

Hekaba's Demon

by Sarah Prineas

My father's ship, *Hekaba*, was a lateen-rigged, rotten-hulled brigantine, manned mostly by superstitious Chinamen and Lascars. We ran a ragged trade route smuggling Malwa opium from Bombay to Canton.

The signs were auspicious as we set out. A brief morning rain had settled the heat of the day before, and a fresh breeze took us easily out of Bombay harbour and into the Arabian Sea. The journey was uneventful; we crept along India's western coast down to Alleppey, where we snuck into port to resupply.

The night was hot, humid, with no wind. *Hekaba* was rocking herself to sleep at anchor and most of her crew were ashore sampling the delights of the port's snake boats and twisty canals. My father was in his cabin with a bottle of whiskey for company. To distract the attention of nosy British East India Company officials, he'd taken on relatively innocent supercargo: missionaries on their way out to China to convert the heathen masses. They were safe in their bunks. I was aft on a watch no one else could be bothered to keep, listening to the creak of stays and the lap of wavelets against the hull, watching lantern light spill onto the oily swells, thinking about nothing in particular.

My reverie was interrupted by the hollow thunk of the dory against the hull, then the slight dips of the outboard ladder being climbed. A round face appeared over the taffrail. The first mate.

"What's going on, Chen?" I asked in Mandarin.

He swung a leg over and landed barefoot on the deck. "Passenger, Griffin."

Nothing unusual in that. Another passenger wouldn't make a difference. I nodded and leaned against the rail to watch.

The men followed Chen aboard, escorting into the circle of lantern light a veiled figure. As I watched her catch her balance on the rocking deck, her veil parted to reveal a smooth, brown cheek and a wickedly glittering green eye, which looked me up and down and then winked. "I am Daevas," she said in Hindi. Behind the veil her mouth curved into a smile. "And you're a handsome young sailor, are you not? Shall I barter with you for passage?"

"No. Not with me." I glanced at the first mate. "All right, Chen, take her to my father. But don't let the foreign devils get a look at her."

* * *

As the tide turned the next morning, we tacked out of Alleppey port. On this trip our passengers, besides Daevas the Malabar maiden, were the Goforths, father and daughter. He was a Presbyterian patriarch with a square-cut gray beard and plenty to say about fire and brimstone. A missionary, of course; true to his name, he'd been spreading the Word for years in Shangxi Province and had gone back to Edinborough to fetch his daughter from Bible school.

Emily Goforth was a complete mystery to me. At first I'd thought her a proper minister's daughter, but as she walked the decks with her father, I saw her sneaking keen-eyed glances from beneath her bonnet at the men as they, shirtless and singing, hauled up the anchor and hoisted the sails. She was blonde, smiling, glowing with health--a peach of a girl. But not for long, I feared. Inland China would do for her in no time, chew her up and suck out the sweet juice, leaving only the wrinkled stone behind.

Designed and created by [Tony Geer](#).

All works copyrighted by their respective authors and artists. All other content copyright 2003-2006 Lone Star Stories.

"Another Lonely Day" image copyright [Jamie Kelly](#).