

Praise for Frank P. Ryan's writing

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Catherine Mann, The British Fantasy Society

“His main characters are brilliantly depicted, as are the weird and wonderful adventures they embark on – it’s hard to imagine either teen or adult not being enthralled . . .”

Shelley Marsden, *Irish World*

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Pamela Luke, *Fantasy Book Review*

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Stacey Comfort, Booklist on Line

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The Twins of Moon

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Other Fiction Titles by Frank P. Ryan

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Goodbye Baby Blue

Sweet Summer

Tiger Tiger

THE SEA OF STARS

BOOK TWO THE TWINS OF MOON

FRANK P. RYAN



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THE SCUTTLEBUTT

The spray struck Eefa full in the face. Wiping it from her eyes with half-frozen fingers, she took a firmer grip of the prow rail to steady herself against the rolling of the ship. How she had come to love the sea in the few weeks they had been aboard. It just felt so alive to be here. From day to day, sometimes from moment to moment, it sprang surprises on you. Right now, in the glimmering light of a new morning, she leaned out as far as she dared over the rail so that her nostrils were filled with ozone. Blinking the salty spray from her eyes, she peered down into the depths and glimpsed there something new, something strange, perhaps even wonderful, something quick-moving by them, absorbed with its own being and survival, just beneath the churning froth of the waves. Even at night, when she was perched in this selfsame spot, she had found herself imagining the mysteries in those inky depths, glimpsing flashes of movements flickering with phosphorescent light, like ghosts of the deeps.

Of course, she shouldn't allow her imagination to run away with her. It didn't do, as Bird Woman had warned her more than once, to let this happen. Nevertheless, there were real dark powers out there, searching for her and her twin brother, Magio – enemies that, for reasons she couldn't fathom, were determined to put an end to them. Only recently she and Magio had been so threatened that, had it

not been for Quimbire and Bird Woman, they would never have escaped from their home in Warren on the island of Moon. The memory of all that was still so close, so terrifying, that even now Eefa felt her heart wilt inside her chest, her mouth go uncomfortably dry. The familiar sense of fear made her want to blank it out, to pretend it hadn't happened. But it wasn't easy to do so. Oh . . . it wasn't easy at all!

Even as Eefa was lost in her memories, two hands appeared from behind to close off her eyes. 'Trade you a secret for a wish.'

She could smell the owner of those large, brawny hands. 'Quimbire!'

She could feel the damaged fingers where Bird Woman had splintered the broken bones after Quimbire's brave fight with the Hunter. Quimbire had been prepared to die to save her and Magio. Eefa knew why he was hugging her now. He was trying to give her courage after so many terrifying adventures. Right now, gazing out into the waves, Eefa needed all the courage she could find.

Quimbire laughed, rotating her around by the shoulders so he could look at her.

'Gave me the run around, you did. All those times Magio tried to persuade me you were real. And all the while I couldn't believe him. Yet here you are as real as this creaky old brig. Hey, you got to allow a hoary old mariner time to get used to you.'

It was so strange now to hear Quimbire actually talking to her – something she had, instinctively, avoided throughout her childhood. She knew now that she had let her own fears block out the possibility of anyone other than Magio and Gran from knowing that she actually existed. Now, looking back, it seemed a strange thing to have done, something too

foolish to comprehend. And yet her instincts had been so overwhelming – even if they had been brought about by some kind of irrational fear.

‘I know I did, Quimbire. I’m sorry – I suppose it will take us a little while to get used to one another.’

‘Forget about it, Kiddo. We have other things to worry about.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘The danger hasn’t gone away. This is the Sea of Stars. You can’t even imagine how unpredictable these waters are. The normal rules don’t apply here.’

‘I like surprises.’

‘Hah!’ Quimbire threw back his head and laughed. He lifted her effortlessly off the deck, then twirled her around as if she weighed no more than a cork, all the while still guffawing with laughter.

‘My dear young lady – since a young lady is what you now assuredly are – be aware that every living creature has its secrets. If you but studied the tiniest creatures on the sea floor, stealing shells to hide in – or the shock-eels hiding in their burrows – or the birds that lay their eggs in the nests of others – all have their secrets. And no world is more riddled with secrets than the eldritch sea we now blithely sail. Magic is all about us here. It hides in the wind that billows the sails above you, in the isles that abound in every direction, and all the more does it lurk in the deeps beneath our keel.

Eefa leaned her head back and gazed up enraptured into the sky of whirling clouds. Oh, she was already coming to realize that those waves about them were nothing like the friendly surf at Warren where she had so loved to play. These were roiling monsters, slow-rolling walls of water that struck the ship as if they wanted to devour it. But still, and perhaps

even more so, she relished the wonder of it all, the unknown places all about them, and the new discoveries they would soon be experiencing.

‘Oh, Quimbre – I know you’re worried about the ship.’

‘Alas,’ he hesitated, ‘she’s a poor old scuttlebutt with a single mainsail, and all the while I can hear her clinkered timbers squeaking and shuddering as they cringe from all that pounding.’

A poor old scuttlebutt.

Eefa laughed inside at Quimbre’s words. And even as she did so, she realized that he had unwittingly given the ship her name.

So that’s it – we’re sailing the Sea of Stars aboard the poor old Scuttlebutt.

She lifted her chin to gaze up at the Scuttlebutt’s single great sail, only now growing visible in the dawn, its belly bowed by the wind, and the two smaller triangular sails on the prow side of the mast.

‘Why did you choose her, Quimbre?’

‘It was all I could find seaworthy in that accursed graveyard, given our numbers and the short shrift we had for escaping that monstrous shore.’

His words caused Eefa to blink too rapidly and for her heart to pitter-patter too rapidly in her breast: *that monstrous shore*. They evoked a memory that she would rather forget – a terrifying memory.

Eefa shuddered to recall the Beach of Bones, where the Lady of the Shore had been imprisoned. How she hated to be reminded of that terrible place, the iron shackles that had tethered the goddess there, held fast to the monstrous shack of unyielding iron plates, doorless and windowless, that had been her only shelter. Now, thinking back, Eefa recalled how

Bird Woman had explained, even as they fled from the hunter, how strange it was that the Beach of Bones was not truly off the northwest coast of the island of Moon, but lost in some in-between place, a mysterious location half-way between the real world that ordinary folks lived in and the heavens that contained the undying. That strange in-between world was called Dromenon.

Dromenon . . .

It was an impossible concept even to think about, just one of many bizarre things that had happened along the way in their escape from Moon. For example, it had taken the wings of a dragon to snatch them from extreme danger and then ferry them to the Beach of Bones. The memory of that extraordinary escape was emblazoned on her memory. Looking back, it was all a confusion of dread, power, and the strangest things – magic beyond their understanding. They had been forced to accept that there was nowhere left for them on Moon. Quimbre had been forced to search for a seaworthy craft from the litter of wrecks that had ended up on the Beach of Bones.

Eefa closed her eyes tightly shut for several moments.

When she opened them again, she found herself confronted by Quimbre's bewhiskered face, that grey-haired head lifted at the sky, his dark brown eyes squinting at the movements of the clouds, his nostrils agape. Eefa knew that he had once been a pirate. Perhaps only a pirate could have spirited them away from such a terrible place in such impossible circumstances. Right now, the sea around them was increasingly choppy and, here in the exposed prow, the spray was directly in their faces and in their hair.

Magio's shout rang out from behind. 'Oh, stop tormenting Quimbre – you know he did his best!'

Her brother must have overheard them talking, and now he joined them, piping up in defense of Quimbre.

Out of the corner of her eye, Eefa saw that Bird Woman was approaching. She too must have overheard Eefa's conversation with Quimbre, since it was to their captain that she now addressed her caution. 'It would appear that your best has put us at risk from squall to squall.'

'Have a care, Woman, with that whiplash of a tongue. You do not know this patch of sea. She has her moods and will turn on those that do not pay her sufficient respect.'

Magio weighed in to support Quimbre. 'He's telling you what you know to be the truth, Bird Woman.'

Bird Woman sighed. All three of them, Eefa, Bird Woman, and Magio, knew that Magio was right. Quimbre had saved them all, at terrible risk to himself, in their escape from Moon. And now he was their only hope of surviving in this leaking old brig.

Eefa cut through the tension to blurt out, 'Quimbre has given the ship a name. We are sailing the Sea of Stars on the good ship Scuttlebutt.'

Magio cheered. 'Hey, Quimbre – did you really call her that?'

'Methinks your sister had a hand in naming her.'

'Britzy!'

'Britzy my foot!' Bird Woman wrinkled her lip in scorn. 'I presume he chose the name to suggest we are set to sink to the bottom in her?'

Quimbre showed his teeth in a grin. 'Well, such is likely if we just worry ourselves to death and meanwhile do nothing about it. But we won't be scuttling anytime soon – not if I can help it.'

Bird Woman pressed him. 'Then, you have a plan?'

‘Well – that might better be described as a hope and a prayer.’

‘Even so, let’s all hear it.’

‘Very well! I promise you all that we’ll get together a proper meeting of minds to discuss it.’ Quimbire looked from one of the twins to the other. ‘What do you say, Kiddos – are we agreed?’

‘Agreed!’ They chorused.

Later the same day, Eefa found herself thinking back to Quimbire’s words – *a hope and a prayer* – as she found herself once again in her favorite spot at the prow rail, and the Scuttlebutt dipped and rose again through another devastating sway. It seemed to her that all of her life had been spent running from terrifying forces.

None of them, not even Magio, could imagine what it was like to have been invisible from birth. The torment of that had so scarred her childhood that, were it not for her brother’s love, it would have been unbearable. But now here she was, feeling the thrust of the winds on her body, the cold wet spray on her cheeks. What must surely be no more than a nuisance to the others was a source of delight to her. How everyday experiences made her feel truly alive. For a moment, she was back there, racing Magio the beach at Warren, her feet running on the warm white sand, heading for their den.

She was flooded by the realization that the simple, wonderful, childhood game was gone now.

Gone forever.

Buffeted by the wind and rain, she strained every muscle to press herself forward – enjoying, if only for a fleeting moment, her sense of becoming an integral part of the prow of the ship.

Eefa felt immensely saddened at the loss of that world of childhood. But now she must put it aside and no longer think back. The beach at Warren was gone, lost forever. In its place was this new wonderland. She inhaled its briny smell deep into her nostrils, her whole being enchanted by the realization that she here she was, aboard the good ship Scuttlebutt, sailing the enchanted Sea of Stars.