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FROM THE SPICES OF SANANDIRA, PT. I

by Bradley P. Beaulieu

Uhammad ben Yazr woke with someone nudging his shoulder. By the pale light of the moon through the open window of his dhoba he could see his friend of twenty years, Jalaad, holding a finger to his lips.

“We have to leave,” Jalaad whispered. His breathing was labored, as if he’d been running, and he smelled of sweat, and his eyes.... Jalaad was not a timid man, but here he was, the whites of his eyes revealing how deep his terror ran.

“What’s happened?”

“No time.... Hurry, and by the gods, tread softly.”

As Uhammad pulled on his robe and sandals, Jalaad woke their adopted son, Riisi, and within moments they had climbed out through the window to the alley and were running through the cold streets of Sanandira’s northern end.

They left nearly everything. Clothes, food, the supplies they had purchased—even Uhammad’s turban, leaving his long hair in a tangled mess. The only thing Uhammad had allowed himself was the precious wooden case of King’s spice,

fyndrenna, the very reason Jalaad had been scouring the city for a sand ship.

By the time they reached the docks, the eastern sky had brightened, coloring the pink sand of the bay with a yellow brush. A handful of sailors could be seen among the dozens of piers and various ships. It made Uhammad feel particularly exposed after so much creeping about. Out in the sandy bed of the harbor, undocked, was a warship flying King Sulamin's colors.

Jalaad led them to a bedraggled cutter whose sails had been patched and repatched, making Uhammad wonder if they could hold any wind at all. At least the ship's skis that angled out from the hull and supported it against the sand were solid and made from quality skimwood.

They rushed up the gangway and onto the deck, Uhammad kissing two fingers for luck, and they were off in moments.

Before they'd even hoisted the mainsail, a group of city guardsmen reached the docks. Close in tow were two of King Sulamin's veiled soldiers. They pointed to the retreating cutter, and the soldiers began sprinting for the open sand, toward the warship.

Jalaad screamed, "Heave, damn you! Heave!"

"Shut up, you bloody stick of a man, and heave yourself!"

Riisi had seen only twelve, perhaps thirteen summers—he'd been too young to know his age when he'd come into their care—but he had always had a steady hand. At the rudder, he chose a shrewd path that avoided the ruts while keeping the sails full.

Sulamin's warship stirred as the guardsmen neared it. Uhammad stared at the forecastle and sterncastle, both of which housed several large ballistae that could cripple the cutter or launch grapples to reel them in. Still, the wind was brisk and they enjoyed a handsome lead; by the time the warship was taking on sail, they were already into the open desert, the only sound the sighing of the skis against the sand and the occasional snap of canvas.

"Now," Uhammad said, his heart finally beginning to slow, "do you mind telling me what happened back there?"

Jalaad took the rudder from Riisi and wiped the sweat from his brow. "Sulamin found us."

"I'm not addled, Jalaad. *How* did he find us?"

"The merchantwoman you bought the pepper from.... She must have told them."

Uhammad had bought the casks of pepper from Sanandira's bazaar. The woman surely hadn't known the treasure that had lain within them, but each cask had born the

mark of Kaliil, the trader Uhammad and Jalaad had signed on with years ago in hopes of hiding from King Sulamin.

“It doesn’t make sense,” Uhammad said flatly. “She didn’t recognize the seal. Why would she have told them?”

Jalaad shrugged, focusing on the horizon.

Uhammad watched him carefully, working it through in his mind. They had been in Sanandira for eight years, but that only made the discovery of the casks—and the priceless box of spice hidden away inside one of them—that much more prophetic. Uhammad had always felt like a disloyal goat, abandoning the caravan the way he had. Clearly the gods were urging him to atone for his failure those many years ago on that final journey with Kaliil and Riisi. Jalaad had argued against it, blaming the discovery of the casks on mere chance, but what fool would ignore such a sign from the heavens?

Uhammad had begun plans to return to the desert, and all the while Jalaad had railed, blustered, and finally threatened to leave the journey to Uhammad alone. But in truth he cared about Riisi every bit as much as Uhammad did. He would never abandon them; he was not averse, however, to complain while the drink was on him, and he had returned that day near dawn with the smell of kefir on his breath.

The implications settled over Uhammad like the bitter taste of over-steeped tea. “You were in your cups.... You were in

your cups and you complained to anyone who would listen, like you always do.”

“I was angry! You were wasting our savings on nothing!”

“*Nothing*? Damn you, Jalaad! I should throw you to the mercies of the sand!”

“*Me*? I found us this ship! I smelled Sulamin’s men on our trail and paid the greedy goat of an owner an extra dram just to keep him quiet! I snuck back to get you when I could have left!”

“Well,” Uhammad said, sketching a bow, “I suppose you should be granted a lordship then! Sooner or later, Jalaad, your mouth is going to get us killed.”

“Either that or your fool plans,” Jalaad said, keeping his hands on the rudder and his eyes forward.

“You can leave any time you wish.”

Jalaad bit back a reply and instead kept his eyes on the horizon. As he often did when they argued, Riisi left to the only place he could: the single cabin belowdecks. And with that outward reminder of their hostilities, Jalaad and Uhammad settled into a silent and mutual *détente*.

With no provisions, they were forced to dock at the first caravanserai they came across. It was little more than a collection of red-bricked dhobas clinging to a patch of land whose only distinguishable feature was that it contained a waterhole. They worried over Sulamin’s warship the entire

time, and they returned to the open sands within a half-hour. It was only there, when they saw no sign of the King's men, that Uhammad allowed himself to breathe a sigh of relief.

As they continued southward, memories of the desert began to flood back to Uhammad. The Jalari was cruel, but she was also achingly beautiful—her endless waves of rolling sand, her burning sunrises and sunsets, her indigo nights. The tricks of the wind and curve of the dunes came back quickly as well. He had been a crewman for nearly six years, after all, and the feel of the wind and tug of the rudder never truly left a man.

The harsh cycle of day and night began to meld together as they approached their destination. Riisi spotted a broken mast, though the ship to which it was attached still lay hidden beyond a withered outcropping of rock. When they passed the outcropping, the derelict caravel came into view: *Rhia's Dream*, the last ship Uhammad and Jalaad had served upon before leaving for Sanandira.

They pulled in sail and searched the wreckage, but it had long been stripped of anything valuable. Jalaad was disappointed, but Uhammad didn't care. They had come because their former captain, Muulthasa, had had a strong emotional experience here, an important component for the fyndrenna to work its spell.

With Jalaad and Riisi watching, Uhammad settled himself onto the hot sand near the ship. From within the pockets hidden in his layers of clothing he retrieved the glass phial filled with the golden spice. For someone as uninitiated as he, the amount of fyndrenna he was about to apply would come dangerously close to killing him. But the old farseer in Sanandira had given him what advice she could.

“I know you feel a sense of purpose, Uhammad,” Jalaad called down from the cutter, “but we don’t have to do this. We could just keep sailing to Ilinnon. We could sell the fyndrenna and live comfortably for the rest of our lives.”

Uhammad glanced at Riisi. He had thought of selling the spice and living richly—any man would—but this was not for him. This was for the boy, who had lost himself in the desert those years ago. He had returned voiceless from the journey they had begun together, a terrible wound along his throat, and could remember almost nothing of his past. Uhammad would return this to him—his past—a thing every bit as important as his future.

Jalaad took his silence for uncertainty. “You’re a cook,” he continued. “I’m a man of business. We have no place here, not anymore.”

“Take Riisi and remain on deck,” Uhammad said. “I don’t know how long the spell will have me.”

Jalaad screwed up his face in annoyance, but obeyed and guided Riisi back to the skimship.

In little time, all was silence, and Uhammad was alone with the desert and his phial of spice. He pulled out the wooden stopper, to which was affixed a slim silver spoon. After shaking the excess away, he held it above his left eye and focused on his strongest memory from the early days of their journey. It was of Muulthasa leaning over the side of the gunwale, neck muscles taut as a harp string, sighting down the length of a crossbow.

After pulling back his lower eyelid, he tapped some of the powder into it. His eye began tearing immediately; it burned worse than the bright red peppers he used to flavor his dishes. He repeated the procedure with his right eye before the burning forced him to stop.

Tears mixed with the fyndrenna, turning the blue skyline liquid. The horizon blurred then sharpened then blurred again. He felt weightless. Foreign thoughts and emotions forced upon him a desperate sense of panic, and despite his sudden wish to fight the call of the spice, it had all too soon taken hold of his entire being.

* * *

Though everyone is exhausted from the dawn-to-dusk work of transporting our goods, we set out before last light and

join a sizable caravan heading north. The desert heaves a great sigh as the sun nears the horizon and cooler winds slip over the deck.

Kaliil's sandships are only three of forty in the caravan, and we're near the fore—the more dangerous position—since Kaliil isn't nearly as wealthy as most of the other caravan masters. Kaliil's ship, *The Crying Gull*, skims astern of my own, *Night Wind*. The yellow canvas of our third, *Rhia's Dream*, the one carrying the fat rahib and his guards and the least of the spices, brightens like burning copper as it moves between me and the sun. I refrain from shouting at the helmsman, Uhammad, for not staying in line; the men have been on the sands long enough to be granted some leniency, and there's little harm in stretching the sails a bit.

Just then a huge black fist punches up from the sand and catches *Rhia's Dream*. One of the spars along the ski shatters and the flat prow crashes, spraying a fan of red sand to both sides as the ship gouges the dune and tilts hard alarboard.

I scream for my ship's pilot, Rafaf, to slow. He ignores me, making me scream until my throat burns. The sand, as if it were so much water, parts, allowing a black-as-night head with two misshapen ears and a crown of black spikes to rise above the surface. Broad shoulders and a muscled chest follow, and then the creature stalks toward the stricken skimship.

As our ship heads downslope, the scene is lost from view. My standing orders are to abandon a ship before risking another to a vengeful creature like the ehrekh, but two of the men aboard, Jalaad and Uhammad, I know from my days in Harrahd as a member of the King's guard—orders or no, I can no more leave them than I could cut the heart from my own chest.

I run back to the wheel and push Rafaf aside, screaming at him to watch the fore. He does, though his eyes are wild with fear. I pull at the wheel, tipping us larboard and nearly sending two men over the side.

We come about.

Behind us, *The Crying Gull* slows but does not follow. I can hear Kaliil screaming, "Leave them, leave them!" But his words are lost as we tack west and the rear ships whip past us.

"Crossbows at the ready, men, and load the ballista!"

Rafaf and another crewman pump their arms against the huge windlass used to draw the ballista's firing cord into place. The other seven that can be spared from the pursuit take up crossbows and crank them to the ready and lace the tips of the quarrels with wax to better penetrate the ehrekh's skin. In truth we can only hope to wound it, to slow it perhaps, but at my core I fear that striking it will only make it shower its rage on us instead.

As we crest the dune and the sight of devastation comes back into view, my arms tighten to the point where I can no longer steer the ship. The ehrekh has already caught up to *Rhia's Dream*, which lies capsized against a sharp outcropping of rock. Some of the men stagger away in ragged paths.

The rahib's round form crawls from the rear of the broken hull just as the ehrekh—easily as tall as two men—rips a thousand pounds of rigging from the ship. The silk trader, Azadeh, with her boy in tow, stumbles through the uneven sand after them. Her blue veil is marred by a swath of red blood.

The ehrekh turns, its jaundiced eyes ablaze, as a spear flies upward and grazes its jaw. It rears back and growls like a struck lion and then unleashes its vengeance on the poor soul who loosed the spear. His screams stop moments later.

The survivors flee, but at a pace so slow that I fear they'll never reach us in time. The ehrekh hurls a barrel at them. It narrowly misses Azadeh and crashes into one of the rahib's guardsmen, sending a cloud of black peppercorns over the sand.

Dear gods, thirty have been reduced to nine in the blink of an eye.

I pull us about, heading straight for the ehrekh. "Now, Rafaf! Now!"

The ballista bolt flies.

The aim seems off as it eats the distance between my ship and the ehrekh, and my heart sinks as the man-length bolt bites into the sand short of the creature, but a moment later the thing rears back and releases a howling call to the skies. It rips the bolt free, sending an arc of ochre blood over the dusky sand.

Two men release their quarrels.

“Wait for him, damn it! Wait for him!”

The ehrekh charges as I order the sails reefed. The ship slows, but the nine running from the ehrekh are losing strength while the desert spirit gains ground.

Inexplicably, the ehrekh halts near the rahib’s fallen man. From the puddle of peppercorns littering the desert floor it snatches a wooden case, which had apparently been stowed inside the peppercorn barrel. A golden powder leaks from within to float like so much dandelion seed on the wind. The ehrekh sniffs it and throws it to the ground in a renewed rage.

Our ship slows to a crawl, and the first of the staggering survivors reach the hull and are pulled up by waiting arms. The ehrekh bears down.

“Open sails, men!” I scream. “Ride the sand, or we die this day!”

We pull the rest of the survivors to safety, including Jalaad and Uhammad. The fat rahib is the last to make it aboard as the ship takes speed. Too slow. Too slow!

The ehrekh charges forward, but our speed is gaining.

Then it slows. I think it is giving up the chase, but it opens its maw and *bellows* at the ship.

Something strikes me full on. The wind is knocked from my lungs. The hull groans and the mainmast releases a sharp crack. I pause, sure the mast will split and come falling down on us, but praise to the gods above, it holds.

We crest the dune and make for the tiny silhouette of *The Crying Gull* several miles ahead. The rest of the caravan has been reduced to little more than a flock of black triangles against the indigo sky. As we gain on them, I find myself unable to be angry at Kaliil for not helping—all I can feel is relief—but through the emotion I realize what the presence of the ehrekh might mean.

The ehrekh are solitary spirits, rarely seen, but King Sulamin the Betrayer has two under his yoke which he uses to control the caravan trade. Was it one of *his* ehrekh that attacked us? The possibility of crossing the path of one by chance seems unlikely. And there is the golden spice hidden within the peppercorn barrel. The ehrekh became enraged after smelling it. King Sulamin worked hard at eradicating

competition for a few select spices; perhaps the spice had been one of those.

There is yet another possibility. Stories are told of the ehrekh being sent by the Kings of Harrahd as crude yet effective assassins. My fear grows that Sulamin has found me at last. Six years ago, mere minutes before Huad, the rightful King, was murdered by agents of Sulamin, I was asked to gather men and spirit the Queen away. I thought surely it would be only days, perhaps weeks, before peace was restored in Harrahd, but Sulamin was ruthless in securing his position, and soon there was no one to challenge his claim to the throne.

No one but the Queen.

But if Sulamin had found me, the ehrekh would have been bent on my destruction, would it not? It had seemed too intent on the rahib, and so I had to wonder if he had angered King Sulamin in some way.

Many questions with few enough answers. But I intend to find some of them when we land again.

* * *

Uhammad coughed, puffing red sand into his nose. He pushed himself off the desert floor as Muulthasa's memories—like the scent of juniper in autumn—faded with great reluctance.

Jalaad appeared before him with an urn of water. “I thought you were dying.”

Based on the position of the sun and his aching bones, Uhammad guessed that nearly four hours had passed. “Then why didn’t you come save me?”

“You looked so peaceful.” Jalaad’s exaggerated smile was not in the least bit comforting. “What did you learn?”

“What have I learned?” Uhammad wiped the back of his hand across his wet mouth and beard. In truth, he hated reliving that experience, in part from the fear it rekindled, but mostly from the shame. What he had done to Muulthasa.... “I have learned that I have made poor choices in life, Jalaad.”

Jalaad put on a sarcastic smile. “This is news?”

Uhammad frowned and shouldered his way past.

They took to the ship and headed for the nearest caravanserai, the same one Kaliil had taken them to those many years ago. Near sunset, Riisi’s sharp eyes spotted the sails of a warship. Immediately they dropped down a dune and rode the gutters like pirates, hoping they had gone unnoticed. It seemed that luck was with them, for when they pulled beneath an escarpment of rust-colored rock, they saw nothing along the horizon.

Their nerves were strained with the knowledge that Sulamin’s men hadn’t given up. Jalaad argued for sailing past

the caravanserai, but Riisi had excellent eyes, and Sulamin's ship probably hadn't spotted them. Besides, Uhammad explained, they needed as much information about Muulthasa's northward path as they could get.

They reached the caravanserai late into the night. Uhammad found the master and paid him his landing fee, feeling exposed in the minutes it took to do so. After kneeling in their dhoba and taking another dose of the glittering spice, Uhammad calmed himself and focused on his memories of that night, shamed at the mere thought of them. *This is my penance, he told himself, to live my betrayal through Muulthasa's eyes.*

* * *

With the silver moon bright and the entire caravan fearful of the ehrekh's chase, we continue on through the night until we reach the first caravanserai. It is small, and we normally would have sailed past, but the caravan leader, Sytaatha, has called a halt.

Less than five minutes after grounding the ships, Kaliil calls me to accompany him. We enter the caravanserai's largest dhoba, where a healthy fire sends a trail of smoke through a hole in the thatched roof.

With their guardmasters hugging the wall, the seven other caravan masters stand behind Sytaatha, watching soberly. They

look like a tribunal of the gods, spread in an arc and wearing gold-threaded kaftans and silk turbans and jeweled shoes. Every one of them wears a dour face. I want to scream at them for refusing to help us—what is a caravan for if not mutual protection?—but Kaliil bows and yanks my arm when he realizes I haven't followed suit.

“We have already spoken, Kaliil,” proclaims Sytaatha.

“It was pure chance,” Kaliil says as he stands and raises his hands in a defensive gesture. “It could have been any one of us.”

“But it *wasn't* any one of us. It was *you*.”

“The ehrekh are mischievous spirits. They are toying with us. What else could it be?” His last words are spoken weakly, as if even *he* hears the foolishness in them.

“Whatever the reason,” Sytaatha continues, “King Sulamin has marked you. You will not join us. You will take the eastern passes or you will wait a half-day here while we continue in the morning—I leave it up to you—but if we so much as see your sails on the horizon, we will turn and destroy you.”

“Come, now. Let's be reasonable. We can question the rahib. It must have been him the ehrekh was after, not my spices. What would an ehrekh want of such things?”

“The rahib or you, it no longer matters. Your foolish guardmaster *wounded* the ehrekh. It will come for vengeance now, no matter what its initial purpose.”

Kaliil glances my way shamefacedly. “I could leave them both here.”

My face reddens. How I yearn to ask the gods to wither his skin and dry his bones, but I stifle my vengeful thoughts, for one never knows when the gods will come calling, asking for their favors to be returned.

Sytaatha stares, waiting for Kaliil to accept his fate.

As sure as autumn streams dry, Kaliil’s face loses its fight. “I paid money to join you.”

“And I should keep it,” Sytaatha replies, “for it will most likely litter the sand of the ehrekh’s lair. But here.” He sends a small leather bag jingling through the air. It thumps with a fortuneless clink at Kaliil’s feet. “Never let it be said Sytaatha is unfair.” And with that they leave.

My fear over this turn of events is just beginning to rise when we hear the ehrekh’s cry spread across the desert—a long harroon, unlike anything I’ve ever heard, and at the center of it a thumping, growling undertone.

A violent shiver gallops up my frame.

Kaliil stares at me wide-eyed, as if I could protect him. “Call everyone,” he tells me. “Now.”

I refuse to move, for there is something we must have out. “Did you have fyndrenna aboard that ship?”

Confusion twists Kaliil’s face. “Muulthasa, if I could afford fyndrenna, do you think I’d still be skimming the sands with miserable curs like you?”

“Answer the question, Kaliil.”

His face turns hard. “I told you to find the men.”

At most times I allow Kaliil’s bullying to go unchallenged, but in this he will not win. I wait for his answer.

The life seems to drain from his shoulders. “No, Muulthasa. It was galangal. Nothing more.”

I stare into his eyes, measuring his words. “Galangal...”

“Nothing more.”

Kaliil may be telling the truth. Galangal is the least of the spices Sulamin has control over, and it carries the least punishment if caught. Plus, fyndrenna is the most expensive spice the desert has ever known. A man like Kaliil would have difficulty obtaining a few drams of the stuff, much less an entire case.

I nod, satisfied, and go to find the men. When I return, Kaliil is questioning the rahib near the fire.

“Then why were you leaving Ilinnon so quickly?” Kaliil asks him.

“My reasons are my own.”

“Not when I’ve lost a ship they’re not!”

“It has nothing to do with an ehrekh, I can assure you.”

Kaliil stalks back and forth. Azadeh, her face still masked by her blood-crusted veil, holds her child to her hip and looks upon the exchange with keen interest.

The rahib removes a necklace with a sizable emerald from his neck. He holds it out to Kaliil. “And when we reach Harrahd, a thousand shepis more.”

Kaliil hesitates, perhaps for the benefit of his audience, and then accepts the offered necklace. “Fifteen hundred,” he says.

“Done,” replies the rahib, who walks away immediately, apparently not willing to tempt fate any longer.

The harroon of the ehrekh comes again, and the child begins to cry. As Azadeh turns to leave, she looks straight at me, that look of fear still in her eyes. A memory sparks suddenly within me, something about her piercing green eyes. But like a silhouette standing too far from the firelight, it is unclear, insubstantial.

I retire to a room above the tavern with my men and try to find sleep, but the memory of the woman’s eyes and the sound of the ehrekh’s call haunt me sleepless.

As morning approaches, I find three of the men preparing to leave. To my shock, both of my companions from my days in Harrahd—Jalaad and Uhammad—are among them.

“We do not sail until after midday,” I tell them, knowing their true purpose.

Jalaad, ever bold, steps forward. But to my surprise, he hides his eyes as he speaks. “I saw it rip three men limb from limb in the blink of an eye.”

“We must stand together, Jalaad, now more than ever.”

“Stand, hide, run.... It will all end the same.”

Jalaad leaves, but stout Uhammad pauses in the doorway, his face a study in shame.

“Uhammad, please.”

He shakes his head slowly. I have never felt so alone as I do now, staring into a mirror of my own emotions, and I realize with a sudden clarity that no words or coin will be enough to convince them to stay.

“Where will you go?” I ask.

“Sanandira,” he says. “We head for Sanandira.”

And with that he leaves.

Six more have abandoned us by the time we pull anchor.

* * *

Uhammad opened his eyes to darkness. The fyndrenna had been disorienting the first time—but this time he felt like

he was under an opium haze. His breath rose and fell, as slow as the tides. The stern words of the ancient farseer echoed in his mind. *Use it once, she'd said, and you need worry but little. Twice in the same week, be prepared for muddied senses and a slow awakening. Thrice, and you'd best say your prayers before it touches your eyes.*

He might be dying, for the effect refused to ebb, but finally, minutes later, his breathing returned to normal.

Nearby, the embers of the fire in the center of the dhoba glowed fitfully. Uhammad shifted closer and poured himself a cup of lime tea from the now-cold pot. Jalaad, sleeping beneath a thin blanket, woke at the sound and stared at Uhammad with guilty eyes, the expression echoing Uhammad's own feelings.

"Did Muulthasa curse our names?" Jalaad asked as he stoked the embers into a meager flame.

Uhammad sipped his tea. It was difficult, now that the pull of the fyndrenna was gone, to sort his own memories and emotions from those of Muulthasa. "I don't think he blamed us for leaving. I think a part of him was glad we were escaping his fate."

Jalaad stared into the fire. "Then he was a fool, or he was lying to himself. A man in his right mind would see us for what we were."

"And what were we?"

Jalaad paused. “Do I have to say it?”

No, Uhammad thought, *you don't. We were cowards then and we're cowards now.* It would have been easier if Muulthasa had been less understanding. It would have felt more proper if he'd been furious. *I would have been,* Uhammad told himself.

A call, soft but clear in the desert night, sounded in the distance. It brought back memories of the ehrekh, how primal it had been, how vengeful. This felt... apropos somehow, as if Uhammad's craven attempt to escape it had only been postponed these eight years and the chase could now resume.

They both held utterly still, waiting for another, closer call, but the night remained silent. It was then that Uhammad realized Riisi was not in the dhoba with them. “Where's Riisi?”

Jalaad looked about, a confused expression pinching his long face.

Uhammad rushed out into the chill night air, sure the ehrekh had stolen Riisi away and was now trumpeting its victory from afar. He and Jalaad wove through the caravanserai's sprinkling of dhobas, calling Riisi's name, but it wasn't until they moved beyond them that Uhammad spotted him standing atop a dune, silhouetted by the light of the golden moon, Tulathan.

“Let me talk to him,” Uhammad said.

Jalaad nodded with a slightly pained look in his eye. Riisi had always been closer to Uhammad, and it still hurt Jalaad to face that.

Uhammad trudged through the sand to the top of the dune. He remained silent, wanting simply to share the star-filled sky with Riisi for a time. The tips of the dunes were brushed with gold, as if Tulathan were a flower that had shed its pollen on the desert below.

“You remember the calls, don’t you?” Uhammad asked after a time.

Riisi didn’t reply.

“Don’t worry. They roam the desert, and they call from time to time.”

It’s chasing us, Riisi signed.

“Don’t be foolish,” Uhammad said, though the words were only for Riisi’s benefit. “Why would it be chasing us?”

The same question was asked when it attacked the first time.

“There are a thousand reasons why Kaliil’s ships might have been chased, the fyndrenna not the least of them.”

Riisi exhaled noisily. *And here we are again with the King’s spice.*

Uhammad could not deny his logic.

And then there’s me.

“Had that been its purpose, the ehrekh would have beaten down the walls of Sanandira long ago to find you.”

But the words didn't sit right, and Uhammad wondered if Riisi was telling him everything he knew, everything he remembered of those days before reaching Sanandira.

Do you think it's one of King Sulamin's?

“It may very well be.”

Odd, don't you think? They've been missing since I found you in Sanandira, and now here they are again.

Indeed. The ehrekh had been notably missing from the desert for years. The timing was conspicuous in that their disappearance coincided with Kaliil's fateful voyage eight years ago, but like Riisi's past, Uhammad had never been able to fit together all the puzzle pieces to understand why.

“Come,” he said. “The desert seems unwilling to grant any insights this night.”

Uhammad guided Riisi back to the dhoba, and they all slept, though fitfully. It seemed like ages before the sun rose. Thankfully the ehrekh's call was heard no more, and so it was with lighter hearts that they left the caravanserai and traveled north. Uhammad followed the path he'd gleaned from Muulthasa's memories, for there was no other choice.

Three days later they found an abandoned caravanserai. But this time, when Uhammad prepared the fyndrenna, he felt

exposed, as if touching the past was drawing the ehrekh's attention. Foolish, he told himself, but he still couldn't rid himself of the notion.

Best to get it done quickly then. He focused on Muulthasa and powdered the fyndrenna into his eyes.

* * *

We have neither heard nor seen sign of the ehrekh since leaving the caravanserai three days ago. Perhaps the gods toy with me on my final voyage home, for my mind is resolute—no matter what dangers might present themselves in Harrahd, I will return home. Or if my Alenha has fled back to our village, I will search for her there.

I pray that King Sulamin has given up on a trifle like me for spiring away his cousin, Queen Rossanal, six years ago. And if he hasn't.... Then at least I will see Alenha for one more day.

Kaliil sells another portion of his mace below his cost to make room aboard for the rahib and his men. Azadeh and her son—gods know why he allows them to stay—are bunking in my cabin, though Azadeh never sleeps when I'm in the room, only when I'm on deck, and avoids me completely otherwise. Even when we ration out food, she asks Wahid, who has taken a liking to her, to fetch it for her.

I haven't been able to unravel the remembrance she sparked, but I no longer care. We are six days from Sanandira, ten from Harrahd, and by the grace of all that's holy, I will find Alenha and be done with this life forever.

Our two ships skim the dunes, the morning chilly and bright. I man the wheel of *The Crying Gull*, my eyes aching from the lack of sleep over the long, cold night. Kaliil stands near the bowsprit, scanning the horizon with his looking glass. I ask Rafaf to relieve me.

As I reach Kaliil's side, a long harroon breaks over the dunes from the southeast. My grip stiffens painfully on the gunwale's railing. My hands refuse to release, for the sound is so near. I thought the ehrekh had lost our scent, that it had been mere bad luck that had placed us within its reach, within its hatred for mankind.

I scan the dunes over and over, but with the sun angled so low, I can discern little among the shadows.

From the west comes another harroon, with the same rattling aspect to it. I trade fearful glances with Kaliil as the other men eye us. I want to provide strength for those watching, want to hide my fear, but I find I have lost all courage with the realization that there are now two of them chasing us.

"Do you still deny there is spice aboard?" I ask.

Before he can respond, Wahid whistles down from the vulture's nest. "Oasis!"

A large caravanserai comes into view as we glide beyond an escarpment of black rock. Dozens of men, each armed with a bow or crossbow, stand along the wall. The gate opens and out ride three men. Two of them ride further back than the lead, and each bears a bow, arrow nocked.

Their leader—an old man with a black turban with a single gold medallion at the brow—raises his hands as our ships slows to a halt. "Do not think to trouble us, Kaliil. Move on, and take the anger of the desert with you."

Kaliil's face turns red. "The desert be damned, Aegi! How many times have I sprinkled gold in your taverns? How much silver have my men lost gambling at your tables?"

"None of that matters when the desert itself seeks to spit you out."

"Then at least let us provision. We're short of water. Surely you must realize Sytaatha was exaggerating."

Aegi flicks his hand toward our ship. The two riders behind him pull back their bows and loose one arrow apiece. I yank Kaliil back from the edge instinctively, but the arrows bite into the wood of the hull well below the gunwale's railing.

“Best put on sail, Kaliil. I hear the ehrekh move with devilish speed.” And with that Aegi returns to the protection of his caravanserai.

Kaliil fumes. I think if he had enough men he would order us to throw ourselves against them.

We return to our desert trek, and Kaliil calls me into his cabin. He sits in his large padded chair, watching the horizon through the opened shutters set into the rear of the cabin.

“Two of them, Muulthasa,” he says, rubbing away at his golden wishing coin.

I say nothing in return, and he eventually turns his sober eyes on me.

“You’re from Harrahd,” he says.

I nod to him carefully. We have never discussed my origin. I have grown accustomed to hiding the fact, but it is easy enough to discern my northern accent.

“King Sulamin, his control over the ehrekh.... Is there no way for them to lose the scent?”

I shrug. “I know little enough about him, and less about the ehrekh. I’ve heard as many rumors as you. They hunt what they’re bidden to hunt and do not rest until they have it.”

Kaliil frowns and returns to his vigil over the dunes. “Why didn’t they attack together that first time?”

An interesting question. “Perhaps they weren’t sure where we would be. Perhaps one was position along the eastern trail, the other along the west.”

As his fingers continue to rub, the golden coin slips in and out of view. “Can the ehrekh *smell* fyndrenna hidden deep in a ship’s hold?”

The words settle over me like the cold winter winds of the north. I close my eyes, angry for ever believing he had none aboard. The way he throws his betrayal about, like it means nothing to him, enrages me. I take a deep breath and release my question slowly. “How much do you have?”

“Two more cases.”

“By the gods, Kaliil! Sulamin would kill you over one. For three they’ll kill us all!”

Kaliil slams his fist onto his desk. “Can they *smell it*, Muulthasa? Will they stop chasing us if we rid ourselves of it?”

The ehrekh’s bellow plays across the desert behind us. So loud is the noise, it can be no more than a mile away now.

“We had better hope so,” I tell him as I head for the cabin door. “Bring them on deck.”

I return to the foredeck, where the woman watches the horizon intently. Her veil whips in the hot wind, revealing only her painted lashes, her bright green eyes. She is so familiar. If only I could see her face unobstructed....

“Best you get belowdecks,” I say.

She casts her gaze downward and heads for the hatch.

Before she can take two steps, the ehrekh’s call echoes, close. It is different this time, higher-pitched.

“Hard to starboard, Rafaf! Now!”

Rafaf pulls the ship hard over. Ahead, an explosion of sand bursts into the warming desert sky. An ehrekh howls. The force of his breath shoves us to one side, and the ship groans as it lists far to starboard. Our scout falls screaming from the vulture’s nest and flies wide of the tilted ship. His screams stop with an abrupt thud.

Rafaf is forced to compensate for the lean by pulling larboard. The ehrekh lunges and catches the stern railing, which shatters free in a six-foot section as the ship continues on.

The men bring their crossbows to bear and let fly, but the beast waves its hand, sending up a hissing wall of red sand to foul the quarrels’ paths. By the time the sand plummets back to the dunes, the ehrekh has vanished.

Kaliil grapples his way along the gunwale, wary of the concealing sands below our skis, and hands me an ornate inlaid box. The scent of aged bonewood and pepper cannot hide the overpowering smell. It burns, like strong rum, but there is a sweetness to it and an underscent of rosemary or angelica.

“One?” I stare at him, incredulous. “You brought only *one*?”

“Throw it to the sand when it comes. If it follows the box, then it must be after the fyndrenna. If not....”

No sooner do the words escape his mouth than the ship bucks, sending me through the air. Kaliil falls and slips backward along the deck. The ship is tilted strangely, and a moment later I see why: the second ehrekh has grabbed onto the stern deck. One of its black hands reaches high and hooks a fistful of rigging to pull itself higher. The other, gods save us, is lodged *through* the hull.

The rear of the ship drops and scrapes against the sand. Kaliil loses his hold and slips further along the slick deck toward the ehrekh. It bares its yellow teeth and releases a pleased, chill-inducing growl.

Unable to think of anything else, I throw the case of fyndrenna at the ehrekh. It roars as the case bursts and the golden spice within sprays it in the face. The beast snatches Kaliil’s leg. Rafaf abandons the wheel in favor of a crossbow and releases a quarrel deep into the ehrekh’s shoulder. It mewls and throws Kaliil high into the air behind it. He flies silently, limbs flailing. His black turban flutters free of his head, and his golden coin glints as it spins away and lands in the ruddy sand.

The ehrekh pulls itself higher along the tilted deck. I attempt to swing the loaded ballista around, but the pivot was not designed to point astern.

A voice calls from behind me. "Run, Muulthasa!"

I yank at the ballista again and again, trying to bring it to bear. I pray the gods will allow me to turn it on the beast, but they have apparently cast a deaf ear to my plight. I spin when the hollow sounds of its footsteps become too loud, too terrible to bear unseen.

The thing towers above me, and I know I am about to die. It grabs my leg and pulls me away from the weapon. I slide down and lose my hold. My head cracks against the deck, and for a while I can hear only high-pitched sounds.

A blur of motion shoots in from my right. Blood sprays my face and neck, so hot it burns. The ehrekh rears back and releases a howl so loud I clamp my hands over my ears.

Hands grab me about the shoulders and yank me to my feet. I stumble over the edge of the tilted ship and run, blind from the acrid blood.

We are running to our last ship, *Night Wind*, and though I am too addled to understand everything around me, I realize we have escaped.

That *some* of us have escaped.

The *Night Wind* takes us into her arms and carries us away, but we are mindful of what has been lost. Kaliil is dead, and the men—even the rahib—turn to me to see them through. They tell me the ehrekh took a bolt from the other ballista, that it lay motionless as we fled the remaining ehrekh's rage. If the gods allow any fortune to shine on us this day, the first ehrekh still lies on the deck of our ship, its lifeblood spilled.

As I sit in the solitude of the captain's cabin, I despair. Sytaatha had the right of it. Even if the ehrekh lay dead, the other will hound us until we are dead to the last man. I kneel and pray long into the night for Alenha's future, wishing I had been able to be part of it...

...and wake without knowing I had fallen sleep.

Sunlight streams through the open shutters, but the wind is up, sending the sands to blowing in great swaths. The moment I close the shutters, a thought enters my consciousness, one I had been chasing for days.

Six years ago was the night I left my wife, the night my guard unit and I were ordered to spirit Queen Rossanal and her handmaid away from the city. I remember much of it like it happened yesterday. I saw the Queen clearly only a handful of times during our two-week flight from her cousin, who was then *Lord* Sulamin. She was veiled every time, but her eyes

were distinct—her left eye off ever so slightly from the other, their color the deepest green I have ever seen.

It is that gaze I had forgotten.

I order Rafaf to bring Azadeh to me. She treads carefully into the cabin a few minutes later with her son held protectively before her. When she sees the seriousness in my face, her head droops, and she stares at Rafaf until he removes his hold of her.

“They’re after *you*, aren’t they?” I ask when we’re alone.

She, Queen Rossanal, the woman I swore my life to protect, stares at me with those serious green eyes, and nods. The hold on her child tightens, and I wonder if she fears I will simply take her out to the deck and throw her to the sands.

I pace, unable to place the last of the pieces. “Why?” I ask. “Why would the King send them now? And what would make you brave the return to Harrahd?”

The Queen doesn’t answer, but she holds her son closer, and it’s as if she has pointed to where the puzzle pieces ought to go. Her son. He is five at least, the right age for her to have been pregnant when she fled Harrahd. Could it be? Could this boy....

“He is the rightful King?” I ask.

The ehrekh’s lonely call plays over the desert.

The Queen's eyes pool with tears. "Would you serve your King as you served your Queen?" Her voice has lost its royal luster; perhaps the desert has burned it from her.

I kick the captain's chair, sending it crashing into the far side of the cabin. "You *abandoned* us! In foreign lands, without warning, without money, and with no hope of survival! King Sulamin's men found our trail within weeks. He began plucking our lives like feathers from a dead pheasant. I am one of only three remaining of the nineteen who rescued you."

She brushes one hand deliberately through her son's golden-brown hair. "I had another to worry about."

"But you were the Queen! You could have received help from the Kyman in Ilinnon or the King of Jabatti. You could have—"

The Queen holds up one slender hand, a tear slipping down her cheek. "I was little more than a child myself," she says. "I didn't know if one of you might be loyal to Sulamin. I couldn't trust you as a whole, and I didn't know which *one* of you to trust, so I trusted no one."

"You stole my wife and child from me."

"I know. If we get back to Harrahd, I would see you reunited."

And now it seems her fears were justified, for my fingers ache to throw her from the ship. How can she expect me, for

my men, to help her back to Harrahd after all she's done? And to act as though she could simply repair my life with a wave of her royal hand....

“Get back to your cabin,” I say.

“My brother has prepared the way—”

“Now!”

Her eyes blaze. She seems ready to oppose me—as she might have once—but the fire in her eyes dims, and she lowers her head. How strange to see the Queen I once served so cowed.

“You loved your kingdom once,” she says quietly.

“It paid well.”

“No, I saw it in the way you protected me. You made sure I was safe every step of the way. You barely slept, our first five days from Harrahd.”

“That wasn't loyalty. That was fear.”

She bows her head, still unwilling to meet my eyes. “Then think of your family. You must have heard how dearly Harrahd suffered when my cousin stole the reins from my husband. How it still suffers.”

I open my mouth to spit back a reply....

But how can I? How can I turn my back on my Alenha? For she is Harrahd to these desert-dry eyes. Anything I do for the Queen I do for Alenha as well, and our child.

* * *

(Concluded in [BCS #71](#))

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THE NINE-TAILED CAT

by Michael J. DeLuca

I arrive at the door of my house in the dark with lamp and spade, jungle mud caked past my ankles, thickets of scratches streaking my limbs. I set the lamp on the step, sling the sack of stinking goat's meat off my shoulder, and reach for the knob.

And there's that cat in the moonlight—the one I've been hunting since dawn. It clings by its black claws high in the pinabete tree, lashing its five spotted tails against the shadows. That same ruby bracelet hangs around its neck. Nine rubies. I shouldn't have to count; I have another just like it.

Nine rubies rich as kisses, yet the shine on each one's surface is paler than milk. I've never seen reflected moonlight sparkle so, except atop the mountain on crusted snow closer to sky than to earth.

Such beautiful jewels. How fine they would look beside the others on my Maya's wrist. But I won't fall for that trick twice.

I heft the shovel in my hand. The glint of it doesn't compare. If I sharpened it, maybe. If I flattened it out with a mallet and ran the edge against a stone until it sparked like

death-day firecrackers, then it just might outgleam the cat's ruby torque.

I should have sharpened it before I left. Why didn't I? The eyes, so round and pitying. It bewitched me. I assumed it would fall for my traps.

The spade just clangs against the tree-trunk, blind and dull, and the cat departs from the moonbeam, flicking its tails.

The last time I don't think it had so many.

I leave the lamp, the meat and the shovel. I let the door slap closed and go in looking for the other bracelet.

It isn't on the dresser. Maya's rings are there, her pearl necklace. I touch them, still awed by their presence here in my house, even months after we wed. It isn't by the basin, though her brushes and combs are there, and the bottle of cacao cream whose scent once made me so desperate and still makes me shiver.

I creep to the bed, where Maya sleeps. Her right arm lies dark on the coverlet, bare. I peel back the blanket and the sheet, wrinkled in curves around her shape like rope lava wrapping the mountainside, still supple, still cooling.

I fall down beside her, gazing stricken on the curve of her neck and her hip. At last I touch her skin; I gently draw her left wrist out from under the pillow. And there I find it: the bauble that won me her hand and all the rest of her, when my ring and

my love and all my charms could not. Nine rubies, like berries of blood on a golden vine.

I took that bauble from a four-tailed cat I met at my traps on the jungle slopes, one morning when the light beneath the forest canopy was green and the sky was white. It let me stroke its spotted coat. It purred like a storm. It did not speak, though by the look in its eyes I feared it might.

I thought it a god-king's pet, escaped. I thought it glad to be rid of the heavy jewels, of divinity's weight. The four tails I ignored, because I was mad with love and lust for a woman I could not have, because it was convenient to do so.

I gave the bracelet to Maya on her birthday, when her father, out of cruel consolation, asked me to a feast at her family's house. A feast where I could consume all but what I wanted most. My gift, though it was never mine to give, changed their minds about me sure enough.

Maybe I can give it back. The cat has another already. But I have to do *something*. Even if it means I have to give *her* back as well. I can't live like this.

The bracelet has no clasp. It never had. It slipped from the cat's head so easily. I grasp it tight; I pull. My fingers press cruel marks into her wrist. The gold digs a ring of red around her hand. It will not come free.

She wakes. She watches me burning, holding her hand. In another time, before she was mine, she would have taken me without a word, without thought for her father, her master. We would have slept and in the morning woke afraid, wondered if it was a dream, and done it again to be sure.

She pulls her hand free and rolls away, tucking it again beneath her cheek.

“What’s the matter?” she mumbles at the wall.

I rise. “Nothing.”

The goat’s meat that failed to draw the five-times-damned cat to my traps is gone from the stoop. Blood stains the stone in the lamplight. Frogs scream at the darkness. Tree shadows tilt and shamble across the maize. The cat is gone—but not far.

The lamp swings in my hand and the world spins as I search among the roots. I find the spade where it fell, take it up and flee into the house.

Our people lost the craft of making metal; this spade is all I possess. It came to me from the conquerors before they fled. I have used it digging the trenches through the jungle. I have used it cutting furrows for the maize. I have used it digging traps. It has made me what I am, as much as that thing on Maya’s wrist. Now it must serve to protect all that.

I take my shovel out to the mill-house and pound it flat. I sink the cog into the shaft that sets the millstone spinning and press the edge of the shovel-blade hard against it.

The metal rings my treachery.

There's my Maya, standing limp and languid in the black silk nightgown the door-frame's shadow drapes her with to hide her from the lamplight's shame. To hide the red bracelet from mine.

"What are you doing?" she asks.

"Nothing, my love. Go back to bed."

If it had been the old Maya, the real Maya, my lover from before the bracelet stole her soul and fed it like morsels of meat to the cat, she would have said... what? Something I could never expect. Something clever, playfully cruel. She would have stepped forward into the light, and that would be all of this instinctive vengeance of mine. Cat and jewels forgotten, I'd have left the shovel there on the stone and the lantern burning and followed her to bed.

But she isn't that anymore, whatever she is—maybe no more than a body and voice. She turns, and the lines of her fade, and the last I catch is the glint of rubies.

It's a long time before the rusty shovel-blade begins to gleam. When it does, I let the mill-wheel cease, and I go in and

kiss my sleeping shadow of a wife good night. Then I come back for the lamp and the blade.

Now I have an ax, and not a spade. I have a weapon. I have hope and desperation.

I creep from the doorstep across the pinabete tree's roots into the jungle. It waits for me there: the cat, with its friendly eyes, its tails. It purrs like a lover and a coming storm. It arches its back and begs me to stroke it.

I raise my blade instead.

Maybe if I can cut off the cat's new tail and sew it up in a bracelet round her other wrist, she'll go back to the way she was. Maybe I delude myself. At least the cat will be dead.

I let my ax swing. It falls between the cat's huge, pale, liquid eyes. I turn my own away. When I look back, blood gleams in the lamplight. Brain clings sticky and gray to the blade. But the cat is gone.

When the conquerors came, they carried a weapon for use on their own kind—a scourge. After we became their servants, they turned it on us. They left, and now it is ours. One stroke and the will is broken. They call it the nine-tailed cat.

I wipe the ax on a tree and go home.

At my doorstep, all is serene. The maize barely rustles. Even the frogs don't speak. Have I won?

It will be such relief to sleep.

In the bedroom, I throw myself down beside her. I kiss between her shoulder-blades. I kiss her head.

My lips are cut by shards of bone.

Something has shattered my Maya's lovely head. It has stolen all her lovely blood and brains. And the bracelet is gone.

I smash the bottle of cacao cream. It splits like a skull. I sit awhile on the floor, drowning in her reek.

My life, my lust, my only soul. I would have killed for her. Her father shouldn't have sold me her love. He should have let me take it.

I could pretend that she still lived, that I had won her soul back from the cat and all was the way it had been. I could still kiss her flesh where it remains unmarred. But Maya's flesh isn't all of her. It isn't what I loved, much as I begin to hate myself for that. Otherwise, I could have lived with her shadow, invited the cat to curl at the end of the bed while we slept.

I wrap her in the sheet where we made love so many times and lift her. Maya must sleep in the mill tonight. Tomorrow I will dull my axe and pound it back into a spade. I will dig her a grave among the maize. But first I have to rest.

I hear a purr, like that of a lover. In the doorway, stretching languidly among shards of glass and globs of cream, the cat.

I count the tails: four. I killed one of its souls. And I'm sure it will find that mine is long lost. It will have to go hunting.

The doorway's shadow tries to hide from me the nightmare I can't help but see in the cat's loving eyes. The axe is at my feet. The rubies gleam.

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COVER ART

“Fly High,” by Tina Marie Lane



Tina Marie Lane is a Environment Designer and 3D Artist with eleven years of professional experience in designing architecture and retail environments. Her freelance work delves into these areas as well as fantasy environments for games and literature. Recently her work has appeared in 3D Artist Magazine and can also be found at her website www.toyrocket3d.com. She fashions her worlds, both real and imagined, from Dallas, Texas.

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