

DREAM PIRATES' JEWEL

by

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The days following the fall of Sulcarkeep were the darkest known by these proud seafolk. For most of them it was a time of heartbreaking sorrow. The Sulcar were a wandering people, but they knew the pangs of longing, and their prows often turned to home port where awaited her comforting arms.

With their mighty city destroyed, the vast Sulcar fleet wandered aimlessly. The destiny of many of these ships would never be known to kith and kin, for many took to exploring unknown places.

Other Sulcar crews took their ships for hire to foreign lands where there was great need for sure sea skills and sturdy vessels. The remaining few chose to rebuild what they had lost, yet the attempt to do so on the site of the old city left many of these hardy folk dead, and even more sick-unto-death; for a strange force emanated from the rubble of the destroyed port, soon making of it a place accursed.

After this failed hope, two of the Sulcar ships separated from the rest. These two mighty titans of the shipbuilder's craft—the *Moon-shell* and *White Spray*—withstood the elements, taking their crews across the great ocean to the shores of High Hallack. The barren shoreline offered no comfort to the weary sailors, yet they searched as one does

for a hidden treasure, studying the mountain cliffs for signs that would guide them. Near sunset, the cry rose to set anchor.

Two small boats went from the mother ships toward a small opening in the range of mountains that dropped straight as a wall to the ocean. Entering the narrow passage, the crews of the boats were amazed at what they beheld. The day's waning light revealed a bay spread before them, large enough to rival Sulcarkeep herself! This bay was surrounded by rocky cliffs on all sides, save an inner shore to starboard that boasted a thin, sandy space before a gradual rise to more mountains. To most, this would not seem a likely harbor. For Sulcar, it was such as they dreamed of. These folk were master builders as well as sailors. Their ways of shaping stone to their purpose were not well known, yet all who had visited Sulcarkeep would never forget the magnificent evidence of talent and beauty. This bay rekindled hope for raising a new keep, the settlement that was to be named Osberic in honor of a fallen leader of Sulcarkeep.

Amid shouts of joy, the explorers returned with the glad tidings; and at dawn's light of the next day, they began to widen the opening to admit the huge ships. A study of their maps placed the bay in southern High Hallack. No brows furrowed over the discovery, as nigh impassable mountains lay between their find and the chaos that gripped the Dales. Any threat from the sea would first have to pass their harbor gate, a task not easily done when that opening was guarded by Sulcar marines! Yet there were dangers ahead that not even these brave soldiers could imagine.

The main docks were completed a year and a half after the arrival of the seamen. During the intervening months, the ships were used for trade. The inhabitants of Osberic were grateful that they had come in two ships as, thanks to this good fortune, one crew was always at home.

Slowly at first, then more quickly as word was passed, the settlement grew into a town as it became known that once again the Sulcar mastered their own storehouses.

Each time a ship returned, the population of the seaport increased—not only with fellow Sulcar, but with others displaced by Fate. One such was a young girlchild, found in her ruined home by a sailor from the *Moon-shell*. The child was orphaned by a pirate raid upon her village, which had served as a trading stop. She was—like many victims of war: staring with empty eyes, her mind unreadable. Seasoned veterans all, these sailors had seen such as her before. The ship's crew did what they could, knowing that time would heal best. The man who had found the child huddled in a corner of her small shack recounted a strange tale.

The sailor, Gatil, told of entering the dwelling, sword at the ready, when a scene was forced into his mind of an evil-looking brute, wielding a heavy knife, and about to attack from behind! Gatil, a large-chested, red-bearded man, moved with speed in spite of his size. Turning to meet his attacker, he meted out pure justice with the edge of his blade. As Gatil lifted his gaze from his fallen enemy to the wall beyond, he met the large gray eyes of the girlchild; and he knew 'twas she who had saved him. The foeman was a straggler from the raid.

People of the Sulcar were well acquainted with the witch Powers of the women of Estcarp, having allied themselves with these formidable ones in times past. Gatil's tale meant that the foundling was of witch-blood. It was suggested that she be given over to the witches as one of their own. For reasons he would not voice, Gatil refused to let the child be taken. His shipmates thought that such resolve bespoke his gratitude to she who saved his life. The final decision was the captain's, who agreed to take the child back to Osberic while her mind and body healed, on the grounds that her Powers had seemingly made common cause with the Sulcar.

In time, the *Moon-shell* returned home with its cargo, material, animal . . . and human. Though normally a gregarious reveller, Gatil did not join the celebration that lasted all night, but took the girlchild from the docks and

went straight to the end of town where stood a small house built of stone. The dwelling was isolated as if the one living there were to be feared, yet the path to its door was well worn; and a brightly colored patch of herbs and flowers served to dispel any worries. At the sounds on the path, a woman appeared in the doorway, waiting as Gatil approached with his burden.

The lady of the house was tall, a trait shared by many of her neighbors. She had a strong body and long, powerful legs; yet her face and raven-dark hair had not the sun-touched fairness of the Sulcarwomen. Instead, her features were of Estcarp, with a paleness in her face, and cool gray eyes.

She had been brought to the town by her father, a Sulcar captain, when she was a girl on the gateway to womanhood. A dour man, he would only say that his daughter's mother had been dead many a year, he having carried the child to sea with him after the tragedy.

He left with the next voyage of the *White Spray*, an ill-fated one. The ship returned with only half her crew. The others had been lost in a violent gale, and the captain was among the missing. Henceforth Osberic cared for the young woman named Teo—as it had looked after so many others—accepting differences as only a port town can.

Teo was a quiet girl, who chose her own path without need of others or their approval. Early on, it was learned that she had at least some portion of the Power, and already had some training in healing arts. Whence her knowledge came, she would not say. For this talent, and her willingness to use it, she became widely lauded. As she grew into womanhood, she set herself apart—comfortable with her garden and small house—to practice as a wise woman.

In his youth, Gatil had been enamored of Teo . . . before it was known that she was vested with the Power. In that early time, he had gifted her with the name Dark Willow. Long after first passion had fled, the name remained between them, whether in hope or sorrow none

could say. As he came upon Teo's house, his limp charge stirred to look at the woman in the doorway. As the child's eyes met Teo's, the girl was as in a trance.

"Dark Willow, I bring one in need," spoke Gatil with uncommon softness. "She has suffered great loss and will not speak . . ." He stopped as Teo held up a hand.

"I know that she is of witch-blood, and the Power sleeps within." Touching the child's brow with all the gentleness at her command, Teo said, "She is already more gifted than I."

Gatil studied Teo's face. "You will care for her?" he asked. Teo nodded, taking the child from his arms. Gatil followed as Teo entered the hut; and without waiting to be asked, he recited the tale, once again, of how the child had warned him against danger. Teo nodded, as she sat the little girl in the smallest chair in the room.

"The thing which you speak of is not uncommon in fully instructed wise women. Yet for a child, it is extraordinary. You bring a treasure to my house, Gatil. She will be so treated."

"Worry not on my stead," said Gatil, strangely. "Empty-handed I am not." With this cryptic parting, Gatil left the lodging. Teo reflected that he had seemed nervous.

It was not long before the news spread: Osberic had a new member. In a short time, the child volunteered her name to Teo: It was Myrna. That was a most important first step. Once fully in the healer's care, the child prospered; and before a full passing of the moon, she was chattering as suited one her age. Yet of her past, nothing was to be revealed, for all the girl recalled was her birth name. In time, Myrna became as a daughter to Teo, learning what she could of healing arts and of that small talent of which Teo had control. With each passing year, as Myrna grew, so did her Powers—but so grew her foster mother's doubts that she could train her.

Whatever was put before her, Myrna was quick to understand. With a skill in handiwork that rivaled any adult's, she learned well the lessons of herb-lore and the healing

craft. During this time of knowledge, Gatil would call upon the cottage, cheering Myrna with sailors' tales and filling the house with booming laughter. Thus did the foundling enter into young womanhood, happily expectant for what was to come.

Teo watched her charge closely as the time of maturity approached, anticipating changes in the Power that would come as certainly as the rising of the sun. She watched, knowing that the girl, who was to her a daughter, would have to be sent away . . . away to the witches.

So it was that on a fine summer morning, as a sea breeze blew through the tiny hut, Teo stood kneading the dough that was to become the week's bread. Myrna sat in the light from the window, quietly working colored threads on a green silk tabard.

"Aunt Teo?" Teo looked from her bread dough to her young charge. Myrna's hands lay idle as she faced the sea.

"Aye, child?"

"If we must live with the sea, why does not all we use come from her?" Then, as if the matter were of no importance, Myrna returned to her needlework.

"Such questions! Fishing is all well and good. It is a gift. Yet we are a people of trade, Myrna. Think you that length of cloth you work came from the seaweed?"

Myrna laughed. "No, but do you know of a bird from the sea?"

"Mean you gulls?"

"No, a bird that has its birth in the sea."

Teo stopped her task and looked at Myrna. It was unwise to lightly dismiss those words.

"Explain, Myrna, what mean you?"

"I had a dream."

"Tell me!" demanded Teo, surprised at the sharpness in her voice. With a glance to the window, and a frown for her foster mother's tone, Myrna told what she remembered:

The dream began at sea. The water was becalmed, flat as a mirror, and the sun above was a dull shield in an empty

sky. Upon the sea was an abandoned ship that bore the markings of Osberic. Then a shadow filled the sky as from a giant eagle. Yet no bird was this; but instead, dark clouds in the form of a bird. The eagle-shape swooped down from the sky to shatter the sea into a million shards of broken glass!

When the aspect of the eagle rose again, there was water underneath—but a bubbling, foaming nightmare into which the ship vanished; only now the vessel was no longer empty. There was a full crew of skeletons, rowing their way to an unimaginable depth at the very bottom of the world.

Myrna paused in the telling to ask for a drink of water. Teo was trembling. She had hoped the dream to be of good fortune, yet it was a soul-threatening vision, that darkest of omens. "Is there more?" asked Teo as she passed the cup of water, spilling some as her hand shook.

"Aye," answered the girl and, after drinking, resumed the telling: When the ocean was still, a vile green scum lay on the surface. Myrna beheld herself gliding over the water and sweeping away with a purple wand the scum. With this magical tool, she also drew back the ship from the depths. Yet now the living manned her rigging! Gatil was among the crew as the ship set sail, a giant living eagle flying before them.

"There be no more," Myrna said as her guardian slowly returned to her dough, frowning in deep thought. There was nothing she could say, until she understood.

"May I go to the shore?" asked Myrna. Teo nodded silently. A terrible thought had entered her mind unbidden: Gatil had not told everything the day he brought the child. Teo had learned long ago never to disregard such sendings. When Myrna had been gone awhile, Teo went in search of the man.

Gatil, she was to learn, had asked to remain behind when his ship left port. As Teo searched on, she found that he had last been seen, the hour after his fellows set sail, walking at the farthest limit of the beach. Nobody had come across him since.

As the day reached its end, and the sun lit up the horizon with red fire, Teo found herself by the shore where Myrna was collecting shells. The first stars came out, mysterious eyes to watch the affairs of frightened men. Teo shivered in dread that something was amiss. Witch Powers or not, she usually felt this way only before the coming of a violent storm. Yet there was not the least sign of ill weather. "Come, young one, it is time we think of the evening meal!" she called out. Her long legs carried her over rocks and boulders to the beach, just short of running. Thus was she hugging the girl with all her might, and hurrying the two of them home, as if in one motion. This was to the good.

In the night, the monster came.

The first sign that anything was wrong in Osberic was the fate of two fishing boats that went out at dawn. A good league from the harbor had appeared three black pyramids, two in a straight line from each other, a quarter mile apart; the third farther out, making the tip of a triangle if seen from the way the boats were approaching.

A man aboard the second boat complained of a stench from rotten fish, but no one else noticed it. Despite failure on the part of this fisherman to raise an alarm, the second vessel was well behind its sister.

The first boat sailed between the two pyramids. The sailor afflicted by the foul odor let out with a shout as he saw the black things rising from the water. Cries from the first ship could be heard over the louder sound of wind rushing through a water-filled horn. Then, as the water swirled, the first boat was moving in a circle, caught betwixt the pyramids. Within seconds, a whirlpool had sucked them down, as the pyramids extended to reveal that they surrounded the open mouth of a behemoth. Other pyramids appeared as the monster rose. It was gigantic.

Fortune smiled upon the second ship, but there were no survivors from the first. All Osberic knew of the tragedy by noon as wreckage continued to wash ashore for days, no part of it any larger than a few inches.

Brave men who went seeking the monster were all slain ere the night had fallen. The next morning, a merchant ship from Alizon was warned from the shore to try a different landing farther up the coast. That it was close enough to receive the message sealed the doom of all aboard, for the monster was attracted to the new bait. On that day was it learned how swiftly the menace could move under water. From further sightings was it better described: The monster had five of the necks or tentacles. And there was worse to tell. The wreckage found afterward contained not one human bone. Of a certainty was it total destruction to enter that black maw.

With the blocking of their port, Osberic was cut off from the rest of the world. The nigh impassable mountains to the west had become a bane instead of a protection. "I'll not be laid siege to by an overgrown fish or snail," thundered the old chief at a gathering of the townspeople. But even as these words escaped his withered lips, the truth was borne in on his unhappy listeners.

One young Sulcarman, who had lost a brother during the first attack on the leviathan, spoke thus: "We won't be starved out by a creature of the sea. The ocean be as much ours as 'tis the home of a water breather."

"I hear that it is coming closer," said the town metalworker. "What good will our defenses do us, when it will be within the harbor, anon?"

"If we could only slay it," lamented the chief.

Teo had held her tongue; she had been counseling herself not to involve Myrna, fearing that the strange dream augered some dire link with the monster. As the life of the village was at stake, she felt that her duty was clear. She would trust in the goodwill of Osberic, even at a time of peril. Thus did she tell them of the darksome dream, and how she had failed to divine the whereabouts of Gatil.

"He must be found!" said the chief. "Teo, I ask you to bring Myrna to speak at this gathering."

Teo went to the keeping place that was used by those for whom the meetings held no interest: the children. Myrna

was now of an age to help in the caring of the young ones. As Teo neared the place, a crying teenager met her at the door.

"What ails you, Randa?" asked Teo.

"Oh, gods forgive me. Myrna has been kidnapped!"

Only then did Teo notice the bruise on the girl's cheek—proof that she had fought with the abductor. Putting her arm around the girl, Teo asked a question, afraid that she already suspected truly: "Who was it, then?"

"Gatil."

"Come," said Teo, in a voice barely above a whisper. They walked back to the children's keep where the young ones were competing to see who could weep the loudest.

Once all was calmed, Teo asked, in her kindest voice, that Randa tell what had happened. The teenager swallowed, sighed, then began: "He didn't knock. I heard the door open, and when I turned, he was looming over me. He had a terrible face, with dark circles under his eyes; and I shall ne'er forget his scowl. I started to offer greeting, but he pushed me away, and seized Myrna."

"Did he hurt her?" Teo could not believe the worst of Gatil, yet she had to be certain.

"No. He took her by the arm, and said that she must go with him. When I tried to stop them, he struck me." Randa's hand went to her face. "Myrna struggled, but he held firm. When they left, what could I do? I daren't abandon the children." Randa began to sniff again, and Teo feared there would be another bout of weeping from all in the room save herself. There was no time for that.

"Did Gatil say aught else?" asked Teo with an insistence that Randa could not ignore.

Here the girl made a serious effort to remember. "Aye, he said something that frightened me. I think it was: 'Why didn't you tell me of the jewel, Myrna? Gods protect us from that cursed thing!' Your daughter didn't struggle after that, but left with him."

Teo gave thanks to Randa and went outside. She had to gather her thoughts. Perhaps Myrna had not come from

her ruined village alone. Perhaps something came with her. The jewel of which Gatil had spoken could be the key to the doom that had befallen them all. She was troubled that there had been no jewel in the dream. Then again, Teo concluded, dreams are odd tapestries, with meaning often hidden.

The task was to find Gatil and Myrna. Where could they be hiding? Suddenly Teo shouted in joy. Randa nervously peered outside the children's keep and inquired about the older woman's health. Teo laughed for the first time in many a day.

"Send a boy to the elders!" she commanded. "Tell them to send men to the cave at the top of the cliffs, near the guard post. I will go ahead." She who had once known Gatil's mind so well should have remembered his favorite secret hiding place in the days of his youth.

Once again, Teo was thankful for the exceedingly long legs with which she had been blessed as she made haste over the craggy terrain. Her route brought her within view of the harbor, the expanse of blue-green water giving no indication of the sea-spawned nightmare lurking just below the waves. And then she beheld a sight that made of her a statue, helplessly watching a small boat, rowed by Gatil—whose shock of red hair she would recognize anywhere—heading toward the mouth of the harbor. Sitting in the stern, wearing the green silk tabard, was she whom Teo loved.

A voice was calling out a name, again and again; and every time this voice was louder until the name had become a scream. Somewhere behind fear-glazed eyes, Teo knew whence the voice came. It was she who was screaming: "MYRNA!" As the last sound died, that brightly garbed figure, so far away, so small, seemed to respond by waving. But the boat did not turn back.

"*Move with care,*" a voice was speaking from inside, "*don't break your neck on the way down. Myrna will not be aided by your death.*" Carefully she began her descent, still breathing heavily from the unfinished climb.

Halfway to the beach, she met several men coming up. There was a brisk exchange of words before they all joined her, the cave forgotten. They arrived in time to see the small craft bobbing up and down in the beginning of a whirlpool between the dread black pyramids. Running into the waves, mad with fear, Teo had to be restrained by one of the men.

Although the people on the beach could do naught to stave off the monster's hunger, this was not true of Myrna. She stood up in the boat, and held an exquisitely shining object above her auburn locks. Gatil was occupied with trying to keep the skiff afloat, yet never took his eyes from the girl—and then opened his mouth in surprise as she threw whatever it was in her hand into the roiling water.

A funnel of dark cloud spun down from the heavens and hung over the harbor. In that instant, as the storm seemed to wait, Gatil was able to pull free of the suction of the whirlpool, straining every muscle that this should be so. When the skiff had moved just out of range of the terrible portent threatening above, only then did the sky fall upon the spot where they had been.

A bellowing cyclone it was, a rending of natural order, that smashed into the sea, making a white frothing in which there were sounds of piping and wheezing, the death song of a sea monster. Lunging through the spray, coughing out salt in the bargain, Gatil reached Myrna and held her in his arms just as a big wave crashed over them and filled the tiny craft, sinking it. No one dared to stop Teo this time as she plunged into the brine and swam for the spot where the skiff had disappeared beneath the waters.

Three men joined her in this attempt, but the others were rooted to the spot, transfixed by what they saw—for not often does one witness a giant waterspout lifting several tons of slime-encrusted monster completely into the air. For the first and last time did men of Osberic have a clear view of their eldritch foe. Out of its natural element, there was something almost humorous about it, for the shape of its lower body bulged in such a way as to make one think of

a wine jug. Yet was through that bloated organ that it could force water, and whatever else fell into the stream, at incredible speed, making the creature both quick and deadly. No weapon of iron or steel could prevail against such as this, but the power released by Myrna was of a higher order—and now the funnel of air whipped back into the sky, carrying with it the sea thing as if a leaf caught in a playful breeze.

Waking as from a trance, the men on shore turned back to a sight of the normal, and then were ashamed that they were not helping Teo, who was returning to the beach, fighting the swells and towing Myrna behind her. “But . . . Teo . . .” They could hear the girl between gurgles of water as they dived in to be of service to the women. “I can swim all by myself.” Naturally the events just past had turned the once-placid harbor into churning madness, and good-sized waves breaking on the shore made it more challenging a task for everyone to clamber onto the welcoming sand. No one who was visible was left to flounder in the surf, and when all were safe it was Myrna who first noticed that one was missing.

“Mayhap he did not wish to live,” said she, her voice both adult and weary. Taking her foster mother by the hand, Myrna continued: “When Gatil unveiled the jewel, and I looked deep into its fiery light, much was made clear to me. He asked if I knew of any danger from the jewel. When I saw in its very center the shape of a bird, I remembered when I had last held the beautiful gem. The old woman who took care of me after my mother died had shown it to me on every birthday, promising that it was my legacy.”

“Your mother,” Teo echoed her. “Yet you’ve not remembered . . .” In all the years she’d lived with Myrna, Teo had never seen the child cry, but now, to her surprise, tears were trickling from the round gray eyes.

“The jewel would have it that I remember my own mother, that and more! There was something special about the old woman who took care of me, for she had funny

pointed ears and yellow eyes. She had come from the Old Country to the east, to nurse me after my mother died . . . in childbirth! My mother had been a witch, but the Power was not hers to command after she was raped."

"Dirty pirates!" muttered a man of big belly and little wit. "Whence did the scoundrel come?"

"Was not a pirate that took my mother. He was of the Sulcar."

At this revelation, an angry muttering arose from the crowd as though a rumbling in the earth. No one would bring himself to believe such about one of their own, for the Sulcar lived by a code as stern as the rule of the tides. Myrna was not intimidated, but pointed to the harbor and said, "My father lies out there."

"Gatil," moaned Teo, and all were silent.

"He didn't know that I was his daughter, save for hints in his dreams that he could not bear to recall in the light of day. In the cave, when I learned the truth, I passed it on to him. 'Tis possible the Power in me recognized the Sulcarman who carried me from my village, years after he had lain with my mother."

"This be more than I can hold!" shouted one of the men. "What witch could be so taken?"

Teo had heard stories about gems of Power, and now what there was of the Power in her spoke with a voice that gave meaning to Myrna's dream. Though a weighty matter to set before these exhausted men, Teo had to help them understand. "Hear me," she began. "'Tis true that no witch would allow a man to take advantage of her. And no Sulcarman would behave as a brigand, taking what is not freely given. Yet the Power of the jewel overcame both these obstacles. Long ago, when Gatil must have touched the precious bauble—that which was a focus of magick for a bloodline old as the hills of Estcarp—there was a punishment for witch and man alike. Having erred so grievously, he should never have returned to that village, no matter how many years had passed. The jewel was calling him back, that which no man should touch; that which no man,

having done so, could resist. That he should steal it was his greatest sin of all, and it brought down the monster on all of his kinsmen, may he be forgiven."

The men were satisfied with this explanation, and a few even added a hearty "Aye!" to what Teo had spoken. For it was enough that they had been witness to the destruction of the sea monster, and that their savior was a thirteen-year-old girl who could in no manner be blamed for what had befallen them.

"You are a brave young woman," said Teo.

"Mine was not the only bravery," Myrna replied, turning her gaze to the sea. "He could have fled when he knew the truth. Instead, he helped me do what was required of us. The wish will never die in me that I had known my father sooner."

Afterword

As avid readers of Andre Norton for a number of years, when the opportunity was offered to write in her Witch World universe we were both flattered. We feel that Andre's brand of High Fantasy draws upon qualities of the classic fairy tale. We wanted our story to reflect some of the wisdom of the "Old Ways." Relationships between man and woman, and parent and child, lie at the heart of what fantasy can teach us.

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