



THE PRESERVATION OF CAPTAIN HAIFA BRINDISI

A Pathfinder RPG Story

H. Rad Bethlen

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Being a record of tragedy, found in the wreckage of the sailing ship Dragon's Star; which, having been damaged while at sea and later smashed amongst rocks in the Ironbound Archipelago, was the scene of much suffering.

Let this stand as a testament to the weakness of the body, the capriciousness of the mind, and tell that the soul does suffer both. I am the only survivor of the ship *Dragon's Star*. I was born and raised in the fishing village of Arsmeril, on the northern coast of Varisia. My father was from Ustalav, having fled the curse of that soil. Nay, he did not suffer any soil, but passed from land to sea, to be seen no more. What I have of him is precious little; although, it can now be said, and you shall come to believe, that he did not leave me bereft of the gifts of his blood.

I was raised by my mother and uncles, simple fisherfolk; hearty, silent, and devout to the gods. I learned by heart *The Eight Scrolls* and can recite from memory the *Hymns to the Wind and the Waves*, being often of the necessity to call upon the guidance of Desna and the mercy of Gozreh.

I have many male cousins, but none were so by nature drawn to sea than I, and although I was a girl, my uncles did not keep me back, seeing that salt was in my blood. By the time I could balance enough to walk I had my sea legs. While the other girls of the village dreamt of the Eagle Knights of Andoran, or some suchlike romance, I was longing for open seas and fair winds.

If I had known what my fate would be, that I would not sail at the pleasure of fair winds, not at all, but be put meanly to land by the cruelest winds any sailor has suffered, I would that an Eagle Knight had taken me away and kept me in his castle, a pretty bauble, safe from all knowledge of sea and self.

Know that we suffered from a total want of all that would sustain life. The *Dragon's Star* had been battered by waves and was leaking profusely. We had endured relentless winds, which had the sinister nature of the fey. Indeed, we worried that some sea spirit was revenging us for an unknown injury.

First, two pair of our foremost main shrouds on the larboard side were taken by the wind. The next morning our two fore main shrouds on the starboard side were carried away. We applied runner and tackle for the security of the mast. The weather was intolerably bad, day and night. By the next morning the wind calmed. We sang hymns and made offerings to Gozreh. Despite this, the next day a sudden wind came and, to our unspeakable horror, tore clean away the forestay and foresheets. Not only this, the foresail was rent in pieces. We had no recourse and tried our best under a balanced reefed mainsail.

The sea was as mountains upon us and it was here that the ship began to leak in earnest, the wood strained beyond its natural constitution. That night the tack of our square sail gave way. The sail was torn to tatters. Our flying jib was blown overboard. Despite all this we made way, our only bit of canvas being our mainsail. Our ship sat low due to the water we'd taken on. We worked the pumps without respite. Gozreh was not finished. After a calm that put us at ease, a gale blew hard from SSE and took apart our mainsail. We were at his mercy.

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The *Dragon's Star* sailed out of Magnimar. We'd a load destined for Promise, on the island of Hermea; yes, the home of the great gold dragon, Mengkare, or so it's said, none I know of having seen him. We'd made the port once before and little can be known of the city, for a high, red sandstone wall and gates of burnished bronze keep all within secured against intrusion from outside. We were blown NNW and figured ourselves closer to the Mordant Spire or Syranita's Aerie than Promise; although, we had no way of knowing, having no sight of stars, nor sun, nor land.

A great deal of our stores were flooded, despite our efforts to preserve them. Much of the cargo was of no use. We had only some small amount of flour, sugar, dried meat, raisins, wine, but precious little fresh water. We rationed these but my men, against orders, took the wine to excess and the rationing was forgotten. The storms raged and we knew not which way the wind took us. If we passed beyond the Mordant Spire all was lost, for no ships sail those waters.

We had among us a priest of Gozreh, Timmons, who we adorned with the title of Saint. He was an old sailor of many campaigns. He had seen the Eye of Abendego and many other wonders. He'd been shipwrecked twice before, the second time suffering forty-one days on a barren island. He was of great aid to us. Not only was he immune to the hardships of the sea, he could provide food and fresh water by means of divine largesse. We could scarcely believe our misfortune—and his—when a wave took him overboard and carried him out of reach. He disappeared, and with him our hope.

I cautioned the men against wine, for it does little to aid under such circumstances. They refused to drink the water, convinced it was brackish. The wine being more plentiful, they preferred it. What little water there was I retained, it being my only advantage against Fate. The men were constantly warming the wine, for which they maintained a small fire. It got so that the smell of it was noxious to me.

We'd been thirteen days at the mercy of the storm, tossed terribly, half-sunk, and without means, when I retired to my cabin to await the arrival of Trelmarixian, the Horseman of Famine, for he was surely stalking us. By this time I was emaciated with sickness. Despite having hooks in the water there came no fish. I kept within arms-length only this journal, an ink pot and quill, the dirty water, and Saint Timmon's wand. I must tell of this.

Timmons had fashioned a wand out of an oar that he had with him when he'd been forty-one days upon the rock. The oar, his trousers, and his shirt, were all that had come with him from the wreckage of the *Ruby Prince*. This oar was his means of survival and rescue. He used it to club turtles and crack their shells. He resorted to drinking their blood, there being no fresh water on the island, and gathering their meat by use of sharp-edged stones. He found the highest point and planted his oar, using his shirt as a flag. A ship, the *Kantaria*, which had been blown off course, saw the shirt-flag and sent a boat to investigate.

Timmons brought his oar from that desperate place and, feeling a certain affection for it, whittled it down to something manageable. This he enchanted with all sorts of useful magics. One of its enchantments was the calling down of a pillar of fire, which proved a deterrent to piracy. This wand was in his quarters when he was taken by the sea. I retrieved it, more to preserve the old man's memory, than to make use of, for I had no learning of magic and knew not how to operate it.

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After a fortnight of hard blowing, the sea calmed. We were adrift. The men came and said they were hungry and having no recourse were going to draw lots to see which among

them would sacrifice himself to preserve the rest. They wished my blessing on this demonic pact. Perceiving them in liquor, I begged them to wait out the day, hoping that our deliverance would come presently. They argued my request, saying what had to be done best be done now and why prolong our suffering.

They said they'd eaten all the leather belonging to the pumps, cut their shoes to strips and eaten those, and had even eaten the buttons from their coats. I warned them against the damage such an act would do to their everlasting souls. I beseeched them to pray. They said there was hunger to contend with, damn prayer. They said they cared not if I acquiesced, having come to me out of respect for my former responsibility as captain, although they contended that circumstances had made all equal.

I told them I would never condone such an abhorrent act and while I could do little in opposition I would not give the order nor partake of their sinful feast. They responded that they required not an order and as to eating or not eating, I was free to follow my own inclination. They left but soon returned and said that they'd come together and drawn lots.

Know this, of those left all were human with one half-elf, who had been my steward, his name being Melorca. They said that the lot had fallen upon him. He flung himself at my feet, pleading that I do something, but I was powerless. The men drug him from my cabin. The manner in which they'd previously gone away to converse amongst themselves, and how the lot had fallen, gave me the idea that the half-elf had been sorely treated. Although, in all honesty, it surprised me that they'd even pretended to treat him as equal to themselves.

They dragged him to the steerage and pierced his neck at the base of the skull. This I was told of later. They cut him open and began to extract his entrails, wishing to fry them for dinner. One man, Dorset, was so taken with hunger he cut out Melorca's liver and ate it then and there, despite the fire being at-hand. He paid for his impatience. That night he went raving mad and was thrown overboard by the others, this, despite their wish to preserve the meat of his body. They were fearful of gaining his condition, should they partake of him.

That evening I heard one of the men say to the others, "Even though she would not consent our getting of meat, let us give her some." One of them entered my cabin with a piece of Melorca's flesh, and offered it to me. I raised the wand and said I'd rather burn him to Hell and the ship with him, then resort to such an act, and further dared him to return a second time with such an offering.

Despite their earlier excesses with both wine and stores, the men rationed Melorca's remains with the greatest of care. All this time I ate nothing, only sipping now and again of the water. Knowing that I had condemned them, and knowing too that their hunger should return, I expected some violence to my person. I slept little and kept Timmon's wand in-hand—as a bluff.

A few days after the last of Melorca had been consumed they returned to my cabin. They said they had seen nothing of land nor sail, had caught no fish, had no fresh water, and nothing else which would sustain life. They again asked for my blessing over the choosing of lots. Furthermore, they argued that all this time I had partaken of no sustenance and surely must be too weak to remain stubborn.

I argued against another act of murder. What good had the half-elf's death done them, for they were once more hungry and desperate? They said lots must be drawn. Seeing as I could do nothing to prevent it, and seeing how unfair their earlier selection had been, I tore a sheet

from this journal into pieces and wrote everyone's name upon a fragment. These went into a can from which I drew a name.

The man whose name it was, El-Barek, a sailor who had come from far away Rahadoun, a man of great fortitude, beseeched his fellows: "I ask no god to help me, for they've done enough to damn us all. I ask only for five minutes to reflect upon my life." This was granted to him. Afterwards, he walked willingly into the steerage and met the same fate as Melorca.

I had suffered more than I ever thought I could endure. I had found a state well beyond weakness. I could barely keep my eyes open or grip my pen. It has taken every effort to keep up a journal.

I drank the last of the water, closed my eyes, and prepared to die. Some time later, I know not how long, I awoke with a greater thirst than I previously had. There was a rich taste upon my tongue. I found the strength to sit up. Besides me was one of my men, Hoskuld, an Ulfen. He held a wooden bowl in his hands, filled with blood.

"Quiet," he said. "Trelmarixian is close. Protest not, for it is too late. Drink." With this he held the bowl to my lips. I drank. I drank not only that single bowl of El-Barek's blood but many. I slept well for the first time in memory and was so completely restored that I was able to leave my bed and walk amongst my men. Indeed, I was so fully restored that I felt not at all the ill effects of starvation, nor of dehydration. The men gazed at me as if I were a miracle. Even though they had consumed Melorca and were now consuming El-Barek, they had little health, keeping just out of reach of the Horseman.

The sky was clear, the sun especially bright. I found that it pained me to remain under it. I found also the smell of El-Barek's cooking flesh to be revolting. The aroma coming from the pail of his blood, however, was so agreeable that before I was aware of myself I was drawing it out with cupped hands and drinking as a glutton.

This made the men wary. They offered me meat but I declined. I was aware of their judgment and returned to my cabin. I licked and sucked every crevice of my hand's flesh. The taste of blood was intoxicating. I sat on my bunk in a state of unwholesome wellness. It was a pleasure to be out of the sunlight.

Despite all I had drunk, I could not refrain from obsessing over El-Barek's blood. I began to jealously desire it for myself. That evening, as soon as the sun fell below the horizon, I went to the deck and found the pail empty. This aggrieved me more than reason would suggest. I was furious and kicked the men awake to inquire if they'd thrown the blood overboard. No, they said, they drank it. I began to accuse them but caught myself and returned to my cabin.

I was too agitated for sleep. I felt that I'd been wronged by my men. I believed that El-Barek's blood was mine. I was in a near frenzy when I came to myself. Where had such thoughts come from? Was I truly so desiring of human blood that I planned vengeance upon those who had denied me?

It was then that I understood why I had been so completely restored by El-Barek's blood. I understood why my father, who I always thought dishonorable, had not stayed to raise me, but had taken a boat and gone alone upon the water never to return. I understood that it was not the cursed soil of Ustalav that my father fled from, but the curse within himself. My father, although he had once been, was not human, nor was I entirely human, and had *never* been. They've a term for my kind, a term told in stories to frighten children, a dhampier. The living offspring of a vampire. A live-born undead.

I barricaded myself in my cabin, fearful that the craving for blood was too powerful a lure. I feared not my men, I feared for them. In time my men came to the door, beat upon it, and announced "land ho." I freed myself and went to the deck. Indeed, there was land. We rejoiced. Here might be civilization and with it hope. If not people and their works, may there at least be fresh water and wild nature with all her bounty. We were at the mercy of the wind and waves. We had not even oars, we used prayer instead. As if by miracle, the waves carried us to the island.

Yet, the miracle failed. As we approached we saw that the island was barren rock. Worse than this, we were being carried toward it with haste. There was no shore upon which to make a safe landing, only sharp rocks. We braced for impact.

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The ship was smashed upon the rocks. We made our way onto the island. It was but little larger than the *Dragon's Star* and completely devoid of life. Nor was there a spring. There were some divots and natural bowls which we cleaned out in the hope that rainfall would fill them with fresh water enough to drink. Each man watched his divot as if water would appear by necessity alone. Would we once again resort to lots? Not I, for I was twice as strong as all my men combined and could overpower them.

No, there would be no lots. There would be no killing of one to preserve the rest. My men were for *me*. They held my nourishment within. All the blood on that island was mine and would be used to keep me alive until the time when Desna, the goddess of luck and travelers, should vouchsafe my deliverance. If she did not, then the blood of my men would serve only to prolong my misery, nothing more. As to *their* misery, was I not relieving it?

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The last man was two weeks dead when I accepted the will of the gods. I sucked his blood until it was no more. His body was so drained, so light, being only bones and flesh, it caught the wind and sailed when I kicked it from the rock. I was reduced to my previous state, one of utter weakness. Once more did the Horseman of Famine, that prince of starvation, stalk me. I had done all for naught; sacrificed my soul, my salvation, and secured eternal damnation, for what? A few extra weeks of life upon a barren rock.

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I was in the ship when I heard a voice. The remains of the *Dragon's Star* had been tossed high enough on the rocks to remain out of the water, and thus had drained. It was the only place of shade and, while certainly not comfortable, it was the only respite afforded me. I was near death and thought myself delirious, when one man inquired of another, "Signs of life?" I turned my head to gaze out of a hole. I saw a man pass by. He was studying the wreckage but had not seen me, sunk in the gloom.

I thought him a delusion and dismissed all thoughts of rescue; which, I had long abandoned in favor of death. Yet the voices continued. I crawled free of the wreckage and saw that a boat rowed close. Five men sat within, fresh, young, well-fed, and shocked to see me. They had come from a ship at anchor, to which they pointed. I saw the King's colors, King Eodred of Korvosa. I was saved.

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I pen these last words with haste. I must leave my record here, in the *Dragon's Star*. I dare not take it with me, for fear of being found out. Can I digest human food, or must I now,

and forever, subsist on human blood? I shall learn while aboard the *Belde*, for that is the name of the ship.

I will say nothing to my rescuers of what has transpired, or of how I managed to outlive my men. It is enough to know that I leave the truth to rot upon this barren rock as the gods left me. I shall pray no more, but, like El-Barek, whose blood awakened me, I shall exercise my own reason, rely upon my own strength, a strength which has saved me while the gods remained aloof and uncaring. I shall go to Ustalav, to learn what I truly am, or perhaps to distant Geb, where I need not fear.

Haifa Brindisi,
Captain of the *Dragon's Star*



H. Rad Bethlen has been compared to Isak Dinesen (*Seven Gothic Tales*) and Fritz Leiber (*Ill Met in Lankhmar*). He is known for his work in the fantasy and horror genres as well as his non-fiction. He has been published in Europe and America.

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