



THE INCIDENT
WITH THE PIRATE

CASSANDRA BYRNE



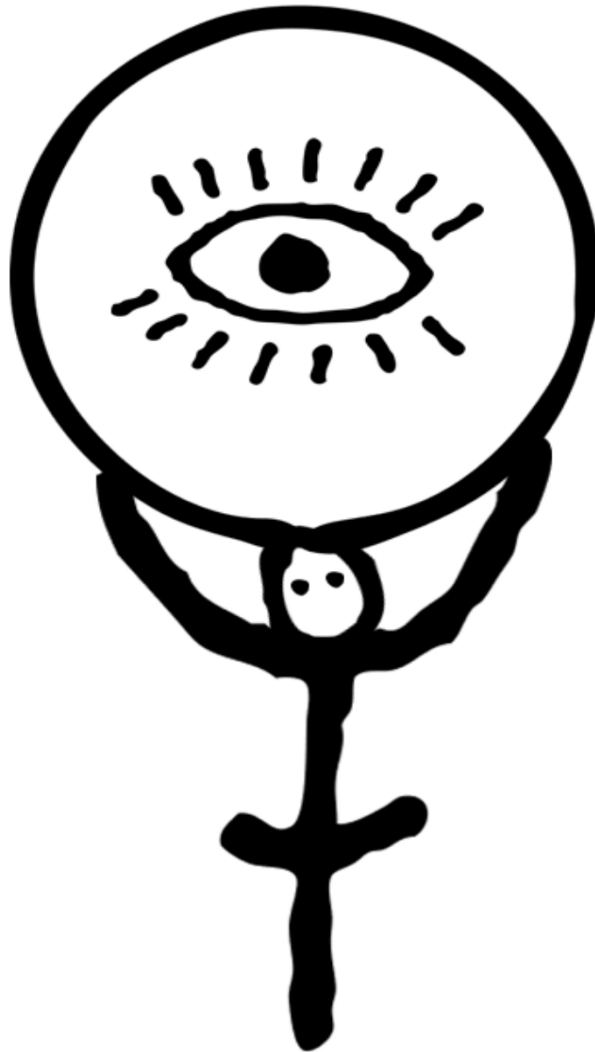
The Incident with the Pirate

BY

CASSANDRA BYRNE

COVER ART

PARRIS RYAN



Copyright @ 2023 Cassandra Byrne

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form without permission from the author or publisher, except as permitted by U.S. copyright law. Before proceeding beyond this page, you are advised to call upon the Many-Eyed Mother (depicted above) for protection from eldritch entities, ghosts, and the all-devouring wrath of the hungry stars. She offers herself freely, without expectation or attachment (which is what it means to love).

For business inquiries and other requests, contact valsombra@blackbriarstudios.com

Written by Cassandra Byrne
Cover Art by Parris Ryan

Published by Cassandra Byrne
www.theironchronicle.com

Of all the ports in either world, Theodore Vale detested Vastengrad the most. She was all rusty reds, from her docks to the lord's keep, stained by the algae blooms and salt of the Shrieking Sea, *Malhalholtra*. Skraefolk infested the alleys and watering holes, carving sigils and prayers to the old gods on every surface a knife could scratch. It wasn't like London. A man needed to be careful where he put his eyes. Here, curses carried weight.

London. The thought of it tugged at Ted's heart.

He never cared much for London, with her oppressive fog and soot-stained streets, but after six years stranded so far from home, there was no price he wouldn't have paid to see its harbors. He'd left a wife there, Anne, and their daughter, Liz. At night he ached for Anne's warmth beside him—to feel her weight in his arms. It hurt too much to think of Liz, with her mop of honey-blonde curls and her mischievous laugh. He often wondered if she even remembered him.

It was Anne and Liz that kept him going. Ted never gave up on finding a way home. Rumor and hearsay brought him to the Isle of Penz, where he'd dueled the Grand Hypographer and won. All that for nothing. The Hypographer claimed to know the way between worlds, but Ted saw him for what he was—a charlatan. There was no magic in him, and in the end Ted cut out his lying tongue in a fit of rage.

Ted searched two more years before he heard rumor of a horn that could bridge the worlds. Another year before he tracked the treasure to its owner, a marauder who plied the Reaver's Sea. Ted took his

ship and his crew into those treacherous waters, ran the warchief aground, and tore the man's secrets from him on the beach.

There was treasure on those islands—queer magic too—but no way back to London. Ted wrested the horn from a barnacled temple and placed it on the mantle in his quarters. Damned thing didn't work, but it served as a reminder of the hunt.

All hope seemed lost until the German found him. A priest by trade, he'd crossed over some twenty years prior and long since gave up on getting home. The man described himself as a scholar whose life's work was the study of the connection between the worlds. It was from the priest that Ted learned of the witch.

"Evelyn Grimsby," the German said. "Have you heard of her?"

Ted shook his head. The name meant nothing to him.

"No? Nothing of the monastery she burnt, with all those monks still in it? Or of the deadly trap she laid at Lord Rothmorrow's manse, where ten good men died? The witch can open the way between worlds, but she guards her secrets jealously. She has your key, but you will need to take it from her. She travels with it and keeps it locked away in an iron cask."

"Where can I find her?"

"Hard to say. The woman is a serpent. She slithers from city to city, leaving chaos in her wake. If you find her, do not let her manners fool you. She is a savage creature and will not hesitate to kill you if you cross her."

Ted spent months tracking her down. Everywhere he asked, people agreed: she was mad. An eccentric who brought ruin on everything

she touched. He learned that she studied the other worlds that fed this one obsessively, and that gave him an idea for a trap. If she wanted stories of other worlds, he would give her one.

Ten weeks he stayed on dry land, away from salt and sea and the ship that brought him to this world, telling his story to anyone who would listen. Told it again and again, each day, until his throat cracked and he was sick of the sound of his own voice. Then one day Ted received a letter from her asking if he would meet.

Ted agreed and sent the two steadiest members of his crew ahead. Frank Tubbs and Molly Whit. They rented a room across from hers at The Toad & Spider. While Ted kept her busy, they would break into her room and retrieve the cask.

He waited for the witch in the commons of the inn, slow-nursing a glass of whiskey. Even though his eyes were up and he was looking for her, she came at him sideways somehow and got the drop regardless.

“Theodore Vale?” the lady asked.

Grimsby cut a sharp figure. Tall and severe, with dark hair put up in a tight bun. A black velvet dress with a green waistband covered her from her ankles to her chin. She wore two ornate flintlock pistols loose at her hips. A pair of promises. Rare in this world.

The priest’s description of her was accurate. She possessed a predator’s eyes. Flat and cold and touched ever-so-slightly by disdain.

Not a problem for Ted. He’d tussled with sharks before.

He forced himself to smile and offered her a seat. "Evelyn Grimsby, I presume?"

"*Lady Grimsby,*" she said, correcting him as she sat. "Thank you for agreeing to meet with me, sir. I understand you are from Elsewhere?"

"Elsewhere," Vale answered with a snort. "Yes, that's what you all call it, isn't it? 'Oh,' they say, 'you are from Elsewhere, I am so sorry'—as if it were a disease."

She shrugged. "People from Elsewhere often go mad in our world. Where in your world are you from, Mr. Vale?"

"London. And it's *Captain Vale.*"

He could be snooty about titles too.

"That's in England, isn't it? How long did it take you to learn the language?"

'Learn' was an interesting word for it. Felt like the devil grabbed hold of his tongue and bent it into a new shape. The German claimed the natives here spoke "the true language" because God did not confuse their tongues at Babel.

"A year, or thereabouts. I expect we might have learned sooner, but my crew and I spent much of our time here at sea, trying to find a way home."

"How many of you are there?"

"There were twelve of us that came through alive. We're down to eight now. We lost two men in a knife fight in Treppania, another to the headsman's block in Kal Salei, and then six months ago, my first mate up and hung himself at a brothel in Helsgrad."

"I am sorry to hear that, Captain."

She might have meant it. He couldn't tell.

"He was a good man," Ted said, acknowledging her condolences.

"Would you tell me how you came to be here?"

"We heard a rumor about a Spanish galleon limping home from the colonies. Her crew'd taken ill and her captain didn't want to wait to find replacements. Well, that sounded like an opportunity. We decided to take a run at her. Caught her at sea and she put to flight. Gave us a chase, but my ship, *Red Shadow*, is a fast bitch. The galleon's captain realized we'd overtake them so he tacked course into a storm instead of giving up his cargo and his honor. We followed."

"And when you came out of the storm, you were here."

"That's right. That's how it goes, isn't it?"

Lady Grimsby nodded. "You are correct, sir. That is how it happens. Someone loses their way in forest or fog and ends up here. Or perhaps they turn down an unfamiliar alley on a dark night and emerge from the other end in another city entirely. The geometry of it is unnatural. Our worlds are folded together, somehow—or else connected when convenient by a malign intelligence."

"Does it ever happen the other way round? Do people from here end up there?"

"Not so far as I know. Unless I am mistaken, we do not appear in your books or your stories. There are churches to your Christian God here, but the old gods of our world are apparently unknown in yours. Where did you come through?"

"The other end of the world. Past Treppania and Kal Salei. The Circle of Teeth, I think you lot call it."

"A frightful place. It has claimed many ships."

"Almost took ours as well. Frost and death, that's all we saw. A bitter cold such as I have never known. A miracle we survived."

"More true than you know. Strange creatures make their home in the depths of those frigid waters." The witch hesitated, rubbing her finger over the rim of her tea. "Captain, I must admit—I had an ulterior motive for wanting to meet with you."

Ted frowned. What other motive could there be? This was his trap. He'd baited her here. At that very moment, he expected Molly and Frank were picking the lock on her door. "I don't understand."

"The horn you stole—"

A thumping sound from the room above interrupted her. Heavy footfalls and the rumble of drawers. Molly and Frank, looking for the cask. Lady Grimsby heard it too. She paused to listen, her eyes on the stairwell, then moved to stand.

"Captain Vale—"

"Wait!" Ted pleaded. "What about the Unseelie Courts? Faeries. Both our worlds share those stories. Are you sure you don't know the way between worlds?"

"There is no way to be known, Captain Vale."

"Everyone says that," he muttered. "They all said you'd say it, too. Except the German fellow. He said you were a liar."

She cocked an eyebrow. "The German?"

“The priest.”

“What pri—?”

Before the exchange finished, something above went sideways. Sounds of an argument. Then a noise that could only have been a door splintering on its hinges, and a heavy blow that rattled the ceiling. A woman’s voice cried out in horror. Molly. Had to be.

“What the hell is all that noise?” the innkeeper muttered, striding toward the stairs with purpose. Another loud crash stopped him dead in his tracks.

“I’m sorry, Captain Vale, I’m afraid I must go.”

Lady Grimsby started for the stairs. Vale moved with her. He pulled a dagger from his belt and lunged across the table for a quick strike. She seemed to sense him coming and danced to the side, then pulled him past her and sent him to the floor on his back. In that same smooth motion, she drew a pistol and fired. The flintlock belched smoke and thunder, and a fat iron ball struck the floor next to Ted’s head. An inch to the right and his brains would have been one more red stain for Vastengrad.

Chaos spread throughout the inn. Customers jumped to their feet at the sound of the gunshot and pushed past each other in a rush for the exit, hoping to escape before the violence grew worse.

Ted rolled onto his side and gave the witch a hard kick in the shin. Stumbling backward, she drew the other pistol and lined him up. Ted scrambled under a nearby table, tipping it over to give himself some cover.

More sounds of violence from above.

"Mr. Wulf!" Lady Grimsby cried out. "Are you alright?"

A man's low voice called back from above: "Yeah, I'm alright."

Captain Vale shouted in turn. "Molly? Frank?"

Molly's voice wavered. "I've got the cask, Ted!"

"No," the witch hissed. "You fool, you've no idea what you're doing."

He didn't bother to answer the charge. Could be the witch was right. Maybe he was a fool. Didn't matter. He needed to get home. Back to Anne and Liz.

He'd kill anyone who kept him from them.

Ted lifted the table and used it as a shield, barreling toward the witch. She sidestepped again and took her shot. This one found home. It caught him from behind in his left shoulder. Pain lit up Ted as he turned to face the witch. He still had his dagger, and both her shots were spent.

He moved to cut her, but she was fast. She dodged the blow and struck him across the face with the butt of her pistol. The room went wobbly, but he stayed on his feet. He'd taken worse hits. Ted caught her in the thigh with his knife. The bitch didn't scream. She scowled and gritted her teeth, but she didn't scream. Then she countered with the butt of her pistol. A quick blow that nearly broke his wrist. He wondered how long it'd take to heal. Wondered if he'd have a chance to find out.

He didn't want to die here. Not in this awful place.

The witch brought the pistol back to strike him again. Ted looked away, but the blow never came. Molly was there, all covered in scarlet. A nasty gash sat on her cheek, and another above her left

breast. She caught Lady Grimsby's wrist and disarmed her, then staggered her with a nasty headbutt.

The two women scuffled in muted silence. The witch ripped Ted's dagger out of her thigh and slashed Molly across the forearm. A deep enough gash to give Molly pause. Both women stumbled backward. Above them, it sounded like whoever Molly'd tangled with was pulling himself back to his feet.

Molly went to Ted and helped him up. Her eyes were on the stairs, full of fear. "We've got to go, Ted."

"Where's Frank?"

"He's dead. We've got to go."

They were halfway to the door when the witch's henchman thundered down the stairs into the common room. He was the biggest man Ted ever saw. So broad-shouldered he needed to turn sideways to get through the door. One of Molly's knives was still stuck in the man's shoulder. His nostrils flared like an enraged bull and he came at them, knocking aside tables and chairs like they were dollhouse furniture.

"We aren't done yet, you and me," the big man growled, leveling a long knife at Molly.

Ted didn't remember much of what followed. They made it out of the tavern and disappeared into Vastengrad's back alleys, dodging and weaving through a crowded marketplace with the witch's henchman in pursuit. He cornered them at the docks, but the rest of *Red Shadow's* crew was waiting; William Stirge and "Black" Bill French, Jim Prince, Gilbert G eroux, and Tom Crowe. The henchman

was pinched, with Molly and Ted before him, *Red Shadow's* crew behind him, and nowhere to go but the water.

"No trouble, boys," the henchman said, suddenly reasonable.

"Return our property and I'll be on my way."

Ted spat a mouthful of blood onto the docks. "Afraid we can't do that. This is how we get home. Give your mistress my apologies."

The big man shook his head and laughed. No mirth in it. Something dark and sad instead. "It's not that," he said. "I promise you it's not."

Molly passed the cask off to Ted and circled toward Jim Prince, who tossed her a hatchet. "Mr. Wulf? Is that what she said your name was?"

"That's right. Didn't catch your name, love."

"Molly Whit."

Gérroux whistled. "Brimstone Molly to you, big man."

"Yea," said Molly, menacing closer, "that too. Fancy another go, Mr. Wulf?"

"If we're being honest, Molly, I'm not sure I like my odds." The henchman took a step backward and his heel landed at the edge of the dock. "No chance you'll let me walk away? Not in the mood to get wet."

Molly tapped the gash on her cheek with her hatchet. "I wasn't in the mood to get wet neither."

"Fair enough, Molly Whit," said Mr. Wulf, taking a look at the muddy red waters of the Malhalholtra. "I suppose it's a swim for me. Until we meet again."

Molly lunged for him as he jumped into the bay, resurfacing some ten feet off to shake out his shaggy mane of salt and pepper hair like a dog. He gave them all a final look, inventorying every detail of their faces, then vanished back into the harbor's dark waters.

Molly and the boys helped get Ted up onto *Red Shadow*. He retreated to his quarters with Molly and the cask while the others readied the ship to depart. Molly set the iron cask on his desk. Heavy. Cold. Ted ran his trembling fingers over it until they found the lock.

"Open it," Molly urged him.

"Give me your hatchet."

Two solid strikes and the lock broke open, scattered in pieces across Ted's desk. Molly stayed close behind, one hand on his uninjured shoulder. Molly Whit, always there to keep him steady. He might have hung himself alongside his first mate, if not for her.

Ted opened the cask and it bathed the room in greens and blues, walls fluxing in the strange light. They'd opened up a box and found the heavens staring back. He wondered if this was what Pandora saw when she plunged the world into chaos. This would make a good story for Liz. He could already see it. She'd nestle up with him for bed, and he would tell her about the time he stole salvation from a witch.

Inside the cask was a finely wrought iron lantern. No, a cage. And in it was not a light, but a tiny woman with black opal eyes, long dark hair, and a pair of dragonfly wings. The woman sprawled indelicately, every inch of her glowing except her eyes. Her eyes were a kind of matte black, flecked with bands of coruscating light.

He was too enchanted by the fact of her existence to look away. By the shocked expression on her face, she was as surprised to see them as they were to see her.

“Christ, Ted,” Molly swore breathlessly, “it’s a bloody faerie.”

He didn’t see a faerie. He saw a way home.

“Just like the German said.”

And then he heard the faerie in his head. Her voice was a soft caress from a summer breeze. The hairs on his neck and forearms pricked up. Molly swore later she’d heard nothing, but Ted heard the faerie clear as day.

Theodore Vale.

She knew his name. She knew his goddamned name. Ted felt her in his head, leafing through his memories as if they were pages in a book—pausing when she reached his memories of the witch from that very afternoon. He wondered if that was the reason for the cask. To seal her up. To shut her out.

“Yes,” he whispered, struck dumb with awe.

You want to see your wife. Your child.

Ted drew a sharp breath, choking back emotion, and nodded. He felt the faerie turn the page and suddenly he was back in London and Liz was three, with the flu burrowed into her lungs like a tick. She shivered in his arms, her chest rattling with fluid, and Ted felt sure she would die. Two days of terror and sorrow, but his sweet girl fought through it and came out the other side. She even earned herself a nickname from G eroux: *la petite lionne*.

He left two weeks later on the voyage that brought him here. The memory of it nearly broke him.

I understand. I was a mother once, too.

“Will you help me?”

The faerie’s stone black eyes alighted on the horn Ted kept on his mantle—the one he’d torn from the barnacled temple.

I cannot reunite you with your family, but I can bring you to one who can.

“Who?”

Tal’voleis, Who-Dreams-of-Doors. The horn you keep will wake him.

Ted’s head swam with visions of blizzard and bone, ships splintered and ripped in half. He recognized the place. Frost and death.

“We have to go back there?” Ted asked. “The Circle of Teeth?”

You must retrace your steps. Tal’voleis can reunite you, but he will be angry when you wake him. I could soothe his temper and plead your case for a price.

“A price?”

There is always a price, Theodore Vale.



A captain’s best friends are his compass and the night sky, but in this world neither could be trusted. Compasses did not behave properly on the open ocean. Other things, moving in the depths, tugged at their needle, and they became more liability than boon.

The stars were no better.

Here, the constellations waxed and waned, burning bright one moment, winking out of existence entirely the next. These stars were bands of undulating coral and pale white gold, autumn reds clouded by streaks of gray, or bright waves of emerald and sapphire. There were eight constellations in all, and they twisted and writhed in the sky above, contending with one another for dominance.

Wakeful, watchful, and slumbering the locals termed them. All Ted knew was that when he looked up at them, it felt like they were looking back. Some nights he dreamt of them. That he was bound to them by strings, dancing for their delight.

The unreliability of compasses and the uncertainty of the stars meant that travel on the open ocean was tantamount to suicide. Only a madman would attempt it. That meant staying along the coast. *Red Shadow* followed it north, along the highlands, past the iron city of Streissberg and its cascades of twinkling lights.

Prototype steamships crowded Streissberg's harbor, whilst towers of scrap lay rusting on its shores. The city itself was carved into the face of a cliff like a bas relief and extended deep underground. Its hidden foundries burned at all hours of the night, venting smoke and sulfur from massive chimneys.

The crew gathered on the forecastle to get a better look as *Red Shadow* slipped past the city in the night.

"Look at all those lights," Jim Prince murmured. "How do you suppose they managed that?"

"I heard there's a devil chained in the city's bowels," said Tom Crowe. "It's him that powers all the lights."

"An awful place," said Molly Whit.

"You sound scared, Mol."

"Look at it. Can't you feel that? It's hungry."

Jim Prince laughed. "Is that so? What do you suppose it eats?"

"I think it eats people. I think it chews them up and spits them out."

Ted left the crew to wonder at the iron city and returned to his quarters, where he kept the faerie. He didn't trust her enough to let her out of the cage. Better to keep her under lock and key, for now.

We haven't stopped moving.

"Seemed wise to put some distance between ourselves and the witch."

You were right to do so. She will pursue us.

"That may be, but she won't catch us."

You must be careful. She is clever.

"In my experience, most types of clever stop at the shore. We're on the water now, and here I've yet to meet my equal."

She'll know where we're going.

"How?"

I am bound to her, as she is to me, by the weight of a promise.

"We'll be ready for her."

Pray that you are.

He worked with the faerie to plot their course. North, still. North until they reached the snowy wastes beyond the Far Ranges. Rimefrost spread across the ship, set the crew's teeth to chattering,

and turned the ocean spray to icicles in Ted's black hair. Old Suram loomed in the distance, with its walls and cannons. A joyless place.

The crew was relieved when *Red Shadow* put it to her stern.

Then west, skirting bergs and frost-reef before a sharp turn south toward warmer climes. And then it was three months and they were half a world away, at the island of Treppania for re-supply.

Ted enjoyed the time off the ship. Most of all, he enjoyed being away from the faerie. She pleaded with Ted to release her so she could be out under the stars. He almost did. Not yet, though. He couldn't take the pain if she ran off and left him back where he started, without a glimmer of hope.

Drums and music filled the air on the island's firelit beaches, the kind of rhythms that put a swivel in people's hips and a heat between their thighs. The island was full of pretty ladies with olive skin and green eyes. Ted watched Molly dance close to one, kissing now and then in the firelight.

He used to like Treppania. He liked it less now. The dark-haired ladies all reminded him of the witch, and the heat from the bonfire felt hollow, knowing their destination. Even huddled next to the fire, the memory of that place still made him shiver.

Molly padded barefoot across the beach and sat next to him, breathless. "Come and dance with me."

"Not tonight, Miss Whit."

"Come on, Captain! There's no music where we're headed!"

Ted shook his head. She looked disappointed. Worried, maybe.

"What's wrong?" she asked. "You look tired."

He *was* tired. He couldn't sleep anymore. The damned faerie was always digging around in his memories.

"I suppose I am. I'm tired of this place. This world."

"You'll get us home."

Such confidence. Molly Whit never doubted him. Not for an instant. He put his arm around her, pulled her close, and dropped a kiss on her forehead. "I'll do my best."

"You'll see. This time next year, you'll be back in London sitting with Liz on the docks, telling her all about the ships as they come in from the sea."

Ted tried to imagine what Liz might look like now. He wondered if her hair was still curly, or if she'd inherited her mother's freckles. At times it felt like he might have dreamed up the pair of them. And then he worried they were a dream he might forget.

"I'd like that. That'd be nice."

He felt Molly hesitate. Something was bothering her.

"What's wrong?"

"Do you trust her?"

Ted didn't need Molly to explain she meant the faerie.

"Why do you ask?"

"I don't like her, Ted. I don't like her weird black eyes. This is gonna sound crazy, but sometimes I think I can feel her...moving around in my memories. There's something wrong about her. She doesn't sleep. She doesn't eat. And when she's in my memories, it's like—"

Molly stopped, unable to bring herself to say whatever she was thinking.

"What?" Ted pressed. "Go on."

"—it's like she prefers the bad ones. If we're headed back there... to that place... you better be sure we can trust her."

She was right. He knew that. What good would hanging onto hope do him if they got all the way there only to watch it fly away? They'd have gone back to hell for nothing.

"I've got to let her out, don't I?"

"If she leaves, she leaves. Better to lose hope here, than there."

"You're a wise one, Miss Whit. I hope you're wrong about her."

"Me too."

Ted gave her a pat on the shoulder and stood. "I suppose I best get to it."

"Right now?"

"Better to do it while the crew's away. If it doesn't work out, I'll have to think of what to tell them." He gave a nod towards the others, who were celebrating with the locals. "Keep the boys in line, will you?"

"Growl and go's the word, Captain."

The ship was dark when Ted got back. A soft green light beckoned from his cabin door. When he threw it open, the faerie was standing expectantly in her cage.

She was already in his head.

Welcome back.

"You knew I was coming?"

Your thoughts burn bright.

"You know why I'm here, then?"

I do.

"Shall I take you out to look at the stars, first?"

As you wish.

He set her on the taffrail and took a spot beside her. Above them, the constellation of the Sineids writhed and twisted in the night sky, a pale serpent whose light shone with all the vibrant pastels of a coral reef. In the east, the Atols contended with them for dominance, guttering green and yellow. All the heavens were bright with color.

Thank you. Her voice was still in his head, but her tone was changed. Subdued, maybe. Like a parishioner at church.

"Why do they do that?" Ted asked the faerie. "Struggle like that?"

Why does anything do what it does? Because they must. Because it is in their nature.

"And what's in your nature?"

She did not answer. He could not tell if she ignored the question purposefully, or if she was too busy drinking in the stars.

"I used to like looking up at the stars. It comforted me to know that no matter how far I traveled, Anne and Liz were looking at them too. Now, they eat away at me. They remind me how impossibly far I am from home."

You're afraid they've forgotten you.

Of course they'd forgotten him. He remembered how beautiful Anne was the night he met her. Even in a patch-worn dress, she sparkled like a sapphire. She was more than a pretty face, as well; he'd fallen in love with her wicked sense of humor and the mischief she kept hidden at the corners of her smile.

Six years.

Too long to leave anyone on their own. Especially a woman like that. He wouldn't blame her if she'd found someone else. It would break his heart, but he wouldn't blame her.

"Anne was a handsome woman. I'm sure plenty of men have come to call on her, and Liz..."

It took everything in him not to cry at the thought of another man taking his place as Liz's father. Someone else to sing her songs and tell her stories. Ted tried to imagine if such a man would be kind or cruel or—

She remembers you.

"What?"

She dreams of you at night. She has a little wooden frog you brought her from a place called France. She sleeps with it under her pillow. Looks at the stars and wonders if you're alive.

"You can see her?"

Oh yes. I followed your love back to her. A trail of breadcrumbs.

Ted nodded and choked back his tears. The conversation made what he was about to do so much harder. He didn't want her to know how scared he was she might leave. He couldn't lose hope

again. "I'll free you, but you must give me your word. Your promise. You must—"

She did not wait for him to finish.

I will bring you to Tal'voleis. The horn will blow and I will plead your case and I will make him open the way between worlds. I swear to you, Theodore Vale, free me and you will see your wife and daughter again. Are these terms acceptable to you?

"They are."

Then the deal is made. We are bound by the weight of a promise.



They spent two weeks docked at the mouth of the Salumatra River, with the walls of Kal Salei a mile hence. Everything in the ancient city was built from mud, sand, and sun-dried salt, with sharp, clean lines shaped to perfection. It was an orderly place, where nearly every crime was punishable by a choice between the headsman's axe or the hangman's noose.

With his spyglass, Ted could make out the hanging men that decorated the city gates. The faerie sat beside him, basking in the warmth of the sun. He let her out of her cage in exchange for her promise. A fair trade, as he saw it. Her freedom for his family.

She hadn't run.

"Who's that one?" Ted asked, training his spyglass on one of the hanged men.

Tem Suffar. A thief.

"What'd he steal?"

Another man's wife.

"What about her?"

Siva Nulara.

"Her crime?"

She questioned the Divine Math.

"She was pretty."

She was clever.

The faerie's mood lightened after being freed from her cage. She enjoyed showing off for him with these little games. Her eyes saw the world differently than his. Her ability to read a person's memories did not end with their death, apparently. Still, the more comfortable she got, the more uncomfortable she made him. She didn't ask before she looked at memories and the process was... unpleasant.

You're bored? Don't you want to play? Ask me another question.

"I've had enough of dead men and their crimes. We've been in Kal Salei for two weeks. We've resupplied and finished repairs. We should be on our way."

We must wait. The horn will not work until the constellations turn and the Voleids are wakeful.

Of course. Like everything else in this bloody world it turned on the whims of the stars.

The faerie turned to Ted and regarded him with those black opal eyes of hers, grinning as she did. Something about her smile made

his stomach turn. The shape of it was unnatural. Too wide for her tiny face.

Ask me another question, she insisted.

“What do you eat?”

Oh, yes! I like that question!

“Well?”

I might eat the color red, or the smell of a newborn baby. I might eat memories or hours, or the warmth of a fire on a cold winter night.

“What does that mean?” Ted asked, unable to hide the disgust and confusion in his voice.

I eat what I want. Ask me another question.

“Where are you from?” Ted asked cautiously. “What are you?”

I was born from Sun and Moon. I am first amongst faeries, mother and sister to them all.

“Do you have a name?”

I have many names. Opal-Eyed Solinde is the one I like best.

With every question, the faerie’s excitement seemed to grow. Her dark eyes grew wider by the moment, flat circles flecked with brilliant splashes of color that reminded Ted of the night sky and its hungering stars.

“Have you ever hurt anyone?”

Oh yes, she told him, would you like to see?

"No. That's alright. I think I'm done for now." It was all wrong. The faerie. The journey. What if it was all a terrible mistake? He thought he might throw up.

I'm not done. You're not allowed to be done.

Ted opened his mouth to snap at her, but the words caught in his throat.

I can work you like a puppet.

A sharp pain blossomed in his chest, just below his heart. It felt as if someone reached inside him, grabbed hold of his lungs, and squeezed them tight. "You're hurting me," Ted rasped.

This is what it's like to drown.

He could barely breathe. "Please!"

And then it was over. Air rushed into his lungs. He felt her swimming in the memory of his terror, moving across the water of his mind like an oil slick. Several members of the crew rushed to his aid when they realized something was amiss.

"You alright, Captain?" asked Mr. French, casting a wary glance toward the faerie.

Ted pushed the man away. "I'm fine, Bill. Just need to lie down."

The stars changed that night and the Voleids burned brighter than Ted had ever seen them, a gash of autumn reds like a bloody hole in the sky. Ted ordered the crew to their stations and they pulled out of Kal Salei's harbor, into the vast expanse of the Great Southern Ocean.

If the encounter with Ted held any significance for the faerie, she did not show it. She sprawled out on the forecastle, eyes cast upward, serene as she bathed in starlight.



Thirty days out from Kal Salei, the sun became a distant memory, replaced by rough waters and freezing rain. *Red Shadow's* foredeck was an ice-slicked nightmare. Jim Prince and Tom Crowe, bundled together under as many layers as they could gather, worked tirelessly with chisels to clear what they could from the booms. Molly stayed aloft in the mains, keeping the rigging as tight and clean as she could. Twice, a sudden icing from ocean spray shifted the weight of the ship and almost caused her to capsize.

Mr. Géroux lashed himself to the wheel, frost in his yellow beard. Ted stood beside him, nose running with blood, struggling to match their charts to the shifting constellations in the sky. With coverage from the clouds, it was difficult to make sense of them, but patience and a sharp memory kept them on their proper course.

The faerie remained with him, perched upon his shoulder, fingers dug into his wool jacket like little claws. There'd been no wickedness or violence from her since that day in Kal Salei, but Ted could no longer bear to look at her.

"A little more to port, Mr. Géroux."

The Frenchman hauled the wheel and the rudder answered with a shudder from below. The rudder was starting to ice, and if it locked up, that would be it. They'd have to shelter through the storm and make repairs as best they could once the weather broke.

"*Pas bon*, Captain! She is breaking!"

"Rock her gently, Mr. Géroux. Keep her warm and steady, we are close."

They *were* close. Ted wiped the blood from his nose with his sleeve. His head pounded from looking at the charts, but they were near their destination. The Circle of Teeth. He tried to follow the constellations on the charts, with their twisting lines and bizarre geometry, and felt a lancing pain behind his eyes.

"It should be here," he muttered, squinting back up at the stars.

"Captain!"

Mr. Géroux's eyes were wide. Before them, farther to port and hidden near a berg, rested the wreck of a Dutch carrack, her colors ragged and torn. And there, beyond, an English sloop. They were everywhere. To port and starboard as far as the eye could see.

"That's it, Mr. Géroux. Stay the course."

Ted's heart jumped in his chest. He was frozen to his core, but the warmth of a London pub beckoned, and little Liz and her honey curls.

The wind died a sudden, queer, death as they passed the carrack. It was as if mother nature herself were cut off mid-sentence and *Red Shadow* crossed some invisible wall even the elements did not dare trespass. A few flurries gave way to warm, wet rain and heavy fog. Ted turned. To their stern, the winter storm's rage continued unabated; to the fore, the seas were dark and calm, littered with the wrecks of ships from every age.

"I never thought to see this place again," Mr. Géroux whispered.

Mr. French and Mr. Stirge took up places on the foredeck and called out directions to Mr. Géroux. The water was shallow enough that there was real danger they might run aground. All Ted saw in the dark waters was the reflection of the Voleids in the night sky—a wound in the fabric of creation.

“How deep, Captain?”

“Haven’t a damned clue, Mr. Géroux. Careful to port.”

The Frenchman pulled the rudder back; it did not fight him now. He steered *Red Shadow* around the bones of an English frigate. Its aft quarterdeck rose vertically out of the water, as it were dropped on its bow from the heavens.

“There’s a light!” called Molly from the mains.

“Say again, Miss Whit?” Ted called back.

“There’s a goddamned light!”

Ted raised his spyglass as they came past the frigate and scanned the graveyard before them. There, a steamship out of Streissberg. *Iron Bride*. Still as death, with all her lanterns lit. Nestled between two wrecks, she guarded the way forward. There was no movement on her deck, but the windows of her crew quarters burned like torches.

It’s her. She’s here.

“How can that be?” Ted muttered. There was no way she’d beaten them, not unless she’d crossed the open ocean. It was tantamount to suicide. Only a lunatic would have risked it.

“Captain?” said Mr. Géroux, eyeing the faerie on Ted’s shoulder with unease. “What is it?”

"The witch."

"Your orders?"

"Take Mr. Stirge and get the port guns ready. I'll take the helm."

They made their approach slow and careful. Ted called Molly down and she took up position beside him with the spyglass.

"Keep your eye on that deck, Miss Whit. I want to know if a bug farts."

"You think we caught them sleeping?" Molly asked.

"I think it's very unlikely."

Red Shadow slipped closer, carried by the gentle current of the circle's calm waters. Ted guided her past the hulks of ships whose names he did not recognize; massive vessels of alien design, whose hulls were glittering obsidian and polished metal, unlike anything that belonged to this world or his own. They looked as if they had been torn in half. He could not imagine the force required for such a feat.

"Molly?" he whispered.

"Nothing."

It is a trap. Destroy her ship now or you will doom us both.

The faerie radiated a cold, venomous rage in response. It raised the air on his arms. Ted could feel her emotions bleeding into the air around him, threatening to overwhelm him. Molly seemed to sense it to. She looked as if she could not decide which posed a greater threat; the faerie or *Iron Bride*.

"I will not let her stop us," Ted said to the faerie. "I will not break my word. You need to calm down, because I need to focus. Will the horn wake your monster? Are we close enough?"

No.

"That's that then, isn't it?" Ted turned to Molly and the spyglass. "Eyes up, Miss Whit. Stay to your task."

The deck remained clear as they approached. A hundred yards out, and *Iron Bride* remained silent. Tom Crowe and Jim Prince joined Ted and Molly on the quarterdeck.

"Call the distance, Mr. Crowe."

"Fifty yards."

No sound from her engine. No sign of movement through the windows of her lower deck.

"Twenty yards."

Then ten yards, and *Red Shadow* was upon her, drawn up beside the steamship like a viper preparing to strike. Nothing. No one laying in wait. No sudden fire from her guns. Silence, and the faintest of breezes.

Whatever this is, it is not what it seems.

"Why the hell is her deck clear?" growled Mr. Prince.

"What do you think, Mol?" Vale asked.

"I don't like it."

"Go aboard. Take Mr. G roux and Mr. Prince. Step quiet and don't do anything that'll get you killed."

"If we did catch `em sleeping?"

"Make sure they don't wake up."

They threw a line over to *Iron Bride*, and Mr. Crowe and Mr. Stirge helped close the gap between the ships. Molly and the others stepped across, sure-footed whispers in the night. Something gnawed at Ted's belly as he watched them vanish through a hatch to below decks. There was something off about *Iron Bride* but he could not place it. This close, he could see she was a whaler, not a warship. Compared to *Red Shadow* she was only lightly armed, with two forward guns on an elevated platform. Clean, but lived in. Proper tools on the cutting deck. Spearguns, harpoons, billhooks, and knives.

"Is it a whaler?" Bill French asked, confused.

Ted gave a cynical laugh. "Very good, Mr. French. We'll make a sailor of you yet."

"Where's the whaleboats?"

Ted frowned. His eyes scanned the deck. The gnawing in his belly turned to panic. *Iron Bride's* small boats were missing. Every one of them.

"Bloody hell," Ted muttered.

He was still trying to make sense of it when Mr. G eroux scrambled up from *Iron Bride's* below decks, white-faced and trembling. Molly and Jim Prince clambered up over top of each other behind him.

"Explosives!" the Frenchman shouted. "Don't fire! *Plus d'explosifs que vous ne pouvez l'imaginer!*"

"Damnit, Mr. G eroux, in English!"

“It’s packed with explosives,” Molly yelled, “someone’s turned it into a goddamned bomb.”

Red Shadow’s crew was still crossing back from *Iron Bride* when the first grappling hook landed on their ship’s foredeck. One meaty hand followed another, and then the witch’s henchman, Mr. Wulf, hauled himself up over the rail and onto the deck, like a grinning black shadow from the pits of Hell. He wore a suit of boiled leather armor, with a greatsword strapped to his back.

“The damned whaleboats!” Ted cried.

Mr. Stirge yelled the alarm and armed himself with a bench hook. Mr. Crowe followed suit, taking up a two-handed maul. Both were good, stout men who’d survived more than their fair share of violence, and neither man needed orders to know *Red Shadow* was being boarded.

Ted grabbed his cutlass and scampered down the quarterdeck stairs to join Jim Prince, Molly, and Mr. Géroux as they moved to reinforce the foredeck. Two Volgvarran sellswords in leather armor joined the witch’s henchman—proper military men by the look of them.

It was the short and ugly sort of violence. Molly threw her hatchet and caught one of the sellswords in his chest. It didn’t pierce his armor, but it knocked him down and took the wind out of him. Mr. Crowe staved the man’s head in with his maul. Ted parried a blow from the other mercenary and took him in the gullet. He died gurgling. The big man, Mr. Wulf, took Mr. Stirge’s head with a whirling blow from the greatsword, then hammered Mr. Crowe to his knees with a second blow that split the haft of the maul in two.

A shot rang out from the quarterdeck and Ted turned to see Mr. French slumped at the helm, his head blown apart. The witch stood behind him, all clad in black, her pistol smoking. Behind her, a Volgvarran with a salt-gray beard appraised the sails. Too old to be a fighter. A sailor, then.

She meant to steal his ship.

“Molly,” Ted growled, “get the damned horn.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I’m going to kill that bloody witch.”

Molly darted across the deck while Mr. Géroux and Mr. Prince squared off against the witch’s henchman. Ted used the mainmast for cover and crossed to the quarterdeck. The witch finished reloading as he reached her, but didn’t have time for another shot. She raised her flintlock, he grabbed it in desperation. The hammer struck his forefinger and he wrenched the pistol from her hand, throwing it across the deck.

The witch took up Mr. French’s blade and parried a wild swing from Ted. They matched each other blow for blow, stride for stride, each parry followed by a quick retort. She nicked him on the collarbone—a hair’s breadth from bleeding him out like a stuck pig. He caught her side as she dodged, leaving her with a gash beneath her breast.

Ted pressed the attack, driven by rage, raining furious blows upon the witch until he’d sent her sword skittering across the quarterdeck. She staggered backward, clutching at her side, blood running over her forearm. He expected fear in her eyes, all he found was cold calculation.

The faerie's words were like knives in his brain. *Kill her.*

"She's playing possum."

KILL HER!

Ted moved to finish the witch, but she drew a dagger from the folds of her dress and ducked his blow. In an instant, she was inside his guard. Her dagger found the tendons in the back of his knee. White hot pain shot through him and his legs went out from under him. Then she was on him, her dagger at his throat, her fingers clawing for the pistol she'd dropped.

"This is not how my story ends!" Ted spat at her. "I will not die in this godforsaken place!"

Her voice was full of some dark sorrow: "This is not your story, Captain Vale. You will find no happy endings here."

"I want to go home!"

"It's not possible."

"She promised!"

They were locked in that deadly embrace when Molly blew the horn. A low, mournful note reverberated in the night air. The seas themselves answered it in kind with a sounding from the deeps that rattled *Red Shadow* to her very bones. Waters churned and bubbled and both ships tumbled together toward the epicenter of the movement.

The faerie was off his shoulder and in the air. A green ember high above the ship's deck.

"Is it done?" Ted cried out, fading note still ringing in his ears.

It is done. Tal'voleis wakes.

And then everything turned to madness. The red gash of the Voleids tore open and became a wound, a door, a horrifying gateway to some distant, abyssal realm. It looked as if the sky itself were bleeding. *Red Shadow* and *Iron Bride* dislodged from each other and the steamship slipped past them, hull scraping along the bones of ancient wrecks, toward whatever it was that was coming.

"You'll keep your promise?" Ted called out to the faerie. He thought of Anne and her dark freckles. Of Liz and her honey-gold curls.

Yes, the faerie answered, her eyes on distant waters.

The witch straddled him, pale-faced and bleeding, cold fury in her green eyes. She pressed the barrel of her pistol to Ted's forehead. He struggled to get free, but she held him fast, her knife at his throat. More men were frantically climbing aboard from the quarterdeck grapples.

Red Shadow was lost.

"What was the promise?" the witch hissed. She glanced up, past the foredeck, out to sea. Now, for the first time, Ted saw fear in those dark green eyes. Fear and something else. A terrible reflection Ted could not make sense of. He turned his head and saw it at the corner of his vision. A horror, vast and ancient, born from the depths of the sea. A being of earth and seaweed, on whose massive frame whole ships were little more than pock-marked scars. Looking back to her, he saw it advanced in her eyes, lumbering toward them.

"She promised to take me home."

"Her exact words!" the witch shouted. "I need her exact words!"

"She promised I'd see my wife and child," Ted wept, listening as he heard the monstrous creature draw closer to the ship. "Her freedom for my family!"

The witch set her jaw and glared down at Ted with frustration. Then her knife was in his eyes, iron on bone, digging, scraping, until the world was dark. Ted screamed in agony, the sound of the knife grinding in his head as loud as anything he'd ever heard.

"It's over," the witch shouted. "Your bargain is broken! Send them home! Get back to your cage!"

Somewhere in the dark, Molly wailed: "Oh God, no!"

It's too late.

"What did she do?" Ted screamed.

They're here, Ted. Anne and little Liz.

"Molly, What did she do?"

"Don't look, Ted!"

I tried to keep my promise.

"No!" Ted shrieked, heart seizing in his chest.

I wish you could see them.

His final moments were spent in darkness, listening to what sounded like the apocalypse. Screams of frightened men. The great booming call of that terrible creature. Molly weeping.

Somewhere beyond, he heard the sound of the creature lifting something from the sea and felt *Red Shadow* roll away from the disturbance in the water. *Iron Bride*. The creature must have pulled the whole ship out of the water. He could not conceive of it.

The witch left him blinded in the dark with that stabbing in his heart. He heard her voice, clear and calm above the chaos.

“Fire!” she yelled. “Now! Before it is too late!”

The last thing he heard was the roar of cannons and a sound that dwarfed all others, more terrifying even than the keening of the horn or the call from the deeps—an explosion so loud it rattled the heavens.

And then Theodore Vale was free. Free from pain and heartache and the memory of a better world.



In the moments before *Iron Bride* exploded, Evelyn Grimsby watched as Tal’voleis reached forth, two skeletal forms cradled in the palm of its outstretched hand. A girl and her mother in ragged night clothes, dirt from the grave still clinging to them.

Evelyn heard, from somewhere above, the faerie’s tinkling laughter cut short. With the pirate’s eyes cut out, her promise could not be fulfilled. Some unseen force snatched her from the sky, threw her against *Red Shadow’s* deck, and dragged her back to her cage.

Then the world turned red and the ship was bathed in the light of *Iron Bride’s* explosion. The colossal figure of Tal’voleis towered over them a moment longer, unaware that a mortal blow had been delivered. The creature disintegrated as it waded toward them through the frigid waters. Mud and bone spilled out into the sea, releasing the wrecks trapped in the creature’s frame.

“Mr. Wulf!” Evelyn shouted.

"All clear!" he called back.

She turned her attention to the old Volgvarran she'd hired in Streissberg. "Mr. Hess, are we ready to sail?"

The old man stood at the helm, hands shaking on the wheel.

"Mr. Hess!" she snapped.

"Yes, ma'am. All ready!"

Like that, with a firm hand and a few orders, some sense of order returned to the world.

Of *Red Shadow's* original crew, only Molly Whit and Gilbert Géroux survived the bloody violence that dark night. Evelyn ordered them taken into custody for the return trip to Vastengrad.

Géroux escaped when they docked in Treppania and ran off into the overgrowth of the island's jungles. Everyone thought him mad, but Evelyn understood. She'd spent time in those jungles. The canopy was so thick in places that it blocked out the light of the stars. She did not blame Mr. Géroux for hiding there, not after what he'd seen.

Miss Whit fared better. She was haunted by night terrors brought on by her brush with the faerie and the creature from the deeps, but she seemed made of sterner stuff than Mr. Géroux. Mr. Wulf, no stranger to nightmares himself, took on her care. He sat by her door most nights, and stayed by her bed during the worst of it.

"Will she recover?" Evelyn asked Wulf one morning, after a particularly hard night.

"Not on her own. Alcohol will get her, or opium. Got most of the lads I went to war with. Sailors need a crew like soldiers need a mission."

"We could offer her a job."

Mr. Wulf raised a shaggy eyebrow. "A job?"

"Mm," said Evelyn. "We can't help her get back to her world, but we can offer her a place in ours."

"I'll make the inquiry."

And then Evelyn was back in Vastengrad, seated at a table in the Toad & Spider, not fifteen feet from where she'd first met Captain Vale. She didn't even notice that the fat iron bullet she'd fired at the man was still stuck in the floorboard.

The innkeeper, Mr. Bagger, brought her a cup of tea, still piping hot, and a newspaper. "I do hope today will be quiet, Lady Grimsby. No more incidents like the one with the pirate."

"As do I, Mr. Bagger."

Evelyn snapped open the paper and took a sip from her tea. Scalding, just the way she liked it. The burn of it replaced the bitter taste of her most recent adventure. The paper did its work as well, chasing off sad memories, melancholy, and the danger that comes from idyl.

What lay behind was forgotten; what lay ahead was all that mattered.

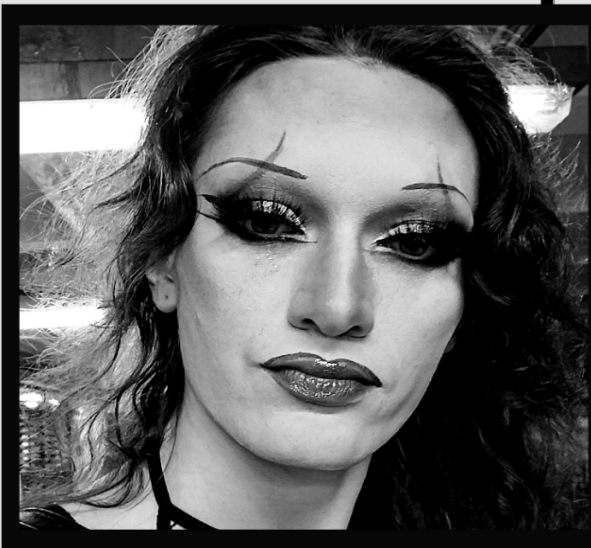
CASSANDRA BYRNE (WRITER) is a trans author and voice actress who dwells in the shadow of Philadelphia, city of brotherly love. By day, she ministers to cantankerous, foul-humored digital spirits as an IT executive, while by night she pens works of cosmic horror and tempts roleplayers into the twisted wilds of her imagination. You can find more stories by her on Amazon, and in the pages of Tales from the Magician's Skull. You can also hear her voice on audiobook anthologies by the HOWL Society.

She can be found online posting about trans joy, Warhammer 40k, and other nerdy nonsense.



SOCIAL MEDIA

Instagram: @valsombra818
Website: www.theironchronicle.com



PARRIS RYAN (ARTIST), the Cursed Queen of Philadelphia, is a trans artist and performer who channels her exquisite madness into art both on and off the stage. As an artist she brings other worlds to life with oils and acrylics—retelling her life's story as a mythopoetic journey of romance, betrayal, heartache, and revenge.

As Lamia, Philadelphia Magazine's Best Drag Queen with a Twist, she pours her heart into making sure each and every performance is an unforgettable experience. She can be found hosting events at a variety of Philly's hottest venues.

SOCIAL MEDIA

<https://beacons.ai/tslamia>
Etsy: <https://cursedqueen.etsy.com/>
Instagram (artwork): @parrisryanart
Instagram (drag): @thelamiaqueen

