

JAMES MAXEY



GREATSHADOW

BOOK ONE of the DRAGON APOCALYPSE

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SOLARIS

*For Greg Hungerford,
and other ghosts who haunt me.*

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Also by James Maxey

Books of the Dragon Age

Bitterwood
Dragonforge
Dragonseed

CHAPTER ONE

BONE-HANDLED KNIFE

WHEN INFIDEL GRABBED me by the seat of my pants and charged toward the window, I didn't protest. Partly this was due to the speed of her action, but mostly due to my inebriation from the sacramental wine we'd stolen. Plus, it wasn't the first time I'd been defenestrated by her. Of course, this window was five hundred feet up, in a lava-pygmy temple carved into the sheer cliff face of a volcano.

In my semi-drunken haze, I admired the view as I departed the temple, surveying the landscape around me. The night sky was bright orange as the bubbling caldera above reflected against belching steam. Far below, the dark, vine-covered canopy of trees draped like a casually tossed blanket down slopes stretching to the moonlit ocean. A lovely tropical night, one might even call it serene, save for the steady pulse of war drums and the nerve-jangling pygmy battle cry. It's difficult to relax when five-hundred waist-high men are barking in unison, "Yik-yik-yik-yik-yik!"

I reached the apex of my arc and began to fall. The pygmies were drowned out by the whistling wind and a deafening, high-pitched shriek tearing from my throat.

I don't know why I was screaming. If experience was any guide, Infidel had aimed me toward a particularly bushy looking patch of forest. While my brain had faith in her, my vocal cords had doubts. I quickly saw that my brain was correct as I fell toward a living net of blood-tangle vines. I threw my hands over my eyes. My leather gauntlets spared my face from the worst of the thorns as I punched into the canopy, the vines popping and snapping beneath my weight. I bounced from branch to branch on the trees below. Even with my leather armor, the beating was as bad as anything I'd ever received at the hands of a mean-spirited bouncer.

Seconds later I jerked to a stop, completely tangled. I spread my fingers and found my face inches above a jagged obsidian boulder. The sobering realization I'd just escaped a messy death negated the effects of the stolen wine. I reached for the steel flask in my back pocket and took a quick gulp to restore myself. As much as I wanted to hang in the vines until my nerves calmed, I knew that the pygmies wouldn't need long to find me. I reached for my bone-handled hunting knife and chopped at the tendrils, my body lurching, until I slid onto the boulder and tumbled to the ground.

I looked up at the hole I'd punched in the canopy. Far above, a dark speck shot from the window through which my hasty exit had been facilitated. The speck quickly took on the shape of a woman as she hurtled toward the gap in the trees.

Infidel was laughing. She had both hands wrapped around the dragon skull, hugging it to her chest like an oversized watermelon. Her long blonde hair trailed out behind her. She was still wearing the loose-fitting white blouse and navy breeches from her recent stint as a mercenary in the pirate wars. She was barefoot, the soles of her feet black as coal. The orange light caught the string of yellow beads around her throat, a necklace of human molars that she'd kept as a diary of sorts while she'd served aboard the *Freewind*.

If she'd been aiming for the hole I'd left in the vines she missed, overshooting by several yards. I lost sight of her, but heard curses and grunts as she bounced from branch to branch, the blood-tangle snapping as it slowed her fall.

I managed to find my feet as she stumbled out of the darkness. Her blouse and breeches had been torn in a dozen places, but there wasn't a scratch on her enchanted skin. She had blood-red flowers jutting from her hair, and thorny vines draped over her shoulders. She held the dragon skull above her head one-handed, as if it was carved from balsa. With her other hand, she used her cutlass as a

machete. Her lips were pressed together tightly as she spotted me.

“Are you okay?” she asked.

“Nothing’s broken,” I said, my voice trembling. I took another swig from the flask. “Your aim’s still good.”

She giggled. “I’m glad you’re fine, because I’m looking forward to teasing you for the next ten years about that scream. Even I can’t hit a note that high.”

I held a finger to my lips and whispered, “You can laugh later. The pygmies won’t be far behind.”

“We’ve got a good head start,” she said, looking up at the temple. She plucked a few flowers from her hair and flicked them away. “You worry too much.”

For most of my life, I’ve earned a reputation as a man who doesn’t worry enough. It’s only around Infidel that I play the role of responsible adult. She’s been magicked up to be as strong as ten men, with skin as tough as dragon hide. Her supernatural gifts have left her fearless, an aspect of her personality that draws me like a moth to a flame. Like many a moth, I sometimes get singed.

She held the dragon skull toward me, admiring it in the dim light. “The Black Swan’s going to slip her own drool when she gets a look at this.”

Since I was presently in hock for a life-endangering sum of money to the Black Swan, I hoped that would be the case. There are blood-houses throughout the Shining Lands that pay handsomely for dragon bones. A single knuckle can be worth its weight in gold. An entire skull, complete with lower jaw and all the teeth, was a fortune so large that adjectives fail me. It would cover my debt, and, more importantly, once more restore my line of credit at the bar. The cheap river-pygmy hooch I’d been swilling since the Black Swan cut me off was unbecoming of a connoisseur of fine spirits.

I whispered, “Let’s get going. The pygmies know this jungle better than we do, and—”

There was a tapping sound, like raindrops hitting a leaf. Infidel looked over her shoulder, stretching out her long, slender leg. Three porcupine quills were caught in the torn fabric of her pants. Suddenly the air around her was thick with flying quills, some tangling in her hair, some bouncing off her impervious forehead. My own armor sprouted a dozen of the missiles. None made it through the leather, which was good. Lava-pygmies tip their darts with poison.

“Follow me!” Infidel shouted, slicing at a wall of vines with her cutlass and leaping through, the dragon skull balanced on her shoulder. She could have stayed and fought without risk. By running she was protecting both me and the pygmies. We’d come out here to rob them, not to kill them.

I ran as fast as I could, slashing out with my bone-handled knife to better clear the path. In the darkness, I focused on Infidel’s bright hair bobbing before me like a ghost. The pitter-patter of pygmy feet echoed in the canopy. Darts tapped across my shoulder blades as they continued to fire.

I kept falling farther behind. I was only a week away from my fiftieth birthday, too old for this profession. Once this was over, I swore I would find a safer, more gentlemanly way of earning a living. My breath came in ragged gasps. A stabbing pain ran up my side. I could barely raise my knife to chop away the remnant vines Infidel left in her wake. I felt sure that if I pulled off my boots, sweat would pour out like stale beer from a pitcher.

I wiped the perspiration from my eyes and when I pulled my hand away, Infidel was gone. I kept running. The darkness in front of me had an Infidel-sized hole torn from it, and beyond I could once more see the rolling clouds of the eerie orange sky. There was a bass rumble ahead, a sound like a waterfall. I skidded to a halt on the lip of a cliff and looked down into a deep scar in the earth. Infidel dangled from a mass of roots just beneath my feet. She was still carrying the dragon skull, but her cutlass was nowhere to be seen.

“I know where we are!” she yelled, her voice nearly drowned out by the rushing water beneath her.

I knew as well: the southeast slope of the volcano is cut through by a whitewater river that cascades all the way to the sea, about ten miles distant.

“We’re practically home!” she shouted.

I was of a different opinion. Many years ago, a palm-reader in Commonground told me I’d die of drowning. More poetically, she’d told me, “The sea will swallow your bones.” It had been one reason I hadn’t joined Infidel on the *Freewind*. I extend my caution by never imbibing anything weak enough for a fish to live in.

“Jump!” Infidel yelled.

“Let’s weigh our options!” I shouted back.

Of course, arguing was pointless. Infidel pulled herself up on the thick root she held, clamping onto it with her teeth. With her now free hand, she punched the cliff wall. The root-draped stone beneath me crumbled.

As I dropped, Infidel grabbed me by the shoulder, pulling me toward her. She wrapped her arm around me, pressing me tight against her unbreakable body. Her breasts flattened against my back as she spooned me, curling us into a ball with her powerful legs. Her breath was hot against my neck. We fell through darkness, weightless.

I couldn’t breathe. Partially because Infidel’s arm across my belly was as gentle as a python, but, even more, because I so often dream of Infidel’s embrace. She’d been a mere teen when I met her; I’d worn-out drunk twice her age. I’d watched as she’d ripped the arm off a bold warrior two feet taller than her who’d pawed her lithe body as she’d stood at the bar of the *Black Swan*. I wasn’t the only man to witness this that quickly decided an attempt at seduction wasn’t worth the risk.

I was, however, the only one who bought her a cider that evening and told her tales of the ruined cities hidden in the jungle. I’ve always been quick to make friends. Fate has brought me many fortunes over the years, and I’ve spent those fortunes making sure the patrons of the *Black Swan* never go thirsty. Yet, I’ve never had a friend quite so true as Infidel. Her lightness balances my darkness; her recklessness makes the ongoing foolishness of my life look like sage wisdom. The two of us laugh together freely, and trust each other with our lives. I’m the one person who would never betray her for the obscenely large bounty on her head. She’s the one person who never abandons me when my money runs out and I’m suddenly begging for drinks.

Never once in ten years of friendship has a night passed in which I didn’t fantasize about her touch. I’ve never spoken a word of my secret passion. She means too much to me. It’s not my arm I fear losing; it’s her company. Our time together is so much sweeter than our time apart.

As dreamlike as her embrace might be, there was the unfortunate reality that we weren’t in a bed, we were hurtling toward a dark, raging river. With a horrible jolt, Infidel’s shoulder cracked a boulder. We bounced into the torrent and her grip loosened. I inhaled, a bad move since my head was under water. We slammed into another rock and I slipped from her grasp. My face popped above the surface for a second and I coughed, water spraying from my lips. I sucked a cupful of air and croaked, weakly, “Infidel!”

She didn’t answer as I bobbed along, careening from rock to rock. In moments of panic, the mind can grasp onto the most trivial details, and I noticed I’d lost my knife. Infidel either misplaced or broke her weapons on a daily basis, but I’d carried this knife for forty years; it had been a gift from my grandfather. For a fleeting second, finding the knife felt like a priority. Then, from the thunder ahead I realized that I was about to be swept over a waterfall, and my new priority became not to do so. I clawed desperately at boulders, but my hands had no strength. I still could only gulp small mouthfuls of air. The rocks pummeled me like the fists of giants. The knife-sharp pain that had torn my gut when running sliced me from groin to gullet. The water pushed me under and I went numb.

They say that drowning men see their lives pass before them. I could only see the fortune teller, an old woman with dark eyes, her ears sporting gold rings and thick tufts of gray hair. Her voice crackled like dry leaves as she traced the line of my palm and told me how I’d meet my end.

Of course, she'd told Caleb the Crusher that he'd die by hanging, and he'd been the man whose arm Infidel had torn off on her first night in Commonground. You have to question the skills of a diviner who misses such a fate.

I slammed into a rock face first. Stars danced before me, changing to snowflakes as they showered down in the darkness. I found myself standing before Aurora, the ice-ogress who serves as the main muscle at the *Black Swan*. She was discussing the small matter of my bar tab. In the three months Infidel had been at sea, I'd been a little freer with my purse than usual. When I confessed that I had no money, Aurora had pointed out that a man was never completely without assets. Artfully butchered, human flesh could pass for pork; only a few coins per pound, but for a grown man that added up. I assured her that once Infidel returned, my fortunes would improve. She gave me thirty days. It was thirty-two days later when Infidel got back. Unfortunately, the *Freewind* had been on the losing side of the pirate wars. This was in no way Infidel's fault, but it meant that she'd not received the bonus promised to her in the event of victory. Given the way the *Black Swan* calculated interest, the handful of coins Infidel had been paid failed to dent my debt. Thus, not for the first time in my life, I was off to plunder the ancient tombs and temples of the Vanished Kingdom.

As I was swept over the lip of the waterfall, I took some small measure of comfort that my corpse would be sufficiently mangled that Aurora couldn't even sell it as dog food.

The drop proved to be the shortest distance I'd fallen that evening, a trifling fifty-foot plunge into a broad pool. The water at the base of the fall roiled. In the turbulence, I couldn't even guess which direction was up and which was down. The shallow gulps of air I'd gotten bobbing in the river were exhausted in seconds. My leather armor was heavy as steel plates. The pounding water pinned me. Yet, the pain and pressure felt distant. The water was warm, heated by the volcano, almost pleasant. The polished gravel beneath me was as comfortable as a feather bed. I went limp, all my weariness flowing from me like bubbles from my lips. There were worse ways to die.

As I was about to discover.

Just as I was on the verge of sleep and surrender, a strong hand grabbed my hair. I was tugged into the air and tossed over Infidel's left shoulder like a sack of sodden potatoes. She was still carrying the dragon skull, her fist shoved inside the base. She waded through knee-deep water as I draped across her back, my eyes at the level of her heart-shaped buttocks. Water poured out of my lips and nose, but I couldn't muster the will to inhale.

Infidel laid me on a beach of black sand, dropping the skull beside me, then straightened, shaking her head to get the hair from her eyes. She looked as soggy as a drowned rat; her torn pirate blouse hung from her arms like flaps of skin on a once-fat man. Her hair was plastered to her scalp, knotted so horribly that she needed a razor more than a comb. At some point, her necklace of molars must have snapped. The only evidence it had ever been there was a single tooth wedged between her hip and the top of her broad belt. Despite her sorry condition, her waterlogged clothes revealed the magnificent paradox of her body, the sleek and sultry curves that sat atop angular, iron muscles.

I spotted something amiss on her flawless form. A dark red stain glistened atop her left shoulder. I sucked in a spoonful of air, the effort making me tremble, and whispered, "You're bleeding."

She frowned as she followed my gaze to the crimson circle that seeped out across her blouse in ever-lightening shades of pink. Her eyes grew wide. In the adventures we'd shared, I'd only seen her bleed three times. Once, No-Face had caught her square in the mouth with his ball and chain, producing a split lip. He'd hit her by accident and she didn't hold grudges, which was the only reason he was still alive. The same couldn't be said for the bounty hunter who'd gone after her with a shadow sword. He'd crisscrossed her arms with a dozen cuts before she wrestled the blade away. They'd had to carry out what was left of him in buckets. And, of course, there had been the tussle with that mechanical tiger with the diamond-tipped claws. The only scars on her otherwise flawless legs had come from the

fight.

Her face turned pale as she pushed the remnants of her pirate blouse down her shoulder, revealing streaks of red across her ivory skin. She wiped away the blood with her fingers, leaving behind smooth, unblemished flesh.

She looked back at me, her face turning whiter still.

I looked down. I understood why I couldn't breathe.

The good news was, I'd found my knife.

The bone handle was jutting from the waist of my leather armor. Eight inches of honed steel were lodged in my gut. I couldn't feel a thing, but blood pulsed from the wound with every fading heartbeat.

Infidel dropped to her knees. I looked up at her, her face so bright as the world around me darkened. I took in another thimble of air and mumbled, "Tell the f-fortune teller... I want... my m-money back."

Infidel frowned, then just as quickly grinned. "You faker," she giggled. "It's nothing more than a scratch." She grabbed the edge of my vest with both hands. The thick leather tore like tissue paper in her superhuman grasp.

Her jaw went slack.

It was something more than a scratch.

Her gaze met mine once more, and for the first time ever I saw tears gleaming in her eyes, her lovely eyes, a pale blue-gray, the ephemeral color sometimes found on the horizon of the ocean, where you can no longer tell where the sky ends and the water begins.

I couldn't let my final words to her be some joke, some quip that hid the great secret truth of my life. I managed to swallow another mouthful of air and whispered, "I... have always... l-loved you."

"Stagger," she whispered back, eyes closing, tears rolling down her cheeks. "Oh, Stagger."

I closed my eyes as well, unable to spare the strength to keep them open. My heartbeat fluttered in my ears, faint and failing. I hoped I could die at peace now; I'd confessed what I should have revealed ten years before. And yet... and yet there was one thing more. One last secret haunting me as I slipped toward my final rest. My blood turned cold as the guilt of my only betrayal of Infidel's trust pulsed through me.

I mouthed the words, my voice barely audible, "I... didn't lose... the m-map. I... s-sold it... to the... the... f-fishmon—" My voice failed. I tried to breathe but couldn't. My body refused to obey, save for my eyes, which opened once more.

Infidel's face was inches from my own. Her lips were puckered. I had the distinct impression she was about to kiss me. Then her eyes snapped open. She jerked upward as my final words sank in.

"You did *what?*" she asked.

I tried to answer, but it was no use. My body was done for. I couldn't even close my eyes. Her lips moved, but I couldn't hear what she said. Her words were lost beneath the roar of waves from a distant, invisible ocean. Behind her, I could see the bright orange faces of lava-pygmyes as they emerged from the forest, holding spears tipped with glassy black rock above their heads, preparing to strike. I couldn't warn her. I couldn't do anything except drift upward. Whatever essence there may be of a man that is separate from his body had come loose as my heart went silent. I found myself floating, a shapeless, formless thing, a fog composed of memories and broken dreams, cut free from my flesh.

I looked down through non-existent eyes at the scene beneath me. Spears were bouncing off Infidel's back. She rose with a snarl, yanking the bone-handled knife from my belly. Normally, I love to watch Infidel in combat. She fights like the unholy union of a bobcat and a ballerina, a whirlwind of blades and laughter that traces the landscape around her with long and looping arcs of blood.

But, I paid little mind as she raced toward the first pygmy and delivered a kick that sent him flying

above the treetops. Instead, I looked down at the sorry, sodden thing that I'd once thought of as me. I hadn't made it to fifty, but the mask of wrinkles around my eyes could have belonged to a man twice that age. My cheeks and chin were speckled with scraggly white stubble; I couldn't grow a decent beard on a bet. My shoulder-length hair was streaked through with gray, and my pony-tail did nothing to hide the scaly bald patch at the back of my skull. I was tall, and in my better days my torso had been shaped like a V, with broad shoulders and a narrow waist. Until this moment, I always pictured myself with that body, and had never accepted that the bottom of the V had gotten lost beneath an O, big, oval jug of jiggling fat that must inevitably attach itself to a man who loved his liquor as much as I did.

With my eyeless vision, I could see the truth of who I'd been: a fat, half-bald old drunk who'd been vain enough to fantasize that a woman whom the gods must surely envy might one day love him.

As my consciousness expanded, ever wider, ever thinner, I was dimly aware that I'd miss that man. Then, I had no awareness at all.

Or, more accurately, I had awareness, but no will, no ability to guide my perceptions or ponder the scenes I saw. I was spread through all things. I was present in the dark depths of the ocean, floating beside hideous fish with lantern eyes and jaws like bear-traps. I was present in the jungle, slithering among the branches crawling with snakes and toads and beetles, all in rainbow hues brighter than gemstones. I was present in the bars of Commonground, where battle-weary veterans of the pirate wars stumbled along the uneven boardwalks as whores called out for their company. I could feel all the lust and loneliness of their moments, all the sorrowful joy that spills into the universe when two strangers touch in intimacy.

And, far, far above the squalid city, I was present in the clouds, looking out upon a night sky full of glittering diamonds, keenly aware of every point of light. The sky shimmered with distant suns and unseen planets, and I could hear the murmur of countless voices, the indecipherable echoes of life on worlds too numerous to number. What was left of my mind shrugged and surrendered, unable to absorb the infinite majesty of a creation in which my life had been of no consequence at all.

It was into this vastness that I would disappear. The final spark of my consciousness calmly dissipated. Like a stream of stinking urine spreading into the ocean, I was absorbed once more into the Great Incomprehensible All.

Then, blood pulsed within my non-existent heart.

There was another pulse, then another, and I began to feel as if I once more had veins and arteries, as if I once more had lungs. The atoms of my awareness raced back from the ocean, from the forest, from the sky, coalescing into a specter above my still very dead corpse. Where I'd been only a formless mass of thought, I could now look down at ghostly fingers, wraith-like toes, and a phantom wang. I was hanging naked above the shell of my body. I reached down to touch it, but my ghost hands found no purchase in the dead flesh. Yet, I was definitely me again. Something had halted the dispersal of my soul.

Around my body, the ground was wet with blood. Far more blood, I knew, than had ever pumped through my heart. I quickly spotted the severed limbs and mangled torsos of half a dozen pygmies. I felt a shiver of guilt that I'd brought this fate upon them. I spun around, searching for Infidel.

She looked as if she'd been doused with buckets of tomato juice. She had a pygmy dangling in her grasp, a chief judging from his feathered head-dress. She had my bone-handled knife pressed against his throat.

"Call them off!" she growled, as more pygmies emerged from the trees. "Just leave us alone and no one else gets hurt!"

The chief responded by spitting in her eye. Two seconds later, his head was separated from his shoulders.

As his blood flowed across the bone-handled knife, life flowed back into me. I inhaled, my ghost lungs filling, and shouted, "Infidel!"

She didn't react. She was too lost in her anger to hear me as she charged the newest round of warriors, a dozen spearmen clustered in a frightened clump at the edge of the clearing.

I grabbed at her arm as she raced past me. My fingers passed right through her skin.

"Infidel!" I screamed again.

She didn't even blink as she crashed into the wall of spears, splintering them. The wide-eyed pygmies turned in unison to flee. She gave chase for only a yard or so, then, either in frustration or as a warning, she punched the nearest tree, splintering the trunk.

The tree groaned, then toppled, as Infidel lowered into a half crouch and scanned the area, her eyes as intense as a cat searching a bush for a bird.

Infidel remained alert for several minutes as her panting breath returned to normal. At last, she relaxed, straightening up. The pygmies had taken the hint. She twisted her head in a slow arc, her bones popping as the tension in her neck and shoulders slackened. Her lips parted slightly as she took a deep breath. Looking at my body, her shoulders sagged.

She walked toward my corpse, her arms limp at her sides, my bone-handled knife barely dangling in her grasp. When she reached my remains, she stared down, breathing slowly. The music of frogs and insects began to hum and strum as the violence of the moment before was swept away by the unceasing flow of time.

She shoved my knife into her broad leather belt and knelt before my body. Placing her arms beneath my knees and shoulders, she lifted me. I twisted my ghostly form to occupy the space of my corpse, trying to feel her hands upon my dead flesh, to no avail. I could no more grasp my body than I could grasp the wind.

She carried my cadaver into the calm end of the pool, walking ever deeper until I was submerged. She ducked her whole body beneath the water. I didn't know what she was doing. I was mystified, unable to read the blank mask of her face and eyes. She bobbed back above water to breathe. The blood from the battle washed from her face. As the water carried off the gore that caked my grandfather's knife, my ghostly body faded from my sight. I was no longer dispersing into nothingness, or allness, but was instead simply invisible, intangible, a memory of a man haunting the woman he once loved, his soul somehow bound to the blade that had killed him.

Beneath the water, she undressed me, peeling away my torn armor, still studded with pygmy darts. She washed the blood and mud and sand from my pale skin, her fingers gently tracing the lines of my face. She calmly worked the tangles from my hair, then let my body drift in the still water as she ducked back beneath and pulled off the shreds of her own clothes, scrubbing her skin, her hair spreading through the water like a halo as she patiently pulled out bits of vines from the numerous knots. Twenty minutes later, she carried my now clean corpse from the water. She was naked save for the thick black belt that sat upon her angular hips. The blade of my knife pressed against the smooth arc that traced where her belly met her hip, the tip resting near the thick blonde curls of her pubic hair.

She laid me gently on the black sand and sat beside me, her legs folded beneath her. I looked as if I was sleeping. The hole from which my life had drained was just a jagged flap an inch or two across, not so fearsome. She folded my arms over my chest, cupping the uppermost hand in her slender fingers. Free of blood, her skin gleamed like marble.

She sat for a long time, her lips twitching. Sometimes, she looked on the verge of tears. In other moments, I was certain she was about to curse, and beat my battered corpse with her fists. In the end, her lips curled upwards, as the faintest hint of a smile managed to claw its way up from beneath grief and guilt and rage.

She shook her head gently as she looked into my face. As the jungle crescendo grew with the

approaching daylight, and song birds lent their voices to the drone of bugs and frogs, she swallowed deeply.

“You old fool,” she whispered. “I loved you too.”

CHAPTER TWO

THAT DAMNED MAP

INFIDEL BURIED ME on a high bluff overlooking the sea. She'd carried me here wrapped in a colorful cloth she stole from the lava-pygmy village not far from the base of the falls. She'd met no opposition. It would be a long time before members of that tribe would come anywhere near her. The village emptied out as she walked into it. She could have robbed them blind, except, of course, they didn't have much to steal. The village was nothing but stick huts with dirt floors, with a few scrawny chickens the only livestock. It brought home the magnitude of my sins.

When the monks who raised me had had taught me about hell, they'd painted vivid pictures of barren landscapes in which the damned are tormented by horned devils. I never feared it. But, if I'd been told that I'd linger on after death, forever confronted by the people I'd hurt the most... maybe I would have tried to be a better person.

After making my shroud, Infidel had fashioned an impromptu sarong from the remaining cloth. The fabric had a crimson base looped through with green lines and yellow circles. The yellow circle motif could be found all through the ruins of the Vanished Kingdom. My grandfather had speculated that the yellow circle represented Glorious, the primal dragon of the sun, who had been worshipped as a god in ancient times. I don't know if the pygmies gave the same symbolic value to it, or just liked the design. The festive pattern was remarkably inappropriate for wrapping a corpse, but Infidel valued practicality over propriety. Despite its failings as a shroud, I thought the cloth looked good on her. She normally didn't wear vivid colors; she especially disliked bright greens for some reason.

She'd spent much of the day following the river to the sea. Given the rugged terrain, she made better time with me as a limp corpse across her shoulder than if I'd still been alive. Her endurance matched her strength. Even with my weight, plus the dragon skull, she never stopped to rest or eat.

By the end of the day she'd reached my final resting spot. I don't know if she'd planned to bury me here. Perhaps she intended to take me all the way to Commonground, to have me outfitted for a proper coffin by one of the city's numerous undertakers. Unfortunately, after a single day in the jungle heat, I was beginning to spoil. Dark, foul-smelling fluid stained my shroud, and by the time we reached the bluff the fabric would go black with flies faster than Infidel could shoo them away.

Infidel placed me at the foot of a shaggy, wind-blown tree as the sun set behind us. Shadows danced on the waves as she rested. A cool, steady breeze blew up from the sea, drinking up the sweat beaded on her face. Her hair danced around her eyes as she stared out at the darkening sky, watching the stars flicker to life above the water.

At last, she began to dig. She had no tools other than her bare hands and my old knife. The soil was sandy, covered with a layer of scraggly grass. She worked through the night, digging until she had a pit deeper than she was tall. She lowered my body into the ground with a look of utter weariness, then proceeded to cover me with the mounds of damp earth heaped on both sides of the hole. She finished just before dawn, running her hands over the sandy grave as if she was smoothing out the wrinkles on a sheet.

She thrust the bone-handled knife into the soil above my head, where it stood like the world's smallest tombstone. I felt a flutter of panic. Would she leave the blade there? My spirit was now tied to the knife. For my soul to remain anchored here so close to my body was, I suppose, appropriate. Yet, I no longer felt any connection to the rotting meat six feet below. I wanted to remain with Infidel.

I had no lips with which to speak, so I merely thought the words, *Keep the knife. Keep the knife.* I

suddenly understood what the monks had tried to teach me about the fierce urgency of prayer. *Keep the knife. Keep the knife. Keep the knife.*

She sat down, resting her hands on her knees as she glanced at the yellowed handle. The humble bone gleamed like precious ivory, polished and oiled by a lifetime spent in my sweaty hands. *Take it, I prayed. Take it.* Her face was lined with deep furrows around her lips as she frowned. She looked as if she was about to cry, but, always when she was on the verge, she'd swallow. Her fists would go tight, and the moment would pass. Her eyes turned away from the tiny tombstone. I sensed that my prayers would go unanswered. Still, as long as she still lingered by my grave, there was hope.

At last the sun came up. The water danced with colors to rival the sarong still draped around her shoulders. Gulls wheeled in the air above the cliff, calling out to one another. Clouds drifted leisurely overhead, white as lambs in a distant field. I wanted to tell her that she'd done a good job. My bones had to rest somewhere, and this was a fine choice, a grave any ghost could be proud of. As much as I wished to continue to journey by her side, I knew my time had passed. If I was now a prisoner to eternity, this peaceful, sun-drenched bluff would be an acceptable jail.

By my count, Infidel had been awake for almost forty hours. Her endurance was superhuman, but not infinite. Her head sagged as she watched the endless dance of the waves. At last, she stretched out on the white sand of my grave. She used her arm as a pillow, and her fingers brushed against the handle of the knife. She looked at it again, her eyes bloodshot and bleary. She snatched the knife free of the soil, clutching it to her invulnerable breast like a doll. Then, with a shudder, she gave herself to sleep.

She slept fitfully through the day, undrapping the cloth of her sarong and using it as a blanket pulled over her head to block out the light. As someone who'd shared campsites with Infidel, I knew she talked in her sleep. Mumbled, more accurately. Many a night I've lain awake and tried to make sense of her slurred half-words. Usually, I can't interpret them. But, as she turned from one side to the other, three unmistakable syllables escaped her lips: "So sorry."

She thinks she killed me. She thinks that as we fell toward the river, she was the one who drove the knife into my gut.

Perhaps.

I wish I could tell her that I don't blame her. She shouldn't ignore the fact that we were out robbing that temple because I was the one in debt, because I'm the one who needs to buy the company of crowds, because I'm the sucker who can't resist a good sob story from any down-on-his-luck bum who begs me for a few spare coins and winds up with my entire purse.

Of course, I wouldn't have been in debt when she got back from the pirate wars if I'd sold the map for even a fraction of what it was worth.

That damned map.

A year ago, Infidel had hunted down a fallen Wanderer by the name of Hurricane. Wanderers have a longstanding pact with Abyss, the primal dragon of the sea, that prevents them from ever drowning as long as they spend their lives without touching dry land. Their behavior is guided by ancient and elaborate laws; transgress these laws, and a Wanderer can find himself put ashore on some distant desert island. Hurricane had suffered that fate, due to acts of piracy against fellow Wanderers. But, he didn't live out his days on his island prison. He'd built a raft, fled to the Isle of Fire, and resumed his piracy. The Wanderers placed a bounty on his head, a price large enough to catch Infidel's eye.

Finding Hurricane was no great challenge. He'd set up camp in a sea cave on the western side of the island. Infidel made swift work of his crew, and took Hurricane out with a single punch. We were searching his treasure chest when we found the map in a hidden compartment at the bottom. Even before we opened the thing, we knew it was something special. It was embroidered onto metallic cloth spun from threads of gold far finer than silk. When we unrolled it, it made a musical sound, like tiny guitar strings plinking. It showed the central volcano of the Isle of Fire and plotted out several key

buildings from the Vanished Kingdom. I knew this area well, both from my own explorations and my grandfather's detailed surveys. At the building I call the Shattered Palace, the map showed a tunnel leading into the volcano. Depending on how you held the map to the light, different layers were revealed; there were tunnels beneath tunnels. Someone had used ordinary ink to trace out some of the pathways, and there were notes near these paths, written in a code I couldn't decipher. I could only scratch my head as I turned the map from side to side, pondering the different images. Beneath the overlapping layers I spotted an 'X', and two words written in old-tongue that were perfectly clear.

Greatshadow. Treasure.

Greatshadow is the primal dragon who lives in the central volcano of this island. I've never seen Greatshadow, but my grandfather wrote that he'd been on the island once when the dragon was awake and he said that the big lizard had a wingspan half a mile wide. The heat of Greatshadow's breath will turn iron armor into hot white syrup dripping off the blackened bones of any knight foolish enough to face him. Like all dragons, Greatshadow has an eye for gems and precious metal. What he does with them, I can't even guess. It's not as if he strolls down to the *Black Swan* from time to time to buy a round. Still, he's been hoarding riches during the rise and fall and rise of at least two civilizations. If a man could sneak into that treasure vault for even five minutes, he could snatch up enough wealth to carry him through a dozen lifetimes.

While I deciphered the map, I was thinking out loud, pitching my thoughts and theories to Infidel. Almost instantly, I regretted it. I could hear the wheels turning in her mind. We'd been tomb-raiding together for a long time. Why not go after the ultimate treasure?

Here's why: Greatshadow isn't just another monster. He's the living embodiment of fire. He may be wrapped in scaly hide, but he's fundamentally an elemental being, a sentient force of nature. A fraction of his intelligence is present in every flame. You can't kill something like this with just a strong arm and sharp sword.

Infidel is tough, but her skills as a thief tend toward the smash and grab. There was no way she could reach Greatshadow's treasure without confronting the dragon, and, if it came to that, good as she was Greatshadow would win.

So, at my first convenient opportunity, I 'lost' the map.

This was really the only time I've ever deceived her, other than the daily, ongoing, unspoken lie that I wanted nothing more of her than friendship. It's weighed heavily on my conscience for the last year, mainly because she'd accepted my lame explanation of how I'd lost the map down a privy hole on the docks in Commonground. She'd reacted to my story with her easy-come, easy-go shrug and never mentioned it again. Maybe she'd known all along the adventure was too big for her. If so, that makes my lie even worse. If she could have been dissuaded from the lair by simple reason, we could have sold the map for a small fortune, perhaps even a large one. I didn't need to betray her trust. We could have been living it up in Commonground rather than out robbing pygmies with the same foolish bravery of young boys throwing rocks at a hornet nest.

She turns again in her slumber, moaning softly.

I'm sorry, I pray to her. So, so sorry.

INFIDEL RETURNED TO Commonground the following day, making good time as she bounded along the shore. In open terrain, she's fast as a jack-rabbit, using her super-strong legs to propel herself in skips that cover a dozen yards a stride. Around mid-morning she found the wreck of a ship; it couldn't have been more than a few weeks old. She didn't take long to explore it, but did manage to pull a damp, sand-covered yard of canvas from the wreckage. She wrapped the dragon skull in this — a wise precaution. Even with Infidel's reputation, Commonground is full of thieves who would be tempted to

the sight. It's a lawless city, a bad place to call home. Of course, there's not a lot of choice in addresses when you live on the Isle of Fire. Commonground is the only real city on the island.

Actually, there are a couple of things wrong with that statement.

For starters, the city isn't on the island, but out in the bay. The whole place is up on stilts. Plus, it's not really a city in the ordinary sense of the word. It's a collection of docks. It's like a city that exists entirely of streets where the homes come and go on a daily basis. Wanderers gather here, taking refuge in the sheltered bay, and on any given day you can find a hundred or so of their ships at the port, and several thousand of their ilk milling about. But, the Wanderers don't live in Commonground. They stay only a little while, then move on, replaced by the crews of other ships.

The only permanent residents of Commonground are people who've come there due to the lawless nature of the place. The Wanderers don't impose their codes on outsiders; they care nothing of the actions of others as long as it doesn't harm them. So, over the years, Commonground has become a haven to men and women not welcome in the more civilized parts of the world. Along the docks you find barges housing bars and brothels and blood-houses. These draw visitors from distant ports, mainly young, hedonistic men escaping the chains of morality that confine them in places like the Silver City. Also drawn to the place are criminals who've fled their homelands to seek out the one place on earth where no one ever asks about your past. It's taboo even to ask a person's real name in Commonground. Everyone goes by nicknames. It wasn't like my mother looked at me in the crib and said, "I bet he'll be a drunkard. Let's call him Stagger."

Commonground is just a lousy name. As noted, there's no ground at all. And you'd be hard pressed to find anyone who's common.

A few hours after she'd plundered the wreckage for the canvas, Infidel reached one of the boardwalks leading out into the bay. She strode purposefully through the maze of docks, ignoring gawkers as she passed. The sight of her in the colorful sarong was turning heads. Infidel normally dressed in a more masculine fashion, often wearing leather armor even though she didn't need it.

Not that there were that many people out to gawk at her. The late afternoon sun was unbearable. The docks didn't really come to life until darkness fell. The algae-green water of the bay was as smooth as jade in the windless heat. Fortunately, the tide was in. When the tide was out, a strong sea wind was the only protection against the raw sewage and fish-rot stench. With the water high, the stink wasn't so bad, though I was left to ponder why I could smell at all, since I no longer had a nose. Of course, I was seeing without eyes, and hearing without ears. If I wound up near whiskey, would I be able to taste it?

Of course, the best place to put that to the test was exactly where Infidel was heading. Near the heart of Commonground, Infidel reached the largest barge anchored at the docks — the *Black Swan*. This was a saloon and gambling house that catered to the high rollers from the Silver Isles. Wealthy men could visit the *Black Swan* with little fear for their safety. Thieves knew that messing with a guest of the barge could result in a visit from the Three Goons. Not many people would risk that for a bag of gold. A dragon skull on the other hand...

Infidel stepped through the door of the bar, pausing as her eyes adjusted to the shadows. The bar was decorated with a level of opulence that stumbled across the fine line separating good taste from garishness. The walls were lined with dark, polished teak; large paintings of scantily clad goddesses hung there. The various gaming tables sported crisp velvet surfaces. Only a single poker table was fully occupied. Everyone else was likely sleeping in the well-furnished rooms above. The main room was at least twenty degrees cooler than the air outside. Behind the bar at the far end of the room was the reason why.

A first timer to the bar might mistake the creature who stood there as male, given the broad shoulders and looming height. Few people have ever seen an ice-ogre of either sex. Aurora's nine feet

tall, with pale blue skin mottled with patches of white, like a sky full of clouds. She's bald save for a tuft of dark blue hair in a knot at the tip of her scalp. Tusks jut up from her lower jaws, reaching to her eyebrows. Her clothes offer no hint of her gender; she always wears a long sleeved, walrus-skin coat that hangs down to her ankles. Aurora exhaled as she spotted Infidel, her breath coming out in a fog. The ogress is in charge of security at the *Black Swan*. While most of Infidel's visits are peaceful, she has been known, occasionally, to cause a bit of property damage.

"Where's your shadow?" Aurora asked, squinting at the doorway behind Infidel. Crystals of frost on her cheeks sparkled like diamonds.

"My shadow?" Infidel asked, walking toward the bar.

"Stagger," said Aurora. "I never see you without him hang-dogging behind."

"Stagger's dead," said Infidel, placing the sack onto the bar. There was no emotion as she spoke the words.

"Oh," said Aurora. She shook her head slowly. "I'll miss him. Most drunks think they're funny and charming. He really was, sometimes."

"He was more than just a drunk," said Infidel.

"No offense," said Aurora, in a tone that sounded as if she had, indeed, meant no offense.

Infidel looked directly into Aurora's eyes. She knew about Aurora's threat to sell my body for meat. Aurora probably knew she knew. Of course, Aurora was just the enforcer. If Infidel had come here looking for revenge, she'd be looking for the woman who really called the shots.

"I need to see the Black Swan," said Infidel.

Aurora crossed her arms, her biceps bulging beneath the walrus leather. She and Infidel had never lashed into one another; Infidel probably had an edge, but Aurora wasn't going to be a pushover. Her strength was supplemented by a formidable array of ice magic; for a tropical town, Commonground has a surprising number of residents who've lost limbs to frostbite. "The Black Swan has a busy schedule," Aurora said. "I'll see if I can work you into her calendar."

"I need to see her now," said Infidel.

Aurora shook her head. "She'll see you when she wants to see you."

"She'll want to see me now," said Infidel, pulling the canvas away from the dragon skull. All the people at the poker table suddenly placed their cards face down and stared at the bar. Whatever stake they were playing for, a dragon skull would trump it.

The ice-ogress let loose an appreciative whistle as she eyed the priceless object. "The lower jaw and everything," she said, reaching out to touch it.

Infidel caught her by the wrist. Aurora tried to pull back, but Infidel held her arm immobile. I had my answer as to who was strongest. Then Aurora grinned, and Infidel grimaced as her whole arm turned blue.

"Hold me too long and you'll lose those fingers," said Aurora, coolly.

"No one touches the skull but me and the Black Swan," Infidel said, through chattering teeth.

Aurora nodded. Infidel released her wrist.

"Given the nature of this transaction, I'll see if the boss is available," said Aurora, drawing her arm back. Infidel rubbed her frosted fingers as the ice-ogress vanished behind a red silk curtain at one end of the bar.

I sincerely hoped the Black Swan wasn't available. Whatever Infidel was planning to do, it couldn't be good.

As Infidel waited, a tall man in chain mail peeled away from the shadows in the far corner. He was broad-shouldered, his hair cropped short, his face rugged, probably handsome once, before his nose had been broken one too many times. His proboscis perched over his lips like a scaly red vulture. His hands were large and rough, his knuckles thick with calluses. I'd never seen him before. Perhaps this

was some new enforcer that the Black Swan had hired, though more likely he was employed by one of the clients as private muscle. The man's gaze kept darting between the dragon skull and Infidel's bosom, accentuated as it was by the sarong.

"That's a mighty expensive thing for a little lady to be carrying," Vulture-nose said, easing up to the bar. "Seems like you could use a little security."

There was a commotion at the poker table. Everyone was standing up and stuffing their chips into their pockets. One by one, they bolted for the door.

Infidel gave him a sideways glance, and said, with remarkable restraint, "Go away."

The big fellow grinned. "Aw, don't be like that. For a pretty gal like yourself, I wouldn't have to work for money. We could work out things out in trade. You scratch my back, I scratch yours."

To demonstrate what he had in mind, the doomed man placed one of his meaty paws on the small of Infidel's bare back. His hand was nearly as large as her slender waist as he began to gently rub her.

It's easy to rub Infidel the wrong way.

When Aurora poked her head back into the room a second later, Infidel was in exactly the same position as when she'd left. Above her was a hole about a yard across. Sunlight filtered down. A naked man in the room directly above sat up in his bed, looking up at the hole that had suddenly appeared in his ceiling. He looked down at the matching hole in the floor. He rubbed his eyes, perhaps not certain if he was awake. A single boot tumbled from the sky, landing with a *thump* on the floor next to Infidel.

"Some guy knocked a hole in your ceiling," she said. "You should be more careful who you let in this joint."

Aurora grimaced. "The Black Swan will see you now."

THE SALON WAS dark save for a red glow from the glass window of the cast iron stove. A ceramic crock of potpourri simmered on the stove, filling the room with a cloying floral perfume and a level of humidity worse than anything out in the jungle. Despite the heat, the Black Swan had a shawl of black feathers draped across her silk dress; save for its ebony hue her gown looked like something she might have worn at her wedding. Like a bride, a lace veil concealed her face. Her hands were wrinkled claws speckled with dark brown liver spots, her long nails painted to match her wardrobe.

In a city of outlaws who would rob their own grandmother, the rise of the Black Swan as its most powerful denizen was something of a mystery. It seemed improbable that this frail old woman commanded the respect of ogres and half-seeds, but Aurora kept her head bowed as she approached the leather couch where the Black Swan lounged and said, in a reverent hush, "Madam, Infidel has come to discuss a matter of commerce."

"Thank you, Aurora," said the Black Swan. Her scratchy, dry voice made me imagine that, should she cough, dust would come out.

The old woman turned her head toward Infidel, then motioned her to have a seat on the padded leather chair across from the couch. As Infidel sat down, the Black Swan said, "Aurora informs me your lover has passed away."

"He wasn't my lover," said Infidel, somewhat over-emphatically, I thought.

"I see. I had assumed—"

"You assumed wrong," Infidel snapped. "Stagger was my friend. With the life I've led, I needed a friend more than I ever needed a lover."

"Ah, friendship," said the Black Swan. "It's a commodity I find sorely overrated. You cannot pay someone to be your friend; they may pretend to be so, but you would always know the truth. In my experience, if a thing cannot be purchased, it has no true value."

"Or it may have the greatest value of all," said Infidel.

“Your naiveté is charming.” The Black Swan shifted on her couch. A handful of downy black feathers drifted to the floor. “Though, perhaps I’ve underestimated your judgment if you didn’t take that old drunkard as a lover. You must have known that when the desire for alcohol gripped him, he would have gladly walked over any of his so-called friends to reach a bottle. Even you, my dear.”

If I’d still had teeth, I would have ground them.

Infidel pressed her lips together. I was surprised at how calm she seemed. She said, “I haven’t come to discuss my personal life. I’ve come to pay off Stagger’s debts.”

The Black Swan tilted her head. “This is most honorable of you.”

“Honor has nothing to do with it,” said Infidel. “I want to clear the balance sheets once and for all. I know you think of Stagger and me as a team; I don’t want the money he owed you to influence any business we may undertake.”

The Black Swan nodded. “The skull will cover Stagger’s debt, and more. I will arrange an auction. Aurora will deliver the balance of the proceeds to you.”

“Keep them,” said Infidel. “I want to open my own account to make use of your services.”

Aurora raised an eyebrow, obviously surprised by this news. The Black Swan’s face showed no reaction.

“I want to hire the Three Goons,” said Infidel.

Aurora’s other eyebrow shot up.

“This is... most unusual,” said the Black Swan.

“Is it?” asked Infidel. “They’re hired muscle. People purchase their services every day.”

“Despite your many limitations, my dear, you are hardly lacking in muscle. Why would you possibly need their help?”

“I’ve got a robbery in mind. A smash-and-grab with a payoff that will make this dragon skull look like a hunk of tin. As good as I am, I’ll need backup. The Three Goons can get the job done.”

“Undoubtedly,” said the Black Swan. “Alas, I cannot give you what you ask for. Another client recently engaged the Three Goons in an open contract. I don’t know when they will be available.”

“I’ll buy out the contract,” said Infidel. “Just name the price.”

“My dear, I admire your ambition, but you cannot possibly match the resources of this client. For all practical purposes, their purse is infinitely deep.”

“Who is it?” Infidel asked. “I’ll talk to them. Make them an offer.”

“You know that is a confidential matter.”

Infidel frowned as she crossed her arms. Negotiations weren’t Infidel’s strong suit. I used to handle this sort of business.

The Black Swan said, “Perhaps there are others who could serve your needs? Commonground is thick with mercenaries. Post a bill and you’ll have a hundred men standing in line for the job within an hour.”

Which was true, but the Three Goons were worth a lot more than a hundred men. Remember No-Face? The only man who ever gave Infidel a split lip? He’s one of the Goons. And he’s not the one that most people are afraid of.

Infidel’s hands balled into fists. Aurora tensed up. Infidel’s eyes narrowed as thoughts danced in her mind. She still hadn’t given up. “You’ve tried to hire me before,” she said. “I’ll work for you for the next year. Take any job you give me. At the end of the year, you give me the Goons, no questions asked.”

The Black Swan nodded, smiling faintly. I quickly sensed this was a bittersweet smile. She wanted to accept Infidel’s offer, but couldn’t. “Tempting. Quite tempting. There are men who would pay a lifetime of wages to use you for a night.”

The color drained from Infidel’s cheeks.

“My darling, you don’t think I would waste a year of your service on fighting, do you? As you note, already have access to the finest mercenaries on the island. I have a high priestess for my chief enforcer. Why shouldn’t I have a princess for a whore?”

Aurora scowled deeply. It took me a second to realize that she had to be the priestess. It seems I wasn’t the only one with a religious background that never got discussed. But I was even more intrigued that the Black Swan referred to Infidel as a princess. What did she mean?

Infidel jumped to her feet. Snow began to fall in the room as the temperature dropped to single digits. A sheen of ice glistened on Aurora’s clenched fists, with icicles growing down like spiky claws.

“That wasn’t what I was offering,” Infidel said, her voice trembling as she tried to control her temper. “Don’t twist my words!”

“You should be more careful with what you say, my dear,” said the Black Swan. “You’ve offered a binding contract. Alas, I cannot act upon it. My word is my bond, and my previous contract for the Three Goons is sacrosanct. Your virtue — such as it may be — is safe.”

Infidel stared at the Black Swan, then cast one more glance at Aurora, now encased in a shell of ice that resembled armor. Infidel unclenched her fists, her shoulders sagging. I could sense she wasn’t afraid of Aurora; she just knew that she wouldn’t get what she wanted by hitting anyone in this room. She turned toward the door, then glanced back. “I want the balance of the skull in diamonds.”

“Of course, my dear,” said the Black Swan. “I’ve often thought you’d look good in jewelry. This new fashion of yours is a step forward, but could benefit from a few simple adornments.”

Apparently, the Black Swan had never seen one of Infidel’s molar necklaces.

The poker players were back at their table as Infidel stalked across the main room. The hole in the ceiling already had planks laid across it. As Infidel reached the door, Aurora called out to her.

“Hey,” she said.

Infidel paused at the door, but didn’t look back.

“I... I wanted to say that the Black Swan was wrong about Stagger,” said Aurora. “He’d do a lot of things for a bottle. But he’d never sell out a friend. And everyone could tell you were much more than a friend to him.”

Infidel sighed, shaking her head.

“Not everyone,” she whispered, as she stepped outside.

CHAPTER THREE

RIPPER

I FELT SENTIMENTAL as Infidel climbed from the creaking gangplank onto my old boat. She grabbed at rigging and rails as she moved across the slanted deck. I've lived my life askew — the mud-locked boat sits at a ten-degree tilt. An objective man would describe the place as a hovel. To me, the place was the closest thing I've ever had to home.

If you witnessed my vagabond lifestyle, you'd never suspect that not so long ago my family was wealthy. My great-grandfather was the famous — or perhaps infamous — Ambitious Merchant. Merchant is a family name stretching back generations, and it's common for followers of the Church of the Book to name their children after desirable virtues. Seldom has a man been more suitably monikered. Ambitious made a fortune in the slave trade, with Commonground as his base. The river-pygmyes have enslaved forest-pygmyes for centuries, but it was my ancestor who realized that these squat, muscular men could be sold as a commodity to the mines on the Isle of Storm. The trade goes on to this day, though my family no longer has any role in it.

The so-called pirate wars had more to do with the slave trade than with actual piracy. Many Wanderers regard slaves as just another cargo, which doesn't seem to mesh with their claims to hold freedom as the highest virtue. A band of radical Wanderers had taken a stand against the slave trade, going so far as to raid ships and free the captives. For this, they were branded as pirates, and wound up with every navy in the world united against them. Infidel had signed on to a losing cause from the start.

While I've never gone so far as to take up arms to oppose the slave trade, I've always had a gut dislike of the practice, and have never been shy about sharing my views. The business corrupts everyone, especially the river-pygmyes. They think of forest-pygmyes as animals, when anyone can see they're the same race, just of differing hues. Each of the three major pygmy tribes dye their skin with jungle berries: forest-pygmyes are green, river-pygmyes blue, lava-pygmyes orange. Wash them off with vinegar and they're all fish-belly white. My grandfather, Judicious Merchant, son of Ambitious, discovered that the bitter dyes were an effective mosquito repellent, which is why I remember him with dark green skin.

Judicious had been trained to take up the family business until he made the mistake of actually talking to the pygmyes. They told him tales of the Vanished Kingdom, a once great nation on this island, its monuments now buried beneath roots and vines. My grandfather burned through a great deal of the family wealth with his elaborate expeditions into the jungle. Judicious bore a son by a forest-pygmy woman; this was my father, Studious Merchant. As a teen, Studious aided his father by traveling to the Monastery of the Book, home of the world's most extensive library. He went to these archives to read everything that had ever been written about the Vanished Kingdom. But, while he was there, he grew to love the prayerful, contemplative life of the monks and joined their order. As a monk, father had his flaws. My existence is testimony to his difficulty with the vow of celibacy.

I'm told my mother was a prostitute who abandoned me on the monastery's doorstep. I've never even learned her name. I was raised in an orphanage run by the monks. My father taught there, but barely acknowledged me. Every three or four years, my grandfather, Judicious, would visit and tell me stories about his jungle adventures. He said that when I was old enough, he'd take me with him. I never saw him after my tenth birthday, when he'd given me the knife. I eventually reached Commonground on my own when I was seventeen, but no one had seen my grandfather in years. The

jungle had swallowed him long ago.

My grandfather had owned the sailboat *Infidel* now stood upon; in his day, it was quite a vessel. As years passed with my grandfather absent from Commonground, the boat had been looted. Pretty much everything that hadn't been nailed down had been stripped, along with a fair share of stuff that had been nailed down. The husk was still anchored at the docks when I got to town, and no one protested when I moved in.

Infidel pushed aside the torn curtain that led into the small shack I'd built from cast-off lumber. She found the duffel bag of clothes she kept stashed in the rafters and tossed her sarong onto the floor. I'd never seen her naked when I was alive, but this was the second time since I'd died I'd gotten to see her in full glory. Yet, her nudity didn't provoke lust. All my ordinary desires seem muted. Since dying, I haven't felt hungry or sleepy. Of greater interest is that I haven't felt thirsty. Perhaps I should be relieved. My afterlife truly would be hell if I were tormented by desires I had no hope of slaking. Still, it seems wasteful to finally look at *Infidel*'s body and feel only dispassionate appreciation of her symmetry.

She pulled on a pair of canvas breeches, but frowned as she looked through her various blouses. Many were blood stained and torn; she always was hard on clothes. She pitched aside the duffel and picked up one of my old shirts from the back of a chair, holding it to her face to sniff it. At first, I thought she must have found the scent unpleasant; her eyes began to water. Then, she hugged the shirt to her chest as she closed her eyes tightly. After a moment, she composed herself, slipping the shirt on, rolling up the too-long sleeves and cinching up the dangling shirt tails with her thick leather belt. She dug around under the bunk and found an old pair of boots she'd left here. In the jungle, she normally went barefoot. However, the boardwalks of Commonground were littered with things no sane person would want squishing between their toes. She shoved my bone-handled knife into the boot sheath, then rooted under the bed until she produced the scabbard that held my old saber.

For the first time in two days, she ate, raiding my pantry for dried herring wrapped in seaweed and a jar of pickled peppers. She washed it all down with the ceramic jug of rotgut I kept by the bed. *Infidel* rarely drank anything stronger than cider, but she chugged down the hard liquor like it was cool water. Afterward, she wiped her mouth on her sleeve and belched.

Usually, my shack felt cramped with the two of us. Now that it was just her, the place looked larger than it used to. *Infidel* scanned the room, her eyes surveying the clutter. There were books everywhere. Like my father, I'm an avid reader. A muddied pair of my boots sat next to the door. The oil-cloth coat I wore during the rainy season was still slumped on the floor next to them.

But the dominant feature of the room were all the empty bottles — wine, cider, ale, whiskey. Somewhere in the world was a glassblower who earned a living due to my habits, though the bastard had never bothered to write me a thank-you note.

This mound of mildewed books and dirty bottles was all the evidence left that I'd once been alive. Whatever the quirks of my sundry ancestors, at least they'd all successfully reproduced. I'd died childless. The only legacy I left the world amounted to little more than litter.

THE SUN HAD set by the time *Infidel* departed my shack. The tide was flowing back out to sea. She wrinkled her nose as the stench of the muck wafted around her. She wound her way through the maze of gangplanks and piers, heading west. I knew where she was going. I had, after all, managed to choke out most of the word 'fishmonger' in my feeble dying effort to shed my guilt.

Biggsby was a rarity in Commonground, a man who made his living in an honest profession. Biggsby did brisk business selling barrels of dried and pickled fish to Wanderer ships, and supplying the more upscale establishments, like the *Black Swan*, with fresh oysters and rock lobsters to serve their

clientele. Of course, Bigsby wouldn't live in Commonground if there wasn't something wrong with him. In his case, it's physical. Bigsby is a dwarf, barely four feet tall, with the torso of a normal man but stubby legs and arms. He spends much of his time haggling with river-pygmyes, buying their daily catch. Perhaps he came to Commonground to feel tall.

I'd sold Bigsby the Greatshadow map for a handful of coins. I'd been quite casual about it. I told him the map had belonged to my grandfather, but was a fraud that he could probably sell as a historical curiosity. My conscience had been assuaged because I knew that Bigsby wasn't likely to raise a band of adventurers to go after the fortune. Nor would he drunkenly boast in one of the local bars about his treasure map. He was a quiet, timid man, who survived in this rough city by keeping — please pardon the expression — a low profile. If Bigsby did sell the map, he'd do it discreetly.

The fishmonger rarely went out at night. He was up at dawn every day to buy the night's catch. As Infidel came within sight of his warehouse on the western edge of the bay, all the windows were dark. I guessed he'd gone to bed. Then I noticed a single dim light in one window, no brighter than a candle. As I focused on the window, I thought I could hear muffled voices. But the voices fell silent as Infidel stepped onto the gangplank leading to Bigsby's door. The plank squeaked; the candlelight went dark.

As Infidel neared the door, I noticed that something was off. Specifically, the door was off its hinges. It was merely leaning in the frame, the wood around the lock and hinges freshly splintered. Infidel didn't notice this detail. Instead, she paused a few feet away and kicked, cracking the door in twain. The halves fell into the room, clattering loudly as Infidel stomped inside.

The door that Infidel had entered led to the room that served as Bigsby's office. Bigsby sat on short stool next to an empty pickle barrel he used as a desk. He was scribbling in the ledger he used to record the day's trades. An extinguished candle sat beside the ledger, a plume of pale smoke rising from it.

He stared at Infidel, slack-jawed. His face was covered with sweat; dark stains seeped from beneath his armpits. He looked terrified, but this wasn't fresh terror. His clothes had been soaked before Infidel had kicked in the door.

"C-can I-I-I... can I help you?"

"I'm here for my map," said Infidel.

"Y-y-yuh-yuh... uh... huh?" All the blood was gone from Bigsby's face, apparently taking with it the capacity for coherent speech.

Infidel stalked forward. She slammed her fist on the barrel, which all but vaporized in a spray of splinters. She reached for Bigsby.

"I don't... I don't... I don't..." Bigsby's voice fluttered as her hands slowly neared. I thought he was about to faint.

As her hands reached his throat, Infidel sighed. Her mouth relaxed from its menacing snarl as she stared down at Bigsby's frightened face.

She stepped back and crossed her arms.

"Look," she said. "I'm having a bad day. Let's pretend I didn't just kick in your door and start over. Stagger gave you a map. I want it back. It's rightfully mine; I killed the last guy who owned it."

Bigsby wiped sweat from his eyes as he contemplated this bit of mercenary logic.

Infidel continued: "I'm willing to pay a reward for the map. We'll call it a finder's fee."

Bigsby swallowed hard. His eyes kept darting from Infidel toward the door on the side wall. I'd been in this shop a hundred times; there was nothing behind that door except for a small porch, and stairs leading down to the dock where he traded with the pygmies. Was he thinking of making a run for it?

As I looked at the door, I felt a strange sensation, like the hair on my neck rising, if I'd still had hair on a neck. I could barely hear a faint, distant buzz. I watched Bigsby's eyes. He wasn't thinking of running. He was afraid of whatever was lurking on the porch.

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