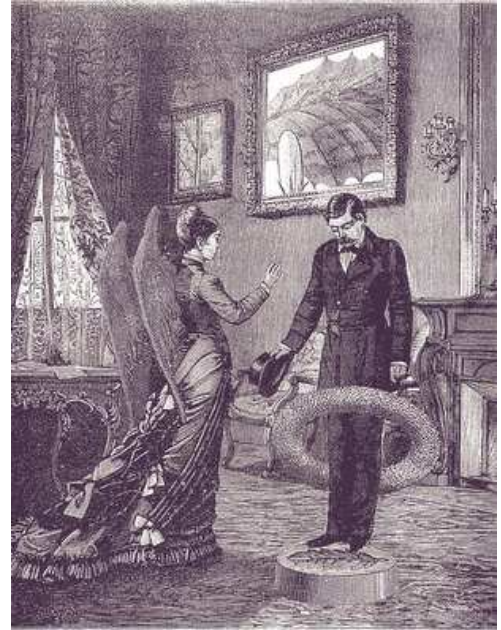


The Alchemy of War

Paul M. Jessup

Originally published in Electric Velocipede #12



Karac perches on the looking stones of Silas Bay, the sea spit frothing in black turmoil against the iron clouds of the horizon. Behind him the city belches fissures of steam and smog, glittering against the grey cliffs, an oppressive structure with clear and angry features, its brass and clay towers aggressive against the backdrop of sky and earth.

The songs of birds mating fill the air with angry cries as Karac stands and walks towards the alchemy turtles moving sleepily along the beach. They have come to lay their eggs against the foam and torrents of the sea, the tips of their gigantic blue and silver carapaces bobbing up and down against the waves.

Karac pulls out a hooked knife as he walks.

From above he can hear the city and it sounds alive, like one voice around him, crawling into him in a siren's song of degradation and broken art. The handle of the knife is made of bone, the white of it gleaming against the scattered orange lights along the walkways of the beach. The hook is angled out, against his arm in the shape of a perfect triangle, a circle inherit in the air around it.

The shells of the alchemy turtles are covered in occult art, etched in with thick silver that sheds a light even without reflection. These artistic designs inscribe the notes of spells, created by millennia of evolution, until the perfect magick is imprinted on their backs.

Karac just needs to find the right one, the one with the correct equation that will bring him eternal life. His whole life he sought immortality, and with each failure he grew older, a little closer to death. There are fifteen shells at home, all of them empty of promises. None of them fulfilled.

He was spent of spells.

Spent of searching.

Karac hopes tonight will be different.

As he walks he ponders stealing several of the eggs to sell on the streets. "Could get a good price with that," he thinks, "A damn good price indeed."

#

Kym watches the scrambling shadow of Karac below, darting across the beach with his knife in hand. She feels the cold come off the sea and pulls the black-feathered shawl further up on her shoulders, her hair spitting around her face in purple coils. She feels a sort of terror in the moment he grabs one, feels her stomach recoil in wait and agony and she wonders why she just stands by and watches, why she can't go down and stop him.

Kym can't take this murder in the name of science.

But still, she loves him.

And this was important to him.

All of this was important to him.

She would still wait for him in bed tonight, will still hold his hand as he brutalizes the poor creature in the relentless pursuit of knowledge. She would still stand in their apartment, her eyes on his muscular body as the turtle screams in pain. She feels a turning in her stomach as she realizes that yes, yes, she will still let him inside of her tonight, will still rock against his body, still slick with blood of death.

#

The sky overcity becomes black with a cloud of zeppelins, their bodies pregnant with bombs and greek fire, the ugly faces of the drivers plastered against the glass, waiting for the war to come. Formations are of a circular nature, hovering fat and swollen, black chains unrolling from their bodies, crawling with the fighters armed and ready for war.

The citizens below do not even look up anymore.

They have become used to the skies of war.

They have become used to being a hostage of hate.

#

Karac and Kym have an apartment that overlooks the west bank and stares down out into the vast sea of the city itself. The walls are decorated with the empty shells of turtles past, and between them are paper lanterns, giving the tiny cramped living space a feeling of holy light.

His workroom is out on the balcony that overlooks the city, consisting of a stone table and several brass instruments used in cutting and carving and killing. He loves to work by the light of the sky and city, the clear gaslamp glow of streets keeping him company at night.

#

Lamlarra looks up. She is one of the few people who can look up still, can look up and see these war machines in the sky. The other citizens look past the zeppelins and the planes, looked past and see the clouds and the sky, the stars and the sun. They don't want to think about war anymore, so they become blind to what they don't want to see.

"I'll never be used to war," Lamlarra thinks, "I'll never be used to the idea of constant death and misery."

She crawls through the alleyways on the south end, feeling the oppressive shadows of war above her. She smells oranges and bread baking from an open window and pauses, feeling the sword of her grandfather against her thigh. "I'm so hungry," she thinks, "I just need something to eat."

From behind her she hears black dogs barking, angry and obstinate in the alley. She turns and sees their glittering chains snapping their necks back against the walls as they leap at her. Her stomach becomes painful in its hunger, the barking of the dogs calling out angrily with each leap and fall.

"My brother," she thinks, "He'll give me some cash."

She wonders if he even knows that mother is dead.

Probably not.

#

Karac carves the green sentient body out of the shell, dumping the still wet and sticky corpse on the ground. He absently wipes his hands afterwards, looking at his work with awe and inspiration. It's these moments when he's truly happy. When he doesn't care about anything in the world- and the only thing that matters is that husk of the shell, and what is imprinted on its back.

He turns the shell over and looks at the diagrams, pulls out his magnifying glass and stares at each etching, carefully decoding the meaning in his mind. "This is it," he thinks, "This is the one I need. I can do this tomorrow and be born into eternity."

From behind him he can hear the voice of his wife calling him to bed with her. "Enough work for the day," he thinks, "Time to relax a little."

#

Lamlarra waits on the steps outside of her brother's house, the night of the city blue and gold against her frail body. She looks in her reflection against the brass door, straightens her rags and her hair to try and look somewhat respectable. The stone of the stairs spiral up against the exterior of the building. "I haven't been here in months," she thinks, "I can't stand climbing these steps. I always feel like I'm going to break my neck."

She holds her breath and knocks on the door.

Her knuckles sound like bombs rapping against it.

Above her the sirens of war sound in the sky.

Silas Bay is under attack.

#

The corpses of alchemy turtles rise like monoliths out of the glass of the burnt sand, bodies frozen in mating and ecstasy as the waves crash against them. Their shells are cracked and broken by the weight of dropped weapons, their spells erased from them by the war above.

The zeppelins of Silas Bay drop these bombs, tearing and killed these alchemy turtles. From the skies the turtles look like an invading army, crawling out of the sea and ready to storm the city, disguised in metallic green armor.

Even their eggs lay in a broken, empty mess.

#

When Karac hears his sister knock on his door he is pulling himself out of his wife, her body spent and shaking beneath him. He curses to himself, pulling his robe down from the brass hook on his bedroom wall, wondering who in gods name would come calling at this hour.

He looks over at Kym as he walks towards the front door, her body framed by the bed and turtle shells. She sits up a little with her blanket dangling beneath the tip of her nipple, a sly and spent smile on her face. He smiles at her, and in that moment, in that single space of a second, the sounds of war tears at the air around them.

Breathless, he answers the door and sees the sky above red with the lights of fire and his sister in rags, chewing on the tips of her fingers.

"Mother's dead," she says.

Karac nods.

"I know."

#

Kym sees Lamlarra in front of her husband and holds her breath. "What is she doing here?" Kym thinks.

She hears the screams from the beach below, hears the sound of extinction echo into her ears. "Oh no," she thinks, "They've killed them. They've killed all of the turtles."

And in that thought, in that split moment of harsh realization, she surrenders herself to the cruelty of the world around her. She feels herself become lost once again in the moist air of war, her arousal crawling under her skin and feeling the need for another orgasm, helpless in this city of bones.

If I cum, she thinks, I can feel safe again. I can feel whole again wrapped up in the arms of my husband. I can't stand feeling so lost, feeling so alone, feeling so helpless.

#

Kym and Karac sit underneath the downtown bridge, Lamlarra next to them eating a sandwich she had picked up on their way out of the apartment. Kym watches her eat, jealous of such hunger. "Such passion in her mouth," Kym thinks as she watches, "I wish I could have that. Even if it meant starving."

"What are we going to do?" Kym asks as Lamlarra finishes eating.

"We can't go home, not yet. We live way too close to the fighting," Karac says and sighs, "I guess we try and find a war shelter for a few days and hope everything is still standing when we return."

For a moment Karac's mind dwells on that turtle shell in the apartment. It was too big, he thinks, far too big to take with them. "I only wish," he thinks, "I had the wisdom of writing down the equations before we left." He looks over at his wife, and sees her eyes wet with worry. He wants to tell her everything will be all right, that they will make it out okay. "But," he thinks, "I could never lie to her like that."

Kym rests against a large brown bag she took with them, filled with alchemy turtle eggs. She had hoped to be able to save them, to repopulate the earth with such proud and noble creatures. Karac was hoping to sell them, in case they needed money at some point for food or weapons.

Lamlarra smiles. "I know of a safe place," she says, "These days I've been on the streets, wandering. Ever since ma died. There are some places underground- entire villages of people living in the sewers. It would be safe, and far from the war. We could go there."

Kym stands up, the sounds of screaming coming from the streets around them. They feel the heat of buildings burning, and the sound of the earth shaking from the aerial destruction.

Kym feels arousal, desiring the freedom and comfort that sex gave her. "Let's go then," Kym says, her body dark against the war around them.

#

There are sewers beneath the city, rolling and mazelike below the surface of the earth itself. A tribe of homeless and destitute live inside of it, a village of collectors and discarded refuse from the world above, now joined by those who wish to survive the war around them.

The sewer people move on with life as normal, tending to their crops of mushroom and herds of blind albino cattle, ignoring the top dwellers who have come to live with them while the city shakes and screams above. Maps are handed out, directions and jobs given to every person who comes down below.

A starving thin violin trio dressed in rags, skin covered in sores from lack of sunlight, plays a funeral dirge to welcome the survivors into the underground. When Lamlarra walks passed them she remembers the jaws of the black dogs, snapping at her in the alleyway earlier. These violinists have the same look in their eyes: hungry, envious and empty.

#

Five days underground and Kym feels like she is covered in itching pain. It crawls over her body like the filth around her, clings to her skin like the smell of decay. She scratches and scratches and feels no relief.

She can't bathe down here, not in that river of shit.

#

Kerac has taken to smoking pipes with the men out by the shell near the entrance. He looks at the city from the shadows underground, sees the war in the streets and feels odd and uncaring as people are drug out from their homes and murdered.

These days he helps the underground men by showing them the simple mechanics of magick, helping them raise helper spirits and water demons to provide a stronger crop and protect them from the illnesses so prevalent below.

He shows some of them how to read and write, and after a month of living underground he has helped them tap into the city's gas lines and bring light underground. They call him the sun bringer, the darkness eater.

He hasn't washed either, but the itching doesn't bother him. He wonders if he ever wants to return above ground, even after the war is over. Here he is needed. Here he is wanted. Here he is someone special.

Above ground he was just some petty little alchemist, an almost-scientist. Down here he is rising among the ranks, soon to become lord among his people. "They love me," he thinks, "They may be filthy and ignorant, but they are learning. And they love me."

#

Lamlarra has become the keeper of the eggs. She holds them to her chest, feels them wiggle and beat beneath their hard shells. Someday, she knows, they will hatch and call her mother. She will be whole then, no longer a figurative human. She will be a creature made out of a complete cloth

She feels more at home here, like her brother does. She learns how to wield the morrow blade sword, learns the art of bladed fan dancing and protecting the children from the scavengers above ground. She has become a stronger person than ever before, a more vigilant and violent guard.

Last week they made her into an officer of the underground courts. She hopes that next month she will rise up and become a judge among her new people.

#

After two months Kym goes above ground and finds the city empty. Along the roads bodies are piled high and on fire, the smell of burning flesh only slightly worse than the sewage stink below ground. She grimaced at first, the sun too bright above ground, the rays bursting against her skin in hot and angry rays.

Most of the buildings are now empty shells, the tops of which are blown off and leaving them like clay and brass honeycombs in the air. The once proud spiral towers of Silas Bay are wrecked and crumpled beneath the sky of after war.

She walks through the streets, sees black dogs barking and tearing hot bodies out from the flames. The bodies fuse the air with an orange light as the dogs try to eat their fill, tongues being burned with each lick of the flesh. She hears in the distance a baby crying, a mother screaming and someone singing a drinking song.

In front of her is the carapace of a zeppelin, its ribs without flesh in the hot air. Flies hover over the massive dead, crows fighting the dogs and the flames for their own share of the kill.

"It's over," she thinks, "It's finally over. So why don't I feel relieved?"
She falls to her knees, sobbing and dry heaving.

#

Kym is drained of all emotion as she walks back into the darkness of the underground kingdom. "The war is over," she thinks, "I can go home again, back to our apartment. I can take the alchemy turtles with me, we can start a new life there, outside of the shadows of below ground."

She walks up to Karac and puts her arms around him, sobbing. His body is warm, strong, stinks of underground. A sewage musk mixed with his own sweat scent. He holds her for a moment, unsure of what was wrong. It had been so long since he'd seen his wife display any emotion at all. Her eyes, until now, had always been haunted with the ghost of her soul.

"It's over," she says.

He nods, smiles. "Of course it is."

"No, no," her head is buried into his chest, hearing the trumpets of his heart, "The war. The war is over."

She feels his heart pause between beats. "We can go home again," she says, "Return to our apartment. Everything can be normal again."

"Is our apartment still there?"

Kym remembers the shells of homes, the war torn streets. The sounds of pain, of suffering. "Yes," she lies, "Everything is still there, everything is still fine. Just empty. No soldiers, no war."

For the first time she could remember she feels happy and excited.

#

They fight over it. He yells at her, she yells back and throws things at his head. The people outside- the people Karac has come to know and love just listen on in despair. Eventually it is Lamlarra who comes to her aide. "The alchemy turtles are going to hatch soon," she says, "They will need sunlight. And food. And a beach to swim in and mate on. The sewers are not their home, they will die here."

With that he agrees. Kym hates Lamlarra for taking this away from her. She wants to be the one who is the hero for once. She wants to be the one who set them free, who came and told them the war was over.

Instead, it is Lamlarra and Karac who get all of the credit. Miserably she follows them as they announce the plans to return to the surface. She follows them in hopes of finding peace once again in her life.

#

The minute the eggs come above ground Lamlarra feels them crack and stir, heads sticking out from the white of the shell, eager and alive in her hands. Seven hatched turtles in the ruins of Silas Bay, each with the writ of wisdom on their backs. From behind them they hear people climbing out of the sewers, staring at the empty world.

Kym reaches over and grabs her husband's hand. She feels it wet with sweat, the sun hot and bearing down on them from behind a wall of after war dust. Her heart pounds in her stomach. She is free now.

And she feels a passion. A passion of her own. A passion to rebuild.