

Beck

By

Rob J. Hayes

“This is not my finest moment,” Beck said with a weak smile.

The first pirate leered at her, the second jeered, and the third gave an uncomfortable-looking burp and set about scratching his arse with the hand not attached to a rusty cutlass. Beck heard shouts from down below. More pirates were gathering down in the streets of Mud Free and, upon glancing down at the crowd, Beck was fairly convinced it was the entire crew of *Ocean Deep* and they were on the verge of actually baying for her blood.

She backed away another step and the three pirates followed her, another step and her back pressed up against something solid and unyielding. Beck looked back and grinned. A post driven straight into the rooftop of the town hall and a fraying rope stretching to the ground to help secure the rickety wooden structure. Luck had ever been Beck's best friend and now, it seemed, was no different.

“Alright,” Beck said. “I'll tell you what, I give up. You win.” She sheathed her rapier and held up her hands in the most placating manner she could hustle up. Two of the pirates charged her.

Beck stepped into the first attack. Allowing the blade to skim her stomach she sent a lightning-fast kick to the back of the pirate's knee and then twisted away from the second attack, grabbing hold of the pirate's belt as she went and, with a practised flick of the wrist, pulled the leather strap free. Before any of the three pirates could figure out what had happened she was running to the edge of the rooftop where she leapt into empty air, wrapped the belt around the fraying rope and prayed to Volmar it would hold her weight.

Cursing pirates, a dilapidated wooden shack, and more mud than Beck knew existed passed quickly beneath her as she slid down the rope at a frightening speed. Even worse, the end of the line was rushing up to meet her and it looked far from pleasant; a flat wooden wall that she was willing to wager was far less-soft than she would have liked. Her wide-brimmed hat pulled free in the wind and whipped away spilling Beck's long golden hair free and she let out a curse a moment before letting go of the belt and plummeting the last six feet to the muddy ground below.

Beck hit the ground heavy, stumbled, and pulled one of her pistols free from her jerkin, aiming it upwards and firing in one fluid motion. The bullet cut straight through the fraying rope and somewhere behind her Beck heard a scream as one of the pirates following her fell from a height he was less than comfortable with. She shoved the pistol back into its holster on her jerkin and broke into a run, her coat and hair flapping behind her.

It appeared the pirates were not in the mood to stop chasing her, if anything they seemed more invigorated than ever. Beck had to admit that, in retrospect, throwing their captain into Mud Free's muddiest quagmire was probably not the best idea she had ever come up with. The problem was the man would simply not leave her alone and she did not appreciate his fevered attempts to grab at her arse. Of course, she hadn't known at the time he was a Captain and neither had she suspected that her dumping the dull-witted fellow into a pile of mud would earn her the bloody attention of a few dozen rowdy pirates.

She could hear shouts from close behind and barrelled round a corner at full speed only to skid to a halt by what probably passed for a tavern in Mud Free, finding herself confronted by two more men who had that undefinable *piratical* air about them. One was a giant with a bald head and a whole host of small metal spikes shoved through various parts of his face and the other was a more slight fellow with a kind-looking face and long brown hair matted together into locks. The two new-comers heard the shouting from the other pirates and set about grinning, already knowing

they'd stumbled onto a bit of sport. Beck sighed and resigned herself to having to slaughter half the town just as the muddy captain and his entire crew came charging around the corner.

“Right bit o' fun ya'v given us, luv,” said the muddy captain.

“Not ta mention Bissy's broke both his legs in that fall,” put in one of the others.

“Aye,” continued the captain. “Reckon it's time we made ya pay for the insult, eh?”

Beck was just reaching for her pistols when the door to the tavern crashed open and even more pirates started filtering out into the muddy dirt-way that passed for a street. In most normal settlements Beck might have looked around for help from the local populace or lawfolk, but Mud Free was a pirate town. The local populace knew when trouble was brewing and knew better than to get anywhere near involved. The lawfolk were likely pirates themselves. She would get no help and knew it.

“Stay out o' this or I'll have ya all strung up by ya stones!” shouted the captain in a drawl that would have made most drunkards proud.

“What about me?” said a woman from the doorway to the tavern. “Don't reckon I've got any stones an' yet it don't stop 'em being bigger than yours, Blu.”

“You stay out o' this an' all, Elaina or I swear I'll...”

“You'll what?” The woman walked into view, she was tall and homely with black hair and a straight, proud back. “You'll run an' tell da' I was mean ta ya?”

Blu stepped forwards. “I'll put ya in ya damned place, woman.”

The pirates surrounding the woman bristled and a couple of swords began rattling in their sheaths while the pirates surrounding Blu started yelling insults and letting forth more than a little spittle. Beck couldn't help but notice she was squarely in the middle of what was looking to turn into a full scale piratical brawl and she doubted anyone involved in such a conflict was likely to escape unharmed.

The woman took a step forward herself, her hand resting on the hilt of the sword hanging by her hip. “Aye, ya welcome ta try, brother. But I reckon ya might just end up like Callup an' I ain't sure I could explain ta ma' why I had ta cut up another one of her sons. Might be best ya just pack up an' fuck off 'cos this here witch hunter belongs ta me. Got myself a vested interest, ya might say.”

Beck couldn't say she wanted either of the two groups of pirates to have her, but then she certainly didn't want them both having her.

“What d'ya want with her?” Blu asked, making a point of not advancing any further.

Elaina made a point of advancing further. “She's a pretty thing, don't ya think? Thought I might find out what a cunt tastes like.”

Beck felt a fair portion of the violent tension drain away, though it was without a doubt replaced by a completely different type of attention and one she was not entirely comfortable with.

Blu backed away a step and spat into the muddy street. “Ya can have her,” he said with a nasty grin. “Jus' make sure it hurts.” Then with a dramatic turn and wave towards his crew he stalked away with many angry pirates in tow.

Before Beck could think of making a break for it she once again found herself surrounded by pirates, but this time with the other woman within easy striking distance. Beck considered reaching for one of her pistols and quickly decided it would be unwise given her current situation.

“What is it you want from me?”

“Luckily for you it just so happens I'm after myself an Arbiter. Need your help, you might say.” Some of the crew laughed, grinning at Beck through an assortment of rotting teeth and extravagant beards. “Oh don't let my crew scare ya much, I assure ya it's nothing too dangerous.”

“Why would you need an Arbiter's help?”

“Well there's this item, once owned by my great, great, great,” Elaina frowned, “great?”

Another of the pirates, this one small and round and with a bent pair of glass spectacles across the bridge of his nose, cleared his throat. “Great, great, great, great, great.”

“Ah, thank you, Bob,” Elaina waved a hand towards the small, round pirate. “‘Bout as trustworthy as broken clock that one but has an eye for detail. Great, great, great, great, great grandfather.”

“I’m sorry for your loss...” Beck scanned the pirates surrounding her for any hope of escape and found her prospects unlikely at best.

“Many thanks. So this item is lost, or was lost. Reckon I know where it is, but don't reckon I can get ta it without some sort of help along the lines of the magical. That'd be you, I reckon.”

“It's an interesting offer, don't get me wrong, and you all seem like proper, upright folk,” Beck looked hard at one of the pirates who appeared to be missing half an ear and all of a brain. “Except for you, I do believe there is something wrong with you. That being said I feel I must decline. The Inquisition is not in the habit of helping out pirates. Good luck finding your heirloom though.”

Elaina laughed. “I’m willing to offer ya something for your troubles, something ya can't live without.”

“And what would that be?”

“Your life.”

Again Beck thought about reaching for her pistols and again assessed her chances at somewhere close to suicidal. “Well when you make me an offer like that I don't see how I can refuse.”

“Excellent.” Elaina sketched a mocking bow. “Glad to have ya aboard. My name is Captain Elaina Black.”

“Captain Black?” Beck asked, feeling the colour drain from her face.

“Aye.”

“Daughter of the other Captain Black?”

“Aye.”

“Wonderful. You don't suppose we could pick up my hat on the way to your ship, do you?” Beck resigned herself to what was likely to be a very uncomfortable rest of her life, and consoled herself with the knowledge that it was at least also likely to be very short.

Four days drifting at sea on board *Starry Dawn* and Beck found herself experiencing a new level of boredom. It was true her training to become an Arbiter had been long, arduous, and at times dull, but she had always found ways to lift her spirits. Sometimes she would imagine the day she would prove herself worthy of becoming an Inquisitor, or sometimes she would torture initiate Darkheart in the hopes he would reveal himself for the heretic they all knew he truly was. Since completing her training life had become a lot more interesting with rarely a dull moment. Wandering Arbiters travelled the world, experienced the four great empires of man up close and personal, and hunted down practitioners of dark magic. And Beck had wandered almost everywhere. Everywhere but the Pirate Isles and Inquisitor Hironous Vance had seen fit to remedy that lack.

Dwelling on her mission would only turn Beck's spirits even darker so instead she decided to focus on the here and now and both were firmly rooted aboard Elaina Black's ship, *Starry Dawn*. Beck couldn't tell one form of sea-faring vessel from another, but the ship was small and sleek and seemed to cut smoothly through the waves. Her compliment of pirates ranged from grime-ridden men with more fingers than teeth, to toughened women with skin darkened by the constant sun. But most intriguing of all was Elaina Black herself.

Far from the tyrannical blood-thirsting maniac many of the rumours suggested she would be, Elaina Black seemed young, full of life, and near permanently cheerful. The pirate captain spent most of her time on deck, not giving orders but jumping to tasks with the rest of her crew and never passing up the opportunity to do any job that needed doing. She could run along the ship's railings with all the grace of a particularly lithe cat, climb the rigging more surely than your average monkey, but also bellow out orders in a volume more fitting a particularly large orchestra complete

with drums. Captain Black also seemed completely at ease putting herself on display and in the four days that Beck had been aboard she had witnessed the woman strip naked on deck to wash herself with sea water twice. Beck might have thought it odd that it earned so little attention from the male members of the crew, but no doubt they had seen it all before many times.

Beck had yet to learn any real information regarding this *job* she had been recruited for, despite questioning the captain many times. She could feel her compulsion, her magic gripping hold of Elaina Black's will every time she asked the woman a question, but somehow the pirate seemed immune. Beck had asked a few of the other crew members and found their wills easy to dominate, but it appeared only the captain herself had any real knowledge of where they were sailing and why.

A shout went up from above that land had been spotted and in only moments the ship shifted course just a little to point them directly at the small spot of dry amidst the wet. Elaina Black dropped from the rigging just a few feet from Beck and sauntered over, wearing a grin as large as her face.

“Tell me something, Arbiter,” Elaina said, her bright blue eyes shining. “Do you know how to swim?”

Beck tensed. If the captain had brought her out all this way just to try and drown her then the woman would find herself sorely disappointed. “Of course I do. Do you think the Inquisition would send one of its agents out into the world without being prepared?”

Captain Black laughed. “Actually I was counting on that. You see it's almost time for you to take a dip in the blue. You might want to, uh, lose the coat.”

Beck snorted. “You coerced me onto this venture under the premise that refusing would be bad for my health. Diving into shark-infested waters seems just as bad for that health, Captain Black. Perhaps I should take my chances against you and your crew instead.”

The pirate held up her hands and smiled. “No need to get all dangerous, Arbiter. There's no sharks round here. Pol, there any sharks round these waters?” she shouted.

“Not a one round here, Cap,” a shout drifted down from somewhere in the rigging above. “Don't much like the water with it being a bit too fresh round these parts.”

“See. No sharks,” Captain Black continued just before her smile disappeared. “Neither are there likely to be any ships so even if you did manage to kill me and all me crew, who exactly would be sailing you back home to your city of sun? Truth is you're fucked, Arbiter, so how about you stop bitching and help me out and both of us will get out of this alive and happy. I'll even drop you anywhere round here you want to go once we're done.”

Beck mulled it over for all of a couple of seconds before deciding she had little choice but to trust the pirate's word for the time being. “And why exactly am I going for a swim instead of you?”

“There's a cave on the south side of that little island. It's underwater and not too easy to find, or so the rumours say. After just a little swim you'll surface into a cavern. Ain't much I know about the cavern other than the chest that lives in it contains a bit of gold and a chart.”

“All this for some gold?”

“Fuck the gold. I want the chart, Arbiter.”

“And you needed me...”

“Cave ain't easy to find. Reckon it'll be a bit easier with someone who can see and breathe underwater.”

Beck groaned. She could neither see, nor breathe underwater, but magic was capable of many things and she had the feeling denying those uses to Captain Black would be pointless.

“Fine,” Beck snarled, already wishing Inquisitor Vance had sent someone else to the Pirate Isles. “I do this for you, fetch you this chart, and you take me to Port Sev'relain.”

Elaina Black's eyes creased into a frown. “Sev'relain is it? Aye we can do that.”

Only a short while later Beck found herself standing at the railing of *Starry Dawn* staring down as the anchor disappeared beneath the blue waters. The sea was clear and calm, but as the

chain rattled away she lost sight of the anchor it went so deep.

“Reckon that attire suits you, Arbiter,” Elaina Black said as she joined Beck staring down into the water. “Might make a pirate out of you.”

Beck was dressed in only a pair of patched and worn sailors' trousers, loaned to her by the pirate captain, and the blouse that she usually wore underneath her tunic. To say Beck missed her coat, her pistols, and her store of charms and runes would be an understatement, but underwater they would actually only serve to hinder her movement.

“You ready?” Elaina asked.

Beck shot the pirate an acidic glare and she backed away a step.

“Take your time then.”

Beck took a deep breath and looked inside for calm. She was well aware that the crew of *Starry Dawn* were gathering around to watch, but their interest meant nothing to her. Even for an Arbiter like her, an Arbiter famed for her skill and raw power in the sorcerous school of magic, casting and maintaining two augmentation spells at once would be a drain.

Tapping into her faith, Beck reached out to Volmar and let her God's power flow through her, bolstering her own magic. She was well aware that acting as a conduit to a higher being would allow them to affect the world in countless small ways, but she trusted Volmar with her life and the lives of everyone. Beck whispered the first spell into her hands, letting the magic coil around her fingers where it waited for a suitable target, then she slowly wiped her hands across her eyes and the magic flowed into them.

The first noticeable difference was the world seemed to take on a glassy feel, as though she were looking at it through a window. Colours seemed a little less bright and everything looked just a little further away.

“Well fuck me if that ain't a little disconcerting.” Beck turned to a group of pirates who were close by and all stepped backwards, leaving only Elaina Black nearby.

“Are your eyes meant to look so... well... like a fish's really?” the pirate captain asked.

Beck grinned and watched as even the captain swallowed nervously.

Again Beck tapped into her magic, this time letting the words of the spell catch in her throat where they stuck, seeping into her larynx and flowing back down into her lungs. The air became thick and hard to breathe, the world felt too dry and the sun unbearably hot, but Beck weathered the assault on her senses.

“Now I'm ready,” she said to the gathered crew of *Starry Dawn*.

Some of the pirates clasped hands over their ears and others turned and fled, all but running away from her. Again only Elaina Black held her ground but the woman looked anything but certain that she wanted to be there.

“Your voice...” Elaina said, her face a picture of disgust.

Again Beck smiled. She knew her voice would sound distasteful to others but to her it sounded no different. “You wanted me for this magic, Captain,” Beck hissed.

One pirate emptied his stomach onto the deck while another dropped to his knees screaming to make the noise stop and by the time Beck had finished the sentence only Elaina Black remained close enough to hear Beck's altered voice.

Even through her glassy vision Beck could see it took all the bravado the captain possessed to step forwards. She held out a small cylinder with a rope around it. “For the chart,” Elaina said.

Beck took the cylindrical case and slung the rope over her shoulder and looked backed to find Elaina holding a knife.

“Just in case,” the pirate said, flipping the knife around so the handle was towards Beck. “The cave should be around here somewhere, closer to the island by a drop, I reckon.”

Beck took hold of the knife and placed the blade between her teeth.

“Good luck down there,” Elaina said. “We'll be waiting here for you.”

Beck gave the captain a smile she didn't feel. The assault on her senses was becoming too

much. She needed to be underwater or release the spells' effects. Without another word Beck stepped up onto the railing and jumped, hitting the water hands first and wasting no time diving under, inhaling lungful after lungful of water until the panicked drowning sensation stopped and she could breathe almost normally.

The world underwater was alien and blue. It was bright and clear up where Beck floated but down below she could see it start to turn dark and even murky in places. Sand and rock and colourful coral littered the sea floor below and she could see countless small fish darting about. Larger beasts occupied the water as well, and Beck found herself fascinated by a fish easily as big as she was, but with a beak for a mouth, watching it as it chipped away at a rock.

Looking upwards, Beck could see the hull of *Starry Dawn* dipping into the water and the shadow of its bulk looming above her. The light from the sun shone down but fragmented on the surface and reached Beck's augmented eyes in an array of shards even more beautiful than the new world that surrounded her. The chain of the anchor ran down past her all the way to the sea floor and Beck swam along next to it, descending further and further into the endless blue.

One thing Beck could say about the Pirate Isles, and it was something she was more than a little glad of, was that the water was warm. There was no chill sapping the strength from her limbs as she dove ever deeper. Upon reaching the sea floor a patch of sand stirred and whipped into a frenzy as a small, flat creature no bigger than Beck's arm, obviously disturbed by her presence, decided it was time for a relocation. Beck watched the creature go, marvelling at its needle-like tail, before turning towards the island and kicking off, beginning her search for Captain Black's hidden cave.

Beck wasn't sure how long she spent looking for the cave but by the time she came across it, no more than a small gap in a rock bed and overgrown with long, tendril-like coral, her arms and legs were tired from swimming and she felt drained from the sustained use of magic. It took quite a bit of effort to snap off enough coral for her to safely swim into the cave and many little fish fled the destruction. Soon Beck was staring into the dark hole and wishing she had a good heretic to hunt rather than risking her life in a dark, underwater cave.

Knowing that procrastination over the job at hand would do little but make the situation worse, Beck decided it was best to throw caution to the unpredictable wind of the isles and dragged herself into the opening.

It started off close and tight and darker than the deep night, and only Beck's augmented eyes let her see anything at all, but even that light did little but outline the rock around her. The cave wall scraped her on all sides and before long she could feel stinging grazes on her arms and legs, but she persisted through the pain and the claustrophobia. Her mind imagined horrible scenarios like the cave dead-ending and her getting stuck, dying in the rapidly cooling waters, a nameless corpse never to be found. Or worse, some sea beastie could swim in behind her and start munching on her legs and she would be powerless to stop it.

Beck found her breathing had sped and she was gulping in lungfuls of water. Her concentration slipped and she could feel the magic in her throat and lungs losing its hold on her flesh. If the spell slipped now she would be just as dead as if a sea monster did eat her. Panic setting firmly in, Beck began pulling herself through the cave faster and faster, hand over hand, heedless of the twists and turns and the cuts and scrapes she was earning. Her lungs started protesting, they weren't getting enough oxygen and already she was starting to feel like she was drowning.

Her head banged against rock and the augmentation in her eyes vanished leaving her vision blurred and stinging and still Beck pulled herself along, reaching forwards with her hands and grabbing hold of rock again and again. As blind as a newborn, Beck could no longer tell where she was going and that only served to increase her panic. She breathed in a lungful of water and the magic lost its grip and suddenly the water in her lungs was heavy and oppressive and killing her. Beck coughed but underwater only more water flooded in and suddenly she knew she was drowning and she would die there, lost in a nameless cave on a nameless island in a Godless region of the big

blue.

Having already resigned herself to death, it took a moment for Beck to realise she had broken the surface of the water and was holding onto the side of a rock pool, throwing up salty water and desperately trying to suck some oxygen back into her body. It seemed as though she floated there coughing for hours before she was again breathing normally and eventually she opened her eyes to see where she was.

Beck's throat was roar and the taste in her mouth was approaching heretical, but she thrust those concerns aside and looked around. She had found the cavern and it was huge. Aside from the pool she floated in there were others as well, many others and the floor of the cavern was dotted with watery pit falls and spiky stalagmites which were mimicked by their tight cousins up above. That was when Beck realised the cavern was lit and lit well. A strange greenish light seemed to emanate from the walls and gave the rock an eerie, otherworldly glow.

Dragging herself out of the water, Beck stood and gave a shiver. It was cold in the cavern and she was wearing very little. Her blouse, now ripped and torn in places, clung to her, and her trousers were little more than rags held up by the rope belt she wore. Her skin was covered in bloody scrapes and grazes and she hurt like all the Hells. But she was alive. Cold, hungry, tired, and alive.

As water dripped from her onto the rock floor, Beck pushed her sodden hair back from her eyes and decided she didn't care how the cavern was lit, only that it was and she could see the chest not a hundred feet away across the puddle-ridden ground. The chest sat upon a small mountain of gold bits that would have seemed like largess, but every sense that Beck could count was screaming at her to be careful, that all was not as it seemed.

She approached the chest with caution, picking her way between the watery puddles on the floor of the cavern and keeping her eyes and ears strained for the first hint of a trap, but she found none. Even whispering a blessing to enhance her vision, Beck saw nothing out of the ordinary. With trepidation that bordered on insanity she placed her right foot on the mountain of gold bits and started to climb.

It wasn't so much a climb as a scramble but, after resorting to using all fours, and releasing more than one avalanche of cascading coins, Beck found herself kneeling in front of the chest she had been sent to find. Still she sensed nothing out of the ordinary so, holding her breath, Beck pushed open the lid of the chest and waited for the trap to spring.

Nothing happened.

Inside, the chest was empty save for a small roll of leather-backed vellum Beck could only assume was the chart Elaina Black wanted so badly. With no other option but to complete her quest, Beck reached in, picked up the chart and slotted it into the cylindrical case she had been given, clipping the lid down tight afterwards.

A splashing noise alerted Beck to the trap she had just somehow sprung and it was followed by a distinctive rattling that she had heard only once before. Slowly turning around and hoping that she was wrong, Beck's spirits dropped when she saw animated skeletons climbing out of the standing pools that dotted the cavern floor.

The skeletons were little more than fleshless constructs given cohesion and movement by the magic that animated them, but they would be deadly nonetheless. Necromancy was one of the worst heresies a person could commit, second only to consorting with demons, but Beck could already see the magic was old and faded. Whoever had set the trap was obviously long dead and possibly one of the very monstrosities she saw before her now. They were crude things, taking lurching steps towards her as they dripped water onto the cavern floor, and some were missing parts of themselves. A skeleton with only one arm was closest to her and it stumbled a step in its progress, falling backwards into another behind it that sported only half a rib cage.

On a normal day Beck would find these half-formed golems no problem at all, she would crush them all and set about making certain the cavern was devoid of any more of the heretical magic, but this was no normal day and she did not have any of her supplies with her and, as she just

started to realise, she had dropped the knife Elaina had given her which put her distinctly on the weapon-less side of armed.

With a groan that was pure frustration Beck swung the case back over her head and leapt, sliding down the cascading mountain of gold bits and hitting the floor at a sprint. Only the largest pool, the entrance pool, at the back of the cavern was devoid of the walking, clawing skeletons and that was where Beck was headed.

She barged past the first skeleton, narrowly avoiding its bony grasp and dodged away from another. One crawling horror, missing one full leg and half of another reached for her and Beck leapt over it, clearing its grasp with ease. She landed heavy, jarring her right foot and twisting her left ankle as it slipped on the wet rock. Beck let out a cry of pain and fury but kept on, her sprint slowing to a hastened limp and her ankle agony with every step.

Still the walking, crawling skeletons came for her and Beck resorted to pushing them out of the way and barging past them as she went, ignoring the stinging scratches they left on her skin.

With just a few feet left before the pool that would lead her to safety, Beck's spirits soared just as a bony hand shot out of a pool far too small to contain a complete skeleton, and locked hold of her ankle. The cavern floor rushed up to meet her and Beck threw her hands out in front too late. She crashed to the ground and her head smacked against the rock, exploding into painful bright white lights.

Everything seemed distant. Beck knew she was in a rush but she couldn't remember why. The light was already fading, replacing itself with a dull green, painful blur. Beck rolled onto her back, aching from the very core of her being, and lay there staring up into the cavern ceiling which appeared to be moving. Something hard and sharp dug into her back causing a fresh wave of pain and Beck's head cleared a little. The cavern ceiling wasn't moving, she was. Ignoring the flaring pain in her head, Beck looked up to see a skeleton had hold of her leg and was pulling her back towards one of the pools.

With a roar of fury Beck kicked the monster away and scrambled to regain her feet. The pool she needed was only a few feet away if she could just get there. A bony hand grabbed hold of her blouse and wrenched her backwards again, further away from the pool. Beck let out a sound that was one part whimper and one part growl, frustration and anger warring within her in equal measure.

Off-balance and stumbling backwards, Beck grabbed hold of a nearby stalagmite and whispered a quick blessing of strength. Pulling with all her might, she tore away from the skeletal hand, letting the construct keep half of her blouse. A manic laugh escaped Beck's lips as she tore away the other half of her blouse and limped towards the entrance pool, speaking the words of the spell that would allow her to breathe underwater as she went.

Beck reached the edge of pool and dived straight in, not bothering with the spell to augment her eyes. She was too exhausted to keep two high level sorceries active and she didn't have the time to activate the magic. Blind in the dark water and desperate to be away from the cavern of death, Beck pulled herself along, hand over hand, praying silently to Volmar that the magic that animated the skeletons didn't extend outside of the cavern.

The journey out of the cave didn't seem to take anywhere near as long as going in and Beck soon found herself seeing blurry light ahead. A few moments later she emerged into the ocean, already feeling the warmer waters against her bare skin. She wasted no time pointing towards the surface and kicking and pulling herself through the blue until she had her head above water. Then she released the spell on her throat and lungs and spent another couple of minutes hacking up water and remembering how to breathe.

Starry Dawn was just a short swim away yet it took a monumental act of will for Beck to travel that distance and she ignored the cheers and shouts of the pirates on board until she was alongside the ship.

Captain Elaina Black was standing at the railing, staring down. She dropped a rope ladder

over the side and grinned at Beck. “You get it?”

Beck ignored the pirate's question and started climbing, feeling the last of her energy drain out of her as she did. After ignoring Captain Black's offer of a helping hand to get over the railing of the ship, Beck stood to find a number of pirates gawking at her.

“You got one hell of a pair on ya,” Elaina Black said with a grin “You get it?” There was a greedy glint in the pirate's eye.

Beck could feel every cut, scratch, and scrape on her body and her head was throbbing from the knock it had taken, but she stood straight and faced down the pirate captain. “I'm going to need a new blouse,” she said in an icy voice, “and some salve for these wounds.”

“Aye, Pavel'll see to ya cuts,” Elaina Black said impatiently. “You get it?”

Beck pulled the cylindrical case over her head and tossed it to Captain Black who promptly ripped the lid away and pulled out the chart inside, unrolling it in her hands and grinning fiercely at it.

“Port Sev'relain,” Beck reminded the captain.

“Aye,” Elaina Black said, still staring at the chart. “Lucky for us both, I reckon. Next stop is in that very direction.”

Beck had her wounds seen to by the ship's doctor, Pavel, a priest of the Five Kingdom's, then stuffed herself with food from the mess before crawling into the bunk assigned to her and spending a full day asleep. When finally she woke it was dark and *Starry Dawn* was moving along in the seas at a leisurely pace. She found Captain Black sitting near the figurehead and watching the dark waters beneath them.

“Ya did good, Arbiter,” Elaina Black said without turning around when Beck drew near. “By the looks of you it wasn't entirely smooth sailing though.”

“Whomever hid that scroll had a good knowledge of necromancy,” Beck admitted. “I was lucky to escape.”

“But you did.”

“Where does the chart lead?”

“A small island about two days south of your Sev'relain. Little more than a scrap of land really. If I remember it right there's a few trees and some monkeys but little else. Ain't big enough to support a settlement so no one stops there.”

“And what is it you hope to find on the island?” Beck asked.

Elaina Black stared at Beck for a moment before shrugging. “A book. Journal of the first Captain Black.”

Beck snorted. “Must be an important book for the captain to hide it on a nameless island with its location hidden away so well.”

“Mhm,” Elaina purred. “Reckon it contained more than just his memoires. Captain Black knew some magic, might be some of it is written down.”

That made Beck narrow her eyes. If the book contained magic then it was likely a heretical manuscript, especially given her recent encounter with necromancy. She could not allow anyone, let alone a murderous pirate, to get their hands on such evil power.

“And this island is on the way to Port Sev'relain?” Beck asked.

“More or less, aye.”

“Then I'll see this little quest through,” Beck said with a sharp smile at the captain. “I will help you get your book and then you will drop me at Port Sev'relain.”

Elaina laughed. “Fairly certain we already struck that deal, Arbiter.”

The waves surged around the island like relentless little armies throwing themselves against a castle wall. It was a small strip of land barely more than a few hundred feet across and after a few jagged rocks the land gave way to stunted trees each struggling to outgrow the others. Despite its

small size, animal calls could be heard drifting out across the crashing waves. Beck watched the island sceptically as the dinghy drew nearer.

There were eight of them in the dinghy and aside from Captain Black, Beck knew none of their names and did not care to learn them. She had no idea how the pirates might react when she destroyed the book they were looking for, but learning the names of the people she might have to kill seemed counter-productive so Beck maintained a distance from them all.

As the little boat drew close to the island one of the pirates leapt out, cursing as he landed and claiming to have stubbed his toe on a rock, and pulled the boat in so that the others need only wet their boots as they scrambled ashore.

Before long Beck found herself standing next to Captain Black on the rocky beach as the woman studied the chart that had been so arduous to attain. After waiting patiently for a while, Beck closed the gap between them and looked down at what had the captain so confused.

“Now what?” Elaina mused, cocking her head first one way at the map, then the other.

“Do we have the right island?” Beck asked with a grin. “I’d hate for all my efforts to be wasted. For you at least. I still expect to be taken to Port Sev’relain regardless of your ability to find your ancestor’s diary.”

“It’s the right bloody island,” Elaina snapped. “Just... damned thing doesn’t say where on the island to look.”

Beck scanned the little trees located further in. “Doesn’t seem like there’s much to search.”

Elaina snorted. “Ain’t likely to be left out in the open for just anyone to find, is it. Probably buried or something. We can’t exactly go and dig up the entire island.”

Beck glanced behind her to see a couple of *Starry Dawn*’s crew departing the dinghy with shovels in hand but the other four remained behind, sitting in the boat with little to no indication of leaving.

Captain Black stared at the chart a little longer before a grin spread across her face. She pulled a knife from her belt and slid it between the parchment and the leather-backing and when she was finished she handed the chart to Beck.

“Call it a souvenir of your adventure,” the captain said with a grin before taking her knife to the leather-backing and hacking it to pieces.

In short order Elaina dropped the scraps of leather to the ground and held up a small, dull coin that looked to be made of copper. A silver chain was looped through a hole at the top of the coin so the thing could be worn as an amulet.

Elaina shot Beck a smug grin. Beck gave Elaina a hearty shrug.

“Watch,” Elaina said and dropped the coin, catching the chain between her fingers. Instead of dangling there limp, the coin twisted and angled inland as though it were being pulled towards the trees.

“Interesting,” Beck said, studying the coin. She had seen dowsing charms before but never one hidden to look like an ordinary item.

“So let’s follow the coin,” Captain Black said, starting off towards the trees and the calling animals.

In no time at all they were standing on a small patch of scrubby dirt with the coin twisting first one way, then the other as it attempted to drag Elaina’s hand down to its target. The captain snatched the coin back up and pocketed it before pointing to the small scrub. “Get rid of the plant and start digging, boys,” she said with a wild grin.

There was another chest buried in the island and it looked a lot like the one Beck had found in the underwater cavern. As the two pirates lifted it out of the hole they had dug and set it on the earth, Elaina bent to get a better look at the large oak chest. The two pirates collapsed onto the dirt, exhausted and sweating from the exercise and the heat. Beck peered around Captain Black to get a better look at the chest.

“Looks pretty solid,” Elaina said, poking the chest with her boot. “And I don’t see no lock.

Take a look, Arbiter, see if you can detect any magic or something.”

Beck sensed nothing from the chest, but some magics were subtle and, as lingering magics aged, they often lost potency and form, making detection harder. “Seems safe. Or at least as far as I can tell.”

“So how do I open it?” Elaina Black asked, pushing at the lid but getting nowhere.

Beck considered using a rune of explosion. The blast would destroy the chest and hopefully whatever lay inside, but she wanted to see the journal before she destroyed it so her report to Inquisitor Vance would be complete.

“There's writing on the top of the lid,” Beck said. “Just underneath that little oval disk is written '*Black Blood is the Key*'.”

“Thought that was just a doodle,” Elaina said.

Beck snorted. “It's written in old Acanthian, before they took to speaking the common tongue. There are many old, lost languages that only the Inquisition remembers.”

“Good job I brought an Arbiter with me then,” Elaina said with a grin. The captain then placed her thumb against the oval disk and winced. When she pulled the digit back it came away bloody and Beck could see a smear of dark red blood against the oval on the chest. An audible click sounded from the chest and it seemed to Beck as if even the nearby monkeys were holding their breath in anticipation.

“Guess my blood is as black as his was,” Elaina said, reaching towards the chest. The pirate stopped, her hands hovering just a few inches above the lid. “Ah, fuck it,” she cursed and threw the lid back, bracing for the consequences. Nothing happened.

Elaina leaned in, a greedy glint in her eyes, and reached into the chest. Beck slowly drew one of her pistols from its holster on her jerkin.

“Now da' will have to let me back into Fango,” Elaina cooed at the book in her hands.

Click.

Beck drew the hammer back on her pistol, its barrel pointed squarely at the pirate's back. Elaina slowly turned her head to look at Beck.

“I'm going to need that book, Captain,” Beck said in a voice she hoped came across as cold and calculating.

The pirates who had dug the hole were on their feet but they could see the pistol trained on their captain so weren't making any moves.

“Reckon there might be some misunderstanding, Arbiter.”

“I can't allow a book containing necromancy to remain in the hands of pirates. I will destroy that book whether or not I have to destroy you with it.”

“This is the problem with you true believers,” Elaina Black said with a sigh. “Always so damned zealous.” Very slowly the pirate Captain stood and turned, the book held out in hand.

Beck reached out and took the book, her pistol still trained on Elaina.

“Before you go setting the thing on fire,” Elaina said, her hands held up and nowhere near a weapon. “Reckon ya might want to look at it.”

Beck cocked an eyebrow at the pirate, she had no need to dabble in necromancy.

“I know I said it was full of spells and such. Thing is that was a little bit of a lie,” Captain Black said, wincing. “Figured it would help you make the decision to help me. Have a read. It really is just the old Captain Black's journal. Lots of shit about course corrections and mutinous first mates, I reckon.”

Beck struggled opening the catch on the heavy book while holding her pistol and resorted to setting the thing down on the ground. Once it was open she flicked through the pages, scanning them only briefly while pointing her pistol at the pirate Captain.

“Then why?” Beck asked. “Why make me risk my life to get the damned thing?”

Elaina smiled. “My da's a bit of a collector of the old Captain Black's personal effects and I ain't exactly in his good graces right now. Figured if I came bearing gifts he wouldn't give me the

beating I deserve. Needed magical help getting hold of the bloody thing, as you're well aware. You did a grand job, by the way. Very much appreciated.”

Beck kept flicking through the pages but the truth was she had been lied to and manipulated. In a fit of anger she stood up and kicked the book away.

“Whoa,” Elaina Black hissed. “That's a fucking antique and my way back into my da's good books.”

“Now what?” Beck asked, unwilling to lower her pistol and unsure of how she would get off the island if the pirates decided to leave her there.

“Now I take you to Sev'relain,” Elaina Black said in a calm voice as she shuffled forwards and picked the book out of the dirt and closed it again. “We had a deal and you held up yours. Don't reckon I'll stick around though. Soon as you're off the boat, I'm gone.”

Though it went against her nature and better judgement, Beck put away her pistol and nodded to the pirate Captain. “The sooner the better.”

Three days later Beck found herself standing on an old wooden pier staring back at the retreating form of Elaina Black grinning at her from one of *Starry Dawn's* dinghies. Part of Beck was sad to be parting ways, the Captain was endearing in her own way if a little dangerous and more than a little mad.

Turning towards the pirate settlement of Port Sev'relain, and the folk staring in wonder and fear at her Arbiter coat, Beck felt her spirits drop. She had been sent here by Inquisitor Vance to find a particular pirate and he had given no period of time for the mission. With a heavy sigh, Beck resigned herself to smelling the Pirate Isles for a while longer.