



THE MYTHIC CIRCLE

Volume 1988 | Issue 5

Article 4

Spring 4-15-1988

The Lonely Maiden

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Recommended Citation

Reedman, Janet P. (1988) "*The Lonely Maiden*," *The Mythic Circle*: Vol. 1988 : Iss. 5 , Article 4.
Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mcircle/vol1988/iss5/4>

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sword. Daran reached forward and touched him with a slender piece of wood.

"What --" began the captain, and frowned in puzzlement, his concentration broken. He looked at the floor, the ceiling, and the window, then shrugged. It must not have been important...

Mario, Rufio, and the other seventeen guards gasped, then charged toward Daran -- until they were sent flying by a new attack upon their rear. Sharp hooves flashed, fists flew, and a wooden bench was lifted and hurled into the mass of guardsmen. Caroline and Shadow felled three of the soldiers and began, businesslike, on the next three.

Daran grinned, and, holding the Wand of Forest's Rule before him, quickly put five guards out of action with quick artistic epee thrusts.

Soon all the guards were down, or, like the captain, sitting on floors or leaning against walls in postures of relaxation and ennui. The three rogues dispatched the final resistance with wand-tip, hoof-stamp, and bare-knuckle pounding.

"My wand!" exclaimed Shadow.

"It was on the Doge's nightstand," Daran laughed, shedding the heavy and encumbering robes of state. "He was using it as a sleeping aid, to overcome his insomnia." He placed the artifact in Shadow's trembling hand.

They escaped from the alerted palace without any great difficulty, bearing with them the wand and what money they found in a quick search of the bedroom. Through the streets they ran, over bridges and into marketplaces, reveling in their freedom and in the bright seaside sunlight.

"I hate to abandon our octopus friend," Caroline said as they passed under a portico and along a colonnaded loggia. "But I do think we ought to head inland."

"I agree," Daran nodded. "One shipwreck in a week is enough, and summer storms are boring when repeated too often."

With Shadow, they clambered aboard the rear platform of a passing ale-wagon, itself little more than a barrel with wheels. Perhaps the carter didn't know that he'd gained hitchhikers; perhaps he merely didn't care.

Men on the street stared fixedly at Shadow as the cart trundled by. One brave Bulgarian bristled his mustachios to impress her. Slowly, happily, they cantered along the causeway that crosses the Laguna Veneta to the mainland.

It was then that Karakil surfaced with a fountain of sea-water, grabbing everyone from the wagon, then the wagon itself.

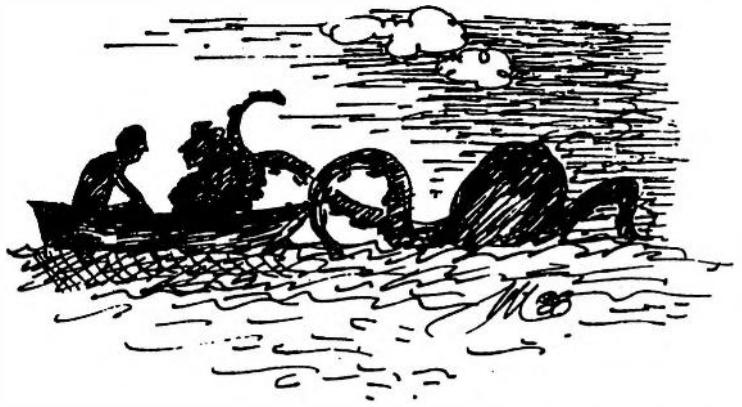
After the giant octopus had been admonished, after the horses had been chased down and calmed, after the driver had been revived from his faint and had been recompensed for his lost ale, (which took exactly all of the gold the trio had taken from the bedroom of the Doge), and after the drunken octopus had stopped swimming figure-eights in the Laguna, Caroline and Daran bid farewell to Shadow-of-a-Fir and resignedly clambered into their old rowboat, which Karakil had thoughtfully brought for them.

"Octopuses."

"Octopi."

Karakil emitted another underwater belch

of air, and towed them out to sea. Eventually he let them go in London, going by way of Tunis, Barcelona, and Nantes.



THE LONELY MAIDEN

by Janet P. Reedman

Lonely maiden, in my distress,
I wandered to the Haunted Wood
Where yewtrees bore their poison fruit;
I had no fear--for I was good.

Unwed, unloved by any man,
I was pure enough for unicorn,
Save that the thoughts in my mind
Were filled with jealousy and scorn.

My sisters wore white wedding gowns,
I had no ring, no village lad,
And so I fled away to show
I would not praise what they had.

Shivering in my cotton skirt,
I passed seven great hawthorn trees,
Then heard a whisper on the wind,
Made by a voice and not by breeze.

A man in green stood on the path,
His eyes were bright, his hair was dark;
He took me in his arms just once,
Then vanished in the woodland bark.

Returning home, splashed in mud,
I pondered my lonely fate;
I could never wed mortal now,
Having been an elflord's mate.

And now I sit old and grey,
A despised and loveless crone;
Watching sisters' babes laugh and play
While I dream wild dreams--alone.