

Songs of the Dying Earth

Stories in Honour of Jack Vance

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Extract

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LIZ WILLIAMS

Caulk the Witch-Chaser

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Here she takes us along with a witch-chaser as he leaves Azenomei and heads down the river Scaum to the open sea, away from Almerly and toward the bleak shores of Alster—and also toward, for better or worse, a change of professions...

Caulk the Witch-chaser

LIZ WILLIAMS

C*aulk the witch-chaser* came out of Almery on a rising tide, sailing first the brief distance down the Xzan, then the Scaum, towards the coast. Occasionally, he took the strand of hair out of the pouch and studied it: it lay silver in his palm, like the light of the long-lost moon, but he knew that if he looked at it under the sun, it would be the dull scarlet of old blood. Caulk smiled thinly at this thought, opening his coat and adjusting first his thirty nine daggers, then the scalps. The smell of the Scaum rose up, salty and brackish, redolent of unsuccessful poison.

By midnight, he had reached the mouth of the estuary. He anchored the boat for a few minutes, sent down a fluke-loaded line, then brought it back up writhing with glass eels. He cooked them in a mess in a pan, ate absently, and headed for open sea.



This had all come about in Azenomei, a month ago, when Caulk had first met the owl-killer. Normally, he would not have bothered with such a person: Caulk had standards of fastidiousness which the owl-killer

unfortunately failed to meet. The man—small, balding, with huge pale eyes—had lurched against him in a tavern, spilling cheap ale over Caulk's high black boots. Caulk clucked in exasperation and the owl-killer leered at him.

"Bit fussy, aren't we, for someone who drinks in hovels?"

"I am here on business," Caulk replied icily, wiping ale off his boots.

"Aren't we all?" The owl-killer cackled and broke into a small capering dance, the feathery pelts flapping at his waist in a manner that was somehow lewd. Caulk blinked, and the owl-killer was gone. Dismissing the matter, Caulk waited for his own appointment, which failed to materialize. In disgust, for it was now twilight and too late to return from Azenomei, Caulk purchased a bowl of leeks, then arranged a room in the inn above and stalked up the stairs to his new residence: a low room, black beamed, with panels of a russet wood. Caulk deemed it acceptable enough, though the bed was lumpy, and, on investigation, the mattress bore faint stains of a suspicious nature. Caulk wrapped himself in the coarse blanket and fell into an uneasy sleep, punctuated by leek-fuelled dreams.

He woke under attack. A harsh voice assaulted him; something brushed roughly across his face. Throwing the blanket aside, Caulk snatched one of his daggers from beneath the pillow and thrust it in the direction of his assailant. It struck something yielding: there was a startled squawk. An owl dropped dead to the floor, yellow beak gaping. Caulk hissed with annoyance; he was certain he'd left the window closed. On investigation, this proved still to be the case. The owl must have been crouching in the rafters.

Moments later, someone banged on the door.

"Be silent!" Caulk commanded. "Do you wish to wake the whole household?"

"I demand entry!" said a voice that was somehow familiar. "You have trespassed upon my province, I require redress."

Irritated, Caulk threw open the door, daggers at the ready, but was immediately rendered nerveless by a bolt of jade light. The daggers dropped from his hands and clattered to the floor. Caulk strove to speak but a muttered pervulsion caused the spell to choke in his throat. Caulk stared in outrage at the owl-killer, who ran into the room, gathered up the round, feathery corpse, and stashed it in a bag.

"Now," the owl-killer said, fixing Caulk with a beady glare. "*About* redress."

Caulk, disconcerted by this buffoon's evident abilities, found himself able to speak. "An accident!"

"Nevertheless."

"I intended no harm! The thing attacked me!"

"Doubtless you startled it."

"I was asleep!"

"The authorities in Azenomei take a dim view of folk who trample and stamp over the purlieus of others," the owl-killer mused. "I know of one such who, only last week, was hoisted onto a gibbet of pettish-wood and lambasted by the populace, before being transported to the midst of the Old Forest and obliged to find his own way home. He has not yet succeeded in this endeavor, that I am aware of."

"But—"

"It is doubly unfortunate that my brother, Pardua Mott, happens to be the head of the Azenomei Board of Fair Trading. A man of the most upright and correct rectitude, a respectability so pronounced that he had his own daughter exhibited in the Hall of Reproachable Conduct minus her undergarments, after her branding."

"I—"

"I am, however, a fair man," the owl-killer Mott went on judiciously. "I am prepared to concede a measure of inadvertency in your actions."

"That's very—"

"Rather than have you hauled in irons before my relative, which admits little other than a mild form of personal satisfaction, I shall demand an alternative form of reparation. You see," the owl-killer said, beadily, "I need a *particular* owl..."



AS HE passed the distant humps of the erg-barrows along the upper shore of the estuary, Caulk relived this unfortunate course of events and grew exceedingly sour. White Alster was known to be a dismal place, with little to recommend it, unless one happened to be a connoisseur of remote rocky spars, ruined fortresses, and black sucking bogs. Moreover, Mott had been un reassuringly vague as to the whereabouts of his quarry.

"Besides," Caulk had protested, still beneath the unnerving dictates of the pervulsion, "I am a witch-chaser, not an owl-finder. Surely that's *your* remit."

The owl-killer gave an avian blink. “Indeed, and I am, of course, aware of your profession. Your high boots, the enfoldments of your hat, the multiple hems of your coat, all speak of your calling. However, lamentable circumstances entail that should I set foot on the shores of White Alster, I will activate a locator spell and a vast shrieking will alert the hags to my presence. Besides, all that you are likely to encounter is largely within your own area of expertise. Sea-hags and tarn-wights *are* witches, after all, not to mention shape shifters.”

Bitterly, Caulk conceded this to be true.

“I shall give you an aid—a strand of owl-witch hair. Watch it closely. It will twitch you in the required direction.”

Steal a witch’s hair and you stole a piece of her power. Even novices knew that. Caulk looked narrowly at the strand and asked, “And if I refuse?”

He did not care to recall what came next: the indignities of a further pervulsion and the contortions it entailed. Mott’s merry laughter still stung his ears. Now here he was, sailing towards White Alster on a following wind and leaving Almerly and its manses far behind. Caulk was aware of a pang, from more than the spell, that prodded him onward.

He sailed for several days, becoming increasingly bored by the dull expanse of choppy sea. Occasionally, bloat-fish rose up from the depths and regarded him with bland white eyes, whereupon Caulk was forced to summon a frothing conjuration and drive them off. Once, a great flapping bird moved ponderously from horizon to horizon, but otherwise there was little sign of life. It was with a relief mingled with apprehension that Caulk saw a broken shore rise up in the far reaches of the sea: White Alster.

It was not immediately obvious how to approach a suitable landing site, if any existed. What initially appeared to be a range of shattered turrets resolved itself into mere rock; a squat cylinder of stone that had seemed only an outcrop bore windows on its far side, but there was no sign of jetty or pier, and when Caulk looked back, the windows themselves were gone.

A bleak place, overlain with a sanguine glow in the last light of the dying sun. Caulk had seen worse, but also better. He thought with a shudder of the Land of Falling Wall, its ergs and leucomances. But White Alster, too, was said to have forests: who knew what lay within? Tempting to simply turn back towards Almerly—but the pervulsion snagged at his neuronal pathways and Caulk grimaced.

At last, when he was beginning to fear that he would be obliged to sail fruitlessly along the coast forever, a flat plateau of rock became apparent, slimed with black weed and underlying a stump of castle. With renewed enthusiasm, Caulk drove the boat forward, sending out a spine of rope which clung relentlessly to the weed-decked stone. By degrees, Caulk hauled the boat inward until it was possible to make it secure by means of an ancient bronze ring and for him to step out onto the rock.

Once upon the shore of White Alster, Caulk became aware of a plangent sensation, comprised of subtle melancholy and longing. At once, the lowering sky above him, with its shades of grey and rose, and the foam lashed coast, appeared less forbidding, more appealing. He turned his face to the castle, to find that a face was watching him in return.

Caulk took an involuntary step back and narrowly missed tumbling off the dock. The face—little more than a pallid oval with black slits of eyes—had withdrawn into the shadows of the castle. A sea-hag? Caulk was too far away to tell. A bell-like note filled the air, and Caulk stumbled forward.

No. He must leave, at once. Memories of a wight burrow in Falling Water beset him, he had met this kind of thing before. Caulk muttered a spell and all was as before: the cold coast, the churning sea. Then the spell drained away like bathwater and Caulk was once more pulled forward.

As he reached the edge of the dock furthest from the sea, he realized that an eroded stair led upwards. The bell sounded again, sweet and plaintive amid the crash and spray of the waves. Caulk blinked, trying to remember why he'd come. Something about owls... But the bell once more rang out and Caulk staggered up the stair, protest ringing inside his head.

It was close to dark. A mauve twilight hung over the coast and the world was suddenly calm and hushed, the boom of the sea muted by the thick rock walls between which he now stood. The bell came again and it wasn't a bell, not quite, but contained faint notes amongst the main strike, a fading, ancient tune. Caulk smiled, now striding eagerly upward.

She sat in the middle of her chamber, wearing violet and grey. Black hair fell down her back, bound with silver. The white face was the same, and the long dark gaze. She sat before a complex thing, an ebony instrument that almost hid her from his view, comprised of many dangling pegs and latches which she struck with a small hammer.

Caulk hesitated at last, but it was too late. The song had already reached out and snared him in silver webs of sound. He snatched at a dagger but

his hand fell uselessly to his side. The sea-hag began to whistle, louder and louder, until the noise wove itself into the echoes of the instrument and Caulk dropped to the floor.

The sea-hag rose and poked him with a long toe.

"Well, well, well," she said. "A witch-chaser, eh? From Almere, by the fashion of your hat." She licked white lips. "I think a tea party is called for."



CAULK LAY enveloped in coils of writhing noise. It made it difficult to think. He was still cursing himself at having fallen for the sea-hag's lure.

The sea-hag herself stood a little distance away, in the company of her sisters. There were three of them, all cast from a similar mold, though one had hair the colour of willow leaves, and the eyes of another were a whiteless jade. They murmured and smiled and whispered behind their long hands whenever they looked in Caulk's direction. But mostly they were occupied with admiring his daggers.

The tea set sat on a nearby table, next to the curious instrument. Caulk could see lamplight through the thin china cups, which were embellished with roses. He strained at the bonds of sound, but they were as tight as ropes and his struggles only constrained him further. The sea-hags gave little glinting laughs.

"Not long now," one of them said. She bent and drew a fingernail down Caulk's cheek. He felt a trickle of wetness in its wake, followed by the familiar tang of iron.

"We want you to choose," another sea-hag said. "Which one of us is the fairest? Whoever you choose shall take the longest knife."

Death, to touch the daggers of a witch-chaser. They'd have to be cleansed, if he got out of here. Caulk took a long breath, storing it up.

"Shall we?" the willow-haired hag simpered. The sisters sat down at the table, arranging their tattered garments with fastidious care. The black-haired hag poured tea, which descended in a steaming dark stream into the cups. It did not look like tea, thought Caulk, squinting up from the floor. It didn't smell like it, either. He took another breath, judging the moment. The sound writhed around him, holding him fast.

"So," the black-haired hag said, taking a bite of a small mossy cake. "Which one of us, then?"

Caulk clamped his mouth shut and glared at her.

"Oh," green-hair whispered, "he doesn't want to play!"

"We'll *make* him play!" Black-hair rose, taking one of Caulk's daggers, thin as a pin, from its holster. Caulk sucked in another breath.

"Speak!"

Caulk did not speak. He thought he had it now. He pursed his lips and whistled, emitting a high-pitched stream of sound. He heard it mesh with the bonds that held him, throwing them outward. The sea-hags screamed, clapping their hands to their ears. Caulk took a frantic breath and whistled louder, feeling his face grow redder with the effort, but the bonds held, and held... He felt the break a second before it happened, sensing the shift in tone which signified that the sound-web was about to snap. Then it shattered. In an instant Caulk was on his feet, snatching at the dagger as thin as a pin with his left hand, and a dagger as white as bone with his right. Two sea-hags went down in a rush of greenish blood over the tea cups, struck through the throat. That left the willow-haired woman, whom Caulk killed with the black dagger, up under the ribs. She cursed him as she died, but Caulk laughed and whistled it away.

Gasping, he lent on the wall to get his breath back. The stone felt rough and wet beneath his hand. At the end of the chamber, a little arched window looked out onto darkness. Caulk peered through it and saw the glint of the heaving sea far below. Salt water is always a power: Caulk, with a remaining scrap of a spell, called up an arch of foam and cleansed the daggers. The bodies of the sea-hags were already rotting down into kelp and slime.

His head clearing somewhat, he remembered the instructions given to him by the owl-killer.

They frequent a tarn called Llantow, to the north, between two hills, not far from the coast. I cannot provide you with a map. You will have to watch the hair.

Not very helpful, Caulk had thought at the time, with the pervulsion twinging inside his head. He thought the same now, but perhaps the sea-hag's fortress contained a map? Gently, he tried the door and it swung open. Caulk stepped out, into a shadowy corridor. The sea wind blew through, a thin, eldritch whistling. Caulk looked right and left. The corridor appeared to be empty. For the next hour or so, he would have no magic to conjure up a light. He slipped down the passage, hearing the sea boom and crash through the holes in the ruin. Caulk ran through a maze of passages, seeing nothing except huge pale moths, floating about the ruin like ghosts. The eyes of the sea-hag? Possibly. But they did not seem to be paying any attention to him.

He sprinted down a staircase, hearing his own footsteps echoing like the tap-tap of a bone xylophone, scanning side rooms. But there was nothing and no-one. Outside, it seemed a cleaner, purer world. He had done someone a service, at least, in ridding White Alster of the hag-nest above him. Hopefully, he'd done it before the hags had had time to spawn, sending their jelly out into the stagnant pools and waiting for it to fruit. But he had no illusions: more hags would scent the deaths and move into the ruin. It might not take very long, so Caulk, temporarily magic-less, resolved to stay clear. He headed weakly out across the moor, away from the coast, and made an uneasy bed for the night under a bush. Over the moors, a cromlech was dimly visible: best avoided, to Caulk's mind, as the likely home of visps and leucomances.

The next day dawned with a pallid grey sky. Caulk looked out across a landscape of black moss, tarns like obsidian eyes, low hills. Against the grey morning, the vista was sombre. Caulk sighed and made a bleak meal of dried posset. Then he studied the strands of hair: they twitched in his hand, pointing north. He started walking, hopefully in the direction of Llantow tarn.

He had heard no owls overnight. He was not sure whether to be encouraged by this or not. If there were owl-witches, then perhaps they were keeping to their hunting grounds of Llantow. Or perhaps the owl-killer's information was out of date and there *were* no owl-witches. Caulk gave another sigh, this time of frustration. He did not think 'I couldn't find any' would be a satisfactory explanation, in which case an enforced holiday from Almery would prove necessary, assuming that the pervulsion allowed him that option. Caulk was reluctant to test its limits.

He kept walking, following the hair, which twitched and writhed like a worm. Towards late afternoon, a shimmering dark expanse that might, or might not, be Llantow tarn came into view, lying under a glowering range of hills. A rainbow glinted in its depths, swirls of rose and jade, and Caulk was immediately wary: he'd seen such things before, in Falling Water. Marsh-sprites and tarn-frits used them as a lure; Caulk looked pointedly away.

Around the tarn were clusters of small trees, with white bark and dark green foliage. A peppery scent filled the air—this must be what passed for spring in White Alster. Caulk's nose began to itch, not good news, for someone needing to remain surreptitious. He took a determined breath and headed, via a circuitous route, toward the tarn.

If any owl-witches were in residence, it would be in the crags on the hillside, rather than around the tarn itself; apart from the trees, there was no adequate shelter. Caulk crouched low behind a thicket of juniper, dined off posset, waited for twilight.

Nothing. Still nothing—and then, just as the pitiful sprinkle of remaining stars pricked out, there was the rustle of wings overhead, and an owl soared out across the rippling face of the tarn. Caulk, stiff and cold in the juniper, saw through amplifying glasses the tell-tale extra limbs tucked underneath the wing span: little atrophied arms and legs that, when the shifting magic occurred, would flesh out into human shape.

Elation and relief were rapidly followed by adrenalin. The actual existence of an owl-witch now necessitated planning and capture, rather than a sorry return to Almerly with a tale of failure. On the other hand, the attempted capture of a witch might result in no return to Almerly at all. Caulk watched, wrestling with professional misgivings, as the owl-witch swooped down on something at the far end of the tarn. A thin shrieking filled the twilight, followed by sounds of bones being crunched. Caulk gave careful attention to the skies, and, seeing nothing, backed up the hillside. The best time to catch a witch would be during daylight, but, at the moment, he was too close to the hunting ground. He crawled up towards a pile of boulders, then hid. More witches flew out from the crags. Caulk counted five, including the initial sighting. He was so intent on the witches that he failed to smell the leucomance until it was almost upon him. Caulk turned at the last instant, to glimpse a narrow head, glowing eyes, bared teeth. The leucomance crouched and twittered at a pitch that made Caulk's ears bleed. He threw a dagger, but the leucomance bounded up onto one of the boulders, where it sat grinning at him. Caulk cursed and the leucomance put a hand behind one pointed ear, grinning harder. Its genitals twitched, repulsing Caulk, who threw another dagger out of sheer irritation. The leucomance leaped high, there was the beat of wings in the darkness and the leucomance was gone with a sudden cry. All well and good, except that the commotion had attracted the attention of the remaining witches, who now came to perch on the boulder and watch Caulk with shining, intrigued eyes.

"Hold!" Caulk shouted, as the last witch came in to land and dropped the dead leucomance with a heavy thud. "I am Caulk the Witch-chaser!" He brandished two of the daggers, letting his coat fall open so that the others were clearly visible. "I have slain a nest of sea-hags on the coast

of White Alster! I have hunted tarn-wights in the Tsombol Marsh, and weasel-witches in the polders of Taum!" He twitched the coat open further, displaying the scalps. "See these?"

"All too clearly," an owl-witch said. She quivered, the little limbs extending and fleshing out, her round head elongating, until a woman wearing nothing but a feather cloak stood in front of Caulk. Vestigial breasts and a hooked nose did little for him, and the witch's skin was a faint grey, reflecting the light from a patch of luminous moss. She smiled, displaying teeth as sharp as the leucomance's. She preened before Caulk, who forced a look of reluctant admiration to cross his features.

"All those dead sisters," the owl-witch said. Beside her, the others also metamorphosed. Two were clearly older than the others, but, like the sea-hags, they had a similar range of appearance. Another damned nest, Caulk thought, but kept the admiring expression in place.

"Do not try to make me feel guilt, madam," Caulk said. "No witch loves another."

"But we love witch-chasers *less*," the witch said, and smiled.

He could not take all of them down, and he knew it. "How do you feel about owl-killers?" Caulk asked.

A hissing, spitting moment of frenzy, during which Caulk stepped rapidly back and reached for longer knives. The first witch made a rattling noise in her throat and brought up a bony, bristling pellet, which she spat out at Caulk's feet.

"What talk is this?"

"I was hired—no, *compelled*—by one such to come here," Caulk told her. "An owl-killer of Almery, named Mott."

More hissing. Caulk again moved back.

"We know of Mott," one of the older witches said. Her small mouth curled in disdain. "A wicked man."

"No argument from me," Caulk said quickly.

"Mott cannot come to White Alster," the old witch said. She shrugged her shoulders and the cloak ruffled up. "He would die. He stole my hair."

"Aha!" said Caulk. He held out the strand and snatched it back as she clawed towards it. "Would this be it, by any chance?"

"My hair!" The witch's face was avid.

"You spoke of a compulsion," another witch murmured.

Caulk laughed. "What benefit is there for me, in killing owl-witches?" He hefted the strand of hair higher, keeping it out of reach. "Your pelts

bring nothing on the market. Your beauty—” and here Caulk gave a small bow, “is not prized in the flesh-pots of the south. Why would I bother, unless a pervulsion had been placed upon me?”

“I would kill you,” the eldest witch said, considering. “But I have a score to settle with Mott.”

Caulk looked towards the moss, conjured a small bolt of heat. The moss sizzled and fried.

“No more sting than a nettle,” a witch said, with scorn.

“Maybe not. But enough to fry a strand of hair,” replied Caulk. There was a moment of silence.

“A witch-chaser is not the best person to enlist,” the younger witch said.

The older one put her head on one side, regarded Caulk. “Not even for a price?”

“What kind of price?” Caulk said, very wary.

“Tell me,” the old witch said, “how happy are you, with your life?”

Caulk thought. *Not very*, was the answer to that. He’d chased witches the length and breadth of old Earth, watched the stars start to go out, made enough to survive, little more. Plus there was the constant annoyance of folk like Mott. When younger, the work had afforded a degree of satisfaction, but of late, that had begun dangerously to pall...

The young witch rustled her cloak, revealing hints of skin that were starting to become more appealing.

“Then I have an idea...” the old witch began.



CAULK’S BOAT put back into Almenomei harbor on a rising tide. He stepped out onto the dock, seeing the ancient town with different eyes, evaluating turrets and gables and eaves. Absently, he rubbed the sore place on his wrist: the old witch had not been gentle, but then, that wasn’t the way of owls, as Caulk now more fully appreciated. Yet, it was a small enough price to pay for the quietening of the pervulsion, which now lay still within his head.

He had been told to send word by courier to Mott, using a certain combination of digits and letters which, the owl-killer had assured him, would be comprehended by any reputable messaging company. Caulk located a courier at the inn, and then waited in the same upstairs chamber in which he had met Mott. It brought back memories, none of them pleasant. And yet, it had led to changes that were intriguing...

There was a knock on the door; Caulk opened it, to find an eager Mott outside.

"Well, did you find my owl-witch, Caulk?"

"I did."

"Where is it?"

"Within."

Mott took care to keep out of immediate dagger thrust, Caulk observed, but that hardly mattered. He fingered the bite on his wrist. The owl-killer glanced impatiently around the chamber. "It looks empty. I see no pelt, no hangings. Where is my owl-witch?"

"Here," Caulk said and felt the wrench as bone turned, skin turned, soul turned. He swept up on broad black wings to the height of the chamber, then down, as Mott's pale eyes widened for the last time.

Some while later, Caulk hoicked up a pellet and spat it onto what was left of Mott's body. Then he soared up and out of the chamber, over the roofs of Azenomei, heading first down the Xzan and then the Scaum towards the open sea. He'd told the girls that there would be a recently empty turret—much nicer than the boulders of Llantow, with plenty of room and a nice view. It would, he thought as he flew, prove eminently suitable for a new home.



AFTERWORD:

I WAS eleven years old. It was the mid 1970s and I lived in a small, bucolic city in the West of England. I longed to travel to the Gobi desert, to Siberia, to South America, but options for doing so were...limited. So I voyaged through books instead, and by the time I was eleven, I was already widely traveled—to Narnia, Prydain, Green Knowe, Prince Edward Island. Then one day my mother grew bored with the Gothic novels she'd been reading and brought back something different from the local library—a novel called *City of the Chasch*. I read it, very quickly. Then I read it again. After that, we went back to the library and returned, over time, with *Planet of Adventure* and the *Demon Princes* books, and with *The Dying Earth*.

Since then I have been to the Gobi, and to Siberia. I've never taken

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a spacecraft or a time-machine to Tschai, or the Dying Earth, but I know they're real places—I've been there, too, after all. And when I was eleven, I started writing the novel that would, years later, become *Ghost Sister*. I was nominated for the Philip K Dick Award, some years ago in Seattle, for that book. And, during the convention, I interviewed Jack Vance. I told him it was all his fault. "Godammit," he growled, "you gotta be so careful with stuff like that."

—Liz Williams