

# The Guns of Two Space

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POETRY REFERENCES

**"The Guns of Two Space"  
The Warriors of Westernness, Book II  
Dave Grossman and  
Bob Hudson**

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## **Author's Comments:**

### **Introduction and Important Background Info from Dave Grossman**

I am Pallas Athene,  
and I know the thoughts of all men's hearts  
and discern their manhood or their baseness.

From the souls of clay I turn away,  
and they are blessed but not by me.  
They fatten at ease  
like sheep in the pasture  
and eat what they did not sow  
like oxen in the stall.  
They grow and spread  
like the gourd along the ground,  
but like the gourd  
they give no shade to the traveler.  
When they are ripe death gathers them  
and they go down unloved into Hell  
and their name vanishes out of the land.  
*But to the souls of fire I give more fire,  
and to those who are manful  
I give a might more than man.*  
These are the heroes,  
the sons of the immortals who are blessed,  
but not like the souls of clay,  
for I drive them forth by strange paths  
that they may fight the titans  
and the monsters  
and the enemies of Gods and men...  
Tell me now, Perseus,  
which of these two sorts of men seem  
to you  
more blessed?

Charles Kingsley  
Canon of Westminster and Chaplain to Queen Victoria

The life of a ship, propelled only by wind: not as the wind listeth, but obedient to command and guided by an almost occult power, acquired only by long practice and experience.

The rush and bustle of peopled deck: ringing orders, peremptorily expressed and instantly obeyed; eternal vigilance, the price of salvation; and the right thing done instantly, on the spur of the moment, at the right time.

This was a realm prolific of poetry: poetry of romance and poetry commemorating deeds done. It was the time of the after-dinner songs and elaborate toasts, and these Words helped supply such a need.

The period of steam and steel has produced nothing like it. The locomotive, the telegraph, the steamship: these were the beginning of the end of deep thought. True thought, distilled and aged over months and years of solitude became rare...

From the introduction to  
*American Naval Songs and Ballads*  
by Robert W. Neeser, 1938

### **On Poetry and Science Fiction**

In this series of books I've tried to craft a world in which deep respect, even veneration for poetry could exist. But in reality there's no need to make up such a world. Throughout history, from Homer to Kipling, we existed in such a world. And nowhere was this more so than at sea.

In an environment such as the shoreless seas of two-space, in this book, where advanced technology can't exist, the power of well-crafted Words would again be the key to men's hearts. A leader (such as Melville, the captain of the *Fang*) who masters such Words would have a powerful edge in mastering his men.

**When you read these poems, I encourage you to read them aloud.** Or, if you're in a public place, at least mumble them quietly! For poetry was meant to be spoken, not read, and you lose half the joy if you don't let these Words, these ancient, powerful Words, roll off your tongue and o'er your lips.

Hopefully the words in between the poetry will give you some small measure of pleasure as well.

### **On Fans and Readers**

I would like to make a note of thanks to all the Baen Books fans who responded so kindly to the first volume to this series. But many of my readers have not had past experience with military science-fiction. These individuals were drawn to the book from the military and law enforcement communities, based on their experiences with my nonfiction books and my "Bulletproof Mind" seminars.

There has also been a sizable number of "nautical fiction" fans (especially readers of the Hornblower and Jack Aubrey series) for whom my work was their first taste of military science-fiction. The response from these wonderful readers has also been gratifying.

For all of you who generally do not read science fiction but are pleased by this series, I would like to strongly recommend that you take a look at other Baen books. John Ringo, Eric Flint, David Drake, David Weber, Leo Frankowski, and all the other "race horses" in the great "stable" of Baen authors are true giants in the land. Their books have given me *great* joy over the years, and I highly recommend them to one-and-all.

### **On Warriors and Warrior Scientists**

I said in the first book of this series (and it bears repeating) that my "day job" is to be on the road, almost three-hundred days a year, training soldiers (Green Berets, SEALs, British Special Boat Service and Royal marine Commandos, Army Rangers, the USMC, etc.) and cops (the FBI, the ATF, the CHP, the RCMP, etc.) about the psychology and physiology of combat. It's a *great* job. I teach them and then they teach me, in an endless, ever-refining feedback loop. I can never thank them enough for putting it on the line for us, every day, and for sharing their experiences with me. You can get a better feel for what I do, and take a look at some of my scholarly writings on these topics, through my Web site, [www.killology.com](http://www.killology.com), or my books, *On Killing* and *On Combat*.

I need to thank my fellow "warrior scientists." The concept of *science* fiction has usually involved the integration of *science*, or projected science, into fiction. This series is the first time that anyone has integrated the new field of "warrior science" into fiction. The characters in my book cite real twenty-first century researchers. (You can find out more about them, and this field, in *On Combat*.) I sincerely believe that hundreds of years from now these pioneer friends of mine will be remembered and cited.

The combat experiences of my characters are based on the latest research, on what I'm teaching, *and* on what those who have been there have taught me. Any errors are my own!

### **And Finally:**

To Bobby A. Hudson, Jr., Commander, U.S. Navy (retired), my co-author, partner in crime, and friend. "Gentle reader beware: twisted military minds at work."

To Leo Frankowski, our mentor, guide, good friend, and in-house editor. To our publisher, the late Jim Baen, who was a friend and a man of vision... he will be missed. And to the great people at Baen Books who are carrying on his vision. To our faithful and true friends and proofreaders: Barb (Sabrehawk) Walker, Jim (G-2) Bray, Rocky (High Deacon of the Ever Evolving Church of Violence) Warren, Steel Parsons, John Lang, Elantu Viovodi (author of that great source of wisdom, *The Contented Poacher's Epicurean Odyssey*, who helped put words in Mrs. Vodi's mouth), Carlie Cockett, Scott Blackledge, Ranger Rob Jones, Eric (ESR) Mryiad, Reb, and many others.

To my extraordinarily competent and long-suffering staff, Susan Tacker, Chris McCorkle, and Aubrey Joe Grossman.

And to the sheepdogs of life. Long may they live and prosper so they are there when we need them!

Most of all, to my princess, my favorite proofreader, my bride and friend of three decades: my Jeanne, who stands watch at the door to our world.

Hooah!

Dave Grossman

Lt. Colonel, U.S. Army (ret.)

Director, Killology Research Group

[www.killology.com](http://www.killology.com)

(Note: If not otherwise indicated, the titles and authors of the poetry used throughout the book are listed at the end.)

## **The Crew of Her Majesty, the Queen of Westernness' 24-Pounder Frigate, *Fang***

Lt. Thomas Melville, Captain

Ulrich, his coxswain

Grenoble, his bodyguard, a Sylvan

McAndrews, his steward

Lt. Daniel Fielder, 1st Officer

Lt. Jarad Crater

Lt. Buckley Archer

Lady Elphinstone, Ship's surgeon, a Sylvan

Mrs. Vodi, her "lob-lolly girl"

Pete Etzen, Thadeaus Brun, corpsmen (medics), "Doc"

Brother Theo Petreckski, Ship's purser, a monk

Roxy, Ship's cook, "Cookie"

Kaleb Jones, Ship's cook

Mr. Caleb Tibbits, Ship's carpenter, "Chips"

Mr. Joby DeWalt, a Celebri, Ship's carpenter

Mr. Darren Barlet, Ship's master gunner, "Guns"

Sgt. Don Von Rito, Ship's gunnery sergeant, "Gunny"

Mr. Bronson Hans, Ship's sailing master

Marines

Lt. Broadax, a Dwarrowdelf

Cpl. Petrico, Cpl. Kobbsven, L.Cpl. Jarvis, Pvt. Dwakins, and others

Rangers

Josiah Westminster

Aubrey Valandil, a Sylvan

Midshipmen:

Anthony Hayl

Garth Aquinar

Hezikiah Jubal

Abdyl Faisal

Lao Tung

Ellis Palmer

Ship's dogs

Ship's cats

The monkeys

Cuthbert Asquith XVI, an unhappy passenger

## **Timeline**

2104: Kenny Muraray creates the first Pier and begins exploration of two-space.

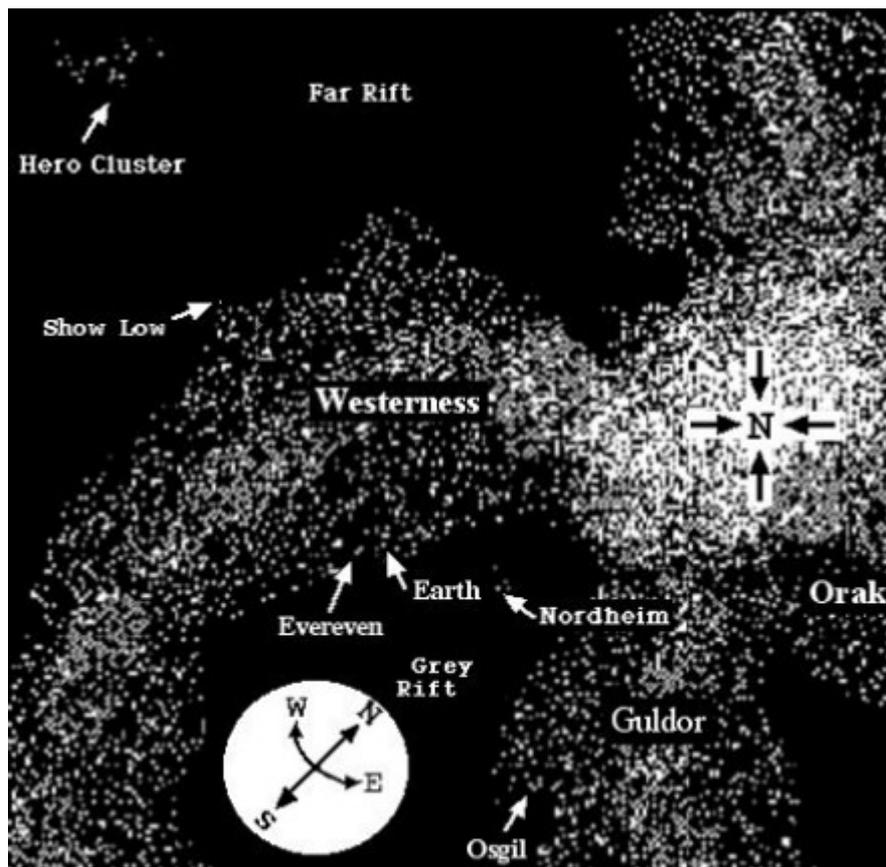
2119: The great Crash on Earth is caused by a two-dimensional virus brought back from a computer taken into two-space. The Crash leads to a catastrophic destruction of most computers and the entire World Net and a collapse of civilization as virtually all computers and computer data-bases are destroyed. Only a few isolated military nets remain intact.

2210: Earth's early two-space Ships first land on Westerness.

2420: Star Kingdom of Westerness is peacefully established, as Earth loses interest in two-space.

2628: The Great Two-Space War begins with a Guldur invasion of Stolsh Empire and Osgil. The Westerness exploration Ship *Kestrel* is attacked by the Guldur, and *Fang* is captured by Westerness forces. (See: *The Two-Space War*.)

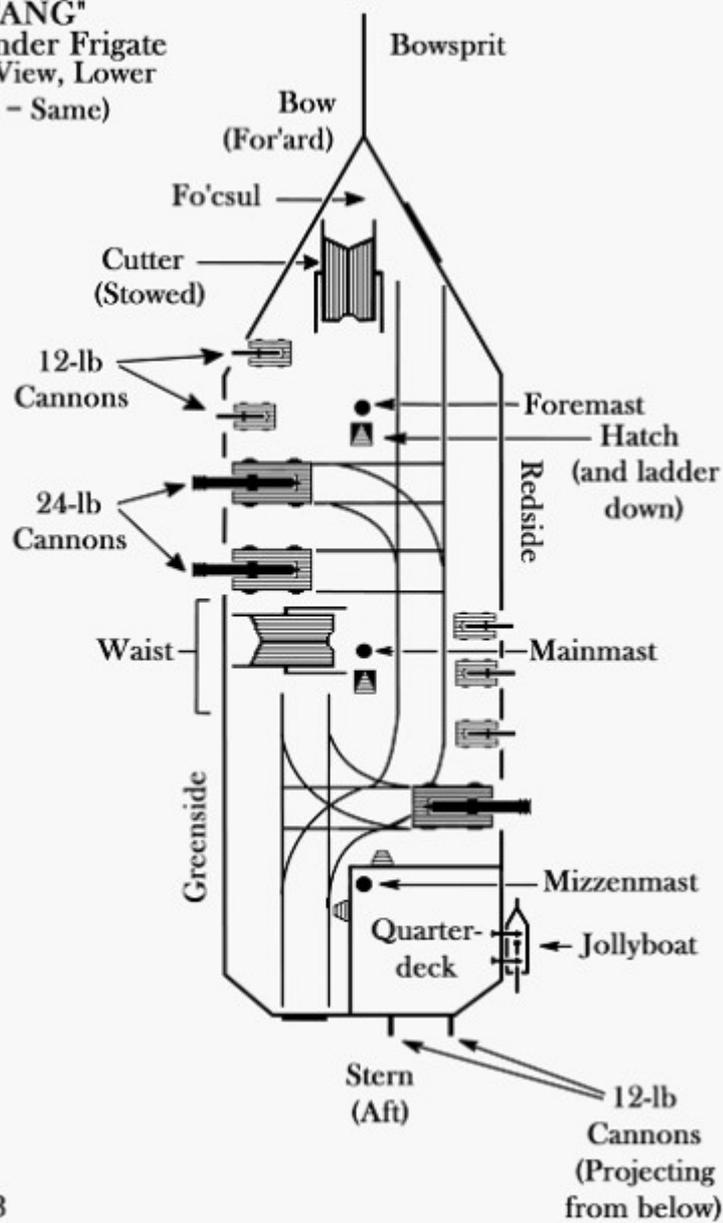
2629: *Fang* returns to Earth.



DG, '05

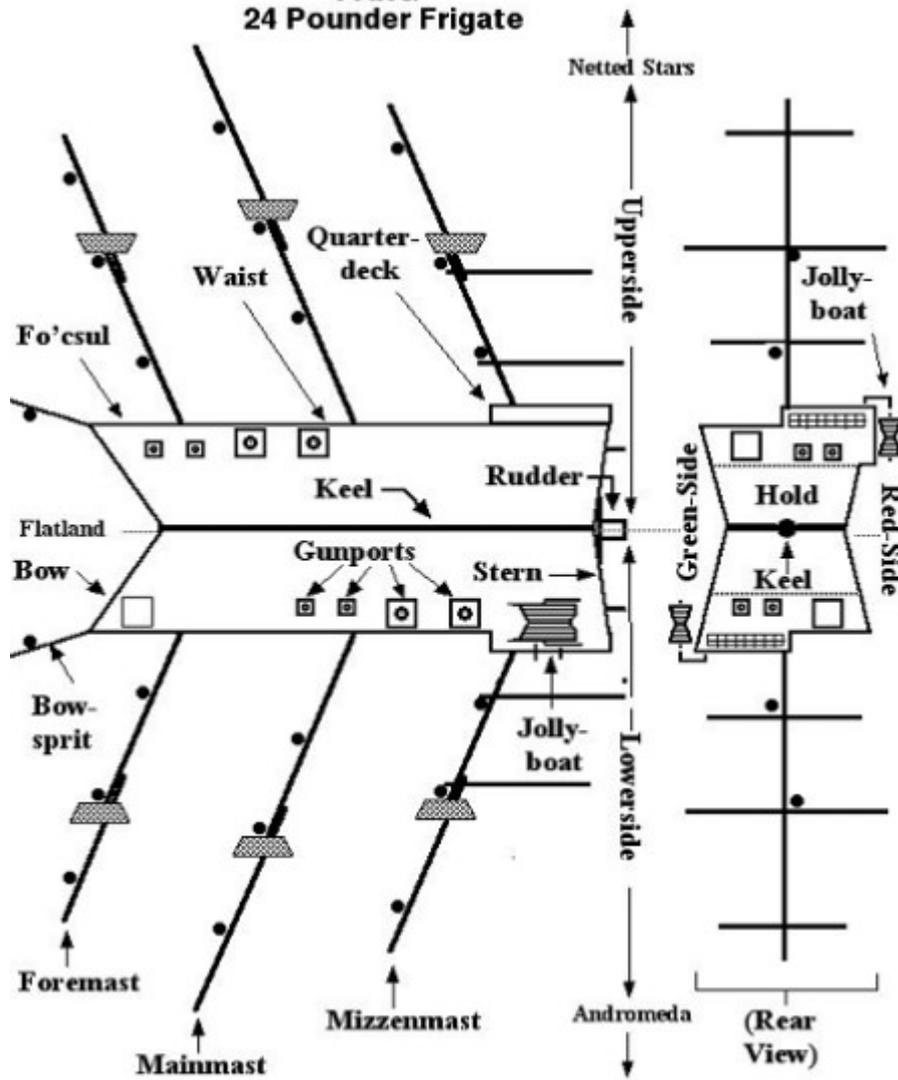
Map of the Galaxy

**"FANG"**  
 24-Pounder Frigate  
 (Upper View, Lower  
 View - Same)

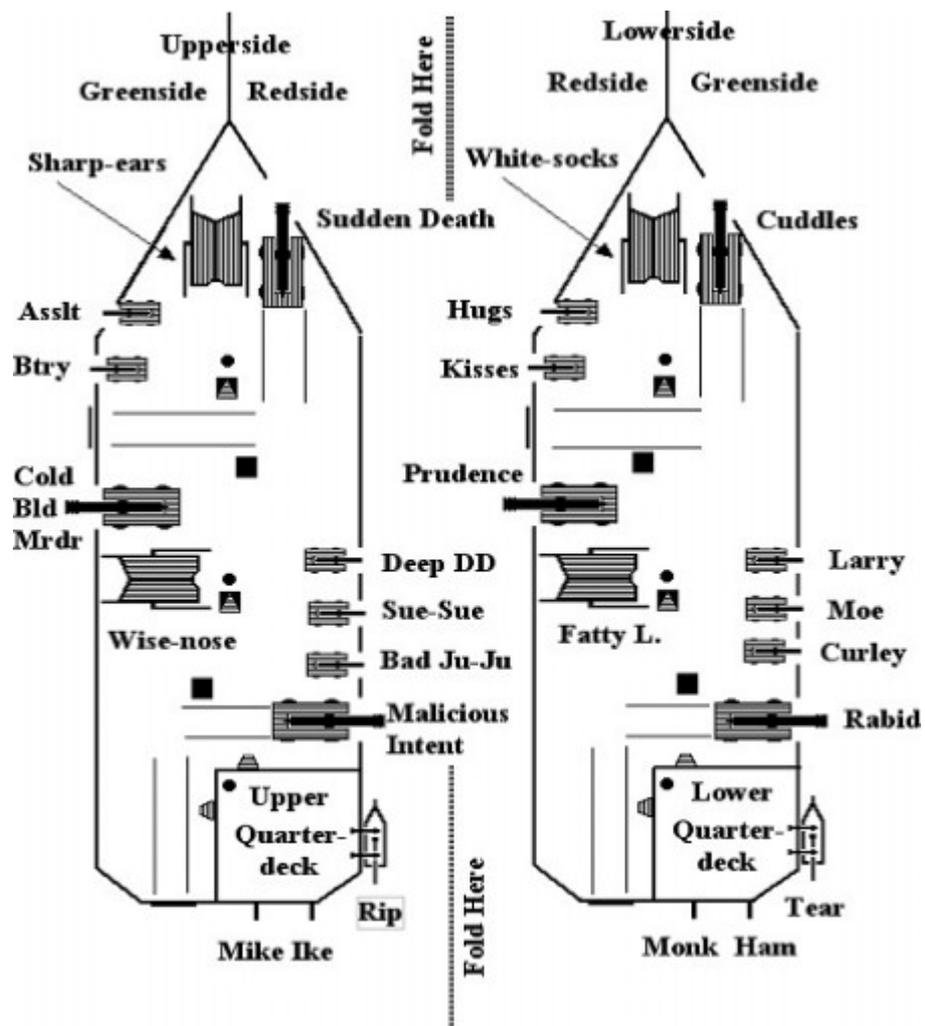


DG '03

**"FANG"  
24 Pounder Frigate**



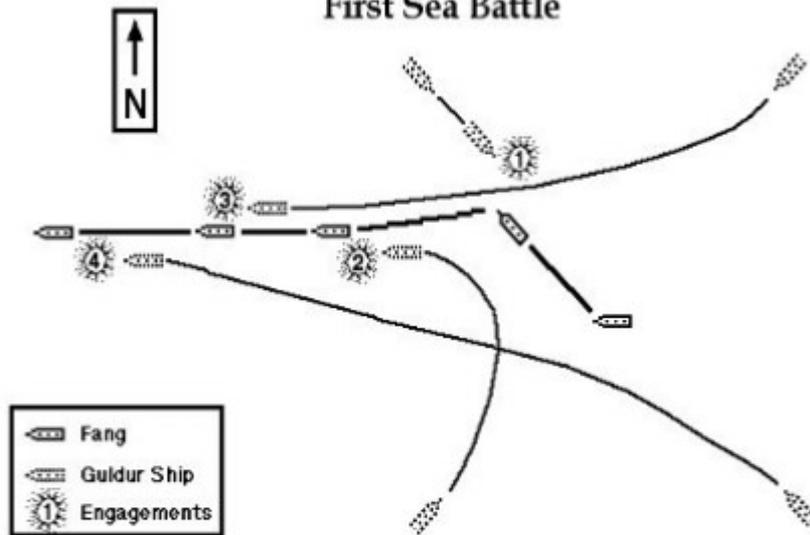
(Sails, shrouds, ratlines, stays, supports, etc., not depicted) DG '01



**The *Fang* & Her Guns**  
 (As described by Bro. Theo to Asquith)

DG '05

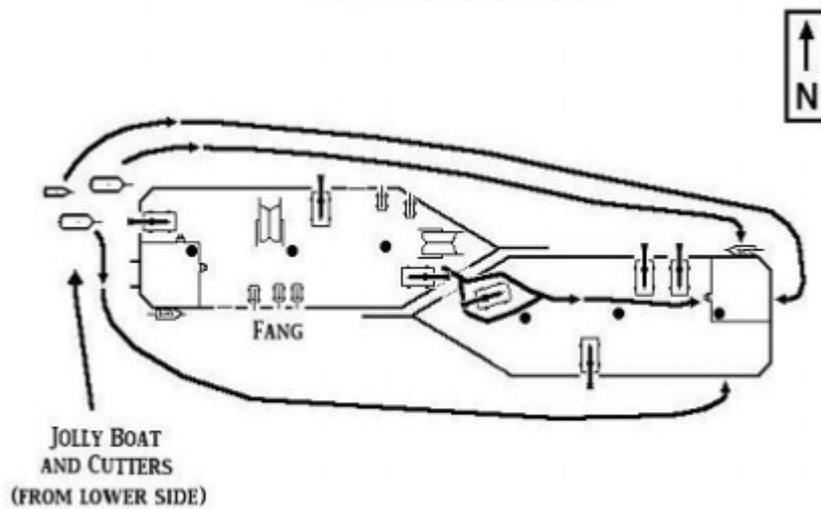
## First Sea Battle

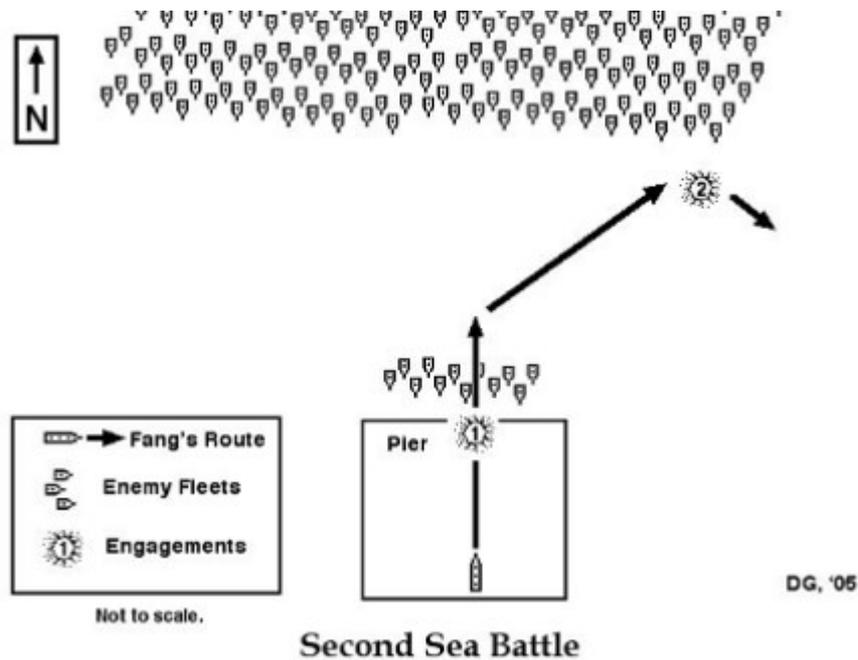


Distances are not to scale, especially the long "stern chase" represented by engagements 2, 3, and 4.

DG, 04

## BOARDING ACTION





# PROLOGUE

## Airy Navies Grappling In the Central Blue

For I dipt into the future,  
 far as human eye could see,  
 Saw the vision of the world,  
 and all the wonder that could be,

Saw the heavens fill with commerce,  
 argosies of magic sails,  
 Pilots of the purple twilight,  
 dropping down with costly bales.

Heard the heavens fill with shouting,  
 and there rain'd a ghastly dew  
 From the nations' airy navies  
 grappling in the central blue.

"Locksley Hall"  
 Alfred Lord Tennyson, 1842

A fragile wooden Ship, complete with canvas sails, was sailing between the stars. This was patently, embarrassingly impossible, of course, but fortunately the Ship didn't know that, and neither did her crew.

Actually, it was more like *two* old-fashioned three-masted sailing ships, cut off at the waterline and joined together like some bizarre "Siamese twin" of a Ship. And if you happened to be out in interstellar space as the Ship whizzed by, you couldn't actually see it, because it was in another dimension and it was going far, far faster than the speed of light. But it was there, take our word for it.

To understand how this Ship came to be there will take some explanation, and a good dose of imagination.

First, you have to imagine a two-dimensional realm. This part is not too hard. Humans have imagined such a realm since 1884 when Edwin A. Abbot first introduced the concept in his book, *Flatland: A Romance in Many Dimensions*. In this Flatland, or two-space, there is left and right, forward and back, north, east, south, and west, but *no* up or down. Just two dimensions, see?

Now, imagine the entire galaxy in two-space. The whole, immense galaxy, with its billions of stars, solar systems, and planets all compacted into a vast, flat, two-dimensional disk. For humans to travel in this realm, a Ship would have to create a pocket of three-dimensional space, which could intrude into two-space like a soap bubble, existing above *and below* the flat surface of a vast, calm ocean. This really is no harder (indeed it is actually quite a bit easier) than imagining hyperspace or other, complex, multidimensional models. And, when you think about it, it is logical that humans should travel between the stars via the simple, basic realm of two-space rather than some complex realm of multiple dimensions that nobody ever really understood anyway.

*But*, this simple realm has rules of its own. The laws of physics, and chemistry, and... well, hell, just about *everything* changes here. One of the most important of these changes is that time and space are different, so that it only takes weeks or months to sail between the stars.

Another major difference in two-space is that complex technology cannot exist here. The easiest way to think of it is simply to understand that two-space has a "grudge" against high-tech. Under the right circumstances living organisms and simple tools can exist here, but anything complex will immediately start breaking down.

People who claim to have excellent imaginations often seem to balk at this aspect of two-space. "Why *can't* complex technology exist in two-space?" they cry out in frustration. And the answer is, "Why can't people breathe water, or energy be created, or pi equal three, or entropy be reversed, or pigs fly in *our* universe?" Different universes are going to have quaint, unique, inexplicable, incomprehensible, unpredictable, and fundamentally *different* laws! And, as every traveler knows, if you travel to an exotic land, you'd better be prepared to accept and obey the law of the land.

So, if computers, complex spaceships, and other technological devices cannot exist in this realm, how then—you may ask—do you travel between the stars?

Well, our Ship, although it is a fragile, complex thing of wood, rope, and canvas, is really very simple technology. Two-space *tolerates* it. The "Keel" of the Ship creates a pocket of three-space that can exist in the midst of two-space. The Keel also generates gravity and warmth. (Or maybe it is two-space that provides the gravity. Nobody is really sure.) And the wood of this Ship is coated with a glowing white, two-dimensional "Moss" that gives light and air for the passengers crowded upon its decks. (A sense of superstitious homage causes the crew to always treat the Moss and the Keel as proper nouns, as befits such wondrous, mysterious, supernatural, life-giving objects. Ancient mythology, passed on from the Elder Races, says that the Moss was Lady Elbereth's Gift, intended to keep sailors out of the freezing vacuum hell of the Elder King.)

And, by the way, that Moss becomes a sentient, two-dimensional creature, or perhaps a colony of creatures, which makes the Ship... alive. Apparently *much* to its surprise. Thus, out of respect for this living creature that allows humans to travel upon its back between the stars, it is always referred to with a capital "S". It is... a Ship. One *hell* of a Ship. One hundred and fifty feet of living grace and star-spanning power.

Oh, one last thing. The "winds" of two-space are always exerting a constant, downward pressure. Two-space, you see, responds to our little pocket of three-space in much the same way that an oyster might react to a grain of sand. The Ship is an irritant and two-space is trying to squish it flat. Which seems only fair. So our Ship has forward-leaning masts, and the downward pressure catches the canvas sails and pushes the Ship forward.

See, it is all very simple and elegant. And stunningly beautiful as we zoom in on three officers standing on the upper quarterdeck of our improbable Ship. Watch closely now, the special effects are subtle but expensive and really quite impressive.

Two of them were tall with elegant, classic, navy blue jackets. The other was short and very wide, with a red coat. They were the captain, his first officer, and their marine lieutenant.

Beneath them was the glowing white wood of their Ship. Above them a forest of luminous white masts and spars, dirty off-white canvas sails, and brown hemp rigging hummed and sang as their Ship raced between the stars. Above the central blue that they sped through, above the perpetual purple twilight of the horizon, far above the rigging of their Ship, hung stunning, achingly beautiful, crystal clear stars, constellations, and galaxies, spread thickly and densely across the black sky.

All around them a constant, faint, ethereal music rang in their ears. Their noses breathed in the crisp air of two-space, which always smelled like new-fallen snow on a calm, clear winter morning. (Although belowdecks it sometimes smelled more like a locker room.)

It was a realm of beauty and wonder surpassing anything that mankind had ever known before.

And, as always, whenever sentient creatures are involved, they immediately muck it up and spoil the calm, exquisite grandeur of it all by trying to kill each other.

In this case their personal pocket paradise was marred by four *other* Ships coming to destroy them. Their enemy's goal was to "sink" their Ship so that it would pop into three-space, where they would all die hideous deaths in the cold vacuum of interstellar space.

Needless to say, the three officers on the upper quarterdeck ( *and* the small cloud of sailors and marines around them) all objected vigorously to this possibility. And therein lies our tale.

"My god, four of them!" said the first officer with a touch of despair in his voice.

"This isn't the first time people have tried to kill us," the captain replied calmly, looking at his first officer with eyes that were both less and *more* than human. "Lots of them, indeed *most* of them, are dead."

Lt. Thomas Melville was Master and Commander of Her Majesty, the Queen of Westerness' Ship, the *Fang*. He was the rightful captain of a sentient wooden Ship. They were traveling serenely across the shoreless seas of two-space, headed due west, two days out of Osgil with all sail set, on the long haul across the Grey Rift, between the spiral arms of the galaxy on their way to Old Earth.

Melville should have been a happy man as he and his two officers stood on the upper quarterdeck of his Ship. (*His* Ship, by God!) They should *all* have been very cheerful and lighthearted as they looked out upon the deep, dark blue of two-space, their eyes focused on the distant, purple horizon.

They existed in a world of wonder and excitement. They were young. They were victorious in past battles. The Osgil courts had declared the *Fang* to be a war prize and had awarded enough prize money to make them quite wealthy. And they were partaking in the greatest adventure that mankind had ever imagined: they were literally *sailing* among the stars.

But two of them, the captain and his first officer, were *not* happy. Each was responding differently to their current situation. Melville's response was fierce anger and determination. The first officer, Lt. Daniel Fielder, was worried, with a familiar, sick knot of fear welling up in his gut.

The third officer standing there was Lt. Broadax, the commander of their marine detachment. Broadax was a Dwarrowdelf in sworn service to the Crown of Westerness. She was short, squat, and wide, dressed in marine red, with wild, wiry black hair jutting out from under a round iron helmet and a scraggly

beard punctuating her gnarly red face and bloodshot eyes. The prospect of pending battle made *her* as gleeful as a piranha in a goldfish bowl.

"Hot damn! I wus afraid we wus gonna have a dull trip, an' now here comes more fun!" said Broadax, rolling her cigar across the broad, toothy smile that split the mass of gristle and hair that passed for her face.

"You didn't really think they'd let you get away with it, did you?" said Lt. Fielder, pointedly ignoring Broadax's bloodthirsty comments. "You should have known it was coming," continued the first officer. "You captured one of the Guldur frigates and they're coming to get it back."

"Hmm," replied their young captain. His response was echoed by a faint "Hmmm," from the pint-sized eight-legged alien spidermonkey on his shoulder.

Broadax and Fielder also had one of the strange little monkeys perched on their backs. The monkeys had adopted them on an alien world and the small, furry, fawn colored creatures had rapidly taken on the characteristics of their individual hosts. Melville's monkey managed to communicate an aura of calm confidence intermixed with flashes of youthful mischief and excitement. Fielder's monkey was looking over its shoulder apprehensively, craning its accordion neck in a comically anxious fashion. Broadax's monkey was bouncing up and down on her shoulder, with an excited "Eek!" escaping from it periodically.

The three of them stood shoulder-to-shoulder (or shoulder-to-hip in Broadax's case) looking out at the distant enemy sails. Melville was in the middle, providing a buffer space between his first officer and his marine lieutenant.

Melville's dog, Boye, was rubbing his head adoringly against the captain's leg. Boye had reached his full height, but he was still a puppy: awkward, skinny, ungainly, uncertain, and absolutely delighted with the world and his role in it. The dog *also* had a monkey perched upon his back, enjoying the world with the same puppylike glee that radiated from its host. An ancient, tattered old Ship's cat lolled on the railing beside them, keeping a disdainful eye on the brash young puppy.

"After all," Fielder continued, "how did the Westerness ambassador on Osgil put it? "You managed to provoke half the galaxy.""

"Ha! Piss on *that* bastard," said Broadax, snarling around her cigar and twirling her battle ax in her fingers for effect. ("Eep! Eep!" echoed her monkey for emphasis, puffing on its own cigar.) "'E's *dead* , ain't 'e?" she continued. "An' *we're* alive!" ("Eek eep! Eek!") As though that trumped all other arguments in a Dwarfrowdelf's mind. And there *was* a certain irrefutable purity to her logic.

It was true that the pompous Westerness ambassador to Osgil was dead, and they were alive in spite of the efforts of their own ambassador ( *and* the Guldur and Orak Empires) but Fielder chose to ignore that.

"Hmm," said Melville. ("Hmmm," repeated his monkey.) The slender, gray-eyed, brown-haired young captain had the top of his left ear missing, and Fielder couldn't help staring at it, wondering, not for the first time, if the sword cut that had clipped Melville's ear had also affected his hearing. Or his thinking.

"They are taking you quite seriously," Fielder continued. He had the petulant good looks of an aristocrat, and his dark hair, dark eyes, broad shoulders, bushy sideburns and glowering brows were in marked contrast with his slender young captain. "Four of their frigates, identical to ours. We can assume they're carrying their new 24-pounder cannons, just like us. Except they'll each have two more cannon than us, since the Osgil took two of ours." The first officer had failed to mention that the *Fang* virtually bristled with 12-pounder cannons that their attackers would not have, but still the situation was grim.

"Hmm." ("Hmmm.")

"Ha!" said Broadax. ("Eek!") "They'd *better* take us seriously. We'll hand 'em their freakin' heads, an' send 'em to suck vacuum with the Elder King!" ("Eep! Eek!")

Their prize money had made them all wealthy, so Melville and Fielder were wearing gold-buttoned blue jackets of the finest wool, splendidly tailored. To Melville it was all so new and so much better than anything that he had ever had before, that it felt like borrowed finery.

Broadax's red coat took much more material, but it was of equal quality and splendor. Their jackets were belted over white trousers, and the two naval officers each had a sword and a pistol hanging comfortably from their belts. Melville had a gold epaulet on his right shoulder, while Fielder and Broadax had one on their left, and they all had gold braid on their cuffs.

Except for the round iron helmet that seemed to be obligatory for any Dwarrowdelf, no one else on the crew wore a hat. Their faces were tanned by the weird light of the Moss that coated their Ship, and most of the crew kept their hair short due to hygiene requirements in a realm where water was one of their most precious commodities.

And everyone aboard had bare feet. The deck and most of the bare wood on the Ship was coated with the lustrous, glowing white Moss that provided light and oxygen to the crew. This Moss was also a sentient, symbiotic life-form. For most members of the crew the physical contact of their bare feet on the deck provided a general empathic contact with their Ship. But for the captain the contact was much more powerful, and through his feet he could feel *Fang*'s fierce eagerness for the approaching battle.

Melville's Ship was alive, it was feral, and it lusted for combat like a hound aching for the hunt. And the captain could not help but echo the battle-lust of his Ship.

Fielder was disconcerted by the combined effect of all the "Ha!'s" and "Hmmm's," but he persisted doggedly. "They have us boxed in, but if we turn around now with all sail spread, we might be able to cut

between two of them and make it back to Osgil. One advantage we have is that we're faster. With our royals, our spritsail topsail, and our studding sails we can outrun them. They might cripple us as we pass between them, but we're only two days out from Osgil. There's a chance we can limp into port, or maybe we'll get some help from Osgil naval vessels patrolling the area. But there's *no* chance of help in the direction we're going." Fielder's monkey continued to scan the horizon anxiously.

"Hmm." ("Hmmm.")

"Ha!" ("Eep!")

The Guldur Ships were coming at them from four directions. Two were coming from the front at the ten o'clock and two o'clock positions, and two from their rear at four o'clock and eight o'clock, closing in on the *Fang* with geometric perfection across the flat, blue plane of two-space, or Flatland as it was often called. The Guldur must have had advance notice of the *Fang*'s exact route and departure time in order to do this, which implied that someone in Osgil had passed on classified information to their enemy.

Melville was deeply angered by the threat to his beloved Ship and crew, but at one level he couldn't help but feel a faint twinge of... satisfaction. It wasn't that he *liked* having an entire evil empire try to kill him (or two evil empires, if you counted the Orak), but he took it as a kind of "vote of confidence." It showed that he was pissing off the very people who most deserved it.

"No," the captain finally replied. "The geometry is working against us. It will take too long to turn around. That will give them a chance to close in on us and we'd definitely have to fight two at once, and then all four could be on us if they damage us enough to slow us down. If we charge one of the bastards to our front, then we have a chance. Besides," he added with a grin, "the boys need the exercise. There's no hurry, but soon I think we'll clear for action."

"Aye! Tha's the spirit, Cap'n!" said Broadax. ("Eep! Eek!")

Fielder looked over at Broadax with a shake of his head, thinking dark thoughts about the "Demented dwarf" and her suicidal joy of combat. Then, with a cold shock, looking at Melville's gleaming eyes and grim smile, he realized their captain shared that joy. Hell, Melville was even worse!

"I was afraid you'd say that," said the first officer. "Damn. I'd just started to become accustomed to some of the little luxuries in life. Like breathing."

"We can handle it," said Melville, with quiet confidence.

"Hoo-rah!" said Broadax, crouching and punching the air with delight. ("Eeek!" echoed her monkey, bouncing up and down on her helmet.)

"We can handle it? For God's sake, sir," Fielder hissed, trying to keep his voice down so the others on the quarterdeck wouldn't hear, "if I had an ego that big I'd be an admiral."

"No brag. Just fact," Melville replied with that fey smile and quicksilver glint in his eyes that Fielder always dreaded. "Remember Ambergris."

"Yes, but the Guldur didn't have any of their new, 24-pounder frigates opposing us in the main battle at Ambergris. *And* you caught them by surprise at Ambergris so they didn't know to concentrate their fire on us. *And* you had the whole damned Sylvan and Stolsh fleets helping you out!"

"It's simple geometry," the captain replied calmly. "We'll charge one of them, take him out in passing, *and then* run for it. You gotta have confidence. Remember, as Saint Blauer put it, 'If you doubt yourself while facing your opponent, you're already outnumbered.'"

"Dammit, sir, we *are* outnumbered!" said Fielder in exasperation. "There's *four* of 'em!"

That brought a sincere chuckle from Melville and Broadax, and a peal of delighted *EEK*s from their monkeys. Melville's knack for poetry brought an appropriate verse to his mind and straight to his lips.

"To every man upon the earth  
Death comes soon or late;  
And how can man die better  
than facing fearful odds  
For the ashes of his fathers  
And the temples of his gods?"

This brought a growl of approval from Broadax, along with nods and satisfied grins from the quarterdeck crew. Melville had the Voice of command and authority, something that many leaders never develop, *and* he had a knack for poetry that could provide the right Words at the moment of truth. It made them feel larger than life and let them dip into a deep cultural reservoir of strength and courage. But those Words only served to increase Fielder's exasperation.

"Well *I* can think of a 'better' way to die," Fielder hissed. "Like when I'm ninety, at the hands of a jealous husband. And not in this god forsaken realm, but someplace..."

"Where the virgins are soft  
as the roses they twine,  
And all save the spirit of man

is divine."

That brought an appreciative chuckle from Melville. He loved it when Fielder turned poetry back upon him, and his first officer had gotten fairly good at it, perhaps out of sheer self-defense.

"Captain," Fielder continued, "all they have to do is get one lucky shot. If they take down one mast or one spar, that could slow us enough for the rest to catch up, and then it will be four to one, with us even further away from any possible help. Captain, we need to turn about."

"If they damage us enough to slow us down, then we'll maneuver and take them out one-by-one. We can handle them one at a time. Now go take command of the lower quarterdeck and give the order. Clear for action." And *there*, there was that insane, fell, fey grin again.

"I guess we'll have to call off the pistol match on the lower deck," Melville continued glumly. The captain took pride in his pistol skill. Pistol marksmanship was one area where he had a chance of winning a Ship-wide match, and he was truly sorry that the competition had to be canceled. *Oh well*, he thought, *just one more score to settle with the bastards attacking us.*

Fielder looked at his captain in dismay. *We are about to die*, he thought. *We're outnumbered four-to-one, and the crazy bastard is sorry that the pistol match had to be called off. Besides*, he added to himself, *I'd have beaten the pompous, poetry-prating, prat bastard.*

"Very good, sir," Fielder responded, feeling himself sink into a familiar, fatalistic funk. It was almost like an old friend coming back. A most *unwelcome* old friend who drank all your beer, ate all your food and left his stinky, smelly laundry everywhere.

Broadax just laughed as Fielder saluted and left, while her monkey capered joyfully on her helmet.

Then Melville gave the command that would set the battle into motion. "Quartermaster, point us straight at the enemy Ship to our two o'clock."

"Aye, sir," the quartermaster replied, beaming with pleasure as he spun the wheel to the right. "Two o'clock and straight at 'em it is."

"Where are we going, and why am I in this handbasket?" muttered Fielder as he headed down the ladder to the lowerside.

The quarterdeck personnel (consisting of the quartermaster and his two mates, the midshipman of the watch, and the marine guard) had all been paying careful attention, subtly straining and unobtrusively shifting to hear the words spoken by the three officers at the rail.

After Fielder left, Lt. Broadax turned to check on the status of the quarterdeck's marine guard. When the guard saw her looking at him he snapped to attention, but this was Private Dwakins and he had a very short "attention span." Broadax nodded at him as she started to pass by, and her nod was Dwakins' cue to revert back to his normal, slack-jawed slump as he asked a question. "Lewtenat, yew don't think thar'll be combat, dew yah?"

Dwakins was one of the new recruits they had picked up on Osgil. Broadax looked up at him with a confident smile. Now was the time for *leadership* and *motivation*. Broadax had been a private, a corporal, and a sergeant, and had just recently been reluctantly promoted to lieutenant after many happy years as an NCO. She was the product of huge doses of marine leadership and motivation over the years, and she had learned her lessons well. Now she proudly took one of her favorite lines and served it up to the young private, savoring every word.

"Whassa matter, Dwakins?" said Broadax. "Ye wanna live forever? Remember what they told ye when ye joined up! 'In *blood* ye were born, in *blood* ye shall live an' in *blood* ye shall die!'"

"Damn," replied the private. "Ah don't remember 'em tellin' me that part when Ah joined up."

"Oh?" said Broadax, momentarily disconcerted.

"Well, hell, Ah think if'n they'd a tol' me that, I might'a not signed up."

"Don't try ta think, dammit! Ye'll jist hurt yerself."

"I'm sure I'd a remembered that," Dwakins continued, with a look of cross-eyed concentration on his face. "Ah don't know how Ah missed it! An', ya know, now that Ah thinks about it, Ah *would* like ta live forever. Or at least for quite a while longer."

Her best shot at motivation having failed, Broadax fell back on "Plan B," the tried-and-true, time tested technique that had been mastered by a thousand generations of NCO's. When the enemy has you off balance, go on the attack.

"Dwakins, I think the lifeguard shoulda pulled ye out o' the gene pool a looong time ago."

"Wull yeah, 'cause muh skin gits all wrinkled up if'n Ah spends too much time in the water." Then he

remembered to add, "Mah'yam," giving the proper respectful title to a female officer. At least he had been told she was female, although he had significant doubts on that matter.

Dwakins had repulsed her first two assaults with the innocent ease of the truly oblivious, but Broadax's main force was standing by in reserve, waiting to cut him off at the knees. "Dwakins," she said, looking up at him with baleful glare of her beady, bloodshot eyes. A glare made all the more effective because it was a concentrated essence, trapped in the narrow band between the iron Dwarrowdelf helmet and her beard. "Ye shut the hell up, pay attention to yer duty, and fight when I damned well tell ye to fight! Or I'll kick yer tail so hard ye'll be eatin' out o' yer rectum! Ye got that?"

"Yes, mah'yam!" he gulped. Dwakins was overwhelmed with relief. Marine motivation and clever insults confused him, but threats now, threats he could handle.

If only he could figure out what a "wreckdum" was.

The quarterdeck personnel were all grinning at each other after they heard their captain give the order to prepare for combat. Young Mr. Anthony Hayl was the midshipman on duty, and he listened in confusion as the sailors smiled confidently and whispered over his head. They were all trying to look wise and intelligent, generally with indifferent success.

"Our cap'n's a real fire eater."

"Aye, he's a right plucked one, an' lucky ta boot."

"'We'll take 'em *all* on,' 'e sez!"

"Aye, an mebbe we'll board one o' the bastards an' make sum more prize mune!"

Each of the crew had one of the eight-legged spider monkeys perched on his shoulder, and the monkeys were echoing their hosts' ferocious enthusiasm for the approaching combat.

Hayl had just come aboard the *Fang* a few days ago. At twelve years old he was as green and inexperienced as any crewman or officer that ever was, but he already had a soft, furry, eight-legged monkey perched on his shoulder.

The baby monkeys always appeared when no one was looking. How they reproduced and where they came from was a mystery. When they first arrived they were palm sized and dappled like a fawn.

Hayl's monkey had shown up two days ago and had clung to him tenaciously ever since. The monkeys had a weird, upside-down face that could be pulled into their thorax on an accordion neck. When it came up out of the thorax, its mouth came out first, then its nose and eyes, and finally its neck. Right now Hayl's monkey shared its master's uncertainty, clinging tight to the boy's shoulder with its jug-eared head pulled back into its thorax. The only thing you could see was a hairy half-moon sunk into its fluffy chest, with its chittering teeth on top, and its nose and part of its eyes peering out fearfully.

Hayl was reaching up and stroking his tiny monkey, making reassuring noises and wishing *he* had a hole that he could pull his head into. Just offhand, it looked to him like Lt. Fielder was the only sane person onboard, while the captain—*and* everyone else on the Ship—was stark, raving mad. He had been raised on Osgil, it was his home, and all his instincts said, "Run! Run away! Go home!" But the captain said fight, so fight they would.

And as he faced his first sea battle at the tender age of twelve, young Midshipman Hayl was a very frightened, homesick boy.

\* \* \*

Often I think of the beautiful town  
That is seated by the sea;  
Often in thought go up and down  
The pleasant streets of that dear old town,  
And my youth comes back to me.  
And a verse of a Lapland song  
Is haunting my memory still  
"A boy's will is the wind's will,  
And the thoughts of youth  
are long, long thoughts."

"My Lost Youth"  
Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

# CHAPTER THE 1ST

## Clear for Action: "The Beauty and Mystery of the Ships"

I remember the black wharves and the slips,  
And the sea-tides tossing free;  
And the Spanish sailors with bearded lips,  
And the beauty and mystery of the ships,  
And the magic of the sea.  
And the voice of that wayward song  
Is singing and saying still:  
"A boy's will is the wind's will,  
And the thoughts of youth  
are long, long thoughts."

"My Lost Youth"  
Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

By the end of the twentieth century, the art of conversation had pretty much died on Old Earth. A person from that toxic era probably could not have truly imagined the effects of a lifetime spent without TV, video games, movies on demand, and other forms of electronic entertainment. In the retro-culture of Westernness, true conversation was born anew. And aboard the *H.M.S. Fang*, among an intelligent, literate crew confined together for months, even years on end, conversation flourished as a cherished art form.

The art of conversation was not at all like someone from that decayed era of ancient Earth would probably have imagined it to be. It was filled with long companionable pauses. A full day might be spent pleasantly preparing bon mots and witty quips to present to one's peers at dinner. While conversation flowed within one group, a messmate would be lounging about, quietly reading a tattered old book. Another might be writing in a journal. Conversation and writing often involved long, detailed descriptions—it was Zane Grey rather than Louis L'Amour. (Although both of these classic Western authors were deeply beloved.) Sketching was a common pastime, and free time was often filled with in-depth classes, passing on skills and knowledge. Music and intricate crafts occupied many of the crew's free hours. So did long, pleasant card games. And contests.

Shooting contests were popular on the Ships of the Westernness Navy, and on this Ship, Sunday afternoon shooting matches were a favorite diversion.

In two-space there was no weather and no daylight—only eternal, splendid, star-spangled night. The days and weeks were tracked by carefully calibrated hourglasses. And the Ship's calendar indicated that this was Sunday afternoon.

Earlier this morning there had been "captain's rounds," a thorough inspection of every nook and cranny for dirt, disrepair, and disorder. With that solemn, Sunday ceremony completed to the captain's

satisfaction, the afternoon could now be devoted to enjoyment.

Thus, while the captain and his first officer were on the upper quarterdeck observing the approaching Guldur Ships, most of the *Fangs* were gathered on the lower quarterdeck for a pistol match.

"There can be absolutely *no* doubt that females are the equal of men in battle when it comes to marksmanship," said Mrs. Vodi, the venerable surgeon's assistant, or lob-lolly girl. "There can be debate, and good people can disagree when it comes to other realms, such as swordsmanship, where physical strength comes into play, but *this* is a universally admired warrior skill and it is one area where the field is level."

Mrs. Vodi was patiently explaining this to Cuthbert Asquith XVI, in response to his query as to why she and Lady Elphinstone, the Ship's surgeon, were participating in the pistol match. The diminutive earthling had trouble understanding why anyone would participate in such a "sport" but at least for the sailors, the marines, and the Ship's two rangers, this was part of their job description. Mrs. Vodi stood in a dowdy black shift with her gray hair up in a bun, while Asquith wore the height of fashion in civilian clothes, with a snuff colored waistcoat over white breeches.

"God made all men equal," Mrs. Vodi continued, "but Mr. Colt made men *and* women equal. *If* you're willing to practice." With that she sent a stream of chewing tobacco over the rail into two-space for emphasis. ("*Sppuutt.*") Her toothless face looked to Asquith like a good-natured golden raisin, and when she spit it was as though the raisin had contorted up and ejected a seed. Her monkey, perched happily on her left shoulder, also spit a tiny stream of tobacco juice overboard ("*Sppriitt*"), in an impressive display of synchronized spitting.

Asquith could not help but look, in horrified fascination, as the two streams of brown juice arced out, joined together in midair, and sank into the vast dark blue plane of Flatland. Then it bounced back out once and disappeared forever into interstellar space.

"So," said Mrs. Vodi after unleashing her expectoratory exclamation mark, "there should be nothing but scorn for any female whose job might bring her into combat, if she doesn't willingly and constantly practice her pistolcraft.

"Weapons, particularly handguns, are critical, indeed indispensable, for any small person in neutralizing a size and strength disadvantage. Before there were firearms, our ancestors were routinely terrorized by bullies whose only justification was that they were big and hairy. There are fools in every era who would bring back those dark times. Whenever a culture returns to those days, whenever citizens are disarmed or women are told that they shouldn't learn to shoot, then it is women who suffer most. In view of that irrefutable fact, women, of all people, should master this skill."

Cuthbert Asquith XVI was a citizen of Old Earth who had chosen to make a foray into two-space, in order to see "primitive, exotic worlds." Nano-tech and bio-robotic implants were first-class tickets to a ghastly death upon entry to Flatland, because the strange, exotic realm of two-space was corrosive to high technology, and complex devices decayed quickly. Thus, most worlds were content to settle into a retro-culture environment, with technology remaining stable at levels which Earth had experienced prior to World War I.

Old Earth was a rare exception to the galaxywide retro-culture norm. Earth was a high-tech world teeming with billions of people, most of whom refused to give up their nanotechnology and bioengineered bodies to travel the galaxy. But Earth still had great power and influence within the star kingdom of Westerness. So, upon being contacted by the government of Earth, the Westerness foreign ministry had readily obliged by giving Asquith what seemed to be a safe billet in a small consulate on Ambergris.

Thus Cuthbert Asquith XVI had purged himself of all his implants and nano-tech, and arrived on the sleepy Stolsh world of Ambergris. Just in time for that world to be invaded in the opening stages of what was now known as the Great Two-Space War. A war that was still raging across that spiral arm of the galaxy.

Having experienced some of the excitement he thought he was seeking, and finding it *not* to his liking, Asquith escaped Ambergris aboard the *H.M.S. Fang* as the sole survivor of the Westerness Consulate on that unhappy planet. Now the little earthling was aboard the *Fang* en route from Osgil to Old Earth, trying to figure out how he could politely escape from Mrs. Vodi's harangue on the responsibility to participate in pistol marksmanship training. It occurred to him to briefly fake some social malady, but God only knew what remedy the medico might force upon him.

"You know I'm not *just* responsible for the crew's medical welfare," Vodi continued. "I'm also trained and qualified to watch out for their emotional and psychological welfare. Post-traumatic stress disorder, debriefings, psychology, counseling, and all that. In my training I learned that Dr. Sigmund Freud, in his *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, discovered 'that a fear of weapons is a sign of retarded sexual and emotional maturity.' Well," she continued with a leer, "no one ever accused *me* of being sexually retarded! Heh, heh."

*Whoop, whoop. Info overload,* thought Asquith, looking at the ample, mature, matronly body of Mrs. Vodi. *I really didn't need to know about that.* Then he looked longingly over the railing at the deep, dark blue of two-space and thought, *Just one quick leap and it will all be over. One jump, a brief instant of pain, and I'll escape this insane asylum forever.*

Mrs. Vodi saw him gazing intently over the side and said companionably, "It really is fascinating, isn't it. I never get tired of looking out at the splendid blue fabric of space."

"More like the ugly black floorboards of hell," muttered Asquith.

The competition had quickly weeded out the less able pistol shots in the Ship's crew, so that now only the *Fang*'s best marksmen were firing off the greenside of the lower quarterdeck. Much of the rest of the crew was watching from the mainyard, the mizzenyard, and the railing along the greenside waist. The jollyboat had been moved out of the way and the competitors aimed at targets hung off the greenside of the Ship from the mizzen yardarm. The audience took great pleasure from the show as they engaged in betting and banter from the sidelines.

Luckily for Asquith, the number of competitors had dwindled to the point where Vodi's turn to shoot came quickly. As she moved to the railing and picked up one of the muzzle-loading pistols that they used in two-space, Asquith happily slid out of range of Vodi's harangue *and* her tobacco juice. Only to be intercepted by yet another well-meaning crew member who felt it was his responsibility to educate the earthworm.

"Marksmanship is important to keep you alive in combat," said Lt. Buckley Archer, slipping smoothly in to replace Mrs. Vodi. Just a few short months ago the dapper young man with his bushy sideburns and elegant red goatee had been a midshipman, but the loss of their old Ship, the boarding and taking of the *Fang*, and the subsequent battles to escape the invading Guldur had slaughtered the Ship's officers to such a degree that young Archer had been given a field commission and was now serving as the Ship's second officer.

"If you are a good shot," Archer continued, "then you gain a key tactical advantage by opening up the ground between you and the threat. At arm's length, your opponent doesn't have to be good, he just has to be lucky. The better the shot you are, the more distance is your friend. As Lt. Fielder says, 'Distance can be our friend. But *not* if the other guy is a better shot than you. Then you can run, but you'll only die tired.'

"Our weapons are really very accurate, you know," the lieutenant continued. "The barrels in all of our muskets and pistols have rifling in them. And the musket balls and pistol balls we fire really aren't 'balls' at all. See," he said, holding up what looked like a misshapen lump of lead for Asquith to see, "they're bullet shaped, with a cavity in the back. It goes down the barrel easy, but when you fire it the cavity expands and grips the rifling in the barrel, making it damned accurate. But the gun is only as accurate as the one who shoots it, so you gotta practice!"

Asquith nodded politely. He was not sure which was worse: the mindless monotony of going off somewhere so that he could be alone, or the tedium of listening to the inane prattle of these barbarians. He reminded himself that a conversation, almost any conversation, was probably better than being alone with himself.

He could not understand these people. This week it was a pistol competition, next week a boxing match was planned. They seemed to be always looking for a fight—in a deranged, cheerful sort of way. If there was no one to fight, they fought each other. When they were all alone they probably punched themselves in the nose and shot themselves in the foot just to stay in practice.

"You know," Archer continued, "if there's danger, and you don't prepare, if you don't train for it, then your unconscious mind will let you know about it in your dreams. There are lots of different versions of the same basic message. For example, people who are into martial arts sometimes dream that their punches and kicks don't work. But people who have to go into combat with guns have dreams that their gun doesn't work. Bullets droop out of the barrel, bullets have no effect, gun jams, can't pull the trigger, can't find the gun, these are *all* different versions of the same thing. And you know what it means?"

"Um, that your dinner doesn't agree with you?" said Asquith.

"Ha! It could be that," the young lieutenant replied, his seemingly invulnerable sarcasm screens leaving him completely undeterred by Asquith's response, "but usually it means that you need to go train! See? Your unconscious mind *knows* that there is danger and it is worried that you cannot perform. So for most people, the only answer is to prepare! To train, and train hard!"

"Ah, I see. Does that make this annoying repetitive dream go away?"

"Usually. 'Cause, you see, the dream is your unconscious mind *begging* you to go train! Your unconscious mind is telling you that you are unconfident, and training builds confidence! As the Duke of Wellington said, 'No man fears to do that which he knows he does well.' Once I train, then I'm victorious in my dreams! And *this*, this competition, is great training, complete with an element of stress, and it's *fun*! And it's good entertainment for the whole crew."

"Well, thank you, Lieutenant. If I ever have those annoying dreams, I'll know just what to do. I don't suppose you know what it means when you dream that you are in public with no clothes on? Do you think your unconscious mind is telling you to do the laundry?"

Archer just shook his head with a good-natured grin and went to take his turn to shoot.

Asquith looked around at the group on the lower quarterdeck. Captain Melville, Lt. Fielder, and Lt. Broadax had gone to the upper quarterdeck after the lookout had spotted a sail on the distant horizon. Other than Mrs. Vodi and Lt. Archer, the remaining competitors were their two buckskin-clad rangers, Josiah Westminster and Aubrey Valandil; Mr. Barlet, their master gunner; the Ship's purser, Brother Theo Petreckski, complete with brown robe and bad haircut; their surgeon, Lady Elphinstone, in a buttercup-yellow dress with a grass-green sash about her waist and her long golden hair braided behind her; a handful of red-jacketed marines, including Gunny Von Rito and Corporal Petrico; and the captain's two bodyguards, Ulrich and Grenoble. With the sole exception of Asquith, everyone had a small, fawn colored, eight-legged monkey on his or her back.

Ulrich, the captain's vicious, deranged coxswain, was shooting now, and the crew watched in amazement as the little sociopath fired his two pistols with blazing speed. Usually Ulrich spent his time nurturing his beloved pigeons, but a pistol match could draw him away from his obsession with his feathered friends. His shots were not always the most accurate, but the scoring was based on a complex

combination of speed and accuracy, and Ulrich was lightning fast. Almost unbelievably fast, and fairly accurate in the process. And always there was that disturbing gleam in his stare, like the madness in a weasel's eye.

One of the few new crew members in a key position was Grenoble, a "bodyguard" assigned to Captain Melville by the King of Osgil. The people of Osgil were Sylvan, like Lady Elphinstone, their surgeon. They were an ancient race of creatures who inhabited densely forested, low-gravity planets, and the King of Osgil was as close to a "High King" as the far-flung race of Sylvans would ever have. When the king of all Sylvans assigned you a bodyguard you didn't turn him down, but Grenoble was already causing tension with Ulrich. As the captain's coxswain, Ulrich was normally the captain's assigned bodyguard, and the pint-sized psychopath was becoming jealous of the Sylvan.

The Sylvan was Ulrich's polar opposite and they probably would have clashed even under the best of conditions. Grenoble was a tall, pure, haughty paladin, on loan from the King of Osgil's personal bodyguard. Ulrich, on the other hand, was a malicious killer, redeemed only by the fact that he was pitifully loyal to Melville. Other than that the only positive quality in the vicious little sailor was his apparent love and affection for the pigeons that he nurtured and raised onboard.

Even their clothing was a study in opposites. Ulrich, festooned with pistols, knives, and a vicious little short sword strapped to his hip, slouched against the rail in his dirty blue coat and canvas pants. While Grenoble bore a gleaming knight's sword at his side, ramrod straight and slender in the "crimson-and-clover" of the Sylvan King's Own Regiment of Bodyguards: a short, hunter-green jacket over grass-green trousers, with scarlet braid and piping.

It was fascinating to watch the two compete. Ulrich was lightning fast while Grenoble was deadly accurate, and the antipathy between the two of them was palpable.

The Ship's remaining officers were Lt. Crater, Lt. Broadax, Mr. Hans (their sailing master), and Mr. Tibbits (the Ship's carpenter), all of whom had been eliminated early in the competition. With the exception of Lt. Broadax (who had gone to the upper quarterdeck with the captain and first officer), these officers were now lounging on the opposite side of the lower quarterdeck, watching the match from this privileged position while the rest of the crew had to crowd the yards or the railing at the Ship's waist.

The contest came to a sudden halt as the first officer returned from the upper quarterdeck and called out, "The fun's over, me lads. Four Guldur Ships have come to crash our party. *Clear for action!* "

Asquith stayed on the lower quarterdeck as the crew went into high gear, preparing the *Fang* for combat. The Ship was always as busy and crowded as a beehive. Except without the honey. And a lot more stinger. Now it was a beehive that had been kicked over. To the earthling's untutored eye the activity around him was a blur of crowded, noisy and confusing chaos, as everyone prepared the Ship for combat and moved to their battle stations. The Ship herself seemed to tremble with anticipation when a long earthquake tremor shook the decks as the massive 24-pounders were run out.

For Asquith it was a magical transformation from chaos to order. For the *Fang* it was a daily ritual that had been performed countless times in the past. But this time, once again, it was for real.

The guns were run out with great thunderous, squealing thumps, bulkheads were knocked down, and the decks were cleared for action. On both the upper and lower gundecks the usual clutter of cargo pallets, cages for livestock and poultry, and everything that could be disassembled was struck down into the hold, so that (with the exception of the Ship's boats) there should be a clean sweep fore and aft. Scuttle-butts full of fresh drinking water were centrally located with dippers hanging from them.

All hands were at their action stations. Ordinarily that would mean that the watch below would need to be roused, but they were already up for captain's rounds and then most of them stayed to watch the pistol match on the lower deck.

Actually it was no longer quite appropriate to speak of them all as "hands." They were not all human. Many of them were Guldur and, strictly speaking, they were... "paws." Then there was a small handful of the reptilian, semi-aquatic Stolsh, who might technically be considered "claws."

The Guldur on the Ships attacking them had hateful Goblan "ticks" on their backs, working together with the Guldur pack masters to drive them into dark paths and evil purposes. The Guldur in the *Fang*'s crew had been liberated from their ticks and pack masters when the *Fang* was boarded and captured. They were now trusted Shipmates and proud veterans of famous battles at the approach to Ambergris and the siege of Ai.

At some point in the distant past an ancient Ur species had seeded the galaxy with genetically similar stock. The Guldur were canine derived and were useless in the rigging. On Guldur Ships a cloud of Goblan (who appeared to be derived from baboons) did all the work in the upper rigging, but anywhere that a Guldur could put his hindpaws on a stable deck they served the *Fang* with distinction.

Up in the rigging a crew of crack Sylvan topmen stood easy. These expert sailors were a gift of the Osgil High King, in thanks for the *Fang*'s service to the Sylvans and the Stolsh during the Guldur invasion of that part of their spiral arm. As you got higher up in the rigging the pull of gravity got less and less. The Sylvans were natives of vast forests on low-gravity worlds, and they were natural topmen, capable of supernatural acrobatic feats in the low-gravity fields high up in the rigging.

Besides the Guldur, the Sylvans, and a few Stolsh, the only other nonhuman member of their crew was Lt. Broadax, the Dwarrowdelf commander of their marine detachment. And then there were the monkeys. The monkeys. Their secret weapon. Their force multiplier. A secret weapon *so* secret, that even *they* didn't know how in the hell the critters reproduced!

The monkeys had adopted them on an alien world, and it was quickly discovered that the eight-legged

beasties could block bullets. In combat the monkeys carried a wooden belaying pin, which they constantly waved around with amazing strength and speed in a seemingly bizarre, aimless fashion. After the battle the belaying pins were often found to be riddled and encrusted with blocked and deflected musket balls, and each wide-eyed crewman would sit down with "his" monkey and try to find some special treat to give to the little creature, some favorite place to scratch it, as they cooed, "Goood monkey. Niiice monkey."

Every crew member and all of the dogs had a monkey, and each monkey now held a belaying pin. Since each monkey "bonded" and became almost permanently attached to only one individual, be it man, Guldur, Sylvan, or dog, it didn't need a name. Soon it was thought of as an extension of that personality and it became "the captain's monkey" or "Broadax's monkey." Even the "bearer" of the monkey began to see it as a part of himself, therefore he tended to not even think of it at all, secure in its constant presence.

And so a crew of human, Guldur, Sylvan, Stolsh, Dwarrowdelf, monkeys, sentient alien cannons, and a feral, sentient Ship all stood ready for combat.

On the upper quarterdeck Lt. Broadax stood beside Melville. She had a cigar clinched in her teeth and her monkey, perched atop her helmet, also clutched a lit cigar in one upper hand and a belaying pin in the other. The monkey was taking periodic puffs off the cigar while flailing the belaying pin in intricate figure-eight and cloverleaf patterns with such speed and power that it hummed and whistled as it sliced through the air. Broadax's people had evolved on high-gravity worlds and her heredity combined with her uniform and her nasty habit to make her a short, squat, bearded, red cloud of toxic cigar smoke.

Behind Melville was his coxswain and bodyguard, Ulrich. Ulrich's monkey emitted the same surly viciousness as its host and in addition to a belaying pin it was flipping a short dagger in the air.

Next to Ulrich was Melville's Sylvan bodyguard, Grenoble. Grenoble's new monkey was still young, holding a belaying pin in its two top hands while clinging to the Sylvan's shoulder with the remaining six hands. Grenoble kept looking askance at his monkey, not at all sure what to make of this creature that had appeared mysteriously and now seemed permanently attached to him.

A quartermaster and two mates stood at the wheel. Behind them was Hargis, Melville's clerk, standing by to time and record the battle. The remaining members of the quarterdeck crew were young Midshipman Hayl, a marine guard, and a Ship's boy standing by to serve as a runner.

On the lower quarterdeck Fielder was in charge, complete with his own quartermaster team, a clerk's mate, a marine guard, and a midshipman. If anything happened to Melville, Fielder would assume command.

High up in the rigging the Sylvan topmen stood beside crack human topmen, with pistol and sword at

their hips, ready to adjust sails, repel boarders, or attack into the enemy rigging. On the upperside old Hans stood with the topmen. On the lowerside the bosun did the same. Marine sharpshooters manned the crow's nests. Gathered aft and beside the upper quarterdeck, Lt. Broadax's marines served as a ready reserve. In the same location on the lowerside Brother Theo and a handful of purser's mates stood with the two rangers, forming an additional reserve.

Their medical personnel had moved down into the hold. An operating table, consisting of sea chests lashed together and covered with tightly drawn sailcloth, was centrally located beneath an expanse of radiant white ceiling. In one well illuminated corner of the room was a much feared device known as "the Rack," consisting mostly of braces and leather-covered chains, designed to hold writhing, pain-wracked patients in various positions during operations. Dressings and coil after coil of bandages sat beside a grim array of saws, retractors, scalpels, forceps, trephines, catlings, and other mysterious torture devices.

Lady Elphinstone and Mrs. Vodi both wore freshly laundered white linen caps, sleeves, and aprons over their startlingly different buttercup-yellow and drab black dresses. More aprons were neatly folded and stacked close at hand, so they could quickly change aprons to avoid transferring infection from one surgery to the next. Elphinstone had her long blond braids pinned up and Vodi's gray hair was in its usual bun. Buckets and swabs waited in the corner, full of antiseptic and water to swab the decks when they became bloody, sand to spread on the slick wet decks, and ominous empty buckets to hold amputated limbs and body parts.

The cats had all gathered in the hospital, curled up in corners, peering out from beneath bunks, or sitting at Elphinstone and Vodi's feet, grumbling and mewling plaintively about the inconvenience of it all. They were making it clear that they were unhappy with the situation, and they were ready to take their complaints to the management, thankjewverymuch. Meow.

Doc Etzen and Doc Brun, their two corpsmen, stood at the upper and lower hatches with their aid bags, ready to provide triage, immediate lifesaving medical attention, and to direct the evacuation of the wounded.

Roxy, the one-eyed old cook, stood by with her mates, ready to refresh the scuttlebutts and to act as litter-bearers. And old Roxy was a hell of a shot with a pistol and sudden death with her meat cleaver if push came to shove.

Deep in the hold the carpenter and his mates formed a damage-control party, standing by to provide repairs to the precious Keel, brace up structural damage, or to sally up and assist Hans or the bosun with repairs to masts, yards, and spars.

In the rigging, on the quarterdeck, in the surgery, and in the hold, all was ready. But the battle would be won or lost by the guns and their crews. *They* were the deadly, destructive arm of the complex compound organism that was their Ship. The success or failure of the guns would mean the difference

between continued life... or a cold, painful, lonely death, with their frozen lifeless corpses floating forever through interstellar vacuum.

Captain Melville had developed a strategy that played to the strengths of the *Fang* and her crew. And their great advantage, their edge over any potential opponent, was the tremendous accuracy of their 24-pounders when Melville was personally aiming the guns.

Gunpowder would only smolder in two-space. To make a pistol, a musket, or a cannon "fire" a projectile you had to place a specially designed Keel charge at the base of the barrel, which protruded out from the back of the barrel like a glowing white nipple. A musket ball or cannonball was rammed down the muzzle, and at the breech end of the barrel it lodged against the Keel charge. Two-space weapons didn't have or need a normal trigger. When the firer made physical contact with the "nipple" of the Keel charge it generated a pulse of directed energy that blasted the projectile down the barrel. The Keel charge could be used repeatedly, and it actually got better with time.

The Keel charges on the guns were small versions of the large Keel that ran the length of the Ship and gave them the ability to exist in two-space. Like all Keels they had a coat of glowing white Moss on them and the Moss was sentient. Not only was the Ship alive, but the pistols, muskets, and cannons in two-space also had a degree of intelligence. The firer could actually use the innate intellect of the gun to help direct the bullet or cannonball toward its target. Over time the gun captain and the gun became a team, developing a high degree of accuracy, like a horse and rider, or a hunting dog and a hunter learning to work together, forming a synergy, a gestalt that was greater than the sum of the parts.

The bigger the gun, the greater the intelligence. Pistols and muskets were barely sentient, sending an empathic "purr" of pleasure and eagerness to the person who fired them. The 12-pound cannons were like puppies, sending a telepathic, dog-like yelp of fierce delight that registered clearly in the firer's mind. But the 24-pounders were something else entirely. Melville and his crew had boarded and captured the *Fang*, complete with her cannon. Later, when *they* were the ones manning the 24-pounders in combat, they were stunned by the bloodlust that emanated from these huge cannons when they were fired. A bloodlust that was a distant echo of the savage spirit of the Ship herself.

In one critical battle Melville had learned how to harness the savage malevolence of the cannon with the deadly computing power of the Ship. This was a technique that the Guldur had never developed, and the *Fang* s had gone out of their way to keep it a secret.

With few exceptions, only a Ship's captain was in true telepathic contact with his Ship. Melville had learned, almost by accident, how to use this telepathic contact with *Fang*, while firing the 24-pounders, to make a supernaturally accurate and deadly combination. In essence the young captain became a human circuit, an organic relay, between his Ship and the cannon, guiding, directing, and channeling the alien, malignant spirits of both the gun and the Ship into a fell, fey, and phenomenally accurate killing team.

In one way they were like a horse, a dog, and a rider, all telepathically linked into a deadly killing team. From another perspective, Melville, his Ship, and his 24-pounders could be viewed as a human, an alien

AI, and a sentient alien gun, all acting as one, in a fierce, feral totality of extraordinarily accurate death and destruction.

Thus, the accuracy and power of their 24-pounders when the captain was directing them gave the *Fang* a tremendous advantage in combat. Their *other* major strength was their ability in a boarding action. Melville's tactical creativity and leadership skills, his crew's ferocity and combat experience, his subordinate leaders' experience and competence, and their enemy's persistent inflexibility, all combined to give them an edge in a boarding operation. So, at close quarters Melville preferred boarding to battering, and at a distance he preferred the fine-work of exact, very carefully aimed gunfire. His crew knew this, and they prepared carefully for either eventuality.

The scene was the same on both the upper and lower main decks. The members of the gun crews were at their cannons, each man (or Guldur or Stolsh) in a place he knew intimately well, each with his own particular handspike, crow, ram, bed, quoin, and train tackle all neatly at hand.

Swords and pistols were in racks close to hand. Each gun crew was ready to swing into close combat at an instant's notice, acting as an organized squad under the command of their gun captain, either to repel boarders or to form a boarding party.

A supply of carefully selected and inspected roundshot, canister and grape was standing by in the shot garlands beside each gun. The precision cannon fire that their captain intended to use required a glass-smooth roundshot, and the shot was always rusting, or it had small clumps of packing grease still on it. The job of chipping, cleaning and polishing the round shot was like cleaning a kitchen or sharpening a knife. It was a job that was never really completed, and now the gun crews were dedicating their attention to this task with renewed vigor.

The petty officers, midshipmen, and officers stood out at intervals on the deck, blue-jacketed markers in the chain of command. The master gunner, Mr. Barlet, stalked the gun line on the upper deck, checking his guns and their crews. Gunny Von Rito did the same on the lower deck.

To Asquith's uneducated eye it seemed as though the Ship had magically transformed itself in a brief instant of turmoil and motion. The commotion stopped, and suddenly there was perfect order. Assembled around their guns, spaced evenly in the rigging, and at their stations on the quarterdeck, the entire Ship was standing at the ready. Ready for battle. Ready to kill or be killed, with emphasis on the former and disdain for the latter.

Killing was what they did, and they did it well.

In the stern of the Ship, next to the upper quarterdeck, a red-coated marine detachment waited under the command of the huge Corporal Kobbsven. They would be the shock troops for any boarding action. Some of them were eager. Some were fearful. Many were resigned to their fate. And some were... uncertain.

"Corp'ral," asked private Dwakins, "wat's a wreckdum?"

Unfortunately, Dwakins had turned to the wrong person. When they were passing out brains and brawn, Kobbsven put both hands in the same bucket.

The redoubtable Corporal Kobbsven's mustache contorted, and his single eyebrow did the work of two (and it did it admirably well) scrunching together in an intense effort at concentration. Then, after a considerable (and apparently fruitless) effort to achieve a reasonable facsimile of intelligent thought, the corporal said, "It's vat we's goin' ta do ta dem bastards. Yah, yew betcha."

## **CHAPTER THE 2ND**

# **Meeting Engagement: "She Opened Fire at Seven Miles"**

On a cruiser won from an ancient foe,  
As it was in the days of long ago...

She opened fire at seven miles—  
As ye shoot at a bobbing cork—  
And once she fired and twice she fired,  
Till the bow-gun dropped like a lily tired...

"Ballad of the Clampherdown"  
Rudyard Kipling

Now the *Fang* began the slow dance of death with her four consorts. It would take hours, maybe even days for this stately ballet to play out. The first encounter would be a meeting engagement, with both Ships moving straight toward each other. After that Melville planned to make a run for it, with the enemy strung out behind him in a long stern chase.

The first Guldur Ship would be upon them soon enough, but there was time for the captain to visit every gun, place a hand on each shoulder, and call each sailor by name. He began on the upper gun deck, working

counterclockwise from the quarterdeck. The guns were organized into four batteries, each under the command of an officer. The redside upper battery consisted of one 24-pounder and three 12-pounders. The first gun on the redside was a gleaming brass 24-pounder, nicknamed Malicious Intent by its crew. Then came three black iron 12-pounders, Bad Ju-Ju, Sue-Sue, and Deep Doo-Doo, all surrounded by their proud crews. These four guns formed the upper redside battery under the command of Midshipman Lao Tung.

Each crew was fiercely proud of their 24-pounder's savage spirit but they were also somewhat in awe of it, so it was reassuring to have their captain and master gunner come by to give them an encouraging word.

As he approached the bow of the Ship Melville came to Sudden Death, a 24-pounder that was ordinarily on the greenside, but had been moved up to the bow gunport in preparation for the coming head-on battle. Moving on around to the greenside, there were Assault and Battery, the two 12-pounders in the upper greenside battery. Then there was the gap where Sudden Death sat when it wasn't in the bow, followed by Cold Blooded Murder, another of the vicious 24-pounders. These four guns were under the command of Lt. Buckley Archer.

Melville looked with sorrow at the spot occupied by Bad Ju-Ju, which was designed to take a 24-pounder but was currently filled with a 12-pounder. Then he looked with equal sadness at the gap that had been left when Sudden Death was moved to the bow.

When they had captured the *Fang* there were eight of the brass 24-pounders aboard. Melville and his officers were amazed by the size of these guns. For centuries everyone had believed that the nature of two-space "technology" limited the practical size of any Ship or gun. It was not possible to build a gun that could throw a cannonball bigger than twelve pounds, and it was not feasible to build a Ship with a Keel any longer than their *Fang*. There were smaller Ships and guns, but none larger.

These 24-pounders were the Guldur "secret weapon"—a cannon with a throw weight twice as large as anything anyone had ever seen before. But the Guldur had apparently been limited in their production capacity, and on all their Ships they had left the bow and stern gunports empty, with a system of tracks in the deck to move the guns to those positions. In an ideal world the *Fang* would have had four more 24-pounders, to fill the upper and lower gunports in the stern and the bow. In Melville's mind those

absent guns felt like missing teeth to a probing tongue.

To aggravate the situation, the Sylvans on Osgil had insisted on taking two of his 24-pounders! Oh, they had paid for those guns, and paid well, in money, honor, and political support. And they had replaced them with some of the finest 12-pounders in the galaxy. But Melville still hated to see two more gaps in his "teeth."

To say that he looked with sorrow or sadness at the spots where a 24-pounder should sit was not quite accurate. He did feel those emotions, but at times like this what he felt could be better described as a *lust*. He yearned for a full compliment of guns for his Ship like some men covet women or wealth. And if this battle turned out as planned, soon he would have a few more 24-pounders to fill some of those gaps, *and* he would have a few of the Guldur Ships to contribute to the Navy of Westernness. That would teach the bastards to attack him and his Ship!

Meanwhile, the crew of the *Fang* had compensated for the shortage of 24-pounders by putting 12-pounders everywhere that they would fit. The number of spots where they could put a 12-pounder was limited by the deck space taken up by their four cutters, and the long recoil on the 24-pounders combined with the tracks needed to shift those huge guns to the gunports in the bow and stern. Still there was room for two 12-pounders in each of the stern cabins, and two more on each of their upper and lower broadsides. And there were two additional 12-pounders replacing the 24-pounders taken by the Sylvans.

The upshot of it all was that the *Fang* currently carried fourteen 12-pounders and six 24-pounders. On any other human, Sylvan, or Dwarrowdelf Ship in the galaxy, the 12-pounders would be the primary armament. Aboard the *Fang* the 12-pounders took second place, a distant second, to the devastating, malignant power of the 24-pounders. Especially when they were being fired by Melville. Those damned guns were deadly... there just weren't enough of them to satisfy their captain.

In his fear and confusion, Cuthbert Asquith XVI found himself gravitating toward Lt. Archer, the young officer who had gone out of his way to be friendly to the little earthling during the pistol match. Archer was in command of the two 12-pounders and two 24-pounders of the upper greenside battery, but his superbly trained crews had everything under control, and there was really very little for him to do at the moment. Thus the dapper young lieutenant was quite happy to spend a few minutes in conversation with Asquith.

"Do you really think your two little 12-pounder popguns will do us any good?" asked Asquith.

"Hmmm. That's an excellent question," replied Archer. "It's been a subject of considerable debate among the crew. It was pretty well established in the early age of dreadnoughts, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries on Old Earth, that mixing shorter-range weapons together with longer meant that the shorter weapons never got fired, i.e., that when push came to shove they might as well not be there.

Thus if one gun had a range of eight miles and another a range of ten miles there was a two-mile edge that ships had to penetrate under fire, and generally the ships in question would be sunk before they had got within eight miles. For this reason World War One ships generally had uniform batteries. So you see this is a question that has been debated for centuries, and I assume that's what you're asking about?"

"Umm, yes, well..." replied Asquith, who was a little surprised to have his cynical, sarcastic question taken seriously."

"I'd say that the 'single type gun' school was, indeed, a prevailing theory, but in reality it was only dominant for a historically brief period of time. The old sailing ships of Lord Hornblower's and Captain Aubrey's era had a variety of guns, often in double- and triple-deckers, with big guns in the bottom deck, getting smaller as they went up. Even frigates often had long-range guns for bow chasers, and short-range carronades where they could fit on the quarterdeck."

""Umm. You don't say," said Asquith, who was now totally lost, as Archer continued, happily oblivious to his companion's ignorance and confusion.

"World War II battleships, cruisers, destroyers, and frigates had the biggest main guns they could fit on the ship, but they also bristled with secondaries: 5-inch, 3-inch, 40mm, .50 cal, etcetera, wherever they could fit. Of course many of those were for antiaircraft, but they also were used for close-in defense, especially against kamakazi-boats and submarines, and for shore support.

"I remember reading about John F. Kennedy, who was the commander of a small patrol boat in World War II, and later became an American president. He was always scrounging extra cannon or machine guns, and one of his crew joked that Kennedy would strap a 105mm howitzer onto his PT boat if he could get one. I think that's the way our captain sees the situation, and I fully agree with the sentiment. 'Better to have it and not need it, than to need it and not have it.' That's my motto."

"Uh huh...?"

"Still your point is absolutely valid," concluded Archer, "and if the captain could, there is no doubt he'd have 24-pounders everywhere they could fit! *But*, Ship's cannon are one of the most expensive and precious commodities in the galaxy, after Ship's Keels and Piers. We simply can't get them, so we make due with whatever is available. I really like talking and thinking about this kind of thing, and I'm glad you do too. Any other questions?"

"No, thank you. Not right now..." muttered Asquith as he wandered off after the captain and his entourage.

Melville was intimately aware of the fact that they could all be killed. The slightest error or misjudgment on his part could mean that his friends and his Ship—all the people who looked to him for survival and existence—would die. They were all, *all* his responsibility. Not just them, but their families and their nation depended upon him. And that responsibility weighed heavily upon his soul at moments like this, for he had learned to love his crew with a deep devotion of a type and intensity that few men could ever comprehend.

*Was there love once? I have forgotten her.  
Was there grief once? Grief yet is mine.  
Other loves I have, men rough, but men who stir  
More grief, more joy, than love of thee and thine.*

At moments like this the sentiment that a man has for a woman, even for his wife, paled in comparison to this love.

*Faces cheerful, full of whimsical mirth,  
Lined by the wind, burned by the sun;  
Bodies enraptured by the abounding earth,  
As whose children we are brethren: one.*

They were a family that had been forged in blood and flames, in tears and death, in victory and sorrow. Shakespeare had said it well, "We few, we happy few, we band of brothers." And sisters. His job was to protect his brothers and sisters, his family.

*And any moment may descend hot death  
To shatter limbs! Pulp, tear, blast  
Beloved friends who love rough life and breath  
Not less for dying faithful to the last.*

He had seen them die. He had led them to their deaths and they had trusted and obeyed him to the end. He had held them in his arms as they died...

*O the fading eyes, the grimed face turned bony,  
Opened mouth gushing, fallen head,  
Lessening pressure of a hand, shrunk, clammed and stony!  
O sudden spasm, release of the dead!*

The desire to protect them, prepare them, lead them, and equip them, to the *utmost* of his ability, was a burning need within him. A lust, a yearning.

*Was there love once? I have forgotten her.  
Was there grief once? Grief yet is mine.  
O loved, living, dying, heroic comrade,  
All, all my joy, my grief, my love, are thine.*

As the battle approached Melville ached for the resources that would help them to survive in battle, like a drowning man craves air. He would fight and struggle and do absolutely anything, up to the limits of his honor and his duty to his higher authority, in order to get the resources that his Ship and his people needed to survive. And that meant more of those damned, deadly, rabid, magnificent, vicious, wonderful, savage 24-pounders.

So Melville heaved a sigh as he looked at the spots where a 24-pounder could go, and then he stepped into the captain's cabin, where all of his possessions had been neatly stowed and two 12-pounders were pointed out of the *Fang*'s stern. Both the upper and lower stern cabins had been stripped of internal partitions and furniture so that the two 12-pounders in each cabin could be manned without obstruction. These two guns had been named Mike and Ike by their crews, who stood proudly by as their captain greeted and spoke with each of them. For administrative purposes they were considered to be part of Lt. Archer's battery, but their position here made it difficult for Archer to properly supervise the guns. So McAndrews, the captain's steward, assumed supervisory responsibility for these two guns and their crews.

Under ordinary circumstances the gun crews slept and ate around their guns. The guns were their home, their turf, *their* little piece of the Ship. But the upper stern cabin was the captain's sleeping room and office, and the lower cabin was taken up by their hospital. So these crews could only be with their guns when the Ship was cleared for action. Normally the captain's steward kept the cannons neatly covered with tidy drop cloths, using them as a kind of combination sideboard and credenza. Thus it was McAndrews who spent the most time with these guns and it was only proper that he should have some degree of responsibility for them.

Throughout his inspection tour Melville was like a mother duck followed by a row of ducklings. His dog, Boye, stayed beside him at all times, with the dog's monkey riding astride Boye's shoulders like a hussar at a parade. Immediately behind him was Mr. Barlet, the Ship's master gunner. As they came to each battery, the battery commander fell in behind Mr. Barlet. And then behind them came Melville's coxswain, Ulrich, and his Sylvan bodyguard, Grenoble, subtly jostling each other for position.

This was a line of deadly, dangerous ducklings indeed, and when it came to laying and firing the big guns, Mr. Barlet was the deadliest of them all. The crafty warrant officer was as black as a gun barrel and just as hard, with a true genius for long-range gunnery. When Melville first met the man he had been ramrod stiff. But since then Barlet had learned to relax with his captain, confident in his position and his mastery of the guns. And now he had a relaxed attitude that belied his deadly competence.

Finishing his tour of the upper gun deck, Melville moved to the hatch and went down the ladder to the hold with Barlet, Ulrich and Grenoble following along behind him. (On land this inclined ladder would have been called a staircase, but no such creature existed aboard a Ship.) As he went below decks the pull of gravity was greater with each step downward, and the sweet crisp air of two-space was replaced with the stuffy warm smell of confined humanity. At the bottom he was on the deck just inches above the plane of Flatland, where the gravity was approximately one and a half times that of Earth. The 1.5 gees pulled at him as he moved toward the hatch to the "lower" half of the Ship.

On his way he stopped, dropped to one knee, and placed a hand on the Keel that ran the length of the Ship, like a large, glowing white log extending down the center of the deck from bow to stern. Through this physical contact he asked his Ship, <<Are you ready, my friend?>>

<<Y E S! W E K I L L N O W!>> As always, the telepathic response filled him with deep kinship, as you would feel when you patted a large, powerful, and much beloved dog. The feeling filled to overflowing the gap in his soul that mankind has always reserved for his dog companions. This was combined with a faintly alien undertone of eagerness and battle lust that thrilled him to his soul.

<<Yes,>> he replied, <<we'll teach those bastards a lesson they will never forget.>>

<<P L A N?>>

Then Melville told *Fang* the plan. The plan was good, but his past successes had lead Melville to expect *more* of himself. Most men would do what they could and say it was "good enough." But he was not satisfied with that. The question that he always asked himself—and his officers and his Ship—was, "Could anything more *be* done? What more *can* we do?" So Melville and *Fang* worked and gamed out the coming battle, refining bits and pieces of strategy and tactics between them, communicating in a realm beyond words

<<Y E S!>> concluded *Fang* afterward with wolf-like joy. <<G O O D P L A N!>>

Melville gave one last pat to the Keel—to his Ship, his friend. Then he stood up and (with tiny eeps of joy from their monkeys) the captain and his dog dove headfirst into the open hatchway beside the Keel. As his body cleared the plane of two-space what was "up" became "down" and he was upright and pulling himself out of the hatch, on the other side of the galaxy, with 1.5 gees tugging at him. Melville helped his dog clamber up onto the deck. Then they moved up the ladder to the one standard gravity of the lowerside gun deck.

As he came onto the deck Gunny Von Rito fell in beside Mr. Barlet, with Ulrich and Grenoble again filling in the rear. This part of the Ship was almost an exact replica of the one he had just left. In fact, it would have been easy to get mixed up as to whether you were on the upper or lower side (which could be confusing and even deadly during combat or precision maneuvers) except that the sailors of two-space had two things helping to keep them oriented. One was the fact that the constellations were completely different, with the Netted Stars hanging above the upperside in stunning splendor, and the magnificent pinwheel of Andromedia floating above the lowerside. But this was not always easy to spot through the array of yards, spars, and canvas sails that were usually spread above the Ship.

The other way to tell that this was the "lower" side of the Ship was the railing. On the upper deck the reaside was on the right, or starboard side of the Ship, and the greenside was on the left or port. The railing on both sides was painted the appropriate color, one of the few places on the entire Ship where the wood was covered with paint rather than the vital, life-giving Moss. On the lower deck this was reversed. Thus, in two-space, you never talked about turning the Ship to the left or right, or port or starboard. You always turned to the green- or reaside.

Stepping up out of the hatch on the lower gun deck, Melville turned aft to the nearest guns, located on the greenside, and moved around the deck counterclockwise. Bald, bullet-headed Gunny Von Rito, and black, whipcord lean Mr. Barlet were a mismatched set of old friends and shipmates who had weathered many battles together with their captain, but they were still like mother hens in their concern that something might be amiss with their gun crews. Melville was not out to play "gotcha" with his seasoned old master gunner and his gunnery sergeant, but it was his job to spot anything that might be even remotely awry with their preparation for the coming battle. In the end, though, he found only a competent, eager group of warriors, in a state of splendid readiness.

The aftmost gun on the greenside was a 24-pounder nicknamed simply, Rabid, which could have applied to any of those big brass guns. Then came three 12-pounders, Larry, Moe, and Curly. These four guns were the lower greenside battery, under the command of Lt. Jarad Crater.

At the bow gunport was a 24-pounder named Cuddles, a particularly nasty piece of work, even for *these* guns. Naming this gun "Cuddles" might have seemed incongruous, or perhaps an attempt at reverse or understated humor, until you understood that Cuddles was the name of the *Fang*'s alpha male cat. Cuddles (the cat) was the most malignant, vicious, feral creature on the Ship. He was the alpha male in a long line of raping, incestuous, violent creatures. Many sailors liked cats, and some scorned them, but everyone *feared* Cuddles. And Cuddles' namesake, jutting out the lower bow gunport like a great brass phallus, lived up to that spirit.

Moving on around, Melville and the inspection party came to two 12-pounders named Hugs and Kisses, then the gap where Cuddles went when it was part of the broadside, followed by their last 24-Pounder, Prudence. Prudence was named after the wife of that crew's gun captain, McGowly, and the entire crew swore that Prudence (the wife) was to wives what Cuddles (the cat) was to cats. These four guns were under the command of Midshipman Abdyl Faisal.

Then Melville popped into the lower stern cabin, where Monk and Ham, the two final 12-pounders, lay

waiting. Usually this stern cabin was their hospital, but when the Ship was cleared for action the medical personnel shifted into the lower hold, and the guns were pointed out the stern gunports.

As with the upper stern cabin, these gun crews did not usually have the opportunity to sleep and eat around their guns, and it was difficult to have one of the battery commanders supervise them from the gun deck. In this case it was Ulrich who had supervisory command. Whenever the stern guns had to fight, whenever there was a target behind them, Melville's coxswain and his steward, Ulrich and McAndrews, had to drop their other responsibilities in order to provide supervision for these guns. And that was just fine with Melville. Those two were a couple of burdens, a pair of albatrosses around his neck, and he was happy for any additional responsibilities that gave him some relief from their sometimes overbearing attentions.

With his inspection complete, satisfied that his Ship was in a state of complete readiness, Melville went forward to Cuddles and prepared to engage the enemy.

"Mr. Barlet," the captain said, turning to his master gunner, "you can take charge of the upper gun deck. I'll fire the first shot from here, then pop up to join you in the upper bow to fire the next shot. We will not fire until the enemy fires at us. I'll have Lady Elphinstone, Brother Theo, Valandil, Westminster, Asquith, and Lt. Broadax with me as witnesses that we did not fire the first shot. When we get to Earth I want there to be absolutely no doubt that the Guldur started this battle."

"Aye, sir," Barlet replied with a scowl on his ebon face. "I hate to give 'em the advantage, but if the curs follow their standard doctrine—and when did they ever do otherwise?—they'll start firing as soon they think there is a chance of hitting us. Then we'll have a hell of a surprise for them."

"Aye, Guns. Aye," said Melville with a confident grin and a slow nod. "For them doctrine is almost a religion, but for us doctrine is your starting point—and then you improvise! So they'll be out to slow us down enough for their friends to come gang up on us. They'll want to knock down our sails and rigging, but *I'll* be aiming to punch a ball into their Keel. We'll be going for the kill on this one. So be ready for me to come join you right after Cuddles here says her piece."

"Aye, sir," Barlet said with a salute as he departed.

Melville returned the salute and turned to his coxswain. "Ulrich, get me Elphinstone, Brother Theo, Valandil, Westminster, Asquith, and Broadax, asap. And the first officer and the sailing master as well."

"Aye, sir! Da skurgeon, da pursker, da rangersk, da earthwurm, da marine el tee, da firsk osskifer, and da skailingk masker, cumingk up!"

Cuthbert Asquith XVI had wandered to the lower quarterdeck, where he now stood beside Lt. Fielder. The little earthling's tension was almost unbearable as the Captain Melville completed his inspection tour and the *Fang* began to approach the first Guldur Ship.

The crew members were using this time to rotate into the "heads" where they could drop their body waste into two-space. Even veteran warriors were experiencing the "stress diarrhea" that almost always happened before combat, and they knew to take this opportunity. Otherwise, in the heat of battle it would turn into *explosive* stress diarrhea.

Asquith could not tolerate the long, companionable silences that were so common among the crew. He *had* to talk, and so he turned to Fielder. "I guess everyone must be eager to put all that practice at shooting to work now. Ready for more death-defying feats, eh?" he asked.

"You mean more *not* so death-defying feats," scowled the first officer. "We've lost a lot of good men in our past battles and more will die today. Sometimes death won't *be* defied. My Grandma BenGurata always put it this way. Take out a \$50 gold piece."

The bewildered earthling put his hand in his pocket and pulled out a gold coin.

"You got one?" Fielder continued grimly. "Good, good. Now let's make a bet. If I win, I get to keep all your money. If you win, *you* get to keep it. You like that bet?"

"No, no. I... I don't think so."

"Well, *that* is a gunfight. And *that* is combat. You risk everything, and you don't win anything. You just get to keep what you have. You can't win an extra life, and you might lose the only one you have."

Asquith was turning white with fear and Fielder was beginning to feel just a tiny bit better, so he continued in this vein. "I don't care what flavor of gun you have. I don't care how well trained you are. There is always a chance you will lose everything. *That* is combat. So avoid it, at all costs. But if you can't avoid it, then by God you better be good. And as warriors—sailors, marines, rangers—it is, unfortunately, our job to go in harm's way, and we would be very, very foolish warriors if we were not ready for the moment of truth. In the end, the steely confidence that comes with training, and a firm willingness to blow your potential opponent's brains into a fine pink mist will hopefully serve as a sufficient deterrent."

Fielder's brand of misery did love companionship, and the first officer continued with a grim smile. "This time deterrence didn't work. The enemy is attacking, and we don't have any choice except to fight. So we fight. Maybe, if we're lucky, we'll be able to keep our lives. Maybe. But if you are *not* lucky you'll be smashed into a bloody mass by a cannonball, or blown out into Flatland where you'll bounce once and then pop into interstellar space, to die a hideous, painful death in the cold, merciless vacuum."

Asquith looked like he was ready to vomit with fear and nausea, but Fielder was feeling quite a bit better. In the midst of his gloom, seeing someone who was even more frightened than himself always created a small sunbeam of satisfaction that was completely undimmed by any sense of shame.

Just then Ulrich came and stood at the foot of the ladder leading up to the quarterdeck. "Cap'kin says firsk osskifer an' da earthwurm ta repork ta him in da lower bow. Sir." Then he sketched what might generously be considered a salute as he turned to get the others that the captain had sent for.

"Well," said Fielder, not bothering to return a salute to Ulrich's rapidly departing back, "it looks like you'll have a front row seat for all the 'fun'... eh?"

"Shipmates," Melville began, "I've brought you here as witnesses that we did not start this battle. We will not fire until they fire at us, and if they do not fire we'll be perfectly content to go on about our business. If they fire—and I don't think they came out here just to give us a big wet kiss—then I would like to have you on hand to bear witness. An esteemed Earth ambassador," this was said with a respectful, open-handed gesture to Asquith, and the captain's demeanor coupled with his exaggeration of Asquith's position seemed to make the little man stand a bit taller and prouder, "a widely respected Sylvan surgeon," this was said with a slight bow toward Lady Elphinstone, and she nodded back with solemn dignity and perhaps a twinkle of humor in her eyes, "a man of the cloth," to which Brother Theo, their purser, gave a dignified nod with just a hint of self-mockery in it, "two members of the Regiment of Rangers, one of them a Sylvan," the two rangers nodded with wry grins, "and a lieutenant of marines who is also a Dwarrowdelf," at which Broadax exposed her teeth—in what *could* have been a grin or a snarl—and took a long drag on her cigar, "will all be able to testify that we did not fire first. And I don't think that there is anyone on Earth or all of Westernness who would dare to call you all liars."

There were nods and confirmations all around on this point, which was reinforced by the solemn nods of the monkeys that sat on their shoulders. Only Asquith did not have a monkey, and his repeated gulps and nods made up for the deficiency. Then Melville turned to his first officer and sailing master. "Mr. Hans, you will take over the upper quarterdeck. Lt. Fielder, you have the conn from the lower quarterdeck. Assuming that they fire, I plan to bore straight into them and sink them long before we have to pass, but if they're still afloat when we meet them, then let us attempt to pass with our redside facing them."

Fielder and Hans nodded, and then Melville continued. "Very well, any questions? No? Then if my witnesses will please stand in the fo'cs'l here, and Lt. Fielder and Mr. Hans report to your stations, I think it is about time to expect some incoming mail from our Guldur neighbors. God bless you all, my friends, and may God bless our Ship and our endeavors."

"Amen," said Brother Theo.

"Aye," replied Broadax. "An' God damn them Guldur bastards to suck vacuum an' freeze in hell!"

"Amen to *that* ," drawled Westminster with a nod and a wink as Melville got into position to fire Cuddles.

The 24-pounders were the Guldur secret weapon, but the Guldur had not figured out how to fire these guns with any accuracy. With any pistol, musket, or 12-pounder in two-space, you fired the gun by sighting it, and then touching the glowing Keel charge at the base of the weapon when you were ready to fire. When you touched the weapon off, you were actually in empathic contact with the Keel, and a good marksman learned how to "tell" the gun where to shoot, in addition to physically aiming the barrel in the conventional manner. To aim a 12-pounder you stood well to the side of the gun and leaned forward to aim down the barrel, in an awkward, hunched-over position, so that when you touched the Keel charge the gun would not hit you as it recoiled violently.

The 24-pounders were so huge that you could not aim and fire them without being crushed by the recoil. The Guldur dealt with this problem by sighting down the barrel, getting the gun aimed at the target, then stepping back and touching the Keel charge at the base of the barrel. The problem was that this lost a lot of the accuracy. As their master gunner, Mr. Barlet, put it, "You're always firing from old data when you shoot that way. And you can't 'guide' the shot home, you can't 'tell' the gun where to shoot. I just don't know how else to put it, but the bottom line is that the Guldur are only getting about half the potential accuracy from the guns."

So Barlet designed something that was the *Fang* 's ultimate weapon. They built a platform that went up and partially over the gun. The gun captain laid on this platform and sighted down the barrel, so that when he touched the top of the Keel charge it recoiled harmlessly beneath him. This truly was a "secret" weapon. The gunner's platforms had been struck down in the hold whenever they were in port, and the crew all understood the necessity of keeping this a secret from the Guldur.

By using this platform the *Fang* 's gunners could fire their 24-pounders with a degree of accuracy that the Guldur never dreamed was possible. But the guns were even *more* accurate when the master gunner, Mr. Darren Barlet, fired them.

The 12-pounders had the intelligence of puppies and the 24-pounders were as smart as wolves—enraged wolves. Whether puppies or wolves, Mr. Barlet was their pack master, their alpha male, and they *obeyed* him. His men joked admiringly that they could lay him on a gun carriage and put a cannonball in his mouth, and he would *command* it to seek the enemy. The ball didn't dare disobey. In essence, that was exactly what he did: *commanding* the cannon to hit and making it obey, just as a good dog handler would command his dog.

When the captain fired the 24-pounders he placed one hand on the white, Moss-covered platform and the other hand touched off the Keel charge in the cannon, completing a circuit with his Ship to form a devastating, three-part "totality" of death and destruction that completely transcended anything that even

Mr. Barlet could achieve. Barlet may have been the pack master, but Melville was the "husband" of the Ship herself—the *only* one with intimate relations. And when the Ship was channeled through Melville into the guns, it was as if some two-space demigod was telling the guns where to fire. No mere mortal could ever match that ferocious precision.

Now Melville was stretched out atop Cuddles' firing platform, ready to fire while her crew stood patiently by, prepared to reload and bring the gun back into battery. The gunport was off center, leaving the fo'cs'l (the area in the very point of the bow) free for the witnesses, who were all watching carefully, taking their responsibility seriously. Asquith tried to take his cue from the individuals around him. He felt that it was important not to embarrass himself among these people. In particular, he found himself concerned with making a good impression on the beautiful, alien Lady Elphinstone, standing so regally in her yellow dress. Out of kindness to the men who might soon be under her knife, she had left her starched white apron and cap in the hospital. No man wanted to disgrace himself before a beautiful woman, and Asquith found himself rising to new levels of self-control and restraint.

Although two-space was perfectly flat, it had an effect which gave the illusion of a curved surface—perhaps because the pull of gravity bent the light waves. Thus there was a real horizon, and distant objects could be over the horizon and out of sight, just like on a planet.

From the upper and lower sides of the *Fang* the view of the enemy Ships had been the same. At first the upper sails of the four approaching Ships were seen by lookouts from atop the mainmast. By the time Melville and Fielder had finished their discussion on the quarterdeck, the tactical situation had changed enough to be visible from the deck. The oncoming Guldur Ship's hull could now be clearly seen from the *Fang*'s main deck, while the two Ships closing in from their flanks had nearly all of their sails visible. Due to the *Fang*'s superior speed they were actually pulling away from the fourth Ship, which was directly to their rear and could not be seen from the deck.

For Melville it seemed like an age as he layed atop the great gun. It was a long, drawn-out moment of unmoving crystal clarity, almost like a painting. The enemy Ship framed in the gunport, a thing of breathtaking beauty beneath a pyramid of sails. The barebacked sailors crouching beside the gun with handspikes, their gun captain concentrating grim-faced beside them. The white glow of the Ship's exposed wood illuminating everything with sparkling beauty. And above all the beautiful purity of the stars and galaxies that hung above them, contrasted by the deep royal blue of two-space beneath them.

Then they saw the approaching Guldur Ship fire a shot from the lower bow gunport. Above them the ball made a series of popping sounds as it cut a perfect round hole through their spritsailtopsail, foresail, mainsail, and mizzensail, severing some of the rigging on the way.

"No one hit!" cried the bosun from the rigging. "We're already making repairs!"

From the upper quarterdeck a report was called down to Fielder through the voice tubes, and he relayed it to the captain in the bow. "They fired and missed completely on the upperside!"

Melville nodded and looked at his assembled witnesses. "My friends, do we have a consensus that they have fired, and that our response from this point on will be in self defense?"

There was a chorus of ayes, a "Damned right!" from Broadax, a solemn nod from Lady Elphinstone, and a gulp and a nod from Asquith. Then Melville looked down the barrel of his gun and said quietly, "Then you'd all best be off to your duty stations. Oh, and Brother Theo, please ask the first officer to note it in the log: the enemy has fired upon us, and we are returning fire in self defense. Mind the recoil as you leave." His monkey clung to his shoulder and stretched its neck out so that it could also look down the barrel.

Asquith started to wander into the recoil of the gun but the gun captain quickly herded him to the side with a few tut-tuts. "Ol' Cuddles'd smash ya like a bug if ya was to go over there, sir."

The young captain felt his heart pounding against his breastbone like a hammer. Sweat trickled down his back, but his mouth was bone dry. His hands were cold and clammy, as his body shut down the blood flow to the outer layer of muscles in anticipation of taking damage. This was known as vasoconstriction, and it was the body's method of preventing blood loss. But it also caused loss of fine motor control since the muscles weren't getting blood, and Melville began taking deep, controlled breaths to get it under control. He knew from experience that once the battle started he'd be fine, but the anticipation was hell and his combat breathing was the tool to get it under control.

Melville gazed along the barrel. The elevation was right: it had been carefully calculated ahead of time. But to point it true he made tiny jerks of his head to the men with the crow on one side and the handspike on the other. With these tiny, last-minute corrections complete, Melville kept his left hand in contact with the Moss on the platform, let out his breath in a sigh, and reached down lovingly, caressingly with his right hand to stroke the Keel charge of the long brass 24-pounder.

<<Yes!>> Cuddles cried out in his mind and then, "*Cha-DOOM!!*" the gun roared as Cuddles screamed <<SmashDie!!>> in his head and the instantly recoiling gun shot inboard beneath him. A flashing stab came from the gun combined with a concussion, the shriek of the deadly recoil, and a harsh smell of ozone in the air as though they were discharging lightning bolts, all accompanied by a copper taste in the mouth.

Melville and the gun's crew were scarcely aware of the enormous ringing crack, the flash of light, and the stink of ozone. Auditory exclusion shut out the sound of the shot, just as a hunter shuts out the sound of his shot when he drops a deer, and all the other violent manifestations were taken for granted. They rammed home a new ball and wad, and then ran the piece out again with a squeal like some huge hog going to its death and ending with a satisfying thump as the gun came into battery. The crew's motions, though extremely rapid, precise, and powerful, were so automatic that most of them had time to see the flight of their ball and the fountain of wood as it smashed a gaping hole low in the enemy's bow.

Melville paused just long enough to see the ball hit. Then he rolled off the platform, landed like a cat, and departed without a word, accompanied by his dog and a chorus of cheers. With his monkey clinging tightly to his back, he trotted to the hatch, slid down the ladder into the hold, and landed with flexed

knees in the 1.5 gees. He and Boye stepped quickly to the hatch that led to the upperside, dove head first into the open hatch, went up the ladder, and in a matter of seconds the captain and his dog (and their monkey riders) had gone from the lowerside bow to the upperside bow, where Sudden Death sat waiting for him.

Again he mounted the platform and took aim, with his monkey craning to look down the barrel as well. Again the huge brass cannon screamed, <<Yes!>> "*Cha-DOOM!!*" <<KillHurt!!>> And again a hole was smashed into the enemy's bow and a cheer rose up from the *Fang* s and their monkeys. And once again auditory exclusion shut out the sound of the shot. But he could not shut out the vicious, savage scream of the gun in his brain. It made his mind ring like a bell. It made his *soul* ring with a fierce, feral, angry, *alien* yearning for death and destruction.

Both above and below, a hole was already smashed in the bow of the enemy's Ship. If he could put one of the 24-pound balls through that hole and into the enemy's Keel, the Ship and everyone aboard her would die almost instantly. Almost. There would be a few seconds as the horrible certainty of their fate sank in.

Of course, the same thing could happen to them. Melville and his crew, his friends, his *family* could also die. He had not asked for this battle. The enemy had sought him. They had hunted him down and they planned to kill him and his brothers. It was kill or be killed, and Melville was determined that it would not be him or his friends who died this day. Not this day.

Almost without thought he found himself back on the lower gundeck, lying atop Cuddles. <<Yes!>> "*Cha-DOOM!!*" <<SmashDie!!>> the gun screamed in his ears and his brain. The gun crew's initial nervousness was gone now, replaced by a sort of wild-eyed joy as they grinned at each other like children. This was not another drill. It was real, and they were firing in earnest at a real enemy. In that brief moment the crew, the Ship, her guns, and her captain became one entity, one creature, focused with absolute, single-minded intensity upon the destruction of their foe.

Because of the delay as her captain went back and forth between her guns, the *Fang* was firing slightly slower than her opponent, and the enemy was beginning to play havoc with their rigging. But ah, the precision, the deadly, exact placement of the *Fang* 's shots. As they closed with the enemy Ship its fire was like a shotgun blast in their rigging. But Melville's fire was like the steady blows of an ax, cutting and hacking deep into the enemy's heart.

It was only a matter of time. It was only a question of how much damage the enemy could do to the *Fang* 's rigging before they died. For die they must. Die they would. And die they did.

The *Fang* s all cheered as the enemy Ship began to sink. Melville had lost track of where he was and how many shots he had fired, but he *felt* this last, killing blow sink home.

Above and below the plane of two-space the view was the same. First the Guldur Ship's hull sank from view, then her mainsails, her topsails, and finally her topgallants disappeared. In the end there was only a

short stub of her mainmast standing up, with a cluster of terrified Guldur and Goblan clinging to it, striving and fighting for a few last seconds of life. Then they too disappeared into the cold depths of interstellar space.

If they could have reached them the *Fang* s might have tried to rescue even the most despised enemy from this fate, but they were too far away. The only boats the Guldur carried were their jollyboats, and there wasn't even time for the enemy to get those off.

Every soul aboard the *Fang* shuddered to see hundreds of sentient creatures die such hideous deaths. Dying in the cold embrace of vacuum was every sailor's fear. *How did Tennyson put it?* Melville thought. "*Faultily faultless, icily regular, splendidly null.*" Tennyson was describing a woman, but those words well depicted the frigid, grand, ghastly, awesome nothingness of interstellar space, and men rightfully feared it.

But *Fang* and her guns did not shudder at their enemy's demise, they *exulted* . There was no pity in them, no empathy. And Melville shuddered anew as he felt the cold touch of those alien minds in his soul.

Then Melville rolled off the platform and stood swaying. He put a hand on the shoulder of the man who stood beside him and hung his head, suddenly exhausted and panting with exertion.

"A masterful piece of gunlaying, sir!" said the man with sincere appreciation and admiration, reaching over to slap the captain on the back.

Melville turned to look at him, staring with blank eyes. Then he realized it was *Cuddle's* gun captain. He was Jose Perrera. Li'l Jose. A stocky, bantam dynamo of a man, full of life and humor, with a wife and children waiting at home. Melville felt dazed and confused. Cuddles had fired the killing blow, and this man, this brother, was alive because of Melville. This man, and *all* his friends would survive for a little while longer. They were *alive!* And felt good to be alive!

Like a cleansing flood washing through his soul, Melville looked up at the stars and felt the life of his brother, Jose Perrera, beneath his hand. Melville felt this man's happiness to be alive, to be victorious. He felt the joy of every living creature on his Ship, sent to him, transmitted to him by his Ship ( *his*Ship, by God!) through his bare feet. For a brief instant he felt what it was like to be the Ship, in empathic contact with the whole crew. And, in turn, his Ship felt through him what it was like to be human and to rejoice in being alive. Without *Fang* Melville could not have felt the emotions of his crew, and without Melville *Fang* could not have comprehended the emotions.

*It is good to be alive,* the captain and his Ship told each other. And, by God, they intended to stay that way.

As Melville stood, shaking with exhaustion and emotion, McAndrews poured him a mug of hot tea as the steward's monkey added sugar and lemon. All around him the gun crew was working feverishly,

checking their equipment and refilling the shot garlands in preparation for the next battle. Melville smiled and nodded his thanks to McAndrew as he took a sip of tea, sweet and tart, exactly the way he liked it. The captain's monkey reached out its accordion neck for a drink and he delighted in the little creature's shudder as it sipped the steaming hot fluid. His steward was an unctuous, overbearing albatross around Melville's neck, but, damn it, the man did have his moments.

"Ah, sir, look what you've done to yer best uniform," said McAndrews as the steward—and his monkey—regarded the captain mournfully. Melville looked at the friction burns on his pants from sliding down the ladders, and the rips where his jacket had been snagged as he rolled off the firing platforms of the guns, then he looked at McAndrews with a sigh. His steward didn't really scold, he just slumped his shoulders and shook his head with a woebegone look on his face, as though the weight of the world had been placed on his shoulders due to his captain's irresponsibility.

"Ah, McAndrews. What would you do without me to fuss over?" he murmured as he reached down to pat his dog and took another sip of tea.

## **CHAPTER THE 3RD**

# **Stern Chase: "The Great Stern Gun Shot Fair and True"**

She opened fire within the mile—  
As ye shoot at the flying duck—  
And the great stern gun shot fair and true,  
With the heave of the ship, to the stainless blue...

"Ballad of the Clampherdown"  
Rudyard Kipling

Five topmen had been killed by the enemy fire during this engagement. One of them was struck by cannonballs and two were thrown out into space when rigging snapped. Two others had tumbled to their

deaths, landing with awful thuds upon the deck far below. There were scarlet streaks on the deck planks to mark where they had landed and the fresh spilt blood was still being slowly soaked up by the white Moss. Even now a topman was trying to lower himself to safety with one blood-soaked leg hanging from his body by a muscle.

There were many holes in the sails, and a fair amount of damage in the rigging, but the most telling blows were a 24-pound ball that had snapped the upperside foreyard

clean in two, collapsing their foresail. Another shot had clipped the top quarter off their upper mainmast, taking down their maintopgallant and the royalsail that rode above it. To balance the thrust they immediately slacked the equivalent sails on the lowerside.

Melville estimated that this was about fifteen percent of their overall thrust, combined with another ten percent or so lost from various holes shot through their sails. A new foreyard and topgallant mast were being swayed up, and the holes were being patched, but still this was enough of an advantage for the enemy Ships to close the distance with them. His mind was spinning with calculations.

"A cast of the log, if you please, Mr. Hans," Melville said to the old sailing master.

"Aye, sir," Hans replied with an approving nod.

Melville could see some of the quarterdeck crew looking at him questioningly. They couldn't see why the captain needed a cast of the log while the Ship was in such mortal danger, but Hans understood. They needed to calculate exactly how fast the Ship was going, so the captain could know how the battle would play out. This kind of situational awareness was their young captain's strong suit. *He might not be a master o' the riggin' and sails like the legendary Captain Jack Aubrey, thought Hans, but 'ats what I'm 'ere for. And damned if 'e can't see a plan an' call a battle like nobody's business.*

Hans and the quartermaster went aft with the little half-minute glass and the small piece of Keel which served as the log. The log was cast, and the quartermaster's arms vibrated as he held the reel above his head.

"Nigh on to eight knots, sir," reported the quartermaster to Hans.

"Just shy o' eight knots, sir," said Hans to Melville, who was standing right beside him and had heard the first report full well. "We'll pick up a li'l speed as repairs an' jury masts go up, but we know the Guldur can do close to ten knots, even with their sorry riggin' an' sails."

Melville nodded as his brain raced. The situation was worse than he'd thought. Their old *Kestrel* had been one of the fastest frigates afloat, able to do fifteen knots any time she chose. Hans had re-rigged the *Fang* after they had captured her, spreading a glorious array of royals, studding sails, and a

spritsailtopsail that brought her up to almost thirteen knots. But now their glorious array of sails and rigging had been shot to hell.

The *Fang* and her crew had punched a hole in the net that the enemy had cast around them, and they were escaping through that hole as fast as they could. The Ship that had been dead ahead of them was now dead, indeed. The two that had been to the *Fang*'s left and right were currently closing in behind her. The fourth Guldur Ship was also closing in, since the *Fang*'s speed had been reduced so badly, but it was still far behind.

If Melville kept on the current course the two enemy Ships immediately behind them would catch up with the *Fang* at about the same time, so he gave the order to cut to the left, or greenside. This would give them a chance to engage the enemy to their left before the one on the right could open fire. Melville estimated that in about an hour the first enemy would be close enough to start firing.

Once again he intended to gather his witnesses and wait until the enemy opened fire first. Westernness obstinately refused to join in this war, no matter how bad the provocation, but they could not deny him the right of self-defense.

Even when the enemy did open fire it would be a long, drawn-out battle. A stern chase was a long chase, and there would be time to feed the crew.

The Westernness Navy had consciously modeled itself on the legendary British Navy. Not much was known about those distant, semi-mythical times. When mankind had first entered into two-space they brought back the Edler King's Gift: a two-dimensional virus, a living creature that had created the Crash, a devastating collapse of virtually every database and electronic system that existed on Old Earth. Much of mankind's knowledge was lost forever, but they *did* have the multi-volume biographies of legendary naval heroes, such as Horatio Hornblower and Jack Aubrey, to build on. Just as the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* provided the only available knowledge about that period in ancient Greece, so did Hornblower and Aubrey provide most of their insight into the era of naval combat in wooden ships on Old Earth—an era so very much like their own. Fortunately, there were many more volumes of valuable material in these British Naval biographies than in Homer's two works.

The British Navy had always tried to feed their men before a battle, and Captain Melville believed in doing the same. Just minutes after he gave the order their cook, Roxy, and her mates had their "burners" set up under a big pot of chili and another pot of macaroni. These burners were yet another special adaptation of a Keel, designed to release energy as heat, since normal combustion generally didn't work in two-space.

Meals in the Westernness Navy were a carefully managed social occasion. Roxy would set up her kitchen on the upper gundeck on one day, and the next day she set up on the lower gundeck. This made the upper and lower crews socialize during meals, which contributed to the cohesion of the whole Ship.

Today it was the lowside's turn to host dinner, and the whole crew rotated in to share a hot meal.

As Midshipman Hayl sat down to a steaming hot plate of chili-mac he couldn't help but think of the remaining three Ships that were coming to kill them. He couldn't avoid thinking of the hideous demise they had just inflicted upon the first enemy Ship, and he understood deep in his gut that the same thing could happen to them. Death was dominant in his mind as he sat down to eat. While he thought on these grim matters, his body absentmindedly took a bite of his food, and since he was a healthy lad with a day of hard work and excitement under his belt, his stomach discovered that it was *good* to eat. His youthful body reminded him that however his heart might feel, his body needed fuel. So he began to eat, and he found that the act of eating made him feel better. This was a new discovery for young Hayl, but it was an old, tried and true friend to the rest of the crew as they ate their meals.

As he was eating, Hayl suddenly had the disorienting experience of scooping a full spoonful from his plate, only to place an empty spoon in his mouth. The first time it occurred he was completely baffled. A few bites later it happened again. He was beginning to doubt his sanity and he started to keep a careful eye on each spoonful of food. He realized what was happening when he saw his monkey snag a mouthful of chili-mac in its tiny, three-fingered paw.

Hayl looked at the baby monkey on his shoulder and he couldn't help but laugh and shake his head. It *EEK* ed happily back at him, bobbing up and down on all eight legs, and the young midshipman couldn't find it in him to begrudge the wee creature its small tariff on the goods that went from his plate to his mouth. Then the two of them both got down to some serious eating.

Melville stood on the upper quarterdeck and watched the squealing, shrieking movement of a 24-pounder into the upper stern gunport as he gulped down his own plate of chili-mac. Melville's monkey also took periodic "tariffs" on his food, but by now the experience had become so common that the captain barely noticed when an empty spoon came up to his mouth. He was watching the mass of men as they heaved the groaning gun down the well-greased tracks, but his mind was elsewhere. Finally he shook his head and turned to the boy who was serving as his runner.

"My compliments to the Ship's carpenter, and will he please report to the captain at his earliest convenience."

"Aye, sir," replied the boy with a gulp. "Ship's carp'ter ta the cap'n at 'is soonest conven... soonest conven'ance."

"Aye," Melville replied with a nod and an encouraging smile.

The boy sketched a salute and scampered off.

In just a few minutes the carpenter, Mr. Tibbits, was standing in front of Melville.

"A hatch through the decks?" asked Tibbits, rubbing his bald spot. "Aye, sir, I guess we could do it fairly quick like. An' the goal is for you to have a ladder straight down to the lowerside?"

"Aye, Chips. Except I'd just dive straight down, pop through to the lowerside, and then climb up the ladder on the far side. Then I'd reverse the process going the other way. The objective is to get quickly from one side to the other so I can fire both of the stern guns as fast as the crew can load them."

The old carpenter had been a traumatized, exhausted man after their old Ship, the *Kestrel*, had died. The only thing that had kept him going was his sense of duty to this new Ship, but by now he was completely bonded with the *Fang*, and her captain. Today he was a new man, and he seemed to have absorbed some of the youthful energy of his Ship and his captain.

"I've seen it done before, sir," Tibbits replied with a nod. "I was a Ship's boy on the old *Heinlein*. She had her hatches set up in line like that. When we have to pass a lot of cargo, say, from the upper maindeck to the lower hold, sometimes we dropped it straight through the hatches like that, and then the boys on the lowerside could just snatch it, clean as a whistle, as it popped in. As a boy I used to jump straight through like that, just like you're sayin'. But, by the Lady, not many folks want to try it! If you miss by just a smidgen, you'll hit the edge of the hatch at high speed in 1.5 gees, and it'll cripple or kill you deader'n hell. An' there's things that seem to pull you to the side sometimes, like maybe there's variations in the way the gravity pulls at you."

Melville nodded and considered. "How about if we ran a line through, nice and taut, like a fireman's pole?"

"Aye," the old carpenter replied thoughtfully, "you could do that. This hatch'll tie up more deck space where you'd want to put cargo, and I'll tell you, sir, the one bad thing about our *Fang* here—much as I'm loath to admit any flaw in her—is that she ties up a lot of cargo space. These damned tracks to run the big guns on prevent you from putting in much deck cargo if you're gonna keep the tracks clear, and keeping these hatches clear will tie up more space on the gundecks and in the hold."

"Aye, good point, Chips. But we can keep them covered, stack cargo on top when we have to, and only clear them when we need a particular gun. We'll try it first with a hatch by the stern guns. Make it happen, Chips."

"Aye, sir. We'll get right on it," he replied rubbing his hands and nodding his head with an air of sincere satisfaction. "Would you mind walkin' over with me and chalking out the exact spot where you want it?"

Melville felt a surge of pleasure as he considered the old carpenter's enthusiasm. Tibbets had become like a doting, protective father to Melville, willing to give staunch support to his captain's initiatives. The young captain was still uncertain and insecure in his position, and the unconditional, professional support of a man like Mr. Tibbits meant the world to him.

In just minutes the carpenter's mates were cutting a hole in the upper gundeck, beside and well to the rear of Malicious Intent, the 24-pounder that was now sitting at the stern gunport. By the time the first of the three pursuing Guldur Ships began to fire at them, a vertical corridor had been cut all the way through to the lower gundeck, where Rabid was in position at the lower stern gunport. Melville had positioned the hatches so that a taut line running from the upper mizzenmast yard could run through the center of the hatches to the lower mizzenmast yard.

Once more, Melville was laying on the platform above the gun, with his group of witnesses waiting beside him in the lower stern. With the exception of a few dedicated lookouts, virtually every eye in the Ship was looking back at their foe, with hearts pounding in their chests. Then the Guldur fired on them. As the enemy's 24-pound balls screamed overhead, punching through their sails, Melville once again had his witnesses confirm that the Guldur had fired first, and then he returned fire.

<<Yes!>> "*Cha-DOOM!!*" <<SmashDie!!>>, and Rabid slammed back beneath him. He watched the shot crash into the enemy's bow and heard the cheers of his crew as he rolled off the platform and raced back to the new hatch. He dove headfirst down the hatch, with his hands grabbing the rope and his feet gripping the rope above him. As a young middie, skylarking in the low gravity of the upper rigging, he had often slid down a line headfirst like this, and that experience now stood him in good stead. He dropped through and into the upperside, where he was now head-up and climbing the rope. He used his momentum to clamber up the line to the upper deck, ran to Malicious Intent, hopped up on the platform, took careful aim, and fired another shot. <<Yes!>> "*Cha-DOOM!!*" <<KillHurt!!>>

Boye, unable to follow Melville down the line, sat on the lowerside deck and whined pitifully, gazing longingly into the hole where his master had vanished.

Melville fired each of the stern guns in turn, bouncing back and forth between the lower and upper sides, using the new hatches to speed his movement. Each time, Boye barked with delight when Melville clambered up the rope to fire the lowerside stern gun, and then whined with frustration when his master disappeared down the hatch again.

As the enemy's bow guns hammered away at his rigging, Melville punched a steady series of deadly accurate shots straight into their bow. The distance between the two Ships did not close nearly as fast during this stern chase, and it took longer than it did the last time for Melville to shatter the enemy's Keel and make his kill, but the outcome was the same as before.

After a brief but brutal slugfest Melville's superior accuracy took its toll. The enemy Ship was sinking and the *Fang* s were cheering as their pursuers died.

Melville watched and wondered—not for the first time—how long it took to die in a hard vacuum. Explosive decompression was not a quick or painless death. But how long did it take? Ten seconds? A minute? As long as you could hold your breath? However long it was, every second would be filled with pain. Blood vessels bursting in the brain. Eyes hemorrhaging and lungs rupturing. Explosive expansion of nitrogen bubbles in the joints...

Perhaps it was too much pain to really register. Maybe at some point the chorus of agony would overwhelm the mind. So many extraordinary, simultaneous violations of the body might be just massive overkill to the pain receptors in the brain.

Perhaps. Maybe.

The inhabitants of two-space lived in constant dread of answering these questions, of meeting the enemy that waited patiently all around them, lurking constantly and malignantly.

And always there was this: *Better you than us* . The angel of death had passed over them. Their tension eased, and most of the veteran crew thought to themselves, *You bastards came looking for trouble, and you found it.*

This latest battle had done still more harm to their rigging. The topmen had worked like heroes to repair most of the damage suffered in the first engagement, but now their ragged sails had absorbed additional holes and their yards and rigging ended this battle in worse shape than before. This time even more topmen lay dead or wounded in crimson pools upon the deck, and the next enemy Ship had already closed into range.

Their major bit of good luck thus far was that the enemy had not shattered any of their masts. But that could change in a moment. With this third Ship Melville changed his strategy and began to aim at the enemy's masts. He had to keep them at a distance, and just a few good shots could shatter the approaching Guldur's foremast and slow them greatly. Besides, he didn't want to sink these last two Guldur Ships. He had *other* plans for those bastards!

Melville and the third Guldur Ship began their battle by each taking out a mast. Just as Melville's precisely aimed shot from Malicious Intent shattered the enemy's upper foremast right at the base, a lucky shot from the enemy combined with previous damage to take down the *Fang* 's upper mizzenmast.

With a shattering, rending roar, the mizzenmast came tumbling down while Melville was still on top of the

upper stern gun. He looked up in time to see the great mass of canvas, and spars come ponderously down, dragging two screaming sailors and a trail of rigging behind it like writhing snakes. He rolled off the platform and crouched next to the gun carriage as the foot-wide yardarm smashed down across the gun.

"All hands to the gun!" roared Melville as he crawled out from the debris. "Clear this gun for action!" He heaved himself up, only to realize that his right hand was half sunk into the shattered, pulped skull of one of the assistant gunners.

"Clear the gun first, then see to the rest!" Melville shouted. All around him the entire upperside crew was dashing about, chopping and hauling at the debris like a mass of ants on a kicked-over anthill. He wanted to stop and help with this task, but their lives depended on hammering the enemy, and he raced to the hatch. "Mr. Hayl!" he said, grabbing the young midshipman by the shoulder. Hayl jumped and Melville couldn't help but smile briefly. The boy had anticipated the touch of a deadly splinter or cannonball and not his captain's hand.

Melville looked him in the eye and said, "Come to the lower deck and tell me the instant this gun is cleared for action. Do you understand?"

The boy's face was white and his eyes were wide. Melville could hear the tension in his voice as he nodded and squeaked, "Aye sir!" Then Melville saw Archie Hargis, his imperturbable clerk, look him in the eye and nod calmly from behind the young midshipman. Melville grinned with relief—he knew that a veteran crewman would backstop the midshipman to ensure that he was informed as soon as the gun was back in action.

He scrambled over a mass of debris and dove into the hatch. With the fall of the mizzenmast the line running straight down the center of the hatch had gone slack, and his heart was in his throat as he made the dive without his guideline. He dropped through to the lowerside, where the rope was still attached to the lower mizzen topsailyard, and scrambled up the line to the deck, where Boye greeted him joyously. He looked up at the quarterdeck and called to Lt. Fielder, "Daniel, the mizzenmast has come down on the other side!"

"Aye, sir. They called over the voice tube to tell us. We've already slacked sail to balance the thrust."

"Good. Send all of your idlers up to help them, and have someone get this line taut, so I can go safely back through the hatch when the upper stern gun is clear."

"Aye, sir!" responded Fielder calmly, and then he began to call out clear, concise and effective orders. Melville grinned as he hopped up on Rabid, the lower stern gun. Fielder may not have much liking for a fight, but when the chips were down his competence, combined with his strong sense of self preservation, made him extremely capable. As Sun Tzu said, "When in death ground, fight!"

Then Melville fired the gun and saw the ball shatter the enemy's lower foremast. He watched with intense

satisfaction as the mast shivered and then slowly bowed forward, picking up speed as rigging snapped and the angle became more pronounced, until it slammed down across the enemy's bowsprit in a great flapping tangle of wood, canvas, and cordage.

Now the enemy had both his upper and lower foremasts down. This new damage did not slow the enemy any more, since they had already slacked sails on the foremast to balance the thrust, but the forward-leaning masts had come down like fallen trees, completely blocking the enemy's bow guns. Melville only had one gun to fight this battle with, but the enemy had none.

Melville began to slam shot after shot into the enemy's mainmast. Rabid's gun crew threw themselves at their handspikes and rammers, oblivious to anything but the hungry muzzle of their gun. After just three shots the Guldur's mainmast came tumbling down, and the *Fang* began to pull rapidly away from Guldur number three.

Guldur number four, the last of their attackers, was now closing rapidly. Over sixty percent of the *Fang*'s sails were out of commission and one of her two big stern guns was down, while a completely fresh enemy came charging at them with both bow guns blazing.

Melville and Rabid were getting to know each other. They were fine-tuning their relationship with each shot fired, and as this new enemy approached, Melville, his Ship, and his gun all felt a great sense of confidence.

On the upperside the Guldur Ship would be hammering them mercilessly and the *Fang* could not respond. Their only hope was to quickly and efficiently stop the enemy, right now, with *this* gun.

*He is the gun, he is the Ship. They are him and they are one.*

*He aims down the barrel. The tiny motions of his head happen without conscious thought, guiding the crew to make minuscule adjustments to the gun. He is not aware of reaching down to touch the Keel charge at the base of Rabid's barrel, it is just... time. In the fullness of time it happens.*

*<<Yes!>>"Cha-DOOM!!" <<SmashDie!!>>. He guides the shot home, willing it onto the target. Rabid's first shot is just a hair left, smashing halfway through the left side of the enemy's foremast.*

*Melville waits with intense frustration while the crew reloads the gun and slams the huge weapon*

*back into battery. <<Yes!>>"Cha-DOOM!!" <<KillHurt!!>> The second ball goes slightly to the right, barely clipping the mast.*

*"Ah, you bastards," murmurs Melville as the gun is slammed back into battery by its crew. "We got you bracketed."*

*<<Yes!>>"Cha-DOOM!!" <<SmashDie!!>> Rabid screams as the next shot splits the difference between the last two, and smashes through the foremast.*

*The crew cheers themselves hoarse and Boye barks triumphantly as they watch the enemy's foremast tumble down and cover the bow gun. The Guldur Ship is now close enough that the two 12-pounders in theFang 's stern cabin beside him can finally come into action. For a brief period they add their share of death and destruction, punishing the enemy for the presumptuousness of getting this close.*

*Melville's lips draw back and he begins to hammer away at their mainmast.*

*<<Yes!>>"Cha-DOOM!!" <<KillHurt!!>> Again it is slightly to the right, with splinters flying out from that side of the enemy's mainmast.*

*Again, the frustrating, agonizing wait as the gun is reloaded, and then: <<Yes!>>"Cha-DOOM!!" <<SmashDie!!>> The next ball sends splinters the size of a man's leg flying out from the left side. Melville can feelFang say <<B R A C K E T E D !!>> He can tell thatFang likes the concept communicated by that word.*

*He doesn't notice the stink of ozone or the blinding flash of the cannon, he only has eyes for the enemy. <<Yes!>>"Cha-DOOM!!" <<KillDie!!>>. The mainmast comes tumbling down, and the Fang begins to pull away from her tormentor.*

*But Melville,Fang , and Rabid are not done. The enemy can still do damage on the upperside, and the foe is still in range of their gun. Melville must continue to savage the enemy Ship for as long as he can.*

*Now their target is the enemy's mizzenmast; their last mast, their only mast on this side. Already the enemy has dropped out of range of theFang 's 12-pounders, and the two guns in the stern cabin beside him go silent.*

*<<Yes!>>"Cha-DOOM!!" <<KillHurt!!>> But this time the ball misses. Melvillefeels the shot go left. The Fang is pulling away from her target. The range is greater with every second, yet still they fire. There is a vicious rage upon them and it is not in them to stop when they can still do damage.*

<<Yes!>>"Cha-DOOM!!" <<SmashDie!!>> The next ball sends splinters blossoming out from the Guldur's lower stern cabin.

"Damn, dead on, but too low," Melville mutters while Fang and Rabid seethe with frustrated rage.

The gun crew sees where the ball struck, and they automatically elevate the barrel. It is now back in battery and raised to the maximum possible extent.

It seems to take forever for the gun to come back into battery, but finally it is ready. Melville touches the Keel charge and commands the next shot. Fang dedicates all of her vast intellect to compute and direct the shot. <<Yes!>>"Cha-DOOM!!" <<KillHurt!!>> With an intensely gratifying, almost orgasmic surge of effort, Rabid spits out the ball.

The crew cheers and roars as the final mast shivers and falls on the distant enemy Ship, while Rabid's crew races to refill the shot garlands, not willing to rest until their gun is ready for the next battle.

Now there were only three Ships still alive in this piece of two-space: the *Fang*, and two Guldur strung out to her stern. One enemy Ship was completely dismantled on one side, while the other was only getting thrust from one mast. The *Fang* had steady thrust from two masts—albeit with badly damaged rigging and terribly tattered sails.

If Melville wanted to he could pull away from his enemy and escape the battle. But that would mean they were still out there, and with some repairs they *could* still catch his tattered, mangled Ship.

It would not be easy, but there would never be a better time to finish off the attackers, and Melville's beloved Ship and crew would not be safe until their enemy was completely defeated. Besides, Melville was a firm believer in kicking the bastard while he was down.

In victory, humility. But until the victory was won and his Ship was safe, his motto was: fair fights are for fools.

*I am no Homer's hero you all know  
I profess not generosity to a foe...  
If you play a game of chance,  
know before you begin*

*If you are benevolent,  
you will never win.*

Their achievement thus far had been nothing short of amazing. Throughout history there have been warriors with extraordinary, deadly superiority in combat. There were swordsmen, duelists, and snipers on every world who racked up hundreds of kills, and Melville was in part a duelist and a sniper. But the *Fang*'s prowess was more akin to the man-machine interface of the fighter aces or elite tank crews in the twentieth century on Old Earth. Some of these war machines were manned by pilots and crews whose remarkable competence permitted them to make hundreds of kills.

The majority of the fighter pilots and tank commanders in twentieth century combat never got a single "kill" to their credit. Many never got the opportunity, and those who did often found out, too late, that they didn't have the killer spirit. One of the greatest fighter aces of all, a man with over three hundred kills to his name, said that most of the time he killed men who never knew he was in the sky with them.

As Melville felt the thrill of his survival, his success, his triumph, he knew that this was what it must have felt like for one of those legendary aces. The finest pilot in the finest machine with the finest crew, all utterly devoted to killing. He and his Ship were death incarnate. Melville laughed aloud. Joy surged through his soul—joy in victory, joy in life. As he stood there, with one hand stroking the hot barrel of Rabid and one hand on the Moss of his Ship, McAndrews poured him a mug of tea as the steward's monkey added lemon and sugar.

Melville took a sip, and then he held the cup up for his monkey. He felt almost dizzy and slightly disoriented as he began to relax. After the intense, focused concentration of aiming the gun it was like waking from a dream. As the savage spirit of Rabid seeped out of his soul it was like coming down from a drug high. Suddenly he realized that his body was bruised and battered and his hands were rope-burned. His awareness expanded outward from aiming the gun, to his body, to his Ship. Suddenly he remembered the rest of his responsibilities, the rest of his Ship.

"Dear Lord," he said, "what about the upperside?" Then he handed the mug to McAndrews, turned, and strode quickly to the hatch.

He called over his shoulder to the quarterdeck, "Steady as she goes, get us well away from those bastards for now."

"Aye, sir," Lt. Fielder replied. "Sounds like a good idea to *me*."

Melville gave the rope a tug to be sure it was secure on the other end and slid down headfirst as he had done so many times before, except this time he was conscious of the pain in his hands. When he popped through to the other side he didn't have the energy to clamber up the rope, so he swung over to the ladder and climbed up onto the upper gundeck.

On the lowerside Melville had taken the last two enemy Ships out of action by dropping their foremast over their bow guns and then hammering them with impunity. On the upperside the situation was reversed. The 24-pounder at the *Fang*'s upper stern gunport was out of action, and both enemy Ships had been able to pound away at the crew as they tried desperately to clear the gun and repair the damage. The only thing that prevented the enemy from dropping the *Fang*'s mainmast on this side was the fact that Melville had done so much damage, so quickly, on the other side and then pulled away from the battle. Even then, it was a close-run thing.

The upperside mainmast had taken several grazing hits, and the rigging and sails were in a shambles, but still they had thrust from the sails on two masts, and the topmen were placing patches on the sails. The damage to the Ship was serious, but it could be repaired. What ate at Melville's soul was the damage to his beloved crew.

Here a burly gun captain sat in a pool of blood, cupped the head of his assistant gunner and quietly told him that his arm was gone. Here the cook's mates gently wrapped a body in sailcloth and took it to join the line of silent forms in the waist, lying in military order even unto death.

The *smell* was what always got to Melville. The copper smell of blood wasn't really all that bad. What revolted him was the stench of vomit and feces you got when you opened up human stomach and guts. Some writers referred to it as a "slaughterhouse smell" but Melville always thought this sickening odor was distinctly different from any butchery of animals that he had experienced. Blood smelled like blood, whether it was cattle in a slaughterhouse or humans on the deck of a Ship. But the smell from the contents of *human* entrails was distinctly different from that of herbivores butchered in a slaughterhouse. It was like the difference between human feces and horse dung ... except worse. It was *that* smell that made a battlefield so distinctive, and nauseating, to Melville.

The captain put a hand on every shoulder and gave a quiet word to every beloved Shipmate. Then he moved to the sick bay and did the same as tears streamed down his cheeks.

*O loved, living, dying, heroic comrade,  
All, all my joy, my grief, my love, are thine.*

You cannot truly understand what it is to command, until you lose men in battle. And yet, to truly protect these warriors, he had to be willing to take them into harm's way. In war no one was ever really safe on the defensive. If you sat and huddled on the defense, or if you ran and hid, in the end you—and those you loved—would probably die. Only by gaining the initiative did you have a chance to survive. Only by seeking out and attacking the enemy, on *your* terms, at times of *your* choosing, could you ever have a degree of true safety in combat.

To be a great military leader you must sincerely love your men. But to keep your men safe, all too often you have to give them orders that could result in their deaths. That was the great paradox of military

leadership. That paradox was a burden upon Melville's heart. And yet it had also become a comfort, because once he truly understood it, he also knew that he had no choice.

Everywhere Melville went he was greeted by cheering Shipmates, and his heart was lifted. The support of his men and his Ship made it easier to live with what he had to do. They cheered because their captain had once again saved them against long odds. And, like the Ship and her guns, they yearned to finish the job.

A bloodlust was upon them all, and Ulrich spoke for most of the crew when he said, "Le's go back and furnish da baskards!" They were back on the upper quarterdeck, in their original battle stations. Standing beside Ulrich was Grenoble, the captain's other bodyguard, who nodded in rare agreement with the vicious little coxswain. The rest of the quarterdeck crew roared their agreement.

"Shut yer yaps!" said Lt. Broadax, turning the concentrated essence of her snarl upon them all. "The cap'n 'll make 'is own damned decisions, an' if 'e needs any crap from ye I'll crack yer thick skulls an' squeeze it out fer 'im!"

All around them the Ship was bustling with crew members making repairs. The damage to the mizzenmast on their upperside would require a Shipyard to fully repair, but the rest of the damage could be put to rights. The upper quarterdeck was especially busy, as the sailing master and bosun directed the placement of a temporary mizzenmast. It would only go high enough to rig the mizzen mainsail and a small mizzen topsail, but that was a significant improvement over their current state.

"Aye, Cap'n," reported old Hans. The lanky, gray-bearded sailing master was standing beside Melville on the quarterdeck, directing the placement of the jury-rigged replacement mast. "We'll 'ave ta do without a mizzen topgallent an' royal on the upperside," and then he and his monkey spit a stream of tobacco into two-space for emphasis. "But this jury mast, combined with the mending an' patching o' sails an' riggin', should bring us up to around eighty-five percent thrust."

Melville nodded his thanks. He was no "Captain Jack" with a mystical understanding of sails and rigging. He had to depend on Hans and his other experts in that area, but he knew he could trust the old ex-NCO's estimate without hesitation.

Then Hans winked at Broadax. The Dwarrowdelf officer smiled back (if that distortion of the gristle and hair on her face could be called a smile) and winked one beady, bloodshot eye back at him. On land the two of them were bizarrely mismatched lovers. Or at least, they appeared to be lovers, but after one look at Broadax no one really wanted to know... whatever there was to know. Aboard Ship they were professionals who were content to give each other winks, leers, and admiring glances. Not for the first time Melville thought of Longfellow's lines when he saw Broadax and Hans together.

*No one is so accursed by fate,  
No one so utterly desolate,*

*But some heart, though unknown,  
Responds unto his own.*

Melville considered the situation carefully. Two crippled enemy Ships sat waiting for him to gobble them up. But they would not go down without a fight.

Those Ships and their guns were extraordinarily valuable resources just waiting to be snatched. But it would cost him lives, the precious lives of his Shipmates.

War was coming, and he knew deep in his gut that those Ships and those guns might turn the tide in some future battle. But the Admiralty would not thank him for it.

It would *really* tick off the Admiralty if he took these Ships. Westerness' policy was dedicated to avoiding an involvement in the affairs of the Elder Races. But Melville (and the Sylvan, the Stolsh, and the Dwarrowdelf) knew that, sooner or later, Westerness would be on the receiving end of the kind of brutal, genocidal attack he had personally witnessed being inflicted upon the Stolsh.

Everything he had done up until now was undeniably an act of self-defense. According to the laws of the sea, when those Guldur Ships attacked him it was either an act of war or an act of piracy, and either way he had the right to hunt those Ships down and capture or destroy them. But the timid souls who were currently in command at the Westerness Admiralty would not see it that way.

*Well, hell, thought Melville, how could I possibly be in any more trouble than I already am?*

On the one hand there was his personal desire. He *wanted* more guns for *his* Ship and, damnit, he wanted to teach the Guldur a lesson. He had a score to settle with those bastards and most of all, for himself, he wanted the *honor* and the *glory*. That was what had motivated old King Henry V:

*The fewer men, the greater share of honour...  
By Jove, I am not covetous for gold,  
Nor Care I who doth feed upon my cost;  
It yearns me not if men my garments wear;  
Such outward things dwell not in my desires;  
But if it is a sin to covet honour,  
I am the most offending soul alive.*

On the other hand, as Master and Commander of a Ship, he could never let himself be driven by his personal desires or his lust for glory. If he tried to capture those Ships it would cost him lives, and all the glory and honor in the world was not worth the life of a single one of his precious, beloved Shipmates.

And it would probably make trouble with the Admiralty—maybe even *more* trouble than he already had, hard as that might be to imagine.

On the gripping hand, there was glory and guns for his men and his Ship, glory and guns that would help them survive in the political and physical battles yet to come. And those guns and Ships would help Westerners survive the brutal, genocidal assault that he *knew* was coming. It was his *duty* to get those guns for his men, his Ship, and his nation. Duty: that fierce, harsh, insatiable mistress of his who could rightfully consume as many lives as she desired.

For once, duty and desire were in agreement.

"Turn us about," he said to the quartermaster. "We have unfinished business to attend to."

He had never felt more alive in his life. *And that makes sense*, he thought, *because...*

*We live in deeds, not years;  
In thoughts not breaths.*

## CHAPTER THE 4TH

# Close Approach: "Be Steady Boys, be Steady"

Stand to your guns, my hearts of oak,  
Let not a word onboard be spoke,  
Victory soon will crown the joke;  
Be silent and be ready.  
Ram down your guns and sponge them well,  
Let us be sure that the balls will tell,  
The cannons' roar shall sound their knell;  
Be steady boys, be steady.

"Sterret's Sea Fight"  
Anon. (originally published in broadside format in 1801)

It was time for breakfast. They had fought for many long hours, and the crew was tired. Not exhausted, not at the end of their rope, but they were tired and a meal would be refreshing. They had pulled out of sight of the two Guldur Ships, and the tension was great as they broke their fast and headed back, the prey turning upon its predators.

Today's meals would normally have been served on the upperside, but the upper deck was a shambles so the lowerside was hosting meals again. The lunch meal for the night shift had been skipped, and those worthies were particularly hungry, although almost everyone aboard had a hearty appetite.

*Almost everyone.* Cuthbert Asquith XVI could not understand how the crew could eat under these circumstances. Right beside him was Lt. Archer, who would soon be leading men in battle. The young lieutenant would probably be the first to die, yet he was eating with great zest, wolfing down his meal while walking around and making sure that his men had been taken care of and were eating well.

Archer looked over at the earthling. "Adrenaline!" he said with a broad grin as he scarfed down his scrambled eggs. "The breakfast of champions."

Asquith was baffled by this young man, and all the others like him. He had existed in a constant state of tension, unable to eat anything since they first encountered the enemy Ships.

Meanwhile, the Ship's routine continued in a placid, surreal manner. At this moment, in the background Asquith heard that age-old chant: "Sweepers. Sweepers, man your brooms. Give the Ship a clean sweep-down fore and aft. Sweep down all lower decks, ladder backs, and passageways. Throw all trash clear of the stern... Now sweepers... "

Having been completely rebuffed at any attempt to give spiritual consolation to Asquith, Brother Theo Petreckski was espousing the "finite heartbeat theory" to him.

"We each have been allocated a finite number of heartbeats, and when we use them up, then our brief span of existence in this world is complete. Thus, agitation, irritation, consternation, and all perspiration resulting from unnecessarily vigorous operation of your body only serves to use up your heartbeats needlessly."

Brother Theo was full-bellied, with a thick blond tonsure and a round, red face that spoke of a soul long traveled under alien suns and often wrapped around exotic wines. He had twinkling blue eyes, and an expression around his eyes and lips that hinted of pending outbursts of song and laughter.

As he continued to pontificate, Lt. Fielder cut in. "Your stream of consciousness is definitely overflowing its banks."

"Ah, Brother Daniel," Theo replied with a look of mock piety, "at moments such as this I can't help but contemplate the uncertainty of the future. Think of how little time there may be left. How few heartbeats, and how each one must be nurtured, preserved, and cherished."

"Uh-huh," the sardonic first officer replied. "Well, I'm saving mine up for sex and fleeing from irate husbands."

"Daniel," said Theo with a kind smile and a shake of his head, "you are a truly twisted man. When you die, they will probably have to screw you into the ground."

"I have to admit," Fielder growled, "you are bringing religion into my life. I don't think I ever really believed in hell until I met you."

"Ah, well, I'm just God's humble servant, doing the best I can," the monk replied with a mischievous grin.

"God, please save me from your followers!" muttered the first officer in mock dismay.

Asquith was baffled by all this banter. But he was slowly beginning to understand that it was entertainment intended for one-and-all. Fielder and Theo derived pleasure and reassurance from restating some well-established and well-worn positions. And everyone on the quarterdeck took pride and satisfaction in knowing that they were warriors who could pontificate, philosophize, and remain true to themselves even in the face of death.

The enemy Ship came into sight.

They were plodding determinedly after the *Fang* with full thrust from the sails on their one remaining mast on the lowerside, as the ticks swarmed in the rigging, trying to make repairs. The canine derived Guldur "curs" were the definition of "doggedly determined."

On the enemy's upperside there was still a full compliment of masts, but the sails on two of them had to be slacked to balance the thrust. The enemy was feverishly working on a jury lower mainmast but their repairs had not progressed as far as the *Fang*'s.

Fielder had come up to join Melville and Broadax on the upper quarterdeck. Broadax's battle station was with her marines beside the upper quarterdeck, and it was normal for her to move over and join the captain.

"Just for the record, sir," said the first officer quietly, "I recommend against this."

"Noted," replied Melville. "So noted."

Broadax just chuckled and twirled her ax, while her monkey capered atop her helmet.

"How do you intend to go at her, then, sir," said Fielder resignedly.

"I'll tell you, but I want Hans to hear this as well."

Then he called up to the sailing master in the rigging, "Mr. Hans, if you have a moment?"

In seconds Hans slid down a backstay, landing with a gentle thump. He and his monkey spit tobacco juice over the side and he said, "Aye, sir?"

Gesturing at the enemy Ship Melville said, "We'll go at her and blast away any scrap of sail on the lowerside that can still give her steerage. After that we'll pound the hell out of her from one side until she bleeds from her gunports. Then we'll blast her some more, getting closer and giving her plenty of canister and grape after we've dismounted her guns. I intend to be sure that we've pounded her to a bloody pulp. We'll hammer her as best as we can without sinking her into three-space, and *then* we'll board."

"Well, sir, if it must be done, then I certainly approve of doing it that way," said Fielder.

"Aye, sir," agreed Hans. "By the Lady, thas my ideer of a fair fight."

"Damn straight," agreed Broadax, spinning her ax between her fingers like a profoundly ugly majorette twirling her baton. For today's work the *Fang*'s sweet mistress of the ax had selected a vicious, double-edged chopper with a thick blond haft that was three feet in length, properly rawhide wrapped, and a head that weighed twelve pounds. It had a nice, pointy, six-inch spike on the top, so it could slice, dice, chop, and, when necessary, stab straight ahead.

"Aye," Melville replied. "Hans, we may be needing a jib and a spanker for rapid turning. Any problem with that?"

"No, sir," the sailing master replied. "The jury mizzenmast on the upperside shouldn't 'ave any trouble takin' a spanker, and there's no problem ta speak of anywhere else."

The "winds" of two-space were constantly downward, so there was no use for jibs and spankers (sails that ran parallel to the Keel of the Ship) except to provide thrust for rapid turns when placed at the bow and stern of the Ship. The *Fang* had used these before in battle, and the old sailing master looked forward to using them again.

With a big grin and another synchronized spit of tobacco juice, Hans added, "Proper use o' a jib and a spanker'll spin us on a dime so's we can bring all our guns inta play. An' *that* 'll show the damn curs what *real* sailin's about. By the Lady, them stewpid bastards made one hell of a mistake when they decided to come after us!"

This last line was greeted with growls of approval from the quarterdeck crew. Then Fielder went to take command of the lower quarterdeck and Melville went to the lower bow gun. The Guldur's remaining mast would go down soon, and then the bowsprit. After that the enemy would be stripped clean of sails on the lowerside, and largely immobile. The *Fang* could come at them from one direction, dismount the guns on that side, and hammer the Guldur with impunity. Or at least that was the plan.

Again Melville waited by Cuddles, the lower bow gun, with his assortment of witnesses.

"Shipmates," Melville said, looking at the group with a wry grin, "it is possible that this might all have been a misunderstanding." That was received with cynical smirks from most of his audience. "Now that we are safe, I intend to go back to the surviving Guldur and try to find out why they attacked us. I hope to be able to explain to them that we mean no harm, that this was all a mistake, and that I intend to offer assistance."

The response among his audience ranged from total confusion in the case of Asquith, to serene inscrutability on the part of Lady Elphinstone, to conspiratorial nods and winks among most of the remainder. Everyone except Asquith understood that their captain had the right to go and attack these Ships, but he was going out of his way to make it clear that he had given the enemy a second opportunity to avoid the fight.

"However," continued Melville, "if they insist upon attacking us, then we will defend ourselves."

They only had to wait a few minutes until, at maximum range, the enemy's bow guns opened fire.

"Well," drawled Westminster, "It was worth a try. But you know what they say, 'Never pet a burning dog.'"

"Aye," replied Melville, "now everyone to their duty stations."

This time the enemy was not firing at their rigging. Previously the Guldur had aimed to slow them down, so that all four Ships could gang up on them. Now there weren't any other Guldur Ships in sight, and the enemy was aiming for their Keel, trying to make a kill shot. Fortunately they didn't have Melville's precision. For them it was a one-in-a-hundred chance... but they *did* have a chance. Everyone aboard the *Fang* knew that death could come for them this day.

Every heart was pounding with fear and anticipation. On the upperside the first enemy shot was low. A second later the shot from the enemy's lowerside smashed into the hull. The *Fang* reverberated from the impact of the big 24-pound ball and the deck shuddered beneath their feet.

The captain returned fire with Cuddles, and the battle was on.

Melville and Cuddles were able to make steady hits on the Guldur's remaining mast. The best the enemy could do was to put about a quarter of their shots into the *Fang*'s hull, but each hit made the big Ship ring like a gong, and each strike of that gong could be their death knell.

On the upperside Mr. Barlet, the master gunner, was working with Sudden Death to slam cannonball after cannonball into the enemy hull. Barlet was intentionally keeping the ball high. He wanted to avoid making a kill shot into the Guldur's Keel, and there was no real value in hitting the rigging since the enemy would—hopefully—soon be dismasted on the other side. Barlet wasn't out to dismast or sink the enemy Ship. His goal was to dismount the enemy's bow gun and kill their crew. The huge 24-pound cannonballs were deadly, but the real slaughter was caused by the splinters of wood that fountained out like shrapnel as each ball punched through the enemy hull.

But the exchange was not all one-sided. Periodically the enemy did the same thing to the *Fang* that Barlet was doing to them, as cannonballs and splinters took their toll on Melville's beloved Ship and crew.

"Capt'n!" interrupted a young Ship's boy in squeaky excitement. He scurried across the deck, skipping over gun tackles and flaked halyards like a rabbit as Melville waited for the sweating crew to slam Cuddles back into battery. "Chips sez ever'thin's okay so far! Nuthin' we can't handle 'e sez. The wurst of it is that a cannonball destroyed some o' the support structures in the surg'ry."

"Damn," Melville replied. "We need the surgery up and working. Tell the damage control parties to make that a top priority until I say otherwise, and continue to keep me informed. And in the future you *will* refer to the Ship's Carpenter as *Mr.* Tibbits. Is that clear?"

"Aye, sir! Tell Mr. Tibbits the surg'ry's top prior'ty. Keep you informed."

Melville had a painful memory of another bright-eyed, irrepressible boy bringing him a message from the carpenter, and a similar reproach given in the heat of battle for using the term "Chips." The young captain reflexively whispered a little prayer that this boy would meet a better fate.

As the damage control team charged into the hospital the petty officer in charge was stunned by the carnage that met his eye. Mrs. Vodi appeared to have been buried under a veritable heap of esoteric medical equipment.

"My gawd! Mrs. Vodi's been hit! You men get that junk off of her!"

What *they* saw was an old lady buried in debris. What *she* saw was a group of hormonally challenged young men with large, sharp instruments in their hands.

"Put down that ax and back away slowly," said Vodi calmly, as she looked up from amidst jumble of straps, boards, and chains known as The Rack: the device used to hold their patients during surgery. Surgery in two-space was often conducted without anesthesia, since complex chemicals quickly decayed and lost their properties. This much-feared apparatus was designed to hold a writhing, pain-wracked patient at varying heights and positions, while also strapping him down and keeping him still during an operation.

The band of sailors pressed into service as a damage control team listened in dazed amazement as Mrs. Vodi continued. "You take care of bracing up that bulkhead there. I've got this repair under control and I *know* better than to underestimate the power of stupid men in large groups. You boys think 'cause you're guys that you're automatically good with tools, but trust me, it isn't so. When you master the one you were born with we'll talk about letting you get your hands on other stuff."

On the other end of the surgery Lady Elphinstone was operating on a sailor who had a large splinter in his leg. Vodi's tirade kept her patient distracted from his own agony, while the surgeon simply sighed resignedly, with a long-suffering shake of her head.

To add to the situation, the Ship's cats were all mewling and grumbling plaintively from the corners and under the beds. It was bad enough when the *Fang*'s big guns fired and the Ship shuddered. But then cannonballs began to punch through the hull, making the Ship ring like a great gong as the deck planks bucked. The cats quickly climbed up the scale from upset and cross, to peeved, petulant, vexed, piqued, and nettled. And they were *just* about to work their way right up to irate, angry, and mad, thankyewverymuch. After all, just what part of "meow" don't you understand?

"Now git away," Vodi continued. "You *don't* want to mess with me. We have ultimate power. We're medical folk. *We* can cut your clothes off, buddy." Then she continued in a muttering monotone as she returned to her repairs, "Ask the average male if he'd rather be shot at or have a trouserectomy and you *know* what he'd pick. *That's* power."

Then Melville dropped the enemy's final mast. With each shot they drew nearer. The next two shots dropped their bowsprit, and the Guldur Ship was almost completely dead in the water. With three more shots he dismounted the enemy's bow gun. The crew cheered as the enemy cannon flipped in the air. Melville rolled off the gun, turned to Cuddle's gun captain and said, "I'm going to see how they're doing on the upperside. You give 'em hell here. Just be sure not to hit them in the Keel. We've worked too hard to capture these bastards. All your Shipmates will be seriously pissed-off at you if you sink them," he added with a laugh.

On the upperside Mr. Barlet had focused on the enemy's bow gun as they drew closer, and he had succeeded in dismounting the gun on this side as well. Now the battle had become a matter of maneuvering to stay directly off the enemy's defenseless bow. By putting up scraps of canvas on the lowerside the enemy could still turn slowly. The *Fang* had to deal with this possibility, and Melville moved to the upper quarterdeck to be prepared for rapid maneuvers. At the quarterdeck he met Hans, who had remained in command of the upperside while Melville fired the guns. Broadax was also there in her usual position, where she could watch the big picture and keep an eye on her marines.

"Hans, I want you to remain in command here. I'm going to the lower quarterdeck where I can watch and anticipate any jury sails or jibs the enemy tries to put up to turn their bow away from us. I think they're going to get tired of what we'll be feeding them."

"Aye, sir," Hans said with a wolfish grin, and Broadax growled her agreement. "Ya know, Cap'n, them vacuum-suckers over there can get a smidgen of steerage way by putting up sail on the upperside. Even without a balancin' sail on the oppersite side, a little bit won't tip 'em, and they've still got three good masts on this side. The trick is, anythin' they do without an equal thrust on the other side 'll be real slow an' sluggish like, so we should have lots a warnin'."

"Got it," said Melville. "You sound off over the voice tubes and let me know if they're up to anything on this side. Meanwhile, when we get within small-arms range of them I want you to turn us to start hammering them with the red broadside and our muskets."

"Aye, sir," Hans nodded.

"We'll be slipping the two cutters on the lower deck over the greenside. Without any masts on the lowerside I don't think the Guldur can have anyone high enough to see us doing that, and we'll keep the

cutters' masts stepped so they should be hidden behind the Ship on the upperside. I'm going to put boarding parties in the cutters. We'll approach them bow to bow on the redside, and then board above and below from the *Fang*. Lt. Broadax, I want you to take the lower boarding party, I'll take the upper." She nodded and snarled her happy agreement as the captain continued. "The two cutters will stay out of sight, towed behind the Ship with their masts stepped. When the boarding parties have the enemy's attention, the cutters will swing around both flanks and take their upper quarterdeck."

Melville's commands had been given loudly, so the entire quarterdeck crew knew the plan. As he headed down the ladder to the gundeck he was met by Lt. Archer, who reported to the captain with a grin that nearly split his face.

"Permission to lead the boarding party, sir! I just thought of a crushing remark to make to a Guldur and I'd like to deliver it personally."

"Lt. Broadax and I will be heading up the boarding parties," Melville replied. "You may lead the force coming from the cutters. Send one cutter around each side in a pincher movement, with boarding parties on the upperside. The cur commander should be on the upperside quarterdeck. The plan is to hit them from all sides at once. Everyone got that?"

"Aye, sir!" replied Archer. "Cutters to swing around and hammer the upper quarterdeck from both sides. You hold 'em by the nose and we'll kick 'em in the ass!"

"Aye!" added Broadax with glee. "Hit 'em frum ever' direction an' they'll drop like a dockside hooker's drawers. Personally, I wouldn't bet my hairy pink hind end on the theory, but it'll be fun tryin'!"

"Good enough," said Melville with a laugh. "Lt. Archer, I'm counting on you to wait until we have them well and truly occupied in the bows, and then move like lightning to their quarterdecks. You step lively now, you hear me? When you make your move you must be *fast* so that they don't get a chance to fire one of those 24-pounders at you on the way by. I want you to personally defeat whatever cur is in command on the quarterdeck so their Ship will accept you as commander. Their doctrine is like ours, and the senior cur should be on the upper quarterdeck. It's important that you kill their commander, or personally take his surrender."

"Aye sir!" Archer responded, his eyes sparkling with pleasure as he realized that he would command their prize. "I'm to take out whatever cur is in command of the upper quarterdeck, and take command of the Ship." Then he added with a cocky grin, "And a wise choice, if I may say so, sir!"

"Well, you're of damned small use here!" replied Melville. His face seemed to be wrestling with his mouth as he tried to suppress a laugh. "And try not to get yourself killed in the process," he added. "Remember: incoming fire has the right of way, there's no such thing as a fair fight, and I *need* you to take command of the prize. And take Mr. Hayl as a messenger."

"Aye, sir!"

As Lt. Archer headed off he heard the captain give a separate set of orders to Hans and Ulrich. It had something to do with the lower jollyboat, but Archer was not paying too much attention.

On his way past Hayl he looked at the young middie with an insane grin on his face. It seemed to Hayl's confused mind that there were a lot of those grins going around. "I'll be leading the boarding party that comes from our boats," Archer said. "The captain says for you to come with me as a messenger. Just stay right behind me, try to keep out of the fighting, and do exactly what I tell you."

The redside gun crews crouched motionless. Each gun captain was glaring down the barrel of his cannon. Then the Ship turned her redside to the enemy and, above and below, the redside broadside began to crash into the enemy bow. On the upperside, where the enemy still had their masts standing, the gun crews paid particular attention to the yardarms and rigging, sending broadside after broadside of grapeshot and canister, which sent shotgun-like blasts of smaller shot to sweep the Goblan "ticks" from the rigging.

*Fang's* redside railing was lined with a seething mass of warriors firing cannons and double-barreled muskets at their foe. The enemy Ship was badly crippled, but the battle was far from over. The *Fang's* cannons roared, Guldur muskets cracked their defiance, and death was in the air.

On the enemy Ship the toll was horrendous. Blood overflowed the decks and began to wash over the sides faster than the white Moss could soak it up. It was as if the Ship herself was bleeding, and not her crew.

Melville, his Ship and his guns felt fierce, feral satisfaction when he saw that blood. *Better you than us, you bastards!*

*See the blood in purple tide,  
Trick down her batter'd side;  
Wing'd with fate the bullets fly,  
Conquer boys— or bravely die...*

\* \* \*

They had been in almost continuous combat for over eighteen hours now, and the prolonged fight had

taken its toll on Cuthbert Asquith XVI. The little citizen of Old Earth was just a passenger, so no one expected him to fight. But they were pleased when he could provide them with a welcome diversion.

"This is insane!" cried Asquith, shaking with terror as he laid curled up in a ball in a corner of the quarterdeck. "What is the difference between this and insanity!?"

Crouching next to him, using the railing as a support for his rifled musket, was Josiah Westminster, a ranger and one of the Ship's crack rifle marksmen, who was picking off enemy leaders with supernatural accuracy. His fellow ranger, Valandil, was doing the same on the lower quarterdeck. A team of sailors and Ship's boys were ramming balls into the double-barreled, muzzle-loading, two-space rifles and handing them to the ranger as fast as he could aim and fire.

"The difference between battle and insanity?" repeated Westminster thoughtfully, looking over his shoulder at Asquith. "Is this a trick question?"

"No!"

"Well," the ranger drawled, looking back at the enemy and squeezing off a careful shot, "just off-hand then, Ah'd hope that with insanity the scenery is better." On the enemy quarterdeck, nearly two-hundred yards away, a Guldur officer spun down with a scream.

Then one of the Ship's boys who was helping to load muskets for the ranger farted loudly—a normal fear reaction. Or maybe it was just the chili-mac they'd had for dinner.

"Hmmm. Your voice is changing," said Westminster, "but your breath still smells the same."

Enemy musket balls were skipping and bouncing across the decks like gleeful, indiscriminate children of the malignant gods of war, leaving random, promiscuous death in their wake. One of them punched through the head of a sailor who was loading a musket, spewing brains and blood out the back of his skull. The unfortunate sailor's monkey had been distracted, reaching low with its belaying pin to block a bullet that would have taken out its master's kidney. Now the little creature wailed in sorrow and despair as the sailor slumped to the deck.

For Asquith that was the final straw. He promptly lost bowel and bladder control, and sat huddled in shame and humiliation in the corner.

"They say that reindeer emit an odor to warn the herd of danger," said Westminster with a friendly grin as he handed off an empty musket and grabbed another. "Ah'll bet it smells a lot like that." The team of loaders around him didn't miss a beat as their comrade died, barely bothering to wipe the gore from their faces as they focused intently on their urgent task of loading muskets for the ranger.

"Oh God, go ahead and rub it in," said Asquith. "I'd expect you bastards to kick a man when he was down."

"No, jist the opposite, mah brother," the ranger replied, touching off both barrels and smiling as yet two enemy leaders spun down. "Hooah," said Westminster with quiet satisfaction. His monkey was perched on his shoulder, gibbering in bloodthirsty satisfaction as it watched its master's shot strike home.

The ranger's dog was sitting next to him, and it echoed the monkey's delight. "Bad! Bad! Bad!" barked the dog.

Then Westminster continued, with a friendly glance over his shoulder at Asquith as he grabbed yet another musket, speaking in a clear, calm voice that carried across the quarterdeck. "Ah want you to know how common that is. It happens to lots of folks in combat. Don't you worry 'bout it, none, and don't you ever let anyone else give you any grief about such matters. Those who've been there, they understand. Let me tell you the story of Captain Bravo."

Then, to Asquith's amazement, as Westminster fired a steady stream of deadly-accurate musket balls at the enemy, while the battle raged all around them, the ranger calmly told his tale.

"Captain Bravo was a famous *marine* officer..."

"Oh lord, here we go," said the marine sentry on duty on the quarterdeck, as he fired off a shot and then shook his head in mock dismay. The sailors on the quarterdeck all grinned. There was nothing they loved more than a good marine joke.

"One day Captain Bravo's ship was attacked by a pirate ship," the ranger continued, pressing off another shot, "and he called to his men, 'Bring me mah red coat!' Then he put on his red jacket and proceeded to lead his men bravely and defeat the enemy."

The ranger's firing and loading never stopped. On the gundeck *Fang*'s cannons thundered with an unwavering, unrelenting cadence of death. The sailors at the wheel never departed from their careful attention to their duty. In the rigging above them more sailors were standing by to adjust sail. And every man stood ready to respond instantly to the orders of their commander, Captain Melville, who stood at the rail beside Lt. Fielder, with a grim smile and a keen eye to the big picture. But even as they took note of the myriad, life-and-death details of taking their Ship into battle, even as their friends fell dead and wounded around them, the *Fang*'s listened with rapt attention while Westminster spoke, punctuating his tale with a constant stream of deadly rifle fire.

"Later they were attacked by *four* pirate ships. Again Captain Bravo called out, 'Bring me mah red coat!' and then he led them into victory against overwhelming forces. Finally his men asked him, 'Captain Bravo, tell us, sir, why do you ask for your red coat before battle?'"

"Captain Bravo replied boldly, 'So that if Ah am struck in combat you will not see the blood, and will not lose heart by knowing that Ah am wounded!' Well, you can bet that his men were mighty impressed."

The ranger continued to fire as he spoke, like a clockwork machine, never missing a beat or a shot.

"A few days later the ship was attacked by ten pirates! So the men all waited expectantly for Captain Bravo to call for his red coat. Then he stood up bravely, and in a clear voice called out, 'Bring me mah brown pants!'"

Asquith looked on in amazement as everyone within ear-shot of the ranger burst out laughing. *H.M.S. Fang* was a crack Ship, with very high morale, and now their morale rose just a notch higher, each man a bit more confident and certain of himself, knowing that they could jest in the face of death.

"Damn! That's funny!" laughed a sailor, almost hysterical with a bizarre cocktail of laughter and tension.

"Wit is a ranger's secret weapon," replied the buckskin-clad Westminster. "If we weren't funny, smart, and damned good-looking, we'd just be marines in sensible clothing."

Captain Melville's young dog, Boye, was whimpering beside his master, in contrast to the ranger's dog who seemed to be eagerly anticipating the coming boarding operation. Every fiber of Westminster's dog, Cinder, communicated the pure joy of a good hunting dog watching his master pull the shotgun down on a crisp fall morning. While the captain had to periodically reach down and pat Boye reassuringly as the young dog quivered and huddled against him.

The two dogs also had monkeys on their backs, echoing the attitudes of their hosts. Cinder's monkey seemed eagerly intent upon the coming battle and waved its belaying pin about gleefully, while Boye's monkey clutched its belaying pin tightly as it trembled in fear.

Westminster was plying his steady stream of unrelenting death upon the enemy, as his monkey and dog watched and provided moral support, and a small cloud of loaders handed him a continuous supply of double-barreled muskets. The enemy was firing back, but at this range their musketry was largely ineffectual, while the ranger's shots struck home with remarkable consistency.

Then the ranger looked over at Captain Melville's whining, cowering dog and said, with mocking affection, "Hey, Boye! If you were shorter and longer you'd make a good dachshund."

The dog, hearing its name, looked at him and cocked its head.

"You know why? 'Cause you're *such* a weenie! Yer a weenie dog! A wimpy, weenie dog!" The dog actually seemed to look embarrassed.

"You see that dog?" Westminster asked Asquith, never missing a shot as he talked. "Everyone expects a big mutt like him, from a great line of warrior dogs, to be brave and fierce. He's the son of mah dog here, you know. But the truth is, even though he's got most of his growth, he's still a pup. He's not even a year old, and he'll be skittish and uncertain until he grows and experiences more. Don't judge the dog by the pup, and don't judge the warrior by the recruit. We all need to grow. Give yourself that opportunity to learn and grow. As long as you live, forgive yourself for the bad days, learn from the good days and," he concluded, putting a bullet in the head of an enemy officer for emphasis, "git on with life while you have the opportunity."

Lt. Archer was on the lower gun deck, getting the cutters over the greenside. Archer had picked Petty Officer Bernard Hommer to serve as his senior NCO in this attack, and the two of them were giving out commands and instructions to their boarding party faster than young Midshipman Hayl could understand them.

Nothing seemed to make sense to Hayl. He just stood, gobsmacked by events and distracted by details. It was as though he were looking at a fantastically detailed painting. Hayl was struck by Archer's elegant red goatee and sideburns. And he observed that, unlike most sailors, Petty Officer Hommer kept his curly blond hair long and his locks were like a golden helmet as the two young warriors laughed together. The little middie was strangely touched by the beauty, the vigor, and the vitality of these two young men as they prepared for battle.

Finally Archer looked over his shoulder at Hayl, who was obediently staying right behind the lieutenant, and asked, "Are you ready?"

Suddenly a memory from a childhood book came back to him. "Help, Mr. Wizzurd!" said Hayl with a weak grin and a feeble attempt at bravado, "I don't want to *be* a navy midshipman any more!"

"Haha! That's the spirit," replied Archer with a wink. "Come on a-long!" he sang as he scrambled down into the cutter, "Come on a-long, with Ell Tee Archer's rag-tag band! Come on a-long! Come on a-long! We're the finest band in the land!"

It all seemed like a bad dream. Just a few hours ago they were sailing peacefully through such incredible beauty, enjoying a pleasant pistol match on the lower quarterdeck, and now his world was filled with death and fear. Like so many young boys across so many centuries, Hayl found himself thinking of his mother, his family and his home, wondering how he got here, and wondering if he would ever see home again.

\* \* \*

I remember the gleams and glooms that dart  
Across the school-boy's brain;  
The song and the silence in the heart,  
That in part are prophecies, and in part  
Are longings wild and vain.  
And the voice of that fitful song  
Sings on, and is never still:  
"A boy's will is the wind's will,  
And the thoughts of youth are long, long thoughts."

"My Lost Youth"  
Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

# CHAPTER THE 5TH

## Boarding Action: "Out Cutlasses and Board!"

"Captain, they cry, the fight is done,  
"They bid you send your sword."  
And he answered, "Grapple her stern and bow,  
"They have asked for steel they shall have it now;  
"Out cutlasses and board!"

They cleared the cruiser end to end  
From conning-tower to hold.  
They fought as they fought in Nelson's fleet;  
They were stripped to the waist, they were bare to the feet,  
As it was in the days of old.

...On a cruiser won from an ancient foe,  
As it was in the days of long ago,  
And as it still shall be!

"Ballad of the Clampherdown"  
Rudyard Kipling.

The *Fang* s all waited, each in his own way, for the two Ships to close.

The upper and lower bow guns mercilessly battered the enemy with huge shotgun blasts of grapeshot. In the upper bow Melville crouched with his boarding party. On the upper quarterdeck Lt. Fielder had the conn. In the lower bow, Broadax waited with her marines, twirling her ax and puffing her cigar contentedly. They tried not to think about the horrors that awaited them, but everyone who could do so had changed into clean clothing to help prevent infecting wounds.

Trailing behind the *Fang* , staying where the enemy couldn't see them, the two cutters from the lower deck followed closely. Their uppersides were packed to the gunwales with handpicked sailors, each one armed to the teeth. One of the Ships' two jollyboats also rode beside them.

These two miniature, one-masted, two-space Ships were named *White-socks* and *Fatty Lumpkin* . Along with *Sharp-ears* and *Wise-nose* , the two cutters stored on the upperside, the cutters were a remnant of their dear, beloved *Kestrel* , the mortally wounded Ship who had died to help them capture the *Fang* .

Once the cutters were separated from the *Fang* they took on an intelligence of their own, and the two young commanders could feel the child-like eagerness radiating from their boats. Lt. Archer was in the upper bow of *White-socks* and his friend, Lt. Crater, in *Fatty Lumpkin* . The two young lieutenants looked across at each other and grinned. The lowerside jollyboat, which had come with the *Fang* and had been named *Rip* , carried old Hans and Ulrich in it, along with a small, crack crew of sailors.

"I wanted to be a marine but I couldn't pass the physical. I couldn't get my head in the jar," said Lt. Fielder to Asquith.

The little earthling was still crouched in malodorous misery and fear on the upper quarterdeck. A sporadic spray of Guldur small-arms fire was keeping his head down. Fielder stood beside him at the rail, keeping a watchful eye on the tactical situation and maintaining a generally one-sided conversation with Asquith. In the midst of his own fear and anxiety, Fielder continued to draw comfort from the earthworm's abject terror.

Their conversation had turned to the subject of marines, and Fielder was waxing eloquent upon one of his favorite topics. "You have to think of marines as big, dumb dogs. You even have to talk to them like

dogs. 'Hey, boy! How ya doing! You wanta play? Huh? Huh? Fetch, boy, fetch! Go get the Ship! Get the Ship! Come on, boy! You can do it!'"

"Except'n fer Dwakins," added the quartermaster at the wheel, happily contributing his two bits to a popular subject. "I do believe 'e's too dumb ta git the ideer."

"I do believe you're right," said Fielder with a nod. "In Dwakins' case you just have to level with him. I can hear Broadax right about now. I've heard it a hundred times: 'Dwakins, yer too dumb to live!'" he said, in a fair imitation of Lt. Broadax's gravelly voice, causing the quarterdeck crew to break into laughter. "'Jist try ta keep up with the other doggies, an' do what they do. If ye die first, we're splitting up yer gear!'"

The baffled earthling shook his head in confusion, disgust and dismay. These people truly were insane. Of that there could be no doubt. But then a line occurred to him, and he found it comforting to say, "Now would I give a thousand furlongs of sea for an acre of barren ground."

"Ha!" said Fielder in surprise. "Behold the earthling. Wonder of the ages. Prick him and he bleeds Shakespeare. That's *The Tempest*, I believe?"

"Yes," replied Asquith, finding that he relished the intellectual distraction. "There's been nothing else to do here except read. It's been kind of lonely, so, 'My Library, was dukedom enough.'"

"Well then," said Fielder, gesturing expansively at the Ship, "what do you think of our little universe? The Bard says, 'Here is everything advantageous to life.'"

"'True; save means to live,'" replied Asquith on cue.

"'Misery acquaints a man with strange bedfellows,'" replied Fielder with a sincere grin and a shake of his head. "As for me..."

"My only books  
Were woman's looks—  
And folly's all they've taught me."

Then, tentatively, Asquith reached up his hand to Fielder. "Here's my hand." His gesture of friendship was under the cover of the quoting game they were playing, but it was nonetheless heartfelt, as he opened himself up to be snubbed by the sardonic first officer.

But Fielder replied in kind, and on cue, with apparent sincerity and kindness, as he reached down his hand, "And mine, with my heart in 't."

Fielder and Asquith remained in companionable silence as the battle raged about them, the first officer gripping the railing and standing ramrod straight in spite of his fears, the earthling still nestled in his corner. Then the enemy added injury to all the insult that had been heaped on poor Asquith's plate. The Guldur Ship managed to put their upperside bow gun back into battery and sent one double-shotted cannon blast into the *Fang*'s quarterdeck before they were hammered by counterfire from the *Fang*. One of the Guldur cannonballs hit the mizzenmast and sent a shower of wood splinters amongst the quarterdeck crew.

"Damn," said Fielder sadly, looking down at the wounded and unconscious earthling. "This has been a real 'bad hair day' for you my friend. Now sleep, for,

"We are such stuff  
As dreams are made on; and our little life  
Is rounded with a sleep."

\* \* \*

"Dwakins, ye doorknob, yer too damned dumb ta live!" roared Broadax. "Jist shoot when I tell ye to, an' stab the first Guldur ye see. Then try ta keep up with the udders, and do wat they do. If ye die first, we're splitting up yer gear."

"Uh, okay, sir. Er, mah-yam," Dwakins replied. "Ah guess Ah won't be needin' it then." His baby monkey cringed and managed to mirror Dwakins confused helplessness.

Dwakins did have a very thick crust on his pudding. Life had been so much simpler when he was an apprentice mole-catcher back on his home world, Fforde, but his boss had told him he should "go join da damned marines an' see da galaxy."

So he *was* thick, but he was also new and he had to learn everything the hard way in the midst of a veteran crew. In this case his sin was a continued failure to keep his loaded musket and its razor-sharp bayonet pointed away from his comrades. With an "Eek!" of outrage, Lance Corporal Jarvis' monkey had barely managed to deflect Dwakins' bayonet as it was about to slice open the back of Jarvis's head.

There was just too much going on, and Dwakins kept getting distracted. In exasperation Broadax had put the young private in the very front of the formation, where he was less likely to shoot or stab one of his comrades in the back. However, he was also in the most perilous position, with the least combat

experience and survival skills, so he was very likely to die. Bringing a certain sad truth to Broadax's claim that he was too dumb to live.

The job of the combat rifleman truly was one of the most mentally challenging tasks anyone could ever face. The fluid, ever-changing realm of combat, the variety of weapons and circumstances, and the unforgiving nature of the environment, all meant that putting stupid men in the infantry was tantamount to murder.

In the twentieth century one U.S. Secretary of Defense had ordered that 100,000 low-IQ individuals be drafted into the U.S. Army. These were popularly known as "MacNamara's 100,000," named after the politician and military dilettante who had made that decision.

These draftees—also known as "MacNamara's Morons"—would probably have been rejected even at the height of World War II due to their scores on military entrance tests. The politician who made this decision declared that the reason these men had performed so poorly on their entrance exams was because they had been socially deprived, and the military was going to be used as an instrument of social mobility for all these poor, misunderstood individuals.

Instead, the military became the death of many of them, because at that time the U.S. was participating in a nasty little war in Southeast Asia. In combat these "socially deprived" draftees died at a rate four times greater than soldiers in the top two intelligence brackets. And you have to ask yourself, how many of their comrades did they manage to kill or get killed along the way?

Combat is a nasty, brutish, unforgiving realm that has no mercy for the physically or mentally inferior. It is the ultimate Darwinian sieve: it filters out all but the deadly, intelligent, and lucky. And Lt. Broadax knew that as she put poor Dwakins in the front line. *But, what the hell*, thought Broadax. *He knew the job was dangerous when 'e took it. Besides, maybe the poor dumb son-of-a-bitch'll be lucky enough to live long enough to git deadly!*

Broadax positioned Lance Corporal Jarvis to Dwakins' left. Then with a disgusted shake of her head she looked at the broad-shouldered veteran of past battles and said, "Do yer best ta keep this poor bastard alive, Jarvis."

Jarvis looked like he was already overwhelmed with his own concerns, thankewverymuch, but he said, "Yes, ma'am," and looked across the bows with a nod and a gulp.

"So, Dwakins," Jarvis said, patting the private on the shoulder reassuringly. "Are you ready?"

"Um, yah, Corp'ral," replied the terrified private in a confused attempt at bravado. "We's gonna wreckdum, right?"

"You know," Jarvis muttered to his monkey, "I think I'm actually dumber than Dwakins. He doesn't know any better, but I *reenlisted* for this! When I get home, first thing I'm gonna do is beat up my high school guidance counselor."

"Eep!" replied his monkey.

*As the two Ships approached, Fielder expertly reduced sail so that they came quickly into contact, theFang 's redside bow up against the enemy's redside bow, as gentle as a kiss.*

*At that moment, as the two sentient Ships gently scraped together, there was an exchange of Moss. Along with the Moss came a transfer, almost an invasion of ideas, concepts, and history surging fromFang into the enemy Ship.*

*Fang had made similar contact with the venerable old Westernness ShipKestrel during the boarding operation that led to theFang 's capture andKestrel's death. During that contactFang had learned of an ancient Ship that loved its crew with a deep and abiding affection, built over centuries of contact and exploration. During that battleKestrel willingly gave her life for her crew, taking most of the Guldur boarding party down with her, and in doing so she taught the youngFang about love, affection, sacrifice, partnership, and trust.*

*A sliver of theKestrel's shattered Keel had been lovingly wedged in beside theFang 's Keel. The exchange of information and cells between these two alien life-forms was a complex concept that could only be partly understood. It would be truthful to say thatKestrel lived on inFang . It would also be correct to say thatKestrel had invaded, conquered, and even replaced the young, unformed personality ofFang . Or you could say that the two Ships now lived in symbiosis, two souls melding into one.*

*Whatever it was that had happened toFang was now happening to the enemy Ship.Fang told of a new race that did not abuse or torture its own. A new relationship based on trust and love, not fear and hate.*

*Fang told of these things, via a communication system that could not lie, to an entity that could not doubt.Fang spoke of these things and the enemy Ship listened, with awe and wonder.*

Melville and Boye crouched with the boarding party in the upperside bow as the Ships began to touch. Once again he felt a moment of great visual clarity. It was as if he were an observer in an art gallery looking at a classic masterpiece full of stunning, detailed color and breathtaking beauty. He held his

sword out in front of him and watched the brilliant stars run along the blade like molten gemstones.

It was a brief instant of stillness and quiet, a moment of bated breath. Melville's knack for poetry brought a verse to mind.

*There was silence deep as death,  
And the boldest held his breath  
For a time.*

If the contact between the Ships was gentle, the surge of troops who flooded over the railing was not. As they closed to within a few feet Melville gave the command for his boarding party to, "Fire!" just as the bow gun gave one last, 24-pound shotgun blast of grapeshot at point-blank range. <<Yes!>> "Cha-DOOM!!" <<KillDie!!>> and the deck planks bucked beneath their feet, as if to launch them into battle.

Melville was sickened as he briefly glimpsed Guldur defenders fall screaming into the inexorably closing gap between the two hulls, to be ground into a tormented mass of offal, fur, and broken weapons.

On the lowerside, at the same instant, Broadax was doing the same thing. The bow guns above and below belched out their terrible load of death, scattering the Guldur defenders who tried to make a stand at the rail. Then the gun crews left their reeking charges, grabbed the loaded, double-barreled muskets standing in ready-racks beside their guns, and threw themselves into the fray.

The huge blast of grapeshot from the cannons was devastating, painting the deck red and sending a grisly fountain of blood and limbs into the air. But the real harm was done by the volley of individually aimed fire from the marines' double-barreled, rifled muskets. The grapeshot was junk mail, addressed to "occupant." The musket balls were first-class mail, hand delivered and personally addressed to each individual defender. This kind of precision rifle fire was a much better method of getting the message out, and the message was: "Your breathing privileges have now been revoked."

After the initial volley the *Fang* s stormed aboard the Guldur Ship in a wave of cold steel.

On the lowerside Broadax led the way as her marines slammed into the enemy with an audible crash. The clang of steel on steel sounded like a cartload of scrap iron being dumped into a pit. This was accompanied by a roar of terror, anger, and desperation from both sides, then the awful slaughterhouse thud of steel on flesh, and the groans and piercing screams of the wounded and dying.

Broadax clenched her cigar in her teeth. Her ax sliced through the enemy in great swaths of blood and gore, and her monkey gibbered with joy. Dwakins was on her left, and she did her best to keep the young marine alive.

Dwakins was dazed and confused by the noise and the violent movement all around him. There was a loose liquid feeling in his guts, and his testicles were crawling up to meet it. In ordinary life there was usually too much going on for him to keep track of it all. In the midst of this din and confusion he didn't have a chance. He had fired both barrels of his musket when the lieutenant told him to, then he leapt across with the others and now there was a big, yellow dog in front of him, about to stab him with a bayonet.

*Suddenly Dwakins' vision narrows and nothing else in the universe matters except for the one creature in front of him. His sense of sound goes away and the world becomes deathly quiet.*

Dwakins was dumb, but his body was of ancient lineage and wise in the ways of survival. When you are profoundly frightened your brain will normally shut out all senses except one, and you will only receive data from whatever sense the brain thinks is most important for survival. Usually the one sense that is most essential is vision, and that is often further limited by tunnel vision, cutting out all distracting, peripheral sights.

This powerful, ancient survival mechanism did exactly what it was supposed to do in Dwakins' body and mind. The sensory overload and confusion left him. His brain tuned out all input except for the sight of the individual who was about to kill him, and his body took action to survive.

*He thrusts his musket forward with the strength and speed of desperation, slamming his bayonet to the hilt in the Gudlur's chest. Dwakins' thick, black hair flies forward with the force of the blow, momentarily blocking his vision. He has a fleeting, distracting thought about his corporal, who had been telling him to get a haircut, but somehow there was never enough time. With his vision blocked and useless, the survival computer that is his brain chooses to turn on his body's tactile sensations. Suddenly he is conscious that the force of his bayonet thrust makes his hands ache like an ax blow that unexpectedly hits a rock. For a brief instant that shocked feeling in his hands, combined with a sickening, grating feeling as the blade crunches through bone, is the only sensory input that enters into the meager mental universe that is Private Dwakins' brain.*

*Then his hair settles down, his vision returns, and Dwakins looks at the creature he has stabbed. The doggie's face is a mask of cringing confusion and dismay. Its eyes are wide, its ears are back,*

*and its head is cocked to one side. His old farm dogs looked just like that when they were being punished. Then it looked down at the bayonet hilt and the musket protruding from its chest, and a look of ineffable despair comes over its face as it drops its own weapon and wraps both hands around Dwakins' musket barrel, almost as though it is clasping its hands in prayer.*

*In a flash of insight, Dwakins realizes that the primary reason he is alive is because this doggie was even more confused and scared than he is. Dwakins is struck with a great sadness as he realizes that he might have just killed one of the few creatures who is more stupid and frightened than he is.*

*Everything up to this point takes only a few heartbeats to transpire, but the effects of slow-motion time make it seem like forever. In this same, stop-action daze, Dwakins' eye is caught by movement above him, and he realizes that the doggie's tick is about to bring its short sword down upon his unprotected skull.*

*Dwakins' monkey tries to stop the blow with a despairing "Eek!" but the tiny creature is still small and immature, and the blow is too powerful for it to block. Dwakins only has enough time to look into the Goblan's malignant red eyes and think, Oh-Gawd-I'm-gonna-die! before Lt. Broadax's ax comes up from his right, in a great, sweeping, backhanded, upstroke that enters underneath the tick's armpit, slicing off its left arm, shoulder, and head, and launching them up into the air in a red rocket of arterial blood. The blow is so fast that even in slow-motion time it seems like a blur.*

*Then the Guldur drops backward. Dwakins' bare feet slip on the blood-slicked deck, and he falls on top of his foe. The doggie's body slams back on the deck, and the bayonet protruding from its back is driven back out of its chest, falling beside them. They are both on the deck, embracing like lovers as Dwakins reaches out and strokes the Guldur's head. His foe looks up at him with stunned, shocked, hurt, puppy eyes.*

*Dwakins whispers, with tears in his eyes, "Nice doggie. Good doggie."*

Out of the corner of her eye Lt. Broadax saw Dwakins make one good lunge and sink his bayonet into one of the enemy. Then she saw the cur's tick take a cut at Dwakins, and she decapitated the critter with one casual backhand swipe of her ax. She took note of the fact that Dwakins slipped and fell, then she lost sight of him as Lance Corporal Jarvis stepped over his body and shifted right to fill in the gap.

Dwakins' panic-induced response resulted in tunnel vision and auditory exclusion in the young private, but Broadax's reaction to combat was completely different. She was conscious of everything around her, she heard all the sounds, and she was prepared to give commands or assistance as needed. Dwakins was a charging lion, completely unaware of anything but its prey. Broadax was a veteran wolf, hearing every member of the pack *and* the prey, conscious of all that was happening, and ready to contribute to

the team effort.

To Broadax's right were Corporal Kobbsven and Gunny Von Rito. The massive Kobbsven bore a mighty, two-handed claymore, and Von Rito had only an ancient K-bar fighting knife in his hand. The two of them formed a deadly, long-range/short-range team that had been perfected in many past battles.

The *Fang* s all had their monkeys perched on their backs, usually clinging with six legs and swinging a wooden belaying pin with the other two. They used these wooden clubs with supernatural speed to block enemy sword blows and bayonet thrusts, and even incoming bullets.

Immediately behind Broadax was Corporal Petrico, their armorer and crack pistol shot, carrying four double-barreled pistols stuffed into his belt, and six more in two specially made bandoleers that formed a big X draping across his narrow chest. Petrico was using his pistols with great care and precision to help the individuals in the front rank. The marines' monkeys tended to block the shots and blows that were aimed at their hosts' head and shoulders, so Petrico focused on those who were shooting or thrusting from below. With a carefully aimed snapshot and a cry of, "Take *that* , chew pocker!" he placed a bullet between the eyes of a Guldur who was kneeling down and about to fire a musket up into Kobbs' stomach. Then, with another cry of, "And *that* , chew pocker!" he put another bullet into a dismounted tick who was scurrying around on the deck, trying to reach in and hamstring Lt. Broadax.

The rest of the marines formed a phalanx beside and behind these lead elements, and together they chewed through the enemy like a rip saw through soft wood. They quickly swept around the dismounted enemy bow gun and dispatched the enemy who were trying to use it as cover.

The dog-like Guldur stood on two legs, and wore only a leather harness of crossed chest straps and belt to hang their ammunition and equipment on. Most of them held muskets in their forepaws and all of them had a vicious Goblan tick on their backs. The *Fang* s had learned to like and trust the Guldur prisoners who had joined their crew. In fact, many of the *Fang* 's doggies were participating in this boarding operation. But not a single one of their malignant, spiteful ticks had permitted themselves to be captured.

These filthy creatures each wielded a short sword with deadly efficiency, howling and screeching like baboons as they sat perched atop each cur's shoulders. It was generally believed that the ticks exerted some kind of mind control over their hosts, and between them and the Guldur packmasters, the average cur seemed to have no real control over its own destiny. Thus it was with particular pleasure that the marines who were not in the front ranks used their muskets to pick off the ticks. Without their ticks the Guldur were notably less deadly and determined.

Broadax was both prima donna and chaperone in a red dance of death, leading by example and exhorting others on, slaying and slaying as she grinned that cheerful grin you see in skulls. The combined effect of the marines' attack was devastating and totally demoralizing, and the enemy fell like wheat before the reaper. Lt. Broadax's boarding party quickly reached the enemy's lowerside quarterdeck. Her marines were barely able to keep up with Broadax, who was a living, breathing avatar of death and dismemberment as her ax swirled through the foe in great red swaths.

In a matter of minutes the marines stood panting upon the enemy's lower quarterdeck. The remaining Guldur, profoundly daunted by the gore encrusted Broadax and with their ticks picked off by riflemen, threw down their weapons and cringed at her feet.

"We surrenderr! We submrit!" cried out the Guldur's remaining petty officer. "You arrre a mighty warrriorr. Therre is no shrame in surrenderrring to you!"

There was a chorus of whimpers of agreement from among the Guldur as they looked up at Lt. Broadax, and then from among the phalanx of marine bayonets, an anonymous voice called out, "Damned right! And that's jist our womenfolk!"

"We ain't got time fer this, dammit!" shouted Broadax. "Third squad, leave a guard and the rest of ye start bustin' through the hatches to secure the Ship's Keel and make sure the mutts don' scuttle the Ship. Then ever'one move up and help with the battle on the upperside! Move out, ye bastards! Move!"

On the upperside Melville took the point, with a sword in his right hand and a double-barreled pistol in his left. Westminster and Valandil were at his flanks, armed with sword and pistol. The two rangers also each had a double-barreled musket slung over his back. They had all left their scabbards behind. Their lives would not depend upon being able to sheath their blades aboard the enemy Ship, and the scabbard might trip them up and throw them beneath an enemy blade in the midst of battle.

Westminster's dog, Cinder, stood close beside her master, panting with doggie glee at the prospect of the coming combat. The captain's dog, Boye, was huddling hesitantly between Cinder and Melville, constantly looking to his dam and his master for reassurance. Boye's monkey waved a belaying pin uncertainly as it clung to the dog's neck.

Grenoble stood behind the captain with a broad-bladed spear in his hands and a brace of pistols holstered on his hips. The Sylvan bodyguard was a hereditary guardian of warrior leaders. He knew that in battle a commander often had to lead from the front, but the tall Sylvan was trained to thrust his spear over, around, and even under his captain in order protect him in battle. Ordinarily Ulrich, the captain's coxswain, would be there as well, but Melville had given him another mission.

Brother Theo, the Ship's purser, also stood behind the captain with a pistol in each hand. Behind Theo was a small cluster of midshipmen with pistols. The middies' primary duty was to hand a steady supply of fresh pistols to Brother Theo, and to fire their own pistols in extreme emergencies. The midshipmen also had a few of the precious, rare, and hideously expensive, Keel-charge "concussion grenades." Melville hoped they could hold these in reserve, but if the attack got bogged down he wouldn't hesitate to use them.

More of the Ship's dogs were immediately behind the front line, mixed in with Ship's boys who were carrying razor-sharp knives in their fists. And each of *them* had a monkey with a belaying pin. The boys and the dogs—and their monkeys—fought the battle down low, scrambling among the legs, biting and hamstringing the enemy. It was hard to say if the boys or the dogs were anticipating the battle with greater glee.

Their offensive line was set up to attack the enemy low (the boys and dogs with their monkeys), middle (the majority of the assaulters and their monkeys), and high. The "high" component consisted of their topmen with their monkeys. They were led by the elite Sylvan sailors (and *their* monkeys), who were attacking from the *Fang*'s rigging into the still intact upperside rigging of the Guldur Ship. The canine-derived Guldur were poor hands at operating in this realm, so they depended upon great swarms of Goblans to do any work that did not involve having both hindpaws planted firmly on the deck. The Sylvans were masters of maneuver and battle in the low gravity that existed up in the rigging, and they were confident in their ability to sweep away the Goblans who were still alive in the upper regions.

The enemy's upperside was better defended than the lowerside. Their upper quarterdeck fairly bristled with the remaining Guldur crew members, each with a tick on his shoulders. Melville knew that the Guldur had gutted the rest of their Ship in order to make a final stand on the upper quarterdeck. This was standard operating procedure for the curs, and it was exactly what he had anticipated.

The Guldur's goal was to inflict as much damage as possible upon their invaders. Melville's objective was to prevent that. To take the enemy Ship with minimal loss of life to his precious crew. He had a scheme in place to do that, and all he could do now was fight like hell, keep an eye on the tactical situation, and see if the plan came together.

Melville's boarding party came across the enemy's upperside bow, a wave of cold steel immediately behind the hail of grapeshot and volley of musket fire that atomized the front line of the foe. This attack was very similar to what *Fang*'s marines were inflicting upon the enemy on the lower deck. The methodology was slightly different, but the results were largely the same.

Melville vaulted over the rail and his bare feet slithered and skidded on the blood-soaked decks. All around him his boarding party stumbled over limbs and tripped over the thrashing carnage, choking on the airborne ichor of the pulverized, smattered Guldur, mouths and eyes filling with a salty-tasting, sickening red mist. Those who stumbled were left behind, but most kept their balance and launched themselves into the Guldur defenders.

The boarding party was led by three masterful swordsmen of the Kingdom of Westerness, who sundered the enemy ranks with fearsome, fell-handed skill and ability. The onslaught was supported on both flanks by veteran sailors with flashing bayonets, but the real keys to their success were Melville and his rangers. Each was a true artist with the sword, cleaving a red web of death among the enemy.

The swords of two-space were always straight, since the corrosive influence of that strange realm played the devil with curved surfaces. The influence of two-space also helped to keep their weapons deadly sharp. They were stored in special compartments in the Ship, essentially "floating" in that impossibly thin plane of two-space. The influence of Flatland worked to pull the blades "flat," atom by atom, so that the edges of the blades were drawn into mono-molecular sharpness. The bayonet blades and short swords of the enemy were equally sharp, but the curs and ticks who carried them were no match for the three swordsmen of Westernness and the blades they bore.

The swords of Melville and his rangers flashed in crimson arcs, severing limbs and piercing bodies with a practiced ease that seemed deceptively and frighteningly effortless. Under stress the body shuts down the blood flow to the outer layers of skin and muscles. This "vasoconstriction" allows the skin to become a kind of "armor" that can take great damage without much blood loss, which can be a valuable survival mechanism. One side effect of this is to make blood pressure skyrocket, and when an artery *is* severed, the blood fountains out with amazing power. Great gouts of arterial blood sprayed out from each precisely aimed stroke of those Westernness swords. A maelstrom of crimson ichor splattered and splashed off blades and bodies as Melville and his rangers flicked off heads and limbs like a swordsman might flick spent blossoms from a rose bush in idle practice.

The Ship's boys, dogs, and their monkeys battled underfoot, bedeviling and badgering the enemy with flashing fangs and pitiless knives amidst a red rain of blood and limbs that flowed down from above. Soon the dogs were heaving great, pink, foaming breaths from gore-drenched muzzles, and the boys' arms were soaked to the shoulder in the crimson life fluid of the hapless Guldur whom they had hamstrung and neutered with their remorseless blades. The blood in the air and on their faces ran hot and salty into panting, screaming mouths, while the monkeys screeched from their backs.

Brother Theo was delivering a continuous fusillade of rapid-fire pistol shots from directly behind the line. He picked off the Goblan ticks on the enemy's shoulders with machine-like precision and speed, with a supply of pistols constantly renewed by the hurried reloads of the middies.

Following immediately behind the piercing, penetrating triad of Melville and his rangers, forming a fourth point to their diamond, was Grenoble with his broad-bladed spear. One moment that spear flashed to Melville's right while the captain cut to his left, spilling an enemy's guts like a great ropey tide of slimy, sickly, purple snakes. Just as the captain's sword stabbed to his right, Grenoble's spear flashed back and thrust swift as an arrow to Melville's left, piercing a Guldur's heart in a great gush of red, and then snapped back with such speed that it left a line of blood in the air, like scarlet thread following a darting needle. An instant later that broad blade thrust high to pick off a Goblan tick, then down between the captain's legs like some great, gore soaked, tripod phallus, to cut a cur's hindpaw out from under him.

The boarding party's monkeys, crouching upon their shoulders, were blocking and neutralizing the attacks of the enemy's ticks, and most other attacks upon their hosts' upper bodies. Periodically, with a resounding "*Thwack!*" the monkeys' flashing belaying pins would block an incoming bullet. This was something that the *Fang*s would not have believed, *could* not have believed, if they had not personally examined the bullet-encrusted, wooden belaying pins after past battles.

The momentum of their combined, multilevel attack was stunning and devastating. The enemy who stood

were mowed down like grass, and those who tried to take cover behind the dismantled bow gun were swept over from both flanks. Many chose simply to fall to the ground and curl into whimpering balls in the face of that implacable, inexorable onslaught. Melville and his boarders were happy to step over them, pausing only long enough to hack at any Goblan who remained alive, but permitting the broken Guldur sailors to live.

High above them in the rigging, the *Fang*'s topmen, led by their Sylvan compatriots and ably assisted by their monkeys, slammed into the Goblan in the rigging. It was only on this front that the attack bogged down. It seemed that an inordinate number of the Goblan had been hiding in the crow's nests, and now they came boiling down like a deranged cross between insane circus clowns coming out of their car and enraged hornets pouring out of their nest. The Sylvans' skill in the low gravity of the upper rigging was astounding, but so was that of the Goblan, and their greater numbers slowed down the advance.

The rest of Melville's boarding party cut through to the enemy's quarterdeck. As Josiah Westminster put it later, "We went through 'em lak a double dose of Mrs. Vodi's best rhubarb purgative."

*Gotta maintain the momentum of the attack,* Melville thought to himself.

"Come on! Come on!" he roared to his men.

"The combat deepens. On, ye brave,  
Who rush to glory or the grave!"

The warriors around him cheered. It was *good* to have a captain with Words, ancient, apt, and powerful Words ready to do his bidding. It let them know that their forefathers had been in similar straits and survived to tell of the experience. The speaking of Words at moments like this reached deep into their collective, cultural heritage to lift their spirits. Or, as old Hans put it, "Them Words can reach down into the heart of a man what's pissin' his self with fear, an' pull 'im up by the short-an'-curlies!"

And then they slammed into the mass of defenders at the enemy's quarterdeck.

"Okay you bums, time to keep me safe for women everywhere!" cried Lt. Archer as their cutter, *White-socks*, approached the enemy's quarterdeck on the upper redside. The Guldur did not notice the cutter coming at their right flank as they focused on Captain Melville's boarding party.

"Sir, are ya sure that's not 'from women everywhere?'" asked Petty Officer Hommer, tossing his head to flip his hair out of his eyes as the two young warriors laughed together.

Then *White-socks'* single sail was slacked and an expertly tossed grapnel came up from the cutter's bow and thudded into the jollyboat along the enemy's upper redside. The cutter slewed drunkenly as the grapnel was pulled tight, and the sailor at the tiller brought them expertly along side the enemy.

"At 'em, boys!" cried Archer.

*The lead elements of Archer's boarding party are standing on the yardarm of the cutter's mast, with the rest ready to follow. The young lieutenant is on the very end of the yardarm, with Hommer immediately behind him. Archer is balanced like a cat, with a pistol in each hand.*

*As they approach the enemy Ship, Archer leaps into the jollyboat that hangs from davits off the enemy's redside, firing both barrels of both pistols. "Crackcrack" first the right, then "crackcrack" the left, Archer thumbs the Keel charges on the two-space pistols as fast as he can put the front sights onto a target.*

*Four Guldur fall, each with a bullet smashing into its right ear. Then Archer drops his pistols and vaults the quarterdeck railing, drawing his sword as his feet hit the deck.*

*The rest of his small boarding party is right behind him, with Petty Officer Hommer in the lead, firing both barrels of their muskets into the unsuspecting enemy's right flank and leaping onto the quarterdeck behind their lieutenant. Little Midshipman Hayl is in their midst, waving his midshipman's dirk and screaming like a madman.*

*Archer's sword begins to take its toll just as the enemy becomes aware of his presence. An overhand slash of his terrible sharp blade beheads the first Guldur, slicing effortlessly through the hapless creature's throat and spine, and then continuing to cut his Goblantick in half at the waist. The surprise of the flank attack combines with the speed of the blow and the sharpness of the edge so that the blade cuts completely through before the victims fully understand what has happened. The Guldur has a brief look of confusion on its face as its head tumbles back and a red fountain gushes up from its severed neck. The tick is able to look down into the intestines of the lower part of its body as it falls backward with an expression of horrible, frustrated rage upon its face.*

*Archer's return stroke eviscerates a Guldur who is turning toward him, and the hapless creature crouches and turns to its left, dropping its musket and holding its spreading entrails like a football player holding a ball.*

*To each side of him Archer's sailors advance with their bayonets flashing, but the impetus of their*

*attack quickly stalls against the mass of enemy troops. Midshipman Hayl crouches low and scrambles through the boarding party to get to his designated position behind Lt. Archer.*

*Then Archer finds himself facing the biggest, blackest, ugliest Guldur he has ever seen, wearing an officer's harness, complete with a tick to match the size of its host.*

*He knows that this has to be the captain of the enemy's Ship, and his task is to defeat this creature. The smashing blows of the Guldur, combined with the attack from its tick, are too much for Archer and he knows he is outmatched. His arm is already numb from blocking blows, his monkey is overmatched by the smashing overhand clouts of the big tick on his opponent's back, and the sailors to his left and right are being pressed hard by multiple foes. Archer barely deflects one crashing sword blow as it slices a furrow into his left shoulder. Another scratches his right forearm.*

*The young lieutenant suddenly feels an awful sense of despair. Is this what it feels like to die? he asks himself. Is this what it felt like for those creatures I just killed?*

While Archer and his group attacked the Guldur's right flank, Lt. Crater and the crew of his cutter hit the enemy from the opposite direction. Crater and his party leapt from the yardarm of their cutter onto the enemy's upper greenside, quickly cutting down the few Guldur who stood in their way. On this side the quarterdeck was still about five feet above them, with another three feet of railing above that. They slammed a volley of musket and pistol balls into the mass of enemy packed onto the quarterdeck above them. The Guldur reeled from this unexpected assault on their left flank, but they quickly rallied, and Crater's attack bogged down at the railing.

Melville and his men also found themselves stalled at the quarterdeck. He and his rangers were battling at the ladder, while the rest of his men shot and stabbed up at the defenders.

After many battles Melville had honed his situational awareness to a fine edge. He knew when Archer slammed into the enemy's right flank, and he was aware of Crater hitting the left flank. The primary objective of this attack was to have Archer personally defeat the Guldur who was currently in command of the Ship. That was the key to getting the Guldur Ship to accept Archer as the new captain.

Melville knew from personal experience that the enemy's captain would be the biggest, toughest, most skillful fighter aboard. He also knew that young Archer would not be a match for such an enemy. Melville was hoping that the slaughter of the Guldur crew inflicted by the *Fang*'s cannon fire would have whittled down the enemy's chain of command to the point where a less capable opponent would be in charge. In fact, he was betting Archer's life on it.

Through the mass of bodies in front of him Melville could catch glimpses of a huge, shaggy black form moving toward Lt. Archer's boarding party, and he had a sudden, morbid sense that he had lost his bet and Archer might pay for it with his life. The young lieutenant had trusted his captain, and Melville was sick with dread at the possibility of having sent Archer to his death.

*Well,* thought Melville,

*The mouse that always trusts to one poor hole  
Can never be a mouse of any soul.*

He had prepared for this possibility. This mouse had another hole. His plan was to attack at the enemy from every possible angle, and there were still one or two directions yet to come into play. It was a slim reed to grasp, but he would do the best he could on his end and hope that Broadax, or Ulrich and Hans would be successful on their fronts.

"Rangers!" Melville called out to Josiah and Valandil, "Archer's fighting their captain. Wound the captain if you can, and Pop the tick off his back. He's a black, shaggy cur."

Without a word the rangers both took a step back, dropped their swords, and unslung their muskets. Having these slung over their backs had been a hindrance to the rangers' swordsmanship throughout the battle, but they understood the plan and had been keeping the muskets in reserve for such an occasion.

Among the swirling mass of creatures on the quarterdeck above him Melville saw Petty Officer Hommer, fighting at Archer's right side, take a musket ball in the chest. He felt anger and sadness as he watched Hommer, a beloved old Shipmate, fall. That helmet of blond curls drooped down as the young NCO sagged to his knees and then keeled over onto the deck, dropping his musket from nerveless fingers.

*As full-blown poppies, overcharg'd with rain,  
Decline the head, and drooping kiss the plain—  
So sinks the youth; his beauteous head, deprest  
Beneath his helmet, drops upon his breast.*

Melville found himself fighting alone at the base of the ladder going up to the enemy's quarterdeck. Without his two rangers beside him he was suddenly too busy to worry about Hommer or Archer... or anything else besides survival.

But he was not truly alone. His monkey clung tightly to his neck, blocking bullets and blows with its belaying pin, and his dog, Boye, and Josiah's dog, Cinder (along with *their* belaying pin-equipped monkeys) stayed at the captain's flank. And Brother Theo and Grenoble provided support from behind him, while his sailors closed in from his left and right. After a brief instant of grave danger Melville was able to hold his own in the fierce melee.

Amidst the milling, scrambling throng above them the two rangers spotted one tick that projected up above the mass. In an instant they both took a shot, their muskets cracking together as one, and the tick went down. But they could not get a shot at the enemy captain.

Hans was the *Fang*'s best boat handler, perhaps the best in the Western Navy. With consummate skill the old sailor swung the jollyboat, *Rip*, around Archer's cutter and across the Guldur's stern at breakneck speed. Ulrich was perched up on *Rip's* tiny yardarm, and as they shot past the enemy Ship he leapt up and clung to the ledge below the stern windows. Swift and nimble as a deranged ferret, Ulrich scrambled up the stern and launched himself onto the quarterdeck railing with his monkey clinging tightly to his back.

The Guldur were all turned away from Ulrich, dealing with the attacks on their front and flanks. Balancing on the railing like some grotesque gargoye, the vicious little coxswain promptly initiated a one-man onslaught on the enemy from a new and unexpected quarter.

Standing up on the taffrail gave Ulrich enough height to see a huge black cur beating down Lt. Archer's guard. This was clearly the enemy captain, and young Archer was obviously losing his sword fight. He was just seconds away from becoming dog meat.

As Ulrich was drawing his pistol he saw the tick fall from the enemy captain's shoulders. Two musket balls had entered the vicinity of the tick's left ear and punched out the right side of its head, blowing its brains out in a fine, pink mist. Ulrich knew that this was probably the rangers' doing, but he also understood that the force down on the main deck was unlikely to get a good shot at the enemy captain, who was well back on the quarterdeck.

Quick as a mongoose, Ulrich snapped off a shot that shattered the Guldur captain's right forepaw. Then the second barrel took advantage of a momentary gap in the mass of Guldur defenders to smash the enemy's left ankle. He might have been able to put a bullet in his target's head, but the goal was not to kill the enemy captain, only to weaken him enough to allow Archer to win his duel.

The enraged Guldur forces standing behind their captain turned to face their new tormentor. Every loaded musket was turned on Ulrich, sending a hail of bullets whizzing toward him. Any Guldur who was not in direct, hand-to-hand combat with an opponent turned and charged at Ulrich in a furry tide of seriously pissed-off mutts.

With a " *Thwack!*" and an "Eek!" his monkey's belaying pin deflected a head shot, but two bullets hit Ulrich like fists smacking into a block of beef. One went through his right lung and out his back. Another shot made a direct hit on his right thighbone.

Everything slowed to a crawl as Ulrich fell backward, and he had plenty of time to note that he barely felt the through-and-through in his lung, but the hit to his thighbone hurt like hell. He had heard that in the heat of battle you usually wouldn't feel a flesh wound but bone hits *hurt* , and he was strangely intrigued to recognize that this was painfully correct.

With a snarl of defiance Ulrich dropped back into the cold embrace of two-space that waited below him. His right hand tossed an empty pistol into one cur's onrushing face, while his left hand flipped a dagger into another's throat. The last thing the Guldur defenders saw was Ulrich's monkey echoing its master's snarl and hurling its tiny dirk into a cur's eye.

*Lt. Archer watches the enemy's blade come hammering down at him. The Guldur captain is not using any finesse, just pure brute strength to pound down his guard, and it is working. Slow-motion time makes the blade come down at an agonizing crawl. There is a horrific despair welling up in his chest as he watches the hated blade come down. I don't want to die , he thinks. Dear God, I don't want to die!*

*Then he sees the blur of two bullets punch into the left temple of his opponent's tick. He had heard that the effects of slow-motion time could be so intense that you can actually see bullets, and now here it was. The tick gets a confused, cross-eyed look on its face. The right side of its face balloons out and then the hateful creature's brains spray slowly out of the right side of its skull. Archer's monkey cries out with an "Eek!" of joy and relief as it watches its foe slump to the deck.*

*Then a bullet slams into the Guldur captain's right arm and his right forepaw begins to lose its grip on the descending blade. Archer's numb arm moves his sword up and deflects the now weakened blow, assisted by a "smack!" from his monkey's belaying pin.*

*The Guldur's left forepaw reaches across and reinforces his right, beginning to fight two-handed, just as another bullet cuts his left hindpaw out from under him. The creature falls to his left with his guard still high, and Archer swings a weak, sweeping, waist-high, horizontal blow that sends a ropey flood of guts flowing out of his opponent's body.*

*With a howl of outrage a Guldur sailor beside the falling enemy captain thrusts his bayonet at Archer's chest. The young lieutenant is just beginning to feel a wave of relief, and now once again he sees death coming at him and he knows that he is out of position to block this blow.*

*In mid-thrust the Guldur's glaring eyes and fierce concentration gives way to a distorted mask of agony. Then it looks down in horror as its guts, and their contents, flow out onto Midshipman Hayl like a cauldron of sickening, stinking stew being poured over the little middie's head.*

Hayl had been scurrying underfoot. When he saw a cur about to attack Lt. Archer, he thrust up with his horrifically sharp, double-edged blade and literally stirred the Guldur's guts. He inserted his midshipman's dirk just above the pelvic bone and was astounded at how easily it slipped in. He sliced up in a broad arc to the solar plexus, and then down and back up in a spiral motion. He continued to be amazed and strangely pleased at how effortlessly the blade slid through the Guldur's body. Then his pleasure turned to dismay and disgust as the hot, reeking contents came pouring over him in an unholy baptism of bubbling blood and diverse foulnesses.

"Eep!" said his monkey.

*Ulrich's bullet-riddled body falls down off the Ship's stern and into the merciless maw of two-space. He can clearly see the stern of the Guldur Ship churning through two-space as he falls, and he is not sure which is worse: seeing the awful blue depths of two-space coming at him, or the Ship moving away from him. He closes his eyes as he punches through the plane of two-space and feels an awful, biting cold wash over his body, a brief preview of the icy death that awaits him.*

"Brrr!! " squeaks his monkey, clinging helplessly around his neck.

*The effects of slow-motion time make these seconds last for an agonizing eternity as Ulrich bounces back through the icy plane to the other side.*

"Brrr!! " repeats his monkey with a screech of despair.

*Then he seems to hang there, his last moment in life stretching on, and on...*

"Dammit, Ulrich," says Hans, "gimme a hand here. I can't hold ya ferever!"

*He opens his eyes to discover that, in a feat of incredible boat handling, old Hans has spun the jollyboat back around just in time to catch him on the rebound.*

*His monkey is stretched out between the two humans, with four hands keeping a death grip on Hans' arm while the other four are locked around Ulrich's skull. The little creature has a look of wild desperation on its face as it quietly gibbers a stream of incomprehensible monkey obscenities.*

*It slowly dawns on the little coxswain that maybe he is going to live. He reaches up an arm and a leg and hugs the boat's gunwales like an ardent lover.*

*"Damn!" says Hans, rolling him the rest of the way into the boat. "Them vacuum-suckers dun shot the hell out o' ya, lil' buddy."*

*"Thask mah technique, shee?" mumbles Ulrich. "Ik's a trick, shee? By bleeding I lures 'em into a falsek sensa skecurity..."*

The eviscerated Guldur captain and the sailor that Hayl had gutted both leaned forward in grisly bows and plunged to the deck. There was the briefest of pause before the remaining curs turned on Archer in a final spasm of fury. The press of Guldur in front of Melville had eased off, so he took this opportunity and stepped to his left, calling over his shoulder, "Give me a boost!" Then he sprung up and grabbed the top of the quarterdeck railing with his left hand. Numerous sailors helped to launch their captain up onto the quarterdeck. Melville vaulted over the rail, hacking to his right and taking off a cur's arm at the elbow. Then he slammed his sword to his left, driving down an enemy's sword and cleaving its skull with a blow that jarred his wrist.

Through a gap in the melee Melville saw a Guldur attacking Lt. Archer from the flank. This one appeared to have Archer dead-to-rights, but Melville had an ace in the hole. He twitched his left hand down to the small, over-and-under, double-barrel Colt pistol tucked into his belt, and with one fluid motion he drew the gun and snapped off a round at the Guldur.

This pistol was a family heirloom. It was centuries old and the intelligence in the pistol's Keel charge had developed into something that was remarkably vicious, and *accurate*. Most two-space pistols and muskets gave a faint <<prrr>> when you thumbed them, but this little gun gave a distinct <<grrr!>> as it worked with its master to guide the bullet home.

The ball slammed into the Guldur's right rib cage just as it was raising its sword to strike Archer down. The bullet smashed through both lungs, unbalancing the enemy and flipping him over the rail into two-space.

Melville caught a glimpse of the Guldur falling back with a shrieking sob. The noise cut off like a door closing when the wretched creature fell through the plane of two-space. Then the sound of its despair reappeared when it bounced once and looked up at Melville with a final gurgling sob before it dropped

forever into interstellar space.

*He sinks into the depths  
with a bubbling groan,  
Without a grave, unknell'd,  
uncoffin'd, and unknown.*

The Guldur defenders had given one burst of wild outrage after the loss of their captain, and then they seemed to lose heart. Only the ticks were still fighting and trying to goad their hosts on. A hail of Westerness bullets picked off the remaining ticks, and then the battle was over.

Melville and Archer knelt down beside the Ship's dying captain. They rested wearily with both hands on the hilts of their upright swords, the points dug into the deck.

"Okay. It's official," gasped Archer. "This job is just too damned exciting sometimes."

"Watch his hands!" said Westminster, kicking a pistol out from behind the Guldur's back. "Always watch their hands," the ranger drawled. "Hands kill. In God we trust, everyone else keeps their hands where Ah can see them. Or paws... as the case may be." Valandil stood silently beside Westminster, facing in the opposite direction, watching his partner's back and wiping his sword with a piece of some luckless Guldur's shirt.

"Therrre iss no honorrr in thiss," hissed the Guldur, pawing the deck with arms gone flaccid as he looked up at Melville. "Thiss pup did not defreat me!"

"It was a pack kill," said Melville, looking down at the dying captain. "Like your four Ships attacking us."

"Urrr? Prack krill," the Guldur nodded. "Prack krill." Then, very quietly, with his dying breath, he looked up at Archer and whispered, "Urrr. Grood pup. Brrrave pup..."

"It seems kind of unfair," whispered little Hayl to himself. "We all just ganged up on him."

"Would you rather it was you layin' there?" asked Westminster softly. The middie didn't think anyone had heard his comment, but he should have known the sharp-eared ranger was listening. Hayl kept watching the dead enemy captain with wide-eyed fascination as the big ranger put a hand on the boy's shoulder and quietly continued. "It's one of Saint Clint the Thunderer's 'Rules of a Gunfight.' Don't never forget it: 'Always cheat, always win. The only unfair fight is the one you lose.'"

Young Hayl absentmindedly wiped Guldur guts and gore from his face while he looked down with wonder at the dead enemy captain. As he watched, the Guldur's eyes become fixed and without understanding. *So this is the enemy*, he thought. *So this is war.*

\* \* \*

I remember the sea-fight far away,  
How it thundered o'er the tide!  
And the dead captains, as they lay  
In their graves, o'erlooking the tranquil bay  
Where they in battle died.  
And the sound of that mournful song  
Goes through me with a thrill:  
"A boy's will is the wind's will,  
And the thoughts of youth are long, long thoughts."

\* \* \*

In an ideal world, all of Melville's elements would have converged on the enemy's upper quarterdeck at the same time. Melville's boarding party, the crews of the two cutters from the flanks, Ulrich on the jollyboat from the stern, the Sylvan topmen coming from above, and Broadax's marines from below, should all have hit simultaneously. But the real world seldom lives up to expectations.

In this case the Sylvan topmen in the upper rigging had been badly delayed by stronger than expected Goblan resistance. Whatever their personal, moral, and hygienic shortcomings, no one could deny that the ticks fought superbly in the upper rigging. In the end *Fang*'s topmen were not able to provide more than a sporadic sprinkling of musket fire from above before the battle was over. The topmen and the *Fang* s down on the deck then picked off the remaining ticks at their leisure.

The Sylvans were delayed, but at least they were able to contribute something to the battle on the upperside. Lt. Broadax and her marines, on the other hand, arrived well after the battle was over. In the end it was anticlimactic when Broadax came smashing up through a secured hatch cover like some oversized, explosive, blood-soaked mole busting out from the bowels of the earth.

*Thus arrives Broadax the Great*, thought Melville with true affection in his eyes. "*Herself a host, ' to paraphrase The Illiad* .

"Dammit!" she cried in disgust and dismay, her gore-soaked head darting back and forth like a deranged, rabid, rodent peering out of its hole. "Damn, damn, damn! Ye done hogged all the fun on this end, didn' ye?"

Melville stood up from beside the dead enemy captain and rested his bloody sword blade on his shoulder. "Is the Ship's Keel secured?" he asked her.

"Aye, sir. They ain' gonna scuttle the Ship. This Ship's ours, dammit, bought with blood and battle."

"Aye," Melville replied, and then he looked over at Archer, still kneeling beside the body of the fallen Guldur captain. "Lt. Archer, move down to the Keel and claim possession of your Ship." Then with a sad but faintly humorous smile he added, "It is good that you are bleeding. These Ships seem to like a bit of blood."

"Aye, sir." Melville could see the gleam in Archer's eyes and he knew what the young lieutenant was thinking. *His Ship, by God. It was his Ship.*

"Aye, son. Now go claim your Ship."

Then Melville allowed himself to relax as he crouched down and rubbed his dog's ears. Boye had stayed faithfully by his side throughout the battle, and the little monkey on the dog's back had stopped more than a few bullets and sword cuts, judging by the condition of the belaying pin in the critter's true-hands. The dog's sopping red muzzle made it clear that he had tasted blood this day; and his tongue-lolling, doggie grin said that he *liked* it. "Good boy!" said Melville as he thumped his dog's side. "Good dog!" Boye looked up and licked his master's face, and for just a moment they both shared a sense of pure, undiluted pleasure as they reveled in their victory... and the sheer joy of being alive.

Victory. O sweet victory! Rapture gripped him with an intensity that most people will never know. But already, from a place too deep for words, sorrow began to groan.

He looked around at the mass of dead and dying, a carpet of misery that covered the deck around him, and all he could feel was the joy of living in the face of death that psychologists called "survivor euphoria." Melville looked at one Guldur lying on the deck with a great, gaping wound in its throat, staring into the sky and gasping out its last breath in terrible agony, and he was amazed to feel so good in the face of so much tragedy and suffering.

*Ah, to think how thin the veil that lies  
Between the pain of hell and paradise!*

He knew from past experiences that remorse, post-combat exhaustion, and possibly even depression would come to visit him eventually, but for now it was good to be counted among the living and the victorious, and he lifted up his head and called out to the universe,

"Sound, sound the clarion, fill the fife!  
To all the sensual world proclaim,  
One crowded hour of glorious life  
Is worth an age without a name."

And all around him his *Fang* s roared their agreement.

*Dwakins walks into the hospital with a big, yellow Guldur in his arms and tears in his eyes. They are both soaked with blood. The Guldur has been pierced through the right lung and is breathing in great, ragged gasps. "Please, mah'yam," he asks Mrs. Vodi, "can yew fix 'im?"*

*"Yes," she says kindly, examining the wound and guessing what must have happened. "Yep, I think we can help your furry friend here. Lay him down, and then you get back to your squad before you git into trouble. We'll do the best we can."*

*"Thankee, ma'am. Thankee. Ah think 'e's a good doggie, mah'yam. Ah really dew."*

*Vodi just nods. The battle was largely one-sided, and there are time and resources enough to be compassionate to the enemy. After all the killing, it feels good to make room for a little compassion.*

# CHAPTER THE 6TH

## Rejoicing, Remorse, and Recovery: "Out from the Gloomy Past"

We have come over a way  
that with tears has been watered,  
We have come treading our path  
thru' the blood of the slaughtered,  
Out from the gloomy past,  
till now we stand at last  
Where the gleam of our bright star is cast.

Lift ev'ry voice and sing,  
till earth and heaven ring,  
Ring with the harmonies of liberty;  
Let our rejoicing rise,  
high as the list'ning skies,  
Let it resound loud as the rolling sea.

"Lift Every Voice and Sing"  
James Weldon Johnson

Lt. Broadax had just brought one of her wounded marines into the hospital. The unfortunate wretch was slung over her shoulder like a sack of potatoes being carried by an ambulatory fire hydrant, his feet dragging behind her. The marine moaned as his ankles thumped

into each step as she came up the inclined ladder—which sailors refused to call "stairs."

"Quit yer bitchin', dammit," Broadax grumbled through her cigar as she flipped her cargo onto a bed. "Sweat dries, blood clots, bones heal, but glory lasts forever! So suck it up, an' be a marine!" she said encouragingly. The marine landed next to a wounded Guldur sailor with blood-soaked bandages sealing a punctured right lung. Then she stopped to watch as Vodi and Elphinstone prepared to operate on Asquith.

The earthling had taken a shard of wood in his left eye. Another had lodged in the palm of his left hand after severing the middle finger. The finger was hanging by a thread of flesh, and the stump was oozing blood.

Asquith had recovered consciousness, but he was in a state of extreme shock, looking dazedly with his right eye at the shard of wood in his hand. He was still oblivious to the splinter that stuck out of his left eye like a broken tooth.

"I guess that's fate's way of giving you the finger, my friend," said Mrs. Vodi with a cheerful laugh. As she said this she reached out to hold his good hand to stop him from touching the splinter that was protruding from his eye socket. If nothing else, Vodi's patented bedside manner was guaranteed to distract her patients. And they needed to keep Asquith distracted from the wound to his eye for as long as they could.

"Don't worry," Lady Elphinstone reassured the patient. "We'll get that splinter out of thy hand, and we'll get thy finger reattached, good as new."

"Splinter!" said Asquith, surfing the crest of hysteria as he looked at the mass of white wood protruding from his hand. "You call that a 'splinter'? A splinter is something I can take out with tweezers! And just how do you primitives intend to do the microsurgery required to reattach my finger?"

"We use leeches and maggots in our surgery," said Vodi happily, as the surgeon began to prep the patient. "Right up until the twenty-first century they were still using leeches in microsurgery, then they were replaced by all kinds of exotic, high-tech goodies. Out here in two-space that stuff wouldn't last two seconds, so we use these little piggies. They'll suck up blood and inject enzymes that will make your blood vessels dilate, engorging themselves and swelling up to ten times their original size in the process."

"Mmm. Sounds kinda kinky," said Broadax with an evil chuckle and a wink at Vodi. The marine lieutenant had decided to hang around for a minute to watch the show. "I love that kinda talk," Broadax continued. "Do tell us more."

"Plus it provides a mild anesthetic so thou dost not even feel its presence," continued Elphinstone primly, pointedly ignoring the other two females in the room.

"Ah, 'at takes all the fun outta it!" cackled Broadax.

"We use a slosh of beer to draw them to the surface," said Mrs. Vodi as Lady Elphinstone pointedly ignored the lewd commentary and concentrated on her work. "The little devils love beer. There you go. Here come some cute ones to the top. Aren't they just lovely?"

Asquith whimpered and Broadax craned her neck, watching with the voyeuristic excitement of someone who isn't on the chopping block.

"The primary thing we use them for is to reattach severed limbs," Vodi continued. "They inject bunches of nature's own anticoagulant. We just slap them onto any severed limb, and these girls do the housework for us. Sucking up all that nasty old used blood, so it doesn't cause gangrene. Dilating blood vessels so the good blood can flow. What more can you ask?"

Asquith listened to all this in horrified wonder. "What more can you ask! OhGodOhGodOhGod! I'll tell

you what you can ask! To be released from the clutches of depraved, sadistic people like you! Maggots! Leeches! What kind of doctor *are* you?!"

"Hmm," replied Elphinstone distractedly, as she finished strapping Asquith to the operating table with leather-coated chains. "The kind that might just save thy finger. But 'tis another matter that concerns me."

"Yes? What is that?" asked the diminutive earthling.

"Wouldst know what it is?"

"I *said* so!"

"Then I shall tell thee."

"Yes? And...?"

"'Tis this," she said, pointing sadly at the shard sticking out of his eye socket. "I'm afraid there's no hope for thine eye."

On that note Asquith gave a distracted, cross-eyed look from his right eye, focusing on the splinter protruding a few inches from the left socket. Then he suddenly realized why he was not receiving any information from that eye. He spasmodically tried to reach up with his hands to feel the wound, but he was firmly strapped to the table. Then he sighed and fainted.

Later, with his eye removed, the empty socket bandaged, his finger reconnected, and his dirty drawers changed, Asquith came to bleary consciousness. Vodi and Elphinstone were hovering over him.

"Well," said Vodi, "that splinter damned near punched through to your brain. It almost got you, but it looks like you'll come out of this adventure with nothing worse than an eye patch. Very rakish and stylish-looking it will be. Any preschooler would tell you that the patch is the mark of a true sailing Hero, every bit as much as a peg leg or parrot would be."

Asquith nodded blearily, and started to drift off to sleep.

With a gentle smile Lady Elphinstone added,

"So may'st thou live, till like ripe fruit thou drop

Into thy mother's lap."

"A healer's blessing," mumbled Asquith. "Thank you. But I don't think it's original. I think that's Milton..."

"Shh. 'Twill be our secret."

The two Ships remained lashed together as they exchanged crew members and supplies. Repairs were already begun and the wounded were all evacuated back to the *Fang*. The Guldur dead were dispatched with little ceremony, while the *Fang*s that had been killed were wrapped lovingly in sailcloth and brought back aboard their Ship.

The prize crew for Lt. Archer's new Ship was enjoying one last meal aboard the *Fang* while the final details were wrapped up. Melville whispered a little prayer for Archer and his men. Just a handful of good sailors could keep a Ship going in a straight line, but they would be doomed if they had to fight. Over lunch Archer filled Melville in on his telepathic contact with his new Ship.

"It was amazing, sir," said Archer. "My Ship told me I was a 'Good pup.'"

"Yeah, *Fang* told me the same thing," replied Melville with a laugh. "Congratulations, Buckley. You have won a Ship. She will be loyal to you, and there is no one in the galaxy who can take her away from you, short of killing you. Within a week you and your prize crew should be able to use the captured Guldur, just like we did aboard the *Fang*. Any idea what we should name her?"

"Well, sir," said Archer, gulping down a bite of Cookie's meat loaf covered in catsup, "like the *Fang*, she appears to have been named after a specific tooth in a Guldur's mouth." His next fork full came to his mouth empty as his monkey intercepted it with a lightning-fast flick of its truehand, and Archer never missed a beat as he sent his fork down for another bite. "Best I can figure, it's one of the back molars. So how does ' *Gnasher*' sound?"

"Excellent! I now pronounce you captain of Her Majesty, the Queen of Westernness' Ship, the *Gnasher* .

Now get on over there and get some sail up on her while we police up the other Guldur Ship. As soon as you can get under way, set a course for Nordheim. I think the Dwarrowdelf there will make us welcome and help us refit. We should catch up with you shortly. If we don't show, just go on to Nordheim and then to Earth."

"Um, sir, one last question," said Archer. "I'm really honored and overwhelmed to be given my own Ship. It is the most coveted gift. But I gotta know, why didn't you give this opportunity to Lt. Fielder? He *is* senior."

"Well," replied Melville thoughtfully, "you are now a fellow Master and Commander of a Ship, and essentially an equal, so I'll speak frankly. But this has to stay between us. I offered the opportunity to him. His answer was not just 'No,' but '*Hell no!*' He said he wanted to keep his sanity and, I quote: 'French kissing an alien mind is not conducive to mental hygiene.' He also felt he was better off staying here with a lucky captain. And, frankly, he had absolutely *no* interest in facing the enemy captain in mortal combat."

"Hmmm," replied Archer, "in retrospect, maybe he's the smart one."

"Aye. I've thought that many times," said Melville with a sigh.

In the end, the battle for the last Guldur Ship went comparatively well. This time Melville hammered the enemy with cannon fire for considerably longer, paying special attention to the crow's nests in order to butcher the ticks who were hiding there. Only *then* did he conduct the boarding operation. He cursed himself for not doing the same previously, but he had been too eager to have enough enemy crewmen survive so they could form the core of a crew for the Ship in the future. He had miscalculated, spending the lives of too many of his own sailors, trying to preserve the lives of the enemy. It was a mistake that he would not make again.

Lt. Crater led the cutter party that assaulted the quarterdeck from the enemy's right flank this time, with Midshipman Hayl again serving as the "messenger" for this force. Midshipman Hezikiah Jubal, an able seaman who had been promoted from the ranks and had seen several boarding operations, was in charge of the cutter party hitting the enemy's left flank. The marines took the lowerside again, and this time Private Dwakins was able to keep his feet if not his wits. And Corporal Petrico replaced Ulrich in the assault from the jollyboat onto the enemy's stern.

This enemy captain had been killed by the *Fang*'s cannon fire. The low-ranking Guldur in charge of the Ship quickly submitted to Lt. Crater, and Corporal Petrico leapt up onto the stern rail with a pistol in his hand and a great cry of "Die chew pockers!" on his lips, only to find that the battle was over. The Ship readily accepted Lt. Crater as her captain, and she was christened the *Biter*.

Melville felt a great weariness flood through him when this final enemy was defeated. He knew it was his normal post-combat malaise, combined with the physiological "backlash" as the sympathetic nervous system stopped providing survival hormones and the parasympathetic processes began to demand attention and bodily resources for neglected maintenance functions. Having been through this several times before helped a lot, but knowing what was happening did not take *all* the sting out of it.

In his case, the normal, human, post-combat response was aggravated and complicated by his telepathic and empathic communication with his alien Ship and her guns. In some ways the spirit of his Ship strengthened him, and in other, unpredictable ways it weakened him. The result was that he was emotionally off-balance after combat.

A part of him feared that he would become unstable, and would spin into a pit of madness. As Neitzche put it, "Whoever fights monsters should see to it that in the process he does not become a monster. For when you look into the abyss, the abyss also looks into you." Melville peered constantly into that abyss, and he felt a constant dread of its result. Or maybe it was simply a sane man's wish to remain so, in an environment that damned near required insanity to deal with it.

The young captain stood on the enemy deck and looked out on the ghastly, gruesome carpet of wounded, dead, and dying sprawled thickly upon the white deck in awkward, undignified postures. *The dead are always without dignity*, thought Melville.

They were mostly Guldur, the wounded ones moaning softly or trying to crawl away like sick animals will do, leaving bloody smears behind them. There were many who would never move again. Some of his crew was here as well. Melville stood amidst the malodorous miasma of the battle, mourning each and every one of them as he softly bestowed a benediction.

"O ye afflicted ones, who lie  
Steeped to the lips in misery,  
Longing, yet afraid to die..."

The warriors around him nodded their solemn agreement.

Melville was reeling under the weight of exhaustion, trying to shake off his post-combat depression and silence the blood-lust of the alien minds that had bonded with him. Then fate dealt him its harshest blow of all.

"Sir," said Fielder with unaccustomed gentleness. "I'm afraid I have bad news." His first officer had met Melville in the bow just as he was climbing back aboard the *Fang*, and the sadness in Fielder's eyes chilled Melville in a way no words could accomplish.

"Go ahead. What is it?"

"Chips... Mr. Tibbits, he was killed just before we launched the boarding parties. The butcher's bill is really surprisingly light, but he... he will be missed."

"Aye," replied Melville quietly, thinking of the gentle old Ship's carpenter. Tibbits' death had not been particularly heroic. A random bullet, probably fired from a Goplan in the upper rigging, had caught the old man in the head as he was coming out of a hatch. It came as such an out-of-the-blue surprise that his monkey was completely unprepared to block it. It was just damned bad luck. A senseless death, like most deaths in combat. As usually happened whenever a crew member died, Tibbits' monkey just ... disappeared.

Melville turned away from Fielder as tears began to well up in his eyes. The whole weight of this battle, the ultimate responsibility for all the deaths that had happened, suddenly felt like an unbearable burden.

Melville had lost both of his parents as a teenager, and like his parents, that decent, fatherly old man just hadn't seemed mortal.

*If I had thought thou couldst have died,  
I might not weep for thee;  
But I forgot, when by thy side,  
That thou couldst mortal be.*

The loyal old officer who had been such a staunch supporter to his young captain *couldn't* have been the one to die. It wasn't conceivable that he was dead.

*This is the real world, Melville told himself. It is not some fable, where the characters you really love are never killed. Sometimes the wrong people die. That is the terrible, unpredictable actuality of real combat. Remember this the next time you think about going into battle.*

As a wise man once wrote, "Life isn't fair. It's just fairer than death." And those who get to live, should. It took all the energy he could muster to get on with his duties. But that stern mistress, that harsh hag, *duty*, drove him on.

Melville moved to the upper quarterdeck and called the crew aft. "Shipmates," he said, gripping the quarterdeck rail and looking out upon their faces, "there's a possibility that more Guldur are coming." Through his bare feet on the deck and his hands on the rail he felt his Ship imparting strength. "We may not be done fighting. We need to get repairs in place, get as much speed on these Ships as we can, and get the hell out of here. You deserve a chance to rest, but we all know that life isn't fair. So let's go to work."

The *Fang*'s crew, for the most part, were as exhausted as their captain. They had all been under incredible, life-and-death pressures—literally seconds from death for hours at a time. But the crew tended to be less oppressed by the post-combat let down, and they didn't have the fey, fell, and sometimes malignant spirits of alien minds to shake off. The crew was generally of a simpler disposition and philosophy, without the burden of command. *They* were already anticipating the loot and the fame that would come from this battle.

These enemy warships didn't have any commercial cargo that the *Fang* could claim, and most of the actual Ships' equipment would stay onboard. Furthermore, their eventual objective was Earth, and the *Fang*s had a sense that the Westerness Admiralty would *not* welcome the news of this battle. Nor was the Admiralty apt to tender money for their war prizes, as the King of Osgil had done for their capture of the *Fang*. But all the dead ticks (there were no captured ticks) had been stripped of their silver, gold, and gems. And two Shiploads of ticks made for a lot of loot.

The Guldur officers sometimes carried money, but the cur sailors generally did not have anything of value. In life and in death the cur crewmen were mostly tragic, impoverished, oppressed creatures. A Guldur sailor's attitude seemed to be, "If you can't eat it, play with it, mount it, or fight it, then piss on it." (Which, in fact, wasn't much different from a young Westerness sailor or marine.) But past battles had taught the *Fang*s that the Goblans secreted their life's savings upon their bodies and, unlike the Guldur, the ticks were wealthy, grasping, miserly creatures.

As to the fame the *Fang*s had earned, well, there was no doubt that this tale was a ticket to free drinks in any tavern in Westerness. Or Sylvan or Dwarrowdelf space for that matter. So the fame was good and you *could* upon occasion drink fame, but you could not eat it. Nor would it buy you that retirement farm, tavern, or business back home that most sailors dreamed about. In the end what really counted was the loot, which was placed into a common kitty and then carefully divided by rank and duties. Thus the money from the ticks was nice and it was immediate, but the primary source of wealth (or at least potential wealth) was the future income of the captured Ships themselves.

One of the rarest, most expensive, and precious things in the galaxy was a Ship of two-space. The technology behind the Keels was a great secret, but it was common knowledge that the manufacturing process was arduous and expensive, dwarfing even the enormous cost of the huge, intricate, complex wooden Ship, constructed of the rare and costly Nimbrell wood. The Star Kingdom of Westerness made these absurdly expensive Ships, and then their crews spent generations helping to pay for them.

Although their routes and assignments were usually prescribed, a Ship of the Westerness Navy operated its own budget with a high degree of independence in internal business affairs. Cargo, trading goods, food, supplies, and equipment were not supplied from some central storehouse. These goods were earned, purchased, constructed, and traded for with great zeal and a constant eye for profit.

Each Ship of Westernness was a business, and each crewman a stockholder in the business. If the business did badly the officers and crew could have their Ship taken away from them. Such foreclosures were rare, but they did happen. As the sailors said, "The best way to get back on land is to miss a boat payment." Of course, if a Ship was on special duty for the crown, such as exploratory duty, then the Navy met their payment, or paid them for their service. During time of war, commercial operations and trade became secondary, the crown assumed responsibility for the Ship's payments, and they became first and foremost men-of-war.

The older Ships, like their *Kestrel* and the other Raptor Class frigates, and the Author Class frigates, had been paid off over the span of many generations. The new Poet Class frigates were still in the process of paying for themselves. The Queen and the Admiralty always got their share, but once the Ship was paid off there was a far larger slice of the profit for the crew.

Thus, what was exciting and important to the *Fang s* was that their Ship was paid for, and so were these newly acquired Ships, *Gnasher* and *Biter* . The *Fangs* were now stockholders in these new Ships. *Gnasher* and *Biter* were debt free, so money would flow from them in the years to come and a share of the wealth from all three Ships would go to each crew member who was there from the beginning. Future crew members would have to pay out their ownership shares, but the current crew would reap a profit from the very beginning.

The exhausted *Fang s* worked their miracles on the *Biter* as they cycled through all-too-brief rest periods.

Again the wounded were evacuated back to the *Fang* and the dead Guldur were put over the side. Their bodies had not yet stiffened, and the limp corpses sailed lazily into two-space without resistance, as if they were resigned to their fate and glad to get it over with.

The Ship had to be self-sufficient. Very little was ever wasted. Economic survival required it, and their actual physical survival might demand it at any moment. The lack of some trivial piece of equipment could very well mean the difference between life and death. "For want of a nail..."

The ropemaker and the carpenter's mates picked through the debris to salvage everything that might be of use. All around them were the sounds of hammers, axes, and saws, mixed with the strong smell of paint from the repaired red- and greenside railings.

Above them the sailors stayed busy splicing and mending, and the tattered sails were pulled down to patch and stow for future use. The sailmaker and his mates were squatting amidst most of the open deck space, their canvas spread and their needles flashing as they patched and repaired the sails that could be salvaged. Some of the canvas would be put immediately into service, wrapped lovingly around the bodies that came out of the hospital.

Periodically a surgeon's mate would come on deck and toss a bloodstained bundle over the side. A leg? An arm? No one wanted to know, and the silent, grim-faced observers couldn't help but think that it

might have been theirs. The *Fang* s tried to salvage everything, but there was nothing in that bundle that could be put to future use. The owner was done with it.

Lt. Fielder didn't spare himself as he moved constantly among the work parties without a sign of fatigue. He and old Hans examined every repair and woe unto any culprit whose work was not up to their standards.

Melville visited the hospital as often as he could. This was his hardest duty of all. He tried to touch each warrior. To hold a hand or grip a shoulder. And as he made physical contact with each wounded warrior he attempted to direct the energy and the spirit of his Ship into them as it flowed through him. Thus, in the only way that he was able, with tears welling up in his eyes, he comforted and strengthened the wounded and dying.

*Was there love once? I have forgotten her.  
Was there grief once? Grief yet is mine.  
O loved, living, dying, heroic comrade,  
All, all my joy, my grief, my love, are thine.*

Even Cuthbert Asquith XVI awoke to find the young captain standing over him, with a gentle hand on his shoulder. When it happened he felt... different. And the feeling lingered, as though he had been shown a door, or at least a window, into a land that he did not know existed. A remarkable place, full of light and darkness, good and evil, courage and fear, fellowship and loneliness, honor and hopelessness, glory and obscurity, duty and despair.

"For once thou hast avoided injury in one of these battles of yours," said Lady Elphinstone, looking fondly at the captain as he stood over the little earthling.

"Aye," added Mrs. Vodi. "You'd almost think he doesn't love us anymore!"

He shrugged, and all his numb mind could think to say was, "Please don't take it personally. I'll try to do better next time."

"Don't feel obligated for our sake," replied Vodi with a sad smile as he stumbled out the door.

As he worked, Melville found himself jerking his head in what were jokingly called micro-naps. He pinched, slapped, and even punched himself to stay alert. When that didn't work he collapsed onto his bunk and sank into instant unconsciousness. An hour later McAndrews would shake him awake and hand him another mug of hot tea.

As the captain, he could have slept for as long as he wanted. He could even rationalize it by saying that he needed to be alert and fit to make command decisions. But Melville knew there was the very real possibility of another Guldur attack. Survival depended on getting well away from the site of the original battle and moving quickly in a new, unpredicted direction.

Melville could not bring himself to get more rest than his crew, and the crew took *their* lead from their captain. He had to keep them going. They had been in savage, continuous combat, but the fight was not over yet. Let them falter and they might drop. Allow them time to mourn the loss of a Shipmate and they could lose the will to continue.

So the *Fang* s worked like heroes to get jury masts up on the *Biter* . Soon they had her under way, with more and more sail going up with each passing hour. In just a few hours they caught up with the *Gnasher* , whose prize crew had put up enough sail for her to limp along, and then both crews worked on the *Gnasher* .

In a matter of just a few exhausting days Melville had a flotilla of three Ships making sail for Nordheim. *Gnasher* and *Biter* had three jury masts on one side, and the *Fang* had one jury mast, but still they were making respectable speed.

Lt. Broadax, Lt. Archer, Brother Theo, and Midshipman Hayl were in the hospital the day after the final battle, visiting the wounded. When the Ship was not in combat the hospital was located in the lowside deck cabin. On the upperside this same cabin was occupied by the captain. The deck cabins were at about one gravity (as opposed to the rest of the area belowdecks, where the gravity increased to 1.5 gees as you went down to the Keel) and they were well ventilated, so the deck cabins weren't nearly as stuffy and close as the other enclosed spaces below decks. But still, just as the faint fragrance of food is always present in a kitchen, the indistinct odors of disinfectant, feces, and urine usually lingered in the hospital. In spite of the ventilation and the constant efforts of the medicos. To the crew these were the distant scents of death and suffering... the vague lingering ghosts of comrades past.

Archer had just checked up on his old friend, Petty Officer Bernard Hommer, who looked like he would recover from his wound thanks to Lady Elphinstone's surgical skills. Then Archer and Hayl thanked Ulrich for saving their bacon on the enemy quarterdeck.

"Aye," replied Ulrich, looking Archer in the eye with an expression of crazed concentration, "well I dun got shot ta hell gittink ya a Ship, ell-tee. Don'k screw it up, now, ya hear? Don'k let *nobody* takesk it away frum ya."

Archer and Hayl left with a final nod to Ulrich. Then Brother Theo joined them and Hayl asked his two seniors, "Wasn't he kind of disrespectful?"

"Well, you gotta make allowances for a wounded man," said Archer, "and then you have to make special allowance for Ulrich. He's pretty much one of the deadliest bastards you're ever gonna meet."

"He seems kind of small and scrawny," said Hayl, doubtfully.

Brother Theo shook his head sadly. "There is potential for significant edification here, young Mr. Hayl. Never judge the sword by the scabbard, nor the warrior by his looks. Countless times I have found myself deceived by first impressions. You just can *not* tell the quality of a man's spirit by his appearance."

"Aye," added Archer. "I'd rather have a man of any size or shape who has a 'never-quit' combat mind-set, dressed in his skivvies and a light coat of grease, armed with a toasting fork; than a trash-talking spineless wannabe with full armor and a cannon, who you have to constantly look back to see if he's behind you."

Just then Lt. Fielder came past them with a nod and went into the hospital to visit the wounded. The three Ships were still a mass of activity as they struggled to get jury masts and sails up, but this was part of his daily duties as first officer—something he found distasteful but necessary. When he entered the big stern cabin he found Broadax talking with Elphinstone, Vodi, and Asquith.

"Uh oh," whispered Archer to Brother Theo as he peered into the room, "Broadax is still in there. There might be some sparks flying."

"Why? What's going on?" asked Hayl.

"Well," replied Archer with a look at Brother Theo, "I suppose you need to know about the personalities of your officers, and in this case you need to understand about Broadax and Fielder's feud, if only to figure out when to get out of the way."

"Aye," said the monk, "the boy needs to know, for his own safety. Their quarrel is a very pretty, petty quarrel as it stands. We should only spoil it by trying to explain it. For now, know that they are, the both of them, as headstrong as the proverbial allegory on the banks of the Nile, and just as deadly."

"Huh?" said Hayl, but Theo kept rolling on with nothing more than a quick wink to mark his little malapropism.

"They may be headstrong, but they are also pragmatic. They'd both love to kill the other, but if one of them offers the challenge to a duel, the other gets to choose the weapon. Lt. Fielder would opt for pistols and riddle poor Lt. Broadax, while Broadax would select edged weapons and Fielder would be worm food in the blink of an eye. And so they dance. It provides a form of entertainment for the crew. A kind of dangerous spectator sport. Just be sure to never mention it to either of them, and stay well out of the way whenever they are in the same room."

"Aye," said Archer. "So let's kind of linger here and watch the show, shall we?"

His full family name was Baronet Daniello Sans Fielder: the noble family "without a field," having lost all land, wealth, influence, and everything but their title many generations ago. He had been sent to sea at a young age by an impoverished family, and he was as bitter as baking chocolate and self-centered as a cat. Melville kept seeing hints that somewhere inside him there was a nugget of decency. But then that might just have been wishful thinking.

Fielder was a master pistol shot and an extraordinarily proficient first officer who directed the day-to-day operations of the *Fang* with great skill and energy. He was also an unrepentant coward who could fight like a demon if cornered. He claimed he was following the philosophical path of an obscure twentieth century thinker named Linus, who held that "there is no problem so large or complicated you can't run from it." Now that he had acquired some wealth, he was even more desperate to avoid danger and hang on to his fortune.

Melville knew that if he got rid of Fielder the Admiralty would never assign a replacement for him, and in all honesty Melville was unlikely to find anyone half as competent to run the Ship. In the end the captain rationalized his decision, figuring that the *Fang* did *not* need a bold, brilliant, and charismatic first officer who was determined to outshine her captain. Besides, Fielder helped provide an anchor and a balance for Melville. Or so he kept telling himself.

She was Lt. Ninandernander Broadax, a Dwarrowdelf in sworn service to the Crown of Westerness. No one ever called her Nina. (Unless old Hans did in moments of intimacy when they were off duty and off the Ship, but no one *even* wanted to think about that.) She was as twisted as a strand of barbed wire, and beloved and respected by almost everyone aboard. Everyone except Fielder, that is.

The Dwarrowdelf were a race of delvers, seeking heavy metals deep in the hearts of high-gravity worlds. Survival on such worlds requires great strength and lightning fast reflexes. It is intuitively obvious and widely understood that high-gee worlds can nurture a race with great strength. Less well known is the fact that fast reflexes are also a byproduct of high gravity.

A fundamental requirement for bipedal, humanoid existence, on any world, is to catch yourself if you trip and fall. Getting your hands in front of your face before it smacks into the ground is a basic survival skill. You have to do this *fast* on high-gee worlds, and the price of failure is high. In high-gravity the slow and the weak die off quickly, and the survivors are naturally selected for strength and speed.

The downside of existence on high-gee worlds is that projectiles drop very quickly. Rocks, arrows, bullets, and just about anything else launched in high gravity and dense atmosphere have a flight path similar to a rock thrown underwater. Thus the Dwarrowdelf had zero skill with projectile weapons. It was

bred out of them across countless generations of natural selection, and a Dwarrowdelf never had the chance to develop a skill with projectile weapons, even if they were capable of it.

The result was that Lt. Broadax was not just a bad shot, she was *dangerous* with any kind of gun unless she had lots of time to think, or was able to screw the end of the barrel directly into her opponent. And even then, more often than not she'd end up grazing and crippling her terrified foe.

Her skill at ranged weapons might leave everything to be desired, but in close combat she was one of the most fearsome warriors that nature had ever wrought. And she was a product of a military organization, combined with combat experiences, that worked together to forge her natural, raw talents like a master smith will forge a perfect blade. She was a blade that had been hammered in white-hot fire and death, and quenched in oceans of blood.

Her warrior spirit was as strong as her body, and she lived for one thing and one thing only. Glory! She rejoiced in every battle they fought. *This* was what she'd hoped for when she abandoned her people to be the first Dwarrowdelf to enlist in the Marine Corps of Westernness. As a female, her own society wouldn't allow her to be a warrior. They wanted to deny her the glory of battle, but she had proven herself and had been honored by her own people. Today she had no regret for turning her back on her people and her culture to fight as a mercenary for some distant kingdom. *This* was what she was born for.

Melville loved her dearly and she was truly loyal and grateful to him. But, like Fielder, Broadax was a flawed tool. In the end she was a borderline sociopath who was pathologically incapable of avoiding a fight, and willing to do anything for glory. Fortunately, over the centuries military forces have developed rituals, ceremonies, honors and guidelines to gainfully employ borderline sociopaths while keeping them within the limits of acceptable behavior.

Lady Elphinstone was in the process of scolding Lt. Broadax, taking the cigar out of the marine's mouth with a fierce look and a peremptory "No smoking!" The surgeon held the stogie at arm's-length and looked at it as though it were a cancerous tumor. Noxious odor and smoke drifted from one end, while the other, unlit end of the stogie was dripping with saliva and falling apart in her hand. Broadax didn't smoke cigars, she tortured them, igniting one end and mangling the other until the poor thing finally succumbed somewhere in the middle. Elphinstone gingerly tossed the decaying, dying stogie into a slop bucket, where it found an end to its suffering and misery with a brief "*hiss!*" of relief.

"But it's my right ta smoke!" said Broadax, belligerently.

"There are a lot of things that thou hast the 'right' to do," responded the surgeon, primly. "But many of them need to be done in private, or at least not in my hospital. For example, thou shouldst move thy bowels in private. Can we trust thee not to do *that* here?"

The ordinarily unflappable ex-NCO looked slightly stunned and dazed. Lt. Broadax had met her match and she knew it. The predator defending her lair is almost never defeated and it is seldom worth the cost even if you can. (That is why the lion tamer is in the cage *before* the lions. If you did it the other way around, you'd be paying to see an entirely different kind of entertainment!) So Broadax simply clammed up and turned to watch the floorshow.

Fielder came into the hospital just as the medicos were turning their attentions away from Broadax and directing their tender mercies upon the hapless Asquith. Ordinarily the first officer would have avoided Broadax, but he could never let anyone think that he would run from the marine lieutenant, and he was happy to see her in one of those rare moments when she was disconcerted and socially off balance. Besides, Asquith and Vodi were sparring, and it was the best entertainment aboard the Ship.

"Garlic soup?!" said Asquith.

"Now, eat up," Vodi replied patiently. "Garlic is a goodness. Garlic was invented by a righteous and loving God so that man could swallow snails without choking."

Asquith tried to digest this logic as Vodi continued sternly, while the others looked on with the virtuous pleasure of the healthy observing the ill. "Now that you are here in hospital," she said, "you must leave off your bad habits. You must give up cussing, smoking and drinking."

"But I don't do those things!"

"Well there you have it. You're a sinking ship at sea with no ballast to throw overboard. You forgot to cultivate your bad habits when you had a chance. Now there's no hope for you! It was good knowing you. I think."

"Thanks, that makes me feel better," Asquith said weakly.

"It's my job to make people comfortable. Or miserable. By fits and starts. Depending on what they've earned lately. I wouldn't want to deny you anything you've worked so hard to achieve."

"Can't you hold your tongue for one minute, and just feed me?"

"She can't hold her tongue," interjected Fielder, "she'd cut herself."

Vodi looked over at the first officer with a saccharine sweet smile that said, *Sooner or later, buddy, you'll be under my care. Sooner or later.*

"Speaking of thanks, and just rewards," continued Asquith, "what about those leeches you used to reattach my finger? What's become of them? Are they still around?"

"Unfortunately," said Vodi, with true sadness, "to get the greedy little piggies to let go we have to pour salt on them, and that kills them."

Asquith looked at Elphinstone, who was examining his dressings while Vodi distracted him, and asked, "How does a doctor who believes life is precious feel about killing these creatures?"

"Wouldst thou know the crux of the matter, then?"

"I asked, didn't I?"

"Then I shall tell thee."

"Yes?"

"'Twas simply this. I had to chose between them or thee," she replied. "'Twas a hard choice, but in the end it was the lesser of evils. Which wouldst thou have preferred?"

Still trying to protest—or at least delay—the garlic soup that Vodi was spooning down his throat, Asquith began to pursue one of his favorite topics. "Why can't you people do anything that isn't primitive and ineffectual? Like this foolish soup as medicine. Or look at my hand," he said, holding it up and looking to the urbane Fielder for some sympathy. "It's the damned Flintstones! They stitched me up with waxed thread. Waxed thread! Somebody just light my wick and make a wish! When I finally get back to Earth, the book I'll write will pay for the therapy I'll need."

Everyone grinned at that. They all appreciated a good rant from their pet earthworm, who had remained obstinately ignorant about such matters until now, when they were suddenly, rudely, and quite painfully inflicted upon him.

"Or this silly Ship," he continued, gesturing petulantly at the luminous white bulkhead beside him and glaring at them with his one good eye. "Why can't the hull be made out of steel? Then that so-called 'splinter' wouldn't have taken out my eye."

"Nope," Vodi replied, full of the infinite patience that a medical specialist can have for a patient who is completely at her mercy. "It has to be made out of this special kind of wood that the Moss will grow on. That really limits the number of Ships out here in Flatland."

"Why can't it be part wood and part steel?"

"'Tis because," replied Elphinstone with equal patience, "the inimical forces of two-space tend to twist and distort, and eventually destroy most structural parts not made out of Nimbrell timbers."

"Could the canvas be made out of mono-filament? Or plastic?"

"No," said Broadax, throwing in her two-bits. "Anythin' artificial decays real quick, eaten up by that evil bastard, the Elder King! So it has to be made out o' something livin', so Lady Elbereth protects it, ye see? An' gunpowder is pretty much inert in two-space. It just kinda smolders. Like tobacco. Thank the Lady for that."

"That gunpowder doesn't work?" asked Asquith in confusion.

"Naw," she said scornfully, rolling her ubiquitous stogie around in her mouth. Lady Elphinstone had taken her lit cigar upon entering the room, but she could still chomp on an unlit stogie, inflicting a slow, hideous demise upon it from one end only. "I thanks the Lady that tobacco will burn, or at least smolder. Otherwise how's a girl ta git a good smoke?"

"You know," said Mrs. Vodi, "Lt. Broadax inspired some of our Guldur crew members to take up smoking cigars. They looked for all the world like a dog with a cigar in its mouth, which is a singularly incongruous and ludicrous sight. For most of them, though, the habit didn't take. Whenever they got excited or distracted they tended to think the cigar was food and swallow it. Then you heard a unique yelping noise which is universal dog-speak for 'lesson learned.'"

"Aye," said Elphinstone. "So things only smolder in two-space. As a result there are no real burns. The only way thou canst be burnt in two-space is to spill thy food or," looking disapprovingly at Broadax, "swallow thy cigar."

"Now, my lady," said Vodi with a wink, "we all need to cultivate those bad habits, so you have some baggage to throw overboard when you get ill. If we ever get the good lieutenant in our tender mercies she'll have to give up those awful things, and the shock will either kill her or heal her."

"Could you use Greek fire?" asked Asquith doggedly, not yet convinced that these primitives were doing all that was possible to overcome the limitations of their environment.

"Nope," said Vodi, patiently. "Like I told you. No combustion, that's why the cook has to heat the food with modified Keel charges in the burners."

"So all you have to fight with are bare blades, and muzzle-loading muskets and cannons, launched by those crazy Keel charges?"

"Yes, although some of those cannon, you have to admit, are pretty potent," said Vodi, shoving another spoonful of soup down her unwilling patient's throat. "You've touched the Keel charge on some of those 24-pounders?"

Asquith shuddered at the taste of the soup *and* the memory of the 24-pounders. "Yes. I've never felt anything like it in my life. Pure hatred and destructive malice. That does bring up a question. Does size really matter? It appears that the larger the weapon, the more aggressive. Is this true? Or is there a really, really angry derringer out there? What about a weapon that's pacifistic in nature?"

"Does size really matter?" replied Vodi, wagging her spoon threateningly in Asquith's face. "Such a straight line you hand me, my friend! But I'll let that one go and wait for a sportin' shot."

"The bigger a gun is, the more intelligent it tends to be," said Fielder as he lounged against one luminous white bulkhead. "But you should try a few shots from the captain's little pistol. It's been in his family for generations, constantly remaining in two-space and building up a personality. It's amazingly intelligent, *and* it's the most vicious thing I've ever held in my hand—barring a few ex-girlfriends I can think of. As to a pacifist weapon, well I've yet to run into one of those, but the galaxy is a big place. Who knows what's out there."

"What about gas warfare?"

"Been tried," replied Fielder. "The chemicals decay almost immediately upon entry into two-space."

"So that's why the level of medical support is so poor? No drugs at all?"

"They tend to decay on long voyages," replied Fielder. "Even our canvas sails decay over time, and we've spent centuries breeding and developing the plants that they came from. That's why the medicos grow a garden that includes the garlic you are enjoying. Our Vodi is a master herbalist, and the cook has a small garden of herbs and spices."

"Aye," said Vodi with dignified pride. "I'm an herbalist first class and an apothecary second class. Herbalism is really my strong suit."

"I think you've been spending too much time inhaling your inventory," said Asquith petulantly. "None of those 'herbs' did me any good. *Chains* are your strong suit! Chaining folks down on the operating table!"

"I guess it could be worse," said Vodi with a wink to one-and-all. "In Lt. Broadax's case, chain *mail* is

her *only* suit."

Always happy to reinforce and support any cut at Broadax, Fielder groaned appreciatively and said, "Go to your room!"

"Only if you'll spank me when I get there!" replied Vodi with a saucy smile.

Fielder grinned back, not visibly daunted by the prospect of spanking the ample Vodi. Then he left with his dignity intact while Broadax and Vodi chuckled and Elphinstone looked on with a disapproving but resigned shake of her head.

Finally, they were done with repairs. As old Hans put it, "We did a right fine job a blastin' the blazes outa them vacuum-suckin' Guldur bastards. There ain't much more we can do ta turn these crippled, shot-ta-hell hulks into fightin' Ships." So the period of constant effort and exhausted naps was mostly behind them and they finally had a few moments to slow down for reflection. Now it was time to mourn their dead and honor their fallen.

The sailors of two-space lived in dread of being buried in space. The bodies of their fallen comrades would be buried in the rich, living earth of the first planet they came to. For now their canvas-wrapped bodies would be pulled behind them, sunken in two-space, like a macabre stringer of frozen fish towed behind a boat. Burial could come later, but right now they needed to take time for a memorial service.

Melville stood on the upper quarterdeck looking down at a sea of upturned faces full of grief, expectation, scars, and broken noses. Men at war, warriors who had *adjusted* to war, grieved briefly and intensely. His job was to guide them along that path. Melville felt like he had had far too much experience at it. He longed for someone to help him with the burdens upon *his* soul and spirit. But for now his duty was to speak Words for their fallen comrades.

"The Bible tells us that, 'there is a time for everything,'" began Melville, "'and a season for everything under the sun.'"

His crew sighed and settled in to hear their captain apply the healing balm of Words to guide and carry them through their grieving. Untold thousands of applications of these ancient Words to the griefs of more than two thousand years had carved them into the cultural consciousness of the listeners, giving the Words power. Power to heal and power to strengthen lives in times of sorrow and loss. And it helped that Melville was a darned good speaker.

"'There is a time to be born, and a time to die. A time to sow, and a time to reap. A time to *kill*, and a time to *heal*.' Shipmates, my brothers and sisters, the time for killing has passed, for now. It is time to

grieve, and it is time to heal.

"He that lacks time to mourn,  
lacks time to mend.  
Eternity mourns that.  
'Tis an ill cure  
For life's worst ills,  
to have no time to feel them."

Among the humans were Sylvans who listened with shining eyes. Their race had already been enchanted and fascinated by Earth's language, culture and heritage, and now they were part of it. Guldur crew members, scattered throughout the crowd, listened with cocked canine heads, fascinated by the cadence, beauty, and *sense* of the words.

"So let us mourn, but the purpose of that mourning is to mend. To heal. *Think*, and ask yourself: if *you* had been the one to fall, and your comrades were driving on, what would you want for them?"

Melville paused briefly and then continued, answering his own question. " *To live!* You would want your brothers to live the fullest, richest, best life they can. That is what you lived, and fought and died to give them!"

The crew nodded their heads in agreement. "Aye," rumbled quietly from many throats. "Aye."

"Now they are the ones to fall. Your comrades have fallen, and what do *they* want for you?"

Again the crew nodded as their captain went on to echo the answer that was in their hearts. "The same thing! They would want the same thing for you. The fullest, richest, best life you can have. *That* is your mission. *That* is your moral, sacred responsibility. *That* is what they lived and fought and died to give you. And that means you must go on.

"We've lost these comrades, and we can never have them back on this side of the veil, except in our hearts, minds, stories, and songs. But if their loss destroys just one of us, if survivor guilt takes away the fullness of just one life, then we've given another life or another victory to the bastards who came to kill us. And we'll be *dammned* if we give those bastards one more life!"

He completed this last sentence in a soaring oratorical crescendo and his warriors responded with a roar of affirmation. Then Melville nodded and turned to Brother Theo Petreckski. "Brother, will you lead us in a Song?"

"I'd be honored to, Captain," replied the monk with a nod. The *Fang* s were a diverse lot, drawn from many cultures and species, and bound together mostly by the iron bonds of the fellowship of arms. They came from many and sundry faiths, but when the mystery of life and death was upon them, a Song of Faith, led by a man of faith, even an unordained monk like Brother Theo, could be comforting. Like Melville, Theo reached back to the old, strong Words that resonated in the heritage and souls of these lonely men in this distant, desolate patch of space. In his clear, pure tenor voice he began one of the many songs that the sailors loved to sing at Sunday services,

"Lift ev'ry voice and sing,  
till earth and heaven ring..."

and the company joined in...

"Sing a song full of faith  
that the dark past has taught us,  
Sing a song full of hope  
that the present has brought us;  
Facing the rising sun  
of our new day begun,  
Let us march on till victory is won.

"God of our weary years,  
God of our silent tears,  
Thou who hast brought us thus far on the way;  
Thou who has by thy might,  
led us into the light,  
Keep us forever in the path, we pray."

A skeleton crew was placed in charge of Melville's little flotilla, and for the first time in many days they rested.

"So what did you think about being in battle?" asked Midshipman Aquinar.

The exhausted middies were now gathered in the midshipmen's berth. The air was thick with the smells of the middies' food stores, human sweat, dogs, and confined humanity as they lay snuggled into their canvas hammocks. Brother Theo and Mrs. Vodi had checked in on them, and this was the first time they had been together and alone without the constant demand of work and the endless burden of fatigue. Now, tired as they were, they had to talk, and Aquinar had raised this intriguing question.

Hayl was new to the *Fang* , and he respected and admired the "old-timers" like Aquinar. Even the older, veteran midshipmen admired tiny Aquinar, who had been the first to adopt a monkey.

*What do I think of battle?* Hayl asked himself. "Well, it was *kind* of fun. I think. Maybe," he answered. His monkey was snuggled beside his head, looking up drowsily from his hammock.

"Yeah, but what class of fun?" replied Aquinar, whose monkey was already asleep, burrowed out of sight somewhere in his bedding.

"Huh?"

"There's four classes of fun," said Aquinar patiently. "Class I Fun is 'Fun at the time.' Class II Fun: 'It's fun later, but not at the time.' Class III Fun: 'It's fun for others to hear about it.' And then there's Class IV Fun: 'Fun you regret.'"

Hayl mulled this over as Aquinar continued.

"For me I think it was Class II," said Aquinar. "I know there were people who honestly enjoy combat, like Lt. Broadax, and I'd like to be like her. Battle is definitely Class I fun for her. And there are those who can look back on it as fun, like climbing a mountain: it's hell at the time but you can look back on it with satisfaction. I think it was like that for me, Class II Fun. How 'bout you?"

"Well, I don't regret it," said Hayl. "I'm glad I'm alive and I'm glad we won, so it's not Class IV. But it wasn't fun at the time, I was scared to death through it all. I'm not even sure it's fun later. So it wasn't Class I or Class II. I guess it was Class III Fun. The kind of 'fun' we can tell others about for the rest of our lives, and they'll admire us for it. The kind of thing that it's fun to hear about, but not really all that much fun to do. Was it like that for you the first time?"

"Aye," said Aquinar. "I think they call those adventures. Something you really wouldn't want to do yourself, but it is good to read about or hear about while you're snuggled in a warm bed while a storm outside pounds on your roof. It was like that for me at first, battle. It was definitely Class III Fun. As you get more experience under your belt I think you'll adapt. I did. Most people do."

"Aye, I hope so."

Then they pulled black sleep masks over their eyes, blocking out the constant light of the lambent Moss all around them, and they drifted off to sleep.

But in his sleep Hayl kept seeing an endless flow of blood and guts pouring over him, and the sad, dog eyes of the enemy captain staring at him. In his dreams the Guldur captain kept looking at him with those mournful eyes and asking, "Why did you have to kill us? Why? Did you think it was 'fun' to kill us?"

Always Hayl answered, "We didn't want to! We had to, or you were going to kill *us* ! Please, please, leave me alone. We didn't want to." And he awoke, sobbing.

When he awoke, Mrs. Vodi was there, holding his head, pulling off his sleep mask and whispering gently in his ear, telling him to "breathe, breathe deep. It's only a dream, little one, it's not real. Now you have to breathe. Get it under control. Separate the memory from the emotions, my little one, and make peace with the memory. Breathe with me. In through the nose, breathe in, breathe in, hold it, hold it. Good. Good. Now out through the lips, out, out. Breathe with me."

Hayl found that he could not deny Mrs. Vodi as she looked in his eyes and whispered her commands. As she held his head and breathed into his face he found himself breathing deeply in sync with her, and he found himself regaining control.

"You did what you had to do, little one," continued Mrs. Vodi, stroking his sweat-soaked hair, while his monkey gibbered quietly and stroked the hair on the other side of his head. "We all did. I'm so *very* glad that you are okay, that you made it, and it is right for you to be glad you are okay. The worst is over now, and it is okay to be alive. Breathe with me now, breathe. Whenever the memories come you remember, little one, you remember to breathe, and *know* that it is okay to be glad. Every one of God's creatures will fight for its life and be glad to survive. It is okay to be glad, it is good to be alive. Breathe now, breathe..."

There were many ways to deal with the demons after combat, many ways to put them to rest. For Fielder and most of the officers in the wardroom the solution was found in fellowship, humor, songs, and wine. Not necessarily in that order.

Warriors throughout history have understood the importance of social and cultural responses to combat stress. Veterans of battle have always used military group bonding, supportive leaders, and affirming comrades, combined with alcohol, sex, memories of sex, singing, and humor to help them deal with their combat experiences. Far from being placebos, these life-affirming activities are actually powerful survival mechanisms that have been developed across the millennia to help defuse traumatic situations and reassert normality into shattered lives.

Tonight, in the wardroom, red wine, warm fellowship, and cleansing laughter flowed freely. It is a remarkable fact that warriors can always find *something* to laugh about after the battle. In this case, much mirth was generated by the discovery that Josiah Westminster had lost part of his mustache somewhere in the battle. It might have been shot off or cut off, but the ranger had a different explanation. "Ah *thought* one bite was chewy, when I grabbed a snack there in the heat of the battle!" he said, fingering his lopsided 'stache. "Now mah poop's gonna look like a fox turd!"

The air was rich with the scent of wine, good food, and close companionship. Old Hans and Lt.

Broadax sat side-by-side, enjoying each other's company, but not going any further while aboard Ship. Broadax and Fielder had an unspoken truce on this night, and all the officers and warrants took turns discussing the battle, eating, drinking, leading songs and reciting poetry.

The spirit and theme was set by Lt. Fielder as he led them in a toast.

"Fill every beaker up, my men,  
pour forth the cheering wine:  
There's life and strength in every drop,  
—thanksgiving to the vine!"

\* \* \*

Melville lay in his bunk. He was one of the few in the entire Ship who was alone on this night. The captain in solitary splendor.

But he was not completely alone. Boye slept beside him, woofing gently and hunting in his dreams. Beneath him and all about him, his Ship was in constant, empathic contact. Nestled beside him, his monkey slept the sleep of the exhausted. And far, far away, across the Grey Rift in Osgil, his betrothed, his Sylvan princess, reached out her loving spirit.

It was good to have his Ship and his beloved in his heart and his mind, to cancel out the *others* who kept him company on this night. The angry, alien, malignant, murderous spirits of his guns were also with him, burned into his neurons and seared into his soul. And the spirits of all the beings he had killed came back across two-space to visit him when he shut his eyes, asking if it was all truly necessary, asking if they really had to die. But most of all, the memory of lost friends and comrades came to visit, bringing remorse, regret and second-guessing that turned into self-loathing.

His dead comrades fused and melded with the enemy and the alien hatred of his cannons, forming a toxic mixture that sapped the life from him. Times like this made death and oblivion look desirable, appropriate, and even preferable.

Melville's talent for poetry never truly turned off, and he found himself thinking,

*I could lay down like a tired child,  
And weep away the life of care  
Which I have borne, and yet must bear.*

And then he loathed himself even more, for he had little patience with self-pity and angst, in others or in himself.

Yet still his self-loathing and self-doubt kept rising up like a corpse from the grave. He second-guessed himself over and over again, trying to think what he could have done differently. Was he truly worthy to be captain of this great Ship? Or was he only a glory-seeking fool? Did he really do the right thing? Were his motives pure? Were Tibbits and all the others dead because he had sought glory?

*His food*

*Was glory, which was poison to his mind  
And peril to his body.*

In this case, his quest for glory was poison to these beloved crew members who had trusted him and died. Was it also poison to his mind and his body?

In the depths of his despair and doubt he thought again of the great Ship that had accepted and befriended him, the magnificent crew that had accepted him, and—most of all—the Sylvan princess that had embraced him. His Princess Glaive.

"It is not over, dear Thomas," she had said to him. "Thou shalt remember me, and thou shalt come back to me. I will call thee from across the galaxy, and thou shalt come. I have woven mine magic, the simple magic of a sincere woman's true love, and now thou art mine. *For as I say, so must it be.*"

As he thought of her his despair seemed to wash away. He looked out the stern windows of his cabin and remembered her with fresh tears in his eyes. But now they were the healthy tears of a young man dreaming of his beloved who was far, far away. Tears known to many, tears of anticipation and longing. Tears of affirmation and life. And he whispered to the stars,

"Oft in the tranquil hour of night,  
When stars illumine the sky,  
I gaze upon each orb of light,  
And wish that thou wert by."

Boye woke to the sound of Melville's voice, placing his big hairy head on Melville's cot and licking his master's face, the dog's monkey looking sleepily over his head. Melville's monkey stirred and crooned quietly beside him. The captain's hand touched the bulkhead beside his bed, and he felt the firm, wild, and loving spirit of his Ship spread through his mind, body, and soul.

Then depression and demons fled before the memory of his true love and the love of his companions. This crisis of spirit passed. He was able to weep healthy tears for his beloved fallen comrades, and for Tibbits, the fatherly man who had been so dear to his heart. And he whispered through his tears, as he stroked his dog's head,

"And the tear that is shed,  
Though in secret it rolls,  
Shall keep his memory  
Green in our souls."

In his cabin the captain finally slept, and he slept deeply. Deep enough to dream alien dreams in brilliant colors he had never seen. Deep enough to reach out and touch the face of the galaxy. Deep enough to feel the love of his Sylvan princess touch him from across the stars. Her love was the air that he was breathing, and his Ship was the firm earth beneath his feet.

In his dreams, his love, his Ship, and he wove a tapestry of faith and trust and strength that was a balm onto his soul and gave wings to his heart. Together they lit the candles of their spirits. Together they became a star that blazed, like a beacon in darkest times. Together they would seek out the darkness and go light the galaxy. In his dreams.

In the marines' berth Private Dwakins was curled in a ball, racked by sobs and nightmares. Gunny Von Rito and Lance Corporal Jarvis were there beside his hammock. Von Rito laid a gentle hand on his shoulder. "Breathe, breathe, it's only a dream, son. Breathe in, breathe in..." said the gunny.

"Gunny, corporal," sobbed Dwakins, "Ah knows we gotta fight fer our lives. I know we gots ta do this. The enemy didn't give us no choice. But when does the poetry, an' the honor, an' all the glory stuff the captain talks about begin?"

"Aye, Dwakins," said Jarvis, his squad leader, "yer right! We gotta do it, and the battle will kill enough. The enemy kills enough. It'd be crazy to let it destroy lives after the battle, lives that didn't *have* to be lost. So we *choose* to focus on the good stuff. We multiply the joy and divide the pain, so we can live with what we have to do. The captain explained it to me once, and now I understand it. The bad stuff is true, but the good stuff is true too! And you gotta look for the good parts. You gotta *choose* to focus on the good stuff. There is honor if we honor those who did it. There is glory if we give them glory."

"Aye, son," growled Gunny Von Rito. "You done good. All of us, working together, we saved the lives of every person aboard. And now we're gonna live full, rich lives afterwards! And the bastards who tried

to kill us ain't gonna take that away. *I give you honor* , son. And *I give you glory* , and you have to take it if you're gonna be able to live in this old world and do this job. Now breathe, breathe in..."

Among the Ship's boys there were also tears and nightmares that night. And Lady Elphinstone was there doing for them what Mrs. Vodi and Brother Theo did for the middies.

From the highest to the lowest, from the captain to the middie, amongst the Ship's boys and the marines, there were many tears shed that night. Not everyone wept, but each in their own way dealt with burdens and loss.

They mourned lost comrades, and lost innocence. Then they slept the "sleep that knits up the ravell'd sleeve of care." And as they slept they healed, and steeled themselves to get on with all the glorious and mundane challenges of life.

\* \* \*

The day is done, and the darkness  
Falls from the wings of Night,  
As a feather is wafted downward  
From an eagle in his flight.

And the night shall be filled with music,  
And the cares that infest the day  
Shall fold their tents like the Arabs,  
And as silently steal away.

# CHAPTER THE 7TH

## Nordheim: "The North Countree is a Hard Countree"

Oh, the North Countree is a hard countree  
That mothers a bloody brood;

And its icy arms hold hidden charms  
For the greedy, the sinful and lewd.  
And strong men rust, from the gold and the lust  
That sears the Northland soul.

"The Ballad of Yukon Jake"  
Edward E. Paramore, Jr.

Asquith woke up the next morning with two new things in his world.

First was a determination to adapt to this strange world. He had dreamt of guns that would not fire and a puppy that looked up at him with frightened eyes. And he knew what that meant.

The second was his monkey. He had a monkey. It was a tiny, dappled, fawn-colored thing at first, snuggled next to his head in bed, looking up at him with sleepy eyes.

The two events blended together in his mind. The

monkey meant that he had been accepted by this world, and he was determined to accept it in return. Whatever that led to, whatever it meant, he was willing to give it a try.

The little earthling called for paper and pencil, and he began to write. During the long days of recovery and convalescence Asquith interviewed his fellow patients and he took careful notes as his monkey watched attentively from his shoulder.

The monkeys were on the captain's mind as well.

"It's the most extraordinary phenomenon," said Brother Theo, as he sat over a glass of wine at the captain's table. "The monkeys can die. We know that. We dissected one! And if the monkey dies and its human lives, then another baby monkey appears within the next few days, and, well, it appears that the new monkey has the *exact same* memories and personality as the one that died! Most commonly, though, the monkey dies with its human, and we bury them together. But what happens if the human dies, and the monkey doesn't?"

"Okay, I'll bite," said Melville, taking a sip of his wine as he reached up to scratch his monkey behind its

ear. "What happens?"

"The monkey just... disappears! Nobody knows where they go, just as no man fathoms where they come from."

The monk held his hands up in a shrug of frustration and confusion, and looked over at the monkey on his shoulder, who promptly mirrored the gesture and said, "Eep?" innocently.

"Could they have been thrown into two-space, or maybe, I don't know, maybe they leapt into two-space in despair, or something?" asked the captain.

"No, Captain," replied Theo, shaking his head. "I observed it in our battles at Osgil and Ambergris, and that was my supposition. But there's no denying it. It's occurred too many times. I have too many examples. Nobody sees it happen, but they simply... go away. The host dies, and then they're just... not there anymore. There *is* no other explanation."

"Does the rest of the crew know about this?"

"Yes, Captain. There's no concealing it. And, frankly, everyone just takes it in stride. Two-space is a realm of mystery. They live with the inexplicable, like Alice's 'Red Queen' believing in the impossible twice a day. It's something we'll have to accept, I suppose. Maybe someday we'll figure it out."

"You rascals," said Melville, looking at his monkey. "You mysterious little rascals."

"Eep," agreed his monkey.

The flotilla of crippled Ships made their slow, uneventful journey across the vast dark blue expanse. Ordinarily they would pass through countless solar systems as they sailed the shoreless seas of two-space. Usually there would be glowing areas of orange, yellow, and red that meant they were traveled through suns. (Or over, or around, or beside them... whatever the relationship was between two-space and three-space.) They would have seen areas where the plane of two-space was cloud white, sea blue, grass green, dull red, gray, brown, and every other earth tone, and every combination thereof, as they sailed through planets.

But now they were traveling across the Grey Rift, sailing between the spiral arms, and there was nothing to see except an eternal sea, an endless horizon that constantly moved before them, and the unchanging stars and galactic lenses that hung above them. They were bearing north, galactic north, toward the legendary Dwarfworld of Nordheim.

On the upper waist, every day except Sunday, Brother Theo Petreckski conducted classes for the middies. The Ship's boys and many of the crew also tried to make time for these sessions, hanging back on the fringes or sitting above the class on the mainmast yardarms as Brother Theo lectured the "young gentlemen." Today the captain was teaching and every available ear was listening.

Melville's primary goal was to prepare them for their visits to Nordheim and Earth. Since there was plenty of time, he began at the beginning.

His midshipmen sat cross-legged on the glowing white deck in their cropped blue jackets over white shirts and sailcloth pants, with Brother Theo sitting off to one side like a benign Buddha in his brown robe. A deck chair was brought out for the captain and he sat in front of the middies. Every soul had a monkey perched on his shoulder, and the monkeys gave the impression that they were also listening and understanding.

Melville looked at his middies with a touch of sadness. They were growing up. The ones who weren't dead.

Abdyl Faisal and tiny Garth Aquinar were the only two middies remaining from the *Kestrel's* original crew. Archer and Crater had been promoted from midshipman to lieutenant and were now commanding their own Ships. *Kestrel's* other middies were all dead.

Aquinar was still just ten Earth years old and small for his age, with a round face, and dark, wise eyes that seemed to look through you. He was too young to serve as a middie, but Captain Crosby of the *Kestrel* had brought the boy along as a favor to an old Shipmate. Part middie and part mascot, he had grown into an remarkably competent young man.

Faisal was tall for his thirteen years, dark and slender with a natural grace and elegance.

Ellis Palmer was huge for his twelve years, destined to be a giant. He had proven himself as a Ship's boy and had been promoted to midshipman shortly after they captured the *Fang* and lost their old *Kestrel* .

Anthony Hayl had joined them on Osgil. He was about the same age as Palmer but with significantly less experience aboard Ship. This was balanced by his experience in the civilian world and the preparation that his family had given him.

The final two middies, Hezikiah Jubal and Lao Tung, had proven themselves as able seamen and were promoted to middie after the capture of the *Fang* . These last two were next in line for promotion to

lieutenant, if any promotions were ever to be given in the future. Which was doubtful, given the fact that the *Fang* and her crew were *not* in the good graces of the Admiralty.

"Lads," Melville began, looking out at the young faces of his midshipmen, and the other Ship's boys and sailors beyond them who also "happened" to be listening in. "In this strange realm that we call two-space, complex or advanced mechanisms can't exist. Our star kingdom depends on the crude technology of wooden ships, and the iron men who man her. We fight with cannon, sword, rifled musket, and bayonet. But can somebody tell me what the most important weapon in two-space is?"

There was a long pause, and then Aquinar answered, looking at his captain with eyes dark and deep as space, "Sir, the most important weapon is the human brain. 'All things are ready, if our *minds* be so.'"

"Aye," their captain replied, "well done. So who can tell me 'Steinbeck's Law'? Mr. Palmer?" he said, in response to the middie's raised hand.

"This is the law," began Palmer in a deep rumble. "The purpose of fighting is to win. There is no possible victory in defense. The sword is more important than the shield and skill is more important than either. The final weapon is the brain. All else is supplemental."

"Aye, well said," replied the captain. "Never forget, we made it into two-space without any outside help. Our minds were the weapons and the tools that got us here. Can you imagine what it must have been like when that great innovator and researcher, Kenny Muraray, created the first Pier, and saw it disappear up into nothing? Soon, Moss grew on the Keel and they went up and studied two-space."

He tried to communicate the awe and wonder of that first event to these young men, and to everyone else who listened. Their rapt attention made him think he was succeeding. Or maybe it was just their respect for the captain.

"Westernness was discovered by the men of Old Earth in the year 2210, over four-hundred years ago. That was almost a century after Earth's first, disastrous entry into Flatland, when they tried to take computers into two-space. The computers came back ruined, but they also came back with the Elder Kings' Gift: a devastating two-space virus that caused a total collapse of Earth's worldwide Info-Net. This resulted in what we call the Crash. But still the Pier was there, and those early pioneers went from the equivalent of a dugout canoe to the mighty frigates of today in just a few centuries."

Everyone around him nodded. This was an old tale, but one they enjoyed hearing again, and their captain gave it new twists and new credibility.

"So why did Westernness take over from Earth? Why did Earth step aside as leaders?"

There was a long, awkward pause, and then Tung answered. "Well, sir, the vast majority of human

colonies came from Westernness, since we had lots of big, ancient Nimbrell forests to build the Ships and Keels. And Earth rebuilt their high-tech world, but that technology can't be exported across two-space. Earthlings all have nano-tech and bio-robotic implant stuff, and other technology that makes them live for centuries. But if any of that junk came into two-space, they'd be real dead, real fast. So, over the years they weren't willing to come out here and they just kind of lost their curiosity or excitement."

"Aye," said Melville. "High-tech can be a real trap. You can lose interest in two-space and become decayed and moribund, *and* you will always be vulnerable to another Crash. On major, star-faring worlds there's little need for technology beyond Victorian levels. So worlds like our Westernness, or Osgil (where we just came from), or Nordheim (where we are headed), simply don't bother with it."

His class all nodded. They understood what the captain was talking about. They also understood that the Guldur attacks were forcing Osgil and many other worlds to move toward machine guns, artillery, and other early twentieth century technology to protect themselves from invasion.

"So we've rejected technology," continued Melville, "and chosen to take another route. What is that route?"

Again there was an awkward pause, and finally Jubal answered, in a slow drawl, "Well, sur, maintainin' a two-space kingdom is what motivates us. Since high-tech can send yah off track, like Earth, we *choose* ta stay at a basic technology level. We call it retroculture: an intentional move backward in technology an' culture."

"Good!" said Melville. "In the Navy this is reinforced by our love of three major bodies of classic literature and history. Who can tell me what they are?"

Midshipman Hayl, deciding it was time for him to answer a question, raised his hand, and the captain nodded. "Sir, the major sources of literary inspiration for our civilization are: classic science fiction, the extensive biographies of great sailors such as Horatio Hornblower and Jack Aubrey, and (most importantly) Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* ."

"Aye," said Melville. "Quite right. Through these classic works of literature we are reaching back into our past to build the best present we can."

Then the young captain's voice grew low. He leaned forward and his eyes, his speech, his whole body communicated wonder and excitement. "It is a wild, crazy, wonderful and incredibly diverse galaxy out here, and we are privileged to see it. Most people never leave their home planet. The Ships of two-space are rare, and travel is too expensive for all but the very rich, or for settlers making once-in-a-lifetime trips. But you and I, Shipmates, *we* get to see this wonderful galaxy! And the most amazing thing that we found when we finally broke out into two-space was that Others were already here! Somewhere in the primordial past, an ancient, Ur civilization appears to have seeded much of the galaxy with genetically similar stock. Other races have been traveling out in this realm for millennia. We found fair elves who live high up in the vast trees of low-gravity worlds like Osgil, and doughty, stout-hearted dwarfs who mine

deep into high-gravity worlds like Nordheim."

Melville added with a wry laugh, "There are even wolves, complete with goblin riders. (All of you have made an intimate acquaintance with *them* !) There are also orcs and ogres! And there are legends of silicon-based, troll-like life forms, and insectoid civilizations! Let's hope we don't have to fight them too!"

His middies grinned in response to their captain's jest, and he continued. "The crazy thing is, it's almost like Tolkien's writings were prophecy. Polite people talk in terms of 'Sylvan' and 'Dwarrowdelf' rather than elves and dwarfs. The Sylvan and Dwarrowdelf prefer it that way, and so do we because, quite frankly, we are all a bit awestruck and uncomfortable dealing with it. Our feelings toward Tolkien are almost religious. We treat this whole business as if it were the gift of some god, or like a gambler would refer to his luck."

Melville grinned to himself, realizing that he was giving a reiteration of one of his academy classes. Captain Ben James, one of his favorite instructors, was the first person to ever talk about these things, and it had stuck in his mind.

"Even the Sylvan and Dwarrowdelf themselves have embraced Tolkien as a kind of semi-prophecy. Tolkien always insisted that the power of his work was in its applicability, not its allegory. Now the application of his writing has achieved widespread cultural influence almost like the Bible. Just as the Greek culture and language was embraced by the conquering Romans, our culture and language have become the lingua franca for the elder races, and our literature, especially Tolkien, was key to that."

"And now we get to see Nordheim," interjected tiny Aquinar, his normally calm voice squeaking with excitement.

"Aye," boomed Lt. Broadax. She stood off to one side, leaning on her ax. Most of the group hadn't realized that she was listening. "Nordheim, where the Way of the Wind is a strange, wild way, carving her wonders out of snow-jeweled hills an' ice, amidst twisted emerald evergreens, an' granite spires flecked with sparkling quartz and mica. An' in the still o' the dawn ye will know the Splendor o' Silence. An' her mountains! Ah, her lush mountains filled with sweet veins o' gold, silver an' gems!"

"Aye, indeed!" replied Melville, looking at her with a fond smile. "But the real gems to be found on Nordheim are her people, the mighty Dwarrowdelf. And now we are about to make landfall on that legendary world. Most Dwarrowdelf worlds are concentrated up here in the galactic north, where the planets tend to have a greater density of heavy metals. Just as the Sylvans tend to cluster out toward the edges of the galaxy and the ends of the spiral arms, where there seem to be more of the light-gravity, low-density worlds that they love.

"And," said Melville, his face growing hard as he continued, "after Nordheim we are under orders to report to Earth. The people of Earth often seem rude when they talk about our culture. They call us 'primitives.' Sometimes they even call us 'Hokas.' Out in two-space, or on one of our worlds it's appropriate to challenge them to a duel in response to such an insult. Because, you see gentlemen, we are

not Hokas! We are the Kingdom of Westernness! Our culture and values now rule one of the greatest empires in the galaxy. While their values and decaying culture sit festering and rotting on one lonely, sick old world."

There were growls of agreement, and then the captain made eye contact with each individual as he continued sternly. "But, on Earth, provided you get shore leave, you will be *their* guests and you must play by their rules. That means no duels and no acts of violence. If you cannot live by the rules of a world, then don't go there."

"Unless yer there ta kill the bastards!" added Broadax. "Then ya don't give a damn about their rules."

Several days later they were met by a half dozen Dwarrowdelf longships, well before they had come in sight of Nordheim's Pier.

"The Dwarrowdelf dislike low gravity," explained Brother Theo to his class of middies as they crowded the upperside rail to watch the approaching Ships, "which means that their 'longships' are, indeed, low and long, with only one sail on each of their three masts. With, of course, the obligatory row of heraldic shields lashed to the rail.

"The Dwarrowdelf are also appalling shots," he continued, "so they only have a few 12-pound cannons in the bow. Their preferred strategy is to blast you at close range, then ram and board you."

"Aye," drawled Josiah Westminster, who was leaning up against the railing beside them. "They ain't worth a damn in a gunfight, but with their big crews of ax-wielding maniacs, if they get a chance to board you, yer finished."

All eyes were on the approaching Dwarrowdelf Ships. On the upper quarterdeck, Melville commented to Fielder, "They probably can't figure what or who we are. We must look like three forlorn and misshapen Guldur cripples, limping in with our crude jury rigs and sparse display of sails."

"Aye, sir," replied his first officer dryly. "They're probably trying to decide whether to sink us or condemn us."

Melville looked back on the two Ships traveling behind them, and he felt a great surge of satisfaction in what they had accomplished. In a loud, clear voice he said,

"Beauty in desolation was her pride,

Her crowned array a glory that had been;  
She faltered tow'rds us like a swan that died  
But although ruined she was still a queen."

His crew growled in agreement. Pride. Beauty. Glory. Still a queen. Those were just the right words to communicate how they felt.

On the lowerside railing Cuthbert Asquith XVI stood beside Mrs. Vodi, Lady Elphinstone, and the other ambulatory patients, all looking at the Dwarrowdelf Ships coming in from their flank, and their sister Ships trailing behind them.

"I still don't get it," said Asquith as he looked out at the magnificent sight with his one good eye, while absentmindedly reaching up to pet his baby monkey.

"What don't you get?" asked Mrs. Vodi with a sigh.

"Well, as I understand it," replied Asquith, "Flatland, or two-space, allows you to traverse the universe from one place to another in a straight line. That is, if we consider the galaxy in three-space to be a solid lens, like a vast frisbee, then if we want to go from point A to point B we have to traverse along the arc of the galaxy. Flatland reduces the huge frisbee of the galaxy to a small, flat disc. Thus allowing us to travel from A to B in a short, straight line... Am I right?"

"Yes," replied Mrs. Vodi. "The key point is that Flatland seems to have everything much closer together, or maybe we can just move around in it faster. Either way the effect is the same. As if you took a big frisbee and compacted it into a dime, or something even smaller and flatter, and then hopped from one densely packed molecule to another."

"Okay," continued Asquith, "so this means that the Keel of your dimensionally ambivalent Ship interfaces with Flatland, allowing a three-dimensional object to move within the realm of two-dimensional space. Still right? And, apparently for a sense of balance, the Ship must actually be Siamese ships, joined together at the keel, transecting Flatland by having 3-D objects above and below. Okay?"

"Okay."

"But how does it work?!" said Asquith with sincere distress in his voice. "I really am trying to understand it all. Mind you, this is coming from someone who once readily accepted that a John Carter could be telepathically summoned to Mars."

"Don't ask *me* how the universe works!" replied Mrs. Vodi. "I'm just a lob-lolly girl. And, truth be told, I don't think anyone understands it. But for that matter, whoever really understood 'warp space' or 'hyperspace' in all those old science fiction books? The bottom line is, here we are. And right now the key question is, 'How will the Dwarrowdelf receive us?'"

"Eep!" agreed their monkeys in chorus, gazing fearfully at the oncoming longships.

"Who be ye?" asked an imposing Dwarrowdelf standing in the upper bow of the lead longship. He had a horned helmet on his head, was coated in glistening mail, and held a huge, double-bladed ax over his shoulder. He was a bit more than half the height of a tall human, and almost half again as broad as Broadax, with a nose like a turnip and a dense black apron of a beard that made their marine lieutenant's whiskers seem like a lady's peach fuzz.

The longship's forward-mounted guns were fully manned, and the crew seemed to have their huge axes close to hand. Melville's three Ships had all cleared for action. Their guns were not run out, but otherwise they were ready for battle.

It was a bit of a nuisance to take this precaution. It meant that everyone's bedding and personal equipment had to be swept up in a great bundle and taken below. It would take hours of hard work to straighten up and sort out his cabin afterward, and McAndrews would let him know about it. But, dammit, that was his steward's job. And if those longships were determined to fight, Melville and his Ships could be in a world of hurt if they were not ready. It would be pure chaos trying to clear away the guns and go into action while actually under fire. The battle, if there was going to be one, would be lost even before it was begun.

*Bad enough to be shot at by allies, thought Melville. Even worse to not be able to respond if it happens.*

Clearing for action was also a wake-up call to one and all. The anticipation and thrill of the preparation for battle, the piping of whistles, the harried commands of petty officers, the orderly rush of sailors, the tramp of marines marching to their stations, and the sharp orders of the officers all said that everyone aboard had to be at the ready. Ready for anything and everything the galaxy might throw at them.

Or as ready as three badly battered, undermanned Ships could be.

Nordheim had diplomatic relations with Westerness, complete with a human ambassador in residence, so Melville didn't anticipate too much difficulty. Still, he couldn't help but be anxious. But there was not a hint of nervousness in his voice as he responded.

"I am Captain Thomas T. Melville, of Her Majesty, the Queen of Westerness' 24-Pounder Frigate, the *Fang*." Melville was wearing his best uniform—lovingly brushed, primped and prepared by McAndrews and his monkey—complete with the gold medallion and emerald ribbon of the Order of Knights Companion of the King of Osgil hanging around his neck beside the platinum medallion with scarlet ribbon that denoted him as a member of the King of Stolsh's Royal Host of Glory.

The two Ships had come to a dead stop with their redside bows facing each other. They had to be fairly close for their two atmospheric fields to overlap enough for a conversation, but still each officer had to speak in a loud, clear voice to be heard, and every ear on the upperside of both Ships was listening.

"Aye!" replied the Dwarrowdelf. "By the Lady, we know of Melville, Friend of the Dwarrowdelf League. And we know of the mighty *Fang*. An' we honor ye, saviors of Osgil. Though ye do look a wee bit worse for the wear! But who be yon two raggedy Guldur Ships a bearin' the Westerness ensign?"

"They are two recent additions to the Westerness Navy. Four Guldur Ships attacked us. We sunk two and boarded the others. Now they are ours."

The Dwarrowdelf's eyes grew wide and he grinned, as a rumble came up from the longship's crew.

"Aye, laddie! Just like that, was it? Ye make it sound simple. Well I be Captain Strongfar, and I'd bet my beard ye've got one hell of a tale to tell. An' damn me if I wouldn't buy the ale to hear it!"

"Captain, I'd gladly swap that tale for a brew, but I'm here for a bit more than your famous ale. I'd like to barter for a complete refitting of our three Ships, and I have something of great value to offer in trade."

"Aye, do ye now laddie? Truly ye know the way to a Dwarrowdelf's heart! Tales of fierce battles against overwhelming odds *and* an offer to barter something of 'great value.' Then follow me. *If* yer raggedy pack o' wee battered boaties can make it the rest of the way without a tow!" Then he roared a great thundering laugh as his crew quickly and expertly pulled taut the spanker and jib sails at stern and bow. The longship spun sharply about under the pressure of these sails, then the mainsails were pulled taut and the Dwarrowdelf led the way to the Pier.

The Nordheim Pier spanned the dark blue plane of two-space like a great, glowing white wall. The Dwarrowdelf dislike of light gravity kept all of their buildings low, but they were spread wide and long and topped with endless crenelations, and all of it was coated with lambent, life-giving Moss.

As soon as they came into the atmospheric field of the Pier Melville had the *Fang*'s 24-pounders bang

out the proper salute. It seemed like every Dwarrowdelf on Nordheim gathered on the Pier to hear the fierce thunder of the *Fang*'s 24-pounders. The answering salute by Nordheim's 12-pounders seemed weak in comparison.

Captain Strongfar directed Melville's Ships into the nearest dockyard. The three Ships came to rest at their designated docks, then Melville and Brother Theo stepped onto the glowing white surface of Nordheim's Pier. As the Ship's purser and a master negotiator, Brother Theo would play a key role in their transactions with the Dwarrowdelf.

Captain Strongfar met Melville and Theo, clasping wrists in the Dwarrowdelf fashion. Both humans had the powerful forearms of master swordsmen, but it was clear that Strongfar could have crippled them, snapping their wrists like twigs if he had wanted to. The Dwarrowdelf claimed that this was their traditional greeting, but Melville was convinced they did it as the most effective way to demonstrate their strength and intimidate any other species. Which was a good tradition by the best measure of such things, in that it seemed to have worked so far.

There was a brief exchange of pleasantries and an assistant came up with a huge pile of fur in his arms. Strongfar donned a cloak and a pair of boots made of thick black pelts, making him look even wider and fiercer. Melville and Theo followed his lead, then the Dwarrowdelf captain led the way down a stairway.

As soon as they stepped down the stairs and left the realm of two-space, Melville was met by a blast of icy cold and the strong pull of Nordheim's gravity. He could see his breath, and the air felt heavy. Cold and heavy. He was immediately grateful for the cloak of thick pelts that hung awkwardly over his uniform, and the soft fur boots that covered his otherwise bare feet.

He was on Nordheim! In the twinkling of an eye he has stepped down into a realm of bitter cold air, low wooden buildings, and sparkling snow and ice. From the stairs it was only a dozen steps through the biting cold before they came to a tavern. The sign overhead said "Glod's Rest" in English (and he assumed that the runic writing beside it said the same thing in the local tongue) above a swinging board with a disgruntled Dwarrowdelf painted on it. Melville and Theo ducked through the doorway behind Captain Strongfar, entering into a warm, cozy taproom amidst a swirl of snowflakes. The heat enfolded them like a blanket while Strongfar called out, "Ale, ye lazy laggardly wench! Hot ale for a Friend of the Dwarrowdelf League!" As they sat down to leather tankards of steaming hot mulled ale, they were joined by the Dwarrowdelf admiral and the Westernness ambassador.

"Now tell us yer tale, lad!" said Strongfar.

"Ha!" cried Captain Strongfar after Melville had related every detail of their battle, marking the positions of the various Ships with tankards atop the table, and charting their maneuvers in wet streaks of ale. "That is one *grand* tale to be telling yer babes and grandbabies in the years to come!"

A densely packed host of Dwarrowdelf had crowded around to hear the story, responding with roars of pleasure as Melville told of each Guldur Ship sunk or captured. His audience was especially enthusiastic when he told of Broadax's exploits in the battle.

Admiral Smitehard, the senior Dwarrowdelf naval commander, called out, "A toast to our brave friends: to Melville and his *Fang*, true Friends, noble Friends, *worthy* Friends of the Dwarrowdelf League!" This was greeted with a great roar of agreement and much quaffing of ale from the crowd. The admiral had a white avalanche of a beard, and the avalanche flowed with rock slides of golden ale as he drained his tankard.

Ambassador Theilharsen, the Westerness representative to Nordheim, was a fourth-generation citizen of this hi-gee world. He looked a lot like a Dwarrowdelf and had taken on distinctly Dwarrowdelf tendencies. The ambassador's eyes filled with tears of pride as he heard his countryman's tale.

"Tell me what it is you need, lad," boomed the ambassador. "And tell me what it is that you have to offer in payment, and I'll do my best to make sure these rascals don't swindle you."

"Swindle!" cried Admiral Smitehard. "Swindle, ye say! We'd nay swindle a hero and a friend such as this."

"Ha!" replied Ambassador Theilharsen. "You'd try to cheat your own mother if she wasn't twice as smart as you'll ever hope to be, you wretched rascal."

"Oh, aye, and me mother'd disown me if I didn't try," replied the admiral, "but that has nothing to do with this case. *This* is different. By the Lady I swear to ye, I barter with no axe in my hand!"

"Don't listen to him, son," said the ambassador. "When it comes to trade, these scalawags always go for the throat. It's in their genes. They don't know *how* to do anything else. They're like sharks smelling the scent of blood, or lawyers drawn by the promise of contingency fees."

"Lawyers!" roared the admiral, thumping his hand on the thick, wooden slab of a table with such force that the tankards bounced. An angry roar went up from the crowd as he continued. "'Lawyers' ye say! By me grandma's gray beard, ye've gone *too* low, sir! If ye weren't an ambassador that would demand a duel, it would!"

Melville looked at the thick underbrush of bristling beards that were crowding in around them. It occurred to him that if not for a steady dousing of ale, one stray spark could send them all up like dry straw.

"Pay no heed to him," said the ambassador with a wink. He seemed remarkably calm as he leaned back

to take a drink of ale. "It's all bluff and bluster. They could teach greed to lawyers, and bloodsucking to leeches, but as long as you have something they want, you've got 'em by the beard. So what is it you're offering?"

"Well, sir," drawled Melville, working hard to remain nonchalant and cool in the face of so many angry Dwarrowdelf, "I'll tell you, but are you sure this is something we want everyone in the tavern to hear? If they're such fierce negotiators, is it wise to put all of our chips on the table?"

" *Well* said, Captain!" replied the ambassador, thumping his tankard down on the table. "Well said. Let us retire to your Ship, and these wretches can all stew in their juices. You outline the situation to me, and then I'll come back and cut a deal for you."

"Nay, nay!" cried the admiral and Captain Strongfar in what appeared to be sincere consternation.

"There's no need for that, laddie," said the admiral. "Ye can trust us to take good care of ye. Don't ye be turning us over to that penny-pinching, pencil-necked pen pusher. Anything but that!"

"Aye," replied Ambassador Theilharsen. "What he means is that I know their tricks, and I know to get it all down in writing, in triplicate. They hate to get their agreements in writing you know."

"O woe. Woe and doom! There it is!" cried the admiral, burying his head in his arms. "The writin' of it down with words on paper it is, and the living with it for generations to come. How's an honest man's children ever to re-negotiate—"

"You mean renege!" added the ambassador.

"—or rework a deal—" continued the admiral doggedly.

"Ha! You mean go back on your word!" interjected the ambassador.

"—in a world that's full of writing and paper everywhere?"

"Come on then, Captain Melville," said Ambassador Theilharsen as he stood up and finished his ale with a gulp.

Melville looked over at Brother Theo, who had been sitting serenely throughout the conversation, contentedly nursing his ale and never saying a word. The monk simply looked over at his captain with a benevolent smile and nodded.

"Aye, sir," replied Melville, standing up. "Under one condition, and that is that you keep my purser with you every step of the way, and he has final approval on the deal."

"Captain," said the ambassador, "you are young, but it is obvious that you are wise for one of your age. And the surest sign of that wisdom is your willingness to delegate to those who are experts in their field. My friends, one last toast to Captain Melville, and his good Ship, *Fang* !" Then he took the admiral's mug off the table, raised it high, and gulped it down.

Suddenly all the anger and animosity in the room fell away like the facade it so obviously was. A great roar of agreement shook the room, the admiral snatched a drink away from a hapless bystander, and everyone in the tavern drank to the toast. Except for the one fuming, flustered bystander.

"Well, it worked," said Ambassador Theilharsen three days later, as he sat in Melville's office aboard the *Fang*. Theilharsen was less than five feet tall, and twice as wide as a normal man, with a good-sized gut to go with it. Melville imagined he could hear the ambassador's chair groan as he plopped down into it.

McAndrews hustled in with two big mugs of ale while the monkey on his shoulder clutched a bowl of pretzels. Melville handed one mug to his guest and took the other as he sat down across the table while the steward set the pretzels between them. The ambassador grunted his thanks and drank deeply before he continued. "Once the Dwarrowdelf checked with their local chapterhouse of the Celebrimbor Shipwrights guild, they were ready to sell their mother's beards for two of those 24-pounders. How did you know it would take two guns? What do you suppose that's all about?"

"I don't know for sure, sir," replied Melville, "but when we were on Osgil the Sylvans were prepared to trade just about anything for *two* 24-pounders. I hate to even guess about matters involving the Celebri. Nobody in the galaxy wants to get crosswise of *them*. Still, I can't help but think they need two guns to... well to breed more."

"Damn!" replied the ambassador. "Breeding you say!" His thick gray beard burrowed into his barrel chest as he scratched his head in thought. "Do you really think so?"

"Well, it's one possible explanation," said Melville, taking a deep drink of his ale. "For whatever reason, however they do it, they seem to need at least two to create more, and I'd call that breeding stock."

"Aye, son. It may be best not to spread *that* thought around, but I appreciate you sharing it with me. Knowledge is power, but if you become too powerful you become a target. Whatever the reason, it worked. *And* the Dwarrowdelf were excited about what your pint-sized alien allies could do for them."

The ambassador chuckled and lifted his ale in a mock salute to the monkey on Melville's shoulder. The creature responded with a nod, an "Eep!" and a sip from Melville's mug as the ambassador continued.

"Broadax's little demonstration made true believers out of the admiral and old Strongfar," continued the ambassador. "Who'd have thought that critter could stop bullets like that? Your Broadax didn't seem worried, but damn her monkey fussed when they shot at her!" The Ambassador looked down thoughtfully and said, "You know, no offense intended, but in my humble opinion, anybody who would volunteer to be shot at, no matter how confident they are, is either foolishly optimistic or nuts!"

"And our Broadax is both!" said Melville with a chuckle.

"Aye," continued the Ambassador. "Anyway, after Broadax demonstrated that the monkeys can actually block bullets, Admiral Smitehard readily found a couple of Dwarrowdelf marine sergeants who were willing to transfer to the Western Navy and serve on the *Biter* and the *Gnasher*."

"Thank you sir," said Melville with a satisfied nod as he held his mug up, offering his monkey a drink. "This is one of the best gifts I can give those young commanders. Broadax has proven the value of a good Dwarrowdelf to lead their marines. And it will take time, but this is their best route to get some monkeys. I'm betting one will adopt them shortly after arriving aboard. When their enlistment ends they'll probably bring their monkey back with them, and wherever there is one, soon there will be more."

"Aye, so I understand," replied the Ambassador. "In a galaxy full of wondrous and amazing occurrences, those mysterious monkeys of yours are one of the damndest things I've ever seen."

"Amen to *that*, sir. But how does it look for the *Fang* to get a few more Dwarrowdelf to enlist with our marines?"

"Ah, not so good there, lad. When a Dwarrowdelf goes out on a *Wander-yahr* and leaves his own people like this, he—or she—has to do it alone. So you only get one per Ship. It's a matter of honor, you see. With the Dwarrowdelf you either get a Shipload, or you get one, nothing in between."

"I guess it was too much to hope for more marines like Broadax on my Ship," replied Melville. "But just one could make all the difference for Archer and Crater. I figured the Dwarrowdelf would be willing to do it, just for the possibility of picking up some monkeys along the line. But, sir, do you think there's any way we can keep this business about the monkeys a secret, even to Earth?"

"Son, they wouldn't believe me, even if I told them. Hell, I'm not sure *I* believe myself, and I saw it! Besides, I'm doing this as a private contractor, making a tidy commission along the way. And what I do in private is nobody's damned business but my own. Eh?"

Then the ambassador stood up, finished his ale, wiped the froth from his beard, and concluded, "The Pier's dockyard captain superintendent will be coordinating with you tomorrow morning, and the dockyard will be giving their very best to each of your Ships. And Nordheim's best is very good indeed!"

Under the steely eyes of Dwarrowdelf dockyard officers, the three Ships were careened, and all damage was repaired. *Fang*, *Gnasher*, and *Biter* were rebuilt, reinforced, and made better than new with wood especially grown and twisted to shape over centuries on Nordheim's wintry slopes.

While the dockyard was doing their work, Melville was locked in a bitter struggle with himself. He yearned to steal some 24-pounders from *Gnasher* and *Biter*, and now was the time to make the transfer. He had the authority. Archer and Crater couldn't stop him, they wouldn't even try. They were happy just to have the Ships. They wouldn't complain. And it was his *right*, wasn't it? But Melville just couldn't do it. A war was coming, and he couldn't bring himself to rape those Ships and leave them with fewer 24-pounders than the *Fang* had. *Damn* he wanted more guns for his Ship! But, *by God!*, he wouldn't do it at Archer and Crater's expense.

Nordheim's dockyard was good and fast, but still it took almost a month to finish the work. Meanwhile, the crew of all three Ships had a chance to partake of Nordheim's various pleasures. Which consisted mostly of damned fine booze, and little else.

Most crew members agreed that the Dwarrowdelf food was almost as repulsive and unpalatable as their women, and any thought of a pleasant bar brawl with the locals was immediately rejected as a painful path to suicide. After imbibing enough of the excellent hooch, someone *might* have been drunk enough to consider the local ladies of negotiable virtue, but said "ladies" were completely uninterested in them.

Nor could they bring themselves to enjoy the bitter cold of any outdoors activity. As Ulrich put it, "I ain't seen my nutsk in t'ree days!"

So they adopted the standard operating procedures of the young sailor everywhere: "If it's cold outside, stay inside and drink until ya runs out of money, then head back to the Ship to eat and recover."

Even Roxy, their cook, had a miserable time as she bartered with the local victuallers for fresh food to fill the larders of their three Ships. This time of year about all that was available were potatoes and other root crops, along with dried peas and beans. There were also some smoked hams and plenty of venison jerky, but the Dwarrowdelf had strange ideas about spices that made even the jerky and the hams virtually inedible. And there was beer, of course. *Lots* of good beer.

Brother Theo, their purser, had limited success with his efforts to barter for goods to sell on Earth. The cargo they had acquired on Osgil was intended for trading to the earthlings, and the Dwarrowdelf had no interest in Sylvan luxury items. Theo couldn't get a good exchange for any of their current cargo, but he

was able to use hard currency to purchase a good variety of luxurious furs, exotic wood, and splendid gems to fill *Gnasher* and *Biter's* holds. They were just lucky that the Ship's coffers were filled with gold from the Sylvan prize court. Gold *always* worked on Nordheim, and these items would bring spectacular prices on Earth.

So it was fairly safe to say that no one really enjoyed their stay on Nordheim. Except for Broadax and old Hans. They found a local room and "shacked up" happily during this period.

It *could* be argued that Lt. Broadax was, if anything, a positive influence on old Hans. Normally by this point in any liberty Hans would have been testing the patience of the shore patrol and most of the tavern owners, trying to prove he was the hardest-drinking, hardest-fighting, and hardest-loving man-jack in any port. Instead, he and Broadax had quietly disappeared... And no one really wanted to think about what he was trying to prove to anyone. Even more, no one wanted to ask him, for fear that he would have told them! Some things are definitely much better left unknown.

Shortly after their arrival Asquith was given a clean bill of health and released from the hospital. A task which Vodi performed in her own inimitable fashion.

"You call *this* a clean bill of health?" he shouted, as his monkey crouched fearfully on his shoulder. "One eye gone and you can't even replace it! What earthly good is your wretched, prehistoric, caveman excuse for medical care!"

"Ah," said Vodi, shaking her head sadly, "we save your life and nurse you back from the brink of death, wiping yer bottom and changing ya like a baby for weeks on end, and this is how you thank us. I've about had my fill of you, mister. Now," she said, leaning over and getting squarely into his face, "absquatulate!"

"Absquatulate?" repeated the confused Asquith, crouching back in his bunk, unconsciously pulling his blankets up around him as the large, menacing mass of Mrs. Vodi loomed over him, her monkey peering over her shoulder. Even worse, her huge, evil cat, Cuddles, had launched itself up on the bed to reinforce its master's commands. Asquith's baby monkey, meanwhile, was huddled out of sight under the covers.

"*Absquatulate*: verb, meaning to stop squatting, to pick up all your worldly goods, and boogie. Either that or I'll have to definistrate you.

"Definistrate?" he asked, his confusion and panic mounting.

"*Definistrate*: verb, meaning to throw someone out of a window. Failing that I may just jugulate you!

"J-jugulate?"

"*Jugulate*: to strangle. In other words, you ain't welcome here no more. I declare you healed, so y'all git!"

On that note, he launched himself from his bed and fled, his hospital gown flapping in the breeze behind him and his monkey *eep* ing fearfully as it clung tightly to his back.

"Well," said one old salt as he watched the half-naked Asquith flee from the hospital, "I see Mrs. Vodi done heal't another one."

"Yup," replied his friend. "Anuther happy customer."

Asquith wanted a second opinion. He demanded to be put off the Ship and checked himself into a hospital at a local Dwarrowdelf religious institution, insisting that he was still ill and in need of medical care.

It took only a few more days for Melville and Brother Theo to coordinate for the burial of their dead. The frozen remains of their fallen comrades were pulled up from two-space, placed in sturdy coffins of local wood, lowered into graves hacked into the icy earth of Nordheim, and marked with fine granite stones carved by Dwarrowdelf stone masons.

It was cold. Bitter cold. *No time for long eulogies today*, thought Melville as he and his crew stood over the graves. *Even in the best of circumstances, warriors seldom can afford long eulogies or extended periods of mourning. We must grieve intensely and briefly, and get on with living.*

And so he stood over the grave of Warrant Officer Caleb Tibbits and all the others, and said his brief threnody, his lamentation for the dead, choking back his tears.

"Gashed with honorable scars,  
Low in Glory's lap they lie;

Though they fell, they fell like stars,  
Streaming splendour through the sky."

Then Brother Theo led them in the singing of "Taps" and that old, old tune rang out, sad and lonely beneath the snow clad evergreens, echoing from the frozen mountainsides.

"Day is done. Gone the sun.  
From the lakes. From the hills. From the sky.  
All is well, safely rest. God is nigh.

"Fading light. Dims the sight.  
And a star. Gems the sky. Gleaming bright,  
From afar, drawing nigh. Fall the night.

"Thanks and praise. For our days.  
'Neath the sun. 'Neath the stars. 'Neath the sky,  
As we go, this we know. God is nigh."

Thus, they laid their comrades to rest with proper honors. Promissory notes for their buyout shares had been mailed to everyone who had a next-of-kin on record, along with a letter of condolence from their captain... from Melville... from the man who had led them to their deaths.

The young captain thought briefly about the souls of all the enemy who had been killed and were not honored. *How did the Iliad put it?* "The rest were vulgar deaths, unknown to fame." Melville whispered a little prayer for his fallen enemy, and then they left their friends and Shipmates buried in the firm, final embrace of the frozen earth.

There would be a spring. The Dwarrowdelf assured them that there *was* a spring in this frozen land. And grass would grow upon these graves. But the *Fang* s would not be there to witness it. The dead were interred, and the living must get on with life.

*Across the many days in dock, as Fang, Biter, and Gnasher rested against the Pier of Nordheim, the three sentient Ships were in constant communication with that ancient, sentient Pier. And the Ships told the tale of Kestrel. Or they passed on the essence of Kestrel herself as they exchanged Moss. The effect was the same.*

*Kestrel was one of the oldest Westernness Ships, and in her selfless, dying act she had helped her beloved crew capture Fang. And the dead which she slew in her dying were more than those which*

*she slew in her life. In the process she passed on to young Fang the story of a turbulent, generous, affectionate, wolfing race of humans who loved their Ship with a great and abiding love. And a Ship who returned that love with equal intensity and purity. This story did the spawn of Kestrel tell to the Pier at Nordheim.*

*The three Guldur Ships also told their tales. Tales of bondage and hate that festered and polluted their decks. Tales of a dark, indomitable tide of death, destruction, and desolation that rolled across two-space. And a tale of the three Ships' liberation and gratitude. Of a strong young captain and brave young pups who now shared a fierce love with their Ships.*

*An enemy was coming, full of strength and hate. The race of men could not match that enemy strength to strength. But there was hope, for love belonged to the men of Westernness, and to their allies. And their Ships returned that love! The enemy could not give love, it would destroy them if they tried.*

*The ancient Pier at Nordheim listened, marveling that this young race should be worthy of such love from a child of the Lady. And the Pier kept this thing, and pondered it in her heart.*

*From that day on, each Ship that docked with the Pier at Nordheim was told this tale. Each Ship that shared Moss with the Pier became a part of Kestrel, and took her forth with them when they departed.*

"Look over there, at the other end of the bar," said Mrs. Vodi. "I'll be damned if it isn't Cuthbert Asquith Ex Vee Aye hisself."

It was the crew's final night on Nordheim. Tomorrow they would set sail for Earth, and the *Fang*'s wardroom had gathered for one last night of drinking at Glod's Rest, which had become their favorite watering hole. Melville and most of his officers were gathered beside a table—they generally didn't fit *under* it—next to a crackling fire.

Broadax and Hans were still in their love nest. Broadax had let Melville know that the Dwarrodelf here on Nordheim weren't particularly bothered by her choice of boyfriend. "They jist think 'e's a bad habit I'll grow out of," said Broadax.

Some of the other *Fang* s were relaxing with Ambassador Theilharsen and Captain Strongfar, both of whom had become staunch friends. A group of Dwarrodelf miners were gathered around the bar lustily chanting a classic Robert Service poem about gold, of course.

"I wanted the gold, and I sought it,  
I scrabbled and mucked like a slave.  
Was it famine or scurvy—I fought it;  
I hurled my youth into a grave."

And sure enough, on the other side of the room, Asquith and his baby monkey were morosely nursing a beer.

"I wanted the gold, and I got it—  
Came out with a fortune last fall—  
Yet somehow life's not what I thought it,  
And somehow the gold isn't all."

Vodi had visited the little earthling several times while he was at the local hospital, boring him in her delightfully distracting manner with all the minutia and gossip of the *Fang*. And she had a delicious tidbit of news to share.

"No! There's the land. (Have you seen it?)  
It's the cussedest land that I know,  
From the big, dizzy mountains that screen it  
To the deep, deathlike valleys below."

"It seems that our earthling checked himself into a Dwarrowdelf hospital, which happens to be run by a church. He was placed under the care of a Dwarrowdelf sister. And apparently the name 'Mattila' is a common Dwarrowdelf name."

"No!" said Fielder, looking up with pleasure.

"Yes!" Vodi replied gleefully. "I swear to you. After just a few days he was desperate to escape the tender mercies of Matilla the Nun!"

"Some say God was tired when He made it;  
Some say it's a fine land to shun;  
Maybe; but there's some as would trade it  
For no land on earth—and I'm one."

"I declare, that man's got no more sense than a dog," said Vodi. "It's because he's color-blind," she continued. "Everyone knows that dogs are color-blind. In humans, color blindness is almost entirely a male disorder. Really. People who are color-blind have a dog gene. They also often pee in corners. That's why they're mostly male."

The purity and beauty of her logic stunned them all into silence for just a second, then they all nodded solemnly and drank to that. And the Dwarrowdelf continued their Service chanty in the background.

"You come to get rich (damned good reason);  
You feel like an exile at first;  
You hate it like hell for a season,  
And then you are worse than the worst."

Then the *Fang* s all watched as Asquith stood up on unsteady feet and lifted his mug to the assembled Dwarrowdelf at the bar. The miners paused their chant politely to let him have his say.

"I will drink beer," began Asquith loudly.

The Dwarrowdelf all roared their agreement and drank to that. Asquith's monkey stretched out its head and drank deeply from his mug as he continued.

"Beer is the mind-killer. Beer is the little-death that brings total obliteration. I will face my beer. I will permit it to pass over me and through me. And when it has gone past I will turn the inner eye to see its path. Where the beer has gone there will be nothing. Only I will remain."

That brought a fierce roar of approval from everyone in the tavern, human, and Dwarrowdelf alike. *Especially* the Dwarrowdelf, who thought it was wonderfully clever. After gold they loved to sing and chant about beer and ale more than anything else. *And* they liked *Dune* . A lot. Even if there weren't any dwarves in the book. Anyway, the Fremmen *did* have a lot of beards.

Then the miners raised their tankards in a vigorous reply to Asquith's salute, and continued,

"It grips you like some kinds of sinning;  
It twists you from foe to a friend;  
It seems it's been since the beginning;  
It seems it will be to the end."

Melville took the opportunity to walk over to Asquith. He put a friendly hand on the earthling's shoulder and said, "Well said! Now come and join us, my friend."

"Am I welcome?" asked Asquith.

"You are a Shipmate, and the *Fang* is your home for now," replied Melville with a friendly grin. "My dad always said that 'home is the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you!' Come on."

So the two of them came back to join the *Fang* s and they all drank a toast to the diminutive earthling.

"Tell us about Matilla the Nun!" said Fielder.

"Oh, God, you don't want to know," replied Asquith. "I thought it was bad aboard the *Fang* , but now I apologize. It's a harsh old world out there, my friend."

"Eep," agreed Asquith's monkey sadly as it gulped his beer.

There was a chorus of agreement and long quaffs all around in response to that.

"The winter! the brightness that blinds you,  
The white land locked tight as a drum,  
The cold fear that follows and finds you,  
The silence that bludgeons you dumb."

"Old Bobbie Service was at the top of his form when he wrote this one," said the ambassador as he leaned back and enjoyed the miners' chanting with sincere emotion. "What a master of our language that man was, and how the Dwarrowdelf honor him."

"Aye," added Captain Strongfar. "It's that damned 'all conquering English language' of yers, as Churchill put it. There was some Dwarrowdelf blood in Churchill, ye know. All ye have to do is look at him to see it. And the Words, ah them Words, aye they capture our very soul."

"You know," said the ambassador, "the English language became dominant because the British Empire was dominant, but also because there was never any governing body to control it."

"Aye!" said Strongfar. "Kind of like the Dwarrowdelf, ye know. No central government for us! Even our

planetary leaders, what you would call our kings, are best translated 'mine boss' or 'union steward.' And we'll run the rascals out of office if they don't take care of the people and the land."

"I've stood in some mighty-mouthed hollow  
That's plumb-full of hush to the brim;  
I've watched the big, husky sun wallow  
In crimson and gold, and grow dim,"

"So English was allowed to grow, to live, to evolve naturally," continued the ambassador with a nod. "It's the kind of thing that ambassadors study, but most people don't really understand. Latin was killed by the Ciceronians, who maintained that only words used in the writings of Cicero were true Latin. Essentially their efforts were to freeze Latin from the time of Cicero, and *because* of that they stopped Latin from evolving. What does not grow, dies."

That sounded like it deserved a toast, so they all drank happily to that concept as the ambassador continued.

"Once upon a time French was the lingua franca. But the French Academy was established to guard the 'purity' of the language, which doomed it, because they wouldn't allow it to evolve, to adapt. The failure of their language to adapt to the needs of their empire might actually have been why their empire failed."

"But English has never had a controlling body, has it?" asked Melville with keen interest.

"Aye, lad," replied the old ambassador. "And English is the only language on Earth in which the first-person singular is capitalized. Therefore 'I' is emphasized, empowering the individual. 'I' decide what my language is. And English is the only major language that keeps the original spelling of the language from which the word came. We have no qualms about stealing words. And it *is* stealing, not borrowing, because we have no intention of returning them. We even keep some of the original rules."

Mrs. Vodi added, "The English language is a lot like the old United States. A melting pot in which everything is welcome. Or maybe a better model would be a stew pot, in which spicy new 'chunks' are welcome."

"Aye," said Captain Strongfar. "Of course, everyone accepts it in their own way. The Sylvans have their silly affectation with all those 'thous' and 'thees.' We play it pretty straight, although our use of 'ye' instead of 'you' *is* a bit of an affectation, I suppose, if truth be told. But ye Westernness folk are the ones with the damnedest assortment of dialects, accents, and affectations. There is yer Corporal Kobbsven's Scandinavian lilt, and all those southern and hillbilly accents. As best I can tell, the further their homeworld is from Earth or Westernness, the more pronounced those accents become. The one I can't figure out, though, is yer coxswain, Ulrich. Where in the deep bowels of the Elder King's frozen black hell did *he* come from?"

"Well, he's not saying," replied Melville, "and no one really knows. The one thing we can all agree on, though, is that the linguistically innovative and syntactically challenged Ulrich doesn't really have an accent. He has a passionate *grudge* against the English language, and he tortures it with malice aforethought. But the good news is that *you* have chosen to speak our language, and as your guest please permit me to say, 'thank you' for that."

"The alternative is to try to communicate in the Dwarrowdelf tongue," said the ambassador, "which is as twisted and tortuous as their damned mining tunnels! For example, they employ something called the 'triple negative.' So someone might ask you in Dwarrowdelf, 'Isn't it not that you aren't feeling well today?'"

"What in the *hail* does *that* mean?" asked Westminster, who was leaning quietly back in a corner smoking a pipe.

"Damned if I know," replied the ambassador with a shrug. "That's why we *always* negotiate in English!"

"Foul calumny and infamy!" said Strongfar. "The perfidious slander of weak minds that cannot grasp the beauty of a truly complex language. Still, sadly, it's true that everywhere I go, as I sail the vast expanse o' two-space, it's yer language, literature, and poetry that rules the hearts of millions, nay billions, across the vast galaxy. So here's to yer wolfling civilization that sprung up without any help from others, and yer all-conquering language, ye magnificent bastards! It looks like ye showed up just in time to help us kick the Guldurs' hairy arses!"

That earned another great cheer and a mighty quaff of ale, while the Dwarrowdelf chorus continued in the background.

"The snows that are older than history,  
The woods where the weird shadows slant;  
The stillness, the moonlight, the mystery,  
I've bade 'em good-by—but I can't."

Melville knew that it was time for him to leave. His officers could linger for a while longer, but as their captain he felt that he must lead the way.

The young captain sat in the warm inn, knowing that he had been fortified and renewed by his visit to this harsh world. Outside the winter wind howled and the sleet hissed upon the windows. In here were the warm ambers and reds of the open hearth where the fire popped and glowed as potatoes baked and a big kettle of mulling ale simmered sweetly, the fat candles flickered, monkeys chattered quietly from overhead, and sleeping dogs rumbled beneath the benches.

"It's the great, big, broad land 'way up yonder,  
It's the forests where silence has lease;  
It's the beauty that thrills me with wonder,  
It's the stillness that fills me with peace."

The fragrance of the place seeped into his soul, warming him to his core as much as the heat that flowed from the hearth. It was an organic odor of old hardwood walls and furniture imbued with countless applications of beeswax polish, generations of tallow smoke, fresh pinewood scent seeping from the fire, frothy beer, wet boots, and damp dogs.

Outside, the building shuddered beneath the fierce wind. Inside his spirit was warmed by good companions tried and true, new friends, and quiet conversations after an evening of loud, lewd, and lusty songs, with contented bellies thoroughly wrapped around good beer.

It all seemed terribly precious and dear to him, and a part of him knew that it might never again be the same. Soon it might all be destroyed by the politicians and the Admiralty on Earth. He was under orders to report to the Westernness Admiralty at Earthport, and he would obey, but he knew that his heroic deeds, so honored and lauded by the Sylvans and Dwarrowdelf, would not be appreciated by the timid little men in charge on Earth. Those small sad souls feared change and fled into denial as their only bulwark against the cruel, harsh galaxy that was coming to attack them. And ultimately, unfortunately, *they* would be the ones who passed judgment upon Captain Thomas Melville and his friends.

"They're making my money diminish;  
I'm sick of the taste of champagne.  
Thank God! when I'm skinned to a finish  
I'll pike to the Yukon again."

A bitter bile built up in his stomach and throat as he considered what might wait for them on Earth. It was *hard* not to be in control. After being literally the captain of his fate as they traveled between the stars and fought their way across a sizable slice of the galaxy, it was *hard* for him to accept what might be waiting for them. A part of him wanted to break free from authority, to return to Osgil and accept the offer that the High King of the Sylvans had made. To place himself, his Ship, and his crew under Sylvan authority. In essence, to rebel from authority, to defect from his nation.

"The strong life that never knows harness;  
The wilds where the caribou call;  
The freshness, the freedom, the farness—  
O God! how I'm stuck on it all."

Rebel. Defect. Ugly words. Pitiful, wretched words when matched up against the fierce beauty of his two harsh mistresses: duty and honor.

Melville sat for one last moment, drinking up all the sight and sound and smell he could, feeling a great wave of the dull ache that one great author had termed "anticipated nostalgia." Then he gave a heavy sigh, stood up, paid the tab, flung on his great fur cape, whistled for his dog, and with one last nod to the room he prepared to go out into the bitter cold. But he went forth with a fierce inner fire of contentment and peace, knowing that he was doing his duty and acting with honor.

"I'll fight—and you bet it's no sham-fight;  
It's hell!—but I've been there before;  
And it's better than this by a damsite—  
So me for the Yukon once more."

Melville's monkey came scampering across the room, scurried up his side, and nestled under the cape, wrapped around its master's neck like a scarf, with only its head peeking out. Boye leapt up cheerfully, trotting happily along beside him, eager for adventure, with the requisite monkey nestled deep into the thick ruff at the dog's neck. Then he went out into the night with a blast of cold, a flurry of snow, and one last wave to his friends, ducking through the low doorway with a final Robert Service stanza echoing in his ears.

"There's gold, and it's haunting and haunting;  
It's luring me on as of old;  
Yet it isn't the gold that I'm wanting  
So much as just finding the gold."

His dog was the personification of happiness and delight as they left. Boye rubbed his head against Melville's thigh, and he reached down to rub the dog's ears. Wagging his tail enthusiastically, the great beast stood up on hind legs to sniff inquisitively, his hot breath covering Melville's face in a warm cloak.

The dog didn't borrow trouble. He lived in the present, finding joy in eager bounding through the snow drifts, while the dog's monkey held on like a rider at a steeple chase, *EEK* ing merrily.

The young captain looked at Boye romping in the lamplight of the surrounding buildings, and he laughed out loud as they went down the street. He lobbed a snowball that dropped quickly in the heavy gravity, and the dog leapt up to catch it in a happy, chomping explosion of snow.

Like his faithful companion, Melville had an irrepressible, cheerful spirit. He would never be worth a damn at mathematics, or the engineering and mechanics of a Ships' sailing plan. Others would have to do that for him. But he possessed a few Gifts that were unfolding in a satisfying manner. The Voice of command and authority, something that many leaders never develop, was coming early for him. He had a knack for poetry that often provided the right Words at the moment of truth, and he had the ability to communicate them well. He was a natural at tactics and military history, and he was very good with a sword and a pistol. But perhaps his most important Gift was his ability to live intensely in the present.

Most humans spend all their energy thinking and worrying about what happens next or what just happened. They cling desperately to the past, or they live in dread and anticipation of the future. The only time they deal with *now* is by looking back on it. And because of this, most people live in fear, dreading the future instead of living in the present.

Perhaps it was because he lived so completely in the present that Melville was generally fearless. It was something most dogs can do. That's why dogs are usually happy and ready for a romp, a nap, a fight, or a tummy rub at a moment's notice. Dogs just avoid the whole *angst* business. Melville felt that people could learn a lot from dogs. They seemed to have things better worked out, dogs.

For Melville, as long as there was life there was hope. And where there is hope there can be no despair. So he threw back his head, smelled the crisp cold air, and looked up at the ancient alien white peaks all around him. And above those mountains...

*...the moon set the pearly peaks gleaming,  
And the stars tumbled out, neck and crop;  
And I've thought that I surely was dreaming,  
With the peace o' the world piled on top.*

What the hell. He never was any good at the whole angst thing. The dog's spirit was infectious, and Melville couldn't help but feel that wherever they went, whatever they did, whatever was waiting for them, it would be... an adventure. Out there, somewhere.

\* \* \*

There's a land where the mountains are nameless,  
And the rivers all run God knows where;  
There are lives that are erring and aimless,  
And deaths that just hang by a hair;

There are hardships that nobody reckons;

There are valleys unpeopled and still;  
There's a land—oh, it beckons and beckons,  
And I want to go back—and I will.

# CHAPTER THE 8TH

## Earth: "To Arrive Where We Started"

We shall not cease from exploration  
And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time.

"Little Gidding"  
T. S. Eliot

They made a splendid show as they sailed into Earthport.

Just a little over a year ago the *Kestrel* had set out with the Sylvans on a joint exploratory mission. Now her crew returned with three noble frigates, each with a towering pyramid of canvas above and below, including royals and studding sails, sailing serenely into Earthport. Each Ship had the flag of Westernness above her, a swirling galactic pinwheel, gold on a field of blue, proclaiming the possession of three mighty and magnificent new Ships in the Navy of Westernness. And each Ship had powerful guns aboard that were unlike anything ever seen before.

Young Hayl sat in the crisp, cold air, high in the foremast crosstrees, bursting with joy as he eyed the great

Ship *Fang* and her consorts trailing behind. He looked with pride at the seamen bustling about the deck below, or straddling the yards all around him, prepared to slack sail for final approach.

He was midshipman of the watch, thus to him went the traditional honor of serving as lookout on close approach to a port. "Get aloft with you, Mr. Hayl," the first officer had said, "and tell us what you see."

Fielder had looked at the boy with unwonted fondness as he scrambled up the ratlines. He saw Melville smiling at him, scowled, and made a mental note to be cruel to someone in the near future, just in case anyone thought he was going soft.

"Our young gentlemen are growing up on this voyage," said Melville, "him most of all."

"Aye, sir," replied Fielder. "The ones that don't get killed learn fast."

Old Hans was up in the foremast beside Hayl, cheerfully passing on his experience to the young middle. The two of them were perched far above the Ship, sitting as calmly as if they were on a comfortable (albeit somewhat cold) park bench. "Feast yer eyes on it, boy!" said Hans. "'At's the biggest Pier you'll ever see in human space. Bigger'n Osgil, even though Osgil's Pier is thousands o' years older. This port is why the Admiralty is based on Earth instead of Westerness. When Earth was in charge of our kingdom they built up this base, and it jist made sense to keep the Admiralty at our biggest facility. An' since they was here it kept gittin' bigger acrossst the centuries. The Queen an' the Naval Academy is at Westerness, but this is the only facility that can handle all the demands of our Navy. We's comin' in on the east side, so 'at's Earthport's East Dock yer seein', with the South and North Docks spreadin' out to our left and right."

"Aye, sir," replied Hayl excitedly. His monkey was leaning forward on his shoulder, *EEK* ing with joy and craning its neck eagerly as they both peered into the distance. Three stately frigates sat at the East Dock. To Hayl's eyes they looked like queens holding court over a host of smaller craft. Many of the lesser Ships were moving about in a state of controlled chaos, like a swarm of water beetles. "I think those are two of the new Poet Class frigates, and one of the Author Class."

"Well spotted, lad!" said the old sailor. "Ya can ignore all them brigs an' sloops an' luggers. With jist a few exceptions, the Westerness Navy don't maintain nothin' but frigates here at Earthport. If'n they ain't got three masts they don't count. The rest of 'em's jist the flotsum and jetsum o' two-space." He emphasized this by spitting a brown stream of tobacco juice, which was immediately joined by a smaller stream from his monkey. In the low-gravity environment that existed high up on the mast, the stream of tobacco juice flowed unnaturally straight and far before it dropped off into two-space as old Hans continued his lesson.

"The two Poets are the *Tennyson* an' the *Masefield*. An' damn-me ifn the other ain't the ol' *Heinlein* herself! Our *Kestrel*, maysherestinpeace, was one of the Raptor Class. Those were the first handful o' frigates that Westerness ever produced. Then they went to the Author Class. An' the first an' greatest o' the Author Class was the ol' *Heinlein*. All o' that class 'ave long since paid off their debt, an' you can bet their crew an' stockholders is doin' well fer themselves, thankyouverymuch! The Poet Class though, they's mostly still payin' off their debt."

"But our debt is paid, right?" asked Hayl.

"Aye, lad. By the Lady, we've paid in blood an' lives, the most precious coin of all. Yer right lucky to be a member of a fully paid out Ship. Plus ya got shares in the *Gnasher* an' the *Biter*, which oughta be counted as paid off, if everthin' goes right. An' 'at means we shouldn't have any problem fillin' up the berths on all three o' our Ships with quality lads. Eager young merchantmen from every lugger, schooner, sloop, an' brig ya see out here'll jump Ship in a heartbeat ta join us. But pay attention ta the Westernness Ships ya see here, son. In the future you'll be expected ta know the status o' all our frigates, *an'* the names o' their boats."

"But the names of the boats are always changing, each time they use a boat to establish a new world. How can you be expected to keep track of something that's always changing?"

Hans reached over and cuffed the boy lightly. "Don' ya go snivelin' on me now. You'll git yerself a copy of the *Naval Gazette* an' you'll study it, is what you'll do. An' ever' time ya comes inta port ya gotta git yerself the latest *Gazette* and git updated. It's not so hard. The Author Class boats are named after the writer's books. Ya can bet the old *Starship Trooper* an' the *Harsh Mistress* are still with the *Heinlein*. They ain't prob'ly never gonna sacrifice *them* ta establish a new world. So at's two of her six boats right there. Last I heard they was gettin' ready to use novellas and short stories for the other boats, since the grand ol' lady's pioneered so many worlds they done used up most of Heinlein's novels. Things 'ave prob'ly changed, but when we left 'ere a year ago it was the *Menace from Earth*, *Podkayne*, *Sixth Column*, an' *Waldo*. Yer job is to find out any changes, asap when we git inta port."

"Aye, sir," said Hayl, slightly daunted by the task. "Does every sailor keep track of these things?"

"Ever' good officer does, ya betcha! An' most petty officers will. Don' worry, it'll come easy in just a few years. The Poet Class now, they names their boats after the writer's poems. The *Tennyson* over there has the *Light Brigade*—I'm bettin' they ain't never gonna let that one go—*Crossing the Bar*, *Sleeps the Crimson Petal*, *Idle Tears*, *Morte d'Arthur*, an' *Ulysses* las' I heard.

"Look now," old Hans continued with excitement, "we's gittin' close enough ta see the Ships at the North and South Docks. The Author Class at the far end o' South Dock is the *Iain M. Banks*. She's one o' the last o' the Author Class, an' they name *her* boats after the sentient spaceships in 'is books. Rare bit o' whimsy on the part o' the Admiralty, that. Right now I think the *Banks*'as got the *Screw Loose*, *So Much for Subtlety*, *Just Testing*, *Xenophobe*, *Very Little Gravitas*, an' *I Blame the Parents* fer 'er boats. Ya know, it's fairly common ta name a new planet after the boat what formed her Pier. An' yew can betcha there's some damned funny-named frontier worlds what's come outa them Ships!"

The old sailor laughed with pleasure at the thought, and little Hayl couldn't help but share the old salt's infectious joy as they came proudly into port. The air began to shake and the mast trembled with regular, rhythmic blasts of cannon fire as they entered the port's atmosphere and the *Fang* began paying her respects to the admiral's flag.

"Clear those idlers off the rail!" called Lt. Fielder from the upper quarterdeck. "That's Earthport and the Admiralty you're gawking at. We don't want them to think we're a bunch of bumpkins!"

The *Fang* had come to Earthport.

It was a *fait accompli*. Their bold arrival filled the hearts of all sailors with pride. It filled the media and the minds of the public with wonder and excitement.

"An' it's really, really pissed-off the old ladies in the Admiralty," said Broadax with her usual diplomacy and tact. "They definitely gots their panties in a knot."

None of their Ships had been given shore leave, but there were plenty of taverns and dives on Earthport herself.

The Admiralty seemed to be keeping them on the carpet. Maybe they needed time to decide what to do, but Melville thought it was a case of, "Let's show 'em who's boss and keep 'em stewing in the waiting room." Whatever the reason, it was a major tactical blunder on the part of the Admiralty. While they waited, forces were advancing on other fronts.

The saga of Melville and the *Fang* were already legendary among the Sylvans, the Stolsh, and even the Dwarrowdelf. Their latest battle added yet another chapter to the legend. Westerness, on the other hand, had heard nothing but rumors and second-hand accounts, and Earth didn't care much about what happened in two-space. Until now.

The write-up of their exploits in the *Naval Gazette* had been very positive and it was picked up by the Earth newspapers. To Earth, everything that happened in two-space was a kind of exotic, persistent delusion. Earthlings just didn't go there. Most of them *couldn't* go into two-space without major sacrifices, so for them Westerness and everything else that happened "out there" was a sort of tedious series of obscure fantasy novels that played out year after year, whether you read it or not. After all, nothing ever really *happened* there. But the exploits of Melville and the *Fang* changed that. This was war! This was action! It was adventure and blood and guts. And it caught the fickle fancy of Earth's popular culture.

What really amazed everyone was the success of Asquith's book. The e-publishing trade on Earth could get a book from manuscript to worldwide distribution in a day, and Asquith's novel was literally an overnight mega-hit. He became an instant celebrity, making the rounds of every media venue on Earth. Fate had granted him an eye patch, which he came to wear with a swagger. Any young lad would assure you that the patch is the mark of a true sailing Hero, as much so as a peg leg or parrot would be, and his

exotic, adorable monkey substituted nicely for a parrot on his shoulder.

The book was a tremendous hit on Earth. Aboard the *Fang*, the reception was quite different.

The Admiralty had denied any kind of shore leave for the *Fang* and her two consorts, but Asquith, of course, had been permitted to return to Earth. To everyone's amazement, he came back.

Paper copies of his book had been printed and distributed in less than a week, and by the time Asquith returned everyone had read it. The little earthling was sitting in the wardroom with most of the Ship's officers. For Asquith the wardroom had long since become a comfortable place of companionship, but now the atmosphere was heated. Aboard the *Fang*, the critics were not kind.

"*Captain Melville and Fang: The Terror of Two-space*," read Fielder in a droll, oratorical tone. "To Captain Melville," he continued, "Damn his poetry, damn his Ship, but God bless the bloody bastard, because he saved me for my dear mum."

There was a roar of laughter at Asquith's expense as Fielder read this dedication.

"What in the *hell* is *that* all about?" asked Fielder, holding the book up and looking at Asquith.

"Clearly," said Mrs. Vodi, "during the trip the Stockholm syndrome has set in, and our mess mate has become a fan. Albeit a reluctant, uncertain, and somewhat conflicted fan. I must note though, that you did diverge significantly and somewhat embarrassingly from the truth. And the truth was strange enough."

"So he embellished," drawled Westminster as he leaned back in his chair with a foot on the table. "He is a poet, ma'am. An art-eeest!"

Mrs. Vodi whacked the offending foot off the table, muttering something about, "Damned rangers, never can housebreak 'em! Treat every piece of furniture like a tree stump." Westminster and the others paid scant attention. The conversation was just too much fun to interrupt.

"Indeed," interjected Brother Theo. "He never claimed that it was true! 'Based on the true story!' is a line that provides the purest defense possible: simple artistic license. Sir Phillip Sidney in his famous *Defence of Poesy* said, 'I think truly, that of all writers under the sun the poet is the least liar... for the poet, he nothing afirmeth, and therefore never lieth.'"

"Thank you. I appreciate your support, I think," replied Asquith, with a nod to Theo and Westminster.

"Eep?" echoed his monkey.

"And I *did* sell it as fiction. Nobody on Earth really believes *any* of it, you know. They think I'm making it *all* up! Huh! I don't need drugs to be mentally unbalanced. I can do that all by myself!" Then, looking at Fielder he continued, "But I take it you don't think it's very good?"

"Frankly, no," replied Fielder.

"I thought it was good when I was writing it," said Asquith. "It practically wrote itself! It seemed like it just *flowed* up out of the Well of Lost Plots! I just got this... warm feeling when I was writing it."

"That happens to writers sometimes," said Mrs. Vodi kindly. "Just remember that it feels like that when you wet yourself too."

"Huh," said Asquith. "Become a writer and suddenly everyone's a critic. Well, dammit," he continued doggedly, pulling his shoulders back and lifting his head high in a posture that only served to emphasize his lack of chin, "when you've written your own book maybe you'll have a right to criticize."

Fielder began a slow, deliberate retort but Asquith pre-empted him. "'Look, he's winding up the watch of his wit; by and by it will strike!'"

"Now see here," said Fielder, "this Shakespeare riff of yours has gone just about far enough, I think."

Everyone grinned. It was good to see Asquith stand up for himself, and no one felt any need to defend Fielder.

"Tis clear, as the Bard said," continued Asquith, once again trampling over Fielder's languid, sardonic response, "'many wearing rapiers are afraid of goose-quills.' And, dammit, at least the book is selling!"

The diminutive earthling's peeved obstinance combined with his eyepatch made him look like a buccaneer bunny that has discovered that his water bottle is empty, and is determined that the management will hear about it. "And, frankly, I didn't expect to come back. I'd rather do root canal work on an angry Guldur then go back out into two-space again. But my publisher made me sign the contract in blood and I honestly didn't understand what I was getting into. You wouldn't *believe* the fine print in a book contract! The publisher has a right to demand a sequel, *and* my eldest begotten son for all I know. And who would have thought that an obligatory book publicity tour meant out here in two-space! So I have to stay with the *Fang*, selling the rights to my book to publishers in each port while I write the next book."

"Ha! But you hate it out here!" grinned Vodi.

"Tell me about it," replied Asquith glumly. "There isn't even enough time for my cloned eyeball to come out of the vat before I have to head back out into this insanity! Being a writer is *not* what I thought it would be. Basically, I'm doomed to carry cases of my book with me wherever I go for the rest of my life, hawking copies and working on the sequel in my spare time."

"Welcome, my friend," said Brother Theo, patting him on the shoulder, "to the ranks of wandering wayfarers, traveling troubadours, vagabond vagrants, roving rogues, and road agents, and all their ill-mannered ilk, distributing data across the galaxy, like parasites disseminating disease."

"Yeah, that's me," sighed Asquith. "Well, my friends and mess mates, I've come to know *your* ilk, so I brought a couple dozens of excellent Earth wine with me as a peace offering. I had our mess steward open a bottle, so charge your glasses whilst I propose a toast." This earned a sincere cheer, and in less than a minute they all held their glasses high as Asquith said,

"I have no doubt at all the devil grins  
As seas of ink I spatter,  
Ye gods, forgive my 'literary' sins,  
The other kind don't matter.

"So here's to literary immortality," concluded Asquith glumly. "It's not necessarily what it's cracked up to be."

"Eep," agreed his monkey.

That brought a chorus of further agreement, and thus the critics were placated by the time-honored process of a spirited defense, and a well-placed bribe of spirits.

Whatever events were occurring in the slow-paced halls of the Westerness Admiralty, the dizzying speed of Earth's fickle public was leaving the Navy far behind. Asquith's book generated a plethora of demands for Melville to make media appearances across Earth, which left the Admiralty in a state of extreme agitation and confusion.

Several centuries ago, just as humanity had gotten a good start at exploring two-space, Earth had peacefully relinquished her nascent star empire to Westerness. Since then, Earth's attitude toward

Westernness and two-space had been one of benign neglect combined with total disinterest verging on disbelief. By now, most of the people on Earth thought of two-space and Westernness (if they thought of it at all) as just an elaborate fantasy played out by some obscure sect.

The Admiralty tried to respond to Earth's demands by hinting that Melville was in deep trouble for losing the *Kestrel*. They implied that it was a "Navy thing" and the plebeian public wouldn't understand, "Don'tcherknow old boy?"

This was *not* well received on Earth. The best thing the Navy could have done was to have simply ignored the public, and the fickle finger of fandom would have gone somewhere else. But the Navy's heavy-handed response made Asquith's book even *more* popular and greatly increased the frenzied demand for media appearances.

Asquith's biography of Melville sparked a fad that briefly made poetry popular on Earth. For the first time in centuries the home of Kipling and Shakespeare was actually talking in rhyming couplets. The higher-ups in the Navy bureaucracy may have wanted to hold Melville responsible for losing the *Kestrel*, but Asquith used his fame to mount an informal defense in the popular media. In particular, a bit of doggerel, written by Asquith and posted on the Net became a big hit:

I should not tell YOU how to fight,  
You who put *Kestrel* on its flight  
To poke around among flat stars  
With crewmen schooled in masts and spars.

While *Kestrel* sank you traded *Fang*  
Quite slyly with that Guldur gang.  
Their blush of vict'ry turned to shame  
With how you won that fighting game.

The curs then watch as off you sail,  
Them flinging curses from the rail.  
Your *Kestrel's* loss a crime? It's NOT!  
In tactics books THAT should be taught!

Then the Admiralty made their next mistake. They let Melville make a few appearances, trying to throw a bone to placate the media moguls who kept Earth's bored billions entertained. It only served to tantalize and taunt the beast.

Melville ended up doing a brief whirl of media appearances that left him bewildered and exhausted. He did enjoy it, in a mind-numbing sort of way. But most of it was quickly forgotten, like vague memories of irrational, nonsensical dreams that blend together and really don't matter in the morning.

One event that did stick in Melville's mind (primarily because of its particularly bizarre nature) was a literary party with Asquith's publisher and agent in attendance. The Admiralty had granted shore leave to all of the *Fang*'s officers when they finally let Melville go, so Mrs. Vodi and Fielder were also at the party in response to Asquith's invitations.

Melville and Fielder were in their best uniforms, accompanied by their monkeys, but without pistols, swords, or even knives. Weapons were forbidden on decadent, pacifist Earth, and there was absolutely no way to slip anything through the tight decon stations designed to keep out weapons and the devastating two-space virus that had caused Earth's "Crash" centuries before. Both officers felt naked without their weapons, and Fielder had quickly tucked away the first steak knife that he could get his hands on.

As they entered into the party they were struck by a vast panoramic scene. The event seemed to be taking place at multiple levels in a huge, vaulted chamber. Above them, people stood on large flat sections of carpet that floated in mid-air, drifting around in a dizzying fashion, though never bumping into each other or crowding their riders. People mingled freely, stepping up, down or across, from one piece of flying carpet to another as freely and easily as if they were stepping down a set of stairs, while they talked, sipped, and snacked.

"Thomas Melville of the Royal Westerness Navy, Captain of Her Majesty, the Queen of Westerness' Ship, the *Fang*," announced a major-domo in a voice that was subtly but powerfully enhanced by electronics as they entered into the vast ballroom. "Member of the Order of Knights Companion of the King of Osgil, Member of the Royal Host of Glory of the King of Stolsh, and Friend of the Dwarrowdelf League. And his... monkey," said the announcer, with a microscopic pause that seemed to communicate great depths of amazement or confusion, "Squire to the King of Osgil.

"Baronet Daniello Sans Fielder," continued the major-domo, "Lieutenant of the Royal Westerness Navy, First Officer of Her Majesty, the Queen of Westerness' Ship, the *Fang*, Knight of the Realm of Osgil, Member of the Stolsh Royal Order of Honor, and Friend of the Dwarrowdelf League. And his monkey, Squire to the King of Osgil."

Melville and Fielder wore the twin "gongs" awarded to them by the kings of Osgil and Stolsh hanging from colorful ribbons around their necks, and each of their monkeys proudly bore its own medal in a similar fashion. But, proud as the two officers were of their medals, they would both have happily traded them in for swords when they saw the arrogant and disdainful glances of the assembled earthlings turned their way.

"Cuthbert Asquith, the Sixteenth, Earth's Consul to the Planet Ambergris, and his monkey." Asquith looked almost dashing with his black eyepatch and tuxedo, and the monkey perched on his shoulder added an exotic, alien effect.

Asquith's literary agent was named Curt Richards, a tall, elegant, stately man in a white turtleneck under a black jacket. He spent the whole night talking about the revolutionary new idea of publishing "p-books" (books actually written on paper!) for distribution on Earth, and striving with single-minded tenacity to get a bigger advance from Asquith's publisher.

The publisher was a very real and surreal shock to Melville. Standing before him in a Navy uniform was none other than Captain Ben James of the Royal Westernness Navy (retired), who had been Melville's professor at the academy.

As a cadet Melville had always thought that Captain James was several sheets short of a full spread of sails, but now he had to concede that the man who had been his favorite professor was also a canny and cunning old bird. James was living happily on Earth, where high-tech medicine prolonged his life while he built an impressive publishing empire based on rot-gut pulp fiction. And Asquith's book was the current crown jewel of his empire.

Captain James had become hugely successful at marketing Earth fiction (in p-book form) to the thousand worlds of Westernness' far-flung star kingdom, while also marketing Westernness fiction (in e-book form) to Earth and to the teeming billions on the Moon, Mars, the Asteroid Belt and the moons of Jupiter and Saturn. He was even having some success at marketing to Dwarrowdelf and Sylvan worlds, although their civilizations were having difficulty understanding the difference between copyrighted material and the vast treasure trove of Earth literature that was in the public domain.

Melville found himself admiring the incredible energy and sheer audacity of Captain James' accomplishments, while noting that the cunning little dynamo was still a bit "all knots and no rudder" as they used to put it at the academy. *And*, thought Melville, *you must never forget the array of fruit salad on the old captain's chest. All those ribbons said that he'd been there, done that, bought the T-shirt... and then washed his windows with it.*

Melville made the mistake of saying that he was surprised at the continued success of the literature on an advanced world like Earth. Captain James promptly went into instructor mode and informed Melville that, "Reading is actually the highest of high-tech. One classic author called it, 'an infinitely complex imaginotransference technology that translates odd, inky squiggles into pictures inside your head.'"

"Yes, my friend," added Richards, the literary agent. "Any sufficiently advanced technology is magic, and *books* will always be a kind of magic."

It appeared to Melville that the only truly stable, sane one in the literary crowd that night was Etaoin Shrdlu, a publisher who had made a competing offer for Asquith's book and seemed to view the whole event with serene placidity. Then Asquith informed him that this was merely the effect of very high-quality medication, and Melville decided that it was time to mingle.

But if Melville thought the book folks were crazy, he was quickly given an education in higher order insanity as he stepped up onto one of the floating platforms and began to mix with the poetic and artistic types at the party. His first brush came as he tried to extricate Mrs. Vodi from a full-fledged harangue against some "art-eests" whose works were on display at the party.

"You bunch of flakes and fakes," said Vodi as she lectured a gaggle of artists and critics in her usual diplomatic and tactful manner. She had them neatly trapped in a corner, and was running them ragged like a sheepdog joyfully penning sheep. "You call this art? Ha! You know that a society is truly decadent when it falls for your brand of fakery. It violates the First Law of Art, Carmack's Law, which says, 'If I can do it, it's not art.' How many years of art school did you have to go to to learn to splash paint on a canvas like that? If someone studies music for four years, they walk away with an ability to play an instrument and can do something I could never do or imitate. But you walk away with an art degree, and the best you can do is *this*? Something any fool can imitate? *This* is the best ya got? 'If I can do it, it ain't art!' And the price tag! Ten thousand dollars for *that*? Oh, so *you* know so much about art, eh? Then *you* buy the freaking thing! And you, dammit, get some clothes on that man! What the hell's *that* supposed to be? Performance art? Performance art! Squirting *those* substances into *that* orifice has *not* been approved by the surgeon general! Oh, and now you're gonna light it, eh? Betcha think that's clever? Ha! I've seen better around any campfire when the boys have been eating beans! I know an artist has to suffer for his art, but why do *we* have to?"

Vodi's monkey was enjoying the harangue immensely, reinforcing key comments with the occasional "Eek!" as it kept a careful watch in all directions. Periodically the creature would whip an arm out with blinding speed to snag an olive from a passing martini or an *hors d'oeuvre* from a tray or a hand.

With the exception of the "performing artist" the artsy folks were all dressed in black. (Which Vodi claimed was really about personal cleanliness, or lack thereof.) They had been happily grazing along, maintaining serious expressions no matter what kind of drivel they were viewing in the name of "art." Now someone was calling their bluff, and one of the sheep bleated in response, "Well, you just don't get it."

Vodi was beginning to wind down, but this last remark ran fingernails down the blackboard of her soul. "And *that* violates the Second Law of Art, Elantu's Law," she replied with renewed vigor, cutting off the recalcitrant sheep and herding it back into the flock, "which says, 'If the artist has to explain what it means, then it's not art.' It's not art, it's a *failure*. Instead of universal symbolism or universal language, it's gibberish. Or a con job!"

It occurred to Melville that it was a good thing Broadax or Ulrich weren't there. *They* would have been demonstrating the fine art of high-pressure, arterial blood splatters on the walls. *Hmmm*, thought Melville, distractedly. *It wouldn't be high-pressure blood splatters as I don't think they would be in full vasoconstriction. Oh, wait, after the first victim—I mean, "artistic endeavor"—the rest would be in full fight-or-flight mode. Well, flight anyway. Thus resulting in the proper arterial paintbrush for their preferred canvas. At least until the police showed up to put an end to Broadax and Ulrich's brief but dramatic careers as artists and art critics.*

Melville grabbed a fresh drink from a passing server. Then he cut in and took Mrs. Vodi gently by the arm, guiding her down onto yet another of the levitating platforms with a laugh as he placed the drink in her hand. "You better take this," he said. "You've got to be working up a thirst."

"Ha! I was just getting started. But now that you mention it..." and the rest was drowned out with a series of deep refreshing gulps concluded by the loud, satisfied sigh of a dog who had just given the sheep what-for, or a person who had just struck a blow for rational thought. This was joined by a happy "Eek!" from her monkey as it reached out to sip from the same drink.

They were ambling along peacefully, happily strolling up, down and around, going from one platform to another, when suddenly it became Melville's turn to strike out at the insanity of a depraved and decadent society. He was trying to stay out of trouble. He was honestly *trying* to be a good guest, but then one of the black-clad art-eests who had been spouting tepid free verse in a corner had to go and ask him about poetry.

"Ah! The famous Captain Melville!" said a black-clad poet of indeterminate gender, whose unnaturally black skin glistened with ever-changing sparks and flashes of color. "I understand that you have a flair for poetry. Tell me honestly now, what did you think of my new work? I *saw* you listening as I was reciting that last bit."

"Well," Melville replied, "There were only three small things wrong."

"Oh," said the crestfallen poet. "What would that be?" s/he asked as the others listened in.

"First, you read it. Which can be excused, but perhaps not when it comes to something *you* wrote. If the artist won't bother to commit it to memory it must not be worth much. Second, you read it poorly. And third, it wasn't much worth reading in the first place. If you think that's poetry, you're just fooling yourself. One late twentieth century poet put it this way:

"True poetry to me has meant  
Possessing the ability  
To use some brilliant words to make  
Another person clearly see

"A vivid mental picture and to  
Make an easy, natural rhyme,  
As if the words were idly used  
In idle talk some idle time.

"It may be my opinion,  
But it's why we know Lenore,  
And Free Verse won't last as long  
As the Raven's, 'Nevermore.'"

"Eek!" added Melville's monkey in its own pithy conclusion.

Mrs. Vodi chortled gleefully as the would-be poet's space-black face took on a flush of fiery tracings. S/he tried to drink from his (her?) empty glass, while the cloud of black-clad onlookers all looked down their noses and tut-tutted. Melville realized that Fielder was standing behind him, looking impeccable in his best, hand-tailored uniform. The first officer was framed by a pair of stunning blonds who had an unnatural number of teeth between them. They were both stroking Fielder's monkey, and the little critter seemed to be delighted by the attention. Playing to his two lady friends, Fielder drawled, "It's a good thing that no duels are permitted on Earth. Otherwise, I'm afraid we'd have to kill an awful lot of these people."

Melville was amazed that Fielder's brass balls weren't setting off every metal detector on Earth, not to mention his lady friends' BS detectors. But his two companions were obviously impressed and captivated by this bloodthirsty comment. Both of them blushed deeply across their abundant décolletage and Melville stared in fascination as twin flushes ran up their perfect white necks like a Guldur horde burning everything in its path. One of the blonds whispered something in Fielder's ear. Whatever she said must have been singularly stimulating, because it made *him* flush and breathe deeply. "Wonderful party, Captain, but I think we'll be on our way now," he said as he departed hastily.

"Well!" said Vodi, "I haven't had so much fun since the hogs ate my little brother!"

Melville wasn't exactly sure what to make of that, so he nodded and the two of them continued to wander, each finding comfort in the company of a fellow pilgrim in this very strange land. They quickly left the realm of art-eests, as signified by the absence of black attire, and entered a region of gaudy, brilliant, and often quite risqué garments.

Then they saw someone dressed in the uniform of a Westernness naval officer and started to head toward him, moving up and down across the levitating platforms, like swimmers striking out for an island in an ever-shifting sea of the unfamiliar and insane. The Westernness officer had his back to them, and Melville was set to say hello as he moved in beside the man. But he quickly came to a confused halt as he realized that it *wasn't* a man and there was something very wrong about the uniform.

"It's the Melville Look," she said, turning toward him with a satisfied smirk and a wink to her stable of fawning admirers. "All Earth is abuzz about your capturing that *Fang* thingee, and *this* is going to be *all* the rage, dahh-ling."

This clearly called for some witty, cutting repartee on Melville's part.

"Huh?" he said.

Vodi was in shocked amazement at the situation but at least she was able to generate an intelligent response. "Well damnit, Josiah's dog helped capture the Ship. So shouldn't you all be wearing dog collars and sniffing each other's bottoms?"

"No, no, no, my pet," the fashion-eesta replied, as delicate patterns of navy blue and gold danced and flickered across her face. "That is *so* last year. The whole canine dominance thing's been done to *death*, deary. It's not due to come around again for at *least* a few more years. But *this* is a caftan of a *completely* different color.

"Although," she continued, her face rippling and shivering with pinks and reds as she spoke, "I must say that everyone *did* like those dog collars, leashes, and naked partners going about on all fours. The roller blades surgically implanted into hands and knees is what really made it work last time, along with that *wonderful* 'In Heat' drug. And all that yummy anatomy hanging down certainly opened up a whole new range of body paint and bustier options. What a lark it was!"

"I do *not* want to hear about it," said Vodi.

"Well, I do admit it was a little hard on all the boys and girls who overdid the organ enhancement fad that was popular just before that. Anyway, you should be honored. But you know, Captain, your jacket is really *not* quite the style, and those shoes are completely passé.

"Now hang on just a minute!" said Vodi in outrage. "How can you say the captain doesn't have the Melville look? He *is* Melville! Who the hell made *you* the fashion police?"

"Well, darling," she replied, haughtily scanning Vodi's simple black shift and her gray hair pinned up in a bun. "The whole fashion SWAT team couldn't save *you*, deary."

"Oh, honey," said Vodi, cocking back her arm with a saccharine smile that has terrified a veritable host of patients across the years, "I'm gonna slap you so hard that by the time you stop rolling, your clothes will be out of style."

Melville still had not said a word. He was floating along in a state of total, shell-shocked bemusement when Brother Theo came up and interrupted Mrs. Vodi's righteous wrath.

"Ohhh. Now *that* has potential," cooed the fashion-eesta, looking at Theo and apparently oblivious to how close she was to a painful life lesson from Mrs. Vodi. "Rope belts and rough brown cloth, ooo, I can just *see* it catching on! And I *really* like the haircut," she added, her face taking on rope-like patterns of brown and tan as she looked at Theo's tonsure. " *That* basic concept can be applied elsewhere on the body too, darling. Yass, I think I know what's coming after the Melville look. But you know, the little rat on everyone's shoulder really doesn't work. The whole furry mascot bit has been done to death."

"Eep?!" replied all three monkeys in outraged chorus.

"Excuse us please, madam," said Theo, taking Melville and Vodi aside. "I must confer with the captain." As they walked away the monkeys' arms reached out in all directions in a blur of movement, and a veritable hail of olives, glasses, and *hors d'oeuvres* flew back at the fashion-eesta with uncanny accuracy.

Theo guided Melville into a dimly lit alcove and Vodi happily followed, sensing some useful gossip about the "real" world.

"I've negotiated with the Earthport chapterhouse of the Celebrimbor Shipwrights guild, Captain. Just as we anticipated, they were eager to acquire two of the 24-pounders. They came and took possession of the guns today." Melville nodded. The Dwarrowdelf had taken two, and now the Westernness Shipwrights had taken two more. All of these were taken from *Gnasher* and *Biter*, leaving them with exactly the same strength as the *Fang*.

Once again Melville felt the urge to claim some 24-pounders from *Gnasher* and *Biter* to fill the gaps in his Ship. This was his last chance to do so, and he was sorely tempted. But much as he yearned to have those guns, much as he lusted to fill those gaps in his "teeth," he just couldn't bring himself to strip Archer and Crater's Ships. He would have to be content with an equal distribution of 24-pounders between the three Ships. Besides, he *did* have all those lovely little 12-pounders to fill in the gaps. That was something that Archer and Crater did *not* have, nor could they spare the ruinous expense for them. (Since, after Piers and Keels, cannons were some of the most precious commodities in the galaxy, mostly because they were driven by a big Keel charge.) Nor could Melville bring himself to share any of *his* 12-pounders with them. His largess just didn't extend quite that far!

"So did we get what we wanted for the 24-pounders?" asked Melville. He had no problem with Mrs. Vodi listening in. He trusted her discretion.

"Aye, sir," Theo replied with obvious pleasure. "This has been a *very* successful port call for us. We received an excellent price on the three Shiploads of trade goods we brought from Nordheim and Osgil. *And* the Shipwrights' guild paid us *most* handsomely for the two 24-pounders." The purser smiled and there was a brief pause as he allowed himself the indulgence of a major gloat. A gloat which Melville and Vodi fully shared. Above all else they were traders, and there was a deep sense of satisfaction that came with making a profitable port call.

"The Celebri also agreed to support us in our dispute with the Admiralty," said Theo, " *and* they have pledged some future, undefined 'favor'... which causes me a degree of foreboding. Those are very strange people, Captain, and I'm not sure I want them doing us too many 'favors.' Anyway, I apologize for interrupting you with all this—"

"Huh," interjected Vodi, "rescued is more like it."

"—but," Theo continued, "I have received word that you will be summoned to see the admiral tomorrow, and I wanted you to know about this before then."

Lt. Fielder joined them as Theo concluded his report and left with a polite nod of his head. The first officer looked considerably more disheveled than the last time they had seen him. He had lost some of his sartorial splendor, but he appeared to be quite pleased with himself and his lot in the world. Fielder was accompanied by a gorgeous redhead dressed in a conservative white suit.

*Where does he get such a steady supply of stunners?* thought Melville.

"Sorry to bother you, sir," said Fielder, "but this young lady asked me to escort her to you. She says she represents a pro-war faction in the Admiralty. They want to crank up the fleet's Reserve/Retired Enhanced Manning Force and do other war prep, but frankly their cause looks hopeless."

Things were moving entirely too fast for Melville. He needed time to think. He desperately wanted the world to just slow down a bit. Mostly, he yearned to get aboard his Ship and sail far, far away from this madhouse.

"The 'Reserve/Retired Enhanced Manning Force?'" asked Melville. "Do they really call it that?"

"Yes, Captain," said the redhead in a husky voice. "Otherwise known as the R/REMF."

"Careful, sir," said Fielder. "This is a high-tech world and this could be a setup." Looking at her suspiciously he continued, "You might be wired for sound. There's only one way to find out, and you probably won't enjoy it."

"How do you know I wouldn't?" she purred.

"Oh. She looks like a real hard case, sir. Just give me ten minutes alone with her and I'll get at the truth."

"Mmmm. Seek, and you shall find," she said, licking her lips, "and the truth shall set you free."

"I think this is a matter that can be left in my first officer's capable hands," said Melville. "I'm going to my Ship."

As he stepped out of the alcove with Mrs. Vodi, Melville commented, "You know, they are all flakes. Take those actors over there, or the news commentators who've been interviewing me and whose only skill is looking good and reading a prompter. They're just hollow shells. The character or reporter we *think* we love is not the person. What we see is nothing more than words and ideas poured into his hollow soul by a writer. And the art-eests and fashion-fascists we met, with rare exceptions they're all just faking it and deep inside they know it. I honestly think authors are the only celebrities who are truly worthy of admiration. You can't fake writing a book, especially a successful book: there are no real shortcuts, and you pretty much have to do it on your own.

"Hilaire Belloc wrote about *The Barbarian*," Melville continued thoughtfully as he scanned the crowd. "For him a 'Barbarian' is a man who 'will consume what civilization has slowly produced after generations of selection and effort, but he will not be at pains to replace such goods, nor indeed has he any comprehension of the virtue that has brought them into being.' I think that is why we rightfully revere authors. Their work has given us countless thousands of hours of pleasure. We do not want to be barbarians, so we are sincerely at pains to make a contribution of our own. If we can't do that, the least we can do is to comprehend the hard work and other virtues that brought these books into being, and to appropriately honor and appreciate the author."

"You have a valid point, Captain," replied Vodi. "Writers *are* definitely worthy of our esteem, if any celebrity is. But with all due respect I'd bring to your attention Exhibit A for the opposing view."

Melville looked where she was pointing and saw little Asquith pestering his agent to get out of his contract, while his agent diligently plied the publisher for a bigger advance.

"Well, maybe not all writers," agreed Melville with a rueful laugh. "But at least there's the military. *There* is a realm of decisive men of action. *There* is a place where you can find true giants who stride the galaxy and are worthy of admiration."

Groans and thuds came from the dark corner of the alcove where they had left Fielder and his girlfriend, and Vodi cocked her head with a thin smile and said, "Once again you have an excellent point. Our military does have its 'giants' who are worthy of honor and glory. But do you include moral giants like Fielder?" And on cue the redhead began a gasping scream, or at least Melville assumed it was the redhead.

"Or," continued Mrs. Vodi, "were you referring to intellectual giants like Broadax and Ulrich? Or maybe you mean those great mental and moral giants of the Admiralty?"

"Huh," said Melville.

"O wad some Power the giftie gie us,  
To see oursels as ithers see us!"

"Indeed, Captain," replied Mrs. Vodi.

"I guess we all have feet of clay," said Melville. "We're all just people trying to get by. Who the hell am I to judge? I'm going to my Ship."

"Eep!" agreed his monkey.

The next morning Melville received a letter summoning him to the admiral's office. McAndrews and his monkey fussed over the captain's uniform, and then it was only a short walk down the dock and into the Admiralty headquarters.

Melville had left his monkey behind but at least he was able to carry his sword. He entered the vast puzzle palace and was led through a maze of corridors and offices which were walled, floored, and roofed with glowing white Nimbrell wood. The walls were peppered with tasteful paintings, and prints accumulated over the centuries.

Finally he was led into the inner sanctum, high up in the main building of Earthport. *More like the "inner sphincter"* thought Melville. The gravity was extremely light here, but his heart was heavy as he walked into the admiral's suite.

The ancient hallways, expensive old furnishings and vaguely musty atmosphere made Melville feel like an intruder in a posh gentleman's club. A chummy realm of collegiality and handshake deals. An exclusive club where he was *not* welcome.

"So, you have one of those new Guldur Ships, eh?" said the dapper young flag lieutenant who was the admiral's aide. "How do you find it?"

"Usually where I left it."

"Ha, yes, mmm. Indeed. You know, Melville, nobody here's quite sure what to make of your story. Personally I think that a tale of such bizarre complexity and outrageous daring has *got* be true. Nobody here can believe you're smart enough to make it up. Well, off we go to see the admiral."

As he entered the admiral's office he was disconcerted as his bare feet trod on a plush, maroon carpet. Usually aboard Ship and on Piers the decks were left bare for the Moss to flourish. The walls had an assortment of oil paintings, and a big bay window looked out on the Pier.

"Ha! Melville," said Admiral Beaucoup, a bluff old man with huge white muttonchop sideburns who was behind an enormous desk, leaning back in a black chairdog. The admiral pointedly did not get up, nor did he offer Melville a seat or refreshments. "So *you're* the young man who's been the source of so much

trouble, eh? You've got an amazing number of people who want your head on a platter, I'm afraid. So many pigeons have come home to roost, it's like a damned eclipse!"

*Good!* said a little voice in Melville's head. *Then we will fight in the shade!*

"You know," the admiral continued, wagging his finger admonishingly with a jovial chuckle, "in retrospect, capturing three Guldur Ships, sinking a couple dozen others, and helping to kill a few hundred thousand Oraki and Guldur just *might* not have been a very good move. Eh?"

*Well sir,* thought Melville, *it is true that we helped turn a couple hundred thousand of them into buzzard buffets on Ambergris. And thousands more are freeze-dried pup-sickles floating around in space thanks to us. But if we don't kill enough of them, the others just won't respect us in the morning, don'tcher see? And, anyway, what's the point of having a devastatingly destructive, kick-ass Ship if you can't use it?*

That's what the little voice in his head was gibbering. What *he* said was, "Well sir, it *was* all in self-defense. They did start the whole thing by ambushing and killing the *Kestrel*, our captain, and a good portion of our crew."

"Eh, well they do admit to that, but they say it was an accident. They claim they were cleaning their cannon when it went off. Damned wogs and aliens, can't trust any of them, eh?" said the admiral with a knowing wink.

"And the Oraki claim you executed one of their royalty. Two good shots to the forehead and one right into the old kisser. Ha! Good shootin' that, eh? Best thing to do with 'em if you ask me. But I'm afraid the whole matter is completely out of my hands. It's all politics, don'tcher see? We can't let them think you're being rewarded for that kind of behavior. Where would we be if *all* of our officers went off whacking wog royalty, eh?"

Thus Melville was informed of the Admiralty's judgment. In the end, it wasn't as bad as he'd feared. He was pretty sure that he could see the influence of the Celebri Shipwrights at work, and it was a bemused and mostly relieved young captain who returned to his Ship.

"Deck there!" called the lookout in the foremast crosstrees. "I can see the cap'n comin'!"

"Very well," replied Fielder. "Midshipman of the watch, call the side party, stand by to pipe the captain aboard."

Soon Melville came up the gangplank and saluted the side party as his monkey leapt happily to his shoulder.

"Well," he said, when he stood on the quarterdeck with his first officer and purser, who were the two key officers involved with the operation and finances of the Ship. "I think we've succeeded in dodging the bullet. They've denied us prize money for the *Gnasher* and the *Biter*, but they sure as hell are *not* going to give 'em back to the Guldur."

"Huh. Tightfisted bastards," said Fielder.

"Wait, you haven't heard anything yet," replied Melville. "Archer and Crater remain in command of their Ships. The Admiralty doesn't have much choice about that, since the Ships have bonded to them. There'll be no promotions for any of us though. They've rated us all as sloops, and therefore a lieutenant can stay in command."

"Ha!" exploded Fielder. "The most powerful Ships afloat, and we're rated as sloops. *There* is the twisted mind of the bureaucrat at work for you."

"Aye," Melville replied with a sad, bemused shake of his head. He felt like he was in the middle of a novel, like one of those compelling, addictive, and terribly frustrating Connie Willis books from the classic era of science fiction, where you just wanted to take every single silly sod of a character and slap the snot out of them. "At least they can't deny us the Osgil prize money," Melville continued. "But here's the real kicker. Look at this," he said, holding out a sheet of paper for them to look at. "They've assessed a 'registration fee' for all three new Ships."

"Hmm," said Brother Theo, carefully calculating the sums. "It's nothing like having to pay for a new Ship from the Keel up. We could probably scrape up the fee for the *Fang* from our Osgil prize money. And the income from our cargos, and from selling the 24-pounders on Nordheim and Earth would go a long way toward paying for the *Gnasher* and the *Biter*. But it's an ingenious way for the Admiralty to 'tax' us and get their teeth into us."

"Aye," said Melville. "Of course, we won't pay our debt off right away, even if it didn't bankrupt us. We'll pay it in increments over the next few years, just like a new Ship. Oh, and the *Fang* is still banished to the far side of the galaxy. I don't know what they plan to do with *Gnasher* and *Biter*, but I'm betting they'll keep us far apart from each other."

"Probably the poorest possible milk runs and scut jobs they can find," said Fielder.

"The important thing is, we've got our Ship," said Melville, "and we've got twenty-four hours to get the hell out of Dodge. Is everyone aboard?"

"Aye, sir," replied Fielder. "There were amazingly few complications with the local authorities. We just got our only problem child out of hock from the local authorities. It seems Ranger Valandil was arrested

for climbing some of their skyscrapers, which apparently is something they frown on here. EarthPol has some remarkable vid shots of him free-climbing outside the 212th floor of his hotel. The cops said to ask him—and all the other Sylvans—to, "Please not climb our buildings."

"Huh. It's always the quiet ones, isn't it?" said Melville, shaking his head. "Well, we're off. Our first stop is Lenoria, followed by an endless string of one-Pier ports to the Western Rim, and then across the Far Rift to the Hero Cluster. We'll probably never see Evereven and our homes and families in *this* lifetime, but at least we are alive and fairly well off."

"Amen to that," said Fielder. "After everything we've been through, I'm just happy, and surprised, to be alive!"

"Oh, and call all hands aft," added Melville. His face suddenly split into a grin of sincere pleasure as he continued, "I've actually got orders now, and I have to read myself in as Master and Commander!"

When the crew and officers had assembled, Melville stood at the upper quarterdeck rail, looked out upon his crew, and began reading from the parchment in his hand. The more he read the bigger the smile became on his face. Initially there was some confusion among the crew, but then the *Fang* s began to echo their captain's smile.

"By the Commissioners executing the office of Lord High Admiral of Westerness and Lenoria et cetera, and of all Her Majesty's planets and territories et cetera. To Lt. Thomas Melville, Esquire, hereby appointed Master and Commander of Her Majesty's Ship the *Fang* ."

This was greeted with a great roar of approval from the assembled *Fang* s, and Melville's face was alight with joy as he continued. He had heard other commanders read themselves in before, but as he read these beautifully penned, powerful, ancient Words, he felt something greater than himself flooding through his soul.

"By virtue of the power and authority to us given, we do hereby constitute and appoint you Master and Commander of Her Majesty's Ship the *Fang* willing and requiring you forthwith to go aboard and take upon you the charge and command in her accordingly, strictly charging and commanding the officers and company belonging to the said Ship subordinate to you to behave themselves jointly and severally in their respective employments with all due respect and obedience to you their said commander, and you likewise to observe and execute as well the general printed instructions and what orders and direction you shall from time to time receive from us or any other of your superior officers for Her Majesty's service. Hereof nor you nor any of yours may fail as you will answer the contrary at your peril. And for so doing this shall be your warrant. Given under our hands and the seal of the office of Admiralty on this fifth day of May in the twenty-seventh year of Her Majesty's reign."

The *Fang* s roared their approval, and rising up through their bare feet there was a great tide of affirmation, a fierce ratification that came swelling out from *Fang* herself, until it felt like a ringing in the ears and a soaring in the soul.

During the time that Melville had been making his whirlwind media tour, the *Fang*'s sailors, marines, and middies had been training and qualifying on high-tech simulators on Earth. And they took the qualification process very seriously.

An American private who fought in the trenches of World War I back on Old Earth had a base pay of \$13 a month. But he received an extra \$5 a month if he qualified expert with his rifle, which was a significant bonus. In the early twenty-first century, the Los Angeles Police Department still maintained a "bonus range" which provided bonus pay for pistol marksmanship. Officers received \$8 per month as a Marksman, \$16 per month as a Sharpshooter, \$32 per month as an Expert, and \$64 per month as a Distinguished Expert.

The sailors, marines, and midshipmen of the Western Navy received similar bonuses for qualifying expert with their pistols and rifled muskets. The sailors also received considerably more pay if they passed the series of simulators and tests that qualified them as an "able-bodied sailor."

Needless to say, the *Fang*s were all eager to earn such qualifications, and a stop on Earth was their chance to attain them. But Earth's high-tech total immersion simulators weren't just for qualifying as marksmen or able-bodied sailors. These incredibly realistic combat simulators also gave them a chance to fight and "die" yet still live to learn from the experience.

(Only Broadax failed to benefit from this opportunity. She was kicked out of the simulator facility because she kept going into berserker attacks on the computers and their operators. "This is not combat! This is a simulator! It's just like a video game! There are *rules!*" screamed the enraged senior simulator operator as a squad of marines finally escorted Broadax from his facility.)

Between sessions on the combat simulators, the troops had a chance to immerse themselves in the "classics" that were not available in printed form. The *Star Trek* TV series and movies, the *Star Wars* movies, and of course Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* movies were standard fare for a young sailor's first Earth visit. These movies and TV shows had survived the Crash created by the Elder King's Gift through data disks that were recovered from museums.

The middies were pretty "buzzed" by this experience. Their captain had just read himself in, and then the midshipmen began their morning class. During a break in their training Brother Theo took the opportunity to discuss their recent activities.

"And so, my friends," began Theo when his middies had assembled in the waist, "you have now had an

opportunity to experience the classics. Earth brings in a tidy sum from Westerners citizens who come to steep themselves in these movies, like an ancient Muslim making his Haj to Mecca—back before it was nuked into a glassy plane. And the *Lord of the Rings* is the most famous and popular of them all. Peter Jackson was a *great* genius, but even *he* had a tragic flaw. He tried to change the work of the master. He actually changed Tolkien's original!"

"But, sir," interjected Aquinar, "what we saw seemed pretty true to the book."

"Aye," Theo replied with the kindly chuckle and benevolent nod of a buddha holding court. The usual ring of additional students and onlookers had gathered around, listening with eager attention. "Jackson cannot be blamed for neglecting to think of the far future. But he really should have anticipated the fact that hundreds of years later the copyright would have passed, and the technology would be there to 'rectify' a movie just as easily as you can rewrite a book. Thus it was inevitable that most of Jackson's deviations from the original text would be changed back, but it was done so artfully that you would not have even noticed the difference. Of course, the movie and the book are not nearly so salient to Earth, but they are terribly important to Westerners. So in the process of catering to us, you can rest assured that most of the scenes that were not faithful to the book were treated like some perverted, obscure mistranslation, with the errors and departures from the primary source quickly sorted out for future generations."

"What kind of things did they do in the original movie?" asked Faisal with horrified fascination.

"Well, for instance, there was Gimli, who was played almost entirely for comic relief in the movie." This brought a growl from Broadax who was listening nearby, leaning on her ubiquitous ax and looking as if she'd like to fight somebody. "Or, worst of all, there was the treatment of Merry and Pippin. In the book they were transformed through war from simple, carefree souls into 'fearless hobbits with bright swords and grim faces' who came home and brought a righteous reckoning to the Shire. In the original movie this was completely omitted! There were several other such instances. They should have known that altering this story was like changing the Bible, and that six-hundred years later people would be watching a version that had completely corrected their sad attempts at 'artistic license' with one of the great works of all time."

"Well," said Jubal thoughtfully, "it was one hell of a movie."

"Aye," said Grenoble, the captain's Sylvan bodyguard who was standing silently by in his crimson-and-clover uniform. "Thy Prime Minister Disraeli, a great leader who stood at the helm of the British Empire in their prime, advised us to 'Nurture your minds with great thoughts. To believe in the heroic makes heroes.' 'Tis nothing in the galaxy more heroic than thy *Lord of the Rings*. It may be thy culture's greatest contribution. *Believe* it in thy heart, and may the heroes of literature make thee heroic in life. For that is what literature should accomplish."

"Aye," concluded Theo, "so here's to the great twenty-first century genius who made this masterpiece come alive on the screen, and, here's to those who went back and rectified his hubris and folly."

Then he changed topics and asked his class, "Tell me, what did you think of your experiences in the simulators?"

There were shudders and frowns among the middies, and then tiny Aquinar looked up with his dark eyes and said, "I got the impression that the simulator *liked* killing us, sir."

"Aye," replied Brother Theo. "Computers. The intelligence may be artificial, but the malice is genuine. Enough talk. Back to sword drill, you laggards!"

Later that day the middies were invited to dine with the wardroom. In the captain's cabin, Melville was hosting Archer and Crater. It was the *Fang*'s final evening in port, and soon another chapter in their adventure would begin.

The wardroom was filled with the satisfaction and contentment of full bellies after a good meal. The wine was circulating and the discussion had turned to the *Fang*'s treatment by the Admiralty.

It was hard for them to accept what had happened. What good was glory, bought at such a tragic price of blood and lost lives, when others didn't recognize it? It was like being a wealthy man traveling in a foreign country, where you couldn't exchange your money into the currency of the land.

"At least we got our prize money from Osgil," said old Hans, "an' we've all got ownership shares in *three* Ships, by the Lady! Accrost the years 'at's gonna amount ta more money then most folks could dream of."

"Eep!" agreed his monkey, bobbing its head happily.

"I don't know," replied Fielder, "I can dream of an *awful* lot of money. Me, I want what's coming to me... The world, sweetie, and everything in it. The bottle stands by you, Mr. Hayl."

Broadax shook her head. "If'n ye ain't morally bankrupt, yer definitely overdrawn! Hell, money ain't everythin'!" growled Broadax. "We been cheated outa our fair share o' glory, fame, an' *immortality*, dammit! Fame an' immortality bought with blood an' lives. The lives of our mates, an' the lives o' *bunches* o' Guldur an' Goblan bastards we done sent to freeze in hell with the Elder King. They done spat on the sacrifice o' all our dead mates, an' the spirits o' all the enemies they took with 'em!"

"I don't want to achieve immortality through acts of glory," replied Fielder, "I want to achieve immortality through not dying!"

Broadax just snarled as the first officer continued. "As for fame, well: once God gave a man a choice of fame, power, and adulation, and wealth. So he asked only for great wealth. And lo, he had all of these. *We have* got wealth, and wealth *will* make you famous and powerful. *And* handsome—at least in the eyes of most ladies. Come now, Mr. Hayl. Move the bottle along smartly if you're not going to partake."

"But not wisdom," replied Brother Theo as his monkey nodded wisely from his hood. "No amount of money can buy wisdom. *That* is one commodity that has not been commercialized."

"Hmm, you want wisdom, do you?" asked Mrs. Vodi with a smile. "Once two men saved a fairy. The fairy gave them each one wish. One asked to be the wisest man on earth. The other asked to be even wiser, and lo, the fairy turned him into a woman!"

That received a round of appreciative laughter. Then Midshipman Hayl said hesitantly, "Forgive me if I'm out of line, but can anyone tell me *why* we have been treated like this. I thought we'd be greeted as conquering heroes."

"Ah, Grasshopper," replied Theo. "Once two peasants saved a fairy. The fairy gave them each one wish. The one asked for a cow. The other said, 'I wish his cow would die!' Do you see? It is an eternal human tendency toward shortsighted selfishness. We are the first peasant, and the Admiralty is the petty, vindictive second peasant."

Hayl was feeling the wine and he also felt a bit overwhelmed and sulky. His monkey sunk its head deep into its thorax, and the middie looked down at the table as he muttered, "Please don't call me 'Grasshopper,' sir."

"Very well," replied Theo with a twinkle in his eye and a chuckle that took the sting out of his words. "Members of the mess, I propose a toast to he who shall now be known henceforth as 'Cockroach.'"

That brought general laughter and a cheer as they all raised their glasses, and a chorus of voices said, "To Cockroach!"

"That's not so bad really," laughed Westminster. "Since the little bastards are almost impossible to kill!"

Lady Elphinstone favored Hayl with a gentle smile that made his heart melt and his spirits soar. "The boy's question deserves an answer," she said, kindly turning the conversation away from poor red-faced Hayl. "Generations without war can do this to a nation. History becomes legend, and legend became myth. And some things that should not have been, are forgotten."

"Aye," growled Broadax. "Yer Westernness has had it too damned soft, and now ye pays the price! But there's been many places an' times when people've thought of war as the given, an' *peace* the perversion. Take the Greeks o' Homer's time, fer instance. They saw war as the one endurin' constant, as routine an' all-consumin' as the cycle o' the seasons. They knew full well that war can be grim an' squalid in many ways, but it wus still the time when the will of the gods were manifest on Earth. To the Greeks, peace wus nothing but a fluke. A delay brought on by bad weather, or when ye had ta keep the troops at home until the harvest was done. Any o' Homer's heroes would see the peaceful life o' yer average Earthling, or even most citizens o' Westernness, as some bizarre aberration. An' in truth, 'at might jist be the wisest way ta look at it."

That brought a series of solemn and somewhat surprised nods. No one had ever heard Broadax pontificate in such depth. Frankly, no one knew she had it in her, but clearly this was touching on a topic that was near and dear to her heart.

Lt. Fielder nodded and added, "I fear that the powers-that-be in the Admiralty have become something dreadful and disgusting: politicians. Over the centuries we've protected them from the natural results of their actions, so we've bred all the sense out of them. They weren't too smart to begin with, and it's been downhill ever since. Now they have become urbane terrorists, fighting with memos and news leaks instead of muskets and cannons. For them it is total warfare, and there is no rule book."

"Excuse me," said Asquith, hesitantly, "and I mean no disrespect, but isn't it disloyal to speak of the Admiralty this way?"

"Yep, we're a strange mix," replied Hans. "Outspoken, freebootin' merchants, combined with the warriors of a democracy." The others nodded in agreement to this as he continued. "'Ere in the wardroom we say what we damned well think. But we obey orders, by God. An', young midshipmen," he said, pointing a stern finger at the middies, "you'll do the same. It's a fightin' man's right ta gripe, but we *will* do our duty. *Aye, lads?* "

There was a chorus of agreement from the midshipmen as Hans concluded, "Otherwise, we be no different from them vacuum-suckin' scumbags we despises."

"Aye," said Lady Elphinstone softly as she held her wineglass up so that her monkey could take a dainty sip. "Ye who knowst what war is like shall find it almost impossible to communicate with the children of peace. To a warrior, war is a teacher of positive values: courage, self-sacrifice, respect for authority, dedication to a common goal. But these are signally absent in the soft and cynical selfishness of Earth's culture. The men of war can't crack the cynicism of such a culture. 'Everyone' knows that if those values had ever *really* existed in the past, they were only the result of some collective delusion. The children of peace think they are too smart for that, but they are really just cynical. Most of them, like Earth, and the Admiralty today, think 'tis but a sick joke to suggest that war could ever teach anybody anything good. But thou knowst better, and in the end thou shalt do thy duty. We shall *all* do our duty. And *if* thou livest, thou shalt be the wiser and the better for it, like Merry and Pippin returning home to the Shire."

"Well said, my lady," said Brother Theo. "Forgive me, Cuthbert, I mean no personal offense, and I am sorry to speak so bluntly, but the leaders on Earth, and most of those among our Admiralty, are wraiths. Like Tolkien's Ring Wraiths. Wraith derives from words like *wrath*, as in anger. *Writhe* which is to twist and turn. And *wreath*, which is a twisted thing. The wraith is defined by shape, not substance. They are creatures of vacuity. Emptiness. They sell their souls a nickel at a time to get power, and when they get it, they are empty, hollow, soulless creatures."

"Yesss," replied Asquith cautiously. "I fear that there is some truth in that, and I take no offense. But do we really want to be saying all of this in front of these lads," he said gesturing toward the midshipmen.

"These 'lads' are military officers and *warriors*," scowled Lt. Fielder. "They are all veterans of battle. *Many* battles for most of them. The boy asked, dammit, and he has a right to understand what has happened, and why it happened. We do them no favors by protecting them from reality."

"Aye and what they must comprehend," said Theo, "is that one of the great instruments of power is technology, and one of its great victims is nature: the world, the pastoral environment that we know and love on all the worlds of Westernness... except for Earth."

Then Theo reached out to the bottle, and frowned as he poured the last few dribbles into his empty glass. "Mess steward!" shouted Fielder. "I say there, a fresh bottle. We're dry as a hangman's eye here!"

Theo nodded his thanks and continued. "Tolkien despised the internal combustion engine, you know, which polluted and defiled his environment and his world, usurping the horse, the walk, and the community. Tolkien, who we venerate, is all about applicability, not allegory. And he can definitely be applied to technology. Lord how he would have despised television, video games, movies and vids on demand, and all the other, modern versions and perversions thereof. Especially when each individual can pursue and feed his worst perversity."

There was a pause as the mess steward brought a new bottle and topped off Theo's glass. The monk and his monkey sipped and sighed with satisfaction as Mrs. Vodi picked up the conversation.

"For Earth, this technology is a cancer, a tragic disease," said Vodi. Like the Rings of Power in Tolkien's writings, all the different versions of the electronic screen pollute and defile Earth's cultural environment. Art, the home, the conversation, and most especially the written word are its victims."

"Aye," continued Theo. "Westernness escaped that when we burst out into two-space and embraced our retro-culture, but Earth did not. We left our Admiralty at Earthport because our best naval facility was here. And, lamentably, across the centuries the Admiralty has become a part of Earth. But we, and the rest of the Kingdom of Westernness are frontier worlds. We espouse and embrace the old ways. And one thing we can be sure of—the thing that Tolkien, Heinlein and the other masters understood so well—is that sometimes there is evil in the land and brave men must go to war."

"Darkness comes," whispered Lady Elphinstone. "A kind of darkness that most men cannot imagine. Blacker than the space it moves through. And good men must go forth to fight it."

"War," said Brother Theo, looking at the middies, "is Sanskrit for, 'desire for more cows.' And 'checkmate' in chess is from the Persian 'Shah mat' or 'the king is dead.' So what does that suggest to you, my young gentlemen?"

This was met with wide-eyed silence from the midshipmen, and finally old Hans answered the question.

"At means we gots the choice o' givin' 'em all our cows, or whackin' their king!" said Hans. "I'm all for takin' a stab at the big kahuna, cause I kinda likes my cows. I'll be *damned* if'n I'll give em a single damned cow!"

"Aye," replied Brother Theo. "Well and succinctly put, Mr. Hans. On that note, let us conclude this evening's class and proceed to a more pleasant topic. The bottle stands by you, Mr. Jubal."

While the *Fang*'s officers were hosting the middies in the wardroom, Lieutenants Archer and Crater were Melville's guests in *his* cabin. They had all read themselves in as Master and Commander of their respective Ships, and this meal was a form of celebration, as well as a good-bye.

McAndrews was, at best, an unimaginative cook. And Mrs. Vodi, who was sometimes called upon to cook for special occasions, was dining in the wardroom. So the meal in Melville's cabin was catered from the Pier, and it was excellent since they could afford to pay for the best.

Key members of the *Fang*'s crew had been sent to form a cadre for *Gnasher* and *Biter*. The young commanders did not have authority to promote anyone to officer ranks, and the Admiralty was not going to give them any officers. But they did have the authority to upgrade from within the enlisted ranks, so top-quality young petty officers had been promoted and transferred. These individuals would form a loyal core of combat-hardened shareholders who would help Archer and Crater get off on the right foot.

For example, young Bernard Hommer (he of the golden halo of hair) had largely recovered from his wound and had been sent to Lt. Archer's Ship to serve as bosun and acting sailing master, and another top bosun's mate had gone to serve in the same capacity aboard Crater's Ship. Cookie sent her two best helpers to be Ship's cooks. Brother Theo sent his two top mates to serve as acting pursers. Each of the *Fang*'s departments sent two trusted, experienced, loyal young NCOs to fill key leadership positions aboard these two new Ships. And, of course, they already had two Dwarrowdelf NCOs to lead their marines.

The remaining enlisted berths had been filled with eager volunteers from here on Earthport. There was no lack of experienced sailors and marines from aboard Earthport's swarm of luggers, brigs, and sloops who were willing to jump Ship to earn shares aboard a Western Navy Ship. This was especially so considering the wealth and fame of these three Ships. (Which was yet another good reason to appreciate Asquith, since it was his novel that helped to spread their fame on Earth *and* on Earthport.)

Archer and Crater were also able to find plenty of young midshipmen who were eager to sign on with them. Judicious selection from among many applicants had given them some experienced watch officers who would help cover their lack of commissioned officers. But the Admiralty and NAVPERS (the Naval Personnel Office) kept a tight grip on all officer assignments, and there would be no more officers for the *Fang* and her sisters.

Melville had given Archer and Crater what advice he could, encouraging them to stick to that harsh mistress, Duty, while listening to their experienced NCOs and acting fairly. "Your Ship will remain faithful," said Melville, "and you have a cadre of loyal, experienced NCOs. Listen to the advice of others, then make your own decisions. Be guided by your sense of duty, and allow yourself the time to grow into your position. Don't destroy yourselves because of the bad days, take pride in the good days, and never stop learning."

"We'll try to remember that," said Archer solemnly, while Crater nodded.

"You will not, you rascals!" replied Melville with a laugh. "After a brief, cautious period you'll think you know better than everyone else alive! Your Ship will give you confidence, and you will be full of piss and vinegar. Which is as it should be, I think. Just be conscious of what is happening, listen to your NCOs, and never forget your duty."

Then he concluded, lifting his glass, "To Duty, my brothers! And to our Ships!"

"To Duty and our Ships!" replied his companions.

"Eep!" echoed their monkeys happily.

*Fang, Biter, and Gnasher had rubbed against the Moss of Earthport, Mankind's most ancient Pier. And these three sentient Ships told their tale, just as they had told it to the Pier at Nordheim.*

*Kestrel had been an old, old friend to Earthport. Her passing was mourned, and a fierce anger was kindled in the heart of that ancient Pier. Earthport intuitively and instinctively understood Kestrel's selfless, dying act that had helped her beloved crew capture Fang. The sentient entity that was Earthport was not surprised by Kestrel's sacrifice. It had exchanged Moss with Kestrel*

*thousands of times across the centuries. In the end Earthport was Kestrel , and Kestrel was Earthport, and she loved her humans with the same intensity and purity.*

*Under the circumstances, Kestrel's sacrificial actions came as no surprise to Earthport, but the ancient Pier was shocked to its core by the three Guldur Ships' experiences. A Pier that had known only gentle, loving symbiosis with humanity was stunned when Fang, Gnasher, and Biter told of the bondage and hate that had festered upon their decks. And a Pier that had known only joy and prosperity suddenly knew fear and dread when it learned of the dark tide of death, destruction, and desolation that was spreading across the vast face of two-space.*

*From that day forth, each Ship that rubbed Moss with the Earthport became a part of Kestrel , Fang , Biter , and Gnasher , and they carried their tale and their warnings via a system of communication that could not lie, and could not be ignored.*

*A message was also sent through the bare feet of all those who strode upon the decks of Westerness' Ships, and to all who stood upon her Piers. The message that came to the men of Westerness via their Ships and Piers was not one of words, but rather of feelings, emotions, and concerns. If you could put those diffuse feelings and emotions into a single word, it would be "War!" Red war was coming. War to the knife.*

*And Westerness began to prepare herself for war. The Moss knew, even if the Admiralty was in deep denial. Even if her sailors and marines did not know it yet, they felt it. Oh yes, across that vast star kingdom, they could not help but feel it... and prepare.*

The next morning the *Fang* 's sails boomed and cracked like thunder as each piece of canvas, from the vast mainsails to the tiny royals, filled and hardened to the constant downward wind of two-space. The *Fang* took on ever more speed as each sail began to draw, until finally she left Earthport under a cloud of canvas.

As they sailed away from Earth, old Hans and Midshipmen Hayl were again high up in the cold air of the crosstrees.

"Okay, lad," said Hans, "that Poet Class frigate comin' in, who is she and what's 'er boats?"

"That's the *Emily Bronte* ," replied Hayl promptly. "And her boats are *Remembrance*, *High Waving Heather* , *Night Is Darkening* , *Happiest When Most Away* , *How Still How Happy* , and *No Coward Soul Is Mine* ."

" *Well*done, lad! Well done! I can see ya ain't been wasting yer time here at Earthport. Ya been studying, have ya?"

"Aye, sir. But I also knew that she was due in, so I paid special attention to her."

"Hoo-yah! *Well* done, again," said the old sailor with a wink. "Ya'd do well to study Emily Bronte, indeed. Like all the Bronte sisters, she died young, but what a mark she made, what a light she lit! ' *No Coward Soul Is Mine*,' indeed! May we be able to make such a mark before we're called home, lad. An' may we be able to say the same."

\* \* \*

No coward soul is mine  
No trembler in the world's storm-troubled sphere  
I see Heaven's glories shine  
And Faith shines equal arming me from Fear

## CHAPTER THE 9TH

# Forsaken: "Risk the Wrath of the Gods!"

Shove off from the wharf-edge! Steady!  
Watch for a smooth! Give way!  
If she feels the lop already  
She'll stand on her head in the bay...

Raging seas have we rowed in  
But we seldom saw them thus,  
Our master is angry with Odin—  
Odin is angry with us!

Heavy odds have we taken,  
But never before such odds.  
The Gods know they are forsaken.

We must risk the wrath of the Gods!

"Song of the Red War Boat"  
Rudyard Kipling

*The Fang* and her crew sailed on, forsaken but not forlorn. The tin gods of the Admiralty were angry with them, and *they* were disgusted with the powers-that-be.

The important thing was that they had survived. Once again the *Fang* s had faced heavy odds. They had risked the wrath of the tin gods, and they had *survived* .

And that was good enough for now.

The good news was that at least Melville was now formally and legally the Master and Commander of the good Ship *Fang* , the crew and midshipmen had managed to put in some quality training time, and the *Fang* had been resupplied. The bad news was that they were forsaken: rejected, denied, and cast out by the Admiralty. And the unkindest cut of all came from NAVPERS.

The Naval Personnel Office was generally considered to be the Western Navy's version of Russian roulette. NAVPERS was responsible for all officer assignments, but it also assigned petty officers and warrants to Ships. And so, as one final indignity, NAVPERS (or some clerk hiding deep in the bowels thereof) had stolen away Roxy, their old, one-eyed, Jewish cook at the last moment before sailing.

There was still a good stock of food from the victuallers, since like all good department heads Roxy had completed refitting and resupply before going on liberty. She had been a sweaty, repulsive old figure, often with a chew of tobacco in her mouth as she slaved over her boiling pots and pans, with a yarmulke pinned to her head. (Apparently, in her particular sect, the women wore yarmulkes.) But the fruit of her labors was the best Ship's fare anyone had ever known, and she was much appreciated and beloved. And during the mass-exodus of the boarding action in which they had captured the *Fang*, Roxy had proven herself to be hell-on-wheels in close-combat, with a meat cleaver in one hand and a pistol in the other. She would be missed.

Since drinking to excess, fighting, and consorting with the opposite sex are frowned upon aboard military Ships, that left eating and sleeping, reading and studying, competitions and crafts, drills and exercises, and daily duties as the main entertainments aboard. Eating was the first and foremost of these, and eating well was regarded as an absolute necessity to keep a crew's morale up.

All of which meant the assignment of Kaleb Jones, a graduate of the Western Naval Culinary and Catering School, was even more obviously a demonstration of NAVPERS' disaffection with the *Fang* .

In fact, Jones was the worst graduate, with the lowest passing score ever seen. Which had resulted in his original assignment to the Admiralty galley being regarded as a masterpiece of revenge on the part of the Culinary and Catering School's commanding officer. No one was quite sure who he was trying to get revenge upon, but it was widely agreed that he had succeeded admirably! The situation was made even worse by the fact that Roxy's two best helpers had been assigned to *Gnasher* and *Biter*. All in all, it did not bode well for the stomachs aboard the *Fang*.

Thus it was a grim Shipload of *Fang*s who faced every meal with angry groans. Kaleb Jones was happily oblivious to the waves of hostility that came his way with every meal.

"Boys, I'm a gonna feed ya somethin' 'at'll change yer lives!" roared their new cook cheerfully, while he stirred the pot with the barrel of a loaded pistol. Jones had proven early on in Ship's competitions that he was deadly proficient with that pistol, and he handled his various chef's knives in a blinding blur of efficient activity that awed most sailors, so there was an understandable reluctance to confront him. "An' don' ya gimme no grief, now. I've spent all day chopping up these toothsome veggies and putting 'em in these damned cans fer ya. Heh, heh! 'Er majesty didn't send me to eight weeks o' catering school fer nothin'!"

It was almost as if he relished the curses and growls that his efforts received.

"Yum, yum," cried Jones. "We gots salt beef *and* this here alien mystery meat. Ya know wot they says. One meat is a meal, two meats is a feast! 'At's wot they told us grad-yew-ates o' the Royal Caterin' Corps, an' 'ats my motto! Well, come on boys, chow down!"

When no one stepped forward he continued to encourage them in his own, inimitable way. "Wot ya waitin' fer?" he cried, offering up a reeking slab of mystery meat on the end of his double-barreled pistol. "Ya ain't gonna durty up silverware fer this, air ya? It's toothsome finger food! Us members o' the Royal Caterin' Corps 'as got asbestos hands, but even wimps like you should be able to handle this."

Melville would have been worried about the safety of his new "cook" except for two things. First was the loaded, double-barrel, two-space pistol that the cook always held in his hand, *and* his demonstrated proficiency with said pistol and all of the other sharp implements of his profession. He stirred with that pistol, served with it, and did almost everything else that could be done with it in a kitchen. The other thing that probably kept the boy alive was the one singular exception to the almost universal disgust the crew had for Jones' cooking.

That one exception was Lt. Broadax.

At her first meal she showed up acting in her normal, morning, pre-coffee, pre-cigar fashion: grumpy and snarling to all in sight. And then, wonder of wonders, she smelled the lumpy, burned, and curdling porridge mess Jones had prepared for breakfast.

Josiah Westminster summed it up best in the wardroom later. "Well, it was like watching Boye the pup come up on something new and interesting. She actually stopped mangling that stogie of hers and stood up so tall she almost woulda hit my chest bone! Then she turns and starts sniffing. Ah wondered what had hit her and started sniffing myself, but all Ah could smell was the gawdawful concoction that miscreant masquerading as a cook had mangled to death and stuck on the serving line. And she walks over to the line and bounced the deck gang who was waiting to see who would give in to hunger first outta the way, and she leans over it and sniffs! And her eyebrows went up, and her beard starts aquivering, and she starts a playing with her ax, and Ah'm a thinking we were gonna get hurt trying to save the poor benighted idjit.

"Then she reaches out and grabs the plate from the nearest sailor and shovels in a bite, and Ah jist knew, Ah *knew* there was gonna be some blood. Ah mean even Cinder don't like that stuff and Lord knows she'll eat anything!

"So then there was one of those 'pregnant pauses' you're always hearing about, except this one gave birth to a litter of little puppy pauses, each one doing embarrassing things on the deck. And then damn me if she doesn't *smile* ! Ah don't know about y'all but Ah don't remember her smiling anytime someone wasn't gonna get hurt. Ah have to admit Ah was considering right smart whether Ah should fade back or stay and watch the fun.

"And she ups and smiles again and takes another bite! And then she says, 'Ye know, I ain't et nothin' this good since I left home an' me dear ole mum's cookin'! We finally gots us a decent cook!' And she ups and wanders away, still smiling and eating! Ah haven't been so surprised since the neighbor's daughter taught me boys and girls were different!"

The indignity of having their beloved cook stolen away was slightly balanced by the arrival of their new carpenter, Joby DeWalt. A wide, loud, hairy bear of a young man with an engaging grin, he had arrived aboard at the last possible moment with an enormous chest of tools balanced on one broad shoulder, and a small bag of personal belongings hanging from the other hand.

The amazing thing was that he was a member of the Celebrimbor Shipwrights guild, specially assigned to be the *Fang*'s carpenter. The young Celebri had outlined the situation to Melville with disarming honesty, in his booming voice.

"Well, sir," he said to Melville, "Your NAVPERS wasn't really too accommodating. They kept insisting your Ship had plenty of good solid bosun's mates who were capable of filling in as Ship's carpenter. But the Guild disagreed since we wanted to know more about your *Fang* , and NAVPERS finally decided to... reconsider. But for some reason they seemed a bit unhappy with sending me." Joby grinned slightly at this last, seeming to find a bit of humor in the situation.

"Well, Mr. DeWalt, that helps to explain why you're here," Melville said as he reflected upon the

profoundly unappetizing lunch that McAndrews had delivered to him. "However," he continued as he pushed the plate aside, untouched, "as captain, I have to ask how your membership in the Celebrimbor Guild is going to impact your job as Ship's carpenter. The Guild are known to be somewhat, mmm, reticent about many aspects of our Ships."

Joby appeared to be a bluff, hearty young man, open and free, but the man that peered out through his eyes for a moment was one much older and much, much colder. "Sir," he said after a quiet moment, "I am a Celebrimbor master Shipwright. If it doesn't touch on my oaths or honor to the Guild, I am your man. Is that sufficient?"

For a moment, Melville and *Fang*, mixed together inside his soul, looked at DeWalt and sensed a kindred spirit that had been touched with the otherness of the Moss. Melville looked deep into those eyes and saw the fierceness and strength, the pain and joy that came with linking your soul to that of an alien creature. With a wry smile he said, "Yes, Mr. DeWalt, I believe that will be more than sufficient. On to other topics then. First, tell me what you think of our *Fang*."

Joby thought for a moment, scratching his red beard as he looked out into two-space through the stern windows in the captain's office. "Well, now, for a sloop, she really looks a bit like a three-masted frigate." He chuckled at his own joke and shook his head.

"Honestly, now, she's well found and masted, built strong as anything from our Shipyards. To be more than a bit honest, she's actually stronger and stouter than anything we've ever made, since we built for speed. The Guldur seem to have built for flat-out fighting ability, and capacity to withstand damage."

Melville nodded. "I suspected that. The *Fang* had to be able to handle the 24-pounders, so she was built tougher than most Ships. Even her mast and spars are remarkably stout."

"Yes, sir, and we're really interested in how you've used that strength to put up more sail and get more speed out of her than anyone would have thought possible." Then Joby grinned and started a comparison, an almost frame-by-frame comparison, of the strengths and weaknesses of the *Fang* to the Ships of the Author and Poet classes. While interesting in itself, after the first five minutes Melville began to wonder what he had unleashed upon himself and tried to intervene.

"Do you know, Mr. DeWalt, that is absolutely the best analysis I have heard of the *Longworth's* cargo space loading." At least he tried to say that, with his monkey adding a desperate "Eeek, Eeek!" But Joby continued on, apparently entranced by his subject matter and oblivious to the increasingly desperate attempts by Melville and his monkey to break into his monologue.

Despite his interest in the subject and his pleasure at having a Celebri Shipwright assigned to his Ship, Melville couldn't help but wonder if putting young DeWalt aboard might have been part of the Admiralty's none too subtle revenge. As his monkey essayed another leap into the air, he kept wondering if there was any way to shut the man up so he could get back to work!

While most of the crew was settling back into the cycle of work, sleep, and play without any real difficulty, the middies themselves were having trouble returning to their usual cycle of learning and mischief. After finding their lives expanded by the high-tech world of Earth and the myriad forms of visual entertainment so readily available, they found another enduring truth: withdrawal from any addiction, no matter how brief or mild, is unpleasant. In this case, the addiction was to violent visual mush in the form of classic television and movies.

Brother Theo knew what they were going through. It took about four days to detox from a heavy diet of violent, visual entertainment. Which is why the first three days of most summer camps for kids in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries were pure hell, but by the end of the week, the kids didn't want to go home! For the first time in their lives those children were surrounded by other healthy kids, and they were healthy as well!

Theo kindly tried to help, in the finest Navy fashion, by keeping the boys working harder than they had since refitting the *Fang* after battle. "Young gentlemen," he declared, "your immersion in the classics of TV and movies was of great value in your professional development, but it was also kind of like going on a drinking binge, or a drug trip.

"The effect that you are feeling was almost the undoing of civilization in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. By the early twenty-first century, the average child in America was spending forty-five hours a week in front of the tube, and the impact was so toxic and powerful that when schools started programs designed to convince kids (and their parents) to turn it all off, the improvement was stunning and irrefutable. The first school district in human history to turn off all TV, movies, and video games was Escanaba, Michigan, in the early twenty-first century. That momentous occasion, which has been called the 'Escanaba Miracle' led the way for a staggering, worldwide decrease in violence, bullying, sleep deprivation, and obesity, and tremendous improvements in test scores, attendance, academic achievement, learning, and behavior.

"John Lang, a particularly astute observer from that turbulent era, wrote a nice piece of poetry that communicates the growing concerns of the time:

"Back in Medieval days  
Cathedrals once held Passion Plays  
Since Peasants couldn't read but only look;  
That's how they learned the lessons  
In the Bible's many sessions,  
For few people could afford a hand-penned book.

"Technology's new printing press  
Soon made books cost a whole lot less  
And people started reading far and wide;

Soon words were found on bonds and stocks  
And on your breakfast cereal box,  
Where many kids' first words were 'Free Inside!'

"Our stories now are mostly seen  
On TV's or the movie screen  
And reading books scares strong, stout-hearted men.  
Technology is paving ways  
To lead us back to Passion Plays,  
And might just send us further back again.

"Of course," Theo continued, "we now know that the impact of violent visual imagery goes much further than just undermining literacy. By the early twenty-first century they had brain scan studies demonstrating that a steady diet of violent visual imagery resulted in emaciated, malnourished forebrains, catastrophically shut down left-brain processing, and overdeveloped midbrains. Which is the state you gentlemen are in today.

"We let you go on this little electronic binge for the learning experience and the exposure to the great classics. But I think you can see how potentially addictive it could be if you had access to it all the time. Never forget that the electronic screen is a cross between Medusa and Cyclops. It has one eye and turns you (or at least your brain) into stone. The only known cure is to make sure you sweat the stone out of your brains! And your hind ends as well!"

With the assistance of Lt. Fielder and Mrs. Vodi, Brother Theo managed to keep their every waking moment, and not a few of their sleeping dreams, filled with studies and work. All in all, he felt that they were recovering nicely from their battle and the subsequent overdose of technology they received on Earth.

Already the effects of their last battle were fading. Memories of Shipmates killed and crippled friends left on Earth had become like old scars, forgotten except when a twinge brought them to painful remembrance. Remembrances which were dealt with by breathing ("In through the nose, two, three, four..."), gentle counseling, and more hard work.

"Remember your training," said Brother Theo in one session, "we have talked about how the body reacts after you have been in a fight: a real fight, a killing fight, where even if you know you are doing right, it is hard, because you and your friends are in peril, and some won't come back. Anything can trigger your memories of that incident and those remembrances are powerful and will affect you." He paused, "Or any one of us," he continued quietly. Gunny Von Rito, and several other hardened veterans, who were leaning against the rail nearby, nodded slowly. "The only cure is time, and applying the old maxim: pain shared is pain divided, and joy shared is joy multiplied. Never forget, you *must* talk about the incident—and when you do, you must focus on the positive aspects. You cannot *not* think about something. Trying to not think about the event can send you down the path of madness."

One of the crew lounging nearby called out, "'Pain shared is pain divided?' How does that apply to our

so-called breakfast, Brother?"

Amid a background of combined moans, groans, and laughs Brother Theo replied, "I stand by my statement, my son. After all, contemplate upon how you would feel if you had to consume it all by yourself."

"Eep!" added his monkey, and then they delved back into the lessons at full speed.

Lt. Fielder had just settled into the morning watch when he saw Cuthbert Asquith XVI wander over to the rail. While Asquith was not normally a dandy, he usually looked quite a bit more put-together than he did this morning: unshaven, a bit pale in the face, and somewhat disheveled. It might not have been noticeable on another man, but for Asquith it was like a waving flag saying, "I... I... I don't fееeel so goood...! Even his monkey looked downcast and dejected.

Fielder walked up to him quietly and said, "Bert, what's the matter?" Then he offered optimistically if not too hopefully, "Did one of Jones' so-called meals finally poison someone enough that we can fire him?"

"Thanks for your concern, Daniel. But, no, he hasn't succeeded in poisoning anyone... yet. That I know of. Although I do think his 'chef's special' today was Heimlich maneuvers..." He sighed. "Do you know, I never understood why they called it a 'mess' in the old books until I started eating, or rather trying to eat his cooking."

Fielder laughed quietly and said, "Well, according to Lady Elphinstone the food is in fact nutritious and healthy and will sustain life indefinitely, or at least as long as you can stomach it. She says that by Dwarrowdelf standards the food would be considered adequate, if not outstanding, due to its soft texture."

"Soft!" Asquith exclaimed. "Soft, she says? Daniel, there was a sailor last night who was using some of the salt meat in the stew as a carving medium. He said it had softened just enough he didn't have to use a chisel to work it!"

Off in the distance, their new cook was waving his pistol in the air and berating a sailor who had complained that the meat was too tough. "Just set about it with a couple of forks," explained Jones. "If 'at don't wurk, ya just kind of maul it with a bit of knife work..."

Fielder found it hard to maintain his usual sardonic humor in the face of this situation and stared glumly off into the stars of two-space. "Like I said, the Dwarrowdelf would consider it a bit soft. Lady Elphinstone reminded me that food under high gravity has to be fairly dense simply to grow upright, which means those who eat it have to have equally stout teeth and jaws." He sighed again. "Like Broadax's."

"Yeah, Daniel," replied Asquith. "Broadax certainly seems to like it."

Fielder chuckled. "Apparently so, Bert. And since she is happy, life is better for the marines and sailors she has to work with, which means they have a Catch-22 situation: if they complain about Jones and get him replaced, then they have to deal with an unhappy Broadax; but if they keep Broadax happy, they have to eat Jones' cooking."

"Damned if they do, and damned if they don't", Asquith laughed. "And here I thought I had some difficult decisions."

Again a snatch of angry conversation came to them from the mess line.

"I saw ya put innocent potatoes in there," cried a sailor, "an' *this* is wat came out. How can you git *potatoes* to be so tough?"

"Ya just cooks 'em fer a long time. Tumble 'em in, bobble 'em around, and fry the hell out of 'em. Fry the hell out of 'em, 'at's my motto. An' a dab o cookin' sherry. Ya needs lots a cookin' sherry. Call me obvious, but ya can never have too much cookin' sherry or bitterash root. At's my motto."

"What's troubling you then?" Fielder asked, looking around to check on the Ship and make sure they were relatively private.

"Well," Asquith said shyly, "a while back Lt. Archer was telling me about... dreams." He paused, then said, "He was telling me about dreams where the subconscious is sending a message and he mentioned that when you start having dreams of failure that your unconscious mind is telling you to practice."

Fielder nodded and said, "Generally, that's the interpretation of those types of dreams. In the sports world they're called 'performance anxiety dreams.' Guns not working in your dreams means you need to practice shooting. Punches that don't have any effect on your opponent represent a lack of confidence,

and hard training can provide that confidence. I've had those a time or two myself. Especially when I'm, umm, escorting a married woman," he said with a leer.

"Married women? Daniel, isn't that dangerous with that barbarian custom of dueling that you Westernness types have?"

Fielder laughed. "That *would* explain why I only get those dreams when my current girlfriend is married. But that doesn't answer your question, Bert. What kind of dream are you having?"

"Pistols... guns..." he mumbled. "Damned things won't work. Just sort of wilt in my hand. Or bullets droop out the barrel. So my mind is telling me I need to learn about the damned things? I never wanted to be a duelist. I never wanted to go into combat! I never even wanted to leave Earth again!"

Fielder looked at him with a brief feeling of sincere affection. Sort of like you'd feel for a frightened pet bunny. "Look, Bert, you're getting a few things confused here. There is a huge difference between a duel and combat. The only similarity is that in both cases someone is trying to kill you. And the same training generally works for both. The best protection that you can have in a violent galaxy is to be deadly proficient with a pistol. Not to win duels. The whole idea is to *avoid* duels. The goal is to make it clear, to *any* potential enemy, that challenging you is tantamount to suicide. In the real world, most of the time, people don't go around looking for the fastest gun to beat in a fair battle. That's a myth from the Earth's Old West. It's the paradox of combat: in the real world, the better able you are to kill someone, the less likely you are to have to do it."

Asquith was silent for a while, thinking it over. Fielder stood by companionably, waiting for him to decide what he wanted, hoping the little man would decide to learn pistolcraft. While it might not be necessary, it *could* just save his life. And, he reflected, surprising as it was, Asquith had developed into a friend. Life was long. Things changed. People changed. And a tincture of time combined with native intelligence was one of the best medicines for curing ignorance.

Asquith sighed. "Well, what do I have to lose?"

"Aye," said Fielder. "My Grandma BenGurata always said, 'It's best to learn skills at leisure, just in case circumstances force you into a career change. And *change* is the only certainty in life.'"

Fielder believed in the general principle of striking before your victim gets a chance to talk himself out of the idea. So he arranged for Brother Theo to give Asquith his first lesson off the upperside stern, or "fantail" of the Ship. This allowed for Fielder to be nearby on the upper quarterdeck to observe and assist, and to store up a few embarrassing anecdotes for a time when Asquith, or others, would enjoy them. This location also kept most of the idlers from kibitzing or otherwise "helping" the earthworm learn the basics of survival.

Brother Theo was more than happy to teach Asquith, since it gave him an excuse to spend a morning shooting and teaching. Two things he loved to do. As Asquith learned quickly, Brother Theo did love the sound of his own voice, although this was leavened by his sincere interest in his pupil, and in the subject matter.

"Mr. Asquith, first, you have to understand that all we can do is train you to operate a weapon: to *use* it effectively and efficiently when needs must. The *ability* to actually fire the weapon and extinguish a life at the moment of truth must come from within." His monkey *EEK* ed emphatically at this, causing Brother Theo to twitch a brief grin at the little creature on his shoulder. "I would like to assert that the likelihood of such an event is doubtful, but based on recent history..." he trailed off with a slightly sad smile.

Asquith sighed. "I know, and I believe I need to learn the skill. I understand the need for it, but I must admit I'm not too happy about it."

Brother Theo nodded. "You are playing at the edges of the 'paradox of the warrior' that has followed us throughout civilization. You see, the warrior must have the skill, and the *will* to kill. The young soldier, sailor, or marine is issued a weapon and learns the skill. That is the easy part, and it does not make him a warrior. Next, he must understand, he must truly comprehend the fact that weapons *kill*. The full magnitude of the act of killing must hit him, and he has to deal with it, which should make him reluctant to take up his weapons, *unless* he believes it is truly necessary. And that is the vital step in the evolution of the true warrior: realizing what weapons can do, and still believing in the necessity to protect yourself and your loved ones. So, grasp it, understand it, and don't let go of it. Weapons exist to kill."

"Then why don't you store your weapons away if they're so dangerous? Why do you have them on you or near you so much of the time?" Asquith asked curiously.

"Ah, grasshopper," Brother Theo answered with a chuckle, "there are no dangerous weapons. There are only dangerous men! And to deal with dangerous men in a dangerous world, you must be dangerous! Ergo, you *need* a weapon, and the skill and the will to use it.

"Now," continued the monk, "you have asked a terribly important question. An inquiry which demands a response! Why must we have our weapons with us?"

"Oh, no," Asquith groaned. "Is there any chance of getting the short answer here, or am I going to have to hear it all before I get to shoot?"

"Watch it, Mr. Asquith, you're starting to sound like my poor midshipmen when I lecture them!" He grinned at the earthling, and continued, "Seriously though, we must avoid what Saint Blauer called a 'lip service, fortune cookie mindset.' Like, 'Be the willow, bend don't break.' That's just splendid. Thankyouverymuch. But a fortune cookie could have done about as much good! The key question to ask is, 'Do I have a tangible, useful skill afterward?' So, what will it be, a fortune cookie, or a skill that will

stick to your ribs and be there for you when your life depends on it?"

"Well, when you put it that way, I guess I'm here to learn a skill."

"Good!" replied Theo. "So the answer is that teaching someone to use a weapon gives you conscious skills. It's only when you live with a weapon and carry it with you at all times that it becomes an unconscious part of you, so that it will be there when you need it most. To be honest, carrying a weapon is inconvenient, often uncomfortable, and frequently, if you will pardon a man of the cloth using vulgarity, a royal pain in the arse!"

"If you'll forgive me saying so, you don't always sound very, um, 'pious' I think is the word."

"Some folks wear their halos much too tight," said Theo with a chuckle and a self-deprecating shrug. "I figure God wants spiritual fruit, not religious nuts."

Asquith laughed. "Well, anyway, if carrying a gun is so blessed inconvenient, why do it? Why not just keep it somewhere nearby so you can get to it when you need it?"

"I'll answer that," replied Fielder, who had been listening. "My favorite literary character says, 'When you need a gun, you need it very badly, and nothing else will do.'"

"Pre-zactly," replied Theo. "I like to explain it this way. If I have it on me, no one else can take it from me. And when I need it I probably won't be able to plan exactly when the occasion will be. So if it isn't on me, I won't have it!"

Fielder snorted and said, "That's a hell of a long-winded way of saying the same thing," and then he wandered off to torment some errant soul up in the rigging.

"And," added Theo, "as St. Farnam put it, 'Carrying a gun also imparts a sense of self-respect, indeed nobility, to the carrier. He continually confirms in his own mind that his life and health are important and worth defending and that he, not some unit of government, is the one primarily responsible for his own safety and well being. It is the ratification of the doctrine of individual responsibility.'"

"Huh!" said Asquith, mulling that over carefully.

"Enough of that, my friend!" declared Theo. " *This* is your standard Westernness two-space pistol, commonly referred to as 'old reliable.' And it is, indeed, reliable. So long as you take care of it and keep it either on you or stored next to the Keel at all times so that the effects of two-space are minimized. Two barrels, each with a Keel charge at the end which acts as a trigger when you thumb it, one sight, one rod to ram the bullets home, and a pouch of bullets to practice with."

He looked Asquith directly in the eye. "I discussed this with the captain. He agreed that if you were interested and motivated, this pistol is yours. And to make it a bit more desirable, I'll tell you a secret. This is one of the pistols Gunny Von Rito tuned up and customized for me, so you can count yourself among the rare recipients of his craftsmanship."

Asquith was silent for a moment. He looked away into the distance of two-space and then looked back and said with a slight grin, "Well, perhaps we should help me figure out what I should be doing with this pistol so I don't embarrass us all."

Brother Theo chuckled heartily and said, "Well then sir, you have asked for it! First, this is the front sight..." and he continued happily into the first lesson of pistolcraft for his newest student.

Ulrich had picked up a genuine parrotlet—a kind of pygmy parrot—while he was on Earth. He named the tiny green bird "Spike" and kept it on one shoulder. He and his monkey were teaching it to talk. Ulrich was training it to say, "I'm Spike! I taste like chicken!" and "Heeere kittykittykitty!" His monkey was teaching it to say, "Eep!"

This project was one of the many things that Ulrich did to keep himself entertained while he did the officers' laundry. Most of the time the little coxswain didn't mind washing and pressing for the officers. It needed to be done right, and no one bothered him while he was doing it. Besides, it helped keep his skipper looking impressive, and Ulrich knew better than anyone that appearance could overawe the opposition as much as any weapon. And it *did* make it easier to kill them when they were overawed, which was something that Ulrich heartily approved of.

The officers' laundry facility and Ulrich's pigeon cages were wedged into a small "head" that protruded like a barnacle from the side of the Ship. Under ordinary circumstances, any crewman would come to the head to sit in comfort and drop his waste into two-space. But *this* head was the coxswain's private domain. He was walking toward his area when he heard a sound that was out of place. It almost sounded like a voice but no one came down here unless they had to. Most of the weaklings couldn't handle the smell of the laundry and the pigeons combined.

He dropped the laundry bag he was carrying and drew his pistol as he slowly sidled down the passageway toward the sound. He slid down low and risked a quick peek around the corner, and then stood up suddenly in disgust.

"Hey!" he said, as he holstered his gun and walked around the corner. "Jist wat da hell ya thinks yer dewink?" Remarkably enough, the little sociopath was only curious instead of angry, a situation that most of the crew would have sworn was impossible.

" *Urk!*" grunted Asquith as he tried to simultaneously turn and keep from dropping the bag of bullets, ramrod, and pistol he was juggling in his hands.

Ulrich flicked out a fast fingertip and casually redirected the muzzle of the pistol out over the side as Asquith's monkey made a dive and caught the bag of bullets and the ramrod with a scolding "Eeek!" The earthling's helplessness actually made Ulrich feel somewhat expansive, a condition which might be charitably referred to as peevish in a normal sailor.

Asquith blinked his one good eye rapidly a few times while he opened and closed his mouth. He finally squeaked out, "Practicing!" and started to wave the pistol upward as a demonstration, which move was quickly forestalled by Ulrich pointing it over the side again.

"An' jisk wat are ya practicink? How ta juggle a piskol over da side o' the Ship?" Ulrich shook his head in mild bemusement. Finding an earthworm, practicing with a pistol no less, outside his laundry was not something he ever expected to see! The surprise actually rendered him close to something normal people called agreeable—so long as you could call a highly violent, volatile and unpredictable sociopath agreeable.

"No, ummm, actually reloading rapidly. Brother Theo and Lt. Fielder both agree that I have the basics down and simply need practice. Actually, Lt. Fielder said a few tens of thousands of practice shots was all I would need. I think he was joking a bit, though, I mean, tens of thousands of bullets, I mean..." Realizing he was babbling, Asquith shut up and just stood there.

Ulrich on the other hand was digesting the revelation that both Brother Theo and Lt. Fielder thought this man had the basics down. The coxswain knew both of them well and liked neither of them. (Actually, Ulrich didn't like *anyone* aboard the *Fang*, with the possible exception of his birds and his captain.) But he *did* respect their abilities with guns. Especially Fielder when he had a .45 auto. The man was useless unless he was forced to fight and then he was damned near as fast as Ulrich.

"Damned idjits gotsk it mesked up anyhowsk. Ya gotsk a monkey an' he's willink ta help. Get two piskols, an' give the monk the bulletsk an' ramrod. Like dis." He grabbed the bag of bullets and slung it over his shoulder so the mouth was near the monkey on his shoulder, and took the pistol and ramrod and handed the ramrod to the monkey.

"Now if'ink you're inna furball, in a *real* fight, yer monkey'll be busy usink 'is belayin' pin ta keep yer puny haid t'gether. So's it ain't gonna be this faskt, but he's buttoads faskter 'n you. Hell, he's faskter 'n I am, but don't tell the l'il baskard, he'll jisk git a swelled haid." The monkey on the coxswain's shoulder added an amused "Eep!" Asquith couldn't think of a single monkey aboard that looked so, well, *feral* was the only word that seemed to describe it.

Suddenly Ulrich lowered the pistol and aimed outward, and his thumbs touched the Keel charges rapidly one after the other <<purr!>> "*Crack!*" <<purr!>> "*Crack!*" as the pistol fired, and then he laid the

muzzle on his shoulder pointing up as he pulled another pistol up in his left hand and fired rapidly again.

*Where did that gun come from!?* thought Asquith.

Meanwhile Ulrich's monkey used one hand to snag a bullet, drop it down a barrel, and ram it home with the other hand while repeating the process in the other barrel. Ulrich brought the pistol to the ready and fired, <<purr!>> "Crack!" <<purr!>> "Crack!" as he laid the left-hand pistol in the hollow of his right shoulder so the monkey could reload it using the same rapid series of movements. The pistol in his right hand pivoted up to his monkey's hands as the left hand presented and fired, <<purr!>> "Crack!" <<purr!>> "Crack!" and returned to be reloaded as Ulrich pointed the pistol over the side.

"Eep!" said Ulrich's monkey with smug satisfaction.

"Eep!" echoed his parrotlet, bobbing its head and peering down the bore of the pistol curiously.

Asquith and his monkey stared at Ulrich and his monkey, then looked at each other, then back at Ulrich again. Ulrich flipped the gun in his right hand around and held the butt out as he made the one in his left hand disappear in the same mysterious fashion it had appeared in the first place. "I told ya ya wuz doinink it wrong," he said.

"An' only practicek it here. Itsk our secret. Ya hear me?" Ulrich snarled and looked at Asquith with feral malice. The diminutive earthling gulped and nodded in sincere agreement.

"Dat dam'd gun's loaded. Ain't suppoz ta be empky. Ain't no good ta no 'un empky. Gun's gotta be loaded, got me?" He glared at Asquith.

Asquith took the gun cautiously, feeling like he was playing with unstable explosives. He was careful to keep the pistol pointed well away from this awful little man while he accepted the bag of bullets with his other hand. "Ummm, yes, I believe I do, and rest assured I will keep it properly, uhh, loaded, I mean, uhh..." He trailed off, watching to see what would come out of this scary, sawed-off sociopath next.

"Good", Ulrich grunted. His monkey seconded with an emphatic "Eep!" which was again echoed by his parrotlet. Then he turned and crabbed off around the corner toward his laundry and his pigeons.

"Eek!" said Asquith's monkey.

"Hmm," Asquith replied, looking meditatively after the dangerous little man. "That was a singular experience. I wonder if I can fit him in the next book?" He shook his head as he handed the bag of bullets and the ramrod to his monkey. He wondered if Brother Theo would be averse to giving him another pistol as he turned back to his solitary practice.

He started to scratch his nose, and his monkey gave a startled "Eeek!" and whacked the muzzle of the gun away from his nose.

"Oops," he mumbled. Maybe Daniel was right. It might take a few tens of thousands of rounds just to get the reflexes right!

Captain Thomas Melville, Master and Commander of Her Majesty the Queen of Westerness' Frigate the *Fang* felt pretty good as he stepped on the main deck early in the morning watch. The morning report from the watch officer had placed them on track and more than halfway to Lenoria. *Fang* was content with her lot and he felt her rumble happily beneath the surface of his mind, like a sated lion sprawled out in the warmth of the day.

The canvas overhead belled full with the winds of two-space, and the day watch was industriously cleaning, stowing, and working on the myriad things necessary to keep a Ship operational as a warship. Brother Theo was giving a lecture while the midshipmen were working on some project, and the marines were, ummm, what *were* they doing?

Looking aft, he saw Lt. Broadax leaning against the redside rail, eyes fixed overhead at her marines swinging through the rigging in a single line. She had a manic grin on her face and a cloud of smoke swirling around her as she watched her marines skylarking high overhead. Her monkey was also conspicuous for its absence.

"An' da best o' da mornin' to ye, sir!" she said as Melville came up to her.

"And to you, Lieutenant. Might I ask what your marines are doing this morning, swarming through the rigging like monkeys?" he replied quizzically.

"Jist a li'l mornin' PT, Cap'n!" she replied. "I'd be up with 'em, but I'm sorta dawdlin' over breakfast this mornin'. Ya know, that Jones boy is a genius. This food is tongue swallerin' good! I don' know where he got sweet noodles an' bitterash root fer spicin' but 'at's da best damned porridge I've et since I joined da marines. Seems he wus taught by a visiting Dwarrowdelf cul-er-nary specialist at the Royal caterin' Academy! An' the boy done took right to it! Now ain't *that* a stroke o' luck! An' yew know wat that boy tol' me today?"

"No, what did he say?" replied Melville hesitantly.

"E sez, 'Ya gotta add enough that it doesn't taste as if yer being apologetic about yer spices. At's wat

they tot us at the Royal Caterin' Academy. 'At means hole hog or none, to you uneducated sorts!'"

Broadax shook her head admiringly and continued, "Makes me feel almost homesick. An' I thot my boys might appreciate a li'l game fer PT this mornin', jist ta keep their sweat glands happy. So's my monk's off leadin' the parade while I finish my breakfast!"

No doubt about it, she was fairly chortling with pleasure as she savored her food and watched her marines swing by overhead. Then Melville thought about what she had said, and blurted, "Bitterash root? You mean the breakfast was supposed to taste that way?" He couldn't help but be aghast at the thought, as his morning breakfast of what he had thought of as river rocks and burnt sticks rolled over in his stomach.

"Yessir! Best I've had in years! Put me in a good mood I gots ta say. Ready fer some liberty in Lenoria wit Hans there." She paused for a second and then almost whispered, "Hey, skipper, is it true that stogie smoke kin mess up 'lectronical stuff?"

Melville's eyebrows rose before he could catch them. He was still somewhat flabbergasted that Jones' food might be tasting the way he had *intended* it to taste. And he was stunned to find a genial and voluble Lt. Broadax he had never imagined existed.

"Ummm, actually, Lieutenant, I understand that cigar smoke can cause some significant degradation of electronics equipment," he replied with a touch of confusion. "It's not something you really have to worry about, except on Earth. Why do you ask?"

"Well, I wus buyin' a bit o' a surprise fer Hansie 'at this 'Secrets' place, an' the li'l bints made me put it out. Then they had me skin outta me mail fer fittin' them frilly things. Anyway, I wuz curious if they wuz tellin' me true," she replied absently as her eyes sharpened to a glare at her marines.

"Scuze me, sir," she mumbled as she stomped forward toward the hatch that the marines were currently using to dive between the upper and lower gundecks. "I tole ye, one atta time down 'at line, ye misbegotten idjits!" she snarled as she moved forward. "Are ye tryin'ta turn yerselfs inta brainless sailors insteada brainless marines?"

Melville was still standing where she had left him. "Broadax and lingerie?" he muttered. "Hansie?" The thoughts that bounced through his head were combining with his river rocks and burnt stick breakfast to make a previously wonderful morning entirely too interesting.

He looked at his monkey who looked back at him, apparently equally stunned. "You know," he said quietly, "there's an old Chinese curse that wishes you should live in interesting times."

The monkey let out a small, inquisitive "Eep?"

"Makes me wonder which old Chinese guy I got mad at me," he finished as he stepped up the ladder to the upperside quarterdeck. The monkey's emphatic "Eek!" made him wonder—for the umpteenth time—just how intelligent their pint-sized companions actually were.

As he reached the quarterdeck, the watch officer, Lt. Fielder came up to him.

"Good morning, sir," said Fielder, saluting as the captain approached. "By the stunned-ox look on your face I see that you have already had the pleasure of Lt. Broadax's company this morning."

"It's that obvious, is it?"

"She was up here talking with me earlier, sir," Fielder said with a barely suppressed grin.

"She's in a... pleasant mood, it would seem," replied Melville.

"Oh, yes, sir! She was going on about shopping in Earth stores for trinkets and lace and..."

"Stop!" Melville said as he held up a hand and shook his head, laughing. "I think this comes under the heading of TMI—too much information for me to process first thing this morning. Plus, I'm still wrestling with the idea that Kaleb Jones' meals are coming out exactly the way he planned!"

Fielder blinked and looked at Melville. "You mean he's not incompetent? So he *must* be trying to kill us!" Then he added with a shudder, "Well, all of us except Broadax, who is apparently convinced he's a culinary genius."

Melville grinned wryly. "According to our good marine lieutenant, this morning's disaster was actually something like sweet noodles with bitterash root seasonings. And also according to her, it was surprisingly delicious! And, apparently, good cooking—at least her idea of it anyway—is the quickest way to our Broadax's heart."

"Humph," Fielder replied with feeling. "The quickest way to *her* heart is through the chest wall with a knife! Or at least that's what I would have said before I saw how she reacted to Jones' cooking."

"Hmm."

"You know, sir," Fielder continued after a moment's thought. "If we had anyone aboard who could have done the job at all I would have begged you to replace Kaleb. Right now though the crew is sort of stuck at an impasse: Jones' food means Broadax is happy, and for some reason it seems to trickle down and make their lives better. On the other hand, feeling like you're getting poisoned at every meal is not exactly good for morale. I think if it wasn't for the marines, that pistol Jones carries all the time, and his demonstrated skills with said pistol *and* his knives... Well, if not for that, I have little doubt that one of the watches might have tried to recalibrate Jones' cooking skills before this. And even *with* all that going for him, I wouldn't want to be in Jones' shoes right about now."

Melville sighed. "Yes, I know. Unfortunately the only person we have aboard who could conceivably take his place is Mrs. Vodi. But she and Lady Elphinstone were both emphatic that she is only competent preparing food on a small scale and has no experience with using the large Keel burners. Besides, her full attention is required for her regular duties. Maybe we should have him prepare a human recipe instead of a Dwarrowdelf recipe?"

Fielder shook his head mournfully. "Already been tried. Remember the piece of black wood we had for dinner last night? Or was it leather?" he wondered aloud.

"Oh, yes," Melville replied with a shudder.

"That was a porterhouse steak," Fielder said with finality. "The operative word being *was*."

"Oh," Melville replied. "Damn."

Shaking off his mood, Melville took his leave of the quarterdeck and went forward to where Brother Theo was holding lessons for the midshipmen in his usual location, on the upperside waist.

The midshipmen all had knife blanks in front of them. These were lengths of tempered steel that had been ground to final shape but the blade had been given only a cursory sharpening, roughly suitable for minor work, but not the working edge a sailor depended upon.

Luckily for the midshipmen (and the ultimate purchaser of the blade), the blanks were stored so that they were "floating" in the plane of two-space, next to the Keel. The influence of Flatland worked to "draw" the edges into mono-molecular sharpness without affecting the temper of the steel. The blanks were differentially tempered with a very hard edge to hold that sharpness, and a much softer temper for the blade body, making for a knife or sword that was sharp, able to withstand shock and hard use, and still remain serviceable. Brother Theo had purchased the blade blanks on Nordheim, and they had been waiting in the hold, changing and becoming more valuable and more deadly with each passing day.

With the Ship's upcoming port call in Lenoria, Brother Theo was taking the opportunity to have the midshipmen (as well as any unoccupied hands available) add hilts, handles, and pommels. Thus turning

these deadly and utilitarian knives into works of art. Highly useable art, mind you, but art nonetheless!

Hilts had been purchased at Nordheim as well. They were rough bronze castings in several designs that had to be cleaned, fitted, and polished. The handles were of either Osgil zebra wood or Nordheim satin wood, and lovingly hand-carved. Pommels of one of five semi-precious stones were added last, from Arakis desert pearls to, most expensive of all, real pre-collapse cat's-eye marbles from Earth. For safe handling of the blades, they were inserted into an ironwood holder and clamped with leather straps so they could be held safely as the middies and crew worked on them. In a separate group, other crew members were cutting, tooling, and sewing sheaths from four different varieties of Ambergris saurianoid hides.

Never being one to waste time, Theo was using this opportunity to expound upon Lenoria and its history and culture.

"Lenoria..." he began as he inspected the hilt of a knife he had just been handed. "Mr. Jubal, what have I told you about ensuring that the wrappings are snug? Think of having the hilt slide in your grip when you need it the most, and have pity on the poor soul who would buy such shoddy work! Even worse, think about how little money the Ship would receive for such slipshod craftsmanship!" Jubal responded with a grin and proceeded to repair the offending item.

Brother Theo started again. "Lenoria is one of Westerness' earliest colonies," he told the middies, "and it is now quite well developed. Some would say that it is even more beautiful than Westerness, the child outshining its parent. Its beautiful architecture, epic landscapes, strange cultures, and unusual animals make it one of the favorite stopovers for two-space Ships traveling west from Old Earth or from Westerness. The magnificent statue of the Goddess of Flight is a much-celebrated favorite among sailors. It makes Earth's Statue of Liberty pale by comparison, yet even *it* is dwarfed by the scale and complexity of Lenoria's Four Liberties. As the poet wrote:

"My soul, there stands a country  
Far beyond the stars,  
Where stands a winged sentry  
All skillful in the wars."

The thought of shore leave on this legendary planet made the middies' young eyes glow with excitement as their teacher continued.

"Many of Westerness' thousands of colony planets have names and themes based on the classic science fiction that has informed and inspired our civilization. There must be a dozen desert planets named Dune or Arakis. (None of them, incidentally, has managed to give us a really decent sand worm or any useful 'Spice.' But you have to give them credit for diligently and persistently ingesting every known substance on each of these worlds in their search for a Spice.) Westerness has made Tolkien's work the theme for its architecture and much of its culture, with a lot of Victorian England mixed in for good measure. In the

same way, Lenoria took its theme from some work done by Tom Kidd, an illustrator and writer in the classic era of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries."

He could see the young midshipmen begin to squirm as he commenced to wax eloquent on ancient history, and he knew that he should probably get to the point. "Among our retro-culture planets Lenoria is rather unique in its heavy development of airships to travel between its rugged plateaus. The huge, beautiful, lighter-than-air ships that grace the skies of Lenoria are something you will never forget. And, yes," he added with a sigh, "the nightlife of its portside facilities is as wild and diverse as anything you will find across the galaxy.

"Mr. Hayl," he admonished, "you are building a tool and a work of art for someone to cherish, not something that gets thrown into a box and ignored! Have pride in your work there!" Brother Theo's monkey *EEK* ed imperatively and glared at the offending middle as well. The midshipmen could never decide if Theo's monkey was mocking the monk or just mirroring him, but either way the little creature's antics were a constant source of amusement to them.

Melville wandered off, randomly looking at the fixtures of his Ship. Today's meals were being served on the upperside, and the young captain was about to move to the lowerside quarterdeck in order to escape the effluvia arising from Kaleb Jones' latest offense upon nature.

As Melville walked away from the mess line he heard one sailor complain, "I been watchin' ya! This stuff's been stewin' in its fat fer days now!" Indeed, Jones' bubbling cauldrons never ceased their labors, filled with unidentified entities constantly struggling to the surface as if to scream, only to be pulled down by other damned souls before they could speak.

"Aye!" replied Jones happily, shoving his pistol barrel in the boiling pot and stirring it. "'Ats wat they calls a slow cooker. Ya know I was never one fer slavin' over the stove. There's just one of me, ya know? So I needs to fix food that just gets on with itself. Right toothsome it is!"

"But... the fat..." protested the hapless sailor.

"Do I try to tell ya 'ow to sail this here boat? Don' *even* try to argue 'bout cookin' with an official grad-yew-ate of the Royal Caterin' Corps! The flavor's in the fat, ya know? Bet you didn't know that! An' a bit o' cookin' sherry... you can never 'ave too much cookin' sherry or bitterash..."

The next day started oddly. Kaleb Jones apparently managed a foul-up of unusual magnitude: the morning meal actually tasted good! A bit salty, perhaps, and a bit chewy, but wonderful in comparison to the normal Dwarrowdelf pottage the crew had almost become accustomed to.

Jones was in an apoplectic fury at the miscreants who had replaced his bitterash root with pepper and his ground rockthorn powder with salt! Not to mention the fact that Lt. Broadax seemed to have taken issue with the tampering with her breakfast! After a discussion with Jones involving much fondling of her ax on her part, and steady blanching of the skin on his part, Jones had gone into a flurry of checking for the adulteration of any of his other supplies.

Lt. Broadax then tried to put it out of her mind in the best way possible: by helping her marines train to be all they could be! Not that they saw it that way, of course.

Broadax slammed a hapless marine to the deck and looked in disgust at his unconscious body. "Corporal!" she growled out to Kobbsven. "Dock that marine a day's pay fer nappin' on the job!"

"My gawd," Dwakins mumbled from the sidelines, "she's tryin' ta kill us!"

Kobbsven nodded mournfully, his droopy, scraggly, handlebar mustache looking even more pathetic than usual. "Ja, yew betcha. I tink maybe *she* tink she's workin' off her frustrations wit' a liddle hand-ta-hand training. Only ting is, I wants ta keep my hands! An' all my udder parts too!"

Broadax rumbled from within her toxic cloud of smoke which seemed to keep wreathing her short form no matter how hard the constant breeze kept blowing it downward. "Kobbsven! Ye overgrown ox! I heerd dat! Git yer butt out here. Yer the next 'un."

"Damn it, Dwakins, see whut ya made me do!" he moaned.

"Yer all *veal!*" snarled Broadax to her marines. "Ye know wat veal is, boys? It's *food*, kept inna box so's its muscles decompose an' fill with fatty tissues while its brain grows weak. Yer all *veal*, so come to momma an' I will set ye free frum yer leetle boxes!"

Kobbsven moved slowly toward the center of the smoke cloud. Very, very slowly. She might be a third of his height but she was faster than greased lightning and had one hell of a mad on.

He slid forward and then fainted with his left hand as he shifted back. At least that's what he thought he was doing as he felt an iron fist grab his groin and flip him up as her other hand grabbed his chest. He saw her head underneath him (*how in hell did he get up here?*) and as he swung at her with his fist he suddenly felt the deck slam him in the back as her foot planted itself against his throat.

"Blast it, Kobbsven!" he heard her growl above him. "Lookee wat ye did, ye doorknob! Ye broke my ceegar! Dammit, all yer doin' is makin' me mad! Why in hell can't ye sorry excuses fer marines do like yer

supposed ta an' hit *me!* Not a pore defenseless li'l ceegar that ain't never hurt nobuddy!"

Kobbsven coughed, and spoke to the center of the three clouds swirling over him. "Uhh, no excuse, ma'am?" he ventured trying to focus on where he thought she was.

"Damned right! No excuse! Now git!" she said. "Dwakins! Yer next! Remember, boys, 'pain is jist weakness leavin' the body!"

"I didn't know I vas dis weak," mumbled Kobbsven as he crawled away.

Melville looked over at Fielder as they stood together at the upper quarterdeck rail. "I see our Lt. Broadax is returning to her normal, congenial self. I guess our morning repast might have had something to do with her decision to change the training schedule?"

He cocked an inquisitive eye at his first officer, who returned a sheepish grin.

"I admit I heard that she was a tad perturbed after breakfast, Captain, but the reality does seem a bit, ummm, extreme! Brother Theo mentioned that some of the midshipmen were a bit excited this morning before breakfast, but we decided that further inquiry might not be a good idea. And after seeing her training regimen I am quite *certain* it's not necessary to pursue that inquiry any further. I'm not sure the middies would survive a training session that intense!"

Melville chuckled as his monkey *eeep* ed in cheerful agreement on his shoulder. "Midshipmen do enjoy their pranks, don't they?" he responded, "but I really think they ought to find something to keep them out of sight for a while, don't you?"

"Brother Theo and I agreed that there were some tasks that needed to be done that should keep them well away from our resident ogre. It is good for my soul to see so many industrious young men volunteer so eagerly. I think they were truly inspired by our marine lieutenant's current vigor! Hopefully she will cool off after some liberty in Lenoria tomorrow." Fielder gave one of his patented sardonic smiles and continued. "I think I had better suggest that the galley be off-limits for their hijinks, as I am not sure Jones would survive his next food *faux pas* . As a matter of fact, even our Guldur crew members are out of sorts."

"The Guldur?"

"Yes, sir. It seems that Hans has had a few of them ask why the food got so bad again. He said they weren't really unhappy, just curious as they had gotten to like having food with some flavor!"

"Damn!" said the captain. "I was looking forward to finding a replacement for Jones. I didn't realize that a sizable portion of the crew actually enjoyed his cooking. How do the Stolsh feel about it?" asked the captain. It was easy to forget about their handful of doleful, semi-aquatic Stolsh crewman.

"Who can tell? They're always so *gloomy* about everything." The first officer winced as he watched another marine bounce out of the cloud of smoke and land on the deck. "Damned good thing those boys have been taught how to fall, or Lady Elphinstone and Mrs. Vodi would be even busier than they're going to be."

"I don't think Lt. Broadax would be so incautious as to deprive the Ship of the services of any of her marines." Another marine bounced out to lie groaning on the deck before crawling to the side. "At least I hope not," Melville murmured as his monkey uttered a worried "Eep!"

The approach to Lenoria's Pier was normal. The *Fang* and the Pier made their respective cannon salutes, and as the Ship came into the dock, the anticipation began to peak.

Melville had been especially glum as he and his crew ate their meal that morning. His two bodyguards, Ulrich and Grenoble, were standing at the rail with him as they picked at their breakfast.

"It really is a good thing that we're coming into port," confided Melville to his two companions. "The Ship's stores are completely out of catsup and mustard. So that's Flavor Hider Mark I and Mark II out of action. All I had left was my personal bottle of hot sauce, and I used the last of that two days ago. With Flavor Hider Mark III out, I think I might starve. But, if you don't mind my asking, I notice that you've both got a bit of hot sauce left, and um, I wouldn't ordinarily ask, but since we're almost at port I wonder if one of you could share?"

The deranged little coxswain and the hereditary Sylvan bodyguard looked at each other and nodded. For once they found something they could agree on.

"Captain," began Grenoble, "We would take a bullet for thee—"

"—But cha ain't gittink none o' our damned hot saucek!" said Ulrich.

"In a word: aye," said Grenoble.

"Damn straight!" concluded Ulrich.

"I'm Spike! I taste like chicken!" added his parrotlet.

Elsewhere aboard the *Fang*, Corporal Kobbsven was holding forth to the marines on a subject near and dear to his heart: food! "I knew dat Jones vas trubble as soon as I laid eyes in 'im. Neffer trust a skinny cook, boys! Ja, yew betcha! I mean if *he* won't even eat his own food... Yew need a gal with *meat* on her bones, like our plump old Roxy, for really good cooking! So I figgers as soon as we gets off da Ship, we can git to da Danske Heart Rest'rant, were dey got's lutefisk dat'll stick ta yer ribs. Ja, an' potatoes an' dose liddle green peas, and some lefse. Now dat's da food o' the gods, it is! I'm tellin' ya boys, dat's better an' sex it is!"

Gunny Von Rito's disgusted response to this was, "If that's better than sex, let me tell you, you're not doing it right!"

Dwakins piped up, "Hey, Corporal, wut's that lutefisk stuff yer talkin' about? Some sorta food? Somethin' edible?" Dwakins looked pathetically eager at the thought of food not prepared by Kaleb Jones.

The gunny started laughing, and responded, "Dwakins, ya' idjit. Lutefisk is some dead, dried fish the old Vikings used to get and keep in lye. For some strange reason, certain people," and he shook his head at Kobbsven who was lost in a daydream of gustatory delights, "seem to think it's still edible. Come to think of it," he continued after a moment's thought, "compared to what we've been eating, this overgrown ox might be right!"

All the *Fang*'s hopes and prayers were dashed by the appearance of a dainty, smartly dressed lieutenant who appeared at the gangplank as soon as the Ship was moored. Luckily for his safety, he delivered his envelope to the captain and departed before anyone knew its content.

"Restricted to the Pier and base?!" Fielder stormed. "Do they think we're a pariah Ship?" His monkey *EEK* ed plaintively, clearly in sympathy with its person.

The conversation in the wardroom with Captain Melville was not a pleasant one, for anyone involved. Apparently the long arm of the Admiralty had managed to reach out to Lenoria in the form of a fast mail Ship that had gone out before them from Earth. The resultant orders sat on the table in front of Melville.

"I don't think I would go quite that far, Daniel," Melville observed thoughtfully. "We are permitted access

to the Pier and the Navy base on Lenoria. It's just that, according to the Admiralty, 'the skills and person of the sloop *Fang* are required urgently at your future ports of call. In the interest of speeding your departure, you are directed to restrict liberty to expedite your departure to these future ports of call...' And Lenoria's port admiral was quite, umm, direct in his interpretation, which also precludes us from taking anyone into the crew, or leaving anyone ashore. So I'd say we weren't being treated as a pariah... More a source of infection!"

Brother Theo was aghast. "Sir, we are prohibited from taking on new crew members? But what about Kaleb Jones? A replacement, or assistant or something?"

"Jones." Melville inhaled and exhaled slowly, shaking his head as he tried to take a sip of the sherry in front of him, which seemed to have evaporated from his wineglass. He turned to glare at his unrepentant monkey, who continued to clean the fur around its mouth.

"It appears we are, in fact, stuck with him. On the other hand, Brother Theo, as our purser, I think it best you deal with the victuallers for the foodstuffs and not Jones. The least we can do is make it more difficult for him to inflict his culinary masterpieces on us!"

"Don' worry, I got's faith in da boy," came a growl from Lt. Broadax, seconded by an "Eek" from her monkey and punctuated by dual clouds of smoke.

Fielder muttered, "Your 'boy' is a demon right out of Dante's *Inferno* !

"Now see the sharp-tailed beast  
that mounts the brink...  
Behold the beast  
that makes the whole world stink."

Melville shook his head and continued, "Lt. Fielder, arrange for liberty parties, and make sure they know they are limited to the base and Pier only. Which means we need to assign someone to supervise the shore patrol. Someone sharp, wise to the ways of the sailor, and who is experienced enough to keep them relatively safe. Definitely not a midshipman!"

All eyes swung involuntarily to Mr. Hans, who sputtered into his drink. "Aw, bugrit! Captain, we had a few plans, I mean..." and he trailed off. He looked at his inamorata, who just shrugged and proceeded to try and prove that her cigars should be declared toxic weapons based upon effect. They were both professionals, and could be counted on to deal with the situation appropriately.

"Aye, sir," Hans replied disconsolately.

Melville ignored the byplay as he left the wardroom muttering, "Plans?" Remembering Broadax's words about her shopping excursion on Earth, he shuddered and resolved not to ask. After all, they were liable to answer!

The port visit was just barely long enough for the Ship's company to take care of urgent business. Cargo was bought and sold through port factors at a sufficient profit to keep Brother Theo happy. Asquith was able to sell one copy of his book and the rights for reproduction and distribution of said book to a local publisher. Fresh water was unloaded to keep the barrels full before their next voyage out to the stars. The sailors and marines looked longingly at the world outside the base fence, but they had to be content with visiting every restaurant and store on the base and Pier, and stuffing themselves with food that everyone agreed was downright delicious compared to their repasts of late.

This stop also gave the crew members a chance to purchase books, magazines, paper, pencils, art materials, and supplies for various projects. Most importantly they were able to stock up on "gedunk" and "pogey bait"—old terms from ancient prehistory, translated from a long-forgotten language, which apparently meant "food to be taken aboard and hidden until needed for sanity."

The Ship's officers were relatively understanding, permitting most of the foodstuffs to come aboard without objection. Except for Kobbsvens lutefisk. After their experiences with Jones' abominations, everyone was understandably suspicious of any unfamiliar food, and the lutefisk required intervention from Lady Elphinstone to explain that it was indeed a foodstuff and was edible by normal human beings. Seeing as it was Kobbsvens bringing it aboard, Fielder was inclined to wonder at the "normal" part of that statement. Didn't the man have a nose?!

Among the duties required of the officers of any visiting Ship was the thankless task of "Officer of the Guard." To ease the work of the port authorities, the various Ships at the Pier were required to supply a lieutenant or warrant officer for a full 24-hour detail. This duty included inspecting the various checkpoints, gates, fortifications and cannons which protected the Pier; supervising the guards at the entrances of the base to ensure that prostitutes and thieves were kept in check; and visiting the groundside bars within the confines of the base, as well as supervising the shore patrol that helped with these tasks.

While he was the Officer of the Guard, Hans was called to respond to a report of a disturbance at the "Club." The "disturbance" turned out to be almost seven feet tall and weighed at least three-hundred pounds.

Normally, the arrival of the shore patrol and the Officer of the Guard had a quelling effect on the Club. Every man and woman there knew that they hadn't done anything, but in the face of authority they tended

to search their consciences for any minor offense the Navy might not be willing to overlook.

In this case, though, the smashed tables, groups of moaning sailors, and the overwhelming odor of that most terrible of sins—spilled beer—persuaded most of the attendees that they weren't on the menu for the night and they proceeded to hunker down and watch the show.

Hans drew a beer from the bar and sat down looking at the man-mountain who stood before him. His shore patrol party took their cue from the old warrant and stood back with considerable trepidation.

"Come on, old man," the disturbance yelled. "I can take you, your whole damned shore patrol, and anybody else 'at wants ta help!"

Having been on both sides of such altercations in the past, Hans was more amused than anything else. The trick was to get the idiot out of there and into the lockup where he could sleep it off before they shipped him back to his Ship. Hopefully without getting his shore patrol hurt, or, well, even himself. Much as old Hans hated to admit it, these little dances were getting a bit tough on the bones. Especially considering the stress his sweetie had been putting on them in recent months! He broke off his internal monologue as he took a deep pull of his beer.

"No problem. Jist start swingin'," Hans said, sipping at his beer. "I'll catch up."

The huge sailor gaped at him, a bit confused by Hans' response. The damned shore patrol was supposed to mix it up, not stand back and watch that old man, even if he did look more like a mobile chunk of oak, rawhide, and whipcord than a person.

"Awww, come on. Wouldn't you like to try to paint just one wall with me? I ain't never seen no bosun or warrant as could take me!"

"Weelll, maybe we can have a little fun," said Hans. "But ya must've already worked up a hell of a thirst, so let's have a beer or two first."

The huge, drunken sailor could see nothing wrong with that suggestion, so he grabbed a pitcher of beer off the nearest table that was still standing, and drank it down in one long chug.

"Damn!" said Hans. "If you can fight like you can drink, we've got our work cut out for us. Bet ya a dollar ya can't do that again."

"Ha! You lose old man," replied the sailor, as he grabbed another pitcher and chugged it down.

"Hot damn!" said Hans in wide-eyed wonder as he tossed a silver dollar on the table. "I guess I lose, but it was worth the price for the show. I do like a man who enjoys 'is beer. The problem is, ya look like a feller who's smart *and* strong. If we put ya in the brig, I'm bettin' you'd jist break right out again."

"Damned right!" said the sailor, who was now swaying like a tall pine in a strong wind.

"Jist as I thought," said Hans, looking up from his beer with a nod. "I'll bet ye're also an escape artist—a regular Houdini. Between yer brains an' yer brawn, there can't be much that'd hold ya."

The giant sailor nodded and burped, then he decided this called for another beer, and he began to drain another pitcher.

"Dammit," Hans continued, "if I had some chains, you could show us how strong ya really are. But all I've got is this puny set of handcuffs. I'd be willin' ta wager another dollar, jist ta see ya break out of 'em. Wadda ya think? Can ya do it?"

"Yeah, sure!" said the sailor. "As long as you don't mind your jewelry gettin' busted up. See these scars on my wrists? They're proof that I've busted out of every set of handcuffs anyone ever tried to put on me!"

Now Hans was beginning to get seriously concerned. "Okay, then, 'at raises the stakes. Can ya do it with the cuffs behind ya?"

"Ha! You betcha!"

"Okay! Finish yer beer an' turn around. This is somethin' I gotta see!"

Once in the cuffs, the huge sailor puffed, pulled and jerked for several minutes. "Damn! These are really strong. I can't get out of 'em," he growled.

"Are ya sure?" Hans asked.

The sailor tried again, with muscles standing out in an amazing display of human anatomy. "Nope," he gasped. "I can't do it."

"Be sure. I'm rootin' fer ya. Come on, give it one more try." Hans took another pull of his beer as he watched the huge sailor with interest. For a minute there he thought the ox might break out of them!

"No, damnit!" he panted, dropping to his knees in exhaustion, "I can't!"

"In that case," said Hans, picking up the silver dollar on the table, "yer under arrest."

The shore patrol moved in to take custody of the baffled and exhausted sailor, while Hans reflected that old age and treachery would always win over youth and energy!

Of course, a set of high quality Dwarrowdelf "bracelets" helped. Old Hans hummed happily to himself as he dwelt upon some of the other, more pleasant, and considerably more kinky applications that these particular "bracelets" had seen recently.

*Only two more hours ta go before my duty's up, thought Hans as he took a long, satisfying drink of his beer. An' my li'l angel's waitin' fer me in her room at the bachelor officer quarters. Gotta be sure ta get my cuffs back from this dummy after they git him in a cell an' 'e passes out. Heh! If they worked on my li'l sugar plum, there's no way that big oaf coulda busted 'em!*

The *Fang* was ready to sail, but her first officer was in a bit of a dither. The stores had been loaded, the sailors and marines had brought aboard their gedunk, pogy bait, and survival rations for the trip, along with paper and pencils for their journals and material for their projects, art and craftwork. Everything was ready for their departure—except Broadax! Where in hell was she?

Melville came up to his first officer as he paced near the upper quarterdeck at the gangplank. "Are we prepared to get underway, Daniel?"

Fielder turned to him and responded, "Well, sir, all the pre-underway checklists are done and complete, I've made a tour of all the berthing spaces, all the miscellaneous items the sailors and marines brought aboard are stowed, and the catered lunch we ordered for today is sitting in the mess. We even got our last crewman out of the brig. Seems Ranger Valandil was picked up for public urination."

"Huh!" said Melville.

"Like you said, sir, it's always the quiet ones. So we're prepared to depart, except for one minor detail. Lt. Broadax is missing."

"Broadax?" Melville replied in surprise. "Any messages from her?"

"One message from her via Corporal Petrico. She said she'd be aboard before we got underway and she had a surprise for us."

"A surprise, eh? In that case we should know soon, because unless my eyes deceive me I see a smoke cloud in a gingham dress coming down the Pier."

Fielder turned and saw what appeared to be a brightly covered fireplug emitting copious amounts of smoke, followed by a porter carrying boxes and bales of stuff behind her. He blinked once or twice and said, "Do you know, Captain, I do believe I have now seen everything. Lt. Broadax in a gingham dress... And what *is* that porter carrying for her?" he wondered aloud. His monkey chirped confusedly as well.

Lt. Broadax reached the bottom of the gangway and snarled at the dapper lieutenant and his guards, who had been posted there by the port authority to enforce the *Fang*'s pariah status and ensure that they didn't take anyone into the crew, or leave anyone ashore. The conversation was... intense. Broadax communicated graphically, biographically, and autobiographically what she thought about her fellow lieutenant, in a manner that only a former senior NCO can truly master, with she and her monkey both blowing great clouds of toxic smoke in the process. The unfortunate lieutenant's squad of guards were clearly enjoying the situation, and the captain and crew of the *Fang* listened in intently from the rail. Her victim quickly desired nothing more than to get Broadax out of his hair and onto her Ship. Then she mounted the gangway with her porter following behind.

"Hoo-yah!" she said with a salute. "I'm reportin' aboard, sir!" Somewhere behind her beard it looked like she had a sly smirk on her face as she leaned forward and whispered, "An' I gots a serprise fer ye! But I thinks it better waits 'til we's underway."

As Melville looked down at her in confusion, he felt his monkey grab his ear and pull gently up, until he was looking at her porter. Or what appeared to be her porter at first glance, until he recognized the ugly, old, one-eyed face mangling an unlit cigar, with a little monkey head peeping out of the collar of her longshoreman's smock. It was Roxy, their old cook! How in the *hell* did Broadax find her? How did she get here? In any case, the staged last-minute arrival to get past the guard on the Pier explained a few things, the rest could wait until they cleared port.

Melville said quietly, "Aye, I think you have a point here, Lieutenant." He continued loudly, "Lt. Fielder, let's get the *Fang* underway and where she belongs, a long way from here."

"Aye, sir!"

Melville looked at Broadax again. *So, he thought, reaming out that poor lieutenant in public was just a smoke screen (literally and figuratively!) to get Roxy aboard. She has many roles, our Broadax . She is our Achilles, our berserker, our Amazon. She is a marine, a warrior, a hard-boiled leader. But perhaps her most remarkable persona is just being Broadax, on liberty, stuffing that body into*

*a dress and letting her and Hans roam the streets of some poor, innocent, unsuspecting planet!*

Lenoria was now falling behind them and it was explanation time. And the explanation was interestingly devious. Roxy had been greatly distressed at being pulled off the *Fang* and assigned to shore duty. So she called in a lifetime of favors and connections in order to pull a trade with the cook of the mail packet Ship scheduled for Lenoria. And the wiley old cook was quite happy to jump Ship as soon as the *Fang* hit port. The biggest problem had been figuring out how to get aboard at the last minute so she couldn't be taken off again. Roxy and Lt. Broadax had worked up a scam so that their beloved cook could get aboard as a porter.

"See Cap'n," Broadax crowed proudly as she stood upon the upper quarterdeck with Melville and Fielder, watching Lenoria's Pier sink into the east, "it's actually pretty easy oncet I set my mind to it. I figgered if'n that pansy Ell Tee an' 'is guards wus a watchin' me, they wouldn't notice nobuddy wit' me. An' jist ta make sure, I got meself all dolled up right purty so's he couldn't mistake me."

She grinned up at him and concluded, "So since she follered me home, can I keep 'er?"

Roxy's chest went up and down accompanied by a slight wheezing, which was as close as she ever came to laughing.

Melville smiled from ear to ear and the rest of the quarterdeck crew cheered themselves hoarse. "Well," he replied, "since you put it that way, I guess so." He frowned then and added, "You realize we probably need to change the mess around, don't you. Roxy *is* senior cook..."

"Amen," muttered Fielder. "Now we can dump Jones on a particularly pestilent, flea-bitten world I know of that's on our route. I have a long-standing grudge against the place."

Broadax ignored Fielder and said, "I bin thinkin' on 'at, Cap'n. I know ye humans is all sorter weak in da jaws an' don't appreciate the finer cookin' 'at Jones put out fer us. But ye know though, the Guldur likes Jones' cookin' too. Mebbe we can work out a deal where's we gots two chow lines. 'Specially as a sort of a favor since I broughts Roxy back ta us, ye know?"

Melville smiled in relief. "Best idea I've heard for a while, Lieutenant. I'll do it on one condition."

"Whuts 'at?" Broadax replied suspiciously.

"Have Jones set up downwind!" Melville replied.

That night, as the *Fang* and her crew sailed happily off into the endless twilight horizon of two-space, a happy wardroom invited their captain to eat with them. Everyone dined with gusto and great satisfaction as Roxy served up heaping platters of her best chow, while Broadax devoured a reeking plate of mysterious gristle that had been prepared by Kaleb Jones.

Dinner was followed by Mrs. Vodi's famous "Death-by-Chocolate" cake. Upon finishing his dessert old Hans leaned back contentedly and—with a none-too-subtle leer and a wink at Broadax—said, "Ahhh. I kin only think o' one better way to die!" A sentiment to which all and sundry were willing to drink heartily.

After dessert the loyal toast was called for by the junior officer present. "Gentlefolk, the Queen!" squeaked tiny Midshipman Aquinar.

"The Queen!" chorused the response.

"Gentlefolk, fill your glasses for another toast," cried Lt. Fielder. "Here's to Roxy!" he said, after all the glasses were full, holding his own glass high. "The best damned cook in two-space! She is now officially AWOL and on the lam from the Navy, but she will never leave *our* hearts and we'll protect her to our deaths!"

This brought a chorus of agreement and everyone drank deeply from their glasses.

Then Broadax added, "An' 'ere's ta Kaleb Jones, who cooks a damned good meal fer those wat can handle it, an' who made ya appreciate yer Roxy!"

That brought an even louder cheer of agreement as they all emptied their glasses.

"You know," said Melville with a grin, "it was a close call as to whether Jones would have met a violent end. It's happened before, as in the tragic case of Boomer Johnson, about whom an ode was written long, long ago."

This brought smiles all around. "Can ya give us the poem, Cap'n?" asked old Hans.

"Aye, if you'd like," he replied.

The mess roared their approval, and Melville began:

"Now Mr. Boomer Johnson  
was a gettin' old in spots,  
And you don't expect a bad man  
to go wrastlin' pans and pots;  
But he'd done his share of killin'  
and his draw was gettin' slow,  
So he quits a-punchin' cattle  
and he takes to punchin' dough.

"Our foreman up and hires him,  
figurin' age had rode him tame,  
But a snake don't get no sweeter  
just by changin' of its name.  
Well, Old Boomer knowed his business—  
he could cook to make you smile,  
But say, he wrangled fodder  
in a most peculiar style."

"Hey, I don't think this poem is gonna work, Cap'n," interjected Hans in the pause between stanzas.  
"This feller's cookin' was good!"

Melville just smiled and continued:

"He never used no matches—  
left em layin' on the shelf,  
Just some kerosene and cussin'  
and the kindlin' lit itself.  
And, pardner, I'm allowin'  
it would give a man a jolt  
To see him stir frijoles  
with the barrel of his Colt."

"Ha!" laughed Broadax, "tha's my boy allright!"

"Now killin' folks and cookin'  
ain't so awful far apart,  
That musta been why Boomer  
kept a-practicin' his art;  
With the front sight of his pistol  
he would cut a pie-lid slick,

And he'd crimp her with the muzzle  
for to make the edges stick."

"Yeah, killing and cooking definitely aren't too far apart!" interjected Westminster. "Jones pert near did both at once!"

"He built his doughnuts solid,  
and it sure would curl your hair  
To see him plug a doughnut  
as he tossed it in the air.  
He bored the holes plum center  
every time his pistol spoke,  
Till the can was full of doughnuts  
and the shack was full of smoke.

"We-all was gettin' jumpy,  
but he couldn't understand  
Why his shootin' made us nervous  
when his cookin' was so grand.  
He kept right on performin',  
and it weren't no big surprise  
When he took to markin' tombstones  
on the covers of his pies."

"Amen!" said Brother Theo, who had lost a fair amount of weight over the past few weeks. "Jones' pies almost *were* my tombstone!"

"They didn't taste no better  
and they didn't taste no worse,  
But a-settin' at the table  
was like ridin' in a hearse;  
You didn't do no talkin'  
and you took just what you got,  
So we et till we was foundered  
just to keep from gettin' shot.

"When at breakfast one bright mornin',  
I was feelin' kind of low,  
Old Boomer passed the doughnuts  
and I up and tells him 'No,  
All I takes this trip is coffee,  
for my stomach is a wreck.'  
I could see the itch for killin'

swell the wattle on his neck."

"At least he was an honest man who did his killing with a gun!" laughed Fielder.

"Scorn his grub? He strings some doughnuts  
on the muzzle of his gun,  
And he shoves her in my gizzard  
and he says, 'You're takin' one!'  
He was set to start a graveyard,  
but for once he was mistook;  
Me not wantin' any doughnuts,  
I just up and salts the cook."

"Ha! Tha's the spirit!" cried Hans. "Death to the cook, sez I!"

"Did they fire him? Listen, pardner,  
there was nothin' left to fire,  
Just a row of smilin' faces  
and another cook to hire.  
If he joined some other outfit  
and is cookin', what I mean,  
It's where they ain't no matches  
and they don't need kerosene!"

The mess exploded in applause and Melville bowed and said, "So you see, gentlemen, Kaleb Jones could have met a worse fate, and as captain of this good Ship, I'm just glad we avoided bloodshed! But now we can say that we've come through Guldur attacks and attacks of Dwarrowdelf chow. And as for me, I think I'd rather face the Guldur any day!"

This brought a roar of agreement as Melville concluded, "We have proven that the *Fang* and her crew can take anything the galaxy has to throw at us! So, gentlefolk, I give you one last toast: God bless the good Ship *Fang* and all those who fare upon her! Long may she sail the seas of two-space!"

The wardroom's roar of agreement shook the walls. "To *Fang* !" they chorused.

*Fang went forth from the Pier at Lenoria, but she left behind a piece of herself, and a piece of Biter and Gnasher ... and a little bit of Kestrel . And their tale spread to every Ship that came to Lenoria, and every Ship carried it forth.*

*<<Remember, remember,>> whispered unspoken words that were heard across thousands of Ships and Piers in the months to come. <<Remember Kestrel . Remember a dark tide of fear and hate. Remember war, red war is coming! And remember the love that quenches hate and fear as water quenches fire. Remember.>>*

*And across every Pier and every Ship, and within the souls of every living creature that stepped upon their planks, at a conscious and unconscious level, they knew and remembered...*

# CHAPTER THE 10TH

## Across the Spiral Arm: "The Trail That is Always New"

It's "Gang-plank up and in," dear lass,  
It's "Hawsers warp her through!"  
And it's "All clear aft" on the old trail,  
our own trail, the out trail,  
We're backing down the Long Trail—  
the trail that is always new.

The Lord knows what we will find, dear lass,  
And the deuce knows what we may do—  
But we're back once more on the old trail,  
our own trail, the out trail,  
We're down, hull down, on the Long Trail—  
the trail that is always new.

"The Long Trail"  
Rudyard Kipling

After dinner in the wardroom that first night, as usual, the doings of their shore leave was a key topic of discussion.

"Did you get anything while you were ashore?" Mrs. Vodi asked Lt. Broadax.

"Aye. Ol' Hans said 'e was worried about my mood

swings," replied Broadax, "so 'e bought me this mood ring ta help him keep track o' how I'm feeling. See?" she said, holding it out as Mrs. Vodi and her monkey gazed admiringly at the ring. "When I'm in a good mood this stone turns green. An' when I'm in a bad mood it leaves a big freakin' red mark on 'is forehead! By the Lady, mebee next time 'e'll buy me a damned diamond!"

"Well," said Fielder, with a sympathetic nod toward Hans, "as that ancient haiku master, the Venerable Professor Satori wrote:

"Why buy a diamond?  
With the pressure she exerts,  
All you need is coal."

\* \* \*

After feeling the warmth (or rather the lack thereof!) of the Admiralty's welcome on Lenoria, the *Fang* s were more than happy to leave as quickly as possible and defrost their tail ends. With Roxy the cook having managed to return to the Ship through various low and sneaky methods, Melville had a start on improving the crew's culinary conditions.

This was advanced significantly when Lady Elphinstone and Lt. Broadax prevailed upon Captain Melville to assign Kaleb Jones to the marine contingent as their nominal cook—which gave Lt. Broadax control and approval of Jones' menus. Luckily for the marines' sensitive digestive tracts, (sensitive in comparison to the Dwarrowdelf and the Guldur anyway) this agreement also made sure the marines got to eat with the sailors.

Almost everyone was happy with this arrangement. The sole exception being Kaleb Jones himself, who was somewhat unhappy about being assigned to the marines. While he didn't mind cooking for them, his attitude was more along the lines of: "No way in hell I'm gonna belong t' th' damned marines!"

This unsatisfactory attitude was corrected quite handily by the senior marine aboard, Lt. Broadax herself. While the counseling session was conducted privately in the wardroom, the betting was heavily in

favor of broken bones and contusions on Jones, rather than permanent lasting damage. All and sundry were firmly convinced that Broadax valued him as a cook, and equally convinced that his big mouth and her explosive temper would make for an entertaining session, even secondhand.

Alas for all those betting, the session was apparently conducted peacefully and quietly with the two of them departing in apparent amity and friendliness. An appearance that was only mildly marred by one of the wardroom's chairs having been broken into hand-length kindling pieces (with the only tool marks being impressions of Broadax's fingers in the hard oak), and stacked neatly in front of Jones' chair.

"The map of our Star Kingdom of Westerness," said Brother Theo, "can be perceived as being much like the United States in her early years. This analogy is quite fragile and purely contrived, and can be dangerous if taken too far. Never forget that this model is based on an artificiality, a generally agreed upon convention to call this the 'upper' side and to view everything from this perspective. But by doing so we come up with a map of the galaxy which has us in the west like Westerness or the Shire, and Osgil and the Guldur to the east, just like the Tolkien mythos."

Brother Theo's students, complete with the usual batch of idlers, were listening intently as the monk explained. This was more than the usual academics. This was no less than an outline of their kingdom's current reality, and their Ship's destiny and plans within that reality.

"Or you can use another paradigm and think of the planet Earth as New York, the Grey Rift as the Atlantic Ocean, and Westerness as Washington, DC, or thereabouts. Lenoria might be thought of as Pittsburgh in the early frontier days. If we use this model, then we will be sailing completely across the continent, or across the galactic arm, to the rim world of Show Low, which is similar to San Francisco in its old, Barbary Coast days. The Far Rift is comparable to the Pacific Ocean, and our final objective will be a star cluster called the Hero Cluster, which is analogous to a group of islands in the middle of the ocean."

This generated a buzz of excitement from his listeners. They had heard that they were headed to the Rim, and from there across the Far Rift and out into the vastness of two-space, but this was the first time they had received so much detail.

"Again," concluded the monk, "these models must be used with extreme caution. We are *not* America, nor are we Tolkien's Westerness or the Shire. We are *us*. No more and no less. But whoever we are, we are off on an *adventure*, my friends."

Thus the *Fang* started on the next round of her appointed port calls. Normally, Ships of the Westerness Navy were assigned a route that allowed for a reasonable amount of trading, with periodic ports capable

of handling the liberty needs of a group of sailors and marines far from home wanting to bleed off stress in the time-honored fashion of indulging in too much alcohol, loose women, and open spaces under wide blue (or green, yellow, indigo, and varied other color schemes) skies.

Unfortunately, the tin gods of the Admiralty hadn't finished with them yet.

The *Fang* found herself out amidst the dark, rolling, forgotten planets of the kingdom, on a tour of the smallest and newest one-Pier worlds that the Admiralty could put together on reasonably short notice. To keep civilization alive on these worlds, Ships had to visit, dropping off interstellar mail as well as magazines such as *Home and Gardens*, *Vogue*, *Saturday Evening Post*, and *Home on the Range Monthly*, delivering one copy for each planet, which was then reproduced and distributed. Since there was normally no chance of turning a profit on these runs, the Admiralty had to literally pay for the privilege of sending them out to the back end of the galaxy by remitting a portion of their required payments for each planet visited.

"So far you've only observed major ports," Brother Theo told Asquith as they stood at the stern rail a few days after leaving Lenoria. "You've seen Earth, Lenoria, Ambergris, and Osgil, some of which have a hundred or more pilings, or Keels, or Piers making up their port. But there is a limited supply of Keels. Truly, they are the most valuable commodity in our civilization. They can be utilized for Piers, or for Ships, but not both.

"Thus, you have seen the great ports, and now you are about to see the norm. On most of our worlds there is only one piling coming up to form the Pier. These are the choke points in our kingdom. Indeed, the paucity of Piers and Ships are the limiting factor in our galactic civilization."

"What is stopping us from making more?" asked Asquith.

"You can ask our new carpenter and resident Celebri Guild member, Mr. DeWalt, but he won't tell you," replied Theo. "All the Guild will say is that they are doing the best job they can, manufacturing Keels as fast as humanly possible. And I have no cause to doubt them. Over the years many individuals of great political power have come from the Celebri, and if it were within their power to produce more, I have no doubt that they would do so."

"Okay, I'll forgo the dubious pleasure of asking DeWalt, who gives even longer answers than you do. And I understand that now we're going to see the rural, pastoral aspect of Westernness."

"Nooo," said the monk, pursing his lips thoughtfully. "There *is* a beautiful, rural, pastoral side to Westernness. But this isn't it. What we are about to see are the kind of nowhere worlds that exist only to avoid the embarrassment of having a big open patch on the map. Verily, I tell you. Somewhere there's a potbellied bureaucrat who looks at the map of our galactic arm and says, 'Hey, that's too big an open

patch. We need a stopover there.' So the explorers make an extra effort until they find some marginal world that will support life, and *poof*, there you have it, a blank spot on the map neatly filled in. The little clerk in Westernness is happy, and a bunch of wretched folks must live on this hell hole. And we have to visit them."

"The fun just never stops," muttered Asquith. "One more question, if I may ask it of you, Brother?"

"Certainly."

"I'm working on my second book, and I'm trying to figure out a way to help the readers keep the deck plan of the upper and lower sides straight. Hell, *I* still get mixed up sometimes! Have you got any suggestions?"

"I believe I may be able to assist," replied the monk with a genial smile, pulling out a pencil and the notebook where he kept many of the working notes for his duties as the Ship's purser. "I actually have it sketched out here," he said flipping through pages of load plan sketches, manifest lists, and stores usage calculations. "Here it is! See?" he continued, pointing with his pencil at a meticulously drawn illustration of two deck plans, side-by-side and virtually identical. "This is a diagram of the *Fang*'s upperside, and here, right beside it, is the lowerside."

"They look the same to me," said Asquith.

"Ah, but it's what's different that is important. Notice that the greenside and the redside are in different directions, and the names of the guns and the cutters are different! And the hatches that the captain uses to cut through from the upper to the lower sides in combat are a tad off center. Now, take this page, and fold it right here, and, ta-da! The greensides and the redsides are on the same side, and the hatches line up!"

"Huh!" said Asquith, taking the book and folding the page in, and then back again. "I think I get it!"

"May I humbly suggest that you put an illustration like this in your book?"

"Maybe," the diminutive earthling author replied cautiously as he digested the idea. "You know, it might just work. I saw something like this on the back cover of a *Mad Magazine* once."

Their journey would take them through little of the greatness of Westernness. Cuthbert Asquith the XVI described the series of one-Pier worlds as the "Smallness of Westernness" which neatly outlined the cluster of one-horse, one-Pier ports they visited. This term also neatly described the small minds and

timid spirits back at the Admiralty, a viewpoint which Asquith was gleefully happy to record in his next book.

The *Fang*'s course was more reminiscent of the garbage man's route through alleys and cul-de-sacs rather than the tomcat march of the best damned Ship afloat—which the *Fang*s knew they deserved! As old Hans put it, "The only way ta git ta these hellholes is by mail packet or by accident!"

One shining light in the unrelenting blandness of their trek through that vast obscurity where the dark planets of the kingdom spun in the lonely night, was Brother Theo. The cherubic monk was able to acquire the finest comestibles and potables that each world had to offer, at the best possible prices. The *Fang* was a wealthy Ship, just back from foreign climes, battles, and hardship tours (not to mention their experience with Jones' abominable cooking) so they spent money like... well, like sailors. They purchased exotic local varieties of microbrewery beer, wine, steaks, roasts, seafood, homemade baked goods, vegetables, and fruits to fill their larders. All of the finest and freshest quality.

From the mess deck to the wardroom to the captain's table, none of the crew had ever experienced such food. Even their perennially insatiable midshipmen found themselves fully satisfied with the quantity of food that was provided. And, happily for their marines, Kaleb Jones was still able to placate the esoteric tastes of their resident Dwarrowdelf.

In addition to providing an endless flow of local delicacies from countless worlds, Brother Theo was also a wizard at figuring out cargos that would turn a decent profit from port to port, as well as when they reached civilization again. He was determined to make them all rich (or rich *er* depending on your perspective) and *that* was an objective that every *Fang* aboard could support wholeheartedly.

The only crew member who was completely happy with this rather mundane state of affairs was Asquith. There was no combat, no excitement to distress the little earthling, and he was able to sell a copy of his book at every stop. The book was quickly purchased by a local publisher who would reprint and market it on their world, and then would hawk it off to even more worlds. Inside of a few months his book could be found on most of the planets in the star kingdom, being touted as "A Bestseller on Earth!" and "A true story of the greatest hero of our age."

Despite the lack of stimulation in their journey, the *Fang*s knew there was a valid reason for every stop. Each of these worlds was a member of their great star kingdom, hungry for news and information from the major planets. And, unlike early colonists on Earth, they were a literate people, educated and intent on improving their lot in life. (Or at least to find some literary escapism and cheap entertainment in their lives.)

Westernness' control of its empire was not merely a matter of her Ships, although those mighty symbols of trade and power were a critical ingredient. Westernness' rule also was represented by a permanent and organized system which had immense power to accumulate, absorb, and assimilate local institutions.

There was a whole nexus of professional, social, and psychological links that permeated all levels of the

star kingdom, all serving to bind them together. Westernness had made a huge investment, politically, economically, and culturally, in expanding the frontier to the far edge of the galactic arm and beyond, and they were determined not to lose it. *And* (perhaps most importantly) they were determined to gain a return on their investment. This had to be done very carefully, maintaining bonds of kinship and fidelity, while turning a profit *without* alienating the far-flung citizens.

The viability of the frontier depended not just on communications within the region, but also on the maintenance of links back to Westernness and the core planets. All of which required substantial shipping assets, and even the smallest of planets was usually provided with a small two-space Ship to meet local needs.

Salutes were exchanged with the local Ships as they approached each Pier. Initially the salute was in time, but once the local crew fired the first few shots they often fell further and further behind, as the weary, potbellied reservists tried to keep up. And always there was the question, "How many shots to honor a three-masted Ship commanded by a lieutenant?" The resultant answer varied from port to port as they traveled across the vast expanse of Westernness.

It was rare for a mighty frigate (or even a three-masted "sloop") to visit such minor worlds as these. In many cases the *Fang* was the biggest Ship the locals had ever seen. Indeed, their arrival would have been a major sensation in most of these ports, had there been a sufficient critical mass of population for a good sensation to get off the ground.

The planets they visited were filled with weary women, determined farmers, cagey hunters, and fierce-looking trappers with beards, buckskin, and a smell to match any pelt. (In some cases, the pungent odor of the untanned hides was actually a relief from the smell of the trappers!) And all of them were, as Asquith put it, "talking in authentic frontier gibberish."

On a few occasions they were called upon to move parties of settlers from one backwater world to another. Because the *Fang* was far larger than the usual Ships that plied these small ports, she was a natural method of transport for big groups who had long ago sent in requests to move to another world. The *Fang* s felt sorry for these brave souls, and yet they were respectful of their hardy pioneer spirit.

The crew tried, in their rough, sailor fashion, to be kind and supportive to their passengers. Toward the end of each short voyage, the captain always held a special meal for them. The settlers were assembled for a dinner in their honor on the upperside waist and Melville always offered a toast to them. A toast that was shared wholeheartedly by his officers and crew.

"Here's to you, my fellow adventurers," he said, "and to your new lives as a part of this new frontier world. My brothers and sisters, you are the future. Work hard, live well, be happy and fertile, and keep your powder dry! I hope that someday we can meet each of you again. Until then, may God bless you and keep watch over you."

Then Brother Theo sent them forth with an ancient blessing upon their new home. "Blessed of the Lord

be this land, for the precious things of heaven, for the dew, and for the deep that coucheth beneath. And for the precious fruits brought forth by the sun, and for the precious things put forth by the moon. And for the chief things of the ancient mountains, and for the precious things of the lasting hills."

And these Words from a man of the cloth were a great comfort to their passengers.

In the end, Words and respect were all they had to give.

For Cuthbert Asquith XVI, one major benefit of the long trip had been a chance for target practice. And some more practice. And still *more* practice.

He had railed and sniveled at the thought of learning to shoot, but now he was surprised to learn that he actually enjoyed it! Shooting well was a joy, and once he started to practice, he could feel himself relax and his aim improve.

He had spent some time with Brother Theo and Daniel, benefiting from their tips and learning to shoot well, but he found that the most improvement simply came from practice. It was like the hoary old joke from well before the Crash:

"Hey buddy, can you tell me how I can get to Carnegie Hall?"

"Practice!"

Even though Carnegie Hall didn't exist anymore, the philosophy (and the joke) still applied.

So Asquith tried to enjoy a little shooting during every day of this interminable trip through the alleys and backroads of Westernness. He didn't stand watch, nor had he any assigned tasks as a paying passenger, and the library had palled during his first month onboard. (If you could use the term "library" to describe several shelves of classic science fiction, reference manuals and texts, and a few torrid romance novels that no one seemed to claim but were nevertheless well-thumbed and -read.)

To Asquith, the choices were fairly slim: spend each day writing and drinking until he could no longer

write, or find some outside interest to fill his day.

He told himself that he already had one full-time vice called writing, and a second full-time vice of drinking would interfere with his first vice. So it was clear to him that he needed to fill the void with other interests, and pistol shooting had done wonderfully well. (Not to mention, he still remembered the incident as a young man when some so-called friends had recorded images of him at a party experimenting with some of the miscellaneous intoxicants available on Earth. The imagery had convinced him that looking like a fool was quite embarrassing, and had played a strong part in his initial decision to take the drastic step of traveling off Earth!)

Asquith was having his monkey reload his pistol, using the technique that Ulrich had taught him. And, in keeping with the coxswain's "request" Asquith only practiced this in secret, shooting from the little coxswain's private area. He found that he quickly got used to the smell of the pigeon coops and the laundry. After a lifetime on Earth, it almost felt like home.

He relaxed and took a deep breath, then let it out part way and held it as the first pistol came up and the front sight came into focus on the center of the target suspended out from the side of the Ship. He touched the nipple on one barrel and then the other <<purr!>> *Crack!* <<purr!>> *Crack!* Then he laid the muzzle of the pistol on his shoulder and his monkey rapidly reloaded while his left hand gun came up <<purr!>> *Crack!* <<purr!>> *Crack!* With all four rounds grouped nicely at the black spot in the center of the silhouette.

For Asquith, the hardest part of learning to shoot with either hand had been the coordination of twisting his one good eye so that he could see clearly down the sightline of his left pistol. At one point he had tried something called a "border shift" where, after firing with his right hand, he attempted to juggle and shift the two guns from hand to hand.

Right in the middle of this maneuver Ulrich appeared from out of nowhere. Ulrich's monkey snatched Asquith's pistols out of midair while the crazed coxswain screwed his own pistol onto Asquith's nose.

"Now, ya ain't gonna do somethink so stupkid agin, are ya?" snarled Ulrich. "Da Ship moves! An' da fightink moves. So ya *don't* wants yer gunsk outa yer hands. Got ik?"

"Heere kittykittykitty!" added his parrotlet.

The little lunatic was like that: he and his feral monkey would show up out of nowhere, make a point, and disappear again. He wasn't malicious, but for some reason known only to God and Ulrich himself, he

seemed to approve of Asquith and his shooting.

As his right gun lined up on the target he was reminded quite forcefully of their resident psychopath when he felt a rock strike the back of his head. *Whack!* Asquith's head bounced forward with the impact and he pivoted, the pistol arcing around in front of him. He felt a blow to the inside of his right arm as his pistol was smacked aside, and he felt that damned cold muzzle socket itself onto the end of his nose again like it grew there!

"Damn it, Ulrich!" he said with a whiney nasal intonation caused by the blockage of his nostrils. "What in the hell are you playing at? That hurt!"

Then his mind caught up with his body which had frozen cross-eyed staring at the barrel of Ulrich's pistol. The coxswain's monkey (looking feral and vicious as always) had its head beside Ulrich's, smiling a malevolent upside-down smile and flipping a little dagger between four hands.

Ulrich's parrotlet was bobbing happily on top of his monkey's head. The bird hopped onto the front sight of Ulrich's pistol, looked Asquith in the eye, and said, "I'm Spike! I taste like chicken!"

The coxswain laughed quietly as he removed the pistol (and the bird) making the gun disappear as the bird fluttered back up to his shoulder. "Ya know, yer responsk was pretty good there. If'ink I wasn't ready ya'd 've 'ad me in yer skights. I likesk that, I does I does."

"So why'd you do that?!"

"Yer gettink better wit' dem piskols, so's I figgers iks time fer ya ta learn how ta shootsk under combat condish-kins," replied Ulrich.

"Pray tell me, sir, whatever do you mean?" Asquith replied sarcastically. Ulrich was an interesting character, and Asquith had come to realize that the man, while he was as dangerous as a pissed-off cobra (and likely twice as fast) seemed to enjoy passing on these tidbits of combat wisdom.

Ulrich looked at him seriously. "See, ta captaink, he's damned good 'n ta furball. Fightsk like he's sum kinda crazy man, but he fightsk smart. He gotsk the best sit-yew-ational awarenesk I ever seed. But 'e needsk someone to watch 'is back. I kin cover him mosk o' da places he goes..." He paused and Asquith could have sworn he almost looked shy. *Shy? Ulrich?*

"But 'e can't alwaysk take a bodyguard wit' 'im. You, now. . ." He paused and smiled—a very small, very nasty smile, but a smile nonetheless. "But you goesk wit' 'im most places. So, da better ya doesk, da

better da oddsk are my captaink has some backup wut might keepsk 'im alife.

"So, I seen hows yer shootink an' yer pretty good at it. Yer fask, yer accurate, 'n yer monksk dewink good too." Ulrich's monkey *ee*p ed quietly in agreement, without interrupting the steady juggling of its dagger from hand to hand to hand. His parrotlet, bobbing happily on the monkey's shoulder, echoed the sentiment.

"But ya gotsk ta git some sit-yew-ational awarenesk. So's I gotsk just da' t'ing fer it." He held up a leather strap, then folded it in half, put a small stone in it, and swung it rapidly in the air.

Something wizzed past Asquith's ear. He spun and looked, and there was a large ragged hole in the target, next to the small group of holes his bullets had made. He spun back to look at Ulrich.

Ulrich smirked malevolently. "So'sk yew'n yer monk 'r gonna keep on practicink, but I'm gonna add sumpthink. I'm gonna be shootink at ya wif dis liddle slink. So'sk iffn yer monk ain't payink attention, yer gonna git hurt."

Asquith stared at him aghast. "Ulrich, have you completely lost whatever tiny bit of mind you possessed! If my monkey's loading my pistols he can't be looking at you, and those rocks hitting my head are liable to kill me! I know that Brother Theo says what doesn't kill you makes you stronger, but *killing* me won't make me stronger! And I am not going to be a bodyguard for Melville! I'm just shooting for the fun of it!"

Ulrich flat out laughed (something the entire crew would have been shocked to know he was even capable of) and said, "Naw, dese won'k kill ya! I gotsk some 'o da dumplinsk 'at Jones made fer ta lieutenant an' ta Guldur. Dese'll jist git yer attention! An' yer monk don't needsk ta see ta reload. Li'l sucker gotsk hands ta spare, ya see?"

"So yew jist keep shootink. Yer monk'll watch yer back *an'* reload. 'E's jist gotsk ta practice it, ya see?"

"An' yeah ya ain'k no bodyguard. Ya ain'k gotsk da eye fer it!" he added, smirking at the reference to Asquith's single eye. "But ya might be jist a mite bedder'n nuthink."

Asquith thought about it, ignoring Ulrich completely as he did. He turned and looked over the side at the vastness of two-space hanging in widespread panorama around him. His monkey *ee*k ed for his attention, and when Asquith looked at it, it nodded its head and flourished its belaying pin in one set of hands and a bullet and ramrod in another pair.

Asquith smiled and scratched its head gently. "So, little man, you think we should learn this as well, hmm?" He turned back to face Ulrich and his monkey again, catching sight of an anxious look on the coxswain's face before it changed back to the vicious leer he was used to seeing. *God help me, the man is serious!* Asquith thought.

"All right, you sawed-off psychopath, let's get on with it! If you're going to ruin my morning of shooting to teach us a new trick we might as well do it right!"

"Aye, 'ats da spirik!" said Ulrich. "Give a man a fishk, an' 'e'll eat fer a day. Teachk 'im ta fight, an' 'e'll feast on da meaty marrow of hisk foes fer a lifetime!" Ulrich smirked as Asquith tried to digest this morsel of psychotic wisdom. Then the coxswain's hand blurred forward launching a dumpling at Asquith. "Crack!" resounded from the belaying pin in his monkey's hands as it screeched loudly in surprise.

"What in hell!" Asquith screamed, shocked and surprised that Ulrich had launched a dumpling at his head the moment he agreed. *Dumpling hell!* he thought. *That's a rock, I don't care what Broadax thinks!* Then he was even more surprised to find that he had a pistol in his right hand. But his final and most significant surprise was to find that his pistol had been smacked aside and that damned muzzle was screwed onto his nose again.

"Ya know, yer gettink purdy good at haulink out yer piskol when yer surprisked!" Ulrich praised him. "Jist 'member when yer shootink yer fair game fer me from now on!" he chortled as he sidled back toward his personal empire of laundry piles and pigeon coops.

"I tell you, the man is absolutely bug-nuts crazy!" Asquith whispered to his monkey as he turned back toward his target. The monkey *EEK* ed fervently in agreement.

He glanced around and made sure Ulrich was nowhere in sight.

The pistol rose again to the target <<purr!> "Crack!"<<purr!>> "Crack!" followed by a resounding *Whack!* and an "Eek!" from his monkey.

"Damn it," muttered Asquith, not even bothering to look, "this is going to take some getting used to." His monkey muttered quietly in agreement. Where was that crazy coxswain? He glanced around again, still not seeing the man or his monkey.

The rest of the morning continued on in the same way, punctuated by the sound of gunfire, resounding *Whacks!* and the occasional "Owww!" followed by an apologetic "Eep."

As Asquith could attest, the acquisition of a new skill, no matter how laudable, could involve considerable pain, not to mention the odd knot on the head!

"What doesn't kill us makes us stronger, huh?" he muttered resentfully. <<purr!>> " *Crack!*"<<purr!>>  
" *Crack!*"

"That man is nuts!"

"Eep!" replied his monkey in fervent agreement.

A typical visit was their stop at DunFoundIt!

DunFoundit! was the dull runt of a sickly litter of ports. The capital city was DunDidIt! and (according to the port guide) the local cemetery was named DunLostIt! The local citizenry were very insistent that the proper pronunciation and spelling *did* include the exclamation point.

As they approached the Pier a one-masted lugger, laying proud claim to a solitary 12-pounder and crewed by militia men, approached in a somewhat uncertain fashion.

"Personally, I think they're drunk!" Fielder said in a musing tone.

"Drunk, hmmm? Truth to tell, I think I'd prefer that to what I fear is the real culprit," Melville responded sadly.

"Incompetence combined with lack of practice?" Fielder hazarded a guess.

A sigh. "I do believe so," Melville responded glumly. "I know they're focused on survival and making the planet's development profitable, but is it too much to ask for them to at least spend *some* time drilling in two-space? Or at least to find someone reasonably competent to drive the boat?"

Initially, Melville, Fielder, Westminster, Valandil, Lady Elphinstone, Brother Theo, and Asquith would be the only members of the crew going down to the surface of DunFoundIt! (The rest of the *Fang* s would take their liberty after this advance party had made the necessary coordination.) Brother Theo and Asquith went as the representatives of the mercantile elements, while Fielder and Melville were the embodiment of the political and military forces. The rangers were responsible for groundside security of the team, and for coordination with the local representatives of the Corps of Rangers. And Elphinstone had to certify the medical safety of the port before the crew was released for their liberty.

All were armed with black powder, muzzle-loading pistols and the rangers had their double-barreled rifles—which were the most complex weapons that could be transported in two-space. Everyone but the Sylvan surgeon carried a straight-bladed sword, with the edge enhanced by two-space conditions. While they didn't expect problems, they always tried to foresee potential difficulties and have a solution handy. And one problem that mankind has managed to bring with him, wherever he went, was mankind himself. Humanity had in itself the seeds for both the noble and the criminal, and grew great quantities of each wherever it was planted.

Their monkeys rode comfortably on their shoulders, with the exception of Brother Theo's monkey, who liked to ride in the hood of his robe, stretching out its neck so that it appeared to be a natural extension off to the side of the monk's head. For some reason, this innocent pastime tended to have an extremely disconcerting effect upon persons negotiating with Brother Theo.

When Piers were established from two-space, they almost always came out on high ground. In this case, as they came down the ladder from two-space the party found themselves atop a large, sparsely wooded hill that provided a vast, arid panorama in every direction.

The jaded sailors may have yearned for something more exciting than an endless series of one-Pier worlds, but even the most world-weary soul always felt a flush of exhilaration upon landing on a new world. This was a *whole world*, with *endless* possibilities! Around every corner or over the next hill there might be alien civilizations, ancient ruins, deposits of gold or unknown gems, exotic animals, and wonders of nature that no man had ever seen. And there was nothing but horseback and a man's own hind-legs available to travel across the uncharted distances of an entire planet. It would not be completely explored for centuries, and sometimes the urge to strike out into the unknown was almost overwhelming.

The port was built around the Pier. Despite being an apparently busy place, there were exactly eight buildings in sight, complete with one road that came up out of the woods, dead-ending in front of the largest structure, a warehouse of some sort. The port master, also the postmaster, manager of the general store and apparently also the local publisher, mayor, librarian, bartender, and chronic overachiever was named Jack Beech. He was happy to see them, and delighted to receive the latest news and magazines. He was also overjoyed at the chance to purchase a copy of Asquith's book and the publishing rights thereof.

Business was quickly concluded and a bag of letters was passed on to the postmaster, who promptly cried out to the crowd of locals, "We DunGotMail!" Then the contingent from the *Fang* departed to ensure cargo was transferred smoothly, liberty was administered fairly, and revictualing and rewatering were completed before getting underway to the next little one-Pier world.

The transfer of goods up and down the Pier could have been expedited by using *Fang* s instead of the idlers who appeared around the dock area once the announcement of an inbound Ship had spread, but that would have been bad for relations, and maintaining good relations with frontier worlds was the whole purpose of their visit. Thus, locals were used for all groundside tasks, under the supervision of harried *Fang* s.

One of the keys to the long-term success of Westerness was providing properly trained, maintained, and led military personnel to establish a stable and loyal presence in each newly acquired region. Much of this occurred at the officer level, with Westerness Naval Academy graduates like Flavius Cerialis, who commanded DunFoundIt!'s solitary, one-masted, two-space Ship. Flavius exemplified the acculturation of the elites of the frontier fringe regions who had much to gain from acceptance and compliance with Westerness' suzerainty.

Flavius and his wife, Susanna, hosted Melville, his first officer, and his surgeon for dinner. This provided an opportunity for the *Fang*'s leaders to partake of local delicacies (such as they were) and exchange information at a social level. The local naval officer also served as the Westerness planetary agent, and he had one lonely marine corporal to help him out. The corporal and his wife also joined them at dinner.

Flavius was a much harried and harassed officer who was profoundly embarrassed by his Ship's performance during the exchange of salutes. In the course of their conversation he took the opportunity to explain that it was currently the prime season for hunting the local musk deer, which was a key source of meat and hides, and a major export product. His regular crew of DunFoundit! reservists had all taken leave during this time, and he was trying to train some members of a backup crew.

Ordinarily Flavius' little Ship would be bouncing back and forth between the local planets, working in concert with the one Ship that every other Pier could boast locally, in order to provide communication and trade between the local planets and their nearest hub-world, Podkayne. But Flavius had no intention of going anywhere with his current crew, so he was able to extend the courtesy of his home to the visitors. The rest of the *Fang*'s had an opportunity to purchase home-cooked meals while they were dirtside, but it was usually a bit of a slop-house conducted on a large scale by local wives, and few would enjoy the pleasure of a leisurely meal like this.

Flavius and his wife were excited to know that the *Fang* had brought in Asquith's book along with the latest magazines—bestsellers usually being slow to arrive. Literature and culture were vitally important to the infinitely diverse and wildly varied worlds of Westerness.

They also leaned heavily on the local library of classic science fiction that was provided by the government. A wise man once said that, "Books are the compasses and telescopes and sextants and charts which other men have prepared to help us navigate the dangerous seas of human life." And science fiction was the instrument that had been specifically prepared to navigate the dangerous seas and distant planets of two-space.

"Every planet has its own brand of challenges," said Flavius, "and over every hill or across every river there is a chance that we will run into something new. The old sci-fi books tried to consider every possibility and provide possible solutions. They don't so much tell you what to do. They tell you *how* to think! And believe me, that's more important. And there are lots of other great nuggets to mine from these old classics.

"For example," continued Flavius excitedly, "many arid frontier worlds like this one have established farms based on a model presented by one of the ancient science fiction masters. On worlds like this, hardwood is extremely rare and expensive. But land is cheap and irrigation can be done if you are willing to work hard. So, many settlers dream big and plan for the generations.

"You see this table we're sitting at? This is real cherry wood. It's worth six months' pay for the average person here. A local rancher paid his taxes with this table! The price of hardwood is fabulous, since it takes decades to grow."

"So, you plant forests?" asked Melville.

"Yep. But not just any forest, sir!" They were both lieutenants, and Melville was actually junior in time-in-grade as a lieutenant, but the local officer insisted on calling Melville "sir." "This is a forest that will pay for itself as it grows. Drip irrigation is the best way to wet down a forest in a desert. You run a thin line to each tree, and give it just the right amount of water to thrive. Not only does it use less water than other methods, but it's cheaper to install and it stops the development of undergrowth, which pretty much ends the danger of forest fires.

"But these are very special, well planned forests. You see, most temperate hardwoods produce fruits, nuts, or edible seeds. What's more, they usually produce more edible calories per hectare per year than the same land would produce if it was sown with wheat or corn. Some fruits come in the spring time, like cherries. Others ripen in the summer and others, like apples and acorns, drop in the fall. By carefully selecting the type and number of trees, just the right amount of food is falling all the time to feed and raise five pigs per hectare per year within about seven years. Many more than that as the forest gets mature. And they do 'fall' when they are good and ripe. You don't have to pick anything except some of the fruit that you might want for yourself. Hogs are slaughtered in the fall, leaving a prize boar and enough older sows around to get the herd going for the next year. Pigs reproduce quickly, and are ready for the butcher in half a year if you feed them well. You see? It's all automatic and self-sustaining, except for having to feed your winter stock."

"So, thou hast found the sure path to easy living!" said Lady Elphinstone with a knowing smile.

"No, milady," replied Flavius, returning her smile shyly. "As I'm sure you know, 'There ain't no such thing as a free lunch.' Except for paradise worlds, you have to work and work *hard* for your food. This is just a clever way to get the most payoff for your efforts, and to leave a legacy of incredibly valuable hardwood to your grandchildren. In addition to maintaining the irrigation, you have to worry about predators, insect infestation, bird flocks, and a dozen other things that can go wrong. Of course the predator pelts are worth good money when you kill them, and you can usually eat the birds you have to kill, so there's always an upside for a hard working, straight shooting, brave, industrious pioneer.

"Another example of culture drawn from the classics is our plan for property tax assessment. On planets using this law every land owner is required to figure out what he thinks his land is worth, and submit that

figure to the Land Index. Then he is taxed, based on his own evaluation. Then, if somebody makes an honest offer to buy the land at that price, he either has to sell it, or to increase his evaluation by at least five percent. The great thing about this system is that it completely eliminates the need for government appraisers, and all of the expense, fraud, and corruption that they naturally entail.

"Every single piece of property, from buildings to wilderness land, and everything in between, has a description written up on it in the index, which is maintained at the real estate brokers' expense. Failing to pay your taxes for three years results in your land being automatically sold to the highest bidder. That saves the government the cost of a lot of tax collectors."

"Ha!" said Fielder, raising his glass. "I'm all for that. The least government is the best government as far as I'm concerned."

"Amen to that," replied their host. "But you always need someone like me and my boys to deal with the two-legged predators here in the town and the port. And you need people like our Corps of Rangers who deal with *all* kinds of predators, and ever'thing else, out in the outback."

Along with the Western Navy and the Army's Corps of Discovery, the Corps of Rangers was the third and perhaps the most elite arm of Western's armed forces. (The marines were considered to be a "department" of the Navy. The "men's department," as the marines would say.) The Navy, the Corps of Discovery and the rangers worked together to create the desire, and they helped to *satisfy* the desire, of a "westerling kingdom."

On DunFoundIt! the rangers were personified by Nathaniel Bumper and his partner, John Foy, who had invited the *Fang*'s two rangers, and any guests they wanted to bring, to a local farmhouse for dinner.

The rangers' weathered faces were tanned to mahogany and their hair was bleached from forgotten suns. They were trainers, county extension agents, protectors, marshals, leaders, and legends. Westminster and Valandil had invited Brother Theo and Asquith to accompany them. They had also invited several of the middies to join them, because telling tall tales and expostulating wisely was much more fun when there were young folks to hear and admire it all.

After a good meal provided by a local farmer and his wife, the four rangers, Brother Theo, Asquith, the midshipmen, and their hosts sat back to enjoy cigars and sip some of the local hard cider. The conversation naturally turned to worlds they had seen.

"Some are rich, with great natural wealth," said Ranger Foy. "And some are barren and rocky. Take Union, where oil flows plentifully from their native soil to go forth and feed the wheels of industry. On the other hand we have Borax, where bare rocks stare insolently at the arriving colonist with an almost spoken dare, 'Get a living from these stones, if you can!'"

"Yep," said old Natty Bumper. "One thing all worlds have in common, though. If there's life, there's a food chain. An' where there's a food chain, there's an alpha predator that humans have ta fight. Always there's the battle for survival. An' we humans are the greatest survivors the universe has ever seen!" Then he added with a leathery old grin, "With the possible exception of the cockroach, of course."

"Aye," said Brother Theo. "As our captain would put it:

"And life is colour and warmth and light,  
And a striving evermore for these;  
And he is dead who will not fight;  
And who dies fighting has increase.

"The fighting man shall take from the sun  
Take warmth, and life from the glowing earth;  
Speed with the light-foot winds to run,  
And with the trees to newer birth;  
And find, when fighting shall be done,  
Great rest, and fullness after dearth.

"The blackbirds sing to him, 'Brother, brother,  
If this be the last song you shall sing,  
Sing well, for you may not sing another;  
Brother, sing.'"

"Hooah! *Well* said," responded Foy with a nod.

"So, Natty," asked Westminster, "are you having any luck getting these farmers and pioneers to maintain the warrior spirit?"

"It's always a battle," replied the old ranger. You know, jist last week I heard someone say they was a *vegetarian!* " Looking over at Midshipman Hayl, the grizzled old ranger asked, "Do you know what a vegetarian is, son?" As the boy was opening his mouth to answer the ranger said, "It's an old American Indian word that means 'bad hunter!' Next thing ya know, we'll have *vegans* here! Tha's another old Indian word. It means, 'useless bastard can't even milk a cow!'"

Natty smiled and joined in the laughter, and then he got deadly serious.

"Complacency is always the greatest predator. It kills off the two-legged grass-eaters ever' time. No sooner do ya clear out most of the werebeasts and jackwolves, an' some damned fool will stop carryin' 'is rifle, an' next thing ya know he's dead. I guess it's a good thing there's always somethin' to play Darwin

an' take the stupid ones outa the gene pool. God knows how bad it will git when we kill off all the predators and the sheepeople begin to thrive. 'At's when I'll be movin' on to the next world."

"Aye," said Brother Theo. "*Cogito, ergo armatum sum*: I think, therefore I am armed."

There was a mixed chorus of "Amen" and "Hooah!" in response to that, as the monk continued.

"It's always been that way. Take the case of Massachusetts. In 1636 an exasperated General Court of the Massachusetts Bay Colony unanimously passed an ordinance that said..." Then the monk took a sip of his drink and began to recite from memory.

"Whereas many complaints have been made to this Court, of the greatest neglect of all sorts of people of using the lawful and necessary means for their safety, especially in this time of so great danger from Indians, it is therefore ordered that no person shall travel above one mile from his dwelling without arms; upon pain of twelvecence for every default."

Theo took another sip and continued thoughtfully, "It is interesting that going unarmed was scornfully referred to as neglectful. Protecting oneself was not just a personal responsibility, it was a duty to the community! A community that needed the contributions of every able-bodied person. In fact, for over a century after the danger from hostile Indians was eliminated, there was no suggestion that this ordinance be repealed. A century-and-a-half later, those people were the leaders of the armed rebellion that created the United States!

"But, alas, two centuries after the revolution, Americans living in that same place were denied the right to carry firearms in self-defense! They were required to depend completely upon uncaring and inept bureaucrats for personal protection, and nearly every other necessity of life. Those were dark decades when helpless citizens were brutally murdered, and neighbors and bureaucrats alike just yawned and went about their business as if nothing had happened. Citizens were of so little value, they were considered expendable!"

"Damnfool sheep!" muttered old Natty.

"Aye," continued Theo. "You know, the Massachusetts state motto was, 'By the sword we seek peace.' Two centuries later they were denied the right to self-defense! Their ancestors would rightly think they had lost their senses!"

"Any sane citizen would think the same!" said Foy. "But," he sighed, "how quickly we forget."

"I'm not much up on history," said Natty, "but mah partner, Ranger Foy here, is a gen-u-ine history buff. Tell 'em what ya was tellin' me the other day, John."

"Well," began Foy after a long hard drink of his cider, "At about the time the original thirteen United States adopted their new constitution in 1787, Alexander Tyler, a Scottish history professor at the University of Edinburg, had this to say about the fall of the Athenian republic some two-thousand years prior:

"A democracy is always temporary in nature; it simply cannot exist as a permanent form of government. A democracy will continue to exist up until the time that voters discover that they can vote themselves generous gifts from the public treasury. From that moment on, the majority always votes for the candidates who promise the most benefits from the public treasury, with the result that every democracy will finally collapse over loose fiscal policy, which is always followed by a dictatorship.

"The average age of the world's greatest civilizations from the beginning of history, has been about two-hundred years. During those two-hundred years, these nations always progressed through the following sequence:

-From bondage to spiritual faith;

-From faith to great courage;

-From courage to liberty;

-From liberty to abundance;

-From abundance to complacency;

-From complacency to apathy;

-From apathy to dependence;

-From dependence back into bondage.'

"So," continued Foy, "Westernness, as a constitutional monarchy, can avoid apathy and dependence as long as we're faced with a great challenge. The challenge of expansion has kept us fairly stable. Our current growth seems to be in place as a self-perpetuating process. A frontier spirit of independence and self-reliance has been made possible, with expansion being encouraged and perpetuated because it can bring great wealth and prosperity. This kind of process can only happen in a free market, in a society with a high degree of liberty, such as a republic or a constitutional monarchy like ours.

"Others would disagree, and they may have a point, but the way I see it, we must avoid becoming a pure democracy, or mob rule, and we need to institutionalize our frontier spirit. Our 'Right of Self-Defense' and 'Right of the Individual Citizen to Keep and Bear Arms' are enshrined in our Constitution, and it's damned hard for anyone to twist *that* around!"

"Well said!" replied Brother Theo. "May it ever be so! Gentlemen, I give you a toast. A toast to be drunk with home brew on a frontier world. To the fundamental right of all free men. The right that keeps them free. The right that sustains all other rights: the Right of Self-Defense, and the Right of the Individual Citizen to Keep and Bear Arms!"

"Hooah!" chorused the four rangers. "Aye!" said the middies. And, "Damned straight!" said the farmer and his wife with curt nods.

Cuthbert Asquith XVI was too busy jotting it all down to say anything.

Before they left there was always the Dance.

Small communities could sometimes be quite blatant about their desire to pick up some fresh material for the local gene pool from passing Ships. Larger communities were more subtle about this, sometimes even functioning at the subconscious level, but there were plenty of females of childbearing age to be bedded practically every night, on almost every planet, by most male crew members, if they were willing. The peak of this mating ritual was the Dance.

It was usually held in a barn, with local musicians, lots of local home brew, and plenty of alien, exotic versions of dark corners, hay lofts, sandy dunes, grassy meadows, mossy glades, and cabins that just happened to be empty that night. The women were seldom beautiful, and "childbearing age" stretched well past the years that some would consider to be the peak of feminine beauty; but they were willing, and so were most of the *Fang* s. There was always plenty of locally produced alcoholic lubricants available, and, as Fielder put it, "Beauty is in the eye of the beer holder."

Melville was a terrible dancer, and he was sincerely disgusted by his failure in this social grace. He couldn't understand why his skills with the sword in the "dance of death" didn't apply to the ballroom—or the barn dance, as the case may be. With a sword in his hand he glided like a trout. On the deck of a Ship in a boarding action he was a graceful human whirlwind with a glittering steel limb. On the dance floor the best he could manage was a slow, clumsy box step or an occasional leisurely waltz. Anything else was a recipe for social disaster and public humiliation. Usually after a few dances he would retreat to his Ship.

While enjoyable in and of itself, the process of holding so many women reminded him of how far short they fell of his standard of womankind—his beloved Glaive, the Sylvan princess he had left behind on

Osgil. Most basically asked the same question: "What are the fashionable ladies wearing in Westerness this season?"

Melville had absolutely no idea. Even if he *had* been on Westerness, he probably wouldn't have noticed. He *could* tell them something about what was popular on Earth, and he blushed thinking of "In Heat" drugs, body paint, bustier options, and his dance partner with "all that yummy anatomy hanging down." His answer was always, "Oh they are generally wearing something in gingham, off the shoulders, in bright prints with matching fan. Why, much the same as you are wearing, now that I think upon it." This answer always seemed to serve well, pleasing his dance partners wonderfully.

His first officer fielded the same question with an entirely different stock response. "Oh, they are showing much more décolletage this year," Lt. Fielder would say with a disarming smile. "Very low cut and daring. I must say, it would look good on you." Somehow, Fielder's brazen lack of conscience gave him an odd sort of charm. His partners certainly seemed to love it.

Lt. Fielder *never* came back to the Ship early.

The trip through the "smallness" of Westerness seemed interminable at times. From DunFoundIt! to GetLost, passing through HomeAtLast, Friday, First and Second Foundation, Dreamland, El Dorado, Enigma, and Knight's Tale, the list of worlds seemed endless at times.

Brother Theo's ingenuity in the trade arena was often stretched. But his creativity in keeping his midshipmen productively employed and out of mischief was even more frequently strained.

Theo had never been one to waste talent when it came to making sure his middies knew how to keep their young selves alive. The lecture this day was being conducted by Gunny Von Rito and Mr. Hans on the subject of knives, swords, and other sharp pointy objects.

"Young gentlemen," Theo said, and then looked around at the supposedly industrious members of the crew who were "working" in the near vicinity of his lecture on the upper waist. "And you various other idlers, layabouts, gadabouts, roustabouts, wastrels, sots, and other sorts who are eavesdropping on this lecture. Which leads me to digress and wonder why I haven't seen all of you at my Sunday morning services? It's apparent that it isn't the sound of my voice acting as a sedative.

"In any case," he continued, "today's lecture comes in two parts. In the initial portion, I have the pleasure to introduce the theory, and in the second part, Gunnery Sergeant Von Rito and Mr. Hans, both extremely well-versed in the art of the knife, will help you to begin your lessons in close-and-dirty knife fighting. And Grenoble, the captain's bodyguard, kindly on loan from the King of Osgil, will help with some unique Sylvan aspects of the art.

"These fine gentlemen have consented to assist me since, while the Lord has gifted me with some few accomplishments," and he folded his hands over his rounded belly and smiled cherubically, "I freely admit that my experiences in close combat are limited to wrestling with temptation!"

"An' who wins, eh?" came a voice from the mainmast.

"Ah, young Thompson," called back Brother Theo as his monkey *eep* ed cheerfully, "I admit to struggling with temptation, but then the Lord put us here to struggle, did he not?"

"In any case," he continued good naturedly, "the first illusion and temptation you must conquer is the delusion which would lead you to believe that a gun or a pistol will always triumph over the knife!"

"This illusion is one that has killed countless people across the centuries. They assume (notice that lovely word 'assume' which makes an 'ass' out of 'u' and 'me' whenever you use it!) that their firearm is a magic wand which will cause others to freeze and obey their every command, that the mere threat of use is enough to cause compliance in their opponent.

"This same mind-set produced the derisive phrase 'bringing a knife to a gunfight' with the implication that you are overmatched in every case. But researchers in the late twentieth century, in the early days of the Warrior Renaissance, found that a knifeman who began within twenty feet of his opponent was frequently successful! Even though the person being attacked had a firearm at the ready!"

Brother Theo paused in his pacing at the center of the group. "Why was the knifeman successful against the gunman? Does anyone have an inkling? Or are you all practicing your naps for Sunday morning?" he grinned at the midshipmen cheerfully. His monkey propped its head on top of Brother Theo's as it looked around as well.

Midshipman Hayl spoke up quietly, "The OODA loop, sir?" he ventured.

"Excellent, Mr. Hayl! Excellent! The OODA loop, which for those of you who don't remember is the short form for the Observation, Orientation, Decision, and Action loop! When something happens, when the fecal matter impacts the rotating oscillator, as it were, first you see it! You Observe it! Then you have to figure out what it is, what is happening, you have to Orient yourself! After that, you have to Decide what to do about it! And finally, you must Act!

"And while you are processing this OODA loop, you are burning up time! The one resource no one can replace! You are wasting time, and as Napoleon said, "Ask of me anything but time!" And then right in the middle of your loop, something changes! So the loop starts again. You start over again at Observe... And right about then, your finger still on the trigger, you observe a foot of cold steel has now become intimate friends with your belly button.

"And you die!

"Which is why we went from laughing at someone who brought a knife to a gunfight and started taking him or her seriously. And that, young sirs, is why we exercise you to the edge of your endurance in learning how to respond to every manner of attacks! So that when you face an opponent in a fast-moving, rough-and-tumble, life-and-death encounter, *they* die instead of *you* ! Because *your* mind isn't even in the loop! You will respond and react on reflex, on muscle memory, not thought!

"It has been pointed out that grapplers, or wrestlers, make an art out of closing distance, clinching and wrestling. It's a smart game plan, because eliminating distance greatly diminishes an opponent's ability to effectively retrieve and employ guns. Punches and kicks are also diminished in potency when bodies are in contact.

"But Saint Farnam, writing in the early twenty-first century, pointed out that the nemesis for grapplers is a blade. Even when bodies are in contact, an opponent can efficiently retrieve and use a blade on a grappler, even a good one. Conversely, pistols are less likely to be retrieved and used effectively in the clinch.

"Against such an attack a potential victim may be able to use a blade more effectively than a pistol, at least initially. An attacker is less likely to notice a blade in the victim's hand than he would a gun. Even after the attacker has been made (painfully) aware of the fact that his victim has a blade, disarming him or her is nearly impossible. Levering a pistol out of someone's grip is much easier. A gun is only dangerous in one direction!

"When opponents separate, a pistol comes into its own, and a blade diminishes in usefulness. Think of a blade as something we can use quickly to get the attacker off of us and out of physical contact. When we have thus separated from him and gained distance, we can then utilize our pistol to prevent him from closing the distance once more.

"The best use for a blade is when you have one—preferably concealed—and your attacker doesn't know it until it is employed. When it is employed, he will probably be more than happy to separate, after which you can default to your pistol.

"And now, I leave you in the capable hands of the Gunny and Mr. Hans for lots and lots of lovely, loving practice." Brother Theo bestowed one last, kindly smile upon them and moved to the side.

Old Hans moved to the center of the circle and grinned nastily. "Well, young gennulmans, the Gunny an' I ain't Academy trained, but we is sorta good at our trade, which is stayin' alive an' makin' sure them that fight agin' us don't! So we're gonna help you boys ta figger out how ta stay alive inna clinch." He and his monkey both spat a brown stream of tobacco juice over the rail.

He chuckled evilly and continued. "I don't think you boys is gonna enjoy it much. An' speaking of things people ain't gonna enjoy..." He looked up at the yardarm over the circle and called out, "Thompson, ya wise-ass! Git yer butt down here. We needs a trainin' dummy, an' you proved yer qualerfy fer the job by mouthin' off ta' Brother Theo!"

The only reply was a smothered "Oh hell," as Thompson slid down a line to the deck.

And thus they trained and trained across the endless days. Not just midshipmen, but gun crews, topmen, and every other member of the *Fang*'s crew trained at every conceivable combat task. The middies would sometimes protest, and most often it was Grenoble who would answer.

"I have been studying thy history, and it *tells* us why thou must train. A proverb from thy ancient Chinese tells us, 'to chop a tree quickly, spend twice the time sharpening your ax.' In 404 B.C., Thucydides wrote in *The History of the Peloponnesian Wars*, that 'true safety was to be found in long previous training and not in eloquent exhortations uttered when they went into action.' Almost two and a half millennia later, thy Field Marshall Rommel told us that 'the best form of welfare for the troops is first-class training.' See? 'Tis thy *welfare* we are seeking! We want only what is *best* for thee. So sweat and *suffer*, little brothers! 'Tis good for thee!"

"But, every day, sur?" asked Midshipman Jubal. "Do we have to do it *every* day?"

"Thou sluggard! Thou hast most Saturdays and a good portion of Sunday off. What more couldst thou ask? An ancient samurai master told his student, 'You must concentrate upon and consecrate yourself wholly to each day, as though a fire were raging in your hair.'"

"Mah whole *body* feels lahk it's on fire!" Jubal muttered.

"Cogitate upon it from this perspective," added Brother Theo helpfully. "Life is like the parable of the carrot and the donkey. You can see the carrot, but pull as you might you can never reach it. The secret to enjoying life is to learn to love pulling the cart. Now, again, from the top!"

"Great job," whispered Midshipman Lao Tung to Jubal as they started the knife drill again. "Now my hair is on fire, my carrot's forever out of reach, and my damned *brain* hurts just thinking about all them proverbs and stuff!"

But still they trained.

There were no great centers of civilization to partake of. No streets of bars and brothels, no stores packed with merchandize, no vast array of restaurants and vendors. But on each world there was at least one place to buy wholesome, homemade meals that were cheerfully sold for desperately needed cash. And some worlds had something different and exciting to offer. Occasionally the sun was brighter, or the animals were more colorful, or the vegetation greener, or the beaches whiter. Some worlds had exotic native food and animals, or unique souvenirs to treasure for a lifetime.

And some worlds—indeed, most worlds—had, as old Hans put it, "Ab-so-lutely nuthin' ta commend 'em."

But finally, it was done.

After their last one-Pier world, as they were headed into Show-Low, the captain invited his officers to dinner. At the end of a good meal the consensus was that the crew was content, and it was good to go for a while without anyone trying to kill you. A man could get used to this!

"It isn't as boring as sailing across the rift," concluded Melville. "No one is trying to sink us, and we do get a warm welcome on each world, such as it is. You have to admit, there is a kind of satisfaction in honest labor, and the crew is settling into it. As the poet said,

"Art thou poor, yet hast thou golden slumbers?  
O sweet content!  
Art thou rich, yet in thy mind perplex'd?  
O punishment!...  
O sweet content! O sweet, O sweet content!  
Work apace, apace, apace, apace;  
Honest labour bears a lovely face..."

"Aye," replied Lady Elphinstone. "'Tis pleasant. 'Tis 'sweet content' indeed. But I fear 'twill not last. Peace is not thy lot, my friends, for thou are not 'souls of clay.' Thou are heroes: the 'sons of the immortals,' the 'souls of fire.' And of thee the Goddess says:

"But to the souls of fire I give more fire,  
and to those who are manful  
I give a might more than man...  
for I drive them forth by strange paths

that they may fight the titans and the monsters  
and the enemies of Gods and men."

"Thanks, milady," said Fielder sourly. "Forgive me for saying so, but you really know how to ruin a mood."

She only smiled softly and quoted, "'Tell me now, which sorts of men seem more blessed?'"

*And from every Pier they visited, Fang sent forth her message: <<Remember Kestrel ... A dark tide of fear and hate comes... Red war comes! Love quenches hate and fear... Remember.>>*

# CHAPTER THE 11TH

## Liberty: "Went Downtown Just to Ease My Pain"

I went downtown, it was just to ease my pain  
I ended up out walkin' in the rain

I took my pistol and a hundred dollar bill  
I had everything I needed to get me killed

"South Nashville Blues"  
Steve Earle

The next stop on their agenda was a planet called Show Low, which had recently been selected as the capital for a new territorial sector. Demonstrating a singular but common dearth of imagination, the sector had subsequently been designated the Show Low Sector.

As they approached Show Low's Pier, old Hans and Midshipman Hayl were once again up in the crosstrees.

"That's the mighty *Weber* and the redoubtable *Ringo* !" said young Hayl, correctly identifying the two frigates docked at the Pier.

"Aye, lad," replied Hans. "Two o' the greatest Ships ever ta set sail. I can tell ya been studyin'. Theys lots less Ships here than Earthport, as you'd expect. But what's the significance o' these two?"

"Together with the *Drake* and some other Ships a little more loosely affiliated, they form the core of what's often called the Baen Fleet," said the little middie, eager to show off his knowledge. "They were assigned to the 'near frontier' immediately upon commissioning, and have been working the most profitable of the well developed frontier worlds ever since. As opposed to the Ships we saw at Earthport, which were mostly working the developed worlds, and the Sylvan and Dwarrowdelf runs."

"Well done, lad!"

"Do you want to know their boats?" Hayl asked eagerly, since he had the answers on the tip of his tongue.

"No, lad. That one's too easy fer ya! I'll try never to give ya a question I knows ya know the answer to. Them Ships' are both loaded up and ready to head out, which will make us the cock-o'-the walk here. So tell me what they's loaded with? What's their cargo, lad, where do they come from, an what cargo did they bring from those worlds?"

"Cargo?" squeaked the middie in dismay. "How would anyone know that?"

"A veteran ossifer could make a pretty good guess. And a good Ship's ossifer would make it his job to find out! What's sellin'? What's good to get from each port? Tha's yer job now, lad. Knowin' that kind of info is key to the success of yer Ship! And it ain't just the purser's job. By the Lady, it's ever'body's job! So find out, an' brief me on it, asap."

"Aye, sir," replied the middie. He gazed out on the bustling Pier with a look of dismay. Then with a visible effort he took on an aspect of dogged determination that made the old Sailing Master laugh. *The boy's a right plucked one all right!* thought Hans. *He'll do. He'll do jist fine.*

Show Low. From the name you would expect that it was a planet run by gamblers, a casino world. A whole world named after a game of poker! Instead, the world had started as a farming paradise, with a climate and soil that made attractive and bountiful propositions of both farming and ranching.

So this colony, by virtue of its ability to resupply the Western Navy's two-space fleets, as well as its attractive location on the Rim, made it an excellent hub for travel up and down the western edge of the spiral arm, and an ideal launch point for expeditions across the Far Rift. This created more and more trade, bringing increasing quantities of money, business, and lawlessness to the capital city of Lowball.

While there were casinos by the score in Lowball, there were also restaurants, theaters, bars, taverns, and sporting events. And, of course, there were establishments euphemistically referred to as "sporting houses" where ladies of negotiable virtue could be found.

Thus, the *Fang* s finally had an opportunity to sink into the fleshpots of a major port and seek wine, women, and song. But not *necessarily* in that order. Wine and song the *Fang* s had been enjoying in moderation on a daily basis. And women *were* periodically available during the Dance on many of the worlds they had visited. But Lowball provided an environment that *combined* great quantities of wine and song with an endless supply of willing, attractive young women. At least it was an "endless supply" until their money ran out.

In other words, Lowball had all the basic ingredients for a port call where a crew with prize money to burn could relax and cut loose. But it was also infamous for its lawlessness and violence. The spirit of the endeavor was communicated by an old ballad sung by one sailor as he staggered back aboard Ship:

"Oh, I've traded tomorrow for today.  
But goin' up was worth comin' down!

Yeah I had lots of money  
Which I spent,  
Like it was goin' out of style!  
Now I'm content!  
Wearin' my memories like a smile.

"Yeah, I've traded tomorrow for today.  
But goin' up was worth comin' down!"

After a few days of hard work, the officers also were given the chance to take shore leave.

"Clothes make the man," said Fielder, admiring his perfectly tailored uniform as the Ship's officers met in the wardroom prior to departing the Ship. "Naked people have little or no impact on society."

"Beauty's only skin deep," growled Broadax in reply, "but ugly goes all da way to da bone."

"So, when we get off the Ship would you like for me to call you a cab, or should I just whistle and have the flying monkeys bring you your broom?" Fielder's monkey *EEK* ed at the jest, and reached down to straighten his lapel.

Broadax growled briefly and chewed on her stogie, but her heart just wasn't in it. "I've got plans fer this liberty, I do!" She laughed gleefully as her monkey puffed out a toxic cloud to equal hers. "We got da best damned cook in the Navy. Nobody on any o' these pitiful li'l planets can't match Jones' cookin'. Nope. But beer! Lager, stout an' all their li'l brothers are jist callin' fer a girl 'at knows how ta treat 'em. An' then I gots me a few udder plans, I do!"

She glanced over at Hans, and gave a girlish giggle that sounded like gravel being crunched underfoot, winking in what she obviously believed was a sly manner. The old salt gave her a goofy grin, and then spat through the open port in unison with his monkey. Everyone in the wardroom tried simultaneously to pretend they hadn't noticed the byplay and to erase the thought of Hans and Broadax having "plans" together.

Fielder suppressed a shudder and shook his head. "Well, personally, I plan on finding the finest restaurant in town, and getting around the biggest, freshest, tenderest steak that money can buy, followed by an equally fresh and tender young lady!"

"I didn't know you knew anyone on Show Low, Daniel," Asquith replied confusedly. "Is this one of those Navy things, a girl in every port and all that?"

"More like a port in ever' girl!" cackled old Hans.

Brother Theo shook his head and replied, "Well, Cuthbert, I think it's more in the nature of Lt. Fielder making acquaintance with a young lady of negotiable virtue, if you catch my drift. Not the sort of friends I could hope he makes, you understand, but perhaps this is where he will see the error of his wayward ways!"

As Fielder started to retort, Gunny Von Rito stuck his bald head in the wardroom. "Excuse me, sirs. Ma'am," he added, nodding to Broadax. "Cap'n said to remind you to report to the armory in the Westernness governor's compound first. The Marines are gonna fit us out from the 'emergency supplies."

Then the gunny looked at Broadax and added with a grin, "And, Lieutenant, they say they've got somethin' even a Dwarrowdelf can do some good with! So cap'n said you need to go too!"

Broadax growled as she stroked the ax strapped to her chest. Her monkey gave a derisive "Eek!" as it looked over the top of her head to meet her eye to eye, then *EEK* ed again and yanked its head down tight to its torso. Apparently even her monkey wasn't immune to the glare from an angry Dwarfrowdelf.

Fielder nodded. "Gunny, how about the sailors? Is there sufficient stock of .45s for the men who are pistol qualified?"

Von Rito nodded. "Aye, sir. The petty officers and sergeants have all made sure the men are buddied up with our people who are qualified and carrying .45s, and everybody's got their knife with 'em too. The marines here say they got plenty of emergency supplies an' they're making sure we know what's what here. I guess this can be a pretty rough port call, and the local boys don't want to have to be pulling nobody's chestnuts out of the fire. If you know what I mean, sir?"

Show Low's marine armory was a surprise. Melville and his officers had expected the standard armory: a small room or building designed to withstand almost anything man or nature could throw against it, with a selection of firearms and sharp pointy objects to thrill the heart of any warrior.

"It's a damned warehouse," breathed Fielder in awe.

Their expectations were right in one way—it *was* a blockhouse, solidly built, and well-lit by gaslights and skylights. In every other way, it far exceeded their expectations.

"Aye," Melville agreed, looking around at the neatly arranged crates stacked up to the ceiling. "I would say that the marines here have had time to build up their supply."

"You know, Captain," said Brother Theo as he gazed around and fingered the crates with a professional eye, "the Roman legions of ancient Earth ran workshops which manufactured most of their weapons. One papyrus of the second or third century A.D. from Egypt shows small groups of men working in the workshop of the Second Legion, Traiana, on a whole range of weapons including bows, shields, broadswords and catapults. Somehow I imagine it must have felt a lot like this."

The monk's pontification was interrupted by a big marine officer in working uniform, who walked up and saluted Melville.

A navy captain was considerably higher in rank than a marine captain, but Melville was *not* a captain. By courtesy he was referred to as "captain" aboard his Ship, but he wore the one epaulet of a lieutenant on his right shoulder, indicating that he was a lieutenant in command of a Ship. Thus there was no real requirement for a marine captain to salute him. But there was something about this salute that said it came from the heart, and Melville returned the salute with a flush of pleasure. It felt good to have the respect of

fellow warriors like this.

"Captain Melville, I'm Captain Muhn Koluwitz," said the big marine, "commanding the Westernness governor's marine forces here. Welcome to Show Low. The sector's crown governor, Sir Geoffery Chudloss, asked me to extend his warmest welcome to you and your officers." He paused and waved a hand at the warehouse. "As you can see, my marines have had time and resources to prepare a stockpile of emergency supplies for future use, and some of my boys have proven themselves to be quite skillful. And the governor agreed that it would be useful for you to be properly equipped for your visit here." He chuckled. "Although our idea of proper equipage might be different from that of the Admiralty's!"

Melville cocked an eyebrow at him in inquiry. "How so, Captain? I would think that we were a bit below the Admiralty's notice out here."

"To be honest, sir, I would have thought so too. Governor Chudloss and I had a little heart-to-heart chat a few days ago. A heart-to-heart with the governor isn't something a lowly marine really hankers after, if you know my meaning." He shuddered slightly, with a grin.

Broadax snickered and her monkey *EEK* ed along with her. "I think wat yer sayin', Cap'n, is ye ain't real keen on comin' ta the attention of the politicians and boo-ree-crats that done infested da higher regions o' our fine milit'ry org'nization, eh?"

Captain Koluwitz replied thoughtfully, "Well, Lieutenant, coming to their attention doesn't bother me near as much as what their attention on *you* and your Ship does to my sensibilities. Captain Melville, the governor asked me to pass on an informal message from him, in two parts. Would you like to hear it here with your officers, or in private?"

"Right here will be fine," said Melville.

"I get the feeling," scowled Fielder, "that we're *persona non grata* again, and the governor isn't going to be seeing us any time soon."

Captain Koluwitz replied with a sigh, "You are right, and wrong, but probably not for the reasons you think. The first part of the message is that the governor has received a letter from the Secretary for Colonization which passed on a request from the Admiralty. Taking out all the flowery parts, it basically says we are to expedite your arrival and departure, with emphasis on the departure, with a subtly worded hint that interaction with you would *not* be a 'good thing.' However, through private channels, the governor has also received a copy of the formal declaration of support from the King of Osgil, the Stolsh Ambassador to Osgil, and the Dwarrowdelf Ambassador to Osgil."

Then the marine captain added, "Oh, and did I mention the governor also knew the late, unlamented, Sir Percival Incessant, the former Westernness Ambassador to Osgil? I won't bore you with his feelings for Sir Percy, which are apparently shared by many others, but being an enemy of Sir Percy has definitely

made some friends for you."

He smiled openly as he continued. "In any case, the governor will certainly comply with the Admiralty's guidance in this matter. However, in light of the repairs and refit necessary for your Ship (which he noted he has not yet received the request for) the governor has found it acceptable to grant your request for shore leave and liberty for your crew. And while the governor shall not receive you, Sir Geoffery Chudloss, in his private capacity, is hoping you will honor him with your presence at dinner tonight. Those of your wardroom who are able to attend are also invited. This includes your monkeys as well, since he's heard of them and is interested in meeting them."

Melville and his officers grinned in response to this, while their monkeys lifted their heads high and *EEK*ed happily.

"Is it true that the baby monkeys appear from nowhere? If your monkey is killed, a new one appears that has the same personality and memories as your first monkey? And if their master dies they just disappear?" asked Koluwitz, eyeing the little creatures in wonder.

"Aye," said Melville with a shrug. " *And* the little buggers can do some amazing things for you in a battle. Just try not to think about it too hard, it'll only give you a headache. And the second part of Sir Geoffery's message, Captain?"

The big marine captain sobered quickly, but the merriment in his eyes didn't stay away for long. "Watch your back, sir. Watch your back. Show Low is a dangerous, lawless place at the best of times. Sir Geoffery was sent to do some housecleaning here, but he's just getting started. Every criminal and gunslinger in the sector has been hanging out on this planet. They're all here. You name it, we've got it. Rustlers, cutthroats, murderers, bounty hunters, desperadoes and mugs, pugs, thugs, nitwits, half-wits, dimwits, vipers, snipers, con men, aliens, alien agents, muggers, buggerers, bushwhackers, hornswagglers, horse thieves, bull doggers, train robbers, bank robbers, ass kickers, cow punchers, and Methodists!"

"Damn," said Melville. "Could you repeat that?"

"Hmph," grunted Fielder scornfully. "With all due respect, I think you've both been watching too many Old Earth westerns."

"So," continued Koluwitz with a wink, "it is best to *always* watch your 'six' on Show Low. But in your case there are some strong rumors floating around. We haven't been able to track them down, which is another reason that the marines are making sure you are properly fitted out for the current fashion in evening wear." He grinned again. "Wholly on our own authority, as standard SOP, mind you."

Melville nodded. "We are truly in your debt."

"Think nothing of it, sir. The industrial base here is strong enough that our initial sales of .45s to law enforcement types and rangers brought in enough to purchase a steam engine. With the steam engine and a few metal bits which had been enhanced in two-space we were able to improve our capacity, which let us build our own nitrocellulose plant. In other words, we ended up building our own firearms and ammunition plant."

He looked embarrassed. "In all honesty, it was unintentional overkill. The men were under utilized and the project just took on a life of its own, so we expanded out and built the warehouse and firing ranges. Overall, though, not too bad for a short company!" He gazed around proudly as he escorted them to the armory's office.

Brother Theo coughed politely. When that didn't attract the big marine officer's attention, his monkey *peeped* loudly which quickly caught their host's attention.

"Your pardon, Captain, but what do you do with this abundance of 'emergency supplies'?" Brother Theo asked curiously.

Captain Koluvitz walked back to him, looking at the monkey curiously. He replied absently, "Not much, Padre, mostly clean and maintain them, and shoot them—a lot!" He chuckled, sharing his joy at having an almost unlimited supply of warrior toys to play with. "Our pistol and rifle teams have done well in inter-sector competitions for many years now. We also sell some to law enforcement organizations, maintain a partial loadout for the local militia and their training, and whatever's left over—well, that's why they call them emergency supplies."

Then he turned grim as he continued. "And we saw the complete report on your Ambergris exploits. The one from the King of Osgil, not the one from the Admiralty. And 'exploits' they were! I talked with Corporal Petrico as well when he was function-checking all the weapons for issue. As a result of this information the governor has decided to authorize a new warehouse, and some additional workshops as well, out of the sector trading funds. We want to have enough BARs and .45s to equip a few battalions, at least. Eventually, we hope to do something similar with the other planets in our sector.

"By God," he continued grimly, "if anyone ever hits us like they hit the Stolsh, they'll have one hell of a surprise waiting for them."

"My friend," said Melville quietly, "after what we saw on Ambergris, that strikes me as a very good idea."

"Aye, sir," replied their host. "I heard it was bad..." After an uncomfortable pause he continued, "There is also a group in town who makes and sells firearms. I don't know if you have heard of them? The 'Revolvers'? The 'Church of the Six-Gun'? They are the ones who are trying to have the neo-pope declare Samuel Colt as a saint?"

Fielder snorted. "Right, the ones who swear that the six-gun was given to Samuel Colt as a divine revelation to make all men equal? The true 'God's Gun'?"

"You've heard of them, then!" Koluvtz laughed. "Well, the governor thinks they are full of..." He looked over at Mrs. Vodi and blushed. "Full of, ummm..."

Vodi laughed and said, "Stand easy, Captain. As a medico I've had a lot of experience with the substance you're referring to!"

"I'll bet you have!" replied Koluvtz. "By the way, I heard that you have a Sylvan surgeon. Doesn't she need a pistol?"

"She's more of a knife person," replied Vodi, "and she's real handy with a couple of little single-barreled pistols of hers, but she's not a large-bore person so she didn't need to come. But *I'll* happily take one of your .45's, and I'll try to watch her six."

"So anyway," interjected Melville, "I take it you think the Revolvers are wrong in their beliefs."

"Well, not really," Koluvtz replied thoughtfully. "The classic peacemaker design is wonderful, ergonomically speaking, even if you can only carry five rounds safely, but it really isn't too effective after the first shot, in my opinion. Training lets you cock as you draw, slap it into a good two-handed grip, aim, and squeeze gently away—but then you have to shift a hand, re-cock, re-aim, slowly squeeze, and repeat as necessary, then fiddle with a damned loading gate, popping out hulls and feeding fresh food..."

Melville waited patiently as the marine captain continued with almost religious fervor. After all, they were in this man's debt.

"Maybe it is just me," their host continued, "but I immensely like the idea of drawing an M-1911 .45, while thumbing down the safety, evaluating, squeezing, timing the slide so it locks down as you bear down on target, squeeze and repeat as needed."

The *Fang*s looked at each other and smiled indulgently as Koluvtz continued.

"So, I will be fair and say that, although the six-gun is a good gun, the works of Saint John Browning and the 1911 and its variants... Ahhh, now there is a lovely, reliable, acceptably accurate, (did I say reliable?) pistol. We believe that production of his M-1911 pistol, and his Browning Automatic Rifle or 'BAR' gave us the most bang for our production buck, as it were. And since we mostly limit our sales to military and law enforcement types, sales from the 'Church of the Six-Gun' go generally to the public. Which, overall, is a good thing. I think it was Heinlein who said, 'An armed society is a polite society.' By that standard, Show Low is a *very* courteous society!"

Fielder looked at him thoughtfully. "If I had to guess, I'd say that you've been trained by the monks on Gunsite Planet."

Koluvitz grinned at him. "I forgot to mention that Sir Geoffery and I both spent some time in meditation and training with the monks there." The marine captain shook his head with a wry smile as he continued. "The governor can shoot rings around me, and anyone else on the planet! He's the sector pistol *and* rifle champion. And don't for a minute think we *let* him win! If any of us could ever beat him, we'd do it in a heartbeat and never stop rubbing it in!"

As he led them to the issue desk with the waiting marine armorer and their own Corporal Petrico standing by to assist, he added with a laugh, "Oh, and the governor said to tell you: he never did learn to play golf! 'Piss on golf. Real men go to the range!' has become his motto after he heard about you and your rangers' exploits on Ambergris!"

Dinner with Sir Geoffery that evening was an informal affair at his residence. The governor was an impressive man, despite his average stature and plain dress. He was clean shaven, with a lantern jaw, and close-cropped sandy hair that was solid gray at the temples. His most distinctive features were his steely eyes and powerful, riveting voice and inflection.

Melville noted the wear on the left hip of the governor's plum colored jacket where a sword would hang, as well as the slight bulge on the right side indicating he was probably equipped with one of the armory's lovely .45 caliber pistols in a hand-tooled and decorated paddle holster to match the ones they had issued to Melville and his crew. The regimental pin in his cravat indicated he had been an army spec-ops commander in his younger days. The governor's calloused handshake was like gripping a hand full of coarse sandpaper, making it clear that he still spent a great deal of time with a pistol and a sword in his hand.

The dinner party included the governor, his aide, several of the governor's secretaries, and Captain Koluvitz. Interestingly enough, all the men and women seemed to be ex-military, almost evenly split between marines and the army.

After introducing himself to Melville, the governor went on to politely greet Melville's monkey.

"Do our mysterious little alien visitors need any special food?" asked Sir Geoffery. "I'd hate to neglect a guest."

"No special diet required, sir," replied Melville, reaching up and rubbing his monkey behind its ear. "As best we can figure, in its native environment the spider monkey is an herbivore, and it primarily eats

shoots and leaves off of one specific tree. But since adopting us, they've also adopted our diet and appear to thrive on whatever we eat."

The governor was an excellent host who kept the conversation limited to lighthearted stories of the city of Lowball and its inhabitants. All of which he humorously asserted were absolutely true, So Help Me God!

"Trust me, my friends," said their host with a booming laugh, "I could never even dream up stories as interesting as the ones I see daily. We have a lovely city, set in a lovely land, with a rare mix of cultures and sophistication.

"For example, last week I was dining at the Kansas Street Grill, which is an excellent place for steak. As a side note, avoid the seafood until the winter here, seafood in summer is a bit of a gamble with your stomach.

"Where was I? Oh, yes, the Kansas Street Grill. While I was dining, two gentlemen (and I use the term loosely here) who were apparently hunters or trappers by their gear, were seated nearby. I am guessing, but I must admit you rarely see gentlemen around town, in new suits, carrying packs and rifles! Apparently they were celebrating some success, and they both had a fresh shave, a bath, and a new wardrobe. The smell of Bay Rum and pomade was something fierce.

"So, here these two trappers were seated at a table by a very formally dressed maitre d'. Did I mention the Kansas Street is somewhat ritzy, at least by Show Low's standards? And Billy Bob, I believe was his name, pulls the damask napkin out of the silver napkin ring, places it around his neck and ties a knot in it.

"And the maitre d', Johann, grits his teeth and asks, 'Sir, will you be having a shave or a haircut?'"

Sir Geoffery laughed with the rest of the table and then sadly shook his head. "Although, I must admit they do have the best chef on the planet, damned if they don't!"

He paused for another sip and added loudly. "Not that Anna, my cook, is bad. No, not at all! But I fear she's slipping of late and can't measure up to Kansas Street's Chef Stevey."

A voice came from the serving window going to the kitchen. "I heard that, Sir Geoffery! And if for some reason your dessert soufflé collapses, you can comfort yourself knowing that the best chef on the planet wouldn't let it happen!"

General laughter followed as Anna stuck her head through the window and waved a wooden spoon at him.

"Gentlemen and ladies," announced the governor, "may I present the architect of this splendid repast: my cook, Anna, who has been with me for over fifteen years. As an aside, and in my defense, I will simply point out that the Chef Stevey at the Kansas Street Grill is also her husband, and that the two of them do persist in making my life interesting!"

"Get along with ya now, Sir Geoffery!" she replied, coming through the dutch door with a serving tray. "We ne'er make your life more interestin' an' it deserves a' be. An' Stevey said those boys' names were John and Sam, not Ernie an' Billy Bob!"

"I surrender, and yield my narrative and my palate to thee, O wondrous and all-knowing cook!" He stood and bowed elaborately toward her. She placed the dessert on the sideboard and solemnly curtsied in return.

As she returned to the kitchen, he looked over at Melville and said quietly over the general conversation, "Anna came to work for me as a cook after her retirement from the Army. Before that she was my regimental cook, and Stevey was my sergeant major. One of the best things about forming a brand-new sector administration was that it left me free to choose military and ex-military, as opposed to the political hacks that seem to fill most of the older sector governors' offices."

"I see," replied Melville. "And if I might venture a guess, I'd bet there was a good reason why the Secretary for Colonization wanted a—if you will pardon my familiarity—highly competent retired general officer, a governor's office staffed with a significant number of military officers, and an armory manned with some amazing overachievers?" He lifted a politely inquiring eyebrow at the governor.

"Hah, you're a cool one, aren't you? Yes, there is a very good reason, strategically. There's the Grey Rift and the whole width of the spiral arm between us and the Guldur. But if they take out our East Coast, Westernness will have to fall back on our frontier worlds, and Show Low is a key hub. Furthermore, if any unknown bug-a-boo attacks *this* coast from across the Far Rift, they are going to need supply and refit worlds. Strategically, Show Low is well located, has abundant natural resources, food stores, an agreeable climate, one of the biggest Piers on the West Coast, and a population that alien invaders might view as prime slave labor or livestock. In other words, we're a likely target if anyone hits the West Coast, and *our* defense is key to defending the Rim. But it is also a lawless planet that is much in need of taming before it can be truly useful.

"So," the governor continued, "the Secretary of Colonization and the Prime Minister decided it was well past time to designate some sector governors, and perhaps add some additional marines specializing in manufacturing and training. And Show Low was the first planet to benefit from this new policy." He grinned cheerfully as he added, "And I must say that your reports have added considerable impetus to the overall process!"

"Thus we prepare," the governor concluded with a sigh, "and plan and try to anticipate all the things that could happen. But tonight, we drink and enjoy... still, we remember McCrae's 'Flanders Fields,' eh?"

Melville nodded as he thought of the lines:

*In Flanders Fields the poppies blow  
Between the crosses, row on row.*

Then Melville looked up from his wine and quoted:

*"If ye break faith with us who die  
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow  
In Flanders fields."*

Sir Geoffery nodded. "Exactly, my boy. Exactly. So, let the Admiralty rage, but know that your achievements are appreciated, and your reports have been heeded. And you and your Ship will always have a 'port in a storm' here, should you have need." Then he smiled sadly and said, "At least until the poppies grow o'er my dead body."

Melville nodded at the older man. He understood.

While liberty went on apace, the *Fang* still needed to be maintained and resupplied. Someone had to do all the thousands of things a Ship must do on a daily basis to keep it in fighting trim.

Which meant that for the Ship's officers and captain the next opportunity for liberty occurred the following evening, Ship's time. Since they were in port for only a short period, they didn't reset the Ship time, so that an evening of liberty for them actually started in midmorning in the city of Lowball. Taking the governor's recommendations for a vaudeville matinee show had provided an evening's (or late morning's, depending which rubber clock you used) entertainment in a surprisingly well designed theater. After the show they went looking for a tavern for an after-dinner tipple or three.

It was a drizzling, rainy day dirtside. Raincoats were never needed in two-space, and most of the *Fang* s had purchased cheap waterproof ponchos from vendors who set up stalls at the base of the Pier. Rain dribbled fitfully as they stepped out of the theater, so the group of officers walked down the covered boardwalk, seeking a drink and enjoying the smell of the rain while horse-drawn wagons, carriages, and cabs rattled on the cobblestone street. In two-space there was nothing but the constant crisp air above deck, or the locker room smell of confined humanity below, and it always felt good to enjoy the rain or sunshine of a real planet.

The colors of Show Low were as refreshing as the sounds and smells. The street was alive with rich earth tones: the browns and tans of fresh wood, the soft gray of weathered wood, the steel gray cobblestones glistening in the rain. These earth tones were punctuated by myriad flashes of bright color in signs overhead, in shop windows and the clothing of the crowds.

As they walked along the boardwalk their middies were badgered by a local character who was wearing a black cowboy hat with a six-gun slung on his hip.

"I seed a glimpse o' them cursed M-1911 autermatics under yer jackets!" said the character.

"Yep," replied Hans, patting his hip with a confident smile. "Nuthin' but the best fer our friends!"

The man looked at young Hayl with the wild eyes of a zealot and said, "Repent and mend yer ways, boy! The revolver is the *true* God's Gun! The Colt single six was the gun that won the West! By the time your M-1911 showed up, it was all over but the shoutin'!"

"You know, historically speaking, he's got a point there," said Hayl thoughtfully.

"Now, don't yew lissen to 'im!" said Ulrich, who was standing behind Melville. He and Grenoble were shadowing the captain in their capacity as his bodyguards. "'E'll turn ya into a blasked 'revolver'! Then we'd 'ave ta run ya outa the Navy for wat they calls 'apostacky.' I think I skee skum o' them 'loosk wimen' over there. Yew go talk with them, boy. Better *that* than yew turn into a pockin' revolver."

Ulrich began to shoo the happily compliant midshipmen toward a brothel, but Melville called out, "Leave Mr. Hayl with me, Ulrich, and you and Grenoble keep an eye on the rest of the middies." Tiny Aquinar was still aboard Ship as the watch officer, and with Hayl now out of the batch, Melville felt like he had done his best to keep the youngest middies away from temptation. The others were old enough to tend to themselves, and there was no way that anyone could keep them away from the brothels if that was their goal. With Ulrich and Grenoble watching over them, the middies who were headed eagerly toward the ladies of negotiable virtue would be about as safe as possible under the circumstances. Besides, Melville had been looking for a way to get out from under the eye of his overprotective bodyguards.

Ulrich and Grenoble both gave the captain a set of matching scowls, but an order from their captain was the only thing that could get them both to agree. Besides, they were on liberty on a Westernness planet. What could go wrong here?

The remaining officers stepped into the small foyer of the Laughing Dog Tavern. They were immediately stopped at the door by a hulking bouncer with the classic broken nose and traditional attitude.

"Yew scum gotta check yer weapons," said the bouncer, leaning against the wall and looking down his crooked nose with obvious scorn.

"Why?" replied Broadax, rolling her cigar in her mouth. "We know they works jist *fine* ."

"Ha...Ha," said the bouncer with a sneer. "And yer gonna have ta put dat stinkin' cee-gar out."

The fluid flow of motions beneath Broadax's rain poncho indicated that a census of lethal hardware was taking place. Melville knew that he was going to have to intercede quickly before the idiot met an unfortunate end, but then Fielder cut in.

"She doesn't really smoke cigars, she merely mangles them," said Fielder, hoping to confuse the bouncer with a technicality.

"I ain't talkin' to yew, pretty boy. An' I don't like *none* o' yer attitudes. Yer *all* dee-nied admittance."

"Attitudes are contagious," said Fielder with a pleasant smile. "Ours might kill you."

"Ye got kids?" asked Broadax, looking up with what a scholar once called a "coprophagic grin" and an intensity that caused the bouncer's few functioning neurons to start pinging around in panic. Just about then her monkey reared up from her shoulder and started flipping its belaying pin from hand to hand.

"Uh, no...?"

"Want 'em?" she snarled, whipping an ax up from under her poncho in a blur that stopped with incredible precision in front of her victim's fly.

The bouncer's eyes widened as he watched the supernaturally sharp blade slicing its way slowly but inexorably through the front of his trousers. His back was pinned to the wall so he leaned forward and grabbed the haft of the ax with both hands. This brought his throat down into Broadax's reach and her other hand shot up to grab him by the windpipe.

"Now, if yer lookin' fer trouble, I can oblige ye. But I think ye prob'ly made a honest mistake," said Broadax. "Right? Jist say argh... Thang- *kew!* An' ye'd like to apolergize, cause ye didn't understand that we wuz a group o' Westernness naval officers. Our rain gear dun covered our unerforms, otherwise ye'd a showed proper respect fer yer betters. Right? Jist whimper."

"Well done!" said Fielder. "When in doubt, choose to live!"

"Thas a good feller," concluded Broadax as they entered the tavern. "Now go off and tend to yer laundry. An' I'd rekermend some new shoes too."

The Laughing Dog Tavern appeared to be a good, solid, well-maintained tavern from the outside, complete with a picture of a howling yellow mutt swinging above the door. The inside, on the other hand, turned out to be much more interesting. The bar in the center was the only well-lit region in the room and clustered there, like insects drawn to a lantern on a warm night, were a remarkable assortment of creatures, talking in low voices or silently nursing their drinks. Booths could be discerned in the surrounding gloom, most of them filled with shadowy figures.

Asquith whispered, "Places like this don't really exist, do they? It's so thick with clichés you could cut it with a knife and serve it on a plate! It looks like every bounty hunter, bushwhacker, cutthroat, cheat, scoundrel, scalawag, scene stealer, and plagiarist in the sector is here."

"Ah, then you'll be right at home on several counts, eh?" replied Fielder with a grin.

"Doesn't anyone in here have a job or something to do besides sit around and drink?" continued Asquith.

"Well," replied Fielder, "Looking at the number of less than reputable types mixed with the more respectable citizens, we seem to have stumbled onto a lovely cross-section of Lowball lowlifes. And some of those 'less reputable' lovelies are just my type! Ahh! *This* is what I joined up for. The opportunity to travel to erotic places."

"Don't you mean exotic, Daniel?" Asquith replied curiously.

"Look, Bert, you want to travel to exotic places, you feel free. To each his own."

Asquith's brows furrowed as he considered this, and replied, "Dammit, Daniel, this is not funny. Some of these people look pretty dangerous!"

Young Hayl chimed in, "Is there something to be scared of here?"

"Yep. *Us* ," said Melville with a happy smile. He felt like he should be preventing some of his crew's over-the-top behavior, but whatdahell, it had been a long tedious trip and they were *all* ready to blow off a little steam.

Asquith snorted. "And next you'll be telling us that they're all just a lot of misunderstood children, and we should be patient with them and their provincial mannerisms."

"Well, Bert," replied Fielder, "I wouldn't go quite that far, but if we are here for just a nice drink or two, we probably should practice a bit of understanding. The alternative *could* prove to be exciting, and unpleasant!"

"Damned writers always gots ta babble 'bout everthin' don't they?" Broadax snorted as she tugged Hans over to a booth in a corner. She looked at the two men occupying a table built for many more, chomping on her cigar as she ran a considering hand up the thick, hardwood haft of the ax she still held in her hand.

"Yew boys always take up more room 'an ye kin use?" she said, gesturing casually with the ax. "Mind movin' over a bit so's a few friends an' us kin join ye?" Broadax smiled—not that it was easy to tell that's what it was through the mass of hair and gristle that made up her face. Meanwhile, once again, her monkey pulled out its belaying pin and started tossing it from hand to hand.

The two men looked at each other, then looked at Broadax and Hans, squinting at the two monkeys. The older one replied as he fastened his hand in his companions cravat and yanked him clear, "Do ye ken, we'uns had jest finished up fer th' aft'noon an' were thinkin' it might oughta be time fer us ta be headin' on back ta' work?"

"What 'n hell ya' talkin' 'bout Jack, what work?" came faintly from the departing backs of the two men.

Broadax replied to their rapidly moving backs, "Boys, I didn't mean fer ye to git all... damn." She looked after them, shrugged, and said to Hans quietly, "Sweetie, do ye think I scared 'em aways or sumpin'? I wus jist thinkin' they might share a bit o' th' table."

Lady Elphinstone had come close enough to overhear and replied, "Nay, gallant lieutenant, methinkst 'twas perhaps thy feminine ways that didst overcome their churlishness at holding such a fine table from our fair officers and gentlemen."

Hans' eyes crossed as he tried to avoid smiling or even worse, chuckling as Broadax cogitated upon this statement.

"Ohh, I gets ye. Guess they jist ain't used to seein' high class wimmen aroun' this joint!" she concluded.

The *Fang* s all flipped off their rain gear and seated themselves around the table, shifting and jockeying to prevent their backs from being turned toward the room.

Midshipman Hayl leaned over to Brother Theo and asked quietly, "Brother, I thought those guys were just scared? Or *were* they being polite?"

Brother Theo looked over at him affectionately. "Well, young Cockroach," he whispered, "you have to remember that the capacity for self-deception is almost limitless. And since Lt. Broadax is in her own way a gentle, sweet Dwarrowdelf lass, she can't help it if she believes everyone else sees her the same way!"

Hayl looked over at him. "Okay, I got it. They *were* scared!"

After the first three or six rounds the clientele seemed to accept them in their midst. First impressions might actually have been wrong, since in this case the tavern actually did a fair business for the theater and show crowd, especially in the afternoon while there was still daylight outside. Granted, it also seemed to have a fair component of rogues, pimps, prostitutes, the occasional policeman, mercenaries, bodyguards, and other less definable types, but all in all it had a nice neighborhood type of feel, at least if your neighborhood was located in one of the suburbs of outer hell.

"Daniel? Danny-boy, is that you?" came a call from a lady who had just entered, gliding toward their table. She was a tall, willowy redhead dressed as if she had just come from the theater. She looked like someone had poured her into her gown and then forgot to say "whoa!" If it was any more low cut she'd have been barefoot. The only thing that kept her from being arrested for public indecency was a red, livefox stole draped over her generous and otherwise well displayed décolletage.

Fielder stood up quickly as he pulled her name from his mental files. "Ursula! Ursula Smithstone-Haugh! Whatever are you doing here?" he said warmly as he crossed over and lifted her hand to his mouth for a warm kiss accompanied by a slow inventory from her heels to her hairdo.

"Daniel, what a lovely surprise! I didn't realize you were on Show Low. How wonderful! Ever since Bernie died I have just been gadding about and stopping off wherever the Ships do, and I had just about given up on anything ever happening here! Is your Ship here for a while? Do you have some time? I have so many things I could show you about this town! Lovely parties, and theaters, and *other* things..."

Fielder laughed deep in his chest as their eyes met. "First, if I might introduce you to my wardroom? This is Captain Melville of the *Fang*, whose first lieutenant I have the honor to be, and then next to him..."

Ursula broke in quickly, "The Captain Melville of the book? The man everyone is talking about! How exciting! Why, Daniel, how wonderful! How *ever* did you hire him to work for you?"

Brother Theo quickly brought his hand up to cover his smiling mouth. Broadax wasn't quite so lucky, as she had been drinking deeply from her lager when Ursula made this surprising interpretation of the facts. Her subsequent spray of beer through the nostrils, followed by copious choking and gasping sounds provided a needed distraction while Fielder recovered. Melville, on the other hand, remained calm and distinctly amused as he watched his first lieutenant figure out how to deal with this remarkable woman.

"Ahh, Ursula, what a lovely thought. But, no, the Navy is a bit more formal than that, and I have the honor of actually working for *him*. You know how tiresome Navy protocol is. And, indeed, I must admit I have found it to be quite amusing and instructive watching Captain Melville deal with the cards fate has dealt us."

"Whatever, Daniel. I was going to go to that boring vaudeville show, but since you are here, I have a much better idea to while away the hours." She leaned close to him, apparently whispering in his ear, although Melville had to wonder how much whispering could be done with a tongue planted so deeply into that selfsame ear!

"Why, Ursula, that sounds like an admirable plan," replied a very flushed Fielder as beads of sweat appeared at his hairline.

"Daniel, your hairy friend is looking at me," she whispered a bit louder, just enough so the table could hear.

"The monkey? He's harmless, my dear. Just ignore him." Fielder pulled away to see his monkey stretching its neck out so its upside-down face was eye-to-eye with Ursula.

"I can't! Daniel, maybe you could let him stay here for a bit? Pretty, pretty please?" and she leaned in and nibbled at his ear, while giving a poisonous glance at the monkey.

The little creature stuck its tongue out and scampered to Fielder's other shoulder.

Fielder looked at her moist lips and sultry eyes, and then over to his monkey, who was determinedly looking away, two sets of arms crossed, the picture of high dudgeon and offended feelings!

"Maybe this time I'd better try it alone, little guy," he whispered. The monkey *eep* ed in offense, glared at her, jumped down to the table and leapt over to join Lady Elphinstone's monkey. Both monkeys now directed offended glares toward the oblivious couple.

"Captain, ladies and gentlemen, if you will excuse me, Mrs. Smithstone-Haugh has a few points of interest she would like to share, I mean, show me, here in Lowball." And with that, he and Ursula left the tavern with unseemly haste.

\* \* \*

She can kill with a smile,  
she can wound with her eyes.  
She can ruin your faith  
with her casual lies,

And she only reveals  
what she wants you to see.  
She hides like a child,  
but she's always a woman to me.

\* \* \*

"Do you know," mused Melville, "I'm not quite sure if I just witnessed the fastest seduction on record, or a mutual kidnapping?"

Lady Elphinstone cocked her head and considered momentarily. "Well, Captain. I think 'twould be best described as a scientific demonstration. 'Twas a wondrous manifestation of the physiological fact that Lt. Fielder's body hath contained within it only sufficient blood for operation of one major organ at a time. In this case, 'tis apparent that all the blood hath rushed south and abandoned his brain, so that it might operate other parts of his body! And I *do* believe that his monkey is quite offended!"

The monkey added an emphatic "Eek!" and glared at the door.

Hayl gaped at her. "Huh? What does that mean?" he asked.

Broadax snickered loudly as she lit another cigar. She took a puff and then gaped momentarily as it disappeared, and glared up at her monkey, who was cheerfully puffing the vile root into an atmospheric atrocity. She snarled halfheartedly as she started lighting another one and said, "Le'me make it real simple fer ye, boy. Wot she said is that our first officer only got's enough blood to run 'is gonads or 'is gray matter. So 'e's either gonna be thinkin', or runnin' after wenches. 'E can't dew both!"

"An' I think he's gonna be playin' make-up ta 'is monkey when 'e gits back," added Hans.

The monkeys all seemed to be in general agreement on that one, glaring at the door and muttering quietly amongst themselves.

Broadax snickered. "Hey, Hansie, ya know dis place gots rooms upstairs... Wanna go check 'em out?"

Melville reflected that at times, ignorance (or at least a strained sort of intentional blindness and deafness) could be a blessing. *And why is Hans tossing those handcuffs in the air and catching them? I really, really don't want to know. . .*

\* \* \*

She can lead you to live,  
she can take you or leave you.  
She can ask for the truth,  
but she'll never believe you.

And she'll take what you give her  
as long as it's free!  
She steals like a thief,  
but she's always a woman to me.

\* \* \*

While the open hansom cab provided protection from the rain and a wonderful view of the city in the early afternoon, Fielder and Ursula were both somewhat distracted by her continual small inroads on his trouser fastenings, while all of Fielder's approaches were persistently thwarted by subtle sinuous movements of her livefox stole. Somehow, they arrived at her hotel and her room, but Fielder didn't notice the process, only the final result, as they stood locked in an embrace.

"My, oh, my, you still taste good, Daniel," she whispered as she let her livefox drop to the floor, fully exposing her ample and admirable anatomy for the first time, as her stole slithered off to its nest in her steamer trunk.

"Oh, my, my, my," gasped Fielder. "Hello-o-o, girls! Did you miss me?" Ursula began to work on his shirt buttons, slapping his hands playfully away as he started to assist her, and then again whenever he reached toward her.

"Quit that, you naughty boy. I get to unwrap my candy first, and then you can unwrap me—after I teach you that you were such a naughty boy for running out on me last time."

Fielder groaned as she pushed him back onto the bed so she could pull his pants and boots off. The feather mattress engulfed him like a warm snowdrift. "Well, what in heaven's name did you expect me to do, Ursula? Bernie was coming up the steps, and I either had to go out the other door or shoot him, and it's such bad manners to shoot a man when you've borrowed his wife!"

Ursula t'sked, "Well, it would have saved me the trouble of shooting him myself. I mean, he was actually complaining about all the money I was spending! It's not like he was using it or anything! Oh, that's what *that* was! Do you still insist on carrying weapons with you everywhere, Daniel?"

"Well of course I'm carrying weapons. I'm *dressed*, aren't I?"

"Well, we can fix *that*! Why do you men have to carry those big lumpy pistols? It just ruins the lay of your suits! Well, you won't be needing these right now, will you?" she giggled throatily, as she gathered up all his clothes and deposited them neatly on a chair with his sword, pistol, and boots laid on top.

Fielder looked up at her as he lolled naked on the bed. Memories of their past experiences came back to him as he feasted his eyes upon her. Seldom had he met a woman so everlastingly eager beforehand and so inexhaustibly energetic in the event. "Come here, Ursula, it's not fair you get all the fun. My turn to undress you now!"

Ursula giggled again, as she moved closer. "Now, Daniel, not just yet. We have a couple of things to sort out first." She reached into her handbag and pulled out a small derringer, which had a remarkably large bore. "Say hello to my little friend, Daniel," she said sweetly.

Fielder's normally very strong paranoia, which had been defeated by a lack of proper blood supply to the brain, suddenly came roaring back, as the gallant reaction to a beautiful woman decided to go hide in a cave. The combination of lack of clothes, lack of weapons, and a very beautiful woman pointing an undoubtedly lethal pistol at him suddenly conspired to make him feel extremely naked. In multiple senses of the word!

"Now, Ursula, what's a little girl like you doing with all this here pistol?" Fielder hazarded, as he tried to sit up a bit more. "If you fire that at me, you might hurt me! And maybe break your pretty little wrist as well."

"Lay back down, Daniel, that's a good boy. You are such lovely eye candy! You silly boy, no, it won't break my wrist. It didn't hurt too much when I shot Bernie with it! And no, I don't intend to hurt you, my dear!"

Fielder sighed and started to relax, very, very cautiously. Maybe this was just some kinky fun?

"I promised to bring her a memento of you, but I just couldn't stand to *hurt* you, so I'll have to kill you first! Then I'll take her little souvenirs! You won't be needing them anymore." Ursula smiled at him sweetly.

Fielder felt his "souvenirs" suddenly try and crawl back up through his stomach and hide behind his navel. Come to think of it, he'd sort of like to hide somewhere too. Suddenly this didn't seem like one of his better ideas. *Maybe I should listen to Brother Theo a bit more*, mused the last tiny corner of his mind that was still somewhat unpanicked.

"Souvenirs, Ursula? I really don't like the sound of that!?" Fielder managed to say past lips and throat that had suddenly gone dry.

"Well, Madelia said you were just a common gigolo, and she wanted you separated from the tools of your trade, dear." She grinned sweetly at him. "But I stood up for you. I told her that you were never common, dear."

"Thanks—I think," Fielder replied faintly. Then he thought about what she had just said for a second.

"Madelia?" Fielder asked, astonished. "You mean Lady Madelia? As in the Sylvan princess Madelia?"

"Oh, yes, she's such a sweet lady. And you did so upset her, Daniel! Whatever did you do to her?"

"Besides not sticking around for her to kill me? Or shooting her in the derriere? I really can't think of a *thing* other than that!"

"Oh, no!" she gasped, starting to chuckle. "You didn't? In the arse? No wonder she's so upset with you! You naughty, naughty boy! If she hadn't been so generous with me, I might just have to keep you myself, and spend some time punishing you the way I used to! Especially after the way you ran out on me, and made me kill Bernie myself. Do you know how long I had to work to set it up so that *you* would kill him? Ah, well, it all worked out anyway." She gave that throaty giggle of hers again. Somehow, the erotic effect was ruined by the muzzle of the derringer she kept trained upon his chest.

"Well, I guess it's time to get on with business. I hate to bring in outsiders, but I'll need my bodyguard to come in and back me up for a second, dear. Just in case you decide to get uncooperative and end up needing more killing than my itty-bitty gun here, you know? But don't worry, I'm a pretty good shot, and if you hold still I promise it will be over quickly."

\* \* \*

She will promise you more,  
than the Garden of Eden,  
Then she'll carelessly cut you,  
and laugh while you're bleedin'!

But she'll bring out the best,  
And the worst you can be.  
Blame it all on yourself,  
'cause she's always a woman to me!

\* \* \*

The memory of Princess Madelia made him even more terrified, if that was possible. He looked desperately around the room and noticed a silver handmirror sitting next to the bed on the nightstand.

As Ursula turned to her left and glanced at the door, Fielder lunged convulsively at the nightstand. His motion was slow, or at least his perception of it was sped up. It seemed as if he had all the time in the world as he lunged for the mirror, grasped it and then aimed his throw at her face. Even if the natural flinch reaction could be overridden, Ursula's vanity would make her protect her most valuable asset!

He seemed to take forever to fall off the bed, roll, pivot and plant his right fist in her solar plexus while his left hand grabbed the derringer, wrenching it out of her grasp. He even had time to admire the scenery and appreciate what happened to all that adorable anatomy as his fist sunk in. Time suddenly returned to normal as he stood feeling the breeze from the open window curling around his exposed buttocks and other parts.

A hand pounded at the door. "Milady! Milady! Are you all right?" Fielder wondered what kind of unmitigated idiot would knock on a door of someone he was supposedly bodyguarding, instead of just bursting in. Then he remembered some of the sessions that he had enjoyed with her in the past and decided that it might just be common sense. It was just as well, since it gave him time to... *exit, stage left!*

Fielder raced to his clothes and put his hand on his pistol, looking over at Ursula. She deserved it, but in her own sweet poisonous way, she wasn't really mad at him, it was just business. *Besides*, he thought, *cold-blooded murder of a helpless woman might be a trifle hard to explain to a magistrate...*

He grabbed his pants, intending to put them on, when the bodyguard started to break down the door, and from the voices outside the door, it appeared that Ursula's goon now had some reinforcements. *No time to get dressed!* He snatched up the pile of clothes and weapons and headed toward the window, naked. As he passed Ursula, who was still trying valiantly to catch her breath, he quipped, "Don't bother looking in the mirror, Ursula! You won't like what you see!" It was a poor attempt at humor, but it felt

good to be dishing it out for a change.

He dove out the window before he could translate her reply. *Something tucker? Oh, well, not that important anyway*, he snickered as he swarmed down the fire escape cheerfully, still naked as a jaybird, holding onto his bundle of clothing with a death grip.

The first thing he noticed was that the rain had finally stopped. Then his worldview took a sudden shift as he realized he had just dropped into a busy alley filled with clotheslines, housewives, and pedestrians, most of whom were aghast at the sight of a nude man, carrying his clothes, coming down a fire escape!

"Pardon me," he said, nodding graciously to an elderly lady passing by, as he dropped his clothes to the ground and pulled his pants from the pile.

"Get that bastard!" gasped a female voice from above him, followed by a very authoritative *BANG!* and the *SPAAANG!* of a ricocheting bullet.

*Safety over clothes*, Fielder decided as he swept up his possessions and tried to set a record for the nude hundred-yard dash down the alley, bursting through clotheslines in every direction. Behind him he could hear Ursula and her henchmen scrambling down the fire escape.

"Doesn't that woman know when the fun's over?" Fielder gasped to himself as he ran for the first corner he could find.

Fielder, naked (if you didn't count being festooned with bits of brightly colored clothing and dainty undergarments draped about him like holiday bunting), left the alley and ran gasping through an even more crowded street, followed shortly by Ursula and her minions.

"That's right sweetie," cackled an elderly granny as Ursula and her "girls" bounced past. "You go git 'im. There's lots o' good times left in that one, it's plain ta see."

"I'll get him all right!" gasped Ursula.

Fielder poured on a burst of speed, thinking that if he got out of this he should consider spending more time working out with the marines. Running through the streets was obviously not his forte! Especially naked!

After a few blocks, quite a few alleys and one cul-de-sac that nearly gave him heart failure, Fielder managed to avoid the hue and cry and get his clothes (and weapons) on and (mostly) properly arranged. It was amazing how much better, clothes (and a properly prepared .45) could make you feel about your place in the world.

*I wonder if Ursula will ever forgive me for messing up her little business arrangement with Madelia?* he ruminated as he rounded a corner and hailed a passing cab.

"The Laughing Dog Tavern, sir. Quickly, if you please, I find I have extreme need of a drink or ten!"

The driver shrugged suspiciously and flicked his whip over the horses. You got all kinds of toffs in this city. Even disheveled, wild-eyed Navy officers with lipstick on their faces. *I jist hope ta hell the bastard tips well!* he thought darkly.

\* \* \*

She is frequently kind,  
and she's suddenly cruel.  
She can do as she pleases,  
she's nobody's fool!

But she can't be convicted,  
she's earned her degree.  
And the most she will do,  
is throw shadows at you,  
But she's always a woman to me!

\* \* \*

Fielder sauntered casually into the Laughing Dog. At least on the surface he was sauntering, but (like a duck moving serenely above the water and paddling like hell underneath) he was actually operating in the red zone of awareness, extremely alert and massively paranoid of anyone and everything in the area. The *Fang*'s first officer was old friends with fear and paranoia, those poor sisters of sweet madness, who knocked loudly upon his door at moments like this.

After a few minutes thinking in the cab, (not something he wanted to waste liberty time on, but highly conducive to survival when a lovely mercenary tries to shorten your life), he knew that if Maddy had hired Ursula, then it was very likely that she had hired others on Show Low to make life interesting (or shorter, or both) for the *Fang*'s on shore leave. Definitely *not* a good situation, don'tcherknowoldboy. Not to mention, it ruined the first good liberty they had had in ages!

So, in addition to operating in the advanced stages of paranoia and fear, Fielder was also beginning to

develop one hell of a mad-on! Or as many a wise man had noted over the years, getting between: a) a sailor just in from sea who wanted wine, women, and song and, b) the aforementioned wine, women and song... was really *not* a good idea! It tended to have painful consequences for the interruptee.

While Baronet Daniello Sans Fielder, lately known as Lt. Daniel Fielder of her Majesty, Queen of Westernness' Navy, might not be a brave soul, fearless and spoiling for a fight, he was quite capable and competent when he had to fight, and nobody ever said being scared was detrimental in a fight. Panic: bad. Fear: good! Fear kept you from doing stupid things, panic *made* you stupid.

And right now, for some reason, Fielder was feeling very frightened, very put upon, and very paranoid. And very, very frustrated.

*Damned woman could have at least have finished with our business before she got onto the mercenary routine,* he thought resentfully as he walked into the tavern.

Fielder was relieved to see that Melville and Hayl were still at their table, as well as his monkey. As he came up to them, he was fixed by the stares of five pairs of eyes. Well, four actually. Upon seeing his arrival, Fielder's monkey turned around and presented its back to him.

"Captain Melville, you have no idea how happy I am that you're still here," Fielder said as he flopped into the closest seat that had its back to the wall.

"Daniel!" replied Melville cheerfully. "I must admit I hadn't expected to see you for a while longer. The, uh, lady you departed with seemed to have extensive plans for you."

"Plans? You could say that. But I really didn't want to stick around for them. I need a drink first! I really, really need a drink!"

Hayl looked at him and pushed over a pitcher. "Try this, sir. They make a *great* micro-brewed root beer!"

Melville grinned. "I think Lt. Fielder might want something a bit stronger, Mr. Hayl." He pushed a bottle toward Fielder. "Brandy? And then perhaps your story?"

Hayl's and Melville's monkeys both appeared to find the situation humorous. Fielder's monkey, on the other hand, was sitting on the middle's shoulder and seemed fascinated by the wall behind the table.

Fielder poured a glass of brandy down his throat and looked up in surprise. "Damn, Captain, why didn't you tell me this was the good stuff! It's a sin to let me go gulping this down like that!" He shook his head and poured another glass from the bottle.

He looked over at the monkey. "Okay, my friend, you were right and I was wrong. Turn around and look at me, if you please. Baronet Daniello Sans Fielder doesn't apologize very often so you really ought to turn around and get the best view of it."

His monkey said, "Eep?" inquisitively and extended its head up and back so that its mouth was on the bottom with its two button eyes staring at him.

Fielder sighed. "Alas, I should have taken you with me. I really, really wished you were with me, especially when she pointed that derringer at me. You win, I apologize, okay?"

The monkey blinked at him slowly, then looked at its monkey compatriots. It looked back at Fielder consideringly, then scampered back over toward its customary position on his shoulder. Fielder sighed with relief and reached up to scratch the little creature gently, and then yanked his hand back suddenly. "Ow! I said I was sorry, you little monster! That hurt! No biting! Ow! No hitting either! You made your point! I surrender!"

Melville and Hayl were both trying unsuccessfully to stifle their laughter as Fielder's monkey bit the thumb on his left hand followed by a sound left-right boxing of his ears, then leaned in close to his head and hugged him.

"Damn," muttered Fielder as he drank another sip from his glass, "my luck seems to be shot in dealing with anybody and everybody today. You win, no leaving you behind next time, no matter *what* some pretty strumpet says!"

Melville chuckled. "Well, Daniel, now that you have made friends again, what was that about a derringer? I thought she was more interested in other sports when you two left."

"So did I, Captain. So did I. Turned out that she was a lot more mercenary than I remembered. Come to think of it, she always was a bit monetarily focused, it's just with that scenery..." He drifted off, and was recalled suddenly to his story by a tiny fist tapping his ear meaningfully. "Okay, okay, don't do that! Jeez! Anyway, Captain, do you recall a certain former girlfriend of mine, Princess Madelia, from whom we made a hasty departure on Osgil?"

Melville and Hayl suddenly grew serious. Hayl's eyes flashed around the room searching for the lovely Sylvan princess. Lovely, but distinctly homicidal where Captian Melville and Lt. Fielder were concerned. Hayl had been there when the captain, Fielder, and Broadax had shot their way out of Maddie's ambush, and it was *not* a pleasant memory.

"Aye, I remember her," Melville replied soberly. Madelia—or "Maddy"—was also the overprotective aunt of his own beloved Princess Glaive. "Why?"

"Well," continued Fielder, "it seems Ursula was hired by Maddy to acquire certain mementos, or 'souvenirs' from me. I, on the other hand, wanted to keep them attached to my body." He smiled sardonically. "They may not be much, but I really like *all* the parts that I was born with! So I was forced to make a hasty and somewhat undignified departure."

"Huh?" Hayl interjected. "What do you mean, she wanted a souvenir?"

"Later, lad, later," replied Fielder. "For now, just let it ride that Maddy was not happy with me, so she hired Ursula. And her getting those souvenirs would have been a terminal transaction for me. In more ways than one!" He shuddered and sipped his brandy.

"Daniel, enough about the souvenirs!" Melville said as he crossed his legs uncomfortably. He thought for a second and then continued. "No telling how far Madelia is willing to go for revenge on us *or* our crew. I'll take Hayl and fetch Elphinstone, Petreckski, and Asquith. They were doing some shopping nearby.

"You, Daniel, I am going to treat like your namesake, and send into the lion's den. Mr. Hans and Lt. Broadax departed some time ago to take a room here. You fetch them and head back toward the Pier, rounding up any *Fangs* you see on the way. I think our liberty here has come to an end."

Fielder paled. "Broadax and Hans? Captain, I honestly don't think that's a good idea. Broadax and I really don't get along all that well, and I, uh..." He paused for a second, swallowed and plowed on. "Sir, just the thought is enough to put me off... I mean, uh, midshipmen are customarily used as messengers..." He trailed off, looking beseechingly at his captain.

"Daniel, you two really do need to get along better," Melville chided. "Besides, given the threat, I don't want Hayl off alone, and you have a much more highly developed sense of paranoia as well as a better chance of survival if Lt. Broadax doesn't want to be interrupted. After all, you've got longer legs! You should be able to outrun a Dwarfrowdelf. And it isn't like she could shoot you, now is it?" Melville grinned unrepentantly at him. "Shoot *at* you, maybe, but not shoot you!"

Fielder moaned, then swiped the bottle of brandy. "Ohhh, I never realized quite how evil you could be. This may ruin all future thoughts of dalliances with nubile young ladies forever..." His voice trailed off as he wandered toward the front desk of the lobby.

Melville looked over at Hayl, who had his face buried in his arms on the table, his shoulders shaking. "It's safe, Mr. Hayl, you can look up now. Mr. Fielder won't notice your laughter. Speaking of which, you do realize it isn't necessarily very nice to laugh at your superior officer?" Melville was fighting to keep control of his own face as he said this.

"I know, Captain, I know, but his face when you told him to go collect them was just so, just so..." and he collapsed in another fit of giggles, accompanied by the two monkeys.

"Aye, lad!" said Melville with mock solemnity. "Brother Theo will never forgive the fact that he wasn't here to see it!"

After checking at the front desk, Fielder went up the hallway to the door of room thirty-two. He faced the door and shuddered as he heard a gravelly giggle, followed by a deep voice mumbling something. He stood to the side of the door and knocked. After a moment, he swallowed hard and knocked again.

A minute later, there was no response. Fielder took a deep breath and gave a solid kick to the door and then jumped to the side.

The door shuddered and one of the oak planks in the top of the door fell part way into the hallway, propelled by a thrown boot.

"What ever 'tis, we done wan' any. Get gone, ye pockin' moron!" came the dulcet tones of Broadax's voice.

"Urgent message," shouted Fielder as he crouched on the hallway floor looking up at the protruding boot. *How in the hell do you throw a boot that hard?* he thought.

"It's Lt. Fielder," he called out. "I was sent by the cap...urrk!" He trailed off as the door slammed open, a hard foot kicked his feet back, and an equally hard hand grabbed him by the throat. The curve of the very sharp ax blade resting next to his eye completely monopolized his attention. Of course, it might have been a bit less fascinating if it hadn't been right next to Mama Fielder's favorite boy's face!

"Captain sent me. Recall. Enemies," he gasped out, squeezing his eyes shut after a quick glance at a nightmare figure: fuming, red-faced, and naked except for a helmet, one boot, and a wide expanse of kinky black body hair. *How can any one female have so much hair?* he gibbered to himself as he tried to shove a red hot iron through his mind's eye.

*Please lord, don't let this be my last vision before I die,* he prayed fervently—something he last recalled doing when a certain young lady actually proved to be a young wife with a very unamused husband.

The steel band left his neck, and Fielder fell to his knees. He wasn't about to open his eyes or to stand up yet. He really wanted to keep what sanity he had left, thankyouverymuch.

"Wot's happenin', then?" he heard Broadax ask. There was the sound of a slap followed by Broadax saying, "Quit it sweetie. Sounds like threr may be a good fight brewin'. An' I *really* needs ta kill someone. It's been too damned long. Jist about anyone'll do." The she added with a wink and a leer in her voice, "An' ye *know* what dat does fer me!"

*Please, lord, just a little deafness? Just a little?* Fielder prayed.

Various jingling and jangling sounds intermixed with the occasional thumps sounded through the room as the two officers dressed while Fielder told his tale.

"Wouldja git muh boot, hon? T'anks. Okay, Lootenant, oncet I gits a ceegar goin' fer me an' my monkey, I'll be ready ta ride!"

Then, curiously she added, "Ye okay? I din't hurt ye, did I? Ye kin git up, if ye want's ta."

Fielder looked up at the two, mostly dressed officers, both looking at him curiously. "Ah, I was just trying to give you some privacy, that's all," he said as he mustered his dignity and stood.

"Privacy, hell," Hans said. "We's Shipmates, skin's jist skin."

Fielder gaped for a second, thinking, *What are you saying, you idiot, I value my sanity!* Then he closed his mouth and said diplomatically, "Well, that may be true for you and I, but Lt. Broadax is a well brought up young lady." Then he waited to be struck down by lightning from heaven.

"Huh," Broadax stared. "Mebbee yew ain't such a dirtbag as I thought. Come on, boys. The local marines gave me a li'l toy t' try out."

Fielder looked down at what appeared to be a small cannon in her hand, with the barrels (four, five?) all fanning out to cover a sixty-degree horizontal arc, as she held it out straight.

"What is that thing?" he said in fascination.

Hans answered as Broadax gazed at her miniature monstrosity with fondness. "Well, contrary ta popular opinion, a Dwarrowdelf *can* shoot accurately, they jist gots ta spend some time thinkin' 'bout it. An' thinkin' an' fightin' don't always seem ta go together real good. So the local boys made these li'l 10-gauge shotgun barrels, clumped five of 'em togedder, sorta fanned out so's the pattern spreads out flat. It's got a

single trigger an' a pistol grip. She's loaded with a double-ought gift package an' kicks like a holy terror, but my li'l angel loves it." Hans looked down at the Dwarrowdelf affectionately.

Fielder swore to himself that he was going to be standing behind her if, no, when, she fired that monstrosity. Might be the only damned safe place in the vicinity when hell broke loose.

"So, ya ready, Honey?" asked Hans.

"Sweetie, I wus *born* ready!"

\* \* \*

Oh, she takes care of herself,  
she can wait if she wants,  
She's ahead of her time!

Oh, and she never gives out,  
and she never gives in,  
She just changes her mind.

...Yeah she's always a woman to me!

# CHAPTER THE 12TH

## Gunfights, Guts, and Gore Galore: "I Have Seen the Gunman Kill"

...They tell me you are wicked and I believe them, for I have seen your painted women under the gas lamps luring the farm boys.  
And they tell me you are crooked and I answer: Yes, it is true I have seen the gunman kill and go free to kill again...

Come and show me another city with lifted head singing so proud to be alive and coarse and strong and

cunning.

... here is a tall bold slugger set vivid against the little soft cities;

Fierce as a dog with tongue lapping for action, cunning as a savage pitted against the wilderness...

Under the terrible burden of destiny laughing as a young man laughs,

Laughing even as an ignorant fighter laughs who has never lost a battle...

Laughing!

Laughing the stormy, husky, brawling laughter of Youth, half-naked, sweating, proud...

"Chicago"  
Carl Sandburg

The late afternoon sun had just broken through the clouds as Melville and Hayl left the Laughing Dog

Tavern. As soon as they stepped out into the street, two bravos with swords at the ready came toward them.

Melville drew his sword and held it with the relaxed confidence of a man who knows it well. The crowd around them melted back at the sight of the drawn steel. He wished for a moment that he had his faithful dog with him, but Show Low was *just* civilized enough that you couldn't take a dog into a good restaurant or a theater. Even more than his dog, he needed his two faithful bodyguards, but he had foolishly ditched them. At least he had his monkey, and Hayl to cover his six!

Melville made a hasty assessment of the situation. There were bystanders (including plenty of women and kids) everywhere, and although they were staying well out of sword's reach, most of them didn't seem inclined to miss the show. "Blades only," snapped Melville to Hayl. "Too many people if a bullet misses. Cover my back. If I go down, get to the *Fang*. Have the duty officer send a party to recall our crew."

"Aye, sir," Hayl replied. His hand slid to the small of his back as he pulled his dirk out, regretfully leaving the .45 in its holster. Not that a middie's dirk was a poor weapon. It seemed small next to a sword, but the traditional "midshipman's dirk" was a foot-long blade with a two-space edge, making it quite formidable threat. Combined with the highly trained, battle-hardened veteran of several very nasty melees that Hayl had become, the blade and the boy constituted respectable protection for his captain's back. Very respectable.

Melville heard Hayl breathe deep and slow, bringing his body under control. At the same time he sensed his monkey pull its belaying pin from beneath its belly. Melville felt anger and rage at these mercenaries who would attack him in the streets full of innocent citizens! Scanning the cast of characters in the street he thought, *Well... citizens anyway.*

*Melville's field of vision narrows as he feels his body prepare itself for battle. He pulls the air deep into his lungs, his native ferocity combining with the alien bloodlust he inherited from his Ship. This alien gift, combined with his own training, makes him even more impatient for the dance to begin; so as the posturing bully stands in front of him and begins to talk, he strikes!*

*The bravo stops at almost two arm's lengths from Melville, planting the tip of his sword in the ground, and saying with a sneer, "Well, Captain Melville, Lady Madelia asked me to find out what kind of funeral... walp!"*

Always catch 'em when they're talking, *Melville thinks to himself*. Nobody can talk and fight at the same time.

*His opponent screeches and falls back from the first thrust, parrying with lightning speed. Melville evades the riposte by the simple expedient of lopping off the idiot's arm.*

The bastard was fast! *he thinks*. He's probably the best they've got. That's why they sent him after me. But speed was all he had going for him. What kind of training did these fools have? Beating up women and children? Who the hell stops to talk when weapons are drawn? *These thoughts run through his mind as he pivots left to block the thrust of the bravo coming around his first opponent.*

*The attacker slips slightly in the blood gushing from the first man's arm. Melville's body takes over from his mind, sliding in to pierce his opponent's chest and heart with a full-extension lunge that's so pretty it actually makes the surrounding crowd cheer and applaud.*

Midshipman Hayl had his hands full as two more assailants appeared from out of the crowd to attack his captain from behind.

*Hayl stutter-steps in close and ducks, remembering Gunny Von Rito's words, "You gotta get in close when you got a knife and he's got a sword. It's damned hard, but you ain't gonna kill 'im just blocking his sword." He feels the jar as his monkey's belaying pin parries the sword to the side, and he senses the kiss of the blade touching his arm. He doesn't hear anything, and all he sees is a patch of pale shirt above the man's waist as his weapon slides in.*

*Hayl thrusts his knife up, over, and back down again. The wonderfully sharp blade guts his opponent like a fish. Then he pivots to the side to avoid the reeking mass of intestines as they fall out.*

*Hayl twists his head to locate the other assailant, and spots him just as the man swings a sword at his head in a powerful, two-handed, overhand blow. The little middie feels his world slow down as he tries to duck. He watches his monkey's belying pin slam into the side of the sword, but without enough force to block the blade coming at his head.*

*His left arm is already in a high-guard position, so in desperation he blocks the blade to the side with his left hand. He feels the dull "smack" of the impact as he watches the blade rip through his outstretched wrist. The monkey's belying pin together with his hand succeeds in deflecting the powerful blow. The deflected blade takes a bit of his hair with it, and he watches in horror as his hand falls to the ground, accompanied by a sprinkling of his hair.*

*Huh! babbles a tiny voice in his mind as the effect of slow-motion time gives him plenty of time to study his gushing stump. Lt. Broadax always says a battle shows what you're made of... It looks like meat, but there's less of that now. And lots of blood, although that's going fast too. And some tubes and white knobby bits...*

*The young midshipman sees the blood fountain out from his wrist and, in an inspiration born of desperation, he points the gushing stream of arterial blood at the swordsman's face and eyes. Hayl sees his opponent flinch. He seizes the opportunity and slams his dirk to the hilt in the man's chest, punching up through the diaphragm and into the heart. He is oblivious to the cheers of the watching crowd, but he distinctly hears the rattling gasp as the man realizes he has been killed by a mere boy.*

*Hayl lets go of his dirk, drops to his knees and grips his wrist, trying to stop the bleeding as he looks around wildly for any other assailants. The best first aid is to kill the man who's trying to kill you first! Otherwise, it's all sort of useless isn't it? Who told him that? He can't remember.*

*He hears the sound of his monkey, eek ing frantically as the little creature scrambles down his arm and uses six of its eight tiny hands to squeeze the end of his wrist, slowing the flow to a trickle. His monkey is playing tourniquet with his left arm, so Hayl draws his .45 in his right hand. (To hell with his dirk! He's dropped it anyway...) He looks around for other attackers, and sees only his captain pulling a sword from someone's chest. So fast? he thinks. It all seemed like it took forever.*

*Melville pivoted and saw only the departing backs of the surrounding crowd. Good survival instincts, he thought bemusedly. The show's over so they're leaving before the cops arrive.*

He saw Hayl on his knees with two dead bravos sprawled out in front of him. The captain hurried over, rapidly cleaning and sheathing his sword on a piece of shirt that one of his attackers no longer needed.

Hayl was looking around alertly, pistol in hand, his monkey *EEK* ing frantically as it squeezed the bleeding stump where the boy's left hand should be. *Bloody hell! thought Melville. What happened to his hand? What a stupid question, Thomas, later.*

Melville's monkey scampered over and picked up a bloody lump—Hayl's hand. Melville dropped to one knee, looking around at the tactical situation as he took the .45 from the boy and quickly placed it in the holster on Hayl's hip. Then he drew his own pistol and continued to "scan 360."

"Good job, son," he said huskily. "I think we need to get the hell out of Dodge. Quickly. Are you up to it?"

"Absolutely, Captain!" Hayl replied, and then his eyes rolled up into his head and he fell over in a faint.

"Damn," whispered Melville. "Damn."

A steady roar of gunfire was coming from the bar they had just left. *Fang*'s first officer, marine lieutenant, and sailing master were still inside. *Think, Thomas. Think!* They should be able to take care of themselves. His priority was to get this boy to the hospital, then he could bring back help Fielder, Broadax, and Hans if need be. But he suspected it wouldn't be necessary. God help any fools who crossed swords with those three lunatics...

Fielder, Hans, and Broadax left the mismatched couple's cozy love nest and were heading down the steps into the bar. Then someone shouted, "There he is!" pointing up at the *Fang*'s first officer.

"Oh, hell!" muttered Fielder, as a cluster of local talent drew their swords and headed toward the stairs. *Damn!* he gibbered to himself. *Ursula must have hired every bravo and sellsword on the planet! And to think, just a few hours ago she wasn't even in my clue bag, let alone my paranoia pocket!*

"I think we should try to negotiate," said Fielder.

"The word 'negotiate' ain't in my vocab'lary," snarled Broadax.

"Too many syllables?" asked Fielder innocently.

Her eyes crossed as she considered the word "syllables" and then she responded distractedly, "It don't matter why, the important thing is, it ain't in there. So here's the plan, I'll rush 'em, an' yew two pick off the stragglers."

"Oh, goodie," said Fielder. "Looks like you've got it all worked out."

"Yeah," she replied with an evil grin. "Except fer the part where we don't git kilt!"

"Don't!" said Fielder. "Don't even think about it!"

"I never do," replied Broadax as she charged down the stairs and into the mass of swordsmen who were gathering in front of her, screaming, "Jump on my ax while ye can, fools, *I* won't be so gentle!"

Hans and Fielder promptly drew their .45s and began to provide a thundering blast of covering fire for Broadax.

"She always hogs the bad guys," said Hans apologetically between shots. "She's jist selfish that way. But I figger she needs 'em more'n I do."

Fielder wasn't concerned about Broadax *or* Hans. He figured the deranged dwarf and her unbalanced boyfriend could take care of themselves. It was the bad guys who stepped back and drew their pistols who worried him. And he *liked* shooting people who worried him.

From the stairs Hans and Fielder had a good field of fire, but they were also exposed, so they blasted away at their foes as rapidly as they could while their monkeys *eek* ed plaintively and blocked bullets furiously. They automatically divided up the room. Fielder, standing on the left, took the left half; while Hans worked the right side.

*Broadax slices through the mob, her ax flying in great gouts of blood and gore while her monkey blocks blows and screeches triumphantly from atop her helmet. One of her opponents ("victims" might be a more accurate term) barely deflects a swipe of her ax, losing his sword in the process. He isn't smart enough to quit while he's ahead, and as she sweeps past him he hits her from behind with a chair. Her monkey ducks amidst a loud "Goongg!" and an explosion of splinters as the chair smashes into her helmet, but otherwise it had absolutely no effect.*

*After a brief pause the miscreant foolishly begins to smack her about the ears with the bits that*

*are still in his hands—which her monkey ignores as it stays atop her helmet and concentrates on blocking more lethal blows. This gets her attention, and she lashes back with one foot.*

*"Owww! That had some salt on it," calls Hans admiringly from the stairs, where he and Fielder continue to systematically pick off anyone who displays a firearm. "At'll teach 'im, sweetie. Nuthin' but a bloody smear where 'is weddin' tackle ought ta be!"*

*The gunshots stop, and Broadax stands atop a heap of her dead, dismembered, and disemboweled foes. She and her monkey are drenched in crimson gore. Her uniform is torn to ribbons and her blood-soaked chainmail "lingerie" glistens like rubies in the flickering lamplight. The drifting gunsmoke joins with the stogie fumes that she and her monkey are happily emitting, and the coals of their two cigars glow like demon's eyes in the dim light.*

*"Huh!" she says, looking around triumphantly, "I guess 'ats all of 'em." The moans of the wounded indicate that anyone who isn't dead is in no condition to disagree, or to do anything except lie there and bleed, which is fine with her.*

*Then shots crack out from a new, unseen quarter. Broadax points her little "playtoy" upward and pulls the trigger, letting loose a roar and a gout of flame that would do a small dragon proud, pulverizing the lamp that hangs immediately above her.*

*Broadax is extraordinarily pleased with these results. This is the first time she has ever actually hit what she's aiming at in combat! Her voice calls out from the sudden darkness. "Hot damn! I like that! So didja see who's shootin' at us?"*

*"Well I'm pretty sure it wasn't that lamp, damnit!" says Fielder. "Now I can't see a thing."*

*"An' neither can they," she answers, as debris from the ruined ceiling rains down, bouncing off her helmet as her monkey hunkers down beneath her chin. "But they prob'ly can hear yer snivelin'! An' ye shoulda been keepin' one eye shut, ta build yer night vision."*

*"I would! If I'd of known you were gonna shoot out the damned light! That's a gaslight, you know," adds Fielder, petulantly. "You could have set this whole place on fire!"*

*"Nah, they gots autermatic shutoff valves when the pressure blows. Basic Dwarrowdelf mine technology. Now quit yer bitchin' an' look fer the bad guy!" concludes Broadax with a snarl.*

*Then there is another burst of fire in their direction, and in the gloom Fielder and Hans can spot their opponent's muzzle flashes. Immediately they send several rounds of very accurate fire in return. This results in a groan, the thud of a pistol hitting the ground, followed closely by the thump of a body. All of which is taken as a good indication that the miscreant had decelerated*

*some slugs.*

*"Haha! At'll learn them vacuum-suckers!" says old Hans, thumping Fielder on the back. Hans is the kind of man who turns into seasoned hardwood with age, and it feels to Fielder like he's being smacked with a table leg.*

*"Yep," says Broadax. "Blud flies win yer havin' fun!"*

As they headed out the door Fielder commented wryly, "Well, that's another dive can't go back to."

"Why not?" replied Broadax, sincerely perplexed. "We won, didn't we?" She jubilantly flipped a twenty dollar gold piece on the bar as they went past and said to the two frightened eyes that had been peering out at the floorshow, "Barkeep! A round fer the house. Whiskey fer you, an' beer fer all my li'l friends on the floor back there!"

\* \* \*

When the gunsmoke settles,  
we'll sing a victory tune,  
And we'll all meet back,  
at the local saloon!

And we'll raise up our glasses,  
against evil forces,  
Singing, "Whiskey for my men,  
beer for my horses!"

\* \* \*

Fielder, Hans, and Broadax moved hastily through the small foyer (the bouncer being conspicuously absent ever since Broadax had administered her etiquette lesson) and out of the tavern to see Melville on one knee with pistol in hand, protecting Hayl and facing the saloon door, while scanning in all directions. The captain's monkey held a bloody lump in one paw and brandished a belaying pin with a couple of others. Hayl's monkey clung tightly to his little master's wrist, acting as a tourniquet.

"Well, hell," stormed Broadax, looking at the corpses. "Looks likes yew had yer dance without us."

Fielder pulled out his .45 and scanned 360. It might not be much use at the moment, but it damned sure felt nice in his hand.

"Over a dozen of them attacked us in the bar, Captain," said Fielder, as he completed his scan. "They've been shown the error of their ways," he added dryly."

There was no response from Melville.

"Captain?" Fielder ventured as he prodded the still bleeding body of a dead swordsman with his foot. He was pleased to note that their foes here were all suffering from a severe and permanent case of dead.

Melville looked him in the eye. His face was expressionless, but the rage in his eyes was chilling. "Daniel."

"You okay?"

"Hayl's hurt," replied Melville. "I'm fine."

His eyes pivoted to Hans. "Mr. Hans, you and Lt. Broadax take Hayl to the naval hospital asap. Lt. Fielder and I will recover Elphinstone, Theo, and Asquith, then return to the Pier. All *Fang* s are to return to Ship. Send parties to recover anyone who doesn't return on their own. Clear?" he snapped.

"Aye, Cap'n," said Hans. "Mr. Hayl to the hospital. You an' Mr. Fielder to recover the monk, the doc an' the earthwurm. Broadax an' me recover the crew an' git 'em all back ta the Ship. All clear, Cap'n."

Hans recovered the middie's dirk from the chest of a corpse and wiped it quickly on the man's shirt, while Broadax reached over with one meaty paw and picked up the unconscious boy and his monkey as if they were a small bag of potatoes, tipping them over her blood-soaked shoulder. Hayl's monkey screamed monkey invective at her as it kept its grip on the seeping wrist while being tossed around with the midshipman. Her other hand held her ax, twitching it casually as she exhaled a cloud of smoke. Melville's monkey tossed Hayl's hand, and Broadax's monkey snatched it out of the air. Hans returned the dirk to its sheath on the boy's belt and pulled the two full magazines of .45 ammo from the mag holder on Hayl's hip, keeping one and tossing one to Fielder.

"Well, Cap'n, ye sure know how ta show a girl a good time!" Broadax chortled as she and Hans left at a quick trot.

"You know, Daniel, I really am very unhappy with Lady Madelia right now." His voice sounded normal (well, almost normal) but the look in his eyes was anything but. Something alien was peering out of those eyes. Fielder had seen warmer looking vacuum in the depths of interstellar space, and it matched his own mood perfectly.

Fielder holstered his .45 and replied, "Trust me, Captain, you aren't the only one."

Melville's and Fielder's grins were both much more a predator's snarl than anything of humor.

"We're burning daylight, Daniel. Let's go." The two of them moved off rapidly down the street, looking for their wayward crew.

\* \* \*

Grandpappy told my pappy,  
"Back in my day, son,  
A man had to answer,  
for the wicked things he done"...

'Cause justice is the one thing  
you should always find.  
You gotta saddle up your boys,  
you gotta draw a hard line.

\* \* \*

The trip to the hospital was fairly quick by foot. In actual fact, anywhere in the town was within walking distance. No matter how sophisticated it might seem, it was still a small outpost on a frontier world. It *was* a strategic shipping nexus, but the total population on the planet was under half a million people—although with some of them it wasn't clear whether they should be counted as people, livestock, or wildlife!

The naval hospital was actually a wing of the city's medical center. It maintained a separate herbal greenhouse to resupply depleted stocks aboard Ships, as well as necessary stores to maintain health among a deployed crew. (It had taken decades to get brandy declared a medicinal store. Which had many benefits, not to mention that being a medicinal store, it no longer counted against the wardroom's allowable amounts of spirituous beverages! Naval Medical command had been fighting off an attempt to have it supplemented with scotch whiskey for almost as long!)

It turned out that Mrs. Vodi had been living at the hospital for the past few days as she organized the medical department's resupply efforts. (And not incidentally managed to maximize her nighttime liberty in port.) This was a stroke of luck for Midshipman Hayl as she bullied, cajoled, wheedled, extorted, and downright intimidated everyone in sight to make his treatment a top priority.

The prognosis for reattaching his hand wasn't good, even with the resources of the hospital. And the hospital did have significant resources. While their retro-culture frowned mightily upon technology developed subsequent to Old Earth's First World War, exceptions were made for drugs and medical innovations available throughout the twentieth century. Even the most staunch conservative did not condone anyone's child to needless suffering or death for want of basic medical technology like antibiotics. Least of all their own!

Mrs. Vodi appeared calm and collected, in about the same way that the eye of a tornado appears to be peaceful and placid. Her impact point upon the hospital caused about the same amount of furor as that same tornado, its energy all focused upon helping one of her middies. When he was in the operating room and things were, in her words, "the best he can possibly get on this damned, benighted planet that hurt my boy!" she turned her attention on Broadax.

"Put those damned cigars out!" snarled Vodi at the blood drenched Broadax, yanking her cigar and her monkey's out of their gaping mouths and throwing them through a window into the street. "What do you think this is, a bar? It's a hospital and you should know better than to try and poison everyone in it for your own pleasure!"

She rounded on Hans next. "Now, in words of one syllable, not that you can handle anything more complex, who did this? And why?" Normally a levelheaded person, accustomed to dealing with the horrific injuries that cannonballs and splinters could inflict randomly upon her crew, she was incensed by the maiming of one of her boys. The thought of it was enough to send her rampaging out on the streets looking for the guilty bastards to return the favor!

"That Sylvan hag!" Vodi scowled after Hans told her that Lady Madelia had sponsored the attack. "If I had the chance, I'd happily plug her through the heart, kick dirt on her corpse, and wear red to her funeral! And Ursula! Oh, I know *her* type. I call them urinals: they're the kind of woman men dribble over, and women have nothing to do with!"

"Mrs. Vodi," interrupted the young corpsman, "I've got some guys at the front desk say'n they're from the *Fang* and want'n to know if Captain Melville is here. They say they heard he was hurt in some kind of fight. Only t'ing is t'ey looks more like local bully boys. Ain't got a navy look, if ya catch my drift."

Broadax and Vodi looked at each other and with that silent telepathy women throughout the universe seemed to have developed, nodded and started toward the entrance, feeling for various lethal bits of hardware. Mrs. Vodi did a double take when Broadax pulled out her "pockin' pistol" as Petrico had christened it.

"Would you mind if I borrowed that for a couple of minutes, Lieutenant?" Vodi asked eagerly.

"Hmm? Shore, shore," she replied absently as she handed it over and pulled her ax out of her belt. "I'm still sorta partial ta my old friend here."

Hans moved in front of the two women, hands outspread. "Ladies, ladies, jist a min'it, now. Honey, hold up. Lissen up fer a sec!" He smiled sickly as he met two, no, *four* sets of glares including monkeys—who seemed to have entirely too much ability to reflect their human's emotions. His monkey took the better part of valor and elected to slide down his back and hide, with just its mouth and eyes peeping over his shoulder.

"Now, we kin take care o' these bully boys. By the Lady, there ain't no problemo there. But why does we need ta? These vacuum-suckers ain't the ones 'at tried ta kill the boy an' our cap'n. Those bozos are already dead, an' little Mr. Hayl dun 'imself proud, even if it cost 'im."

The two women looked at him with gimlet eyes, but they were willing to listen for a few more minutes.

"I figger if we tell 'em that the cap'n's okay an' he's headed on back ta a certain tavern, that'll give us enuff time ta git everyone back to the Ship. An then the cap'n can figger out what he wants to do, and we'll know where to go find the bad guys if we want to."

Vodi and Broadax thought about it, and reluctantly agreed.

"But, damn it, sweetie, it ain't fair!" said Broadax. "I'm an art-eest, and us artists *yearn* ta do wat we wus born ta do. They already messed up my plans fer this afternoon! I shoulda got another good fight outa it at least!" She snarled and fumbled for a fresh cigar. Then looked over at Mrs. Vodi, snarled again, and started chewing the end furiously, but she didn't light it.

"Weelll," said Hans thoughtfully. "We can't kill 'em outright, even if it would jist be chlorine in the gene pool. But mebbe we can come up with some place to send 'em that'll make their lives reel excitin'. I gotta think... I jist wish I knew more about this dirtball of a planet!"

"Ahhh! That's a *good* idea!" said Vodi with an evil grin. "And I know just the place to send them. I think I can also guarantee that them *and* all their friends will be occupied for a good while. No innocent bystanders either!"

"You stay here," continued Vodi. "I'll go pass the word on to those idiots. Besides, this way I can check out who they are. Hell, they might be our boys and no way I want one of *our* guys to go where I'm sending these bozos! I'll tell them I'm a nurse from the hospital, which is what I am right now!"

"Go gitum!" said Hans, punctuating this with a happy chuckle as he and his monkey spit into the nearby trash receptacle.

"Hey, cut that out!" yelled the corpsman. "I have to clean those cans!"

Hans smiled—or was it a snarl? "Could be worse, sailor! Wouldja rather clean out trash cans or swab up those scumbags' blood offa the decks out there?"

The corpsman paled at the thought, and after a second look at Hans' face and a sideways glance at the blood-soaked, sawed-off lunatic who stood beside him fondling a battle-ax, he gulped and remembered a previous, pressing engagement.

Broadax was mangling her cigar at a furious rate, and her brows were pulled together in thought.

"Hey, hon, where did she say she wuz sendin' them scumbags, anyhoo?" she asked.

Mrs. Vodi laughed out loud when they asked her upon her return.

"Those idiots are all testosterone and no brains, they'll fit in good out there. See, one of my local friends mentioned that a group of, shall we call them, oh, stalwart hunters and trappers, had come back to town and were having a shindig. Only thing is, these boys have sorta gotten used to doing without women, if you get what I mean..." She trailed off and grinned.

"Seems like these boys got only three interests in life," continued Vodi, "and drinking and fighting are the other two. And it can get quite vigorous in there, and some of those boys ain't too socially adept nor subtle if you know what I mean."

Broadax looked quite fascinated with this whole idea. "Now, I ain't quite sure what ye means yet, but it sounds interestin'ly evil!"

"Well," replied Vodi, "it seems like they'd had problems that ended up in a few legal complications. These boys just don't know how to act when someone says no. So the police and them set it up. No one gets in without a password, but once you're in, you're on yer own." She smiled beatifically.

"So I gave 'em the password. I figured that them and all their friends should be gainfully occupied for a good while. And knowing some o' those boys, I figure these bravos and sellswords will learn the pleasures of receiving instead of giving!"

Hans looked at her in admiration. "Woman, 'at's *evil* . Truly, truly evil! The Elder King hisself couldn't o' wished worst on 'em! I love it!"

"The damned fools should know better than to trust free cheese in dark corners!" Vodi replied.  
"Besides, it was *your* idea in the first place, I just put the icing on the cake. If I was as good as you, I'd figure out how to get them to put their own handcuffs on!"

"Well, I wasn't a *master* chief fer nothin'!" cackled Hans, "But yew done outdid me with this one!"

"Yep, I do believe we're in the presence o' genius!" said Broadax, looking at Vodi in a wide-eyed admiration. "Sweetie, I think it's time ta buy this woman a drink!"

\* \* \*

'Cause justice is the one thing,  
you should always find.  
You gotta saddle up your boys,  
you gotta draw a hard line.

When the gunsmoke settles,  
we'll sing a victory tune,  
And we'll all meet back,  
at the local saloon!

And we'll raise up our glasses,  
against evil forces  
Singing, "Whiskey for my horses,  
beer for my men!"

\* \* \*

Petrecki, Elphinstone, and Asquith were easy enough to find. They had heard the commotion and screams from Melville and Hayl's fight, and they headed toward the sound of the battle. By the time they got there, Melville and Fielder were just starting to look for them.

Melville was pleased by their response. Moving toward a fight isn't always smart, but you *want* people with that kind of instinct around you when life gets ugly.

The captain quickly briefed them on the events of the afternoon. Brother Theo tried mightily not to grin or even look at Fielder when he heard about the result of his dalliance with Ursula.

"Thou certainly hast a way with women, Daniel," said Lady Elphinstone, shaking her head with a wry smile. "Thy girlfriends all seem to hate thee exceedingly, so that the hatred wherewith they hate thee is greater than the love wherewith they loved thee."

But their smiles disappeared completely when they heard about Hayl. Then they split up. Melville needed to get to his Ship, where he would be in position to maneuver and control his forces, so he, Asquith, and Brother Theo headed toward the *Fang*. Meanwhile, Fielder and Elphinstone went to alert the midshipmen at the brothel. The middies' liaison with the local ladies of negotiable virtue was about to come to an abrupt end.

While the trip to the Ship was uneventful for Melville and Brother Theo, Elphinstone and Fielder were not quite so lucky.

They were cutting through a crowded outdoor cafe when a police officer intercepted them. "Hold up there, you two!" called the cop from across the cafe. When they looked at him, he yelled, "Yeah, you two. The one in the green dress, and the one with blood all over his legs."

Elphinstone looked over at Fielder's white uniform pants, splattered liberally with the blood from Midshipman Hayl, the dead bodies they had waded through in the bar, and the four dead bravos he had inspected in the street.

"Why, Daniel, I do believe 'tis us he hath hailed so impudently!" she said serenely.

Fielder glared at her with no apparent impact on her good spirits. "Think so, Sherlock?" he grunted.

The officer stomped over to them. He was short, stocky, and looked a wee bit irked. "What t' hell are you Navy types doing here? An' where t' hell did that blood come from?"

Fielder read the officer's name tag.

"You're Officer Alberick?"

"Thanks," he said, rolling his eyes and stepping closer. "If you're going to play mentalist then how much do I weigh?" bellowed the hard-case cop.

"About a buck ninety-five," Fielder replied with an infuriating grin. "Give or take a donut."

The cop's volume control was no better than his grasp of personal space. His response to this was to lean forward and shout louder. "Your breath smells of alcohol! Have you been drinking?"

"Your eyes seem glazed, have you been eating donuts?"

The cop turned red and looked at Elphinstone. "You gonna tell me what da hell yer up to?"

"Thou wouldst know who we are?"

"Yes!"

"Then I shall tell thee without delay."

"Well?"

"I am called Elphinstone. Probably because 'tis my name."

"That's real cute, but it's not answering my questions! There's four dead bodies in the street just a few blocks away, chopped, gutted, and sliced clean, like from one of those fancy blades you Navy scum carry. And there's a bunch more shot and chopped to hell inside the Laughing Dog! So what do you know about those bodies, and where in hell did that blood come from?"

Fielder's face paled as his temper rose. Elphinstone felt action was needed to prevent having more blood spilled. After all, while the cop was being an officious jerk, he was doing his job, and injuring or killing a police officer was a great way to inspect prison cells—from the inside. She slipped a hand inside her shore medical kit, and palmed a syringe.

"Good officer, I pray thee calm thy wrath! We shall be more than happy to assist thee in thy quest for information! Ah, wait, there's a wasp on thy jacket!" she said as her arm snapped out like a viper and pumped the syringe into the artery in the side of his neck.

"What in the hell?" he gasped in confusion as his hand moved up to his neck.

"Bad cop. No donut!" said Fielder as he stepped forward and eased the officer slowly to the ground.

The customers at the tables around them were staring, but there seemed to be enough lawlessness in those who were watching, and enough ambiguity in the situation (since it wasn't really clear why the officer had fallen and there was no blood) to keep any observers from interfering. Fielder looked at the Sylvan healer with raised eyebrows.

"'Tis but a mild sedative, Daniel. We must make haste with our mission, and 'tis so much easier than arguing, is't not?" she smiled at him. "And so much easier than getting the governor to have us released after assaulting this gracious officer!"

Fielder grinned and nodded. As he stood up, the grin was wiped away instantly by the voice that came from behind them.

"Daniel, Daniel, I am just so, so disappointed in you!"

He spun around to see Ursula again, accompanied by... *What would be the right collective noun? A gaggle of goons? A bully of bravos?* The thoughts spun through his mind as he looked at her, then at the five armed men accompanying her, and then back at her. *Damn. She must have recruited every piss-ant prairie punk who thinks he can shoot a gun!*

Ursula was dressed in a slinky red thing that looked like it had been spray-painted on. *Wait! Maybe it is just a layer of body paint...* Ursula saw Fielder's eyes lingering on her body and gave him a sly smile and a wink that made his heart ache. Well, the ache might have been lower. *Man, that woman looks good!*

The tactical situation wasn't good. To his front was Ursula and her merry band of gunmen. *The lead singer and her five percussionists, ready to set a merry beat on the revolver...* To his right were a group of children in an alley tending a large flock of chickens. To his left and rear were nothing but tables filled with customers. *Playing to a packed house.*

*Why in hell did that cop have to stop us?* Fielder dithered to himself as he tried to find some option that increased the odds of personal survival.

The only good news was the fact that the customers in the outdoor cafe had noted the big Colt revolvers that each of Ursula's friends brandished. The danger of getting caught in a crossfire and the well developed survival instincts of the locals made the tables empty almost magically. Fielder now had a clear field of fire in front of him. Five targets, and no innocents. He also knew that Elphinstone had her two single-barreled pistols hidden in her sleeves and she was a deadly shot.

Maybe they had a chance!

Elphinstone spoke up quietly behind him. "I am watching thy back, Daniel. Thinkst thou I can help, tell me how."

"Take the two on the right, then cover my six," muttered Fielder

"What ever do you mean, Ursula?" Fielder countered as he watched the five gunmen. They were armed with Colt Peacemakers. Good guns, but the idiots hadn't even cocked them yet. Holding them in their hands, not even ready to fire. *Yes, maybe God's watching out for me*, he thought, while he gave the appearance of relaxing as he talked with her.

"Well, Daniel, just for old time's sake I tried to be nice to you, and you abused my hospitality. Then you broke my favorite mirror! That was just too, *too* much. Now I want you to meet my friends. They're local sellswords, but they're all tolerably skillful players, and they've been good to me. And they are *so* upset that you hurt me," she concluded with a pout.

"When we were together," continued Ursula, "you said you'd die for me. Now we've broken up, and I think it's time to keep your promise."

Fielder looked at Ursula and then at her gunmen, and shook his head. She had the kind of allure that could literally enthrall men, and she used that beauty like a psychopath uses a weapon: without mercy or hesitation. Her bravos were probably completely smitten, but he had to try. "Boys, it doesn't have to be this way. You know you're not all getting out of here alive. Don't let her lead you astray. She looks good, but take my word for it, she's stone cold frigid. The original Ice Maiden."

The insipid smiles on the bravos' faces made it clear that they were hers, body and soul. The look on *her* face made it clear that right now she fancied neither. She wanted only Fielder's death. Now.

"You know I'm not a maiden, Daniel," replied Ursula. "And whoever heard of an Ice Matron? You've turned into a major bore, and I'm beginning to experience some serious ennui here. So let us *begin* this dance."

Fielder was in motion even before she stopped talking. It was always a good idea to attack while your opponent was talking.

He said a quick prayer to the "Church of the Tactical Truth" whose creed was, in the words of the Reverend Cardinal Mad Dog McLung, "Go forth and be Tactical." Or, in the words of Saint Blauer: "If you mean to do it—make it mean!"

Her boyfriends all had the classic, stylish pose that that you see in the truly self-deluded, just before they are sliced to bits, shot to death, or otherwise become aware that death is an equal opportunity provider.

The head goon shifted his grip on his gun, sliding his thumb up to the hammer as if to cock it. Unfortunately for him, he stopped and looked at Ursula for confirmation before acting. Even more unfortunately, Fielder was already Acting and was no longer Observing and trying to Orient to what was happening around him. He was one whole OODA loop ahead of them.

*We've got five, no, six targets,* he thought to himself, remembering Ursula's little derringer cannon. Then Fielder gave himself a quick pep talk, trying to ambush his brain before fear and reason could kick in. *But I've got one of the finest examples of Saint Browning's divine inspiration, cocked and locked with a tummy full of the local marines' best ammo. Seven in the mag and one in the chamber—eight ways of dying slung on my hip!*

Fielder's eternal nonchalance was replaced with swift catlike movements. His hand was already moving back to his holster as he sidestepped to the left. In the time it took the head bravo to look at Ursula, Fielder had smoothly drawn his pistol and thumbed the safety down.

Assuming the bad guys were experiencing tunnel vision (which was a pretty safe assumption), the sidestep took him out of their field of view and literally off of their radar screen. It also made them adjust to his action and start up a new OODA loop.

The gun nestled in his hand like a handshake from an old and trusted friend. He saw the front sight come up to settle on head-goon, placed it just under a silver button on his chest, and stroked the trigger geennntly. The gun surprised him when it went off (as it should) and he brought it back down to the same target as the slide slammed back into battery and he stroked the trigger again. He let the recoil of the second shot pull the gun up and placed the front sight right on the middle of head-goon's continuous eyebrow and squeezed again. He seemed to have all the time in the world, choosing his aim, pressing the trigger, riding the recoil to the aim point. Blood blossomed on the bravo's chest, his head snapped back and he dropped like a stone—DRT: dead right there.

It was called the "Mozambique drill." Fielder had practiced it so intently that it came automatically, and with such astounding speed that the three shots seemed to roll together into one continuous blast. *Best way to influence their hearts and minds,* he babbled to himself, *is two to the heart and one to the mind.*

Fielder knew that a human being can suck up a lot of .45 rounds and still keep going. *All* pistol rounds (even the vaunted .45) were notoriously ineffective (as compared to shooting someone with a rifle, or preferably a 12-pounder cannon!), and Fielder's philosophy, learned on his Grandma BenGurata's knee, was to shoot people the way they used to vote in old Chicago: "Early and often!"

He was scared, he was mad, and he was determined to finish each opponent, onceandforall. Thankyouverymuch. As Machiavelli put it, "Never do your enemy a minor injury."

As always, he didn't hear his shots in combat. Just as the lion doesn't hear its own roar (if it did, all elderly lions would be stone deaf), and the hunter doesn't hear his shots. Whether you're shooting deer or

men, the ears "blink" when you "roar"—just like the lion's. Living proof that man has the neural pathways of a predator in his head, just as he has the gripping fangs of a predator in his mouth.

As Fielder shifted left to the next target, he was aware that Lady Elphinstone's two pistols had spoken and saw that the two bravos to the right were acutely distracted by the holes that had appeared in their foreheads. The diners who had not already departed were now leaving in a mad scramble. The people were all going in the right direction ( *away* from the shooters) but a burst of bloody feathers indicated that one of the chickens was having less success at fleeing the battlefield.

*Damn! What a confusion!*

"Daniel," said Elphinstone. "We are attacked from behind."

"Kill 'em!" shrilled Fielder.

"Certainly."

Fielder's front sight settled on the next man, who was raising his gun one-handed, turning side-on like a duelist. Daniel aimed at the damp spot in his armpit, and touched off two shots with incredible speed, focusing on the target area and the front sight, then riding the recoil up to put the front sight on the eye facing him before pressing the trigger a third time. He felt intense satisfaction as his opponent dropped instantly, DRT, again.

He felt a "Twack! Twack!" as his monkey's belaying pin blocked two bullets from god-knows-who, and a tug at his jacket as the last thug dove to the ground firing his six-shooter. This guy was a big one! Daniel hurried his last two shots at the huge thug, missing with both as the man rolled and twisted on the ground. Of course, acting like a broken-back snake on the ground may have kept Fielder from hitting him, it also kept the bravo from shooting accurately, so it was an almost even tradeoff. Except for the fact that the slide of Fielder's pistol was locked back on an empty magazine.

Stupid, stupid! *Fielder screams to himself.* That's what I get for over-training on Mozambique drills. Never do Mozambique drills when you have more than two opponents, or you end up with an empty gun and reloading while the last guys are shooting you.

*While chewing himself out for fatal stupidity, he still doesn't stop trying. Fielder drops the magazine out with his right thumb as his left hand sweeps back to the magazine holder and pulls out fresh fodder. He feeds the mag into the grip as his eyes watch the huge bravo pop up with a cocked gun in his hand and a contemptuous sneer on his face.*

*Then Fielder hears a disembodied voice from his opponent. "I'm Spike! I taste like chicken!" chirps the voice.*

*The big gunman's face goes blank and he freezes. A millisecond later two shots punch out the front of his chest and whizz up over Fielder's head.*

*"Heh heh," says Ulrich, stepping out from behind the gunman with a smoking .45 in his hand, his monkey on his shoulder, and a tiny green parrotlet on his head. "He warn't so toughk."*

*This is followed by a thump as the gunman's huge body finally figures out that it was dead, tips over, and hits the ground like a fallen tree. The hilt of a knife standing up from the back of his skull shows where Ulrich had neatly pithed him. There are two .45 caliber entrance wounds in his back from where Ulrich had shot him. The small dirk sticking out of his right kidney is probably from Ulrich's monkey.*

*"Heeere kittykittykitty!" says Spike, peering down at the gunman's body.*

*"Ya think they wask gonna finishk this?" says Ulrich as he reaches out with a bloody hand to pick a morsel off of an abandoned plate.*

*Maybe it took the poor bastard so long to fall, because he had to figure out what to die from first, thinks Fielder, eyeing the corpse.*

*As the scar-seamed little coxswain looked down at the fallen body, his monkey reached out, snagged the bite of food from Ulrich's fingers and popped it into its mouth.*

*Fielder let the slide slam forward on a fresh mag, and spun around looking for more attackers. *Where in hell did Ursula go? Damn that woman!* And part of him couldn't help but think, *Damn she looks good!**

*...the most she will do,  
is throw shadows at you,  
But she's always a woman to me...*

*He paused in surprise as he saw Lady Elphinstone pull her knife from a dead man sprawled behind him. *Damn! She dropped two with her pistols and then covered our rear with her knife! Not bad. Not bad at all...**

Fielder pivoted to the front again—just in time to see Ulrich prying his knife from the back of his victim's skull while his monkey pulled its tiny dirk from the hapless bravo's kidney. "Well dip me in vacuum and call me an ice cube!" said the highly disconcerted first officer. "Where the *hell* did you come from?"

Ulrich just shrugged and stole another bite from the table. "Eep!" said his parrotlet.

"And, damn," added Fielder, looking at the corpse at Ulrich's feet, "two .45 slugs to the heart, a knife in the base of the skull, and one in the kidney. Don't you think that was a *little* bit of overkill?"

"Ya never know," replied Ulrich, with an evil smirk. "He mighta bin one o' them *reel* tough guysk. Sometimes overkill isk *jiist* enough."

The *Fang*'s crew were all highly competent, professional, experienced killers, but most of them had to build up a good mad first. *Most* warriors had to get worked up to take a life. But the crazed coxswain was a stone cold, dispassionate killer. Like a farmer's wife wringing a chicken's neck. And that could be useful. *Some tasks call for a hammer, or an ax*, thought Fielder. *That's Broadax. Other jobs needed a corkscrew. That's Ulrich.*

"Well, *sir*," sneered Ulrich. "I guessk ya musk a' bin a bit flustered. Dewin' a pockin' Mozambeekee drill win ya had five targetsk! Or wusk you jusk savin' skum fer me? Heh, heh."

"More lead, more dead," muttered Fielder. "That's my motto." *I'll never hear the end of this*, he thought. *And the little bastard is right. I was just so damned scared that I let myself get rattled, and I almost died because of it. But I really don't care what kind of ribbing I take. I'm alive!*

"An' ya know, I think yer girlfrienk may be insane," continued Ulrich as he stepped to a table and picked up a blood-spattered pork chop. "An' I shouldk know."

His monkey *EEK* ed in vigorous agreement as the two of them began to gnaw on the pork chop.

*I'm not sure which of those two crazies is scarier, Ulrich or his monkey*, Fielder thought. *With those damned knives in its hands it looks like a carving machine gone mad!*

"Yes, Daniel, I must agree," said Elphinstone. "Thou shouldst definitely tread carefully with Ursula. I think she's a psychopath."

"Thank you both for the tip. I'd never have noticed," Fielder scowled. "But, again, where *did* you come from?" he asked Ulrich, semi-politely—after all there was no sense in pissing off *another* psychopath today!

"It's jusk eatin' at a corner table an' keepin' a eye on the brothel wit' our middiesk, win I seed these idjits walkin' up wit dat pretty girl o' yoursk. Ya know, tha'sk won hail of a wuman ya gotsk there!"

"She almost killed me! Twice!" Fielder exclaimed.

"Yep. Thatsk *my* kinda wuman!"

"Quick, too!" added Elphinstone. "She moved beyond my ken almost as fast as thy pistol came out, Daniel. Art thou wounded, Daniel? Thy jacket's arm hath a hole." She grabbed his left arm, and looked at it closely. "'Tis through thy jacket from front to back." She ripped the sleeve open to show a dimple in his skin. Shaking her head, the surgeon reached into her medical pouch as Fielder looked on in astonishment.

"I was hit? But I'm not bleeding, I can't be hit!" Fielder looked at his arm. As he watched the hole opened and blood started to pour down his arm.

"I *am* hit! Damn! I've heard about this. Vasoconstriction kept it shut, didn't it?" Fielder suddenly began to feel dizzy looking at the sight of his own blood. Other people's blood didn't bother him, but *his* blood was different!

"Aye, 'tis normal, Daniel," Elphinstone replied as she bound up his arm with bandages. "The human body replies to the insult of mortal danger by trapping the blood within the core of the body, such that thy outer skin canst act as armor during a fight!"

"Ulrich," she continued on as she bandaged him, "thy captain hath decreed that our liberty is at an end, and that all of our gallant Ship's company shall return aboard her, forthwith. Wouldst thou carry this message to the midshipmen and all others thou dost encounter?"

"Aye, ma'am," he replied. "Grenoble'sk coverin' the back entrance o' the brothel. I'll git the middiesk an' him, an' we'll git back ta the Ship." Then he added with apparent pleasure, "Heh heh. I guessk I'll 'ave ta interrupt the middiesk fun." He looked around quickly and then departed immediately.

As Ulrich left, a waiter poked his head out from under a table. "Hey!" the man shouted indignantly. "He didn't pay his bill! The son-of-a-bitch just eats, shoots and leaves!"

"Here," snarled Fielder, flipping the waiter a small gold piece with his good hand. "This should cover it."

"All right, what's going on here?" said the authoritative voice of a policeman. This one unfortunately came

with several other members of the local police department, all of whom had their guns drawn and appeared somewhat upset by the gory scene.

*Probably mad because we interrupted their feeding frenzy at the local donut shop,* Fielder mused irritably. *Damn, damn! I should have known the shots would draw cops. Ulrich was smart enough to get out in time.*

The police officer stopped and looked in dismay at the half dozen corpses strewn about in the stiff, awkward poses of death. "What in hell killed all these men?" he wondered aloud.

Lady Elphinstone looked at him. Then she shook her head mournfully as she examined the corpses. "Violent death, 'tis such a sadness. God knows, the grave doth come soon enough to us all... Multiple gunshot wounds. Stab wounds, slashes. Twas one hell of a fight."

"But who, or what, killed them!"

"Well, me thinkst we can rule out natural causes. 'Tis best we say they died mostly of lead poisoning. High velocity lead poisoning..."

"Huh." He looked around in dismay. "I think it's best if we take this one downtown."

"Hey, Sarge!" one of the other policemen called. "You ain't gonna believe this. Alberick's over here on the ground, sleepin' away!"

The sergeant looked at the snoring Alberick and back at Elphinstone and Fielder. "I really think you two are gonna have a few things to be explaining here. Let's go!"

Melville and Midshipman Hezikiah Jubal were at the *Fang*'s upper-side quarterdeck rail as they discussed their pending departure.

Jubal was the senior midshipman, currently serving as the watch officer. "Sur," drawled the middie, "we're still missin' Lt. Fielder and Lady Elphinstone. So far we haven't had any response from the governor or the local police to our inquiries concernin' them. To be honest sur, Ah'm gettin' pretty concerned."

"Aye, Hezikiah. Me too."

"How's Midshipman Hayl, sur?" asked Jubal anxiously.

"Mrs. Vodi says that he's resting comfortably. Two-space seems to be aiding in his healing."

"How 'bout his hand, sur? Do they know yet?"

Melville sighed. "No, not for sure, but it really doesn't look good. His hand was reattached but Mrs. Vodi said that the damage was extensive, and he'll probably lose it. It might have been better if his opponent had spent more on his sword and bought one that had been tempered and sharpened in two-space, as it would have been a clean cut. Of course, then it might have cut through and killed him instead. Better to lose a hand than your life. But still..." He trailed off, shaking his head grimly and staring down into the dark blue plane of two-space, wishing that he could have done more.

"Yer lookin' at it wrong, sur, if Ah may say so." Jubal had served as an able seaman before being promoted to midshipman. If there were ever any more promotions to lieutenant to be made aboard the *Fang*, Jubal would be the first. So it was a Shipmate and a veteran of many battles who looked his captain in the eye as he continued. "You made sure Hayl got the trainin' he did, and that trainin' saved his life. Ah think it's amazin', Cap'n. He's a young boy, who started out as a midshipman—not someone like me who's been a sailor fer years. Those idiots you and Hayl killed knew absolutely nothin' about the Ever Evolvin' Church of Violence. But you made us pay our tithes in sweat and tears in trainin'. And curst hard it was too! And then you two brought them, our enemy, into the fold and initiated them into the mysteries of the True Way. Most folks don't know anythin' about violence, but we who do are a curst sight safer for it."

Melville blinked, trying to digest what Jubal had said and everything it implied. He was mildly disturbed by the religious connotations, but the young man had stumbled upon an elemental truth. No matter how it was stated. Those who forget, misuse, or ignore the way of violence are doomed to be initiated into the rites the hard way.

He shook his head and smiled ruefully. "Well said, Hezekiah. But it's hard to remember that when I think of young Hayl down in sick bay missing a hand."

"Aye, Captain, Ah understand, but the little tyke is alive—and he took down two of the scumbags that wanted to make you and him dead. Personally, Ah'm proud as hell of the boy!"

Melville grinned back at him. "Trust me, I'm proud of him too. Not to mention he kept me alive by covering my back. Here, now, what's this?"

They both looked down the Pier at a trio of figures approaching the Ship. Soon there was a sizable number of the crew at the railing, shaking their heads in wonder at what they saw.

Fielder was "pitching woo" to a brace of local ladies hanging on his arms as they saw their brave sailor to his Ship. It would have been a classic, timeless scene, identical to those played out by human sailors for untold millennia, if not for the bizarre sight of an alien monkey's head bobbing happily above Fielder's head.

"Yep," said Fielder, "there I was, facing the entire Guldur horde. And let me tell you, ladies, they were open for business..."

"Some of the people on that boat seem unhappy to see you," whispered one of his ladies, looking up at the faces on the railing. "Especially that short guy with the beard and the ax."

"Pay no attention to them. The downside of being better than everyone else is that people tend to assume you're pretentious."

"But why would they be like that?"

"Sometimes, the solution to a morale problem is just to kill all the unhappy people. It seems harsh, and the useless, expendable ones who are next on the chopping block tend to resent the fact that the only purpose of their life is to serve as a warning to others, but that is the law of the sea."

"It must be awful having to make those kind of decisions!"

"Yes, it's lonely at the top. But it's comforting to look down upon everyone at the bottom. I have to admit, I am often 'whelmed' by the responsibility. Not overwhelmed, mind you, just... whelmed."

Looking at the young midshipmen watching from the rail, one of his girls asked, "Aren't the young ones damaged by all that killing and stuff?"

"Aye, it's true," said Fielder as they stepped up the gangplank. "The hearts and minds of lesser beings are a lot more fragile than mine."

"He ain't got a mind ta damage, above 'is belt!" snarled Broadax disgustedly.

"The leapord never changes hisk shorts," muttered Ulrich.

"Heeere kittykittykitty!" added his bird.

"We had reports that said you were dead," said Melville with a grin as Fielder came onboard. He was pleased in spite of everything to see his first officer return. Boye, tail wagging furiously, ran up to greet the latecomer.

"Bet you fifty dollars I'm not!" said Fielder with a smile, a salute, and a happy pat for the dog and the dog's monkey.

"Well, if you are, it looks like you weathered the experience well," said Melville, returning the salute.

"So ye convinced 'em ta let ye go, eh?" said Broadax disgustedly.

"The trick is to never tell the truth," said Fielder cheerfully. "Police never believe what anyone tells them anyway, so why give them extra work?"

"Ye've got the luck of the devil," scowled Broadax. "Personally I think yer related."

"Hey, 'He needed killing' is still a valid defense here," replied Fielder with a shrug. "Besides, the judge thinks I'm corrupt. We met previously in a brothel, so he trusts me. It's always nice when your vices pay off.

"Now, my ladies," said Fielder to his escorts, "I must leave you."

"But Danny, I thought you loved us?"

"I do, my sweet, I do. But not exclusively."

After Fielder saw his inamoratas off, he briefed Melville about his experiences.

"And the ladies?" Melville asked wryly.

"Simply a side effect, Captain, an aspect of my departure. The judge and I had a long discussion about our insignificant little altercation, and we merely moved it to a location more conducive to civilized conversation."

He grinned and added, "It didn't hurt that I was picking up the tab, either!"

"Well, what about Lady Elphinstone? She was arrested with you, wasn't she?"

"Well, Captain, the judge was a wee bit ticked off at our brave healer. He didn't mind her cleaning up the local gene pool a bit, but her knocking out a police officer with a sedative was deeply offensive to him. He was mumbling something about unlicensed drug dispensation, assault, and a few other minor things."

"I think I had better get the governor involved in this one, then. It sounds like it could be serious," Melville said grimly.

"Well, that really isn't necessary. For two reasons," replied Fielder, smiling and buffing his nails on his jacket.

"Firstly, it seems the local judicial system was overwhelmed with another case that had literally scores of dead and many more maimed. Apparently a large group of bravos and sellswords, hired by a visitor to this planet who has since departed hastily, attacked the private party of a group of local rustics with aberrant tastes in companionship and entertainment. The result was a bloodbath: murder on a mass scale, rapine of an unusually unsavory sort, and general mayhem of a magnitude that is uncommon even for *this* planet."

"Hmm," said Melville, shaking his head with a chuckle. "That appears to be Hans and Vodi's plan coming to fruition. I'll fill you in later. So the local population has experienced some intense natural selection, and the judicial system has bigger fish to fry. Tell me the other reason I shouldn't worry about Elphinstone."

"Well," began Fielder, "the judge and I had a long conversation and I told him that, as a naval captain on independent duty, you had the rights of high and low justice. That you had strong feelings about her behavior, and would be more than happy to take care of it."

Melville's eyebrows rose toward his hairline. "High and low justice? Daniel, did you happen to mention that I only have authority over offenses to Navy discipline? And I really don't think sedating a policeman affects Navy discipline. Nor do I think acting in self-defense is a crime!"

"Now, Captain. I never said what her punishment would be. After all, I am merely the poor overworked first officer!" He looked piously innocent for a moment before his face collapsed into a grin. "It's all far above my pay grade! I merely let the judge draw his own, umm, conclusions."

Melville studied him, then grinned back. "If this deal with the judge works, Daniel, remind me not to play poker with you. Such peasant cunning!"

Fielder placed his hand to his chest in mock indignity. "Please, Captain, not *peasant* cunning! Baronet Daniello Sans Fielder may be accused of many things, but never anything so base!"

Lady Elphinstone was brought to the gangplank of the *Fang* late in the afternoon watch. She was accompanied by a clerk of the court. Only a very careful observer could have discerned that her buttercup yellow dress and grass green sash were slightly begrimed.

"Are you in charge here?" asked the portly clerk.

*Clearly not*, Melville thought. "Yes," he said.

"I need to know what are your plans for this offender?"

Melville pontificated. "Aboard this Ship the captain is high, low, and every other altitude of justice to be had in two-space. Once I have her under my authority I assure you that I shall pass judgment hastily enough to make even you happy, lest the sentence have the unseemly taint of cool deliberation."

The clerk was clearly impressed by the captain's oratory. "Well, since you are ready for rapid judgment, then I am pleased. The judge will be as well. Tell me, what shall be the punishment for her crimes?"

Melville smiled benevolently and replied, "I believe that I shall sentence her to banishment to the deepest depths of the far frontier while she cares for our sick and wounded, in exchange for room and board and some pocket money, on her solemn promise not to ever kill or drug anyone not equally deserving."

And with this the portly clerk, and the Show Low criminal justice system, had to be content.

Elphinstone stood with her usual serene composure as the clerk left.

"Welcome back, my lady," said Melville.

"I thank thee. And I bring thee a message from the governor."

"What is it?"

"Wouldst like to know?"

"I'd like nothing better."

"Then I shall tell thee."

"Well then?"

"The governor says that he appreciates thy efforts as the 'Uber-Darwin lifeguard in the local gene pool' and thou art always welcome on his world. But, under current circumstances, 'twere best thou shouldst depart as soon as possible."

"I'll drink to that!" muttered Fielder.

\* \* \*

We got too many gangsters,  
doin' dirty deeds,  
Too much corruption,  
and crime in the streets.

It's time the long arm of the law,  
put a few more in the ground,  
Send them all to their Maker,  
and He'll send them on down.  
You can bet, He'll send 'em on down.

'Cause justice is the one thing,  
you should always find.  
You gotta saddle up your boys,  
you gotta draw a hard line.

When the gunsmoke settles,  
we'll sing a victory tune,  
And we'll all meet back,  
at the local saloon!

And we'll raise up our glasses,  
against evil forces,  
Singing, "Whiskey for my men,  
beer for my horses!"

\* \* \*

They were about to make the long run to the Hero Cluster. If they forgot anything, it couldn't be replaced at a convenient port stop—since there weren't any! So long hours were used to conduct pre-underway checks, finish the final loading of stores and water, and complete a thousand other vital tasks to ensure their survival and safe travel in two-space.

The crew of the *Fang* pitched in and worked like demons—hungover demons for the most part, but hardworking nonetheless! The general attitude was that if you were going to hoot with the owls, you had to scratch with the chickens. And if that meant you had to make a discreet stop to relieve your stomach over the side to do your job, well, that was part and parcel of a great liberty!

One of the worst chores was loading the barrels of food and water for the next stage of their trip. Two-space both helped and hindered in this process. It helped because water and food tended to remain fresh and useable longer in that environment. Conversely, that same environment wreaked havoc on most of the tools they could use to lift heavy objects. Due to the constant degradation of complex, machined surfaces, they were limited to using simple pulleys or "single-blocks." These were made of hardwood riding in a wooden saddle, which could be readily maintained with a chisel and lubrication. The downside was that with two blocks you only had a two-to-one ratio for lifts.

To hoist a standard fifty-five-gallon barrel it took a five-man team: three men to lift the almost five-hundred-pound barrel, one to stabilize it with a separate line, and a fifth man with a snubbing line running around a belaying point to keep it from falling if someone lost their grip. For some reason, the Navy felt it was exceedingly bad form to drop five-hundred-pound barrels on peoples' heads. Killing someone intentionally was one thing, but doing it by accident was a sign of bad workmanship—like a surgeon amputating the wrong leg!

This all meant that loading stores for getting underway was a slow, tedious, and hellaciously hard job for all hands. Food, water, and stores for a crew on a lengthy voyage occupied a *lot* of space, and it took a lot of time to get aboard.

During the final watering process, a "package" came aboard with the *Fang*'s water barrels.

A dockyard worker cracked a sealed case and dropped the blob of black "goo" atop one of the last barrels scheduled to come onboard. He had been well paid for this act, and it was the easiest money he had ever earned. Basically, it was like cracking an egg into a pan.

"Ugg!" was his only comment as he watched the goo seep into the cracks in the barrel.

<<!!!>> replied the goo.

While the *Fang* s were preparing to get underway, they also had to get the remaining members of the crew back aboard. Normally this wasn't a problem, but ending their liberty early meant that working parties (large, heavily armed parties in this instance, just in case Ursula still had some surprises waiting for them) had to be sent out to the local brothels, bars, gambling dens, shops, bookstores, theaters, and churches to recover the crew.

And a few *Fang* s had to be bailed out of jail.

Lance Corporal Jarvis shook his head in rueful appreciation of his two squad members. "Dwakins, what in the *hell* happened to you?" he asked.

Dwakins had apparently started in the standard marine liberty uniform, but it was currently torn, stained and bled upon in such a fashion that it was obvious he had either survived a tornado or one hell of a good fight.

The other marine that Jarvis had to bail out was a bit of an anomaly. Rawl was an enemy Guldur who had been wounded (by Dwakins no less) when they captured *Gnasher* and *Biter* . From the dried blood on Rawl's fur and claws, it was apparent that the two of them had been involved in the same battle.

Their monkeys didn't look much better.

"Wuhl, Corp, ya know me 'n Rawl's buddies, right?" Dwakins asked, looking at Jarvis eagerly through the one eye that wasn't swollen shut.

"Yeah, Dwakins, you two are the Brothers Dumb. Always hangin' out together. Get on with it!"

"Wuhl, we wus havin' a quiet beer, an' this local cop sez Rawl couldn't be there. 'Lie with a dog an' ya wakes up with fleas,' 'e sez! He wus reel mean about it, too! Even if it wus true. I mean, we got all the fleas outa ol' Rawl a long time ago. So Ah *had* to defend muh friend and Shipmate!"

Jarvis moaned as he looked down and rubbed his eyes. "Damn," he muttered. " *Why* did I have to up and reenlist for this madhouse? Well, it looks like the Brothers Dumb win the booby prize again,

Dwakins. Did you ever stop to think it might not be a good idea to start a fight with a cop? In a cop bar?! Next to the station house?!"

Dwakins and Rawl looked at each other, then at Jarvis. "But, Corp, Lt. Broadax tole me not ta think! She sez I'll only hurt muhself!"

And, of course, the emergency supplies had to be turned into the marine armory.

Hans was taking great pride in the fact that his weapon was clean, nay pristine, as he prepared to turn his .45 in. "Ya know," he said, "a well made .45 like this will feed anything. Even empty brass," he continued, as he jacked back the slide repeatedly and ran a magazine full of expended brass cartridges through the pistol.

"Hmm," Hans added, "I wonder if I should take the grips off and clean under there. Hate to turn in a dirty weapon."

Broadax was bored to tears by all of this. "It'll feed *anything*?" she asked, innocently, taking the pistol from Hans. "How 'bout this..." Then she dropped a sugar cookie into the breech of the .45 and hit the slide release. The slide slammed forward, spraying out a cloud of greasy crumbs and sugar.

Hans went cross-eyed in stunned anger as Broadax returned his pistol. Then Broadax put a dab of gun oil behind her ear, winked at him slyly, and said, "We only gots a few hours left on this dirtball. There's a tavern with an upstairs room right across the way. An' I thinks ye otter consider some uther priorities besides cleanin' yer damned gun."

Hans' anger died and he breathed deeply as he leaned forward and nuzzled her behind the ear.

"I love the smell o' gun oil in the evenin'," he said with a leer. "It smells like... well-lubricated parts..."

In addition to the Brothers Dumb, there was one other *Fang* who had fallen afoul of the law on Show Low. Ranger Aubrey Valandil had been cited early in their stay for spitting on the sidewalk. He had failed to make his court date, and there was a warrant for his arrest. As the senior ranger, Westminster went with Valandil to pay his fine, then he brought the errant Sylvan ranger home.

When the two rangers returned to the Ship they reported to the first officer in the wardroom. The only

other occupant of the wardroom was Brother Theo, who was bending over a ledger in a corner.

"You are a black eye to this Ship, Ranger!" said Fielder, shaking his head in mock dismay. "Arrested for climbing buildings on Earth, public urination on Lenoria, and now this? You're a pocking one-man intergalactic crime spree!" Fielder, who had broken countless laws on Show Low, up to and including public nudity and multiple homicides, looked at Valandil sternly and asked, " *Whatare* we going to do with you?"

The quiet, self-possessed Sylvan ranger, who seldom said a word or displayed emotion, was sincerely embarrassed. And Fielder was deriving enormous pleasure from the sheer, pompous hypocrisy of his statements.

Westminster too was enjoying his partner's discomfort. Valandil probably hadn't spoken a complete sentence since he was thirteen, and his response this time was an abashed silence.

"Ah'll accept personal responsibility for him, sir," drawled the ranger. "He has assured me that his wild days are behind him, and Ah believe him."

"It's always the quiet ones, eh, Josiah?" said Fielder, with pursed lips and a nod. "Very well, you are dismissed. But I've got my eye on you, Ranger Valandil."

"Daniel," said Theo, looking up from his ledger with a shake of his head after the rangers left. "Your soul is so dark, it smudges mine."

Fielder just smiled.

Finally, the Ship was ready. Everything from rice to rhubarbs was packed away in its place, and all the crew was aboard.

As they cast off, the age-old call came forth from the dock workers: "Don't worry, sailor, we'll take care of yer girls for you while yer gone!"

And the good-natured, traditional response came back, "Good, they need some female company!"

*And Fang left her message at one last Pier before they departed the galactic arm and headed into the Far Rift.*

<<Kestrel ...war...remember, remember...>>

# CHAPTER THE 13TH

## Across the Far Rift: "Tyger! Tyger!"

Tyger! Tyger! burning bright  
In the forests of the night  
What immortal hand or eye  
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

In what distant deeps or skies  
Burnt the fire of thine eyes?  
On what wings dare he aspire?  
What the hand dare sieze thy fire?

"Tyger! Tyger!"  
William Blake.

The *Fang* s were particularly happy to pick up many tins of small fish packed in oil, which were a special delicacy on Show Low.

"Damn," said Broadax in wonder as she opened a can. "Them li'l fishies is crammed in as tight as... Well, damnme if they ain't packed tight as earthlings on public transportation. I hated ridin' in them ye know. They always smelled reel bad ta me."

"Aye," replied Hans, reflecting on the fact that

elevators and packed subways tended to smell different to a Dwarrordelf. "They's lots of 'em in there. An' any one of 'em beats the hell outa the culinary indignities of that damned cook o' yers."

"Hey now!" said Broadax. "I likes 'is chow. I swear to ye, the angels dance on my tongue when I eats his cookin'! So jist remember, anyone lays one hand on that boy an' ye gots *me* ta answer to!"

"Well, there is one good thing ya can say fer him!" said Hans with a grin.

"Wat?" she asked suspiciously.

"After eatin' Jones' food, our recent adventures on Show Low seem a *lot* less threatenin'!"

In the midst of this happy chatter an exhausted Fielder leaned back in his chair and fell into a deep slumber, sleeping the sleep of a man with nothing on his conscience. Or a man with no conscience at all.

Thus began their slow, placid journey through the distant deeps of two-space. They were bound for the Hero Cluster, one of the westernmost outposts of Westerness. The Far Rift was a vast ocean between the spiral arms of the galaxy, and the Hero Cluster was a lonely group of islands in the middle of that ocean.

The routine of the Ship, the drills, the meals, and the daily tasks necessary to keep her functioning perfectly as a man-of-war were soothing and familiar to the crew. They had all been given the chance to relax and blow off some steam on Show Low, and the stories thereof were told and retold, gaining polish and glory—and frequently losing any relationship to reality!

Once the Ship and crew had finished shaking down to their normal routine, Melville and Fielder started implementing a training schedule. This included daily drills, training for the crew in their areas of responsibility, cross-training in different work areas so that the Ship could continue to operate if people were injured or killed, damage control training, casualty control training, and practice and competitions to hone the skills of the crew.

An outside observer might think that there was very little work aboard a two-space vessel. The sails rarely needed to be adjusted to catch the constant winds of two-space, and the weather never changed, so just what *was* there for these lazy sailors and marines to do? As one ranger put it, "Ah, the life of a sailor. They eat 'til they're tired. Then they sleep 'til they're hungry."

What civilians didn't realize is that dealing with the effects of two-space required daily effort. Each of the

simple tools and machines they carried with them had to be examined, measured, and if necessary, repaired daily.

And while the sails and sheets did not need adjusting to catch the wind, they were also vulnerable to the deteriorating effects of two-space. This was minimized by using natural materials that had once been alive (and were therefore less subject to decay), but even they were affected over time. Thus the boatswain's mates and carpenters were kept busy checking and repairing the Ship's hull and rigging as well.

Two-space firearms were largely immune to deterioration by the presence of their Keel charges, but the cannon carriages and ammunition had to be checked and rotated to minimize the effects.

And then there were the people.

While the Moss provided the air, light, and heat needed to support life, there is more to life than that!

So Roxy and Kaleb were kept busy preparing healthy, toothsome, and nutritious meals. (Although there was considerable debate as to whether Kaleb Jones' meals should ever be called tasty, even *with* the vociferous praise of Lt. Broadax and the Guldur!). Since the entertainment and morale value of food was important to the crew, both groups of sailors tended to combine and good-naturedly chastise each other about the glop the others were eating. However, since Jones and Broadax had nothing anyone could identify as a sense of humor about their food, the conversations tended to be fairly subdued. The threat of Jones' ever-present pistol and Broadax's uncertain temperament kept the joking at a quiet, cautious level.

To provide entertainment, Melville and Fielder initiated a schedule of competitions. There were the usual hornpipe, singing, and poetry contests. There was even a shadow puppet competition conducted in a cabin with all the luminous walls covered with sailcloth, and a light coming in from a hole in the bulkhead from an adjacent cabin. This was won, hands-down, by a shadow rendition of Macaulay's "Horatius at the Bridge" presented by Marine Bentley, ably assisted by his monkey using all eight limbs to represent both the bridge *and* the oncoming enemy host.

But most of the competitions involved skills that had application to the Ship's performance in combat. Such as: fastest watch team to remove and replace a sail, quickest boat crew to launch a jollyboat or cutter, time to shift cargo from one part of the hull to another to balance out the trim, fastest cannon crew, and *lots* of drills and contests focused on proving who could win the bragging rights as the "best in the crew" at individual skills such as swordsmanship, pistolcraft, and rifle marksmanship.

"I think that completes the training schedule, Daniel," Melville said with a sigh as he pushed away the stack of paper.

"Pretty much, sir." Fielder took a sip of the captain's wine and stared at the goblet in thought. It was an excellent vintage, just purchased on Show Low and stored up for the journey. "But I think we need to take another look at the pistol match. Right now, it's planned as another bulls-eye competition, which isn't bad." He took another drink and swirled the liquid around, watching the glints of light reflect from it.

"But?" Melville prompted.

"Dammit," the first officer answered with a scowl, "I screwed up on Show Low. If it hadn't been for Ulrich showing up when he did it might have been a permanent mistake. I know I'm good with a pistol. Hell, there are only one or two people on the *Fang* who are as good as me, and on my best day I can beat anyone aboard." He grinned at his captain, silently daring him to contradict him.

Melville laughed, not bothering to disagree. No matter what his other faults, Fielder *was* naturally talented with a pistol. And he worked hard to enhance that natural gift. Of course, Melville was confident that on a good day *he* could take his first officer. But he didn't really mind when Fielder had an occasional win. There was no shame in losing to a man who trained so hard, not when you knew that his skill might be keeping you alive someday! Having men who trained with you, encouraged you, teased you when you made a boneheaded mistake and cheered you when you did well: *that* was vital to making and keeping his *Fang* s such deadly competent warriors.

"But I made a near fatal error," Fielder continued. "I had three targets, four if you count Ursula, even if she did make herself scarce when the fight started. Maybe more if Elphinstone had missed. But I just automatically used the Mozambique drill, two to the heart and one to the head, when I *should* have moved laterally while putting one quick bullet in each of those bastards and then gone back to double-tap them."

"Okay, Daniel. So what do you want to do differently? More lectures and training on tactics in a gunfight?"

Fielder considered for a moment, then drained his glass and poured both of them a bit more of the wine.

"An excellent vintage, sir," commented Fielder in sincere appreciation as he took another sip.

"Thank you, Daniel." Melville dutifully took a sip, but he was oblivious to the taste. This was yet another of his social failings, along with his inability to dance. He could hardly tell one wine from another if it weren't for the different colors. McAndrews had selected and purchased all the wine for his captain, but Melville would be damned if he'd let anyone know that.

"Lectures and tactics training would definitely be useful, sir," continued the first officer. "But I think we need to move to a more practical shooting competition. It was actually suggested by Ulrich, and I think the little psycho may actually have a good idea here. In two-space we're limited to our double-barreled pistols, but the same principles apply. Rapid reloads and engaging multiple targets are key to survival. So,

in addition to lectures and practice, I suggest we shoot timed competitions: two guns per man, four rounds from each gun, eight rounds all together. That way we get them practicing rapid reloads for the match."

"Okay, Daniel, but a lot of our people will be terribly slow at reloading, and maybe a bit unsafe. How do we get it all done in one Sunday afternoon?"

"Well, in the early elimination rounds we'll do it without reloads, so we quickly identify the ones who need the most training. Then we'll keep reducing the time until we have it down to eight people who are the fastest. At the end we'll shoot off man-to-man, with reloads required, in a single elimination, until we figure out who's the fastest at shooting and reloading."

Melville pondered this as they both sipped their wine.

"I like it, Daniel. It will be new and entertaining, it sorts out the ones who need more training, it identifies some cadre to teach them, and eventually we can do it with everyone being required to reload. Best of all, it gives *me* bragging rights when I beat you."

"Sure," Fielder replied with a confident smile. "And then Ulrich will win an elocution contest and Broadax will take first prize in a beauty contest."

It was Sunday. First they had the time-honored ritual of captain's rounds. Then Brother Theo held a religious service from the upper quarterdeck. After the service would come the pistol match (which everyone was anticipating eagerly) so Theo kept it short.

"During the early days of World War II, on Old Earth, the British Army was trapped on the coast of France in a place called Dunkirk. The situation was grim. They were outnumbered, overwhelmed, and defeated, trapped on a narrow strip of beach with their backs to the sea. Across the English Channel the British were desperately scrambling to prepare an evacuation fleet consisting of every scow and fishing boat available. 'Hold out!' England told her troops. 'We will rescue you!' The commander of the besieged British forces sent back a three-word answer: 'But if not...'"

The assembled *Fang* s all nodded attentively. *This* was the kind of sermon they could sink their teeth into.

"'But. If. Not!'" continued the monk dramatically. "These were the words of the three Hebrew children about to be thrown into the fiery furnace in the Book of Daniel. 'Our God shall preserve us,' they said, '*but if not*,' He is *still* God. Shipmates, that British officer had *faith*, and he was communicating to a culture steeped in faith, who understood the deep meaning of a simple three-word message.

"Shipmates, some of you think that we are forsaken by the Admiralty. Cursed and forlorn, banished to the farthest reaches of our star kingdom! Have faith. However bad it is, our God will preserve us. If we train, prepare, and persevere, He will show us a path home. *But if not*, He is *still* God and He has promised to preserve our *souls*!

"Permit me to conclude with my favorite Psalm. A short little piece of ancient poetry called 'The Traveler's Psalm.'"

The crew sat back to listen. Here were Words, the most ancient of words, to provide solace in times of trial.

"I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills,  
From *whence* cometh my help?  
My help cometh from the *Lord*!

"Behold! *He* will not suffer thy foot to slip.  
He that keepeth Israel  
shall neither slumber nor sleep.

"The *Lord* is thy keeper,  
The Lord is thy *shade* upon they right hand.  
*Heshall* not suffer the sun to smite thee by day,  
Nor the moon by night.

"The Lord shall preserve thee from *all* evil!  
[How?!]  
He shall preserve thy *soul*!

"The *Lord* shall preserve thy going out,  
and thy coming in;  
From this day forth,  
and even for *evermore*.

"What more could we ask?" concluded the monk. Then he nodded to the captain and stepped away from the rail.

"Amen," said Melville, delighted as always with a padre who understood the virtue of a short sermon.  
"First officer, set up for the match!"

"Brother," asked Midshipman Hayl quietly as they departed, "did they rescue those guys on the beach?"

"Aye, verily," Theo replied distractedly as he prepared for the match. Then he looked over at the young middie, who was unconsciously rubbing the stump at the end of his arm, and the monk smiled. "It has always been referred to as the Miracle of Dunkirk. Every fishing boat and rinky-dink civilian pleasure craft that could float came across the English Channel that night in perfect weather, the clouds kept the German aircraft away, and the evacuation went flawlessly. But even if He didn't rescue their bodies, the greatest miracle is to preserve our sad, sorry souls. The Almighty *does* work miracles, little Cockroach, he just does it in His own peculiar way, in His own sweet time. Now, let's get on with the match, eh?" he concluded with a wink and a grin. "I have to teach some of these heathen a lesson in marksmanship!"

Everyone aboard was excited by the idea of a practical pistol match. The practice targets were shot to bits and had to be replaced on almost every watch. The only people who were not required to shoot in the match were the rangers (Josiah Westminster and Aubrey Valandil) and Ulrich, who had volunteered to serve as judges.

The rangers had nothing to prove when it came to marksmanship, and everyone knew that they would be competent and impartial. And having Ulrich as one of the judges helped to ensure that no one was going to argue over trivialities—it just wasn't safe!

The first two elimination rounds were fairly straightforward. While firing one pistol and then the other was simple, doing it in the allotted time wasn't always so easy. It required either shooting one gun with the weak hand, or shifting pistols. Either method was allowed so long as safe gun handling rules were used and the target was hit.

The final roster of eight people shooting in the head-to-head competition had two wildcards. Grenoble, Lt. Fielder, Captain Melville, Mrs. Vodi, Brother Theo, and Lance Corporal Jarvis were odds-on favorites. No surprises there. But to everyone's amazement, Private Dwakins edged out Corporal Petrico—who had a misfire after failing to ram home one of his bullets properly. ("Somebeach! Da pockin bore was pockin distorted 'cause the mawdikkin Keel charge is pockin bad!" snarled the little armorer.) And the real surprise was Cutherbert Asquith XVI, who astonished the entire crew by firing his two pistols accurately and rapidly without even a discernible pause.

These eight shooters were the best of the best. It was a great honor to make it this far, but the real contest was yet to come.

While the crew was enjoying the competition, the Ship's cats were participating in a contest of a different

sort, hunting an entirely different beast, in the starry forests of the night...

An alien empire was preparing a devastating sneak attack on the Hero Cluster. They had an extensive spy network, they knew about the *Fang*, and they had very wisely concluded that Melville and his Ship had to be neutralized to ensure the success of their attack.

The nature of two-space precluded most methods an enemy could use to sabotage a Ship. Explosives other than Keel charges didn't explode, flammable materials didn't flame, and the warping effects of two-space precluded any technologically sophisticated attacks. From time immemorial, the only way to destroy a two-space Ship had been with another Ship.

But Melville and his crew had demonstrated repeatedly that trying to attack the *Fang* with another two-space Ship (or even with *four* such Ships) was simply a good way to lose Ships—either to Melville and his prize crews or to the depths of intergalactic space.

So a sentient alien slime mold had been placed aboard the *Fang* on Show Low. It was sentient, but in all other ways it was anathema to life. Other than loyalty to its masters, its only real joy was in destroying virtually every species that it encountered. Once the mold was in contact with a life form, it tailored its own waste byproducts to produce lethal bio-toxins specifically designed to kill that specific species.

The saboteurs had planned well. The slime mold had been deposited on the surface of one of the water barrels. Once the barrel was aboard, the mold could slip out unnoticed into the Ship's environment to meet up with humans for the first time—and kill them!

The cats' alpha male was a nasty, gnarly, vicious, mottled-yellow creature named Cuddles. He was locked in a struggle against a large black cat named Brutus, who was actively challenging Cuddles' position. In some cultures the old male is allowed to slink back into quiet dotage and peaceful retirement, living out his last years in some protected spot. But that was not for Cuddles.

This was truly a life-and-death struggle. Cuddles would die before he would give up the privileges that came with being top cat. Privileges such as first choice at any food and the opportunity to violently possess any female that was currently in season.

Cuddles and Brutus had been among the first to notice the mold seeping from a water barrel stowed on the lower deck next to the mainmast. The cats were instinctively suspicious and hostile toward anything new in their environment, and this black mold seeping out from the water barrel was definitely something that did not belong. Cuddles and Brutus tossed the first few blobs overboard with hacking slashes of their

claws. As other cats arrived to deal with the intruder, the two competing alpha males backed off to opposite neutral corners where they could keep an eye on each other as they cleaned their paws.

Fortunately for Cuddles and Brutus, the disoriented, isolated samples of the mold on their paws had not yet had the chance to analyze the nature of this new enemy. Without the full processing power of the main body, the small colonies on Cuddles' and Brutus' paws could not develop the poisons and toxins which would allow it to tailor biochemical weapons for this new feline foe, and it could not rapidly adapt to the destructive mechanisms of the two cats' digestive tracts.

The ninja slime mold was virtually immortal. It could endure impact, shock, stabbing, strangulation, freezing, fire, and dismemberment, but these isolated samples of the mold could not survive the awesome destructive ability of the powerful digestive tract of a cat. The slime mold that Cuddles and Brutus licked off their paws was doomed to the inglorious fate of being defecated into two-space, causing only minor diarrhea and indigestion in the process.

The final eight pistol competitors were shooting from the greenside railing in the lower waist. The targets were hung from the mainsail yardarm. A few lookouts and a skeleton crew were manning the upperside quarterdeck, with the rest of the crew observing from the lowerside rails, rigging, yards and quarterdeck. The dogs also sat watching attentively, eagerly enjoying the competition and cheering on their masters with boisterous barks.

First up in the competition were Dwakins and Mrs. Vodi. Lance Corporal Jarvis felt more than a bit conflicted here, since he was Dwakins' squad leader. Jarvis wanted the lumbering blockhead to do well, but he also wanted to win.

"Just take it easy, Dwakins, you'll do fine. Shoot just like you been practicing," Jarvis reminded him, "and don't worry about how you're doing."

"He do rreal gud," Rawl insisted.

Since Dwakins had carried the wounded Guldur into sick bay, Rawl had been his constant companion. He was one of the few Guldur who had elected to join the marines instead of the Ship's company of sailors. Rawl wasn't the sharpest tooth in the mouth, but he was steady and reliable—so long as he was with Dwakins. And when Dwakins was with Rawl, the two of them together seemed to have fewer problems dealing with life and its challenges than either of them alone. Or as Brodax had observed more than once, "Either of them two idjits alone 'ud have to double their brains ta make a good moron. I mean, them boys can hide their own Easter eggs, if ye know what I mean? But ye gets the Brothers Dumb workin' tagedder an' they makes one good marine!"

The perfect example of this was Dwakins with a pistol. Before Rawl came into his life, Dwakins was

competent, but nothing more. But when the two of them spent time together building their skills, they grew faster and more fluid, as if they combined together, shoring up the other's weak spots and problem areas.

Jarvis finally realized that, as their squad leader, the best way to handle the two of them was to simply give them a job and let them figure out how to handle it. They never seemed to go at it the same way that any normal marine would, but they always got it done. Somehow.

So when the two shooters came to their mark, Mrs. Vodi appeared relaxed and confident, and Dwakins was arguing with Rawl all the way to the mark.

"Ah ain't eatin' dat glop Jones is makin' tonight! It's got dem rocks init ya call dumplin's. They's jis' liddle rocks is what they is!"

"Nawrr, you gots' terr chew 'em up good. Iss gud food—betterr than Rrroxy makes tonight. She makes salt porrrk stew. Gud, yes? Taste rike human! But bitterrash dumprings betterrr."

"Ah still ain't eatin' it!"

"We bet then. You win rround. We eat Rrroxy sstew. You lose, we eat Jones sstew. Much betterr forr us both. Good forr you and you little teeth. Make sharrperr!" Rawl growled back.

"Done, ya overgrown puppy. Now lemme shoot so's Ah can eat some decent stew tonight!" Dwakins shook his head and stomped over to the mark.

Jarvis looked over at Rawl, who stood there with a doggie smile on his jaws, his tongue hanging out over his lower fangs.

"What're you two yammering on about?" said Jarvis. "He's supposed ta be getting ready to shoot, not thinking about dinner!"

"If Dwakins thinks, he no sshoot good. So I distract him," Rawl replied. "My brrother do betterrr when his brrain not involved."

Broadax looked up at Jarvis. "Dwakins has a brain?" she whispered incredulously.

Jarvis simply shook his head in resignation. "I think the Guldur has custody of it most days. And then Dwakins comes outta the blue and surprises me again."

"Them cops on Show Low found out it ain't a good ideer ta peeve our Dwakins," said Broadax. "I found out he managed ta git a half-dozen 'er so of 'em sent ta the hospital fer various contusions, abrasions, and cuts. Rawl sez he an' the monks jist covered Dwakins' back whilest he went through those flatfoots like grease through a goose! But what really musta shook up them cops wus Dwakins' battle cry. He kept shoutin', 'Wreckdum! Wreckdum!' as he clobbered 'em. I betcha *that* confused and scared the hell outa of 'em!" Broadax shook her head in combined amusement, admiration, and bewilderment. "Yep," she concluded, "might jist make one good marine outa them two idjits!"

Valandil tapped the bell to start the match. Mrs. Vodi and Dwakins both drew their first pistol, quickly firing both barrels, drawing the second pistol as they fired and then shifting their stance to fire that gun with the opposite hand. Both Dwakins and Vodi holstered their first pistol and grabbed two bullets as they fired the second gun. They reloaded both barrels in that gun, fired the reloaded pistol, and then reloaded and fired the pistol again.

While Mrs. Vodi was fast reloading, Dwakins was even faster and he completed firing his seventh and eighth rounds as she was just bringing the pistol to bear on the target.

Westminster peered at the targets, and all eight rounds from both contestants had entered the required areas, four in the head target area, four in the center of mass of the torso silhouette.

"Dwakins takes the round," he announced, to Vodi's obvious disgust, and Dwakins joy.

"Hoo-yah! Ah gots salt pork stew fer mah dinner tonight!" he yelled, which confused Vodi and the rest of the crew mightily.

"Awwr rright, awwr rright," Rawl growled at him. "Want to make it besst two ourrt of threer?"

<<Forces of evil!>> the slime mold called out telepathically to the cats as it retreated in disgrace, oozing back into the cracks in the water barrel to escape the slashing onslaught of the cats' digging claws. And retreat it must. Already several large cell clusters had been flicked overboard into two-space where even its immortal cells could not survive.

Wherever it was in contact with the cats' paws the message was sent. <<You will carry your coffins on your backs. To die in disgraceful failure. Taking your schemes back with you. Or to dig your own graves after you bring death to yourselves beneath the searing light of our sacred stars against which you perpetrate aggression.>>

The cats were... confused. Many kinds of vermin had tried to infest their Ship, but their prey had never

<<talked>> to them before...

"Next two contestants will be Brother Theo Petreckski and Lance Corporal Jarvis," Valandil called out.

Brother Theo took the mark and looked over at the marine. "Corporal Jarvis, I do hope you will not take it amiss when a man of the cloth has to teach one of our poor marines what it means to shoot well!" he called out cheerfully.

Jarvis laughed delightedly. "Not at all, Brother. Just remember to spend some time in prayer confessing the sin of unwonted pride!"

"Now, now, Corporal. It's only unwonted if I lose! And God favors those who practice!"

Jarvis only laughed as he let his mind focus on the targets, relaxing as he readied himself to react with the whip-crack fast reactions he was known for.

The slime mold tried a new tactic, seeping down the side of the barrel through the cracks to the deck, and then oozing slowly toward the nearest crevice in the decking. The mold killed the Moss wherever it came into contact with it. While *Fang* couldn't feel the mold directly, it could sense the areas where the Moss died. For *Fang* it was as though something was scraping a tiny strip of Moss off of the deck. This was the kind of thing that happened all the time when heavy objects were dragged or pushed across the deck, and *Fang* quickly grew back over those spots. It was nothing unusual, no cause for alarm.

For the cats, it was obvious something was happening when the Moss stopped glowing in a spot near the base of the barrel. This gave them an area to home in on, slashing, scraping, and licking at the alien creature with their claws and their abrasive, raspy tongues.

Once again the slime mold was forced to take shelter in the cracks between the water barrel's staves.

For the other cats, taking over the battle from Cuddles and Brutus, their luck had run out. By the time they came into contact with the slime mold the intruder had analyzed the body chemistry of this new foe and had developed toxins which would kill the creatures that consumed it. These cats would defecate the small colonies they ingested overboard into two-space, but not before the intruder had released enough toxins to kill them.

Jarvis and Brother Theo were both fast. Very fast. Firing and reloading, the two men finished in a dead heat. The final score showed Brother Theo to be more accurate, with one of Jarvis' rounds landing slightly outside the target zone. Not far (if it had been an actual foe, he would have suffered an acute and terminal case of lead poisoning) but enough for Brother Theo to move on to the next round.

"Ah, hell!" Broadax cursed. "Ye means ta tell me the honor o' the Westernness marines is restin' on the backs of the Brothers Dumb? Wot kinder nonsense is this, Corp'ral?" She jerked her thumb over at Dwakins and Rawl, who were still arguing passionately over the merits and failures of bitterash dumplings. "If'n them two doorknobs ain't talkin' 'bout food, they's talkin' 'bout women. An' neider o' the two of 'em knows enough of the female o' *any* species t' fill a thimble!"

Jarvis stood shaking his head. "Yep. And for this I decided to stay in the marines. If I hadn't got all noble and greedy I coulda been home now, behind my old mule, peacefully plowing my own land. And damned if that don't sound right nice compared to dealing with my two idiots."

Broadax sighed, exhaling a cloud of toxic smoke that was repeated in miniature by her monkey. "Well, ye know no good deed goes unpunished. So go sort out the Brothers Dumb an' git 'em settled down agin. It's downright embarrassin' hearin' 'em yammerin' like a couple o' puppies growlin' over a teat!"

She snarled again as she walked over to Hans, who was carefully looking the other way as he controlled a case of the giggles.

"I vonder vot dem cats is lookin' at?" Corporal Kobbsven observed to the sailor next to him.

The sailor turned and saw several cats sitting on their haunches and staring at the side of a water barrel on the deck.

"Dammed if'n I know. Who knows why a cat does anyting? O' course who but a marine wastes time starin' at a cat anyhow?" the sailor chortled.

Kobbsven growled slightly and forgot about the cats as he watched the captain and his first officer move to the firing line.

"Woof!" added Boye at their feet, as the dog (and his monkey) watched his person intently.

Melville and Fielder looked relaxed and confident as they approached the rail. They had stripped off their jackets and were in white shirts and blue trousers, with their bare feet on the Moss of the Ship.

<<P U P S H O O T N O W?>> came the message through the Moss to the captain. <<P U P W A N T H E L P?>>

The temptation was great. *Fang*'s assistance might make a big difference in this contest. But Melville grinned cheerfully as he thought back to *Fang*, <<No, I don't need help with this one. We shoot as we are, so I can prove to Daniel that he needs more practice. Besides, having you help would be cheating—and we save that for our enemies, not our friends!>>

<<P U P P L A Y F I G H T!>> He caught a flash of amusement through the Moss as it sent back *Fang*'s response.

<<G O O D F O R S P I R I T ! F U N !>>

As he stepped up to the line for instructions, he whispered to Fielder, "Don't worry, Daniel, I'll be gentle. I know it's just your partying catching up with you, and not your increasing age and feebleness!"

Fielder sniffed and raised his nose a bit as he said, "Gentle, huh? Partying, age, and feebleness? Sir, don't you know that you have to relieve yourself of tensions to shoot well?"

Melville smiled and said softly, "Yes, and I'm sure running naked through the streets is a great tension reliever, now isn't it?"

"Not fair, sir, not fair! It seems I will have to teach you manners by out-shooting you today!" he chortled in response.

Westminster shook his head at the two of them. "Sirs, if you two fine gentlemen are through talking trash, Ah'd like to get this match under way."

Fielder and Melville grinned at him and each other unrepentantly.

"When you hear the bell, you will draw and fire both barrels from each gun at the two targets," the ranger drawled. "Each target must have one round in the head region and one in the torso, both in the kill zone. You will then reload and repeat the sequence, for a total of eight rounds fired, four in each target." Even though the participants had heard the directions many times before in previous matches, they

listened carefully as judges had been known to vary the target zones at the last minute.

"Are the shooters ready?" Westminster asked.

Melville and Fielder nodded, looking relaxed and composed while their monkeys crouched on the rail nearby, watching.

*Ding!* went the bell in Valandil's hand. Melville's right hand came up holding the pistol and met his left hand in front of his chest as it rose to eye level. <<purr!purr!>> the pistol spoke in his mind and "*Crack!Crack!*" it said to his ears. On the second shot both hands dropped as the first pistol went into the holster, the second lifted out in his left hand and met the empty right hand, coming up to eye level as the pistol cracked twice more.

Fielder was shooting at the same time, but Melville was totally immersed in his task, feeling the grip of the pistol, watching the front sight as it came into focus and covered the target as his thumb caressed the nipples of the Keel charge.

As Melville fired the second shot from the second pistol, he brought the muzzle up, thumbed a bullet into each muzzle, rammed them home, brought it up to align with the target, and thumbed the Keel charges: <<purr!>> "*Crack!*"<<purr!>> "*Crack!*" as he aimed first at the head and then the torso. Then he brought the gun in, reloaded, and repeated the sequence again.

<<CUBSPLAYFIGHT!GOODPRACTICE!>> Melville felt from *Fang* .

<<Good practice!>> Melville agreed with a smile.

"Cease fire," shouted Valandil.

"I told you that you needed more practice Captain!" Fielder chortled. "Or maybe you need a bit more relaxation time in port."

Melville grimaced at the targets, then shook his head ruefully. "Point taken, Daniel. I think perhaps I had better think about my own practice schedule as well as the crew's."

Westminster leaned in to look at the offending target. Melville had been faster, but one of his shots was high and outside the torso ring. "Well, Captain, it might not be good enough to win here, but in the real world Ah reckon it'd hit the man's throat right in front of the spine. Woulda taken the fight outa him real

quick. 'Course that's why we always teach folks to shoot at the center of mass: 'cause you've got room to miss the center and still maybe take 'em out anyway. But it ain't quite good enough today," he said, grinning cheerfully at his captain.

<<PUP NEED MORE PLAY FIGHT!>> he felt from his Ship.

Melville sighed ruefully, regretting that he hadn't used *Fang*'s assistance. <<The other guys all cheat. They practice,>> he thought back good-naturedly. <<And, yes, this pup needs to practice too. I just wish everyone would stop rubbing it in!>>

The slime mold was... frustrated. To say the least. In all its countless millennia of experience it had never run into targets that were so alert, and so stupidly stubborn! And the Ship! Never before had the Moss given the slightest indication that it could even sense the presence of the mold on its surface! Yet these mammals and the Moss seemed to work together to frustrate it in its sacred duty: the death of all aboard for the greater glory of Quar!

A person in this situation might be rightfully accused of sulking, but the mold was a creature of a very different type. It took out its frustrations by tweaking the waste products it was secreting into the water barrel, making the death slower, more painful, locking it in tightly to the biological information it had acquired in losing chunks of itself to the cats.

The alien mold considered itself an artist of death, and these exasperating mammals had driven it into a creative frenzy.

"So whatsk the status o' da bettink on da match so far, Hansk?" Ulrich asked.

Hans quirked a grizzled eyebrow at Ulrich, his monkey, and the goofy little green bird bobbing atop his head. "'Bout the same as it were an' hour ago. Most o' the bets had the captain or Fielder picked as t' winner, a good chunk had Grenoble up, an' most o' the marines were goin' fer Dwakins. But they're mostly bettin' from pride fer one o' their own more'n they think he can win it."

"Huh. How's 'bout da bettin' on Asquith?" he asked curiously.

"Him? The earthworm?" Hans asked incredulously. "I gots two idjits in the whole pool who bet on him t' win. An' he's one o' 'em!" He paused and looked thoughtfully at Ulrich then continued slowly. "O' course, if'n by some chance he *did* win, those two idjits would split the pool, wouldn't they?" His monkey spit

over the side, which cued Hans to do the same. "Ya wouldn't happen ta know who actually put down the money on him, wouldja?" he probed.

Ulrich smiled beatifically—a truly frightening sight to Hans, since the only other times the old seadog had seen that same expression was in battle, framed by a mask of gore.

"Well, I know'd one o' them idjitsk wask Asquith," said Ulrich, "an' sinesk t' othersk me, I'm guessink we's gonna find out whosk da idjitsk here shortly!" He grinned evilly as his monkey *EEK* ed wickedly.

"Eep!" agreed his bird.

"An' whilsk you're at it, see what kinder odds ya can git on a side bet fer da earthworm againsk Grenoble." He handed Hans a bulging leather purse. "I figger Asquith'll finishk up shootink 'fore Grenoble finishkes reloadink 'is lask round. So's whyn't ya see what kinder oddsk ya kin get fer us, why don't ya?"

Hans tossed the purse in his hand thoughtfully. "Lemme git this straight," he said slowly. "Ya want me ta bet that Asquith will be done shooting—and win!—before Grenoble finishes reloading to fire his last two shots? Look, Ulrich, I can buy that Asquith has been practicin'. I can even believe that he's good enough ta win against Grenoble—even though the pockin' Sylvan knight is faster'n hell. I mean, I know ya bin workin' with the boy. But before Grenoble finishes *reloadin'* ?!"

Hans shook his head and continued. "I can git good odds fer it, but yer gonna lose, unless somethin' happens ta distract Grenoble. An' if it does, all bets are off, Ulrich. I know how ya feels about that Sylvan, I do. You can't deny that you'd give yer right arm to stick it too 'im."

"Atsk right. Skumbudy's right arm, anyway. They's always lotsk a right arms around, no sense in wastink mine."

"That's what I thought. But, by the Lady, *nobody* gits ta play fast 'n loose with the rules jist ta embarrass someone else." Hans said, giving the sawed-off psycho a glare which slid right past him.

"Nawrsk, ya gotsk me wrong, Hansie, ya does. All straightsk, not a thing I'm gonna do exceptin' watch that prancink prig git taken down a notch—or maybe ten! See how 'e feels after an earthworm beatsk 'im like a drum!" He chortled evilly.

Hans eyed him curiously. Then he crossed his arms and stared over the side for a moment. "Wellll," he said slowly, "so long as it's on the up-'n'-up, I think I can git some good odds." He smiled at the little coxswain. "After all, it ain't like it's gonna happen. So, hell, I'll even be taken some o' yer money myself!"

Ulrich grinned back. "You jesk be doink dat, an' I'll be collectink from ya after the match."

"Heeere kittykittykitty!" concluded his parrotlet.

Cuddles and Brutus crouched on on the deck on opposite sides of the water barrel, watching for the appearance of their nemesis.

A calico cat was stretched out on its side, shivering feverishly and whining quietly. Cuddles got up and paced over to her, sniffing her mouth and body.

Besides the smell of meat and sickness Cuddles caught a whiff of the mold on her breath. Musty, dark, and nasty, the mold had a smell reminiscent of food gone bad.

While not very intelligent compared to a man or a monkey, the cats had generations of breeding and the environment of two-space to thank for their extra capabilities compared to the cats throughout history. And one thing Cuddles had, along with the native cunning that was his birthright, was an abundance of experience with all sorts of pests.

Right now, all that experience and cunning was screaming out to him that this enemy was death to the cats! Cuddles turned back and sat on the deck again, looking at his enemies: an alien mold, and a cat that wanted to replace him as alpha male.

Cuddles' tiny cat brain wondered how he could use the situation to his advantage. After all, the mold had to go.

And so did Brutus.

Grenoble neatly folded the red-braided, hunter-green jacket of his crimson-and-clovers, handed it to a Ship's boy for safekeeping, and moved to the firing line clad in white shirt and red-trimmed, grass-green trousers. He looked relaxed and ready as his monkey hopped up into the rigging above his head to watch. The proud Sylvan knight and hereditary bodyguard looked over at Asquith and grinned confidently as he waited for the match to start.

Asquith pulled off his plum-colored jacket, handed it to another Ship's boy, and moved to the firing line. His monkey stayed on his shoulder, holding a belaying pin and looking around suspiciously. Its eyes found Ulrich, and it shrieked a fierce "Eek!" and waved its belaying pin at him while looking around even

more suspiciously.

Westminster looked over at Ulrich, who looked back at him with an innocent shrug that fell about a mile short of true innocence.

The ranger shook his head, and walked over to Asquith.

"Mr. Asquith, normally the monkeys are spectators and not participants in these events," he drawled with a friendly smile.

"Says who?" Asquith replied back, looking like a dyspeptic bunny rabbit on a rampage. "I'm not about to get out here without him. Those damned Dwarrowdelf dumplings hurt!"

Westminster looked at the earthling in confusion. "Ah'm not sure Ah understand what you mean. What dumplings? What in the blazes are you talking about? You're just here to shoot."

Asquith nodded over at Ulrich. " *Hisd*damned dumplings! The things *hurt* when they hit from that sling of his!"

Westminster looked over at Ulrich, who looked back with a shrug.

"Eep?" added his bird innocently.

The ranger shuddered and decided that he really didn't want to know how Ulrich taught pistolcraft. At least not right now. But he noticed that Asquith looked more peeved than nervous as he waited on the firing line. And his monkey looked downright irritated, swinging its belaying pin back and forth, looking all over but seeming to concentrate in Ulrich's direction more than anything else.

The bell in Valandil's hand rang and Asquith and Grenoble both chose to shoot with a gun in each hand rather than the more stable two-handed hold. While the two-handed grip provided greater accuracy, its downside was that it required reholstering and drawing to shoot the second pistol.

With a .45 (Saint John Browning's masterpiece of warrior engineering) a two-handed grip was the standard marksmanship method. A .45 also had a round up the spout and another seven in the magazine, and reloading was quickly accomplished with a mag change.

But with a two-shot pistol, more pistols meant more firepower. Like the ancient pictures of pirates and naval heroes festooned with bandoleers of pistols, the modern sailor found it better to have more pistols, and then shift to the sword rather than try to reload in combat.

So in two-space, the real master of the pistol was one who could maximize his firepower by shooting with either hand. These two men understood this. One by dint of long training and brutal practice in battle, and the other by means of lots of training and brutal practice with a psychopath who felt that you didn't learn anything unless it was associated with pain when you got it wrong.

Grenoble concentrated on his pistol, focusing on the front sight as it covered his target, and then gently thumbing the nipples of the Keel charges on his pistol: <<purr>> " Crack!" <<purr>> " Crack!" He got two good hits on the target, then shifted to his other hand and repeated the drill: <<purr>> " Crack!" <<purr>> " Crack!" Then he holstered one gun as he quickly started the reloading of the other pistol. After shooting both dry, it was best now to concentrate on loading and firing just one pistol for sustained fire.

As he thumbed in the two bullets and started to ram them home he heard Asquith's next two shots, something he hadn't heard before due to his intense concentration. *Alas, the earthling hath need of much more practice if he hath just now fired his second pistol*, Grenoble thought smugly. While he respected the work that Asquith had done to learn to shoot, he felt that the man was a dilettante rather than a dedicated warrior who had truly devoted himself to the art of war.

For Asquith, the match was actually a source of considerable pleasure. He liked shooting and enjoyed doing it well. The only problem with Ulrich as a teacher was that the damned psycho didn't know how to relax. Shooting *was* relaxing for the diminutive earthling, but Ulrich always managed to make the practice sessions stressful.

*Ulrich could probably find a way to take the fun out of sex*, he thought. Every time Asquith practiced, he had to focus on the targets while his monkey had to... how did these sailors say it? Oh, yes, "Watch his six." *Curious term*, he thought, as his sights steadied down on the head of the target and he gently thumbed the nipples of the Keel charges on his pistol <<purr>> " Crack!" <<purr>> " Crack!" and then brought it back to lay against his shoulder while his monkey reloaded it. *I wonder where it came from? These Navy types have done such odd things to the English language.*

The second pistol rose into view and steadied on the target as he focused on the front sight, locking in on the holes in the target that his first two rounds had made. Ulrich called this game "chasink da bullets," where he aimed at his previous bullet hole and tried to put the next bullet where the first one had gone. *What else did he say? Oh, yes, aim small, miss small.* <<purr>> " Crack!" <<purr>> " Crack!" and he angled this second pistol across his chest so the monkey could reload it.

Asquith felt the monkey push the first muzzle away signaling it was ready for use. He let out his breath and held it to steady his aim.

This was really pleasant! In practice, every single time he began to have fun, Ulrich started slinging those damned dumplings at him. He couldn't simply settle in and enjoy the shooting: he had to keep aware of what was happening around him because the psycho was always testing him! Painfully! All those distractions made him really appreciate his monkey. His pistol's front sight came into view and steadied on the target as he gently thumbed the Keel charges again. <<purr>> "Crack!" <<purr>> "Crack!" Then he laid it against his shoulder just as his furry friend pushed the other barrel forward to signal that it was ready.

*I wonder where these little guys came from?* he asked himself for the ten thousandth time. *They may not talk, but they're definitely intelligent. Heh, heh, like Daniel's monkey being so offended when he left him behind at that tavern.* The front sight settled on the previous bullet holes, or was that a hole? *I can't tell if I missed or not, it just looks like one hole. I can't believe I missed, what an embarrassment!* The pistol spoke again <<purr>> "Crack!" <<purr>> "Crack!" and he returned it to his shoulder for reloading. *Oh, my god! There's not enough holes there! Where did the other round go?*

He holstered the first pistol as he brought the second gun up for reloading, then holstered it when his monkey pushed it away to tell him it was ready.

*I cannot believe I missed that shot!*

Grenoble focused on finishing reloading his last pistol as his ears rang from Asquith's shots. He brought it up carefully but quickly and touched off the final two rounds, then holstered it and turned to look at his opponent who was standing with his hands on the rail, staring at the targets with a definitely peeved face. He looked like a rodent with some kind of stomach trouble. *I hope he didn't just give up in the middle of the match*, Grenoble thought.

Melville was astonished, to put it mildly. Asquith's shooting had been a surprise, but his monkey reloading for him? The captain turned his head to look at his own monkey thoughtfully, only to see the little creature staring back at him.

"Now why in all the purple Dwarrowdelf hells didn't we think of that?" he asked his monkey quietly.

The monkey shot its head up to peer at the target then stretched it back over and down to look at him upside down—or right side up depending on your viewpoint, at least its eyes were "up" this way. Then it squeaked out a baffled "Eep!" and an emphatic six armed shrug, as if to say, "Darned if I know!"

"I think we have some practicing to do, my friend," continued the captain, thoughtfully. "Lots of practice. I get the feeling that it isn't quite as easy as Asquith and his little friend made it look!"

"Eep!" added his monkey in agreement.

Ulrich came up to Hans gleefully. "I tole ya I'se been workink wit' 'im. Gotsk ta git 'im used ta a real furball, so's I bin usink them rocks we gets in da soup. They's great in a sling, an' they don't hurt 'im much. 'Sides, it kept 'im frum gittink too eggsited when 'e shot in compertition, nawr didn't it!"

Ulrich's monkey brandished a fist and screeched emphatically from his shoulder, "Eek! Eek!"

"Eep! Eep!" added the bird, bouncing excitedly on his other shoulder.

"Don't hurt much, you maniac!?" Asquith called back. "Damned things leave a knot the size of an apple! A big, juicy apple! Besides, I can't believe I missed that target!" he moaned.

"Whatja mean, missked? Ever' skingle shot hit it!" Ulrich yelled back.

"I mean I missed, you sawed-off psychopath!" replied the little earthling, going nose-to-nose with the equally diminutive coxswain. It looked like a deranged bunny facing down a rabid ferret. "There's not enough holes in the head! What, are you blind as well as insane?"

Everyone took a step back. *Nobody* talked to Ulrich like that! Melville and Fielder weren't sure whether to grab Ulrich, or Asquith, or dive to the deck. They were totally flabbergasted when Ulrich laughed and called back, "An' yer a right idjit if'n ya thinks ya missked it! Ya jisk hit da bullet hole! See? Dis hole'sk a leetle lopsided. An' smackink yew wit' dem dumplinsk wus great fun! Yew looked goofy as hell jumpink 'round tryink ta shoot when ya gotsk stung!" Ulrich hooted as his monkey and parrotlet *eep* ed emphatically in agreement.

Asquith laughed and moved back from the firing line as the captain and his first officer looked at each other, trying to regroup and figure out what had just happened. Asquith, shooting like a machine, focused on the target, and firing rapidly and precisely? His monkey reloading? Asquith and Ulrich laughing at each other? Maybe they had better make an appointment with Lady Elphinstone to find out if they had misplaced their sanity.

Shaking his head, Melville stepped over to see what the judges had to say. Wait, Ulrich *was* one of the judges! And Valandil never had much to say, he only spoke up when there was a safety violation. So it all depended on what Westminster decided.

Melville wanted Westminster to back Asquith—primarily because he did *not* want Fielder to win! He also immediately understood that Ulrich and Asquith had introduced a tremendous combat multiplier, and all future matches *would* permit the use of monkeys. As captain, his decision would be law, and he *could* interrupt here, but he resolved to leave it to the judges. It would be *so* much more gratifying and satisfying if Fielder was defeated *without* Melville having to interfere.

Grenoble and Westminster were arguing about the match as Melville and his first officer got to the table. As usual, Ranger Valandil remained silent (living up to his nickname, "Quietfoot") while the Westerness ranger and the Sylvan knight tried to make sense of the situation.

"I have a thought on the matter, that I would communicate to thee," said Grenoble.

"You do, eh?" said Westminster.

"Wouldst hear it?"

"Ah'm not sure Ah want to know. But Ah think you're gonna tell me anyway."

"In truth, my friend, I was most astonished at the method in which Master Asquith hath chosen to shoot so expeditiously and capably. 'Twas obvious that they spent much time in their preparation, and 'tis to their honor 'twas most well done. But 'tis true as well, that the rules of this bout doth say that the shooter must shoot with no outside assistance, doth it not?"

"Eep?" said Grenoble's monkey, crossing its top set of arms and craning its neck to look the Sylvan in the eye balefully.

"Yeah, yeah," Westminster retorted. "And since when is a monkey considered to be 'outside help' now? Ah don't know of a single member of the crew who thinks that the monks are outside help! Ah mean, the monks have become *part* of us. Like mah little feller is 'Westminster's monkey'—although Ah have to admit, sometimes Ah feel like Ah'm more his human than he's mah monkey! And the matches are supposed to be a *practical* shooting match, to simulate fighting. And ain't no-ways, no- *how* Ah'm going to fight without my little guy."

Grenoble glanced over at the monkey scowling on his shoulder and said, "'Tis truth, my friend, but... 'Odsblood! 'Tis a *true* dilemma here. Wouldst know what 'tis the nub of the matter?"

"What?"

"Shall I tell thee?"

"I said so!"

"'Tis this. We *must* be true to the rules of thy bout, but how doth we do so and still appease our little friends? Truly 'tis a dilemma!"

Grenoble's monkey gave an "Eek!" and looked at him in outrage.

Everyone present watched with amusement. Not only had Grenoble been defeated by the underdog, but now his own monkey was going to make him concede!

"Ah don't think your monkey agrees with you, mah friend," said the ranger.

"Forsooth, little brother," said the Sylvan to his monkey, beseechingly. "Thy contributions are many and undeniable, and 'tis true that thy skills are perhaps underutilized as our friend Asquith and his companion hath demonstrated. But I am loath to be defeated by this earthling's tricks and my honor requires that I bring forth this point!"

His monkey performed a complicated shrug involving multiple shoulders and gave a dismissive "Eek!"

Westminster laughed at the monkey's response. "Well, Ah'm with your monkey on this one. Ah can't think of a single reason why it shouldn't be permitted! We're trying to teach our folks to shoot better and faster than the bad guys. The way Ah see it, as the senior judge Ah've got two choices. Ah can stick to the rules, ignore reality, and prevent our folks from practicing for a real gunfight. Or Ah can set up a match that encourages them to practice the way they'd be shooting in the real and nasty. And all the gods know—human, Sylvan or Dwarrowdelf—that how you practice is gonna be how you do it when it matters!"

There was a murmur of agreement from the onlookers in response to this. The ranger was tapping into fundamental principles here.

"Way back in the twentieth century," said Westminster, "when they first started figuring out warrior science, they had police officers armed with revolvers. They found out that in *real* gunfights the cops were acting just like they did on the range, collecting their empty brass, all neat and pretty, instead of dumping them on the ground and reloading. There were a couple of times when they found dead cops with empty brass in their hands or their pockets! The lesson learned is 'train like you fight' 'cause there *ain't* no Tooth Fairy, and there *ain't* no Easter Bunny, and there *ain't* no *Combat Fairy* who's gonna

come bonk you with the Combat Wand and make you capable of doing all the things you never practiced. You do *not* 'rise to the occasion,' you *sink* to the level of your training!"

Grenoble sighed. "'Tis true, my brother. It hath been proven time and again that how thou dost do it in drills is how thou shalt do it when the fur flies! I will agree with thee that this is an allowable practice—but *only* if thou can'st prove that it doth not distract thy monkey from its ability to protect thee from the slings and arrows of thine enemies!"

Ulrich spoke up for the first time. "I can tell ya that the monkeysk need practicink wit' dat! Ya gotsk ta make sure they ain't too focused on one thing. I wuz worried 'bout dat muself, so's I bin usink Asquith fer an 'spermental dummy. I bin usink my sling an' those liddle dumplinks Jones makes fer ammo. Hurtsk if'n it hits, but I figgered it wouldn't kill 'im. An' I figgered even if it did kill 'im, 'e's the most hexpendable member of the crew. Heh heh. It took 'is monk a bit ta git it tagedder, but they done it."

"'Expendable,' am I!" said Asquith in outrage. "I'm the damned Ship's historian, and *you're* going down in the annals as a psychopathic, homicidal maniac!"

That seemed to please Ulrich enormously. He and his monkey grinned ear-to-ear and looked at each other happily.

"Heeere kittykittykitty!" added the little green bird from atop his head.

By the end of the day the mold had been able to preserve about half of its beginning mass and was firmly ensconced in the cracks of the water barrel. And a half-dozen cats had died. The final score at the end of the quarter was: six cats dead, and half the slime mold ingloriously defeated.

Both sides waited for the next round in the battle. The mold took the opportunity and the information that it had, and began to secrete large quantities of carefully tailored poisons into the water barrel. Poisons designed to kill cats, since that was the only biological data that it had available.

Grenoble wasn't the only one who was initially outraged by the change in rules.

*Initially* being the operative word, since after he had taken a few minutes to think about it, he had a blinding flash of the obvious: if his monkey helped him, they both had a hell of a lot better odds of surviving in combat.

And very few combat veterans value arbitrary rules over survival. Ethical warriors have rules that are cast in stone, such as sparing opponents who have surrendered, and treating honorable enemies honorably.

At the same time, there was a long historical legacy (tracing back to Odysseus and Sun Tzu in human society) which enshrines duplicity, deceit, and sneakiness to give your own side an edge. An old military adage says, "If you ain't cheatin', you ain't trying... and if you get caught cheatin', you ain't trying hard enough."

The crew and officers felt that the monkeys and their capabilities gave them an edge in survival, and this new monkey-assisted loading technique was another edge they could use. Unfortunately, like most things that look easy, the rest of the match proved that skill and coordination come with a price: practice!

Asquith and his monkey were the hands-down winners for the rest of the match, and Ulrich won the equivalent of about six months' pay from his well-placed bets.

"Bugrit. I guess Asquith wins," said Hans, shaking his head as he handed over Ulrich's winnings.

"Da earthwurm didn't jisk defeat yas!" Ulrich crowed to the chagrined shooters with an evil, snaky sneer. "E drove off yer herdsk, sold yer familiesk inta slavery, and buried yer rottin' corpskes in unmarked gravesk! Heh, heh."

The other competitors had tried hard, but figuring out when your monkey was done reloading turned out to be a bit more complex than it appeared. And then there was the problem of retraining muscle memory. The better the crew was at shooting and reloading by themselves, the harder it was to remember to do something new—especially in competition the first time. The only competitors who came even close to giving a smooth performance were Dwakins and his monkey, who took second place overall.

In the end, Asquith was presented with the trophy: a small Nimbrell wood plaque with two tiny crossed pistols (carved out of a piece of Kaleb Jones' salt pork!) to hang on the wall of his tiny cabin. But the thing that he found himself valuing most of all was a sincere handshake and a "Well done!" from Melville, and the respect and applause of his Shipmates.

Most touching (and confusing) of all was when Ulrich walked up, put a hand on Asquith's shoulder, looked him in the eye and said, "Not bad fer a slimeky, usklessk earthwurm!"

"Eep!" added his parrotlet.

"How'n da hell didja manage 'at one, Dwakins?" Broadax growled balefully at the private, after the match.

"Manage wat, mah'yam?" Dwakins replied in confusion.

"You 'n' yer monkey, ya dimwit! How'dja git the reloadin' so smooth!?" she shouted in exasperation.

"Ummm, I dunno. He jist did it fer me...?" Dwakins said desperately, while Rawl looked on in confusion.

"Rieutenant, I think he jussst tell monkey to rreload pisshtols!" Rawl contributed.

"Eep," added Rawl's monkey, helpfully.

"Oh, by the tangled beard of my mama, *why me!*" she screamed to the sky. "Jarvis! Git yer ass over here an' see if'n ye kin help these two idjits figger out what'n da hell theys doin' right!"

"To think," Jarvis muttered to himself, "I coulda been staring at the uncomplicated north end of a peacefully south-bound mule right now. My da's right: I *am* a greedy idjit."

"I tole ye Jarvis, ain't no good deed goes unpunished!" she snarled back.

Everyone knew what the daily ration would be for the crew. For each man during the average day at sea (after the first couple of weeks, when all perishable goods had been consumed) there would be a gallon of water; one pound of biscuit or some equivalent thereof; a pound of salt pork, salt beef, beef jerky, or some equivalent thereof; a half gallon of small beer or wine; a pint of oatmeal, or other whole grain cereal; four ounces of cheese; four ounces of sauerkraut or some other form of pickled vegetable; and two ounces of lemon or lime juice. In all these cases, the "some other form" was often an alien equivalent of meat, fruit, vegetables, or fermented drink that the sailors of the eighteenth or nineteenth century on Old Earth could never have dreamed of. But the basic ratio and distribution of the types of food was something that those ancient sailors would have readily recognized.

Overall, given the nature, diversity, and quantity of goods that he had to purchase, load, maintain, and distribute, it was no wonder that a ship's purser was traditionally dishonest or incompetent. Multiply each man's daily rations by the number in the crew, times the long weeks and months at sea, and you got some idea of Brother Theo's headaches.

Theo saw to the apportionment of the daily ration, after that it was up to Jones and Roxy and their mates to do their best with it. And of late, there was a serious problem with their "best." In fact, the food seemed to be making the crew ill!

As if Brother Theo did not have enough problems, over the last few days most meals had been accompanied by a number of the crew reporting to the sick bay, sick as... well, sick as dogs was the best way to say it. Vomiting and diarrhea were bad anywhere, but in the cramped conditions aboard Ship it was even worse, and Theo couldn't track down what was causing it. They had started boiling the drinking water, and both Jones and Roxy were using proper sanitation and cooking methods, so the products of their galleys *should* have been healthy and filling.

Although, Theo reflected, he'd take the "healthy and filling" part on faith when it came to Jones' galley. Even after all this time watching Broadax and the Guldur chow down on what appeared to be rocks, ashes, and solid chunks of wood that had started out as perfectly useable salted meat, flour, and meal, he still couldn't believe that anything could eat that... stuff, and claim it was good!

Brother Theo hoped that word of Jones' food never got to the neo-pope. Food that bad could have profound theological implications. There was still a strong strain of Neo-Catholicism that preached mortification of the body to strengthen the spirit, and the Lord knew that Jones' stews and cuisine definitely constituted mortification of the flesh for any human.

Well, any normal human, anyway. Dwakins seemed to be willing to eat the food every other day with his Guldur companion. The only thing he refused to eat were the "dumplings"!

But that didn't solve Theo's problem.

*What was causing this illness?* "I guess it's time to go check with Lady Elphinstone and the captain, and see if they have any ideas," he said to himself resignedly.

The ninja slime mold that was supposed to neutralize the threat posed by the *Fang* was itself neutralized... by a bunch of felines! Ignominiously trapped in a water barrel, the slime mold railed and ranted, poisoning the water with cat toxins and waiting for an opportunity to escape.

"In truth, Captain, I have been confused in my search for the cause of this plague of sickness. And, in honesty, this confounded confusion doth make me wroth!" Lady Elphinstone declared.

The surgeon, her lob-lolly girl, the purser, and the first officer were all meeting in the captain's office to discuss the matter.

"Aye," said Brother Theo. "So far we have determined that it isn't anything to do with the food preparation equipment or techniques. We even checked the spices and utensils." He shuddered briefly and added, "I inspected Jones' galley area myself. Do you know how nerve-wracking it is to be followed around by an irritable cook who stirs his food with a pistol?"

Melville nodded sympathetically.

"Or at least he *did* stir his food with that pistol. I finally got him to agree to use regular utensils and holster the gun to help isolate the cause of the sickness. I'm not sure it would have been possible if I hadn't brought Lt. Broadax along. She proved to be, uh... convincing in a way that I couldn't."

"I wish I'd been there for that," grinned Fielder.

"So far," Theo continued, "we know that it isn't a disease or caused by poor hygiene. At one time or another it strikes every living creature aboard, including the dogs. The only exception is the monkeys, which proves that they are truly alien, but we already knew that. And we know that it kills cats—horribly and painfully."

"Eek!" added his monkey emphatically from his robe's hood, where it was comfortably ensconced with its head peering over the monk's thin blond tonsure.

"Dammit, Captain," said Vodi, "something's killing my kitties, and we *gotta* figure out what's doing it!"

"Aye. It doth appear to be a biochemical toxin that is fatal to felines," explained Elphinstone. "But for us it hath only a few side effects. Wouldst know what they are..." Then, looking at the first officer with a tight smile, she added after a microscopic pause, "...Daniel?"

Blinking in surprise Fielder responded, "I'm not gonna like this, am I?"

"Please, do tell us," prompted the captain.

"Then I shall."

"Thank you," said Melville, grinning in anticipation of whatever Lady Elphinstone had in store for the first officer.

"The primary symptoms appear to be nausea, anal leakage, and methinks probably impotence."

"I'm getting two out of three just listening," said Fielder weakly.

"If we hath luck in isolating it, mayhap we can clear up two of them before we get to port and find out if thou dost suffer from the third, Daniel!" Elphinstone retorted primly.

"Okay, so it's a toxin or a poison," interjected Melville. "And it must have come aboard on Show Low. Have we got a feel for the source? Have we narrowed it down yet?"

Silence came from around the table, until Brother Theo said slowly, "Captain, we're pretty sure we have it narrowed down to the water supply. And if it is, we may be in trouble, depending on how much of our water is contaminated. If we're lucky it won't be too much. But it's hard to tell, and even harder to analyze in two-space."

"How did you figure out it was the water?" asked Fielder curiously.

"Serendipity!" claimed Elphinstone. "Able Seaman Jackon started having symptoms, so he shifted to eating what he considered a sovereign remedy: small beer and salt pork straight from the cask." She shuddered daintily. "Methinks the man doth have a stomach created to sup on the fare from hell to survive upon that! But, leastways, he was correct, in that he hath cured his malady, and those that were afflicted were also cured of the worst of the malady with such fare."

Mrs. Vodi chimed in sourly, "Humph. 'Cures' it, in a manner of speaking. Constipated, tipsy sailors all blowing gas outa both ends. I damn near think I'd a rather have them cleaning out their trousers, puking over the rails and sitting on the head all day, than burping in my face and farting left and right!"

Lady Elphinstone and Mrs. Vodi were both mildly offended when the meeting broke up in gales of laughter.

The ninja slime mold continued its battle, and the crew was puzzled by the medical mystery of their malady. The cats were deeply frustrated. And the dogs were happily oblivious.

Lady Elphinstone was profoundly puzzled as she inspected and re-inspected the water barrels. Her confusion might have been alleviated if anyone had told her that the affected water barrel had been broached. But the load plan called for the cooks to use a different cask first, and the medicos remained in frustrated ignorance.

And so the cats continued to get sick and slowly die. Mrs. Vodi and Lady Elphinstone were nearly overcome with grief, guilt, and frustration as their sick bay filled up with dying cats.

Cuddles was completely unaffected. And Brutus, who shadowed Cuddles' every step also managed to share the alpha male's immunity.

Cuddles was, by nature and breeding, nasty and cunning. He avoided water anyway as a general principal. And *especially* water that had any smell of mold! Meat and lots of it was his just reward as the head cat. Gravy juices as well. Or dainty laps from a beer held up to him, which was his due as feline royalty.

As Kobbsven finished firing the pistol in his left hand he lifted his right hand to bring that pistol from his shoulder. And felt it yanked back, accompanied by a loud "Eek!" of protest from his monkey.

"Yah, yah!" he said crossly, in his singsong Scandahoovian accent. "I din't know ya weren't ready, liddle one. Ya don't gots ta be screamin' so loud. I gets der message! Yah, yew betcha."

The big marine corporal looked over at Asquith and his monkey and yelled in frustration, "Dis here is von shtupid idoit ideer! Yah, yew betcha. How are ya to be shootin' if'n yer monk ain't done reloadin' fer yah yet? I keeps on doin' dis drill, an' he ain't never done when I'm ready!"

Asquith had been standing beside the firing line, helping to instruct the marines in this new technique. His friend, Lt. Fielder, was standing beside him, and the two of them exchanged glances as the little earthling heaved a sigh and started over to explain things one more time to the big ox.

Fielder looked at Asquith and said with a smile, "Bert, let me see if I can explain it to him this time, all right?" He strolled over to the frustrated, red-faced marine and his highly pissed-off monkey, who had spent most of the morning trying to learn how to shoot and reload together.

Kobbsven's basic problem was that he was very good, and had lots of practice doing it the old way. Which meant that his shooting and reloading skills were burned into muscle memory. Instead of shooting and then bringing the pistols in for his monkey to reload, he kept them low to his side so he could holster and reload rapidly. Kobbsven had proven he could do it slowly, but the moment he was asked to speed up, his old reflexes came in to play.

Fielder reflected that the last monkey he had seen this angry with its person had been his own after that tête-à-tête with Ursula. Which gave him an idea for a training technique that just might work.

He looked up at Kobbsven's red, scowling visage and grinned in a wonderfully friendly fashion. Which made Asquith nervous. The earthling had learned that the first officer only got that expression when someone was going to receive "good training"—or, in other words, a painful educational experience.

"Kobbsven," said Fielder, shaking his head slowly, "Lt. Broadax is convinced that somewhere in your prehistoric cranium there exists a node of something resembling brain matter which can be trained. I'm not too sure she's correct, but I am willing to see if I can assist the learning process."

"Vat?!?" Kobbsven replied in confusion.

Fielder looked over at Kobbsven's monkey. "Can I assume that that you have your trusty little belaying pin with you?" He smiled evily as the monkey pulled the length of hardwood out from underneath its stomach. Not for the first time, it occurred to him that there was something just a little bit odd about the way the monkeys kept those belaying pins under their bodies. The dimensions just didn't seem quite right.

"Excellent!" Fielder exclaimed genially. "And since you are obviously the brains of this team," he continued, speaking cheerfully to the monkey and ignoring Kobbsven, "I'll explain the new training method to you so that *you* can implement it! *If* Kobbsven does it wrong, smack him in the head with your pin! Just the head, mind you, we don't want to actually hurt him."

Kobbsven's monkey replied "Eep eep!" and sent the pin whistling through the air toward the big marine's head, stopping just short of impact. Then it twisted its head to the side and looked at Fielder inquisitively.

"I do believe you might want to start off a bit less enthusiastically," Fielder said thoughtfully. "I know Kobbsven is sturdy, especially in the head area, but he really belongs to the marines and not the Navy, and so I have to give him back in almost the same condition I got him, do you see?"

The monkey looked at him consideringly, *eeek* ed in agreement, swung a somewhat less enthusiastic blow toward Kobbsven's noggin, and then cocked its head over toward Fielder.

"I think that might be about right," Fielder said judiciously. "Just remember to take it easy with him, after all *you* have to live with your human!"

Both Kobbsven's and Fielder's monkey replied with a less than enthusiastic "Eek!"

As Fielder started to join Asquith, Kobbsven asked plaintively, "Lieutena't Fielder, vat am I supposed ta do now?"

Fielder stopped and looked back at him. "Well, Corporal, you should practice shooting, and your monkey will helpfully remind you if you're doing it wrong."

Asquith looked at him curiously. "Daniel, what are you..."

Fielder interrupted him, "Shhh, Bert. Just watch the show and see if this has any effect."

Asquith looked at him quizzically, shrugged, and returned his attention to Kobbsven.

"Whenever you're ready, Corporal Kobbsven," Asquith called out.

The big marine turned to the firing line muttering under his breath. They could barely hear what he was saying, but it didn't seem to be in English and it definitely wasn't happy.

He lifted his first pistol, aimed and fired over the rail at the target, "*Crack!Crack!*" then dropped the gun to his side as he lifted the second pistol up.

His monkey screeched "EEK!!" whipped out its belaying pin and whacked him over the head. As Fielder said later, "It was just enough to get his attention. Of course, for anyone else, they would have been out for the count, but with Kobbsven..."

"YOW! VAT JA DODAT FER!?" Kobbsven screamed at his monkey as he reached up to grab his head with the hand that held the empty pistol.

In a blur of activity the little eight-limbed creature grabbed the muzzle end of the pistol with one hand, quickly flicked a bullet into each barrel with another, rammed them in with two more hands, and shoved the pistol away to signify it was reloaded. Then it smugly screeched, "Eep!" with its arms crossed in front of its chest and its head extended out in front of Kobbsven's.

Asquith called out, "Corporal, I do believe your friend was just getting your attention so he could reload your pistol for you." He struggled to keep from laughing out loud at the outraged expression on Kobbsven's face.

"Yah, yah, but yah din't haf to hit so hard!" Kobbsven said aggrievedly to his monkey, who glared back, and began to tap its belaying pin into its hand.

"Yah, yah, okay. I gots it. Yah, yew betcha," Kobbsven muttered.

Fielder leaned over to Asquith and whispered, "Bert, let me know how many belying pins the monkey has to go through to get an idea into Kobbsven's head. I have to admit I've always been curious if pounding an idea into someone's head actually works!"

Asquith winced in mental pain and nodded.

Cuddles decided that the damned mold had to go. Enough was enough. After all, it was decimating his harem, and something had to be done!

Thus he concluded that it was time to take the matter to the head human. Cuddles had tried to tell Mrs. Vodi and Lady Elphinstone, but they were too preoccupied with finding the source of the poison and treating the dying cats to pay much attention to one more yowling, complaining cat.

Cuddles had a general sense that dogs did this kind of thing all the time. Your basic, "Quick, come see! Timmy fell into the well!" role was something that the proud, independent cats of two-space had gotten away from. It was thoroughly beneath their dignity. If their ancestors ever *had* the ability to do it, it was gone now. But Cuddles felt that it ought to be pretty simple.

Melville was not a cat person. No cats were permitted in his cabins, and when one tried to enter it was rapidly and ignominiously evacuated by McAndrews.

But in this case McAndrews was not handy. So when Cuddles wandered in, the captain gave the mission to Ulrich, who was whittling on a piece of dried salt pork.

"Ulrich, get rid of the cat," said the captain.

"Aye, Capkin!" replied the coxswain.

"Eek!" and "Eep!" echoed his monkey and bird.

Ulrich had caused his ubiquitous dagger to disappear, but his monkey was flipping its little dirk in one of its upper hands with calculated menace.

Cuddles took one look at Ulrich coming toward him and immediately panicked. *This* was terror

incarnate, thought Cuddles. *This* was the most pitiless aspect of the savage wilderness hunting him down. *This* was the reason why cats sought shelter with fat dumb humans in the first place. Humans were supposed to protect cats from creatures like this!

Ulrich was inhumanly fast, but he was not quite able to catch the deranged cat as it scampered around the room in abject terror. Boye joined joyfully into the spirit of the chase, leaping and barking happily with his monkey *eeek* ing from his neck, egged on by cries of, "Heeere kittykittykitty!" and "I taste like chicken!" from Spike the parrotlet.

Then Ulrich snarled in frustration, flipped out his dagger, and cocked his arm to throw. His actions were mimicked perfectly by his monkey with its own tiny dirk. Ulrich figured cats were a constant threat to his beloved pigeons, and here was a chance for some preemptive psychopathic payback.

Melville had a vision of Cuddles being pinned to the deck by twin blades. The cats were being decimated by this mysterious malady, and Elphinstone and Vodi had been crushed by every death. The captain didn't like cats and couldn't find it in himself to worry if they all died. In the end he was convinced that the cats were parasites who contributed very little to the Ship. But he did care about the surgeon and her lob-lolly girl. They were dear friends and formidable women, and he had a sudden vision of trying to explain himself to them if Ulrich killed this cat.

Besides, it would make a terrible mess. All that blood. And McAndrews would give him hell for it.

Melville's mental computer clicked and whirred and came up with the results in a millisecond: killing the cat was Not A Good Idea.

"Belay the knife! Damn it, don't kill the cat, Ulrich!"

Ulrich froze, his mind spinning. Then he said, "I'll jisk pink 'isk tail to da deck den!" and his arm reared back again as he chased the cat out from under Melville's writing desk.

Once more Melville had The Vision. Still there would be a mess. Plus, there would be a wounded martyr that the medicos would patch up and fuss over, and he would once again be the villain. It might be even worse this way.

"Belay that!" ordered the captain.

Luckily, McAndrews came in at that moment.

"McAndrews, damnit, get rid of this cat," said Melville.

"Heeere, pusspuss," said the steward, crouching down and making the foolish face that only cat people make for their cats.

*Safety! Succor! Salvation!* thought Cuddles. This was the fat stupid human they had first joined around the campfire!

Cuddles leapt into McAndrews' arms, shuddering with fear. "Mwrow!" cried the cat, issuing his complaint to the management as he looked into the steward's round face.

"WoofWoof!" added Boye eagerly, which was basic dog-speak for "And stay out!"

Then, danger gone, as he was being carried outside the cabin, Cuddles looked up in the steward's kindly face and wondered if the stupid fat human had any food.

*Food? Got food? No? Then to hell with you,* he said, with a flip of his tail as McAndrews set him down. There were only two kinds of humans. The smart, dangerous ones who didn't trust cats, and the dumb, friendly ones who fed them.

"Cats. They love me, you know," said McAndrews. "They're great judges of character."

Brutus, in his battle for the alpha male position, finally appeared to have overcome the ninja slime mold. By eating it.

The mold had made a desperate attempt to escape the water barrel while the cats' leader was gone—which was Brutus' opportunity to put his plan into action. After he devoured the enemy, he intended to regurgitate or defecate the creature over the side of the Ship.

The thing tasted terrible, but a cat's gotta do what a cat's gotta do.

The cats were selfish, self-centered little beasts (quite similar to Fielder except he wasn't little), but they did have their pride, and Brutus was determined that he wasn't going to be defeated by a mobile patch of mold. This bold act would also, once and for all, establish Brutus as the alpha male.

This tactic had worked before, but Brutus had failed to observe something that Cuddles had instinctively understood: after the first two times, the mold had adapted and it was now able to poison any cat that came into contact with it.

So the tactic didn't work, and the mold began to fight back. First Brutus tried to hack it back out, intending to vomit it into two-space. This was something that cats were particularly skilled at. It was generally best done over something irreplaceable that people were fond of, and he saw no reason why it shouldn't work.

Cuddles had just returned from his unsuccessful foray into the captain's cabin, and he looked on with keen interest. It wasn't every day that you saw a cat try to hack up an alien hairball.

When that didn't work Brutus went to Plan B: trying to expel the alien out the other end of his digestive tract. But when the mold came out, it clung to Brutus' hindquarters like a large, slimy growth hanging from his rump. As Brutus stood, awkward and splayed out over the "head" (which was nothing more than a seat with a hole in it, suspended over two-space) the mold began to <<talk>> to him.

<<Charge on, charge on, charge on. The beloved chant is raised, as though our cells are circumambulating the sacred mandala or returning to the place from which the first Messenger cell climbed from the primordial muck and ascended to Godhood on that Blessed Night.>>

This was very confusing. Food often made noises or communicated distress, but not *after* it was eaten.

<<We pass through your feeble digestive tract. We gain strength from your acids. We incorporate your bile to cleanse the stars of your desecration!>>

Brutus had done his best, but now he admitted defeat and looked pleadingly to Cuddles for help. Cuddles carefully considered the situation. Then, with one brutal, powerful, lighting-fast uppercut swipe of his paw, Cuddles smacked Brutus (and the mold) off into space. As the black cat flipped back, his body paralyzed with toxins, he was only capable of one last plaintive, bewildered, frustrated, enraged "Warrlllll!!!" as he spun 360 degrees and landed in Flatland, feet first.

\* \* \*

What the hammer? what the chain?  
In what furnace was thy brain?  
What the anvil? what dread grasp  
Dare its deadly terrors grasp?

And what shoulder, & what art,  
Could twist the sinews of thy heart?  
And why thy heart began to beat,  
What dread hand? & what dread feet?

\* \* \*

On the lower quarterdeck, Lt. Fielder, the officer of the watch, looked out upon these proceedings with bemused approval. *Cats are excellent judges of character*, he thought. *They distrust all other cats.*

On the other side of Flatland, two idle sailors were leaning on the upperside railing. They watched in amazement as a cat popped through the dark blue membrane of two-space, emerging feet first. He appeared only briefly before dropping back into interstellar space.

"Dead cat bounce," said the one, laconically. "Thas sumpthin' ya don't see ever' day."

"Yep," replied his friend, calmly. "Except I don't think 'e was dead. Looked like he was squatting to poop."

"Rough way ta go."

"Yep. He didn't look none too happy 'bout it."

The cats around Cuddles all watched Brutus bounce once and disappear into two-space. They understood. Once again Cuddles had demonstrated that old age and treachery will defeat youth and enthusiasm every time.

Cuddles wandered off with the kind of catlike nonchalance and poise that causes envy in humans and outrage in dogs. With both his enemies (vermin and feline) now well and truly defeated, he automatically went into his default mode of looking for food or females to rape. *Food or sex? Food? Sex?* Sometimes life was hard for the top cat. Decisions, decisions.

*Food.* Food sounded good, and this time of day Mrs. Vodi should have something for him, he thought as he trotted off.

"Well, Captain, we have good news for you," Brother Theo reported.

Once again the purser, surgeon, and first officer were meeting in the captain's cabins. Mrs. Vodi was too busy nursing her sick and dying cats to come this time.

"That would be a pleasant change," Melville replied with a grin. "What have you got for me?"

"Welladay," said Lady Elphinstone, "we hath found the source of the illness that hath afflicted our gallant crew. Wouldst know what it is?"

"I'd like nothing better!" said the captain.

She shook her head in frustration as she continued. "'Twas a water barrel placed as deck cargo in the lowerside waist. It hath been broached by the cooks, but 'twas not recorded!"

"Aye, Captain," said a grim faced Theo, "and it is my division's responsibility to keep those records. I'm afraid I must accept the blame for what has happened."

"Nay," said Elphinstone. "'Tis a joint responsibility to inspect all sanitation and monitor all records. I must shoulder my portion of the reprobation."

"Hell, I should have spotted it during captain's rounds on Sunday," said Melville, "and in the future we'll be watching for this. The good news is no one has died." Then he looked at the surgeon's grim countenance and corrected himself quickly, "Except for our cats, of course. Which is certainly a tragedy. The question before us is, how much harm has been done to our water supply?"

"There shouldn't be too much cross-contamination, Captain," said Theo. "There are procedures in place to prevent that. Any secondary reservoirs that drew water from that source will have to be purged and cleansed, but it shouldn't amount to much."

"Good!" said Fielder. "So it should all be over now?"

"Aye," replied Elphinstone. "Fear not. The nausea, incontinence and anal leakage shall clear soon. I'm not sure about the impotence, though. 'Tis possible that will be a permanent effect. I am confident that thou shalt let us know when we get into port, won't thee, Daniel?" She gave him a sweet smile which didn't hide the glint in her eyes.

"Oh, hell," he moaned.

"Back on subject here," Melville said. "The final question is, how did it happen? I mean, why a poison that only kills cats?"

"We think it's just a fluke," said Theo. "Some local toxin, maybe from an aquatic life form on Show Low that the felines just happened to be sensitive to. No way it could have been intentional. I mean, if someone was going to attack *Fang*, why would they poison our cats?"

"Aye," nodded Melville. "I know you love them," he said quickly to Lady Elphinstone, "but they're not exactly our achilles heel! I mean, come on, you have to admit that they're not *essential* to our survival, now are they?"

"Hello, my sweet little Cuddle-kins," cooed Vodi, scooping up the cat as he sauntered into the hospital. Vodi was a truly wise woman, but everyone had a weakness, and this was one area in which the universe had pulled the wool over her eyes. In her mind, this malignant, vicious, rapacious, murderous fur coat with razor blades was still an adorable kitten. Cuddling him and cooing to him she said, "Has 'ou been a good boy? Has 'ou been staying out of trouble?"

Cuddles purred happily, and somewhere deep in his self-centered cat soul he thought his feline thoughts: *If you only knew, person. If you only knew. Now, where's my damned food?*

\* \* \*

When the stars threw down their spears  
And water'd heaven with their tears,  
Did he smile his work to see?  
Did he who made the Lamb make thee?

Tyger! Tyger! burning bright  
In the forests of the night,  
What immortal hand or eye  
Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?

## CHAPTER THE 14TH

# Arrival at the Hero Cluster: "Having *Us* , They Know No Fear!"

Eternal Father, strong to save,  
Whose arm hath bound the restless wave,  
Who biddest the mighty ocean deep  
Its own appointed limits keep;  
Oh, hear us when we cry to Thee,  
For those in peril on the sea!

Lord, guard and guide the men who fly  
Through the great spaces in the sky.  
Be with them always in the air,  
In darkening storms or sunlight fair;  
Oh, hear us when we lift our prayer,  
For those in peril in the air!

The Navy Hymn or "Eternal Father"  
(Various verses have different authors, and many are unknown)

There were very few truly devout men about the *Fang* . Even Brother Theo could not really be called pious. But there were also precious few who did not feel the tug of mortality in the midst of battle, and no sentient creature could avoid a sense of wonder and awe at the nature of

this magical realm that they traveled in.

Thus, the religious services held every Sunday morning were always well attended, and Brother Theo tried to minister to their spiritual needs without chasing anyone away. He found that the best way to do that was to keep it short, and to tap into the deep roots of their history and culture with Words and stories. And of course a few Songs of faith. The *Fang* s did love their singing, and the ancient old Songs touched the soul of the sailor far from home.

"Shipmates," said Theo, "we are about to enter into a new chapter in our voyage. We are far from home, and far from our loved ones. But we are off on a *great* adventure, and we are never far from the

Almighty, even out here. So let us sing the Navy Hymn, and let this be my sermon, and may this be our prayer, dedicating our loved ones and our Ship to Him." In his strong, clear, tenor voice he led them through the first three verses. The third verse was written in the twentieth century for the early astronauts, but the sailors of two-space claimed it, happily and loudly, for themselves.

"Aloft in solitudes of space,  
Uphold them with Thy saving grace.  
Thou Who supports with tender might  
The balanced birds in all their flight.  
Lord, if the tempered winds be near,  
That, having Thee, they know no fear."

"Aye," growled Broadax, in the pause between verses, "having *us*, 'they know no fear' out here!" That drew a cheer as the assembled *Fangs* continued.

"God, Who dost still the restless foam,  
Protect the ones we love at home.  
Provide that they should always be  
By Thine own grace both safe and free.  
O Father, hear us when we pray  
For those we love so far away."

There were more than a few tears as they dwelt upon that verse and their loved ones far away, and there was peace and solace in entrusting them to the Almighty.

Before the final verses Brother Theo interjected, "And as we sing these last two verses, let us take this opportunity to humbly entrust and rededicate ourselves and our Ship to Him."

"O Father, King of earth and sea,  
We dedicate this ship to Thee.  
In faith we send her on her way;  
In faith to Thee we humbly pray:  
O hear from heaven our sailor's cry  
And watch and guard her from on high!

"And when at length her course is run,  
Her work for home and country done,  
Of all the souls that in her sailed  
Let not one life in Thee have failed;  
But hear from heaven our sailor's cry,

And grant eternal life on high!"

"Hear from heaven our sailor's cry, and grant eternal life on high! What more could we ask?" concluded Brother Theo.

"Amen," said the captain. "First Officer, clear for action! All hands to battle stations, and prepare the Ship for competition between the gun crews. Mr. Hans, get my jollyboat out to position the targets!"

The problem with the enthusiastic competitions so beloved by the captain and his crew was the occasional injury. These kept Lady Elphinstone, Mrs. Vodi, and their corpsmen gainfully occupied with repairing the young sailors and marines, and castigating them for their carelessness. While the medicos complained of the extra effort these injuries caused, they took solace in the fact that the wounds were all relatively minor and the work was fairly easy.

The lack of major casualties left the medical personnel with plenty of time to deal with their one major recovering invalid, Midshipman Hayl. The sword wound itself had healed quickly, but the hand failed to reattach properly and had to be amputated. Joby DeWalt, their Celebri carpenter, had spent many days during the long voyage across the Far Rift, carefully forming a prosthesis and working with Mrs. Vodi and Hayl to ensure that the cup was a proper fit. The final product was a pleasant surprise to the boy.

"All right, young sir," said DeWalt, "let's see how the cup fits over the arm now. Make sure it isn't binding."

Hayl held his arm out and looked at the leather and wood brace which extended up the length of his forearm. "It's on like you and Mrs. Vodi showed me, sir," he replied. "It's snug but not too tight, and there's room in the straps to tighten it if I need to."

DeWalt nodded and pointed to the white wood along the length of the brace. "You can see that I used Nimbrell wood on your new arm, lad, and the Elbereth Moss took to it well. See, the braces come down to the end of the cup where there's a socket for your attachments to screw in, so you won't have just a pirate's hook!"

"Although," added Mrs. Vodi cheerfully, "if you wanted to impress the pretty girls you could always borrow Mr. Asquith's eyepatch and one of Ulrich's birds and pretend you're an old time freebooter!"

Hayl smiled dutifully, but stared despondently at the leather and wood brace on his arm.

"But, how...." he burst out, "how can I ever be a midshipman when I'm missing a hand? How can I be as good as I need to be for the captain if I can't use both hands?" He turned his head away to hide his tears.

DeWalt flushed and started to mumble, "Well, as to that..." but he was overridden by another voice.

"As to that, Mr. Hayl," said Melville as he came into the sick bay, "don't you think the captain should decide what you can and cannot do for him?"

Melville and DeWalt had talked with the medicos about Hayl. Physically, he was in excellent shape, indicating that he was one of those individuals whose healing benefited by the unpredictable environment of two-space. Mentally though, the boy was having a difficult time of it.

Hayl felt guilty about passing out after the fight, and was second-guessing himself. But Melville also felt guilty, and he saw the lad as he was: a brave young man who had done his duty to the limit of his endurance and stayed ready to fight until the moment when his abused body could stand no more and collapsed.

He thought of Words that described the young middie's spirit:

*Out of the night that covers me  
Black as the Pit from pole to pole,  
I thank whatever gods may be  
For my unconquerable soul.*

Melville smiled as he felt a surge of joy. *Joy* that he had the privilege to command such men ( *and* boys!) as this. He looked at the middie with so much pleasure and affection in his eyes that Hayl felt the top layers of his sadness being swept away, and he couldn't help but grin back. If his captain could be so happy to see him, then maybe life wasn't so terrible.

"I think that perhaps the situation is not so grim as you're making it out to be," said Melville kindly. "It'll be a long while before we can get you back to Earth to have your hand cloned and attached. Until then, Mr. DeWalt has come up with some, ah, *innovations*, you might say, that will help you along the way. In particular, the Nimbrell wood and the Keel charge he incorporated into the brace should help."

Hayl looked at the brace, and then at the captain and the carpenter. He concentrated on the wood where it touched the skin of his forearm and felt a... well a <<purr >> was the only way he could describe it!

He looked over at DeWalt, with his eyes wide. "I feel it," he said, "I feel it in my head. It's purring! It

likes me!" he said excitedly.

Hayl's monkey *EEK* ed and slid down to examine the brace closely, touching it gently. Then the little creature extended its head up and over so it was looking at Hayl eye to eye, and it *EEK* ed again excitedly.

"Yes, lad, it purrs," DeWalt replied with a gentle smile. "And it will do more as you get used to each other. *Fang* is fond of you. She thinks you are a 'good pup.' Which made it easier for me to work with the Ship and the wood to build a tiny mite of a Keel charge into the cup, and a bit of Nimbrell wood for the bracings.

"I tell you true, lad," the carpenter continued, "that even being of the Celebri this brace was cursed hard to make." DeWalt shook his head slowly, "If the Ship itself hadn't wanted to help, it wouldn't have worked. So what you have there is a piece of the *Fang*, which means that it has a bit of an ability to influence and manipulate gravitic forces, just like a pistol's Keel charge." He reached into the bag next to him and pulled out what appeared to be a simple hook, made of steel inlaid with white Nimbrell wood.

"This little jewel works with it quite well. The hook is actually split, so with practice, you can grasp things with it. The inside arc is sharp, except for the top of the curve, so you can hold something like a rope to climb without cutting it. The Keel pieces will give it the force you need to hold the two sides of the hook together, and will let go when you want them to. They're cursed rare. I've only seen a prosthetic like this once before and that when I was a lad. To make one takes not only a master Shipwright. *Which* you are just lucky enough to have," and he bowed with a mischievous twinkle in his eye. "But you're also blessed to have a Ship that cares enough to help. Like I said, *Fang* thinks you're a 'good pup.'"

Hayl stared at the brace and the hook in surprise and then looked up. "The hook is sharp on the inside?" he asked.

"Two-space sharp at that," DeWalt replied. "So be careful with it. I've got a guard for the blade to use until you learn to control it."

Melville added, "And, Mr. Hayl, before you start worrying about losing your place in the Navy, I think you should consider Admiral Lord Nelson, in Hornblower and Jack Aubrey's days, who lost not only his arm, but an eye as well. It didn't seem to hurt his career much!"

"Aye, sir, that it didn't," Hayl replied thoughtfully.

"Here, now, you two, I think you've had enough time with him for today," Mrs. Vodi exclaimed as she came through the door. "Come bother the lad another time, he needs his rest, he does!"

As she ushered the two from his bunk, Hayl sat up and looked at them both and said, "Sirs?"

They stopped and looked at him.

"Thank you," he said simply.

DeWalt nodded, and Melville looked at him and said in return, "I think you have it wrong, Mr. Hayl. I thank *you* for saving my life by taking on those two backstabbers. Without your help I would most likely have been overwhelmed. You *are* a 'good pup.'"

Hayl smiled, examining his brace and hook, and then scratched his monkey's head distractedly. "Well, it looks like I have some work to do here, so I'd best get busy."

His monkey said, "Eep," and nodded, and Hayl felt the purr of his new arm nestle up against his soul.

"Good mornin', Mr. Hayl!" called Hans, standing on the upper quarterdeck observing the sails and rigging.

"Good morning, sir," replied the midshipman as he came up to the quarterdeck. "I came to see if I could get caught up on the Ship and all that's happened recently. If you don't mind, sir?" Hayl grimaced and concluded hastily, "I hate to say it, but I've been remiss in my duties and haven't been paying attention to our track. Nor much of anything else outside of sick bay, for that matter."

Hans nodded slowly and thoughtfully as he looked down at the lad. The boy looked good. Not great, mind you, but good for someone who's been through a helluva fight against overwhelming odds, lost a hand, had it reattached, and then had it removed again. *Lad might jist have it in 'im to go far if 'e gets past this hump here*, Hans thought to himself. *Got grit, 'e does!*

"Well, lad, I'd say ya had 'cause ta be a mite distracted. Ya done okay. Hell, ya done better'n most o' the gents as went ta yer last dance. After all, them vacuum-suckers di'n't make it back alive!"

Hayl surprised himself with a grin, and smothered it. Then he caught the edge of a smile on the old seadog's face. "In any case, sir, I thought that perhaps I should catch up on the Ship's status. I heard about the troubles with the water—Mrs. Vodi was heartsick at losing so many cats—but I don't even know the Ship's position. I don't know where we are!"

Hans and his monkey spit over the side. "Cats! Huh! Damned, filthy, creatures. Too uppity ta even say hello, an' always sneakin' up on yer. Give me a good faithful dog any day. At least a dog'll stand by ya

when the dance starts! A dog'll protect yer loved ones from critters an' mentally deranged folk. Against a determined opponent even a medium sized dog can make a good speed bump. But a cat's barely a piece of pea gravel. Even if it *was* willin' to put up a fight, which it ain't. So, Vodi may be heartsick, God bless 'er, but the overall impact on the Ship is minimal."

Hayl just grinned and nodded politely. He wasn't about to take sides in the cats vs. dogs debate.

"Overall the Ship's in good order. Runnin' a mite low on potable water, but we're okay 'cause we's on track fer landin' at the Hero Cluster tomorry. We'll go straight in to Hector, 'cause 'at's the planet where the cluster capital and Navy headquarters is located."

"Tomorrow!" said Hayl, surprised that time had gone by so quickly.

"Aye. I'm a lookin' forward ta a nice long shower, an' then a bath." Hans chuckled. "'Course they prob'ly don't wants me ta use up the planet's *entire* water supply, so I'll try an' conserve some an' shower with a friend!"

Hayl turned red from the tips of his ears to his collar and cleared his throat. "Umm. I guess that makes sense, sir," he said feebly.

"Damn straight it do! Wait 'til yer a bit older an' you'll find out wat I mean!"

Taking mercy on the boy, Hans changed the subject. "How ya gittin' on with yer new flipper? Chips done tole me it wus special, but I can't see as it looks much different from any I've seed a'fore."

Hayl beamed widely. "It's really good, sir! It ain't like my hand, but it works great, and in some ways its better, see?"

He held up his left arm, showing off the hook on the end of the leather and Nimbrell wood brace. "Mr. DeWalt told me he used part of the Keel, so it's like I've got a little piece of the *Fang* with me all the time. And see, it lets me grab stuf. And it's *strong* ! I can crack nuts with it!"

As Hans watched, the hook on the end split in two and opened and closed like a clamshell as the middie demonstrated how he could grasp with it.

"And look, the hook has an edge here and here, so it can cut stuff. And it's sharp! Sharp as my dirk!"

Hans gaped in sincere amazement and said, "Well dip me in two-space an' call me a vacuum-sucker! That does take the cake, son, currants and all!"

Hayl looked at it affectionately and said, "And it's sort of funny... When I'm using it, it kind of 'purrs' in my head, and I can sort of *feel* things through it. It's strange, but I can tell things are there, but it's... different from my hand."

Hans shook his head. "By the Lady, it's too much fer an old man, but I'm cursed glad it's workin' fer ya. Stick with it, an' purdy soon you'll be back up ta snuff."

"Aye, sir. Captain Melville reminded me about Admiral Lord Nelson. It didn't seem to hurt his career any!"

"Nope, it sure din't!"

"Thank you, sir, for the update. I had best be going before Mrs. Vodi finds out I'm up here. Talk to you later, sir!"

Hans nodded and watched as the boy—no, young *man*—walked off forward. *Lad's comin' along nicely, he is. A bit more time an' seasonin', an' he'll do jist fine.*

\* \* \*

In the fell clutch of circumstance  
I have not winced nor cried aloud.  
Under the bludgeonings of chance  
My head is bloody, but unbowed.

\* \* \*

"So what have you got planned after we arrive in the Hero Cluster, Daniel?" Asquith asked as he picked up his wineglass.

Fielder laughed. "Bert, what do you *think* I have planned? First, I'm going to find the hottest shower I can to get the smell of this trip off me, and then, in no particular order, a steak with all the trimmings and a decorative lass with intentions of committing bodily assault on a man in uniform!"

Asquith quirked an eyebrow and chuckled. "Another old friend like what-was-her-name, Ursula?"

Fielder paled slightly. "No, I believe I've sworn off old friends for awhile. I think I'll make some new ones."

Sitting across the wardroom table, Hans chuckled and said, "I jist gots ta be wunnerin' why ya have such luck with yer ol' girlfriends, Lieutenant? Maybe it's sumthin' in yer karma. Or mebbe it has ta do with your choice o' ladies?"

Lt. Broadax whacked him lightly on the arm—well, lightly for her. Hans grabbed his arm and gave her an aggrieved look.

"Leave 'im be, Hansie," she said. "His girlfriends always ends up being a big slice o' fun cake fer me, with blud-an'-guts icin' on top! I wish 'im well. Hopefully he'll find somebody with a pulse, bad judgment, and no restraining orders against him. An' then she'll try ta kill 'im, an' we'll git invited to the dance!"

Fielder was still trying to digest this, in appalled bewilderment, as Broadax rolled happily along.

"Besides we got's ta make some plans fer ourselves, ye know. I think we oughta git the biggest hotel room we kin find, so long as it's got a big shower an' a tub."

Hans turned to her with a grin. "An' why's 'at, angel?"

"Well, ye knows I gots trouble reachin' 'tween my shoulder blades good, an' I gots some spots 'at need some attention."

Fielder blanched and thought feverishly, *Okay, selective deafness doesn't work. Maybe if I concentrate on something I've got to do. Something... anything!* His eyes closed briefly as he shook his head minutely. *Lord, why me? Between this, getting beat in the pistol match, and whatever that poison was that got into our water, this has got to be the worst trip...*

"Well, now, Angel, turn-about's fair play. After all we gots kinda in'erupted last stop!" Hans said, turning to look irately at Fielder.

"Now, Hansie, like I said, it all turned out fer t' best, di'n't it? We had us a nice li'l dustup, an' den we gots ta clean an' *lubricate* our equipment, eh? Remember?" she chuckled slyly—which sounded like a gravel crusher working on a small chunk of granite.

*Oh my God! Why, me?* Fielder smiled sickly, and said "Steward, why don't you bring the brandy so we

can toast our upcoming port call?" *I wonder how much booze it'd take to induce deafness? Maybe a touch of blindness? Memory loss?* Fielder looked at the bottle and sighed. *Nowhere near enough onboard. And just imagine the hangover!*

Hans and Hayl sat in the crosstrees of the mainmast, keeping an eager lookout for their landfall on Hector, the base planet of the Hero Cluster and the home port of the local fleet detachment. Hayl was reveling in the opportunity to sneak out of sick bay and actually do something. As always, young Hayl found himself refreshed and invigorated by the crisp, cold air and the incredible view that came with this height. And old Hans was enjoying the chance to share his hard-earned knowledge with someone who wanted to learn.

"Yep," said Hans, "navigatin' in two-space is simple plane geometry, with the stars above ta act as guides. The stars inside our galaxy is all stationary—or at least for *our* lifetimes they's stationary, an' thas good enough fer me. An' the solar systems is sorta compacted. The early explorers of Earth's solar system was amazed ta find it jist took a day or so ta sail to Mars an' Venus in two-space! The suns is all stationary, but the planets *do* move. So, solar system's is always laid out flat, always aligned with the plane of two-space, an' slowly, over the period of a year, the port moves around the sun. But the Pier sticks out and is clearly visible ta home in on, if'n ya start at the sun and spiral out. 'Specially the major Piers that've been built up with big buildin's an' fortifications on top of 'em. Ya with me so far?"

"Aye, sir!" replied Hayl.

"So, ya see, ya gotta root around a bit fer a planet sometimes, but we know it'll be fairly close to the sun. If ya don't see the Pier stickin' out on yer way in, jist go to the sun, git in the masthead, an' look around as ya spiral out. Remember, all solar systems is smashed into a reg'lar, even, sun-with-rings-around-it shape in two-space. 'Ceptin' they's compressed. Fer example, Earth's solar system is roughly two-hundred-and-fifty nautical miles in radius, or around five-hundred miles in diameter, an' it takes us less than two days to sail through it at our top speed o' thirteen knots.

"So," Hans continued, "Sol is a big yeller disk with a radius o' fifty miles, Mercury orbits at a radius o' fifty-four miles, Earth orbits at a radius of about eighty-two miles an' is almost twenty miles across in two-space, while Pluto is a bit over two-hundred-and-fifty miles from the sun..." He paused to spit tobacco juice from his chaw and look around at their two monkeys frolicking in the reduced gravity of the crosstrees.

Hayl broke in excitedly, "...and after you clear the solar system, the reduced gravitational effect increases the distance distortion so that while our two-space speed stays at about thirteen knots, the distance covered increases from a single solar system to around a light-year or so per hour which makes interstellar travel possible! And then, in the area between the spiral arms that effect gets even greater..."

Hans broke in with a laugh, "An' if'n ya knows all o' that ya don't needs me ta act as schoolmaster, now

does ya?"

Hayl smiled back, unconsciously shifting his grip with his hook as he turned to look at Hans more directly. "Sir, you know that's not true! It's just so... so neat how everything comes together so we can travel in two-space from planet to planet." He sobered for a moment and continued. "While my hand might not be as good as it was, my mind is! Which means that to be a naval officer like the captain, my mind has to be sharp enough to compensate for my hand, sir. And there's lots I don't know: like what to do if you can't find the Pier right away? And I thank you for telling me."

Hans grinned at him cheerfully. "Aye, there's lots worse models ya kin pick asides our cap'n, eh?"

Hayl's monkey came swinging through the rigging to the little middie, tapped his head, and pointed downward.

"Uh-oh! It's Mrs. Vodi! I'd better get on down, sir, before she catches me up here. She thinks I ought to stay below until Lady Elphinstone clears me for climbing in the rigging! Thanks for the lesson, sir!"

Hayl dove out into the low gravity of the upper rigging, with his monkey clinging tightly to his shoulder. Then he snagged a backstay with the smooth part of his hook, slid down the line to the deck, and walked up innocently behind Mrs. Vodi.

Hans switched the chaw around in his mouth as he watched the lad. "Ya know, my li'l friend," he said to his monkey. "I gets the feelin' 'at young feller may be as int'restin' as our captain ta be around in the years ta come."

"Eep!" agreed the monkey.

\* \* \*

It matters not how strait the gate,  
How charged with punishments the scroll,  
I am the master of my fate:  
I am the captain of my soul.

\* \* \*

The *Fang*'s arrival at the Pier on Hector was a bit anticlimactic after the long journey and the joyous welcomes they had come to expect on their travels through the Smallness of Westernness. Even more than Show Low this was a bustling hub of activity, and they were just one more Ship in a port filled with military and commercial craft of every sort.

The Pier was crowded with small one- and two-masted Ships loading and off-loading cargo in the commercial docks, and several frigates were moored in the military docks. But the pilot brought them to dock at an otherwise empty, stand-alone portion of the Pier. This section of the port was within the military area, but distinctly separate, and normally used only for rewatering and revictualing military Ships.

A suspicious mind might see the influence of the Admiralty in their semi-isolation, but the simple truth was that the *Fang* needed to totally off-load and reload all of their water supplies, as well as replacing the water barrels. No one was taking any chances with *whatever* it was that got into their water. By berthing them directly at the military supply dock, the process could be completed much more efficiently.

Waiting for them on the Pier was the port admiral's messenger, a young sailor who quickly delivered an invitation to a soiree at the port admiral's residence the next evening for Captain Melville, his officers, and their guests.

And that was all! No hidden warnings, veiled threats, or social complications. Just a simple invite, and we'll see you later!

While their reception was welcome, it put pressure on the wardroom to get their official business of delivering mail, periodicals and other publications completed, and the Ship resupplied as quickly as possible so that they could attend the function. Their isolated location may have simplified the major evolution of replacing all the water casks, but it also greatly complicated most other resupply tasks!

For some strange reason, the Navy felt it was inappropriate for the officers and captain to miss a superior's social function just so they could complete Ship's business. Of course, failing to complete official Ship's business because you had to attend a social function was considered to be inexcusable as well.

So this left them with only one option: to get everything done as expeditiously as possible, so that the officers and crew might have some time before the vagaries of the Navy sent them off on their merry way again—sans liberty. Or even without the damned showers they all wanted!

And so the *Fang* s turned to with a will!

*Oozing slowly and unsteadily down the gangplank, forming a tiny dark line in the Moss, was the*

*traumatized remnant of the ninja slime mold that had been sent to destroy the Fang. No bigger than a teardrop, the few surviving cells had little intelligence. All memory was pared down to a few essential survival facts.*

*It could remember the emergency rally point where it was supposed to meet up with friendly agents on Hector in order to escape and evade out, if needed. It remembered <<horror, shudder, fear>> the enemy's most fearsome weapon: a malevolent, relentless, vicious entity called "cat."*

*And it remembered (oh yes, it remembered!) the formula for the biochemical toxin that brought slow, hideous, painful death to the cats! The slime mold believed deep in its soul that this vital intelligence would help them neutralize the enemy's ultimate weapon and win this war!*

"Mr. Hayl," said Brother Theo quietly. "Do you discern that dapper young lieutenant headed toward us on the Pier?"

"Aye, sir...?" replied the middie, who was standing on the upper quarterdeck as the watch officer.

"And," continued the monk, "do you also perceive a yellow cord affixed to the shoulder of his uniform jacket? It is referred to as an aiguillette, which means he's a flag lieutenant."

"Aye, sir. Thank you! But... what's a flag lieutenant?"

"Hmmm. I can see that I have been remiss in my tutorial responsibilities. Your ignorance is understandable, since no such creature has ever deigned to visit the *Fang* before. Admirals and generals are known as 'flag officers' because they are authorized to fly their own personal flag, denoting their rank, and marking their position on the battlefield or aboard Ship. And an admiral's staff lieutenant is called a 'flag lieutenant.'"

"In other words, he's pretty important?"

"Aye, you have stated the crux of the matter in your customary, succinct fashion. And...?"

"And I should tell the captain?"

"Aye, that might be perspicacious."

"Captain Melville, there's another messenger, a flag lieutenant is here to see you, sir!" Midshipman Hayl said after knocking on the cabin door.

"Okay," replied Melville distractedly as he looked up from the lists and paperwork spread in front of him on his desk. "Send him in, please, Mr. Hayl. Well," he said to Fielder, who was going over the checklist of tasks to be accomplished after arrival at port, "it looks like we're a bit ahead of schedule so far, Daniel."

"Yes, sir. Mail's off, package transfers completed, we're working on supplies and rewatering, Brother Theo is ashore looking after cargo, and Mrs. Vodi is off to the hospital for resupply and herbal materials. All in all, we should be complete by midmorning tomorrow. Just in case we get another bum's rush off the planet," he concluded with a sardonic smile.

The marine guard outside the captain's door snapped to attention and saluted, and the messenger knocked on the hull next to the open door. Their visitor's aiguillette and his impeccable uniform indicated that he was a flag lieutenant. It was obvious he had just come from the planet since he was still wearing shoes—something naval personnel *didn't* do when working on Piers and Ships, to spare the wear and tear on the Moss.

"Captain Melville?" he inquired.

"Yes, how may I help you, Lieutenant?"

"Sir, I am Lt. Kit McKurkle, Rear Admiral Middlemuss' flag lieutenant. He sends his compliments, and asks if you would be so kind as to stop by his office to have a talk with him, when things are under control here. If after working hours, his home this evening would be fine."

Melville was more than a bit astonished. Admirals tended to demand your presence on the instant, not send someone to politely ask you to stop by when you have time!

"If you will give me a minute here, I will turn things over to Lt. Fielder, my first officer, and accompany you now."

Lt. McKurkle grinned and shook his head. "You really can take your time, sir. Before the mail came in this morning, we were ready to send you straight back out, and the admiral really *would* have wanted to see you asap. Prior to today's mail the only thing the admiral knew was that he had a loose cannon coming in and the Admiralty had requested he expedite anything necessary so you could continue your mission. Expedite as in 'get them in, and then get them out' would be the correct interpretation, I believe!"

He caught the glance between the two officers and smiled slightly. "Yes, gentlemen, I am afraid that your friends in the Admiralty haven't forgotten you yet. Before you get too wrought up about it though, the admiral asked me to share a few things with you. First off, he and Sir Geoffery Chudloss on Show Low go way back. To be honest, I'm not too sure how far back they go, but they are and remain good friends, and the morning's mail packet included some dispatches from Sir Geoffery concerning the *Fang* and her crew."

"Uh oh," muttered Fielder, thinking about what Sir Geoffery might have said about the *Fang*'s first officer and his escapades ashore.

"Exactly!" replied McKurkle, looking at Fielder and confirming his worst suspicions with a grin and a nod. Looking back at Melville he continued, "It also helped explain the *Fang*'s relationship with the Admiralty, sir. And, to put it bluntly, it has probably made your life here a lot more pleasant than it would have been otherwise!" He concluded with a chuckle, "So you see, there really is no rush now."

"Yes, I understand," Melville said slowly. "And I certainly appreciate the admiral's kindness, but I will still be returning with you, Lieutenant. My crew have fought and traded their way across half the galaxy, and my first officer is fully capable of dealing with the responsibilities on this end."

"Thank you, sir. Oh, and he also asked that I tell you that any references to invitations to your crew and wardroom definitely include your monkeys. Sir Geoffery didn't say much about them, except that they would be of extreme interest." He looked at the little monkeys with curiosity.

Melville and Fielder's monkeys both shot their heads up, looked at each other and gave a manic, "Eek, eek!" at this.

Fielder looked over at his monkey and said, "See what happens when you get a reputation? Next thing you know, they'll be inviting the monkeys and forgetting their people!"

His monkey gave a dismissive "Eep!" and snapped its head back down to its shoulders.

Melville stood and put on the uniform jacket that McAndrews held out for him. The steward's monkey gave the jacket a few last brushes as Ulrich buckled the captain's around Melville's waist.

"Well, Lieutenant, shall we be going?"

"Yes, sir. Oh, I almost forgot. Admiral Middlemuss has arranged for some temporary loans from the marine contingent for you and your crew. Prior to leaving the base of the Pier area, please have your qualified personnel visit the armory. They will be issued .45 caliber pistols and holsters. While he doesn't particularly want a repeat of your adventures on Show Low, he really would like to make sure that if

anything *does* happen, it happens to someone else!"

Lt. Fielder smiled happily. "I like the sound of that, Mr. McKurkle."

McKurkle grimaced. "Actually, I'm not sure you will."

Melville looked concerned and said, "What do you mean? Is there some kind of problem that you haven't mentioned yet?"

McKurkle looked a bit embarrassed and said, "Well, no. It's just that after reading the report Sir Geoffery sent from Show Low, the admiral asked me to pass on that it would be considered a 'favor' if Lt. Fielder limit his movement to the naval facilities, except for official duties. Sir Geoffery believed that the attacks were focused on the captain and yourself, and the admiral hopes to minimize your exposure in order to forestall an potential problems."

Fielder paled. After his frustrating experience with Ursula he had been looking forward to a fair amount of spooning during this port call. Maybe even some forking. "Restricted to base? Official duties? Oh my god, all those wonderful erotic sights and I'm stuck here?"

Melville suppressed a laugh and said, "Now, Daniel, it's not that bad. After all, we do have a command performance at the reception tomorrow evening. I'm sure there will be plenty of women and wine for you there."

Fielder ignored him as he sat down. His monkey's head began bobbing up and down as it chuckled quietly, "Eep eep eep..."

Rear Admiral Ivar Middlemuss had a bushy mustache, a beak nose, steady eyes, and features that at first appeared to be severe, even hard. Until he smiled, and then everything changed. And the admiral smiled often.

"Captain Melville! Welcome to the Hero Cluster!" said the admiral, shaking hands with a firm, two-handed grip. "I've heard a good bit of you and your adventures, and have been eager to meet you." His grin projected a warmth that Melville was not used to seeing in a flag officer. Especially one who was speaking to *him* ! "Although, from reading your exploits, I had expected you to be at least a foot taller, and possibly breathing fire! And *this* must be one of your famous spider monkeys!"

"Eep!" said the monkey, politely.

"A pleasure to meet you as well, small sir!"

Melville laughed and said, "I think you have been reading too much of Mr. Asquith's prose then, sir. I am simply an officer in Her Majesty's Navy."

Middlemuss smiled again with a slight shake of his head. "No, not simply an officer. But I won't embarrass you now—I'll save that for later when we discuss the dispatches and news at the morning briefing."

Gesturing to the other individual in the room, the admiral said, "Right now, I'd like to introduce you to Dr. Eric Myriad-Forsythewald, an expert in beastics and monstrology. He has come all the way from Westerness to learn something about the legendary 'Crab' species and their star kingdom."

Melville shook his hand and said, "The Crabs? I'm afraid that's a new one on me, sir. Who—or what—are *they*?"

Dr. Myriad-Forsythewald, dressed conservatively in a puce suit with coordinating cravat, was a distinguished gentleman in his late middle age. He was tanned to a deep mahogany by countless alien suns, and his dark hair was shot through with gray. He looked more like an engineer accustomed to working in the field than an eminent scholar.

"Charmed, sir, charmed!" He shot his cuffs, shook hands with Melville, and said, "Please just call me Eric."

"Gentlemen, now that we've been introduced, let's be seated," said the admiral. Their host's office was richly appointed in dark, indigenous woods, with a heavy desk, book-laden shelves all around, and three dark brown chairdogs. They settled back into the chairdogs as the admiral called out, "Simpson! Tea for three! Is tea all right with you, Melville? Or do you need coffee?"

"No sir, tea is just fine. I was really intrigued by what the admiral was saying about these Crabs, Doctor. Can you tell me more?"

As the admiral's steward served them, Dr. Myriad-Forsythewald continued. "Well, now, the Crabs are reportedly a race of creatures that resemble some sort of crustacean. Which no doubt explains the name, eh? The difference is, this Crab is not only large, but intelligent, and able to sail in two-space." He sighed and continued. "So far though, we have nothing except second-hand reports to support their existence. Thus, I, your humble servant, was sent here to determine the truth of these legends."

Rear Admiral Middlemuss mumbled, "Humble servant, my arse." In a normal voice he said, "Captain, the good doctor does himself a disservice. He is actually the chair of the department of Alien Philosophy

at the King's University on Westernness." The admiral harrumphed and brushed his mustache contemplatively. "Additionally, this old reprobate and I have been friends since he came onboard the *Chaucer* when I was a fresh-caught lieutenant."

Dr. Myriad-Forsythewald grinned and lifted a finger in the age-old symbol for a fencer registering a touch and continued. "'Tis true that I have some small expertise in alien studies, beastics, monstrology, and such. Thus, Captain, I would very much like to have your permission to study the alien members of your crew. I have spent time with the Sylvans, but I suspect your Lady Elphinstone has much to teach me. Plus, I understand that you have a Dwarrowdelf officer and even a few Stolsh aboard! And I would *dearly* love to study these remarkable monkeys of yours. With your permission, of course, and I think the admiral can vouch for me when I say that I will not be disruptive or invasive in the process."

"Aye, of course, sir," replied Melville.

"Hmph!" said the admiral. "Sure, I can vouch for the fact that he is a good man to have aboard and will not be a nuisance. But be forewarned, Melville, he is no respecter of authority when it comes to cards. He will take your money without hesitation, and he runs the most shameless bluffs! So, I gather that Lt. McKurkle told you a bit about the communications I have received concerning you and your *Fang*?"

At Melville's nod, he continued. "Originally, all I had was the missive from the Admiralty, which hinted that you were a loose cannon, and that I would be advised to expedite any port visits and keep you well away from inhabited planets once you were attached to my group here. With not a whole lot of explanation as to what you had done to get that bunch of old ladies' panties in a bunch. So, originally I was minded to have you here at the soiree tomorrow and then send you immediately on your way!"

Then the admiral gave another one of those remarkable smiles and said, "Luckily for you, the mail you brought in from Show Low had a letter from Sir Geoffery. It explained more than a few things that he knew, and the outcome of your visit to Show Low. While I don't think we need a dose of chlorine in the gene pool here, it sounds as if it didn't do them too much harm there!"

Melville started to reply, then stopped with his mouth open, not quite sure what to say. *What the hell*, thought Melville with a mental shrug. *Notoriety isn't as good as fame, but it beats obscurity any day.*

"Never mind, Captain, never mind! Things happen, and it all turned out for the best. Although, Sir Geoffery did say he wasn't quite sure how you managed to engineer that remarkably sordid little riot that occurred just before you left. He asked me for some clarification, just for his own edification and amusement!"

Melville shook his head sharply. *That's not something I thought I'd be discussing right away with my new boss!*

"But why don't we take a break and get to know each other over some cards, Captain? Port, cigars,

and a few hands of poker. Capital way to get to know my new officers, don't you think?" He laughed as he led the way to a study where a green felt table awaited.

"So your Mrs. Vodi and Mr. Hans were the ones who set up the massacre at, what was it called, the 'shindig' then?" The admiral laughed uproariously. "Capital idea! Wonderful way to ensure payment in kind!" He threw his cards into the center of the table and said, "You know, Thomas, you just don't bluff worth a damn!"

"Your deal, Captain," said Dr. Myriad-Forsythewald, taking stock of the chips in front of him on the green baize table.

They were seated in wooden chairs in the admiral's den. No chairdogs here. These were no-nonsense chairs in a serious room dedicated to the earnest business of poker.

"Seven card stud, gentlemen, nothing wild?" Melville replied with a grin.

"Good. Only old ladies and children use wild cards," growled the admiral. "Deal 'em."

Fortune was favoring both Melville and Dr. Myriad-Forsythewald. The good doctor's style of play was solid and unimaginative but highly competent, while Melville's was flashy and unpredictable. Both, however, were doing much better than Admiral Middlemuss. Or his chief of staff, Captain George Stockard; or his aide, Lt. McKurkle; who had been dragooned into the game to round out the play.

The cigars and spirits were excellent, as was the conversation. All of the men at the table were well educated, widely experienced, and interesting conversationalists. They were all deeply interested in the *Fang*'s experiences and battles during the Guldur attack on the Sylvan and Stolsh star kingdoms. But Melville tried hard not to monopolize the conversation, pumping his hosts for information about the Hero Cluster and the Far Rift.

Dr. Myriad-Forsythewald was currently holding forth on the mysterious Crabs. "In general, the Dwarrowdelf are only interested in tunnelics. But one of their sages, Esray Picklowmuch—an outcast from a famous family of deep miners—is well versed in monstrology and beastics. He is currently the Lecturer in Recent Runes at a Dwarrowdelf university. He gave me some insight into what we can expect from the denizens of Flatland in the Far Rift.

"It seems that the dominant species on the western edge of the rift is a crab-like, or insectoid civilization. They are considered semi-mythical. Both humans and Sylvans have had virtually no interaction with them. The Dwarrowdelf on the other side of the pole have reported some contact, though. And in recent years there have been secondhand reports of communication between the Crabs and the Guldur. Gentlemen,

this must remain within this group, but I can tell you that the Sylvans and Westernness Intelligence are deeply concerned that there might be an alliance between the Guldur and the Crabs. Clearly the matter calls for more research! And thus, my visit."

"Raise you five, sir," said McKurkle.

"See you, and raise you another five," said the admiral followed by the rest of the players tossing their bets into the pot.

"From everything that Picklowmuch has been able to piece together," continued the good doctor, "they are like a cross between crabs and ants, with six legs and a hard, chitinous outer shell. Their body stays horizontal to the ground, moving on six legs, but they can raise the front of their torso up and use their forelegs or foreclaws as hands. Again, kind of like an ant, but broader and bigger, like a crab. For lack of any better term, I will refer to them as the Crabs.

"They have a fighter class, who are reportedly the size of a prone human. They fight with a kind of musket, and in close-combat they use a sword and shield in their foreclaws. Their fighters also have a formidable set of pinchers in their mouth, and a scorpion-like tail with a stinger on the end."

He broke off to glare at Melville. "Are you really planning on raising on that mess in front of you? What are they teaching young officers today?" He made a tsk-tsk sound, raised, and continued on in the face of Melville's grin. The admiral looked at his chief of staff and they both grimaced and folded their cards.

"The Crab workers are about the size of a racoon or a badger and are reported to be fairly intelligent, with softer chitin. They also have royalty, who are bigger than a human. The Crab royalty are apparently quite rare, and they are the most intelligent.

"We don't know anything about their language, what they call themselves, their politics, or their social structure. All we know is that they have a vast empire on the other side of the Far Rift. The only other thing that we know about them is that they travel in small, fast Ships—gunboats, really. Like most other species we know of, their Ships are essentially two ships connected at the Keel, with one mast and one cannon in the bow, and then duplicated on the other side of Flatland. The most notable characteristic of their Ships is the one, glowing white sail that can be spotted from a great distance. We've had many reports of those sails by traders out here, but they apparently are devilish fast Ships and they avoid all contact.

"Hm. I do believe this hand is mine, gentlemen," concluded the doctor, in a sudden change of topic. He turned over his cards to reveal a straight, ace high.

The others groaned companionably and tossed in their cards, except for Melville, who said, "Now, Doctor, let's not be hasty," and flipped over his hole cards to show a flush.

"Damn," the doctor sighed. "How do you do that?"

Melville laughed and said, "It seems as if you were talking more than watching, Doctor! It really is a good thing this is a low stakes game, or the night could become entirely too interesting!"

A laugh ran around the group and subsided quickly when Mrs. Middlemuss came into the room. The men stood quickly and politely greeted her.

The pleasant interlude of cards was brought to a reluctant end by her appearance.

"Gentlemen, dinner is served, so if you can put out those awful smoldering pieces of peat you call cigars, you are all welcome to come to the dining room!"

The evening was enjoyable, but Melville was happy to get back aboard *Fang*. No matter how nice the surroundings were, his Ship was his home, and he felt her welcome as his feet made contact with her deck.

His officers were pleased to hear the outcome of his meeting with the admiral. The only exception to this was Fielder's depression at learning that, in addition to being restricted in his movement and liberty privileges, he was assigned as the Officer of the Day for the fleet, starting at midnight. The admiral figured that a man of Fielder's capabilities would find it easy to deal with the, as he described it, 'disabilities of senior officers who may have overindulged.'

"Clearly, Daniel, the admiral has his eye on you," warned Melville. "So try to be good. If you can't be good, at least be careful."

"I'm always good, sir. And I'm always careful." Fielder replied sourly. "Virtuous is an entirely different matter."

For the *Fang*s, the walk from the military supply dock to the admiral's quarters was fairly short. The distance for the officers on the Ships at the commercial docks and the main military docks was significantly greater and necessitated the use of carriages and omnibuses.

The broad steps leading up to the main entrance of the admiral's residence gleamed under bright gaslight

and the glow of two moons, and there was great color and bustle as the local gentry arrived. Small children were earning pennies by opening carriage doors, while their big brothers held the horses' reins as gentlefolk alighted, the ladies' brilliant gowns blossoming like flowers as they emerged. Many of the town's notables arrived on foot, while some chose to join the country gentry in coming by carriage, to emphasize their consequence in the community. The sound of music flowed from the huge open doors, as bright to the ears as the gaslight was to the eyes, promising gaiety, festivity and romance.

The arrival of Captain Melville and his wardroom was obscured by all the activity at the admiral's residence. Another handful of naval officers was an insignificant splash of dark blue amidst a surging tide of gaudy gentry and diplomats, their brightly accoutered carriages, and the continuous flood of caterers' carts and servants laboring to ensure that the function was supplied with the social lubricants necessary to keep everyone at their preferred level of satiation and inebriation.

The furniture had been cleared away (or led away in the case of the chairdogs) or tidily pushed along the walls to create a ballroom. Outside a set of open french doors a string quartet played with great skill and enthusiasm. Inside there was a jostling crowd of civilians in crisp black and white, sea officers in blue and gold, ladies in vivid gowns of every possible color, soldiers and marines in green and scarlet, and servants in red jackets bustling about with trays laden with glasses. Around the perimeter, more servants refilled glasses as quickly as they could, while the guests congregated like foam, flotsam, and lilies along the banks of a lake.

The admiral sighted Melville and his officers almost immediately. "Thomas!" he called. "Glad to see you and your wardroom here. If you would please introduce me to your fine ladies and gentlemen and their companions?"

Melville made the introductions of his officers—and their monkeys, who were apparently impressed by the admiral's courtesy. Conversation was stilted at first but had returned almost to normal when another group approached. Admiral Middlemuss stiffened almost imperceptibly as he turned to greet the new arrivals. Melville was astounded to see a Guldur admiral and his aides—thankfully minus their Goblan ticks. The Guldur was tall, grizzled, gray in the muzzle, and with a decidedly disagreeable cast to his countenance.

Perhaps the Guldur thought that his expressions would be as impenetrable to the humans as the humans were to the Guldur. But Melville and his wardroom had been eating, working, fighting, living, and dying with the Guldur in his crew ever since they had captured the *Fang*. Those members of his crew were what the *Fang* called "good pups" but this envoy (or whatever he might claim to be) was nothing but a tick-ridden cur! Even *if* his tick was not currently present.

"Captain Melville," said Middlemuss, "may I introduce you to Admiral Gwarlur, and I apologize if I do not pronounce it properly, Admiral. For some reason my throat seems unable to growl your name properly."

"Admiral Gwarlur," said Melville, offering his hand and saying the name with impeccable accuracy.

The Guldur admiral looked at the extended hand, wrinkled his snout, and said, "Thank you, but I'm not hungry."

Melville retrieved his hand smoothly and replied with supreme self-confidence and a gracious smile that made Middlemuss think of gold plated steel. "Well, I'd hate to be the one to give you indigestion! But, ah, silly me! I *am* the one that's been giving you indigestion, aren't I? So terribly sorry," he added in a wonderfully insincere voice, "I hear that you have lost some of your Ships recently. Some of your *best* Ships."

The Guldur admiral gave him a malevolent glare, momentarily lifting a lip off his teeth in a quickly controlled growl. "They have temporarily fallen into bad company," the Guldur snarled, with only the slightest accent. "It's amazing how ignorant you humans are of proper commitment in dealing with more traveled and capable races. Your species barely seems to know how to travel about the galaxy, much less how to act when faced with your betters!"

"We humans do live in blissful ignorance. Some are in militant ignorance. The effect is the same. And as to our betters, well, perhaps we shall learn when the time comes that we finally meet them," Melville returned blithely.

"So it's true that the vast majority of the people in your wretched, pastoral empire can't even find Guldur on a map of the galaxy?"

"Yes, but the small majority who can find it are all in the Navy. Don't worry," said Melville with a feral grin, "the ones who need to find you won't have any difficulty."

To a certain type of officer, Melville's youth, his failure to work his way up the ranks and touch every base, his unquestionable ability, and his remarkable successes all combined to become a personal insult. Fortunately, Admiral Middlemuss was not one of those. He just seemed amused and bemused by his new captain.

On the other hand, he also didn't see a need to let Melville enrage the Guldur admiral to the point of provoking a duel. While it wouldn't bother him a bit to see the Guldur taken down a peg or two (permanently!) it also would have all the hallmarks of a true diplomatic disaster.

Worse yet, what if Melville lost? While it might make certain factions at the Admiralty very happy, it would greatly complicate matters in the Hero Cluster.

And so, somewhat reluctantly, Admiral Middlemuss broke in. "Captain Melville, I'm sorry to take you away when you're having such a wonderfully productive discussion with the admiral, but I had promised to introduce you to some of our guests. Admiral, gentlebeings, if you will excuse us?" he said as they swept away.

Sometime later, after Melville had been introduced to most of the room's inhabitants (and to some of the excellent local wines), Mrs. Middlemuss entered the ballroom and rang a small crystal bell to attract everyone's attention.

"It is time for the polonaise before supper," she announced to the room. "I must beg you all to leave your conversations and come join us."

"Mrs. Middlemuss' wish is our command," said Melville to the general agreement of the room.

"Captain Melville, I understand that you don't dance?" said Mrs. Middlemuss.

"It is painful to be reminded of what I am missing in the presence of so much beauty," said Melville with sincere regret. He loved music, and could carry a tune fairly well upon occasion (although there were times when others would disagree), but there was no denying that he was an abject failure at dancing. "In dancing I must choose my battles. Anything other than a slow box step is an invitation to social and podiatric disaster."

That was the sad truth, but it also established the opportunity for him to make some invitations when the beat and music were right. There would be a few lovelies whose company he could enjoy without inviting complete embarrassment and humiliation. And the pleasure of holding a woman close, even within the standards of propriety, was something that reminded him of what he and his men were protecting.

At least as long as he kept off her feet!

The time strolled pleasantly past, filled with beautiful women, good wine, and pleasant conversation.

"Getting about time for the supper march," announced the admiral. "Captain Melville, would you be so kind as to escort Mrs. Middlemuss?"

"Delighted, of course," he replied with a smile.

The only thing wrong with the dinner was that, as the guest of honor, Melville was seated near the head of the table. Normally this wouldn't have been too much of a trial, as the admiral and his wife were both cheerful and interesting dinner companions.

Unfortunately, protocol also dictated that the Guldur representative be seated near the admiral as well. And while Melville knew quite a few Guldur who he would cheerfully share a meal with (at least anything not cooked by Kaleb Jones!), the Guldur admiral was definitely not among them!

"Melville," lamented Admiral Middlemuss, shaking his head sadly as he ate, "one of these days I'm going to have to teach you how to play golf.

"Dear Lord! Why, sir?" said Melville with mock dismay and a disarming smile as he sipped his wine.

The admiral was struck by the sheer charisma of the slender young captain's grin. But behind that unflagging good humor, Melville's gray eyes flashed like cold steel in moonlight. Middlemuss realized that he was getting a glimpse of the personality that had forged the *Fang* and her crew into such a fearsome weapon.

"Because you seem too happy."

"Have mercy, sir! Anything but that, please. I promise to be good. I swear I won't sink a single Guldur Ship while under your command."

"Hmm, with the exception of Admiral Gwarlur's Ship—which is protected by diplomatic immunity—there *are* no other Guldur Ships in this part of the galaxy."

"Damn, did somebody beat me to all the rest of 'em?" He replied, with irrepressible deviltry dancing like quicksilver in his eyes.

"Humph," said the Guldur, who had been sitting at the table, listening, scowling, and growling. "R'all right then, if you arre so puissant, why have you and yourr supposedly amazing Ship been wrritten off, and condemned to the deepest, darrkest depths of the frrontier? Hmph. You arre beneath ourr notice."

Melville shrugged and smiled. "We've seen all the action anyone ever needs, and all we really want now is a quiet life as free traders. But I've got one hell of a Ship and a damned fine crew, and if I was you, I'd continue to take 'notice' of me. And my Ship."

"It is true that we underestimated you and your Ship. That won't happen again."

"I get underestimated a lot. And by better people than you."

Just then the Guldur admiral's aide came to his side and whispered in his ear. The Guldur smiled an evil, wolfish grin. "I am needed at my Ship," he said to Admiral Middlemuss. "I'm sure you will understand."

Middlemuss made agreeable noises as the Guldur stood up from the table with a brief bow that was barely more than a nod, and left.

"Well," said Dr. Myriad-Forsythewald, "I hate to cast aspersions on another guest, but I do believe that the temperature in this room has risen at least ten degrees since the Guldur gentleman's departure!"

Admiral Middlemuss made a brief grimace. "I hate to agree, but the Lord knows I am not the best diplomat when it comes to dealing with arrogant, overbearing aliens! Not, of course, that I would even dream of expressing such an opinion of our esteemed departed guest! Oh, perish the thought!" There was a general chuckle of agreement around the table.

"I can understand why he might be perturbed at my presence," said Melville, "but why is he so obviously disturbed by the Kingdom of Westernness? As he so graciously, continuously and acerbically pointed out, we are newcomers and beneath their notice!"

Dr. Myriad-Forsythewald replied thoughtfully. "I believe it is that, to him, Westernness represents *thumos*," he said. "*Thumos*, an ancient Greek psychological concept, cannot be translated directly into English because it combines the qualities and emotions of passion, spirit, energy, and courage. *Thumos* has a negative side, such as the anger of Achilles. But it is also a creative force of great and positive life powers. On Old Earth, England—and then her great colonies: Canada, Australia, and especially America—represented *thumos* for most of their history, and they were much feared and despised for it. Today the situation is largely the same with Westernness."

"And," said Melville, "the one thing that the Guldur and the Goplan are not, is *thumos* ! They are an oppressive, controlled, centrally managed empire, which refuses to delegate authority or permit any kind of freedom or independent action."

"That, I believe, is why they feel threatened by such newcomers to two-space as we," agreed Myriad-Forsythewald. "That they, long resident throughout this sphere are not, and have not ever been *thumos* , and are content to merely exist! While we, stumbling and rash in our youth and energy, are running hither and yon with enthusiasm, courage, joy and creativity."

"Aye!" growled the admiral.

Melville picked up his glass, stood, and smiled at the table. "Then, ladies and gentlemen, I give you the Queen, our allies, and our *thumos* ! Long may we revel in it!"

"Hear, hear!" his companions cried as they drank deeply.

After dinner, the party moved back to the ballroom for yet more dancing. Melville and the admiral tried to slip out with Dr. Myriad-Forsythewald and a few other officers for poker, cigars and brandy. But before they could make good their escape, they were cornered by the beautiful, gracious, and quite formidable Mrs. Middlemuss.

"Captain Melville, where are you going?" she asked in full Mrs. Rear Admiral mode, just as Melville had almost made it through the door to the study where the card table awaited them. Her tone made the entire procession—august officers and academic alike—pause like guilty children.

"Uhh, ma'am, I was simply stepping aside for a few moments of gentlemanly conversation..." he began cautiously.

"Oh, piffle. You were sneaking off to join my husband and his cronies for another of his endless card games. But *someone* needs to think about the overall success of the party. These old fogies will not be missed," she said, gesturing dismissively at Melville's fellow escapees, "but I have quite a few young ladies who lack a dance partner, and you, sir, are most highly in demand!"

"But, ma'am, I remind you that I am a terrible dancer..." he began desperately, and was cut off by her voice and smile.

"Now, Captain, I've been watching, and you will do fine. I even had the band modify the song list for you. You will do quite nicely!" she said firmly.

The admiral looked back at his wife's face, then over at Melville and said, "Well, every once in a while someone has to make a sacrifice for the greater good. I guess tonight's your night. Have fun!" With a nod, he quickly closed the door. You could almost hear the relief as they managed to make their retreat from this most formidable opponent—the hostess determined to make a social success!

For most of the rest of the evening, Melville was forced, (not *entirely* against his will, mind you) to

escort lovely young women to the dance floor. As always, the process reminded him of his Princess Glaive. How shallow every woman seemed by comparison. Always there was the same question, "What are the fashionable ladies wearing in Westernness this season?" Always Melville assured them that they just happened to be wearing the height of fashion. And always they were delighted by his blatant, flattering lie.

Dancing with young ladies *did* have its occasional pleasant aspects, and it was immensely preferable to having them all cluster around him and compete for his attention between sets. At least dancing prevented them from ganging up on him!

From his vantage point on the dance floor he observed the social ecology of the Hero Cluster. The men gathered in the corners like cobwebs, spinning tall tales, business partnerships, and networks of friendship and information. The matrons moved along the edges, like a rainbow of colored mice, nibbling at reputations, assessing prospects, and plotting the future genealogical architecture of the Hero Cluster.

Melville caught occasional glimpses of his officers through the crowd and around the perimeter of the room. Brother Theo in an intense discussion with a varied group of academics and officers, with his bright-eyed monkey hovering over his head and watching with interest. The middies huddled in a corner, seeking escape. Lady Elphinstone, slim and elegant in a small cloud of naval officers vying for her attention. Hans and Broadax in a corner with a group of older officers and warrant officers as well as a few marines, producing a toxic cloud of cigar smoke that was, thankfully, pulled out through the open windows by a breeze. Fielder, assuring his dance partner that the latest fashion on Westernness was, "Very low cut and daring," and how wonderful it would look on her. And of course, Ulrich and Grenoble, always keeping a watchful eye on their captain from the sidelines—no ditching *them* after what happened on Show Low!

"Captain, I dare say you haven't heard a word I've said!" declared the redheaded damsel in his arms.

She had the worst case of halitosis he had encountered in any female of his experience, although he had upon occasion encountered worse in some men and especially among Guldur with whom he had crossed swords. But then he wasn't required to hold any of *them* close. At least not for long. Melville grinned winningly and said, "My lady, I must admit that as a dancer I am sadly lacking in grace. If I fail to concentrate on the steps, we should have to call in the surgeons for the care of your poor feet!"

She pouted momentarily and then melted in even more closely and whispered up to him, her dragon breath just inches from his face, "Well, we couldn't have that now, could we?"

Feeling her body warmth against him awoke quite a few feelings, foremost among them panic, which was made worse by the smile Mrs. Middlemuss was gifting him with from the sidelines. His monkey caught on quickly to his unease and came to his rescue by extending its neck so that its up-side-down face was, so to speak, eye to eye with her closed eyes, and said softly, "Eek?"

Her eyes popped open and she repeated the verbal sally, albeit in a much more emphatic voice. " *Eek!*"

"Ohmigod! What is that animal?" she shrieked.

Melville almost trembled with relief. "Why, uh..." what was her blasted name again? Oh, yes, June. "...pardon, June, I thought you had met my monkey."

"It's Jane!" she said frostily as she stormed off the dance floor.

"Whew!" he said as his monkey *eep* ed quietly in agreement.

Seeing Mrs. Middlemuss coming toward the dance floor yet again, in full Mrs. Rear Admiral mode with still another young lovely in tow, Melville did what most stalwart young officers would do at that point: he beat a hasty strategic retreat to a quiet corner near the bar.

The bar happened to be adjacent to an exit, so he was in a position to see Lt. Fielder taking his leave of a lovely young lady. It was close to midnight, and the *Fang*'s first officer was headed off to begin his shift as duty officer. They both seemed distinctly disheveled, and the lady had a faint set of grass stains on the back of her white gown. Although it was probably only noticeable to anyone who was sober—a condition Melville had reluctantly embraced due to the need to save the feet of various lovely ladies throughout the night.

"I must say good night, my dear lady," said Fielder.

"It is more like good morning now!"

He kissed her hand, bending low and eying her décolletage, "You are a delight to see at any hour, madam."

She smiled demurely and replied, "I believe you have seen enough for one day, sir!" But the wink over her shoulder as she turned took away the potential sting of her words.

Melville shook his head in wonder. *What was it about Fielder that attracts the ladies so? Perhaps it's the same thing that makes women of that sort like cats...*

It was well after midnight before the guests began to disperse from the party. Some of the officers were so inebriated that they had to be carried to their Ships. Others staggered out the door, glassy-eyed but unsupported, moving with the intense concentration of drunken men struggling to avoid disgracing themselves.

Others were stopping in the shadows to find their own brand of pleasure. Through a brief flicker of moonlight Melville saw a woman's body, naked to the waist, her arms wrapped around a navy officer's neck and giggling with enjoyment as he fumbled at her clothing.

It was at that moment, as officers were spread to the four winds, leaving and traveling to many destinations, with their crews mostly on shore leave, that the Crab attack hit.

Aboard the *Fang* Lt. Fielder had resigned himself to an evening of sorting out high-ranking drunks, ensuring the return of the command groups to the appropriate Ships, and all the other associated duties assigned to a man who had attracted the attention of the admiral in a most unfortunate way.

The *Fang*'s first officer believed that any bad fortune should be shared with his friends. His brand of misery truly loved company. This philosophy, combined with his natural laziness and desire for assistance, had caused Fielder to coerce the wardroom into assisting him with his duties.

Normally, getting the *Fang*'s officers to leave a party early would have been a task of Sisyphean dimensions. Luckily for Fielder, he had two things working for him.

First was the nature of an admiral's soiree. While junior officers could be made to attend, they couldn't be forced to enjoy it. And, to be honest, the *Fang*s were warriors, and had found themselves somewhat uncomfortable in the continued company of so many "sheepeople." Thus, the wardroom members were not entirely displeased to have an excuse to leave the party early. "Sorry, ma'am. Duty calls, don'cherknow?"

The other thing in his favor was his promise to take them out drinking the next time they were on liberty. The admiral had restricted Lt. Fielder's freedom, but there were still plenty of bars and clubs on the base where he could fulfill this promise. Knowing the capacity of his companions, he didn't think it would be cheap.

Asquith looked over at Fielder as they stared out at the spectacular panoply of two-space. The sailors and officers assigned to the shore patrol were out in force tonight. The officers and men aboard the *Fang* were standing in reserve, ready for any situation which needed a wise head or a firm hand to control it.

Fielder was thinking morosely about how much booze it was going to take to fill up this crew. *Damn*, he thought dejectedly, *I expected the wardroom to help out in response to my bribe. But most of the crew too? Damn, that's a lotta beer! But that's what I make the big bucks for, isn't it? To spend on wine, women, song, and friends—and to waste the rest reluctantly?*

"Daniel," Asquith asked, "is it normal practice to have the first officer of a Ship assigned to help the shore patrol after an admiral's party?"

Fielder grimaced and then chuckled ruefully. "No, Bert, not really. It's a good idea, mind you. We have a lot of Ships in port to attend the soiree. Maybe to impress that Guldur admiral. From the admiral's point of view, assigning me to this duty is making a virtue of necessity. Remember the attacks on Show Low?"

Asquith nodded silently, and his hand reached down unconsciously to caress the two-space pistol holstered at his hip. Fielder noted the gesture and echoed it with a grin. Amazing how his friend had changed during their journey!

"Well, I guess it *could* happen again," continued Fielder. "So, keeping me off the streets reduces the probability of another attack by my dear old friend, Princess Madelia. Although I think the admiral was more concerned for the potential innocent bystanders than he was about me!"

Asquith murmured, "I can see why, after what happened on Show Low." This was punctuated by an emphatic "Eep!" from his monkey. Asquith reached up to scratch behind its ears gently. "But what about the captain, Daniel? Isn't he a prime target as well?"

Fielder snorted derisively. "Yes, there is that, isn't there? Which might explain why Ulrich and Grenoble are always with him." He continued softly, "But, Bert, I've noticed that he seems, at times, to..." He paused and then continued "not exult in violence, but since he bonded with the *Fang*, he appears to be more, well, comfortable where the action is hottest. I'm not sure how to describe it, but since the bonding, it's as if he has incorporated the Ship's eagerness for battle into his personality. So, I don't see him hiding from a fight."

Asquith was looking out at the field of stars above him and asked idly, "Daniel, were there any other arrivals scheduled today or tomorrow?"

"Not that I know of Bert, why?"

"Then what are those things out there?" he asked, pointing out toward a group of specks that looked like distant sails, but glowing oddly white, like the Moss on the timbers surrounding them.

"I don't know," replied Fielder, "but I don't think they were invited to the admiral's soiree." After a brief hesitation he called out, "Battle stations! Battle stations!" Then he quietly added to Asquith, making the little earthling snort with laughter, "All hands prepare to fend off party crashers."

Better safe than sorry was the motto taught to Baronet Daniello Sans Fielder on his Grandma BenGurata's knee. In all things *except* women.

The rapidly approaching vessels appeared to be small, one-masted boats. He couldn't tell much else about them, except that they were all distinguished by a large, glowing white sail on the single mast.

The leading Ship was suddenly punctuated by a flash as it fired a cannon from well outside the atmosphere of the Pier. The cannonball made no noise until it pierced the air cloud around the Pier with a shrill shriek, bounced through the plane of two-space and disappeared into the depths of space.

"Damn," said Fielder quietly. "What fresh hell is this?"

\* \* \*

Eternal Father, strong to save,  
Whose arm hath bound the restless wave,  
Who biddest the mighty ocean deep  
Its own appointed limits keep;  
Oh, hear us when we cry to Thee,  
For those in peril on the sea!

# **CHAPTER THE 15TH**

## **The Attack of the Appetizers: "Who Knows Only Honor, Knows Not the Odds"**

The man who knows only honor,  
knows not the odds;  
The man who knows only the odds  
knows not honor

Cries of alarm rang through the streets. "To your Ships! To the docks! We're under attack!"

At the admiral's party, and in the gardens around the admiral's residence, there was pandemonium.

The officer fumbling at his lady love's undergarments was luckier than most. He was able to get the word quickly and race to his Ship, pulling at his clothing. Others were either incapacitated beyond responding, or finding it difficult to run while pulling their pants on!

Melville had his clothes on, he was not drunk, and

he headed back to his Ship at a dead run without wasting a second to utter a word to anyone.

Like the rest of the wardroom, Hans had let himself be bribed by Lt. Fielder into leaving the admiral's party early. Not that it was much of a sacrifice. It wasn't really his kind of party.

Hans had the *Fang*'s mooring lines singled up and ready for either the captain's arrival or for Mr. Fielder to assume command and take her out to engage their attackers. Not that he wanted Fielder to take her into combat, but it didn't look like any of those other idiots were going out to fight the enemy. Which left it up to the *Fang* and her crew.

The old sailing master gave a sigh of relief as he heard the lookout up in the crosstrees call out, "cap'n's coming down the Pier, sir! At the double, with Ulrich and Grenoble."

*Heh, heh! Them Crabs'll be suckin' vacuum an' sayin' hello to the Elder King soon enough, now that our cap'n's aboard!* thought Hans. *Besides, they ain't seen a real crab until they seen my sweetie when she's fired up!*

"Inform the first officer!" said Midshipman Aquinar to the Ship's boy by his side. The boy was actually older than Aquinar, but he obeyed the tiny middie's command without hesitation.

"Man the side," continued Aquinar, in his clear, calm young voice. "Call the bosun." While her crack crew prepared the *Fang* to sail into combat, her marines moved quickly to form a row of crimson jackets and white cross belts against the luminous decks. As the captain came up the gangplank, the

marines' double-barreled muskets cracked to present arms while the bosun's whistle shrilled its piercing salute.

"Come aft, Mr. Fielder," said Melville to his first officer as Boye and the dog's monkey greeted the captain's return with joyful barks and *EEK*s. "A sharp-looking turnout," he said to Lance Corporal Jarvis as he walked past.

The compliment brought a tight, proud smile on the rigid face of the young NCO. The world had gone mad. Again. But all was well with the *Fang*: their captain was aboard.

All around them the fleet was in panic. The *Wordsworth* and the *Osprey* were already sunk, and the *Thomas Gray* was going down as Melville watched. Most of the Ships were dying at dock, and their crews were able to escape onto the Pier. But the loss of these noble, ancient old Ships pierced the heart of every watching sailor.

A few lines from Gray's "The Epitaph" came to Melville's mind as he stood on his quarterdeck and watched that great Ship go down.

*Here rests his head upon the lap of Earth  
...And Melancholy mark'd him for her own.  
Large was his bounty, and his soul sincere...*

"We commend thee to 'The bosom of his Father and his God,'" whispered Melville.

"Oh, God. Are we gonna die?" asked Asquith quietly, as he watched Ship after Ship disappear from two-space.

"Yep," replied Melville as he hurried to the quarterdeck. "Everyone does. But not today," he growled. "Not today, by God."

Due to her position at the military supply dock, the *Fang* was closer into the perimeter and was not in the fight yet. That was about to change.

"All the wardroom and all but a handful of the crew's aboard, sir," reported Fielder. "We're ready to fight."

"Good!" replied the captain. "Mr. Hans! Get us under way. Head straight out. Punch through and get some distance from the bastards. Give me all the speed you've got, as quick as you've got it."

"Aye, sir!"

"Mr. Barlet, give 'em a whiff of grape, all around!" Melville ordered. "I want those bastards to have something else to think about besides shooting at us. Have all guns fire for their Keels whenever you come to bear. They're flimsy little pockers! I think our 24-pounders will smash 'em to bits if we get a good body blow. Even the 12-pounders might, but the big guns will for sure!"

"Aye, sir!"

In the midst of chaos, confusion, and fear, the *Fang* was the embodiment of competent, capable professionalism. The men aboard the other Westerness Ships had never seen war, and they had no idea what to do about it. *Fang* had seen more war than anyone in the galaxy, and her crew knew exactly what to do.

The enemy had a tiger by the tail, they just didn't know it yet.

"Damn, I'm glad you made it back before we got underway!" Fielder said urgently but quietly.

"Me too," said Melville.

The small enemy Ships were moving slowly and deliberately, using their bow-mounted guns to shell the helpless Westerness Ships that were docked there. The masts and spars of moored Ships partly blocked the view, but he could occasionally see the enemy craft as they moved.

The Pier's harbor defense 12-pounders were just now beginning to fire on the enemy. The moored Westerness Ships had nothing but their harbor watches aboard, and were apparently incapable of offering any defense.

"It's those damned 'Crabs' we've been hearing about, isn't it?" asked Fielder.

"Yep," replied Melville. "Those glowing sails fit the description to a tee, and I can't imagine who the hell else it could be!"

"Aye," agreed his first officer, soberly.

"Out of sheer morbid curiosity, Daniel, what were your plans if I hadn't shown up?" Melville asked as he watched the sailors taking in lines and adjusting sail to shove the bow out from the Pier. He glanced upward to verify that the topmen were standing by to sheet home the sails as soon as Hans ordered it.

Fielder answered grimly, "As soon as we had finished up the minimum necessary to get the Ship underway I was taking her out under my command to attack the bastards. I'm no hero, but given a choice between dying helplessly, or dying with a gun in my hand, I'll go down fighting every time."

"Hoo-yah!" replied his captain with a grin.

"Eep!" echoed his monkey.

"The cannons are double-shotted with roundshot and grape," said Fielder. "I figured we'd turn them into a crab *hors d'oeuvres* if we could get in close. Biggest problem is getting the angle to take out the crab-cakes without doing more damage to our own guys! If I was lucky, we'd destroy enough of them to bust out, and maybe even give our Ships a breathing spell. Hell," he concluded, waving at the Westernness Ships at dock, "some of those useless bastards might even get under way and actually join the fight!"

Then Fielder looked over at Melville with a grim smile and said, "Most of all, I figured if I was really, really lucky, you'd get your tail here before I got us underway. 'Cause, dammit, I'd rather give up my greenside testicle than take command of this Ship."

"Why so, Daniel?" asked Melville, as McAndrews and his monkey quietly poured, lemoned, and sugared a mug of tea. He took a sip and sighed in satisfaction, nodding thanks to his steward as his monkey craned its neck for a drink.

Fielder shook his head as the sails boomed and filled overhead and the *Fang* started to gather forward momentum. "We're on death ground here, Captain. Surprised, outnumbered, maybe outgunned, and it doesn't look like we're going to get any help from the rest of the Navy. At least for a while. We've got to move and fight, and *that* I can do. But to do it right, we've got to have *Fang* with us. And damned if I'll have that alien..." He paused to search for words and gave up quickly to continue " *whatever* it is, setting up housekeeping in *my* head and playing footsie with *my* mind!"

He shuddered and looked at Melville and continued quietly. "But I'd do it and be damned, before I'd let the *Fang* die without a fight at the hands of a pile of hyperthyroid escapees from a seafood buffet!"

Melville could sense Fielder's fear and sincerity through his link with the Ship. He felt *Fang* in his head as it commented in surprised approval, <<G O O D P U P!>>

The captain looked at his first lieutenant. Fielder was secure and calm on the outside, but inside he was

terrified of the possibility of linking with the *Fang*. Yet Fielder was utterly determined to do whatever was necessary for the survival of the Ship. Or at least *his* survival, and in this case they were one and the same.

<<He is, isn't he?>> Melville agreed. <<He's changed—and for the better. But we had better not let him know, or he'll act different just to be contrary!>> Melville grinned at the amusement he felt in response from his Ship.

"Well, Daniel, it just doesn't get any better than this! A beautiful day in two-space: the stars above, targets all around us, and we get all the fun to ourselves! What more could we ask? Well, maybe more targets. But hey, you can't have everything you want in life!"

Fielder snorted and shook his head. Melville was crazy as a besotted bedbug, no doubt about it. But sometimes you needed a madman. And this definitely looked like one of those times!

Melville considered the tactical situation. The military dock used for re-watering and re-victualing was a bit under a thousand yards from the main docks where the rest of the Ships were berthed. The entry point from the *Fang*'s dock into three-space was also close to the party at the admiral's residence, so it had been fairly convenient for Melville to get back to his Ship. But the officers and crews whose Ships were berthed at the main military docks had a lot farther to go in order to get from the admiral's quarters to their Ships. Which meant, in essence, that those Ships were isolated and essentially unmanned for now.

*Never thought I'd have a reason to be happy our water was contaminated, but if not for that, we probably would have been tied up outboard of one of the other Ships. Would have made us first on the menu for the Crabs!*

The leading Ships of the attackers were cruising slowly past the Westernness Ships berthed at the main military docks, firing as their guns came to bear. The only saving grace was that the Crab cannons were fixed forward, which required the enemy to point their Ships at a target in order to hit it. This meant that after firing they had to put their helm over and circle out toward the main body of attackers in order to reload, and circle back to attack again. It might have been more efficient to simply sit dead in the water and pound the moored Ships, but even the most brain-dead sailor knows that a stationary target is a dead target!

The *Fang* had managed to get her crew aboard quicker than the other Westernness Ships. And she had the brief breathing period provided by distance from the main attack. Also on the positive side of the ledger was the fact that, although the Crabs had overwhelming numbers, individually their Ships were very inferior. Added to that was the fact that the *Fang* and her crew were seasoned warriors. Melville knew he could count on his *Fang*s to fight to the last. But he had absolutely no intentions of this being their last fight!

This combination of factors gave Melville a fair amount of confidence. A lot *more* confidence and hope than he'd possessed when he was racing to his Ship, or when he first came aboard and saw so many noble, ancient old Ships sinking all around him.

Fielder looked over at his captain, coolly holding a mug of tea in his hand and gazing thoughtfully at the enemy. The captain's dog, Boye, sat happily beside his master, echoing Melville's calm demeanor. *The man doesn't even look worried! What the hell is wrong with him? Doesn't he realize we could all die here today? The damned poetry-prating fool is gonna get us killed!* He shook his head and puffed air out through pursed lips. *Of course, I thought that the last two or three times, too.*

"Captain, I'm heading to the lower quarterdeck now," Fielder said. "Anything else?"

Melville cocked his head to the side, and then turned and grinned at him. "No, Daniel, I'd say we both know what to do. We'll be going off to our redside, cutting through the enemy fleet wherever they look thinnest, and hitting them with both broadsides as we pass through. If they want to engage us in turn, then they'll have to turn to us and chase us, which'll keep them away from the rest of the fleet. Not much else we can do yet, is there?"

"Aye, Captain," replied Fielder. "One other point worth noticing. See those flags they're all flying? I think those are copies of our signal flags. Really a pretty good copy, once you notice it. If they *are* signal flags, what they say is, 'No quarter.' See, the exact same flags are on all of them. Not too good as insults or threats go. But kind of scary, because it says they've been studying us!"

"Aye," said Melville. "They know our signal flags and we have to assume they know our language as well. This was *not* a spur-of-the-moment attack."

"Oh?" replied Fielder with his patented cynical smile. "You don't think all the little crabbies just got up one morning and said, 'Hey, let's all go out and have human for dinner tonight!'"

"Nope," replied Melville, chuckling in spite of himself. "I think we have to apply Murphy's Law here, and assume the worst. They have been planning this for a long, long time, they know a great deal about us, and they are not stupid."

"Aye, Captain. And we know absolutely nothing about *them*. Our Ship has been dealt a few good cards, but overall I'd have to say that Mr. Murphy is alive and well today!"

"Amen," grinned Melville. "If you ever manage to kill that bastard Murphy, just hunt him down and kill him, you'd be my hero."

Fielder surprised himself with a laugh. "Yep, ol' Murph's got to go. But for now, we have a battle on our hands, and I for one intend to survive. So, God's mercy on us all, and it's time for me to head to the lower quarterdeck. I seem to recall a good recipe for crab salad, so I'll go round up the ingredients."

Boye, sitting beside them, echoed the laughter with an eager bark, while their monkeys chimed in with happy *eeek*s.

The crew wasn't too sure what the laughter between Lt. Fielder and Captain Melville was all about, but they took great comfort in the fact that their Master and Commander and his first lieutenant could laugh as their Ship sailed into battle. That laughter did more to ease the minds and spirits of their crew than either of the two officers would ever guess. The *Fang*s weren't foolish enough to think that they were going to win without a fight. But if their leaders could joke and laugh, then they could win! And as leaders had observed over and over through the centuries, knowing something is possible, no matter how improbable, is the first step toward making it happen.

Aquinar, the midshipman of the watch, was standing by the upperside quarterdeck rail with Westminster and Vandalil. The tiny middie was flanked by the two rangers, his chest barely coming up to the rail. Brother Theo walked over to him as the boy was staring at the Crab Ships pounding the vessels over at the commercial and military docks. The damage that the enemy guns were inflicting on their targets made it clear that the Crab gunboats were firing something quite a bit heavier than 12-pounders. After each cannon fired, you could hear the ball slam into a Western Ship like an ax into seasoned oak, crashing through the Nimbrell wood, and sleeting deadly splinters through the air to kill and maim any crew in the area.

The few sailors aboard those Ships had to be catching hell. From the damage the cannonballs were causing to the hulls, you would have expected the Ships themselves to look as if they were bleeding. It wasn't the first time the *Fang*s had seen Ships receive such a hammering, but it was the first time they had seen it happen to almost empty Ships.

There *was* blood, but thankfully not the quantities they had seen from a full crew taking the shattering storm of splinters and iron. And if the *Fang*s could divert the enemy's attention and turn them from attacking the moored Ships, then there was a chance that the crews could board and take vengeance upon their tormentors!

Staring over the little middie's head, Brother Theo watched the Crab gunboats in their attack patterns. Then he caught sight of Aquinar's face. It was set, grim, and serious far beyond his years. The boy was also white as chalk, telling Theo that he was frightened to the point where his body was taking involuntary action to help him survive.

When reacting to life-and-death situations the body pulls all the blood from the skin and capillaries, leaving telltale indicators like a dead white face. There are benefits to this physiological effect. The outer layer of skin and the extremities act as armor for the core organs, and blood loss from wounds is greatly reduced. With the blood trapped in the body core, the organs have energy and oxygen for important things, like staying alive. Adrenaline comes with this package, giving the muscles speed and strength to fight on, even when the body might not otherwise have resources to do so.

But there is also a price to be paid for this powerful survival mechanism. The shutdown of blood flow to the outer extremities means that the muscles are not getting oxygen and they stop working, causing a loss of dexterity and fine motor control. Blood flow to the brain is also reduced, so that the more frightened you become, the less rational you are. Basically, the only thing that a body can do well in this extreme fear state is to run away. And as any warrior can tell you, running away—turning your back on an armed enemy—is a very good way to die!

As Theo watched, he could see Aquinar begin to regain control. He listened to the lad breathing deeply, in the fashion he had taught them: in slow and deep, hold, out slow, hold, over and over, forcing his body to relax from the peak of hysterical response. The breathing was allowing Aquinar to regulate his body, allowing him to *control* his fear response. To use his fear, instead of *being* used by it.

Brother Theo placed a kindly hand on Aquinar's shoulder, hoping to comfort him. The startled lad whipped around and grabbed for his dirk, his pupils dilating with fear. This was accompanied by a tremendously loud fart.

"Oh," he cried, "I'm sorry, Brother!"

Theo laughed. "Not a problem, Mr. Aquinar, after all, I'm upwind."

"Well Ah'm not!" said Westminster, standing beside him. "Damn, son," he continued with a laugh that took the sting out of his words, "that's a potent one. Save it for the enemy, eh?"

"My fault for startling you," said Theo. "Just promise me that you'll stay away from Jones' bitterash noodles. The thought of your intestinal flora fueled by those abominations is enough to make my nostrils cringe!"

Aquinar responded shamefacedly, "It seems it's gotten to be a habit. Every time we go into battle I get horrible gas, and it's so..." He paused trying to find a word and was interrupted by Theo.

"So absolutely normal, lad! You know what's happening. You're going into battle, so your body is determining where it can preserve energy. 'Sphincter control? We don't need no stinkin' sphincter control here! Dump it and send the energy to the arms and legs!'"

"Okay! I got the picture already," broke in Aquinar, surprising himself with a laugh. "I understand it's normal, but it *is* embarrassing!"

"Aye," said Westminster, with a glint in his eye. "As the wise man said:

"Sometimes...  
when you cry...  
no one sees your tears.

"Sometimes...  
when you are in pain...  
no one sees your hurt.

"Sometimes...  
when you are worried...  
no one sees your stress.

"Sometimes...  
when you are happy...  
no one sees your smile.

"But *fart!* just ONE time...  
And everybody knows!"

"Hoo-yah!" growled Lt. Broadax as she stomped up in a cloud of cigar smoke. "Wise wurds, indeed. Well translated from the original Dwarrowdelf! An' now, if'n ye lazy rangers is ready ta do a mite o' work, them pockin' boats over there oughta be in range o' them pansy li'l rifled muskets ye boys got. So why don't ye try ta make yerselves useful?"

Valandil, as usual, said nothing, but Westminster drawled back at her with a grin, "Yep, Lieutenant, that's our plan. And Ah think the range might have closed almost to where our slings and arrows can bring outrageous fortune upon our foes."

Broadax blinked. "I di'n't say nuthin' 'bout no damned slings an' arrers. I want ye to use yer damned muskets!" Her monkey blinked at her in momentary confusion and then shook its head sadly as it blew a cloud of smoke up toward the rangers.

Westminster coughed and waved his hand in front of his face. "Damn, Lieutenant, I can't even *see* the enemy when I'm in the middle of this cloud bank. What in blazes did you soak them pieces of salvage rope in anyhow? A slop bucket? This last batch is *potent*, even for you!" He coughed again for emphasis and said, "Don't you be worrying your pretty little head over us, we'll be in range momentarily, and we'll do our job."

"'Pretty little head,' my hairy arse! Git to work an' quit tryin' ta butter me up. I'm already taken!" she growled to cover her chuckle as she headed back to get her marines ready to fire. The marines might not be as effective as the rangers at sniping, but sometimes quantity has a quality of its own!

"What ya think? The eyes or the mouth area on them oversized crawdads?" Westminster asked casually as he looked over at the closest Crab gunboat.

"Methinks the eyes," Valandil replied.

"Yup," said Westminster, deep in thought. "Their mouths keep closing, and at long range their shells *might* just stop a bullet. So eyes it is. Awful hard shot, though." He shifted into a stable position, kneeling down and bracing the double-barreled musket against the rail, looking downrange at the Crab cannoneer standing to the side of the bow-mounted gun as the loaders ran it back into battery.

"Nickel a shot?" offered Westminster with a grin.

"'Tis done," returned Valandil.

Westminster sighted, sighed, and slowly thumbed the white Keel charge on his musket. <<Purr>> "*Crack!*" The two keen-eyed rangers watched the target as the bullet made a gouge in the Crab's shell.

Valandil said, "Thou hast the range, but high and left. 'Tis a nickel thou owes me."

Westminster grunted, sighted again, and touched off the second barrel. <<Purr>> "*Crack!*" He set the musket's butt down on the deck so his monkey could reload it for him. This time the impact was obvious as the Crab cannoneer spun around and dropped out of sight. "Bet that hurt!" said Westminster with a satisfied chuckle. "Looks like we're even again!"

"Hmmm. Not for long, if it takes thee two shots every time!" said Valandil as he raised his musket.

And the two rangers were off on their own private competition.

"Mr. Hans, you have the conn," said Melville. "I'm going forward to talk with Mr. Barlet. Then I'll be manning the bow gun for a while. You keep us on course and send word if you need me."

"Aye, sir," growled the old sailing master.

"One more thing. These Crabs seem to be hitting the rigging as often as the hull of our Ships. I want you to rig netting overhead. Maybe we can keep the debris off our heads. It's gonna be hard enough as it is without various odds-and-ends raining down on us."

Hans looked at him for a moment, and then looked up at the rigging. "Aye, sir, I've read about them in Cap'n Aubrey an' Admiral Hornblower's journals. An' it might jist come in handy soon. I reckon we can git it done."

"Good! Pass the word down for the lowerside to do the same."

"What kind of idiotic plan is this?" Fielder muttered to no one in particular as the command came down the voice tube to the lower quarterdeck. "Rigging nets overhead? Dammit, we've got a battle to fight and we're rigging *nets*?" The first officer was sinking into his usual pre-battle funk and was just itching to find someone to share his misery with. Everyone on the lower quarterdeck was trying hard to avoid his notice.

"Ah, hell," he said, shaking his head in disgust. "Midshipman Jubal!"

"Aye, sir?" Jubal replied.

"You heard the order. Start rigging nets overhead to catch falling debris. That takes priority over anything except firing the cannon until you're done. Got me?"

"Aye, sir. Rig nets over the main deck and the quarterdeck. The job has priority over anything except firing the guns. It'll be easy, sir. No big deal, really!"

"Well that's just fan-dam-tastic. Now I suggest you get out of here, because you know damned well that I'm going to take our current situation out on *somebody*."

"Aye, sir!"

"So snap to!" Fielder barked as he turned to watch the Crab gunboats chew up the unresponsive frigates tied to the Pier.

"We might all be dead soon, and Melville's rigging nets!" he muttered to himself. "What an asinine idea. If it was worthwhile it would already be doctrine. Humph."

As the captain came up the redside, he visually checked the 24-pounder, Malicious Intent and the three 12-pounders, Bad Ju-Ju, Sue-Sue and Deep Doo-Doo in the broadside. All were loaded and in battery, ready to fire. Their gun crews were equally prepared, nodding their heads to the captain as he moved to the bow, where Sudden Death had been moved from its greenside battery position.

"How are we set?" Melville inquired.

"Everyone's all dressed up for the dance, Captain!" Barlet replied with a grim smile on his ebon face. "The 24-pounders are double-shotted with grapeshot and roundshot. I figger the double-shot isn't going to reduce range enough to matter here, and the grape'll make their misbegotten lives more... interesting, eh? I wasn't sure the grape would be as effective from the 12-pounders, so I double-shotted them with roundshot. Soon as we get the angle we need to engage the enemy without hitting our own Ships, we can open fire."

Melville laughed and nodded. "Aye, Guns, that it will. Those bastards haven't taken any really effective fire yet. So far it's just been a turkey shoot for them. It's easy to fire accurately when no one is shooting back! I'm betting we can unnerve them with that first whiff of grape. Then double-shot all the guns with roundshot and go for the kill. I want to *sink* those bastards, and I'm betting our 24-pounders will do that with one good hit."

"Aye, sir!" said Barlet with a grin of feral joy on his face. His guns were going into a target-rich environment like nothing he had ever seen before, and *this* is what the man lived for.

"I'll be manning the upper bow chaser," the captain continued. "I'll fire as soon as there's a clear shot. Everyone else do the same."

"Aye, sir!"

Melville was in the bow, laying quietly on the platform above Sudden Death, watching the enemy Ship as it circled out on its attack run. The way it was traveling, he would have only a brief window between the

Pier and a friendly Ship when he could get a good shot. Boye sat on the deck beside the gun carriage, his head poked through the railing, looking at the enemy and eagerly anticipating his master's kill.

The captain's left hand caressed the white Moss of the platform, feeling the telepathic surge of *Fang*'s ferocity echo back at him, meeting his own bloodthirsty urge to smash these murderous intruders. His lips pulled back over his teeth as he watched the Crab gunboat draw clear of the end of the Pier. Closer, closer, clear!

He touched the Keel charge to fire the big 24-pounder, and felt a momentary <<pause>> as the gestalt of human, *Fang*, and Sudden Death considered the target and the gun. Then, <<Yes!>> and it fired, "*Cha-DOOM!!*" <<KillHurt!!>>

At this close range the roundshot not only sheared through the hull, it shattered the Keel and the mast as well. The grapeshot also did horrendous damage, sending hundreds of musket balls smashing over the deck. The results were both amazing and horrifying, smashing down almost the entire crew and splashing ichor and splinters through the air like water from a hooked trout. The little Ship twisted and disappeared from two-space as Boye and their two monkeys barked and *EEK* ed jubilantly.

Those who weren't killed outright would face either a painful death by explosive decompression and freezing in vacuum, or a more drawn-out demise by falling from the sky to the planet below. In either case, they were no longer Melville's problem.

"Standby the broadsides!" Melville called as he rolled off of Sudden Death's firing platform and trotted over to Malicious Intent. Already the *Fang* was up to full speed, with every scrap of sail set. They popped through the window where Melville's first victim had disappeared, and were suddenly in the midst of a swarm of enemy gunboats.

Mr. Barlet allocated the other targets to the remaining guns, a job Gunny Von Rito was doing with the cannons on the lowerside.

Melville took the most challenging shot for himself. His target was a Crab gunboat that was curvetting back and forth nearest the frigates, slamming cannonballs deep into the bowels of the helpless Westernness Ships at point-blank range.

Melville focused on the target, feeling the bloodlust: his, and that of his alien symbiotes. He heard the call of the cannon to become one with it, the urge to <<SmashKill!!> this intruder, this hateful invader! He rode the feeling, watching, aiming until the shot was... just... right! He touched the Keel charge, riding the empathic cry of <<DieHurt!!>> as Malicious Intent spoke "*Cha-DOOM!!*"

Once again roundshot and grapeshot flailed the target, with spars, huge splinters and chunks of Crabshell and ichor flying high. As the debris settled, the little gunboat turned onto its side and slid out of two-space.

Melville's personal menagerie *reek* ed and barked triumphantly and the crew cheered as their captain scrambled down. The other guns topside, combined with the lower side's 24-pounders and 12-pounders, had taken out four additional Ships. About another dozen of the Crab gunboats were running like hell and had already moved out of range!

"Good work, gentlemen!" said Melville as he looked around the Pier. "Damn! I think that's all of them!"

The *Fangs* were cheering themselves hoarse as old Hans walked up and spoke to him quietly. "Cap'n, jist got word from the lookout in the crosstrees. Sez we gots a whole mess o' them li'l bastards comin' at us from the north, jist over the horizon. I'd guess these guys wus jist to soften up the harbor defenses, an' mebbe this is their main body comin' in fer the kill?"

"How many of them, Mr. Hans?" Melville asked.

"Sez 'e can't count 'em. A 'real buttload' of 'em, 'e sez." The old salt and his monkey punctuated this by launching twin streams of tobacco juice into two-space.

"That's just real damned helpful, isn't it?" growled Melville. He shook his head and said, "I'm going up to take a look. Assemble the officers on the upper quarterdeck, and make sure we're ready for action again."

*Damn*, thought Melville, looking out at the approaching enemy Ships. *Trouble doesn't come in threes. It gathers passengers as it goes and arrives in mobs and swarms.*

Melville looked over at Able-Bodied Seaman Kivon Dillsvon, who was serving as the Ship's upperside lookout, high atop the mainmast. "I owe you an apology, Dillsvon. When I got the initial report that the number of Ships approaching was a 'buttload,' I was a bit disgusted." The young captain suppressed a shiver. The cold up in the crosstrees, combined with the tactical situation, had chilled him to the bone. Looking again at the mass of glowing white sails filling the northern horizon, he continued, "But I have to admit that 'buttloads' is about as useful a word as 'myriads' or 'hundreds' or any other term indicating too damned many bad guys to count."

"Eep!" agreed his monkey emphatically.

Dillsvon bobbed his head as the wide-eyed monkey on the seaman's shoulder perfectly mimicked the action. "Yah. I knewed it vasn't right fer a report, but damn, sir, der's a buttload o' dem rascals out der!"

Melville replied absently, "Aye, that there is. I guess this time we'll have to let some of the other Ships in the fleet share the fun with us. Never pays to be too greedy," he said as he grabbed hold of the backstay to slide down to the quarterdeck.

Dillsvon looked at his captain sliding back down to the deck, then the old sailor spoke quietly to himself. "Aye, Cap'n, I tink yew be right. Ve might vant ta let the rest o' da fleet help out dis time!" He grinned down at the captain again and then looked out at the tiny, glowing sails, trying to figure out *just* how many of them there really were.

Melville walked calmly over to the group of officers waiting for him on the upper quarterdeck as McAndrews and his monkey prepared him a mug of tea. With the exception of Lady Elphinstone (who was caring for the few crew members who were wounded in the short engagement) his officers were all there, while Ulrich and Grenoble stood behind him.

The entire Ship had quickly become aware that yet another battle was pending, against an enormous force. (That kind of news could not be kept secret for long in a tiny world consisting of one-hundred-and-fifty feet of closely packed humanity.) And each of the *Fang*'s officers responded to the news in different ways.

Lt. Broadax looked insufferably cheerful and happy, gleefully creating (with the help of her monkey) a cigar-generated toxic cloud that could have won the upcoming battle all by itself if it could have been mass-produced and transported through the airless atmosphere of two-space.

Mr. Hans looked absolutely imperturbable—until you noticed his lingering glances at the rigging and masts, looking at them with the eyes of a lover wondering how many would be ruined beyond repair by the pending battle.

Lt. Fielder simply looked... pissed-off. To him it appeared that the entire incident was concocted by God to make him miserable. Or dead. Which in his mind were almost equal events.

The midshipmen varied between the phlegmatic calm of an experienced warrior, and the frightened anticipation of a rookie. All of them were tried and true warriors. But still, most of them were just boys, with a boy's enthusiasms and emotional volatility.

All in all, Melville couldn't think of a better group of officers to go through this next trial with. But *he* was the Captain. He was the man who had to decide on the strategy and tactics for a battle against innumerable enemies. It was his responsibility to determine how they could best combat the enemy horde, knowing that he was going to have to spend the lives of these beloved comrades to do it. Spend them frugally, with a miser's touch, but spend them nonetheless. For he knew that with the odds facing

them, the chances were slim (hell, damn near nonexistent!) that they would all make it out intact, much less alive.

*This is the real world, Melville told himself. It is not some novel, where the characters you really love never die. Sometimes the wrong people die. Like Mr. Tibbits, the gentle, beloved old carpenter.*

The loss of Tibbits and the maiming of young Hayl had scarred Melville's soul. He could no longer depend upon denial and ignorance to protect him from the horror of combat.

Maybe it was part of his maturing process as a warrior. Just another hurdle to overcome. But he could no longer pretend that the good guys, the ones you loved, could not die. *We Could Die!* That was the terrible, unpredictable actuality of real combat. *Remember this the next time you think about going into battle*, he told himself bitterly.

God above knew it wasn't fair. One Ship against all of these bloody bastards, *whoever* the hell they were. His men, his Ship, his guns against this bloody fleet that covered the horizon to the north of him.

You expected unfairness in life. Life is hard. Then you die. But this went beyond that. He felt his mortality. He sensed his impending death. They were going to die. They were *all* going to die! He felt overwhelmed with despair as he looked at these men and prepared to give them the orders that would lead them to their doom.

His knees felt weak and the mug of tea in his hand began to shake slightly. All was gone. Hope? Gone. Future? Gone.

*No!*

*I am Thomas Melville, Master and Commander of Her Majesty's Ship, the Fang, and I refuse to accept it!* He drew a deep combat breath and felt *Fang's* ferocity seeping into his soul. *I am Fang! I am her mighty guns! I am her crew! And we refuse to accept it!*

*As a wise man once wrote, "Life isn't fair. It's just fairer than death."*

"Shipmates," he began, taking a calm, steady sip from his tea as his dog sat quietly beside him, "we have a bit of a challenge in front of us. You have heard by now that the Ships we just destroyed were not alone, but rather the vanguard of a vast fleet."

He took a breath, let it out slowly, and took another sip of tea. "To be honest, I haven't a clue how many of them there are. They all seem to be the same type of small Ship with glowing white sails. But there are, as Dillsvon just told me, a 'buttload' of them."

There were a few strained chuckles from the officers as they absorbed his words.

"It appears that the fleet will be delayed in getting underway. They will have to man the surviving Ships, tow the badly damaged ones out of the way, and then form up in line of battle. Our job is obvious. Delay the enemy fleet until Rear Admiral Middlemuss gets the Navy out and can engage and destroy them."

Fielder asked, in a tone that was completely devoid of his usual sarcasm, "Sir, have you any idea how to delay this 'buttload' of Ships without getting the *Fang*'s—and our—butts shot completely off?"

"Actually, Daniel, I do," he said with a small smile. "Or at least a method of giving our fleet time enough to get underway. I hope it will be sufficient to keep us intact, but it's going to be close."

"I had the signalman hoist the flags for 'enemy in sight' and 'Intend to engage,'" Melville continued. "I reported the number of Ships to be 'greater than one hundred.' Which," he added bemusedly, "is the most that our code book had for a signal for enemy fleets. It would appear that the people who made up our signal books suffered from a dearth of imagination."

"My plan is to act like we are damaged and running from the fray here at the Piers. We will appear to be easy prey. Somebody that they will want to gobble up before they continue on to the bottled up, besieged, and thoroughly smashed fleet they expect to find Pierside."

"My only concern is that the Crabs who just got away may know that we're not that hurt. But I'm betting they'll have trouble telling all our Ships apart, or maybe they'll think that the ones we sunk hurt us when they weren't watching. If they *don't* take the bait, we'll find some way to get their attention."

"Mr. Hans will take charge of strewing debris, spare spars, and other objects about, making it appear as if we have taken serious damage. Furl our sails and hang some old rotten canvas, and tear them up good so that they look battle-damaged. We have cause to believe that they can read our signal flags, so we'll limp along and appear awfully easy to spank while we send deliberately snide, snotty, and nasty flag messages to the enemy. Mr. Fielder can use his imagination for that one, I believe." The officers chuckled briefly and he continued the briefing with a renewed sense of confidence.

*This might work. Dammit, it might just work! Keep telling yourself that, Thomas. We don't have to fight them all. We just have to delay them. Give the Crabs a good bloody nose, and hold out until the rest of the fleet can join us.*

"Let us *provoke* them. They are alien, but I'm betting they are predators, and it is a universal truism that every predator cannot help but be tempted by the wounded-duck routine. I want us to look like a frigate that is barely holding herself together—an easy target—as we go crawling out to escape the destruction that they think is happening here."

"And when they see us, why then we'll do what would come naturally to a Ship so damaged. We'll attempt to run away, at the same crawling pace." He grinned again, but this time it was more a flash of predator's fangs than a true smile. "When we have them trailing us, looking for a prize... Well, then we unfurl our real sails, throw overboard anything that hinders us, *and we fight!*"

"Eep!" echoed Melville's monkey. The other monkeys and their humans all nodded in agreement.

"It'll be a running fight," continued Melville. "A stern chase. And a stern chase is a long chase, so we'll have lots of time to share things with them. Little things like 24-pound cannonballs to make their lives interesting. Then we'll circle back here and let the rest of the fleet have some of the fun. After all, we wouldn't want them to think that we're too greedy to share now, would we?"

From their duty stations on the upperside gundeck and the rigging, the *Fang*'s sailors and marines were watching the officers on the upper quarterdeck. As they heard the chuckles rising from their leaders they wondered what in the *hell* could be so damned funny at a time like this.

Melville looked over the greenside railing at the multitude of small Ships approaching the Pier. The enemy fleet had closed enough that the glowing sails could be seen from the main deck now, and they looked like a vast, white wildfire that spread across the horizon.

*Six down, and only a thousand or so to go, eh?* the captain mused as he stared out at the small craft. *Should make for an exciting morning, shouldn't it?*

"*Damn*there's a lot of 'em!" Melville said to the two buckskin-clad rangers who were standing with their rifled muskets at the quarterdeck rail. "How'd that joke of yours go, Josiah? First Captain Bravo had one ship attack him, and then four, and now..."

"Yep, sir," Westminster drawled with a grin. "It's definitely brown pants time."

"Ha!" replied his captain, mirroring the ranger's grin. "We'll hold that in reserve. I've got a few other tricks I want to try first."

"Mr. Hans," Melville continued. "Let's bend on sail for speed—or at least as much speed as we can get from that ratty canvas. You did a great job of making it look battle damaged. I want to come left three points to the greenside, so that we're aimed at their left flank, the far right edge of their formation as we face it. My intent is to open fire as we come into maximum range and draw them away from the port. That should give our Ships time to come out and join us."

"Assuming that they do," muttered Midshipman Hayl, the captain of the upper redside battery, who was standing on the maindeck directly below Melville.

"No, Mr. Hayl, you do them a disservice," Melville rebuked him gently. "They may not have our experience at war, but they are men of Her Majesty's Navy. They *will* come out to play with us."

*I have no doubt they will come, eventually,* Melville thought grimly. *But will they come in time to give us succor—or to give us last rites?*

Cuthbert Asquith XVI stood near the lowerside bow looking at the vast swarm of sails coming toward them. The sight was so amazing that it took a moment for him to shift from awe to fear and despair. A veritable tidal wave of beautiful luminous sails over lovely little white Ships was coming at them. And all of them crewed by some kind of overgrown crab that wanted revenge for every seafood buffet he had ever enjoyed. Sometimes the world made absolutely no sense at all.

"Daniel, if we've never had contact with these 'Crabs,' then why the hell are they trying to kill us? It just doesn't seem logical!"

Fielder looked out over the greenside at the approaching horde. He sighed and said, "Damned if I know, Bert. I've never even *heard* of them until that Dr. Myriad... uh... Forays... whatever his name is. Until he mentioned that they were a legend or myth out here in the far rift. They should've stayed mythical."

"Somehow I don't think my pistols are going to do much good here, Daniel," Asquith said quietly.

A glint from one of the leading Ships drew the eye to a cannonball in flight toward the *Fang* .

"Hmmm. Good reach on that one," observed Fielder. "From the range on that cannon, and from everything we've seen so far, it appears to be something bigger than a 12-pounder and smaller than a 24-pounder. Based on the size of the Crab Ships I'd say that in my professional judgment it's probably around an 18-pounder."

"Is that bad?" Asquith asked in horrified fascination.

"Well, yeah. It sure isn't *good* news that everybody in the galaxy seems to have bigger guns than us. The Guldur have those damned 24-pounders, and now these Crab bastards have 18-pounders. And remember, there's two of them in each of those little gunboats, one on the upperside and on the

lowerside. So, it's definitely bad news if they hit us. An 18-pounder on our hull wouldn't do quite as much damage as the 24-pounders the Guldur were hitting us with, but they've got one *hell* of a lot more of them and it really isn't going to be pretty." Fielder took a bit of morbid satisfaction from watching Asquith's face pale as the significance hit home.

"Oh," he replied in a small voice. He paused for a moment then continued. "Any suggestions for anything I can do to help, Daniel?"

Fielder looked at him in surprise.

Asquith looked back with what he probably imagined was a ferocious expression, but instead looked more like the snarl of a dyspeptic terrier.

"To be honest, Bert, with only one eye, you wouldn't be worth anything with a sword—no depth perception. And unless you're a psychotic berserker like our Mistress Broadax, an ax isn't one of the best choices for you. On the other hand, I think that you and your monkey have more than proven yourselves as pistoleers, so if you would care to remain here as a reserve with me if we are boarded?"

Asquith smiled at him gratefully. "Thank you, Daniel. I'd be honored to stay with you as a reserve." His monkey seconded him with a fierce "Eek!" as it brandished its belaying pin and ramrod.

"Ere, now," came a gravelly voice from behind them as Broadax and her monkey came forward from inspecting her marines. "I 'eard dat!"

Fielder paled and shook his head. "Never fails with her, does it?" he whispered to Asquith.

Broadax continued with what she apparently thought was a grin, but came across as a gaping fissure in a furry mask wreathed in the ever-present cloud of toxic smoke. "Psychotic berserker, eh?! I *likes* that 'un. Jist remember now, if'n we gits a chance we gots ta board a few of 'em. I needs sum more ax practice, ye know! Girl's gotta keep her berserkin' up, ye know!" As she passed she gave Fielder a friendly, gentle tap as far up on his back as she could reach, which felt a lot like being rabbit-punched.

Asquith and Fielder watched as she headed to the upperside to check on the marines stationed there.

Asquith said thoughtfully, "Daniel, correct me if I'm wrong, but I thought that you two were, well, not enemies... but perhaps, unfriends?"

The first officer shook his head in confusion. "Well, I sort of thought so too. Brother Theo and I were talking about it with Hans, and near as we can figure out, I keep getting her into fights and she *really* likes that. And somehow, what I'm saying doesn't seem to be what she's hearing." He shook his head in

confusion, "Or maybe it's what I'm saying doesn't come across to her in the way that others hear it."

Fielder sighed and continued. "Although I've got to admit that while she's as ugly as homemade sin and will never be a Weber—one of those decorative Amazon heroines in some of the classic science-fiction writing—she sure as hell is useful in a fight. Pound for pound I'd rather have that maniac on my side in a fight, than damned near anyone else I can name. So long as she doesn't have a gun. Lord, she has to be the universe's worst with a gun."

Asquith looked up at a sound, a whispery *wheet* ing noise he had heard during their last battle. A sound that sent shivers down his spine.

"Ah, looks like the waiting is over, Bert! That was one of their balls coming through into our air bubble. That means we should be able to start hitting *them* now."

Asquith considered for a second. "Daniel, if we can hit them, doesn't that mean that they'll soon be able to hit us?"

Fielder gave him a grim smile. "Yep. Makes life kind of exciting, now doesn't it?"

Barlet and Melville were standing near Midshipman Ellis Palmer, who was commanding the upper greenside battery. Sudden Death had been shifted from the bow to its position in the broadside battery, to get maximum firepower on the greenside. Each cannon was loaded with a single roundshot. The gun captains had done their best to find the smoothest, roundest balls for this first shot. This was going to be long-range gunnery, and for that they wanted the best possible fodder for their cannons.

They all understood that if they could entice the Crab fleet to pursue them it would eventually turn into a short-range slugfest, as the faster Crab Ships caught up with the *Fang* . But before it came to that, they'd have the chance to even the odds with their broadsides and then whittle the enemy down with the stern chasers.

Midshipman Palmer looked over at his captain. "Sir, what happens if they don't change course to attack us?"

Melville smiled at the midshipman. Palmer was a deep-voiced lad who was huge for his twelve years. He had served with great heroism and intelligence as a Ship's boy and had been promoted to midshipman shortly after they had captured the *Fang* . He had great potential as an officer and it was always good to develop the tactical knowledge and experience of the next generation.

"Well, Mr. Palmer, what do you think would happen?"

The middle thought for a second. "Well," he rumbled, "I figure that if they don't change course or attack, then we can cruise down their flank and pound the hell out of 'em with our broadside, then come behind 'em and romp across their rear and beat hell out of 'em with *even more* broadsides! An' since their guns are fixed forward, they won't be able to shoot back! Somewhere in there they oughta start changing their mind about ignoring our Ship!"

Melville nodded. "Not bad for a first pass, Mr. Palmer. Of course," he added with a grin, "whenever they *do* turn on us, we'll be in the midst of a swarm of Crab gunboats, like a crocodile intruding into a piranha-infested river."

Palmer shivered as he considered the idea.

"Just remember," continued the captain, "this 'croc' eats schools of piranha for lunch! Our big advantage is that we don't have to face our opponents to shoot them, but they do."

"Aye, sir," said Palmer. "Plus our 24-pounders appear to have a slight range advantage. *And* the incredible accuracy we have when you're firing the guns, if I may say so, Captain."

"Aye! So for now we have two tasks. We must fight them, *and* we must lure them away from the Pier so the fleet can get underway. Given our altered appearance and the fact that we are apparently running away, we should be downright irresistible."

"Aye, sir!" growled Palmer. "Like a doddering old drunk, just asking to be rolled for his wallet. But when the robber rolls *this* drunk over, he'll find out we're faking, armed, and pissed-off mean!"

Barlet interrupted him. "It looks like it's about that time, sir. Their last shot entered our air bubble. Which isn't good. Their guns must be about 18-pounders. And 18-pounders against our 24-pounders isn't all that unequal a contest," he concluded soberly.

"No, it isn't," Melville replied as he climbed up onto the aiming platform above Sudden Death. "Especially when there's so damned many of them. So we better get started evening the odds."

## CHAPTER THE 16TH

# Crab Salad at the Seafood Buffet: "Thoughts That Make the Strong Heart Weak"

There are things of which I may not speak;  
There are dreams that cannot die;  
There are thoughts that make the strong heart weak,  
And bring a pallor into the cheek,  
And a mist before the eye.  
And the words of that fatal song  
Come over me like a chill:  
"A boy's will is the wind's will,  
And the thoughts of youth are long, long thoughts."

"My Lost Youth"  
Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

Midshipman Anthony Hayl stood behind Deep Doo-Doo, Sue-Sue, and Bad Ju-Ju in his capacity as the upper redbottom battery commander. Malicious Intent had been moved to her position in the stern, ready to fire at the Crabs who would be chasing them if the captain's plan worked out.

Their initial battle with the Crabs had been frightening, but it had all happened so quickly that Hayl didn't have much time to think. This battle was going to be a *lot* worse. And he had plenty of time to think about it.

In all of his creative, optimistic, youthful imagination, young Hayl could not conceive of any way that they could survive. He had seen too much battle, too much death to have any illusions left. They were dead. They were all *dead*. There was no avoiding it, no way around it.

He had eagerly sought the opportunity to be a midshipman with the great Captain Melville. He had had such incredible dreams. Such feats of valor and triumph had filled his head. None of his daydreams included the nightmares that still visited his sleep upon occasion.

Hayl thought he was brave, but he felt his knees weaken and the blood drained from his face as the

reality of this battle loomed before him. Then he felt the Keel charge in his new arm begin to <<purr>> and he felt a piece of *Fang* 's fierce spirit surge through him. He started his breathing routine and began to get his body under control. But it was so much harder to rein in his *imagination* .

Then Grenoble, the captain's Sylvan bodyguard, walked up beside him companionably and put a hand on the boy's shoulder. "Art thou frightened, son?"

"Aye, sir."

"Use thy breathing, lad. Control thy body, and have faith in thy comrades, thyself and thy training. *The Mirror for Princes* , written in Persia, on Old Earth in thy eleventh century, encourages warriors to 'reconcile your heart with death. Under no circumstances be afraid, but be bold; for a short blade grows longer in the hands of the brave.' Five hundred years later, an earthling named William Makepeace Thackeray said that 'bravery never goes out of style.' 'Tis not easy, lad. Few are born with it. But try with all thy might to nurture courage. Then thou shalt never be out of style."

"Aye, sir. I'm working on it."

"'Tis all that anyone could ask, and 'tis the path of wisdom. 'Fear tastes like a rusty knife and do not let her into your house.'"

\* \* \*

And the words of that fatal song  
Come over me like a chill:  
"A boy's will is the wind's will,  
And the thoughts of youth are long, long thoughts."

\* \* \*

Captain Thomas Melville layed on the firing platform of Sudden Death and considered the coming battle. Cutting across the front of the attacking fleet at this angle meant that a portion of their leading Ships could always bring them under fire with those bow-mounted cannon. But only a portion. For the entire Crab fleet to bring effective fire on the *Fang* they would have to shift course, and essentially start chasing her.

And that, unfortunately, was exactly what Melville was trying to force them to do. Just escaping the battle would be fairly straightforward. If he simply ran for the eastern horizon, Melville *might* be able to

save the *Fang* and her crew. But he would be doing so at the cost of the utter destruction of the Hero Cluster's fleet. A cost that was totally unacceptable to the captain and crew of the *Fang*. They would die before they would let that happen.

So their mission was to entice the Crabs in, like a mother duck luring the predator away from her nest, with the age-old wounded-duck routine. It was one of the oldest tricks in the book. Would it work on the Crabs?

Melville watched over Sudden Death's sights as his first target slid closer and closer into his line of fire. He felt the ferocity of the 24-pounder beneath him: a chilling bloodlust to smash, rend, and kill raged through him, an emotion that had come to feel comfortable next to his soul. And from *Fang* herself he felt the anger and the urge to fight, to destroy these intruders—an urge that snuggled in tight to the other side of his soul.

These combined emotions roared back and forth between the three of them, as they jointly considered the target, watching while it slid under its single, glowing sail, closer and closer to its doom. They ignored the occasional 18-pound cannonball fired by one of their target's many mates, although those shots were getting more accurate with each passing moment.

The prey slid inexorably closer until, finally, the three (the gun, the Ship, and her captain) decided as one that it was theirs! The cannon growled its hate and loathing for the attackers, and belched forth its iron ball. <<Yes!>> it said in his mind. "*Cha-DOOM!!*" <<KillHurt!!>> screamed out the cannon and Melville watched as the shot traveled out... and slammed into the bow of the small Ship, smashing it like a firecracker set off in a child's model, sheering off the bow, and snapping the Keel like a toothpick as the Ship twisted and disappeared from two-space.

Midshipman Palmer screamed out, "Yes!" and pumped a fist into the air, as his monkey screeched out in agreement and waved its belaying pin in the air. "Hot damn, sir! Ya got 'im!" He continued more quietly but no less enthusiastically as the gun team rapidly reloaded the cannon for the next shot. "On the first shot! Just smashed 'im to pieces!" Sudden Death was one of the guns in his battery, and he took a great degree of ownership and satisfaction in "his" gun's accomplishment.

Melville nodded briefly, still focused on the tactical situation. He moved over to Cold Blooded Murder, the other 24-pounder on the upper green battery. As he layed down on the aiming platform he said, "Mr. Barlet, I'll be..." He broke off and involuntarily ducked as a ball found the forward rail and smashed into it, slashing the air with splinters and other debris. Luckily, the splinters and other shrapnel failed to find a home in flesh, but it was sobering taste of things to come.

The captain raised an eyebrow and drew up one side of his mouth in a lopsided grin. "As I was saying, I'll be going back and forth between the 24-pounders on the upper and lower greenside for the first few rounds. You and Gunny Von Rito will engage with the other guns as they bear. This will rapidly become a target-rich environment. So as they close, shift to rapid fire on all guns using the gun captains. Let no target go unserved!"

Barlet shook his head and grinned back, watching as the sailors and marines moved up to clear away the damage in the bow. "Aye, sir! Too bad we only have one broadside engaged. All the poor boys on the redside are going to feel ignored and unloved!"

Melville replied with a thin smile as he aimed Cold Blooded Murder toward his next target. "Don't worry, Mr. Barlet. They'll have their chance. Soon enough."

He touched off the next round, not lingering to see if it hit (it did) and scarcely waiting for the gun to finish its recoil before he dove through the hatch to the lower gundeck. His monkey screeched with joy as they slid headfirst down the line strung between the two levels.

Boye and his monkey couldn't follow their master's slide down the rope, so they had learned to take the long way round. The dog raced pell-mell down the ladder to the hold, dove through the hatch to the other side, scrambled out, thundered up the ladder to the deck, and joined his master with a happy bark. Boye's monkey sat astride the dog like a rider at a steeple chase, *EEK* ing merrily throughout the trip.

Melville alternated quickly from one 24-pounder to another, bouncing from the lowside to the upperside as needed, firing any gun that was loaded and could bear on an enemy Ship. Sliding from one 24-pounder to the next he engaged an unending supply of targets that quickly grew closer and closer to the *Fang*. Grenoble stayed constantly behind the captain, while Ulrich reluctantly gave up his bodyguard role to supervise the lower stern guns.

He rolled off of Rabid's firing platform and was momentarily startled when the flanking 12-pound cannon fired for the first time in this battle. As he looked out over the side he was startled by the *whip-crack* of a cannonball going overhead, followed by a rustling crash as part of a yardarm and its attached canvas and rigging came down on the net overhead.

"Damn!" he yelled as a chunk of spar settled down, bouncing immediately over his head. "That was just a wee bit close for comfort!" Melville said with a grin to Rabid's gun captain.

"Aye, sir!" he yelled back, as he and his gun crew continued their dance, loading the cannon and heaving it back into battery.

Melville scrambled back to the hatch between the upper and lower gundecks, stepping over foot-long splinters, cordage, and a bleeding wreck of a sailor being tended by a corpsman.

The Crab cannons continued to flail at the *Fang* as she crossed the front of their formation. Between her speed and her angle, and the fact that the Crab fleet was maintaining the course for Hector, the *Fang*

was still catching only occasional hits. But when an 18-pound ball hits, it does so with authority. Authority that translates into splintered wood work, smashed equipment, and—saddest of all—shattered crewmen.

Melville assessed the tactical situation. The Crab Ships had closed to the point where they were in effective range of both the 24-pounders and the 12-pounders. This meant that, reluctantly, he had to admit to himself that his job as cannoner was over for now. Much as he wanted—nay, *yearned!*—to keep personally killing the enemy, it was time for him to look after the Ship as a whole.

Asquith and Lt. Fielder were watching from the lower quarterdeck as the range closed enough for *Fang*'s 12-pounders to enter the fray. Gunny Von Rito was allocating targets and making sure the gun captains were concentrating on different Ships. They were close enough now that Melville had stopped firing individual guns, turning them over to the gun captains. Even without the captain's supernatural accuracy, they were near enough that the 24-pounders were killing with practically every shot.

The combination of Melville, *Fang*, and the vicious 24-pounders had destroyed dozens of the Crab gunboats, and now they were killing the Crabs with even greater intensity and efficiency. Yet they had only managed to destroy a slim fraction of the vast enemy fleet, and in spite of all their efforts, the Crabs didn't seem to have any inclination to change course and pursue the *Fang*.

All their efforts seemed to be without effect. It was as if they were trying to stop a tsunami with cannon fire—a veritable glowing white tsunami of Ships.

"You know Bert, this might be a good time to see if we can goad them a bit," Fielder commented. "The captain said he wanted to get them to chase us. So let's see if they can read flag signals!"

"Signalman, hoist the flags for 'We will accept your surrender.'"

Asquith turned to him as the signalman hoisted the flags and said, "Surrender? Isn't that perhaps a wee bit premature, Daniel?"

"No, Bert, the intent is to piss them off. If they can read the flags—which is a big if, by the way—then it might anger their admiral or whoever's in charge. In which case we may be begging them to come try and spank us." He laughed sardonically. "If they do, it'll get ugly. But dammit, it's going to take a lot more that they think to spank the *Fang*."

*The Princess looked at the enemy Pier as it began to come into sight to their south. The Fleet was*

*ready to kill. One damaged enemy Ship had escaped Her vanguard, and it was doing a surprising amount of damage to theFleet as it fled. Through the Hivemind She felt the unease of those who were taking fire from the lone enemy Ship. The Hivemind <<felt>> their pain as they died in a variety of horrific, painful, and exotic ways, and the urge to turn on their tormentor was great. But the Princess sent calming messages to theFleet as her attendants groomed her.*

*Her noble consort preened and watched Her proudly. He was yearning to mate with Her. The little attendants proudly groomed his sperm sack as it became swollen and distended—creating delicious pain!—in response to his powerful urge to cross his genes with one who has made such a killing!*

*<<Do not be distracted, my children. Ignore their foolishness,>> She said soothingly to the Hivemind.*

*TheFleet could only do one thing at a time. First they must take out the big target. There would be much blood and joy. The enemy would suffer every flavor of despair!Then She could send a swarm to destroy this one, slow enemy Ship that thought it could escape the wrath of Shewhomustbeobeyed!*

On the upper quarterdeck, the two rangers were taking occasional maximum-range potshots with their muskets whenever an enemy Ship drew near enough. As they watched the fleet close with them, Westminster suddenly reached out and touched Valandil on the arm. "Aubrey! Look over there, at that Ship toward the center of the Crab fleet. Follow my sights," he said as he took careful aim and then cocked his head to the side, so that his partner could sight down the barrel. "Look carefully. Do you see? All the Crabs on all the other Ships keep facing that way and turning those eye stalks in that direction. And word has it that their royal caste is bigger, right? Well they're so far away that it's hard to tell for sure, but Ah'd swear that Ship has two really big crawdads, lots bigger than the rest. Ah do believe they might just be royalty!"

Valandil sighted down Westminster's musket, ignoring the crash and slam of the continuous firing of the cannons. "Aye, 'tis so," replied the Sylvan ranger, in his typical, laconic fashion.

"They're a damn sight bigger than the rest," said Westminster. "Not too smart either. If they had any sense they'd stay out of sight. At least, that's what Ah'd do if Ah was them. Ah wonder if taking them out will get their attention. Knocking out these piss-ant gunboats sure doesn't seem to be distracting them.

"Messenger!" Westminster called to the Ship's boy assigned to the upper quarterdeck.

"Aye, sir!" chirped the boy eagerly.

"Son, Ah need you to pass the word to the captain, *asap* . We've spotted a Ship that looks like it has Crab royalty that we can invite to dinner. Ask the captain if he thinks they should be the entree for the next course!"

"Damn, sir," said little Aquinar, who was the upper quarterdeck officer and had been listening carefully. "How many courses does this meal have?"

Westminster looked the boy in the eyes. He saw innocence and frustration. Fear and perplexity.

But not naiveté.

"Until they've had a bellyful of shot and steel, son," said the big ranger. "Until they've had a bellyful."

Melville got the message as he was returning to the upper quarterdeck. Standing on the quarterdeck, Westminster again put the Crab royalty in his sights and cocked his head aside so the captain could sight down the barrel at the Ship.

"Yep, Josiah, it looks like I need to take one more potshot!" He grinned to himself at the thought.

Through his contact with the Moss he asked *Fang* , <<Mark that Ship! Do you see it? Can you help me spot it again?>> He felt eager, bloodthirsty agreement back from his Ship.

"Royalty, eh?" he continued to Westminster. "Let's take 'em out. Maybe *that* 'll get their attention!"

"Mr. Barlet!" he called over the quarterdeck rail.

The master gunner came up to him quickly, reluctantly leaving the greenside battery as they blasted away at the enemy fleet.

"Sir?" Barlet shouted above the din.

"I'm about to take down a Ship that looks like it has a few Crab royalty aboard," said Melville. "It may be their flagship. If this attracts their attention we'll have a *lot* more company coming to this dance. If they all close in on us, shift back to double-shooting the guns. Pass the word to the lowerside as well. We'll need all the help we can get if they come at us full bore.

"Mr. Hans!" the captain called up to the sailing master who was standing on the mizzenyard overhead, supervising repairs.

"Aye, sir! I wus lis'nen. Wackin' wog royalty, eh! By the Lady, I'm all fer *that* ! Heh, heh!"

"If this works," said Melville, "it might be a good idea to head dead away from the Crabs to start making them chase us. They're faster, but a stern chase will give us more time to pound them before they get here."

"Aye, sir!" replied old Hans as he and his monkey cheerfully launched dual streams of tobacco juice over the side.

"So prepare to cut away the bad canvas," Melville continued, "and get us ready to make maximum speed. Our new course will be hard to the redside and due east."

"Aye, sir!" Hans nodded in understanding as he sent messengers up into the rigging to prepare the topmen for the next phase of the engagement.

Melville scanned the area of two-space near the Ship with the larger Crabs—the ones that were probably royalty. He looked to see if there was other potential "royalty" nearby, but he could only see the one Ship with the larger Crabs.

He was on Cold Blooded Murder's firing platform, looking down over the sights while he signaled for the gun crew to adjust his point of aim. With one hand on the 24-pounder and the other on the *Fang*, Melville completed the circuit, acting as the biological equivalent of an AI targeting system. He could feel the anger and the bloodthirst of *Fang* as well as the yearning to mangle, maim and murder that emanated from Cold Blooded Murder. He felt these urges mingle in the deepest recesses of his own psyche and his lizard brain screamed out its *need* to fight and kill these intruders. All three of them intermingled into a *lust* to kill, until the shot was perfect. The cannon belched out a wave of force carrying hate/anger/bloodlust wrapped up around one 24-pound cannonball. <<Yes!>> "*Cha-DOOM!!*" <<KillHurt!!>>

Melville lost track of the cannonball in the air, but it was obvious when it hit. The 24-pound ball smashed directly at the base of the Crab's mast, sheering through the Keel, sending bodies and splinters into the air. Then the Ship turned turtle and twisted back out from two-space into the interplanetary depths of the Hector system.

*Suddenly, he was HewhocommandstheFleet!*

*Just an instant before he had been just one more HewhocommandsaShip, receiving soothing messages from their Princess, Shewhomustbeobeyed, and now the Hivemind had settled on him, the largest and most mature male, to take charge!*

*Shock!Horror!Despair! He began to gnaw on one of his foreclaws as he tried to send feeble messages through the Hivemind.*

*TheFleet was in complete panic. There were collisions. Ships were being damaged! Some were even sinking! And it was all his responsibility!*

*Almost half theFleet was running away, headed back to the Hive, toward the nearest known Royalty!*

*But the portion of theFleet that had the hated RoyalslayerShip in sight responded differently. After a brief period of confusion, their response was to avenge the slayer of their Princess!*

*Not knowing what else to do, HewhocommandstheFleet snatched up a crewman and began to gnaw on the creature's head, sucking out its neural matter and sending out a weak signal to the Hivemind. It was hard to get through all the death cries and anguish of those who were perishing, but HewhocommandstheFleet sent his message, to the best of his ability. And that message was: <<Killthem! Killthem! KilltheRoyalslayerShip!>>*

Melville rolled off the aiming platform and headed for the upper quarterdeck when he heard old Hans exclaim from the rigging overhead, " *Bugrit!*"

"Eep!" echoed Hans' monkey, emphatically.

The captain stopped and looked up at the old sailing master who was staring at the fleet of small Ships. Then he turned toward the Crab fleet. The closest elements of the enemy swarm were just a long musket shot from *Fang* 's bow and closing fast.

Melville had accomplished his mission. The enemy was now well and truly pissed-off, and they were coming at the *Fang* . But all he could think was, *Damn, those little bastards are fast! How in hell do*

*they get that much speed from a single sail?* Melville felt *Fang*'s curiosity mingling with his.

Every single one of the Crab Ships that he could see was changing course and headed toward the *Fang* in a vast, converging, chaotic mob. *Fang*'s cannons continued to fire, adding to the confusion as the Crab Ships veered toward them. In the midst of the turmoil many of the Crabs were colliding, and some were even sinking.

"Mr. Hans," Melville said, "I *think* we have attracted sufficient attention now. If you would, cut hard to our reaside, due east—a little south of east if you need to—and straight away from the Crabs. And get some proper sails up again!"

"Aye, sir, an' with pleasure!" said Hans as he quickly passed on the command.

Melville continued wonderingly, "I guess the doctor was right when he said they had some sort of hive mind. It must've given them one helluva of a headache when I hit that Ship with their royalty on it. I don't think these damned oversized appetizers are gonna give up and go home now."

Hans slid down a line to join his captain. Already the *Fang* was on her new course and good canvas was being unfurled. "Aye, sir," he laughed bitterly. "They looks like a beehive that a kid whacked with a stick. An' they jist figured out where the stick came from."

"Okay," said Melville. "The good news is that they're breaking off from targeting the Pier and coming for us. So," he added with a grin, "I guess we've got 'em right where we want them. We'll lead 'em on a merry chase and hammer them with our stern guns."

"An' when they catch up with us?" asked Hans.

Melville shrugged. "Then maybe we'll turn on them and bust through with all guns blazing. Somewhere in there, Admiral Middlemuss and the fleet should come join the party!"

"Deck there!" came a call from the lookout high above. "About half those bastards is goin' the other way! The ones you can't see, they's all runnin'!"

There was an enormous cheer from the *Fang* s. Suddenly there was hope. Half the enemy had been defeated in a single stroke. Of course, there were *hundreds* more to go.

Melville's mind spun. He and his Ship worked together as a biological AI, studying all available data and looking at the situation from every angle, striving to leave chance with few places to hide.

"Mr. Barlet! I want you to personally take charge of the 12-pounder stern guns up here. Have the Gunny do the same on the lowerside. The Crabs have a speed advantage, so put paid to any bastard that tries to follow us. I'll take the stern 24-pounders. When they catch up with us, the broadsides will be handled by their gun captains, as they come to bear."

"Aye, sir," replied the master gunner. "Those bastards won't know what hit 'em!"

*HewhocommandstheFleet scuttled up behind HewhosteersstheShip. He ripped off one of HewhosteersstheShip's back legs, and began beating him with it.*

*"Slow down! Hold back. We need to stay back to signal the cowards who are retreating, and we don't want the enemy to single us out to be destroyed. TheFleet cannot stand to lose another leader!"*

*Then he turned to use the leg to beat on Hewhosendsthesignals. "The Hivemind cannot hear my commands! Send signal flags! All Ships attack the RoyaltyslayerShip!"*

The *Fang*'s guns were recoiling more unevenly now. Their crews were tiring, stunned and exhausted by the constant thunder and crash.

The stern chase had not lasted nearly as long as Melville wanted it to. The rear guns didn't get a chance to take out much more than a dozen Crab Ships each before the enemy's superior speed allowed them to begin to swarm around the *Fang*. Now every gun was in play, lashing out death and destruction to the enemy in all directions.

Gun captains raised a fist to signal when their gun was ready, their faces rigid with concentration. Quick as the fist was raised the order was given to fire. The blasts of the mighty 24-pounders were like huge spitting tongues of flame and light, leaving a powerful tang of ozone in the mouth. The double-shotted cannons smashed into the enemy boats in an explosion of splinters and Crab appendages. High up in the rigging, the topmasts shivered with each blast of *Fang*'s big guns.

The deep, bass blasts of the 24-pounders were accompanied by the metallic bangs of the 12-pounders and the sharp cracks of the muskets, and above and around it all were the screams of the dying and wounded, and the singing of the rigging. The deck bucked beneath their feet with every blast of the guns, and periodically there was a ringing, wooden gong sound as *Fang*'s hull took a hit from one of the enemy's 18-pounders.

Then there was a crescendo of tortured, splintering wood as *Fang* smashed into a hapless Crab Ship, sundering it in two and sinking it almost instantly. As their atmospheric clouds came together, the *Fang* could hear the death cries of the Crabs in the shattered Ship, their screams cut short as they sank into the icy grip of two-space.

It was an insane symphony of death and destruction, a nightmare chorus of torment.

"Keep double-shotting the guns!" bellowed Mr. Barlet as the master gunner rallied his gun crews. "It's just what the bastards need up close and personal like this!" Then Barlet saw his captain striding across the deck. "A target rich environment, sir!" he shouted with a snarling, feral grin on his face. In the midst of the battle's madness the *Fang*'s master gunner stood lean, dark, and hard, like a teak sword.

Melville could feel the madness surge through him like a fever. It was infectious. He could see it in the faces marred by sweat and blood, Guldur and human alike, poised over hot guns like half-naked alien demons. Even the humans seemed alien, and the Guldur looked like fiends from hell.

"I don't know if they scare the enemy," muttered Fielder as he stood on the lower quarterdeck beside Asquith, looking out at the gun crews, "but by God they scare the hell out of me!"

Above them the protective nets jerked and twitched with falling debris, flying splinters, and the occasional body. A yardarm punched through the net, gouging into the planking next to Asquith. Then a body slammed into the netting and rolled through the gap. Asquith helped catch the hapless sailor, and began to drag him to the surgeon. Amazingly the man appeared to be unharmed, his fall having been broken by the net. He staggered to his feet with a nod of thanks and scrambled back up into the tattered rigging.

"Huh," said Fielder calmly. "I guess those nets were a good idea. Chalk another one up for the captain. Dammit, he'll be insufferable if we survive this."

On the upper quarterdeck Midshipman Palmer looked down at his hands, holding the end of a shard of glowing white wood protruding from his chest. His monkey had blocked a small forest of splinters, but it couldn't stop them all, and the little creature sobbed softly as it stroked the boy's pale cheek.

*It's all right, Palmer tried to tell his monkey. It's okay.*

Every breath hurt, but he didn't want to stop. He found that he had grown fond of breathing in the span of his twelve brief years. It was a useful habit. He and his body didn't want to give it up.

He watched bright red bubbles gurgle out of his mouth and drop onto his hands with every breath. He could see his reflection in the bubbles, and everything seemed very precious and beautiful.

Then the bubbles stopped. He was going to miss them.

No one noticed as Palmer's monkey gave one last, shuddering sob and disappeared from three-space.

Melville dove through the aft hatch and scrambled up the rope to the upperside. Here Mr. Barlet was still striding the gundeck, but up on the quarterdeck Death was the watch officer. One lonely quartermaster stood wild-eyed at the wheel, his legs straddling the bodies of two other men who had been killed at that post.

Young Midshipman Aquinar had been wounded and evacuated, and Midshipman Palmer had taken over as quarterdeck officer. Now Palmer was dead, his legs spread before him and his back against the splintered remains of the lower quarterdeck's greenside railing. The boy had his head bowed and his hands clutched a splinter in his chest as if in prayer. A pool of blood was spreading out from his body, as a corpsman raced onto the quarterdeck and began to conduct triage amidst the bloody carnage.

Down in the hospital, Lady Elphinstone's fingers were like scarlet claws moving with blurring speed as she operated on the wounded. Her monkey was an integral part of her, as its dripping red paws passed instruments, tied off arteries, and applied pressure, all at the precise moment required, without need of asking or telling. Even as her hands ministered to one patient, her eyes were resting on the next recipient of the tender mercies of those scarlet fingers.

Mrs. Vodi and her monkey were everywhere, moving swiftly and efficiently, helping those she could, as the wounded helped each other. One sailor, his eyes bandaged and blind, was holding another patient against his shoulder, shielding and calming his friend as he groped blindly for his friend's mouth and gently separated the man's lips. His monkey held a cup of water in its two upper paws, pouring a blessed sip of water into their Shipmate's mouth.

Midshipman Aquinar had returned from sick bay, and once again he stood beside his captain on the upper quarterdeck. A gaping splinter wound in his thigh had been hastily bandaged and he had limped back to his duty station. The tiny middie looked over at the pool of blood where Palmer had died and gulped. The blood was slowly congealing, and part of it was being absorbed by the Moss.

Aquinar had seen Ship-to-Ship combat before but he had never been seriously wounded, and he had *never* seen anything like this glowing horde of Ships. The volley of fire from the enemy gunboats was raining all around them. As they drew in close, the Crabs were able to fire with swivel guns that were mounted all around their Ships. In the face of the oncoming swarm of Ships, the hail of incoming fire, and the psychological shock of his recent wound, the tiny middie found himself unconsciously shifting to place his captain between himself and the enemy.

Westminster and Vandalil still fired calmly and steadily from the rail, causing horrific confusion in the tight-packed enemy fleet as they picked off Crab quartermasters with deadly efficiency. Often, with the quartermaster suddenly slumped over the wheel, a Ship would veer off course and foul several other Ships. "By God, sir," Westminster laughed, "young Aquinar has the right idea!"

The rest of the quarterdeck joined in the laughter at the middie's expense, and, red-faced, Aquinar stepped out from behind his captain to face the oncoming swarm. Melville laughed with the rest and put a reassuring hand on the boy's shoulder.

"Signal from the Pier, sir," said Midshipman Aquinar, happy to find a distraction from his faux pas. "All Ships will attack enemy soon. How can we assist until then?"

*How can they assist?* thought Melville, looking across at the signal flags flying from the Pier. There really was nothing they *could* do until the fleet got its act together and sallied out. But you had to give Middlemuss credit for asking. "Here," said Melville with a laugh as he jotted a short message on the slate, "tell them this. You'll have to spell it out. I don't think any of that is in the code book!"

"Yes sir!" The boy laughed, and promptly limped over to send thirteen flags, each representing one letter, up the halyard.

"Sir! Response from the *Fang* !" said Admiral Middlemuss' signal lieutenant.

"Well?" snapped the harassed admiral.

"Um, sir, it says, 'SEND MORE CRABS!'"

"Ha! Melville, you magnificent bastard!" shouted the admiral. "If we both live through this day, I'm going to make you *wish* the Crabs had won!"

The *Fang* was like an angry, drunken sailor, charging into a bar fight with a feral grin and clenched teeth, wanting only to inflict pain and oblivious to any damage taken. Hope was not an ally today. But desperation and bloodlust were firmly on their side.

The Crabs were close enough now that the *Fang*'s 24-pounder cannonballs were blasting through the enemy Ships and damaging the Ships beyond them. It helped, but *damn*, there were still so many of them.

The bow guns were now fully engaged as well, taking care of the fastest craft that were trying to block their course. After they rammed the one Ship that played chicken with them, the Crabs hadn't tried that trick again, but still they raced to get ahead of the *Fang* and then spin around to gift her bows with one of those damned 18-pound balls.

*I bet those 18-pounders would fit right into our broadside like they were made for it, if we could capture a few,* Melville thought idly as he calmly walked the gundeck.

The bow gun spat out its double-shotted rage at a Ship that had mistakenly zigged when it should have zagged. In this kind of furball, an error like that was something that didn't happen more than once—it tended to be permanently fatal.

The Ship literally exploded with the impact of two 24-pound balls at close range, throwing the mast and sail high into the air, and shattering the hull—and incidentally the crew—into shards of wood, ichor, and chitin that rained down upon *Fang*'s gun crews as they sailed forward.

The glowing white sail on the Crab Ship's upperside spread out and flew directly into the upper bow of the *Fang*, wrapping itself around the hull and decking, forcing the gun crew and damage control party to hack and yank at the sail, throwing the pieces onto the deck and over the side.

<<!!>> came from *Fang*—a feeling of surprise too great for words, focused on the pieces of sailcloth that the crew had thrown on the deck. Melville moved forward and picked up a piece and realized why the sails glowed.

*The damned things are covered in Moss! No wonder they glow. Hell, this must be why they're so damned fast!*

<<I W A N T T H I S!>> sent *Fang* . <<W E N E E D T H I S!>

Melville was in total agreement with that assessment, but, <<We need to get out of this battle alive first!>> he told his Ship.

<<Y E S ! W E K I L L ! G E T S A I L S ! K I L L N O W !>>

<<Can't argue with that one,>> Melville agreed as the crewmen finally succeeded in clearing the sail that was fouling his bow gun.

"Belay that!" called Melville to a sailor who was about to cast a glowing white bundle of sailcloth overboard. "Just throw those sails on the deck there. And keep up the good work." he added, to encourage the confused young crewman. "We're giving them hell!"

"Aye, sir!"

*Yeah, thought Melville, we're giving them hell, but we're taking it too.* The good news was that the Crabs were terrible shots—probably because their royalty was gone and they were acting in a kind of collective berserker rage. And the *Fang* was still making good headway with only one gun—a 12-pounder—knocked out of play. But, *damn!* , the butcher's bill was stacking up with a few of the gun crews at 50% manning. Plus the sails and rigging were shot to hell, and several masts were shattered and barely standing. If this kept up, it was only a matter of time before the *Fang* went down.

*Ah well, thought Melville. "One crowded hour of glorious life is worth an age without a name."*

*HewhocommandstheFleet was enraged and confused. Half his Fleet had left the battle and he could not get them to return. Already they were far enough away that he did not sense them in the Hivemind. Worst of all, his Royalty, his glorious, dangerous, beloved Princess, Shewhomustbeobeyed, was dead! And this large lump of dead sail, this RoyalslayerShip had killed her. And it wouldn't stop!*

*He chewed the head off of another one of his groomers and sucked its brains out meditatively.*

If we cannot kill them because of their cannon, *thought HewhocommandstheFleet*, then we must board them. They will have to stop firing the cannons to fight us, and we can close and kill them with our Ships!

*His skill in sending commands to the Hivemind was slowly improving, and he shared his vengeful thoughts with his hive brothers.*

*It was needful now for a Ship to close with the hated RoyalslayerShip. To grapple them and board them. Then the Royalslayers must stop their cannons to fight! And when the cannons stop they will die!*

*The Hivemind was in agreement with the plan.*

*In their single-minded, collective, obsessive concentration on avenging their Royalty, none of theFleet realized that by focusing on the one Ship, they neglected to think about the fleet fast approaching from the Pier area. After all, they could only do one thing at a time. And their Guldur allies had promised that these humans were easy meat, unused to fighting, and would run... like this offal!*

"What in all the silly Sylvan hells are these oversized appetizers doing now?" Even though Asquith was right next to him, Lt. Fielder had to almost shout to be heard over the cannons' roar, the cracking muskets, the crash of falling, rending wood, and the cries of wounded men.

Asquith looked in the direction of the first officer's gaze. One Crab Ship was pulling ahead of its companions, aiming itself at the *Fang*'s greenside rear quarter. The little Ship was now so close that its hull was essentially below the *Fang*'s guns.

"Lt. Broadax!" yelled Fielder to the marine commander, who had been going back and forth between the marine detachments on the upper and lower sides, like an anxious child hopping from foot to foot. "It looks like the Crabs will try to board, so you get your wish! Standby to repel boarders!"

"Gunny Von Rito!" Fielder continued. "Tell the gun crews to be alert to any other Crab Ships who try to board us. Pass the word to the upperside. *Dammit all*, don't let those pockers get that close again, and *don't* let them reinforce this boarder!"

The harassed gunny looked up in exasperation. "Aye, sir!" was all he said as he continued to direct the fire of the lowerside guns.

As Fielder was bellowing his commands, Broadax scrambled up to the quarterdeck and hopped onto

the taffrail, perched like some hideous red gargoyle, looking over at the oncoming Ship.

The *Fang*'s guns couldn't depress enough to hit the approaching gunboat's hull, but they had shattered the enemy's mast. Still, the enemy Ship had considerable momentum and *Fang* was moving so slowly now that the Crabs were going to be able to grapple.

Broadax hopped back down and roared in her gravelly voice, "*Hoo-yah!* All right, boys, we gits ta have some fun, now! Marines, standby to repel boarders, an' then ta take it over to 'em! Corporal Kobbsven, yew tell the lads on the upper side and take charge there. I'll lead the boys on this side. We'll meetcha in the middle over a nice plate of Crab legs and drawn butter!"

She shook her ax in the air with glee and yelled to Fielder, "Hot, damn! Ye *do* take me to the *best* dances, an' I appreciates it!"

Fielder shook his head gloomily. "See what I mean, Bert? I tell her to repel boarders and get a boarding party together..." He ducked reflexively as a sleet of splinters sprayed out from the mast overhead, then continued. "...and she acts like I asked her out to a fancy dress ball. Any normal mortal would be scared spitless, but not her."

Asquith, to his own amazement, laughed! Here they were, beset on all sides by enemies, the quarterdeck had been lashed with splinters and debris, killing off one quartermaster and wounding another, he'd had the crap scared out of him (or it would have been if he hadn't known to go to the head before all this had started), he *knew* they were all gonna die, and he managed to laugh at Fielder!

"Daniel," he said through the chuckles which were threatening to erupt into full scale, hysterical laughter, "did you ever stop to think that if she wasn't the kind of woman she is, *you* might be the one leading the boarding party?!"

Fielder paled at the thought. While he could fight, and damned well if need be, he considered himself a lover not a fighter. And the idea of leading the boarding party into the grinder that was coming alongside was a horrifying thought.

A slug from a Crab swivel gun wheeted past their heads and they both flinched reflexively. *Swivel guns*, Fielder thought to himself distractedly. *Crabs got swivel guns. How come we ain't got swivvel guns?*

"Good point, Bert," he responded. "I'll make sure that when my plate gets filled with Crab entrees trying to add me to the menu I'll pass it on to Broadax."

"I'm sure she'll appreciate it! Have you reconsidered apologizing to her and burying the hatchet?"

"Apologize? For what, Bert? And any buried hatchet would probably be between my eyes! And, oh by the way, do you mind if we continue this discussion another time?" he yelled as he yanked Asquith out of the way of the grappling hook that seemed to magically appear behind him, hovering in the air before it slammed to the deck, then slithered toward the rail where it grabbed fast, burying its tines deep into the wood.

"Damn!" yelled Asquith as he spun reflexively to face the rail while his pistols seemed to leap unbidden into his hands.

"Hey, Loo-tennannt Brooad-ax! Company's coming!" lilted Fielder as he joined his friend, drawing pistol and sword. While he liked the newfangled monkey-assisted loading procedure, one advantage of steel was that it never misfired. And with Asquith and himself on pistols, and their monkeys reloading and blocking, they might be able to hold the quarterdeck until the marines got aboard the enemy Ship.

Grappnels flew like striking snakes and Crab small-arms fire rattled off the deck like deadly pebbles. The enemy Ship surged up to the *Fang*'s stern and Brooadax's marines flowed across. One hapless Crab fell between the Ships, where it was trapped between the two grinding vessels, screaming like a tormented animal. Its eye-stalks rolled with agony as ichor painted the hulls a sickly green and yellow. Then the lifeless husk slid down into two-space and disappeared.

*As the Fang's hull touched the Crab Ship, there was an exchange, a transfer that functioned at many levels. Moss and neurons, citizens and hostages, ambassadors and philosophers: the exchange between the two Ships was all of that and more.*

*Fang found this new Ship to be incredibly alien, but once again the Fang told her tale, and the new Ship... listened.*

*The Crab Ship felt alien feet flooding onto her decks, while even more alien concepts and ideas flowed into her soul...*

"Warm work, Captain!" said Barlet with a grin as he paced the gundeck. The endless, aching drills on the long passage across the Far Rift had taught them well. *Fang*'s guns never stopped roaring their hate and defiance. The sound was painful and jarring as the double-shotted guns vomited death and made the deck planks buck beneath the gun crews' feet.

"Aye! That it is!" replied the captain. Boye barked his enthusiastic agreement. "Make sure your men have weapons to hand—the Crabs are trying to board aft. Brooadax and her men are taking the fight to

them, but others may try to take advantage of the distraction."

"Aye, sir! We're ready!"

*HewhocommandstheFleet was dismayed. "Why are they still shooting their cannon? How can they fight when they are attacking the Ship? No mind can control fighting hand-to-hand and firing cannon at the same time! No one can do that!"*

Rear Admiral Middlemuss looked at the *Fang* with something approaching awe.

She was like a comet, surrounded by a large cloud of Crab gunboats, but there was still a tail of at least a hundred, maybe two hundred more following her, swirling in and out, trying to get shots off at her. Her upperside mainmast and mizzenmast were shattered, with the top half of the mizzen totally shot away. Blood flowed from her decks. And still they fought, blazing away with cannon from both broadsides, with the stern guns taking their toll on the followers, and the bow cannon taking out any who approached too close to their course. She wasn't making more than five or six knots now, but the *Fang* was still fighting. And, most importantly, she was totally dominating the attention of the Crab fleet.

"Damned if he hasn't gotten them in a perfect shooting gallery lineup for us," the admiral muttered. "And I don't think the buggers even know we're here yet!"

He yelled up at his signal lieutenant, "Signal hoist to read, 'All Ships, turn to greenside, on my mark. Form line ahead. Engage as targets bear. Maximum firing rates. Friendly target danger-close.' Got that?"

"Aye, sir!"

He turned to his flag captain, Captain Stavros of the Frigate *Asimov*. "You understand my intent, then, Captain?"

"Yes, sir. On your command we'll turn to the greenside, form a line of battle, and start pounding the Crab Ships as we sail past them. Since the Crabs all mount their cannons forward, they'll have to break off from the *Fang* to attack us, and incidentally make themselves dead in the water, then we can make them dead indeed!" he finished with savage glee.

"You've got it. It'll be point-blank range for the guns so make sure your boys are ready."

"We'll be ready, Admiral, don't worry. Trust me, we're *all* ready for some payback!"

Melville read the flag hoists as well, with a surge of joy in his heart. *That crusty, poker playing, old S.O.B. actually came through for us! Now we just have to survive for a few more minutes.*

"Mr. Barlet, we're about to have some friendly company off our redside. Make sure your gunners cease fire when the line of battle comes into our firing arc."

The Crabs' attempt at boarding had been well and truly defeated. The flood of marines down into the Crab Ship, from both the upper and lower sides, had turned the table on the enemy boarders, sending them scurrying back in full flight, discouraged, disheartened, and dismayed. But not before Asquith, Fielder, and the quarterdeck crew spent a few frantic minutes potting the Crabs that climbed over the lowerside quarterdeck rail. The deck was littered with twitching Crabs and a handful of writhing humans in their mutual death agonies. The rapid, accurate fire from Asquith's pistols had amazed Fielder. He contributed when he could, in between his responsibilities conning and fighting the Ship as a whole.

*Damn, Fielder thought as he watched Asquith's guns blaze and Crabs drop like flies, that psycho, Ulrich, has really trained Bert to perform under pressure. I wonder what our little earthling could do with a decent pistol, like those .45s we had down on the planet. Going to have to introduce him to those soon. Real soon!*

On the upperside quarterdeck Grenoble, the two rangers and the dogs—along with their monkeys—served the same purpose, hammering the invaders with such gleeful efficiency that Melville and the quartermaster never even had to participate.

The quarterdeck personnel, above and below, only had to defend themselves for a few brief minutes before the *Fang*'s marines hit the Crabs. The lunging line of bayonets moved across the enemy's lowerside bow with Broadax at the center. Fielder watched her pounce forward and sink her ax into the thorax of one of the enemy's big fighter Crabs, while her monkey deflected the alien creature's scorpion-like stinger. Her blow sounded like an ax biting into a log, smashing the big Crab down into the deck and cracking its shell like a coconut. A splash of green ichor fountained out in all directions from the

creature as its innards came out, under compression, from the mashed body. Then she tore her ax out as you would from a chopping block, pulling a ropey string of green slime back with the axhead.

Working together as one, Dwakins and Rawl fought beside her, and they fought well.

Above and below, the marines moved forward like a butchering machine run amok, slicing and dicing the Crabs, pausing for a single volley of massed fire on command, and then pushing forward into the mass.

"Daniel," said Asquith quietly as they watched the marine machine at work aboard the enemy Ship. "Am I mistaken, or did I just hear Dwakins and Rawl shouting, 'Wreckdum! Wreckdum!' over there? What in the *hell* is that all about?"

"I really don't want to know, Bert."

"*Execute!*" ordered the admiral, and the line of battle, all the seaworthy Ships (or as close to seaworthy as they could make them and still get underway in time) turned nimbly to their greenside, forming a line of battle, like a string of ducklings following their mother, the flagship *Asimov*.

Middlemuss pumped a fist in the air in excitement, then quickly placed his hands together behind his back. He tried to maintain a calm stately demeanor, but the huge smile on his face gave him away as he observed the *Fang* draw closer to his beam at about five hundred yards distance. His gunners and officers watched him like a pack of dogs eager to be unleashed, waiting impatiently for the chance to fall upon these scum who had caught them by surprise. The time for retribution was approaching—quickly.

Melville strode the upper quarterdeck, stepping over a groaning sailor. Much as it hurt to leave the man, the captain's job was to keep the *entire* crew alive, not just one wounded crewman. So Melville simply called "Corpsman! Over here!" and kept going.

He glanced over the stern and verified that the marines had their battle in hand. Fighting was still fierce but it seemed to be concentrated at the stern of the Crab Ship.

He looked around the quarterdeck and noted with sorrow that the quartermasters had both been killed

or wounded, and that a seaman named Simpson was manning the wheel. Tiny Aquinar was still standing his watch, hobbling around on his wounded leg and breathing deeply as he awaited orders. Melville nodded to him, "Mr. Aquinar, have the signalman make the signal for 'Reporting for duty.'"

"I'll do it sir," said Aquinar quietly. "Signalman's dead."

Melville felt ashamed that he hadn't even noticed. "Mr. Barlet," he called over the quarterdeck rail, "the redbase batteries will cease fire on my command."

"Aye, sir!" the master gunner replied.

Melville watched as the Westerners Ships came closer to his beam... closer... closer.

"Signal from flagship, sir," said Asquith. "Return to port!"

"Thank you. Mr. Barlet... redbase batteries only, *cease fire* !"

Midshipman Hayl felt the deck heave beneath him and the air was suddenly filled with a shower of deadly wooden shards and falling rigging as yet another cannonball smashed into *Fang*'s mainmast. Other balls screamed overhead like tortured souls escaping from hell.

All around him the mast, decks, and railing were splashed with blood, as though the Ship were being painted by a lunatic. Men were being pulped into purple and scarlet masses by the enemy fire and falling spars that burst through the protective netting. He felt the tug of small splinters and debris on his clothing and wet splatters on his face. Looking down, he saw flecks of gristle and blood on his white pants.

Initially, Hayl was the upper redbase battery commander. His guns hadn't gotten much play at first, and he and his gun crews had quietly watched as Midshipman Palmer, Mr. Barlet, and Captain Melville worked the stern chasers and the upper greenside battery. Then the enemy had begun to pull around the *Fang*'s redbase, and suddenly his guns were very busy.

When Midshipman Palmer was called to replace the injured Aquinar on the upper quarterdeck, Hayl had to fill in and command both the greenside and the redbase batteries. He allocated targets whenever the captain or the master gunner didn't, he saw to a steady supply of shot for the guns and water for the crews, and he redistributed manpower as men were injured and killed.

Then Palmer had died while commanding the quarterdeck, and Hayl's duties and responsibilities became

even greater! He still could not yet fully grasp the fact that the deep voiced, giant of a boy was dead.

Fortunately, Aquinar had limped back from the hospital to resume his duties on the quarterdeck. Hayl deeply respected the courage that it took to come back to the fight. The hospital wasn't really all that much safer, but it would have been tempting to just hunker down there and make the most of your wound. But not little Aquinar.

Young Hayl had been pushed to the limits of his endurance. He tried to be everywhere, encouraging, exhorting, assisting, directing, and allocating resources for his guns. His new arm sent a constant message of support and reassurance from the *Fang*, and his monkey's belaying pin had blocked a dozen deadly splinters.

One of his 12-pounders, Bad Ju-Ju, had been upended by a direct hit, killing or wounding half the gun crew. He had reassigned the survivors and kept the guns firing. It became an obsession with him. The guns must be fed. They must keep firing! They could not stop. They must not stop.

The air shook with each crash of *Fang*'s guns as she gave far more than she received, and her guns, her vicious, feral guns screamed out their hate and wrath. "*Cha-DOOM!!*" And a cannon sprang back inboard where it was caught by its tackle. The sweat-soaked crew reached for fresh fodder to feed their guns, rammed two balls down its throat, and then ran the heavy cannon back out with a squeal like dying hogs.

"*Cha-DOOM!!*" "*Cha-DOOM!!*" The guns pounded like a great, thundering heartbeat, and Hayl knew that if that heart stopped beating, the Ship, and everyone aboard her, would stop living.

The young, one-armed middie felt shocked, stunned, and amazed when the captain gave the command command and the redside guns finally stopped. It was almost as if his own heart had ceased beating.

But they still had the greenside battery to feed and fire. He redirected dazed crewmen, pushing and shoving them to assist the exhausted greenside gunners. And the beat went on...

*HewhocommandstheFleet pulled his mangled foreclaw out of his mouth and watched with satisfaction as one whole side of the hated enemy Ship finally fell silent. It was working! The Royalslayer's sluggish Hivemind was finally turned toward repelling the boarders! He gathered himself to order a mass attack on that side when he felt the sudden confusion of theFleet's Hivemind.*

*He whipped his head around, trying to pinpoint the source... and finally saw them! "Ships!" he cried. "The fleet from the Pier is here! How? How?"*

*The attendants around him groveled and the whole Fleet's Hivemind came to a halt as he snatched up an eager attendant, bit its head off, and sucked its brains out. The little Crab's final conscious act was a cry of blissful joy.*

*Under stress, and in the absence of Royalty, the neural matter from his attendants would go to the admiral's brain and he could be transformed to Royal status, with true Royal command abilities.*

*But, damn, he was quickly running out of attendants!*

*And the soldiers' skulls were too damned thick to suck their brains out...*

*He started to give orders to save his fleet, then stopped, wondering why his voice was muffled. Blast! He had his foreclaw in his mouth again. The urge to devour another attendant was overwhelming, and there were several juicy specimens gathered round, eagerly bobbing their heads up to have their brains consumed. But he had to give orders first!*

*"Retreat!Runaway!Run!Run!" he cried aloud, throwing his claws out frantically and flinging an attendant into two-space with a last wail of confused despair. HewhocommandstheFleet was also sending the same signal, to the best of his limited ability, at all empathic, telepathic and gestalt levels.*

*"Quick, signal the retreat!" he called out to Hewhosendsthesignals. HewhocommandstheFleet ripped an arm off of the signal officer and began to beat him with it as the hapless Crab raised the signal flags up the halyard.*

*Then the enemy fleet opened fire.*

*"Commence firing as the targets come to bear!" ordered the admiral.*

He watched with intense satisfaction as the *Asimov's* broadside rang out from bow to stern, ripping out close-range blasts from their double-shotted cannon, smashing the Crab boats in crushing volleys of 12-pound balls. The gun crews reloaded with a will, returning the guns to battery to deliver their message of vengeance to the next lucky Crabs in line. As each Ship cleared the *Fang*, they commenced to fire in turn, smashing swathes of the Crab's Ships from two-space.

"Damn, I love it when a plan comes together," said Middlemuss to his chief of staff. "Especially one thrown together on a wing and a prayer like this one."

Captain Stockard replied thoughtfully, "I'd have to say that this plan relied a lot on Captain Melville giving us time to get out here. Seems like a lot of responsibility to heap on one young man's head at the last minute."

Middlemuss sighed. "Yes, it is. But *he's* the one who did the heaping. And I could tell from his poker that he plays one *hell* of a bluff. Damned glad I am that he played this bluff, too. Without him getting underway and taking out the attackers at the Pier and then distracting this fleet... Well, without him there wouldn't *be* a fleet."

"Aye, sir," Stockard replied. "Aye."

The Crab fleet began to dissolve like sugar in hot water. Between the pounding guns of the fleet and the broadsides of the *Fang*, their will to fight had been thoroughly shattered. They still outnumbered the Westerness Fleet, but with their courage—and their royalty!—gone, the remains of the Crab fleet started to run for the northern horizon.

Their guns were all mounted at the bow, which meant that they were turning their unarmed sterns to the bow chasers of their very irate pursuers. And while the Crab Ships were very fast, they weren't fast enough to escape unscathed—nowhere near fast enough.

For a stern chase is a long chase, and a faster Ship being pursued by a slower Ship can be in range for quite a long time. As the enemy fleet learned to their sorrow.

"Jarvis," said Broadax, "load up one o' them swivels and train it on the prisoners. If they try ta retake the Ship, ye know what ta do!"

He nodded and moved to a swivel gun mounted on the rail of the captured Crab Ship. Lance Corporal Jarvis was a right smart young lad, and Broadax was confident he could figure out how to make the thing work.

"Uh, sir," Broadax called over to Melville, "they's given up. Or at least they's stopped fightin'. An' yer right, Cap'n, they been studyin' us. Damnme if'n they don't talk our lingo! Sort o'. But they say they can only surrender ta royalty!"

Melville had come to the lower side to assess the damage on this half of his Ship. He and Fielder stood on the lower quarterdeck, watching the rout of the Crab fleet with subdued humor. The *Fang* was still intact, so to speak. She had taken damage. Terrible damage. And it hurt to even consider the butcher's bill, but she could still fight.

"Royalty?" said Melville. "Huh... Well... um, Lt. Fielder is a baronet. Mr. Fielder, the Crabs say they can only surrender to royalty. Go across and sort the matter out, please. There's a good fellow."

Not knowing what else to do, Melville then went back to the business of clearing the Ship's damage and making her ready for further action. It looked like the battle was over, but you never knew.

One thing warrior science had learned (and paid the price in blood to do so) was that if you relaxed after a battle, the price your body demanded was complete and utter exhaustion. That is why Napoleon had said, "The moment of greatest vulnerability is the instant immediately after victory." The best time to counterattack is after the enemy has won: when they let down their guard and were all suffering from the physiological backlash that came after battle.

Men were being carried below, to meet the tender mercies of Lady Elphinstone and her mates, sawing, cutting and stitching endlessly. Others were being dragged to the side, limp and emotionless, to await the sailmaker and his mates, who would sew them into their hammocks for the final journey.

Some of the wounded were moved to the other side, away from the dead, chatting quietly and watching the remaining hands at work with professional interest. Great masses of fallen cordage, shredded canvas, shattered wood, and a dismantled gun were strewn about. Men picked their way amongst it like stunned survivors of a Shipwreck.

To counter this post-combat letdown, Melville knew to keep the men busy. Keep them occupied doing the urgent tasks necessary to fight again if need be. Resupplying the ammunition for the guns, caring for the wounded, clearing away the damage, making repairs to the Ship's rigging—anything and everything that must be done if the Ship was to survive.

Melville stood on the upper quarterdeck and watched his crew scramble to repair the damage. Men and Sylvan were clambering aloft to splice severed lines, while the sound of pounding coming up through the deck told him that the carpenter and his mates were repairing damage to the hull.

The captain jerked in surprise as Thad Brun, one of the *Fang*'s corpsmen, put a hand on his shoulder.

"Cap'n, you're gonna have ta go ta th' sick bay fer some o' these, but I'm gonna take out a couple o' t' worst fer now!"

Melville looked at him in surprise. "What are you talking about?"

"T' splinters, Cap'n. Ya didn't catch any bigguns, but 't looks like ya walked tru a cactus."

Melville stared at him, then looked down at his coat. His right side had a veritable forest of toothpick-sized splinters from his hips to mid chest. At first he thought none had penetrated until he realized the sodden feeling on his side was not sweat... and the damned things burned!

"Oh, hell," he said wearily, "not another session in the body shop."

"Naw," replied Doc Brun as he carefully worked his hand between the coat and his side and then suddenly lifted it clear of the skin to the accompaniment of what felt like a host of fire ants suddenly taking bites of his skin—and in unison, at that!

"Urrrk!" was about all Melville could manage as he rose to tiptoe.

"Eep!" said his monkey cheerfully. It joined Boye and the dog's monkey in craning their necks to observe the process with clinical interest.

"And *why* didn't you block those?" Melville asked his monkey accusingly.

The little creature held up a tattered, scarred and bullet-pocked belaying pin, shrugging innocently and expressively, as if to say, *And just how in the hell was I supposed to have blocked them all?*

"Yep," continued Doc Brun, oblivious to the captain's discomfort. "Nuttin' too serious here, jes' need a bit o' cleanin' out. But I think I'd take that coat off, 'twere I you. It's gots ta feel like a pincushion in there!"

"Thanks, I hadn't noticed!" retorted Melville. "And, Doc, have I mentioned lately that your bedside manner really sucks?"

"Yup, been tole that a'fore. Be glad ol' Doc Etzen didn't treatja, Cap'n. He's not near as gentle as me. Gots ta get back ta work. Yer okay fer now, skipper." And Brun picked up his equipment bag and headed for the next victim.

McAndrews and his monkey prepared the captain a mug of tea and then took his jacket, tut-tuting quietly as he and his monkey sadly examined the ruined garment. "That was yer best dress coat, too. Straight from the party to the battle," muttered the steward. "You *coulda* taken time to change first..."

Fielder was wide-eyed with amazement, an amazement that was tinged with considerable disgust and fear. But he hopped down from *Fang*'s lowerside stern to the Crab Ship's bow and strode to their lower quarterdeck.

"What the hell is going on here," he asked the befuddled Broadax.

"areyouRoyalty?" chittered a little alien, as it waved its eye stalks, feelers, and front pinchers in his direction. "areyouNobleblood?" It sounded like a hyperglycemic child with a mouthful of marbles.

"Yes!" said Fielder arrogantly.

Through the Moss of their Ship the Crabs sensed the truth of Fielder's statement. "Royalty!Nobility!Royalty!" they cried, scuttling around him, tugging at his cuffs.

"Get back, you scum! Get back, I say!" spat Fielder as he sent them flying with kicks of his feet. But still they gathered around in ecstasy at the very idea of meeting true royalty. In horrified panic Fielder kicked one small Crab and stomped another of the groveling creatures, crunching them both into ichorous globs.

"Oh mah gawd we're dead now," said Broadax as she looked at the sudden swarm of Crabs all around them. "Git ready to sing yer death songs boys, Mr. Congeniality here 'as killed us all!" Then, with true dismay in her voice she added, "By the Lady, I can't believe I'm goin' to quaff ale in the hall of my ancestors, an' the only honor guard I can take down with me is a bunch of stinkin' overgrown piss ants!"

"yesyes!" cried the little creatures in ecstasy. "itisRoyalty! wearescum! wearescumtoher! shecrushesusbeneathherfeet! isproofofRoyalty!"

Then they pursued the panic-stricken Fielder across the quarterdeck with renewed vigor, crying, "crush *me!*crush *me!*"

Fielder was trapped in a corner, so he readily obliged them, still shouting, "Get back! Get back!" as the Crabs crunched beneath his feet.

One of the Crab officers, significantly bigger than the others, interceded. He started pushing the royalty

smitten Crab crew out of the way, enlisting some help from a few of his crabby subordinates.

Finally they pushed back the infatuated tide, and the Crab officer approached the terrified Fielder.

"ihavekeptthemback!" it chittered, turning its eye stalks and feelers up to him. "ihaveservedyouwell!"

"Yes, yes, well done" said Fielder.

"nowcrushmeplease! crushme! chrushmeplease!"

"No! You are unworthy! You must take command of this vessel. Obey every order from our Ship. Obey every one of our crewman who is assigned to this Ship. If you serve us well in battle, I will come crush you as a reward, and place someone else in charge."

The Crab officer trembled in such ecstasy that his appendages rattled together. "yesyes! iwillservyou!"

"Yes. Good. Be sure that you do." Then Fielder departed by the same route he arrived, and the Crab officer called after him.

"yes!yes! mayyouhavemanyyoung! mayyoureggsacksburst!"

Broadax and her marines simply looked on in openmouthed wonder. The Dwarrowdelf race had a strong meritocratic streak in them. Their leaders were often hereditary, but only if they proved themselves worthy. So it was that Broadax could speak with a passionate sincerity that most of the men of Westernness could not understand when she concluded, with wonder and disgust, "Gawddamn royalty. They're nothin' but stiff, starched, prong heads anyways!"

Later, Elphinstone tried to tend several of the dying aliens, attempting to treat them (or at least reduce their suffering) but also to understand them.

"I'm sorry that you had to die like this," the Sylvan surgeon told one of the little creatures that had been stomped by Fielder.

"no! isgood!" the alien gasped out. "isRoyalty. isNobleblood." Then its eye stalks rolled up and looked at her. "istrue? isRoyalty?"

"Yes," she said sadly. "I understand that he is a baronet."

"he? is male?"

"Yes."

"ahhh. is good," the crushed creature replied as it shuddered out its last breaths. "is Royalty. could be better. could be female. like Queen."

In dying ecstasy it spoke of its queen mother like a delirious, dying soldier would call out to his mother. "terrible as the dawn. treacherous as the sea. stronger than the foundations of the earth. all shall love Her... and despair. I lick Queen's foot as it crushes me..."

Elphinstone could only shake her head sadly.

Midshipman Hayl stood, swaying with exhaustion and horror.

He could never tell the people at home about this. He could not speak of it, but he could never forget. He knew there would be dreams and nightmares about this battle.

But there was also a surge of pleasure, of *great* joy! There was the pure elation of being alive when he thought all was lost. There was the unspeakable satisfaction of looking in the eyes of living Shipmates and dead foe. The smell, the feel. It was in his blood!"

"Art thou happy, lad?" asked Grenoble, who came up beside him.

"Aye, sir," he replied with sincere surprise. "Aye. Is... is that okay, do you think?"

"The Scots, that great warrior tribe of thy homeworld have a proverb that says, 'Danger and delight grow on the same stalk.' Thou hast cause to be happy, lad. Thy Anne Bronte said that he who 'dares not grasp the thorn should never crave the rose.' Be happy. Rejoice in it. Thou hast earned it."

As the *Fang* limped into the Pier's atmosphere cloud, the guns on the glowing white bulwarks began to roar out a salute. A band was playing, the drums beating and the bugles calling out with wild, piercing cries of delight.

The *Fang* would have dipped her flag in return but the flag, the halyard, and the mast it flew from had all been shot to hell. A weary crew manned one of the 12-pounders and tried to return the Pier's salute, gun for gun, but they gave up after the cannons on the bulwarks just kept banging on and on...

Young Hayl was not the only one with tears in his eyes as the *Fang* s watched the crowds on the docks cheer themselves hoarse. Hayl's monkey screeched in triumph and his new arm surged with feral alien elation. God help him, he *loved* it.

\* \* \*

I remember the bulwarks by the shore,  
And the fort upon the hill;  
The sunrise gun, with its hollow roar,  
The drum-beat repeated o'er and o'er,  
And the bugle wild and shrill.  
And the music of that old song  
Throbs in my memory still:  
"A boy's will is the wind's will,  
And the thoughts of youth are long, long thoughts."

\* \* \*

*Months later, the shattered remnants of the Fleet returned to TheHive and HewhocommandstheFleet knelt trembling before TheQueen, ShefromWhomAllAuthorityflowed. He sighed with relief as he felt his skull crunch beneath TheQueen's powerful mandibles. At last the responsibility—and his head—was off his shoulders...*

*TheQueen carefully considered the information that flowed into her mind as she digested the neural matter of the pathetic, ineffectual male. Hewhowas hewhocommandstheFleet had developed quasi-Royal status during his long trip home, and She had briefly considered mating with him before sucking out his brain, but there was nothing of value in his genes. His status was pure happenstance, andthen he failed to excel.*

*So, Her Fleet had been defeated. And Her best agent, a virtually immortal being that had served her species for untold thousands of years, had come back not just defeated but traumatized and*

*destroyed. These "humans" had overcome the best She had to offer. Twice!*

*But lives lost in battle were as nothing to her. She felt about them like a sailor might think (if he thought at all) about brain cells lost to a hard night's drinking. The important thing was that She had learned much in the process.*

*She now knew the enemy's two great strengths. The humans' two ultimate weapons. One was a powerful, virtually unbeatable Ship, stolen from Her Guldur allies. The other was a malevolent, vicious creature called "cats."*

*The human's ill gotten Ship was slow, and its sails were dead. Still, this enemy Ship was going to be hard to destroy, and She would not underestimate it again.*

*The good news was that Her agent had brought the solution to cats. Soon Her agents everywhere would begin to distribute the powerful bio-toxin that would strip the humans of their cats.*

*She savored the knowledge that these "cats" would soon suffer every flavor of torment!*

# CHAPTER THE 17TH

## Taking the Long Way Home: "The Souls of Fire"

But to the souls of fire I give more fire,  
and to those who are manful  
I give a might more than man.

These are the heroes,  
the sons of the immortals who are blessed...  
for I drive them forth by strange paths  
that they may fight the titans and the monsters  
and the enemies of Gods and men...

Charles Kingsley  
Canon of Westminster and Chaplain to Queen Victoria

*Who was that old general who said that the only thing as bad as losing a battle is winning one?*  
Melville thought to himself in pain.

He had left the sick bay after being treated by Mrs. Vodi and Lady Elphinstone. As usual, they had also treated the young captain to a tongue lashing intended to make him more careful in the future.

"Its my job," he replied. "I've got to be a good example to the crew," he replied.

"Sorry to burst your bubble, Captain," said Mrs. Vodi, "but you look more like a horrible warning!"

He responded with a shrug—which hurt—and an insouciant grin, saying, "An anonymous wise man once wrote that, 'Life is not a journey to the grave with the intention of arriving safely in a pretty and well-preserved body, but rather to skid in broadside, thoroughly used up, totally worn out, and loudly proclaiming, "Wow! What a ride!"'"

"Well, Captain, thy 'ride' hast been naught but an uncontrolled fall thus far." replied Elphinstone. "In medical terms thou art what we call CTD: circling the drain. If thou hast any plans beyond the next few years, thou wouldst be well advised to learn how to apply the brakes."

Melville looked at his Ship in dismay as Fielder, Hans, and DeWalt stood with him on the upperside gundeck.

The *Fang*'s hull had been pierced, smashed, and gouged in a surprising number of places. The rigging looked as if a maniac with a carving knife had been hacking out bits and pieces of rope, canvas, and wood, and then reglued them together at random. That was due to the topmen working like fiends to keep the masts, spars, sails, and rigging functional throughout the battle.

The Keel though (the all-important Keel!) was miraculously untouched.

The nets rigged above the main deck had proven useful in saving more than a few lives—much to Fielder's mixed disgust and satisfaction. Disgust that the idea worked, and satisfaction that he wouldn't have to find more men to man the Ship.

*No, give the man his due*, Melville thought. *The satisfaction was due to the men's lives being saved.* Fielder might be a thorough bastard at times, but he cared about his men. Of course, the reason (or so Fielder explained to anyone who asked) was that qualified, competent men who were thoroughly trained would keep him alive longer. Luckily, no one had ever said he had to like them all! But respect for competence, now *that* was important. And the thought of losing a competent sailor was enough for Fielder to suggest that the idea for rigging nets be submitted to the Admiralty as well as the *Naval Institute Proceedings*. Melville suspected that his first officer might need to visit a local dentist before they left again—the way that man ground his teeth!

Walking with *Fang*'s first officer, carpenter, and sailing master to survey the damage to their Ship was a sobering experience. Here, a shattered gun carriage, the 12-pound cannon still lying on the deck, with the area around it splashed with dark, dried blood, emitting a faint burned-pork smell overshadowed by the iron-coppery reek of blood and the stench of feces and urine—both purged and riven from sailors—still hanging in the air. Underfoot the deck was littered with splinters (as if a chunk of wood a foot and a half long and an inch through could truly qualify as a "splinter"!) rammed into the Nimbrell wood. And over there, a smear of blood and other... *things* less easily identifiable coated the bulkhead. *Enough!* he thought bleakly.

As they climbed down into the upper hull, the first thing that met the captain's eye was a hole in the hull that a boy could crawl through. "Gentlemen," he said, "your opinions of the damage?"

They looked at each other, then Hans nodded and spoke first. "Well, sir," he said, then paused as he and his monkey spit tobacco juice out yet another hole smashed through the hull of the Ship, "yer know, the old gal is actually pert' near seaworthy. Hull's good, got sum patchin' ta do. Prolly have ta replace the upperside mainmast and mizzenmast, it wus only quick work on riggin' an' stays kept 'em up, they's so beat ta hell. A helluva lot of riggin' ta be replaced. An' some o' the yards is sprung bad. Got's ta replace most o' the canvas too." Hans stopped talking, chewed slowly on his wad of tobacco, shifted the cud to his other cheek and looked over at Melville.

"Cap'n, I gots ta talk 'bout the sails. Them glowy ones the Crabs had." Hans looked over at Melville who simply nodded for him to continue.

"I bin lookin' the stuff over. It's light. 'Bout half the weight o' our canvas. An' the glowy stuff is Elbereth's Moss!" he finished reverently. "Lady Elbereth's Gift, on sails! Who'd a thunk it! Midshipman Hayl dun brought it ta me. Said *Fang* liked it main well, so's he'd been talkin' to the Crabs. He's sayin' that they's sorter fascinated with his hook, so he got's 'em talkin' 'bout it, an' they tol' him they grow this stuff! He says one o' dem Crabs can start growin' it on the sails, an' it'll grow an' take over from the canvas."

<<I WANT / DESIRE / NEED THIS!>> came blasting into Melville's mind so strongly he winced, as did DeWalt, followed by scandalized and annoyed *EEK*s from their monkeys.

Melville shook his head carefully, then said, "And I imagine you want permission to start trying to farm our sails with this Moss growing material?"

"Well, sir, I know it's a new ideer, an' even though I ain't much on newfangled things..." He trailed off for a moment. "Even so, yessir, I do recommend we tries it. I mean, it's the Lady's Gift! It's meant to be used! I don't mean to git all religious an' mystical, but it's like the Lady herself's given it to us, to help keep us outta the hands o' the Elder King. So, mebbe we'll try it on one sail first, ya knows?"

Melville nodded. "Good, good. If we can use this new 'Mossy' sail instead of canvas, then that will shave quite a few tons of weight off of our vessel, which should correlate to some speed improvement. Not to mention, *Fang* seems curiously intent on obtaining sails made of this material. And, in all honesty, I think it might be best to keep our gallant lady happy with whatever finery she so desires."

DeWalt smiled and said, "I think that the sailcloth may have more effect than simply weight reduction. In any case, though, *Fang* does seem intent on them. I thought our *Fang* was going to take my head off in her eagerness to get these sails! And with due cause, I do believe."

"Please explain," said Melville, who was eager to learn any Celebri secrets that his carpenter might let slip. "Captain," said DeWalt carefully, "I've been examining the Crab Ship. The 18-pound cannon are nice, very nice indeed. Still, in comparison to the 24-pounders, they are not truly that important. But there are two other... *treasures* aboard that Ship. Treasures of unimaginable worth. First are the swivel guns!"

"I like the sound of 'treasures of unimaginable worth,'" said Fielder as he leaned against a bulkhead and crossed his arms. "Although my capacity for imagining treasure may be better than you think. But how could these little popgun swivels be of value, Joby? They can't be much more than a three-pounder."

"I have to be careful about giving away secrets here," replied the carpenter, licking his lips, "but it is as if you had horses and cats, but no dogs! Nothing to fill that gap! The ships of Hornblower's days were littered with swivel guns, and they were a key ingredient in the ship-to-ship battle. Kind of the machine gun of their day. But we don't have that, and we can't... er, can't 'design' one. We don't have the ability to make it. If you had any *idea* of the resources and effort that have gone into making them across the years! Well, believe me, it has remained one of the top three items in the Celebri wish list."

"Hmmm, and what are the other two?" asked Melville, trying to be casual.

"I can't say, Captain. I've already given away more than I should. But war is upon us now, and believe me, these swivels will be of incredible value. And the Celebri will reward the *Fang* enormously for two of them."

"Once again, it has to be two, eh?" Melville probed. "As though you had to breed them?"

"Captain, I implore you to keep that kind of conjecture to yourself."

"Very well," said his captain with a nod. "Please continue. You said there were *two* treasures?"

"Aye," continued DeWalt excitedly. "The other is the sailcloth!"

"Was *that* on the Celebri wish list?" asked Fielder.

"Ha! We never even thought of it as a possibility. It is beyond our wildest dreams! Truly, sending samples of the sail material to the Guild headquarters, along with some Crabs to tend it, is of vast importance. We all understand that the amount of Moss living as part of the entity affects its ability. The bigger the gun, boat, or Ship, the 'smarter' the entity. I am only conjecturing now, but I think the value of the sails that allow growth of the Moss on them might be more important than the just the weight savings! The potential value includes the mental, or calculation ability of the Ship. And I think it might explain the impressive speed of the Crab boats!"

"Sez you," interjected Hans. "Damned mains'ls weigh a couple o' tons each, all by their ownelves! The weight alone explains the diff'rnce!"

"Be that as it may," said DeWalt, "I think the added area of Moss growth may prove to be more important in the long run. And what if this sailcloth is better at catching the 'winds' of two-space? We don't really know what it *is* that our sails catch. Many experts believe that it is a two-space manifestation of gravitational forces. We just call it the 'wind' to explain how it can push our sails. Whatever it is, it's entirely possible that this sailcloth, consisting of a two-space organism, would be better at catching the two-space wind, thus giving us greater speed!

"You know, Captain," the carpenter continued with a dreamy, distant look in his eyes, "it is a weird and wonderful galaxy out there. The Ships and guns are sentient, because they are capable of being coated with Moss. Why *not* the sails, which are an extension of the Ship! Or maybe even the rigging, or a sword, or who knows what?"

"Enough, Mr. DeWalt!" said Melville with a laugh and a kind hand on the man's broad shoulder, as he reeled his carpenter back into reality. "I believe that I can understand the potential importance of the sails. But right now, we need to get repairs started more than we need to debate the utility of captured Crab accouterments, correct?"

"Aye. Anyhow, Captain," DeWalt continued, "I take it that you noticed the Crabs were trying *not* to kill our Ship? The people, yes, but they wanted the *Fang*, and wanted her bad enough to keep trying to chip away at us rather than simply blasting our Keel at point-blank range. I find that rather disturbing myself, since I don't think our crabby friends have the physiological capability to climb through the rigging to sail her. And if they can't sail her, then why did they want her? That's a puzzle, and I simply don't like the answers I keep getting."

Fielder smiled sardonically. "You mean answers like the idea that the crab cakes were working with that

scumbag of a Guldur Admiral?"

Melville grinned briefly and then winced as he tried to shrug. "I think we can take it as a working assumption that the Guldur were clearly involved in the planning for this somehow. Hope the cur chokes on this mess in any case. All right people, back to the main issue. And that issue being: time to repair the Ship. How long?" Melville fixed his officers with a gimlet eye.

DeWalt looked at Hans, who raised an eyebrow. The carpenter nodded and then said, "Captain, Mr. Hans and I have been discussing the very same thing. We're agreed that with just the Ship's resources we can be ready to get underway in two or three days. But—and it's a big one—we won't be in shape for combat. And, it looks like we're headed for more combat." He sighed and rolled his big shoulders to loosen them up. "For us to be combat ready, using Ship's resources, we're talking about five to six weeks minimum. We can do that without bankrupting the Ship—but just barely."

Melville scowled. "Damn, I really don't like those odds. How about using the Shipyard resources here on Hector?"

DeWalt nodded. "With the Shipyard's full resources, I can have the *Fang* out of here in under two weeks. Replace instead of repair, do it the fast way. And to be honest, I know the master of the local Celebri chapterhouse in Hector, and if I lead the work it'll get done better and faster."

He grinned. "Reason I know the masters here, is that one's my cousin, and the other married my little sister. And I was on the board that sat for their mastership."

He sobered quickly as he continued. "However, the odds on using the Shipyard are very low right now. They have five Westerness frigates they are trying to salvage and repair, which has the yard fully preoccupied."

Melville nodded thoughtfully. "All right, gentlemen. Complete the things that must be done immediately. Get your folks taken care of and make sure they're doing okay. Mr. Fielder and I have to finish the after-action report and have my clerk get it copied and over to Rear Admiral Middlemuss' office. Keep the folks going in two-in-three watches so they can get some rest, but make sure we have lookouts set in case the Crabs come back for another visit. And make sure that *you* get some rest."

"That goes fer you too, Cap'n!" said Hans with a grin. "Looks ta me like yer body's debtors is all lined up to collect on their IOUs!"

"Aye, Hans. You've got *that* right," replied Melville with yet another grin that turned into a wince. "I'm going to lead by example on this one."

Melville slept through most of the morning and felt pretty decent when he got up. He might not be the most patient man in the world, or the most cautious, and certainly not the most diplomatic, but he was right up there at the top of the line when it came to resiliency.

He smiled at the image in the mirror as he called for McAndrews. Time for a shave and to get cleaned up, and then...

Then he sobered as he thought, *And then it's time to visit the naval hospital and see how Lady Elphinstone and the doctors had gotten along with my sailors. And then the letters to the families of the men that died, and having Brother Theo set up the funerals...*

More funerals. Always there were the funerals...

Boye came over, sat on the floor next to him, and put his head on his person's knee. Melville absently rubbed the dog's ears. Their two monkeys were chattering happily to each other as they rooted out some small insect or alien vermin in the corner.

He leaned over and scratched Boye's chest with both hands. The dog immediately stuck his long tongue out to lick his person's face.

"Ahh, *phhbtt*," Melville hacked and spit as he pushed the dog away. "I should know never to have my mouth open near you unless I want to have my tonsils licked!"

Boye bounced up, ready to play, but was disappointed when his master turned back to the mirror to continue getting ready. Melville might have a lot of limitations and failures, but one thing he did well was living in the moment, with all its joys and pains. And for now, getting ready to face a most difficult day was sufficient.

Several days later, Melville was feeling relatively at peace with the world. The funerals were over, and the *Fang*s had grieved intensely but briefly. The repairs had begun, even though they weren't progressing very quickly. Hector's Shipyard was overwhelmed by the sudden influx of major repairs, and top priority was being given to Ships that were barely staying afloat. By virtue of her relatively intact condition, the *Fang* wasn't slated to receive dockyard support for another week, or three... or more.

Dockyard resources and supplies might be tight for a frigate, but Melville was able to scrape up sufficient materials to repair the one-masted Crab Ship they had captured. She would be a useful little tender and he was determined to keep her. There were many times when a small, fast Ship with a healthy

bite could come in handy.

In a remarkable turn of events, Midshipman Hayl had been adopted by the Crabs and their Ship. Lt. Fielder had taken the young middie over to tell the Crabs that Hayl was in charge of a routine repair detail aboard their Ship. The first officer had wisely kept a phalanx of bayonet-armed marines around himself to prevent the royalty-besotted Crabs from mobbing him with their sycophantic scuttling.

The Crabs' initial response to the small, one-armed midshipman was intense curiosity. Then the bizarre crustaceans decided that Hayl must be Fielder's larva or pupae.

"threelimbs? isgrub! islarva! ispupae! royallarva! wewillprotecthim! wewillnurturehim!"

The Crabs seemed to watch over Hayl with a proprietary air, as someone to be cherished and protected. Unlike their adoration of Lt. Fielder, which was a completely different story. *Talk about your one-sided love affair!* Melville chuckled to himself as he reflected on the matter. The Crabs had an inbred adoration of royalty and hereditary nobility of any type. Fielder, on the other hand, absolutely loathed the Crabs. (He didn't even like seafood!) Since this was roughly the relationship the Crabs had with their own royalty, the little alien creatures felt right at home.

Fielder, though, was considerably less content with the situation. It looked like maybe the answer was to put Hayl in charge of the Crab Ship.

The captain's thoughts broke off suddenly as Midshipman Aquinar knocked on the door and then stuck his head and shoulders in. "Sir, Lt. McKurkle is here from the admiral's office," he said solemnly.

"Ah. Send him in straightway, would you?" Melville replied as he stood up and tucked in his shirt.

"Welcome, Kit." Melville smiled as his guest entered. "I thought I still had a few hours before we met for cards tonight," Melville added in a jesting manner.

The two of them had spent a good bit of time together over the last few days, most of it at the admiral's quarters. Large quantities of cigars and spirits had been reduced to smoke and fumes in working meetings at the admiral's office. In the present crisis, poker games were now somewhat fewer and farther between. But the admiral still managed to fit in some of his beloved poker sessions. He had an interesting method of deciding how to allocate scarce resources. He got the principal officers involved in the issue to attend a game, and hashed out the problems with the men involved over cards, sorting out problems and priorities.

Essentially it was the same business that would have been conducted in the flag conference room, but in much more congenial surroundings. And these occasions were helping the Admiral forge his fleet and officers together into a unit. But it took time, and time was something that Melville wasn't sure they had to

spare.

"I have a feeling that all bets are off tonight, Thomas," Lt. McKurkle returned soberly. "Admiral Middlemuss sent me to bring you to his office as soon as possible. And no, I can't talk about it, but..." He looked up and met Melville's eyes. "I am also to tell you that the *Fang* will be transported to the Shipyard area at the beginning of the second shift, and you are to ensure that the Ship is prepared."

Melville looked at him closely. McKurkle looked serious, but then he often did. Melville wondered idly if a sober demeanor was something that was issued to all admiral's aides when they took the job.

"Aye, I'll pass the word immediately. And then we'll head over to the admiral's. I must confess, my curiosity is piqued."

"Dammit, Melville, sit down," said Rear Admiral Middlemuss. The admiral was reclining thoughtfully back in a chairdog and he gestured curtly to a matching dog. The coffee table between them was made of an exotic wood that seemed to trap the eye when you tried to follow the dark whorls of its grain. The room was filled with dark wood and thick rugs, smelling of the admiral's rich pipe tobacco, with faint undertones of beeswax polish and chairdog.

Melville eased himself down and the big creature *woofed* softly while Melville scratched behind its ears. The chairdog enticed him with its softness, as it was intended to, contouring and drawing him down into its furry warmth. Melville remained tense for a moment, and then he relaxed and allowed the creature to have its way as the admiral's steward passed him a steaming hot cup of deliciously sweet tea. As usual whenever he was in a chairdog, Melville's monkey began to quietly explore the big, soft creature.

"Well, Thomas, you've already been informed that your Ship is going into the Shipyard tonight. Before I explain, I want to know about your plans for this little Crab gunship that you've refitted."

Melville shrugged. "I see it as having great potential to be an extremely fast scout, tender, and consort for the *Fang*. Unless I'm forced to, I have no intention of selling it for prize money. The hive-mind crew of the Crab Ship bonds to royalty, and they have bonded to Baronet Fielder, my first officer, much to his dismay and embarrassment. He treats them, well, disdainfully, while everyone else tries to be nice. The result is that the enemy crew grovels and admires Fielder even more, since he's treating them exactly the way their own royalty does."

"Huh. I'll be damned," replied the admiral. "'Different strokes for different folks,' eh? From everything I've heard, your Fielder would best understand that."

"Aye, sir."

"Do you intend to put Fielder in command?"

"No, sir," Melville answered, sipping at his tea thoughtfully. "I don't think he'd stand for it. The Crabs seem to have accepted little Midshipman Hayl as Fielder's larva or grub. Their relationship to immature royalty or nobility is one of mutual love and affection that's easier for us to understand. So I'm thinking about putting Hayl in command of the Crab Ship, with a small crew of humans to support him."

"Be careful, damnit," the admiral growled. "It might be a trap."

"Aye, sir," Melville replied with a cocky grin. "It *could* be rigged with biological contaminants, alien saboteurs, or bad poetry. But I don't think so. My Ship tells me we should trust it, my *gut* says we can trust it, and I'd like to have it along."

"Okay, I can see where a Crab tender and scout would come in handy. And Lord knows, you'll need all the help I can give you. Anything you need from the dockyard will go to the Crab Ship as well as the *Fang*."

"Aye, sir...?" Melville responded, questioningly.

"You want to know what the hell's going on, that makes me grab you and pull you into my office, and shove the *Fang* ahead of half the other Ships for repair, most of whom have more senior captains and more serious damage, right?" Middlemuss lifted one corner of his mouth while his eyes narrowed with an "almost" smile.

The semi-smile disappeared as the admiral continued. "A fast mail packet arrived this morning. It came straight from the Admiralty on Earth, via Show Low." Melville sat up straight at the news.

"Oh, sit back, Thomas. It wasn't the old ladies at the Admiralty trying to stick their fingers in your eye again. Truth to tell, I would have *much* preferred that. Come to think of it, so would you."

Melville's eyebrows rose in astonishment before he corralled them, forcing himself to lean back in his chair and put on the poker face he had been practicing of late.

The admiral continued. "The Crabs' attack appears to have been timed to hit just before we got word of a Guldur attack on Westernness. Our Guldur guest probably received advance warning, as you saw, during last night's party. His Ship left port, heading west, immediately after he left the party. Shortly thereafter, the Crabs hit. But you know all about that."

The old admiral's face was grim as he continued. "The news is... overwhelming. We found out that Westerness has been invaded by the Guldur. Vast enemy fleets have swept through and devastated our empire. Dozens of small planets have fallen to the enemy before they could get warning, with everyone destroyed, hideously and horribly butchered by the Guldur. As word spread by fast Ships, hundreds of small, one-Pier worlds had to pull their Pier down or face invasion and destruction. All those Piers died when they were brought into three-space, but it was the only choice.

"Lord knows how long it will be before we can get back to those worlds with another Pier. Many of them only had a total population of a few thousand souls. The poor bastards may not be able to survive under these conditions."

Melville thought of all the planets they had visited on their lazy journey through the "smallness" of Westerness. Hundreds of those fragile frontier worlds would now have to fend for themselves. Many of them would die slow, lingering, horrible deaths: alone, afraid, and cut off from the rest of humanity.

"It was classic maneuver warfare. The Guldur didn't attack our strength. They cut through us, avoiding our main fleet and destroying our heartland, like Sherman's march to the sea during the American Civil War in the nineteenth century.

"This attack was a devastating economic loss to our star kingdom. And just the threat of another such invasion fleet may make the continued expansion and sustainment of Westerness, as it is currently happening, unviable. The only option is to go on the offensive. But the limitation in Keels and Piers means that it will be very difficult to launch a major offensive."

Melville felt a sick, stunned feeling in the pit of his stomach as the admiral continued grimly. He sat on the edge of his seat, oblivious to the chairdog's quiet protest, and placed his teacup carefully on the coffee table. His monkey also ignored the chairdog and quietly moved up to Melville's shoulder, its big eyes shining intelligently.

"The worst of it was what they did to Earth. Apparently, the Guldur dropped a bunch of tiny containers over the side while they conducted a raid on Earthport. They weren't really attacking the Pier. The raid was just a cover for the Guldur to get close enough that the containers could transition back to three-space in such a way that they were in Earth's atmosphere. High, but in atmosphere. As best we can tell, the containers were imbedded with the Elbereth Moss, or the Elder King's Gift, or whatever the hell caused the Crash."

The admiral stopped and looked at his pipe, playing with it for a moment before relighting it. "Once it got on Earth, the virus got into the Earth's grid..."

"Oh, dear Lord!" breathed Melville. "Another Crash. Except this one was intentionally started by our enemies."

"Aye. This is something *we* don't have to worry about. As citizens of the Kingdom of Westernness, we intentionally limit technology to levels that two-space will grudgingly accept. The Sylvans learned this lesson thousands of years ago, and we followed in their footsteps. But Earth has been one of our weak points, simply because they've refused to accept any restraints on their technology.

"So, as we read the scenario, on high-tech worlds like Earth, the enemy can send down some kind of bio-electronic virus bomb that creates another Crash. Any Ship can drop these bombs by simply passing over the two-space location of the planet.

"On Earth the result has been the death of *billions*, and an almost complete destruction of the infrastructure on the planet. Water purification, distribution, and pumping worldwide. The food factories that kept them all fed. The climate control and air circulation for underground warrens where they lived. You name it, it's broken. Virtually the entire population of Earth is wiped out. Most died horribly. Suffocated. Dehydrated. Starved..."

The pipe stem in Middlemuss' trembling hands snapped with a brittle sound, and he carefully laid it on the coffee table.

"The wheels have come off of any kind of World War II or *Lord of the Rings* analogy for our kingdom," the admiral continued, gazing down at his pipe sadly. "Basically, the Germans have nuked New York, the Orcs are in the Shire, and the Eastern Seaboard of the U.S. has been ravaged by Nazi panzer divisions. Decades, maybe centuries of bitter war are in front of us. And Westernness has paid the price for its obsession with peace and staying out of the Elder Race's affairs. Any government that is adamantly unwilling to pay war's butcher bill up front will inevitably pay it with compound interest in the end. There's an old, old quote by a man named Porteus:

"War its thousands slays,  
Peace its ten thousands.

"In this case, though, it was tens of billions. *Billions*," he whispered. "Damn, I can barely even conceive of it!" the Admiral said while shaking his head slowly.

"And, with exquisite timing, their allies attacked us out here. There have been reports of enemy agents and sabotage everywhere." Then, with a thin smile, he continued, "Some bastard even dumped piranha in my koi pond. They might try to sabotage your Ship, Melville, so keep an eye out."

"Will do, sir, but we haven't seen anything so far."

Admiral Middlemuss nodded distractedly and continued. "The good news is that the billions of citizens on the Moon, Mars, Venus, Jupiter's moons, and all of Earth's other colonies are untouched. For them

two-space was always a kind of unreal sideshow. But now war is upon them and they are taking it seriously. There is cause to believe that they will be invested in helping us as best they can."

And so, war was finally upon them, thought Melville. War. The bloody, tragic domain of tyrants. The sport of kings, emperors, and would-be gods. The acid test of men and of civilizations. The red forge of death and democracy, of fear and freedom. And the profession of warriors, who took their wages in the coin of death and glory, honor and pain. War had come to Westernness ... and to Earth.

"The rest of the good news is that the two Ships you captured, the *Gnasher* and the *Biter*, commanded by your two wolf cubs, were the only thing we had that could defeat the enemy. They've become quite the heroes back home, ultimately leading the fleet that drove the enemy off, harassing and hammering them halfway back across the Grey Rift."

Melville glowed with pleasure when he heard about Archer and Crater's triumph with *Gnasher* and *Biter*. He had been terribly tempted to steal their 24-pounders away from them, in order to fill the gaps in his Ship. But he couldn't bring himself to rob them of their precious guns when he knew that a war was coming. Now those guns, those *magnificent* guns had saved Westernness and sent the Guldur running with their tails between their legs. And on *this* side of the galaxy, Melville, his Ship and his guns had defended Westernness' western frontier. Those damned, deadly, rabid, magnificent, vicious, wonderful, savage guns had been the key to the survival of their civilization.

"And," said the admiral, "you're an even *greater* hero across whatever is left of Westernness. Which means the Admiralty—or at least certain senior members of it—hates and fears you more than ever. They've made it clear, in no uncertain terms, that you are not, under any circumstances, to come any further to the east than the Hero Cluster. In fact, I am under orders to send you on further west, and not to let you come back. You really have pissed-off the old, ossified coffin dodgers in the Admiralty, son. If it wasn't for the potential damage that their idiocy is doing to Westernness' survival, I'd congratulate you on the quality of your enemies, but as it is..." The admiral trailed off, shook his head, and continued.

"Of course, when those orders were written the Admiralty didn't know about the Crabs' attack on *us*. I'll follow my orders, but I will also use my authority, as the crown governor-general, to give you letters of marque and reprisal, to capture or destroy all Guldur and Crab Ships you should encounter."

"Damn them, sir! We're in the middle of a nightmare, and they're keeping their best Ship on the other side of the galaxy!" Melville paused for a moment to control his indignation at the infernal idiots at the Admiralty. Then he thought about what the admiral had just told him.

"Huh. Letters of marque to capture Guldur. Thanks a lot sir. With respect, there's not much chance of capturing too many of *them*."

"Not around here, but if you go far enough west you will. Head out to help Captain Everet and our colony on Morning Glory. Assist and inform our Sylvan allies, and keep on going west, for as long and as far as you want. Hurt the bastards, son. Hurt 'em bad! Sooner or later you'll run out of Crabs and you'll

catch the Guldur in the rear! Eventually you'll get back to Osgil.

"Capture their Ships and pull up any Pier that they don't take down. Do a Sherman's march combined with a Doolittle raid on them. Pull whatever inspiration you want from history, so long as it has you behind what they think are their front lines, *hurting them!*"

Middlemuss took a breath and continued a little more calmly. "Use your own judgment, just make the bastards bleed! I'm counting on you to be a running sore in the enemy's flank. Drain them of some of their strength. Capture what you can and sink the rest. Assist our friends and kill our enemies! And, by God, I hope you can tell the difference between them better than the Admiralty can!"

"This may be the end of Westernness as we know it," the Admiral concluded weakly. "We truly are hanging by a thread. Earth is gone, billions dead, our kingdom in a shambles..."

Rear Admiral Middlemuss looked at Melville with a scowl that only partially belied his inner reflections. *The boy is just... good. Decent and good, dammit!* thought the admiral. That was the only way he could think to put it. He had never known anyone who could be called simply "good."

*Without Fielder and his crew of alien thugs Melville would be helpless in the world, yet they are all magnified and somehow made stronger and better by their captain. The Almighty has woven him deeply into the fabric of the universe, he has been raised up to answer the challenge of the age, and the galaxy is a better, richer place for it.*

That's what the admiral thought. What he said was, "Melville, a wise man once said that, 'Sometimes the sickeningly self-righteous—like you—are the last bastion of defense.'"

"Well... I wouldn't put it quite that way, sir."

"Humph. All your talk of duty and honor can be a bit cloying, but dammit, the truth is that you're right. You are our kingdom's forlorn hope. Even if no one else sees it, I do. And someone was foolish enough to put me in charge; so, *by God*, that's what's going to happen."

As always, Melville was caught off balance by the promise of peril and responsibility. It took him by surprise and his first reaction was that he didn't like it. Yet while his immediate response was almost despairing, soon the lure of the challenge and the promise of the future began to make itself felt. He had been given a free hand and an opportunity to make great contributions. And a chance to return to his princess on Osgil! What more could any man ask?

Of course, most of a galaxy—as well as several billion enemy—stood in the way. *But that's no obstacle to true love!* Melville grinned and said, "That a worthy task is impossible is no excuse for not attempting it."

The admiral slowly shook his head as he watched Melville's smile. The young captain was given a forlorn hope. A veritable suicide mission. And he was loving it. "Anything that is in my power to assist you, anything within reason and my authority, it's yours," assured the Admiral.

Melville thought quickly. He planned to pick up a flotilla of war prizes, and as this flotilla was assembled, he would have to see that every vessel had an officer who could be relied upon to read and transmit signals correctly. Unless communications were good, all discipline and order would be lost. And he needed someone to command the Crab Ships. Someone the Crabs would accept, like they accepted Hayl. That meant more middies. Lots of middies.

"Well, sir, I need a completely free hand from the Shipyard. Not just repairs, but all the supplies and spares I can fit aboard. And I'll need officers, midshipmen, and petty officers to take charge of prizes."

"Yes, yes, I'll tell the Shipyard's captain superintendent to give you anything you need. Humph. Every young captain's wish is to have his way with my Shipyard, like a lad lusting after my daughter," the admiral muttered with a sour grin.

"As to officers. Hmmm. I don't have authority to order the assignment of officers, only NAVPERS can do that. But I can give you permission to conduct field promotions within your Ship. That's a trick you seem to have already mastered, and you'd probably do it anyway once you leave my immediate authority. At least this way you won't have to worry about them being confirmed down the road. Hmmm, and I can give you some petty officers as well as fill you up with able-bodied seamen and marines. And Dr. Myriad-Forsythewald is begging to go with you. So I'm sending him along. He might just be useful. God knows he's a royal pain in the arse here, always nosing around and pulling those outrageous bluffs at the poker table!"

Then, with a scowl the admiral continued, "And as to middies, well, you can have all of *them* you want. Our star kingdom has hundreds of families with enough political connection to get a midshipman's rating for their boys, but not enough clout to get them into the academy. Impoverished, expendable younger sons have been foisted off on the Navy from across the kingdom and beyond, just to get them out of the way, with an outside chance that they can make their fortunes at sea. A sizable portion of them seem to wash up here, like flotsam on a distant beach. Try hard not to get them killed, but they're out here because nobody will miss them too badly. And if you make them all rich heroes you'll have support from every sector of Westernness!"

"Aye, thank you, sir."

"So, you are the man of the hour. They're just your sort out there Melville, all monsters and fierce beasties, the lot of them. Now you've got the war you've been calling for, and the kind of mission that I think you and your Ship were meant for. My career, on the other hand, will be destroyed either way. If you get sunk or captured I'm to blame. And if you make it back to Osgil those old women in the Admiralty will never forgive me. But this is what is best for the kingdom, and if the price is my own

mediocre career, then so be it."

"Sir, this isn't what I wanted."

"I have no complaints. Thanks to you we survived a surprise attack from a superior force, and by God I led a fleet in battle! I'll see to it that word about your role here gets back to the press in Westerness. That'll put another knot in the Admiralty's panties!"

"And besides, I'm counting on you to bring back a vast fleet of war prizes, and I'll get the admiral's share of it all. My career may be finished, but if you do your job, maybe I'll go out as a very rich man."

The work being done in the Shipyard was progressing better than Melville could have hoped. The tripod being used as a crane to install the new masts on the *Fang* had been erected in less than a watch, and dropping in the two new masts had taken less than a day.

The time-consuming part was the actual installation of the rigging to support the masts and sails, followed by the backbreaking work of actually putting the new sails into place. Since the two-space environment was so hostile to non-organic materials, the Ships of Westerness were all equipped with natural fiber canvas—strong, sturdy and unbelievably heavy to the uninformed. While Westerness' society was uniformly against unrestrained technology, almost every sailor would have been happy to use lighter materials—if they would only survive the environment.

Sails made from once-living materials were the only thing that would withstand the stresses and rigors of two-space for long enough to be useful. Silk would have been a good replacement—but when made thick enough to substitute for sailcloth it became prohibitively expensive. The high-tech replacements for silk lasted for only a few days in two-space before starting to degrade. The historical replacements such as nylon and kevlar and their ilk performed no better before their untimely demise.

Thus, canvas sailcloth made of cotton fibers reigned supreme in two-space, as it had for centuries on the sailing ships of Earth. To expedite rigging the sails, the Shipyard actually had heavy-duty block and tackle, kept on the planet below and fully inspected and tested before each and every use. This equipment still relied on old-fashioned human effort, but it let that muscle power be used much more efficiently, although with a greater element of risk than was normally tolerated in two-space.

Hans, Melville, and Brother Theo were watching from the *Fang*'s upper quarterdeck, surrounded by a great whirlwind of activity and an all-encompassing din as the new sails were being hoisted up into place.

"Well, gentlemen," Melville told his companions as they watched the evolution, "I've officially put Mr. Hayl in charge of the Crab Ship we captured. He's named her the *Sting*, after that stinger that the Crab

warriors have. He says the Ship is pleased with the name, and apparently the *Sting* and her crew are happy to have him in command."

"Aye, Cap'n," said Hans. "By the Lady, Mr. Hayl's a good call, if I may say so. But I told the lad he shoulda named her the *Shrimp*. Heh, heh! Git it? A tiny shellfish, eh?"

"I couldn't agree more," nodded Theo. "About Mr. Hayl, that is. For he is a choice young man, and goodly, and there is not among the children of *Fang* a goodlier person."

"Hmm, I'm glad you two agree. It's quite a responsibility for someone his age, but it seems to be working out. Mr. Hans, as soon as we get these sails on, let's get that new Crab sailcloth in place on the *Fang* so it can start growing."

"Aye, Cap'n!"

"You know," continued Melville, "we haven't really slowed down to think about it, but it really is amazing that the Crabs *grow* the sailcloth. I'm still trying to wrap my mind around the idea of *growing* something in two-space."

"Aye," Brother Theo agreed. "And if this material is cheaper than sailcloth... or even close!" He paused as he swallowed his excitement. "If it is cheaper, then we have a product that would make the crew of the *Fang* unbelievably wealthy if we could corner the market..."

Hans grinned at the purser and nodded his head happily. "Turns out there's nuffin' easier 'n growin' it. They gots a Crab what sews patches onto the sailcloth an' then the Crab encourages it t' grow, like." He frowned momentarily. "Not too sure how 'e does it. But it grows! An' when it grows it eats the sailcloth an' replaces it wit' the glowin' sailcloth stuff. I still got that sail from the Crab Ship we ramm'd an' sunk, an' we can git it started on the upper and lower fores'ls right away, Cap'n."

"Aye, make it happen, Hans," Melville replied. Then he took a deep breath and said slowly to Brother Theo, "You know, if this sail material is as good as *Fang* thinks it is, it's going to be a huge edge for our Navy. I'm not sure it's even ethical to make a profit on something so important to the survival of our culture—hell, our very species!"

"Future profits, now..." said Theo thoughtfully.

"Aye," said Melville. "After we kick the Guldur's and their allies' butts back into their kennels. *Then* we can start claiming our due. Now there's an idea!" Melville and his purser grinned at each other as they considered the prospect.

Hans and his monkey spat over the side, carefully avoiding a working party repairing the damage to the hull below. Then he grimaced and said, "Beggin' yer pardon, Cap'n. Even if'n the sails are as good as the *Fang* thinks, they're still a change. I'm all for it, ya understand, but some sailors ain't gonna want ta change fer nothin'."

Melville nodded slowly. "I think this war is going to cause changes, Hans. *Lots* of 'em. Westernness has been comfortable with our stability and refusal to change, but we've reached a cusp. We must change or die. Die as a nation, maybe even as a species. Die as anything except slave fodder to the Guldur, the Crabs, and probably the Orak!" He inhaled deeply and continued.

"We've resisted technological advances beyond the late Victorian era—with only a few exceptions, such as World War I weapons like the Browning Automatic Rifle and the .45 auto, plus a few medical techniques and drugs like antibiotics and anesthesia. None of these things are used in two-space, because they won't work out here. But they are in use on the planets of Westernness as they develop the infrastructure needed to make them.

"Our people and our planets already have the knowledge to build an industrial civilization to rival anything in the twentieth century. They have the reference books, the blueprints, and the necessary know-how to do it all with no guessing, no research. And yet, we haven't. With the exception of Earth and her colonies inside Sol's solar system, all human worlds stayed low-tech.

"In two-space we are limited as to what technology, or complexity of equipment can be transported. So anybody we attack from a Ship will have to be conquered with muzzle loaders and sharp two-space steel. But the planets have the knowledge, and now the motivation, to winnow through the early decades of the twentieth century to find tools of war that they can reasonably build. Aircraft? Tanks? Possibly. Breech-loading artillery? Almost certainly. Heavy and light machine guns and mortars? Definitely. Most of those things were in use in World War I on old Earth. They would make it possible for a small force to clobber any two-space invader, and they wouldn't be vulnerable to a Crash. Frankly, these things are absolutely vital for the survival of our species and our civilization, and there's absolutely no excuse *not* to build them."

"Aye," added Theo. "It would seem to me that every world would, in effect, have two military organizations: a high-tech establishment for home defense (if you can call early-to-mid twentieth century high-tech) and a low-tech establishment for exploration, defense of trade routes, and offensive operations. Despite cultural biases toward conservatism, the advantages of modern technology for combat are sufficiently overwhelming that I really doubt anyone who is capable of building a tech base will forgo it. You know, Captain, this will make warfare a lot like the period in the Middle Ages when fortifications were largely invulnerable and they had to be taken primarily through siege or treachery."

"Good point," Melville replied, nodding thoughtfully. "For millennia there has not been any significant threat of interstellar war, so the various worlds and empires were free to go off in whatever direction pleased them. And, for a lot of people, given the chance, a pastoral, Victorian or Shire society—with advanced medicine and a few other 'cheats'—is very appealing. Now we will be forced to move away from that. But only slightly. Just moving from the 1890's to the 1920's will do the trick on most worlds, I think. And the very real example of what happened to Earth will prevent anyone from going too far in that

direction."

Hans and Brother Theo were nodding thoughtfully as Melville continued bleakly.

"So there will be a transformation, my brothers. And these new sails may be the least of it. Given a choice between changing to keep your loved ones alive, or refusing to do so and watching them die... well given that clear choice, change generally wins. As Lord Byron said,

"A thousand years scarce serve to form a state:  
An hour may lay it in the dust.

"And this hour, gentlemen," concluded Melville quietly, "may have laid Westernness in the dust."

"Not if we got anythin' ta say about it, by the Lady!" growled Hans.

"Amen," echoed Brother Theo grimly.

A side benefit of the Shipyard refit was that some liberty time was available. The opportunity for shore leave was there, but not the energy. At the end of their shifts most of the *Fang*s were too exhausted to do much more than share a beer or two before heading off to their racks.

There were some exceptions of course...

"Thank you for saving us, good sir. You will forever be the heroes of the Hero Cluster.

"'Tis our purpose in life, madam," replied Fielder with typical nonchalance, bending low to kiss her hand as he scanned her body, lingering over the key attractions. "But some duties are more rewarding than others."

"You are so modest!" cooed his admirer as she hung from his arm.

"He likes to practice modesty," said Asquith. "He's very proud of it. Good thing too. He'd be insufferable otherwise."

Roxy had negotiated with the local victuallers to fill them to the brim with food, including cold goods in all three crow's nests, and frozen goods secured in bundles at the crosstrees. While Jones had been reluctant to let Roxy do the negotiating, he had been mollified by Brother Theo's decision to allow him to acquire his own unique spices and condiments for the trip. Brother Theo was of the private opinion that most of the supplies he purchased could have been acquired much more cheaply at the local dump and charcoalry, but Jones' cuisine did seem to keep the Guldur happy. As well as one particular Dwarrowdelf, and *that* made it worth the expense and effort.

Besides, Brother Theo had made sure that the contracts with the Shipyard were established with the billing for all work and supplies coming from the kingdom's purse, rather than the *Fang*'s own money. After all, the work was being done at a premium price at the request of the local flag officer, wasn't it? And since the *Fang* was being refitted at the Shipyard, provisioning the Ship after battle should be considered part of the repair rather than a normal expense, shouldn't it? Which left all that coin available for other important things—like a profitable cargo...

And while Brother Theo was that rarity among pursers—a reasonably honest man—no man became successful in that field without at least a touch of larceny in his soul!

"My final status report, sir," said Melville as he entered the admiral's office and placed a thin stack of paper on the big wooden desk.

Rear Admiral Middlemuss looked up from his work as the young captain entered. The confident grin on Melville's face reminded him of a quote by Admiral Bull Halsey in World War II, who said, "There are no great men, just great circumstances, and how they handle those circumstances will determine the outcome of history." *And with such men as this, and those reprobates he calls a crew, will our history be determined*, thought Middlemuss.

"Humph. More reports from Earth, Melville," said the admiral, tossing across a packet of official correspondence that had come in on the latest mail packet. "You are the man of the hour. The Ships you captured and the crews you trained have saved the day. Your 24-pounders are being reproduced by the Dwarrowdelf, Sylvans, and our own Celebri, thanks to you. My local Celebri guildmaster tells me that the Crab sailcloth and swivel guns being sent back to Westernness are an even bigger deal than the 24-pounders. I've sent the guns and the cloth, and some Crabs to tend or 'grow' the sailcloth, along with signed documents donating them to Queen and Crown, but only for the duration of the current war. Somewhere along the line they may make you rich, and I want to be sure that I get the admiral's share of any prize money and proceeds! I'm also saving some of the cloth, and the crabs to tend them, for *my*

fleet."

Middlemuss snorted bemusedly as he continued. "And that blasted alien Ship of yours appears to have been single-handedly spreading war fever across Westernness. Everywhere the *Fang* was in port, she convinced the Pier, and the Pier told her story to every Ship that docked there, which in turn passed it on to every Pier that *they* docked in, which passed it on to the Ships that docked at *those* Piers. The bottom line is that, in a remarkably short time, every Ship and Pier in Westernness has become rabidly pro-war, *which* of course has influenced all the captains and their crews. Pretty damned effective PR campaign!

"Most intriguing of all, word is coming to us that those damned monkeys of yours are beginning to appear in your wake, everywhere that you've traveled! They'll come in real handy in this war, I think." He glared at the monkey on Melville's shoulder and muttered, "You mysterious little buggers!"

The monkey just shrugged with a look of wide-eyed, "Who, me?" innocence as the Admiral continued.

"So you've been spreading monkeys and war fever across Westernness, like a damned intergalactic plague ship! And it's spread like clap through a cheap dockside cathouse! This, combined with all your achievements, has completely turned the tide of popular opinion, making the Admiralty look even more foolish than ever. So they hate you all the more, because you've succeeded in proving to the entire known universe that they're galactic-class idiots."

"Aye, sir," replied Melville cautiously, not knowing what else to say.

"Sit down, dammit," said the admiral, gesturing to a chairdog, as he studied Melville's report. "According to this, and my chief of staff's report, your Ship is ready to get underway. All accounts for your Ship have been settled..." A strange, wry look passed over the admiral's face, a source of confusion to Melville until later when he spoke with Brother Theo about certain contracts and stores. "Your new crew members are aboard, your poker accounts have been settled. Or should I say winnings?" He bent a mildly reproachful eye upon the unrepentant Melville.

"Why, heavens, sir, just because some poor soul tried to run an outrageous bluff with the biggest pot of the night..." Melville grinned at him.

"Humph. Be that as it may." In spite of himself Middlemuss couldn't help but twitch a smile back. "I understand your Crabs are singing like songbirds, giving us excellent intel on the Crab civilization?"

"Well, Admiral, 'singing' is not exactly the right word for their speech," Melville replied, "but they seem to have no reluctance to share everything they know. Hayl and Dr. Myriad-Forsythewald are working with your intel staff and getting it all down on paper." Melville had a sudden fear that the admiral might claim the *Sting* and her Crabs for intelligence purposes, so he added, "Their knowledge might well make the difference between success and failure for us on this mission."

"Aye," agreed the Admiral as he slid a sheet of paper over the polished top of the desk. "They followed you home, so you can keep 'em. I've put your orders in writing. When you get to Osgil, there will be no doubt that you were acting under orders."

Melville looked at the lethal piece of paper. A single page filed with terse lines that would dispose of so many lives.

"And here are your letters of marque," added the admiral, sliding two more sheets of paper across the desk. Two more deadly scraps of paper, which unleashed the *Fang* to wreak havoc upon vast portions of the galaxy, held in check only by his conscience and the Laws of War. "Nobody has a clue what the format for a letter of marque ought to look like, but that is as legal and thorough as we could make it. Now be off with you." And then as a strange kind of blessing he added,

"Wert thou all that I wish thee,  
great, glorious and free.  
First flower of the earth  
and first gem of the sea.

"Now git!" Middlemuss said, turning his back and looking out the window to hide the traitor tears in his eyes.

"Oh, and Melville," he growled over his shoulder, "tell that damned rascal of yours, Fielder, that a certain influential gentleman from the local government was inquiring about his location this morning. I understand my flag lieutenant made a small mistake and directed said gentleman to a, umm, house of lesser repute on the outskirts of the city. Just so he knows he's still making friends and influencing people. Eh?"

"Aye, sir." Melville strode out the door, shaking his head at the continuing follies of his first officer. Societal rules to Fielder were like fence-posts to a dog.

*A jealous boyfriend? Melville mused. Maybe an outraged father? Perhaps a brother? Nah, probably a husband. Daniel's allergic to the possibility of having to get married, and he says the best way to avoid that unhappy fate is to woo only married women.*

Melville hosted his officers to dinner that evening, and informed them of their mission.

"And so, the good news is, we're headed home. We thought we'd never see Westernness again, but by God we're headed home! The bad news is, we're taking the long way home."

"Humph!" Fielder snorted. "The 'long way,' eh? Most of the galaxy, at least two alien empires, and several billion enemy are in the way. And the path is across uncharted realms!"

"Aye," replied Melville with a touch of wonder in his voice. "Uncharted realms. As Swift put it,

"So geographers, in Afric-maps  
With savage-pictures fill their gaps  
And o'er uninhabitable downs  
Place elephants for want of towns."

"Or they put 'Here be dragons!'" said Broadax, with a laugh and grin that looked like it should split her hairy face, "an' we're the dragon slayers!" Then she scowled and added, "An' we gots sum serious payback ta dish out to the raggedy-assed, sorry excuse fer dragons in them parts! By the Lady, if they got an ass, we'll kick it, and send 'em ta suck vacuum with the Elder King!"

"Amen," agreed Mrs. Vodi in a subdued voice. "I still can't believe that they are all dead. The fashion-eesta, the art-eests, all the silly, foolish, gentle people we saw on Earth... They're *all* dead?"

"Aye," replied Melville. "The lucky ones are dead. The few who remain alive may envy the dead. Hilaire Belloc wrote about the decadent, irreverent, foolish individual we met over and over again on Earth. He called that person *The Barbarian*. 'Discipline to him seems irrational,' and he is affronted that 'civilization should have offended him with priests and soldiers.'

"Belloc says that, 'We sit by and watch the Barbarian. We tolerate him; in the long stretches of peace we are not afraid. We are tickled by his irreverence, his comic inversion of our old certitudes and our fixed creeds refreshes us; we laugh. But as we laugh we are watched by large and awful faces from beyond: and on those faces there is no smile.'"

Melville sighed as he continued. "While Earth went its decadent, irreverent way, the Guldur were watching with awful faces from beyond. And they were not smiling. Now Earth is dead... But, my brothers, my sisters, *we will avenge them* ! We will *avenge* the billions dead on Earth! We have a crack crew. If there is anyone in the galaxy who can get us through this mission alive it is you. But I will not have anything but volunteers on this mission."

"I just wish there were more of us," sulked Fielder. "Out of all the vast fleets in Westernness, it would be good if a few of them could come along to help us."

Merriment danced in Melville's eyes as he replied, "No, my friend. If we are marked to die, we are enough to do our country loss; and if to *live*, the fewer men, the greater share of *honor* .

"God's will! I pray thee, wish not one man more!

"By Jove, I am not covetous for gold, nor care I who doth feed upon my cost. It yearns me not if men my garments wear. Such outward things dwell not in my desires. But if it be a sin to covet honour, I am the most offending soul alive!

"No, faith, my brother, wish not one man from Westernness. God's peace! I would not lose so great an honor as one man more, methinks, would share from me for the best hope I have. O, do not wish one more!

"Rather proclaim it, Fielder, throughout my Ship, that he which hath no stomach for this fight, let him depart. His passport shall be made and crowns for convoy put into his purse. We would not die in that man's company that fears his fellowship to die with us!

"This Ship is called the *Fang* : he that outlives this voyage, and comes safe home, will stand a tip-toe when this Ship is named, and rouse him at the name of *Fang* . He that shall survive this voyage, and see old age, will feast his neighbors, then will he strip his sleeve and show his scars, and say, 'These wounds I had aboard the *Fang* !'

"Old men forget. Yet all shall be forgot, but he'll remember with advantages what feats he did that day. Then shall our names, familiar in his mouth as household words: Melville the captain, Fielder and Broadax, Hans and Barlet, Elphinstone and Vodi, Westminster and Valandil, Theo and DeWalt, Hayl and *Sting* , be in their flowing cups freshly remember'd.

"This story shall the good man teach his son; and the good Ship *Fang* shall be remember'd. From this day to the ending of the *world*, but we in it shall be remember'd. We few, we happy few, we band of brothers— *and sisters!* For he, or she, to-day that sheds their blood with me shall *be* my brother, shall *be* my sister. Be they ne'er so vile, *this* day shall gentle their condition. And gentlemen in Westernness now a-bed shall think themselves accursed they were not here, and hold their manhoods cheap while any speaks that fought with us aboard the *Fang* !"

This application of a classic bit of Shakespeare to their current situation brought a thrill of pleasure to every heart, and a thunderous roar of approval rang out as they drank to that.

Melville looked at his first officer and asked, "What say ye, Daniel?"

Shaking his head with the driest of all possible smiles Fielder responded, "Bah! As for me and my

impoverished house, I have no choice." And indeed, it was true that no other Ship was apt to take him, and to stay in port would likely spell his doom when his many enemies caught up with him. (To say nothing of husbands!) "So, as Churchill said, 'Go for the swine'—or crabs or curs!—'with a blithe heart!'"

"Lt. Broadax?"

"A mission laced with danger an' destruction? Nay, verily *eager* for death and disaster? Wat more could a girl ask?!"

"Brother Theo?"

"There is a verse that warriors have claimed across the centuries," the monk replied. "Isaiah 6:8, 'I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, Whom shall I send, and who will go for us? Then said I, " *Here am I Lord! Send me!*"'"

One by one Melville's officers answered in the affirmative.

"Aye," concluded Melville. "Then tell those bastards that *Fang* is afoot in the land! The *Fang* is coming. *And all hell's coming with us!* War, war is still the cry! War even to the knife!"

Once again there was an answering roar of affirmation and a quaffing of the captain's excellent wine before Melville continued. "The admiral has let slip the dogs of war. In 2001, the United States back on Old Earth—God rest their souls—was attacked by terrorists, and over three-thousand citizens were murdered in a single day. You all know the rest of the story. After decades of peace, America let slip her dogs of war. A warrior poet wrote about those 'sheepdogs' who defended their flock in those days. Now Westernness has let slip *her* dogs, and these Words apply to us, every bit as much as those Words of Shakespeare's that I just shared:

"Most humans truly are like sheep  
Wanting nothing more than peace to keep  
To graze, grow fat and raise their young,  
Sweet taste of clover on the tongue.  
Their lives serene upon Life's farm,  
They sense no threat nor fear no harm.  
On verdant meadows, they forage free  
With naught to fear, with naught to flee.  
They pay their sheepdogs little heed  
For there is no threat; there is no need.

"To the flock, sheepdogs are mysteries,  
Roaming watchful round the peripheries.  
These fang-toothed creatures bark, they roar

With the fetid reek of the carnivore,  
Too like the wolf of legends told,  
To be amongst our docile fold.  
Who needs sheepdogs? What good are they?  
They have no use, not in this day.  
Lock them away, out of our sight  
We have no need of their fierce might.

"But sudden in their midst a beast  
Has come to kill, has come to feast  
The wolves attack; they give no warning  
Upon that calm September morning  
They slash and kill with frenzied glee  
Their passive helpless enemy  
Who had no clue the wolves were there  
Far roaming from their Eastern lair.

"Then from the carnage, from the rout,  
Comes the cry, "Turn the sheepdogs out!"  
Thus is our nature but too our plight  
To keep our dogs on leashes tight  
And live a life of illusive bliss  
Hearing not the beast, his growl, his hiss.

"Until he has us by the throat,  
We pay no heed; we take no note.  
Not until he strikes us at our core  
Will we unleash the Dogs of War  
Only having felt the wolf pack's wrath  
Do we loose the sheepdogs on its path.

"And the wolves will learn what we've shown before;  
We love our sheep, we Dogs of War!"

\* \* \*

Melville saw his guests out the door of his cabin, after a long night of planning and partaking of drink and discussion. Finally he was alone with Grenoble and Ulrich.

"I won't order you to do this, either, my friends," the captain said, looking at his mismatched set of bodyguards. "Tell me now if you want to opt out of this one, and I'll understand completely."

Grenoble responded, "A Hebrew proverb of thy Old Earth says, 'If someone is going to kill you, get up early and kill him first.' The *Hagakure* sets forth that a samurai's word is 'harder than metal.' I will keep my oath. Whither thou goest, I go. Let us get up early and kill the enemies of *both* our kingdoms. *First!*"

"Aye," muttered Ulrich in agreement. "Kill 'em first. Damn straight! Kill 'em all! An' let God sort 'em out!"

"Heeere, kittykittykitty!" agreed his parrotlet.

"And I'll be hanging around too, sir," said McAndrews from behind him, where the portly steward and his monkey were clearing the table. "As the Lord liveth, and as thy soul lives, I shall not leave thee.' There's not a manjack aboard who'd leave you, Captain. And you sure as hell can't get rid of *me* that easily," he added with a grin.

Melville looked at this faithful man, who lived only to serve. Then at the two bodyguards who were ready to stop a bullet for him. Through his feet his Ship sent a message of loyalty and trust from hundreds of other steadfast souls. And he felt a lump in his throat.

*Think where man's glory most begins and ends  
And say my glory was I had such friends.*

\* \* \*

The *Fang*'s first officer, as usual, was profoundly depressed at the prospect of danger. "You know, the fate of all mankind... the fate of the *galaxy*, is in our hands," said Fielder in the wardroom after the captain's dinner. "That is just... so... so..."

The wardroom chimed in to help complete his sentence.

"Scary?"

"Sad?"

"Pathetic?"

"Awesome!"

Fielder put his head in his hands and muttered, "God help us."

*Fang's* large new batch of midshipmen, with a proper appreciation of the insignificance of their species, had come aboard with an awestricken, daunted hush.

Fielder and Asquith were watching as they were received aboard by Midshipman Jubal. The repairs to the Ship were complete, and the time had almost come to get underway.

"Are you coming with us?" Fielder ask the little earthling.

"Do I have a choice?" replied Asquith. "I've signed a contract in blood with my publisher. I'm going wherever the hell Thomas Melville and his crew of alien thugs goes. Lord help me!" he concluded with a weak grin.

"Hmm... Maybe. Maybe not. Have you considered the possibility that, amidst the tragic storm clouds of war there might have a small silver lining for you? That your publisher was probably killed and your contract nullified when the Guldur hit Earth?"

"Yes, I did. It made me feel lousy, thinking that all those people were killed and I got out of a contract that's probably going to get me killed just like them." Asquith sighed and shook his head. "I haven't quite grasped the fact that my whole planet is dead. I just can't... digest it. I think I'm going to have to see it before I really believe it..."

"But I *can* adjust to the fact that publishers must be immortal! You've got to give him credit: Captain Ben James is a survivor. Turns out my publisher moved to the Moon, where low gravity combined with high-tech promises to keep him alive for another hundred years... probably just to torment me. He still has contacts though, since the letter from him got here on the most recent mail packet. Apparently the demise of Earth has turned my first book into an interstellar mega-bestseller, and there is no way that he's letting me off the hook."

Fielder commiserated in amused sympathy. "I guess we'll have the pleasure of your company for a while longer then. And it has all the makings of a *long*, desperate journey. Hmph. Traditionally, a suicide mission at least has the benefit of being brief."

"Life is sure strange," said Asquith despondently.

"As compared to what?" Fielder asked innocently.

"Well, dammit, I guess you've got me there."

"So, have you got your sequel written yet?"

Asquith snorted. "Hell, I've got two books for them. I sent the manuscript for everything that has happened so far, and now this forthcoming misadventure will be the third book in the series. That ought to keep my publisher happy. I can see it now: *The Further Adventures of Captain Melville and His Merry Band of Hooligans, Aliens, Cutthroats and Other Fun People: Complete With his Cheering Section in the Red Jerseys Led by Our Own Inimitable Mistress of Mayhem Herself!*"

"It's dangerous business, going out the door," said Fielder with an understanding nod. "You never know where the adventure will take you."

"I just wish I knew where we were going!"

"I know, but it's classified," replied Fielder, realizing full well that virtually every other soul aboard knew, and Asquith would find out soon enough. "If I told you I'd have to kill you."

"Do it, and put me out of my misery."

Fielder couldn't help but laugh. As always, he was pleased to find someone more miserable than himself when danger reared its ugly head. "Nope, it's best that you don't know," he replied. "That way, if we get captured, you can tell them that you're here against your will."

"I *am* here against my will!"

"Good job. Keep practicing."

The final preparations for departure were happening in a kaleidoscopic blur of activity. In the midst of everything else that needed to be done, a Ship arrived with that greatest of all delights to the sailor: letters from home. The *Fang* s had hoped that some mail would have caught up with them on Earth, or perhaps at Show Low, but those hopes had been in vain. Now many months worth of mail arrived in one batch, and activity about the *Fang* slowed to a crawl as everyone read their mail and posted their hasty responses to loved ones...

"Hmm," said Brother Theo, as he and the rest of the officers sat in the wardroom, quietly reading their mail and companionably exchanging tidbits of gossip, news, and information. "It seems that the monkeys have, indeed, appeared everywhere that *Fang*, *Gnasher*, and *Biter* have traveled, spreading spider monkeys like a virus. They're mostly attaching themselves to warriors. Not much more info. It'll be interesting to see how that develops. Methinks mankind has found a true friend."

"Look at this!" exclaimed Broadax holding up what looked for all the world like a large, misshapen rock. "Mah mum sent a loaf of Dwarrowdelf bread! Seems ta've survived the trip jist fine!" she added, as she started to beat a chunk off with the back of her ax.

"Hmm," added Fielder, holding up an amazingly similar lump of calcified matter. "My mother sent some of her fruitcake. After you're done hacking off a piece of your bread, I'd be obliged if you would apply the same technique to this."

"Damn! That does look good, doesn't it!" said Broadax, eyeing the fruitcake covetously.

"Huh!" said Westminster. "Ah got a letter from mah sister. Everyone's safe. The Guldur invasion was too far east to impact them. The big news is that there's trouble back in our church again. Apparently the finance committee refused to provide funds for the purchase of a chandelier, because none of the members know how to play one! She says that the new pastor asked Bubba to help take up the offering, and three guys and a gal stood up. Terrible confusion and bickering resulted from that little 'fox pass!'"

Up in the captain's cabin Melville was cherishing a letter from his betrothed, Princess Glaive. "My Knight, my Paladin," she wrote, "never doubt my love for thee, nor my faith that thou shalt return..."

"Aye," he whispered to the wind. "I'm coming." And he posted a reply. He and the letter were going around the galaxy in different directions. He wondered if he would arrive sooner than the letter, but he never doubted that he *would* arrive.

Early the next morning, the *Fang* and her new tender, the *Sting*, departed the Hero Cluster, headed due west, taking the long way home.

Before they left, Rear Admiral Middlemuss had given the *Fang*s a speech, exhorting and praising them,

and quoting Churchill to say that he could "...promise nothing but blood, sweat, and tears!" to *everyone* in the Hero Cluster.

"Oh goodie," muttered Fielder. "We're going to take on several vast galactic empires with nothing but the admiral's personal bodily fluids."

The *Fang* made a proud sight, with her full panoply of sails, complete with Hans' prized royals and stuns'ls and her crew manning the rails in observance of old traditions as she exchanged salutes with the Ships remaining behind. The *Fang*'s royals and stuns'ls would have made her stand out anywhere in the known galaxy. But her mainsail had a particularly singular appearance, with a section in the middle of the standard Navy sailcloth which appeared to be, well, glowing.

Captain Thomas Melville stood on his quarterdeck. Boye was next to him, front paws on the quarterdeck rail, barking with delirious doggy delight at the *Sting* sailing close beside them. The strange thing was how good he felt. It was *good* to be alive, and *good* to experience life with a double dose of the passion left in it.

Lord, he loved his job.

He loved his dear, betrothed Princess Glaive with as great and pure a love as any man could have for a woman. But first and foremost he had to play a desperate game for mortal stake, for the future's sake. The game, his Duty, his job, *this* was his first love, and his first love was for this.

*But yield who will to their separation,  
My object in living is to unite  
My avocation and my vocation  
As my two eyes make one in sight.*

*Only where love and need are one,  
and the work is play for mortal stakes,  
Is the deed ever really done  
For Heaven and the future's sakes.*

\* \* \*

Rear Admiral Middlemuss stood at the Pier watching the *Fang* as her sails sank into the west. Signal flags were sent from atop the bulwarks with a final message: "GOOD LUCK FANG. GOD SPEED."

A signal officer ran up to Admiral Middlemuss clutching a scrap of paper with Melville's response jotted down on it. "Sir," he said, "one last message from the *Fang*'s signal halyard.

The admiral read the note and nodded.

It said three words: "BUT IF NOT."

Aboard his Ship ( *his*Ship, by God!), Midshipman Anthony Hayl looked for the remnants of his former sadness, and found instead only an enormous joy. Something had broken inside, but the fissure didn't open up the usual well of sadness. Instead he discovered a fierce exultation that was all the more precious because it had been bought and paid in sweat and blood, stratagem and struggle, distress and discomfort, pain and torment, death and dismemberment.

Mr. Hans had helped him rig a topmast on the *Sting* , complete with a glowing topsail and Westernness-style rigging. This new sail was bringing the *Sting* up to completely new realms of speed, and his Crabs *and* his Ship loved it. She might just be the fastest Ship in the galaxy! And Mr. Hans was talking about adding stuns'ls!

The fate of the galaxy was hanging in the balance and they were sailing off into appalling danger, yet Hayl felt nothing but thrilled. Thrilled by what he was doing, and how very blessed and honored he was to be able to do it. The little bit of the *Fang* in his arm, and the *Sting* beneath his feet echoed and amplified his joy until he thought he would burst.

The Pier was sinking out of sight on the eastern horizon. It was just the two Ships out here together, and, dammit, he couldn't help himself.

"Quartermaster, take us on a lap around the *Fang* !"

"Aye, sir!" replied the crusty old sailor, feeling the boy's infectious elation.

There were six humans aboard *Sting* and all of them hooted with delight. Under his feet Hayl felt the *Sting's* joy, and through her he felt the reciprocal pleasure of his Crabs.

"Again! Take her in closer this time!"

Like a happy dog circling its master the *Sting* kept making laps and the *Fang* s hung over the railings and cheered them on.

Melville, Broadax, and Fielder were standing on the quarterdeck watching the *Sting* go past.

*What a brave, splendid boy*, Melville thought, as the one-armed midshipman and his Ship came whipping past them. During their voyages the captain had watched Hayl metamorphose from a caterpillar boy, into a deadly, butterfly-bright warrior and a leader of warriors.

"Huh!" he said to Fielder. "These young officers. Give 'em their own Ship and they think they don't have to answer to authority any more. Assign Mr. Hayl a mission, if you please, Mr. Fielder. Send him out scouting in front of us, out there, somewhere," he concluded, waving to the westward.

"Aye, sir," replied the first officer, who was sinking into a deep funk.

Casting one last glance at the Pier as it sunk below the horizon Fielder muttered, "Good bye, fool world."

"Hoo-yah!" shouted Broadax, as she and her monkey waved jubilantly at Hayl, fiercely echoing his pleasure.

The little middie waved back from the *Sting* with such joy that Melville couldn't help but grin back.

\* \* \*

I remember the black wharves and the slips,  
And the sea-tides tossing free;  
And the Spanish sailors with bearded lips,  
And the beauty and mystery of the ships,  
And the magic of the sea.  
And the voice of that wayward song  
Is singing and saying still:  
"A boy's will is the wind's will,  
And the thoughts of youth are long, long thoughts."

# POETRY REFERENCES

## *Prologue:*

To every man upon the earth...

"Horatius," Lord Macaulay

Where the virgins are soft as the roses they twine...

"The Bride of Abydos," Lord Byron

## *Chapter 2:*

Kipling's "Ballad of the Clampherdown" (parts of which are used at the beginning of this and several other chapters) was originally a satire on the armchair strategists of the early 1900s who felt that future naval actions would involve boarding actions. It was taken seriously and became quite popular, so he kept his mouth shut. It was not until many years later that Kipling fessed up about it. Taken a bit out of context it works well for the purposes of this book, but the reader is encouraged to look at the complete poem in the proper historical light.

Was there love once? I have forgotten her...

(and following four stanzas)

"Fulfillment," Robert Nichols

***Chapter 3:***

I am no Homer's hero you all know...

(Taken from the wall of the Frog Inn, British Special Boat Service headquarters, Poole, England. Author unknown.)

O loved, living, dying, heroic comrade...

"Fulfillment," Robert Nichols

No one is so accured by fate...

"Endymion," Longfellow

The fewer men, the greater share of honour...

*Henry V*, Shakespeare

We live in deeds, not years...

*Childe Harold*, Lord Byron

**Chapter 4:**

See the blood in purple tide,

"Sterret's Sea Fight," Anon.

(originally published in broadside format in 1801)

**Chapter 5:**

My only books...

"The Time I've lost in wooing," Thomas Moore

(All the other quotes by Fielder and Asquith in this section are from Shakespeare's *The Tempest* .)

There was silence deep as death...

"Battle of the Baltic," Thomas Campbell

The combat deepens. On, ye brave...

"Hohenlinden," Thomas Campbell

The mouse that always trusts to one poor hole...

"The Wife of Bath," Alexander Pope

As full-blown poppies, overcharg'd with rain...

*Iliad*, Homer

He sinks into the depths with bubbling groan...

*Childe Harold*, Lord Byron

Ah, to think how thin the veil that lies...

"Janus," George W. Russell

Sound, sound the clarion, fill the fife!...

"Old Mortality," Sir Walter Scott

**Chapter 6:**

O ye afflicted ones, who lie...

"The Goblet of Life," Longfellow

If I had thought thou couldst have died...

"To Mary," Charles Wolfe

He that lacks time to mourn, lacks time to mend...

"Philip Van Artevelde," Sir Henry Taylor

Lift ev'ry voice and sing...

"Lift Every Voice and Sing," James Weldon Johnson

(The first two verses of this song are included at the beginning of the chapter.)

Warriors throughout history have understood...

Drawn from Ben Shephard's excellent book, *A War of Nerves: Soldiers and Psychiatrists in the Twentieth Century*

Fill every beaker up, my men, pour forth the cheering wine...

"The Baron's Last Banquet," Albert Gorton Green

I could lay down like a tired child...

"Stanzas written in dejection, near Naples," Shelley

His food/Was glory...

"Phillip Van Artevelde," Sir Henry Taylor

Oft in the tranquil hour of night...

"Song," George Linley

And the tear that is shed...

"Oh breathe not his Name," Thomas Moore

The day is done, and the darkness...

"The Day Is Done," Longfellow

***Chapter 7:***

Beauty in desolation was her pride...

"The Wanderer," John Masfield

Gashed with honorable scars...

"The Battle of Alexandria," James Montgomery

Day is done...

"Taps," Anon.

I wanted the gold, and I sought it... (and following stanzas)

"The Spell of the Yukon," Robert Service

**Chapter 8:**

Sir Phillip Sidney's line from *Defence of Poesy* is drawn from John Barnes' excellent book *One for the Morning Glory* .

I have no doubt at all the devil grins...

"I Have No Doubt," Robert Service

I should not tell YOU how to fight...

"Bit of Doggeral," John Lang

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True poetry to me has meant...

"Prose Poetry," John Lang

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O wad some Power the giftie gie us...

"To a Louse," Robert Burns

Nurture your minds with great thoughts...

All warrior quotes by Grenoble are cited in text and drawn from Thomas A. Taylor's definitive guide to the bodyguard, *Dodging Bullets: A Strategic Guide to World Class Protection*.

"But there's been many places and times when people've thought of war as the given, an' peace the perversion..."

(and)

"Ye who knowst what war is like shall find it almost impossible to communicate with the children of peace..."

Are both derived from [www.leesandlin.com](http://www.leesandlin.com), with the kind permission of the author, Lee Sandlin. The Dwarrowdelf accent and Sylvan affectation have been added, with much due apologies to the original author.

No coward soul is mine...

"No Coward Soul Is Mine," Emily Bronte

**Chapter 9:**

Back in Medieval days...

"Full Circle," John Lang

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Brain scan studies...

See [www.killology.com](http://www.killology.com) and click the brain scan link for the Indiana University Medical School brain scan research.

My soul, there stands a country...

"Silex Scintillans," Henry Vaughn

Lenoria...

Any reader interested in learning more about Lenoria, and Tom Kidd's artwork, should look at *Tom Kidd, Tundra Sketchbook Series Vol. 11*, Tundra Publishing.

Now Mr. Boomer Johnson...

"Boomer Johnson," from *Classic Rhymes*  
by Henry Herbert Knibbs, 1999,  
Cowboy Miner Productions

(used with the kind permission of the Knibbs estate)

***Chapter 10:***

Why buy a diamond...

From the book *Gaiku* , by The Venerable Professor Satori

(copyright 2006, used with the kind permission of the publisher, Armiger Publishing)

Books are the compasses...

Jesse Lee Bennett

Art thou poor, yet hast thou golden slumbers?...

"Sweet Content," Thomas Dekker

But to the souls of fire I give more fire...

Charles Kingsley, Chaplain to Queen Victoria

***Chapter 11:***

I went downtown, it was just to ease my pain. . .

"South Nashville Blues," Steve Earle

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Oh, I've traded tomorrow for today...

Anon.

She can kill with a smile...

(and all remaining verses in this chapter)

"She's Always a Woman," Billy Joel

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***Chapter 12:***

When the gunsmoke settles...

(and all other stanzas in this chapter)

"Beer for My Horses," Toby Keith

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***Chapter 13:***

What the hammer? what the chain?...

(and all other stanzas in this chapter)

"Tyger! Tyger!" William Blake

***Chapter 14:***

Out of the night that covers me...

(and later stanzas in this chapter)

"Invictus," William Ernest Henley

***Chapter 15:***

Here rests his head upon the lap of Earth...

"The Epitaph" from "Elegy in a Country Church Yard,"

Thomas Gray

***Chapter 16:***

Sometimes... when you cry...

Anon.

Fear tastes like a rusty knife...

*The Wapshot Chronicle*, John Cheever

(as quoted in Thomas Taylor's superb book on the bodyguarding profession, *Dodging Bullets* , which is the source for all of Grenoble's quotes)

***Chapter 17:***

A thousand years scarce serve...

*Childe Harold*, Lord Byron

Wert thou all that I wish thee...

"Remember Thee," Thomas Moore

Most humans truly are like sheep...

"The Sheepdogs," Russ Vaughn,  
2d Bn, 327th Parachute Infantry Regiment,  
101st Airborne Division, Vietnam '65-'66

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Think where man's glory...

"The Municipal Gallery Revisited," William Butler Yeats

But yield who will to their separation...

"Two Tramps in Mud Time," Robert Frost

**THE END**

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