

The Thirteenth Ship by Christina Engela

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The Thirteenth Ship

Imagine, if you will:

The only female Corsair who had ever achieved any respectable level of notoriety, was the one they called the Hell Queen. She was all long blood-red hair, black make-up, corsets, and pale white skin. This may sound like a Goth fantasy to some, however – unlike many professional women who are occasionally misjudged by their appearance, or their clothing or other characteristics attributed to them due to their sex, her reputation was all about – well, her actual *reputation*. And her reputation said that the Hell Queen showed even less mercy than some of her male counterparts – and completely, totally, absolutely – was *not* somebody you wanted to fuck with. Not even if whips and chains were your thing.

If she were the Devil's wife, it was said – that is, if Mephistopheles were ever foolish enough to take her for his bride, then Hell would soon display signage reading: "UNDER NEW MANAGEMENT" above the door. Rumor had it that she favored torture, and some of the more unlikely tales that followed her exploits mentioned drinking the blood of her victims, like a vampire. Of course, like many myths that sprung up around the Corsairs – especially the infamous ones, these were often dreamed up and circulated by the Corsairs themselves to instill fear in the people they preyed upon. That being said, it was claimed by Space Fleet's Public Relations Bureau, that this myth, as well as many similar myths, should be viewed as propaganda, misinformation and a feature of the long years of intelligence warfare that had been waged upon the innocent civilians living in the fringe worlds of Terran space – and were bound to be, at heart, untrue.

Yeah, right.

Bearing all of the above in mind, try to imagine how frightened, shitting-himself, and badly in-need-of-a-change-of-under-wear Hank MacMillan was, when he first realized that the small, shiny, black speck on his ship's stern sensors, was a Corsair ship – and headed right towards him. Have an idea? Okay – *now* try to imagine, if possible, what it felt like to Hank when he awoke the following morning, in unfamiliar surroundings, barely able to remember his

own name, let alone what had happened between the *then* and the *now* – beside the seductive and sleeping figure of a pale, naked, and ravishingly beautiful redhead.

Bewildered and blinking in the dim light of the bedroom he found himself in, he looked this way and that. They were lying under a sheet, and it was a four-poster bed, made of wood, it looked like. The canopy was dark, like the night sky without stars. A large flat-screen TV hung on the wall opposite, blank. It was – well, uninteresting, compared to *her!* She had the most angelic face he'd ever seen – full lips and the whitest, smoothest-looking skin. Her hair was red – not like carrot-red hair he'd seen before, or the wild blends of black and purple and red... it was a bright natural looking red, and it flowed down to cover her shoulders, following the curves. She breathed softly, regularly, seemingly fast asleep. Aside from the raging questions bubbling up in his imminent panic, all seemed to be at peace.

He couldn't be sure of her age, but he guessed she looked somewhere between jail-bait and mid-twenties. And she had an astonishing figure on her, he noted, just at the same time as he realized with something of a shock, that he too, was naked under the sheet.

The feeling of pressure down below reminded him of his now urgent need to find a bathroom. He stumbled out of bed – noticing it was a wooden four-poster bed, and getting mildly annoyed at his rings which got stuck in his long, tangled hair as he tried to comb it through with his fingers. Fishing them out, and cursing under his breath, while still confused and virtually panic-stricken, he stumbled across the fluffy carpet on the floor towards what he fervently hoped was the en-suite bathroom. He absent-mindedly greeted the classical figures in the murals painted on the wall in passing.

Having relieved himself, he lowered the seat and lid of the toilet, and sat down to reflect on his dilemma behind the closed door. What *the hell* happened? *How* did he get here? *Where* was here? And who was *she*? *Think, dammit! Think!*

Convoy 27 was a flight of 12 loderunners that had been running silent, in the dark to avoid Corsair attacks which were becoming more and more frequent on the run between Andronicus and Tegra – two of Earth's oldest and biggest colonies. The 12 ships were carrying cargoes of *impervium*, *obstinatium*, *bitanium*, and *insubordinatium* – some pretty useful materials used in the manufacture of hyperdrive systems, gravity nets and transmatter devices. His ship – well, the one he had been flying, was a pretty average loderunner for the time and place – that is, it was always needing repairs of one kind or another, and they were almost always late for everything. This trip had seemed no different, and the *Juno* had been falling behind the rest of the convoy, even lagging behind the convoy's *battlespringer* class escort from Space Fleet. The escorts as a rule used to sail behind the convoy, keeping an aloof distance from it all, almost as though they were embarrassed to be sailing with merchant vessels. And so, he remembered, they were the 13th ship in the convoy.

He remembered the last sighting of the escort ship as it eventually vanished off their forward sensors, the *Juno* literally crawling along at just above warp speed. The skipper had gone to engineering to help the 'macs try to coax more speed out of the engines, and then

suddenly, out of the black, there was the blip on the rear sensors. One lone ship, closing from astern.

He paused in the recollection of his thoughts, to glance past the light filtering through the blue curtains over the narrow window above the toilet cistern at his back. He reached out with one hand to feel the black material behind it. It was thick and velvet, like black-outs, but more to the point – there was a *window* behind it!

He pushed it aside and looked outside, and was even more taken aback when he realized there *was* an outside! It was morning, and daylight shone brightly outside! He'd been on a ship! *In space!* How did he get *here*? How long had he been here? *Where* was here? He sank back. What the Hell was going on? Why couldn't he remember?

He let the curtains fall closed again, suppressing the rising tide of panic again, and washed his face in the basin. The feeling of the cool water as it soothed his face helped to relax him some. At least he wasn't dead yet. He was alive, perhaps he'd been abducted – but to what end? He didn't seem to have been abused, and he didn't seem to be a prisoner either. And that girl out in the bedroom – wow, wow, woweee! Just as he was beginning to think it wasn't all bad, he looked into the mirror.

The cry of alarm fading from his hearing, he stared into the mirror, unable to believe his own eyes. The face looking back at him wasn't his! It looked like his dad, only not quite... His long brown hair was riddled with gray, his face had wrinkles and – and it seemed he'd aged overnight! The rest of his body seemed to be very much as he remembered it, although he felt a little shaky now. He was 25! It couldn't be! What had they done to him? He was looking at a man at least 60 years old in the mirror!

Feeling broken, lost and confused all over again, he sank down onto the closed toilet lid, using it as a chair – hands clamped firmly over his mouth, eyes opened wide. There was no sound from the other side of the door, no sign that *she* had awakened or heard his crying out just now. Breathing deep, he began tying back his graying fronds with a scrunchie he found on the basin.

The other ship had been Corsairs of course, he realized, as the memories began to surface. The *Juno* didn't stand a chance. Commercial ships didn't carry armaments, least of all anything that would scare off the likes of the Hell Queen. The rest of the convoy left them behind – and the escort, perhaps understandably, stayed with them rather than to turn back and come to their rescue.

A few shots from the Corsair blew what was left of their engines to smithereens, and the 'macs – and the skipper along with them. And then it was just him and a few other members of the crew left, as the expected Corsair raiding party transported aboard using transmatter technology, expecting resistance. And that was where he first saw *her* – as the shimmer faded – the woman he'd just shared a bed with – standing in front of him! She held a sword, unsheathed, dressed in a long black Victorian skirt, lace-up boots and a corset all trimmed out with red

fooferah and piping. Her hair was tied up in two pony tails at the side of her head, like some kind of anime' character. Dressed to kill! It was the Hell Queen!

"Oh my fucking gods!" He breathed. *"I'm a dead man!"*

Most Corsairs were known for cruelty and few were known for taking prisoners. Phinegan and Dort got the business-end of the Corsair's blasters in the first three seconds after they arrived on *Juno*. But the Hell Queen had looked at him and showed him that the myths were true. The darkened eyes and the fangs she flashed his way as she licked her lips, told him that.

He remembered running towards the cargo deck, with a couple of big Corsairs in hot pursuit sent to bring him back. They were shooting at him as he ran down the corridors of the ship, occasionally roaring with laughter at the awkward squeaking noises he was making. Narrow misses or not, he could tell they were toying with him. Getting away from those two had been like something out of a Charlie Chaplin movie, but to make a long story short (which involved some broken wooden crates, paint tins and scaffolding), he'd managed to get hold of one of their weapons. It was something he'd never seen before, not that he was any kind of expert in weapons. They were standing there, in the cramped cargo deck, panting, covered – no, dripping in green and yellow paint – and looking at him like two hulking quarter-backs about to give the little new guy on the other team a thorough work-over.

"Don't move!" He threatened, hoping that what he was holding was the trigger as he aimed the overcomplicated looking weapon at them. They took one look at him, then at the thing he was holding, then at each other – and ran in opposite directions, just as he nervously squeezed the trigger. Behind where they had been standing, the door dissolved somewhat dramatically into thin, fizzing, hot air.

He saw her standing there – right outside the now open door, in front of him. Her face was full of concern as she saw the tears streaming from his lost look in his eyes and down his worn, tired old face. She reached toward him, and pulled him gently into her arms, wrapping him up in them, close to her. He didn't fight it anymore. He'd remembered. And for now, he knew he would forget again by the next morning, maybe even by the same night.

"Oh, my poor love!" She sighed, soothingly as she led him meekly back to the bed. *"There, there."*

She'd spared his life, all those long years ago. The myths about the Hell Queen had been true – at least, some of them were. She *was* a vampire, and she *did* take blood to live – but she had spared him. She took him prisoner instead. He'd fought off her best men – and made an impression on her. She had earned a harsh reputation and she'd let it go – to start a new life. A lot can change in a person in thirty years.

Often, in the course of the past thirty years, she had crooned in his ear as he fell asleep beside her, that he had been her salvation. That he had brought her back to herself. True, their meeting had been a turning point for them both. She'd turned her back on the Corsair life, and

they eloped together into the blackness of space. A year or two after the fall of Meradinis, when the Corsair base-world was taken down by the Terran Space Fleet, they had come *here* – and set up this modest home in the colonies. And she loved him, even as he grew older, even while she didn't. She was constant, always the same, forever young – and now that was the case inside as well as out.

For the most part, they had been happy, living like ordinary folk – until he got sick a year ago now, and began to forget...just about everything. It was some kind of variation of an alien disease indigenous to this world, the doctors said – the effects of which were similar to Alzheimer's... but there was no known medical cure. It was progressive – and irreversible. The doctors could slow it down a little, but the end was inevitable.

“Come, love.” She crooned. “It's time for your medicine.”

He nodded silently, his eyes fixed on her features – as youthful and beautiful as the day they first met. The beautiful hazel pools that were her eyes looked deep into his soul, and her smile brought him peace again. She picked a spot on one of her wrists and pricked herself, held the wound to his lips, and he drank, kissing her wrist – caressing it with both his hands as he did so.

He'd refused, long ago, to allow her to turn him... to let her bite him and then drink of her to complete the transition. Silly, he thought now. It was too late for that – too late now to change his failing old mind! Oh, what cruel irony is fate! Her blood was now all that would keep him sane – not a cure, not a healing... just to keep him as he was now, so that he wouldn't get any worse. But, they both knew – even he, in his lucid moments, that eventually the suffering would become too great for them both, and that they would have to let it end. And it would be a mercy.

A knowing look on her perfect features told the tale that this was not the first time this scene had been played out, and neither would it be the last, for now. She held him close, rocking him gently from side to side, resting her chin on his shoulder as he drank his fill.

THE END

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Thanks!

Christina Engela

About the Author



Christina Engela is one of South Africa's most unique and skilled storytellers, having written 13 novellas in three science fiction series, and also several non-fiction titles. Best known for her realistic characterization and for casting fully-fleshed-out LGBT characters in leading roles, Christina brings her wealth of personal experience to each of her stories. With several new offerings already in the pipeline, including several standalone titles, 2020 is bound to be a busy year for her fans!

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