

From the author

What is the state of Print-on-Demand publishing?

I'd like to say the sky is the limit. I'd like also to say that thanks to the advanced technology of the 21st Century, science fiction literature on-demand in the form of accessible self publishing has blossomed. Piers Anthony, however, put it as plainly as I would at this point:

As some of you may know, I support self publishing. In fact I'm on the board of directors of one of the big ones, Xlibris. I invested in it for blockhead reason: not to make money, though it is possible I will, but because I wanted this avenue to exist for all writers. Yes, I use it myself; I have nineteen books there at present, all of which I paid to publish. Xlibris isn't perfect, but it's good enough, and so are the others.

Where does that leave us, so many years after the POD boom and bust? Slogging through the biggest slushpile in history trying to find those gems that would 'rise to the top' and get the attention they deserve. Anthony puts it in black and white: it's not perfect.

Why hasn't POD marketing for self publishers taken over? Because no mechanism yet exists to allow good self-published writing to rise to the top, over so much egoboo garbage. Go take a look at the SF/F offerings of buybooksontheweb.com as an example. How can such crap get five-star reviews?

No one is seriously reviewing this material. What has to be done is now in the hands of the reader – I say go right to the source - go find an offending excerpt and demolish a work – online, unabashedly, and for all to see. Maybe it'll get withdrawn, and THEN the cream will indeed rise.

Next, of course, you could look at some GOOD literature, like what you have in your hands, and generate a little positive word-of mouth for some POD materials you've actually read, and that you actually like, and that wasn't priced insultingly. Demand goes up and the price of publishing this way will drop. Access results, and we all get what we want from the medium.

And if the right people see these trends, they may get the message: POD gets bought, POD gets read, and POD is as serious a threat to the brick-and-mortar establishment that it once promised to be. A slow revolution, but a sure one.

~M.A.

GIANNI BUBONIC

The mace I'd packed in my satchel was crude, but I'd made a point to sharpen the nails that studded the roughly drilled iron ball, and the stockings I'd packed around its chain kept it quiet as I nervously held its sawn-off handle through the hole in the bag. It was a lightweight satchel, brightly colored despite its tattered stitching; not my style at all. But if they're looking for a knight, a sly boy packs like a squire. I'm a sly boy, so I packed like a squire that night. The sharp pins threatened to poke through the thinnest parts of the bag, and I had to carry it all just so, to keep from drawing any attention. It was tricky, but I knew that they'd work.

I'd just tied off my mount three shops beyond the *Gnome*, and walked back as the town crier called out nigh midnight. No sense making a show of it, a ragamuffin kid like me arriving on a white horse. I caught a glimpse of myself as I passed the mirror shop and had to laugh. The dung was drying nicely, but one edge of the huge cross someone had tattooed on my forehead was still visible in the strong moonlight. I pulled up my hood, made my way past a sleeping guard and pushed through a crowd of tavern regulars.

The *Gnome* was a typical bar/brothel in Dark London; a narrow little hole with two small doors - one at either end - and sooted-black windows that flew open whenever someone was aimed through them. The gap between the doors was filled nightly with drunkards, whores - and some who aspire to be both, on occasion. Luckily for me, the strongman at the front was more interested in some other strongman when I crept past, and looked for the man I was to meet.

Rafael was a fat little crust, and his flowing Arabian silk couldn't hide the immensity of his body as he dug his way through a plate of the *Gnome*'s speciality, fillet of rat in a rich soured milk sauce. Beside him stood a large man with hair that that I could only describe as a cat sewn to his skull. Meatball. My hand tightened around the handle of the mace, as I picked my way through the regulars and stood coolly before him.

"You a Protector," I asked, non-chalantly, while Rafael's eyebrows arched.

The thug shrugged. "You need one," he squeaked, in a voice that surprised both me and a few bystanders. I stuck my chin out and ruffled the bag, letting some links clink together. I meant business.

"No thanks. I got me *protection* right here."

Rafael cleared his throat. "Hold, Lancelot."

"*Lancelot*," some said in disbelief. I'd turned to face the fat man but found myself staring back to the meatball. "It's a livin'," he twittered, shrugging. I clucked my tongue and looked to Raf again, with disdain in my eyes.

"Stand off, Lance," he rumbled. "That's a mace Sir Gianni's got there."

Lance nodded and sat down, his eyes never leaving mine. I pulled up a stool and sat directly across from the silken giant.

“What’s the big idea, Raf? Why’d ye leave me out in the cold with yer package?”

“You have it,” he asked, his face twisting into a maze of mock concern. I leaned forward and licked my lips.

“Aye,” I smirked. The heavy pendant had been chafing my neck since the day this misadventure had started, and only the four hundred gold pieces Raf had promised me in exchange would soothe the itch. I rubbed my chest lightly and anchored my feet between the legs of my stool.

“And I still have th’ mark yer chums left, too.” I reached up with my left hand, tore the hood down around my neck and brushed the dried dung from my face.

For a full moment the brothel/bar fell silent. But then once everyone had looked to their partner to confirm that their eyes weren’t fooling them, four dozen half-drunk patrons made a sorry example of standing up and filing out of the tavern in an orderly fashion. Before one could cough twice, they’d used each of the little exits, the front window, and the narrow stack aft both privvies to gain their freedom screaming, “plague, plague,” like scalded sows the whole time, through a fevered cloud of spilled ale and flying feet. The sound of straining wood frame rattled the night as burly men beat down the doors and shutters, and extracted themselves from the contaminated room.

In another moment I was alone in the bar with Rafael the Thief and his man Lance.

“It was nice to have the extra space, Raf, but this gets ye olde in a hurry,” I spat.

Rafael let his breath out like a coughing horse, and began to laugh. His teeth still had bits of rodent du jour in them and I had to quell the urge to pick them for him with my sawn-off mace. Lance sensed my agitation, though, and leaned forward, holding a heavily weighted box over the table.

“You’ve been very sloppy, Sir Gianni. *Very* sloppy.” The meatball reached for a handkerchief and dabbed his master’s mouth while he roared. “*Oui*, my stunted knight.”

Raf paused to peek beyond the edge of the table at my bag. “The other Frenchmen, they have been looking for you and your little... *gift*. Perhaps it was a good thing that with that *tete a la croissant*, no one would come within fifty paces of you while you carried it. But *I* have no such insurance and have had to fend for myself.” He motioned to Lance. “I have your reward.”

He narrowed his eyes at me, his smile frozen. “Iron is a wondrous metal, is it not? Makes a heavy mace.” He glanced again at Lance, and the cat-haired henchman slid the box across the table.

“That better be gold,” I croaked, my hands sweaty on the wooden handle. But as if someone had reached into the bag, I felt a tug. The shock was hard to keep from my face, but Raf saw it and smiled wide.

“Even better. *Lodestone*,” he sneered, as the mace leapt out of the bag and buried its sharp spines in the table directly under the box.

As I tugged at the useless weapon, I could hear Lance standing beside me, drawing his sword. I didn't look up, and kept my eyes on the handle, almost praying to dislodge the thing so I could defend myself in the only way that would prove to be useful against sharp steel. It wouldn't budge. I froze as I heard the sound of a sharp edge whistle through the air.

A loud, wet *thuck* echoed through the empty barroom and I released the handle, my heart racing. I spun reflexively, arms out, eyes wide, but felt no pain.

Lancelot shrieked like a bludgeoned donkey and fell to his knees, whimpering. His sword dropped to the floor, clanging on blood-spattered timbers, and he held up a bleeding hand, his wrist limp and useless.

A woman's voice pierced the silence from the rafters above. "Did someone mention *gold*, Rafael de Facade?"

The fat man's face whitened, and he staggered back from the table, clutching for a dagger buried under folds of silk. Before he could fumble it out of its scabbard, a pair of boot-clad feet landed on the table only a breath away from my nose, and I launched myself backward to avoid the rest of my rescuer's body. The table came apart under her, and with a swift spinning kick, Rafael's face sported the heelmark of a particularly popular brand of boot, and he fell to the ground gasping for air.

Between us now, tugging the arrow out of the floor near an unconscious Lancelot, was a vision in scarlet robes, a well-muscled girl with rubylite hair, and the smartest bandoliers and quivers I'd seen on anyone, let alone a woman. She shot a glance at the quivering Rafael, and kicked the box open. The gray stones scattered, and she turned again to the Frenchman.

"I believe you owe me *partner* some compenseession."

"Who... who *are* you," Raf gasped, his eyes searching mine. I stared back, fully covering my own shock at still being alive. I brought the mace up, flicked off a stray bit of lodestone, and held it ready to smash the bastard's skull.

"Molle-Gwynne," she beamed. She curtsied and took his shaking hand. "Molle-Gwynne O'Fear, swarn protector of th' Underworld Cache." She tugged me to my feet and dug under my tunic. With a firm yank, the pendant slid from around my neck and she swung it around her little finger at the fat man.

"Of which this," she said, swinging the pendant carelessly, "is an important part."

She stepped to Lance's side and toed his listless form to make sure he was no longer a threat. If he was conscious, he was stilled out of fear. I surely was.

"Gwynne O'Fear," I panted, not quite believing. It was one thing to be a young knight in rags, slumming for excitement, but to be rescued from a crude and unworthy death by a legendary princess of a mythical land was quite another.

"I have gold, oh, lots of it," blubbered the man. He searched his robes furtively and got up to his knees, whereby O'Fear abruptly reached down and grabbed a healthy swath of silk. "But n-not here."

"Then," she said, with a crisp leer that almost sounded Irish. "Yell hafta take us *to* it, man."

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He was outside, waiting.

It didn't take a knight to notice how little the hooded man fit in, here; a glimpse of his robes was all anyone could need. It wasn't that the bottomlessness of the black cloak and simple black mask was entirely out of place in this den of treachery, nor was it the gleam of his riding boots and gear.

He didn't have *shit* all over him. He must have been an outsider. He certainly wasn't *royalty*; I'd have sussed him in a shake.

A chamber pot's contents don't care where they go, as long as it's down. In Dark London, this is an inescapable truth - a law of existence. The black-clad man waiting beside the back entrance to the *Gnome* was untouched. He must not have been in town for long.

As I see it, recollecting, he must have had a wooden arm. Carefully wrapped in a tight leathery tunic, and exquisitely carved by those crafty carpenters of the far East, the thing was probably strapped to the stump with leather thongs and strung like the sinew and muscle it replaced to arc out in a killing blow with the flick of the shoulder. Of course, the Orientals hadn't stopped there - they never stop fiddling with the latest popular gadget - they'd packed the forearm with a slender stiletto, honed to a hair-splitting gleam, and rigged it to fly out as if he's had a blade in his 'hand' the whole time. Fancy.

We'd slipped past the rear guard of the *Gnome* easily enough; Molle-Gwynne had no trouble convincing them to let her by with Rafael in tow, and I got past untouched thanks to the cursed cross tattooed to my forehead - a prank, wrought by Raf's henchmen, that I'd itched to get undone for six weeks. Everyone gave me space; a lad with the mark of the Black Death found himself lonely indeed in the biggest city in the world. But did I mention something about chamber pots?

I looked up just in time to dodge an ill-timed but ample volley from three flights up, and that probably saved my life. Molle-Gwynne and Raf were only a pace ahead and were spared the assault, but I found myself hard against the wall, wiping my leggings and sandals in disgust.

The ninja dropped from a platform in the darkness, smiling silently through the parting of his scarf-mask, and offered a kindly salute to our captive. I could sense that Raf was expecting this, as he stood stock still and practically saluted back. With his left hand, because the French were so damnably backward, but his hand never reached the side of his head.

In an instant the stiletto was out, flashing in the moonlight. Without a sound, the blade had cut a zig-zagging path through the Frenchman's torso, starting at his neck and ending at the left side of his belly.

He fell to earth face-down with a plop, his Arabian silk in tatters but cut so suddenly that it never saw a drop of blood.

In a blur, Molle-Gwynne was in retreat, arcing past me into the last alley, and as she caught my left hand to drag me along, my other hand twitched out the mace. I fell back, the mace launching itself into the air at whip-lash speed directly at the ninja's face. But then, the face was gone, and the mace buried itself in the wood of the far wall, followed by the clattering chain and handle. The girl pulled my arm nearly out of its socket, and we disappeared into the dark.

It was literally pissing rain when we returned, just after one o'clock - the time Dark London had collectively agreed to empty their sewage into the streets below (give or take an hour). Molle-Gwynne stole a glance down and around the corner, where the King's guard were poking Rafael's body around and asking questions. My mace was spotted easily; I thanked myself for not packing my royal weaponry tonight. If any of that would be found, it wouldn't matter that I couldn't show my face in the castle - I'd be banished anyway.

"Cor, I could swear I got 'im in the fice," I was stammering in the cold.

"Fast. Too fast fer most, Gianni boy. Likely the best of the best. Yeh jess save him fer me next time, right?" She had a rabid gleam in her eye, and a mad grin on her face. We stood and climbed to the roof.

"Right-right. All yours, m'lady. Long's ye fancy ye have an edge."

The red-haired mercenary tossed her head with a laugh, and as we reached the rooftops and made our way westward over the heads of sleeping London, she brandished her crossbow and dropped it deftly into a deep holster on her back.

"I have an edge, all right. A dozen of 'em, right here in this quiver."

My shadow had never graced the harbor before. The smelliest of the Dark London slums, it was well beneath the heels of an upright knight such as myself, and what little sea trade the Land had managed for the last centuries hardly warranted any better. No oil lamps in the streets, and not even a well-lit tavern or whorehouse in the lot, greeted us when we slunk into the fishermens' end of the kingdom.

Fishermen. Those unclean, windburned, grotesque things that had only the claim that they were slightly less damned than the plagued, but were shunned as easily for their trade-mark trappings.

They *stank*.

"Why'd you lift the Underworld Pendant," Molle-Gwynne o'Fear was muttering, as we crept toward a particular mongerstand near the brackish waters. I'd gotten accustomed to the muffled tinkle of meticulously sharpened crossbow bolts, a chime that kept time with her footsteps. "'Tis just a little thing; yeh'd left a fortune in gold and gems and risked yer hide for the wee'est of them."

"Bound by the oath," I whispered. "Plus, 'twas all they asked after. Search me why. If Rafael had carried out his side of the bargain and taken the pendant to the castle without trying his little extortion, my quest would've been over days ago."

“Well, yeh proved yerself a crafty one to have lighted it out from under me,” she said, and motioned me toward the door, ahead of her. “What oath d’yeh mean?”

I stopped and turned, just before she laid knuckle on the grimy door. I pulled my hood down, and tugged the remains of the necklace from a pocket, a thin string of gold that ever-so-slightly didn’t match the pendant it once held, which she now had safely in her own satchel. With a flick, I showed her the tiny medallion on the end. “My oath of honesty as a knight.”

“A knight...” She took a breath and regarded the necklace, and then searched my eyes. I reached up and covered the cursed tattoo and tried to smile benevolently, hoping that it would jog her memory in the slightest.

“Sir John the Just!”

“‘Tis I,” I said, thankful to release the earthy accent at last. “But until I get this thing off my head, remember that I’m Just Gianni. As far as the French Bastard was concerned, they were buying the artifact for the crown from me, a common thief, only because now I can’t get near the castle myself with this damned tattoo.”

“But I’d heard you were on crusade! The fleet, the brigade in the north, what are they...”

“A feint, m’lady. A deception meant to distract the Crown and the Land from my little adventure. I had more domestic things to accomplish, and it didn’t do well for anyone of the Land to know that it had to be done under their very dirt-sotted noses.” I dropped the necklace back into my pocket and tugged the hood back over my eyes. “And, I am to remain Just Gianni until I can get back to the castle with the object of my quest. Safe,” I said, while she knocked, “and unmarked.”

A smile crept across her face. She nodded. “I had a feeling yer plague was a ruse.”

“Wasn’t my idea,” I spat, thinking of the French knaves who’d drugged me and given me the death badge as I dozed almost two months ago. “I’d have it scraped off with a blade, if I’d had one that was clean enough.”

“What need does the Crown of England have of a small gold pendant? And by the by, we’re even, sire. I’ve got it back so I have nah quarrel with you.”

“The sea map inside, which shows the way to Aquain. The Golden Land.”

She shrugged. “There’s nah map in this pendant. But I *can* tell yeh who can lead yeh to Aquain.”

“A sailor,” I asked, looking around.

“Y’might say. Friend of mine, Joan-Sea.”

The door creaked open, and a snout poked out at knee level. With a snort, the hog was tugged back by a leash, and the void between door and jamb was presently replaced by the form of a stooped man with old scars on his face and a blue cloth patch over his right eye. He squinted with his left, and prodded the pig from sight. “Gerroff! It’s only Molle-Gwynne again.”

“Good tidings, Botswan Finn. Yer stayin’ up late, these nights.” Molle-Gwynne o’Fear strode past the smelly old man, and disappeared into the shop. The hog trotted through and sniffed between my knees.

“Avast! Who’s the runt,” he rattled, and turned to eye the girl.

“Just Gianni,” she said carefully, as she poked past tables of fish in varying states of decomposure. “We need ta lay low fer a night, and then arrange fer a chat with Joan-Sea.”

I kicked past the offending pig and blinked at the lamplight inside the shop, just as Finn shut the door. I nodded sagely. “The sailor...”

Finn laughed.

“No. The mermaid.”

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“I thought mermaids were the stuff of legend,” I finally said as we made our way through the south side of the harbor, just as the sun set on the second day of our journey. Molle, who’d thanked Botswan Finn only hours ago for the lodging and a hastily assembled new outfit for myself, was picking her way past shops up the southern slope, almost toward what I’d guessed was a small monastery at the top of the hill. Warm lights glowed through tattered curtains, betraying candle light to prying eyes, even at such a distance. It was a house of light.

“Look around yeh,” she almost sang. “In my land there’s hardly a thing that is as fancy as what I saw when I got here.” She reached back and retrieved the note Finn had pressed into her hand at their parting. “Dark London is as legendary as a place can be, Just Gianni.”

The greasy bit of paper smelled of fish and unwashed hogs, but was our only voucher to see the mysterious Joan-Sea. Darkness fell as we reached a shack of cheap amusement on the outskirts of the fishermen’s domain, and the ever-present light of the monastery would soon battle that of the full moon due to rise at the opposite edge of the land.

“Legend, my knighted arse,” I huffed, scratching at the tattoo. “Six weeks in this hellhole, with not a day to bathe, and see how much you like it.”

“Not a day,” she sniffed, looking me over.

“Finn’s tub smelled like trout,” I grunted. “Not fit for a dog.”

She held the screed at arms length and scowled. “Damnation! I thought it were jess this *note* that smelt...”

Someone stirred within, and the door slid wide open.

“Ticket, please,” said a small man who appeared in the doorway, smiling from ear to ear. “We welcome you to Jihaud’s House of Amusement, but we must have vouchers

first!” He stole a glance past the red-haired woman, directly at me. “Kids get in free, of course, m’lady, even smelly ones.”

“Stow th’ pitch, shill,” she hissed, looking about with grave concern. “We’re not supposed ta be seen.” She practically stuffed the oily letter in the man’s mouth, but for his quick retreat, and got her silence. We pushed our way in and I shouldered the door shut.

The place was a miniature circus, but with nothing uncommon anywhere. Everywhere we looked we saw eyes returning our gaze, most in fear, but some with hopeless disinterest. A smattering of bored or sleeping monkeys was in one cage, next to a roomful of dozing chickens. I was utterly unimpressed.

“That hen has a paper dog mask on it! Is this a circus for idiots?”

Molle laughed. “A front. No need fer anything exotic, jess enough ta fool the inspectors, eh, Jihaud?” Then, with a prod, “Take us to Joan-Sea. She has to tell us something.”

“Who’s Joan Sea,” Jihaud began to say, but was hushed again with a wave of the note. He opened it at Molle’s less than polite insistence. “Oh, *that* Joan Sea. Right this way, m’lady. Any friend of Botswan Finn...”

“I said, stow it.”

“Yes, m’lady.” With a graceful bow, the ‘circus’ owner ushered us past a doorway, hidden by panels of Japanese tapestry on one wall of the atrium.

Joan-Sea’s corner of the circus was poorly lit, but the sound and smell of splashing sea water was strong enough to keep us treading lightly and cautious. A woman sat half immersed in the pool in the center of the room, and I’d be damned if she didn’t have scaly fins for legs! She splashed them loudly, greeting the woman at my side, and showered us both with briny water.

“Molle-Gwynne O’Fear, as ah live and breathe!”

The accent was unfamiliar to me but as time passed, one thing I’d decided - besides the fact that the mermaid was exquisitely beautiful - was that her voice was *astonishingly* annoying.

The Princess of the Underworld surprised me yet again. Her Irish-like brogue evaporated in an instant, and they fell into conversation, cackling like bothered geese. In that annoying accent that made me want to run from the room screaming.

“Well, sugar me down and scratch mah eyes out, Joan, yew are just a *dream!* How *dew* yew dew it?”

“Darlin’, It ain’t easy, no. And with a *fool* like Jihaud as a caretake, sakes *alive*. May’s well just dry up and *die*. But yore looking fine as well, ah must say aloud.”

The formalities went on for a while, and I found myself sitting down with my hands over my tortured ears, for the moment mercifully ignored by the two. They prattled on, catching up on old times, stretching their voices to an unbearable, reedy shriek at times, laughing like hyenas at others. I shrank under my hood. No beauty could make up for *this*.

“Well, who do we have *here*,” said the mermaid, finally, and I sensed my invisibility wish had worn off at last. I stood forward silently.

“A friend, sugar. Just Gianni here would like a favor, which is why ah’m here, and all,” Molle said, very quickly. “This li’l darlin’ wants to know how to get to that li’l ol’ City of Gold.”

“Aquain! Why, sure nuff, this is bringing back memories, sugar!” The mermaid drew near the edge of the pond before me, and looked me over with distressingly sultry gold eyes. “Little boy, would you like to know the short way,” she fluttered her eyelids, daintily, “oah the *long* way...?”

“Mah guess is on the short,” sniffed Molle, who was shifting uneasily for some reason. “Y’all get that drawn, sister, I know how it’s done.”

“Pity,” said the mermaid. “*Ji-haud!* Fetch us a pair of wide scrolls, please.” She drifted to the center of the pond while the caretaker of the little circus disappeared silently. “Ever been a’spelled bah a muh-maid, Just Gianni?”

“Never, Lady Joan-Sea,” I managed to stammer, a knight’s worth of bravery balled up in my throat. “Why?”

“It can only be done once,” murmured Joan-Sea, as Jihaud carried the scrolls into the room and unrolled one in my lap, thrusting a lump of coal into my right hand. “Molle here’s been through this once already, child, and so she can’t do it. But *you...*” Her lids lowered and one eyebrow perked up naughtily. “You *are* a fresh one, aren’t you? Jus’ look into mah *eyes...*”

Words cannot. Words cannot describe...

The mermaids lips barely moved, though the light of the dim lanterns around the pool shimmered as if they were alive with sparks. Shadows danced, and I looked, fixated upon her golden eyes. Out of the corner of my vision I could see movement, and felt my hands moving against my will, but even when I stared I could barely see as they darted and flashed, magically coaxed into a blur.

Seconds later, I tore my eyes away from the mermaid’s gaze, and looked down. Between my shaking, coal-dusted hands was a detailed map to a faraway land, which before that instant I *swear* was not on that parchment.

“...And that, darling,” the half-fish, half woman before me said, smacking her lips, “is the *short* way.”

“How,” I said, shifting my weight back. The other scroll was also filled, from end to end, with detailed directions. “M’lady, I am astounded.”

“Mmm, sugar, that’s *nothin*,” she smouldered. “Come back sometime when you’re a touch oldah...”

“M’lady,” called Jihaud from the doorway. “Many apologies, but while you were occupied, Lady Molle-Gwynne had a *guest*.”

I spun and clutched for my mace, which, of course, I’d lost long ago. Jihaud sported a fresh knife wound in the side, but he’d bandaged it securely and did not look too

worried about it. Joan gasped in horror when she saw him this way, but he waved her away and handed me a scabbarded sword.

“You’ll need this,” he said, wincing as he sat beside me. “We kept him entertained while you drew the map, and now he is surely on your friend’s trail. You must go now, and do try not to draw further attention to us.” He cocked his head toward the mermaid, who looked on in concerned silence.

I nodded. “Where did she lead him?”

“Take the scrolls, and go to the monastery. You should hurry, but stay covered. Tell the monks that Jihaud d’Arbout sent you, and they will reunite you with her.” He stood and took a breath. “If she lives.”

A quick word of thanks to my unlikely comrades was all that they would accept. I made motion to convince Jihaud that by saving me from death by ambush, he was in line for royal commendation. He shrugged off the acclaim with ease, betraying his priviness to more information than I’d cared to divulge - likely revealed in Finn’s little note.

“I am but a servant, Sir John. I serve.”

And then I disappeared into the night.

It did not occur to me then, as I climbed stealthily out the back window of the circus shack on the edge of town, and made my way up the rocky slopes toward the warmly lit, castle-like structure at the top of the hill, that the full moon was directly overhead.

I’d been drawing my little map for three hours.

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According to Rafael, it would have cost four hundred gold pieces to have a Dark London chemist remove the tattoo from my forehead, quietly and without any questions. My dream of returning to the castle of my lord without falling to the arrows of sharpshooters I’d help train myself, ordered to keep the plagued - and even the black-marked kin of the plagued - away from the gates by a safe distance at all costs, had died with that silken bastard de Facade. The mark was as much death sentence as it was a curse for life, and the cold, hard cash I’d needed to become respectable again was now as retrievable as Raf’s lately missing heartbeat.

How little the fair townspeople knew! That John the Just, Small Knight with the Great Heart, lurked only a league from the Crown with the object of a kingdom’s quest, and was *not*, in fact, matching swords with some pirate on the high Atlantic or knifing his way past throngs of northern barbarians - or however else you may have heard the tale.

No, London’s hero was in their midst, playing catch-who-can with a ninja that was half machine and a horde of leaderless Frechmen, bent on revenge. Somewhere in the cadre, I suppose, was a less-than-popular robber-knight named Lance. Nursing a punctured wrist courtesy of my ‘partner’, an agile warrior princess who’d spoken with fishwomen of legend as if she were born with them, and who considered dodging both chamberpots and the flash of sharpened Japanese steel something of an adventure.

I decided to myself, not entirely in jest, that I needed a better line of work, but if ever I thought my life was difficult, I'd only need think of the *monks*.

"We've been expecting you, My Son," said a priest, as he let me through heavy oaken doors at the end of a manicured cobblestone path, lit by lanterns at each end. In the distance a melodic chant echoed from stone walls, and since I failed miserably at concealing my face in the lamplight, the man who greeted me seemed taken aback but strangely less intimidated than others I could mention.

"We are protected," he said, slowly signing with his right hand, "here above all places, My Son. No curse can befall the men of the Word."

I knew otherwise. Few age-old secrets left the monasteries that the Christians had scattered across the Land, but it was not hard to tell what fueled the familiar black smoke that issued from within the walls of each - whenever the Plague came. The same smoke rose from hundreds of piles throughout the Land, over the bodies of the fallen, also sons and daughters of their Christ. No more immune than the filthiest of London's godless heathen. I swallowed a bitter response with great difficulty, not wanting to make any more enemies than I had.

Let them wallow in denial. I had better things to do.

"I came after a friend..."

"Yes, My Son. The warrior woman and her challenger arrived here only moments ago. You have the scrolls she spoke of?" The priest peered at my sack, crusted with mud from a hasty climb up the rock-studded hill.

"The scrolls? But..." I handed them to him, not needing to be reminded that my oath of servitude to the Crown also included a duty to my king's Church.

"They'll be well taken care of. We'll have to hurry; they're getting started right now." And the priest led me down the corridor, leading me through a maze of impenetrable stone and into the guarded depths of the monastery. The chants grew steadily louder, but eluded us at turn after turn as we descended, while he told me of Molle-Gwynne o'Fear's brilliant plan.

She had sent a message to the ninja, via Botswan Finn: Leave us alone, or the secret maps will no longer be a secret. She'd been ignored, but hadn't marched into combat without making her threat quite real.

Molle had convinced the clergy of the scrolls' authenticity, and by arranging the involvement of the monks, she had spawned a crusade of her own - she'd wagered the priesthood on her life, all stakes on a battle with the black-swathed killer who had followed us from the *Gnome*. If she proved victorious, there would be no one to hunt us down. I would be vindicated and the Monastery would have her golden Pendant as a prize. If she fell, the priesthood was ready to print a superb and only slightly inaccurate rendition of my little map in the next edition of their atlas, and claim the land it led to in the name of the Crusade, sight unseen. The thieves' hunt for fair Aquain would be over.

In dealing with the Brotherhood, Molle had apparently omitted the crucial detail that the streets of Aquain were rumored to be *paved* with gold, but the monks didn't need to know everything, did they? Men of the cloth were still men, and were therefore capable

of double-crossing anyone. I'd been fleeced more times in two months than I could ever fear. Being a knight in rags, fleeing thieves in silk on the streets and alleys of my own country - with cutthroats as my only allies - I felt ready for any surprises the Church had to offer.

I was in a pretty lousy mood, and it was getting worse.

"I wish I'd never gone on this damned quest," I said, tasting sweat as we trotted down the circular descending passage toward the ghostly song.

"Not to worry, My Son," said Dragu the monk, who's speech became less and less formal the deeper we descended into the mountain. "Everything should be back to normal after tonight, God willing. Have a little faith."

"Faith!" I stopped and looked at him evenly, tugging the hood from my forehead to remind him anew of my suffering. Dragu must have just crossed the threshold, because I unloaded on him like I'd just walked into a confessional. I threw my hands up in disgust and paced the landing in a froth.

"I've just spent my entire vacation running around Dark London like a stray dog. Half the people I meet run screaming. I *swear* the other half wants me dead. My rear is *still* sore from having to ride without a saddle, and I can't get near my robes, my sword, my favorite *food*, or my own bed without one of my *own men* trying to cut me down if I get within a hundred paces of any of it! I don't want to sneak around anymore. I don't want to reek. I don't want to hide." I shook my fist at the monk, my red eyes glaring.

"I want *room servants!* Can a little faith give me that?"

My hands dropped to my sides. I'd been emotionally drawn and quartered.

Dragu drew near, examined the tattoo, and scratched his chin with a wry smile.

"That's henna," he said, matter-of-factly. "It'll be gone in a few more weeks. Nice facsimile, though. Had *me* worried for a while." He looked at me quizzically. "Didn't you try *washing* it off?"

"I..." Before I could answer, he'd pushed past a set of doors, and we were bathed in candle light, our voices drowned in the chant of a hundred massed monks. We'd emerged into some sort of arena. Around a large, raised skin-covered square, scores of them sat in row upon row of wooden pews, chanting rhythmically in time for a priest who stood alone in their midst.

"What is this," I asked over the din, my rant forgotten.

"We call it a Boxing Ring." Dragu smiled, and then shrugged. "Even monks have to fight it out sometime. It's not well known, but we keep our battles 'boxed in', behind closed doors. Solidarity 'n all that. Wouldn't do to have the peasantry know we were at odds, now and then, would it, My Son?" A conspiratorial nudge.

I nodded, still not quite believing. He led me to a row of pews at the front, genuflected and sat.

"Besides, we're *men*, for Christ's sake. We have opinions. Why, if it wasn't for our little fight nights, Crazy Brother Greg over there would have the world believing the Lord walked on *water* or something. Lucky he lost that one - he wants a rematch, of course,

in time for the next edition of the Bible. But since he won his last bout we're all still officially celibate." He shook his head but waved pleasantly at the fat, balding git in the back corner.

"Bastard," he said, through smiling, clenched teeth.

"We have a great bout for you tonight," bellowed the monk in the center of the square. "This is a high-stakes match, winner takes all. Please hold your wagers for the regularly scheduled fight, between Brother Charles and Brother Aremis, over the Billing of the Apostles, and the latest changes to the calendar." The monk looked off into the distance as if to cue some hidden observer. "But the first match of the evening is a very special one, and it's open now for *cash* wagering."

A cry went up from the crowd - I'd never seen so many priests throwing money around in my life.

"Simmer down, fellas. Betting opens in a moment, but let's take a look at our bonus competitors, shall we?" The man edged toward the far corner, just as the curtains were drawn from either side of the underground arena.

"I give you the Main Event!"

~

Dark London held many surprises for unwilling tourists. Not every day could a man find himself in an underground torture chamber decked out like some holy coliseum, surrounded by goodnatured monks who only lately had confided that they were as bloodthirsty as any of the great Unwashed, even willing to bet on the lives of a pair of complete strangers on this killing floor they called a Boxing Ring.

If I'd known I'd have been to witness all this, I'd have sold vouchers and made a fortune on the spectacle, without the trouble of slinking around in those filthy rags, dodging the best of the local French and Japanese murder-of-the-day clubs. Sly boys don't get much for their trouble; they just get into more. But that night, mine were a drop in the chamber pot compared to what Molle Gwynne O'Fear was stepping into, and all on my account. When the curtains parted, though, I had only my health in mind.

He was there, at the edge of the 'boxing ring' arena, scanning the faces of his fanatic audience with eyes that, unblinking, may as well have been painted on his face. One glance at the tattooed cross on the forehead, however, and a spark of recognition lit them. I found myself not breathing.

Throng of monks, two rows' worth, parted to allow him onto the arena. Like a hot knife through lard he flowed there, as if *through* the heavy hemp twine they'd ringed it with, fluid as a jackal at midnight. Eyes never leaving my own. With heart in throat, I regretted Dragu's choice of front-row seats so deeply that I could taste it. With less than half the arena crossed, the ninja leapt into the air, in a backflip that silenced the crowd and made me cringe, expecting the quickest of deaths from his hidden blade.

She hit the platform running. She screamed.

The black-clad man fell to the floor like a bag of rats. In an instant, he rolled aside of Molle's initial flurry, a running jump in his direction, one hand in front for balance, the other up over her shoulder, clutching at her quiver. Her menacing crossbow was nowhere to be seen.

By the time Molle's somersault had cleared him, he was already back on his feet, shaking loose dust from his two-toed sandals and with eyes locked on this new game. I was forgotten. I think I started breathing again.

Only to stop, in unison with ten dozen men of the cloth, when the ring of unsheathed Japanese steel echoed from the walls.

The blade was long. *Very* long. As he swished it before him, I could swear the thing could reach out and behead anyone in the back row, it held so much menace.

"Jehosophat," cried Dragu. "No blades! This fight is all wrong."

"Didn't she tell you about this," I croaked, shrinking into my pew. "He's not human."

"No," was the reply. "And I don't think anyone told *him* about the rules."

I rolled my eyes. But then sat riveted when the man gave out a shattering, lung-emptying scream and dove slashing at Molle-Gwynne o'Fear.

Except that she wasn't there anymore. She'd darted beyond, in the darkest corner of the ring, while it seemed everyone was busy staring at the awesome and *definitely* illegal weapon. I glanced at the ring. No blood stains. Well, the monastery had something new to add to their task list tonight, I was sure. I only hoped that the blood spilled tonight wasn't *familiar* blood. But Molle was unarmed!

Or was she?

The ninja spun and slashed, repeated his war cry and lunged again. Molle flicked into the air, dodged and weaved, all the time with her hand steadying her quiver. The blade whistled past yet again, clipping the bindings of her expensive boots. It snatched her off her footing and onto her side. With an arch of the back that I'd thought only wild animals were capable of, she levitated into the air to avoid another slash - barely.

At that point I saw a lock of brilliant red hair flutter to the skin floor. She alighted from her latest leap, threw a glance at the bit of her mane there, and gaped.

I sensed something in her... *change*.

She took a deep breath and looked at her opponent, who was steadying himself for his third melee. She twitched imperceptibly, and smirked.

"Yeh jess made a *fair* sized mistake," she hissed, and finally freed her other hand.

The gasp from the crowd was en masse. In her hand she held six crossbow bolts, fanned out in a semicircle, each glinting barbed and meticulously sharpened points. As she flashed them at the man, he stepped back. Moments later, somehow, her other hand returned to view - with six more.

Her dance was precise, silent, and too fast to watch. She'd stepped forward and disappeared. The next time my eyes could focus on her, she was turning with one hand wrapped around her middle, and her other making a sweeping rake at the ninja's

unguarded torso. Another blur, and that hand was gone, tucked behind her back, and the first hand was making a downward stroke from high above. When she finally stopped moving, she was face-to-face with the ninja, at kissing distance, her feet firmly planted upon his.

“I am Molle-Gwynne o’Fear. Know ye my wrath,” she muttered, with teeth clenched. Her scarlet robes settled in the firelit stillness of the ring. The ninja took a breath, his eyes strangely unfocused.

And then, with a solid *thump*, his wooden arm fell to the ground, trailing severed twine and shredded black cloth.

“Yeh don’t mess with the *boy*...”

The ninja folded backward, without a word, eyes glazed and sightless, and when he did his middle opened up like the pages of a book. He fell so hard that he bounced. He started bleeding only a second or two after he stopped breathing.

Molle shook her gored points and slid them one by one into her quiver, breathing deeply but calmly. She kicked the dead man once, and spat on his face.

“And yeh *never* fool wi’ th’ locks.”

A crescendo of cheering went up from the monks and, in a flurry of flying coins, she and I were gone.

~

We never looked back once, Molle and I. The Castle, the Crown, and the glory of my lord the King are fading memories; I’ve learned in the intervening months how little it had all meant. The tattoo, thank the Gods, washed off within another week, and I can take my place among the living - but not before concluding a little business.

With the eventual blessings of Dragu and his clutch of eccentric monks, we worked up a bit of venture capital and chartered a boat. It was a small one, with no crew and barely adequate provisions, but we’d thought about that when we made the deal. I’m a sly boy. I’ll learn the ways of my new friends in a hurry.

We are taking a vacation.

Jihaud has joined us, after nursing himself back to full strength and having liquidated his holdings through the enigmatic Botswan Finn. With a perfect draft of the map to gold-paved Aquain, we plan to make a pilgrimage of discovery - fortnights ahead of either Crown or Christian. Because even on the cloudiest of nights we sail on unhindered - with a sassy, krill-swilling damsel called Joan-Sea as our unerring guide.

We might come back, someday, after we’ve had our fill of paradise.

But we just might take our time with that, thank you very much.

END

Gianni Bubonic was broadcast as a serial radio teleplay in January 2001 at Michigan's premier SF/F Convention CONFUSION. Go see them this year at

<http://www.stilyagi.org/cons/confusion/>

Tell them I sent you.

FREON is the fannish pseudo for a man named Michael A. Andaluz, a longtime fan and major participant in Ann Arbor Science Fiction Association's annual ConFusion. Over the last ten years, he's alternately run Convention Operations, drawn program art, whipped up flyers, written blurbs, and has recently created the phenomenon known as Radio Free Fandom, which launched in 2001. Michael is behind the GIANNI BUBONIC Radio Teleplay, and has published both essays and short stories in Science Fiction's Small Press both online and in print. His novella, THE JAM, appears online as a Sept 11th tribute. An AASFA Board Member for three years running, he's currently editing the Association's 'zine, TANSTAAFL, and shopping his first short-story collection, ASCENT STAGE I