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# Sarbanes at Sea

by

Joe Krauss

It cost me 5051 scudi for passage on a scow out of Kennettsmouth. Five thousand went to make the captain think the risk worthwhile and 51 to buying 17 casks of Kander mead, one for each of the blackguards charged with keeping that tub afloat. Liquor of that character was hard to come by then, but it remains the best distraction I know. I wanted no attention, as you can imagine, and when a man drinks enough that he thinks he sees two of you, you can be certain that he will remember neither.

The captain suspected what I was; I would never have trusted a dolt without wits enough for that. I chose him precisely because he seemed canny enough to take the certainty of my gold over the chance of a king's cruiser intercepting him. As for the possibility of his own betrayal, I trusted him as far as the 5000 scudi would lead. And so long as it led out of West Morinda, I was satisfied.

My purse was full enough. I'd been throughout the province for months, pandering myself to merchants and mayors and even one petty prince. Such men sought me. They wanted wizard blood, but not, as the king did, to spill in the gutters of the town square. They craved it for the veins of their unborn sons or, failing that, their

daughters' wombs.

And their pay was handsome. Certainly more so than their wives or daughters. I have stood stud for many a local potentate, my good friends, and I can tell you that there is labor in it beyond your bawdy jests. But there is a fortune in it for those of us of the blood – as well my grandfather taught me – and I have never regretted pawning my own jewels when need has pressed me.

My berth should have gone for a first mate. My good captain was a master of economy, and he released his regular lieutenant when I made him my offer. It mattered little that I knew nothing of the sea except that boats go where the winds tell them. He'd put out among the men that I was to help with the command, and that satisfied them and gave me the anonymity I sought.

I boarded three days before we could leave port and spent them holed up in that closet, walking the decks only by moonlight and then just to taste the breeze. My berth permitted me to spy upon the men who bustled about the decks, however, and I came to know the face of every one of them.

So it was I noticed that we acquired an 18<sup>th</sup> hand on the morning we put out. His hair alone told me that he was no Morindan. Unlike theirs, a curly mass of yellow, his was black and straight, much as you see my own.

He was shorter as well, but stockier. Where they mirrored the shape of the masts they served, he was squatter, more powerful. His was a body built for the land, and I could see he took to sea only out of desperation.

But it was the gauntlet he wore on one hand that told me of his blood. You speak among yourselves of my own ... disfigurement. This I know, and you needn't bother with denials or confessions. It is a mark of my line, or of so much of that line as I know. Perhaps some of my bastards have two fine hands that wouldn't betray them even to the most learned inspectors. Still, he wore the glove too well, with too much ease for mere fashion's sake. He was accustomed to hiding one of his hands, and for one such as I, he had as well declared at the top of his voice that we fled the king for the same reasons.

Had he arrived any earlier, I might have killed him at once, but I wanted no trace of murder. Nor did I compel my captain to send him in search of another berth because, were he apprehended, the king's ministers might have been more resolute in tracking others of us. Since we were departing hours after I noted him, I did nothing. My captain could sell passage to another refugee, but if he compromised my safety I'd have his liver.

And we raised sail none too soon. I had seen guardsmen throughout the three days of my captivity, but never so many as when we left port. If there were this many in Kennettsmouth, it meant some minister had reports of me in the vicinity. My notoriety was in its adolescence only, but there were men who would risk their lives to destroy me. I fear no man, but even I fear an entire kingdom on the alert.

We were at sea less than a full day – I lost track of the hours after a bout of retching – when the crow's nest spotted a distant sail. It was too far to see clearly at first, but I extracted the story from the captain soon enough. He told me it was a king's warship

charged with eliminating piracy. It was the usual practice of such a vessel, he informed me, to board ships such as ours to check for the proper tax stamps and, often, to extract additional monies from captains whose standing with the government was, as he put it, "like lice on a balding man's head. We've nowhere to hide and nowhere else to warm ourselves."

He surely guessed that the patrol might also have been looking for me – or for one like me. I cursed anew our last-minute passenger, assuming it was his trail the authorities had followed to my own refuge. It irritated me that I could be compromised by a child with little sense of his own gift, little knowledge to awaken the power in his blood.

In retrospect, I should have proposed a bribe right away. A full purse deployed correctly is as formidable as a platoon, and no corrupt collector would risk either life or command to apprehend a man that his authorities could not know was aboard a vessel he had searched. I was troubled, though, by the patrols I had seen at Kennettsmouth and by the boy, and I mistrusted myself at sea. My instincts were in as much turmoil as my stomach.

"You will outrun his majesty's ship," I instructed the captain. He had not before heard me give a full command, and it bewildered him. He stood confused for a moment, and I had to strike him across the cheek to regain the attention I demanded. "You will outstrip him, sir. If it is a fair wind that you require, I shall supply it. If you would have the sea trouble our pursuer and not yourself, describe the commotion you desire, and I shall cause it."

He stood there dumbfounded still, and I had to restrain myself from taking his life at that instant. He was, as yet, an instrument for which I had need.

I gathered the air around myself into one ball and I spoke to it. "Air, you are air no longer. I name you stone. You will forget

what you were, and know only that you are stone.” And by the power of my blood it was so. It knew its name, and it did my bidding.

My aim was off. I attribute that now to the unsteadiness of the waves and to the sunlight that the sea mirrored into lightning. Instead of striking the vessel’s mast, my missile pierced its sail. It exhaled like a man sighing, and we began to pull away.

“By the masks,” the captain declared as he recovered himself. “They’ve a crew close to a hundred men. If she nears us now that you’ve singed her, we’re food for the sharks.” I had no time for his prattle, and he lost all ear for his own words as we watched several archers appear on the deck and draw back their strings.

The failing sail had revealed the sun behind it too abruptly for me to see with the clarity I needed, and there was nothing I could do to deter the first few volleys. They were far enough way that there was little worry, but I did feel one arrow sing above my head, and several struck the sides of our vessel. I heard the scream of a mate on our ship as another struck his thigh and remained there, its feathers waving back and forth like a tippler laughing. He was a man of no consequence, though.

“Enough,” I spoke when a passing cloud restored my vision. I called on the sea and gave a portion of it a new name, saying, “Sea, I name you ice. You are this new thing, this thing I have named you.” And at that, by the power of my blood, I caused an iceberg to arise between our ships.

The captain eyed me in a way that pleased me. In the instant, he knew me for his commander. Even though we were aboard his ship, he saw my rightful place and made way. He told me that the patrol, though slowed, would persist in its chase. It had struck its mainsail, but even one as ignorant as I saw that it could persist with only its lesser sails.

“I expect you to inform me if there is

any change in our pursuer,” I commanded. “I have need of rest if I am to hold off a warship by myself.” And then, after I had turned away, I added, “Have the new crewman come to see me. I shall be in my cabin.”

The boy entered with all the proper deference. His clothes were of a fine make, too fine by the half for travel that called on him to work passage as a seaman. His adoring mother, no doubt, had outfit him for his adventures, and I could imagine her smothering him with kisses as the father or some guardian weighed in with calculations on when pursuers would arrive at the front door.

I said nothing when he walked into my cabin. I lay in my hammock, observing him as I rocked with the interminable sway of the ship. I like to measure a man’s mettle in silence. The canny and the stupid bear it well. He gave a proper bow – head, neck and shoulders – and said, “You requested me, my lord?”

When I didn’t answer, he looked directly ahead rather than at me. He’d had military training; even an irregular such as I recognized it for what it was. Five minutes I had him stand there, and five minutes he held his posture as at a review. I think perhaps he even understood the situation; he was as a private standing before a captain, and I was measuring him only to see how he might serve my designs.

“You were pursued yestermorning as you made your way to this vessel. You know that don’t you?” I spoke without preamble, yet he showed no surprise.

“I fear so, my lord,” he said. “If I have put you in peril as a consequence of my recklessness, I beg the chance to make amends.”

“What makes you think that you could make amends, child? Have you some secret that will win us this pursuit? Have you power enough to battle a warship of the very

king of West Morinda? You do know that we are hunted creatures, lad?

“We, sir?”

“I know what you are, child. Do you have any idea yourself?”

He looked me in the eye, and I saw a flash of pride. “I am, sir, as I believe are you, of the royal line of Kander. I bear the mark of that descent between the fingers of my left hand, and, I understand, I carry a power that tyrants fear.”

“Royal?” I laughed. “You have that story from your grandmother, I imagine. What is she? Some great merchant’s niece, a girl-child the great man set out for breeding with that earless, formless thing that survived Kander’s wreck?”

He flushed but held his composure. “My grandfather was Carwen Ffarald, general of Mayst province until the barbarians sacked Kandrasit and the last prince fell. He led a remnant of our people into the Morindan plains and established a household there. How my grandmother came to know that prince of whom you speak I cannot say. We are patriots, sir, and we are pledged to see Kander restored.”

“Are there others of you?”

“I have two sisters, my lord. There are...” he paused, “cousins, I understand. I have never met them, though. The time is not yet ripe for them to go abroad.”

“And it is for you?”

“It is, sir. Folk of Kander are spread across the lands. Some have found wealth and influence, but most know hardship and displacement. We need a leader, sir. We need someone of the blood who can demonstrate that Kander lives, that there is hope for the restoration. We are a mighty people, betrayed only by the short-sightedness of the ministers who misled the royal powers of my grandfather’s time.”

I laughed, and wondered at the stories that went untold: the century of corruption that preceded that great purging, the cousins

who slew cousins, the fathers who blinded their sons that they might sustain their line without brooking a rival.

I said merely. “And you would be that leader, child? You would gather the folk and lead them back to the valleys of our making, reestablish the kingdom and sit atop its throne?”

He met my gaze. “I would serve that cause, my lord. If others of the blood will lead us, I will aid however my powers permit. You are right to laugh at a revolt with none stronger than I to lead it. I am on a quest; I seek a leader to follow.”

I watched my young cousin reassume the posture of a lieutenant.

“Would you follow me?” I asked.

“To Kander, my lord. if you will you lead us there.”

“Yes,” I nodded to him. “Yes. We shall see.” I paused to give an impression of seriousness. Can any of you imagine me coveting such a crown, desiring to sit in pomp and to hear the complaints of a wounded, whining aristocracy? No, rather the Four Knaves for me, my friends, rather our ‘operations’ and the likes of you for my citizenry. That boy saw in me another Sun King. He imagined me a hero in his family’s noxious idea of such a creature. He dreamed me a better man than I am, so let us hoist flagons to him.

I awoke the next morning to find my stomach yet troubled. When I came aboard deck, the captain pointed wordlessly, half a mile away, to two, and perhaps a third sail. Their captains knew their maneuvers. As I had to squint into the bright light that they knew enough to use against me, I feared that they were prepared in other ways. Surely they would have bouzouki and bows.

Life at sea is monotony, my fellows. You’ve tried it, Kallen. You were in a Korian freighter’s galley when good cousin Meynard found you, weren’t you? It is a sundial frozen at noon; it is a horizon that

runs with malicious sameness in every direction.

I paced and gathered my strength, searching for distractions to keep my mind off the condition of my stomach. I consulted one of the captain's charts and found that, while it would take another week to reach Amanara, we might find harbor in Arra Cammelon. I prepared one of the lifeboats for my own, secreting my chest there and naming it a thing that none could see but myself.

And, out of curiosity, I tested the boy and found him, for the most part, wanting. He was too precise, too much wedded to the idea that what he saw was what needed to be. He had no stomach for the work, little will that he knew for his own alone. It's more than blood that goes into making a wizard, boys, more than blood. There's arrogance, too, the certainty that this world is mine for the taking and the remaking.

Still, when I spoke of his grandmother, when I made him think fleetingly of her couplings with the thing that begot his mother and his aunts, I saw a spark that I thought I might fan if only there were kindling at hand. What held him back was only – and laugh if you will, my fellows – what held him back was nothing more than love of me. The boy so clearly wanted my regard that he could not see to hate me, could not imagine that I was a father he would have to loathe in order to harness all that his blood promised. I gather he'd have had me for his own father if wishing could make it so. Laugh at a jest such as that. I was probably more father than his own hapless pater; I shared the blood with him at least.

The morning augured ill. The sky was cloudless and the sun high, and the sea flashed so bright that my eyes ached when I tried to regard the sails that stalked us. It was a morning of nature's wizardry, with the sunlight wreaking its own transformations, naming one wave a bolt of lightning and

another a furtive dolphin. Heaven is a wizard that surpasses us all, even Teeyus, and in the face of it I knew to husband my strength.

I named the occasional cloud, and I was pleased to find the boy capable of nearly that much. Such moments were respite, though, and the ship or ships that fell back while the shade held would close again when we were again naked beneath the sky. The strain of pursuit told on my concentration, and the ships dogged us for hours. I needed sleep. The boy seemed exhausted from his efforts as well, but I instructed him to make some display of wizardry to cover my absence. It was barely noon when I took to my cabin.

The captain roused me in what seemed an instant, but I learned it was already past 2 o'clock. I staggered to the deck, and found our pursuers knew their game. One ship had closed to us on the sunless side; two others had the afternoon sun behind them, and they were distorted and ghostly even though they were no more than 200 meters away. The closer of the two had a handful of archers at the prow, and one or another fired a shot to test the range.

Near them, I saw a group of performers, and I could already hear them above the waves. They were a serious sounding group, harmonizing well enough for soldiers and with instruments in tune, but they had no real grace. They gave me little worry save for one figure, the short plump one I assumed, with a tenor that sounded as if it might disrupt me.

The boy was a wreck. He held his eyes open through stubbornness, but he was staggering wildly as his fatigue danced with the rolling of the deck. "Sleep," I told him. "We will have need of you when the ship to the port side closes." He made to argue with me, and then he slumped at the base of a mast with his head lolling against his shoulder.

When I saw that the arrows would reach us soon enough, I went to the starboard side and, carrying a cone to amplify my voice, I

spoke to the mainmast of the lead pursuer. “Wood,” I called, “wood, you are no longer wood. You are no longer a thing that wrestles with the sea beneath you. You are sand, sinking sand. Stand before the wind no longer but sink, find your level.” And, by the power of my blood, I made it so. That great mast began to quiver and chunks of it fell in grains to the deck below.

The fool performers sang their merriless tune all the louder, and I laughed to see one of the player’s hands draw back in pain as a bouzouki string snapped across it. The fiddles sawed noisily back and forth, offering a cacophony that threatened nothing but its auditors. The group was disarrayed at once, its members as badly trained as they were ungifted. As I feared, though, the tenor held. His voice was pure enough, and his song beguiling. The wood heard him, not me, and most of the mast remained whole.

His back was turned to me so that he might sing to the wood, and it was a simple matter to speak at once to one of the arrows his fellows had already put aloft. With a word, it turned in flight and found him below the shoulder blade. And this was rich: he died noisily, shrieking, his song corrupt beneath the too bright sky.

Still, the mast held. He had done that much, and I knew at that moment that I was overmatched. I had not yet dispatched a single ship, and the other two were closing. I spoke quickly to a stone I’d carried in my pocket, calling it fire, and sent it toward the mast again. There was an explosion near the crow’s nest, and the top-sails came crashing down, obscuring two of the archers and knocking another off his balance.

The remaining archers fired wildly toward us, and a few arrows struck our ship as we pulled away.

I ran across the deck to confront the port side threat. Too late. It’s arrows were in range, and I had to retreat again. From behind a barrel on the deck, I saw two of the

scow’s sailors wave in surrender, gesturing for the Morindans to throw them ropes to make fast our ships. In disgust, I called up a wind that caught them unsuspecting and blew both overboard.

I crawled to the boy, who lay insensible. My own head ached, so I doubted he could accomplish much, but it was past time to see his blood at work.

“Boy,” I called as I struck his head against the mast. “Boy, awake to the fray. For Kander, boy. Rise for Kander.”

His eyes snapped open, but they were glazed.

“Call on your blood, boy,” I said. “Rain fire on the foes who approach.”

He staggered vaguely toward the port side, and I heard him mumbling incantations, seeking the formulae I had given him only the morning before. I heard an explosion and then shouts.

Our ship was on the brink of chaos. An arrow took our captain in the chest. He clutched it with both his hands, so startled at its sudden appearance that he seemed not to know his own pain. Other fools stripped off their shirts and waved them wildly, so anxious to surrender that they pranced about like animals.

I spoke to the ropes that secured one of the dinghies, and they unraveled, sending it to the water below to drift away. I heard the thud, thud, thud of arrows against it.

I found my way to the cargo hold and spoke to my cloak, telling it to become as a barrel. It was an old trick, one I’d perfected in the markets of my youth to protect myself when my grandfather had angered one marshal or another. Then I lost myself to sleep at once.

I awoke some hours later, confident that dark had fallen above. I crept up the stairs, amused to find that my barrel had actually been moved while I slept inside it. Imagine, the fools had had their hands upon me and, sensing my weight within, mistook me for

cargo.

There was only one warship remaining, its topsails obliterated. Our deck was quiet; the captain's body lay near the wreckage of several chests.

When I looked up, I saw the boy. They had tied him by his ankles so that his arms hung downward, and he dangled in a light breeze. His fine clothing was in strips, and I thought for a moment that they had tied a ribbon around his neck. It was, I saw soon, the work of a knife they had dragged across his throat, no doubt severing the vocal cords as they'd been trained. It goes without saying that they'd gouged out his eyes.

They'd found their wizard.

I made my way to a lifeboat and lowered myself as quietly as I could. A splash alerted one of the ship's watchmen, and I heard him sound the alarm just as I told

the air to rise up in my single sail. I spoke fire to the boards of the ship as I pulled out of range of my voice, and I knew that I would live to see the dawn.

The men of the ship busied themselves with putting out the fire, and I sped noiselessly away toward what I took to be the direction of Arra Cammelon. I turned back a final time and saw the boy illuminated by the fire, hanging as if waving a fare-thee-well.

He served me, and I thank his insulted corpse.

I made landfall several hours later. Damn the West Morindans, boys, and damn the marshals of every nation. I've had my vengeance on them, as all you know, but I never was to sea again. Laugh with me, boys, and drink. I never was to sea again.—