

Short Stories 94 and 95: The Green Rabbit from S'Rian and The Choice of the Black Goddess

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Marc Aramini — 17 Aug 2014, 07:07

“The Green Rabbit from S'Rian” appeared in the shared world anthology *Liavek* in 1985, and the sequel “The Choice of the Black Goddess” appeared in its sequel *Liavek: The Players of Luck* in 1986. They are both collected in *Storeys from the Old Hotel.*

SUMMARY:

The Green Rabbit from S?Rian

Captain Tev Noen decides to appeal to self interest to recruit a crew of rowers for his ship serving the Levar of Liavek's Navy and is astonished at the success of his second mate Dinnile in filling every available position with Nomads from the Great Waste.

As they are about to leave, Noen is commissioned by an admiral to retrieve a relic which has disappeared and might have gone to sea, a jade rabbit reputed to contribute to luck, fertility, and wealth which has been stolen from a wealthy jeweler named Serkosh in the city. Two of his crew, Syb and Su, want to go aground after being paid so they can give money to their families, who survive by fishing but live in poverty.

Noen's first mate, Oeuni, spots the trireme *Zhironni* they are after with its mast raised, and they engage it in combat. The magician has not had time to raise a wind to make it sail, but creates illusions such as a sea serpent to dissuade Noen's *Windsong* from attacking. Windsong attacks using its culverin named Poltergeist and rams the other vessel, at which point Noen is able to board the hold and find the Green Rabbit. A female tempts him, saying they can rule an isle in the Sea of Luck or beyond together, and then the leader of the Nomads, Myllikesh, enters and tries to take the Green Rabbit so that he can return as ruler of a land of prosperity — for one has only to throw down the rabbit to create fecundity. The female attempts to seduce him, and succeeds in stabbing him, at which point Noen knocks her unconscious and the illusion dissipates - she is revealed to be an elderly male illusionist. In the struggle, the Green Rabbit falls into the sea and runs away, and Myllikesh dies believing the rabbit was wasted. Noen knows that it will bring prosperity to the fishermen in the area, fulfilling the dreams of Syb and Su. When he returns, he speculates how rich the sale of the *Zhironni* will make him. His first mate is in his cabin, her arm bandaged, wishing to tell him how brave she was in the battle, and reassuring him of his own bravery as she kisses him.

“The Choice of the Black Goddess”

Haunted by the loss of first mate Oeuni's hand through infection when the injury from the first story was not treated in time, Noen has also lost any profit from capturing the enemy ship in the first story, which was returned to the Ka Zhir because Liavek is not currently at war with them.

The

Windsong is leaking after being damaged in a magical storm (produced by the villain of the story), and spots a distress flag on a ship flying the colors of Liavek. The ship is becalmed in a bay with a small island and a larger coast. After insuring that the water is deep enough for the *Windsong*, they approach and spot a building in the distant forest. They also see a large tower with artillery on the coast, so Noen takes a small crew ashore. While he is in transit, he watches a black bird land on the *Windsong*.

There, they encounter an acting troupe whose current leader, Baldy, is serving as stage magician to maintain the illusion of the tower that Noen and his crew saw earlier, though it is just a prop. He explains that the ship they were traveling on was losing one crew member a day mysteriously when a storm forced them aground. The captain and his two crew members went to investigate the building Noen also saw through the forest, leaving the acting troupe behind. Two of the actors are Nordread and Marin Monns, who indicates that he is in fact the leading woman of the troupe and only dresses as a man. Baldy tells Noen that somehow their normal stage magician Xobbas has become three magicians, probably impostors, and that the real troupe leader is missing.

Later that night, one of Noen's crew brings in a sailor who claims to have been hidden on the becalmed ship they found in the harbor, but soon enough Noen and Oeuni realize he is a "woman", or at the very least not a sailor. It is Marin once again, and Marin indicates that it seems that all of the magicians are fakes, as the real Xobbas was an elderly, kind, and somewhat naturally self-pitying man, and these ones are alternately cruel, frightened, or just too mobile to be the elderly man. Oeuni reveals to Noen that she found a fresh grave marked with an X where she believes the wizard Xobbas was buried.

Noen decides to go up to the building and follow the missing captain and crew. The troupe comes as well, interested in the fate of their real leader, Amail Destrop. When they finally arrive at the temple, a nomad still working for Noen reads the Tichenese writing, which says "The Black Warrior Woman, Precious Helper of Men". The vines have been cleared away so someone could read it in its entirety, and a trail of ants leads them to the fate of the captain of the becalmed vessel and his two remaining crew members: skulls which have been desecrated so that the brains have been extracted or eaten. Inside, a huge shah board, a game like chess, sits on the floor, with only a large piece, the black sultana, remaining.

Seeing the symbols on the floor, they decide to place their members on the appropriate chess spaces to fill up the board. Oeuni and Noen will control the Black and White sides, respectively. After placing the crew and actors on the board, they realize they need four wizards. Baldy takes one position, and Noen realizes they need three more wizards. One of the Xobbas imitators appears (Amail Destrop in disguise) and stands upon a space. They notice that a third, silent wizard has also appeared, smaller than the second but dressed in the same fashion. Finally, a fourth materializes (the villainous Pardoner who probably stowed on the becalmed ship in the hopes of pillaging this temple and who killed Xobbas), rubbing his hands in anticipation.

They are trapped in their respective spaces on the boards. The silent wizard only says, "It would be better, perhaps, if you were not to ask to know too much," then the statue of the sultana begins to rock like a pendulum and moves, revealing a space beneath it. A dark thing from overhead (Kakos, a demon kept by the pardoner) swoops down into the hole, and Oeuni runs forward to confront it. Her hooked hand emerges with an emerald necklace, her right hand full of gold, but the crowned demon grabs her hand and pulls her downward — she digs her hook in to keep from being pulled into the pit. A black slab from the wall seals the pit as the large sultana disappears into a far wall, going through it as if it was nonexistent. Noen tries to free

Oeuni but cannot, even breaking his sword on the demon's arm.

The fourth wizard gloats that they will all die and admits that the demon is his. The black sultana reappears from the other side of the board and crushes the wizard “to a broken doll whose crimson blood splattered — The black statue had reentered its own temple through the door like the figurehead of a galley that flies before a gale, and it had struck him like that galley's ram”. The demon's arm is severed as the slab falls into place. Here Noen notices that Oeuni's hooked hand seems to have switched sides, and she whispers, “I had to choose. Lose my other hand, or the demon would have killed you and Dinnile and everybody. It wouldn't have killed me — it told me that.” Baldy notices that the remains of the hook is merely a prop — Oeuni has regained her hand after making the choice put to her by the Black Goddess.

Amail Destrop reveals that he found the corpse of Xobbas and disguised himself as the wizard to try to find whoever killed him. His wife, Nordread, has been dressed as a man the entire time, but abandons her disguise here. The third wizard has disappeared, save for a single black feather resting upon the wizard's space in the shah board, and they speculate that the villain was a Pardoner who sacrificed the crew of the ship daily to his demon, who required one sacrifice a day, but saved the troupe in order to play the requisite game of shah in the temple and plunder the Black Goddess' treasures. Marin reveals himself to be a man, and Oeuni leaves the emerald necklace on the statue of the Goddess.

COMMENTARY: Set in a shared world, the *Liavek* stories are standard fantasies inspired by the success of *Thieves' World*, unlike most of Wolfe's other work up to this point. By and large, Wolfe stayed within the guidelines established for the world in tales which were primarily straightforward adventure stories, but there are still a few subtexts of note, and by the end of the second story identity and gender ambiguity definitely surfaces.

At first it seems that the Green Rabbit has in fact brought prosperity to Tev Noen — granting him a crew to search for it (some of whom are still present in the second story) and wealth in the form of a magnificent captured ship, which, when sold, would entitle him to a quarter of profits. Alas, we see this undercut by the second story completely, with the ship returned to its nation of origin because Liavek and Ka Zhir are not currently at war, and Noen left with no profit from his efforts.

Rather than emphasize the magic in the first story, the primary brunt of Wolfe's specific research shows a naval battle with guns and sails. The specific terms like luffing (steering so far to windward that the sail and airflow are disrupted) and transforming the ship into something closer to a xebec to ram the enemy are the most dense portions of “The Green Rabbit from S?rian”. This meticulous attention to nautical detail and the features of the ship continues in the second story, flowing from the engineer's love of detail and process.

There are a few seemingly throwaway lines such as “It was beyond belief. Too good to be true. For a dizzy moment [Noen] wondered if it were his birthday — could he have forgotten” No. Dinnile's perhaps. No. Or — of — course — one of the nomads'. What better luck could the poor devil have than seeing himself and all his friends fed and safe aboard the *Windsong*? Or what worse? The rules of Liavek's magic system are based on birthing hours and labor — on the anniversary of a mother's labor, the individual born has a significant portion of unusual luck. Magicians in Liavek can harness this luck on their birthdays into an artifact or phylactery, which then serves as the focus of their magical powers. The risk is death. The Green Rabbit is one such artifact, designed to grant prosperity when it is thrown down. It falls into the sea and brings to life the dreams of Syb and Su, so that their fishing families can be prosperous.

The other salient feature of the *Liavek* shared world is that it is based on gender equality.

Wolfe almost plays fair here, especially since the first mate, Oeuni, is seen to have eyes that never cry even when she loses a hand and ultimately makes a choice which saves everyone. However, the subtext of both stories actually manages to create some further thematic confusion between the sexes which probably shouldn't be ignored in an analysis. It is almost as if the dissolving gender roles creates a kind of uncertainty in identification, almost farcical by the end of the second story.

Tev Noen, while effective and hands on as a captain, is plagued with almost self-deprecating doubts and catches himself easily influenced and swayed by female attention, even recognizing and agonizing over the fact that he certainly gives his first mate Oeuni preferential consideration. This only seems a slight, perhaps subliminal commentary on a setting which places females on the front lines of battle, whether in a commissioned naval vessel or on the field — constant consideration for Oeuni monopolizes his thoughts: "Noen found that he was thinking of Oeuni drowned, helmetless, the green sealight shining on her shaven head, arms and long legs tossed in death's parody of swimming. Oeuni whom he would never possess, drawn down to the dark by her cuirass. Ler Oeuni lost." Her final choice, to sacrifice her other hand so that her crew and the thespians may live, grants credibility to her presence in battle and as first mate — she is the hero of the second story and is rewarded with a new hand.

Noen's inadequacies before women occurs throughout both stories, especially as he loads his gun in front of a female crew member who is more experienced with incendiary weaponry in the second story as his small landing party approaches the island of the marooned thespians: "Eitha, the cockswain of the jolly, had her gun loaded and ready long before Noen (only too conscious of the eyes of the four men at the oars) had rammed a handful of musket balls down the barrel of his own and fixed the match in the serpentine." Even at the conclusion of the first story, when the duplicitous elderly male magician masquerading as a female casts her attention on the nomad Myllikesh, Noen "was surprised at the pain that gave him."

Noen is definitely susceptible to the charms of women, but there is some latent sexism inherent in some of his thoughts, as he says of the actually male Marin Monns, "I don't know why, but I like her."

The first story quotes Shakespeare's Henry VII in its presentation of gunpowder as "villainous saltpeter" — Shakespearean plays were famous for this kind of cross dressing, and the thespian troupe in the second story is no different.

When Noen first arrives at the shore and comes upon the group of actors, he is shocked when "the white plumed disputant" in "a very masculine coat" kicks aside her sword to curtsy and proclaim herself the leading woman. Noen even mentally challenges Marin's gender: "The ?leading woman" sighed. (Noen decided the second disputant was a woman, though a woman as tall as he). Later Marin disguises himself as a sailor as well, and even his blushes are contrived. Yet beneath that — Marin is a man pretending to be a woman playing a man, while Nordread, the other disputant, is actually a woman who deceives him completely in her masculine disguise, and Noen never thinks twice about her. This gender confusion is disconcerting and ubiquitous, and one cannot help but wonder how much of this is simply thespian and nautical tradition and how much an authorial commentary on a setting established with more or less absolute equality between genders. If Marin were not a man pretending to be a woman pretending to be a man, I might say that the commentary was perhaps subconscious, but that level of imitation speaks of something a bit more intentional.

There is little other ambiguity in the tales save for the apparent murder but subsequent duplicate (or triplicate) presence of Xobbas the troupe wizard, famous for disguising himself, and the identity of the third wizard to appear in the game of Shah. Fortunately, there are really

only two options for his identity — he is either the spirit of Xobbas or the goddess herself in disguise, and the text of course hints that the goddess is probably responsible for bringing Xobbas back for one scene. The fate of the original crew of the *Lady of Liavek* is fairly straightforward — sacrificed to the demon Kakos by the Pardoner who killed and tried to replace Xobbas.

When Noen is heading to the island, he spies a bird “as black as any crow, yet lovely with its long wings and tail and its elaborately ruffled head: not a carrion bird, Noen thought, nor even a predatory one, though he was no student of such things.” It settles on his ship, and he remarks, “Smaller with its wings folded.” Later, the depiction of the goddess shows her helm with the wings of a bird, and this feather is left behind in the place of the third wizard to appear on the Shah board. For this reason, we know that she has been acting throughout the story and has perhaps even aided Noen and the troupe by returning Xobbas to the board for one final move.

NAMES AND SETTING DETAILS

While most of the names seem to be standard fantasy world inventions, some of them have real world meaning — Marin Monns, for example, could mean sea mountain or even a mount of Mars, of which the most prominent is Mount Olympus, named after the home of the Greek Gods.

The demon of the pardoner, Kakos, has a Greek name which means “inner malice” or “rotten”, “poisoned”, and this is certainly an intentional naming.

Below are some background details from the appendix in the first *Liavek* anthology.

The Kil which are mentioned briefly in both stories are another part of the Liavek setting as a vague threat on the sea, possibly climbing up the side of ships, and at one point Noen asks if they are responsible for the missing crew members in “Choice of the Black Goddess” — they are mammalian sea folk who can breed with humans.

The Pardoner who serves as the villain in the second story is a member of “a sect of mendicant priests who will intercede with any god on anyone's behalf — most people like them but consider them a little crazy — they are the jacks of all-trades of the preisthoods, and often come from those who left or were cast out of other faiths.”

The Black Faith, also called the Kin of One Path, believe in absolute goodness and is primarily monastic in nature. Whether the Black Goddess is related to the Black Faith or not is ambiguous.

S'Rian was an older town on the hills overlooking Liavek, conquered and mostly destroyed long ago.

Ka Zhir is the large trading city across the Sea of Luck from Liavek, and Liavek won a recent war against them.

Tichen is a large expansive nation with a strong army and weak Navy.

UNANSWERED QUESTIONS:

Does the bird which lands on the Windsong represent the Black Goddess taking an interest in Noen and his crew, specifically Oeuni? The feather that is left behind after the shah game definitely seems to be the symbol of the Goddess, but the quote about cylindrical shah seems to invoke the idea of a cyclical existence outside the standard board (ie — the return of a piece

after death) - “you pretend the board's a cylinder, that it wraps around the whole world, so to speak. Then a piece that goes off one side diagonally appears in the net row on the other — You see, while we thought we were playing conventional shah, the gods were playing cylindrical shah. I think there's a message there, though I'm not sure I know what it means.”

With all the cross dressing going on, can we expect to see the Black Goddess manifest as a man? This and the feather point towards her as the third wizard on the shah board (her crest is “a bird with outspread wings”), but the talk of cylindrical shah and its message probably contributes to a reading in which Xobbas has been returned to the board for a brief time by the Black Goddess.

CONNECTION TO OTHER WORKS:

I feel that these stories are distinct from just about everything Wolfe has written in that they are classifiable as standard commercial fantasy, and, insofar as there is a subtext, it seems to be one on gender and leadership rather than on plot elements. *Pirate Freedom* shares the nautical setting and perhaps *Wizard Knight* is Wolfe's closest return to the fantasy setting, though his inclusion in the* Liavek* project, according to the creators of the setting, was based on *Book of the New Sun* and its fantasy feel.