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Consequences
by Walter Jon Williams
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White sails cut precise arcs against a background of vivid color: green sea, blue sky, black volcanic sand. Spindrift shone like diamonds as it spattered over the weather rail. Birdwing heeled in the strong gust; timber and cordage groaned as they took the strain. Captain Derec SuPashto adjusted his stance to the increased tilt of the deck. His mind was on other things.

Birdwing and its convoy was about to be attacked by the Liavekan navy.

"My compliments to the ship's wizard, Facer," he said. "Ask him if he can veer this wind two or four points."

"Sir."

A veering wind would be useful, Derec thought, if Levett could conjure one up. But whatever happened, let it stay strong.

"Starboard a point, Sandor."

"Starboard a point, aye aye."

"Break out our colors, SuKrone."

"Sir."

Derec's first reaction on seeing the three Liavekan warships was not one of anxiety, but rather relief. Birdwing would finally have a chance to prove itself to Ka Zhir, and that chance was desperately needed

As the black-and-gold Zhir ensign streamed out overhead, Derec studied the enemy with narrowed eyes: three bright ships on a shallow sea the color of green baize. The lead galleass was a big one, thirty oars or more per side, white foam curling from its massive ramming prow. It was painted purple with scarlet trim; a rear admiral's blue pennant fluttered from its maintop and gold leaf winked from the carved arabesques that decorated the stern. The second galleass, three cables astern, was smaller and lighter, its rigging more delicate: it would be at a disadvantage in this strong wind, this choppy sea. It hadn't been painted; its sides were the bright color of varnished wood. Astern of the second enemy was a small xebec -- its military value was negligible unless it could get under an enemy's stern in a dead calm, in which case it could pound away with its bow chaser until its opponent was nothing but driftwood. Likely it served as a tender, or was used for chasing down unarmed merchantmen. Derec's impulse was to discount it.

A brave sight, these three, on the green ocean. They seemed entirely in their element.

Derec knew that appearances were deceiving.

He wondered what the Liavekan admiral was thinking as he stood on his fine gingerbread poop. The Liavekan squadron had been lurking along the coast between Ka Zhir and Gold Harbor for the obvious purpose of attacking a convoy; and now a convoy had appeared, twelve caravels and two huge carracks, all crammed to the gunnels with trade goods. The Liavekan squadron, waiting behind a barren, palm-covered islet, had duly sprung their ambush and were now driving toward their prey. But what in hell, they must wonder, was the escort?

A ship of Birdwing's type had never been seen in these waters. The stout masts and heavy standing rigging marked her as northern-built, a Farlander ship able to stand up to winter gales in the high latitudes, but even in the north she would cut an odd figure. She was too narrow, flat-sided, and low for a carrack. The forward-tilting mainmast and bonaventure mizzen would have marked her as a galleon, but if she was a galleon, where were the high forecastles and sterncastles? And where were the billowing, baglike square sails the Liavekans had come to associate with those heavy, sluggish northern ships? Birdwing's square sails were cut flat, curved gently like a bird's wing, hence her name.

To the Liavekan admiral, Derec wondered, how did this all add up? A

galleon with its upper decks razed, perhaps, in an effort to make it lighter, and furthermore cursed with an eccentric sailmaker. Some kind of bastard ship at any rate, neither fish nor fowl, with a broadside to beware of, but a military value easily enough discounted. Everyone knew that northern ships couldn't sail to weather -- unlike the oar-driven galleys and galleasses of the Levar's navy, galleons were doomed to sail only downwind. And the Liavekan's tactics were clearly aimed at getting the escort to leeward of its convoy, where it couldn't possibly sail upwind again to protect it.

You're in for a surprise, milord admiral, Derec thought. Because Birdwing is going to make those wormy hulks of yours obsolete, and all in the next turn of the glass.

"Wizard's compliments, sir." Lieutenant Facer had returned, sunlight winking from his polished brass earrings; he held his armored cap at the salute. "He might venture a spell to veer the wind, but it would take twenty minutes or more."

Within twenty minutes they'd be in gunshot. Weather spells were delicate things, consuming enormous amounts of power to shift the huge kinetic energies that made up a wind front, and often worked late or not at all.

"Compliments to the wizard, Facer. Tell him we'll make do with the wind we've got."

"Sir." Facer dropped his hat back on his peeling, sunburned head.

For a sailor he had a remarkably delicate complexion, and these southern latitudes made things worse: his skin was forever turning red and flaking off. He was openly envious of Derec's adaptation to the climate: the sun had just browned the captain's skin and bleached his graying hair almost white.

Facer turned and took two steps toward the poop companionway, then stopped. "Sir," he said. "I think our convoy has just seen the enemy."

"Right. Cut along, Facer."

"Sir."

The Zhir convoy, arrayed in a ragged line just downwind of Birdwing, was now showing belated signs of alarm. Five minutes had passed before any of them noticed an entire enemy squadron sweeping up from two miles away. Derec had no illusions about the quality of the merchant captains: the convoy would scatter like chaff before a hailstorm. None of them was capable of outrunning a squadron of warships: their only chance was to scatter in all directions and hope only a few would fall victim to the enemy. Still, Derec should probably try to do something, at least to show the Zhir he'd tried to protect their cities' shipping.

"Signal to the convoy, Randem," he said. "Close up, then tack simultaneously."

The boy's look was disbelieving. "As you like, sir."

Derec gave him a wry grin. "For form's sake, Randem."

"Aye aye, sir. For form's sake."

Signal flags rose on the halyards, but none of the convoy bothered an acknowledgment: the merchanters had no confidence in the ship's fighting abilities and were looking out for themselves. Derec shrugged. This was nothing more than he expected. At least they were clearing out and leaving an empty sea between Birdwing and the enemy.

Birdwing gave a shuddering roll as it staggered down the face of a wave; Derec swayed to compensate and almost lost his balance. His heavy breastplate and helmet were adding unaccustomed weight to his upper body. The helmet straps were pressing uncomfortably on his brass earrings, and the helmet was warming in the sun, turning into an oven.

Carefully Derec calculated his course and the enemy's. The wind was holding a point north of west: the convoy had been moving roughly north along the general trend of land. The enemy squadron was racing under oars and sail as close to the wind as their characteristics permitted: they were trying to gain as much westing as possible so as not to be pinned between Birdwing and the coast. Their course was more or less northwest: Birdwing was moving

nor'-nor' east on a converging tack. Unless something prevented it, the ships would brush at the intersection of their paths; and then the enemy would be to windward of the Birdwing, which was just where they wanted to be.

At which point, Derec thought confidently, they were going to suffer a terrible surprise.

Birdwing's crew were already at quarters; they'd been doing a gun drill when the enemy appeared. There was nothing to do but wait.

"Wizard's compliments, sir." Facer was back, his leather-and-iron cap doffed at the salute. "The enemy is attempting a spell."

"Thank you, Facer." Suddenly the brisk warm breeze blew chill on Derec's neck. He turned to face the enemy, touched his amulet of Thurn Bel, and summoned his power.

Awareness flooded his mind. He could feel the protective shields that Levett, Birdwing's wizard, had wound around the ship; from eastward he could feel a strong attempt to penetrate those shields. Derec called his power to him, but held it in reserve in case the onslaught was a feint. The attack faded grudgingly before Levett's persistent defense, then disappeared. Whatever it was, the probe had failed. Levett's protective spells remained intact, on guard.

That was the strategy Derec and Levett had formed weeks ago. The wizard's magic would remain defensive, and Birdwing's bronze cannon would bring the war to the enemy.

Derec let his hand fall from his amulet. He saw his officers standing around him expectantly; he gave them a smile. "Done," he said. "We're safe for the moment." He saw them breathe easier.

He looked at the enemy. Brightness winked from the enemy's decks: marines in their polished armor. He could hear the thud of kettledrums and crash of cymbals as the enemy quartermasters beat time for the rowers. A mile to leeward, in deeper, bluer water now, the galleasses were laboring in the steep sea, the smaller one having a particularly hard time of it.

Derec's awareness tingled: the enemy wizard was making another attempt. Derec monitored the assault and Levett's efforts to parry it. Once again the enemy was repulsed.

There was a flash from the flagship's fo'c'sle, then a gush of blue smoke that the wind tore into streamers across her bows. The thud came a half second later, followed by a shrieking iron ball that passed a half cable to larboard. The range was long for gunshot from the pitching deck of a ship beating to windward. Jeers rose from Birdwing's crew.

Another thud, this time from the smaller galleass, followed by another miss, this one coming close to clipping Birdwing's stern. The enemy were giving their gun crews something to do, Derec thought, rather than stand and think about what might come, their own possible mutilation and death.

There was a bump and a mild bang from Birdwing's maindeck, followed by a hoarse bellow. Derec stepped forward to peer over the poop rail; he saw one of the marines had stumbled and dropped his firelock, and the thing had gone off. Marcoyn, the giant marine lieutenant, jerked the man to his feet and smashed him in the face. The marine staggered down the gangway, arms windmilling: Marcoyn followed, driving another punch into the marine's face. Derec clenched his teeth. Hatred roiled in his belly.

"Marcoyn!" he bellowed. The lieutenant looked up at him, his pale eyes savage under the brim of his boarding helmet. His victim clutched the hammock nettings and moaned.

"No interference with the sojers!" Marcoyn roared. "We agreed that, Captain!" He almost spat the word.

Derec bit back his anger. "I was going to suggest, Marcoyn, that you blacken the man's eyes later. We may need him in this fight."

"I'll do more than blacken his eyes, by Thurn Bel!"

"Do as you think best, Marcoyn." Derec spoke as tactfully as possible; but still he held Marcoyn's eyes until the marine turned away, muttering under his breath, his fists clenched at the ends of his knotted arms

Marcoyn's strange pale eyes never seemed to focus on anything, just glared out at the world with uncentered resentment. He was a brute, a drunk, illiterate, and very likely mad, but he represented an element of Birdwing's crew that Derec couldn't do without. Marcoyn was the living penalty, Derec thought, for the crimes he had committed for the ship he loved.

Derec remembered Marcoyn's massive arms twisting the garrote around young Sempter's neck, the way the boy's eyes had started out of his head, feet kicking helplessly against the mizzen pinrail, shoes flying across the deck. Derec standing below, helpless to prevent it, his shoes tacky with Lieutenant Varga's blood...

His mouth dry, Derec glanced at the mizzen shrouds, then banished the memory from his mind. The enemy had fired their bow chasers once more.

The smaller galleass fired first this time, followed a half second later by the flagship. Interesting, Derec thought. The smaller ship had the better crew.

A strong gust heeled the galleon and drove it through the sea. The waves' reflection danced brightly on the enemy's lateen sails. The enemy squadron was half a mile away. If the ships continued on their present courses, Birdwing would soon be alongside the enemy flagship in a yardarm-to-yardarm fight, a situation ideal for the northern galleon.

Another pair of bangs, followed by a buzzing and a smack: the smaller galleass's ball had pitched right through Birdwing's main topsail. Derec saw blond and redheaded countrymen looking up in surprise, heard nervous laughter. This was the first time most of them had been under fire. Derec realized he should probably say something now, offer an inspiring comment to drive any thoughts of fear out of his sailors' heads. He could think of nothing.

"Run out the starboard chaser!" he finally called. "We'll answer that!"

There were some scattered cheers, but Derec could see puzzled expressions. The enemy were within range of the broadside guns: why not open fire with the whole battery? Derec kept his counsel. He was saving the first broadside for close range.

The bronze starboard demiculverin rumbled as it thrust its muzzle from the port. Derec could see the gun captain bent low over the chaser's barrel, timing the ship's motion, linstock in his hand. There was a gush of fire from the priming, then a roar; the gun flung itself back like a monstrous bronze beast. Derec turned to leeward and saw the nine-pound ball skip on the waves like a dancer twenty yards ahead of the enemy's prow. A groan of disappointment went up from Birdwing's crew.

"Chaser crew, fire at will!" Derec called.

The chasers banged at each other for another three or four rounds apiece. The Liavekans showed no sign of changing course: were they really going to let Derec lay alongside and fight exactly the kind of battle he wanted? Ignoring the artillery duel, Derec studied the enemy, the changing relationship between the ships. Tried to get into his enemy's head, wondered what the enemy admiral was thinking.

The sound of kettledrums and cymbals was very loud now, carrying clearly upwind. The enemy sweeps moved in beautiful synchrony, the blue water boiling at their touch. The distance between Birdwing and the lead enemy narrowed, and Derec was considering running out his starboard battery when flame blossomed from the enemy's sides and the air was full of shrieking. Derec's heart turned over at the sound of a slamming noise from below -- a shot lodged home -- followed by another smack as a ball tore through the fore topsail. The enemy had fired its full broadside, maybe ten guns in all.

His nerves wailing in surprise, Derec bit his lip and frowned at the enemy. Something had changed, but he couldn't say what. Something in the pattern of drumbeats and cymbals. Another level of his awareness sensed the enemy's magician attempting a spell. With a start he realized what the enemy intended.

"Hard a-starboard!" he roared, and ran to the break in the poop. Just below him, sheltered by the poop overhang, Sandor the timoneer controlled the

ship's whipstaff. "Hard a-starboard!" Derec shrieked again, and he felt the change in the ship's motion that meant the timoneer had flung his weight against the whipstaff and the galleon was beginning to respond to its big rudder. Derec suddenly felt the nature of the enemy spell -- it was an attempt to paralyze them for a few seconds, but Levett had parried it, again without the need for Derec's assistance. Derec glanced at the surprised faces of his crew.

"Both broadsides, load and run out! Starboard guns, load with double-shot! Larboard guns, load with roundshot!" He glanced at the enemy to confirm what he suspected, and found it true -- the bright silhouettes were narrowing as one set of sweeps backed water while the other continued driving forward. Lateen sails billowed and snapped as the yards were dropped to the deck. The enemy were changing course, driving straight into the wind under the power of their sweeps alone.

Birdwing lurched as the waves caught it at a new angle. "Braces, there!" Derec shouted. "Rudder amidships!" The galleon filled with shouting and stamping as the crews bent to their work. Heart in his mouth, Derec gazed at the enemy.

The relationship between the ships had changed drastically. The enemy vessels had simultaneously turned straight into the wind while preserving their relationship to one another, from a line ahead into a line of bearing. They had attempted to cut behind the Farlander galleon, head upwind and into the convoy without the necessity of a fight. Birdwing had just turned downwind and within the next two minutes would pass along the flagship's starboard side. The ships would exchange broadsides on the run, and then race past one another.

If Birdwing were a caravel or high-charged galleon, that would have been the end of the fight: Derec could never have turned into the wind to pursue the enemy. The Liavekan admiral would have got between him and his convoy, a master stroke. But Birdwing was something the Liavekan hadn't seen, and savage exultation filled Derec as he realized he had the enemy in his hand.

There was a massive rumbling as the guns were run out, all fifty-four of them, heavy demicannon on the lower deck and lighter, longer culverins on the maindeck. Derec stood on the break in the poop and shouted through cupped hands.

"Larboard gun captains and second captains remain with your guns! All extra crew to the starboard guns!" Bare feet drummed the planks -- the crew had practiced this many times. Birdwing didn't carry enough crew to efficiently fight both sides, and Derec wanted his starboard guns served well.

Enemy kettledrums thundered over the water. The purple-and-scarlet galleass was frighteningly close.

"Starboard broadside, make ready!" Derec shouted. "Fire on my order! Sail trimmers, stand by the braces! Timoneer -- starboard a bit!" He'd pass alongside the enemy and drive Birdwing right through their starboard bank of sweeps if he could.

But abruptly the kettledrums made a flourish, then fell silent. The enemy sweeps rose like white teeth from the water, and then drew inward. The Liavekans were prepared for Derec's maneuver.

"Midships!" he called. And suddenly there was eerie silence -- no kettledrums, no shouted orders, no guns running out, only the whisper of the wind and the deadening beat of Derec's pulse in his ears.

The galleass came alongside, and the guns spoke. The enemy fo'c'sle guns bellowed first, so close their fires licked Birdwing's timbers, and the air filled with splinters and moaning shot. Then Derec shrieked "Fire!" and the galleon lurched as all its guns went off more or less together, from the demicannon on the lower decks to the little sakers and minions used by the marines. Abruptly there was a chorus of screams from the galleass as shot and splinters tore through the close-packed oarsmen -- the weird and awful cries sounded clearly even to Derec's deafened ears. The enemy quarterdeck guns went

off last, massive iron cannon firing fifty-pound stone shot that burst on impact and laid low a score of Marcoyn's marines.

But all that was anticlimax: as soon as Birdwing's guns fired, Derec was shouting new orders. "Hard a-starboard! Starboard guns, reload! Larboard guns, fire as you bear!"

Kettledrums and cymbals punctuated Derec's cries: the enemy admiral's galleass was losing momentum, beginning to swing in the wind. They had to get under way, and quickly. Derec saw sweeps beginning to run out, and saw also that his salvo had blown gaping holes in the galleass's sides. The row-deck must be a shambles. Triumph filled his heart.

Suddenly he was aware of the pressure of an enemy spell. Levett seemed to be handling it; but suddenly there was another strike, moving fast as lightning, a white-hot flare in Derec's mind. Derec's own power lashed out without his conscious effort, turning the spell away. A hollow feeling overtook him as he realized the spell's nature: the enemy wizard had tried to set off the powder cartridges on the gundeck. The powder magazine itself was well guarded by spells renewed yearly, but the powder was vulnerable as the ship's boys carried it to the guns, as the gun crews ladled the cartridges into the breeches and rammed shot atop them. This closely engaged, explosions on the gundeck would be disastrous.

The purple galleass fell off the wind a bit before its sweeps finally struck the water. Birdwing turned like a dolphin under the enemy stern, the starboard guns running out again, barking as they drove iron lengthwise through the enemy, wreaking hideous destruction on the narrow enemy vessel. Derec pounded the taffrail, roaring encouragement to the guncrews. Birdwing was now close-hauled between the two enemy galleasses, and the larboard guns -- manned inefficiently by two men apiece -- fired as the smaller vessel came into line: the range was much longer, but Derec saw the foremast come down. The fully crewed starboard guns ran out again, driving another broadside into the admiral's port quarter. The kettledrums fell silent. Sweeps flailed the water in panic.

"Stations for tacking! Helm's a-lee!" Derec's heart beat fire: a bloodthirsty demon howled in his soul. He wanted the enemy smashed.

Birdwing pivoted on its heel like a dancer, running along the purple ship's larboard side. Two full broadsides lashed out; the enemy timbers moaned to the impact of shot. The mainmasts and mizzenmasts fell: the enemy rudder hung useless from its gudgeons. Nothing but small arms replied: the Liavekans hadn't reloaded their larboard guns after the first broadside, either because they hadn't the crew or hadn't thought it was necessary. Now they paid for their neglect.

The enemy flagship was left astern, a near-wreck pouring blood from its scuppers. Birdwing tacked again, heading for the smaller enemy; the lighter galleass had bravely turned toward the fight in an effort to succor its admiral. Useless: Birdwing forged ahead and yawed to fire one broadside, then the other. The guns smashed enough enemy sweeps to stagger the galleass in the water; the next broadside brought the mainmast down along with the enemy colors.

Derec saw the third enemy vessel's colors coming down -- the xebec had surrendered, even though it had stood away from the battle and might have got away.

Then there was silence, filled only with the gusting wind and the eerie sounds of the dying. Wreckage littered the sea: broken sweeps, jagged splinters, torn bodies of the dead. The enemy were drifting toward land: Derec would have to order them to drop an anchor, till he could juryrig masts and get them under way.

Suddenly the silence was broken by cheers, Birdwing's crew sending roar upon defiant roar into the sky.

Derec looked down at the capering men, laughing and dancing in the waist of the ship, dancing in the blood of their crewmates who lay where the enemy's shot had flung them.

Then he remembered the mutiny, the way the men had danced in the blood of their countrymen, and the taste of victory turned to bitterness in his mouth.

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"Ah," said Prince Jeng. "My mutineer."

"Your serene and glorious Highness," Derec said, and fell to his knees, bowing low and raising his hands to his forehead.

Jeng was a balding man in his late thirties, tall for a Zhir, bearded and portly; he was heir to the throne, and head of the Regency Council while his father the king was ill and recuperating at the Obsidian Palace inland. It was Jeng who had intensified the undeclared naval war against Liavek, and who as a means of forwarding his policy had welcomed Birdwing to Ka Zhir. This was Derec's first lone audience with the Prince -- he had met Jeng twice before, but only as one petitioner among many.

Jeng seemed a bit surprised at Derec's submission.

"Rise, Captain SuPashto. This is an informal audience, after all. Would you like a sherbet on the terrace?"

"Thank you, Your Highness." Derec rose and suppressed a feeling of discomfort. Back in the Twin Kingdoms, on the continent the Zhir called Farland, he'd never had any dealings with high nobility, and despite Prince Jeng's hospitality he was not at home here. Derec was also uncomfortable in Prince Jeng's language: his tongue was rough, and he desperately wished for an interpreter.

Jeng's cool summer silks whispered on marble as Derec followed him to the terrace. The sherbets were already laid on a wrought-iron serving table: obviously the Prince had not expected Derec to refuse an offer of refreshment. Below the terrace, cliffs fell away to reveal the Inner Harbor of Ka Zhir.

A strong sea breeze blew through the palace, but below the harbor was windless. A hundred ships of burden stood on their perfect reflections in the still blue water. Among them, small guard boats scuttled like water spiders under oars. Thirty war galleys were drawn up on the shelving pebble beach of Great Kraken Island, safe beneath the guns and curtain walls of Fort Shzafakh, which was perched atop the old volcanic dome. Beyond, between the Inner and Outer harbors, thousands of slaves were toiling to build the New Mole, at the end of which a new defensive fortification would rise, from which a massive chain could be raised to block the channel and keep the Inner Harbor safe. The new fort was coming to be known as Jeng's Castle, just as the intensified conflict with Liavek was gaining the name Jeng's War. Neither term was official; but language was, in its inevitable fashion, reflecting the realities of power.

Jeng scooped up his sherbet in one broad paw and walked to a brass telescope set on the terrace. Touching it gingerly -- the metal had grown hot in the sun -- he adjusted the instrument and peered through it.

"Your conquests, Captain," he said. He stepped back from the telescope and, with a graceful gesture, offered Derec a look. Derec nodded his thanks and put his eye to the instrument.

The bright varnished galleass leaped into view, anchored in the Outer Harbor next to the xebec. The Zhir ensign floated over both, black-and-gold raised over the Liavekan blue. The admiral's purple galleass was just behind, drawn upon the shelving beach where it had been run aground to keep from sinking. Birdwing's distinctive silhouette, a total contrast to every other vessel in the harbor, shimmered in a patch of bright, reflective water.

"I understand the xebec surrendered without a fight," Jeng commented. Derec straightened and faced the Prince. The sea breeze tugged at the Prince's cloth-of-gold silks.

"Yes, Your Highness. The xebec captain witnessed the loss of the two larger vessels and concluded that mighty wizardry was at work. He surrendered rather than be blasted to the bottom."

"But wizardry was not at work, was it?"

Derec shook his head. "Nay, sir. We had a wizard, and so did they; but

the magics canceled each other out."

Jeng raised his delicate silver spoon to his mouth. "We have interrogated Tevvik, their wizard," he said, sipping sherbet as if it were wine, "and he confirms this. In return for his testimony, we have released him on parole."

Derec shrugged: the wizard's fate meant nothing to him.

"A pity that Admiral Bandur was killed in the fight. He might have brought you a large ransom."

"With Your Highness's blessing," Derec said slowly, staggering through the foreign phrases, "we will capture more admirals."

Prince Jeng smiled catlike and licked his spoon. "So you shall, Thung willing."

"If Your Highness will modify our privateer's license to permit us to cruise alone against the enemy..." Derec began, but Jeng frowned and held up a hand.

"There are those on the Council who say your victory was a fluke," Jeng said. "They say the winds were kind to you. What should I answer, Captain?"

Derec hesitated, an array of technical terms running through his head. How much did Jeng know of the sea? Ka Zhir depended on ships and trade for its livelihood, and Jeng was an intelligent man who took an interest in the affairs of the kingdom; but how much practical seamanship did the Prince know?

"Your Highness has seen galleons from the Two Kingdoms before, and from Tichen?"

Jeng nodded. "They come with the annual trading convoys, yes. My mariners do not think well of them."

"They are slow, yes. And cannot sail into the wind."

Jeng finished his sherbet and scoured the dish with his spoon. The sound grated on Derec's nerves. "So my advisors tell me. You say your ship is different."

"It is, Your Highness. We call it a race-built galleon," stumbling, having to fall into his own language, "to distinguish it from the old style, which we call high-charged."

Jeng reached for a bell on the table and rang it. "Race-built?" he said. "Because it is faster?"

Derec was surprised at Jeng's conclusion: the Prince understood Derec's language better than he'd suspected.

"With respect, Your Highness, the root of the word is razor," Derec said. "Because the upper decks, the high sterncastles and forecastles, are razored off. The race-built galleon is lower in profile, and also lighter, without the weight of the castles."

A servant appeared. The Prince ordered more sherbet, then looked at Derec and frowned. "The castles, my advisors tell me, are the galleon's great advantage in combat. The castles can hold many soldiers, and the soldiers can fire down into enemy ships."

"The castles also make a high profile, and a high profile can catch the wind. The wind catches the ship and tries to push it to leeward. This is called leeway...."

Prince Jeng's eyes flashed. "Any Zhir child knows this, Captain. Please do not inform me of matters I learned at my mother's knee."

Derec's heart skipped a beat. He lowered his eyes and looked at Jeng's feet. "Your pardon, Your Highness. I was merely trying to make the point that with a lower profile, the race-built galleon makes much less leeway and is therefore able to point higher into the wind."

"Yes." Curtly. "Very well. I understand."

"Also, Your Highness, we have a new form of square sail called the birdwing. It's flatter, rather like your own lateen sail. Although it holds less air, it's somehow able to drive a ship nearer the wind."

Prince Jeng's sternness dropped away, replaced by frank curiosity. "Is that so? How can that be?"

Derec shrugged helplessly. "I do not know, Your Highness. It appears to

be a property of the wind that we do not yet understand."

"It works, but you don't know why?" Jeng considered this. "I shall have to inquire of my philosophers. We know why the lateen works so well, of course -- it's the triangular shape, which reflects the universality of the Triple Unities of Heart, Wit, and Spirit."

"Perhaps Captain-General Collerne understands these matters," Derec said, "I don't know. The birdwing sail had been in use on some of our smaller craft for two or three generations, but it was Captain-General Collerne who thought to use it on a warship. It was also his idea to raze the upper decks, after he noticed that some old ships that had their castles removed became better sailers." A fire kindled in Derec as he thought of his old captain and teacher. "He wanted to create a fleet taking its orders from sailors, not generals appointed to command at sea. A fleet that fights with broadside guns instead of rapiers and firelocks, that uses the wind and water to its own advantage..." His thick northern tongue stumbled on the Zhir words.

"Yes, yes," Jeng said. "That's all very well, but it's practical issues I'm concerned with." A servant arrived with another bowl of sherbet. He gave his catlike smile as he tasted the treat. Derec understood how the man had grown so stout.

"I am trying to speak practically, Your Highness," Derec said. "Your galleys and galleasses are built lightly, so they can be driven through the water by muscle power. Because they must have so many rowers, they must water and victual frequently, and they must stop and let the rowers off every few days, so that they won't sicken and die. If the enemy attacks while your ships are beached, your fleet is in grave jeopardy. Your ships can carry only a limited number of guns, because they are built lightly.

"Because it is powered by the wind, Birdwing is built stoutly and can resist punishment that would sink one of your galleys. Our holds are deeper and our crews are smaller, so that we can carry more provision and stay at sea much longer. Birdwing carries twenty-seven guns on each broadside, twice as many as your largest ship -- and that's not counting sakers and minions. The Liavekans simply won't be able to stand up to a race-built ship, and a fleet of race-built craft will sweep them from the Sea of Luck. I'll stake my life on that, Your Highness."

Prince Jeng looked at him darkly. "You may have to, Captain SuPashto." Derec felt a cold touch on his neck. Prince Jeng took a deliberate sip of sherbet. "You are from a northern land, where political realities are somewhat different. Your King Torn is bound by custom and by the House of Nobles. There is no law of custom in Ka Zhir, Captain. The King is the law here, and in the absence of the King, the Regent."

"I understand, Your Highness."

Jeng's eyes were cold. "I think not, Captain. I think you do not comprehend the ... necessities ... of life in Ka Zhir." He turned, facing the Inner Harbor, and pointed with his silver spoon, an oddly delicate gesture in such a big man. "You see the New Mole, Captain? I ordered that. One order, and thousands of slaves were set to work. Many of them will die. I didn't have to apply to the Regency Council, I didn't have to speak to a treasurer, I didn't have to get the permission of a House of Nobles. I merely gave an order one fine morning -- and behold, the slaves die, and the mole is built."

"Yes, Your Highness."

"Perhaps our political character," Jeng said, turning philosophical, "is derived from our volcanoes. They are unpredictable, inclined to sudden violence, and prone to massacre. So are the Zhir. So is my family.

"I am a tyrant, Captain," he said. He turned back to Derec, and his smile sent a chill through the northern man. "My very whim is law. I am an educated man and am considered an enlightened tyrant by my philosophers" -- his smile was cynical -- "but I would scarcely expect them to say anything else, as I would then be compelled to have them crucified. That is the problem with being a tyrant, you see -- I can't stop being tyrannical, even if inclined otherwise, because that would encourage other would-be tyrants to

take my place, and they would be worse. I am not as great a tyrant as my father -- he had his unsuccessful commanders beheaded, and I only have them whipped, or make slaves of them. But I promise you, Captain SuPashto," and here he pointed his spoon at Derec, and the gesture could not have been more threatening if the Prince had held a sword. "I promise you that if you fail me I will have you killed."

Prince Jeng fell silent, and slowly ate two bites of sherbet. Derec said nothing. From the moment he had entered into conspiracy with Marcoyn and the two of them had raised the crew, he had expected nothing but death.

Jeng looked at him curiously. "You do not fear death, northern man? I can make the death unpleasant if I wish."

"My life is in your hands," Derec said. "I have always known this."

"Then you understand the essential character of our relationship."

Prince Jeng smiled. He finished his sherbet and put the bowl down, then put his arm around Derec's shoulders and began to walk with him back into the palace. "I have in mind to give you a squadron, Captain," he said. "It will be under the nominal orders of a Zhir, but it will be yours to command, and my admiral will understand this. Bring me back lots of the Levar's ships, and I will favor you. You will be able to replace those old brass earrings with rings of gold, and diamonds and emeralds will gleam like reflective water on your fingers. Fail me, and ... well, why be morbid on such a lovely day?"

Derec's mind whirled. "Thank you, Your Highness," he stammered.

"I will send some slaves aboard to replace your casualties."

Derec hesitated. "I thank you, Your Highness. Could I not have freemen? They -- "

Jeng's tones were icy. "Slaves can pull ropes as well as anyone."

Derec sighed inwardly. Jeng would send his slaves aboard and collect their share of the pay and prize money. The slaves would not work hard and would prove cowardly, because they hadn't anything to fight for. It was a persistent evil here, one Derec had hoped to avoid -- but now he must concede.

"I thank you, Your Highness. Strong men, if you please."

"No women? Not one?"

"Women are not as strong. On a galleon, the sailors must move heavy cannon, and fight the yards when the sails are filled with wind..."

"Really? But surely there are less physical tasks. Scrubbing the planks, or cooking, or serving the officers."

"Then there are discipline problems, Your Highness. If you will look at the complaints in your navy, I'm sure you'll find more than half having to do with officers playing favorites among their prettier crewmates."

"But how do your sailors keep warm at night?"

Derec smiled. "Abstinence makes them ... fiercer fighters, Your Highness."

Prince Jeng looked shocked. "I would never deprive my men and women of their pleasures, Captain. They're prone enough to disobedience as it is. But if you insist on your barbaric customs..." He shrugged. "The least I can do is rescue you from this cold regime -- one of my commanders must learn to enjoy life, yes? Until your ship is ready, you will stay in the palace and accept my hospitality. I will send a woman to your room tonight." He hesitated. "You do like women, yes?"

"Ah. Yes, Your Highness."

"You did make me wonder, Captain. Perhaps you would prefer more than one?"

Derec was surprised. "One is generally sufficient."

Jeng laughed. "I'm unused to such modesty. Very well. One it is."

"Thank you, Your Highness. For everything."

The Prince had steered Derec back to the audience chamber, and he dropped his arm and stepped back. "The majordomo will show you to an apartment."

"Thank you, Your Highness." Derec knelt again, raising his hands to his forehead.

"One more thing, SuPashto."

"Your Highness?"

Prince Jeng smiled his catlike smile. "No more mutinies, Captain."

* * * *

A day later, coming aboard Birdwing, Derec was surprised to meet the Liavekan wizard, Tevvik, at the entry port. The pleasant-looking young man smiled and bowed, his expression cheerful. Derec nodded curtly and stepped below to his own wizard's hot, airless cabin. He rapped on the flimsy partition.

"Enter." Derec stepped in to find Levett sitting in his bunk, reading a Zhir grammar by the light of a tallow candle. Derec stood over him.

"I've come for my lesson, wizard," he said.

Levett was a short, thin man. Though he was young, his hair and beard were white. Diamond chips glittered in his hoop earrings. His green eyes studied Derec.

"As you like, Captain. I was just chatting with a colleague. Tevvik's an interesting man. Shall we go to your cabin?"

Derec turned and moved down the passageway to his cabin. The stern windows were open, providing relief from the heat. Flitting reflections danced on the deckhead above.

"I have been comparing notes with Tevvik," Levett offered.

"The Liavekan."

"He's Tichenese, actually. That's why he's so dark. It was a matter of chance that he was in the Liavekan navy -- it might as easily have been Ka Zhir, or the Two Kingdoms. He's seeking adventure and foreign lands; he doesn't care whom he serves. He's on parole; now he'll set up on his own, here in town. Of course," Levett said rather deliberately, "he has no family. No one depending on him. He can afford to wander."

Derec sat at his table and held the wizard's eyes for a long moment. The wizard looked away.

"I have promised you your liberty, wizard. As soon as I know your weather spells."

"I have never doubted your word, Captain."

"Just my ability to keep it."

Levett said nothing.

"This situation was not of my making, Levett," Derec said. "I'm sorry you are without your wife and family; I know you love them dearly. As soon as I can spare you, you will be free to take the first ship north. With money in your pocket."

Levett licked his lips. "They will call me a mutineer."

"The mutiny was mine, wizard."

"I understand. You were left no choice. I had no choice myself -- when the fighting broke out, I wrapped myself in illusion and hid."

"You had no part in the mutiny, true enough."

"Those in authority at home ... may not understand."

"There would have been a mutiny in any case. My choice was to try to control it, lest everyone die."

The finest ship in the Two Kingdoms' fleet, Derec thought bitterly, and the man who had conceived it, fought for its building, sweated through its construction -- Captain-General Collerne -- had been denied command. Instead Birdwing received a courtier from the capital, Captain Lord Fors, and his venomous lieutenant, Grinn ... and within two months, with their policy of vicious punishments mixed with capricious favoritism, they had destroyed the morale of the crew and driven them to the brink of violence. Derec -- who as a commoner had risen to the highest rank available to the lowborn, that of sailing master -- had tried to stand between the captain and his crew, had tried to mitigate the punishments and hold the crew in check, but had only been mocked for his pains and threatened by Grinn with a beating. A sailing master, the senior warrant officer on the ship, flogged ... the threat was unheard of, even in a service accustomed to violence.

After that, Derec knew that mutiny was only a matter of time. Derec approached Marcoyn first -- the man was constantly in trouble, but he was a fighter. Derec then chose his moment, and as an officer had the keys to the arms chests: Fors and Grinn both died screaming, begging for their lives as maddened crewmen hacked at them with swords and pikes. Lieutenant Varga, a good officer who had been appalled by his captain's conduct, had nonetheless tried to rescue Fors, and was stabbed and flung bodily into the sea for his pains.

Derec had tried to hold the killings to three, but the mutineers got into the liquor store and things soon ran out of control. The ship's corporal died, bludgeoned to death in the hold; another dozen, known captain's favorites or those suspected of being informers, were killed. Marcoyn had led the blood-maddened crewmen on their hunt for enemies, had hung the remaining lieutenants and a fourteen-year-old midshipman, Sempster, from the mizzen shrouds, and there garroted them one by one. Derec had stood by underneath, watching the starting eyes and kicking heels, helpless to prevent it -- he was the ship's sailing master, another officer, and if he'd objected he would have danced in the shrouds with the others.

After the crew had sobered, Derec had been able to reassert his authority. Levett, who had hidden during the mutiny, had lent supernatural influence to Derec's command. Now Derec was captain, and had chosen his officers from among the bosun's and master's mates. Marcoyn, who was illiterate and could not navigate, had been given the marines, whose morale and efficiency he was in the process of ruining with a brutality and capriciousness as hardened as that of Captain Lord Fors.

"You have done as well as you could, Captain," Levett said. "But now that you possess the royal favor, can you not do without me?"

Derec looked up at him. "Not yet, wizard. You are the best windspeller I know."

Levett was silent for a time, then shrugged. "Very well. Let us go about our lessons, then."

Derec reached inside his shirt for his amulet of Thurn Bel. The wizard seated himself. "Clear your mind, Captain," he said, "and summon your power. We shall try again."

* * * *

Drained, his lesson over, Derec stepped onto the poop and nodded briskly to Randem, the officer of the watch. Moaning through the rigging and rattling the windsails was the fitful wind that he had, at great effort, succeeded in summoning. Not much to show for three hours' effort.

He stepped to the stern and gazed over the taffrail at the lights of Ka Zhir. His eyes moved to the cliffs above, where his apartment and his harlot waited in Jeng's palace. She would be disappointed tonight, he thought; the wizardry had exhausted him.

Time to call his barge and head ashore. The order poised on his lips, he turned to head back for the poop companion. He froze in his tracks, terror lurching in his heart.

Dark forms dangled from the mizzen shrouds, their legs stirring in the wind. Tongues protruded from blackened lips. Pale eyes rolled toward Derec, glowing with silent accusation.

Wrenching his eyes from the sight, Derec looked at Randem, at the other men on deck. They were carrying on as normal. The ghosts were invisible to them.

Derec looked again at the dead and stared in horror at young Sempster, the boy swinging from the shrouds with the garrote still knotted about his neck.

The dead had risen, risen to curse him.

He was doomed.

* * * *

Drums and cymbals beat time as Derec's rowing squadron backed gracefully onto the shelving pebble beach of Ka Zhir's Outer Harbor. Birdwing, a damaged

galleass in tow, dipped its ensign to its nominal Zhir admiral. The galleass had lost its rudder in an autumn storm, had broached-to and been pounded before the rowers got it under way again. Birdwing was continuing to the Inner Harbor, to deliver its crippled charge to the Royal Dockyard.

"Keep the Speckled Tower right abeam till the octagonal tower comes in line," the Zhir pilot said. "Then alter course three points to larboard to clear the New Mole."

"Aye aye, sir," said the timoneer.

The sound of anchors splashing echoed over the bay, followed by the roar of cable. The squadron's three prizes, all round-bowed merchantmen, had just come to rest. Derec, looking out over the taffrail, saw the crippled galleass slew sideways in a gust, then come to a sharp check at the end of the hawser. Birdwing gave a brief lurch as the cripple's weight came onto the line.

The bonaventure flapped overhead as Birdwing turned gracefully to larboard. A ghastly stench passed over the quarterdeck, and Derec hawked and spat. Ka Zhir used slaves in some of their ships, and they were chained to the benches and lay in their own filth -- the smell was incredible. Derec turned away from the galleass and faced forward, his eyes automatically giving a guilty glance to the mizzen shrouds. His mind eased as he saw the clear, tarred black hawser cutting through the bright blue tropical sky.

Over his voyages of the last six months, the ghosts had returned many times, every few days, sometimes in broad daylight. Usually Derec saw them hanging in the mizzen rigging, but on occasion he'd see them elsewhere: Lieutenant Varga, his wounds pouring blood, his hair twined with seaweed as he watched Derec from amid the crew as the hands witnessed punishment; the ship's corporal, his skull beaten in, sitting on the main crosstrees and laughing through broken teeth as the ship went through gun drill; and once, most horribly, Derec had entered his cabin at dinnertime only to find Midshipman Sempter sitting at his place, gazing at him over his meal, his mouth working silently as he tried to speak past the garrote. Derec's steward had watched in amazement as the captain bolted the room, then returned later, sweating and trembling, to find the ghost gone.

Nothing untoward had ever happened: Derec's luck on his voyages had been good. Admiral Zhi-Feng, Derec's nominal superior, was an intelligent man, and on Prince Jeng's orders had diffidently followed Derec's advice; he was learning quickly, and had recommended that Birdwing's lines be taken by draftsmen so that an entire squadron of race-built galleons might rise on the Royal Dockyard's stocks. Five galleons were a-building and would be ready by spring. Derec had fought three engagements with Liavekan squadrons and won them all, capturing two galleasses, four galleys, and a number of smaller craft; he had sent in over forty merchant ships as prizes. Corrupt and slow though Ka Zhir's prize courts were, they had made Derec a wealthy man: the strongbox he kept beneath the planks in his sleeping cabin was crammed with gold and jewels. Prince Jeng's War was proving successful, much to the discomfort of Liavek. With an entire squadron of galleons, Derec had no doubt the Liavekan navy would be swept from the seas.

Derec glanced up at the royal palace, the white walls on the tall brown cliffs, and frowned at the sight of the flag that flapped from its staff. Something was wrong there. He stepped to the rack, took a glass, and trained it on the flag. The Royal Standard leaped into view. Derec took a breath.

So King Thelm was back, having presumably recovered from his illness. Jeng would no longer be Regent; absolute power had now passed to his father. He wondered at the alteration's implication for himself, for Birdwing, and decided there would be little change. Thelm might negotiate an end to the war, but still Birdwing and Derec had proven themselves over and over again: Thelm wouldn't throw away such a strategic asset.

"Bel's sandals!" SuKrone's curse brought Derec's eyes forward. Amazement crackled in his mind.

Birdwing had rounded the fortification at the end of the New Mole,

and the entire Inner Harbor was opened to view. The harbor was full of the tall masts and dark rigging of a northern fleet, the huge round-bellied caravels that brought metals, pitch, and turpentine to Ka Zhir every autumn, returning with sugar, kaf, and spices; and riding to anchor were northern warships, three high-charged galleons and one leaner, lower shape, a race-built galleon like Birdwing, but longer, showing thirty gunports each side.

Floating above each ship was a green ensign with two gold crowns, the flag of Derec's homeland.

They had come early this year, and caught Derec unprepared.

* * * *

The scent of death swept over the poop. It was just the smell of the galleass, Derec thought; but still his spine turned chill.

"What do we do, Captain?" Marcoyn's mad eyes were wild. Drunkenly, he shook his fist in Derec's face. "What the piss do we do? They're going to have us kicking in the rigging by nightfall!"

Birdwing was still moving toward the Inner Harbor, a party of men standing in the forecandle ready to drop the best bower. Derec was looking thoughtfully over the rail. One of the big galleons -- Derec recognized the Sea Troll -- had storm damage: one topmast was gone. The Double Crowns was missing its castles: they had presumably been razed in an effort to make it as light and handy as Birdwing. Monarch, the other high-charged galleon, stood closest, towering over every ship in harbor and carrying eighty guns. But it was the other race-built ship that had an admiral's red pennant flying from its maintruck, and it was to this ship that Derec's eyes turned. Torn II, he thought: so they had built her, and sent her here to find her precursor.

"Captain! Answer, damn you!" Marcoyn staggered, not from the heave of the deck but from his liquor.

Derec turned his eyes on the man and tried to control the raging hatred he felt. "We will wait, Mr. Marcoyn," he said.

"You've got to do something!" Marcoyn raged. "You know Prince Jeng! Talk to him!"

Derec looked at Marcoyn for a long moment. Marcoyn dropped his unfocused eyes, then his fist.

"We fight under the flag of Ka Zhir," Derec said, indicating the ensign flying overhead. "We have Zhir protection. The trading fleet is here, aye, but it's under the two hundred guns of Fort Shzafakh and another two hundred on the mainland. They daren't attack us, Marcoyn. Not openly."

Marcoyn chewed his nether lip as he thought this over. "Very well, SuPashto," he said.

Derec stiffened. "Captain SuPashto, if you please, Mr. Marcoyn."

Marcoyn's eyes blazed dull hatred. "Captain," he spat. He saluted and turned away.

The other crewmen, the small, dark Zhir standing beside the tall, fair Farlanders, had watched the confrontation, trying hard to conceal their rising fear. Derec's quiet tones had seemed to calm them. He stepped forward to the break in the poop.

"They daren't touch us, boys!" he shouted. "Not openly. But there will be Two Kingdoms men ashore on leave, and for now we'll have no shore parties. When we must send parties ashore, we will go armed and in large groups. Now," he ventured a ragged grin, "let's show them what we've learned. As soon as our anchor's down, I want those sails harbor-furled, without a dead man in 'em; I want our old chafing-gear down; and I'll have some parties detailed to renew our gilding. Mr. Facer, see to it."

"Yes, sir."

Derec nodded curtly and stepped to the weather rail. He watched the northern fleet grow closer.

* * * *

The admiral's summons came at sunset. Derec was half expecting it, he'd seen

Zhi-Feng's barge take him ashore to his quarters in the Lower Town. Derec put on his best clothes, strapped on his rapier, and thrust a pair of pistols in his belt. He called for his gig and had himself rowed to the admiral's apartments.

The admiral was dressed in a gorgeous silk robe, and his hair and beard had been curled and perfumed. Gemstones clustered on his fingers. He drank wine from a crystal goblet as big as his head. His belt had scales of gold.

Derec scarcely noted this magnificence, his attention instead riveted on the admiral's other visitor, a portly man plainly dressed. He fell to his knees and raised his palms to his forehead.

"Rise, Captain," said Prince Jeng. "Forgive this melodrama, but I thought it best not to let anyone know we had met." He sat in a heavy cushioned chair, eating red licorice. Derec rose. Jeng looked at him and frowned.

"Problems are besetting the two of us, Captain SuPashto," he said. "The same problems, actually. My father, and the trading fleet."

"I trust in your guidance, Highness."

Jeng seemed amused. "That's more than I can say, Captain. Neither I nor anyone else really expected His Encompassing Wisdom to recover, and I'm afraid the old man's found my regency a bit ... premature ... in diverting from his policies. He didn't want a naval war with Liavek in his old age, and now he's got one, and if the war hadn't been so successful, half the Council would have got the chop." Jeng grimly raised the edge of his hand to his throat. "But since we're winning," he added, "he's not sure what to do. At this point I think we'll fight on, so long as we stay ahead." He picked up a stick of licorice and pointed it at Derec like a royal scepter. "That makes you valuable to him, and so you may thank your victories for the fact that you and Zhi-Feng haven't been beheaded on your own quarterdecks."

"I owe my victories to your kindness and support," Derec said. "May Thung preserve Your Highness."

"Thank you for your concern, SuPashto, but I doubt I'm in real danger," Jeng said. "I'm the only heir the old man's got left. The first went mad, the second died trying to invest his luck, the third played a losing game with His Scarlet Eminence and got his neck severed for losing.... There's no one left but me. The worst that will happen to me, I think, is exile to an island. It's everyone around me who'll lose his head." He smiled. "His Encompassing Wisdom might want to perpetrate a massacre just to show everyone he's back."

Zhi-Feng looked a little green. "Gods keep us from harm," he murmured.

Jeng chewed meditatively on his licorice wand. "The problem presented by my shining and beloved ancestor, may Thung preserve him, may be finessed," he said. "The problem of your trading fleet is not so easily dealt with. Briefly, they want you dead."

"I expect no less, Highness."

"They have demanded that you and your ship be turned over to them. This demand has thus far been refused. You are too valuable to the war effort."

Derec felt his tension ease. "I thank Your Highness."

Jeng's eyebrows rose. "_I_ had little to do with it, Captain. His Encompassing Wisdom cares little for my counsel these days. We may thank the old man's common sense for that -- he's not going to throw away the war's biggest asset, not without some thought, anyway. No, the problem is that your northern admiral is proving damnably clever."

"May I ask which admiral, Your Highness?"

"I have heard you speak of him. One Captain-General Collerne."

A cold wind touched Derec's spine. For the first time in this interview he felt fear. "Aye," he said. "A clever man indeed."

"You know him well?"

"My first captain. Brilliant. He designed Birdwing and taught me everything I've learned about the sea. He got me my master's warrant. He's the best sailor I know."

Jeng looked at Derec coldly. "I'd advise you to leave off this

admiration and learn to hate him, Captain SuPashto. He wants your hide, and he won't leave the Sea of Luck without it."

Yes, Derec thought, that was Collerne. Brilliant, unforgiving, a demon for discipline. He would not countenance mutiny, not even against the evil man who had supplanted him in his longed-for command.

"I must trust to Your Highness's protection," Derec said simply.

Jeng's eyes were shards of ice. "My protection is worth little. Let me tell you what your damned captain-general did. Once he realized we wouldn't give you up because of your value to the war, he offered to fight in your place. In exchange for you and the other ringleaders, he's offered us his two best ships, Torn II and Double Crowns, to fight under our license and flag for the next year. Collerne himself has offered to command them." Jeng sucked his licorice wand. "The implication, I believe, is that if we refuse him, he'll offer his ships to Liavek instead."

Derec's mouth turned dry. "Can he do that, Your Highness? Does his commission extend that far?"

"If it doesn't, he's taking a remarkable amount of initiative. The fact is, he's made the offer, and the King's considering it."

"Highness," the admiral said. There was sweat on his perfumed brow. "We -- Captain SuPashto and I -- we have experience in this war. We've fought together for six months. Our crews are well drilled and every man is worth three of this Collerne's."

Jeng looked bleak. "I shall attempt to have some friends on the Council point this out to His Encompassing Wisdom. But in the meantime I'll try to get you both out of the harbor. If Collerne can't find you, he can't kill you."

"Very well, Your Highness," said Zhi-Feng. He looked somewhat less anxious.

"Your fleet is ready?"

"We need only take on water," Derec said. "Birdwing has six months' provision. The rowing fleet carries victuals only for six weeks, but we can take food from captured ships if necessary. Or buy it ashore."

"I will have water-lighters alongside at dawn," Jeng said. He threw down his licorice and straightened. "I'll try to ... persuade the harbor master to send you a pilot. If he's not aboard by nightfall, warp your way out the back channel. I'm afraid now the New Mole's completed, the chain bars the main channel at sunset, so you can't escape that way."

"Your Highness is wise." The admiral bowed.

Jeng's face turned curious. He looked at Derec. "How do they treat mutineers in your navy, SuPashto?" he asked.

"They are tied to the mast of a small boat," Derec said, "rowed to each ship in the squadron and flogged in view of each ship's company. Then they are taken to the admiral's ship, hung from the mizzen shrouds, and disemboweled. Before they can die they are garroted. Then their bodies are preserved with salt and hung in an iron cage till they weather away."

"That sounds most unpleasant," Jeng said mildly. "Were I you, I would provide myself with poison. When the time comes, you can cheat your countrymen out of some of their fun." He shrugged. "Life is full of experiences, my philosophers tell me, but I think I can attest that some are best avoided."

Desolation stirred in Derec like a rising autumn gale. "I will follow your advice in all things, Highness," he said.

When he returned to the ship, Derec didn't look up. He knew the ghosts were there, dark shadows that smiled at his approaching doom.

* * * *

The water-lighters arrived just before dawn, and just afterward a messenger from the palace. Birdwing was to remain at anchor in the Inner Harbor until the complication with the Two Kingdoms fleet was resolved. If the galleon moved, she would be fired on by every gun on Great Kraken Island.

There was a hush on the Birdwing after that. Derec bought fresh food and wine from lighters offering wares alongside -- he never let the hucksters aboard, fearing Two Kingdoms agents -- and he kept the crew at their tasks,

brightening the ship's paint and overhauling the running rigging; but the men were subdued, expectant. Dark shapes hung in the shrouds, filling the air with the stench of death. Red stains bubbled silently on the white holystoned planks. Derec kept his eyes fixed firmly on the horizon and sent the wizard ashore to buy poison. Levett returned with a vial of something he said was strong enough to kill half the crew.

On the evening of the second day, the summons from court arrived. Derec was ready. He spoke briefly with his officers concerning what was to be done after he left, put on his best clothing, and dropped two small pistols in his pockets.

With an escort of the Zhir Guard, quaintly old-fashioned in their ancient plumed helmets, he was rowed to the quay, then taken in a palanquin up the steep cliffs to the palace. There were new heads above the gate, illuminated by torches: a pair of the Council had died just that afternoon. The wall beneath them was stained with red. Local witches clustered beneath, hoping to catch the last of the ruddy drops in order to make their potions. A chamberlain took Derec through the halls to an anteroom.

"Wait within," the chamberlain said, raising his palms to his forehead. "His Everlasting and All-Encompassing Wisdom will grant you audience as soon as the Council meeting has concluded."

"May Thung protect His Majesty," Derec answered. He turned to the door.

"I shall send refreshment," the chamberlain said. Derec opened the door, stepped inside, and froze.

Glowing eyes turned their cold light on him. The ghosts were there, Varga with blood and seawater dripping from his clothes, the corporal with brains spattered over his clothing, the others with blackened faces and starting eyes, the garrotes twisted about their necks. Terror poured down Derec's spine.

Young Sempster stood before Derec, five paces away. His brass-buttoned jacket, too big for him, hung limply on his boyish frame. His feet, the feet that had kicked their shoes off as he died, were bare. There was a hole in one stocking. Sempster's mouth worked in his beardless face, and he took a step forward. Derec shrank back. The boy took a step, and another. His pale hand came up, and it closed around Derec's amulet of Thurn Bel. He tugged, and the thong cut into Derec's neck like a garrote. Derec smelled death on the boy's breath. The boy tugged again, and the amulet came free.

"Take him," Sempster said, and smiled as he stepped back.

Strong hands closed on Derec's arms. His pistols and his vial of poison were pulled from his pockets. His rapier was drawn from its sheath.

The image of Sempster twisted like that in a distorting mirror, faded, became that of Levett. The others were Zhir Guard. Their officer was holding Derec's sword.

Levett held up the amulet of Thurn Bel. "Never let another mage know where you keep your power, Captain," he said. He pocketed the amulet. "The rest of his men will surrender easily enough. They're fools or boys, all of them."

Derec's mind whirled as cuffs were fastened before him on his wrists. A chain was passed from the shackles between Derec's legs. The Guard officer unfolded a scroll and began to read.

"By order of King Thelm and the Council, Captain Derec SuPashto is placed under arrest. The Royal Authority is shocked" -- she was remarkably straight-faced in conveying the King's surprise -- "to discover that Derec SuPashto is a mutineer and rebel. He is commanded to the Tiles Prison under close guard, until he can be turned over to Two Kingdoms justice." She rolled up the scroll and placed it in her pocket. Her face was expressionless. "Take the prisoner away."

Derec looked at Levett. Mist seemed to fill his mind. "There were never any ghosts," he said dully.

Levett looked at him. "Illusions only," he said.

The man behind Derec tugged on the chain. Derec ignored it. "You

planned this," Derec said. "All along."

"Something like it." Levett looked at him from three paces away, the distance beyond which Derec could not manipulate any power stored in the amulet. "I regret this, Captain. Necessity compelled me, as it compelled you during the mutiny. I want to return to our homeland and to live in peace with my family. Collerne can guarantee that, and you can't."

The guard, impatient, tugged hard on Derec's chain. Pain shot through Derec's groin. He bent over, tears coming to his eyes.

"This way," the guard said. Stumbling, Derec let himself be dragged backward out of the room. A push sent him staggering forward. With five of the Guard and Levett, he was marched from the palace, beneath the dripping heads of traitors and into the night.

No palankeen waited: he would walk down the long switchback path to the Lower Town, then through town to the prison. The cool night breeze revived him. The officer lit a torch and gave it to one of her men. The party was silent save for the clink of the guards' chain coifs as they walked.

The Lower Town was growing near, tall buildings shuttered against the violence of the streets. Anyone with sense went armed here, and in company. Derec began to murmur under his breath. The party passed into the shadows of the crowded buildings. The street lamps were out, smashed by vandals. Derec's heart beat like a galley's kettledrum.

A pike lunged from an alley and took the Guard officer in the side. A dark body of men boiled from the darkness. The shackles dropped from Derec's wrists, and he lunged for the guard to his right, drew the main gauche from the man's belt, and slid it up under the chain coif to cut the astonished man's throat. Feet pounded the cobbles. Steel thudded into flesh. The torch fell and went out. Derec spun, seeing in the starlight the stunned look of the guard who was suddenly holding an empty chain where once a prisoner had been. The dagger took him in the heart, and he died without a sound.

A dark figure reeled back: Levett, already dead from a rapier thrust through both lungs. Marcoyn's bulk followed him, boarding axe raised high; and then the axe came down. Derec turned away at the sound of the wizard's head being crushed. Facer stepped out of the darkness, his face sunburned beneath his leather-and-iron cap, his sword bloody.

"Are you well, Captain?"

"Aye. Good work. Drag the bodies into the alleys where the City Runners won't find them."

"Fucking traitor." There were more thudding sounds as Marcoyn drove the axe into Levett again and again. Finally the big man drew back, grinning as he wiped a spatter of blood from his face. Liquor was on his breath.

"Got to make sure a wizard's dead," he grunted. "They're tricky."

"Best to be certain," Derec said, his mind awl. He'd posted the men here and knew what was coming, but the fight had been so swift and violent that he needed a moment to take his bearings. He looked at the dead wizard and saw, in the starlight, the amulet of Thurn Bel lying in the dust of the alleyway. He bent and picked it up. *Never let another mage know where you keep your power,* Levett had said; and Derec had always followed this prescription, though Levett never knew it. He'd invested his power in one of his brass earrings, one so old and valueless that no captor looting valuables would ever be tempted to tear it from his ear.

The bodies were dragged into the alley, piled carelessly atop one another. Wind ruffled Derec's graying hair: somewhere in the melee, he'd lost his cap. "To the ship, Captain?" Facer asked. He held out Derec's sword and the Guard officer's brace of wheellock pistols.

Derec passed the sword belt over his shoulder and rammed the pistols in his waistband. "Not yet," he said. "We have another errand first." He grinned at Facer's anxiety. "We have to wait an hour for the tide in any case, Lieutenant."

"Yes, sir." Doubtfully.

He led them through the empty streets of the Lower Town. Even the

taverns were shut. Working people lived here, dockworkers and warehousemen: they didn't roister long into the night. Derec searched for one narrow apartment, found it, knocked on the door.

"Who is it?" A young, foreign voice.

"Captain SuPashto of the Birdwing."

"A moment."

The Tichenese wizard, Tevvik, opened the door, a lamp in his hand. His long hair was coiled on his head, held in place by a pin in the shape of a blue chipmunk. He recognized Derec and smiled. "An unexpected pleasure, Captain," he said. His Zhir was awkward.

"We're sailing for Liavek immediately. You're to accompany us."

Tevvik looked surprised. "I'm to be exchanged?"

"Something like that."

Tevvik thought about this for a moment, and shrugged. "I think I'd rather stay, Captain. I've developed a profitable business here."

From over his shoulder, Derec heard Marcoyn's growl. Derec was tempted to echo it. Instead he decided to be frank. "We're escaping arrest," he said. "You're accompanying us because you're a water wizard."

Tevvik's eyes widened. "You mean I'm being abducted?" He seemed delighted by the news.

"Aye. You are."

The wizard laughed. "That puts a different complexion on matters, Captain. Of course I'll accompany you. Do I have time to fetch my gear?"

"I'm afraid not."

Tevvik shrugged, then blew out his lamp. "As you like, Captain."

The waterfront district was a little more lively: music rang from taverns, whores paraded the streets, and drunken sailors staggered in alleyways looking to be relieved of their money. Derec and his party moved purposefully to the quay, then took the waiting barge to the galleon.

"Everything's prepared, Captain," Facer said. "We've cleared for action and the men are at quarters. The yards are slung with chains, the cable's ready to slip, the sails can be sheeted home in an instant, and we aren't showing any lights."

"Has the other party found our pilot?"

"SuKrone's got her under guard in the gunroom."

"Very good."

The boatmen tossed oars and Derec jumped for the entry port. He stepped onto the maindeck and sensed rather than saw his crew massed beneath the stars. He mounted the poop, then turned to face them. "We're running for Liavek, men," he said. "I have reason to believe they will welcome us."

There was a stirring ended swiftly by the petty officers' voices calling for silence.

"Those of you who were slaves," Derec said, "are now free."

Now there was an excited chattering that took the officers some time to quiet. Derec held up a hand.

"You may have to fight to keep that freedom, and that within the hour. Now -- quietly -- go to your stations. No drums, no noise. Facer, fetch me the pilot."

Derec leaned against the poop rail, pulled the big horse pistols from his waistband, and carefully wound the spring-driven locks. He was aware of the Tichenese wizard standing by, watching him. "Do you know weather magic, wizard?"

"Some. It is not my specialty."

"What is?"

"Fireworks. Explosions. Illusion."

"Can you make Birdwing look like something else?"

"Your ship is a little large for that. Perhaps I could cloak it in darkness. The darkness will not be absolute, but it may make its outlines less clear."

"Very well. Do so."

Facer and SuKrone pushed the pilot up the poop ladder. She was a small, dark woman, her head wrapped in a kind of turban. She was dressed in the house robe she'd been wearing when SuKrone's men had kidnapped her. Derec pointed one of his pistols at her, and he heard her intake of breath.

"Take us out by the back channel," he said coldly. "If you fail me, I will shoot you twice in the belly. Follow my instructions, and I'll put you over the side in a small boat once we're clear."

The pilot bowed, raising her palms to her forehead. "I understand, Your Excellency. But we must await the tide."

"Half an hour."

"Thereabouts, yes."

"Do not fail me." He gestured with the pistol. "Stand over there."

"Your obedient servant, Excellency."

"Wizard, Facer, come with me." Derec stepped forward off the poop, along the gangway, climbed the fo'c'sle. The land breeze brought the sound of music and laughter from the town. Derec looked to starboard, where the twisting back channel between Great Kraken Island and the mainland was invisible in the darkness. Glowing softly in the night, masthead riding lights stood out against the black.

"There's our problem," he said. "_Double Crowns_ is moored right near the entrance to the passage. We'll have to pass within half a cable."

Facer pursed his lips, blew air hesitantly. "They've lookouts set for us, I'm sure. They know we want to run. And if they give the alarm, Shzafakh's bastions will blow us to bits."

"My darkness won't cover us that well, Captain," the wizard said. He was speaking easily in Derec's own language, and with a native accent: apparently he'd spent time in the Two Kingdoms.

"We can't fire on them without raising an alarm," Derec mused. "We can't run aboard them without calling attention to ourselves." He shook his head. "We'll just have to run past and hope for a miracle."

"Captain." Tevvik's tone was meditative. "If we can't pass without being noticed, perhaps we can make people notice something other than ourselves."

"What d'ye mean, wizard?"

"Perhaps I can cause an explosion aboard Double Crowns. Then maybe the gunners in Shzafakh will think we're running from a fire, not for freedom."

Derec scowled. "The magazine is protected against spells."

"I'm sure. But powder in the open is not."

"They would not have cartridges in the open -- it's all held in the magazine till needed. Don't waste my time with these notions, wizard."

"I was suggesting a boat full of powder nestled under that ship's stern. I can make that go off well enough."

Astonishment tingled in Derec's nerves. He tried not to show it; instead he stroked his chin and frowned. "With a little sorcerous wind to push it where it's needed, aye," he said. He pretended to consider. "Very well, wizard," he said. "We'll do it. Facer, fetch the gunner."

Tevvik smiled. "I wish you wouldn't use the word 'wizard' that way, Captain. The word's not a curse."

Derec looked at him. "That's a matter of opinion, Mr. Tevvik."

He led the Tichenese back to the quarterdeck and gave the orders for men to file to the magazine and bring up ten casks of powder. "Barefoot only, mind," he said. "No hobnails to strike a spark. Belts and weapons are to be laid aside. Scarves tied over their ears so their earrings won't strike a spark." He drew his pistols and pointed them at Tevvik.

"Don't set them off when they're alongside," he said, "or I'll serve you as I'd serve the pilot."

The wizard raised his hands and grinned. "I have no intention of blowing myself up, Captain."

"Maintain those intentions," Derec said, "and we'll have no trouble."

The barge was loaded with powder, and canvas thrown over the barrels to avoid getting them wet. The boat's small mast was raised, its lateen set, its tiller lashed. The boat was warped astern and Derec concentrated, summoning his power, keeping it ready. A small wind to blow his thirty-foot barge was fully within his capabilities.

"Tide's turning, Captain."

"Very well. Prepare to slip the cable and sheet home."

"Aye aye, sir."

There was a murmur of bare feet as men took their stations. Derec took a careful breath. "Sheet home the main tops'l. Set the spritsail and bonaventure."

The heavy canvas topsail fell with a rumble, then rumbled again as it filled with wind. Birdwing tilted, surged, came alive. Water chuckled under the counter.

"Slip the cable."

The cable murmured from the hawsehole, then there was a splash as its bitter end fell into the sea. A pity, Derec thought, to lose the best bower anchor.

"Helm answers, sir," said the steersman.

"Larboard two points. There. Amidships."

Derec glanced over the stern, saw phosphorescence glinting from the bone in the teeth of the powder boat.

Birdwing was barely moving. The back channel was dangerous and twisting; he needed maneuverability there, not speed.

"Pilot," he said. The woman stepped forward.

"Sir."

"Take command. No shouting, now. Pass your orders quietly."

"Yes, sir."

The pistols were growing heavy in Derec's hands. He ignored the tension in his arms and stepped to the weather rail, peering for sight of Double Crowns. The masthead lights were growing nearer. Five cables. Four. Three. He summoned his power.

"Cast off the boat."

Derec's heart leaped to his throat as the boat lurched wildly to the first puff of wind and threatened to capsize, but the barge steadied onto its course, passing to weather of Birdwing. He guided the boat with little tugs of his mind, aimed it toward Double Crowns.

Two cables. Now one, and from across the water a shout. More shouts. The barge thudded against the razee galleon's tumblehome near the stern. A drum began beating. Alarm pulsed in Derec: on this still night, that drum would be heard all over town. Derec steeled his mind to the necessity of what was to come.

"Give us fire, wizard," he said.

"Your obedient servant." Tevvik pursed his lips in concentration and made an elegant gesture with his hand. Derec remembered at the last second to close his eyes and preserve his night vision.

Even through closed lids he saw the yellow flash. A burst of hot wind gusted through his hair. He could hear shouts, screams, and, from his own ship, gasps of awe. He opened his eyes.

Double Crowns seemed unchanged, but he could hear the sound of water pouring like a river into her hold. The drum was silenced; in its place were cries of alarm. As Derec watched, the razee began to list. Crewmen poured from the hatches in a storm of pounding feet. The galleon's list grew more pronounced; Derec could hear things rolling across the deck, fetching up against the bulwarks. Then came a sound that was a seaman's nightmare, a noise that half paralyzed Derec with fear -- the rumble of a gun broken loose, roaring across the tilting deck like a blind, maddened bull before it punched clean through the ship's side, making another hole through which the sea could enter.

He couldn't stand to watch anymore. He moved to the other side of the

poop, but the sounds still pursued him, more guns breaking free, timbers rending, men screaming, the desperate splashing of drowning crewmen. Then, mercifully, Birdwing was past, heeled to the wind, and entering the channel.

The pilot negotiated two turns before the first challenge came from one of Fort Shzafakh's bastions. The island rose steeply here, and Birdwing ghosted with its sails luffing for lack of wind. The fort was perched right overhead -- from its walls the garrison could as easily drop cannonballs on Birdwing as fire them from cannon.

"Hoy, there! What ship is that!"

Derec was ready. He cupped his hands and shouted upward in his accented Zhir. "Two Kingdoms ship Sea Troll!" he roared. "A warship blew up in harbor and started fires on other ships! We're trying to run clear!"

"Holy Thung! So that's what we heard." There was an awed pause. "Good luck, there."

"Much obliged."

Birdwing ghosted on. Derec could see grins on the faces of his officers, on the wizard. In his mind he could only hear the sounds of Double Crowns filling with water, men dying and timbers rending. He barely noticed when the channel opened up and ahead lay the dark and empty sea.

* * * *

An hour after dawn the land breeze died. The pilot had been put ashore long since, and even the old cone of Great Kraken Island was below the horizon: Birdwing was running northwest along the coast in the clear, broad, shallow channel between the mainland and Ka Zhir's stretch of low boundary islands. Winds were often uncertain in the morning, particularly near the coast and especially during the transition between the nightly land breeze and the daytime sea breeze: there was nothing unusual about it. Derec dropped the second bower anchor and let the galleon swing to and fro in the little puffs that remained. The crew drowsed at their stations. Fretfully Derec looked southward. Sea Troll, he thought, was damaged: it could not pursue without raising a new main-topmast. But Monarch and the new race-built ship were fully seaworthy. Were they becalmed as well? He suspected not. Derec looked at the Tichenese.

"Master Tevvik, do you think we can whistle up a wind between the two of us?"

The wizard spread his hands. "I am willing to try, Captain. I am not an expert."

Derec called for a pot of kaf, ordered breakfast for the crew, and the two went to his day cabin. The partitions separating the cabin from the maindeck had been broken down when Birdwing was cleared for action, providing a long, unbroken row of guns from the stern windows to the bow, and Derec's table was hastily brought up from the orlop, and blankets to screen him from the curious eyes of the crew.

"You're planning on privateering for Liavek now, I take it?" the wizard asked. "There will be a Two Kingdoms fleet in harbor, you know."

"I'll find a small harbor somewhere along the coast. Come in under a flag of truce, negotiate with the Levar's government."

"I can speak for you." Derec looked up in surprise. The wizard smiled again. "I know a man named Pitullio -- he worked for His Scarlet Eminence."

"I thank you," Derec said. "I'll consider that."

For two and a half hours he and the wizard tried to raise a wind, preferably a strong westerly that Birdwing could tack into and Monarch, the old-fashioned high-charged galleon, could not. The puffs continued, the ship dancing at the end of its cable, sails slatting.

"Captain." Facer's voice. "The lookouts see a squall coming up from the south."

Derec sighed. He could feel sweat dotting his brow: he had been concentrating hard. The wizard looked at him with amused eyes, grin white in his dark face.

"It's not our wind," Tevvik said, "but I hope it will do."

Derec rose wordlessly and pushed aside the curtain. His body was a mass of knots. "Ready a party at the capstan," he ordered. "I don't want to lose another anchor." He climbed to the poop.

It was a black squall, right enough, coming up from the south with deliberate speed. Ten minutes of stiff wind, at least, and with luck the squall might carry Birdwing with it for hours, right into the stronger ocean breezes. Derec had the second bower broken out. The galleon drifted, waiting for the squall.

Derec looked into the darkness, hoping to gauge its strength, and his heart sank.

Right in the center of the squall, he saw, were two ships. He didn't need his glass to know they were Monarch and Torn II, driving after him on a sorcerous breeze. Perhaps their wizards had even been responsible for his being becalmed.

"Quarters, gentlemen," he said. "We are being pursued. Have my steward fetch my armor, and send the wizard to the orlop."

He stopped himself, just in time, from glancing up into the mizzen shrouds. The ghosts of his slaughtered countrymen, he knew, had been an illusion.

But now, more than ever, he felt their gaze on the back of his head.

* * * *

They were coming down together, Derec saw, straight down the eight-mile slot between the mainland and the sandy barrier isles. Monarch was to starboard of the race-built ship, three or four cables apart. There was a black line drawn in the azure sea a mile before them where the squall was pushing up a wave.

"We'll try to outrun them," Derec said. "We may prove their match in speed." He tried to sound confident, but he knew his assurances were hollow: the conditions were ideal for Monarch, booming straight downwind with her baggy sails full of sorcery. "If we lose the race," Derec went on, "I'll try to get the weather gage. If we're to windward, Monarch at least will be out of the fight."

A sigh of wind ruffled Birdwing's sails. The ship stirred on the water. The sails filled, then died again. Derec strapped on his armor and watched as the darkness approached.

And then the squall hit, and the sun went dark. The sails boomed like thunder as they flogged massively in the air; the ship tilted; rain spattered Derec's breastplate. Then the sails were sheeted home, the yards braced -- the helm answered, and Birdwing was racing straight downwind, a white bone in its teeth, sails as taut as the belly of a woman heavy with child. Magic crackled in Derec's awareness, a seething chaos of storm and wind. Desperately he looked astern.

Monarch seemed huge, castles towering over its leaner consort, its masts bending like coachwhips in the force of the wind. Derec gauged its speed, and a cold welling of despair filled him. Birdwing seemed to be maintaining its lead over Torn II, but Monarch was surging ahead as studding sails blossomed on its yards. Birdwing's own studding sails were useless in this wind; the stuns'l booms would snap like toothpicks.

Derec stiffened at the sound of a gun: the big ship was trying its chasers. Monarch was pitching too much in this following sea, and Derec never saw the fall of shot.

Yard by yard the great ship gained, its black hull perched atop a boil of white water. Derec hoped for a miracle, and none came. Hollow anguish filled him.

"Take in the t'gallants," he ordered. "We will await them." Diligently he fought down despair. "Don't send down the t'gallantyards," he said. "We may yet be able to show them our heels."

Monarch's stuns'ls began coming in as they perceived Derec's shortening sail. The maneuver was not done well, and sheets began to fly, spilling wind from sails, a last-ditch method of slowing Monarch so that it

would not overshoot its target.

Derec watched nervously, gnawing his lip, trying to summon his power and weave a defensive net around his ship. He could feel Tevvik's energies joining his, strengthening his shields. Another gust of rain spattered the deck; gun captains shielded their matches with their bodies. Monarch looked as if it was coming up on Birdwing's larboard side, but that might be a feint. Would the huge ship alter course at the last minute and try for a raking shot across Birdwing's stern? If so, Derec had to be ready to turn with her. Plans flickered through Derec's mind as he gauged possible enemy moves and his own responses.

"Load the guns. Roundshot and grape. Run out the larboard battery." Maybe the guns running out would prod Monarch's captain into making his move.

But no. The man seemed eager to get to grips, and disdained maneuver. He had almost thirty guns more than Derec; he could afford to let them do his thinking for him. The black ship came closer, its little scraplike sprit topsail drawing even with Birdwing's stern. Derec could hear officers' bellowed commands as they struggled to reduce sail.

Anxiety filled Derec as the ship rumbled to the sound of gun trucks running out. Monarch was pulling up within fifty yards. Torn II was eclipsed behind the big ship, but now that Birdwing had shortened sail he could expect her shortly. He glanced again at the men, seeing the gun captains crouched over the guns with their slow matches, the officers pacing the deck with rapiers drawn, ready to run through any crewman who left his station. "No firing till my order!" Derec bellowed. "There may be a few premature shots -- ignore them!" And then inspiration struck. He turned to one of Marcoyn's marines, a blond man sighting down the length of a swivel gun set aft of the mizzen shrouds. "Blow on your match, man," Derec said. "I'm going to try a little trick."

The marine looked at him uncertainly, then grinned through his curling blond beard, leaned forward over his matchlock, and blew. The match brightened redly. "You other marines, stand ready," Derec said. He looked at the black ship, and fear shivered down his spine as he saw himself looking straight into the muzzle of a demicannon. Each enemy gunport had been decorated with the snarling brass head of a leopard: now guns were running out the beasts' mouths. Monarch's foremast was even with Birdwing's mizzen. Derec waited, his pulse beating in his ears, as Monarch crawled forward with glacial speed.

"Pick your target," Derec told the marine. "Steady now! Fire."

The four-pound mankiller barked and the air filled with a peculiar whirring noise as grapeshot and a handful of scrap iron flew toward the enemy. "Fire the murderers!" Derec spat. "Now!"

Another three minions banged out, and then there was a massive answering roar as every enemy gun went off, flinging their iron toward Birdwing. The smaller ship shuddered as balls slammed home. Derec took an involuntary step backward at the awesome volume of fire, but then he began to laugh. He'd tricked Monarch into firing prematurely, before all her guns bore. They'd wasted their first and most valuable broadside, half the shot going into the sea.

"Reload, you men! Helmsman, larboard a point!" Derec cupped his hands to carry down the ship's well to the gundeck below. "Fire on my command! Ready, boys!" Birdwing began a gentle curve toward the giant ship.

"Fire!" The deck lurched as the big guns went off, the long fifteen-foot maindeck culverins leaping inboard on their carriages. Derec could hear crashing from the enemy ship as iron smashed through timbers. "Reload!" Derec shrieked. "Fire at will! Helmsman, starboard a point!"

Enemy guns began crashing. Derec saw a piece of bulwark dissolve on the maindeck and turn to a storm of white fifteen-inch splinters that mowed down half a dozen men. Shot wailed overhead or thudded into planking. Musketry twittered over Derec's head: the enemy castles were full of marines firing

down onto Birdwing's decks. The smaller ship's guns replied. For the first time Derec felt a magic probe against his defenses; he sensed Tevvik parrying the strike. There was a crash, a deadly whirl of splinters, and the yellow-bearded marine was flung across the deck like a sack, ending up against the starboard rail, head crushed by a grapeshot. Derec, still in his haze of concentration, absently sent a man from the starboard side to service the gun.

Guns boomed, spewing powder smoke. Birdwing's practiced crews were loading and firing well. Derec smiled; but then his ship rocked to a storm of fire and his heart lurched. His crews were faster in loading and firing, but still the enemy weight was overwhelming. Derec's smaller vessel couldn't stand this pounding for long. He gnawed his lip as he peered at the enemy through the murk. His next move depended on their not seeing him clearly.

The deck jarred as half a dozen gundeck demicannon went off nearly together. Smoke blossomed between the ships, and at once Derec ran for the break in the poop.

"Sailtrimmers, cast off all tacks and sheets!" he roared. "Gun crews shift to the starboard broadside! Smartly, now!" He could see crewmen's bewildered heads swiveling wildly: man the starboard guns? Had Torn II run up to starboard and caught them between two fires?

"Cast off all sheets! Fly 'em! Run out the starboard battery!"

Topsails boomed as the great sails spilled wind. Birdwing's purposeful driving slowed as if stopped by a giant hand. The flogging canvas roared louder than the guns. The galleon staggered in the sea, the black ship pulling ahead. Frantically Derec gauged his ship's motion.

"Hard a-larboard, Sandor! Smartly, there!"

Losing momentum, Birdwing rounded onto its new tack. A rumble sounded from the gundeck as the demicannon began thrusting from the ports. "Sheet home! Sailtrimmers to the braces! Brace her up sharp, there!"

There; he'd done it: checked his speed and swung across the black ship's stern. He could see the big stern windows, the heraldic quarterings of the Two Kingdoms painted on the flat surface of the raised poop, officers in armor running frantically atop the castle, arms waving....

"Fire as you bear! Make it count, boys!"

Birdwing trembled as the first culverin spat fire. The whole broadside followed, gun by gun, and Derec exulted as he saw the enemy's stern dissolve in a chaos of splinters and roundshot, a great gilt lantern tumbling into the sea, the white triangle of the bonaventure dancing as grape pockmarked the canvas.... He'd raked her, firing his whole broadside the length of the ship without the enemy being able to reply with a single shot. Derec laughed aloud. "We've got upwind of them!" he shouted. "They'll not catch us now!"

"Holy Thung! Look ahead!" Randem's young voice was frantic. Derec ran to the weather rail and peered out.

Torn II was bearing down on them, bow to bow, within a cable's distance. She'd been trying to weather Monarch so as to attack Birdwing from her unengaged side, and now the two race-built ships were on a collision course.

"Hands to the braces! Stations for tacking! Starboard guns load doubleshot and grape! Put the helm down!"

Birdwing, barely under way again, staggered into the wind. Canvas slatted wildly. Torn II was bearing down on her beam, its royal figurehead glowering, waving a bright commanding sword.

"Fire as you bear!" Derec pounded the rail with a bleeding fist. "Run out and fire!"

The marines' murderers spat their little balls and scrap iron. Then a demicannon boomed, and another, then several of the long maindeck culverins. Birdwing hung in the eye of the wind, all forward momentum lost, the gale beating against her sails, driving her backward. More guns went off. Torn's spritsail danced as a roundshot struck it. Captain-General Collerne was curving gently downwind, about to cross Birdwing's stern at point-blank

range.

"Starboard your helm! Help her fall off!"

Too late. Captain-General Collerne's scarlet masthead pennant coiled over the waves like a serpent threatening to strike. "Lie down!" Derec shouted. "Everyone lie down!"

He flung himself to the planks as the world began to come apart at the seams. The ship staggered like a toy struck by a child's hand as an entire rippling broadside smashed the length of Birdwing's hull. Gunsmoke gushed over the quarterdeck. The taffrail dissolved. The bonaventure mizzen collapsed, draping the poop in pockmarked canvas. Yards of sliced rigging coiled down on the deck. Below there was a metallic gong as a cannon was turned over on its shrieking crew.

Then there was a stunned silence: Torn had passed by. Through the clouds of gunsmoke Derec could see Marcoyn standing, legs apart, on the fo'c'sle, sword brandished at the enemy, an incoherent, lunatic bellow of rage rising from his throat. "What a madman," Derec muttered, his ears ringing, and then he got to his feet.

"Brace the spritsail to larboard!" he called. "Clear that wreckage!" The tattered remains of the bonaventure were turning red: there were bodies underneath. As the canvas was pulled up, Derec saw one of them was Facer, the sunburned man cut in half by his homeland's iron. Derec turned away. He would pray for the man later.

Slowly Birdwing paid off onto the larboard tack. The sails filled and the galleon lost sternway. Water began to chuckle along the strakes as the ship slowly forged ahead. Canvas boomed as Torn II, astern, began to come about. Derec looked anxiously over the shattered taffrail.

Monarch was only now lumbering into the wind: she was almost a mile away and had no hope of returning to the fight unless the wind shifted to give her the weather gage once again. But Torn II was the ship that had worried Derec all along, and she was right at hand, completing her tack, moving onto the same course as Birdwing. If she was faster sailing upwind, she could overhaul the fugitive ship. Derec gave a worried glance at the set of his sails.

"Keep her full, Sandor. Let her go through the water."

"Full an' bye, sir."

"Set the t'gallants." He was suddenly glad he hadn't sent down the topgallant yards.

"Aye aye, sir."

"All hands to knot and splice."

The topgallants rumbled as they were smoothly sheeted home. Birdwing heeled to starboard, foam spattering over the fo'c'sle like handfuls of dark jewels tossed by the spirits of the sea. She was drawing ahead, fast as a witch as she drove through the black gale. Water drizzled from the sky, washing Facer's blood from the planks. The water tasted sweet on Derec's tongue, washed away the powder that streaked his face.

Torn's topgallant yards were rising aloft, a swarm of men dark on her rigging. Birdwing made the most of her temporary advantage; she'd gained over a mile on her adversary before Torn's topgallant bloomed and the larger ship began to race in earnest.

Derec felt his heart throbbing as he slitted his eyes to look astern, judging the ships' relative motion. Birdwing had lost her bonaventure: would that subtract from the ship's speed? He continued staring astern. His face began to split in a smile.

"We're pulling ahead!" he roared. "We've got the heels of her, by Thurn Bel!"

A low cheer began to rise from the crew, then, as the word passed, it grew deafening. Birdwing was going to make her escape. Nothing could stop her now.

Two miles later, as Birdwing neared a half-mile-wide channel between a pair of boundary isles, the wind died away entirely.

The sails fell slack, booming softly as the ship rocked on the waves. From astern, traveling clearly from the two enemy vessels, Derec could hear the sound of cheering.

* * * *

"Sway out the longboat! Ready to lower the second bower! We'll kedge her!"

The words snapped from Derec's mouth before the enemy cheering had quite ended. There was a rush of feet as the crew obeyed. Derec wanted to keep them busy, not occupied with thinking about their predicament.

"Send a party below to splice every anchor cable together. Fetch the wizard. A party to the capstan. Bring up the tackles and the spare t'gallant yards. We're going to jury a bonaventure. SuKrone, help me out of this damned armor."

One of the two longboats was swung out and set in the water. Carefully, the remaining bower anchor was lowered into it, and the boat moved under oars to the full length of the spliced anchor cables. Then the anchor was pitched overboard into the shallow sea and crewmen began stamping around the capstan, dragging the ship forward by main force until it rested over its anchor.

Tevvik appeared on deck to Derec's summons. He looked haggard.

"Hot work, Captain," he said. "Their wizards are good."

"I felt only one assault."

"Good. That means I was keeping them off."

"We're going to need wind."

Tevvik seemed dead with weariness. "Aye, Captain. I'll try."

"I'll work with you. Stand by the rail; I'll be with you in a moment."

The sound of clattering capstan pawls echoed from astern. Torn and Monarch were kedging as well.

"Up and down, sir." Birdwing was resting over its anchor.

"Bring her up smartly."

"Aye aye."

Birdwing lurched as the anchor broke free of the bottom. Derec moved toward the poop ladder, then frowned as he saw the two stream anchors lashed to the main chains. A shame, Derec considered, that so much time was wasted getting the anchor up, then rowing it out again. Capstan pawls whirred in accompaniment to Derec's thoughts.

"Swing out the other longboat," he said. "We'll put one of the stream anchors on the other end of the cable. Have one anchor going out while the other's coming in." He grinned at SuKrone's startled expression. "See to it, man!"

"Sir."

Crewmen rushed to the remaining longboat. Derec walked to where the Tichenese was waiting, propped against the lee rail where he'd be out of the way.

"We shall try to bring a wind, wizard," Derec said. "A westerly, as before. Ready?"

"I'll do what I can."

Wearily Derec summoned his power, matched it to the wizard's, and called the elements for a wind. Meanwhile a spare topgallant mast was dropped in place of the broken bonaventure mizzen, a lateen yard hoisted to its top, a new bonaventure set that hung uselessly in the windless air. Derec and Tevvik moved into its shade. Capstan pawls clattered, drawing the race-built ship forward, through the channel between barrier islands, the two longboats plying back and forth with their anchors. The pursuers were using only one anchor at a time and were falling behind. The water began to deepen, turn a profounder blue. Torn II crawled through the island passage. Monarch's topgallant masts loomed above the nearer island.

The heat of the noon sun augured a hot afternoon. Pitch bubbled up between the deck seams and stuck to crewmen's feet. Weary sailors were relieved at the capstan and fed.

"Deck, there! Captain! Right ahead! See what's happening!"

Derec glanced up from his summoning, and his heart lurched as he saw

the wind itself appear, visible as a dim swirling above the water; and then the sea itself rose, a wall of curling white foam. Desperate energy filled him.

"Clew up the t'gallants! Close the gunports! Call the boats back! Clew up the fores'l!"

The sea was coming with a growing hiss, a furious rank of white horsemen galloping over an azure plain. Tevvik looked at the wave with a dazed expression. "It's all coming at once," he said. "It's been building out there, everything we've been summoning since dawn, and now it's all on us at once."

"Helmsman! A point to starboard! Use what way you can!"

Sails were clewed up in a squeal of blocks. The entry port filled with frantic sailors as one of the boats came alongside. There was a cry of wind in the rigging, an anticipation of what was to come. Derec ran to the mizzen shrouds and wrapped his arm around a stout eight-inch tarred line. He looked at Tevvik.

"I suggest you do likewise, wizard."

And then the summoning was on them. The bow rose to the surge of white water and suddenly the air was full of spray as the frothing sea boiled around the ship. Canvas crashed as it filled with wind, bearing Birdwing back till suddenly she came up short at the end of her anchor cable, and with a plank-starting shudder the galleon was brought up short, burying her beak in foam, a wave sweeping the decks fore and aft, carrying crewmen and capstan bars and everything not lashed down in a frantic, clawing spill for the stern.... Derec closed his eyes and mouth and tried to hang on, his shoulders aching as the water tore at his clothing and body. His mind still registered what was happening to the ship, the jarring and checking that meant the anchor was dragging, the demon shriek of wind in the rigging, the thrumming tautness of the shroud around which Derec wrapped his arms....

Just as suddenly, the white water was gone, past. A strong sea breeze hummed in the rigging. Half-drowned crewmen lay on the planks like scattered driftwood, gasping for air. Exultation filled Derec.

"Hands to the capstan! Prepare to set the fores'l and t'gallants! Lively, there, lively -- we've got a wind!"

The stunned survivors raised a feeble cheer and dragged wearily to their work. The other longboat -- miraculously it had survived, bobbing on the wave like a twig -- picked up a few swimmers who had been carried overboard, then came to the entry port in a mad thrash of oars. Wind whipping his hair, Derec gazed astern to see the wall of white as it drove toward his enemies.

Torn II had seen it coming and had had time to prepare. Her boats were in, her anchor catted home; and Derec suppressed a surge of admiration for the proud way her head tossed to the wave, the clean manner in which she cut the water and kept her head to the wind. Then the wave was past, and she began setting sails. Derec's gaze shifted to Monarch. The wave was almost on her.

She hadn't seen it coming; that much was clear. She'd just kedged clear of the southern tip of the island, and the white water was within two cables' lengths before Monarch was aware of it. Suddenly there was frantic movement on her decks, sails drawing up, the boats thrashing water; but the white water hit her broadside, driving her over. She staggered once, then was gone, only wreckage and the tips of her masts visible on the rushing water. Derec blinked: it had happened so fast he could scarce believe the sight of it. He looked again. His eyes had spoken truly: Monarch was gone.

"Thurn Bel protect them," Derec said, awed, reaching automatically for his amulet and finding nothing. He knew precisely what had happened. The gunports had been open on this hot afternoon, and the wind and water had pushed her lower ports under; she'd filled and gone down in seconds. Six hundred men, their lives snuffed out in an instant. Derec shook his head, sorrow filling him. Why was he fated to kill his countrymen so?

"The sea trolls will feed well tonight," Tevvik said solemnly. His hairpins had been torn from his head, and his long dark hair hung dripping to

his shoulders.

SuKrone's voice broke into Derec's reverie. "Cable's up and down, sir."

"Break the anchor free. Lay her on the larboard tack."

The anchor came free with a lurch, the yards were braced round, the birdwing sails set and filled with wind. Birdwing heeled gracefully in the stiff ocean breeze.

"This isn't over yet," Derec said as he watched Torn II flying after them. "The captain-general's lost two ships, half his squadron, with nothing to show for it. He's got to bring us back or he's done for. He'll never have another command."

"We're faster than he on this tack."

"That won't end it. He'll spend the rest of his life in the Sea of Luck if he has to."

"Let us hope," Tevvik said, his eyes hardening, "he will not live long."

Derec shook his head: he couldn't wish Collerne dead, not Collerne who had been such a friend to him, who had raised him to the highest rank to which a non-noble could aspire.

The brisk wind carried Birdwing smartly over the water, the bow rising to each ocean wave. But then the wind dropped little by little and Torn II began closing the distance, her red admiral's pennant snapping in the breeze like a striking serpent. Birdwing was faster only in stiffer winds: Torn had the advantage here. Derec's heart sank.

"We shall have to fight, then. Gun captains to draw their cartridges and replace them with fresh -- they may have got wet. All hands check their powder."

Derec donned his cuirass -- the helmet had been washed overboard -- and reloaded his pistols. Tevvik returned to the safety of the orlop. There was no cheer among the crew as they went to their tasks, only a kind of grim despair.

They had labored all day, escaped death so many times. Were they cursed, to be so forced into yet another struggle?

"Stations for tacking," Derec said. "We'll see how badly the captain-general wants to fight us." He still could not bring himself to speak of the man disrespectfully.

Birdwing came across the wind easily. "Ease her a bit," Derec ordered. "Keep her full." He ordered the guns loaded with roundshot and gauged his distance carefully. "Back the main tops'l," he said finally. "Run out the larboard battery." He was going to give Collerne a hard choice. "Ready, boys!" he called. "Aim carefully, now!" The ship's motion altered as the main topsail backed, as the ship's speed checked and its corkscrew shudder ended. Carefully Derec gauged the ship's motion. Tops'l aback, Birdwing was a far steadier platform.

"Fire!" The deck shuddered to the salvo. White feathers leaped from the sea around Torn. "Fill the tops'l! Reload and run out! Helm down!"

Derec looked at the other race-built ship, eyes narrowing. His maindeck culverins, longer though with a smaller bore than the demicannon on the gundeck, were ideal at this range. He would claw to windward, fall off, fire, then claw to windward again while his crews reloaded: he was going to punish Torn II mercilessly on the approach, make her pay for every fathom gained. The enemy couldn't reply, not without luffing out of the wind to present her broadside.

Collerne had two choices now, Derec knew. He could continue beating toward Birdwing, paying for every inch with lives, or he could fall off the wind and open the battle at this range. The battle wouldn't be decisive at a half mile's distance -- the two ships would fire off their ammunition at this range, fail to do mortal damage, and that would be the end of it. Derec prayed Collerne would choose the latter outcome.

"Back the main tops'l! Run out!"

Another broadside crashed out. "Fill the tops'l! Load! Helm down!"

Fall off, Derec thought fiercely as he looked at the enemy. Fall off,

damn you.

The enemy were determined to stand Derec's fire. His heart sank at the thought of killing more of his countrymen.

Having no choice, he did what he must. He fired another broadside, tacked, fired the larboard guns. Torn's bow chasers replied, pitching a ball at Birdwing every few minutes; but Torn II had to be taking punishment as she came into the culverins' ideal range. Her sails were as pitted by shot holes as the cheeks of a whore with the Great Pox.

Five hundred yards. "Fire!" He could hear the sound of shot striking home. Four hundred. "Fire!" Three. "Fire!"

The wind blew the ocean clear of smoke. Derec stared to leeward, hoping to see a mast fall, a sail flog itself to bits, anything that might allow him to slip away. Nothing. Reluctantly he gave the orders.

"Fill the mains'l. Clew up the t'gallants. We'll give the captain-general the fight he's come for."

The guns lashed out once more and then Torn luffed elegantly, the bronze guns running out the square ports, two lines of teeth that shone in the bright southern sun. There were gaps in the rows of teeth; two ports beaten into one, another empty port where a gun may have been disabled. Derec's breath caught in his throat.

Fire lapped the surface of the ocean. Torn's crew had waited hours for this and it seemed as if every shot struck home, a rapid series of crashes and shudders that rocked the deck beneath Derec's feet. There was a cry as a half dozen of Marcoyn's marines were scattered in red ruin over the fo'c'sle, then a shriek, sounding like the very sky being torn asunder, as a ball passed right over Derec's head to puncture the mizzen lateen. He was too startled to duck.

Birdwing's guns gave their answering roars. Derec gave the command to fire at will. He could sense the magic shields Tevvik wove about the ship; felt a probe, felt it easily rebuffed. There was only one enemy wizard now; he was as tired as everyone else. The range narrowed and the marines' murderers began to bark. Gunfire was continuous, a never-ending thunder. A musket ball gouged wood from the mizzen above Derec's head; he began to pace in hope of discouraging marksmen.

Derec's ship seemed to be pulling ahead as the range narrowed and Birdwing stole Torn's wind. Derec didn't want that, not yet; he had the foretops'l laid aback, allowed Torn to forge ahead slightly, then filled the sail and resumed his course.

Fifty yards: here they would hammer it out, guns double-shotted with a round of grape choked down each barrel for good measure. A maindeck culverin tipped onto its crew, its carriage wrecked by a ball. There was a crash, a massive rumble followed by a human shriek. Derec stared: the main topgallant had been shot away and came roaring down, a tangle of rigging and canvas and broken timber. Marcoyn already had a party hacking at the wreckage and tossing it overboard. Derec clenched his teeth and waited. Thunder smote his ears. Gunpowder coated his tongue in layers, like dust on a dead man.

The wreckage was clear: good. The enemy was falling a bit behind. "Set the fore t'gallant!" Derec roared; the seamen gave him puzzled glances, and he repeated the order.

Canvas boomed as the topgallant was sheeted home; Derec could feel the surge of speed, the lift it gave his nimble ship. He peered over the bulwark, squinting through the smoke that masked the enemy. With his added speed, he'd try to cross her bows and let her run aboard: he'd have his every gun able to rake down the enemy's length with scarce a chance of reply.

"Put up the helm!" A musket ball whirred overhead; two quarterdeck murderers barked in reply. The marines were cursing without cease as they loaded and fired, a constant drone of obscenity. Derec wondered where they found the energy.

Birdwing curved downwind like a bird descending on its prey, Derec staring anxiously at the enemy. He felt his heart sink: the blue sky between

the enemy's masts was widening. Collerne had been ready for him, and was matching Birdwing's turn with his own.

"Helm hard to weather!" Frantic energy pulsed through Derec. "Hands to the larboard guns! Run 'em out! Braces, there! Brace her around!"

If he made his turn quick enough, he might be able to slide across Collerne's stern and deliver a raking shot with his fresh larboard broadside, a stroke as devastating as that which Torn had fired into Birdwing's stern that morning.

Sails boomed and slatted overhead. The firing trailed off as the guns no longer bore. Derec ran frantically for the larboard rail and saw, too late, a tantalizing glimpse of Torn's stern, a glimpse lasting only a few seconds before it slid away. Derec beat a fist on the rail. The maneuver hadn't worked at all -- Collerne had anticipated everything. The ships had just changed places, larboard tack to starboard, like dancers at a ball. And Torn was firing with a new broadside now, not the one he'd punished for the last few hours.

"Luff her! Gun crews, fire as you bear!" He'd get in one unopposed broadside, at least.

The unused broadside blasted away into Torn's starboard quarter. Derec could see splinters flying like puffs of smoke. He filled his sails and surged on.

Now they were yardarm to yardarm again, the guns hammering at point-blank range. The crews were weary, taking casualties, and the rate of fire had slowed: the deadly iron thunderstorm was blowing itself out. A whirring charge of grape caught SuKrone in the side and flung him to weather like a doll, already dead; a musket ball whanged off Derec's breastplate and made him take a step back, his heart suddenly thundering in panic. Frantically he began pacing, his feet slipping in pools of blood.

Who was winning? Torn had been hard hit, but her weight of armament was superior; she had a larger crew, having probably taken men off the damaged Sea Troll; and Derec was forced to admit she had the better captain. Birdwing had been hit hard in the first fight, and her crew were exhausted. Everywhere he looked Derec saw blood, death, smoke, and ruin.

He'd try his trick one more time, Derec thought. He couldn't think of anything else. If it didn't work, he'd just fight it out toe to toe until there was nothing left to fight with. He wouldn't surrender. If Birdwing lost, he'd take one of his stolen pistols and blow his own brains out.

Birdwing was forging ahead, the topgallant still set. Very well. He'd try to do it better.

"Hands to tacks and sheets! Hands to the braces! Ready, there? Helm to weather!"

Birdwing lurched as the rudder bit the water. Bullets twittered overhead. The enemy wizard made some kind of strike, and Derec felt it deep in his awareness; his mind lanced out and parried. He could sense Tevvik there, feel a part of the foreigner's mind merge with his own.

If you ever do anything, he begged, do it now.

The answer came. Very well.

Derec looked up again, saw the blue space between the enemy's masts increasing. Damn: he'd been anticipated again.

"Hard a-weather! Sheets, there! Man the starboard guns!"

They were dancing round again, just changing places. The bonaventure and mizzen lateen boomed as the wind slammed them across the deck. Derec saw the enemy stern and knew he could never cross it, knew it for certain -- and then there was a yellow flash, Torn's windows blowing out in rainbow splinters, bright light winking from each gunpoint along the maindeck. Guns boomed, firing at empty sea. Derec's mouth dropped as he saw an enemy marine, standing with his firelock in the mizzen chains, suddenly fling his arms back as each of the powder flasks he carried across his chest went off, little dots of fire that knocked him into the shrouds...

Tevvik, Derec thought. He specialized in fireworks. But now Derec was

screaming, his throat a raw agony.

"Fire as you bear!" Birdwing was going to win the race: the maindeck explosion had paralyzed the enemy, possibly blown the helmsmen away from the whipstaff.

The guns went off, flinging hundreds of pounds of metal into the helpless ship's stern. Torn wallowed, the wind pushing her away. Derec could hear her crewmen screaming for water buckets. Tevvik must have set off a pile of cartridges on the maindeck, spreading fire, making guns go off prematurely while their crews were still ramming shots home....

Birdwing followed, firing shot after shot; Torn's crew were desperately fighting fires and could not reply. Derec sensed a new energy in his gunners; they were firing faster than they had since the enemy's approach. They knew this was victory, and wanted to hasten it.

"Captain." It was one of the surgeon's assistants, a boy in a bloody apron. Derec glared at him.

"What is it?"

"The wizard's unconscious, sir. The Liavekan, what's-his-name. He just yelled something in his heathen tongue and collapsed. Surgeon thought you'd need to know."

Derec put his hand on the boy's arm. "Compliments to the surgeon. Thank you, boy."

The guns roared on. Torn got her fires under control, but the explosion had devastated the crew: they didn't have the heart to continue. When all the gun crews dribbled away, heading for the hatches, the officers conceded the inevitable and hauled down their colors. Birdwing came alongside to take possession.

Collerne, leading his surviving officers, surrendered in person, a tall, white-haired man in beautifully crafted muscled armor, a splinter wound on one cheek, both hands blackened where he'd beat at the fire. Derec looked into the man's eyes, hoping to see some sign of friendship, of understanding for what Derec had had to do. There was nothing there, no understanding, no friendship, not even hate. Derec took his patron's sword wordlessly.

"We've done it, SuPashto! Beaten 'em!" Marcoyn was by Derec's side now, his pale, unfocused eyes burning fire. "We're free!" Marcoyn saw Collerne standing mute by the poop rail; he turned to the captain-general, stared at him for a long moment, then deliberately spat in his face.

"Free, d'ye hear, Collerne?" he roared. "You thought you'd strangle us all, but now I'll throttle you myself. And now I'll be captain of your ship as well."

The spittle hung on Collerne's face. He said nothing, but his deep gray eyes turned to Derec, and Derec's blood turned chill.

Derec put a hand on Marcoyn's armored shoulder. "He's worth more in ransom alive," he said. "You and your people take possession of the other ship."

Marcoyn considered this, the taunting grin still on his face. "Aye," he said. "Maybe I'd like their money more than their lives." He gave a laugh. "I'll have to give it some thought. While I enjoy my new cabin on my new ship."

He turned to his men and roared orders. There were cheers from the marines as they swarmed aboard Torn II and began looting the enemy survivors. Collerne's eyes turned away from Derec. There was no gratitude there, just an emptiness as deep as the ocean. Despair filled Derec. The rapier in his hand felt as heavy as a lead weight.

"Go to my cabin, Captain-General," he said. "Wait for me there. I'll send the surgeon to tend to your hands." In silence, Collerne obeyed. Derec sent the other officers below to the cable tier and had them put under guard.

Suddenly Derec was aware of Tevvik standing by the break of the poop. How long had the wizard been there? His face showed strain and exhaustion, but he'd heard everything; his hooded expression demonstrated that well enough.

Derec glanced up at the mizzen shrouds. There wasn't room any longer

for all the countrymen he'd killed; the ghosts, he thought, would have to stand in line.

It wasn't over yet, Derec knew. The Two Kingdoms trading fleets came to the Sea of Luck every year, and sailors had long memories. Squadrons would hunt for Birdwing, and even if Derec received the protection of one of the cities, there would still be kidnappers and assassins. No end to this killing, Derec thought, not until I'm dead. Will the gods forgive me, he wondered, for not killing myself and ending this slaughter?

The two race-built ships spun in the wind, locked together like weary prizefighters leaning against each other for support. Wreckage and bodies bobbed in the water. From Torn II came a smell of burning.

Derec realized he was the only man remaining who could navigate. He ordered his charts to be brought up from the safety of the hold.

"Secure the guns," he said. "I'll chart a course north, to Liavek."

* * * *

The sea was kind that night; a moderate wind, a moderate swell. The two ships traveled under easy sail and echoed to the sound of repairs.

Near staggering with weariness, Derec paced Birdwing's weather rail. Colterne still waited in Derec's cabin. Marcoyn was probably drunk and unconscious in the admiral's cabin aboard Torn. Only Derec was without a place to sleep.

There was a tread on the poop companion, and Derec saw Tevvik approaching him.

"You have recovered?" Derec asked. His tongue was thick. No matter how much kaf he consumed his mouth still tasted of powder.

"Somewhat." The wizard's voice was as weary as his own. "May I join you, Captain?"

"If you like." Exhaustion danced in Derec's brain. He swayed, put a hand on the bulwark to steady himself

Tevvik's voice was soft. "You will have to make a choice, Captain," he said.

"Not now, wizard."

"Soon, Captain."

Derec said nothing. Tevvik stepped closer, pitched his voice low. "If Marcoyn gets his way, you will all die. His Scarlet Eminence won't make a deal with a butcher."

"This is my affair, wizard. None of yours."

"Only the thought of ransom kept him from another massacre. What will happen when he realizes the ransom will never come? Liavek isn't at war with the Two Kingdoms -- their prize courts will never permit you to ransom a neutral. When Marcoyn thinks things through, there will be trouble." Tevvik's easy smile gleamed in his dark face. "I can deal with Marcoyn, Captain. He will have gone overboard while drunk, and that's all anyone will ever know."

Derec glared at the foreigner and clenched his fists. "I'll have my own discipline on my own ship," he grated. "I don't need wizard's tricks, and I won't be a party to conspiracies."

"It's far too late for that, Captain."

Derec jerked as if stung. "It's not too late to stop."

"Events generate their own momentum. You of all people should know that." He leaned closer, put a hand on Derec's shoulder. "Marcoyn's marines have the firelocks, Captain. He has possession of one ship already, and he can take yours anytime he wants."

"He needs me. The man can't navigate."

"Once he turns pirate, he can capture all the navigators he needs."

"_I can deal with him, wizard!_" Derec's voice roared out over the still ship. Tevvik took a step back from the force of his rage.

His mind ablaze, Derec stormed down the poop ladder, past the startled helmsman, and down the passage that led to his cabin. The guard at the door straightened in surprise as Derec flung open the door.

Colterne looked up. He was out of his armor and seated in one of

Derec's chairs, trying to read a Zhir book on navigation with his bandaged hands. Derec hesitated before the man's depthless gaze.

"I want you off my ship, Captain-General," he said.

Collerne's eyes flickered. "Why is that, Mr. SuPashto?" He spoke formally, without expression.

"I'm going to put you and your officers in a boat and let you make your way to Gold Harbor. You'll have food and water for the trip. A backstaff so you can find your latitude."

With a careful gesture, Collerne closed his book and held it between bandaged hands. "You are running for Liavek, are you not? Can you not let us off there?"

Derec looked at him. "It's for your safety, Captain-General."

Collerne took a moment to absorb this. "Very well, Mr. SuPashto. I understand that you might have difficulty controlling your people now that they've had a taste of rebellion."

Suddenly Derec hated the man, hated his superiority, the cold, relentless precision of his intelligence. "You would have strangled and eviscerated every man on this ship!" he said.

Collerne's voice was soft. "That was my duty, Mr. SuPashto," he said. "Not my pleasure. That's the difference between me and your Mr. Marcoyn."

"Marcoyn had a good teacher," Derec said. "His name was Captain Lord Fors. Marcoyn's an amateur in cruelty compared to him."

Collerne stiffened. Mean satisfaction trickled into Derec's mind; he'd got a reaction from the man at last. He wondered if it was because he'd scored a point or simply had the bad taste to criticize one officer in front of another.

"The only order I've ever had questioned," Derec said, "is the one that would prevent my people doing to you what you fully intended to do to them. Now" -- he nodded -- "you will follow me, Captain-General, and from this point onward you will address me as captain. Maybe I wasn't born to the rank, but I think I've earned it."

Collerne said nothing, just rose from his chair and followed. Perhaps, Derec thought, he would say nothing at all rather than have to call Derec by his stolen title. Derec collected the rest of the officers in the cable tier and then climbed to the maindeck. Birdwing's remaining small boat had been warped astern after the fight, and Derec had it brought alongside. He put a stock of food and water aboard, made certain the boat had mast, cordage, sail, and backstaff, then sent the prisoners into it. Collerne was last. The captain-general turned in the entry port, prepared to lower himself to the boat, curled his fingers around the safety line. His bandaged hand slipped uselessly, and Collerne gave a gasp of pain as he began to topple backward into the boat.

Derec leaned out and took the captain-general's arm, steadying him. Collerne looked at him with dark, fathomless eyes.

"I acted to preserve the ship, Captain-General," Derec said. "There was no other way. Birdwing was your dream, and it is alive, thanks to me."

Collerne's face hardened. He turned away, and with Derec's assistance lowered himself into the boat.

"Cast off," said Derec. He stepped up to the poop and watched the fragment of darkness as it fell astern, as it vanished among the gentle swells of the Sea of Luck.

He'd said what he'd had to, Derec thought. If Collerne refused to understand, that was naught to do with Derec.

"What now, Captain?" Tevvik's voice. Derec turned to the wizard.

"Sleep," he said. "I'll deal with Marcoyn in the morning."

* * * *

Derec rose at dawn. He wound his two pistols and put them in his belt, then reached for his sword. He stepped on deck, scanned the horizon, found it empty save for Torn II riding two miles off the starboard quarter. He brought Birdwing alongside, shouted at the other ship to heave to, then backed

Birdwing's main topsail and brought her to rest a hundred yards from the other ship. He armed a party of _Birdwing_'s sailors and had them ready at the entry port. Derec told _Torn_'s lookout to give Mr. Marcoyn his compliments and ask him to come aboard _Birdwing_.

Out of the corner of his eye, Derec saw Tevvik mounting the poop ladder. The Tichenese seemed unusually subdued; his expression was hooded, his grin absent entirely.

Marcoyn arrived with a party of half a dozen marines, all dressed grandly in plundered clothing and armor. The big man looked savage; he was probably hung over. A brace of pistols had been shoved into his bright embroidered sash.

Derec could feel tension knotting his muscles. He tried to keep his voice light. "I need you to resume your duties aboard _Birdwing_, Mr. Marcoyn," Derec told him. "I'm sending Sandor to take charge of the prize."

There was a pause while Marcoyn absorbed this. He gave an incredulous laugh. "Th' piss you will," he said. "The prize is mine!"

Derec's nerves shrieked. Ignoring the sharp scent of liquor on Marcoyn's breath, he stepped closer to the big man. His voice cracked like a whip. "By whose authority? I'm captain here."

Marcoyn stood his ground. His strange pale eyes were focused a thousand yards away.

"The prize is mine!" he barked. "I'm in charge of the sojers here!"

Hot anger roared from Derec's mouth like fire from a cannon. "And I am in charge of you!" he shouted. He thrust his face within inches of Marcoyn's. "Birdwing is mine! The prize is mine! And you and your sojers are mine to command! D'you dispute that, Marcoyn?"

Do it, Marcoyn, he thought. Defy me and I'll pistol your brains out the back of your head.

Marcoyn seemed dazed. He glanced over the poop, his hands flexing near his weapons. Derec felt triumph racing through his veins. If Marcoyn made a move he was dead. Derec had never been more certain of anything in his life.

Marcoyn hesitated. He took a step back.

"Whatever you say, Captain," he said.

Readiness still poised in Derec. Marcoyn was not safe yet, not by any means. "You are dismissed, Marcoyn," Derec said. "I'd advise you to get some sleep."

"Aye aye, sir." The words were mumbled. Marcoyn raised his helmet in a sketchy salute, then turned away and was lost.

Tension poured from Derec like an ebbing tide. He watched the burly marine descend the poop ladder, then head for his cabin. He looked at Marcoyn's marines.

"Return your firelocks to the arms locker," he said. "Then report to Randem's repair party."

"Sir."

Derec sent Sandor and some of the armed sailors to the _Torn_, then looked up at the sails. "Hands to the main braces," he said. "Set the main tops'l. Steer nor-nor'west."

Men tailed onto the braces, fighting the wind as they heaved the big mainyards around. Canvas boomed as it filled, as _Birdwing_ paid off and began to come around, a bone growing in its teeth.

Relief sang in Derec's mind. He had managed it somehow, managed not to have to become Marcoyn in order to defeat him.

"Well done, sir." Tevvik's voice came quietly in Derec's ear. "But you should have let me handle him. Marcoyn's still a danger."

"To no one but himself." Flatly.

"I disagree, Captain. What will happen when he discovers you've set Colterne and the others free?"

"Nothing will happen. He will drink and mutter and that will be the end of it."

"I pray you are right, Captain."

Derec looked at him. "I won't have a man killed because he might be a problem later. That was Lord Fors's way, and Marcoyn's way, and I'll have none of it."

Tevvik shook his head and offered no answer. Derec glanced aloft to check the set of the sails.

Suddenly he felt his heart ease. He was free.

No more mutinies, he thought.

Birdwing heeled to a gust, then rose and settled into its path, forging ahead through a bright tropical dawn.