

REDEMPTION SONG

BY STEPHAN MICHAEL LOY



MID-WORLD ARTS
Indianapolis, Indiana

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CHAPTER THREE

Jeffrey Odom sat ankles crossed on deck, cursing his existence and the low-assed pay that made it such a chore. The mid-morning sun blazed into his eyes. No matter which way he slumped, the sun came around, forcing him to squint. God damned boat must be rotating, he guessed. God damned turn in the current, Goddamnit. He shielded his eyes with one hand and glanced about, finding nothing but the same dirty gunwales, the same worn paint on the old cabin, and the same skinny bastard at the flying bridge.

"Can you keep the damned boat decently parked?" he called to the other man, not caring about the peevishness of his tone.

The man glanced at him, then turned away. Bastard didn't like Odom much, though they'd never met before this job. Feeling was mutual.

"He asked that I keep this position, and the lines over the port rail," the skinny guy called.

So, *he* was rotating the boat? Jesus! "So fine. But keep the sun in one fucking place, why don't you."

"There's a current down deep. Keeps moving the tanks. They're getting under the boat."

Odom didn't understand any of that. Odom was no sailor. Everything he knew about sailing came from watching *Jaws* about fifteen times. He had answered an ad in the *Tribune*, for pity's sake, an ad for monkey work. The thin bastard at the flying bridge lorded it over him with his sailor shit. They had been at it for two fucking

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weeks. The SCUBA dude, the one with the payroll, was nice enough, but hardly ever aboard. He showed up at the boat every day, rode out with them cracking jokes and commenting on the weather, then spent all but a few hours around midday deep in Lake Michigan, like a freaking mermaid or something. Odom worked topside to feed the lines and answer his majesty the skin diver's infrequent calls, and to deal with the uppity skinny dude who thought he was Captain Queeg. Now the guy moved the boat just to keep the sun in Odom's eyes. This wasn't worth the pay.

Odom raised a finger to protest but the call signal cut him off. Two loud buzzes issued from the black box with the communications line snaking over the rails and into the great green deep.

Captain Queeg turned to look at him. "Well?"

"How's about you come down here and hump this shit for a change."

"My job's to steer the boat. Yours is to feed the lines."

Well, okay, much as he wanted to, Odom couldn't argue with that. He threw the dude a sneer and climbed stiffly to his feet.

Odom wasn't made for the lake, mentally anyway. Day after day he arrived for work dressed in cargo shorts, flip-flops and some dark t-shirt or other. Each day he shivered in the early morning and roasted late in the day. He burned until he looked like a stubble-chinned lobster, and sweated into his shirt until the dark material at the armpits showed rings of perspiration salt. The diver always kidded him about it, but Odom returned every day dressed in the same impractical get-up. Captain Queeg had schooled him, had told him to wear jeans and long sleeves to protect against the sun. He had told Odom to get a hat. And because Queeg said so, Odom didn't do it.

Every day he regretted his decision, but anything was better than giving in to that dipshit. Now Odom shambled to the left rail -- the port rail, they called it. He couldn't walk on the rolling deck very well. He reached for the line draped over the rail, the one next to the communications cable, and put on his leather work gloves. His hands protected, he proceeded to haul the rope aboard.

Bringing in the line was arduous work. It hung three hundred feet into the lake and was anchored by two heavy oxygen tanks. Actually, they were rebreathers, Odom recalled the diver saying. They released no bubbles and the air lasted longer, or something.

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Odom's job was to haul the tanks aboard, switch the emptied tanks for fresh ones, and lower those back into the water. The diver would use up the air he carried, then exchange those tanks for the ones Odom sent him. This way, the diver hardly returned to the surface. He swallowed his air on a bait line.

Odom took half an hour to haul up the heavy air tanks. He took a minute or two to switch them out, then thirty seconds to pitch them over the gunwales. The SCUBA dude's air lasted an hour, so Odom got thirty minutes to rest. All that time, Captain Queeg played lousy, pop star country music over the radio.

"What's he doing down there, anyway?" Odom asked once after the sun started baking him from right overhead.

"I dunno. Maybe diving for wrecks."

Odom peered over the rails toward shore, where he picked out the marina, Shedd Aquarium, and the fountain at Grant Park. "What the hell kind of wreck sits half a mile off Chicago?"

"The lake has a long history. But just last year, around Christmastime..."

"I read about that. Some dumbshits set off fireworks on a ferry. Went down in, like, twenty minutes. What's he want with a ferry? Shopping for a used Toyota?"

Odom thought that funny, and laughed. Captain Queeg did not.

"There were a bunch of boats out here then," the Captain said. "Some bigwig radio star on the ferry, and hundreds of smaller craft. Skiffs and sailboats, tour boats and yachts. Stupid time to be out on the lake, what with rough water in December, and ice. They were out there because they thought the world was ending and they were gonna get raptured. More than one boat went down, and I don't think it was fireworks."

Well, so what? It was just boats, after all. It wasn't like a Spanish galleon filled to the brim with doubloons.

Odom heard splashing alongside. He stood and went to the rail, watching as a figure in a shiny, black, rubberized skin clambered against the ladder hung down to the water. He struggled with the tanks on his back, working his way out of them.

"I'm here," Odom called, and cast about for the pole, the one with the hook at the end. He found it where it was stowed above the scuppers, and lowered the hook end down to the man. The diver

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draped the tanks on the hook by their harness, then gave Odom the signal to take them aboard.

Even depleted of oxygen, the rebreather seemed as heavy as a car. Odom struggled with it as he had every day, Captain Queeg helping after coming down from the bridge. The weight of the tanks made for slow, tedious going. The diver climbed aboard before his tanks did.

He said nothing, just sat on the winch at the back -- stern -- of the boat, arms hanging limp off his knees. He tore off his headgear and gloves but left the close-fitting body suit alone. His breath came in heaves.

"Steady there," Captain Queeg directed as they lowered the tanks to the deck and strapped them to the gunwales. He shook water from his hands as Odom finished the niceties.

"Need a drink, boss?" Queeg asked the man in the back.

The diver shook his head once.

Both crewmen knew better than to press. Something about the pressure down below, Odom thought he recalled. A man could take it for only so long.

Odom finished stowing the tanks, then took up his seated position on the deck.

The boat rocked in the broiling sun, the lake reflecting blinding shards of light. Somewhere down the shore, probably Navy Pier, the deep horn of a ship sounded.

"Will you be going down again?" Queeg asked after a while. He sat on the steps leading to the flying bridge.

The diver didn't answer for long seconds. Then he turned his eyes to take in the deck and seemed to notice his crew for the first time. The sun had baked his short, sandy hair dry, and his stubby chin reflected white-blond in the sunlight. "Yeah, sure," he said, his voice raspy. "In a while. Take the boat two points starboard and maybe a hundred yards."

Queeg offered a casual salute, then rose to ascend the stairs. "Odom!" the bastard called, and Odom clenched his fists. "Drag up the lines!"

"Why? I'll just have to toss them over again when he goes back down."

"I have to move the boat. I don't want those lines tangling in the propellers."

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"Shit, it takes half an hour--"

"Odom." That was the diver, the one holding the pay. "Haul up the lines."

Odom frowned. Odom grumbled. Odom hauled up the lines. Thirty minutes later, the engine kicked in and they trundled off to a new speck of water.

From his usual position on the deck, nursing the complaining muscles of his arms, Odom addressed his boss. "You know, they make this shit called sonar, so you can find what you're looking for without ever going into the water. Then, when you dive, you're right on target."

"What we're looking for won't show up on sonar."

"Oh? And is it too nose-y to ask what exactly we're looking for?"

"A body."

That stopped him. A wreck, an old car, the lost treasure of French fur traders, okay. A body?

"What the fuck..."

"Last December a lot of people were lost. Some of them need finding." The diver started putting on his gear, a clear sign the discussion was over.

Odom decided not to take the hint. "That's it? You're looking for a dead person? I don't know, man. That's kind of ... off-putting."

"You go along for two weeks and you want to get out now? We can drop you off -- and pay you off -- when we get back to shore tonight."

"No, no, no. I'm cool. But this, well, isn't."

The man had his headgear on and shrugged on his tanks. He stopped and grinned. "Come on, Odom. If you were lost at sea, wouldn't you want to be found?"

Well, yeah, Odom imagined, except, being dead, he wouldn't want anything.

"Get the other tanks over the side. It's time to go back to work."

The diver worked his way over the gunwales while Odom wrestled the tanks to the rail and made sure the line still held. The diver dropped, splashed, and was gone. The extra tanks followed, then the communications line.

The operation slid by at half-speed from there. Before, Odom had just done a job, a mindless task that paid him in cash money every evening at the dock. Now he knew the gruesome purpose

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behind that job, and it was ... strange. A body. Holy God. And what would the boss do when he found that body? Surely he wouldn't bring it aboard. The implications overwhelmed a simple day laborer's senses. The boat, the water, and the now more mysterious boss congealed into a surreal morass. This would take some processing.

Odom looked up from the gunwales where he had stood for he knew not how many minutes, thinking. He thought he might turn it all over with Queeg until he saw the Captain up on the bridge, hand on the wheel and eyes on the help. Odom watched Queeg while Queeg watched him, and knew not to open his mouth any more than he already had.

Queeg wasn't shocked by the purpose of the dive. Queeg had known all along. He showed it in his relaxed manner, the laid-back attitude of a lion stuffed with wildebeest, considering a gazelle as a snack for later.

Three men on a boat, one of them odd man out.

Odom wondered if he might need a new job. Maybe when they got back to dock, he'd pick a direction and just start walking.

Maybe he wouldn't even insist on getting paid.

CHAPTER FOUR

Sally knew she approached the end. The continual whine of tires on asphalt changed pitch and deceleration rolled her against the back of the two front seats. The floor of the van tilted one way then the other, and she heard the machine grunts of switching gears.

Pay attention. Look and listen, she thought. It would give her something to do besides panic.

She strained to see something other than cheap carpet and metal walls. Treetops flashed past through the windows, evergreens. The sky beyond them looked like dirty cotton balls. Where was she? How long had she lain on the floor of that van, smelling the carpet's embedded stink of rotted geraniums? Wilted brown petals hid in the recesses of the wall panels, sometimes breaking loose to flutter at her nose. She couldn't stretch out her arms or legs. Her wrists and ankles burned from wear against the thin, plastic cords that bound her. She wondered if she had any skin at all on her wrists; she couldn't look far enough back to check.

Don't worry about your wrists. They've seen worse treatment.

Oh, yes, and thanks for the low blow.

Her wrists held scars from past abuse, from episodes of self-destruction in which Sally found no pride. Or they had. For all she knew, those wounds were scraped clear, erased from her body by newer afflictions.

Her destiny was to suffer, whether at her own hand or those of others.

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She keened bewilderment against her duct tape gag, but all that came out was a low hum. Why must she live such a miserable life? Why must her fates conspire to torment her? They had saddled her with an abusive husband, a man who tried to murder her. They had driven her to virtual self-flagellation as she lurched from one dismal relationship to another. They had coaxed her through several attempts to do the world a favor, to assist its efforts to end her bullshit life. Even when fate gave her reason to live, when it provided her a child to love and protect, that gift arrived with a dollop of cynicism in the form of debilitating handicaps.

Eulie, her Eulie, her one good reason, had proven at once her trial and conviction. She had lived from the moment his life budded within her, but all those days she had lived with guilt. She hadn't proven much of a mother; she had given Eulie poverty, had raised him with ineptitude and ignorance. Even the body she gave him was cursed. Maybe he was better off without her, after all.

When I said focus, I didn't mean on that.

Shut up! Shut up! Voices in my head.

Just the one.

She grunted against her gag as she rolled along the carpet and struck the rear gates. The metal doors sent shocks of pain up from one knee. She barely avoided getting brained by a jack handle sliding about in the same cramped space. The embossed German name on it wanted badly to brand her. What was this? They drove uphill. She heard the engine groan against their ascent. The treetops through the windows seemed tilted. They also seemed to hang over the vehicle, almost a tunnel of trees.

They climbed a mountain. Where were there mountains in France?

Was she still even *in* France?

The van groaned. It drove around a bunch of corners, or up a series of switchbacks; Sally wished she could see better through the windows. The men up front ignored her. They smoked cigarettes and engaged in short, clipped conversations in French. They treated her with as much consideration as trash they took to the dump.

Please, God, don't kill me. I've done what you asked. I've done the work. Please, let me see my son again.

No snappy comment. Maybe he ignored her, too.

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Brakes squealed. Sally rolled into the back of the front seats. She felt the duct tape balloon across her mouth as the wind tried to blow out of her. Her eyes watered from agony as one ankle caught at a strange angle refused to roll with the rest of her body.

The cargo door opened. A man reached in. He grabbed her under the armpits and pulled. Carpet burn; they didn't care. He held her suspended above cobblestones, her body half in, half out of the vehicle. Another man took her legs. The two hoisted her like a rolled-up carpet, then she was out of the van.

Leaden skies. Buildings, their walls coated in painted plaster. Casement windows. It all looked old, careworn. Where had she seen that sort of thing, and cobblestones?

The men carrying her were not the ones from the van. Those two stood by their doors, stretching. They were dressed in khakis and button-down shirts and wore identical leather jackets. The men carrying Sally wore cheap, dark suits.

They maneuvered her through the front doors of the building the van stood at, the storm-heavy sky giving way to a darkened interior and the faint whiff of mold. The men manhandled Sally into a more-or-less vertical position propped at the edge of a straight-back, wooden chair. One man held her upright while the other drew a nasty switchblade from within his suit jacket and sliced the straps holding her arms and ankles.

Suddenly, painfully, Sally could sit up.

She tried to thank them, but only mumbled into her duct tape.

The man with the knife held her arms flat against the chair arms. His partner looped a strip of Velcro around each chair arm and wrist, and cinched them tight.

Without ever uttering a word, the men left the room and closed the door after them.

Sally heard only the rattle of duct tape as her breath drew in and out, or tried to. She concentrated, calmed her breathing, and directed it through her unobstructed but blood-caked nose. Her eyes teared from the pressure at her wrists, which she could see were naked of skin beneath the Velcro. She tested her new bonds, but could not move her hands.

So, little was changed. They still held her prisoner, but her back ached from straightening.

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She peered around her prison, disappointed to find next to nothing. She sat in a vestibule dominated by cracked and yellowed plaster walls and by a warped, worn wood floor. A hallway behind her went off to right and left. They hadn't even bothered to put her in a room. The place was dark, possibly unused except as a venue for tying down kidnapped women. Her only light came from a painted-shut transom over the door to the outside and from some unknown source far down each end of the hallway.

Okay, now what? If they planned to murder her, they were taking their sweet time.

As if in answer, a scuffling sounded from beyond the door.

Pay attention now. Look and listen.

The door opened. Two men entered, not the same ones who had carried her in minutes earlier. One man, in a charcoal suit, carried a chair, a six-pack cooler, and a folding tray table under one arm. The chair was gray metal and padded at the seat and back. It looked like something from a '60s war movie. The chair went down in front of Sally, the cooler beside her left leg, and the tray table next to the cooler. The second man, in a gray suit shiny from wear, carried another tray table, this one open and draped with a white towel. With a butler's fussiness, he arranged his tray table beside the metal chair.

After checking to see they had done their jobs, the two men left the way they had come, leaving the door open.

Outside was cobblestone, another one-story plaster-coated building across the street, and the brooding coolness before heavy rain. The back end of the van intruded into the universe framed by that door.

Sally noticed sweat rolling into her left eye. More sweat greased the rest of her body, the salt of it stinging her wrists.

With the nonchalance of unbounded confidence, someone stepped into the rectangle of the doorway. The man wore a rumpled, off-white suit over his thin frame and a straw fedora atop his age-wrinkled head. He had huge, knobby hands. What thin light the day could muster reflected off his round, wire-rimmed glasses. He had to be at least seventy years old.

The sight of him made Sally breathe harder and faster. She lost the rhythm through her nose; the duct tape started fluttering again. She didn't see an old man in a suit. Rather, something crouched atop that impression. She saw iron and blood, and the exhaustion of long

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marches and strenuous battles. War stood in her doorway, and something akin to sacrifice. She saw these things not with her eyes. For all intents, the figure before her was just the old man. She saw those things, those impressions, those glimmers, with that something that made her different. That something that probably brought her to the vestibule of an abandoned building to die.

She tried to move her arms again. She tried so hard and so desperately that her chair rattled against the warped floor. Her raw wrists burned against her restraints. The bindings seared her, but she didn't care. She just wanted to escape that man.

"Good afternoon, Miss Reiser," the old man said. He spoke in a tremulous tenor, his accent odd beneath the quaver. Eastern European? "I hope your trip was not too ... uncomfortable."

She doubled her effort to escape, adding a keening, nasal whine to the scraping riot of her chair.

He stepped into the building and Sally's intuitive mind heard thunder. "Yes," he said, nodding his head and rubbing his nose in a show of sheepish apology. "I imagined you might react so. It is the sight, is it not?" He took four easy, unhurried strides around the chair placed before Sally until he stood directly in front of her. "Here, let me help you with that." He grasped one corner of the duct tape and snatched it from her face.

A gasp flew from Sally's mouth. Her face slapped sideways with the pull of the tape and her hands tightened to claws. Tears drowned her eyes.

"I apologize for that, too." The old man released the tape and let it hang from Sally's hair. "Personally, I find it easiest when it comes off quickly. The discomfort is great, but does not last. Isn't that the mercy of quickly inflicted pain? It hurts, yes, but is over in a moment. Give me the well-thrust sword over a woman's betrayal any day."

Sally turned back to the man. Her eyes, clearing, rested at his chest, where a red and white pin held his tie in place. "Who are you?"

The man cocked his head at her, and clicked his tongue. "Not the best question, under the circumstances. You might have asked 'Why am I here?' or 'What do you plan to do with me?' 'Who are you?' gains you nothing, I would think."

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The tiepin was of a red cross on a white field. It seemed somehow pious.

He stepped away from her and sat down in the other chair. Without a word, he made a minor adjustment to his tray table then reached for the cooler. From it he extracted a bottle of Evian water, a clear plastic glass, and a sandwich.

Sally's stomach growled. She began to salivate.

"Sorry again. My snack." He waved the sandwich at her, filling the vestibule with hints of ham and mustard. "I'm a diabetic, I'm afraid. Frequent snacks to control my blood sugar. I assure you, I am not being intentionally rude."

He took several dainty bites of the sandwich, seeming to forget Sally sat in front of him. She wanted to scream at him, bury him in questions, weigh him down with pleas for mercy, but she willed herself to silence. If he had something to say, he'd say it. Sally did not control the conversation.

"A good sandwich," the old man said. "I must ask what restaurant it came from." He looked at her askance. "I would offer you a bite or two, but you are Jewish, no? You cannot eat of the unclean beast."

Sally's stomach protested otherwise.

He set the sandwich on the tray table, took up the water bottle, and poured himself half a glass. Purposefully, as if acting a part, he closed the bottle, set it down behind the sandwich, and took up his glass for one long draught.

Sally licked her lips.

"Good and cold, though I'd prefer a sip of wine. Oh!" He seemed to notice her again. "Now I *am* being rude. You haven't drunk in, what, twenty, thirty hours? How long, Marcus?"

French answered him from beyond the door.

"Thirty-five hours! Intolerable. How can you answer questions if your throat is parched for water? Come, allow me."

He poured a dribble of water into the glass, then rose from his chair. He carried the water to Sally and, cradling her head, brought up the glass for her to take a sip.

Sally tried to pull away.

"Come now," the old man said, wagging a finger at her. "I drank from this myself. There is no poison in it. Drink."

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He brought the glass back to her mouth. This time, Sally let the liquid touch her lips. She slurped at it. She couldn't have stopped if she wanted to.

"Good, good, very good." The man returned to his seat. He sat with his elbows on his knees, examining Sally as if reading directions. "Interesting thing, quenching one's thirst. A little water, just the right amount, can loosen the lips, allow communication. Of course, a little water does not alleviate the dryness, the parched throat. In fact, a little water is painful. It reminds the body what it is missing. You, Miss Reiser, were given a little water."

He just sat there, letting her think about it.

She tried not to.

The wait drew on.

Something brushed at the edge of hearing, maybe a breeze through trees.

No other sound polluted the stillness.

"So!"

Sally flinched.

"You will now tell me all you know about John Bennington, Jr. and his so-called network."

As if cued, a man in a suit stepped into the building. He must have been waiting just outside the door. He walked around the old man and stood at Sally's side.

"Why would I tell you anything?" Sally asked, and the effort burned her throat. "I don't even know who you are."

"And you will not, Miss Reiser. This is not one of your American action movies. I am not -- what is it? -- a super villain. I will not prognosticate on my vision for an enslaved world or my plans to make it so, assuming I have such a vision. No, I will ask questions and you will answer them. That is our arrangement."

"No."

"Yes. You see, we have a schedule. An aircraft arrives in a few hours to take you on to the next and possibly last phase of your association with us. Before that time, I require answers. You will supply them willingly, or not."

The man beside Sally removed the towel from his tray table. Laid out on its surface were three hypodermic needles, alcohol pads, a blood pressure cuff, and a stethoscope.

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Sally jerked away from the table. She strained at her bonds. Her chair rattled against the floor, beginning a slow creep toward the wall. The man beside her stepped behind the chair to steady it.

Look! Listen!

"No!"

"Yes, Miss Reiser." The old man's face cracked in a nicotine smile. "You will be very helpful. Now, tell me about this network..."