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THREE CAME UPON A FIRE

A tale by Epidiah Ravachol

Illustrated by Juan Ochoa

MEENO'S HOSPITALITY

Thunder rolled in across the featureless horizon. Clouds bruised the western sky and cast long shadows across the flats. They would bring cold wind and rain with them. But among the patches of thin scrub that dotted this almost unbroken land, the air remained still and heavy. Only young, one-armed Meeno moved across the amber landscape.

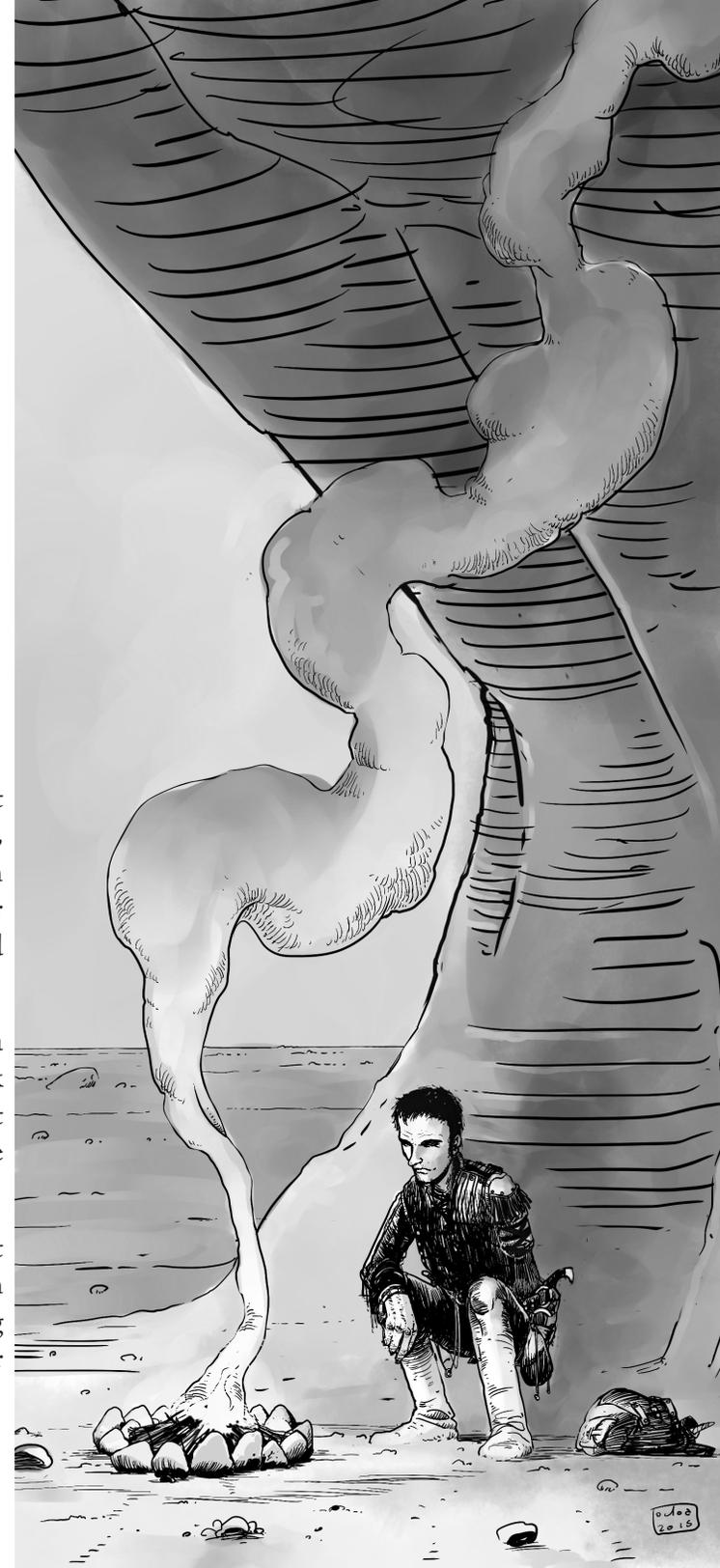
After a long trek from the south, watching the storm rolling in on his left, he found a massive jut of red rock protruding from the crust at a low angle. It had a low ceiling, but one Meeno could sit or lay beneath. It would be shelter enough from the rain, if not the wind, and it was wide enough to comfortably fit a fire.

Meeno busied himself collecting dry scrub and twigs under his only arm. On that vast plain

with little more than the silhouette of that giant rock thrusting from the flat earth to navigate by, distances were deceptive, much like they had been at sea. He ranged further than he expected to gather a usable pile of kindling, and by the time he reached the shelter again, daylight had all but disappeared.

The ground was hard and unreceptive to digging a fire pit, but time had worn chunks of the red rock free. The detritus laid scattered about the rock. Just inside the shelter's edge, Meeno assembled a circle of largest stones he could carry.

Pinning several twigs across the top of the largest stone with his sandaled foot, Meeno knelt down and—with a knife more accustomed to filleting fish—he shaved a tinder pile onto a slightly smaller stone.



From his knapsack, Meeno pulled a length of twisted horn and a small roll of seal skin tied together with a leather thong. The horn had had been hollowed out and fitted with a piston of hard wood. He removed the piston and unrolled the seal skin to reveal glistening animal fat. Securing the piston between his knees, Meeno pinched a bit of tinder between his thumb and forefinger and dabbed his middle finger in fat. He filled a shallow depression on the tip of the piston with the tinder and greased a ring around it. He fit the horn back on to the very edge of the piston.

With a sure and practiced swiftness, Meeno snatched the horn up and slammed it onto his thigh, driving the piston into it. Placing the horn on the stone next to his tinder pile, Meeno stepped on it and pulled the piston out.

A mote of ember and ash fell from the tip onto the stone.

Cupping his hand around the remaining tinder pile, Meeno nudged it toward the ember and gently blew.

A thin wisp of smoke.

Then flame.

Meeno slowly fed the smallest kindling to the flame and worked the fire off of the stone and into the circle where more kindling awaited it.

He could not sustain the fire for long with the fuel at hand. Meeno planned to build it up fast enough to heat the stones through, so that he might depend upon their warmth later. Behind him, the thunder rumbled through his roof of rock. In sympathy, his stomach growled. He could find no game while he

collected the kindling. It would be a hungry and fitful night, but for now he would enjoy the respite of the fire.

The first wanderer came upon him from the east, when the sky behind her was a deep, dark blue and as of yet untouched by clouds. He watched her approach with curiously little alarm. His spear was close at hand, and though he had to crouch to move about underneath the red rock, it made an excellent shield. So he watched as a point on the horizon grew and took form even as the shadows of night robbed that form of its silhouette.

She strolled up to the fire and stooped to greet Meeno with a broad smile. One hand she braced against the rock ceiling, and in the other hand she held out three rabbits by their legs.

"If you would share your fire, I would share my dinner."

Being both in a port, Meeno had learned many tongues in his 18 years. Hers was familiar but not one he knew well. The words "fire" and "dinner" were unmistakable. As was her smile. Rolling his spear away, he made room for her under the rock by the fire.

She ducked under the shelter, dropped the rabbits onto a fire stop, and winked at Meeno.

"I am Kalin and overjoyed to have found a fellow wanderer in this waste."

Meeno nodded and watched her closely. She had two swords, one at each hip. The left was sheathed in an old, ornate scabbard of leather and bronze. The other was longer, plain sword of steel that lay naked from her right hip. Neither would be of

much avail to her under this close rock, and Meeno kept his knife at hand. He probably had nothing to fear from her, but her travelling leathers bore the scars of battles past and she moved with the primal confidence of a jaguar.

As Meeno sized her up, Kalin sat in the spot Meeno cleared for her, pulled a knife from her boot and began working with the rabbit meat. "I do not suppose you have a name?" she asked without looking up from her task.

Meeno's attention had already been drawn away. The light of the fire now beat out the last of the twilight. The world that had previously stretched to the horizon now reached only as far onto the plain the firelight could cast itself. Across this border strode another woman. She was older than Kalin, and apparently armed with only her stout walking stick. She carried with her several knapsacks and satchels, but did not seem overburdened with them. Again, Meeno thought he had nothing to fear from her, but to happen upon two travelers in such a lonesome land may not be coincidence.

"Have you room at your fire for one more?" she asked when she was just far enough to be completely visible in the dancing light.

"It is his fire and he does not say much, but the rabbit meat is mine and I share it freely with all who would join us on this night."

The older woman nodded and approached. Addressing Meeno, she produced a bladder from one of her satchels, "I have wine to share. Not enough to slake all our thirsts, but enough to chase the rabbit down our throats."

Again, he could not grasp the language, but understood the meaning, and welcomed her with a gesture. "Meeno," he said, for it was about time introductions were made.

"Meeno, I am Calyre," she said as she ducked under the rock.

"Kalin," the younger woman offered with a nod to Meeno and Calyre, each.

Meeno grabbed a rabbit and began skinning it with knife and tooth. It was not a savage act, but one of casual deftness. The two women sat in silence for a moment with open curiosity as they watched their one-armed firemate work.

The third wanderer happened upon them while the meat was roasting and the winds brought the first of the rain. The rock was proving to be poorer shelter than they had hoped. They shifted about to

find the driest spots near the fire as rivulets of rain crept across the hard ground.

Twice the lightning revealed the third wanderer in the distance as he ran towards the fire. The first time, it was Kalin's sharp eyes that spotted him while he was just blotch on the horizon. "We may have to prepare a place for one more guest," she said to Meeno, who nodded though he could not understand her. She reached behind her and moved Meeno's spear between her and the fire, so that he could reach. Meeno studied her face for intent. She winked and nodded out towards where she had seen the approaching figure.

Calyre witnessed the exchange. Taking her walking stick in both hands she propped herself up to one knee.

By the second lightning strike, the third wanderer was now discernable. It was a tangle of wet, brightly

colored clothing with a long sword strapped to his back. Though he was not yet close enough to make out his face, he clearly saw the three around the fire place their hands upon their weapons, for he threw his own hands up and slowed his gait.

"I seek no trouble! Simply shelter from this storm!" he shouted upon entering the edge of the firelight.

Calyre nodded to Kalin who in turn raised an eyebrow to Meeno. Setting his spear aside, but within reach, Meeno waved the soaked traveler in. And thus Bluetuck—who had no fire, food, or wine of his own to share—was welcome to a portion of theirs.

BLUETUCK'S FORTUNE

Squatting by the fire, Bluetuck warmed his hands and dried his beard. "I had already steeled myself for a night of trudging naked before the fury of this storm when I spotted the far-off glow of your fire-lit cavern. And I am ever grateful. I would offer you all the coin I have, but I fear you would not accept it."

With that, Bluetuck tossed four silver pieces that shined as gold by the light of the flames. Each was the size of a hand and engraved with delicate symbols that were made almost smooth over the centuries. Symbols that even in this worn state hinted that they may have been minted by some cyclopean dynasty now long forgotten.

They radiated inexplicable revulsion, causing Meeno and Kalin to curl their noses to them. Calyre yanked a length of cloth from one of her satchels and swiftly gathered the abhorrent coins in it, careful not to touch them. She sealed them in with



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"I WOULD HUNT
THE WOLF,
SEE THE TERROR
IN HIS EYES..."

"...AND DRIVE HIS
PACK INTO
THE EARTH."

an intricate knot that she muttered an incantation over before offering the bundle back to Bluetuck.

“Such is their welcome everywhere.” He accepted the bundle with a heavy sigh. “I am unable to be rid of these coins and, it would seem, as long as I have them, I have been unable to earn coin of any other denomination.”

“Where did you find them?” Calyre asked, peering at him with suspicion.

“I stole them, of course. You do not earn such an evil wage through honest work. At least, the first of them I stole. From a tomb high upon a craggy mountain. I was climbing the mountain in retreat from a hetman whose disfavor I had well and truly earned.”

“There must have been easier escape routes than to climb a mountain. Why there?” Kalin asked, offering a Bluetuck a piece of meat freshly torn from the spit.

“They were horse-folk, capable of riding me down on level land, and they treated the mountain with some suspicion. Even refusing to camp in its shadow.” Bluetuck explained as he devoured the morsel. “I did not intend to climb all the way to the summit. Just into a pass that I knew led to a valley beyond. But a storm such as this one raged on the valley side, forcing me to seek refuge. Day followed night followed day. My flesh, cold. My gut, ravenous. My fingers, raw. My arms, my back, my legs, all ready to betray me, ready to surrender to the sweet lure of gravity and fling myself into the howling oblivion below.

“In the dark of the following night, against the protestations of my every sinew, I pulled myself

onto a blind ledge, a smooth stone floor carved into the side of the mountain. There, in the dark, with no fire such as this to warm me, and no meat such as this to sate me, I crept into a corner and succumbed to sleep.

“There I should have died and froze to the stone floor--and fresh ornament for some hoary sky tomb. But as the sun pricked my flesh with a false promise of hope, I did wake and found that I curled up beside a massive sarcophagus, easily thrice as long as any needed for a normal corpse. I did not see the face of it, as it towered above me and I had no heart left in me to climb and see. Even in the welcomed light of the sun, the place disturbed me.

“I had resolved to climb down immediately. Every muscle and thew of me found renewed vigor in light of the discovery. And it was a relief. I slipped myself over the side that I saw two of those coins at the base of the sarcophagus, gleaming in the dawn. Reward for all the trouble I had been through.”

“This is no reward,” Calyre said, nudging the bundle of silver by Bluetuck’s side with her walking stick.

“This I learned soon enough.” Bluetuck collected the bundle, and stuffed the lot in a pouch hanging from his waist, to everyone’s visible relief. “Once off that mountain, I found no merchant, no tradesman, no freeman, noble, or serf willing to trade me so much as a bowl of chaff for either of the coins. All that gazed upon their slick façade recoiled just as you did. I found that I could not be rid of them by any conventional means. I cannot bring myself to leave them behind or toss them into the sea. I have tried. Nor could I earn any other coin or goods in trade for,” he reached over his shoulder and lightly touched the hilt of his sword, “my services.”

Meeno, who had been resting against the low ceiling, leaned forward and gripped his spear. Touching his spear-arm, Kalin gave Meeno a small grin and felt his muscles relax.

“I had to depend on charity, voluntary and otherwise, until my path crossed that of a sorceress who did not recoil at the sight of the coins. Contrary to my experiences, she was drawn to them and deeply interested in their origin. I was invited into her seclusium, where I was fed, bathed, and clothed. I fattened there for weeks. By daylight, my hostess kept to herself, leaving me with her parchment, ink, and scribes. I was to draw all I could remember of the sarcophagus, make maps to the tomb and of all my travel since, and chronicle the minutest details I could recall. By night my hostess would avail herself to me and we would find other ways to occupy the hours.

“It was as exhausting as the climb to the tomb itself, but she promised to double my fortune, so I continued on.”

“Ah, but you have suffered so,” Kalin said with laughter that Meeno quickly joined despite his lack of context.

“But I have!” Bluetuck mocked injury. “When she had all that she sought, I was sent on my way with naught but two more of these cursed coins for my troubles.”

Calyre chuckled. Such was the warmth and closeness of the fire that Bluetuck, too, laughed at his own predicament with these stormbound strangers.