

Vengeance is mine!



# Blade of the Storm Witch

Reign of Hex & Steel

Robert E. Vardeman



# BLADE OF THE STORM WITCH

SHORT STORY FOR REIGN OF HEX & STEEL

ROBERT E. VARDEMAN

# REVENGE CANNOT BE DENIED!

Lady Rennata d'Orly has been cruelly misused by Admiral Benks. He stole her wealth, sank her ship, killed her crew, made her husband walk the plank and then committed the ultimate degradation on her. He set her adrift in a monster-infested ocean. Naked. But he chose the wrong pirate for such a death.

Rennata has one ally. A wind sprite. From a fate no one should be dealt to taking magical revenge on her hated enemy, Rennata will never quit. She will never admit defeat, no matter the challenges she faces. She will seize the Blade of the Storm Witch for her own.

This is her story.

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In a second bonus story, Alvera is not tapped by Death's bony finger. He must continue to trade, to deal and make his living along the Feathered Road no matter that he is increasingly shunned. What immunity he has slips away when his companion's cold touch reaches for him as they cross "The Poisoned Lands."

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# BLADE OF THE STORM WITCH

BY ROBERT E. VARDEMAN

"Naked as a clam, she was," came the anxious whisper. "The cap'n, he pulled her up in a net."

"Is she a mermaid? I never seen one," came another whisper, this one raspy and carrying more than a hint of lust. "Lemme closer. Lemme look. I hear they're 'bout the most gorgeous creatures a man'd ever want to see."

A round of argument rose to a fever pitch as the men debated whether she was a mermaid and what Siren's voice a mermaid might possess.

Renatta d'Orly shivered despite warm sunlight on her bare skin. She had almost drowned after being set adrift on a crude raft. Shivering like a wet dog, she sent droplets of water flying in all directions. She pushed herself to hands and knees and let tiny rivulets of seawater drip from her body, tickling sensitive portions before falling to the rough wood deck of the merchanteer.

"Stand down, you blighters. Back. Give her room to, uh, to, uh, breathe." In spite of the confusion about her condition, the voice carried the bark of command.

"Captain," she croaked out. Adrift for the better part of a day, exposed to ocean and burning sun, parched, Renatta hardly felt up to a long conversation. But there was one thing she had to know. "That ill-gotten spawn of a shark. Where is he? Benks."

"Benks?"

She looked up at the officer, fury twisting her exhaustion into resolve. He had no idea who she meant, who had burned her ship to the waterline, foully murdered her husband Esau and who had set her adrift to die painfully.

"An admiral in the fleet of that blackguard, Govannon."

"King Govannon? Of Loyin?"

Strength fed by rage now, she came to her knees. This revealed her complete nudity. Members of the crew made lewd comments. Others gasped, shuffling about as if they'd never seen a nude woman. Renatta doubted many had ever seen one in such a state. Even in such a horrific condition, her posture remained regal—a sight to behold. Her lustrous auburn hair was caked with salt and her brilliant emerald eyes were bloodshot and leaking tears from ocean water. Even in such a horrific condition, her bearing and beauty remained regal.

Renatta clenched her fists and got to her feet. It took all her willpower to keep from collapsing. The crew stepped away as if they faced a force of nature. She looked aloft into their sails. The outline of a ghostly face pressed into the mainsail. A force of nature had saved her by blowing this merchanteer to where she drifted alone and nearly dead.

"Thank you," she mouthed, staring skyward at the wind sprite's outline. It had been imprisoned and used by her husband to blow their pirate ship in just the right direction. She had freed it from magical bondage and it had repaid her. The steady creak of the ship's timbers proved that.

"The admiral of the Loyin fleet sent you to the bottom?" The captain sounded uneasy at this.

"Are you not from Tatendra?" she demanded. She jabbed a finger at the Tatendran pennant snapping in the wind. "So where's your backbone?"

"Well, yes, but you make it sound as if we are at war, Loyin and Tatendra. We're not armed."

"War finds you whether you seek it or not," she said coldly.

The captain swallowed hard and looked away to shoo his crew back to their posts. The ones manning the lower spars had the best view of their naked passenger. They hooted and called crude jeers now.

If her husband had been here, every last one of them would have lost their tongues.

But Esau was gone. So was their ship and loyal crew.

"We carried letters of marque and reprisal bearing the Cherubim's own sigil," she said. "Those allowed us to pursue any vessel threatening Tatendran shipping."

What she said wasn't true, not exactly. First Citizen Marinka had no love for Govannon and cared little what pirates did to his merchant fleet. Renatta had always insisted that they avoid plundering any ship flying the flag of Tatendra. Esau had reluctantly agreed, though many a fat merchanteer had tempted him.

"The letters of marque," the captain said. "You have them?" He flushed under his heavily weathered skin when he realized how absurd that demand was. "No, of course you don't. You haven't any pockets for them. Or anything else, being without a stitch on" He coughed awkwardly and bent to pick up an ornate box. "All you had was this. You clung fiercely and we couldn't pry it free when we rescued you."

Renatta snatched the music box from the officer and clutched it to her bosom. It was all she had saved from the treasure they had left buried on the desert isle. Benks had allowed her to keep it—as a taunting reminder of all she had lost.

"You need medicines," the captain said, his voice more assured now. "You must be in pain from the sunburn. And your flesh is ... bloated."

"That happens when you're left in the sea for hours," she said, her voice dry as the salt caking her skin.

A quick look aloft again showed the wind sprite still moved the ship along, for all the good that did. The captain said his vessel didn't carry any cannon. What good would overtaking Benks and his filthy bunch be if she wasn't able to send them to the bottom of the sea?

"To join Esau and the others who sailed so valiantly with us," she said in a voice lost in the stern breeze.

"My cabin," the captain said. "Take my cabin. I'll find unguents and, and, uh, clothing. We might have something suitable in our cargo."

"I'll take whatever rags you can spare—so long as they come with steel."

"Well, yes, it can. Um, this way, uh—"

"Renatta," she said. "Lady Renatta d'Orly."

"Of course, Lady Renatta." He half bowed, looking hesitant. The watching crew hooted, calling out more crude remarks.

She held her chin high as she walked with as much hauteur as she could muster.



Renatta stood, legs spread wide for support, in the bow just above the figurehead. She closed her eyes and lifted her chin, letting the brisk wind cool her skin. The burns from her dip in the ocean had faded, leaving her cheeks leathery and raw. Even smiling caused a sting of discomfort.

There was no reason to smile. Admiral Benks was not skewered on his sword.

"Lady Renatta," came the captain's hesitant voice. "We must port soon. The produce in the hold is turning ... odorous."

She inhaled deeply. All she smelled was salt air—and failure.

"Please, whatever you do, release us from... from *that*." The captain half turned and pointed at the billowing sails.

Renatta smiled at that. A little. It hurt the corners of her mouth.

"The wind sprite drives us on. I have no control over it."

"But you do. It obeys you. I know it!"

She spun on the officer and turned her harsh stare on him. Icebergs would have melted under her contempt. This time the captain found enough backbone to not cringe away.

"The ship will be ruined if we do not deliver our cargo to Tatendra. We cannot stand another loss."

"Another loss," she sneered. "You allow Loyin privateers to pillage at will. You do nothing to stop seafaring thieves like Benks from stealing your precious cargo."

"We are merchants, not warriors," the captain snapped, then hesitated at his own boldness. "Even if we find the Loyin fleet, what can we do? We don't even have a chase gun!" He gestured wildly, taking in the entire ocean. "You expect us to ram a dreadnought? A fleet of them!"

"We've held this heading for a week now. Where does it take us?"

"I cannot say. These are forbidden waters."

"Forbidden by what ruler?"

"By the gods of the sea!" The captain's voice rose until it screeched. "You defy powers." He glanced over his shoulder. The mainsail betrayed the wind sprite's visage.

"Soon enough," she said.

"What's soon enough?"

"We will arrive at our destination. See? The sprite is ... grinning."

The captain followed her gaze, then shuddered. The mainsail betrayed the wind sprite's visage.

"It watches us," he whispered.

Shaking his head, he returned to his post at the stern, next to the helmsman. Renatta watched as the men exchanged heated words, then looked forward.

Ocean, endless ocean. And mayhap the whisper of fog on the far horizon. Not much. But a little patch. Renatta knew they were about to reach their destination chosen by the wind sprite.



"We'll run aground, Cap'n. We're sailin' blind."

The captain whispered some meaningless reassurance to his helmsman. Renatta ignored the byplay. The ship slid slowly, as if it ran on ice, across the sea. The fog parted before the ship and then closed back soundlessly. That drew Renatta's attention most. Not that they plowed ahead blindly or that the wind sprite had ceased its puffing against the sails—those hung limply without so much as a puff of wind sending the ship gliding forward—but the quiet. The silence. The silence of the grave?

Her heart hammered fiercely. It was as if she had spent her life waiting for this moment. But how to seize it? What was there to seize?

"To the port side!"

The lookout high in the crow's nest bellowed another warning, then spilled into a torrent of curses that made Renatta blush, and she thought she had heard every possible imprecation and invocation of nether deities.



She gripped the spray-slickened railing and strained to see what the sharp-eyed sailor already had.

Nothing.

Nothing.

Then as silently as they cut through the water *it* loomed.

A ship! It was half the size of the merchanteer. And it was forged from the very fog through which it sailed.

Indistinct, ever-shifting in form, she made out the gun ports, all opened. Behind them in the shadows poked the muzzles of faintly visible cannon. On deck slithered and slipped the crew. Or what passed for a crew. The unhuman figures were made from the stuff of the vessel, only with the shimmer of moonlight on a cloudy night about them. They darted about, waving vaporous swords, screaming unheard war cries.

Behind her the merchanteer's sailors whimpered in fear. She ignored them. Her attention focused on the phantom ship edging closer.

At the last possible instant, with a serpent's hiss, it slewed about and came bow first at the merchanteer in full ramming attack. Such a collision always sent one, or both, ships to the bottom of the sea. But not now.

The misty prow slid a few feet into solid wood and stopped. Renatta saw the ghost crew moving forward, fog weapons raised.

They were boarding.

Renatta climbed to the railing and balanced precariously on the slippery wood. She exhaled sharply. "May Cherubim guide you well, Captain!" and stepped out onto the misty deck of the other ship.

No splash. No fall. No descent into the abyss.

Instead, she sank a bare inch and found a deck as solid as any she had ever trod.

Her breath caught *Impossible!*

Around her swarmed misty figures. Some had eyes—burning embers, locked onto her with silent hunger. Others had nothing but gaping black

pits, voids where sight should be. The air was thick—heavy with something unseen, something felt in the marrow. They stood still, their bodies shifting like water, edges unraveling into mist before reforming again. Not men. Not ghosts. Something in-between. Their movements were not chaotic—but measured. Deliberate. They studied her, not attacking.

A pressure built behind her eyes, a crawling unease that made her breath come short and sharp.

She clenched her jaw. She would not show fear.

A thousand whispering voices curled through the air, but not one spoke aloud. Lips of cloud and rain sneered in greeting.

Not foes. Not yet.

She had found her new ship.

"Benks must suffer for what he's done. Hunt him. Kill him. Avenge my crew!"

Her impassioned words had no effect on the crew of apparitions around her.

Silence.

Nothing moved.

Her blood went cold.

They weren't ignoring her. They were waiting.

For what?

Renatta stepped forward but lowered swords of mist and shadow turned more substantial than steel, pinning her in place. The air thickened, resisting her every move.

The sails above snapped taut. The spectral ship moved away from the merchanteer. She heard loud cheers rise in the other crew. Human cries of relief. That worthy ship slipped away in the fog, leaving her abandoned to the deck of an insubstantial ship.

The ship of fog had claimed her.

And the merchanteer had escaped.

Renatta turned back to the phantom sailors.

"What now?"

The wind sprite's whisper answered, curling through the rigging.

"We go where only the lost dare sail."



She squinted through the cloaking fog. They travelled on to somewhere an ordinary ship could never venture. Renatta almost called out to ask of their destination. Then she fell silent. Nothing she said or did influenced the elemental.

A light tap at the spot between her breasts was reminder enough that the locket that once held and controlled the sprite was lost now, gone to the bottom of the ocean when she freed it from magical bondage.

Walking carefully, still wary of the misty planking under her feet, she went to the prow and tried to pierce the fog. When twin beams of lambent red lashed out, she grasped the railing and bent forward. The eyes of the figurehead blazed with the fury of the lower reaches. Even the Doom Point lighthouse failed to match the intensity of those rays.

Renatta looked up and saw how the light penetrated the fog and let her see *things* writhing about. She half drew her sword and put a shaking hand on the wire-wrapped handle of her main gauche.

The creatures cavorted and reared, baring dripping fangs of crazy dimensions. Any of those fangs could pierce the strongest armor. Strangely the mouths holding those formidable weapons snapped and tore at the very edge of the fog illuminated by the twin beacons. Something about the light held the sea serpents at bay.

As the mist ship slipped past one of the more ferocious creatures, Renatta could not restrain herself. She whipped out her sword in a vicious arc that cut across the serpent's face. Ichor the color of a setting sun exploded outward. The ear-shattering cry of rage and pain caused her to recoil. She dropped to an en garde stance, ready to pay the price for her reckless attack. The serpent struck—and rebounded off the barrier between the ship and the fog.

As quickly as it struck, it was left behind. The ship of mist and shadow plowed on across the frictionless sea.

She looked back at the sail with the wind sprite's outline. The canvas stretched to the breaking point. Strands of fabric tore loose from the immense pressure applied by the elemental. Anticipating what happened when it ripped free of the spars caused her some discomfort. Adrift in the mirrored sea with monsters such as she'd wounded was a fate worse than simply dying at Benks' hand.

"It's not," she said through clenched teeth. "I will not die until Benks knows his life is forfeit—and why." Fingers tightened on the hilts of her weapons. Resolve hardened. Wherever the ghost ship took her, propelled by the wind sprite she had manumitted, she would find her way back. Every last ship in the Loyin fleet would sink and Benks die a fitting death before she died.

A fitting death? The thought tantalized her. What fate was vile enough?

She jerked to attention. The mist parted in tattered ribbons. Before them lay an island not on any chart nor in any sailor's tale.

An island no mortal should have reached.

The ship lurched as it beached. This drove her forward. Renatta gripped the rail and kept from pitching overboard. She glanced over her shoulder. The sails dangled limply. The ship itself had taken on a more substantial form and no longer flowed like smoke under her.

Renatta bent over the prow to get a better look at the figurehead. The blazing orbs had died to smouldering red embers. The light cast on the

beach gave a bloody aspect to the sand. She took a deep breath and vaulted the railing. She fell far longer than she expected, but when her booted feet touched the sand, there was no powerful impact. It was as if she had floated like a feather.

"Like a tendril of fog," she said softly.

A few steps on the sand convinced her that, as gory as it looked, the beach was no different from dozens of others she had found. A knot formed in her throat. The last island she had trod had been with Esau as they buried their plunder. Benks had trapped them and sunk their ship. While he had stolen some of their treasure, the bulk of it remained. Renatta had hidden it too well for an impatient, self-important, arrogant despot like Benks to take the time needed for a thorough search of the island.

Somehow, she still carried the music box that Esau had given her. Renatta touched the satchel holding the small box with the tiny pirate that spun and waved his sword about as a sea chanty played.

Her reverie snapped when a huge pillar of the red sand rose in the air before her. It stretched higher than the crow's nest of the biggest sailing ship she had ever seen. Then it began to spin. Slowly at first, then it gathered velocity and carried not only sand but small stones and seashells aloft.

She backed away and threw up his arm to protect her face from the pelting sand. The sandspout dodged and glided to match her every effort to escape. With her head held low and both arms protecting her face, he let it completely encircle her.

The roar of the wind deafened her. And with the total isolation caused, she heard a distant voice. A whisper. But one she recognized.

"Esau!" She cried and was reward with a mouthful of sand. She spat and closed her eyes against the grit

The voice sounded again, closer, with more intimacy.

"Lady. Lady Renatta."

"What is this? Am I going mad?"

"You freed me."

Squinting into the red swirls, she saw the face formed in the storm wall just inches away. She reached out. The face retreated, but it was one she recognized. The wind sprite's face had pressed into the sails of both the merchanteer and her old pirate ship, the one Benks had burned to the waterline before scuttling.

"You saved me. We are even."

"My debt is great. You were never cruel."

"Esau commanded you."

The voice hissed and whined as the wind speed increased. But she thought she understood the words. The sprite loved her. Had fallen in love with her. That had made its servitude bearable.

Then she had given it freedom to surge and blow and course over the sea and land as its own will directed.

"You brought me to this island. On the ship of mist."

"The fog cutter. You commanded it."

"It's magical. I have no power. Magicks are beyond my skill. You were the steersman."

"You are wrong." The whine of wind left her ears ringing.

Renatta found herself pushed along when the tornado began to drift along the beach. Try as she might, escape was impossible. The fierce winds at the edge rebuffed her. There was no eye to this storm, but the winds weren't as punishing. The blood-red sand beneath her boots turned to crisp vegetation. As she stumbled along, she crushed the plants. A vile odor rose, turning her stomach, but even as it nauseated her, it filled her with a strength she had never felt before. Or had she? After Benks had thrown her into the sea to cling to the nailed cross members until her strength faded and she died, similar resolve had filled her.

Only it was more than resolve.

"Your power," the sprite whistled. "I can release your full power."

"What good would it do me?" She spat grit from her mouth. Tears rolled down her filthy cheeks. Her skin prickled with every darting dust mote and she wanted nothing more than to drop down, curl up and wish away the punishment.

"You seek revenge on Admiral Benks." There was a long pause and words so faint she almost failed to hear them. "As do I."

"Yes. Are you saying we can defeat him together? You pushing along the fog cutter? But you are wrong about my powers. I am no mage."

Laughter filled her ears. "Wait. You must prove your worth, but your powers are vast."

"Vaster than Benks? He has an entire fleet at his command."

"He is nothing. You will use newly won powers against him and his ships."

"What are you saying? What new powers?"

Renatta gasped when the intense whirl of the windstorm around her died to reveal the temple. She had thought the ten-story tall Cathedral of the Cherubim in Tatendra was magnificent, cast in marble and gilt with soaring arches and intricately wrought stained glass windows depicting the Flight of the Innocents. The edifice before her made that look like a peasant's hovel.

"I can go no further." The wind sprite's soft sigh carried regret. "This is your fight now."

"Fight?"

"It's a test."

Renatta looked around. She was alone. Even the tower of whirling dust had died down, leaving over a thin film on the broad ebon steps leading to the magnificent carved onyx. She tried to make out the figures on those doors. Her eyes became confused as she followed lines that turned on themselves and were swallowed by strange creatures beyond her understanding.

The first step toward those doors filled her with a gnawing dread. She stepped back down and the apprehension vanished like smoke in a hurricane. That made stepping up again all the more difficult. She knew what to expect.

And it hit her harder this time. Her gut belly tightened and she felt that disrespecting the sanctity of this glorious structure was at hand.

Clamping her lips tightly, she took another step. The nausea passed. Soaring, giddy joy filled her now. If she died at this instant, her life would be complete.

"No," she grated out. "No!"

Not knowing what she faced if she continued—retreat meant gut-wrenching agony—she took another step. Steeling herself, she moved again. The wave of pain washing over her senses drove her to her knees. A quick twist let her roll to the next higher step.

All her dreams were fulfilled. She stared out over verdant fields with a bright sun shining down from the orangish sky. High above spun the two moons. They winked knowingly at her. They approved. All the myths about those sky-bound orbiters were wrong. They weren't evil. They were good and beckoned to her to cross the fields of clover and to inhale deeply of the flowers blooming in wild profusion.

"Esau." The name slipped from her so easily. She reached out. The man on the far side of the field had to be her husband. Her dead husband.

Renatta recoiled. This paradise was hers, if she accepted death. A light breeze caressed her cheek. On that wind came Esau's cherished voice calling her name. She reached out toward him, then shook herself violently. To step out into that field meant revenge on Benks would never be delivered. Not by her hand. Someone else? Was that good enough?

All she had to do was accept death.

With a spasmodic jerk, she took another step toward the opened onyx gates and was instantly plunged into an arctic hell. Her flesh froze. Tingles of dying nerves turned to lances of pain that drove her to her knees. She wept in agony, and those tears froze to her cheeks. Her eyelids were caked open and fraught with tiny icicles. Blinking became impossible to protect her vision from the



cutting wind. Everything she had ever heard of those sent to the Demesne of the Lost.

All was ripped from her. Dreams and hope and love. The torment of the elements tearing away her flesh would be eternal. Her days would be spent loathing her existence and moaning piteously for what she had lost. Anything good would be remembered—with regret at having lost it. Beauty and intelligence faded with every icy gust. She slipped away and knew it, dreaded it, would dread it for eternity.

She had ventured where she would be defeated easily. This was the penalty. Her soul was being flayed to ribbons.

Some faint memory stirred. Renatta moved her satchel about and reached inside to place her hand on the music box lid. Her only way to remember Esau and what they'd had. Freedom. Love. Adventure.

Something within the music box clicked. The bawdy chanty played a few notes. Not much but enough.

A shriek tore her chapped lips as horrific pain exploded throughout her body. She lurched forward. The spell was broken somehow by the music box. She glanced over her shoulder. She stood at the top of the obsidian-dark steps. The twin doors were open before her. The walls pulsed with a pale, spectral glow. The stone breathed, whispering in an ancient tongue she couldn't understand.

The patterns etched onto the stone floor writhed about as if they were alive, but her eyes fixed on the plinth in the middle of the vast room. A few blinks cleared her vision of the tears still flowing. She stepped forward, unbidden, and reached out.

At the center—on a pedestal of polished black glass—a blade.

Renatta stepped closer.

The sword floated, suspended above the pedestal. Its crystalline length churned with lightning and storm, shifting between fire, water, thunder. ....

"Fire," she whispered. It felt wrong speaking in a normal voice in this *place*.

Even as she named what lay trapped within the crystalline blade, it changed. Torrents of water gushed from the hilt to the needle-sharp tip. She flinched, expecting to be drenched in the water. But even as the flood rose, it disappeared. Black storm clouds billowed and thrashed about within the blade.

Renatta tore her fascinated gaze from the blade to the plaque on the pedestal. She wasn't a scholar but recognized the Old Words. A few. She carefully mouthed them. Deep in her skull those words echoed until she understood that whoever touched this sword controlled the elements.

She reached out—

"Not all elements can be tamed." The deep voice rumbled through the chamber.

Renatta spun, her sword flashing free. Her fingers tightened around the hilt, knuckles white, breath shallow. She pivoted fast, feet sliding slightly on the smooth black stone.

A warrior stood before her.

The man was massive, built like a storm-carved pillar, his bared chest riddled with old scars. His twin swords rasped free in unison—a sound as sharp and clean as ice cracking. Billowing silks whispered around his legs, and golden wire rings twisted through his ears—one for every life taken.

Renatta counted. He had slain armies.

"Not all," he continued. "Only storms. Not all elementals permit their powers to be caged."

He stepped closer. The blue light that emanated from the walls and ceiling sent shimmery waves from his shaven head. The light caught the twisted-wire gold rings in either ear.

"Have so many truly died?" She sought to distract him with the question. Nothing about this giant of a fighter spoke of willful boasts.

"There might be more. I lose count of days. And deaths."

"It would take long years for so many kills."

He nodded. The light caught a spider web of scars on his forehead and cheeks. But his eyes were hidden, deep in pits of darkness that betrayed nothing of his inner soul. If he had a soul.

"You're the guardian of the blade," she guessed.

His expression did not change. His silence was answer enough.

"I have no desire to fight you," Renatta said.

"Nor I you. It makes no difference when we are both driven by forces we do not understand."

He moved like liquid, no wasted motion.

The twin swords flashed forward—a silver blur.

Too fast.

Renatta twisted, the first blade whispering past her cheek—so close she felt the air shift.

The second was coming too fast.

She dropped low, rolling, the blade slicing a lock of her hair as she moved.

She crouched, panting. A sharp sting—a thin line of blood traced across her forearm. First blood. Point to him.

He shrugged his broad shoulders and lunged in a curious fashion that somehow launched both tips at each of Renatta's eyes.

She swept the blades aside with her main gauche and tried to lunge. Her opponent already retreated. He hardly seemed to step as much as flow like liquid. She faced not only an expert swordsman but a magical being.

But the scars! He could be injured. Many before her had found the proper avenue of attack to pierce him. And there was a curious ridge on his chest near his heart where a deadly thrust must have come close to ending his proclaimed century of fighting.

She parried and thrust, defended and engaged. Back and forth they fought until she gasped for breath. While her opponent seemed as fresh as when he began the match, a thin sheen of sweat on his body caught the blue light and turned him into a pillar of cold luminescence. That buoyed her spirits.

While his wrist remained strong and his breathing unhurried, the sweat gave evidence of his exertion.

Still, she realized how futile this fight would be if it went on much longer. Renatta circled the pedestal with the elusive crystalline sword. The blade's interior changed endlessly from fire to storm. Try as she might she saw no connection between the raging weather within the blade and her opponent. He had to be magical to guard the weapon for so many years. Yet he fought independently of the flashes and rushes of wave.

"Magical," she said. The sprite had not accompanied her into the temple. Some spell held the wind elemental away.

She danced away from a well-delivered thrust, wincing at the shallow scratch left on her thigh. With the swing of her hips, she moved her satchel around to dangle in front.

"Have you ever seen my magicks?" she taunted.

The sneer told her this warrior feared nothing she might summon, not within the temple.

"Listen and be dazzled!" The satchel flipped open. The tiny pirate spun—its bawdy sea tune spilling into the room, bright, jarring, alive.

The guardian froze.

It was only a fraction of a second—but she took it.

Her blade struck in a blur of steel.

The tip bit into the scar near his heart, sliding between ribs—hot blood slicked her fingers.

A breath. A pause. A gasping intake of air.

He fell forward, knocking her to the floor.

She lay with the still twitching body pinning her against the floor.

The blood gushing over her sizzled and popped and felt like acid. Using the pommels of her weapons, she batted this way and that against his body until she rolled him away. They lay side by side on the floor, staring upward at the crystal dome above.

The difference was that she appreciated the play of light off the facets etched in the overhead crystal dome. Her opponent's eyes stared only at whatever death offered him.

Renatta sat up and laughed in emotional release. The music box had landed at few feet from her. The tiny pirate spun about, waving its sword and the music played and played and played. She wondered if it ever had to be wound.

She carefully scooped up the box, closed the lid and gave it a lingering kiss. Even in death, Esau watched over her with his gift.

The box tucked safely into her satchel, she wiped her blades clean and turned to the pedestal. The blue light intensified and then shifted colors through the spectrum. She wasn't sure what to do.

She reached out and gripped the hilt. She expected it to be warm. Or cold. Or wet. Or dry. Something. It felt as if she grasped air.

The sword rose, unbidden, weightless in her grip.

A shiver ran up her arm. Not cold. Not heat. Something ... vast.

Inside the blade the storm churned, lightning slithering like trapped serpents, thunder rolling deep and distant.

She breathed in—and the air tasted of rain, of wind, of crackling power just before the sky splits open.

The weapon followed her hand. Every movement created a new storm within. The faster she swung the sword, the more furious the trapped tempest.

Renatta calmed herself and held the blade out from her body. On impulse, she whirled in a circle. The blade met the stone pedestal and cut through it as if it were made of nothing but a futile hope.

Walking to the doors, she stared at the bright orange sky outside. Clouds moved sluggishly above. On impulse she leveled the sword at those clouds. A lightning bolt erupted, sizzled through the air and touched those clouds. Where they had been strands of high ice a moment before, they billowed

furiously and became a lead-bottomed storm. Rain pelted down onto the field below.

She caught her breath at the sight. The sky darkened instantly, clouds twisting, boiling.

The raindrops fell—each one slamming into the earth like a stone from heaven.

The ground cratered, torn apart by the force.

She had called down a storm of stark destruction.

Renatta jerked the sword back. The storm clouds calmed and once more scudded across the sky, high and icy and harmless.

Speechless, she stared at the weapon in her hand. The hilt remained as nothing more than a puff of air, but the interior sloshed about as if a massive tidal wave built.

"My storm witch." The whisper came on a gentle breeze. She recognized the voice.

"To my wind sprite," she acknowledged, raising the sword in salute. Careful about triggering the deadly power of the blade, she lowered it immediately and stared down the steps she had mounted to reach this point.

By the time she danced down to firm earth, enduring what each step delivered, she was ready to go hunting for a fleet of ships commanded by a malevolent Loyin admiral.



Renatta stood in the prow of the misty ship. She held her storm blade aloft. Light from the distance focused through the crystalline length and projected the scene, perhaps over the horizon, of the Loyin fleet.

"Eight ships of the line," she said. "That's a war fleet." She had no idea who King Govannon sailed against. The upstart king held great ambition for one so recently ascended to the throne of a minor country. Loyin had one major port and little else to recommend it.

That might be why he sent out Benks and the war vessels. Not to protect trade but to capture other ships and impress their captured crews into service. Benks had been miffed that the pirates in Esau's crew had scuttled their own ship rather than let it be seized. They were all clever men and knew what it meant to be forced into service of an ambitious king.

And a despotic admiral.

She turned the blade slightly, capturing more of the distant sun's rays. The fleet's deployment showed that it prepared for battle. With a small movement, she concentrated her distance devouring gaze on the gun ports. All were raised and the crews made ready to fire.

"Faster," she cried. "I will sink them all!"

Wind roared.

The ship surged forward, cutting through the waves like a specter.

She squinted as the air blew over her cheeks and made her eyes water. Mist streamed from the ship, testament to their pace. What should have taken a day's travel was accomplished in a mere hour.

The thunder of cannon warned her that a battle had been joined. Using the magnifying properties of her magical sword allowed her witness Benks' flagship blasting down the main mast of a wallowing merchanteer. His other ships stood off, letting their commander have the pleasure of intimidating a defenseless ship of commerce.

The first warship never saw them coming. When the lookout high in the crow's nest happened to turn from the battle, such as it was, to look about, it was too late.

The prow of the shadow ship drove into the stern of the larger wooden ship. The insubstantial fog sliced through it like a heated blade through snow.

Renatta cut that doomed ship in half from stern to stem. Men fell into the sea screaming for their lives. Each half of the ship splashed noisily and sank immediately.

She rushed on. But the fate of the trailing ship had alerted the others in the fleet. They hove about to train their guns on her. The first barrage passed too high. Her ship was tiny in comparison to the lumbering Loyin warships. Two more of Benks' vessels were sliced apart.

But the rest of the fleet lay far enough to either side that they lowered their guns and found her range. Renatta recoiled when the first cannonball fired straight and true for her midships.

The hot iron ball passed harmlessly through the foggy vessel. The warships changed tactics and sent chain shot and other fiery caltrops in her direction. Flaming tar balls and strangely shaped projectiles sailed past—through—her magical ship.

She laughed and knew the ordinary warships had no chance to sink her. Then an iron splinter tore across her scalp. She yelped in pain and grabbed the injured spot. Blood flowed freely. Her blood. This focused her on the real menace. Her shadow ship might not sink but its captain was vulnerable.

"Fire," she said angrily. She expected gun ports to open and her ship to launch magical weaponry. Nothing happened.

The ship's only offensive weapon lay in ramming and sundering. Despair seized her. She had sunk three of Benks' fleet. What of the remaining five, including the flagship commanded by the loathsome officer?

Wind swirled about her.

"Blow them away. Sink them with your wind!" She shouted her orders to the wind sprite, but it only touched the sea nearby and lofted a water spout.

Then she realized how ineffective the wind sprite must be against the war fleet. It powered them along but lacked the power to capsize such immense ships of the line.



She growled deep in her throat, furious and frustrated at her helplessness. Renatta lifted the sword with its insubstantial grip and churning storm trapped within the crystal blade.

The explosion from its tip staggered her. It took both hands to hold now, to direct the lightning blasting forth in an eye-searing coruscation. The nearest dreadnought exploded in flames. In seconds only cinders floated on the whitecapped ocean.

A twitch of her wrist lifted the tip to another ship. From the once empty sky came a torrential downpour. Gale force winds capsized another ship. And the storm crashed yet another warship into its companion. The sickening crunch as they collided told her that neither would remain afloat much longer.

Her ship came about and sailed directly for the remaining Loyin ship. The flagship. Benks' personal vessel, *Fist of the Seas*.

She laughed at the sight of so many Loyin sailors diving overboard before the collision of ships. At the last possible instant, she sheered away. The magical ship floated low, close by and below the huge warship's cannon. But that hardly mattered. The gun crews joined their mates in abandoning ship after seeing how easily the rest of the fleet had been dispatched.

Renatta pointed her sword at a tight knot of sailors thinking to leap from the flagship onto the deck of her fog ship. The crackle of electricity, followed by the hiss of powerful discharge, fried them all. Along the length of the *Fist* what remained of the crew took to lifeboats or just dived into the sea.

All around swarmed vicious sea serpents and other hungry denizens of this fearsome ocean. Being incinerated by her magicks proved to be the more merciful death compared to being devoured in giant toothy gulps by the marine monsters.

Renatta hunted for a way to board the warship and saw nothing. She cried out in fury. Then her cry turned to a gasp as a waterspout whirled about and

lifted her easily to the deck of the hated flagship. The wind sprite lowered her gently. She heard its distant chuckle.

And warning.

She turned to the wheel where Benks clung fiercely.

"Steer wherever you please, Admiral. Your destination will be the same." She balanced the blade in her hand, considering what to do to the man.

Benks' face was devoid of all color. His hands shook as they ran nervously up and down on the wheel.

"D-don't kill me. I'll plead your case before King Govannon. H-he is a merciful man."

"Mercy?" Renatta laughed, low and sharp. If Benks was without morals or mercy, his liege lord made him look like a saint. "You stole my treasure, sank my ship."

Her grip tightened on the storm blade.

"I'll see that Loyin replaces them. And y-your booty? It's in my cabin. Fine treasure it was."

"You think this is about gold?"

"You—"

"You murdered my crew. You killed my husband."

She would have found the admiral's dagger in her chest if a gust of wind hadn't caught the steel and deflected it. The wind sprite shrieked, twisting the hard-thrown blade away.

She quietly thanked the wind elemental. For a moment she considered letting the sprite deal with Benks. Then she saw the raw hatred on the officer's face and remembered how he had forced Esau to walk the plank. How he had thrown her naked into the serpent-infested ocean naked, to die.

"You wanted power, Benks?" Renatta lifted the storm blade, lightning withring inside it. "Then let the storm crown you."

The winds roared, the sea answered, and the sky tore open.

Benks screamed as the hurricane snatched him up, his body tumbling skyward—higher—higher—until the storm swallowed him whole.

"Do as you will with him," she said to the wind sprite. "Make him suffer. Let the storm drag him across the sky before it takes him."

For a moment, she continued to aim her blade skyward. Then she yanked it away.

A final gust, and Benks was gone.

Renatta sagged. It had been over too quickly. He should have suffered more. For days or weeks. Years! If she knew how, she should have used the witch blade to send him to the prison moons tumbling across the sky.

"Lady?" The timorous voice came from the deck below. She walked to the railing and looked down. The captain of the merchanteer stood with a half dozen sailors, all with swords and daggers drawn. "Are you safe and well?"

"Safe? Well?" She laughed. The mirth turned into hysteria she could not stop.

The merchant captain and his crew looked on fearfully. It took Renatta some time to control her emotions. The release had been immense.

"Yes, my good man," she finally answered. "I am well. How fares your ship?"

"Some damage," he said, turning more professional now. "We can repair."

"You sail for Tatendra?"

"We do, lady." He puffed himself up and said, "We are forever in your debt."

"Would you like to be in my service?"

The captain looked fearful, then cautiously curious.

"I claim this Loyin ship for the First Citizen of Tatendra." Renatta gestured from stem to stern showing the extent of her conquest.

"Praise Marinka," one sailor mumbled.

"Praise First Citizen Marinka," Renatta said louder. "And praise me, the Lady Renatta d'Orly, captain of this ship by right of letter of marque and reprisal. Will you lend me enough crew to return to Tatendra, good captain?"

"You allow me to keep my ship?"

"Will you sail for me, under my protection?" She looked over the railing, hunting for the shadow ship that had brought her to this battle. Cold fingers clutched at her throat. The ship was gone.

She lifted the blade. Storms still raged within its crystalline length. The handle felt like a breath of spring air in her grip. And the *Fist of the Seas* was hers by right of battle.

"You can guarantee safe passage and decent profits?"

"Safe passage and huge profits," she amended.

"We must discuss the matter more, Lady Renatta."

"And we shall," she said. "First we celebrate. This wallowing tub must be laden with fine viands. I cannot see Benks gaining such a girth without gourmet offerings and fine wines. Have your men break it out from the captain's cabin, if necessary."

Her new merchanteer captain barked orders. Renatta stepped back and went to the wheel. It had been lashed down for battle. She ran her fingers over the hemp used, then felt a wild and free impulse.

She pulled out the music box and placed it on the compass binnacle. She lifted the lid to reveal the sword-waving pirate. The tune began as the pirate pirouetted about. Renatta couldn't restrain herself. She broke into a jig, only to stop and stare as a hidden drawer popped open on the music box.

Resting inside lay a portion of an ornate royal crown. A single green gem gleamed in the bright sunlight, turned into a column of dazzling intensity that then lifted slowly from its resting place. Renatta reached for it but the crown fragment arced over to vanish without so much as a ripple in the bloody ocean. She stared after it, wondering what this portended. Or what its magicks had given her to achieve such victories.

The chanty continued to play. She lifted her magical blade. What other magicks did she need? She held a magical weapon that commanded fierce storms. So what if her misty ship had disappeared? Already her new ship's

sails billowed and a face pressed into the canvas. A wind sprite was her companion.

And she knew the location of an island weighed down by four chests full of plunder. With it she could buy more merchanteers and become the most successful shipping magnate in Tatendra. In the entire world!

Her feet once more found the rhythm of the song that allowed her to dance a jig without inhibition. Renatta d'Orly was mistress of sea and storm!

The End

"Blade of the Storm Witch"

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**R**obert E. Vardeman is the award-winning author of more than one hundred novels and scores of highly acclaimed short stories, including the 2025 Will Rogers Medallion Award winning "Windmill." Although his main interests are science fiction and fantasy, he also has written steam-punk, mysteries and high-tech thrillers, as well as westerns under the "Brody Weatherford" and "Jackson Lowry" pen names. Prior to becoming a fulltime writer, he worked at Sandia National Laboratories in the solid state physics department. For more information or to sign up for his newsletter, go to the website Cenotaph Road.

This Chain Story Project story is set in the Reign of Hex and Steel universe (coauthored with Richard Prosch).



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