

## PEARLS OF THE BEHOLDER

Chunk!

She rammed the point of the dagger into the table. Its old wooden legs creaked and wobbled but remained erect, in protest.

The old crone looked up, unblinking and unfazed, at the young pirate captain holding the knife in front of her. "You asked for information, my child," she said, "and I've given it." Against the ruddy firelight, the crone's dark, ebony skin sheened brightly between her ample wrinkles.

"I paid you good coin, witch!" Scarlet said pulling the blade back. "How in the seven hells am I supposed to use what you told me."

"I gave you the only way to acquire the fabulous pearls," the crone said. "Whether you do it...well that's up to you."

Scarlet remained silent, in deep thought.

The crone smiled a toothless grin. "Very well. I'll help you out a little more." She turned around in her seat like an old oak tree twisting in the wind, about to snap, and grabbed a large vial filled with a green slime. "Here you go Captain Scarlet."

"What is this?" she asked wrinkling her brow at the sticky substance. "Is this poison? Will it kill it?"

The crone cackled loudly. "No, no, no. That's for you."

"For me?"

"It's a pheromone scent."

"What? You...you don't expect me—"

"Child you have one chance at the full moon tonight," the crone said. "After that, you won't have another chance until its next rousing, not until you're as old and withered as me." Scarlet did not reply. The crone cackled again as if she were having a grand ole time. "Child, what have you got to lose? You lost your ship. You lost your crew. You're a captain in name only, as toothless as I am."

The moon glimmered against a black velvet sky. The moistness of the sea air flowed pleasantly over Scarlet's skin as she smoldered in anger, walking briskly to the shore.

*Stinking old witch, she thought. I should have gutted her before I left. But she knew she may still have need of the crone, if she survives that was. Anyway, it was not as if the crone was wrong about her. She was a captain in name only. Men are so pathetic! All of her men in her*

crew fell victims to the siren's call. Like idiot lemmings, they steered her ship into the rocky reefs in a heat of lust over mere illusions. All hands perished. She was the only one lucky enough to survive. "Lucky?" she harrumphed. Hardly lucky, she was left with nothing, poor and destitute.

She located the outcropping of rocks with relatively flat tops that lead away from the shore and into the water, just as the witch had told her. She hopped from one cropping to the next until she reached the very end where the cold waters of the sea surrounded her from all sides. She popped open the vial and jerked it away immediately at arm's length, the foul stench of the green liquid assaulted her senses. *It's the only way*, the witch's words echoed in her recollection. She sighed, wondering if she could furnish her new crew with all-female pirates the next time.

"What the hell." She lifted the vial over her head and poured the foulness over her head. As it dripped down her neck and body, the calm waters of the seas began to roll. Splashes of waves started to form, and in less than a moment the waters boiled white.

"Well that didn't take long," she said to herself as she frantically grabbed and primed her two muskets. Her hands trembled, which surprised her, since she had faced down British galleons before without as much as a quiver.

She trembled and shivered when out of the corner of her eye she caught the first sight of a giant eel-like creature emerging out from the surface of the waters - one at first, then two, three, until it was countless. The eels squirmed, twisted, and thrashed until the water was a cauldron of foam, and then they shot high into the night sky like towers. Reflecting clearly in the moonlight it was clear these were no eels. These were tentacles – giant tentacles filled with teeth!

*Run!* Every fiber in her body told her to run. *Forget the ship! Forget being captain! Run for your life!*

She nearly turned to flee just as the fleshy, cauliflower-like, scaly, head of the Leviathan emerged. The head was the size of a house with its mouth agape like a cave, scooping barrels worth of water along as it surged towards her – teeth, curved and sharp, and each one as long as Scarlet's entire body.

Then she saw them and all her fears melted away – three perfect pearls set in grotesque eye sockets at its brow, each worth a fortune. She raised her musket in front of her.

*Hold. Hold until you see the bright pink fleshy part at the back of its throat. It's the only way to kill it.* This was the information Scarlet paid for with good coin.

She held. She held when the dark waters bubbled around her. She held when the beast's maul surged over her. She held when the long rows of teeth encircled her.

**BANG!!!**

The front door of the crone's hut slammed open. The old crone, who had drifted to sleep at the table, bolted up, jarred rudely awake. She squinted at the entrance. Standing at the threshold, silhouetted in moonlight, stood Scarlet, wet, bedraggled, and exhausted. She barged into the hut and slammed on top of the table, a flawless and brilliant pearl the size of a human's head.

“Alright witch, tell me who will give me the best price for my prize.”

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