

Blood Wolf

The First Heroes New Tales of the Bronze Age

by Stephen Michael Stirling, 1953–

Published: 2004



In the opening volume of S. M. Stirling's Nantucket series, the Information Age found itself confronting—and entirely surrounded by—the Late Bronze Age of the thirteenth-century B.C. Even as guns, germs, and steel (not to mention three-masted barques, radio, and a money economy) bring about a completely different kind of Iron Age in the course of the novels, no one, not even the Nantucketers, must ever underestimate the timeless power of cunning.

His name was *Kreuha Wolkwos*—Blood Wolf, in the tongue of the Keruthini folk—and he was the greatest of all the warriors of his people, although still unwedded and barely old enough to raise a thick yellow down on his cheeks. Even before that fuzz sprouted he had been called a man in the *korios*, the war-band of the youths who spent the summer living like a wolf pack in the woods off what they could hunt and steal. Now even householders and the clan chiefs called him a man, for six heads of his taking—the oldest weathered down to a skull, the newest still ripe—were spiked to the lintel above his father's house-door. This year he had come to his full height, a finger's-span below six feet, rangy and long-limbed; agile enough to run out on the yoke-pole of a chariot while the team galloped, fast enough on his own feet to chase down deer and cut their throats with his knife. At a full run he could throw his narrow-bladed javelins through a rolling hoop of rawhide half a hundred paces distant, and in a wrestling bout few men could keep their shoulders off the ground once Blood Wolf's hands closed on them. At the Sun Festival he had thrown the sacrificial bull by its horns and then danced the night through by the side of the Spring Queen.

Two horses and eight cattle were his by *soru-rechtos*, booty-right, taken in lawful raids, besides sheep, bronze, cloth, and a girl who would be valuable if she lived to womanhood. Many men hated him for his toploftiness, but none had dared face him for some time. Two of those heads on his father's lintel were fellow-tribesmen, slain within the sacred wands after due challenge. His name was often spoken around the hearthfires, and all knew that—if he lived to be a householder—the ruler of the tribe, the High *Reghix*, would make him successor to the broad lands of his father. Then he would surely become a great chief whose name lived forever.

Right now that pride was lost in a dull misery as he scrambled to the lee side of the boat and puked helplessly, bringing up only a spatter of thin, bitter bile into an ocean that heaved gray and white with foam beneath a cold October sky of racing gray cloud.

His stomach had been empty since the first few minutes of the daylong voyage from the mainland to Alba, the White Isle. One of the boatmen pushed him aside as he adjusted a rope, and he was too weak to return a blow for the insult. Only when the fifty-foot length ceased moving beneath him did he raise his head.

„Get your arse out of our boat, wild-man,“ the crewman said.

His accent was strange to the young man's ears, and the order and sometimes the endings of the words he used, but comprehensible—many tribes distantly related to the Keruthinii folk had settled across the salt water in Alba, the White Isle. That didn't mean they were his friends; the opposite, if anything.

The seaman also scooped up the horsehide bundle that held Blood Wolf's goods and threw it on the planks of the dock. Two more grabbed the youth by the belt of his wolfskin kilt and half-carried, half-threw him out on worn oak-wood. That done, the crew ignored him as he crawled up the splintery surface toward his goods. Gradually the shaming weakness left him, and he could sit, then stand, spit some of the vile taste out of his mouth, begin to feel like a man once more. He had crossed the Channel to Alba; beyond Alba lay the Summer Isle, and beyond that the River Ocean, and the Island of Wizards, Nantucket.

First he looked to his weapons: round shield, spear, a light bronze-headed axe, and his precious steel knife, bought from Alban traders. Then he swung his pack onto his back and walked landward as he gazed around, trying hard not to gape at the magical city of Southaven. The shore tended north and south here, but little of it could be seen; great piers of timber framework filled with rock stretched out into the water. Beside them lay ships, more than he could count on fingers and toes both, many times more, their bowsprits looming over the broad cobbled harborside street thronged with folk and beasts and wagons. There were more folk here than in his whole tribe—six or seven tens of hundreds.

The ships' masts were taller than trees, their rigging and yards a spiky leafless forest, but that was nothing beside the ones out on the water with chimneys of *iron* sticking up from their middles and belching black smoke, and great wheels on either side churning up foam.

„True wizardry,“ he murmured to himself, grinning.

And in the tales, didn't the great warrior always come off well from his meeting with wizards? Either gaining their friendship and battle-luck, or overcoming and plundering them. He snuffed deeply—silt, fish, salt water, horse-manure, odd sulfur-tinged smoke, but less sweat and ordure stink than you'd expect—and looked along the street. At the thronging folk dressed more richly than great chiefs or tribal kings and more strangely than his eyes could take in; everything from homelike kilts and shifts to shameless string skirts on bare-breasted cloaked women, long embroidered robes, with the odd-looking trousers and jackets and boots that the majority favored, making a dun-colored mass. And at the nets of cargo swinging ashore, laden with sacks and bales and kegs of the Gods alone knew what unguessable wealth; at buildings of baked brick, some five times a man's height, with great clear windows of glass—and remembered the price the Keruthinii chieftains paid for a single tumbler or goblet of it...

His belly rumbled. It had been more than a day since he'd eaten, and that had gone to the Channel fish. It was a cool brisk day with a strong wind under scudding cloud, enough to awaken any man's appetite.

„*Stop, thief! Stop him!*“

Kreuha's head whipped around. The cry had been in En-gil-its, the tongue of wizards and wizard traders; he'd learned a little of it. And the call was repeated in half a dozen other languages, two of them close to his own:

„*Kreuk! Kreuk!*“ That was the ancient call to raise the hue-and-cry after one who stole by stealth.

A man came pushing through the crowd, vaulted a pile of barrels, leapt and scrambled over a four-wheeled wagon piled with bales of some dirty-white fibre; that gave him space to pick up speed, heading for the frayed edge of town south of the small-boat docks. He was holding a sword in his hand; Kreuha's eyes narrowed at the sight. The blade was like none he'd seen, slightly curved and as long as a man's leg, with a round gold-chased guard and a hilt made for two hands. Sunlight glittered on the bright metal, picking out a waving line in the steel a little back from the cutting edge.

Kreuha laid his pack and spears down and ran three bouncing strides to put himself in the man's way. The thief stopped, sweating and snarling; he was a few years older than the newcomer, shorter but broader, with a shock of dark-brown

hair and beard. The arms below his sleeveless singlet were thick with muscle and lavishly tattooed. But there was something about the way he stood, the sweat and desperation that made him blink—

„Give me the sword,“ Kreuha said, crouching slightly and spreading his hands so the man couldn't dodge past him. „And I will return it to the owner.“

And be richly rewarded, he thought. He'd heard of such weapons. The lords among the wizard-folk wore them. *This one is no warrior, only a thief.*

„If you try to strike me, I will kill you and take it,“ the Keruthinii tribesman continued calmly.

The man hesitated for an instant and then cut desperately, a sweeping two-handed roundhouse blow at waist level. It was clumsy, and Kreuha could see the prelude coming a full three heartbeats before the steel began to move, but it was hard enough to slice him to the spine if it landed—the more so as the blade looked knife-sharp. Kreuha leapt straight up as the sword moved, and it hissed like a serpent as it passed beneath the calloused soles of his feet. One long leg smashed out, and his heel slammed into the thief's breastbone with a sound like a maul hitting a baulk of seasoned oak and a crackling noise beneath that. The man was shocked to a halt, staggered backward with his face turning dark purple, coughed out a spray of bright arterial blood, and fell bonelessly limp.

Kreuha landed on his feet and one hand, then bounced erect. The sword spun away, landing on the cobbles and sparking as steel struck flint-rich stone. The tribesman winced at the slight to a fine weapon and bent to retrieve it, marveling at the living feel it had in his hands. He was considering whether he could take the head when a party of strangers came up, breathing hard from their run.

„Oh, hell,“ Lucy Alston-Kurlelo said, looking down at the body of the dead thief. He was extremely dead, and stank. „I *knew* I shouldn't have hired him.“

She turned to glare at the Southaven policeman. He spread his hands, including the one holding a revolver: „I offered you hands from the lockup willing to sign up rather than work off their sentences here. Ardaursson was a brawler and a drunk and a thief, and this looks like a clear case of self-defense. I didn't say anyone you bought out of lockup would be any good.“

Lucy shrugged. That was true enough; there simply weren't enough deckhands to go around, with demand so high; more so as the *Pride* was going far foreign, a long high-risk voyage, not schlepping back and forth across the Pond between Alba and Nantucket. The thief had been a fisherman by trade, worth any dozen farmers or dockside sweepings... if he'd been honest.

„No charges?“ she said.

„No charges. Plain enough case of taken-in-the-act; I'll file the report.“

And you did supply this piece of garbage yourself, she thought to herself. Instead of arguing with the peace officer—officials in Southaven had gotten very assertive since the local Town Meeting was admitted to the Republic two years ago, and though young, the policeman came of a prominent local family—she looked at the kilted youngster who'd kicked in the luckless thief's chest.

Pretty, she thought. In a chisel-faced blond athletic way. And he was obviously fresh off the boat from the European mainland. No east-Alban tribesman would still be carrying bronze-headed spears, even in the backwoods of the north; hell,

most of them were in trousers these days, some building themselves brick houses and sending their children to missionary schools.

Not from anywhere near the trade-outposts at the mouth of the Loire and Seine and Rhine, either, she thought.

At a guess—

„*Khwid teuatha tuh'on?*“ she said: What tribe is yours? Of what people do you come? „*Bawatavii?*“ she went on: „*Jowatani?*“

Those were the nearest coastal groups over the water, but he looked a little too raw for that. He'd been staring at her in wonder from the moment she showed up. Lucy was used to that; black people weren't common in Nantucket and extremely rare elsewhere. Her own birth-mother had been Alban, her father an American—a Coast Guardsman who later turned renegade and eventually ended up as a king on the upper Nile. One of her two adoptive mothers had been true coal-black, as opposed to Lucy's own light milk-chocolate, and there were still people in Alba who thought Marian Alston was some sort of spirit or demigoddess... though her deeds had more to do with that than her appearance.

„*Keruthinii teuatha eghom h'esmi,*“ he said, shaking his head and visibly gathering himself. „I am of the Keruthini folk.“ He drew himself up proudly: „Those who drove the Iraiina to Alba in my grandfather's time.“

She grinned; that had happened just before the Event landed the late-twentieth-century island of Nantucket in 1250 B.C.E. It'd been a typical tribal scuffle between two small bands of scruffy bandits. Evidently it was a legendary battle-of-the-heroes thing with this boy's people, now that the tribal bards had had a generation to work it over.

Then his jaw dropped a trifle more as he noticed she was a woman; he might not have at all, save that her jacket was open on a well-filled sweater.

Still, he recovered fairly well. „This is yours?“ he said, turning the *katana* and offering it hilt-first—and surprised her by saying it in gutturally accented but fairly good English. „You are from the Island of Wizards?“

Well, not just pretty, but fairly smart, she decided, carefully examining the edge—this was a pre-Event heirloom, carried back in time with the island of Nantucket to the Late Bronze Age—and then wiping it clean with a cloth before slipping it into the sheath whose lip rode over her left shoulder.

Not *just* an heirloom, though. The layer-forged metal had minute etchings along three-quarters of its length, where the salt and acids of blood had cut into the softer layers between the glass-hard edge steel. Only some of them were from her mother's time.

„It is and I am,“ she said. „Lucy Alston-Kurlelo, captain of the merchantman GREY LADY'S PRIDE...“ She saw his eyes open slightly at the family name; curse of having two famous mothers. „And I'm shipping out soon. Interested in a berth?“

For a moment the man's face—he looked to be in his late teens, considerably younger than she—grew keen. Then he looked wary.

„On... ship? Ocean?“ He pointed out toward the salt water. At her nod he raised his hands in a warding gesture and swallowed.

Lucy laughed and flipped him a gold ten-dollar piece. He caught the small bright coin and nodded with regal politeness. She sighed as she turned and led her people back toward the ship.

„Well, let’s go see what other gutter-scrapings, shepherdesses, and plowboys we can rustle up,“ she said to her companions—first mate and bosun and two senior deckhands; her younger brother Tim was supercargo and in charge back at the dock.

They nodded in unison. The Coast Guard kept the North Atlantic fairly free of pirates, and Tartessos did the same for the waters south of Capricorn and the western Mediterranean. You could take a chance and sail shorthanded on the crowded runs between here and home, and you needed to squeeze every cent until it shrieked to meet your costs even so.

Where the PRIDE was going, Islander craft were all too likely to meet locals who’d acquired steel and even gunpowder without developing any particular constraints on taking whatever they wanted whenever they could. You needed a crew big enough to work the guns and repel boarders; the extra risk and expense was what kept competition down and profits high on the Sumatra run and points east. It was also one reason she and her sister-cum-business-partner Heather never shipped together on these long voyages.

No sense in making *two* sets of children orphans with the same shower of poisoned blowgun darts.

The strangers departed while Kreuha was marveling over the gold-piece; he had seen copper and silver coins from Alba and the Isle of Wizards, Nantucket, but this was the first one of gold he’d ever held. He held it up to the fading light of afternoon; there was an eagle clutching a bundle of arrows and a peace-wreath on one side, and strange letters and numbers on the other.

One of the strangers had remained, a young brown-haired man in blue tunic and trousers, with a wooden club and one of the fearsome-wonderful fire-weapons at his belt—the awesome type called *revolver*, which let the bearer hold the deaths of six men in his hand. He pulled a metal whistle free and blew three sharp blasts on it.

„*Ual kelb soma krweps*,“ he said, to Kreuha in something close to the warrior’s own language: „To summon help with the body.“

Blood Wolf nodded, although he didn’t offer to help himself—dead bodies were unclean, and he didn’t know how he’d get a purification ceremony done so far from home. The man went on:

„I am... you would say, a retainer of my chief. A warrior charged with keeping order and guarding against ill-doers among the people. In English, a *policeman*.“

Kreuha’s brows rose. *That* was a duty he didn’t envy; you’d be the target of endless ill-will if you had to offend people as part of your duty. He’d never walked away from a fight, but now that he’d come to man’s estate he didn’t go looking for them, not *all* the time. His lips moved, as he repeated the word softly several times, to add to his store of En-gil-its terms.

„It’s also my duty to advise strangers,“ the armsman went on. „No slight to your honor, stranger, but it’s forbidden here to fight unless you are attacked.“ He looked at Kreuha’s spears. „How were you planning on finding your bread in this land?“

Kreuha drew himself up. „I am Kreuha Wolkwos, the Blood Wolf,“ he said. „Son of Echwo-Pothis, Horse Master; son of a chief who was son of a chief, and I am foremost among the men of war of my people. I come to find some great lord of the

wizard-folk who needs my arm and faith, so that I may win fortune and everlasting fame.“

The armsman—*policeman*—made a wordless sound and covered his brow and eyes with a hand for a moment. Then he sighed. „You think that, do you?“

„How not?“ Kreuha said, puzzled. „Already a lord... well, lady, mistress... from Nantucket itself wished me to follow in their fighting-tail. Surely I would quickly rise in any such band.“

„Oh, Captain Lucy,“ the policeman said, nodding. „Well, you *were* lucky to get that offer, and you'd probably see some fighting on the PRIDE. Hard work too, but she's run on shares.“ At Kreuha's look, he went on: „You get a share of the gain at the end of the voyage.“

Kreuha nodded—a lord always shared booty with his sworn men. But then he remembered the *voyage* here to Alba, and gulped again. „I cannot... not on the sea. A lord by land, yes.“

It was more than the memory of his misery; it was the *helplessness*. How could the Blood Wolf be mighty if his belly made him weaker than a girl?

The policeman grinned, the more so at Kreuha's black look. „Nobody ever dies of seasickness,“ he said. „They just wish they would—until it passes, which may take a day or two.“

He pointed out a building with a tall tower attached to it, a street or two back from the dockside. „That's the Town Meetinghouse. It's a hiring hall, too. If you can't find work, go there and mention my name: I'm Eric Iraiinisson. They can always find something for a strong back, enough for stew and a doss, at least.“ Sternly: „Remember also that here robbers are flogged and sent to the mines for many years, and robbers who slay or wound are hung up and their bodies left for the crows.“

Kreuha nodded with stiff dignity; just then two more men and a woman dressed alike in the blue clothes came up. They had a horse with them, and tossed the corpse onto its back with brisk efficiency.

„I have gold,“ he pointed out. „Cannot gold be bartered here?“

Eric Iraiinisson nodded. „While it lasts,“ he said.

Kreuha saw eyes upon him. This tavern was full of men who looked a little less alien than the smooth folk of the upper town; there he'd noticed stares and smiles at his dress and manner. Here there was a dense fug of sweat and woodsmoke from the hearth, and plain rushes on packed dirt below, and plain stools and benches. He had feasted well on beef roasted with some spice that bit the tongue, and beer that was good though strange. Now a man had offered to pay for his drink; he knew of coined money, but such was rare and precious in his tribe still, not something to be casually thrown about on an evening's bowsing. Still, the amber drink was *whiskey*, something that only the High Reghix had tasted at home...

„I will drink, if you will drink with me again afterward,“ he said. „Drink from my bounty. I have gold!“

Remember that whiskey is more potent than beer, he reminded himself. Still, it couldn't be much stronger than ice-mead, and his belly was full of bread and meat to sop it up.

„Arktorax thanks you,“ the man said, then grinned at him and tossed off the small shot-glass, breathed out satisfaction, then followed it with a long swallow of beer. Kreuha imitated the stylish snap of the wrist, throwing the amber liquid at the back of his throat.

„Ai!“ he wheezed a moment later, when he'd stopped coughing. „What do you make this out of, dragon's blood?“

„Barley,“ Arktorax laughed; he fit his name of Lord Bear, being bear-tall and thick. „It's made from barley. But if it's too strong for you—“

Kreuha's fist thumped the table. „By He of the Long Spear, nothing's too strong for a Keruthinii of the Wolf clan! I've drunk the vats dry and danced all night, at our festivals.“

He soothed his throat with a long draught of the beer. It made a pleasant coolness after the fire of the whiskey, but the flame had turned to a comfortable warmth by now.

„That's the problem with being a Keruthinii,“ he went on, signaling to the wench who served the tables. „You're so tough and hardy you can't get drunk.“

His new friend laughed long and loud. „Are you boasting, or complaining?“ he said, and tossed off his glass in turn.

Kreuha missed the considering look in his eye, and the glance he exchanged with the impassive figure behind the plank bar. Instead he laughed himself, until the tears ran from his eyes. The next whiskey went down far more smoothly than the first, and tasted good: there was a peaty, sweetish flavor to it he hadn't noticed the first time. That called for another beer, and when it came he stood, swaying a little.

„Drinks for all!“ he said. A roar of approval went up, bringing a flush of happiness to his cheeks. Everlasting fame was the warrior's reward. „Let no man say Blood Wolf son of Horse Master son of Stone Fist is a niggard with sword-won gold!“

„Sword-won?“ Arktorax said.

„Aye!“ Kreuha shouted. „Gold won by winning a sword!“ He was also accounted something of a poet, at home. „Listen and I will tell you of how I won it, bare-handed against a wizard blade—“

He was half-chanting it by the time he was finished, and men crowded around to slap him on the back and shout their admiration. *A fine lot, a fine lot*, he thought a trifle blurrily. His boon companion looked a little wary when he mentioned the black warrior-woman, but not everyone could be as stout in the face of the unknown as Blood Wolf. „—and so I came here, that men might know of my deeds,“ he said.

„So you're the one who killed Frank Athadaursson with one blow of his foot!“ a woman said admiringly. „You must be a *real* man, beard or no...“

Hours later he lay with his head on his hands in the quiet of the near-deserted tavern, giggling occasionally. His stomach threatened to rebel, but even that thought was funny... His eyes crossed as he watched his own reflection in the glass before him. It was that that saved him, an image of an arm raised behind him.

Reflex pushed him to one side, falling to the rushes of the floor as the small leather sack of lead shot cracked down on the beer-stained wood of the table rather than the back of his head. He lay gaping as the barkeeper turned and raised the cosh again, then lashed out with one foot. By purest luck that plowed into the fat man's groin, and he doubled over in uncontrollable response. Kreuha scrambled away on his backside, as the woman and his friend Arktorax—the man he'd thought was his friend—came at him with ropes and a canvas hood.

His back hit the rough brickwork of the wall, and he scrambled upright, lashing out left and right with his fists. Another man's fist thudded into the tough muscle of his belly, and he felt the night's drinking and the long-ago meal leave in a rush of sour bile. That saved him; Arktorax stepped back with an exclamation of disgust, and Kreuha turned and turned again along the wall, as if he were rolling down a slope. His hand found the latch and he fell forward with a splash into a muddy street under a thin cold rain that shook him back to the edge of consciousness. He rose, plastered with a thin layer of earth and horsedung churned to gray slime, and turned to meet the rush from the tavern, trying to scream out the war-howl of his clan.

Where is my axe? he thought. *Where—*

Shadowy figures rushed at him. He lashed out with a fist, head-butted an opponent who tried to grapple with him, then screamed with shocked pain at what that did to his drink-fuddled head. Blows landed on him in turn, many, more than he could begin to count and from all directions. He went down again, and feet slammed into body and head—feet encased in hard leather boots. Instinctively he curled himself into a ball and covered his head with his arms.

Blackness, shot through with the sound of a whistle.

Kreutha came back to consciousness slowly. He recognized the symptoms—splitting headache, nausea, blurred vision—of a bad hangover combined with being thumped on the head. The place where he woke was utterly unfamiliar; there were strange shouts, metallic clangs, stench. And bright light, light that hurt like spears in his eyes. Despite that he opened them—and saw a cage of iron bars not far away, with men inside gripping the metal with their hands. He bolted straight upright, letting the blanket fall away—

„Easy friend, easy!“ said a voice in his own language.

Blood Wolf looked around, blinking and squinting and holding up a hand against the light of the bright mirror-backed coal-oil lamps. The voice came from Eric Iraiinsson, still dressed all in blue, jacket and trousers. A hand rested on his revolver, and Kreutha forced himself to wariness. Then he noticed that he was *outside* the cage, unbound, and that a corridor led to a door that swung open and closed as folk passed by. A woman dressed in blue like the man sat behind a table, writing on many papers before her; even then Kreutha shuddered a little at the casual display of magic. The Alban traders he'd met had carried revolvers, some of them... but the knowledge of writing on paper had proved to be a weapon nearly as strong and far harder to understand. He'd heard that the priests of the wizard-folk would teach it to those who took the water-oath to their God. It might almost be worth it.

„You're safe here,“ the man in blue said. In English, he continued: „I'm chief policeman of the dockside station... in your language... hard to say. I guard the peace in this area. I found you in the street.“

I am *safe*, Blood Wolf thought; and with that the nausea came back, redoubled. It showed on his face.

„The bucket, use the bucket!“

It was a big wooden one, but already half full; he knelt in misery and then staggered erect when the last cupful of sour stomach-acid had come up; he was spending far too much time these days puking. That thought made him smile a little, a very little, as the policeman guided him back to the bench and handed him a blanket; Kreuha clutched it around his shoulders, and took the cup of hot steaming... something-or-other that he was handed. Sipping cautiously, he found it unlike any of the herbal teas wisewomen had given him for childhood complaints. It had cream in it, and a delicious sweetness without the musky flavor of honey, and under that a bitterness. Still, it warmed him and diminished the pain in his head and brought something like real wakefulness. The two tablets he swallowed with it seemed to help as well, for all that they were tiny, white, and tasteless; the effect was like willowbark tea, but stronger and quicker.

When he had climbed far enough out of wretchedness to talk, he looked up to find the man-at-arms also dealing with papers. Occasionally other armed men—and a few armed women—would come in, sometimes leading prisoners in the manacles known as *handcuffs*; many of the captives were drunk as well.

„Is it the custom here to make men drink and then fall upon them?“ he asked the... *policeman, that is the word.*

Eric Irainison laughed. „No, it's the custom to arrest men who break the town's peace,“ he said. „This is a seaport, and a fast-growing one, with many folk who are strangers to each other and many rootless young men. When ships come in and crews are paid off, we get a lot of traffic here.“

„I broke no peace!“ Kreuha snapped. „I was set upon dishonorably, by stealth!“

Eric nodded. „And so you're not under arrest. The three assaulting you would be, if I could find them—and evidence against them.“

„Ai!“ Kreuha's head came up; he was owed vengeance for this indignity. „I can give you faces, and names. Arktorax son of—“

He told all he knew, then scowled as Eric shook his head.

„I know those three,“ the policeman said. „They're *criminals*—“ he dropped the English word into the conversation, then paused to search for an equivalent „—evil-doers, breakers of taboo and custom. If you were to take them to court, they'd lie truth out of Creation. They're crimps, among other things. If you'd fallen asleep, you'd have woken up in the foc'sle of a sealer or a guano-boat, with a thumbprint on a contract and no way back until you'd worked a year for a pittance and daily swill.“

Fury flushed more of the pain out of Kreuha's system. „They sought to make a slave of me?“ he cried, springing erect, his hand reaching for a missing axe. „I will take their heads! I will feed their living hearts to the Crow Goddess! I will kill, kill—“

Eric's hand went to his revolver; Kreuha considered that, and the blood-debt he owed the man, and sank back.

„Not quite a slave,“ the policeman said. „If I could get them on that, I’d be a happy man; the penalty’s death. Or if I could prove crimping charges, that would be nearly as good—ten years’ hard labor. But they’re careful, the swine; they never pick on citizens and never do anything before witnesses. We don’t keep track of every stranger who wanders in here—we can’t.“

„Is no man here *man* enough to take vengeance on them?“ Kreuha said indignantly. „Or to call them doers-of-naught before the folk? I will challenge them to fight me between the wands—the men, of course, not the woman.“

The policeman chuckled. „You remind me of my grandfather,“ he said. „Or me as I might have been, if Nantucket hadn’t come out of time... Fighting to the death is against our law here. It’s treated like murder, killing-by-stealth. You could invite them to meet you outside our Township boundary.“ He pointed northward. „The Zarthani still allow death-duels. Arktorax and his friends won’t do it, of course. They’ll laugh at you, no more, and so would most other people.“

Kreuha stared in horror. „Did the wizard-folk take all honor from you Iraiina when they overcame you and ground you beneath their heel, then? You were warriors in our grandsires’ time, even if we prevailed in the end.“

To his surprise, the policeman’s chuckle turned into a full-throated laugh. „You do remind me of my grandfather’s grumbles,“ he said, then held up a hand. „No offense. No, we fled here after you put defeat upon us, took in the Nantucketer renegade Walker, and he led us to war and yet more defeat, and then the Nantucketers did something far more... *drastic*—that was in English—„more *powerful*, you might say, than grinding us down.“

Kreuha shivered, imagining the vengeance of wizards. „What?“

„They lifted us up again, helped, taught us their faith and all their secret arts.“ He pulled a silver chain around his neck, showing a crucifix. „My father they took to Nantucket—he was young, our chief’s nephew and heir—and the sons and daughters of many powerful men—and sent them to their... *schools*, places of learning. My father lived for years in the house of the Republic’s chief like one of his own sons. When he saw all that they had, how could he be content to sit in a mud-floored barn and think himself grand because it was the biggest barn? And so he sent for teachers and missionaries, and... well. *My* sons could be Chief Executive Officers of the Republic, if they desire to go into politics.“

The conversation had mostly been in something close to Kreuha’s tongue, which Eric spoke easily enough. The young warrior noted that when the policeman spoke to his own subordinates—who must be his own tribesfolk, or mostly—he used English.

He shivered slightly, he who had never known fear before a mortal foe. *Mighty wizardry indeed, to make a whole tribe vanish as if it had never been.* Then he shook his head. That was an Iraiina problem, not his. Or perhaps not a problem for them either.

„I thank you for your courtesy to a stranger,“ he said formally and began to rise.

Eric reached over and pushed him firmly down again with a hand on one blanketed shoulder. „It’s a cold wet night to go out with nothing but a kilt—and if you are truly grateful, you could help me deal with that God-damned crimp and his gang.“

Kreuha’s eyes went wide. „I thought you said—“

„I said you couldn't chop them up with a war-axe in fair fight,“ the other man replied. „But we in the Republic have a saying that there is more than one way to skin a cat.“

Slowly, as Eric outlined his idea, Kreuha's smile matched that of the man across from him. If the wizards of Nantucket had taught the Iraiina all their arts, then they must be a crafty, cunning, forethoughtful crew.

I like it, he thought. Aloud: „Tell me more.“

„Arktorax!“ Kreuha called jovially.

The little tavern was half empty on this afternoon; with the tide beginning to make in a few hours, crews would be back on their ships and fishing boats, and most ashore were at work. The big hearth on the inner wall had a low coal fire burning, and two big pots of stew simmering on iron hooks that swung out from the chimney wall. The tables were littered but mostly vacant, their few occupants looking to be oldsters or idlers, and a harlot or two.

Arktorax was sitting with a cluster about him, throwing dice from a leather cup; he rose, his expression a little wary, one eye puffed up and discolored. Long greasy blond hair swirled about his face as he turned to face Kreuha, carefully putting his back to the wall without seeming to hurry about it.

„Ah, I see you took some blows also,“ Kreuha said. „Shame and eternal shame to me that I was too drunk to ward you—or myself. Between the whiskey and the crack on my head, I don't even know how badly I did! But I did remember I left my gear with your friends here.“

He seated himself, and Arktorax took the bench across the table, waving a hand. A wench—it was probably the same one who'd helped to befool him last night—brought a plate with a loaf of bread and lump of cheese, and two thick glass steins of foaming beer. The barkeeper called her over, and after a moment she returned with his spear, axe, dagger and bundle of goods. They might be wealth in the Keruthinii lands, but here they were only a pittance of scrap metal.

Kreuha made himself smile as he lifted the stein. In daylight, he could see what a shabby den this was—his mother would never have allowed rushes this fusty or garbage-strewn—but the crofters and gangrels here drank from glass mugs! And the beer was better than any his father brewed, as well. For a moment he saw himself as this Arktorax did, as a woods-running savage to be plucked and sold.

No, he thought. *Lord Bear here thinks he has fallen on a sheep in a pen. He will find it's a wolf—a Blood Wolf.*

„The police took you off,“ Arktorax said, relaxing a little and cutting a slab of the bread and cheese. „Officer Iraiinisson, that would be.“

„Yes,“ Kreuha said, and scowled with rage. It was a genuine enough expression; the other man didn't need to know it was directed at *him*. He went on, his voice rough:

„And threw me in a cage full of vermin, and barked questions at me as if I were some thrall to be thrashed for not shoveling out the byre! By He of the Long Spear, by the Crow Goddess, I swear I will have my vengeance for last night's work!“

Arktorax nodded. „He's given to questions, is our officer Iraiinisson, and no mistake,“ he said genially. „You told him all, I suppose.“

Kreuha grimaced. „I did not, not even what little I knew. I am not a spear-captive, to be kicked and cuffed. And he said he would not let me leave this place, so long as I did not tell him what he would know!“

„There’ve been complaints about him in the Town Meeting more than once. I complained, the last time he ran me in on suspicion—and had to let me go,“ Arktorax said. „He’s had a feud with me for years, the son of a pig, but he and his kin have too many votes behind them.“

„Why don’t you kill him, if he’s defamed your honor before the folk-moot?“ Kreuha said. „I would give much to see his blood.“

The big burly man looked at him blankly for a moment; they were speaking the same language, more or less, but it was as if Arktorax had just heard words without meaning to him. He smiled, shrugged, and switched to English:

„Was your mother a whore by choice, or did her father sell her?“

„I’m sorry,“ Kreuha said, with an effort at self-control greater than he’d needed to remain motionless on night ambushes. Eric had warned him they’d probably test him so. „I speak none of the wizard tongue.“

Arktorax chuckled. „I asked if you would like me to assist in your vengeance,“ he said smoothly, with a genial grin.

„I would like that very much,“ Kreuha said. „Very much indeed.“

The planning went swiftly. This time Kreuha turned down whiskey; that would not arouse suspicion, not after last night. He did grumble a little, as the urchin Arktorax hired sped off toward the police station and they left the tavern, the barkeeper and the woman in tow.

„Can you shield me from the blades of his kin?“ he asked. It wasn’t a question he would have made, or at least put that way, on his own.

„Just this way—“ Arktorax said.

The building they entered was large and dim; empty as well, up to the high beams that held the ceiling. Mysterious piles of boxes and barrels hid much of the floor, stretching off into dimness.

„Yes, of course, my friend,“ he went on, clapping Kreuha on the shoulder. „You will vanish from this place as if you had never been.“

The fat man chuckled, and spoke in English: „Just as we planned; Captain Tarketerol will be most grateful.“

Kreuha smiled and nodded, the skin crawling between his shoulders. That was a Tartessian name; the wizard-folk of Nantucket kept no thralls, but the men of the far southern kingdom most assuredly *did*. Perhaps the villainy of these three was worse than Eric had thought... which was very good.

„And Officer Iraiinisson will be dead,“ Arktorax said. „We three can swear you were with us—and that’s the truth, isn’t it?“

He laughed, and then there was a long while of tense waiting, until a knock came at the door. The woman swarmed up a ladder to peer down at the doorway, and then turned to give a signal: the policeman was alone. That had been likely anyway, since there were only a score of the blue-clad armsmen in Southaven.

„Kreuha Wolkwos?“ Eric Iraiinisson’s sharp voice came through the boards.

„I am here,“ Kreuha said, taking stance in an open space not far from the portal.

The light was dim and gray, through small windows high up around the roof, but there was enough for someone who’d hunted deer and men by moonlight.

„And the Blood Wolf is ready to speak as you wished,“ Kreuha went on.

The door opened, letting in a spray of light along with a mist of fine rain. Kreuha poised with his spear, and the policeman staggered back—

„Kill!“ Arktorax shouted, pushing him with a heavy hand between the shoulders. „What are you waiting for?“

Kreuha dove forward, rolling around the spearshaft and flicking himself back erect, facing the man who'd pretended friendship. The Keruthinii grinned like his name-beast and bayed laughter that might have come from his clan totem indeed.

„I am waiting for you to put your head in the rope,“ he said—in English, thickly accented but fluent enough. „Arktomertos,“ he added, in a savage play on the man's name: *Dead Bear*.

The crimp roared anger, turned, snatched up a barrel and threw it. That took strength; it was heavy, and the policeman dodged, falling backward into the street. When the wood staves struck the thick timber uprights of the door they cracked open, and fine-ground flour exploded in all directions. The fat man who'd been Arktorax's henchman turned to flee; Kreuha's arm cocked back as he squinted through the dust, then punched forward with smooth, swift grace. The flame-shaped bronze head took the barkeeper between the shoulders and he fell forward with the spearshaft standing up like the mast of a ship sailing to the ice-realms where the spirits of oathbreakers dwelt.

That left Arktorax. The big man drew a broad-bladed steel knife from beneath the tail of his coat and lunged, holding it underarm and stabbing upward in a stroke that would have opened the younger man like a fish filleted for the grill. Kreuha bounded back with panther ease beyond the reach of the blow, his hand unslinging the bronze-headed axe slung over his back as, for the first time since he'd set foot on the boat that brought him to Alba, he felt at ease: here was something he understood.

Arktorax wailed as he stumbled forward, drawn by the impetus of the failed stroke. The keen edge of the bronze skittered off his knife and gashed his forearm. He dropped the knife and tried to catch it with his left hand; Kreuha struck backhanded, then again, and again, smiling.

He was holding up the head when Eric Iraiinsson came through the door—this time with his revolver drawn. He swore in English, then by the hooves of the Horse Goddess.

„I didn't mean you to kill them!“ he said at last. „We were to capture them for trial—“

„You didn't mean to kill them,“ Kreuha grinned. „I did, Eric son of the Iraiina—and ask your grandfather why, some day.“

The policeman shook his head. „This means trouble.“

„Didn't you say your law allowed a man to fight in self-defense?“ Kreuha said. *No. I can't keep the head*, he decided regretfully; he did spit in the staring eyes before tossing it aside, and appropriating the dead man's knife and the contents of his pockets.

„Yes... but there's only one witness, and I'm known to have accused him before,“ Eric said. „It could be trouble for me as well as you—he does have kin, and friends of a sort here.“

Kreuha grinned. „Then let me not be here,“ he said. „I’ve been thinking of what you said earlier.“

Eric looked at him, brows raising. „Now that’s forethoughtful,“ he said. „Maybe you’ll go far, young warrior. If you live.“

„All *right*,“ Timothy Alston-Kurlelo said.

Lucy and her younger brother both stood in the forward hold, watching a cargo-net sway down. It dangled from a dockside crane, which made the rate of descent something she needed to keep an eye on—if they’d been using one of the PRIDE’s spars as a derrick, she’d have trusted her deck-crew.

Two sailors had ropes on the net and were guiding it to the clear space at her feet; orderly stacks of other goods rose fore and aft, covered in tarpaulins and tightly lashed down. The early morning air was cold; the first week in November was usually chilly and raw here in southern Alba, and she could scent the faint mealy smell of snow.

„I’ll be glad to get out of the harbor,“ she said, mentally running over the list herself.

Simple goods for the raw-native trade: spearheads and axe-blades, saws and hammers, kegs of nails, chisels, drills, printed cotton cloth, glassware and ornaments, cheap potato vodka. Wind-pumps and ore-breakers and stationary steam engines for the mining dredges Ellis & Stover had set up out east these last five years; treadle sewing machines and corn-shellers and cotton-gins, threshing engines and sugarcane crushers for the Islander settlements in the Indian Ocean... She took a deep satisfied sniff of the smells, metal and oil and the pinewood of boxes and barrels. Even the bilges were not too bad; the PRIDE had been hauled out for complete refitting in the Fogarty’s Cove shipyards on Long Island not four months ago.

„Won’t we all,“ her brother said; he was a slim dark young man in his teens, chin blue-black with stubble despite his youth, holding his clipboard with a seriousness that made her smile.

„This is the last of the chocolate,“ Tim said as the net creaked to the decking.

Longshoremen sprang to unhitch it and begin stacking the cargo under the direction of the bosun and his mates; they knew the captain’s fanatical insistence on neatness and having everything precisely in place. She grinned inwardly; that was another reason she and Heather didn’t ship together if they could avoid it. She drove Heather crazy by being finicky, and Heather’s blithe confidence that everything would come right in the end with a lick and a promise infuriated *her*, the more so since it seemed to work about as well as her methods instead of resulting in the immediate ruin it should. They’d been raised like twins—they were the same age almost to the day, as close as they could figure it—and loved each other dearly, as long as they didn’t have to watch each other work too closely.

It’s a very good thing Alston-Kurlelo Shipping and Trading has three merchantmen and a headquarters to run, now, she thought.

Lucy nodded to Tim, then sprang and planted a foot on the hook of the line that had held the cargo net and a hand on the cable. A man on deck whistled and waved, and the line jerked upward. She judged her distance easily as her head came above the hatch coaming, then jumped down to the deck, her mind on her

return cargo. Tin, of course—alluvial tin washed from the streams was cheap enough to compete with the hard-rock mines here in Alba, with their high fixed costs. The West Alba Mining and Smelting Corporation had annoyed everyone during the long years it had a virtual monopoly.

Hmm. Can't expect more than a few hundred tons ready for loading. What else? There was always market for teak, but it was bulky in relation to its value. Would it be worth another thousand miles of easting to top up with cinnamon and cloves in the Celebes, then return via the Horn? If she did that, she could make a brief stopover on the coast of Peru; the locals there had silver in the ingot, and cocoa, and some excellent handicrafts... *Best keep a careful eye on prices via radio.* That helped only so much, though. You still had to take months covering distance.

The deck was busy too, with sailors making all secure for their departure on the evening tide. The mates and the senior hands were busy as well, showing newcomers how to coil a line, or shoving them into position to clap onto a rope and haul. There was an occasional foot to a backside as well; she frowned, but there wasn't much alternative until the raw hands learned enough to be useful. Until then everyone was doing their own work and half the trainees' as well, and there weren't as many even for simple pull-on-this as she'd have liked. Another group were being shown down the line of guns bowsed up against the bulwarks, sleek blue-black soda-bottle shapes, thirty-two-pounders bought surplus from the Coast Guard a year ago. She suppressed a wish for a Gatling; that would eat half the voyage's profits, and she had over a hundred employees, two children, and four nieces and nephews to support.

„All's well, Mr. Hands?“ she called to the master-gunner.

He turned and touched a knuckle to his forehead. „As well as can be expected, ma'am. Arms drill as soon as we make open water? These handless cows—“

„A week or two after,“ she replied. „When they can be trusted to go aloft and reef.“

She was *very* unlikely to meet a pirate before then, but sailing into a bad blow was entirely possible. And when she'd reached the Roaring Forties and started to run her easting down before the endless storms... then she wanted every jack and jill able to hand, reef, and steer.

„In the meantime, signal the tug we're ready,“ she said, as the crew began to batten down the hatchway. „Prepare to cast off!“

A noise on the docks drew her head up. A man was running down the quay, dodging carts and goods and passersby; a young man, with long fair hair and a mainlander's leather kilt. Her eyes widened slightly. *That's the woodsrunner, the Keruthinii*, she thought. And despite the recent rain, looking rather ghastly with flour-paste; doubtless there was a story behind that. He dashed for the gangway where crewmen were unfastening the lashings.

„Belay that!“ she called, as they snatched up cargo-hooks or put their hands on their belt-knives. „Let him on board!“

She went over to meet him; her first mate fell in behind her, and a pair of the older hands with belaying pins from the rack around the mainmast, held casually but ready. He bounded up the plank with a stride that made him look as if his legs were rubber springs, then halted and cried her hail.

„What are you doing on my ship?“ she asked quietly.

The young man—*Blood Wolf*, she dredged out of her mind; typical melodramatic charioteer-tribe name—was breathing deeply but easily, and he grinned with a cocky self-confidence.

„I came to see if you still wish my allegiance, chieftainness,“ he said. „For I wish to leave this *dunthaurikaz*, and see far lands.“

Lucy snorted, hooking her hands in the brass-studded belt she wore over her long sea-sweater. „I’m not taking you on board if you’ve broken Southaven law,“ she said.

He offered her a piece of paper. She snorted again; it had the municipal stamp, and the Republic’s eagle; she recognized Eric Irainisson’s handwriting and signature, as well. Apparently the youngster wasn’t wanted... exactly.

And I could use another hand. This one looks to be quick-thinking as well as strong.

„It’s fifty cents a day and your keep,“ she said, and looked him over. „Eight months to a year round-trip and a share of the take to depend on how you’re rated when we make the chops of Nantucket Channel and pay off. And you do what you’re told when you’re told, or it’s the rope’s end or the brig. Understood?“

He grinned again. „Command and I obey,“ he said with a grandiloquent gesture, then went down on one knee and placed his hands between hers.

She knew the ceremony; this wasn’t the first time she’d gone through it, either.

„Mr. Mate!“ she called.

„Ma’am?“

„Sign this man on; rate him ordinary and see he’s issued slops and a duffel.“
Louder: „Prepare to cast off!“

The crew bustled about; Lucy went up the treads to the quarterdeck, taking her place beside the wheel, with the helmsman and pilot. She looked southward, to where the gray water of Southaven Water waited, and the world beyond. Down on the deck, Blood Wolf was looking in the same direction, and she could hear his clear, delighted laughter.

