

goddess tithe

By Anne Elisabeth Stengl

First Chapter Sample



“SHE WILL ALWAYS CLAIM her tithe,” the old man said. “Such is the law of this sea.”

The boy sat cross-legged before the old man, tying knots as fast as his small fingers could fly. During the months of this, his first voyage to the western reaches of the great Continent, he had learned to tie more than twenty different knots under the old man’s direction. As a little child on his mother’s knee, the boy would never have believed so many knots existed.

But that was long ago. A lifetime, it seemed, since he kissed his mother goodbye; perhaps forever. Since then he had begun to learn the secret of knots, and his fingers had toughened until the rough fibers of the ship’s ropes could no longer flay them to tear-blinking agony.

“*When you have learned a hundred knots, then you will be a sailor,*” the old man had said. The boy believed him, because he was so old and so ugly that he must be very wise.

This was why the boy also believed the old man when he said, “Just you wait, young Munny. Captain knows the laws better than you or I ever will. He knows what she demands.”

The boy—who was called Munny, though this was not the name his mother had given him—glanced uneasily over his shoulder toward the hatch that led, eventually, down to the *Kulap Kanya*’s deepest hold.

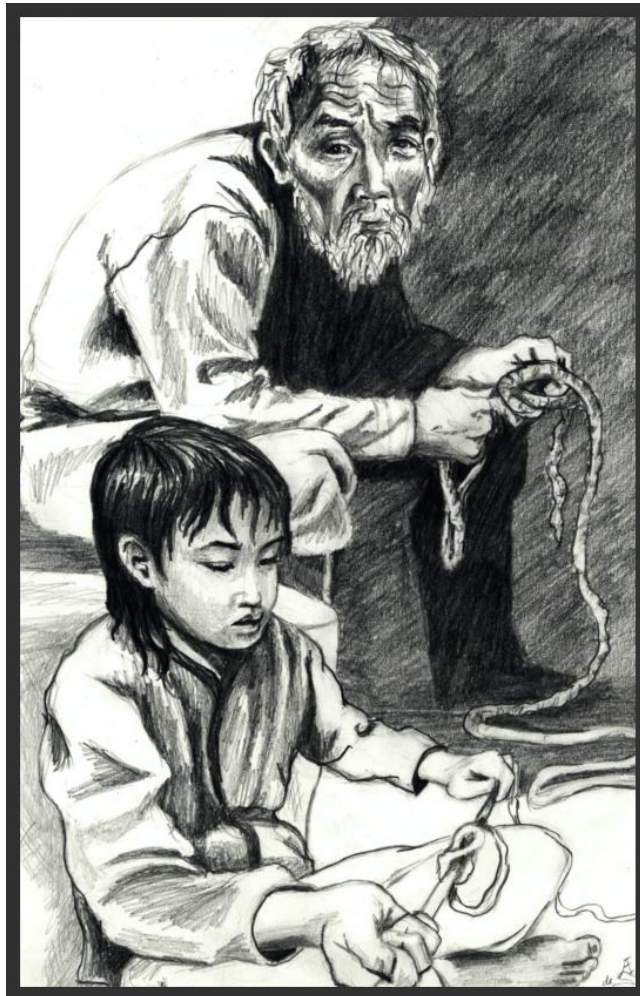
The hold where the devil lurked.

“Why,” Munny asked, “does the Captain not give him over? We have been six days at sea, and still he is down there!” Munny shivered as he spoke, for the devil in the hold frightened him.

But the old man reached out and tapped him sharply on top of his head, hard enough that it hurt and brought the boy looking round again. “Do I hear you questioning the Captain, little sea-pup?”

“No, Tu Pich,” Munny said, bobbing respectfully in an awkward seated bow, and focused once more upon his knots. He was practicing what the old man called the “Mother’s Arms,” and it was difficult enough for his small hands without the added pressure of the old man’s scowl . . . or the dreadful chill of the hold’s gaping mouth at his back.

He hunched over his work, fingers trembling, and was relieved when the old man, seated upon a large cask above him, leaned back at last and closed his eyes. The world was full of sounds: the creak of timbers, the shouts of sailors, the ever-present rumbling conversation of the wind and the sea. But somehow the old man could make the small sphere of existence around his wrinkled self seem a haven of calm. Glancing up at him every now and then, Munny felt calmer too, despite the lurking evil below deck.



“Never doubt the Captain, my boy,” the old man said suddenly, his voice as creaky as the timbers themselves and equally as strong. “I’ve sailed with him two ten-cycles of years, and while I have withered and bent under the ocean’s harsh caress, the Captain never has. He is as hale and hearty as he was the day I first saw him. He knows the laws of the sea. He will honor Risafeth when the time is right.”

Even as the old man spoke, a sudden change in the air brought both him and the boy sitting upright and twisting their heads about. All those upon the deck did likewise, and all those running the tack lines, even up to the man in the lookout. As a well-tuned orchestra turns ever to its conductor, so the crew of the *Kulap Kanya* turned to Captain Sunan as he stepped from his cabin into the sun.

He was a tall, lean man with a face unweathered by the salty air he breathed. To the men of his command he was like an ancient hero out of legend come to life. How could it be that he was nothing more than the master of a merchant ship sailing between Lunthea Maly and the western trade city of Capaneus, back and forth with the regularity of the changing seasons? Such a man should not be bound to one ship, to one repeated voyage. Such a man should not deal with traders and the shore-hugging businessmen back home.

Such a man—or so Munny thought with a thrill in his thin young breast—should be fighting dragons and monsters and devils with his bare hands. He should consort with gods, goddesses, and Faerie queens.

But no. Instead, Captain Sunan commanded the *Kulap Kanya*, which not even Munny could pretend was the proudest merchant vessel on the seas.

Munny sat frozen over his work, watching as the Captain strode across the deck and mounted the stairway to the quarterdeck. There the quartermaster, Sur Agung, saluted smartly after the Noorhitamin fashion, his right fist pressed to his left shoulder.

A kick planted itself in Munny’s thigh, causing him to drop his half-worked knot. Munny, startled, gave a cry and looked up into the face of Chuo-tuk, his nemesis.

“Get up, scrub-louse,” Chuo-tuk said, speaking with the imperiousness of a prince, though he was only the boatswain’s boy. However, he was bigger and older than Munny by six years, and if there was one rule Munny had learned in the months of his first voyage, it was to listen to anyone bigger than he.

Munny scrambled to his feet despite the old man’s protests of “Leave him alone, Chuo-tuk. He’s not bothering you.”

Chuo-tuk ignored the old man and took Munny by the ear. “Get up there, quick-like,” he said, with a vicious tug to emphasize his domination. “Find out what Captain is saying to old Agung.”

Munny hastened to obey the moment his ear was released. He was often called to this sort of work, being small and light on his feet. It was easy enough for him to slip into shadows and crevices to overhear conversations the lower sailors were not meant to hear. It was a crime punishable by five lashes if he was caught. But Munny considered the possible threat of five lashes compared to the definite reality of a kicking from Chuo-tuk to be odds worth taking.

He climbed not the stairs themselves but the outside railing, clinging to the shadows just beneath the quarterdeck. The sea was calm that afternoon, the *Kulap Kanya* rising and settling as gently as a baby rocked in a cradle. For this, at least, Munny could be thankful, as he clutched the railing and craned his neck to hear what he might.

Sur Agung was speaking. “You’d have to ask Bahurn to know for certain. But I hear he’s been swearing storm-bursts below about the ‘large rat,’ and I little doubt what his answer will be.”

“Summon Tu Bahurn, if you please, Agung,” said the Captain.

Bells were rung, orders were bellowed, and soon Bahurn the boatswain was scrambling up from the hold, swearing even now, “Dragon’s teeth and tail and gizzard!” Munny pressed himself still further into the shadows of the stair, terribly frightened that Bahurn would spot him as he went past. But Bahurn was too busy swallowing his curses and pulling himself together to present a respectful front to notice one skulking cabin boy.

“What is the news on our . . . little problem?” the Captain asked when the boatswain had saluted.

“If I may respectfully contradict my captain, I wouldn’t call him so ‘little,’ if I were you. He’s found his way to the cheeses now, and we’ll have no Beauclair blue-crust left to offer our masters in Dong Min or Lunthea Maly if he goes on unchecked.”

From where Munny clung, he could just see the Captain’s face. And—though he would never have told Chuo-tuk as much for fear of a disbelieving slap—he could have sworn he saw a smile tilt the corner of the Captain’s stern mouth.

“We would not want to be without our prized Beauclair blue-crust come trade day in Dong Min, would we?”

“No indeed, Captain,” said Bahurn.

“The time has come then,” said the Captain. “Our hold-devil has become too much of a nuisance. Bring him to my cabin, will you?”

“With pleasure!”

Munny dropped quietly from the rail, backing into a dark recess even as Bahurn flew down the stairway, roaring, “Saknu! Chuo-tuk! I require your assistance in lower storage!”

So Chuo-tuk was called away, scrambling down to the lower hold before Munny could bring his report. Munny scurried back to the old man, who remained sitting upon the cask, gazing out to sea as if he was not at all interested. But Munny knew he was and hastily said, “They’re bringing him up, Tu Pich! They’re bringing up the stowaway at last!”

“Ah. This is good,” said the old man. “Risafeth will have her due, and our voyage will be safe.” He smiled then, displaying his three yellow teeth. “Did I not tell you the Captain would do what he must when the time was right?”

Munny did not answer. He could already hear the shouts and sounds of struggle deep down in the bowels of the ship. He stood a little behind the old man’s cask, breathless as he waited.

Soon Bahurn and his two sturdy boys appeared through the hatch, dragging the brown foreign devil behind them.

End of Sample

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