



# THE GIRL WHO WRITES THE FUTURE

## PART FOUR

BY FREDERIC S. DURBIN

### A CROWD-SORCERY STORY

*Fable Thatcher has a mysterious power of prophecy —whatever she writes comes true, unless she writes concerning herself. One evening, the wizard Khaos comes to the Moonlight Faire, searching for the girl who writes the future. Khaos battles Roderic, the wizard who raised Fable. Before he dies, Roderic tells Fable to seek help at Hush Castle. There, in the library attended by the Silent Sisters, Fable barely survives the attack of a winged monster, a homunculus sent by Khaos to spy on her. Her life is saved by a girl wearing a cloak of blackbird feathers, Araceli Luminè, who lives in a loft under the library's highest dome.*

*Opening a trunk, Luminè shows Fable a book written in Ishantrian, the language of wizards and sorcerers. Luminè's father had died retrieving The Book of Shadows from Khaos, who'd stolen it from the Hall of the Flame of Knowledge. On its pages, the writing regarding the future swirls like smoke, the shadows of what is to come not yet having definite shape. Only the One Prophecy appears clearly—words that Fable herself wrote four years before while in a kind of daydream, when the pen moved mysteriously by itself. The Prophecy foretells that Fable will descend the Secret Stair to the Cavern of Koth—the lair of Khaos—from which none have returned alive. Luminè tells Fable that she knows the way to the Secret Stair and will lead her on the dangerous journey: "Maybe you are my courage, Prophecy Girl."*

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**FABLE THATCHER** pushed her face close to the view-slit in the iron turret. A few snowflakes swirled in the moonlight, and the wind shook the evergreens. Shivering, Fable pulled the *calan* closer around her, the cloak's fabric holding in her warmth. The steam wagon was colder at night, when the fire of its engine burned down to coals and the water in its pipes cooled. But it was a relief to ride in the rumbling wagon after weeks of walking northward across the kingdom of Elseven and deep into the forests of Hettyria, sleeping in barns, creeping through hedges and woods, following the bright blue star Ceraz winking above the Dusk Mountains.

Fable had been unable to write a prophecy to make the journey shorter; the power could not be used to benefit herself directly. Fortunately, Luminè was skilled at living in the wild. What the dark-haired girl couldn't gather or snare, she could buy at the back doors of inns. Her father had left her a purse of golden *shokiras*. The money lasted well, for the girls didn't dare to lodge with other travelers. Servants of Khaos were hunting them—riders, like those who had come to the Moonlight Faire.

They'd had two close calls since leaving Hush Castle in the predawn darkness on the night they'd faced the homunculus. The first time, Luminè's raven-feathered cloak had hidden her and Fable in the shadows beneath a bridge as the horses thundered past. The second time, Fable had put the pursuers off their trail by scribbling a prophecy calling the

forest animals to make thrashing noises in the underbrush.

Fable heard the hatch open and close softly behind her. Luminè had returned. In her black, feathered cloak, Luminè seemed no more than a shadow. Fable hurried down the ladder into the mostly empty chamber at the back corner of the steam wagon, where the girls had been stowing away for three days.

With a grin, Luminè unloaded her pockets, unwrapping a wedge of cheese, three potatoes, an apple, and two tiny smoked fish.

“Good stealing!” said Fable, her stomach growling.

“I don’t mind stealing from thieves.” Luminè uncapped her waterskin and swigged.

Fable chewed gratefully. Even Araceli Luminè, for all her craftiness, had been surprised to learn they had hitched a ride with robbers.

It had happened this way: in the Whipwoods, with its floating, ghostly lights, the girls had wriggled through a bed of ferns to investigate a campfire. Keeping their distance, they’d supposed the men around the fire to be merchants bound for the capital in their caravan of nine shiny steam wagons. In one, Luminè had found an unlocked hatch, and they’d slipped aboard. There was no cargo inside—only empty boxes, broken barrels, rope, and a weather-stained tent in a heap. Its canvas folds made a good hiding place. Huddling there, the two soon heard enough to know the men outside were pirates taking a holiday from seafaring, who’d stolen the wagons and intended to use them to get inside the gates of the capital city on the dark business of thieves.

“If they fooled me,” breathed Luminè, “they’ll have no trouble fooling the city guards.” She shrugged. “At least Khaos will never look for us here.”

Twice each day, a pirate clunked inside the wagon to stoke the fire in its furnace, boiling the water to shoot pressurized steam through the engine. Then the girls hid beneath the collapsed tent. But most of the time, Fable and Luminè had the corner chamber to themselves.

Fable crunched a potato and broke off half the cheese. “We’re almost to Corginard,” she whispered.

Luminè nodded. “City of Spires.”

“What happens tomorrow?”

“We sit still until we’re inside the gate.” Luminè pushed hair back from her face. “I’m not worried about Corginard.”

No. The worry was what lay beneath its famous spires: the Cavern of Koth. *Where I’m going to die*, Fable thought.

The wagon, dimly lit by moonlight filtering down from the turret, reminded Fable of the Moonlight Faire, and of Roderic, the only father she’d known. Now, like her real parents, Roderic was dead—because of her. Memories prickled her throat, and her eyes filled with tears.

Luminè watched her. Sometimes Luminè’s gray eyes roiled like a wintry sea; sometimes she would sit alone on a rock or stare at the horizon, refusing to speak. But Fable had never seen the girl cry.

“Come on.” Luminè clapped Fable’s shoulder. “Let’s have a look before they’re awake.”

Luminè wrapped up the apple core and fish bones. It was middle-night. There was perhaps an hour before the pirates stoked the fires.

Fable clambered up beside Luminè into the turret, an iron dome. Though the windows were only slits, the girls checked to be sure no one was looking.

Sharing a rung with Luminè, Fable gazed into the night. Dry leaves swirled, rattling against the armored wagons. Meadows of sere grass stretched away on either side, and scrubby trees sheltered a stream where the pirates had made camp. Three men at the fire, the night guard, muttered as the breeze kicked up a flurry of sparks. As the season grew colder, the constellation Yunen rose higher—Yunen, the lady with her sword. She shone above the mountains, now wearing a thin veil of smoke from the pine logs.

Fable drew comfort from the stars, so far removed from the world’s troubles yet also constant. Roderic had said that the dead passed to a land beyond the stars. When Fable looked at the night sky, she felt she was looking toward her parents—and now Roderic himself. She hoped they all might be looking down on her. “I’ll be there soon,” she whispered.

Luminè gripped her arm. Both girls ducked as a sentinel trudged along the line of wagons. A wide-brimmed hat concealed his face. Fable glimpsed the hilt of his razor-sharp *kneaver*, its blade fashioned from the leaf of a plant that hardened like iron when it dried.

A pirate shouted.

For a horrible instant, Fable was sure they’d been discovered. But a guard raced

past, hammering on the side of every wagon. “Roust out, ye *ortfen* dogs!”

Luminè nudged Fable. “Hide!”

Fable shook her head. She had to know what was going on.

Men tumbled out of wagons, yelling. Someone doused the fire. The captain growled orders: “Roll ’em, lads! Into the trees!”

Someone clattered aboard the girls’ wagon. Luminè squeezed her sword’s hilt as Fable held her breath. She heard the crashing of wood tossed into the furnace, the mutter of a pirate coaxing the flames, the wheeze of a bellows.

*What were the pirates running from?*

The wagon lurched into motion. Fable clung to the ladder as the chamber echoed with a loud whirring of gears. Wheels chewed the turf. Slowly, the nine wagons trundled toward the thickets higher up the slope.

“Too slow!” hollered a driver. “No steam yet! They’ll run down!”

It would take time for the boilers to heat; the wagons were crawling uphill using only their clockwork drives, powered by thick, tightly wound springs. It was emergency propulsion, intended only to move the wagons a few yards—hardly a means of escape. Two of the wagons, which the pirates had neglected to wind up, remained unmoving. Their drivers and furnace men abandoned them, pelting up the hillside on foot, gold buttons and earrings glinting in the moonlight.

Following the gazes of the running men, Fable looked into the southwestern sky and gasped.

At first, there were only flickers of fire in a cloudbank, like a strange lightning storm.

Then the vapors rolled aside, and out of the mist swooped a gigantic ship of the sea under towers of rigging, her white sails full of the wind—a ship that soared in the night air! The dancing fires were lanterns along her rails. The ship pulled out of her dive and leveled off, hull just grazing the treetops.

Cries rang up from the steam wagons: “The *Blue!* The *Bonny Blue!* It’s Red Maggie!”

Fable’s eyes widened. At the Moonlight Faire she’d heard many rumors of Margaret O’Shanahan, the fierce pirate. Travelers spoke of her bewitching beauty—curly hair the color of flame, eyes like the emerald sea—and of her ruthlessness. She’d won a bet against a *bidriem* enchanter, a master of wind and waves, and as her prize, Red Maggie had claimed a spell that allowed the *Bonny Blue* to fly.

Pine boughs slapped the wagon’s sides as it bounced through the first grove and onto clear ground again. The clockwork began to slow. “Come on, ye hunk o’ scrap!” raged the driver.

The *Bonny Blue* swept overhead, her crew clinging to nets of rigging like greedy spiders. Fable saw bristling beards, bandanas, dark tattoos, grins with missing teeth. A cannon blasted, its iron ball slamming into a wagon ahead. The stern of the *Blue* loomed tall as a cathedral, and above billowed the Jolly Roger, the skull-and-crossbones flag.

The crew’s jeering drifted over the wind as the ship came about like an immense kite, ranks of sails flapping.

Surrounded by scraggly trees, the wagons stalled, springs unwound. Needled branches

crowded the windows. “Good,” whispered Luminè as they bumped to a stop. “We’ve got cover!” She hurried down the ladder, and Fable followed.

Luminè pushed open the hatch. After a look around, she dropped into the gloom and beckoned Fable. Luminè’s black hair glistened around her pale face; her eyes shone. She seemed a wild creature, part bird, part fox, part shadow—as formidable as Red Maggie.

Boots thumped, and Luminè hid Fable with her cloak until a pirate had blundered past. The girls crouched beneath a tree.

“MAGGIE!” roared a voice. The captain of the wagon pirates stood atop his rig, his feet spread wide—one a wooden peg leg—his coat and pigtails flying in the breeze. Brandishing his wicked kneaver, he glared up at the *Bonny Blue*, which rolled and bobbed, lanterns swinging. A long rope stretched behind the ship to the crown of a pine tree. Red Maggie had dropped anchor there, in the treetop. Her crew was sliding down other ropes to the ground.

“MAGGIE!” thundered the peg-legged captain. “Ye knively *taw!* Ye kettle-head! Don’t ye recognize yer ain father?”

The crew of the *Bonny Blue* bounded up to the wagons, blades drawn. But seeing pirates there, not merchants, they halted and gaped.

Now Red Maggie herself propped a boot on the rail and leaned on her knee, arms folded. Her curls fluttered like fire beneath her broad hat, and Fable half wondered why the hat was not burned up.

“Ye bletherskirl!” She stared at her father. “What ye doin’ there?”



The captain put his fists on his hips. “The same thing ye’re doin’, ye daft lass, only in a diff’rent place! These rollin’ scuttles be empty—fer now!”

Margaret raised her brows. “Goin’ straight into Corginard are ye, ye toad?”

“Aye,” said the captain. “Watch an’ learn! Ye can pray ye’ll have sich brass when ye’re grown, wee *miff!* A flyin’ tub don’t make ye a proper corsair!”

The daughter bristled. “I’ve nothin’ to learn from a cork-pullin’ skulldugger. I can smell ye from here, ye slumgullion!”

The two peered murderously at each other for a long moment, their crews befuddled, standing like posts. When father and daughter burst into belly laughter, followed by all their salty sea dogs, Luminè tugged Fable’s elbow.

“We don’t have much time,” said Luminè.

“No!” Fable pointed. “This way!” Before Luminè could protest, Fable headed downhill, slipping through the murk. No one saw them sprint across the open grass. The pirate crews were too busy thumping each other, whooping with mirth. As the girls reached the tree where the anchor lodged, Luminè nodded understanding.

Luminè scrambled up. Her sword slashed the rope, and it snapped free. The heavy anchor plummeted to the ground, Fable leaping out of its way.

The *Bonny Blue*, all sails raised, ran before the gale. No pilot manned her wheel. As laughter turned to shouts, the ship’s bow

dipped to earth and plowed a furrow. Then the schooner leveled out, nosing through trees. Pirates scattered like rats. The *Blue* smashed into three of the wagons, tumbling them. She cruised on into the woods, crunching and cracking. When crewmen reached her wheel, she rose again, clearing the trees. On the slopes, pirates of both crews dashed after the ghostly shape, cursing and hollering.

“Brilliant!” said Luminè, alighting beside Fable. “They’re all plenty busy. And soldiers will be coming out to see what the noise is about. We’ll circle that way.” She clutched Fable’s arm. “I think we’ve saved Corginard from a pirate raid.”

Fable took a breath of chill air, scented of pine and moss. We’re going to our death, she thought. But we’ve given the O’Shanahans a night to remember. She jogged after Luminè, feeling alive.

*to be continued*

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