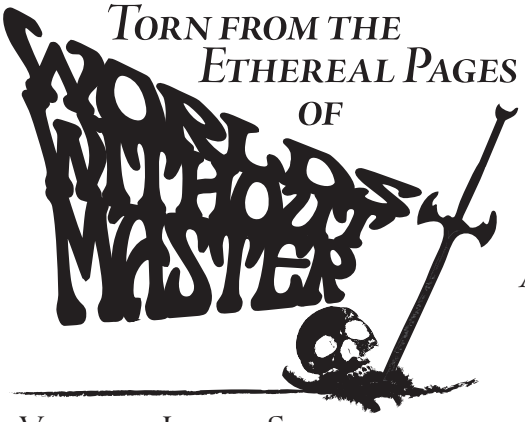

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Strange Bireme

A bizarre & fantastic tale by
Epidiah Ravachol

Volume 1, Issue 1, September 2013

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About *Worlds Without Master*

"Strange Bireme" first appeared *Worlds Without Master*, Volume 1, Issue 1 along with:

- "In Ssef Seat: the Cannibal Queen," a tale of dark debauchery from D. Vincent Baker and the debut adventure of the scofflaw Jakko Orange;
- *Enter the Avenger*, a roleplaying game of swords, sorcery, and the troubling insecurities of vengeance by Rafu (Raffaele Manzo);
- Illustrations from Ed Heil, Storn Cook, and Tazio Bettin;
- "Oh, the Beating Drum!" a sword & sorcery comic from Bryant Paul Johnson;
- And a miscellany of wondrous sights.

Worlds Without Master is an adventure fiction and gaming ezine featuring sword and sorcery short fiction and games from Epidiah Ravachol and many others. An ezine that will grow in size and content as its Patron Horde grows in number. You can lend your swordarm to the cause or purchase the entire first issue by going to www.WorldsWithoutMaster.com.

Strange Bireme

By Epidiah Ravachol

Seven millennia ago, a cataclysm fell from the firmament and slid into a ragged, northern shoreline, shattering cliffs, searing the sea, and burning a barren apron across that high land. In its wake it left a massive cavern gaping at the sea—wide enough to ride fifty horses in abreast and twice as tall. As the years rolled forward, smaller alcoves formed all along the cave walls as softer rock exposed to the ocean and weather eroded away. And a long pebbled beach stretched from beneath the shelter of the cave ceiling to where the ocean met a mur of cliffs.

Thirteen centuries ago, the ancestors of People of the Cliff fled to this broken land and settled their small tribe in this giant seaside cave, all but hidden from the world.

Seventeen years ago, Meeno was born to a seawoman whose galley spent a long harbor among the People of the Cliff and who returned five days after his birth to leave the child with his father.

Nineteen days ago, in the Pleasure Halls of the Vernal Lords far to the west, a drunk Manyara, who was employed as a bodyguard to a distant cousin of the Lords who spent his days locked in palace orgies, first met Snorri, who was bound, naked and presented as an execution for the Lords' entertainment. Each measured a doomed destiny in the other's eyes and within the breadth of a glance they sealed a wordless pact. Manyara

slew the guards and armed Snorri. Together they plundered the halls until driven out three days later by a legion bivouacked nearby. They were pursued across the scarred hills as they fled towards the star-shattered coast.

Twenty-three hours ago, the pair—after losing all they had stolen in an incident involving the hunting party of a certain exiled countess and her sorcerous consul—stumbled upon the People of the Cliff and their hidden shore. Knowing that the men who sought them believed the torn land ended in a brutal collision with the sea and held no refuge, they fell into welcoming arms and a long-needed slumber.

It was on this beach hidden from the world to the west by gargantuan cavern where fair-bearded Snorri now sulked in early twilight. He stared at a tall, narrow arc of the eastern sky, boxed on three sides by rock and on the fourth by sea. The rest of night's shimmering dome was unobservable from this damp and foamy vantage far out on the shingle. It was Snorri's opinion that this alone was reason enough to barter his spear and Manyara's ample swordarm for passage on the trade galley that now harbored in the shadow of the cliffs.

Manyara was, as would become their habit, of a different mind. She warmed herself by the cliff-fires after a long afternoon of diving with young, one-armed Meeno. Though the two shared no language, there was not much else they had not shared since the sun flooded the cavern earlier that morning. All the People of the Cliff welcomed Manyara and Snorri, as it was considered an uncommon boon for the People of the Horizon to descend upon them by any route other than the vast eastern sea. But

Meeno took special interest in Manyara. Possessing something of his mother's soul, the young diver listened well to the great distances that clung to Manyara's voice and in the echo of her laughter along the cave walls. Here, in this wayfaring warrior, his budding wanderlust was made flesh.

The two—communicating largely through touch and gesture, for Manyara's tongue was not yet practiced in Meeno's speech—were sharing jokes over a feast of oysters and fish when Snorri climbed out of the tide and into their nook, one of hundreds of shallow caves that pockmarked the cliffs.

"You are wet, Snorri."

"And you, observant," Snorri said, hovering over their fire.

"And you, gloomy."

"There are reasons to be." Snorri glanced over his shoulder to the purple strip of night peering through the gap in the cliff walls.

Meeno could feel Manyara's thews coil beneath her flesh, though she remained lounging against his armless side. Following her gaze, he peered out across the sea, but could not find reason for alarm.

"What threatens?" Manyara asked.

Snorri shook his head, shivered and returned his attention to the warmth of the fire, "There is not enough sky to tell, but I read an ill message in the stars tonight. Venkares, the azure heart of the Celestial Lynx, does not show. It should have risen an hour ago along with the rest of the wildcat. This brings dark mischief."

Manyara cast her head back in a low, throaty laugh, causing Meeno to startle, "This troubles you? For the first time since I

found you dragged before the Vernal Lords to be executed for their arousal, we are among a welcoming people with food and drink and finer yet pleasures. And a bashful star has you down? Tell me, Snorri, what you lack, and with the morning sun we will set out to make dark mischief on whatever hands hold it, so that we may sate the sky's prophecy and your melancholy in a single blow."

"We should sail with yonder galley upon the morn."

Manyara laughed, "I doubt they sail so soon."

The jagged folds of the coastline were such that the night fires of the People of the Cliff could be seen far out to sea but only along the briefest of latitudes. They existed only as rumor to most sailors, but it was the custom of the People to invite those fortunate few who happened upon their haven into their cliffside homes to share bed and bounty. It was a rare sailor who heard the rumors and did not spend their nights with a weathered eye out for a twinkle on the shore. And rarer still the crew in a hurry to leave the port's embrace once those alluring fires were sighted.

Captain Vrucius was no rare sailor. Out on the stony beach, still groggy from the night's long adventures, he was making himself a breakfast of smoked fish and goat butter when Snorri emerged from the fog and made his case for Manyara and his immediate passage aboard *The Anraruvian's Shame*. The captain employed every polite excuse for his remaining in port a day or two more. The wind shifts a little too much, the sun rises a bit too rosy, the seas are perhaps too calm, his crew too worn out by the vigorous locals, brigands sail too far north in this weather, raiders sail too far south, if his cargo arrived at its destination too

swiftly he could not demand a price high enough to reimburse his crew. Snorri, for his part, listen politely to each objection before proclaiming Vrucius a liar or a coward, and either way unfit to captain, and had he thought *The Anraruvian's Shame* at all seaworthy, he would relieve Vrucius of the vessel that very morning. But as she was plainly as shabby as her captain, Snorri assured him that he would simply wait until a better ship came along. Captain Vrucius promised that if he saw any merit to Snorri's threat, and if this shore possessed a tree with limb strong enough to hold his fat head, he would have had Snorri hanged for piracy long before.

Snorri turned heel and marched across the shingle into the mist. Moments later he returned with a stout fishing spear in hand. Vrucius near fled at the sight. "Gather your rope," Snorri said with a wink before loosing the spear at the galley silhouetted against the rising sun, burying it half through the mast, "there sprouts such a tree."

Vrucius, unable to meet Snorri's violet eyes, mumbled something about not having rope to spare, and left to busy himself beyond the Northerner's glare.

Meeno awoke to the chill left by Manyara's absence. Wiping the sleep from his eyes, he caught but a glance of her prodigious frame in mail and with shield at cave's edge before she slipped into the sunlit fog. With practiced feet, she swept silently across the pebbled beach to where Snorri helped himself to the captain's breakfast. Vrucius, having abandoned the meal, was bringing discipline down upon his crew. *The Anraruvian's Shame* was to weigh anchor within the hour.

Manyara crouched to a knee and grabbed strip of fish flesh, "So we sail this morning after all?"

"I doubt they would have us."

Manyara smirked, "Poets make the worst hagglers. So we must remain in this paradise and your melancholy."

"Perhaps not," Snorri pointed to a single point of dazzling light on the horizon, "Perhaps another ship approaches."

"One whose deck lantern shines so distinctly in the sun?"

"Or more sharply reflects its rays."

Meeno sprinted up to them, planted a couple of two-pronged fishing spears in the shingle, and gazed out into the orange-gray fog, shielding his eyes with his now free hand. When his eyes fell upon the same bright spot an anxiousness grew on him. Proffering a spear to Manyara, he nodded to the water.

Snorri said, "Take care to guard your limbs from whatever lurks beneath." Among his people, Meeno was not alone in missing an arm or a leg. Manyara, who in her travels had witnessed far stranger traits in far stranger peoples, thought nothing of it. But Snorri held to his theory that some beast from the primordial depths had developed a taste for human limb.

Manyara handed Snorri her shield, "I am what lurks beneath," she said, before heaving off her mail and chasing after Meeno into the drink.

After sunset, Snorri found himself in much better spirits despite having spent the majority of the day carefully studying the barely perceptible approach of the will-o-wisp, which now floated on the dark evening waters. The People of the Cliff had gathered up their great stores of driftwood and erected

several large fires out on the beach instead of in their caves, as was their usual custom. Around these fires they laid a bounty of fish, goat cheese, and a bitter, stringent brew made from the berries of a cliff grown bush. Music was played, a syncopated chant accompanied by drums and pipe, and everyone joined in an undulating dance done entirely while sitting cross-legged. During the feast, Meeno showered Manyara with gifts made of shells and shark teeth. Manyara kept slipping Snorri questioning looks, for she began to fear she may have unintentional entered into a contract.

Snorri merely laughed, and drank deep of the brew.

Eventually the fervor died down as Meeno and his people slid into humming with a lazy rhythm that, when coupled by the last dances of the slowly dying fire, further dulled the senses and brought about a near trance. Snorri did not notice when the young man seated next to him stood.

But standing he was when, from the darkness, stepped another man, shorn of all hair and adorned with a golden loincloth and a tube of bronze rings that wrapped around his body connecting an apparatus strapped over his nose to an ornate box strapped to his back. Enthralled, Snorri watched as this new man leaned in, as if to kiss the other, pursed his lips and blew out a shimmering, green-purple smoke that the other deeply inhaled through his nostrils.

The stranger spoke words Snorri did not understand, but the other obeyed and lifted his left arm out to his side and held it up with his other arm. The stranger lifted a featureless silver rod to the other's shoulder. The end of the rod produced a blue wave that cut through the other's muscle and bone, freezing the blood

into a crimson frost that drifted in the evening breeze.

Deeper instincts broke Snorri from his trance. He leapt to his feet and slashed deep into the stranger's gut with his knife. As the blade tore out of the flesh, he snagged it on the bronze tubing, severing that. The stranger fell back, spurting blood from his wound and the iridescent smoke from the end of the tube that remained attached to the ornate box. This smoke, when freed, separated into a purple wisp climbing into the air and a noxious green cloud that rolled along the ground.

It was Snorri's misfortune to stumble into this green cloud as his legs, asleep from sitting so long on the rocky ground, gave way. He took one breath that stabbed at his lungs, and rolled out of it, coughing. Focus fled from the world.

A second stranger approached Snorri's prone form, rod extended, its end glowing blue. Swift as a panther, Manyara was on her feet. Her steely grip tore the mask from this stranger's nose before she heaved him onto the fire. The thrashing, screaming and scent of seared flesh snapped Meeno from his trance. Blue dots lit up all across the dark moments before a pale blue glow emanating from a new ship on the harbor spilled across the entire beach.

Tossing the stricken Snorri over shoulder, Manyara turned Meeno and spoke one of the few words she had learned in his language: "Where?"

Meeno leading, they fled across the shingle to the open water. A stranger moved to intercept them, a woman this time, shorn and garbed like the other two. As she swung the glowing end of her rod around, Manyara wrapped her massive hand around the woman's throat. The stranger tried to sever the arm

that held her, frostbiting tissue wherever the rod connected. Unwilling to yield her momentum, Manyara dragged the stranger with her into the tide, releasing her victim only when she felt the soft crunch of a windpipe.

Lifeless, the stranger fell into the shallows, a thin, delicate layer of ice crusting over the water where her rod landed.

They swam around the cliffs, Meeno searching for a small cave to hide in and Manyara keeping Snorri's head above the water. When such a cave was spotted high above the water line, Snorri was unconscious, forcing Manyara to scale the slick rock face as Meeno did, with but one arm. Once in the cave, they huddled close to one another for warmth and kept watch until the morning sun.

Consciousness descended on Snorri in a pounding haze.

"Ah, you missed quite the night, my friend," Manyara said, her back to him. With a hand dug into the rock, she was leaning out of the alcove, peering towards the harbor. The sun was setting behind the cliffs, casting purple shadows far across the water.

"Would that I had," Snorri said, before convulsing and scrambling to the cave edge so that he could vomit into the sea far below.

"How do you feel?"

"I am suffering, but alive. How do we fare?"

"There is a bireme beached on the shingle, at least until the tide moves in. It is the source of last night's dark mischief. This was not its first visit to this shore."

"Meeno's arm?" Snorri asked, rolling onto his back, "The

whole plague of missing arms?"

Manyara nodded to the harbor, "The festivities were in their honor. It appears to be a sacrifice of sorts."

They fell into a silence while Snorri righted himself. He was weak, but no longer helpless, "I favor no gods that make such demands."

"Neither do I."

"The People of the Cliff may not thank us for what we are about to undertake."

Manyara pulled herself back into the cave, "Meeno may still be able to walk among them without suspicion. He swam back to secret us some weapons. The might may aid us if you are well enough."

The two dove into the dark foamy waters. Upon the shore, Meeno greeted them with a bundle of fishing spears and two crude knives. Hotly kissing him goodbye, Manyara took a knife and slipped into the cliff shadows to set about the grim business of butchering any strangers that yet prowled the beach.

Snorri leaned heavily on Meeno's shoulder to stop him from following. This was work she could best do alone, padding as a cat across the pebble shore. His lungs yet ached and he would need Meeno's aid to do what he must. The two retreated into the cold water and worked their way to around to where the waves lapped at the massive bireme's stern. Constructed from a dark wood Snorri did not recognize, the ship's deck towered over the shore. As they prowled around it, Snorri could see a shimmering, like fireflies, through the two rows of oar ports. Every plank and plane along all sides and angles were covered

in detailed carvings that reminded him of overwrought maps, occasionally studded with tiny beads of various metals.

In the indigo glow of dusk, they could see two strangers, bald and masked, standing as statues upon the foredeck. Beckoning Meeno, Snorri ran far enough up shore to clearly see these two over the ship's rail. He took a spear in each hand, drew in a long, painful breath, and flung them. One stranger caught a spear in the neck. A green-purple cloud burst forth from the wound, as the force of the impact spun him half over the rail.

The other spear splintered on its victim's ribs.

Blood pounded in Snorri's head as he charged down the shingle towards the bireme. On his heels, Meeno loosed a spear that sailed over the injured stranger who had fallen to his knees in search of the rod he dropped.

When they reached the bireme's hull, Snorri was spent and feared he would not clamber onto the deck in time. He wheezed and bent low so that Meeno could spring off his back. Though he had but one arm, Meeno spent his life clinging to cliff sides. He was on the deck and sunk his knife into the right shoulder of the stranger, causing him to spasm and knock the silver rod at his fingertips across the deck.

Gripping Meeno by the hair with strength inhuman, the stranger pulled Meeno's face in close to his. Lips parted and the scintillating green-purple gas wafted into Meeno's nostrils. The pungent scent felt familiar, comforting to Meeno.

When the stranger asked him to remove the blade, he felt a little embarrassed that he had not already done so. When the stranger asked him if he ever wondered what the knife felt like sheathed in his own flesh, a compelling curiosity overtook him.

Would it not be satisfying to plunge it deep into your left breast?

Meeno had the knife half to his heart when a breathless Snorri seized his arm.

Your ally wishes to taste the blade first. Would you not oblige him?

Suddenly twisting under Snorri's grip, Meeno plunged the knife into the stargazer's hip. With the last of his energy, Snorri whipped Meeno by his arm into a mast. The collision dazed Meeno and sent the knife over the rail.

Collapsing onto the nearby rail, Snorri looked to the stranger, expecting to be poisoned or bewitched by whatever noxious fumes he would breathe. But the stranger, now slick from his hemorrhaging wounds, crumbled before him.

A figure emerged from a portal in the aft cabin, hairless and clad only in a golden loincloth as the strangers, but wearing no mask or tubing, and possessing a cold, blue radiance instead of a head. It stood almost unbearably brilliant against the early night sky. As it approached him, it filled Snorri with a sickening vertigo, as if some giant had carelessly tipped the world on edge.

"You are known to me!" Snorri shouted, "Known as the Palua the Night Gem to those who navigate the temperate waters of the Southern Seas. Known as Gennerah, Goddess of Sowing to those who till the fertile between the great rivers of Amari and Amura. Known by more than two hundred names within the walls of the City of Fire and Coin. Known to my people as Venkares."

At these names the figure halted.

"It is true! Oh, the shame to have been found beneath the

dome of the heavens instead of resting upon it," Snorri grinned. "Oh the songs I will sing of this night, when the heart of the Lynx sailed from the heavens to these humble shores."

The radiance warmed in hue and dimmed slightly. As the figure took a step back from Snorri, its body seemed incongruent to him.

"I wonder, what petty delights motivate you. Why clothe yourself in flesh and travel to these shores?"

For a moment it seemed to Snorri that the radiance was about to answer, when a fresh horror struck his eyes. In the shifting of the radiance's hue, he noted the tone and texture of its flesh was mottled along seams and fissures. It was a creature half-constructed and Snorri's desire to interview such an apparition was overcome by his desire to remain all of his own whole and not to donate to this piecemeal body.

With an authority he did not feel, Snorri spoke, "It is of no consequence. I have named you. That is all that matters. Gather your shame and return to night's veil. There is nothing more here for you."

The radiance diminished into its proper place in the sky with such speed that Snorri succumbed to his dizziness and slumped over.

Manyara woke Snorri and helped him to his feet. There was a great wonder in her eyes. Wordlessly, she helped him over to a large hatch held open by Meeno, who had his face turned from it in disgust. A purple smoke billowed from the open doorway. Through it, Snorri could see below deck where it mixed with the green mist. There, where one might find galley slaves or

an army at the oars, were rows of posts intricately carved in a style matching that of the boxes worn by the strangers, and attached to each post were several sinewy, disembodied arms that clutched the oars.

There struck at the wandering hearts of Manyara and Snorri a panopoly of possibilities. What bizarre seas could this bireme navigate? What strange and undreamt of shores would it bring them to? What wonders might they witness from this unearthly deck?

When Meeno saw the joy in Manyara's eyes, he let the hatch slam shut, turned from the pair, and disembarked. He could not look back until he was sure the tide rolled in to free the bireme from the shore. When he did he saw only an empty beach and the heart of the Lynx, now more flush than azure, returned to its rightful place in the sky.

The Realms

You do not take up sword and spell to tag along with someone else's adventure. You do it to change the course of your destiny. To mold the world to your wants and desires.

Listed below are the stories, games, articles, and miscellanies in this issue that represent worlds available for you to craft your own adventures in. If you should so desire, you may take the characters, settings, and situations from any of these, create something new, and submit it to *Worlds Without Master*.

By default, any submission to *Worlds Without Master* is not be part of any shared world. Creators have the usual controls over their creative properties. The following options exist only for creators who expressly want to take part in this endeavor.

Additionally, the following agreements exist solely between the creators and *Worlds Without Master*, and do not govern the creators' rights in regards to any other publication.

The Free & Chaotic Realms

Anyone may submit material using the characters, settings, situations and any other part of this body of work as if it were their own as long as they also agree to make their work part of this Free & Chaotic Realms. This is as open as it gets, with the only curation being the *Worlds Without Master* submission process.

The Curated Realms

Material submitted using the characters, settings, situations

and any other part of this body of work will be sent to the original creator or the creator's designated curator for approval before being accepted by *Worlds Without Master*. If accepted, this new material is bound to that particular curated realm.

Other Shared Realms

Groups of creators who wish to find their own agreement on how to share their worlds are welcome to do so however they wish.

Edicts

Creators are welcome to make up a list of rules other creators must follow while using their works. These rules are set in stone. *Worlds Without Master* will not accept any work that appears to violate an applicable edict that is not also created by the original creator.

More about the realms policy can be found at:
www.Dig1000Holes.com/words/realms

"Strange Bireme," Manyara, Meeno, and Snorri belong to the realms curated by Epidiah Ravachol. Their edicts may be found at:

www.Dig1000holes.com/words/edicts