

Come Dancefight, My Beloved Enemy

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(Originally published at Trabuco Road, March 2007)

Your tuxedo bunches up in the armpits as you jam a harpoon gun down the throat of a mechanical shark. The Caribbean is too warm for a drysuit, much less a tux, but you, of course, are wearing both. The mechalodon thrashes again. This time its camera-eyes get a good look at you. It's hard to see through the cloud of sparks and bubbles when you pull the trigger, but you could swear the damn thing winks.

Which confirms your suspicions. The secret masters of this seaborne luxury arcology are self-styled techno-pirates who masquerade as wealthy libertines alongside the other residents. Guard sharks do fit the piracy motif, but robot guard sharks are classic Zuleikha. So she did escape from Skopje after all.

The crackling robot twirls away into the midnight-blue abyss, taking your empty harpoon gun with it.

You glance at your chronometer. The blinking red display shows only a minute and thirty seconds until the intake conduit activates. Damn. The robot took longer to dispatch than it should have. You're getting slower these days.

All the more incentive to finish this one last job and leave the business while you still can. Sleeping with one eye open isn't as exciting as it used to be.

The conduit pulls in coolant water for the power plant and secret microwave pulse generators used to assault offshore data havens like Sealand and Canary II. You retrieve the plasma torch from your belt. As gobbets of white-hot steel pop and fizz on their way down to the abyss, following the shark, you amend your priorities.

One: Retrieve the stolen quantum encryption keys before the pirates open your bank account and plunder your retirement savings.

Two: Destroy the lair on your way out. This is de rigueur. Professional pride demands it, especially for your swan song.

Three: Avoid Zuleikha at all costs.

Crazy she might be, but she'd never forget who left her

for dead in a Macedonian abattoir. Any sane person would agree she deserved it after what she did to you in Quito -- your shoulder has never been the same -- but Zuleikha wasn't blessed with a sense of perspective.

At a minute-five, only two tangs hold the grate over the conduit. One tang remains at oh-forty-five. The grate falls away with twenty-eight seconds remaining.

The intake activates twenty-five seconds early.

You're still hooking the torch back on your belt when the entire ocean tries to hurl itself through the conduit, and you along with it. A sharp edge slices your cheek.

Your air cylinder catches on the lip of the pipe. The straps dig in to your shoulders as the titanic inflow tries to pull you into the guts of the arcology. But the cylinder won't budge.

You claw at a strap and manage to pull it around your elbow and off your arm. The current sucks your free arm over your head. The remaining strap squeezes tighter than ever.

Scrunch. The world turns black, then red, as you dislocate your shoulder. It takes focus not to retch into your regulator. You take one last full breath, wrangle your limp arm out of the strap with your good hand, and then you're bodysurfing through the conduit. The light on your mask illuminates only the immediate edges of the pipe,

leaving your destination in blackness.

More bad news: you didn't reset your chronometer when you entered the conduit. Meaning you have no idea how far you've traveled. Meaning you might pop out anywhere. Lungs on fire, you slap the conduit with a gecko glove. The instant bond jerks you to a halt and stretches your abused shoulder into new agonies.

You're so desperate to breathe that you don't care where you tumble out of the pipe. All that matters is you get out. Now.

Torch in hand you work as fast as you can. Bubbles, steam, and turbulence make it impossible to see what you're doing. Any second you're going to inhale a lungful of seawater.

You wonder, fleetingly, how Zuleikha will react when they find your bloated corpse lodged in the plumbing.

You fall, coughing and sputtering, twenty feet to the floor of a submersible bay. There's a crunch from the vicinity of your ankle when you land. You can't clamp your mouth shut while gulping down air, so the groan escapes you.

You grit your teeth against the grinding in your ankle as you crawl behind a control console, then slam your shoulder against the wall until it pops into place with another scrunch. You force your gorge back down long enough

to stash the drysuit behind a rack of oxygen tanks.

From the concealed pouch in your cummerbund, you produce two amphetamine capsules and a hypo filled with a cocktail of painkillers and steroids. The capsules go in your mouth; the needle goes into your leg, just above the ankle. The pain in your shoulder recedes; your ankle feels solid again. An illusion, you know, but with luck it'll last long enough to get the job done.

Later, that ankle will need a complete reconstruction. That'll take a nice little chunk out of your retirement savings. Assuming you have any left by then.

With the pain under control, and feeling slightly high from the drugs, you peek around the console and survey the bay. The floor is open to the ocean. Submersibles hang from overhead cranes and smaller runabouts rest on slides along the walls. Everything is marked with the arcology's Jolly Roger motif.

It's a clean setup. A thirty-person boarding party could deploy itself in under a minute. Times four bays in the arcology -- a sizeable force. And if the arcology just happened to drift past an offshore data haven, perhaps even hosting a few dignitaries at the time, nobody would be any wiser if an armed squad plundered the haven without raising any alarms.

And since the havens make their commissions off transactions of dubious legality, they're unlikely to appeal to the authorities.

The glitterati inhabiting the world's most exclusive arcology think the pirate motif is a harmless affectation, a nod to their accumulated wealth and the epicurean lifestyle they enjoy in international waters, unencumbered by the tax laws of their home countries. Joke's on them.

It's a clever arrangement that deserves your professional admiration. Or it would if it hadn't raided the haven hosting your illicit retirement savings. Pangs of jealousy accompany the realization that crazy Zuleikha has landed a plum job. The perks here are probably pretty good.

You wonder if she gets medical coverage. Freelancers never get medical.

Three men stampede through a door on the far side of the bay, gawking at the ruptured conduit. You can tell they're not specialists: the matching, one-piece jumpsuits practically scream "goon".

The jumpsuits are almost too retro to be believed. Quite a bit like something Zuleikha would have designed, in fact. You realize that she isn't just a consultant for the pirates. She's in charge of security.

One goon dashes for an alarm panel. You drop him with a

fast-acting tranquilizer dart from the blowgun concealed in the carnation on your lapel. He's snoring before his face hits the floor.

The others approach along opposite sides of the bay. Lefty takes up a length of chain and wraps it around his fist. Righty grabs a wrench.

You laugh. You're high on amphetamines.

When Lefty has crossed half the distance, you tap a button on the console. A rack swivels away from the wall, taking him by surprise. He topples into the ocean as the slide tips downward, ejecting a string of the empty runabouts on him, one after another.

Righty is too quick to fall for the same trick. He dodges the falling runabouts. You spar briefly, but he's a goon and goons don't make great fighters. It's the way of the world. An army of real mercenaries with real skills -- like you or Zuleikha -- would burn more disposable income than even the most diabolical of evil masterminds would care to part with.

He goes down when your foot connects with his temple. Your ankle doesn't look quite right when you land -- a swollen, aubergine mass -- and you wonder how long until the painkillers wear off.

The clink of chain echoes through the fog of drug-

induced smugness in your brain. It sounds like a loose bracket on the runabout slide. But it's coming from behind you. Loud, getting closer. You spin --

-- into a fist.

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You wake with the tuxedo digging into your armpits again, and you're coughing so hard that a trail of spittle has run from the corner of your mouth to your chin. Your shoulder is worse than it's ever been. Your arms hurt because they're pulled behind you over the back of the chair to which you're tied; you're coughing because the ball gag is slightly too big for your mouth.

"It's good to see you again, darling."

Zuleikha stands before you, dressed like a caricature of a pirate queen: flames of hair streaming from beneath her tricorne hat; brass buttons gleaming in twin rows down the front of her peacoat; jodhpurs tucked into knee-high boots; hands resting daintily on the pommel of a scimitar poised with tip to floor.

It's perfectly constructed, this artful pose.

Meaning she's been standing there like a mannequin, waiting for you to wake up.

God, she's crazy. And beautiful.

"You're looking well," she adds.

"Pfff, ppfff," you say. A leather strap cuts the corner of your mouth.

She leans forward, squinting. "What happened to your cheek?" She produces a paisley kerchief.

You twist away when she leans forward to daub at your face. "Pfff pf ffppf."

Zuleikha takes a step back and plants one fist on her waist. The other, you note, is still firmly on the scimitar.

"Sometimes I feel like you don't find me attractive any longer."

"Pfff?"

"My therapist has been helping me to understand parts of my life in a new light. Our relationship, you and I, all we ever do is fight. But we never communicate."

The goons flanking the door shift their feet and look around the room, conspicuously embarrassed. You're embarrassed for them. Nobody likes it when dysfunctional couples air their dirty laundry in public.

This is the conversation you've been avoiding for years. You'd much prefer Zuleikha were still angry about Macedonia. But you know how to push her buttons, so you stoke that fire a bit:

"Pfff pff ppppfp pffpfp pp. Pffpf?"

Zuleikha holds one lovely, slender hand over her heart. "I know, darling. I know. But you didn't mean it. It was the job."

Wow. You've never seen her so levelheaded. It's disconcerting. You try to see her pupils, wondering if she's on something. Maybe the therapist put her on Thorazine.

She continues, "And I'm the same way, you know." She caresses your arm. This time you don't flinch. "Does your shoulder. . . still hurt you?"

"Pff. Pff ff pfpfp pfffpf pffppppffp pfpffp."

She kneels next to your chair. The goons straighten up, instantly alert. Zuleikha raises your trouser leg and tugs down your sock. You know that if you bothered to look, you'd find your ankle holster empty.

"Oh, darling," says Zuleikha, "it looks terrible."

She turns to the goons. "Untie him." When they balk, she uses her dominatrix voice. You haven't heard it in years, but you've reminisced about it many times.

As they loosen the ropes around your wrists and ankles, she unbuckles the ball gag and gently tugs it from your mouth with a practiced hand. Your jaw pops.

"Where are you taking me, Zuleikha?"

"Your ankle wants attention."

The stims and painkillers have worn off. You're feeling strung out, thin, and the look in her eyes adds to the beads of sweat on your forehead. "There's no need for that," you say a little too quickly. "You already know I'm working alone--"

A smile crinkles the corners of her eyes where tiny crow's-feet have taken hold. You're not the only one who's getting older.

"Torture? Really, now. Is that what you think of me?"

"Yes, it is. What would you call Quito?"

"You forgot the safe word, darling."

You glare. She shrugs.

"Never fear. We get wonderful medical coverage here."

Zuleikha sheaths the scimitar, then helps you to your feet. Your ankle fails. She pulls your good arm over her shoulders and lifts you up.

You get a whiff of her shampoo, something lemony. It complements her skin, the way it always smelled like a Neapolitan summer. Back then she said you smelled like salt, pure and clean.

The goons tag along as you hobble out of the holding cell and through a back door to Zuleikha's office. It has the usual arcology flourishes -- wood paneling, brass fittings, even an astrolabe and a ship's wheel -- but you

also recognize a Zulu mask, and the spear she once used to drop a charging rhino. Interior design courtesy of Long John Silver and Allan Quatermain.

She takes you outside to a carpeted balcony. The interior of the arcology is an immense atrium ringed with balconies like this one. They're wide at the bottom, over a mile in circumference, and tapered toward the top. The overall effect is of a hollowed-out beehive.

You peek over the railing. The center of the arcology is given over to a tropical green space. The air smells rich and loamy. Parrots flutter through the treetops in flashes of blue and red. Rainbows thread the atrium like natural holograms, suspended in the mist from waterfalls that sparkle in the sunlight.

It beats the hell out of the rusty Maunsell tower you've inhabited for the past decade.

"We even grow our own fruit," says Zuleikha. "Scurvy, you know."

"Do the taps come with hot- and cold-running rum, too?"

"Yes, but not the good stuff."

You peer down at her where she's hunched under your arm. She winks. The tug at the corner of your mouth threatens to become a smile, so you turn away.

You never could read Zuleikha.

As you approach the infirmary, you contemplate making a break for it. But Zuleikha is easily your equal when you're in top form; you're far from it right now. And if you did knock her out, you're still in no shape to fight your way to the vaults, even with a scimitar.

Aside from the fake dubloons on the walls, the infirmary is set up like a regular doctor's office, complete with receptionist. Which makes sense. For most of the residents, this arcology is simply an exclusive living space. Not a lair.

The receptionist ushers the two of you into the back after a single look from Zuleikha. You're sitting on the edge of an exam table, trying to decipher the expression on Zuleikha's face, when the doctor enters.

You leap from the table, aiming your stiffened fingers at his trachea, but your ankle gives out. You miss. Zuleikha catches you.

"Easy, darling. Don't worsen your ankle."

Her words don't register, because you're too busy glaring at Emilio Pietikäinen, a.k.a Doctor Zombie. Nine years ago he escaped when you and Zuleikha together destroyed the laboratory he'd built in a dormant Mexican volcano.

"Our Emilio has returned to his roots, darling. He ran

a respectable medical practice in Helsinki for many years before turning his attention to, ahem, other things."

Pietikäinen shrugs. "I tired of coming home with the stink of embalming fluid all over me."

The two of them push you back on the exam table. You struggle, but Zuleikha holds you down while Pietikäinen slides a needle into your neck.

"He needs a full nanosurgical treatment on his ankle. And take a look at his shoulder, won't you?"

"I assure you he'll have my full attention," says Pietikäinen. "He'll be good as new in a few hours." Then he does something downright suicidal: he puts his hand on her shoulder.

You roll aside, so that Zuleikha doesn't flip him on top of you. Nobody hits on Zuleikha. But instead of tossing him like a doll and shattering his nose like the old Zuleikha would have done. . . she smiles.

Sometimes your eye socket still aches where she fractured the orbit for a similar presumption back when you first met her.

"I'll return in a couple of hours, darling. Just relax." If she sees the confusion on your face, there's no sign. You watch her hair fluttering under the tricorne as she leaves Pietikäinen to his work.

"Didn't know you were living on the arcology," he says. He takes in your tux, then rolls back your trouser leg and peers at your ankle. "Or are you still playing the old party-crashing routine?"

You ignore him, trying to remember if Doctor Zombie had also been a world-renowned hypnotherapist. Or are you confusing him with Professor Mentat?

You're still picturing his bony hand on Zuleikha's shoulder when the sedatives kick in.

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When you wake this time, the pain in your ankle is gone and your shoulder feels tighter than it has in years. The cut on your cheek no longer stings. Repairing fractured bones and torn ligaments must be easier than transplanting zombie brains.

You're alone and unrestrained. With your ankle healed, you could take the doctor, the receptionist, and the goons, if you pop a couple more amphetamines. Maybe.

Or you could stay in the back, feign sleep until Pietikäinen returns, and then strike.

You're not stalling until Zuleikha returns. That would be stupid. It's simply good tactics.

This argument with yourself continues until the clomp of boots on marble echoes across the waiting room. Eyes

closed and breathing like you're still under the sedatives, you listen to the rustle of her peacoat, the creak of leather straps on her sheath. The citrus scent of her shampoo lessens the ozone stink of deactivated nanites.

Her shadow crosses your eyelids as she leans over you. She must notice the twitching under your skin as you tense up to grab her, because you hear the shinnng of an unsheathed scimitar.

"Please, let's not fight. Haven't I been good to you?"

You don't say anything.

"Today, I mean. I've been good to you today. And I know you're awake because the monitors caught your eyes opening."

Monitors. Didn't even notice them. Damn it. You really are getting older and slower these days.

You sit up. Zuleikha sheathes the blade. Shinnng.

"Since you're feeling pugnacious again, I take that to mean Emilio has performed admirably. As always."

Performed? As always? What the hell does that mean?

She crosses her arms and leans against the sink. "Why are you here?"

"Why are you here, Zuleikha?" It occurred to you during your preparations for this job, back when you first suspected her involvement, that she might have orchestrated the raid on the data haven that stored your savings. You

assumed it was payback for Macedonia, but now you're doubtful. She's acting so strangely.

Levelheaded. Centered. Sane.

If she wants revenge, she's ignored at least two opportunities thus far.

Her gaze flits over your face. She's trying to read you, get a bead on you.

Then you realize: Zuleikha doesn't know about your savings.

A long moment passes before she responds to your question. "Let's go for a walk."

You grit your teeth again when you hop down from the table, but other than a dull residual ache, your ankle feels whole.

She takes your arm. By the eccentric standards of the arcology, you look like a normal couple: visiting dignitary and pirate queen. You've always made an attractive pair. Of course, by taking your arm she'll be able to feel the subtle shift in your weight and muscle if you gear up for a fight.

So you play along. If Zuleikha wants to walk and talk, fine.

Besides, she smells good.

Zuleikha leads you to one of the spars that arc over

the atrium. They intersect the balconies at regular intervals. The spar is constructed from a nanotube weave impregnated with synthetic spider silk. Something in the back of your mind screams at you that this is important; you stop taking sidelong glances at Zuleikha long enough to remember your plan, and make note of the construction for when it comes time to destroy the lair.

"Where are we going?"

"You wanted to know why I'm here. I'll show you."

A round glass elevator arrives, gliding silently down the spar like a dewdrop rolling down a blade of grass. A string quartet is playing "Amsterdam Maid" over the elevator sound system when it opens. You wonder how many pirate ditties have been transcribed into highbrow chamber music.

The transparent floor pushes on the soles of your shoes, lifting you higher, providing a fabulous view of the arcology. Men and women stroll along the balconies, swim in pools, lounge in sunlit cafes.

As lairs go -- and you've seen more than a few in your day -- this one is unsurpassed.

"Are you still living in the Maunsell?"

Zuleikha studies you again. Her eyes twinkle.

You clear your throat. "Yes."

"Oh, darling, ever the romantic."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Doesn't it ever get. . . old? Living in that drafty, rusty thing."

"I like it just fine. And you found it charming, as I recall."

She sniffs.

"What about you, Zuleikha? Still have the villa?"

"No," she says, sighing. "I tired of sleeping with one eye open."

That's something you can agree on.

The elevator glides to a halt three levels above Zuleikha's office and Pietikäinen's infirmary.

"What did you want me to see?"

"Here." The warmth of her body soothes the ache in your newly-rebuilt shoulder as she nudges you toward a long windowpane.

Inside, a dozen children sit cross-legged on the floor. They're arranged in a semicircle around a man reading "Peter Rabbit" aloud.

You swallow. Mum read that to you just before the bailiffs hauled her away and she was hanged for treason.

"In addition to medical coverage," says Zuleikha, "we get excellent daycare."

Something congeals in your gut, cold and hard.

Jealousy, but something else, too. It's regret, and you're surprised.

You study the kids, looking for Zuleikha's eyes, her nose.

"I see. How old are your children?"

Zuleikha's laughter is a throaty lilt. You first heard that laugh in a bar in Minsk, right before she poisoned your contact. It's a sexy laugh.

"No, darling, no children, not presently. But. . . haven't you ever considered it? Leaving the business behind? This silly dance?"

"You haven't left the business, Zuleikha. Your work is swimming underneath the arcology as we speak."

The hair draped over the collar of her peacoat catches the sunlight and shines like brushed copper. "They hired me to train the security forces. I negotiated a bonus for the surplus mechalodons. They were just gathering dust anyway."

It makes sense. You'd have done the same. You nod. "I killed one on the way in. Sorry."

Zuleikha shrugs. "I had grown bored of maintaining them."

The old Zuleikha would have been righteously pissed. It's hard to build a robot shark.

She takes your hand. "We're not so different, you and

I."

No, you're not.

What if you found the keys and escaped back to your rusty, drafty, lonely hideout? What then? Retirement -- money and the time to finally enjoy it, but nobody to enjoy it with. Nobody who could possibly understand you.

Is that the happy end you're looking for?

You decide to tell Zuleikha about the encryption keys. It's a gesture of commitment, trusting her not to screw you over. Between her job and your retirement savings, the two of you could live comfortably here. Maybe you could learn to play bridge. Live like a normal couple. Sleep with both eyes closed.

After all, if you get restless, the arcology must have a spectacular self-destruct mechanism. Every lair does.

Zuleikha will understand.