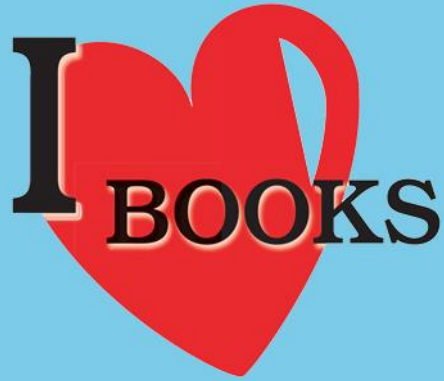




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Opening extract from
Reckless III
The Golden Yarn

Written & Illustrated by
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1

THE MOONSTONE PRINCE

The doll-princess was not having an easy labor. Not even the palace garden offered a refuge from her screams, and the Dark Fairy listened, and she hated how those groans and whimpers made her feel. She hoped Amalie would die. Of course. She'd been hoping ever since Kami'en had said yes to the other one in her bloody wedding gown. Yet there was more: an unreasonable longing for the infant who was pushing those screams from Amalie's vapid, pretty mouth.

Through all these months, only her magic had kept the unborn child alive. The child that could not be. "You will save it. Promise me!" The same whispered plea, every time after he'd made love to her. Only that had made Kami'en return to her bed at night. The desire to meld his flesh with human flesh—it made him so helpless.

Oh, how the Doll screamed. As though the infant were being

carved with a knife from her body, the body that only a Fairy lily could make desirable.

Kill her already, Skinless Prince. What gives her the right to call herself your mother?

He would have rotted inside her, like a forbidden fruit, if it hadn't been for the magic the Dark One had spun around Amalie. Yes, the infant was a boy. A son. The Dark Fairy had seen him in her dreams.

Kami'en did not come for her help himself. Not this night. He sent his bloodhound to find her instead. His milky-eyed jasper shadow. Hentzau stopped in front of her, and as usual he avoided looking in her eyes.

"The midwife says she's losing the child."

Why did she go with him?

For the child.

It filled the Fairy with quiet satisfaction that Kami'en's son chose the night to come into the world. Amalie feared the darkness so much, she always kept a dozen gaslights burning in her bedchamber, even though their pale light hurt her husband's eyes.

Kami'en was standing next to Amalie's bed. He turned as the servants opened the door for his mistress. For an instant, the Fairy thought she could see in his eyes a shadow of the love she used to find there. Love. Hope. Fear. Dangerous emotions for a King, though Kami'en's stone skin helped him hide them. More and more, he was starting to resemble one of the statues his human enemies erected for their Kings.

The startled midwife toppled a basin with bloody water as the Fairy approached Amalie's bed. Even the doctors backed away from her. Goyl doctors, human doctors, Dwarf doctors. Their black frocks made them look like a murder of crows drawn in by

the scent of death rather than anticipation of a new life.

Amalie's doll face was swollen with fear and pain. The lashes around her violet-blue eyes were congealed with tears. Fairy-lily eyes...The Dark Fairy thought she could see in those eyes the water of the lake that had once delivered her.

"Go away!" Amalie's voice was hoarse from screaming. "What do you want? Who called you?"

The Dark One pictured those violet eyes being snuffed out and that soft skin Kami'en so loved to touch turning cold and flaccid. The temptation to make her dead was so sweet. Too bad the Fairy couldn't indulge it, for a dead Doll would take Kami'en's son with her.

"I know why you're not letting the child out!" the Dark One whispered in Amalie's ear. "You're afraid to look at him. But I won't allow you to kill him with your dying flesh. Deliver him, or I will have him cut out of you."

How the Doll stared at her. The Fairy wasn't sure whether the hatred in Amalie's eyes revealed more fear or jealousy. Maybe love bore fruit even more poisonous than fear.

Amalie squeezed the infant out. The midwife's face turned into a contorted mask of horror and disgust. On the streets, they already called him the Skinless Prince. But he did have a skin. The Fairy's magic had given him one, as hard and as smooth as moonstone, and just as transparent. His skin revealed everything it covered: every sinew, every vein, the small skull, the eyeballs. Kami'en's son looked like Death—or at least like his youngest spawn.

Amalie groaned and pressed her hands over her eyes. Kami'en was the only one who looked at the baby without dread. The Dark Fairy took the slithery body and stroked the transparent skin

with her six-fingered hand until it turned as red as his father's, giving such beauty to the small face that now all the averted eyes turned back in enchantment to admire the newborn prince. Amalie reached out for her son, but the Fairy placed the baby in Kami'en's arms. She did so without looking at the King, and when she stepped out into the dark hallway, he didn't stop her.

The Dark Fairy had to pause halfway and struggle for breath on a balcony. Her hands trembled as she wiped her fingers on her dress, again and again, until she could no longer feel the warm body they'd touched.

There was no word for child in her language. There hadn't been in a long time.



2

AN ALLIANCE OF OLD FOES

John Reckless had stood in Charles de Lotharaine's audience chamber before, once, with a different face and a different name. Was that five years ago? He found it hard to believe it hadn't been longer, but those past years had taught him much about time, about yearlong days and years that passed as quickly as a day.

"These will be better?"

Charles, the Crookback, frowned as his son tried to hide another yawn behind his hand. It was an open secret that the crown prince Louis was suffering from the Snow-White Syndrome. The palace kept silent about where and how the prince had contracted that malady (as was, in these days of progress, the preferred term for the effects of black magic). Yet the parliament of Albion had already seen debates on the dangers (and opportunities) of a King on the throne in Lutis who could at any moment fall into a sleep lasting days at a time. The Albion secret service claimed

that Crookback had even gone so far as to secure the services of a child-eater to heal the crown prince. Judging by the yawns Louis tried to hide behind his dark red sleeves, she'd not been very successful.

"You have my word, and that of Wilfred of Albion, Your Majesty. The machines I will build for you will not only fly higher and faster than the airplanes of the Goyl but will also be much better armed."

What John did not mention was that he could only be so confident because those Goyl airplanes had been designed by him as well. Not even Wilfred of Albion knew of his famous engineer's past. His stolen name and new face had shielded John from such exposure, just as they protected him from the Goyl, who were supposedly still looking for him. A different nose and a different chin were a small price to pay for days spent free of fear. His nights were still shattered by dreams that were the legacy of years spent in Goyl prisons. But he'd learned to make do with little sleep. Yes, the past five years had indeed taught him a lot. Not that they had made him a better person—he was still a self-serving coward, relentlessly driven by ambition (some truths were best faced straight on). His imprisonment had taught him that, but also a lot about this world and its inhabitants.

"Should your generals be concerned that airplanes may not be the answer to the military superiority of the Goyl, then I can assure you that the parliament of Albion shares these concerns and has authorized me to address them by presenting two of my most recent inventions."

The authorization had, in fact, been issued by King Wilfred himself, but it seemed best to maintain appearances. Albion was proud of its democratic traditions, though the true power

still rested with the King and the nobility. It was no different in Lotharaine, though here the people had a less romantic view of noble and crowned heads—one of the reasons for the armed riots that were currently plaguing the capital.

Louis yawned again. The crown prince had a reputation for being as stupid as he looked. Stupid, moody, and with cruel tendencies that worried even his father. And Charles of Lotharaine was getting old, though he dyed his hair black and was still a handsome man.

John motioned one of the guards who had accompanied him from Albion to come closer. The Walrus (this moniker for Wilfred the First was so fitting, John was perpetually worried he might one day actually use it to address his royal employer) had him well guarded. Albion's King had insisted, over John's well-known dislike for ships, that his best engineer go in person to sell Crookback on the idea of an alliance. The construction plans, which the guard now handed to the King's adjutant, had been drawn by John especially for this audience, leaving out a few vital details he would supply after the alliance was completed. Crookback's engineers wouldn't notice. After all, John was confronting them with the technology of another world.

"I call these 'tanks.'" John had to suppress a smile as his Lotharainian competition leaned over the drawings with an obvious mix of envy and incredulous awe. "Not even the Goyl cavalry can withstand these machines."

The second drawing showed rockets with explosive warheads. There were indeed moments when John's conscience tried to put him on trial. He could have brought inventions into this world that would have made it healthier and more just for its people. He usually soothed his conscience with a generous donation to

an orphanage, or to Albion's suffragettes, though that of course brought up memories of his wife, Rosamund, and of Jacob and Will.

"Who is going to manufacture these valves?" an engineer asked doubtfully.

John returned to the present, where he was a man without sons and where the woman in his life was the daughter of a Leonese diplomat and fifteen years his junior.

"If they can make those valves in Albion," Crookback barked at the engineer, "then we can damn well do it here. Or will I have to recruit my engineers from the universities of Pendragon and Londra?"

The engineer's face lost all color, and the King's advisors regarded John with cold eyes. Everyone in the hall knew what the King's answer meant. The decision was made: Albion and Lotharaine would form an alliance against the Goyl. A historic decision for this world. Two nations that for centuries had used any excuse to declare war on one another, now turned into allies by a common foe. The old and eternal game.

John decided to go to the palace gardens to write a missive informing the Walrus and the parliament of Albion of his diplomatic success, even though it turned out to be near impossible to find a bench without a statue towering over it. His phobia against stone statuary was just one of the irritating consequences of his imprisonment by the Goyl.

He finally found a bench under a tree. As he wrote the message that would shake the balance of power in this world, his uniformed guardians used the time to stare after the ladies of the court as they ambled between the pristine hedges. They certainly seemed to confirm the rumor that it was Crookback's ambition to have

all the most beautiful women of Lotharaine gathered at his court. John found a little comfort in the fact that Crookback was an even worse husband than he. After all, John had never been unfaithful to Rosamund until he discovered the mirror. And as far as his affairs in Schwanstein, Vena, and Blenheim were concerned, one could certainly wonder whether having such dalliances in a different world actually counted as adultery. *Oh yes, they do, John.*

As he put his signature under the dispatch (with a fountain pen he'd discreetly modernized, after having grown tired of ink-stained fingers), he saw a man rushing toward him across the white gravel paths. He'd noticed the man before, standing in the audience chamber by the crown prince's side. The unexpected visitor wore an old-fashioned-looking frock coat, and he was barely taller than a large Dwarf. The spectacles he nervously adjusted as he stopped in front of John had such thick lenses they made the eyes behind them look as large as an insect's. Fittingly, his pupils were just as black and shiny as insect eyes.

"Monsieur Brunel?" A curtsy, a servile smile. "With your permission: Arsene Lelou, tutor to His Highness the crown prince Louis. Could I, possibly, eh" — he cleared his throat as though his assignment were stuck there like a splinter — "bother you with a request?"

"Certainly. What is it?"

Maybe Monsieur Lelou needed help in explaining some technical innovation. It couldn't be easy to be the teacher of a future King in such a rapidly advancing world. Yet Arsene Lelou's request had nothing to do with the New Magic, as science and technology were referred to behind the mirror.

"My, eh, royal pupil," he lisped, "has for these past months been fielding inquiries regarding the whereabouts of a man who

has also worked for the Albian royal court. And since you are a member of that court, I wanted to take this opportunity to ask you in His Highness's name for your aid in our search for this person."

John had heard nasty stories about how Louis of Lotharaine dealt with his enemies, so the man Arsene was asking him about already had his deepest sympathy.

"Certainly. May I ask whom you are inquiring about?" Always best to feign helpfulness.

"His name is Reckless. Jacob Reckless. He is a famous, if not infamous, treasure hunter who has worked in the service of, among others, the deposed Empress of Austy."

John noted with irritation his hand trembling as he handed his signed dispatch to one of his guards. How easily one's own body could turn traitor.

Arsene Lelou noticed the trembling hand.

"A bite from a will-o'-the-wisp," John explained. "Years ago, but I still have that tremor in my hands." He'd never been more grateful for his new face, for he had once looked very much like his elder son. "You may relay to the crown prince that he can cease his inquiries. To my knowledge, Jacob Reckless died when the Goyl sank the Albian fleet."

He was proud of the calmness of his voice. Arsene Lelou would not know that the news John had just related had rendered him unable to work for days. His own reaction to the news of Jacob's death had startled John so much that at first he'd been utterly convinced the tears dripping on his newspaper had to be someone else's.

His elder son...John had, of course, known for years that Jacob had followed him through the mirror. All the newspapers

had reported on his treasure-hunting feats. Still, the unexpected encounter in Goldsmouth had been a shock, but his new face had worked even then. It had hidden everything he'd felt at that moment of meeting, the shock and the love, as well as the surprise that he still felt so much love.

That Jacob had followed him had not surprised John. It had been no real accident he'd left the words to guide his son through the mirror in one of his books. (John himself had found the words in a tome on chemistry left behind by one of Rosamund's illustrious ancestors.) John had been fascinated that his elder son had made it his mission to seek this world's lost past while his father was bringing it into the future. In that way, Jacob took more after his mother. Rosamund had also always tried to preserve rather than to change. Could a father be proud of a son he'd abandoned? Yes. John had collected every article about Jacob's achievements, every picture that showed his face or illustrated his deeds. Of course, nobody, including his own mistress, ever knew this. And of course, he'd also hidden from her the tears he'd shed for his son.

"The sinking of the fleet? Oh yes. Impressive." Arsene Lelou swiped a fly from his large, pale forehead. "The airplanes have indeed given the Goyl too many victories. I shall await with burning impatience the day your machines defend our sacred lands. Thanks to your genius, Lotharaine will finally have an appropriate answer against the Stone King."

The toadying smile Lelou gave him reminded John of the icing the child-eaters put on their gingerbread. Arsene Lelou was a dangerous man.

"However, if I may be so bold as to correct you..." Lelou continued with obvious glee. "The Albian secret service may

not be as omniscient as its reputation suggests. Jacob Reckless *survived* the sinking of the fleet. I myself had the dubious pleasure of meeting him a few weeks after. Reckless calls Albion his home. And through my inquiries, I've learned that for many of his treasure hunts he relies on the expertise of Robert Dunbar, professor of history at the University of Pendragon. All that makes it more than likely he will, sooner or later, turn up at the Albian court. He does need royal sponsors. Believe me, Monsieur Brunel, I wouldn't have bothered you if I wasn't convinced you could be of great service to the crown prince in this matter."

John would not have been able to name his emotions. They were, again, surprisingly strong. Lelou *had* to be wrong! There had been barely any survivors, and he'd pored over the lists dozens of times. And? What difference did it make whether his son was alive or dead? To give up the only one he'd ever loved unselfishly was the price John had paid for his new life. Yet those years in the dark dungeons of the Goyl had made the wish to be forgiven by his elder son grow like one of the colorless plants the Goyl grew in their caves... And with it had come the hope that the love he'd discarded so carelessly might not be lost for good. He had to admit he'd always been forgiven most readily. His mother, his wife, his mistresses... Yet a son was probably not as eager to absolve a father, especially not a son as proud as Jacob.

Oh yes, John remembered Jacob's pride. And his fearlessness. Jacob had been too young to recognize his father for the coward he was. Fear had dominated all of John's life. Fear of the opinions of others. Fear of failure and poverty. Fear of his own weakness, his own vanity. His incarceration by the Goyl had been a relief at first—finally a *real* reason to be afraid. Cowardice was more ridiculous when one lived where the greatest physical threat came

from the traffic on the streets.

“Monsieur Brunel?”

Arsene Lelou was still there.

John forced a smile. “You have my word, Monsieur Lelou. I will make inquiries. And should I hear news of Jacob Reckless, you will be the first to know.”

The bug eyes glistened with curiosity. Arsene Lelou had not bought John’s story of the will-o’-the-wisp. Isambard Brunel had a secret. John had a strong feeling that Monsieur Lelou was an avid collector of such secrets and that he was also a master at turning them into gold and influence. But John had some experience in keeping secrets, too.

John rose from his bench. Probably not a bad idea to remind the little bug that he was the taller man. “Is your royal pupil interested in the teachings of the New Magic, Monsieur Lelou?”

As a little boy, Jacob had listened for hours while his father explained the function of an electric switch or the secrets of a battery. The same son who years later dedicated his life to the rediscovery of the Old Magic. A subconscious statement against his father? After all, John had never made a secret of the fact that the only miracles he was interested in were the man-made ones.

“Oh, certainly! The crown prince is a great advocate of progress.” Arsene Lelou tried hard to sound convincing, yet his slightly awkward look confirmed what was said about Louis at the Albian court: Nothing could hold the attention of Lotharaine’s future King for more than a few minutes except dice and girls of any provenance. Recently, though, if the Albian spies were to be believed, Louis seemed to have also developed a passion for weapons of any kind. Not a very good hobby for someone as cruel

as Louis, yet possibly an asset for Albion's attempts to modernize both countries' armies.

And you, John, will show them how to build tanks and rockets. No, it wasn't quite true that John had no conscience at all. Everyone had one. But there were many voices in his head that had an easier time reaching him: his ambition, his desire for fame and success—and for revenge. For four stolen years. Admittedly, the Goyl didn't treat their prisoners as badly as the Walrus or Crookback did. Still, he wanted revenge.