



# DEMONMASTER

## JIM

Hate Filled Her Sails

There's a part of some men who enjoy wandering. Maybe the desire for travel is intertwined with the lust for adventure. For still others, it represents the means of escape. A chance to start over. Somewhere to build a future where no one knows your name.

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**T**he sky was dark and cloudy, the moon made brief appearances between the thick clouds. The wind filled the ship's sails driving her quickly across the choppy waters. James Ozymandias of House Issicar had decided it would be better for him to work on shores where people didn't know his name. So, he boarded a ship headed for the Far Lands. The ship rocked. Jim could hear the vibration of the rigging and the snap of the sails over his head.

Once out to sea, Jim leaned over the railing and glanced out across the troubled waves. A stiff breeze was whipping the water into a frenzy. Just standing on the deck you could feel the salt in the air bite into your face. This was Reaper's weather and he sounded invigorated. *So, Jim heard the demon's voice in his head, do you have a plan?*

The swordmaster grunted. "The savages of the Far lands are said to always be at war, there should be plenty of work for our sword on their shores."

*True enough, Reaper spoke, those savage tribes hate each other with a delightful passion. But do you know the only thing they hate more?*

"What do they hate more?" Jim asked.

*Outsiders.*

"Well, count on you to find fault with any plan."

*I am a demon, Reaper laughed, there are none better at devising plans, building plots, and creating schemes.*

"Do you know what I like about long sea voyages?" Jim teased. "There are no women on board these ocean-going crews."

*Do you know what I like about long sea voyages?*

"What's that?"

*Piracy.*

Jim shifted on his feet. "You didn't. These were honest men."

*Of course, they were. It's no fun to corrupt the corrupt.*

In the distance, Jim could make out a green glow on the horizon. It appeared when the ship rose atop a wave and disappeared when she hid at the bottom of a trough. Who knew what it was; St. Elmo's fire or lanterns hung from the masts? It wasn't long before the lookout spotted it and the captain had his spyglass aimed at it. The boat looked like a simple merchantman if a bit worn. Shortly after this, the captain ordered them to heave to and they headed in the ship's direction.

*You must tell the ship's captain to turn around.*

"Me?" Jim teased. "This is your experiment in piracy. You've corrupted these men; I'll have nothing to do with it."

*You don't understand, I can sense what it is. It's no ordinary ship, she's the Angry Larmorian. She's got no ordinary crew. The ship is manned by a cult called the Colony of the Green Anura. And it's not wind driving her sails, it's hate. Abhorrence of all things living.*

"Save your scary stories to torment small children," Jim offered, "A ship's a ship and a crew is a crew."

*Suit yourself.*

The waves grew deep and the wind howled. The ship with the green lanterns turned away and crew of the *Bonnie Rose* gave chase. They put on more canvas. The water took on the smell of muskeg. The air grew chill. The faces of the men took on a grim character. Jim knew the look well. Their eyes had the brightness of greed. But the lips had the sickening frown of menace. In port, they had none of this look. They looked to be ordinary seamen. Men with families and lives. But he'd seen what Reaper could do to the souls of men. This was his handiwork. The swordmaster kept his palm on the hilt of his blade. Such faces were worn by men who, in the heat of the moment, forgot who friend was and who was foe.

They closed the distance. Above, the sky closed in and a fine rain began to fall. Jim's clothes took to sticking to his skin. It would be wet work when they caught the merchantmen. Especially if the crew decided to resist. In a way, Jim hoped they did. Praying on a defenseless crew would merely goad these men farther from the life they deserved. If there was some resistance, the crew of the *Bonnie Rose* might think better of their chosen path. As Jim watched, the merchantman came about and headed straight for the *Bonnie Rose*. The captain watched them approach with his spyglass. What he could see filled him with dread. The crew appeared painted, head to toe in green. They were all wearing animal masks. He could see they were itching for a fight. Even Jim thought he could hear the strange creatures laugh. They'd heaved away to cause the ship to follow. They'd wanted us to close the distance. The *Bonnie Rose* had fallen into a trap.

"Turn the ship around boys," the captain shouted at the crew. "Turn around. It's time for us to run."

The crew ran to follow his commands, scampering across the wet deck. Slipping and sliding deterred not one of them. It was now a race with time.

"Lay on every piece of canvas you can find," the captain demanded. "Salvation if we make it, our lives if we do not."

*It will matter little;* Jim could hear Reaper counter in his mind. *They are hunting us now.*

Both the strange green ship and a gale closed in on the *Bonnie Rose*. The crew was now readying itself for a fight. Gone were the eyes of greed. Banished were the expressions of certain success. To be replaced by looks of fear and doubt. *Now would be a good time to jump overboard,* Reaper suggested.

"Nonsense," Jim objected. "Now's the time for a little swordplay. The melodic song of blade and steel."

*Don't mind me while I cower,* explained Reaper.

"I'd expect nothing less."

*Make sure you do well,* Reaper insisted.

"I didn't know you cared."

*I don't, Reaper replied, but the conversation inside the skull of a maddened cultist is less than exhilarating.*

The wind picked up to the point it was tearing the fabric of the sails. But no one was willing to fold up an inch of canvas, not with the ship behind them closing. The rain would have been coming down even harder than it had before, except for the wind. So the water had to settle for coming down sideways.

The men on the other ship were climbing the rigging. Preparing to swing across from the yardarms and land on the deck of the *Bonnie Rose*. Somehow the masks gave them a more determined look. Even though you could not see their faces. It was as if their eyes followed you everywhere. They came alongside the *Bonnie Rose*. To Jim, it appeared as if they stayed this way, neck and neck, as the two crews observed each other with stone-cold eyes. The flash of swords in everyone's hands looked the same as the twinkling of stars in the heavens. Or what they would look like, if stars in the heavens hated you.

The crew of the strange ship swung over to the *Bonnie Rose* as if they were carnivorous apes in a primitive jungle. Letting go of the ropes they fell like rain. Some of the struggles were performed in the rigging. but most of it raged on the *Bonnie Rose's* deck. The crew was vastly outnumbered. In the blink of an eye, one cultist stood before him, sword in hand.

Still, only one of the masked creatures was coming after Jim. If he had been given the time to think about it, he would have felt quite offended. He was taller than Jim expected. The green of his skin appeared as if it was painted on. There were some gaps in the application where real skin showed through. Jim breathed a sigh of relief; he was human after all. The one facing him was wearing a mask to make his face appear as if he was a fox only the fur had been dyed green. In his mind, Jim heard Reaper scream.

The swordmaster always found the demon's cowardly behavior annoying. Rather than wait for his opponent to make the first move, Jim closed the distance between the two. In less than the blink of an eye, he thrust; the point aimed at the creature's chest. With surprising skill, the creature moved to block his thrust with what appeared to be little effort. Jim found this disconcerting. "We fight to the death," Jim insisted. "Yours."

There was a flash of swordplay, the clang of steel. It was a rapid exchange, faster than even a maestros' bow across musical strings.

*Why is it everyone is always trying to kill us?*

"I'm pleased to hear you think they are trying to kill us," Jim remarked. His opponent didn't even appear to notice Jim's comment. The clang of steel continued. Jim couldn't even tell if his opponent was breathing hard, but Jim was. He was puffing like a smokestack, his lungs struggling to get as much oxygen into his bloodstream as possible. For the first time since his training, his arms ached and grew tired. His prospects didn't look good.

There was a flash, but it didn't end in a crash of metal. Jim could feel a warm wetness on his chest. He couldn't spare the time to look, but he knew it wasn't the rainwater from the gale which was dropping on the ship in buckets... it was blood. His. Jim backed off.

Reaper's voice was pointlessly nonchalant. *You do realize this does not look good?*

Jim fended off a rain of blows, each one falling faster than the last. "What was your first clue," Jim spat back. The swordmaster was seriously distracted by the screaming Reaper was echoing in his head. The glowing green eyes of his attacker appeared to focus on Jim intently. The creature looked and acted as if possessed. Struggling to keep his footing on the pitching and rain-soaked deck of the *Bonnie Rose*, Jim backed his way toward the ship's railing. Jim had already decided on his course of action. And the sea looked happy a oblige.

He glared at the green-painted man carefully, trying to note the signals his eyes would display about his intentions. The cultist's orbs looked cold and unforgiving. But Jim saw the move as the man's gaze telegraphed it. His eyes narrowed and he lunged. Jim didn't even attempt to block the blow, he merely deftly stepped out of the way and let his attacker charge straight ahead. Just when Jim was expecting him to fly over the railing and into the sea, the man stopped and turned. In the pouring rain, the action was an impossible move... yet Jim stared down at it, still unbelieving. What he saw made his skin flush. The point of the swordmaster's weapon was embedded deep in the man's chest, piercing the heart. Blood jumped from the cultist's mouth.

The green-painted man staggered for the briefest of seconds and then slid off the end of the blade. As the torrential rain cleaned the blood off the steel, Jim's attacker pitched over the rail of the *Bonnie Rose* and slashed into the waiting sea.

It was a moment of triumph. And in this brief pause, a massive wave struck the *Bonnie Rose*. Jim lost his footing and was tossed about violently. The sword fight had been so nerve-racking Jim only had time to note where his opponent stood. His eyes hadn't the opportunity to accurately note the position of the ship's railing. His hand missed it as he attempted to grab on the wood by several inches. His arms flailed uselessly as he was carried out to sea by the gale-force winds.

*Oh, Good.* Jim's mind could hear Reaper's voice inside his skull. *This is going to turn out well.*

The water smelled of seaweed and salt as Jim crashed into its surface. He floundered wildly as the storm raged around him. Nearby was a mostly empty barrel. The coils of rope around it indicated it had once been tied down to the deck of the *Bonnie Rose*. Once, being the operative term. Swimming towards the barrel, Jim grabbed the long streaming rope between him and the barrel. With great effort, he pulled himself closer to the barrel and then used the robe to strap himself to the floating object. He was desperate for anything to keep himself afloat in the churning waters.

Jim started to take in air again once the task was completed. He breathed a sigh of relief... until he saw the second barrel flying directly toward his head.



Waking cold and shivering, Jim noted the loose ropes still encasing his body. He staggered up across the wet sand of an unknown beach. But of the barrel, there was no sign. His empty sword scabbard still clung to his side. The sky had cleared, and the moon showed down brightly on wood splinters which littered the sand. Whether these were the remains of the barrel or parts of the *Bonnie Rose*, only the gods knew for sure. In the distance was a thick line of tropical trees. Jim coughed up water and shook his

head to clear his ears of the sea. He could spot no other members of the ship's crew on the beach. He was alone.

He stumbled toward the line of trees, the sound of small insects flying around his head. *Begone*, Jim could hear Reaper's booming voice in his head. The insects didn't so much fly away as they exploded into flame and then drifted down to earth like a rain of incinerated ash. "Nice to know you are still with me," Jim commented.

*Yes, well my options appear to be limited at this point.*

As Jim made the tree line, he noticed the undergrowth move. Appearing out of the deep shadows were half a dozen men. The red paint covered more of their forms than the loincloths at their waists. Each was armed with a long, stone-tipped spear. The group looked every inch the picture of primitive savages. The type who don't welcome strangers. They all were pointed their spears in the same direction. Jim pricked his finger on the sharpened tip of the one closest to him. Jim fumbled for his sword hilt but found only an empty scabbard.

*Now here are some people I can do something with.* Jim shook slightly as Reaper took control of his body.

"Gentlemen," Reaper's voice called out loudly and the deep sound reverberated about the flowing tree leaves. "We are going to do some magnificent work around here. We're going to have such fun." The group dropped their weapons as if entranced by the sound of Reaper's voice. "Let's go back to your village and show your women what you found on the beach, shall we?"