

# WHETSTONE

AMATEUR MAGAZINE OF SWORD AND SORCERY



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WHETSTONE is an amateur magazine that seeks to discover, inspire, and publish emerging authors who are enthusiastic about the tradition of "pulp sword and sorcery." Writers in this tradition include (but are not limited to) the following: Robert E. Howard, Fritz Leiber, Jack Vance, Michael Moorcock, Karl Edward Wagner, and many more. "Pulp sword and sorcery" emphasizes active protagonists, supernatural menaces, and preindustrial (mostly ancient and medieval) settings. Some "pulp sword and sorcery" straddles the line between historical and fantasy fiction; at *Whetstone*, however, we prefer "secondary world settings," and other worlds liberated from the necessity of historical accuracy.

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# VODA'S ATLAS

Jimmy Stamp

*Stamp's tale of Ka the Cartographer is propelled forward by a lovable protagonist who flourishes despite her propensity for ill-starred misfortune, and in this way this tale of capture-and-escape evokes the picaresque vein of S&S.*

Ka's eyes fluttered open. She saw her feet still shuffling through the white desert, her soft boots shredded by the rocky terrain and the shackles around her ankles. Hunched under the weight of an enormous leather-bound book lashed to her back, Ka grimaced as its straps bit into the flesh of her shoulders, having long worn through the faded green cloak hanging in tatters around her thinning frame. Where skin showed, it was raw and peeling. The air was hot dust. The sun oblivious and uncaring. Raptors spiraled above, circling closer to the caravan every mile as they sensed death coming, and with it a rich meal.

She stumbled. Then braced herself as the chain tied to her waist yanked her forward. Ka groaned and felt her lips crack as she consulted strange tools and made notes in a small book, sketching the rocky pass they marched through and noting the crooked black trees that dotted the stone landscape like frozen lightning. That night, like every night, she'd translate her shorthand into an uncannily accurate and beautifully rendered map in the massive tome she was forced to carry--all while under the ruthless eye of a Mocarian guardsman.

Ka was one of the most gifted cartographers in the Guild. And here she was, enslaved by some powermad marshmen who dreamt of claiming the Deadland.

To call Mocarua a marsh was too generous. It was a swamp. A ditch city of warring tribes who had somehow rallied together under the banner of a lunatic "prophet." Among the dozens of Mocarian soldiers riding unsteadily on stolen horses were a few other press-ganged scholars, a handful of supply wagons, and one large windowless carriage that Ka never saw anyone enter or leave. But on some nights--the most horrifying nights--she saw smoke rise from its narrow chimney and smelled burning human flesh--an odor Ka wished she did not know.

The chain pulled again and Ka glared at her captor, an odious Mocarian Kaptane named Straz.

"Keep up, mapmaker."

"*Cartographer*," she rasped. The chain yanked her harder.

"You should feel honored, mapmaker. Thanks to you and our glorious expedition, this uncharted wasteland will soon be High Seat of the new Mocarian Empire - as foreseen by Voda Crenn, may he show us the way."

She glanced at Straz's bandaged hand, a biting retort on her lips about how his beloved Voda was "showing the way" from the safety of a marsh a hundred leagues away. But Ka stopped herself, saving her strength for what she knew was coming, and basking in the fact that he didn't. Ka knew much more of the Deadlands and its secretive people than she shared with her captors. But knowledge always has a cost. One she paid when she must and collected as often as she could.

Only weeks ago, Ka was safe in Blackgrove, deep in the darkest part of the Last Wood, where sunlight never broke through the dense forest canopy. The Grove was a haven where the most civilized of the uncivilized gathered to revel, reminisce, and plot. Here, they were safe from the eyes of watchmen and wardens, who were paid nicely to stay away and keep out those who don't belong. Along the streets of the picturesque trading post, well-bred blackmailers browsed shops stocked with stolen goods and thieves' tools, and forgers and fencers plied their wares in streets lit at all hours by lantern light. At the Knot and Nest, Blackgrove's finest tavern--it's only tavern, but still quite fine--Ka was sipping a well-earned glass of wine in the musky haze of pipe smoke, her purse heavy with silver. She was enjoying the company of a particularly charming con artist when they were interrupted by a snide voice she had hoped never to hear again.

"Mapmaker."

"*Cartographer*," Ka corrected before reluctantly looking up from her comely companion--who made a quick exit--toward a dirty, weary-looking soldier with the face of a constipated toad and the figure to match. "Kaptane Straz. What a pleasant surprise." Ka smiled, hiding her concern. "How was the Lost Temple of Myr? I presume you found it without any trouble using the map I gave you."

"The map for which we *paid you*. And quite well at that."

"I've always said the Mocarū were the most generous people in the Marshlands."

"We found the temple," Straz sneered, "at precisely the same time as the Cult of Tsiva. Quite a coincidence, wouldn't you say? After we slayed those blasphemers, I found this on one of them." He unfolded a large parchment and placed it on the oak table. "A map to the lost temple. Same as ours."

"Ah, they must've stolen it from one of your men. Or perhaps there's a traitor in your midst," Ka said, offering her best imitation of concern.

"I think not, Ka. We have our map. And we found this identical one."

"A forgery then! How scandalous. Though I must admit to being flattered."

"Perhaps...Or perhaps you sold the information we paid you a hefty sum to find!" Straz leaned in and tapped a signature flourish around the compass rose. "Is this not your mark?"

"Hm...can't be. Let me get a closer look." Ka leaned in. "Actually, that does look like my—" in a flash she slipped a thin dagger from her sleeve and drove it into the flesh of the Kaptane, pinning his hand to the sticky wine-stained wood. And with strength belying her size, Ka flipped the table onto the screaming Straz, grabbed her bag off the floor and dashed through the inn's back door--right into a waiting circle of scowling Mocarian spearmen.

Ka skidded to a halt and put her hands up.

"Oh hello there boys. Bit of a ruckus in there. Nothing to do with me. Now if you don't mind, I'm just going to slip around you here..."

The battered soldiers stepped forward in unison, bringing their chipped and bloodied spear tips close to her neck. Straz stumbled out of the tavern, grasping his bloody hand close and grimacing.

"Chain her up!" He shouted at the spearmen.

"Whoa. Whoa whoa whoa. No need for chains. Look, Straz, I made a mistake. I'm sorry. Listen..." She lowered her voice in her best conspiratorial tone. "I know where things are. Powerful relics. Magical places. A guy like you shouldn't be some Voda's lackey. He should be Voda. Let me go, Straz." Somehow her tone grew even more conspiratorial. "*I can make you rich.*"

"You mistake me, mapmaker." Straz didn't hesitate. "My needs are not so base. And my loyalty not so frail. I live to serve Voda Crenn, may he show us the way."

And this time, we'll make sure you work for us. And only us." He looked toward one of the spearmen. "Get the book."

That was the last thing Ka heard before a spearbutt knocked her unconscious.

For weeks, she has been manacled to Straz or one of his men. It could not have been easy for the Kaptane to track her to Blackgrove. She had underestimated him. She thought him a religious fool when he was, in fact, a dangerous zealot. She had paid a hefty price for that knowledge.

Ka staggered under the great weight she carried and fell to her knees, scraping them on the harsh gravel of the pass. Straz kicked her in the side.

"Get up mapmaker!" He barked.

She grinned ruefully and feigned helplessness under the book.

"I said get up, you piece of--" his command was cut short by a wet gurgle. In the same instant, Ka's body rocked forward as something slammed against the Atlas. *Thud*. Then another. *Thud*. And then *thud thudthudthud*. She made herself small and the book pressed her to the ground as chaos broke out around her. Screams echoed across the caravan as black arrows rained from the sky.

Ka tried to burrow deeper into the sand, but the ground was too hard here in the pass. So she dragged Straz's body closer to shield her from any attacks. With his last breath, he watched in horror and confusion as her eyes rolled up into her head and glazed over.

*Ka slid into one of the raptors.* It was the female this time. She looked through the bird's eyes, toward the battle unfolding in the gap as a tribe of Corb Lejat warriors poured down its steep slopes, sprinting at impossible speed. A wave of fighters crashed into the caravan and the sound of steel and screams filled the air. She saw the Mocarú being slaughtered. The marshmen stood no chance against the Corb Lejat. While the Mocarú believed this land belonged to them, the Corb Lejat--the Stonemen--knew they belonged to the land.

As the brutal ballet unfolded below her, Ka saw something she couldn't explain: a disturbance in the atmosphere around the strange carriage. As if sensing something wrong, the raptor Ka was riding spiraled higher into the sky.

The carriage exploded.

Spinning fragments of wood and metal ripped

through the air and the flesh of soldiers on both sides of the battle. Just as suddenly as they started, the exploding fragments stopped, frozen in time, suspended unnaturally in the air. At the eye of the woody storm, a bald and bare-chested man with a wild gray beard stood on the remains of the carriage, untouched by the destruction. His arms looked burned or scarred; they were mutilated with strange objects, but from her bird's eye view Ka could not say exactly what. Waving his arms, the sorcerer brought the splinters to life, directing them like deadly swarms--straight into the hearts of the Corb Lejat. Dozens fell in a breath.

But at the northern edge of the field, one man still stood, braced against the maelstrom with a heavy circular shield. Rather than run from the sorcerer, he ran toward the devil with shield raised. His ragged sand-colored cloak whipped behind him, shredded by the wood and metal shards. The sorcerer paused for a moment, then began spinning his hands rapidly. A wooden axle ripped itself from the carriage and slammed into the warrior, tearing the shield away and leaving his arm hanging limp by his side.

The sorcerer touched one of the strange objects embedded in his forearm, which began to emanate a menacing crimson energy. Slowly, he raised the glowing arm and launched a shaft of fire from his hand, straight at the staggered Corb Lejat fighter. The magical blaze incinerated everything in its path--wood and sinew alike. Through the eyes of the bird, Ka watched in horror as it crashed into the warrior.

The flames broke like waves against rock, sparks and ash scattering in the air. The sorcerer hesitated, confused. The warrior stepped forward, his cloak and tunic burned away to reveal strange sapphire skin.

Ka watched as the lone fighter roared and leaped forward, pulling a spear from the ground with his good arm and launching it with all the might in his broad shoulders. The obsidian missile passed clean through the wizard, who staggered backward before crashing to his knees.

At once a roar swept across the battlefield as the Corb Lejat began chanting and shaking their spears in rhythm: "BO-JA-DAN! BO-JA-DAN! BO-JA-DAN!" The clangor of metal on metal died away as the last of the marshmen were slaughtered, their moans drowned out by the chant.



The battle was done. The Corb Lejat stepped through the killing field, coldly dispatching any survivors and looting their bodies. But Ka could not tear her gaze from the strange blue figure who killed the sorcerer. She watched as he picked up a spear and joined the others in their march through the dead. The Stonemen cheered as he passed but kept their distance. He walked among them, but he was not of them. She saw him work slowly toward what looked like a pincushion among scattered toy soldiers. She watched as he approached *Voda's Atlas*. As he approached her.

As if to remind Ka that she belonged in her own body, the raptor dove suddenly, no longer able to resist the scent of fresh blood and viscera. On the ground, Ka's eyes fluttered open.

She slid back into her own body just as the warrior grabbed the book and flipped it over, shattering the arrows that punctured it and revealing Ka, trapped and helpless.

"No! I--" Ka's pleas stopped short as she laid eyes on the most remarkable and horrifying man she had ever seen. What she saw from the bird's eye was wrong. His skin wasn't sapphire; it was opal. Paler even than a Stoneman's. But from head to waist it was densely ornamented--or perhaps scarred--with deep blue patterns--spirals, lines, stars, and shapes that she could not name. To Ka's eye, it looked like a map of the heavens laid onto the topography of his body. The effect made her nauseous, but she couldn't look away. She was awed by the artistry. Towering over her, the painted warrior paused for a moment, his cold eyes widened in surprise at finding a body under the strange book. They narrowed as he raised the blood-soaked spear.

"Whoa! Whoa whoa whoa. Stop! Please! I'm a prisoner here!" Ka raised her hands in defense, stealing a second to steady her voice. "Please. Listen. I can help you. I know where things are. Powerful relics. Magical places. I am a cartog--a mapmaker. You're not Corb Lejat, are you? You're a mercenary. A guy like you shouldn't be some mercenary. He should be hiring mercenaries. Let me go, please," Somehow her tone grew even more conspiratorial. "*I can make you rich.*"

The warrior didn't react. Just raised the spear. Ka closed her eyes, feeling nothing but embarrassment at the fact that she was going to die like a stuck turtle.

The spear came down with a thud.

Ka opened her eyes, still alive. The sliced leather straps fell away from her bruised shoulders.

She was free.

Ka offered her savior a hesitant smile as she unlocked her chains using a key taken from Straz's body. She then opened *Voda's Atlas* and began tearing and folding a few of its enormous pages. "No need to waste good work, right? Seems like your people agree," she gestured at the looting soldiers around them. "But they're not your people are they? Tell me, friend. Who do I have to thank for my freedom? Bo-ja-dan? Is that you?"

"The Corb Lejat call me Bojadan." His voice was deep. His tone deadly. "You can call me Kryger. And if you betray me, *cartographer*, you will call me death."

Ka appraised the warrior, and saw no reason to doubt his words. He was clearly dangerous. But he was also something unknown - an unmapped region. And where there was something unknown, there was opportunity. She'd play it safe. For now. Ka had misjudged the Mocaru and paid dearly for her mistake. While She may occasionally--*occasionally*--charge twice for the same knowledge, she never paid twice for it. As the new companions prepared to venture further into the Deadland, Ka absently fingered the empty purse hanging from her belt and smiled.

