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by Michael Ehart



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# Voice of the Spoiler

*Michael Ehart*

I sat on the bare rock, weeping, as the blood dripped from my lowered hand to form small, black balls in the dust. Through my tears, this is what I saw: the scuffed grey toe of my boot, spattered with gore. The oilwood hilt of my sword, dropped in a puddle of its own making. Red dust. And the outstretched hand of Olveg, which still lightly twitched in death. A pariah dog barked somewhere. A hawk cried, or perhaps a sunbird, behind me, over the plain of Aturia.

Olveg was a follower of the Ugarit Masked God, who seems to expect treachery, and so should have been more suspicious. In fact, it was he who died last, the only one who even suspected the trap that left only me alive. I raised my head.

One of Olveg's heavy boots was stubbed against Tovar's head. The rest of Tovar was several feet away, his thickly-muscled frame slumped against the rocky dirt wall of the wadi. I had hoped for more from him, too, a scarred veteran of a dozen wars between the Cities of the Plain. He was quick, and tough, with an old soldier's cynical eye.

Uhlma of Nineveh and his servant, whose name I already could not remember, lay in twin heaps where they fell. They were worthless, their deaths not even causing enough of a delay or outcry to warn the others.

I sighed, and wiped my eyes with my sleeve. My arm was no longer bleeding. Already the wound was closing: soon it would be just another scar.

Stiff for a while, but not enough to keep me from the unpleasant task before me. I knelt beside Olveg, and unfastened his blood-soaked tunic. Soon they were all four naked, laid out side-by-side in a neat line, Tovar's severed head resting on his chest.

I stepped back, and pulled the talisman by its chain from under my tunic, where it rested searingly against my bare flesh. It was red, its broken-tooth shape stained by blood. My blood.

I held it up against the afternoon sun, and cleared my thoughts. Come, I called silently. Come.



The young couple was playing lover's hide-and-seek under the cherry trees when they heard the cries. She was first to react. She put her hands to his lips to stifle his giggle, and ran to where the two of them had left their bows. There was peace in the land, this spring, but they had been raised hard, so neither was ever very far from weapons.

He was quick, and beat her to the stack of gear piled under a tree. He handed her a bow, then strung his. With silent signals, they quickly agreed on a plan, and separately made their way through the orchard to the road.

Just a few minutes before, the road had been empty. Now it was filled by struggling bodies, waving swords and other weapons. Two were already down, and two more quickly joined them, leaving a robed man waving a spear at three men armed with swords. The situation required little experience or wisdom to understand. It was an ambush by bandits, and going quite well for them, too.

There was no real reason why the boy did what he did next: he simply did it. The first arrow was no more than halfway to its target before the second was on its way.

The hum of a bowstring off to his left let him know she had followed his lead. Two of the bandits fell and the third ran off, the ambusher ambushed.

By the time they made to the robed man's side, he had already collapsed. The girl made him a pillow of a discarded pack, and the boy tried to get him to take a little water, but it was clear to all three that he was dying.

"You've seen this before," the man said.

The boy nodded. Young as he was, he had already marched from Ugarit in punitive campaigns against the western savages. He had seen many men wounded far less seriously than this who didn't live, and he had no illusions of this one.

"Boy, there is something you can do for me, and for yourself." The man clawed at the chain around his neck, and pulled out a talisman shaped like a tooth. The effort made him cough, and he had difficulty stopping. His voice was weaker when he regained it. "Have you heard of the Manthycor?"



Nippur was a trade center, the place where the East-West road met the Great River Euphrates. Things were very busy with the spring trade fair. Thousands, perhaps tens of thousands, of merchants, buyers, and their guards, ox-drivers, servants, and whores converged between the gates and the canal.

I was here before, but long enough ago that I was likely forgotten. It was dirty, even as cities go, wet, muddy, and with an entire population that seemed only to be passing through. Even by flashing more gold than I safely should, I was only able to get half a room in a second-rate caravanserai.

Still, I have done some of my best work in second-rate places, and this one was no exception. The public room was packed with caravan guards, paid off now, and wallowing in the luxury of temporary wealth. By the time a week was past, some would be dead, many more in jail, and a happy few at work on their way to the next city. The rest would most likely turn to banditry, thus justifying the employment of their luckier brothers.

I chose my table with care. From long experience with places like this, I knew the greatest danger sits at the quietest table.

In this case, the quietest table was in the far corner, against the hearth of an unlaid fireplace. It was occupied by four men, and there was a clear space around them, a space carefully maintained by cautious neighbors. A good sign.

Another good sign was how carefully I was watched as I made my way across the crowded room to them. Along the way, I scooped up a stool, left on its side by some altercation, and, setting it upright at the table, sat down uninvited.

The largest one, who was carrying weapons, but who was harnessed as a servant, growled and made to stand up. I ignored him. Restrained by a touch of the man beside him, he sat down. Other than that, there was no visible reaction to my invasion.

No visible one, but it was a safe bet that under the table, weapons were drawn, or otherwise made ready. This was a tough, experienced looking crew, and no tipstaff or thief-catcher was going to catch them unaware.

"I have work," I announced. With my left hand I threw a small purse onto the table. My right never left the oilwood hilt of my sword. "High pay, great danger, long journey, bad company."

They laughed. The oldest, a heavily scarred man of forty or so, leaned forward.

"High pay?" he asked, and smiled.



"But we have the talisman!" he cried, in the hundredth installment of the argument which carried them through forty days of travel, to the heart of the Eastern Waste. "It is only a matter of will!"

She smiled as she shook her head. "I still say the best course is to sneak in and sneak out, and not take any chance of being caught."

He flushed, and replied hotly. "And no chance of catching any glory, either!" And then smiled, embarrassed.

She smiled back. Though they had argued this many times, neither had ever grown angry. This was the sort of great adventure that tales were told of, and both were young enough to fully savor the romance of it all. She reached over her horse to touch his hand where it rested on the pommel of his saddle. "Either way, we will be richer than any king," she smiled. "And richer even still, together."

With the belongings of the bandits, they had purchased horses at the next village. Never really admitting that such was the plan, their path had gradually found its way to the east, where the fabled Manthycor guarded a great sorcerer's treasure.

"All we must do is face it down. It is after all, only a beast. And with the talisman, we can commune with it direct." He leaned over, and kissed her. "Just like that, only less sweet."

She laughed, and kissed him back, hard.

"A matter of will!" she teased.



I sat at the edge of the fire-glow, working a stone against the bronze of my sword. The point required special attention, as always, and the light was not so good, here. I could have moved closer to the fire, but that would have meant joining my companions.

I ignored the crunch of Olveg's heavy boots in the gravel. We were camped in a long dry streambed. Its small banks provided some relief from the wind.

Olveg sat next to me. He had tried to insinuate himself into my good graces ever since we left the city. It was fruitless, as I have no graces, good or otherwise, in which to be insinuated.

He was a very suspicious man, a product of the cult of the Masked God, whose followers believe that everyone is out to get them. Everyone includes their god, who, according to their beliefs, regularly betrays His own followers to the other gods for whatever temporary advantage it gains Him.

"That is a beautiful sword!" he exclaimed, and sat on the bank next to me. He had learned that if he waited for an invitation that is all he would do. Wait, that is.

"I am certain that I have never seen one of such curious design. Does not that heavy point make it difficult to wield?"

I continued to work the blade with the stone. Over by the fire, Uhlma was singing an old plains caravan song about a beast, a hero, his companions, and a quest. I have heard this song many times over the years. It is a good song, but it has the story all wrong.

I looked up at Olveg. Better to talk to him than to listen to that song. "Yes, it does make it difficult, at first." I put down the stone, wiped the blade, and slid it into the oiled wolf-skin scabbard.

"But with practice, the advantages soon outweigh the awkwardness." I stood up, and brushed myself off.

"Like all such things, it is a matter of will."



The boy lifted the talisman over his head, just as he had been taught by the man on the road. It was hard, this clearing of thoughts. His excitement kept getting in the way.

The girl stood behind him, almost dancing with anticipation. Every few minutes, she reached out to him, and was barely able to keep herself from tapping him on the shoulder.

Finally, it was too much. "Is it working?" she asked in a loud whisper.

His shoulders dropped in exasperation. He turned around to glare at her, but her face was so alight with excitement that his heart melted, and he found herself smiling, instead.

"It will if you'll stop interrupting me!" he laughed. He reached out, and patted her cheek. "Go sit over there, on that rock, and I'll try again."

She laughed back at him, and backed away from the cave entrance where he stood.

He turned around, and faced the dark cave-mouth. Holding the talisman high, he once more tried to clear his thoughts. Come, he called silently. Come.



At the first rustling in my mind, I stepped back from the bodies, and lowered the talisman. I wanted as little direct contact as possible. Even so, that slightest of brushings was hideously painful, like having daggers thrust into my ears, eyes and heart, all at the same time.

By the time I could see again, it had already begun to feed. As always, it started with the soft parts. The belly and the face are its favorites, and because it feeds so seldom, it showed little restraint. This time it chose to wear the head of a lion, which seemed to be well suited for the task.

It felt the force of my gaze, but did not react right away, engrossed in some particularly savory morsel from the belly of one of the corpses. I was careful not to take note of which one. It is a matter of pride that I not look away, but I long ago learned to look without seeing.

Eventually it looked up, blood dripping from its muzzle. "This one is damaged."

In order to speak, it transformed the lion's mouth to something more human. However, the gore remained, smearing its half-lion visage.

"Yes, he was suspicious, and a little quicker than I expected. The others were no problem."

"You will do better, next time." It lowered its head, features already flowing back to fangs and jowls.

"Next time?" Although expected, it still hurt to know my hopes to be vain. "I thought perhaps, finally...."

It formed an extra mouth on the top of its head, so to talk without interrupting its ghastly feast. "No, I think not. Perhaps next time."

Next time. I felt like weeping, again, but willed not to show it my weakness. At the same time, the old, bitter hope rose, even though I knew that it is based on a lie. Still....

"Will you at least let me see?" I asked, not wanting to beg, but only just keeping myself from doing so.

It grunted, what I first took to be a refusal, but even as my heart sank, there was a glimmering at the edge of the wadi.

It was though a window opened in the bank, onto a small room. It was furnished with large pillows and rich hangings, but I had no attention for those.

My gaze, my whole world, was filled with the youth who lounged there. He was tall, with black, curly hair, a wide mouth, given much to laughter. He was as beautiful as I remembered, dressed in the same clothing he has worn these past three hundred years, unchanged from that day at the mouth of the cave of the Manthycor.

"This is true?" I asked. "Not just a sending, but him truly as he is?" The beast didn't answer. It never does, though I ask each time.

I drank the sight of him in, but soon, too soon, the glimmering faded, and the window closed.

I stood for a while, staring at where he was. Eventually, I was able to move again, and started to gather my gear. I had already gone through the leavings of the others, tucking what looked useful or valuable into my pack. I ignored the sounds the beast made behind me as it dined.

I started back down the wadi, to where the horses were tethered. One of them was better than mine, and so I decided to keep it when I sell the rest.

Next time. Next time, I will select an even tougher band. One not so easily taken from behind. Better swordsmen, who are not so easily slain by a woman, even a woman with three hundred years experience. Instead of being killed, they will kill me, and then kill the Manthycor. And my love will be free.

Next time.

It is a matter of will.



Copyright 2005, *Michael Ehart*

Michael Ehart has been writing for over 30 years. His first national publication was at age 14. Since then he has been published over 300 times, in newspapers, magazines, and e-zines. He is married to one of the most beautiful women in the world, and would offer "pistols for two, coffee for one" to anyone who disagrees, but pesky laws get in the way, and so offers instead to naysayers a referral to a good optometrist.



Cover: "Cat Under the Jack Moon"  
*Beth Zipay*

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Beth Zipay works in accounting when she is not following her first love—tatting lace. She is married and the mother of twin sons.

An avid reader, Beth has been a member of *The Sword Review* editorial team since its inception.



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