

BLACK &
MIST

THOMAS J. RADFORD



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“EASY THERE, LASS, you look fit to murder.”

Violet stopped up short at the sound of Hounds’ voice. It carried over the carousing of her watch on the gun deck. As the *Tantamount* only had a handful of guns, none of which resided here, it was more of a secondary cargo deck. It was also where the crew hung their hammocks; the swinging canvas reminded Violet that she still had to attend to Mantid’s special circumstances.

*Why can’t he fix his own hammock though?
Where’s he sleeping now?*

Violet heaved the sack of salt off her shoulder. There was a gritty white residue on her shoulder where it had sat. She’d fixed the bag up as best she could, knotting the end, but it was a patch job and she knew it. She needed to find somewhere to stow, or another container to store it in. Problem was, having just left port, most nooks and crannies were well stuffed and every spare box had been pressed into service. Gabbi had gone on a shopping spree with the advance, and sundries had done for the rest.

“This one burst,” she said to Hounds, who was surrounded by a half circle of card players. “Need to sort it somehow.”

“You break it?” Denzel asked, then immediately held up his hands defensively. “Didn’t mean nothing by that, Miss Violet. Here take this, weren’t using it anyhow.”

“Thanks.” Violet took the offered apple crate the sailor had been using as a stool. She wedged the ruptured sack as best she could into it, looking around for where she could leave it. She settled on weighting the crate between a trunk and somebody’s seabag.

There. Not my problem no more.

“Play a hand with us, Violet,” Hounds said, dealing cards as she spoke. The woman flicked cards to all the players in the circle, making it look deft and easy.

“Not much of a player,” Violet said.

“Tell that to Denzel,” Hounds smirked. “Not even a round and you’ve hustled him out of the best seat in the house.”

Denzel rolled his eyes; his crewmates laughed and pushed him. With Denzel’s apple crate gone, only two of the circle, one of them being Hounds, had seats. The other was Haze. The old sailor had a folding stool of some sort. The others crouched or knelt on the floor.

“All right,” Violet said. “What’s the game?”

“Tricks and trumps, lass,” Hounds said. “Bid with your partner and no skipping rounds.”

“Who’s my partner?”

“Volunteers?” Hounds peered over her cards, pushing Violet’s five towards her.

There was a round of coughing from the players and eyes were averted.

“How about you, Shellfish?” Hounds said to Haze. The old sailor looked at her ugly.

“Shellfish?” Violet repeated, causing the look to be turned upon her. Didn’t care much, she was well used to it.

“Aye, Shellfish,” Hounds grinned. “Man here’s a certified shellfish, been to the Edge and everything.”

“Ain’t a shellfish, woman,” Haze complained. “It’s a damned turtle.”

“Aye, which is a fish in a shell, ain’t it, Shellfish. So you partnering up with little Miss Murdersome here or not?”

“Not.”

“It’s like that, is it? Shameful. Bringing bad luck on

yourself. Who will it be then?"

Mantid tapped the deck impatiently.

"Thank you kindly, Mantid," Hounds grinned, tilting her head towards the secondary navigator. "The Kitsune and the Mantid, fearsome as they come, lads. Least we know there'll be no table talking."

No table talking, Violet thought, looking at the new navigator, *no bloody talking at all*.

"You know all the lads, Violet?" Hounds asked. "You've met Denzel, surely, and Mantid. Evil card player that one. Darkest bluffer I ever set eyes upon. The ugly one calls himself Haze and the one with the face is Mugs. The two of them against me and Denzel and you and our peerless navigator as the wild cards. First call for trumps is spades. How do you all plead?"

Mantid had his cards splayed out before him, facedown. His head swivelled to face Hounds and he tapped his cards.

"Mantid passes," Hounds said. "Just to be different. Haze?"

The man shook his head. He also cleared his throat with a hacking cough that made the two either side of him lean away.

"Pass," Denzel said in disgust. "How about you, Miss Violet?"

Violet looked at the cards she held. Scarcely a spade to be seen. Nor an off suit bower. She followed those who came before her and passed.

"Same here," Mugs grunted.

"Useless layabouts," Hounds muttered, picking up the kitty and tossing away a few of her own cards. "Not a shred of courage amongst the lot of you."

"Rules are if no one calls trumps we stick with the dealer," Denzel winked. "Faster game that way."

"Stick it *to* the dealer would be more apt," Hounds

scowled. "Who dealt these miserable hands?"

"A miserable dealer."

"The boss lady would have shot you out of the black if she heard talk like that," Hounds said. "Right, ante up."

All the players pushed in a coin.

"I don't have any money," Violet said, alarmed.

"Want to stake your partner?" Hounds elbowed Mantid, to no response. "Fine, cheap sod. Here, lass." She grabbed a handful of coins from her own pile and trickled them in front of Violet. "You do well, those come back out of your winnings; you lose and we've got a problem. So don't lose."

Violet swallowed, not sure if the woman was joking. She took another look at her cards. Not good. Only a single trump and a few face cards. Not good at all.

"What was that about the boss lady?" she asked as betting continued. She wanted to fold but didn't have the nerve to in front of them all, not after Hounds had sponsored her in. "Did you mean the skipper?"

"The skipper, a skipper, not your skipper," Denzel said.

"Our old skipper," Hounds said. "Back in the days when we sailed proper colours, Denzel and I. Crow too, come to think, except he wanted to stay back in Border. Good eyes that man, shame about the nose."

"The good old days," Mugs grunted. "I fold."

His partner Haze made a sound of disgust.

Damnit, should have folded too. Hells.

"Alliance?" she guessed. "You sailed the High Lanes?"

"Sailed everywhere, in the good old days," Hounds said, opening the round with an off suit. "The High and the Free, the Dark and the Far. Didn't stay long enough to make citizen before we had to get out."

“If you call being sent out in a bubble to be used as target practice for the gunners the good old days, sure,” Denzel shrugged, throwing a discard.

“Hence why we got out,” Hounds said.

“One of the reasons we got out,” Denzel muttered. “Oh, let me count the reasons.”

“I don’t understand,” Violet said. She looked down at her cards again. No way to win this hand, best just to discard something.

“Folk called her the Gunner’s Daughter. Went through crews like weevils through biscuits. Got things done though. Braids loved her, the way everyone loves a villain, us . . . not so much,” Hounds said grimly.

“Meanest skipper in the High and the Free,” Denzel said. “Crews changed. She never did.”

Hounds nodded. “Crew got out of line, she’d send her least favourite person out in a bubble.”

“And shoot it out of the black,” Denzel continued.

“And how’s that for sticking it to the dealer!” Hounds grinned, taking the round. She played a high trump the next round but her face dropped when Mantid awkwardly pushed a card forward facedown.

“Is that what I think it is?” She glared at him before Denzel turned it over, revealing the left bower.

“Sneaky shark always plays high.” Denzel shook his head, playing his ace trump. Probably all he had. Haze off-suited and Violet had to throw in her solitary trump. So much for being a good partner.

“Don’t get angry, sailor,” Hounds told hers. “You’re a lousy player to start and when you’re mad you play stupid.”

“Not angry, just tired,” Denzel said. “Woke up last night to find someone watching me sleep. All big and shadowy. Had glowing eyes too. Thought it was the old man’s pet Luscan. Damned horrible, it was.”

“You sure you woke up?” Violet asked him. To her it sounded like Bandit. The loompa’s eyes would glow like that if there was a light to reflect. It was the only way to find him sometimes.

“Damned sure,” Denzel shuddered. “For a moment I thought I was back on the—”

“Play your damned card,” Haze interrupted. “We’re all waiting.”

“Where in the Far Lanes did you learn to play, you damned cockroach?” Denzel stared at the card Mantid had played. He’d gone off suit again but played low, a poor choice on the face of it. Denzel played a high suit, but it was one of the only suits Violet had a face card for. She threw it down with a grin.

“I swear he cheats.” Denzel leaned over the cards. “Not even using a third of the deck and somehow he’s counting.”

“He ain’t counting,” Hounds told him. “Not proper anyway. Sorry, Violet.” She played another trump to win the round, scooping the cards up.

“But that was my move,” Violet protested as Hounds dealt her next card.

“And it was a good move,” Hounds said. “Mine was just better. One card at a time, navigator.”

Mantid waved a forearm over the cards. He’d pushed his last two cards out, facedown again. Denzel threw his own cards down in dismay.

“Gods damnit,” he muttered. “Are those going to be trumps, Mantid?”

Hounds leaned over her navigator. “When I turn those cards over am I gonna be seeing spades staring back at me?”

“He counts,” Mugs nodded his head. “Every time.”

“Least the shark plays,” Haze grumbled. “Not folding like some pissant fish dribbling coin.”

“That folding chair you’re so fond of, old man? Got a new place for you to stow it,” Mugs warned him.

Mantid tapped the deck insistently.

“The black take you, crawler.” Hounds flipped the cards. There were two spades, both lower than what Hounds had won the last round with. Violet put her cards down as well, though facedown. With no trumps between her and Denzel it didn’t matter what she played. It was all down to what Hounds still had left.

The woman stared at Mantid so long her frown lines started to etch. Then dropped two off-suit aces on the table.

“Thought we had him that time,” Denzel sighed.

Haze snorted. “Not likely. Your table talk is awful. Even the girl could tell you were holding.”

“She could?” All eyes turned towards Violet.

“Whose turn is it to deal?” Violet pushed her facedown cards across the table. All the eyes followed them. Except Mantid’s.

Does he blink? Can he even?

“The cockroach.” Denzel pushed the pile of loose cards across the floor. “And ain’t that a sight to see.”

“Good, give you time to grow a pair,” Haze said to Mugs.

“Almost long enough for you to shuffle off this mortal plane,” Mugs shot back.

“Neither of us are that lucky,” Haze said.

Hounds and Denzel waded into the conversation while Mantid shuffled, moving the cards awkwardly around on the floor before trying to gather them up into a deck. He looked up at Violet and flicked his chest twice with one forelimb.

Wait . . . hearts?