



The Magician of Monkton Pier
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by
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Joshua didn't like towns - in his experience as a waterman they were not to be trusted: too many guns and drugs and policemen, who were thieves, and soldiers, who were also thieves, and thieves who were,... well,... just thieves. He also didn't like the way the canals always stank around towns. It was as if all the rubbish and neglect just ran off the pavements and fell in there to rot.

But you couldn't avoid them for long. The canals had been dug way back in the days before there were good roads, with the aim of linking all the towns together. They wandered far and wide through the green bits inbetween, and if you were a long haul boatman like Joshua, not many days would pass before you had to navigate a stretch through town.

The Mattie Rat seemed to sense the town's nearness; Joshua fancied he could feel a certain tingle through the tiller as she nosed her way up the water. She ran smooth and quiet as always, but she had a long memory, this old boat, and towns were always trouble. He'd no valuables on board, at least nothing that was likely to interest the militias. There were some sacks of receipted mails he'd picked up that he could exchange for cash at the post-office. The militia might seize those of course, cash them in themselves, but it only amounted to a handful of coins, which was fine for an old greener like Josh, but to a high spending town militiaman, it would hardly be worth the trouble. It depended how desperate they were.

Mattie rounded a long bend and came gradually upon a line of Anglefolk all seated stock-still on the towpath. They were cloaked and cowed like monks, and Josh noted how slow they were to raise their long fish-poles, as if they were reluctant to let him pass at all. You could always tell what sort of place you were near by the manners of the Anglefolk. He flashed the old peace sign as he slipped by but they remained tight-faced and he could almost feel their smouldering resentment as Mattie broke up the mirror calm water into which they'd been gazing. Sure, he thought: Monkton was getting closer now.

But Mattie was such a gentle boat, too slow to disturb the fish and spoil the Anglefolk's catch, and their resentment was a mystery. She was a solar electric, and passed by without so much as a puff of poison - and no toxic batteries either, so she would only run in daytime. Sure, she was the kindest, quietest of boats but that line of stone faced Anglefolk didn't

see it that way and he guessed they'd be grinding their teeth long after he'd gone.

He was glad when he'd slipped clear and could no longer feel their eyes boring into the back of his neck. They were always good barometers, the Anglefolk, and he predicted a bothersome stretch ahead, but for now the way seemed uncluttered and he gave a sigh, settling into the feel of the water once more. Then he looked up and spied what he thought was a bundle of rags on the towpath. At first he just took it for a pile of town-trash, but as he came nearer he realised it was a woman lying face down in the mud. He eased Mattie down a notch so they were just drifting by, and he took the time to get a good look.

She could be dead, he thought - it was pretty common these days for folks to lie out where they'd dropped for days on end, and it was usually only the stink that motivated people into doing something about it. He saw she had a thick bush of hair all tied with strips of multicoloured ribbon. She had the look of a N'ager, he thought, with her old-time Romany clothes and her bangles and beads and such. She hadn't been dead long, either, or she would have been relieved of her things, clothes and all. Hand made vestments like that were exceedingly rare: nicely needled, and rich-looking, they would have fetched a good price at any market, in town or green - not that he considered it himself: Josh was an old-time waterman and certain types of small-trade were simply not right.

It made him nervous, slowing up so close to town: there was only just enough daylight to see him clean through all the filth. If his calculations were correct, dusk would fetch him up at the Red Rock moorings, out in the green on the other side of Monkton, a cosy waterside inn and the conversation of fellow boatmen - maybe even a song and a lively fiddle-tune to end the day.

But you couldn't just leave a woman face down in the mud, whether she was dead or not.

Mattie slosed to a halt and Josh began growling curses, not sure what he was supposed to do. He stepped ashore and pulled the stern in tight, making ready with the mooring pin when a figure seemed to materialise from the bushes. It was a long-haired guy, youngish, none too clean and kind of stinky. He wore beads and ribbons and things, and he had a medieval look about him. Sure, thought Josh, another N'ager, or maybe just a vagrant.

"You help me, man?"

The N'ager fingered him the peace sign, which Josh always trusted to be genuine, but there was something about this scrawny mutt that didn't quite add up. And anyway, he was too close to Monkton now for any of this to be good news.

"What's up, son?"

"My bitch, she dun fell down."

"Your bitch?"

Joshua thought he meant his dog.

"Yea. She dun be sick or summat."

The bundle of rags stirred, and Joshua realised the N'ager meant the woman.

"Bin oofin' for days man. No jack-bit, see?" He gestured to his mouth in case Josh didn't understand the local vernacular. "No food. Catch me?"

The woman sat up slowly. True, she didn't look too good: she was pale and boney, but a long way from being dead. It was a trap of course, the oldest in the book, and he'd fallen for it. But N'agers weren't known for being thieves - most likely they were just tired and desperate for a ride.

He laughed out loud at his foolishness.

"Could have just stuck out your thumb," he said.

They feigned innocence.

"Never mind. Where are you gentle-folks heading?"

"Tut pier, man."

"Monkton Pier?"

"Yea, gun be a gathrin' there tuneet."

"I thought you N'agers didn't care much for towns."

"Aye, but big gathrin' there alt same. Gun be reet spesh, man. Reet spesh."

They couldn't be real N'agers, thought Josh, not hitching *into* town. Maybe they were just bored city types seduced by the eco-green-scene, and now they were trying to make their way home. But the accent sounded genuine, and this guy really hadn't washed in months. Her neither.

"I'll be passing the pier," said Josh. "You can ride up on the front deck."

"Ah,... blessins man. Badger's mi name."

"I'm Josh. Does your,... um,... lady want some help?"

"Na, 'erl be reet, now. All juss toss her over. Blessings, man. Bitch dun be called Squirrel - 'ers a total nut, but reet gentle like. We's be no bother to ya."

"Hop aboard."

Squirrel managed a half smile as Badger helped her up. There was a look of guilt there too, he thought, which meant she was either sorry for the deception, or there was more trouble to come. She was a tall woman, age hard to guess, maybe thirty, maybe forty, too old for a N'ager really, to old to be Badger's woman - his mother maybe? She was handsome though,... and her clothing gave her an air of something else, something very fine indeed.

Joshua bit his lip. This wasn't good at all.

"There's a cabin forward," he said to Badger. "Put Squirrel down there. Better she stay sick, understand, and out of sight. There'll be militia up ahead and right now she's the only thing of value this boat's carrying. They might think she's worth some ransom. You catch me?"

"I catch you, man. Al keep 'er 'ed down, like."

Badger looked worn out, bedraggled and helpless, like a ragged clown - an easy target for some cruel baiting. In Monkton he'd most likely be set upon at the first street corner, and when they found out he'd not got a bean on him, they'd just slit him for wasting their time.

"Are you absolutely sure you want dropping off in town?"

Badger nodded, though he looked far from certain. "Godda ged tut pier, man. It's in me mind, see?"

"Okay," said Josh, though in truth the N'ager wasn't making any sense at all. Maybe he was stoned. "Any mush on you?"

Badger felt in his pockets. He'd been out collecting that morning and produced a handful of wild Brown Cap. It was in season just then and though it had been illegal in the old days, it was considered a pretty tame hallucinogen now. Also very few people had the eye to tell it apart from all the other mushrooms that would kill you, so it wasn't exactly well known on the urban drug scene. Still, the militias didn't like people bringing in their own stuff, not when people could be buying imported poppy from them.

"Share dis wid ya, and blessings."

"No, you don't understand. You'd better lose it. Monkton's a *really* rough town these days, and militias don't operate to any rules that I can follow. We don't want to give them any cause to make things difficult. Catch me?"

Badger gave a resigned nod, and tipped out his pockets into the cut. "Catch you good, man."

"There's some jack-bit down in the galley, you and Squirrel, help yourself to what you need."

Josh could always find more food, and anyway you always shared what you had with others who needed it more. It was simply the code, and most greeners, especially N'agers would have known that, but Badger looked surprised, almost disbelieving.

"Preciate it man."

As Mattie pulled away, Josh began to wonder. There was definitely something odd about this pair, but it needn't concern him: it was only a short stretch to the pier and then they'd be gone.

There were militiamen on the Marsden Bridge. This creaky structure carried the pot holed remains of the westbound highway and marked the outer boundary of Monkton's urban sprawl. It was an area of old factories, and scrappy warehouses, built in better times and now used for storing all manner of black-market sundries; you could tell by the number of militiamen lurking behind the wires. In most towns they'd cornered the market in currency, fuel, drugs, and since the reservoirs had gone rancid they also made a fair living selling bottled water as well, which Joshua guessed they filled up from filthy taps anyway.

He approached the bridge at full throttle, which for Mattie was about seven miles an hour, and he didn't look up. This was the best way, he'd found: ignore the bastards 'til they hollered, or put a gun in your face. Bullets were expensive after all, and indiscriminate rakings by Klashers were rarely wasted on unarmed watermen.

The Westgate militia wore black shirts and blue jeans and though they carried chrome-plated Klashers, Josh reckoned they were just for show. Their weapon of choice was a big knife. Most of the killings in that part of town involved slittings or hackings, but he tried not to dwell on this as Mattie nosed her way under the bridge. He caught a reflection in oily waters of a stocky militiaman watching him from above, dead eyed and bored, muttering into a mobile. The next bridge, then: Platt Lane; that's where they'd be stopped.

The backs of warehouses reared up, taking the light, casting deep shadows and the Mattie Rat slowed at once as her photocells were starved of light. Josh hated it - it was like she was dragging weed or something and towns were always full of shadows like this. It was as if they loved making the old girl get on her knees and crawl. Without at least a bit of daylight she wouldn't run, and if darkness came on, they'd have to moor up and camp, town or not. He hoped not. The last time he'd overnighted in a town cut had been out Salford way, a few years back. He'd woken to find all the locks had been tested. Mattie had been tag-sprayed stem to stern, and crapped on for good measure.

He shuddered.

They were coming up on a long straight, so he locked the tiller and leaped onto the cab-roof with a broom to sweep fallen leaves from the photocells. She was a long, lumbering boat, seventy feet of wood and iron, and every photon counted.

The Platt Street bridge was an ugly hunk of cracked, tag-sprayed concrete, all meaningless words dribbled by meaningless, brainless town-crazed kids. Sure enough there was a blackshirt on the towpath with a chrome plated Klasher on his hip, and a big knife strapped to his leg. As the Mattie sloshed up, he stuck out an arm and waved them down.

It was always the way, he thought. They always stopped you at the second bridge, as if they thought a boat like this could turn and make a run for it. Dum-nuts! Navigating Mattie was like threading a stick down a pipe, and most people could run faster than he could make her go.

He flashed the peace sign, but the militiaman didn't respond and that was never a good omen.

"Where are you bound?" he called.

Joshua throttled down, hoping he wouldn't have to stop. "Cruising up to Red Rock." He replied.

"Oh yea? Well pull in here while I check you out."

Now, Josh knew that only the police had the legal power to stop and search, but the police didn't run the towns any more - not that the police were any better than the militias these days.

He feigned deafness. "Eh?"

The Klasher was raised and Joshua cut the motor at once, bringing Mattie in gently. There followed an awkward silence while the militia-man sized her up. She was a big craft, and curiously painted in that

curly, old fashioned way. Maybe he was thinking of commandeering her, but she was too narrow and too slow for anything he'd have in mind. Eventually he wrinkled his snout in disdain and leaped aboard. He was a big grinning tub of a man and Joshua sensed the menace in him.

"Not stopping in town then?"

Josh shook his head. "Just going to drop some mails, that's all."

"And your friend there?" The militiaman nodded forward to where Badger lounged, looking about as innocent as a kid hiding a crafty fag in his pocket.

"He's a hitcher. I picked him up a mile or so back. I'm dropping him off at the pier."

"Hitcher got a name?"

"Badger."

"Real name, I meant."

"Well, like I said. I just picked him up. You know what these N'ager's are like: they call themselves all sorts of things. He probably doesn't even have a registered name. Why don't you ask him?"

The militiaman sighed and his expression soured. Another black-shirt peered down from the bridge, speaking into his mobile. There was obviously no rush, and they'd been known to stretch this game out all day. Joshua peered anxiously at the sun. It was on the meridian now, the tide of its energy about to turn.

"You'll need to pay a tax if you want to stop in town."

"I won't be stopping overnight - just long enough to drop the mails."

"You don't understand, water-brain. The rules have changed. You pay to stop, not just to camp."

"Since when?"

The militiaman smiled menacingly. "Since this morning."

Ah. A simple bribe, then. "But I have no money," said Joshua. "We don't use it on the water. You catch me?"

The militiaman looked at him darkly.

"Sorry," said Joshua.

It was ridiculous! Everyone knew that boatmen didn't use cash,... well not much anyway. If you wanted to extract a bribe you stopped a

suit in a four-by, not a Waterman and a N'ager in a solar-powered boat! But then you didn't need brains to qualify for the militias.

"You'll have to sail on through without stopping then."

Suits me, thought Joshua. He could drop the mails at the Red-Rock inn, cut a deal with the landlord, and still live for months off the small change.

The militiaman eyed the hatch. "Is that all you're carrying, just some mails and that no good N'ager?"

"This isn't a lug-boat," said Joshua, patiently. "She runs on sunshine, no power for hauling goods."

But it wasn't bulk goods the militiaman was interested in. He was looking for a little trinket to brighten his day,... so the hatch was opened and he squeezed himself down into the galley.

"There's goods and goods, water-brain. Someone's hauling poppy into town and it can only be coming in on boats like this. Jeeze,... how can you live in it?"

"She's pretty compact," replied Joshua. "But you get used to it."

"And what's that stink?"

"Oh,.. that's probably just the N'ager."

Cupboards were opened at random: there was nothing but pots and pans and books and vegetables. The militiaman was clearly too big for the boat, he banged his head and his knees at every step, and he couldn't turn sideways at all on account of his drinking-belly. He was like a cork in a bottle, and he paused, contemplating the remaining seventy feet of narrow passageway ahead throughout which the smell of unwashed human-being was by now overpowering.

"All right," he said. "I've seen enough." He started to back out in disgust. "You can carry on. But remember, my boys are watching. You pull up even for a pee and I'll sink this stinking tub myself."

"Sure, I catch you."

"And since you won't be stopping in town I'll take those mailbags and deliver them myself. "

That was a pity thought Joshua. "Sure. Okay."

Relieved of her mailbags, the Mattie Rat crept away. Joshua sat at the tiller, seething quietly. It wasn't so much the loss of the mails that vexed him, it was the filthy feel the town had suddenly smeared him with. The scent of the N'agers was nothing. Sure, theirs was the smell of

new-born innocence so far as he was concerned, while the town stank like the devil's most fetid fart.

This was a bad omen. If the militias were clutching at pennies like that, then no one was safe. He certainly wouldn't be passing this way again for a long time, and he needed to spread the word among the other Watermen to avoid Monkton.

Badger's head popped up in the hatchway at Joshua's feet. "Waddee want, man?"

"Money," said Josh. "He won't let us moor up in town either, but I'm pretty sure it's the midtown militia running the pier area. That's a different crew altogether, so we may get away with it."

"Blessings, man. 'Preciate."

"If I was you though, I'd forget it. I'll take you clear through. You keep your head down safe inside, son. I've got a bad feeling." But then Joshua always had a bad feeling about towns.

Badger would have none of it though and became quite agitated: "Have to get tut pier man," he said. "Pass slow. Me and da bitch. We's jump. Can't tax you if we's jump."

"That'll only make us look like we're up to no good, running poppy or something. Listen, Badger, this is a crazy town. People get slit for no other reason than they look out of place. And I don't know what else you've been told, but there's no N'ager gathering at the pier. It really isn't that sort of town any more. No more love and peace, man. No more mush-tents and spirit-dreamings. Catch me? Those days are decades gone."

Badger absorbed this news and chewed it over slowly. "Pass slow," he repeated, eventually. "Godda do wot's to be dun. The pier's in me head, see?"

Josh groaned. Okay, it would be worth the risk just to be shot of him.

It was a medium bright sort of day, but the town sucked more and more of the light out of it, starving Mattie of what little energy there was until she seemed only to be drifting. Badger waited, out of sight in the hatchway. They were running up to the pier, which for those of you who don't know these northern reaches, is just an odd bit of tramway, jutting over the canal where coal tubs had once been run out and tipped up into the open bellies of barges. But that was centuries ago, a time as old as the

canals themselves. The area had been revived as a heritage site for a while, but that was a long time ago as well, and now pretty much everything hung with the same air of ruin.

Badger remained crouching in the hatchway, nervous. Joshua guessed Squirrel was behind him. Sure enough the Mid-town Militia were conspicuous here in their green shirts and caps. They were more laid back than the Westgate mob, and one or two even returned Joshua's speculative peace sign. But there were more of them: gangs of five or six on every corner, Klashers on their hips. They ignored the Mattie Rat, perhaps reasoning that the Westgate mob had most likely already stripped her of anything valuable. But they'd be sure to want a landing tax from anyone stepping ashore.

"If you jump out here, Badger, you might as well stick a sign on your back saying 'slit me'."

Badger's eyes burned with ferocious intent and Joshua was worried the idiot was really going to do it, but Squirrel must have tugged at him from behind, and Badger's face melted back into the shadows.

The Mattie Rat swooshed her way past the pier complex. There was no sign of any kind of gathering - or maybe it was a night time, youth-time, underground type of thing, thought Joshua - not that he'd be hanging around to find out. Still, he couldn't see the militia's allowing it - the only kind of people they liked to see in town were people spending money in the shops they extorted protection from, or people they could tax directly by having them hand over their wallets. And N'agers didn't have wallets.

He dropped the throttle down a notch, so Mattie was barely making way. Ahead lay a narrow stretch, thick and stinking with floating trash and he knew he'd have to be careful here not to snag the prop. He'd have to run at it as close as he dared, then shut down and drift on through.

The stretch was mostly enclosed, only visible from the water and Josh spied a narrow walkway to one side. Maybe his hitchers could hop out there, then melt into the town if they really wanted to - though dressed that way, they'd hardly be inconspicuous for long.

"Now's your chance, folks," he said.

The hatch opened and the two stowaways sneaked up, then hopped over onto the walkway. Joshua didn't look back. "Take care," he said but in his heart he was afraid for them. Sure they'd taken advantage of him,

but they'd not robbed him of anything which was unusual these days, and they didn't seem like bad people.

He'd not gone twenty feet when he realized there was a pick-up parked just the other side of the opening. Militiamen were unloading something into a warehouse - the very warehouse Badger was sneaking around. In a moment he'd walk right into them and then there'd be trouble. It wasn't that N'agers were forbidden in town,... it was just that anyone who looked even a bit freaky was asking for a baiting. And they played rough in towns like this.

Joshua slowed, shot Badger a backward glance, shook his head firmly, then beckoned him aboard, but Badger refused and continued moving along the walkway. Now, Squirrel wasn't much of a talker but Josh reckoned she was the brighter of the pair. She read the alarm in Josh's eyes, tugged Badger's arm and without another word coaxed him back down the hatch and under cover.

The Mattie Rat emerged from the gap and Joshua coolly fingered the peace sign at the militia. There was a mixed reception - some smiles, some jeers. Watermen were such dumb-nuts, but harmless, maybe. The light was good here, the buildings opening out into a kind of razed wasteland. The sun found the photocells, stroked them lovingly, and Mattie came alive with a sudden surge. Joshua felt the boards humming, and he thrilled to them. They'd be clear of this hellhole and slicing clean water in ten minutes. He took a breath of air and steered the boat clear, threading Mattie down the cut ahead and out of sight. Then Squirrel popped suddenly out of the hatch like a ragged jack-in-the-box and grabbed his leg.

"What's up?" he said.

She pointed over the side and Josh thought he caught a glimpse of a log rolling about as he passed by. "Lucky we didn't hit that," he was thinking, except it wasn't a log: it was swimming: it was Badger! He'd slipped over the side, and was making for the towpath. But it was open water here; there was no cover and if he was trying not to draw attention to himself, then he was going about it the wrong way.

Badger was lost then. They could forget him now but Squirrel kept jabbing her finger, her eyes popping, imploring him to do something, anything, and when he shrugged her off she pressed her hand against the tiller.

"Whoa there, we can't turn round here, girl. This boat's seventy feet long, and the water's only fifty feet wide! D'ya catch me?"

She raised her eyebrows and stamped her foot.

What did she expect him to do? "I can't fish him out if he doesn't want to be fished out."

She looked away, and stood up tall beside him, folding her arms in displeasure. Joshua was angry too. They'd tricked him into letting them aboard in the first place, and now it seemed she expected him to help them out of a mess that was all their own making. He should have been glad to see the back of them. One good shove, he thought, and he'd be rid of her too.

He snapped the throttle into reverse and Mattie jarred to a halt, sending Squirrel skittering back, arms spread, ready to catch herself. Joshua reached out to steady her. She grabbed his arm and pulled herself upright. He smiled. "Look, I can't steer backwards," he said. "Mattie has a mind of her own going backwards, but maybe we can cover him while he gets ashore. That's the best I can do."

He watched Badger pulling a good breast-stroke. That N'ager might be crazy but he had some guts, he thought. Meanwhile Mattie slewed this way and that as she tried to reverse, yet, as if reading Joshua's mind, she gradually, clumsily, drew herself closer and closer to the towpath, covering Badger from anyone who might be looking their way. Badger hauled himself out, slick as a water-vole, just as Mattie closed the gap and clunked against the side, letting him slither unseen into the waist-high weeds, and the brick piles of some long felled factory.

Joshua stepped ashore with the mooring line, then held the stern tight, thinking to let Squirrel ashore too, so she could follow her man, but she stood firm by the tiller, arms folded, shaking her head.

"You're not going with him? Can't say I blame you, but won't he be expecting you?"

She pulled out a wind-up pocket watch, that she carried on a chain around her neck. This distracted him for a moment. A N'ager with a watch? Wasn't that a bit like a Waterman with a bank-account? She was gesturing at the watch face, pointing to the minute hand and drawing it down, indicating thirty minutes, then tapping the glass.

"What are you saying? You want me to wait for him? Thirty minutes? Forget it. He's gone, and he's not coming back."

She stamped her foot, her eyes wide and pleading. Then she drew out twenty minutes on the glass. This was turning out to be a very bad

day. "All right," he growled. "But not twenty minutes. Fifteen. And if I see a greenback I'm pushing off. You can stay or swim. It's up to you."

She nodded readily and smiled her thanks. Joshua turned away from her, cursed, then rammed the mooring pin home and tied Mattie off. He'd gone soft on the woman and he hated himself for it. If he'd not taken pity on that bundle of rags in the first place this morning, he'd be miles away by now.

He levered up the inspection hatch and pulled out a few connectors, so if a greenback did come along, Josh could mutter something about engine trouble. There was nothing much that could go wrong with the motor really, but anyone other than a boatman wouldn't know that. He checked his own watch: he'd still make it to Red Rock, he thought. The sun was pretty strong and it was an uncluttered stretch of water from here, a good clear skyline, lots of amps to make Mattie sing.

There came the sounds of pots rattling in the galley and Joshua peered below to find Squirrel brewing tea. "I mean it," he growled. "Fifteen minutes, that's all!" She looked up and smiled, but he wasn't fooled. She was just keeping him sweet - still, he could use a mug of tea. "I like mine pretty strong," he added, suddenly struck by the novelty of having someone else brew up for him. It seemed almost impolite of him to leave her to it: "I mean if that's okay."

Again she nodded, fussing and light fingered, finding her way around the galley. Joshua eyed the stretch of water they'd just navigated. They were out of sight of the pier area, only the sound of dumb trucks rumbling by on the road somewhere near. No houses. No tag-spray, that he could see. It must have been one of those rare reaches you could only get to by boat, which meant more swimming for Badger, or he'd be back pretty soon with his tail between his legs.

Squirrel handed him up a cup of tea and he took a speculative sip. It was a good brew, he thought, hot and sweet, and strong,... and something? He thanked her then took a long gulp. She stood by and caught the cup as he went down, caught his head also with her free hand so he wouldn't bang it on the tiller. She didn't like it when things got broken, and it was a nice cup, a China cup, with an interesting, old-time pattern.

When Joshua came around he found himself by the tiller, his head on a pillow. Squirrel had thrown a blanket over him because she liked people to be comfortable while they slept. She was sitting up cross-legged on the

galley roof, watching over him. It was dark, or at least what passed for dark in the town, and he could see her features clearly in the reflected sodium glow from the street lamps.

He didn't hate her. She'd done what she'd had to do to help her man. All he could really think was that it was dark now and they were going nowhere. And you really didn't want to be camped out on a boat,... in a town,... in the dark.

He didn't move: he was still clearly stoned, he thought, or how else could the little fabric balls she was juggling be moving so slowly? She was barely touching them, just tickling them and they were floating like they were made of air.

"I'll leave you in the mud next time," he mumbled.

She smiled and shrugged. Badger had warned him she was a nut. And yet, okay, there was also something very gentle about her.

"You don't speak," he said.

She shook her head, then caught up the fabric balls and seemed to dissolve them in her hands. She held her palms flat and blew out their remains which flew up like luminous dust, glowing and sparkling.

"Nice trick," he said and then: "You and Badger. You aren't N'agers at all are you?"

Again she shook her head.

He leaned against the pillow and chuckled - he felt pretty good. It was after midnight, and they'd not been murdered yet. Also if someone should happen along Squirrel would have to deal with them herself because he couldn't feel his legs yet. He really ought to have cared more about the situation but he found he couldn't take any of it seriously.

The sky was starting to brighten. There was no moon, and Joshua was puzzled by that. As he looked up into the cloudy blackness, he could make out a strange luminescence. It wasn't just a leftover from Squirrel's trick with the balls. This was something bigger, something higher in the sky: a shape forming as if from white smoke. He watched it coming into focus and then he laughed out loud.

It was a hand, a giant sprite, at least a thousand feet up and stretched over the whole town. It was gesturing,... what,... oh sure: it was the peace sign, the old N'ager blessing.

What else?

Almost at once a war broke out and a whole lot of lead spat from a thousand wild Klashers, from the Westside, clean across mid-town and to the east. But they weren't shooting at each other, they were shooting into the sky. Badger was right: there was a big greeting in town that night.

The disturbing thing for Joshua was that the N'ager blessing was still there at dawn, long after he'd come out of his daze and found his legs, so it was hard to dismiss the trick with the balls and the giant sprite as a psychedelic side effect of the herbs Squirrel had slipped him. Still, it was hard to deny the evidence of his own eyes.

Then Badger turned up, shambling along the towpath glancing back occasionally at his handiwork. A few Klashers were still going off, but only the dumbest of militiamen by now hadn't worked out that the sprite wasn't going to be dispersed by bullets,.. that it was a product of air and mind, he supposed: Badger's mind.

"Blessins man. Thanks for waitin' "

"Oh, that's my pleasure," said Joshua, sarcastically, as Badger hopped aboard.

Squirrel beamed and held out her hand. Badger shook it, very businesslike and proper. Joshua looked up at the thing, hovering huge and utterly ludicrous over the town, like a giant thought bubble. He'd heard stories of people like this, people who could shape things with their imaginations. He'd thought they'd all died out, back in the age of reason, but since those days were mostly gone now, it didn't seem unreasonable to believe these conjurers, these wandering, mischievous pixies might start appearing again.

Sure, that was it: Squirrel and Badger were like old time magicians, pedaling a mixture of deception, hypnotism and showmanship, but it seemed not all their magic was based on trickery.

"Impressive," he said.

"Thanks, man."

"Was it,... erm,... hard to do?"

"It takes a bid o' trainin like," said Badger, modestly. "But it's not dat hard. Just godda think it. Me brain's pretty weak an I godda be reet underneath it. Da pier was da place, see?"

"I don't see how a few hundred yards would have made a difference. You could have done it from here."

"Na. Bin thinkin' this for weeks. Thinkin' always the pier, see? Sure dis is close man, but its nod t' pier. Catch me?"

Joshua didn't catch him at all, and wasn't sure he wanted to anyway. "How long will it last?"

"Not for ever," sighed Badger. "Days maybe, if I dun think it right. But while it's there," he grinned, "It makes for one big gatherin'."

Mattie was waking up now - just enough daylight to turn the screw - so Joshua levered up the mooring pin, and nudged her clear of the towpath. Even at a slow walking pace, they made it to the first meadows in half an hour, and from there the green opened up. There were no militiamen, and no Anglefolk to clutter the run - everyone was in town, gawking at Badger's comic-book peace-sprite.

He kept looking back over the tiller, checking it was still there, half hoping it wouldn't be and then he could tell himself it had been one of those strange dreams. But it remained, its colors deepening as the sun came up. In other times they would have called it a miracle, and yet to Joshua's eye there was something not quite right about it.

"Seems to me you risked your neck for a prank," he said.

Badger was unmoved. "A prank you say?"

"Sure, it was a spectacular prank, a prank like I've never seen before, and I'm impressed, son, but pretty soon it'll be gone. And town-folks have short memories, always jumping from one thing to the next. This time next week it'll just be the same old town it was before. Same stinking hellhole."

Badger shrugged. "Don't 'spect you to geddit man."

"No offense," added Josh: "But it just seemed a childish thing to do - like tag-spraying someone's boat. It sticks in your craw at first, but you get it cleaned up and you forget about it."

Badger smiled. "Sure, maybe it's childish, man. But I's not growed 'nough yet for nothin' more wise. An I reckon nod all dat town's gonna go back da way it was. A heart sees nothin' but guns an thieves an killin', an soon it gets to thinking dat's all der is. So what's bad stays bad. It does a heart good to see some magic once in a while, Joshua. Magic makes a heart want more magic, an dat's how bad things get changed to good."

Maybe the kid had a point, thought Josh.

"Sorry for messin' you," Badger went on. "Dis is a good boat. Reet shush, reet gentle on the green, man. You dun be proud of her, I see. You's a good Waterman, and true. Next bridge, I's be geddin' off. Ged-din' out of your hair."

Joshua was glad to hear it. It was going to be a better day, he thought. He was clear of the town and that always put him in a better mood. The water was crackling, cold and fresh, and Mattie was painting a bright white line on its mirror-black surface as she sliced her way.

"Sure," he said. "Ten minutes. I'll set you down."

"'Preciate it, man. 'Preciate it too if you'd take Squirrel on up to Red Rock wid-ja. We's be splittin' now. She dun got her own business, side from Badger see? And she dun need to rest awhile, too. Catch me?"

Badger lay back upon the galley roof and stretched his arms wide, embracing the morning, the air,... the world. "Man, we really stilled dat town, dint we?"

Squirrel hunched her shoulders in delight and stroked her fingers over the photocells. They were magical, she thought, glittering mysteriously under the dark lacquer, catching the sun like that and making the pretty boat glide over the water.

Joshua felt a tingle through the boards as Mattie's motor surged a little, and he could have sworn that Squirrel looked back then and winked at him.

Suddenly Red Rock seemed a very long way away.

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