

Diana Comet and Other Improbable Stories  
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Prologue

“Every day they’re throwing away more books,” the man said, standing at the bow of the fine sailing ship. A brilliant dome of stars cast white light onto the limitless sea before him. “Hundreds of them. Thousands! Throwing them away like dirty rags or scraps of rotten meat, just because no one wants to learn Dynish anymore. Who knows how many stories have already been lost? Tales of lovesick cowboys and river goddesses and tiny little orchestras that fit into the palm of your hand. About countries where women march off to war and corpses won’t stop talking, and how fairies save the hearts of men. If I don’t go back, more books will be destroyed and lost to us forever.”

His companion said nothing. A salty breeze stirred the sails, and somewhere an unsecured line slapped against a mast. The man drank from a bottle of apple wine and grimaced at the sweet taste.

“I’ve fallen in love with two firemen, both of whom were ashamed to admit their feelings,” he continued. “But somewhere out there is a man who isn’t afraid, or who can live with his fear. I won’t find him if I stay here.”

The captain of the ship, a nun in a black habit and white tennis shoes, listened to this conversation from nearby. She felt no remorse about eavesdropping. Her unnaturally long lifespan, coupled with a life of secrets and hardships, had burned most shame right out of her. She leaned over the railing of the good ship, keeping a sharp eye out for whales.

“I’d take you with me, but you’re too big to fit into my apartment. I don’t think I could even get you up the stairs,” the man said.

The breeze picked up, flapping the wings on the Captain Nun’s ornate cornette. She had heard stories of nuns with such headgear who could fly away on the wind. It seemed improbable, but it was her hope that one day she would indeed find herself aloft above the world.

The man sighed. “I hope you find happiness one day.”

The Captain Nun retreated into a dark alcove as the man passed. She went to the bow herself and spoke to the man’s friend. She confided, “He has great work ahead of him. I saw it in a dream. From all corners of the world he will collect books of forgotten lore and wonderful secrets. Books that could be dangerous if they fall into the wrong hands, and even more dangerous if they go unread. Surely a creature as old as yourself understands how important that is.”

Only the breeze answered. The breeze and that unsecured line, and the slap of water as the hull sliced through it, and the flap of a silver fish which broke free from the depths and then fell back down again.

“Well, sulk if you want to,” the Captain Nun said. “I need a drink.”

And so she went to her cabin, poured herself a generous libation, and opened up a dangerous book.

Author’s notes:

1. In 1989, Aaron Lansky won a MacArthur genius grant for his amazing work in saving thousands of Yiddish books from the trash heaps to which they were increasingly being delegated. Since then, millions of such books have been rescued and collected. Support this effort at [yiddishbookcenter.org](http://yiddishbookcenter.org).
2. Have you read any dangerous books lately? What makes a book dangerous? Would you go to jail over pages and glue, words and ink?