

Forged in Fire

by Clayton Emery
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"Have at 'em, my hearties! Sweep them into the sea, my brave ones!"

Screaming, swinging cutlasses and scimitars, pirates boiled over the side. Bounding from the deck of their dromon onto the merchantmen's cog, bare feet slapping the deck, the pirates rushed the quarterdeck with steel slashing the air.

Clustered on the quarterdeck were a captain and first mate who shouted encouragement at a dozen sailors. Simple merchantmen, they looked reluctant to fight.

And, clambering carefully over the foaming gnashing space between ships, came the corpulent pirate chief who urged on his cutthroats with a cyclone of words. Named Heart of a Lion, he no longer fought toe-to-toe with enemies, but kept to the rear to supervise. Someone had to watch the two ships lest they ran aground, after all. He hollered, "Take them, my fearsome children! A swift attack brings a short battle!"

Howling, thirty pirates split into two packs like wolves and surged up the short companionways to the quarterdeck. With luck, terror would make the merchantmen drop their arms and surrender. Yet Heart of a Lion noticed the merchant captain, a skinny blackbearded man, had been born with a scowl, and the first mate's face was tattooed like a desert nomad's. Too, the other companionway was guarded by a lean woman in bright pinks and yellows, and such people were always trouble.

Sure as taxes, he saw, the ship's officers offered the pirates straight-thrust steel.

A pirate swung his cutlass to bat the first mate's scimitar aside, but an arm like oak simply riposted. The pirate yelped and jumped, pinked in the thigh. Hampered by the narrow stairs, another pirate sliced his cutlass at the mate's ribs, but that blow too was deflected, and the mate drew blood from a forearm. Below, in the waist, Heart of a Lion hollered useless instructions: why would his crew never listen at sword practice? The chief was glad to see a tall pirate finally reach past his fellows and ram hard with a boarding spear. The first mate dodged, but banged into his captain alongside, and the spear split his throat. Gargling blood and spraying his enemies red, the first mate dropped.

Pirates hollered in triumph, and pushed across the red-slick deck after the rangy captain. He bore a worn scimitar and a small round shield with a nasty spike. He swiped viciously to fend two pirates back, then lunged at a third. A fast chop cut a pirate's wrist to the bone. As blood fountained and

the pirate screamed, a shipmate behind rammed him with a shoulder. The wounded pirate blundered into the merchant captain, tangling him. A boarding pike hooked the captain's leg. Tripped up, the captain crashed on his back. Quick as cats, two female pirates jammed blades in his belly and throat. With their officers dead, already the sailors were throwing down their rusty scimitars while the pirates hooted.

"Excellent! Your captain is proud!" yelled Heart of a Lion. Then, since he was captain, he swiftly marked the progress of the two ships. The pirate's dromon, a long lean lateen-rigged many-oared vessel named *Shark's Fang*, was bound to the merchant's cog by stout ropes tipped with chains and iron grapnels. Locked, the two ships pitched and yawed in the lee of a big island to the south. Tharsult of the Shining Sea had many rocky clefts deep-shadowed by dawn, an excellent spot for ambushing the sea lanes. Waves burst into spray against its seaweedy shore. With a full day of bright sun burgeoning, the pirate chief exulted. They could loot this vessel's cargo and be hidden again by sundown.

Heart of a Lion carried no weapon, only a hollow tube of brass that he waved while exhorting his crew. "Press on, sons and daughters of seven devils! Conquer like kings! Drive -- eh? Curse me for a camel boy!"

In a heartbeat, the second pack of pirates had run into a tigress.

Blocking the starboard companionway was the lean woman in pinks and yellows, the colors of the Nallojal, the Navy of the Caleph of Calimshan. Her white cork helmet, wrapped with a purple turban and sporting a brass bill, identified her as a lieutenant of the Imperial Marines. She hefted a straight sword like some Northerner, and fire flashed from her eyes as she hollered, "*Glory to the Caleph!*"

Down in the waist, Heart of a Lion groaned. He may need his brass tube, despite the danger of burning the ship to the waterline. Didn't anyone simply surrender anymore?

Charging the lieutenant came a huge pirate named Tasyn, famed for his brawling and swordwork. He leered as he feinted with his cutlass, relying on a trick to distract her. While the swordsman feinted, the lieutenant struck. Cruel as a dragon's claw, her straight-bladed sword skimmed his knuckles and chunked into a knee carelessly put forward. Tasyn's eyes widened as pain seared his leg, then it crumpled. As the big pirate tilted to the wounded side, the lieutenant slammed the side of his neck. Blood pinwheeled into the sky and striped the lieutenant's blouse and vest.

Another pirate, a woman, attacked as the lieutenant dispatched her first victim. The pirate squatted so low her hams brushed the deck, then she stabbed upwards to spear the marine's groin. Fast as thought, the lieutenant's blade spanked the pirate's cutlass so hard the tip bit the deck, then the straight blade bounced back up. The female pirate saw the sword tip fly for her face like an arrow, then the point pierced her eye and brain.

Ducking herself, using the dropped bodies as a barrier, the lieutenant flicked her sword tip at pirates who suddenly hung back. She taunted, "Come closer, jackals! Taste the iron tongue of the Imperial Marines!"

"Ilmater made me to suffer!" sighed Heart of a Lion. His pirates' attack had stalled, and might even fail if the sailors rallied around that devilish lieutenant. "But Sharess finds favor for those who love life!"

Raising the brass tube in his hand, Heart of a Lion sighted down its hollow length at the ducking, weaving lieutenant, then stroked his fingers down the tube, invoking, "*As'tal rifa!*"

Like a wyvern's belch, from the tube billowed flame that coalesced into a sphere and sizzled through the air. Big as a fistful of flaming pitch, the fireball spanked off the lieutenant's turbaned helmet. Purple silk scorched and ignited, as did hanks of short blonde hair below her cork helmet. Panicked, the lieutenant flipped off her burning helmet, and was in turn slammed alongside the head by a cutlass blade. She dropped, face down in blood.

Yet Heart of a Lion's attack had sufficed too well. The fireball ricocheted from the sturdy cork helmet and lodged amidst tarred ropes and deadeyes in the standing rigging. Instantly tar sputtered and flared like kindling. Paint on woodwork blistered and peeled, smoked and curled and burst into flame. Within seconds the fire streaked up the rigging and set ablaze the mizzensail, the last of three.

"Fire aloft!" hollered a pirate. Instantly seamen chopped at stays to bring the sail down. The merchant sailors joined in, a tacit surrender, because everyone afloat feared fire at sea. Slipping in blood, they loosed belaying pins to free the running rigging. Let go, pushed by the wind, the flapping flaming sail flopped over the taffrail and hissed to extinction in the pitching waves. Pirates and sailors alike lowered buckets on ropes and sloshed the quarterdeck to douse stray sparks. Blood swirled with seawater and ran out the scuppers.

As the emergency passed, and sailors and pirates caught their breath, Heart of a Lion puffed his way up the short companionway. Graced with a glorious black beard combed and perfumed (and rubbed with soot to disguise gray hairs), the pirate chief wore a flowing red shirt that minimized his potbelly, blue trousers cut off at the knee, and a wide silk scarf of gold that matched a yellow turban. Spreading his hands, he announced, "Gentlemen, ladies! Fellow Brethren of the Brine! The gods decreed we possess your worthy vessel, and so it came to pass, so you should find no shame in surrender. Tell me, if you please, who among you is leader?"

With the captain and first mate dead, the worried sailors turned to a grizzled man with a salt-and-pepper beard and scarred cheek. Like most sailors, he wore patched baggy trousers and a plain sturdy shirt, but laced across his chest was a red leather vest wildly embroidered with slant-eyed dragons and doe-eyed maidens. Heart of the Lion noticed most of the sailors wore similar exotic vests. Obviously, this ship returned from far over the eastern horizon.

"I'm Bollus, esteemed sir, humble bosun of the *Eight Lightnings* out of Calimport. Two-hundred sixty-four days out of Kozakura. You shan't kill us, will you, honorable *rysal*? We were ordered to defend the ship, and hope we didn't offend."

"Eh? Oh, no, we shan't kill you." Heart of a Lion was distracted. Where under Father Sky lay, what had he called it?, Koza-koonit? What kind of outlandish cargo would they carry? "In fact, we welcome new recruits, so you have a choice: join us or be put ashore. But take your time and think it over. In the mean, spruce up this mess, if you please. Flake those lines, dress the sails, holystone the decks. `A busy man is a happy man.'"

Relieved to be spared, the sailors jumped to work. First to get pitched over the side were the bodies of fallen pirates and merchanters, once they'd been stripped of weapons, jewelry, and saleable clothing.

A surprised shout went up as the pirates discovered the marine lieutenant was still alive. She was dragged before the captain, head hanging and drooling. Her cheek and neck were singed and wept a sticky fluid, and her hair was burned away on one side. Heart of a Lion noted her blonde hair and fair skin under the dark tan. Probably born of foreign mercenaries, she was nevertheless a daughter of the desert. Typically Calimshite, whose people were united in a mongrel heritage.

"Shall we cut her throat, captain?" asked a pirate. "She killed Tasyn and Nureh."

Heart of a Lion squinted, considering. "That's no big loss. Tasyn was a bully and Nureh cheated at cards. No, I believe we'll chain her to an oar. If she survives the row to port, we'll ransom her back to the navy."

Down in the waist, Harun, the pirates' first mate, had stripped the canvas covers off the hatches to scout the cargo. This merchant's cog was a general-purpose vessel with moveable bulkheads below, fat and beamy as a wooden shoe, with a wealth of square sail. The *Eight Lightnings* could easily sail beyond the Forgotten Realms, and obviously had.

"Captain! You'd best see this!" bellowed Harun. Broad-shouldered and brown, the first mate favored a black mustache curled with beeswax, perhaps because his pate was bald as a bollard. Being an authority on a notoriously undisciplined pirate ship, Harun always sounded disgusted, but especially bitter now. With a sigh over a captain's busy lot, Heart of a Lion plodded down the companionway.

"Cast your eyes on this filthy muck!" The gaping hold contained cask stacked upon cask. Crewmen hefted a dozen barrels up and plunked them on the deck, but they all held the same thing, to judge by the identical calligraphs branded on the ends. Harun pried out a bung with his iron knife and let liquid gurgle into his palm. It was clear and faintly golden, like the wines of Waterdeep.

Heart of a Lion dipped his finger and sniffed. The liquid smelled faintly like burnt honey mixed with turpentine or cedar resin. Gingerly the pirate chief touched his tongue: it burned like spicy pepper. "What *is* it?"

"Flog me like a dog if I know." Harun waved calloused hands. "But we've got plenty of it. Three holds full! The master cabin has some raw silk and silver, and more of these fruity clothes, and painted dishes, may Ogham take my sight! We can sell them for a small profit, but these casks -- they're worthless!"

Heart of a Lion waggled his brass tube for Bollus. Treading lightly, the captive bosun shook his head.

"A thousand pardons, gracious sirs, and a hundred apologies, but we don't know what these barrels hold either. Our captain and mate kept it a secret. They were part owners in this vessel, which is why they fought so ferociously to defend it, while we simple sailors are paid by the day. They didn't trust us to know the cargo, and none of us could speak the language in Kozakura. I think the liquid is pressed from rice, or else juice of the sugar cane, or both. Our captain claimed he'd market it overnight in Calimshan, but how, we don't know."

"Where is your ship's log?"

"Again, ten score apologies, but the captain threw it overboard when you attacked. It had lead covers so t'would sink."

"A secret cargo from an unknown land..." Heart of a Lion smelled his fingertips again. "It's not lacquer, nor vinegar. 'Haps it's lamp oil, like the spermaceti they press from whale blubber at Luskan."

Pirates had gathered to gauge their luck, and now looked glum. Several dipped their fingers. One offered, "It's too thin for lamp oil." Another opined, "It might've spoiled in the hold, lost its body soaking up heat." "If it tastes putrid, it must be medicine." "Did you shake the cask? Perhaps it's separated, like unchurned camel milk." "'Haps it's camel piss."

"This voyage is cursed!" growled Harun. "Without the owners' connections in Calimport, we'll never sell the stuff! Who'd buy something the sellers can't identify? What with having to lay in food and water casks and new sails, and these slim pickings, we won't win enough on this voyage to make our expenses! Some pirates! We can't even profit by stealin'!"

Silently, Heart of a Lion agreed. These past three months, ocean traffic had mysteriously thinned, so even the busy sea lane spanning Tharsult and Almraiven lay deserted. A couple more weeks of bad luck, the pirate chief knew, and his crew would grow restless and angry, and blame their captain for ill fortune. Heart of a Lion would be voted out of his post -- if he weren't forcibly retired over the side on a windy night.

Yes, he sighed, pirating was a dodgy business. Especially since Heart of a Lion no longer wielded a scimitar. A growing prosperity around his middle had slowed him down. These days he preferred to exercise his brain, and to even experiment with mystical geegaws. Hence the brass wand of fire-casting, which he'd acquired in the market of Memnon, a city besmitten by efreet, fire genies. The tube was a handy weapon; still, some of the crew thought magic-wielding was sissified, and hinted darkly that their captain might fare better in another profession. Like flower-drying, or fish-mongering.

So, sighed Heart of a Lion, he better make some captainly decisions before the crew entertained doubts. Stumping around the deck, he checked the million details a mariner must attend at all times. The two ships were still linked by iron and hemp. The tide was flowing, so they drifted safely away from the rocks of Tharsult. The day was barely begun (and his ample

stomach growled for breakfast), so they had plenty of light to work by, but what to do next? Should he order some of these mysterious barrels transferred to *Shark's Fang*, or just jettison them? Without this heavy load, the weed-encrusted *Eight Lightnings* would ride higher. Perhaps by painting out the name and sailing her to Suldolphon, they could gain a quick profit that might satisfy the crew. Unless the ship had already visited Suldolphon, where it would be recognized --

"Ho, Captain! Our pardon, but the pink tiger *demands* to speak to you!"

Braced by two brawny pirates, scorched, bloody, and dazed, the marine lieutenant was still undefeated. She snarled at the pirate chief like a rabid tiger. "Are you *mad*? Why are you fools *doing* this?"

Perplexed, Heart of a Lion asked, "Doing what? Raiding ships? What do you expect pirates to do?"

"*Ptah!*" The lieutenant spat dried blood off a split lip. Having been clubbed upside the head, she strained to focus. "I am Lieutenant Belinda Destine of the Caleph's Imperial Marines! Are you really the pirates' captain? How can that be, a quivering tub of lard fat as a manatee?"

"Did you never hear of Heart of a Lion?" he asked with great dignity. "The boldest pirate of the Trackless Sea, fearless and feared up and down the Sword Coast? Who in the Year of the Shadows stole the Tethyrn tribute ship from under the Syl-Pasha's very nose? Who, during the Darkstalker Wars, looted the bottomless coffers of the Dark Dagger's stronghold, carrying off the Goblin King's crown before Ralan El Pesarkhal even knew it was gone?" Out of breath, the pirate chief paused, then patted his great girth. "Admittedly, those adventures occurred before you were born. But my mighty mind is ever-sharp and even today my name strikes terror --"

"Shut *up*, you blithering baboon!" The officer snarled in a parade ground voice. "Haven't you heard, you sheepheaded shearwater? We're at *war!*"

"Oh. Again?" Heart of a Lion shrugged, both hands in the air. "Someone's always at war, bless the dark dabblings of Shar. War is good. Pirates prosper when countries clash and supplies are shipped --"

"Not *countries!*" she barked. "The kingdoms of the coast are at war with the *deep!* The swimming races vie against the speaking races! At every coast fish-men and water-harpies and whales and whatnot spring from the waves and scuttle ships and massacre shore-dwellers! No village or city that touches water is safe from assault, nor any vessel!"

All the pirates, and sailors too, had gathered to hear the news. Her head ringing, the lieutenant rasped on. "No one knows why they attack or who leads them. The navy admirals posit that a war between ocean-dwellers has spilled onto dry land. A spy claims a coven of ixitxachtls, the flying devil-rays, oppose a mad monster named Iakhovas, whose identity is not known. Or else they support him. It's all unclear. I boarded this vessel in the Border Kingdoms when I heard the news, because Calimshan needs me! Our homeland needs all its citizens, to fight! The land races must band together or else we'll be driven from the waves --"

A scream interrupted. Turning, more people screamed, and cried, and gibbered with fear.

Alongside, rising, writhing, shedding seawater by the gallon, reared an octopus tentacle higher than the mast and thicker around than a hoghead barrel. The flesh was a mottled green and brown, the colors shimmering and shifting in the bright spring sunshine. The largest suckers on that gigantic arm were wide as a man's chest. As the watchers stepped back in fear, another tentacle arose alongside, then a third.

Heart of the Lion had sailed the seas for thirty years, as boy and man, and seen many fantastic sights, but nothing like this. He had time for only one chilling thought -- octopi had eight arms -- so was not surprised to see three more tentacles rising from the depths alongside the dromon. Like loathsome sea-spawned trees, the six arms formed an obscene cage that threatened to block the sun -- and trap the ships.

Like trees, the tentacles toppled and crashed on the wooden decks.

People scattered in all directions, some even jumping overboard. Severed rigging snapped and pinged. Loose sails flapped all whichway. Barrels stacked around the hold flipped and rolled like dice, and several split to spill resinous liquid running in streams down the deck. Half a dozen pirates and sailors were killed outright, crushed by the massive tentacles. Two victims screamed as trapped broken limbs were pulped further.

The marine lieutenant, her captors, and two other pirates were hemmed in with Heart of a Lion, trapped between living walls of slimy flesh tall as hedgerows and stinking of the sulfurous sea bottom. The ships shuddered and groaned like donkeys overladen -- as Heart of a Lion knew they were. Another minute and both ships might shatter. Sucked into the depths, drowning, the crew would be minced like minnows by the yellow parrot's beak that octopuses sported beneath their bulbous heads.

Buoyant as a cork, the merchant vessel yet shuddered as the deck tilted alarmingly to starboard. Barrels skittered. Timbers groaned and planks popped. The pirate captain wondered frantically how to fend off an attack by a giant octopus. Strong men would need an hour to hack through these rubbery limbs --

More noises, odd ones. From beyond the fleshy prison Heart of a Lion heard shouts, curses, and the clank and ring of steel. Mixed in were guttural roars like the rush of surf and the hooting of seals. What where they? How could the ships suffer *another* attack? Could some fiendish master have *ordered* a giant octopus to enwrap the ships, then sent unseen soldiers of the sea swarming aboard?

"Don't stand there gawking like a sea bass! Fight!" Lieutenant Belinda shook off her panicked captors and snatched her sword from one's belt. Whipping it overhead, both hands on the pommel, Belinda sank the sharp blade to the hilt in an octopus limb. Shearing flesh made a sucking sound ghastly to hear. Jumping high and hanging on the blade, Belinda carved a furrow a cubit long that bled dark red. She called to the pirates, "Bestir yourselves! Wedge in your blades!"

Dazzled by rapid events, and wondering what *else* attacked his crew, Heart of a Lion attacked with what came to hand. The fire-casting wand. With no better plan, he jammed the tube against the giant faintly-pulsing limb, then whisked his hand along the polished brass. "*As'tal rifa!*"

Flashback almost killed him.

Heart of a Lion was hurled backward as flame blossomed from the brass tube. A burst big as a bonfire erupted, filling his vision like a sun and blinding him. His head and shoulders thumped the opposite limb, and he sprawled on his broad rump. Yet the huge limb didn't quiver now, but twisted and writhed. Rubbing his dazzled eyes, he discovered his shirt cuffs had been singed off.

A hole big as a man's head was scorched in the octopus limb. Charred flesh rimmed a green hole which now gushed red blood like a hole in a dam. At the center of the wound glowed an inferno: the fireball, composed of mystical *dweomer*, continued to burn and bore into wet flesh.

All this damage he glimpsed for a second, then the limb was gone. Like a flying carpet, the neverending arms ascended into the air. Evidently the octopus was bee-stung. It made sense, thought the dazzled pirate chief: an octopus was unlikely to feel fire on the sea bed.

One arm retreated so quickly the marine Belinda was hoisted into the sky, for she single-mindedly clung to her sword pommel. Only when her boots ticked a canted mast did she let go to thump on the deck. Quick as a mink, she grabbed a dropped scimitar and raced to the attack before the enemy was even certain.

Berserk as a northern bobcat, Heart of a Lion sighed: the woman was battle mad. Crawling to his feet, feeling old and slow, he made a mental note to stay out of her way. What did they feed Imperial Marines anyway? Dragon's blood and wolf guts? Wiping his brow, making sure he retained his fireball wand, Heart of a Lion cast about to see what force attacked his ship and crew.

He wished he hadn't looked.

Green weedy giants, a dozen or more, raged across both ships leaving chaos in their wake. Heart of a Lion recognized the creatures, having seen one dead, caught in a fisherman's net. Sea ogres, called merrow by mariners, loomed ten feet tall yet ran thin as barracudas, with elongated necks and bear-trap jaws. Naked, with flesh pale as a drowned corpse, the males were stippled with seaweedy hair while the females were hung with horrid flat dugs. Every ogre was enscribed with twisted tattoos and hung with necklaces and bracelets and anklets cobbled from sharks' teeth, swordfish swords, tarnished brass and silver, broken bottle necks, and other seawrack. Teeth and nails black as chert were tough enough to rend humans in half, and the monsters revelled in an orgy of bloodlust.

As Heart of a Lion watched, an ogre drove a spear through a sailor's guts, hoisted the squirming woman by the haft and her hair, then bit out her throat so her head flopped against her spine. Two ogres swatted a pirate flat, then grabbed him by both arms and yanked: the limbs dislocated, then

tore from the sockets in gouts of blood. Many sailors and pirates didn't fight at all, just ran in terrified circles, and Heart of a Lion couldn't blame them. Others fought back. Harun swung a wicked boarding axe to slice a merrow across the waist and spill its guts, then swung the other way to hamstringing another rampaging monster and bring it crashing to the deck.

Maddest of all was the berserk Belinda. Since conditions changed rapidly and unexpectedly at sea, Imperial Marines were trained to improvise in battle, to attack with whatever came to hand. Bereft of her sword, Belinda hefted one of the many barrels of lamp oil that rolled and careened across the deck. Gargling her own battle cry, she smashed the barrel into the muzzle of a marauding merrow. Oak slats cracked and liquid gushed over both combatants. Oddly, the sharp reek set the merrow stumbling backward, clawing at its eyes, gasping and retching. Belinda merely shook her streaming blonde bangs from her eyes, hefted the empty cask again, and walloped the merrow in the breast. When it fell, Belinda beat the cask to fragments on its hard head. Heart of a Lion grunted at her mindless ferocity, and reminded himself to sheer clear of Imperial Marines.

As humans struggled and died, Heart of a Lion was disheartened to see more merrow swarm over the sides, rapacious as rats. A pirate swung a scimitar to lop off a black-nailed hand against the gunwale, but another merrow seized his sash and yanked him overboard like a pike on a line. A tall and comical head reared suddenly alongside, with goggling eyes like lamps, an elongated nose like a flute, and raddled brown skin segmented like a scorpion's carapace. A seahorse, Heart of a Lion realized, fully as big as a land steed from the great plains of Amn. Two merrow had wrapped long arms around its neck, and now used the seahorse's curved back to vault onto the ship.

Yet on this benighted day of strange sights, Heart of a Lion was astonished to see that Belinda had spoken true and he'd guessed right: this assault was controlled by a single mastermind.

By the cog's prow, farthest from the fighting, a single octopus tentacle remained suspended in the air, jiggling and bobbing as the giant bottom-dweller writhed in pain. Yet poised on the tip of the tentacle, like a canary perched on a finger, squatted a sahuagin. Tall as a man, hunched like a pelican, with a head like a cod and the body of a frog, finned and spined, the "sea devil" waved a narwhal tusk as it exhorted its queer troops to attack. It croaked and squawked and waved both crooked arms wildly: only the barbs of its froggy feet clamped tight kept it from toppling. A shaman invoking magic, thought Heart of a Lion, otherwise the pain-wracked octopus would flick it off. Perhaps it hurled more magic to goad the merrow in their attack, not that the bloodthirsty enemies of mankind needed much prodding.

Heart of a Lion's only magic trick was the fire-wand, and he had no idea how much *dweomer* still charged the tube. He should conserve his shots, he thought, except the battle could end within minutes, with the merrow the victors.

"What shall we do, master?"

Heart of a Lion shook his head. Chaos whirled like a cyclone around him, and people died before he could think, let alone act. Up on the quarterdeck, three sailors were clubbed down by four merrow who flailed their spear butts again and again on the bloody carcasses. At the prow, the sahuagin shaman made a tearing motion with green scaly claws, and a pirate dropped dead, clutching his heart. The fiesty Belinda's luck ran out, for as she belabored one merrow with a broken boarding pike, another dropped a fist like an anvil that hammered her to the deck, which was awash in the turpentine-reeking fluid.

All this Heart of a Lion glimpsed in seconds, then the attack stalled. Surviving sailors and pirates clustered around their captain. All hunkered at the starboard side of the cog, with the pirates' tethered dromon dipping and pitching alongside. More merrow rose to the attack, some climbing the sides of the dromon and tramping across the deck, trailing water. The defenders were surrounded: twenty weary fighters and their aging captain, who wanted only to go below and take a nap. Their future was bleak. Stand and die under bludgeoning fists and claws, or jump overside to drown, or be crushed between the ships' hulls, or else be eaten by more denizens of the depths.

Unless...

"Grab that barrel!" barked Heart of a Lion. A half-dozen casks tumbled and rumbled along the deck. "And that one! Broach the ends! The rest of you, strip your shirts or sashes!"

Not comprehending, but glad to follow any orders that might save them, the knotty-armed seamen righted the barrels and stove in the ends with belaying pins. Ripe fumes of sap and sugar wafted around the survivors. As blood-spattered merrow closed on the humans like a wolf pack, Heart of a Lion ordered the shirts and sashes sopped in the liquid until it puddled around their feet. One man hissed as the fiery fluid stung a long gash down his shin.

"Fling the juice in their faces! Hurry!" Bare-chested men and a few women hopped forward and whipped the wet clothing at the merrows' evil elongated mugs. Wincing, flinching, the sea ogres shielded their sea-green eyes from the spatters, and shied back, shoving back their bloodthirsty mates.

"They hate the stuff!" crowed Heart of a Lion. "It offends their noses!"

"So what? It's their claws and teeth will kill us!" Always grumpy, Harun snapped a shirt at the monsters and drove them back, but had to soak his shirt while the creatures surged in. "We can't flick laundry at them all day! How do we stop them? Or escape?"

Heart of a Lion shook his head, black beard waggling. He hadn't planned that far ahead. Once the repugnant liquid ran out, or the merrow girded their courage, they'd be massacred. What to do? It didn't help his concentration that the leader of this murder spree, the fish-headed sahuagin, was still perched on its tentacle, raised higher now to observe them. The shaman croaked and rasped like a demented seagull, urging the

merrow on with curses and charms.

"I don't know what else," growled Heart of a Lion, "but I'll fry that frog-fiend and bear it to the Nine Hells with us."

Sighting down his firecasting-wand, Heart of a Lion eyeballed the crooked sea-devil as he stroked his fat hand down the polished brass. "*As'tal rifa!*"

Came a *VA-VOOMF!* like a volcano coughing, and the whole world exploded into flame.

Heart of a Lion hooted as the sahuagin shaman was smashed in the gut by a flaming fist. The foul creature bled red as it tumbled off the octopus tentacle and splashed in the sea. But as he lowered the brass tube, he saw his enemies, crew, and both ships were ablaze.

"Memnon immolate my soul! Who knew the stuff was flammable?"

Heart of a Lion goggled. Across two decks raged fire white-hot and glimmering blue. Flames scurried like rats across deck furniture and wreckage, soared up ratlines, rimmed the sails, and ran rings around the scuppers and gunwales. High above, rigging sparkled and winked like fireworks, and black jots of burning tar rained. Some pirates yelped as their clothing or hair burned, but cooler heads knocked them down and beat out the flames, or else hurled folds of canvas over them. Pirates and sailors leaned far overside, braving the grinding hulls, to sop their clothing in seawater. They slapped the cool brine on sparks atop people and ships.

Mindless, the merrow suffered and died. Many were ablaze. Flames licked up their legs as if they waded a grass fire. Some beat at the flames and only ignited their hands and seaweedy hair. Many galloped, bellowing in pain, to the sides of the ships and dove headlong. One broke its neck ramming the brown armored hide of a giant seahorse. Another merrow hanged itself by snarling its long neck in rigging while jumping overboard. A few, unable to act for the searing pain, fell on the decks and rolled and writhed. Further saturating themselves in flammable liquid, they were incinerated. Evil oily smoke wafting from charred corpses stank like burning garbage. Only a couple of merrow had yet to catch fire, and they ran in panicked circles below dripping ratlines and falling sails ripe with flame.

"To the dromon! Board the *Shark's Fang!*" A true captain again, Heart of a Lion shoved people headlong up onto the gunwale, even picked up a few and lobbed them bodily into the low-built dromon. "Harun, make ready to set sail! Saida -- no, she's dead. Kalil, pull a hatchet and cut the grappling ropes! Jassan, helm the rudder to haul us away from the cog! You sailors, beat out flames!"

A slave to custom, Heart of a Lion refused to leave the deck until his crew was safe. Once all the living were aboard, he cast a last look around the cog to see if anyone remained.

The ship was a vision of hell. Smoke roiled and billowed across the deck like thunderclouds. Through dark curtains he glimpsed burning dying merrow like ghosts condemned to torment, staggering or crawling or writhing in thrashing balls. Paint curled and burned in long uneven stripes. All the

rigging, dried by the fierce southern sun, blazed like tinder. Glancing aloft, the pirate chief saw the standing and running rigging would soon collapse the burning sails and smother everything. Barrel after spilled barrel burned madly like candles, and Heart of a Lion wondered if the sealed barrels would soon explode like dwarven tunnel magic. If so, he needed to get many sea miles distant. Turning to mount the gunwale with a grunt --

-- he paused.

Something had caught his eye. Movement where it shouldn't be. Whirling, he faced the billowing fire. The horrific heat dried his face and eyeballs, making him squint. But somewhere --

There!

"Shar shield her most shameful son!" prayed the pirate. Clutching his fire-wand, he ducked his head and charged the flames.

What he'd seen was a huddled crawling figure, not a dying merrow, but the marine lieutenant Belinda. She'd been hammered to the deck but not killed, too tough to die, Heart of the Lion realized. Sweating buckets in fright, barely daring to breathe, he zigzagged past knee-high flame, skirted a rolling burning barrel, stopped, dashed under a flaming flap of sail, then -- his heart stopped cold -- *leapt* over the open hatchway and crashed clumsily on one knee. An ankle popped like a old twig, and agony coursed up his leg.

Still, the fat pirate reached the lean lieutenant by skittering clumsily to her side. Dazed, she crawled aimlessly away from the nearest fires. Her pink silk shirt smouldered and her yellow sash was ablaze. With no breath to explain, Heart of a Lion ripped off his turban, beat out the fire, then dropped the greasy burning folds. Kneeling, gasping, he hooked a meaty arm around her slim middle and rolled her to his broad shoulder. With a grunt, and grimace of pain from his sprained ankle, the pirate chief squinted in smoke and fire and staggered towards the dromon, which seemed to lay a hundred leagues across a burning wasteland that would put the Nine Hells to shame.

Limping, cursing, praying, Heart of a Lion groped towards safety and cool sweet air. His burden mashed his shoulder and his sprained ankle. He had to circumvent the mainmast, then the mizzen, because the entire starboard side of the cog seemed engulfed in flame. If he couldn't get past the fire at the prow, he'd have to risk the ocean -- and he'd never learned to swim, an instance of laziness he regretted now, but perhaps not for long.

"Come -- *Uh!* -- daughter of disaster! We can't -- *Oww!* -- tarry here!" Heart of a Lion gabbled at the unconscious girl to keep up her courage, or his. "My, they must feed you marines -- *Uh!* -- oats and hay! Come, this is no worse than a forest fire, or so I hear -- what?"

Rearing from the smoke, tall as a flaming volcano, like a ghost from his haunted past, loomed a merrow scorched black along both its sides. Mad with pain, the monster lunged into the mizzenmast, bounced off, then saw the humans and roared a challenge.

Heart of a Lion had no weapon, neither scimitar or even dagger, and was saddled with an unconscious woman besides. Lacking anything else, he used what came to hand. The brass fireball wand.

"Begone!" Craning back one thick arm, Heart of a Lion slammed the tall merrow across the jaw with the brass tube. The sea ogre's mouth shut with a *clack!* as the creature was bowled sideways. The pirate wasn't sure, but guessed he'd broken the thing's neck, a feat more suited to his lusty youth than a middling age. Dropping the bent tube, he staggered on blistered feet for the dromon.

One last sheet of blue-white flame blocked his path to the dromon, and through it pirates turned and pointed, their images rippling in the heat above the fire. A roaring in his head wouldn't let him hear what they called. With no strength left, only heart, the pirate chieftain charged.

In five limping strides, he bulled into the cog's gunwale, pushed headlong, and dove.

Fire filled his vision, then blue sky, then green water --

-- then he crashed on his shoulder against a pine deck.

At the last second he'd twisted away from the shoulder bearing Belinda. Exhausted, pain throbbing in every part, roasted as if on a spit by devils, he lay gasping while willing hands laid him flat. Blessed cool water was slapped on him and the lieutenant. A hand tilted his head and poured fresh sweet water -- truly the nectar of the gods! -- down his parched throat. Then the hero was left alone as pirates and sailors set sail.

Dimly, Heart of a Lion heard the thunk of axes. Under his back, he felt the dromon come alive and pull free of the burning cog. At more shouts, the decks canted slightly. The captain, thirty years at sea as boy and man, felt the dromon's rudder bite the waves as she gained headway. Squinting aloft, he saw sails billow, snap into place, and fill their tan bellies. His ship was safe, and he could rest, lying at ease and staring at the blue sky.

"You -- saved my life."

"Eh?" Rolling his head, Heart of a Lion found the blue eyes of a northerner staring into his. Lieutenant Belinda Destine of the Caleph's Imperial Marines was scorched, smoke-grimed, half-cooked, but alive. She croaked like a crow. "You waded through flames and -- carried me out. You -- coldcocked a merrow with -- one punch. You truly do have -- the heart of a lion."

"Oh. That was nothing. I did that every day when I was young. Even on holy days." Used to boasting about himself, Heart of a Lion was suddenly embarrassed, yet it was pleasant to see a pretty young woman smile. To show off, he pushed to his elbows and casually studied the sails.

"Still," he rubbed his running nose, "pirating has slipped into a lull as of late. Tell me, what do they pay captains in the Caleph's Navy?"

END