

JERRY OLTION and KENT PATTERSON

DUTCHMAN'S GOLD

JAN, I THINK IT'S GOING to rain."

Jan Van der Hoff looked up to where his wife, Frieda, pointed to a mass of black clouds boiling up in the western sky, blotting out the stars like a great fist rising over the ragged Panamint Mountains. "It won't hit here," Jan said. "We're on the edge of Death Valley. It rains here about once every twenty years."

He glanced around the camp. He and Frieda sat together on a double size sleeping bag rolled out on the hard ground. A few feet in front of them, a portable stove sputtered, throwing off a flickering light and reeking of kerosene. Beyond that, Jan's brother Peter sat on an identical bag. His new wife, Sarah, firelight gleaming red in her brown hair, rested her head in his lap. They wore matching red nylon jackets with the designer's logo written two inches high.

Peter was thirty-six, already an established lawyer, and the world's biggest smart ass. Sarah was thirty-one, not far behind Peter. At forty-two himself, his blond hair thinning to nothing, and a bit of a paunch, Jan had a hard time remembering they were not children. Frieda, with both her outlook and figure molded by her job as an aerobics instructor, had more patience.

Lightning flashed. For a split second, the Panamints' barren sides blazed in gold. Wind whispered down the dry gullies, throwing a blinding cloud of dust into Jan's eyes. The wind was cool, and smelled of rain.

"I think may be this is that twentieth year," Frieda said. "We'd better get back to the van pronto."

"What? Become the only people in history to be rained out of Death Valley?" Jan laughed. "Not a chance."

"It's the Curse of the Lost Breyfogle Mine." Peter made Twilight Zone noises. "Face it, bro, you'll never find it."

"I'm not looking for it. I just happen to like camping in the desert."

"Uh huh."

"So what's this Breyfogle you guys tease Jan about?" Sarah asked. "You've been bugging him about it all day. Big family secret? I'm one of the family now. So tell me."

"Oh, Lord. Don't start a historian talking about history." Frieda put her hands over her ears. Jan winced. Once she'd have listened to his historical research for hours. But after sixteen years of marriage, what could you expect? The fact

that she wasn't putting strychnine in his soda made him way ahead of the average.

So he gave Sarah the short version. "I'm writing a monograph on the lost mine mythology of the Old West. The Lost Breyfogle is the local variation of the Lost Dutchman Mine."

"You mean the one in Arizona?" she asked.

"Actually, I've found legends about eighteen Lost Dutchman mines, and I'm sure there's more. Every Western state has at least one."

"Why is it always Dutchmen?" Peter asked. "I smell prejudice here. Trying to make us Dutch folks look careless, like we're always losing our mines."

"I don't think Jan's ever lost a mine, but you should see the way he loses socks," said Frieda.

"What about the Lost Breyfogle?" said Sarah. "Is it a ghost story or something?"

Jan smiled. "Sort of. More like a legend, really, but there are plenty of disappearances and deaths."

"Oh great! Let's hear it."

Jan leaned toward the stove's flickering light. "Well," he said, "there's dozens of different stories, but with a few exceptions, they have a lot in common. First, there's a group going West. Then there's a fight, a storm, a stampede -- some disaster which drives a small party off the beaten trail. With old man Breyfogle, he and a couple of friends wanted to cut across Death Valley. The others didn't.

"Anyway, the small group wanders around, totally lost, and finally stumbles onto a rich gold strike. Sometimes it's nuggets the size of cherries, or ore so rich hunks of gold shine in the sun. The happy miners gather the gold and put it in a coffee can, a blue bucket --never black, or white or red, always blue -- or a Dutch oven. Here, Breyfogle was an exception. He was a giant of a man with huge feet, so he supposedly filled a boot with gold."

"We're going to get a boot filled with water if we don't get back to the van," said Frieda, sniffing the air. "I don't care if it is Death Valley. It's going to rain."

Jan, lost in his story, ignored her. "There's always a prominent landmark which marks the mine; an old abandoned cabin or three tall trees. In Breyfogle's case, it was a twisted tree with a pool of water. Not much of a landmark anywhere else, but a big deal in Death Valley."

Jan paused, noting that Sarah's face was rapt, her eyes sparkling in the light from the camp stove. "So now the miners start back to civilization, carrying

their gold. They note another landmark, a big one, usually a mountain with twin peaks. Sometimes they make a crude map, but that's optional. No sooner do they get away from the mine, there's an Indian attack. They fight like hell, but the Indians kill all but one of them, and knock the survivor unconscious. Dazed, he picks up the gold and wanders around, half out of his head, for a long time. Finally, someone finds him, completely delirious, rambling on about the fabulous gold strike.

"Now comes the fun part. The Dutchman recovers, hires people to go back with him to find the lost mine. They do find some of the landmarks, but not the mine. That poor Dutchman is doomed, cursed to wander the rest of his life, trying to find his lost gold. He goes mad, and finally disappears into the hills forever."

"Wow," said Sarah. "So you're looking for the Breyfogle mine?"

Jan shook his head. "No. Hundreds of people have tried to find it. By now every inch of this desert must have been searched a dozen times. If there were really any gold, they would have found it."

All was silent except the hissing of the stove. Then smart ass Peter had to spoil it.

"My impression of a Dutch miner," he said. He turned his head, speaking with a Dutch accent bad enough to get him hanged in Amsterdam. "Ach, Hans! Come und look at all dee nize golt. Yoost what we bin looking for." Now he turned back. "Hefans. Vo ist dee nize golt mine? It vas here yoost a second ago."

Sarah giggled. Jan was about to say something when a bucket of water hit him in the face.

Or at least that's what it felt like. Driven by a screaming wind, rain hit so hard it went right through his nylon windbreaker and blue jeans. The camp stove sputtered out. The wind picked up the end of the sleeping bag and tried to roll Jan and Frieda up like hot dogs in a bun.

"I told you and told you . . ." Frieda screamed, the wind whipping the words from her mouth.

"Hush! What's that noise?" A low rumbling rolled down the canyon.

Lightning flashed. In the sudden light, Jan saw a brown moving mass at the head of the ravine. "Flash flood! Run for your lives."

A long tongue of water rolled through the camp. In seconds, it had grown big enough to carry off the sleeping bags. With Frieda a step in front of him, Jan scrambled up the side of the slope. His shoes kept slipping in the mud, and he felt like a cockroach climbing a wet glass window.

Lightning. In its glare, Jan saw that the water running through the camp had become a frothing river, tipping over the camp stove and surging on down the valley. In the distance he saw Sarah climbing madly up the side of the ravine, and Peter running downward toward the mouth of the valley where they had left the van.

"Peter! You'll never make it! Get to high ground!" Jan shouted, but he couldn't tell if Peter heard him or not.

Climbing felt like one of those nightmares in which you run as fast as you can but never move. Jan shoved his feet and hands deep into the mud, trying to get a solid hold. Each movement sent a miniature mud slide cascading down into the water. Rain pounded his head and back, sending rivulets of cold water down his arms and legs. In the dark, he could see nothing, not even Frieda, who he hoped was still ahead of him. She taught aerobics. She was lighter and in better shape than Jan. She would be okay. He kept climbing, the slope melting under his hands as if it were made of brown sugar.

A muddy hand struck him in the face. "Stop. We're on the edge of a cliff!" Frieda shouted, her voice strained over the howling of the wind.

Jan put his lips next to her ear. "A cliff? There's no cliff. I've been over this slope lots of times."

Lightning flashed. A few feet ahead, the land abruptly dropped into the night. In the brief instant of light, Jan couldn't see the bottom.

"I nearly fell over," Frieda said.

"I would have if you hadn't stopped me." Jan put his arms around her and gave her a hug. "Have you seen the others?"

"I think Sarah is only a little down this ridge. I don't know what happened to Peter."

"Neither do I. Let's go find them."

They walked hand in hand, balancing on a ridge narrower than a city sidewalk. Jan couldn't believe it. He knew everything looked different in the dark, but surely he would have noticed this incredible cliff before.

When lightning flashed again they saw Sarah on all fours, peering over the edge, her face streaked with mud, tears, and rain.

"It's Peter," she cried. "He's fallen in."

Horrified, Jan looked over the edge of the cliff, but in the darkness he could see nothing. Gusts of wind threatened to pick him up and throw him over.

"Peter!" he shouted.

"Haay . . . aaayy . . . eooo." Jan's heart leaped when he heard Peter's voice replying.

"What did he say?" asked Sarah.

"I can't make out a word, but at least he's alive. Let's see if we can get down there."

"I could, if I had a rope," said Sarah.

There was a rope, a first aid kit, and desert emergency rations back in the van.

At the moment, they might as well have been on Jupiter.

"Here. Give me your belts," Sarah said. She'd already taken hers off. Taking Jan's and Frieda's, she fastened them together. "Now, Jan, you and Frieda hold me. I'm going to lean over the edge and try to see the bottom."

"That's dangerous. You should let me do it," said Jan.

"No. I'm lighter than you, and I've done rock climbing. Frieda, you hang onto Jan and brace him."

Jan and Frieda clung to the belt while Sarah grasped the other end and leaned out over the edge.

"I think I see him," she yelled when lightning lit up the sky again. "Let me out just a little farther -- yow!"

Sarah screamed as the mud ridge collapsed under their feet. Jan twisted in mid air, trying to reach more solid ground. Frieda clutched at his clothes as all three plunged over the edge and tumbled down the slope in a mudslide.

Near the bottom, a thick clump of bushes broke their fall. Jan landed on top of Sarah, then Frieda landed on top of him, nearly knocking his wind out. He gasped for breath.

"Anyone hurt?" Peter said, standing over them.

"I guess not," Sarah mumbled. "But I remember now why I gave up rock climbing."

"I'm okay, I guess. Only filthy," said Frieda.

Jan moaned in a positive manner.

"I told you guys to stay away from the edge. It's overhung," said Peter.

"We couldn't hear you in the storm," Jan said.

"What storm? It's been gone since the second I fell into this ravine."

Astonished, Jan looked into the sky. Stars shone bright and clear around a quarter moon. Not a cloud, or a puff of wind, marred the perfect calm. Clumsily, he stood up.

Not only had the storm stopped in a split second, the ground wasn't wet. And where did all this brush come from? There was no brush this near Death

Valley.

It was taller than he was, and so thick the four of them could barely force a way through.

When they finally got to a clearing, Peter said, "You've been here before, Jan.

Do you know where we are?"

"I've never seen this ravine." In the moonlight Jan could see two sharp peaks prodding the distant sky like vampire's teeth. Why had he never noticed them before? He itched for a better look at them.

Right now, though, the most important thing was to get warm. The ground here might be dry, but they were still soaked. In a few minutes they gathered enough dry grass to make a pad, and lay on the ground, huddled together like kittens in the cold.

As Jan began to grow warmer, the situation felt less desperate. They could not possibly have traveled more than a couple of miles from camp. Come morning they could climb out of this ravine and probably see the van in plain sight.

Lying on his back with Frieda breathing softly in his ear, Jan looked into the sky. As a boy scout, he had learned the major constellations, but now he didn't recognize anything. Well, anything but the famous Southern Cross, which couldn't possibly be, because it never appeared in the Northern Hemisphere.

Something weird was going on here. He wished he had his camera, but that was probably buried under a yard of mud. He had to record this somehow, though. Nobody would believe him otherwise.

Careful not to wake Frieda, he eased the notebook and pen he always carried with him out of his shirt pocket. On a blank page he drew the constellations as accurately as he could, including the horizon for reference. He checked the time and wrote that down as well, then tucked the notebook back into his pocket. When he got back to civilization he would try to figure out what it all meant, but he saw no need to cause a panic now.

He decided he'd better not mention seeing the Southern Cross even in the morning.

Morning dawned foggy and cool. Not your typical Death Valley weather, Jan thought. During the night, he had convinced himself he had been dreaming about the Southern Cross, the vanishing storm, and the shifting mountains. Well, now that day had come, at least the Southern Cross was gone.

On the other hand, getting back to camp looked tougher than he had hoped. A rocky cliff barred the way down the ravine, so they could walk in only one direction: up. Sarah, bless her, fished two crumbled candy bars from her jacket pocket, so they each had a handful of chocolate crumbs.

By noon, they were intently looking for water and finding none. It could be worse, thought Jan. At least the weather was cool, totally unlike the usual furnace heat of Death Valley.

Walking ahead, Sarah and Peter rounded a bend, then shouted, "Water here! A house! Come on, you guys!"

Jan and Frieda broke into a run and rounded the corner.

The ravine widened into a meadow. At the upper end, by a twisted tree, sunlight glittered off a pool of water. Sarah and Peter knelt by it, drinking noisily. A few feet away, nearly smothered by brush, an old log cabin moldered into the ground. Part of the roof had collapsed, the door was gone, and moss covered the side nearest the pond. Perhaps fifty yards away, three tall trees swayed in the slight breeze. On the horizon, the twin peaks Jan had seen last night loomed over the valley.

Jan felt an electric thrill pass down his spine. Full of dread, he knelt beside Peter and looked into the clear pool.

The mud at the bottom gleamed with bits of gold.

"Hey. What's this shiny stuff?" Peter said.

"Fool's gold," Jan said quickly. "Iron pyrites. Pretty, but worthless. Don't pick it up."

Peter plunged his hand into the water and came up with a nugget the size of a cherry. "Fool's gold my ass. Feel how heavy it is. Got to be the real thing."

He handed the nugget to Jan, who took it reluctantly, as if it might bum his hand.

It was astonishingly heavy, and the dull yellow color was right. He dented one side with a finger nail. The indentation gleamed in the sun.

"It's gold, all right," he said at last.

"Here's more," said Sarah. "Lots more."

Peter threw his head back and howled like a wolf. In seconds, he and Sarah had stripped to their underwear and were splashing about, frisky as young otters. Soon they had a little pile of nuggets. Jan and Frieda watched in stunned silence.

"Hey, why so glum, bro?" Peter said as he and Sarah at last wore down enough to rest. "You scared of the Curse of the Lost Breyfogle?"

"Well. I think . . . Hell, yes. I feel like I've walked into one of my own lectures. This can't be real."

Peter laughed. "So what's that?" he said, pointing to the gold. "A myth?"

"We need something to put it in," said Sarah, getting up and walking over to the

old cabin and peering into the doorway. "Hey. Here's something." She ran back, carrying a wooden bucket wrapped with rusty iron bands.

A blue bucket.

Jan stood up. "That does it. This can't be happening. C'mon. I think we should leave this gold and get the hell out of here. Everything so far fits the story exactly. If it runs true, all but one of us will be killed, and the last one will spend his life searching for the mine. I want no part of that."

Peter ignored him and scooped the gold nuggets into the bucket.

"Jan has a point," said Frieda. She pointed to the twin peaks. "Those mountains weren't there yesterday. It's like we stepped off the end of the world, right into Jan's legend. Let's leave the gold, break out of the story, and go home. If we can."

"You crazy?" Peter said. "Hell, if we're going to be scared off by a bunch of old stories, no wonder Dutchmen lose their mines. You scared of an Indian attack?" He lifted the bucket. "Man, feel that weight. I don't know exactly what gold's going for now, but we must have over a hundred thousand bucks. Not bad for ten minutes skinny dipping."

Jan crossed his arms. "If we accept it, we're buying into the myth. Throw it out."

"No way. Sarah and I are keeping our share. We'll keep it all, if you guys don't want any. We gathered it."

Sarah, pulling on her pants, nodded her head. "You don't take your share, it just makes more for us."

"Aw, look," Peter continued. "All last year you moaned and bitched because you didn't get that piddling state research grant. Now, how much was that?"

"Twenty-five hundred," Jan said. The gold drew his eyes as if by gravitational attraction.

"Okay. This bucket's got ten times that much for you. And as much more for Frieda. God knows how much we could get if we had proper equipment."

"It would be nice if you could have your sabbatical," Frieda mumbled, as if to herself. "I could use a break, too."

"Fifty thousand could make a hell of a second honeymoon," Peter said.

Jan realized he didn't have what it took to throw away that much money, not just for an old myth. "Okay," he said at last, "but one thing: I don't plan on becoming the next Breyfogle. We're going to mark this mine so we'll know for sure where it is. I propose we build a cairn every hundred yards or so, so we can't possibly miss our way back."

"Yes, but let's get hiking," said Frieda. "It's after two now, and we may have a way to go."

They started walking, with Peter and Sarah ahead. Finally the walls of the ravine dropped off, and they began climbing to the top.

All the way along, Peter hummed to himself, danced, bounced around, and in general exuded energy.

"Why so glum, big bro? Don't you like being rich?" he asked Jan while they piled stones for another cairn.

"It's the story. I can't get it out of my mind that we're courting disaster by taking the gold." But when they finished the cairn, Jan took his turn carrying the bucket.

They had just about reached the ridgetop when Jan heard an arrow whistle past his face. A gunshot blasted, and a bullet whanged by his head so close he felt the wind. Immediately ahead, dozens of Indians leaped up from ambush. They had greasy black hair, painted faces, broad-bottomed pants, and carried longbows. Some had guns. One had a blunderbuss.

"My god! Run for it!" shouted Peter. He turned to flee, but three arrows slammed into his back. With a look of intense surprise, he pitched face forward to the ground.

"Peter!" Sarah knelt by Peter's body. The blunderbuss boomed, sending a cloud of black smoke into the air. Sarah fell on top of him.

"Behind you, Jan!" Frieda screamed. Jan turned to see Indians surrounding them. One grabbed Frieda, twisting her arm.

Jan stepped toward her, swinging the bucket of gold in a long arc with all his weight behind it. It caught the Indian on the back of the neck. He sighed like a deflating tire, dropped to his knees, then to the ground.

His black hair stuck to the bucket.

Jan gagged. He'd scalped an Indian! But no, the hair was a wig. Jan swung the bucket again, forcing the other Indians to step back a few paces.

For a second, Jan and the Indians stared at each other. They seemed reluctant to close in.

The Indians were all wrong, like the ones in cheap Westerns. Most wore wigs. Their face paint looked as if it had been applied by amateurs in the dark. Jan had seen more authentic Native Americans in grade school Thanksgiving pageants.

A massive man with a full beard wobbled up, the other Indians giving him plenty of room. He had a wooden peg leg which sank several inches into the ground with each step, making him careen like a drunk. He bellowed a command, an unintelligible phrase that sounded like "Dee vrou wen."

The voice reminded Jan of Great Grandpa Van der Hoff, who had never learned English. "Vrouw" was Dutch for woman.

As if shocked to life by the bellowing voice, the phony Indians attacked. One grabbed Frieda. Jan swung the bucket like a mace, but another one grabbed it, jerking Jan's arm nearly out of the shoulder.

Now the peg-legged one slapped Frieda, bringing blood to her lips. Jan jumped him, driving his fist into the man's stomach.

It bounced off. Astonished, Jan struck again. Nothing. It was like hitting a sand bag. The man made a slight gesture with one hand and instantly an unseen force slammed Jan to the ground. The force held him pinned like an insect while an Indian drew his bow, pointing the arrow directly at Jan's chest.

"No! Don't kill him!" Frieda twisted herself loose and lunged in front of Jan just as the bow twanged. The arrow slashed through her body, jutting out in back like a bloody finger. She fell at his feet.

"God, no, Frieda!" Jan struggled violently against the massive weight pressing him into the ground. Exerting every bit of strength, he forced himself up to his knees.

Then a blow from behind sent him reeling down into darkness.

The sun was low in the sky when Jan awakened. At first he thought there were two suns, and that Heaven -- or was it Hell? -- must be in orbit around a double star, but gradually the two images coalesced and he saw a single sun above a sparsely forested hillside. He was leaning against a tree, and his head hurt like fury. Cautiously, he raised his hand and felt for a wound, but met with cloth instead. Exploring with his fingers, he discovered a T-shirt around his head, tied in place with string.

Frieda? Had she bandaged him after some kind of a fall? Then the memory he'd been struggling to hold at bay burst into clarity: Frieda leaping in front of the Indian's arrow just as he fired -- and falling dead at his feet.

Sitting up, he looked frantically for his wife, praying he would find her still alive. He didn't see her body, nor Peter's, nor Sarah's.

The blue bucket of gold lay in plain sight, though, its glittering contents spilled out in a fan over the ground.

Afraid that he might call the Indians back, but more afraid that his companions might have crawled off and might even now be gasping their last breaths, he called out, wincing with the pain it brought to his head. But no one responded.

He forced himself to stand and search farther, but with no better results. He saw plenty of evidence of the attack-- boot tracks in the dirt and splashes of blood on rocks--but no bodies. He should have found at least Peter's. Peter had taken three arrows square in the back.

Besides, why, if any of them had survived, would they have bandaged Jan's head and then abandoned him? That made no sense.

Of course, being attacked by Dutch-speaking Indians didn't exactly make sense, either, but leaving him didn't seem like something Frieda and Peter and Sarah would do. So more likely the Indians had taken them, or their bodies, for purposes unknown. Jan looked for tracks leaving the scene, but he wasn't pathfinder enough to follow any in the general confusion.

The only evidence that they'd ever been there was the scattered gold. Knowing he was taking the next step in the same damned legend, but not knowing what else to do, he scooped the loose nuggets back into the bucket.

He looked around, trying to get his bearings. There were two prominent peaks to the east, one with an unmistakable cliff on the north face. Below them lay the valley with the cabin and the three tall trees and the pool full of gold.

Determined not to make Breyfogle's mistake, he took his notebook out of his pocket, flipped to the empty page behind the drawing he'd made of the night sky, and sketched the landmarks that he could see from where he stood. Then, putting his notebook away, he gathered up rocks and stacked them into a hip-high cairn.

When that was done he took a last, mournful look at the place where his wife and brother and sister-in-law had disappeared, then began the long hike back to civilization.

It was getting dark when he found the van, still right where they'd left it, parked too high on the ridge to be touched by the flood. Jan unlocked the door and lunged for the cooler in back, pouring half a bottle of now-hot water down his throat in one huge gulp, then pouring the other half over his head, which throbbed with every heartbeat. Not caring about the blood and water stains he was putting on the upholstery, he started the engine and drove down the dirt road toward the main highway.

He was halfway to Ridgecrest -- the only town of any size between Death Valley and Bakersfield -- when it occurred to him that he wasn't going to tell the police about the Indians. Or the gold. If he told them about the Indians, they'd think he was crazy, and if he told them about the gold they'd think he killed the others to keep it all for himself. No, far better to blame their disappearance -- and his own injury -- on the flash flood.

He had his story fixed in his mind by the time he walked into the hospital emergency room. He practiced it on the nurse behind the desk, who interrupted him constantly for information about insurance, medical history, and for his signature on half a dozen legal forms before she took him to an examination room, where the doctor asked him about it again while he unwound the T-shirt from Jan's head and examined his wound.

"Hey, you must be a scout master," the doctor said when he cut off the string holding the shirt in place. "I haven't seen a bowline knot in years."

Jan realized the doctor thought he'd bandaged his own wound. He saw no reason

to
tell him otherwise. "I wasn't paying much attention to the knot," he said. "I was just trying to get the damned bleeding stopped." He winced when the doctor pulled the T-shirt loose.

"I just started it again," the doctor said. "Lean over a little so it doesn't drip in your eyes. Ooh, yeah, that's a nasty whack there. A little deeper and you'd be playing harp in the choir invisible."

A policewoman arrived just as the doctor finished stitching him up, and Jan went through his story a third time for her. She asked him a few questions about the storm and how he'd managed to escape the flash flood when the others hadn't, but she didn't seem particularly interested. Jan realized these people were so used to hikers getting lost in the desert and dying of exposure that they couldn't get worked up over three more killed in a simple flash flood. The news of the gold mine and the fake Indians might get their attention, but he'd already committed himself to the other story. Switching it now would only land him in trouble.

Jan felt grim satisfaction in knowing that he'd broken out of the legend. It always included the survivors telling the whole tale.

On the other hand, he needed help searching for Frieda and Peter and Sarah. They might still be alive up there.

He stopped the cop on her way to the door. "I drew maps of the area on my way out," he said. "I can lead the search party back to where it happened."

She didn't look happy. "We'd love to help you, mister, but that flood could've carried them for miles. It could take days to find 'era unless we do it by air, but with our budget we can't fly unless it's a national emergency. About all we could spare would be a deputy and a jeep for about half a day. Unless you can pay for a chopper and a pilot yourself."

"That's my family out there," Jan said. "I'll do what it takes. How soon can we get started?"

"You can't go anywhere with that head wound," the doctor said, but the cop ignored him and said, "If you're serious, I suppose we could get in the air first thing in the morning."

"But that means they'll be out there all night!"

She shrugged. "We can't see anything in the dark. It's tomorrow or nothing."

"All right then," Jan said. "I'll meet you at the airport at dawn."

The doctor tried again. "I told you, you can't --"

"I'll make you a deal," Jan said. "You can put me up overnight, but I'm out of here first thing tomorrow. Either that or you can just tie that T-shirt on my head again and I'll go get a motel."

The doctor blustered for a few more minutes, but in the end he gave in.

Jan might as well have stayed in the hospital all day. When he produced his map for the cop and the helicopter pilot, the pilot-- a wiry, middle-aged guy with hair as gray and skin as leathery as a donkey --scratched his head and said, "I been up and down all these canyons 'round here, but I ain't never seen one looked like that. And I'll guarantee you there ain't no twin peaks out there, neither."

"I saw them," Jan insisted. "From where I was they looked like the tallest peaks around. And I was in that valley; I know it's there. Besides that, I made rock cairns all the way out to the main trail, so all we've got to do is follow them."

The pilot laughed, and the cop laughed with him.

"What's funny?" Jan asked.

"Mister," the pilot said, "there's been prospectors making cairns in them mountains for over a hun'erd years. You'd be better off pushing everybody else's over and following the path what ain't got any than building more of your own."

"Oh."

The cop patted him on the back. "It doesn't matter," she said. "From the air it isn't hard to find evidence of a flood."

She was right; within minutes of reaching the Panamint range, they found it. But the canyon Jan had hiked out of yesterday was not on either side of it. They found no forest, no cabin, no twin peaks . . . and no sign of Frieda, Peter, or Sarah.

Until then, Jan had not believed he'd been caught in a legend. He'd assumed there was some logical explanation behind everything but from the helicopter he could see the entire Panamint range, and the valley was simply not there.

All the same, he couldn't give up without trying everything, so he drove back in the van and tried to follow his cairns, but the helicopter pilot had been right. He was able to follow them for a mile or so, but then at one point he could see four others, none of which were his, and beyond that the terrain suddenly began to look unfamiliar as well. It was as if the canyon he'd been in had been physically removed and a different one put in its place.

Where did it go, then? he wondered on the long hike back to the van. Had he hallucinated the whole thing? Impossible. He'd felt the rocks, drank the water.

He still had the gold.

And the star map. When he'd drawn it, he'd thought it could help them locate themselves; maybe it would. But for that he needed the help of an astronomer.

As the sun slowly set, Jan hiked back to the van and drove home to Los Angeles.

Dennis Bigelow was the only astronomer Jan knew, and him only because they'd met

for a few minutes at a faculty Christmas party. He was a tall, gangly man with enormous glasses, which he pulled off when he saw Jan waiting for him in front of his office first thing in the morning. "Van der Hoff?" he asked, squinting.

"In person," said Jan.

"What happened to your head?"

"An Indian beamed me with a tomahawk. And he took off with my wife's body. I need your help catching him."

"Me?" Blinking Dennis unlocked his office door and ushered Jan inside. He had fewer books on his desk than Jan, but more printouts. He dropped another few inches of them on the pile beside his computer and sat down on the only exposed corner of his desk. "How can I . . . body did you say? Your wife is dead?"

"It's a long story." Jan pulled his notebook from his shirt pocket and flipped it to the right page. "Basically, we were kidnapped and taken somewhere we didn't recognize, but I was able to draw this picture of the night sky before I got . . . put back. I was hoping you could tell me where I was."

"From a hand-drawn map?" Dennis shook his head. "I could maybe tell you which continent you were on, but I assume you know that much."

"No, I don't, actually." Jan held out the map. "I think that's the Southern Cross, but beyond that I can't even guess."

Dennis took the notebook from him. "What's this stain all over it?" he asked.

"Blood. My blood."

"Oh." Holding it by his fingertips, Dennis examined the drawing. "Hmm, you drew in the horizon, that's good. I can probably give you the latitude within a few degrees, then. If you knew the exact time when you drew this, I could even give you the longitude. Only accurate to within the limits of your observation, you know, but it's surprising how precise the unaided eye can be on angles. Did you check it for accuracy after you drew it?"

"I did," Jan said with pride. "And that scribble there under the blood stain says 10:53 P.M."

Dennis slowly shook his head. "You know, ever since those Indiana Jones movies,

I've had to rethink my attitude toward you history guys. You really get into your work, don't you?"

Jan shrugged in self-depreciation. "This really didn't have much to do with work. We were just camping out."

"Of course." Dennis leaned over and switched on his computer.

A few minutes later, after loading a star map program and playing with the view until he approximated Jan's map on the screen, Dennis leaned back in his chair and said, "There you go. You were thirty-five degrees south latitude, and about seventy degrees west longitude. That puts you. . ." He pulled an atlas out of the bookcase next to his computer and flipped through the maps. ". . .hmm. You were somewhere south of Santiago, Chile. About on the 'N' in 'Andes.'" He held out the map for Jan to see.

Jan sat down on the corner of the desk Dennis had vacated. "Chile? How'd we get clear down there?"

Dennis shrugged. "That much I can't tell you."

Jan couldn't believe he had been transported to Chile and back by supernatural means, but an hour in the library poring through the map section added another argument to the theory. There in the foothills of the Andes, about a hundred miles south of Santiago, was a canyon the same shape as the one he'd drawn, complete with a likely looking double peak to the east of it.

All he needed was a good explanation of how a flash flood in Death Valley could send four people to South America, and how he'd gotten back while the others hadn't. Everything he could think of sounded equally illogical: time travelers, UFO aliens, even God.

He even considered the possibility that he had gone crazy and murdered Frieda and Peter and Sarah himself, then invented the whole bizarre story afterward to rationalize their murders, but that made even less sense. In that case, where had the bucket of gold come from?

Ghosts? The four of them had obviously been caught up in an old legend; maybe they had run afoul of some old-timer's ghost up there in the mountains, and it had set them up to follow in his footsteps.

Whatever the reason, Jan felt sure the only answer he was likely to get waited for him in Chile, not in California.

Flying to Santiago turned out to be no more difficult than flying to a major city in the states. It was more trouble to charter a helicopter, but Jan soon discovered that enough American cash could accomplish practically anything. He'd

sold some of the gold before he'd left, so he wasn't sweating the price.

Within

two hours he was once again in the air, this time in an aging two passenger chopper with no doors. Wind swirled around him the whole way; that and the engine's roar made conversation with the pilot impossible, but they didn't need

to talk anyway. Jan clutched a topo map in his hands and pointed out the way, and the pilot flew where he pointed.

At last the twin peaks swam toward them from the horizon, and the valley below them took on shape. Jan's heart beat faster and faster as more and more landmarks checked out. There was the bend with the meadow and the pool of water, and beside it was the cabin. And in front of the cabin, working with picks and shovels, were three people! For a moment Jan felt sure it was Frieda and Peter and Sarah, but when the helicopter drew closer he realized all three were men. Heavily bearded, ragged-clothed men.

"Set it down by that cabin!" he shouted to the pilot, pointing. The pilot nodded and swooped the 'copter around in a turning dive that sent the miners running for cover. "Don't scare them off, you idiot!" Jan shouted, but it was too late. Two of them ran straight up the sides of the valley, while the third made a running dive right for the middle of the pool.

Jan leaped out of the 'copter as soon as it touched down and ran toward the man in the water. The miner was just struggling out to join his companions in their flight when Jan caught up with him and grabbed him by a loose shirt tail.

The man screamed as if he'd been shot, then fell to his knees and bowed his head.

"Jeez, get a grip," Jan said. "I just want to talk to you."

The man babbled something that sounded like "Vader mivergif!" It took Jan a moment to realize he'd spoken Dutch. He'd said, "Father, forgive me."

Jan replied in kind, saying, "I'm sorry we scared you. I just want to talk to you. Honest."

"Talk?" the man asked. "You aren't taking me to Hell?"

"What ? Of course not." Jan snorted at the idea, then curiosity made him ask, "Why? Do you think you deserve it?"

The man turned his head to see his tormentor, then gasped. "You of all people have to ask?"

"What, you know me?" asked Jan, but then the miner's face registered. It had been obscured with streaks of war paint when he'd last seen it, but Jan was sure that this was the same "Indian" who'd shot an arrow through Frieda's heart.

"On second thought," he said as he grabbed a handful of the man's collar and pulled him to his feet, "Maybe I will send you off to Hell. But not until I get some answers. Start talking."

The helicopter's engine wound down to an idle, and the swooshing blades slowed to a less distracting pitch. The man looked nervously around, no doubt hoping for help from his friends, but the other two were halfway up the ridge by now and still receding. The helicopter pilot waited in his seat, an enormous pistol held casually in his lap, but he made no threatening moves with it. Jan figured he would probably only interfere to protect his 'copter.

"I said, start talking," Jan ordered. "Why did you attack us, and what did you do with my wife's body?"

Trembling like a leaf in the wind, the man stammered, "I--we--it was--it was the price of our freedom! Vandervecken made us do it."

"Freedom? Vandervecken? What are you talking about?"

The man swallowed. "Vandervecken is a ship's captain. He swore a blasphemous oath, and was cursed to sail the seas for eternity. He--"

Jan jerked the man's collar. "I know all about him. Probably more than you do. What does--"

"Hah! I was bosun on the Flying Dutchman for over a hundred years." As if remembering his pride for the first time, the man shook off Jan's hand.

Jan considered grabbing him again, but the glint in his eyes decided him against it. He said, "Hundred years my ass. You're not a day over sixty."

The man shook his head. "Forty-eight I am, and was when Vandevercken captured me in 1852. I've sailed with him ever since, frozen in time even as it passed me by."

Jan pressed his hands to the sides of his head, as if he could physically force his mind to make sense of the man's speech. When no answers came, he asked the question foremost in his mind: "What does Vandervecken have to do with my wife?"

But he already suspected the answer. Somehow he'd gotten caught up in not one legend, but two.

The miner confirmed his suspicion. "She was the price of my release." Hastily, he added, "not her in particular, but just another person. None of the crew can leave the ship without Vandervecken's permission, and the price he requires of us is a suitable replacement. But suitable he means somebody we can snatch without too much fuss, and who's able-bodied and Dutch. He wants no foreigners on his ship. But he wanted even more from me. He required a woman who might come to love him, and thus end his curse."

Jan remembered Wagner's opera about the Flying Dutchman, how Vandervecken had supposedly been cursed to sail the seas until he found a woman who would be "true unto death."

"Then Peter and Sarah were their replacements?" he asked, nodding toward the two other miners, who had paused in their flight now that it looked as if Jan wasn't going to whisk their companion straight to Hell after all.

"That's right," the man said. "They're what we call 'impressed labor.' We were trying for you instead of the other woman, but she got herself killed in the fight so we didn't have much choice. We had to leave one of you alive."

"What kind of animals are you?" Jan asked, horrified. "Trading a total stranger's life for your own. It's --"

"When you've spent a century on the Dutchman and passed up the opportunity to get away, maybe I'll listen to your little speech, but until then, don't start getting all indignant on me."

Jan's bluster died as quickly as it had come. A century at sea? He already knew what he'd do. "Why didn't you just snatch them while they were sleeping, then?" he asked. "Why such an elaborate plan? Why the gold, and the Indian raid? And how did you know we were Dutch in the first place?"

The man shrugged. "Vandervecken told us you were the ones. He's got . . . powers. The gold was payment for their service; Naval law demands it when you impress a man to sea duty. The Indian disguise was supposed to help you explain it away to your people. We didn't want you in prison; we wanted you out telling others about the lost mine and getting more Dutchmen out hunting for it. There's others on the ship who're itching to leave, too."

Jan didn't know how much of the man's story he could believe, but it did fit remarkably well with historical facts. Except. . . "Indians are out of date. You'd have done better to impersonate bikers."

The man shrugged again. "Maybe your missus can set 'em straight before the next raid."

"Frieda's alive, then?" Jan asked, hardly able to believe it possible, but willing to grasp at any hope.

"Aye," the former bosun said, "if you can call time on the Dutchman life."

"How can I get her back?"

"You can't. Unless you want to replace her, like she did me. I told you, Vandervecken won't let anyone jump ship."

"We'll see about that. Conjure him up for me. I want to have a word with him."

The man laughed. "Oh you do, do yet I'll reckon your tone'd change if I did, but we're cut off now, no more able to reach him again than you are. Which is why we're here grubbing in this damned played out mine; we've got to find us a way to earn a living in this newfangled world of yours, 'cause we're on our own now."

"There must be a way of finding him," Jan insisted.

"Oh, aye, there's ways. Go get yourself lost at sea. Vandervecken's practically the patron saint of the lost, 'specially lost Dutchmen. If your luck's with you, he'll come to wave at you as you drown."

"And if my luck isn't with me?"

"Then you drown on your own, I guess."

Jan looked in the man's eyes, but saw no hint of duplicity there. Jan could hardly believe his story, but he didn't know if he had much choice. He had no other leads to follow.

"All right," he said at last. "We'll try to catch up with Vandervecken on the high seas."

"Not 'we, "' the man said, his nostrils flaring in sudden panic. "I ain't going with you."

"I say you are," Jan said. "You took my wife; you'll help me get her back." He reached out to grab the man's collar again, but this time he fought back; he shoved Jan's arm aside and punched him hard in the stomach. Jan staggered backward a step, recovered his balance, and lunged forward again, but checked himself when he saw the glint of a knife.

"I'd sooner go to Hell than back on that cursed ship," the man said. "And I'll take you there with me if you press it."

Jan turned his head to look toward the helicopter. The pilot held his gun a bit more readily now, but it was clear he wasn't going to interfere in Jan's dispute. Jan looked up the ridge and saw the other two sailors climbing back down. They no doubt would interfere, but not to Jan's advantage.

"At least tell me," he said, backing off and lowering his arms, "where will I most likely find him?"

The man kept his knife poised for action, but he said, "You've got courage, I'll grant you that. Well then, I'd look for him rounding Cape Horn, westward. He keeps trying to get into the Pacific Ocean, but he can never make it. That's part of the curse. The ship's always in a storm, you see, and always gets blown back. He tries the Cape of Good Hope for a few years, and the Northwest Passage once in a while, and the Horn when he ain't trying the others. My guess is he'll keep at the Horn a while longer, now that he's got fresh crew and it's right close for him to challenge again."

Jan nodded. "Cape Horn, eh? Anything else I should know?"

"Well, you're supposed to keep a bible on board and nail a horseshoe to the foremast to keep him away, so don't go carrying either of those with you. And if Vandervecken gives you any letters to mail, nail those to the mast, too, or you'll never make it home."

"If I catch the son of a bitch, I'll nail him to the mast," said Jan.

The man laughed. "I don't think you'll find that as easy as you think. Mortals can't touch him unless he wants 'em to. But all the same, I wish you luck."

"Thanks, I guess," Jan said, turning away and walking back to the helicopter. "Take me back to the airport," he told the pilot as he climbed into the passenger seat. "And put that damned pistol away."

Three days into his voyage, Jan began to wonder if he was on a fool's errand. The Tierra Del Fuegan who had sold him his boat had certainly thought so. The only thing Jan had attracted so far had been an albatross, an enormous white bird that followed him everywhere he went, sometimes perching on the top of the mast but usually keeping station just off the port bow. Albatrosses were omens of good luck, if Coleridge could be believed, but Jan didn't know if he wanted luck. He'd tried shooing the thing away, but it wouldn't leave, and he wasn't about to shoot it. Coleridge's Ancient Mariner had tried that and had been cursed to drift, alone and becalmed and dying of thirst, on the endless sea.

Even the thought must have had some effect, for on the afternoon of day three, on an uncharacteristically calm sea on the Atlantic side of the Cape, Jan couldn't get the engine to start. He'd been using the sail as much as possible, both to conserve gas and in the hope that the older technology would somehow bring him closer to the Flying Dutchman, but now he was still miles from the Cape and in this feeble wind it would take most of the day just to make the passage.

He'd just about worn out the battery, but the engine kept firing, leading him on with the promise that on the next try it would catch for certain. Jan resisted the urge to hold his thumb on the starter button until the battery melted through the hull, once again opening the choke and letting the intake manifold air out before trying it again. The starter spun slowly, and the engine coughed once, then died.

"Damn you!" Jan swore. "Start, you son of a bitch, or I'll take you apart bolt by bolt and feed you to the sharks." He mashed down the start button again, and the engine coughed once more, then backfired loudly.

"Arrgh!" Jan growled, yanking back on the throttle. "I'll start you, you Godforsaken pile of pistons, if it's the last thing I --"

The boat pitched in a sudden swell, nearly throwing Jan from his pilot's chair.

"What the hell?" he asked, grabbing the handrail for support. The sea had been calm as a bathtub a moment ago. He looked out to starboard; nothing there. Nothing to port, either. But when he turned aft, his hair tried to stand on end.

There, pitching and rolling as if in a gale, less than a hundred yards off and closing fast, came a glowing four-master, its sails in tatters, its figurehead etched by wind and waves until it resembled a skeleton more than the woman it had once been.

Another wave reached out from the ghost ship and rolled Jan's boat. He could see the horizon through the hull, and if he squinted he could see flickering shapes on deck and in the rigging, but there was no hope of recognizing Frieda or Peter or Sarah among them.

It was the Flying Dutchman. Jan was certain of it. What had brought it now he couldn't guess, until he remembered the angry words directed at the engine. He shivered anew. He'd been that close to making the same mistake Vandervecken had made.

Jan had never imagined how careful a person had to be about legends and blasphemous oaths and the like.

Now, faced with the real possibility of eternal damnation on board a phantom ship, his resolve nearly died. Frieda and Peter and Sarah were already dead; what could he accomplish by joining them save compounding their torment? Most likely Vandervecken would simply add Jan to his crew as well. Jan would be better off going back to Los Angeles and trying to contact Frieda through some kind of spiritualist or a Ouija board.

Even as he thought it, he knew he could never live with himself if he did that.

Frieda had taken an arrow through the heart to save him from death; could he do any less for her?

The ship drew alongside his boat, still pitching and rolling in its own personal storm. Jan reached out and snagged one of the trailing lines as it swept past, tugging on it to draw himself still closer. It felt like pulling on a thick strand of spaghetti -- cold and clammy and stretchy, as if it weren't quite substantial -- but the gap between the two vessels narrowed until he could jump across with a line of his own to the netting hanging from the side of the Dutchman and tie them together with a real rope.

The rope held fast, but Jan might as well have been clinging to cobwebs. The ship continued to buck in heavy seas, and now Jan felt the storm as well, but when it pitched upward his hands would slip through the ropes as if they were hardly more than smoke, and he would drop downward a foot or more before he could catch another piece of the net and check his fall.

He heard ghostly voices shrieking at him from above, and cold chills swirled around him, but neither the ship nor its crew would grow substantial enough for him to grasp or even to hear or see clearly. Something still kept him from crossing over into their world.

His boat banged against his legs, and he kicked it away. The net seemed to grow firmer in his hands as he did, but only until the next wave came to shake him loose. What was the problem? Why couldn't he get on board?

His boat drew closer, and he slipped through another rung of the net. His feet were only inches from the water now. He considered jumping back and trying again, higher up on the net, but when he tugged on the connecting rope the ghost ship grew fainter still and he lurched downward another notch.

It was the boat. His last link with the real world kept him from completely joining the spirit world. That had to be it. Without letting himself hesitate, Jan untied the rope and flung it away from him, casting his boat free.

At once the wailing from overhead became the cry of dozens of voices. The net

in
his hand became solid and gritty with salt. Sudden wind whipped his hair into his eyes, and when he reached up to sweep it aside, a wave slammed him into the
side of the barnacle-encrusted ship.

A shock of pain shot through his head, exactly where he'd been injured before. The barnacles slashed at his clothes, ripping his coat and scraping his shoulder. Wind howled about his ears. At least now the ropes felt solid. Clinging as close as he could, Jan crawled painfully up the ship's wooden sides.

A bearded face looked over the ship's rail, staring down at him. "Help me,"
Jan
cried, using his last strength to pull himself above the water level. "Help me,
please."

"You don't know, Amerikaner," the man said. "Far bedder you drown now dan come aboard dis ship."

Rage flowed through Jan's veins. Would that idiot let him drown? His anger gave
him new strength. Clumsily, he climbed up over the rounded hull and crawled through the railing, finally throwing himself gasping full length on deck. The ship plunged in the storm, moving so abruptly Jan felt in danger of being bucked
off. Wind howled through the rigging. Yet whenever the deck fell, Jan could see
the boat he had bought in perfect calm, bobbing along gently as a toy boat in a
puddle, albatross gliding overhead.

"Jan! Jan! Are you okay?" Suddenly Peter bent over him. Peter's face looked strained; his normally clean-shaven cheeks were black with stubble, and his filthy clothes reeked with sweat. Jan had never seen anything so beautiful.

"Peter." He rose up and hugged his brother. "I found you." Even as he spoke, the
wind whipped the words from his mouth.

Peter didn't smile. "God, I'm glad to see you, Jan, but I wish you hadn't come here. That sailor wasn't being cruel; he was giving good advice. Now that you're
on the deck, you won't get another chance."

"There's always another chance. Where are Frieda and Sarah?"

"They're below. Captain Vandervecken's below with them."

"Let's go get them." Jan struggled to his feet.

Peter grabbed him by the belt. "Not a good idea. You don't know this guy."

Jan glanced at the sailors who were gathering around.

"If we could get the crew behind us. . ."

"Ha. If the crew could do anything, they'd have hung Vandervecken from the yardarm and sailed this tub back to Amsterdam 400 years ago. The guy's not

human."

Jan remembered the force which had pushed him to the ground during the attack of the phony Indians. "You might be right. But there has to be something we can do.

Even a ghost must have weaknesses. I mean, look at this ship." The deck's planks were shrunken and splintered, the sails threadbare, the rigging so worn the ropes looked furry.

"Don't let appearances deceive you," Peter said. "The curse will keep this thing afloat forever, and Vandervecken will be its captain no matter what we do." Moodily, he stared off into the sky. "You were right, incidentally. Taking that damned gold signed us up for a term of seven times seven years. Then God knows how long searching for substitutes. I wish I'd listened to you."

Jan patted his back. "No matter. He'd have just taken you anyway."

"No. He can't. His magic doesn't work that way. He has to follow the rules to the letter. He has to pay wages in gold. You must accept before he can take you. Only good thing about this ship; Vandervecken's as much a prisoner as any of us."

Jan shook his head. "That's his problem, not ours. We have to rescue Frieda and Sarah and get the hell off this nightmare."

"Get off the Flying Dutchman?" a man laughed. Jan turned. The man stood an easy six feet four and had the biggest feet Jan had ever seen unconnected to an elephant. "You hardly came on. Don't worry. They say the first hundred years is a snap." He grinned. "Of course the next few hundred get tedious."

"Oh, where's my manners?" Peter said. "Let me introduce you. Jan Vander Hoff, meet Charles Breyfogle, late of the Lost Breyfogle mine."

"Ah, the historian. Your brother has told me so much about you," Breyfogle said.

Jan gaped. Before he could respond, a high-pitched squealing music and a drum beat joined the perpetual howl of the wind.

"All hands fall out for wedding drill," shouted a huge, thick-necked man. Behind him, another man blew on a whistle, and a boy pounded on a drum. "Captain Vandervecken's orders. All hands on deck for the wedding."

"A wedding?" Peter said.

"You ain't heard? Vandervecken is going to make at least one of the women marry him. Maybe both," Breyfogle said.

Peter gave a sort of choking roar, and turned. Breyfogle grabbed him, holding him as easily as a boy might hold a kitten. "Calm down, Peter. Or Vandervecken

will whip you again."

"He whipped you?" Jan asked.

"With a cat-of-nine-tails until you could see his ribs," said Breyfogle.

"God, I'm sorry, Peter."

"It healed at sunset. Can't permanently hurt the living dead. Damned unpleasant at the time, though." He stopped struggling against Breyfogle. "We can't beat magic. Jan, what can we possibly do?"

"All hands aft." The bull-necked man cracked his whip. In seconds, the entire crew -- over forty men -- stood in two long lines facing the poop deck. At the front of the poop deck, there were two doors and two stairways leading to the top.

The men swayed with the plunging of the ship. Spray cascaded over the bow and across the deck. Yet the sun shone brightly, and a few yards from the Flying Dutchman, the waves lapped languidly.

The music, such as it was, reached a crescendo. Slowly, with exaggerated dignity, Vandervecken stepped out a door, turned his back and ascended the stairs to the poop.

In spite of his own circumstances, Jan couldn't help examining Vandervecken with the eye of a professional historian. He wore a thick blue coat with short tails, broad bottomed trousers, and a hat the size of a pizza pan. He had a black eye patch and a wooden leg which thumped with each step, and a thick leather belt with several pistols thrust inside it, plus a cutlass, and a cat-of-nine-tails whip. A cliché pirate, Jan thought, but then he realized this was the original from which the cliché sprang.

Now on the poop deck, Vandervecken turned to face the crew and bellowed, "Bring forth the brides."

The door below the poop deck opened. Out came a man tugging a chain.

At the other end of the chain, dragged like a dog by a leash, was Frieda.

"Frieda!" Jan shouted, running to her.

"Jan! You came for me at last." She wore a long dress cobbled together from a dozen different garments. Her face was pale, her hair ruffled and whipping in the wind. She'd lost weight. Her hands were chained in front of her. Behind her, also chained, stood Sarah.

The man jerked the chain, pulling Frieda face forward to the deck. Jan kicked him in the knee cap, then ripped the chain from his hands. Astonishingly, he did not resist, just stood staring as if thunderstruck. Jan helped Frieda up and gave her the hug of her life.

"Who dares touch a bride of Vandervecken?" Vandervecken roared. He leaned over the rail of the poop deck, the cat-of-nine-tails in his hand.

"She's not your bride, she's mine," Jan shouted back.

"What? This is true?" Vandervecken looked at Frieda. Frieda nodded.

"Ha. You told me you were a virgin."

Frieda shrugged. "You said you'd beat me if I weren't."

"The bride of Vandervecken must be a virgin! You?" He pointed to Sarah.

"Me? Hardly. I'm from Marin County," she said.

"You're plain out of luck, chum." Jan bent over to check the thick iron bands and the crude locks of Frieda's chains. Antique stuff, more rust than iron.

One

good strike with a hammer would shatter them.

"Look out!" Frieda screamed. A sudden blow on the back of the head nearly dazed

him. Looking up, Jan saw Vandervecken grinning down at him. With an expert flick

of the whip, Vandervecken made the balls at the end of each cat tail dance.

Jan grabbed at the whip. It flashed out of his reach, then caught him in the face, slashing his cheek wide open. Blood spurted down his neck and chest.

Screaming, Jan ran to the steps and charged up. Vandervecken stood at the top of

the stairs, grinning. The whip slashed open Jan's other cheek. When he threw up

his hands to protect his face, the whip caught him full on the testicles.

Shocked with pain, he instinctively lowered his hands. The next blow gouged out

his eyes.

"Eggs or eyes," Vandervecken roared. "You can't hold them both."

Jan couldn't see. Blood spurted down his face. Now the cat slashed his temple. Dazed with pain, he stumbled, falling from the steps onto the main deck,

landing

on his left elbow. He heard the bone snap like a dry stick. Frieda screamed.

Now Vandervecken and someone else stood over him. Rough hands plucked away his clothes. Soon Jan lay naked on the splintered wooden deck. He could hear Vandervecken bellow with laughter and smell the stink of his own blood. Then Vandervecken started working with the cat. Jan lifted his good hand to save himself, but the cat flicked here and there, always catching him by surprise.

Blind, smothered in pain, at long last Jan lost consciousness.

He came to on a bunk deep inside the ship. The bunk heaved and lurched with every motion of the storm-bound Flying Dutchman.

"Here. Drink this. It's not good, but it's hot." Peter held Jan's head in his lap and pressed a tin cup to his lips. Obediently, Jan gulped down the hot liquid, some kind of broth. It stank like rotten meat.

Hanging on a chain from the low roof, a lantern swayed back and forth, flinging

fantastic shadows everywhere. A dozen other bunks lined the walls, each one

with
a sleeping man in it.

"I can see!" Jan said.

"Yes. Like I said before, the living dead heal at sunset. Whatever body you had
when you came aboard is the one you have when you leave. If you ever do."

"Thank God."

"Maybe. The bad news is that Vandervecken will do the same thing to you
tomorrow, and it will be all fresh and new."

"No. I can't possibly endure that again."

"You have to."

"I can't. I'll go mad. We have to get out of here."

"There doesn't seem to be a way other than breaking the original curse."

"And how do we do that?"

"We don't. Has to be a woman. If Vandervecken can find a woman who is true to
him unto death, the curse will be lifted. Fat chance. They don't make women
that
stupid."

The ship's bell clanged.

"Got to go. You get some rest," Peter said. He rose, and in a second, he was
gone.

When sleep finally came, Jan dreamed of the last act of Wagner's the Flying
Dutchman. The over-rich, cloying music climbed to a crescendo as a young
woman,
madly in love with Vandervecken, filled the concert hall with a voice like a
thing in pain. Pledging her troth, she committed suicide by diving into the
ocean. Stage left, the fake waves swept back and forth, while a ship the size
of
a canoe sank beneath the floor.

Jan turned over and moaned. Something from that opera nagged at the corner of
his mind. A line, maybe a bit of dialogue or a note in the program. Something
important.

"Up, up, you lazy dog." Jan woke to find Breyfogle standing over hi m like a
bearded mountain. He clapped his hands together to make a loud smack. "Take
that, worthless sluggard." He slapped his hands twice more. "That'll teach you
to be smart with me," he roared. Then, in a whisper, he said, "Better you
start
screaming now."

Jan screamed.

"Louder."

Jan screamed as loud as he could.

"Touch me, you dog! Let that be a lesson to you!" Breyfogle shouted. Then he whispered, "You've got to get up. Act hurt, or I'll be in trouble."

"Oh. Thank you. I'll be miserable. What's going on?"

"Vandervecken wants you on deck."

Involuntarily, Jan's muscles tightened. "I can't face that man."

"You must come. Or I must drag you, and I have no wish to hurt you. But I have even less wish to be hurt myself."

There was no choice. In seconds, Jan was up on deck, cold wind and spray licking at his face. Glancing at the horizon, he was astonished to see the old boat he had bought still floating nearby. He would have thought they would have sailed far beyond it during the night. But then, he realized, if this ship had been trying to round the cape for nearly 150 years, it couldn't be going anywhere fast.

"This time, with the cat, don't fight it," Breyfogle whispered. "Lie down, pull your knees to your chest, and cover your face. It will all heal tonight."

Breyfogle pushed Jan across the deck. The wind whipped his hair in his face.

Only then did Jan notice the squealing music. Vandervecken had all hands drawn up in lines just like the day before. Frieda and Sarah stood in chains. Vandervecken strode the poop deck, making the lead beads of his cat-of-nine-tails dance in the wind.

"Ah, ha, my friend. You need another lesson today?" Vandervecken cracked the whip.

Jan shrank back. His stomach rose; he felt like vomiting. He could not go through this again.

Breyfogle shoved him forward. Two other men grabbed his arms while others stripped him and lashed his wrists to the stair railings. Vandervecken, taking his time, humming a tune, came down the stairs. The whip flickered here, there, around Jan's body, anticipating but not touching.

"So where should my cat have its first taste, my friend?" Vandervecken said. The irritating tune he hummed ricocheted through Jan's mind like an errant cannonball. He'd heard it before.

The cat cracked in the air.

The sound cleared Jan's mind. Now he remembered the tune. From the opera, of course. And now he remembered the line he'd been trying to recall last night.

"Don't touch me, Vandervecken," he shouted. "The curse is fulfilled. We are all free!"

Vandervecken only laughed. The whip slipped over Jan's shoulder, each lead bead like a sharp nail against his skin.

"First, you must find a woman true to me unto death. Do you see any such?" Vandervecken said.

"Yes! There's one in front of you. Frieda."

Vandervecken roared with laughter. "That one? She true to me? She fights like a tiger."

"No. That's not the condition of the curse. You must find a woman true unto death. Nothing about true to you. But she was true to me. She died taking the arrow intended for me!"

Instantly, the entire crew hushed. Vandervecken stood, his mouth open, the whip swinging in the wind. Then suddenly the storm stopped, the Flying Dutchman halting in mid-plunge so abruptly it tossed everyone sprawling to the deck.

"The curse is broken!" Peter shouted, leaping to his feet. He opened a clasp knife and sawed away at the ropes binding Jan. Meanwhile, the crew staggered like drunks, trying to regain their land legs after centuries of perpetual storm at sea. Voices chattered in Dutch and English.

Jan's ropes broke away. "Let's get Frieda and Sarah and get the hell out of here," he said to Peter, running to where the women stood. He gave Frieda a quick hug, then tugged uselessly at her chains. Why hadn't he thought to bring some tools?

"Here is what you need," said the sailor behind him. He produced an enormous antique key and unlocked the chains. Frieda and Sarah stood rubbing their wrists, trying to restore their hands' circulation.

"The ship is sinking!" someone yelled. Immediately a dozen other voices took up the cry. Jan looked around. Now that the curse had gone, the Flying Dutchman had become just another old ship badly in need of maintenance. As an historian, he would have loved to save it for a museum, but at the moment that didn't seem to be an option.

"Make for that boat over there!" he shouted to the helmsman, pointing to his own craft in the distance. Obediently the helmsman put the wheel about, and the Flying Dutchman heeled.

"No! I will not have it!" Vandervecken waved two long-barreled pistols at Jan. "The first man to desert this ship dies." He stepped to the railing of the poop deck, trying to cover everyone with his pistols.

The crew stood transfixed. Instantly, Jan realized what had happened. It wasn't really the pistols that frightened them. It was Vandervecken himself. Years of instant obedience could not be erased in an afternoon. He had to break that spell. He looked around for something to distract the crew's attention, even for a second.

The albatross. Sunlight gleaming from its long, snowy wings, it soared overhead,
a mere ann's length from the main mast, blessing the ship and all its crew.

"Look. Up there! The albatross," Jan shouted. "The bird of good omen."

"He's right!" one man screamed, "it's a sign from heaven." The sailors shouted like children, singing, shouting, dancing with glee.

"Okay, we're out of here," Jan muttered to Frieda, who had already peeled out of her long skirts and was helping Sarah with hers.

"No. It is not a bird of good omen," Vandervecken shouted, his frustration obvious in his voice. "I'll show you what happens to those who defy me." He raised both pistols, taking careful aim.

"No! Don't shoot the albatross!" Jan shouted.

Two spurts of smoke burst from the pistols, followed by twin thunderclaps. The albatross fell to the poop deck with a sickening thud, feathers fluttering down after it.

Vandervecken picked up the fallen body, then made the wings flap in a grotesque parody of flight.

"Now we're in for it," Jan said.

"What do you mean? It's just a bird," Peter said.

"No, it's the embodiment of luck, and Vandervecken killed it. Just like the Ancient Mariner."

Laughing heartily, Vandervecken draped the dead albatross around his neck like a feathery scarf.

"That does it!" Jan shouted, his voice cracking with sudden fear. "Abandon ship! Everyone overboard now!"

Jan helped Frieda, then Sarah, then Peter over the railing and into the sea. Then he straddled the railing himself, hesitating just a second as he looked down at the frigid water sweeping along under him. Vandervecken pulled out another pistol.

Jan leaped. He cleared the ship's side and plunged into the clear gray-green Antarctic water. Freezing, he swam with clumsy but determined strokes.

He was only dimly aware that others were swimming as well. When he at last reached his boat, his hands were so cold he could merely scratch helplessly at the side.

A bearded face looked down at him. "Ha. Much bedder now you not drown," said the sailor. The man grabbed Jan's arm and pulled him over the gunwale.

For a few seconds, Jan huddled with the others at the bottom of the boat. Frieda. Sarah. Peter. He hugged them all, grasping their hands, pulling them closer to his heart. The boat was packed with sailors, with Breyfogle already bellowing orders to get the rigging unsnarled and the sail up.

"So why the last-second panic?" Peter asked. "The curse is broken. He couldn't do much."

Jan shuddered, and not from the cold. "One curse is broken. But what about shooting the albatross? Didn't you ever read Coleridge?"

He pulled himself up to look over the side. Everywhere there was movement. Waves sparkled in the breeze, seagulls fluttered around the mast, clouds raced by high overhead.

In all this animation, only the Flying Dutchman remained motionless, sitting utterly and unnaturally still. . .as idle as a painted ship upon a painted ocean.