

## SEALIGHT

By Ian R. MacLeod

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“YOU WILL BE CAREFUL, dear?”

“Of course I’ll be careful.” Ran Kirving carried his mother from her bed to the wicker wheelchair, smoothing the blankets over the remains of her legs.

“Tomorrow’s a big day, son. The happiest day of your life.”

“Yes, Mother.” He kissed her temple.

“So you will be careful, won’t you?”

Ran smiled and patted her hand. Then he picked up the bag of skidding sandwiches she’d made him the night before. “See you this evening.”

He took the stairs of the creaky tenement three at a time, past the screams of babies, the slow rumble of household arguments that would last into the night, the cabbages talk reek of too many lives pressed too close together.

The courtyard was filled with flapping washing and sunlight. Ran paused to take a breath of the relatively fresh air. As always, it was flavored with rotting seaweed and stagnant canal.

“What a lovely morning? a voice called.

Ran looked up and saw Piir leaning from the creaky balcony of her parents’ tenement. She was still in her nightgown, her red hair tied back from her wide and innocent face.

“Yes,” Ran said, squinting at her through the fluttering sheets, telling himself over and over again how lucky he was to be marrying her, hoping that with enough repetition he might come to believe it.

“I’ve just got the hem of my dress to finish,” Piir said. She laughed. “Think of me, all in white.” She turned slightly and the flashing sunlight caught the rounded shape of her figure, the curve of her belly that people were already starting to notice.

“I’ve got to go,” Ran said with a wave.

Piir waved back. “You will be careful, won’t you?”

It was a fine day for fishing. The wind had veered away from the dimly foul stench of the marshes and Ran’s sail snapped taut in the breeze. The sea was flat

blue and almost waveless. Even the ancient hull of Ran's boat had decided not to leak for a change.

Ribald shouts rang across the little flotilla. Ran's fellow fishermen knew that he was getting married tomorrow, and were full of advice as to his wedding night. Ran made the appropriate gestures to them, knowing that they would be unable to tell whether he was actually smiling.

The wind hurried them down through the main channel toward the lagoon. The seagulls circled and cried. Spires and cupolas flashed bronze and drifted to leeward.

Off to the east, the last island of the city soared darkly from weedblack rocks. As he had done each morning since his childhood, Ran gazed toward it. This was where the palace of Torea raised the dark shoulders of its impenetrable seaward face, shrugging off storm and time. He had learned of its legend, which is also the legend of Lady Jolenta, from his long-dead father as he sat at the prow of this same little boat. How Jolenta had been cursed with ageless beauty five centuries before, and how it was said that she still lived somewhere beyond those ragged battlements. Every few decades, some nobleman would tire of writing turgid poetry in her honor and vow to release her, make her his lover, even his wife. But the stories always ended there. The abandoned Eastern Quarter of the city was a dangerous place at the best of times, where ghosts darted in the dark canals and the mined houses held secrets best left undiscovered, those who tried to penetrate the walls of Torea were invariably never heard of again.

What Lady Jolenta needed, Ran had decided long ago, was an adventurer, a hero from the dazzling pages of the books Ran lacked the talent to read. Some giant built with shoulders like a milk yoke, golden hair and flashing blue eyes, a magic sword and a dark secret. Ran gazed up at Torea's massive central tower, topped by a widening profusion of roofs, weathervanes and turrets like a warted mushroom. Sometimes, when he returned weary from a day hauling the nets and stared up at it through the grainy evening, he thought he glimpsed a light flickering from the highest window. But tomorrow he was to be married, and the sun was already bright enough to douse a thousand lanterns. It seemed that there was no room left in his life for such mysteries.

Ran hawked up a gob of spit, lobbed it an admirable distance. He swung the boom toward the wind and cut through the water, leaving the little flotilla behind. Partly, he wanted to spend his last day of bachelorhood alone, but also the further west he sailed along the coast, the bigger his catch of skidling was likely to be. Mostly, the fishermen in their fragile boats preferred to keep together and net the thinner shoals in the middle flats of the lagoon rather than risk going near the marches. Even the surrounding waters were places of uncertain danger, tied to the past by a gray pall of nightmare legends. But Ran's boat was close to the end of its life. His grandfather had bought it thirdhand many years ago. Now, the boards were split and the sail was more patch than canvas. Within the next year or two, and if a

storm didn't catch him before, Ran would need a new boat. With his mother to support — and now Piir and the child that was forming in her belly— it was imperative that he find the money.

The keel creaked and the ominous coastline grew nearer as Ran daydreamed of heroes and quests. Green scum veined the water. Islands of slick black sand slumped to the horizon, tufted biliously green in patches. The catches were abundant here — the water was like soup and the fish thrived — but so were the risks, not least of which was grounding the keel on some hidden mudflat. The sail sagged in the still air. Ran unstowed the oar and swept it slowly to each side, canoe-fashion. The wooden blade made a sucking sound. Otherwise there was silence.

Ran glanced down over the side of the boat, praying for the continuance of open water, wishing, too, that he did not have to fish here. He jumped as water erupted close to his elbow, but it was no more than a bubble of marshgas, foul-smelling but harmless. The disturbance caused a shoal of skidling to scatter through the silt like spilled coins. He nodded to himself and leaned forward to stow the oar. This was as good a place as any. He unfurled the nets.

The dark air was hot. He sweated as he worked, drawing the nets through the sleek water. Gutting the skidling, feeling the bright shudder as each life spilled in a gathering slick, he pictured Jolenta, alone in her tower. He saw the fall of her hair against pale shoulders, the gleam and shift of silk across her limbs, a sea-diamond glinting in the soft valley between her breasts. . . . He shook his head and squeezed a skidling eyeball between finger and thumb until it popped.

Noon came. Time for Ran to eat the skidling sandwiches his mother had made for him. Off to the west, he had noticed a stony gray island that seemed more substantial than the rest. Welcoming the prospect of resting on solid ground for half an hour, Ran eased his boat through the maze of channels. He threw a grappling iron across the last few feet. It struck the gray surface of the island with an oddly liquid smack. He hauled himself in.

Ran had half his mind on the grim horizon, watching the glint of distant marshlight. If he hadn't been doing so, he might have noticed the gray-green coils that began to seethe beneath the boat a vital moment earlier. As it was, when he jumped from the prow his feet struck the island with a fleshy slap. His right boot split the surface and black blood puddled up over his ankle, but by then it was too late. The water was starting to boil with angry, seeking flesh.

Tentacles writhed dripping from the water. A rough grayish lump that Ran had assumed to be a rock set in the middle of the island split open to reveal a malevolent yellow eye. A tentacle swung around his arm like a wet rope. Others smacked across his waist, his neck. The muscular flesh bulged, then relaxed, holding without crashing. It lifted Ran lightly toward its steaming maw. Ran screamed and straggled, but the creature's strength was enormous. And he was no hero — he could think of

nothing he could do that would make any difference to his fate. He thought instead of his mother, he thought of Piir, the way she furrowed her brow when she was unhappy, the way she crinkled her eyes when she smiled. The beak and lips dilated to accept his kicking feet, his legs, his thighs.

It would all have been over quickly enough had the creature not been indolent and ancient, used to eating nothing larger than the frogs and snakes and gray things of the marshes. Somehow it couldn't swallow Ran past his hips. He was stuck — the mouth would widen no further. The throat pulsed uselessly, grinding Ran's legs. The creature began to thrash wildly, turning pinkish in anger, then red as it began to choke. The yellow eye watered and blinked. The creature grew desperate. One of the tentacles pulled hard at Ran's right arm. For a moment, he felt as though it might bust from its socket, but the creature's strength was failing. It was choking, dying.

The tentacles fell uselessly into the water. Silt swirled, began to settle. Ran heaved against the collar of flesh that held him. He pushed again, images of a slow death inside the maw of this dead creature playing through his mind. Given the choice, he would rather the thing had consumed him — but then he felt something give. Lubricated by stinking saliva, he hauled himself out.

He picked his way across the bobbing island of flesh, trying to ignore the white parasites that scuttled around his feet. Before he jumped back into the boat, he noticed something glimmering at the corner of his sight. Filled with a weird sense of curiosity, he decided to look.

He expected no more than light on water or a dead fish, but what he found was an oddly shaped knife wedged into the wrinkled flesh where two tentacles joined. The handle terminated in two golden loops. He took it and pulled. The blade winked in his face, seeming to focus what little light penetrated the marsh. He smiled and stuffed it into the belt beneath his sodden jerkin, wondering whether it might finally signify a change in his luck.

IT WAS GROWING dark when Ran's boat drew back into sight of the city. He drifted on the stale evening breeze through the treacherous channels, past salt pans and weed-strung bones of ancient wrecks toward the fishermen's harbor. His body responded to the boat's needs as he stared east. Torea was black with night, but he was sure he could see a filigree of light from one window. Breathing the gathering aroma of the city, he thought of Jolenta, the white purity of her flesh. Clean and cool, like sheets of new linen . . .

Most of the other fishermen were already back at their moorings. They all wanted to know about Ran's plans for the evening, which inn they would be starting the traditional pre-wedding carouse in. Ran plucked a name at random — the Captain's Lash; a suitably lowlife dive. He told them he'd be there at seven bells, and wondered how long they would sit there waiting for him with tumblers of spiked ale before they realized he wasn't going to show.

He made his way home across bobbing walkways, over creaking bridges, through the courtyard and up the final stairway where the same babies were crying, the same arguments rumbling. His mother was sitting up in bed in the smoggily lit parlor; Piir generally came around about midday to see to her. Ran noticed that the flask of cheap nullwine that she used to relieve her pain was almost empty. She must have had a bad day—it was always worse when the weather was close and hot.

Her illness was now progressing toward its later stages. He remembered his father first breaking the news to him many years ago. Him saying, Son, I've got to tell you something that means you're going to have to grow up quicker than your mother and I would wish. Ran didn't really understand then. Something called mermaidosis. But then a kid from across the courtyard showed him a cheap painting of a woman with the lower body of a fish and laughed and said, that's what's happening to your Mum, stoopid. Mermaidosis was a virus that took women in youth and slowly turned their legs and belly to fishscale and/in. The lucky majority died when the silvering reached their waist, but it was said that some became fish in the whole.

“Have you had a good day, dear?”

“You know.” He shrugged. “Average.” What was he supposed to say, some creature choked when it tried to eat me? Now, maybe if he'd battled it to death . . .

“Looking forward to the wedding tomorrow?”

“Of course.”

“Piir's a lovely girl, Ran. She'll make a fine wife . . . “ She gave him a look. “. . . and mother. Living here with us, we'll be more of a family again. Like long ago when your poor Dad was alive. Come here.” She opened her arms.

Ran knelt beside the bed and leaned into the fishy scent of her embrace. He could feel the pressure of the jeweled knife beneath his jerkin where he had pushed it into his belt. When his mother's hands patted close to it, he drew back.

Ran fried skidling for them both on the smoky hob. They ate in silence, both wrapped in their own visions of the future. Afterward, he washed himself at the communal tap, changed, refilled his mother's flask of nullwine, settled her blankets and snuffed out the lights. He tiptoed away, thinking she was asleep, but as he reached the door, he heard her mutter, “You will be careful, won't you, dear?”

“You know me,” he said. “I'm always careful.”

He descended the stairs to the courtyard, looking up, he could see the light of Piir's window through the shaggy curtain. He turned quickly left alongside the canal.

Loose gray entrails of mist were forming over the water but the heat of the day remained. Worn paving and crumbling walls gleamed like sweatslick skin.

Ran took a bridge toward the prosperous Middle District. His nostrils were assailed by different mixes of odor with each breath; potpourri from an open window, patchouli from a lady, her skirts discreetly lifted to avoid the mud, the brown reek of a sewer rising up through grating, incense from the open door of a temple, the spice of a hot meats stall. And sweat on sweat. Heat on heat.

No fishermen could afford to live in these middle districts. Ran was very conscious that he didn't belong here — conscious also of the many patrols of the State Police he saw, with their blue uniforms and bronze truncheons, tipping their caps to anyone who looked wealthy, glaring at the poor. Ran was relieved to find that they only glanced neutrally at him. He was wearing his best jerkin and trouser: they weren't new or even first-hand, but they were clean and unpatched, good enough at least to convince the Police that he wasn't a candidate for a night in their tide-flooded cells.

He took one of the many ferries across the Great Canal. Beyond, and even this late in the evening, the tight alleyways of the Jeweler's Quarter were doing a good trade. Ran wandered, gazing through the barred windows at displays of seajade, dwarfen gold, bloodpearl earrings, and necklaces of wyvern teeth. After passing and re-passing several times, he eventually settled on a jeweler away from the main thoroughfare with a display of dusty birthstones and dead insects in the window. The sign above the door said GRIMMIERY AND HALE, ARTICLES FOR THE DISCERNING.

The interior was thick with shadow and the underwater glint of jewels beneath glass. A gray-haired man behind the counter raised an eyebrow, then let it drop. "Can I be of . . . assistance?"

"I want something valued."

"Insurance purposes?"

Ran shrugged. He wasn't sure what insurance was, except that his mother had complained once or twice that they didn't have any. "It's, er, this," he said.

The jeweler extended his fingers. "Let me examine, Sir."

Ran hesitated, then handed it over.

A flicker of distaste passed over the jeweler's face. It dissolved as he examined the knife.

"Where did you get this?" he asked.

“I’m a fisherman . . . I mean, a captain. We’re very rich. It’s been in the family for years.”

“Then doubtless you’ll know what it is?”

“Well, a knife...dagger, I suppose.”

“A knife, dagger.” The jeweler chuckled — not a pleasant sound. Then he did something with the knife that — to Ran at least — seemed extraordinary. He looped his long fingers into the twin gold hoops at the top and pulled. The knife was hinged in the middle. It split into the shape of an X; two separate blades. The jeweler closed it again with a snip.

“Have you not heard of scissors?”

“I, er . . . can you remind me, please?”

“Scissors are used by the comfortably off and the well educated to cut their hair. Of course, the poor use a razor . . . “ He gazed at Ran. The eyebrow went up again. “ . . . if they use anything at all. But this pair, I would not like to guess at their intended use, or their value. See the way the blades fit together, so tightly? Yet they slide apart like oil on water if the pressure is applied just so.” Snip. “The work is finer than the finest smithy in this city could produce. They are dwarfen, I would guess, although you would need the word of an expert to be sure. For all I know, they have some magic cast into them; certainly the level of craftsmanship suggests it. Scissors such as these might be used to cut a lock from the mane of a unicom . . . “ He gazed absently into the gloom. “ . . . that kind of thing.” Snip. “So I must repeat my question. Where did a lout like you find them?”

Ran lunged forward. He snatched the scissors from the jeweler’s hand, narrowly avoiding serious injury to them both. He was out of the shop and off down the maze of alleys before the jeweler had a chance to cry out or raise the alarm. It was only when Ran was catching his breath in the darkness half a mile off that it occurred to him that he really had no reason to run or feel guilty. The only other creature who could possibly claim ownership was the octopus — and that was dead.

So the knife — the scissors — might be valuable. If he was lucky, he told himself firmly, they would bring enough for a down payment on a boat . . . or a new wheelchair for his mother. Or a crib for the baby. He turned the golden blade over in his hands. Dwarfen . . . magic . . . unicoms . . . he couldn’t help thinking that these scissors were just the kind of thing that a hero might carry . . .

Ran slid the cold metal back into his belt and glanced around. He saw decrepit high-gabled buildings. He had run further than he realized; their ornate style was

characteristic of the ancient Eastern Quarter. Only a few lights glowed from the highest floors or flickered through the gaps in the sag-roofs, and those were pale and cold; as likely a sign of ghosts as habitation.

He picked his way through the litter of moonlight and rubble. He was lost, but he knew where he was going. Tomorrow might be the biggest day of his life, but this last night was his alone. Ran's feet crunched the broken remains of mosaics and stained glass, passed over bridges and through courtyards. This had once been the wealthiest district of the city, where the barge sails were silk and the water sellers sang *bel canto*. Here, Lady Jolenta would once have walked, drawing all eyes, all dreams, all envy. Hardly anyone lived here now, just the ancient and the insane, muttering over days of past glory. He saw two such creatures fighting over the corpse of a cat washed up in the scum of a canal. Opinions varied as to the reasons for the decline of the Eastern Quarter. Some said it was no more than the drift of fashion and problems with the seadrains. Another version of the story -which Ran preferred not to dwell on tonight — was that creatures had started to ferment spontaneously in the fetid silt.

He came suddenly to a wide canal arched by the bonewhite branches of dead *densia* trees. The far end was blocked by a massive wall. Above it, reaching far into the sky, were the roofs and pinnacles of Torea, much closer than he had ever seen them from the lagoon. Unmistakably, a light glinted from the highest tower, although from where he stood it looked as though it was coming from somewhere amid the stars.

Ran reached back into the belt, drew out the scissors, held them menacingly before him in his right hand in much the same way as he had seen adventurers depicted in woodcuts. He prowled along the footway. The waters of the canal beside him were flat, catching the night like a dark mirror. The moon shifted through the white branches overhead.

He stopped: the moon still slithered through the branches. The sensation of watching it was odd, like staring from a stationary ferry at a moving deck beyond. Then he realized that the branches were soundlessly rubbing together like greedy hands.

He started to back away. The whole avenue was twisting and swaying now, and in total, unnerving silence, although the white branches looked as though they should clatter like ancient bones. Then something tapped Ran's shoulder. He spun around. A thousand arms opened to embrace him. He lashed out with the scissors, but a twig whipped instantly around his wrist. Feeling their touch on his face, his hands, his body, Ran understood why the branches made no sound. They were soft as flesh.

They picked him up easily. A branch slid across his mouth, searched and parted his lips. He kicked and squirmed as others lowered him toward a gray trunk which had splintered open to form a wet and hungry maw. He tried to scream, but



by now the fleshy softness of the wood had circled his tongue. The yawning trunk was filled with pulsing redness — Ran could smell its greed. He was gripped helpless and rigid. So much for magic scissors — it seemed that the fates had decreed that no matter what else happened today Ran was destined to be eaten by something large and many-armed. Some adventurer you are, he thought, haven't even reached the walls of Torea. Then he thought of his mother, and wondered if Piir would ever marry.

Darkness dosed over him. Sadness, too, and a kind of relief. He didn't expect to awake.

RAN DREW A slow breath, then another. The third -and the ache in his bruised ribs — was enough to convince him that he was actually alive. He could hear the clash of sea against rock, but the sound was faint, and something about it told that it came from far below. The air was almost cool, brushing lightly against the sweat on his face. It tasted sweet. Like the sound of the sea, the green scent of canals was there, but it was distant.

Finally, he risked opening his eyes. Nothing happened; but now he could feel the soft pressure of a blindfold against his lids. Still drowsy, but alarmed, he tried to shift his arms and legs, but he found that he was bound, seated in some kind of high-backed chair.

Softly female laughter made him start.

“So you are awake now, my gallant knight. What is your name?”

Ran opened his mouth. Nothing came out. His tongue was as sore as his ribs from the grip of the nsia trees. He swallowed, tried again. “Ran Kirving, your — your ladyship.”

“My ladyship.” Again, that laughter. It came from behind him. Something about it gave Ran goosebumps. It was warm, friendly, cold, harsh . . . fire and ice. “You do me this honor without even seeing me, without knowing who I am.”

Ran felt a rush of disappointment. “But aren't you Lady Jolenta?”

“So, after all this time, I am still known of in the city?”

“My father told me . . . I—I'm just a fisherman. I pass the seawalls of Torea every morning.”

“A fisherman. Sometimes I watch your sails from these windows. Do men still write poetry about me?”

“I suppose so.”

“Have you written any?”

“No.” Ran felt his cheeks flush. “I can’t read or write.”

“Well, thank God for that, Ran Kirving, for I cannot stand poetry, especially the kind that men write about me.” The voice drifted from his back to his left side, then to the front. “Now, will you tell me why you are here?”

Once again, Ran was struck speechless. He had given the details of the matter perilously little thought, but he had imagined that reaching Jolenta would involve many dangers which would be bravely and ingeniously overcome. Beyond that, he had little idea of what would happen, except that it would be likely to involve a strong element of the erotic or — failing that the romantic. But hearing her voice . . . all wonder and beauty was there like the swirl of an icy current on a cloudless day. And age too; five centuries of solitude.

She laughed. “You probably expected me to welcome you with open arms.” Her voice was close now. Her breath was odorless yet its scent was dark and sweet, overpowering.

Ran shivered and nodded; there seemed little else to do but admit the truth.

“You need not feel ashamed — you are no different from the others. The vanity of man changes little with these many years. But still it puzzles me why anyone should assume I seek male company when I have so conspicuously isolated myself from the world.”

“Isn’t there . . . some kind of curse?”

“A curse? Oh yes, there is indeed a curse. I am cursed with this beauty that will not age. But the way I choose to live my endless life, that is my own freedom. Every few years, the far-seeing waters of that canal tell me of some new adventurer who seeks to disturb my solitude. Usually, I simply leave the nsia trees to deal with the problem, and I must confess, Ran Kirving, that was my first inclination with you too. But you were obviously of a different breed to the pampered noblemen who usually come this way. And instead of a wand or a knife, you carried a pair of scissors! For that alone, I thought you deserved just a little mercy.”

Ran was silent. Her breath, her voice, the slight warmth that came from the close presence of her body, had drifted further away from him again, but still he felt light-headed.

“What did your father tell you about me?”

“That you were beautiful. I was just a child. He’s dead now.”

“I’m sorry to hear that, Ran, even if I envy his release.”

“Envy?” Ran heard his own voice with surprise. “How can you say that? You live here in a huge palace . . . I have to share rooms with the smell of the toilets below and people yelling and the floor creaking . . . skidding for breakfast, dinner . . .”

“Yes, of course. And I am glad that I allowed you to enter Totes, Ran Kirving, if only to remind me that suffering is never unique. Desperation must lie somewhere in your heart. If you look at it in one way, I suppose trying to see me is a kind of suicide. Certainly, none have yet survived to tell the tale.”

Ran said nothing.

“Did your father tell you nothing more about me?”

“No.”

“Well, while there is still some portion of the night remaining, perhaps I might help you to understand. It goes back at least as far as the Third Campaign,” Lady Jolenta began. “I was born to riches, a merchant family whose wealth began with blood and piracy generations before. It was said that my great-grandfather gained this palace of Torea in a drunken wager over which of two turds floating out from a sewer sluice on the Great Canal would pass under Ridotto Bridge first. Wealth and idleness had corrupted the vigor that sent my forefathers to sea.”

Her voice had lost some of its icy calm.. She began to pace to and fro. Ran heard the gentle sigh of silk against flesh, the pad of footsteps on stone. “Before I was born, my mother employed an ancient hag who was skilled in the arts that women use to make themselves look comely. The hag was a whispering bag of bones who lived in a hut on the marsh flats and survived by scouring the shore drift and seaweed for dead fish and maybe the occasional jewel or relic washed up from some forgotten wreck . . . hardly an advert for her trade, but then I have heard it said that the best magician is often the least likely one. My mother’s hair was dark of course, as is my own, as is the hair of most women in this city probably to this day. But she wanted to be blonde, and the hag gave her a potion. It worked, in a way. It made her hair blonde, but made it all fall out. . . .”

“You might smile, Ran Kirving, but you must understand that to a woman of court, this was as the loss of gallantry might be to a knight . . . or so at least it seemed to my mother. She had the hag convicted under some statue about the Description of Trades. And she came to watch the beheading. Before the axe was raised, the trembling creature saw her sitting amid the nobility in the most expensive seats. With the presence of death at her shoulder the hag also sensed that my mother was with child. She screamed a curse across the heads of the crowd, one of the

strangest curses in this city of strange curses. The hag said that my mother would bear the most beautiful child in the Known World.

“It came to pass. I was born beautiful beyond imagining. For his own reasons, my father doubted the tale of the curse. One look in the mirror told him that I was not his child. As I grew, the thought became an agony to him, until he murdered my mother in a fit of rage and then threw himself from this tower. I found half of him next morning on my balcony. He had struck the sharp railings as he fell. The other half lay amid the scattered petals of a rose garden far below.

“It was the first of many tragedies that were to blight my life. You must realize, Ran, that I was truly young then, that I had the same hopes and fears as any other girl approaching womanhood. But women who thought themselves beautiful despoiled their looks with acid rather than accept the flaws that my face threw at them like a mirror flashing in the sun. Others simply ended their lives. Of course, there were many who wished to kill me, but the attempts always ended in bizarre tragedy. The wet nurse who had been my friend and companion from birth was poisoned by a draft intended for me. Children were drowned on a barge on which I was to have traveled.

“Men, of course, all longed to gain my favors. There were duels and suicides, endless reams of turgid poetry. I longed for companionship, love. But people grew pale and trembled in my presence, and I soon found that those who disguised their feelings and reigned simple friendship were not to be trusted. I began to realize that beauty is power, and that like all power it brings everything but that which you desire. Increasingly, I became a recluse, counting the bright years of youth by the seelight that passed across the inner walls of Torea. Perhaps, I thought, time would finally despoil my beauty and bring me peace. But when I gazed closely into the mirror at the turn of my thirtieth year, I could see no trace of line or wrinkle. And ten more years brought no change. At fifty, when I hadn't ventured from Torea for decades, I finally realized the full power of the water seller's curse on my mother. I would never grow old.

“So I ordered my few remaining servants to spend all the great wealth I had inherited on filling the halls and rooms of Torea with supplies that would last until all the clocks in the Known World stopped beating. Then I sent them away and sealed the windows and doors against all possible intrusion. I paid the best magicians in this city to set traps and golems to guard the ways against any who might be foolhardy enough to intrude. I turned inward to solitude . . . to this tower, to this room . . . “

Her footsteps ceased. The faint sound of the waves had changed. Ran guessed that the tide was drawing out, that morning was approaching. The stray thought came to him that this was to have been his wedding day, that even at this moment, Piir would probably be gazing at the light gathering beyond the grubby curtains in the room she shared with her younger brother and sister.

“You mean that you wish to die?” he asked eventually.

“Yes, if I cannot live some life other than this.”

“Could you not simply —”

“Stab myself, throw myself from the window? Do you think I have not tried all of these things? I feel pain, but the healing is instant . . . “

Her voice quavered. Ran sensed that she was close to tears. He also sensed that she was a little mad — but then in view of the tale she had told it could hardly be otherwise.

She began to pace again. “It is nearly morning, Ran Kirving. I am grateful that you have allowed me to unburden myself . . . You probably do not realize that I see your face whole. The blindfold you feel on your eyes is no more than a spell.”

Ran instinctively tried to reach toward his face. But his hands were still bound — or perhaps that was a spell too.

“I think I will let you go, Ran. But you must prove to me that you wish to live. After all these years, I must admit that I would find the demonstration of such a desire interesting. I will let you go, but first you must agree to my changing the blindfold spell to something stronger. I found it glimmering in a box many decades ago and it seems a pity not to use it. The spell will show you that which you most fear in all this universe and the many, many others. For all I know, it could bring madness. Would you submit to that, were I to let you go free?”

Ran felt his spine freeze inside his back. He tried to picture the drooling horrors he would have to face. One thing seemed certain — from the way things had gone today, they were likely to be hungry and have a great many arms. He forced himself to nod before he had time to dwell further on the matter.

“I wish you luck.”

The footsteps drifted away, returned. He heard the creak of a lid, the waft of sandalwood. Then she was close by him. He heard the sound of her lips parting. Her flesh gently brushed his face.

Something slammed into him. It was like being hit by a boom when the wind swung suddenly. Ran braced himself for darkness and horror. He opened his eyes.

The scene was incredibly real. He could hear it smell it taste it. It was no use telling himself that he was in Torea. He was here.

The tenement was lit by cheap fish oil candles that smoked and reeked of

skidling. Or perhaps the smell was coming from the dinner that Piir was cooking on the merge fire. She turned to him and smiled. Her face was blotched, her teeth had gone, she was hugely fat. A baby was screaming in a cot, unconsciously batting a louse that was trying to crawl over the vomity blankets toward its mouth. Beyond the half-open curtains where they slept, his mother was moaning, thrashing her silver tail, shouting. “You will be careful, dear, won’t you?”

The scene was horrible, overpowering, real. Yet, somehow, Ran had to laugh — was this really the worst that the universe might offer him? Then he blinked and it was gone.

He blinked again. Morning light was filtering through the great windows of a circular room. Marble, silk, and gold gleamed. Lady Jolenta stood smiling before him.

“I saw too,” she said. “You are truly a brave man.”

Ran tried to move. His arms were free.

“I think these are yours.” She held out the scissors.

“Thank you.” Ran took them without shifting his gaze from her eyes. He was no longer bound. He made to stand up, then hesitated. “Can I ask . . . “

Her look grew fierce. For a moment, he sensed the madness and the darkness of centuries. But he forced himself to speak. “For a lock of your hair.”

“My hair . . . that has never been cut since I was born . . . yet since you ask, and since you have the scissors.”

Ran stood up. Jolenta was fully as tall as he was. His hands were shaking and clumsy, unused to such a delicate job, even if the tool had been familiar. But they were strong from years of hauling nets and gutting skidling. He took a tress of her hair, he put thumb and forefinger through the handle of the scissors. As the jeweler had said, their workmanship was exquisite. The blades moved apart like oil on water.

He cut. There was no snip, but an instant of thunderous silence. The brightening morning dimmed. Sparks ran from the blades, shivered the image of Lady Jolenta. She shattered like a broken mirror, flew in a thousand directions as an ancient wind poured through the air. Then something solidified again before him. He looked down at it in pity and horror.

“Ran Kirving.” A voice that he half recognized whispered from toothless gray lips. A voice that might once have quivered from the perfect lips of Lady Jolenta before they were eroded by age. “Thank you . . . you have brought me release.”

“But . . . “

A withered claw waved at him. “No, there has been enough talk. You must hurry to your wedding.”

The wind blew again, lifting him into darkness. In a moment, he found himself standing at the start of the avenue of the nsia trees with the walls of Torea rising beyond. The trees looked harmless enough in the morning light, but Ran wasn't going to dally long enough to make sure. He broke into a run along the ruined walkways, back toward his home.

The wedding went well as such things are counted. Piir and Ran's mother had been concerned about Ran's absence the night before, but assumed without asking that he had been up to the sort of drunken pranks husbands-to-be generally undertook.

Afterward, Piir moved into their little tenement and her belly grew taut and life went on and the catches of skidling were mostly good, even far from the marshes. Mostly, Ran took the advice his wife and mother offered each morning and was careful. The baby was a sweet thing. They named her Dottie. She had her mother's rare red hair, the same pretty green eyes. There were days when Ran came home tired and Dottie was screaming and Piir was irritable with lack of sleep and from dealing with his mother's increasing pain when he remembered the sour vision that Lady Jolenta had presented him with. But the good came with the bad as it had always done: little triumphs, the play of the sun, the breath of the sea, Piir's laughter and her sense of humor, his mother's joy at Dottie's smile.

Ran's boat still leaked, and sometimes he thought of trying to sell the scissors he kept hidden with a lock of hair inside a niche in the tenement wall. But he could never quite bring himself to do it. And as he finally honored an oft-broken resolution and set about teaching himself to read, he discovered the tale of the Sea Prince Roderick, who had been required to perform nine quests to win the hand of the wild and beautiful Juliana, the Princess Bowskill. The proud Sea Prince had returned from his final quest for a flask containing the breath of a dragon with his features so scalded and ravaged that he was promptly called upon to perform a tenth. The tale then told that he had set out to shear the snakes from the head of a marshharpy armed only with a pair of enchanted scissors, and was never heard of again. All of which gave Ran cause to think.

On holy days the Kirving family would sometimes walk the long breakwater beyond the glittering wharves where the waves flashed and the buoybells clanged. Ran would push his mother's wheelchair, and Piir the pram for Dottie that a carpenter cousin had made them. Usually, they would turn back when they got to the stretch of shore that lay at the edge of the city, but sometimes at Ran's insistence they would go farther on to give scraps of food and old clothing to the withered hag

who lived in a hut on the marsh flats and scoured the shore for whatever the tides might bring. The hag was a mad old creature, but mostly she seemed happy. It was said that others now came this way to seek her wisdom, or simply to gawk at her ugliness. It was said that she had once been a great beauty, a turner of heads, but few except Ran could credit that it was possible for loveliness to lie beneath those ruined features. And he shared his secret with no one.

Walking back along the breakwater toward home one autumn evening, something strange happened. Ran was pushing Dottie's pram, Piir his mother's wheelchair. His thoughts were far away, deep in the half-finished text of a salt-stained book that the old hag had found on the shore and given him. He was reading the book as he rested at anchor each noon in his boat, prising each new page apart to discover the joys of wonder and an escape that he had spent his life yearning for.

The sea along the breakwater was restlessly choppy and the wind was rising from across the lagoon, but still there was no warning and no reason for the great wave that broke over them. Ran and Piir were drenched, and Dottie spat out a mouthful of water and began to cry, but the wheelchair had been overturned, and Ran's mother had fallen from it. Before Ran could help her, she flicked her long fishy tail and began to haul herself hand over hand across the wet stone, leaving the fallen wheelchair and the tumble of blankets behind. There was a frozen moment — filled only with the sea and the crying gulls — then Ran and Piir began to move. But it was already too late. Ran's mother slithered over the edge of the breakwater and plunged into the deep rising ocean beyond.

There was a flash of silver fin, the wave of a hand. In another moment, she was gone.

\* \* \* \*

Ian R. MacLeod has been called the first important new writer of the 1990s. His short fiction has appeared in *Asimov's*, *Pulphouse*, and *Interzone*, among many other places. He has a novel making the rounds, and his first short story collection will appear from Arkham House sometime next year

"Sealight" came out of his love for Venice and his desire to play with some of the elements of heroic fantasy. "I always envy the way your average hero seems to be able to set off on his quest without arranging to have his mail redirected, his dog fed or his rent paid," he writes. "It strikes me that in real life, even in fantasy real life, things are very different."