

"A Bounty Split Three Ways"

(excerpt)

by Peter Kovic

**ONE**

L'Acoste and I were dry, as long as we stayed under the trees. Then the wind picked up and the rain came at us sideways.

We sheltered in the vine-covered remains of a castle. Every surface was jagged or dripping or alive with lowly green things. We built the best fire we could to dry our cloaks. I shivered and wiped my wet nose on a wet sleeve. I thought of Jenny.

By afternoon the rain stopped. By sunset the trees had dwindled away. We came to a cliff, and my understanding of the world turned upside-down. There were boats in the sky.

I laughed. They couldn't be real. Two longboats and a sailboat, no different from those I had seen come through the mudplains since I was a child. They floated thirty yards over the void, roped and staked to the cliff like kites. They had to be a painting, like the ones that used to hang in the Baron's house. But I could see the boats shift in the high winds off the cliffside, their cloth sails buckling and snapping. Real. I was speechless as men went up and down the ropes like ants. They loaded wine casks from a two-horse wagon that had passed us earlier that day.

L'Acoste spoke to the sailors in a tongue I had never heard before. One of the sailors asked me, in a heavy accent, if I

were a supporter of Jeunet or Dufay. I could tell he didn't really care. He barely paused from his loading long enough to hear my muttered allegiance to Jeunet. When L'Acoste came back to me he pointed and said, "I got us on this boat."

He tightened his belt and his pack before scaling the rope upside-down, across the void, as the sailors did. They asked if I wanted my leg tied to the rope. I said yes. I followed him across, slower. My ax and bow dangled beneath me. Arrows rattled in my closed quiver. Jenny. Don't look down. Keep going, hand-over-hand. Then I felt L'Acoste's grip on my shoulders, helping me onto the deck of the sailboat.

We found a place ondeck to stay out of the way. The boat sailed into the night, and the quilt of farms and forests below gave way to icy black nothing. Lonelier than the black sky, broken only by stars reflected in a lake or stream. The wood of the boat's railing felt no different than the wood of my hut or my plow. I asked L'Acoste how this was possible. He was going over the map by the light of the sailboat's torches.

"I talked to the crew and the other sailors we saw on the cliff," he said, as if that's what I asked him. "They been waiting days on that cliff for a late shipment. The only fancypants crew they seen come through got on a big purewhite skyboat going east."

"Do you think that's our old man?"

"I reckon so. If he's going east, he's going to Triaplak or Salazar. Either way he's gotta stop at a little place called Lupp. This boat right here takes supplies to Lupp."

They gave us a corner belowdeck to sleep on our cloaks and listen to wine casks rattle. The planks of the floor made a sorry bed. My pack made a sorry pillow.

"This's nothing like what me and Jenny are gonna have when I get home," I said.

"Is that so." L'Acoste wound a worn brass pocketwatch. He had a way of speaking that held no insult but no interest either. Like a flat procession of words that had nothing to do with what his hands or his mind was doing.

"Good-looking watch," I said.

"My father's." He put the watch away and started on his bedding.

"So who's she? Some girl you deflowered back on the farm. What do you farmers grow?"

"Mudsoy."

"Sounds awful."

"It's cheap magic. Every potion that's less than five rupees has mudsoy in it. Every cheap charm's smeared with it. Probably some in your glow-bulb. You'll never go broke growing it, but it's so easy to grow that you'll never have a fortune. The laziest drunk in the mudplains has a patch that keeps him in drink. And Jenny's father, who has five more acres than any of the other farmers, can only afford a few nice things."

"I don't understand farming."

After I lay down with my boots off I wasn't sure if I was talking or dreaming. Sometime in the night L'Acoste was invited by a sailor to play poker. I stayed with my story, either

telling him or telling myself or just going over it in my mind. My back to the cold, hard wood. My mind on Jenny.

*I knew a way inside the Baron's house. It was his winterhouse because it never snows on the mudplains. I asked if she wanted to go inside. The other boys had told me about the sidedoor to the formal pantry that never locked right.*

*I asked her because I wanted her to think I was strong, dangerous. She said yes and I was surprised. I started to feel something tangible in the air between us. Instead of being tough I opened doors and helped her through windows. Silver-grey sunlight came through the drapes. Musty. Everything had a whitesheet over it - every sofa, table, and divan, with the shapes of snowglobes and ashtrays coming through. She said that, if she had just one house like this, with a quarter of its nice things, it would be enough. She would never leave it. I nodded.*

*I kept making the long walk from my hut to hers. Every walk in the mudplains is longer because your feet sink. You carry your shoes or they get left in the mud.*

*We talked about the faces of her father and my parents, and she wondered how the men and women in the portraits throughout the Baron's house stayed so smooth. And we knew - even though she was the prettiest girl in the mudplains, with red lips, tiny feet, and giant eyes - we knew one day she would be as hard and gnarled as my mother.*

L'Acoste was telling me to wake up and get my bow. His sword and pack were gone. His eyes were unfocused and his breath smelled of something from one of the casks.

"I lost everything," he said.

"What?!"

"Sword, map, rupees, the bulb! You got to get it back!"

"We can't find him without the glow-bulb!"

"You're gonna get it all back."