

Glen Cook's last story here was a seagoing fantasy titled "Ghost Stalk" (May 1978), which proved very popular. This new story is an immensely entertaining science fiction tale about an Earthman who is shipwrecked on the quiet sea of another world.

Quiet Sea

By GLEN COOK

With dawn a hundred doves unfurled their varicolored wings upon the quiet sea, fluttering nervously. The waves ran gentle now, but during the night the earth beneath the deep had groaned and shaken like a brunwhal in its death throes. Ahead lay deep blue water, cool Fenaja water from the arctic, but Rickli sensed no danger. They would reach the Pimental Bank before noon. Meanwhile, he would mend sail, ignoring the aches in his heart and leg, and daydream of mountains, forests, and snow. Maybe later, when they got ready to put the seines over the side and he would only be in the way, he would limp down to the galley and swap lies with the Shipwrecked Earthman and help sharpen scaling knives.

Such were the thoughts of Rickli Manlove at dawn on the Ninth of Eel in the year 866 of the local reckoning. The Shipwrecked Earthman preferred 3060. He had lost count of his months and days. After a few years he had given up trying.

Rickli, too, had given up. It had been a year since the Fenaja harpoon had shattered his knee. For months he had hoped, but, finally, he'd had to accept the truth: never again would he ride the bowsprit of a racing chaser and, with the salty spray stinging his eyes and soaking his beard, plant his harpoon in the glistening back of a fleeing brunwhal. Nor would he ever again trade insults and harpoons with the cruel Fenaja.

Once the crew had named him Left Hand Sea Terror. Now he was only The Crippled Sailmaker. So it went. So it went. He bore the Fenaja no special malice. They had done what they'd had to do, as did Man. When the grunling weren't running, the blackfin were.

He wet a finger, held it up, sniffed, and considered the bow of the sails. The breeze was barely sufficient to keep way on. An inauspicious sign at dawn. The fleet could become becalmed. The Fenaja would be hard pressed to resist such temptation.

But there was no feeling of danger in the deep blue water. Perhaps the Fenaja were elsewhere. Far over the quiet sea, shell horns winded. A chaser's mainsail fat-bellied in the breeze. Throughout the fleet youngsters scrambled into the rigging to watch. The brunwhal were the most valuable, and most cunning, creatures of the deep. The Children of the Sky used everything but the name.

The Shipwrecked Earthman had been amazed that they remembered their off-world origins after so many centuries. But many things had amazed him here, their survival most of all.

Rickli and the Earthman were almost friends, close enough that the Earthman had confided that he wasn't an Old Earther at all but a colonial from a world called Bronwen. The distinction seemed important to him.

They hadn't always been friendly. There had been a time, before the big fight off LaFata Bank, when Rickli had joined his peers in mocking the man for his incompetence. But a harpoon through the knee, the Earthman's ministrations, and a year of mending sails had given him a new perspective. The Earthman was no longer sailing his native sea, was almost as helpless as one of the bottom creatures the divers brought up and, threw on deck. In the Earthman's water, Rickli suspected, he would be more helpless than was the Earthman here.

The youngsters drifted down from the rigging. Rickli chuckled. Even at the winding of the shells he had known there wasn't enough breeze for the chaser to overhaul the brunwhal. He carefully inserted his tools into their brunwhalhide case, reached for his carved cane of spearfish ivory. The ship grew quiet around him. Soon there were no sounds but the souging of the wind in the rigging, the sea whispering along the hull, and the creak of the vessel's planks and frame. Those sounds, in the deeps of the nightwatches, could leave a man terribly lonely. He added the thump of his cane as he hobbled aft.

There were times when Rickli cursed his leg for what it denied him, but as often he remembered that he was lucky to have it at all. Had it not been for the Shipwrecked Earthman, he might never have survived. As the augurs reminded them, when the grunling weren't running, the blackfin were. "Thomas?" he called down into the galley.

"Here, Rickli." The man came to help him down the ladder.

Thomas Hakim, the Shipwrecked Earthman, was a small, dusky, dark-eyed man who had only recently developed the habit of wearing his hair long and tied back in a tail, though he still kept his beard carefully trimmed in a "space." It had taken years to break the habit of regular haircuts.

On his ships, he had said, short hair had been mandatory.

The people of Quiet Sea all wore theirs long. Hair became rope and twine. On Quiet Sea all available resources were exploited.

"Looks like a peaceful crossing."

"Good. Good." The Earthman returned to his scaling knives. "A pity we can't make peace with the Fenaja."

It was, Rickli thought, one of the Earthman's favorite themes, one whose futility the man recognized. Natural competition made peace and cooperation impossible.

"The augurs say we'll do well here. No one's been to Pimental Bank for years. The sandweg should be tall."

The Earthman was ever a devil's advocate. "So? And what then? We build another ship. For what?" Rickli chuckled, playing the game. "Why, so we can gather sandweg faster and build another ship sooner. Someday we'll have the biggest fleet on Quiet Sea."

"You already have it. One of those days you'll all listen to me, say the hell with it, and go sail off the edge of the world."

"That's what I like about you, Thomas. Always a cheery outlook."

"Christ!" But he smiled. The manner was a pose, Rickli had learned after having been thrown into Hakim's constant company by the Fenaja harpoon. "What were the horns about?" Though he had been with the fleet for years, Hakim still couldn't read signals.

"Brunwhal. They didn't get him."

"So it goes."

"When the grunling aren't running, the blackfin are. You need any help?"

"No. I'm almost done. Nothing till the salting starts. Checkers?"

The game had made the Shipwrecked Earthman famous across Quiet Sea. Before his falling-star arrival, all games had had to do with the sea. Checkers had caught on as a simple alternative to tradition. Hakim had tried teaching other games as well, especially chess, but the Children of the Sky had rejected them as too complicated. Their culture, Hakim had told Rickli, was too tight and changeless, with never-varying, simple goals, to accept unnecessary complexity.

The Children, though, enjoyed it when he told fortunes with a now ragged deck of tarot cards, though the augurs frowned at his treading on their heels. The Earthman thought that it was the pictures which seized their attention, not the patter. Pictures were almost unknown on Quiet Sea. With Hakim's aid, Rickli returned to the maindeck. They set up the board atop a cargo hatch. People not otherwise occupied came over to watch. They were the best players on board.

"So tell me about Outside," Rickli said after a few moves. Hakim never lost his zest for reminiscing. Rickli didn't believe a tenth of what he said, nor did anyone else, but his tales were always entertaining. Also, they distracted him from his game.

"Did I tell you about the Iron Legion and the war with Richard Hawksblood in the Shadowline on Blackworld?" Hakim scanned his listeners, responded to their headshakes with: "It started centuries ago, before the Ulantonid War, but the high game, the endgame, was played out on Blackworld...."

The crowd grew till Dymon Tipsword, captain of Rifkin's Dream, came round growling at people off their watch stations. It was one of the Earthman's best stories. He got into it so deeply that Rickli beat him three straight.

Despite his crankiness and inability to master the simplest skills of seamanship, the Earthman was well liked. Aboard Rifkin's Dream, at least as a storyteller, he had become an honored institution.

"Pale water!" a lookout shouted from the maintop.

"The bank," Rickli said. All aboard relaxed slightly. The Fenaja shunned shallow, warm water.

Hakim gathered the checkers. "Even in paradise there's work for the sinful," he muttered. Rickli had become accustomed to such cryptic remarks, remarks Hakim seldom explained.

For the hundredth time Rickli wondered what twist of fate had brought Thomas to Quiet Sea. Though Hakim willingly chattered about himself, he refused to explain how he had come to be in a small ship, alone, near this long-forgotten world, nor would he tell what had led him to crash. His sole recorded remark on the affair was an observation that he had been lucky to set down near the fleet.

Rickli remembered the day well. He had been a rigging boy then, a maintop boy, when the morning sky had shown sudden, short-lived, unknown stars, and it had been during his masthead watch, later, that the sky had opened up and a shooting star, throwing off blinding-bright fragments of itself, had come roaring down with thunders worse than those of any storm. The main body had hit the water beyond the horizon. A great column of steam had risen to mark the site. The augurs, versed in the old lore, had turned the fleet that way, though the object had splashed down in

Fenaja water.

Thousands of dead sea creatures had floated round a burned arid twisted object wallowing deep in the waves. It had been huge, frighteningly so, and made of metal.... That had brought awe into the eyes of everyone who had not yet made the pilgrimage to Landing, where the remains of the Ship still lay. When the strange object had cooled enough to be touched, every person, who could had set about scavenging metal, much of which had proven, unworkable later. On Quiet Sea, where there was no land at all and smelters consisted of charcoal hearths in the galleys of ships where handfuls of bottom nodes, recovered by lucky divers, were worked, that much refined metal seemed an unbelievable fortune.

Then they had broken through the outer skin and had found the unconscious man hanging in the curious strapping. He had been a dark, angry little man whose features had borne the stamp of intense concentration and fear.

Though fearful, the augurs had brought him out and had done their best to mend his health. In the meantime, his vessel had been looted. Many of the Children still wore bits of glass and plastic for jewelry. In the early days there had been a communications problem. Hakim hadn't spoken a language anything like their own, which had evolved through the centuries into one whose primary concern was the sea, its colors, deeps, moods, denizens, and the ships that sailed upon it. There were language difficulties even between the older fleets, though the augurs did their best to discourage diversion.

The Earthman's ancestors, and Rickli's, hadn't spoken the same language as contemporaries on Old Earth. And Hakim's people had followed a far different road since then.

But he had been a fast study. Perhaps a hint of why could be found in his tales of adventures on many worlds.

Though it had been obvious he would be a long time becoming productive, every ship in the fleet had vied for possession of the castaway. The augurs had spread the news that he had come from the semi-mythical world of their origin. The Children of the Sky had been hungry for news and knowledge.

The competition had become so intense that the augurs, fearing violence, had ordered a lottery. Rifkin's Dream had won. And had never been sorry, though at first the young people, Rickli included, had resented his presence because he had been granted so much unearned privilege. But when he had come to understand the tongue and culture, he had done his best to pull his weight. Often over Dymon Tipsword's objections. The captain had sensed from the first that his new man would never make a sailor.

Thomas Hakim had never seen a sailing ship before Quiet Sea. He could only admire the complex relationships between the maze of booms, yards, rigging, masts, and sails, not begin to understand. The youngsters, who had grown up on the ships, sometimes thought him retarded. Where and when, the Earthman did what he could. He had settled into the galley because cooking was what, it proved, he best understood. Signals sounded over the water as the lead vessels entered the shallows. Orders shouted by dozens of captains carried over the quiet sea, sometimes resulting in confusion. Sails came in with whines and shrieks of tackle. In places the Pimental was so shallow that the larger vessels might run aground. The Bank was rich, but had to be exploited carefully. One dared not risk losing the vessel that was one's only home.

Quiet Sea was a calm, peaceful, relatively friendly world which supported its human population comfortably, in almost Polynesian ease, but there were pragmatic realities to be faced even in Eden. Worst was the lack of living space. The ships were all they had, were difficult to build for lack of land, and were always populated to their supportive limits. Humanity being fecund, stringent measures were required to control population.

In Rickli's fleet this took its simplest form. Crews were segregated by sex. Male children were allowed to remain with their mothers only during their first two years. In other fleets other methods, often harsher methods, were employed, including drowning of unwanted newborns, the old and halt. No technology of contraception existed.

The sexual mores of the society had been hard on the Shipwrecked Earthman. His great goal, he had once told Rickli, was to make it possible to mate without breeding. He had shown Manlove one of his ideas, a sheath of finest grunling gut carefully scraped and cured. Rickli had understood the technical aspect, but not the emotional. He had simply remarked that the material could be put to better use as sausage casing.

The fleet began to disperse. Some, like Rifkin's Dream, would seine. Chasers would range out in search of brunwhal, which hugged the food-rich banks. Others would send divers below for shellfish, useful bottom plants, sand, and stone, the latter for potential ore, ballast use, and transport to the centuries-old project to create, at Landing, what Quiet Sea lacked naturally: dry

land. Specialized vessels would harvest sandweg, a huge bottom plant that could be cut into lumber. The stands were rich on Pimental, often rising five meters above sea level. Hakim and Rickli, with everyone else not otherwise occupied, helped clean and salt the catch. "Mixed catch," said Rickli, puzzled, dragging a thrashing blackfin from a lively pile and stilling it with one quick jab of the butt of his knife.

Halkin took a smaller, more easily cleaned grunling. "Not a good sign," he agreed. When the Species mixed in the shallows, it was because the blackfin felt threatened by something in the deeps. Blackfin preferred the cooler, deeper waters on the faces of the banks. The grunling preferred the warmer shallows. "Fenaja?"

"Probably not. There would've been some sign."

Dymon Tipsword, too, was concerned. He had a caution pennant bent to a halyard and run to the maintruck. Here and there, similar pennons ran to other mains. "Whatever, we'll find out first," said Rickli. Rifkin's Dream was seining on the extreme left of the fleet, nearest the deep water.

"Probably just the temblor last night"

"Maybe." But a feeling of wrongness had begun growing on Rickli. Why hadn't there been any Fenaja sign during the crossing? They didn't attack often, but when ships entered their waters they always came up to watch, their ugly, whiskered snouts trailing Vs on the surface as they dared the humans to start something. Sometimes they would lift their dun, scaly foreparts from the waves and croak insults learned from other men. But as long as there were no bone-tipped harpoons in sight, their intentions remained peaceful. Their attacks, generally, came in waters where one of their occasional, sudden, inexplicable population explosions had left the blackfin schools depleted.

The winchmen hauled a bulging net aboard, scattering the sand-covered deck with flopping fish. The youngsters, wearing brunwhalskin chaps and gloves, began heaving the smallest and females over the side. Neither grunling nor blackfin had dangerous teeth, but their scales could rasp the skin off a man with one caress. Dried blackfin hide was used to sand the decks. During fishing those decks were covered two centimeters deep with sand from ballast meant to absorb spilled blood and entrails.

"Uhm" Hakim grunted. "There's your Fenaja."

Rickli stood, ignoring the sudden sharp pain in his knee. "Part of one." He hobbled forward, helped others pall the mangled corpse from the pile offish. "Dymon!"

Tipsword came down from the helm, spent a long minute staring at the remains. "All right. Back to work. We've got a hold to fill. You three, put it back over the side. Its people will be looking for it." As activity resumed, the captain stalked back to his station. A new set of pennons ran to the main. The ship's armorer began making the round of battle stations, setting out harpoons, axes, swords.

Rickli resumed his seat, said nothing for a long time.

"What is it?" Hakim asked. "Half the body had been eaten. It still had a broken harpoon in its hand."

Hand was a misnomer, From the Fenaja's forward end, near what might pass as shoulders were it accustomed to going upright, a specialized pair of tentacles grew; the ends of these had modified into three finger-length sub-tentacles. The quasi-intelligent creatures used them as a man used hands.

"Meaning he maybe died fighting something that was eating him?"

"Uhm." Naturally enough, the monsters of the legends and folklore of the Children of the Sky were all creatures from the deep and, though Hakim had never encountered a man who had seen one, the sea people believed in their existence as devoutly as their ancestors had believed in dragons and trolls.

The only known enemies of the Fenaja were human. But the Children of the Sky had little real knowledge of what lived at the bottom of the deeps. Their interest was the banks, an ecological cycle into which their ancestors had inserted themselves.

The seining, cleaning, and salting went on, though wary eyes kept glancing toward deep water. Yet the crew trusted Tipsword's judgment. Had he believed real danger existed, he would have had the nets hauled in and stored.

The tension bothered the Earthman. "Think I'll go get Esmeralda," he said, putting his knife aside,

Rickli nodded, reached for another blackfin. The thing the Earthman called Esmeralda had been one of the few possessions he had reclaimed after the looting of his ship. To Rickli it looked like an ornate mutation of a shipfitter's mallet, except that Hakim always handled it backwards.

Manlove suspected it was some sort of Outside talisman. Hakim brought it out each time Rifkin's

Dream sailed into danger, but Rickli had yet to see the man do anything with it. Just as Thomas returned, flying fish began skipping across the sea. Tipsword judged their numbers and the length of their jumps, Shouted, "Ship the nets! Forget the fish! Bring them in!" It wasn't necessary to tell the cleaners and salters to clear the decks. Every man able began pitching fish over the side. New signals rose to the main; hornmen stood by. The sea began boiling two hundred meters off the port bow. "Cut it!" Tipsword thundered at the netmen. "Now! Move it!" Men shuddered. A good seine costs hundreds of manhours to make. But; if they were lucky, they could come about and recover it later. Bladders made of brunwhal stomachs would keep it afloat. Someone began wielding an ax. The trouble horns screamed across the water. Nearby ships became furious with activity.

"Hard right rudder!" Tipsword ordered. "Stand by to shift sail."

The rigging boys were already aloft.

Rifkin's Dream was the long-dead shipbuilder Rifkin's attempt to combine the best of two types of rigging in one of the fleet's largest vessels. She was square-rigged on her forward and top-main-masts, schooner-rigged on her main and mizzen. Sharp course changes could result in mass confusion.

There was little of that this time. Everyone was too frightened to make a mistake.

"Oh!" said Rickli. Nothing else would come.

"Jesus," said the Shipwrecked Earthman, softly. "What the hell is it?"

"Grossfenaja. The deepdarkdevil."

Rifkin's Dream slowly heeled over as her rudder took hold and she took the wind on her beam. Her stern slid sideways toward the thing rising from the deep. The nearest seining ship winded its own horns and cut its net lines too.

A shout from the masthead directed their attention forward. Half a kilometer ahead, another one was rising. Then another, off the port quarter.

"Never heard of anything dike this!" Rickli shouted, the nearest beast was still surfacing, more and more tentacles slapping water, some reaching for Rifkin's Dream. Dymon Tipsword shouted for the younger boys to get below.

"Must have been the earthquake," Hakim muttered. "Christ! Another one."

The main body of the nearest broke water. It was over sixty meters long and serpentine, like a fat Midgard serpent whose tail had turned into a kraken. The head was at the end opposite the main mass of tentacles, with just two five-meter Fenaja-type limbs nearby.

Regaining his composure, Rickli said, "Any of the other old monsters I would've believed, but this...."

The creature writhed in an effort to direct its head toward the ship, but it seemed Tipsword had acted in time and the vessel would slip away.

"Sandweg!" the forward lookout cried. A moment later he hurtled into the sea as the vessel plowed into a dense young stand, the tops of which hadn't yet broken water. The bows rose high, Rifkin's Dream shuddered, then lurched forward as her momentum snapped or uprooted the plants.

But she hadn't enough way on to carry her through. Her stern and rudder hung up. In moments she was dead in the water.

"Battle stations!" Tipsword bellowed. "You boys below, see if she's sprung any leaks. Spearsong, get a boat over. Winchmen, stand by to kedge her. Thomas, get coals from the galley."

Hakim ran. Rickli, trying to stay out of the way, wondered how their puny weapons, even fire, could stave off the predator. He glanced at the rest of the fleet. No help there. Panic and confusion were the supreme admirals of the moment. And running for shallower water seemed no real solution. The creature that had surfaced immediately ahead was already dragging itself through water just four meters deep. Speed seemed the only escape.

He noted a racked harpoon with an ornate grip of brunwhal ivory. His own, that the crew had given him when he had been Left Hand Sea Terror, best chaser spritman in the fleet. He hobbled over and exchanged it for his cane. There was comfort in the familiar grip. He would die with his old companion in hand.

The decks and tops seemed utter chaos, yet the frenetic activity had its purposes. But for the thing bearing down, it might have been the last moment before an ordinary Fenaja fight. There had been more panic and confusion at LaFata. Rickli stayed out of the way, gradually drifted forward. The sword, ax, and harpoon men all seemed so young, just boys. Where were the longbeards, the grizzled old men who had manned the rail at LaFata? Dead, of course. Still there, consigned to the deep. Not many had been as lucky as he. Half this crew had transferred aboard after that battle.

"Jesus," he murmured, borrowing from the Shipwrecked Earthman. The thing's head was scarred with

a mouth large enough to take a man or Fenaja at a gulp. Twenty meters from Dream, it plunged beneath the water, torpedoing into the sandweg wrack left by the ship's passage. Rickli shouted a warning to Spearsong, but too late. The head rose and destroyed the longboat with a single snap of huge jaws. The fore-tentacles snatched men from the water. The thing's rear smashed into the port side. The vessel jumped, shook, groaned in protest. Everyone went tumbling. Rigging boys rained from above, smashing into deck or sea with terrified screams. Rickli lost the harpoon. Tipword thunderously ordered everyone back to the rail. Then a tentacle whipped over and snatched him away from the wheel. He went , over the side, into the sea, hacking with a rare metal sword.

Though they numbered only twenty and were no thicker than a man's arm, the monster's rear tentacles seemed to fall in a deadly rain. Against them harpoons were useless. The sword and ax men managed to damage a few, but the beast seemed oblivious to pain. Its head reared high to starboard and observed critically while its tail worked murder to port.

Dead men speckled the sea.

Tentacles began reaching through hatches and snaking out the boys below. Terrified, pathetic screams echoed below decks.

Rickli suddenly understood that they were fighting the wrong end. Its normal prey probably never realized that. He tried to tell someone, but with Dymon gone there was no one to make them listen. He glanced to starboard. The creature was casually nibbling on a boatman. He bent, picked up a harpoon, cast it.

His knee betrayed him. He collapsed on bloody sand, almost cried when the harpoon whispered past the thing's trunk, a meter below his target. He had to get closer.

It had to be out the bowsprit. From nowhere else could he be certain of being close enough to overcome his knee. He grabbed another harpoon and started.

There wasn't much thought in the journey, that seemed an endless pilgrimage to keep a rendezvous with death. There was pain such as he hadn't known since the Fenaja harpoon had struck.

Tentacles whipped about with Rickli Manlove seemingly their special target. One seized him round the bad knee, pulled and squeezed, but fate placed a levelheaded ax-man nearby. He went on, crawling, dragging the reinjured leg. Something had gone in the knee. He had heard and felt it. Three meters out the bowsprit, he collapsed, unable to go on.

Salt spray stung his eyes. Or was it tears? Failed again.... He wasn't sure where he was, on a chaser racing after the humping brown back of a brunwhal, or lying half-dead after LaFata.... His will returned. Then his strength. Just enough. He made it to the leadsman's platform, dragged himself upright, gripped his harpoon, threw.

And sagged in defeat. Low again. It buried itself deep, but a meter below the huge yellow eye for which he had aimed.

"Rickli! Rickli Manlove!" The Earthman's curious, harshly accented voice seemed to come from years and kilometers away. Slowly, he turned.

The Earthman stood at the foot of the bowsprit, harpoon in one hand, his talisman in the other. A tentacle had him round the waist.

Rickli reached a futile hand....

The Earthman put the harpoon in the air. It slapped his palm.

He felt familiar ivory, the old, comfortable grip of his high years.

He turned. He aimed. He cast.

He collapsed, but only after he had seen his old companion buried gripdeep in the yellow eye.

Rickli lay unconscious for days. He came round to find Rifkin's Dream, with help from other ships, trying to keep afloat during repairs to her hull and rigging. Some vessels worked the beast's remains. Masts crowded the battle site. Through them he could see a similar cluster in the distance.

The Shipwrecked Earthman lay beside him, drugged, his waist a mass of ripped skin and ugly bruises. His guts must have been churned good. His talisman remained gripped in his left hand.

"Good afternoon, Captain." "Ilyana Wildhaber. What're you doing here?"

"Keeping this tub off the bottom." She was captain of Replete, a repair and stores vessel, "It's a jinx."

"Have Weatherhead change our station."

"There'll be changes. This made LaFata look like a christening party." "Tell me."

"There were six of them. Several ships weren't as lucky as Dream. Three were dragged into the deep. Six more went down in the shallows. Two we'll re-float. Most everyone got involved."

"Guess there'll be work for a crippled sailmaker, then." Rickli's greatest fear was that the crew would vote him supernumerary, a fear that had begun while the Fenaja harpoon still quivered in his knee. No such vote had been taken in living memory, even against incorrigibles, but Rickli felt

he was a child of fate. A malevolent fate. "Didn't you hear? You're captain now."

"No."

"Yes. They voted. You'll replace Dymon. If you live." Rickli at last found the nerve to look down. "A one-legged man?"

She shrugged. "Got to go. You lie still, don't get it infected. They'd take it off at the neck next time." Rickli stared at the battered masts and rigging, pondering the odd course of fate. A harpoon man in good condition grew old in his job, usually perishing when age tricked him into fatal error. But as a sailmaker who could fight, he had with one cast of a harpoon won the hearts of a crew. Such as it might be. His elevation might be a mockery. Losses had been heavy when he had made his throw.

Rifkin's Dream did not weigh anchor for six weeks and then moved only a kilometer. Rickli and the Earthman were both off their backs but not in good health. Hakim couldn't handle solid food, Rickli drilled his crew mercilessly, trying to meld a scattering of veterans and dozens of transfers into a new ship's company. "What do you think?" he asked the Earthman one day. "They'll cope. They always do.

Why worry?"

"I want them to look sharp. We're going on pilgrimage."

"Landing?" The Shipwrecked Earthman had never visited the site of Man's first touchdown on Quiet Sea. During his tenure individual ships or squadrons had felt the need and made the hadj, but Rifkin's Dream had sailed on, remaining with the fleet as it crawled from bank to bank. It had been twenty-five years since the vessel had gone. "The whole fleet. We need the luck. Two disasters in one year.... It's time."

Landing's special significance hadn't attained religious standing, but some superstition had attached itself, encouraged by the augurs. To maintain their birthluck, all Children of the Sky were encouraged to visit the Ship every few years.

The reason, the Earthman had suggested, was so the augurs at the Ship could gather information from scattered sources, collate it, and disseminate it again.

The Earthman, Rickli reflected, had a lot of strange ideas about the Children of the Sky. He supposed that was the alien viewpoint. Whatever, Thomas was eager to reach Landing.

If anything, the encounter with Grossfenaja had ripened and mellowed their relationship. The Earthman now shared more of his alien thoughts.

While crossing the Finneran Bank, the traditional boundary between seas well-known and the frontier waters the fleet generally cruised, just a week's fast sail from Landing, Rickli said, "Thomas, you've never told us why you're here. Something must've brought you."

The sun had set an hour before. The bright jewels of the galaxy winked down as they began their migration toward dawn. Rifkin's Dream had settled into the long, lonely silence of night, whispering and creaking to herself, but telling few stories to listening ears. The passage of ships excited bioluminescent plankton in the shallows, scrawling pale stripes across the quiet sea. Hakim stared at the stars, at the constellation the sea people called the Spiderfish, for a long time.

"I don't know, Rickli," he said at last. "Why does a man leave home? I thought I knew then. Somehow, from here, it doesn't seem all that important."

"Was it so wicked a thing?" Rickli knew he had touched a nerve with the initial question. When Thomas stayed awake to watch the Spiderfish, he was feeling homesick. That much Rickli knew for sure about the Earthman.

Hakim frowned to him, his expression barely visible in the starlight. Afraid he had overstepped, Rickli turned to survey the running lights of nearby ships. Night sailing could be tricky.

"Some thought so. You wouldn't comprehend. The survival imperatives are different. Here, you all live in the same environment and culture." He pointed upward. "There's a fleet, the greatest of them all. Every ship is as far from its neighbor as we are from any of them. Some are big, some small, some strong, some weak. Like the fishes of the sea. Here, there're warm shallows where the living is easy and the fish get along, then the cold deeps, and in them things that get hungry, that sometimes surface, like Grossfenaja...."

Rickli wasn't sure he followed, unless the Earthman meant that some of his people preyed on others. "You mean like the pirate ship in the Saga of Wilga Stonecipher?"

"Eh? Oh. Yes, I suppose so. In any case, men Outside sometimes go after other men the way chasers pursue brunwhal."

He went silent, continued staring at the Spiderfish.

Rickli knew he had pushed as far as he dared, yet couldn't resist asking, "Would you go back now? If you had the chance?"

Hakim studied him a moment, looked back to the sky, said nothing. Rickli shrugged, surveyed the fleet again.

Thomas had been thinking about it, he knew. The man couldn't help it, no more than he could help thinking about serving in chasers, despite LaFata. The Earthman man was crippled too. It just wasn't anything as obvious as a missing kg. Perhaps it could be called a broken heartline home. Landing, for those who had never seen it, appeared on the horizon as the most outstanding anomaly of the sea, a great hump rising from the water like the back of some mythologically huge brunwhal "That's the Ship," Rickli told the Shipwrecked Earthman, when the thing finally became visible from helm level. Excited crewmen had been scampering up and down the rigging for hours. But not Hakim. He had a positive terror of heights.

"Strange, for a man who flew between the stars."

"Jesus, how'd they bring her down in one piece?"

"They didn't, really." Rickli scanned the fleet. By now, every vessel had hoisted at least one black sail. Some looked like the dark birds of death Hakim had called them. The chaser crews were getting impatient, waiting for Weatherhead's permission to begin their race to the ancient wreck. "That's why we're still here."

The Vessel had been built at the close of Old Earth's Twenty-second Century, equipped with crude hyper generators, to take out certain political favorites before an anticipated collapse of civilization. Almost two kilometers long, she had never been meant to enter atmosphere. Rickli was unsure of the circumstances that had brought her to, and had forced her landing upon, Quiet Sea. Only the augurs knew. He cared only that it had been managed and that his ancestors had survived.

Thomas cared, mostly from curiosity, but could get no more from Rickli.

"Ask the augurs when we get there," Manlove kept telling him. "They'll spend a month talking to anyone willing to listen."

He thought he understood Thomas's interest. The Ship was the nearest a connection Outside as existed on Quiet Sea. A hopeless, centuries-out-of-date connection, but certainly something more concrete than shared species-hood.

Outsiders, judging by Hakim, set great store by artifacts and possessions. The Earthman still, at times, mourned some small item lost when his ship had been looted. Rickli had spread the word among the captains, but little had turned up. Everything convertible had long since been made into something useful.

Weatherhead released the chasers. With a strong following breeze they were soon dwindling in their race to the hump.

"You really miss it that much?", the Earthman asked.

Rickli smiled. "It shows? I think it's just not being able, It was my life, you know."

"I understand." Thomas glanced at the sky. "Those old-timers had guts. People out there nowadays, in their shoes, would just give up."

"It was a chosen crew. They knew they couldn't go back before they started."

"A definite advantage. None of us can, but few of us realize it." After a pause: "You know, I think what I miss most, more than land, is birds. They were always a symbol of freedom." His expression became faraway. Rickli reached out and, for an instant, let his hand rest lightly on the Earthman's shoulder.

Thomas had told him a dozen times that his fellows would not be coming to rescue him. They had had no idea where to look.

It was almost dark when Rifkin's Dream dropped her stone anchors. In the morning she would move to one of the stone quays whiskering the dry land the Children of the Sky had built around their Ship.

"Seems to me," said the Earthman, gazing at the island that had taken centuries to create, "that it would've been easier to poulder. More land for less fill."

Rickli had to have it explained. Thomas told him about dikes and sub-sealevel land recovery.

"Suggest it to the augurs. They might be interested."

"I'm not sure I want to go anymore." Hakim nervously caressed his talisman. Since his narrow escape, he had kept it with him always.

Rickli smiled. Of course he would go, just as he himself would visit a chaser if invited. Every man tried to mend his heartlines.

"They've made a lot of headway since I was here last," Rickli said the following morning, as Rifkin's Dream warped in to a low stone pier. "They've doubled the land area. They didn't used to work that hard at it."

The Earthman observed without comment. Several vessels were already offloading ballast to be added to the fill. The Ship itself was completely surrounded. Curious sea people were looking it



over, some lining up at an open hatchway for an interior tour.

"Rickli, it sounds defeatist, but why bother? You seem to have adapted."

"We did without for centuries. It was just a dream thing. Ships would come on pilgrimage and everyone would bring a stone as a symbolic gift. They piled up. Then the augurs built a little sawmill on the pile. It made cutting sandweg so much easier that people started thinking it might be handy to have an island just for that. So they started bringing bigger loads of stone. Didn't push it, though, because they were used to doing things the old way. Then the augurs built a bigger sawmill, that handled about half the sandweg used in the fleets, and a smelter where they turned out almost a tonne of metal a month."

He took out the knife that, with the captaincy, he had inherited from Dymon Tipsword. "This's a genuine Wintermantel. Better than anything they make here, but it took the man a month, sometimes, to make one blade."

Hakim laughed sourly. "The glories of industrialization." "It'ssobod? Look there. Places where they can take a ship out of the water for repairs. And ways where they can build a ship in a tenth the time it takes at sea, with a quarter of the men." "No. I'm a cynic. What're those buildings down there? Beyond the drydocks and shipyard." "I don't know. They're new. Must be important, though. That's a lot of sandweg to hold out of ship construction. "Uhm. Curious." It wasn't till later that Rickli realized he had missed the specific that had caught the Earthman's eye. The buildings had glass windows. Hundreds of them, especially on top.

Partial starts on other buildings lay scattered over the manmade island. The augurs seemed to have a big program in mind. Rickli frowned. Providing the materials cost the fleets time and materials they could use themselves. He didn't understand. Unless there were rewards worth the cost, as with the sawmills and smelters.

Thomas didn't know what he wanted. Sometimes he would start for the pier, then would pace, then would return to wait till Rickli had fulfilled his duties. Then he would grow impatient again, only to repeat the cycle.

At last Rickli felt able to go. He left the ship to the duty section and, with Thomas's help, slowly advanced up the pier. He felt uncomfortable, naked, defenseless, so wide had the world expanded. And he felt dizzy. For the first time in a decade he was on footing that did not sway and roll with the restlessness of the sea.

"This isn't going to cut it," said Thomas. "I'm going to make those crutches."

They had argued about it before. Rickli didn't want them. But practicality began to alter his mindset.

"Where're you going?" he asked. Hakim was turning right, away from the rusty mountain of the Ship.

"I want to look at something."

But they never reached the windowed buildings. Rickli's leg bothered him too much. At his request they paused to rest in the shade of an oddly designed hull in the last stages of construction.

The Earthman studied it, finally asked, "How much glass do they make here, Rickli?"

He shrugged. "Things have changed. Used to be just a little, from bottom sand, for special bottles and trinkets."

"Handblown?" Thomas ran his fingers over the smooth seamless hull.

"Never saw it done any other way." He, too, studied the strange vessel. So much metal had gone into its construction. Surely the augurs wouldn't be so wasteful. "Is something wrong?"

"I don't know. This isn't my native sea. But there's something odd here, something that makes me feel the way I did just before the Grossfenaja surfaced." He caressed his talisman, which protruded from the waistband of his trousers.

Perhaps because he was in a suggestable mood, or because he was uncomfortable ashore, Rickli began to feel it too. "Let's go back to the ship. You make those crutches, and we'll poke around later."

"Crutches? Oh, yes," He helped Rickli up, saying, "Maybe you should think about a wooden leg."

"A what?"

By way of explanation, Thomas told him a decidedly fishy tale about an ancient seaman named Long John Silver. The idea intrigued Rickli. Though the notion wasn't unique, it hadn't occurred to him in relation to himself. He had encountered few men who'd had to cope with being an amputee. The state of medicine was such that few men ever survived such operations.

Returning, they encountered acquaintances from Replete, who, in good humor, offered to carry Rickli back to Rifkin's Dream, although the ship was out of their way. It seemed they hoped his luck would rub off. Though it hurt his pride, he accepted. His remaining leg hurt more.

As they moved down the pier, Hakim asked one of the women, "May I see your knife?" A shiny new fishknife protruded from her waistband.

Grinning, "Sure. The augurs are trading them for sandweg." Less cheerfully: "After Pimental, we're overstocked."

Rickli thought the Earthman would never stop turning the blade, examining its grip, thumbing its edge. Finally: "Rickli, can I see yours?"

The sailors, now puzzled, released him so he could hand Thomas the knife. It was one of only a dozen iron blades to be found aboard Rifkin's Dream. "Forged by Aullgur Wintermantel himself," he told the others. The smith, though a century dead, was still a legend.

The Earthman placed Rickli's knife back down on pier stone, suddenly swung the other so that their edges met sharply. "Thomas!" Iliyana's women growled angrily.

Hakim held the blades up for all to see. Rickli's had been deeply notched, the other nicked imperceptibly.

"A genuine Wintermantel?" the new blade's owner asked, her anger fading as she saw the quality of her knife. "Really?" "Yes." Rickli was dumfounded. His edge should have damaged the other.

As the sailors drifted away, talking excitedly of further trades, Hakim said, "You may get an answer to the question you asked the other night." He didn't apologize for damaging the Wintermantel. He seemed terribly upset.

Rickli let it ride till they were comfortably back aboard, observing ship and Ship from the captain's station. The Earthman stared into the distance and caressed his

"What is it, Thomas? What's wrong?"

"I'm not sure. The knife. The finish on that hull. The glass-topped buildings. But especially the knife."

"Why? It was a good one."

"Exactly. Too good, Rickli. I don't care what the augurs have been doing, they couldn't have made that knife. That was a machined blade, an Outside blade. The question is, did it come with the Ship?" After a glance toward the strange buildings, "I'm afraid of the answer."

Rickli made the intuitive leap. "You think the augurs are in touch with your people?"

"Not mine, Rickli. Not mine."

"Ah, so. The enemy. Your Fenaja."

Hakim took the talisman from his waistband, peered down its long axis.

"Grossfenaja." One word. But still he wouldn't elaborate,

"Your enemies are mine. Twice you've honored my life."

"So it goes," Hakim murmured to himself, the ancient acceptance of fate characteristic of the Children of the Sky. "No. They're merciless. They'd destroy you all if I dragged you in. If they're really here."

Now Rickli said, "So it goes. If they're that kind of people, then they should be enemies."

"Stay out of it, Rickli. Stay out. I'll try to avoid them. Yes. That's best. If they don't know I'm here, they won't bother anybody. I'll just stay aboard till you put to sea again. I'll decide what to do when you're ready to cast off."

But the wills of Fate and the Shipwrecked Earthman weren't in concert. Shortly, Rickli said, "What's this?" indicating a group coming down the pier. "Ship augurs."

A youth ran up, announced, "Augurs Blackcraft and Homewood request permission to board, sir."

"Granted." To Thomas, "The top people. Must've heard about the Grossfenaja."

"Uhm." Hakim was not convinced. .

The augurs were old, and some disabled. The lore mastery was reserved to those no longer able to cope with the sea. Though the whole party boarded, only Blackcraft and Homewood, male and female, approached the captain's station. Both eyed the Earthman. . "Greetings," said Homewood, her voice surprisingly youthful. "It's been long since Landing was honored by Rifkins Dream.

"And longer since Dream was graced by the presence of an elder augur." Rickli decided he should try to put them on the defensive.

Their eyes kept drifting to Thomas.

"We hear some strange things have befallen in the interim." Blackcraft seemed strangely wary.

"The years drift past, the ships come in, and sailors tell their tales. Some were hard to credit."

"No doubt. The young embellish with drama. A Saga grows from ordinary events." "So it goes."

"Yet these tales seemed no riging boy's daydream.," said Homewood, looking directly at the Earthman.

"How can we judge the truth of sea stories?"

"Never mind the fencing, Rickli," said Hakim. To the augurs: "What do you want?" "You're the Shipwrecked Earthman?"

"What do you want?" "Are you the man called Thomas Hakim?"

"What do you want?" "You must come with us." "No," said Rickli. "Thomas is restricted to ship." They were growing irritated. Blackcraft grumbled, "Captain, these are matters beyond you. And I remind you, you're no longer at sea."

"An oversight that can be corrected with a word."

"Tell your masters," said the Earthman, "that if they want me, they'll have to come see me themselves."

"Masters?"

"The: Outsiders. The Sangaree. The people who sent you here. The people who have been giving you

Outside goods in return for use of Landing. You probably think they've done well by you. But you've been cheated. Terribly. You don't know them, don't know what they are. Tell them that if they want Thomas Hakim, they'll have to meet him before the Children of the Sky. You'll learn." They could see Thomas was immovable. Homewood bowed slightly. "So it goes." She and Blackwood rejoined their deputation. Soon one of the lesser augurs was hurrying up the pier. "'Ah." The Earthman chuckled nervously. "I was right. But I was only guessing."

"What's it all about, Thomas?" Rickli asked.

"My enemies are here. But they're not sure who I am." After a time: "You should have stayed out of it."

Rickli shrugged. "You're my friend. You were my right hand at Pimental." From the captain's equipment rack he took a shellhorn "You're one of our own now." He blew recall. Stunned silence settled over Landing. Then sea people were everywhere, running, Before the Earthman could protest, Rickli had had danger pennons run to the main and had instructed the armorer to fill the weapons racks. By ones, twos, and threes, crewmen came running aboard, battering the augurs in their haste to reach their stations.

"You're a fool, Rickli Manlove. This isn't your fight." But the Earthman wore a smile.

"Maybe. Stay out of the way till I get muster."

Other vessels, too, began readying weapons and sail. The chaos on Landing diminished as crews found their ways to their ships.

Through the confusion came a wedge of five tall men in outlandish clothing. Rickli stared. They were heavier than his people, more muscular. Even from a distance he could see that there was no humor in their faces.

"These are your enemies?" he asked.

"Some of them. Watch the little one. The one who seems the least. He's their leader, Gaab Telle. There're blood debts between us. I'll keep out of sight." He slipped down into the galley.

Rickli called his armorer.

The five came aboard as if they owned Rifkin's Dream. Their not having asked permission aggravated Rickli's predisposition to dislike them. The light one spoke with Homewood and Blackcraft, then came aft. All five had hard, dark eyes. Fenaja eyes.

"Where is he?" Telle asked. He glanced speculatively at Rickli's stump.

Quiet as death, with an expression as grim, Thomas slipped from the galley, his talisman in hand. He nodded.

"Right behind you," Rickli replied.

They turned. The leader went pale. "You!"

"Of course. I take some killing. How's the universe been treating you, Telle? Not well, I hope."

"But..."

"As a writer once said, the reports of my death were exaggerated. You didn't send enough shooters."

So, thought Rickli, this was the man who had tried to kill Thomas. He signaled his armorer. Crewmen began selecting weapons.

Men of Quiet Sea almost never used weapons against one another. Rickli doubted his men could now. But maybe the Outsiders wouldn't recognize the bluff.

"I'll make sure this time. This's one operation you're not going to wreck." He didn't seem impressed by the martial display.

Thomas pointed his talisman.

The leader laughed. "Bluffing with a dead lasepistol, von Rhor? Six years old? Gotta. Take him." One man took one step.

There was a dazzling flash. The man fell, steam twisting from a small black hole in his back. Pandemonium. Crewmen scattered. The augurs fled to the bows. The tableau of confrontation

remained a tense pocket of false calm amidst the confusion.

Telle and his men seemed stricken. And Thomas, too, as though he could neither believe what he had done nor that his weapon had actually functioned.

Rickli took his ivory-gripped harpoon from the captain's equipment rack. A great calm, like that of the last moment before the cast from a racing chaser's sprit, descended upon him. The sight of one man killing another had not shaken him as much as he thought it should. Maybe he would react later, after the tension had passed.

"Six years, Telle. Six years I've sailed the quiet sea, without a hope, yet cherishing this thing. My only regret had been that you were still alive, that I'd failed and you were still peddling your death dust.

"I don't expect to live through this. I tried to avoid it because it'll cost these good people. The augurs think you're benefactors, yet you're raising the drug right in their front yard. When I die, you'll carry the candle to light my way into Hell."

"Spoken like a true hero," Telle sneered. But most of his arrogance had faded.

"Rickli," said the Earthman. "A favor."

"Anything, Thomas." "Have them stripped. Move the shooters forward." "Thomas?" Telle asked.

"What happened to Nicholas von Rhor?" Don't mean anything here, Telle. And just between us, that's not it either." The bodyguards moved away. "Actually, it's Soren Deatherage."

"The Hell Stars"

Rickli did not understand the exchange, but the winds of hatred blowing between the men made it clear they had hurt one another deeply and often. Maybe Thomas would explain later. But he doubted it. He had learned more about Hakim in the past ten minutes than in all the years before. Thomas handed his talisman to the armorer, began shedding his own clothing.

Rickli had never seen Thomas unclothed. Now he frowned. The Earthman was older than he had suspected. His body hair was heavily salted with grey. "In the fleets we settle personal disputes by wrestling," said Hakim.

"Man to man, Telle. I'll be thinking about what you did to my wife."

A smile ghosted across Telle's thin lips. "Then I'll remember Karamar and the Hell Stars." With a swiftness that stunned Rickli, he picked.

Thomas was lighter, shorter. All the disadvantages seemed his. Yet he held his own.

He moved as suddenly as Telle, throwing an openhanded finger punch Rickli was unable to follow.

Telle blocked with a forearm as he whipped past, flicked a kick at Hakim's groin. Thomas took it on his thigh, unleashed a kick of his own that connected with the back of Telle's pivotal knee as he turned. Telle went down. As he did, he caught Thomas's foot and dragged the smaller man with him. They rolled across the deck, kneeling, gouging, biting, then broke, bounced up, and squared off. They traded feints and counterfeints almost too subtle for Rickli to follow.

This, he thought, was another new facet of Hakim. The style of fighting was quick and deadly. He was glad Thomas hadn't lost his temper under the heavy, needling of his first few years aboard.

He might not be able to work ship, but he could kill.

The fighters came together in a flurry of punches and kicks. Then Hakim was on the deck, bleeding from one cheek. Telle circled him warily while Thomas awaited a chance to regain his feet.

Thomas seemed less practiced and clearly had less stamina than his Opponent. Rickli worried.

Hakim suddenly seemed to do three things at once, reversing their positions. Now he circled cautiously while Telle awaited a chance to rise.

It went on and on, time weighing ever more heavily on the Earthman. He was getting slower. Telle began moving with more confidence.

The larger man suddenly moved in, forcing a contest of strength. For long minutes the two strained in one another's grasp; then there was a loud crack. Thomas gasped. His left arm went slack. Telle stepped back with a look of satisfaction – and Thomas loosed a kick that destroyed his knee as thoroughly as the Fenaja harpoon had destroyed Rickli's.

Telle went down with an expression of pained surprise.

Holding his broken arm with his good hand, Thomas circled, waiting to kick again.

Telle seized an ax from a nearby weapons rack, threw. Thomas dodged, but not fast enough. The blade opened a gash on the outside of his left thigh. He fell, his blood staining the deck. He tried to rise, groaned, fell back, dragged himself to the mizzenmast, placed his back to it.

Telle pulled a sword from the rack, crawled toward the Earthman.

"Thomas!" Thomas Hakim!"

The Shipwrecked Earthman looked Rickli's way. Manlove threw the ivory-gripped harpoon.

It slapped Thomas's hand. He held on.

Crossing the Finneran Bank by night again, Rickli Manlove peered at the Spiderfish. Unnatural stars had been blooming there since before sundown, Thomas's people had come searching for their

enemies. Hakim's message, sent on Telle's Landing equipment, had gotten through. Quiet Sea would never be the same.

Riekli thought of Hakim's talisman, of the battle, and of Outside as Thomas had described it before Rifkin's Dream had departed Landing. He wondered if, knowing of those things, the augurs would have pulled the Earthman from the sea six years ago.

Too late now.

"So it goes," he murmured, surveying the running lights of the fleet. "When the grunling aren't running, the blackfin are."

Changes due or no, there was work to be done. Fish to be caught, sandweg to be harvested, Fenaja to be fought, stone to be transported to Landing. He had enough to concern him here on the quiet sea.