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## RED DIRT

by Ian McHugh

*Nieuw Holland, 1792*

The night we docked in Zwaanstadje, I dreamed of a red dirt plain. Its colour was of such intensity it fluoresced beneath the dry white grass and the olive foliage of the bushes that sparsely covered it. No creature moved, nor any breath of wind. The sun beat against my hatless head and I felt I stood too close to its flames.

I heard a voice and turned to find its source. Red rocks broke the monotony of the plain. At first, I thought them merely boulders, for they had such a rounded shape. Then my eyes adjusted, or perhaps the dream developed perspective, and I realised it was a massif of gigantic stones. I looked upon the bones of the world after the world had worn away. The age of the place yawned in my mind, older, by far, than the paltry few millennia of God's Creation.

The voice came again, a bass dirge at the very edge of hearing. It was not a sound from any human throat, but the song of the land itself.

I turned my back to the rocks—the heart of the place, I sensed—and fled. My shadow was like an anchor chained to my feet, dragging unwillingly behind me through the dirt. I ran, but the plain was without limit, and every time my feet struck the ground, I felt the vitality drain from me, leaching through my booted soles and into the parched earth.

\* \* \*

I found Huon loitering in the scant shade of the Commissariat's entrance. Even after months at sea, he had somehow managed to preserve a complete uniform free of rents and stains. I refrained from picking at the broken threads where a button was missing from my own dishevelled coat.

I paused beside him, postponing the moment when we must emerge from the shelter of the walls. The afternoon heat was enough to scorch the lungs and parch the eyeballs in their sockets. The smell of woodsmoke from the indigenes' fires pervaded the air. Inland, grey tendrils curled into the sky.

“Well?”

While I did not demand formalities of Huon outside the presence of the crew, it was a license I sometimes regretted.

I squeezed the bridge of my nose. “The Commissaire demands a bribe before he will permit us to re-provision. The sum he has named is outrageous.”

Huon snorted. “We should sail for Tasmanie. We could stretch our supplies that far.”

“Only if we abandon our mission and cede all of Australie east of Nieuw Holland to the English,” I said. “Besides, after the debacle at Isle de France and with Piron working the crew into such a lather of resentment, I fear half of them would desert, should we put into a French port.”

Odd shadows flickered in the corners of my vision as I squinted against the glare of the Commissariat’s plaza, paved in the piss-yellow local limestone from which most of the Dutch settlement was constructed. The orange, blue and white flag of the *Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie*—the United East India Company—drooped like a hung man.

Scabrous-looking native bushes separated the plaza from the gravel track that led to Zwaanstadje’s solitary, exposed stone finger-wharf. Tied up at the near end was the V.O.C. merchantman *Enkhuizen*, with the typical fat belly that tapered upwards, designed to avoid port taxes levied on the area of a ship’s deck. Beyond, our own converted cargo hauler, *La Recherche*, flew golden fleurs-de-lis on royal white.

“There are whaling colonies along the south coast,” Huon suggested, as we stepped out onto the sun-blasted plaza.

“Half of which are pirates, and the other half are *English* pirates.” I shook my head. “No, we will chart such colonies if we find them, but I do not wish to interact with them.”

Huon subsided. He thought me too cautious but knew well enough when my patience with his second-guessing was about to fray.

“The price the Commissaire has named is only his opening gambit,” I said. “I expect he will come down to something more reasonable quickly enough. What of the crew?”

“I left Rossel to organise them for shore leave,” he said.

He must have known that I would not have approved such an order, had I been present. I ground my teeth, but there was little profit to be found in countermanding him now.

“I felt there was small risk of even the republicans among them deserting in such a godforsaken place,” he added, blandly. “The savants are ensconced at the inn.”

“So we fervently hope,” I said. “Come, let us see if Monsieur Piron is still where you left him, and not up to mischief.”

Our steps kicked puffs of dusty sand as we walked behind the low limestone promontory that partly sheltered Zwaanstadje from the sea. Upon it squatted an octagonal gun fort, fashioned from the same jaundiced rock, that served as the town’s nominal defence against the English and other

pirates. In the fierce light, my shadow seemed unsynchronised from my steps. I put the illusion down to weariness.

I noticed Huon stifling a yawn.

“You slept poorly, Jean-Michel?”

He nodded. “My dreams were troubled.”

“As were mine,” I said. “This place has a malaise about it.” Enough so that it caused me to doubt my decision to resupply here even as I re-affirmed it.

A trio of Dutchmen passed in the opposite direction, dressed in sober black and white. Their features had a pinched quality that seemed to me more pronounced than the usual retentiveness of Puritans. Silver badges tinkled on their sleeves, cast with the religious sigils—*runes*—of the Northern Churches. It was a curiosity of Zwaanstadje. I had never before witnessed such ostentatious displays of faith from adherents of the Green Christ.

I paused before turning the corner, bothered by some detail. It took me a moment to pinpoint the strangeness. The hairs on my neck stood up. The Dutchmen’s shadows were too short for the time of day, tucked up beneath their feet, when the sun should have laid them across the ground and up the walls of the buildings.

Huon observed my reaction curiously. I began to raise my arm to point, but the Dutchmen were already stepping through a doorway.

Our inn was located on the boulevard that constituted Zwaanstadje's east-west spine. The town huddled between the harbour fort and the Church of the Green Christ on its hill barely a mile inland, with its T-shaped pinnacle that signified both crucifix and pagan hammer. The boulevard's breadth was much reduced by the stalls and shop-front awnings of the merchants that crowded its length. Mohammedans and Chinese wore robes densely embroidered with their native scripts. Tattoos were common, peeking past the edges of cuffs and collars. The air seemed full of the ringing of tiny bells from the badges on the sleeves of every Dutch man and woman.

We found Piron, our expedition's naturalist, artist and principle republican agitator, lounging with wine bottle and glasses beneath the awning at the front of the inn. His eyes had a bruised look that suggested this afternoon's refreshment was merely a resumption of the previous night's pursuits.

Piron lifted his glass but made no move to rise. I elected to ignore the slight. Huon pulled out the vacant chair for me and fetched another for himself. I dropped my hat onto my lap and scratched my sweating scalp.

"Monsieur Bertrand is in his room?"

“Resting,” Piron replied. “Until he regains his land legs.” The astrologer had spent the majority of the journey from Brest resting in his cabin while he “gained his sea legs”.

“He may have time,” I said, with a grimace of resignation to imply that the circumstance was entirely beyond my control. “We will be delayed here before we can resupply.”

“Then surely we must consider Batavia instead,” said Piron, “and circumnavigate the continent by the reverse route.”

I glanced at Huon. He looked away with a shrug, not bothering to conceal the gesture from Piron. I bit back a terse remark, annoyed at his lack of support. At least Piron had made the suggestion often enough to reassure me he would not risk impoundment of the ship here in Zwaanstadje.

Reprovisioning would not have been a consideration at all had our own countrymen at Isle de France not defrauded us so thoroughly. Not to mention that nearly a fifth of our sailors had jumped ship there. Huon suspected Piron of having a hand in the fiasco. I was unconvinced, but even so, Batavia, jewel of the Dutch Republic’s East Indian empire, was the last place on God’s Earth I wanted to take Piron and the seething nest of resentment that constituted my ship’s crew.

“King Louis desires a colony on the Australien mainland,” I said, “and we need to find it before the English do.”



Piron made an uncouth noise. “His ‘Nouvelle Orleans du Sud’.”

Huon bridled at the insult to our monarch. “Monsieur, His Majesty’s agents in Sydney Town were confident that they could sabotage the English expedition from there, but their report was months old when it reached France, and it has been months more since our departure.”

“We must anticipate that the English are already at sea, monsieur,” I added, mildly.

Piron rolled his eyes. “Then we must make the best of the situation,” he said. He captured the half-empty wine bottle and filled two empty glasses, which he pushed towards Huon and myself.

Huon examined the pale contents of his.

“Capitaine Bruni,” Piron chided.

With a sigh, I lifted the glass. I could discern little of its bouquet over the ever-present smell of smoke. I raised a toast. “To King Louis, long may he reign.”

“*Vive le roi!*” Huon responded.

Piron’s thin mouth curled. “*Vive la France.*”

\* \* \*

I dreamed a second time of the red dirt plain. This time I was already in motion. The voice of the land was more strident

this time. Guttural and nasal, it filled the air, rising and falling, speeding and slowing.

Shadowy figures ran at my side. Sometimes they took the shapes of men, with long shadow spears in their hands. Sometimes they would change shape, becoming lean-bellied dogs, or great running birds, like ostriches, or else stretch out into the low shapes of giant lizards. Sometimes they were bounding creatures for which I had no analogue, with long tails and low heads.

They harassed me, poking with their spears and biting at my heels, or simply placing themselves in my path. Their every touch bled my strength. I fought to evade them but, irresistibly, they turned me.

The red bones of the world loomed, again, before me. Now my shadow reached out ahead, dragging me along in its wake. I tried to slow my suddenly headlong pace, but I could not.

\* \* \*

Neglecting breakfast, I returned early in the morning to *La Recherche* to review the state of the ship and crew.

Smoke curled into the cloudless sky. There were more fires than yesterday, ringing the landward sides of the town.

The shadows on the buildings seemed alive with movement, although the air was too cool for mirages. The memory of my dream still lingered, fooling my weary brain into

believing that I glimpsed animal shapes writhing there. I hurried my pace along the empty streets, wondering if I should just pay the Commissaire's bribe and be done with the place.

I found my ship in good order but the crew less so, exhibiting the after-effects of a reckless approach to the consumption of alcohol. Both the sailors on duty and our pair of excitable young ensigns were under the firm control of Rossel, *La Recherche's* estimable Master Sailor. With him was our Sergeant of Marines, Delahaye—a ruffian and a lout, but by Huon's account a good soldier.

“How is morale?” I asked.

“They have little love for this place, Monsieur Capitaine,” Rossel said. “But I do not think they are mutinous yet.”

*Yet.* I concealed my dismay. “And if we are delayed here?”

Rossel's expression was answer enough. Casting my eyes over the crew, I noticed that many wore items decorated in Oriental lettering. Sunlight flashed on numerous cast metal badges. I saw too that bare wrists and ankles, and even some faces, were adorned with runes, ideograms or Mohammedan script. The majority appeared to be painted in impermanent ink, but several evidenced the rawness of fresh tattoos.

Sergeant Delahaye said, “Would you like me to put a stop to it, 'sieur?”

I shook my head, reluctant to confess my ignorance as to why they should so quickly adopt the unusual local custom. Too, the sergeant's bare-knuckled approach to discipline would likely be disastrous, given the present volatility of the crew.

"Common sailors cannot be expected to comport themselves as gentlemen, Sergeant," I said. "And few are exemplars of faith, in any case."

I gathered from the momentary sour twist of Rossel's lips that he was similarly disenchanted with the sergeant's methods. I chewed my lip for a moment, then added, "Let them know that we are likely to be in port here a little longer than we might prefer. I am not happy about it, but it is beyond my control."

"Monsieur Capitaine," Rossel said. He hesitated before continuing, "one man has not returned from yesterday's shore leave. Marchant."

I swore under my breath. Marchant was one of the junior helmsmen. *Damn Huon for letting them ashore.* "Send one of the ensigns out with a couple of marines to find him. And spread the word that our delay here will be short."

\* \* \*

Monsieur Bertrand had joined Huon and Piron at breakfast when I returned to the inn. I addressed him first,

“Good morning, monsieur. You have re-discovered your land legs?”

Bertrand, a grey little man and impervious to sarcasm, smiled faintly. “Regrettably, not yet, Capitaine Bruni. I am so far unable to stomach any food.” His place setting was indeed bare apart from a steaming lemon drink.

I restrained myself from further remarks at his expense and sat. To Huon, I said, “Marchant did not return from shore leave.” He started to rise but I waved him back to his seat. “I am handling it.”

The shadows of the early morning pedestrians were distinctly shorter than they should have been for the time of day. A most disconcerting sorcery—more so, as I began to wonder at its purpose. I rubbed my eyes, tiredness compounding irritation from the smoke of the indigenes’ fires.

My companions all looked as haggard as I had appeared to myself in my shaving mirror. They had, too, a peculiarly pensive air. I wondered if they had been arguing.

“Should we transfer to an inn with more comfortable beds?” I enquired.

Huon cleared his throat. “Capitaine, you mentioned yesterday that your dreams had been troubled. Was that also the case last night?”

I nodded. “Yes. Why do you ask?”

The three of them exchanged glances. Piron said, "It appears we have all experienced identical dreams."

Over his shoulder, I spied one of our marines, shoving his way through the crowd on the street to reach us, his mouth open as if to raise a shout of alarm.

\* \* \*

The body was sprawled in the nightcart alley behind a dilapidated whorehouse. The ensign sent to find Marchant had posted the rest of his squad at either end of the alley. A handful of sailors, clustered sullenly at the nearest entrance, pushed past the marines in our wake. Half-dressed Oriental girls observed in silence from the rear balcony of the whorehouse, while Rossel waited, fists on hips, with the white-faced ensign.

"Monsieur Capitaine," the ensign quavered, "he has no shadow."

Marchant's body lay in sunlight, but cast no darkness beneath it. It was as though it had been cut free of the earth and no longer quite touched it. The hairs rose on my neck, my head filled with hunting shadows and the red dirt plain, and the strength that had bled from me as I tried to flee my dreams.

"My god," Piron breathed.

I sent the ensign into the whorehouse for a blanket to carry the body and longed wistfully for a reason to have excluded Piron, precious little benefit though it would have been.

Bertrand, unperturbed, knelt to prod at the corpse.

“He has been dead at least half a day,” Rossel growled.

“He refused to protect himself, Capitaine,” offered one of the sailors. “He would not have heathen symbols on his skin.”

“Protect himself from what?” said Huon.

“The shadows, Monsieur Lieutenant.”

My gaze strayed to the rippling darkness on the building walls. Not tricks of the light, after all. My skin crawled. I looked down at my own shadow, tucked tight beneath my feet.

“Capitaine Bruni...” Piron began.

I held up my hand. “Not now, monsieur.”

The glances the sailors shot between us were not lost on me. Rossel glared at Piron, who sneered back. Now I knew why the bastard Commissaire thought he could extract such an exorbitant bribe.

The crew were reluctant to handle their shipmate’s corpse, crossing themselves repeatedly. I crossed myself before I grabbed an arm and ordered them to help me lift him onto the blanket. Marchant was surprisingly light for a man his size.

\* \* \*

“One of my crew lies dead, monsieur!” I bellowed, thumping on the Commissaire’s desk, with Huon, Rossel, Piron and Bertrand all crowded behind me. “His shadow stolen by sorcery!” I jabbed my finger at him. “I hold *you* responsible.”

“*Heer Kapitein*, please, we are reasonable men...” the Commissaire replied. He raised his palms in what started as a placatory gesture but became defensive, his silver badges jangling as I leaned over the desk.

“Reasonable men do not use murder to improve their bargaining position.”

The Commissaire affected bewilderment. “I am sure I do not...”

“The V.O.C. officials responsible for this settlement—you, monsieur—deliberately withheld the information from myself and my that could have saved that man’s life.”

His nostrils flared. He switched from French to English. “The knowledge to protect oneself from the shadows is readily available, *heer Kapitein*, as many of your sailors have already discovered.”

“This is an insult to my crew, to me, personally, and to France,” I declared, in the same language. The Commissaire’s French was execrable and my Dutch non-existent. It was to our mutual chagrin that we were compelled to conduct our business in the language of our common enemy.

His eyebrows rose. “Now, *Kapitein* Bruni, let us not say anything we might later regret.”

“Be assured, monsieur, I do not bluster,” I said. “If Dutchmen will not deal honestly with honest travellers, then I



will not hesitate to recommend to His Majesty that France assume this burden.”

Whether the French Navy could capture and hold Zwaanstadje against the V.O.C. fleet was debatable, but *La Recherche* alone possessed sufficient firepower to devastate the town. While to do so would considerably complicate our mission, there was even less profit for the V.O.C. in such an outcome.

Unfortunately, the Dutchman called my bluff. “I will not be threatened, *heer Kapitein*.” He leaned back in his seat and looked us over. “Are your dreams troubled, *heeren*?”

Our expressions were evidently answer enough. He offered a miniscule smile. “You are not thinking clearly, *Kapitein Bruni*. You share the dreams of the land, this place that declines to wear our label of ‘*Nieuw Holland*’.”

“We dream of red earth, Monsieur Commissionaire,” said Rossel, “when there is nothing underfoot here but sand.”

The Commissaire raised his arm to point, eastward. “The red is in the centre. It begins beyond the escarpment, thirty miles inland.”

“How do you endure it?” asked Piron.

The Commissaire flicked his sleeve, causing his badges to jingle. “At root the dreams and the shadows are one and the

same. But you have timed your arrival poorly. The *kaffirs* are calling the shadows to them, before their *Vuurnacht*.”

“Fire night,” murmured Bertrandt.

“Have the fires not already begun?” exclaimed Huon.

The Commissaire chuckled. “What you have seen already is merely normal, *heer Luitenant*.” He raised a palm. “The fires pose no threat. But you may wish to follow the example of most of your crew and protect yourselves from the shadows.” He pushed back his chair and lifted his foot onto the desk so that we could see the sole of his shoe. The leather was inlaid with curling silver wire. “Personally, I recommend the Arab silversmith on Nieuwmarktstraat.”

Huon asked, “And when you sleep, do you leave your boots on?”

The Commissaire lowered his foot. He unbuttoned his cuff and rolled it back to reveal the rune-sign tattooed on the inside of his wrist. “Paint or ink will do, for the duration of your stay.”

I said, “Monsieur, we are officers of France, defender of the Catholic faith. We cannot adorn ourselves with heterodox symbols.”

He shrugged. “Perhaps, *Kapitein*, if you are concerned for your faith, you might try Latin signs, although I could not speak for their effectiveness.”

I glanced at Bertrand. He seemed bemused.

“Now, if you will forgive me, *Kapitein, heeren*,” the Commissaire continued. “I have work to which I must attend. If I can assume that you will now agree to pay the necessary... surcharge, I will send a clerk with prices for the inventory you requested.”

Thus dismissed, we were herded outside by the Commissaire’s secretary. I found myself hurrying through the shadowed entry alcove, like a man with vertigo flinging himself across a deep fissure.

“That went well,” said Huon, once we stood on the shadeless pan the plaza.

I could have strangled him for his lack of discretion.

Piron’s eyes narrowed. “Surely Batavia has become an option,” he said. “For the good of the crew...”

I rounded on him. “Do not question my decision, monsieur! We will reprovision *here*.” I stamped my foot for emphasis. “Perhaps you should have considered the good of the crew at Isle de France.”

Piron’s gaze flickered to Huon and Bertrand. He moistened his lips. “If that is your wish, Monsieur Capitaine,” he said. “In that case, I, for one, will be making a visit to this Arab. I trust the Lord will forgive me for placing heathen symbols between my Christian soul and this un-Christian soil.”

Bertrand regarded him with contempt. "I will put my faith in the true word of Our Saviour."

Piron was already walking away. Rossel, arms folded, shook his head at the naturalist's retreating back.

Huon frowned. I guessed that his instinct was as pragmatic as Piron's, but he felt constrained from following suit when I had already expressed my opposition. I was strongly tempted to recant but, as Captain, felt obliged to set a resolute example.

"Will you pay the man his bribe now?" he asked.

It was certainly the prudent course, particularly given the urgency of our mission, and Huon's opinion was plain enough. But I was still too furious, the wound to my pride still too fresh, to consider submitting to the Commissaire's machinations.

"You should never have allowed them shore leave, Jean-Michel," I snapped. Huon straightened sharply, his cheeks flushing with resentment.

I composed myself. Bertrand looked at us with raised eyebrows. Rossel at least had the grace to pretend not to listen.

"Monsieur Bertrand," I said, "Perhaps you could examine how Catholic wards might protect us from these dreams."

He responded with a grunt and a terse nod, I presumed by way of acquiescence to my request.

I said, "Messieurs, I think we will sleep aboard the ship tonight."

\* \* \*

I sent Huon and Rossel to fetch some men from the ship, while Bertrand and I returned to the inn to pack our belongings. I fought the urge to run the entire way, my eyes roving for hunting shadows among those of the other pedestrians and in the dark nooks of the walls. I was drenched in sweat beneath my jacket by the time we crossed the inn's rune-carved threshold.

Rossel arrived a short time later with both ensigns and a party of sailors. I noticed the slightly cringing posture of the ensign who had found Marchant.

"There is a problem?" I asked.

Rossel leaned close to murmur. "Monsieur Capitaine, he had them leave Marchant's body on deck. Wrapped, but in full view of the crew. The Lieutenant had it removed to the infirmary, but the crew are agitated. He had some pointed words to say to the boy."

"And Monsieur Piron?"

"Still with the silversmith, I presume, 'sieur."

"A temporary blessing, at best." I sighed, puffing my cheeks. "It was unfair of Lieutenant Huon to blame the young man. The responsibility is mine for delegating the task while I

vented my pique on the Commissaire. Let us ensure that Piron's belongings are returned to the ship with ours. Better to avoid any more perceived insults, no matter how petty."

I left the ensigns to organise the rest of the packing and took Rossel to knock on Monsieur Bertrand's door.

He opened it only a crack. I saw he had covered his hand and part of his face in inked Latin script. Disconcerted, I said, "Monsieur, we are retiring to the ship now. The men are ready for your luggage."

"Thank you, no, Capitaine," he replied. "I will remain here to test my hypothesis. Good day."

He closed the door. Rossel said, "Should we remove him, 'sieur?"

Yes! I was tempted to reply. I glared at the door in exasperation, then threw up my hands. "Let him do as he pleases."

\* \* \*

Piron was on deck when we returned to the ship. As he turned, the activities of the crew subsided. I felt a thrill of fear. Had I so underestimated him?

Huon was on the quarterdeck. He was plainly as startled as me, for all that he had been present aboard the ship while Piron rabble-raised. A swift glance from me was enough to send the nearest ensign scuttling belowdecks.

“Well?” I said to Piron, concealing my alarm behind a facade of dignified authority.

He responded with a sardonic smile. “The crew have requested that I present their demands...”

“Be careful in your choice of words, monsieur,” I said. “To demand of a captain on the deck of his ship is mutiny.”

“...for your consideration.”

From the corner of my eye, I saw the marines stationed by the gangplank lift their muskets from their sides. The sailors standing near them who’d followed me onboard still stood uncertainly with our cases in their arms, Rossel at their head. The look he fixed on Piron was murderous.

I sensed an inkling of possibility.

“Say on,” I told Piron.

“The crew request that you consider diverting to a more hospitable port, such as Batavia.”

I looked around at the nearest sailors. None would meet my gaze, except for Rossel, who returned my stare intently. Perhaps the miscalculation was not mine, after all.

“Batavia, you say? Why not to Ville La Perouse in Tasmanie? It is a French port, after all, monsieur, and we are all loyal servants of France, are we not?”

Piron was silent as I stalked around him. “The defences you have acquired against the malaise of this place, are they so ineffective?”

“A man has died!” he exclaimed, turning to face me. “Killed by the shadows that haunt this place.”

“Killed by the treachery of our hosts,” I said. “Batavia is also a V.O.C. port. I would not expect to be dealt with more generously there.” Some of the sailors exchanged doubtful looks.

Footsteps clattered. Marines formed up across the deck. I motioned for them to stand at ease. I stared at Piron. The stillness of the moment extended.

My mouth was dry as I looked around at the crew. “As you were.”

They hesitated. My heart thudded.

“As you were!” Huon bellowed. The sailors moved.

I maintained my bearing, although I wanted nothing so much as to sag with relief. I indicated the pile of cases beside the gangplank and said to Piron, “Monsieur, you may transfer your belongings to the brig, or remove them from my ship.”

He sputtered, scarlet-cheeked, before regaining control of himself. “I will take my leave, Capitaine.”

To Huon, I said, “Ensure that Monsieur Piron has sufficient funds for passage to French territory.”



“Yes, Monsieur Capitaine.” I fancied I could hear the smirk in his voice. The closest French territories were Isle de France and Tasmanie, not France itself.

I stayed where I was on deck until Piron had clomped down the gangplank with his trunk and easel. Rossel accosted him as he went, to snarl some insult too low for me to hear.

Huon rejoined me. “He is a threat as long as we remain here,” he said. “Mutiny is a hanging offence.”

“And if we tried to string him from the yards we’d be lynched,” I replied. “He misjudged his moment, and was ill-prepared for the confrontation. With luck, my leniency will not be lost on the crew.”

“I fear they will see it as weakness.”

“I *trust* they will be encouraged to remain loyal,” I said.

He held my stare, further argument apparently on the tip of his tongue. His expression disturbed me.

“Have you an alternative solution?” I said. “A *palatable* solution?”

Huon lowered his gaze, his jaw clenching.

“Round up those of the crew who are still ashore, and send someone to fetch Bertrand.”

“Yes, Monsieur Capitaine.” He strode away, barking instructions.

\* \* \*

Sleeping aboard the ship served us not at all.

I found myself once again upon the red dirt plain. This time I stood at the foot of the massif. The face of the nearest giant stone rose, sheer, just beyond the reach of my fingertips. At such proximity, I could see that it was layered in subtle shades of red: rust, blood, ember and brick. Its voice vibrated through my ribs, overwhelming the laboured beat of my heart.

Although the sun beat down from directly overhead, my shadow stood against the red stone wall. The shadows that had bled and herded me stood with it, in a ring, upon the cliff face, their heads turned inward. They began to dance. My shadow danced with them and I, a hollow puppet drained of strength and will, followed suit.

\* \* \*

In the morning I awoke to parched eyes and a tickle in my throat. A haze of smoke hung in the copper light streaming in through my stateroom window.

One glance at my haggard visage in my shaving mirror and I threw down the razor as a futile cause. Hatless and in shirtsleeves, I presented my dishevelled face on deck.

A dark pall of smoke arose inland, dense enough to redden the light of the sun.

Huon stood at the rail with Sergeant Delahaye. Their backs were to the deck, heads close together, the sergeant nodding

vigorously to whatever Huon was telling him. As I watched, their conference concluded and they turned.

Both men started when they discovered me watching. Delahaye recovered himself enough to execute an awkward salute. I held him a moment, examining his face, before responding. He fled below decks.

I beckoned to Huon and made my way up to the quarterdeck.

“What was that about?”

“We have a few strays left to round up,” he said.

“They have followed Piron?”

“Perhaps. I was impressing on the sergeant the importance of finding them.” It was a plausible explanation and Huon’s bland expression offered me nothing. But Sergeant Delahaye’s reaction did not seem quite that of a man who had received a simple dressing-down.

Huon handed me a telescope and pointed to the south-east. “The hill a short distance inland.”

I put the scope to my eye.

A modest butte rose above the riverside treetops. Smoke ascended from the woods all around it, but none from the summit.

Several male indigenes stood on a bare rock shelf. I could make out little detail, save that they were dark-skinned. About

their heads, they whirled weighted ropes. As one of them slowed, I saw that the weights consisted of leaf-shaped boards that sawed the air as they spun.

“Do you hear it?” Huon asked.

I had dismissed the faint sound as either the noise of the wind in the rigging, or some industrious activity from the town. It was reminiscent of the throb of a windmill’s sails, if one could isolate that noise from squealing screws and cogs, but irregular, rising and falling, speeding and slowing with the overlapping rhythms of the whirling boards.

“It is the voice from the dream,” Huon said.

The nape of my neck prickled. The collective growl of the spinning weights mimicked the song that had invaded our sleep. *Calling the shadows*, the Commissaire had said.

Rossel presented himself. His salute exposed a neat row of ideograms painted inside his forearm. He handed me a leather document wallet. “Monsieur Capitaine,” he said, “a gentleman of the V.O.C. has delivered this. Their prices for the inventory you requested.”

The clerk in question loitered by the gangplank. I opened the wallet and glanced at the documents within. I kept my expression neutral as I strode down the steps and across the deck, then tore the papers in half and handed them back to him.

“These prices are piracy,” I said.

The Dutchman’s eyes bulged. I stepped aside, extending my hand towards the gangplank. His posture was much like Piron’s had been as he left the ship.

\* \* \*

Glowing motes drifted through the air like snow. I set the crew to dousing the decks and rigging, as much to keep them occupied as because of the threat the hot ash posed.

The V.O.C. merchantman, *Enkhuizen*, cast moorings and was towed from her berth by longshore boats. *La Recherche* was left alone at the wharf.

Upon the hill, around the Church of the Green Christ, the townsfolk lit bonfires of their own. Even through a telescope I could perceive little with clarity, but I judged that much of the population had gathered there. The church bells rang in relentless peals. In the town, fireworks crackled and fizzed near the Chinese temple. A reedy wail could just be heard from the minaret of its Mohammedan counterpart.

In the ears of every man on board rang the song of the red dirt plain, no longer the faint imitation of the indigenes and their whirling boards.

Sergeant Delahaye was among the last to return to the ship, hurrying up alone after a mixed party of sailors and marines. I noted the terse nod he gave to Huon in the act of

saluting us both. As he lowered his hand I saw that his knuckles were skinned and raw.

Huon met my incredulous stare squarely, daring me to put the question. Did I *really* want to know?

I moistened my lips. “How is Monsieur Bertrand?” I asked. I had sent Huon with some marines to fetch him from the inn. They had discovered Bertand kneeling at a makeshift altar in the middle of his room, surrounded by a ring of Latin wards he had chalked on the floor. He was unable to stand because he had been in that position all night while shadows prowled the walls.

He sniffed and looked away. “Writing,” he said. “Furiously.”

I released my breath slowly. At least Bertrand was secure aboard.

Rossel approached.

“How many unaccounted for?” I said.

“Two, Monsieur Capitaine.”

“They will be at the church, or one of the temples,” said Huon.

“At least Piron has suborned only two,” I said, sarcastically.

Huon did not deign to reply. Rossel’s expression was studiously bland.

I tapped the telescope against my chin while I gazed at the row of warehouses on the far side of the Commissariat. “Lieutenant,” I said. “Find me a volunteer to go ashore at sunset. I want to know whether those warehouses are guarded tonight.”

His eyes widened. “You intend to rob them?”

I corrected him, pleased to have caught him off-guard, “I intend to negotiate our terms of trade from a position of strength.”

\* \* \*

Rossel volunteered. When he returned, he was in such haste that for a moment I thought him pursued. But no cry arose from the waterfront.

He gathered his composure and saluted. “Deserted, Monsieur Capitaine.” He hesitated, plainly having more to say.

“Say on,” I told him. “You will not be thought a fool if you have a strange tale to tell in this ungodly place.”

Rossel swallowed. “The shadows, Capitaine. They are everywhere, crawling around.”

Huon said, “Perhaps the Dutch have good reason to believe they need not guard against thieves this night.”

I allowed the reference to ‘thieves’ to pass. “Perhaps they underestimate the audacity of the French Navy,” I said, then to Rossel: “Do you believe they threatened you?”

“They appeared to recoil from my shoes, 'sieur.”

“You intend to proceed?” Huon exclaimed.

I nodded, hiding my irritation that he would question me so openly before the crew. Having decided to act, I was reluctant to abandon my course. Success, I told myself, would both avenge Marchant's death and renew the respect of the crew. “I do. Identify the men who have modified their shoes or painted their feet. Include the marines in your examination.”

“Yes, Monsieur Capitaine.”

Huon and Rossel executed my instruction quickly. Most of the sailors and around half of the marines, including Sergeant Delahaye, had protected themselves in some fashion.

Rossel saluted. “What of the missing men, Monsieur Capitaine?”

I was strongly tempted to leave them to their fate. But, looking at the doubtful faces of the crew, I saw that he was right to raise the matter. I said loudly, “I will take a party to search for our missing shipmates. I would not care to abandon any man in such a place as this.” My eyes met Huon's as I added, “Including Monsieur Piron.”

He scowled. Delahaye's cheek ticked.

“Wear my shoes, Captain,” said Delahaye.

I nodded. “A sensible suggestion. Lieutenant, organise a party to remove what we need from the warehouses. Three



marines to accompany me, and enough men aboard to defend the ship. You recall the stores we require?"

Huon saluted, but his stare was uncompromising. "Yes, Monsieur Capitaine."

"Good. Monsieur Rossel, you have the ship while the Lieutenant and I are ashore. I want the port-side cannon charged and aimed at that fortress."

The sergeant's feet proved daintier than mine, but with a small amount of cursing, I was able to squash my feet into his shoes. Following my example, Huon exchanged footwear with one of the marines. Rossel presented me with a pair of charged pistols.

"You should finish the job, Capitaine." It was Bertrand. He had cleaned his face, but the grey shadows of his inking remaining. "I believe I have determined the best combination of Latin phrases."

I stared at him a moment. "Thank you, monsieur. That would be appreciated."

He hurried away to his cabin and returned quickly with inkpot in hand. He instructed me to remove my coat and shirt, and I suffered him to mark the points of a crucifix on my chest, shoulders and forehead with Latin script. *Dissolutio*, I read upside-down among the words beneath my heart. *Difficultas* was prominent on my left shoulder and *Perseverans* on the

right. Strange choices as words of protection. I opened my mouth to enquire what he was writing on my face, but the intensity of Bertrand's expression disconcerted me.

"Jean-Michel, do not wait for me past sunrise," I said as I re-dressed. With Bertrand now writing on him, Huon replied curtly, "Understood."

*Sacrificium*, I read on his brow.

I suppressed a shiver. "Good luck, messieurs," I said to my officers, then loudly: "Vive le roi!"

"Vive le roi!" the crew responded. Trying to feel reassured by their heartiness, I gathered my trio of marines and marched down the gangplank.

\* \* \*

No stars were visible, only a rusted canopy of smoke reflecting the light of the fires. No lamps burned in the houses, and the smoke settled in the narrow streets between the terraces. Shadows gnawed at edges of the light cast by our lanterns. Dark limbs probed towards our feet. The packed sand throbbed with the song of the land, as loud in our ears as a storm at sea. Our own shadows tucked themselves tightly beneath us, heedless of where the lamplight told them to lie.

We had travelled perhaps half the distance to the church when one of the marines gave a sudden cry and dropped his lantern. It burst with a splash of burning oil. His fellows

dragged him clear, beating out the flames that had caught on his trousers. The poor man was shaking visibly.

“What happened?” I demanded, shouting to make myself heard.

He stammered a response. “Monsieur Capitaine, a shadow ran across the light at my feet. The shadow of a man, with no man to cast it.”

The darkness seemed to press even closer. The marines peered fearfully into it. No doubt our dead sailor and his missing shadow were as prominent in their minds as in my own.

“Are you fit to continue?” I asked the injured man.

He gathered his resolve. “Yes, Monsieur Capitaine.”

I gauged the distance remaining to the Church of the Green Christ. Its bells still chimed defiantly against the night. “Good. Let us proceed.”

\* \* \*

Approaching the church, we had a clear view down the rear slope of the hill to the great blaze the indigenes had set. The trees were crowned in fire, the dry grass and bushes at their feet also aflame. In between, the trunks appeared to dance, like gnarled stick-men.

On the ground before us, shadows writhed in the flickering light of the bonfires around the church, all the shapes from our

dreams and the corners of our eyes. I looked back down the hill at the illusion of movement, if illusion it was, among the burning trees.

Calling the shadows, the Commissaire had said. *Making* them, I thought. Could it be that the indigenes were *shaping* the dreams of the land?

We continued our advance. The dancing shadows recoiled from our tread. I began to hear the voices of the assembly in the churchyard, singing the strident hymns of the Green Christ. Beneath the gate was a paved labyrinth of rune-carved stones. As we stepped across it and onto consecrated soil, the song of the congregation became abruptly stronger, drowning altogether the roar that emanated from beneath our feet. This close, the ringing of the church bells pummelled the ears.

I worked my jaw to pop my ears, as one habitually does in the calm at the storm's eye. Then I realised the condition of the people before me. Their faces were grey, soot rubbed into their skins. Their hair was loose and crowned with oak leaves. No few—men and women alike—were shirtless and whipped themselves with switches of birch while they sang. All were unshod, the soles of their feet tattooed with runes. I saw adults and children walk upon beds of hot coals laid around the bonfires.

I crossed myself, conscious of the words written where my fingers touched. “Let us find our shipmates quickly,” I shouted, “and be gone from here.”

We circled the church. People we passed regarded us with sullen expressions and red-rimmed eyes, but none sought to interfere with our progress.

We had almost returned to our starting point when I heard an exclamation in French.

It was our two missing sailors, their faces as sooty as any townsman’s. They all but grovelled at my feet, babbling over the top of each other, so relieved were they to see us.

“Forgive us, Capitaine. We did not realise.”

“We were afraid to try and return to the ship.”

“The shadows!”

On another occasion, I would have berated them. As it was, I felt only relief. I asked if they had seen Piron.

“No, Monsieur Capitaine. Not this night.”

“Damn.”

I dithered over whether to continue our search in the Oriental quarter. I pictured Sergeant Delahaye’s battered knuckles and wondered what we would find if we did locate him. The din around us made it difficult to think. It would be convenient in the extreme if Piron could not be found.

The pain of my compressed toes inside Delahaye's shoes tipped my decision.

"We have small chance, I think, of finding Monsieur Piron before morning," I said. "We shall return to assist with the removal of goods from the warehouses."

Neither sailors nor marines were able to disguise their relief.

\* \* \*

Crewmen emerged from the warehouse in pairs—one man loaded with a sack or crate, the other with a lantern to light his way. Our two rescuees followed suit without waiting for instruction, eager to redeem themselves.

"Piron?" Huon asked, with studied casualness, adding another chalk mark to his tally board.

"He was not at the church."

He looked up, then nodded once, his expression unmistakably relieved.

"What more do we need?" I asked.

Huon pointed. "The rest of that flour, and then we are done."

I handed my lantern to one of my marines and joined the line to collect a sack. A second marine copied my example. I hefted the sack on my shoulder. "I will see you back at the ship," I said to Huon.

Less accustomed to heavy labour than the crew, I quickly regretted my display of solidarity. I gritted my teeth and trudged onwards. The eyes of the men returning from the ship widened in surprise when they saw me.

Either Huon or Rossel had taken the initiative to douse *La Recherche's* lights. Passing the corner of the darkened Commissariat, the sailors ahead of me were shuttering their lanterns as they approached the end of the wharf and came into clear sight of any watchers that might have been left on guard in the fort. Their footsteps crunched on the gravel surface of the wharf.

Gunshots cracked. Muzzle flashes lit up the underside of the ship's rigging. Screams and a confusion of shouts followed.

I froze for a moment in shock. There came another ragged volley of shots. "Mutiny!" I cried.

Lanterns burst on the wharf, lighting knots of struggling figures as sailors turned on the marines stationed at the foot of the ship's gangplank. Other sailors scattered away from the fighting, anxious not to be mistaken for mutineers. A marine fled shrieking down the wharf, his jacket aflame, and tumbled down the banked rocks into the water.

I drew my sword and a pistol. With my three marines beside me, I charged the nearest group of fighters. A marine toppled in front of me. I fired my pistol into the face of his

opponent, then hurled it at a second mutineer, distracting him while I lunged with my sword.

Bodies surged past, sailors crashing into the melee, followed by another squad of marines. The mutineers broke and ran. Huon tripped to a halt, panting, to watch the phalanx of marines pursue them up the wharf.

One of the fallen men at our feet gave a sudden cry, abruptly choked. Huon's lantern swung wildly. Shadows crawled over the sailor's face and down his torso. His hands and heels clattered on the stones. A marine screamed, lurching to his feet, as the shadows crawled up his thighs.

Huon caught my arm and dragged me backwards. The marine looked towards us, searching for our faces behind the lantern's glare. He gave a final wail of despair as the shadows engulfed his head and stood, an upright darkness in the shape of a man, his arms still reaching for help.

"My god," I heard myself say. "My god, my god." As though some disjointed part of my mind was trying to offer a prayer but could not recall the first line.

Shadows fainted towards our feet, probing for weaknesses in our defence. One covered the toe of my borrowed shoe. I kicked away in alarm.

Down the wharf, a man cried, "I can't move! They're on my legs!"



“To the ship,” I cried. “*To the ship!*”

I began to run, then stopped.

Huon held his lantern high. Horror mixed with anger on his face as the shadows reached his chin.

“Damn your foolish pride, Antoine Bruni,” he said.

The shadows covered him.

“Jean-Michel!”

I fled with a howl, as if I could outrun his accusation and make it unsaid.

“Let them aboard!” I bellowed at the marines holding the gangplank against the crowd of sailors, mutinous and not, desperately trying to flee the wharf.

The sailors fell back from my flailing sword, several falling into the water as I surged up the plank. I carried the marines before me and, with the weight of sailors pressing behind, burst onto the deck.

The press of fighters scattered across the deck in diminishing knots, the mutineers quickly losing their appetite for struggle as their fellows who had escaped the wharf simply slumped onto the deck. Several ran for the far rail and dived over.

The splashes of their landing resounded in the falling quiet.

“Enough!” roared Sergeant Delahaye, striding about and striking aside the weapons of his marines who thought they might mete out some punishment to their surrendered foes.

“Enough,” I echoed him, faintly. “Enough.”

I stabbed the point of my sword into the deck and looked around. “Where is Rossel?” I asked.

An ensign pointed a bloody hand. “Fled overboard with the others, Monsieur Capitaine.”

I stared at him with creeping dismay. *Rossel? A mutineer? Damn my foolish pride.*

\* \* \*

The fires had guttered by dawn, the majority of the smoke dissipating on the morning breeze. The crew gathered on deck, pensive and sullen, the fight beaten from them with the crumpled bodies along the length of the wharf in plain sight. The ground was still. The hunting shadows were gone, and with them the voice of the red dirt plain that had plagued us through the sleepless dark. Most of those who'd been knocked into the water during the battle had been retrieved safely. Of Rossel and those who had fled overboard with him, there was no sign.

“We must retrieve our dead,” I said. Men crossed themselves and made signs of warding.

I did not call for volunteers but marched alone down the gangplank. I had neared its foot before the plank shook with

following steps—the two sailors I'd retrieved from the church. A moment later, Monsieur Bertrand scuttled after them.

We stopped beside the nearest fallen sailor. The body cast no darkness beneath it. Bertrand pointed to a rune on the man's right foot. "I believe this sign is imprecisely rendered. You see?"

I could discern no difference between that sign and its correspondent on the corpse's left foot, but saw no reason to doubt the astrologer's claim.

"Pick him up," I said.

Sailors and marines hurried past us as we lifted the dead man.

As with Marchant, the body seemed too light.

How much, I wondered, did a man's shadow weigh?

\* \* \*

I wrapped Huon myself and bound the body for burial at sea, while the sailors and marines did similar service for their mates. I sent the ensigns to resume the search for Piron, instructing them to also recompense Monsieur Van Hulsen for his broken lock. Then I stood on the quarterdeck, by the wheel, and stared at nothing.

The Commissaire came in person, escorted by a squad of V.O.C. mercenaries, who lay the shadowless corpses of Rossel and the half-dozen who had fled with him in a neat row along

the wharf. I allowed the Commissaire to board alone. His bloodshot eyes swivelled to observe the gun crews still posted beside their cannons. I noted the smears of grey around his ears and at the edges of his beard.

“Kapitein,” he said. “Last night our warehouses were broken open and a quantity of goods removed. They corresponded closely to the manifest you left with me.”

He bristled, expecting me to profess innocence.

I offered him Huon’s smudged tally board. “These are the goods now stowed in our hold. Name a reasonable price and I will pay it before we cast our lines. Attack my ship, or any of my crew currently ashore, and I will demolish your fortress and all of your warehouses. Sergeant, please escort the Commissaire from the ship.”

He held up the tally board to stay Delahaye a moment. The badges on his sleeve tinkled as he gestured at the wrapped bodies still on the main deck. “I will name you a price, Kapitein Bruni,” he said. “But you have paid a fool’s price already.”

Piron was located a short while later, sprawled in an alley behind the Chinese temple. He had been beaten and robbed and left for the shadows. Sergeant Delahaye would not meet my eye while the ensign reported Piron’s fate.

\* \* \*

We have given our fallen shipmates a Catholic burial at sea. But even as I led the crew in prayer, I wondered if there was any purpose to it, except for those who had the bitter fortune to fall on deck at the hands of their shipmates.

The crew remain mutinous. Only their lack of a leader, and their terror of this land of smoke and shadows and red dirt dreams off our port bow, keeps them in check. For how long I cannot say.

Piron's fate rankles me as much as it does they. Sergeant Delahaye has taken to drinking alone in his cabin.

Our course to the Pacific keeps us continuously in sight of the coast. Never a day passes that we do not see smoke from the indigenes making shadows in their fires.

Our misadventure has cost a score of men their lives and, I fear, their Christian souls. If in my dreams I should ever revisit the red dirt plain, I am certain I will find their shadows dancing among the others imprisoned there.

May the curse of Christ rest on Zwaanstadje and upon every godforsaken son of a bitch who resides there. Pride dictates that we attempt to complete our mission, but already I am determined to tell King Louis that there is no profit to be had for France upon this fatal shore.

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## LESSION'S TOWER

by Fox McGeever

The taste of salt on the air ignited a voracious hunger in Lession's gut when he leaned over the parapet of the lighthouse tower. A wind was rising, a strong, fierce wind that chilled the air and made his heart bang hard and fast against his chest. Was it a Gray storm? He took a long deep breath until his ribcage cracked. Yes. Must be a Gray. Only the wind current from a Gray was strong enough to whip salt from the waves and carry it up this high.

Far below, the waters of the Empty Sea heaved and swelled with all the colors of darkness like the storm was building in its belly and not off in the eastern sky. Six months since the last Gray. Six months. Too long eating fish and crabs without a scent of red meat. His belly was sour and tight from the taste of the sea.

"Is the wind right, My Lord?"

Lession turned to watch Hurkerna climb up through the trapdoor in the center of the floor.

"Will you fly, My Lord?" she asked. "Will you... feed?"

Lesson's chest tightened. It was hard to look at her some days. The black leather of her skin was stretched tight around every bone, sinew, and thread of muscle. When they'd imprisoned her here, her breasts had been full and proud. Now they sagged like blooms in autumn. Even the ridges of armored skin around her head were loose and ropery these days, for want of a proper feed.

As if to answer her itself, the wind blasted across the parapet, whistling through the skulls that dangled on ropes from the stone basin that capped the tower. Before the lighthouse had been abandoned, the basin had held fire to warn seafarers of the rocks. Now he used it to store the bones of his catch.

He caressed one of the skulls. He remembered this one, a child he'd taken a year ago, a lost leaf adrift on the gray wind. She'd begged for her life. But her salty tears did little except turn his hunger insatiable. Like most that didn't fight, she had died quickly, painlessly. She didn't deserve to hurt. Too beautiful. Too fresh.

He patted another skull. Hurkerna had hung these decorations here, and he was proud of her for it. She'd sat for days over each one, cleaning them, polishing them with sandstone and rubbing them with fish oil until they glistened in the sunlight like beads of coral.



“I’m so hungry, My Lord,” Hurkerna said. “The taste of fish is vile in my mouth.”

“The wind ripens. And it is not fish I scent on its breath.”

He arched his back with pleasure when her talons wrapped around his chest and dug into his skin. She would have made a good mate, perhaps a mother of at least three, if they hadn’t castrated him before his exile. He flinched at the memory. The mental pain, the knowledge that his line would end with him, was still a hot open sore in his mind that was impossible to heal.

But if the castration had been terrible, it had been nothing but a bite compared to the wing-cutting.

Halgon knew what he’d been doing before they marooned him here. The Chief himself had taken his wings, hacked them off with a white-hot whale knife before slicing them to pieces and tossing them onto the bonfire he’d used to heat the blade.

“You’ll kill no more of us, demon.” Halgon had said as Lesson’s wings had crackled and spat on the flames not ten feet on front of his eyes. “But we’ll show you mercy. We’ll show you we are not the simple food stock you think we are. You’ll live out your days on the tower. May fish grow to your liking and repentance blossom in your heart.”

Then, as the smell of burning meat filled Lesson’s lungs, Halgon’s men had sealed his wounds with molten tar to ensure

that nothing else would sprout from his back. The thousands gathered in the square outside the Temple of Circles had laughed that day, and that laughter still rang harsh in his ears. He looked south across the sea. In the distance the spires of the City of Roses stood proud against the backdrop of the White Peaks.

None were laughing there now. Oh no. They'd be testing the wind, too, securing their carts and boats in storm frames before herding their animals underground into the storm shelters.

A bead of saliva leaked out from between his lips and trickled down his chin. Not all would make it to the shelters. There were always a few: the drunk, the stupid, the courageous, or the lost, who braved a storm. Not many, but always enough.

"I wish I could come with you," Hurkerna said. "I wish I could...."

Lesson turned and ran a talon down the side of her face. "You have no need to fly again, my love. I will return with such delights as to make the smile blossom on your face again. I will search for a child."

"A child?" Hurkerna's eyes flared crimson. "A child? It's been such a while since I've tasted tender flesh."

Lesson licked her forehead. When they'd first brought her here he'd looked at her with spite, a curse to mock his

impotence. Yet, despite his initial desire to kill her, he'd grown fond of her. The sight of the lumpy ridges of scar tissue that ran from her shoulders down to her buttocks was a fuel to keep the fires of revenge blazing hot in his heart.

Yes. She would have made a good mate, in another life, in another place. She was strong and intelligent, and it was she who'd opened up his scars and teased the remains of his wing muscles back out into the open.

Halgon had done his work silently and without malice that terrible day. But he'd been too hasty, too excited. His blade had simply seared these vital inner muscles instead of severing them. They would never lift him, but they did enable him to guide the wings Hurkerna had spent two years fashioning from driftwood, rags, and other flotsam washed up along the shore.

"Take me with you, Lesson," Hurkerna said. "I long to see the land again, soar above the great forests and mountains and be free if only for a short while. Please, My Lord. Just for tonight."

Lesson's heart sank. He stroked the side of her face again. "I sense the storm is weak. I may have perhaps little more than a few hours on the wind. Perhaps next time."

Hurkerna sighed. The fire in her eyes faded to a dull ember. "Yes. Next time."

Lesson turned away. The lie was always the same, and she'd never once questioned it. Off in the east the first rain clouds had dropped, masking the horizon in a gray, shifting curtain. He turned south again.

"Tonight, Halgon," he hissed onto the wind, and muttered a curse that the wind would carry his words across the water and spread them like fire across the City of Roses. "I'll cut another flower from your perfect garden and watch it wilt and die on my rocky plate." He pointed towards the trapdoor. "Now, Hurkerna. Fetch my wings. The wind is rising fast and soon I must be off."

\* \* \*

Once he was strapped into the leather harness attached to the wings, Lesson rested against the parapet while Hurkerna threaded the seal sinews through his muscles before connecting them to the wings. The pain was as bad every time. But it was good, worthwhile pain; pain that always sank away once he was in flight.

When she was done he climbed onto the parapet and waited, watching the waves crash in great snowy plumes on the rocks far below. Wind tugged at the wings, tempting him to fly. He resisted its call. The breath of The Gray wasn't full yet. No. Before he could take flight the skulls had to *scream* with it!

“A flower, My Lord,” Hurkerna cried, her voice weak above the crash of waves. “Bring a flower to brighten up my heart.”

Lesson opened his mouth and sucked in a great breath as the first drops of rain spattered against his face. All around him the skulls jerked and strained against their ropes like they were somehow alive and desperate to join him. Jagged streaks of lightening tore the sky apart. Thunder rocked the parapet. The pitch of the wind rose into one long, terrible scream.

He flexed his muscles and jumped. He automatically stiffened as the Gray embraced him, buffeting him about like a wild beast trying to throw a rider.

He steadied once the initial shock of artificial flight had passed. He quickly found one of the stronger lower currents and followed it landward. When he reached Deepta Island about a mile off shore he wheeled right, rode an upper draft over the Hadlock Hills, and approached the City of Roses from the west, gliding dangerously low over the outlying slum area of Pawter in case any of the sentry towers atop the walls were still manned.

He didn't linger over Pawter. The stink of open sewers was vile, and there were little pickings here. The bones of withered chickens were better dressed with flesh than the inhabitants of Pawter. Besides, a different danger rose from this place. Many

of the wooden shacks were already flattened. Strips of board and loose planks were slicing through the air like swords.

After passing over the western gate, he entered the city proper and rose higher, content for a while to just examine it, observe any changes made that might pose a danger. They'd laid traps before, primitive wooden cages and nets he'd taken great pleasure in destroying.

Little had changed. The stone and marble houses that lined the avenues of the northern quarter were as clean and hatefully pure as ever. The Markets Fields were deserted. He avoided the military district of Sanglone. Too many eyes. Too many brave hearts that might seek a reputation at his expense. He also kept clear of the Temple of Circles. Like a blot on the landscape, its three towers rose up from the heart of the city as if to mock him. That's where they'd snared him, taken him down with a hail net barely six months after he'd left the Nothing Lands to seek food.

His back muscles twitched at the memory. The movement caused his left wing to dip and sent him into a brief spiral. He regained control quickly and headed for the docks. A few loose dogs ran about in mindless panic as he soared above them. He'd taken dog before, and the taste sat foul in his mind. He'd take none today. Even if he had to risk all and fight his way into a shelter, he'd bring Hurkerna a worthwhile feed.

His first catch was a drunk, a silver-haired sailor who was staggering through one of the back streets close to the Havel Dock. He snatched him on the first dive.

“Relax, my friend,” Lession hissed into the stunned man’s ears and caressed his head with his free hand. “It’s all a dream. None of this is real.”

The man barely struggled. When Lession bit a chunk from his shoulder, he went limp. The initial thrill of tasting meat soon evaporated. The flesh was old, sour, steeped with alcohol. He couldn’t take this back to Hurkerna. No. Goat would taste far better.

After storing the man on the roof of a warehouse, he began making broad sweeps over the maze of alleys, squares, warehouses, and tenements that lined the harbor side. Sometimes slaves would attempt to flee under the cover of a Gray. Other times he’d found children here, wandering alone, lost in the panic of a storm evacuation. He’d taken the girl somewhere around here.

But where exactly?

He rode a current upwards until the dock area became a map. He circled for a while, using the landmarks to stir up the memory of that wonderful catch. Had she been over by the fish markets? No. Too open. She’d been away from the markets, trying to shelter in....

Down below, a figure stirred close to the wood yards. A small figure.

His chest swelled with hunger. The wood yards. Of course. That's where he'd found her. She'd been trying to wriggle underneath one of the iron frames used to stack the timbers.

But who was down there now, another child? Or had the sailor's alcohol-laced blood addled his mind and turned a memory into reality?

He made a pass over the timber yards.

It *was* a child, a boy, perhaps ten or twelve years old, whose bare limbs looked so wonderfully white and meaty. Perfect. If he took the boy to Hurkerna immediately he might, with luck, get a second catch before the winds dropped. And if he didn't, we'll, maybe the sailor's blood might freshen once the old drunk had sobered up.

Lesson wheeled left and made a second pass over the wood yard, the heady scent of a thousand pine trees on the wind flushing the sailor's stink from his nostrils. The boy had seen him. He was sprinting towards a warehouse building at the back of the yard. The windows of the building were broken. The entrance door was banging in the wind. Lesson cursed. If the boy went in there he'd have to land, take him on foot.

But what if it was a trap? What if....



An image of Hurkerna, her lips shiny and beautiful with blood, appeared in his mind. For the first time in months she was smiling. He circled a third time, dipping low to examine the yard. Apart from the mounds of timber and the dozen or so wagons secured in their storm frames, the place was empty. Halgon would never dare try anything here. It was too open. They'd do it in a holy place, a temple or meeting hall, somewhere they'd feel safe and confident.

He cursed again when the boy scampered into the warehouse.

Pangs of hunger clawed at his gut. He circled the building and swooped to examine the loading bay at the rear. Though it was barely six feet high, the updraft here was just right, a perfect place to take flight from. He glided around to the front, dropped to the ground, and stood perfectly still for several seconds while his body regained its natural balance.

He approached the door. Shrouded in shadow, a corridor led off into the bowels of the building. His chest swelled. This was good. Dark, narrow places were always good. No room for traps or any more than a handful of soldiers.

He went after the boy.

"I've come to help you," he hissed, walking on the balls of his feet so his claws didn't clatter or scrape off the floor. "You must go to a shelter. I'll take you there."

A childish sob passed down the corridor.

“Your mother sent me, boy. We are both in danger. We must leave soon before this roof collapses.”

Like part of the storm had followed him in here, a wave of dried leaves rustled past his feet. He paused when the corridor split at an intersection.

“Please, child. Time is short. You must not....”

Another sob. This time off to his left.

He didn’t budge. He couldn’t risk panicking the boy. Not now. Not when he was so close. “Come here, boy. Quickly now.”

“I can’t. I... I’m afraid. The storm will take me.”

Saliva flooded Lession’s mouth at the sweet innocence of that voice. Such a glorious prize for Hurkerna. Such a thing to make her laugh again.

He followed the corridor left until it emptied out into a storeroom. Apart from a stack of timber at one end of the room and a marble statue sitting in an alcove beside the sliding door to the loading bay, the warehouse was empty. Wind tore at the roof like a thousand curious hands, making the beams groan and tremble. Streams of dust fell like tiny waterfalls. The dust got into his nose and tickled his throat. The boy was kneeling at the statue. It looked like the God Aronus, the water god. He crept towards the boy, ever so slowly now. “All is well. I’ve come to help.”

The boy buried his head into the statue's feet. He was mumbling something, perhaps a useless prayer. "We must leave this place." Lesson paused. "The roof is weak. The Gray will soon whip it off and suck us both up into its gut."

"I know who you are." The boy turned his head, his raven hair falling over his face to conceal his eyes.

"I am not what you think. I am a friend to many."

"I cannot go with you."

Lesson swallowed the saliva in case it spilled from his mouth and scared the boy further. So the boy knew who he was. Well then, there was little point playing any more games. All he needed to do was distract him for a few more moments. "Listen to the wind. Do you not long to fly upon it? I can bring you there, carry you above the clouds and show you sights that only gods can see." Lesson edged closer "Do you not long to see it?"

The boy released his grip on the statue.

"Come with me. We'll soar over the Nothing Lands. You'll get knowledge that will make you rich one day."

"But..." The boy glanced towards the far door. "My mother, my family. I cannot leave them."

"You'll not be gone long. All I yearn for is some company, a companion to share the wonders of flight with. Your family will

think you taken by the storm. Imagine their joy when you return with such stories as to swell their hearts.”

“They’ll think me a demon worshipper. They’ll burn me on a pyre.”

A fresh burst of saliva flooded Lesson’s mouth. The smell of the boy’s fear was waning, replaced by a healthy curiosity. “They’ll treat you as a hero. Tell them you fought me and won.” He pulled the double bladed dagger from his waist scabbard and held it towards the boy. “Take this. It’s made from a metal no mine in these lands could produce. They’ll know what it is. “

He tossed the dagger onto the floor. The clang of metal off stone echoed briefly around the room before the wind drowned it out. The boy’s head jerked back, briefly revealing his eyes. Gray eyes, set into his face like stones.

Lesson’s heart jumped. Those eyes. He’d seen them before. But where? “What’s your name?”

The boy’s mouth dropped open. When he rose to his feet and stepped towards the weapon, Lesson matched him step for step.

“Tell me your name, boy. Let me know who I shall carry to see miracles.”

The boy was close now, close enough to smell onions and bread off his breath. The smell was like a trigger. Lesson leaped and closed the gap in a millisecond. He tore at the boy’s

shoulders. His claws slipped away. The boy was wearing something beneath his jerkin. Armour!

Caught off balance, Lession made a vicious swing for the boy's head. The boy was quicker. His hand shot out as he twisted sideways. He plunged a needle into Lession's thigh. A bolt of fire blasted up Lession's leg. Scrabbling madly at the dart he toppled sideways to the floor. His leg muscles flexed and tightened. Paralysis raced up through his body, a hungry, animal thing that froze every muscle and sinew it touched.

"What... what have you done? What have you...?" Lession's roar faded to a whimper as his chest tightened.

"I am Jakar. Son of Halgon." The boy stepped closer and looked down without a hint of triumph in his eyes. "And I am punishing you for your sins."

Lession sucked in a slow, heavy breath. The eyes! Yes. Now he remembered. They were Halgon's eyes. "Halgon's son?"

"And one day his successor." The boy's voice deepened, the squeak of childhood changing effortlessly into the voice of a youthful warrior. "Many skulls hang upon your prison walls, Lession. When The Gray is done we will reclaim them and lay them to a proper peace."

A pounding ache rose up behind Lession's forehead. Tricked! By a child! He eyed the dagger, desperately trying to will his arm out to reach it. "You... you planned all this?"

“The Council decided your fate.” The boy produced another needle from a pouch at his waist. “The first sting was a poison. The second sting is their gift.”

Lesson closed his eyes when the needle jabbed into his arm. A throbbing ache began, sending weak pulses of energy out along his veins, enabling him to roll over and haul himself up to his feet. He rounded on the boy and tried to ball his fists. But his fingers were too heavy, too stiff. “You’re... you’re... releasing me?”

“Return to your prison. Let it become your tomb. The antidote will give you half an hour at most before your body hardens to stone.”

To stone! The words almost dragged Lesson back to the floor. Hydrameade! Impossible! They couldn’t have gotten hydrameade. “How did....”

“It took three years and much coin to find it.”

Lesson coughed and spattered the floor with yellow mucus. “Why not slay me? Where are the soldiers? Where is Halgon?”

“None will laugh at you this time. My father takes no delight at this. Soldiers are not needed. You can waste your energy trying to fight me. Or you can use it to return to your tower.” The boy tossed a third needle towards Lesson. “Your

partner must share your fate. When we come for the bones we will boil her slowly if we find her alive.”

Briefly, Lesson imagined himself finding the energy to fling himself forward and use the needle on the boy. Then an image of Hurkerna passed through his mind. She was smiling, watching for his return. He stuffed the needle into his empty scabbard. “You show me mercy.”

“We are human. We are merciful.”

Lesson staggered towards the doorway leading to the loading bay, on legs that felt like they’d been filled with molten lead. He unlocked the door and stumbled outside. A gust of wind caught him, forcing him to steady himself against the doorframe. The boy followed, stony-faced, those terrible eyes as cold and unmoving as his fathers.

“The tower is yours, Lesson. We’ll name it after you to mark your passing.”

Lesson paused. My passing! So they didn’t know the hydrameade wasn’t fatal, didn’t know that the truth was even worse and the poison would only petrify him indefinitely. He gave the boy a brief, sad smile before spreading his wings and stepping off the loading bay. The current took him quickly, violently, buffeting him about as it whipped him upwards into the calm heart of the storm. Within seconds the yards disappeared below and the City of Roses was hidden beneath a

swirling rain cloud. The current held him there for a while, effortlessly, like a feather on the wind.

What now? Could he return to the tower? Could he use the hydrameade on Hurkerna, condemn her to a sleep that might last a thousand years or ten times that? Should he not kill her instead and end the misery permanently?

Or would it not be better to drop through the waves and spend eternity at the bottom of the sea, until barnacles covered him and he became a fireside tale.

The very notion sent a new burst of energy flooding through his muscles. No! Hurkerna was waiting. He couldn't leave her alone, couldn't leave her to face the fate Jakar promised. She would die, not by human hands, but by his.

She needed peace.

And when others took flight from the Nothing Lands some day, others who might carry with them the remedy to hydrameade, he'd have his revenge on the City of Roses.

He screamed a long, warlike scream. And it was as if the Gray understood him. The current shifted, released him, and guided his wings until he was gliding out across the sea. Hurkerna was on the parapet when he broke through the clouds. As his arms turned to heavy weights he angled sharply, sailed over her head, and slammed onto the tower with such force it shattered his wings to pieces.



“My Lord!” Hurkerna cried as she dragged him from the wreckage. “What has happened? Are you all right? Are you...”

He dragged himself up and clung onto the parapet for support as the leaden heaviness sank deeper into his limbs.

“My Lord, you are hurt?”

He grabbed her and held her tight. “I am sorry. So very, very sorry. Our day is done here, Hurkerna.”

“What....”

He grasped her tighter, pinning her arms by her sides. “You will suffer here no more.” He nibbled open the larger vein that ran down the back of her neck and nuzzled against her cheek while her life blood drained out and pooled around their feet.

“My Lord, you weaken me.”

“It is not hunger that drives me, Hurkerna. It is love.” Lesson eased his grip and stared at her. Love. The word echoed off inside his head like a plea for mercy, not from Hurkerna, but from some deep part of himself. Of course he loved her, loved her too much to carry this through.

She shouldn't die. She *couldn't* die. Even if it meant condemning her to a terrible sleep, a future without her would be a future dark and grim. His hands cramped as he sealed up the vein and pulled the needle from his scabbard. Her jaw dropped when he raised it in his hand.

“My Lord, what... is that?”

“Hydrameade.”

“Hydra.... No! Please, My Lord. Not that. I cannot....”

Lesson grabbed her shoulders and spun her around when she tried to shove him away. “It is our future, Hurkerna. Our future. Look west. Look towards the Nothing Lands, for it is from there our salvation will rise some day.”

He slipped the needle into her arm. As her muscles stiffened, he used his last reserves of energy to mould her into a comfortable position, both hands resting on the parapet, her head tilted so she was looking out over the Empty Sea.

“This poison cannot kill us as they think, my love,” he whispered into her ear. “It can only bind us. Time to rest now. Time to sleep.”

Like a keening lament, the Gray storm howled its fury and turned the waves of the Empty Sea white as he took a position beside her and fixed his eyes on the western horizon. He took one last, long breath, raised his arms, and pushed his chest out. He held this position as his heartbeat slowed and the white sea faded to gray and then sank away into blackness.

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*Fox McGeever is an Irish writer currently living at the edge of a dark and endless forest in Sweden. When he's not out sifting through the shadows of this forest for inspiration, he's hard at work creating his alternative world The Parawerthan. In addition to Beneath Ceaseless Skies, his work has appeared in Withersin and Necrotic Tissue. Lesson's Tower is set in The Parawerthan. Fox's alter ego is currently trekking through this world. You can follow his progress at [www.parawerthan.com](http://www.parawerthan.com).*

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## COVER ART

“Fantasy Gate,” by Wolfgang Wachelhofer



Wolfgang Wachelhofer is an Austrian graphic artist and web designer who has a deep passion for surreal art. Most of his inspiration comes from the rich and colorful cultures of Brazil, where he lived for four years. He has done a lot of work for various clients for which he has earned a high reputation for his uniqueness. View more of his art in his [online galleries](#).

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