blue, phosphorescent crabs.

On this night the moon Tundaroon, high and bright, threw green fireflies across the surface of Ocean, while little red Andaluse brooded low in the sky. Their blue brother Sussurus bided his time on the other side of the world, perhaps awaiting the

storm hinted at by the piled clouds in Cumulo and the swirling thunderers touched with red approaching from the west up in Caprico. For now, though, the sky was clear and calm, and the mansion that topped the mountain glowed warmly with fire-light as if a welcoming beacon like those found in cloudhouses in the Calms of Dellabrynda.

Captain Monteroy Absinthe walked from the upper dock of Montforte to the mansion, having slipped in among a party being ferried over from neighboring Speckleton Cove. Once inside the building, he waited nervously among other guests at the entrance to the ballroom. He had dabbed his rapier with tar to make it look more like a dress sword, but now he worried that it had spotted his breeches. Had he forgotten to polish the buckles on his shoes? Were the frills on his shirt stiff and flaring? He was about to reset his hat once more when it became his turn to be announced.

The servant raised an eyebrow as he looked at the name on his card. He rapped his staff against the marble floor. “His Graciousness,” he called out and then coughed into his hand—was he laughing?—“Allister Pinchpence. The Alabaster Duke.”

Absinthe swept into the room. The ballroom was enormous, with columns of amber marble running along all sides, supporting a high gallery. Drooping, russet bunting decorated the gallery walls between torch sconces that took the form of

skulls with glowing eyes. A chandelier glittered with crystal droplets that magnified its hundred candles.

Guests danced in the swimming light. The ladies, dressed in titanic hoop skirts, glided across the floor, while the men strutted in martial bearing and snapped open fans in time with the orchestra's pompous tune. Open windows let in the sea breeze that gusted now and then with the approaching storm to shiver decorations of rust-colored crepe. Tables of food were stationed between the columns. A punch bowl, big enough for five people to bathe in, held a bubbling concoction of yellow.

Absinthe felt embarrassed. He had assumed he would be making a grand entrance, with people complimenting him on his attire, assuring him of the effectiveness of his disguise; but there was a part of him that wanted to fit in with this sort, these landed gentry, beyond the ruse of his persona. Instead he stood there while all the others ignored him, and though the orchestra was loud, he felt a great silence in the room. He knew the cause: the morbid ground beneath his feet. Used as he was to the heaving of a living deck, whenever he walked on land the unyielding ground always seemed silent, dead, lonely.

Presently, though, as his pyrate eye scanned the room, he discerned the treasure trove of jewelry worn by the guests alone, and his hungry spirit quickened in his heart. Even the bows of the fiddle—violin?—players looked to be made of silver.

When he spotted his quartermaster Doubloon holding up a tray among the food tables, disguised as a server, he fought a smile.

Absinthe plucked a cream puff from the tray. "Thank you, my good man. Your apron is crooked."

Doubloon fussed with the fabric. "Captain, this disguise is hardly—"

"That's 'Duke' to you, servant," Absinthe said loudly, and then he whispered, "Is everything in place?"

"Yes, Cap— Duke. Do we attack now?"

"Patience. I have to meet Lady Montforte before I can threaten her life." He popped the cream puff into his mouth and looked around, chewing. "Now which of these shriveled old cows is she?"

Doubloon indicated with his head the other end of the ballroom.

Absinthe glided along the edge of the dance floor, toward a woman with a prunish face and gray hair whipped into a coifed confection: the Lady Montforte. She was holding court, seated within a circle of sycophants and eyeing the proceedings vacantly.

He loosened his rapier in his scabbard and gauged the odds. There were few in the room who looked like guards, and those around her would be no match for him. He would introduce himself to her and state loudly the signal to his men,

which was the statement “What a beautiful dress you are wearing, my lady,” and they would rush out of their hiding places. The only problem was the loudness of the orchestra. What if some of the men did not hear him?

As he approached, the lady raised a monocle to her eye and gazed at him with a disapproving air. All was in place. There was no turning back now.

He stopped a few steps away from where she sat—he could leap behind her and have his sword at her throat in an instant—and bowed. As he did so, he eased his left hand to his scabbard, angling the hilt downward to come in line with his right hand now slowly arcing toward it.

“My Lady Montforte,” Absinthe said. “I am—”

“The Alabaster Duke!” cried a woman to his left. She swept toward him in a dress that was as wide as she was tall, its enormous hoops narrowing to a slim waist. She was young, lithe, and uncommonly pretty, smiling at him with a wide, quick mouth and large eyes the color of honeyed amber. “I am Lady Montforte. We’ve been waiting for you for *ages*.”

He was taken aback, all sails braced round into the wind. She was beautiful. *This* was the Lady Montforte? How could his agents have been so wrong? He vowed never to use his own rumormongers as spies again.

She leaned toward him, placing her hand on his left arm. “The Marquis of Old Bail has been talking to me about his but-terlily plantations again. You’ll rescue me from such boredom, won’t you?”

The lady’s hand on his arm sent a thrill of warmth through him. Her shoulder-length copper-colored hair was straight and loose, and she looked up at him with her head tilted sweetly. Though the paleness of her skin indicated someone not raised laboring out of doors, there was nevertheless something about the set of her features—signs of malnourishment when young—that indicated a strength underneath, as though she had married into her station instead of being born to it.

He found it difficult to speak. “I am—”

“The Duke. Of course. How are your coconuts?”

“Madam? Oh, my coconuts. Very fine. A fine crop.” All he knew about the persona his rumormongers had established for him was that his wealth was based on coconut plantations on land recovered from the sea.

He adjusted his towering hat, careful to keep his balance. He still had a job to do. She was leading him into a crowd of people, and her proximity made it difficult to get at his sword. He needed to stall to gain the weather gauge again. “Congratulations on the anniversary of your husband’s death.”

“Thank you. The caterers are a little rough-looking, but the food is grand. Do you like the decorations? The skulls are based on my husband’s face.”

“The dead autumn roses on the columns are particularly choice,” he said, matching her droll tone.

“You’ve had balls for the dead yourself, no?”

Damn those rumormongers, he thought. “Why... yes.”

“I heard you were a widower,” she said, giving his arm a squeeze. “It must get awfully lonely on those plantations.”

“Coconut trees are bad company, I fear.”

“So are plum orchards, I’ve found, these past five lonely years. By the way, I understand you are an expert on defense against pyrates. How do you keep them from grabbing your coconuts?”

I’ll blast those rumormongers to Harrowdeep, he thought.

“Oh, yes. What scum. The trick is to shoot them, my lady. Aim a pistol at their hearts and squeeze.”

“How brutal! I was told wit was your weapon.”

“Shooting pyrates isn’t brutal. It’s a necessity.”

“And you do all this shooting yourself?”

“I have servants for that.”

“Really? I suppose that makes you a sword man,” she said, looking at him inquisitively. “Jerking it out, thrusting, that sort of thing.”

But first I'll have them keelhauled, he thought, twice.

"There's a fine art to sword work."

"You've had a lot of practice, then."

"I've had my share of engagements."

"What's your opinion about *my* defenses?"

"Madam?"

"My mountain. Is it protected against pyrates?"

"I haven't seen enough of it to know."

"Few have." She smiled. "That is, you'd have to find your own way round. There're no maps. My husband always said, no maps. If you make a map, someone is sure to steal it, and then everyone starts running around looking for it, sticking each other with swords. It's all a bit squint, really." She stood away from him, pouting. "You have no opinion at all, Duke?"

By the Thirteen, she's a flirty one, he thought. There was no telling what extravagant things his rumormongers had said about him. What if she was looking for a new husband? He was not used to navigating such shoals; it was rather like tacking through crosscurrents up in Tempestes.

Absinthe used his cuff to wipe at his brow as he tore his gaze away from her décolletage and settled it instead on her beautiful eyes. "The mountain is very defensible, but I'm not sure about the mansion. Those windows are too large."

“But I love the sea breezes. I have a cannon on the roof. And the mountain is all caves, so bombarding the place would do no good. And pirates like swinging from ropes, don’t they? They can’t very well swing into those windows. A rope attached to what? A *moon*?” She laughed.

“I’m sure you have no reason to worry about pirates. Your jewels must be well-guarded and hidden.”

“Of course,” she said. “A pirate would have to spend *ages* groping about to get at my jewels. Though it’s funny. My husband had these books, old ones he didn’t want me to see. You know how he hid them? On shelves in the library. No one would suspect they would be *there*.”

Absinthe surveyed the room for a more advantageous position as she spoke. Now was the time to give the signal, but the lady had taken his arm again and the orchestra was laying in with a rousing rendition of “The Lament of Drowned Wenterly.”

“Oh, you’re new here,” she said. “I’ll introduce you. Remember, you’re my guardian against butterlilies, if it comes to that.” She stopped in front of a man who wore a gray wig four handspans high. “Duke Pinchpence, this is Baron Sabato of Deadman’s Dock.”

The man snapped open a silver fan and gazed at Absinthe through eyeholes cut into it. “Ah, the Alabaster Duke. Expert

on the pyrate problem. Those ruffians raid my fields every Tundaroon Full. Ghastly practice.”

Absinthe instantly disliked the man. “Lay out some picked crops in a dummy field,” he said. “The pyrates will be drawn to them and will leave the rest alone.” *And setting out such easy bounty will save us the trouble of harvesting your fields ourselves*, he thought.

“What an excellent idea,” Lady Montforte said, turning to the baron. “And you still grow those lovely sugarblooms, don’t you?”

The lid on a large marble urn next to Absinthe began to rise. Below it was Wenn, the cook’s mate, wearing the lid like a hat and clutching a knife in his teeth. “Mow, Cap’m?” he asked.

“No, not now,” Absinthe whispered. “Wait for the signal. And why didn’t you tell me she was beautiful?”

Wenn looked confused. “Booty where, Cap’m?”

“Well, I think it’s wonderful,” Lady Montforte was saying, turning back to Absinthe as he hastily leaned on the urn lid to shut it. “Shall we proceed?”

She took his right arm this time, leading him to a group of guests lingering near one of the columns. The farther he got from the center of the ballroom, the less chance that his men would hear his signal. He was casting about for a way to draw

her into the open when she presented him to a tall woman who wore a red cloak draped casually over one shoulder.

“Duke Pinchpence, the Electress Serpentine, of the Bridge-water Reaches.”

“Ah, the pyrate expert,” said the electress, bobbing her cocked hat. “Those scoundrels regularly plunder my talia orchards at night. When Sussurus is full, the fruits positively glow from the blue.”

“Keep watch fires lit at all times,” Absinthe said casually. “The pirates, knowing they will be seen by the light, will stay away.” *And we can use those fires to find you more easily*, he thought.

“I told you he would be marvelous,” Lady Montforte said to the electress. “Is the talia coming in full, otherwise?”

The tall, green leaves of a sword plant next to Absinthe were pushed aside by a silver one to reveal the face of Havelyn, a forecastle man who took watch on the tallest tower. “Now, Cap’n?”

“No, not now!” Absinthe said. “Wait for the signal. And why didn’t you tell me she was so fetching?”

Havelyn looked out over the dance floor. “Fetch what, sar?”

“Though I don’t care for talia fruit myself,” Lady Montforte was saying. Absinthe quickly closed the sword plant leaves as if

arranging them more decorously. “Oh, you must meet the earl. Come!”

Now he was in a press of people. If he drew his rapier, he would have no room to maneuver. If he could put his back to one of the tables—

The lady steered him toward a short man whose black-gloved hands were nearly covered in lace cuffs. “Duke Pinchpence, Earl Reticella,” she said, “of Portmanteau Isle.”

“Nice cuffs,” Absinthe said. “They’re the latest fashion.”

“Oh, my dear Alabaster,” Reticella said, “I understand that you have fended off pyrates at every turn. My estate’s cannon could drive them off, but the villains drop down from straight above when Andaluse is behind them. Our metal can only be angled so high.”

“Dig a hole below the barrel, straddled by the wheels,” Absinthe said. “That way, the cannon can be aimed straight up.” *And when the force of the blast breaks the axle and drives the cannon straight into the ground, we can plant your funeral flowers in the barrel,* he thought.

“Fantastic!” said the earl, turning to Lady Montforte. “Now don’t tell me you made those plumlollies yourself.”

Absinthe backed toward a gigantic cake of eleven tiers, aiming for an open spot among the crowd. A panel slid aside in the lowest tier and a hand snaked out to scoop a glob of icing

from the layer above. Merrick, a topman, lay on his side within the cake's hollow interior. "Now, Cap'n?"

"No, not now!" Absinthe hissed. "And why didn't you tell me she was so charming?"

Merrick deposited the icing in his mouth. "Harm who, sar?"

Absinthe slammed the panel shut.

"And then you can visit more often," Lady Montforte was saying to Reticella. She made to take Absinthe's arm again, but he stood away and gently clasped her right hand in his left, leaving his sword hand free.

He was running out of time. He had to separate her from the crowd. It would not be long before one of the *Crimson Moon's* boats would launch so that he and his crew could make their escape.

The tune had stopped as the orchestra flipped through their sheet music. At last his men would be able to hear his signal. A thought came to him.

"My lady, may I have the honor of the next dance?"

She looked at him quizzically and then shrugged. "Of course."

He led her to the center of the floor. Here he would have room to maneuver while his men secured the guests. One of the house guards casually guided his partner to stand close by, but

otherwise they were alone. One person coughed, and then another, as all waited for the music. Absinthe and the lady were directly under the chandelier, its light bright in his eyes and setting her face aglow. They had to stand far apart because of the hoops of her dress, but it would be easy to spin her, grab her around the shoulders, and draw his sword to demand the jewels.

His men were ready. Now was the time to give the signal.

He hesitated. The words would not come.

"I'm very disappointed," Lady Montforte said, frowning.

"Madam?"

"If you're going to dance with a lady, shouldn't you compliment her on her dress? My very best seamster worked on it for *ages*. Or has fighting pyrates hampered your manners?"

"Um," he said. The perfect opportunity had sailed athwart his bows. All he had to say was "What a beautiful dress you are wearing, my lady," and the room would burst with his men attacking, overcoming the crowd, and the jewels would be his. Something was holding back the words. She was so beautiful.... "It's a rather... it's a...."

The room was deathly still. He could sense the other guests leaning toward him, listening, waiting for his response. His men were waiting for the signal. Doubloon glared at him, still holding his tray of cream puffs. "What I mean to say is...."

Her brows knitted. “Yes?”

“That is to say....”

“Well?”

Ah, hell, he thought. *Think of the jewels. Think of the treasure.* He cast back his head and spoke loudly. “What a beautiful —”

The orchestra struck a note, beginning its new piece, but Absinthe had not noticed a bass drum among the players, so he could not at first fathom what caused the next note: a throaty, rumbling *boom*. Then smoke roiled past him, plaster scattered across the floor, and all the guests screamed.

A section of wall burst apart from another explosion, widening a window. The lady was torn from his grasp by the nearby guard. The orchestra dropped their instruments in a caterwaul of disjointed notes. Guests rushed away from the wall as a third explosive crack threw smoke and the smell of powder into the room.

Absinthe was borne away in the press of guests, who fetched up against the food tables, but he leaped over one to stand behind a pillar. Through the breach in the wall swarmed men waving pistols and cutlasses, jumping from a boat floating outside the window. They ordered all in the ballroom to stand and hold.

Absinthe caught Doubloon's eye, cautioning him to remain where he was. *Pyrates*, he thought. *Some other dumb bastard had the same idea I had.* He had a horrible thought that the lady had been cut down or hurt in the rush of guests. He peered from one side of the column and then the other, but he could not see her. People continued to rush away from the wall, and then he saw her. She was being grasped protectively by the guard. Absinthe shook his head. *Who's dumb now?* he thought. *Was I concerned for her for her or because she led to the jewels?*

The attackers stationed themselves on either side of the gap, covering the guests. One last man entered, and as he did so a flash of lightning cracked outside and thunder rumbled through the room. The storm had arrived, and sheets of rain sluiced through the sky.

This last pyrate sauntered over the marble floor. He wore a greatcoat of red leather, the upturned cuffs stitched with blackwork in the shapes of snails. His beard, painted green, was oily and thin, and he walked with head tilted back, gazing through spectacles perched on his nose.

"Now, now," he said in a high voice, "let's have no more unpleasantness." He drew a pistol and shot the guard protecting Lady Montforte through the head. Blood sprayed across her

dress and she screamed as the guard's body collapsed to the floor. "Except for that last bit," the pyrate said.

Lady Montforte stood shivering, shocked. The pyrate held out the pistol for one of his men to reload. He casually drew a sword as he approached the lady and laid its tip on her collarbone. "Now, Lady Montforte, you will take me to your jewels."

"Who—who are you?" asked Lady Montforte.

"I am your death, if you do not deliver," the pyrate said, "but you may call me Captain LaRoche, of the *Fishwife*."

Absinthe did not recognize him nor know the ship. The man's greatcoat appeared to be a size too big for him. He was probably some young, landbound thug trolling the coast, unable to sail the sky, though obviously he had some boat that did. *Of all the times for some petty thief to stomp on my plans*, he thought.

The pyrate's men herded the guests toward one side of the room, opposite the entrance. Absinthe slid away, from column to column, ducking behind tables to stay hidden, approaching a place opposite Doubloon.

He halted. One of LaRoche's men, scouting away from the others, was approaching the next column over, looking for stragglers but ignoring servants like Doubloon. Absinthe rushed toward the column and put his back to the marble.

One boot step, two—the pyrate's face appeared in profile as he moved past the column.

Absinthe slipped behind him, thrust his forearm under the man's jaw, and dug a knee into his back. Nothing but a gurgle escaped the man's throat. After a time he stopped clawing the air and went limp. Absinthe lowered him to the ground.

"But will my people be safe?" Lady Montforte was asking LaRoche in a fear-streaked voice.

"It's much harder to rifle through corpses," LaRoche tittered, "so we'll keep them alive for now. As for you, I am merely removing riches ill-gotten by the death of your husband. I am here to clear your conscience."

Absinthe saw her lift her chin in a brave show of strength. "I suppose I have no choice."

"The choice is between living and dying. The usual one."

A red rage stirred in Absinthe's chest. Now some filthy cut-purse stood in his way to the jewels. And he saw no reason to injure Lady Montforte, whereas there was no telling what this desperate thief was willing to do.

Lady Montforte and LaRoche, accompanied by two of his men, approached the entrance to the ballroom. Absinthe and his men were slightly outnumbered. He would have surprise on his side if he gave the signal and unleashed his crew, but the attackers were still alert. As time passed they would gradually let

down their guards. The storm raged outside. A delay would allow the boat from the *Crimson Moon* more time to arrive.

He could let LaRoche do to Lady Montforte what he wanted and then dispatch him to secure the jewels... if he was willing to see her harmed. Regardless, as she led LaRoche to the treasure she would lead Absinthe there as well, if he followed.

He stepped out of his shoes, tore away the hose from his feet, and laid aside his hat. He peeked around the column as the lady and LaRoche moved past. She glanced his way. Did she know he was there? Was there a plea for help in her eyes?

He shuffled over to the last column. One of LaRoche's men was stationed at the door. Absinthe moved to the other side of the column where he was visible to Doubloon and signaled.

Doubloon stared at him.

Absinthe pointed to a pitcher on Doubloon's table, and then made a fist and opened it.

The quartermaster rolled his eyes; then, still holding his tray of cream puffs, he lifted the pitcher, moved it over the floor, and dropped it. It shattered. "Oh, no," he said. "I dropped a pitcher."

The pyrate by the door moved toward him. "Hey, watch it thar," he said. "You get over with the others."

Absinthe slipped through the entrance and into the shadows beyond.

Grand staircases led to levels of the mansion above while smaller ones led below. The stones of the nearest one going down flickered with the light of torches. Silhouettes danced. Absinthe hurried down the steps, drawing his rapier.

Voices echoed up to him, but he could not catch what they said. Down he went, coming to a carpeted hallway with doors of ebony at either hand. LaRoche and the lady entered one at the far end.

Absinthe slipped down the hall and stood with his back to one side of the door, his rapier held up before him. Voices came from within.

“You’re a scoundrel and a rogue,” the lady said in a quavering voice. “I say again, how dare you! How dare you kill one of my guards. Did you think I would not give you the jewels otherwise? You thieves are all the same.”

“Just let us take the jewels, dear madam, and there will be no more blood shed.”

“What guarantee do I have of your honesty?”

Absinthe peeked into the room. A lavish canopied bed occupied most of it. On a chest of drawers was a large wooden box and behind it a mirror. Next to this stood LaRoche and Lady Montforte. Near the door stood one of LaRoche’s men, while the other waited behind the lady.

“I have no honesty,” LaRoche said. “Open the box, damn you! Who are you to judge me? Look at you in your bloody dress.” Laughter gurgled in his throat. “Take it off and show me your jewels!” He grabbed the top of the lady’s dress and ripped it open.

Absinthe sprang into the room, delivering a thrust of his rapier into the belly of the nearer man, who went down. He saw Lady Montforte dart toward the wooden box and LaRoche’s hand dive to his belt, just when the other guard leaped to the attack with a cutlass. Absinthe blocked the roundhouse slashes, and when the man was caught in a backswing, he lunged; but the pyrate backstepped and blocked, turning aside his point.

Absinthe felt his hilt slip. It should not have been so easy to parry his blade. His palm itched. The cuffs! The one on his sword hand was covering his palm, foiling his grip.

He backpedaled and jumped onto the bed. He sliced through the gossamer stuff of the canopy, cutting it loose, and cast it into the pyrate’s face. As the pyrate fought through the gauzy web, Absinthe jumped to the floor on the other side of the bed, grabbing at one cuff and then the other to rip them off.

The cuffs would not come off. The tailor had not loosened the stitches!

The pyrate’s blade made short work of the fabric and he came roaring off the bed. Absinthe blocked his reckless slices,

and then backstepped once, twice, moving closer to the door to prevent the pyrate from slipping past his point.

After another sloppy swing from the man, Absinthe saw his chance. He gripped his rapier by hilt and blade in half-sword fashion to thrust out—only to find his arms pinned to his sides from behind. His rapier clattered to the floor. The pyrate promptly held his cutlass to Absinthe's throat and smiled, gold tooth winking.

Absinthe felt hot breath laughing against the back of his neck. The first pyrate held his arms, his barrel belly apparently none the worse from Absinthe's initial attack.

"Now, now, what have we here?" LaRoche said, tilting back his head to look through his spectacles as he aimed his pistol at Absinthe's heart. "A hero to defend your honor, madam?"

Absinthe looked to Lady Montforte. The top of her dress was torn away. Underneath she wore a bustier of red leather, worked in front with the image of a rose.

"See what you've done?" she said to LaRoche. "I said no killing. It only makes people reckless."

LaRoche moved toward Absinthe, his spectacles becoming opaque with the reflection of a hallway torch. "I am not sure this is a reckless man," he mused.

"Killing wasn't part of the deal," Lady Montforte said. "Someone has to answer for it."

“Oh, I believe someone will,” said LaRoche, studying Absinthe intently. He placed a finger underneath the blade of his minion’s cutlass to raise it higher. Absinthe was forced to lift his chin.

LaRoche’s gaze fell to his neck. “Now, now, someone will pay indeed.” He peered more closely. “I believe a portion of your accoutrements has become loose, sar.” He grabbed Absinthe’s neckcloth and tore it away. “Or should I say, *Captain Monteroy Absinthe*.”

“Captain?” exclaimed the lady. She pushed down the remainder of her dress, stepping out of the hoops. She wore thigh-high russet boots, black leggings and a silver-worked belt from which hung a pistol and a dagger.

“*Pyrate* captain,” sneered LaRoche.

Absinthe felt paralyzed. To have a blade in close proximity to his throat made a panicky tingle start at the base of his spine and work upward. He was exposed in more ways than one. And the lady... how could she be dressed that way?

Lady Montforte put hands on hips and glared at him. “Pyrate? You were after my jewels?”

“Well, I—” Absinthe began, but LaRoche turned to her.

“Unless he is a plant of yours,” he said. “Perhaps you bargained with him for a larger share?”

“Don’t be a fool! If I wanted you dead I’d have planted guards in this room to cut you down. I needed the ones in the ballroom for appearances.”

By the Thirteen, I’m the one who’s a fool, Absinthe thought. He had not stumbled upon a defiant hostage resisting her captor but an argument between partners. “You’re in league with *him*?”

“Shut up,” she said. “If you were a real duke you’d know how ridiculous it is to stay landed while your farms drown and your buildings flood. Going pyrate is the smartest thing I’ve ever done... besides kill my husband.”

“Yes, yes, she’s the Autumn Rose now, you see,” said LaRoche, chuckling. He turned to the lady. “But why don’t you prove your loyalty by showing me the jewels just the same?” He leveled his pistol at her.

Her pistol was instantly aimed at him. “Are you going to let him ruin our deal? This means he has men hidden in the ballroom, or outside.”

“All the more reason to get the jewels and make our escape.”

Sighing, Lady Montforte opened the box. A glittering cascade of light filled the room. Inside the box were diamonds and rubies and emeralds, shimmering from an inner fire.

“Now, now—how do I know these are the real ones?”

Lady Montforte lowered her pistol, exasperated. “He really has put doubt in your head, hasn’t he? Go ahead. Test them.”

Keeping his pistol leveled at her, LaRoche reached into the box and picked up a large brooch that held a square-cut diamond. He made a pass with it across the mirror. He waited. A crack sounded. The mirror burst into a thousand shards.

“Bad luck, that,” Lady Montforte said.

“It could hardly make mine worse,” LaRoche said, “but perhaps things are turning around.” He slammed the box shut. “Killing the captain of the *Crimson Moon* is quite a prize.” He aimed his pistol at Absinthe. “Move aside, Winkle. And you better duck, Fisheye.”

Absinthe struggled against Fisheye’s hold as Lady Montforte looked from Absinthe to LaRoche and back again. “I said no killing!” she snapped.

“Don’t tell me what to do!” cried LaRoche. “This is a partnership, not a marriage.”

“Do you want his men to hunt you down to the ends of the world for revenge?”

“It would be rather inconvenient to take him with us!”

Absinthe’s feet slid as he wrestled with Fisheye. “And here I thought you were a lonely royal,” he said to the lady, “in need of... rescuing.”

“And I thought you were a foppish duke who’d mind his own business like the others.” She turned to LaRoche. “I have the water cells.”

LaRoche regarded Absinthe through his spectacles. “Now, now, that would keep captain’s blood off my hands. And a gradual death is such sport. If I don’t miss my guess, our Captain Absinthe is not too fond of water.” He laughed. “Very well, madam. To your merry little dungeons, then.”

Absinthe twisted in the pyrate’s grip. “I suppose this means there’ll be no cake,” he quipped.

The lady rounded on him. “What a meddlesome bore and filthy liar you are.”

Absinthe straightened up as best he could. “I object to ‘filthy.’”

LaRoche scooped up the box of jewels with one hand while keeping his pistol aimed at Absinthe. Lady Montforte bent to pick up her dress.

“Leave the dress!” LaRoche commanded.

“It’s made of the finest silk from Halambar and worth a fortune... *partner*.” She gathered the fabric and led them into the hall. Fisheye shoved Absinthe forward, and Winkle brought up the rear.

A fool indeed, Absinthe thought. Why had he leapt so recklessly into that room? What had he hoped to accomplish? She

was in on it, after all; the pyrate attack had been arranged, and for what? She had no idea what she was getting into by turning pyrate. His regard for her was rapidly turning to contempt... if he lived long enough to feel it.

He was running out of options. He had an entire room full of his men upstairs, but if he called out now they would not hear him. Dungeons... in water? They reached the stairs and descended, Fisheye prodding him in the back with his cutlass.

The steps gradually narrowed, the stones of the walls becoming more roughly hewn. The torch sconces grew fewer, dimmer. It was colder down below and the walls were furred with algal green.

They came to the last torch and Lady Montforte took it up. A few steps more and the stairway ended in water, opening into a hallway that stretched away to one side. Splashing, Lady Montforte proceeded to light a torch on the wall.

Absinthe took one more step down, spun on his foot and grabbed Fisheye's arm, slamming it against the wall. As the cutlass clattered to the ground, Absinthe caught Fisheye's foot with his own and threw him into the water.

Before Absinthe could snatch up the weapon, he felt LaRoche's pistol at the back of his neck and Winkle's blade at his spine.

“Seems our good captain is afraid of water,” tittered LaRoche.

Sputtering, Fisheye stood. He splashed toward Absinthe and punched him in the stomach. Absinthe doubled over, winded.

They entered the hall, where stood a series of small cells barred with iron. The water came up to Absinthe’s shins, cold. A black wavelet tumbled slowly out of the darkness to splash his knees. Winkle took a set of keys from the wall and opened one of the cells.

“And that leads to one of your grottoes?” asked LaRoche of the lady, indicating the hall.

“Yes,” she said.

“How long will it take for these cells to flood with the tide?”

“Two hours.”

“Tut, tut. I’m so sad we can’t stay to watch. Very well, Fish-eye. Get on with it.”

Fisheye shoved Absinthe into the cell.

“And her as well,” LaRoche said.

“*What?*” Lady Montforte took a step back, but Winkle was on her, snatching the dress out of her hands and yanking the pistol and dagger from her belt.

Absinthe made for the opening of the cell, but Winkle shoved Lady Montforte toward him and they both went down into the water.

LaRoche lifted the dress, which floated on the water as a dome, and tossed it into the cell. "You may be able to barter with that in Harrowdeep," he tittered. "Perhaps Leviathan will spare your soul just a minute more."

The cell door clanged shut, locked.

"*Why?*" Lady Montforte screamed at him.

LaRoche tilted back his head to gaze through his spectacles, the lenses shining green from the light on the walls. "Oh, my dear lady, someone's been filling your head with romantic pyrate tales. Pyrates never team up." He hefted the box of jewels. "I'm solo, sweetheart."

He laughed, as did Winkle and Fisheye, and all three splashed through the water to the stairwell, taking the torch from the wall with them. Their shadows danced upward and then disappeared.

The lady's torch sputtered in her hand, casting her dejected face in amber and gold. Absinthe went to the bars and shook them, testing their strength. A wave came through the hall again, curling against the far wall and rolling into the cell. Was the water higher than it was a minute ago?

Angry, he shrugged off his waterlogged greatcoat. Now able to grasp his cuffs firmly, he tore them off. The water *was* getting deeper. A thrum of panic inched up his spine.

He threw the cuffs away. “Don’t you know never to trust a pyrate?”

Lady Montforte held the dress above the water. “*He* lost trust in *me*. It was your meddling that made him think I was double-crossing him. And what are you talking about? *You’re* a pyrate.”

“Exactly.”

“What?”

“Well, *I* didn’t make a deal with you.”

“No, you just snuck into my ball in disguise, lying about who you were. I surely know better than to trust *you*.”

“I think we’re a little beyond that now.”

Her eyes flashed. “You were going to hold me hostage and rob me of my jewels. Or were you just going to kill me? Along with all my guests?”

Absinthe grabbed the lock and shook it. “Don’t you have some secret way of opening these cells? They’re your dungeons.”

“I never intended to *inhabit* them,” she said. “And it’s not a dungeon. These were storerooms for the docks.”

“If you’re going to play pyrate, you should call it a dungeon.”

“I’m not *playing* pyrate. I’m *turning* pyrate.”

Absinthe ran his hands over the bars, looking for weak spots. “You have a mansion, money, status. You have *land*. Why would you want to turn pyrate?”

She brushed a strand of hair away from her eyes. “How long would I have those things? How long before the waters drown it all? And before that happens, those buffoons you saw dancing in my hall will finally realize their gold and jewels are worthless, that a loaf of bread is worth more than a ruby. How long before they’re all clawing at each other, when their orchards and fields are finally submerged? Better to take to the skies now, when they still think my jewels are worth something. Better to be free than drown in lies.”

“That sounds very romantic.” Absinthe took off his sash and flung it around the lock. He gathered the ends tight around his hands and pulled. “But being a pyrate is more than just swinging from ropes and doing whatever you want.”

“Really? What else is there?”

He stopped pulling and thought a moment. “Well, that’s most of it, actually.” He tugged again on the sash. “But you have responsibilities. To your civilians, your crew.”

“I have no civilians.”

“And no crew, do you? Did you really think LaRoche was going to take you with him? He was going to betray you whether I showed up or not. He was going to take advantage because....” He stopped.

“Because?”

The sash was no use. He flung it into the water.

“Because I’m a woman,” she said.

“Yes—no! Because you are a rich landed royal who’s been pampered all her life.” He ran his hands over the bars shared with the next cell over.

“Do you have women among your crew?”

“Of course I do.”

“Why?”

He let fall his hands, exasperated. “Because if someone’s good at killing I don’t care what sex they are. Red Betty can throw a dagger into a man’s neck at sixty paces.”

She sighed. “Take my hand.”

“What?”

“Take my hand and feel how soft and pampered it is.”

“I thought we were trying to get out of here.” Frustrated, he kicked the door. Another wave curled into the room, the water black and viscous. It splashed over his knees, higher than before. It was *cold*. He shivered. He would die in cold; he would die in *water*.

She held out one hand while clutching the dress and torch with the other. He sighed and grabbed it. Her palm was as rough as leather. Turning it over, he saw calluses that could only indicate sword work. He had been too distracted in the ballroom to have noticed before.

“Should I tell you of how my husband hurt me?” she said quietly. “Should I tell you of how I endured it? Of how I secretly trained with sword and dagger until the day I *made* him stop? The hardest thing to learn in life is how to say ‘No more.’”

She yanked her hand away. “Or should I tell you about my uncle, who trained me to shoot with pistols, because he wanted me to be able to defend myself against pirates? He told me all about them. But while he instructed me in ways to fight them, he had no idea how much I fell in love with those stories he told, of how I dreamed to sail the skies.” She glared into his eyes. “You were going to rob me. You were going to hold a sword at my neck and threaten to kill me. Or you were going to kill me and my guests outright. It didn’t matter, as long as you got what you wanted.”

He looked at her steadily and spoke low. “I was going to rob you. I probably wouldn’t have killed you, if I could have avoided it. Yes, I would have threatened your life and those of your guests. I would have terrorized you as best I could. I

would have robbed you and left you and not given a damn what happened to you afterwards.”

She moved back a step, her face softening. “Thank you for your honesty, Captain. But you had your chance to attack. When we were about to dance. You could have grabbed me then, threatened me. Yet you hesitated. Why?”

He looked into her eyes. They glinted from the torchlight. He could not tell her the real reason. *She really is beautiful*, he thought. And his guess that she had not been born into this life was certainly right. There was a vulnerability in her quick smiles, tempered by some inward toughness made from a fiery past. “My men would not have heard me above the music.”

She considered this. “But—”

A wave struck the cell. It pushed through the bars and he shuffled to keep his footing. “Do you have a way of getting out of here?”

She looked at him for a moment, as if reading his face. Then she shrugged. “Of course I do.” She stuck the torch between the bars, reached under the dress, and drew out a pistol. “We’ll shoot the lock apart.”

“Why you little minx.” He shook his head, dumbfounded. “Why didn’t you—?” He shook his head again. “I always said every woman carries a weapon under her dress.”

She slapped him.

“In *Cocoa Boa*, I was going to say.” He rubbed the side of his face. “I once met a fair young lady there who carried a bumberbuss hooked to her hoops.”

“Oh.” Reaching under the dress again, she drew out a bumberbuss. “Like this?”

He sighed. “Aye.”

She hung the bumberbuss in the bars, handed him the pistol, and reached again into the dress.

He spun her around, clamped his arm across her chest, and held the pistol to her temple. “Now tell me this isn’t another ruse.”

“Captain—”

“How do I know this isn’t part of the act, that LaRoche isn’t waiting to kill me as we go up those stairs? It’s all very well to accuse people of being liars when you’ve faked an entire pyrate attack.”

“Captain, look down,” she said. “You wouldn’t want me to steal *your* jewels, would you?”

He looked down. She held a dagger in her hand, tilted up and inching along his thigh.

“It appears we have a stalemate,” he said.

“No, Captain. I have what you want, and you’ll cooperate with *me*.”

“How is that?”

“Do you really think I’d give LaRoche my jewels? The real ones?”

“But the mirror—”

“That brooch was real, carefully placed on top of all the others. The rest were fake. I knew he’d reach for the biggest one in the box. *Men.*”

“What do you propose?”

“I don’t propose anything. You will remove that pistol from my head and you will help me to secure the real jewels. We will form an alliance.”

“The real jewels?” He relaxed his grip and lowered the pistol.

She tucked the dagger into her belt and grabbed the pistol out of his hand. She drew out another pistol from under the dress and slid both into holsters in the back of her bustier. Taking up the bumperbuss, she checked the powder, aimed at the lock, and fired. The lock bent, smoking. She kicked at the bars and the door swung free.

Absinthe swung the door shut before she could leave. “Wait a minute. What alliance?”

“The one between you and me. Oh, I’ve heard of you. Captain Monteroy Absinthe, who dreams of uniting the pyrates, of bringing together sea and sky.”

“That’s over now.”

“Because you need the crown of the First and Last Pirate King? Some barnacled old piece of black coral to put on your head? That’s convenient. You don’t have to take responsibility as long as you’re busy chasing legends. The other captains won’t obey *you*? They won’t follow *you*? Oh, that’s right. Never trust a pirate. Can’t you trust yourself?” As she looked at him, her gaze fell to his neck. Her eyes lingered there until she looked away, abashed.

“I’m the only one I *can* trust,” he said quietly. “And I’ve given up chasing legends.”

“So now it’s just survival.”

“Of course. What else is there?”

She shrugged. “Oh, I don’t know. Home?”

“Never had one.”

“Honor?”

He spread his arms. “Pirate.”

“Oh, right. Love?”

“Is there still love in the world?”

She took up the dress and moved toward the door. “Yes, Captain. It’s there always.”

“Maybe that’s a legend *you* chase.”

He thought his words would hurt her, but when she turned to look at him she was smiling, her eyes merry. “Yes, it is!”

He let go of the bars. She shouldered open the door, splashed to the stairs, dumped dress and bumberbuss to the ground, and drew out a piece of amber lace from her bustier. It was a mask. She placed it over her eyes and tied it in the back.

“Remember to call me the Autumn Rose,” she said. She gathered up the dress and tossed her hair to look at him. “Are you coming?”

He sighed, splashing after her. “Drop the dress.”

She laughed. “It’s made of the finest silk from Halambar and worth a fortune... *partner*.”

* * *

(Concluded in [Issue #45](#))

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Adam Corbin Fusco’s fiction has appeared in The Year’s Best Fantasy and Horror, Realms of Fantasy, Weird Tales, Science Fiction Age, The Best of Cemetery Dance, and other publications. His web site can be found at <http://adamcorbinfusco.com>.

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COVER ART

“The Canyon,” by Christophe Vacher



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

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