

# The Golden Whip

## by Jay Lake

By all the saints and murders, if I'm going to lash myself in the hard-heart, it's going to be with a golden whip. Silver's for pussies and pretty boys with tattooed eyeshade and one ball lost to the pimper-man. The high-hats like titanium, rendered fibrous and braided into a coil sharper than a toothsome serpent and twice as louche as Cleopatra's twat. Poor folks do it with plastic, like they always have, retro-heads do it with leather like they always will.

Me?

Gold.

Good old fashioned riverbed riches a man with a tin pan and a decent shotgun could winnow out of God's country, at least back when God had a country. He's stateless now that the Vatican's gone retail and Mecca is a parking garage for the sandraces.

No, gold for my whip, gold for my heart, gold to pay me for the betrayals I've heaped on those around me. For the love of Me, anyone who'd sell himself for thirty pieces of grubby silver doesn't know the commodity market for warm snot.

A man's honor is always worth spot avoidupois.

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There's this thing that happens when you contract your happy ass to Mother Company. Docs come rolling in with blinking lights and a needle long as your forearm. Mostly for show, they could do it with cell-wall traction and biomagnetism and damned if you'd know better than you'd just been pinched by a table-elf down at Sally's Dirty Bar, but that needle says "serious" in a voice could draw blood off a street lamp.

You listen when doc plunges that thing into your chest. Well, maybe you do. I screamed like a girl until my teeth buzzed. Sooner be knifed with a nickelback shiv out of the hoverbays.

There's the priest-comporter reading rites and contract clauses over you, there's the recruiter grinning into his next bonus, there's two witnesses shagged out of the drunk box — never fear boys, you're next — then you're in with Mother.

Everything's easy after that. Which is kind of the point. Pain and focus, boy, pay attention. We'll never hurt you this much again. Unless you get out of line. Or we get bored. Or the wind blows north by northwest and Cary Grant comes stumbling through the corn, guns blazing from the summer sky.

They suck you in with a little bit of money and little bit of the warm and little of bit of plain old fashioned easy. After a while you don't know no better.

Lot of guys spend their lives that way, happy.

A few slip the noose and run for the riverbanks, diving into an acid bath hoping to swim faster than their muscles will slough away.

Thing is, after a while, there's people that like you, need you, love you, down there inside Mother Company. That needle becomes an old ghost, last memory of your life before. Now there's

dependencies and reflexive contracts and mutual-aids, tiers and territories of folk who might live or die on your simple error. Drop a decimal on a bulk protein trade? 3,700 dead in Delany-on-Mars. Rounding error in the water purification budget? Sepsis rages through Lower Kowloon like fleas through a dog pound.

What the hell, there's more people where they came from. Mother Company needs you, not them. You're part of Her.

After a while, you're running ops for a whole region, life support and basic trade and civil order, all rolling across your desk while nimble fingers rub your shoulders and it all seems okay.

Then one day some bastard with a Rousseau complex and a hairdo could stop air traffic walks in your office with the gleam of Enlightenment in his steel teeth and a ball of holy fire in his hand.

"Here," he says, hands it to you.

Nobody hands you shit doesn't belong, not past chimp security and four hundred thousand virteo cameras and the nanobath in the elevators.

You take it.

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High fall far falling green flowers exploding in showers of fractured glass pollen fire running in your veins like oil in an old Arab's dreams the satellites scream in their orbits from the pain of gravity what's left of you but a cavity open white skin and pale red insides besides the world is gone and your skull gleams pretty and pale in the desert night and you can see God up there in the sky His great watery eye unblinking as Mama's stare while grind out your first and last high up on the porcelain pillar who's a good boy shit and get a kiss and here's your needle Company man and what the hell ever happened to a simple life with a simple plan and you can see the damned stars and how they connect those red lines are the blood inside your eyes blooming like those fractured flowers until Mother Company unplugs you from Her neural net or you unplug Her from yours or the plugging is as mutual as ever it was between mother and son one long fuck begun with an extrusion when you weighed nine pounds and knew three words two of them bad but that's all you can say now something which translates around the wet rough burping as "help..."

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When that son of a bitch fed me the holy fire, I thought I wanted it. I didn't know what it was, but it looked good. Candy and babies, right? Or maybe candied babies.

By the time I found my ass and my hands again on the same stretch of real estate, forty thousand people had died and a tsunami was swamping Dili in the wake of a subaquatic disaster in the Sunda Strait. There were boys with zap guns and big long hooks standing over me. They looked worried.

"Sir?"

"I..." I couldn't get any further than help. These boys weren't about help. They were beyond it. I wondered why they hadn't killed me yet.

"We're going to have to ask you to leave."

That would probably be a good idea, I tried to say, but it came out in a slow slime of gravid bubbles.

Then there was a long march down a number of halls I'd never seen before, into corridors roped with data conduit and oxygen feeds, past rusted fetters bolted to grimy walls festooned with thin-scratched hashmarks, until they turned me out in a green clearing that stank of birdshit and rotten fruit.

"I..." That was one of those baby-words.

"Good bye, sir." The door shut into empty air and I was alone in the middle of a riot of life that would have put Darwin to shame.

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So there's a road out of anywhere, right? On an island you can build a raft. In the desert you can walk each night into the rising moon, sleeping your days away beneath a blanket of sand. But in the jungle...thickets of possibilities leading in great, vicious circles well-supplied with teeth.

I wondered as I walked each day, bereft of direction or intent but unwilling to rot in place, thinking about Mother Company. Did She cry for me in Her chrome-steel brain racks? What about my people? I had and did kill with a thought, spared and savaged entire tribes and nation-folk in the efficiencies of the market. Now I was...a man alone.

My chest ached where the needle had gone in.

At night the crying of my people kept me awake.

Birds rising over the morning jungle in a screeching feathered tide were all the news that was fit for me.

One day I worked a length of vine free, using rocks from a riverbank that only cost me a few leeches to fetch. I employed my handiwork to beat myself until my back bled. That felt better. Kind of like being at work.

With the pain came the holy fire. My veins sang.

"Walk on," I told a green-eyed cat that stared like a pagan god. It had hair the color of fire.

"Walk off," it said, but I didn't believe it.

Maybe the holy fire was talking to me.

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Three days later I saw the cat again. It lazed atop a cyclopean wall overrun with creepers and silver beetles the size of my hand. I showed my bloody vine, but the cat was not impressed. I tried to explain myself, but it would not listen.

"Go home to Mother," the cat said.

"No." Were people still crying for me, somewhere in the western Pacific?

"Go away."

"No."

The cat shrugged with the grace of its kind and rolled off the back of the wall, falling from my sight into the endless green void that is the jungle.

Where there's a wall, there's a way, I thought, and followed down the shadowed road the cat had shown me.

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When finally I found the beach, the Intros found me. Small men and women, wearing shark-leather loin cloths and necklaces strung with data storage beads.

"Company man," said one, a red-head who looked a hell of a lot like a certain cat. She had the same sparkle to her as the bastard who'd busted my office with holy fire all those...days...weeks...years ago?

"Still got wires in his head," said another. He'd been dark-skinned once, that one, but spent enough time underwater to stretch out, wrinkle up and go pale as a rotten grape. He jabbed toward me with a coral-headed spear, but it was a lazy, slow move.

"Mother talk to you at night?" the red-head asked.

I found my words, throat like sanded glass. "Just the cat."

She smiled and I was sure, though I already knew I'd never know.

"And the fire," I added. It was in my veins, strong as ever, though the jungle hadn't given it much to latch to except fractal noise and olfactory overloads. These Intros with their gear and their weird and the pounding sea behind them were bringing up the flames of the holy fire sure as any hydrogen leak.

"Let us in," she said.

For her, I would do anything.

I sold my people for a smile.

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Intros might be living in huts, but they got gear. Nice, organic gear runs on xylem matrices with diamond-seed nangates embedded. Slower than a whore's smile, but unhackable except with Monsanto's best.

Not much Monsanto down here on the shores of paradise. That's why it was still paradise.

They tied me down, fed me palm wine, doped me up, laid a hypno hook or twenty, wired me in off a triple sat-bounce through a black-sponge router, and hacked their merry way into Mother's western Pacific cores.

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You're the sum of your choices, the measure of your days. Some moldy old fucker said that once. Spray off the quoteserver, boys, because you've made a test pattern of eighteen percent of the terrestrial economy, shockwaves out to Titan. Hell, you even crashed Mercury's temperature futures exchange. You were the conduit for the greatest act of cultural sabotage since Ahmed Q. Khan gave the mullahs the bomb.

You were the judas goat for a bunch of Intros with a post-Luddite agenda and a hell of a lot of ambition.

Only one thing left for you to do now. Weave that whip of gold, smack-crack across the back, and go hunting the orange-headed cat and the man with the holy fire. Because you need more, more of both, or

you're going to die just like the millions you killed that day on the beach.

You're too big to kill, too mad to die, too old to live.

So where the hell are they?

If you could only find your way back into that jungle, you might know.