

DEADWIND SEA



JOSH WAGNER

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Selected Sample; Chapters 1-5

(Not for resale)

*Please distribute this far and wide
Enjoy!!*

Impossible Clock Productions

DEAD WIND

SEA

Dreamed up by

Josh Wagner

DEADWIND SEA

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Somewhere in Montucky

www.joshwagner.org

www.deadwindsea.com

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For Heather and Adryan

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Deadwind Sea began unexpectedly one winter day, while I wandered around the hills of Arizona. I was living out of my truck at the time, parked out on my dog's dad's owner's mom's land. The point of this little journey was to write a novel, but not the one you're about to read (in fact, that particular novel remains unfinished to this day, but I'm getting there). My best guess as to the true origin of *Deadwind Sea* is that it was a desperate attempt by my subconscious to avoid having to work on what I was supposed to be working on.

So above all, I want to thank Susan Akey and Terry Bender for providing the environment in which I found so much inspiration. And of course, Lucyfurr, who has been my constant companion, although she still hasn't learned how to read.

There are so many others to thank. My primary support system: Mom and Dad, Josh and Sarah, Katie and Aaron, Joel, Jasmine, and Jenna Berg. A huge thanks to Dave Baxter, the first gentleman to read the entire story, and who provided some dern'd fine criticism! Doctor Park Cooper for additional early editing, and Kiva Singh for last-minute editing. For their continuing support along this crooked road: Lauren Perry, Jan Napiorkowski, and Chris Moreno; Camilla d'Errico, Josh Hagler, Joshua Dysart, Caitlin Vogel, Christian Olson, Steve Saunders, Mila Aguilar, Skyla Mitchel, Brad Wilson, Jon Aaseng, Dean and Kay, John Nilles, Theo Ellsworth, and Alyssa English. New friends and inspiration: Michelle Morano, Bre Lopuch, Aaron Fields, Christopher Judge, Courtney Blazon, and all you other crazy fools in Missoula creating such a brilliant stew of art and conversation.

And of course, warmest thanks to my grandmother Mercedes Maria Orcisitas de las Padilla Smith, a loving and plucky woman, and the link to my Spanish ancestry.

FOREWARD

I remember when this book was called “Dead Weed” (terrible title, but it grew on me, I actually like it a lot now, but oh well), and Josh Wagner hadn’t yet put his stamp on the comics world with FICTION CLEMENS, SKY PIRATES OF NEO-TERRA, OUTLAW TERRITORY, and I think a few other scatterings here and there. I befriended Josh because I read FICTION CLEMENS, and then I read some of his prose work. He, in turn, sweetheart that he is, read some of mine.

Instant karma.

We discovered we were both crotchety-yet-passionate hacks with pie-in-the-sky ideas about literature and its boundaries, about what made a good comic, about what made a good book. Let me tell you: it’s hard to impress a wannabe struggling writer if you’re also one yourself. Competition is fierce, and usually when some other jerk hands you something *they’ve* written you just knee-jerk *know* that **your** stuff is better than whatever it is you’re reading by this other guy. Only something that can swiftly and irrevocably penetrate this ego-armor will get through. Only something undeniably, outrageously, calculatingly, gravitas-ly, magically, oh shit I suck this is good-ly performed on paper, can quash the cynic in a self-proclaimed writer.

Ladies and gentlemen, I give you *Deadwind Sea*.

This is a book I read on my computer in too-tiny Mac-formatted font and with that headache-inducing glare that computer screens generate. If I could adore the book via that, I can only imagine how much fun you’re going to have reading this on paper. The story falls somewhere between *The Princess Bride* and *The Adventures of Baron Munchausen*, with a dash of *Flatland* thrown in for good measure. And all wrapped in a narrative voice unique to Josh and Josh alone. This is part fable, part novel, part metaphysical reverie, totally accessible. Trust me, I hate the “Ooo, look, it’s multi-layered it’s deep you won’t understand it because I can’t be bothered to really write a plot” type of “original” work. This is a story, first and foremost, and a darn tootin’ good one.

But don’t take my word for it, take these checklists’:

THINGS YOU LIKE

- A complexly layered plot
- Prose both heavy and light, a balance of pulpy and poetic to where one does not detract from the other.
- Things you’ve never thought of before. Things you would never think of to write.

- Humor that constantly catches you off guard.
- Characters endearing no matter good, evil, or something more real.
- A PERFECT ENDING.

THINGS YOU RUE

- Elements of plot, character, or setting that smack of being “cool” or “neat” or “mind-blowing” without purpose or obvious use to the plot, characters, or setting.
- Semi-formed or surface-level philosophy or meta-anything that are not explored or satisfactorily meshed with the story on a foundational level.
- “Quirktastic” eccentricities replacing actual character development
- Retellings, remakes, re-hashed stories with a single or too-few new element(s) added.

So, if those lists generally align with your interests, I gotta tell you: *Deadwind Sea* is the epitome of List #1. Even better, it playfully walks the fine line, often incorporating much of the “RUE” list but forever tying them down and showing us all how it’s really done.

The original idea was for this book to be an illustrated monster, with more art by fan-favorite comics guys than you could shake a longbox at. But even in its present state, as a pure prose novel, you won’t need the visual accompaniment. *Deadwind Sea* is a smorgasbord of visual stimulation shaped by Wagner’s wonderful words.

Life may have taken me in the direction of the publisher in recent years, rather than writer, but I’m still hip deep in the culture and art form, and still as persnickety as ever about what can be considered a good book. *Deadwind Sea* is, in my opinion, a fabulous book that should not be missed by a single soul. If you disagree, I dare you to write something better. Then send it to Josh. He’ll probably love feeling about your book the way I feel about his.

Dave Baxter

Deputy Director, *Robot Comics*
 Publisher, *Killing the Grizzly Comics*
 Writer of things hopefully to be read by the masses in
 the near future. Until then, just read this.

Chapter One

Tree

BEHOLD!

Spring colors pour upon the plains east of Sevilla where a young shepherd boy busily minds his own business. His business is growing up, and though his mother says he does this too fast, his father says too slow.

The year is 1322. The world is a jumble of wars, famines, plagues, papal intrigues, and poets chasing lovers into Paradise—the sorts of things that might interest a young shepherd like Sergio if only he were aware of them. Slender enough to be awkward, with baffled hair and long creased hands, Sergio knows only his fields. Most of his days are wrapped in the lazy peach-green pasture of his grandfather. It is this pasture where, through the unlikely wonders of geometry, our young shepherd is just about to fall in love.

But before he can get to that, there is the small matter of the sheep in the tree.

To the men of Sergio's family, how the sheep got *into* that tree was a far more interesting puzzle than how they might manage to get it out. Uncle Alejandro stamped his feet, tugged his graying curls, and swore to the Holy Mother that the sheep had fallen from heaven. "Look at the hooves! Immaculate! Not a scuff, not a scrape. This sheep has never touched earth. It is a gift from above!"

Uncle Nicolas was not convinced. The portliest of three brothers, Nicolas had enough hair above his lip to make up for everything that was missing off the top of his head. He massaged his epic moustache with four fingers and said, "If that's so, then it's a gift for me. Saint James branded it with my mark."

Four faces turned sideways, peering at the letters *N.C.*, which were shorn into the sheep's flank. Four faces silently

acknowledged the miracle theory debunked.

“Look, it obviously ran up the tree,” said Joiton, who was the tallest and youngest of the brothers. “The bark is flaked off here. Something wolfish chased it.”

“Never in three-hundred years of this family has a sheep climbed a tree,” shouted old Julio, father to the three men. Julio held the distinguished title of village elder. It was not uncommon for people from the neighboring countryside to come and read omens in his wrinkles. Julio kicked the trunk with his big leather boot. “And probably never in the history of the world!”

“Would you rather be dinner to a wolf, or defy the history of the world?”

“Maybe the sheep just stood in one spot while the tree grew around it,” offered Nicolas. The other men held their hips and unleashed a united groan at this suggestion.

“Well maybe it *did!*”

“Where’s Sergio?” old Julio asked.

“Probably sleeping in the field somewhere,” said Joiton. And indeed, Joiton’s son was known for that sort of thing. Sergio was not lazy by nature, but slipping away for long naps seemed to be his best shot at keeping out of trouble. Most of what Sergio tried to accomplish in his handful of years had ended up a disaster. Whenever he set his mind to a task, the men of the family steered clear and waited for the inevitable crash. When they’d asked him to build a shed, the shed collapsed within days. “Dig a ditch there!” they told him once, but he dug too deep and eroded an irrigation system. “Sakes alive, Sergio! Just go help your mother in the kitchen.” But his mother, fearing for the safety of her family’s digestion, would have none of it. Sergio was not a dull boy, but luck had a way of playing

tricks on him, and so he often set off alone, away from any sort of endeavor, lest he steer it to catastrophe.

As the bickering of the men went on, the sheep continued to dangle, front legs spread around a single branch, back legs pinched together and jammed into the tree's cradle. Its wooly posterior squished between the branching wooden arms like an old woman squeezing into a young girl's skirt. A habitual bleating rattled the sheep's jaw, and it gazed longingly toward the distant sea of grass.

Meanwhile, Sergio, unbeknownst to the men of his family, was on his way up the tree with a pair of shears and a rope. He had decided this was one situation that his hapless fortune could not make any worse.

"Okay listen everyone. I know what happened," Nicolas waved his hands, quieting the others. "It's almost mid-day. The blind padre from the parish council comes by here every morning to bring a basket of grain to the monastery. Sometimes the women run out to greet him and beg him to bless the children. Sometimes there are so many babies thrust into his face that the wobbly old padre doesn't know what to do, and has to shove his way to safety. I have seen him escape before by grabbing a baby and placing it in a passing cart, in order to send the women off on a chase. I think he must've been here, got thronged by the women, and *intended* to place a getaway baby in the tree. But instead he picked up a sheep."

"Oh for the love of all the little creatures," groaned old Julio, "Who mistakes a sheep for a baby?"

The others fell silent, gazing evasively away from the old man. At last Joiton raised a timid hand. "Um, I have—one time—thought a sheep was a baby. I was in a hurry."

"So have I," said Alejandro quietly, looking away. "I

mistook it for my youngest son, and scolded it for nearly ten minutes.”

Old Julio, slack-jawed, turned to Nicolas. “You, too?”

“The opposite, actually. But it was a very ugly baby.”

“What’s that sound?” Joiton interrupted.

They all stopped. Between the blurts and bleats of the sheep recurred a thin, snapping tone, like someone slapping a stone with a twig. Something white began to fall from the sky.

“Is it snow?”

“Are the cottonwoods molting?”

One fluff landed between Julio’s lips, masquerading him as someone who’d shamefully tried to stuff a rabbit in his mouth. From above, clumps of wool rained down, for Sergio was snipping away at the sheep’s thick coat.

The men looked up. “Sergio! What are you doing?”

Joiton needn’t have asked, for at that moment the lamb’s back end, now shorn much thinner, slipped away from the arms of the tree. The poor creature revolved like a pig on a spit and would have fallen on Nicolas’ head had Sergio not first bound its front legs with the rope. Forty old Spanish fingers stretched up to meet the petrified, dangling creature while Sergio let it loose one inch at a time.

“Ahhh!” cried the men of the family happily, and accepted the floating beast into their fold. They did not even set it down, but shouldered it back toward the village, rope trailing behind and slipping (at the last) from Sergio’s grip.

“Wait! Help *me* down now!” It was one thing for Sergio to climb up so high, and quite another to get back down. His legs were short, and his ballance had never been that

great, and he was lucky to have made it up to the sheep in the first place.

Whether they ignored him deliberately or not made little difference. The men had a story to tell down at the shop, and there was no time to argue over the best way to liberate yet another entangled nuisance.

There Sergio sat, clinging to his branch and his shears, wondering whether freedom would be worth a broken bone or two, when the great mystery of love suddenly came upon him—or rather—passed beneath him.

As far as mysteries go, love is a tenacious one. The best analysis of even the most casual romance is met with scorn simply by virtue of being an analysis at all, while the worst provides fodder for thoughtful hemming and hawing, but no solutions to love's bouquet of problems. Love is certainly a fertile ground, breeding everything and anything from the most blissful, idiotic joy, to a teeth-gnashing sorrow, to a longing for everything to stop, just so this accursed love might stop.

Sergio had never given any thought to the mystery of love, as suitable for it as he proved to be. But the mightiest hero may metamorphose from the lowliest coward; so too did Sergio's first steps into the ways of love arise merely from a new and indelicate point of view.

Until this day, Sergio simply never had the opportunity to view a woman from the sacred forty-five degree angle.

Here she came, Ivette, the village orphan, whose hair, like the wings of the midnight moth, sang moonlit songs in a loamy black whirl. Ivette, whose eyes were simple and soft, rising up at their corners like the arrows of Eros. Ivette, whose lips drew curtains of breath off the sea and lay them as pillows of wildflower upon a meadow'd cliff.

None of these virtues had ever occurred to Sergio before. Though he'd known her all his life, not once had he found her particularly beautiful. They had been childhood friends. First he'd teased her, then she'd thrown a rock at his head, and then they were friends. But now he saw each charming feature anew, bundled together in a holy revelation that emerged from the tops of her sun-dazzled breasts.

Sergio said nothing. His throat went dry. His lips went numb. He nearly tumbled from the tree, and he scraped his hands scrambling to avoid the fall. She could not have heard him, and yet she stopped. She stopped at that forty-five degree angle. A breeze drifted in and tossed her skirt slightly to the west. She smiled and wrapped her arms around her ribs, hoisting her love of fine Spanish mornings and further illuminating this heavenly vision.

And then she looked up. She raised her head and set her eyes upon his as if she'd known for years and years that he would be hanging in that very tree on that very day. She smiled. Perhaps she was only struggling not to laugh at him, but joy seemed to burst against the insides of her cheeks, and finding no escape there, turned back to flood from her eyes. Perhaps she was only enchanted by his predicament, but she stared at him then, second after second, not speaking, and never looking away.

Their eyes entwined, tangling tighter and deeper with each passing moment, teasing one into the other to test what mixtures might emerge. First the whites flirting, circling one another like tangling veins; and then the colors, his a swampy, freckled green, hers golden rings braiding a violet pool; and finally the black void centers, where sunlight skips across a ship's square sail, squalling the infinite inky

seas of souls unknown. They met and loved and wed in those few moments, and if they'd been allowed to hold the gaze any longer they would have produced thousands of children, each explorers, princes, philosophers, inventors, musicians—a clan too powerful for gravity to contain, a kin of voyagers launching off the surface of the world, into the seven spheres above, and out through the Empyrean to create new universes of their own.

But their gaze did stop, and just in the nick of time, when a flush in Sergio's cheeks triggered an itchy new layer of sweat on his skin. He coughed and looked away.

Then, glancing back, he smiled and said, "Would you help me down?"

* * *

Like most lads of high mediaeval Spain, Sergio had been raised to understand that a woman's love is not something to be seized or stumbled-upon. Love should be won, and winning the love of Ivette now took high priority in Sergio's life. But how could he, a poor shepherd boy, whose greatest talent consisted of messing everything up, hope to win the hand of such a beautiful maiden?

It kept him up nights, this question. He lacked any real tallent and he was to soft-spoken to be charming. His face was symmetrical enough, but no one would have called him handsom. Even his body conspired against him. His hands were big, but he had small arms and narrow shoulders. He could not do much heavy work. There was no chance of establishing his own business or amassing a fortune. Time after time Sergio nearly gave up in despair, saying to himself, "Oh, what does it matter?"; but recollection of

that forty-five degree angle of his forty-five degree angel spurred him ever on.

He considered their childhood together: after that time when she'd hit him in the head with a rock, Ivette had dragged Sergio out for a walk in the hills. There they found a pile of large boulders to climb on. At the top of the pile, Ivette had accidentally dropped a precious pendant of silver—the only thing of value she owned. At the time Sergio didn't know what to do. Ivette was crying and he tried to console her, but with so many rocks around, Sergio felt a failed attempt might make things worse for both of them, and so he just went home.

Now, years later, he was going to do something about it. One at a time Sergio moved all the rocks from one end of the field to the other. It took him the whole day to transplant the entire pile. Alas, no pendant turned up. He did, however, manage to create a sinkhole right in the heart of the property belonging to old man Freites and his crazy wife Veronica, who proceeded to drive Sergio off with a stick.

Our shepherd boy's next plan consisted in staging a perilous predicament for his lady love, in hopes of following up with a daring rescue. Yes, this was a very stupid thing to do, but a young man has to try something. He waited until Ivette was alone in the woods. Then he released old man Freites' ravenous and deranged bull from its pen. The plan was to set it charging into the woods, at which point Sergio would come riding up on his father's horse and sweep the young beauty off her feet and on to safety.

Well, the bull never even made it to the woods. Oh, it charged all right, and as ravenously as hoped, and even in the right direction. But the fat old thing had a heart attack

halfway into phase two, and died right there in the field. When Veronica caught Sergio at this murderous turn of events, she beat the living daylights out of him.

Bruised and battered, Sergio was beginning to run out of ideas. *One more chance*, he thought, *and if this doesn't work...*

But before he got around to implementing it (and it would have been great!—Imagine our hero up all night weakening the bridge so that when Ivette crossed it, down she'd go, downstream into his heroic waiting arms), his mother decided to intervene.

“How are things going with your young lady, Sergio?”

Sergio was still working over the details of his bridge plan, and the calculations were still leading him to $2+2=5$. “Not good,” he said, and then, in a display of utter despair: “Oh, what does it matter?”

His mother pursed her lips and raised old eyebrows. “Why don't you just try talking to her about it?”

Here was a novel suggestion. The idea had never crossed Sergio's mind. “That's too easy,” he declared.

“It might be harder than you think,” said his mother, “but you may be able to manage it.”

Sergio figured it wouldn't hurt. Actually, he figured it would probably ruin everything, but he told himself it wouldn't hurt.

That evening Sergio made his way to the miller's home across the brook, where Ivette lived; but as he did so, Ivette herself was making her own way over to find out why Sergio had been acting so much stupider than usual. They met on the little wooden footbridge, and stood face to face under the light of the full moon. Ivette smiled. Sergio muttered and scratched his head.

“How are you this evening, Sergio?” she said.

“Oh, fine, I suppose.” He felt his plan was thwarted.
How can I talk to her if she’s talking to me?

“It’s a lovely moon tonight, isn’t it?”

“Sure is. Very round.”

“Hm. I never noticed how nice the bridge looks in the moonlight. Is it true that your grandfather built this bridge?”

“I think so,” said Sergio. In fact he knew so, but Sergio didn’t like to be certain of anything out loud, not if he could help it.

“My father says he remembers watching your grandfather lay the first boards, back when he was only a little boy. It’s a very nicely-made bridge.”

“Yes, it isn’t that bad, is it?”

“Do you ever think about the fact that all the old people in the village used to be young just like us? They used to be full of energy, and make things, and go on pilgrimages and...and climb trees. And before that they were just tiny little creatures who couldn’t take care of themselves.”

Sergio tried hard to remember if he’d ever thought about that sort of thing before.

“The point is,” Ivette said, noticing his wayward gaze, “as soon as you think things have changed a great deal, you realize they’ve always been the same. But then, if you start to think they’ve always been the same, you notice everything is changing all the time.”

“Things don’t seem to change that much to me.”

Suddenly Ivette grabbed Sergio’s hand. He nearly panicked. His legs trembled and his lips went dry. His very first thought was, *Fling yourself into the water!*

Ivette turned and looked over the rail of the bridge. She

watched the reflection of the moon bend and wiggle on the brook's rushing ripples. "See? The moon keeps changing shape on the water. I bet it never holds the same shape twice, but it's still the moon the whole time. Who do you think was here before us, Sergio?"

"Here on the bridge?"

"No, I mean generations and generations ago, before the houses were built. Before people made this village."

Sergio stared blankly at the tangle of fingers between them, knuckles rolling one over another like the wild river ripples below. "I suppose no one was here. Or maybe just another village."

"Maybe," Ivette said. She let go of his hand and leaned far over the rail, lifting her feet off the ground.

I could push her in now, Sergio thought, and then dive in after and save her.

Ivette went on, "I wonder if there was ever a forest here. And maybe people came and cut down all the trees. Maybe it was the Romans."

"That would've been a very long time ago," Sergio said.

"And before that, only the trees and the animals."

"The sheep?"

"No, *wild* animals! When I was a little girl I used to pretend that there was no village, and that the whole world as far as you could see was one big forest, and I lived all alone in the forest with the wild animals."

"That sounds terrifying," Sergio offered.

"It was fun." Ivette stood upright and turned to look at him. She tried to catch his eyes, but Sergio's lids stuttered and he looked away. Ivette said, "Maybe our spirits lived here hundreds and hundreds of years ago—maybe even thousands of years ago—before there were even animals."

“Wouldn’t we remember that?”

“Would we? Suppose our spirits lived their whole lives trying to make themselves into people like you and me. Maybe we made ourselves into plants first, and then animals, but every time we changed into a different form, we lost so much of what we’d been before, that our new selves weren’t able to remember our old selves.”

All this was going way over Sergio’s head. Still, it seemed to make some sense. He didn’t think it had really happened, but he thought it could be possible, and he said so.

“So what about now?” he asked. “Are we finished, or are we still trying to become something else? I don’t feel like I’m trying to become anything.”

“Don’t you? Aren’t there things that you want, but you don’t have? People always want something, desire something,” (when she said the word *desire*, Sergio blushed, and although it was too dark for Ivette to notice, she went right ahead and noticed anyway), “and maybe this is our way of changing ourselves into something new, groping along in the dark after our little desires.”

For a moment, Sergio was too flustered to speak—which was all well and good, for he wouldn’t have known how to respond anyway.

“Sergio.” Ivette’s tone changed at once into something far more serious. Sergio looked at her. She let the sound of his name linger for a few moments. “Why did you move the rocks in Old Man Freites’ field and then set their bull loose and almost get yourself killed both times?”

Sergio couldn’t stand it any longer. Her question pried him open as if he were an old sunken chest. He told her everything. Weak in the knees and faltering in the voice,

Sergio fell at her feet. So caught up in the emotion was he, that most of what he said made absolutely no sense. Ivette thought he was raving, but she did manage to catch one phrase: “a scoundrel for your love.” She’d never heard that phrase before. It was completely ridiculous, of course, but there was some charm to it, and more importantly it confirmed her thoughts about exactly what Sergio was up to.

She let him off the hook. “Are you trying to tell me that you’re in love with me?”

“I have nothing to offer you but a lifetime’s worth of failures and misfortune,” Sergio said with damp eyes, “but they are yours if you want them.”

And for some reason buried deep in the incomprehensible mystery that is woman, she did want them. Very much.

* * *

What it was exactly that Ivette could possibly see in Sergio initiated a stream of endlessly wagging tongues. Everyone in the village had learned (via a small-town gossip engine bordering on telepathy) of Sergio’s sudden infatuation with the orphan girl. But everyone, including the boy’s father, thought it would all come to nothing. Only Sergio’s mother believed that her son could carry through; and even more surprising, she believed Ivette would love him in return.

Everyone knew that Ivette was something of an odd duck. She was an orphan of unknown stock. She did not resemble anyone from the village, nor from other villages nearby. Her dark hair, nearly black, seemed exotic,

beyond Byzantine, while her eyes displayed a color that ranged from a searing purple in shadow, to a shining blue in sunlight. Some of her ideas struck the villagers as so outlandish as to have been wrought from deep India or the furthest frozen lands of the north. But she was beautiful, and most of the young men of the countryside had their eyes on her.

“She’s unpredictable,” Sergio’s mother said. “That’s how I know. And she’s got certain feelings about things, feelings that fly in the face of reason.”

Indeed, when asked about the matter, Ivette expressed two of these ineffable feelings. She said there was something in Sergio’s eyes that ripened like fruit on a vine, as if another Sergio was just waiting to emerge. “And I think I will need him very much,” she added enigmatically.

They were married late that fall, outside the small village parish. The blind old parish padre, whom Uncle Nicolas still blamed for placing the sheep in the tree, gave the new couple a basket of grain and promised to bless their babies. Uncle Alejandro wept, and covered it up by blowing his nose several times at key moments in the ceremony. Old Julio, who was Sergio’s grandfather, asked the orphan bride for a dance, and it was a charming and dignified moment. Sergio’s mother Cecilia took the opportunity to give pointed glances to her other sons who had not yet found wives of their own. And the men of the family, Nicolas, Alejandro, and Joiton, offered so much contradictory advice that Sergio felt there could never be such a thing as a good husband. But Ivette read his thoughts, and kissed him, and whispered to him, “Take me to the tree where I found you.”

Six days later, Ivette died.

Chapter Two

Breath

I N the stables where the men of the family kept their horses, there lived an old black dog. Every summer when the streams dried up and the fields began to brown, the horses took mount and the men drove their flocks into the hills to camp along tributaries of the Great River in search of wild grasses. It usually took two or three days of the horses being gone for the old dog to realize that he was alone in the stables. It took another two days for the dog to get up, take a good fresh sniff of home to remember his way back, and then plod slowly out along the horse trail to find his old companions. He usually reached the first tributary by the time Nicolas, Alejandro, and Joiton were about to leave the second, and he reached the second about the time they left the third. The old dog took a long, slow drink from the third tributary, sniffed around to be sure that they'd been there, and then struck out again along the trail. The sheep had long been returned to the village fields, the saddles polished and put away, and the horses just getting used to fresh hay and a warm roof over their heads when here came old dog, plodding through the stable doors. *Well I finally found you guys*, the dog thought, and satisfied with his trusty snout and his equestrian reunion, lay back down in his same old spot for some well-earned rest.

* * *

Ivette lay dead for three days. Sergio sat beside her the entire time, holding her hand. She grew cold, but not as cold as a lifeless girl should. Her face turned pale, but not as pale as a lifeless face should. She simply did not seem

as dead as dead was supposed to seem, so Sergio would not let them bury her. Then, on the fourth sunrise, though she grew no warmer nor her skin more flush, Ivette's lips parted and she breathed.

A doctor was summoned immediately from Sevilla.

The doctor was an old Alexandrian goat of a man who wore a long black robe and small blue cap. His eyes pinched close together on his wrinkled face. A spiraling white ocean shell stuck out of his ear, held in place by a metal rod attached to his hip. When Sergio spoke, the doctor would point the shell in his direction and ask the boy to repeat whatever he'd just said.

For a long while the doctor sat beside Ivette, watching her breathe. When her chest rose he said, "Hmmm..." and when it fell, he said, "Ahhh..." Then he took her wrist and felt for a pulse, and shook his head woefully.

"What do you think?" asked Sergio when he could no longer stand the silence.

"What?" said the doctor, pointing to his shell.

"Is she..." Sergio trailed off. It was all he could say.

"Dead?" the doctor nodded. "Yes."

"But she is breathing."

"What's that?"

"SHE IS BREATHING!" This was something Sergio had no trouble shouting.

"Hm. Yes. That is the strange thing, isn't it?" and the doctor returned to his examination. He held Ivette's arm up a few inches, then let it thump back onto the bed. He peered in her ears and peeled open one of her eyelids, into which he placed a few drops from a green vial. He put his shell up to her lips and listened to her breath come and go. At last the doctor leaned toward Sergio and said, "Her

soul has gone to the West. It has followed the setting sun into the Land of the Dead where it will await the Last Judgement. And yet her breath remains. She is using this body to transport air back to her soul. You can see how shallow her breathing is. This is because the air has so great a distance to travel.”

“Then there is still hope,” said Sergio. “There is still a connection between her soul and her body. She might still come back!” He was very agitated and before the doctor could say “What”, Sergio repeated himself loudly.

“Well...” the doctor pondered the thought. “Yes, technically it is possible I suppose. But for a soul to follow even the strongest thread back over the Ocean Sea...I don’t know. Wherever she is, it’s probably taking all of her will just to maintain her breath. How would she find the strength to return?”

“Perhaps someone could go and bring her back.”

It took a long time for the doctor to decide upon a response to this. He stood up and paced the room. He gazed out the window. He asked Sergio if he might see some coin, to cover the expenses of such a distant house call.

Sergio quickly handed him five coins, and the doctor lost them in the deep folds of his robe. “Someone might be able to bring her back. There is always hope. But what living man has ever crossed the great Ocean Sea?”

“If I were to try, how long would I have?”

“It is hard to say. The body needs food and water to stay in shape, even if it’s dead. I might be able to dig up a device that would do the trick, but...well, I couldn’t say how long it would help, and more importantly, you see...I noticed your father owns a very nice work horse, and normally I wouldn’t suggest such a high price, but my brother’s horse

just died, and there will be so much more travel, and labor, and parts and pieces, and—”

“Anything you ask,” Sergio said resolutely.

Two days later, the doctor returned with his contraption.

The device was based on a simple set of scales. On one side was placed a small bowl, and on the other a cup.

“Someone must fill the cup each night with water, and place fruit and grain each morning into the bowl.”

Beneath the scales were two levers. The doctor explained that as each container was filled its side of the scale would drop activating one lever or the other, which would pull one of two strings. One of the strings opened the door to a birdcage resting on the windowsill. The other opened a little wooden box.

“These birds have been trained to carry water in their beaks. They will deliver the water to the girl and keep her well irrigated.”

“And the box?” Sergio asked.

“What?”

“WHAT ABOUT THE BOX?”

“Ah, yes...in the box are seven mealworms. These worms have been dissected, and their digestive systems removed. All that remains is a long, inactive intestine that will pass food unchanged from one end to the other. Every day, after the worms have eaten of the fruit and grain, they will enter the patient’s mouth, climb down her throat and enter into her stomach. By the time they reach the stomach the food will have reached its egress. The worms will deposit it there, and return to the box.”

“Have you used this device many times before?”

“Not myself,” said the doctor, “but I acquired it from a Slavic shaman who often employed it to fatten his cows

before the slaughter. I am fully confident that it will do the trick.”

And Sergio decided he might as well be confident too. What other choice did he have?

When the doctor walked out, Sergio stood over Ivette and touched her hair. With each of her slow breaths he imagined that it might be the last, and his chest tightened. But when the next finally came he accompanied it with a sigh of relief. Sergio held a sharp rock in one hand, a rock he found at the base of their tree. He pushed the rock point into his palm, piercing the flesh. He squeezed his fist above Ivette’s brow until a single drop of blood splashed onto her forehead, just above and between her sealed eyes. “I will not fail you,” he said softly, but he could not help feeling that he already had.

* * *

Sergio left the village early, as the sun warmed the sky. He carried a small bundle of necessities, a bit of food, a flask of wine, some rope, a wooden cup and bowl, handkerchiefs, and a curious multi-purpose tool that his grandfather had picked up during his travels north of Italy. The sun rose on his left, and Sergio made his way southward over gently rolling hills toward the Great River.

Before his village vanished from sight, Sergio heard footsteps jogging up from behind. His father, breathless, called out to him. “Listen, son, I just wanted to say—well, there’s no delicate way to put it. We both know that you haven’t had much luck with things, and you know, there should be a word for it, but you’ve always been liable to make a disaster out of whatever you put your mind to. But

look, Ivette wasn't bad luck for you. And it wasn't your doing that caused things to turn out the way they did. All I'm trying to say is I think you'll see this through."

Sergio thanked his father and they embraced. Joiton slipped his son a couple pieces of silver. "Here's a few extra coins. It's all I could come up with." Then the man gave his boy a stern look, as is required by fathers, and turned back to the village.

Orange was the sky, dotted by purple clouds when Sergio spied the Great River washing down the plains. A cool breeze bent the high grass, which drove the sunset shadows to sway. It would be another half-day downstream to Sevilla, and Sergio looked for a good place to spend the night.

He made camp beside a small grove of olive trees near the river, where an upstream jetty created a downstream eddy. With time's aid this had formed a flat sandy beach and a great place for the river to spit out excess driftwood. Sergio gathered wood for his fire and he listened to the sound of that eddy. The river swelled and the eddy surged, and a moment later all would be calm. This became, to Sergio's ears, the breath of his love and the knowledge that Ivette was still clinging to life.

Soon another sound came murmuring along the river's drift. Gruff off-key voices united in simple sailing shanties, sung to serenade the stars and coax them into view.

*Aye-ya! Alee,
From river to the sea.
Alee! Aye-ya!
By now we can't be far.*

*Aye-diddley-aye-
Diddley Aye! Aye! AYE!
If we don't rest from lack of work
we may keel o'er and die!*

*Aye-ya! Alee,
A'sailing lay-zi-ly
Alee! Aye-ya!
From Byzantium to the stars.*

*Aye-diddley-aye-
Diddley Aye! Aye! AYE!
If we don't rest from lack of work
we may keel o'er and die!*

Sergio saw, coming around the river bend, a mid-sized raft made of fine planks and a real top-notch mast and sail. It may have been twenty feet wide. From the middle of the ship sprung a little cabin hardly big enough to hold two people. The raft's paltry crew clung to the ropes that fastened down the mast. They swung and sang and shoved each other roughly about, but none fell overboard. On the back of the raft several large crates were stacked to toppling heights.

"Ahoy, there!" shouted one of the sailors, who had spotted Sergio. "Man, ho!"

Everyone got a real laugh out of this and rushed to the side of the craft to make faces. Their sudden shift of weight sent the raft into a whirl, and it took all hands to steady her. Once back in control some of the men struck oars and steered the boat toward the bank, past the jetty and the eddy, and put to shore beside the beach.

“Anchor her down!” cried a voice from inside the little cabin. The door popped open and out came a gruff-looking pirate whose posterbill face pronounced the most vibrant red mustache, waxed and curled with the utmost care. He looked like a circus strong man without the muscles. An empty scabbard sashed across his chest over a loose white shirt. Under his arm was tucked a waterlogged manuscript, likely a bit of pulp romance. He emerged from the cabin tightening the drawstrings of dark brown pantaloons.

“Captain’s off the poop deck!” someone shouted, and then there came such a riot of men rushing for the little cabin that Sergio thought the ship would capsize.

“Cut it out!” snapped the captain, striking with his manuscript a fat old fellow. “Anchor her down, I said, and bind to port. There’ll be pissin’ space enough for the lot o’ ya on shore!”

Everyone obeyed, each in his own way. The tangle of men produced not a tangle of knots as Sergio had expected. Miraculously, an orderly anchorage emerged from the chaotic crew’s clamor. Within moments they beached their raft with sails furled.

Upon disembarking, the dozen-or-so crew members stormed the beach and went to picking olives, relieving themselves, gathering wood, and otherwise scurrying about. The captain graciously approached Sergio as a man well trained in the art of bowing. His grin was infectious, and though still wary of this invasion, Sergio returned the smile.

“Greetings traveler!” The captain’s words were an extension of his gestures; fingers, elbows, chest and eyebrows all worked in harmony to punctuate his sentences. “I am Captain Sweegan, and this is my crew. We’re the deadliest,

most relentless, most tormentingest river pirates in the land, but never fear! We are notoriously lazy, and if you haven't a small fortune tucked away in that knapsack of yours, we won't consider you worth the trouble. Still, if you don't mind, this looks like an ideal napping beach and we hoped you'd let us share it with you."

"Well it's a pretty big beach," Sergio said. One of the crew, a skinny fellow with pickled blue eyes and a swab of curly blonde hair, walked up and poked his nose into the folds of Sergio's knapsack. Sergio couldn't help peering at the man, while making every effort to appear unconcerned. He had always felt that it only exasperated impropriety to respond to rudeness with suspicion; but he did add, "As long as you aren't planning to kill me in my sleep."

"Wouldn't think of it!" Sweegan laughed. He reached out and slapped the blonde-haired snoop upside the head as if he were shooing a fly from Sergio's ear. "Go do something useful," he growled, and the wiry fellow scampered off. Sweegan turned back to Sergio. "That would require one of my men to be awake when they could otherwise be sleeping. Never gonna happen. Now, why don't you let us help you get this fire going."

The fire was blazing and almost out of control by the time darkness fell. Most of the men huddled about, whittling on sticks, picking at their teeth, or roasting some sort of edible that they'd brought along to shore. Sweegan shared half a chicken with Sergio, and Sergio shared his meager flask of wine.

"So my father is Aragonese, but my mum is Irish— 'twas she who gave me this hair. What my mum ever saw in that old bastard is beyond me. He's dead now and mum's back

living in the green country. And me? I've got *these* ragtags. But we do okay."

"I've never met pirates before," Sergio said, pulling Sweegan's half-chicken off the fire and handing it over for inspection.

"Looks done to me," said the captain, and he tore it in two. "These days we deal mostly in art. Pretty odd, I know. But there's a prince of Azamor who's offering more gold than any of us can count to bring him these paintings. You should see these things. Most of them are awful. Painted by rich merchant's sons from the Italian coast. Some of them you could hardly call art. I've got a couple landscapes that are so realistic you can barely tell they're not the real thing. What's the point of art like that? Might as well just look out your window!

"Anyway, this African prince seems to think they'll be worth big money someday. Well, they're worth big money now. To *us*, right boys? As long as someone thinks a thing is valuable, and has the cash to prove it, well, I guess that makes it valuable. But if you want my opinion, half these paintings would make better kindling."

Captain Sweegan took a swig of wine and pointed toward the edge of camp. A silent black Moor bundled in dusty brown robes sat alone just beyond the perimeter of the firelight, gazing into the sky. "That's the prince's man," Sweegan said. "He'll be connecting us with a real ocean ship in Sanlúcar to take us down the coast to Azamor. He's a strange one."

"How so?"

"When I met him he said we already knew each other. He said we'd known each other for years, but I don't have any memory of it. He seems sincere, though. Confident,

quiet, keeps to himself.”

Sergio nodded. “And after Africa, what then?”

“After Africa we’ll be rich enough to buy our own ship. We may graduate off these rivers...if it’s not too much work.”

Sergio laughed. He was starting to like this strange half-Irish pirate more and more, and it was nice to listen to stories and be distracted, however briefly, from thoughts of his plight. But it couldn’t last forever, and the inevitable question brought it all back.

“So what’s your story? Where are you headed?”

“Sanlúcar, as well,” said Sergio. “I’m trying to charter a ship to the West.”

“Same as us then. Well I’m sure we’d be happy to have you aboard...if you don’t mind sailing with scoundrels. What’s your port?”

Sergio smiled demurely. “No. I mean, thank you for the offer, but I’m going further west than that.”

Sweegan shot him a curious glance. “Further? What’s further than the African coast? The Canaries, or...you can’t possibly mean...”

“The edge of the world,” said Sergio quietly. “The Land of the Dead.”

And with these words, Sweegan’s smile returned, bigger and brighter than before. “Aha! Well, well, that’s quite a—”

“Quite a coincidence!” interrupted a voice. It was the same skinny blonde who’d earlier been snooping in Sergio’s bag, and who was now snooping on their conversation.

Sergio glanced at Sweegan. “Coincidence?”

“What Blithe Barney *means* to say,” Sweegan said swiftly, giving Blithe Barney a dour glare, “is that we met some men just the other day who were speculating about

such a voyage.”

“Really?” Sergio brightened. “Are they going soon? Where can I find them?”

“Don’t get your hopes up, kid,” said Sweegan. “They were all talk, these blokes. Just a useless gang of merchants with ridiculous notions of turning a profit from the Land of the Dead. But if you ask me, the whole concept is absurd. There’s no such place as a Land of the Dead. There’s just death and you go into the ground.”

Sweegan looked up to find Sergio’s expression plummeting.

“Ahh,” Sweegan said softly, “but *you’ll* make it, kid! You’ve got faith, right? It’s just like our little art caper. Value is in the eye of the beholder. Don’t matter so much if a thing exists or not, as long as you believe it does.” Sweegan tried his best to sound convincing.

After that, the conversation trailed. Most of the crew drifted off to sleep. Before Sweegan turned in he said, “Hey, Sergio, if you want we’ll give you a ride down to Sevilla. There’s a few people I could introduce you to. You never know.”

“That would be nice, thank you,” said Sergio sincerely.

But Sergio was a shepherd and was used to waking up before dawn, while these river pirates considered it a sin against God if they didn’t sleep past noon. So by the time Sweegan was up and wondering where Sergio’d gone off to, the boy was cresting a final hill and looking down upon the great city of Sevilla.

* * *

“Passage to the West? You want to go to the Canaries—

Is that what you mean?"

It was not at all what Sergio meant, and he told them so. Then he would sigh, and depending on how strong he felt at any given moment, Sergio might either tell them exactly what he meant, or just walk away. In either case he always received more mockery than advice.

"The FAR West? Into the Ocean Sea? Beyond the edge of the world? Not a chance."

He decided that if derision could float he would be well on his way.

Sergio spent the next three weeks camped outside of Sanlúcar. Every morning he rose before the sun and wandered down to the ports along the Great River in search of a ship. After each long day soliciting sailors and collecting rejection, Sergio would retire to a small cove just out of sight and spend the rest of the evening fashioning a little raft of his own. He sanded planks like he was shearing sheep, and he cut the pegs like he was trimming horns; but as he was never very good at shepherding to begin with, the miserable craft underwent multiple revisions before it held together. Even then, what stays dry on land might still sink in the water, and Sergio had no illusions about his luck. This raft would be his last resort. If he couldn't find passage by the time it was complete, he would sail into the northwesterly winds and hope for the best. "If I drown, then I drown," he said.

At night Sergio stood upon the riverbank and listened to the wind swell across the current. This, too, was the breath of Ivette, coming to him over the water, letting him know that she still held onto a fleeting hope of life. Sergio realized that this hope could snap at any moment, and as the breeze fell to stillness this fear chilled his bones.

* * *

“A-ho, traveler!” The voice came from behind a pile of stones, stacked north toward the city. The sun was halfway below the hills, and Sergio was just calking the final planks of his small boat.

“Looks like a fine craft—” said the voice.

The man was not old, but he was getting there. He carried his massive frame with gentle composure, stepping carefully from stone to stone as he made his way along the beach. A dark, creased face, squinting more out of habit than necessity, scanned Sergio’s work.

“—but it won’t make it a day out of port.”

Sergio started inspecting for leaks and grumbling in his mind about old Moors who can’t mind their own business. “What’s wrong with it?”

“You have never built a ship before, have you?”

“Have *you*?”

“You might say I’ve built several. You’re the boy who wants to sail the Ocean Sea, right?” He said it as kindly as he could, but Sergio could hear the chuckle squeaking out with his words.

Sergio took a closer look at the man, and then suddenly recognized him: the old Moor who had been with Sweegan and his pirates! The black man recognized the recognition and smiled. “Yes, it’s me. I helped those lazy pigeons set off and thought I would come see how you were faring.” He sat down on a stump and dangled his bare feet over the surface of the river. Dirty, cracked feet that years of bargaining with earth had tempered to shoes. He grunted and wiggled his body into place, folding up his hands

between his knees.

“Can you smell it? The scent of the sea reaches all the way here. It is why men started sailing south instead of east. Easier on the back, too.”

“Will you help me with my boat? I’ll pay you,” Sergio said, trying not to sound as desperate as he was.

“You’ve got a one track mind, haven’t you?” The man released his hands from between his knees and bent down, sliding two fingers over the sanded prow. “I will make you a deal. You give me everything you own. Give me this boat, and your money, and whatever food you have. You give me your clothes, and some of your skin, and a bit of your blood, and in exchange I will take you to the far lands in the West.”

Sergio suspected mockery. There was a lilting twinge to the man’s voice. But it was an ancient twinge. It was the twinge of the raven making fun of the wolf from high atop his perch. It was the cliff mocking the sea that crashes hopelessly against it. The laughter of a mole nestled just beyond the fox’s reach.

“If you can truly take me there, I will give you all you ask and more.”

“Oh, not *more*! If I asked for any more your corpse would be the only thing left to deliver.”

“Where is your ship?”

“It’s around. Why don’t you build us a fire while we wait. Darkness comes soon.”

In the firelight, the Moor seemed to melt over the flames, drawing toward him the trees, rocks, riverbed, and stars; and within these plications his outline mingled and merged. The cold air sucked back the lighter elements, and the heavy flesh of night filtered through his eyes and

onto the blaze. The bits of wood hissed and snapped, and provided little warmth.

“Few living have tread the path you seek. But many men have journeyed east into the rising sun. I wonder—if it is true, as some men say, that the sun which rises is indeed the same sun that set the night before, then how does it make its invisible journey back east? There is an infinite distance between east and west, but the sun comes up in only a matter of hours. This is how I know that each day’s sun is truly born anew, destined to glance at but a single of man’s days before extinguishing forever in the Ocean Sea. Its cold, stony husk is then piled beneath the earth, and it is this mountain of dead suns that supports our world in space.

“If you make it to the Dead Lands, shepherd, you may be forced to cross this mountain. Beware, for the stones might still be hot, and you will see reflected in their faces the entirety of each dead sun’s long dead day. They are scattered and not kept in any order. You may become confused. You may see the day of your father’s death precede the day of *his* father’s birth. Then you will find yourself lost and forget your own name.”

The Moor wobbled his head and swooned. He seemed to remember something, and then raised his eyes from the fire.

“Now, go down to the river and wash your face and arms. Take off all of your clothes and bring them to me. Bring me a stick from out of the river. It must be a stick from deep under the water. If you don’t dive for it, it will not be good enough. And then—how much money do you have?”

“These coins are all the money I have in the world. I’ve

sold what I could.”

“It is enough.”

Once Sergio had done what was asked, he stood naked and trembling before the Moor. He handed over his money and his clothes, and a stick retrieved from the river. The Moor then tore all of Sergio’s clothes into tatters. He threw them on the fire, which blazed greedily at their touch. He told Sergio to hold very still and not to be afraid. Then he struck the shepherd boy with the stick, hard on each shoulder. He beat the stick against Sergio’s chest and scraped downward, cutting his skin. He went after the shepherd boy’s legs next, and when he asked Sergio to turn around so that he could go to work on his back, the boy did so without questioning. The Moor took dirt and mud and rubbed it in Sergio’s hair. He rubbed dirt into his wounds. Sergio suffered all of this without complaint. He had failed at everything else in his short life, and whatever the cost he would not fail Ivette now. Finally, with a hefty grunt the Moor flung Sergio’s coins into the river. “May they roll to Atlantis, and teach those dirty bastards the value of a year’s wages!

“You have not disappointed me, shepherd. Sit by the fire while we wait for your ship, and I will tell you the story of three sailors from West Dacia. Who ever thought there would be a story worth hearing about sailors from West Dacia? But this is the only one there is. They were brothers and their names were Julius, Adolphus, and Leo.”

Chapter Three

The Raft of the Jewish Sailors

ONCE, many hundreds of years ago, during the dwindling last days of the Old Roman Republic, there was a famous general in Gaul who had the misfortune of admitting three very unusual Jewish brothers into his army.

Now these three brothers never wanted to be in the army; it was an establishment as suited for them as basketball is to bees. Julius, whose thick black moustache envied an overgrowth of eyebrows, only wanted to make his fortune. Leo, bold of nose and forehead, was in it for the ladies. And Adolphus? The youngest brother, curly blonde with the face of an angel, only longed to see what was beyond the next horizon and what waited on the other side of every door. They were fleeing some trouble in their hometown in West Dacia, and hoped the army would be a good place to hide out until the trouble passed.

How the brothers got into the mess in the first place is a story of its own. Suffice it to say that Leo, who was the eldest of the brothers, fell in love with the wrong woman. He fell in love with the wrong woman's sister as well, and then with the wrong woman's sister's slaves. Two of them anyway, or possibly six. So the brothers skipped town at the last moment, made their way to Gaul, and joined the Roman Legions.

Julius, Leo, and Adolphus tried their best to fit in, but none of them had much talent for hard work, discipline, or following orders. It wasn't two weeks and they'd driven completely mad their commanding officers, who proceeded to string them up before the great General himself.

But fortune favors the ridiculous, and it so happened that the General had been pushing his severity a bit too far in recent months. His men were feeling throttled and

were starting to complain about it. The General hoped that a show of clemency might help balance out his image. So instead of executing the three Jewish brothers, he made them his personal assistants, declaring reform a superior remedy to punishment.

He realized his mistake that very same day, when he saw Julius and Leo shouting at each other from opposite banks of a stream.

“How do I get to the other side?” Julius asked.

“You *are* on the other side,” Leo replied.

Not three days later, the General stood on the brink of his own personal hell. In addition to the trouble the brothers caused intentionally, and all the trouble they stumbled into from natural talent, was the simple matter of their personalities. You see, Adolphus never said a single word, and his two brothers never shut up.

Adolphus was a mute. He was mute neither clinically nor of religious conviction, but rather by convention. When the brothers were young it was always Leo and Julius getting into discussions, jokes, and quarrels. The dialog between them was an unending stream. Adolphus never quite found the perfect moment to squeeze into their conversations, and being a polite boy, precise and artful, preferred simply to say nothing at all. Whether at some point thereafter he forgot how to speak due to lack of practice, or whether he simply drew deeper and deeper into a complex web of finding the right thing to say and the right time to say it, was a matter of fierce scholarly debate between Al-Azhar and Al-Karaouine right up to the time of the Mongol invasion; and notable Frankish philosophers have considered it an extreme case of *esprit d’escalier*. Either way, Adolphus never spoke, and to the General’s ears his

silence did not diminish, but rather intensified, the deluge of constant chatter between Julius and Leo. For these two did not have *conversations*. No, what they had was a single unending conversation that paused only long enough for the brothers to sleep; an epic conversation that would last their entire lives, transmuting through various stages, logically progressing, relentless, and covering nearly every topic you might imagine.

As the army marched through Gaul, the brothers found themselves more and more on the General's bad side. No matter what the General said, Julius was there to fire back some quip. This would get Leonard going, and it was all downhill from there. Meanwhile, Adolphus routinely stole the General's horse and attempted to set it free in the woods. At any given time the brothers might break into dances or fights, arguments or dice games. And they ate everything in sight. If the General had not vowed before his entire army to spare their lives, they certainly would not have lasted a day.

But just because he could not kill them did not mean he was stuck with them. At last the General exiled the brothers on a small, rocky island in the Aegean. Here they had no fresh water, no food, and not a shred of clothes. All that remained on this island were a few dead trees, the rotting boards of an ancient shipwreck, and piles and piles of rocks.

The three brothers sat on three boulders overlooking the sea. They held their heads in their hands, and sighed in unison.

Julius said, "Now you see, what we've got here is the spitting image of a predicament."

Leo shook his head woefully and replied in a thick

Italian accent (he'd been practicing up to try and fit in with the Romans). "No, I no think'a we can see the future. Not even of a' mint. I think'a we got ourselves a disaster."

"Oh a disaster, eh?" said Julius through a saccharine smile. "Well, I'm not one to mints words. Let's just say we're in a real fix."

Leo grinned like a boy who's found his little lost puppy. "That's'a fine. We fix'a that boat then'a we can all go home."

"You sure don't make it easy to be a lost cause."

"Cause'a why?"

Julius scratched his head. "Cause why *what*?"

"I don't'a make it easy to be a'lost, cause'a why?"

"No. You're right," Julius groaned, peering at Leo through narrow eyes. "You're right. I take it back. In fact I've never seen such an ideal specimen of a lost cause in all my life."

The days slosed on without food, without water, without hope of rescue, and the brothers, who had always lived comfortable lives rich in wit and optimistic of fortune, now began to despair and grow quiet as they prepared for death.

But Adolphus refused to give up so easily. He took what planks remained usable from the wrecked ship and he built half a raft. Then he cut down the island's three trees and he built another half a raft. He put the two halves together into a full raft, bounced happily around his creation, and presented it the others.

The sight of the raft lifted their spirits a bit, but there was another problem. The raft had no mast and no sails. The sea around them was rough and vast and there would be no rowing against it, not even if they had oars. And so the brothers sank again into despair and hunger and

thirst.

Then on the seventh night after he had finished his raft, Adolphus stood upon the highest rock of the island and gazed west toward the unknown. He then turned to gaze east toward home, sighed deeply, and for the first time in his life, Adolphus spoke.

Adolphus told his brothers that they had no other choice. If they did not get off the island they would be dead in a few more days. One of them would have to sacrifice his life. Not for food—I doubt any of them would have had the stomach to eat one of their brothers, even to survive. What Adolphus offered was a way off the island. He reminded them that Twelve days ago they were marooned. Nine days ago he built half a raft. Seven days ago he built another half a raft. And today he would finish the job. He said there would be no argument. He had spoken. He would be the one to die, if only so that the conversation might continue.

Adolphus gave his final instructions and then he lay down on the shore and closed his eyes. An angelic glow quivered over his soft features, and his last breath left him.

Julius and Leo mourned the loss of their brother, but soon got to work, so that his sacrifice would not be in vain.

The first thing they were to do, according to Adolphus' final decree, was to take out his eyes and to bury them in the sand until it was time to depart. Then they were to peel his flesh and lay it out upon the rocks to dry. The same should be done to his intestines. Meanwhile, they must clean his bones and bind them together, constructing a high and sturdy mast for the raft he'd built. The bones of his hands should be placed at the base to hold it fast, and his grinning skull should perch atop as a crow's nest.

Once this was done, and the flesh was dried, dexterous Leo was to cut, patch, and sew Adolphus' skin into a great sail. This sail would affix to the mast and leverage to the craft by Adolphus' intestines, once they'd dried into a tough, sinewy rope.

The two surviving brothers named their new ship the Silent Harpy. When they pushed it into the current, wind filled the skin-stitched sail with billowing salvation. So overjoyed were they that Julius nearly forgot Adolphus' eyes, and had to swim back to the island to dig them up. With those eyes in his hands the ship would always know which way to go. And so it was that the three brothers made their way back toward the mainland.

But before reaching port, another unforeseen event arose that would change their lives forever.

A terrible wind struck just off the coasts of Italy, blowing the Silent Harpy back to Sea. Before they could make it out of the storm, a longboat of fierce sailors from the North set upon them and boarded their ship. These brigands showed no mercy, and with rusty sword points shoved Leo and Julius to the edge of the Silent Harpy. But just as one blade marked Leo for a killing thrust, the mast of old Adolphus' bones swung between sword and target. The killer felt his sword cut through flesh (the flesh of the sail), and thought for sure he'd pierced Leo through. But when they saw Leo still alive and unharmed, the gaping Norsemen fell to their knees and worshiped the brothers as gods. They pledged their ships to the Silent Harpy, and the chattering Jewish brothers of Dacia began their career as pirates.

As the years wore on, their armada grew. Saxons and Carthaginians added to the Norsemen, along with

Phoenicians, Egyptians, Greeks, and Romans. The fame of their legend spread around the world, and the Silent Harpy pillaged the coastal cities of the Empire for twenty years before the Senate decided to crack down. And whom should the Senate choose to put a stop to them, but their famous old friend, the General from Gaul.

At first the General was merely grumpy about his new post. He was an army commander, with little love for the Sea. But when he learned that the maestros of his latest headaches were his old Jewish exiles, the General lost all composure. The same Julius and Leo, whose incessant conversations had driven the great man almost to suicide, now pillaging his provinces? The same Adolphus who stole his prized horse again and again, now making a fool out of him once more!

For the rest of his career the General lost all concern save one: to capture the Silent Harpy, or to sink the dreaded raft for good.

In his later years the General was once quoted as saying: “Those insufferable Jewish boys! In my youth I had designs of marching on Rome and overthrowing the Republic, but those three kept me ever occupied, focused, obsessed—to such a point that I had no time or energy left at the end of the day to crawl into my tent, much less plot a rebellion. I’ll get them if it’s the last thing I do!”

It took ten more years for the General to catch up with Julius and Leo. Ten years over every inch of the Mediterranean and even a time or two into the Ocean Sea, but at last the brothers grew weary of piracy, weary of fortune, wine, and wenches. They divided their possessions among their fleet, and, longing to finish out their final days in witty twists of conversation and peaceful evenings,

sailed alone the Silent Harpy into the nearest port, and into the waiting arms of their longsuffering nemesis.

He might have killed them on the spot, but the years had honed the General's ambition into a holy icon, and he would not be satisfied with only two out of three. Particularly since legend attributed the illusive Adolphus as captain and leader! And so he had Julius and Leo jailed until he could find the third. Then he would crucify them all together.

For many long nights as the brothers rotted in prison, the General sat in silence gazing up at the skull atop the Silent Harpy's mast, trying to plan his next step. He knew that this raft was his key. All of the legends spoke of it as a mystical craft, second only to the Argo in admiration and prestige. In thirty years of sailing she never once floundered at sea or turned about in a storm. She always seemed to find her way to a safe port, to a wealthy town, and, until her penultimate voyage, to wherever the Roman army was *not*. If anything would help the General find the notorious Adolphus of Dacia, it would be the Silent Harpy.

One moonlit night, against the insistence of his advisers, the General stood alone on the raft and pushed her out to sea. His captains watched until the outline of the Silent Harpy disappeared into the mist, and neither Harpy nor General was ever seen again.

Julius and Leo sat quietly in their prison. They had not spoken in days, and no longer felt even the desire to escape. Julius reached into his pocket and pulled out the tiny hard eyeballs of his brother Adolphus, the eyeballs he had pocketed prior to their final docking. He stared into those eyes and smiled, and he would swear from that day on that those eyes smiled back.

Just then, an army of their old pirate crew stormed the prison and cut their old captains free. They begged for them to return and lead their fleet, but the brothers refused. Both Julius and Leonard were content to remain on dry land. They retired comfortably in Southern Gaul, surrounded by inexhaustible wealth and inexhaustible memories. When Leonard died ten years later, Julius fell into a lonely depression. There was no one he could talk to quite the way he had talked to Leonard, and Julius found himself wandering along the western coasts, now and then stealing glances toward the horizon in hopes that he might someday see a mast of bones and an empty skull come rising up beneath the sun. But that day never came.

In the last year of his life, Julius chartered a ship to the Canary Islands, the westernmost land known to man, beyond which the great Ocean Sea drenches the slanting wastes of the world's edge. Once there, he walked to the far end of the westernmost island and stood out on the furthest peninsula of rocks, staring into the sunset. He took old Adolphus' eyes out of his pocket and held them loosely in his right hand. He planned to throw them into the sea and let the currents take them. Perhaps, he hoped, they would find their way back to the Silent Harpy.

Just as Julius was winding up for his throw, a voice cried out, "Wait!" The voice belonged to an old beggar, dressed in a sack and leaning against a driftwood cane. The man was nearly bald but for a few strands of wiry white hair that tangled like vines over his plump and shriveled ears. He said, "Why are you throwing away those perfectly good eyes?"

It was only then that Julius noticed the skin of the old beggar's face creased inward on wrinkly waves of flesh

toward two gaping sockets, like black whirlpools pulling on his cheekbones. This strange old man was blind.

“They were my brother’s eyes,” said Julius. “I’ve come to this most westerly place to give them back.”

“And if I can prove to you that this is not the most westerly place, that mortal feet have stood on solid ground far further west than these wretched islands? If I can do that, will you give me those eyes instead of wasting them on the fish, who I am certain can find more than enough to eat on their own?”

After a moment’s hesitation, Julius agreed to let the man try.

“Good...” said the blind-man. “Then I will tell you of the girl who went fishing for the moon.”

Chapter Sour

The Girl Who Went
Sishing for the Moon

It began in 587AD in Tomis, on the Black Sea. A chill winter night beleaguered the district of the damned. Here a dirty blacksmith walked into a dusky tavern, torch lit at every corner. In the center of the room fractured green moonlight filtered through a pale glass roof onto a cavalier stage. Here and there a sleeping soldier clung to the floor. One or two cloaked and quiet men waited for the show. From the shadows there drifted the warbling of a lyre, followed by a staccato whistle of pipes and the simple rhythm of a boot striking the floor. A curtain opened from beyond the moonlight's reach, and out came the Strigoica.

In the torchlight her skin glowed soft and red, like a kettle left too long over a fire. Her hair, too, was red and wild, and her eyes flashed violet through the green atmosphere. Persian silks covered her body, tied to knots that tugged thin chains and long winding strings of polished stone. She led with her hips, jutting them outward on cue with the beat of a drum, as if her movements alone thundered the air. A black veil draped over her face like a falcon's broken wing, arrow-struck, plummeting through layers of cold fog.

The blacksmith took up a stool near the stage and waved away the barmaid's offer of wine. On and on the music played, marching from tempo to tempo, holding long, slow notes whenever she loosed one of her thick silk knots. At the end of the dance she did not pick up her things, but left them strewn about like cherry blossoms fallen from spring's pinch.

The band began a quieter, happier tune. The proprietor rolled the soldier toward the door. The blacksmith caught the woman's eye, and she let her smile approach him. Kneeling at his feet, she waited on his words.

"I know what you are," he said.

“So do I.”

“I want the full treatment.”

“It will cost you.”

“I can pay.”

“It will cost you more than that.”

She led him into a small room separated from the tavern by a thin white sheet. Here she bade him sit on a round couch, torn in some places, nibbled by rats in others. She stood naked before him and stretched her hands to the sky. Her bones cracked and the darkness of the room seemed to creep into the curved corners of her flesh.

“Are you ready?” she said. His answer twitched in unblinking eyes.

The Strigoica placed one of her long, black fingernails between her breasts and spread her feet slightly apart. The muscles in her finger tensed. She pushed the fingernail against her skin and began to slide it slowly down toward her navel. She traced a serpent’s trail, leaving a serpent’s image behind as her blood was drawn from gently ripping flesh.

The blacksmith swallowed hard. He stared at the purple zig-zag pattern, which held fast for a moment, as if she’d only revealed a hidden tattoo. Then the liquid began to drip down, drops mingling and sliding off-course, pooling about her curves. She cut two more lines, one below each breast, tracing a canyon between ribs. Three fingernails from her other hand slipped between flaps of skin, and she peeled them back slowly. Blood flowed freely now, painting her legs, dripping off her knees and onto the floor. She removed her nipples. The rest of her torso came off in strips, now peeling away of its own volition wherever she made the appropriate incision. She stood unwrapped, without either

symmetry or ferocity. He could see her muscles twitching; these she severed as well, methodically, precisely, until he caught his first glimpse of bone—a hip—it seemed almost to glow in contrast to the surrounding darkness. At her fingertip's bequest, pectorals unraveled in ribbons of meat. He saw her black heart, and it did not beat behind its pale cage.

At last even her arms were stripped bare, save for the skin on her hands. Two clinging leather gloves.

When she reached up under her rib cage and plucked the heart, neither of them flinched. It came free easily, like overripe fruit.

"Is this what you wanted?" she whispered in the dark.

"Yes," he said with a shudder.

She held the heart up under his nose. His eyes closed and he breathed in the scent of pumpkins rotting in the moonlight, and of drowning cattle, of insects dissolving on the web.

So intoxicated, he did not feel her hand carve into his own chest. He twitched and groaned as she ripped loose his still-beating heart and squeezed it out through a gaping hole in his abdomen.

The Strigoica's ribs swung above her swaying hips, a vacant birdcage in the breeze. There she hung the blacksmith's heart; and in exchange she placed her own dead heart into his chest.

"There..." she said softly. "Now you simply *must* go and drown yourself in the sea, my love."

His eyes slowly unsheathed, and his smile was slack. He managed a nod, and then clumsily rose to his feet.

* * *

The blacksmith's living heart incubated inside the chest of the Strigoica for nine days. Its beat gradually slowed and finally stopped before the outer layer hardened into a thick, calcified shell. On the evening of the ninth day the shell cracked, and grey dust sprinkled down the cavity of her torso to pollinate her womb.

The baby could not have been a happier child. The midwife slapped out of her not a cry, but giggles of delight as the little girl wiggled her wrinkly hands and bobbed her fat melon of a head. Mother held the baby and rocked her to and fro. The child pinched at her mother's lips and chin. They were still bound umbilically, and the midwife reached for her knife. But before she could make the cut, the barn doors burst open admitting a flood of Imperial soldiers, several bishops, and four bald dwarfish eunuchs.

"Put down the blade, woman," said a wretched old clergyman. He said this with difficulty, for his lips had been sewn together. One of the eunuchs, tethered from the bishop's belt by a rope, mouthed in silence his master's words.

"No!" screamed the Strigoica, clutching her laughing child to her breast.

The eunuch's mouth opened wide. Wordless lips slapped together fishlike, slopping drool, as the bishop spoke through them. "Did you think we would not find you? This is a devil's child, a Dhampir."

"Her father was a man," she shrieked. "A blacksmith. A citizen!"

The bishop stepped forward, flanked by guards, and said, "It is not the father who is a devil."

And though her fingernails extended into slashes,

though her teeth shot out of her mouth to kill six soldiers, still they came. They tore the child from the Strigoica's arms, and then with knives they pinned those arms to the walls.

"Do not cut the cord," the bishop said. "It must be ripped from the devil's womb, and then both of them must be hung from it until they are dead."

As one soldier held the baby girl out by her arms, four others went to tugging at the umbilical cord. They tugged and tugged and the baby stuck out her tongue and giggled and even snorted a bit. Still they tugged, yanking yard after yard of the sopping stuff, but there seemed to be no end to it.

"Enough!" the bishop shouted, as his dwarf raised exasperated arms to the heavens. "Burn it off."

I'll not describe this grisly scene save to say they brought the flame as close to the mother as possible, severing them in such a way that the child remained attached to dozens of feet of dangling cord.

"Fate," hissed the Bishop, "has provided this abomination with the means of its own strangulation."

As the soldiers gathered up the coils of her omphalic appendage, the midwife pleaded with the bishop for the infant's life. "You cannot hang a baby!"

"No," the eunuch mimed, "not if it is human. We shall put it to ordeal. Throw the child into the sea. If the waters reject it and it floats, then there is no doubt this is a devil child."

As ridiculous and utterly Frankish as this notion might sound, the child did in-fact float. She bobbed along the waves of the shallows of the sea. The impossibly long umbilical cord floated right beside her, coiling snugly into

a protective bonnet around the little buoyant body.

“Dhampir!” they cried from shore. “Drag it in and burn it!”

Well they certainly gave that a good try, but whether it was her drowned father protecting her from the depths, or whether because the Sea itself did not reject but rather loved her, or simply by some random wiles of the current, no one could retrieve her. Not by stick or wading or boat. And the delighted hours-old baby girl drifted out to sea.

*

Here Julius interrupted the blind storyteller. “Alright, I see where this is going. She’s going to float all the way out past these islands and into the vast oblivion beyond only to touch a’ground on some rock more westerly than this. It’s a cute story, but it doesn’t actually prove anything.”

The blind man coughed, and his head teetered around thoughtfully. “Well, you’re wrong about a couple things. First of all, she doesn’t touch a’ground anywhere. And secondly, as for proving my point, I’ve got my proof for you right here.”

And slowly, almost painfully, the old man peeled his eyelids open to reveal a pair of young, beautiful blue eyes. He blinked twice, looked left and then right, and smiled contentedly.

“Yeah...That’s the good stuff. See, I’ve got your eyes. And a shrewd man such as yourself never would have given them to me unless I had fulfilled our agreement to your satisfaction. Since I *do* have your eyes, you must have been convinced already. And that, sir, is my proof.”

Julius held open his empty hand. Adolphus’ eyes—and

they had *just* been there, ready to be flung into the sea—were gone. He leaned forward and peered into the blind man's face. Those were Adolphus' eyes all right, no doubt about it.

"Now, shall I finish my story or just go home? I have a lot of things I could be looking at other than your old face, you know."

"You can finish," Julius said softly. "If you like."

"Alright, I will. And don't worry about your brother's eyes. I will carry them a lot farther than your hand could have thrown them."

*

And so, the joyful little baby bobbed westward for days and days. She drifted along through the Golden Horn and beneath the bridges of Constantinople, down the Bosphorus Strait, into the Sea of Marmara, and further west through the Dardanelles. She hugged shorelines and followed the routes of Odysseus. She avoided being tangled up in the trading ships, and eventually she headed out into open waters.

As she floated, she grew. If a Strigoica's child is not born an orphan, she will make herself one without hesitation. Because of this, the first eight years of this brood's development go by in about three weeks. By the time she lost sight of Gibraltar's stone, the little girl was old enough to speak and reason and check out the world. And as she grew, so did her umbilical cord.

The little Strigoica gathered quite a following. Many of the fish made a game of chasing her, knowing that she'd steer them clear of nets. Pelicans, too, swooped about the

child, knowing that there'd always be fresh fish. They all talked with her and told her what they could about the world, about the deeps and shoals, about the sky and the winds and about distant lands. She received quite an education. For anything she asked, at least one of the creatures in her entourage could come up with an answer.

A few weeks after skirting the western coasts of Africa, strange tides carried the young child far to the north, and there she spotted an island unlike any she'd ever seen before. Great cliff walls of solid white surrounded the island, and tended to scatter the sunlight blindingly. As soon as she drifted close enough to get a good look, she found that deep within those walls the diaphanous whites gradually swirled into thick, creamy blues. The island had no beaches, for its cliffs plunged straight down into the sea. Even more remarkable, those cliffs shot up so high into the sky that the little girl could not see where they ended and where the clouds began.

"What is this place?" she asked the fish.

"It is ice. That's all we know," they said. *Ice*, she thought, *how beautiful*. Various loops and spirals had been carved into the ice, some of them quite elaborate. And on the western side of the island she spotted, jutting here and there out of the frozen walls, little frozen trinkets—a marble horse, a wooden sled, a doll of rags and patches.

"What is this place?" she asked the pelicans.

"It is tall. That's all we know," they said, and explained to her that none of them had ever been able to fly high enough to get over the peaks and into the heart of the island. "Not even the albatross could make it," they told her. "And boy did he try!"

But so great was the floating girl's curiosity that she

would not cease pestering them about it. The pelicans demonstrated that they could not scale the walls. The fish began to ignore her. At last the albatross came along, skimming the water's surface, and said, "The moon! Only the moon has sailed above the island's heart. Only the moon knows its secrets."

"The moon," laughed the girl. "Let's ask it."

"Ask the moon? Your voice would never carry, and even if I were to carry your voice up there myself and then throw it from the highest point I can fly, it would not even reach the tops of the island peaks, much less all the way to the moon."

"Then I'll have to catch the moon and bring her down to me," the girl said.

All the seabirds watched as she reeled in her umbilical cord, bound it like a lasso, and swung it about her head. She let go. It soared up and up toward the moon.

"Not even close," said the albatross, as the snare splashed back down into the sea.

"This is stupid," the girl pouted. "Don't you think I should be able to get what I want?"

"I don't see why not," said the pelicans.

"Well I want to catch the moon. There has to be a way."

"There is one way," the fishes told her, and the fishes, who know a thing or two about fishing, explained that on some nights the moon's reflection floats down to bathe in the ocean. If she could catch the moon's reflection, she'd surely gain the moon's attention.

That night, just as the fishes had said, the sun went down and the stars settled in the sky, and the moon's reflection descended to bathe in the waves.

Craftily, the child snuck up behind the moon's image.

Slowly she loosened her umbilical cord, swell over swell until it settled just above the reflection, but the reflection did not bite. She tried wrapping the cord around it like a noose, but the reflection slipped away every time.

She tried again the next night, and then the next. The moon itself was growing smaller, waning toward the thin crescent sliver which marked its famine, and it was only then, at the moon's absolute hungriest moment, that its reflection lost all reason and chomped down on the umbilical cord with its pincer-like points.

"Aho!" cried the girl giddily, and she gave the cord a quick tug. It held fast, snagging on one of the reflection's craterous cavities. The moon itself cried out and tried to flee, dragging its reflection, and the cord, and the girl, and all the cheering fish beside her, in a mad dash over the great sea.

Laughing, the child skipped along, leaping over waves. The moon gave a good flight, but no amount of struggle could release her from the young huntress' ineluctable snare.

Presently the moon grew tired and succumbed to the futility of her situation. As the happy girl had hoped, there now followed pleas and negotiations. *Oh, release me*, cried the moon, *Release me, and I will do anything. I haven't much to give but rocks and cheese, but I have gazed down upon the earth many days and nights and have seen many things. I can perhaps give you knowledge?*

"Yes," said the girl. "Tell me the secrets of that great white island, the one whose peaks are so high. Only you have seen what goes on at its heart. Tell me this and I will set you free."

It's a deal, said the moon, and began her tale.

Chapter Five

The Voyage of the Ice Mage

MANY thousands of years ago there lived an old magician whose home grew out of a lush green island in the middle of the cold northern reaches of the Ocean Sea. At that time there were no great ice peaks. There were no peaks at all. Just a pleasant little countryside covered with life. At the heart of the island this plump, bearded wizard spent his days in long walks, thinking about what he could do to bring all of his powers into focus. The magician's name was Claus von Krink, and he wanted to accomplish something truly unprecedented.

What Claus desired more than anything was to save the world. He lived in a very dark time when the Queen of the Earth and the King of the Sky were at odds with one another. In the land of men, fierce wars shattered homes and stole many young lives. Claus thought a lot about what it was that caused people to fight so much, and he realized that each generation carried on the conflicts of the last. These conflicts heightened with each passing generation, often merging into one another, dividing into allied camps, stacking complex treaties, and regularly breaking out in bloody massacres. Claus realized that when children were very young they gave no thought to wars, but as soon as they began to grow up they were taught that their destiny was to kill and be killed.

"Perhaps all that's needed is an alternative," Claus thought. "If I could give the children some sort of trinket to occupy their minds...something that allows them to imagine a different reality and conceive of their own destiny rather than inheriting that of their parents, then perhaps they will discover how to live in peace."

All he needed to do was create one such enchanted object for each child, and he could change the world forever. He

would make a multitude, customizing them to the various environments of civilization. He would give them moving parts (but none so small that a child might choke), bright colors, sparkling gems, and a dash of music. Most importantly, he would make enough for everyone, so that no one could possibly have reason to fight over them.

There was only one problem: Time. By the time he could finish making that many objects for that many people it would be far, far too late. All the children would have grown up, fallen into their fathers' wars, and possibly killed each other completely.

But Claus had a plan. He constructed towering walls of ice to surround his island such that the sun would never pass overhead; and he built them so tall that no shadow would ever fall upon him. Everyone knows that the days are marked by the passage of the sun across the sky and the shadows it casts. If in this way the sun could be prevented from doing its work then no days would go by. Claus would be able to stop time long enough to complete his project. "The flight of the moon, however, is erratic," reasoned Claus. "Every now and then she might drift by, and count off a few hours of the day. But perhaps this is for the best, because if no time passed at all, I'd never get any work done." So he calculated his ice walls to just the right height as to give him ample time for completing the toys, but not enough time for the children to grow up.

Claus donned great robes of red fur to keep him warm, and tucked his waterfall of a beard into its folds. His bright, twinkling eyes surveyed his workshop. He cracked his knuckles and let loose a self-satisfied laugh, which rattled his epic girth as if he were one of the gel-cakes of ancient Rus. And then Claus von Krink set to work. He

crafted whirling cones of wood, globes that bounced wildly when dropped, elliptical tubes that would orbit a child's hips, flying disks, and oscillating ropes. He made gadgets of water and gimcracks of glass, some with flashing lights and some with chiming bells. He designed interconnecting blocks that could be assembled in various ways, to let the children create their own fancies. He shaped small animal replicas, with soft fur and enchanting crystal eyes through which one might catch a glimpse of another world.

Had he not built his ice walls the sun probably would have passed overhead twenty-five thousands times or more before Claus finished his grand constructions. At last, when his work was done, Claus melted a tunnel through one of the chilling walls, and carried all the toys to the outside world. A ship was waiting there, proud and worthy, and large enough to transport millions of magical world-saving trinkets. The ship's crew was a rag-tag bunch of miscreants and criminals and adventurers. Claus had hired the hopeless, the lost, the heartsick, and the misplaced. He hired those who slept without waking, and those who never slept a wink. He took in the bereaved, the baffled, and men who knew not how they had come to be crewmembers at all. Altogether Claus and his men heaved into the currents until the wind took hold of the sails, then they struck out south and east, toward the kingdoms where children lived. The ice reformed behind them, sealing up the island forever.

But Claus never delivered a single toy on account of one tiny and unexpected consequence in his master plan.

What Claus failed to realize was that his new ice island's new ice walls had, like an ice cube in a glass of beer, cooled the temperature of the whole North Sea, making it

much more unlikely that surface water would evaporate. Without water going up, the clouds stayed dry, and the sustaining lowland storms stopped rolling in. By the time Claus embarked on his voyage of delivery, a great drought plagued the coastal regions of northern Europe. A council of kingdoms convened to address the problem. The top cosmologists of the land were called-in and commissioned. After weeks of argument it was agreed that certain astronomical manipulations might be made through the use of spell casting, prayers, the erecting of precise monuments, and a good calf-slaughter or two, that would result in “cranking the temperature of the sun up a notch”.

It was a fine idea on paper, but the implementation involved many subtle details, and the cosmologists of the time just weren't accurate enough to tackle it. Instead of tweaking the temperature of the sun, they completely tossed it off its trajectory across the sky. As Egralik, the leading historian of the time, noted: *Everything went all wonky*. Humanity was still in the thick of trying to reverse the process when old Claus von Krink pushed out to sea.

The first sun he'd seen in years and years was traveling in the wrong direction.

After a week of sailing, the old Mage realized that they should have found port days before, but instead of turning back Claus pressed on toward the rising sun (which was, for the time being, coming up in the west). Another several weeks went by and Claus began to worry that he'd done his spell backward. “Maybe instead of stopping time, I made it go faster. Maybe it has been a million years, and all the lands have dissolved, leaving us a'sail on a world of pure Ocean Sea...”

But before long they were not even a'sail. They had come

to a place of no winds, where the depths grew still and the boat glided across the water like a stone across a sheet of ice. At last the ship came to rest under the scorching sun and the still, dry air. The crew took to oars. Claus stood off the poop and one-by-one tossed his magical toys into the calm waters. Considering these toys a delicacy, the whales of that region pounced upon them like puppies after a skirting stick. They chomped with a splash, and with each toy devoured, the ship moved just a bit further on its course.

Finally Claus' craft returned to windy seas. Meanwhile, in the land of men the cosmologists managed to undo their solar blunder, and got everything back on track. Claus watched the day roll backward from dusk to dawn and realized his mistake at last. He saw now that he had been going the wrong way all along. But by this time madness had seized him. The setting sun was growing larger each day, and he knew he was nearing the place where it sank into the horizon. He no longer cared about delivering toys; now he wanted only to touch the spot where the sun touched the sea. "Onward to the West," he cried, tossing the remainder of his toys overboard. The failure that had once crippled him now spurred him into the unknown.

The sinking sun, fat on the horizon, nearly blotted out the western sky as it blazed in terrible reds, devouring greens, and soul-piercing blues. Standing at the prow, Claus watched great tongues of flame leap off the surface of the sun and spiral up into disjointed birds, plumed by blazing brands and smoking leaves. He could feel the heat on his face, cooled only by the misty sea spray. "Onward! Into the sun!" Claus shouted, sputtering with tears. He gave no more thought to saving the world, no more thought

to anything but a magnetic lust to become one with the god before him.

The crew were in a panic, some of them trying to follow Claus' orders, others clamoring for mutiny. The struggle raged about him, but Claus stood still, gazing ever toward where the base of the sun touched down into the white salt waves. The air hissed as if the world were a balloon that had been punctured. The ocean froth turned to steam as the sun doused below the surface, submerging into its daily bath.

"Clamp the Jigillywigs! Brehaul the Quartspatler!" Claus demanded, baffling his men, who tried their best to obey.

"Land, ho!" came cries from the crow's nest, but Claus ignored them. His men reported hints of what looked like mountains to the south, but it mattered not to him.

Now the torrents of steam rose in gulps and gales. Clouds gathered from all corners of space and time to dance in this terrible and sudden storm. The sinking sun sent up wave after wave, walls of water several hundreds of feet high, buffeted only by the windclouds a'squall around it. Claus, arms raised like lightning rods, no longer gave orders to his men, but commanded only upon the elements, invoking winds: "Now, Solanus! now, Favonius! now, Auster! now, Septentrio! On, Eurus! on, Africus! on, Caurus and Aquilo!" Forces struck the ship from all sides, tossing it to and fro, and shattering it at last to splinters.

One survivor, a lowly crewman, set adrift on a plank as the night calmed beneath dark stars. After countless unconscious hours he washed ashore, naked, battered and bruised, covered in mud and sweat and blood. Gentle waves flung him onto the sand like a tangle of kelp, and the

easternmost shore of this strange western beach accepted him.

There, Sergio slept, until the sunrise woke him.

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