

# PAPER ANGEL PRESS SAMPLER



2017



Paper Angel Press  
Sampler

2017 Edition

No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, except for the purpose of review and/or reference, without explicit permission in writing from the publisher.

Cover design © 2017 by Niki Lenhart  
[nikilen-designs.com](http://nikilen-designs.com)

Published by Paper Angel Press  
[paperangelpress.com](http://paperangelpress.com)

All rights reserved.

DIGITAL EDITION

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

FIRST EDITION

Introduction and Afterword  
copyright © 2017 by Paper Angel Press

*Best Intentions*  
copyright © 2016 by J Dark  
used by permission of the author

*Broken Bridge*  
copyright © 2017 by J Dark  
used by permission of the author

*Building Baby Brother*  
copyright © 2016 by Steven Radecki  
used by permission of the author

*Children of the Wrong Time*  
copyright © 2017 by Flavia Idà  
used by permission of the author

*Grimaulkin*  
copyright © 2017 by L. A. Jacob  
used by permission of the author

*Grimaulkin Tempted*  
copyright © 2017 by L. A. Jacob  
used by permission of the author

*Homecoming*  
copyright © 2016 by Lisa Jacob  
used by permission of the author

*The Iron and The Loom*  
copyright © 2016 by Flavia Idà  
used by permission of the author

*The Names of Heaven*  
copyright © 2017 by Flavia Idà  
used by permission of the author



# CONTENTS

Introduction .....	i
Best Intentions .....	1
Broken Bridge .....	9
Building Baby Brother .....	11
Children of the Wrong Time .....	23
Grimaulkin .....	31
Grimaulkin Tempted .....	43
Homecoming .....	49
The Iron and The Loom .....	65
The Names of Heaven.....	89
Afterword .....	105
Publishing With Paper Angel Press .....	107



# INTRODUCTION

**W**ORDS HAVE POWER.

They have shape and color and tone, they have texture and subtext, they can make us think and cry and laugh and rage and ponder. A good novel has the ability to leave us yearning after its worlds for days.

This was the magic that we wanted to bring into the world when we began Paper Angel Press. We have worked magic with our various writings; and we have had magic worked upon us by other people's words. Our goal was to have a safe place for new authors to explore the wonderful things that happen when you tell a story and other people read it. Our vision was to have the time and space to help new writers polish their works, without the unrealistic pressures of large-press budgets.

We're a small press. Which makes it sound like a business, and doesn't really explain the amount of time we've spent working with the wonderful authors that have come to us in the

## *Introduction*

last year. We know the insides of their heads, and of their hearts. There's nothing like designing someone's first book cover with them to help you understand what they really meant. A small piece of editorial marginalia might say, "Could you unpack this idea ...?" and next thing you know, your author is coming back to you with an entire new corner of their world, because when you tugged on that one thread, a brand-new piece of their vision was revealed ... even to them.

That is magic.

Within these pages you will get a quick glimpse at the worlds we've seen this last year — the privilege we've had in being brought along from fantasy to speculative modern fiction to medieval Italy to the discovery of the new world by the old world ... We have circled the globe and then some. We have left home, and rediscovered it again, within the pages of the tales our authors told.

Come along with us. Come look inside ...

Laureen Hudson  
*Acquisitions Editor*

# Best Intentions

Book One of the *Glass Bottles* Series

J Dark



**Z**HIRK AND I PULLED UP AT UNCLE TODD'S PLACE in Cole Harbor. It was a small bungalow nestled among near-identical bungalows that had been base housing at one time. Uncle Todd's was a quiet tan in color, and the porch dipped slightly at the front due to settling. The place was tidy, and the small garden in the front of the house gave it a cheery look, one that I remembered well from living here up until about ten years ago, when I turned eighteen and left.

Fawn stayed another two years, and moved out after Aunt Ruthie had died. Uncle Todd had lived here alone since then. I walked up the familiar steps and he was at the door before I even had a chance to knock.

"Fernie! Com'ere and give your Uncle Toddie a hug," he said as he swept me into his arms. Uncle Todd was a rail. He was near one-point-eight meters tall, but ridiculously only around

sixty-five kilograms. His lean face reminded me of the anteaters at the zoo. He had a thick shock of black hair, and a thick, greying mustache. He had on old, comfortable khaki pants and a denim shirt of faded brown. Bright red suspenders clipped on the baggy khakis, a bright splash of color over the soft earth tones.

As always, Todd was happy to see me. He was one of those people with open arms for anyone who came by. A genuine ‘treat everyone as you want to be treated’ person, who actually lived the words. True to form, he stepped off the front porch and greeted Zhirk like a long-lost friend who just happened to show up. We entered the house and sat down, me on the old recliner and Zhirk on the floor as there was no furniture big or sturdy enough for him.

Todd looked at our faces and picked up on the mood. He went into the small kitchen, and a moment later, brought us some lemonade. As he settled on the sofa next me, he said “This isn’t just a social call, is it? Your friend there,” he nodded at Zhirk, “has got a shotgun. What’s got you spooked?”

“I need to know more about Mom and Dad, Uncle Todd. I have someone after me and there’s weird stuff that’s happening. I got a bottle that seem to drain a person. I got weird magickal stuff going on. I got a guy that’s a drooling vegetable, that’s like a puppet on someone’s string. And there’s a guy that’s seriously powerful, and can leap a three story building. That’s what’s going on.” I leaned against Uncle Todd, inhaling the soft pine scent of his aftershave.

“You’re the only one that knows what Mom and Dad were doing when they died, and I need to know, Uncle Todd. It’s weird, but I believe that it’s all tied together by Mom and Dad. Please, can you tell me more about them?”

I watched him sit back up and swallow. After a long sigh, he replied, “All right, you’re old enough. But do you mind me calling Fawn here to join us? I want to tell you, and I really don’t want

to tell the story twice. Once is going to be hard enough,” he finished, with a wistful, desolate look. He got up from the sofa, then walked back to the kitchen, and the only phone in the house.

About fifteen minutes later, Fawn strode grimly into the house. Uncle Todd smiled sadly and gave her a big hug. She closed her eyes and returned the hug, her chin resting on top of his shoulder. Uncle Todd stepped back, and collapsed onto the sofa, uncomfortably rigid as he waited for Fawn to sit down. She flashed me a flat smile as she sat on the arm of the sofa next to me, then looked over at Uncle Todd. I looked at him with her. Uncle Todd really looked like he wanted to forget the whole thing. His body was piano-wire taut, and you could feel the reluctance vibrating in the air. He took a deep breath, then began.

“First off, you got to understand that this was still when the changing was new to everyone. You had all sorts of people trying to practice magick the way they thought it should be done. A lot of those people were lonely, desperate, or just plain nuts. Most of the world didn’t think about magick. Magick that worked was pretty hit and miss. The effects were uncontrolled and intense. Mike and Cathy were two of the few who enjoyed a stable belief in magick. They saw it as a natural part of the world, and enjoyed the quiet communing with nature that the Wiccan religion provided.”

Todd sighed and looked away as if he were seeing the story. “They’d been married eight years before the changing and wanted children. Whatever the reason, despite all their efforts and all those of modern science, Cathy never was able to get pregnant. When magick came back into the world, they, like a lot of the others, were caught unawares. Fortunately, their first accidental spell didn’t kill them. They worked together carefully after that, and quickly learned methods and rules that helped them survive learning magick. They eventually garnered enough magickal control to attempt to have children. Fawn, you and Fern are the result of that. Twin girls. They were ecstatic to have

the two of you and were very happy for five years. But that sixth year, we had a plague sweep through Halifax, and you two got very sick.”

Fawn and I shifted in our seat. Zhirk remained a quiet lump on the floor. He’d closed his eyes, his whole being absorbed with listening. Uncle Todd closed his own eyes for a minute, then opened them, and continued. His voice started to get hoarse. Whatever he was going to say, he really didn’t like.

“Your parents were desperate. The plague was one of those that had developed immunity to modern antibiotics. The two of you were going to die. Your dad called me and asked to stand in on a ritual to try and save the two of you. Our casting was a dismal failure. The spells were not strong enough to fight the disease. Your mom got the idea to cast a different kind of spell. This one was an invocation to the other side of the life force, death. Cathy came up with the thought to barter a life for the two of yours. She convinced your dad it was the only way to save you two. So they worked a calling and attracted an entity of pure malevolence.”

I looked at Fawn who was wide-eyed. I think I was as well. Mom had called to Death to save us. Uncle Todd had tears rolling down his face. His features stilled as he exerted his will.

“They called it Semjaza. I think it was some kind of demon or avatar. They bargained for its assistance, and it agreed. Semjaza gave them the method to create and cast the spell to save your lives. Your dad had reservations, but like any parent, was willing to go to the extreme to save his children. They researched the spell for three days, and then fasted for two more, making sure that they were in harmony with the world around them before casting the spell.”

Uncle Todd stopped and looked at us. His eyes were haunted as he thought about how to say it. “The first part of the spell went without difficulty. It was the second part where things

got tricky. Your parents were so deeply into the natural part of the world, and to call something so unnatural upset a lot of things in and about them. They were committing a rape of life energy, drawing it off from the plants and animals around them, feeding it to Semjaza in exchange for your two lives.”

His voice cracked as he returned to the story. “I messed the spell up. You girls started screaming and collapsed as the magick began to flow into you. I saw pieces of you flaking and floating away to that thing your parents called up. Your dad saw what was happening and tried to abort the spell. The power had control by then. He and your mother were locked into the casting. When Mike stopped chanting his part of the spell, it began to collapse.” Uncle Todd looked bleak. It was like the color had gone out of him, and his clothing. It all felt like, I don’t know. Words can’t describe the sense of loss, of desolation, that I got from looking at him.

“I wasn’t as direct a part of the spell as you four were, and when Mike and Cathy started screaming, I froze. Your dad started chanting again, and yelled at me to save you two by completing the spell. Instead, I pulled you both from the circle and ran to the cars. You two were screaming like damned souls, that thing was howling in rage about something, I don’t remember what.”

We all paused to take breaths. Todd went on with the story. “I looked back and saw a swarm of black blobs emerge from the its mouth and float over to your parents. Wherever they touched, a gouge of flesh disappeared and blood spurted, and the blob returned to that demon. I didn’t watch any more, you two were screaming. The flaking had stopped, but something flowed back into the two of you when I pulled you off the pentagram. It was like a greasy smoke that emanated from your folks and the demon. It cut off when you were in the car.” His haunted look made him seem even thinner, gaunt like a starving man.

“I ran to the driver’s door and yanked it open. Your folks started screaming for me and I looked back. They had large pieces missing and Semjaza was screaming at them still.” Tears were streaming down Todd’s face as he forced himself to finish the narrative.

“Your mom looked right at me and I could see her pleading for me to come rescue her. Your dad was screaming in utter terror as those blobs took pieces of him. The ground was wet with blood.” Todd’s rate of speech quickened. “I panicked and drove like all hell was chasing me. When I got you two home, you were both unconscious. All I could think of was to put you in bed and talk with Ruth.”

“The next morning, when we checked on you, you were both like puppets. Eyes open and just lying in bed. No reaction to anything. Later that day, I noticed little wisps of something floating around the house. It seemed thickest near your door. I looked in and saw faint black smoke flowing into you. The black stuff was from the spell I guessed, so whatever happened was still going on.”

“Ruthie and I set up a quick circle. We weren’t as near as practiced, nor as powerful as your folks. The spell took all day and most of the night, but we managed to cast a spell that cut the link to whatever it was. You girls woke up the next morning like nothing ever happened, and we just carried on. You didn’t seem to remember what happened that night. You never really asked about your folks, and we just went along with that. Ruthie figured you’d ask eventually.” Uncle Todd drew a shaking breath.

“The hard part was listening to you scream on the anniversary of the casting. It’d happen right at the time the spell started, and stop at the time we blocked the spell from you. I don’t know why. I don’t know how. It just happened.”

“Other than that, you were normal, healthy kids. In fact, you never did get sick again from anything again after that night. For

that matter, now that I've thought about it, neither have I." He took a deep breath, and looked at me and Fawn. "That's the story. You now know as much as I remember. I hope it helps." He stood up, looking at Fawn and I. "Now you know, and lord knows, I want to forget it all." Uncle Todd shuffled tiredly into his bedroom and locked the door.

No one moved at all. I could hear Uncle Todd crying behind the door. I'm sure Fawn and Zhirk heard it too. We got up as silently as we could, and quietly left the house, which seemed changed after the story. Everything had a kind of loss to it, as if nothing was whole or would be again. Fawn surprised me, giving me a quick hug. She ran to her car, got in, and drove off without glancing back.

Zhirk and I got into his truck, and rode all the way back to the office in silence. I don't know that the story helped at all. It was confusing to me. We were going to die and they used 'black' magick to heal me and Fawn. Then my parents were eaten by something because they didn't finish the spell. Uncle Todd and Aunt Ruthie blocked the spell somehow, so it didn't keep putting something into us? That's what it sounded like to me.

I wanted to talk to Fawn in the worst way, but she had turned off her cell phone. I called her desk and Detective Marin answered and let me know that she had called in sick. Fawn would need a lot of alone time for this apparently. We knew something had gone wrong, but this was really opening old wounds we didn't know we had in each of us. Still, with Baldy being out there and stuff swirling around magick-wise, she'd be smarter to be with someone so they could cover her back.

I didn't know where to look so I borrowed a line from Uncle Todd talking about what his granddad told him about some place called Viet Nam - 'If you're stuck and can't do anything about a situation, get some sleep. It may have changed when you wake up'.



# Broken Bridge

Book Two of the *Glass Bottles* Series

J Dark



# 1

I SHOULD HAVE KNOWN I WAS BEING PLAYED.

“Let me repeat what you’ve said, to make certain I heard you accurately. You’re hiring me to find a white rabbit.”

It took nearly all my willpower to not ask if it was two meters tall, or wore a Victorian coat and carried a large pocket watch. I also snidely thought that it was too long after Spring for him to be wanting me to hunt down the Easter Bunny because he hadn’t gotten his favorite chocolate eggs.

“Mr. Cobb,” I repeated, with what I hoped was sympathetic patience, “I’m not really able to handle this kind of job very easily. Now if you’d take this problem to Larry Potter, he may well be able to find your rabbit without the huge charge you’d get from me.”

“You’re the one I need, not some wannabe finder. I gotta find my rabbit, and I gotta have you find her.” The petulant note in his voice was really getting irritating.

I am not the most patient person in the world, and he’d hit my limit. I gritted my teeth, and tried very hard to be polite. Like you’d expect, I didn’t quite try all that hard.

“Mr. Cobb, I don’t find lost animals. I don’t like using magick. You need magick to find a lost rabbit as fast as you’re wanting to. There’s no way I’d even know where to look and, to be honest, I’m not interested in looking. This kind of job is for a real private detective, or a magicker, not a finder. So tell you what: you get your lazy butt up out of my guest chair, go out the door, and go hire someone else. She or he can whip up a spell to find your little white bunny pretty quickly. Problem solved. Good day.”

Mr. Norman Cobb got up very slowly from the chair, and tried to go for intimidating. He stepped over to the edge of the desk, placed both hands on it and leaned forward, trying to get into my face and force me to back up. This action, and the invasion of my personal space, really started to piss me off.

“Ms. Fatelli,” Mr. Cobb said in a tense, frustrated voice. “I told you already. I don’t want no fuckin’ magicker. I want *you* to find my rabbit! Now either you start trying to locate my rabbit, or ...”

I respond even less well to threats, and grabbed the paperweight. He saw the motion and came around the side of the desk to stop me from throwing it, and probably to try and intimidate me further. I spun my chair to face him and, as he cleared the edge of the table, I planted my stiletto heel in between his legs, making contact with those soft and extremely tender testicles. He gasped and screamed at the same time, sounding more like a duck than a man. He fell to his knees, then toppled

onto his side, moaning. He curled about his injured area like a fetus.

I stood up out of the chair, all one-point-six meters of me. “Mr. Cobb,” I said to him. “I don’t find lost animals, I don’t like threats, and I don’t like your attitude. When you can walk, get out. Oh, and if you want to file an assault charge, I have a camera that records all my talks in here, just in case someone tries to pull stunts like yours.” I sat back down in my chair and waited until “Mr. Norman Cobb” got back up off the ground.

He groaned again, staggered towards the door, then stopped. I saw his shoulders tighten. I stood up quickly; when someone does that they’re usually getting a good mad up just before they try to take your head off. Then his whole body started shuddering, and I heard him whine like a wounded animal. *What the hell?*

He turned around slowly, tears leaking down his cheeks. He stood there, halfway to the door, gazing at me with the most intense anguish radiating from him.

“Please, Ms. Fatelli, I’m ... sorry. I need you, not Mr. Potter. The rabbit, that’s my daughter. She’s been changed. Somehow, something changed her. She was playing in the yard, and I heard her scream, and I got to the door and saw her shrink into a rabbit and run off. Now she’s missing. Halloween is tomorrow. I’m afraid someone’s going to catch her, and keep her, or kill her. I know a magicker could do it easier, and cheaper, but I can’t go that way, Ms. Fatelli, I ... just can’t.”

I sat back down and looked, really looked, Norman Cobb over. He gave every semblance of a man broken by a need so desperate that he’d do anything to fill it. Hardcore crack addicts look less strung out. This made no sense. It bothers me when things make no sense. Why would a person come to me to find a magically-changed girl, and then refuse to go to the people who

could help him most? I decided to take a chance and look at him with my mage sight.

Everyone has mage sight — theoretically, at least. It's that, even in a world where magick has been shown to exist, most people will run from it in a heartbeat. And, of the other ten percent who don't, maybe one in ten of those will actually sit down to study it, and, of those, only about one in fifty actually have the perseverance to become really good. What this means is that magickers — people who *really* know magick — are few and far between.

When I looked at him, I just about went blind as the bright essence of him assaulted my eyes. Looking at a fae can do that to you, especially if the fae in question is strong. All fae are strong in magick, much more so than humans, generally. So they tend to glow when viewed with the sight. "Mr. Cobb" glowed like a blast furnace. The recoil stabbed through my eyes like a knife. I jammed my hands against my eyes to lessen the pain.

Mr. Cobb straightened and threw off the glamour that shrouded him. His whole image changed. Instead of a rumpled grey business suit, he wore a deep violet shirt that looked like silk, tights of deep green, and a deep rich brown leather vest. A short, nasty-looking sword, about as long as my forearm, hung off of his left hip. He gained in height as well, standing just a shade under two and a half meters tall, and rail thin.

"Ms. Fatelli, now do you understand why it is so important to find my daughter?" He rasped out.

"Well, for starters," I said, deadpan. "Because she's your daughter?" That's me, life of the party.

I swear he growled slightly at that, and then took a deep breath. "My daughter has been turned into a rabbit. I need to find her before something irrevocable happens. There are other things involved ... other magick. I am also certain that you have

experience with this other kind of magick. That is why I have come to you.”

“Mr. Cobb, or whoever you are,” I replied. “I have no idea what you’re talking about. What kind of magick do you mean, exactly?”

The Elf lord straightened and extended one arm. Just out from the tip of the arm, an object coalesced into view, hanging suspended in the air. When I saw what it was, my stomach flipped over, and I almost started whimpering. He was showing me a glass bottle. The same glass bottle that I had seen destroyed sixteen months ago during the biggest living nightmare of my life. I wanted to curl up and hide in a corner, but that really wasn’t an option right now. Zhirk would have told me to get after it; he’d have my back. Only he wasn’t here anymore. He’d died when the Fallen Angel, Ahiah, had killed him in the front office.

I stared at the bottle like a bird hypnotized by a snake. Cobb stared at me like a starving wolf watches a crippled sheep.

“Ms. Fatelli, you have seen this before, haven’t you? The human who changed my daughter was attempting to use this on her.”

“How the hell did the guy get that thing, and why are you sure he’s human? If he was, why didn’t your daughter just change back after she got away?” My voice was high-pitched, as I was nearly screaming at him. I was angry and scared at the same time. I think that’s a standard reaction when you have the absolute life scared out of you like I just had.

He didn’t bat an eye, nor show any reaction to my outburst. He just waited, absolutely, completely, nerve-wrackingly still. He watched me a moment more, then replied with a maddeningly neutral voice.

“I believe that he had made a mistake in the spell, that the rabbit was not what he wanted. My daughter may have shifted before he could complete the spell, and he bound her to that

form since his spell was tailored for a human, not a rabbit.” He shuddered slightly and, if he had not been so still prior to that, I would not have noticed.

Cobb continued in that strange, neutral voice. “He used cold iron in the spell.”

Cold iron. Anathema to the fae. I’m not sure why, but cold iron is about the worst thing that a fae would face, and most of them would bolt away if given a chance. It’s their poison. A single nail made of cold iron is enough to seriously weaken the most powerful of fae spells, and any typical one is blown away like dust. I wasn’t sure what that did in this case, but it probably had something to do with why this child was still a rabbit. Maybe it locked spells like shape-shifting. Who knows? I sure didn’t. But the bottle — the fucking bottle — terrified me. I’d never thought to see it again after the huge implosion at the cabin. But god, or, in this case, magick, has got a real warped sense of humor.

I had to admit one thing: I did have more experience with that damned bottle than the rest of the world. I wish I didn’t. That bottle sucks your whole self, soul and all, out of you. It converts your soul, and anything that you were or might have been, into magickal energy. You’re gone; nothing’s left. No soul to reincarnate, or go to heaven, or hell, or wherever you believe souls go. It’s a complete destruction of you. The holder can get one huge boost of power, but to keep at high levels, the user has to keep putting more people in the bottle.

I looked back again at Mr. Cobb. I wanted to turn and run. I couldn’t though. It wasn’t a rabbit anymore; it was a little girl.

“All right, I’ll help you find your daughter, but I’m going to get full discretion on who or what’s used to do the job, or we can part ways right now.”

Cobb smiled and said, “Done.”

Like I said earlier: I should have known I was being played.

# Building Baby Brother

Steven Radecki



# 1

“DAD, CAN I HAVE A BABY BROTHER?”

I paused, still holding the Lego piece in my hand.

“Are you sure you want one?” I tried to sound casual about it. “You know you’d have to help take care of him. He’d be in your toys ...”

“I know, Dad.”

Josh gave me an exasperated look. We’d been through all this be-fore.

It wasn’t that I necessarily wanted to deprive Josh of the sibling experience. I’d been through it myself. I also knew that it wasn’t all play time and brotherly love.

“Okay, Josh,” I said, turning to face him. “It’s your choice: you can have a baby brother or too many toys.”

Yeah, I admit it. It was kind of a cheap shot. But it was a whole lot easier than explaining the real reason.

Before answering, Josh took a quick look around his bedroom. He surveyed his collections of Lego sets, action figures, and the stacks of video game discs.

“Too many toys,” he finally announced, nodding firmly in confirmation. With that decided, he turned his attention back to our current construction project, snapping a new piece into place.

Whew, I thought. Dodged that bullet. Again.

Later that night, after finally getting Josh to bed, I settled myself at my desk with the intent to pay the bills and deal with other house-hold-related recordkeeping. Glancing at the clock, I saw that it was quite a bit later than I’d hoped. I considered putting off those tedious chores for just one more night, but knew there was no guaran-tee that tomorrow night would be any better than this one. The odds were that it was unlikely to be. It’s amazing how many excuses, and other delaying tactics, young children will resort to rather than simply closing their eyes and going to sleep. It’s probably not quite as astonishing, though, as when you look away for a moment, only to turn back to find their head against the pillow and their breathing steady and slow.

Might as well get it done, I encouraged myself, barely succeeding in fighting back a yawn. Most of these people do like to get paid on time.

It’s strange, but when I’m working, I usually prefer it to be quiet. At night, though, and when tackling these kinds of tasks, I find a little background noise comforting — just something playing at low volume so I’d be able to hear Josh if he needed me.

I wasn’t really in the mood for music, so I turned on the small tele-vision that sat on a low cabinet across from my desk. The screen lit up with a graphic and bloody scene from an episodic police procedural.

Ugh. I can catch the late news if I want to see that ...

I changed the channel. Again. And then again.

Fairly quickly, I despaired of finding any programming that was not an overly gritty adult drama or a talk show host chatting about the latest geopolitical happenings with sparkling celebrities who had also dropped in to discuss their latest motion picture, television series, concert tour, stint in rehab, or any combination of the above.

My fingers paused on the remote control when I caught sight of a small doe-eyed boy moving through blue-tinged darkness across a moonlit hillside. I recognized it as a scene from Kubrick's last science fiction movie. While it wasn't among my favorites, neither was it among the worst, and I hadn't planned to really watch it anyway.

It might have been avoidance behavior, or simply fatigue, but my mind kept drifting when it was supposed to be keeping track of which payments I'd already made. I tried to focus on my balances due, but my eyes and attention kept wandering back to the images on the television screen. I watched the small artificial boy move along the scenery, and I began to wonder if it was really possible to create something like him.

Creating the software to do it, that I could almost imagine. That's my day job. I plan and develop computer programs. I try to make the hardware do what my clients want it to do, to produce the results that they want from it. I don't typically design or build the actual circuitry or components. I leave that to the electrical and mechanical engineers. I was certain that I could never construct a cybernetic being as complex as the ones presented in that film.

By the time I finally went to bed, though, I found that I was still thinking about it, unable to banish the notion from my thoughts. I tried telling myself that there were technological and financial realities to be consider — ones that would make such a project almost impossible for me to achieve alone.

## *Building Baby Brother*

After being unsuccessful in wholly silencing the persistent voice in my head, I finally decided that only thinking about the notion would cost me nothing. Well... other than perhaps the price of the loss of a little sleep or a few unusual dreams. So, I closed my eyes and let my mind see how far it could go with the idea.

It was still working the idea the next morning and, after I had dropped Josh off at school, I began to realize that not only might it be possible, but that it might also be practical using only off-the-shelf components. With the large number of computer stores in the area, I thought it possible to get everything I might need. If I couldn't find it at the one of the many shops, I had several friends who worked for some of the major computer and chip companies. They could probably get their hands on whatever else I might need. I even began mentally composing a proposed shopping list: motherboards, memory, hard drives ...

While I suffered from no delusions that what I might create would be anywhere near as complex as the one I'd seen in that movie — or from any movie, for that matter — I had, in the span of one evening, gone from “That's impossible!” to “How hard it could be?”

Well, a lot harder than I thought, it turned out. Much harder.

# Children of the Wrong Time

Flavia Idà



# ONE

**M**ICHAEL HOLMES AND NORA SAVINS passed through the bottleneck of the security checkpoint, stepped into the ornate atrium of the Department of Vital Privileges, and looked at the white marble statue of the Founding Father.

The Founding Father beamed down on them above the busy crowd, a handsome young man with long black hair, who carried in one hand an ancient movie script rolled up into a scroll and, in the other hand, an auto racer's helmet. The wreath of laurels at his feet hadn't wilted since the national celebration of his birthday.

"Keanu Reeves," Michael said reverently. "Best thing America ever gave us."

He pointed at the inscription carved in tall letters on the base of the life-sized statue. "And his words that began it all."

He recited the movie line, known to every citizen older than six.

*“You need a license to drive, you need a license to fish, you need a license to own a dog, but any moron can become a parent.”*

Under the inscription he read the First Law of the Republic: *“Never Again Any Moron.”*

Behind the statue was the Republic’s flag, a field of blue showing an ancestry chart with golden stars in place of family names.

Michael looked at Nora. “Are you all right?”

Nora made a small headshake for *no*.

“Do I look okay?” she asked.

“I told you, you look great.”

“Yeah, well, all you have to do is pick the blue suit over the grey suit. Me, I have to be conservative, but not dowdy; feminine, but not trampy ...”

Michael brushed aside her concerns with a good-natured laugh.

“Come on, Grumps. Smile.”

He glanced at his holofolder marked *Reproduction – Application One*.

“Here we go,” he said softly. He passed his hand over the elevator plaque and stepped in after her.

Anxiety had dropped a wall between them. Too many worries, too many hopes, made noise in their minds. Was he a good provider, and did they really say he must provide for eighteen years? Was she a good homemaker, and did they really say she must make a home for eighteen years?

The elevator was full of people, each headed to their private petition. One elderly couple, the husband in a medchair, was certainly on their way to the Office of End-of-Life Privileges. The man was breathing with difficulty, a portable oxygen mask over his face. The woman wore a look of quiet anguish.

Nora eyed them on the sly. She thought it seemed cruel that a man that sick should be required to bring his application in person; but, of course, it was because anyone might make the application in his name with malice aforethought.

Would these two be granted their License for End-Of-Life Privileges? she wondered. Would she and Michael one day have to bring a similar application?

The elevator bell dinged; the doors swooshed open. People streamed down the hallway in a mingled chatter of voices. Michael and Nora found the door of the office marked *Reproduction – Application One*. Michael bent to kiss Nora’s cheek, then leaned into the blinking Sesame panel and said, “Open”.



# Grimaulkin

L. A. Jacob



# ONE

## *FREEDOM 2000*

**T**HE AIR WAS CLEAN OUT HERE, making me think of renewal and rebirth. I stood outside, taking in a deep lungful, closing my eyes to better feel the microscopic bits of pure summer heat hanging in the air, ready to burst forth in a month or two.

“C’mon, man, I ain’t got all day!”

I snapped open my eyes to focus on the cabbie standing next to his yellow car. He was the first man I set my eye on here outside. Glaring at me was a tall, dark man with a Yankees baseball cap.

“Just a minute,” I said, and did what I said I wasn’t going to do: I looked back.

The door clanged shut behind me, its iron bars sliding into the side wall. I heard echoes of more cold iron being bolted into place, to keep the men and women inside. I don’t know what I

thought I was going to see in looking backward. Someone waving goodbye from one of the high windows of the cells?

“Come ON.”

The driver got in the car when I moved toward the cab. I suppose the cab and the \$50 in my pocket was the least the prison could do for me after I'd been their guest these last five years. Now, due to my reaching the adult age of 18, I was free.

I got into the back of the car. It smelled of cigarettes and abused leather. I hadn't even shut the door before the driver took off from the front door of the William F. Blackstone Prison. I looked up at its brick facade. Maybe it was a little lighter than I remembered it. There were no bars on the outer windows, beyond which were the offices and visitors' rooms (hardly used). The guards could retreat there if a riot ever broke out. Not that one ever happened while I was there.

The circular drive let me take a good long look at the building before the cab shot out like a bullet, heading to the wrought iron gates. I glanced at the guard who waved us through. I didn't know him. What did I expect? A “Hey, good luck, Mike”?

The very second I crossed the threshold of the outer gate, I felt the magic.

It was power, pure and simple, that surrounded the prison. Inside Blackstone Prison, there were obvious — and hidden — runes and markings to stop magic from being used by the prison's occupants. That didn't stop people from talking about magic. Or practicing some theories.

To see if the magic was active out here, I spread out my hand on my lap so that the driver couldn't see, and concentrated on the center of my palm. I felt it grow hot, then a small flame appeared.

I quickly quenched the flame and looked up at the driver, who was looking at me through the rear-view mirror, as I expected.

“You're goin' to the bus station, right?”

“Right,” I said.

That’s what they told me when they gave me these clothes that didn’t fit. I knew they were from other — possibly dead — prisoners. I wore a long-sleeved button-down blue shirt with the Polo logo in faded blue above the right breast, threadbare at the elbows. The pants were two sizes too big and, if I didn’t have the belt, they would have been down around my knees. The shoes were also too big, but at least I didn’t feel like I was wearing clown shoes.

There was no way I would have fit into the clothes I came in with. There’s not much to do in prison other than read and work out. Since reading material wasn’t exactly prolific — I read *Stranger in a Strange Land* eight times and hated it each time — I’d pushed myself to the limits and beyond in the gym.

“What were you in for?” the cabbie asked.

I looked out the window.

“You don’ wanna talk about it?”

“No. I don’t.”

“How long were you there?”

“Five years.”

“Oh, that’s nothing.”

“Yeah. Easy for you to say.” I glared at him through the rear-view mirror. “I’m not exactly in the best mood for conversation.”

“Jeez,” he muttered, looking away.



As the cabbie shut up and drove, I looked out at the quiet world. I put the window down; it only went about half way before stopping. It was enough, I suppose.

I could smell the fields of upstate New York — animal smells of cow and horse dung. Even this close to the prison there were still some domestic animals, small local farms that I would

later find out could be considered “organic”. I could feel the magic in the air, tingling, giving me goose bumps. I could use the magic myself if I wanted to. I could probably fly to the bus station almost as quickly as this guy was driving. However, I was let loose from prison with a simple caveat: that I could no longer summon any entities. As that was what had gotten me into trouble this time, I had agreed.

“Summoning” is a broad term in magical circles, especially with the so-called Magical Cops, the Rosicrucians. What I just did in the back seat could be considered a summoning, if I had used something outside of my body to create the fire. However, I used my own will, and my own heat, to manifest a flame. If I used my own will and energy to fly, I could probably get about twenty feet down the road before falling out of the sky. I would need an entity, something outside of my body, to keep me aloft if I wanted to fly to the bus station.

Being in prison gave me plenty of time to work on my semantics so I could argue my point if necessary — if I got caught. If I used energy and power outside of myself to augment my own abilities, was that a summoning? I could argue that it wasn't. If I had wings, then yes, I could use magic to fly. But I have legs, so I can use the energy around me to run faster (that is, if my body could handle running faster, which, in its present, well-toned condition, I supposed it could).

Of course, if it was ever found out that I was using magic in daily life, the Rosicrucians would swoop down on me like a flock of pigeons on bread. So, if I used magic, I had to keep it tightly under wraps.

We drove out of the more rural area of upstate New York into the city of Troy. The cabbie sped through the streets like he had melting ice in the backseat and had to get it to the freezer because his life depended on it. I supposed I should have talked

to him, but I really wasn't in the mood to bare my soul to a cabbie. I needed to bare my soul to someone else.

This part of town was full of boarded-up properties. People of different races other than my own thronged the neighborhoods. It didn't look like a pleasant area for a white boy like me. But, if I had to, I could take care of myself. I'd learned a few things in that gym: boxing, wrestling mixed and cobbled together martial arts, and magic.

As the cabbie drove, avoiding people and cars, running yellow lights, and rolling through stop signs, I slunk a little lower in the seat. I didn't want to end up back in prison because someone looked at me like I was fresh meat and I had to defend myself.

The bus station was a square building that had been top-of-the-line ... in the '50's. Now, it had a few boarded-up sections of its own. Graffiti covered the side we approached. The cabbie pulled up to the curb just behind a bus that was dropping off passengers at the front door.

"Your stop," said the cabbie.

"Thanks." I put my hand on the door. I heard a hum and saw that the window was being closed, probably from his end.

"Yeah."

As soon as I shut the door, the cabbie peeled around the bus and took off.

I thrust a hand into my pocket. The two twenties and a ten were still there.

I turned to see a set of cloudy glass doors that looked like they had been there since the Cold War. I pushed through them to the interior of the bus station.



I looked around for a paper schedule. Instead, I found the schedules displayed on large TV's attached to the wall. I had two options: go home to New Haven, and see what awaited me there; or find out if my older sister Evelyn — who we all called Evie — had stayed in Providence, after graduating Brown University.

I surrendered to the Fates — and my budget. I approached the counter. The young dark-skinned girl with straight bright red hair stood behind the counter, smiled and said, “Good afternoon. How can I help you?” I thought she looked weird with the red hair; I said nothing about that.

“How much is a one-way trip to Providence?”

“Twenty-five dollars.”

“And New Haven, Connecticut?”

She consulted a screen. “Thirty-two, seventy.”

“I'll take the trip to Providence.”

One thing about being a wizard: a lot of times fate — the Universe, the Great Creator, God, what have you — likes to intervene for reasons that come to fruition in time. This was probably one of those times, so I let it happen.

I boarded the bus, handed over my ticket to the driver, and found a seat. These seats were far more comfortable than any in prison, that was for sure.

We left Troy and headed to the Massachusetts Turnpike. I ended up dozing most of the way to Providence, since there's only so much trees, rest areas, and cars a person can handle watching.

I woke up to see the Providence skyline in the twilight. The sun set behind me, illuminating the skyline from behind some buildings. We went past the city, two exits beyond a bit of a traffic jam, and arrived at a large bus station.

I disembarked and looked around. Magic was here, too. Lots of it. I knew the history and antiquity of the buildings powered this magic. This was the town of H. P. Lovecraft, after all.

I saw a pay phone and picked up the handle. Its line was dead. There was an entire wall of pay phones, and I tried them all. Nothing.

I noticed most people seemed to be talking to little large bullet-shaped objects they held near their ears. When they finished talking, they would sometimes close these devices like a *Star Trek* communicator, or just slip them into a pocket or purse. I'd read about these things in one of the old *Time* magazines that we had in the prison library: cellular telephones. How amazing. But it didn't help me.

Again, Fate intervened.

"You need any help?" asked a girl. She was cute, about sixteen, wearing a mini-skirt, a pink shirt with a short jacket, and thigh-high platform boots. Her makeup was thick and runny, like she'd run, or had been through a short, but intense, crying jag. I looked down at her — I didn't realize that I had gotten this tall in five years.

"I need a phone," I said. "And a phone book."

She laughed. "They don't have phone books anymore." She pulled out one of those cellular phones from a humongous tote bag she carried. "Here, use mine. Call 411."

"411," I repeated, easily memorizing the short number. I took the phone and dialed. Nothing happened.

"Press the green button."

"Oh." I did, and held the phone awkwardly to my ear. A computerized voice said, "Cingular 411. City and state, please."

"Providence, Rhode Island."

"Please state the name or business you wish to call."

"Evelyn LeBonte."

"One moment, please." There were a series of beeps. "The number is ... 401-548-9664. The number again ..."

"Okay—"

"Dialing."

“Oh.” But I had memorized the number.

The girl looked at me, amused. Okay, so I was a tourist in this world of technology, but she would be a tourist in my world of magic. I could understand her slight grin. It seemed I had a bit of catching up to do.

The phone rang three times before picking up. “Hello, you have reached Evie and Dominic.”

Goose pimples formed on my arms, hearing her voice again, I wanted to reach through the phone and somehow teleport there. I could probably do it, but not without an entity. Her voice continued, “Neither of us are home right now, so if you could leave a message after the beep, we’ll get back to you.”

It beeped.

“Evie. Evie, It’s Mike.”

I paused. What was I going to say? I heard a loud click and a whine of feedback. I held the phone away from my ear.

“Mike?”

She sounded breathless, like she had bounded across the room to get to me. I could envision her doing just that.

“Yeah.” I took in a shuddering breath, holding back emotion from my voice. “Yeah, it’s Mike.”

“How do I know it’s really you?”

“Ask me something only I would know about you.”

I could hear her breathing, catching her breath. She said, in an accusatory tone, “What’s my favorite color?”

I thought for a moment. “It used to be fire-engine red.”

“No, no, no, that’s too easy.”

“Phil used to say that color made you look cheap when you painted it on your nails.”

“Mi — Mikey?” I heard her swallow a sob.

“Yeah.”

“Oh, my God, Mikey ...”

“Yeah.”

I looked at the girl. She was watching me, curious. I wondered if she could hear Evie's strangled voice.

Evie asked me, "Where are you?"

"I'm at the bus terminal in Providence."

"You wait there. I'll pick you up. I'm in a green Camry."

"I don't know what a Camry looks like. Is it a car?"

"Look for the green car. God, Mikey ... Don't go anywhere!"

"I won't."

She hung up. I looked at the phone trying to figure out how to hang up.

"A Camry is a car," said the girl, as she held her hand out for the phone. I gave it to her. She pressed the red button and tossed it back into the tote. "Have you been under a rock these past few years?"

"You could say that," I said. "I appreciate you letting me use the phone."

"No worries, mate." She smiled. "I can wait with you while your friend picks you up."

"She's not my friend. She's my sister." I turned around. I noticed a hot dog cart, and my stomach growled. I hoped the girl didn't hear it. "I guess I'll wait outside."

The girl followed me out the front door, where another bus deposited a new set of passengers. We stood off to the side in the late twilight.

"What's your name?" she asked me.

"Mike."

"I'm Ashleigh."

I held out my hand; she took it. I shook her hand, being careful not to squeeze too tightly. In prison, a handshake was often a small contest to see who was the strongest.

"So have you been under a rock?"

"I've been abroad."

"Where?"

“Greece.”

“They don’t have cell phones in Greece?”

“Not where I was. No, um ...”

“Reception?”

“Yeah.” I noticed her backpack. “You in school?”

“Yeah. I just came from my friend’s house.”

“Aren’t your parents going to be worried?”

She shrugged. “Foster parents. They don’t care.”

“Oh, I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be.” She stood very close to me. I could feel her nipples poking my arm.

I turned to her and gave her my most winning smile. “Ashleigh, I don’t swing that way.”

She pouted. “Figures.”

I laughed. “I appreciate the offer, though.”

“Yeah, you would.” She looked me up and down. “Well, you’ll have a line of guys just trying to get in your pants.”

I laughed, and I think I blushed. “I’m not here for that. I’m here to see my sister.”

We made small talk after that. She told me who the president was, and a little about the current state of the world. I got her to talk about her friend and her life, so I could avoid talking about mine.

I saw a green car pass by very slowly.

“There’s your ride,” Ashleigh said.

# Grimaulkin Tempted

L. A. Jacob



# ONE

THE DJ BEGAN PLAYING SOME SLOW MUSIC and started announcing the wedding party. They all entered and took places before the head table. Then we all rose when Evelyn and Domenic came in. They had their first dance, then the wedding party had their dance, and then they all settled in.

“Hm,” said Scott. “They didn’t greet the guests.”

“Just as well,” I said, glad I didn’t have to shake my father’s hand.

They immediately started serving lunch. The soup was salty, the salad bland and wilting, and the steak tarragon was nothing more than a chunk of meat with some salt and pepper. But the stuffed potatoes were to die for.

Danny said, “Evie’s motioning for you, Mike.”

*Grimaulkin Tempted*

I had my back to her, so I turned around. She was waving at me to come over. I got up and stood across from her, then squatted down so I was at her level.

“How’s everything?”

“I hope you didn’t pay an arm and a leg for the food.”

“Too late now, right?” she laughed. “Listen, after the father-daughter and mother-son dance, will you mind if you danced with me?”

“I don’t know how.” My dancing consisted of boxing footwork.

“I’ll lead,” she said with a smile. “It’s not complicated.”

“All right.”

After lunch came the required dances. Then the DJ announced, “Evelyn Marcello would like a dance with her brother, Michael LeBonte.”

I got up. I expected the whole room to turn and stare at me. They didn’t. Evelyn waited out in the middle of the dance floor as I crossed it. I had watched the other dancers intently, and saw that it was mostly standing around, shifting from foot to foot, without moving much. I stared at her awkwardly.

She smiled, and took my hands. Placing them on her waist, they started to play “Faithfully” by Journey.

“You know this song used to make me cry,” I said.

“It made me cry after you left.”

I looked down at the sequins on her dress. “You look beautiful.”

“Thanks. I wish I could see you in a tux. You would have been more handsome than Dom.”

I chuckled. “We can’t get married. Isn’t that still illegal?”

“It sure is.”

“I see Becky filled out nicely.”

I felt a tap on my shoulder. “Hey.”

It was Dom. “Oh, you want to dance, too?” I put my hands on his waist, and guided him away from Evie.

“You’re crazy, you know that?” he said, while I heard laughter.

“I’ve been wanting to do this since I saw you.”

“Oh, really?”

I laughed to try and diffuse the situation. I let him go, brushed the front of his tux, and gave him a kiss on the cheek.

“You take care of my sister.”

“Or else?”

He knew the truth about me and hadn’t mentioned it to Evie. His eyes were shining, from drink or from happiness, I couldn’t tell.

“You know it,” I said, guiding him back to my sister.



# Homecoming

*A War Mage Novel*

Jake Logan



# TWO

★ *WORCESTER, MONDAY* ★

**L**ogan Airport was busy at 5 a.m. on a Monday. Somehow Brent had lost a day in travel, but he slept most of it on the three planes that got him here.

He rented a car, took the insurance, and picked out a 2004 Chevy Impala. He caught Route 90, the Massachusetts Turnpike, while listening to a familiar Boston station playing Dire Straits. Worcester didn't have its own rock and roll radio station, so the airways had to pick up stations from the big cities of Boston and Providence, Rhode Island.

Familiar landmarks on Route 90 made him smile. Even the signs on the turnpike did: Allston/Brighton, Weston, Route 128, Framingham... I-495. Route 146, one of the Worcester exits.

## *Homecoming*

He took that exit. From there, he continued to Route 122A, going to Worcester Center. Traffic was heavy around Worcester, due to signal lights and people trying to get to work early on Monday morning. He checked the clock in the car — it was near 8 a.m. Chances were his mother might still be home, getting ready for work, his father probably already at the police station for his job.

He drove to Edward Street, past the house. Still white siding, small for five, but too big for the remaining two. No cars were parked in the driveway, and the deck in the back had a mosquito net covering it. His heart gave a little leap — it was as he had left it. He continued down the street to the end, where it met MA-9. He took a sharp right, then another right into the parking lot of a large building which housed different doctors' offices for the University of Massachusetts Hospital across the street.

UMass Hospital, a sanctuary for vampires.

When he was 16, Brent had gone to work in the transport department in UMass, and met Dr. Bates, who openly stated he was a vampire. Vampires were legal in Massachusetts and most of the liberal New England states, but in other states, such as the Deep South, they were chased out at least, destroyed at worst. When Brent left for the Army, they were talking about making vampirism federally legal.

Brent walked into the medical building instead of the hospital, to the second floor, down the well-worn carpeted hallway, to the door that said, "Dr. Timothy M. Banant, Endocrinologist." Brent took a deep breath and opened the door. His hazel eyes lit immediately to the frosted sliding glass doors on the other side of the room. He went to the window and it took a moment before the glass slid open.

The woman with reddish-auburn hair and round glasses was looking at something on her desk as she asked, "Can I hel—" She looked up. Her jaw dropped.

“I was wondering if —”

“Brent!”

He grinned as she jumped up from her seat, ran around the desk and threw open the door that separated the office from the waiting room. Brent caught her in his arms when she ran into them. She was a petite woman, so catching her wasn't difficult.

“Hi, Mom,” he said, hugging her. No one else was in yet. She stepped back a moment, looking up at him, her hazel eyes welling up with tears.

“Oh, my God, Brent — how — are —” She threw her arms around him again. “How long are you here?” she said, muffled in his uniform.

“About a month.” Three weeks, four days to be exact.

“Why didn't you tell me?” She pulled back, putting her small hands on his biceps.

“I've been on planes since they gave me leave. I figured getting here was more important.”

His mother looked him up and down. “They haven't been feeding you,” she said. He knew he was fit and trim, hardly any fat on him at all. The Army did that to a person.

“Mom...”

“Did you call your father?”

“I thought I would go see him after I get a shower.”

“You need the keys?”

“Um, yeah.”

She walked back to the office. “Is Keithy still out of work?” he called.

“He was out last week.”

Brent set his jaw, refraining from saying anything. His mother knew how he felt about Keithy and his “injury”. Now was not the time or place to discuss it.

“I'll get these back to you at lunch.”

“With a Ruben from Jake's.”

## *Homecoming*

He laughed. “Yes, Mom.” His mother kissed him and sat down. An old man came in and held the door open for him. Brent murmured his thanks. He glanced at the old man, who smiled at him.

He walked to the car, and drove back to his parent’s house. He unlocked the door to hear barking. The big German Shepherd came bounding out and leapt up, placing his huge front paws on Brent’s shoulders.

“Pickles!” Brent rubbed the dog’s head, scratching his ears, as the dog licked his face. Brent had hoped that Pickles would remember him. The two had been near inseparable since high school, when he got the German Shepherd. The K9 unit tried to train Pickles for basic work but he was the rebel of the litter. They finally put him up for auction and Brent’s father won the bid.

“That’s a good boy,” he said, and the dog jumped down. He took off his backpack and set it down on the floor in the foyer.

He walked through the impeccably clean house to his room, as it was since he left but dusted frequently. The clothes he pulled out of his drawer smelled freshly laundered. He pulled out what he needed and got undressed.

Pickles was sniffing at his backpack. “Don’t piss on it,” Brent said, padding naked across the room to the door. He picked up the backpack, bringing it with him to the bedroom. After locking the front door, he walked over to the bathroom and took a long, much-desired hot shower. Finally, he wasn’t encased in a layer of dust or dirt.

Pickles waited on his bed as he usually did. He and Brent played tug of war for a short time with the wet towel. Brent flipped the towel at Pickles who dove out of the way before it hit him. Brent pulled on his underwear. Those fit, however his denim shorts were a little too big. He chuckled as he threaded a belt through the hoops.

He pulled on an AC/DC t-shirt — it was a little tight across the chest, but still fit. He got on socks and sneakers.

He put Pickles out to the dog run. He stood at the credenza by the back door that held the fancy china, the set of dishes that were taken out for holidays. Along the top of the credenza were pictures of the family. In the center was his official Army picture in formal dress greens. He looked so young there, less than two years ago.

Keithy's picture showed a big broad man, his arm around Brent's shoulders. It was the last picture before the accident. Before Keithy stopped driving.

Another picture was of his sister, Lori. Her three kids were gathered around her, dressed in swimsuits, as she sat in a lounge chair by a nondescript pool somewhere. There were no pictures of her and her ex-husband, Alan, anywhere on the credenza.

When Pickles came back in, Brent made him pirouette before tossing a treat to him. "I'll be back, okay, big boy?" He found his old phone, plugged in the wall at his nightstand. He thought he was due for an upgrade by now. He unplugged it, flipped it open, and dialed the home landline. Hearing the home phone ring, he nodded, confirming that it worked.

Brent glanced at the clock on the phone. Nine. Plenty of time to see Dad. He flipped it shut and headed out to the car.

Brent parked in the tiny parking lot for visitors. He walked to the front of the building, built as a state of the art in the '70's but now rough around the edges like the men. As he got to the door, someone shut the door in his face. With an angry sigh, he tore the door open.

He walked into a foyer area lined with wooden benches on either side. The person who had slammed the door in his face sat at one bench, looking angry and nervous at the same time.

Brent walked up to the glass window and leaned on the counter. Beyond the window he could see officers both

## *Homecoming*

uniformed and plain-clothes, working. The desks and chairs beyond were metal and beaten, old and well-used, like a lot of the plain-clothes guys. The female officer talked to him through the small speaker set in the window. “Yes?”

“I’d like to see Detective Jim Rogers.”

“In regards to?”

“I’m his son. From Afghanistan.”

“I’ll check if he’s in. Please take a seat.”

Brent sat down on the well-worn wooden benches across from the guy. The man glared at Brent, as if the reason he was here was his fault. Brent glared back at him, daring the guy to start something.

“What,” the guy snapped at him.

“Nothing,” said Brent, turning to look through the glass beyond the receptionist. This wasn’t the first time he’d come to visit his father. A few of the uniforms glanced out at him, and one or two waved to him. He smiled and waved back.

He looked up to see his father moving on the left-hand side of the room. He threaded his way between desks and came to the side door leading to the waiting area. Brent stood up to meet him. He was a large man, tall and broad like Brent, but with a paunch Brent didn’t have. Because he was losing his hair, to make things easier, he went bald. He had Brent’s angular face that was filling out, however; not as chiseled as his own.

“Brent!” He pulled Brent into a bear hug. “How are you? Are you here to stay?”

“Just a month,” he said.

“At least for Fourth of July, that’s good. Come on back.”

People called him by name as he followed his father to a desk behind a partition and diagonally under the stairs. “I got a new partner. Luke gets in around 10.” His father hooked a chair over for Brent. “Coffee?”

“As long as it’s not the same that the Army has.”

His father laughed. “Cream, no sugar?”

“Yep.”

His father walked to the coffee station which was within view of the desk. Brent looked around — his father had moved from the middle of the room to the edge, closer to the glass-enclosed office of the captain of detectives. His father returned with the coffee, the stirrer sticking out of it. “How is it over there?”

“Do you want the line we’re fed or the truth?”

“*Que est veritas*,” said his father. “What’s in your gut?”

Leave it to his father to get right to the emotional heart of the matter. “It’s a worthless fight. The people don’t trust us, don’t understand the idea of freedom and liberty. We’re helping them so that the Taliban can come sweeping back to a clean country.”

“Damn. You’re there for how much longer?”

“Two years. Then college.”

“Good thing you have plans. Better than your worthless brother.”

“What’s up with that?”

His father shrugged. “He’s screwed the system, that’s all. Got the right doctors to write the right things.”

“Should I do some —”

His father said, “No. Leave him alone.”

“I can cast something —”

“It’s not worth it, Brent.” He smiled and pointed to a small stack of files in a file holder on his desk. “At least my unsolveds are less than my solveds.” He drank his own coffee. “Did you talk to your mother?”

“She wants lunch.”

He chuckled.

“Hey, Brent.” A man came over and clapped a pair of hairy hands on Brent’s shoulders. “Back home?”

## *Homecoming*

Brent craned his neck to look at the bear of a man standing over him. He was large in every sense, broad, strong, and hairy. “For a little while. Hi, Tony.”

“Looking good, kid. The Army put some meat on those bones.” He slapped Brent’s shoulders, hard. Brent winced. “Captain wants us,” he said to his father.

“Luke isn’t in yet.”

“Us.” He motioned between Brent’s father and himself. “As in you and me. We’re the only ones here this early.”

His father got up. “Must be a hot one. Be right back,” he said to Brent.

Brent watched them go, his father walking over, swinging his arms, and Tony, loping along like the werewolf he was.

Rubbing shoulders with the vampires in UMass had introduced him to a whole host of Children of the Moon, as they liked to call themselves. Werewolves, vampires, fae, ghosts, and witches; creatures that most people didn’t believe existed. Worcester was a stop for some of them on the way to Boston, where supposedly the RevWar ghosts and Old World vampires held sway.

Many of the Children of the Moon worked together. They believed that they were all of the shadowy underground, fringes of the multitudes of the Children of the Sun, as they called humans. As with the human races, countries, and cultures attempting to join with each other, there were some growing pains.

The fae’s hate of the vampires had eased into dislike; the werewolves and vampires joined together and buried the hatchet centuries ago. Ghosts worked with anyone who could notice them, which were mostly witches and some vampires. Vampires liked to consider themselves the “aristocrats” of the Children of the Moon, but werewolves and fae often would put a kibosh on any vampire that got too big for their britches. That was when the old animosities would come into play, and a hunt would be

called out on the vampire, who would have no recourse than to pipe themselves down or get out of Dodge before the wolves and fairies destroyed them.

Before he had even gone to UMass Hospital to work, sometimes Brent would help his father with cold cases. He glanced over at the file folders that his father had called “unsolved.” He lifted himself slightly off the chair and picked out the first folder from the pile.

Some of these cold cases were vampires that had lost control, or uncaring vampires that were passing through to Boston or other points beyond in the hinterlands of New York or even further west. Sometimes they were fights between werewolves, or a fae gone rogue. Or sometimes, they were just people.

He glanced around the room again, opened the folder. Taped to the inside flap were photographs, mostly of the scene of the crime. He wasn’t looking for those. “Marilyn Monroe” was in the alias line, called that because she — he, actually — played that character in some clubs. He was found dead on Worthington Avenue, a hot spot for gays, drugs, and sex workers. His real name was unknown—

—*John Kemp*—

—Brent grabbed a sticky note pad and ball point, scribbled the name and pasted the note next to the blank spot that said “real name”. He glanced around again, then continued to read the narrative.

“Marilyn” had been found dead from strangulation according to the coroner. He turned the page. Three suspects were named. He looked closely at each name, but none stood out. However, one of the suspects mentioned “Tool”, and that name highlighted in red in his mind’s eye.

All Brent had to do was think the spell, and “Tool” came up in his mind, everything from how he looked to his last known address, the make and model of his car —

## *Homecoming*

Brent scribbled one note after another. He was still scribbling when his father snatched the folder out of his hands.

Brent's eyes were white when he noticed the folder was gone. To quench the spell, he closed his eyes and exhaled.

"I told you not to do that anymore," said his father sternly. "Psychometry isn't grounds for a warrant."

"Sorry, Dad." Brent opened his eyes. "I was only trying to help."

"I know you were. You've always been right. But this kind of thing is too freaky to admit in court. They don't care if the Armed Forces believes in it."

"Will you at least notify his next of kin?"

His father opened the folder and looked at the front page. "We'll try." He closed the folder and tossed it on his desk. "Besides, if the department knew what you could do, you'd be working for Larry first, and you know what kind of an idiot he is."

Brent glanced at an empty desk, a few rows away from his father's. Larry Salucci was an excellent patrolman, a mediocre sergeant, and a horrible detective. He never asked the right questions, even with a cheat sheet. He followed his gut, and was often wrong.

"Want to go with me on a call?"

Brent glanced at the clock. "Yeah, sure, I have a couple of hours."

"We'll bring you back in time for lunch." His father picked up his jacket.

Tony walked over to them, shrugging into his jacket. "Is Boy Wonder coming?" he asked.

"Yes. We have to bring him back for lunch or my wife will be pissed."

Tony chuckled. "C'mon then."



Brent climbed into the back seat. He searched for the buckles. “No seat belts?”

Tony turned to Brent’s father. “What year is this car? 1967 Chevy?”

Brent found the seatbelt tucked into the back seat. “Never mind, I found them.” His father drove the three of them to the hospital.

“Domestic violence,” said Tony. “White female, aged 28, found beaten outside her home at four-thirty a.m. this morning. The newspaper delivery person called it in.”

“You’re going to be the reporter,” said Brent’s father to Brent. “Pick a paper.”

“The *Gazette*?”

“Sold.”

They drove to Saint Vincent’s. They walked through the crowded emergency room, flashing their badges. Brent followed close so he wouldn’t be left behind. The two men stopped at the nurse’s station, and Tony asked where the woman was who had been found beaten. “Fifteen,” said the nurse.

The three men went to the temporary room, separated from others by a thin wall of glass and curtains around it. The smell of the hospital reminded Brent of the operating theater back in Kandahar. All he needed to do was utter the healing spells he knew and most of these people would be out of here. But that would also mean he would be exhausted by the time he finished.

Brent’s father knocked on the window, which was covered by a curtain. “Detectives Jim Rogers and Anthony Carlucci. Can we come in?”

“Yeah,” said a tired voice, and the two men stepped inside. Brent came in right behind and took a spot in the corner.

The two detectives showed their ID. “I’m Detective Rogers,” said his father. “What’s your name?”

“Linda.”

## Homecoming

“Linda, can you tell us what happened?”

“Dunno,” she said. Brent looked at the woman. Her eyes were swollen, one eye swollen shut, the other shiny and red. She was probably white, but her face was going to be covered in black and blue bruises. “Went outside with my dog. Got beat up. Don’t know where my dog is.”

Tony flipped open his reporter’s notebook. “Do you live at 78 Lincoln Avenue?”

“It’s my sister’s house.”

“Do you live there?”

“I was visiting.”

“Where was your sister?”

“She’s not home.”

“What kind of dog do you have?”

“One of those mop top dogs.”

“Havanese?”

“I guess.”

Brent bit back a chuckle. Leave it to Tony to know his dog breeds

“What’s your dog’s name?”

“Harry.”

His father asked, “Did your dog have a leash?”

“Yeah.” She focused her open eye on Brent. “Who’s that?”

“I’m a reporter from the *Gazette*,” Brent said.

“I don’t want no reporter here,” said the woman. She glared at his father and Tony. “I don’t know who beat me up and stole my dog.”

“I thought you said you lost your dog.”

“They musta stole my dog,” she said.

They would eventually get her to tell them what was going on, but Brent wanted to help. Brent thought the truth spell and when the woman caught his eye, he let it go with a push of his

will. The woman stared at him, blinking. The two detectives turned to look at Brent, who gave them a short nod.

“So,” began Tony, “what —”

The woman suddenly burst into tears. “If I tell you, he’ll kill him!”

“Who’ll kill who?”

“Tyler. He’ll kill my baby.”

Her “baby” was Harry, the dog. She had gone outside to take the dog out while her sister wasn’t home. Tyler had broken up a few days ago with her sister==who she refused to name. While Linda was outside, Tyler approached. Tyler, a linebacker training for the Patriots, easily overpowered her and started to beat her, first with a leftover snow shovel from outside, then with his fists. She tried to run to the door but he caught her in between the doorway and outside and he started beating her there too. She tried screaming, but the area was apathetic and no one came to her.

“He said he was gonna take my baby and he said he was going to kill him if my sister didn’t talk to him.”

Brent stepped outside, having “gotten the story.” His father asked more questions as Tony stepped out to take a look at the records. Brent hung around the room, until his father came out. “Need to see if the dog’s still there,” he said.

Tony returned. “No note of a dog following the ambulance.”

“Of course not. That would be too easy.”

Tony chuckled. “I shouldn’t have a hard time finding a dog.”

“The hard time will be if the dog goes to you, Tony.”

“Just because I’m an alpha doesn’t mean I can get all dogs to do what I want.”



The Iron  
and  
The Loom  
A Novel of Italy

Flavia Idà



# I

**I**N ROMAN TIMES, when heroes passed among men like comets, the town had been called Hercules' Harbor. In the year of Our Lord 1136 it was named Tropea, "*She who puts her enemies to flight.*"

It rises high atop a spur of grey granite jutting into the Mediterranean along the rugged coast of Calabria, almost halfway between Palermo and Naples. Above the steep face of the cliff the walls came sheer out of the rock, rounding up in their hold a cluster of red tiled roofs that broke only at the two gates. From the Portammare, the Sea Gate, a long curving stairway cut into the stone led to the Marina, where the fishing boats were kept and ships cast anchor beyond two little islands of white sandstone molded by the wind; from the Porta Vaticana started the road toward the watchtowers of the coast and the farms of the inland.

To remind the people of Tropea that yet another foreign race had fallen in love with their land and was now their master, there was the tallest and newest building in town, the Castro. There the Norman governor sent from Palermo by King Roger d'Hauteville kept his soldiers and meted out justice. Only the lords could look at that massive castle without fear, for they were the only ones who entered it or left it of their own will.

Safe in the shadow of the Castro and of the Norman Crown, Tropea gathered along its narrow streets its narrow houses, those of the local noblemen side by side with those of fishermen and artisans, yet kept solidly apart by invisible walls thicker than brick. The true heart of the town was Piazza Portèrcole, opening bright and unexpected between the marketplace on one side and the church of the Black Madonna on the other. From a house in Piazza Portèrcole one could watch the world unroll its endless tapestry woven of days and nights.

The house of Vasili d'Àrgira looked onto Piazza Portercole. Two stories high, it had been cut from a single block of granite. The two small round balconies with their black wrought-iron bars looked like two spiders that had stopped their climb to bask in the warmth of the stone. Each window had its fringe of swallows' nests under the sill, and each had its bunches of herbs hung to dry. Behind it was a garden bursting with fruit trees, while a lone palm shaded the roof; and by the steps of the front door rested two crossed oars, painted green and black.

If a fisherman's family could have a coat of arms, those two green-and-black oars would have been chosen for the d'Àrgiras of Tropea, to whom from time beyond memory the sea had been home, road, and often grave. Their name was Greek, meaning 'silver'. Not that any of them had ever been wealthy enough to deserve it; the pure sparkle it brought to mind spoke not of their pockets, but of their souls.

In an age when a man could only accept injustice as he would have accepted drought and disease, Vasili d'Àrgira had been born with the hallmark of an undying hatred of everything unfair. He wouldn't just sigh and pray to God every time the armed servants of the Byzantine lords went down to the beach and took away in the span of a moment the best of an entire fishing season. First he had grumbled, then he had tugged at his basket of fish; finally one day he had openly refused. The scars left on his back by the whip had become his most precious possession.

For ten years since that day he had gathered around him the men whose trade was the lifeblood of Tropea. He had argued and he had fought, and the hangman's noose had often dangled closely before him. When the Norman rulers had replaced their Byzantine predecessors, with different titles but with the same arrogance, they had found him at the head of a guild of fishermen so strong that they had been forced to accept it along with every other long-established institution of the town.

Two generations of Falizza, the local breed of aristocrats, had wanted him dead. But to lay hands on the "most just man in Tropea" meant to face the anger of nearly every other man and woman in town; not to mention the frown of the Norman governor, who delegated to Vasili the task of peacemaker in litigations, and who that peace was very much interested in maintaining.

Yet no enemy Vasili d'Àrgira might have made ever afflicted him like a private nemesis all his own: his daughter Kallyna, whom he felt that God had given him as he would have given him a thorn in the side, to remind him day and night of his many other blessings.

Even the lack of a son had been remedied years before, when fate had sent to his house Michele and Arni, the two orphaned sons of his best friend. Michele had been pledged to Vasili's youngest daughter Sila since the two were children; to Michele

he would hand over the leadership of the fishermen's guild, and both young men were as dear to him as true sons. But Kallyna seemed bent on defying Vasili's every plan for a peaceful old age. For years now she had refused to marry the man he had chosen for her, causing unending trouble within his home; until he had been forced to allow his youngest daughter to marry first, against every proper custom he knew.

It was now the middle of July. Summer dried up the hills and smoothed the sea into long days of blue sleep. For many months Vasili and his men had hunted the swordfish in the manner practiced along the coast of Calabria for thousands of years. Now it was time to end the hunting season and to think of the wedding, to celebrate with man's brief rituals the enduring ones of nature.

\* \* \*

“God willing, wife, this is the last day.”

“God willing indeed. A supper table where only women sit is bad luck.”

In the new light of dawn Vasili got up from bed, put on his shirt and his black vest, and reached for his cap.

He was one of those men who don't need to be tall to command respect. Everything in his spare frame had a quiet dignity about it. In his handsome face the eyes were of a strikingly clear blue, which stood out from his many wrinkles like the sea from beyond furrows of brown earth. His wife Neia only came up to his shoulders. She was a small, thin woman who even in her appearance knew how to keep her place, one step below her husband.

“Here is your lunch, eat it in good health,” Neia said like every morning. That morning, however, she let a smile wander

on her sunburned face. “Michele and Arni are down in the cellar grinding the spears,” she added.

Vasili took from her hands the cloth bundle still warm with loaves of bread that had just come out of the oven. “Michele won’t kill a single fish today,” he grinned. “Not the day before his wedding.” He stepped out on the landing, opened the door of the room next to his and glanced in.

The room was still almost in the dark; the thick shutters still held out against the first daylight. His gaze ran on the loom made of olive wood and tall enough to almost touch the ceiling, with the small icon of the Black Madonna nailed to the uppermost bar and the shuttle carved in the shape of a boat. The blanket Kallyna was weaving was almost finished. Bedsheets and linens were neatly piled on top of the walnut chest; Sila’s wedding gown lay across a chair.

The embroideries seemed to gleam in the dimness, bursting into a rainbow of colors: baskets of fruit, ships and waves, birds, flowers and trees. Only Kallyna could turn the world into silk thread, Vasili thought with a pleased smile; and in what little space was left by the loom, the bed in which his daughters slept seemed to him only a little larger than their cradles of years before.

Sila slept peacefully, wise even in her rest; Kallyna lay instead wrapped in her long black hair, her hands gripping the sheets and a frown on her face. Suddenly she stirred in her sleep, shaking her head.

“No ... no!” she whispered frantically.

Vasili eyed her for a moment, until she went back to sleep. Then he drew a long sigh and closed the door.

“Had you ever noticed that Kallyna talks in her sleep?” he asked Neia on his way downstairs.

“Yes,” Neia nodded, “and it’s not a good sign at all. Perhaps if we spoke to Padre Costantino, if he could finally give her some peace....”

Vasili went on down the creaking stairs. “She’s young. Give her time. Once she’ll have a little one crying for hunger at her breast she’ll be all sweet,” and his voice was sweet already at the thought.

Neia shrugged doubtfully, then followed him into the kitchen that gleamed dimly with the large copper pans hung above the hearth. “Let’s hope so. Now that Sila is all settled down, Kallyna can marry Raimo Trani any day she wants.”

Vasili turned around, looming over his wife’s fragile figure. “You know she won’t even hear Raimo’s name anymore. By now I myself am not so sure I did the right thing when I promised her to him. Why, I think she spurns him even in her sleep!” he blurted out, remembering Kallyna’s panicked whisper.

Neia approached him cautiously. “But she’s been pledged to him for all these years,” she reminded him softly. “You can’t take back your promise now... or can you?”

Vasili didn’t answer, annoyed. He slipped a slice of bread into his shirt, grabbed a chunk of cheese from a plate, and finally moved away from his wife’s outstretched hands. “Michele, Arni, it’s time to go!”

Neia’s hands fell against her sides.

The two brothers stepped out of the cellar’s door. Arni must have been teasing Michele, and was still smiling mischievously.

“Father,” he said, “look how sharp the spear is this morning. Michele woke up to grind it earlier than he ever did in all his life.”

Michele kept winding around his elbow the rope tied to the end of the double-pronged spear. Once more he pretended not to have heard anything. He pointed at the front door. “Go get the oars, huh?”

Arni kissed Neia goodbye and went out. In the hour before dawn the square was quiet and empty.

Resigned now to brooding alone over Kallyna’s troubles, Neia stood patiently on the threshold to watch the three men

leave. But first Michele cast a look at the window of Sila's room, and Vasili didn't miss that look. He grinned to himself, then spoke his gruff farewell to his wife.

"Come on, boys, come on. Like the proverb says, men do and women talk." Then under his breath he added, "And if women didn't talk, we'd all live like dumb beasts."

On the smooth cobblestones of Piazza Portercole their footsteps sounded so familiar, like drops of water from a fountain.



Sila pushed the shutters open, letting in the early morning light to prance around all over the room. Kallyna screened her eyes, moaning, and Sila laughed.

"I wonder whether you'll be so sleepy the day before *your* wedding," Sila teased. She sounded light-headed with happiness; and she had every reason to be, Kallyna thought with envy. Sila had always belonged to the adults' circle, and of her own choice. She stood like a rock; Kallyna had no rest, like the tide.

Neia came in, always so quiet and always so worried, announcing the exhausting array of chores that awaited them.

"You certainly picked the right day for oversleeping, daughters. We have the trousseau to set, the water to draw, the bread to bake... and Aunt Tresa is going to be here any minute, God help us if the oven's still empty by the time she walks through that door."

Her eyes stubbornly shut against the light, Kallyna kicked away the sheets, grumbling.

"All this fuss... as if Sila were leaving for France or some other place at the end of the world."

She sat up, and as she shook her hair the sunlight made it look blue instead of black, like the wings of a crow.

Neia kept puttering around the room. “Sila *is* leaving, in a way,” she said. “And you too have long been ripe for the same journey.” Then she left, carrying an armful of tablecloths.

Kallyna didn’t speak.

“Let’s go now,” Sila prodded her. A moment later she had already disappeared, leaving Kallyna behind. Kallyna always seemed to be left behind.

What a dreary night that had been, she thought. Always the same bad dreams... At last she left the bed. Through the open window came a scent of salty air and jasmine. She stretched out, making herself as tall as she could, as though she wanted to take flight and vanish; but all the supple strength of her body reminded her painfully that she was still on the ground.

She had never had a mirror; still Raimo kept telling her, in his own dark way, that she was lovely. Her sad, proud black eyes were large and lustrous under the shady mass of her hair that the braids had molded into light ripples. Her face had the shape of an almond, and her skin the soft glow of copper. Her very name, that Vasili had fashioned from the Greek word for ‘beautiful,’ reminded her constantly of a gift in which everybody seemed more interested than she was.

Voices rose from downstairs — excited, admiring women’s voices. She imagined them, friends and neighbors, crowding around Sila’s trousseau, feeling the fine linen cloth. And cries of wonder, laughter. All the things she could not share.

It was time to go. At least the preparations for the wedding would keep her away from Raimo. But all that sunlight made her eyes ache.



It was daybreak again, and the fishing flotilla of Mastro Vasili d’Àrgira had already scattered to every corner of the sea. Five

*ontri*, as the boats were called with the ancient word, were headed south. Their prows were decorated with painted eyes, to see the dangers of the deep, and with wooden figureheads of Saint Peter, protector of fishermen. A flock of gulls chased them, flying around like white banners.

Vasili's boat pointed the way. From its center rose the mast, three times as tall as the *ontre* was long, and scored by short pegs that led to the top. There, in a tiny cage at the top, Arni stood raking the water with his gaze.

It took the tireless attention of sharp young eyes to keep the long watch on that dizzying stand. Arni had been trained to be a lookout ever since he was barely ten. Now it was a joy to watch him climb the mast with all the nimbleness of his strong, slim body, every muscle taut under the brown skin. Fishermen's sons grow up fast, and indeed there was nothing childish left in Arni; yet one child-like smile could still dispel his many man-like sorrows. Arni had the deep and easy gentleness of a lamb, for which he was named.

Clutching the spear and following the wake of his brother's gaze, Michele stood poised on the long catwalk that thrust out from astern. The double tips of black iron bobbed up and down with the pitching of the boat. At his feet was the second spear that would be used if the first one was lost; but Michele had never lost a spear. He held the shaft with the powerful grace of the Archangel Michael battling the Evil One with his sword of fire. He was the living hope of the d'Àrgiras for the years to come. So many expectations rested on his broad shoulders; but carried confidently, lightly.

Vasili manned the rudder, riding or cutting the currents that he knew as he knew the lines in the palm of his hand. In his mind he thanked God for such a fine morning, and for so many others like this one.

Beneath the changing, oil-smooth water something stirred. Arni screened his eyes against the glare of the sun and leant over from his tall perch. Michele started to loosen the thick rope at the end of the spear, while the oarsmen rested, looking up in expectation.

Then Arni suddenly pointed ahead and uttered the sighting cry whose meaning had been eaten away by the sea wind in ten centuries of use.

“*Fa aleuu!*” There was the swordfish, its silvery back plowing the sea in long arching strokes.

The men bent on the oars and began to row toward their prey. Their breath merged on the same rhythm with the dip of the blades and the creaking of the wood against the rowlocks.

“*Eia*, come on, my friends!” Vasili urged them. But the fifteen-foot-long monster had seen the shadow of the boat above him. It turned sharply toward the open sea, his glassy eye staring in terror. The boat lurched after him. Michele’s hand tightened around the polished ash wood of the spear’s shaft.

Vasili’s eyes narrowed with excitement. “Don’t let him go. Lord, how fat he is!”

The fish knew he was doomed. He veered left, then right, then left again, wildly. Sweat glistened down the rowers’ backs.

“We’re on him... *Eia* now, *eia!*”

Leaping on the water, the ontre rushed so closely onto the swordfish that the hull resounded with the knock of his back. All eyes turned to Michele, leaning tensely from the catwalk. Frozen in the ancient stance of Grecian javelin-throwers, he weighed the spear in his hand once, twice, then tossed it with a master’s thrust. The spear cut a deadly trail through air and water, then plunged into the sea and into the thick body below. The rope snapped taut between the boat and the fish, now tied inexorably together. Michele started tugging, helped by Gheorghe di Nico. At every tug the wound gaped larger under the water.

With a few last jerks the fish wriggled in the pale floating cloud of his own blood. Then Michele shouted, "Heave!" and the huge prey left forever the sea. Its long fearsome blade tossed crazily among the fishermen's bare feet. Then it finally rested on the bottom of the boat, lifeless.

Michele pressed his foot against the creature's side and pulled out the spear. "I tell you, this must have been the grandfather of all swordfish," he beamed.

Vasili grinned, rolling up the rope. "It will pay for the musicians at the wedding. And for the priest, and for the deacons, too."

The four oarsmen laughed, wiping their foreheads. Gheorghe di Nico slapped Michele on the shoulder. "But do leave the biggest portion for the groom, Mastro Vasili," he said. "He will need it, the morning after the wedding."

Michele shoved him down. "Fool."

Vasili hid his smile and handed Michele the rope. "Beautiful kill, son." Then he called Arni to come down the mast. It was almost noontime, they would row to the nearest beach and eat.

Arni had already his feet on the lower pegs when something glittered again underwater. He climbed back to the top, scanned the sea carefully.

"There's another one!" he shouted. "Right behind us!"

Hastily Michele took up the spear he had left on the bottom and bent down, searching the water. Then he looked at Vasili. "Father, it's the female... and she's full of eggs."

Vasili turned and observed for a while the smaller fish swimming around the *ontre*, utterly heedless of the danger in her frantic search. He smiled affectionately.

"She's looking for her mate. Look how close she comes, you could catch her with your bare hands."

Michele was waiting, the spear raised.

"Let her go," Vasili said.



It was well past midday. The town had fallen asleep in the sultry afternoon. The thick dark shutters were closed like eyes closed against the sun, the houses hunched together to escape its might. Only the cicadas, the noisiest insects in God's creation, kept chanting their song from under the olive trees.

The oven was finally cooling off, a gaping mouth black with ashes and smelling of bread and cake. Aunt Tresa snored, with her head on her arm on the kitchen table. Neia and Sila were sewing, in the shade by the door.

Kallyna was sitting under the lemon tree. It was her favorite corner, the farthest one in the garden. Small green fruits were budding among the leaves of the tree; the hot motionless air was all scented with their bitter tang. On the trunk, endless lines of ants scurried up and down, always so busy. She watched them dully, thinking again and always about Raimo and about herself who hated Raimo and who would soon become his property for life.

There were lucky women who, like her mother, were given to a man they could learn to love in time; others, the Almighty's own pets, married someone they had chosen, like Sila. But Kallyna d'Àrgira was among the outcasts. Everything that was alive in her soul would forever be dead in Raimo's.

The cicadas stopped briefly, only to resume their tune with greater frenzy. It was all so quiet that she could almost hear her own blood running through her veins, carrying its swell of pain.

For two years Raimo had touched her like hot iron. All she knew about love were his thick hands searching her all over, and the taunts with which he tried to make her like it. He would not spare her one proud detail of his exploits in every whorehouse of the county; in utter good faith, to prove to her that he would make a good husband. And of course, like a good husband, he

made a point of persecuting her with a jealousy bordering on obsession.

She nestled against the tree trunk. She wondered whether Michele had ever treated Sila that way; whether Arni would ever dream of making her feel what Raimo made her feel. Before Raimo she had been a happy, trusting girl. Now she had become “the moody one.” She had gone through every one of the humiliating rituals of rebellious daughters: the endless arguments, the hysterical tantrums, the forced fastings. Nothing had helped, and in the process she had only bought a little time to ward off the inevitable. The worst thing was when she exasperated Vasili so much that he locked her up for days. Knowing that she alone could drive a man as mild as her father to such anger gave her the greatest pain and the greatest shame.

The grey cat must be skulking through the fuzzy leaves of the fig tree; wary, invisible. Neia’s chair creaked.

Certainly after a while Raimo would grow tired of her and start chasing other women. Maybe then he would finally leave her alone. He would leave her alone and she would stay home to wait for him, with yet another brat of his growing in her belly. She hugged her knees and hid her face against them, as if to become a lump of stone that nothing could pierce.

Tonight again she would go talk to her father. By now she truly had nothing more to lose.



In the last of the sunlight the town high on its rock looked like a crown of pink gold. Out on the far horizon the sun that night was setting directly behind the dark triangle of the Stròmboli volcano; the legend said it was a good omen.

The seven men in the *ontre* rowed slowly, tired. The catch had been good. Two swordfish rocked gently in the air, tied to

the base of the mast as was the custom, so that those ashore could see right away that the day's work had been fruitful. The hunting season was over. Now the sea could finally grant rest.

The men's minds arrived home much faster than the boats. Michele sat by himself, his hands under his chin. He watched the wake left by the *ontre* and he thought that tomorrow night Sila would undo her long braids for him.

Arni pulled in the oars and jumped first onto the sand, while the others untied the heavy catch. The stairway from the Portammare became alive with the skirts of women and the bare feet of children coming down to welcome back the boats. It was also Arni who first noticed Kallyna in that crowd, and when Vasili ordered to pull the boat he missed his grip to look at her.

She smiled to all in a hurry, as though she had already something to be forgiven for.

"I'm happy to see you, Father. What a big one you caught! Supper's ready, are you hungry?"

From the way she sounded, so out of breath, everyone knew immediately why she had come. Arni wanted to say something; but he was not supposed to speak before Vasili, and Vasili delayed his answer. So Kallyna kept out of the men's way while they slid soapy planks under the prow, pulled the boat, tossed the planks again and pulled the boat again until it was on dry land.

"Of course we're hungry," Vasili said then quietly. "We've been working all day." He gathered up the planks and laid them on the bottom of the boat. Finally he looked up at her, but he didn't like what he saw: when Kallyna began twisting her hands together, it meant that she was hunting for words. "We're done with the preparations for tomorrow, Father," she began. "All we have left to do is set the tables in the kitchen."

Vasili drew himself up. "In the kitchen? No, no. We'll set the tables outside, in front of the main door. To my daughter's wedding all Tropea is invited," he said without haughtiness.

Michele looked at him in surprise. “Even the lords?” he asked.

Vasili unrolled the burlap sheet and spread it over the boat. “If they wish to come,” he nodded. “All those who have nothing to hide can be my guests. I want the day to be remembered.”

Michele’s face lit up with admiration and joy. He shouldered boldly the oars and elbowed Arni to come along.

But Arni wanted to stay. If Kallyna had something to say, he wanted to take her side as he always did, with his silent and savage devotion. He turned to Vasili. “Father, do you want me to take a look at that crack in the hull? I can give you a hand with the caulking, too.”

Vasili shook his head. “No, son, it’s just a scratch. You go ahead.”

Arni still wouldn’t move; and while Vasili wasn’t looking, Kallyna motioned him to go. Arni turned around. It hurt him so to imagine what was about to happen, and to see how impatient she was to try one more time, against all hope. He wrapped into his shirt the big shell he had found for her and then sadly followed Michele homeward.

After a while Kallyna gathered all her breath in. “Father, may I speak to you? About Raimo?”

Vasili tied the burlap sheet to the rowlocks and didn’t look at her. “All I care to know is whether he’s set the day and the month,” he said simply.

Her hands clutched the gunwale. Perhaps it was better to end the conversation right there and then.

Gheorghe di Nico stopped by. “The catch is on its way, Mastro Vasili. We sold all of it already, and Manuele is minding your share, as always.”

“Thank you, Gheorghe. Come to the wedding tomorrow, with your mother.”

Gheorghe smiled. “We wouldn’t miss it for the world, Mastro Vasili.” Then he glanced at Kallyna; and Kallyna knew that Gheorghe had lived that day for nothing but that glance. The look of love in the young man’s gentle eyes filled her with sorrow. Both knew she could not afford even to acknowledge it. She could only pretend, again, that she hadn’t noticed it.

Gheorghe hung his head, with a smile of resignation. “Then good night, Mastro Vasili.” “A good night to you, too,” Vasili answered, and as Gheorghe walked away Kallyna had to bite her lips so she wouldn’t start crying, not now.

Vasili pulled at the flaps of the burlap sheet to tighten it. “What’s for supper?” he asked.

Kallyna couldn’t remember. “I don’t really know. Mother did the cooking today, I helped Sila with the trousseau.”

Vasili hunkered down to look at the small crack in the keel of the boat.

“Father, please listen to me.”

“I’ve been listening to you for two years. The neighbors, too, have been listening. What you want to tell me is as old as the rocks. You want to hear my answer again?”

Kallyna shut her eyes. He spoke with an even, patient voice, the voice of a man who knows in his heart that he’s right.

“You were promised to Raimo Trani two years and three months ago. He would have married you then, had you not taken ill the week before the wedding and had you not opposed him ever since, God knows for what reason. That is all there is to the matter, and that is all there will ever be.”

She looked away. Her words came out wooden, cracked. “I was not taken ill, Father. I had just found out that every night after he called on me he went to Bruna’s house and ...” She stopped abruptly, and couldn’t go on.

Vasili rapped the keel of the boat, listening to the sound it made.

“Bruna is not the sort of girl a man would want for his wife,” he said flatly. “She is what she is, and everybody knows it. As for Raimo, at his age he certainly cannot live like a monk.” He searched the sand, looking for a sharp pebble. “What counts is that he loves you. He has said so and he has proven so, first of all with the bride price he paid for you, one that nobody else —”

Kallyna started to shout. “If he had seen a clay jar in the market that he happened to like more than the others, he would have done just the same, Father!”

Vasili stepped quickly in front of her, to hide her outburst from the eyes of the people crowding the beach. Startled, she raised her arm to protect her face from the slap. But he didn’t hit her; Vasili had never hit anybody. He looked at her sternly, then let his hand drop. She breathed in hard, staring at the sand. Vasili squatted down again to scrape the edges of the crack with the sharp pebble. His voice sounded strangely hollow, like a sunken bell.

“I have held my own against the lords of Tropea for ten years, but I cannot get my own daughter to obey me.” He glanced up at her; her face now wet with tears made him avert his eyes.

“I want nothing but that, to obey you,” she whispered. “But you make it so hard! Anybody else... Gheorghe di Nico ...”

“Put him out of your head,” Vasili snapped. “Him and anybody else. Trani would drag me before the law for breach of promise, and Cosimo Falizza will not miss the smallest opportunity to have me hanged from the beam of my own front door. Is that what you want?”

She stooped toward him without shame. “Then I will not marry at all, ever. Tell Raimo that I want to become a nun, so he won’t dare say that you cheated him or—”

Vasili’s eyes sparkled with furious amazement. “In the name of all the saints! What could ever be so hateful about a man to make you say a thing like that?”

She backed away, shaking. She wondered how two people could live so close for so many years and still have to shout at one another as though they were standing on the opposite banks of a river.

Then Vasili quieted down. He threw away the pebble and headed for the stairway.

“Enough of this. We go home.”

Kallyna wiped her eyes and started to walk after him, stumbling with her bare feet on the first stone step. She knew it was over for good, this time. Vasili would not talk about it anymore, or tolerate further arguments from her; and that same night, when Raimo would come as he did every night, he would set the date of the wedding himself.

A burst of outrage flared up inside her. At least she could speak out, the way prisoners did on the scaffold. She fixed her gaze upon the black figure climbing the stairs, turning his back to her.

“They call you the most just man in Tropea,” she said slowly, each word sinking like a stone in the void between them. “How could you have become so deaf and blind? Raimo is not one of us, and you know it. His place is with the lords, because of his arrogance, of his love of money, of every other thing you’ve flung into the lords’ faces for years. How can you be so unjust with *me*, with your own flesh and blood?”

On the step above, Vasili wheeled around, stunned. He stared at her as if she had just put a knife in his back. There was no anger of his that could put out the fire in her eyes. He looked frightened, defeated.

“Daughter,” he said, “before God I swear that I have never done anything to harm you. Your mother broke her back on the hills for twenty years, picking broomflower for the weavers for five *scudi* a day. My daughters have been luckier. The Lord has seen fit that I should be able to give them a house, a craft, and

good husbands who will spare them that life of humiliation and toil. No matter what you say to me, I have not a single regret to carry before my Maker when my time comes.”

He looked all around him, sweeping with his clear eyes the setting sun, the coast and the sea, as if calling them all witnesses to his words. Then he shook his head.

“Still you’re not happy. Still you keep flying about like a caged bird, with only one thought in mind — to escape, to bite the wind that nobody can bite. Ten more years of fighting all the Falizzas of the world will not wear me out like you did.”

Inside Kallyna’s throat words rolled like waves. She stepped up briskly, to lessen the terrible distance between herself and him, to wipe from his face that look of aching resignation. But Vasili had already resumed his climb, and now he walked bent, like an old man.



Shortly before the curfew, when the soldiers sounded the horn from the turret and locked both gates, Vasili rose from his supper and went to sit on the front steps with Michele and Arni.

The sky peeked in from the half-opened door, already white with stars. Neia shook the crumbs off the tablecloth into the hearth. During the day she did that in the garden, but never at night, when the particles of food would draw the hungry souls of the dead to her door. Then she called Kallyna to help her make the bed in the room upstairs that up to a month ago had been empty and now was all done up, ready for the bride and groom.

Kallyna took the sheets and spread them with slow, heavy hands, lost in her own thoughts. Noises would drift from this room to hers, those sweet little noises she feared. Tomorrow night she would sleep alone, until the time would come when she would have to sleep with—

“Tuck the sheets in properly at the sides, Kallyna,” Neia warned her.

She looked up with an air of sarcasm. “What for? They’ll all be crumpled up anyway, the day after tomorrow.”

Neia stopped, looking sternly at her from behind the pillow she was fluffing up. But Kallyna did tuck the sheets in as dutifully as if they were altar cloths.

The men’s voices rose louder from below through the open balcony, together with a sound of steps approaching on the cobbled way.

“Have a good night, Mastro Vasili. Forgive me for coming so late tonight. I was up at the Castro.”

Kallyna had waited in dread for that voice all night. Neia leaned out to see. “It’s Raimo.” Kallyna slipped another pillow into the pillowcase and said nothing.

He talked loudly, battering the quiet night like a hammer. Every word was mouthed heavily, to impress those who listened.

“And a good night to you, Mastro Raimo,” Vasili was heard answering. “Please sit here with us.”

He was the only person Vasili had ever addressed as “Mastro,” that is as his own peer. Kallyna never missed the bitter irony of that word. In his clever way of courting Vasili, of flattering him and ingratiating himself, Raimo was truly her father’s only master.

“May I go to bed now, Mother?” she asked, closing the shutters.

After a long and hard day finally left behind, Neia was too exhausted to start an argument. She would excuse Kallyna with Raimo for not showing up.

“All right,” she surrendered. She kissed her daughter’s forehead. “Sleep well, and say your prayers so you won’t have bad dreams,” she added with a sad smile.

Kallyna smiled back wanly; then she took shelter in her room. The room was dark except for the window's square full of sky. But she wasn't safe from the voices of the men below.

"Today I was given the plans for the new cathedral," Raimo was saying. "The bishop has finally gotten through his head that it must be built in a different spot, like I told him so many times, or else at the next earthquake it will end up just like the old one. I'm sure he's good at other things, but when it comes to building he ought to leave it to those who know how, am I right? Now I'll start looking for masons and stonecutters all over the county. We'll begin in September at the latest."

Vasili must be really impressed by Raimo's words not to notice that Raimo was talking about nothing except himself. "This is good news, Mastro Trani. Before that time, though, we must settle a family matter that you know well. With the help of the Lord, what do you say about the last day of August?"

Up in her room, Kallyna could just see the grin spreading on Raimo's face.

"I am your servant, Mastro Vasili. If you say the last day of August, the last day of August it will be."

That would be all, she thought. They had disposed of her life as they would have done with the purchase and sale of a head of cattle.

She buried her face in her pillow. So be it then. Now it would only be quicker, like the last stroke of a Norman sword.



The  
Names  
of  
Heaven

Flavia Idà



# ONE

*APRIL 1511*

**A**LL THROUGH THE NIGHT THE REEF HAD WAITED FOR THEM, and now it had them.

There was a sudden crack of planks splitting in half, the noise of the rock biting into the ship, then the wind rushing in through the broken ribs. The rigging snapped, chain links ground apart. The mainmast doubled up on itself and came down smashing onto the deck. Canvas ripped from one end to the other, and the topsail flew away in the night. The prow reared up, shook, stuck in the grip of the stone. The sea flooded into the hull.

They all heard them, the sounds that meant no hope. Crawling, pushing, wrestling the ropes and barrels that trapped them, the men reached out toward the only lifeboat left whole. They fought to be first.

Captain Valdivia's voice raged against the gale. "We can still float her, you bastards. I say we can!" He called the first mate. "Santiago, cut the mast loose. Send Felipe and two more below deck." But they all ignored him, as though their names didn't belong to them anymore.

Santiago Alvarado crossed himself, holding onto a spar. "No, Señor Don Capitán. We couldn't float her if she grew wings." He looked over his shoulders. "The boat, Señor Don Capitán!"

Captain Valdivia cursed, his hand welded to the wheel. "Stay back, damn you. Mind your places!"

The men heard only their own fear. They put their hands to the capstan and struggled against the rope to lower the boat. "Mother of God, deliver us from evil. Queen of the Sea, save our lives." But the sea had no ears and no heart, the sea had only a mouth.

The boat hit the water. The men held onto the rope until their hands bled. The keel cracked, timbers fell apart. Muskets and crossbows slid down the half-sunken deck. Like yellow hail the twenty thousand gold coins of King Ferdinand of Spain pelted the waves. Off plunged the fine steel breastplates, the letters and reports to His Honor the Governor of Hispaniola, and Juan de Córdoba with his good sword on, and Diego García with the name of his woman slurring in his mouth.

The ship groaned out loud beneath them. At last Captain Valdivia let go of the wheel and tumbled toward the gunwale.

"Find me the lookout," he begged. "Get the son of a whore into my hands." But the lookout lay crushed under the mast and had paid already for looking the other way when out of the water the Víboras had lashed out, true to their name of Viper Rocks.

The men fell, jumped, slipped into the boat — without sail, without oars and without food or water. The wounded screamed in pain, trampled.

Someone was crying out from the twisted shadows of the ship. “Don’t leave me behind. For the love of God, help me!”

Gonzalo Guerrero reached out with both hands and felt the wet, desperate grip of Jerónimo de Aguilar. He pulled Jerónimo down, as their weight sank the boat further and the others fought and shoved to keep their places. Aguilar crouched in his sliver of space. In a frenzy he kissed the prayer book he’d salvaged from his hammock. The keel came apart. The night sounded like wood and iron.

The fallen sails had covered the stern, a shroud for the burial. Captain Valdivia looked up at the wheel that was spinning as if under a ghost’s crazed hand. The pride and sweat of his whole life, his pretty *Esperanza* with the gilded figurehead was shuddering her last in the waves.

Slowly the laden boat drifted into the black nothing. It pitched and it scratched along the edges of the reef. The men threw out their hands blindly, feeling for the hard stone blades. Then the sea pulled them into its void.

Gonzalo Guerrero crossed his arms, his fingers clawing with cold and with fear at his sodden shirt; and like all his nineteen companions he thought, That’s all I’m left with now, my life and my shirt.



Five days. The sea was smooth now and the wind was gentle, that tropical wind smelling of spice that drove them toward a point it alone knew. Five days they’d lived like steers packed in a slaughterhouse, close enough to hear the next man’s thoughts knocking against one’s skull. They’d laid the wounded on the bottom, on the others’ feet. They wailed and begged continuously. The bilge water had turned brown with blood and vomit. During the night the wind froze them, during the day the sun scorched

them. Those who could sleep woke up screaming, maddened by the endless rocking of the boat, their tongues cracked with thirst and their stomachs shrunk with hunger.

Once in a while someone started to rave and tried to walk out of the boat. "I'm going to Prudencio's tavern for some wine. Who wants to come with me?" Captain Valdivia raised his voice and quieted the man down. He could still keep some order among his men, who were no longer his men but the sea's. He'd threatened to throw overboard the next man who started a brawl: they all needed the extra room.

Most of the time they lay coiled against the sun, in attitudes of orphans helping one another to sleep. Then someone would burst into fevered talk, about how beautiful Castile looked at harvest time, about how they were all going to live and to remember. They would start trying to catch fish with their hands.

"Let's hope the currents take us eastward, into the sight of baptized eyes," Leon Sandoval kept saying.

Santiago Alvarado the first mate cursed him. He was a big, quarrelsome man with a thick beard.

"Damn your soul, boy, can't you even recognize the cardinal points anymore? We're drifting to the west, away from known land."

"And what is to the west, in God's sweet name," Leon broke out with a fit of cough. "The stars at night make no sense. No one's had time to name them yet."

Captain Valdivia was holding in his lap the head of the dying helmsman. He looked at nothing.

"Maya," he said through swollen lips. "I spoke to Don Cristóbal Colón seven years ago, when he returned from his fourth voyage." He seemed to smile. "He told so many lies he made me want to have a ship... To the west of Cuba, he said, is a land called Maya."

Leon lay back and moaned in his teeth. “Maya” was just a name, a single outcrop of syllables against an entire breadth of dread. They still belonged to the unknown.

Felipe del Castillo grumbled something to himself, his forehead matted with blood. “That old madman, talking about Paradise as though he’d seen with his own two eyes Adam and Eve running about naked!” His face twisted. “Lord God, we’re here on account of a fool, we die because of an old man’s delusions!”

Captain Valdivia forced him to go back to his corner. The sun pressed down on the bare heads, on the parched mouths. The boat stank like an open coffin.

“Paradise,” Felipe murmured. “He called it Paradise.”

Gonzalo Guerrero looked at the black fin that had been following them for two days and nights. He was a tall, well-proportioned young man with a handsome broad face and hair the color of dark copper. He’d always been content with his looks. Work had made him strong, and women found him pleasant. He watched the sea around him.

At the other end of that sea wide as the breath of God there was Palos de Moguer, where he was born and from where, when Gonzalo was barely five, Christopher Columbus had sailed to search for the Indies. By now his uncle would be pulling the nets in by the cove. His sister would be sewing, with supper ready. By now his parents’ grave would again be growing with poppies.

It was a tough sea, stingy old cheat. It called him in the nights; it told him to come, to come. He had listened for hours to the same tale, told and retold in Palos, the tale of the mad Italian who had nagged three ships from the sovereigns of Castile and had gone off to find another world.

The strange animals, the strange people old Don Cristóbal had brought back from that other world. The fever, the dreams he’d stirred. They had haunted Gonzalo’s childhood, then his

adolescence, then his manhood. He pulled in fish and he thought endlessly of, “some day, some day.” He went to bed hungry and in his sleep the Queen of Cathay wanted to marry him.

In 1502, when the Admiral had set out on his fourth voyage, Gonzalo had begged his father to let him go with him. He was sixteen, and for his last expedition Don Cristóbal had enlisted boys, some as young as twelve. His father had refused. Gonzalo, mingled to the crowd that watched the Admiral walk down the pier for the last time, had thought of jumping after the ship.

Then his father had died, leaving him with nothing to keep him in Palos anymore. He had strained long enough at the bit, yearning to escape that hencoop of oppression and toil. Finally the day he'd turned twenty, old enough for the law, he'd gone out of the house, bought a second-hand breastplate and signed up for the next caravel due to sail for the Caribe. His sister had cried while she sewed the image of the Virgin of Seville in his good coat. His uncle hadn't said anything, except that he wanted him back by next year's Easter, to help out with the herrings; and Gonzalo had promised.

So he had endured the four months at sea that it took to reach that other world. Four months of nightmares on a filthy hammock, of cockroaches and lashings and womanless misery, always with the vision of Eldorado burning the sense from his mind: to be fed gold in bowls at breakfast and supper, to be awash in gold like the sunset!

Not that he knew where this gold was to be found. No one knew. He thought of streams where he would pan under the natives' benign eyes, or of marketplaces where they would trade cloth and axes for the precious metal. He imagined the day he would return home with a hatful of nuggets the size of duck's eggs. “Uncle, buy a new boat. Sister, no more scrubbing laundry in the river for the Countess Moncada.” He had stepped off the gangplank walking like a prince.

Then had come the brutal awakening. There was no gold in the Caribe, certainly not enough for a hatful. The bright yellow light had gone out for him as it had for countless others, beginning with Don Cristóbal himself. For three years he had followed ship after ship to island after island: to Hispaniola, to Darién, to Jamaica, to Cuba. There was no gold anywhere, no silver and no gems, no palaces of the Queen of Cathay. There was nothing but mosquitoes, alligators and snakes — green hell.

The sole property that could be acquired was the islanders, a people as simple as the air that was their only clothing. They laughed and wondered at the newcomers, they brought them food and drink and women; and they could be driven to abject terror by the mere noise of the guns, by the mere sight of the horses. It had been the islanders who'd paid in full for everything that wasn't there.

What Gonzalo had seen in the Caribe had been enough to sadden him for the rest of his life. He'd always thought the Spaniards went to Mass every Sunday and paid their taxes to the king. Here, where there were no churches and the king was many thousand of miles away, the Spaniards did something else. They hunted the natives down, burned them alive, tortured them to make them say where they'd hidden the gold they didn't have; they raped little girls and they hanged old women.

On Hispaniola an adventurer named Hernando Cortez rounded up men and women with his dogs and worked them to death by the hundreds in his estates. Because the population of the islands had been almost wiped out in less than ten years since the New World had been found, black slaves now had to be shipped in from Africa, to be worked to death in their turn.

Left on their own, the petty governors sent from Spain with nothing more than a title on a piece of paper passed the time making war on one another, while the gallows kept sprouting everywhere now for this, now for this other “traitor to the

Crown,” rows of black gallows all along the coral shores of Paradise.

Gonzalo had felt caught in a trap, betrayed by everything he had ever held dear. He knew he didn’t want to go home empty-handed; but he knew even more that he was sick at heart of having to bear daily witness to the nightmare that the New World had become. It seemed that every evil from which he had tried to escape had been carried to the islands in the hold of the ships and was now flourishing tenfold.

Not knowing what to do, he’d kept risking his life on land and sea for nothing more than his sailor’s pay, a pound of salt pork every week, and an allowance of hopes gone insane. When yet another war had broken out, this time between Diego Nicuesa and Vasco Nuñez de Balboa, he’d signed his name on Captain Valdivia’s roll only because Captain Valdivia paid a few *maravedí* more than other captains. All he wanted was to get away long enough to decide once and for all. Now he was drifting to his death, having found nothing, not even an answer.

He turned his head away from his companions. The sea was so close, and waiting with its terrifying smile.



Ten days. The ship’s cook, whose ribs had been broken by a falling spar, was dead. They waited for the sharks to lag behind, then cast him overboard. During the night two more men died, simply gave up. There was more room now, but the empty places meant it all would soon be an empty place. Wounds festered. Their skin had begun to wrinkle and crack like that of old men.

Captain Valdivia had stopped shouting. He was a hard, graying man who now cursed himself under his breath for wanting to cry. But Leon Sandoval used his good eyesight to scan the endless water for signs of land. Once a cormorant flew over,

making him cry out that the coast must be near. He was a boy of fifteen.

Hallucinations taunted their minds. On the ninth day the bosun flung himself into the sea, claiming he'd seen a vineyard full of ripe Málaga grapes. Before they could pull him back in, the sharks found him in an instant. But that day it rained, and they gathered the rain in their hands, in their boots, in anything they could get, sobbing at the wet bliss in their throats. They held up their faces with their mouths open, drinking until they retched.

Jerónimo de Aguilar spent his every waking minute reading from his prayer book and praying for the salvation of his soul. Gonzalo could hear him whisper Latin in his teeth, hurrying to repent.

Jerónimo was a thin but not delicate man, with soft hands and the skittish manners of a schoolboy. To his parents, who kept a butcher shop in Écija, his religious vocation had come at first like a catastrophe, for he was the son who must follow in their footsteps. When he had made his decision to sail for the Indies, they knew he lusted not merely for gold but also for heathen souls to convert to Christ. However, they had reasoned in giving him their blessing, if there was gold in the heathens' lands, a rich priest would be even better than a rich merchant.

So far, for Jerónimo the rewards of both profit and proselytizing had been slim. He had spent whatever money he had in preparing a lawsuit against a man who wanted to cheat him out of a piece of land on Hispaniola. The lawsuit was the reason for his voyage aboard the *Esperanza*. The documents he was bringing with him for this purpose had now been lost in the wreck.

As for the spreading of the Gospel that was so dear to his heart, all the islanders of the Caribe had already been converted, more often than not at sword point, and they now flocked to

Mass, though some of the friars said it was only to get some respite from their labor. Even so, now that the Lord was calling him to His presence, Jerónimo had at least one good deed to bring before His judgment. With eloquent pleas he'd been able to persuade an old cacique to accept confession, before the man was burned at the stake for arguing that Mary could not be both a Virgin and the Mother of God.

Against the glare of the sun, Gonzalo eyed him closely. He'd never been fond of Jerónimo. There had been many times during their voyage when his piety had galled him. It had an answer for everything; it made Gonzalo wonder what was it that made some people so vulnerable to that sort of unblinking faith. Fear, certainly; of the elements, of illness, of all that could not be explained. Of all these things Gonzalo too was afraid, like all men. But he also loved whatever justice could be done on earth and now instead of somewhere else and later. For the sake of justice he could become fearless. Once he had protested the punishment of a shipmate whom everyone knew was innocent, and he had ended up sharing the man's appointed lashes.

After his father's death he had saved up what little money his uncle gave him and he had spent it to have a priest teach him to read and write. He had seen how easily those who handled a quill cheated those who didn't. If he could even the odds, it was worth going without bread and wine and everything else.

It was taking too long to die, he thought. Once God makes up His mind, He should at least be quick. A sound like a sob came from him. Jerónimo looked at him with a haunted look.

"Brother Guerrero," he said. "I pray for you too. Take heart, for soon we will all be in the glory of the Saints."



Thirteen days, and Christ's own passion had lasted only one. By now some were so dry they could not weep or urinate. One of the officers burned out in a single night. The helmsman and Luís Gallego lingered on, dwindling like candles.

During his last hours Luís begged Jerónimo to confess him and absolve him of his sins. Jerónimo looked terribly sad.

"I'm not a priest yet, brother Luís. I took holy orders when I was a boy, but I have not the power to absolve you." He helped Luís join his hands. "Confess to God and to Jesus. In His mercy He will hear you."

Luís' lips quivered. His eyes stared out with a grief beyond words. With that grief that no one could soothe, he went.

They didn't throw the three bodies overboard because the sharks were all around. They had to leave them where they lay, their faces covered with their shirts, horrible to feel at night when the flesh of the living turned as cold as the flesh of the dead. Death had become their only deity. Hurry up, they prayed, hurry up you old whore. And when the coast smiled, they felt almost as though they'd been cheated.

It was Leon the boy who sighted it. His mouth was too dry for him to shout. He started waving his arms with inarticulate sounds. From the water it looked truly like the piece of Paradise in old don Cristobal's tales: green and wild, tangled with trees and brush, skirted in pink beaches and humming with herons.

Captain Valdivia crossed himself. "O Blessed Mother of God, we thank Thee."

As if welcoming them, flamingos rose high, long red wings flapping. Gently then the current nudged the boat into the lagoon.

Gonzalo could not take his eyes off the shore. Relief as fierce as pain gripped him. He crawled over the gunwale and let himself fall into the water. It was clear as new glass and warm as milk. He floated, arms outstretched, his blunted senses savoring the rebirth.

They tumbled out of the boat and onto the sand. A few of the men had to be carried and put in the shade. Jerónimo sank to his knees and kissed the ground. Others joined him in whispered prayers to God's infinite and infinitely incomprehensible mercy. For a long time they just sat, pressing their hands on the comforting firmness of the earth. Then the well-known endeavors of survival flooded back into their minds, sent trickles of forgotten energy through their limbs.

Captain Valdivia began dividing the men to their tasks. "Felipe and Leon, you two seem strong enough to go searching for fresh water. I need others to make a grave for the dead. The rest of those who can walk will look for food."

Gonzalo reached into his boot, pulled out his good knife. "Who else has daggers?" he asked. "We can tie them to branches, use them as spears. If the savages can survive, by God so shall we."

"We'll build a raft, sail back to Hispaniola," said Ponce Noriega the gunner.

"Yes, but where are we?" wondered Pedro Mendez.

Captain Valdivia took off his soiled shirt. "That we will find out later. To your tasks, now. Stay within earshot if you can."

Up in the palm trees the brown jays chattered like gossips, curious about the strangers. The air was hot in the long afternoon of the Caribe. The men worked slowly. Each movement was painfully tiring, but they were held now by their new hope. They dug a shallow pit in the sand, placed the three dead bodies in it and covered them with more sand. With twigs and dry seaweed Jerónimo fashioned a cross and planted it on the grave.

In the shallows there were sea urchins, abalone and crabs; on the beach, turtle eggs and a dead bird. The men wobbled, fell, crawled back up, maddened by their hunger and their clumsiness. Then they gathered around with whatever they'd been able to

find and started to scrape, cut, break and divide the food, their mouths open in anticipation.

“We look like old women making supper,” Gonzalo said. “Old gypsy women in Granada.”

Before sundown Felipe and Leon were back with the news of fresh water they’d found not too far away. The water was a bit brackish, but clear. They had gathered some in large waxy leaves, and the others fell onto it. Like a nurse Jerónimo fed small pieces of mussels to Alonso Carrera, who was too weak to sit up. They ate the turtle eggs with the soft shells and all. The seaweed provided the salt they all craved.

Then Rodrigo Gutierrez told the others to watch, for he was going to piss. They clapped their hands at the feat and bet on who’d be next. Life, wayward and drunken, had resumed its place among them.

The night came slowly, spreading long layers of blue over the ocean and raising clouds that looked like tall baroque ceilings. They lay down on the sand next to each other, and sleep took them quickly. Now they could speak again the word that helps a man’s heart to beat: *mañana*, tomorrow.



# AFTERWORD

**W**E CREATED PAPER ANGEL PRESS AS AN ACT OF REBELLION. Rebellion against generic rejection letters that provide no useful explanation as why a story was rejected. Rebellion against publishing schedules that more often than not make authors wait months, if not *years*, before they see their book in available for sale. Rebellion against author royalties paid in single-digit percentages.

As an author myself, I frequently find myself frustrated and dismayed at the callous disregard with which the major publishers treat aspiring writers.

“Publishing is a *business*,” they remind us. I understand that, and I believe that many writers understand that. It is, however, a small comfort to an author who wants to understand why their manuscript was rejected or, if their manuscript was accepted, why they will only earn barely more than a dime, and

## *Afterword*

often far less than a quarter, for each copy sold of a paperback edition that sells for \$7.99.

Paper Angel Press is our solution to those problems. We view our authors as collaborators in the creative and promotional process that culminates in the publication of their work. Should we reject a manuscript, we will let the author know the reasons why. Once an author has delivered their final manuscript to us, our goal is to have their book available for sale within two months. We involve the author with, and expect them to participate in, the development of the promotional activities that support the release of their book. We pay our authors based a royalty scale that reflects this partnership.

We also understand that many authors are not full-time writers. They must balance their writing time with the demands of their jobs, families, and other commitments. They might also not have the talent (or time) to become artists or experts in marketing and promotions. We are here to provide them with support in those areas.

At Paper Angel Press, we commit to our authors to fulfill for them our mission statement:

*To bring new works of fiction and art to light.  
To give people a chance to realize their dreams.*

Within these pages you will find samples from our collaborations with our authors. They have created new worlds for all of us to explore and enjoy. If these brief excursions into their worlds capture your imagination, check out their complete tales and experience the entire adventure they offer.

If you have worlds inside you waiting to be shared, send us your stories. Let us help you bring them to life for others to experience.

Steven Radecki  
*Managing Editor*

# PUBLISHING WITH PAPER ANGEL PRESS

**W**E ARE ALWAYS LOOKING FOR NEW STORIES TO TELL. Let us help you bring yours out into the world for others to enjoy.

Here are some basic guidelines that will help make all of our lives easier.

## **MANUSCRIPT FORMATS**

- Send us your complete, finished manuscripts in digital format. It makes the whole process faster and less expensive if we don't have to mail copies of your manuscript back and forth.

- Please use a standard book manuscript format when you submit your book to us. If you're not sure what one is, here's a good source. Except please, not Courier. Or Comic Sans.
- Please submit the complete manuscript in .ODF, .DOCX, or .RTF format to [submissions@paperangelpress.com](mailto:submissions@paperangelpress.com). If you want bonus points, also attach a .MOBI file (that will help our editorial team be able to read it faster).
- Include the following in your cover letter/email:
  - Title of your book
  - Your real name
  - Your snail mail address
  - Your email address
  - Genre
  - Approximate word count
  - Synopsis

## **NON-FICTION SUBMISSIONS**

Due to the different requirements around non-fiction books, we would prefer to see a proposal before you send us your final manuscript. If you need a template to work from, we have some sample proposals available [here](#) you can use.

## **SUBMISSION DEADLINES**

We accept submissions all year long. We will usually try to acknowledge receipt of your manuscript within 72 hours. We'll also try to let you know whether or not we're interested in working with you to publish your book within 30 days after that. Both of these periods may vary, though, depending on the number of manuscripts we've received during that time.

## **WHAT KIND OF BOOKS DO YOU ACCEPT?**

We're pretty much open to everything and anything. We're not about pushing any particular social or political agendas. We're here to help you get your book published. That said, we are most interested in:

- Science Fiction
- Fantasy
- Historical Fiction
- Inspirational Non-Fiction

However, if you have a story that doesn't fit into one of these categories, and believe that there's a market for it, let's see if it's something that we might be able to get excited about as well.

## **CONTACTING US**

For more information, and additional submission guidelines, please visit [paperangelpress.com/submissions](http://paperangelpress.com/submissions) or send us an email at [submissions@paperangelpress.com](mailto:submissions@paperangelpress.com).