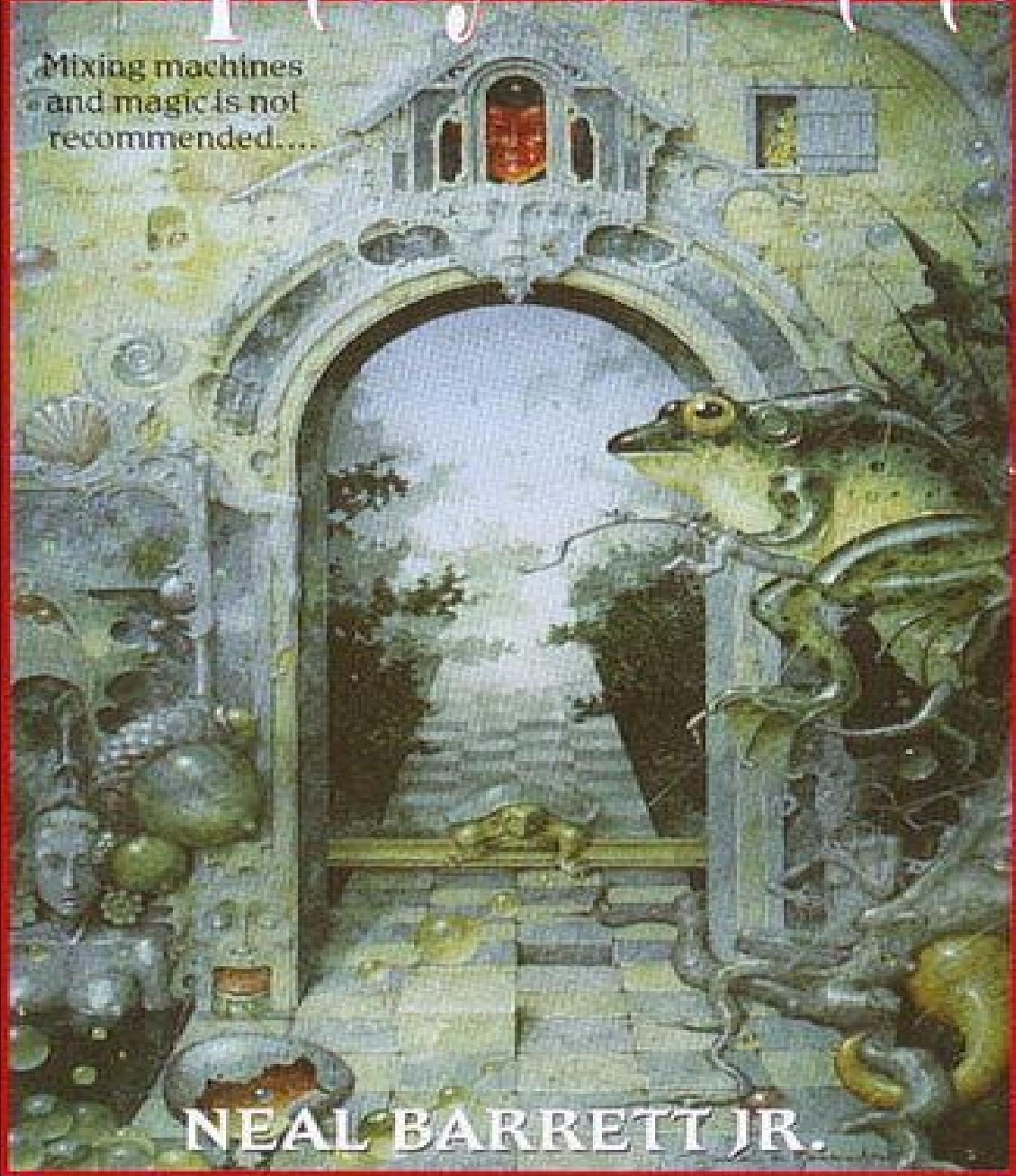


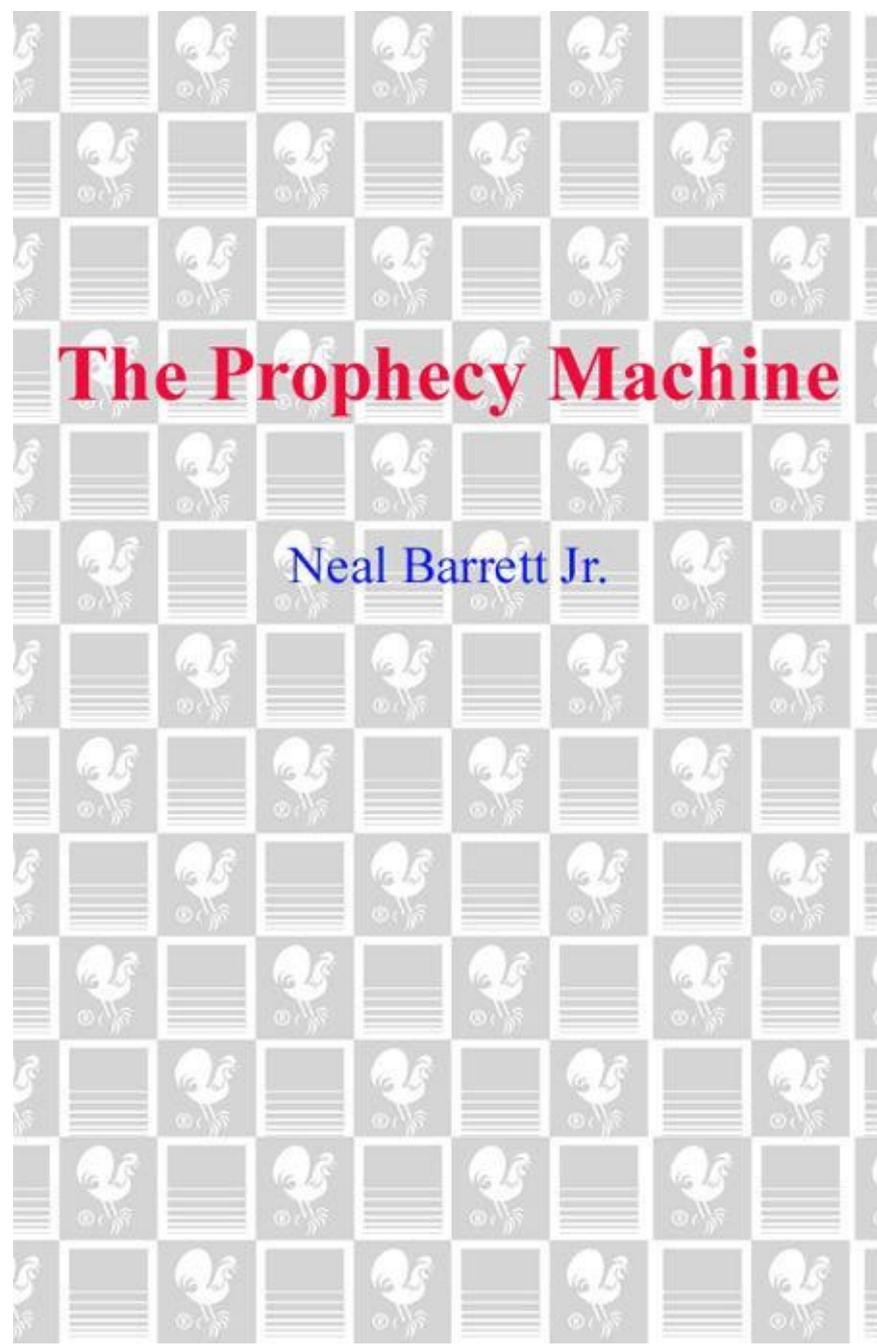
THE Prophecy Machine

Mixing machines
and magic is not
recommended....



NEAL BARRETT JR.

DAUNTAM BOOKS



The Prophecy Machine

Neal Barrett Jr.

GROWING PAINS

Sabatino stumbled back, nearly knocking Finn down. A bright burst of energy seared Finn's eyes, tugged at his flesh, tore at his bones. Sabatino cried out, but Finn couldn't hear. The Great Horror shrieked, thundered and roared, clattered and howled, twisted and tangled in tortured convolutions, as if it might rip itself apart....

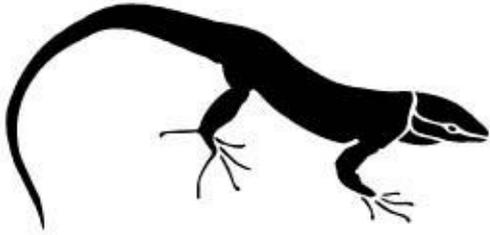
... and, once more Finn was frightfully aware of the foul, obscure distortions, the sluggish bits of darkness that wound their fearsome way through the vile crusted entrails of Calabus' hellish machine. Even this close, he could not tell what those shapeless forms might be. And, he was more than thankful he could not.

He and Julia had guessed that Calabus' strange device was, indeed, prodding, pushing, thrusting itself blindly through the Nucci mansion as it grew.

And where might it go after that, he wondered. What might it want to do ...?

*This book is for
William Browning Spencer,
An Absolutely Awesome Writer,
My Very Dear Friend,
and Comrade in Arms against
The Wretched Foes....*

☞ The ☞
**Prophecy
Machine**



Neal Barrett Jr.



BANTAM BOOKS

NEW YORK TORONTO LONDON SYDNEY AUCKLAND

MASTER FINN FILLED HIS LUNGS WITH THE CLEAN salt air, with the heady ocean breeze. The *Madelin* Rose raced atop a gentle swell, then plunged once more into the briny deep.

“Great Socks and Shoes,” Finn said aloud, dizzy with the sweet intoxication of the sea, “Why, man could bottle this wondrous stuff and sell it in every foul alley, every dank and smoky town. There’s a fortune to be had in pure, uncontaminated air!”

“What’s that now, lad? Were you speakin’ to me, Master Finn?”

Finn looked up to find Captain Magreet in his path, boots spread wide, poised upon the deck with perfect ease. The ship might roll, the ship might sway, might turn upon its back for a while. Nothing Finn was sure, would trouble good Captain Magreet.

“Just muttering, sir,” Finn said, “taking in the air. And a lovely fine day it is, too.”

“Might be, might not,” the captain said. “Might be heading for a squall.”

Finn raised a brow at that. “A—squall, sir? We’re headed for a squall?”

“Of course not, a day like this? Not a chance of that at all.”

“That’s good to hear.”

“Never been to sea before. I’ll bet I’m safe in sayin’ that.”

“No, sir. My very first time.”

“Aye, then you’ve never heard the wind shrieking in the shrouds, never seen a fifty-foot wave comin’ at you in the night.”

“My heavens, no.”

“Neither have I. Hope to hell I never do.”

The captain, lost in some frightful image of his own, gripped the rail and stared out to sea.

Finn, clad in ordinary clothing—putty-colored trousers, gray flaxen shirt, broad belt and ankle boots—felt much like a common sparrow next to the dapper Magreet. The captain was a colorful sight indeed, dressed in the customary garb of an officer at sea—ruffled crimson shirt, harlequin knickerbockers, and a fancy plumed hat.

Finn, without meaning to criticize, felt that this radiant attire was somewhat out of sorts on a shaggy stub of a man like Magreet, a globular fellow with stumpy legs and scarcely any neck at all. Tanned and parched, seared by the weather and the years, his skin was dark and furrowed as a nut. His nose was a great inflammation, a monstrous knob that looked as if tiny red spiders had spun their webs there. Finn guessed, with little hesitation, that the captain was wed to Madame Rum, the curse of many a man who went to sea.

“And how fares your, uh—whatever it be, Master Finn,” said Magreet, studying the deck for a moment, then facing Finn again. “I hope you don’t take offense, sir. I don’t mean to pry.”

“Certainly not, none taken,” Finn said. He was, in fact, greatly surprised Magreet had kept his silence this long, as they’d been asail for half a week.

“What I thought is,” the captain said, rubbing a sleeve across his nose, “I thought, with the salt a

and all, the ah—object on your shoulder there, that's the thing I mean, might be prone to oxidation, rust as it's commonly called.”

“Indeed.”

“I've been some curious, as others have as well, just what it might be. Now don't feel we're trying intrude ...”

“Of course not, sir.” Finn smiled, taking some pleasure in finding the captain ill at ease. “What you speak of is a lizard. I design and craft lizards of every sort. Lizards for work, lizards for play. Lizards for the rich and poor alike. I make them of metal, base and precious too, sometimes with finer metals, sometimes with gems. The one you see here is made of copper, tin, iron, and bits of brass.”

The captain closed one squinty eye, looked at Finn's shoulder, then looked away again.

“And these—lizards, what exactly do they *do*, Master Finn?”

“Oh, a great number of things,” Finn said. “When we have some time I'd be pleased to explain. Perhaps one day I might be able to make one for you.”

“Yes, well ...”

“This one, now, this one is somewhat unique. This one is strictly ornamental. It really does nothing at all.”

“Ornamental, you say.” Judging by the captain's expression, he had little use for ornamental things of any sort. “Well then, I wish you a good day, sir. Enjoy your voyage aboard the *Madeline Rose*.”

“I surely will,” Finn said.

The captain turned, then stopped, as if a thought had flicked like a moth about his head.

“Your servant,” he said, “I hope she's some better today.”

“Sadly no, sir. I fear she finds little comfort in the sea.”

“I'm sorry this is so. Please tell her again, I view that ah—incident with regret. Assure her she's perfectly safe aboard my ship. No harm of any sort will come to her here.”

“I've had no success in quieting her fears thus far, Captain. I am most uncertain that I will.”

“Nonsense,” said the captain, waving Finn's words away. “I'm sure she'll come around. And when she gets on her feet, you are welcome to bring her to table. You will find us more casual than dry leggers, lad. Close quarters, you know.”

“I've no complaints, sir.”

“Quite—pleasant in appearance, as I recall,” Magreet added. “Most attractive for her kind.”

The captain seemed to pause, a vessel poised to brave the sea. Finn, however, showed no sign of answering at all.

“So. Indeed, sir ...” the captain said finally. “A pleasure to see you, Master Finn.”

He turned, then and walked aft, ducked in a passageway and disappeared below.

Finn felt the heat rise to his face. He had not missed the spark, the sooty little thought, the furtive damp anticipation that danced for an instant in the captain's tiny eyes.

He took a deep breath and shook the seeds of anger away. Anger, even displeasure, were not emotions he dared display. Not here, or anywhere, not in a world where bigotry still held sway. Or might wink, as the captain implied, at what went on between a man and a maid of lesser kind. Still, he did not speak about it to a stranger, or scarcely even to a friend ...

“Ornament, am I? Doesn't do anything at all?” said a voice like a croak, like a rattle, like a saw cutting tin. “A fine thing that is, Finn.”

“Shut up,” Finn said. “There are ears everywhere. You can't *talk*, Julia. Try and remember that.”

“Oh, I'll remember, all right. Next time you need Julia Jessica Slagg to save your neck from some terrible assault, to drag your bony flanks out of the fire, to—”

With nary a glance, Finn tapped a copper scale at the tip of a brassy tail. Julia gave a hiss and a *sckruk!* and went silent at once.

“There are times,” Finn sighed to himself, “when a man takes pride in his work, when he knows he is master of his craft. Then there are times when he wonders why he didn't choose an ordinary trade like magic or the law, some dreary task that takes scarcely any skill at all ...”



THE MADELINE ROSE RACED ACROSS A TRANQUIL sea with a song in her rigging, the wester-wind full behind her sails. The morning sky was bright, the sea as green as a wicked maiden's eyes.

The particular maid that came to mind brought a smile to the face of Master Finn, a smile so full of pleasure past of a lady he'd not forget, that Finn turned at once from the rail to be sure no other was about.

With great relief, he thanked whatever gods held sway upon the sea that Letitia Louise was down below and out of sight. Granted, she was sick, weary, greatly out of sorts, and most likely cursing the day she gave her love to Master Lizard-Maker Finn. Still, all in all, bless her, she was there, not *here*....

If fair Letitia had seen that smile, he knew he would be in deeper trouble than he was. Letitia had an uncanny talent for guessing what—or who—might be in his head. It was no sort of magic, nor any kind of spell—every Newlie born, every number of the Nine, carried both the burdens and the gifts of the animals they'd been.

For Letitia's folk, it was caution, quickness, a shifting of the eyes, habits born of a bone-cold fear of the creatures who'd preyed upon her kind, stalked them, tracked them, hunted them down, ages before they'd both taken on a higher form. That fear was with Letitia's people still, for in many ways, the ancient foes had scarcely changed from what they'd been.

Now, standing on the foredeck of the *Madeline Rose* watching the beauty of the foam-flecked sea, Finn was shaken once again by utter disbelief, by the cruelty of the joke that Fate had seen to cast the way.

"How, in all creation," he said aloud, "could things go so awry? How could I have possibly gotten poor Letitia into *this*?"

It was difficult to stay on deck at all; only Letitia's tears and the heat down below had driven him up into the day. Once there, he found it near impossible to peer into the vessel's very peak, through the maze and the tangle of the headsails and halyards, the becketts and the blocks, the mainsails, foresails, and who knows what. Still, as if this action might purge him, as if he might atone, he made himself look with his eyes again.

And there, in the dizzy heights above, leaping from the shrouds, scrambling up the masts, was the very source of Letitia's nightmares—screeching, howling, loathsome creatures with pointy tufted ears, flat pink noses and pumpkin-seed eyes: striped, spotted, ginger, black and white. They all wore mulberry, plum, or lilac pantaloons, and little else at all.

Here then, the crew of the *Madeline Rose*, likely a hundred of the dreaded Yowlie folk, maybe more than that. And somehow, with no great effort, Finn had managed to pay a small fortune to set Letitia down in their midst.

He could tell himself there was nothing else for it, that it wasn't his fault. They had boarded in the night, gone to their cabin and awakened with the land far out of sight. How was *he* to know these agile

evil-eyed devils were prized the world over for their prowess in those shaky heights above the sea?

“What did I know?” he said aloud. “I was born and raised a landsman, and I ply a landsman's trade. What am I supposed to know about anything that floats?”

He had learned a great deal that very first morning when Letitia's screams brought him quickly out of sleep. There, in a porthole, caught in the early dawn light, was a flat-nosed creature with grinning opal eyes. Her screams had brought another, then another after that, until there were half a dozen horrid faces pressed against the glass. Only the appearance of the captain himself had finally chased the brutes away. All this was but a single day gone, but it seemed an eternity to Finn ...

“I always say,” said a voice as soothing as hail on a roof of rusty tin, “I always say there's trouble enough come tomorrow without all this moaning about the past. One takes what comes, one shakes away sorrow and trods on ahead. One—”

“By damn,” Finn said, “I turned you off, now you're blathering again.”

“Don't build a bleeding wonder if you don't expect her to act like one,” Julia said. “I'm more than you imagined, less than what I'll be.”

“That makes no sense at all. Are you aware of that? You're a braggart's what you are, a pompous puffed-up bag of tin. I can't imagine how you turned out like you did. I must have put something backwards somewhere.”

“There's no use blaming yourself for this grievous turn of events. It *is* your fault, of course, but there's little you can do about that. Wisdom comes easily to the man who's waiting for the axeman's blade to fall. For the first time in his life, he knows exactly where he's going next.”

“Am I mistaken? I don't think I asked your opinion. I don't think I asked you anything at all.”

“As a matter of fact, I don't suppose you did. Still—”

“Julia, another sound, any sound at all, and I swear you go into the sea. Where, as the good captain put it, you'll learn what rust is all about.”

“Finn—”

“I warned you, I vow I won't again.” “Quiet,” Julia hissed softly in his ear, “now it's you that's rambling, Finn!”

Julia saw them first over Finn's shoulder, coming from the maindeck to the bow. An instant later Finn heard them too, turning hastily as Julia became ornamental once again.

Finn had glimpsed the pair before, a pinch-nosed lawyer and his unlovely spouse, each the very image of the other— gaunt, spare, stiff as winter reeds, each wrapped tight in heavy robes, as if the fair sun might burn their pale visages away.

“A good morning to you,” Finn said, though neither deigned to look his way. Instead, they paused well away from the rail and muttered darkly to each other, careful not to look at the blue and churning sea.

“That woman's face would curdle lead,” Julia croaked in Finn's ear, “and *he's* no great prize himself ...”

“Quiet,” Finn said, “I don't believe I asked.”

The man looked back just then as if he might have heard the two. His frown, though, was not for the lizard or Finn.

“*You*. Stop dawdling around back there,” he shouted, “Get your useless carcass up here, Gyrd!”

With a whimper and a whine, the Newlie lad appeared, stumbling along the larboard deck balancing a silver tray of goblets, oat-bread, goat-bread, two-pepper cheese, and a dark red beaker of ale.

This, in the right hand, flailing for a hold with the left. The lawyer scowled, the woman shook her bony chin. The Newlie slipped, caught himself again. Far overhead, a gaggle of crewmen screeched and laughed aloud.

Startled, beset on every side, Gyrd's pointy nose twitched, his ears perked up and his red eyes

sparked with sudden fear.

“By damn, watch what you're doing,” the counselor warned, “I'll thrash you good and proper if you drop that, boy!”

Like all of his kind, Gyrd was a lean and graceful creature on the land, yet plainly uncertain out at sea. Just as those harsh words rent the air, the ship plunged her oaken bow into the deep, leaped up again, burying the foc'sle in a veil of foamy white.

Finn grabbed a rail and held his breath. Ahead and to his left, the Newlie took one good step and then the next, fought the wall of water, coughed, spat out the sea, and never gave way.

“Good lad,” Finn shouted aloud, “You've done it, boy!”

Gyrd turned to face him, started to grin—

—and that was the moment a burly, pock-faced, mean-eyed man with a shock of red hair lurched out of nowhere, bursting up from a passageway with no sort of warning at all.

Gyrd cried out as the man struck him soundly, lifting him off his feet, sending him sprawling nearly sweeping him into the sea. His legs hit the railing, bringing him to his knees. Tray, tidbit, goblets and bottle went whirling into the deep.

The lad shook himself, tried to stand, then fell back again.

“Onions and Leeks!” Finn swore, “Stay down, don't move, you've likely broken something, boy!”

Finn raced quickly across the deck. The boy gave a plaintive little bark, stared at Finn and thrashed about. The bow dipped again, hurling tons of water from the sea. Finn choked, wiped his eyes, opened them again. The big brute stood there blocking his way.

“Watch yourself, sir,” Finn began, “You've no right to just—*whuuf!*”

The man didn't bother to look. His palm struck Finn in the chest, knocking him roughly aside.

Finn swore, caught himself, and turned in time to see the fellow clutch the boy's jacket in his fist and jerk him off his feet. He shook the poor lad like a rag, then slapped him hard across the face.

The boy howled in pain. His head snapped back, his feet kicking feebly in the air.

“Stinking beast!” The man held the lad close to his face. “I'll teach you to lay hands on your better. By *damn*, the day's coming for your kind!”

He took a step toward the railing, raised the Newlie high, held him there screaming, thrashing about his head.

Finn knew, saw how it would happen, saw it as clearly as if it were happening then. He moved in a blur, not even looking at the man, his eyes locked only on the boy. He leaped, grabbed the Newlie's skinny legs and hung on. The man stumbled back and hit the deck hard. He yelled at Finn, but Finn couldn't stop. He walked right over the brute, flailing for balance, much like moving on slippery stones across a creek—stepping on the groin, then the belly, then the head.

Folding the lad between his shoulder and his chest, he ran across the foc'sle past the big foremast and the maindeck below.

“Stay here,” he said, setting the lad down, “Right here. Don't move. No, that's wrong. *Don't* stay here—go. Go anywhere. Hide.”

“S—sir—”

Finn didn't have to look. He heard the heavy boots, heard the deep and throaty roar. He turned, the man saw the man coming, decided he couldn't be *that* big, nobody could ...

HE GLANCED ABOUT THE DECK, SEARCHING FOR A weapon, anything at all. Thought, for a second, that he might use Julia, swing her like a club, knew she wouldn't care for that. Besides, he noted, Julia wasn't there. Somewhere in the melee, Julia had disappeared. Fallen, jumped, leapt down a hole. Whatever, she was nowhere in sight. There was no one there but Finn himself, Finn and the Newlie, wailing, barking, quivering lad behind him, and the ugly, flame-headed lout with murder in his eyes.

“Look, there is simply no reason to behave like this,” Finn said, backing off a step, then backing off again. “I'm sure you were—distracted; simply out of sorts back there. I'm certain you meant no harm to the lad. If you'd just apologize now, I'm sure we can—*Pickles and Pots, man, don't do that!*”

The short silver blade flicked out of the man's long sleeves, sang a nasty song as it whipped in a swift and killing arc, clipping a brass button from Finn's favorite shirt and sending it rattling 'cross the deck.

Finn sucked in a breath. Before he could get his wits together, the fellow was at him again, leaping and slashing, cutting wicked circles in the air.

There was nothing to do but back up, feint to the right, shift to the left. Back off, do it all again.

And how long could *that* go on? One man with a weapon, frothing at the mouth, another man without.

“This is a stupid pastime,” he shouted, shuffling to the right as the madman sliced to the left. “This is simply ridiculous, totally inane. This is—*Huuuuk!*”

Finn's heart nearly stopped as the weapon took another button off his shirt. He backed up, nearly to the bowsprit that arched out over the sea. Once more, the *Madeline Rose* plunged into the foam, nearly drowning Finn, then rose up swiftly again. Clearly Finn's assailant didn't care for water. He growled in anger, tried to slap the stuff away.

Finn took a moment to catch his breath.

Maybe this lout will break for lunch, he muttered to himself, and while he's filling his belly, I'll run down and get my blade, see how the bugger likes that . . .

“*Rawwwk!*” the bully yelled, or words to that effect.

Spilling pools of water, water splashing out his boots, out his pockets, out his nose, he sprang at Finn, forcing him back against the rail. Finn tried to leap aside, but the man was quick for his size. Twice, the blade slashed across his chest, venting his shirt and nearly kissing his skin.

Finn stepped away, hard against the rail with nowhere to go except the churning sea below. He felt the rough touch of the tangled lines at his back. His foe slashed out again. Finn sucked in his belly, grabbed the rail with both hands, and kicked the brute soundly in the head.

The man howled and staggered back. Finn grabbed a line and pulled himself up into the shrouds. Red Hair was on him in a second, climbing up behind, the knife clutched in his teeth.

“Come on, you overgrown lout,” Finn shouted, “get at it or take a nap!”

Bushes and Trees, he said to himself, now why did I have to say that?

He risked a look down, and almost lost his hold. The deck already seemed a mile or so below. The ship yawed to port, jerked him backwards, then shoved him to starboard again, the bully still right on his heels.

Worse yet, the crewmen were all around him now, yowling and howling, hissing and leaping about, sometimes swinging so close he could smell their vile and fishy breath.

“No more of this nonsense,” Finn said aloud, “I'm damned if I haven't had enough!”

He didn't take time to weigh his odds. He jumped, caught a line and pulled himself aft, hand over hand, to the thick mainmast. There, several lines ran straight down to the deck. The big man cursed him, but he didn't look back. He closed his eyes until his boots touched wood again. The trip nearly burned his hand raw, but he was down, and—

—so was the double-ugly lout. Finn could scarcely believe his eyes. The monster had taken the longer way down, climbing back the way he'd come. Still, he hit the deck running and raced after Finn.

“Tomatoes and Toads,” Finn groaned. He took one look at the fellow, then turned and sprinted aft. Almost at once, a figure blurred to his right, a figure with a great plumed hat atop his head.

Finn stopped and turned back. His foe was sinking to his knees. His mouth dropped open and his hands hung loose along his sides. Captain Magreet, in glorious regalia, stood over the man with a wooden belaying pin gripped in his hand.

“A nasty customer,” Magreet said, looking up at Finn. “I hate like the devil to sap a paying passenger, but this isn't the first time, I'll tell you that.”

Finn kept a cautious distance from the fellow on the deck. He was still on his knees, eyes rolled back in his head.

“I'd say he's lost his senses. Either that, or someone's got him in a spell.”

“No magic to it,” Magreet said, leaning over to spit into the sea. “This fellow's plain mean. He's one of the Nucci clan, they're all a nasty lot. You hurt, are you, lad? If you are, why, I've got a potion below that'll fix you up fine.” He cast a wink at Finn. “Take the pain away, clean out your liver and everything besides.”

“Thank you, Captain, I'm fine.” He'd never heard of the Nuccis and didn't care to ask. “That boy now, he could use some help.”

“Ah, now I expect he'll be fine.” He glanced at the boy who still sat cringing by the mast. “Those Newlie folk are tougher than you think. I guess that's likely enough, seeing what they were before ...”

The captain paused and grinned at Finn. “Now why am I telling you for, sir? You'd know better than me, seeing as you got one yourself.”

Finn was seething inside, but he'd learned to keep his feelings off his face.

“If you'd seen what happened, sir, you wouldn't dismiss it so lightly. This—this lunatic here committed wanton assault on the lad. Tried to kill him, quite frankly.”

Magreet frowned. “Now that's strong talk you're layin' on me, Master Finn.”

“I was here, Captain. He damn near killed *me*.” Finn took a breath. “Look at him, sir. Tell me he's *fine*.”

Magreet cleared his throat. “Well, I suppose not entirely fine. Slightly beaten, possibly bruised you might say.”

Finn ignored him, walking quickly to the lad.

“Can you stand up, boy? Do you feel as if a limb is broken, or some other vital part?”

All the boy could do was whimper. He shrank from Finn's touch, moaning, and his slight form trembled from head to foot.

“I'll do what I can,” Finn said, “and that's not a great deal. There is surely someone aboard acquainted with the physical arts ...”

“You needn't bother,” said a voice behind Finn. “We'll take care of its damage now.”

It?

Finn stood. In all the trouble and strife, he'd completely forgotten the black-clad lawyer and his wife. Clearly, they had managed to vanish when the mayhem and bother began.

"If I may, I'd suggest you get some medical help for the lad. I'm sure there's some kind of physician aboard. Just ask the captain to—"

"Gyrd, get up," the man shouted, "Get up or by damn you'll regret it!"

The man kicked out viciously at the boy, aiming at his head.

"Here, now." Finn stopped him with an open palm to the chest. The man staggered back, nearly going to the deck.

"You interfere with my goods, and I'll have the captain put you in irons!"

"He will, too," his wife put in.

"I shall interfere if it's the proper thing to do," Finn said, "and if I catch you abusing this lad again ..."

"Gyrd is not a *lad*," the man said, glaring at Finn, pulling himself to his feet. "An IT is what it is and nothing more than that. Now step aside, Master whoever you are, and I'll take my proper place below."

"Call him what you like. Just don't hurt him again. He has the same rights as you."

The counselor rolled his eyes at that. Still, he clearly saw something in Finn he didn't like. Turning away, he nodded at his wife, then walked off with his head in the air as if he'd just astonished the judge, the jury and everyone in court.

His wife squatted down and lifted the Newlie to his feet. The boy gasped, swayed and nearly fell, but the woman had a firm, bony grip on the boy's slender arm.

"You'll think twice afore you spill your Master's precious tray again," the woman said, in a voice like iron striking tin.

Dragging the whimpering lad away, she turned and stomped after her husband. First though, she stopped, drew a small blood-red stone from under her robes, kissed it twice, held it beneath her left eye, then pointed it at Finn.

At once, Finn felt a sharp prickling chill, as if the woman's amulet had burrowed its way into his heart.

It was not a big spell, but it hurt all the same. Finn took a breath to shake it off. Almost at once, the pain disappeared. As had the black-clad woman and her miserable charge, gone back below.

He felt a great sorrow for the boy. He wanted desperately to chuck the skinny bastard and his wife into the deep, but that wouldn't help, really wouldn't do at all.

"Master Finn ..."

Finn turned to face Magreet. The burly oaf at the captain's feet was off his knees now. He leaned against the mainmast, rubbing the back of his head. He was still the same enormous lout who'd tried to make sausage out of Finn. Yet, Finn thought, something was not the same. He was still large and ugly, his hair was still red. Now, however, whatever demon drove him seemed to be at rest.

"I must officially warn you," the captain said, "that I will brook no more of this violence and poor attitude aboard my vessel. If you have any further quarrel with one another, you will cease hostile action until you get ashore."

Finn stared. "Does *he* know that? By damn, sir, it was he who tried to stick a blade in me, not the other way around."

"I have informed Mr. Nucci as well."

Nucci frowned at Finn. "I need to know your name, and your family history as well, sir—if indeed you did not spring from common folk. Honor demands that I meet you again and battle until one of us is dead."

Finn had to laugh. "Do I get a blade this time, or just you?"

~~"Whatever you wish." The bully waved him off. "I assure you, though, a weapon will do you little good against me."~~

"You think not?"

"Oh, I am certain of it, sir."

The man's ugly face split into a joyous grin. "I hope you will join me for supper tonight. I do not wish you to think ill of Sabatino Nucci, in spite of our little quarrel."

"Thank you for the invitation," Finn said. "But I don't believe I will."

Sabatino shrugged. "As you wish, then. Captain, if you ever strike me again, I shall consider it extremely annoying. Good day to you both."

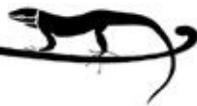
Sabatino Nucci strolled away. Finn watched him until he was well out of sight.

"Feathers and Birds, what in bloody hell is the matter with him? Why, he would've fair *skinned* the lad if I hadn't come along. And he nearly skinned me."

"I told you," Magreet said. "He is a Nucci. The Nuccis are vicious, every one."

"But not all the time."

"No, not all the time. And the trouble with a Nucci, Master Finn, is he will never tell you *when ...*'"



“HE NEVER EVEN ASKED ABOUT THE LAD. WAS HE hurt? Was he maimed? Was the poor boy alive or was he dead? I tell you, Letitia, I am not even certain this Sabatino fellow remembered what he had done.”

“Why, how could he not?” Letitia pressed a delicate finger to her chin, a gesture Finn always found so enchanting. “Of course he did. The boy was a Newlie, so the man didn't care.”

“Maybe,” Finn said, pacing the small cabin from one end to the next. “I'm not too sure of that. When it was over, he was rude, pompous, nasty, terribly overbearing, but quite a different fellow from the frothing lunatic he'd been....”

“Lunatic or not, he's a *human* person, and that's the way they think.” Letitia wrinkled her nose and smiled. “Not you, of course, dear Finn. Sometimes I think you're simply too nice to be a person at all.”

“I appreciate the thought.”

“Well, it's true, my dear.”

“Nicely put,” said Julia Jessica Slagg. “You'll never get a finer compliment than that. Or like I don't deserve it, I fear.”

“Be quiet,” Finn said, “nobody asked.”

Julia gave a rusty cackle and clawed up the bed to Letitia's lap. “If this poor lizard had to wait for someone to *ask*, she would never get to speak at all.”

“I'm grateful you reminded me of that,” Finn said. “That switch is not working as it should. If the ship would hold still for a moment, I could remedy that at once. Of course, with all this rolling and such, vital cogs and gears could spill out and roll about ...”

“Stop it, both of you,” Letitia said. “I have to spend our vacation in this—tiny, stuffy room, but I don't have to listen to you two bicker all the time.”

She sighed then, and reached out to touch Finn's hand, as she nearly always did when a single word had passed between the two. And when Finn looked into those enormous, glossy black eyes that swirled with iridescent color like opals drowned in warm and fragrant oil, his heart near swelled with joy.

Granted, her ears were perhaps a bit long, but they came to a soft and lovely curve, peeking little furry pink secrets through her long ashen hair. Her lips were small and shapely, and, while her nose was somewhat pointy, Finn found it to be a very nice nose indeed. Her form was quite slender in all the proper places, and not too slender where slender wouldn't do at all.

How, he wondered, could he not love Letitia Louise? What she had been was not what she was now. An animal was one thing, a Newlie something else again. Many, of course, couldn't see the truth of that. Many, he knew, likely never would.

And who, in the end, was blessed with more kindness and love? Fair Letitia, or Sabatino Nucci and that vile and scrawny pair with little but stone in their hearts? All three were human through and through, and what did that gain them but cold and empty lives?

The world was full of questions, and Finn, Master Lizard-Maker, knew the answers to very few all ...

He brought their supper from the galley, a meal Letitia hardly touched—watery oyster soup, oat bread and fish. Letitia nibbled on the bread, but, as ever, wouldn't touch the soup or fish. Meat was meat, whether it came from land or sea. Her kind had never been predators, they'd always been the prey.

“Did you see anyone?” she asked, her precious pink tongue finding crumbs at the corners of her lips. “Does everyone go and eat there? I mean, it must be interesting, meeting new people at sea ...”

“Not especially,” Finn told her. “There were quite a few diners, but no one of note, as I recall.”

“Passengers, you mean. But not the crew.”

“Oh, no, not the crew. They have their own quarters forward, quite a distance from here.”

He couldn't miss the little shudder at the mention of the Yowlies. That encounter had shaken her to the core.

“And the man who attacked you wasn't there? Truly, Finn?”

“Truly, Letitia. I didn't see the man.”

“You could have been killed. A man like that has no love for humans, either. He only cares for himself.”

“I should say that's true. But you needn't worry. He'll not bother me again.”

Finn was glad he'd slightly edited his adventure with Sabatino Nucci. He hadn't mentioned that the loony had challenged him to a duel, and asked him to supper as well. He could scarcely fathom the man's bizarre behavior, and saw no reason to share it with Letitia Louise.

“I think,” Julia put in, scratching herself with sharp iron claws, though, as Finn knew, there was no way she could possibly itch, “as the captain suggested, I could use some lubrication. This salty air is not beneficial to creatures of the metal persuasion. You might, while you're at it, oil that sword in your pack, Master Finn. I expect it's been affected too.”

“Thank you for the advice,” Finn said, tossing the lizard a frosty look that Letitia couldn't see. She flicked her brass tongue and pretended she'd dropped off to sleep—which, like itching, was a talent reserved for creatures of skin and bone, not those of copper, iron and scraps of tin.

“I almost wish we hadn't come,” Letitia said, taking up her thoughts again. “I miss our house and my kitchen. I even miss the smells of Garpenny Street. They are odors less than sweet, to be sure, but they are *our* odors, Finn.”

“Yes, well, you'll like Antoline Island when we get there,” Finn assured her quickly. “I understand the hotel is practically new, and the beach is quite grand ...”

“That boy,” she said, as if he hadn't spoken at all, “he was injured, you said. And no one, certainly not his—his *masters*, or the captain of this horrible vessel, seem to care. I feel so sorry for the lad. The Foxers are very nice folk. Several of them clerked at Counters Hall, you'll recall. I'm sure you've seen them there.”

“I have indeed,” Finn said.

“Before the Change, they were as hungry for my kind as the Yowlies were, Finn. But that's not the way now. They're different, but the Yowlies are the same ...”

She paused, and held him with her magnificent dark eyes.

“We remember sometimes, all the Newlies do. It's there in our heads from those who came before. Sometimes I'm running through a burrow, squeezing through a musty hole running for my life. It isn't me, Finn, but it is. It's there, and it doesn't go away just because you want it to.”

“I'm sorry,” she said, shaking her fears away once more. “I can't help being what I am.”

“There is nothing else I want you to be,” he told her. “Nothing but what you are.”

“Yes, I know. And I thank you, Finn.”

He wanted desperately to take her in his arms, hold her, and assure her the world would surely change, that all that was wrong would then be set aright. He knew, though, that this wasn't so, that Letitia knew it as well as he.

Newlies had the same rights as humans, but laws are only as good as people want them to be. The Foxer boy was a servant in name, but in truth, little more than a slave. The counselor couple had "hired" him from someone who dealt in such things, and the boy could never get away.

Things should change, and they would, Finn knew, but not today or tomorrow, not when Letitia wanted them to ...

"I should have stayed to help," Julia said, when Letitia had dropped off to sleep, and a candle made shadows on the walls. "I could have bitten that lout's hand off and saved you a little time."

"For once," Finn said, "you did exactly what you should have done. If you had joined the fray they'd all know now you are neither an ornament nor a toy. We've been through this before. Many people are not quite ready for talking hunks of tin."

"Hunks of tin, is it?"

"So to speak. I suppose one could word it another way."

"Surely one could."

"Do not be quick to take offense, Julia. I am not in the mood for this."

"Don't be quick to give it, then. I've got feelings too, you know."

"Yes, I do know," Finn said with a sigh of resignation, not far in truth from a sigh of regret. "Whatever came over me to fill you with emotions, like a baker squeezing custard into a tart? I must have been reeling drunk to do such a fool thing as that."

"You were quite sober, as a fact," Julia said. "A glorious moment, a brilliant achievement, the high point of your life, the—"

"That's quite enough. Be still, now, I'm taking a nap."

"Then I will too."

"We are both aware that you can't do that."

"Sleep well," Julia yawned. "I shall wake up promptly at six ..."

WITH THE SETTING OF THE SUN, THE SEA HAD changed from a very pleasant blue to a most unseemly green. The wind was up, having its way, blowing from the south for a moment, then shifting to the west. Crossways, sideways, this way and that. All this mischief played havoc with the *Madeline Rose*. The crew would get the sails set properly, the wind would swiftly change, and howling, hissing, knocking one another about, they'd swarm into the rigging once again.

Captain Magreet stood on his quarterdeck shaking his fists, cursing the crew as the crew cursed him, shouting out orders that changed from one moment to the next.

"In for bit of a blow, are we, Captain?" Finn asked. "Smells like rain to me."

"Ah, does it now?" Magreet sent him a withering look. "So you're a master of gizzards, and a master of storms as well?"

"Lizards, it is. And I meant no disrespect, sir. It was merely an effort to be polite."

Magreet spat a goblet at the deck. "Well, take your bloody manners somewhere else. I've no use for them here."

"Indeed," Finn said, "I can see, at the moment, you're somewhat distracted. I appreciate that."

The captain turned and stomped away, mumbling to himself. Finn walked forward past the great mainmast, which was thick as an ancient tree.

There was no one else on deck, no passengers, at least. That suited Finn fine. He didn't need company, especially the unfriendly Nucci, and the pair of scarecrows. And, to be honest, he didn't want to be with Letitia for a spell.

As ever, he chided himself for such a thought. Though he knew it wasn't so, he could not abide the idea that he might, as so many others did, harbor some small intolerance for what Letitia's folk had been.

It was not the wisest thing a man could do, falling in love with his Newlie housekeeper, taking her for a wife. Not in legal terms, of course, for what he'd done was a felony, a criminal act, one that could cause a careless man to lose his head. Everyone knew there were men—and very likely women too—who had quite intimate relations with one of the Newlie kind. No one *said* anything about it, of course, one simply looked the other way.

On the whole, Finn had to admit, beasts should never have been changed into men. It was no great favor to the world, and a tragedy to the creatures themselves. He thought of the sad, sometimes hopeless look in Letitia's dark eyes: a look that held the sorrows and the fears all her kind brought with them from the past.

Letitia was mostly a woman, and a breathtaking woman at that, but she would always be a part of what she'd been. Her kind were not animals now, but they would never, ever be human.

Shar and Dankermain, the great seers who'd cast that unholy spell three hundred years past, had paid very dearly for their crime, for the sin of creating the Nine. Why they did such a deed went with them to the grave, but the spawn of their magic was left behind.

And why, the thought came to Finn, as it often did at such a time, why did you do the same? What your reason, Master Finn?

He had asked himself the question a hundred times past, for he, like the two mad seers, had broken law of nature himself, giving life and reason to a thing of brass and tin. Given his creation the brain of a ferret, a poor creature caught in a trap and nearly dead.

And why? For much the same reason, he supposed, that the rebel magicians had crossed the line themselves. Though his was no act of magic, he, like the seers, had done what he did because he had the art—because he had the talent, because he had the flair. He had dared the act of creation simply because he could.

The wind was high now, snapping, cracking in the sails, whining through the shrouds, scattering foam atop enormous dark waves. The sailors, Finn noted, had set cheap weather amulets and charms on the rigging—a rattle of bones, strings of shiny stones, pots, pans, bundles of colored sticks, bloodwood dolls and dead leather toads.

And even above the shriek of the wind, the captain, legs set as solidly against the deck as if they sprouted there, could be heard yelling and cursing at his horrid crew.

“Set the headsails!”

“Man the halliards!”

“Keelhaul the bos'n!”

“Get aloft there!”

“Let fly the jib!”

That, Finn imagined, or something wholly different, he couldn't say for sure. It all sounded quite the same to him.

By the time he reached his quarters, the storm was full upon them—a gale, a blow, a raging hurricane, a loud and frightful thing that tossed the ship about like a stick of rotten wood.

Still, Letitia stayed fast asleep. Fear and exhaustion had finally brought her down. And, in a corner of the cabin he could see Julia there, two ruby flares of light, crimson points of fire in the night.

Slipping off his clothes, he slid in gently beside Letitia and took her in his arms. She made little sounds in her sleep, and curled into him like a spoon. Her warmth, her touch, the satin feel of flesh next to his nearly set him afire. He desperately wanted her then, to fully share their love, to light the passion between them.

Instead he held her, let her sleep, touched the tiny pulse in her breasts, listened to her breathe. He was certain he couldn't sleep, sure he'd have to stare at the ceiling all night, listening to the shriek of the storm. All of which he did for a minute—or a minute and a half.

Something brought him up out of sleep, he couldn't say what. The storm was weaker now, but the *Madeline Rose* still bobbed about.

Voices. Out in the passageway. Two or three people, maybe four. He pulled on his trousers and opened the door. Three men stood there, two short and one tall, passengers he might have seen before.

“What is it,” he asked, “what's going on here?”

“Someone's come up missing, can't find him anywhere,” the short man said, squinting past Finn to see if he kept the pretty Newlie in his bed.

“Who? What are you talking about?” He blocked the man's way, came out and shut the door. “Missing from where?”

“That young Foxer,” one of the others said. “The one that got hurt up there.”

Finn felt a chill in his heart. *No. Make it not so ...*

“Aren't you the one makes blizzards? The fellow got the tar beat out of him today? Say, weren't you ___”

Finn was already gone. He took the steps topside four at a time. Suddenly, the captain was there



FINN DREAMED. He dreamed about a lot of things he didn't ever want to dream again. He dreamed he was sizzling, broiling, frying in a pan. Someone was having him for lunch. Someone was hungry, someone who didn't care to wait till he was done.

He woke up flailing, thrashing, and kicking about in a pool of salty sweat. He sat up with a start to find a lizard patiently gnawing on his leg.

“Custard and Clams,” Finn exclaimed, kicking out at Julia, sending her skidding across the room. “What in holy hell's wrong with you?”

“You break it, you fix it,” Julia said. She flicked her scaly tail, shook her tinny head. Everything seemed to be in place.

“You snore like a storm, and sleep like the dead. If it wasn't for me—Custard and Clams, indeed. Get your big feet on the floor. Look out that porthole and tell me what you see.”

“Why would I want to do that?”

“Don't, then. Lie there and roast in the heat.”

Finn muttered to himself, then padded across the floor and squinted out the small, salt-encrusted window at the hot and brassy sea. He blinked and looked again. Unless his eyes deceived him, there was no sea in sight. Neither brassy nor hot, not any sea at all. Instead, he saw a rotting wooden wharf piled high with barrels, boxes and crates. Scattered with garbage, overripe fruit, swill, slops and wasps of every sort. The smell was a horror, and the air was thick with swollen green flies.

Beyond the sordid dock was a grim and dirty town full of narrow, high-roofed houses, all crammed and choked up together like weeds. A great horde of people, none more attractive than the next, crowded the cobble alleyways. It was, truly, an awful sight to see. It made Finn yearn for the simple but clean byways of Ulster-East, the quiet of his own Garpenny Street. He even missed the dull sound of cannon down the bay, the colorful war balloons soaring overhead.

“Great Apples and Pears,” Finn said, “What sort of place is this? We're not supposed to be here anywhere, we're supposed to be at sea!”

“Well, I'm certain that we're not,” Julia said. “Land and water are not at all alike.”

“As ever, I'm grateful for your help,” Finn said, frowning at the ruby-eyed creature who'd climbed atop a chair. “I don't know where we are, but I mean to find out.”

Struggling into trousers while hunting for his shirt, he glanced at Letitia Louise. She was still sound asleep, her fine ashen hair a silken veil across her cheek. The sun painted golden stripes across her bare and lovely back.

“I'll talk to the captain,” Finn said, turning away from the sight, “I'll get an answer to this.”

“Good idea,” said Julia Jessica Slagg, “that's what I'd do myself.”

The deck was crowded with people. Cargo and luggage were scattered all about. Enormous hulking Bullies, broad-shouldered Newlies with short, stumpy knobs atop their heads, glassy eyes and massive necks stalked up and down the gangway bearing heavy barrels and crates. Many wore golden

rings in their noses, many had lewd tattoos.

Finn found Captain Magreet on his quarterdeck, shouting, shaking his fists, cursing at everyone's sight. His officer's hat was askew, feathers and plumes sagging limply in the heat.

"I want to know exactly where I am," Finn demanded. "I want to know why we're stopping here."

Magreet gave him a single sour glance. "Get away from me, sir. Get out of my sight."

Finn stepped in front of the captain, blocking his view of the bustle down below.

"I merely asked, Captain, where we are and why. As a paying passenger, I have every right to information such as that."

"Hah! That's what you're thinking, now, is it? What damn fool told you that?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"Move it there," Magreet shouted, pushing Finn gently aside, "Get busy, you vile, odorous, good-for-nothing beast, or I'll have the flesh peeled off your back!"

One of the Bullies made a deep, rumbling sound in his chest, gave the captain a murderous glance, and moved no faster than before.

A pair of Yowlie crewmen teased the big fellow, scampering about in his path. The Bullie lashed out with one stout foot, but the Yowlies were too quick for that.

"Can't stand the ugly brutes," Magreet said, "They'll turn on you faster'n a southern squall. Damn me, are you still here, Finn? What the devil is it now?"

"Same as before, Captain. I'd like to know where I am, why we're stopping here."

"Makasar. Port of Nakeemo. Sour oats, red beer. Tar and fertilizer, plus a couple dozen other lovely scents, is what you're smelling now. That, and the local damned un-bathed population out there."

Finn shook his head. "My ticket says nothing about a port of call. Not anywhere at all."

"'Course it doesn't."

"What?"

"You deaf or what, boy? Your ticket's going to say where *you're* going. You aren't going somewhere, it isn't going to say."

"That's ridiculous. If the ship's going to stop somewhere—"

Magreet granted Finn a patient sigh. "A passenger coming here don't have a ticket says where *you're* going, sir. None of his damn business. Isn't your business where *he's* headed for."

"Captain, my—servant-companion is not overly taken with the sea. How many more stops will we make before we reach Antoline Isle? I would simply like to know that."

"You would, would you? An' why's that?"

"Why? Because I—" Finn took a breath. "All right, how long will we be here? When will we leave?"

"Overnight."

"Overnight?"

"What did I just say? I believe that's what I said. We sail again on the morrow, out with the morning tide."

"Fine. That is what I asked. You could have said that in the first, sir, and I'd have been long gone."

Magreet didn't answer. He was scowling at a large Bullie who had dropped a barrel on the rocky quay. The barrel burst open, and something dark and oily ran out.

"You'll pay for that, you lout," Magreet yelled, "It'll come right off of your back!"

"In that case," Finn said, "we shall be spending the night ashore. It will be a great relief to get out of the heat for a while."

... *It'll give poor Letitia a chance to settle her nerves, he said to himself, and get something decent to eat.*

"I don't suppose there's some rule you haven't bothered to tell me about," he said aloud. "I won't

have to buy another ticket to get back on again.”

The captain looked bewildered. “Are you daft, man? Who ever heard of such a fool thing as that? Meanin' no offense, Master Finn, but I don't see how you landsmen have the wits to piss and eat, and keep yourself clean. Damned if I do ...”

“Oh, how I adore you, Finn! Finn, my sweetness, my darling, my very own love. You are truly the most wonderful man in the world!”

“I appreciate the thought,” Finn said, making no effort to fend off the moist and tender kiss Letitia showered upon his face. This, in spite of the fact that a passenger or crewman might walk in the cabin at any time, leaving Finn to explain a human and a Newlie in fond embrace.

“In truth, though, I did nothing at all.”

“Nothing? *Nothing*, dear Finn?” She twitched her pretty nose and rolled her ebony eyes. “What you have *done*, my love, is save me from—from gross despair and madness. You have given me reason to live!”

“No, really, I—”

Letitia suddenly let him go, caught up her skirts and whirled about the small cabin, for an instant baring her lovely legs, always a pleasant sight to see, though Finn had seen them many times, and certainly a great deal more than that.

He was pleased with this sudden leap from the depths of despair to unending joy. Still, he couldn't help but think about getting her *back* aboard the ship on the morrow. Letitia had chosen to ignore that part of his tale. She would, he knew, recall it soon enough again.

The deck was nearly clear of cargo handlers and passengers when Finn brought Letitia on deck. He carried their small overnight satchel, which Letitia had stuffed near to bursting, even though they would only spend the night ashore.

“It is quite delightful,” Letitia said, gazing at the gray, drab little village that lay beyond the dock. “It looks almost like home, Finn.”

“Ah, yes it does, in a way, I suppose.”

It is nothing of the sort, Finn said to himself, but he knew Letitia would see some beauty in a sewage pool if it was not aboard the *Madeline Rose*.

As he helped Letitia down the gangway, he looked over his shoulder for the captain, but Magree was nowhere about. And, though several Yowlies clung to the upper riggings, Letitia, in her elation at going ashore, didn't seem to notice they were there.

The moment Finn and Letitia stepped ashore, the sun dropped behind a bank of clouds, leaving the town in half shadow. Without the harsh and unrelenting light, the crumbling stone and rotting thatch seemed somewhat softer, the drab and muddy shades now partially obscured.

“I don't like it already,” said Julia Jessica Slagg, clinging to Finn's waist beneath his cloak. “It's a damned pesthole is what it is. A canker, a blemish, a dunghill, a dump. A grubby, vile and shabby place, a—”

“Shut up,” Finn said quietly, “There are people all about, I shouldn't have to tell you that.”

Finn hurried Letitia along. As they left the broad wharf for the crowded streets of the town, Finn saw that the grimy shopfronts looked much like those at home, though clearly not as clean.

Finn recognized several passengers among the locals. A fat man who sold bad wine, another, a dealer in jewels who'd shown Finn a glittering array of bracelets, necklaces and rings—all of them, Finn was nearly sure, as false as the man who sold them. He also glimpsed the gaunt, hooded lawyer now without their charge, the poor lad who now lay far beneath the sea.

And then, for only an instant, at the far end of the street—

Finn felt heat rise to his face. *Sabatino Nucci!* There was no mistaking that burly frame, startling red hair, and haughty walk. It was, truly, the pompous, arrogant fellow himself. And, as the winds o

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